

Buddhism Throughout the Ages

Michael Levin

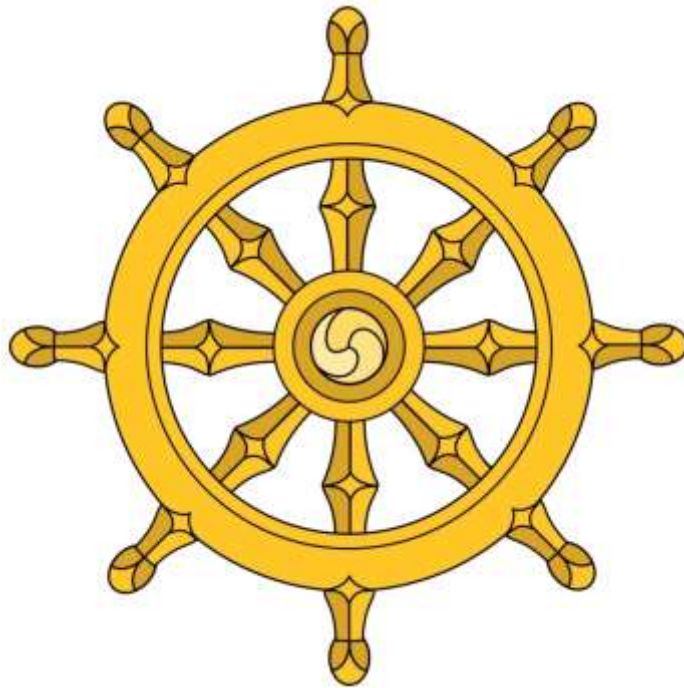
This is the first of three talks on the history and lineages of Buddhism. You may visualize the three talks as being three concentric circles working from the outside in.

1. Buddhism Throughout the Ages
2. The Vajrayana Buddhism of Tibet – The Path of the Three Yanas
3. Lineage, Transmission and Lifestyle – Our Spiritual Ancestry

This first talk is a lecture with some historical and geographic background as to the origin of Buddhism, how it spread, and the various schools that developed throughout the ages. It makes use of some maps and images from two Wikipedia articles:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Buddhism, and

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schools_of_Buddhism . So relax and enjoy the show.

