

What Is 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 *dharma* 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 recognised by scholars: Theravāda (lit. 'School of the Elders') and Mahāyāna (lit. 'Great Vehicle'). The Theravada tradition emphasises the attainment of *nirvāṇa* (lit. 'extinguishing') as a means of transcending the individual self and ending the cycle of death and rebirth (*saṁsāra*), while the Mahayana tradition emphasises 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 practised in the Indian subcontinent before declining there; it also had a foothold to some extent elsewhere in Asia, namely Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

Nirvana (Buddhism)

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Nirvana or nibbana (Sanskrit: *nirvāṇa*; IAST: *nirvāṇa*; Pali: *nibbāna*) is the extinguishing of the passions, the "blowing out" or "quenching" of the activity of the grasping mind and its related unease. Nirvana is the goal of many Buddhist paths, and leads to the soteriological release from *dukkha* ('suffering') and rebirths in *saṁsāra*. Nirvana is part of the Third Truth on "cessation of *dukkha*" in the Four Noble Truths, and the

"summum bonum of Buddhism and goal of the Eightfold Path."

In all forms of Buddhism, Nirvana is regarded as the highest or supreme religious goal. It is often described as the unconditioned or uncompounded (Skt.: *asaṃskṛta*, Pali: *asankhata*), meaning it is beyond all forms of conditionality — not subject to change, decay, or the limitations of time and space. Nirvana is typically seen as being outside the realm of dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*), representing a truth that transcends cause and effect, as well as all conventional dualities such as existence and non-existence, or life and death. Nirvana is also said to transcend all conceptual frameworks, being beyond the grasp of ordinary human perception.

In the Buddhist tradition, nirvana has commonly been interpreted as the extinction of the "three poisons" of greed (*raga*), aversion (*dvesha*) and ignorance (*moha*). In early Buddhist sources, these are also known as the "three fires" (an analogy that internalizes and inverts the three fires of Vedic ritual). When these three poisons are extinguished, permanent release from *saṃsāra*, the cycle of grasping, suffering and rebirth, is attained. What this means was interpreted differently by the various Indian Buddhist schools. Some like the *Vaiśiṣṭika* school, held that Nirvana was a really existent transcendent reality (*dravyasat*), while others (*Sautrāntika*) held that Nirvana was merely a name for the total cessation of suffering and rebirth. Nirvana has also been claimed by some scholars to be identical with insight into *anatta* (non-self) and *sunyata* (emptiness), though this is hotly contested by other scholars and practicing monks.

Traditional sources distinguish between two types of nirvana: *sopadhishesa-nirvana* literally "nirvana with a remainder", attained and maintained during life, and *parinirvana* or *anupadhishesa-nirvana*, meaning "nirvana without remainder" or final nirvana (attained after the bodily death of a fully enlightened person). Nirvana, as the quenching of the three poisons (and all defilements) and the complete ending of all rebirth, is the most common soteriological aim in the Theravada tradition.

In Mahayana Buddhism, a further distinction is made between the "abiding" nirvana (equated with the nirvana of non-Mahayana Buddhism) and the Mahayanist nirvana which is "non-abiding" (*apratiṣṭhita*). In Mahayana, the highest goal is Buddhahood, which is seen as a non-abiding kind of nirvana that allows a Buddha to continue to manifest in *samsara* in order to guide living beings on the path. Thus, a Buddha is not 'stuck' or 'fixed' in a transcendent reality, nor does a Buddha dissolve into a state of cessation, but continues to manifest in the world through countless transformation bodies (*nirmāṇakāya*), while also retaining a transcendent dimension (*saṃbhogakāya*).

Why Buddhism Is True

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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.

Impermanence (Buddhism)

doctrines of Buddhism. The doctrine asserts that all of conditioned existence, without exception, is "transient, evanescent, inconstant"; Anicca is one of the

Impermanence, called anicca in Pāli and anitya in Sanskrit, appears extensively in the Pali Canon as one of the essential doctrines of Buddhism. The doctrine asserts that all of conditioned existence, without exception, is "transient, evanescent, inconstant".

Anicca is one of the three marks of existence—the other two are dukkha (suffering or unsatisfactory) and anatta (without a lasting essence).

