



CHAPTER ONE



THE ORIGINS OF BUDDHISM, CHRISTIANITY, AND ISLAM

GETTING STARTED ON CHAPTER ONE: Why do we refer to Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam as “universal religions”? In what historic circumstances did each of these religions begin? How did each of them reflect the religious traditions that preceded them? What made it possible for the teachings of the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad to be accepted by peoples outside their own cultural groups? “All religions are basically similar.” After reading the chapter, how would you respond to this statement?

INTRODUCTION

What is it about human beings that moves them to think, feel, and reach beyond the everyday struggles for food, shelter, survival, and safety? Very early they realized they could not survive as isolated individuals and had to learn to cooperate by helping others and accepting help. Once they became aware of suffering and loss and knew that one day they would die, humans began to question why they were born, what would happen after they died, and what values should guide the way they lived. Throughout the world and over the vast expanse of human experience, people have tried to imagine how life came about, how the world was created, and how it works, and they have made efforts to symbolize their insights and pass them on to future generations.

Humans have included in their insights an important place for a sense of the sacred: some transcendent reality, truth, or moral principle that explains the way the world works, gives comfort and can be relied on for help. They often worshiped forces in nature such as the sun, sky, thunder, trees, and snakes, as well as a variety of tribal gods that they

hoped would take special care of them. They called on war gods and goddesses to lead them to victory and on gods of fire and light to illuminate their days and bring security and prosperity to their lives. They knelt before images of divinity, prostrated in prayer, sat in quiet contemplation of the infinite, engaged in philosophical arguments about the nature of the divine, and stood in awe and wonder at the magnitude and glory of the universe. As they tried to make sense of it all, they sought collective meanings that they could share.

Early peoples in China, India, the Mediterranean basin, and west Asia offered sacrifices to please the divine forces and convince them to keep the world going. These sacrifices grew in complexity, and over time specialists developed who claimed to know the right way to speak to the divine powers and the proper way to perform the sacrifices. The communities believed the gods and goddesses would have to answer prayers as long as the rituals were performed correctly, and they looked to special men and women to help them grasp sacred realities: priests and priestesses, shamans, brahmins, monks and nuns, ministers, gurus, diviners, mullahs, hojas, ascetics, griots, and a host of others who offered ways to make meaning out of life's joys and suffering as well as ways to manage, if not control, events.

As cities developed and business, manufacturing, and trade supplemented herding and agriculture, nature gods personifying sky, storm, thunder, and fire, or agricultural deities representing the earth and seasonal cycles began to lose their potency. Besides, there were so many gods and goddesses, each promising, but not always delivering, special protection and prosperity for its own special group. How could these tribal gods satisfy the competing demands, especially in matters of warfare, when groups were constantly at each other's throats? Prayers often went unanswered, and sacrifices became empty rituals, making priests rich rather than appeasing and influencing the divine. In more complex, interdependent, insecure urban environments, constantly threatened by war, some people questioned the possibility of any kind of universal order and longed for effective ways to deal with the changeable and arbitrary nature of their lives.

Moreover, in small communities humans, bonded from birth to family, clan, and community, felt concern for the needs of their less fortunate members, and kinship ties and common blood moved them to compassion and charity. However, in larger urbanized societies, where a select few were growing rich by living off the labor of a vast number of poor peasants and laborers, the fellow feeling born of blood ties was often absent. Who would take care of the widows and orphans in these societies, the sick and disabled, the young and the elderly? Urban

dwellers clearly understood the seeming capriciousness of life and knew firsthand that even if they observed all societal rules, things could still often turn out badly. Why did good people suffer and why was there so much evil in the world? How could justice and mercy be balanced and what should be the proper goals of life? People are still asking these questions today.

As human communities confront these ultimate mysteries and struggle to develop a coherent view of the world, they most often look to some form of religion as the wellspring of meanings. Of course, as the Buddhists know so well, no one bathes in the same river twice. History flows, even when it meanders and sometimes turns back in the opposite direction. The collective meanings that religions endeavor to supply are constantly changing as new historic circumstances demand adjustments, calibrations, and sometimes reformations in these faiths.

Meanings and the symbols that embody religious worldviews are as basic to survival as bread. In the words of Herbert Gutman, a noted historian, "It is not so much what happened in history as the meanings we make of what happened."¹ To make sense of what we experience, we pass it through our cultural filter and its symbols. Among the factors that shape how we interpret experience and give meaning to events, perhaps none has been more significant than religion.

Religious insights and the faiths that embody the collective meanings and transmit them to future generations are crucial factors in human history. These insights and faiths guide both everyday actions and illuminate cosmic concerns. Religious values help people know what to eat and when, which holidays to celebrate, how to mark events in our lives such as births, becoming an adult, marriage, and death. Religion helps humans find solace in suffering and, perhaps most important, how to face and find meaning in death. Religious faith and its teachings have inspired much art, literature, and music and provide a guide for what to hold sacred and how to live a moral and aesthetically sensitive life.

Religion also serves many social functions, such as fostering communal identity, cementing group cooperation, and both legitimizing and challenging dominant elites in the society. Religion also encourages the relationship and interaction of all strata of society. Merchants and political leaders often look to religion for legitimization for their burning ambitions. Through history the majority of people have been and still are poor, and they sometimes mobilize around their faith to battle for reform. More often, the poor settle for some form of eternal justice: When the Day of Judgment comes, "the meek shall inherit the earth,"

but until then, they often have to be satisfied with "a haven in a heartless world."

According to the eminent anthropologist Clifford Geertz, religion establishes in humans "powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations" by "formulating conceptions of a general order of existence."³ Religion protects us from the impending chaos that threatens our collective and individual lives on at least three levels: our ability to understand the universe and how it works, our ability to endure suffering, and our ability to face evil. It gives direction to people's lives and infuses them with a sense of how to think and feel about what is happening.⁴ Religions are not mere abstractions or lists of beliefs and practices. Nor are they merely things that individuals do and believe in one isolated compartment of their lives, unrelated to other dimensions of life, such as changes in technology, the production and exchange of goods, and war. The loyalty that each faith commands from its believers fosters intense and impassioned feelings and actions. Religious faith can inspire the most horrible violence and even genocide. That same faith can also move people to sacrifice their lives for others, go on peace marches, and participate in worldwide efforts to feed the hungry and heal the sick. Whatever direction the force of faith takes, students of history must take religion seriously; it is intertwined in all of human life and is an integral part of history.

UNIVERSAL RELIGIONS

One of the most significant aspects of the first millennium C.E. was the development of religions that were open to anyone and whose teachings were valid for all people. Scholars such as Edward Farmer and others⁵ have identified these faiths as "universal" because they are not linked to blood, racial, ethnic, or national groups, and anyone can join them. In societies that worshiped local gods and goddesses and where only elites had access to the sacred knowledge, mass participation in religion was a revolutionary idea.

Universal religions have several characteristics beside the fact that they welcome all who believe. Each of these faiths was founded by a historic person who synthesized a variety of teachings current during his lifetime and created a new path. Worship is usually focused on a single, all-powerful divinity that transcends the world, but also seems to intervene in human experience. Universal religions promise believers the possibility of salvation, often in some form of life after death in a heaven. This reward generally results from devotion and obedience to the divine power and observance of the rules of the faith. Heaven offers a form of

postponed justice. Things may not seem fair in this world, but even a peasant or destitute person can expect to be rewarded with heaven for living a good life or having faith.

Universal religions provide saints or other intermediaries to help believers reach or realize salvation, so believers do not have to strive totally on their own. Intermediaries such as a messiah or a bodhisattva also can provide a personal link between divinity and humanity. In addition, the message is in a language average people understand, and the insights are often given in stories and parables. These faiths incorporate existing practices and mix elite religious concepts with popular rituals, making the faith accessible to people far from where it originated.

Finally, universal religions address and deal with the everyday problems and insecurities that people are experiencing. They offer solace to those who feel their lives are hopeless or meaningless, and they answer questions about suffering and the presence of evil. They offer a common set of ethics for living a moral life and also promise forgiveness for sins and the possibility of ultimate salvation. They inform everyday life and give hope and comfort in a seemingly capricious and hostile world.

Certainly the beliefs and message of the founder are important to any religion, but so is the historical context surrounding its founding and spread. Faiths, like politics, economics, and technology, change over time and often stray far from their original formulations. What happens to a religion in a new cultural setting often depends on political forces, economic realities, even pure chance, as much as on the intrinsic attraction the faith has for potential believers. As diverse groups in different parts of the world encounter new beliefs and work to make them their own, they alter and adjust the message as they translate it into their own language, art, philosophy, and traditional values. Newly settled nomadic groups, men and women concerned with survival, political leaders seeking forms of legitimacy and strategies for unity, merchants looking for profit and peaceful zones of exchange, and common people desperately searching for explanations for suffering, inequality, and evil all found reasons for embracing one of these faiths, as well as ample ways to adjust that faith to their own needs and traditions.

Of all the numerous religious worldviews that had developed by the first millennium, only Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam meet the criteria established here for a universal religion. None of these faiths started out with a universal appeal, and their founders most likely would have been surprised at how their messages spread. Nevertheless, over time the followers of each faith calibrated the message so that it might appeal

to anyone and everyone, no matter what their race, ethnic status, caste, or class.

