



Significant Milestones in the Evolution of Buddhism to the Modern Era

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ABSTRACT

In contemplating the present state of Indian Buddhism, there exists a profound sense of nostalgia and longing within the writer's heart, prompting a sincere desire to revive Buddhism in its homeland. Through a process of research and on-the-ground surveys, the chosen topic emerges: "*Significant Milestones in the Evolution of Buddhism to the Modern Era*". The objective of this exploration is to offer insights that could benefit practitioners on the bodhisattva path, and bring long happiness, peace, harmony, unit and prosperity not only for the Indian nation but also for all sentient beings and all species living in this universe.

Given Buddhism's origin in India and its profound impact on the country's cultural and spiritual heritage throughout history, understanding how to reinvigorate it for contemporary relevance is paramount. From the era of King Asoka in the 3rd century B.C. to the present day, Buddhism has played a significant role in shaping the ethos of the land.

Keywords: *Siddhartha Gautama, Buddhism, Milestones, Evolution, Ancient Times and Modern Times.*

Introduction

These are important keywords in the topic. Here, the writer explains that the word as following:

Siddhartha Gautama: The historical Buddha, whose life and teachings form the foundation of Buddhism.

Buddhism: The core subject of the topic, representing the ancient spiritual tradition founded by Siddhartha Gautama.

Milestones: Key events or turning points in the history of Buddhism that have shaped its development.

Evolution: The gradual development and transformation of Buddhism over time, encompassing changes in philosophy, practices, and geographical spread.

Ancient Times: Refers to the early periods of Buddhism, including the life of Siddhartha Gautama, the formation of the Sangha, and the early spread of Buddhism in India.

Modern Times: Signifying the contemporary era, highlighting movements, revivals of Buddhism.

Originating in India almost twenty-six centuries ago, underwent a complex historical journey, from its inception during the golden age to periods marked by significant events. Unfortunately, due to these historical developments, Indian Buddhism gradually waned, eventually slipping into obscurity. Between the 14th and the early 19th century A.D., it seemed almost forgotten. This ebb stands of Indian Buddhism in stark contrast to the thriving state of Buddhism else countries, with Mahayana Buddhism flourishing in Vietnam, China, Taiwan, Japan, and Korea, and Theravada Buddhism prospering in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka, Myanmar etc.,. Astonishingly, in its birthplace, India, Buddhism has seem sunk beneath the dust of time. Despite boasting a rich cultural and philosophical heritage along with a profound history, the majority of Indians are largely ignorant of their own spiritual legacy before. However, recent times have witnessed a remarkable global resurgence of interest in Buddhism. Millions around the world are turning to this ancient spiritual tradition, seeking solace, guidance, and the myriad benefits offered by its precious teachings.

Against this backdrop, the theme "*Significant Milestones in the Evolution of Buddhism to the Modern Era*" emerges. This exploration seeks to unravel the historical and cultural significance of Buddhism in India, critically assess its current state of relative obscurity, and emphasize the imperative need for a comprehensive revival. The discourse not only highlights the unique challenges faced by Buddhism in its homeland but also offers a beacon of hope, pointing towards a potential renaissance and renewed interest in the timeless wisdom of this ancient spiritual tradition.