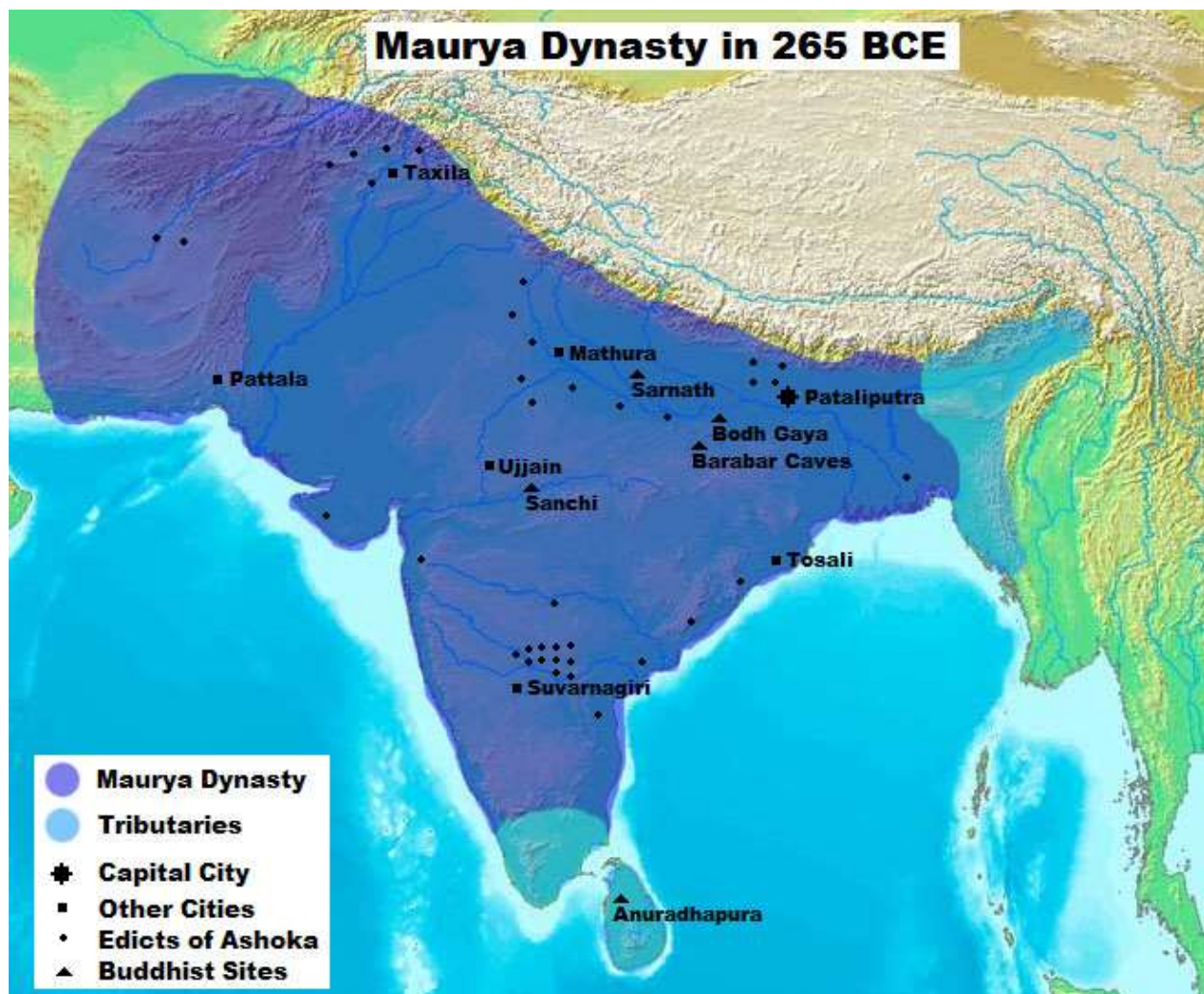


The Buddha, Gautama, Siddhartha, Shakyamuni, whatever you want to call him, was born within several decades of 500 BCE, scholars are not certain. The oldest written teachings are from several centuries later, and the earliest iconography or image dates from around 100 CE. The story of his life is well known and has many elaborations, and is the source of many teachings. Briefly, he was born a royal prince, the son of the ruler of a small kingdom in what is now Nepal. Sages and astrologers prophesized that he would either be a great king and ruler, or a great teacher of the path of liberation. Since his father wanted an heir to his throne, Gautama was brought up in great luxury, trained in all manner of athletic and intellectual skills, but sheltered from any sight of old age, sickness or death. He was married to a beautiful and dignified princess who bore him a son. Nevertheless, when he discovered that everything in the world is

impermanent, and that everyone is subject to aging, body decay and death, he was so affected that he gave up all this to discover the path of liberation for all beings. This took perhaps six years culminating in sitting awake under a tree all night and obtaining realization just at dawn. He lived to be eighty years old, traveling and giving many teachings.

The oldest documents, historically, are the *Tripitaka* or Three Baskets. The three are the *Sutras* or teachings given by Gautama, the *Vinaya* or rules of the monastic order, and the *Abhidharma* or Buddhist psychology and philosophy. The sutras are the earliest source of many very basic teachings including the four noble truths, the eightfold noble path and the four foundations of mindfulness. The course that we will be offering in the fall of 2015, *The Development of Ego* is based on the Abhidharma.

The spread of Buddhism was energized by the great emperor Ashoka who lived around 250 BCE. He conquered a large part of the Indian subcontinent, organized a council which put the Tripitaka into its final form, and proselytized Buddhism throughout his kingdom and beyond.

