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The History of Buddhism

By Colleen Messina

Buddhism began about 2,500 years ago when a young prince gave up his kingdom to seek enlightenment. It is said that Prince Siddhartha left behind his lovely wife, a rich palace, and every material comfort to find inner peace. Evil spirits assailed him, but he persisted in sitting in meditation. After six years, he achieved true understanding, or enlightenment. He became the Buddha, or the Awakened One.



The Buddha traveled around India for fifty years until his death in 483 B.C. He taught the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path (the eight steps to achieve enlightenment). No one wrote down his teachings, but the Buddha formed a community of monks to carry on his message.

After Buddha's death, five hundred monks met in a council. One monk, an exceptionally sharp fellow with an excellent memory, could recite all the Buddha's teachings! The other monks debated about the details until they were satisfied. These lessons from the Buddha, called the Sutras, were translated into many languages and passed along by word of mouth for over 200 years. Later, the teachings of Buddha were written down on palm leaves in the first century A.D.

Two groups of Buddhists emerged. One group called themselves the Theravada, or the "way of the elders." This group developed between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D. This group was more traditional and still exists today in Southeast Asia. They believe that people reach nirvana by their own efforts. The monks, called arhats, shave their heads and wear saffron robes. They never marry, and they live a simple life. They carry begging bowls from house to house to ask for food. Their goal is to achieve nirvana by themselves. They want to help others by setting a good example.

The second group that branched off was more liberal. They became the Mahayana Buddhists, and this movement began in the 2nd century A.D. Today, they exist in Central and East Asia. Mahayana Buddhists believe that you don't have to achieve enlightenment alone, but that other beings called bodhisattvas can help you. A bodhisattva is one who will become a Buddha in the future. A bodhisattva stays and helps others achieve enlightenment before leaving the Earth.

Zen Buddhism is a group within Mahayana Buddhism. It began in China in the 13th century and has fascinated many people because of its intriguing puzzles, called *koans*. Zen monks ask odd questions like "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" This puzzle is called a koan and is supposed to help the students think in a new way. Another famous koan is "How did your face look before your ancestors were born?" Zen Buddhism focuses on meditation.

Buddhism is a peaceful religion. The Buddha never forced anyone to study his teachings, so Buddhism spread gradually over the Indian plains along trade routes. An Emperor named Ashoka adopted Buddhism and made it the state religion of India. He lived from 272 B.C. to 231 B.C. This emperor made fairer laws because of the Buddha's teachings, and he had these laws written on stone columns which were erected around his empire. He sent Buddhist missionaries all over India and beyond. Some of them went to Egypt, Palestine, and Greece.

It took centuries for Buddhism to reach the West. In the last half of the 1800s, Europeans began to study the ancient cultures of India and China. Explorers discovered exciting parts of Asia for the first time. They wrote about the monasteries, temples, and chants (as well as the yaks and yak butter tea) that seemed so strange to them. English people found these things refreshing and different from the rather stiff and proper rules of British life. Societies began to spring up to study oriental subjects. Sipping tea and eating crumpets while discussing Buddhism became a fad.

In the twentieth century, Buddhism was suppressed because eastern nations that used to be Buddhist came under Communist control. When this happened in Mongolia, China, and Korea, Buddhist monks and nuns had to leave their monasteries. Their temples were destroyed, and no new monks could be trained. Scriptures could not be printed. Tibetan Buddhists, who had been in Tibet since the 8th century, were also forced out of their homeland by the Chinese communists. They settled in India with their leader, the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama has worked tirelessly for Tibetan religious freedom.

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However, Buddhism is making a comeback. Buddhists practice in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Russia, Indonesia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Nepal. Buddhism has been growing in China since 1977. In Tibet, monasteries have been open since the 1980s, and scriptures are being reprinted. Today, there are more than 300 million Buddhists in the world. Even though there are many branches of Buddhism, many Buddhists say the same prayer, "*May all beings be free from sorrow.*"

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Questions

- _____ 1. What is the name of the path that Buddha taught?
 - A. the Eightfold Path
 - B. the Peaceful Path
 - C. the Silk Road
 - D. the Way of Enlightenment

- _____ 2. What is the name of the Buddhist scriptures?
 - A. the Torah
 - B. the Bible
 - C. the Sutras
 - D. the Koran

- _____ 3. Who is the leader of the Tibetan Buddhists?
 - A. the Pope
 - B. the Archbishop of Canterbury
 - C. the Dalai Lama
 - D. the Prime Minister of China

- _____ 4. Which country became especially fascinated by oriental subjects in the 1800s?
 - A. the United States
 - B. China
 - C. Great Britain
 - D. Brazil

- _____ 5. What is the name of a Zen Buddhist puzzle?
 - A. a revelation
 - B. a Mad Lib
 - C. a koan
 - D. a fortune

- _____ 6. Approximately when did Buddhism reach the West?
 - A. 1450
 - B. 500 B.C.
 - C. 1875
 - D. 1,000 B.C.

- _____ 7. Which political movement was the most damaging to the Buddhists?
 - A. democracy
 - B. anarchy
 - C. socialism
 - D. communism

- _____ 8. What word goes at the end of this Buddhist prayer: "May all beings be free from _____."
 - A. sorrow
 - B. hunger
 - C. pain
 - D. ignorance