An argument could be made to include Judaism and Hinduism as universal faiths because they also accepted converts, but neither of them has focused on conversion as a major goal. Hinduism is ambivalent about conversion. Groups that migrated into the Indian subcontinent adapted to Hinduism by becoming new castes, and brahmins journeyed outside of India spreading their insights. Interestingly, one of the most impressive Hindu temples in the world can be found in Cambodia and the Hindu worldview significantly influenced the development of both mainland and island Southeast Asia. Even so, most Hindus would say that one has to be born a Hindu. Judaism accepts converts as well, but being a Jew is most often considered a fact of birth as well as belief and practice. There is no doubt that Judaism and Hinduism have provided the ethos and historic roots for one or more of the universal religions examined here. It is sometimes said that Buddhism is Hinduism's vehicle for reaching a wider audience and that Christianity and Islam carried Judaism to the world.

This study focuses on how religions develop and spread to other areas, changing and adapting in the process. As you consider the history of these universal religions, you can ponder the attraction each had and how their original messages changed as they spread from their modest beginnings to distant lands. It is noteworthy that although their founders never traveled more than a few hundred miles from their homes in North India, Palestine, and Arabia, these religions now span the entire earth. The Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad would likely be surprised that the ideas that they preached would one day attract two-thirds of the people in the world.

THE SETTING AND CONTEXT

Although the origins of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam were separated by more than a thousand years, the contexts out of which they grew have some noteworthy similarities. Siddhartha Gotama, the founder of Buddhism, lived in the sixth century B.C.E., during a time when the tribal organization the Indo-Europeans had established in the Indian subcontinent centuries earlier was breaking down, and urbanization, accompanied by commercialism and cross-cultural contacts, was rapidly accelerating. Five centuries later in west Asia, during the time of Jesus of Nazareth, Hellenistic culture, and Roman military occupation, which threatened the tribal loyalties and survival of the Jews, was spreading across west Asia. Finally, in the seventh century

C.E., during the lifetime of Muhammad, the founder of Islam, the strong blood loyalty of the Arabian Bedouins was being undermined by the growth of trade and commercial contacts and the rise of towns in the Arabian Peninsula.

The migration of nomadic groups into settled areas and the subsequent slow movement from herding to settled farming, the development of towns and cities, and the emergence of larger political units that transcend tribal loyalties—a recurring cycle in world history—usually results in a search for new meanings. As people try to adjust to changing realities, gifted teachers emerge who offer creative responses that calibrate traditional worldviews into more timely and satisfactory cosmologies.

It is not surprising to find religious ferment when old values are threatened. As conditions change and established ways seem inadequate, people seek new meanings. This was true in North India in the early centuries of the first millennium B.C.E., in Palestine during the Hellenistic Age that followed Alexander of Macedonia's conquests, and also in Arabia during the early centuries of the Byzantine Empire. These eras of social turmoil all sparked an outburst of creative energy and reform. Out of these troubled times, new religious faiths that were innovative syntheses of the old and new were born.

THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

Indian civilization dates back at least 4,500 years when people built sophisticated cities in the Indus River valley. Archaeological evidence, including carefully constructed drains and waterways, suggest the Indus people were interested in ritual purity and probably worshiped a mother goddess or goddesses. Archaeologists have uncovered little evidence of warfare, and few weapons have been found. In addition, Indus seals depicting figures in the yogic "lotus" position suggest that the Indus people may have practiced meditation.

Sometime around 2000 B.C.E., a large number of nomadic tribal groups, collectively known as Indo-Europeans, began to move south and east into major urban centers from the Mediterranean to India. The Indo-Europeans who reached India around 1500 B.C.E., about the same time that the Achaeans arrived in Greece, were known as "Aryans."

The interaction of the nomadic Aryans with the urbanized people of the Indus civilization resulted in a common culture that was a blending of both ways of life. One of the major aspects of this synthesis was in the realm of religion and worldview. The Aryans brought a typical nomadic worldview that pictured the earth covered by a vast sky dome managed by a three-tiered collection of celestial, atmospheric, and

terrestrial gods. Among the more important gods were Varuna, who governed the rhythms of the universe; Indra, the storm and war god; and Agni, the god of fire.

The Aryan religion centered on sacrifices that brahmins (priests) performed. Over the centuries these rituals grew more and more elaborate until they sometimes involved the slaughter of hundreds of cattle, sheep, and even horses. In addition, the brahmins followed strict rules of purity and avoided any kind of ritual pollution in performing the sacrifices. Every instrument used in the rituals had to be ritually purified, and only brahmins were allowed to touch them. Brahmin power steadily increased, and they claimed they could interpret the will of the gods. If they performed the rituals accurately, the gods seemed compelled to respond to their sacrifices, prayers, and supplications.

As the indigenous people and the Aryans mixed, their distinct worldviews gradually merged into one complete religious system. The Aryans' more masculine approach and the Indus people's inclination for the mother goddess fused, and these sky gods and earth goddesses blended into a synthesis, symbolized by paired father and mother divinities such as Ram-Sita, Shiva-Parvati, and Vishnu-Laxmi.

After 700 B.C.E., urbanization increased and ambitious tribal leaders sought to expand their power by conquering smaller tribes and creating multi tribal kingdoms. As the importance of tribal and blood loyalties decreased, men and women began to identify themselves not by tribes but as members of occupational groups, called jatis (which Europeans later called "castes"). Individual castes clustered together in specific parts of the cities and attempted to strengthen their unity by arranging marriages and sharing food with members of their own group. These castes, which often cut across geographic boundaries, provided a certain amount of security for their members as well as a new source of identity.

The brahmin emphasis on purity and pollution, which may well have been a legacy from the Indus culture, permeated the entire social structure, including the kinds of foods that one ate and shared with others. In caste rankings, those who dealt with impure things were considered impure and were slotted onto the lower rungs of the social ladder and often shunned. Those, like the brahmins, who dealt with pure things, stood at the top of the caste rankings, followed by warrior-rulers and administrators, known as *kshatriyas*. Every other group was ranked somewhere between the lowest outcastes and the highest *kshatriyas* and brahmins.

The brahmin/*kshatriya* alliance was crucial in the new kingdoms. Rulers looked to brahmin advisors to help them establish legitimacy. At

the same time, many people, especially in the middle and lower castes, began to question the traditional brahmin dominance, to doubt the value of rituals and elaborate sacrifices, and to resist supporting them. As prayers went unanswered and the sacrifices no longer seemed to work, a desire for reform spread, especially in republics that bordered the larger kingdoms.

Besides antibrahmin sentiments and the significant shift from tribal loyalties to caste identification, the new urban culture was also upsetting the economic security of self-sufficient villages. Individual village artisans could not compete with craftsmen in far off cities who had established large caste/craft organizations and had access to cheaper raw materials and more efficient ways of producing goods. At the same time, village farmers, who were pressured to supply food to the growing cities, were often exploited and forced to pay taxes in the form of foodstuffs.

The increasing sense of inequality, dissatisfaction, and social flux left many unwilling to follow society's rules and questioning their inherited worldview. As a result, from approximately 900 to 600 B.C.E. in North India, large numbers of seekers after the truth wandered about the countryside searching for new meanings. When word of their insights filtered out to the larger community, others, disenchanted with their lives, sought out these wandering ascetics and often became their disciples.

The teachings of these ascetics are described in the Upanishads, one of Hinduism's most important texts. The Upanishads, composed between c. 700 and 200 B.C.E., introduced the concept of rebirth (*samsara*) and explained that one's rebirth depended on *karma*, the measure of how well one performed his or her dharma actions that were appropriate to one's age, caste, and temperament. One's good and bad karma is calculated at each death and carried into one's future lives, determining the status into which each person is born. Good karma results in being born into a group with greater status and experiencing a better life; bad karma consigns one to less-fortunate future life. In addition, people who performed their appropriate dharma would be respected by their peers and experience some satisfaction in a life well lived.

Looking beyond the earlier Indo-European deities, the Upanishads introduced the concept of *Brahman* (Oneness, Ultimate Reality), giving a name to the growing sense of a cosmic unity. Brahman represents the invisible and indescribable force that animates the universe, the primal and unchanging energy infusing all things. "Being alone exists," the ascetics explained; everything in the created world, including the gods

and goddesses, is but a manifestation of this Oneness. Each person and every thing emerges from and ultimately returns to Brahman.

The Upanishads taught that one could escape from karma and samsara by understanding that one's real Self is identical with Brahman: "You are That." Often called monism, this idea maintains that ultimately all aspects of the universe derive from one source and return to that source. Truly experiencing that unity leads to moksha (release, salvation): one breaks the bonds of karma and ends the cycle of rebirths. To experience moksha, the Upanishads taught each person had to recognize that all pairs of opposites, such as good/evil, right/wrong, rich/poor, etc., were not ultimate reality and humans had to find a discipline that would take them beyond dualism. The concept of "the oneness of all things" pervaded North Indian life for centuries, and nondualism was an integral part of the legacy that the Buddha would draw upon for his own message.

At the same time, the later Upanishads also taught forms of theism, the belief in a personal, all-powerful god. Whether through god or knowledge of Brahman, it was possible for the seeker to find release from samsara and to experience moksha. However, insights of the Upanishads had very little impact on average people.

By the sixth century, hundreds of teachers were popularizing and reinterpreting the insights from the Upanishads about samsara, karma, dharma, and moksha. Most of them were offering ways to break the bounds of birth and rebirth and the laws of karma, and many of them attracted large numbers of followers. The period became a testing ground for new ideas and new approaches within the vastly changed North Indian landscape. Given this context, it is not surprising that so many people questioned the older religious practices and sought new ways to make sense of their altered world.

In this milieu of reform the questioning groups of ascetics, almost entirely non-brahmins who most often came from small republics bordering larger kingdoms, began to teach new ways to moksha. Many of these ascetics taught that pursuing harsh lifestyles of renunciation of worldly pleasures could lead to moksha. Most refused to eat meat, some went without clothing, while others disdained sleeping in a shelter and lived instead under the open sky. Most of them rejected animal sacrifices, insisting sacrifices should be symbolic. One of these wandering teachers was Siddhartha Gotama, who would become the Buddha.

