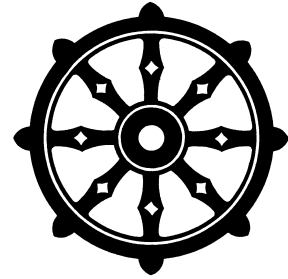


# BUDDHISM RELIGIOUS BASICS

Princeton Buddhist Students Group

<https://www.princeton.edu/~buddhism/>



## WHAT ARE THE MAJOR DENOMINATIONS?

Buddhism is divided into two main branches, Theravada and Mahayana. Theravada Buddhism is mainly practiced in southeastern Asia—Sri Lanka, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia—while Mahayana Buddhism is mainly practiced in northern Asia: China, Korea, Tibet, and Japan. The emphasis of Theravada Buddhism is practice for the spiritual attainment and liberation of the individual. Mahayana Buddhism, which includes Zen, emphasizes the need to practice for self-actualization and then ultimately, to liberate all beings from suffering.

## ORIGINS

### WHO FOUNDED, WHERE, WHEN & HOW:

Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama approximately 2500 years ago in the Himalayas between present-day India and Nepal. Siddhartha was born around the year 563 BC, the son of King Suddhodana and Queen Maya of the Shakya clan. After 29 years of luxurious and sheltered existence, he first saw a sick man, an old man, and a dead man. Realizing that he was unsatisfied with his lavish and comfortable life, Siddhartha left his father's palace to seek to understand the causes of suffering. He then practiced severe asceticism for many years, denying his body food and drink until he reached the point of starvation. At the age of 35, after realizing that death would bring him no closer to enlightenment, he again took food and entered deep meditation beneath a tree. After seven days and nights of meditation he attained enlightenment and became known as "the Buddha," meaning one who is truly awake. He taught monks, disciples, and laypeople throughout India for 45 years until his peaceful death at the age of 80.

### WHY?

Buddhism was founded as a way to end suffering. The Buddha began his search in response to suffering; he wanted to find a way to live a life of happiness, wisdom, compassion, joy and equanimity.

## DEITIES AND DIVINITY

The Buddha is not a god or deity, nor is he worshipped by Buddhists as a god or embodiment of God. The Buddha himself emphasized that he was not a god, but was simply a human being who was "fully awake," attentive and aware of the here and now. He did not ask to be worshipped but rather encouraged others to look deeply into themselves to answer fundamental questions about life and death.

A common confusion stems from the fact that Buddhists often have statues of the Buddha in their homes and places of worship. This is done to serve as a reminder of our own true nature of

wisdom and compassion. Therefore, bowing before such figures is neither idolatry nor worship of the figure itself, but rather a sign of gratitude, respect and recognition. This practice has its roots in Asian culture, where bowing was not construed in the same way as it was and is in the Western world.

Within Buddhism there is no conception of God as one who judges, sets an immutable fate, creates, or destroys. However, in the sense that some understand God as a “divine light” expressed within all people, a very similar idea exists within Buddhism (True Mind). Buddhism by no means rejects the idea of divinity or the divine. Buddhists believe that every moment and every person is an embodiment of this divinity. However, no single word exists within Buddhism to express this concept, because it defies reason and intellect. How can any one word truly describe what is so vast and infinite, all-encompassing, and timeless, in all places and at all times? Once we assign it a word we will limit it, try to judge and rationalize and define. Rather than providing a single word or definition, there is an emphasis on each individual striving to understand this true nature, or Mind. For these reasons, Buddhism does not speak of a God.

### **PRACTICE AND OBSERVANCE**

#### **SACRED TEXTS:**

While Buddhism does not have one single sacred book like the Bible, there are many sacred texts that we refer to. These texts, called sutras, are the spoken word of the Buddha; there are thousands of sutras. The Buddha’s disciples originally maintained his teachings through the oral tradition until they were recorded after his death. The *Tripitaka* (literally “Three Baskets”) is a substantial collection of the Buddha’s teachings, and is one of the central sacred texts for Buddhists. Included in the *Tripitaka* is the *Dhammapada*, a commonly referenced source of the Buddha’s teachings. Sutras and all sacred Buddhist texts should generally be treated with extreme respect.

#### **BASIC RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE:**

Buddhist practice includes meditation and chanting, which is a form of prayer. Most fundamentally, Buddhist observance is practiced through striving to embody the precepts in daily life (see below). This, however, is a difficult task; chanting and meditation help along the way. There is no one holy day in Buddhism, every day is as sacred as the next and as good an opportunity for the practice of compassion. While there is no formal stipulation for how often one should meditate or chant, a daily practice is essential. Dawn and dusk are considered especially good times for meditation, but really the best time is whenever you can!

