

Who was the Buddha?



Elizabeth Guthrie - U3A Timaru 5 August 2019

Who am I?

Elizabeth Guthrie-Higbee

Born in Chicago, migrated to Dunedin in 1980.

MA (1992) in Religious Studies University of Otago, PhD (2004) in Buddhist Studies Canterbury University.

**I lecture on Buddhism, Asian Religions and
New Religious Movements in the Department of
Religious Studies at Otago.**

Goals for today:

-the biography of the Buddha

-Buddhism's spread across Asia

-some of the teachings of the Buddha



Map showing the places associated with the life and career of the Buddha (in red).

The sacred languages of Buddhism are Sanskrit and Pāli.

These two languages are closely related to each other, and Sanskrit and Pāli became the vehicle for the spread of Buddhism throughout Asia.

Sanskrit spellings

- Siddhārtha
- Gautama
- karma
- dharma
- ātman

Pāli spellings:

- Siddhāttha
- Gotama
- kamma
- dhamma
- ātta

The Buddha has many names, or epithets:

- Buddha – “enlightened one”**
- Bodhisattva – “Buddha-to-be”**
- Śākyamuni – “sage of the Śākya clan”**
- Tathāgata – “thus gone”**

For most Buddhists, "Buddhism" consists of:

-stories about the life of the Buddha

-images that they see in Buddhist temples.

In this next section, I want to tell the story of the life of the Buddha, illustrated with images from many places in Asia.

I also argue that Buddhism is a “globalised” religion that has spread far beyond its origins in north-eastern India.

Wherever Buddhism goes, it takes on local ideas and culture.



**Buddhism – like all religions – is
like a chameleon.**

**It changes and adapts to fit into
new environments.**

The historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, was reborn many times before his final birth in Northern India.

Buddhists tell the stories of his previous lives as well as his final birth in a cycle of narratives known as the *Jātakas*.

Through the eons, the Bodhisattva – the “Buddha-to-be” – worked hard perfecting his spiritual accomplishments in order to be able to achieve enlightenment – *bodhi* – and escape from the cycle of *saṃsara*.

There is much academic controversy over the dates of the historical Buddha:

623-543 BCE

563-483 BCE

486 BCE

400 BCE (+/- 20 years)

The final birth of the Bodhisattva as Siddhartha Gautama in Northern India ca. 5th c. BCE was marked by many miraculous events.

His conception was heralded by a white elephant who entered his mother's womb while she was asleep.



**Māyā's dream
Bhārhut stūpa,
2-3rd century BCE**



Māyā's Dream

Dunhuang, Tang Dynasty, 9th c. CE



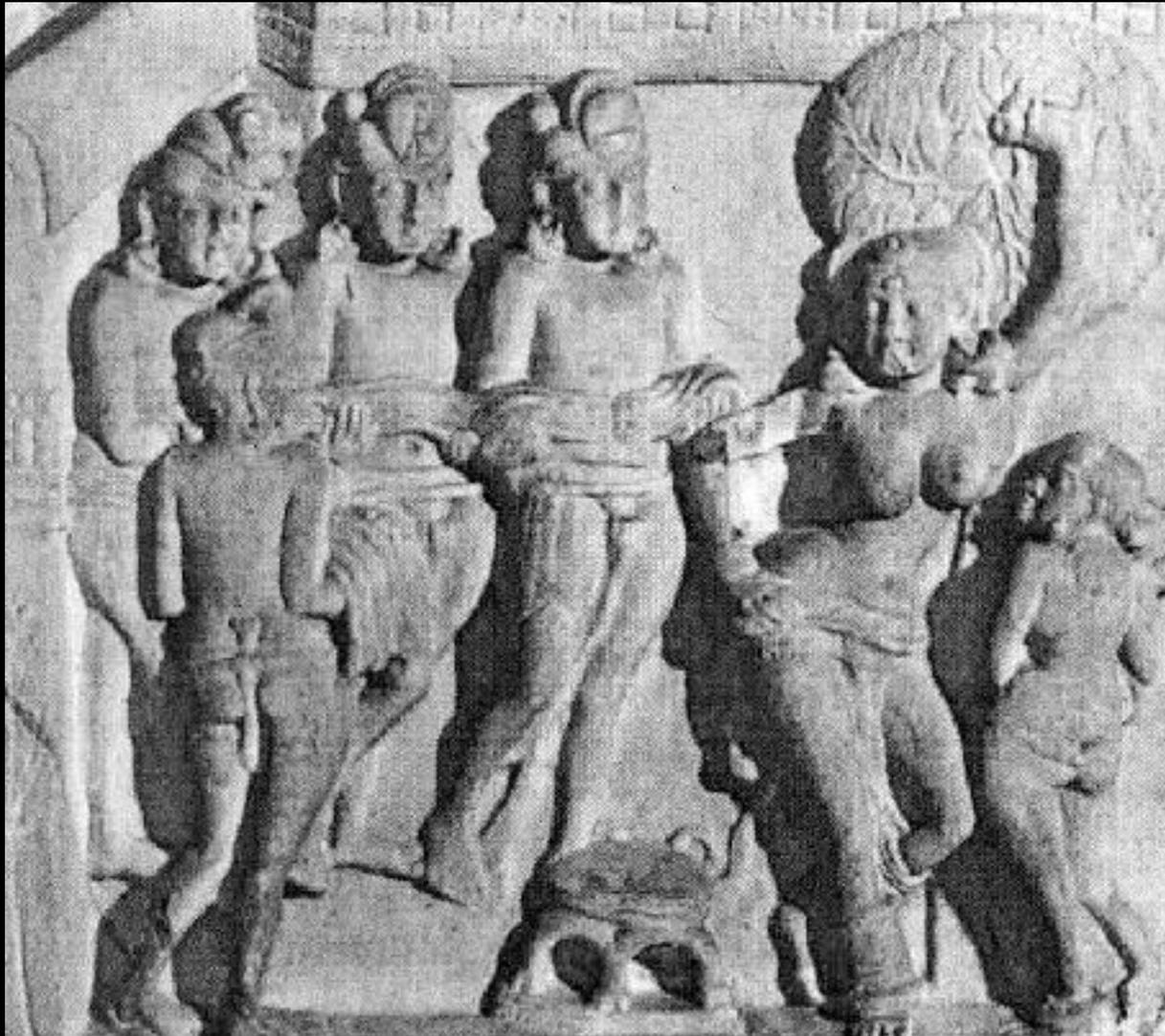
**Cambodian representation of Māyā's dream
1960s, Wat Tuk Khla, Phnom Penh**