1. Key Events in the Life of the Buddha

Siddhartha Gautama, “*Gautama Buddha was born c. 563–483 BCE in Lumbini (what is now Nepal) and raised in the Shaky capital of Kapilavastu*”¹, spent his childhood in a luxurious palace, yet harbored an indescribable sadness. Because he felt the suffering of human life, when walking around the four city gates, he witnessed the birth, old age, sickness and death of the people. At this moment, He deeply felt that human life was too fragile and temporary, it appeared there and then it was gone. When he asked the courtiers, they asked that everyone had to go through such periods even Him so. At this time, all worldly joys were meaningless with him, there was no longer any desire, and concern weighed heavily on his mind. Then suddenly he met a ascetic, with that image of renunciation and majestic appearance that deeply impressed in his consciousness, so much so that he decided to give up his jade palace, his beautiful wife and cute child, he was determined to become a monk at the age of 29 in Theravada Buddhism. For six years, Prince Siddhartha, seeking enlightenment, mastered meditation under sages Ājāra Kālāma and Uddaka Ramaputta. Despite of his two famous Masters confirmed with the prince “*The Dhamma I know is the Dhamma you know; the Dhamma you know is the Dhamma I know. As I am, so are you; as you are, so am I. Come friend, let us now lead this community together.*”² But he realized this knowledge fell short. It was still subtle defilements, ignorance, and the inherent suffering of human existence persisted, it was not complete real freedom. His quest continued, leading to a profound understanding that transcended conventional wisdom. Siddhartha Gautama delved into rigorous ascetic practices, “*he cowered in the thorny bushes, blood dripped from the burning skin, from festering wounds dripped pus, and Siddhartha stayed rigidly, stayed motionless, until no blood flowed any more, until nothing stung any more, until nothing burned anymore.*”³ meticulously following the scriptures. He only ate a single sesame seed each day; “*My backside became like a camel's hoof... My spine stood out like a string of beads... My ribs jutted out like the jutting rafters of an old, run-down barn... The gleam of my eyes appeared to be sunk deep in my eye sockets like the gleam of water deep in a well*”⁴. he practiced the ending of teachings. But he still did not find out the truth. Finally, his body was emaciated, touching the skin of his abdomen was synonymous touching his spine, his body was as weak as a reed and he fainted on the side of the road. Thanks to Sunyata's bowl of milk porridge, he regained consciousness. After washing his body clean, he decided to find out the truth his own insight. He was arriving at Uruvela, now known as Bodhgaya, Siddhattha sat under a Bodhi tree. He vowed: “*Blood may become exhausted, flesh may decay, bones may fall apart, but I will never leave this place until I find the way to Enlightenment.*”⁵ At the sacred Vajrasana, identified by archaeologist Cunningham in present-day Bodhgaya, a momentous event unfolded just as the morning star rise the sky. Siddhattha attained completely enlightenment, had the Three Insights and Six Supernatural Powers. He knew clearly many his past lives. Where was he born, in what family, what clan, who were his parents etc., Complete enlightenment dawned, revealing the profound truths encapsulated in the Four Noble Truths and The Noble Eightfold Path, he recognized the law of "dependent co-origination" (pratitya-samutpatta), etc. The veil of ignorance lifted, and Siddhattha became a Gautam Buddha, the Awakened One, the Enlightened One, revered as Shakyamuni—the sage of the Shakyas. In this sacred moment, the Devas, showered praises and celebrations upon him, adorning the auspicious occasion by scattering flowers as divine offerings. The Buddha saw that the Dhamma, he attained were sublime and difficult for ordinary people to comprehend. Yet, amidst the complexity, he observed many sages diligently seeking enlightenment. Initially turning to two teachers, finding their passing, he then sought five fellow practitioners in Sarnath. He personally traveled to Sarnath where he delivered first sermon to five accompanies, they were progressing sequentially from the stream-enterer to Alahant, first Sangha was establishing. The Buddha continued converting Yasa and his friends, forming a community of 60 Venerable Monks. Each monk embarked on a journey to spread the Buddha's teachings, bringing immense benefit to Devas and humanity. He preached everywhere to all classes, from aristocrats, kings to the lowly classes for 49 years following Mahayana. Countless people have attained Arahantship and other, established the Eight Assemblies which were Monks (Bhikkhus), Nuns (Bhikkhunis), Laymen (Upāsaka), Laywomen (Upāsikā), Devas (Gods or Celestial Beings), Humans, Non-human beings, and Supremely Enlightened Ones (Arahants). The Buddha's teachings, centered around the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the Thirty-Seven Aids to Enlightenment, Dependent Origination (pratityasamutpadā/ paṭiccasamuppāda) held a profound resonance that extended far and wide, reaching the masses. This Dharma, with its universal principles, became a guiding light that spread Buddhism across the Indian subcontinent and abroad. In the Buddha's era, the Indian subcontinent was divided into 16 states, with over 8 kings expressing admiration and devotion to the Buddha. Notable rulers like King Bimbisāra, King Pasenadi, and King Ajatasattu were among those who revered and followed the Buddha's teachings.

2. The Vicissitudes periods of Indian Buddhism

Post-Buddha, among his disciples, King Asoka (304 – 232 BCE), Emperor Ashoka, a pivotal figure in Indian history, underwent a transformative shift from a military conqueror to a benevolent ruler after embracing Buddhism. He advocated for moral governance and social welfare, spreading the Dharma. He convened the Third Buddhist Council to preserve the purity of teachings, leaving a lasting legacy as a ruler dedicated to spiritual and moral upliftment. During this era, Buddhism experienced a period of flourishing, spreading across the Indian subcontinent and extending its influence to foreign countries. Significant Buddhist sites, including the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Lumbini, Kushinagar etc. He went to these holy places to build Viharas or stupa and erect stone pillars that engraved Brahmi letters on them.

