

# Buddhism

## [Table of Contents](#)

Buddhism, one of the major religions of the world, was founded by Siddhartha Gautama, the [Buddha](#), who lived in northern India from c.563 to c.480 BC. The time of the Buddha was one of social and religious change, marked by the further advance of Aryan civilization into the Ganges Plain, the development of trade and cities, the breakdown of old tribal structures, and the rise of a whole spectrum of new religious movements that responded to the demands of the times. These movements were derived from the Brahmanic tradition of [Hinduism](#) but were also reactions against it. Of the new sects, Buddhism was the most successful and eventually spread throughout India and most of Asia.

Today it is common to divide Buddhism into two main branches. The Theravada, or "Way of the Elders," is the more conservative of the two; it is dominant in Sri Lanka, Burma (Myanmar), and Thailand. The Mahayana, or "Great Vehicle," is more diverse and liberal; it is found mainly in Taiwan, Korea, and Japan, and among Tibetan peoples, where it is distinguished by its emphasis on the Buddhist [Tantras](#). In recent times both branches, as well as [Tibetan Buddhism](#), have gained followers in the West.

It is virtually impossible to tell the size of the Buddhist population today. Statistics are difficult to obtain because some individuals may have Buddhist beliefs and engage in Buddhist rites yet maintain folk or some other religion such as [Shinto](#), [Daoism](#) (**Taoism**), or Hinduism; such persons may or may not call themselves or be counted as Buddhists. Nevertheless, the number of Buddhists worldwide was estimated at 376 million in 2004.

## The Teachings of the Buddha

Just what the original teaching of the Buddha was is a matter of some debate. Still, it may be said to have centered on certain basic doctrines. The first of the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha held, is suffering (*duhkha*). By this he meant not only that human existence is occasionally painful but that all beings—humans, other animals, ghosts, hell-beings, even the gods—are caught up in *samsara*, a cycle of rebirth, a maze of suffering in which their actions ([karma](#)) keep them wandering.

Samsara and karma are not doctrines specific to Buddhism. The Buddha, however, specified that samsara is characterized by three marks: suffering, impermanence, and no-self (*anatman*). Not only do individuals suffer in a constantly changing world, but what appears to be the "self," the "soul," has no independent reality apart from its many separable elements.

The second Noble Truth is that suffering itself has a cause. At the simplest level, this may be said to be desire; but the theory was fully worked out in the complex doctrine of "dependent origination" (*pratityasamutpada*), which explains the interrelationship of all reality in terms of an unbroken chain of causation.

The third Noble Truth, however, is that this chain can be broken—that suffering can cease. The Buddhists called this end of suffering *nirvana* and conceived of it as a cessation of rebirth, an escape from samsara.

Finally, the fourth Noble Truth is that a way exists through which this cessation can be brought about: the practice of the noble Eightfold Path. This combines ethical and disciplinary practices (*sila*) and training in concentration and meditation (*samadhi*) with initial faith (*saddha*), which is ultimately transformed into enlightened wisdom (*panna*).

## **The Development of Buddhism**

With the death of the Buddha, the community of his followers (the *sangha*) immediately faced a crisis: what were they to do in the absence of the master? The lay followers who had remained householders undertook to honor his bodily relics, which were enshrined in monuments called [stupas](#). This was the beginning of a cult of devotion ([bhakti](#)) to the person of the Buddha that was to focus not only on stupas but on many holy sites (such as the bodhi tree), which became centers of pilgrimage, and eventually on Buddha images as well.

On the other hand, those Buddhists who had become monks and nuns undertook the gathering and preservation of their departed master's teachings (the [dharma](#)). According to tradition (the historicity of which many scholars have contested), a great council of 500 enlightened monks was held at Rajagriha immediately after the Buddha's death, and all the

Buddha's sermons (the *sutras*) and the rules of the discipline (*vinaya*) were remembered and recited.

In the years that followed, the monks gradually consolidated their communal life. Originally, like many other wandering mendicants of their time, they had tended to be constantly on the move, congregating only once a year for the three months of the monsoon. Gradually, these rain retreats grew into more structured year-round monastic settlements. As new monastic communities developed, it was inevitable that some differences in their understanding both of the Buddha's teaching (dharma) and of the rules of the order (*vinaya*) should arise. Within 100 years of the Buddha's death, a second council took place at Vaisali, during which the advocates of certain relaxations in the *vinaya* rules were condemned. Then, c.250 BC, the great Buddhist emperor [Asoka](#) is said to have held a third council at Pataliputra to settle certain doctrinal controversies.

It is clear from the accounts of these and other Buddhist councils that whatever the unity of early Buddhism may have been, it was rapidly split into various sectarian divisions. One of the earliest and most important of these divisions was that between the Sthavira (Elder) and the Mahasamghika (Great Council) schools. Within the former developed such important sects as the Sarvastivada, whose canon was in Sanskrit, and the Theravadins, whose canon is in [Pali](#) and who today are the only surviving representatives of the whole of the Hinayana, or "Lesser Vehicle," of Buddhism.

