



Buddhism's Global Legacy

For Prelims: [Archaeological Survey of India](#), [Buddhism](#), [Invasion of Kalinga](#), [Mahayana](#), [Vajrayana](#), [Baliyatra Festival](#), [Nalanda University](#), [Emperor Kumaragupta I](#), [Gupta Empire](#), [Aryabhata](#), [Manuscripts](#), [Angkor Wat](#), [Theravada](#), [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#), [Ellora Caves](#), [Ajanta Caves](#), [Sanchi Stupa](#).

For Mains: Global spread of Buddhism, Prominent Buddhist sites in India, Nalanda University.

[Source: IE](#)

Why in News?

The [Archaeological Survey of India](#) has uncovered a **large Buddha head, a giant palm, an ancient wall**, and inscribed **Buddhist relics** in **Ratnagiri, Odisha**, all believed to date back to the **8th and 9th centuries AD**.

- It further threw light on the **spread of Buddhism to southeast Asia** through Odisha.

How Odisha Helped in the Spread of Buddhism?

- **Role of Buddha:** Although there is no evidence of Buddha visiting Odisha, experts credit Buddha's disciples **Tapassu and Bhallika** (merchant brothers from Utkala) as key figures in **popularising Buddhism**.
- **Mauryan Influence:** Emperor **Ashoka's 261 BCE invasion of Kalinga** (ancient Odisha) led him to **embrace Buddhism**, which he then spread across **South and Southeast Asia**.
- **Hiuen Tsang's Visit:** Studies suggest that the Chinese Buddhist monk and traveler, **Hiuen Tsang**, who visited **Odisha in 638-639 AD**, may have also visited **Ratnagiri**, providing insights into the region's **lifestyle, culture, religion, art, and architecture**.
- **Historical Sites:** Odisha has over 100 ancient Buddhist sites, including **Ratnagiri**, part of the **Diamond Triangle with Udaygiri and Lalitgiri**.
 - **Ratnagiri**, a key Buddhist learning center **rivaling Nalanda** from the 7th-10th centuries, revealed remains like a **brick stupa, monastic complexes, and votive stupas**.
 - Ratnagiri is believed to have been a hub for [Mahayana and Vajrayana sects](#), with **Tibetan texts** discovered at the site.
 - Ratnagiri's Buddha sculptures are unique for their **intricate, distinctive hairstyles** not seen elsewhere in India.
- **Maritime and Trade Links:** Odisha's trade with regions like **Bali, Java, Sumatra, and Sri Lanka** helped spread Buddhism, especially in **Southeast Asia**.
 - The [Baliyatra festival](#) honors **Odisha's 2,000-year-old maritime ties** with Southeast Asia and its role in spreading Buddhism.
- **Bhaumakara Dynasty:** Buddhism flourished in Odisha under the **Bhaumakara dynasty** (8th-10th centuries), contributing to the region's **rich Buddhist heritage**.

Note:

- **Mahayana:** Mahayana, meaning "**Great Vehicle**" in Sanskrit, is one of the schools of Buddhism.
 - It believes in the **heavenliness of Buddha and Idol worship** of Buddha and **Bodhisattvas** embodying Buddha Nature.
 - It originated in the **4th Buddhist Council in 72 AD in Kashmir** during the rule of **Kanishka** 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.
- **Vajrayana:** Vajrayana means "**The Vehicle of the Thunderbolt**", also known as **tantric Buddhism**.
 - It incorporates **tantric practices**, which involve **complex rituals, visualizations, mantras, and meditation techniques** to achieve spiritual realization.
 - Vajrayana is primarily practiced in the **Himalayan regions**, including **Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan**, and parts of **Mongolia**.
- **Hinayana:** It is often referred to as the "**Lesser Vehicle**" that emphasizes **nirvana**, primarily through **self-discipline**, and **meditation**.
 - It focuses on the strict adherence to **monastic rules, meditation practices, and ethical conduct**.
 - In Hinayana Buddhism, the **ideal is an Arhat**, who achieves **enlightenment**, while in **Mahayana**, the **Bodhisattva** delays nirvana to aid others' enlightenment.

