Chapter 4: Central Asia and India's Beginnings: 4-5 Buddhism
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4-5 Buddhism

Buddhism is, and has long been, one of the great religions of the world. It has adherents throughout all South and East Asian nations and includes several sects. Buddhism today has the third-largest membership of all faiths, after Christianity and Islam. Historically, its appeal has always lain in its highly "democratic" nature: anyone who seeks the divine can experience it in the Buddhist *nirvana*. Buddhism began in India as an intellectual and emotional revolt against the emptiness of Vedic ritualism. Originally an earthly philosophy that rejected the idea of immortal life and the gods, it was turned into a supernatural belief system soon after the death of its founder, the Buddha.

Siddhartha Gautama ((sih-DAHR-thah GAW-tah-mah) The proper name of the Buddha.) (sih-DAHR-thah GAW-tah-mah; 563–483 B.C.E.), an Indian aristocrat, was the Buddha—or Enlightened One—and his life is fairly well documented (see Framing History: Patterns of Belief). As a young man, he wandered for several years through the north of India seeking more satisfying answers to the riddle of life. Only after intensive meditation was he finally able to come to terms with himself and human existence. He then became the teacher of a large and growing band of disciples, who spread his word gradually throughout the subcontinent and then into East Asia. Buddhism eventually came to be much more important in China and Japan than in India, where it was practically extinct by 1000 C.E.

Framing History

Patterns of Belief: The Buddha

Traditions say that Siddhartha Gautama (c. 563–483 B.C.E.) was the pampered son of a princely Indian family in the northern borderlands of present-day Nepal. A member of the Kshatrija caste of warrior-governors, the young man had every prospect of a conventionally happy and rewarding life as master of a handful of villages. Married young to a local aristocrat like himself, he dedicated himself to hunting, feasting, and revelry—the usual pursuits of his class and time.

But in his late twenties, a notable change occurred. According to a cherished Buddhist legend, on successive excursions he encountered an aged man, then a sick man, and finally a corpse by the roadside. These reminders of the common fate set the young man thinking about the nature of all human life in a (for him) novel way. Finally, he abandoned home, wife, and family, and set out to find his own answers. In the already traditional Indian fashion, he became a wandering ascetic, begging a handful of rice to stay alive while seeking truth in meditation.

Years went by as Siddhartha sought to answer his questions. But for a long time he found no convincing answers—neither in the extreme self-denial practiced by some nor in the mystical contemplation recommended by others. At last, as he sat under the *bodhi* tree (the tree of wisdom) through an agonizingly long night of intensive meditation, enlightenment reached him. He arose, confident in his new perceptions, and began to gather around him the beginnings of the community known as Buddhists (“the enlightened ones”).

Reclining Buddha.

A so-called reclining Buddha, one of the frequent colossal representations of the Buddha, on the island of Sri Lanka, the center of the Theravada school of the religion.

Nomad / Nomad

From that point on, the Buddha developed a philosophy that was a revision of the ruling Vedic Hindu faith of India and, in some important ways, a denial of it. By the time of the Buddha’s death, the new faith was firmly established, and some version of his teaching would gradually grow to be the majority viewpoint before being extinguished in the land of its birth.

In the original Buddhism, little attention was given to the role of the supernatural powers in human life or to reincarnation. The gods were thought to exist but to have minimal influence on an individual’s karma, or fate. Gods could not assist a person to find what Hindus call moksha and Buddhists nirvana, or the state of release from earthly life and its inherent suffering. But in time, this changed among the majority (Mahayana) Buddhists, who came to look on the Buddha and other bodhisattvas as divine immortals who could be called on for spiritual assistance.

Analyze and Interpret

How do you suppose the Buddha would have received this development—himself and bodhisattvas being considered divine—during his own lifetime? The answer is not hard to guess because his rejection of supernatural deities was well known. But it remains true that the very breadth of Buddhist doctrines and practices, which range from simple repetitive chants to the most refined intellectual exercise, has allowed a sizable proportion of humankind to identify with this creed in one or another of its forms.

Buddhism quickly spread among Indians of all backgrounds and regions, carried forth by the Buddha's disciples during his lifetime. What made it so appealing?

The **Eightfold Path** (The Buddha's teachings on attaining perfection.) to spiritual bliss, or **nirvana** ((ner-VAH-nah) The Buddhist equivalent of the Hindu moksha; the final liberation from suffering and reincarnation.) (ner-VAH-nah), demands right (or righteous, we would say) ideas, right thought, right speech, right action, right living, right effort, right consciousness, and right meditation. The person who consistently follows these steps is assured of conquering desire, and will therefore be released from suffering. The heart of the Buddha's message is that suffering and loss in this life are caused by the desire for an illusory power and happiness. Once the individual understands that power is not desirable and that such happiness is self-deception, the temptation to pursue them will gradually disappear. The individual will then find the serenity of soul and the harmony with nature and fellow human beings that constitute true fulfillment.

Much of the popularity of Buddhism stemmed from its *democracy of spirit*. Everyone—male and female, high and low—was able to discover the Four Truths and follow the Eightfold Path. No one was excluded because of caste restrictions or poverty.

Soon after the Buddha's death, his followers made him into a god with eternal life—a thought foreign to his own teaching. His movement also gradually split into two major branches: *Theravada* and *Mahayana* Buddhism.

Theravada (thayr-rah-VAH-dah), "doctrine of the elders," or Hinayana, "the lesser vehicle," is the stricter version of the faith. **Theravada Buddhism** ((thayr-rah-VAH-dah) A strict monastic form of Buddhism entrenched in Southeast Asia; same as Hinayana Buddhism.) emphasizes life in a monastery (**sangha** (A Buddhist monastery. Sanghas often served as havens for travelers, especially those on a religious pilgrimage.)) for both men and women and takes a rather rigorous approach to what a good person who seeks nirvana must

believe. It claims to be the pure form of the Buddha's teachings and rejects the idea of the reincarnation of the Master or other enlightened ones (called *bodhisattva* [boh-dih-SAHT-vah]) appearing on Earth. It is particularly strong in Sri Lanka and Cambodia.

Mahayana (mah-hah-YAH-nah) Buddhism ((mah-hah-YAH-nah) A more liberal, looser form of Buddhism; originating soon after the Buddha's death, it deemphasized the monastic life and abstruse philosophy in favor of prayer to the eternal Buddha and the bodhisattvas who succeeded him.) is much more liberal in its beliefs, viewing the doctrines of the Buddha as a sort of initial step rather than as the ultimate word. The word *Mahayana* means "the larger vehicle," reflecting the belief that there are many ways to salvation. Its faithful believe that there are many Buddhas, not just Siddhartha Gautama, and that many more will appear. Monastic life is a good thing for those who can assume it, but most Mahayana Buddhists will never do so and do not feel themselves disadvantaged thereby. Mahayana adherents far outnumber the others and are found in Vietnam, China, Japan, and Korea.