

6. BUDDHISM



Figure 1. A pagoda in Japan with blooming cherry trees. Mount Fuji is in the background. [1]

Buddhism is a religion and philosophy that developed from the teachings of the Buddha (Sanskrit: “Awakened One”), a teacher who lived in northern India sometime between the sixth and fifth (or fourth?) centuries BC. Spreading from India to Central and Southeast Asia, China, Korea, and Japan, Buddhism has played a central role in the spiritual, cultural, and social life of Asia, and, beginning in the 20th century, it spread to the West. [2]

Buddhism is the world’s fourth-largest religion. Projections for 2025 estimated that the number of people who are Buddhists would be about 511 million, though a 2025 Pew Research Center analysis noted a recent decline in the Buddhist population. The majority of Buddhists reside in Asia, with China having the largest population, followed by countries like Thailand, Japan, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. Buddhism is the state religion in four countries: Cambodia, Myanmar, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka. Despite the recent decline, there have been increases in the numbers of Buddhists in North America and Europe. [3]

Buddhism is a distinct religion from Hinduism, though they share common roots in ancient India, leading to similarities in concepts like karma, dharma, and spiritual liberation. However, Buddhism fundamentally rejects key Hindu tenets, including the authority of the Vedas, the caste system, the concept of an eternal soul, and the idea of a creator God. [4] Buddhism itself has three main branches: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. We will learn more about these later, but in summary, these “vehicles” or

schools represent different paths and adaptations of the Buddha's original teachings. Theravada emphasizes original teachings, Mahayana focuses on universal accessibility to enlightenment, and Vajrayana being a tantric path that emerged from Mahayana. [5] "Tantric" refers to ancient spiritual traditions from India, rooted in Hinduism and Buddhism, that use various practices like meditation, ritual, mantra, and yoga to achieve a state of heightened awareness and spiritual awakening. [6]

In this lesson we will learn about the founder of Buddhism, its important writings, the branches and subsets of this Eastern religion, its internal structure and beliefs, its history, and any noteworthy trends and activities going on within Buddhism. Other elements of Buddhism will also be discussed as needed.

A. THE BUDDHA

Siddhartha Gautama, most commonly referred to as the Buddha, was a wandering ascetic and religious teacher who lived in South Asia during the 6th or 5th century BC, perhaps as late as the 4th century BC, as noted earlier. He was the founder of Buddhism. According to Buddhist legends, he was born in Lumbini, in what is now Nepal, to royal parents of the Shakya clan, but renounced his home life to live as a wandering ascetic. After leading a life of mendicancy, asceticism, and meditation, he attained nirvana (the extinguishing of the passions) at Bodh Gayā in what is now India. The Buddha then wandered through the lower Indo-Gangetic Plain, teaching and building a monastic order. Buddhist tradition holds he died in Kushinagar and reached parinirvana ("final release from conditioned existence"). [7, 8]

According to Buddhist tradition, the Buddha taught a Middle Way between sensual indulgence and severe asceticism, leading to freedom from ignorance, craving, rebirth, and suffering. His core teachings are summarized in the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, a training of the mind that includes ethical training and kindness toward others, and meditative practices such as sense restraint, mindfulness, and dhyana (meditation proper). There are other key elements of his teachings as well. [9]

B. BUDDHIST SACRED TEXTS AND OTHER WRITINGS

Buddhist sacred texts are primarily found in a large body of teachings called the Tripitaka or Pali Canon, a collection divided into three "baskets": the Vinaya Pitaka (monastic rules), the Sutta Pitaka (discourses of the Buddha), and the Abhidhamma Pitaka (higher teachings). Different Buddhist traditions recognize various scriptural collections, including the Pali Canon for Theravada Buddhism and extensive Mahayana canons written in Sanskrit, like the Chinese Buddhist Canon and the Tibetan Buddhist Canon. [10] This is a breakdown of the Tripitaka (or Tipiṭaka), the collections of the Buddha's teachings [11]:

- **Vinaya Pitaka:** Contains monastic rules and guidelines for the conduct of monks and nuns.
- **Sutta Pitaka:** Includes the discourses and teachings attributed to the Buddha and his closest disciples.
- **Abhidhamma Pitaka:** Contains higher teachings and philosophical texts, breaking down phenomena into causally-related elements.

1. Key Texts and Canons [12]

(a) **Pali Canon:** This is the complete set of scriptures preserved in the Pali language and is the canon of the Theravada school.

(b) **Mahayana Canon:** These canons, written in Sanskrit, are recognized by the Mahayana branch of Buddhism. Important examples include:

- **Prajnaparamita Sutras:** Texts on the wisdom of emptiness.
- **Saddharma Pundarika Sutra (Lotus Sutra):** A highly influential scripture, especially in East Asian Mahayana Buddhism.
- **Pure Land Sutras:** Foundational texts for Pure Land Buddhism.

(c) **Chinese Buddhist Canon:** This canon includes the Tripitaka but also many other Mahayana scriptures not found in the Pali Canon.

(d) **Tibetan Buddhist Canon:** This canon contains sacred texts recognized by Tibetan Buddhists.



Figure 2. A giant statue of the Buddha. [13]

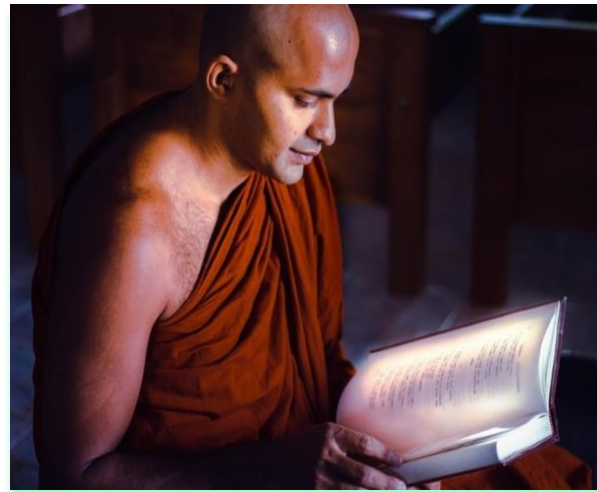


Figure 3. A Buddhist monk reading Buddhist scripture. [14]

2. **Other Important Buddhist Writings**

Beyond the primary sacred texts of their tradition, Buddhists use a wide range of supplementary literature, including scholarly commentaries, esoteric texts like the Tibetan Book of the Dead, a collection of early histories and doctrinal lists, and modern syntheses of Buddhist principles. Specific texts among these are central to traditions like Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. [15] Here these Buddhist writings are in more detail [16]:

(a) **Commentaries and Interpretations**

- **Abhidharma Texts:** Within the major canons, the Abhidharma Pitaka, or its equivalents in other traditions, provides detailed, systematic expositions of the Buddha's teachings.
- **Commentaries on Sutras:** Later traditions also developed numerous commentaries that explain and elaborate on the core Buddhist teachings found in the Sutras (discourses).

(b) **Specific Genres of Texts**

- **Vinaya Texts:** These texts focus on monastic rules and disciplinary guidelines for the Buddhist community.

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- **Mahayana Sutras:** For Mahayana Buddhists, the Mahayana Sutras are considered direct teachings of the Buddha, often including profound philosophical and cosmological ideas not found in earlier texts.
- **Vajrayana Tantras:** These esoteric texts, central to Tibetan Buddhism, contain advanced spiritual practices, mantras, and ritual instructions.

(c) **Modern and Synthesized Texts**

- **The Dhammapada:** This is a collection of popular and influential teachings of the Buddha, sometimes used as a unifying text for study.
- **Modern Compilations:** In various traditions, there have been efforts to create condensed “study texts” that combine key scriptures for novice monks and for broader dissemination of Buddhist principles.
- **Zen Classics:** For Zen Buddhists, texts like The Blue Cliff Record and The Gateless Gate are essential reading that use koans (riddles) to aid in direct realization.

(d) **Cultural and Literary Works**

- **Tibetan Book of the Dead:** This revered text in the Vajrayana tradition guides consciousness through the stages of death and rebirth.
- **Secular Texts:** In addition to religious works, some Buddhist traditions historically produced secular literature in Sanskrit and other languages, including works on grammar, poetry, medicine, and philosophy.

