

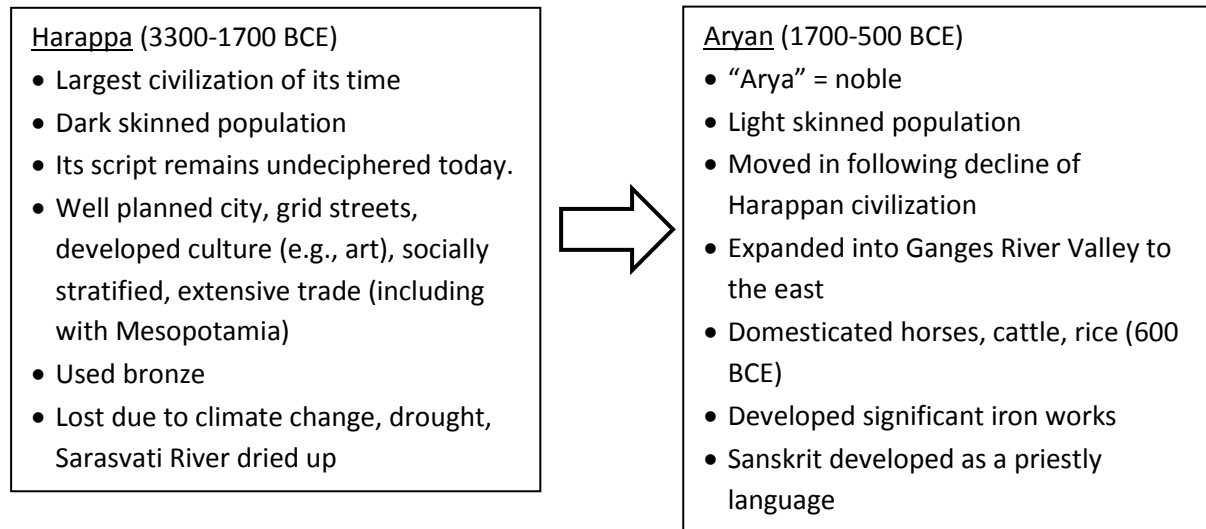
## Buddhism in Context

WHGC (Fall 2012)

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### Development of Indian subcontinent civilization

The Indus River Valley civilization developed in present day Pakistan, with its main city called Harappa. Sanskrit writing developed in this region, which was one of the four riverine civilizations where writing was invented. The other three were Mesopotamia, between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers (cuneiform writing; region contains Sumer, Uruk Babylon, Ur and Assyria as highlighted with our study of *Gilgamesh*), the Nile valley in Egypt (hieroglyphics), and the Yellow River valley in China (oracle bone inscriptions). With the decline of the Harappan civilization there was the entry and rise of the Aryans in this region. These two civilizations formed the core and essence of Indian civilization.

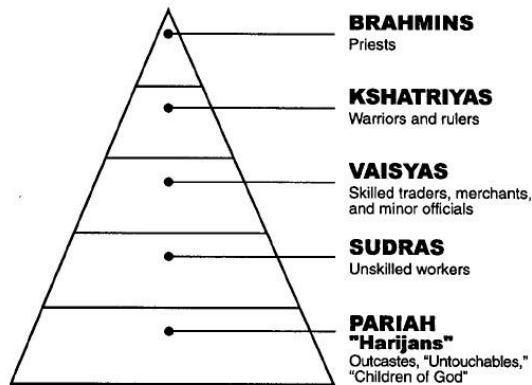


### Development of Vedic religion and the Upanishads

Buddhism has its philosophical and religious origin rooted in *The Vedas*, as do Hinduism and Jainism. The Vedas were Aryan hymns composed roughly 1500–1000 BCE and were passed on in an oral tradition. These were first written down in Sanskrit approximately 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> C CE. These hymns were compiled to an ancient pantheon that consisted of many gods (devas) and goddesses (devis) that included Indra (war), Agni (fire), and Soma (a drink from a hallucinogenic plant). Later scriptures, *The Puranas* (3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> C CE) are important Hindu, Jain and Buddhist religious texts which provide the history of the universe, genealogies of kings and sages, and descriptions of Hindu philosophy. They contain stories about the gods Ganesha and Hanuman, and avatars such as Rama and Krishna.