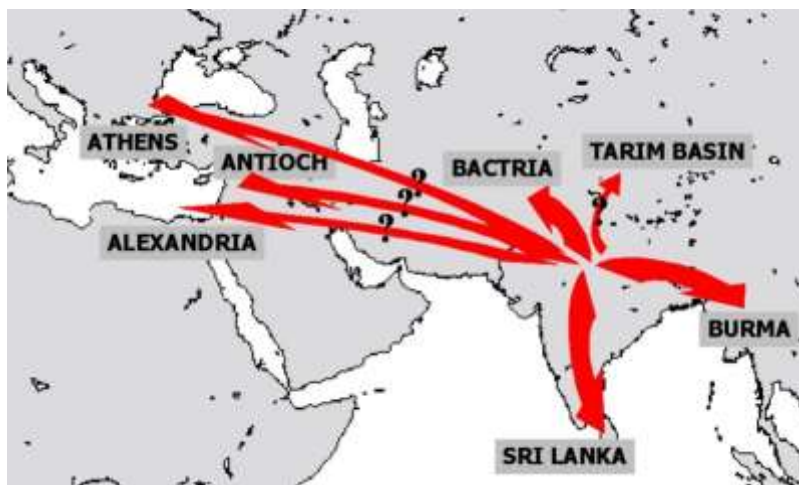


Ashoka's Empire is shown in blue.



The Great Stupa at Sanchi commissioned by Ashoka

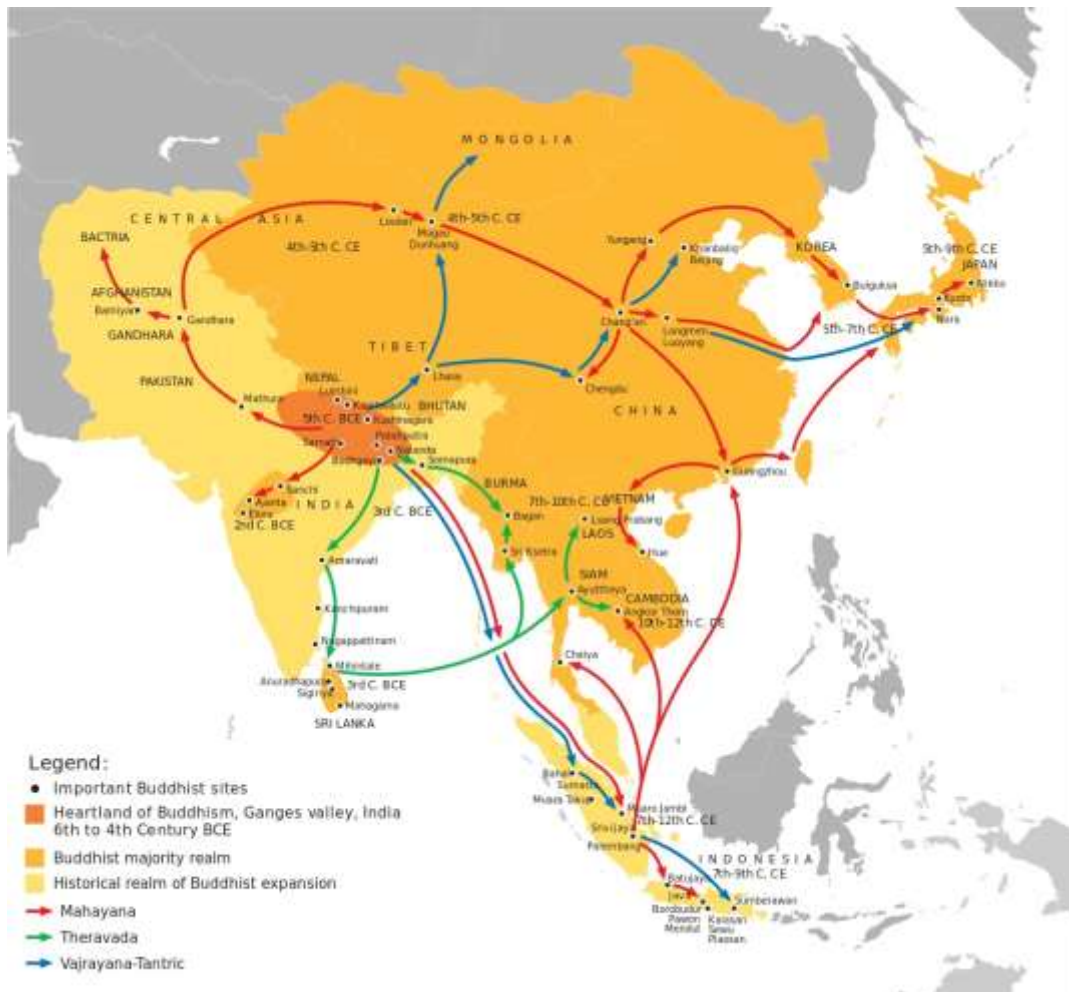
Alexander the Great died in Persia in 323 BCE at the age of 32. Before then, he had built an empire that extended from Greece to the Punjab, where it bumped into the Maurya Empire. One consequence of this was a vast cultural exchange which brought Greek literature and philosophy east to India, and in the other direction Buddhism traveled west through Persia to Greece. As the next map shows, Ashoka's proselytizing of Buddhism reached all the way to Athens. In return, Greek philosophy began to influence Buddhist teachings.



