

Buddhism, History, Types, Sects, Decline of Buddhism in India

July 11, 2026 • vajiramandravi.com



Buddhism arose in the 6th century BCE in the Gangetic plain during a time of second urbanisation and social changes in India. As Buddha's teachings resonated with people discontented with Vedic rituals and caste system, Buddhism quickly spread across northern India. Political and economic support by merchants and artisans fostered Buddhist growth. Further, under the Mauryas, Buddhism expanded both in India and outside. Doctrinal debates within Buddhism led to the emergence of major schools like Theravada and Mahayana.

Buddhism started to decline due to many socio-political factors. Its decline started with the Gupta dynasty, and by the 12th century CE, it almost disappeared in India; however, it continued to thrive in other Asian countries.

Various Sects of Buddhism

After Buddha's death, his followers interpreted his teachings in different ways, leading to doctrinal divisions and the emergence of distinct Buddhist sects.

- The earliest division happened during the **2nd Buddhist Council at Vaishali** around **383 BCE** when the monastic order divided into:

- The **Sthaviravadins** who adhered strictly to the Vinaya code of monastic discipline and
- The **Mahasanghikas** advocated more relaxed norms.
- Around the 1st century CE, after the **Fourth Buddhist Council under Kanishka**, Mahayana Buddhism emerged as a departure from Hinayana Buddhism.
 - **Mahayana** followers formed a distinct sect, worshipping **Buddha images as divine beings**, unlike non-theistic Hinayana.
- In the 7th century, **Vajrayana Buddhism** emerged as a tantric branch of Mahayana. As Buddhism spread via trade networks, localised adaptations led to variants like **Tibetan, Chinese and Zen Buddhism**.
- However, core teachings like the **Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Path and Non-Self** remained common across sects. Divisions were based more on differing practices and interpretations rather than principles.
- The basic tenets of the various sects and subsects are described in the following table:

Sects	Tenets of the Sects of Buddhism
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Hinayana (Lesser vehicle)/ Theravada	- Theravada, meaning "Teaching of the Elders", is the most conservative and orthodox form of Buddhism. - It emphasises attaining liberation from suffering through individual effort and meditation based on Buddha's earliest teachings in the Pali Canon. - It believes in the historicity of a single Buddha, Gautama Shakyamuni. - Emperor Ashoka helped spread Theravada in India. - Emerging from the Vibhajjavada school, Theravada focuses on • Monastic discipline, the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the three marks of existence, karma, rebirth, and practices like jhana and vipassana meditation. • It does not accept later Mahayana sutras. - Theravada is dominant in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, having spread there from India by the 3rd century BCE. - The monastic sangha and its strong connections with the laity are notable features of Theravada Buddhist societies. - The school upholds Buddha's original doctrines and disciplines, idealising the arhat who achieves nirvana through rigorous spiritual striving. Sub-sects- • Sarvastivada: One of the early Buddhist schools, it believed in the existence of all dharmas in the past, present and future. It was influential in northwestern India and Central Asia. ◦ Vaibhasika: A later form of Sarvastivada, its main object is to expose Abhidhamma philosophy. Key classical texts of this school are Abhidharma-kosa (Vasubandhu) and Milinda panho (discussion between Nagasena and Meander I). ◦ Sautrantika: An offshoot of the Sarvastivada and based on 'Sukta pitaka', it came up against the naive realism and pluralism of Vaibhasikas. Main teachers of this school are Kumaralat (a contemporary of Nagarjuna), Yasomitra and Harivarman. • Sthaviravada: The original Theravada school from which the Pali Canon emerged. It emphasised the Four Noble Truths and liberation through arhatship. Dominant in south India and Sri Lanka. • Vibhajjavada: An offshoot of the Sthaviravada school, it compiled the Pali Canon. Its teachings form the basis of modern Theravada Buddhism. • Sammitiya: An early school, it differentiated between the definitive and interpretative teachings of the Buddha. It died out in medieval times. - The Theravada school descends from the Vibhajjavada tradition and is considered the most orthodox and conservative surviving early Buddhist lineage today.
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Mahayana (Greater Vehicle)	- Emerged around 1st century BCE during the Fourth Buddhist Council, emphasizing the concept of Bodhisattvas - enlightened beings who delay nirvana to help others. - The Gupta emperor Harshavardhana patronized Mahayana, establishing monasteries and supporting the translation of texts into Sanskrit. - From Kashmir, Mahayana spread to Central Asia, China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam. - Mahayana is considered more progressive than the older Theravada tradition. It is inclusive of lay followers unlike Theravada's monastic focus. - Key Mahayana concepts include: • Bodhisattva (one who delays nirvana to help others) and Buddha-nature (potential for enlightenment in all beings). • Scriptures like Lotus Sutra and Heart Sutra emphasize the virtues of compassion and wisdom. - Sub-sects include Yogacara and Madhyamaka • Madhyamaka: ◦ Madhyamaka comes from Buddha's famous 'middle position' (madhyama pratipad). ◦ Also known as Sunyavada, it was systematised by Nagarjuna. His famous work is MulaMadhyamikaKarika. • Yogacara, also known as Vijnanavada, is the only idealistic school in Buddhism and Indian philosophy in the strict sense. ◦ It is not only idealism but also absolutism. ◦ It focuses on the workings of the mind and the nature of consciousness. ◦ As a metaphysical system, it comes up against the extreme nihilism of Madhyamika. - Mahayana's universal ideals appealed to the masses as it spread via Silk Route trade networks to China and East Asia. - Sculptural Buddha images and Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara embodied Mahayana's spiritual themes.
Zen	- A sub-school of the Mahayana sect - Emphasises the practice of meditation to achieve enlightenment. It is also known as Chan in China and Son in Korea. - It is particularly associated with Japan, where it developed into several distinct sub-schools.
Vajrayana (Diamond Vehicle)	- It emphasises the use of rituals, mantras, and tantra to achieve enlightenment in a single lifetime. - Practised mainly in Tibet, Bhutan, and parts of Nepal and Mongolia.

