

Buddhist Councils and Important Texts

List of Buddhist Councils

Four Buddhist Councils were held under different kings.

First Buddhist Council

- Conducted under the patronage of King Ajatasatru of Haryanka dynasty.
- The council was established in order to arrive at a consensus on how the teachings of the Buddha could be spread further.
- It was held in 483 BC just after Buddha's demise.
- It was held at Sattapani caves (Sattaparnaguha) in Rajagriha.
- The monk who presided over the first council was Mahakassapa.
- Main objective was to preserve the Buddha's teachings.
- At this council, Ananda composed the Suttapitaka (Buddha's Teachings) and Mahakassapa composed the Vinaypitaka (monastic code).

Second Buddhist Council

- Conducted under the patronage of King Kalasoka of Sisunaga dynasty.
- It was held in 383 BC, i.e., a hundred years after the Buddha's death.
- It was held at Vaishali.
- Sabakami presided over the council.
- The main objective was to discuss ten disputed points under the Vinaypitaka.
- The first major split happened here – two groups that would later evolve into Theravada and Mahayana. The first group was called Thera (meaning Elder in Pali). They wanted to preserve the teachings of Buddha in the original spirit. The other group called Mahasanghika (Great Community) interpreted the Buddha's teachings more liberally.

Third Buddhist Council

- Conducted under the patronage of Emperor Ashoka of Maurya dynasty.
- It was held in 250 BC at Pataliputra.
- The council was presided over by Mogaliputta Tissa.
- Main objective was to purify Buddhism from opportunistic factions and corruption in the Sangha.
- The Abhidhamma Pitaka was composed here making the almost completion of the modern Pali Tipitaka.
- Buddhist missionaries were sent to other countries.
- Buddhism preached by Emperor Ashoka was Hinayana.

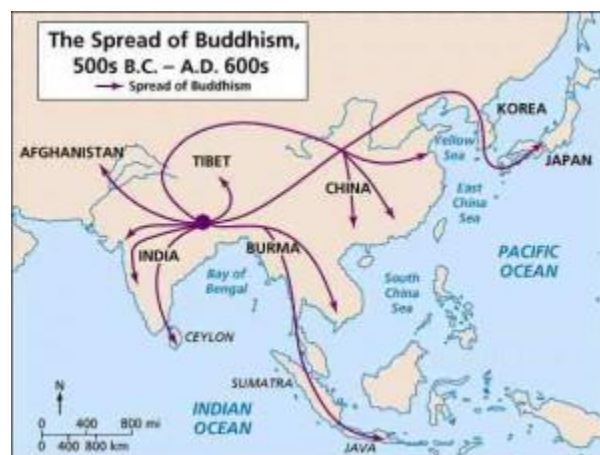
Fourth Buddhist Council

- Conducted under the patronage of King Kanishka of Kushan dynasty.
- It was held in the 1st century AD (72 AD) at Kundalvana in Kashmir.
- Vasumitra and Ashvaghosha presided over this council
- All deliberations were conducted in Sanskrit.
- Here, Abhidhamma texts were translated from Prakrit to Sanskrit.
- This council resulted in the division of Buddhism into two sects namely, Mahayana (the Greater Vehicle) and Hinayana (the Lesser Vehicle).
- Mahayana sect believed in idol worship, rituals, and Bodhisattvas. They regarded the Buddha as God. Hinayana continued the original teachings and practices of the Buddha. They adhere to the scriptures written in Pali while the Mahayana includes Sanskrit scriptures as well.

Buddhist Texts

- The most important sources of Buddhism are the Tripitakas / Tipitaka written in the Pali language. They are:
 1. Sutta Pitaka
 2. Vinaya Pitaka
 3. Abhidhamma Pitaka
- Dhammapada: a part of the Khuddaka Nikaya of the Sutta Pitaka. It contains a collection of the sayings of the Buddha in verse form.
- Milinda Panha: Literal meaning in Pali – Questions of Milinda. It was written around 100 BC. It contains a dialogue between the Indo-Greek King Menander I or Milinda of Bactria and sage Nagasena where Milinda asks questions on Buddhism to the sage.
- Buddhacharita: it is an epic poem composed in Sanskrit by Ashvaghosha in the early 2nd century AD. It is about the life of the Buddha.

Causes of the Spread of Buddhism



- Buddha's magnetic personality.
- He taught in Pali which the masses understood as opposed to Sanskrit.
- He admitted people into the Sangha irrespective of caste distinctions.
- Initial Sanghas were democratic and disciplined organisations.
- The monks travelled to different places preaching the teachings of Buddha.
- It received royal patronage including from Bimbisara, Ajatasatru, Ashoka, Kanishka and Harshavardhana.

Causes of the Decline of Buddhism in India

- Split into Mahayana and Hinayana weakened the religion.
- There was corruption among the latter monks. They gave up austerity and indulged in luxuries. Moral standards deteriorated.
- Royal patronage for Buddhism declined after the end of the Gupta dynasty around 650 AD.
- Orthodox Hinduism became more popular especially due to the works of Kumarila Bhatt and Adi Shankara.
- The invasions by the Huns and later by the Islamic armies further declined the influence of Buddhism in the subcontinent.

NCERT notes on important topics for IAS aspirants. These notes will also be useful for other competitive exams like banking PO, SSC, state civil services exams, and so on. This article talks about the spread of Buddhism in ancient India, Buddhist Councils, and texts.

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