

Aspect	Theravāda	Thai Forest (Theravāda)	Zen (Mahāyāna)	Mahāyāna	Vajrayāna (Tibetan)
Origin	Sri Lanka, SE Asia	Thailand (Forest Reform Movement)	China → Japan	India → East Asia	India → Tibet, Himalayas
Ideal	Arahant (personal liberation)	Arahant (with intense discipline)	Bodhisattva; direct awakening	Bodhisattva (liberation of all beings)	Vajra Master; full Buddhahood
Primary Goal	Nibbāna (cessation of suffering)	Nibbāna, through seclusion and meditation	Realization of Buddha-nature	Buddhahood for all	Enlightenment using all methods
Practice Style	Gradual path via Eightfold Path	Rigorous mindfulness, simplicity, renunciation	Zazen, koans, everyday awareness	Compassion + wisdom; various upāya (skillful means)	Tantra, deity yoga, mantras, visualization
Meditation	Vipassanā + Samatha	V&S, with focus on breath, body, death	Shikantaza, koans, breath awareness	Śamatha + Vipāśyanā; Pure Land recitations	Deity visualization, inner heat, mantra, completion-stage yoga
Texts	Pāli Canon (Tipiṭaka)	Pāli Canon + oral teachings of forest masters	Mahāyāna Sūtras, plus Zen texts like <i>Shōbōgenzō</i>	Mahāyāna Sūtras (e.g., Lotus, Heart)	Tantra + Mahāyāna Sūtras, commentaries
Philosophy	Three marks of existence; dependent origination	Three marks of existence; dependent origination, with direct observation of impermanence and non-self	Non-duality; direct mind-to-mind transmission	Emptiness (śūnyatā), bodhicitta	Emptiness + form as deity expression; union of bliss and emptiness
Ritual/Devotion	Minimal	Minimal or austere	Bowing, chanting, incense, but minimal dogma	Varies widely; includes chanting and vows	High ritual, mudrā, pūjā, empowerments
Role of Laypeople	Supportive; practice merit and precepts	Encouraged to meditate, but monastics emphasized	Strong lay practice presence	Full access to Bodhisattva path	Lay and monastic practitioners both receive empowerments
Monastic Discipline	Strict Vinaya (Monastic Rules)	Very strict, ascetic	Moderate Vinaya; daily life as practice	Looser monastic code; flexible forms	Complex monastic and tantric vows (Vinaya + Tantric samaya)
Language and Tone	Analytical, practical	Minimalist, earthy, disciplined	Poetic, paradoxical, experiential	Expansive, compassionate	Esoteric, symbolic, visionary
Notable Teachers	Buddhaghosa, Mahāsi Sayādaw	Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Mun, Ajahn Sumedho	Dōgen, Hakuin, Suzuki Roshi	Nāgārjuna, Śāntideva, Tsongkhapa	Padmasambhava, Milarepa, the Dalai Lama