

Was Buddha literate?

10 ANSWERS



Robert Walker, I've been practicing as a Buddhist for just short of 35 years, mainly in Tibetan traditions. Not a teacher ...

Updated Jul 19

No, interestingly, he wasn't, but nor was anyone else in India at the time. They just didn't have writing at the time of the Buddha. They did get writing a bit later on, they had it already by the time of King Ashoka. In India at the time of the Buddha, they had professional memorizers instead.

We are talking about 500 BC here, or thereabouts. So, there was writing in the world by then. The Sumerians had it far earlier than that, gradually evolving from proto writing over 3,000 BC see [Cuneiform script](#) . But not yet in northern India.

The Buddha was born thousands of years after the first writing systems were developed. However, writing developed in northern India at a far later date than elsewhere. That is - unless you count the Indus Valley script as a writing system. This is the last major undeciphered script in the world, and also one of the older scripts in the world. This is a typical script:



[Indus Script](#) - undeciphered so nobody knows what it says or what it was for - whatever it was - was only used for short inscriptions of a few symbols

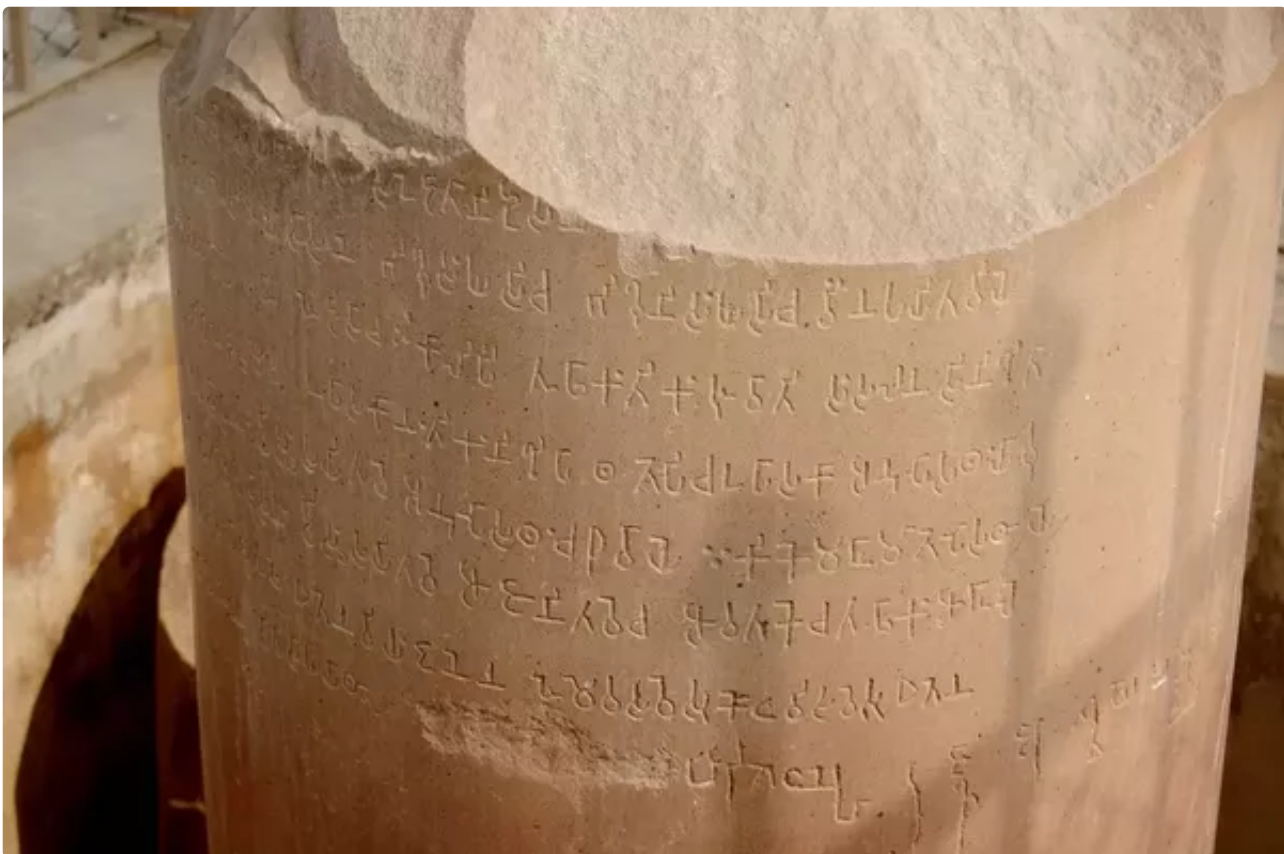
Nobody knows if it was a writing system or not. It could be an early form of writing, like early

heiroglyphs or early Sumerian. Or a form of [Proto-writing](#) [↗](#). like [Nsibidi](#) [↗](#) with thousands of symbols that can be strung together to convey meaning, but not with the flexibility of a true writing system. See also [Nsibiri: The Pre-colonial Writing Of The South Eastern People](#) [↗](#)

