Buddhist Rituals and Practices

Buddhism incorporates a variety of **rituals and practices**, which are intended to aid in the journey to enlightenment and bring blessings on oneself and others. The practice of meditation is central to nearly all forms of Buddhism, and it derives directly from the Buddha’s experiences and teachings. Meditation is is the central focus of Zen Buddhism and the only way to liberation in Theravada Buddhism.

In addition to meditation, the Mahayana schools of Buddhism have developed a variety of other ritual and devotional practices, many of which were inspired or influenced by the existing religious cultures of India, China, Japan, Southeast Asia, and Tibet. The articles in this section provide an overview of some of the main Buddhist sacred rituals and practices.

* [**Meditation**](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/practices/meditation.htm) - Mental concentration and mindfulness
* [**Mantras**](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/practices/mantras.htm) - Sacred sounds
* [**Mudras**](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/symbols/mudras.htm) - Symbolic hand gestures
* [**Prayer Wheels**](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/things/prayer_wheel.htm) - Reciting mantras with the turn of a wheel
* Monasticism
* Pilgrimage - Visiting sacred sites
* Veneration of Buddhas and Deities

<http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/practices.htm>

|  |
| --- |
| [icon](http://click.linksynergy.com/fs-bin/click?id=EEh6NAyp3qk&offerid=30409.544375203&type=10&subid=) |
| Solitary meditation at home. |
| [Young and old monks meditating under full moon, Myanmar](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/images/practices/monks-meditation-moon-c-awfulsara.jpg) |
| Monks meditating by candlelight and moonlight in Bagan, Myanmar. |
| [Zazen room, Kyoto, Japan](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/images/practices/zazen-kyoto-daitokuji-cc-noshadows.jpg) |
| Room for zazen (sitting meditation) in a Zen temple, Kyoto, Japan. |
| [Monk in meditation, Burma](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/images/practices/old-monk-praying-hands-burma-cc-awfulsara.jpg) |
| A Buddhist monk in meditation, Myanmar. |

Buddhist Meditation

All that we are is the result of what we have thought:   
it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts.  
If a man speaks or acts with a pure thought,   
happiness follows him, like a shadow that never leaves him.  
  
--Gautama Buddha, Dhammapada

**Buddhist meditation** is a form of mental concentration that leads ultimately to enlightenment and spiritual freedom. Meditation occupies a central place in all forms of Buddhism, but has developed characteristic variations in different Buddhist traditions.

There are two main types of Buddhist meditation: vipassana (insight) and samatha (tranquility). The two are often combined or used one after the other (usually vipissana follows samatha). In China and Japan, an entire school of Buddhism developed around the practice of sitting meditation: Ch’an or [Zen Buddhism](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/sects/zen.htm).

The basic purpose of samatha or tranquility meditation is to **still the mind** and train it to concentrate. The object of concentration (kammatthana) is less important than the skill of concentration itself, and varies by individual and situation.

Many of the skills learned in tranquility meditation can be applied to insight meditation, but the end goal is different. As its name suggests, the purpose of **insight meditation** is the realization of important truths. Specifically, one who practices vipassana hopes to realize the truths of impermanence, suffering and "no-self."

Loving-kindness is a central virtue of Buddhism, and loving-kindness meditation (metta bhavana) is a way of developing this virtue. It is a practice that is seen as **supplemental** or complementary to other forms of meditation.

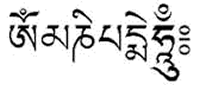
The purpose of loving-kindness meditation is to develop the mental habit of altruistic love for the self and others. It is said to "sweeten the mind."

Beginning with oneself, the meditator seeks to evoke feelings of loving-kindness for each person in the above list. Tools for accomplishing this include:

* Visualization – imagine the person looking joyful and happy
* Reflection – reflect on the person’s positive qualities and acts of kindness they have done
* Mantra – repeat silently or out loud a simple mantra like "loving-kindness"

**Mantras**

**Mantras** are sacred sounds that are believed to possess supernatural powers. The word "mantra" is a Sanskrit word, which probably means "that which protects (tra) the mind (man)."

Mantras are practiced especially in Tibetan Buddhism, where they are believed to embody the power and attributes of particular deities. The best known mantra is that of the beloved deity Avalokiteshvara: [Om mani padme hum](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/symbols/om_mani_padme_hum.htm). Tibetan Buddhists chant mantras repeatedly as a part of [meditation](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/practices/meditation.htm), often with the aid of [mala beads](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/things/mala.htm) for counting.

In addition to invoking deities and providing supernatural power, mantras are often used for **protection** from evil and misfortune. They are chanted during large public rituals to avert collective danger and in private rituals to protect individuals against illness or other misfortune. For example, every summer in Kyoto, Japan, children sit in a circle and pass around a large rosary to invoke the protection of the bodhisattva Kshitigarbha, guardian of children.

