

HIS†ORY

New Questions and Ideas

Lord Gautama Buddha

Siddhartha, who later came to be known as Gautama was the founder of Buddhism. He was born in the 5th century B.C. in a small gana of a Sakya clan. He was a Kshatriya by birth. At a young age, he left his home in the search of knowledge and visited various places. He gained enlightenment under a peepal tree at Bodh Gaya in Bihar and thereafter came to be known as the Buddha or the Wise One. He delivered his teachings for the first time at Sarnath, near Varanasi and spent the rest of his life travelling and teaching the people. He passed away at Kushinara.



A picture of Lord Buddha, teaching his followers

Teachings of Lord Buddha

Following are the teachings of Lord Buddha:

- Life is full of sufferings and unhappiness. These are caused due to human desires and cravings.
- Sometimes, even after getting what we want, we are not satisfied because we want other things. Buddha describes this as thirst or *tanha*.
- According to him, cravings and desires can be controlled by following the path of moderation.
- People should be kind and should not harm anyone, not even animals.
- Our actions (known as *karma*), good or bad, affect us in the next birth also.

The teachings of Lord Buddha spread far and wide. He spread his teachings in the *Prakrit* language so that common people could understand them.

Upanishads

Around the same time Lord Buddha was spreading his teachings other people were also trying to find the answers to various difficult questions. Upanishads are texts in which the answers of spiritual questions are recorded. The Upanishads deal with various ideas. One of the ideas recorded in the Upanishads is regarding *atman* or the soul and the *brahman* or the universal soul. It was believed that both the *atman* and the *brahman* are one. They are permanent and remain even after the death of a person.

The Upanishads were composed in the late Vedic period and contain text which is mostly conversations between teachers and students. Ideas are presented in simple dialogues. Many Upanishadic thinkers were Brahmins and the *rajas*. Sometimes, even women contributed in the writings. Gargi was one such woman who participated in the debates held in the royal courts. Satyakama Jabala, a son of a slave woman was also a notable thinker of this time. Later, many of the ideas of the Upanishads were developed by Shankaracharya.

Lord Mahavira

- Lord Vardhamana Mahavira was one of the most famous thinkers among the Jains. He lived during the same time period as Lord Buddha.

- He was a Kshatriya prince of the Lichchhavis of the Vajji sangha. He left his house at the age of thirty and attained enlightenment after spending the next twelve years in a forest.
- Mahavira asked men and women to leave their houses in order to know the truth.
- He asked people to follow the principle of ahimsa and to not hurt any living being-human, plant or animal.
- He spread his teachings in the Prakrit language, so that common people could understand them.
- The followers of Lord Mahavira came to be known as Jainas. Jainas had to live a simple, honest and chaste life.
- Jainism was supported mainly by the traders. It was difficult for the farmers to support Jainism as they had to kill insects in order to protect their crops.
- Jainism spread to various parts of India, especially Gujarat, North India, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.
- The teachings of Lord Mahavira were passed on orally from generations to generations till they were finally written down.
- His teachings are presently available at Vallabhi in Gujarat.



Vardhaman Mahavira was not the founder of Jainism, but spread its teachings and his knowledge of Jainism far and wide

The Sanghas and the Monasteries

Sangha

The Sangha was an association of Buddhist and Jain monks who left their homes for gaining true knowledge. The rules made for the Buddhist sanghas were written down in a book called **Vinaya Pitaka**. Some rules which guided the Buddhist sanghas were:

- All men could join the sanghas. Women had to take the permission of their husbands for joining the sanghas.
- Children too, had to take the permission of their parents before joining the sanghas while slaves had to take the permission of their masters.
- Those people who worked for the king had to take his permission while debtors had to take the permission of their creditors.
- Men and women in a sangha had to live simple life. They mediated for most of the time.
- They had to go the villages and cities and beg for the food for fixed hours. Therefore, they came to be known as bhikkhus and bhikkhunis meaning beggars.
- Meetings were held to settle disputes which took place in a sangha.

Monasteries

Monasteries were shelters built for the Buddhist and the Jain monks. Generally monks travelled to different parts of the villages and cities for teaching the people. It was only during the rainy season that they stayed at one place. Many of them also stayed and meditated in caves. However, as the time passed, the supporters of Jainism and Buddhism built permanent shelters for them. These came to be known as **viharas**. Viharas of the earlier times were made up of wood and later came to be built in brick. Many a times, a vihara was built on the land which was donated by a rich person, generally a merchant or a trader. Some viharas were even built in caves mostly in Western India. Many people



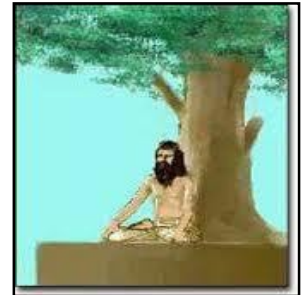
Ruins of a Buddhist Vihara at Paharpur in Bangladesh

provided the monks and nuns with food and clothing. In return the monks taught the people.

The Ashram System

The Ashram system developed in India referred to the following stages in a man's life:

- The life of a man was divided into four stages.
- The first stage was *brahmacharya* where men belonging to the first three castes had to live a simple life and study the Vedas.
- In the second stage called as *grihastha*, they had to marry and run the household.
- In the third stage known as *vanaprastha*, they had to live in the forest and meditate.
- In the fourth stage, they had to become the *samnyasins*.
- Women were not allowed to study the Vedas and hence would follow the ashrams chosen by their husbands.



In the third stage, men had to live in forests and meditate