

Buddhist Councils

Buddhism is a religion and philosophy grounded on the lessons of the Buddha, who lived in between 563 and 483 BCE. Buddhism spread all over the ancient Indian sub-continent and continued to spread into Southeast, East Asia, Central, and Eastern Europe. Believers of Buddhism are called Buddhists. Buddhist ethics are based on the principles of non-violence and self-control. In the antiquity of Buddhism, six Buddhist councils were summoned. These councils were held under the patronage of various rulers and chaired by different monks. The agenda of these councils was to conserve the sanctity of Buddhism and to spread the religion. Buddhist councils are an important topic for the History Syllabus of the UPSC, both for optionals and General Studies. In this article, we will discuss in brief about the six Buddhist Councils for the IAS exam.

The Six Buddhist Councils

In total, six councils have been held in Buddhism since antiquity. Here are a few details about each council:

First Buddhist Council- 400 B.C

- The First Buddhist council convened at the Sattapanni caves in Rajgriha
- It was held under the patronage of King Ajatashatru
- The First Buddhist Council was presided by Monk Mahakasyapa
- The Agenda of the First Buddhist council was to preserve the teachings (Sutta) of the Buddha and the monastic discipline and guidelines for monks(Vinaya).
- It was held just after the death of the Buddha.
- Suttas and Vinaya were recited by the monks Ananda and Upali respectively
- Abhidhamma Pitaka was also recited in this council.

Second Buddhist Council- 383 BC

- The second Buddhist council was held at Vaishali
- It was under the patronage of Kalasoka
- The Second Buddhist Council was presided over by Sabakami
- The Agenda of the Second Buddhist council was to settle the disagreements of different subdivisions.
- This council rejected the Mahasangikas as canonical Buddhist texts. For this reason, the council is considered historical.

Third Buddhist Council–250 BC

- The third Buddhist council was held at Pataliputra in the Magadha Kingdom.

- It was under the patronage of Emperor Ashoka
- The Third Buddhist Council was presided over by Moggaliputta Tissa
- The Agenda of the Third Buddhist council was to analyze the different schools of Buddhism and to purify them.
- Ashoka sent several groups to different countries to spread Buddhism after this council.

Fourth Buddhist Council- 72 AD

- The fourth Buddhist council was convened in Kashmir
- It was under the patronage of Emperor Kanishka
- The Fourth Buddhist Council was presided over by Vasumitra and Asvaghosha
- The Agenda of this Buddhist council was the reconciliation of various conflicts between different schools of thought.
- Hinayana and Mahayana sects of Buddhism diverged after this council.

Fifth Buddhist Council- 1871

- The fifth Buddhist council was held at Mandalay in Myanmar, then called Burma.
- It was under the patronage of King Mindon of the Kingdom of Burma
- The Fifth Buddhist Council was presided by Jagarabhivamsa, Narindabhidhaja, and Sumangalasami
- The Agenda of this council was to recite all the Buddhist learning and scrutinize them in minuscule details
- This council is largely not recognized outside of Myanmar as no major Buddhist countries apart from Burma had representatives attending the council.

Sixth Buddhist Council- 1954

- The Fifth Buddhist Council convened at Kaba Aye in Yangon(Rangoon), Myanmar(Burma)
- It was under the patronage of Prime Minister U. Nu of the Republic of Myanmar
- The Sixth Buddhist Council was presided over by Mahasi Sayadaw and Bhadanta Vicittasarabhivamsa.
- The Agenda of the Fifth Buddhist council was to uphold and preserve the authentic Dhamma and Vinaya of Buddhism.
- A special Maha Passana Guha(cave) was built which was similar to the cave where the first Buddhist council was held.

The history of Buddhism has been an important part of the History syllabus as well as Indian Heritage and Culture topic for General Studies Paper I. IAS aspirants should read about the religion and its tenets, important personalities and events in detail. Questions about the philosophy of Buddhism have also been asked in previous UPSC examinations.