Protective rites play an even greater role in the [Mahayana](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/sects/mahayana.htm) and esoteric Buddhist traditions, found primarily in East Asia and Tibet. In these regions, especially in Tibet, dharanis and mantras are widely used in exorcistic and protective rites. **Dharanis** are statements of doctrine or adoration believed to have spiritual power when chanted. Mantras are shorter statements, often just single words, that are believed to contain the same power. In both cases, their power derives not as much from their content as from their invocation of the gods and the frequent exclamations, which are believed to frighten away evil spirits. One common dharani is the **Dharani of Removing Disasters**, which translates as follows:

*Adoration to all the Buddhas!   
Adoration to the Teaching that knows no obstructions!   
Thus: Om! Khya khya khyahi khyahi (speak, speak)!   
Hum hum! Jvala jvala prajvala prajvala (blaze, blaze)!   
Tistha tistha (up, up)!   
Stri Stri!   
Sphata (burst, burst)!   
One who is quiescent!   
To the glorious one, hail!*

**Mudras**

**Mudras** are symbolic gestures, used symbolically in [Buddha images](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/things/buddha_image.htm) and in practice to evoke particular ideas or buddhas in the mind during [Buddhist meditation](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/practices/meditation.htm) or ritual.

Like symbols held by saints in Christian art or by gods in Hindu art, Buddhist mudras indicate the identity of a Buddha or a particular scene being depicted.

Mudras are also used in ritual meditation, especially in [Tibetan Buddhism](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/sects/tibetan.htm), to generate forces that invoke a particular Buddha or deity.

While there are a large number of esoteric mudras, there are ten main ones, of which five are most commonly used in Buddha images. Each of the [Five Dhyani Buddhas](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/deities/five_dhyani_buddhas.htm) is assigned one of the five mudras, with which they are invariably depicted in art.

Follow a link below to learn more about each of the five main mudras and see examples of Buddha images featuring those mudras.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| [Abhaya Mudra](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/symbols/mudra_abhaya.htm) | [**Abhaya Mudra (Fearlessness)**](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/symbols/mudra_abhaya.htm)  The gesture of fearlessness and protection, representing spiritual power. This mudra is most often seen in standing Buddhas. |
| [Earth Witness Mudra](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/symbols/mudra_bhummisparsha.htm) | [**Bhumisparsha Mudra (Earth Witness)**](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/symbols/mudra_bhummisparsha.htm)  The gesture of "earth witness," which the Buddha is said to have made at the time of his Enlightenment. |
| [Dharmachakra Mudra](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/symbols/mudra_dharmachakra.htm) | [**Dharmachakra Mudra (Wheel Turning)**](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/symbols/mudra_dharmachakra.htm)  The gesture of "wheel-turning" or the turning of the wheel of the dharma, representing the Buddha's teachings. |
| [Dhyana Mudra](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/symbols/mudra_dhyana.htm) | [**Dhyana Mudra (Meditation)**](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/symbols/mudra_dhyana.htm)  The gesture of meditation. |
| [Varada Mudra](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/symbols/mudra_varada.htm) | [**Varada Mudra (Gift Giving)**](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/symbols/mudra_varada.htm)  The gesture of gift-giving or bestowal. |

**Tibetan Buddhism**

**Tibetan Buddhism** (sometimes called **Lamaism**) is the form of [Mahayana](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/sects/mahayana.htm) Buddhism that developed in Tibet and the surrounding Himalayan region beginning in the 7th century CE. Tibetan Buddhism incorporates Madhyamika and Yogacara philosophy, Tantric symbolic rituals, [Theravadin](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/sects/theravada.htm) monastic discipline and the shamanistic features of the indigenous religion, [Bön](http://www.religionfacts.com/a-z-religion-index/bon.htm). Among its most unique characteristics are its system of reincarnating lamas and the vast number of deities in its pantheon.

Tibetan Buddhism is most well-known to the world through the office of the Dalai Lama, the exiled spiritual and political leader of Tibet and the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989.

Historically, "Tibet" refers to a mountainous region in central Asia covering 2.5 million sq km. Today, "Tibet" officially refers to the Tibetan Autonomous Region within China, which is about half the size of historical Tibet. Tibet remained independent until the early 1900s, when it was occupied first by Britain and then China. The Tibetans reasserted their independence from China in 1912 and retained it until 1951, when it was "liberated" by China.

Today, Tibet is still occupied by China. The Dalai Lama, the spiritual and political leader of the Tibetan people, lives in exile in India, and Chinese officials outnumber Tibetans in their own homeland.

