

# Buddhism

## Buddhism

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Buddhism, also known as Buddhadharma and Dharmavinaya, is an Indian religion based on teachings attributed to the Buddha, a wandering teacher who lived in the 6th or 5th century BCE. It is the world's fourth-largest religion, with about 320 million followers, known as Buddhists, who comprise four percent of the global population. It arose in the eastern Gangetic plain as a *śramaṇa* movement in the 5th century BCE, and gradually spread throughout much of Asia. Buddhism has subsequently played a major role in Asian culture and spirituality, eventually spreading to the West in the 20th century.

According to tradition, the Buddha instructed his followers in a path of development which leads to awakening and full liberation from *dukkha* (lit. 'suffering, unease'). He regarded this path as a Middle Way between extremes such as asceticism and sensual indulgence. Teaching that *dukkha* arises alongside attachment or clinging, the Buddha advised meditation practices and ethical precepts rooted in non-harming. Widely observed teachings include the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the doctrines of dependent origination, karma, and the three marks of existence. Other commonly observed elements include the Triple Gem, the taking of monastic vows, and the cultivation of perfections (*pāramitā*).

The Buddhist canon is vast, with philosophical traditions and many different textual collections in different languages (such as Sanskrit, Pali, Tibetan, and Chinese). Buddhist schools vary in their interpretation of the paths to liberation (*mārga*) as well as the relative importance and "canonicity" assigned to various Buddhist texts, and their specific teachings and practices. Two major extant branches of Buddhism are generally recognized by scholars: Theravāda (lit. 'School of the Elders') and Mahāyāna (lit. 'Great Vehicle'). The Theravada tradition emphasizes the attainment of *nirvāṇa* (lit. 'extinguishing') as a means of transcending the individual self and ending the cycle of death and rebirth (*saṃsāra*), while the Mahayana tradition emphasizes the Bodhisattva ideal, in which one works for the liberation of all sentient beings. Additionally, Vajrayāna (lit. 'Indestructible Vehicle'), a body of teachings incorporating esoteric tantric techniques, may be viewed as a separate branch or tradition within Mahāyāna.

The Theravāda branch has a widespread following in Sri Lanka as well as in Southeast Asia, namely Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. The Mahāyāna branch—which includes the East Asian traditions of Tiantai, Chan, Pure Land, Zen, Nichiren, and Tendai—is predominantly practised in Nepal, Bhutan, China, Malaysia, Vietnam, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan. Tibetan Buddhism, a form of Vajrayāna, is practised in the Himalayan states as well as in Mongolia and Russian Kalmykia and Tuva. Japanese Shingon also preserves the Vajrayana tradition as transmitted to China. Historically, until the early 2nd millennium, Buddhism was widely practiced in the Indian subcontinent before declining there; it also had a foothold to some extent elsewhere in Asia, namely Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

## Tibetan Buddhism

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Tibetan Buddhism is a form of Buddhism practiced in Tibet, Bhutan and Mongolia. It also has a sizable number of adherents in the areas surrounding the Himalayas, including the Indian regions of Ladakh, Darjeeling, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh, as well as in Nepal. Smaller groups of practitioners can be found in Central Asia, some regions of China such as Northeast China, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia and some regions

of Russia, such as Tuva, Buryatia, and Kalmykia.

Tibetan Buddhism evolved as a form of Mahayana Buddhism stemming from the latest stages of Buddhism (which included many Vajrayana elements). It thus preserves many Indian Buddhist tantric practices of the post-Gupta early medieval period (500–1200 CE), along with numerous native Tibetan developments. In the pre-modern era, Tibetan Buddhism spread outside of Tibet primarily due to the influence of the Mongol-led Yuan dynasty, founded by Kublai Khan, who ruled China, Mongolia, and parts of Siberia. In the Modern era, Tibetan Buddhism has spread outside of Asia because of the efforts of the Tibetan diaspora (1959 onwards). As the Dalai Lama escaped to India, the Indian subcontinent is also known for its renaissance of Tibetan Buddhism monasteries, including the rebuilding of the three major monasteries of the Gelug tradition.