Or alternatively, it could be a kind of signage a bit like a pub sign, or road crossing symbols or heraldic signs. All the inscriptions are short, just a few symbols each. Analysis suggests that it seems to have many of the characteristics of a writing system, see: [A Rosetta Stone for a lost language \(TED talk video\)](#) [↗](#). Also, [How come we can't decipher the Indus script?](#) [↗](#)

At any rate - whether the Indus Valley script is a writing system, or just a system of signs of some kind - all the texts are very short, and undeciphered. Whatever it was, it was ancient history by then, from 1400 years before the time of the Buddha.

The next evidence of writing in India is the [Brahmi script](#) [↗](#). This was used for [the Edicts of King Asoka](#) [↗](#), a great Buddhist King who ruled much of India a century or so after the Buddha:



[Brahmi script on Ashoka Pillar, Sarnath](#) [↗](#)

So, it seems that the Buddha just missed the introduction of writing to India. If he had been born just a century later...

If there were, just a few pages, or fragments of pages from any of the sutras, reliably dated from the time of the Buddha, this could give us many clues about how the texts have changed between the Buddha's time and the present day, if they have.

If only! But they just didn't have writing at the time. They did however have Brahmins with excellent memories. Because it was so important in their culture, they developed it to the nth degree. The ancient Indian Vedas which are sacred to modern Hindus were memorized word for word for thousands of years in this way.

So, Buddha's followers would have included people who were trained and expert at memorization. The Guinness Book of Records of 1985 records the feat of a Buddhist monk who was first to memorize the entire Pali Canon in modern times:



[BioMingun](#) [↗](#)

The Buddhist Pali canon is vast, with thousands of pages, and millions of words. He was first in modern times to win the titles Tipitakadhara Dhammabhandagarika (Bearer of the Three Pitakas and Keeper of the Dhamma Treasure).

To do this he had to be able to recite any of the sutras, starting anywhere in the sutra - and to do it with understanding, not just reading by rote but reading the words with meaning. And indeed he not only did that but he could also give comparative readings from different texts of each sutra also. Word for word accurate all the way through. It's a stringent 33 day exam, with little margin allowed for errors.

So - it seems at least possible that some of the monks, disciples of the Buddha could have memorized all the teachings in the same way. In some ways this may have preserved the teachings actually more accurately than if they had been written down, copied, the originals lost, the copies copied again etc.

There's a lot of evidence that suggests we actually have pretty good records of the actual words

spoken at the time of the Buddha. Obviously re-arranged to be easier to memorize, probably not exactly as Buddha and his disciples spoke them.

But unusually - they actually started to memorize his teachings, while Buddha himself was alive, in the last few years of his life, at least that's what the canon says. So they could also ask him questions and after he died they had a large gathering, the first great assembly, where they all checked their memories of the teachings and when they agreed on a version of each sutra, they recited it in unison word for word.

The internal evidence is pretty good, I think. I'm talking about the Pali Canon here, not the later Mahayana sutras that scholars agree were written and composed centuries after the time of the Buddha.

The sutras describe the political geography and technology of the time of the Buddha, in great detail. They don't mention King Ashoka who is mentioned often in "backdated" sutras of the later Mahayana schools attributed to the Buddha. The experts who advocate this "view of authenticity" of the teachings say that there are a few sutras in the Pali Canon that are clearly later additions but most of them, internal evidence suggests, were written at the time of the Buddha.

This is a matter of much scholarly debate. They certainly could have memorized them by the analogy of the Vedas. But did they?

I think they did myself. Some expert scholars, mainly western academics for some reason, say that they were composed later. However, I find their arguments weak myself.

