

CHAPTER 4

A HISTORY OF BUDDHISM: SANCHI STUPA

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we will focus on **Buddhism**. Here it is important to remember that this tradition did not develop in isolation - there were several other traditions, each engaged in debates and dialogues with the others. To reconstruct this period the historians, use Buddhist, Jaina and Brahmanical texts as well as a body of material remains including monuments and inscriptions. Among the best-preserved monuments of the time is the stupa at Sanchi which is a major focus in this chapter.

TOPICS COVERED

1. **Broad overview**
 - a. A brief review of religious histories of Vedic religion, Jainism, Vaishnavism, and Saivism. Focus on Buddhism.
 - b. Story of discovery: Sanchi stupa.
2. **Excerpt: Reproduction of sculptures from Sanchi.**
3. **Discussion:** Ways in which sculpture has been interpreted by historians, and other sources for reconstructing the history of Buddhism

THE BACKGROUND

The mid-first millennium BCE is often regarded as a turning point in world history: it saw the emergence of thinkers such as Zarathustra in Iran, Kong Zi in China, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle in Greece, and Mahavira and Gautama Buddha, among many others, in India.

There were several pre-existing traditions of thought, religious belief and practice, including the early Vedic tradition, known from the **Rigveda**, compiled between c.1500 and 1000 BCE.



BUDDHIST TEXTS

After Buddha's death (c. fifth-fourth century BCE) his teachings were compiled by his disciples at a council of "elders" or senior monks at Vesali (Pali for Vaishali in present-day Bihar) which were known as **Tipitaka**.

The **Vinaya Pitaka** included rules and regulations for those who joined the sangha or monastic order; the Buddha's teachings were included in the **Sutta Pitaka**; and the **Abhidhamma Pitaka** dealt with philosophical matters.

Other texts such as the **Dipavamsa** (literally, the chronicle of the island) and **Mahavamsa** (the great chronicle) were written, containing regional histories of Buddhism.

From the **Sutta Pitaka**, there is a description of a conversation between **King Ajatashatru**, the ruler of **Magadha**, and the **Buddha** where on one occasion King Ajatashatru approached the Buddha and told him about a conversation he had had with another teacher named **Makkhali Gosala**.

The Rigveda consists of hymns in praise of a variety of deities, especially Agni, Indra and Soma. Many of these hymns were chanted when sacrifices were performed, where people prayed for cattle, sons, good health, long life, etc.

More elaborate sacrifices, such as the rajasuya and ashvamedha, were performed by chiefs and kings who depended on Brahmana priests to conduct the ritual.

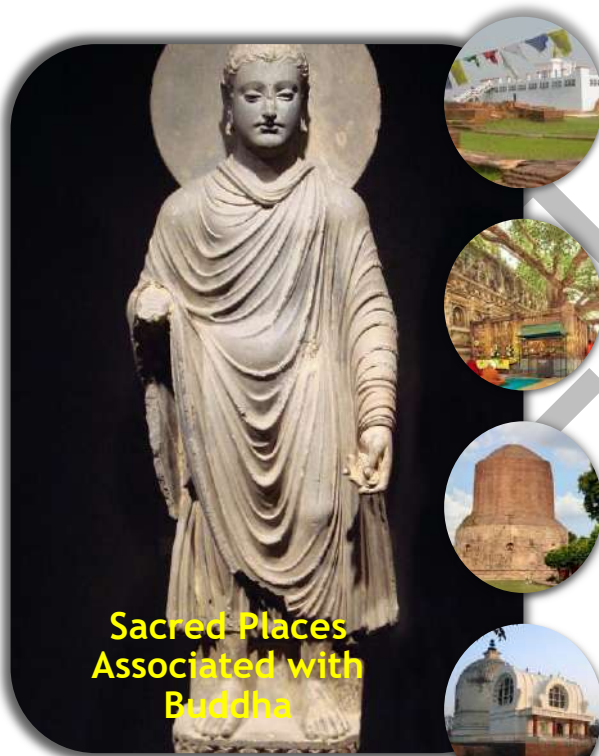
Chhandogya Upanishad, a text composed in Sanskrit c. sixth century BCE.

