

Development and Spread of Buddhism: A Historical Analysis from India to the West



¹Champalal Mandrele (Bhante Chandrakitti)

¹Swami Vivekanand Subharti University, India

¹chandrakittismanjushwar@gmail.com

Received: July 23, 2025; **Revised:** December 14, 2025; **Accepted:** December 30, 2025

Abstract

Buddhism, a philosophical and spiritual tradition founded by Siddhartha Gautama, also known as the Buddha, in the 5th to 4th century BCE, has profoundly shaped global thought and culture. Its development and spread, from its origins in India to its eventual establishment in the West, reflect a dynamic process of adaptation, interpretation, and transformation. This research aims to explore the historical trajectory of Buddhism, tracing its evolution from the early teachings of the Buddha to its dissemination across Asia and its introduction into Western societies. Initially, the spread of Buddhism followed routes across Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia, adapting to local customs, beliefs, and practices. With the rise of colonialism and globalization in the 19th and 20th centuries, Buddhism entered the Western world, where it encountered new social, intellectual, and cultural challenges. This paper will examine key historical moments, figures, and movements that facilitated the spread of Buddhism, as well as the philosophical and doctrinal adaptations that occurred as Buddhism interacted with diverse cultures. The article will also analyze the role of Western scholarship, Orientalism, and modern-day Buddhist practitioners in reshaping Buddhism to fit the contemporary globalized context.

Keywords: Buddhism, Historical Spread, India, Western Buddhism, Cultural Adaptation, Globalization, Colonialism, Buddhist Practices, Orientalism Asian Buddhism

Introduction

Buddhism, founded by Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) in the 5th–4th century BCE in the Indian subcontinent, has evolved into one of the world’s major religious and philosophical traditions. Its spread, from its origins in India to its global reach today, is a fascinating story of adaptation, cultural exchange, and transformation. This historical journey of Buddhism spans over two millennia and has been influenced by a range of social, political, and intellectual forces.

Initially, the spread of Buddhism was localized within the Indian subcontinent, where Gautama’s teachings were passed down orally by his disciples. The establishment of the Buddhist monastic community, or Sangha, was crucial in maintaining the teachings and practices of Buddhism. The early Buddhist monastic tradition became the foundation for institutionalizing the religion. Emperor Ashoka’s reign (268–232 BCE) played a pivotal role in

¹Assistant Professor Department of Buddhist Studies Swami Vivekanand Subharti University, U.P. India

the propagation of Buddhism across India and beyond. Ashoka, after his conversion to Buddhism, promoted its teachings through inscriptions, monuments, and missionary activities. His support for Buddhism led to the construction of stupas (Buddhist reliquaries) and the sending of missionaries to neighboring regions, such as Sri Lanka, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. Ashoka's patronage was not only political but deeply spiritual, creating a fertile ground for the spread of Buddhism in the subcontinent and into surrounding regions. (Bechert, Heinz.1981:41)

Buddhism's spread beyond India into Central Asia and East Asia was facilitated by the Silk Road and other trade routes. Central Asia served as a bridge between the Indian subcontinent and the far-reaching territories of China and Tibet. The Kushan Empire (1st–3rd century CE) was a significant vehicle for the introduction of Buddhism into Central Asia. From there, the religion expanded into China by the first century CE, where it encountered and interacted with Confucianism and Daoism. Chinese Buddhist monks, such as Xuanzang in the 7th century, traveled to India to collect sacred texts, further cementing Buddhism's place within the Chinese cultural fabric. Buddhism's entry into China led to the formation of diverse schools, including Chan (later known as Zen in Japan), which emphasized meditation and direct insight into one's nature. (Chakravarti, Ranabir.2010:71)