How do they explain the consistent internal geography, technology etc? That seems the most conclusive argument to me. Of course not actually a mathematical proof but hard to see how they could have got the internal consistency so right about such things and never slipped up and mentioned later technology - which was changing rapidly at the time - or politics from even the next century, or to mention a city or region in South India (their political awareness of distant parts also increased hugely shortly after Buddha died) etc.

It would be hard enough for an expert in Indian history to do it today, to compose a technologically and politically correct collection of texts as if they were all written in historical India at the time of the Buddha, and not even a century later - but back then, they didn't even have the idea or motivation to do something like that or the understanding of history / archaeology that we have to attempt it, if anyone wanted to do it, and why would they? They didn't try, not at all, with the Mahayana texts or the later additions to the Pali Canon.

I've written a blog post here about those arguments: [Origins of the Buddhist Sutras - were they the Teachings of the Buddha?](#)

So anyway - Buddha was indeed illiterate as was everyone else in the India of his day. But they would probably, many of them, especially the Brahmins, have had better memories than we do for words, able to memorize many millions of words, some of them, without errors.

According to the Pali canon he was born as a prince, and would surely have had the best education of his time. But in those days education didn't include reading or writing, because they didn't have it.

Note, later sutras mention writing. They were composed much later. The early sutras though, the earliest texts in the Pali canon, the ones that may have been memorized since the time of the

Buddha, they don't apparently.

15.1k Views · 96 Upvotes

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Charlie Knoles

Apr 12 · 6 upvotes including Robert Walker

Fantastic answer! Have you by chance read the book "nine lives" by William Dalrymple? There's a fantastic account in there of a modern day Indian memorizer who travels the country reciting a three-day-long, folksy version of the Ramayana all from his head. He is also illiterate and Dalrymple speculates that the part of the brain that is devoted to epic works of memorization may atrophy when people learn to read. Apparently these feats of memorization were also common among illiterate people in Homer's Greece.



Robert Walker, I've been practicing as a Buddhist for just short of 35 years, mainly in Tibetan traditions. Not a teacher ...

Apr 12 · 3 upvotes

Yes that's a good point. The Illiad and Odyssey were also memorized long before they were written down. However there is a difference. Those were improvisatory works. The narrator would tell it differently each time, much as you might recount a story from your own life, but using various techniqu... [Read More](#)



Charlie Knoles

Apr 12 · 4 upvotes including Robert Walker

Fascinating! Thank you for a comment that is as insightful and informative as your original post.

I once had the pleasure of watching two Vedic Pandits reciting Sanskrit scripture from memory in unison for several hours. I was amazed at how perfectly they matched each syllable to the other person'... [Read More](#)



Robert Walker, I've been practicing as a Buddhist for just short of 35 years, mainly in Tibetan traditions. Not a teacher ...

Apr 12

:). Amazing. I've never actually heard that and I'd be interested to hear it.



Stefano Mancini

Jul 8

I do not agree Bhudda was Bhagwan Himself and He was the most literated od all



Stefano Mancini

Jul 8

Bhudda got enlightenment in Bodhgaya in a Sri Visnu temple under a holy tree and all bramins knew samscrit

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OTHER ANSWERS



Alexander Duncan, Editor, writer, and researcher

Answered Aug 18

The question is ambiguous because the English word “literate” has two meanings. One meaning is “able to read and write.” The Buddha did not (not “could not”) read and write because reading and writing were unknown in the oral culture of fifth century BCE India. The second meaning is “educated.” The Buddha was very well educated according to the standards of an upper-class kshatrya of his time. He would have been educated in Vedic and Upanishadic philosophy; probably in Samkhya, since the founder of Kapilavastu, the Buddha’s home town, was a proto-Samkhyan; politics; and the arts of war.

463 Views · 5 Upvotes

It's debatable.

The dominant theory nowadays is that Indians were illiterate prior to some time not long before the reign of Ashoka the Great (circa 250 BCE). Buddha lived about 200 years earlier than that. It is based in part on the fact that the earliest surviving inscriptions in Brahmi Script date to ~300 BCE and, beyond that, there's at least a millennium during which evidence of writing is completely absent. (Beyond that there are traces of something called Indus Script, which may or may not have been a form of writing, and which, in any event, was not created by the same people as Buddha. Indus Script inscriptions were probably made by ancestors of present-day Tamils, and Buddha was Aryan.)