WEST ASIA

Whereas in North India several large kingdoms emerged that were capable of dominating much of the subcontinent, the small Hebrew

THE SPIRITUAL WORLDS OF BUDDHISM, CHRISTIANITY, AND ISLAM

Each of the charismatic individuals who founded the three universal religions grew up in a specific cultural context and historical past that informed his message. By weaving together threads of their own traditions, borrowing from other teachers, and speaking a faith language accessible to those they sought to teach, they all created something new and exciting and, in the process, redirected the histories of large areas of the world.

THE BUDDHA

Siddhartha Gotama, the founder of the first of the universal religions, was definitely not an ascetic in his early life. He was a young prince living in a small kingdom near present-day Nepal. The Buddhist tradition claims that as a young man he lived a life of luxury in a pleasure palace, insulated from any hardships. When he realized the suffering that sickness, old age, and death bring, he is said to have fled from the palace, leaving behind his beautiful wife and his newborn son, and he sought solace with ascetics in the countryside. After intensive study and practicing extreme forms of asceticism, including starving himself, followed by temptations of sex and power, doubt and fear, Siddhartha suddenly experienced enlightenment and became a "Buddha," one who has "woken up."

According to Buddhist sources, the Buddha realized that existence is filled with suffering (*dukkha*). Desire, he taught, is the root cause of suffering: desiring what we do not have and desiring to keep what we do have. Most of all, people fear death and desperately cling to life. If individuals could stop all desires, he preached, suffering would end. This insight was the basis of what became known as the Four Noble Truths: Life is filled with suffering; suffering is caused by desire; one can end desire and therefore put an end to suffering; by following the Eightfold Path one will be able to end desires, lead a moral life, and at death find final release from birth and rebirth in nirvana.

To experience nirvana, which is very close to the Hindu concept of moksha, required a radical change in consciousness. There is no permanent self, the Buddha taught, only a collection of stimuli stored in the brain. People's minds organize sensory impressions into categories such as beautiful/ugly, sweet/bitter, good/bad, etc., and they mistake these mental images for reality. If they can change their understanding and consciousness, they will experience nirvana, the dissolution of the ego, and escape the endless rounds of birth and rebirth.

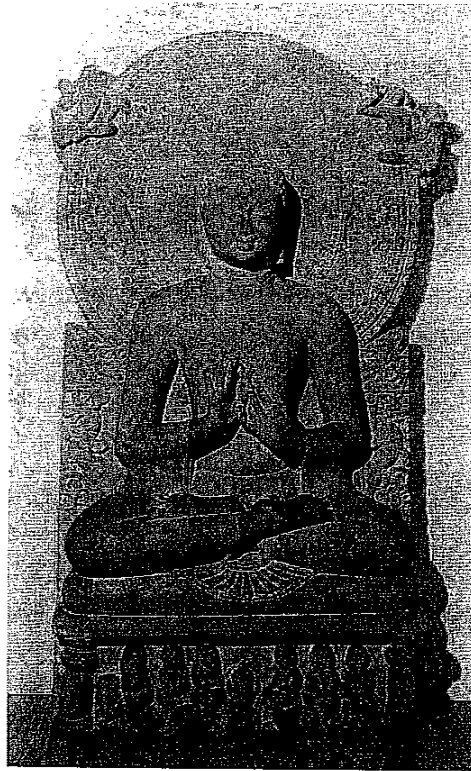


FIGURE 1-1 THE BUDDHA IN TEACHING POSE

The teaching Buddha in Sarnath, Gupta style.

Buddha's Eightfold Path suggests how leading a moral and ethical life can help one realize nirvana. The first two steps—Right Understanding and Right Resolve—include the sincere belief that the Four Noble Truths are correct and the intention to strive earnestly to end desire by following the Buddha's path and letting go of the idea of a self. Steps three through five—Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood—involve ethical commitments that include benevolence and not harming living things. Believers should practice right speech by not telling lies or spreading gossip; right conduct includes not killing, not stealing, and remaining chaste. Right Livelihood advises people to avoid jobs that harm others, such as butchers, hunters, soldiers, fishermen, jailers, slave traders, or liquor salesmen.

Steps six through eight outline one's spiritual development. Right Effort involves banishing envy, lust, and jealousy and guarding the mind against all unhealthy thoughts and images. Right Awareness means paying close attention to the sensations that enter one's body and mind, keeping calm, and being indifferent to pain and pleasure. Finally, in step eight, Right Concentration, one undertakes deep meditation that leads

beyond all pairs of opposites. Freed from sensations, thoughts, and categories, one has finally realized nirvana.

Clearly the Buddha's teachings formed a synthesis of many of the ideas and values that were circulating among other ascetics. He took ideas such as karma, samsara, and moksha from the Upanishads and made them accessible to a wider audience, regardless of gender, caste, or tribe. He was able to combine mystical goals leading to nirvana with everyday ethical concerns such as diet, relationships, and personal values such as truth telling, honesty, compassion and nonviolence. His stress on right livelihood probably appealed to the growing numbers of merchants and traders, many of whom would become his most enthusiastic supporters.

The Buddha's teaching also addressed some of the disquiet people had about the role of brahmins in society. Many had growing concerns about the slaughter of so many animals and the enormous expense of the extravagant sacrifices brahmins were performing in an effort to influence the gods. Buddha denied the existence of gods and goddesses and argued that sacrifices were irrelevant. He also rejected the idea that certain people are born ritually purer than others. No one is born a brahmin, he stated. A person becomes a brahmin only by his actions. Right livelihood also undercut the idea of hereditary caste occupations because he insisted that no one should perform a job that was harmful to any living being, either human or animal.

Karuna, compassion, lay at the center of the Buddha's teachings. He advocated a "middle way" between extreme asceticism and brahminic sacrificial ritualism. Recognizing that no one can be perfect, he suggested that one should try to do as little harm as possible. These values of moderation appealed to large numbers of people who eschewed the extreme discipline and self-mortification that many ascetics of that time were practicing. Although the Buddha's teachings appear to have focused more on psychological insights than on deities and rituals usually associated with a religion, his audiences were familiar with many of the concepts he was using, such as release from karma, and his followers likely heard his words as an invitation to an exciting spiritual quest.

During the last 40 years of his life, the Buddha wandered across the Gangetic Plain preaching to kings, merchants, and common people, and he advised his closest disciples to go by twos and spread his message. Some who accepted the Buddha's Four Noble Truths and wished to follow his Eightfold Path became monks who renounced the world; others were lay followers who expected to continue to lead their normal lives in the world while supporting the monks.

The Buddha, like most successful reformers, offered many innovations for the new age, but as he did so, he worked within the traditions and worldview of the existing north Indian society. When he spoke of karma, samsara, and release, he was referring to familiar principles that he had adapted for his own new message. The Buddha also added a significant ethical dimension to these earlier concepts. Reformers and teachers in other areas, while accepting many of the historic values and belief from their societies, were also offering innovative solutions to the crises of their own times. One of them, about 500 years later, was Jesus of Nazareth.

JESUS

The first century B.C.E. in the Jewish community in Palestine was quite different from life in North India. Instead of release from rebirth, Jews were hoping for the coming of a messiah. Speculation over what sort of person he would actually be covered a wide spectrum of possibilities from a militant political leader to a spiritual redeemer. Whereas the Essenes anticipated that the messiah would bring about the end of time, the Zealots hoped he would lead a revolt against Roman rule and reestablish a powerful Jewish kingdom. In this atmosphere of great expectation, Jesus of Nazareth was one of many itinerant preachers, Jewish reformers, and candidates for messiahhood that emerged in Judea.

Jesus is said to have lived from about 4 B.C.E. to about 30 C.E., and knowledge gained from recently discovered manuscripts known as the Dead Sea Scrolls places his period of teaching at the time of Roman emperor Claudius. Almost nothing is known about his personal life, although tradition claims his father was a carpenter. After his baptism by John the Baptist, another ascetic, he was inspired by the possibility of the imminent realization of the kingdom of God. He is said to have wandered over the countryside during the last three years of his life, preaching that the kingdom was already coming and using parables to illustrate his insights.

In addition to his message of the coming kingdom, Jesus' deep concern for poor and marginalized people living miserable lives in the Hellenized society also attracted followers. Adapting the Ten Commandments handed down by Moses, Jesus emphasized two commandments, which some Jews also emphasized: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind," and "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:37-40) Like the Buddha before him, he stressed compassion and love of one's neighbor. He also advocated peace and

nonviolence, symbolized by turning the other cheek. "You have heard it said you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy," he said. "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew 5: 43-4)

Jesus was not only a spiritual and ethical teacher, but also a healer. During his brief ministry, his acts of healing and exorcism made up a major part of his mission. The Gospels, which summarize his life and teachings, speak often of Jesus' compassion and his responses to the suffering of afflicted persons. Many of those healed were social outcasts such as lepers, a bent over woman, and those with physical disabilities such as blindness. Many New Testament passages testify to the healing miracles Jesus performed, such as raising a man from the dead and restoring sight to the blind. Jesus healed by simply saying to a paralytic, "Get up, pick up your bed and go home." (Mark 2:11) In an age that sorely distrusted physicians and looked to miracle workers, Jesus' power to heal certainly attracted followers. When asked how he differed from John the Baptist, Jesus replied, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up" (Matt. 11:4-5, Luke 7:22)

Jesus tempered Jewish dedication to justice by telling his followers, "Judge not lest you be not judged." When a mob was about to stone a woman caught in adultery, he suggested that whoever was without sin should cast the first stone. He advocated a communal life where people shared what they had, and, instead of amassing treasures on earth, he advised them to prepare for the coming kingdom.