C. BRANCHES AND SUBSETS OF BUDDHISM

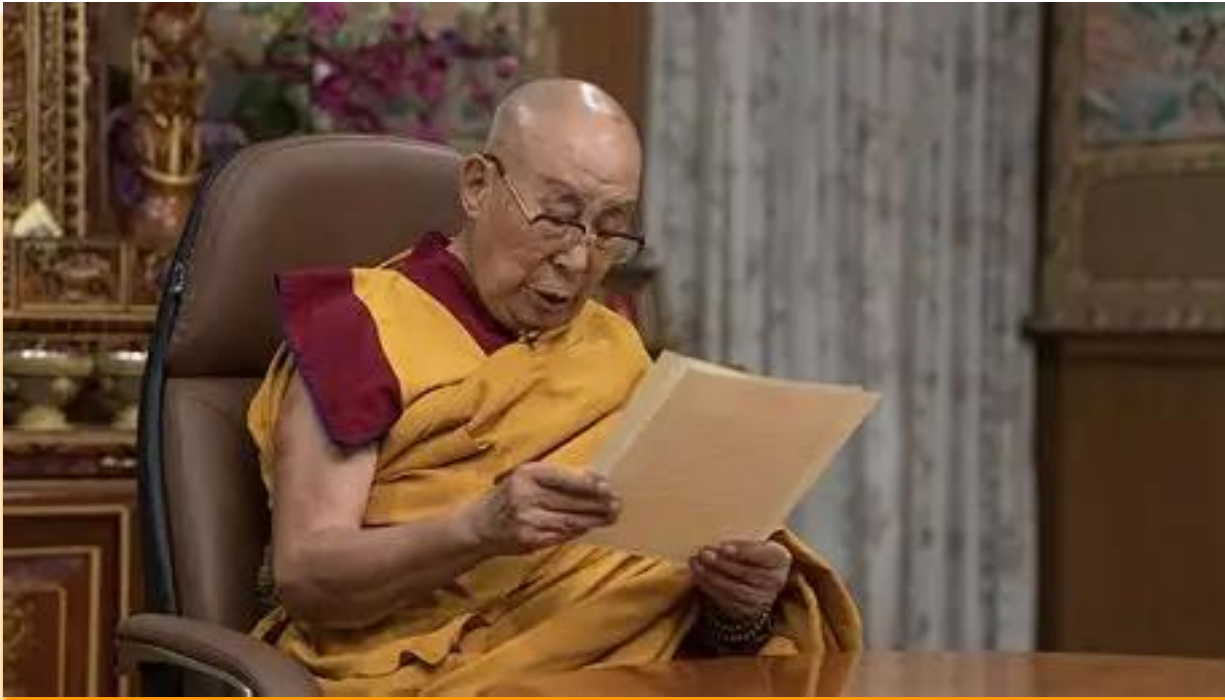


Figure 4. The 90-year-old Tenzin Gyatso, 14th Dalai Lama and head of the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism. [17, 18]

The main branches of Buddhism are Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. Though they all share the fundamental teachings of Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha), they differ in philosophy, practices, and ultimate goals. [19]

1. Theravada Buddhism [20]

- **Meaning:** The “Teaching of the Elders.”
- **Geographical Focus:** Predominant in Southeast Asian countries like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos.
- **Ideal:** Striving for individual liberation to become an Arhat (a “worthy one” who has attained nirvana).
- **Texts:** Adheres to the Pali Canon as its main textual collection, which is believed to contain the Buddha’s original teachings.

Subsets of Theravada Buddhism

- **Insight Meditation (Vipassana) Movement:** A modern, lay-focused meditation movement that originated in Burma and Thailand and has gained popularity in the West.
- **Thai Forest Tradition:** Focuses on monastic living in wilderness settings and strict adherence to the monastic rules.
- **Tantric Theravada:** A Southeast Asian tradition that incorporates esoteric elements not found in classic Theravada.

2. Mahayana Buddhism [21]

- **Meaning:** The “Great Vehicle.”
- **Geographical Focus:** The largest branch, prevalent in East Asian countries such as China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam.
- **Ideal:** Emphasizes the Bodhisattva path, where an enlightened being postpones their own nirvana to help all other sentient beings achieve awakening.
- **Texts:** Incorporates additional texts, known as Mahayana Sutras, which are not part of the Pali Canon.

Subsets of Mahayana Buddhism

- **Zen (Chan) Buddhism:** Originated in China and later spread to Japan and Korea. Emphasizes meditation (zazen) and direct insight into one’s own buddha-nature.
- **Pure Land Buddhism:** Focuses on devotion to the Amitabha Buddha. Practitioners seek rebirth in the Pure Land, a realm where it is easier to achieve enlightenment.
- **Nichiren Buddhism:** Founded in Japan in the 13th century, it is based on the teachings of the monk Nichiren and centers on the Lotus Sutra.
- **Tiantai (Tendai) and Huayan (Kegon):** Japanese schools of Buddhism that emphasize the philosophical teachings found in the Lotus Sutra and Flower Garland Sutra, respectively.

3. Vajrayana Buddhism [22]

- **Meaning:** The “Diamond Vehicle.”
- **Geographical Focus:** Prominent in the Himalayan region, including Tibet, Nepal, and Bhutan. It is considered a subset of Mahayana by some scholars.
- **Ideal:** A path that uses tantric rituals, visualizations, and mantra repetition to accelerate the journey to enlightenment, sometimes within a single lifetime.
- **Texts:** Utilizes additional tantric texts and teachings alongside those of the Mahayana tradition.

Subsets (Tibetan Buddhism)

- **Nyingma:** The “Ancient” school and the oldest tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, founded in the 8th century.
- **Kagyu:** The “Oral Transmission” school, known for its emphasis on meditation and the teachings of the Mahamudra.
- **Sakya:** The “Grey Earth” school, named after the color of the earth at its first monastery. It is known for its scholarly tradition.
- **Gelug:** The “Virtuous Ones” school, or “Yellow Hat” school, founded by Tsongkhapa in the 15th century. It is the school of the Dalai Lama.
- **Shingon:** The Japanese esoteric tradition, which also incorporates Vajrayana teachings.

D. BUDDHIST DEITIES



Figure 5. *Vajrapani, the Protector of the Buddha.* [23]



Figure 6. *Yama, the Lord of Death.* [24]

Buddhism features many deities, though they are not the creators of the universe but rather heavenly beings that can help or hinder beings on the path to enlightenment. Prominent examples include the Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara (compassion) and Manjusri (Wisdom), guardian deities like Palden Lhamo and the Four Heavenly Kings, and the Medicine Buddha. [25]

1. Bodhisattvas [26]

- **Avalokitesvara:** The Bodhisattva of Compassion, a savior figure who gazes down on the world's suffering.
- **Manjusri:** The Bodhisattva of Wisdom, known for his gentle glory and association with literature.
- **Vajrapani:** The Bodhisattva of power and Protector of the Buddha.
- **Maitreya:** The future Buddha who will bring enlightenment to the world.
- **Ksitigarbha:** The savior of beings from hell.

2. Guardian Deities [27]

- **The Four Heavenly Kings:** Protectors who guard against evil forces from the four directions.
- **Dharmapalas:** Fierce protectors of the Buddhist faith, such as Mahakala and Yamantaka.
- **Palden Lhamo:** A female guardian deity, particularly significant in Tibetan Buddhism.

3. Other Deities and Heavenly Beings [28]

- **Indra (Taishaku-ten):** A major god who, along with Brahma, is said to have convinced the Buddha to teach the dharma.
- **Brahma:** A divine being in the Buddhist cosmology.
- **Yama:** The Lord of Death, also known as Emma-o in Japanese Buddhism.
- **Guan Yin (Guanyin):** A widely popular goddess of mercy.
- **Nagas:** Semi-divine, snakelike beings associated with bodies of water.
- **Kinnaras:** Mythical half-human, half-bird beings known for their singing and dancing.

E. BUDDHIST COSMOLOGY

Buddhist cosmology is the description of the shape and evolution of the universe according to Buddhist scriptures and commentaries. [29] This cosmology describes a vast, cyclic, layered universe of countless worlds, centered on the Mount Sumeru and containing the human realm of Jambudvipa. It is not a literal, scientific model, but a symbolic framework for understanding impermanence, dependent origination, karma, and the cycle of rebirth (samsara) through realms of suffering and joy, ultimately pointing to a path to enlightenment. [30]

1. Key Concepts [31]

(a) **Samsara and the Six Realms:** The universe is characterized by a cycle of life, death, and rebirth (samsara) driven by karma. Beings are reborn into different realms, including:

- **Gods (Devas):** In the heavens.
- **Demigods (Asuras):** On the lower slopes of Mount Sumeru.
- **Humans:** In the realm of Jambudvipa.
- **Animals:** Characterized by ignorance.
- **Hungry Ghosts (Pretas):** Just below the surface.
- **Hell Beings:** In the lowest realms of suffering.

