The concept of Buddhism was created about three centuries ago to identify what we now know to be a pan-Asian religious tradition that dates back some twenty-five hundred years. Although the concept, rather recent and European in origin, has gradually, if sometimes begrudgingly, received global acceptance, there is still no consensus about its definition. We can, however, identify two complementary meanings that have consistently informed its use. First, it groups together the thoughts, practices, institutions, and values that over the centuries have—using a phrase coined by the French Buddhologist Louis de La Vallée Poussin—"condensed around the name of the Buddha." The implicit conclusion of this usage is that Buddhism is, in short, whatever Buddhist men and women have said, done, and held dear. Second, the concept suggests some unifying character or order in the overwhelming diversity encompassed by the first usage. The beginning of this ordering process has often been to consider Buddhism as an example of larger categories, and thus Buddhism has been variously labeled a religion, a philosophy, a civilization, or a culture. It must be admitted, however, that no single ordering principle has been found that takes full account of the data included within the first meaning. This admission stands as a rebuke of the limitations of our current understanding, and as a continuing challenge to go further in our descriptions and explanations.

When the first meaning of Buddhism, which emphasizes its encompassment of accumulated traditions, is placed in the foreground, the resulting conception is indeed comprehensive. The further scholarship proceeds, the more comprehensive this conception becomes, because Buddhists have done in the name of the Buddha almost everything that other humans have done. Buddhists have, of course, been concerned with living religiously, some with the aim of salvation, and they have created traditions of belief and practice that help to realize these aspirations. But they have been concerned with much more as well. Buddhists have built cities sanctified by monuments dedicated to the Buddha and they have cultivated their crops using blessings that invoke his name. They have written self-consciously Buddhist poems and plays as well as highly technical works of grammar and logic that begin with invocations to the Buddha. They have commended nonviolence, but they have also gone to war with the name of Buddha on their lips. They have valued celibacy, but have also written erotic manuals and rejoiced in family life, all in the name of...
The transformation of egocentricity of the dominating personification function is now

progressing, as the integration of perception and action is emerging. This can be

observed in the way the individual perceives the world and makes sense of it, as well

as in their actions and behaviors. The transformation is not only evident in the

individual level but also in the collective and societal level, as it influences the way

people interact and form relationships. This process is ongoing and requires

continuous reflection and adaptation.
Buddhism as Sectarian Religion

Buddhism began around the fifth or fourth century BCE as a small community that developed at a certain distance, both self-perceived and real, from other contemporary religious communities, as well as from the society, civilization, and culture with which it coexisted. Thus, we have chosen to characterize the Buddhism of this period as "sectarian." It is quite probable that Buddhism remained basically a sectarian religion until the time of King Atoka (third century BCE). Whether this was a period of approximately two hundred years, as some scholars, dating the death of the Buddha around 486 BCE, maintain, or of approximately one hundred years (accepting a death date around a century later) as others contend, it was by all accounts a crucial period in which many elements and patterns were established that have remained fundamental to subsequent phases of Buddhist thought and life. Despite the importance of this early phase of Buddhist history, our knowledge about it remains sketchy and uncertain. Three topics can suggest what we do know: the source of authority that the new Buddhist community recognized; the pattern of development in its teaching and ecclesiastical structures, and the attitude it took toward matters of political and social order. In discussing these three topics we shall identify some of the main scholarly opinions concerning them.

One primary factor that both accounts for and expresses Buddhism’s emergence as a new sectarian religion rather than simply a new Hindu movement is the community’s recognition of the ascetic Gautama as the Buddha ("enlightened one") and of the words that he had reportedly uttered as a new and ultimate source of sacred authority. The recognition of the Buddha’s authority was based on an acceptance of the actuality and relative uniqueness of his person and career, and of his enlightenment experience in particular. [See Buddha and Tathāgata.] It was based on the conviction that through his enlightenment he had gained insight into the Dharma (the Truth). [See Dharma, article on Buddhist Dharma and Dhammas.] This included the aspect of truth that he had formulated more "philosophically" as, for example, in the teaching concerning the dependent co-originations (pratīyā samutpāda) of the various elements that constitute reality, and also the aspect of truth he had formulated more soteriologically, as summarized, for example, in the classic delineation of the Four Noble Truths (that reality is permeated with suffering, that desire is the cause of suffering, that the cessation of suffering is a possibility, and that there is a path that leads to a cessation of suffering). [See Soul, article on Buddhist Concepts; Pattiya samutpāda; Four Noble Truths; Eightfold Path; and Arahant.] Finally, the Buddha’s authority was based on the confidence that the teachings and actions that had flowed from his enlightenment had been accurately transmitted by those who had heard and seen them. [See Sangha, overview article, and Vinaya.]

