



Introduction

What Is Buddhism? A Brief Summary

Buddhism is a religious tradition that traces its origins to ancient India. Buddhism encompasses a variety of schools, beliefs, and spiritual practices primarily based on the original teachings attributed to The Buddha. "The Buddha" refers to Siddhartha Gautama (also known as Shakyamuni) who was born around 560 BCE in northern India and is considered the founder of Buddhism.

A *Buddha* is one who has attained an ideal state of intellectual and ethical perfection. The term *Buddha* literally means enlightened one. Traditionally, Buddhists believe that a *Buddha* is born in each eon of time, and that Siddhartha Gautama was the seventh *Buddha* in the succession.

The term Buddhists is of more recent and Western origins. In Asia they were known as the followers of The Buddha Dharma (Dhamma) or Buddha Sasana. Buddhism would be more accurately called Dharma-ism.

Buddhism is the fourth largest religion in the world after Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. Today there are more than 700 million individuals worldwide for whom Buddhism is a way of life.

It is believed Buddhism came to Canada about 120 years ago with the arrival of Chinese and Japanese immigrants and the establishment of a Jodo Shinshu Temple in Canada. The Canadian Buddhist population is small but growing. In 2001, there were approximately 300,000 Buddhists in Canada based on the 2001 census. From 2001 to 2011, 2.8 % of all immigrants were Buddhists according to the 2011 National Household Survey.

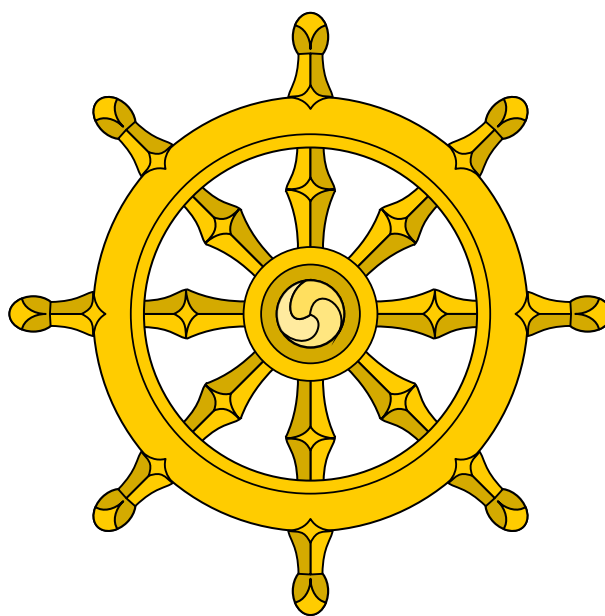


Figure 1:
Eight-spoke Dharmacakra or Dharma Wheel

A Religion, Philosophy, or Way of Life?

Although Buddhism is often classified as a major world religion, this classification is disputed by some and in part dependent on one's definition of religion.

Buddhism can be understood as being a spiritual tradition and “a love of wisdom.” In this light it can be seen as being primarily a philosophy of life or way of living (*Liusuwan*). Traditionally, the ultimate goal in Buddhism was for human beings to achieve *nirvana* (or *nibanna*), that is to be free from the cycle of suffering (*samsara*) that humans experience. For some schools the focus is on the individual achieving *nirvana*, while for other schools it is about helping other human beings achieve *nirvana*, as well as the individual themselves. The Buddhist life path can be summarized as having the following three aspects:

- Morality, virtue (*Sila*): To lead a moral and virtuous life.
- Mindfulness or Concentration (*Samadhi*): To always be mindful and be aware of one's thoughts and actions.
- Wisdom (*Panna*): To develop wisdom and understanding.

Today, for devotees of modern or Western Buddhism, the goal may be less about achieving *nirvana* and more about developing wisdom, cultivating a good heart, and maintaining a peaceful state of mind.

In Buddhism there is no creator god at the centre of the belief system and it is not centred on the relationship between humans and a god. While gods exist in Buddhism, they are not permanent and eternal. Buddhism is non-theistic, as believing in a God or gods is not a central belief. Although, for those that see religion from an Abrahamic perspective or whose religious beliefs are centred on the existence of a metaphysical creator being or beings, this may seem to disqualify Buddhism as being a religion, not all definitions of a religion require a centralized belief system based on a creator god or set of gods. Buddhism does have certain religious aspects. In Buddhist scriptures, the metaphysical aspects of reality that are typically associated with religion are discussed. While the Buddhist teachings stress this is not as important as the practice of Buddhism; they are a part of Buddhist teachings. Perhaps the most “religious” aspects of Buddhism are



Figure 2:
The Great Buddha of Kamakura (Kamakura Daibutsu)

the Buddha's discussions of the afterlife and the various realms of existence. As well, Buddhism addresses a number of questions about human beings and society that may be seen as being similar to religious questions, such as "Why is humanity so diverse?" and "Why is the world or life so unfair?". (Liusuwan)

For these reasons, Buddhism is usually included in world religions studies and for many is considered a religious creed or belief system.

