



Buddhism in East Asia

China, Korea, Japan

» Map of Spread in East Asia

China

During the third century B.C., Emperor Ashoka sent missionaries to the northwest of India that is, present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan. The mission achieved great success, as the region soon became a centre of Buddhist learning with many distinguished monks and scholars. When the merchants of Central Asia came into this region for trade, they learnt about Buddhism and accepted it as their religion. With the support of these merchants, many cave monasteries were established along the trade routes across Central Asia. By the second century B.C., some Central Asian cities like Khotan, had already become important centres for Buddhism. The Chinese people had their first contact with Buddhism through the Central Asians who were already Buddhists.

Spread of Buddhism Among the Chinese

When the Han Dynasty of China extended its power to Central Asia in the first century B.C., trade and cultural ties between China and Central Asia also increased. In this way, the Chinese people learnt about Buddhism so that by the middle of the first century C.E., a community of Chinese Buddhists was already in existence.



Kumarajiva, the translator.

As interest in Buddhism grew, there was a great demand for Buddhist texts to be translated from Indian languages into Chinese. This led to the arrival of translators from Central Asia and India. The first notable one was Anshigao from Central Asia who came to China in the middle of the second century. With a growing collection of Chinese translations of Buddhist texts, Buddhism became more widely known and a Chinese monastic order was also formed. The first known Chinese monk was said to be Anshigao's disciple.

The earliest translators had some difficulty in finding the exact words to explain Buddhist concepts in Chinese, so they made use of Taoist terms in their translations. As a result, people began to relate Buddhism with the existing Taoist tradition. It was only later on that the Chinese came to understand fully the teachings of the Buddha.

After the fall of the Han Dynasty in the early part of the third century, China faced a period of political disunity. Despite the war and unrest, the translation of Buddhist texts continued. During this time, Buddhism gained popularity with the Chinese people. Both foreign and Chinese monks were actively involved in establishing monasteries and lecturing on the Buddhist teachings.

Among the Chinese monks, Dao-an who lived in the fourth century was the most outstanding. Though he had to move from place to place because of political strife, he not only wrote and lectured extensively, but also collected copies of the translated scriptures and prepared the first catalogue of them. He invited the famous translator, Kumarajiva, from Kucha. With the help of Dao-an's disciples, Kumarajiva translated a large number of important texts and revised the earlier Chinese translations. His fine translations were popular and helped to spread Buddhism in China. Many of his translations are still in use to this day. Because of political unrest, Kumarajiva's disciples were later dispersed and this helped to spread Buddhism to other parts of China.

The Establishment of Buddhism in China

From the beginning of the fifth century to around the end of the sixth century, northern and southern China came under separate rulers. The south remained under native dynasties while non-Chinese rulers controlled the north.

The Buddhists in southern China continued to translate Buddhist texts and to lecture and write commentaries on the major texts. Their rulers were devoted Buddhists who saw to the construction of numerous temples, participated in Buddhist ceremonies and organised public talks on Buddhism. One of the rulers expanded on the earlier catalogue of Buddhist texts.

In northern China, except for two short periods of persecution, Buddhism flourished under the lavish royal patronage of rulers who favoured the religion. By the latter half of the sixth century, monks were even employed in government posts. During this period, Buddhist arts flourished, especially in the caves at Dun-huang, Yun-gang and Long-men. In the thousand caves at Dun-huang, Buddhist paintings covered the walls and there were thousands of Buddha statues in these caves. At Yungang and Long-men, many Buddha images of varying sizes were carved out of the rocks. All these activities were a sign of the firm establishment of Buddhism in China by the end of this period.

The Development of Chinese Schools of Buddhism

With the rise of the Tang Dynasty at the beginning of the seventh century, Buddhism reached out to more and more people. It soon became an important part of Chinese culture and had great influence on Chinese Art, Literature, Sculpture, Architecture and Philosophy of that time.

By then, the number of Chinese translations of Buddhist texts had increased tremendously. The Buddhists were now faced with the problem of how to study this large number of Buddhist texts and how to put their teachings in to practice. As a result, a number of schools of Buddhism arose, with each school concentrating on certain texts for their study and practice. The Tian-tai School, for instance, developed a system of teaching and practice based on the Lotus Sutra. It also arranged all the Buddhist texts into graded categories to suit the varying aptitudes of the followers.

