

Practices, Rituals, and Symbols

Within Buddhist devotion there are many practices and rituals, including everyday rites. There are, however, also rites to mark particularly important life events and passages, such as births, deaths, weddings, and so forth.

Prayer, Meditation, and Worship

Meditation

Meditation is an essential aspect of all Buddhist sects and schools. As with other aspects of Buddhism, there is great variety in the practice of meditation. Nonetheless, all meditation involves mental focus and the utilization of various techniques and tools for achieving the necessary mental focus and control. These tools and techniques may include the reciting of *mantras*, chanting, visualization, following one's breathing, or simply watching the mind.

How and where meditation occurs is often a very individual choice for Western and other lay Buddhists. Some use special mats and cushions on the floor, but it can be done while sitting on a chair, walking, or even lying down. It is also incorporated into everyday activities. Meditation is practiced at home and in places of ceremonial significance, such as temples and shrines. Meditation is also part of Buddhist ceremonies and pujas that can include chanting, reciting sutras, and making symbolic offerings of food, incense, and other items to the Buddha, often represented in statue or picture form on a shrine.

Following the Buddha's example, meditation is a major aspect of Buddhist practice. Meditation serves various purposes, such as clearing the mind so that negative thoughts of anger or hatred can be replaced with positive ones of loving-kindness and peace, or to help free oneself from desire.

Through frequent meditation, Buddhists hope to develop insight and wisdom so that they can see the true nature of things. There are different forms and purposes of Buddhist meditation, each with its own techniques and tools. Two major types of meditation are *samatha* and *vipassana* or developing tranquility and insight respectively.

- *Samatha* (calming/tranquility meditation) is intended to help the individual to calm the mind by focusing on one object, feeling, or idea.
- *Vipassanā* (insight meditation) is intended to help the individual to see the truth about reality and develop the wisdom that leads to enlightenment.

The two detailed discourses in the Pali Canon, which describe meditative practice, are the *Anapanasati Sutta* (The Discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing) and the *Satipatthana Sutta* (The Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness).

Generally, Buddhists believe that they need to become proficient at *samatha* meditation prior to attempting *vipassana* meditation.

Common tools and techniques to aid meditation include the following:

- Concentrating on breathing helps the person become alert, focused, and calm.
- Meditating on *metta* (loving kindness) helps to develop good will towards others and all creatures.
- Reciting or chanting a *mantra* (a sacred syllable, word, or verse) helps one meditate.
- Using an image, sculpture, or picture of a *Buddha* or *bodhisattva* helps one visualize the image in their mind.
- Walking meditation involves walking barefoot, focusing on the way the foot touches the ground, coordinating one's breathing and walking, and keeping one's eyes focused a short way in front without distraction can bring about mindfulness and calm.
- Mindfulness meditation involves becoming aware of one's body and mind and developing a lucid awareness.

One of the goals of meditation may be to achieve Right Mindfulness, one of the steps of the Noble Eightfold Path. It is a way of developing calmness, insight, and compassion. Such meditation is ultimately intended to achieve the wisdom that leads one to enlightenment.

The Buddha, as the image of *Buddha-nature*, has many forms. In Mahayana traditions there are also representations of *bodhisattvas*—beings who have achieved an enlightened state, but have chosen not to leave the world of *samsara* in order to help all other beings do so. Some Buddhists construct small shrines at home to help their practice of meditation and to remind them of the buddhist ideals and precepts used in their daily lives.

Buddhists do not worship The Buddha as a god, but they do show deep reverence for him and his teachings through study, meditation, and prayer. Buddhists don't believe it necessary to go to a special place to worship or to congregate with others to do so. A Buddhist may choose to worship at home or at a temple.

Buddhists will designate a specific room or place within the home just for worship. Usually a statue of Buddha, candles, and incense burners will be found somewhere in the room or space reserved for worship.

Buddhist temples are quite diverse in shape, size, and settings. They symbolize the five elements: air, earth, fire, water, and wisdom. Each temple will, however, feature at least one image or icon of Buddha within the temple and the grounds.

Worship takes many forms and is reflective of the diversity of Buddhist schools and traditions. Generally, worshippers in temples in Buddhist

countries sit barefoot on the floor and face the shrine or Buddha icon and chant, while, in Canada and other western countries, they may sit in chairs or pews in some temples. Monks and nuns will also chant religious texts and the worshippers will listen and join in on prayers. Sometimes the chants will be accompanied by musical instruments.

