

# Foundations of Indian Buddhism

Today, Buddhism is an active part of the cultures of Asia and a growing presence in the West, altogether accounting for some four-hundred-million followers. But except among some Tibetan refugees and converts to a 20<sup>th</sup>-century neo-Buddhist movement, the practice of Buddhism in India, the land of its origin, has been virtually extinct since the thirteenth century.

Despite the fact that Buddhism has all but disappeared from its birthplace, the Indian tradition remains foundational to the practice of Buddhism worldwide. Its various regional forms, Theravāda in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, the Mahāyāna traditions in East Asia, and Tantric or “Esoteric” Buddhism in Tibet, East Asia, Mongolia, and the Himalayan kingdoms—not to mention Buddhism in the West—all derive from Indian antecedents. Because of this, an introduction to Indian Buddhist thought is also an introduction to many of the major themes of the religion as a whole.

## Major Topics

Buddhism defines itself as a path to liberation; nothing more, nothing less. The Buddha described this path as combination of moral training, meditative discipline, and wisdom, culminating in the acquisition of a special type of knowledge that sets one free from an endless cycle of everyday existence, an existence he termed fundamentally flawed, *duḥkha*, “suffering.” This special knowledge, and the process of mental transformation associated with its acquisition, form the basis of all Buddhist thought, lending to the tradition a decidedly analytical bent that is centered around the examination of consciousness, mental states, and their relationship with the world around us.

In the centuries following the death of the Buddha (c. 404 BCE?) Buddhist thinkers in India would explore what they took as his original teachings and elaborate upon them in fascinating and diverse ways. Although we have only a few short hours to do so, we will attempt to survey and, hopefully, understand, the key elements of Indian Buddhist thought, including:

- “Core” teachings:
  - Suffering and its origin; emancipation and the path
  - Karma and the causal chain of birth and death
- The practice of meditation
- Buddhist psychology: Abhidharma
- The rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism
- Paths to emancipation
- The Perfection of Wisdom literature
- Madhyamaka: the “Middle Way”
- “The Imagination of the Unreal”: Yogācāra Buddhism
- The Tathāgatagarbha (Buddha Nature) literature
- Tantric Buddhism

Lectures will be held at the Heritage Center (Redding Community Center) from 11:00 to 12:15 on four successive Tuesdays, beginning 30 September.

## Classroom Materials

Download the classroom materials by clicking on this link or copying and pasting it into your browser:  
<https://github.com/mcummingsny/Indian-Buddhism>

## About the Instructor

Mark Cummings holds degrees in East Asian (MA, 1976) and religious studies (MA, 1978; MPhil, 1980) from Yale University and has taught courses in the religious traditions of South and East Asia at Hunter College in New York and Brown University. In 1982 he was hired by Macmillan Publishing Company to serve as the in-house editor and project manager for Asian philosophies and religions in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (16 vols., 1987), leading to a professional career in reference and educational publishing. Since then, he has served, variously, as development editor for multivolume reference works at Oxford University Press, editor in chief of the *Encyclopedia Americana*, and vice president and publisher of the reference division at Scholastic Library Publishing.