

THE FIRST CIVILIZATION MESOPOTAMIA

The world's first civilization emerged in the late fourth millennium B.C. in southern Iraq, developing urban centers situated along the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Essential breakthroughs that allowed the inhabitants of Sumer to make the transition from the Neolithic Age had occurred in the previous millennium. In that period organized communal effort permitted the construction of elaborate irrigation and flood control systems.

This allowed the Sumerians to transform flood-prone marshy lands and surrounding patches of desert into rich farmland. Agricultural surpluses generated population increases which in turn allowed small Neolithic villages to evolve into independent city-states. Controlled initially by priestly hierarchies, these urban centers gradually developed writing and essential political, legal, and economic structures. The transition to urban civilization was hastened by the discovery of bronze and by important technological inventions (wheeled vehicles, the potter's wheel, animal-drawn plows, and the sailboat). These in turn fostered craft specializations and class divisions.

The Greek name Mesopotamia (the land between the rivers) was commonly applied to the entire Tigris-Euphrates valley, which formed a single cultural region. Devoid of natural barriers, Mesopotamia was subject to intermittent raids by Semitic-speaking tribes from the Arabian peninsula to the southwest, and by Indo-European herders from the Zagros Mountains to the northeast.

THE SUMERIANS (3200-2334 B.C.)

Although we know little about the origins of these people, it is clear that the region called Sumer was organized politically into numerous autonomous city-states or temple communities by 3000 B.C.

POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

Initially, a secular ruler and priests jointly ruled each city-state. This eventually gave way to sole rule by an autocratic king who claimed rule by divine sanction. Frequent wars between communities over dispute water rights and land boundaries enhanced the power of the warrior (hunter) kings. If a powerful king attempted to impose regional political unity, his threatened neighbors tried to form military alliances to thwart him.

Periodic attempts to unify Sumer by kings from Ur, Umma, Erech and Lagash proved futile. This continuous warfare weakened the city-states setting the stage for invading Akkadians and Babylonians.

ECONOMIC ORGANIZATION

Each city-state was self-sufficient in meeting local demands for food and manufacture of goods. But the absence of raw materials such as stone, timber and metals forced Sumerian city-states to engage in international trade. Availing themselves of inland and maritime routes, Sumerian merchants established a trade zone that extended throughout west Asia and eastward into the Iranian plateau, and India. They also developed economic activities such as contracts, credit, interest payments, and standardized weights and measures, and a crude uniform money system.

RELIGION

TEMPLES

Sumerian religion provided a cohesive element in the formation of social economic classes and political structures. Temple priests absorbed more than a third of Sumer's wealth (though tithes) and took a leading role in the evolution of Sumerian culture. Each city-state had its founding deity, who owned and ruled the surrounding land with assistance provided by the king and priests. The god or goddess dwelled in massive

multistoried temple complexes called ziggurats. Priests worshipped, fed, clothed and maintained good relations with the gods.

THE GODS

The religion maintained that humans were created by the gods to serve them and received punishment for failure to obey divine commands. The Sumerians gave little concern to the dead. Instead they sought priestly assistance to incur divine favor so they might secure wanted children, live long healthy lives, achieve economic prosperity, victory in battle and escape from natural disasters.

Priestly concern over the nature and power of gods gave rise to myths and legends that enriched Mesopotamia literature. Priestly attempts to ascertain the will of the gods through study and observation of natural phenomena made possible a lunar calendar and the disciplines of astrology and astronomy.

CUNEIFORM WRITING

Sumerian priests responded to practical needs for establishing proof of property rights and for keeping records by inventing a complex writing system in the late fourth millennium B.C. Mastery of the hundreds of abstract signs required intensive study in formal scribal schools and severely limited its use. Now called "cuneiform" because its characters are wedge-shaped, this system was widely used throughout west Asia through the first millennium. Lacking paper, Sumerian scribes wrote on soft-clay tablets. Students in scribal schools produced numerous copies of important texts, many of which were housed in royal archives and are being found today.

