

Ancient India

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

To gain perspective on ancient Indian culture, it is important to explore its three main religions. In this lesson, you will learn about:

1. Period and Location: Ancient India
2. Hinduism
3. Buddhism
4. Jainism
5. Examples of Indian Art

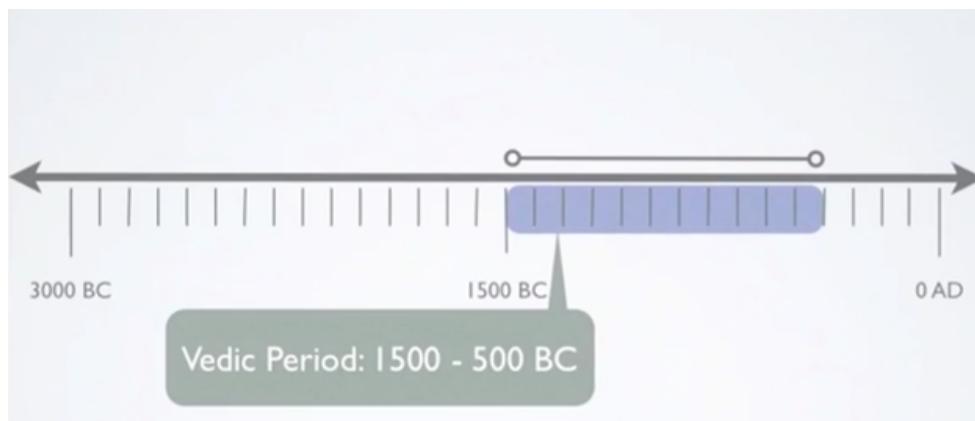


BIG IDEA

Ancient Indian culture developed around the Indus River Valley. The ancient religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism are fundamental to the cultural understanding of Indian civilization.

1. Period and Location: Ancient India

The period of time covered in this lesson, from about 1500 BCE to 500 BCE, is referred to as the Vedic period, highlighted on the timeline below.



The geographical region covered in this lesson is the Indian subcontinent located below the primary continent of Asia. This area includes the present-day countries of Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. Millions of years ago, the Indian subcontinent moved northward and collided with Asia, creating the Himalayan Mountains.

2. Hinduism

The best approach to understanding the culture of ancient India is to look at its main religions. **Hinduism** is just one of these, and it is important for a number of reasons.

Hinduism is considered the oldest continuously practiced religion, reaching back 4,000 years. However, it has no actual date of origin, being understood among its followers as a system of thought that has always existed, just as Brahman, the supreme being from whom all creation emanates, has also always existed. It is the third most popular religion in the world, with approximately 1.3 billion followers. Unlike Christianity/Catholicism, there is no central leader of Hinduism, and no single authoritative text. Hindus believe that all other belief systems are also correct. They also believe that the entirety of creation is one singular consciousness, expressing itself in different ways. Within Hinduism, a practitioner can be polytheistic, monotheistic, or even atheistic. Gods have different avatars, or incarnations, but are still the same god. There are also different versions of Hinduism that emphasize folk religion, scriptures, yogic practice, and asceticism, or devotion to a single deity. The goals of Hinduism are to understand the oneness of existence and through adherence to dharma or duty, to escape the process of reincarnation and rejoin with Brahman for eternity.

The **Vedas** are ancient Hindu texts written in Sanskrit. Although they record the tenets of Hinduism, this system of beliefs existed as a set of orally transmitted ideas passed down through generations. There are several tenets that are essential to Hinduism.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** The idea of dharma, or duty, is very important in the Hindu religion. Karma, or the action or moral law of cause and effect, is also important.

Samsara are earthly pleasures that lead people to desire to be reborn. This idea of rebirth or reincarnation is fundamental to Hinduism, as is the caste system. Hindus believe that one's position in this life is due to the karma one accumulated in another life. Samsara can lead to the accumulation of negative karma and unhappiness. The path to happiness is achieved through the elimination of the samsara through moksha, an enlightenment later called nirvana.



TERMS TO KNOW

Hinduism

A system of religious practice in India that emphasizes the idea of dharma, or duty, and corresponding daily rituals and practices.

Vedas

The oldest and most authoritative Hindu texts, written in Sanskrit.

