

SIRS DISCOVERER

[Home Page](#)
[Back](#)
[Dictionary](#)
[Thesaurus](#)
[Help](#) | [Tips](#) | [Cite](#)

Article may be transmitted to your email. Other transmissions are prohibited.

Your email address:

Include pictures? ☒



[General](#)
Source & Summary Graphics [Print](#)

[Share](#)

Compton's by Britannica
Aug 1, 2011, n.p.

Copyright © 2011 Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc.

Buddhism

Buddhism is the name for a complex system of beliefs developed around the teachings of the Buddha. Though used by many religious groups in ancient India, the title Buddha (meaning “the Enlightened One”) became associated with the founder of Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama, who lived between the 6th and the 4th centuries BC. There are now dozens of different schools of Buddhist philosophy throughout Asia, and many of these schools have spread to Europe and the United States. These schools have different writings and languages and have grown up in different cultures. There is no one single “Bible” of Buddhism, but all Buddhists share some basic beliefs.

Buddhism is a Western word. The religion is known in Asia as the Buddha-Dharma, or the teachings of the Buddha. These teachings, based on Siddhartha's experience of Enlightenment, form the foundation of Buddhism. For every Buddhist the religion is both a discipline and a body of beliefs: that is, Buddhists share beliefs about the nature of the world and how to act in it.

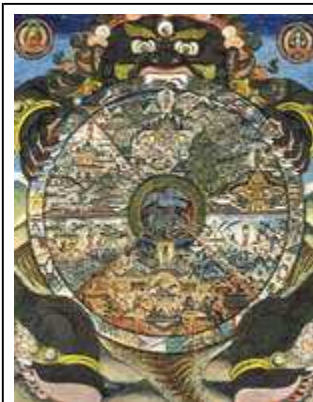


The Bo tree at Bodh Gaya in India is believed

The Bo tree at Bodh Gaya in India is believed to be a descendant of the one under which the Buddha

According to Buddhist tradition, Siddhartha Gautama, having led an indulgent life as a young man, decided to pursue a course of bitter self-denial in order to gain insights into life's meaning. So severe was his lifestyle that he nearly died from it. He then realized that this brought him no closer to the truth he sought than the rich life he had led before. One day when he felt close to reaching the truth, he sat down under a tree now known as the Bo tree (short for Bodhi, or “Enlightenment”). There he attained the bliss and knowledge he had been seeking. Legend has it that, though tempted by a demon, he sat quietly under the tree for 49 days. The place where he sat became known as the Immovable Spot. The Buddha devoted the rest of his many years, until his death at age 80, to wandering through India teaching people. (See also [Buddha](#).)

The Four Noble Truths and the



The Wheel of Life on a Tibetan tanka scroll

The Wheel of Life on a Tibetan tanka scroll painting illustrates the Buddhist doctrine of Transmigration. (Credit: Courtesy of the Newark Museum, New Jersey)

meditated and experienced "the Enlightenment." (Credit: Milt and Joan Mann/CameraMann International)

Eightfold Path

The Buddha was uncertain what to do after his Enlightenment because he realized that the truths that had been revealed to him would be difficult for others to understand. He decided that he should make his inspiration about the nature of life available to others for their betterment. He formulated his experience into a doctrine known as the Four Noble Truths, and these truths

are the basis of all schools of Buddhism.

The first truth is that all life is suffering, pain, and misery, or *dukkha*. The second truth is that this suffering has a cause—*tanha*, or selfish craving and personal desire. The third truth is that the cessation (*nirodha*) of selfish craving can be achieved. The fourth truth is that the way (*magga*) to overcome this misery is through the Eightfold Path.

All Buddhists believe in the idea of “no-self,” that it is a mistake to identify oneself too strongly with one's own personal existence in any one life. To the follower of the Buddha, life goes on and on in many reincarnations or rebirths. This wheel of rebirth, known as *samsara*, condemns the individual to the suffering of being alive and striving. Life's goal, according to the Buddha, is to escape from this cycle of rebirth, to stop being born as a suffering individual with selfish cravings and passions. This release is called Nirvana, the highest bliss, the end of the self.

