The Spread of Buddhism

Buddhism originated in northern India around the year 560 BCE. About 250 years later, during the reign of the Emperor Ashoka (289-232 BCE), Buddhism began to spread throughout India and to south and central Asia.

For well over a thousand years, Buddhism spread across the whole of Asia—south, west, east and north—and is still practised in many Asian countries today.

It has recently spread to Europe, Africa, the Middle East, the Americas, and Australasia.

Theravada Buddhism

In the countries to the south and south-east of India people practise a form of Buddhism known as Theravada, or "Way of the Elders." Its yellow, orange, or brown-robed monks study and teach the Dharma. They regard the monastic life as very important and believe that living as a monk or nun is the best way to become Enlightened. Traditionally, boys follow the monastic life for a time as part of their upbringing. The lay people follow the Buddha's teaching and help the monks by giving them money, food and robes.

Mahayana Buddhism

Mahayana literally means the 'great way'. People in the countries to the north and north-east of India, including China and Japan, follow this form of Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism emphasises the importance of compassion. There are many different 'schools' of Mahayana Buddhism.

Buddhism spread to China at the beginning of the Christian era and to Japan about 500 years later. The Pure Land schools are based on devotion to the Buddha Amitabha. The Zen school lays emphasis on meditation as the way to gain Enlightenment.

Vajrayana Buddhism

Vajrayana means the 'diamond way'. This form of Buddhism spread from India to Tibet around 700 CE and from there to Mongolia. It is also practised in Russia. Ritual and worship play a particularly important role. Many Tibetans chant mantras – sacred phrases – as they go about their daily lives. Tibetan monks and nuns wear maroon and yellow robes. The Dalai Lama is a Vajrayana teacher.

Buddhism in the west

From the 1950s onwards, Buddhism became increasingly well-known in the west, and most of the major Buddhist traditions are now being practised by westerners. There are also new Buddhist movements founded by westerners, experimenting with new ways of practising the Buddha's teachings.