Nalanda University

- **Establishment:** [Nalanda University](#) was founded by [Emperor Kumaragupta I](#) of the [Gupta Empire](#) in the **5th century CE**, around **450 CE**.
 - The university **flourished** under the patronage of the [Pala dynasty](#) during the **8th and 9th centuries**.
 - It was located in the ancient kingdom of **Magadha (modern-day Bihar)**.
- **International Acclaim:** Nalanda, the world's first residential university, attracted scholars from **Korea, Japan, China, Mongolia, Sri Lanka, Tibet, and Southeast Asia**.
- **Admission Process:** Admission to Nalanda was **competitive, with rigorous interviews**, and students were mentored by scholars and Buddhist masters like **Dharmapala and Silabhadra**.
- **Curriculum and Subjects:** The university taught a wide range of subjects, including **medicine, Ayurveda, Buddhism, mathematics, grammar, astronomy, and Indian philosophy**.
 - [Aryabhata](#), the Indian mathematician and **inventor of zero**, was a prominent **educator** at Nalanda University in the **6th century CE**.
- **Library and Manuscripts:** The library, known as **Dharma Gunj or Mountain of Truth**, housed over **nine million handwritten palm-leaf manuscripts**, making it the richest repository of Buddhist knowledge.
- **Destruction:** In **1193**, Islamic invader [Bakhtiyar Khilji](#) demolished the university, killed the monks and **burned the valuable library**.

How Buddhism Spread to Southeast Asia?

- **Cultural Crossroads:** Indian **traders, sailors, and monks** helped spread Buddhism to Southeast Asia, with ports like **Srivijaya (Sumatra, Indonesia)** and **Champa (Vietnam)** serving as key centres for learning and cultural exchange from the **7th to 13th centuries**.
- **Legitimacy of Rulers:** Southeast Asian rulers adopted Buddhism to strengthen their authority, aligning with figures like **Buddha or Hindu deities to legitimise their rule**.
 - The **Srivijaya Empire**, centered in Sumatra, was a key player in the spread of Buddhism.
- **Fusion of Hinduism and Buddhism:** In Southeast Asia, Buddhism often blended with **local beliefs and Hinduism**.
 - Buddhist and Hindu temples in Southeast Asia, like [Angkor Wat \(Cambodia\)](#) and

Borobudur (Indonesia), showcase this fusion.

- **Cultural Diffusion:** Buddhism influenced the local cultures of places like **Bali and Java**, seen in their **dance, rituals, and temple architecture**.

BUDDHISM



Drishti IAS

ORIGIN

- ◉ **6th century BC**, based on the teachings of Gautam Buddha

MAIN FEATURES

- ◉ **Essence** - Attainment of enlightenment (Nibbana)
- ◉ **Supreme Deity** - None

PRINCIPLES

- ◉ Avoid the extremes; follow **Madhyam Marg** (middle path)
- ◉ Individualistic component (everyone is responsible for their own happiness)
- ◉ **4 Noble Truths:**
 - ◊ **Dukkha** (suffering)
 - ◊ **Samudya** (cause of suffering)
 - ◊ **Nirodha** (suffering could be ended)
 - ◊ **Atthanga Magga** (8-fold path to achieve this)
- ◉ **8-Fold Path:**
 - ◊ Right - view, intention, speech, action, livelihood, mindfulness, effort and concentration



BUDDHISM REJECTS

- ◉ Authenticity of Vedas
- ◉ Concept of soul (atman) (unlike Jainism)

MAJOR BUDDHIST TEXTS

- ◉ **Sutta Pitaka** (main teachings of Buddha - Dhamma)
- ◉ **Vinaya Pitaka** (rules of conduct for monks/nuns)
- ◉ **Abhidhamma Pitaka** (philosophical analysis)
- ◉ Other imp texts - **Divyavadana, Dipavamsa, Mahavamsa, Milind Panha**

Buddha's teachings were rehearsed, authenticated & divided in 3 Pitakas at the 1st Buddhist Council

These teachings were written down c. 25 BC in Pali

4 BUDDHIST COUNCILS

Buddhist Council	Patron	Venue	Chairman	Year
First	Ajatashatru	Rajgriha	Mahakashyapa	483 BC
Second	Kalashoka	Vaishali	Sabbakami	383 BC
Third	Ashoka	Patliputra	Mogaliputra	250 BC
Fourth	Kanishka	Kundalban (Kashmir)	Vasumitra	72 AD

How Buddhism Spread Globally?

