THE SPREAD OF BUDDHISM

In the course of the last 2600 years, Buddhism spread from India through various Asian countries. However, it disappeared in its country of origin, India, due to Islamic conquests in the 11th and 12th centuries. Attempts to make Buddhism accessible to a larger amount of interested people in the 19th century, mostly Theravada, in Central Europe and the USA, failed largely because of the living conditions at the time and the lack of authentic transmission. In Tibet, 99.9% of the Buddhist infrastructure was destroyed in the mid-20th century due to Chinese invasion. Since the 1970s, Buddhism has become increasingly popular, especially in Western countries.

No direct written sources exist of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, who lived around 560 BC. His disciples kept the teachings in memory and wrote them down after his death. Buddhist historiography is therefore based on both texts and oral transmissions.

After his enlightenment, the Buddha wandered around northern India teaching for 45 years. In the first years he taught mainly the basics of the Path of the Elders (Theravada), which aims at liberation from personal suffering. Building on this was the teaching of the Great Way (Mahayana), centered on compassion and wisdom. Finally, Buddha also taught the Diamond Way (Vajrayana), which aims directly at the realization of Buddha nature, that is, all the qualities inherent in the mind.

The Path of the Elders spread in the following centuries in India and later far beyond the country's borders. In the 1st century A.D., the teachings of the Great Way became increasingly known in northern India, where they experienced their spiritual heyday from the 5th century onward. After being passed on only from teacher to student in India, the Buddhist teachings first became known in Tibet in the form of the Diamond Way around the 8th century.

In the 11th and 12th centuries A.D., Buddhism was consolidated in Southeast Asian countries as the Way of the Elders (Theravada, also "Southern Buddhism"). In the areas north and east of India, the Great Way and the Diamond Way (also "northern Buddhism") spread.

Buddhism was lost in its country of origin during this period. In the eleventh century, Turkic peoples (the Ghurids) began to take control of India from the northwest. As a result, Buddhism disappeared in Kashmir by the thirteenth century. Teachers and practitioners fled east to the central Indian plains or across the mountains to Tibet. A good hundred years later, the conquerors finally ruled over much of northern India. In the final phase of Indian Buddhism, the lineage holders made every effort to fully transmit the teaching to those countries that had opened themselves to it. In all the countries that embraced Buddhism, it shaped the culture for centuries, if not for a whole millennium, right up to our own time (an exception to this is Indonesia, which became Muslim in the 14th/15th centuries. Here Buddhism lasted for a total of 900 years). Thus Buddhism today unites an extraordinarily rich spiritual life from two and a half millennia with very different cultural backgrounds.

Buddhism grew strong where people were open to it. After Buddha's death, his disciples continued to spread the teaching. The Indian monastic university of Nalanda became the spiritual center of the new movement for a whole millennium. Traveling merchants brought Buddhism to other countries, which then invited scholars from India. Sometimes kings from different regions supported the new teaching, such as Ashoka in India (304 - 232 BC), Songtsen Gampo (604 - 650) and Trisong Detsen (742 - 796) in Tibet, or the Chinese emperor Yung-lo (1360 - 1424). Another important factor in the geographical expansion of Buddhism beyond India was the codification of Buddhist texts. This allowed them to form the basis for the study of Buddhist philosophy and to be widely disseminated. Later, the emergence of Buddhism in other regions of the world was very different: In the 16th/17th century, Mongolian tribes brought the teachings of the Great Way and Diamond Way to what is now Mongolia and Russia. In the USA, on the other hand, it was mainly immigrant Koreans and Chinese, the latter founding the first Buddhist center in San Francisco in the mid-19th century.

At the same time, the first delicate approaches to Buddhism emerged in the German-speaking world among the upper middle classes and in artistic circles. Arthur Schopenhauer (1788 - 1860; "The world exists in consciousness") spoke of "Buddhaism", Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 - 1900), Richard Wagner (1813 - 1873), Rainer Maria Rilke (1875 - 1926), C.G. Jung (1875 - 1961) and Hermann Hesse (1877 - 1962) likewise showed a strong inclination towards Buddhism.

The hippie era, the search for new levels of consciousness by means of drugs, protests against the Vietnam War, peace demonstrations at the time of the Cold War, music with all its extreme manifestations (e.g. the festival in Woodstock), the student and civil rights movements, the politicization of everyday life, the trying out of new ways of life, which in Western Europe and North America expressed a break with the encrusted old traditions and the urge for individual freedom, testified to the changed consciousness of the young generation in the 1960s. Part of this freedom movement arose specifically from a desire for intellectual development.

Research and science also opened up to new ways of thinking. For example, newly emerged branches of science are wisdom research, resilience research, and happiness research.
For example, a branch of humanistic psychology that focuses on the potential of human development and is characterized by a free, non-moralizing, and compassion-based attitude is similar to the Buddhist view of inherent qualities. However, psychology generally describes states in the mind, whereas Buddhism ultimately aims at the full realization of the nature of mind.

The scientific findings of quantum physics about entangled particles and their behavior in space ("space is information") can be related to the statements of the historical Buddha about "form is emptiness, emptiness is form" etc.. This may have facilitated the opening to Buddhist views. In general, however, science is more about knowledge, while Buddhism is about experience.

Buddhist teachings have become widely available and popular in many sectors of society. They inspire - often not even explicitly declared as "Buddhist" (e.g. the development of more mindfulness) - and can change people's attitude towards lasting happiness.

Since the late 20th century, Buddhist teachings have spread to many Westernized countries. There are many communities of different Buddhist directions that live Buddha's way in everyday life and continue his teachings in an exemplary way.