

The Growth and Spread of Buddhism

The rise of Buddhism is closely connected to the prevalent practices in the Brahmanical religion (Early Hinduism). The Brahmanical religion had become increasingly intolerant (of the lower classes) and exclusive (open only to Brahmins and the aristocracy). The emphasis on conducting rituals (with the help of priests) was gradually alienating the masses. Sanskrit was the prerogative of the Brahmins and the aristocracy.

In such an environment, Buddha's teaching offered an alternative to the mainstream religion. The majority of its early followers were the merchants and the Sudras (untouchables). Buddhism provided a path to reach God. The tenets and rules of Buddhism were very simple to understand, appealing to the mass population. Buddha also preached in the local language, Prakrit. The practice of conducting rituals was seen as superfluous to reaching salvation.

Buddha set up monasteries known as the SANGHA. He also laid out rules for the conduct of his monks. Both men and women were admitted to monasteries.

A Buddhist monk (BHIKSHU) had to renounce the world and live dependent upon the generosity of the lay community. Each morning the monk would have to go begging for alms for basic meals. The monks also shaved their heads and wore simple saffron robes.

The growth of Buddhism can be attributed to two main factors:

- the support of the general population
- royal patronage

In his life, Buddha travelled throughout the whole of northern India spreading his message and setting up monastic orders. Since these monastic orders had to beg for their living, they were generally located near settlements, often on hillsides, etc. Often the monasteries were located on trade routes frequented by merchant caravans. They offered shelter to the merchants, who in return made generous donations.

When Buddha died, stupas or mounds were constructed to hold his ashes and relics of his life. These stupas constituted symbols of veneration. Buddha did not believe in being deified.

By the second century AD, there was a major development within Buddhism. There arose a general need for representation of the Buddha in human form. A division in the faith occurred with the creation of two sects: the Mahayana and the Hinayana.

Mahayana Buddhism believed in the elevation of the Buddha to the status of a god. They also permitted the representation of the Buddha as a human being. The rules governing the monastic orders were relaxed. However in the early phase of the schism, the Mahayana remained the minority.

Hinayana Buddhism believed in upholding the traditional values of the Buddha based upon his teaching.

By 250 BC, Buddhism had spread to Sri Lanka. Later, the Mahayana sect became popular. It is this school which spread to south-east Asia and China.

In the sixth century AD, Mahayana Buddhism spread to Cambodia. It was introduced by merchants who conducted trade with the country. Mahayana Buddhism spread to Thailand in the fourth century AD and to China in about 50AD.

(See also the Background Information for 'Chinese Scholars' and 'Ashoka and the Mauryan Empire').