- **Southeast Asia:** By the 5th century CE, Buddhism spread to **Myanmar and Thailand**, and by the 13th century, the **Theravada school** (meaning "the way of the elders") became the dominant form of Buddhism in **South and Southeast Asia**.
- **China:** By the 7th century CE, Buddhism had significantly influenced **Chinese culture**, interacting with **Confucian and Daoist traditions**.

- **Korea and Japan:** Buddhism spread to Korea by the 7th century CE.
 - In the 6th century CE, Buddhism was introduced to Japan, where it blended with **Shinto and other indigenous traditions**.
- **Tibet:** In the 8th century CE, Buddhism, influenced by **Tantric traditions** from northeast India, spread to Tibet.
 - There, it merged with the indigenous **Bon religion** and evolved into **Vajrayana (or "Diamond Vehicle")**, a distinct form of Mahayana Buddhism.

What are the Prominent Buddhist Sites in India?

- **Bihar:** **Bodh Gaya** is the location where **Siddhartha Gautama attained enlightenment** under the **Bodhi tree**.
 - **Mahabodhi Temple**, a [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#) since 2002, marks the spot where Buddha achieved enlightenment.
 - **In Vaishali (Bihar)**, Buddha declared his imminent **Parinirvana** and preached his final sermon.
 - **Nalanda University** in Nalanda was a famous **ancient center of learning**, where Buddhist scholars from across the world gathered.
- **Uttar Pradesh:** At **Sarnath**, Buddha delivered his **first sermon** to his disciples, outlining the [Four Noble Truths](#) and the [Eightfold Path](#).
 - **Dhamek Stupa** in Sarnath marks the site of Buddha's first sermon.
 - **Kushinagar** is the place where **Buddha passed away** and attained **Parinirvana** (final nirvana).
 - **Ramabhar Stupa** in Kushinagar is believed to be the place where Buddha was cremated.
- **Himachal Pradesh:** Dharamshala, especially **McLeod Ganj**, is home to the **Tibetan Government-in-Exile** and the **Dalai Lama**. It is a hub for Tibetan Buddhists.
- **Maharashtra:** [Ellora Caves](#) are a UNESCO World Heritage site, featuring rock-cut temples and sculptures of Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain traditions.
 - [Ajanta Caves](#) are famous for ancient Buddhist monasteries and beautiful murals depicting Buddha's life.
- **Madhya Pradesh:** [Sanchi Stupa](#) is a UNESCO World Heritage site, known for its [Buddhist stupas](#), monasteries, and pillars.

Conclusion

Odisha's rich Buddhist heritage, highlighted by key sites like **Ratnagiri**, and India's role in spreading **Buddhism across Asia** reflect its global influence. With ancient universities like **Nalanda** and **diverse Buddhist traditions**, India's contributions to global culture and religion are profound and enduring.

Drishti Mains Question:

Assess the role of Indian maritime trade in spreading Buddhism across Asia.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

Prelims

Q. 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)

Q. With reference to the cultural history of India, which one of the following is the correct description of the term 'paramitas'? (2020)

- (a) The earliest Dharmashastra texts written in aphoristic (sutra) style
- (b) Philosophical schools that did not accept the authority of Vedas
- (c) Perfections whose attainment led to the Bodhisattva path
- (d) Powerful merchant guilds of early medieval South India

Ans: (c)

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 narratives successfully expounds Buddhist ideals. Elucidate (2016)

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