(b) **Mount Sumeru:** The giant cosmic mountain at the center of the universe, around which the sun and moon orbit.

(c) **Jambudvipa:** The four-continented world system, with the Jambudvipa continent being the realm of humans.

(d) **Kalpas:** Immense units of time used to measure the universe's formation, duration, and dissolution.

(e) **Dependent Origination:** The fundamental Buddhist law that all phenomena arise in dependence on other phenomena, implying no independent existence or a first cause.

2. Purpose and Interpretation [32]

(a) **Symbolic, not Literal:** The cosmology is a symbolic representation, not a scientific account of the universe's physical structure.

(b) **Understanding Suffering:** It provides a framework for understanding the suffering inherent in samsara and the path to overcome it.

- (c) **Spiritual Growth:** It illustrates concepts of impermanence and the interplay of karma and consciousness, providing a map for spiritual practitioners to progress toward enlightenment.
- (d) **Cultural Expression:** Cosmological ideas are expressed in Buddhist art, rituals, and philosophical treatises across different traditions.

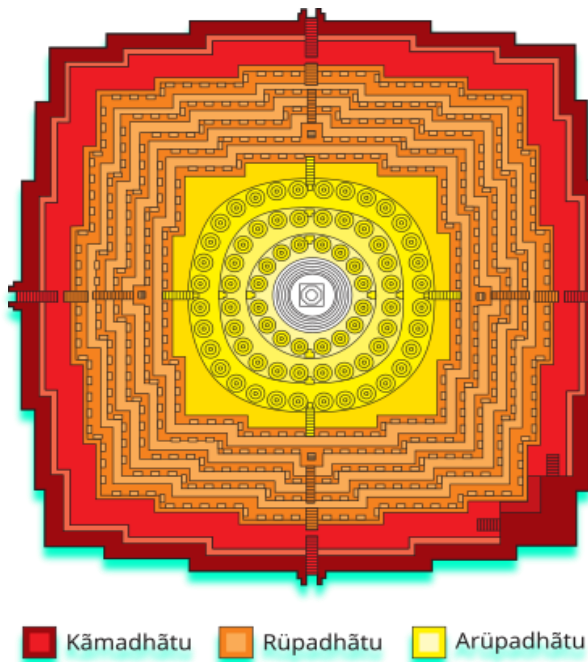


Figure 7. Plan of the Borobudur temple complex in Java, mirroring the three main levels of Buddhist cosmology. [33]

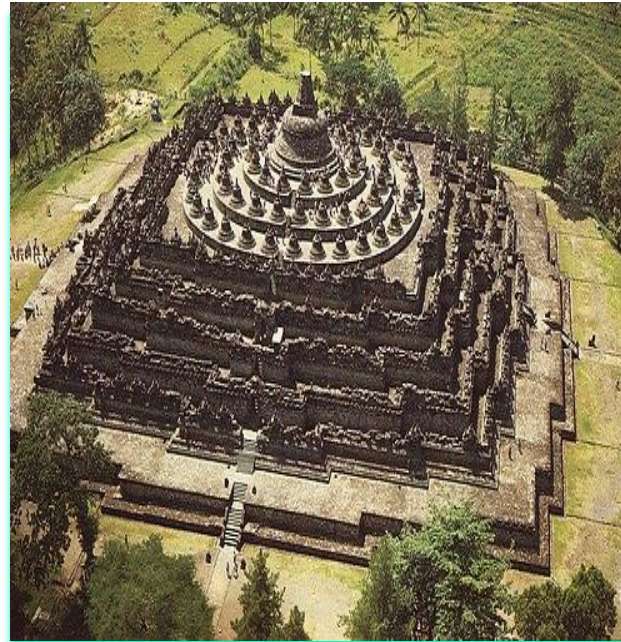


Figure 8. Aerial view of Borobudur. The highest point in the center symbolizes Buddhahood. [34]

There are significant differences in the cosmological beliefs among the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana branches of Buddhism. While all share a foundation in core Buddhist concepts like samsara and the law of karma, their cosmologies differ in scope, complexity, and focus, particularly in their understanding of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and the nature of reality itself. [35]

3. Shared Foundational Cosmology

All three traditions subscribe to a basic spatial cosmology of a universe centered around a great mountain called Sumeru. The universe is divided to three main realms of existence, or dhatus (not to be confused with the six life realms on pg. 7), into which beings can be reborn according to their karma [36, 37] :

- **The Desire Realm (Kamadhatu):** The lowest realm, home to humans, animals, hungry ghosts, hell beings, and six heavens inhabited by pleasure-seeking deities (devas).
- **The Form Realm (Rupadhatu):** A higher, more refined realm of existence for beings who have suppressed sensual desires through meditation. It consists of many heavens for different types of devas.
- **The Formless Realm (Arupadhatu or Arupyadhatu):** The highest of the realms, where beings exist as pure consciousness without physical form.

(a) **Theravada Cosmology:** Theravada, the “School of the Elders,” adheres to a cosmology based on the Pali Canon.

- **A Single World System:** It focuses primarily on a single world-system or cosmos containing the 31 planes of existence within the three realms.
- **Limited Scope of Buddhas:** The Theravada tradition venerates the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, as the one fully enlightened Buddha of this age. While it acknowledges past and future Buddhas like Maitreya, it does not accept the multitude of transcendental Buddhas and bodhisattvas found in Mahayana texts.
- **Emphasis on the Arhat:** The ultimate goal is arhatship, the liberation of the individual. This is reflected in a cosmology where the path to enlightenment is an individual one, with an emphasis on one’s own efforts.
- **Literal Interpretation:** Theravada views rebirth in the various realms more literally, as actual locations or states of being determined by one’s karma.

(b) **Mahayana Cosmology:** Mahayana, the “Great Vehicle,” builds upon and expands the foundational Theravada cosmology.

- **Infinite Worlds:** It posits an infinite number of world-systems existing simultaneously. This includes the concept of “Buddha-fields” (buddhaksetras) or “Pure Lands”—celestial realms created by transcendent Buddhas and bodhisattvas. A Buddha-field is a realm or sacred domain created by a Buddha or advanced bodhisattva through their wisdom and compassion, existing for the benefit of sentient beings to pursue spiritual realization and enlightenment. These fields can be “pure” realms, like the Pure Lands associated with Amitabha Buddha, or “impure” fields, such as our current world, which only appear impure due to the flawed perceptions of its inhabitants.^[38]
- **Multiple Buddhas and Bodhisattvas:** Instead of a single Buddha, Mahayana cosmology includes many Buddhas, such as Amitabha and Vairocana, who preside over their own Buddha-fields and aid other beings. A vast pantheon of powerful, compassionate bodhisattvas, such as Avalokitesvara, is also central to this worldview.
- **The Bodhisattva Path:** The Mahayana path focuses on the bodhisattva ideal, where practitioners strive for enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. This is represented cosmologically by enlightened beings who voluntarily delay their final nirvana to help others escape samsara.
- **Three Bodies (Trikaya):** It introduces the complex doctrine of the three bodies of a Buddha, including a Dharma Body (the ultimate reality itself), a Reward Body (a form visible to advanced practitioners in Pure Lands), and a Manifestation Body (the physical form that appears in our world).
- **Emphasis on Emptiness (Shunyata):** Mahayana cosmology is heavily influenced by the philosophy of emptiness, which posits that all phenomena are ultimately without inherent existence. This means the cosmic realms, while conventionally real, are ultimately illusory.

(c) **Vajrayana Cosmology:** As a sub-school of Mahayana, Vajrayana (“Diamond Vehicle”) shares many of its parent tradition’s cosmological beliefs but adds its own unique, often esoteric, layers.

- **Faster Path to Enlightenment:** Vajrayana emphasizes achieving enlightenment in a single lifetime through accelerated tantric practices, which use the cosmos as a map for inner transformation.