Mantras

The word *mantra* is a Sanskrit term that means a thought behind a speech or action. Mantras are common to Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism. A *mantra* is a word, a syllable, a phrase, or a set of phrases used in meditation and rituals that is spoken once or repeated over and over again (either aloud or silently in a person's mind). Most Buddhist *mantras* are based on significant teachings of The Buddha and *bodhisattvas*. There are many different types of *mantras* used by different cultures and schools of Buddhism around the world.

Many mantras exist, but some of the most common ones or those thought to be the most powerful include the following:

- **The Shakyamuni Mantra**—*Om Muni Muni Mahamuni Shakyamuniye Svaha*—may be translated as “I invoke the Universal sound, Buddha nature and the wise one, wise one of the Shakyans, hail to thee!” This *mantra* pays respect to Siddhartha Gautama. By using the *Shakyamuni Mantra*, Buddhists seek to encourage the development of their own Buddha nature.
- **The Avalokiteshvara Mantra**—*Om Mani Padme Hum*—may be translated as “I now invoke the Universal sound, the jewel, the goal of Enlightenment, love, and compassion, lotus wisdom, and a pure indivisible unity of wisdom with practice.” This *mantra* is often used in Tibetan Buddhism and is chanted to ask for the blessings of Chenrezig. Chenrezig is a famous Buddhist bodhisattva revered for his compassionate nature. By using this *mantra*, the person seeks to cultivate and spread compassion in themselves and others.
- **The Heart Mantra**—*Gate Gate Para Gate Parasam Gate Bodhi Svaha*—is the final verse from “The Heart of the Prajna Paramita Sutra,” often called “The Heart Sutra” or “The Great Heart of Wisdom Sutra.” This *mantra* may be translated as “Going, going, going on beyond, always going on beyond, always becoming Buddha.” By reciting this *mantra*, Buddhists aspire to understand the essence of the *Heart Sutra* and awaken the aspiration of attaining *Buddhahood*.
- **The Green Tara Mantra**—*Om Tare Tuttare Ture Soha*—may be translated as “I invoke the Universal sound and the Green Tara to bring deliverance from suffering and delusion, paving the way for compassion and Enlightenment. I offer this prayer to Green Tara.” The *bodhisattva* Green Tara (the mother of liberation) is called on to help and offer assistance in times of need. Buddhists often use this mantra to overcome challenges and difficulties in relationships.
- **White Tara Mantra**—*Om Tare Tuttare Ture Mama Ayuh Punya Jnana Pustim Kuru Soha Om*—is associated with longevity, good health, and compassion. It

is often chanted with positive intentions for the good of someone else in mind—*Om Tare Tuttare Ture Mama Ayuh Punya Jnana Pustim Kuru Soha Om*—and can be translated as, “I invoke the Universal sound Tare: And the White Tara Tuttare: to bring deliverance from suffering and delusion Ture: And bring instead compassion and Enlightenment Mama: To myself and to... Ayuh: Long life and longevity Punya: Merit from living life ethically and with good intention Jnana: Wisdom Pustim: Abundance, wealth, and good things Kuru: Like the auspicious land North of the Himalayas Soha: I offer this prayer to White Tara.”



Figure 43: Buddhists worshipping at temple in Thailand

- **The Medicine Buddha Mantra**—*Tayata Om Bekanze Maha Bekanze Radza Samudgate Soha*—may be translated as “I now invoke the Universal sound to release the pain of illness, release the pain and darkness of delusion, and achieve supreme spiritual heights. I offer this prayer to the Medicine Buddha.” This Buddhist *mantra* is believed to help alleviate physical pain, encourage personal growth, and facilitate Enlightenment.
- **The Amitabha (Amida) Buddha Mantra**—*Namu Amida Butsu or Namo Amitufo*—is used by Pure Land Buddhists such as the Jodo Shinshu school to chant their homage to Amitabha (Amida) Buddha who is known as the Buddha of infinite light or of infinite life. By chanting the Amitabha Buddha *mantra*, they call on his help to be reborn in the blissful Pure Land where they can reside until they have attained enlightenment.

Physical Prayer Aids

Buddhist prayer beads or *malas* are traditionally used to count the number of times a *mantra* is recited, the breaths while meditating, the prostrations, or the repetitions of a Buddha's name. They are similar to other forms of prayer beads used in various other religions.