The first significant event in the history of Tibetan Buddhism occurred in **641**, when **King Songtsen Gampo** (c.609-650) unified Tibet and took two Buddhist wives (Princess Wencheng from China and Princess Bhrikuti Devi from Nepal). Before long, King Gampo made Buddhism the state religion and established a network of 108 Buddhist temples across the region, including the Jokhang and Ramoché temples to house the Buddha statues his wives had brought as their dowries. Conflict with the former national religion, Bön, however, would continue for centuries.

Tibetan Buddhism exerted a strong influence from the 11th century AD among the peoples of Central Asia, especially in Mongolia and Manchuria. It was adopted as an official state religion by the Mongol Yuan dynasty and the Manchu Qing dynasty of China.Tibetan Buddhism spread to the West in the second half of the 20th century as many Tibetan leaders were exiled from their homeland. Today, Tibetan religious communities in the West consist both of refugees from Tibet and westerners drawn to the Tibetan religious tradition.

Buddhist Prayer Wheels

A **prayer wheel** is of a hollow metal cylinder, often beautifully embossed, mounted on a rod handle and containing a tightly wound scroll printed with a mantra.

Prayer wheels are used primarily by the Buddhists of Tibet and Nepal, where hand-held prayer wheels are carried by pilgrims and other devotees and turned during devotional activities.

According to Tibetan Buddhist belief, spinning a prayer wheel is just as effective as reciting the sacred texts aloud. This belief derives from the Buddhist belief in the power of sound and the formulas to which deities are subject. For many Buddhists, the prayer wheel also represents the [Wheel of the Law](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/symbols/wheel.htm) (or Dharma) set in motion by the Buddha.

The prayer wheel is also useful for illiterate members of the lay Buddhist community, since they can "read" the prayers by turning the wheel.

Prayer wheels come in many **sizes**: they may be small and attached to a stick, and spun around by hand; medium-sized and set up at monasteries or temples; or very large and continuously spun by a water mill. Prayer wheels at monasteries and temples are located at the gates of the property, and devotees spin the wheels before passing through the gates.

The **external cylinder** of a prayer wheel is made out of repoussé metal, usually gilded bronze. The wheel is supported on a handle or axis made of wood or a precious metal. On the outside of the cylinder are inscriptions in Sanskrit (or sometimes Tibetan) script (often Om mani padme hum) and auspicious Buddhist symbols. This outer part is removable to allow for the insertion of the sacred text into the cylinder. The uppermost point of the prayer wheel forms the shape of a lotus bud.

The cylinder contains a **sacred text** written or printed on paper or animal skin. These texts might be sutra or invocations to particular deities (dharani or mantras). The most common text used in prayer wheels is the mantra [*Om mani padme hum*](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/symbols/om_mani_padme_hum.htm).

The Dalai Lama

The Dalai Lama is the head of the dominant school of Tibetan Buddhism, the Gelugpa (or Yellow Hats). From 1642 to 1959, the Dalai Lama was the spiritual and temporal leader of Tibet. Until the Chinese takeover in 1959, the Dalai Lamas resided in Potala Palace in Lhasa in the winter and in the Norbulingka residence during summer.

The current Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, is the 14th in a line of succession that began with Gendün Drub (1391–1475), founder and abbot of Tashilhunpo monastery (central Tibet). He and his successors came to be regarded as reincarnations (tulkus) of the bodhisattva of compassion [Avalokiteshvara](http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/deities/bodhisattvas.htm).

The 13th Dalai Lama, **Tubten Gyatso** (1875–1933), ruled with great personal authority. The successful revolt within China against its ruling Manchu dynasty in 1912 gave the Tibetans the opportunity to dispel the disunited Chinese troops, and the Dalai Lama reigned as head of a sovereign state.

The 14th in the line of Dalai Lamas, **Tenzin Gyatso**, was born Lhamo Thondup in 1935 in China of Tibetan parentage. He was recognized as the incarnation of the 13th Dalai Lama in 1937, enthroned in 1940, and vested with full powers as head of state in 1950. He fled to exile in India in 1959, the year of the Tibetan people's unsuccessful revolt against communist Chinese forces that had occupied the country since 1950. The Dalai Lama set up a government-in-exile in Dharmsala, India (known as "Little Lhasa"), in the Himalayan Mountains. In 1989 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in recognition of his nonviolent campaign to end Chinese domination of Tibet. He has written a number of books on Tibetan Buddhism and an autobiography.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Buddhist  Practice | Main Points &  Characteristics | Confucianism | Taoism |
| Meditation |  |  |  |
| Mantras |  |  |  |
| Mudras |  |  |  |
| Prayer Wheels |  |  |  |
| Tibetan Buddhism |  |  |  |
| Dalai Lama |  |  |  |