Buddha from Gandhara, in the upper Indus River region, where icons were made by artisans skilled in the Hellenistic style.

The expansion northwest into the upper Indus River, in the region called Gandhara and into the Kashmir Valley, and then beyond them up the trade routes crossing the mountains north into central Asia, made these areas a Buddhist stronghold for the next millennium. It was here that the Indic world had already met the Hellenic, for hundreds of settlements across the upper Indus were populated by descendants of the troops of Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE). Indeed, the expansion of the Mauryan Empire was enabled in part because Alexander's campaign of world conquest had faltered on the Indus. Stranded far from home, veterans of Alexander's army settled in the area, where their descendants established small states and became prominent regional traders. Many converted to Buddhism.

To understand Buddhism's successful rise to popularity among kings and commoners, however, we must comprehend how the sangha became the center of Buddhism across Asia.

Sangha and Monastery: The Institutional Vehicles of Buddhism's Expansion

Living in community, Buddhist monks, nuns, and devout lay followers established monasteries and shrines that rooted the faith in every locality. When Buddhist monasticism spread across Asia, it introduced independent, corporate institutions that transformed local societies and regional polities. In ancient India, the early sangha admitted new members without regard for caste as a limiting spiritual or social category. In Buddhism's subsequent missionary migrations, acceptance into the sangha offered ordinary citizens

an opportunity for spiritual seeking and educational advancement that was otherwise unavailable.

Buddhism could not have existed in society at large without the support of the householders, for it was the laity that ensured the viability of the monastic institution. Throughout the Buddhist world, lay people made donations to the sangha to "earn merit" as a means of improving their karma and garnering worldly blessings for themselves, their families, and their communities. It was this central exchange, maintained between sangha and society, that kept Buddhism vibrant.

Varieties of Buddhist Monasticism

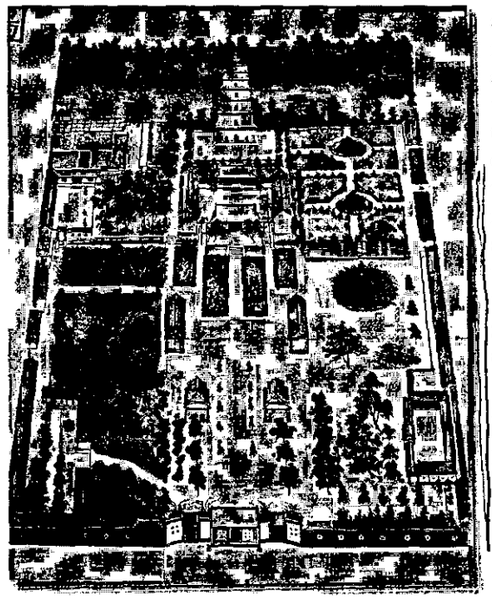
The typical Buddhist community had its center in a monastery (*vihara*), where monks or nuns would take their communal vows, meditate, study, and confirm their compliance with the monastic code fortnightly. These institutions also supported monks who practiced medicine, performed rituals essential to the Buddhist lifestyle of the locality, or managed the institution. Over time, distinctions developed within Buddhist monasticism: there were forest monasteries, where meditation and optional ascetic practices (*dhutanga*) could be undertaken (often under the leadership of a charismatic monk teacher), and monasteries, in village and urban settlements, which offered the opportunity to blend compassionate service to the community with individual cultivation and study. A Buddhist monk or nun typically moved between village and urban monasteries, often going out for periods "in the forest."

In many areas, the focus and inspiration for followers was a monk whose spiritual charisma and exemplary teaching ability drew ascetic disciples and donations from the laity. The common biography of such monks mirrors that of Shakyamuni (the Buddha): disillusionments, renunciation, retreat to the wilderness, nirvana realization, then a return to society to teach.

Practical Mechanisms of Expansion

Many successful monasteries expanded. The pattern was to send out monks to establish satellite institutions following the teachings of the charismatic founder, thereby perpetuating the monastic lineage. This template of Buddhist expansion created "galactic systems" that extended Buddhism into unconverted frontier zones. The resulting network of "mother–daughter" monasteries shaped alliances of all sorts, religious and otherwise, providing the pattern of new Buddhist institution building found from Ladakh to Bali, and more recently from Bangkok to Los Angeles, Dharamsala to New York. This institutional system also resulted in the tendency for aristocratic/dominant caste families to control local monastic lineages, a pattern of ethnic group dominance that was visible until recently in Buddhist Tibet and continues in the Kathmandu Valley, in Japan, and in Sri Lanka. In other contexts, Buddhist viharas broke down ethnic and class boundaries, blurred divisions between peoples, and created transregional communities.

Rulers across Asia were drawn to support Buddhism because of its emphasis on individual morality, its rituals designed to secure prosperity for the state



Buddhist monastery estate in China. By the end of the first Buddhist millennium, major monasteries had become complex institutions whose wealth helped popularize the tradition.

as well as for its head, and the powerful legitimization that respected monastics could bestow on a regime. History has also shown that states favoring Buddhism often placed controls on the sangha's development. For example, to orchestrate the early expansion of Buddhism in China and Japan, emperors ordered each provincial governor to build a monastery. This command was eventually reissued to the subunits in each province, as Buddhist institutions came to mirror the state's own administrative networks. Buddhist exponents, in turn, held up as a model for the ideal Buddhist ruler Ashoka, who today would be called a benevolent dictator. A fair, generous king (governor, local official, etc.) could be called a "future Buddha." The most praiseworthy title was *cakravartin*, a zealous protector and devotee. Thus leading monks in the sangha could offer those wielding political power the highest form of legitimation in the eyes of the faithful. In this manner, Buddhist doctrines, officials, and patrons permeated the secular and political lives of the societies Buddhism entered.