Maya's Dream, Burmese comic book

Māya gave birth to the Bodhisattva in a grove in Lumbinī.

She grasped the limb of a Sāl tree, and the baby emerged from her side.



The Birth of the Buddha
2nd-5th c. CE, Amarāvati (India)



The Birth of the Buddha
Nepal, 5th-6th century CE



The Birth of the Buddha
(Cambodia, mid-20th c)



The Birth of the Buddha

Silk banner, Dunhuang, China, 7-9th c.



Upon being born, the baby Bodhisattva immediately took seven steps, and announced that this would be his last rebirth.

As a young man, on an excursion from his father's palace in Kapilavastu, the young Bodhisattva encountered four sights: an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and a religious ascetic.

These sights made a profound impression on him, and underlie the teaching of the Four Noble Truths.

Four Noble Truths:

- 1) human existence is *dukkha*, suffering
- 2) *dukkha* arises from impermanence
- 3) the cessation of *dukkha* is *nirvāna*
- 4) the Buddha's 8 Fold Noble Path leads to the goal of *nirvāna*.



Visual representation of the 4 Noble Truths

The Bodhisattva married Yaśodhāra, and they had a son, named Rahūla.

However he was not happy with his life in the palace, and one night abandoned the palace and family for the life of a religious ascetic.

After he left his father's palace, the Bodhisattva cut off his hair, put on religious robes, and went to seek enlightenment by studying and practicing religious austerities with other religious ascetics.



Grand Depart

Wat Mahamantri, Phnom Penh, mid-20th century



**For seven years,
the Bodhisattva
experimented with
extreme forms of
religious asceticism
until he almost died
from starvation.**



The Bodhisattva at the point of death. The god Indra plays music to sooth him. Wat Tuk Khla, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, mid-20th century

Finally, he realised that the extreme austerities he had been practising were not the correct path to Enlightenment.

The Bodhisattva broke his fast by accepting a dish of sweet rice from Sujāta.



Sujāta offers the Bodhisattva rice and milk
Wat Tuk Khla, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, mid-20th century

Determined to reach Enlightenment, the Bodhisattva bathed in the river Nairañjana, sat under a Bo tree (*ficus religiosa*) and vowed not to move from his seat until he reached enlightenment.

He began to meditate.

While in meditation, he endured the final assault of Māra, the evil Lord of Death.

Māra put the Bodhisattva through a series of trials.

