Indian Contexts and the Buddha’s Life

Introduction to Buddhism (Spring 09)
Lecture 1
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Ancient Civilizations

The Four Old-World River Valley Cultures

- Egypt
- The Nile
- Mesopotamia
- Tigris & Euphrates
- India
- Indus & Ganges
- Yellow R
- Shang China
- Yangzi

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Indus Valley Civilization

- India’s oldest known civilization
- Existence of complex urban culture with carefully planned towns
- Use of copper and bronze
- Invention of a pictographic writing system
- Decline of the Indus Valley civilization from around 1800 BCE
Settlement of the Aryan People

- **Beginning of the Vedic age**
  - (ca. 1500-800 B.C.E)
- **Codification of the caste system**
  - Brahman (priests)
  - Ksatriya (warriors and rulers)
  - Vaisya (merchants, farmers, and traders)
  - Sudra (artisans, laborers, and servants)
India Around the Buddha’s Time

- Development of larger states (monarchies and republics) around the 7th century BCE (e.g. Magadha and Kosala)
- Intellectual ferment and social changes
- Emergence of new religions traditions that challenged the authority of the Vedic tradition
Veda, hymns to the gods, verses of invocation and praise that are eternal and of non-human origin

Brahmana, treatises on priestly rituals, also including myths and legends

Upanisad, mystical texts concerned with philosophical speculation and yogic practice
Brahman, the substance underlying the universe (or the ultimate ground of reality), is identical to atman, the individual self. Continuing incarnation is ended by knowledge of the identity between Brahman and atman, through which the individual soul merges with Brahman.
Samana Traditions

- Rejection of the Vedic tradition and the caste system
- Renunciation of family ties and adoption of monastic lifestyle
- Investigations of the mind and the universe
- Search for permanent happiness and freedom beyond the mundane world (grounded in belief in transmigration)
Main Samana Groups

- **Jains**
  - Led by Vardhamana Mahavira
  - Acceptance of the doctrine of karma
  - Search for liberation by freeing the soul from accumulated karma
  - Emphasis on radical asceticism and non-violence

- **Ajivakas**
  - Led by Makkhali Gośāla
  - Acceptance of the idea of transmigration
  - Rejection of the doctrine of karma
  - Belief in determinism and fatalistic view of life
  - Adoption of ascetic lifestyle
Main Samana Groups

- **Materialists (Lokāyata)**
  - Belief in free will
  - Rejection of moral causation (karma) and assertion that acts and events happen spontaneously
  - Pursuit of happiness (including sensual pleasure) as the main aim of life
  - Denial of any kind of self
  - Belief in annihilation of the person at death

- **Skeptics (Agnostics)**
  - Avoidance of allegiance to any theory
  - Freedom from all points of view
Sites Associated With the Buddha’s Life

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Buddha’s Early Life

- Mythological vs. historical elements in the story about the Buddha’s life
- The Buddha’s family
  - Ksatriya background
  - Prominent social standing in Kapilavatthu, the capital of the Sakya republic
  - Traditional depictions of the young Buddha as a prince
- Birth in Lumbini grove as Siddhartha Gautama (Gotama)
Buddha’s Early Life

- Life choices: Cakkavatti (universal emperor) or a Buddha
- Sheltered aristocratic life and formative education
- Disaffection with the mundane world
- Seeing the “four signs”
  - Aging
  - Sickness
  - Death
  - Samana/monk
Renunciation

- Flight from the palace at age of 29
- Rejections of all social ties and responsibilities, including those towards his family
- Entry into religious life as an ascetic \((\text{samana})\)
- Search for the Truth
Thai wall paintings depicting Buddha’s life
Wall paintings that depict the Buddha’s life
Mangala Vihara, Singapore
Religious Quest

- Study with religious teachers and mastery of their doctrines and yogic practices
  - Attainment of the sphere of nothingness
  - Attainment of the sphere of neither-cognition-nor-non-cognition
- Practice of self-mortification
- Giving up of extreme asceticism
Awakening

- Meditation practice under the Bodhi tree in Bodhgaya
- Mara’s temptations
- Awakening to ultimate reality and rediscovery of the ancient path
- Consummation of the Buddha’s past practices
- Request from the gods to teach for the sake of suffering humanity
Thai wall paintings depicting Buddha’s life
Beginnings of the Buddha’s Teaching Ministry

- First sermon at Isipatana (present-day Saranath), near Benares
  - The middle way
  - The four noble truths
- Early preaching
  - Respect for other traditions
  - Emphasis on self-reliance and personal experience
  - Focus on practical soteriology rather than theoretical abstractions
Establishment of the Sangha (monastic order)
- Monks
- Nuns

Expansion of the religious community, which came to include numerous people from all walks of life, from impoverished commoners to royalty
Passing Away at Kusinara

- Ananda asking the Buddha about the future of the Sangha
  - Buddha’s refusal to name a successor
  - Bequeathing the disciples to follow the Dharma (teachings) and the Vinaya (monastic rules)
- Final ascent into Nirvana without remainder
- Cremation and distribution of the Buddha’s relics
Buddha's passing away into final Nirvana
Remembering the Buddha

- Memories of the Buddha and their subsequent embellishment
- Transmission of popular accounts about the Buddha’s previous lives (Jataka)
- Importance of the Buddha’s life story for later generations of Buddhists
  - Remembering and revering the great sage
  - Following in his footsteps
- Deification of the Buddha

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