THE BABYLONIANS

Because of its success, the Sumerian region was demanded by other regions. To grow in strength, other regions needed to annex territory and the fertile region of Sumer was ripe for the taking. By 1894, the Babylonians had successfully unified the entire regions.

By offering strong central rule and vigorous state-controlled economy, the Babylonian kings promoted regional unity. So, too did the use of a common Akkadian language, Babylonian law and a state religion based on Marduk, the Babylonian god. By 1154 B.C. the Sumer region was overtaken by larger outside empires, which absorbed the culture of the area.

BABYLONIAN CULTURE

Patronized by the Amorite rulers, scribal schools became major centers of learning, which preserved many religious myths, legends, hymns, fables, and proverbs. Scholars engaged in speculative and practical studies that led to advances in mathematics and science.

EPIC OF GILGAMESH

Deriving inspiration from ancient traditions and the Mesopotamia religion, Babylonian scholars produced the world's first epic poem, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, focused on the heroic quest for immortality by the hero, Gilgamesh, king of Uruk (2800 B.C.) Modern readers are particularly fascinated by its flood tale because it shares many similarities with that told in the Bible by the Hebrews.

HAMMURABI'S CODE

The world's first major law code was composed on the orders of Hammurabi, king of Babylon. The 282 case laws in the code amended existing laws, integrating ancient tribal practices both in their perception of crime and in the severity of their penalties. Penalties include retribution in kind (eye for an eye), loss of body parts, or death; some crimes allowed felons to pay monetary fines for crimes.

ANCIENT EGYPT

The Nile basin in the northwest corner of Africa was home to one of the most remarkable civilizations in antiquity. By exploiting the water and mineral nutrients from the Nile River, the ancient Egyptians transformed nearly 10,000 square miles of desert and swamp into rich arable land. Egypt's remarkably stable culture endured for nearly 3,000 years, until eventually converting to Christianity.

GEOGRAPHY

From its sources in central Africa, the 4,000 miles long Nile River flowed unimpeded through Egypt into the Mediterranean Sea. Within Egypt the Nile flows Northward through 525 miles of desert. The southern most part of Egypt, called Upper Egypt, was an enclosed and protected river flood valley up to a dozen miles wide. Just north of modern Cairo, the river branches into several channels and forms a triangular delta of rich marshy plains called Lower Egypt. Approximately 150 miles wide, these plains contain two-thirds of the arable land of Egypt.

Until the building of the Aswan High Dam in the twentieth century, annual floods covered much of Lower and Upper Egypt between July and October. The receding nutrient-laden waters carried away accumulated salt deposits but left behind a rich alluvium that limited the need for fertilizers. Egypt's climate and an elaborate irrigation system permitted the region to produce two or three crops annually. As a consequence Egypt comprised one of the world's richest agricultural areas. The Nile unified Egypt. It served as its principal communication link and facilitated extensive trade and commerce along its banks.

Mountains and deserts surrounding these rich arable lands isolated and protected Egypt to some extent from its hostile neighbors. They allowed Egypt to produce an indigenous civilization that could fully mature before culturally inferior intruders breached the barriers. Throughout most of Egypt's history alien conquerors eventually embraced Egyptian civilization. This combined with traditional native conservatism to minimize outside cultural influences.

Egypt's unique location at the land junction between Africa and the Near East, and the closest connection between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, created a unique mixture of African, Near Eastern and European cultures and ethnic groups.

PREDYNASTIC EGYPT

Limited data cast few insights on the history of Upper and Lower Egypt before 3100 BC. Once the neolithic revolution had extended into Egypt from west Asia, the Egyptians evolved social structures, art and crafts, and political organizations. They formed into a number of independent city-states. Eventually the need for cooperation to build large-scale irrigation works forced these local political units to merge into loose political federations. In the late fourth-millennium these coalitions in Upper and Lower Egypt transformed into kingdoms. The two halves of Egypt were unified around 3100 BC, when Menes, king of Upper Egypt, conquered Lower Egypt.