One small problem with that picture is that Buddha's culture gave us some truly massive literary works ([Rigveda](#) alone is something like 1000 pages of text) and even one similarly large treatise on Sanskrit grammar, which were definitely composed way before the earliest appearances of Brahmi Script, and therefore were supposedly composed entirely "on the fly", without being written down, and then transmitted orally, teacher to apprentice, without relying on any written cues, over several centuries (in some cases, close to a millennium.) They must have had absolutely mad memorization skills.

The alternate possibility is that Vedic period Indo-Aryans (or at least their priest caste) did have a writing system but they were not inclined to use it to carve stone pillars, coins and clay pots. Anything less durable than that would have decayed without a trace in a small fraction of the time. Even in this case, it's not certain that Buddha himself would have been "in" on the secret of writing.

331 Views · 2 Upvotes



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or the past 40 years.

I don't know, but I am going to assume that while he may have been learned, he probably wasn't literate. Probably no one was. The earliest examples of writing in India are possibly potsherds from the 4th to 6th centuries, BCE. The edicts of Ashoka, the first examples of writing we have that have been deciphered, date from 250 BCE. For reference, the Buddha's time was a couple of centuries before that.

In that time, recitation and memorization was used to preserve knowledge. The Buddha was quite knowledgeable about the Vedas, so there is a good chance he had those memorized. His own teachings did not get committed to writing for 500 years after his life.

248 Views · 3 Upvotes



Ed Conley, After philosophy, Christianity, and guru yoga I arrived at Buddhism.

Answered Jun 13

Before writing, humanity communicated through oral story telling, and memories were much greater than they are now. Buddha monks remembered his talks and passed them on until they were

written down. That's why they are transmitted in concise compact sutras, compressed wisdom that needs to be pulled apart like a cotton ball for its transformative power to be transmitted to you.

Story telling its a direct transmission of the Word. Print becomes an intermediary, an abstraction of the spoken Word, so its power is watered down. There is a big difference between reading what someone says and being with that person when he says the same thing to you. Print breaks the transmission and captures it so it can be dispersed to many.

It's like hearing a sermon in person and watching the sermon on the Media Church. While the Media Church reaches many, its power is watered down by the intermediary of the media and camera. The relationship is not real when the Media is the medium.

The point is, I guess, is that when the Dharma of the Buddha is made live by you seeking it as the Buddha spoke it, not repeating the scriptures like a robot, but by enliven the teaching as your word, as your life, so that the teaching or Dharma is living through you. This is why the Buddha said take refuge in the Dharma. I am the Dharma...of the teaching.

The Teaching is alive, and the Dharma is not caused by the past, some past Buddha. When you become the Dharma you and the Buddha are One as the living Dharma, which is creative and spontaneous when you surrender to it. This is Art...this is Zen.

153 Views · 2 Upvotes



Mark Peterson, Buddhism , Medicine

Answered Aug 18

As his father was king, the Bodhisatta would have been educated to the norms of the class he was born to. As the Buddha, no further education would be relevant. What had to be done was done.

69 Views · 1 Upvote



Ranjan Singh, Vipassana...

Answered Apr 5

Do you mean having a degree kind of thing?

No. He was not.

Asking about a person who got enlightenment whether he was literate or not, is like asking if Sun has lantern.

22 Views · 1 Upvote



Steven Walker, studied at Burn the School

Updated Sep 28

he spoke 82,000 sermons in his time , 2000 were spoken by his

brother cousin anada , who had the most incredible memory

he would remember word for word the sermons . later on they were written down , and kept in 3 large baskets , 1 for beginner 1 for intermediate and 1 for advanced teachings the aryasavaka, he was raised by women and was a prince , being destined to royal court and documentation he would have had to learn to write , he was has the Buddha called upon to settle warring factions and to delegate and read settlements and agreements, he was highly educated and articulate

113 Views · Answer requested by Marek Cieslik



Robbie Jena, BS Electrical Engineering & Automation Systems, National Institute of Technology, Rourkela (1969)

Answered Jun 26

Was Buddha literate?

Not by our understanding of Literacy...

Buddha is the only Corporeal Life form that could talk to his spirit (some say soul) while conscious (Edgar Cayce did that while sleeping). That means, you have access to Heaven...meaning all the knowledge you want to get. Then work with the local knowledge.

As to language...India was taught Sanskrit by 12,000 BP from Lord Krishna Civilization...how much went out who know...

96 Views



Marek Cieslik, PhD from Miskatonic University (1998)

Answered Jul 17

Thanks. You say he was literate - he wrote nothing down, scriptures came into existence several centuries after he passed away.

16 Views

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