Ashoka's Proselytizing of Buddhism

According to scholars, Mahayana Buddhism was deeply influenced by Greek philosophy. Buddhism had from the start taught anatman (non-self). Mahayana enlarged this teaching by introducing shunyata (emptiness). Around 100 CE is the start of what is known as the Prajñāparamita (transcendent knowledge) literature. The Mahayana sutras have a different flavor than the tripitaka sutras. In the tripitaka, the Buddha is typically giving a discourse to an audience of close disciples, often monks. In the Mahayana, there is a vast assembly of great bodhisattvas, as well as monks, and the location is elevated and spacious. The most famous example of this is the Heart Sutra which we have posted previously and studied. It is the root of all the subsequent Mahayana and is chanted in all Zen schools as well as all Tibetan schools. Another famous Mahayana sutra is the Diamond Sutra which lies at the foundations of Zen.

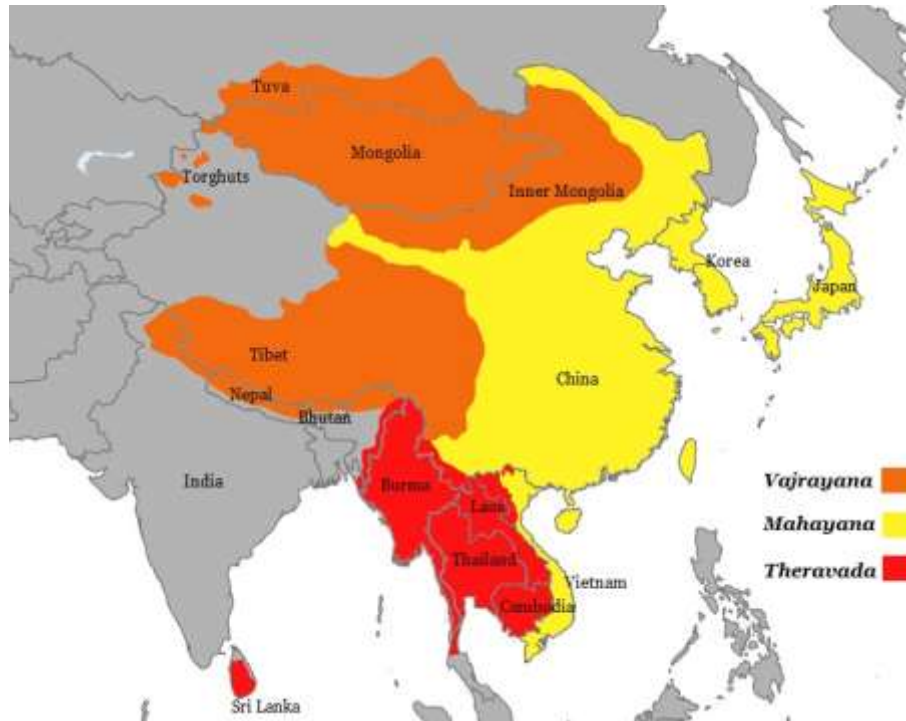
In addition to philosophy, the Greeks also introduced dialectic – the use of debate to transcend fixed positions and open to a larger truth. Nagarjuna (around 150 – 250 CE according to scholars) had a vast influence on all development of the Mahayana, and in Tibet is revered as a second Buddha. He is the famous teacher of Madhyamika, which is the use of dialectic to transcend and exhaust all possible concepts to arrive at a direct realization of shunyata.



The Spread of Buddhism in Asia

This map shows the spread of Buddhism over a larger timespan. The green arrows are for Theravada which spread to Sri Lanka fairly early, and from there to Burma and Laos by sea routes. The red arrows show the Mahayana which includes Zen. Most famous is Bodhidharma who traveled by sea to China around 500 CE. He is the founder of Zen (Chan in Chinese) and brought the Heart Sutra, the Diamond Sutra and the Lankavatara Sutra to China. Zen subsequently spread to Korea and Japan.