Apart from classical Mahāyāna Buddhist practices like the ten perfections, Tibetan Buddhism also includes tantric practices, such as deity yoga and the Six Dharmas of Naropa, as well as methods that are seen as transcending tantra, like Dzogchen. Its main goal is Buddhahood. The primary language of scriptural study in this tradition is classical Tibetan.

Tibetan Buddhism has four major schools, namely Nyingma (8th century), Kagyu (11th century), Sakya (1073), and Gelug (1409). The Jonang is a smaller school that exists, and the Rimé movement (19th century), meaning "no sides", is a more recent non-sectarian movement that attempts to preserve and understand all the different traditions. The predominant spiritual tradition in Tibet before the introduction of Buddhism was Bon, which has been strongly influenced by Tibetan Buddhism (particularly the Nyingma school). While each of the four major schools is independent and has its own monastic institutions and leaders, they are closely related and intersect with common contact and dialogue.

## Buddhism in Japan

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Buddhism was first established in Japan in the 6th century CE. Most of the Japanese Buddhists belong to new schools of Buddhism which were established in the Kamakura period (1185–1333). During the Edo period (1603–1868), Buddhism was controlled by the feudal Shogunate. The Meiji period (1868–1912) saw a strong response against Buddhism, with persecution and a forced separation between Buddhism and Shinto (Shinbutsu bunri).

The largest sects of Japanese Buddhism are Pure Land Buddhism with 22 million believers, followed by Nichiren Buddhism with 10 million believers, Shingon Buddhism with 5.4 million, Zen Buddhism with 5.3 million, Tendai Buddhism with 2.8 million, and only about 700,000 for the six old schools established in the Nara period (710–794).

## Nichiren Buddhism

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Nichiren Buddhism (Japanese: 日蓮仏教, romanized: Nichiren bukkyō), also known as Hokkeshō (Japanese: 法華宗, meaning Lotus Sect), is a branch of Mahayana Buddhism based on the teachings of the 13th-century Japanese Buddhist priest Nichiren (1222–1282) and is one of the Kamakura period schools. Its teachings derive from some 300–400 extant letters and treatises either authored by or attributed to Nichiren.

Nichiren Buddhism generally sources its basic doctrine from the Lotus Sutra claiming that all sentient beings possess an internal Buddha-nature capable of attaining Buddhahood in the current life. There are three essential aspects to Nichiren Buddhism:

The faith in Nichiren's Gohonzon

The chanting of Nam Myoho Renge Kyo with varying recitations of the Lotus Sutra

The study of Nichiren's scriptural writings, called Gosho

After his death, Nichiren left to both his senior disciples and lay followers the mandate to widely propagate the Gohonzon and chanting the Daimoku in order to secure the peace and prosperity of society.

Traditionalist Nichiren Buddhist temple groups are commonly associated with Nichiren Shōshū and various Nichiren-shū schools. In addition, modern lay organizations not affiliated with temples such as Soka Gakkai, Kenshokai, Shoshinkai, Risshō Kōsei Kai, and Honmon Butsuryū-shū also exist while some Japanese new religions are Nichiren-inspired lay groups.

The Soka Gakkai International is often called "the most prominent Japanese 'export' religion to draw significant numbers of non-Japanese converts", by which Nichiren Buddhism has spread throughout the world.

Nichiren upheld the belief that the Lotus Sutra alone contains the highest degree of Buddhist teachings and proposed a classification system that ranks the quality of religions and various Nichiren schools can be either accommodating or vigorously opposed to any other forms of Buddhism or religious beliefs. Various followers debate Nichiren status, as a Bodhisattva, a mortal saint, or an "Original Buddha" of the third age of Buddhism. Nichiren Buddhism is practiced in many countries. The largest groups are Soka Gakkai International, Nichiren Shū, and Nichiren Shōshū.