¹ UNESCO, Lumbini in Nepal is the birthplace of the Lord Buddha, Gethin Foundations, p. 19, which states that in the mid-3rd century BCE the Emperor Ashoka determined that Lumbini was Gautama's birthplace and thus installed a pillar there with the inscription: "... this is where the Buddha, sage of the Śākyas (Śākyamuni), was born."

² MN: 26 *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* – (*The Noble Search*), translated by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, p-257.

³ Hesse, Herman, *SIDDHARTHA* (Global Grey, 1922), p-11.

⁴ MN: 36 *Mahāsaccaka Sutta* – (*The Greater Discourse to Saccaka*), translated by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, p-339.

⁵ KYOKA, BUKKYO DENDO, *The Teaching of the Buddha* (Tokyo: Kosaido Co., Ltd, 1962), p-7.

After, Emperor Kanishka of the Kushan dynasty, during 127–150 CE, also contributed to Buddhism's expansion. Emperor Kanishka of the Kushan dynasty, from 127 to 150 CE, significantly advanced Buddhism. He convened the Fourth Buddhist Council, a significant gathering of Buddhist scholars and monks aimed at clarifying and preserving the teachings of the Buddha. Kanishka's patronage also spurred artistic flourishing, notably seen in Gandharan art. His multifaceted contributions enriched Buddhism's legacy, fostering doctrinal clarity and artistic expression.

3. Key Events Contributed to The Decline of Indian Buddhism

However, Buddhism witnessed a decline in India during the medieval period, influenced by a myriad of factors. Key among them were foreign invasions the external reason while the Arab, Turk, Huna invasion, Muslim invasion, role other religious Preachers, the absence of sponsorship Kings, reform in Hinduism, differences with Brahmanas, etc., some typical as the rise of Hindu rulers who harbored hostility towards Buddhism. Notable instances include King Pushyamitra Shunga (187–151 BC)

Pushyamitra equipped a fourfold army, and intending to destroy the Buddhist religion, he went to the Kukkutarama (in Pataliputra). ... Pushyamitra therefore destroyed the sangharama, killed the monks there, and departed. ... After some time, he arrived in Sakala, and proclaimed that he would give a ... reward to whoever brought him the head of a Buddhist monk"⁶

Archaeological evidence also found traces of the destruction of the tower in Sāñcī stūpa by the king Pusyamitra. Beside, King Shashanka (606–637 AD), who persecuted Buddhism, killed Buddhist monks and nuns, to the destruction of monasteries and temples, burning scripts etc.,

Simultaneously, the advent of Islam brought further challenges. In 1193, the renowned Nalanda University faced devastation at the hands of Turkish general Bakhtiyar Khilji, an associate of Qutb-ud-din Aibak, the founder of the Delhi Sultanate. These historical events contributed to the decline of Buddhism in its place of origin His orders were ruthless, leading to the estimated killing of around 12,000 people, including monks, nuns, and scholars associated with the university. Within a span of six months, he orchestrated the burning of an immense scriptwriters of knowledge, destroying approximately 9 million scripts. This devastating act was not only an assault on individuals but an intentional eradication of a profound intellectual legacy, it was born in India.

There are some opinions that external factors do not cause the decline of Indian Buddhism, but the main reason is that monks and nuns themselves violate the precepts, are lazy, participate in secular work, etc., leading to Poor morality causes loss of trust with Buddhists and the masses, leading to the decline of Indian Buddhism. In my opinion, this evaluation is not entirely accurate, it is only a small factor in the decline of Indian Buddhism. The main cause was the brutal massacre of the extremist kings or some radical Muslims.

For example as a king in a country ordered to kill a Buddhist monk and nuns. I order that who still dared to be a Buddhist monk or not, in this case, those who still wear Buddhist forms or robes are only those who have attained Alahantsip or are in an abnormal state. Let's take a look at some of the Muslim extremists who massacred Nalanda Vihara, showing us that a massacre of more than 12,000 people, the number of survivors had to convert, or flee to other countries.

