

Chapter 12
The Development of Buddhist Belief and Practice
By Tim Callaway

Chapter Summary

I. Periods of Buddhist Expansion/Development

A. First Period

The religion spreads throughout the Indian subcontinent dominated by questions about psychology and the nature (actually, the nonexistence) of the person. Using techniques of philosophical and psychological analysis, Buddhist monks saw self-control of the thinking process as a goal that would enable them to escape the bonds of existence. Few people could aspire to complete mastery of their thoughts and attain “enlightenment” (similar to what Christians call “salvation”), which was reserved for an elite group of monks known as arhats.

The period focused on the rules of the Sangha (monastic order/discipline) associated with the Council of the Rajagrha. It is said that here the Buddhist scriptures were first collected. The period ends with the Council of Vaisali, which formulated the disciplinary practices for the monastic order.

The Sangha dominates the first period while lay people were sidelined. Numerous sects of Buddhism may be generally grouped under Hinayan (Theravadin school) or “lesser vehicle,” referring to the fact that this branch restricted access to membership.

B. Second Period

Buddhism spreads into Asia dominated by questions of ontology such as “What is the nature of the world?” and “What sort of being is the Buddha?” which led to the creation of a vast literature that significantly shaped the religion’s development. The focus shifted from the arhat, a being who earned his own individual salvation, to the bodhisattva, who temporarily renounced his personal salvation in a bid to bring enlightenment to all sentient beings.

This period began around the beginning of the Christian era when what became known as the Mahayana or “great vehicle” was formed. The term reflects the movement’s deliberate attempts to include the laity within the sphere of Buddhist activity/salvation. Foreign influences helped Buddhism to adapt and succeed beyond its Indian roots.

Buddhism spread into Central Asia and on into Korea, China, and Japan. Theravada Buddhism also modified certain practices and moved into Burma, Thailand, and other countries.

C. Third Period

The bodhisattva ideal gave rise to cosmic speculation which produced the ideal of the siddha, a man who had gained control over himself to the extent that he was in complete harmony with the cosmos, unaffected by external constraints. This led to the development in the fourth century AD of

the Tantra—magical practices often associated with sexual rituals. Within Tantric Buddhism the historical person of the Buddha fades into insignificance as new cosmic Buddhas, located in some far distant realm of space and time take precedence. It emphasized miraculous aspects and magical powers and assisted the spread of Buddhism northward into Tibet where Tantric teachings easily blended with the existing folk religion of Tibetans. The first Tibetan monastery is dated around 787.

D. Fourth Period

This period begins around 1000 AD and features death and decline in India but progress beyond the Indian subcontinent. Buddhism died in northern India around 1200 and in the south around 1400 for various reasons including:

1. Buddhists appear to have lost the support of ruling elites
2. A Hindu renaissance incorporating Buddhist philosophies/practices/gods
3. Muslim invasions destroyed Buddhist centers of learning/civilization

Many Buddhist monks took their books and relics and fled to Nepal, which became an important center of Buddhist scholarship and art in the later Middle Ages. Buddhism solidified in Tibet and also spread to Sri Lanka and Indochina where it long flourished.

E. Fifth Period (see also Chapter 13 summary)

When Portuguese traders and missionaries arrived in Sri Lanka, many residents converted to Catholicism. Under British rule there led to more decline until a nationalist revival in the mid-twentieth century saw Buddhism emerge as the primary religion of the area. The Chan school of Buddhism developed in China and was transported to Japan where it became popularized as Zen Buddhism. The Buddhist play “Joy for the World” was recently translated into English.

II. Buddhist Scriptures

Buddhism has a vast number of scriptures usually divided into two groups: Dharma/Sutra (doctrinal texts) and Vinaya (rules of monastic discipline). A third division was added later, the Abidharma (systematization of the Sutras). A sutra is a text believed to have been spoken by the Buddha himself. One of the major divisions between the Hinayana and Mahayana concerned which scriptures were to be considered authentic. As for dating, Buddhism is ahistorical—what matters is the teaching, not how we got it. One of the earliest collections of Buddhist scriptures in a Sri Lankan dialect is the Pali Canon or Tripitaka. Another major collection of Buddhist texts is the Tibetan Kanjur or Tanjur. Altogether there are thousands of Buddhist manuscripts, many are not in English.

III. Buddhist Beliefs

Buddhists do not deny the existence of God or gods, but believe they have nothing to say about our ultimate fate. Only the Buddha has shown the way beyond this realm of existence. The soul or any form of individualized existence is an illusion and there is no such thing as “the person,” merely a series of sense impressions or skandhas. There are three jewels essential to attaining enlightenment: (1) Buddha himself, (2) dharma, which protects, transmits, and maintains truth, and (3) Sangha or the community that preserves Buddha’s teachings. Central to Buddhism are four Noble Truths: (1) dukkha, or suffering; (2) the cause of suffering; (3) suffering can be eliminated; and (4) the Noble Eightfold Path (right belief, attitude, speech, actions, livelihood, effort, awareness, and right meditation). Buddhists believe in enlightenment or nirvana but have trouble explaining it. Buddha said it is best understood as the unknown or the blowing out of a candle. Buddhism speaks of salvation away from individuality (contrary to Western/Christian notions), which can be attained only via self-denial, self-discipline, and deep meditation. Buddhists celebrate Wesakh (birth/death/enlightenment of Buddha) and Kathina (gifts to the poor).