EIGHTFOLD PATH



Right Understanding
Right Thought
Right Speech
Right Action
Right Livelihood
Right Effort
Right Mindfulness
Right Concentration

THE BUDDHA AND THE QUEST FOR ENLIGHTENMENT



Sacred Places
Associated with
Buddha



Lumbini: Birth
Place of Buddha



Bodhi Gaya:
Attained
Enlightenment



Sarnath: Gave
First Sermon



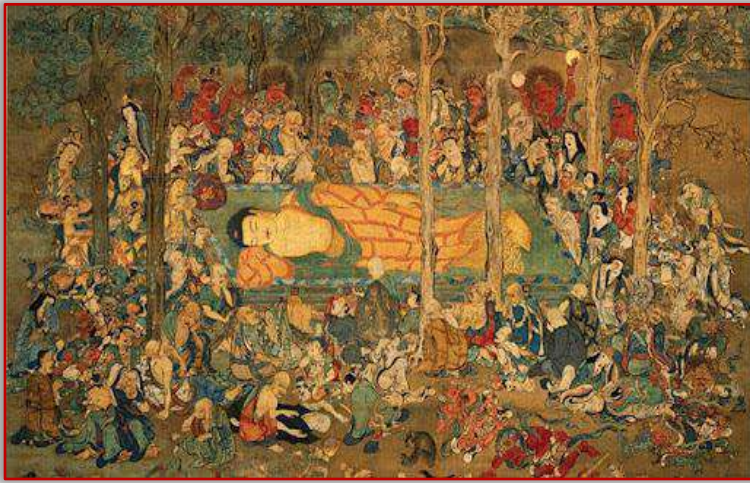
Kusinagara:
Attained
Nirvana
(Nirvana)

Over the centuries, Buddha's message spread across the subcontinent and beyond - through Central Asia to China, Korea and Japan, and through Sri Lanka, across the seas to Myanmar, Thailand and Indonesia. Historians have tried to reconstruct details of his life from hagiographies. (Hagiography is a biography of a saint or religious leader.) Siddhartha, as the Buddha was named at birth, was the son of a chief of the Sakya clan.

The Teachings of the Buddha: The Buddha's teachings have been reconstructed from stories, found mainly in the **Sutta Pitaka**.

According to Buddhist philosophy, the world is transient (**anicca**) and constantly changing; it is also soulless (**anatta**) as there is nothing permanent or eternal in it. Within this transient world, sorrow (**dukkha**) is intrinsic to human existence.

According to Buddhist tradition, his last words to his followers were: “Be lamps unto yourselves as all of you must work out your own liberation.”



Buddha founded a **sangha**, an **organisation of monks who too became teachers of dhamma**. These monks lived simply. As they lived on alms, they were known as **bhikkhus**. Initially, only men were allowed into the sangha, but later women also came to be admitted and this was made possible through the mediation of **Ananda**, one of the Buddha’s dearest disciples.

The Buddha’s foster mother, **Mahapajapati Gotami** (pic illustration next page) was the first woman to be

ordained as a bhikkhuni. The internal functioning of the sangha was based on the **traditions of ganas and sanghas**. The **Therigatha**, a unique Buddhist text, part of the Sutta Pitaka, is a collection of verses composed by bhikkhunis. It provides an insight into women’s social and spiritual experiences. Punna, a dasi or slave woman, went to the river each morning to fetch water for her master’s household.

STUPAS



From earliest times, people tended to regard certain places as sacred, including **sites with special trees or unique rocks**. These sites, with small shrines attached to them, were sometimes described as **chaityas**. It also describes places associated with the Buddha’s life.

