



## Buddhism in India

**Last Updated: October 2022**

**For Prelims:** Origin of Buddhism, Important Buddhist Sites, Principles of Buddhism, Major Buddhist Texts, Schools of Buddhism, Swadesh Darshan Scheme, PRASHAD Scheme, Dekho Apna Desh Initiative, UNESCO Buddhist Heritage Sites

**For Mains:** Spread of Buddhism in Ancient India, Significance of Buddhist Councils, Contribution of Buddhism in Indian Culture, Buddhism as way of Soft Diplomacy, Initiatives taken to Promote Buddhism in India

### Where does the Origin of Buddhism Lie?

- **Buddhism started in India over 2,600 years ago** as a way of life that had a potential of transforming a person.
  - It is one of the **important religions of South and South-Eastern Asian countries.**
- The religion is based upon the teachings, life experiences of its **founder Siddhartha Gautam**, born in circa 563 BCE.
  - He was **born into royal family of Sakya clan** who ruled from **Kapilvastu, in Lumbini** which is situated near the Indo-Nepal Border.
- At the age of 29, Gautama left home and rejected his life of riches and embraced a lifestyle of **asceticism**, or extreme self-discipline.
  - After 49 consecutive days of meditation, **Gautama attained Bodhi (enlightenment) under a pipal tree at Bodhgaya, a village in Bihar.**
- Buddha gave his **first sermon in the village of Sarnath**, near the city of Benares in UP. This event is known as **Dharma-Chakra-Pravartana** (turning of the wheel of law).
  - He died at the age of 80 in 483 BCE at a place called **Kushinagara** a town in UP. The event is known as **Mahaparinibban.**

### What are the Tenets of Buddhism?

- Buddha asked his followers to **avoid the two extremes of indulgence in worldly pleasure** and the **practice of strict abstinence and asceticism.**
  - He ascribed **instead the 'Madhyam Marg'** or the middle path which was to be followed.
- According to him **everyone was responsible for their own happiness** in life, stressing upon the **individualistic component of Buddhism.**
- The main teachings of Buddhism are encapsulated in the basic concept of **four noble truths or ariya-sachchani** and **eightfold path or astangika marg.**
  - **Four noble truths:**
    - Suffering (dukkha) is the essence of the world.
    - Every suffering has a cause - **Samudya.**
    - Suffering could be extinguished - **Nirodha.**
    - It can be achieved by following the Atthanga Magga (Eight Fold Path).

- **Eight-Fold Paths:** It consists of various interconnected activities related to knowledge, conduct, and meditative practices.
  - Right **view**
  - Right **intention**
  - Right **speech**
  - Right **action**
  - Right **livelihood**
  - Right **mindfulness**
  - Right **effort**
  - Right **concentration**
- Dukkha and its extinction are central to the Buddha's doctrine. Suffering is not limited to the actual pain but also to the potential to experience these things.
- The essence of Buddhism is the **attainment of enlightenment**. It points to a way of life that avoids self-indulgence and self-denial. **There is no supreme god or deity in Buddhism.**
- The ultimate goal of Buddha's teaching was the **attainment of nibbana** which was not a place but an experience, and could be attained in this life.
- Buddha also established code of conduct both for the monastic order and the laymen to follow which are also known as the **Five Precepts** or **Pancasil** and refrain from them.
  - **Violence**
  - **stealing**
  - **sexual misconduct**
  - **lying or gossip**
  - **taking intoxicating substances** e.g. drugs or drink

## What are the Major Buddhist Texts?

- The **Buddha's teaching was oral**. He taught for 45 years, adapting the teaching to suit the group he was addressing.
  - The Sangha memorized the teachings, and there were group recitations at festivals and special occasions.
- The **teachings were rehearsed and authenticated at the First Council** and were divided in **Three Pitakas in 483 BC**.
  - His teachings were **written down around 25 B.C.E. in Pali**.
- **Three Pitakas**
  - The **Vinaya Pitaka consists of rules of conduct and discipline** applicable to the monastic life of the monks and nuns.
  - The **Sutta Pitaka consists of the main teaching or Dhamma** of Buddha. It is divided into five Nikayas or collections:
    - Digha Nikaya
    - Majjhima Nikaya
    - Samyutta Nikaya
    - Anguttara Nikaya
    - Khuddaka Nikaya
  - The **Abhidamma Pitaka is a philosophical analysis and systematization of the teaching** and the scholarly activity of the monks.
  - Other important Buddhist texts include **Divyavadana, Dipavamsa, Mahavamsa, Milind Panha etc.**

