

Schools of Buddhism

While there are many different sects, lineages, languages, customs, and texts in Buddhism, there are a few central tenets of all Buddhism: karma, the four noble truths, the eightfold path, and the precepts. Please reference the “Tenants of Buddhism” document to learn more about the elements that are the same of all Buddhist practice.

	Theravada	Mahayana	Vajrayana
Age	4th Century BCE	1st Century BCE	5th Century CE
Origin	India	India	Himalayas
Geographic Spread	Southeast Asia (Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam) and India	East Asia (China, Japan, Mongolia, Taiwan) and India	Himalayas (Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan), East Asia (Japan, China), and India
Number of Practicioners	Approxmiately 100 million	Approximately 325 million	Approximately 20 million
Notable Sects	Vipassana, Thai Forest, Bhavana, Insight Meditation Society (IMS)	Nichiren, Pure Land, Shin, Jodo, Zen, Chan	Tibetan, Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, Shambhala
Notable Teachers	Dipa Ma, Ajahn Cha, SN Goenka, Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield,	Bodhidharma, Thich Nhat Hanh, Shunryu Suzuki, Joan Halifax	Milarepa, Dalai Lama, Pema Chodron, Tulku Urgyn Rinpoche, Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche
Notable Texts	Pali Canon which includes the three “baskets” or “piṭakas”: Vinaya Piṭaka, Sutta Piṭaka, and Abhidhamma Piṭaka	Mahāyāna sūtras include the Lotus Sutra, the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras, the Avatamsaka Sutra, the Lankavatara Sutra, the Pure Land Sutras,and the Nirvana Sutra.	Kangyur (sutras and tantras considered to be the words of the Buddha) and the Tengyur (commentaries)

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	Theravada	Mahayana	Vajrayana
Known As	Way of the Elders	The Great Vehicle	The Diamond Vehicle
Overview	<p>Theravada rests on core Buddhist teachings including the four noble truths and eightfold path to enlightenment, the three jewels (Buddha, dharma, and sangha), and concepts such as impermanence, non-self, karma, rebirth, and dependent origination (the co-arising of phenomena), along with ethical precepts and the meditation practices of samatha (calm abiding) and vipassana (insight).</p> <p>Of the sects that arose after the Buddha's death, what we now call Theravada, the "way of the elders," is the sole surviving strand. As the oldest of the three main Buddhist traditions, it is the one most closely associated with the teachings of the historical Buddha.</p>	<p>Though its origins are not precisely known, scholars believe it arose and existed side-by-side with Theravada for some time before becoming a separate tradition. Mahayanists view their teachings as the "second turning of the wheel of dharma." The first turning refers to the Buddha's initial teachings after his enlightenment, when he introduced the four noble truths.</p> <p>Mahayana tradition teaches that all beings inherently possess buddhanature, the seed of awakening: thus perfecting the qualities of a buddha the buddha-to-be can remove hindrances to realization even within a single lifetime. The Mahayana spiritual model is the bodhisattva, who is motivated by bodhicitta, the desire to awaken to help all beings realize their true nature. The Buddha in Mahayana is eternally present in a pantheon of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and enlightened beings who can be called on for support.</p>	<p>Vajrayana upholds the Mahayana <i>bodhisattva</i> ideal, its pantheon of celestial beings is more extensive, including a wealth of fierce protector deities and <i>dakinis</i> (female deities). Deity yoga—whereby a student takes on the identity of a chosen deity who represents enlightened qualities—is a central practice, guided by the guru, or lama, the master who initiates the student into esoteric practices.</p> <p>Ritual is key, including repetition of mantras (sacred syllables and verses), visualization of mandalas (sacred diagrams), sacred hand gestures (mudras), and prostrations. The highest practices involve the symbolic union of the feminine (wisdom) and masculine (compassion) principles. Tantric practices are largely kept secret, to preserve the sanctity of the teachings and protect practitioners from energies they have not yet been trained to handle.</p>