From certain stories preserved in the tradition it seems that there were some challenges to the Buddha’s authority. For example, there are numerous reports that even during his own lifetime a more ascetically inclined cousin named Devadatta tried to take over leadership of the new movement. Such challenges were successfully met by the Buddha and by those who carried on the tradition. As a result, later controversies concerned not so much the authority of his teachings and actions as their content and correct interpretation.

There is less scholarly agreement concerning the more specific content of the early Buddhist teaching and about the closely related question of the structure of the early Buddhist community. Three conflicting interpretations have been set forth, each defended on the basis of detailed textual critical research. Some scholars have maintained that early Buddhism was a movement of philosophically oriented renunciants practicing a discipline of salvation that subsequently degenerated into a popular religion. A second group has contended that Buddhism was originally a popular religious movement that took form around the Buddha and his religiously inspiring message, a movement that was subsequently co-opted by a monastic elite that transformed it into a rather hilitless clerical institution. A third group has argued that as far back as there is evidence, early Buddhist teaching combined philosophical and popular elements, and that during the earliest period that we can penetrate, the Buddhist community included both a significant monastic and a significant lay component. This argument, which is most convincing, has included the suggestion that the philosophical/monastic and monastic/lay dichotomies should actually be seen as complements rather than oppositions, even though the understandings of the relative importance of these elements and their interrelationships have varied from the beginning of the Buddhist movement.

By the time of the Second Buddhist Council, held in the city of Vesali, probably in the fourth century BCE, the Buddhist community already encompassed two competing assemblies whose members espoused positions that correspond to the modern scholarly group of those who associate the "original" or "true" Buddhism with an elite monastic tradition, and those who associate it with a more democratic and populist tradition. [See Councils, article on Buddhist Councils.] A split occurred at or shortly after the Second Council; those who adhered to the former position came to be known in Sanskrit as Sāvittavādins (Pali, Theravādins), the proponents of the Way of the Elders, while those who adhered to the latter position came to be known as the Mahāsāṃghikas (Members of the Great Assembly).

The third area of discussion about early Buddhism has focused on its sectarian character. While it is not disputed that during the pre-Asonian period the Buddhist community was a specifically religious community only tangentially involved with issues of political order and social organization, it is not clear whether this distance was a matter of principle or simply an accident of history. Some scholars have argued that early Buddhism was so preoccupied with individual salvation, and the early monastic order so oriented toward "otherworldly" attainments, that early Budd-
Buddhism as Civilizational Religion

Buddhism has never lost the imprint of the sectarian pattern that characterized its earliest history, largely because the sectarian pattern has been reasserted at various points in Buddhist history. But Buddhism did not remain a purely sectarian religion.

With the reign of King Ashoka, Buddhism entered a new phase of its history in which it became what we have chosen to call a "civilizational religion," that is, a religion that was associated with a sophisticated high culture and that transcended the boundaries of local regions and polities. By the beginning of the common era Buddhism's civilizational character was well established in various areas of India and beyond. By the middle centuries of the first millennium CE, Buddhism as a civilizational religion had reached a high level of development across Asia. However, the signs of the transition to a new stage had already begun to appear by the sixth and seventh centuries CE.

HISTORY AND LEGEND OF THE ASOKAN IMPACT

Ashoka (r. circa 270–232 BCE) was the third ruler in a line of Mauryan emperors who established the first pan-Indian empire through military conquest. In one of the many inscriptions that provide the best evidence regarding his amity and actual policies, Ashoka renounced further violent conquests and made a commitment to the practice and propagation of Dharma. In other inscriptions Ashoka informs his subjects concerning the basic moral principles that form his vision of the Dharma; he mentions related meditational practices that he commends to his subjects as well as festivals of Dharma that he sponsored. He also tells of sending special representatives to ensure that the Dharma was appropriately practiced and taught by various religious communities within his realm.