## What Role did the Buddhist Councils Play?

- Buddhist Councils marked important turning points in the early Buddhism.
- These councils **resulted in sectarian clashes** and the eventual **Great Schism** that resulted in the two major schools, **Theravada and Mahayana**.
- In total, 4 major Buddhist councils were convened:
  - **First Council**
    - It was **held soon after the Mahaparinirvan** of the Buddha, around **483 BC under the patronage of King Ajatshatru** and was presided by Mahakasyapa, a monk.
    - The council was held in the **Sattapani cave at Rajgriha**.

- The council was held with the purpose of preserving Buddha's teachings (Sutta) and rules for disciples.
  - **During this council, the teachings of Buddha were divided into three Pitakas.**
- **Second Council**
  - It was held in **Vaishali**, a village in Bihar under the **patronage of the king Kalasoka in 383 BC**. It was **presided by Sabakami**.
- **Third Council**
  - It was held in 250 BC in **Patliputra under the patronage of Ashoka** and was presided by Moggaliputta Tissa.
- **Forth Council**
  - It was held in 72 AD at **Kundalvana, Kashmir**. It was presided by Vasumitra, while **Asvaghosa** was his deputy under the patronage of King Kanishka of Kushan Empire.
  - **Buddhism was divided into two sects namely Mahayan and Hinayan.**

## What are the Different Schools of Buddhism?

- **Mahayana:**
  - It is one of the two main schools of Buddhism.
  - The term Mahayana is a Sanskrit word which literally means "**Great Vehicle**".
  - It **believes in the heavenliness of Buddha** and **Idol worship** of Buddha and **Bodhisattvas** embodying Buddha Nature.
  - It **originated in northern India and Kashmir** and then spread east into Central Asia, East Asia and some areas of Southeast Asia.
  - Buddhist schools embedded in **China, Korea, Tibet and Japan belong to the Mahayana tradition.**
- **Hinayana**
  - Literally **Lesser vehicle**, It **believes in the original teaching of Buddha or Doctrine of elders**.
  - It **does not believe in Idol worship** and tries to **attain individual salvation** through self discipline and meditation.
  - Theravada is a Hinayana sect.
- **Theravada**
  - It is the **most ancient branch** of extant Buddhism today.
  - It **remains closest to the original teachings** of the Buddha.
  - Theravada Buddhism **developed in Sri Lanka** and subsequently spread to the rest of Southeast Asia.
  - It is the dominant form of religion in **Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.**
- **Vajrayana**
  - Vajrayana means "**The Vehicle of the Thunderbolt**", also known as **tantric Buddhism**.
  - This Buddhist school **developed in India around 900 CE**.
  - It is grounded on **esoteric elements** and very **complex set of rituals** compared with the rest of the Buddhist schools.
- **Zen**
  - It is a school of **Mahayana Buddhism that originated in China** during the **Tang dynasty** as the Chan school of Chinese Buddhism in and later developed into various schools.
  - It spread to Japan in 7<sup>th</sup> century C.E.
  - **Meditation is the most distinctive feature of this Buddhist tradition.**

## How did Buddhism Spread in Ancient India?

- Buddha had two kinds of disciples - **monks (bhikshus)** and **lay worshippers (upasikas)**.
- The **monks were organized into the Sangha** for the purpose of spreading his teachings.
  - The **Sangha was governed on democratic lines** and was empowered to enforce discipline among its members.
- Owing to the organised efforts made by the Sangha, Buddhism **made rapid progress in North**

### **India even during Buddha's life time.**

- After the death of Buddha, his followers traversed on his path of meditation and roamed throughout the countryside.
- For 200 years Buddhism remained overshadowed by their Hindu counterparts until the advent of **Great Mauryan King - Ashoka**.
  - After the bloodbath in his Kalinga conquest, emperor Ashoka decided to give up the policy of worldly conquest and **adopted Dhamma conquest**.
  - Ashoka during the third Buddhist council dispatched various Buddhist missions to different areas such as Gandhara, Kashmir, Greece, Sri Lanka, Burma (Myanmar), Egypt, and Thailand.
- Through his missionary effort Ashoka spread Buddhism into West Asia and Ceylon. Thus a local religious sect was transformed into a world religion.