Mahayana

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Mahayana is a major branch of Buddhism, along with Theravada. It is a broad group of Buddhist traditions, texts, philosophies, and practices developed in ancient India (c. 1st century BCE onwards). Mahāyāna accepts the main scriptures and teachings of early Buddhism but also recognizes various doctrines and texts that are not accepted by Theravada Buddhism as original. These include the Mahāyāna sūtras and their emphasis on the bodhisattva path and Prajñāpāramitā. Vajrayana or Mantra traditions are a subset of Mahāyāna which makes use of numerous Tantric methods Vajrayanists consider to help achieve Buddhahood.

Mahāyāna also refers to the path of the bodhisattva striving to become a fully awakened Buddha for the benefit of all sentient beings, and is thus also called the "Bodhisattva Vehicle" (Bodhisattvayāna). Mahāyāna Buddhism generally sees the goal of becoming a Buddha through the bodhisattva path as being available to all and sees the state of the arhat as incomplete. Mahāyāna also includes numerous Buddhas and bodhisattvas that are not found in Theravada (such as Amitābha and Vairocana). Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy also promotes unique theories, such as the Madhyamaka theory of emptiness (śūnyatā), the Vijñānavāda ("the doctrine of consciousness" also called "mind-only"), and the Buddha-nature teaching.

While initially a small movement in India, Mahāyāna eventually grew to become an influential force in Indian Buddhism. Large scholastic centers associated with Mahāyāna such as Nalanda and Vikramashila thrived between the 7th and 12th centuries. In the course of its history, Mahāyāna Buddhism spread from South Asia to East Asia, Southeast Asia and the Himalayan regions. Various Mahāyāna traditions are the predominant forms of Buddhism found in China, Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia. Since Vajrayana is a tantric form of Mahāyāna, Mahāyāna Buddhism is also dominant in Tibet, Mongolia, Bhutan, and other Himalayan regions. It has also been traditionally present elsewhere in Asia as a minority among Buddhist communities in Nepal, Malaysia, Indonesia and regions

with Asian diaspora communities.

As of 2010, the Mahāyāna tradition was the largest major tradition of Buddhism, with 53% of Buddhists belonging to East Asian Mahāyāna and 6% to Vajrayana, compared to 36% to Theravada.

## Four Noble Truths

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In Buddhism, the Four Noble Truths (Sanskrit: चत्वार्यार्यसत्ता, romanized: catvāryāryasatya; Pali: cattāri ariyasaccāni; "The Four arya satya") are "the truths of the noble one (the Buddha)," a statement of how things really are when they are seen correctly. The four truths are

dukkha (not being at ease, 'suffering', from dush-stha, standing unstable). Dukkha is an innate characteristic of transient existence; nothing is forever, this is painful;

samudaya (origin, arising, combination; 'cause'): together with this transient world and its pain, there is also thirst (desire, longing, craving) for and attachment to this transient, unsatisfactory existence;

nirodha (cessation, ending, confinement): the attachment to this transient world and its pain can be severed or contained by the confinement or letting go of this craving;

marga (road, path, way): the Noble Eightfold Path is the path leading to the confinement of this desire and attachment, and the release from dukkha.

The four truths appear in many grammatical forms in the ancient Buddhist texts, and are traditionally identified as the first teaching given by the Buddha. While often called one of the most important teachings in Buddhism, they have both a symbolic and a propositional function. Symbolically, they represent the awakening and liberation of the Buddha, and of the potential for his followers to reach the same liberation and freedom that he did. As propositions, the Four Truths are a conceptual framework that appear in the Pali canon and early Hybrid Sanskrit Buddhist scriptures, as a part of the broader "network of teachings" (the "dhamma matrix"), which have to be taken together. They provide a conceptual framework for introducing and explaining Buddhist thought, which has to be personally understood or "experienced".

