

# Buddhism

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**Buddhism** began in India 2,500 years ago and remains the dominant world religion in the East. There are over 360 million followers of Buddhism worldwide and over a million American Buddhists today. Buddhist concepts have also been influential on western culture in general, particularly in the areas of meditation and nonviolence.

Buddhism is based on the teachings of an Indian prince named Siddharta Gautama who lived around 500 BCE. According to Buddhist tradition, the sheltered young prince was shocked by the suffering he saw outside his palace walls, so he left his life of luxury to seek answers. Eventually he succeeded, becoming the Buddha--the "Enlightened One." He spent the remaining 45 years of his life teaching the dharma (the path to liberation from suffering) and establishing the sangha (a community of monks).

Over its long history, Buddhism has taken a wide variety of forms. Some emphasize rituals and the worship of deities, while others completely reject rituals and gods in favor of pure meditation. Yet all forms of Buddhism share respect for the teachings of the Buddha and the goal of ending suffering and the cycle of rebirth.

Theravada Buddhism, prominent in Southeast Asia, is atheistic and philosophical in nature and focuses on the monastic life and meditation as means to liberation. Mahayana Buddhism, prominent in China and Japan, incorporates several deities, celestial beings, and other traditional religious elements. In Mahayana, the path to liberation may include religious ritual, devotion, meditation, or a combination of these elements. Zen, Nichiren, Tendai, and Pure Land are the major forms of Mahayana Buddhism.

# Buddhist beliefs

Religious beliefs are important in Buddhism, but its central doctrines aren't necessarily the same as those of other world religions. Depending on the sect, **Buddhist beliefs** may include gods, ancestors, and the afterlife, but the most important Buddhist beliefs about suffering and how to escape it.

The Buddha himself was called the "Enlightened One." After he became enlightened, he taught that the way to eliminate suffering begins with understanding the true nature of the world.

However, the Buddha considered knowledge important only insofar as it remains practical. He rejected speculation about such matters as God, the nature of the universe, and the afterlife, urging his followers to focus instead on the Four Noble Truths by which they can free themselves from suffering.

## Basic Points of Buddhism

In the 2,500 years since the Buddha's enlightenment, Buddhism has spread over many countries, split into numerous sects, and adopted a wide variety of beliefs, practices, rituals and customs. However, an essential unity centered around the teachings of the Buddha underlies these differences.

## Is Buddhism Atheistic?

One general doctrine agreed upon by Buddhists is: "We do not believe that this world is created and ruled by a God." However, disbelief in a creator God does not mean that Buddhism is atheistic.

## Buddhas and Deities

In Mahayana Buddhism, the universe is populated with celestial buddhas, bodhisattvas, and deities that assist and inspire the Buddhist practitioner. Among the most popular are Kuan Yin, the Medicine Buddha, the Laughing

Buddha and the Green and White Taras. These and other fascinating figures are explored in this section.

## Human Nature

In Hinduism, the soul, or atman, is an eternally existing spiritual substance or being and the abiding self that moves from one body to the next at rebirth. The Buddha rejected this concept.

## Purpose of Life

In Buddhism, the purpose of life is to end suffering. The Buddha taught that humans suffer because we continually strive after things that do not give lasting happiness.

## Reincarnation and Afterlife

The Buddha said of death: Life is a journey. Death is a return to earth. The universe is like an inn. The passing years are like dust. Regard this phantom world as a star at dawn, a bubble in a stream, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, a flickering lamp - a phantom - and a dream

# Buddhist Sects and Schools

There are many subdivisions within Buddhism, but most can be classified into three major branches: Theravada ("Way of the Elders"), Mahayana ("Greater Vehicle") and Vajrayana ("Diamond Vehicle"). Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism went their separate ways in the first century AD. Mahayana then subdivided into several diverse schools, such as Zen, Pure Land and Nichiren, many of which flourish today in East Asia. The Vajrayana Buddhist tradition is an esoteric sect that is predominant in Tibet and Nepal.

To read more about these sects please refer to [this link](#).

# Buddhist practices

Buddhism incorporates a variety of rituals and practices, which are intended to aid in the journey to enlightenment and bring blessings on oneself and others. While some activities are unique to certain expressions of Buddhism, there are others that are found in most of the popular forms of the belief system.

For example, the practice of meditation is central to nearly all forms of Buddhism, and it derives directly from the Buddha's experiences and teachings. Meditation is the central focus of Zen Buddhism and the only way to liberation in Theravada Buddhism. (Also see: Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism comparison chart.)

In addition to meditation, the Mahayana schools of Buddhism have developed a variety of other ritual and devotional practices, many of which were inspired or influenced by the existing religious cultures of India, China, Japan, Southeast Asia, and Tibet.

# Buddhist sacred texts

In Buddhism, there are a vast number of Buddhist scriptures and religious texts, which are commonly divided into the categories of canonical and non-canonical.

The former, also called the Sutras (Sanskrit) or Suttas (Pali) are believed to be, either literally or metaphorically, the actual words of the Buddha. The latter are commentaries on canonical texts, other treatises on the Dharma, and collections of quotes, histories, grammars, etc.

This categorization is not universal, however: there will always be texts that cross boundaries, or that belong in more than one category. Moreover, Zen Buddhism rejects scriptures altogether as an ineffective path to

enlightenment. The articles below provide overviews of some of the most notable Buddhist texts.