Jesus preached about God's love and forgiveness. One of his parables told of a shepherd who was extremely upset over the loss of one of his sheep. Another was about how joyous a poor widow was when she found a lost coin. He told about a prodigal son who had left home, gotten into trouble, and squandered his inheritance. When he returned home, his father rejoiced and celebrated his return. Jesus likened God to that father.

Many Jews, especially the Pharisees, probably saw Jesus as a significant threat to their own status and someone who would both anger the ruling Roman officials and upset the social structure of Jewish society. Certainly, his followers who were anticipating a political messiah wondered when Jesus would make a move against Roman rule. Instead, he spoke about a heavenly kingdom where people would dwell with God after they died. Even so, fearing Jesus would stir up unrest, the Romans, with support from some members of the Jewish community, crucified him in Jerusalem when he was only 33 years old.

CHAPTER TWO

THE EXPANDING WORLD OF BUDDHISM: BUDDHIST ENCOUNTERS FROM SOUTH TO EAST ASIA

GETTING STARTED ON CHAPTER TWO: How did the Buddha's followers try to organize a community and define a common doctrine following the death of their teacher? What was the appeal of Buddhism for women, merchants, rulers, lower castes, and other groups? Why was Buddhism able to spread so widely beyond its Indian home base? And why did it decline in the Indian subcontinent? How did Buddhism change as it took root in new cultural settings? What differences, conflicts, and controversies divided the world of Buddhism as the religion spread? What relationship did Buddhism develop with political authorities? How did the support or opposition of kings and emperors affect its evolution?

The Buddha gained enlightenment and preached his message of compassion and release in the enormously pluralistic religious environment of sixth-century North India. He was only one of many ascetics wandering the countryside, offering new insights, and seeking followers. This charismatic teacher provided a prescription to ease life's suffering and lead those who followed his path to nirvana. In his message, called the *Dhamma*, he taught that suffering results from a desire for permanence in a world of constant flux. The way to end suffering, he explained, is to stop desiring. Be content with what you have, cultivate compassion, and try to do as little harm as possible. Give up the idea of a permanent

self and seek to experience oneness with the totality of the universe, an experience that will result in nirvana and release from the cycles of rebirth.

BUDDHISM'S EARLY GROWTH

Early Buddhists probably included men and women of all social strata and cut across castes as well. The new faith had great appeal to the increasing number of merchants in the cities in the Gangetic Plain. It also resonated with princes and kings who hoped that the Buddha's message might foster unity within their states by offering their subjects a common set of beliefs and ethical practices.

As the number of followers increased, it became apparent that the Buddha and his closest disciples would have to provide housing and food for them. As a result, the Buddha organized his followers into the Sangha, a society that included all who wanted to follow his path, whether monks or members of the lay community. Soon, however, the Sangha included only men who were ordained as monks. Monks took the vows of celibacy, truth telling, and nonstealing, and they gave up their possessions and dedicated their lives to preaching, healing, and helping others. The monks' example of simplicity, meditation, and service set an example for the lay community. The Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha—known as the "Three Jewels of Buddhism"—form the core of Buddhist faith. Members of the lay community were encouraged to build good karma by supporting the monks.

Initially, the Buddha resisted including women in the Sangha and only men joined. His adopted mother and close companion asked the Buddha twice if he would let women join, and both times he refused. When Ananda, one of his most trusted disciples, spoke up for the women, the Buddha reluctantly agreed that they could join the order on the condition that they followed eight additional rules that underscored their inferior status.

His resistance to including women may have been caused in part by his fear that their presence would distract the monks and snare them in the web of worldly concerns, the very state they were working to transcend. Early Buddhist texts presented women as both compassionate caregivers who minister to people in need and also as sexual temptresses whose allure stands in the way of a devotee letting go of the world.

In spite of the initial resistance to including women, large numbers aspired to become nuns. Many were drawn to the Buddha's message and wanted to devote their lives to following his discipline and to living with others who had made the same commitment. Their community

Isidasi -
reasons
for becoming
a nun

provided a home and security for women who had no family to protect them, although a good many of the early nuns came from wealthy families where finances were not an issue. Becoming a nun offered a socially acceptable alternative to marriage and childbearing and a way to escape from an unhappy marriage. Some women also wanted a chance to develop their intellect, a path that was denied to most women.

Technically, the Sangha was the entire Buddhist community and included monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen. However, the Sangha is often used to refer only to celibate monks and nuns who lived in communal groups according to a strictly enforced discipline with written codes of conduct that governed all aspects of behavior. They were expected to work on their own spiritual development to achieve the status of an *arhat* (a saint or fully enlightened being), one who has completed the Eightfold Path and attained enlightenment.

The following story of the "still beautiful" Isidasi, who wants to work off her bad karma, illustrates why some women might have wanted some respectable alternative to marriage. She explains to the Buddha why she became a nun:

In the great city of Ujjani my father was a merchant of high repute. I was his only daughter, deeply loved and pampered. A wealthy merchant sent noblemen from the city of Saketa to arrange a marriage, and my father gave me to be his son's wife. Day and night I humbled myself to honor my in-laws—my training made me bow my head down at their feet. When I saw my husband's sisters and brothers I cringed and crept away to free my seat for them. I kept fresh-cooked food and drink and spiced pickles ready to serve their demands.

I woke early every morning to scrub my hands and feet before I crossed the threshold to beg my husband's blessing. Like a slave girl, I took combs and scented oils and my mirror to groom him. I cooked his rice gruel, I washed his bowl, I waited on this husband like a mother doting on her son. Though I was diligent and humble, meticulous and virtuous in serving him, my husband despised me. He begged his parents, "Give me your leave. I must go away. I will not stay in this house with Isidasi!"

To placate their son, his parents took Isidasi back to her father's house and her parents arranged another marriage for her, but it only lasted a month. Then they got an ascetic to marry her but he only stayed two weeks. Isidasi wanted to kill herself, but decided instead to become a nun.

My father argued, "My child, you may follow the Buddha's way by giving food and drink to holy men and Brahmin priests." I pleaded in tears, begging his blessing, "I must destroy the evil I have done!" My father blessed me then, "Attain enlightenment and the Buddha's way that leads to liberation!" . . .⁹

From the outset the Buddha accepted lay believers: individuals who remained in the world to keep society functioning. Lay people were expected to observe the first three steps on the road to becoming arhats, which included donating financial and material support for the monks and nuns. Because monks and nuns had no reliable source of income, the Buddha instructed them to spend time each day seeking food and other necessities from the lay community. Lay people earned "merit" for their services to the monks and nuns, and merit built up good karma. The symbiotic relationship between the monks and nuns and the lay community that supported them set a pattern that would also be followed by Christianity.

There were many reasons why the Buddha's message attracted so many followers. For one thing, joining his movement did not require a drastic change in worldview for many. The Buddha taught in Pali, the language of the people, rather than in Sanskrit that brahmins used. He wanted all people to understand his teaching and be able to apply it to their own lives. He accepted most of the older concepts common to Indian religions such as dharma (performing the action appropriate for one's age, caste, and gender), karma (the consequences of one's actions), and rebirth. Most Indians were familiar with these ideas and already accepted them. However, the Buddha's criticism of the caste system and of the brahmins, who were at the top of this hierarchical structure, had a huge appeal for the lower castes.

The Buddhist goal of nirvana was also very similar to the Hindu concept of moksha (release from rebirth). He offered an innovative combination of mystical union with the ultimate, the philosophic system developed earlier in the Upanishads, and a new ethical system that stressed human equality. The Buddha recast these familiar ideas into a more contemporary message that included several ethical and moral concerns as well and made that message accessible to anyone who would listen.

The Buddha offered a "middle way" between the Brahminic religion that focused on animal sacrifices and observance of strict rules of purity and pollution and the purely individual quest for moksha espoused in the Upanishads. He also offered a middle way between a hedonistic life of personal gratification and the austere reform movements that required total renunciation of the world, absolute adherence to nonviolence, and strict dietary restrictions that severely limited one's choice of food.

The Buddha also spoke to the general uncertainty caused by the disruption of traditional social norms and the increasing social mobility. In the charged atmosphere that accompanied the rapid rise of the cities along the Gangetic Plain, an entrepreneurial spirit prevailed as

merchants struggled to achieve a higher place in the social system. Merchants were attracted to the Buddha's rejection of the strict hierarchy, which relegated them to relatively low status. They also profited from his appeal to nonviolence, for traders need large areas of stability to carry on commercial activities.

At the same time, the growing desire for more possessions and the enjoyment of physical pleasures were not bringing the satisfaction or peace of mind people hoped for. Their desires never seemed to be satisfied. The more they had, the more they wanted. The Buddha warned that acquisitiveness could only cause more anxiety and suffering and would never result in human happiness. This was a radical idea for any period in history, but his messages obviously struck a chord with many people in sixth-century India.

Moreover, many popular religious practices, including some that were centuries old, began to creep into Buddhism. One example was the worship of sacred serpents called *nagas*, a long-standing tradition in India (and one that continues to this day). In a popular story about the Buddha's enlightenment, a giant naga sheltered him from a violent storm. Before images of the Buddha were made, much attention was focused on the Bodhi tree under which the Buddha gained enlightenment. Tree worship had already had a very long history in India, and the Buddha's enlightenment gave the sacred tree new symbolic meanings. Perhaps most important, meditation, by which the Buddha realized enlightenment, had probably been practiced in the subcontinent since the Indus civilization some 2,000 years earlier. Buddhism prospered by infusing new meanings into these and other age-old beliefs and practices.