Since that time, the vigor of Indian Buddhism waned, and its impact gradually dwindled. Over time, numerous revered sites succumbed to neglect, decay, and abandonment. Additionally, certain sacred locations shifted into the possession of different religions or encroachment by various individuals, people.

A fortunate turn of events unfolded for Buddhism in India during the mid-19th century. Officials, scholars, and monks from both the Western and Eastern worlds, coupled with the efforts of archaeologists like Prinsep, Cunningham, A.C. L. Carlleyle, Dr. Führer, and others, Unknowingly, they discovered the ruined and decaying relics of Buddhism. From that It spearheaded a notable movement aimed at revitalizing Buddhism. This initiative was led by influential figures such as Dharmapala, Devapriya Valisinha, Ven. K. Siriniwasa, Ven. D. Sasanasiri, Ven. N. Jinaratana, Ven. U. Dhammaratana, Ven. M. Sangharatana, Ven. Fujii Guruji, Ven. Mahavira, Ven. Kripasaran, Ven. Bodhananda, Rahul Sankriyayan, Dharmaranda Kosambi, Ven. Jagdish Kashyap, Dr. Ambedkar, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh, Tibetan Buddhism exile, international Buddhism and others. This collective effort aimed at breathing new life into Buddhism in India.

Today, the Indian Government recognizes the immense value that Buddhism brings, not only to the country but also to the world. Buddhism promotes unconditional peace through the teachings of love, compassion, joy, renunciation, wisdom, and enlightenment. To emphasize this, the Global Buddhist Summit took place in New Delhi on April 20-21, 2023. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, at the ceremony's commencement, addressed contemporary challenges facing Buddhist monks, nuns, scholars, lay men, and lay women.

⁶ John S, Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka: a study and translation of the Aśokāvadāna*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p-293.



Prime Minister Modi expressed his belief that Buddhism, with its emphasis on peace, contributes significantly to fostering harmony within the country and globally. In my perspective, there is nothing more noble than the value of peace. Peace serves as the foundation for the development of various positive elements. When a family is in harmony, happiness, joy, prosperity, and economic growth naturally follow. This concept is echoed in a Vietnamese proverb: "Harmony between husband and wife; slapping the East Sea will still make it dry." Analyzing this verse, it underscores the importance of agreement and understanding between spouses in Vietnamese culture for a harmonious family life. The metaphor of slapping the East Sea highlights the impracticality and futility of challenging a formidable force. It also conveys the wisdom and patience required to address any challenge, regardless of its magnitude, through unity, harmony, understanding and peace.

In essence, the Verse emphasizes the significance of harmony and cooperation in relationships. Promoting peace and understanding is crucial at every level, from the family and school to society, both nationally and internationally. This approach is indispensable for fostering positive development on a global scale. The Buddhist value of peace serves as a foundational element, with the potential to give rise to numerous other positive attributes. However, Buddhism goes beyond conventional perspectives, incorporating supernatural elements that may not be ordinary individuals to comprehend. Therefore, the widespread dissemination of Buddhism becomes essential such as offering a remedy accessible to everyone—an elixir capable of alleviating human suffering and ultimately putting an end to it, echoing the belief that challenges, no matter how formidable, can be overcome with consistency and understanding.

Conclusion

In tracing the key events in the history of Buddhism from ancient times to the present, a profound narrative unfolds, reflecting the evolution and impact of this ancient spiritual tradition. From the enlightenment of Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha, to the spread of Buddhism across Asia and its subsequent decline in its place of origin, the journey has been marked by enlightenment, flourishing, challenges, and revival. Throughout history, the teachings of Buddhism have not only inspired spiritual seekers but have also shaped the cultural and social landscapes of the regions it touched. The establishment of monastic communities, the transmission of scriptures, the influence of great emperors like Asoka, the schisms leading to various schools, and the subsequent spread to new continents—all these events contribute to the rich tapestry of Buddhism's journey through time.

As we reflect on the modern era, the resilience of Buddhism becomes evident in its ability to adapt and thrive in diverse cultural contexts. Global events, such as the Global Buddhist Summit and the acknowledgment by governments of the value of Buddhist principles, showcase the continued relevance of this ancient tradition. The history of Buddhism is a testament to its enduring appeal, adaptability, and universal message of compassion, wisdom, and inner peace. From the ancient Ganges plains to the global stage, Buddhism's journey remains a source of inspiration and enlightenment for those seeking a path to understanding the nature of existence.

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