Traditionally, there would be 108 beads, each signifying one of the mortal desires of humankind. This number is attributed to the *Mokugenji* (soapberry seed) *Sutra*, which recounts how Shakyamuni Buddha instructed King Virudhaka to make such beads and recite the Three Jewels of Buddhism. *Malas* are typically made with 18, 27, 54, or 108 beads. A decorative tassel is sometimes attached to the beads, flanked by talismans or amulets depending on local traditions and customs.

Mantras may also be printed or etched on a prayer wheel and repeated by spinning the wheel. Tibetan Buddhists, in particular, use prayer wheels containing prayers and *mantras*. These are turned while chanting and it is believed that the prayer or *mantra* is repeated each time the wheel turns. Prayer wheels can be small ones that may be carried with a person or large ones, some up to nine-feet high found in monasteries.

Prayers are also written on flags and hung up on a line. Buddhists believe the prayer is repeated every time the wind blows.

These physical prayer devices are very common in Tibetan Buddhism and other communities.

Worship in Temples

On full-moon days and special days, Buddhists may choose to visit a temple, a monastery, or other Buddhist gathering places and join others in meditation, prayers, *dharma* teachings, or other events.

Temples are centres for meditation, study, and worship for the whole community. There are as many forms of Buddhist worship and rituals as there are schools of Buddhism.

Worship in Mahayana tradition takes the form of devotion to Buddha and to Bodhisattvas. Worshippers may sit on the floor barefoot facing an image of Buddha and chanting. They will listen to monks chanting from religious texts, perhaps accompanied by instruments, and take part in prayers.

Worship in the temple includes chanting the Three Refuges and Precepts and the scriptures, giving offerings in front of an image of The Buddha, lighting candles, burning incense, meditating, and listening to sermons.

The most important part of a Buddhist temple is the shrine room, which contains one or more *Buddharupas* (Sanskrit/Pali term for statues or models of beings who have obtained *Buddhahood*, including the historical Buddha). A shrine refers to any place where an image of The Buddha is used in worship. Many Buddhists also have shrines at home.

Before entering a temple or shrine, Buddhists may participate in purification rituals. In Japan, the ritual of *temizu*, the cleansing of one's hands and mouth with flowing water is common. It is the first thing to be done upon entering a temple or a shrine prior to praying and meditating. Based on the teachings of Buddhism, the purification process is to help the person have "pure body, pure speech, and pure mind" as The Buddha did.

Buddhist temples also generally use incense/smoke for purification. In addition, before entering the temple or shrine room, people take off their shoes as a sign of respect and also to keep the floors clean. Visitors to the temple are expected to dress modestly, often in white, in Theravada countries. They bow in front of the *Buddharupa* and sit with their feet tucked under (it is considered rude to point the soles of one's feet towards someone else). Worship usually begins with reciting the Three Refuges.

Bhikkhus or *Bhikshunis* may read or recite *sutras*, or give a sermon that explains their relevance to daily life.

Buddhist practice and rituals often require offerings at temples, shrines, or monasteries. It is common to place bowls of water and other food offerings before the *Buddharupa* on a raised platform or altar. The offering bowl has a symbolic meaning in Buddhism. It is there to hold gifts to Buddhist deities offered by the practitioner and community. In Tibetan Buddhism, seven offering bowls are typically placed on the altar and contain seven offerings, including drinking and cleansing water, flowers, light, perfume, and food. Theravada Buddhists often give offerings of candles, flowers, prayer beads, and incense. Mahayana Buddhists also bring gifts but their primary purpose is to demonstrate devotion to Buddha and bodhisattvas.

In Theravada Buddhism, lay persons traditionally were not expected to meditate or know the Buddhist scriptures. This was the responsibility of the monks and nuns in the Sangha. The laity gained merit by supporting the *Sangha* and living their lives in reverence and devotion which they expressed through worship and ethical living.

Another common feature of Buddhist worship and practices is to visit *stupas* which may be located near a temple or at auspicious or special places. When visiting a stupa they will walk clockwise around it while reciting a mantra or a prayer, and concentrating on the importance of The Buddha for their lives.

Importance of Symbolism in Public Worship

There is much symbolism in Buddhist worship, from the place of worship itself to the artifacts used in worship. The table below shows the symbolic meaning of various elements.

