

How Buddhism came to China

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Buddha statues stand in Zhou Park, China. Chinese Buddhism has shaped Chinese culture for centuries. Photo by: Pixabay.

Buddhism is one of the world's major religions. It developed around the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha, or “the Enlightened One.” The Buddha lived in India between 600 and 300 B.C.

For the first 200 years after the Buddha's death, Buddhism only existed in India. Starting after 300 B.C., it began spreading outside India's borders.

Mingdi was a Han emperor who ruled from 58 to 75 A.D. Legend has it that Buddhism was brought into China after Mingdi had a startling dream. In his dream, the Buddha appeared to Mingdi as a flying golden god. Convinced this was a sign, the emperor sent a group of people to India. They returned to China with the holy texts of Buddhism.

In fact, Buddhism entered China slowly. First it came through Central Asia, and later through Southeast Asia. About 2,000 years ago, trade with India brought Indian people and ideas into China. In 200 A.D., many of the most important teachings of the Buddha were rewritten in Chinese. Buddhism became the major religion in China in the 300 and 400 A.D. It reached its peak in China in 600 A.D.

The early centuries

During the rule of the Han family, from 206 B.C. to 220 A.D., Buddhism in China became similar to another Chinese religion. This religion was known as Taoism. The two almost ended up teaching the same beliefs. For example, they taught that all people are born with a soul, which never dies. This was not a normal Buddhist teaching, outside of China.

Many people believed that Laozi, who started Taoism, had been reborn in India as the Buddha. Many Chinese emperors worshiped both Laozi and the Buddha.

After the Han period, a more pure form of Buddhism took hold in China. In part this was because many of the original Indian texts were rewritten in Chinese.

During 400 and 500 A.D., Buddhist schools from India were set up in China. New Chinese schools were also formed. Buddhist temples sprang up everywhere, and Buddhism spread among farmers and poor people. During the Sui dynasty, from 581 to 618 A.D., Buddhism became an official Chinese religion.

Developments during the Tang dynasty

The golden age of Buddhism in China was during the rule of the Tang, from 618 to 907 A.D. The Tang emperors were usually Taoists themselves. However, they preferred Buddhism, which had become very popular.

During this period, many Chinese scholars traveled to India. They brought back Buddhist texts which helped the religion spread. New temples were built in China. Several new Chinese forms of Buddhism began to develop. But they were never able to replace the other main religions, like Taoism.

In 845 A.D., the emperor Wuzong, who was Taoist, turned against Buddhism. He tried to get rid of the religion completely. Thousands of Buddhist temples were destroyed.

Buddhism after the Tang

Buddhism in China never became as strong as it was before 845 A.D. However, it did continue to be important. New Buddhist texts were written that recorded the sayings of famous teachers.

The Chan or Zen school and the Pure Land tradition were the Buddhist traditions that remained the strongest in China. Chan artists became well known during the rule of the Song Dynasty, from 960 to 1279 A.D. These artists had a major influence on Chinese painting. They expressed their religious ideas through their art. Images of flowers, rivers and trees were used to suggest how life is brief and full of changes.

The Pure Land tradition was more popular among ordinary people. These people were usually poor, and rose up against the Chinese government.

After China became Communist in 1949, Buddhism came under attack again. The communist government thought that religions never teach the truth. Buddhists were no longer allowed to openly practice their religion. Many Buddhist temples were destroyed.

After 1976, the Chinese government allowed more religious freedom. Buddhism soon started to make a comeback. However, it still remained under a great deal of control by the government.

Quiz

1 Read the introduction [paragraphs 1-4]. Select the paragraph from the section that explains how Buddhism came to China.

2 Read the selection from the section "The early centuries."

During the rule of the Han family, from 206 B.C. to 220 A.D., Buddhism in China became similar to another Chinese religion. This religion was known as Taoism. The two almost ended up teaching the same beliefs. For example, they taught that all people are born with a soul, which never dies. This was not a normal Buddhist teaching, outside of China.

Which of the following is the MOST accurate explanation of this paragraph?

- (A) Buddhism became the dominant religion during the rule of the Han family.
- (B) Buddhist ideas began to reach other countries outside of China.
- (C) Buddhism in China adopted some of the same ideas as Taoism.
- (D) Buddhism taught that all people are born with a soul.

3 What effect did translations of Indian texts have on Buddhism in China?

- (A) Chinese Buddhism became closer to its parent religion from India.
- (B) Most people abandoned Taoism and adopted Buddhism.
- (C) Buddhism was taught in schools all around the country.
- (D) Most people adopted the Pure Land form of Buddhism.

4 According to the section "Buddhism after the Tang," how did Chan Buddhism influence Chinese painting?

- (A) It helped many painters and artists become better known.
- (B) It used images of nature to emphasize how short life is.
- (C) It featured images that showed how ordinary people lived.
- (D) It helped Chinese artists learn new methods of painting.