- **Inner and Outer Cosmology:** Vajrayana connects the outer macrocosm of the universe with the inner microcosm of the human body. Practices involving mandalas (cosmic diagrams) and visualization techniques are used to explore and transform the practitioner’s inner world by identifying with enlightened deities.
- **The Adi-Buddha:** Some Vajrayana schools, particularly in Tibetan Buddhism, introduce the concept of the Adi-Buddha, or “Primordial Buddha,” a single, ultimate source from which all other Buddhas and the universe emanate.
- **Wrathful Deities:** Vajrayana cosmology includes a rich collection of wrathful deities that are not meant to represent evil but rather to serve as powerful meditative aids to transform negative emotions into wisdom.
- **Transcendence of Dualities:** The Vajrayana path is designed to lead practitioners to a direct realization of the ultimate non-dual nature of reality. Its practices often deliberately challenge conventional categories like “pure” and “impure” to cut through dualistic thinking.

F. THE BUDDHIST CALENDAR, HOLY DAYS, AND FESTIVALS



Figure 9. A 2025 Tibetan Buddhist calendar. [39]



Figure 10. Buddhists observing the holiday of Vesak. [40]

1. The Buddhist Calendar

The Buddhist calendar is a lunisolar calendar used in Buddhist countries to mark festivals and religious observances. It works by combining months alternating between 29 and 30 days and a leap month added to realign the calendar with the solar cycle. There are different versions, such as the Thai and Tibetan calendars, and they are used to observe Buddhist traditions, ceremonies, and festivals. [41]

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This calendar is used primarily in Tibet, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam as well as in Malaysia and Singapore and by some Chinese populations. While the calendars share a common lineage, they also have minor but important variations such as intercalation (insertion of a leap day, week, or month [42]) schedules, month names and numbering, use of cycles, et cetera. In Thailand, the name Buddhist Era is a year numbering system shared by the traditional Thai lunar calendar and by the Thai solar calendar. Today, the traditional Buddhist lunisolar calendar is used mainly for Theravada Buddhist festivals. The Thai Buddhist era, a renumbered Gregorian calendar, is the official calendar in Thailand.[43]

The calculation methodology of the current versions of Southeast Asian Buddhist calendars is largely based on that of the Burmese calendar, which was in use in various Southeast Asian kingdoms down to the 1800s under the names of Chula Sakarat and Jolat Sakaraj. The Burmese calendar in turn was based on the “original” Surya Siddhanta system of ancient India...One key difference with Indian systems is that the Burmese system has followed a variation of the Metonic cycle, which is a period of almost exactly 19 years after which the lunar phases occur at the same time of the year. [44, 45]

In all Theravada traditions, the calendar’s epoch (foundational moment) was the day in which the Buddha attained parinirvana. However, not all traditions agree on when it actually took place. In Burmese Buddhist tradition, it was May 13, 544 BC. In Thai Buddhist tradition it was March 11, 544 BC, the date which the current Thai lunisolar and solar calendars use as their epochal date. Yet, the Thai calendars for some reason have fixed the difference between their Buddhist Era (BE) and AD numbering at 543. In Myanmar, the difference between BE and AD can be 543 or 542 for AD dates, and 542 or 541 for BC dates, depending on the month of the Buddhist Era (as the Buddhist calendar straddles the Gregorian calendar—currently from April to April). [46]

MONTHS IN THE BUDDHIST CALENDAR [47, 48, 49] (Does not include all Buddhist traditions)			
Months (Sanskrit/Burmese)	Gregorian Equivalent, Common Years	Gregorian Equivalent, Leap Years	Number of Days
Chaitra/Tagu	Part of Feb. & part of Mar.	Part of Feb. & part of Mar.	29
Vaisakha/Kason	Part of Mar. & part of Apr.	Part of Mar. & part of Apr.	30
Jyaishtha/Nayon	Part of Apr. & part of May	Part of Apr. & part of May	29 or 30
Asadha/Waso	Part of May & part of June	Part of May & part of June	30
Second Asadha/Second Waso (in leap years)	N/A	Part of June & part of July	30
Sravana/Wagaung	Part of June & part of July	Part of July & part of Aug.	29
Bhadrapada/Tawthalin	Part of July & part of Aug.	Part of Aug. & part of Sept.	30
Asvina/Thadingyut	Part of Aug. & part of Sept.	Part of Sept. & part of Oct.	29
Karttika/Tazaungmon	Part of Sept. & part of Oct.	Part of Oct. & part of Nov.	30
Margasirsa/Nadaw	Part of Oct. & part of Nov.	Part of Nov. & part of Dec.	29
Pausa/Pyatho	Part of Nov. & part of Dec.	Part of Dec. & part of Jan.	30
Magha/Tabodwe	Part of Dec. & part of Jan.	Part of Jan. & part of Feb.	29
Phalgun/Tabaung	Part of Jan. & part of Feb.	Part of Feb. & part of Mar.	30

The Buddhist calendar does not have a “week” in the traditional sense, as days are primarily numbered within a fortnight and named according to lunar phases rather than celestial bodies. However, some Buddhist traditions, like Tibetan and Thai, use a 7-day week that is named after the sun, moon, and other

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planets, similar to other cultures. These names have both astronomical and Buddhist connections, such as “sun day” and “moon day,” and may have additional associated religious meanings. [50]

DAYS OF THE WEEK IN SOME BUDDHIST TRADITIONS [51]		
Gregorian	Tibetan	Thai
Sunday	Nyima (Sun)	Wan-athit (Sun)
Monday	Dawa (Moon)	Wan-chan (Moon)
Tuesday	Migmar (Mars)	Wan-ang-khan (Mars)
Wednesday	Lhakpa (Mercury)	Wan-phut (Mercury)
Thursday	Phurbu (Jupiter)	Wan-phru-hat-sa-bo-di (Jupiter)
Friday	Passang (Venus)	Wan-suk (Venus)
Saturday	Penpa (Saturn)	Wan-sau (Saturn)

(a) Alternate Buddhist Calendar Systems [52]

- **Fortnightly Calendar:** Some Buddhist calendar traditions use a system of numbering days within each fortnight, a period of 14 or 15 days that divides a lunar half into two halves—the bright, waxing half and the dark, waning half [53]—with no names for each day of the week.
- **Weekly Rituals:** Some traditions use a seven-day week but do not assign it a name, instead calling it “The Day of the Week” or “The Week of the Moon.”

(b) Key Differences Between Buddhist and Traditional Calendars [54]

- **Lunar-based:** The Buddhist calendar is lunar-based, so it changes annually. The lunisolar system corrects for the differences in the number of days.
- **Planet-based:** Some Buddhist traditions use a planet-based system for naming the days of the week (see table on previous page).
- **Buddha’s Life Events:** Some traditions commemorate the seven days of the week with significant events in the life of the Buddha.
- **Auspicious Days:** The day of the week is considered auspicious or inauspicious, depending on the day and cultural tradition.

The months of the year in the Buddhist calendar are not named after the signs of the zodiac, although some specific calendars, like the Thai solar calendar, derive their month names from Hindu-based astrological terms related to zodiac signs. Other Buddhist calendars, such as the Tibetan calendar, use numbers or animal signs to signify months rather than zodiac names. However, in the Tibetan calendar, each year and month is also assigned one of the 12 animals, which are used in astrology. [55]

The animals—Mouse, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Sheep, Monkey, Bird, Dog, and Pig—rotate in a fixed cycle. This cycle is also intertwined with...five elements: Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water, resulting in a 60-year cycle that holds significant importance in Tibetan astrology and divination practices. [56]

2. Buddhist Holy Days and Festivals

The main Buddhist holy days and festivals include Vesak, Bodhi Day, Parinirvana Day, Magha Puja Day, and Dharma Day. Other important observances are the Buddhist New Year and the periodic Uposatha (observance days). [57]

(a) Major Festivals [58]

- **Vesak**: Also known as Buddha Day, this is the holiest of Buddhist festivals, commemorating the birth, enlightenment, and death of Gautama Buddha. It is celebrated on the full moon day in the lunar month of Vaishaka, typically in April, May, or June. The variances come with the usage of different lunar calendars or slight differences in the calculation of the date in different Buddhist traditions. For example, some follow the Chinese lunar calendar, which can shift the date further. [59, 60]
- **Bodhi Day**: Celebrates the day the Buddha achieved enlightenment. It is observed on December 8th on the Gregorian calendar.
- **Parinirvana Day**: A solemn day that commemorates the Buddha's death and his final release into nirvana. Mahayana Buddhists observe it on February 15th.
- **Magha Puja Day**: Known as Sangha Day, this festival commemorates a spontaneous gathering of 1250 of the Buddha's enlightened disciples. It is held on the full moon day of the third lunar month (February or March). Again, be cognizant of different traditions as these times do not always match those noted for the calendar months in the table on page 11.
- **Dharma Day**: This festival celebrates the Buddha's first sermon after his enlightenment, which set the "wheel of the Dharma in motion." We will explain this wheel when we discuss Buddhist doctrines and beliefs.
- **Buddhist New Year**: Celebrated at different times depending on the region.