Symbol	Meaning
Shape of <i>stupa</i> or temple	<i>Stupas</i> represent The Buddha's enlightened mind. A <i>stupa</i> incorporates five basic geometric shapes corresponding to the five elements—earth, water, fire, air, and wisdom.
<i>Buddharupa</i> placed higher than worshippers	Shows honour that is due to The Buddha
Different images of The Buddha	Reflects different meanings (e.g. a raised hand, palm outwards, means fearlessness, while hands laying one on the other in the lap means meditation)
Tray of flowers	Shows impermanence—that all things fade and die
Number of flowers	One flower, for example, shows the unity of all things; three flowers, the three jewels
Lighted candles	Represents the light of The Buddha's teaching, or the enlightenment which worshippers are seeking
Burning incense	Represents devotion and fills the room with sweet fragrance, as The Buddha's teaching has spread throughout the world
Bowls of water/offering bowls for food and gifts	Shows that The Buddha is treated as an honoured guest and express reverence and respect
Taking off shoes/bowing	Shows respect to The Buddha

Attitudes Regarding Public Worship

Although most Buddhists think that private worship can be as important as formal public worship, most do participate in forms of public worship, usually at a temple. Public worship brings Buddhists together as a community, provides them opportunities to learn more about the scriptures, and helps develop their practice of meditation. As well, the social aspect of being in the company of other happy devoted people will be uplifting and beneficial to the individual.

There will also be special occasions such as full-moon days and festivals that draw Buddhists to temples. In addition, many Buddhists visit a temple when important personal and family milestones occur or when something important happens in their lives for which they are grateful.

Private Worship

Private worship involves showing reverence and devotion to The Buddha and to *bodhisattvas*, but does not involve worshipping them. Buddhists do not consider The Buddha to be a god.

Private worship helps a person to develop good mental states, so that they can escape the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth and gain enlightenment.

Worship in the Home

Lay people often have a shrine room in their home that contains an image of The Buddha or other deities, candles, flowers, an incense burner, and food offerings. Forms of worship vary, but many Buddhists begin and end each day reciting the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts.

Lay people also pray and meditate before the *Buddharupa* or *bodhisattvas*. Prayers may include requests for a good rebirth.

As in public worship, the home shrine contains many symbolic objects. Buddhists may also use *mala* beads in private worship to help count the repetitions of *mantras* when meditating or praying.

All Buddhists consider worship in the home important for ‘merit-making’ and for developing the qualities of compassion and wisdom needed to achieve *nirvana*.

Rites of Passage

In Buddhism there are four milestones in one’s life that are usually celebrated: one’s birth, becoming a monk or nun, marriage, and death. However, the celebration of these may vary according to the different schools, nations, and cultures.

Birth

Generally there are no specific birth rites or rituals that are performed across the Buddhist world. Although birth rites and practices vary from one country and culture to another, Buddhist celebration of a birth may involve three primary rituals, which include Blessing, Naming Ceremony, and Dedication Ceremony.

During the Dedication Ceremony, the parents promise to commit themselves to ensure the well-being of the child.

The significance of the naming ceremony is to help the child grow up in good health and live a long and full life. In naming ceremonies, the *Bhikkhus* (monk) give the child their name. In Sri Lanka and other Theravada countries,

when a baby is born, monks may be invited to the house where they prepare a horoscope for the baby based on the time of birth. From the details of the horoscope, they decide the first name of the baby. In Tibet, a monk will visit the home and a naming ceremony will take place after about ten days. The baby does not leave the home for the first month, after which it may be taken to the local monastery. In Japan, as in Tibet, there is a naming ceremony at home about one week after the birth, and on the child's first visit to the temple the parents are presented with a scroll for recording the child's life events.

The birth of a child is generally celebrated at the local temple.

- In Tibet, when a baby is born, the parents put flags on the roof of their house and, after a few days, friends and relatives gather at the house bringing gifts of food and clothes. The baby does not leave the home for the first month, after which it may be taken to the local monastery.
- In Sri Lanka and other Theravada countries, within one month of the birth, the parents take the baby to the local temple and put him or her in front of the statue of The Buddha. They ask for the blessings of the Three Refuges—the Buddha, the *Dharma*, and the *Sangha*. The parents make an offering to the temple in thanksgiving for the child.

When the parents present the child in the temple, they are introducing the new child to Buddha, and showing that they want their child to grow up understanding the Buddhist tradition and the Four Noble Truths—and to be able to put the Noble Eightfold Path into practice.