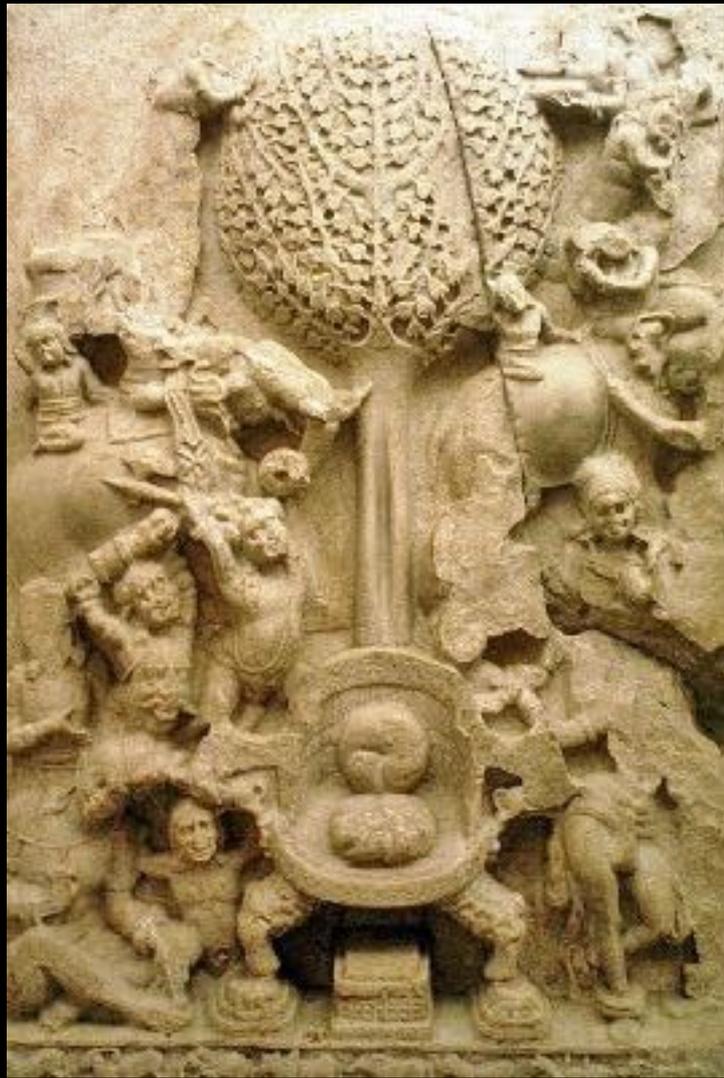
At one point, Māra sent his three beautiful daughters to seduce the Bodhisattva.



**The Temptation of the Buddha by
Māra's daughters**

However, the Bodhisattva was unmoved by Māra's attacks.

With his right hand, he summoned the earth deity to be his witness, and Māra's army was defeated.



**“Aniconic” depiction of the defeat of Māra.
2nd century CE, Amarāvati Stūpa, India**



The “defeat of Māra.”

Wat Mangalawan Phnom Penh. Cambodia, late 20th c.

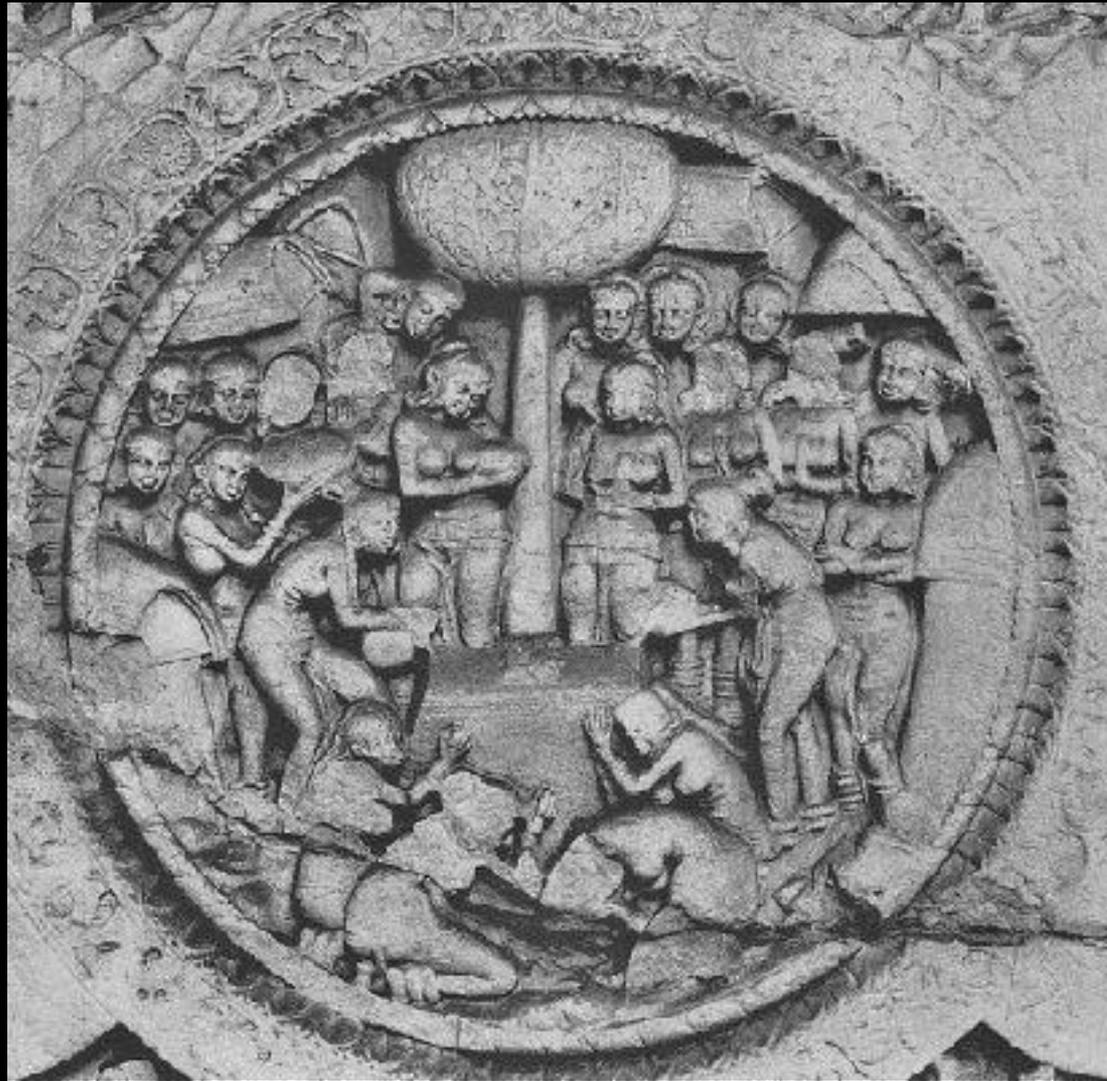
As Buddhism grew in popularity, the Bodhi Tree, where the Buddha reached Enlightenment, became an important pilgrimage site for Buddhists : Bodhgayā.



