

The Essentials of Buddhism

Beginnings:

- In the 5th century (perhaps) BCE, **Siddhartha Gautama** left his home in Nepal to pursue the relief of suffering in India. According to legend, he first pursued worldly pleasure and, failing to find release in that path, became a wandering ascetic. He learned Hindu meditation techniques from various teachers. He achieved **enlightenment** meditating under a ficus tree, now known as the Bodhi Tree, in Bodh Gaya, and was given the title of **Buddha** (“enlightened one”) by his followers. He spent the rest of his life teaching the **dharma** or path that he had found to achieve liberation from suffering (**nirvana**). The Buddha called it the **Middle Way**, as a path between worldly engagement and rigid asceticism. Gautama Buddha, as he became known, organized his followers into a sangha, a monastic order; the monastic structure remains central to all forms of Buddhism, though the Mahayana branch early on came to see it as only one possible structure for the path to nirvana.



Central teachings and practices:

- The **Four Noble Truths**:
 - There is suffering
 - Suffering is caused by attachment
 - The cessation of suffering is attainable through detachment
 - The Eightfold Path is the way to end attachment, and end suffering
- The **Eightfold Path** (or, the Middle Way):
 - Wisdom
 - Right understanding/view: a true grasp of the Buddha’s teachings
 - Right thought/resolve: renunciation of attachments
 - Ethics/Moral virtue
 - Right speech: no lying or divisive talking about others

- Right action: no killing, stealing, or sexual misconduct
 - Right livelihood: earn by benefiting others
- Meditation:
 - Right effort: point will and self in right direction
 - Right mindfulness: constant awareness, focus on teachings
 - Right concentration: practice of meditation stages

The main branches of Buddhism:

- There are about 535 million Buddhists in the world (8% of the population); half of them live in China, while Thailand has the next largest number (64 million). Most of the rest live in Japan, Korea, and the rest of Southeast Asia. Though Buddhism began in India, today there are only about 9 million adherents there - less than 1% of the population. There are roughly 3.5 million Buddhists in the United States.
- **Mahayana** - the Great Vehicle (wide path): emphasizes that the way to enlightenment and nirvana is available to all, through the merit of Buddhas and bodhisattvas as well as monasticism; some primary sects/versions are Pure Land (Japan and China), Yogacara (China, Japan, Korea), Zen, and Tibetan Buddhism
- **Theravada** - the way of the elders: those who believe they are following the original version of Buddhism in which monasticism is essential and senior monks hold primary authority - this version comes from Sri Lanka and holds sway throughout southeast Asia
- **Vajrayana** or Tantrayana - the vehicle of ritual: highly technical rituals (tantra) are the way to enlightenment - can be seen as an offshoot of Mahayana; the lines often are blurry