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Summary

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A Brief History of Buddhism in Indonesia

The spread of Buddhism into the Indonesian archipelago came in two phases. The first phase started as a religious and cultural movement into Sumatra from India in approximately the 1st century A.D. It coincided with a lesser wave of Buddhism from China where Mahayana Buddhism had been established for many years.

The second phase of Buddhism was entirely different. Its point of origin was China, but it was not teachers and monks who came to enrich the Buddhist culture, but seamen and merchants who simply brought their religion with them during the migrations from China in the 18th century.

Chinese chronicles, the writings of the rulers of Central Java from the early years of the Christian era until the 16th century, and the architecture bas reliefs and inscriptions of the last remaining Buddhist temples, are the only witness to what social and religious role Buddhism played in Java. Even the building of Buddhism's largest monument, the Borobudur sanctuary, is certain of neither date nor architect.

It is known that the Indian prince, Aji Saka, was the first Buddhist evangelist of importance to come to Indonesia. At a time when there was no accepted religious philosophy in the region, he introduced the philosophy of traditional Buddhism (67 A.D.) In the same century, King Asoka of India sent two Buddhist monks named Soma and Utara to Thailand. They then proceeded to Swarna Dwipa (later called Sumatra after the two monks where they spread the traditional school of Theravada Buddhism. Meanwhile from the south of China, Java was receiving the message of Mahayana Buddhism which had split from the traditional school of thought at the Second Congress of Buddhism in 300 A.D.

In 450 A.D. the Monk Gunawarman, once a Kashmiri prince, was responsible for converting the kings of Java Dwipa (Sumatra and Java) to Buddhism, although the kingdom of Jambi in Southeast Sumatra resisted change. It is recorded that a Chinese historian, I-Ching, found one thousand Buddhist Monks and a Buddhist university teaching Buddhism when he visited the kingdom of Sriwijaya. But there is little documentary evidence from that time until the discovery of inscriptions dated 732 (Sunjaya dynasty) on the mountain, Gunung Wukir, near Borobudur in Central Java. Until the mid 7th century, Javanese Buddhism was probably solely of the Theravada School.

Meanwhile, it is known that in that in that period Mahayana Buddhism had spread to Sumatra as a result of the re-emergence of Hinduism as a popular

force in India. From Sumatra it gained a foothold in Malaysia and then in the early 8th century it finally made its way into the Indonesian archipelago.

In Java at this time, two kingdoms shared power; the Sanjaya Dynasty and the Sailendra Dynasty. Although the Sailendras were dominant, there appears to have been little animosity, and Hindu and Buddhist fortunes depended very much on the fortunes of these two political forces.

The Sailendra Dynasty quickly adopted Mahayana. Temple building was taken up in earnest by both dynasties. The earliest example of a major Buddhist Temple of the 8th century is the Sanjaya Temple at Kalasan; between Yogyakarta and Prambanan. Inscriptions found on the temple commemorate the building of a Temple (probably Borobudur) dedicated to Tara. It is usually held that Borobudur was laid down under Sailendra sponsorship in about 780 A.D. It was the crowning glory of the Sailendra Dynasty and its completion marked the rapid decline of Buddhism in Java.

Although glorious in its prime, the Mahayana Buddhist period was short lived. By 930 A.D., when the political and cultural capital of the region had moved to East Java, both Buddhism and the Sailendra Dynasty had withered. Then, in the year 1006, came the final blow. An earthquake shook Central Java, and the nearby volcano, Merapi, belched a blanket of rock, mud and ash across the Kedu Plain, choking Borobudur and smothering the farmland of its local people. They fled, and although there is some evidence that the Temple continued to be used, this symbol of Buddhism in Central Java fell into virtual oblivion for almost 800 years, suffocated by volcanic deposits and the ravages of time, climate, and the encroaching jungle.

From the 10th century, the dominant religion of Java was Hinduism which thrived uninterrupted until the arrival of Islam.

Chinese, mostly of Hokkien and Hakka descent, arrived in Indonesia during the Dutch colonial period. Eventually, the Chinese formed their own communities, and their Taoist and Confucian beliefs, mixed with the Buddhism exported to China from India one thousand years previously, blossomed.

Now there are over seventy temples in Jakarta alone. The oldest, dating from the mid-17th century, are in Jakarta's Glodok and Ancol districts.