Siddhartha Gautama: the Founder of Buddhism

Buddhism was founded in the north-eastern region of India in what is now Nepal and is based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the *Buddha*, or the "Enlightened One" (British Broadcasting Corporation). It shares a history and relationship with Hinduism and other religions from the Indian subcontinent.

The Buddha was born to a noble family (*Kshatriya*) of the Shakyas people in North East India. Though some accounts of his life are more elaborate than others, the texts preserved in Sanskrit, Pali, Chinese, Tibetan, and other Buddhist languages agree that Siddhartha was born in Lumbini Garden (present-day Nepal), attained awakening in Bodhgaya (India), began teaching just outside of Benares (Varanasi), and entered complete *nirvana* (passed away) in Kusinara (Kasia, India).

He was trained in athletic skills and was instructed in the spiritual disciplines of the day, which were based on the *Vedas* (Hinduism). His father ordered that he be protected and shielded from the difficulties of life many of the poor experienced. He was not to have contact with ugliness, sickness, old age, and death.

However, in his early twenties, he became disenchanted with his life. He sought a more profound meaning to life and the freedom to experience all aspects of life. Thus, Gautama left his privileged life and began a life as a wandering monk seeking wisdom and truth. He studied under the well-known teachers of his day, learning deep meditation and followed the *yogic* practices. For six years, he starved and punished his body, thinking that the body and its desires were an obstacle to spiritual development. Eventually, Gautama gave up his extreme practices and began to eat normally again.

He decided to meditate deeply under a Bodhi tree to seek his answers and, through meditation, he eventually realized the Four Noble Truths and achieved Enlightenment (*nirvana/nibanna*) under the tree. He then began to share his experience with others.

Buddha is not a god or a deity, nor did he ever claim to be one. Having achieved personal enlightenment and *Buddhahood*, he sought to teach others the path to enlightenment based on his own experiences.

Diversity of Buddhism

Diversity of interpretation and practice has been a feature of Buddhism since its early origins in India and the development of the different schools of “Indian Buddhism” that arose after the Buddha’s physical death. Buddhism today encompasses various systems of philosophy, practice/meditation, and ethics; however, Buddhism may be seen to have evolved into two or sometimes three major traditions, branches, or categories of schools. The first two are Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, and the third is Vajrayana Buddhism. As Vajrayana Buddhism draws on and is founded on Mahayana scriptures and philosophy, it is classified a subcategory or branch of Mahayana Buddhism. Today, these three branches are present throughout the world and in all major Western countries. In Asia, they are distributed and represented geographically as follows:

- **Theravada** is the dominant form of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Burma (Myanmar), and Laos.
- **Mahayana** is dominant in China, Japan, Taiwan, Tibet, Nepal, Mongolia, Korea, and most of Vietnam.
- **Vajrayana** is associated with Tibetan Buddhism as well as a Japanese school called Shingon.

Theravada tradition bases its philosophy, meditation, and ethics on the **Pali** texts (Pali is an ancient language of India) compiled by Buddhists in India and Sri Lanka. Eventually, it spread through Burma, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Thailand, and other Southeast Asian countries.

The Mahayana tradition primarily based its philosophy, meditation, and ethics on the **Sanskrit** canon or scriptures from northern India. Eventually it spread to Korea, Vietnam, Japan, and other East Asian countries by way of Central Asia and China. It also spread from China and India to Tibet and from Tibet to Mongolia.

As each tradition spread, it changed to accommodate the language, culture, customs, and attitudes of the new country or peoples without losing its central message.

Increasingly there are references to *Modern Buddhism* or *Western Buddhism*, terms generally referring to a phenomenon which began to emerge in the late 19th century as Buddhism began to be introduced and practiced in the Western world. Western or modern Buddhism is guided by traditional Buddhist principles, but adapted for the Western cultures and world. Some aspects of Asian Buddhist practice such as chanting, music, and dancing are often not found in Western or modern Buddhism. As well, there is less emphasis on monasticism and a tendency towards the blending of practices and beliefs of the various Buddhist schools.

Sacred Buddhist Scriptures

The Buddha did all of his teaching orally and his teachings were then disseminated orally to others by his followers. As well, he adapted his teachings to suit various audiences, and there are therefore different versions of some of his teachings. His teachings were only written down and compiled into written texts many years after his passing.

In some religions, sin is believed to be the origin of human suffering. In Buddhism, there is no concept of sin. For Buddhists, the root cause of human suffering is *avidya* or ignorance.

