

Change and Evolution

Early Schools of Buddhism

There are many different schools or sects of Buddhism. The two largest are Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhism is often viewed as a form of Mahayana Buddhism and is strong in Tibet, the Himalayan region, and Mongolia. All schools of Buddhism seek to aid followers on a path of enlightenment.

Many different schools of Buddhism proliferated in its early years, and subsequently continued to evolve, split, and, in some cases, die out completely. Some of these schools were ancestral forms of Buddhist schools that still exist today. It is, however, difficult in a guide such as this to accurately reflect the richness of early Buddhist thought, practice, and development.

Shortly after Buddha's death, a number of factions began to emerge, although all fell loosely within the category of what was pejoratively called Hinayana Buddhism. The term *Hinayana* was used by Mahayanists to criticize and put down earlier expressions of Buddhism. It means small, narrow vehicle, or "Lesser Vehicle" referring to the fact that followers practiced for their own, personal enlightenment, in keeping with The Buddha's example of pursuing enlightenment and freedom from the stream of births and deaths.

Hinayana further splintered into other factions within just one hundred years. From the first century BCE a major division began to arise between a more traditional, conservative, and analytical approach to Buddhism that stressed the study of sutras, drawing on the Pali Canon, and a second more open approach that placed more emphasis on the role of the individual's experience of *nirvana* as a means to support enlightenment for other beings, and drawing on other *sutras*.

Hinayana Buddhism developed into Theravada Buddhism, the "Way of the Elders," and became the major religious tradition in South and Southeast Asia. The "Elders" refers to the teachers who received the teachings directly from The Buddha,



Figure 33: The great Amida Buddha statue of Kotoku-in is one of the largest in Japan.

Amitabha Buddha is a semi-legendary Buddha who presides over the Western Pure Land according to some schools of Mahayana Buddhism. Statues of Amitabha appear very similar to statues of Buddha, with the main difference being that the hands form two circles in the lap of Amitabha.

transmitting them to later disciples. In the period prior to the famous Buddhist King Asoka (third century BCE) there were as many as eighteen to twenty groups located in various regions of India, from which the Theravada stream is a major survivor.

Today, Theravada Buddhism is mostly associated with the areas of southern Asia (Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Laos, Burma/Myanmar, and Thailand). In the countries where Theravada Buddhism is dominant, the style and meaning of Buddhism has changed little over the centuries. Although there are differences resulting from history and culture in each region, the practice and doctrine remain the same.



Figure 34: Theravada Buddhist Monks in Thailand

Mahayana, which means a large, greater, spacious vehicle, or “Greater Vehicle”, seeks to bring all beings to enlightenment. It may be seen as having a more inclusive perspective whereby the Bodhisattva, Buddha-to-be, works to save all beings deferring their own enlightenment. The contrast is between the Arhat, the worthy one who has done all to save one’s self, and the *Bodhisattva*, one destined for *Buddhahood* who pledges to save all others, including them.

Another important group was the Mahasanghikas or Great Sangha (Congregation). This group’s beliefs are considered the basis for the later development of the *Mahayana* (Great Vehicle) Buddhist tradition that emerged around 100 CE. It is now largely found in North and East Asia, as well as Tibet. With Mahayana Buddhism, differences in style and teachings brought about great diversity. As Buddhism adapted to various cultures and changing environments from about the second century BCE onwards, new insights and interpretations emerged, influenced by a resurgent Hinduism and Indian philosophy.



Figure 35: Young Tibetan Buddhist monks bearing presents for the Lamdre Lama, HH Jigdal Dagchen Sakya

These two traditions have significant differences not only in terms of the cultural areas to which they belong but also in their fundamental beliefs and practices.

Third Category of Buddhism: Tantric or Vajrayana Buddhism

There are different categories and classification systems used to differentiate between different Buddhist traditions and sects. In some classification systems, a third form or line of Buddhist tradition is identified that further divides the Mahayana Tradition into a third distinct tradition, the Vajrayana Tibetan tradition. In other classification systems, Vajrayana is a subset of the Mahayana tradition.