In places where Buddhism thrived, some monasteries in cities and villages evolved into complex institutions that were much more than refuges for ascetics. The monastery often housed the only local school, and members of the sangha served their societies by spreading literacy. Many urban monasteries also became lending institutions, appointing treasurers to see that when monies donated at shrines exceeded the sangha's requirements, the overage was reinvested (usually in trade loans) into the secular community. Interest earned through this practice was reinvested as well. On the trade routes especially, this practice, combined with profits from renting monastery-owned buildings to warehousing or retailing enterprises, garnered considerable income for the monastery treasuries. Such developments, which are attested from 200 CE onward in India and China, explain how Buddhism traveled across the Asian landscape on the basis of trade, supported by traders, and in cities along the commercial routes.

Another component in the spread of vibrant Buddhist institutions across Asia was the accumulation of lands donated by individuals and the state as perpetual endowments. Since monks were forbidden to till the soil, the sangha (as typically organized by lay managers) would rent out the cultivated lands it was acquiring. Whether its laborers grew rice and wheat or cultivated orchards, the monastery derived the food or cash needed for the sangha's upkeep. Until the twentieth century, in fact, many of the large Buddhist institutions were given indentured workers or slaves (usually entire families). Finally, shrines located within the monasteries would also earn income for the sangha in the form of offerings and from levies imposed upon artisans who sold icons and votive amulets. All these elements made running a major monastery a demanding job and ensured that the manager wielded considerable influence in the community.

These practices of "monastic landlordism," banking, and shrine management were also central to Buddhism's successful missions across Asia, creating the means to endow the faith with reliable income and a strong material culture. Buddhists attracted a following with their spiritual teachings but also with well-constructed, often remarkable buildings, shrines, and image halls that complemented the Dharma. Tied to the productive base of society, Buddhist monasteries were ornamented with masterpieces of art, their libraries grew with manuscript production, and their leaders could develop an effective presentation of the Dharma. Many viharas also organized endowed charities that fed the poor and dispensed free medical care.

But there was one problem. As a practical matter, monastery autonomy and the lack of an overarching authority to regulate the monks' and nuns' obedience to the *Vinaya* norms made political leaders the arbiters of the integrity of Buddhist institutions. These officials had to "purify the sangha" periodically—that is, remove those who were acting contrary to the Vinaya norms or perhaps had not entered the vihara through the proper channels. For Buddhism's strength through concentrating wealth and human resources was also its historical weakness: viharas were vulnerable to the vagaries of state patronage and royal protection, as well as to the devastating effects of internal corruption and civil disorder.

PREMODERN BUDDHISM: THE CLASSICAL ERA

The Pan-Asian Expansion of Buddhism

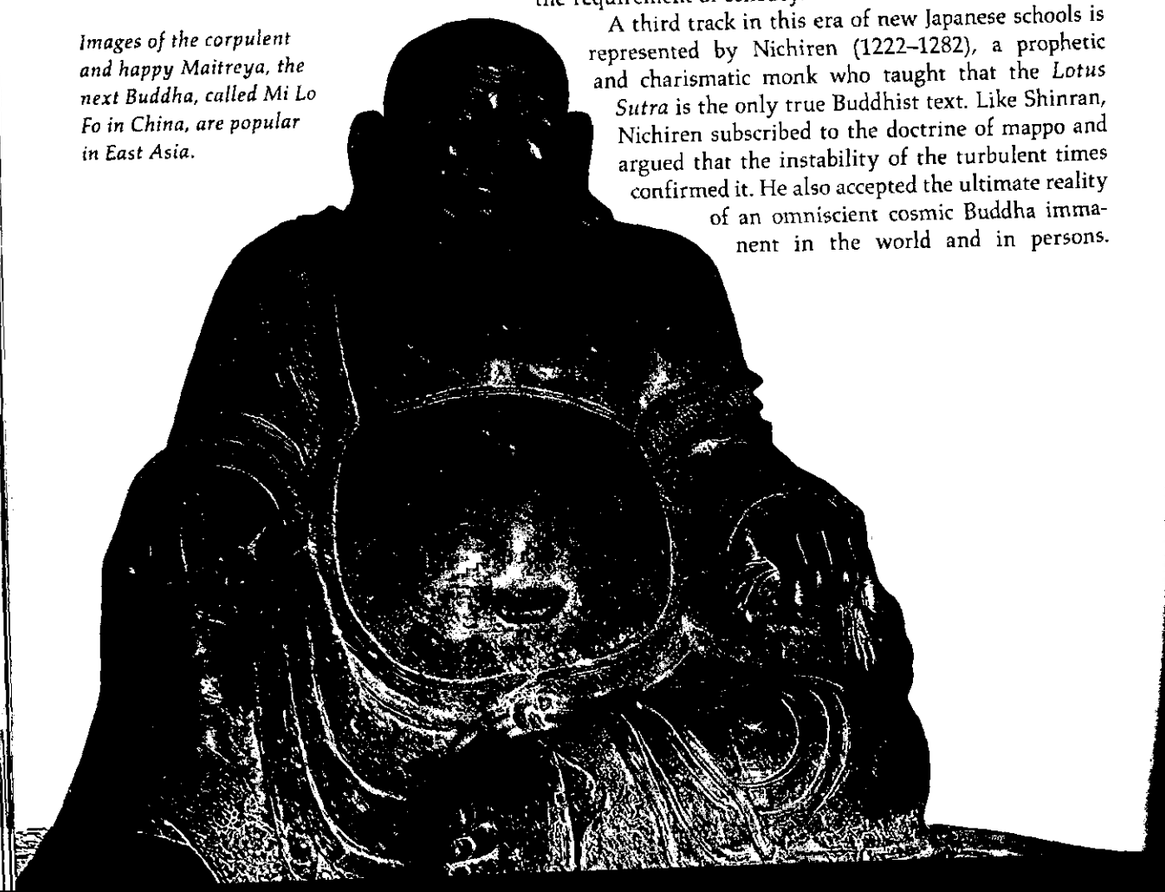
In his first sermon after receiving enlightenment, Shakyamuni Buddha told his former companions, the five ascetic monks, to spread the new teaching universally and to use the local dialects in these communications. Thus, from its inception Buddhism has been a missionary religion, teaching a message directed to and thought suitable for all peoples. As the first missionary religion in the world, Buddhism initially spread to places not unlike the urban and trading centers where it had begun. Within the first millennium of the Common Era, Buddhism was found throughout South Asia and well into central Asia on the overland routes. Monks also traveled on the maritime trade routes to Ceylon and across Southeast Asia. Monasteries welcomed all who would observe the rules of residence. By this time, small circles of philosopher monks had divided into more than twenty schools of doctrinal interpretation. What gave the religion unity was a common reverence for the Three Refuges; however, Buddhism has never been a unified faith either doctrinally or institutionally.

