

Exhibition

Buddhism illuminated

Most people think the Gutenberg Bible (1455) is the world's earliest printed book. It's the world's earliest book printed with movable metal type, but the earliest reliably dated printed book is a Buddhist text, known in English as the *Diamond Sutra*, printed with woodblocks in Chinese in 868. It is one of the most influential Buddhist texts in east Asia, originally composed in Sanskrit, perhaps as early as the 2nd century. A copy of it was brought in 1909 from the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, near Dunhuang in western China, to the British Museum in the UK.

Today, this text forms a celebrated part of the British Library's large collection of Buddhist art objects, books, and illuminated manuscripts, some on public display for the first time in the library's *Buddhism* exhibition. *Buddhism* covers the history of this religion and its three main schools—Mahayana (mainly found in east Asia and parts of southeast Asia), Theravada (mainly in parts of south and southeast Asia), and Vajrayana (mainly in central Asia, including Tibet)—up to the present day, drawing chiefly on the library's collections on various aspects of the philosophy, practice, and art of Buddhism. They include Edwin Arnold's poetic retelling of the Buddha's life, *The Light of Asia* (1879), which fascinated the Victorians so much that it had more than 100 editions in less than 10 years. Today, more than 500 million people are thought to be Buddhists worldwide. This number can only be an estimate because Buddhism does not formally practise conversion and those who follow Buddhist practices might not choose to regard themselves as followers of Buddhist philosophy. What is certain, is that the countries with the highest proportion of Buddhists are Cambodia, China, Japan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam, and most of the objects in *Buddhism* were created in these countries.

By the time that Buddhism was transmitted to Japan from China, beginning in the sixth century, it was already a millennium old in its place of origin: India. Prince Siddhartha Gautama, the historical figure known as the Buddha after his Enlightenment at Bodhgaya (in modern Bihar state), was born in what is now Nepal some

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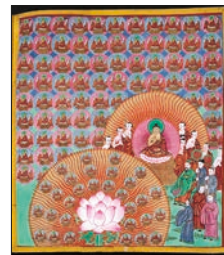
time in the sixth or fifth century BCE (the precise date is disputed). Buddhism then dominated Indian art and architecture for more than a millennium—for example, the sensuous stone sculptures at the Sanchi stupa and the luminous paintings in the Ajanta caves, created between the third century BCE and the seventh century—before puzzlingly declining in India in favour of Hinduism, perhaps partly because the Buddha's “Middle Way” did not endorse caste distinctions. Today, only 0.8% of India's population is Buddhist.

The Indian origin of Buddhism is mentioned surprisingly briefly in the exhibition. In the accompanying book, *Buddhism: Origins, Traditions and Contemporary Life*, jointly edited by the exhibition's two curators, Jana Igunma and San San May, only three out of

the rich variety of illustrations feature India. Curiously, there is no reference to one of modern India's best-known Buddhist sympathisers, its first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, or to the world's most famous living Buddhist, the 14th Dalai Lama, whom Nehru invited to live in India in 1959 after he left Tibet. It almost seems that India is largely overlooked because of Buddhism's decline in the land of its origin—as illustrated in an eye-catching exhibition map that digitally monitors the flow and ebb of Buddhism from ancient times to today.

That said, the exhibition is illuminating for anyone interested in the later history of Buddhism and its current practice. It includes fascinating illustrated palm-leaf manuscripts in the Sanskrit language from 12th-century Nepal, and a gorgeous early 19th-century painting of the annual Perahera procession of the Buddha's Tooth Relic at Kandy in Sri Lanka. In today's Japan, each year in April, sweet tea is poured over a replica of an exquisite eighth-century figure of a child Buddha from Nara standing in an ablution basin, in a ritual to mark what Japanese Buddhists consider to be the birthday of the person whom the poet Rabindranath Tagore called “the greatest man ever born on this earth”.

Andrew Robinson



Woodblock printed work depicting and describing scenes from the life of the Buddha dated 1808. © British Library Board

Buddhism
British Library, London, UK,
until Feb 23, 2020
<https://www.bl.uk/events/Buddhism>

Andrew Robinson is the author of *India: A Short History*, published in paperback by Thames & Hudson in 2019.



Painting of the Annual Procession of Buddha's Tooth Relic, Asala Perahera, at Kandy, Sri Lanka, 1796-1815. © British Library Board