THE FORMATION OF THE CANON

The Buddha did not designate a successor before he died. He told his followers, "The Dhamma will be your leader," and instructed Ananda to "be a lamp unto yourself. Pursue your own salvation with diligence." With such seemingly vague instructions, his followers soon began debating what his parables and metaphors really meant and in what form they should pass his message on to others. The Buddha, like the founders of Christianity and Islam, was a charismatic preacher with a burning message of salvation, not a systematic philosopher whose statements fit into a logical system.

Many of the texts collected in the first centuries after the Buddha's death were his disciples' recollections about issues, and the meanings were often ambiguous. Moreover, the Buddha is said to have told his

disciples to spread his message in the local languages, and followers tried to translate his teachings into languages used outside the Buddha's north Indian setting. With so many followers translating the message and the many individual interpretations that got inserted into the texts, discrepancies about the core meanings of the Buddha's teachings were unavoidable.

Buddhists wanted to establish a common basis for their faith so that those who carried the message to different areas could share a common set of teachings. To achieve this goal, the Sangha attempted to compile a Buddhist Canon in Pali. A series of all-Buddhist councils were convened to carry out the major work of completing the Canon.

At the First Council, held in 483 B.C.E. just a few months after the Buddha's death, and the Second Council, held a hundred years later, the Buddha's disciples recited his sermons that they had memorized, and scribes wrote them down. (It is hard for us to imagine, in an age of e-mail, what prodigious feats of memory these monks had perfected to remember these texts. Memorizing a single source might take a lifetime.) The Third Council, held in 225, revised the collected texts, added two scholarly commentaries, and produced the Three Baskets or "Tripitaka": the Basket of Discipline, the Basket of Discourses, and the Basket of Scholasticism.

EARLY SCHISMS Serious disagreements on several contentious points arose during the Second Council as the growing Buddhist community strove to create a common set of texts and formulate a common core of beliefs and practices. One was over the role of the arhat. One group, the Theravadans (Followers of the Teaching of the Elders), insisted that the Buddha was a human being who had taught that each person, individually, had to go through the same stages the Buddha had experienced in order to become completely detached from the world and experience nirvana. The group known as the Mahasanghika (Great Assembly) ridiculing this notion, claiming the Buddha was not human but an all powerful, almost godlike presence whose appearance on earth was an apparition. They argued that as a divine being, the Buddha could help take away karma and assist people in their quest for nirvana.

The Mahasanghikas also wanted to relax some of the rules in the Sangha and accused the Theravadas of being too concerned with their own personal salvation. Instead, they stressed the idea of the bodhisattva. Bodhisattvas were saints who could renounce the world but chose instead to work for the salvation of others. They focused on the Buddhist teachings about mental discipline and stressed the concept of

emptiness: freeing oneself from all categories whatsoever. The councils were unable to resolve this split and disagreements continued.

THE ROLE OF ASHOKA IN SPREADING BUDDHISM Emperor Ashoka, who ruled the Mauryan Empire in India from 270 to 232 B.C.E., tried to help heal this split, and he also played an important role in the initial spread of Buddhism outside the subcontinent. In his early career, Ashoka acted like anything but a Buddhist. He intrigued to gain power and probably ordered the assassination of all his brothers so he could become king. However, after his bloody campaign against the state of Kalinga that resulted in thousands of deaths, he was filled with remorse at what he realized was a needless slaughter of innocent people. His change of heart probably contributed to his conversion to Buddhism.

Being careful not to impose Buddhism on his subjects, Ashoka transformed the Buddhist concept of Dhamma into a set of social and ethical principles that supporters of any religious persuasion could follow. He then had these principles carved on numerous pillars, which were placed from Afghanistan to southern India to mark the boundaries of his empire. One edict states that he spread his message to Sri Lanka and neighboring Greek kingdoms. Another edict defines dhamma as

... non-slaughter of animals for sacrificial purposes. Non-violence toward human beings, proper attention to kinsmen, proper attention to Brahmins and ascetics, welfare of mother and father, welfare of the aged and many other kinds of moral behavior ... (Rock Edict IV)

Ashoka also made use of Buddhist relics. Tradition claims that the Buddha's bones and teeth that had remained after he was cremated had been divided into eight equal portions and placed inside eight stupas, solid semicircular burial mounds, in eight regions of the empire. Emperor Ashoka is reported to have ordered that these relics be retrieved, divided, and re-enshrined in 84,000 stupas that he ordered built all over his kingdom.¹⁰ In a nod to the importance of naga worship, it was said that Ashoka did not disturb the relics that were buried in the stupa the nagas guarded because the nagas were taking such good care of them.

Although this legend is much exaggerated, Emperor Ashoka did commission the building of stupas, such as those at Sanchi, and excavations near Nepal record that he gave relics for the stupas built there. In addition, many stupas constructed in the third century B.C.E. as repositories of Buddhist relics have been excavated, and more edict pillars have been discovered.

Ashoka convened the Third Buddhist Council at his capital in Pataliputra, which was the largest city in the world at that time. He encouraged Buddhist missionaries to carry the faith to Sri Lanka and mainland

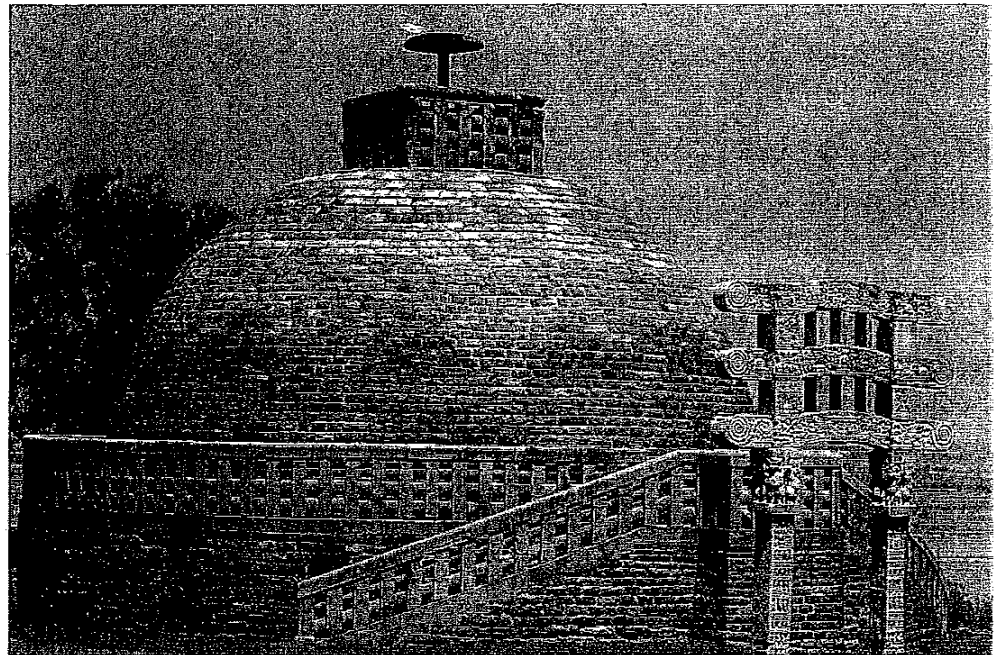


FIGURE 2-1 STUPA AT SANCHI, INDIA

One of the earliest stupas of Buddhist India.

Southeast Asia. Some Buddhists probably also traveled as far west as Egypt, North Africa, and Greece.

Emperor Ashoka's use of Buddhism and especially Buddhist relics illustrates the symbiotic relationship between religion and politics. Heads of state need more than sheer force to establish their legitimacy and authority. To govern effectively, their subjects must believe that their leaders have the right to rule and their laws should be obeyed. Religion helps give them this legitimacy. A common set of beliefs that has moral and ethical appeal and promises some form of deferred justice, especially general ones that everyone can accept, such as the dhamma rules Ashoka promoted, can help bring stability. These values also appeal to military rulers who seek additional forms of legitimacy. Paradoxically, often the support of political leaders, especially kings and emperors, helps a foreign set of beliefs gain acceptance in a new area. The Persian kings had already been instrumental in the spread of Zoroastrianism. Now Emperor Ashoka's support was proving significant in the spread of Buddhism.

In about 247 B.C.E., Ashoka's son converted the king of the Sinhala dynasty in Sri Lanka to Buddhism. A monastery was built in Anuradhapura, its capital, and one of Ashoka's daughters is said to have taken a sprig of the Bodhi tree from Bodhgaya where the Buddha attained enlightenment and planted it in Sri Lanka. (Sri Lankans claim that tree is still living.) By the second century, many among the Sinhalese nobility

and commoners had embraced Buddhism. Sri Lankan Buddhists built universities, temples, and stupas, and commissioned statues of the Buddha. Sri Lanka has been a Buddhist society ever since—the longest continuous Buddhist state.

BUDDHISM SPLITS INTO SCHOOLS

Despite Ashoka's efforts to keep the entire Buddhist community united, subschools split off from both the Theravadans and Mahasanghikas. By the first century C.E., these groups had coalesced into two major divisions within Buddhism: the Theravada and Mahayana traditions, something like Catholics and Protestants in Christianity or the Sunni and Shia in Islam.

The main issue dividing the Theravadans from the Mahayanists was a Buddhist's vocation. Should a good Buddhist focus on his own salvation and strive to become an arhat or postpone that goal and stay involved in the world as a bodhisattva to help others? Theravada Buddhists believed individuals should seek to become an arhat on their own, without help, so some referred to this school as Hinayana, or Lesser "*hina*" Vehicle "*yana*" Buddhism.