Navayana	- It's a modern Buddhist movement that emerged in India in the late 20th century. - It is a reformist movement that seeks to reinterpret Buddhism in the context of the caste system in India, with a focus on social justice and equality.
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Spread of Buddhism

During the lifetime of the Buddha, Buddhism was accepted by a large section of the people.

For example, the people of Magadha, Kosala, and Kaushambi embraced Buddhism. The republics of Sakyas, Vajjis and Mallas also followed the process. The appeal of Buddhism for a large section of the population was because of the following factors:

Social and Economic changes:

- Many **people were disenchanted with the caste system** and the **rigid social hierarchy** and were seeking a more egalitarian and inclusive spiritual path.

Influence of the Buddha's teachings:

- The Buddha's **teachings were compelling and resonated**; emphasis on **compassion, non-violence**, and the importance of personal responsibility appealed to many.

Conversion of rulers and elites:

- The conversion of rulers and elites played a significant role in the spread of Buddhism.
- For example, according to tradition, Ashoka sent his son **Mahendra** and his daughter **Sanghamitra** to Sri Lanka to preach Buddhism. He also established many monasteries and contributed liberally to the sangha.

Monastic network:

- The establishment of a network of monasteries and the spread of the monastic tradition contributed to the spread.

Accessibility of the Buddha's teachings:

- It was accessible to people from all walks of life, regardless of their caste or social status.

Use of Popular Language:

- The use of Pali to explain the doctrines also helped in the spread of the religion, Unlike Brahmanical religion, which had limited itself to the use of Sanskrit.

Spread of Buddhism Outside India

Spread of Hinayana Buddhism

- Ashoka sent Buddhist missions to different places like Srilanka, Myanmar and Thailand during his reign. This laid the foundations for Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia.

Spread of Mahayana Buddhism

- The Kushan Emperor, **Kanishka**, patronised Mahayana Buddhism and supported the Fourth Buddhist Council in Kashmir. This helped spread Buddhism to Central Asia.

Buddhism spread to Central Asia and China through merchants and monks travelling along the Silk Route from India.

- Important Buddhist centres developed along the Silk Route like **Kashgar, Khotan, Bamiyan**, etc.
- Chinese monks like **Fa-Hien** and **Hiuen Tsang** travelled to India and brought back texts and ideas of Mahayana Buddhism. This was then propagated in China.
- In China, it interacted with the local Confucian and Daoist traditions.
- Buddhism came to Japan from China and Korea in the 6th century CE. Different schools like Zen and Pure Land developed here using some local traditions.