Other practices related to the birth of a child include

- Some Buddhists, such as those in Thailand, tie sacred threads around the baby's wrists to greet the spirit Khwan who is believed to look after babies. When the baby is one month old, a monk may shave the baby's hair.
- In Japan, a few days after a birth, the newborn's room is purified.

Death

Death and the grieving process associated with death are especially significant and important for all religious traditions and faiths.

Buddhists do not believe in the reincarnation of individual identities. Rather, it is not one's soul but the person's *dharma*, which is cast into a new life. Buddhists believe that death is simply a transition stage, albeit an important one, between one's present life and the next life. A Buddhist would normally do their best to help a dying person attain a good rebirth by ensuring that the quality of their final moments of consciousness are peaceful and as free of fear as possible. This is best achieved if the family members or visitors stay serene and calm, and help the dying person recollect their good actions. Often, a dying Buddhist will ask to see a Buddhist monk or nun of their own tradition to give them encouragement, spiritual support, and chant Buddhist scriptures

or blessings. Dying Buddhists may request that all pain killers or other drugs, which could impair clarity of mind, be stopped shortly before death.

Because of this and because of the restriction on their participating in parties and the like, funerals are the only major life rite in which Buddhist monks and nuns are actively involved.

Buddhist funerals are not completely sad occasions, as Buddhists believe that the dead person has passed into the next rebirth and, hopefully, will experience a happier and more fulfilled life. After a Buddhist has died, his or her relatives will often perform acts of generosity or religious observance in their name and dedicate the power of that goodness to the well-being of the deceased. For example, the family hopes to improve the future birth of the deceased person through prayer and offering food to the monks.

Ceremonies are held for the benefit of the deceased person but also for the benefit of friends and family left behind. There may be a sermon which will emphasize the Buddhist teachings of impermanence (*anicca*) and non-self (*anatta*) and of the inevitability of death. The ceremony will also be concerned with developing merit which will then be transferred to the deceased person so that it can benefit them in their new circumstances.

Buddhist funeral observances are, to a large degree, based on Indian customs. For example, the cremation of The Buddha's body and the subsequent spreading of the ashes are told in the *Mahaparinibbana-sutta* (*Sutta* on the Great Final Deliverance). Early Chinese travelers to India described the cremations of especially venerated monks. After the cremation of such monks, the ashes and bones were collected and a *stupa* was built over them. The large number of *stupas* which may be found near many monasteries attest to the fact that such practices were widely followed. Cremation was also common for other monks and lay persons.

Buddhism does not, however, prescribe any specific preparation of the corpse or type of funeral so these will vary depending on the school and cultural traditions. The bodies of great Tibetan lamas, such as the Dalai and Panchen lamas, are placed in stupas in poses of meditation. Cremation is common in many countries, but Chinese Buddhists generally prefer the burial of the corpse. Burial is also common in Sri Lanka.

In Tibet, and other parts of China and Mongolia, because of the rocky mountainous landscape and the scarcity of wood, it is not easy to bury a corpse. As such, the preference is for the body to be cremated or for a "Sky burial" to occur. In a "sky burial" the corpse is placed on a mountain to decompose while exposed to the elements or to be eaten by scavenging animals, especially carrion birds such as vultures. This is regarded as a lesson in impermanence for the deceased person in the bardo state and for the

relatives, and it is also considered to be a final act of generosity whereby the dead person helps feed the vultures.

The ashes of the deceased are sometimes kept or enshrined in a Buddhist temple or monastery. Buddhist funeral services are usually performed by Buddhist monks or nuns.

Life in Buddhism never ends: although one's body may no longer live, the soul lives on forever and ever, reincarnating in an endless cycle of rebirths, unless one achieves *nirvana* or enlightenment.

Death in Theravada Buddhism

Buddhists in Theravada countries believe that rebirth takes place immediately after one's death.



Figure 44: Coffin being readied for Cremation—In Buddhism the deceased may be cremated but they may also be buried. There is great diversity in the funeral practices of different Buddhist cultures, there are also many similarities. This image is from a series of photos taken at cremations in Laos and Thailand as part of the 'Bristol Buddhist Death Project', University of Bristol.

In Sri Lanka, a Theravada country, at the funeral the family will give the monks cloth for making new robes. The funeral ceremony will include chanting of verses about impermanence. About a week after the person has died, monks will come to the family home to deliver a sermon. Thereafter, at

three months and at one year, there will be special merit-making ceremonies for the benefit of the deceased person.