Mahayana Buddhists knew it was difficult for individuals to seek their own salvation without assistance. For them, the Buddha was a transcendent being, a savior who came to earth to take away bad karma and help individuals realize nirvana. They urged people to try to become bodhisattvas and work for the salvation of all beings. The Buddha and bodhisattvas were vehicles for salvation, so this group was called Mahayana Buddhists, Great "*maha*" Vehicle Buddhism. Theravadans believe realizing nirvana is possible only through one's individual efforts, but the Buddha and bodhisattvas offer Mahayanists help in overcoming or removing karma. For Theravadans, nirvana means permanently leaving the world, whereas Mahayanists believe experiencing nirvana means becoming conscious of one's identity with totality.

The following example illustrates the difference between an arhat and a bodhisattva: Two men, lost in the desert and slowly dying from thirst and hunger, approach a high wall. On the other side of the wall they can faintly hear singing birds and a gurgling waterfall. One man climbs over the wall and slides down into the paradise on the other side. He has chosen to be an arhat and experience nirvana on his own. The other man thinks how wonderful it would be to climb over the wall, but he hesitates and then goes to help other lost travelers find their way to the lush oasis. He has decided on the path of the bodhisattva. In theory, anyone who dedicates him- or herself selflessly to help others may become a bodhisattva.

Theravadans and Mahayanists also disagreed over the concept of Buddhahood. Theravadans maintain that the Buddha was a human being, a great teacher, and a model for anyone to follow. Mahayana Buddhists argued that humans do not have souls and that all is emptiness and nothing endures. It is possible for anyone to pierce through the illusion of phenomenal reality and see into the deeper truth and attain enlightenment. The Buddha's death was also an illusion, and his spiritual self remains available to assist his devotees. Mahayana Buddhists gradually turned the Buddha into a god and added a three-tiered system made up of a transcendent Buddha, a transcendent bodhisattva, and an earthly historic Buddha. Eventually Mahayana Buddhists systematized all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas into 33 sets of three trinities each.

The differences between these two major divisions of Buddhism are historically significant, but Buddhists have never gone to war with one another over interpretations of doctrine nor condemned and executed any Buddhists for following "wrong" ideas. To this day, the various sects and schools go to each other's temples and worship together in peace.

By the first century B.C.E., artists and craftsmen were not only building stupas to represent the Buddhist faith, but also excavating elaborate



FIGURE 2-2 CAVE SANCTUARY AT AJANTA, INDIA

There are some 5,000 cave sanctuaries in Western India. The most impressive Buddhist caves are in Ajanta. Cave sanctuary construction traveled from India to China, Korea, and Japan.

cave sanctuaries that served as homes for monks during the rainy season and as magnificent worship centers. The Theravada school did not initially make images of the Buddha, but the Mahayana followers sculpted images of the Buddha and bodhisattvas according to prescribed rules. In some of the cave sanctuaries such as at Ajanta, the stupa and the Buddha are the objects of worship. The stupa and these unique cave sanctuaries were widely copied in other areas where Buddhism spread.

BUDDHISM IN THE KUSHAN EMPIRE

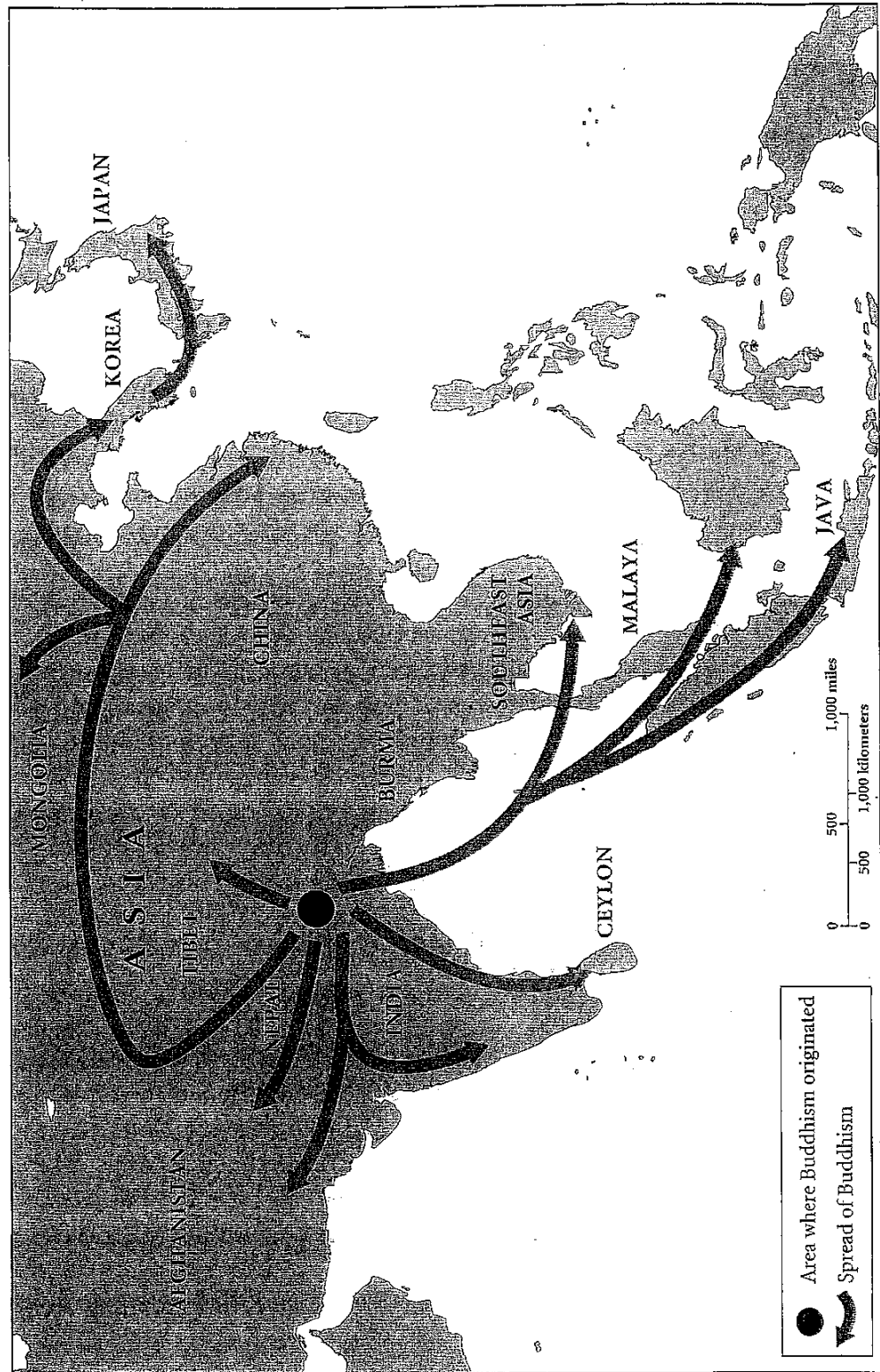
Following Ashoka's death in 232 B.C.E., waves of invaders from Greece, Iran, and Afghanistan migrated into North India, weakening the Mauryan Empire. The Kushanas, the most successful of these newcomers, left the fringes of China when the Han Chinese discouraged them from trading there. Sometime around the first century C.E., the Kushanas established an empire that included northern India and present-day Afghanistan. Their court, situated on a major crossroad of trade and exchange, attracted artists, poets, musicians, monks, and merchants from across the hemisphere.

Under King Kanishka, who ruled for more than 20 years around 100 C.E., the Kushanas became devout supporters of Mahayana Buddhism. After he converted to Buddhism, the king actively promoted the faith in Central Asia. Traders and monks from his court took miniature stupas with them as they sought to spread Buddhism along the major trade routes to China.

Buddhists and Christians mixed in this area during the first century as Mahayana Buddhism took its essential form. This contact may explain why Buddhists and Christians share some similar stories and legends. For example, the parable of the prodigal son, the story of a wayward son who is welcomed home by his father, the parable of the mustard seed, and the story of walking on water are found in both faiths, but are used to illustrate different meanings. Because Mahayana Buddhists had made the Buddha a god, they also shared the concept of the earthly incarnation of a transcendent god who was a savior to humankind. It may be that the Christian concept of the Christ influenced Mahayana Buddhism or that the bodhisattva ideal from Mahayana Buddhism influenced early Christianity, or perhaps influences went in both directions.

BUDDHISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

In the first century C.E., Theravadan missionaries carried their school of Buddhism not only to Sri Lanka, as Ashoka had directed, but eastward to Southeast Asia. Brahmins and Buddhists often accompanied Indian



distant goal that took many lifetimes to achieve, but popular Buddhism accepted faster routes. One popular shortcut was the belief that sponsoring the building of a shrine, temple, or monastery would cause a person to be reborn when Sri Ariya Maitreya, the future Buddha, returned (5,000 years after the historical Buddha). Once in the presence of Maitreya, a person would be assured enlightenment.

Buddhism found a welcome reception in Southeast Asia, in large part by integrating local beliefs and practices. Local chieftains had initially adopted the new faith to enhance their legitimacy. Kings sponsored the construction of elaborate temple and court complexes that replicated the Hindu/Buddhist cosmos to underscore their legitimacy and enticed farmers and workers to become subjects and live near the impressive cosmic courts. After the eleventh century, Southeast Asians transformed Buddhism into a popular faith by surrounding the quest for merit, good karma, and nirvana with a comforting panoply of traditional beliefs in gods, spirits, and ghosts.

