TAKING A LOOK INTO...

Buddhism in India
1. Sources, Setting, and Basic Teachings

1.1. Sources

- **Not many reliable sources** for most of the history of Buddhism in India.

- **Textual sources are late**, dating at the very least five hundred years after the death of the Buddha.

- **The archaeological evidence**, abundant as it is, is limited in the information it can give us.
1.2. Setting

- The roots of Indian Buddhism are to be found in the “shramanic” movement of the sixth century BCE, which was the religious movement by wandering ascetics called sramanas.

- In direct opposition to brahmanas (brahmans).

- Buddhism and Jainism are two major shramanic religions.

- This new age, sometimes called the Indic period, was characterized by the dominant role of “heterodox” or non-Hindu religious systems.

- The use of vernaculars in preference to Sanskrit.

- The new age is supposed to have been a time of social upheaval and political instability.
1.3. Basic Teachings

In Buddhism, the primary evil force was **karma** and a variety of techniques called **yoga** was the means for achieving liberation.

The sustained practice of this discipline was known as a “**path**” called **marga**, and the goal was a **state of peace and freedom from passion and suffering called nirvana**.

In Buddhism, **suffering** was universalized; all human conditions lead to suffering, suffering has a cause, and the cause is **craving**.

To achieve liberation from the cycle of rebirth one must follow the spiritual discipline prescribed by the Buddha, summarized as the **Eightfold Path**.

The follower of Buddhism was expected to renounce the lay life and become a wandering ascetic, an **ideal epitomized by the spiritual career of the founder**.
An influential religious figure called Sakyamuni (personal name: Gautama Siddhartha), at some point in the sixth century BCE, founded in the Ganges River valley the community of wandering mendicants that would eventually grow into the world religion we now call Buddhism.

Scholars generally accept the years 563 to 483 for the life of the Buddha.

The history of Buddhism begins when Sakyamuni was thirty-five (about 528), with his first sermon at Sarnath (northeast of the city of Varanasi).
At twenty-nine he abandoned the household and a spiritual guide.

An early legend claims that Sakyamuni was dissatisfied with what he had learned from two teachers.

He tried the life of the hermit and "awakened" under a papal tree at Bodh Gaya after six years of struggle.

At the age of eighty, the Buddha Sakyamuni died near the city of Kusinagara.
3. The Great Vehicle (Mahayana)

3.1. The origins of Mahayana

- Some scholars think Mahayana has an early origin (beginning of the common era) among Mahasamghika communities in the southeastern region of Andhara.

- Others propose that a northwestern origin, among the Sarvastivadins, close to the second and third centuries CE.

- It may be that Mahayana arose by gradual and complex process involving more than one region of India.

- It is clear that Mahayana was partly a reform movement, partly the natural development of pre-Mahayana Buddhism; still in another sense, it was the result of new social forces shaping the Indian subcontinent.
3.2. Bodhisattva

- Sakyamuni was a Bodhisattva dedicated to the liberation of others rather than himself.

- To achieve this goal the believer sought to imitate the virtue of Sakyamuni’s former lives, adopting a vow similar to Sakyamuni’s former vow to seek awakening for the sake of all sentient beings.

- The Bodhisattva doctrine puts the emphasis on insight into the world, rather than escape from it.

- It also created a new form of ideal being and object of worship, the Bodhisattva.
4. The Mahayana Schools

4.1. Nagarjuna

- **Nagarjuna (150 CE), the founder of the Madhyamika school**, came from South India, possibly from the Amaravati region.
- He became **the first major philosopher of Mahayana and a figure whose ideas influenced all its schools**.

- The central theme of his philosophy is **emptiness called sunyata** understood as a corollary of the pre-Mahayana theory of **dependent origination**.
- Emptiness is **the middle way** between affirmations of being and non-being.

- To defend his views without establishing a metaphysical thesis, Nagarjuna put forward **“no thesis”** as well as **reductio ad absurdum**.
- Among many works attributed to him, the **Mulamadhyamakakarika** is his **magnum opus**.
Three to four centuries after Nagarjuna the Madhyamika school split into two main branches, called **Prasangika and Svatantrika**.

The Prasangika school, represented by **Buddhapalita (500 CE)** and **Candrakirti (550-600 CE)**, claimed that in order to be faithful to the teachings of Nagarjuna, the Madhyamika philosopher had to confine themselves to the critique of opposing views by **reductio ad absurdum**.

The Svatantrikas, represented by **Bhavaviveka (500-550 CE)**, on the other hand, claimed that the Madhyamika philosopher had to formulate **his own thesis**.
Madhyamika scholars also contributed to the development of religious literature, e.g. several hymns attributed to Nagarjuna.

Aryadeva, Nagarjuna’s chief disciple, discusses the Bodhisattva’s career in his *Catuhsataka*, although the work deals mostly with philosophical issues.