When Buddhists in Mahayana countries are dying, someone whispers the name of The Buddha into their ear so that this is the last thing the person hears before they die. After death, relatives wash the body. They then place the body in a coffin surrounded by wreaths and candles. The funeral often takes place a few days after the death to allow the first *bardo* state to happen. This is the time when the dead person becomes conscious of being dead and the next form of rebirth is decided. Buddhists in Mahayana countries think that rebirth takes up to 49 days (7 weeks) after death.

In Tibet, a Mahayana country, as a person dies and for 49 days afterwards, they will have detailed guidance read to them from an appropriate text. In Tibetan, Mongolian, and Chinese lamaseries, a *lama* sometimes recites the famous Bardo Thodol (commonly referred to in English as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*). During this period, the dead person is understood to be going through a series of confused intermediate *bardo* states, and is capable of being influenced.

In other schools, prayers are offered for the deceased at different stages after death, sometimes 30 days or a year later. For example, in the New Kadampa Tradition Buddhist centres, they hold monthly 'Powa Ceremonies' for those that recently died. The Powa Ceremony (see www.southwestfolklife.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/gen_kelsang_lingpur.pdf for a description) is a ritual practice drawn from the Buddhist Tantras and brings together members of the community to offer prayers and other offerings on the behalf of the deceased. It is believed that the Powa Ceremony helps the deceased person attain a higher rebirth.

Ordination of a Monk or Nun

Early in Buddhism, as was noted earlier, the *Sangha* include both *bhikkhus*/monks and *bhikkhunis*/nuns and both live by the Vinaya, a set of rules. To be ordained as a monk, or nun, the teachings of Buddha must be followed and practiced.

Until recently, however, it was only within Mahayana Buddhism that the lineages of female monastics survived and were prevalent in countries such as China, Hong Kong, Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam.

In the Theravada tradition, some scholars believe that the *bhikkhuni* lineage became extinct in the 11th to 13th centuries and that no new *bhikkhunis* could be ordained since there were no *bhikkhunis* left to give ordination. For example, the leadership of the Theravada bhikkhu Sangha in Burma and Thailand do not believe that the full ordination of *bhikkhunis* is possible. One may not be ordained as a Theravada Buddhist nun or *bhikkhuni* in Thailand and the Council has issued a national warning that any monk who ordains female monks will be punished. However, based on the spread of the *bhikkhuni* lineage

to countries like China, Taiwan, Korea, Vietnam, Japan, and Sri Lanka, other scholars support the ordination of Theravada *bhikkhunis*.

Consequently, it has only been in the last decade or two that a few women have taken the full monastic vows in the Theravada and Vajrayana schools.

As indicated earlier, women are seen as being as equally capable of realizing nirvana as men. According to Buddhist scriptures, Buddha created the first order of *bhikkhunis* at the request of his aunt and foster-mother Mahapajapati Gotami, who became the first ordained *bhikkhuni*.

Nevertheless, due to historical practices, teachings, and interpretations, there are differences between *bhikkhus*/monks and *bhikkhunis*/nuns in terms of roles and standing. *Bhikkhunis* are required to take extra vows, the *Eight Garudhammas*, and are subordinate to and reliant upon the *bhikkhu* order. In places where the *bhikkhuni* lineage was historically missing or has died out, due to hardship, alternative forms of renunciation developed.

Attitudes and practices with respect to the ordination of nuns is changing. In 1996, through the efforts of Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women, the Theravada *bhikkhuni* order was revived when eleven Sri Lankan women received full ordination in Sarnath, India. The ordination was done by Dodangoda Revata Mahathera and the late Mapalagama Vipulasara Mahathera of the Maha Bodhi Society in India with assistance of monks and nuns of the Jogye Order of Korean Seon.

In July of 2007, at the International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha, Buddhist leaders and scholars of all traditions met in Hamburg, Germany to work toward a worldwide consensus on the re-establishment of *bhikshuni* ordination. Delegates, *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis*, Vinaya masters and elders from traditional Buddhist countries, and Western-trained Buddhist scholars attended. The Congress Summary Report states that all delegates "were in unanimous agreement that *Mulasarvastivada bhikshuni* ordination should be re-established," and cites the Dalai Lama's full support of *bhikkhuni* ordination.