MAHAYANA BUDDHISTS CARRY THE FAITH TO CHINA

By the first century C.E., Mahayana Buddhism had developed the characteristics identified with a universal religion, including a focus on a divine being and the promise of salvation for all believers and intermediaries that help individuals achieve salvation. By this time, many Mahayana Buddhists had begun to think of the Buddha as a personal savior and then as a transcendent god. Mahayana Buddhism also had absorbed some Indian deities and transformed them into Buddhas or bodhisattvas.

By the end of the first century, Buddhist monks were buying and selling religious items, such as sacred images of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, incense, cloth, and other items used in worship, and actively carrying Buddhism along the Silk Roads. Historical records report that in 68 C.E., two Indian Buddhist monks, Kasyapa and Dharmaraksha, arrived at the court of the Han dynasty (220 B.C.E.–220 C.E.). Other sources suggest a Parthian monk brought Buddhism to the Han capital around 148 C.E. Indian traders also traveled to China by sea, and Buddhist missionaries, consciously trying to carry the faith farther east, journeyed on to Korea and the Japanese archipelago.

It is not surprising that when Buddhism first reached China during the last part of the Han Dynasty, it made little immediate impact. At the time of their initial contact, Buddhist and Confucian values appeared quite incompatible. The Indian worldview based on spiritual discipline and renunciation of worldly pleasures was very different from the Chinese

concern for harmony in social relationships and disdain for metaphysics. Those who dropped out of society to seek enlightenment could not fulfill their filial responsibilities, a central value in Chinese culture, because renouncing the world and becoming a monk would leave one's parents without support.

Blending sophisticated Buddhist philosophy with the Chinese emphasis on practicality and concrete thinking must have seemed daunting, if not impossible, to the early Buddhists. Indian texts are exceedingly metaphoric and its philosophic writing is very abstract, whereas the Chinese literary tradition is filled with concrete metaphors largely drawn from nature. The Indian tradition had a complex and developed psychological analysis, whereas the Chinese tradition had little interest in analyzing personality. The Indian sense of time deals in eons aimed at understanding the infinite; the Chinese tradition deals in lineages and focuses on the finite. The Indian tradition sought otherworldly goals, whereas Confucianism focused on how to build a harmonious society.¹⁷ Chinese Daoism had mystical dimensions, but its emphasis was also directed toward building a better society.

The first Buddhist missionaries in China encouraged translations of their texts into local languages, but early attempts were difficult. Indian Sanskrit and Pali and Chinese are distinctly different. Indian languages have an alphabet and an elaborate grammar; Chinese is uninflected (does not change word endings to indicate gender, tense, etc.), ideographic (uses symbols to express things and ideas), and has no systematized grammar, unlike alphabetical languages normally have. Few Indian Buddhists knew Chinese, and their Chinese colleagues were not familiar with Indian languages and had difficulty identifying Chinese words or concepts that carried the same meaning as the Indian terms. In spite of these problems, between 60 and 317 C.E., about a thousand Indian texts were translated into Chinese.

Initially many Daoist terms were used to express Buddhist ideas. The central Buddhist concept of Dhamma, which means the teaching of the Buddha, was translated as "the Dao" (the way) in Chinese. Sometimes "Dao" was also used for "Bodhi" (enlightenment). The Buddhist word arhat was translated as "Chen-jen," a Daoist term for immortals. Nirvana became "wu-wei," the Daoist idea of nonaction.

The Chinese Buddhists also readily appropriated Confucian concepts. The Indian concept *śīla* (morality) was translated as "hsiao-hsun" a Confucian term for "filial submission," significantly altering the Indian meaning. *Chung*, loyal devotion to authority, a value long known in Daoism and Confucianism, was identified with Buddhism's stress on *karuna*, compassion for all beings.¹⁸

Most significantly, the bodhisattva ideal helped bridge the gulf between Confucian filial piety and Buddhist renunciation, because bodhisattvas wanted to help all living beings along their path to nirvana, including one's parents and other family members.

Not only was it difficult to express important Buddhist concepts in Chinese, deep cultural divides also made it difficult for the Chinese to understand familiar Indian Buddhist metaphors. The sexual analogies Indians commonly used to symbolize spiritual ideas were anathema for the more puritanical Chinese elite. Common images such as kissing and embracing a bodhisattva were totally eliminated in official Chinese translations. Mentions of breast, love, or sexual union were turned into terms such as bird or breeze. Because the Indian and Chinese social structures were different, many Indian Buddhist concepts were also changed. "Husband supports his wife" was translated as "The husband controls his wife." "The wife comforts her husband" became "The wife reveres her husband" when rendered in Chinese.¹⁹

People living during the social and political unrest and instability during the Later Han and after the fall of the Han dynasty in 220 were more open to Buddhism. Confucian values of moral leadership seemed ineffective in the face of dynastic collapse and warfare. *Li* (proper actions) and *ren* (appropriate feelings) did not alleviate the hunger, sorrow, and insecurity people were facing. Buddhism taught people to change their attitudes about the problems they faced and learn to transcend the pain and suffering around them. In addition, Buddhist communities provided social services, including medical care and other charities that helped alleviate the suffering of the poor. Further, Daoism had long offered Chinese people a way to escape the sufferings of this world, and now Buddhists built on that tradition.

After the fall of the Han, centralized China disintegrated into disunity that lasted for three centuries. While China broke into some sixteen regional kingdoms, nomadic invaders gained control of several states along China's northern border. Many of the unlettered nomadic leaders sought out Chinese scholars to serve as administrators. At the same time, the Chinese-ruled kingdoms to the south invited nomads to serve in their military forces. Because the northern border was not well guarded, nomads as well as traders and missionaries easily entered China, and in the radically changed political and social climate, Buddhism took firm root in China.

Nomadic leaders of the small kingdoms in the north were very receptive to Buddhism. As foreigners and nomads, they could not claim legitimacy because they were related to any previous Chinese dynasties. But endorsing Buddhism, with its scholarly traditions and sophisticated

ideas, lent luster and legitimacy to their rule. In addition, these non-Chinese rulers liked the fact that Buddhism was a foreign faith. They did not want to adapt Chinese ways completely, so endorsing Indian beliefs was more appealing than trying to adopt Chinese ones. As one northern nomadic king explained, "Buddha being a barbarian god is the very one we should worship."²⁰ Further, these aspiring leaders feared that the Confucian bureaucrats who worked for them were trying to subvert their authority by spreading Confucian values.

In 311 the Huns sacked Changan, one of the world's most glorious cities, causing many aristocrats to flee from the northern kingdoms, the heartland of Chinese civilization, to the sparsely settled Yangtze River valley. Many of them were conservative Confucians who had lost their estates and turned to neo-Daoism because its reverence for nature offered a refuge from the displacement that the political turmoil had caused. Well-educated scholars were drawn to Buddhist speculation and philosophy and to its cosmology. Moreover, spending one's days in quiet contemplation, scholarship, and meditation meshed well with the lifestyle of the Confucian gentleman scholar, another example of syncretism. They must have found Buddhist renunciation of power and wealth an attractive alternative to the political chaos they had experienced firsthand. Gradually, these Buddhist aristocrats began to attract the attention of would-be kings seeking scholars and administrators, significantly elevating Buddhism's status.

Buddhists often used magic and their superior knowledge to impress nomadic leaders and ingratiate themselves as indispensable functionaries in their courts. For example, after Loyang fell in 316, Fo-tu-teng, the founder of the northern Sangha, met the Hun leader. According to the Chinese tradition, instead of trying to impress him with Buddhist philosophy, Teng took out his begging bowl, filled it with water, burned incense, and said a spell. Out of the bowl sprang a blue lotus "with a color dazzling to the eyes." As a result, the ruler became a willing patron of Buddhism.²¹ Many Chinese flocked to take refuge under this holy man who could protect them and mediate on their behalf with nomadic leaders. By 300, Buddhism was growing rapidly in several northern cities. In the early fourth century there were nearly 200 Buddhist institutions in China's two major urban centers, Changan and Loyang, and these cities supported some 3,700 Buddhist clergy.²²

The support of Northern Wei leaders helped Buddhism spread through their kingdom, which lasted from 386 to 534. Northern Wei nomadic leaders were able to blend their shamanistic practices with the more sophisticated Buddhist system. These leaders claimed to be incarnations of the Buddha and they made Buddhism a political force at

Loyang, their capital city, and supported the construction of expensive temples, monasteries, and cave sanctuaries modeled after the Indian monuments at Ajanta. Emperor Wu of the Liang kingdom (502–49) also patronized Buddhism and actually took Buddhist vows and on occasion gave himself to a Buddhist temple, forcing his ministers to “ransom” him with huge gifts. He also required nobles, officials, and his own family to reject Daoism and embrace Buddhism.

A number of southern merchants from diverse ethnic groups including the Chinese also began to accept Buddhism. They modeled themselves after Vimalakirti, a rich and powerful merchant who had renounced the life of opulence to become a Buddhist teacher. Although this Chinese gentleman wrote a sutra (religious text), he could not completely renounce good food, comfortable housing, and other earthly pleasures. Vimalakirti was close to an ideal Confucian civil servant who enjoyed life's pleasures while still exemplifying and teaching proper etiquette. He seemingly was able to remove himself from the world while still enjoying its pleasures. In the Chinese setting where Buddhism mixed freely with Confucianism and Daoism, such contradictions did not seem to disturb new converts.

Buddhism did not immediately appeal to average Chinese in the north, which had been the site of impressive cities and the home of renowned philosophers, writers, and heroes. Many of these aristocrats had lost power and influence and were saddened to see their homeland overrun by “barbarians.” Seeking some deeper meaning for the upheavals that had left them feeling like exiles in their own land, they began to study the new philosophy in earnest. Buddhism also appealed to those who were wary of the exclusiveness and narrowness of Confucian culture. Other marginalized groups, including women, landless peasants, and wandering craftsmen, were also attracted to Buddhism.