Figure 11. Buddhists gathered to observe Parinirvana Day. [61]

(b) Other Observances [62]

- **Uposatha**: A day of observance that takes place on each new and full moon day. It is a time for intensified religious practice and is a public holiday in some countries.
- **Kathina Ceremony**: A festival that takes place after a three-month rainy season retreat, where the lay community offers robes to the monks.
- **Obon**: A Japanese Buddhist festival honoring the spirits of one's ancestors.

G. BUDDHIST RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP

Buddhist religious leadership is not universally hierarchical; there is no single, global head of Buddhism. Instead, the structure varies significantly by tradition and lineage, ranging from relatively flat, non-hierarchical models to systems with internal hierarchies based on seniority, spiritual attainment, or lineage. Some traditions, like certain schools of Tibetan Buddhism, have prominent figures like the Dalai Lama who hold great respect, but their authority is based on spiritual inspiration rather than direct control over monasteries, which often operate as autonomous entities. [63] Here is a specific breakdown of the key points of Buddhist religious leadership [64] :

- **No Single Head**: Unlike some other religions, Buddhism does not have a single earthly leader for the entire faith.
- **Varies by Tradition**: The structure depends on the specific school (e.g., Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana) and even individual monasteries or regions.
- **Hierarchies Exist Within Institutions**: Even where there is no central authority, individual monasteries often have hierarchies based on factors like age, seniority, or spiritual achievement.
- **Prominent Spiritual Leaders**: Certain individuals, like the 14th Dalai Lama, are highly respected spiritual guides, but their authority is inspirational rather than absolute command.
- **Monastic Autonomy**: Many monasteries function as independent entities, even within a larger school of lineage.
- **Lineage and Dharma Transmission**: In some traditions, leadership is tied to a lineage of teachers and the transmission of teachings from master to disciple, rather than a fixed, top-down system.

H. MONKS, NUNS, TEACHERS, DISCIPLES, AND SCHOOLS IN BUDDHISM



Figure 12. Monks at a Buddhist monastery. [65]

Although Buddhism is not universally hierarchical, there is some structure within this religion. Buddhism includes monks, nuns, teachers, disciples, and schools, which are all part of the Buddhist Sangha (the community of Buddhist practitioners [66]). Monks are called bhikkhu and nuns are called bhikkhuni, while male and female lay followers are upasaka and upasika. Buddhist teachers, often called gurus, guide their disciples to enlightenment. The main schools are Theravada and Mahayana, which have different interpretations of the teachings. [67] Here is a more detailed breakdown of all of these [68] :

1. Monks and Nuns

- **Names:** Monks are called bhikkhu (Pali) or bhikshu (Sanskrit), and nuns are bhikkhuni (Pali) or bhikshuni (Sanskrit).
- **Duties:** They are responsible for preserving and disseminating the Buddha's teachings. They live in monastic communities, renounce worldly possessions and attachments, and dedicate their lives to spiritual training through meditation, study, and chanting. They also serve their communities by offering guidance and spiritual support to lay people.

2. Disciples

- **Names:** Disciples can be either monastic (monks and nuns) or lay (men and women who are not ordained). Male lay disciples are upasaka and female lay disciples are upasika.

- **Duties:** All disciples follow the teachings of the Buddha. Monastic disciples give up worldly life to train full-time, while lay disciples take refuge in the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha) and follow the basic moral precepts.

3. Teachers

- **Names:** The teacher is often referred to as a guru, which means a spiritual mentor.
- **Duties:** Teachers are expected to be spiritual guides, trained in meditation and counseling, who help others on their path to enlightenment. They follow the Buddhist precepts themselves and act as role models for their students.

4. Schools

- **Names:** The two major branches of Buddhism are Theravada (“School of the Elders”) and Mahayana (“Great Vehicle”), as seen earlier, and also Vajrayana (“Diamond Vehicle”), both a distinct branch of Buddhism and a subset of Mahayana. Other traditions include Dharmaguptaka and Mulasarvastivada.
- **Duties:** These schools provide the framework for Buddhist practice. They interpret the teachings differently and have different textual canons and methods for achieving enlightenment.

I. BUDDHIST BELIEFS, DOCTRINES, AND TEACHINGS

Before we get into the details, here is a summary: Core Buddhist teachings common to all branches include the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the Three Marks of Existence (impermanence, suffering, and non-self), and the concept of karma and reincarnation. Variations in the three main branch’s teachings include Mahayana’s emphasis on the Bodhisattva ideal of universal liberation, Vajrayana’s integration of tantric practices, and Theravada’s focus on individual enlightenment as an Arhat. [69]

1. Core Teachings Common to All of Buddhism [70]

(a) **Four Noble Truths:** The fundamental framework of Buddhist thought. They are: the truth of suffering (dukkha), the truth of the origin of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering, and the truth of the path to the cessation of suffering.

(b) **Noble Eightfold Path:** The fourth of the Four Noble Truths, it is a set of eight practices to end suffering, including right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

(c) **Three Marks of Existence:** The fundamental characteristics of all phenomena are:

- **Impermanence (Anicca):** Everything is in a constant state of change.
- **Suffering (Dukkha):** The unsatisfactoriness or unease that comes from attachment to the impermanent.
- **Non-self (Anatta):** The absence of a permanent, unchanging, and independent self or soul.

(d) **Karma and Rebirth (Samsara):** The belief that actions have consequences and that one's actions influence their future rebirths in an endless cycle of life, death, and reincarnation.

(e) **Threefold Training:** The path to liberation is developed through three interconnected disciplines: ethical conduct, mental discipline (meditation), and wisdom.

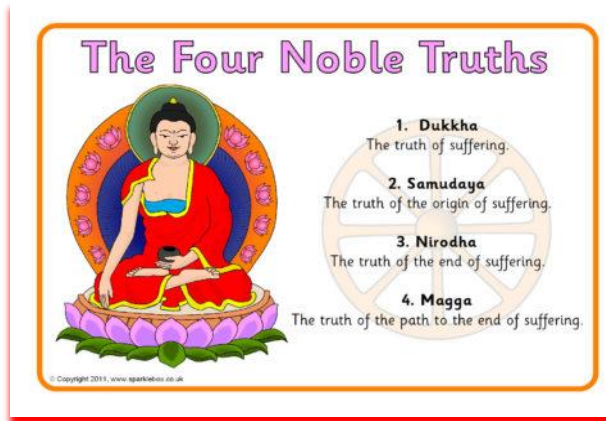


Figure 13. A representation of one of Buddhism's core teachings, the Four Noble Truths. [71]

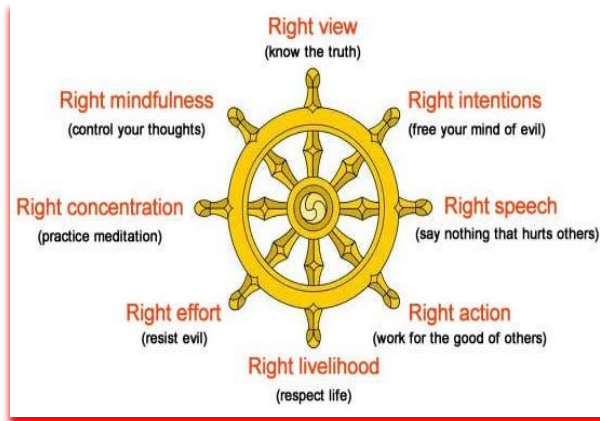


Figure 14. A representation of another of Buddhism's core teachings, the Noble Eightfold Path. [72]

2. Variant and Other Teachings

Theravada Buddhism focuses on individual enlightenment through a gradual path to becoming an arhat, using the earliest texts like the Pali Canon. Mahayana Buddhism emphasizes the path of the bodhisattva, who vows to help all beings achieve enlightenment, and incorporates later sutras and a greater focus on compassion. Vajrayana Buddhism utilizes tantric practices, including visualization, mantras, and mudras (symbolic ritual gestures or poses [73]), to achieve rapid enlightenment, often within a single lifetime. [74]

(a) Theravada Buddhism [75]

- **Core Teachings:** Emphasizes the original teachings of the Buddha found in the Pali Canon and focuses on individual liberation through the Eightfold Path.
- **New or Different Teachings:** The goal is to become an arhat, a fully enlightened being who has liberated themselves from the cycle of rebirth (samsara). The path is often seen as a gradual, individual effort.

