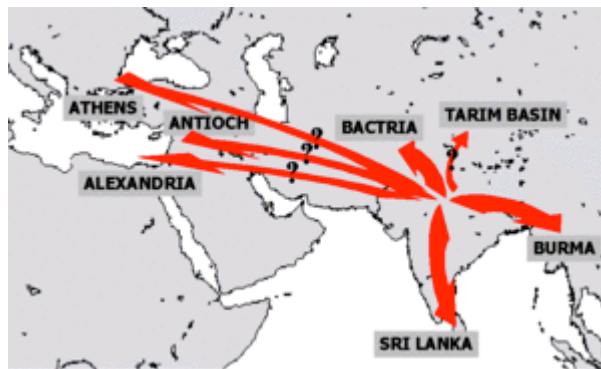


# History of Buddhism

## Early Buddhism

Soon after the Buddha's death, the first Buddhist Council was held to record the Buddha's sayings (suttas). These became the basis of the Pali Canon, which has been the orthodox text of reference throughout the history of Buddhism. The teachings were passed down orally for several centuries.

Buddhism remained a fairly minor religion until King Ashoka converted in about 260 BCE. He spread Buddhism far beyond the confines of India as shown here:



Buddhist proselytism at the time of king Ashoka (260–218 BCE).

(Taken from Wikipedia)

This tradition remains today in the Theravadan school. The name of the school means "Teachings of the Elders" which implies that this was the most conservative school of Buddhism, a school that has attempted to conserve the original teachings of the Buddha. The emphasis is on ethics and monastic discipline.

The Theravadins goal is the achievement of the state of Arahant (lit. "worthy one", "winner of Nibbana"), a life where all (future) birth is at an end, where the holy life is fully achieved, where all that has to be done has been done, and whereupon there is no more returning to the worldly life.

Theravada has for many centuries been the predominant religion of Sri Lanka and continental Southeast Asia.

## Rise of Mahayana (1st c.BCE–2nd c.CE)

Mahāyāna (literally "great vehicle"; from the Indian language of Sanskrit) originated in the Indian subcontinent from 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE as a response to the rather narrow way in which the Buddha's teachings had come to be practised. A new set of scriptures was approved written in Sanskrit. The Mahayana canon further expanded after Buddhism was transmitted to other countries such as China and Tibet, where the existing texts were translated.

The way of the Mahayana can be characterised by:

- **Universalism**, Everyone will become a Buddha.
- **Enlightened wisdom**, as the main focus of realisation.
- **Compassion** through the transferral of merit.

- **Salvation**, supported by a rich cosmography, including celestial realms and powers, with a spectrum of Bodhisattvas, both human and seemingly godlike, who can assist followers.

In the space of a few centuries, Mahayana flourished and spread in the East from India to South-East Asia, and towards the north to Central Asia, China, Korea, and finally to Japan in 538 CE.



Expansion of Mahayana Buddhism between the 1st–10th century CE.

(Taken from Wikipedia)

### **Madhyamaka**

Madhyamaka is one of the main Mahayana schools founded by Nagajuna in the second century CE. It asserts that all phenomena are empty of "self-nature" or "essence", that they have no intrinsic, independent reality apart from the causes and conditions from which they arise.

### **Yogācāra**

Yogācāra (Sanskrit: "yoga practice"), is an influential school of philosophy and psychology that developed in Indian Mahayana Buddhism sometime in the fourth to fifth centuries C.E., also commonly known as Consciousness-only. The Yogācāra has heavily influenced Tibetan Buddhism.

### **Zen**

Zen is the Japanese name of a Mahāyāna Buddhist school practiced originally in China as Ch'an, and subsequently in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Zen emphasizes the role of sitting meditation (zazen) in pursuing enlightenment.

A central part of all Zen sects is the notion of "Dharma transmission," the claim of a line of authority that goes back to the Buddha. Originally this derived from the description of Zen attributed to Bodhidharma:

A special transmission outside the scriptures;  
No dependence upon words and letters;  
Direct pointing to the soul of man:  
Seeing into one's own nature and attainment of Buddhahood.

Some Zen schools use koans. Koans often appear paradoxical or linguistically meaningless dialogues or questions. The 'answer' to the koan involves a transformation of perspective or consciousness, which may be either radical or subtle. They are a tool to allow the student to approach enlightenment by essentially 'short-circuiting' the logical way we order the world. An example of a Zen koan is: "Two hands clap and there is a sound. What is the sound of one hand?"

## Pure land

Pure Land Buddhism, also known as Amidism, is currently one of the dominant schools of Buddhism in East Asia. It is the devotional or "faith"-oriented school of Buddhism, emphasizing rituals, and has become the mainstream branch of Mahayana Buddhism as a whole.

The main idea behind Pure Land Buddhism is that nirvana is difficult to obtain without the assistance of the Buddha. Instead of solitary meditative work towards enlightenment, Pure Land Buddhism teaches that devotion to Amitabha will lead us to the Pure Land (reminiscent of Heaven) from which Nirvana will be easier to attain.

## Vajrayana

The Vajrayana is an extension of Mahayana Buddhism consisting not of philosophical differences, but rather the adoption of additional techniques.

Vajrayana exists today in the form of two major sub-schools:

- Tibetan Buddhism, found in Tibet, Bhutan, northern India, Nepal, southwestern China, Mongolia and, parts of Russia.
- Shingon Buddhism, found in Japan

The key advantage Vajrayana Buddhism claims to provide is an accelerated path to enlightenment. This is achieved through use of tantra techniques, which are practical aids to spiritual development, and esoteric transmission. Whereas earlier schools might provide ways to achieve nirvana over the course of many lifetimes, Vajrayana techniques make full enlightenment or Buddhahood possible in a much shorter timeframe, perhaps in a single lifetime. Vajrayana Buddhists do not claim that Theravada or Mahayana practices are in any way invalid, only that they represent slower paths.

The most important aspect of the tantric path is to 'use the result as the Path'; which means that rather than placing full enlightenment as a goal far away in the future, one tries to identify with the enlightened body, speech and mind of a Buddha. In order to achieve this self-identification with a buddha-form, much symbolism and visualization is used in Buddhist tantric techniques.

Tantric techniques include:

- repetition of special ritual phrases (mantras),
- use of various yoga techniques, including breath control and the use of special hand positions (mudras)
- use of an extensive vocabulary of visual aids, such as cosmic mandala diagrams which teach and map pathways to spiritual enlightenment



A modern Buddhist sand mandala created in Spain in 2004.

- the use of ritual objects such as the vajra and bell, hand drum, and many other symbolic tools and musical instruments
- importance of a guru-disciple relationship, for example by ritual 'empowerments' or 'initiations' wherein the student obtains permission to practice a particular tantra.



Vajrasattva holds a vajra in his right hand and a bell in his left. He represents the beginningless purity of your deepest nature.

Although certain Buddhist scriptures arrived in southern Tibet from India as early as 173 CE, they did not make a great impression until the arrival of the great tantric mystic Padmasambhava in Tibet in 774. It was Padmasambhava (more commonly known in the region as Guru Rinpoche) who merged tantric Buddhism with the local Bön religion to form what we now recognize as Tibetan Buddhism. In addition to writing a number of important scriptures, Padmasambhava established the Nyingma school from which all schools of Tibetan Buddhism are derived.