

A Brief History of Buddhism

During the time when the Persian Empire was being founded by Cyrus the Great circa 550 BC and 500 years before the birth of Jesus Christ, the history of Buddhism began with the birth of Siddhartha Gautama in the Lumbini region of southern Nepal. Born a prince into the Shakya clan He would later be known as Gautama Buddha or simply "the Buddha" which means The Awakened One, as well as "Shakyamuni" - the sage of the Shakya clan.

Renouncing a life of luxury and royal status in the world, Siddhartha chose to leave the confines of his protected world and set out to discover a way to end the suffering and sorrow of life. After years of experimenting with a variety of radical practices to shed the boundaries of existing in a human form, he decided that a path of moderation away from the extreme states of self-indulgence and self-mortification were best for spiritual cultivation.

The man who was once a prince and who had willingly undertaken the quest to find freedom from the illusions and suffering of this world, did not bend from his search and achieved a state of "nirvana" or "enlightenment" after meditating for 49 days under the shade of a fig tree now known as the "Bodhi" tree.

He became known The "Buddha" or "the awakened one" and spent the remaining 45 years of his life teaching his doctrine and discipline to an extremely diverse range of people along the region of the Ganges/Ganga River and its tributaries. (Tathagatha is what the Buddha called himself, which means, "the one who has come or gone thus far")

The Buddha's reluctance to name a successor or to formalize his doctrine, led to the emergence of many different Buddhist movements for the next 400 years and it was not until the 1st century that the Buddha was first represented in art as human form.

The Spread of Buddhism Throughout Asia and Europe

Buddhism first spread to Sri Lanka in the 1st century, Cambodia and Vietnam and then China in the 2nd century, Burma, Laos, Indonesia in the 3rd century, Korea in the 4th century, Java, Sumatra and Borneo in the 5th century and Japan in the 6th century.

Cities along the Silk Road consisted of Buddhist stupas and monasteries adorned with masterful sculptures that kept alive stories of the Buddha's life and teachings. These stopping places were for the purpose of welcoming and aiding travelers between East and West.

Roman historical accounts date back as far as the 2nd century. Clement of Alexandria, the father of Christian dogmatism, wrote about the Buddha: "Among the Indians are those philosophers also who follow the precepts of Boudda, whom they honour as a god on account of his extraordinary sanctity". - Clement of Alexandria "The Stromata, or Miscellanies" book 1, chapter XV [3]

The history of Buddhism spans from the 6th century BCE to the present, making it one of the oldest religions practiced today. Despite being born in India, at the dawn of the 20th century, Buddhism was followed only in a few isolated areas of that country.