

# BUDDHISM

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## BUDDHISM

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Religion, Philosophy, Ethics, Cognitive Science

### 1. Core Definition and Nature

Buddhism is one of the world's major religions and philosophical traditions, originating in ancient India with the teachings of **Siddhartha Gautama**, who became known as the Buddha. Often characterized as a nontheistic religion, Buddhism is fundamentally concerned with individual spiritual transformation and ethical conduct, placing less emphasis on the worship of a creator deity. It is profoundly psychological in its approach, defining itself more as a rigorous methodology or "way of life" aimed at understanding the nature of reality and the human condition.

The central pursuit within all schools of Buddhism is the attainment of **enlightenment**--a profound state of insight that liberates the individual from suffering. This liberation is achieved through mental discipline, moral purity, and meditative practice, culminating in the realization of **Nirvana**. Nirvana is the cessation of craving, attachment, and the delusions that fuel the cycle of suffering and rebirth, known as **Samsara**. The philosophy emphasizes that suffering is inherent to existence, but it is not inevitable, provided one follows the prescribed path of right conduct and wisdom.

Unlike many Abrahamic traditions, Buddhism operates on the concept of individual consciousness and personal responsibility for one's spiritual fate. The Buddha is regarded not as a god, but as an exemplary teacher who discovered the true path and provided the framework for others to follow it independently. The core teachings provide a framework for ethical living and psychological self-mastery, making it a system of thought that spans religious doctrine, psychological theory, and practical ethics.

### 2. Origins and the Figure of the Buddha

Buddhism traces its origins to Siddhartha Gautama, a prince born in approximately the 6th century BCE in Lumbini (present-day Nepal). According to traditional accounts, Siddhartha lived a life of luxury and isolation, sheltered from the world's harsh realities. Upon encountering the "Four Sights"--an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and an ascetic monk--he realized the pervasive nature of suffering (Dukkha) inherent in human existence. This realization prompted him to renounce his privileged life at the age of 29 to seek a deeper understanding of suffering and the means to transcend it.

For several years, Siddhartha pursued various ascetic practices, nearly starving himself, but found that extreme austerity did not lead to the desired liberation. He subsequently adopted the Middle Way, avoiding both the extremes of sensual indulgence and severe self-mortification. After meditating for a prolonged period under a Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya, he attained complete and

perfect insight, realizing the nature of dependent origination and the solution to suffering. At this moment, he became the **Buddha**, which translates literally as "the Awakened One" or "the Enlightened One."

Following his enlightenment, the Buddha spent the remaining 45 years of his life traveling throughout the Ganges valley, teaching the Dharma (the cosmic law and order, exemplified by his teachings). His first sermon, delivered in Sarnath, outlined the fundamental principles that would form the bedrock of the Buddhist tradition: the **Four Noble Truths** and the **Noble Eightfold Path**. These teachings were preserved initially through oral tradition and later codified into the vast scriptural canon known as the Tripitaka (Three Baskets).

### 3. The Four Noble Truths (Cattari Ariya Saccani)

The Four Noble Truths form the analytical core of Buddhist doctrine, often likened to a medical diagnosis: recognizing the illness, identifying its cause, confirming that a cure exists, and providing the prescription. Understanding these truths is prerequisite to embarking on the path to liberation.

The **First Noble Truth** (Dukkha Sacca) asserts that life is characterized by suffering, dissatisfaction, or unease. This suffering is not merely physical pain but encompasses mental distress, anxiety, frustration, and the inherent unsatisfactoriness of transient existence, including the pain of separation from what is loved and association with what is disliked. This truth establishes the fundamental problem the Dharma seeks to solve.

The **Second Noble Truth** (Samudaya Sacca) identifies the origin or cause of suffering (Dukkha). The cause is rooted in craving (tanha), which includes sensual craving, craving for existence (or permanence), and craving for non-existence (or annihilation). This craving is inextricably linked to ignorance (avijja)--the failure to see things as they truly are, particularly the impermanence of all phenomena (anicca) and the lack of a permanent self (anatta).

