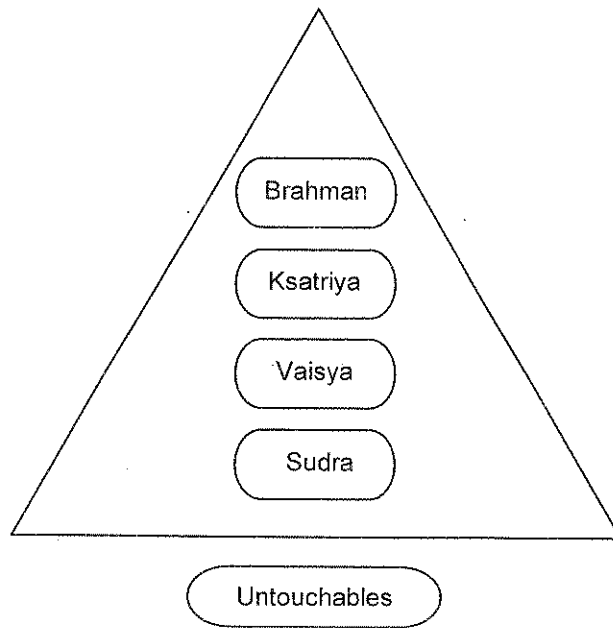


HINDUISM and BUDDHISM

As ^{Indian} South Asian society developed over the centuries following the deterioration of the Harappan tradition, it came to be organized in a hierarchy of social classes, including warriors, priests, and commoners. Later, this hierarchy evolved into the caste system. The members of each caste were determined by their occupation, and taboos prevented them from intermarrying and associating socially in other ways. ^(Indus River Valley)



The untouchables, the lowest members of society, dealt with human waste and the dead. This group did the jobs no one else wanted to do. They were regarded by the other groups as ritually impure and therefore outside the hierarchy of groups altogether. The Sudras had service jobs, and the Vaisya were herders, farmers, artisans, and merchants. The Ksatriyas, the second highest caste, were the warriors and rulers. At the top were the Brahmins, who were priests, scholars, and teachers. Because priests were part of this caste, the early religion is known as Brahmanism. Brahmanism evolved into the larger Hindu tradition.

The Hindus revered many ^{polytheistic} gods. They believed that people had many lives (reincarnation). Also, they believed in *karma*. This meant that whatever a person did in this life would determine what he or she would be in the next life. Thus, reincarnation creates a cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth. The cycle ends only when a person realizes that his or her soul and God's soul are one. ^(moksha) To help achieve this goal, the Hindus had several spiritual practices, some of which are done in the western world today, including meditation and yoga.

The Hindus also believed in the *Purusharthas*: Four Goals of Life. These goals motivated people in their lives.

- 1. *dharma* – living a virtuous life
2. *kama* – pleasure of the senses
3. *artha* – achieving wealth and success lawfully
- 4. *moksha* – release from reincarnation

The Life of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha

Siddhartha Gautama was born in South Asia (what is now Nepal) in 563 BCE, into a family of the Ksatriya class. When he was young, his father asked wise men what his son would become. They predicted that Siddhartha would become a great leader, unless he saw suffering. In that case he would become a wandering holy man. His father tried to prevent this prophecy and sheltered the prince from anyone who was sick or old. When he was 16, he married a girl named Yasodhara, and they had a son. Finally, Siddhartha went outside the palace and saw illness, poverty, and death, elements of life he had never seen before. He fled his home and began to search for peace. Along the way, he met an ascetic^{holy man} who revealed that his happiness stemmed from traveling around the world searching for ways to end suffering. For six years, Siddhartha starved himself, thinking that by forcing his body to suffer, life would become less important. However, he found that he was still unable to resolve the problems of suffering. One day, he sat under a Bodhi tree to meditate. While he meditated, he became enlightened, that is, he received a special understanding of the truth. This enlightenment awarded him the name of Buddha or the Enlightened One. The special insights he received were called the Four Noble Truths:

1. Life is suffering.
2. Suffering comes from wanting what you do not have (greed and selfishness).
3. People can stop suffering by ridding themselves of desire.
4. People can stop desire by following the Eight-Fold Path.

The Buddha taught that to reach Nirvana and stop the cycle of reincarnation, one had to follow the Eight-Fold Path. The first two complement each other. The next three deal with behavior and the last three deal with training the mind.

After discovering these insights, the Buddha did not worship Hindu gods anymore, and today Buddhists still do not believe in a single, all-powerful deity. The Buddha also stopped believing that one caste was better than the others, and he followed *ahimsa* (nonviolence). Buddhism became a way of life, a way to reach enlightenment. When he reached enlightenment, it is said that he could have chosen to leave the earth, but he remained to teach others the path to Nirvana. Buddhists, however, do say that the Buddha did not die but rather “passed away” at the age of 80. He was cremated, and his ashes were placed in special burial mounds called *stupas*. His followers (*Sangha*), similar to Jesus’ “apostles,” were left on Earth to instruct other generations in the path to enlightenment. Today, the *Sangha* are the Buddhist monks and nuns.

The Spread of Buddhism

In 273 BCE, Emperor Ashoka became ruler of India. He fought in many wars and became disheartened by the suffering he witnessed. As a result, he converted to Buddhism and encouraged the public to follow the teachings of the Buddha as well. He sent monks and nuns to travel from place to place teaching the way to enlightenment. Even Asoka’s son and daughter traveled to Sri Lanka to teach Buddhism. Emperor Asoka also placed pillars with Buddhist writings at the various places the Buddha had visited. He persuaded people to go on pilgrimages to those locations. As monks and nuns journeyed around Asia, different groups began to place an emphasis on different aspects of Buddhism: meditating, studying the Buddha’s life, performing acts of mercy, and loving one’s fellow humans. The Buddha even became worshipped as a divine being, though he did not believe himself to be more than human.