

## 1.1 THE WORLD OF THE BUDDHA

[Source: Piya Tan, "Buddhism in India," Lecture 1 of *History of Buddhism*, ©2002]

### Buddhism in world history

When we talk of a "history" of Buddhism, we are referring to the human experience of *samsāra*, the ups and downs of religious fervour, spiritual growth and moral decay, repeating and interacting among themselves in endless colourful cycles. There are some clear patterns in all this, and we shall try to discover them for ourselves. Since history tends to repeat itself, we might thereby gain some wisdom in our positive responses to events that directly concern us as Buddhists today.

### The Axial Age

The history of human civilization is characterized by recurrent waves of **fascination with power and wealth**, and then with the disillusion of these very same power and wealth when they seem not to fulfill the hopes associated with them. Around 600 B.C. (or the first 700-800 years BCE), a major series of such waves swept across all civilized Asia with major "breakthroughs," in what the German Existentialist philosopher, Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) has called the "axis age" or "**axial age**."

In **Greece**, we see the rise of pre-Socratic and classical philosophy; in **Persia**, the coming of Zoroastrianism; in **the Middle East**, the advent of classical Judaism through the prophets and the beginnings of rabbinical Judaism; in **China**, we have Daoism, Confucianism and the "hundred schools"; and in **India**, we see the birth of the Upanishads, Jainism, various heterodox sects--and Buddhism.

According to **Karl Jaspers**, the axial age was a turning point in human history--in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, when Confucius, the Buddha, Zoroaster, Deutero-Isaiah, and Pythagoras were alive contemporaneously. If the axial age is extended backward in time to the original Isaiah's generation and forward to Mohammed's, it may perhaps be recognized as the age in which humans first sought to make direct contact with the ultimate spiritual reality behind phenomena instead of making such communication only indirectly through the non-human and social environments.

### Pre-Buddhist India

A central teaching of the Buddha is that of **non-self** (*anattā*), which offers the cure for individualism and eternalism. The Buddha addressed a society of individualistic city dwellers who generally believed in a creator god or an eternal soul, or who were utterly materialistic.

Furthermore, it was a society of **the Iron Age**, whose metal forged better weapons to wage more devastating wars by ambitious warrior kings who established large kingdoms, with big cities, widespread trade, a well-developed money economy and a rationally organized state. These cities replaced small tribal societies with large conurbia, with all the evils of alienation, specialization and social disorientation that all this entailed.

**The Buddha's public ministry** was mostly in the urban areas, which helps to account for the intellectual character of his teaching, the "urbanity" of his words and the rational quality of his ideas. As if reflecting the widespread republican spirit of his times, the Buddha often declared that he was merely a "guide" (Dh 276), not an authority (D 2:100, 154), and that all propositions, including his own should be tested (A 1:188 f).

Having the advantage of **a liberal spiritual education**, the Buddhists respond to the unknown and the unproven with benevolent skepticism and a spirit of inquiry. In this manner,

## **Background to Buddhism**

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they have been able to accommodate themselves to every kind of popular (and unpopular) belief, not only in India, but wherever they find themselves. □