About 200 years after the time of the Buddha, **Asoka erected a pillar at Lumbini** to mark the fact that he had visited the place.

The places where relics of the Buddha, such as his **bodily remains or objects used by him**, were buried were known as stupas. The entire stupa was revered as an emblem of both the Buddha and Buddhism.

Inscriptions found on the railings and pillars of stupas record donations made for building and decorating.

Some donations were made by kings such as the Satavahanas; others were made by guilds, such as that of the ivory workers who financed part of one of the gateways at Sanchi. Bhikkhus and bhikkhunis also contributed towards building these monuments.



According to a **Buddhist text** known as the **Ashokavadana**, **Asoka distributed** portions of the Buddha's relics to every important town and ordered the construction of stupas over them. By the second century BCE a number of stupas, including those at Bharhut, Sanchi and Sarnath had been built.

Chaitya may also have been derived from the word chita, meaning a funeral pyre, and by extension a funerary mound.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE STUPA

The **stupa** (a Sanskrit word meaning a heap) originated as a simple semi-circular mound of earth, later called anda. **Above the anda was the harmika**, a balconylike structure that represented the abode of the gods.

Arising from the **harmika was a mast called the yashti**, often surmounted by a **chhatra or umbrella**. Around the mound was a railing, separating the sacred space from the secular world.

The early stupas at **Sanchi** and **Bharhut** were plain except for the stone railings, which resembled a bamboo or wooden fence, and the gateways, which were richly carved and installed at the four cardinal points.

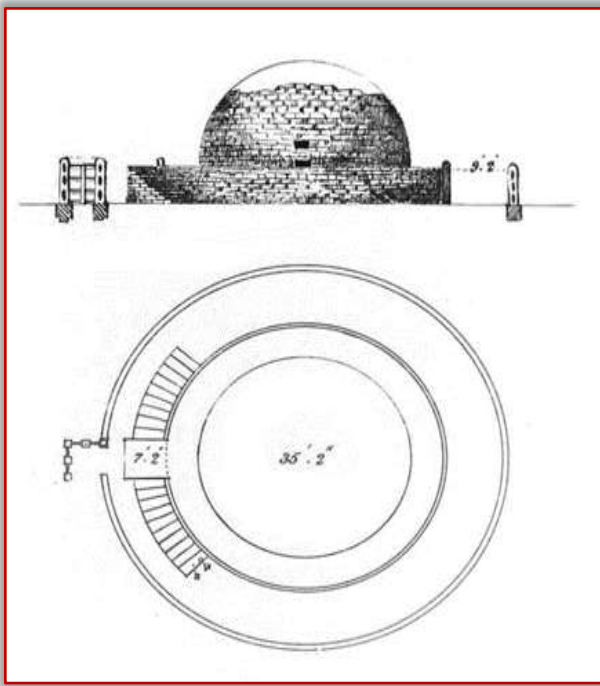
Later, the mound of the stupas came to be elaborately carved with niches and sculptures as at **Amaravati**, and **Shahji-ki-Dheri** in Peshawar (Pakistan).

STUPA OF AMARAVATI

In **1796**, a local raja who wanted to build a temple stumbled upon the ruins of the stupa at Amaravati. He decided to use the stone, and thought there might be some treasure buried in what seemed to be a hill.

Some years later, a **British official** named **Colin Mackenzie** visited the site. Although he found several pieces of sculpture and made





Plan of the Great Stupa at Sanchi

detailed drawings of them, these reports were never published. In 1854, Walter Elliot, the commissioner of Guntur (Andhra Pradesh), visited Amaravati and collected several sculpture panels and took them away to Madras. (These came to be called the Elliot marbles after him.)

He also discovered the remains of the western gateway and came to the conclusion that the structure at Amaravati was one of the largest and most magnificent Buddhist stupas ever built. By the 1850s, some of the slabs from Amaravati had begun to be taken to different places: to the Asiatic Society of Bengal at Calcutta, to the India Office in Madras and some even to London.