Other schools arose which focused on different areas of the Buddhist teachings and practice. The two most prominent schools were the Chan and the Pure Land schools. The Chan School emphasised the practice of meditation as the direct way of gaining insight and experiencing Enlightenment in this very life. The Chan school of Buddhism is said to have been introduced to China by Bodhidharma who came from India at the beginning of the sixth century. He was, like many early missionaries, not only well versed in the Buddhist teachings, but also proficient in meditation. However, during his lifetime, he was not very well known as he secluded himself in a mountain temple. Later, through the efforts of his successors, this school became one of the most important of the Chinese schools of Buddhist practice.

The Pure Land School centres its practice on the recitation of the name of Amitabha Buddha. The practice is based on the sermon, which teaches that people could be reborn in the Western Paradise (Pure Land) of Amitabha Buddha if they recite his name and have sincere faith in him. Once in Pure Land, the Buddhists are said to be able to achieve Enlightenment more easily. Because of the simplicity of its practice, this school became popular especially among the masses throughout China.

Xuan-zang's Pilgrimage to India

During the sixth and seventh centuries, when the various Chinese schools of Buddhism were being developed, there were more monks than before making pilgrimages to India to study the Buddhist scriptures there. Among the most famous of these pilgrims was Xuan-zang, who travelled overland to India. His journey was extremely difficult, as he had to cross high mountains and deserts and was also confronted by bandits. He studied at the well-known monastic university at Nalanda and later travelled widely throughout India. On his return to China, he brought back a large collection of Buddhist texts, which he translated during the remaining years of his life.

»» Pilgrim Route to India

Because of his profound understanding of Buddhism and his excellent skill in languages, his translations marked a new period in Buddhist literature. His travel record gives detailed descriptions of Central Asia and India and provides an eyewitness account of these regions during his time.

Further Development of Buddhism in China

In the middle of the ninth century, Buddhism faced persecution by a Taoist emperor. He decreed the demolition of monasteries, confiscation of temple land, return of monks and nuns to secular life and the melting of metal Buddha images. Although the persecution lasted only for a short time, it marked the end of an era for Buddhism in China. Following the demolition of monasteries and the dispersal of scholarly monks, a number of Chinese schools of Buddhism, including the Tian-tai School, ceased to exist as separate movements. They were absorbed into the Chan and Pure Land schools, which survived. The eventual result was the emergence of a new form of Chinese Buddhist practice in the monastery. Besides practising Chan meditation, Buddhists also recited the name of Amitabha Buddha and studied Buddhist texts. It is this form of Buddhism, which has survived to the present time.

Just as all the Buddhist teachings and practices were combined under one roof in the monasteries, Buddhist lay followers also began to practise Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism simultaneously. Gradually, however, Confucian teachings became dominant in the court, and among the officials who were not in favour of Buddhism.

Buddhism, generally, continued to be a major influence in Chinese religious life. In the earlier part of the twentieth

century, there was an attempt to modernise and reform the tradition in order to attract wider support. One of the most well-known reformists was Tai-xu, a monk noted for his Buddhist scholarship. Besides introducing many reforms in the monastic community, he also introduced Western-style education, which included the study of secular subjects and foreign languages for Buddhists.

In the nineteen-sixties, under the People's Republic, Buddhism was suppressed. Many monasteries were closed and monks and nuns returned to lay life. In recent years, a more liberal policy regarding religion has led to a growth of interest in the practice of Buddhism.

»» Map: Spread of Buddhism - China/Korea/Japan

Korea

Introduction of Buddhism to Korea

The earliest historical records state that there were three kingdoms in Korea, namely Koguryo in the north, Paekche in the southwest and Silla in the southeast. According to tradition, a Chinese monk in the second half of the fourth century C.E first introduced Buddhism to the northern kingdom of Koguryo. A Central Asian monk is said to have brought Buddhism to Paekche sometime later.

The Silla kingdom was the most isolated region and was at first not ready to accept Buddhism. The people held firmly to their traditional religious beliefs. There was such strong opposition to Buddhism that a monk who went there to spread the Buddha's teachings is said to have been killed. Eventually, by the middle of the sixth century, even the Silla people accepted Buddhism.