It would seem from Ashoka's inscriptions that the Dharma that he officially affirmed and propagated was not identical to the Buddhist Dharma, although it was associated with it, especially insofar as Buddhist teaching impinged on the behavior of the laity. However, the inscriptions give clear evidence that if Ashoka was not personally a Buddhist when he made his first commitment to the Dharma, he became so soon thereafter. His edicts indicate that he sponsored Buddhist missions to various areas not only within his own empire, but in the Greek-ruled areas of the northeast and in Sri Lanka to the south. They indicate that he maintained a special interest in the well-being and unity of the Buddhist sangha, that he was concerned to emphasize the importance of Buddhist texts that dealt with lay morality, and that he undertook a royal pilgrimage to the sites associated with the great events in the Buddha's life.

Ashoka's actual policies and actions represent only one aspect of his impact in facilitating the transition of Buddhism from a sectarian religion to a civilizational religion. The other aspect is evidenced in the legends of Ashoka that appeared within the Buddhist community in the period following his death. These legends vary in character from one Buddhist tradition to another. For example, the Theravadins present an idealized portrait of Ashoka and depict him as a strong supporter of their own traditions. Another widely disseminated Ashokan text, the Abhidhammattha, composed in Northwest India probably in a Sarvastivada context, depicts an equally imposing but more ambivalent figure, sometimes cruel in behavior and ugly in appearance. But all of the various Ashokan legends present in dramatic form an ideal of Buddhist kingship correlated with an imperial Buddhism that is truly civilizational in character. [See Cakrawarti; Sangha, article on Sangha and Society; Kingship, article on Kingship in Southeast Asia; and the biography of Ashoka.]

During the Asokan and immediately post-Asokan eras there are at least three specific developments that sustained the transformation of Buddhism into a civilizational religion. The first, a realignment in the structure of the religious community, involved an innovation in the relationship and balance between the monastic order and its lay supporters. [See Monasticism, article on Buddhist Monasticism.] Prior to the time of Ashoka the monastic order was, from an organizational point of view, the focus of Buddhist community life; the laity, however important its role may have been, lacked any kind of independent institutional structure. As a result of the Asokan experience, including both historical events and the idealized example he set as a devout believer par excellence in the affairs of the sangha, the Buddhist state came to provide (sometimes as a hoped-for possibility, at other times as a・ necessary reality) an independent institution that could serve as a lay counterpart and counterbalance to the order of monks. In addition, this realignment in the structure of the Buddhist community fostered the emergence of an important crosscutting distinction between monks and laypersons who were participants in the imperial-civilizational elite on the one hand, and ordinary monks and laypersons on the other.

The transformation of Buddhism into a civilizational religion also involved doctrinal and scholastic factors. During the Asokan and post-Asokan periods, factors within the monastic community began to formulate aspects of the teachings more precisely, to develop those teachings into philosophies that attempted to explain all of reality in a coherent and logically defensible manner. As a result, the literature in which the community preserved its memory of the sermons of the Buddha (the Sutta) and of his instructions concerning the monastic order (Vinaya) came to be supplemented by new scholastic texts known as Abhidharma ("higher Dharma"). [The formation of the canon, the range of Buddhist texts, and the problems found in their interpretation are treated Buddhist Literature.] Given the philosophical ambiguities of the received traditions, it was inevitable that contradictory doctrines would be put forward and that different religio-philosophical systems would be generated. This led to controversies within the community, and these controversies led to the proliferation of Buddhist schools and subschools, probably in conjunction with other more mundane disputes that we do not have sufficient data to reconstruct.

Some sources list a total of eighteen schools without any consistency in names. The institutional and ideological boundaries between groups and subgroups were prob-
ably very fluid. [See Buddhism, Schools of, article on Hinayana Buddhism; Mahayana; Sarvastivada; Sautrantika; and Theravada.]

