Introduction

The history of Buddhism spans almost 2,500 years from its origin in India with Siddhattha Gotama (Pali, Skt Siddhārtha Gautama), through its spread to most parts of Asia and, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, to the West. Richard Gombrich holds that the Buddha was 'one of the most brilliant and original thinkers of all time' (2009: vii), whose 'ideas should form part of the education of every child, the world over', which 'would make the world a more civilized place, both gentler and more intelligent' (Gombrich, 2009: 1), and with Buddhism, at least in numerical terms, as 'the greatest movement in the entire history of human ideas' (Gombrich, 2009: 194). While its fortunes have waxed and waned over the ages, over half of the present world population live in areas where it is, or has been, a dominant cultural force.

The English term 'Buddhism' correctly indicates that the religion is characterized by a devotion to 'the Buddha', 'Buddhas' or 'buddha-hood'. 'Buddha' is not a proper name, but a descriptive title meaning 'Awakened One' or 'Enlightened One'. This implies that most people are seen, in a spiritual sense, as being asleep – unaware of how things really are. As 'Buddha' is a title, it should not be used as a name, as in, for example, 'Buddha taught that . . .'. In many contexts, 'the Buddha' is specific enough, meaning the Buddha known to history, Gotama. From its earliest times, though, the Buddhist tradition has postulated other Buddhas who have lived on earth in distant past ages, or who will do so in the future. The later tradition also postulated the existence of many Buddhas currently existing in other parts of the universe. All such Buddhas, known as *sammā-sambuddha*s (Skt *samyak-sambuddha*s), or 'perfect fully Awakened Ones', are nevertheless seen as occurring only rarely within the vast and ancient cosmos. More common are those who are 'buddhas' in a lesser sense, who have awakened to the nature of reality by practising in accordance with the guidance of a perfect Buddha such as Gotama. The Tibetan tradition also recognizes certain humans as manifestations on earth of Buddhas of other world-systems.

As 'Buddha' does not refer to a unique individual, Buddhism is less focused on the person of its founder than is, for example, Christianity. The emphasis in Buddhism is on the *teachings* of the Buddha(s), and the 'awakening' of human personality that these are seen to lead to. Nevertheless, Buddhists do show great reverence to Gotama as a supreme teacher and an exemplar of the ultimate goal that all strive for, so that probably more images of him exist than of any other historical figure.

In its long history, Buddhism has used a variety of teachings and means to help people first develop a calmer, more integrated and compassionate personality, and then 'wake up' from restricting delusions: delusions which cause attachment and thus suffering for an individual and those he or she interacts with. The guide for this process of transformation has been the '*Dhamma*' (Skt *Dharma*): the patterns of reality and cosmic law-orderliness discovered by the Buddha(s), Buddhist teachings, the Buddhist path of practice, and the goal of Buddhism, the timeless *Nirvāṇa* (Pali *Nibbāna*). Buddhism thus essentially consists of understanding, practising and realizing *Dhamma*.

The most important bearers of the Buddhist tradition have been the monks and nuns who make up the Buddhist *Saṅgha* or 'Community'. From approximately a hundred years after the death of Gotama, certain differences arose in the *Saṅgha*, which gradually led to the development of a number of monastic fraternities (*nikāya*s), each following a slightly different monastic code, and to different schools of thought (*vāda*s). All branches of the *Saṅgha* trace their ordination-line back to one or other of the early fraternities; but of the early schools of thought, only that which became known as the Theravāda has continued to this day. Its name indicates that it purports to follow the 'teaching' of the 'Elders' (Pali *Thera*, Skt *Sthavira*) of the first schism (see p. 90). While it has not remained static, it has kept close to what we know of the early teachings of Buddhism, and preserved their emphasis on attaining liberation by one's own efforts, using the *Dhamma* as guide. Around the beginning of the Christian era, a movement began which led to a new style of Buddhism known as the Mahāyāna, or 'Great Vehicle'. This has been more overtly innovative, so that for many centuries, Indian Mahāyānists continued to compose new scriptures. The Mahāyāna is characterized by a more overt emphasis on compassion, devotion to a number of holy saviour beings, and several sophisticated philosophies, developed by extending the implications of the earlier teachings. In the course of time, in India and beyond, the Mahāyāna produced many schools of its own, such as Zen. One group of these which developed by the sixth century in India, and is sometimes seen as separate from the

Mahāyāna, is known as the Mantranaya, or the 'Path of *Mantra*s'. It is mostly the same as the Mahāyāna in its doctrines, but developed a range of powerful new *practices* to attain the goals of the Mahāyāna, such as the meditative repetitions of sacred words of power (*mantra*s) and complex visualization practices. It is based on *tantra*s or complex systems of ritual, symbolism and meditation, and its form from the late seventh century is known as the Vajrayāna, or 'Vehicle of the Thunderbolt'.

