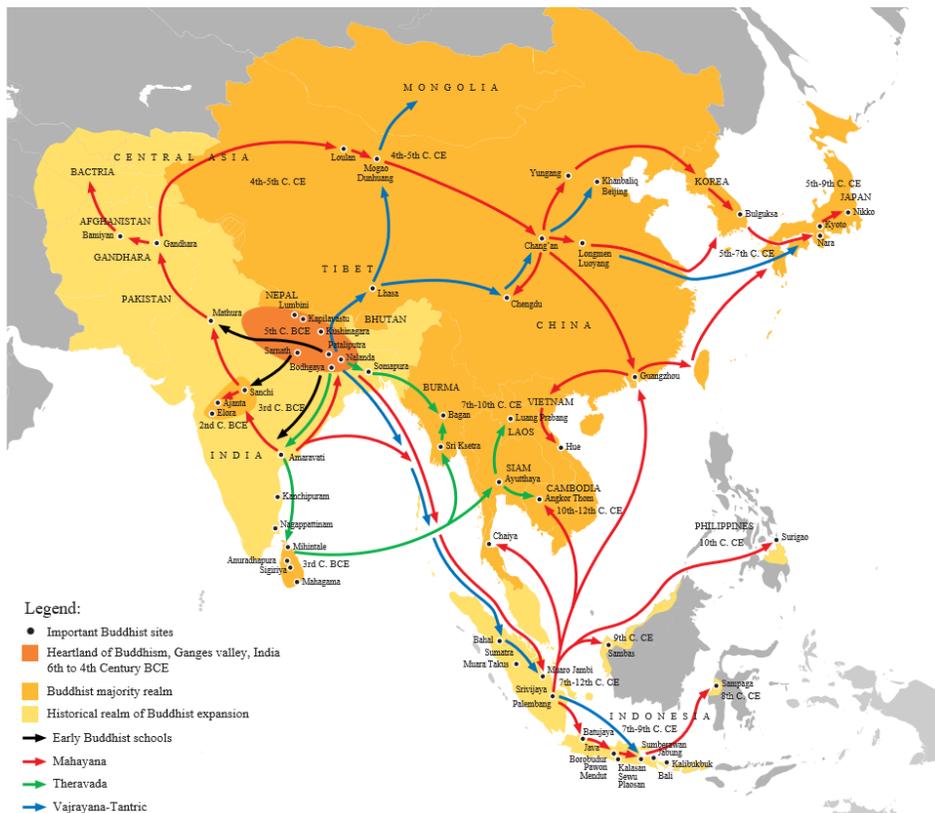


Buddhism around the World



Map of South, Southeast and East Asia (source: internet)



Spread of Buddhism from the 5th Century BCE to 12th Century CE (source: internet)

Outline

1. Buddhism in Southeast Asia (Burma/Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam)
2. Buddhism in East Asia (China, Japan and Korea)
3. Buddhism in the West

Buddhism in Southeast Asia

Burma/Myanmar

One of the Buddhist delegations sent by King Ashoka of India (3rd Century BC) was to Swarnabhumi which is considered the present day Burma. From the first century C.E. onwards, trade between India and Burma expanded and there was increased contact with the Indian traders and their religious beliefs. Buddhism was widely accepted by the people in Thaton, which was the main trading centre in Burma at the time. As more Buddhist missionaries arrived from Indian Buddhist centres, Thaton soon became an important centre for Theravada Buddhism.

In later centuries, Vajrayana Buddhism was introduced to the people in northern Burma. They practised it together with Hinduism and local folk beliefs. In the middle of the eleventh century, a powerful king, Anawratha, brought northern and southern Burma under his rule. As he was a strong supporter of Theravada Buddhism he made it the national religion. He had Buddhist texts and relics brought from Sri Lanka. He also began the construction of monasteries and stupas in the capital city of Pagan, and this was continued by his successors. Pagan soon developed into a centre of Buddhist culture.

In the succeeding centuries, Burma underwent several periods of wars and political unrest, but Buddhism continued to prosper under the patronage of various kings and became part of the life of the common people. The traditional structure of the Buddhist community suffered when Burma came under British colonial rule in the nineteenth century. However, Buddhism has regained its traditional place of importance in the life of the Burmese people since Burma became independent in the middle of the twentieth century.

Burma has at multiple times during history has supported the re-establishment of Buddhism (especially the Sangha order) in Sri Lanka after it nearly collapsed following periods of turmoil including invasions from South India. Two examples are King Anawratha sending a group of learned monks to Sri Lanka on the invitation from the Sri Lankan king, Vijayabahu the Great, in the 11th century; and, Burma supporting the establishment of Amarapura and Ramanya Nikayas (these are two of the three main sects of Sangha in Sri Lanka) in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Impact of Buddhism on Burmese Culture

Similar to many other countries, folk belief system of Burmese people underwent a change after the introduction of Buddhism. Instead of worshipping natural elements, people got accustomed to Buddhist practices. Also, following Buddhist teachings, Burmese completely disregarded the caste system. It is one of the first Buddhist countries to completely eliminate the caste system.

Buddhism has become an integral part of life in Burma. Most Buddhist male in Burma enter the monkhood at some point of their life at least for a shorter period and it is believed that people who had been through the temporary monkhood are more disciplined, honest and kind. Most of the time, the temporary monkhood is attained during the younger ages.

In every village, schools were set up in the monasteries. Here monks taught the children basic Buddhist teachings as well as reading and writing. Burmese are keen to study the *Tipitaka* (the three baskets), which are the core text in Theravada tradition. They also have *Tipitaka* translated to Burmese language to make it more accessible to the common people.