3. Buddhism

Although we often think of **Buddhism** as a religion, a more accurate description might be a philosophy or system of thought. It is based on the teachings of Gautama Buddha, who was known as the Buddha, or the Enlightened One, but the Buddha is not a god, nor did he preach about other gods. Gautama Buddha lived from about 563 BCE to 483 BCE. During the Mauryan Empire, which occurred from 322 to 185 BCE, **Ashoka** was an important Buddhist king of third-century BCE India and was influential in promoting the spread of Buddhism.

The Buddha was born a prince into a wealthy family in the kshatriya, or warrior, caste and was protected from the suffering of the outside world for the first 29 years of his life. As he became aware of world suffering, he was deeply moved and abandoned his way of life to wander as an ascetic and learn how to escape from cycles of suffering and rebirth. He developed the four noble truths, which he spent the rest of his life teaching. They are as follows:

- Life is suffering.
- The cause of suffering is desire.
- The end of suffering comes with an end to desire.
- There is a path which leads away from suffering.

The practice of Buddhism is a lifelong process of becoming self-aware, eliminating one's desires, and achieving enlightenment, also known as nirvana. Those who have achieved enlightenment but want to stay on Earth and help others are known as bodhisattvas. They are commonly depicted in Buddhist art, along with the Buddha. Buddhism was one of many religions that developed in response to the perceived failure of Hinduism to address the needs of the people. It had few practitioners until Ashoka the Great promoted it throughout his kingdom and beyond.



THINK ABOUT IT

Karma, enlightenment, reincarnation, and the elimination of suffering are fundamental to all of the religions explored in this lesson. As you are reading about these different religions, you might also think about how they differ from our Western ideas regarding religion, what it means to have a belief system (What do you believe in? Do you try to convince others to believe the same thing? Do you believe that your religion is the only one that is correct?), and what it means to be morally "right."

☞ EXAMPLE Below is an image of the Buddha. Notice the position of his hands. This is known as a **mudra**. His hands are in the mudra of teaching, also known as turning the wheel of dharma. He is seated in the lotus position and below him is a smaller scene that includes his five disciples, to whom he is teaching his first sermon, as well as a woman and a child. This is one of the most famous sculptures of the Buddha and is located at the Sarnath Museum. Sarnath is known as the location where the Buddha taught his first sermon.



Statue of the Buddha preaching his first sermon

5th century CE

Sandstone

The work shown above is from the Gupta period, which existed from the early 4th century to the early 6th century CE. Almost all of the art from this period is religious, with examples from Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism. The sculptures were made of stone or terracotta, and the style of the figures is smooth and idealized. Sculptures of the Buddha often include an ornate halo with floral designs. The figures have half-closed eyes, indicating that they are meditating, and full lips.

Another important period of ancient Indian art is the Gandhara period, which lasted approximately from 100 BCE to the 7th century CE. Gandhara was a civilization located in northern Pakistan, near Afghanistan, and was a location where a lot of cross-cultural influence took place. The Persians and later, Alexander the Great, conquered this area. For this reason, Gandhara-style art consists primarily of sculptures with Indian subject matter, executed in a Greco-Roman style. Figures of the Buddha often have flowing, curled hair and robes that resemble Phidian wet drapery. The stone commonly used for these sculptures was either greenish or bluish gray, as seen in this sculpture of the Buddha:





Sculpture of the Buddha

1st century CE

Schistose rock



TERMS TO KNOW

Buddhism

A religion based on the teachings of the Buddha, which emphasizes that all suffering in life comes from desire and that the way to achieve nirvana, or enlightenment, and release from the cycle of life is to eliminate one's earthly desires.

Ashoka

An important Buddhist king of 3rd-century BCE India, known for his edicts, posted at the top of monumental pillars.

Mudra

Hand position, usually associated with Buddhist sculpture.

4. Jainism

The third and final major religion of ancient India is **Jainism**. Jainism, once a major religion in ancient India, originated sometime before the 9th century BCE. However, it has since been marginalized to a minor religion, unlike Hinduism, which is still quite a major religion, or Islam, which is practiced by many in modern-day India.

One of the central figures in Jainism is **Mahavira**, who was the 24th Tirthankara, or supreme teacher, of Jainism. Unlike the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), Jainism does not rely on the concept of either a creator god or even a person who provides the central tenets of the religion. In fact, Mahavira even preached against the worship of gods and goddesses as a way to salvation. Instead, Jains venerate ascetics, or people who have chosen a path of extreme simplicity and poverty. They also follow five great vows, which include the following:

1. Nonviolence
2. Truth
3. Not taking what has not been given
4. Celibacy
5. Nonattachment

Jainism emphasizes the importance of all life, to the point that some ascetics wear a cloth across their faces in order to avoid accidentally inhaling an insect. While they practice vegetarianism, they also will avoid eating root vegetables, like potatoes, because this involves killing the entire plant, as well as fruits with a large number of seeds.