Our knowledge of the teachings of the Buddha is based on several canons of scripture, which derive from the early *Saṅgha*'s oral transmission of bodies of teachings agreed on at several councils. The Theravādin 'Pali Canon' is preserved in the Pali language, which is based upon a dialect close to that spoken by the Buddha, Old Māgadhī. It is the most complete extant early canon, and contains some of the earliest material. Most of its teachings are in fact the common property of all Buddhist schools, being simply the teachings which the Theravādins preserved from the early common stock. While parts of the Pali Canon clearly originated after the time of the Buddha, much must derive from his teachings. There is an overall harmony to the Canon, suggesting 'authorship' of its system of thought by one mind. Given that the Buddha taught for forty-five years, some signs of development in teachings may simply reflect changes during this period. Some promising attempts at relative dating rely on criteria of style, and comparisons of related texts in different canons are now producing good results. These canons gradually diverged as different floating oral traditions were drawn on, and systematizing texts peculiar to each school were added. Many of the minor differences within and between canons, however, can be seen to be due to the way in which oral traditions always produce several different permutations of essentially the same story or teachings.

The early canons contain a section on *Vinaya*, or monastic discipline, one on *Sutta*s (Skt *Sūtra*s), or 'discourses' of the Buddha, and some contain one on *Abhidhamma* (Skt *Abhidharma*), or 'further teachings', which systematizes the *Sutta*-teachings in the form of detailed analyses of human experience. The main teachings of Buddhism are contained in the *Sutta*s, which in the Pali Canon are divided into five *Nikāya*s or 'Collections', the first four (sixteen volumes) generally being the older. In other early canons, the five divisions paralleling the *Nikāya*s are called *Āgama*s. The Pali Canon was one of the earliest to be written down, this being in Sri Lanka in around 20 BCE, after which little, if any, new material was added to it. There are also sections of six non-Theravādin early canons preserved in Chinese and Tibetan translations, fragments of a Sanskrit Canon still existing in Nepal, and

odd texts in various languages of India and Central Asia found in Tibet, Central Asia and Japan.

The extensive non-canonical Pali literature includes additional *Abhidhamma* works, historical chronicles, and many volumes of commentaries. An extremely clear introduction to many points of Buddhist doctrine is the *Milindapañha* ('Milinda's Questions'), which purports to record conversations between a Buddhist monk and Milinda (Menander; *c.* 155–130 BCE), a king of Greek ancestry. Another is the *Visuddhimagga* ('Path of Purification'), a very influential Theravāda compendium of meditation practices and doctrine, written by Buddhaghosa (fifth century CE).