The original Bodhi Tree is still alive in Bodhgayā in northern India.



Branches of the Bo Tree have been planted all over the world by Buddhists, and its leaves are a symbol of the Enlightenment.



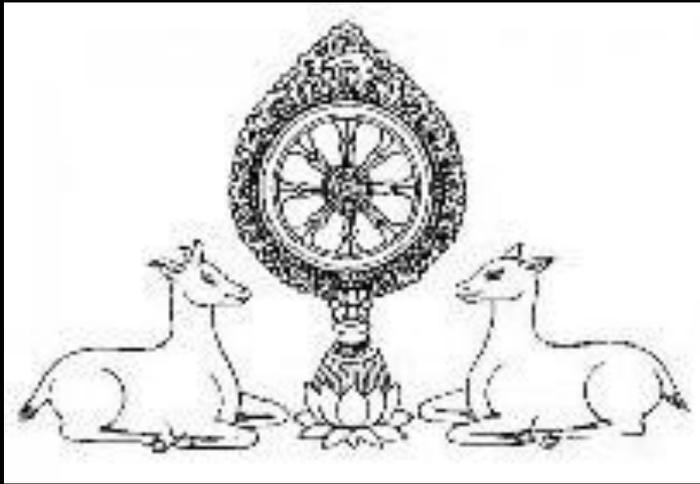
Bo tree and devotees
3-5th c., Amarāvati stūpa, India

When the Buddha became enlightened, he attained *nirvāna* “with remainder” – i.e. although fully enlightened, his body still remained in this world, and he was able to teach his Dhamma to others.

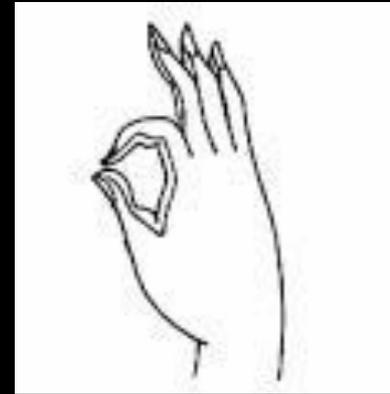
He went next to a deer park near Varanasi [Benares] and preached a sermon to five religious ascetics, who were his former companions. These became his first disciples and were the first Buddhist monks (*bhikkhus*).



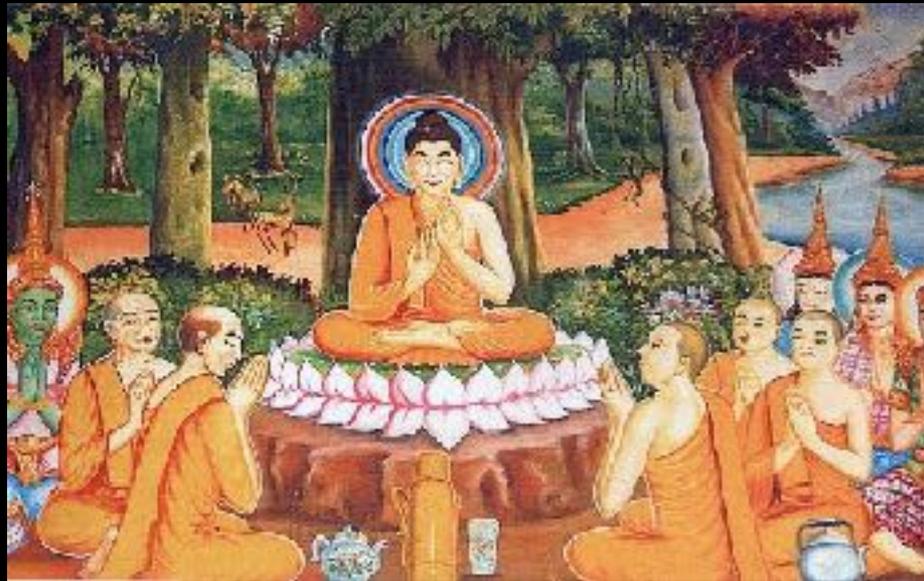
The Buddha preaches to the five disciples in the deer park at Sarnāth. Cambodia, mid-20th c.