The **Third Noble Truth** (Nirodha Sacca) is the truth of the cessation of suffering. It affirms that because suffering arises from craving, suffering can be completely overcome by eliminating that craving. The complete extinction of craving and attachment leads directly to **Nirvana**--a state of profound peace, freedom, and radical non-attachment that transcends the limitations of conventional experience.

The **Fourth Noble Truth** (Magga Sacca) provides the practical means to achieve the cessation of suffering. This path, known as the **Middle Way**, is formalized as the **Noble Eightfold Path**. It represents the comprehensive prescription for leading a life that gradually dismantles craving and leads to enlightenment. It serves as the ethical, mental, and wisdom-based foundation of the Buddhist practice.

## 4. The Noble Eightfold Path (Ariya Atthangika Magga)

The Noble Eightfold Path is the practical training regimen that guides practitioners away from the extremes of indulgence and asceticism toward the Middle Way. It is traditionally categorized into three divisions: Wisdom (Prajna), Ethical Conduct (Sila), and Mental Development (Samadhi). The path is not meant to be followed sequentially, but rather practiced simultaneously, with the components reinforcing one another. This holistic approach ensures that spiritual insight is grounded in ethical integrity and supported by mental clarity.

The Wisdom division comprises the first two steps: Right View and Right Intention. **Right View** (Samma Ditthi) is the correct understanding of the Four Noble Truths and the acceptance of the Buddhist worldview, particularly concerning karma and rebirth. **Right Intention** (Samma Sankappa) involves cultivating pure motivations free from lust, ill-will, and harmfulness, aligning one's aims with kindness and wisdom.

The Ethical Conduct division includes three steps that govern physical and verbal actions: **Right Speech** (Samma Vaca), which means abstaining from lying, divisive speech, harsh language, and idle chatter; **Right Action** (Samma Kammanta), which involves refraining from harming sentient beings (the principle of non-violence, or ahimsa), stealing, and sexual misconduct; and **Right Livelihood** (Samma Ajiva), which dictates that one must earn a living in a way that does not cause harm to others, such as avoiding trades involving weapons, slavery, or the sale of intoxicants.

The Mental Development division focuses on cultivating mental clarity and concentration: **Right Effort** (Samma Vayama) involves actively preventing unwholesome states of mind from arising, abandoning those that have arisen, and cultivating and sustaining wholesome states; **Right Mindfulness** (Samma Sati) is the sustained awareness of the present moment, encompassing the body, feelings, mind, and mental objects; and **Right Concentration** (Samma Samadhi) is the practice of meditation that leads to single-pointed focus and the deep absorption states known as the jhanas, essential for generating profound insight.

The Eightfold Path Components:

- Right View (Wisdom)
- Right Intention (Wisdom)
- Right Speech (Ethical Conduct)
- Right Action (Ethical Conduct)
- Right Livelihood (Ethical Conduct)
- Right Effort (Mental Development)
- Right Mindfulness (Mental Development)
- Right Concentration (Mental Development)

## 5. Key Concepts: Karma, Samsara, and Nirvana

Central to the Buddhist worldview are the interconnected doctrines of **Karma**, **Samsara**, and **Nirvana**, which explain the mechanisms of suffering, existence, and liberation. Karma, derived from the Sanskrit word for "action," refers specifically to volitional actions--deeds, words, and thoughts driven by intention. Unlike a deterministic fate, Buddhist karma is a natural law of moral causality; wholesome intentions lead to positive outcomes, and unwholesome intentions lead to suffering. The primary forces that drive negative karma are the "Three Poisons": greed (raga), hatred (dvesha), and delusion (moha).

Karma perpetuates the cycle of **Samsara**, the relentless cycle of death, rebirth, and redeath. Samsara is characterized by continuous suffering (Dukkha) because all realms of existence--from the lowest hells to the highest heavens--are impermanent and unsatisfactory. Rebirth is not viewed as the transmigration of a fixed soul, as Buddhism rejects the concept of a permanent self (anatta). Instead, it is the continuity of consciousness or the karmic energy imprint that moves from one existence to the next, much like a flame lighting another candle.