Spread of Vajrayana Buddhism

- It was developed in India around the 8th century.
- In Tibet, Vajrayana interacted with the Bon religion.
- Monks like **Atisha Dipankara** and **Padmasambhava** helped spread this Sect in Tibet (mainly) and Southeast Asia.
- Tibetan Buddhism combines Indian Buddhism and local Tibetan beliefs.
- The main feature of the Tibetan Vajrayana is the spiritual head in the form of reincarnated lamas, considered as Bodhisattva of compassion, i.e. Avalokitesvara (Chenrezig).

Buddhism died in India, its birthplace, but somehow managed to be prominent in much of Asia as Hinayana (Southeast Asia), Mahayana (in almost the rest of Asia), and Vajrayana (Tibet).

The Institution of Sangha in Buddhism

The Buddha established the Buddhist Sangha or religious order, which played a key role in propagating his teachings. Many of his sermons were delivered at **Shravasti**, an important centre.

Patronage and Support:

- The wealthy merchants such as **Anathapindika** became ardent supporters, donating generously to the Sangha. This allowed Buddhism to spread as monks travelled and preached.

Membership Policy:

- The Sangha had an open membership policy, allowing those above fifteen years irrespective of caste or gender, except criminals and diseased persons.
- Though initially reluctant, the Buddha later allowed women to join after requests from **Ananda** and **Mahapajapati Gotami**. New monks and nuns had to shave their heads and wear yellow robes.

Routines and Practices:

- Monks had to go on daily alms rounds to beg for food while preaching Buddhism. During the four months of monsoon, they meditated in a fixed abode.

Education Initiatives:

- The Sangha also promoted education among the masses, providing access to non-Brahmins deprived under Brahmanism.

Governing Principles:

- The Sangha was governed democratically with a **code of conduct** for monks and nuns. It had powers to enforce discipline and punish erring members.

Thus, the organised Sangha, with its membership policy, routines, education initiatives and governing principles, helped popularise Buddhism in India.

Factors leading to the Decline of Buddhism

The decline of Buddhism can be attributed to a complex interplay of various historical, social, and cultural factors that varied across different regions and time periods. Here are some of the key factors that have been identified as contributing to the decline of Buddhism in certain areas:

Ideological Decline:

- Buddhism was founded on egalitarian ideals opposed to Brahmanical supremacy and Vedic rituals. However, similar problems of hierarchy, corruption and complex rituals emerged in institutional Buddhism over time.
- For instance, the accumulation of wealth and power within monasteries undermined Buddhism's essence. Monks' involvement in worldly matters contradicted Buddhist principles.
- Multiple divisions into sects and subsects led to a loss of Buddhism's original philosophical core.
- These structural and ideological issues resembled problems in Hinduism, eroding Buddhism's separate religious identity.

Hinduism's Reform and Assimilation:

- On the other hand, Hinduism reformed itself by adopting Buddhist practices like **vegetarianism** and **opposing animal sacrifice**.
- Hindu leaders like **Adi Shankaracharya** established (**mathas**) monasteries on the Buddhist model to revive Hinduism while critiquing Buddhist philosophy.
- Fundamental philosophical similarities between Buddhism and Hinduism on concepts like **karma, dharma and moksha** enabled Buddhism's gradual assimilation into Hinduism from 500 CE onwards.
- Buddha emerging as an avatar of Vishnu in Hindu texts facilitated the assimilation.
- Lower castes found Buddhist egalitarianism attractive, causing the acceleration of the assimilation.

Loss of Royal Patronage:

- Decline of major Buddhism-following dynasties like the **Kushanas** and the shifting of royal patronage towards Brahmanical Hinduism under the **Guptas** accelerated the decline of Buddhism.

- This lack of state support led to the decay of Buddhist sanghas and monasteries.

Lack of Vernacular Literature:

- Unlike early Buddhist scriptures composed in **Pali**, later were written in **Sanskrit**, meaning their ideas did not penetrate the vernacular-speaking masses in inland India.
- This restricted Buddhism's expansion beyond urban elite groups.
- **Foreign Invasions:**
- Invasions from the north-west by non-Buddhists like the **Huns and Turks (Khilji)** led to vandalism and persecution of Buddhist monks and devotees.
- These assaults disrupted Buddhist monasteries, pilgrimage sites and institutions like Nalanda.

The destruction of the Mahayana Buddhist sites in northern India by Islamic invaders from 1100 CE sealed Buddhism's demise in the land of its birth. Despite this decline, Buddhism's impact remains evident through its profound influence on Asia's cultural and spiritual landscape.

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