Spread of Buddhism in Korea

During the sixth and seventh centuries, many Korean monks went to China to study and brought back with them the teachings of the various Chinese schools of Buddhism. Towards the end of the seventh century, the three kingdoms were unified under the powerful Silla rulers. From then onwards, Buddhism flourished under their royal patronage. Great works of art were created and magnificent monasteries built. Buddhism exerted great influence on the life of the Korean people. In the tenth century, Silla rule ended with the founding of the Koryo Dynasty. Under this new rule, Buddhism reached the height of its importance. With royal support, more monasteries were built and more works of art produced. The whole of the Tripitaka in Chinese translation was also carved on to wooden printing blocks. Thousands of these blocks were made in the thirteenth century and have been carefully preserved to the present day as part of Korea's national treasures.

Period of Suppression of Buddhism in Korea

Under the new rule of the Yi Dynasty from the end of the fourteenth century to the early twentieth century, Buddhism lost the support of the court when Confucianism became the sole official religion of the state. Measures were taken to suppress the activities of the Buddhist community. Buddhist monks were forbidden to enter the capital, their lands were confiscated, monasteries closed and Buddhist ceremonies abolished. Despite all the troubles of this difficult period, there were occasionally some great monks who continued to inspire their followers and kept Buddhism alive.

Revival of Buddhism in Korea

With the collapse of the Yi Dynasty, Korea came under Japanese control. The Japanese who came to Korea introduced their own forms of Buddhism, which included the tradition of the married clergy. As a result, some monks in Korea broke away from their tradition of celibacy.

From this period onwards, there was a revival of Buddhism in Korea. Many Buddhists in Korea have since been actively involved in promoting education and missionary activities. They have founded universities, set up schools in many parts of Korea and established youth groups and lay organisations. Buddhist texts, originally in Chinese translation, are now being retranslated into modern Korean. New monasteries are being built and old ones repaired. Today, Buddhism is again playing an important role in the life of the people.

Japan

Introduction of Buddhism to Japan

In the sixth century, the king of Paekche, anxious to establish peaceful relations



with Japan, sent gifts of images of the Buddha and copies of Buddhist texts to the Japanese imperial court. Buddhism was recommended as a means of bringing great benefit to the country. The Japanese people soon accommodated Buddhism along with their indigenous Shinto beliefs. Being a religion of universal appeal, Buddhism helped to foster harmony within the country.

From the very beginning, the establishment of Buddhism depended on the protection and support of the Japanese rulers. Among these, Prince Shotoku deserves special mention for his great contribution to the early growth and expansion of Buddhism in Japan during the early part of the seventh century. Tradition says that Prince Shotoku wrote the first "constitution" of Japan, which promoted moral and social values as taught in Buddhism. His devotion and royal patronage of Buddhism helped to make it widely known. Many Buddhist temples

were built and works of art created. Monks were also sent to China to study. Besides encouraging Japanese monks to read the scriptures, Prince Shotoku lectured and later wrote commentaries on some of these scriptures. His commentaries are said to be the first ever written in Japan and are now kept as national treasures.

The Nara Period

The eighth century in Japan is known as the Nara Period. During this period, Buddhism continued to spread as more new temples were built in all the provinces, the most famous being the Todaiji Temple at Nara. Buddhist scriptures were copied and distributed throughout the country. It was also during this time that Chinese monks started to arrive and many Chinese schools of Buddhism were introduced to Japan.

The Japanese monks not only studied and practised the Buddhist teachings, but also became involved in administrative roles. Some of them served as scribes and clerks in the court, while others helped in the carrying out of public works. A few were assigned to explore and draw maps of distant parts of the country. Though the monastic order grew in size, it remained firmly under the control of the court as the ordination of monks was only permitted at a few centres approved by the court.

The Heian Period

The Heian Period began towards the end of the eighth century, when the capital was established at Heian (present day Kyoto). During this period, two Japanese monks named Saicho and Kukai brought two schools of Buddhism to Japan from China.

Saicho had a temple on Mount Hiei, which was near the new capital. Soon the ruler began to patronise the temple and also sent Saicho to study in China. On his return to Japan, Saicho introduced the Tian-tai school of Buddhism from China. However, he later combined several schools of Buddhism into one comprehensive system. At his temple on Mount Hiei, monks had to undergo a twelve-year course of study and meditation. Some of those who completed their training stayed on the mountain, while others left to serve the state in various administrative posts. The Tian-tai school of Buddhism soon flourished and at the height of its development, there were three thousand buildings on Mount Hiei and thirty thousand monks. Its influence on the development of Buddhism in Japan continued to be felt even a few centuries later.