Developments in the areas of symbolism, architecture, and ritual were also significant components in the transformation of Buddhism into a civilizational religion. Some changes were related to the support Buddhism received from its royal and elite supporters. For example, royal and elite patronage seems to have been crucial to the emergence of large monastic establishments throughout India. Such support was also a central factor in the proliferation of stupas (Skt., stūpas), memorial monuments replete with cosmological and associated royal symbolism that represented the Buddha and were, in most cases, believed to contain a portion of his relics. These stupas were an appropriate setting for the development of Buddhist art in which the Buddha was represented in iconic forms such as a footprint, a Bodhi ("enlightenment") Tree, a royal throne, the wheel of the Dharma, and the like. Morti making and related rituals proliferated and assumed new forms around these stupas. Pilgrimages to the sacred sites associated with the great events of the Buddha’s life became more popular. The veneration and contemplation of stupas and other symbolic representations of the Buddha became increasingly widespread. Moreover, the notion of merit making itself was expanded so that it came to include not only merit making for oneself but the transfer of merit to deceased relatives and others was well. [See also Iconography, article on Buddhist Iconography; Pilgrimage, article on Buddhist Pilgrimage in South and Southeast Asia; Temple, article on Buddhist Temple Compounds; Stupa Worship, andMerit, article on Buddhist Concepts.]

IMPERIAL BUDDHISM REASSERTED AND TRANSCENDED

Despite the importance of Asoka to the history of Buddhism, the imperial order that he established persisted only a short time after his death. Within fifty years of his death (i.e., by the year 186 BCE), the Buddhist-oriented Mauryan dynasty collapsed and was replaced by the Śaṅkha dynasty, more supportive of Brahmanistic Hindu traditions. The Buddhist texts claim that the Śaṅkha kings undertook a persecution of Buddhism, although the force of any such persecution is rendered dubious by the fact that Buddhist and Buddhist institutions continued to flourish and develop within the territory ruled by the Śaṅkhas. Moreover, Buddhism emerged as a dominant religion in areas outside northeastern India where the Śaṅkhas were unable to maintain the authority and prestige that their Mauryan predecessors had enjoyed.

During the three centuries from the second century BCE through the first century CE Buddhism became a powerful religious force in virtually all of India, from the southern tip of the peninsula to the Indo-Greek areas in the northwest, and in Sri Lanka and Central Asia as well. [See Missions, article on Buddhist Missions.] New political entities seeking to secure their control over culturally plural areas emulated Asoka’s example and adopted Buddhism as an imperial religion. This happened in Sri Lanka, probably during the period when the Mahāyāna emerged as a major body of teachings. It happened in central India when the rising Śrāvaka tradition became a supporter of the Buddhist cause. It happened to some extent in northern India when certain Greek and invading Central Asian kings converted to Buddhism. And it happened more fully in northeastern India during and after the reign of King Kanishka (first to second century CE), who ruled over a vast Kushan empire that extended from northern India deep into Central Asia. By this time Buddhism had also begun to penetrate into trading centers in northern China and to spread along land and sea routes across Southeast Asia to South China as well.

A major aspect of the transformation of Buddhism into a fully civilizational religion was the differentiation that occurred between Buddhism as a civilizational religion and Buddhism as an imperial religion. During the Mauryan period, the civilizational and imperial dimensions had not been clearly differentiated. However, by the beginning of the common era Buddhism had become a civilizational religion that transcended the various expressions of imperial Buddhism in particular geographical areas. As a direct correlate of this development, an important distinction was generated within the elite of the Buddhist community. By this period this elite had come to include both a truly civilizational component that maintained close international contacts and traveled freely from one Buddhist empire to another and beyond, as well as overlapping but distinguishable imperial components that operated within the framework of each particular empire.

At this time Buddhist texts and teachings were being extended in a variety of ways. In some schools, such as the Theravāda and the Sarvastivāda, canons of authoritative texts were established, but even after this had occurred new elements continued to be incorporated into the tradition through commentaries. In the case of the Sarvastivada, a huge collection of commentaries known as the Mahābodhiśatva was compiled at a Buddhist council held by King Kanishka. In other schools the Pitakas themselves were still being enriched by the incorporation of a variety of new additions and embellishments. There also began to appear, on the fringes of the established schools, a new kind of śāstra that signified the rise of a new Buddhist orientation that came to be known as the Mahāyāna. [See Buddhism, Schools of, article on Mahāyāna Buddhism.] The earliest of these were the Pāli Abhidhamma Śāstras, which put forward the doctrine of nātya (the ultimate "emptiness" of all phenomena) and proclaimed the path of the bodhisattva (future Buddha) as the path that all Buddhists should follow. [See Bodhisattva Path.] Before the end of the second century CE, the great Buddhist philosophers Nāgārjuna had given the perspective of these śāstras a systematic expression and thereby established a basis for the first of the major Mahāyāna schools, known as Mahāyāna. [See Mahāyāna: Śūnyatā and Śūnyatā, and the biography of Nāgārjuna.]

