



A Brief Introduction to Buddhism

What is Buddhism?

Buddhism is often described as a religion, philosophy, code of ethics, and/or a way of life and was founded approximately 500 BCE by Siddharta Gautama. It can be described as a path of practice and spiritual development leading to insight into the 'true nature of reality' as it pertains to our current and potentially future lives. There is great variety within Buddhism, ranging from the historically non-theistic to contemporary Humanist Buddhists, and many Buddhist communities recognise the existence of supernatural beings such as gods and spirits. In the religious diversity of the West one may find as self-identified Buddhists monks who devote their lives to Buddhism alongside 'spiritual consumers' who occasionally meditate. There are those who are born Buddhists, those who become Buddhists, as well as spiritual travellers who pick some Buddhist concepts and practices that resonate with them and blend them with other beliefs. Whereas Buddhism in the West has become associated with meditation, elsewhere, Buddhism is more readily associated with general cultural and/or monastic traditions. Consequently, people often refer to Western Buddhism, indigenous Buddhism, or other more tradition and/or geographically specific designations to clarify the 'kind' of Buddhism to which they are referring. Buddhism has changed and adapted to different historical times and different cultural contexts many times in the past, and it continues to do this. An oral tradition for much of its early history, the main texts were written later, and mainly by followers.

Patrons

Origins and Pre-sectarian Buddhism

The founder is **Siddhārtha Gautama** (c 563-483 BCE), now generally referred to as the Buddha – an honorific title which means ‘awakened one’. He was involved with the non-Brahmanical *Śramaṇa* traditions of wandering medics during this period and explored the teachings of many of the extant traditions. At the time the Buddha lived and taught, teachings were passed on orally; much of the life of the Buddha and the early days of Buddhism have been mythologised. According to tradition, the Buddha was born into an aristocratic household in Lumbini, a village in modern-day Nepal. He was married at 16 to Yaśodharā, and subsequently their son Rāhula was born. The Buddha left home at the age of 29 to seek religious knowledge and attained enlightenment at the age of 35. The remaining years of his life were spent giving religious teachings, and he died at the age of 80.

The four **Noble Truths** are considered to be the core insights of the Buddha and are usually taught embedded in the Buddha’s biography: suffering is part of life (a result of our conditioned existence based on attachments), the cause of suffering (it arises from ignorance, within a cycle of cause and effect), cessation of suffering (liberation is possible), and the path to liberation (the Noble Eightfold Path). The **Noble Eightfold Path** provides guidance to Buddhists on how to understand the **Dharma** (teachings and wisdom of the Buddha) and put it into practice.

The Buddha’s first followers were wandering ascetics – they were homeless, had few possessions, and travelled around spreading the teachings. There were no monasteries, or formal monastic rules and regulations, until later. Around 400 BCE the first Buddhist Council took place; this was a meeting of 500 monks under Mahākāśyapa, one of the Buddha’s disciples. It was not until much later, in about 80 BCE, that the earliest texts, known as the **Pali Canon**, were written down in Sri Lanka. This consists of records of discourses between the Buddha and his disciples (*sutra*), writings on monastic discipline (*vinaya*), and texts that organize and interpret doctrine (*abhidharma*). Hence it is an important aspect of the teachings (*dharma*), monastic rules for the followers (*sangha*), and early development of Buddhist philosophy (ethics and morals).

As in many religious traditions, the works attributed to Buddhism's founder are of much later pedigree than his lifetime. Furthermore, oral transmission of the Dharma has continued to be a chief mode for spreading Buddhism throughout Buddhism’s history. As such, the teachings themselves may reflect some degree of the socio-cultural and religious contexts of the time, as well as the opinions and motivations of the texts' (unknown) authors. The narratives of the Buddha's life are themselves interwoven, to some extent, with Buddhist doctrine.

Sectarian divisions

Approximately a century after the Buddha’s death, sectarian divisions were forming; there are records of several Councils and eighteen Schools. The biggest rifts formed around the question of monastic discipline and authority. In the 1st Century BCE, what became known as the "Great Vehicle" (Mahāyāna) had emerged as a distinctive school (although it had been evolving for a long time). With its new practices, ethics, and focus on universal (rather than individual) liberation, Mahāyānists cast previous Buddhist traditions into the "Vehicle of Hearers" (Śrāvakayāna) - or sometimes pejoratively referred to as the "Lesser Vehicle" (Hīnayāna).