By the year 100 CE, Buddhism had entered China through central Asia on the silk routes. As it grew more popular and spread across East Asia over

Dogen [1200–1253]) and the Rinzai Zen school (under the monk Eisai [1141–1215]). Both vied for popularity among the aristocrats and warriors who controlled Japanese society in the post-Kamakura era (after 1350).

The Pure Land school also found widespread popular acceptance through the public preaching campaigns undertaken by charismatic monks. Since their simplification of Buddhist practice entailed only the *nembutsu*, the chant of *Namo A-mi-t'o Fo*, the honorific repetition of Amitabha Buddha's name imported from China, householders could hope for nirvana in Pure Land rebirth. A thirteenth-century monk named Shinran continued the basic rituals and textual interpretations imported from Chinese Pure Land teachers and added emphasis on *mappo*, the so-called decadent age doctrine, reflecting acceptance of Shakyamuni's prediction of a decline in popular devotion. Shinran argued that human beings were completely dependent upon the Buddha's grace to reach nirvana and had simply to acknowledge their grateful acceptance of it to enter the Pure Land. Shinran's school, the Jodo Shinshu, became a vital separate lineage, and its sangha was the first in Japan to drop the requirement of celibacy.

A third track in this era of new Japanese schools is represented by Nichiren (1222–1282), a prophetic and charismatic monk who taught that the *Lotus Sutra* is the only true Buddhist text. Like Shinran, Nichiren subscribed to the doctrine of mappo and argued that the instability of the turbulent times confirmed it. He also accepted the ultimate reality of an omniscient cosmic Buddha immanent in the world and in persons.



Images of the corpulent and happy Maitreya, the next Buddha, called Mi Lo Fo in China, are popular in East Asia.

Practice in the Nichiren school was simplified to three devotional acts: a short honorific repetition of the *Lotus Sutra*'s title (*Nam-Myoho Reng-e Kyo*), meditation on an image of the cosmic Buddha designed by Nichiren, and pilgrimage to the school's national shrine. Later, the monk's followers taught that Nichiren himself was a bodhisattva. Their interpretation of Buddhism emphasized Japan's special significance in leading Buddhism through the declining stage of history, a visionary view that endured to inspire several splinter movements in the modern and postwar eras.

The Himalayan Region

In Tibet, Mongolia, and Nepal, Mahayana schools again found supremacy. Across the highland frontiers, Vajrayana traditions came to be regarded as the Buddha's highest teaching, and the monks who introduced Buddhism there taught that Buddhist belief and practice have both outer and inner levels of understanding, the highest of which was accessible only through tantric initiation and practice. In these regions, Vajrayana traditions developed in rich elaboration, and dedicated elites practiced exhaustive meditation regimens. Tibetan scholars translated a vast corpus of Sanskrit texts, commented upon them, and composed their own interpretive tracts. Ritual masters also applied the texts and teachings to many aspects of life, designing rituals to promote the best possible rebirth. Even flags, watermills, and hand-turned wheels were adapted to broadcast the Buddha's teaching, continuously earning merit for individuals and communities.

In Tibet, too, the celestial bodhisattva doctrine was made more accessible to the laity: extraordinary monks and nuns came to be identified as their incarnations (*tulku* in Tibetan) of these divinities. Indeed, after 1250 as these

Archaeological remains of Pagan (Myanmar), one of the greatest Buddhist cities in the world between 1000 and 1400 CE.

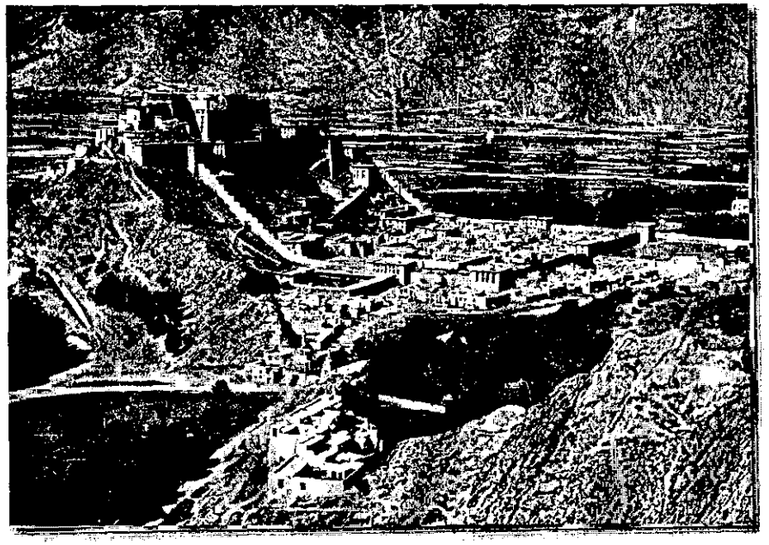
"incarnate lineages" became institutions endowed with lands and households, some tulkus assumed power as both religious and political leaders of their regions. With the aid of the Mongols, leaders of the major Tibetan monasteries ascended to rule over central Tibet, a situation unprecedented in any other Buddhist society. With the triumph of the Gelugpa school under the Dalai and Panchen Lamas in 1642, Tibetan polity assumed its modern form that was dominated by large monasteries (joined by roughly 15% of the male population).