This extension of Buddha traditions of texts and teachings was accompanied by two other developments that also contributed to their civilizational efficacy. During this period the older Buddhist schools (hereafter collectively called the Hinayāna) that had previously limited themselves to the oral transmission of tradition, and the newly emerging Mahāyāna fraeteries as well, began to commit their versions of the Buddha’s teachings to writing. Some Buddhist groups began to translate and write their most authoritative texts in Sanskrit, which had become the preeminent civilizational language in India.

The rapid development of Buddhism led to major changes in Buddhist ways of representing the Buddha and relating to him ritually. Some Hinayana schools produced autonomous biographies of the Buddha. The most famous of the biographies is the Buddhabarana (Acts of the Buddha), by Aṭṭhakota, written in refined Sanskrit in a classic literary form (kavya). The Hinayana schools provided the context for the production of anthropomorphic images of the Buddha, which became a major focal point for sophisticated artistic expression on the one hand, and for veneration and
devotion on the other. These schools also made a place within the Buddhist system for a new and very important figure who became a focus for new forms of devotional practice and, in later phases of Buddhist history, new forms of religio-political symbolism and activity as well. This new figure was the future Buddha Maitreya (“the friendly one”), who was believed to be residing in the Tuṣita Heaven awaiting the appropriate time to descend to earth. [See Maitreya.] By the beginning of the common era other buddhological trends were beginning to surface that were exclusively Mahāyāna in character. For example, sūtras were beginning to appear that focused attention on a celestial Buddha named Amitabha (“infinite light”) and portrayed practices of visualization that could lead to rebirth in the western paradise over which he presided. [See Amitābha and Pure and Impure Lands.]

Closely associated developments were taking place at the level of cosmology and its application to religious practice. In the Hinayāna context the most important development was probably the rich portrayal of a set of six cosmological gats or “destinies” (of gods, humans, animals, asuras or titans, hungry ghosts, and beings who are consigned to hell), which depicted, in vivid fashion, the workings of karmic (moral action and its effects). [See Karmic, article on Buddhist Concepts.] These texts, which were probably used as the basis for sermons, strongly encouraged Buddhist morality and Buddhist merit-making activities. Other Hinayāna works of the period suggested the presence of a vast expanse of worlds that coexist with our own. In the new Mahāyāna context this notion of a plurality of worlds was moved into the foreground, the existence of Buddhas at least some of these other worlds was recognized, and the significance of these Buddhas for life in our own world was both affirmed and described. [See Cosmology, article on Buddhist Cosmology.] Finally, there are indications that during this period both Hinayāna and Mahāyāna Buddhists increasingly employed ecstatic rituals that depended on the magical power of various kinds of chants and spells (paritī in Pali, dhārāṇī in Sanskrit).

Buddhism as Pan-Asian Civilization

From the second to the ninth century, Buddhism enjoyed a period of immense creativity and influence. Prior to the beginning of the sixth century, Buddhist fortunes were generally on the rise. Buddhism flourished in Sri Lanka, India, and Central Asia. Through already familiar processes involving its introduction along trade routes, its assimilation to indigenous beliefs and practices, and its adoption as an imperial religion, Buddhism became firmly entrenched in both northern and southern China and in many parts of Southeast Asia. After about 800 C.E., these well-established dynamics of expansion continued to operate. Buddhism became the preeminent religion in a newly united Chinese empire, it continued its spread in parts of Southeast Asia, and it was established in important new areas, first in Japan and then in Tibet. However, during this latter period its successes were coupled with setbacks, and by the middle of the ninth century the era of Buddhism as a pan-Asian civilization was rapidly drawing to a close.

