

Buddhism

Intellectual Output 2, Unit III



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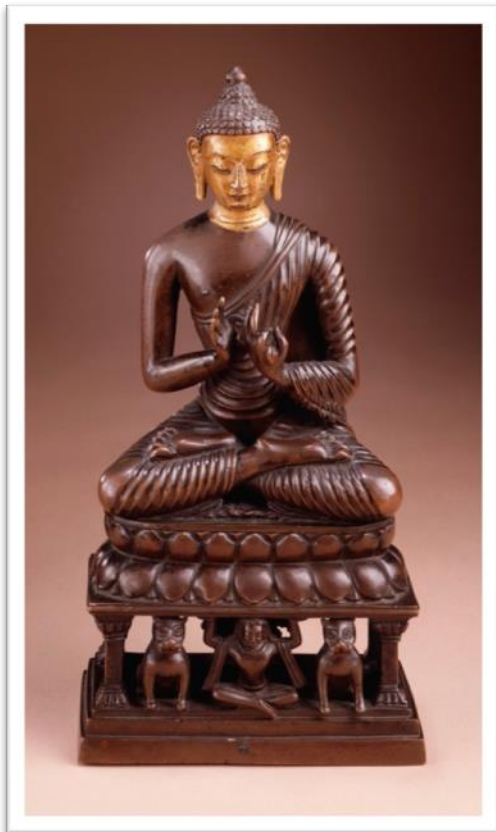
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| 3 | <i>Giovanni Bulian, Ca' Foscari University of Venice</i> | 03/07/2018 |

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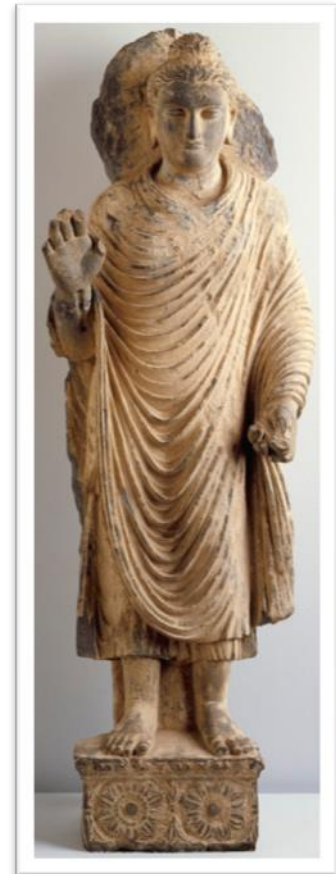
- [Introduction to Buddhism I. A brief overview](#)
- [Introduction to Buddhism II. Diffusion in the world](#)

Origins

Buddhism plays a central role in the cultural and social life of Asia and encompasses a variety of traditions, beliefs and spiritual practices largely based on teachings attributed to the historical figure of **Siddhārtha Gautama** (c. 563/480 BCE - c. 483/400 BCE), commonly known as the (historical) **Buddha**, and who taught mostly in the northern part of India.



1. Buddha in seated meditation. Source: Los Angeles County Museum of Art



2. Buddha in standing position. Source: Los Angeles County Museum of Art

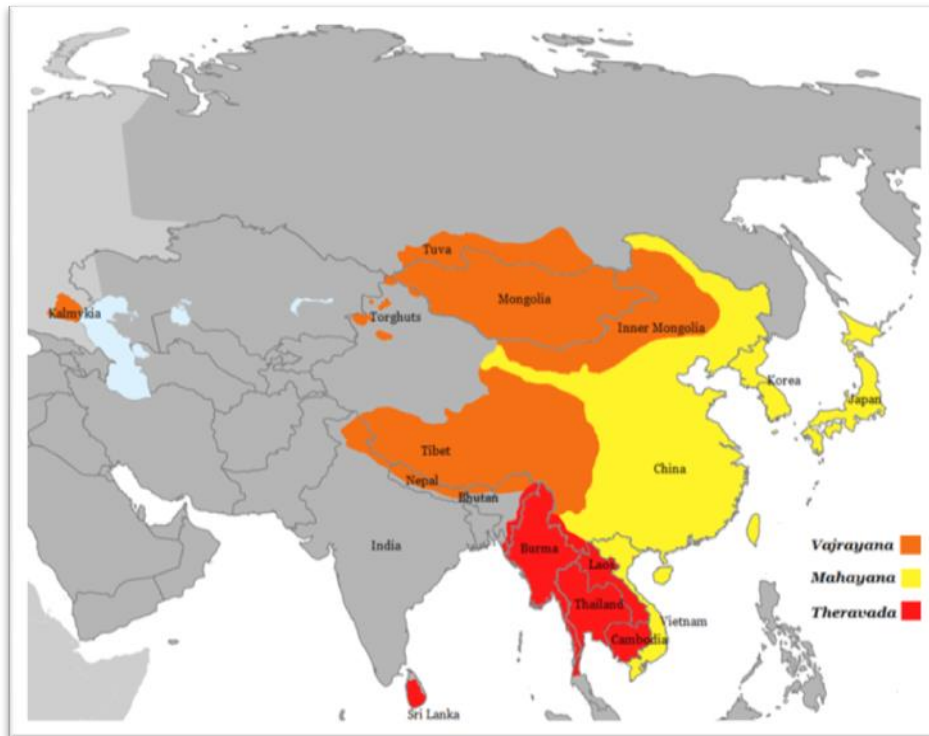
More information on:

- [What is Buddhism?](#)
- [Buddha's biography](#)

Historical development

Buddhism developed gradually spreading its way in Asia during the third century BCE. During the same period, Buddhism developed into two main branches – the “**Little Vehicle**” (**Hinayana**), which refers to the earliest Buddhist teachings, and the “**Great Vehicle**” (**Mahayana**), which presents important developments. A third branch, related to Mahayana

Buddhism, the “**Diamond Vehicle**” (*Vajrayana*) is also referred to as Tantric or esoteric Buddhism. Presently, the “**Little Vehicle**” branch is represented by the “**School of the Elders**” (*Theravada*).



3. Map of distribution of Buddhism in Asia. Source: Wikipedia

More information on:

- [What is Buddhism?](#)
(esp. “Three branches of Buddhism” paragraph in Teacher’s Section)
- [Main doctrinal traditions \(1\). Development of first Buddhist traditions](#)
- [Main doctrinal traditions \(2\). Mahayana developments](#)
- [Main doctrinal traditions \(3\). Vajrayana](#)

Sacred texts

The earliest systematic and most complete collection of early Buddhist sacred literature is the *Tipiṭaka* (“**Three baskets**”), written in Pali, an Indian language. Other canons are written in other languages and follow the historical and geographical development in Buddhism: the **Chinese Mahayana Canon** (used in China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam) and the **Tibetan Canon** (used the Tibetan Vajrayana branch). Another important language is **Sanskrit**. Most of technical terms, in fact, are referred to in Sanskrit (like in this short presentation).

These Buddhist Canons contain doctrines traditionally attributed to the historical Buddha, plus the works of numerous subsequent writers. In general texts are divided in three main categories: the “**Discipline Basket**”, with text focusing on the rules or disciplines of the monastic community; the “**Sayings Basket**”, i.e. sermons of Buddha (the *Sutra*); and the

“**Treatises Basket**”, scholastics reworkings and interpretations of Buddhist doctrines of philosophical and psychological nature.

More information on:

- [Main doctrinal traditions \(1\). Development of first Buddhist traditions](#)
- [Buddhism in China](#)
(par. “Diffusion in China” for historical context of the creation of the Chinese Canon)
- [Buddhism in Tibet](#)
(par. “Diffusion in Tibet” for historical context of the creation of the Tibetan Canon)

Main doctrinal tenets, organization and practices

Buddhism is a doctrine of salvation from *samsāra*, the end-less cycle of **repeated births** and **suffering**, regulated by **the karman**, the principle of cause and effect that binds man to rebirth. Its doctrinal core is a path to the elimination of ignorance and craving, in order to achieve *Nirvāṇa* (“blown out”), that is, the ultimate state of liberation from *samsāra*. The teaching of the Buddha is summarized in the **Four Noble Truths** which make clear the painful nature of human existence and the way to **free oneself from pain**: the truth of suffering, the truth of the origin of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering and, finally, the one way that leads out of suffering, the so-called ‘Eightfold Path’, a development of eight elements pertaining to **wisdom, ethics** and **meditative practice**. Indeed, the main and most ancient liberation practice is **meditation**, but it is accompanied (and often replaced) by various religious practices (transfers of merit, funerary rites, feasts, exorcisms).