Thus Mahayana Buddhism may be seen as umbrella category for a great variety of schools. On one side there are the Tantra schools (the secret teaching of Yoga) which is well represented in countries such as Tibet and Nepal. On the other side of the continuum are the Pure Land sect whose core teaching is that salvation can be attained only through absolute trust in the saving power of *Amitabha*, and the longing to be reborn in his paradise through his grace, as found in China, Korea, and Japan.

Mahayana Buddhist tradition includes a major offshoot, Mantrayana Buddhism. This branch gives primacy to ritual and the transformation of consciousness through *mantra*, or sacred sound formulas. From an intellectual and spiritual point of view, Mantrayana Buddhism is represented by an epistemologically oriented approach to the human situation, codified in the *Sutras*, and an experiential approach, codified in the *Tantras*. The Indian word *tantra* literally means “loom.” In its expanded sense, the term may also refer to “living one’s possibilities.” Mantrayana Buddhists pay special attention to ritual practices and intellectual discipline, and the emphasis on symbolic gesture, practice, and movement is crucial to proper performance of the rituals.

Another major development in the Mahayana tradition was the emergence of Zen Buddhism in China (where it is called Chan), Japan, and Korea, as well as Pure Land Buddhism and Nichiren Buddhism—amongst many other schools.

Mahayana Buddhism has two kinds of practice, the Way of the Perfections and the Vajrayana. Tibetan Buddhism follows the latter method of practice. Vajrayana Buddhism (Diamond Vehicle), is also known as Tantric Buddhism, or Esoteric Buddhism. Within this line of Buddhism, there is a belief that one can accomplish enlightenment much more quickly than by expending effort stretched over the course of many lifetimes, even though one may even become enlightened in a single lifetime.

In the Vajrayana (Tibetan) tradition, monks wear the characteristic maroon robe and, in the Far Eastern Zen tradition, monks wear black or grey robes.

One of the unique features of Tibetan Buddhism is the institution of the *tulku*. A *tulku* is a Tibetan Buddhist Lama (spiritual teacher) who has taken the *Bodhisattva* vow of helping all other sentient beings to escape *samsara* (the cycle of suffering) and has consciously chosen to be reborn to continue his particular lineage. Many *tulkus* were involved in running the Tibetan government and as abbots of monasteries. They are usually distinguished by the title *Rinpoche*, which means “precious teacher.”

There is no real conflict between these overarching schools or approaches to Buddhism. Because of its monastic history, Buddhism has developed sophisticated and subtle philosophical accounts of cosmology, metaphysics, logic, psychology, and ethics. Both Theravadin and Mahayana forms of Buddhism contain numerous schools that continued to explore different and appropriate ways to understand the Dharma.

Buddhism in China

Early on it was said that Buddha taught 84,000 teachings, reflecting the emerging wide diversity. The numerous teachings were gradually transmitted and translated into Chinese in various *sutras*, purported to be the words of Buddha. Presently the complete, modern collection of texts comprises eighty-five volumes with 5320 writings of various types, *sutras*, commentaries, and indexes from China and Japan. It is a massive body of literature.

Chinese Buddhists attempted to unify the Buddhist teachings found in the *sutras* which, as far as they knew at the time, were the true words of The Buddha and compiled by his disciples. Therefore, they all must have a place and meaning within the totality of his teaching. Their understanding was also supported by the Mahayana educational concept of *upaya* or tactful device.

Spread of Buddhism to the West

Buddhism, is not just an Asian phenomena. All of the contemporary schools and sects of Buddhism have been transplanted to the West through the following three main channels:

- Western scholars traveled, studied, wrote, and taught about Buddhism.
- Philosophers, writers, and artists provided insights into Buddhism through their works.
- Asian immigrants brought various forms of Buddhism to Europe, North America, and the world.

In the late nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century, adherents began practicing the religion more consistently in the West. There was an increasing traffic of ideas and teachers, first of leading Buddhists from Asia and later of westerners ordained in the East returning to Europe and the Americas.