The geographical expansion of Buddhism was both a cause and an effect of its civilization-character. But Buddhism’s role as a pan-Asian civilization involved much more than a pan-Asian presence. Buddhist monasteries, often once supported and located near capitals of the various Buddhist kingdoms, functioned in ways analogous to modern universities. There was a constant circulation of Buddhist monks, texts, and artistic forms across increasingly vast geographical areas. Indian and Central Asian missionaries traveled to China and with the help of Chinese Buddhists translated whole libraries of books into Chinese, which became a third major Buddhist sacred language alongside Pali and Sanskrit. In the fifth century Buddhists carried their ordination lineage from Sri Lanka to China. Between 400 and 700 a stream of Chinese pilgrims traveled to India via Central Asia and Southeast Asia in order to visit sacred sites and monasteries and to collect additional scriptures and commentaries. Some of these, such as Fa-hsien, Hsuan-tsang, and I-ching, wrote travel accounts that provide information concerning Buddhist civilization in its fullest development. In the sixth century Buddhism was formally introduced into Japan, in the following century Buddhist Texts from Central Asia, India, and China made their way into Tibet. Beginning in the eighth and ninth centuries monks from Japan visited China in order to receive Buddhist training and acquire Buddhist texts. These are only a few illustrations of the kind of travel and interaction that characterized this period. [See the biographies of Fa-hsien, Hsuan-tsang, and I-ching.]

While Buddhism was reaching its apogee as a civilizational religion, the teachings of the Hinayāna tradition were further extended and refined. New commentaries were produced in both Sanskrit and in Pali. During the fifth century these commentaries were supplemented by the appearance of two very important manuals, Vasubandhu’s Abhidharmakosa, composed in the Sarvastivadinsa-Saṃkhyakāla context in Northwest India, and Buddhaghosa’s Visuddhimagga (Path of Purification), written in the Theravāda context in Sri Lanka. [See the biographies of Vasubandhu and Buddhaghosa.] Moreover, many Hinayāna themes remained basic to the other Buddhist traditions with which it coexisted. Most Buddhists continued to recognize the Buddha Gautama as an important figure, and to focus attention on the single-world cosmology that postulated the existence of three realms—the realm beyond form associated with the most exalted gods and the highest meditational states, the realm of form associated with slightly less exalted gods and meditational states, and the realm of desire constituted by the six gats previously mentioned. This latter realm was especially prominent as the context presumed by pan-Buddhist teachings concerning karmic retribution and the value of giving, particularly to the members of the monastic community.

Within the Mahāyāna tradition this period of Buddhist efflorescence as a civilizational religion was characterized by a high level of creativity and by a variety of efforts toward systematization. In the earlier centuries the Mahāyāna produced a rich and extensive collection of new sūtras, including the Saddharma-pundarikāsūtra (Lotus of the True Law), the Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra, the Lankāvaśāya Sūtra, and the Avatamsaka Sūtra. With the passage of time, voluminous commentaries were written on many of these sūtras in India, Central Asia, and China. These sūtras and commentaries developed new teachings concerning the emptiness of the phenomenal world, the storehouse consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna), and the “embryo of the Tathāgata” (tathāgata-garbha). [See Nāya-viśāma and Tathāgata-garbha.] These teachings were given scholastic forms in various Mahāyāna groups such as the Mahāyana and Yogācāra schools, which originated in India, and the Tien-tai and Huayen schools, which originated in China. [See Yogācāra; Tien-t’ai; and Huayen.]
In addition, these stūpas and commentaries recognized a vast pantheon of Buddhas and bodhisattvas (future Buddhas) and acknowledged the existence of a plurality, even an infinity, of worlds. Some went on to affirm the reality of an eternal, cosmic Buddha whom they took to be the ultimate source of these innumerable Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and worlds (and of all else as well!). Some of these texts highlighted various kinds of soteriological help that particular Buddhas and bodhisattvas could provide to those who sought their aid. In addition to Maitreya and Amitābha, mentioned above, other Buddhas and bodhisattvas who became particularly important include Bhaisajyaguru (the Buddha of healing), Avalokiteśvara (the bodhisattva exemplar of compassion), Mañjuśrī (the bodhisattva patron of the wise), and Kṣitigarbha (the bodhisattva who specialized in assisting those who suffer in hell). [See Bhaisajyaguru; Avalokiteśvara; Mañjuśrī; Kṣitigarbha; and Celestial Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.]