#### *Meditation:*

Silent meditation is practiced to cultivate mindfulness and attentiveness to the present moment. Zazen (Zen meditation) focuses on following the breath, counting exhalations from 1 to 10 and then resuming at 1 again; zazen literally means “one-pointed concentration.” A typical round of “sitting” (meditation) ranges from 25-30 minutes, followed by walking meditation. Posture (sitting with the back and shoulders straight) is important to maintain concentration. Meditation is ideally practiced at all times—it is not just in a quiet room free from distractions, but while

working, washing dishes, running, walking, cleaning, etc. However, regular silent meditation helps to calm and focus the mind and gives strength to apply to daily life.

*Chanting:*

Sutras (the teachings of the Buddha) are recited by chanting; chants are done in different languages depending on the country. In America we chant in English and also in Sanskrit and, for Zen Buddhists, in Japanese. Chants are commonly translated so that people know what they are saying. Often, chanting services are dedicated to those who are suffering, sick, hungry, or otherwise experiencing pain.

*Metta:*

Another Buddhist practice is metta meditation: loving-kindness meditation, in which loving thoughts are directed first to one's self, then to a benefactor, then to a friend, a neutral person, and finally to an "enemy" (someone we have difficulty with) and then to all living beings.

**PLACE OF WORSHIP:**

Buddhist places of worship are usually called temples or centers. In American Zen, places of worship are commonly referred to as Zen Centers. The zendo is the meditation hall, the heart of a Zen center. Stupas are Buddhist holy shrines.

**WHERE ARE SOME OF THE MAJOR COMMUNITIES OF FOLLOWERS TODAY?**

Today, practicing Buddhists are found throughout the eastern and western hemispheres. As mentioned above, Mahayana Buddhism is generally practiced in China, Korea, and Japan; while Theravada Buddhism is practiced in Southeast Asian countries like Thailand, Cambodia, Burma, and Sri Lanka. The Dalai Lama is currently living in exile in India with a community of Tibetan Buddhist followers. There is also a substantial Buddhist population in Europe and the Americas, where both Mahayana and Theravada branches are practiced. Estimates of the total number of Buddhists in the world vary from 250-500 million; most estimates suggest about 350 million—the fourth largest religion after Christianity, Islam and Hinduism (see Sources for website).

**HOLY SITES:**

While there is no single holy place, there are several holy Buddhist sites in India that are visited on pilgrimages; these sites correspond with the place of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, first sermon, and death:

**Lumbini**, the place of the Buddha's birth, near the city of Kapilavastu (in present-day Nepal)

**The Tree of Enlightenment at Bodhgaya**: the site where the Buddha attained Enlightenment while sitting beneath the Bodhi tree. Descendants of this original tree have been cared for, and it is possible for visitors to pay their respects to a descendant of the original Bodhi tree today.

**Varanasi**: where the Buddha gave his first sermon in Deer Park (near present-day Sarnath)

**Kushinara**: the place of the Buddha's death

In all Buddhist countries, there are pilgrimage sites and stupas where relics of the Buddha are said to have been preserved.

#### **A FEW IMPORTANT HOLIDAYS:**

Buddhists celebrate several ceremonies and holidays throughout the year. While these may vary according to different lineages or traditions and the dates may change, here are the essential holidays:

*Vesak*: The Buddha's birth, generally recognized as April 8 (Vesak at many US Zen Centers is celebrated in May when the weather is warm, and is essentially a big birthday party)

*The Buddha's Enlightenment*: December 8. A seven-day *rohatsu sesshin*, or intensive meditation retreat, is usually held around this date to commemorate the Buddha's Enlightenment after seven days of meditation beneath the Bodhi tree

*Parinirvana*, the Buddha's Death: February 13 (again, dates may vary according to tradition)

The Buddha's Parinirvana is an extremely important ceremony, and is not regarded as a negative day in Buddhism but rather, was a time of great serenity and joy for the Buddha.

*Jukai*: Jukai is the formal ceremony of entering the Buddha's Way, or becoming a Buddhist.

Jukai consists of a repentance ceremony, chanting, taking the three refuges (in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha), three general resolutions (to avoid evil, to do good and to liberate all sentient beings), and the ten cardinal precepts, stated below. It is encouraged for Buddhists to take Jukai as often as possible (in our center it is given twice a year) as an opportunity to renew one's vows and resolve to do better.

We also have ceremonies for the New Year, a Hungry Ghost Ceremony (for those beings who, due to their greed, cannot eat food or drink unless it is offered to them), and Ceremonies of Aid (for ending world hunger, for world peace, and other causes).

#### **WHO PRACTICES BUDDHISM TODAY?**

Anyone of any race, nationality, sexuality, or gender can practice Buddhism; there are no restrictions. It is not only a monastic religion; it can be practiced by lay people as well as monks. Especially in the west, many practitioners of Buddhism were not born into the religion but come to it later in life—this is perfectly acceptable. As described above, Jukai is the formal ceremony to enter the Buddha's Way or formally become a Buddhist, when one resolves to live one's life according to Buddhist guidelines.