Wheel of the Dharma and two deer



Jñāna-mudrā, “teaching.” The hand is held at chest level and the thumb and index finger form the Wheel of Dharma.



For the next 45 years, the Buddha and his band of disciples travelled around northern India preaching the Dhamma.

At the age of 80, he became ill, and died in Kuṣināgara.

At this point, he is said to have attained *parinirvāna: nirvāṇa* without remainder.



**The Mahāparinirvāna, Kuṣināgara
Cambodia, mid-20th c.**

His body was cremated, and the ashes – the relics – were divided into 8 parts and distributed among the leaders of his followers.



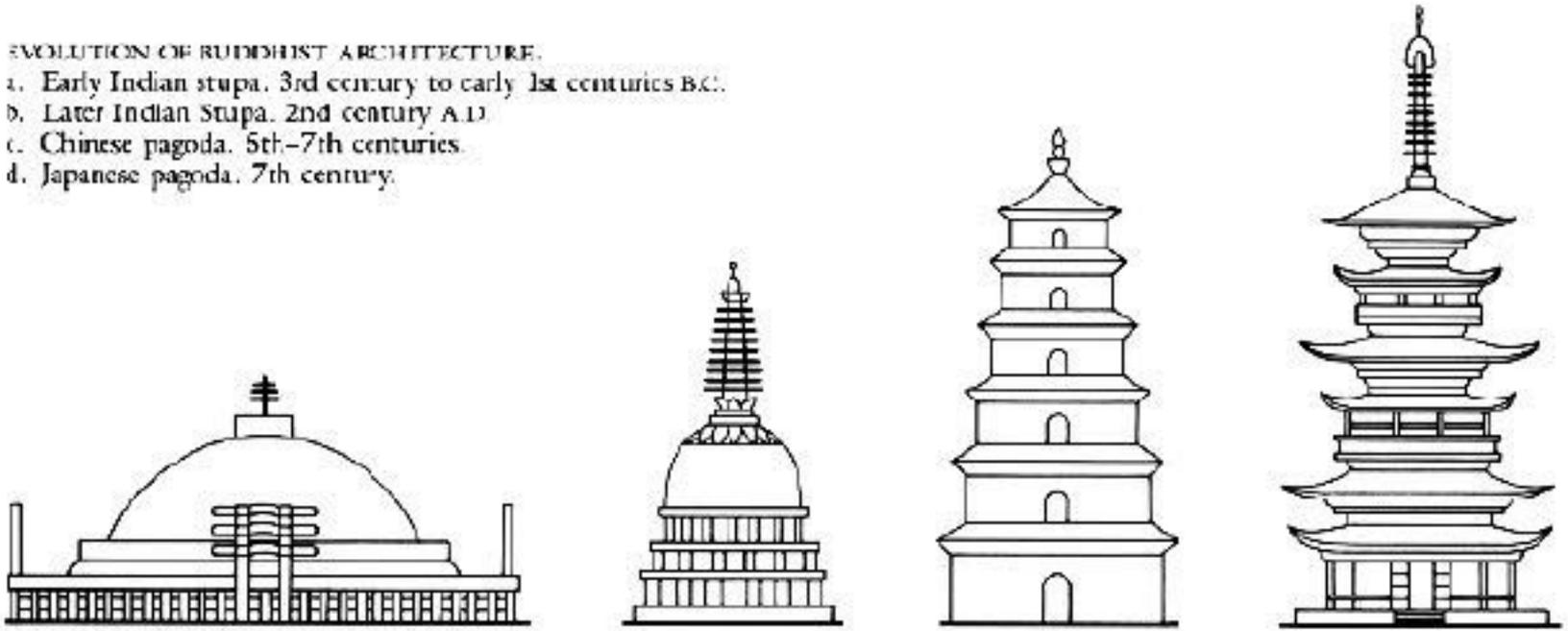


Division of the Buddha's relics
Cambodia, mid-20th c.

