Buddha and Ashoka: Crash Course World History #6

Crash Course: World History
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=====Intro (0:00)=====

Hi, my name is John Green; you're watching Crash Course World History and today we're going to talk about India, which is hard because:

A. I only have 10 minutes...

Past John: Mr. Green, Mr. Green!

Present John: I don't have time for you today, Me from the Past!

B. When we study history we tend to study unified polities that we can label like "The Roman Empire" or "China" or "Beliebers," and this emphasis on unity tends to:

C. lead to labels that mask a lot of historical difference, like for instance "Europe," which is such a weird and nebulous word that we don't even know what it means. Plus:

D, no offense Europe, but there are not many histories more complex than India, and...

E. a lot of what we know about Indian history comes from British historians, who both used and embodied the phrase "historical bias," all of which

F. makes it very unfortunate that we only have 10 minutes. But we will do our best!

Okay, we're gonna make this like Voldemort's soul and split up into eight parts.

(Intro plays)

=====Part one, the Vedas (0:55)=====

Part 1, The Vedas. So as you no doubt remember, the Indus River Valley was one of the earliest cradles of civilization, But that original civilization basically disappeared sometime after 1750 BCE. Then there was a long period of Aryan migration, and by Aryans we do not mean like prehistoric Nazis, we mean people from the Caucasus who migrated down into the Indo-Gag gig gag gi... Stan, can you just spell it for me? Thank you.

We know about these Aryans primarily because they left behind religious texts, the earliest of which is called the Vedas. The Vedas are also the earliest texts of what will come to be known as Hinduism, although it wasn't known as Hinduism then. And they're responsible for tons of stuff, but we only have 10 minutes so let's just cut to:

=====Part 2, The Caste System (1:31)=====

Part 2, The Caste System. The caste system is one of India's most enduring and fascinating institutions. Let us read from one of the Vedas about Purusha, the universe-pervading spirit. When they divided Purusha, in how many different portions did they arrange him? What became of his mouth, what of his two arms? What were his two thighs and his two feet called? His mouth became the Brahmin, his two arms were made into the Kshatriya; his two thighs the vaisyas; from his two feet the shudra was born.

So this section gives a divine explanation for the caste system. Brahmins – who as Purusha's mouth speak to the gods are at the top. Kshatriyas – from Purusha's arms became the warriors, as you no doubt know if you've ever attended my gun show. Vaisyas – the merchants and artisans who provide money for the priests and the warriors came from Purusha's thighs. Because everybody knows that the thighs are the money makers. And the Shudras – are at the bottom. They're the feet, the laborers and farmers who are the foundation of the social order. Also, the rest of us stand on them.

The caste system becomes much more complicated than this, but that basic division into 4 classes remains throughout much of Indian history. In spite of the efforts of many reformers whom we'll be meeting in future episodes of Crash Course. The Caste System is the foundation for another big concept in Hinduism,

=====Part 3, Dharma (2:40)=====

Part 3, Dharma. Dharma is basically one's role in life and society and it is defined primarily by birth and by caste. The whole idea is explained nicely by this passage from the Bhagavad Gita, where Krishna is talking to the warrior, Arjuna. "Having regard to your own duty also, you ought not to falter, for there is nothing better for a Kshatriya than a righteous battle." The Bhagavad Gita is a section of a much larger epic poem the Mahabharata which tells the complicated and long story of a war between two kingdoms.

And we can really see how important dharma is in this passage because Krishna is basically telling Arjuna that because he is a warrior, a Kshatriya, he must fight. Even if he's bad at it – like for instance if he gets killed – it's still preferable to not living his dharma. It's better to be a bad warrior if you're a Kshatriya than to be the world's best baker. Basically, you're better off fulfilling your own dharma poorly than doing someone else's well. That leads us to:

=====Part 4, Saá¹ƒsÄ•ra, Moksha, and Karma (3:35)=====

Part 4, Saá¹ƒsÄ•ra, Moksha, and Karma – there are both personal and social reasons for doing your dharma. Right, the social reason is obvious that dharma and caste combine for excellent social cohesion. You get the exact right number of bakers and the exact right number of warriors.