In order to achieve Nirvana, the Buddha developed the Eightfold Path, which all Buddhists must follow. The Buddha called his path the Middle Way, because it lies between a life of luxury and a life of unnecessary poverty. Not everyone can reach the goal of Nirvana, but every practicing Buddhist is at least on the Path toward Enlightenment.

A basic step, too basic to be listed as one of the eight, is Right Association. One cannot achieve perfection unless one keeps the right company. A Buddhist is supposed to associate with other seekers of truth in a spirit of love.

1. Right Knowledge is knowledge of what life is all about; knowledge of the Four Noble Truths is basic to any further growth as a Buddhist.
2. Right Aspiration means a clear devotion to being on the Path toward Enlightenment.
3. Right Speech involves both clarity of what is said (taking care to say just what is meant) and speaking kindly and without malice.
4. Right Behavior involves reflecting on one's behavior and the reasons for it. It also involves five basic laws of behavior for Buddhists: not to kill, steal, lie, drink intoxicants, or commit sexual offenses.
5. Right Livelihood involves choosing an occupation that keeps an individual on the Path; that is, a path that promotes life and well-being, rather than the accumulation of a lot of money.
6. Right Effort means training the will and curbing selfish passions and wants. It also means placing oneself along the Path toward Enlightenment.
7. Right Mindfulness implies continuing self-examination and awareness. The *Dhammapada*, a basic Buddhist text, begins, “All we are is the result of what we have thought.”
8. Right Concentration is the final goal—to be absorbed into a state of Nirvana.

Buddhists believe that the first two steps on the Path can be taken by anyone. The third, fourth, and fifth steps are for novice monks, and the last three steps show real progress toward the goal. As in many Asian traditions, the religion is not based on attaining the goal so much as being on the road.

“Thus Have I Heard”

The Buddha lived and taught for about 45 years after his Enlightenment, but he did not write down a single word of his teachings. No one during his lifetime put anything he said in writing. His original teachings were handed down from one generation to the next by word of mouth. This continuing oral tradition was not put in writing until about three centuries after his death. By this time, the religion had split into a number of schools. Each school set down the teachings as it understood them.

Since the Buddha felt his teachings were for everyone, not just scholars, he spoke in a language many people

in India understood, Pali. (Hindu texts were written in Sanskrit, which few people could read or understand.) In a country with a system of segregation based on caste, the Buddha's democratic views were a novelty and won him many followers.

Since no one wrote down exactly what the Buddha said, all the Buddhist teachings begin with the phrase, "Thus have I heard." Then they go on to tell what Buddha taught and believed. The oldest Buddhist writings, the Pali Canon, are also known as the Three Baskets. One of the baskets, the *Vinaya* (meaning "discipline") spelled out the rules for the Buddhist monks. These monks, the community known as the Sangha, constitute the oldest continuous religious order of all the world's great religions.

The Lesser Vehicle and the Greater Vehicle

After the Buddha's death, his followers split into a number of factions, each with its own interpretations of the master's teachings. Within 200 years two major traditions emerged. This schism has persisted to the present time. Even within the major traditions, there are smaller sects.

The older tradition, known as the Way of the Elders, is also called Hinayana, or the Lesser Vehicle. Its adherents are the more conservative interpreters of the Buddhist teachings, and the name was given them by the other major tradition, the Mahayana, or the Greater Vehicle. A more respectful name for the Way of the Elders is Theravada Buddhism. It is still the main tradition in countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. The Greater Vehicle, Mahayana, is the form of Buddhism popular in Mongolia, Tibet, China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and Nepal. The word vehicle suggests that Buddhism is a means of journeying from the pain of this world to the bliss of the next. Each tradition believes that it is the best vehicle for Buddhists on their Path.