By the second half of the first millennium CE a new strand of Buddhist tradition, the Vajrayāna, or Esoteric Vehicle, began to come into its own on the subcontinent. This new vehicle accepted the basic orientation of the Mahāyāna, but supplemented Mahāyāna insights with "new and dramatic forms of practice, many of them esoteric in character. The appearance of this new Buddhist vehicle was closely associated with the composition of new texts, including new stūpas (e.g., the Mahāsthāmaprāpta Stūra), and the new ritual manuals known as tantras. By the eighth and ninth centuries this new vehicle had spread through virtually the entire Buddhist world and was preserved especially in Japan and Tibet. But before the process of systematization of the Vajrayāna could proceed very far the infrastructure that constituted Buddhist civilization began to break down, thus at least partially accounting for the change in form that this tradition took in Tibet and in Japan, where it became known as Shingon. [See Buddhism, Schools of, article on Esoteric Buddhism and Mahāyāna.]

During the period of its hegemony as a pan-Asian civilization, Buddhism retained a considerable degree of unity across both the regional and text-oriented boundaries that delimited particular Buddhist traditions. In each cultural area and in each of the three yānas there were ascetics and contemplatives who practiced Buddhist meditation; there were ecclesiastics and moralists whose primary concern was Buddhist discipline; there were Japanists, and the Bons in Tibet, who responded to it with their own innovations shaped by Buddhist ideas and values. [See the articles on these traditions.] During this period, in other words, Buddhism set the standards, religious, philosophical, artistic, and so on, to which a whole range of other Asian traditions were forced to respond. Buddhism also served as a civilizational religion by encompassing other elements—logic, medicine, grammar, and technology, to name but a few—that made it attractive to individuals and groups, including many rulers and members of various Asian aristocracies who had little or no interest in the spiritual aspect of religion.

Buddhism as Cultural Religion

For more than a thousand years, from the time of King Ashoka to about the ninth century, Buddhism exhibited a civilizational form that began as pan-Indian and ultimately became pan-Asian in character. Like the sectarian pattern that preceded it, this civilizational pattern left an indelible mark on all subsequent Buddhist developments. Buddhism never completely lost either its concern for inclusiveness or its distinctively international flavor. But beginning in about the fifth century the civilizational structure suffered increasingly severe disruptions, and a new pattern began to emerge. All across Asia, Buddhism was gradually transformed, through a variety of historical processes, into what we have chosen to call "cultural religion."

The Period of Transition

Buddhist civilization, which characteristically strove for both comprehensiveness and systematic order, was dependent on the security and material prosperity of a relatively small number of great monasteries and monastic universities that maintained close contact with one another and shared common interests and values. This institutional base was, in fact, quite fragile, as was demonstrated when historical events threatened the well-being of these monasteries and their residents. New developments arose within the Buddhist community as a result of these vicissitudes, developments that eventually transformed Buddhism into a series of discrete cultural traditions.

Some indication of these developments can be seen quite early, even as Buddhist civilization was at the peak of its brilliance. Events in Central Asia during the fifth and sixth centuries were not favorable to the Buddhist kingdoms along the Silk Route that connected Northwest India and northern China. These kingdoms were invaded and in some cases conquered by different nomadic peoples such as the Huns, who also invaded India and the Roman empire. The Chinese pilgrim Hsian-tsang, who visited Sogdiana in 630, saw only ruins of Buddhist temples and former Buddhist monasteries that had been given over to the Zoroastrians.

The instability in the crucial linking area between India and China during the fifth and sixth centuries was too great to have been sufficient to wean Buddhism's civilizational structure. For the first time we see the emergence of new Buddhist schools in China that are distinctively Chinese. The appearance of synthetic Chinese schools like Tien-t'ai and Huayan suggests a continuation of the civilizational orientation. These schools sought to reconcile the diverse views found in Buddhist literature through an extended elaboration of different levels of teaching. This, of course, casts Buddhist Buddhism as a civilizational religion, but the manner of reconciliation reflects a style of harmonization that is distinctively Chinese.

The increasing importance of Tantra in late Indian Buddhism and the success of the Pure Land (Ching-t'u) and Ch'an (Zen) schools in China during the Sui and Tang period (581-907) are further indications that the Buddhist tradition was becoming more local in self-definition. [See Ching-t'u and Ch'an.] Chinese Buddhism had a new independent spirit in contrast to the earlier India-centered Buddhism. Moreover, the new movements that emerged at that time seem to be the result of a long development that took place apart from the major cosmopolitan centers. Far more than in the past, expressions of Buddhism were being made at all levels of particular societies, and there was a new concern for the interrelation of those levels within each society.