We could stand in to implement this system in the United States, actually, where everyone knows we suffer from a shortage of electrical engineers and a surplus of people who want to be on reality TV shows. That would not have happen in ancient India. But, say that your dharma is to scoop animal dung your entire life, why do you keep doing that when you see other lives that at least appear to be far more fulfilling?

That leads us to the concept of Saá¹ƒsÄ•ra, or the cycle of rebirth often called reincarnation. The basic idea is that when you die your soul is transferred to another living thing as it is being born. And if you fulfill your dharma, things improve and you get re-born into a higher being. You don't have to scoop elephant dung anymore.

But the ultimate goal is not to be re-born as a Brahmin. The ultimate goal is to be released from the merry-go-round altogether. And that release is called moksha. The law that holds all this together is Karma which is summarized really nicely in the Aranyaka Upanishad. "The doer of good becomes good. The doer of evil becomes evil. One becomes virtuous by virtuous action, bad by bad action."

The Upanishads, by the way, are later religious texts that began as commentaries on the Vedas, but later became sacred writings in their own right. This is a really great way to organize a social order from top to bottom. Everyone has a role, and, because that role has a religious dimension, society stays in balance.

But as a religion, Hinduism has a problem, at least if you want to start an empire; everyone's path to "salvation" is individual. The original Brahmins tried to set themselves up as political leaders, but

Hinduism doesn't really place a premium on worshippers obeying their leaders. And if you are a leader trying to make your subjects listen to you, that's kind of a bummer. Which brings us to:

=====Part 5, Buddhism in the Thought Bubble (5:16)=====

Part 5, Buddhism. We can't establish this historically, but according to traditional biographies, our story begins in the 6th century BCE. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

So there was this prince, Siddhartha Gautama, whose father kept him locked away in a palace because a prophecy foretold that the family would lose the kingdom if he ever left. But as house arrests go, this was a good one: Siddhartha had great food, great entertainment, a hot cousin for a wife, etc.

But he suspected that there was more to life, so he snuck out of the palace a few times. On these travels, he encountered an old man, a sick man, and finally a corpse. Having realized the ubiquity of suffering, Siddhartha left the palace, renounced the crown and sought out all the holiest men to try to find out how it could be possible that life would come to such a terrible end.

Eventually Gautama became an ascetic, fasting and meditating for days at a time, hoping to find enlightenment. And finally, after meditating for about a month under a tree, it came to him. Nirvana. No, not that one. Yes, that one.

He finally understood the meaning of life and began teaching it to people who would become his disciples. He had become the Buddha, which means teacher, and he taught the Four Noble Truths. Which are:

1. All life is suffering.

2. The source of suffering is desire. Not just sexual desire, but all wanting of stuff and prestige.

3. To stop suffering, you must rid yourself of desire. This sounds simple enough, but if you've ever been dumped by someone, you know that it is not that easy to just stop desiring.

4. So how do you do it? By following the Eightfold Path, which as you might suspect is a set of eight prescriptions on how to live that we don't have time to talk about. Because, oh wait look, Thought Bubble, you put some learning in our learning so we can learn while we learn. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So as a religion, Buddhism involves a lot of meditating and moderation and there aren't that many fun rituals, and if you're a Buddhist monk you don't get to have power like most holy people do; you have to renounce everything, including your hair. And, yes, some of them get to be kung-fu monks, but only in China, where Buddhism eventually migrated and became a religion with fun rituals and all kinds of great stuff that Siddhartha Gautama probably wouldn't even have recognized.

But we're not talking about fun populist religion, we're talking about old-school ascetic Buddhism. Sure, you might be happy and fulfilled if you follow the Eightfold Path, but from everything we've learned so far, it would appear that humans don't want to be happy and fulfilled or else they never would've stopped foraging.

But Buddhism was very attractive if you were a low-caste Hindu, because there is no caste system. In theory, anyone who follows the Eightfold Path and renounces desire can be freed from suffering and achieve nirvana, maybe even in THIS life. Instead of having to get re-born for maybe millennia and knowing that each time there is only a tiny chance that you will end up something awesome, like a honey badger. By the way...

=====Part 6, Open Letter (8:02)=====

Totally Tangential Part 6, Did you know the game Chutes and Ladders has its origins in ancient India? They call it Snakes and Ladders. The ladders are steps forward on the path to moksha, and the snakes take you away from it. Which reminds me, it's time for the Open Letter.