## **ESSENTIAL TENETS OF BUDDHISM:**

Fundamental teachings of the Buddha:

### **The Four Noble Truths**

1. Unenlightened life is *dukkha*—full of suffering, pain, and difficulty.
2. This pain and suffering is caused by our ego-based desires and attachments.
3. These desires can be overcome and we can lead lives of wisdom, compassion, joy and equanimity.
4. The way that leads to the cessation of pain is the Eightfold Path—right views, right thought or intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

### **The Ten Cardinal Precepts**

1. Not to kill, but to cherish all life.
2. Not to take what is not given, but to respect the things of others.
3. Not to misuse sexuality, but to be caring and responsible.
4. Not to lie, but to speak the truth.
5. Not to cause others to use substances that confuse the mind, nor to do so oneself, but to keep the mind clear.
6. Not to speak of the misdeeds of others, but to be understanding and sympathetic.
7. Not to praise myself nor disparage others, but to overcome my own shortcomings.
8. Not to withhold spiritual or material aid, but to give them freely where needed.
9. Not to indulge in anger, but to exercise control.
10. Not to revile the Three Treasures—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—but to cherish and uphold them.

The precepts are taken in a formal ceremony, again and again, because we continue to make mistakes—they are not easy. The precepts describe the life and actions of a fully enlightened Buddha. In many Buddhist traditions, the Ten Cardinal Precepts stated here are compressed into five precepts (the first five). The precepts 6-10, in essence, are all encompassed within the fundamental principles expressed in the first five precepts.

A note on the tenth precept: not to revile the Three Treasures, Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, means to respect our true nature (Buddha), the teachings (Dharma) and the community (Sangha); it means to regard all living beings equally, recognizing that all are inherently equal and worthy of respect. Cherishing yourself is equally important to cherishing and upholding the Sangha, supporting the people you practice with and all those around you.

## **OTHER INFORMATION:**

Many practicing Buddhists are vegetarians (and some are vegans) out of respect for the first precept, not to kill but to cherish all life. This is an important religious commitment.

Karma: succinctly stated, karma is described by the Buddha as the law of cause and effect; for every action there is a reaction. The Buddha told his students: if you want to know your past, look at the present. If you want to know your future, look at the present.

Many people make the claim the Buddhism is not actually a religion, but a philosophy. This, from a Buddhist standpoint—the abstract study of Buddhism as a philosophy—is “dead” religion; “living” Buddhism is practiced in daily life. However, Buddhism differs from many other religions because it strongly encourages questioning.

The Buddha encouraged his students to question what they were taught and not to accept teachings blindly without coming to understand the teachings within their own lives; the Buddha even encouraged his students to question his own teachings. This is based on his realization that “Truly all beings are whole and complete, lacking nothing.”

He told his students: “It is proper that you have doubt, that you have perplexity...do not be led by reports, or tradition, or hearsay. Be not led by the authority of religious texts, not by mere logic or inference, nor by considering appearances, nor by the delight in speculative opinions, not by seeming possibilities, nor by the idea: ‘this is our teacher.’ But...when you know for yourselves that certain things are unwholesome and wrong, and bad, then give them up...and when you know for yourselves that certain things are wholesome and good, then accept them and follow them.” (Quoted in *What the Buddha Taught*)

Upon his death, he told his disciples: “Be ye lamps unto yourselves.”

### **RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING**

#### **Books:**

*What the Buddha Taught*, Walpola Rahula (an excellent introduction, highly recommended)  
*The Mind of Clover*, Robert Aitken (written by a Zen teacher about the Buddhist precepts)  
*The Three Pillars of Zen*, Philip Kapleau (one of the fundamental books on Zen in America)  
*To Cherish All Life*, P Kapleau (a Buddhist case for vegetarianism)  
*The Wheel of Life and Death*, P Kapleau (explains the Buddhist concepts of rebirth and karma)  
*The Dhammapada*, Thomas Cleary (translation of the Buddha’s ethical teachings)  
*The Hungry Tigress*, Rafe Martin (Jataka tales, Buddhist teaching stories)  
*Lovingkindness*, Sharon Salzberg (describes metta meditation)

**Princeton Buddhist Students’ Group:** We have designed a website that includes basic meditation instructions and many other online sources: <http://www.princeton.edu/~buddhism>  
Contact the group for more information. All of the books listed above are in the PBSG library and can be read in 31 Murray Dodge (please don’t take them out because we use them regularly!). Several other books on Buddhism can be signed out as well.

**SOURCES:** *What the Buddha Taught*, *The Three Pillars of Zen*, [www.vermontzen.org](http://www.vermontzen.org)