The traditions recognised today contain the literature, teachings and ethics of previous forms, so what are seen as 'sectarian divisions' may still have much in common with one another. But some generally accepted distinctions are:

- **Śrāvakayāna** traditions focus on the teachings of the historical Buddha. The term Śrāvakayāna is usually translated by adherents as 'Disciples Vehicle' and by scholars as 'Mainstream Buddhism.' Scholars now trace distinct schools of interpretation forming from around the mid-3rd century BCE which are generally conservative in their interpretations of earlier teachings.
 - The **Theravāda** tradition is the most well-known and globally influential sub-grouping within this division. It focuses on the Pali Canon as its key textual reference and emphasizes individual enlightenment, which can be achieved without the help of external forces or gods. **Theravāda** interpretations account for the majority of believers in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Burma and significant minority religious groups in Vietnam, China and Bangladesh.
- **Mahāyāna** traditions focus on the transcendent nature of Buddha, bodhisattvas (compassionate enlightened beings), and the doctrine of *śūnyatā*, or 'emptiness'. It emphasizes enlightenment of all beings (focusing on the Buddha's insights and compassion) rather than individual enlightenment, and emphasizes *upāya* (**skillful means**), the use of 'expedient means' to realise enlightenment. The Pali canon is seen as not necessarily being the most expedient or comprehensible for all occasions and locations, hence doctrinal adaptation is seen as important in this tradition. Ch'an/Zen, Pureland, T'ien Tai/Tendai are major Mahāyāna traditions active today.
- **Vajrayāna**, the 'diamond vehicle', is a further development from Mahāyāna traditions and emphasizes the importance of the guru-disciple relationship on an esoteric spiritual path. **Vajrayāna** traditions typically focus on **Tantra**, a term which can encompass a large variety of beliefs and practices including the harnessing of energy (often discussed in terms of a 'subtle body' consisting of channels (*nadis*), winds (*prāṇa*), and energetic focal points (*chakras*), and meditation practices which include the identification with particular deities as a means to enlightenment. A focus on sexual activity as a spiritual path is better termed **Neo-Tantra**, which has developed as an integration of Western esoteric magic and ritual, with selected readings of Indian texts from different religious traditions.

Key narratives in Buddhism

As mentioned above, the life story of the Buddha can be seen to epitomise Buddhist principles and insights. Beyond the tales of **Siddharta Gautama's** biographies, many Buddhists also read the **Jātaka Tales**, which are believed to illustrate important insights via tales of the Buddha's past lives. Another important set of teachings are the **sūtras**. The early sūtras (Pāli, "suttas") and the later Mahāyāna sūtras are discourses attributed to the Buddha or one of his close disciples, and are all considered to be the word of the Buddha (including those that were perhaps not actually spoken by him). Some have become so popular that they inspired their own movements within Buddhism. Theravada Buddhists refer to the **Pali Canon** as their primary source of scriptural authority. (Tibetan, Mongolian and East Asian Buddhist traditions follow other Buddhist canons.) Mahāyāna Buddhists recognize other incarnations of enlightened buddhas (after the historical Siddhārtha Gautama) which have offered further revelations which offer more expedient means of accessing the Buddha's central insights. There are over one

hundred recognized Mahāyāna texts and some Buddhist schools are organised primarily around one of these later texts, e.g. Japanese **Nichiren Buddhism** and its later offshoots such as **Soka Gakkai International** follow only the **Lotus Sūtra**.

Key ideas and concepts in Buddhism

Three Jewels (or Treasures) are regarded as central to Buddhism; *Buddha*, *Dharma* and *Saṅgha*. **Buddha** can refer to the historical figure, the state of Buddha-hood, or Buddha-nature (the innate capacity for beings to transform into Buddhas / achieve enlightenment). **Dharma** refers to the teachings and wisdom of the Buddha. The **Saṅgha** refers to the followers of the Buddha, whether ordained or lay practitioners.

There are three **Dharma Seals**, or basic ‘characteristics of existence’, from which many other ideas have developed. They are: impermanence (*anicca* in Pali/*anitya* in Sanskrit, everything is transitory), suffering (*dukkha/duḥkha*, attachment is futile due to impermanence, and will lead to suffering) and no-self (*anattā/anātman*, our idea of our ego-self as permanent and separate from other things and beings is false, our being is illusory, and realising this will lead to the experience of no-self, and Buddha nature).