BUDDHISM AND MODERNITY

Early Modern Buddhist Polities: Monks, Nuns, Householders, Kings

One decisive factor in Buddhist history has been the relation between the institutional religion and political power, a recurring source of controversy from the colonial period until the present, as we will see again shortly. Buddhists have always looked to the legend of Ashoka (273–232 BCE) to define their exemplary relationship with rulers as protectors and patrons. Only with such support can the sangha's integrity be assured, the Buddha's monuments maintained, and the teachings passed down. In premodern Ceylon, the king appointed a senior monk as the *sangharaja* ("ruler of the sangha"); in every Theravada country today, leadership and jurisdiction over the sangha are found in the form of a single monk or monastic council appointed by the state.

"Nichiren confuses his enemies," a woodcut print by Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798–1861). Nichiren's disciples followed the teacher's example of practicing aggressive missionary exposition, a trend that has marked the school up to the present.



The Potala in Lhasa, Tibet, was the palace of the Dalai Lamas from 1649 until 1959, when the fourteenth Dalai Lama went into exile.

A dramatic modern instance of this exemplary royal support was Burma's King Mindon, who convened the Fifth Buddhist Council (by Theravada reckoning) in 1871. The only complete version among the early collections of the Buddha's teachings was recited and corrected at this conference. These writings, revered today as the Pali Canon, were then inscribed in their entirety on large marble slabs set up in the city of Mandalay. Postcolonial Buddhist governments across the world sponsored similar activities in 1956 on the occasion of the 2,500-year anniversary of Shakyamuni's parinirvana.

For most of its history, the Buddhist sangha has existed in polities ruled by kings or emperors. As a result, a mutually beneficial tradition developed: the sangha adopted rules in harmony with those of states and would applaud exemplary moral leadership on the part of the monarch. In premodern times, monastic Buddhism usually served to promote social stability, accommodating itself to local traditions. The monks also chanted mantras and performed merit-making rituals on behalf of rulers, a custom that continues in modern Japan, Thailand, and Nepal.

Buddhist Monasticism

A monastery (vihara) can be of humble construction or built to imperial, aristocratic standards. Each, however, must have a place for the monks to sleep and a building in which they gather for reception into the sangha, fortnightly recitations, and other proceedings. Monasteries may also have one or more stupas, a "bodhi tree," a meditation hall, and an image hall.

The subsistence of the monks and nuns has remained dependent upon the donations of food and shelter by the lay community. Originally, all sangha members gathered their food in morning begging rounds, and the day's solid food had to be eaten by noon. By the modern period, however, Buddhists had developed other routines: in some places members of the laity would come to the monastery on a rotating schedule with food donations; in other places, monks cooked their own foods. Many Mahayana monasteries of East Asia interpreted the moral rules to require vegetarianism of the monks and nuns, but in recent centuries the restriction against alcohol was taken by most to mean *"no intoxication," not complete abstinence.*

A formal division that endured within the sangha was that between village monks and forest monks. Village and forest were the two poles of the monastic orientation. Generally, male and female renunciants in the former domain were dedicated to service and study, while forest dwellers fasted and meditated.

Meditation Practices

As we have noted, meditation remained essential for all aspirants, lay and renunciant, seeking to move on the final path to nirvana. This practice by monks and nuns, even if only by a few, certifies Buddhism's continuing spiritual vitality, inspiring layfolk to respect and take refuge in the sangha. Until late into the modern era, however, it was almost entirely the elite among monks and nuns who practiced meditation.

Buddhism inherited and extended the spiritual experiments of ancient India. The practice of trance (*samadhi*) is accepted, even encouraged, but this state does not lead to nirvana realization, hence is not given highest priority. The key practice is called mindfulness meditation (*vipashyana*): a careful attending to, or being mindful of, the three characteristics of existential reality—suffering (*dukkha*), impermanence (*anitya*), and non-self (*anatman*). The practice as taught today is simple: while remaining motionless, the practitioner seeks to focus all awareness on the breath, letting go of all intervening thoughts that arise. Attention to, and comprehension of, these realities opens up an awareness of the "inner life" we normally ignore. With such heightened awareness, mindfulness meditation has other critical effects: it shows how suffering and change are inevitable, it nourishes personal detachment that stills desire, and it cultivates the spiritual insight (*prajna*) that dispels ignorance. The development of *prajna* and the removal of ignorance eliminate bad karma and create good karma. Perfection eventually leads to the fullness of *prajna* in a breakthrough, transformative experience of an enlightened mind (*bodhi*).

Mahayana meditations elaborated upon these precedents. Ch'an or Zen mindfulness meditation, like Theravada vipashyana practice, focuses first upon the breath. Given the Mahayana teaching that all beings possess the Buddha nature (*tathagatagarba*), meditation can comprise any activity practiced with mindfulness, from walking to class to sipping espresso, or (more traditionally) from engaging in martial arts to arranging flowers.

In Pure Land meditation, the fervent wish to attain nirvana in an otherworldly western paradise (*Sukhavati*) encourages devotees to visualize that extraordinary paradise as described in the texts. These practices are especially important as death nears, for individuals who can visualize this realm are promised painless passage into heavenly rebirth through the boundless grace of the Buddha Amitabha.

Schools devoted to esoteric Vajrayana innovations developed yet other forms of meditation under the heading of *sadhana*. These *tantric* practices are based upon mind's-eye visualizations of enlightened bodhisattvas and mantra recitations to jump-start spiritual development. By controlling the appearance of mental images, one sees all experience as mind-constructed and thus empty (*shunya*) of any ultimate reality.

Again, however, it is necessary to emphasize that most Buddhists concentrated their devotional activities on rituals and on accumulating merit rather than on meditation, and so we turn to gift giving as the foundation of Buddhist practice.