Zen Buddhism is a derivative of the Mahayana school, which has far more followers than the Theravada school. The most popular school of Buddhism in Japan is part of the Mahayana tradition.

The Mahayana tradition accepts a number of teachings and texts not recognized by the Theravada, but the basic difference between the two schools is in how they see the life and teachings of the Buddha. Theravada Buddhists honor him as a perfected master. They focus on the historical figure and stress the monastic life and the striving for wisdom. Mahayana Buddhists, on the other hand, emphasize the heavenly nature of the Buddha and stress the importance of many different buddhas, both those in the past and those to come in the future; they believe striving for compassion is just as important as the cultivation of wisdom.

This difference of interpretation led to the fundamental split between the two schools. Theravada Buddhists concentrate on the emancipation of the individual through his own efforts, while the Mahayana stress salvation through a life of good works. The Mahayanists emphasize compassion for all things and believe that the ideal goal is to become a bodhisattva, a person who has achieved Enlightenment but has delayed entry into Nirvana to help others attain salvation. Since all the teachings of the Buddha were written long after his death, each school disputes the other's writings. The Theravada school criticizes the writings of the Mahayana for not being authentic. The Mahayanas believe that the Buddha taught each according to his own level of understanding and taught only the most basic ideas to the Theravadas. His deepest insights, say the Mahayanas, he reserved for those on the Greater Vehicle (the Mahayanas).

A third major movement emerged as Buddhism spread into new regions and came into contact with new religions. Vajrayana ("Diamond Vehicle"), or Esoteric Buddhism, first appeared in India in the 6th century AD and later spread into Tibet. This school, which has its own texts, the *Tantras*, emphasizes the importance of the master-student relationship and adopts a mystical approach to the Path toward Enlightenment.

The Three Jewels

In all its many different forms, Buddhism has three cornerstones that are always the same. These are the Three Jewels: Buddha, the teacher; Dharma, the teachings or laws; and Sangha, the community of believers. Monks and devout laypeople believe that these three elements of their religion shelter and protect them in the world. This is expressed in a Buddhist prayer, "I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the Dharma. I take refuge in the Sangha."

For those who choose to live their lives as Buddhist monks (a course open to both men and women), the Three Jewels form the center of their daily lives. Prayer, meditation, and other rituals keep them on the Eightfold Path. In the Theravada tradition monks live isolated lives in their monastery retreats, whereas Mahayana monks include service to the larger community as part of their Path.

Festivals and Celebrations

Throughout the Buddhist countries of Asia, holidays are celebrated to commemorate the life and teachings of the Buddha. The Theravada tradition celebrates four days every month as *uposatha* days. These are the new moon, the full moon, and the eighth day after each new and full moon. Sermons, prayers, and offerings mark the *uposatha* day ceremonies. These ceremonies include offering flowers to the image of the Buddha, reciting the sutras (key texts on the teachings of the Buddha), and meditating. During the *uposatha* days, monks confess their transgressions and listen to recitations of the rules of conduct, and religious laypersons take special vows and dress simply.

Theravada Buddhists continue the practice of *vassa*, a three-month retreat during the rainy season, from July to October. The Buddha himself made this retreat. Many laypeople take a monk's vows for three months, and monks mark their years in the community by the number of *vassas* they have attended. The end of *vassa* is often marked by great celebrations and the giving of gifts to the monks.

Three major points in the life of the Buddha are celebrated in all Buddhist countries—his birth, Enlightenment, and his death or final Nirvana. In countries of the Theravada tradition, all three events are celebrated on the same day. This is the full moon of the sixth lunar month, usually falling in April. In Mahayana countries, the Buddha's birth is remembered on April 8, his Enlightenment on December 8, and his death on February 15. In Japan the celebration of the Buddha's birth merged with a native religious ceremony into the flower festival known as Hanamatsuri.