These key ideas have to also be understood within the context of *karma* and rebirth and have been developed in dialogue with the Indian, and later other cultural contexts where Buddhism has spread (see also our leaflet on Hinduism). The idea of **reincarnation** pre-dates Buddhism and is of fundamental importance to Buddhist thought. Part of the Buddha’s enlightenment, according to texts, was his ability to remember a vast number of previous lives in detail. The process of repeated rebirth is known as **saṃsāra** (endless wandering or unceasing flow). Reincarnation is tied in with the doctrine of **karma**, which, within Buddhism, is generally explained as one of five categories of causation (known collectively in Pali as *niyama dhammas*). *Karma* comprises action within different contexts. It can equal action, or it can form a potential which can grow into an appropriate result when met with the right conditions. It may also signify action over time in the form of the ripening of actions in specific past experiences. Buddhists aim to cultivate actions which will eventually lead to effects that will liberate them from *saṃsāra*. **Nirvāṇa** refers to the state of being free from all forms of suffering and rebirth. More concisely, but also quite simplistically, many interpret *karma* to mean that the circumstances of future rebirths are determined by the moral deeds a person performs in his/her life.

Core practices in Buddhism

Contemporary Buddhism allows for lay members as well as monastics (usually both male and female). In the East, Buddhism still has a strong monastic tradition. For lay-followers in Buddhist-majority cultures, Buddhism is seen as a way of life and devotion is a core practice. In Western Buddhism, meditation is seen as the core practice, and although there is a great variety in the way this is done, it always involves cultivating mental focus (be it through chanting, visualisation, or focus on breath and/or mind). Meditation can be practised in community or in solitude, at home.

Meditation, along with **devotion**, is also part of Buddhist ceremonies and **pūjās** (ceremonial offering to the Buddha and/or deities). Such ceremonies can take place at holy sites, places of worship or of ceremonial significance (such as temples and shrines), or in the home, where Buddhists may construct their own small shrines. Specific dates may vary across schools and traditions, but some key ceremonial dates are:

- Buddhist New Year (dates vary)
- Nirvāṇa Day (Buddha's death and final enlightenment, 8th or 15th February)
- Buddha Day (incorporates the birth, enlightenment and death of Buddha, celebrated on the first full moon day in May)
- Dharma Day (celebration of Buddha's first teaching after enlightenment, *The Wheel of Truth*, it usually falls in July)
- Bodhi Day (refers to the **Bodhi tree** under which the Buddha was first enlightened, and usually falls on 8th December).

Traditionally, the first formal step to be taken in most Buddhist schools requires 'taking refuge' (embracing the teachings of the Buddha) in the Three Jewels as the foundation of one's formal religious practice. (In contemporary Western Buddhism, people are usually welcome to meditate and join in meetings informally.) Taking refuge is also considered the point when one makes a choice to become a Buddhist, and this can be done in lay or monastic ordination ceremonies. A student who takes refuge may make vows to adhere to the **Five Precepts** (*pañca-sīla*). The interpretations of these vary culturally and between sects. Laypeople may undertake at least one of the five, or all five temporarily during certain holidays. Traditions differ in how many vows are common to take.

The Five Precepts are:

1. To refrain from harming living creatures (vegetarianism is mandatory in some traditions, and voluntary in others).
2. To refrain from taking that which is not given.
3. To refrain from sexual misconduct.
4. To refrain from false speech.
5. To refrain from intoxicants which lead to loss of mindfulness.

The Buddha is said to have identified four sites most worthy of **pilgrimage** for his followers:

- Lumbini: birthplace (in Nepal).
- Bodh Gaya: the place of his Enlightenment (in the current Mahabodhi Temple, in India).
- Sarnath: (Pali: Isipathana) in Uttar Pradesh, India, where he delivered his first teaching.
- Kusinara: (now Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh, India) where he died.

These places are popular pilgrimage sites, as are other locations where miraculous events are reported to have occurred, and other sites along the Indo-Gangetic Plain connected to the Buddha's life.