The Congress was seen by the organizers as a major step towards the equality and liberation of Buddhist women (nuns). To help establish the *Bhikshuni Sangha* (community of fully ordained nuns) where it does not currently exist has also been declared one of the objectives of *Sakyadhita*, as expressed at its founding meeting in 1987 in Bodhgaya, India.

Ordination Ceremonies and Practices

The significance of becoming a monk is to escape the cycle of rebirth and death. The teachings of Buddha teach monks to live the ways that lead to a happier world and overcome the world's imperfections and sufferings. Admission to the *sangha* involves two distinct phases or acts as follows:

- *pabbajja* (lower ordination), which consists of renunciation of secular life and acceptance of monastic life as a novice
- *upasampada* (higher ordination), official consecration as a monk

The evolution of ordination practices is not entirely clear. It is believed that in early times the two acts likely took place at the same time. Later, the *Vinaya* ruled that *upasampada*, or full acceptance into the monastic community, should not occur before the age of 20. Thus, if the *pabbajja* ceremony took place as early as age 8, it would mean that a monk could only be fully ordained after 12 years of training. As well, ordination cannot occur without the permission of the candidate's parents.

Many rituals are practiced during ordination. In the Theravada Tradition, the rite established in ancient Buddhism remains essentially unchanged. To be accepted the candidate shaves his hair and beard and dons the yellow robes of the monk. He then bows to the abbot or senior monk, to whom he makes his request for admission to the monastery. He then seats himself with legs crossed and hands folded, pronouncing three times the formula of the Triple Refuge—"I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the *dhamma*, I take refuge in the *sangha*."

He repeats after the officiating monk the Ten Precepts and vows to observe them. Thereafter, in the presence of at least ten monks (fewer in some cases), the candidate is questioned in detail by the abbot—as to the name of the master under whom he studied, whether he is free of faults and defects that would prevent his admission, and whether he has committed any infamous sins, is diseased, is mutilated, or is in debt. The abbot, when satisfied, thrice proposes acceptance of the petition; the chapter's silence signifies consent. Theravada nuns ordination is essentially the same, although their ordination required the presence of monks in order to be recognized as valid.

Mahayana Buddhism added new rituals to the ceremony of ordination prescribed by the Pali Vinaya. The declaration of the Triple Refuge is still a central assertion, but special emphasis is placed on the candidate's intention to achieve enlightenment and his undertaking of the vow to follow the *bodhisattva* path. As well, the presence of five monks is required for the ordination. These usually are the head monk of the monastery, a monk who guards the ceremony, a master of secrets (the esoteric teachings, such as *mantras*), and two assisting officiants.

In the Vajrayana tradition, the esoteric content requires a more complex consecration ceremony. In addition to other ordination rites, preparatory study, and training in yoga, the Tantric neophyte receives *abhiseka* (Sanskrit: "sprinkling" of water). This initiation takes several forms, each of which has its own corresponding *vidya* (wisdom) rituals and esoteric formulas and is associated with one of the five Celestial Buddhas or Dhyani-Buddhas. The initiate meditates on the *vajra* (thunderbolt) as a symbol of Vajrasattva Buddha (the Adamantine Being), on the bell as a symbol of the void, and on the *mudra*

(ritual gesture) as “seal.” The intent of the initiation ceremony is to produce an experience that anticipates the moment of death. The candidate emerges reborn as a new being, a state marked by his receipt of a new name.

Many persons stay as monks or nuns for several years, becoming more mature in their attitude to life. They may leave the monastery and monastic life to get married and have a family. Many Buddhists value the monastic tradition as it shapes their character and stops them from becoming too easily distracted by the passing things of life.

Some Buddhists will stay in the monastery for their whole life in the hope that their dedication will result in them reaching *nirvana*.

Ordination of Nuns or Bhikkhuni

(For detailed ordination requirements for women, see the online book, *Women in Buddhism* by Chatsumarn Kabilingsh (Ordained as Dhammananda Bhikkhuni in Sri Lanka) www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/qanda-women.pdf)

In Buddhism, a *bhikkhuni* (Pali) or *bhiksuni* (Sanskrit) is a fully ordained female monastic. Both *bhikkhunis* and *bhikkhus* live by the *Vinaya*, a set of rules laid out by the Buddha. Until fairly recently, the lineages of female monastics survived only in Mahayana Buddhism and therefore nuns were only prevalent in countries such as China, Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam. Increasingly, over the last few decades, there has been a trend towards more women taking the full monastic vows in the Theravada and Vajrayana schools of Buddhism. This has caused some debate in the community, and more conservative Theravada and Vajrayana members may not recognize contemporary *bhikkuni* ordinations as being valid.

