

## Buddhism – An Introduction

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Buddhism is an Indian religion, and philosophical tradition based on the teachings attributed to Lord Buddha. It originated in the Eastern Gangetic plain as a movement in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and gradually spread throughout much of Asia via the Silk Road. It is the fourth-largest religion, with over 520 million followers who comprise seven percent of the global population.

The **teachings of Lord Buddha** emphasize the aim of attaining liberation from suffering (dukkha) which is said to be caused by attachment or clinging. Lord Buddha endorsed the Middle Way, a path of development that avoids the extremes of asceticism, and hedonism. A summary of this path is expressed in the Noble Eightfold Path, a cultivation of the mind which is said to lead to awakening, and full liberation through observance of Buddhist meditation practices as well as ethical precepts.



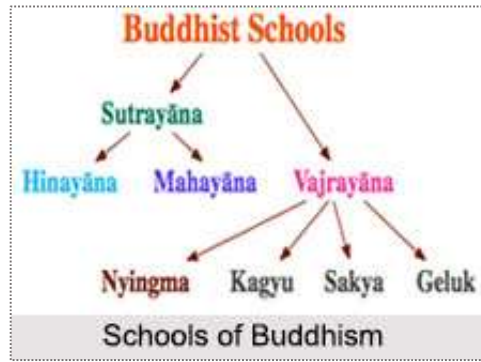
The **schools of Buddhism** are separated in various institutional as well as doctrinal divisions that have existed from ancient times until up to the present.

They all vary in their interpretation of the paths to liberation as well as the relative importance, and “canonicity” assigned to various Buddhist texts, and their specific teachings, and practices.

Two major extant branches of Buddhism are generally recognized by scholars:

- The Theravada tradition (School of the Elders) emphasizes the attainment of nirvana as a means of transcending the individual self, and ending the cycle of death, and rebirth (samsara).

- The Mahayana tradition (Great Vehicle) emphasizes the Bodhisattva ideal, in which one works for the liberation of all sentient beings.
- Additionally, the Vajrayana (Indestructible Vehicle), a body of teachings incorporating esoteric tantric techniques, may be viewed as a separate branch or tradition within Mahayana.



The **Buddhist canon** is a vast collection of scriptures with many texts written in languages such as Sanskrit, Pali, Tibetan, and Chinese. The Theravada branch has a widespread following in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. The Mahayana branch – which includes the traditions of Zen, Pure Land, Nichiren, Tiantai, Tendai, and Shingon – is predominantly practised in Nepal, Bhutan, China, Malaysia, Vietnam, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan. Tibetan Buddhism, which preserves the Vajrayana Teachings of eighth-century India, is practised in the Himalayan states, Mongolia, and Russian Kalmykia. Historically, until the early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium, Buddhism was widely practiced in the Indian subcontinent. It also had a foothold to some extent in Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