Punya and Dana: The Fundamental Buddhist Exchange

The Buddha set out a "graded teaching" to order the spiritual teachings to be given to disciples. This framework begins with the merit-making donations that enable a Buddhist community's diverse cultural activities. Still used as a guide for modern Buddhist teachers, the sequence counsels progression through the following stages of religious striving:

1. *Dana ("self-less giving" to diminish desire)*
2. *Shila* ("morality")
3. *Svarga* ("heaven")
4. *Dharma-deshana* ("instruction on doctrine") on the Four Noble Truths

This hierarchy of progressive practices defines a "syllabus" for advancing in spiritual attainment. Stages 1 and 2 lead to heaven birth (3), the fruit of merit; the doctrines in stage 4 are the instructions concerning reaching enlightenment, beyond good karma making.

Just as merit, or punya, has provided the chief orientation point and goal in the Buddhist layperson's worldview and ethos, dana has always been the starting practice for accumulating it. Meritmaking for most Buddhists, including most monks and nuns, is the central measure of spiritual advancement. Merit making remains the universal, integrating transaction in Buddhist settings through the modern era, regardless of the respective intellectual elite's orientation toward competing Theravada, Mahayana, or Vajrayana doctrinal formulations or spiritual disciplines.

The wish for merit leading to rebirth in heaven has remained the most popular and pan-Buddhist aspiration; indeed, monks from the beginning of the faith were instructed to "show the laity the way to heaven" by acting as a "field of merit." Householders can "plant" donations in this field, and the "harvest" in good Karma they earn will be great. Punya is needed for a good rebirth, and

although Buddhist doctrine holds that heaven is a temporary state, the reward of heavenly rebirth has motivated many to be "good Buddhists."

Merit making can lead one close to nirvana, but it also has practical, worldly consequences, impacting destiny both now and across future lifetimes. Therefore, Buddhists seek punya to change the karma "account" that affects them in this life as well as to modify future rebirth destiny.

To maximize punya and so enhance the course of spiritual advancement, popular texts urge all disciples, monastic and lay, to cultivate such practices as venerating images, fasting, taking extra precepts (as described at the very beginning of this chapter), organizing compassionate actions and charitable institutions, arranging public recitations of the texts, and encouraging meditation.

The most universal expression of lay Buddhist faith and punya seeking has been through dana. Making donations for spiritual purposes and setting aside time for moral observances, like saving an animal or returning a lost object, remained the foundation for householder practice; these still comprise the most visible Buddhist activity today. Passages in the Mahayana texts also articulate the value of dana to the individual as an expression of compassion (*karuna*) and as a renunciatory practice that undercuts desire and attachment.

Another popular pan-Buddhist practice is merit transfer—an idea that philosophers have struggled to rationalize. Texts exhort persons doing something meritorious to share the good deed's karma effects with family, community, and all beings simply by announcing the intent; such sharing is believed to increase the initial merit earned by helping others.

Western nuns reciting from texts at a Tibetan center in London.

Rituals

Buddhist monasteries developed ritual procedures and a yearly festival calendar for the purpose of imposing some uniformity on the widespread sangha network. The monk's vocation came to include priestly duties, performing rituals that linked the Buddha's spoken words with simple gestures. In the simplest (and still most popular) universal Buddhist ritual, monks pour water into a vessel as they chant words revealed by the Buddha. Now imbued with healing powers, the liquid can be drunk or sprinkled over the bodies of those needing assistance. All Buddhist schools also offer food, incense, and flowers to Buddha images, bodhi trees, and stupas.

Mahayana rituals are seen as an important part of a bodhisattva's service to others, and most emphasize mastery of word chains called mantras, known for their spiritual powers. A mantra can be spoken to bless and protect the speaker, the sangha, and an entire settlement. Ritual chanting of the Buddha's own sayings is thought to further the foundations of spiritual practice and infuse towns and families with good karma. Ritual service thus came to dominate Mahayana Buddhism in its missionary program, especially mantra recitations that expressed the faith's spiritual ideals and activated the unseen cosmic Buddha powers promised in the Mahayana texts.

The key Buddhist holiday called *uposatha* occurs each fortnight on the new moon and full moon days. On uposatha, sangha members privately recite the details confirming that they are Buddhists in good standing according to the Vinaya rules. This recitation follows a private confession, to the renunciant's superior, of any transgressions of the rules during the period. Uposatha continues in the modern era to serve as the regular occasion to review, correct, and certify the proper standards of monastery discipline in Theravada societies. Emphasizing the fundamental interdependence between sangha and lay community, householders visit the local vihara on these days to make dana offerings. On these days, too, devout layfolk take the opportunity to don white robes, camp on the monastery grounds, and observe eight of the ten monastic rules. They join with many more layfolk who have come simply to release animals or to make offerings to Buddha images, and remain to hear monks preach the Dharma. Thus, the lunar fortnight rhythm dominates the festival year. The regular succession of uposathas and the two half-moon days are when Buddhists typically undertake meritorious actions, perform rituals, and engage in meditation practices. Thus, each week has a special day for Buddhist observances.

Householders releasing animals earn merit by bestowing the gift of freedom and life.

Festival Traditions and Public Religious Observances

Like other great world religions, Buddhist cultures developed ways of ordering and shaping time through regular monthly and yearly festivals. Some festivals orchestrate the reliving of classical Buddhist events "in the beginning": celebrations of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and nirvana are universal, although occurring in different seasons. Other more regional sacred events likewise mark the year. These include Shakyamuni's descent from heaven to preach to his mother, events marking a key point in a popular bodhisattva's life, or the death anniversary of a local saint.