One of the few men who had a different point of view was an archaeologist named H.H. Cole. He wrote: “It seems to me a suicidal and indefensible policy to allow the country to be looted of original works of ancient art.” The mahachaitya at Amaravati is now just an insignificant little mound, totally of its former glory.

STUPA OF SANCHI

The most wonderful ancient buildings in the state of Bhopal are at Sanchi Kanakhera. When Sanchi was “discovered” in 1818, three of its four gateways were still standing, the fourth was lying on the spot where it had fallen and the mound was in good condition.

Major Alexander Cunningham stayed several weeks in this neighbourhood and examined these ruins most carefully. He took drawings of the place, deciphered the inscription, and bored shafts down these domes. The results of his investigations were described by him in an English work ‘FROM SHAHJEHAN BEGUM, NAWAB OF BHOPAL (ruled 1868-1901), Taj- ul Iqbal Tarikh Bhopal (A History of Bhopal)’, translated by H.D. Barstow, 1876.



Shahjehan Begum, Nawab of Bhopal

Major Alexander Cunningham

Taj- ul Iqbal Tarikh Bhopal

John Marshall

The French sought Shahjehan Begum's permission to take away the eastern gateway, which was the best preserved, to be displayed in a museum in France. **John Marshall** dedicated his important volumes on **Sanchi to Sultan Jehan**.

REPRODUCTION OF SCULPTURES FROM SANCHI



Many sculptures were removed from stupas and transported all the way to Europe. Art historians who have carefully studied a sculpture at Sanchi identify it as a scene from the **Vessantara Jataka**.

According to hagiographies, the Buddha attained enlightenment while meditating under a tree.

Many early sculptors did not show the Buddha in human form but through symbols. The empty seat was meant to indicate the meditation of the Buddha, and the stupa was meant to represent the mahaparinibbana. Wheel stood for the first sermon of the Buddha, delivered at Sarnath and the tree symbolises an event in the life of the Buddha.

There were some other sculptures that were regarded as an auspicious symbol and integrated into the decoration of the stupa. These include **beautiful women swinging from the edge of the gateway, holding onto a tree** that is described in Sanskrit as a **shalabhanjika**.

Some of the **finest depictions of animals** are also found there. These animals include **elephants, horses, monkeys and cattle**. While the Jatakas contain several animal stories that are depicted at Sanchi. Elephants were depicted to signify strength and wisdom.

One of the earliest modern art historians, **James Fergusson**, who was not familiar with Buddhism literature, considered Sanchi to be a centre of tree and serpent worship.



The paintings at Ajanta depict stories from the Jatakas. These include depictions of courtly life, processions, men and women at work, and festivals.

By the first century CE, it was believed that he was the one who could ensure salvation. Simultaneously, the concept of the Bodhisatta also developed. This new way of thinking was called Mahayana - literally, the “great vehicle”.