Over time, these relics have been divided and re-divided and placed into Buddhist stūpas.

EVOLUTION OF BUDDHIST ARCHITECTURE.

- a. Early Indian stupa. 3rd century to early 1st centuries B.C.
- b. Later Indian Stupa. 2nd century A.D.
- c. Chinese pagoda. 5th-7th centuries.
- d. Japanese pagoda. 7th century.



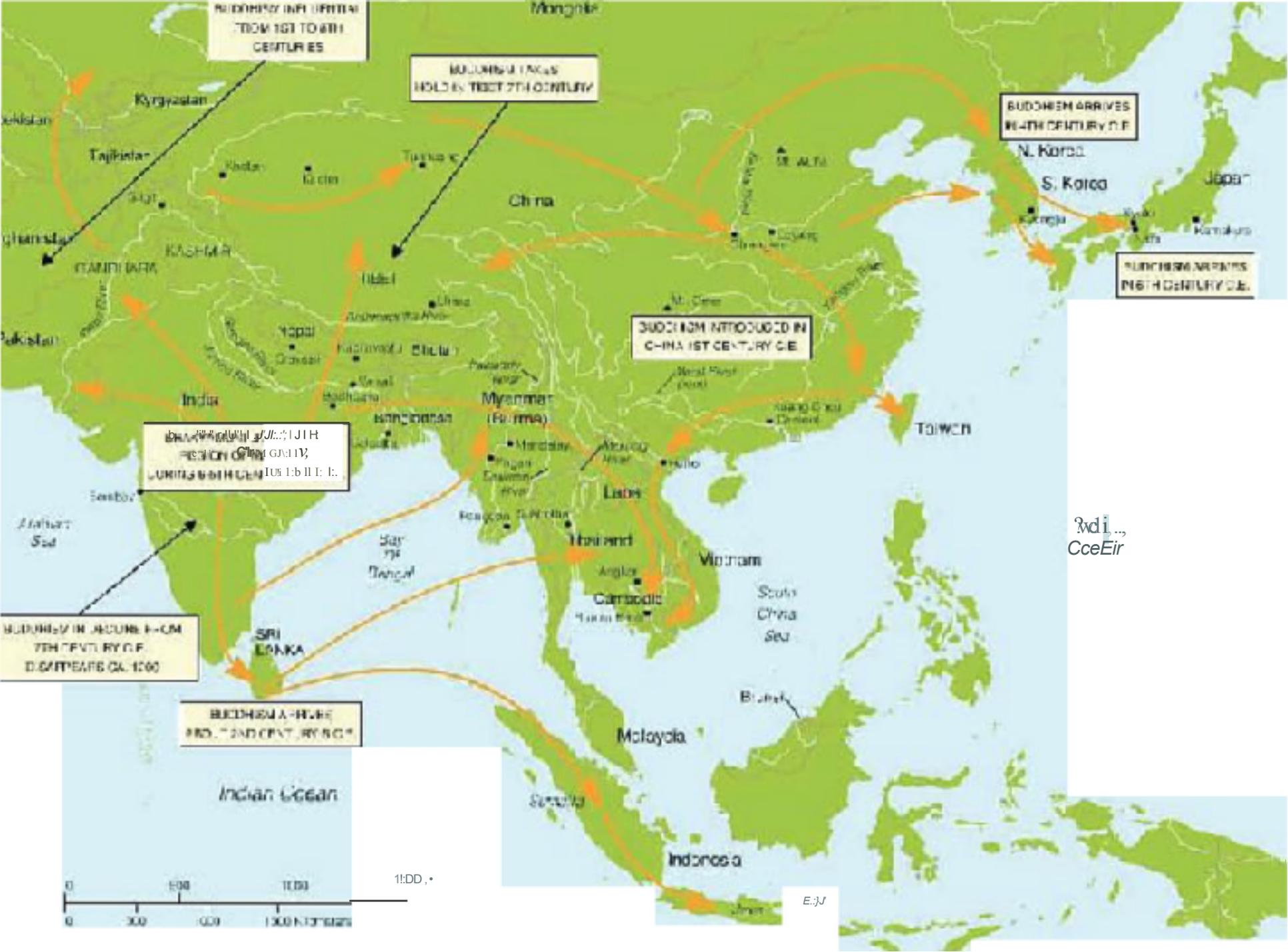
Stūpas/pagodas are memorial mounds or temples. Their purpose is to hold relics of the Buddha.

After the death of the Buddha, his followers continued to preach the Buddha's Dhamma, and Buddhism began to spread beyond the borders of India.

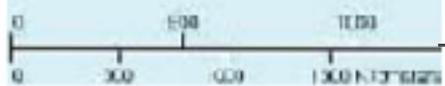
In the next section I am going to consider the transmission of Buddhism from India into the rest of Asia.

I am going to focus on the story of the T'ang dynasty Chinese Buddhist monk and pilgrim, Xuanzang.