The Mahasamghika, also a Hinayanist sect, died out completely, but it is important because it represents one of the forerunners of the Mahayana doctrines. These doctrines were to include a different understanding of the nature of the Buddha and an emphasis on the figure of the [bodhisattva](#) and on the practice of the perfections (*paramitas*).

In addition, within the Mahayana, a number of great thinkers were to add some new doctrinal dimensions to Buddhism. One of these was Nagarjuna, the 2d-century AD founder of the Madhyamika school. Using subtle and thoroughgoing analyses, Nagarjuna took the theory of dependent origination (*pratityasamutpada*) to its logical limits, showing that the absolute relativity of everything means finally the emptiness (*sunyata*) of all things.

Another important Mahayana school arose in the 4th century AD when the brothers Asanga and Vasubandhu sought to establish the doctrine of *Vijnanavada*—that the mind alone exists and that objects have no reality external to it. This idealist doctrine and Nagarjuna's emptiness were to play important roles in the further developments of Buddhist thought outside of India. Within India itself, they paved the way for yet another stage in the elaboration of the religion: the development of Buddhist Tantra.

Tantric Buddhism, which is sometimes separated from the Mahayana as a distinct "Thunderbolt-Vehicle" (*Vajrayana*), became especially important in Tibet, where it was introduced starting in the 7th century. It was, however, the last phase of Buddhism in India, where the religion—partly by reabsorption into the Hindu tradition, partly by persecution by the Muslim (see [Islam](#)) invaders—ceased to exist by the 13th century.

## **The Expansion of Buddhism**

Before its demise in India, Buddhism had already spread throughout Asia. This expansion started at least as early as the time of the emperor Asoka in the 3d century BC. According to tradition, this great monarch, who was himself a convert to Buddhism, actively supported the religion and sought to spread the dharma. He is said to have sent his own son Mahinda as a missionary to Sri Lanka. There Buddhism quickly took root and prospered, and the island was to become a stronghold of the Theravada sect. The Pali Canon was first written there in the 1st century BC; later the island was to be host to the great Theravadin systematizer and commentator Buddhaghosa (5th century AD). Asoka is also said to have sent missionaries to the East to what is now Burma and Thailand. Whatever the truth of this claim, it is clear that by the first several centuries AD, Buddhism, accompanying the spread of Indian culture, had established itself in large areas of Southeast Asia, even as far as Indonesia.

Furthermore, tradition has it that another son of Asoka established a Buddhist kingdom in Central Asia. Whether or not this is true, it is clear that in subsequent centuries more missionaries (especially Mahayanists) followed the established trade routes west and north to this region, preaching the dharma as they went. Ruins in Mongolia's [Orkhon Valley](#), a UNESCO [World Heritage Site](#), reflect the development of a distinctive Mongol form of Buddhism.

## **China.**

Central Asia was at that time a crossroads of creeds from all parts of Asia and the Near East, and by the 1st century AD, Central Asian Buddhist monks were penetrating in turn into China. It is a matter of some debate what was transformed more in this process—China by Buddhism or Buddhism by China. On the one hand, at an early stage, Buddhists became very influential at the Chinese court, and soon their views penetrated the philosophical and literary circles of the gentry. On the other hand, early translators of Buddhist texts often adopted Daoist (**Taoist**) terminology in an attempt to make the Indian Buddhist concepts more understandable, and Buddhism adapted itself to Chinese worldviews, in particular to their stress on the importance of the family.

Buddhism in China also saw the rise of new sects, many of which were later transmitted to Japan. In the 6th century, the monk Zhiyi (Chih-i) consolidated the Tiantai (T'ien-t'ai) school, which sought to order all Buddhist teachings into a set hierarchy culminating in the text known as the *Lotus Sutra*. During the Tang (T'ang) dynasty (618–907), the so-called golden age of Chinese Buddhism, the Huayan (Hua-yen) school (based on the teachings of the Avatamsaka sutra), the Faxiang (Fa-hsiang) school (which taught Vijnanavada doctrines and was promoted by the great pilgrim and scholar [Xuanzang](#), or Hsüan-tsang), and the Chan (Ch'an) school (better known in Japan as [Zen Buddhism](#)) all prospered. At the same time, [Pure Land Buddhism](#) became increasingly popular.

By 845, however, the *sangha* had grown so large and rich that its tax-exempt status now made it a severe drain on the empire's economy. For this and other reasons it became the object of a brief but effective imperial persecution. Many temples were destroyed, thousands of monks and nuns were laicized, and the vast landholdings of monasteries were confiscated. Buddhism, especially the Chan school, did recover, but it never regained its former prestige in Chinese life.