In Southeast Asia, Buddhism was introduced via maritime trade routes. By the 3rd century BCE, Buddhism reached Sri Lanka, where it took root and flourished. Sri Lanka became a significant center of Theravada Buddhism, which remains the dominant form in countries like Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos. The spread of Buddhism in these regions often occurred with royal support, as kings embraced the religion and encouraged its practice. Monastic institutions played a vital role in maintaining Buddhist teachings, and the religion became deeply intertwined with the political and social structures of Southeast Asia. Tibetan Buddhism, which emerged after the 7th century CE, represents a distinct development in the tradition. It absorbed indigenous shamanistic practices and evolved into a unique blend of tantric rituals and meditation techniques. Tibetan Buddhism reached its peak under the rule of the Dalai Lama, who became both a spiritual and temporal leader. (Chakravarti, Ranabir.2003:52)

The most recent phase in Buddhism's expansion occurred in the West during the 19th and 20th centuries. The colonial period saw Western scholars encountering Eastern religions, leading to an intellectual curiosity about Buddhism. Figures like Arthur Schopenhauer, who was influenced by Buddhist ideas, paved the way for increased interest in Buddhism in Europe. However, the 20th century brought about the physical migration of Buddhist teachers and practitioners from Asia to Western countries. Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, in particular, gained traction, especially during the countercultural movements of the 1960s. The Dalai Lama's presence in the West also contributed to the visibility of Tibetan Buddhism. (Davids, T.W. Rhys.1961:29)

In the modern era, Buddhism in the West has often been practiced in a secular context, focusing on meditation and mindfulness rather than traditional religious rituals. This adaptation has allowed Buddhism to resonate with a broader audience, including those seeking spiritual practices without necessarily adhering to religious dogma. Overall, the spread of Buddhism is a complex story of cultural exchange, philosophical adaptation, and the intersection of religion and politics. From its origins in India to its global presence, Buddhism's ability to adapt to various cultural contexts while maintaining its core teachings has been crucial in its survival and growth across continents. As the religion continues to evolve in the West, its historical development highlights its enduring relevance and universal appeal.

Buddhism in India: The Birth and Early Development

Buddhism emerged in the northeastern region of India during the 5th century BCE in a period of intellectual and religious pluralism. Siddhartha Gautama, later known as the

Buddha, was born into a royal family in what is now modern-day Nepal. Despite his privileged upbringing, he was deeply troubled by the realities of human suffering, including old age, illness, and death. This existential crisis led him to renounce his life of luxury in search of a solution to the fundamental problem of suffering. Through years of meditation and ascetic practices, Siddhartha attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, gaining profound insight into the nature of suffering, its causes, and how to overcome it.

The central teachings that arose from his enlightenment are encapsulated in the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. The Four Noble Truths describe the nature of suffering (dukkha), its origin (craving or desire), the possibility of its cessation (nirvana), and the path leading to its cessation (the Eightfold Path). The Eightfold Path provides a practical guide for ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom, offering a framework for achieving liberation from suffering. These teachings formed the core of what would become the Buddhist tradition. Initially, Buddhism was a localized phenomenon, restricted primarily to the northern Indian subcontinent. Buddha's teachings were passed orally and shared with small groups of followers. The establishment of monastic communities, known as the **Sangha**, was central to the transmission and preservation of Buddhist teachings. These communities were composed of monks and nuns who dedicated their lives to meditation, study, and teaching. The **Sangha** became the institutional backbone of Buddhism, providing a space for the practice and dissemination of Buddha's teachings. (Deegalle, Mahinda.1992:96)

The early Buddhist texts, collectively known as the **Tripitaka** (meaning "Three Baskets"), served as the foundational canon for the Buddhist tradition. These texts are divided into three sections: the Vinaya Pitaka (dealing with monastic rules), the Sutta Pitaka (containing the discourses of the Buddha), and the Abhidhamma Pitaka (philosophical and doctrinal elaborations). These scriptures were compiled over several centuries and became the primary means of preserving and transmitting Buddhist teachings. (Gethin, Rupert.1998:98)