The Universal Buddhist Shrine

For all Buddhist schools, the stupa (or *caitya*, a term that can also signify any Buddha shrine) became a focal point and singular landmark denoting the tradition's spiritual presence. Buddhism eventually recognized "eight great relic caityas" for pilgrimage and veneration in South Asia. Stupa worship thus became the chief focus of Buddhist ritual activity, and this has continued through the modern era to the present. The Buddhist relic cult began early, inspiring monks, nuns, and householders to circumambulate the shrines (in the clockwise direction) and to have their own cremated remains deposited in the same great stupa or in smaller votive stupas located nearby.

Theravada monk sprinkling a lay woman with water over which the sacred words of the Buddha have been chanted.

Throughout Buddhist history, the stupa has served as a place to go to recall the Buddha's great acts, a "power place" tapping the Buddha's (or saint's) relic presence and its healing potency, a site to earn merit through joyful, musical veneration, and a monument marking the conversion and control of local gods and spirits. In the Mahayana schools, the stupa was also thought of as a symbol of Buddhahood's omnipresence, a center of Mahayana text revelation, and a perfect form showing the unity of the natural elements (earth, fire, air, ether) with the Buddha nature.

Later Buddhists identified stupas as the physical representations of the eternal teachings. They also expanded the possible sacred objects deposited in them to include Buddha's words in textual form. Despite these many understandings, Buddhists at every level of sophistication believe that ritually correct veneration of stupas will earn them merit. In practice, believers of every school converge at stupas to mark events associated with the Buddhas or saints. Stupas thus remain the natural sites for Buddhist festivals of remembrance and veneration.

Death Ritualism

In all Buddhist countries today, despite many regional differences, death rituals are the exclusive purview of the sangha and a key time for monks to expound core teachings and receive dana. Buddhist mourners carefully dispose of the corpse, relying on ritual to ensure that the dead person does not become a hungry ghost (*preta*) or, worse, a demon (*yaksha*). They also seek to avert bad destiny for the deceased by making punya, then transferring it to the dead person. In adopting such practices, Buddhists straddle both alternatives to the ancient Indic question of whether destiny is based strictly upon an individual's own karma, or whether the proper performance of rituals during and immediately after death can override unfavorable karma and manipulate rebirth destiny. Since Buddhism is conceptually centered on the doctrine that the cosmos is governed by karmic law, ritual traditions naturally surround death, the critical time in the operation of such causal mechanisms. Both Theravada monks and—more expansively—Mahayana ritualists apply ritual expertise to this time. The tradition's dependence on after-death ritual service for sangha donations is evident in all modern Asian traditions; even when people are otherwise hardly observant in modern urban areas of Japan, death rituals performed by Buddhist monks endure.

Buddhism Under Colonialism

The modern era was one of widespread decline for Buddhism across Asia. Medieval states either lost their autonomy or were destabilized by colonialism, first by European powers (the British in Burma, India, Ceylon, Tibet, and China; the French in Indo-China; the Portuguese and Dutch in Ceylon; the Dutch in Indonesia) and later, in the early twentieth century, by Japanese expansionism that lacked any pretense of compassion. In East Asia, the imperial Chinese state was weakened by the colonial powers (primarily Britain)

"Protestant Buddhism": An Enduring Colonial-Era Re-Formation of the Faith

Anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere has described the modern re-formation of Buddhist tradition begun in colonial Ceylon as "Protestant Buddhism." He uses the term to convey two distinct but connected historic trends. The first is intuitively obvious: the adoption of aspects of missionary Protestant Christianity into the Buddhist framework to revitalize its institutions, practices, and doctrines. The second is a deeply ironic reference to a past marked by the arrogance of missionaries and British colonial discrimination against Buddhism.

The early influential mediator of such "Protestantism" in Ceylon was the American convert Henry Steele Olcott (1832–1907), who came to the country and helped activist Buddhist leaders organize their efforts. Olcott emphasized the importance of the laity in revitalization and the founding of Buddhist publications and schools. He also composed a *Buddhist Catechism* (1881) and invented a five-color Buddhist flag, both of which are widely used across the world today. Modern Protestant inclinations were evident in the reformist insistence that spiritual and scientific truth must be compatible and that the only true practice was meditation, not the mindless observance of ritual. Furthermore, the reformers believed—in agreement with the Protestant missionaries—that the practice of Buddhism in Ceylon had been corrupted by idolatry, Hindu polytheism, and an undisciplined and corrupt monastic "priesthood." The laity, however, could reestablish "true Buddhism" through adhering to the pure philosophy and meditation practices taught by the human Buddha. Popular texts and village traditions were strongly critiqued, and two new sangha schools were started with ordination lineages from Burma, both requiring strict adherence to Vinaya rules.

A Ceylonese protégé, who adopted the name Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933), continued Olcott's initiatives and went beyond them, preaching and publishing tracts to spread his vision of revitalized Buddhism. At the age of 29, Dharmapala addressed an ecumenical conference, the Parliament of World Religions, held in Chicago in 1893. He impressed hearers from all over the world with his definition of modernist Buddhism as compatible with science, free from dogma and superstition, tolerant of other faiths, and committed to social reform.

Dharmapala also found an enthusiastic reception among the Ceylonese laity, especially among the newly educated professional elite and the merchant middle class, who owed their rising positions in the world to the changes wrought by the colonial modernization of the country. Dharmapala energized the Buddhist reformers in Ceylon; his speeches and writings also contributed to the linkage between the faith and the nationalist struggles.

Dharmapala celebrated Ceylon as a uniquely pure Buddhist country, elevated the Sinhalese ethnic group as a "chosen Buddhist people," and harshly demonized those opposing the country's Buddhist restoration. Scholars today see these influences as having set in motion the cultural forces that have made the postindependence state, Sri Lanka, a zone of extremes where bloody conflict has taken deep root alongside uncompromising reform.