More recently, Buddhist people have moved to the West. Many of them have been refugees from conflict. Many Tibetans, for example, fled from their country after the Chinese takeover in 1959. The wars in Indochina in the 1950s and 1960s led many Vietnamese people to move to and settle in Europe, Australia, and America. Other Buddhists from countries such as Thailand have established businesses in the larger Western cities. They have all brought their Buddhist beliefs to their new homes, and helped to set up Buddhist centres.

Introduction of Buddhism to Europe

Beginning in the 18th century, a number of Buddhist texts were brought to Europe by returning colonialists and visitors who had visited European colonies in the East. These texts spurred the interest of some European scholars who then began to study them.

Around the 1850s, several Buddhist texts were translated into a number of European languages making them accessible and consequently attracting more European scholars. Some were influenced by Buddhism and began to introduce Buddhist ideas and concepts into their own writings. Eventually, more and better translations of Buddhist texts became available in the early part of the 20th century. By then, a large number of Buddhist texts had been translated into English, French, and German. This included almost the entire collection of Theravada scriptures as well as a number of important Mahayana texts.

Growth of Buddhism in Europe

Before the beginning of the 20th century, the study of Buddhism was confined mainly to scholars rather than practitioners. However, this began to change when a number of Europeans were dissatisfied with only reading about Buddhism, and so they began to travel to the East to acquire knowledge of the Buddhist practices directly and to experience Buddhist monastic life.

Important developments include the establishment of the Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland in 1907, and later the Buddhist Society in London (1924), which remains one of the oldest Buddhist organisations in Europe. Although secular in nature, many of the currently practising groups in the United Kingdom owe their origins to the pioneering work that the Society carried out in translating and disseminating Buddhist ideas to those who would later seek more direct teaching from masters and practitioners elsewhere.

By the early part of the twentieth century, a number of the Europeans, who had travelled to the East to study Buddhism, had returned. Some of them had converted and become monks. These converts and monks promoted and strengthened the Buddhist circles in Europe. They were soon joined by Buddhist monks from Sri Lanka and other Buddhist countries in Asia. Today, there has been a significant growth in interest in Buddhism in Europe.

The membership of existing Buddhist societies has increased and many new Buddhist centres have been established. At present, the major Buddhist traditions of Asia, such as Theravada, Pure Land, Ch'an (or Zen), Vajrayana, and Nichiren Shoshu, have a significant number of followers in Europe.

Introduction of Buddhism to North America

As in Europe, scholars in North America became acquainted with a number of Buddhist ideas in the nineteenth century. Some of the oldest universities in America had departments of oriental studies where scholars studied Buddhist texts.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, Chinese immigrants settled in Hawaii and California. These immigrants brought a number of Mahayana Buddhist practices with them and built numerous temples. The Japanese Buddhist immigrants who arrived later not only built temples but also invited over to America, the Japanese monks who belonged to the various Mahayana Buddhist sects. Nonetheless, Buddhist activities remained largely confined to these immigrant communities.

At the end of the nineteenth century, two outstanding Buddhist spokesmen, Dharmapala from Sri Lanka and Soyen Shaku, a Zen master from Japan, attended the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Their inspiring speeches on Buddhism impressed their audience and helped to establish a foothold for the Theravada and Zen Buddhist traditions in America. During this period, the Theosophical Society, which teaches the unity of all religions, also helped to spread some elements of Buddhist teachings in America.

Growth of Buddhism in North America

It was not until the second half of the twentieth century that Buddhist ideas reached a wider section of the American society. American servicemen returning from East Asia after the Second World War and the Korean War, brought with them an interest in Asian culture which included Nichiren Shoshu and Zen Buddhism. The latter gained considerable popularity in the nineteen-sixties among literary and artistic groups in America and this helped to popularize Buddhism.

When Tibetan refugees began arriving in America after 1959, they brought with them Vajrayana Buddhism. It soon gained a substantial following. During the postwar period, academic interest grew. Many new departments of Buddhist studies were established in American and other Western universities.