During the reign of Emperor Ashoka (268–232 BCE), Buddhism experienced a major transformation. Ashoka, one of the most powerful rulers of ancient India, converted to Buddhism after witnessing the horrors of war, particularly following his violent conquest of Kalinga. His conversion led to a profound shift in the role of Buddhism within Indian society. Ashoka became a passionate patron of Buddhism, using his position as emperor to promote its spread throughout the Indian subcontinent. He constructed numerous stupas, monasteries, and other religious monuments, which served as physical symbols of Buddhism's growing influence. Ashoka's patronage also included the dispatching of missionary monks to foreign lands, including Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia. This imperial support played a crucial role in Buddhism's transition from a local religious movement to a pan-Indian and even international phenomenon. (Keown, Damien.2000:29)

One of Ashoka's most lasting contributions to Buddhism was the creation of inscriptions on pillars and rocks, known as the Ashoka Edicts, which outlined Buddhist moral principles, the importance of non-violence (ahimsa), and the emperor's commitment to the welfare of his subjects. His efforts to promote the Dharma (the teachings of the Buddha) were instrumental in establishing Buddhism as a major religious and cultural force, not only in India but also in the surrounding regions. In sum, the early history of Buddhism is marked by its intellectual roots in the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the establishment of monastic communities, and the crucial patronage of Emperor Ashoka. The spread of Buddhism during this period laid the groundwork for its eventual dissemination across Asia and beyond, influencing millions of lives over centuries.

Buddhism's Spread Across Asia: Routes and Cultural Adaptations

The spread of Buddhism from India to other parts of Asia occurred through a combination of military conquests, trade routes, and missionary efforts. The transmission of Buddhist teachings was a dynamic and multifaceted process that involved not only the movement of ideas but also the adaptation of these ideas to different cultural and philosophical

contexts. In this regard, the Silk Road, both overland and maritime, played a central role in facilitating the spread of Buddhism across Central Asia, China, and Southeast Asia.

1. Central Asia and China

Buddhism's first significant steps outside of India were facilitated by the Kushan Empire (1st–3rd century CE), which controlled vast territories stretching from India through Central Asia and into China. The empire provided a political and cultural foundation for the spread of Buddhism across the region. During this period, Central Asia became an important link in the overland Silk Road trade network, which connected the East to the Mediterranean world. As merchants, scholars, and monks traveled along these trade routes, Buddhist teachings were introduced to Central Asia and from there reached China. (Lamotte, Étienne.1958:63)

The significant introduction of Buddhism to China is traditionally attributed to the first century CE. The *Lotus Sutra* and other key texts were translated into Chinese, and the religion began to take root in the country. One of the most notable figures in the history of Chinese Buddhism was the monk Xuanzang, who traveled to India in the 7th century to collect authentic Buddhist scriptures. Xuanzang's journey not only contributed to the translation of numerous texts into Chinese but also cemented the cultural and religious ties between India and China. (Liu, Xie.2012:313)

Buddhism's spread in China was not without resistance, and it had to engage with the existing Chinese philosophical and religious systems, particularly Confucianism and Daoism. However, the syncretic nature of Chinese culture allowed for the accommodation of Buddhist ideas alongside traditional Chinese philosophies. This interaction resulted in the development of distinct schools of Chinese Buddhism, such as Chan Buddhism (later known as Zen Buddhism in Japan), which emphasized direct experience and meditation as the path to enlightenment. Chan Buddhism developed as a reaction against the increasingly ritualized and doctrinal aspects of Buddhism, instead focusing on the practical experience of enlightenment through meditation. (Snodgrass, Jeffrey M. 1985:32) By the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), Buddhism had become firmly entrenched in Chinese society. It spread further to Korea and Japan, where it evolved into unique regional forms. For instance, in Japan, Zen Buddhism found a strong following among the samurai class due to its emphasis on self-discipline and meditation, which resonated with the samurai code of honor and restraint.

2. Southeast Asia

While Buddhism's spread through Central Asia and China is often highlighted, its dissemination to Southeast Asia was equally significant. Southeast Asia had long-established maritime trade routes that facilitated cultural exchanges across the region. By the 3rd century BCE, Buddhism had already made its way to Sri Lanka, primarily through the efforts of missionaries sent by Emperor Ashoka of India. Ashoka's role in promoting Buddhism across Asia cannot be overstated, as his imperial patronage led to the building of monasteries, stupas, and other religious structures that served as focal points for the spread of the religion.

