

What is Buddhism?

Buddhism is a nontheistic religion or philosophy (Sanskrit: dharma; Pali: dhamma) that encompasses a variety of traditions, beliefs and spiritual practices largely based on teachings attributed to Gautama Buddha, commonly known as the Buddha ("the awakened one"). According to Buddhist tradition, the Buddha lived and taught in the northeastern part of the Indian subcontinent around the 5th century BCE. He is recognized by Buddhists as an awakened or enlightened teacher who shared his insights to help sentient beings put an end to suffering through the elimination of ignorance and craving.

Two major branches of Buddhism are generally recognized by scholars:

1. **Theravada Buddhism** ("The Teaching of the Elders") is followed mainly in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. In Theravada Buddhism, the ultimate goal is the attainment of Nirvana (Pali: Nibbana), or freedom from suffering, achieved by practicing the Noble Eightfold Path (a.k.a. the Middle Way), thus escaping what is seen as a cycle of suffering and rebirth.
2. **Mahayana Buddhism** ("The Great Vehicle") is found throughout East Asia and includes the traditions of Pure Land, Zen, Nichiren Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism (a.k.a. Vajrayana - "Diamond Vehicle"), Shingon, and Tiantai (Tendai). Mahayana Buddhists aspire to Buddhahood via the bodhisattva path, a state wherein one remains in the cycle of suffering and rebirth to help other beings reach awakening.

The foundations of Buddhist tradition and practice are the Three Jewels:

1. **The Buddha** – One who attains enlightenment by oneself, then teaches others to become enlightened;
2. **The Dharma** – the theory and practice taught by a self-enlightened Buddha; and
3. **The Sangha** – the community who attained enlightenment following the teachings of Buddha.

Taking "refuge" in the triple gem has traditionally been recognized as a declaration and commitment to being on the Buddhist path, and in general distinguishes a Buddhist from a non-Buddhist. Beyond this, Buddhist traditions generally incorporate some or all of the following practices:

- **Following ethical precepts** – a set of general ethical rules to be followed as a support for spiritual practice: abstention from killing, stealing, cheating, lying, and drugs and alcohol.
- **Renouncing conventional living and becoming a monastic** – an optional path for those wishing to dedicate their lives to Buddhist practice by donning robes and following the example of the Buddha.
- **The development of mindfulness and practice of meditation** – the practice of mental development as a means of freeing oneself from mental defilement and being of benefit both to oneself and others.
- **Cultivation of higher wisdom and discernment** – the ultimate goal of mental development, generally seen as necessary for true spiritual enlightenment.
- **Study of scriptures** – generally distinguished from true wisdom but still held as important for purposes of learning to differentiate between right and wrong practice and development.
- **Devotional practices** – non-theistic objects of devotion include the Buddha, past enlightened followers of the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, angels, gods, and living spiritual teachers.
- **Ceremonies** – common physical and verbal rituals used to focus the mind include: mantra and scriptural recitation; lighting flowers, candles, and incense; bowing; circumambulating objects of reverence; etc.