The predynastic period produced two notable cultural contributions: the world's first solar calendar and the hieroglyphic system of writing. The foundations of many basic building blocks of Egyptian civilization can be traced to this period.

THEOCRATIC GOVERNMENT

The pharaohs exercised autocratic political and religious control, served as high priests and planned and directed the economy. As sole owners of the land, the pharaohs created a command economic system, which allowed them to control production and distribution through administrative means. The state also maintained a monopoly over domestic and foreign trade. To administer their realm the pharaohs relied heavily on an elaborate bureaucracy manned by royal appointees. Royal viziers (ministers) exercised supervisory control over all central administrative departments. As overseers, they curbed the power of

Egypt's regional governors. They also forced the governors to comply fully with royal taxes on agriculture and to provide labor from the masses for the construction of public-works projects.

Despite the awesome attributes and powers of their office, Egyptian pharaohs continually faced the brutal realities of power politics. Failure to produce a male heir, incompetency, and political factionalism could lead to palace coups and even dynastic changes. Four different dynasties ruled Egypt during the Old Kingdom period. Assassinations, military coups and factional struggles allowed interlopers to usurp the throne and to found new dynastic houses once they secured public acceptance of their divine status.

THE STATE RELIGION

By monopolizing Egypt's economy, the pharaohs could divert a major portion of Egypt's wealth into the official state religion. This religion focused on the worship of various manifestations of the sun god (Re, Amon) and the pharaoh. The priests maintained that Egypt would endure so long as its people performed the proper rituals and worshipped the gods through their incarnation as the pharaoh. Religious rites were monopolized by priests and conducted in elaborate temple complexes. The state religion embraced the tenet that the dead king's soul (ka) departed his body and entered into the divine court of the gods in the heavens. Periodically the king's soul returned to the royal corpse. To preserve the king's body as an adequate residence for the eternal soul in the resurrection, Egyptian specialists skillfully devised means to mummify it.

THE PYRAMID AGE

The most remarkable and enduring structures of the Old Kingdom and throughout Egypt's history were the great stone pyramids used to house royal mummies. Imhotep's innovative use of the mud brick mastaba, an above-ground burial structure, gave rise in 2650 BC to pharaoh Zoser's step pyramid, the world's first monumental stone structure. Eventual modifications in design developed into the true pyramid. The Old Kingdom era witnessed the construction of more than 80 pyramids, the largest of which were located at Giza. Realized through amazing engineering feats, immense costs in labor and material, but with limited technology, the pyramids served as silent reminders that deceased pharaohs continued to play a central role in Egypt's welfare.

During the annual flood season, Egyptian serfs freely performed much of the labor on the pyramids as an act of faith to the gods. Still, the extensive construction costs for these royal projects drained the state treasury and took time and capital away from more important economic projects.

EGYPTIAN CULTURE

In his perceptive description of Egypt, the Greek historian Herodotus (484-425 BC) characterized the Egyptians as the most religious people in the world. Religion dominated all aspects of their lives and served as the foundation of Egyptian civilization. Creative and innovative Egyptians focused their energies on spiritual rather than secular matters. As a consequence Egyptian culture was dominated by religion.

RELIGION

In the absence of both formal and canonical sources or descriptive theological works, the fundamental beliefs of the ancient Egyptians are imperfectly known. What is clear is that they created a national religion based on the idea of immortality. In its advanced stage the religion conditionally offered all Egyptians the potential of a glorious life after death. From it the Egyptians derived their ethical system.

Egypt's polytheistic religion was expressed in two major forms: first, an official state religion that centered on the worship of Amon-Re and the pharaoh; second, a popular religion that incorporated worship of a large pantheon of deities including local and household gods. The state religion – the instrument by which the king and his people secured immortality – was practiced in temple sanctuaries closed to the general public. Popular religion was practiced by ordinary Egyptians near temple complexes and focused on the afterlife of the ordinary citizen.