The next map shows where the major divisions of Buddhism were practiced by the twentieth century

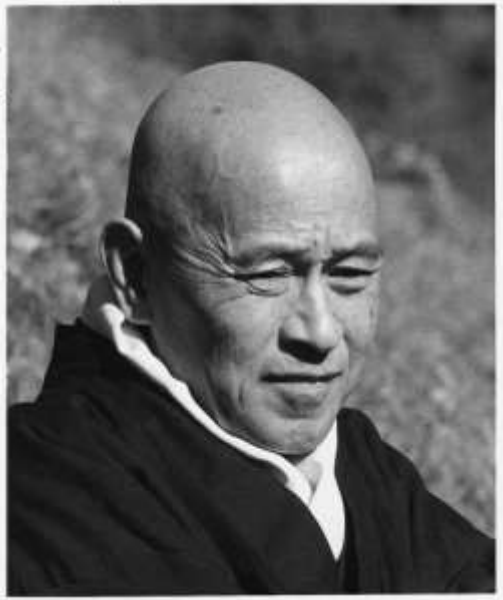


Major Divisions of Buddhism in Asia Today

Over the centuries, all sorts of schools have come and gone. Today, Theravadin Buddhism is found in Sri Lanka, Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. The Mahayana area of the map is mainly Zen. It is practiced in China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam.



Thich Nat Hahn is a Vietnamese Zen Master.



Above: Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche
Left: Shunryu Suzuki, Roshi

Shunryu Suzuki was a Zen Master born in Japan who immigrated to San Francisco where he founded the Zen Center there. His meeting with Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche was a profound experience to Trungpa Rinpoche who described the encounter as meeting his father in America.

Vajrayana Buddhism is practiced in Tibet and neighboring Bhutan, and Nepal as well as Mongolia.

Many important Mahayana texts were written in Northern India in a language called Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit. Sanskrit itself had long since ceased to be a spoken language but was used for academic and institutional reasons as is Latin in Europe. After 1100 CE, most of the Mahayana literature written in Sanskrit disappeared from India, and is available today only in Tibetan or Chinese translation.

To bring this story up to date:

- Since 1959, the invasion of Tibet by the Chinese army has resulted in massive executions of Buddhist teachers and monks and the physical destruction of monasteries, sacred ritual objects and books. Many Tibetans fled to India where there is now a sizable exile community. The Dalai Lama and a large exile community live in Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, India. The Karmapa XVII, who escaped Tibet in 2000, also lives there. There are Tibetan communities in many other parts of India including Orissa as well as South India. There are also Tibetan exiles in Nepal.
- Within the past five decades many Buddhist teachers have immigrated to North America, Europe, Singapore, Australia and many other places. Within a short time, Buddhism has become world-wide, but always as a small minority of the general population. Teachers have come from all three major divisions of Buddhism. Whenever Buddhism in its long history has traveled to a new land with its own culture and language, the form that Buddhism takes

must undergo some change, but in order to be authentic, that which is the quintessential Buddhist essence must be preserved. This is not necessarily visible from the outside.

- The availability of Tibetan texts in English translation has vastly improved in the past several decades both in quality and quantity. In 1970 there were few translations from Tibetan available at all, and it was difficult to make any sense of them because the English was a rather pious mishmash of King James Bible vocabulary. Trungpa Rinpoche founded the Nalanda Translation Committee to produce quality translations and find English words that vividly invoke the original. Only practitioners under the guidance of a teacher are able to do this. There are now many other competent Tibetan translation groups and individuals. In the process, the power of the English language to express deep spiritual matters with precision has evolved and matured.
- The TBRC (Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center) headquartered in Harvard Square, Cambridge, MA, with offices in Chengdu, China and Kathmandu, Nepal recovers Tibetan texts, images them, and makes them available on the web for scholars and translators. The Chinese government actively supports the Tibetan cultural recovery project.

This has been a brief lecture on Buddhism and its major divisions throughout its history. Obviously there are far more details than could be presented here.

The next talk will be on the Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism of Tibet based on the three Yana approach, Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana, the lesser, greater and indestructible vehicles.