Dharmapala's founding of the Mahabodhi Society in Calcutta extended "Protestant Buddhist" reform into other countries in Asia. In recent times, "Protestant Buddhism" has fostered an individualist ethos among those whose ties to a village or traditional sangha have been broken through urban migration. Those influenced by these reformist ideas see it as their own responsibility to practice meditation and study the Dharma (usually in English translations) in the quest for nirvana. Joining the sangha or seeking spiritual guidance from an ordained monk is also not necessarily the norm for those whose view of Buddhism has been affected by "Protestantism."

Buddhism in the Himalayas: Shangri-La?

Many Westerners first became aware of Buddhism through fictional works such as *Lost Horizon*, the film version of which was set in an idyllic, tropical valley amid the scenic, snow-blown Himalayan peaks. It is true that, in fact, Tibetan Buddhist communities have survived in the remote and picturesque settlements nestled among the world's highest mountains, but this region has hardly been a utopian zone for Buddhism in the post–World War II era. Along the southern Himalayan region, the isolation of the states on the Tibetan frontier (Ladakh, Sikkim, Bhutan) enabled them to retain their independence until the end of the Second World War. Since, however, religious conservatism also kept the monks and leaders of these states isolated and ignorant about the modern world, there was little impetus for reform or adaptation to the postwar international political order.

In 1949 most of the territories on the Tibetan plateau ruled by the Gelugpa school's Dalai Lama were declared part of the People's Republic of China, which sent its army to enforce its claims. The peripheries once oriented to Lhasa were soon annexed into adjacent states, while central and western Tibet have been ruled by China as "the Tibetan Autonomous Region." Until the bitter end of China's Cultural Revolution (1976), all religious practices in the region were repressed and most Buddhist temples, monasteries, and shrines were destroyed. Thousands of Tibetans have died since 1949 in conflicts that set Chinese against Tibetan and Tibetan against Tibetan. The fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, went into exile in 1959, and 10 percent of the population has left the country as well.

After 1980, official toleration of limited worship and monastic ordination returned, as did state-sponsored rebuilding of select monasteries. But increasing Tibetan protests since 1987 have been met with further restrictions and arrests, while increasing Chinese migration into the region has reduced Tibetans to a minority in their homeland.

Three nations have remained refuges of the faith. *Nepal*, the world's only Hindu kingdom but one of the world's poorest nations, has several million Buddhists among the highland-dwelling Tibeto-Burman peoples, in its settlements of Tibetan refugees, and among the Newars of the Kathmandu

Valley. Kathmandu is the modern capital of Nepal, and this valley is also Asia's largest center for international institutions connected with the major schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhism also has survived in mountainous areas of northern India (in Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, and Arunachal Pradesh).

India has likewise accepted Tibetan refugees, for since 1959 the Dalai Lama's government in exile has been located in picturesque Dharamsala. Finally, there is Bhutan in the eastern Himalayas, a nation formed in 1907 as the royal kingdom ruled by the Wangchuck family. It is the world's only nation that has Tibetan Buddhism as its state religion.

Most regions where Tibetan Buddhism still flourishes have lost political autonomy. The central, northern, and eastern portions of Tibet were absorbed by China, while Ladakh and Sikkim were absorbed into modern India; Bhutan alone remained independent from India, but only in its internal affairs. In exile and in the isolated enclaves, Tibetan Buddhist institutions have sustained the faith, but these Buddhists struggle as refugees in poverty and as resident aliens within the larger states.

Yet amid the destruction of tradition and the tragedies of exile, there has been a paradoxical development: the end of independent Tibet, the persecution of the faith, and the exile of many Tibetans have also led to the extensive migration of Tibetan Buddhist teachers into almost every country of the world. Now publishing houses, learned lamas, Internet Web sites, and charismatic meditation teachers cross the globe to spread Buddhist teachings. While their predecessors were completely out of touch with the modern world and its spiritual challenges, contemporary monk-scholars and meditation teachers are now leaders in "bringing the Dharma to the West." The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Nobel Peace Prize winner in 1989, is well known as a world leader and is certainly the most recognized Buddhist in the world.

Theravada Buddhism Today in Southeast Asia

The first regions missionized in antiquity by Buddhist monks have remained the stronghold of Theravada Buddhism. In Ceylon and Burma, a new era began with the withdrawal of the British (1947). Buddhism became a pillar of the new nations' identity, and the Buddha was elevated to the status of cultural hero and ancestor.

While supportive of the respective struggles for independence, Buddhism in these states had also been enriched and enlarged by revival movements throughout the colonial period. Most of these involved the laity in the administration of its institutions and saw the establishment of new monastic schools emphasizing revival through strict discipline, meditation, and social service. Buddhist leaders in the first decades after World War II were also at the forefront of addressing the relationship between socialism and communism, the political ideologies that had risen to popularity as alternatives to capitalism in guiding the newly independent states. Some monks were highly suspicious of

communism and allied themselves with aggressive anticommunist campaigns; some political activists and high civil servants, however, used Buddhist rhetoric quite creatively to justify participation in communist regimes.

A Tooth Relic Visits Myanmar

The Buddha's cremation relics have been the most sacred and precious objects for devotees from the faith's very beginnings. Not only are they the sole remnants of the enlightened one, a "sacred trace" of his earthly existence; they are also thought to be infused with immense power, and mere proximity to them is believed to confer spiritual and worldly blessings.

In 1994 the Chinese government loaned a tooth relic to Myanmar. Placed in a jewel-embellished palanquin and conveyed from the Boeing 757 to a silk-draped float pulled by an elephant, the relic was taken to its shrine in the Maha Pasana cave in Rangoon, where over the next six weeks a half-million devotees came to pray and make offerings. SLORC, the country's ruling junta, who had sponsored the visit, used the state-controlled media to emphasize that its members were exemplary Buddhists. In 1995 the junta underwrote the construction of a new temple in the capital where the relic has been displayed in later visits. Displaying and respecting Buddha relics have been recognized as signs of just rulers in Buddhist states since antiquity, and the SLORC generals no doubt intend their sponsorship of tooth relic veneration to win popular approval and counter dislike of their authoritarian rule. After regaining independence from the British Empire in 1948 and undergoing a short period of experimentation with "Buddhist socialism," Myanmar's government has often dealt harshly with persons suspected of fostering dissent. After allowing elections in 1989 but not liking the results, the junta put the winner, Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest, where she remains today.