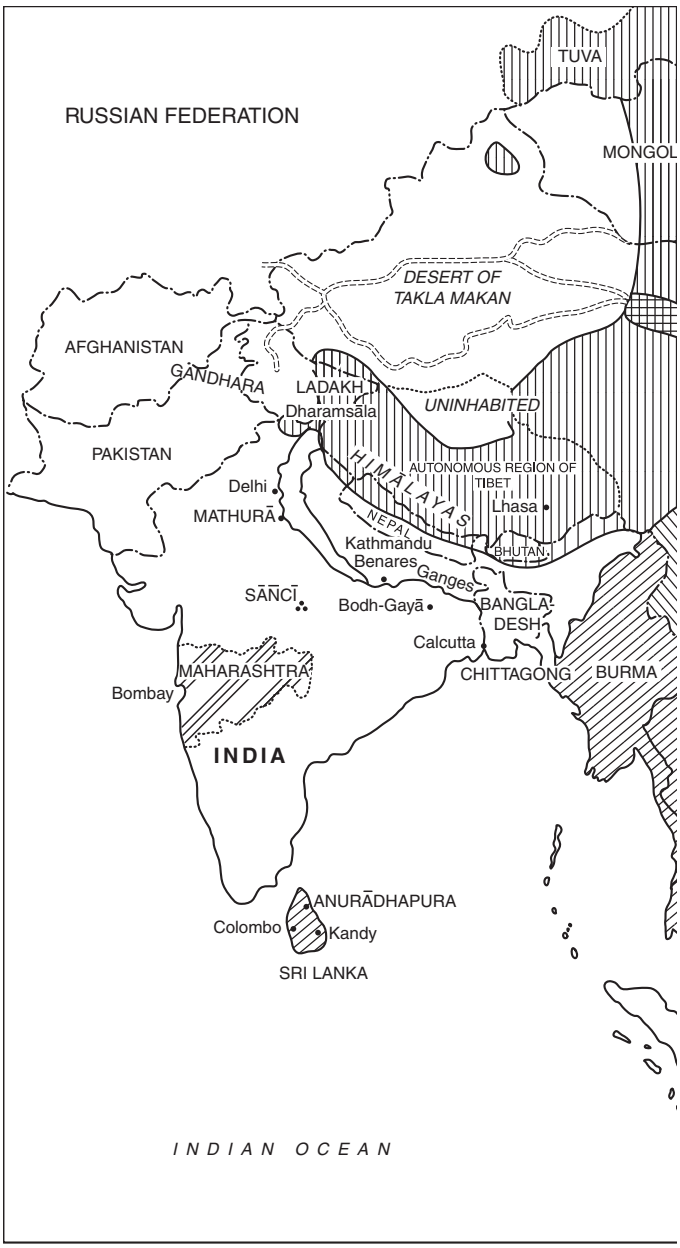
Mahāyāna texts were composed from around the first century BCE, originating as written, not oral, works. In time, they were recorded in a form of the Indian prestige language, Sanskrit. While many are attributed to the Buddha, their form and content clearly show that they were later restatements and extensions of the Buddha's message. The main sources for our understanding of Mahāyāna teachings are the very extensive Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist Canons. While most of the Pali Canon has been translated into English, only selected texts from these have been translated into Western languages, though much progress is being made. For some details on the three main extant Canons, see Appendix I.

While Buddhism is now only a minority religion within the borders of modern India, its spread beyond India means that it is currently found in three main cultural areas. These are those of: 'Southern Buddhism', where the Theravāda school is found, along with some elements incorporated from the Mahāyāna; 'Eastern Buddhism', where the Chinese transmission of Mahāyāna Buddhism is found; and the area of Tibetan culture, 'Northern Buddhism', which is the heir of late Indian Buddhism, where the Mantranaya/Vajrayāna version of the Mahāyāna is the dominant form. One can see these as like the three main branches of the 'tree' of Buddhism, though as all parts of a tree are genetically identical, this underplays the differences that have developed within Buddhism over time. Yet one can trace a series of transformations linking early and later forms in a causal continuum; just as Buddhism says that a person in one life and the next rebirth is 'neither (unchangingly) the same nor (completely) different', this can be said of the various forms of Buddhism that have evolved. A better image than branches of a tree is branches of a large 'family'. There are 'family resemblances' across all three branches, though certain features and forms are more typical of, and sometimes unique to, one of the three branches. The fifth edition (2005) of the Robinson and Johnson book *The Buddhist Religion* was retitled *Buddhist Religions*, to emphasize how

the three main cultural forms of Buddhism are in a sense different 'worlds'. Yet this downplays the continuities and the many connections in the vast network of Buddhism.