## **Japan.**

Before 845, a number of Chinese schools had been transmitted to Japan. Buddhism was introduced into Japan from Korea about the 6th century and initially established itself as a superior means of magical power, especially for preserving and protecting the nation. Early in its history, it received the

patronage of Prince [Shotoku Taishi](#) (7th century) and during the Nara period (710–84) became the state religion.

During the Heian period, in the early 9th century, two monks, Saicho and Kukai, traveled to China and on their return introduced into Japan the Tendai (or Chinese, Tiantai) sect and the Shingon sect, which was a form of Chinese Tantric Buddhism. Both of these esoteric sects were to take part in the mixing of Buddhism with various Japanese Shinto folk, ascetic, and magical practices.

The Tendai sect, moreover, became a fountainhead of several later popular Japanese Buddhist movements. One of the Tendai's traits was the worship of the Buddha Amida and the belief in his Pure Land. With Honen (1133–1212) and Shinran (1173–1262), these Pure Land beliefs were systematized and made the exclusive focus of two new, popular sects, the Jodo and the Jodo Shin. Another Tendai trait was emphasis on the teachings of the *Lotus Sutra*. In the 13th century, the monk [Nichiren](#) founded a dynamic and nationalistic sect that made the *Lotus* its sole basis of worship. Finally, it was also in this same period that two schools of Zen Buddhism were introduced from China.

Under the feudal Tokugawa regime (1603–1867), all these sects became tools of the government; temples and priests were means of registering, educating, and controlling the populace. In the Meiji era (1868–1912), this Buddhist structure was disestablished in favor of Shinto. Finally, during the 20th century, new religious movements within Buddhism, such as the [Soka Gakkai](#) and the Risshokosei-kai, arose in response to the problems of the modern age.

## **Institutions and Practices**

Throughout Asia, wherever Buddhism was introduced, its leaders tended to seek the support of kings and other rulers of the state. The pattern of this relationship between a Buddhist king and the monastic community was given its definitive formulation by Emperor Asoka in the 3d century BC. This was a symbiotic relationship in which, in exchange for the allegiance and religious support of the *sangha*, the emperor became the patron and backer of the Buddhist dharma.

To some extent this pattern was extended to the laity as well. Everywhere, Buddhist monastic communities tended to depend on the laity for food and material support. Although in some places the *sangha* as a whole became well-to-do and the controller of vast monastic estates, traditionally monks were beggars, and in Southeast Asian countries they still go on daily alms rounds.

Traditionally also, Buddhist monks have been celibate. Thus they depend on the faithful not only for food and financial support but for new recruits. Often children will enter a monastery and spend a number of years as novices, studying, learning, and doing chores. Then, following ordination, they become full members of the community, vowing to uphold its discipline. Henceforth their days will be taken up in ritual, devotions, meditation, study, teaching, and preaching. Twice a month, all the monks in a given monastery will gather for the recitation of the rules of the order (the *pratimoksha*) and the confession of any violation of those rules.

One of the pivotal concepts behind the rites and festivals of Buddhist laity and monks is that of offering (*dana*). This includes, for the laity, not just the giving of food and (in special ceremonies at the end of the rainy seasons) of new robes to the monks but also the offering of flowers, incense, and praise to the image of the Buddha, stupas, bodhi trees, or, especially in Mahayanist countries, to other members of the Buddhist pantheon such as bodhisattvas. For the monks, the notion of offering extends as well to the giving of the dharma in the form of sermons, to the chanting of scriptures in rituals (which may also be thought of as magically protective and salutary), and to the recitation of sutras for the dead.

All of these acts of offering are intimately involved in the concept of merit making. By performing them, individuals, through the working of karma, can seek to ensure themselves rebirth in one of the heavens or a better station in life, from which they may be able to attain the goal of enlightenment.

## **Buddhism Today**

Since the turn of the 20th century, traditional Buddhist practices were increasingly challenged by the advances of secularization and Westernization in Asia. In view of this, various modern Buddhist leaders

have tended to deemphasize the popular Buddhist practices and expressions of faith and to stress the more rational and empirical aspects of Buddhist thought as well as the practice of meditation. At the same time, they have given to Buddhism a considerable role in the nationalist movements in their own countries and promoted contacts with other Buddhist nations through such ecumenical organizations as the World Fellowship of Buddhists, which now has chapters throughout the world.

In more recent years, however, some of the Buddhist leaders have lost their national influence. Vietnam, Laos, China (including Tibet), and North Korea, once Buddhist, are now Communist nations, although Buddhism has been restored in formerly Communist Cambodia and Mongolia. Even as Western ideology (whether in the form of communism or secular capitalism) has advanced into Asia, however, Buddhism has begun to spread in the West. Tibetan, Theravada, and Japanese sects especially have firm toeholds in America and Western Europe, and, in the face of further uncertainties in Asia, a few Buddhist leaders have even come to think that the future of their religion lies there.

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