According to Buddhist traditions, during the 3rd century CE, the Indian King Aśoka sent Buddhist missionaries to what is today Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia.



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During the Han Dynasty, political stability meant that trade routes between India, Central, South and East Asia were relatively safe.

Buddhism began to arrive in China during the first two centuries CE (late Han Dynasty).

Buddhism was first transmitted from India to China by merchants travelling on the Silk Roads (trade routes that linked China with the West).



Silk Road Trade Routes

By the second century CE, Buddhist monks from Parthia, the Kushan Empire, Sogdia and India, accompanied the trade caravans and brought Buddhist texts and the monastic lineage to China.

During this early phase, the stories and scriptures available to Chinese Buddhists were incomplete, and the translations uncertain.

The Buddhist iconography dating from the late Han dynasty suggests that at first, Buddhism was not clearly understood.

Chinese Buddhist pilgrims began to travel to India to seek accurate information about the “original Buddhism.”

One famous monk-pilgrim was Xuanzang (7th century CE).

Xuanzang was brought up in a Confucian household.

His older brother became a Buddhist monk, and Xuanzang ordained as a novice and began to study the Buddhist scriptures.

In 618 CE, the Sui Dynasty collapsed, and there was a period of civil war and anarchy.

Xuanzang and his brother fled first to Chang'an, the capital of the Tang rulers, and then to Chengdu in Sichuan. In 622 CE, he returned to Chang'an as a fully ordained Buddhist monk.

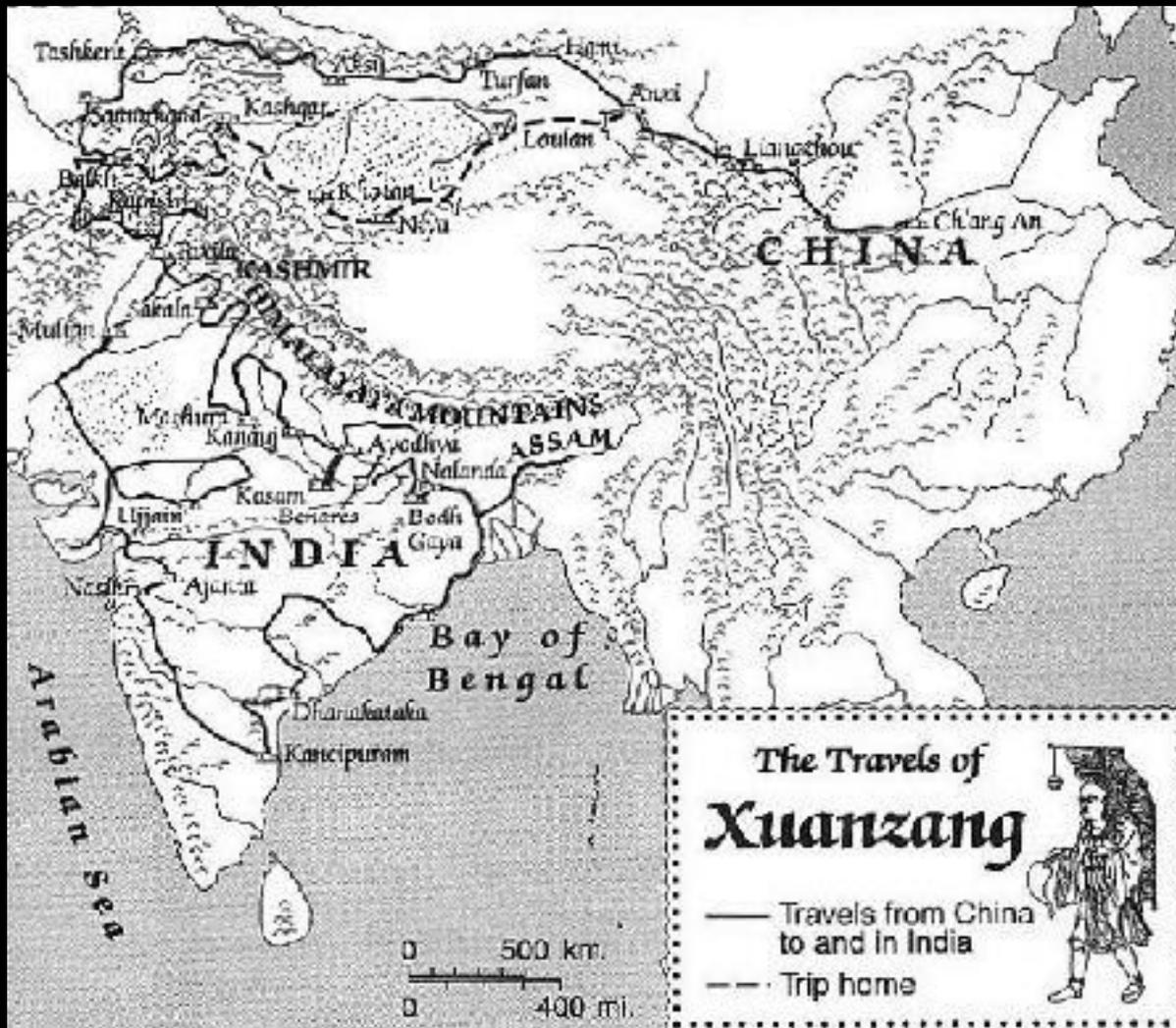
At that time Chang'an was the largest, most cosmopolitan city in the world.