Buddhism's concentration on the essentials of spiritual development has meant that it has been able to co-exist both with other major religions and with popular folk traditions which catered for people's desire for a variety of rituals. There has hardly ever been a 'wholly Buddhist' society, if this means a kind of religious one-party state. Buddhism has been very good at adapting to different cultures while guarding its own somewhat fluid borders by a critical tolerance of other traditions. Its style has been to offer invitations to several levels of spiritual practice for those who have been ready to commit themselves. In Southern Buddhist lands, worship of pre-Buddhist nature gods has continued, while, especially in Sri Lanka, Buddhists also worship gods whose cults are Indian in origin. Most Buddhists would not see this as a betrayal of Buddhism, but just an attempt to interact with minor powers of the cosmos for some worldly advantage: like a person asking a member of parliament to try and help him. In Northern Buddhism, a similar relationship exists with the indigenous Bön religion of Tibet. In China, Taiwan, Korea and Vietnam, Buddhism has co-existed with Confucianism – more a system of social philosophy than a religion, the Daoist religion and much folk religion. People would often partake of elements of all these traditions. In Japan, Buddhism has existed alongside the indigenous nature-orientated religion of Shintō, and the Confucianism that it brought with it from China. Traditionally, people would be married by Shintō rites and buried with Buddhist ones. In China (which now includes Tibet), North Korea, Vietnam and Laos, Buddhism exists under Communist governments. Chinese Communists persecuted Buddhism and vandalized its temples during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), but the government has since been easing up on it, so as to allow a gentle resurgence in China proper, and a continuation of the very strong Buddhist culture of Tibet. The religion remains oppressed in North Korea, but is reasonably strong in Laos and Vietnam. In Mongolia, regions of the Russian Federation, and Cambodia, Buddhism is strengthening after previous Communist periods.

The number of Buddhists in the world is as follows (see Chapter 12 for detailed breakdowns): Southern Buddhism, 150 million; Northern Buddhism 18.2 million; Eastern Buddhism, approximately 360 million. There are also around 7 million Buddhists outside Asia (see Chapter 13). This gives an overall total of around 535 million Buddhists in the world – 7.8 per cent of the total 2010 world population of 6,852 million – though in East Asia, there are at least another 200 million who relate to Buddhism to a fair extent.



Map 1: Current location of Buddhism in Asia.

CHAPTER 1

The Buddha and his Indian Context

Indian culture has not been as concerned with recording precise dates as have Chinese or Graeco-Roman cultures, so datings cannot always be arrived at with accuracy. All sources agree that Gotama was eighty when he died (e.g. *D*.II.100), and the Pali sources of Theravāda Buddhism say that this was '218' years before the inauguration of the reign of the Buddhist emperor Asoka (Skt Aśoka): the 'long chronology'. Sanskrit sources preserved in East Asia have a 'short chronology', with his death '100' years or so before Asoka's inauguration. Based on a traditional date of the inauguration, Pali sources see Gotama's dates as 623–543 BCE. However, references in Asokan edicts to named Hellenistic kings have meant that modern scholars have put the inauguration at *c.* 268 BCE (giving *c.* 566–486 BCE for Gotama) or, more recently, anywhere between 267 and 280 BCE. Richard Gombrich[1] has argued that '218' and '100' are best seen as approximate numbers, and sees 136 as more likely, based on figures associated with a lineage of Buddhist teachers in the *Dīpavaṃsa*, a chronicle of Sri Lanka – with the '218' in this text (6.1) as from its misunderstanding of figures in its earlier part. With various margins of error, Gombrich sees Gotama's death as between 422 and 399 BCE, with *c.* 404 as most likely, giving his dates as *c.* 484–404 BCE.

BACKGROUND TO THE LIFE OF THE BUDDHA[2]

Brahmanism

The Buddha taught in the region of the Ganges basin in north-east India, where the dominant religion was Brahmanism, administered by priests

[1] 1991–1992 and 2000, cf. Cousins, 1996c, Harvey, 2007d: 105b–107a.
[2] For early Indian religion, see: Basham, 2005: 234–58, 289–300; Flood, 1996: 30–102; and Olivelle, 1996.