Geographical Spread

From the outset Buddhism was a **missionary religion**, and under the reign of emperor Aśoka (304–232 BCE), who had turned to Buddhism, the Maurya empire (in ancient India) as well as Buddhism spread significantly. Theravāda became the dominant form of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Thailand (where it had close relations with the monarchy), Cambodia, Burma/Myanmar and Laos. Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna became dominant in China, Japan (where it had a close alliance with the state in the mid-20th century), Taiwan, Tibet, Nepal, Mongolia, Korea, India and Vietnam. Estimates of the world-wide Buddhist

population range from 350 million to over one billion. A [world population review](#) in 2020 estimated there to be 535 million Buddhists worldwide – between eight and ten per cent of the world’s population. China has the highest number of Buddhists (at over 244 million) but Cambodia has the highest proportion of its population (at 96.9 per cent Buddhist). There are an estimated 240,000 Buddhists in the UK according to this resource.

Over time these forms of Buddhism have developed their own style and teachings, which, along with particular local and historical interactions with indigenous religion or spirituality, politics and institutions of governance, has resulted in great variety among Buddhist sects. Furthermore, new movements and traditions have emerged. Japan in particular has seen several waves of new movements based on traditions developed there – **Nichiren** (e.g. **Soka Gakkai International**), traditions that also moved there (e.g. **Zen** which developed from Chinese Chán movements), as well as syncretism of forms of Buddhism with other influences (e.g. **Aleph**, previously known as **Aum Shinrikyo**, **Tenrikyo** and **Agon Shu** which combines traditional Japanese kami and ancestor traditions with a reliance on the **Agon Sūtras**).

Contemporary Buddhism is characterised by its diversity. In some parts of the world it is enmeshed with national politics, and occasionally in battles (e.g. attacks against the Rohingya in Burma/Myanmar), elsewhere it is a cultural institution – and these days all these varieties are found in the West, as well as new forms of Buddhism and syncretistic groups that have recently emerged. The Buddhist landscape is constantly moving and changing.

Buddhism in the West

There were cultural interactions between Hellenistic and Buddhist culture from the 3rd century BCE, and westward transmission of Buddhism along the Silk Road from the 1st century BCE. The introduction of Buddhism to the contemporary West came through intellectual routes (through scholars, writers and artists), many of them officials who were posted to different parts of Asia during the colonial period, and who also happened to be amateur scholars. Many of the first centres founded in the West focused on Buddhist texts, teachings and philosophy, mainly from a scholarly perspective, and were founded by Western scholars/writers such as the **Buddhist Society** in London. Later introduction to and spread of Buddhism came through immigration.

Varying patterns of **immigration** meant that different forms of Buddhism settled in divergent ways. The USA saw more immigrants from China, Japan, followed by Indo-China (now Vietnam), and later South East Asia. Europe saw some immigration from Indo-China (Vietnam) initially, and later from other Buddhist regions. Although many Buddhists in Europe are converts to Buddhism, these days they are outnumbered by immigrants from Asia who brought their beliefs with them.

Some Western Buddhist groups and movements (e.g. Chögyam Trungpa’s **Shambhala** meditation movement and **Naropa University**; and the **Triratna Buddhist Order**) integrate teachings and practices from a variety of Buddhist traditions; some of these ‘western transformations’ have also established teaching centres around the globe. Some new religious movements have incorporated Buddhist teachings and practices within their syncretistic cosmology (e.g. **Theosophy**-inspired groups, **Rajneesh (Osho)**, and many **New Age/holistic** teachings). Buddhist concepts have also become influential in non-religious circles - **mindfulness** (the focusing of attention and awareness) has been used in the treatment of depression among practitioners of **Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT)**.

Some experience their Buddhist faith intensely, while others participate in rituals for rites of passage. Temples and communities are likely to have their own requirements, and many adherents their own reasons, for practising. For more detail on rituals, temples and communities, see Bluck 2006 (below).

Buddhism in the UK

The introduction of Buddhism in the UK was also through intellectual channels. In the Victorian era Henry Olcott (1832-1907) and Madame Blavatsky (1831-91) founded the **Theosophical Society**, where Buddhism became a popular subject of study and discussion. Later, several travelling Britons returned to the UK as ordained Buddhists; eventually a number of these people together formed the **Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland** in 1907, which was succeeded in 1924 by the **London Buddhist Society**. The latter provided a platform for all schools and traditions of Buddhism. In Nineteen-sixties Britain eastern religions became fashionable, and **lamas** (Tibetan Dharma teachers) and other Asian **gurus** began travelling to the West. By the early 2000s there were over 30 different traditions or sub-traditions of Buddhism in Britain. In 1993, Soka Gakkai International were instrumental in founding the Network of Buddhist Organisations UK as an umbrella body.

