



# Buddhism

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## History and Region

Buddhism was founded in north-west India by a prince named Siddharta Gautama around the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. Gautama was expected to follow his father on to the throne and so he was taught the skills of a warrior but was also educated in language, music, literature and poetry which prepared him for the life of a king. In his late twenties, Gautama found himself becoming more and more aware of the suffering of so many people around him which raised many questions for him. In his search for the answers, he left his wife and young son and began to travel across the country, visiting many gurus and listening to their teachings. He also spent many years in solitude and meditation and finally received enlightenment. His followers gave him the name 'Buddha' which means 'the enlightened one'. Today, he is universally known as Gautama Buddha or just Buddha.

Buddhism spread to China by travelling Buddhist monks around the beginning of the Christian Era and then to Japan, Korea and South East Asia. Eventually, two schools of thought developed. Theravāda, the earliest form of Buddhism is usually found in Sri Lanka and SE Asia. Mahāyāna, and later Zen which emerged from Mahāyāna, is mainly found in Tibet, Vietnam, China, Korea and Japan. Rather than focusing on the memorization of the sutras and other sacred writings, Zen Buddhists focus on the Buddha nature of each and every individual and how this can be used for the benefit of others. Different forms of Buddhism are found in many Eastern and Western countries across the world. Indeed, it is one of the fastest growing religions in Australia.

## Sacred Texts

The sacred texts of the Buddha are called the *Tripitaka* and consist of three sections. The first section, called the *Sutta Pitaka*, contains all the Buddha's discourses as well as some by his enlightened disciples. The type of material in the *Sutta Pitaka* is very diverse which allows it to communicate the truths that the Buddha taught to all different types of people. Many of the Buddha's discourses are in the form of sermons while others are in the form of dialogues. Other parts like the *Dhammapada* present the Buddha's teachings through the medium of poetry. The *Jatakas*, to take another example, consist of delightful stories in which the main characters are often animals. The second section of the *Tripitaka* is called the *Vinaya Pitaka*. This contains the rules for monks and nuns, advice on monastic administration and procedure and the early history of the monastic order. The last section is called the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*. This is a complex and sophisticated attempt to analyse and classify all the constituents that make up the individual.

## Beliefs and Teachings

The Four Noble Truths of the way to enlightenment are the basic teachings of Buddha:

1. The Truth of *Duhkha* – suffering and the human condition.
2. The Truth of the cause of *Duhkha* – wanting (wanting what one does not have, clinging to what one has, attachment to the past or future so that one cannot live with awareness of the present).
3. The Truth of the end of *Duhkha* – If the causes of *Duhkha* are removed, one is free from suffering
4. The Truth of the Noble Eightfold Path – Right practice which frees us from *Duhkha*:

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|-------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Right View     | 5. Right Livelihood  |
| 2. Right Attitude | 6. Right Effort      |
| 3. Right Speech   | 7. Right Mindfulness |
| 4. Right Action   | 8. Right Meditation  |

## Rituals and Practices

Buddha taught that Right Practice which follows the Noble Eightfold Path is all that is needed to attain Enlightenment or *Nirvana*. The essence of Buddhist life is the practice of loving kindness and compassion towards all Beings and the practice of mindfulness and remaining attentive to one's thoughts.

## Holy Days and Festivals

Many Buddhists celebrate auspicious days in honour of Buddha's birth, his enlightenment and his death and use these days to do Right Practice. Typically on a festival day, lay people will go the local temple or monastery, offer food to the monks and listen to a talk. The day will conclude with evening chanting of the Buddha's teachings and meditation. Here are some of the more important holy days and festivals:

*Vesak*: Vesak is the major Buddhist festival. It celebrates the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha on the one day. Also known as 'Vishakha Puja' or 'Buddha's Day'.

*Magha Puja*: Celebration of the presentation of teachings by Lord Buddha to an assembly of holy men. Also known as 'Great Assembly Day' or 'Sangha Day'.

*Buddhist New Year*: In Theravadin countries, Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Lao, the new year is celebrated for three days from the first full moon day in April. In Mahayana countries the new year starts on the first full moon day in January. However, the Buddhist New Year depends on the country of origin or ethnic background of the people. As for example, Chinese, Koreans and Vietnamese celebrate late January or early February according to the lunar calendar, whilst the Tibetans usually celebrate about one month later.

*Ashala Puja*: Ashala Puja honours the start of the teachings of Buddha. This event commemorates Buddha's first teaching (the Wheel of Dharma) and is recognized as the beginning of Buddhism. Also known as 'Dharma Day' or 'Dhamma Day'.

*Kathina*: Kathina is an ancient Theravadin Buddhist ceremony originating 2500 years ago in which laity (non-monastics) offer new robes and other necessities to monks and nuns (monastics). It is a time of the year when Buddhists give money to the poor or needy, called giving alms.

*Nirvana Day*: Nirvana Day (or Parinirvana Day) is a Mahayana Buddhist holiday which marks the Buddha's death. His death is celebrated because his followers believe that by dying, Buddha left the world of physical pain and suffering and achieved enlightenment.

*Ancestor Day*: Ancestor Day is a Mahayana Buddhist ritual of saving the deceased from torments after death. Lay devotees make offerings on behalf of their ancestors and dedicate the merit towards the relieve of their suffering. Also known as 'Ulambana' or 'Obon'.

*Bodhi Day*: Bodhi Day is a Buddhist holiday commemorating the day the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama reached enlightenment. Prince Gautama took his place under the Bodhi tree vowing to remain there until he attained supreme enlightenment.