## **What is the Contribution of Buddhism to Indian Culture?**

- The **concept of ahimsa was its chief contribution**. Later, it became one of the cherished values of our nation.
- Its **contribution to the art and architecture** of India was notable. The [stupas at Sanchi](#), **Bharhut and Gaya** are wonderful pieces of architecture.
- It promoted **education through residential universities like those at Taxila, Nalanda and Vikramasila**.
- The language of **Pali and other local languages developed** through the teachings of Buddhism.
- It had also promoted the **spread of Indian culture to other parts of Asia**.

## **How has Buddhism Acted as a Way of Soft Diplomacy?**

- **Share of Cultural and Moral Values:** The **Buddhist faith, due to its emphasis on peaceful co-existence** and its wide pan-Asian presence, **lends itself well to soft-power diplomacy**.
  - Buddhism in India as a Soft Power is different from the conventional sense of the term. India talks about **shared cultural development instead of export of culture**.
  - The **values of peace, accommodation, inclusiveness, and compassion** that are part of our societies can be attributed to the influence of the teachings of Lord Buddha and Buddhism.
- **Strengthening Ties with Asian Countries:** The **ideals of Buddhism** continue to intersect with the **political and economic contexts of many Asian nations** with 22% of the world's population.
  - Buddhism can act as an **intensifying factor for Asian emotional bonding** and connectivity as it is embedded into their **"nationalistic" thinking and actions**.
  - India has in its favour at the moment an **abundance of resources by way of pilgrimage sites**, the presence of the Dalai Lama, and **international goodwill**, as well as the right intentions.
- **International Buddhist Conclave:** The Ministry of Tourism organises Buddhist Conclave every alternate year (since 2004) with the objective of promoting India as a Buddhist Destination and major markets around the globe.
  - In 2018, the conclave witnessed the participation of the delegates from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and 29 other countries.
- **Cultural Exchange Programme with Mongolia:** Under the [Cultural Exchange Programme](#), there are 10 dedicated [ICCR scholarships](#) for **studying 'Tibetan Buddhism'** allocated for Mongolians to study in specialized institutes.
  - The Ministry of Culture is likely to complete reprinting of about 100 sets of sacred [Mongolian Kanjur](#) (a Buddhist canonical text considered to be the **most important religious text in Mongolia**) for distribution in the main centers of Buddhism in Mongolia.
  - Steps have also been taken to **facilitate the visa and travel of Buddhist monks from Mongolia** within India.
  - More recently in June 2022, four [Holy Relics of Lord Buddha](#) (**Kapilavastu Relics**) were taken from India to Mongolia for an 11-day exposition to **coincide with Mongolian Buddha Purnima celebrations**.
- **Kushinagar International Airport:** The [Kushinagar Airport](#) in Uttar Pradesh became the latest

entrant in India's list of international Airports.

- It is expected to provide **seamless connectivity to people** from South east and East Asian countries for **Buddhist Pilgrimage Tourism**.
- The inauguration of Kushinagar International airport is set to be a **landmark in the [India-Sri Lanka relations](#)**.

## What Initiatives have been Taken to Promote Buddhist Tourism in India?

- **Buddhist Circuit:** Under the [Swadesh Darshan scheme](#) the Ministry of Tourism has identified Buddhist Circuit as one of the thirteen thematic circuits for development under the Swadesh Darshan scheme.
  - Under the scheme, 5 projects of Rs 325.53 crore have been sanctioned for Buddhist circuit development.
  - A **Buddhist Circuit Train FAM Tour** has also been organised as part of the [Dekho Apna Desh initiative](#).
    - The tour covers the destinations **Gaya-Bodhgaya, Rajgir-Nalanda** in Bihar as well as **Sarnath-Varanasi** in Uttar Pradesh.
- **PRASHAD Scheme:** The [“National Mission on Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual, Heritage Augmentation Drive \(PRASHAD\)”](#) was launched in the year 2014-15 with the objective of **holistic development of identified pilgrimage destinations** including Buddhist sites.
- **Iconic Tourist Sites:** Buddhist Sites at [Bodhgaya, Ajanta & Ellora](#) have been identified to be developed as [Iconic Tourist Sites](#) (aimed at enhancing India's soft power).
- **Dekho Apna Desh Initiative:** It was launched by the Ministry of Tourism in 2020 to **encourage the citizens to travel widely within the country** thus enabling the development of **Domestic Tourism** tourist facilities and infrastructure.
- **Diversity of Languages:** **Signages have been installed in Chinese** language at buddhist monuments in Uttar Pradesh **and in Sinhala language** (official language of Sri Lanka) at Sanchi monuments in Madhya Pradesh.