Egypt's pantheon of gods, many of whom represented forces in nature, assumed various forms—human, animal, natural object—that were frequently combined. Some shared common characteristics. After 2000 BC the most popular god was the resurrected Osiris, who reuled over the dead. He was the instrument through which the ordinary Egyptian secured personal salvation. Most commoners believed that personal adherence to a demanding code of moral and ethical conduct was essential to salvation. This allowed their soul to pass judgment after death and to enter an agrarian paradise that shared many similarities with Egypt. To protect their souls in the afterlife the Egyptians relied on special omens and spells collected in *The Book of the Dead*.

WRITING AND LITERATURE

The Egyptians devised a nonalphabetic hieroglyphics (sacred sings) system of writing in the predynastic era. The system employed ideograms (pictures representing an idea rather than an object) and phonetic signs to represent ideas and sounds. It was extensively used in west Asia for commercial and diplomatic purposes (served as foundation of oriental writing systems). Scribes wrote with pen and ink on paper-like papyrus derived from the pulp of a reed. Hieroglyphics ceased to be used only in the sixth century AD, after which the writing system remained incomprehensible until 1822 when J.F. Champollion deciphered by using the bilingual inscriptions on the Rosetta Stone.

The ravages of time have reduced the Egyptian literary output. Most of the surviving texts are sacred literature: the *Pyramid Texts*, *Coffin Texts*, *The Book of the Dead*, underworld literature, magical texts, ritual texts, omen texts, and hymns. In addition, important nonreligious works such as “wisdom” texts, chronicles and historical narratives, administrative texts, discourses covering a variety of subjects, and short stories have survived.

ANCIENT INDIA

Approximately two-fifths of Europe, India consists of three distinct regions: the northernmost Himalayan mountain chain and its foothills, the plains and valleys of the Indus and Ganges rivers (Hindustan), and the rest of the southern triangular peninsular (Deccan), which includes the island of Sri Lanka.

THE HIMALAYAS

The Himalayan mountain plain, the world's highest, arcs north of the 1500 mile wide Hindustani plain, severely restricting overland entry into the subcontinent. Similarly, dense jungles and mountains restrict entry from the east. The Afghan passes in the northwest Himalayas, especially the Khyber Pass, provide India's main land link with Eurasia, allowing numerous invaders to enter the subcontinent and settle there, thus contributing to its cultural, racial and linguistic diversity.

HINDUSTAN

Hindustan, the political and cultural heart of India, consists of two river valleys

Indus River Valley. The western region of the Indus valley, site of India's neolithic revolution and first civilization, contains over 100,000 square miles. It is drained by the snow-fed Indus River and its four main tributaries. However, this entire region receives an annual rainfall that varies from five to twenty inches, large-scale agriculture is possible only through irrigation.

Ganges Plain. Considerably wetter, Hindustan's eastern region envelopes the snow-fed Ganges-Brahmaputra river valleys and contains more than 115,000 square miles of India's best agricultural lands. Eminently suited for rice production, this region became India's most populous once it was cleared and developed. This narrow stretch of land will serve as home to many of India's greatest rulers.

DECCAN

This semitropical peninsula, a large triangular plateau that extends into the Indian Ocean, is agriculturally inferior to North India, possessing inferior soil and water resources. Crops are totally dependent on unpredictable monsoon rains that fall between June and September. Rain in the interior is reduced by the Western and Eastern Ghat mountains along the coasts. This makes inland navigation on the Deccan rivers extremely difficult in the dry season. Except at Goa and Bombay, the peninsula is void of good natural harbors.