4. Monks meditating in a Buddhist Zen Temple in Japan. Source: <http://elblogdelperegrinogris.blogspot.it>



5. Buddhist ceremony for the sake of ancestors. Source: University of Bristol

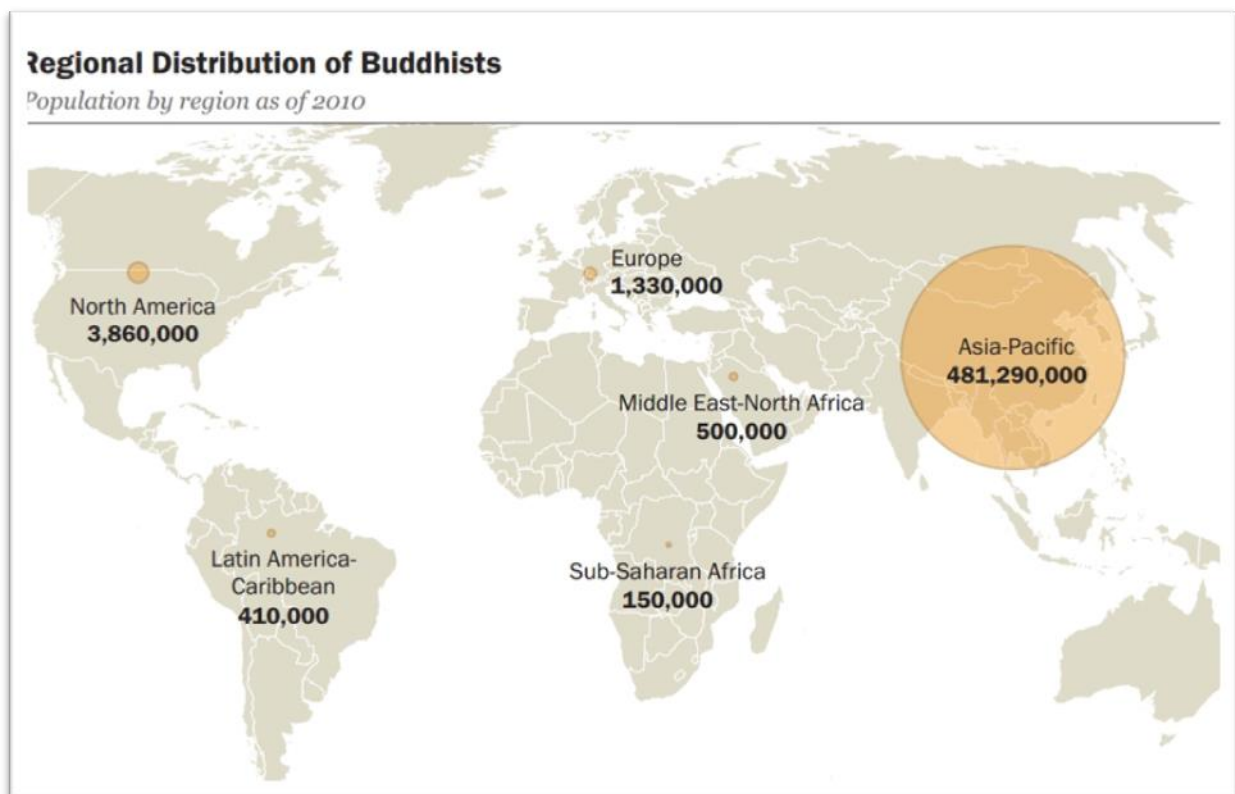
The main institutions of Buddhism are the **Monastery** and the **Temple** (the two are often one single thing), but their organizational structures vary enormously from place to place. There is no central organization in Buddhism like the Catholic Church. In these places **monks** study sacred text, perform rites and preach to the laity. Laity go to monasteries and temples to **worship Buddhas** and other enlightened beings, to ask for various blessings and to hear Buddhist teachings.

More information on:

- [Main doctrines \(1\). Karma and Samsara](#)
- [Main doctrines \(2\). Four Noble truths, Illumination and Nirvana](#)
- [Buddhist practice \(1\). Meditation and transfer of merit](#)
- [Buddhist practice \(2\). Funerary rites, feasts, exorcisms](#)
- [Buddhism and society](#)

Current distribution among world population

According to most scholars, Buddhism is presently the world's **fourth-largest religion** (350–550 million adherents). It is diffused in South Asia, China, Japan, Tibet and many more. It rooted itself in different cultural environments, thanks to its high capacity of **adaptation and change**. Consequently, it's characterized by a enormous variety of practices, teachings and artistic expressions. During the 20th century it **spread to the West**, and it continues adapting to meet the cultural and spiritual needs of the modern globalized world.



1. Present-day diffusion of Buddhism throughout the world. Source: PewResearch Center

More information on:

- [Main doctrinal traditions \(2\). Mahayana developments](#)
(esp. the paragraphs on the concept of **“Skillful Means”**, the principle of adapting teachings and practices to the circumstances and the “Intercultural and interdisciplinary information” paragraph.)
- [Buddhism in Sri Lanka and South-east Asia](#)
(where the **Theravada** branch is prominent)

- **Buddhism in China**
(where the ***Mahayana*** branch is prominent, and numerous indigenous schools of Buddhism were born, for instance *Chan* - mostly known as Zen).
- **Buddhism in Japan**
(where the ***Mahayana*** branch is prominent, and schools - mostly from China - further developed and then spread to the West, like Zen or Soka Gakkai).
- **Buddhism in Tibet**
(where the ***Vajrayana*** branch is prominent, numerous indigenous schools of Tantric Buddhism were born, for instance the *Gelug* school, whose head is the 14th Dalai Lama).
- **Buddhism and modernity**
(Here modern developments of Buddhism around the world are explained, focusing also on the way Western countries encountered and embraced Buddhism).