One of these laws is a very forward-thinking idea, pluralism, which is concerned with truth and the relativity of viewpoints. There's not a single perception of truth, but instead, it depends on your point of view. This idea of pluralism is much different than the Christian religion idea that truth is universal.

Another thought, or law, has to do with the cosmic spirit or soul that all living things are endowed with, from the lowliest bacteria to human beings. Essentially, souls are inherently pure, and karma attaches itself to a soul.

These religions were integrated within the lives of the people. They were very well defined and affected all areas of life. It is important to understand the culture of the people that were participants of these religions in order to understand one, or all, of these individual religions.

☞ EXAMPLE Below is an image of Mahavira. You might notice that there are two swastikas in this image. The “swastik” (a more accurate translation of the original Sanskrit) is a symbol of Jainism that predates its use as a symbol of hate by thousands of years. The four dots between the arms of the swastik represent the four destinies of the soul that has not yet reached enlightenment. Jains will often draw a swastik on a vessel or make an image of it in rice as part of their rituals.





Statue of the Mahavira at the Shri Mahavirji

Rajasthan, India

The exact date of this sculpture is unknown, but it is thought to be over one thousand years old.



TERMS TO KNOW

Jainism

A religion founded in ancient India that teaches the immortality and transmigration of the soul and denies the existence of a perfect or supreme being.