INDO-ARYAN CIVILIZATION

The Indo-Aryans moved into northwest India in 1500 BC. These tribes formed part of the second wave of Indo-European speaking herders, who left east-central Europe in 2000 in search of new homes. Several tribes settled lands along the way to the Indus valley, while other Aryan (“free born” or “noble”) tribes pushed into Afghanistan and the Punjab in search of grasslands. As they swept into northwest India in several waves, they used their superior weaponry and horse-drawn chariots to subdue the natives, to conquer and randomly sack the natives cities, and to master the region.

INDO-ARYAN SOCIETY

By 500 BC the politically fragmented Indo-Europeans had successfully established three common institutions that provided the foundation of the entire society. Each village developed their own systems, but by 500 BC the same system was used by each village. Persisting to this day, these enduring institutions were the extended family, the autonomous village, and the caste system.

The Extended Family. The Aryans embraced a patriarchal social structure based on the extended family. Incorporating the spouses and children of adult sons, unmarried daughters, and widows, the extended family shared a common dwelling. As a close-knit corporation it was ruled by the eldest male. As head of the household, the eldest male possessed absolute power over all family members and family property; he bore the responsibility for the economic and religious well-being of his subordinates. Each member’s role and responsibilities was determined by age and sex. Youths were subordinate to their elders and females to males. The collective interests and needs of the group prevailed over those of each individual. (marriage of daughter arranged for economic help to the whole family.)

The Autonomous Village. India witnessed the emergence of a substantial number of large cities that enjoyed political, commercial and strategic importance. But most Indo-Aryans lived in small farming villages. These compact settlements were commonly preferred over dispersed homesteads because water supplies were limited and they offered families greater protection from the tribal warfare of rival cities. Populated by several extended families, whose farms surrounded it, the village quickly became the local government and administrative unit.

Each village was administered by a royal appointee of the king, the gramani, who presided over the land, which was often a head of an extended family of the village. His role was to execute military, civil, and judicial functions in the village as need arose. With assistance from an appointed council of other heads of extended families in the village, the royal appointee served as a liaison between the village and the central kingdom. As such, he was in a position to protect local interests, to temper the harsh royal policies, and to provide stability at the local level in times of kingdom crisis. Because it enjoyed virtual autonomy over local matters, the village became the enduring pillar in Indian society. Nearly 700,000 of them dot the landscape of India today.

The Caste System. As a minority group in their new homeland, the Indo-Aryan tribes initially attempted to preserve their racial identity by prohibiting interracial marriages. However, miscegenation was widespread and racial distinctions became blurred. Political mastery allowed the Indo-Aryans to impose their own social structure in their new states based on the structure found in the autonomous villages. This consisted of a three-level system of classes (varna) divided into rulers and warriors (kshatriyas), priests (brahmins), and artisans, merchants and farmers (vaishyas). To accommodate the conquered native population that served as servants and slaves, the Indo-Aryans added a new caste, the sudras.

The Indo-Aryans justified these social distinctions by attributing them to the various gods native the beliefs of the people on the continent. Prior to 600 BC they evolved formal controls to curb social mobility. Each of the religiously sanctioned castes acquired its distinct religious and secular status, and the privileges and responsibilities of individual caste members were defined. They then formulated their own rules and established disciplinary procedures to preserve those rules. Many castes acquired exclusive rights to monopolize specific trades and occupations (jati). Since certain trades and occupations, such as those dealing with the dead, were deemed impure; those who performed such trades were denied caste status.

The hereditary caste system discriminated against the lower castes by conferring on those in the superior castes decided economic advantages and exclusive right of access to sacred literature. In its fully evolved form it attempted to segregate each caste by forbidding intermarriage and even contact with members of another caste. Complex rules and restrictions were devised to govern each caste member's religious and secular activities. Village caste leaders had authority to impose fines or to withdraw membership from any who violated them.

