

History of buddhism religion history essay



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The history of Buddhism is also had a lot of movements and split among them. They split into many groups. The major groups are the Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana. Each of them has their own tradition and belief.

Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha)

Nobody knows for certain about the details of the Buddha's life, but most scholars agree that he was an actual historical figure. The events of the Buddha's life are recorded in both Buddhist art and texts.

Siddhartha Gautama was the historical founder of Buddhism, who lived in northern India around the 5th century BCE. After meditation and asceticism for many years, Siddhartha Gautama is the first person who discovered the Buddhist Middle Way or a path of moderation away from the extremes of self-mortification and self-indulgence.

Buddha Siddhartha Gautama was born in the Lumbini, South of Nepal. He is a son of a king named Suddhodana and a queen named Maha Maya. In his early life, he was born as a prince and lived in the royal palace. At his young age of 29 years, after encountered all four signs, an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and a monk, the prince of the Shakya clan in Nepal, Rejected his wealthy, abandoned the luxuries of palace, and left his wife and his young son, to become a wandering ascetic. He retired to the forest in search of enlightenment. And he followed a spiritual life of meditation. He continued meditating until he saw the light of truth.

After six years of an ascetic life, practicing self-denial, discipline and meditation, one evening he attained enlightenment under the pipal Tree in

Bodh Gaya, India, which resulted in the alleviation of all his pain and suffering. He decided that a middle path between luxury and indignity of the body will provide the best way of achieving enlightenment.

In the morning he became a Buddha or an 'enlightened one'. In the same way as any other religious founders he begins to gather his own disciples. Soon after that, He becomes known to his followers as the Buddha.

For the remaining years of his life after he achieved enlightenment, Buddha traveled to Northeastern India and other regions.

Just before Buddha died, he told his followers that after he died the Dharma which is doctrine or his teaching would be their leader.

Buddha's words was considered the primary source of Dharma or the rules of discipline and community living, however there is no evidence of his sayings has survived. The versions of the canon or the accepted scripture preserved in Pail, Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan language are different in each branch of the Buddhism because of the oral transmission during over three centuries. That makes it not accurate.

Buddhism slowly spread to many countries all around the world the primary Indian foundation was expanded by as far as Hellenistic area, Central Asian, East Asian, and Southeast Asian. The history of Buddhism also show that there are movements and it was developed into many divisions, such as Theravada, Mahayana, etc.

The spread of Buddhism

In northern India, by the time of Buddha's death, he was about eighty years old; the Buddha's followers organize the communities of monks.

Most of the early Buddhism still remained centered around the Ganges valley, where the Buddha lived. They spread increasingly from its ancient central land. The canonical sources record two councils, and the Sangha established the literal collections based on the teachings of Buddha and discuss the certain disciplinary problems within the community.

1st Buddhist council (5th c. BCE)

Sangha is the first council of Buddhism which is held in Rajagaha. It was organized a couple of months after Buddha attained Mahaparinirvana or died. They aimed to develop an agreement on Buddha's teachings. However they still did not write the teaching down anywhere.

The Second Council (4th c. BCE)

The second council took place at Vesali around a hundred years after the Buddha died. This council aimed to subside a conflict over the nature of the arahant or the Buddhist saint and monastical discipline, which had arisen between Mahasanghika majority of eastern India and Sthavira minority of the west.

Although we do not exactly sure what happened at this council, we do know that it effected in a split in the Buddhist community. Many groups of the monks were expelled and some of them left by choice because they did not agree with clarifications of the Buddha's teachings by the other group.

The group that continued staying called themselves the Elders or “Thera’ in Pali. They thought that they were the only one who was still keeping with the original spirit of the teachings of Buddha. The other group called themselves the Great Community or ‘Mahasanghika’ in Sanskrit. This group interpreted Buddha’s teachings in more liberal way, but in a route that they felt was more true to his objectives. These two groups finally develop into Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism. Which are the major groups of Buddhism in today.

The Era of Asoka the Great (3rd century BC)

The first Buddhist ruler was Asoka. He was the Emperor of the Magadhan Empire, and he rules over much of the Indian subcontinent. At first, his goal is to expanding his empire as far as possible, but he changed his mind after attending the cruel massacre at the battle of Kalinga. This occurrence led him towards Buddhism. Soon after that he was the first one who built his empire as a Buddhist state. He carved His inscriptions on pillars and rocks around his empire bear witness to the spread of Buddhism and his support of the Buddha’s principles. He also laid the foundation of abundant stupas and spread the teachings of Buddha throughout the outside world.

With Asoka encouragement, Buddhism could spread to the south of India as well as into Sri Lanka. It has remained until today, the earliest form of Buddhism, known as Theravada ‘school of elders’.

In the time of Asoka there is a little conflict within Buddhism, implicating an explanation of the Buddha’s fundamentally simple message of personal salvation.

Mahayana and Theravada

In Mahayana the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, happens to be the latest in a long line of past Buddhas. They remain in some place apart from this physical world, from which they can offer support. And in that place, there are all the Bodhisattvas, who have already begun the final human life in which they will attain enlightenment as Buddha. They also are able to help human who show them devotion.

