

THE ORIGINS OF BUDDHISM

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RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS OF ANCIENT INDIA

The Brahmanical Tradition (primary sources of Hinduism):

- a. **The Vedas**: hymns and ritual texts of the *brahman* priests
- b. **The Upanishads**: texts containing "secret teachings" — *karma*; **rebirth**; an abiding universal "self" (*Brahman = Atman*)

The Dissenting Traditions

- a. **Jainism** (the oldest; stresses self-discipline and reverence for all living things — *ahimsa*)
- b. *_ramanas*, "wanderers": sought truth on their own, so their perspectives varied
- c. **Buddhism**

Shared Assumptions of Buddhism and the Upanishads:

- 1) Ordinary views concerning reality are inadequate and ultimately delusory.
- 2) Earthly existence is essentially flawed: we form false and improper attachments, and, as a consequence, reap a miserable existence. Through rebirth, we are locked into a vicious cycle of suffering and delusion. This cycle is called *samsara*.
- 3) Ignorance (*avidy_*) prevents us from understanding reality as it truly is, and prevents us from perceiving the true nature of our own reality.
- 4) Through dispelling ignorance, we can learn to perceive the true nature of reality, and to free ourselves from false and improper attachments. As a result, we can eliminate suffering, and escape the vicious cycle of eternal suffering.
- 5) Self-effort is mandatory: we cannot look to any external forces to solve our problems for us.

Differences: Buddhism rejects the *Upanishads*' idea of an abiding universal "self."

EARLY BUDDHISM ("Nikaya Buddhism")

I. Founded in northeast India ca. 500 BCE by Siddhartha **Gautama** (traditional dates 546-486 BCE), a *_ramana* ("wanderer") of the *kshatriya* class. After an experience that he described as "awakening" (*bodhi*, often rendered as "enlightenment"), he came to be called **the Buddha** ("the Awakened One"). In Mah_y_na Buddhism, he came to be called the Buddha *_akyamuni*.

II. Earliest Teachings: Uncertain, but tradition relates that the Buddha's first two lessons were thus:

A. The "Four Noble Truths":

1. Life hurts: our life-experience is full of "suffering" (*dukkha*)
2. "Suffering" is caused by attachment (*trishna*: "craving," "longing") to experiences
3. Eradicating attachment will eradicate "suffering"
4. Attachment can be eradicated through "**The Eightfold Path**":
 - a. Superior Understanding (of the Four Noble Truths)
 - b. Superior Thought or Intention
 - c. Superior Speech
 - d. Superior Action
 - e. Superior Livelihood
 - f. Superior Effort
 - g. Superior Mindfulness
 - h. Superior Concentration

B. The Teaching of "No-self": There is no abiding reality, only "impermanence" (*anitya/anicca*), a constant process of change or flux — everything comes into existence and goes out of existence, like the sound of a lute. Consequently, there is no abiding personal reality, only a set of processes (*skandhas*) to which we falsely attribute a sense of identity. This doctrine is called *anatman/ anatta* (imperfectly translated as "no-self"). Learning these facts, and adjusting our lives accordingly, leads to liberation from suffering.

III. Other Teachings of Early Buddhism:

Though nothing in the earliest teachings seems to assume a belief in rebirth, the Buddha and/or his early disciples quickly accepted the common Indian idea that life operates as a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Because of attachment (*trishna*) and ignorance (*avidyā*), we remain trapped in this cycle (*samsara*), constantly experiencing "suffering." But through learning and practicing the Buddha's teachings ("**the Dharma**"), one can eliminate *trishna* and *avidyā*, thereby **escaping from *samsara***. In Buddhism, the state beyond *samsara* is known as *nirvana*. *Nirvana* is not non-existence, but it cannot be described, except as the cessation of "becoming." (Note: *nirvana* is not "happiness," "utopia" or "Heaven.") The Buddha reportedly taught that each being must work out his/her own liberation from *samsara* by diligent self-discipline. Yet, knowing that it is virtually impossible for people to do so on their own, he established a monastic community ("**the Sangha**"), where people can practice the Dharma together, free of the everyday distractions that plague lay life. Anyone is free to enter the Sangha. (Women were admitted during the Buddha's lifetime; many later Buddhist communities lack a women's order.) Those who do not devote themselves fully to the religious life (i.e., by entering the Sangha) cannot expect to achieve *nirvana* within the present life, but they can build up merit, providing a better rebirth, in which they might be able to live the religious life more fully. The Buddha taught that women are capable of attaining liberation, but many early Buddhists considered women spiritually inferior: some thought that a woman must wait to be reborn as a male before she had much real hope of achieving *nirvana*. Yet, there were women elders (*theris*) as well as male elders (*theras*) in the early Sangha. Also, probably influenced by Jainism, most Buddhists came to regard all sentient beings as equally worthy of life; many Buddhists became vegetarian, though the Buddha himself evidently ate meat and taught nothing of the sort.

THE EVOLUTION OF BUDDHISM

Within a few generations, a number of distinct subtraditions developed within Buddhism. One, now called **Theravada** ("**the Way of the Elders**") stressed respect for the elders (*theras/theris*) and the teachings and practices that they passed down. Another, the Mahasamghika ("[Members of] the Greater Assembly") developed new concepts of the Buddhist life. In the third century BCE, during the reign of king A_oka, Buddhist missionaries travelled throughout India and beyond, to the island of _ri Lanka and to most of Southeast Asia. Theravada Buddhism remains strong in those lands today; some scholars call it "Southern Buddhism." But Buddhism died out in most of India by the 13th century.

Beginning around the 2nd century BCE, **Mah_y_na Buddhism** evolved out of certain tendencies in the Mahasamghika and other subtraditions. It became strong in the northwest border regions, where Buddhist "universities" flourished, and Buddhist art was influenced by Greek traditions. During the first century CE, Mah_y_na Buddhism was carried eastward across the Central Asian trade routes to **China**. In China, several new forms of Buddhism evolved, and some of them gradually spread eastward to Korea and Japan, and southward to Vietnam. A well-known example is Ch'an, known in the West as Zen.

Some scholars also distinguish a third form of Buddhism, generally called Vajrayana or Esoteric Buddhism. It evolved in India after the 3rd century CE, and within a few hundred years had spread to the Himalayan region (e.g., Tibet), and to Mongolia, China and Japan.