Anicca is in contrast to nirvana, the reality that is nicca, or knows no change, decay or death.

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.

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 Thiền and north to Korea as Seon, and, in the 13th century, east to Japan as Japanese Zen.

Four Noble Truths

In Buddhism, the Four Noble Truths (Sanskrit: चत्वार्यार्यासत्यानि, romanized: catvāryāryasatyāni; Pali: cattāri ariyasaccāni; "The Four arya satya") are

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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.

Korean Buddhism

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Korean Buddhism began in the 4th century CE during the Three Kingdoms Period. Centuries after Buddhism originated in India, the Mahayana tradition arrived in China through the Silk Road in the 1st century CE, then entered the Korean peninsula in the 4th century, from where it was transmitted to Japan. In Korea, it was adopted as the state religion of 3 constituent polities of the Three Kingdoms Period, first by the Goguryeo (also known as Goryeo) in 372 CE, by the Silla (Gaya) in 528 CE, and by the Baekje in 552 CE.

Korean Buddhism is distinguished from other forms of Buddhism by its attempt to resolve what its early practitioners saw as inconsistencies within the Mahayana Buddhist traditions that they received from foreign countries. To address this, they developed a new holistic approach to Buddhism that became a distinct form, an approach characteristic of virtually all major Korean thinkers. The resulting variation is called Tongbulgyo ("interpenetrated Buddhism"), a form that sought to harmonize previously arising disputes among scholars (a principle called hwajaeng ??).

As it now stands, Korean Buddhism consists mostly of the Seon Lineage, primarily represented by the Jogye and Taego Orders. The Korean Seon has a strong relationship with other Mahayana traditions that bear the imprint of Chan teachings as well as the closely related Zen. Other sects, such as the modern revival of the Cheontae lineage, the Jingak Order (a modern esoteric sect), and the newly formed Won, have also attracted sizable followings.

Korean Buddhism has contributed much to East Asian Buddhism, especially to early Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese, and Tibetan schools of Buddhist thought.

The Buddha

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Siddhartha Gautama, most commonly referred to as the Buddha (lit. 'the awakened one'), was a wandering ascetic and religious teacher who lived in South Asia during the 6th or 5th century BCE and founded Buddhism. According to Buddhist legends, he was born in Lumbini, in what is now Nepal, to royal parents of the Shakya clan, but renounced his home life to live as a wandering ascetic. After leading a life of mendicancy, asceticism, and meditation, he attained nirvana at Bodhi Gay? in what is now India. The Buddha then wandered through the lower Indo-Gangetic Plain, teaching and building a monastic order. Buddhist tradition holds he died in Kushinagar and reached parinirvana ("final release from conditioned existence").

According to Buddhist tradition, the Buddha taught a Middle Way between sensual indulgence and severe asceticism, leading to freedom from ignorance, craving, rebirth, and suffering. His core teachings are summarized in the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, a training of the mind that includes ethical training and kindness toward others, and meditative practices such as sense restraint, mindfulness, dhyana (meditation proper). Another key element of his teachings are the concepts of the five skandhas and

dependent origination, describing how all dharmas (both mental states and concrete 'things') come into being, and cease to be, depending on other dharmas, lacking an existence on their own svabhava).

While in the Nikayas, he frequently refers to himself as the Tathāgata; the earliest attestation of the title Buddha is from the 3rd century BCE, meaning 'Awakened One' or 'Enlightened One'. His teachings were compiled by the Buddhist community in the Vinaya, his codes for monastic practice, and the Sutta Piṭaka, a compilation of teachings based on his discourses. These were passed down in Middle Indo-Aryan dialects through an oral tradition. Later generations composed additional texts, such as systematic treatises known as Abhidharma, biographies of the Buddha, collections of stories about his past lives known as Jataka tales, and additional discourses, i.e., the Mahāyāna sūtras.

Buddhism evolved into a variety of traditions and practices, represented by Theravāda, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna, and spread beyond the Indian subcontinent. While Buddhism declined in India, and mostly disappeared after the 8th century CE due to a lack of popular and economic support, Buddhism has grown more prominent in Southeast and East Asia.

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