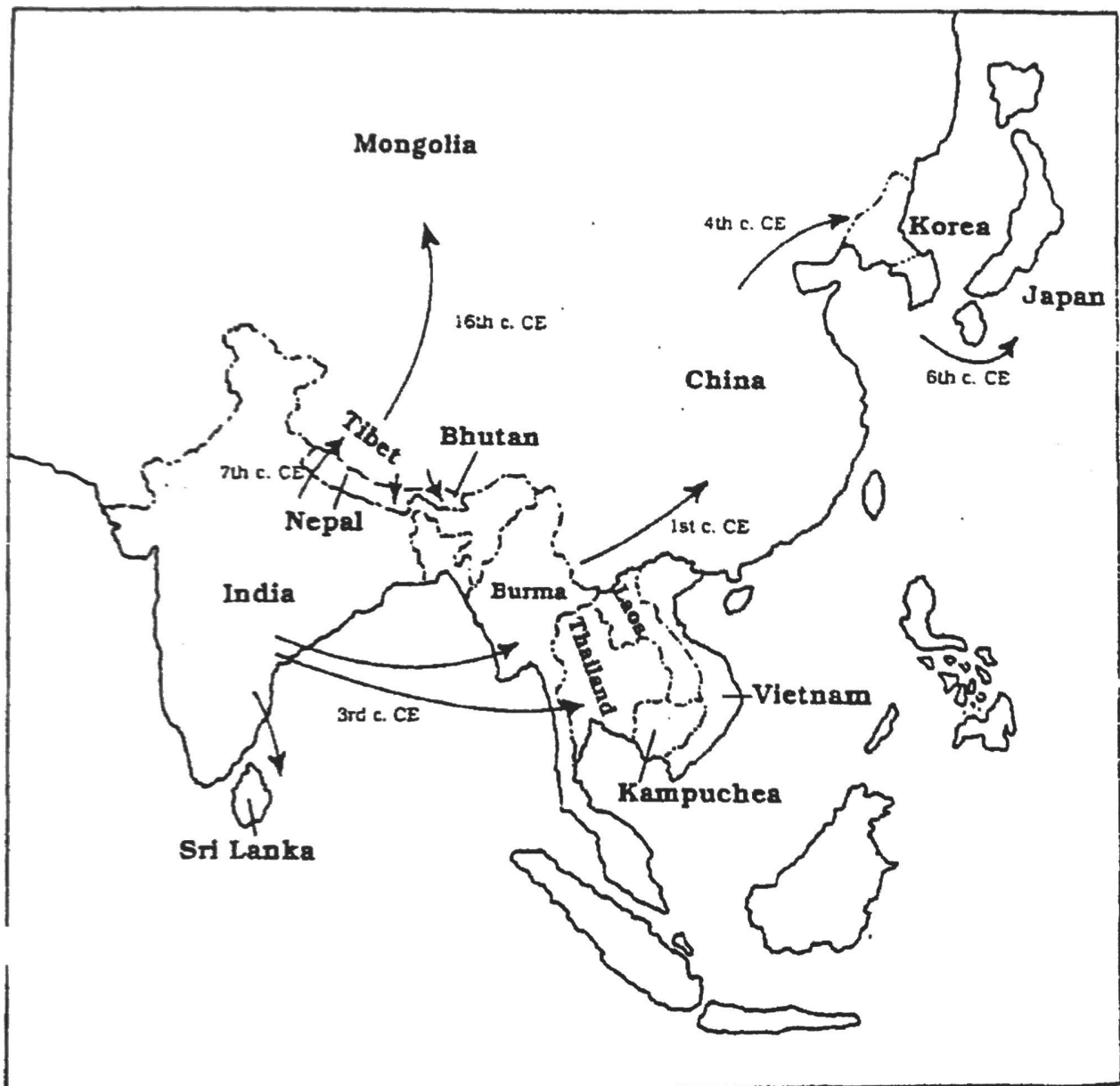


## The Spread of Buddhism

Buddhism began to spread rapidly around 270 BCE during the reign of King Asoka, the ruler of the greater area of Northern India. After engaging his empire in a terrible, bloody war, he underwent a spiritual transformation that included embracing Buddhism. He sent missionaries throughout southern Asia. They met with great success, although they did not convert others through either excessive persuasion or violence.

Beginning in the first century CE, Buddhism spread slowly into China and Japan. The first Dalai Lama, the Grand Lama of Lhasa, was responsible for the extension of Buddhism into Mongolia during the 16th century CE.



## Tibetan Buddhism

If you look on the map entitled "The Spread of Buddhism," you will notice that Buddhism expanded into Tibet in the 7th century CE, more than 1,500 years ago. The people of Tibet are mostly nomadic, moving about the high Himalayan plateaus with their herds. For centuries, Mahayana Buddhism thrived in this rugged, undeveloped country.

Until China invaded Tibet in 1950, this vast natural setting was spotted with Buddhist monasteries. In fact, Buddhism defines both the religious and political climate of Tibet. The ruler of the country, the *Dalai Lama*, is chosen by spiritual merit. His compassion and wisdom are meant to inspire the people. Like the Catholic Pope, the Tibetan Dalai Lama is believed to be the closest link to the spiritual realm.

The foremost quality the Dalai Lama possesses is compassion. In fact, Tibetan Buddhists believe that the Dalai Lama is a manifestation of the *bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara*. (See page 187.) This god embodies the spirit of compassion, the same spirit alive in Buddha. The Dalai Lama is, therefore, a vehicle in which the bodhisattva's mercy can radiate to the people. Finding the Dalai Lama, however, is not always easy.

Tibetans believe that when the Dalai Lama dies, Avalokiteshvara is reborn as a baby. The Dalai Lama usually gives some indication of the baby's whereabouts, after which the search begins. *Lamas*, Tibetan monks, quest for the newborn, looking for proof of his heritage. They put the candidate through different tests. A true Dalai Lama, for instance, should recognize four of the previous ruler's possessions.

Besides the Dalai Lama, there exists up to 200 *tulkus*. These holy men and women are also revered as embodiments of Avalokiteshvara. These leaders are often responsible for spreading the message of Buddhism.

In 1950, Tibet was conquered by communist China. The Chinese government held that Tibet was part of their country. Although the Tibetans rebelled, the Chinese took over, destroying most of the monasteries and causing most of the monks and nuns to flee the country. In fact, while in 1930 there were about 738,000 monks and nuns in Tibet and China, by 1986 only 28,000 remained. Many Tibetans settled in India, while others exiled themselves to the West.