(b) Mahayana Buddhism [76]

- **Core Teachings:** Builds on earlier teachings but includes a vast body of later sutras and emphasizes the ideal of the bodhisattva.
- **New or Different Teachings:** The central idea is the bodhisattva who postpones their own final nirvana to help all sentient beings achieve enlightenment out of compassion. This ideal of universal salvation is a key difference from Theravada's focus on individual liberation.

(c) Vajrayana Buddhism [77]

- **Core Teachings:** A branch of Mahayana that incorporates tantric traditions, esoteric teachings, and oral transmissions from gurus.
- **New or Different Teachings:** Uses specific and often secret methods such as visualization, mantras, and mudras to work with one's own body, speech, and mind to accelerate the path to enlightenment. It is sometimes viewed as a way to achieve enlightenment rapidly.

3. Other Concepts in Buddhism [78, 79]

(a) **Tantric/Esoteric:** Tantric and esoteric Buddhism refer to the Vajrayana tradition. "Tantric" highlights the use of rituals, meditations, and visualizations found in tantric scriptures, while "esoteric" points to the need for initiation and secret, one-to-one teaching between a master and apprentice.

(b) **Nirvana:** From the Sanskrit word for "to extinguish," it refers to the "quenching" of the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion. It is the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice, leading to complete freedom from suffering and the cycle of birth and rebirth (samsara). It is described as a state of ultimate peace and happiness, though it is not a place like heaven.

(c) **Parinirvana:** The final nirvana, or "nirvana without remainder," attained after death. It is the complete cessation of the physical existence for a fully enlightened being, like the Buddha. This is distinct from the nirvana achieved during life, which is sometimes called "nirvana with a remainder" (sopadhishesa-nirvana).

(d) **Dharma:** A multifaceted term that refers to the teachings of the Buddha, which provides the path to enlightenment. It can also mean the ultimate truth or the natural law that governs the universe. Practitioners follow the dharma to cultivate wisdom and compassion, ultimately leading to the cessation of suffering.

(e) **Enlightenment:** The state of complete knowledge and understanding, as achieved by the Buddha under the Bodhi tree. It is the process of awakening to the true nature of reality and the path that leads to nirvana.

J. BUDDHISM AND THE MARTIAL ARTS

Many martial arts have deep roots in Eastern religions like Buddhism and Taoism, which influenced their philosophies, techniques, and training methods. We will revisit the Taoism connection in the next lesson. The connection with Buddhism is seen in styles such as Shaolin kung fu. This particular martial art's origins are linked to the Shaolin Monastery, the birthplace of Chan (Zen) Buddhism. Buddhism emphasizes discipline, mindfulness, and self-improvement, which are core principles in many martial arts. Zen Buddhism, in particular, has heavily influenced styles like Karate. Some practices, like the meditation performed after a karate class (mokuso), are directly based on Buddhist meditative techniques. Certain Japanese martial arts, such as those practiced by the Samurai, drew heavily on esoteric Buddhist teachings. [80]

Here is a more detailed look at Buddhism-influenced martial arts:

1. Martial Arts With Direct Links to Buddhism [81]

- **Shaolin Kung Fu:** In addition to what has already been stated above, this is a fusion of Mahayana Buddhist teachings and martial arts. It is also known as Shaolin wushu or Shaolin quan.
- **Bool Kyo Mu Sool:** A style developed by Buddhist monks and martial artists that includes both internal (ki training) and external (self-defense) training methods, emphasizing health and defense through meditation and breathing techniques.

2. Martial Arts Influenced by Buddhist Principles [82]

- **Karate-do:** The “do” suffix signifies the emphasis on personal and spiritual advancement, a concept heavily influenced by Zen Buddhism, which was adopted by the Samurai.
- **Kendo:** Similar to karate-do, the “do” in Kendo points to its spiritual development aspect, which is deeply rooted in Zen philosophy.
- **Chen-style Tai Chi:** This specific style is said to be predicated on Buddhist thought, while other styles of Tai Chi are more closely associated with Taoism.
- **Wing Chun:** Legend says this style was developed by a Buddhist nun as a non-lethal method of self-defense.
- **Jeet Kune Do (JKD):** Though a modern martial art, its principles draw significantly from nondual traditions of both Buddhism and Taoism.
- **Japanese Samurai Martial Arts:** Zen Buddhism was widely adopted by medieval Samurai, who used meditation to overcome the fear of death in battle, a philosophy that influenced styles such as Niten Ichi-ryu and Yagyū Shinkage-ryū.

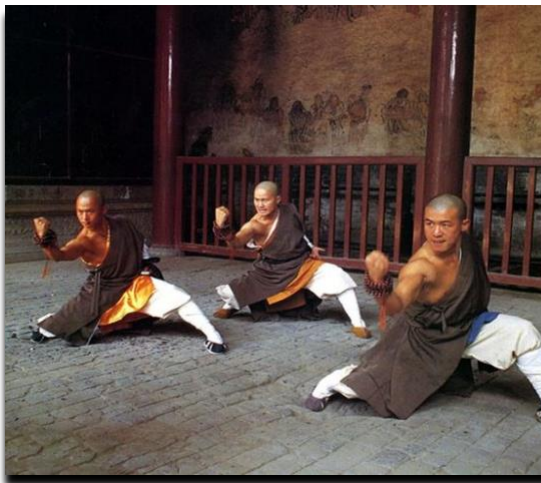


Figure 15. Shaolin Buddhist monks demonstrating the martial art of kung fu. [83]



Figure 16. The late Bruce Lee, one of the greatest martial artists of all time. [84]

If Buddhism is such a peaceful religion, then why did Buddhists develop martial arts? They did so primarily for self-defense against bandits and intruders and for physical and mental discipline to support their religious practices. While Buddhist teachings emphasize nonviolence, martial arts were seen as a

defensive tool to be used only as a last resort, not for aggressive purposes. The physical training also helped monks stay healthy, particularly with issues like poor circulation that arose from long hours of meditation. [85] Here is a more detailed look [86]:

- **Physical Health:** Long periods of sitting for meditation caused physical ailments like poor circulation and digestive issues. Martial arts training, such as the physical exercises introduced at the Shaolin Monastery, helped monks stay fit and healthy.
- **Mental Discipline:** Martial arts training is an extension of the Buddhist discipline, involving mindfulness, focus, and the control of mind and body. This physical practice complements meditation and can lead to greater spiritual wisdom.
- **Nonviolence; Used as a Last Resort:** The core Buddhist principle is nonviolence, but martial arts were not used to harm others gratuitously. Instead, they were a defensive measure to be employed only when peaceful means of conflict resolution had failed.

K. THE HISTORY OF BUDDHISM

Although there is disagreement among scholars over when Siddhartha Gautama was born and lived, it is known that during the general time period—from the sixth to the fourth or fifth century BC—there was much discontent in India with Brahmanic (Hindu high-caste) sacrifice and ritual. In northwestern India there were ascetics who tried to create a more personal and religious experience than that found in the Vedas. In the literature that grew out of this movement, the Upanishads, a new emphasis on renunciation and transcendental knowledge can be found. Northeastern India, which was less influenced by Vedic tradition, became the breeding ground of many new sects. Society in this area was troubled by the breakdown of tribal unity and the expansion of several petty kingdoms. Religiously, this was a time of doubt, turmoil, and experimentation. [87]



Figure 17. The Bodhgaya-Mahabodhi Temple, an ancient Indian Buddhist temple in northern India. [88]

Buddhism, like many of the sects that developed in northeastern India at the time, was constituted by the presence of a charismatic teacher, by the teachings this leader promulgated, and by a community of adherents that was often made up of renunciant members and lay supporters. In the centuries following his death, Buddhism developed in two different directions. One was called the Hinayana (Sanskrit: “Lesser Vehicle”), a term given to it by its Buddhist opponents. This more conservative group, which included what is now called the Theravada community, compiled versions of the Buddha’s teachings that had been preserved in collections called the Sutta Pitaka and the Vinaya Pitaka and retained them as normative. [89]

The other major group, which calls itself Mahayana, recognized the authority of other teachings that, from the group’s point of view, made salvation available to a greater number of people. These supposedly more advanced teachings were expressed in sutras that the Buddha purportedly made available only to his more advanced disciples. [90] Buddhism spread throughout Asia, influenced by factors like trade routes. It spread from India through such routes as the Silk Road, reaching Central, East, and Southeast Asia around the time of Christ. While Buddhism flourished in India for centuries, its influence waned there after the 1100s, even as it became a major religion in other parts of the world. [91]

Buddhism can be broadly divided into various periods. There were, of course, key events in the religion which we will summarize. Here is a sketch of Buddhism’s history and events:

1. Periods of Buddhism's History [92]

(a) **Early Buddhism:** The period following the life of Siddhartha Gautama, characterized by the oral transmission of his teachings and the forming of the Sangha (monastic community).