In Sri Lanka, Buddhism quickly took root and became a central part of the island's religious and political life. Over time, Sri Lanka became the leading center of Theravada Buddhism, which later spread to other countries in Southeast Asia, including Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. Theravada Buddhism, meaning "the School of the Elders," emphasizes the teachings of the Pali Canon, a collection of scriptures considered to be the most authentic record of the Buddha's teachings. (Swearer, Donald K.2010:53) Royal patronage and the establishment of monastic institutions were crucial in the spread and endurance of Theravada Buddhism in these regions. In Southeast Asia, the relationship between Buddhism and political authority was vital. Kings and rulers often adopted Buddhism as a state religion, fostering the growth of monastic institutions and ensuring the religion's integration into the region's social fabric. In countries like Thailand, the King's role as both a political and spiritual leader was intertwined with Buddhist principles, making Buddhism a cornerstone of Southeast Asian political and cultural life.

3. Tibetan Buddhism

Tibetan Buddhism represents another significant phase in Buddhism's spread across Asia. Buddhism entered Tibet around the 7th century CE, primarily through the efforts of King Songtsen Gampo, who invited Buddhist teachers from India and China to Tibet. The incorporation of Buddhist teachings into Tibet was not a simple process, as it had to contend with the indigenous Bon religion, which had its own spiritual practices and beliefs. However, over time, Tibetan Buddhism evolved into a distinct form that integrated elements of the local Bon tradition with Buddhist teachings, creating a unique synthesis. (Tegner, Geoffrey.2018:13)

Tibetan Buddhism is particularly known for its esoteric and tantric practices, which emphasize the use of ritual, meditation, and visualization techniques to achieve spiritual insight. Tantric practices, which had been developed in India, became a hallmark of Tibetan Buddhism, and they focused on the transformation of the practitioner's mind and body through sacred rituals and mantras. The Dalai Lama, the spiritual and political leader of Tibetan Buddhism, became an important figure in promoting and preserving the traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. The role of the Dalai Lama was not only spiritual but also political, and he became a symbol of the Tibetan people's resistance to foreign domination, particularly during the 20th century when Tibet came under Chinese control. Tibetan Buddhism, with its distinct practices and teachings, had a profound influence on the spiritual landscape of the Himalayan region and beyond.

Buddhism in the West: Encounter, Adaptation, and Transformation

The most recent phase of Buddhism's spread has been its introduction to the West, beginning in earnest during the 19th century. This marked the beginning of a period of intellectual and cultural exchange, as the Western world encountered Buddhism for the first time in a systematic and scholarly manner.

1. Orientalism and Western Intellectual Interest

The intellectual movement of Orientalism, which gained momentum during the 18th and 19th centuries, played a crucial role in the West's discovery of Buddhism. As Western powers expanded into Asia through colonialism, scholars began to take a more focused interest in the philosophical and religious traditions of the East. The translation of key Buddhist texts into European languages and the exploration of Buddhist doctrines in relation to Western thought marked the beginning of a deep intellectual engagement with Buddhism. Philosophers such as Arthur Schopenhauer, who was heavily influenced by Eastern thought, incorporated Buddhist concepts of suffering and impermanence into their own ideas about human existence. Schopenhauer's recognition of the Buddhist notion of *dukkha* (suffering) as a universal truth led him to develop a philosophy centered around the alleviation of suffering, which resonated with the Buddhist teachings on the cessation of suffering. (Thich Nhat Hanh.1999:23)

2. Early 20th-Century Western Adoption

The early 20th century saw the first wave of Buddhist teachers arriving in the United States and Europe. Figures such as D.T. Suzuki, a Japanese Zen master, and Phra Vidyadhara, a Thai monk, were instrumental in introducing Zen and Theravada Buddhism to Western audiences. These teachers used both written works and lectures to convey Buddhist ideas to the growing number of intellectuals and spiritual seekers in the West. The counterculture movements of the 1960s and 1970s provided a fertile ground for the acceptance of Buddhism in the West. The rise of interest in Eastern spirituality, particularly in the United States, saw the adoption of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, both of which appealed to the growing desire for alternative spiritual practices outside of traditional Western religious institutions.