Buddhism does not have a single book or collection of sacred texts that is used or recognized by each school or sect. Instead, each branch of Buddhism has its own canon or collection of scripture which it has developed and used. The origins and description of the canons that are used in contemporary Buddhism follow.

PALI CANON

Buddha's teachings were put in written form in Sri Lanka in the Pali language around 25 BCE. This version of Buddhist scriptures is known as the **Pali Canon** (*Tipitaka*). The Pali Canon is considered to be one of the earliest and most comprehensive, compilations of early Buddhist teachings.

The Pali Canon is used by **Theravada** Buddhists which are prevalent in the South and Southeast Asian countries of Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Burma (Myanmar). The Pali canon is composed of "three baskets" or *Tipitaka*. The three baskets are as follows:

- **The Sutta Pitaka:** A collection of discourses mostly attributed to the Buddha, but some of which are attributed to disciples.
- **The Vinaya:** The precepts or rules governing the monastic community which regulate the life of monks and nuns according to rules attributed to the Buddha.
- **The Abhidharma:** This is a collection of Buddhist philosophical writings.

The Pali Canon (complete collection of scriptures and sacred texts) was translated into Chinese, Japanese, and Tibetan. As well, more recently, the Pali Canon has been translated either completely or partially into English and other European languages.

Sanskrit Canon

The Buddha advised his followers and monks to teach in the different languages of the people in the locations or places they visited or in which they lived. In India, the followers and monks first taught in Sanskrit. In the first century CE the Buddha's teachings were compiled into written form, also in Sanskrit. This version is now known as the Sanskrit Canon. Different

versions of the Sanskrit Canon existed, but all were similar in form and content.

The Sanskrit Tripitaka, or Canon, consist of the same three categories of texts as the Pali Canon, namely

- **Sutra Vaibasha:** The *Dharma*, or the five *Agamas*, corresponded to the five *Nikayas* of the Pali Canon.
- **Vinaya Vaibasha:** These are the precepts or rules governing the monastic community, which regulate the life of monks and nuns according to rules attributed to the Buddha.
- **Abhidharma Vaibasha:** This is the scholarly philosophical analysis which differed from the corresponding section of the Pali Canon.

The Sanskrit canon/scriptures were translated into Chinese while some parts were translated into Tibetan and, more recently, into English.

Mahayana Texts

With the growth of Mahayana Buddhism, new *Sutras* were written. The teachings in the Sanskrit Canon was incorporated into the Mahayana texts. The new *Sutras* were based on the existing texts but new material was added to incorporate the Mahayana ideas.

Buddhism came to China in the first century CE. The Sanskrit texts of different traditions were taken to China and the translation of the texts into Chinese went on from 200 CE to about 1200 CE. The Chinese Tripitaka, or Canon, was compiled and followed the same pattern of three basic categories of texts. These were the *Sutra*, *Vinaya*, and *Abhidharma Pitakas*, and they included the original Chinese Sutras.

The **Chinese** or **Mahayana Canon** are the scriptures mainly used in the east-Asian countries of China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. There are a few versions of the Chinese Canon. The **Taisho**, which was completed in Japan, is often considered to be the modern standard edition.

Tantric or Vajrayana Texts

Tantric Buddhism, which developed in India, later became dominant in Tibet. Tantric Buddhism is an esoteric and highly symbolic form of Buddhism, which focuses on mystical practices and concepts as a path to enlightenment. With the growth of Tantric Buddhism, new Tantric texts came into being dealing with new ideas. The Buddhist Tantras are a varied group of Indian and Tibetan texts which outline unique views and practices of the Buddhist tantric religious systems. Tantras are key texts of Vajrayana Buddhism. The tantras

may be divided into four categories that deal with the following various aspects of Tantric Buddhism:

- **Kriya tantra:** ceremonies and ritual acts
- **Carya tantra:** practical rites which combine ritual acts with meditation
- **Yoga tantra:** meditation and spiritual practice—Yoga in this sense is not referring to physical movements and postures (i.e., Hatha Yoga) but to tantric spiritual disciplines or practices including deity yoga and guru yoga.
- **Anuttarayoga tantra:** supreme or higher mystical practice

The Sanskrit tantra texts were translated into Tibetan and were edited in the 14th century in 333 volumes. The Tibetan literature comprises the following two parts:

- **Kanjur** (Translation of the Word of the Buddha) includes the *Vinaya*, *Sutra*, and *Abhidharma*, as well as the *Tantric* texts.
- **Tanjur** (Translation of Commentaries) consists of commentaries on the main texts, hymns, and also writings on medicine, grammar, and so on.

The Tibetan or Vajrayana Canon are the scriptures mainly used in the central-Asian countries of Tibet, Bhutan, the Himalayas, and Mongolia.