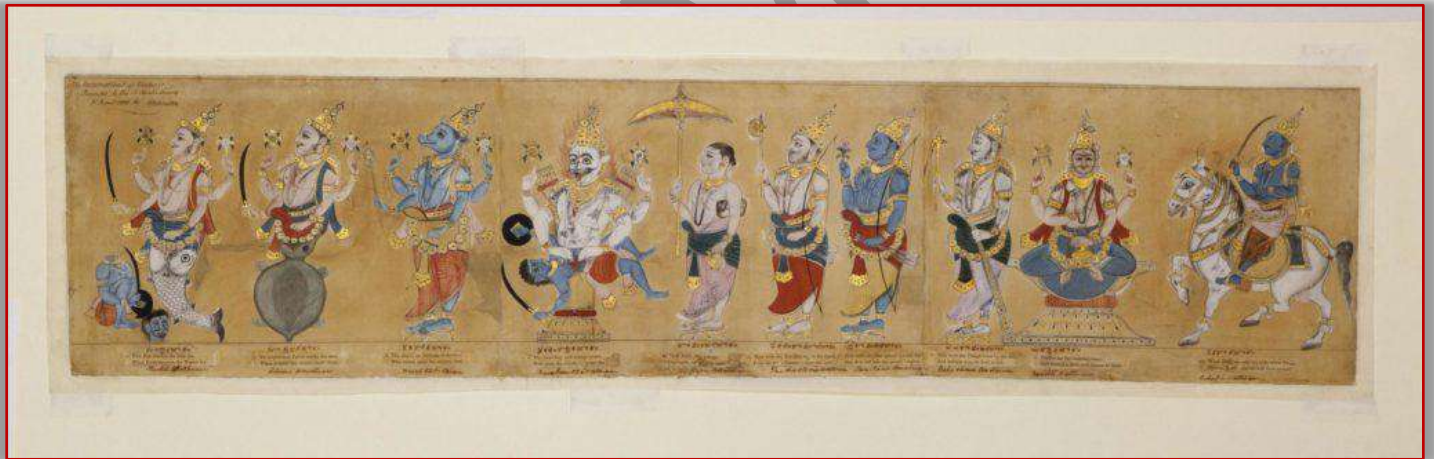
Supporters of Mahayana regarded other Buddhists as followers of Hinayana. However, followers of the older tradition described themselves as theravadins.



PURANIC HINDUISM

The idea of Hinduism included the tradition of Vaishnavism (a form of Hinduism within which Vishnu was worshiped as the principal deity) and Shaivism (a tradition within which Shiva was regarded as the chief god).