Xuanzang asked the Chinese Emperor, Tang Taizong (599-649 CE) for permission to travel to India to search for Buddhist scriptures.

Xuanzang's petition for permission to leave China was refused.

Undeterred, Xuanzang sneaked out of the country in 629 CE, and began the long, dangerous trip to the West.



Map from S. Wriggins, *The Silk Road Journey with Xuanzang*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004.

When Xuanzang travelled to India in the 7th c, Buddhism was in a state of decline.

There had been a Hindu revival, and a series of invasions from the West had begun which would eventually wipe out Indian Buddhism by the 11th century.

However, there was still plenty for Xuanzang to do and see.



Xuanzang

ink and colour on
paper, late Tang
Dynasty, 9-10th c.
Dunhuang caves

One of the places Xuanzang visited on his pilgrimage to India was Bamiyan (Afghanistan)

At that time, Bamiyan was a flourishing, prosperous city on the Silk Road.

Xuanzang reported that the people of Bamiyan were remarkable for their love of Buddhism.

Xuanzang wrote that there were many monasteries in Bamiyan.

The monks and nuns followed the Little Vehicle (Hīnayāna Buddhism) and the school of the Lokottaravādins, a Buddhist sect that has long been extinct.



Xuanzang is a valuable witness for the Great Buddhas of Bamiyan that were destroyed in 2001 by the Taliban.

“To the north-east of the royal city there is a mountain, on the declivity of which is placed a stone figure of Buddha, erect, in height 140 or 150 feet. Its golden hues sparkle on every side, and its precious ornaments dazzle the eyes by their brightness.”



**Larger Buddha of Bamiyan
before and after destruction in 2001**

When Xuanzang returned to China, he was given a hero's welcome by the Emperor.



It is said that he brought nearly 700 Buddhist scriptures back from India on twenty horses.

With the help of a team of scholars, Xuanzang spent the rest of his life translating Buddhist scriptures into Chinese.

When this work was finished, "Having recited some verses in adoration of Maitreya, he gradually sank until the day of his demise on the 10th March, the 13th day of the year 664."

The most famous of Xuanzang's works was the "Heart Sutra," an important Mahāyānist text.

觀自在菩薩行深般若波羅
蜜多時照見五蘊皆空度一
切苦厄舍利子色不異空空
不異色色即是空空即是色
受想行識亦復如是舍利子
是諸法空相不生不滅不垢
不淨不增不減是故空中無
色無受想行識無眼耳鼻舌
身意無色聲香味觸法無眼
界乃至無意識界無無明亦
無無明盡乃至無老死亦無
老死盡無苦集滅道無智亦
無得以無所得故菩提薩埵
依般若波羅蜜多故心無罣
礙無罣礙故無有恐怖遠離
顛倒夢想究竟涅槃三世諸
佛依般若波羅蜜多故得阿
耨多羅三藐三菩提故知般若
若波羅蜜多是大神咒是大
明咒是無上咒是無等等咒
能除一切苦真實不虛故說
般若波羅蜜多咒即說咒曰
揭諦揭諦波羅揭諦波羅僧
揭諦菩提薩婆訶

般若波羅蜜多心經

李兆良恭書



Xuanzang continues to be important for Chinese culture.

Myths and legends about his exploits were recounted in shadow plays, puppets, opera and in the late 16th c. were written down in a novel “Journey to the West “(*Xiyouji*) by Wu Chen-en.

The stories of the Buddhist monk Tripitaka, and his supernatural companions Monkey, Pigsy and Sha, on their journey to the west in pursuit of Buddhist teachings, are kept alive today on television and in comic books.



**Television series:
“Monkey - Journey to the West”**

**Takeaway points for today:
Buddhism starts in Northeastern
India with one man ca. 500 BCE.
After the death of the Buddha, it
continues to spread and develop.
By the 1st c CE, Buddhism starts to
move outside of India into Central
Asia and East Asia, and from there
to Southeast Asia.**

Buddhism – like all religions – is a chameleon. It changes and reflects local conditions



I am going to start by showing a video from the Asian Art Museum (San Francisco) about Buddhism: *Beliefs Made Visible: Buddhist Art in South Asia* (Part II) Asia Art Museum.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jl6S0wdeWk4>