

# Buddhism

## Basic Facts

### Founded

About 530 BC, when the original Buddha achieved enlightenment and began making disciples

### Key Figures

**Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama):** “Buddha” literally means “enlightened one,” and many Buddhist figures have been given the title. However, the original Buddha was a Hindu prince born about 563 BC. He achieved enlightenment in his mid-30’s and became the first teacher of the new religion. Today, some Buddhists regard him as a great teacher, some Buddhists (especially in rural areas) worship him, and some regard him as only one of a number of more important Buddhas.

**Asoka** (304 BC - 232 BC): An Indian emperor who converted to Buddhism as an adult and sent Buddhist missionaries throughout Asia and perhaps as far as Europe.

**Dalai Lama (Tenzen Gyatso):** The exiled leader of Tibetan Buddhism. Gyatso is the 14th Dalai Lama; Tibetan Buddhists believe that each one is the reincarnation of the previous Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama is the most visible representative of Buddhism in the West.

**Maitreya:** Sometimes called the “Laughing Buddha.” Not a historical figure, but a future Buddha expected by many Buddhists who will bring the whole world to enlightenment. Because of reincarnation, Maitreya currently exists, but has not yet been incarnated in his Buddha form.

### Geography

Primarily Asia: China, Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, South Korea, Myanmar, Cambodia

### Adherents

About 350 million, with 1 to 1.5 million in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

## Basic Beliefs

Buddhists believe in the same basic cosmos as Hindus - human beings are reincarnated, and the goal of life is to escape the cycle of reincarnation - but Buddhist approaches differ significantly.

### Four Noble Truths

Buddha’s central insight, from which everything else flows. The Four Noble Truths are:

**The Truth of Suffering:** All living beings are subject to suffering and impermanence.

**The Truth of the Cause of Suffering:** The cause of suffering is desire for selfish gratification and possessions.

**The Truth of the End of Suffering:** Suffering ceases when desire ceases. At this point, one attains *nirvana*.

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<sup>1</sup> In many Asian countries (esp. China and Japan), “Buddhists” may practice a blend of several religions, including Buddhism, with “Buddhism” used as a label for convenience when speaking to Westerners.

**The Truth of the Path Leading to the End of Suffering:** One must avoid the extremes of indulgence on one hand and asceticism on the other (“The Middle Way”) by means of the Eightfold Path.<sup>2</sup>

### The Eightfold Path

The Eightfold Path is not a linear series of steps, but rather a complete lifestyle.

Right Belief	Right Livelihood (i.e. Monk)
Right Intention	Right Effort
Right Speech	Right Meditation
Right Action	Right Concentration

## Schools of Buddhism

While some consider Theravada to be the oldest and “purest” form of Buddhism, as in Christianity, all schools of Buddhism claim to be descended from the Buddha’s original teaching.

**Theravada:** “The Way of the Elders.” Nontheistic, it does not believe in a personal god. Only monks can achieve nirvana, and the role of the laity is to support the monks and practice basic fidelity to Buddha’s teachings. Buddha is considered to be a great teacher but, in theory, Theravada Buddhists are not supposed to pray to him or worship him.

**Mahayana:** “Great Vehicle” or “Big Raft.” More inclusive than Theravada, Mahayana also includes more Buddhas and more scriptures than Theravada. Mahayana features *bodhisattvas*, Buddhas who have achieved enlightenment but have not entered nirvana yet, in order to guide others to enlightenment. All other schools of Buddhism are considered forms of Mahayana.

**Pure Land:** Focuses on Amitabha, a *bodhisattva* known as Amida in Japan. Those who trust in Amitabha and show their thankfulness to him will be rewarded with life in the “Pure Land,” a heavenly region, after they die. Once in the Pure Land, *nirvana* is easy to reach, because you are free from suffering and able to spend your time in meditation. This is one of the most popular forms of Buddhism.

**Zen:** Zen Buddhism teaches that enlightenment is available to anyone, but that you must break free of rational thought in order to achieve it. Zen focuses on master-disciple relationships, daily meditation, and resources like *koans* (“What is the sound of one hand clapping?”) that move the mind past rational thought.

**Tibetan (Vajrayana, “Diamond Vehicle”):** Well known because of the Dalai Lama, Tibetan Buddhism blends Buddhism with Tantric Hinduism and a native Tibetan religion called Bon. Tibetan Buddhists practice meditation, but also use magic and ornate rituals to achieve nirvana. Lamas - monastic leaders - are central in this school, and are considered the incarnations of various *bodhisattvas*.

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from D. G. Burnett, “Buddhism (Theravada),” in *Dictionary of Contemporary Religion in the Western World*.