Although the early Buddhists in Britain were mainly from Theravadin groups (Burma, Thailand, Sri Lanka), followed by Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, in 2020 nearly every Buddhist tradition is represented in Britain. British-founded Buddhist movements include Sangharakshita's (aka Dennis Lingwood, 1925-2018) **Triratna Buddhist Community** (previously called the **Friends of the Western Buddhist Order - FWBO**), founded in 1967, and the **New Kadampa Tradition (NKT)**, founded by Geshe Kelsang Gyatso in 1991. Triratna is an interdenominational Buddhist group dedicated to communicating Buddhist teachings in ways it deems appropriate to the modern Western world; the NKT bases its teachings on Gyatso's commentaries of Je Tsongkhapa (1357-1419), who revived the teachings of Atisha (982-1054) the founder of the Kadam order of Buddhism in Tibet (which later evolved into the **Gelug** tradition).

In England and Wales, according to the 2011 census, the largest proportion of Buddhists (247,743) are Asian or Asian British (147,796) and of these the largest proportions identify as Chinese (49,344) and 'Other Asian' (93,581), whereas Caucasian Buddhists amount to 83,635. This may, of course, not include those who practise meditation and visit Buddhist temples but who also identify with another religion, or are not formally affiliated to a sangha.

Controversies regarding Buddhism in the West

A number of groups and individuals have been implicated in scandals, involving abusive and coercive behaviour as well as intense doctrinal/theological disputes. For an example of the later, the NKT have central practices relating to Dorje Shugden, whom they consider a fully-enlightened Bodhisattva. Shugden worship has been strongly discouraged by the religious institutions associated with the Dalai Lama, who considers Shugden a disruptive spirit. Scandals also include **lineage disputes** (e.g. Samye Ling and Diamond Way are on different sides of a lineage dispute over the 17th Karmapa – an honorific title for the head of the Karma Kagyu school in Tibetan Buddhism), and claims of **sexual abuse** or other forms of abuse of members have also been levelled by former members against many different contemporary Buddhist groups (e.g. Samye Ling, Rigpa, the NKT, Triratna, Shambhala, the Pathgate Institute of Buddhist Studies and the Thames Vihara, a Sri Lankan Theravada temple, amongst other groups). Please contact inform for more information about controversies associated with a specific

Buddhist organisation.

The student-teacher relationship is complicated and plays a different role in Theravāda traditions from the one that it plays in Mahāyāna, and again in Vajrayāna traditions. Most traditions suggest that students have a responsibility to check and test their teachers; Vajrayāna texts even suggest a 12-year period for this. Some have pointed to an uncritical acceptance of historical (mythologised) lineages and dharma transmission among students, without the necessary careful consideration, giving rise to unquestioned submission to authority. Others have argued that some teachers have abused their positions of authority and trust, and/or have pressured students to rely too quickly on their teacher without taking time for proper and necessary checks.

Further Information

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Online Resources:

The development and spread of Buddhism:

<http://www.philtar.ac.uk/encyclopedia/budsm/index.html>

The *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* <http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/>

Tricycle: The Buddhist Review is an independent, non-sectarian Buddhist quarterly magazine established in 1991 by Helen Tworokov <http://www.tricycle.com/>

Tibetan Buddhism in the West: Problems of Adoption and Cross-cultural Confusion
Academic articles compiled by a German Gelug monk, Tenzin Pejlor: <http://www.info-buddhism.com/>

Organisations:

The Buddhist Society UK <http://www.thebuddhistsociety.org/>

The Network of Buddhist Organisations <http://www.nbo.org.uk/>

Critical Websites:

<http://buddhism-controversy-blog.com/>

<http://britishbuddhism.blogspot.co.uk/>

HOW INFORM CAN HELP

- o By providing reliable, up-to-date information about minority religions
- o By putting you in touch with a nation-wide network of experts with specialist knowledge concerning minority religions
- o By putting you in touch with people who can give counselling, legal advice - or just lend a sympathetic ear.
- o By putting you in touch with former-members or families who have personal experience with a particular group.

New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction (London: HMSO, revised 1995) has been written by Professor Eileen Barker to provide practical suggestions as well as general background information. It can be brought second hand from retailers including amazon.co.uk and abebooks.co.uk

Every care is taken to provide as accurate and balanced an account as possible, but we welcome corrections and comments.

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