Theravada Buddhism's presence in North America began in the early 1960s. The Most Ven. Madihe Pannaseeha Maha Nayaka Thera visited America on March 27th, 1964, on an invitation from the Asia Foundation, to propagate Theravada Buddhism. He made arrangements to establish a Vihara in

Washington in 1964. The Washington D.C. Buddhist Vihara was the first Theravada Buddhist monastic community in the United States.

Other places he visited included England, the West Indies, Scotland, Denmark, France, Italy, Germany, Japan, Vietnam, Hong Kong, and Singapore. On his return to the United States of America, he established the Buddhist Information Centre at Greenpath, Colombo. This was the first of its kind to provide information in Theravada Buddhism. The World Buddhist Directory is published by this information centre.

Until the late 19th century, the teachings of Theravada were little known outside of Southern and Southeast Asia, where they had flourished for some two and a half millennia. In the last century, however, the West has begun to take notice of Theravada's unique spiritual legacy and teachings of Awakening. In recent decades, this interest has swelled, with the monastic Sangha from the various schools within Theravada establishing dozens of monasteries across Europe and North America. In addition, a growing number of lay meditation centres in the West, operating independently of the Sangha, currently strain to meet the demands of lay men and women—Buddhist and otherwise—seeking to learn selected aspects of the Buddha's teachings.

The turn of the 21st century presents both opportunities and dangers for Theravada in the West: Will the Buddha's classical teachings be patiently studied and put into practice, so that they may be allowed to establish deep roots in Western soil for the benefit of many generations to come? Will the current popular climate of "openness" and cross-fertilization between the many different schools of Buddhism lead to the emergence of a strong new form of Buddhism unique to the West, or will it simply lead to the dilution and confusion of all these priceless teachings? These are open questions; only time will tell.

Western Buddhist Centres

Meditation is a central focus of practice in most modern Western Buddhist groups. There are a few exceptions where the focus is on chanting such as *Soka Gakkai*. Contemporary western Buddhism has been significantly influenced by the spread of lay practice centres, where lay persons meet for meditation practice and also may stay for meditation retreats.

The activities at Western Buddhist centres allow people to find ways of understanding Buddhism. Today, there exist numerous Buddhist centres throughout the western world. Virtually all the major Buddhist traditions are represented and continue to attract the interest of Westerners from all walks of life.

Rituals in contemporary western traditions are less likely to be seen as providing supernatural benefits. The Vipassanā or insight meditation movement is one such example. Vipassanā centres are led by lay teachers, feature a democratic form of organization, and primarily promote meditation and only minimal doctrinal content and rituals.

Another feature of Buddhism today in the West (especially among converts to Buddhism) is the emergence of newer groups which, while drawing on traditional Buddhism, endeavour to create new styles of Buddhist practice. An example is Shambhala, founded by Lama Chögyam Trungpa, who taught that his intention was to eliminate the cultural aspects of traditional methods of Buddhist meditative practice to reach the essence of those teachings for his Western students. The Shambhala Training system, which he developed, is intended to be a secular path for the cultivation of the contemplative life. Chögyam Trungpa also founded Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, in 1974. Trungpa's movement has been particularly successful in Canada. Halifax, Nova Scotia is the headquarters of Shambhala International.

Lastly, the New Kadampa Tradition—International Kadampa Buddhist Union (NKT—IKBU)—is a global Buddhist movement founded by Kelsang Gyatso in England in 1991. It currently has over 1300 centres (including one in Winnipeg), in over forty countries. The NKT-IKBU describes itself as “an entirely independent Buddhist tradition” but one that is inspired and guided by the ancient Tibetan Kadampa Buddhist Masters and their teachings, as interpreted by Kelsang Gyatso. The objective is to make Buddhist meditation and teaching more easily accessible for 21st-century living.

Other groups that have taken modernist approaches and are represented in Canada, but not in Winnipeg or Manitoba, include

- Triratna Buddhist Order and Community (formerly the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order) founded by Sangharakshita in 1967
- Diamond Way Organization founded by Lama Ole Nydahl in 1972