In a sense the Hindu caste system represented a society founded on a complex structure of mutual obligation and social and religious responsibilities. Unlike our modern society, where law is used primarily to define our rights, in Hindu society, dharma (religious law) was used to define responsibilities and obligations to the gods and other humans. Thus a low-caste Hindu would not feel that his rights were being violated by the limitations of his caste, but would perceive that the gods had given him a different set of responsibilities than the high-caste priest or warrior. The reward for following the laws of the caste was a reincarnation in the next life to a higher caste. It was also believed that society could function only if each individual fulfilled their responsibilities defined by their caste.

ANCIENT CHINA

Modern China occupies 3,700,000 square miles of territory and is slightly larger than the United States, and contains nearly a fifth of the world's inhabitants. Nine-tenth of its people are tightly compacted in the eastern third of the nation (China Proper) where most of China's 300,000,000 acres of arable land lie. This rich agricultural region had allowed the Chinese to maintain the world's largest population since antiquity. Today, three-fourths of China's 1.1 billion inhabitants farm these lands. Its farmlands serve as home to the ethnic Han Chinese, who constitute 93-percent of China's population. Outside this region the land is generally unsuited to agriculture and can support only a small population. Nearly half is mountainous barren wasteland, a tenth is covered with forests, and the remainder suitable to a pastoral economy.

CHINA PROPER

During the first 3,000 years of its existence, Chinese civilizations confined itself to arable basin formed by the Yellow (Huang He), the Yangtze, and the West (Xi) rivers and their respective tributaries. Originating in the Yellow River basin, which historically served as China's political and cultural heartland, Chinese civilization gradually extended southward to Vietnam and into those along its northern and southwestern borders, wherever climate and terrain permitted Chinese style farming. This expansion of Chinese civilization (it dominates the east Asian region today) was due to conquests and to systematic colonization by emigrant Han Chinese, who slowly displaced or intermarried with native inhabitants. China acquired its natural boundaries 2000 years after the development of the Yellow River civilization. This territory is collectively called "China Proper" or "China within the Great Wall." China Proper contains two distinct geographical regions: the North China Plain and South China.

North China Plain. The flat North China plain was the site of the earliest Chinese civilization and home to the Han Chinese. Traversed by the 2,903-mile-long Yellow River, with its Wei and Fen tributaries, the flat plain owed its fertile soil to deposits of loess silt left by the river before its emptied into the Bo Hai Gulf. Combined with wind deposits of the yellow loess (dust) particles, this rich sediment constituted China's loessland. The climate in the plain suited the production of millet, wheat, and other dry crop cereals. Sufficient rainfall eliminated the need for massive irrigation projects. But frequent course changes by this turbulent shallow-bedded river generated floods. These necessitated the construction of huge

network of dikes and canals. Never fully tamed and controlled, the river was often called “the River of Sorrows.”

South China. Separated from the North China plain by the east-west Qin Ling mountain range, South China extended southward past the Nan Ling mountains to Vietnam. Drained by the Yantze, the Pearl (Zhu Jiang), and the West (Xi) rivers, its terrain was a diverse mixture of mountains, plains, hills, and valleys. The middle and lower delta along the deep-channeled and navigable Yangtze constituted China’s richest agricultural pocket. Its full agricultural potential was not realized until several centuries after it was politically integrated into North China by the Zhou dynasty, which introduced the Chinese system of farming into the region. Once this was completed by 1000 AD, abundant rainfall and temperate climate allowed for the production of immense quantities of rice and wheat. By the next century, the region housed three-fifths of China’s population.

Outer China. The hinterland steppe provinces of Inner Mongolia, Tibet, and Sinkiang lay outside of China’s political sphere until modern times. The arid and barren terrain in these large regions was unsuited to Chinese methods of farming.