## Tripitaka (Pali Canon)

The Tripitaka (Tipitaka in Pali) is the earliest collection of Buddhist teachings and the only text recognized as canonical by Theravada Buddhists. Many commentaries have been added over the centuries, however. Tripitaka means "three baskets," from the way in which it was originally recorded: the text was written on long, narrow leaves, which were sewn at the edges then grouped into bunches and stored in baskets.

The collection is also referred to as the Pali Canon, after the language in which it was first written. It is a vast collection of writings, comprising up to 50 volumes costing \$2000 in some modern sets.

## Mahayana Sutras

Mahayana Buddhism reveres the Tripitaka as a sacred text, but adds to it the Sutras, which reflect distinctively Mahayana concepts. Most of the Mahayana Sutras, which number over two thousand, were written between 200 BCE and 200 CE, the period in which Mahayana Buddhism developed.

Different divisions of Mahayana Buddhism emphasize different Sutras, but some texts, like the Lotus Sutra and Heart Sutra, are important to most branches of Mahayana.

## Tibetan Book of the Dead

The Tibetan Book of the Dead is the Tibetan text that is most well-known to the West. Written by a Tibetan monk, the Book of the Dead describes in detail the stages of death from the Tibetan point of view. It chronicles the experiences and religious opportunities a person encounters at various

stages: while dying, at the moment of death, during the 49-day interval between death and rebirth, and at rebirth.

# Buddhist holidays and festivals

Buddhism celebrates many holidays and festivals, most of which commemorate important events in the life of the Buddha or various Bodhisattvas. The date of the holidays are based on the lunar calendar and often differ by country and tradition.

Buddhist holidays are joyful occasions. A festival day normally begins with a visit to the local temple, where one offers food or other items to the monks and listens to a Dharma talk. The afternoon might consist of distributing food to the poor to earn merit, circumambulating (walking around) the temple three times in honor of the Three Jewels, chanting and meditation.

Some of the most important **Buddhist holidays and festivals** are briefly outlined below.

## Buddhism's Sacred Days

### Buddhist New Year

The Buddhist New Year is celebrated on different days throughout the world. In Theravadin countries (Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Laos), the new year is celebrated for three days from the first full moon day in April. In Mahayana countries, the new year usually starts on the first full moon day in January, and Tibetan Buddhists generally celebrate it in March.

### Vesak (Buddha Day)

Vesak is the birthday of the Buddha and the most important festival in Buddhism. On the first full moon day in May, Buddhists all over the world

celebrate the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha in a single day. The name "Vesak" comes from the Indian month of that name in which it is held.

### Sangha Day (Magha Puja Day or Fourfold Assembly Day)

Sangha Day commemorates the Buddha's visit to Veruvana Monastery in the city of Rajagaha, when 1,250 arhats are said to have spontaneously returned from their wanderings to pay their respects to the Buddha. Sangha Day is celebrated on the full moon day of the third lunar month (March).

### Dhamma Day (Asalha Puja Day)

Dhamma Day is observed on the full moon day of the eighth lunar month (July). It commemorates the "turning of the wheel of the Dharma" - the Buddha's first sermon - at the Sarnath Deer Park.

### Observance Day (Uposatha)

Observance Day refers to each of the four traditional monthly holy days that continue to be observed in Theravada countries - the new moon, full moon, and quarter moon days. It is known in Sri Lanka as Poya Day.

### Kathina Ceremony (Robe Offering Ceremony)

The Kathina Ceremony is held on any convenient date within one month of the conclusion of the three month rains retreat season (Vassa). On this day, the laity (non-monastics) offer new robes and other necessities to the monks and nuns.

### Festival of Floating Bowls (Loy Krathong)

At the end of the Kathin Festival season, when the rivers and canals are full of water, the Loy Krathong Festival takes place in all parts of Thailand on the full moon night of the twelfth lunar month. People bring bowls made of leaves

(which contain flowers), candles and incense sticks, and float them in the water. As they go, all bad luck is supposed to disappear. The traditional practice of Loy Krathong was originally meant to pay homage to the holy footprint of the Buddha on the beach of the Namada River in India.

## Elephant Festival

The Buddha used the example of a wild elephant that is harnessed to a tame one to train to teach that a person new to Buddhism should be helped by an older Buddhist. To mark this saying, Thai Buddhists hold an Elephant Festival on the third Saturday in November.

## The Festival of the Tooth

On a small hill in Sri Lanka is a great temple that was built to house a relic of the Buddha - his tooth. The tooth can never be seen, as it is kept deep inside many caskets. But once a year in August, on the night of the full moon, there is a special procession for it.

## Ancestor Day (Ulambana)

In Mahayana countries, it is believed that the gates of hell are opened on the first day of the eighth lunar month and ghosts may visit the world for 15 days. Food offerings are made during this time to relieve the sufferings of the ghosts. On the fifteenth day, Ulambana or Ancestor Day, people visit cemeteries to make offerings to the departed ancestors. Many Theravadins from Cambodia, Laos and Thailand also observe this festival.

A related holiday is the Japanese Buddhist festival known as Obon, beginning on the thirteenth of July and lasting for three days, which celebrates the reunion of family ancestors with the living.

## Sources

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