In Mahayana Buddhism, the basic requirements for ordination as a *bhikkhuni* are similar to that of monks and the ordination has four steps. First the person must make a commitment to follow the Five Precepts. The next step is to enter the *pabbajja* (*pravrajya*) or monastic way of life, which includes wearing the monastic’s robes. Following, the adoption of a monastic way of life, one can become a *sramaneri* or novice. The last and final step is to take the full vows of a *bhikkhuni*.



Figure 45: Nuns with Bodhisattva Day Offerings of flowers and incense, Tharlam Monastery of Tibetan Buddhism, Boudha, Nepal

Female monastics are required to follow special rules that male monastics do not, the *Eight Garudhammas*. The origin of the *Eight Garudhammas* is not clear and is subject to much debate as discussed earlier in the section on the role of women in Buddhism. As well, there is some diversity with respect to the specific vows and rules that nuns must follow among different schools.

The traditional appearance of ordained nuns is nearly identical to that of male monks, including a shaved head, shaved eyebrows, and the wearing of saffron coloured robes. In a few countries, nuns wear dark chocolate coloured robes or sometimes the same colour as monks.

In some schools of Buddhism, such as the Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha of Japan, the ordination requirements and rituals are the same for men and women and are performed at the *Honzan* or mother temple. To become an ordained priest, one has to complete the requirements for a *Tokudo* ordination. *Tokudo-Shiki* is the formal ordination ceremony that a follower takes in becoming a priest or nun. To be ordained, several years of intensive study by the candidate are required. During the ceremony, the follower receives *tonsure* (*teido*), the ceremonial shaving of his/her hair. The follower also receives a *dharma* name (*kaimyo*). After ordination and further study, a minister needs to receive their *kyoshi* certification.

Some Buddhist schools, particularly in the West, have simplified or changed their ordination rituals and requirements for women. For example, in the New Kadampa Buddhist Tradition, ordained women have to change three things; their appearance (cut their hair and don special robes), their names, and their minds. Renunciation monks and nuns have the same vows and tradition, which include the five precepts mentioned earlier plus five more: to practice contentment, to reduce their desire for worldly pleasure, to abandon meaningless activities, to practice the three higher trainings of moral discipline, and to practice concentration and wisdom.

In countries where full ordination is not available to them, women have traditionally volunteered to take limited vows to live as renunciants. These women attempt to lead a life following the teachings of the Buddha. They observe eight to ten of the precepts, but do not follow exactly the same codes as *bhikkhunis*. They do not receive official endorsement or the educational support offered to monks. Some cook while others practise and teach meditation. Theravada women renunciants who are not fully ordained wear white or pink robes. These women are known by various names, including *dasa sil mata* in Sri Lanka, *thilashin* in Burma, *maechi* in Thailand, *guruma* in Nepal and Laos, and *siladharas* at the Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in England.

Marriage

For Buddhists, marriage is not a religious institution, it is a social one. Marriage is not required of individuals for religious reasons, but it is accepted as an important element of life. It is viewed as helping the couple uphold one of the Five Precepts that tells Buddhists to avoid sexual misconduct by being content.

Marriages are celebrated differently due to the diversity of beliefs among Buddhists in different countries and cultures. For example, in some countries, monks do not participate in wedding ceremonies due to the belief that they will bring bad luck to the wedded couple. However, in most countries, monks attend marriage ceremonies and are welcomed. Details of marriage ceremonies usually reflect the cultures of the country in which they take place.

In general, monks are forbidden to attend celebrations, especially where there might be alcohol.

Buddhist Marriage Ceremonies

In Buddhist countries, the marriage ceremony is likely to be held in the home, a hall, or in a specially built pavilion. There is no marriage ceremony held at a temple; although, a monk or a lay teacher may be invited after the marriage ceremony to offer a blessing on the marriage. This will include specific blessings chanted by the monk and maybe a short sermon, probably on marriage.

In some sects, during the marriage ceremony, a Sacred Thread Ritual is done where both the groom and bride attach a thread from their heads and when the speech passage completes, the thread is cut. After the thread is cut, the string is kept by many relatives for three days to ensure the couple will receive good luck.