Mahayana means the Great Vehicle. Its followers try to convince that this form of Buddhism is able carry a more people towards the truth than Theravada Buddhism, which they call as 'Hinayana' or the little vehicle.

The main difference is that in Theravada Buddhism the Buddha is a historical figure who shows the way towards nirvana by his example. This group is basically a human system of self-discipline, with nothing about god. In the younger but larger cult there is still no god, but there are a numerous number of supernatural beings.

In Theravada, they worship relics of the Buddha. In Mahayana, there is opportunity for more varied, more popular and more superstitious forms of worship. It is appropriated to call themselves as the greater vehicle.

Decline of Buddhism in India

Buddhism went on a downward spiral in India in the seventh century, because of the blooming of Hinduism. There was a decline of Buddhism in the northwest of India.

In India, Buddhism grown alongside Hinduism for several years, but from about the 8th century it declines. However Theravada Buddhism finds a stable home in Sri Lanka. The Mahayana's form of the faith becomes slowly descend by the older and more powerful Hinduism. It was very hard for Indian to worship everything.

A weakened Buddhism was not interesting enough for the arrival in northern India in the 10th century of rulers proclaiming another strong faith, Islam. Buddhism becomes simply a weak devotional appearance at a few classic temples. It is the only world religion to be faded down in its birthplace.

Spread of Buddhism to East Asia

Buddhism is the first religion of the world that expanding from its place of origin to other areas. It does so by two definite routes. Each group goes by different ways.

In the 2nd century AD, Mahayana Buddhism travels by a land route. At that time, the north of India and Afghanistan are ruled by the Kushan dynasty. One of the kings in this dynasty, Kanishka, is a follower of Mahayana Buddhism. His support and encouragement of Buddhism has special significance, because his kingdom obtains a central position on the Silk Road at the time when its caravans efficiently link China with Rome.

Theravada Buddhism is spread eastwards into Southeast Asia, in an improvement of Indian trade from the 1st century AD. There were the merchants and sailors who are either Buddhist, or some missionaries who take benefit of the new opportunities for travel. As a result, most of the

kingdoms in Southeast Asia were much influenced by the more advanced civilization of India. These countries also adopt Buddhist religious practices. It often results in the preference of a ruling dynasty. The areas which finally choose Buddhism are Cambodia, Burma, Laos, and Thailand.

Spread of Buddhism in China

Buddhism started spreading into China about 1st century CE. And coexists there, alongside with China's indigenous religions – Daoism and Confucianism.

When China expanded its power to Central Asia, and they start trade between each other. The Chinese people learned about Buddhism from the Central Asians who were already Buddhists. By the middle of the first century C. E., a society of Chinese Buddhists was already in presence.

Until the 8th century it became an extremely active center of Buddhism.

Spread of Buddhism in Korea and Japan

In the fourth century CE, Buddhism existed in Korea and from there, the religion spread to Japan in around 538 CE. Buddhism had become the major religion of the country at the end of the century. In 8th century CE, the religion spread under the encouragement of Emperor Shomu. Later the schools of Buddhism, Tendai and Shingon schools were developed in Japan.

The invention of printing is a remarkable achievement of Buddhists in eastern Asia. Korea contribute the world's firstly known printed document is a sutra printed on a single sheet of paper in 750 AD.

Spread of Buddhism in the West

The Buddha's teachings have been known in many countries throughout Asia for over 2, 000 years, but only very few people in America and Europe have heard about Buddhism.

Over a hundred years ago people from England, German, France, and other European countries began to travel in the Far East. Several of them returned with Eastern concepts. That makes Europeans began to hear about Buddhism.

Many of Buddhist books were brought to Europe by people who had visited the Eastern countries. These texts waked the interest of some European scholars who then began to learn more about them. And many Europeans who had travelled to the East to study Buddhism returned to their home. Some of them had become monks and joined the Buddhist monks from other Buddhist countries in Asia.

After that, Buddhist people have moved to the West. Many of them escape from the fight. For example, Many Tibetans, fled from their own country after the Chinese takeover. The wars in Indochina made many Vietnamese people decided to move to live in Europe and United State. Other Buddhists from other countries such as Thailand have started businesses in the larger Western cities. They have taken their Buddhist beliefs to their new communities, and set up the Buddhist communities.

Buddhism today

Currently, Buddhism has spread to almost every country in the world. There are around 350 million Buddhists all together. Almost half of them practice Mahayana tradition. The largest population of Buddhist is in China; However, Thailand, Myanmar and Cambodia have the highest proportion of Buddhists in their population.

Buddhism is still the most widespread of the ancient religions in East Asia. The strongest concentration is in Sri Lanka, the notable lands of Theravada Buddhism and the three countries, beside to each other, Burma, Cambodia and Thailand. Some Buddhists still practicing in Mahayana , which are in China, Tibet, and Mongolia. In Japan a majority still sticks to different forms of Buddhism.

Nowadays, the faith has begun to spread to new regions. There is now a significant minority of Buddhists in Europe and America.