As propositions, the four truths defy an exact definition, but refer to and express the basic orientation of Buddhism: unguarded sensory contact gives rise to craving and clinging to impermanent states and things, which are dukkha, "unsatisfactory," "incapable of satisfying" and painful. This craving keeps us caught in saṁsāra, "wandering", usually interpreted as the endless cycle of repeated rebirth, and the continued dukkha that comes with it, but also referring to the endless cycle of attraction and rejection that perpetuates the ego-mind. There is a way to end this cycle, namely by attaining nirvana, cessation of craving, whereafter rebirth and the accompanying dukkha will no longer arise again. This can be accomplished by following the eightfold path, confining our automatic responses to sensory contact by restraining oneself, cultivating discipline and wholesome states, and practicing mindfulness and dhyana (meditation).

The function of the four truths, and their importance, developed over time and the Buddhist tradition slowly recognized them as the Buddha's first teaching. This tradition was established when prajna, or "liberating insight", came to be regarded as liberating in itself, instead of or in addition to the practice of dhyana. This "liberating insight" gained a prominent place in the sutras, and the four truths came to represent this liberating insight, as a part of the enlightenment story of the Buddha.

The four truths grew to be of central importance in the Theravada tradition of Buddhism by about the 5th-century CE, which holds that the insight into the four truths is liberating in itself. They are less prominent in the Mahayana tradition, which sees the higher aims of insight into sunyata, emptiness, and following the

Bodhisattva path as central elements in their teachings and practice. The Mahayana tradition reinterpreted the four truths to explain how a liberated being can still be "pervasively operative in this world". Beginning with the exploration of Buddhism by western colonialists in the 19th century and the development of Buddhist modernism, they came to be often presented in the west as the central teaching of Buddhism, sometimes with novel modernistic reinterpretations very different from the historic Buddhist traditions in Asia.

## Chan Buddhism

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Chan (traditional Chinese: 禪; simplified Chinese: 禅; pinyin: Chán; abbr. of Chinese: 禅宗; pinyin: chánzōng), from Sanskrit dhyāna (meaning "meditation" or "meditative state"), is a Chinese school of Mahāyāna Buddhism. It developed in China from the 6th century CE onwards, becoming especially popular during the Tang and Song dynasties.

Chan is the originating tradition of Zen Buddhism (the Japanese pronunciation of the same character, which is the most commonly used English name for the school). Chan Buddhism spread from China south to Vietnam as Thiṇ and north to Korea as Seon, and, in the 13th century, east to Japan as Japanese Zen.

## Vajrayana

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Vajrayāna (Sanskrit: वज्रयान; lit. 'vajra vehicle'), also known as Mantrayāna ('mantra vehicle'), Guhyamantrayāna ('secret mantra vehicle'), Tantrayāna ('tantra vehicle'), Tantric Buddhism, and Esoteric Buddhism, is a Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition that emphasizes esoteric practices and rituals aimed at rapid spiritual awakening. Emerging between the 5th and 7th centuries CE in medieval India, Vajrayāna incorporates a range of techniques, including the use of mantras (sacred sounds), dhāraṇīs (mnemonic codes), mudrās (symbolic hand gestures), mandalās (spiritual diagrams), and the visualization of deities and Buddhas. These practices are designed to transform ordinary experiences into paths toward enlightenment, often by engaging with aspects of desire and aversion in a ritualized context.

A distinctive feature of Vajrayāna is its emphasis on esoteric transmission, where teachings are passed directly from teacher (guru or vajracarya) to student through initiation ceremonies. Tradition asserts that these teachings have been passed down through an unbroken lineage going back to the historical Buddha (c. the 5th century BCE), sometimes via other Buddhas or bodhisattvas (e.g. Vajrapani). This lineage-based transmission ensures the preservation of the teachings' purity and effectiveness. Practitioners often engage in deity yoga, a meditative practice where one visualizes oneself as a deity embodying enlightened qualities to transform one's perception of reality. The tradition also acknowledges the role of feminine energy, venerating female Buddhas and ḥiṇīs (spiritual beings), and sometimes incorporates practices that challenge conventional norms to transcend dualistic thinking.

