

A Timeline of Early Buddhism and the Pāli Canon

Most events relevant to early Buddhism are extremely difficult to date with precision. For example, during most of the 20th century, scholars used the dates 566-486 BCE for the life span of the Buddha. Some Theravāda traditions place the life of the Buddha still a century earlier (7th century BCE). But the best scholarly evidence now suggests 484-404 BCE or thereabouts for the life span of the Buddha. There is also a great deal of scholarly controversy surrounding the age and development of the Pāli Canon, since material evidence for the full canon is scant before the 5th century CE. In light of these on-going debates, the timeline given below must be taken as a useful, but highly tentative, account of the dates assigned to various important events in early Buddhist history.

<u>Date</u>	<u>Event</u>
ca. 484 BCE	Birth of the Buddha in Kapilavatthu. (Near present-day town of Lumbini in Nepal)
ca. 449 BCE	The Buddha's enlightenment and first sermon.
ca. 404 BCE	Death (<i>parinibbāna</i>) of the Buddha.
ca. 403 BCE	First Buddhist Council convened at Rajagaha. Tradition has it that the full Canon was recited here, but this is highly unlikely. More likely, some version of the Vinaya (rules for the monks) and its core rules (<i>pātimokkha</i>) were codified.
ca. 303 BCE	Second Buddhist Council, convenes in Vesāli to discuss controversial points of the Vinaya. Some scholars believe that the first schism of the Saṅgha occurs here, in which the Mahāsaṅghika school parts ways with the traditionalist Sthaviravādins. According to traditional scholarship, this schism marks the beginnings of what would later evolve into Mahāyāna Buddhism.
ca. 268 BCE	Emperor Aśoka assumes throne.
ca. 250 BCE	Third Buddhist Council called by Aśoka at Pataliputra (India). The Abhidhamma Piṭaka is recited at the Council, along with additional sections of the

	Khuddaka Nikāya. The Pāli Canon thus reaches its present form.
ca. 247 BCE	Bhikkhu Mahinda introduces Buddhism to Sri Lanka by converting King Devanampiya Tissa. Mahinda establishes the Mahāvihāra (Great Monastery) of Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka. Ven. Sanghamitta, Mahinda's sister, arrives in Sri Lanka with a cutting from the original Bodhi tree, and establishes the nuns in Sri Lanka.
2 nd cent. BCE	Composition of early Mahāyāna texts (e.g., the Prajñāpāramitā literature).
1 st cent. BCE	Theravāda Buddhist Canon (Tipiṭaka) committed to writing on palm leaves in Sri Lanka at Aluvihara. Composition of <i>Milinda-pañhā</i> or "Questions of King Milinda" to Venerable Nagasena.
3 rd cent. CE	Buddhist monastic university at Nalanda, India flourishes; remains a world center of Buddhist study for over a millennium.
425 CE	Buddhaghosa collates the various Sinhalese commentaries on the Canon, drawing primarily on the <i>Mahā-Atthakathā</i> (Great Commentary) preserved at the Mahavihara, and translates his work into Pāli. Buddhaghosa composes the <i>Visuddhimagga</i> (The Path of Purity) which eventually becomes the classic Sri Lankan textbook on the Buddha's teachings.
5 th cent. CE	Dhammapala composes commentaries on parts of the Canon missed by Buddhaghosa along with extensive sub-commentaries on Buddhaghosa's work
1881 CE	Pali Text Society is founded in England by T.W. Rhys Davids; most of the Pāli Canon is published in Pāli (in romanized script) and, over the next 100 years, in English translation.