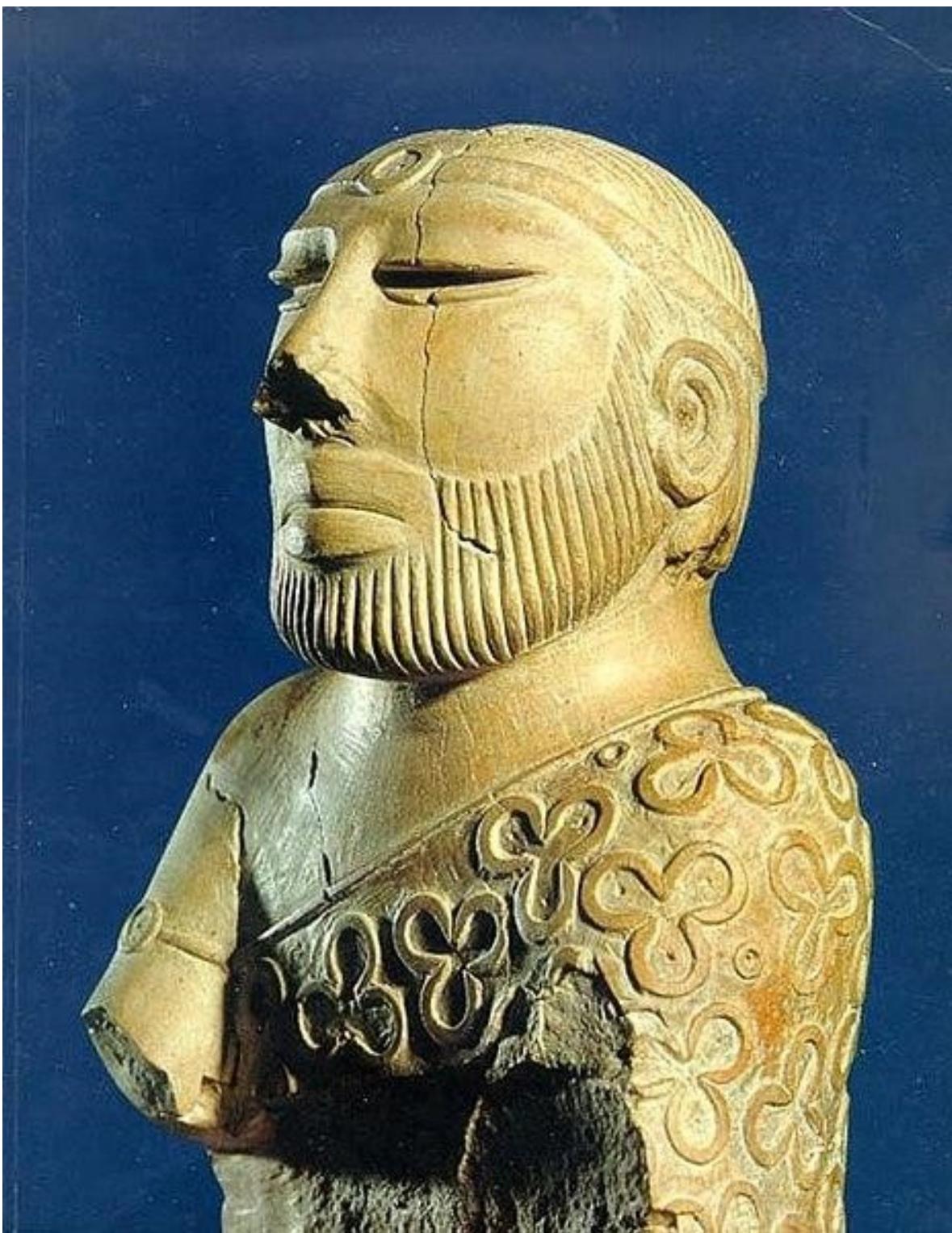
Mahavira

The 24th Tirthankara, or supreme teacher, of Jainism.

5. Examples of Indian Art

The earliest known civilization located in present-day Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan is the Indus Valley Civilization, which coexisted with Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt. The two largest cities were Harappa and Mohenjo-daro. According to archaeological evidence, Harappa once had a population of up to 50,000 people, which is much larger than any other city in its area. Harappa and Mohenjo-daro consisted of buildings made of baked brick laid out according to a grid. This, along with elaborate water drainage and supply systems, suggests that there was urban planning at this site. Unlike Mesopotamia and Egypt, no major temples or works of art have been found at Indus River sites. Most of the objects are small and can be held in one's hand.

↗ EXAMPLE The first example of Indian art is a smaller stone sculpture of the priest-king, located in Mohenjo-daro from 2000 BCE to 1900 BCE.