At about the same time the other monk, Kukai returned from China and introduced Vajrayana Buddhism to Japan. This school of Buddhism became very popular with the Japanese court and its influence was even greater than that of the Tian-tai school of Buddhism. Kukai himself was a learned monk and wrote a great deal on the teachings of this school.

The Kamakura Period

At the end of the twelfth century, political power shifted to a group of warriors (Samurai) who had their headquarters at Kamakura. During this period, a number of distinctly Japanese Buddhist sects arose. They became popular because of their simplicity and directness of approach. Among these sects were the Jodo Shinshu, Nichiren and Zen.

(a) *The Jodo Shinshu*

The Jodo Shinshu was founded by Shinran who studied at Mount Hiei. His master, Honen, taught that the practice of reciting the name of Amitabha would be sufficient for its followers to be reborn in the Western Paradise. However, the other monks on Mount Hiei objected to his teaching. As a result, Honen and his disciples were forced into exile. Shinran was one of the disciples who accompanied Honen into exile.

Shinran's teaching was a modification of his master's. He taught that one need only to have faith in Amitabha to be reborn in the Western Paradise. According to Shinran, it was not even necessary to recite Amitabha's name.

Shinran later got married and, in this way, started the tradition of the married clergy in Japan. Those who follow

this tradition continued to live in temples and conduct religious services, while leading a family life.

(b) *The Nichiren Sect*

The Nichiren sect was founded by Nichiren who studied at Mount Hiei but was not satisfied with the traditional Buddhist practices taught there. He later left Mount Hiei and travelled widely before returning to his native district.

Nichiren felt that the truth of Buddhism was to be found in the Lotus Sutra. He taught that reciting the formula, "Homage to the Lotus Sutra" is the only means of attaining Enlightenment. As he was intolerant of other Buddhist sects and vigorously denounced them, he was later sent into exile. In his later years, he was pardoned and allowed to return. After his death, his followers spread his teaching throughout the country and it soon gained popularity.

(c) *The Zen Sect*

The Zen sect is actually a Japanese version of the Chan school of Buddhism. It gained popularity among the warriors because of its emphasis on strict discipline of the mind and body. Zen teaching also influenced the development of the tea-ceremony, black-ink paintings, the art of flower arrangement and the Noh drama, which consists of dances, and recitation of poems that conveyed Buddhist ideas.

Buddhism from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century

From the sixteenth century, Buddhism lost favour with the military rulers who feared the rising power and influence of Buddhist religious groups in Japan. Some important Buddhist centres were even destroyed by these rulers. In the next three centuries, Buddhism came under the close supervision of the military dictatorship, which had strict control over all areas of life. The traditions of the various sects were, however, maintained. The temples also continued to play an active role in the fields of education and social service.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the Japanese emperor took control of the government. He did not support Buddhism. In fact, many Buddhist temples were demolished and valuable Buddha images and scriptures burned. The Buddhists in Japan responded by modernising their organisations. Schools and universities were established and Buddhist monks were given a modern education.

Developments in the Present Century

Since the Second World War, Japan has seen the rise of many religious groups which are modifications of the older established sects. Nichiren Shoshu, for example, grew out of the Nichiren sect of the Kamakura Period. The lay members of these newer religious groups play a prominent role in promoting Buddhist culture and education. At the same time, the older sects continue to exist and still attract support both inside and outside Japan.



Buddhism Across the Himalayas

Tibet, Mongolia

»» Map of Spread of Buddhism to Tibet & Mongolia

Although other places in Central Asia like Khotan had come under the influence of Buddhism even before the beginning of the Common Era, Tibet and Mongolia remained virtually untouched until much later. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, Tibet and Mongolia lay off the main caravan routes along which merchants and pilgrims travelled between India and China. Secondly, the Tibetan and Mongolian people who were nomads and warlike, were generally indifferent to the Teaching of the Buddha and the higher level of culture that came with it.