These borderlands were thinly populated by tribes of nomadic herders, many of whom had migrated from central Asia. These nomads played a formative role in Chinese history. In the absence of natural borders these nomads sought to control portions of China’s agricultural lands and repeatedly attempted military attacks (the Huns). China Proper devoted considerable wealth, manpower and material to restrain them. China resorted to military campaigns, diplomacy, bribes and the construction of artificial barriers (the Great Wall), but these measures offered only temporary relief. Most common during periods of domestic instability (floods, droughts), attacks from Central Asian nomads posed a serious threat to the politics of China Proper. Inept responses by Chinese rulers to their aggressive “barbarian” neighbors could and did generate dynastic changes and, in rare cases, actual barbarian rule.

China and the Sea. While China possesses over 4,000 miles of eastern coastland with nearly 5,000 offshore islands, it remained land oriented. This was in part due to the fact that China’s political center lay inland, and that China’s greatest danger came from the barbarian tribes along its northern and western borders. Unchallenged by external naval threats (unlike the Europeans) China was totally self-sufficient in essential mineral ores, raw materials, foodstuffs, and domestic manufactures. As a consequence, the early Chinese had little impetus to become a major maritime power, to found overseas colonies or to engage in extensive international trade. China remained to all intents and purposes a landlocked country, and had little to do with outsiders, a psychology of China that remains today.

THE IMPACT OF THE CHINESE WRITING SYSTEM.

The greatest unifier of this diverse region of the world, was the development of a complex writing system. Mastery of the script required the acquisition of a minimum written vocabulary of 3,000-4,000 words, which have their own letters (effect of Chinese education.) While the pronunciation of each word varied among speakers in China’s seven dialect regions, its meaning was identical to all that wrote or read it. This enabled the script to serve as a common form of communication, thus making it a major cohesive force in Chinese civilization.

BUDDHISM

The other great unifier of the Chinese was the religion of the Buddha. Originating from Hindu India, Buddhism slowly moved to China and came to dominate the region.

The Buddha. Siddhartha Gautama (563-483 BC) sought an answer to human suffering that he felt Hinduism could not provide. Seeking answers to the cause of human pain and suffering induced Gautama, son of a nobleman in northern India, to abandon his family and take up the ascetic life. Neither religious instruction nor ascetic excesses provided him answers to the enigma of life. Gautama turned to meditative practices which culminated in a transcendental mystical experience at the age thirty-five. After securing enlightenment (nirvana), the charismatic Buddha (“the Enlightened One”) devoted the remainder of his life to preaching the Middle Way between hedonism and asceticism as the pathway to enlightenment.

The Middle Way. Believing that Hindu Caste system was the reason for the excesses on both sides of the human suffering spectrum, Gautama believed the caste system had to be eliminated. However, Gautama held on the Hindu beliefs of reincarnation and non-violence. Hence, the path to enlightenment, the key to positive reincarnation, lay in the middle of the Hindu belief system

The Four Noble Truths. The Buddha distilled the essence of his teachings into Four Noble Truths: 1) all humans endure pain and suffering; 2) we suffer because of desire, egotism, greed and selfishness; 3) to end suffering we must end desire; 4) desire can be fully comprehended and ended by following the Eightfold Path: right view, right thought, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditation, leading to enlightenment.

Denying the existence of a soul, Buddha taught that the universe consists of solely eternal matter. An understanding of the true nature of the universe through techniques employed by the Eightfold Path enables the ascetic to realize his “non-selfness” and to secure freedom from the bonds of phenomenal existence. Additional fruits from the discovery of the “non-self” are their elimination of fears, doubts, insecurities, and pains and the automatic generation of right speech, right action, and right livelihood. These in turn promote good deeds, compassion, friendship, and concord that advance universal harmony and peace.

Spread of Buddhism. The followers of the Buddha were forced out of India because of their teaching against the caste system. Crossing the Himalayas, the Buddhists found the Chinese people accepting of the religion as an escape to the constant fears of barbarian invasions. In addition, the “barbarians” found the religion as an answer to their suffering and inability to counteract the dominant Chinese culture. Buddhism received a major boost in China when Faxian translated the Hindu texts of the early Buddhists into Chinese, therefore allowing the Chinese a better understanding of Buddhism.