The four sacred Sanskrit texts of the Vedas were read only by priests and provided wisdom about rituals, sacrifice, social conventions, the caste system, and creation. The priests therefore enjoyed exalted social status and power. *The Rigveda* (composed between 1700 and 1100 BCE) was the most important of the Vedas and marked the early Vedic period. The end of the Vedic period is estimated to be about 500 BCE, as it was evolving into Hinduism and other religions.

The Vedic period created a caste system with five classes that became foundational in the long term social structure of India and Hinduism:



<http://eng4uhuamei.wikispaces.com/file/view/caste-system.jpg/216379070/caste-system.jpg>

*The Upanishads* are the collected wisdom of sages (ascetics) that were composed approximately 800-400 BCE (though some may have been composed even more recently). These promote understanding through internal, mental rituals (a more personal religious experience) rather than focusing on the ceremonial performance of rituals and sacrifices. There are over 200 Upanishads, but there are 13 major Upanishads that have had the greatest influence. These include:

*Samsara* (reincarnation)

*Karma* (cosmic justice)

*Dharma* (duty, right behavior)

*Moksha* (nirvana, liberation from samsara)

*Atman* (the unchanging, eternal self)

*Brahman* (universal spirit, ultimate reality, "great world soul")

Importantly, one was to come to understand that *Atman was one with Brahman*. The goal of the religious practice was to shed our karma and allow our Atman to become one with Brahman. In realizing this, one was able to reach Moksha and be reabsorbed into Brahman. This Upanishadic idea is considered one of the greatest contributions to human thought and gave root to other religions that include Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism. In fact, according to Buddhist scriptures Buddha was born a Vedic Brahmin in a number of his previous lives.

The concept that Atman = Brahman is *monism*, or that "the entirety of reality is reducible to only one substance, and that any diversity of reality means just a plurality of aspects or modes of this one substance" (New World Encyclopedia). Quoting from the online New World Encyclopedia about Buddhism and Daoism:

*Buddhism*

Nagarjuna, the Buddhist sage of the second or third century B.C.E., developed the concept of *sunyat*...which refers to a state of emptiness that an individual inherits upon attaining enlightenment....the realization that all beings and natural phenomena, living or dead, are without any svabhava, or "self-nature." Thus, all particulars are without any underlying essence and are essentially empty of being....Since the entire universe is characterized by this emptiness, sunyata could be considered a variation of acosmic monism."

*Daoism*

The concept of the Dao can be one of the best examples of a truly monistic belief. For Laozi, author of the Dao De Jing, the Dao is both the ground (the "mother") of all things and the principle of universal flux underlying all worldly transformations. All things are particular iterations of the Dao, from which they originate, and to which they later return. Also, it actively determines the correct functioning of the cosmos, as all action is patterned upon its transformations. However, the Dao can never be fully understood or defined since it transcends conceptualizations. It can only be subtly pursued by humans through effortless action (*wu wei*), a mode of being where individuals act in a natural, effortless way (thus mimicking the action of Dao in the world). The pervasive presence of the Dao in everything marks it as one of the most distinct examples of religious monism.

**Development of Buddhism, the Middle Way***Jainism*

Mahavira (599-527 BCE) was a wandering ascetic in India that is identified as the founder of *Jainism*. He believed as others that one would obtain Moksha by working off bad Karma, but that this was accomplished through self-sacrifice and self-purification, not through ritual. There is no creator god in Jainism. Jainists practice *Ahimsa*, or extreme nonviolence. This refers to an obligation to alleviate suffering in others, especially if one's happiness depends upon another's suffering. Further, all material objects (animate and inanimate) have souls. This leads to ascetic practices of vegetarianism, and not making use of materials from other things (including clothes). As such, practicing ascetics are known to be naked and even walk in ways to avoid causing suffering to the rocks over which they are traveling (such as refraining from the use of walking sticks). Mahavira died from starvation at the age of 72.