Introduction of Buddhism to Tibet

In Tibet, however, all this changed in the seventh century. The Tibetans, who had long been divided among many warring clans, were united under the rule of a great king, Srong-tsangam-po. His success in uniting the Tibetans brought him and Tibet newfound prestige in Asia. As a result, he was able to wed both a Chinese and a Nepalese princess. His Chinese and Nepalese queens were both Buddhists and before long he, too, became interested in Buddhism.



Srong-tsan-gam-po sent representatives to India and China to study the Teaching of the Buddha and to bring back Buddhist texts. The result of these missions strengthened the king's faith in the Buddhist religion. He had many Buddhist texts translated into Tibetan and encouraged the people to practise the Buddhist teachings. He also constructed many temples throughout Tibet. Thus Srong-tsan-gam-po was the first patron of Buddhism in Tibet. However, no Tibetan monks were ordained during his reign. Moreover, some of the Tibetans regarded Buddhism as a foreign religion and were opposed to it.

The Growth of Indian Buddhist Influence in Tibet

In the eighth century, one of the later rulers, while hearing of the biography of Srong-tsan-gam-po, also developed an interest in the Teaching of the Buddha. He invited Shantarakshita, a famous Buddhist scholar, to Tibet. Shantarakshita was then the abbot of the great monastic university of Nalanda in India. He travelled to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, where he taught the Dharma for several months.

There were, however, many powerful people at the Tibetan court who were opposed to Buddhism and they put pressure on the king to expel Shantarakshita. The king discussed the matter with Shantarakshita and they decided that it was better for him to go to Nepal for the time being. Meanwhile, Shantarakshita suggested to the king that Padmasambhava, a famous master of meditation, be invited from India. Padmasambhava was able to remove all opposition to Buddhism in Tibet. Soon, Shantarakshita also returned. Padmasambhava and Shantarakshita together helped to establish the teachings of the Mahayana and Vajrayana firmly in Tibet. Shantarakshita and Padmasambhava respectively represented the best of the Buddhist scholarship and meditative practices of India at that time. Their teachings, therefore, had a great impact on Tibet. Although Padmasambhava did not remain for long in Tibet, the Tibetans remember him as the "Precious Master" without whom Buddhism might not have been established in Tibet. Shantarakshita continued to teach in Tibet until his death.

During the time of these two great masters, great monasteries were built and the first Tibetans were ordained. Many of the first Tibetan monks achieved outstanding meditative powers. In the course of the next fifty years, many more translations of Buddhist texts were made and the earlier translations revised. A catalogue of the translations was also prepared. Teams of Indian and Tibetan monks working together accomplished all this. By now India had become the primary source of Buddhist culture for the Tibetans.

The Later Transmission of Buddhist Teaching from India

In the ninth century, there was a short-lived persecution of Buddhism in Tibet and many Tibetans felt that the purity of the Buddhist teachings originally brought from India was lost. As a result, many Tibetans again travelled to India to study and efforts were made to invite Indian scholars to Tibet. The eleventh century saw a great increase in contacts between Tibet and India and a corresponding growth in Buddhist activity in Tibet. Of the many outstanding persons who contributed to the revival of Buddhism in Tibet, two may be mentioned. They are the famous Indian scholar, Atisha, and the great Tibetan meditator and poet, Milarepa.

Atisha, who came from the east of India, was very learned. Before becoming an abbot of one of the great monastic universities of India, he had spent more than ten years in Srivijaya, one of the notable Buddhist centres of Southeast Asia. He came to Tibet in the later part of the eleventh century and remained there until his death thirteen years later. He had considerable influence on the later development of Tibetan Buddhism. Many of his teachings were included in the various Buddhist traditions of Tibet.

Milarepa, who lived in the eleventh century, was of a humble background. He studied diligently under one of the noted Tibetan teachers and translators who had returned from India. Soon, Milarepa came to be recognised as an outstanding meditator who had gained extraordinary insight into the nature of things. He put his meditative experiences into songs, which are remarkable both for their beauty and for the depth of their wisdom.

Over the course of several centuries, not only did many outstanding Indian masters visit Tibet, but also many Tibetans made the difficult journey over the Himalayas to study the Dharma in India. They brought back with them the Buddhist philosophy of India and also the knowledge of Music, Medicine, Logic and Art. Within a relatively short period, Tibetan society had been transformed. What had once been a primitive nation was changed into one noted for its learning and wisdom.