known as Brahmins (*Brāhmaṇas*). Later, around 200 BCE, this tradition began to develop into the religion now known as Hinduism. Brahmanism had entered the north-west of the Indian sub-continent from around 1500 BCE, brought by a nomadic people who seem to have come from an area now in eastern Turkey, southern Russia and northern Iran. In this area, people spoke a postulated Aryan (Skt *Ārya*) language – the basis of a number of 'Indo-European' languages spread by migration from there to India, Iran, Greece, Italy and other parts of Western Europe. The form of the language spoken in India was Sanskrit (from which Pali is derived), which is thus linked, through Greek and Latin, to modern European languages. The influx of the Aryans seems to have overlapped with the decline of the Indus Valley Civilization, a sophisticated city-based culture which had existed in the region of Pakistan since around 2500 BCE. The religion of the Aryans was based on the *Veda*, a body of 'revealed' oral teachings and hymns: the *Ṛg Veda Saṃhitā* (*c.* 1500–1200 BCE), three other *Veda Saṃhitā*s, and later compositions known as *Brāhmaṇa*s and *Upaniṣad*s. The Aryans worshipped 'thirty-three' mostly male gods known as *deva*s, or 'illustrious ones': anthropomorphized principles seen as active in nature, the cosmos and human life. The central rite of the religion was one in which the priests sang the praises of a particular *deva* and offered him sacrifices by placing them in a sacrificial fire. In return, they hoped for such boons as health, increase in cattle, and immortality in the afterlife with the *deva*s. In the *Brāhmaṇa*s (*c.* 1000–800 BCE), animal sacrifices came to be added to the earlier offerings, such as grain and milk. The enunciation of the sacred sacrificial verses, known as *mantra*s, was also seen as manipulating a sacred power called *Brahman*, so that the ritual was regarded as actually coercing the *deva*s into sustaining the order of the cosmos and giving what was wanted. The great responsibility of the priests in this regard was reflected in them placing themselves at the head of what was regarded as a divinely ordained hierarchy of four social classes, the others being those of the *Kṣatriya*s (Pali *Khattiya*s) or warrior-leaders of society in peace or war, the *Vaiśya*s (Pali *Vessa*s), or cattle-rearers and cultivators, and the *Śūdra*s (Pali *Sudda*s), or servants. A person's membership of one of these four *varṇa*s, or 'complexions' of humanity, was seen as determined by birth; in later Hinduism the system incorporated thousands of lesser social groupings and became known as the *jāti*, or caste, system. Members of the top three *varṇa*s were seen as *ārya*ns, or 'noble ones', and seen as socially superior due to the claimed purity of their descent.

Brahmins learnt of yogic techniques of meditation, physical isolation, fasting, celibacy and asceticism from ascetics whose traditions may have

gone back to the Indus Valley Civilization. Such techniques were found to be useful as spiritual preparations for performing the sacrifice. Some Brahmins then retired to the forest and used them as a way of actually carrying out the sacrifice in an internalized, visualized form. The *Upaniṣad*s were composed out of the teachings of the more orthodox of these forest dwellers. Of these, the pre-Buddhist ones are the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and *Chāndogya* (seventh to sixth centuries BCE) and probably the *Taittirīya, Aitareya* and *Kauṣītaki* (sixth to fifth centuries BCE). In these, *Brahman* is seen as the substance underlying the whole cosmos, and as identical with the *Ātman*, the universal Self which the yogic element of the Indian tradition had sought deep within the mind. By true knowledge of this identity, it was held that a person could attain liberation from reincarnation after death, and merge back into *Brahman*. The idea of reincarnation seems to have developed as an extension of the idea, found in the *Brāhmaṇa*s, that the power of a person's sacrificial action might be insufficient to lead to an afterlife that did not end in another death. The *Upaniṣad*s, perhaps due to some non-Aryan influence, saw such a death as being followed by reincarnation as a human or animal. Non-Aryan influence was probably more certain in developing the idea that it was the quality of a person's *karma*, or 'action', that determined the nature of their reincarnation in an insecure earthly form; previously, '*karma*' had only referred to sacrificial action. Nevertheless, Brahmanism continued to see karma in largely ritual terms, and actions were judged relative to a person's *varṇa*, their station in society. Gombrich argues that the Buddha's central teachings came in response to those of the early *Upaniṣad*s, notably the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, especially its ideas on *Ātman* (1996: 31). Moreover, in Buddhism the ethical quality of the impulse behind an action was the key to its being good or bad, rather than its conformity with ritual norms (2006: 67–70; 2009: 19–44).

A key term of Brahmanical thought was *Dharma*, seen as the divinely ordained order of the universe and human society, as seen in the specific duties (*dharma*s) assigned to each *varṇa*. *Dharma* includes both how things are (cf. a 'law' of physics) and how they should be (cf. a legal 'law'); it is the existent ideal standard (cf. the standard metre rule in Paris). In Buddhism, *Dharma* (Pali *Dhamma*) is also a central term. Here, the emphasis is not on fixed social duties, but primarily on the nature of reality, practices aiding understanding of this and practices informed by an understanding of this, all aiding a person to live a happier life and to move closer to liberation. Interest in the *Dharma* of things, their basic pattern or order, is also seen in the early Indian concern with enumerating the various elements of a person and the cosmos. In Buddhism, one sees this in various analytical lists, such