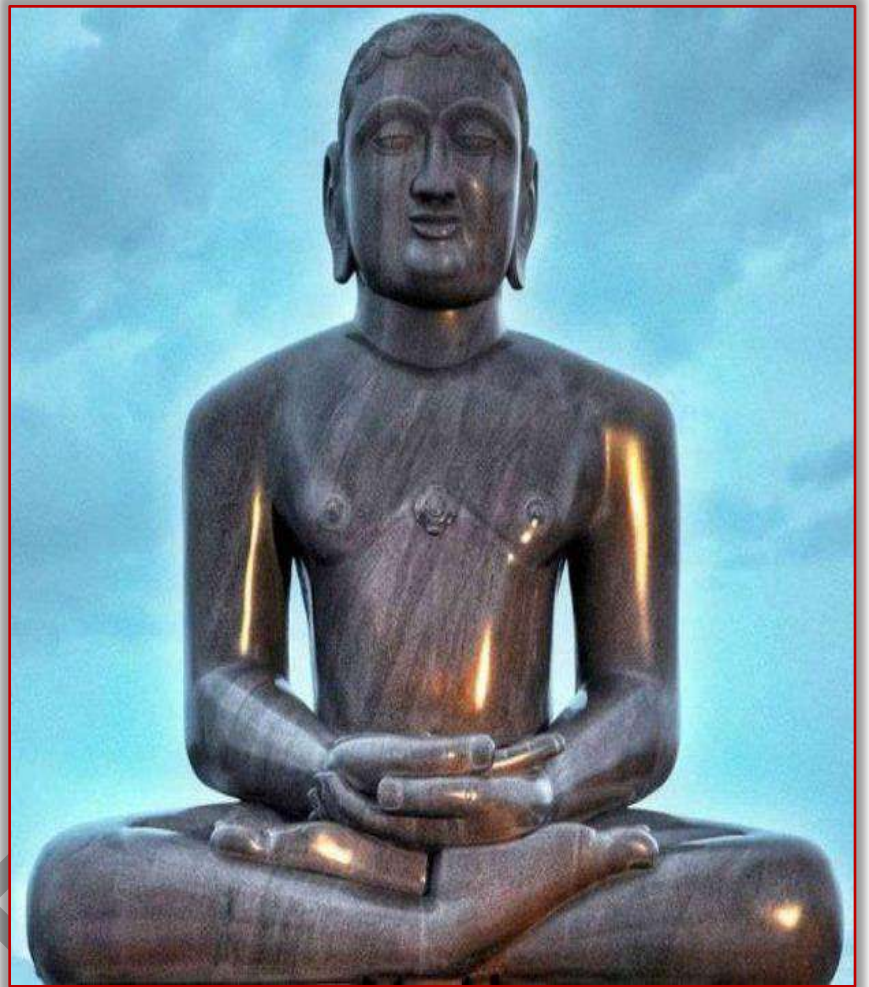
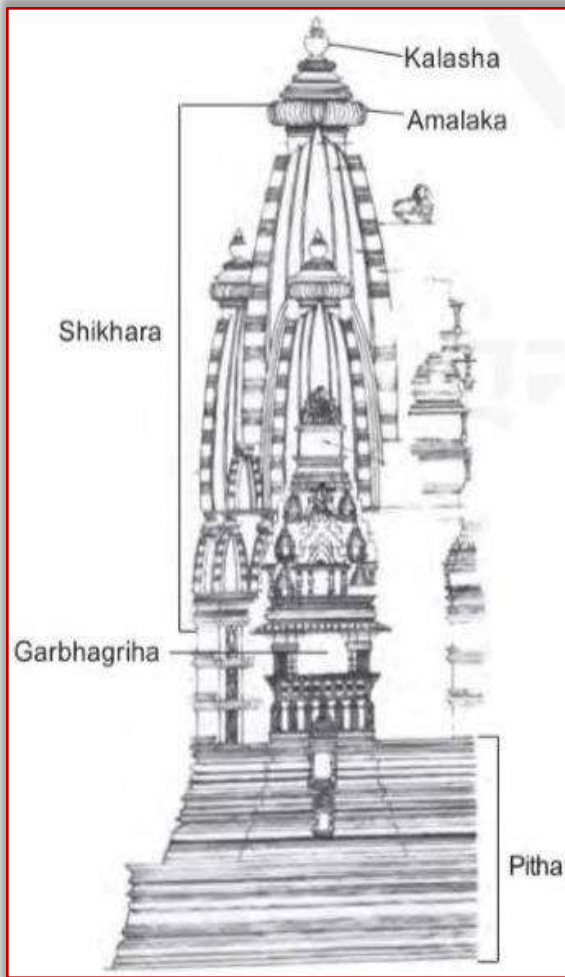
In the case of Vaishnavism, cults developed around the various avatars or incarnations of the deity. Ten avatars were recognised within the tradition.



Shiva was symbolised by the linga, although he was occasionally represented in human form too. Many stories, familiar to these traditions, are contained in the Puranas, compiled by Brahmanas (by about the middle of the first millennium CE). Generally, they were written in simple Sanskrit verse, and were meant to be read aloud to everybody, including women and Shudras.

The tradition of building artificial caves was an old feature of early temples. In the third century BCE on the orders of Asoka these were constructed for renouncers who belonged to the Ajivika sect.





BUILDING TEMPLES

The early temple was a small square room, called the **garbhagriha**. Gradually, a tall structure, known as the **shikhara**, was built over the central shrine. Temple walls were often decorated with sculpture.

JAINISM

The basic philosophy of the Jainas was already in existence in north India before the birth of Vardhamana, who came to be known as Mahavira, in the sixth century BCE.

According to Jaina tradition, Mahavira was preceded by 23 other teachers or tirthankaras.

The most important idea in Jainism is that the **entire world is animated: even stones, rocks and water have life**. The principle of ahimsa, emphasised within Jainism, has left its mark on Indian thinking as a whole.

The **teachings of Mahavira** were recorded by his disciples. (A Prakrit text known as the **Uttaradhyayana Sutta**.)