(b) **Mauryan Empire (322-180 BC):** A pivotal period for expansion, with Emperor Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism leading to missionary efforts across India and beyond.

(c) **Development of Mahayana and Theravada (2nd Century BC – 2nd Century AD)**

- **Theravada:** This school developed and spread, notably to Sri Lanka around 200 BC.
- **Mahayana:** This school emerged and began to spread from Central Asia, and its major texts were translated around the 1st century AD.

(d) **Spread to East and Southeast Asia (1st – 8th centuries AD):** Buddhism was introduced to China (50 AD) Korea (372 AD), and Japan (538 AD), and it also flourished in Vietnam and other parts of Southeast Asia.

(e) **Vajrayana and Tibetan Buddhism (400-1042 AD onwards)**

- **Vajrayana:** Developed around the 4th and 7th centuries AD, leading to a unique form of Buddhism in areas like Tibet.
- **Tibetan Buddhism:** The first dissemination occurred in the 600s, followed by a second dissemination in 1042.

(f) **Decline in India and Resurgence (1000 AD onwards):** Buddhism began a decline in India, which became more significant after the 1100s. Meanwhile, it continued to evolve and sometimes experienced resurgence in other parts of Asia.

2. Significant Early Historical Events in Buddhism [93]

(a) **The Buddha's Life and Enlightenment:** Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, experienced enlightenment under the Bodhi tree and taught the Four Noble Truths.

(b) **First Buddhist Council (c.483 BC):** Held after the Buddha's death, this council codified his teachings orally.

(c) **Second Buddhist Council (c.383 BC):** This council saw the first major schism in Buddhism.

(d) **Emperor Ashoka's Conversion (c.269 BC):** This led to the state-sponsored spread of Buddhism throughout India and into other parts of the world.

(e) **Transmission to China (50 AD):** Buddhism arrived in China, eventually establishing itself and influencing Chinese culture.

(f) **Introduction to Korea (372 AD):** Buddhism was transmitted to Korea from China, deeply influencing its culture.

(g) **Introduction to Japan (538 AD):** Buddhism was officially introduced to Japan, leading to its eventual establishment as a state religion.

(h) **Construction of Major Monuments:** Examples include the Borobudur Temple in Java and the Angkor Wat complex in Cambodia, which became centers of Buddhist art and practice.

(i) **The Huns Invasion:** During the 500s, the Huns destroyed many Buddhist monasteries in India, contributing to Buddhism's decline there.

3. Significant Historical Events in Buddhism From the 600s to the 1100s

This bloc of historical events in Buddhism includes the establishment of Vajrayana Buddhism in Tibet, the flourishing of Chan and Pure Land Buddhism in China leading to the first complete printing of the Buddhist canon, and the decline of Buddhism in India. Buddhism also reached its peak in Korea during the Koryo dynasty, and monumental structures like the Angkor Wat complex were constructed in Cambodia. The Koryo period overlaps into the late 1300s. [94]



Figure 18. The Angkor Wat Temple Complex in Cambodia. [95]

Here is a listing of some major historical events in Buddhism in different places [96] :

(a) China

- **7th to 8th Centuries:** Vajrayana Buddhism is established in Tibet. Large-scale Buddhist art projects are completed, such as the Leshan Giant Buddha, and numerous other sites are carved or decorated with Buddhist imagery.
- **845 AD:** Emperor Wu-Tsung of the Tang Dynasty prohibits Buddhism and other foreign religions, destroying many monasteries and temples.
- **983 AD:** The first complete printing of the Chinese Buddhist canon occurs, a significant development for the spread of Buddhist texts.
- **1127-1129:** Chan Buddhism flourishes under the Song dynasty, becoming a great center of culture and learning.

(b) Korea

- **7th Century:** Monks are sent to China to bring back Buddhist teachings.
- **Late 7th to 8th Centuries:** The Chan school is introduced to Korea.
- **935-1392 (Koryo Period):** Buddhism reaches its peak of importance in Korea.

(c) India

- **600 AD:** Buddhism begins a long and slow decline in India, partly due to the revival of Brahmanic religion and the rise of Bhakti movements.
- **Decline Continues:** By the 1100s, Buddhism has significantly declined in India, with its decline accelerating due to Muslim incursions and the rise of other religious traditions.

(d) Cambodia

- **c.1000:** Construction of Angkor Wat begins.

(e) Other Regions

- **7th to 8th Centuries:** Vajrayana Buddhism is established in Tibet.

4. Important Historical Events in Buddhism, 1200 to the Present

Along with the decline of Buddhism in India went the destruction of Nalanda University there, a Buddhist school. Within this last time frame were the establishment of Theravada Buddhism as the state religion of Thailand in 1385, the development of distinct schools like Zen and Nichiren Buddhism in Japan during the 13th century, and the global spread of Buddhism in the 20th century with increased Western interest and the formation of organizations like the Pali Text Society. During this period, Buddhism also saw significant cultural adaptation, as seen in its integration with local practices in places like Tibet, and the emergence of a reform movement in Southeast Asia. [97]

(a) 1200-1450: De-establishment and Cultural Adaptation [98]

- **Decline in India:** Buddhism became virtually extinct in India, marked by the destruction of Nalanda University in 1199.
- **Establishment of Theravada Buddhism:** Theravada Buddhism was established as the state religion of the Sukhothai kingdom in Thailand (c.1238-1438).
- **Tibetan Buddhism:** Tibetan Buddhism became firmly established, and it integrated with local traditions.
- **Japanese Schools:** Zen, Pure Land, and Nichiren Buddhism were established in Japan during the 13th century. Dogen (1200-1253) introduced the Soto school of Zen. Nichiren (1222-1282) began teaching his Lotus Sutra-based Buddhism and faced significant opposition.

(b) 1450-1900: Spread and Reform [99]

- **Southeast Asia:** The Theravada reform movement spread to Cambodia and Laos from Myanmar and Thailand.

IAOM: MAJOR RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD

- **Pali Text Society:** The Pali Text Society was founded in 1881 to promote Theravada Buddhist teachings.

(c) **1900-Present: Global Expansion and Modern Developments** [100]

- **Globalization:** Buddhism gained a significant following in the West during this period, leading to increased translation and scholarship.
- **Modern Movements:** Various modern movements and leaders have emerged in response to the changing social and political landscapes of the 20th and 21st centuries.
- **Online Presence:** Today a vast amount of Buddhist teachings and resources are available online, making it accessible to a global audience.

L. **BUDDHISM TODAY**



Figure 19. Buddhists worshipping in a religious service. [101]

At the start of this lesson, we glanced at Buddhism today. Now we will take a somewhat closer look. The number of Buddhists in the world has slightly declined and is projected to continue to do so. The global decline is attributed to low birth rates and religious disaffiliation in predominantly Buddhist countries, while growth is occurring in specific regions like the U. S. due to factors like increased interest in meditation and mindfulness. [102]

1. Global Trends [103]

- **Population Decline:** The number of Buddhists worldwide decreased slightly between 2010 and 2020. A 2025 Pew Research Center analysis also backed up this slight decrease, though there are still 511 million Buddhists projected to be in the world in 2025. [3]
- **Future Projections:** The global Buddhist population is projected to remain relatively stable or decline further, while the overall world population increases, causing the percentage of Buddhists in the world to decrease.
- **Reasons for Decline:** Low birth rates in countries with large Buddhist populations and changing cultural trends, particularly among young people, are the main reasons for the global decline.

2. Regional Trends [104]

- **Asia-Pacific:** This region is home to the vast majority of the world's Buddhists and has seen a decline in numbers.
- **Western Countries:** Buddhism is growing in some Western countries, such as the U. S., primarily through conversion.
- **Factors For Growth in the West:** Interest in Buddhist practices like meditation and mindfulness is a significant driver of this growth.