In China and Japan, with their long traditions of ancestor worship, Buddhists have an All Souls Festival for the dead. This festival has two purposes: to remember the dead and to bring final peace to the spirits of those who have died unburied.

The Spread of Buddhism

For the first 200 years after the Buddha's death, Buddhism was a local religion in India. When King Asoka converted to Buddhism in the 3rd century, he used the resources of his kingdom to spread the religion as far south as Ceylon (modern Sri Lanka) and as far north as Kashmir. Buddhism remained an important religion in India until the 12th century, when a combination of factors led to its demise. In the 20th century, Buddhism enjoyed a revival in India as a result of the entry of Buddhists from Tibet and the conversion to Buddhism of many intellectuals and people from the lower castes. (See also [Asoka](#).)

Beginning about AD 150, trade between India, China, and the Roman Empire brought Indian people and ideas into China. Buddhism traveled overland from India to China as Mahayana monks rode with the traders' caravans. In the 3rd century the Mahayana sutras, key texts on the teachings of the Buddha, were translated into Chinese. In the 4th and 5th centuries, Buddhism became the dominant faith of China, reaching a peak in the 7th century.

Buddhism was introduced into Korea in the 4th century. First accepted by the royal court, the religion slowly spread among the Korean people. Ultimately one sect of Chinese Buddhism, known as Ch'an (Zen in Japanese), became the dominant school of Buddhist thought in Korea.

From Korea, Buddhism was brought to Japan for the first time in the 6th century, between 550 and 600. Korean royalty sent missionaries to the Japanese imperial court, assuring the Japanese that Buddhism would bring great blessings to their country. In the 7th century, a devout Buddhist regent, Prince Shotoku, introduced Buddhism into the governing of the state. By the 8th century, Buddhist monks were working as civil servants for the imperial government in the outlying areas. After the 8th century, many different sects grew up and prospered. Those with the biggest following were known as Tendai and Shingon. Shingon now claims more than 15 million followers. The largest sect in Japan today is known as the True Pure Land Sect, or Jodo Shinsu.

The Chinese Ch'an group, which flourished in China between the 11th and 13th centuries, was the last great Buddhist sect to thrive in China. It was introduced into Japan as Zen in the 9th century and became popular around 1200. During Japan's civil war (1300 to 1600), the Zen temples were the only available centers of peace and learning. Buddhism was introduced into Tibet in the 7th century. Tibetan Buddhism is a combination of Mahayana and Vajrayana elements from northern India.

Buddhist Art and Literature

Visual art has been a useful instrument in bringing Buddhism to many people. Throughout Asia, drawings, paintings, and sculptures of the Buddha have been used for teaching and veneration.

Buddhist art is not just decoration. Images of the Buddha show people what it looks like to have achieved Nirvana, total bliss. He is shown as calm and loving, usually with a soft smile and radiant energy. Some scenes show the Buddha at key moments of his life, for example, sitting under the Bo tree. Others illustrate his teachings. There is a story that tells of the Buddha offering his body as food for a hungry mother tiger and her cubs because he felt that all life was sacred. This scene is a popular visual theme in the cave temples of China and Japan. The earliest representations of the Buddha, however, depict him in symbols: a tree indicating his Enlightenment or a wheel his first sermon.

Other Buddhist paintings illustrate the sacred writings, as stained glass windows were created to illustrate the Bible in many Christian churches. Since Buddhists believe that anyone can be on the Path toward Enlightenment, these visual images of the Buddha along his own Path are a helpful addition to the writings that people study. They make the texts more personal and inviting.

Buddhist imagery has played a significant role in the development of sacred art and temple architecture throughout Asia. It is through the artistic images and temple remains that scholars have been able to trace the growth and spread of Buddhism. Artistic styles, for example, were carried from one culture to another as Buddhism spread throughout Asia. Many of the Buddhist images of China and Japan had their origin in India many centuries before.