Santideva wrote the *Bodhicaryavatara*, a world-famous guide to the Bodhisattva’s career.
Approximately two centuries after Nagarjuna, during the transition period from Kushan to Gupta power, Yogacara or Vijnanavada, a new school of Mahayana philosophy, arose in the northwest. The founders of this school were the brothers Asanga (310-390 CE) and Vasubandhu (320-400 CE). Yogacara emphasized the experiences arising during the practice of yoga.

There is nothing but mind (cittamātrata) or the world is nothing but a perceptual construct (vijñaptimātrata). Yogacara was divided into two sub-schools, the school of Valabhi, following Sthiramati (500-560 CE), opposed the Yogacarins of Nalanda, led by Dharmapala (530-561 CE).
4. The Mahayana Schools

4.4. Tathagatagarbha Theory

- The basis of the tathagatagarbha theory was found in **the underlying or innate Buddhahood of all beings**.

- This school is known under two names; one describes its fundamental doctrine, **the theory of tathagatagarbha (the presence of the Tathagata in all beings)**, the other refer to its purported systematizer, **Saramati (350-450 CE)**.

- The school’s emphasis on a positive foundation of being associates it closely with the thought of **Maitreyanatha**, the teacher of Asanga, to whom is often attributed one of the fundamental texts of the school, **the Ratnagotravibhaga**.

- This school is **critical of the theory of emptiness** and describes **the positive attributes of Buddhahood**.
4.5. The Buddhist Logicians

− An important development in Buddhist scholarship came about with the rules of debate and their engagement in philosophical controversies with the **Nyaya school**.

− A creative Buddhist logic and epistemology did not arise until the time of **Dignaga (480-540 CE)**, a scholar who claimed allegiance to Yogacara but adopted a number of Sautrantika doctrines.

− The crowning achievement of Buddhist logic was the work of **Dharmakirti (600-650 CE)**, whose **Pramanavarttika** was his *magnum opus*.
By the time the university at Vikramasila was founded in the eighth century the dominant philosophy at Nalanda was a combination of Madhyamika and Yogacara, with the latter as the qualifying term and Madhyamika as the core of the philosophy.

The most distinguished exponent of this school was Santaraksita (680-740 CE).

Kamalasila (740-790 CE), a disciple of Santaraksita, wrote a number of brilliant works on diverse aspects of philosophy such as the Bhavanakrama.
5. The Vajrayana

5.1. The full-blown form of Tantric Buddhism

- The four classifications in Tibetan Buddhism: the Kriyatantra (the Ritual Tantra), the Caryatantra (the Performance Tantra), the Yogatantra, and the Anuttarayogatantra (the Unexcelled Yogatantra).

- The Anuttarayogatantra is divided into two, viz. the Father Tantra and the Mother Tantra.

- The Mother Tantra or the Yoginitantra was very much influenced by the Saiva Kapalika yogini cult.

- The Vajrayana is based on the Yogatantra and the Anuttarayogatantra.

- The word vajra means "diamond," implying its indestructible nature; the word yana means a "vehicle".

- The Vajrayana belongs to the Mahayana according to Indo-Tibetan Buddhist traditions.

- The most characteristic aspect of the Vajrayana is sexual symbolism.
The works of the Sahaja movement were written mostly in **Apabhramsa (the Dohakosa) and early Bengali (the Caryagiti)**.

Sahaja means “**simultaneously born**” or “**innate**”.

These works date **from the eighth to tenth century**.

The Sahajiya was a movement that represented **a clear challenge to the Buddhist establishment**.

In the Sahaja movement, the ideal person **was a homeless madman wandering about with his female consort**.

The teacher-disciple relationship between **Tilopa and Naropa**: a shining example of the Sahaja movement.
The Kalacakra Tantra is said to have originated from the mystical kingdom Sambhala; the Messiah Buddhism.

The Kalacakra Tantra is famous for its syncretism.

The words kala and cakra mean “time” and a “wheel,” respectively.

The Kalacakra Tantra advocates the concept of Adibuddha, the primordial Buddha, whence arises everything in the universe.
Indian Buddhism was officially disappeared in 1307 with the total destruction of the Vikramasila monastic university by Muslim invaders. Scholars have debated the causes for the decline of Buddhism in India for a long time. The notion that Tantric Buddhism was a “degenerate form” of Buddhism that contributed to or brought about the disappearance of Buddhism is no longer entertained by the scholarly community. The image of a defenseless, pacifist Buddhist community annihilated by invading hordes of Muslim warriors is perhaps also a simplification. The disappearance of Buddhism in India may have been precipitated by the Muslim invasion, but it was caused primarily by internal factors, the most important of which seems to have been the gradual assimilation of Buddhism into Hinduism.
THE SPREAD OF BUDDHISM