3. Current Doctrinal Trends in Buddhism

Current doctrinal trends in Buddhism are shaped by modernism, emphasizing rationality, meditation, and psychological well-being while de-emphasizing traditional cosmologies, rituals, and clerical hierarchy. This has given rise to distinct movements like Secular Buddhism and Engaged Buddhism, as well as a greater dialogue with Western science and psychology. These doctrinal trends reflect Buddhism's ongoing evolution as it adapts its ancient wisdom to modern concerns, from social issues to scientific inquiry. [105]

(a) Buddhist Modernism

Buddhist modernism is a global trend that reformulates traditional Buddhist concepts for a modern audience. [106] Key concepts include [107]:

- **Rationalism and Science:** Many modernists present Buddhism as rational and compatible with scientific inquiry, particularly regarding the mind and consciousness. The Dalai Lama's promotion of dialogue with scientists through the Mind and Life Institute is a prominent example of this trend.
- **Psychologization:** Teachings are increasingly interpreted through a psychological lens. Rebirth, for instance, is often reinterpreted as a process of momentary psychological conditioning within a single lifetime rather than the literal reincarnation of the soul.
- **Focus on This Life:** There is a strong emphasis on achieving satisfaction and flourishing in the current life rather than solely focusing on a future rebirth or nirvana. Practices like mindfulness are framed as tools for personal wellbeing and stress reduction.
- **De-emphasis on Tradition:** Many movements critically reexamine or reject traditional Buddhist doctrines, rituals, and practices that are deemed "superstitious" or nonessential. This includes things like relic veneration and complex monastic hierarchies.

(b) Secular Buddhism

A more radical extension of Buddhist modernism. Secular Buddhism focuses exclusively on the historical Buddha's core pragmatic and ethical teachings, stripped of religious and metaphysical elements. [108] Here is a more detailed look [109] :

- **Pragmatism Over Belief:** It views the dharma as a practical path for human flourishing in this world, not a set of beliefs to be accepted on faith.
- **Rejection of Supernaturalism:** Secular Buddhists are agnostic about or outright reject supernatural elements, such as literal rebirth or other realms of existence. Karma is typically reinterpreted as the psychological impact of one's actions within this life.
- **Egalitarianism:** The movement rejects traditional hierarchical structures and esoteric lineage claims, preferring an egalitarian and democratic community.

(c) Engaged Buddhism

This trend applies Buddhist teachings to contemporary social, political, and environmental issues. It is not a separate school but an approach found across different traditions. [110] This is as follows [111] :

- **Compassionate Action:** Rooted in compassion (karuna) and lovingkindness (metta). Engaged Buddhism seeks to alleviate suffering by addressing its systemic roots.
- **Interconnectedness:** Drawing on the doctrine of dependent origination (pratityasamutpada), this movement emphasizes that all beings are interconnected. Social and environmental problems are therefore understood as collective suffering that requires collective action.
- **Environmentalism:** A significant component involves addressing the climate crisis, promoting sustainability, and advocating for environmental protection.
- **Social Justice:** Engaged Buddhists participate in social justice, peacebuilding, and human rights advocacy, applying principles of nonviolence (ahimsa) to address injustice.

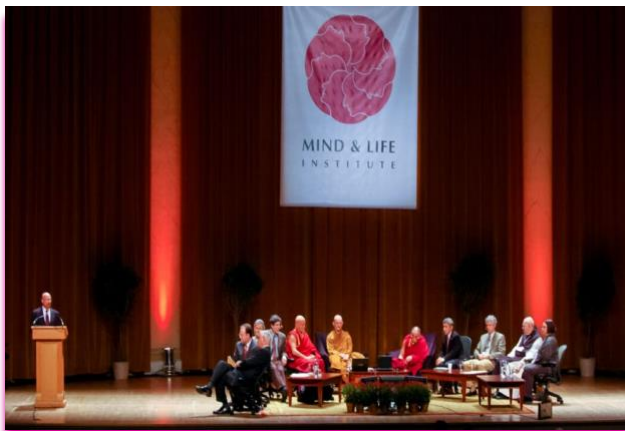


Figure 20. The Dalai Lama and others meeting at the Mind and Life Institute. [112]



Figure 21. An interfaith gathering in Bangkok, Thailand, hosted by Engaged Buddhists. [113]

(d) Internal Debates

Alongside these broader trends, specific doctrinal debates are ongoing within academic and traditional Buddhist communities. [114] These include [115] :

- **The Anatta (No-self) Doctrine:** There is continued scholarly research and debate on the relationship between the concept of anatta and rebirth. Modern scholars often favor a “process-oriented” understanding of continuity, where a stream of consciousness persists through causality, rather than a static soul.
- **Rebirth’s Relevance:** The skepticism toward literal rebirth among many Western and secular Buddhists directly challenges the doctrinal foundations of traditional Buddhism, for whom it remains central to their moral orientation and practice.

(e) Regional Differences

While global trends exist, Buddhism’s doctrinal trends vary by region. [116, 117] :

- **Western Buddhism:** Tends to be liberal, eclectic, and psychological, with a strong focus on meditation and lay practice.
- **Asian Buddhism:** Often remains more traditional, though modernizing movements like Humanistic Buddhism and the reform-minded Navayana also exist. Some traditionalist Asian Buddhists view Western interpretations as heretical or a “diluted” imitation.

M. BUDDHIST PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS

Christians have faced significant persecution from Buddhist groups across various regions and historical periods. This mistreatment often involves physical attacks, restrictive laws, societal pressure to deny Christ, and forced conversions. Countries like Myanmar (Burma), Bhutan, Laos, Sri Lanka, and historically Japan, have seen instances where Buddhist nationalism, government policies, or radical monks contribute to the oppression of Christian minorities. In some cases, converts to Christianity from Buddhist backgrounds face the strongest persecution from families, friends, and authorities, leading to challenges such as denial of burial plots, restrictions on public worship, and difficulties in obtaining official documentation. [118]

In the nations of Bhutan and Myanmar, both of which are Buddhist-majority nations, Christians continue to experience persecution by Buddhist extremists. In Bhutan, Christians are routinely denied access to burial plots and the right to express their faith in public. National legislation requires religious groups to register with the Commission for Religious Organizations (CRO). The law states that the CRO must “ensure that religious institutions and personalities promote the spiritual heritage of the country by developing a society ‘rooted in Buddhist ethos,’” according to the U. S. State Department. [119] Bhutanese law restricts unregistered religious groups from public worship, and the CRO regularly leaves Christian applications unanswered and unaddressed. Without the necessary registration needed to congregate, believers are left to gather together privately and, therefore, illegally. [120]

In Myanmar, also known as Burma, “to be Burmese is to be Buddhist” was a sentiment echoed by Buddhist nationalists for many years. “The Burmese military [has] targeted ethnic and religious minorities for more than two decades...seeking to maintain its grip on power and achieve a Buddhist vision for

Burma,” said Meir Soloveichik, vice chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) in a February 2025 hearing to discuss the deteriorating religious freedoms in the nation. [121]

Many Christians have been killed or forced to flee due to the military’s Buddhist superiority ambitions. According to Open Doors, “government forces have continued to disproportionately attack Christian villages and churches. They have also killed Christian aid workers and pastors, often in serial attacks.” Various Myanmar communities reportedly want to remain purely Buddhist, which also leads to greater Christian persecution. Salai Za Uk Ling, executive director at the Chin Human Rights Organization, said during a March 2025 USCIRF hearing, “Since the military coup in Burma four years ago, we have witnessed a systematic campaign of religious persecution, particularly targeting the Christian population in Chin state.

These attacks are not collateral damage but part of a deliberate strategy to erase the religious and cultural identity of the Chin people as Christians.” [122] So we see, as in Hinduism, so in Buddhism, another “nonviolent” religion, persecution of Christians, often taking the form of violence, especially in Bhutan and Myanmar.

N. CONCLUSION

Buddhism, whether it is growing or not, is yet another polytheistic and misleading religion. The Bible tells us that all who are outside of Christ will go to hell and, ultimately, to the lake of fire, there to suffer forever. Even so, Buddhism alone claims as many as 511 million adherents. Their texts are uninspired, their moral laws conflict with one another, and if it were possible to move even farther away from the one true God, modern Buddhism is more fleshly and sensual than the traditional version of that faith. But anyone who responds in the affirmative, sincerely, to the call of salvation will be saved. Jesus Christ will set them free.



Figure 22. Thai Christians being baptized. [123] **John 3:16:** “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son,, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

REFERENCES

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