The Chinese adapted Buddhism to fit with their traditional cultural values, giving Chinese Buddhism its distinctive characteristics. As in Southeast Asia, converts did not have to forsake their belief in ghosts, spirits, numerous supernatural figures, and other aspects of their traditional beliefs. Regional heroes, mythical characters, and local deities were accepted as bodhisattvas. Devotees could still worship those familiar figures while adding another dimension to their power. Local fertility rites, life-cycle celebrations, and seasonal festivals were gradually absorbed into Buddhist practices as well. Moreover, Buddhism's ethical message of compassion, kindness, honesty, and abstention from lavish materialism supported and extended the Confucian tradition while embedding these values in a more complex philosophical system.

Chinese Buddhists, like their Southeast Asian neighbors, began to infuse the concept of merit into Buddhism. Giving one son to the monastery built merit for the entire family and would help one's parents achieve salvation. Becoming a monk to earn merit became a way of caring for parents. Merit accrued by personal donations formed the basis of the relationship between monasteries and the lay public. Rich merchants and aristocrats who hoped to build merit gave money to build stupas, monasteries, and temples. The wealthy could justify their prosperity by giving large gifts to Buddhist institutions or paying for the construction of new buildings. Political leaders could find justification for their decidedly non-Buddhist military exploits by donating land to Buddhist institutions and removing monasteries from the tax rolls.

Old records indicate that in the sixth century, eunuchs, government officials, "foreigners," generals, aristocrats, emperors, and two prosperous butchers all gave homes to be converted into monasteries.²³ Reportedly, one of the butchers decided to give his home as a monastery when a pig he was about to slaughter pleaded for mercy in a human voice.²⁴ In another case, when a widow's deceased husband appeared and accused her of marrying again before the proper mourning period for him was over, the terrified woman donated her house as a monastery. Clearly, donors seeking merit acted for a wide range of motives. Whatever the reasons, the result was the construction of a panoply of architectural gems, including monasteries, temples, tombs, and even bridges that have enriched the Chinese tradition. Building merit by performing acts of kindness and compassion became important within the Confucian ethical system, and it assured one of being reborn in a better state in the next life.

SCHOOLS OF BUDDHISM

Mahayana Buddhism was by far the most successful form of Buddhism in China, where several separate schools of Mahayana Buddhism developed, each with a distinctly Chinese flavor. These schools were usually associated with a founder and his favorite *sutra* sacred text. To fit into the Chinese ethos, with its enormous emphasis on family and ancestral roots, these schools created lineages beginning with their initial founder or, if he was unknown, with the first generation of devotees. Each of these schools enjoyed a long tradition in China, and most built elaborate monasteries, temples, and retreats, many in lovely settings on mountaintops. The two major Mahayana schools were Pure Land, and Ch'an (later Zen in Japan).

PURE LAND BUDDHISM Pure Land Buddhism, which originated in India, found wide acceptance in China during the difficult days of the later Han period, and it gradually became the most popular form of Buddhism in all East Asia. Pure Land Buddhists put their trust in the compassion of Amitabha (the Sanskrit spelling, Amitofo in Chinese; Amida in Japanese), who is regarded as a much earlier mythological figure than the historical Buddha. He assured his devotees that if they had total faith in him and surrendered to him with absolute devotion, after they died they would go to the Pure Land, an ideal Buddhist paradise. This school takes its definition from the Pure Land Sutra that stresses faith and devotion as the keys to personal salvation. In some forms of Amitabha worship, devotees had only to say his name once in a lifetime to reach the Pure Land.

The Pure Land is described as rich and fertile and filled with gods and men, but with no expressions of evil, such as ghosts or demons. Flowers, trees, and abundant lotuses decorated with beautiful jewels abound. Rivers run freely and their perfumed waters make sweet music as they flow. Dwellers in the Pure Land hear nothing but the Buddha's dharma and teachings of compassion, tolerance, and peace. (Mahayanists use the Sanskrit term dharma, not the Pali term dhamma.) Technically the Pure Land was supposed to be an intermediate stopping-off place on the way to nirvana. However, the Pure Land proved so attractive that for many, reaching it after death became an end in itself. Pure Land Buddhism's paradise is not unlike the Christian and Islamic concepts of heaven.

Members of the Pure Land School practice reciting Amitabha's name to control their thoughts. Usually, the worshiper undertakes a large number of recitations while contemplating an image of Amitabha. Devotees also try to visualize Amitabha and his Pure Land. The goal of this meditation is to merge completely with the vision of Amitabha, which ensures rebirth in the Pure Land.

Amitabha is assisted by the Kwan-yin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, who "hears the cries of the world." Kwan-yin is arguably the most popular bodhisattva in Asian Buddhism. (In Vietnam, she is known as Quan'Am; in Japan as Kannon; and in Bali as Kanin.) According to legend, she was about to enter heaven but, after pausing on the threshold as the cries of the world reached her ears, she turned back to minister to the sufferings of the world. Kwan-yin is the embodiment of compassionate loving kindness. Avalokitesvara, the original Indian Bodhisattva of Compassion, was male. However, by the twelfth or thirteenth century, as the image traveled to east Asia, it became female. Kwan-yin resonates with the Christian Mary, the Tibetan goddess Tara, and several compassionate Hindu goddesses.

CH'AN BUDDHISM The Ch'an School was strongly influenced by the Hindu concept of meditation called yoga that became very popular in China, especially among educated people. The legendary founder and first patriarch of the lineage of Ch'an Buddhism was a monk named Bodhidharma who sailed from India to China in the sixth century C.E. Harking back to early Buddhists who believed the phenomenal world was transitory, Bodhidharma preached that all appearances were illusions. He stressed the importance of meditation and promised that when devotees get in touch with their true mind, they can experience pure wisdom. Bodhidharma said:

To search for enlightenment or nirvana beyond this mind is impossible. The reality of your own self-nature, the absence of cause and effect, is what is meant by mind. Your mind is Nirvana. You might think you can find a Buddha or enlightenment somewhere beyond the mind, but such a place does not exist.²⁵

Ch'an Buddhists focus mainly on meditation and direct experience, although they do not disdain the scriptures. Through meditation and other exercises, a believer may suddenly transcend all the pairs of opposites and sense the oneness of all things and for an instant experience true bliss.

Ch'an and Pure Land Buddhism are often called short cuts to salvation. Both emphasize personal practices and stress that eventually everyone will reach nirvana. Aristocrats and merchants were attracted to Ch'an because it stressed meditation and private self-cultivation. Pure Land attracted far more followers from all walks of life, and its supporters built huge temples where people could come to make offerings to Buddhist and bodhisattva images.

Instead of these schools competing as they might have done in the dualistic West, Ch'an and Pure Land Buddhism found ways to reconcile their approaches. The faithful practiced both meditation and called on the name of Amitabha or Kwan-yin for grace, combining both self-reliance and dependence on an outside power. By the sixteenth century, Pure Land practices were deeply imbedded in Ch'an Buddhism. Even today, "Homage to Amitabha Buddha" is regularly chanted in Ch'an monasteries.

In spite of the focus on the Pure Land and other interpretations of the faith, nirvana remained the ultimate goal. A story from the Lotus Sutra, which became perhaps the most important Buddhist text in China, illustrates the effort people made to help others experience nirvana. There was once a rich man whose house caught on fire while his three children were playing inside, oblivious of the danger. The father,

desperately trying to save his children, called frantically to them to leave the burning building, promising that three magnificent chariots awaited them outside. The children, responding to this promise, left their games and raced outside, just ahead of the flames.

Life, the Buddhists taught, is like that burning house, and people play with its toys like careless children, unaware of their impending doom. Buddhists wanted to free people from their ignorance (playing in the burning house) and bring them to the safety of the Buddha's teaching. The three chariots represented the Three Jewels of Buddhism that await believers to save them from the fires of desire.

BUDDHISM HELPS THE SUI UNITE CHINA

The turning point for Buddhism in China came in 581 with the founding of the Sui Dynasty that unified China after more than 300 years of decentralized power. Emperor Wendi, the first Sui emperor (r. 581–604), sought to establish his dynasty's legitimacy by supporting Confucianism and exempting filial sons from taxation and corvee and by establishing schools and a national college for the study of the Confucian classics.

Wendi's wife was a devout Buddhist, and he also patronized Buddhism and used it to help unify his empire and enhance his authority. He was given the title "the Bodhisattva Son of Heaven" and claimed to be a true believer and a patron of the Buddhist community. He ordered the construction of Buddhist monasteries at the foot of China's five sacred mountains and ordered damaged temples and stupas repaired.

Emperor Wendi copied Emperor Ashoka's earlier example by sending monks to supervise the construction of stupas that delineated the boundaries of his kingdom. He had Buddhist relics enshrined in 111 stupas, all on the same day. Constructing these stupas and distributing relics were apparently important factors in the dynasty's initial success.

However, Wendi did not embrace Ashoka's commitment to nonviolence. The Sui Dynasty was one of the most violent in Chinese history, and the emperor used Buddhism to legitimate his military exploits. He commissioned Buddhist temples at the sites of his famous battles and issued the following edict in 581:

... We regard the weapons of war as having become like the offerings of incense and flowers presented to the Buddha, and the fields of this world as having become forever identical with the Buddhaland.²⁶

Chinese leaders, like Roman emperors after Constantine used Christianity, often turned to Buddhism to gain support for their rule.