The primary Buddhist architectural monument is the stupa, a shrine containing the relics of the Buddha. Stupas were introduced to new regions with the spread of Buddhism and brought with them traditions of Buddhist art. The stupas not only contained relics of the Buddha but were decorated with scenes from his life.

Buddhist sacred writings influenced the literature of the countries that accepted Buddhism as a religion. The oldest texts of Buddhism are the Pali Canon, the writings that are held most authentic by the older and more conservative school, the Theravada. These texts concentrate on the Theravada goal of the individual becoming a Buddha. The Mahayana school has for many centuries built on this base, but their writings are more keyed to their own philosophy of serving others.

Like the religion itself and the visual imagery, Buddhist sacred literature began in India and was spread in translation through Asia. Each country made the literature its own and was, in turn, influenced in other areas of cultural development by the teachings of the Buddha.

Modern Buddhism in Asia

Buddhism has always been ready and able to develop in new environments, with different cultures and customs, and yet still remain faithful to the teachings of the Buddha. It is therefore not surprising that Buddhism continues to flourish in Asia.

During the colonial expansion of the European powers throughout Asia, only Japan and Thailand were not colonized. In all other Buddhist countries, Buddhists chose to take a nationalist and political stand against imperialism. As one example, the king of Burma (now Myanmar) proclaimed himself the protector of the Buddhist community in order to protect his people.

In the 20th century Buddhism has had to contend with Communism, with varying degrees of success. Mongolia, China, Tibet, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam had all become Communist countries by the late 1970s, though most of them later rejected Communism. The most damage to Buddhism was done in Tibet,

where the Chinese Communist occupation that began in the 1950s almost wiped out the spiritual and cultural basis of the Tibetan culture. In 1959 the Dalai Lama, head of the Tibetan Buddhist hierarchy, fled to India with 100,000 followers. In his absence thousands of temples were destroyed and monks were persecuted. Many monks went to Europe or the United States.

In Japan, the most industrialized of Far Eastern nations, Buddhism is still a strong force. New sects are developing. One, Soka Gakkai, is based on the 13th-century teachings of Nichiren. Today Soka Gakkai claims more than 10 million followers and is a minor force in Japanese politics.

Buddhism in the West

Western thinkers have been interested in Buddhism for nearly 200 years, from the time of the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. European artists, scholars, and philosophers started Buddhist study groups in Europe early in the 19th century. European interest in Buddhism at first centered on the Theravada school, but in the 20th century Mahayana and Tibetan Buddhism attracted more attention.

Buddhism was brought to the United States by immigrants in the 19th century. Many Buddhists arriving from Asia established communities and temples to continue their religious practices. At first, the largest communities were on the West coast, where the immigrants arrived. Now there are Buddhist communities throughout the United States. Many different schools of Buddhism are represented, the two fastest growing being Zen and Tibetan Buddhism.

Many Westerners have become so deeply interested in Buddhism that they are becoming Buddhist teachers themselves. In the United States the centuries-old religion is undergoing yet another major transformation. Much as it has been adapted before to so many cultures, Buddhism is being modified to fit 21st-century American ideas and culture.

Related Articles:

[Buddha](#)
[Ashoka](#)

Citation :

You can copy and paste this information into your own documents.

"Buddhism." *Compton's by Britannica*. 01 Aug 2011: n.p. *SIRS Discoverer*. Web. 05 Mar 2013.

[Home Page](#) | [Current Events](#) | [Spotlight of the Month](#) | [World Almanac](#) | [Encyclopedia Dictionary](#) | [Thesaurus](#) | [Help](#) | [Tips](#) | [Cite](#) | [Workbooks](#) | [Tutorial](#) | [Research Topics](#)

[Educator Resources](#) | [Privacy](#) | [Accessibility](#) | [License](#) | [Contact](#)



Copyright © 2013 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.