The ultimate goal, **Nirvana** (or Nibbana in Pali), is the definitive escape from Samsara. Nirvana is not a heaven or a physical paradise but rather a profound, transformative state characterized by the absence of craving and suffering. It is the extinguishing (literally, "blowing out") of the fires of the Three Poisons. Achieving Nirvana means realizing the ultimate nature of reality--impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and non-self (anatta)--and thereby achieving permanent liberation from the constraints of conditioned existence. This state represents the ultimate fulfillment of the Buddhist path.

## 6. Major Branches and Historical Development

Following the death of the Buddha around 483 BCE, the monastic community (Sangha) gradually developed diverse interpretations and practices, leading to the formation of distinct schools. Today, the tradition is broadly classified into three main vehicles, or Yanas, which account for the majority of practitioners globally.

**Theravada** (The School of the Elders) is the oldest surviving branch and is dominant in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos. Theravada holds closely to the original teachings preserved in the Pali Canon (Tripitaka) and emphasizes the role of the monastic community. The ideal practitioner is the **Arahant**--one who has achieved Nirvana for himself, eliminating all defilements. This tradition focuses intensely on meditative insight and rigorous adherence to monastic discipline.

**Mahayana** (The Great Vehicle) emerged later and expanded Buddhism throughout East Asia, including China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Mahayana introduced new scriptures (Sutras) and a

shift in emphasis. The ideal Mahayana practitioner is the **Bodhisattva**--an enlightened being who vows to postpone their own entry into Nirvana until all sentient beings are liberated. This branch emphasizes compassion (karuna) alongside wisdom (prajna). A significant school within Mahayana, directly referenced in the source content, is **Zen Buddhism**, which originated in China (as Chan) and spread to Japan. Zen emphasizes direct experience, intuitive understanding, and rigorous meditation (zazen), often utilizing paradoxes (koans) to transcend rational thought.

**Vajrayana** (The Diamond Vehicle or Thunderbolt Vehicle) is often seen as an extension of Mahayana, dominant in Tibet, Bhutan, Mongolia, and parts of the Himalayan region. Vajrayana incorporates esoteric practices, complex rituals, mantras, mudras, and visualization techniques, aiming to achieve enlightenment rapidly within a single lifetime. It is often characterized by the guidance of highly realized spiritual teachers (lamas) and utilizes sophisticated psycho-physical methods to transform negative mental states into wisdom.

## 7. Contemporary Significance and Impact

Buddhism maintains immense significance globally, both as a living religious tradition with hundreds of millions of followers and as a powerful philosophical system influencing modern ethics, psychology, and cognitive science. The focus on individual experience, self-awareness, and the non-existence of a fixed, permanent self has resonated deeply with Western philosophical and scientific inquiry.

In the West, Buddhist concepts, particularly **Mindfulness** (Sati), have been widely secularized and integrated into therapeutic frameworks, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and various cognitive behavioral therapies. These applications utilize Buddhist techniques to enhance emotional regulation, reduce anxiety, and improve focus, demonstrating the practical psychological efficacy of the ancient teachings without necessarily requiring adherence to the religious dogma. The emphasis on ethical conduct, non-violence, and ecological harmony also provides a compelling moral framework for addressing contemporary global challenges.

Furthermore, Buddhist meditative practices have become subjects of extensive neuroscientific research. Studies utilizing brain imaging have shown that long-term meditation can lead to measurable changes in brain structure and function, particularly in areas related to attention, compassion, and emotional processing, lending empirical support to the traditional claims regarding the transformative power of the practice. Thus, Buddhism continues to offer a complex and sophisticated understanding of consciousness and the human mind that remains relevant to spiritual seekers and scientific researchers alike.

## Further Reading

[Buddhism \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Philosophy \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Psychology \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Sociology \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Dukkha \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Yana \(Vehicles of Buddhism\) \(Wikipedia\)](#)

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