Jainism practices the *Principle of Pluralism* (described by Professor Michael Jerryson during our recent *Truth lecture*), which is illustrated by the story of the blind men describing an elephant. No single perspective can completely comprehend reality, and followers agree to disagree (and not to argue).

*Buddhism*

Siddharta Gautama (563-483 BCE) was born in India and spent seven years as a Jain ascetic. However, he found he was unable to make spiritual progress with the extreme asceticism required. He then began to practice the "Middle Way" between extreme asceticism and ordinary life, eventually reaching Enlightenment and becoming Buddha. This pathway was far more appealing to most people as it was more accessible, that the path to salvation was available to anyone. Further, Buddhism is an egalitarian religion (as is Christianity and Islam), increasing its attractiveness. Buddha too did not claim divine authority in his teachings. Important in the practice of Buddhism is vegetarianism, as well as avoiding greed, hatred, intoxicants, violence, theft, and sexual immorality.

Individuals who have become enlightened and can enter Nirvana, but that postpone to facilitate the enlightenment of others are called *Bodhisattvas*. This has been likened to the saints (and angels) of Christianity. As with Christianity, the salvation of the soul rather than wealth and power are important.

In great contrast to Jainism, Buddha believed that nothing has a soul, that all sentient beings are merely transient. Human need to grasp permanence can only end in suffering. Reaching Nirvana requires accepting "emptiness" and overcoming the illusion that there is a self. Buddha developed the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path to break the chain of reincarnation to reach Nirvana.

### **Rise and spread of Buddhism and its loss in India**

Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire (330 BCE) and took over their Indian holdings. Upon the death of Alexander the Great, Seleucus (358-281 BCE) inherited northeast India. Chandragupta Maurya (340-289 BCE) eventually claimed these lands and captured much of today's Pakistan and Afghanistan. This gave rise to the *Mauryan Empire* (322-185 BCE). Though this empire lasted only 130 years, it was critical to the rise of Buddhism. The third ruler, *Ashoka* (300-232 BCE), Maurya's grandson, converted to Buddhism in sorrow following his brutality in rising to the throne. He is considered the safe keeper of Buddhism as Constantine is to Christianity. Ashoka established monasteries, abolished animal sacrifice, planted trees and gave up hunting, and sent missionaries to spread Buddhism. As well, he was one of the first proponents of religious pluralism. It is believed that his efforts enabled Buddhism to become a world religion.

The power of rule in India continued to change, with the next successful empire, the Gupta Empire in the 4<sup>th</sup> C CE (which ruled for about 220 years and during which The Puranas were written), followed by an extended warring period until the rise of the powerful Mughal Empire (1526-1858). India then became part of the British Empire (1858-1947) before regaining its independence (with the division of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh). It was during the extended warring period when the Indian subcontinent was divided into smaller warring kingdoms that Buddhism virtually died out in India (by 13<sup>th</sup> C CE), its birthplace.

Today there are numerous schools of Buddhism that include (but are not limited to) Theravada, Mahayana, Madhyamaka, and Yogacara, which have spread most dominantly throughout China and Southeast Asia (in particular Sri Lanka, Japan, Korea, Thailand, and Myanmar (Burma)).

### **Try being a Buddhist**

Try to live the Middle Way for three days. (This will probably be more successful after Thanksgiving!)

Prepare a short reflection of your experience. (Due Fri., Nov. 30: Full page, typed, 12 pt font, double spaced)

*What you need to do to be a good Buddhist:*

1. No injury or suffering to others (vegetarianism)
2. No stealing
3. No sexual activity
4. No false speech
5. No intoxicants

*For those who wish, they can try three more for a monk-like experience:*

6. No eating after noon
7. No entertainment
8. No oversleeping

### **Sources (not a complete listing of all locations scavenged):**

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