## UNESCO's heritage sites related to Buddhism

- **Archaeological Site of Nalanda** Mahavihara at Nalanda, Bihar
- [Buddhist Monuments at Sanchi](#), MP
- **Mahabodhi Temple Complex at Bodh Gaya**, Bihar
- **Ajanta Caves Aurangabad**, Maharashtra

## What More India can do to Pursue Diplomacy through Buddhism?

- **Effective revitalisation of the Nalanda University project** and **encouragement of Buddhist studies** in well-established universities will bring International community at a common platform.
- The **promotion of Buddhist tourism** reminiscent of the [‘Incredible India’ campaign](#) is required to popularise India's association with the faith internationally.
- The government faces the crucial challenge of effective execution. **Buddhist diplomacy would go a long way in countering the rise of China, strengthening its relations with Asian countries**, and helping it further down the path of its regional and global power ambitions.
- Presently, it is estimated that there are **nearly 500 million Buddhists all over the World** and majority of them live in East Asia, South East Asia and Far East countries.
  - However, **a very small percentage of them visit the Buddhist sites in India** each year.
  - Therefore, the **significance of encouraging more tourists to visit the Buddhist destinations** where Lord Buddha lived and preached is immense.
- India's Buddhist heritage is not only important from the tourism point of view but is also a binding factor that strengthens its relationship with Asian countries, in line with its [Act East Policy](#).
- As peace and [sustainable development](#) are interlinked, the Buddha's prism can be the guiding

lights to every single stakeholder from local to global institutions and leaders, to work together for promoting dialogue, harmony, and justice based on compassion and wisdom.

## UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

### Prelims

**Q1. With reference to the religious history of India, consider the following statements: (2020)**

1. Sthaviravadins belong to Mahayana Buddhism.
2. Lokottaravadin sect was an offshoot of Mahasanghika sect of Buddhism.
3. The deification of Buddha by Mahasanghikas fostered the Mahayana Buddhism.

**Which of the statements given above is/are correct?**

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

**Ans: (b)**

**Q2. With reference to the religious history of India, consider the following statements: (2016)**

1. The concept of Bodhisattva is central to Hinayana sect of Buddhism.
2. Bodhisattva is a compassionate one on his way to enlightenment.
3. Bodhisattva delays achieving his own salvation to help all sentient beings on their path to it.

**Which of the statements given above is/are correct?**

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 2 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

**Ans: (b)**

**Q3. Which one of the following describes best the concept of Nirvana in Buddhism? (2013)**

- (a) The extinction of the flame of desire
- (b) The complete annihilation of self
- (c) A state of bliss and rest
- (d) A mental stage beyond all comprehension

**Ans: (a)**

**Q4. Consider the following: (2019)**

1. Deification of the Buddha
2. Treading the path of Bodhisattvas
3. Image worship and rituals

**Which of the above is/are the feature/features of Mahayana Buddhism?**

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 1 and 2 only
- (c) 2 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

**Ans: (d)**

**Q5. Why did Buddhism start declining in India in the early medieval times? (2010)**

1. Buddha was by that time considered as one of the incarnations of Vishnu and thus became a part of Vaishnavism.
2. The invading tribes from Central Asia till the time of last Gupta king adopted Hinduism and persecuted Buddhists.
3. The Kings of Gupta dynasty were strongly opposed to Buddhism.

**Which of the statements given above is/are correct?**

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 1 and 3 only
- (c) 2 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

**Ans: (a)**

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**Mains**

**Q.** Pala period is the most significant phase in the history of Buddhism in India. Enumerate. **(2020)**

**Q.** Early Buddhist Stupa-art, while depicting folk motifs and narrativessuccessfully expounds Buddhist ideals. Elucidate **(2016)**