3. Buddhism and Modern Western Practice

In the 21st century, Buddhism has become a prominent part of the spiritual and therapeutic landscape in the West. While many Western practitioners approach Buddhism as a philosophy or practice rather than as a religion, the core principles of Buddhism, such as

mindfulness, compassion, and non-attachment, have become widely embraced in secular contexts. Mindfulness meditation, rooted in Buddhist traditions, has been integrated into therapeutic practices to address issues such as stress, anxiety, and depression. (Walters, J.C.2014:24)

Furthermore, Buddhist teachings on impermanence and the interdependence of all beings have resonated with many individuals in the West who are seeking alternatives to materialism, consumerism, and individualism. Buddhism's emphasis on compassion, social justice, and environmental responsibility has also made it a relevant spiritual path for those concerned with the ethical and ecological challenges of modern life. Buddhism's spread across Asia and its eventual introduction to the West has been a complex and transformative journey. From its origins in India, Buddhism adapted to diverse cultural contexts, evolving into distinct regional forms while maintaining its core teachings. In the West, Buddhism has been integrated into a secular and therapeutic framework, and its ideas have gained widespread acceptance. As Buddhism continues to adapt to modern challenges, it remains a powerful force for personal transformation and social change in the globalized world. (Williams, Paul.2002:56)

Conclusion

The historical development and spread of Buddhism from India to the West reveal a remarkable story of cultural exchange, adaptation, and transformation. From its beginnings in ancient India to its current global presence, Buddhism has shaped and been shaped by the cultures and societies it encountered. Its ability to adapt to different contexts—whether through the syncretic blending of local beliefs in Asia or its transformation into a modern, secular practice in the West—demonstrates the resilience and flexibility of Buddhist thought. As Buddhism continues to grow in the West and globally, its future remains one of continued adaptation, integration, and influence across cultural and spiritual boundaries.

References

- Bechert, Heinz. (1981). *The Transmission of Buddhism in Asia*. UK: E.J. Brill.
- Chakravarti, Ranabir. (2010). "Buddhism and the Indian Ocean: Trade, Monasticism, and the Transmission of Religion." *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2010, pp. 71-95.
- Collins, Steven. (2003). *The Buddhist Religion: A Historical Introduction*. US: 4th ed., Wadsworth.
- Davids, T.W. Rhys. (1961). *Buddhism: Its History and Literature*. UK: Harvard University Press.
- Deegalle, Mahinda. (1992). *Buddhism in Sri Lanka: A Historical and Philosophical Inquiry*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Gethin, Rupert. (1998). *The Foundations of Buddhism*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Keown, Damien. (2000). *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Lamotte, Étienne. (1958). *Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien*. 2nd ed., France: Paris.
- Liu, Xie. (1981). "Buddhism and the Cultural Exchange along the Silk Road: A Historical Review." *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2012, pp. 313-329.
- Snodgrass, Jeffrey M. (1985). *The Symbolism of the Stupa*. US: Curzon Press.
- Swearer, Donald K. (2010). *Buddhism in the United States: A Historical Overview*. Boston: Boston University.
- Tegner, Geoffrey. (2018). *Buddhism in the Modern World: An Exploration of Buddhism's Influence on Contemporary Thought*. UK: Routledge.
- Thich Nhat Hanh. (1999). *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy, and Liberation*. US: Broadway Books.
- Walters, J.C. (2014). "The Spread of Buddhism in Southeast Asia." *Religions of Asia*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 24-39.
- Williams, Paul. (2002). *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*. London: Oxford University Press.