Priest-king from Mohenjo-daro

2000–1900 BCE

Stone

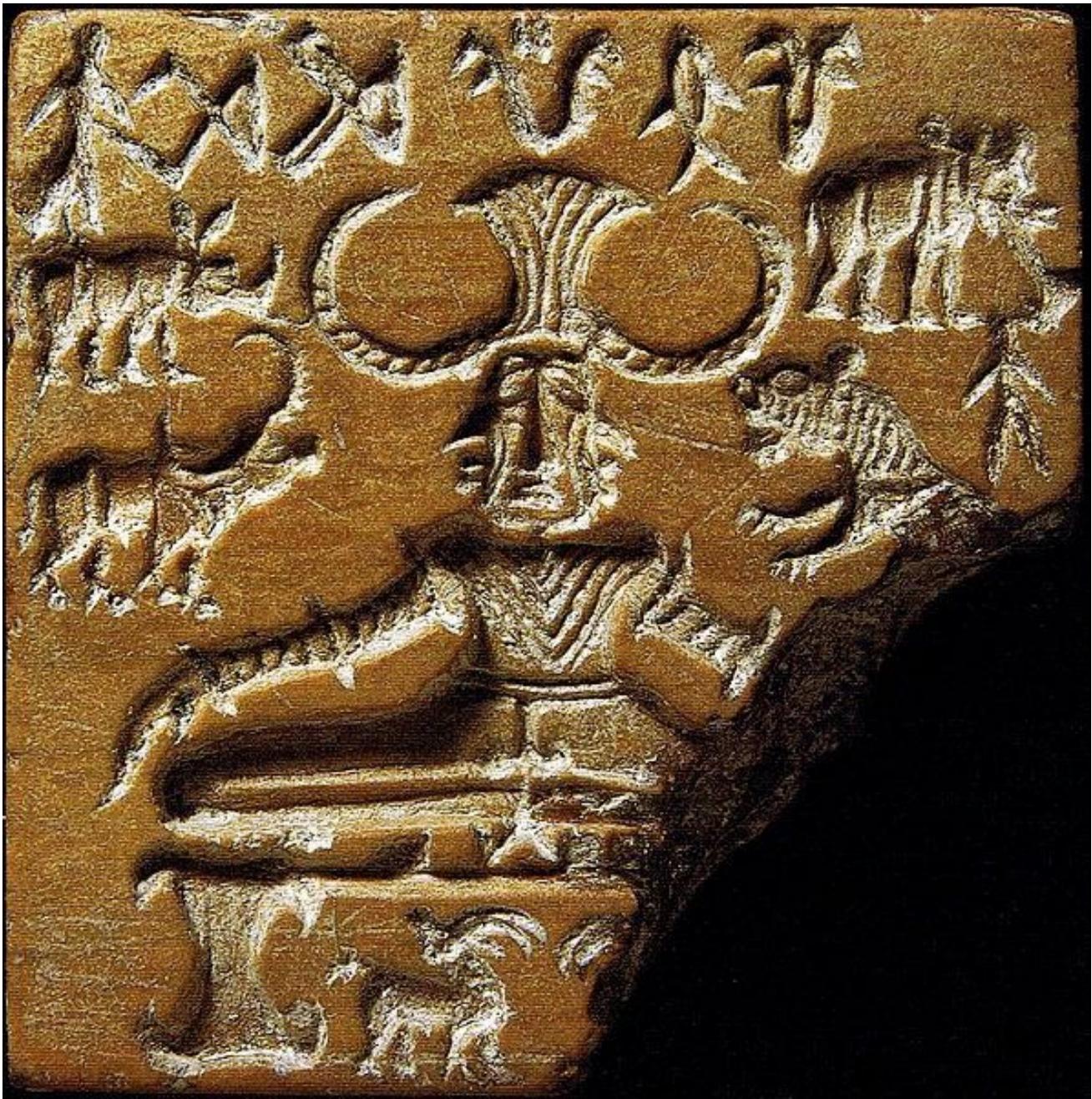


THINK ABOUT IT

Art historians do not know the status of the person portrayed in this sculpture. Was he a priest, king, or god? He appears to be a person of some importance, with a facial expression that suggests confidence. Traces of material found on the exterior of this figure also suggest that it originally had inlaid elements. Interestingly, this sculpture has similarities to artworks explored in previous lessons, including:

- The scroll-like ear on the mask of Agamemnon (Aegean area)
- The stylized beard (Sumerian areas)
- Trefoil-patterned robe

☞ EXAMPLE The next example is a stone relief carving from 2300 BCE to 1750 BCE. It is a seal depicting a figure in a yogic position. Around 3,500 seals have been found at Indus Valley sites. They are usually small, square, and carved out of stone. They have text across the top of the image. We have not deciphered this text, so we do not know what it says. Underneath is usually an image of an animal, or in this case, a person. This figure is sitting in the lotus position, associated with meditation and teaching, is wearing a horned hat or headdress, and also appears to have three faces. It might be an early version of the Hindu deity Shiva, but we do not know for sure. We also do not know what purpose these seals served. Did they represent signatures or stamps? We do know that Indus Valley people participated in trade networks, so it is possible that these seals were used somehow in that process.



Seal with a figure in a yogic posture

2300–1750 BCE

Stone

Some interesting features of this example are:

- The horn-shaped hat or crown
- Portrayal of a three-faced figure
- The yogic pose



DID YOU KNOW

This yogic posture is an important part of the religion of the ancient Indians. It potentially dates back as far as 2300 BCE.



TERM TO KNOW

Trefoil

A decorative shape with three lobes.



SUMMARY

Religion was extremely important to ancient Indian culture. In this lesson, you learned about the **period and location of ancient India**.

Three main religions of this region were explored in this lesson, starting with **Hinduism**, which is centered about the ideas of rebirth or reincarnation and the idea that samsara can lead to unhappiness. **Buddhism** is based on the teachings of Gautama Buddha, who was known as the Buddha, or the Enlightened One. The third main religion is **Jainism**. One of the central figures in Jainism is Mahavira, who established the central tenets of this faith. These foundational laws describe what Jainism encompasses.

Finally, you explored two **examples of Indian art**. The first example was a sculpture of the priest-king from Mohenjo-daro. This piece of artwork has similarities to artwork from previous lessons. The second piece of art was the seal with a figure in a yogic position, dated from 2300 BCE to 1750 BCE.

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TERMS TO KNOW

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An important Buddhist king of 3rd-century BCE India, known for his edicts, posted at the top of monumental pillars.

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A system of religious practice in India that emphasizes the idea of dharma, or duty, and corresponding daily rituals and practices.

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The 24th Tirthankara, or supreme teacher, of Jainism.

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