The tooth relic arrangements represent ironies of a kind not uncommon today. The Communist party of China found it politically expedient to utilize a Buddhist relic for advancing its goals in international relations. For their part, the junta ruling Myanmar has been supplying many of the images China now requires to rebuild the temples demolished by Red Guards during the most destructive years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1969).

Three Contemporary Faces of Thai Buddhism

A constitutional monarchy since 1932 and a country never ruled by a European nation, Thailand is another predominantly Theravada country. Thai Buddhism remains one of the most dynamic faiths in the world today. The society supports traditional and reformist scholarship, the ancient spiritual practices of forest monks, and pioneering reformist initiatives. Thai reformers have assumed active roles in working for the modernization of the country through government development programs in infrastructure building, agricultural innovation, education, and health care. Several notable independent monks have opposed the state's toleration of corruption, pollution, and environmental destruction. However, Thai Buddhist monastic institutions have benefited

Buddha and Buddhist doctrine analogous to the scholarly "search for the historical Jesus" that was emerging within Protestant Christianity at the same time. To publicize these reforms, Buddhists adopted one aspect of Christian missionary methodology: they began by investing in printing technology and undertaking publications that defined reformist doctrines and practices. They also rediscovered the practice of public sermonizing.

Reformers in Siam, as in Ceylon, also articulated new interpretations of "true Buddhism." They taught that Buddhism in its pure form was not concerned with communal rituals or harnessing the cosmic powers of Buddhism to support the secular kingdom. Rejecting the adaptive local traditions that had developed in the process of the globalization of Buddhism, reformers insisted that the only genuine center of the faith was the individual's quest for mind cultivation and salvation. Doctrines describing the interdependent and impermanent nature of existence were emphasized, while the teachings about hungry ghosts and snake gods were rejected. Most reform leaders were critical of—even hostile to—"superstitions," rituals, and other local accommodations. Meditation was now the heart of "true Buddhism," and it was not restricted to monks and nuns: all Buddhists could and should feel capable of seeking nirvana.

The Buddhist Revival Gains Strength

By the early twentieth century, reformers had created new institutions to advance the revivalist goals directly. Also supporting the revival process in Asia was the first generation of Europeans sympathetic to Buddhism, who saw in the faith a nontheistic spirituality that was a compelling alternative to dogmatic monotheism. Many Western seekers interpreted Buddhism as encouraging spiritual experimentation through meditation rather than requiring blind faith. Its philosophy was seen as ancient wisdom marvelously preserved and still accessible.

The exigencies of imperialism had resulted in easier travel for Westerners, and this development enabled sympathetic Europeans and North Americans to assist native Buddhist modernists as they argued back against Christian ministers. Westerners both educated native intellectuals on Christianity and shared with them Enlightenment critiques of Christian dogma. Members of the Theosophical Society, a European group formed to pursue the secret, mystical teachings thought to underlie all the world religions, created new institutions including English-medium Buddhist schools and lay organizations such as Buddhist teaching programs modeled after Christian Sunday schools. Buddhist nationalists also became involved in politics, seeking more favorable relations—and eventually independence—from the European colonial governments. This experience in Ceylon was eagerly shared across Asia with modernists from Japan to Burma.

Early Western scholarship also added to the awareness of modern Asian Buddhists. Indeed, sites associated with Ashoka and many long-forgotten early monuments were discovered in the course of archaeological expeditions under the auspices of the British colonial government. European scholars used modern critical methods to translate and interpret the earliest canonical texts and then disseminated them globally. In fact, it was common for the newly educated indigenous intelligentsia in Buddhist countries to read their first passages from a canonical Buddhist text in English translation. (As in medieval Europe, only the elite among monk–scholars could read the original sacred texts.)

As Buddhist literature in English became available and was assimilated, voices from outside the sangha joined the contested discussion of "what the Buddha really taught." Thus, throughout the Buddhist world, the leaders of the old Buddhist establishments were often challenged to conform to the standards of discipline set forth in the monastic texts. In most Buddhist countries, colonial and postcolonial governments sought to eliminate sources of political dissent by imposing on the sangha regulations supposedly designed to "keep pure" the local Buddhist institutions.

Buddhism Reduced for Western Consumption: Meditation and Atheism

The efforts by the colonial powers to control Buddhism and Buddhists had a paradoxical effect. The global diaspora of Buddhism flowed "backward" on the networks of empire and through Western converts who became aware of Asian religions as a result of expanding communications and travel. For some Euro-Americans, the Enlightenment-based critiques of the Western monotheistic religions were persuasive and led to a search for religions that did not depend upon belief in a personal God. By 1920, Buddhist centers in the West had been established by Euro-American converts and immigrants. As depicted in early popular and sympathetic accounts, the Buddha was a rationalist who rejected ritual and also a heroic social reformer. Buddhism was seen not as a religion but as an atheistic philosophy, compatible with science. Buddhist meditation, however, was regarded as an authentic, ancient spiritual practice, an aspect that attracted Westerners interested in the new field of psychology.

Euro-American contact with Mahayana Buddhism came strongest and earliest with Japanese Zen. Westerners were drawn to the spirit of iconoclasm and to meditation, and to Zen's connection with the fine arts conveyed by early exponents such as D.T. Suzuki (1870–1966). In the years immediately following the Second World War, Zen Buddhism particularly attracted segments of the bohemian and intellectual Western society, leading to a revival in interest that has grown throughout our day. It was in the years leading up to World War II, however, that Japan embarked on an imperialistic course that obscured the peaceful face of Zen Buddhism for decades.