That is very close to my head. Wow. But first let's see what's in The Secret Compartment. Oh look, it's a golf club. Must be so I can play Disco Golf.

An open letter to Chutes and Ladders:

Dear Chutes and Ladders,This is Disco Golf. It's a game of skill. My success at Disco Golf is entirely dependent on whether I am good at Disco Golf. Now, listen Chutes and Ladders, I remember your game being awesome when I was a kid, but I have a 2-year-old son myself and I recently bought him Chutes and Ladders and you know what happened the first time we played? HE BEAT ME.

Chutes and Ladders, this is a child who regularly refers to helicopters as heli-flopters. I don't want to say that he's not my intellectual equal, but I'm potty trained. You know why he beat me? Because there is no skill involved in Chutes and Ladders at all. It is completely random and capricious and arbitrary and cold – just like the universe.

I don't want to play games that are like the universe – I want to play games so that I can forget what the universe it like.

Best wishes,
John Green

=====Part 7, Ashoka (9:18)=====

Okay, Part 7, Ashoka. Remember that for most of Indian history, India it was not one unified place. It was tons of different principalities and city-states and everything else. But India did experience indigenous political unity twice, first under the Mauryan Dynasty in the 3rd century BCE. And then again under the Gupta Dynasty from the 300's to the 500's CE, but we're not going to talk about that because it bores me.

Right now, we're interested in one particular leader from the Mauryan Dynasty, Ashoka, because Ashoka attempted to rule through quasi-Buddhist principles. So Ashoka was initially a warrior who ended up expanding the empire that his grandfather started. And Ashoka experienced this conversion to Buddhism after he saw his own army devastate the Kingdom of Kalinga, something I bring up primarily so that I can say Kingdom of Kalinga.

Stan, is there anyway we can write a song a song about that, like, Kingdom of Kalinga/ I'm sorry you got destroyed... [laughs]

So, Ashoka built stupas, (stoopas?) Hold on...

talking dictionary: Stoopah.

John: Could he have said that any more pretentiously? [straightens posture to mimic] Stupas.

So Ashoka built stupas, these mound-like monuments to the Buddha, all over his kingdom to show his devotion. And he also put up pillars throughout his empire that proclaimed his benevolent rule and said he was going to rule through something he called dharma, which according to one of the pillars went like this: "proper behavior

towards servants and employees, respect for mother and father, generosity to friends, companions, relations, Brahmans and ascetics, and not killing living beings."

So those are not individualistic goals like we see in Hinduism; they're relational goals, like we're gonna see next week when we study Confucianism. And that's one of the reasons why Ashoka's empire wasn't actually very Buddhist because ultimately Buddhism isn't that concerned with the order of the world. Buddhism argues that the fulfillment of the self will lead to the order of the world. In the end, Ashoka's empire didn't outlast him by much, and soon enough Buddhism declined in India, almost to the point of extinction.

=====Part 8: The Big Finish (11:03)=====

Part 8: The Big Finish. So as anyone who has ever practices yoga knows, Hinduism is the most flexible of all the world religions, which is part of the reason it's often described as polytheistic. The belief that god(s) can take many different forms makes it easy for Hinduism to assimilate other religious traditions. Which is exactly what happened with Buddhism. In time the Buddha came to be worshipped as another incarnation of one of the Hindu gods, and not as a mortal teacher. So in the end, Hinduism, rather than purging the Buddha, enveloped him.

So all this means that while Hinduism has a tremendous amount of variety and flexibility, its core tenets of samsara, karma, and the caste system have provided a remarkable amount of cultural and social unity to the Indian subcontinent for millennia.

Fortunately for the Buddha, his teachings migrated East to China. We're gonna make that same journey next week. I'll see you then.

=====Credits (11:47)=====

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script supervisor is Danica Johnson, the show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself. And our graphics team is Thought Bubble.

Last week's phrase of the week was "Right Here in River City". If you want to guess at this week's phrase of the week or suggest future ones you can do so in comments. Also in comments, please leave your questions and our team will endeavor to answer them.

Thanks for watching Crash Course and as they say in my home town, Don't Forget To Be Awesome.