

## **How Buddhism was edited**

Early Buddhism was an oral tradition of spirituality. Teachings were memorized in a structured, yet aesthetically fluid way, to preserve and propagate the word and meaning of the Buddha Dharma for the spiritual transformation of posterity. Writing probably existed in some early form during the Buddha's time (after all, writing was already known for long time in nearby Mesopotamia since about 4000 years earlier).<sup>1</sup> It was, however, regarded as a secular tool, used by kings and their courts for secret and security communications, and by merchants for recording their business transactions.

More importantly, the orality of early Buddhism is to ensure that students really “hear” the living word from living teachers. Such teachers not only transmit the teachings, but also mould the students' character. In other words, there is moral training (discipline of body and speech) and mental cultivation (for inner calm and clarity). Both these trainings are the bases for insight wisdom, so that we can see directly (for ourselves) the true nature of life, and awaken from our self-generated suffering.

The situation changed drastically after the Buddha, as a result of three developments in Indian social history. **The first development** (as already noted) was **writing**, and later, **printing**, especially in China and east Asia generally. Within centuries of the Buddha's death, Buddhist scriptures came to be written down.<sup>2</sup> An early well known example is the Milinda,pañha, purportedly, a record of questions by the Greek king of Bactria (in the northwest of India, 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE) and answers by the monk Nāgaseṇa. The work was completed by about the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. It is an example of a written text, and lacks the repetitive cycles of the early Buddhist texts.

In an important way, writing “liberated” oral Buddhism from the monastic tradition, and allowed even the laity, especially those philosophically, theologically, even politically, inclined to write down their own ideas and ideologies. Such written Buddhist works easily authenticated themselves by their mere palpability and “modernity.” An influential individual, group or lineage started using such texts, which were written to sound like the early suttas, without the repetitive cycles, but meant to displace these ancient texts.

Noticeably, such new texts tend to be philosophical and narrative. They also tend to be hyperbolic in terms of numbers, ideas, and characters, an imaginativeness that is still with us today, and seen in our science fiction movies, such as the Star Wars, Star Trek and Stargate series, all of which never fail to have Buddhistic themes.

By the Han dynasty (by 100 CE), Buddhism had already reached China, and woodblock printing was already known to the Chinese. The movable type printing was introduced in China during the Song dynasty (11<sup>th</sup> century), from which we get most of our Chinese Buddhism today. It was a period of intense religious competition and fertile innovations in teachings and methods, which made Buddhism effectively and uniquely Chinese.

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<sup>1</sup> See Reflection, “[Twitter brain](#),” R341, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> On writing and early Buddhism, see Sujato & Brahmali, *The Authenticity of the Early Buddhist Texts*, 2013:31 f, <http://dhammadownload.com/dhammadownload.com/files/pdf/authenticity.pdf>.

Early Buddhist spirituality was effectively sidelined, even rejected, on account of such a cultural dominance.<sup>3</sup> The printed book allows, even demands, what is internal, visualized and meditated upon to be externalized, seen and worshipped. What is a mental process is reified into sacred books (such as the Lotus Sutra, which is to be upheld as ultimate truth in itself); sacred images (especially of Buddhas and saintly priests) that are believed to have powers of their own; sutras or parts of them become brahminical mantras full of Oms, Svahas, and sacred names, the mere chant of which is said to be able to bring us to paradises, even enlightenment itself.

With the influence of Daoism, we have such notions that we are actually already enlightened, but do not realize it! And in Japan, there even arose the notion that inanimate objects such as trees and rocks, too, would be enlightened.

**The second development** that influenced Buddhism was the rise of **mathematics**, especially the evolution of the notion of zero and infinitesimals (such as huge numbers). The ancient Indians were the first who understood the concept of **zero**, which was rooted conceptually in their religious and philosophical development, especially with the notion of emptiness. Negative numbers were known in China by the Han dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE), based on older traditions.

On account of an awareness of large numbers, the historical buddha was multiplied into billions of cosmic, even eternal, Buddhas, the bodhisattva that Gotama Buddha was before his awakening morphed into zillions of transcendental Bodhisattvas, each in their own right, and Arhats were declared not fully awakened, still in need of Buddhahood.<sup>4</sup> The idea of countless Buddhas and Bodhisattvas was also based on the notion of parallel universes.<sup>5</sup>

**The third factor** influencing post-Buddha Buddhism is politics, or history as a social event. If Theravada Buddhism was promoted by emperor Asoka, India's greatest king, so that it is found to this day in south and southeast Asia, Mahayana Buddhism arose amongst the Kushans (northwest of India), and was effectively promoted by their greatest emperor, Kanishka (400 years after Asoka). The Saka (2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> centuries BCE) and Parthia (around the same time), in northeast Persia, too, contributed to the rise and spread of Buddhism, especially Mahayana.

When Buddhism reached China, the emperor and the literati or elite became its real mouth-piece and innovators. When such powers defined Buddhism, there was almost nothing that the populace, including the clergy, could do to object, but to go with the flow. When Buddhism was made the state religion, it became simply a tool of the state.<sup>6</sup> The peasant and the poor followed a more down-to-earth apotropaic (magical) form of Buddhism, which became part of local magic and superstition.

The emperors and elite saw in Buddhism an effective tool to consolidate their power. Under the notorious empress Wu-zetian (reigned 625-705), Tantric priests, Bodhi, ruci and Mani, cintana,

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<sup>3</sup> See Piya Tan, *How Buddhism Became Chinese*, SD 40b: [link](#).

<sup>4</sup> On this serious wrong view, see Reflections "[To be Bodhisattva, be arhat first](#)," R198 2011 & "The way to true awakening," R403 2015.

<sup>5</sup> See eg **Kosala Sutta 1** (A 10.29,2), [SD 16.15](#). However, early Buddhism unequivocally speaks of only one Buddha in our universe, and make no mention of other buddhas even in the parallel universes.

<sup>6</sup> See *How Buddhism Became Chinese*, SD 40b ([1.2.5](#); [4.3.3.5](#); [5.1.2.6](#)).

edite the Rain of Jewel Sutra (Baoyu jing) to include explicit references to a *female* universal monarch (*cakravarti*). In due course, Wu-zetian even proclaimed herself to be Maitreya, the future Buddha! This is only one of the numerous imperial and elite interventions and innovations in Chinese Buddhism.<sup>7</sup>

These are some of the painful realities of religion. Such an awareness helps us to retrieve the padi from the chaff, to distinguish real gold from fool's gold. Buddhism, like any religion, is somehow influenced and shaped by social and political factors. We are free to choose what kind of Buddhism we want to practise, but ideally such a choice should help transform us into better individuals. Buddhism is not merely about belief, but more so about self-transformation.

It is terribly unwise to take Buddhism merely as a leisure hobby or, worse, as a status or class marker, celebrating our "good karma," or, worse still, as a superstition, looking for "merits." The time will come when our merits run out, and our karma ripens and challenges us. We then blame "Buddhism" for not helping us. But what kind of "Buddhism" are we referring to here?

It is worthwhile to remember that the avowed purpose of Buddhism, at least, early Buddhism, is to know oneself, tame oneself, and free oneself. That is, to be rid of ignorance and craving, so that we become awakened beings, seeing the true Dharma within oneself. However, before reaching the far shore, we must remember that we are still on this shore, and overcome its challenges and dangers, so that we can swim safely across or, at least, start building our raft.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]  
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<sup>7</sup> On Wu-zetian and Buddhism, see *How Buddhism Became Chinese*, SD 40b ([5.2.2](#)).