Virtually the entire collection of Buddhist literature from India was translated into Tibetan. Hundreds of monasteries were established and numerous Tibetan works on Buddhism were written. By the thirteenth century, when Buddhism in India began to decline, Tibet was ready not only to preserve Buddhism, but also to transmit it to other lands.

The Later Development of Tibetan Buddhism

In the fourteenth century, yet another teacher influenced the development of Buddhism in Tibet. He was Tson-kha-pa who was born in the northeast of Tibet. Tson-kha-pa was noted for his careful adherence to the code of monastic discipline and for the quality of his numerous writings. He soon attracted many followers and in the years after his death, his sect gradually gained a very large following in Tibet.

Buddhism continued to flourish in Tibet from the fourteenth century right through to the present century. Learned scholars continued to teach the Dharma and write commentaries. They also wrote original works on Buddhism. Monks and lay followers continued to achieve extraordinary levels of meditation.

In the middle of the twentieth century, when Tibet came under the rule of the People's Republic of China, Buddhism was repressed. Many Tibetans fled to India and to the West to preserve their religion. In this way, through the Tibetan refugees, many people throughout the world came into contact with Tibetan Buddhist traditions. Today, there are Tibetan Buddhist centres teaching the Dharma in many lands. Recently, a liberalisation in the policy of the government towards religion in China has permitted a revival of Buddhism within Tibet also.

Introduction of Buddhism to Mongolia

The thirteenth century saw the rise of Mongolian power in Central Asia. Under Genghis Khan, an ambitious and brilliant chieftain, the Mongols soon made their influence felt throughout the region. By the middle of the century, links had been established between the Mongol court and Tibetan Buddhist masters.

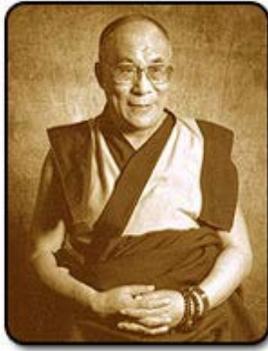
At that time, an army under a Mongol prince threatened Tibet. Sakya Pandita, the most outstanding Tibetan religious teacher of the time, was asked to negotiate with the Mongols. Although Sakya Pandita hesitated to go because of his advanced age, he eventually agreed.

Sakya Pandita succeeded in converting the Mongol prince and his court to Buddhism. He began the work of translating the Buddhist scriptures into Mongolian and taught the Dharma to the Mongols until his death.

Later Sakya Pandita's nephew, Cho-gyal-phag-pa, was invited by the famous Kublai Khan to visit the Mongol court in China. When Cho-gyal-phag-pa reached the imperial court in China, he became the personal religious teacher of the Khan. He stepped up the work of translating the Buddhist scriptures which had been started by Sakya Pandita. During the reign of Kublai Khan, the Mongol court came increasingly under the influence of Tibetan culture. Thereafter, a succession of Mongol Khans continued to look to Tibet for religious inspiration.

The Institution of the Dalai Lama

By the sixteenth century, the number of Tson-kha-pa's followers in Tibet had grown dramatically and the Mongols came under the influence of the new sect. It was then that one of the Mongol rulers invited a chief monk from Tson-kha-pa's sect to Mongolia and gave him the title of Dalai Lama (master whose wisdom is vast like the ocean).



The Dalai Lamas are believed to be embodiments of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara who, out of compassion for sentient beings, assumes human form. Upon the death of a Dalai Lama, a search is made for his successor, who is then recognised as the next embodiment of the Bodhisattva. Today as in the past, the Dalai Lama is held in high esteem by Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhists everywhere.

In the eighteenth century, the Manchus intervened to end a long period of political strife in Tibet. They appointed the then Dalai Lama as the ruler of Tibet. In this way, the Dalai Lamas became political as well as religious leaders. This situation lasted until the People's Republic of China assumed control of Tibet in the middle of this century.

Like the Tibetans before them, Buddhism transformed the Mongols from a primitive people to a nation respected for its learning and wisdom. From the thirteenth to the twentieth century, Mongolia remained a stronghold of Buddhism. There, the Teaching of the Buddha was preserved in many monasteries as well as in the homes of the people. Although Mongolia today is under Communist rule, Buddhism survives in the hearts and minds of the Mongolians.