The most common Buddhist structure that can be seen in Burma is the *Pagoda*, which is similar to the *Cetiya* in Sri Lanka. There are many *Pagodas* that can be seen throughout Burma. Burmese have the practise of painting pagodas golden. Burmese Buddha statues are different from the statues in Sri Lanka. Even the Buddha statues in Burma are gold plated.

Thailand

Before the thirteenth century, the region now called Thailand was composed of many small independent kingdoms. Buddhist influence had already been felt in this region as a result of contact with neighbouring countries. At the end of the thirteenth century, Theravada Buddhism gained the support of the Thai king, Ramkham-haeng. He invited Buddhist monks to teach in his capital city of Sukothai. He also established relations with Sri Lanka by sending monks there to study. Furthermore, he began the tradition of appointing a Sangha chief to oversee the administration of the monastic community. Under his patronage, all the people in his kingdom were said to have become Buddhists.

About half a century later, there was another devout and learned king called Luthai who was a strong supporter of Buddhism. He joined the Order for a period of time and is said to have initiated the Thai tradition of Buddhists becoming monks for a limited period of time, usually about three months.

In spite of the wars in the centuries following, Buddhism continued to grow in importance and enjoyed uninterrupted state support. The Thai Order is as influential today as it was in the past. However, some reforms have been introduced since the turn of the present century. There is greater emphasis on Buddhist education and the monks are actively involved not only in teaching the religion, but also in providing secular education for the lay people. Many monks still teach in the primary and secondary schools that have been set up in the Buddhist monasteries throughout the country. Many others also pursue higher studies at Buddhist colleges and universities. Over the past few decades, some monks have been sent overseas to spread the teachings of the Buddha.

Similar to Burma, Thailand also have had close historical relationships with Sri Lanka and the two countries mutually assisted each other at the time of difficulty. In the 18th century, after Buddhism in Sri Lanka suffered following fighting with Portuguese and also due to the actions of the King Rajasinghe I, Thailand assisted in re-establishing the Sangha order in Sri Lanka. The Siam Nikaya in Sri Lanka that is in existence even today started directly from the support of Thailand in the 18th century.

Other Buddhist Countries in Southeast Asia

- Cambodia – Theravada tradition
- Laos – Teravada tradition
- Vietnam – Both Mahayana and Theravada traditions, but Mahayana is stronger
- In the past, Indonesia and countries in Malay Peninsula have been Buddhist countries (between 5th and 12th centuries), but since 13th century Islam has become the dominant religion in these countries.

Buddhism in East Asia

See the separate notes set

Buddhism in the West

Buddhism remained virtually unknown in the western countries until modern times. The knowledge of Buddhism in the West has come through three main channels: Western Scholars; the work of philosophers, writers and artists; and, the arrival of Asian immigrants who brought various forms of Buddhism with them to Europe, North America and Australia. The 'come and see for yourself' attitude of Buddhism attracts many Westerners. They are not asked to believe in anything, but to follow the Buddha's advice of testing ideas first. Buddhist attitudes of peace, mindfulness and care for all living creatures has resonated with Westerners; this is close to the feeling among many people in recent years.

Europe

In the 18th century onwards, a number of Buddhist texts were brought to Europe by people who had visited the colonies in the East. Around the middle of the 19th century, a few Buddhist texts were translated to European languages. This brought Buddhist teachings to be known to European scholars, some of whom introduced Buddhist ideas into their own writings. Later, more and better European translations of Buddhist texts were made in the 20th and 21st centuries. Today, there are a large number of Buddhist texts had already been translated into English, French and German. This include virtually the entire collection of Theravada scriptures as well as a number of important Mahayana texts.

Before the beginning of the twentieth century, the study of Buddhism was confined mainly to scholars and there was not much practice of the teachings. Later, this pattern began to change. A number of Europeans felt that merely reading about Buddhism was not enough, so they travelled to the East to acquire firsthand knowledge of the Buddhist practices and to experience the monastic life. In addition, Buddhist organisations were founded in the major cities of Europe. These organisations helped the growth of interest in Buddhism through their meditation sessions, lectures and circulation of Buddhist literature.

By the early part of the twentieth century, a number of the Europeans, who had travelled to the East to study Buddhism, had returned. Some of them had become monks and they inspired and strengthened the Buddhist circles in Europe. They were soon joined by Buddhist monks from Sri Lanka and other Buddhist countries in Asia. In recent years, there has been a marked growth of interest in Buddhism in Europe. The membership of existing Buddhist societies has increased and many new Buddhist centres have been established. Their members include large numbers of professionals and scholars. Today, the major Buddhist traditions of Asia such as Theravada, Pure Land, Ch'an (or Zen), Vajrayana and Nichiren Shoshu, have a sizeable number of followers in Europe.

Americas

- As in Europe, scholars in America also became acquainted with a number of Buddhist ideas in the 19th century. Some of the oldest universities had departments that facilitated the study of Buddhism. During the 2nd half of the century, Chinese and Japanese immigrants brought Buddhist practices with them when they settled in the US in the 19th century.
- Passionate speeches by two outstanding Buddhist spokesmen, Dharmapala from Sri Lanka and Soyen Shaku, a Zen master from Japan, at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago inspired

the audience and helped to establish a foothold for Theravada and Zen Buddhist traditions in America.

- When Tibetan refugees arrived in America after 1959, they brought with them Vajrayana Buddhism.
- The basis of Buddhist practice in the West is meditation.

Sources:

1. www.buddhanet.net
2. The Dhamma School text books in Sri Lanka