Vajrayāna has given rise to various sub-traditions across Asia. In Tibet, it evolved into Tibetan Buddhism, which became the dominant spiritual tradition, integrating local beliefs and practices. In Japan, it influenced Shingon Buddhism, established by Kūkai, emphasizing the use of mantras and rituals. Chinese Esoteric Buddhism also emerged, blending Vajrayāna practices with existing Chinese Buddhist traditions. Each of these traditions adapted Vajrayāna principles to its cultural context while maintaining core esoteric practices aimed at achieving enlightenment.

Central to Vajrayāna symbolism is the vajra, a ritual implement representing indestructibility and irresistible force, embodying the union of wisdom and compassion. Practitioners often use the vajra in conjunction with a bell during rituals, symbolizing the integration of male and female principles. The tradition also employs

rich visual imagery, including complex mandalas and depictions of wrathful deities that serve as meditation aids to help practitioners internalize spiritual concepts and confront inner obstacles on the path to enlightenment.

## Saṃsāra (Buddhism)

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Saṃsāra (in Sanskrit (संसार) and Pali) in Buddhism is the beginningless cycle of repeated birth, mundane existence and dying again. Samsara is considered to be suffering (Skt. duḥkha; P. dukkha), or generally unsatisfactory and painful. It is perpetuated by desire and ignorance (Skt. avidyā; P. avijjā), and the resulting karma and sensuousness.

Rebirths occur in six realms of existence, namely three good realms (heavenly, demi-god, human) and three evil realms (animal, ghosts, hell). Saṃsāra ends when a being attains nirvāṇa, which is the extinction of desire and acquisition of true insight into the nature of reality as impermanent and non-self.

## Chinese Buddhism

*Institutions of Chinese Buddhism Chinese Buddhism or Han Buddhism (traditional Chinese: 漢傳佛教; simplified Chinese: 汉传佛教; pinyin: Hàndchuán Fójiào; Jyutping:*

Chinese Buddhism or Han Buddhism (traditional Chinese: 漢傳佛教; simplified Chinese: 汉传佛教; pinyin: Hàndchuán Fójiào; Jyutping: Hon3 Cyun4 Fat6 Gaau3; Pe̍h-ōe-jī: Hàn-thoân Hu̍t-kàu) is a Chinese form of Mahayana Buddhism. Chinese Buddhism emphasizes the study of Mahayana sutras and treatises. Some of the most important scriptures in Chinese Buddhism include the Lotus Sutra, Flower Ornament Sutra, Vimalakirti Sutra, Nirvana Sutra, and Amitayus Sutra. Chinese Buddhism is the largest institutionalized religion in mainland China. Currently, there are an estimated 185 to 250 million Chinese Buddhists in the People's Republic of China. It is also a major religion in Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia, as well as among the Chinese Diaspora.

Buddhism was first introduced to China during the Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE). It was promoted by multiple emperors, especially during the Tang dynasty (618–907), which helped it spread across the country. The translation of a large body of Indian Buddhist scriptures into Chinese and the inclusion of these translations (along with Taoist and Confucian works) into a Chinese Buddhist canon had far-reaching implications for the dissemination of Buddhism throughout the East Asian cultural sphere, including Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Chinese Buddhism also developed various unique traditions of Buddhist thought and practice, including Tiantai, Huayan, Chan, Pure Land and Esoteric Buddhism.

From its inception, Chinese Buddhism has been influenced by native Chinese religions and philosophy, especially Confucianism and Taoism, but also Chinese folk religion. The Chinese Buddhist canon also draws from the traditions of Confucianism and Taoism as well as the rituals of local folk religions.

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