

# What is Theravada Buddhism?

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Note: "Theravada" is pronounced (more or less, in American English) like "terra vodda." The "th" sound in Pali is not like the "th" in "thick"; it's pronounced more like the "th" combination in "hothouse".

## The "Doctrine of the Elders"

Theravada (Pali: *thera* "elders" + *vada* "word, doctrine"), the "Doctrine of the Elders," is the name for the school of Buddhism that draws its scriptural inspiration from the Pali Canon, or Tipitaka, which scholars generally accept as the oldest record of the Buddha's teachings. For many centuries, Theravada has been the predominant religion of Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand; today Theravada Buddhists number over 100 million worldwide. In recent decades Theravada has begun to take root in the West -- primarily in Europe and the USA.

## The many names of Theravada

Theravada Buddhism goes by many names. The Buddha himself called the religion he founded Dhamma-vinaya, "the doctrine and discipline," in reference to the two fundamental aspects of the system of ethical and spiritual training he taught. Owing to its historical dominance in southern Asia (Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Burma), Theravada is also identified as "Southern Buddhism," in contrast to "Northern Buddhism," which migrated northwards from India into China, Tibet, Japan, and Korea. Theravada is often equated with "Hinayana" (the "Lesser Vehicle"), in contrast to "Mahayana" (the "Greater Vehicle"), which is usually a synonym for Tibetan Buddhism, Zen, Ch'an, and other expressions of Northern Buddhism. The use of "Hinayana" as a pejorative has its origins in the early schisms within the monastic community that ultimately led to the emergence of what would later become Mahayana. Today scholars of many persuasions use the term "Hinayana" without pejorative intent.

## Pali: the language of Theravada

The language of the Theravada canonical texts is Pali, a relative of Magadhi, a language probably spoken in central India during the Buddha's time. Most of the sermons the Buddha delivered were memorized by Ven. Ananda, the Buddha's cousin and close personal attendant. Shortly after the Buddha's death (ca. 480

BCE), the community of monks -- including Ananda -- convened to recite all the sermons they had heard during the Buddha's forty-five years of teaching. Each recorded sermon (sutta) therefore begins with the disclaimer, Evam me sutam -- "Thus have I heard." The teachings were passed down within the monastic community following a well-established oral tradition. By about 100 BCE the Tipitaka was first fixed in writing in Sri Lanka by Sinhala scribe-monks.

Of course, it can never be proved that the Pali Canon contains the actual words uttered by the historical Buddha (and there is ample evidence to suggest that much of the Canon does not). The wisdom the Canon contains has nevertheless served for centuries as an indispensable guide for millions of followers in their quest for Awakening.

Many students of Theravada find that learning the Pali language -- even just a little bit here and there -- greatly deepens their understanding of the path of practice.

### [A brief summary of the Buddha's teachings](#)

What follows is a brief synopsis of some of the key teachings of Theravada Buddhism. I've left out a great deal, but I hope that even this rough outline will be enough to get you started in your exploration.

Shortly after his Awakening, the Buddha ("the Awakened One") delivered his first sermon, in which he laid out the essential framework upon which all his later teachings were based. This framework consists of the Four Noble Truths, four fundamental principles of nature (Dhamma) that emerged from the Buddha's honest and penetrating assessment of the human condition and that serve to define the entire scope of Buddhist practice. These truths are not statements of belief. Rather, they are categories by which we can frame our direct experience in a way that is conducive to Awakening:

1. Dukkha: suffering, unsatisfactoriness, discontent, stress;
2. The cause of dukkha: the cause of this dissatisfaction is craving (tanha) for sensuality, for states of becoming, and states of no becoming;
3. The cessation of dukkha: the relinquishment of that craving;
4. The path of practice leading to the cessation of dukkha: the Noble Eightfold Path of right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

To each of these Noble Truths the Buddha assigned a specific task which the practitioner is to carry out: the first Noble Truth is to be comprehended; the second is to be abandoned; the third is to be realized; the fourth is to be developed. The full realization of the third Noble Truth paves the way for the direct penetration of Nibbana (Sanskrit: Nirvana), the transcendent freedom that stands as the final goal of all the Buddha's teachings.

The last of the Noble Truths -- the Noble Eightfold Path -- contains a prescription for the relief of our unhappiness and for our eventual release, once and for all, from the painful and wearisome cycle of birth and death (samsara) to which -- through our own ignorance (avijja) of the Four Noble Truths -- we have been bound for countless aeons. The Noble Eightfold Path offers a comprehensive practical guide to the development of those wholesome qualities and skills in the human heart that must be cultivated in order to bring the practitioner to the final goal, the supreme freedom and happiness of Nibbana. In practice, the Buddha taught the Noble Eightfold Path to his followers according to a "gradual" system of training, beginning with the development of sila, or virtue (right speech, right action, and right livelihood, which are summarized in practical form by the five precepts), followed by the development of samadhi, or concentration and mental cultivation (right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration), culminating in the full development of paññā, or wisdom (right view and right resolve). The practice of dana (generosity) serves as a support at every step along the path, as it can help erode the heart's habitual tendencies towards craving and as it can teach valuable lessons about the causes and results of one's actions (kamma).

Progress along the path does not follow a simple linear trajectory. Rather, development of each aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path encourages the refinement and strengthening of the others, leading the practitioner ever forward in an upward spiral of spiritual maturity that culminates in Awakening.

Seen from another point of view, the long journey on the path to Awakening begins in earnest with the first tentative stirrings of right view, the first flickerings of wisdom by which one recognizes both the validity of the first Noble Truth and the inevitability of the law of kamma (Sanskrit: karma), the universal law of cause and effect. Once one begins to see that harmful actions inevitably bring about harmful results, and wholesome actions ultimately bring about wholesome results, the desire naturally grows to live a skillful, morally upright life, to take seriously the practice of sila. The confidence built from this preliminary understanding inclines the follower to place an even greater trust in the teachings. The follower becomes a "Buddhist" upon expressing an inner resolve to "take refuge" in the Triple Gem: the Buddha (both the historical Buddha and one's own innate potential for Awakening), the Dhamma (both the teachings of the historical Buddha and the ultimate Truth towards which they point), and the Sangha (both the monastic community that has protected the

teachings and put them into practice since the Buddha's day, and all those who have achieved at least some degree of Awakening). With one's feet thus firmly planted on the ground by taking refuge, and with the help of an admirable friend (kalyanamitta) to help show the way, one can set out along the Path, confident that one is indeed following in the footsteps left by the Buddha himself.

Buddhism is sometimes na&iuml;vely criticized as a "negative" or "pessimistic" religion and philosophy. After all (so the argument goes) life is not all misery and disappointment: it offers many kinds of joy and happiness. Why then this pessimistic Buddhist obsession with unsatisfactoriness and suffering?

The Buddha based his teachings on a frank assessment of our plight as humans: there is unsatisfactoriness and suffering in the world. No one can argue this fact. Were the Buddha's teachings to stop there, we might indeed regard them as pessimistic and life as utterly hopeless. But, like a doctor who prescribes a remedy for an illness, the Buddha offers hope (the third Noble Truth) and a cure (the fourth). The Buddha's teachings thus give cause for an extraordinary degree of optimism in a complex, confusing, and difficult world. One modern teacher summed it up well: "Buddhism is the serious pursuit of happiness."

The Buddha claimed that the Awakening he re-discovered is accessible to anyone willing to put forth the effort and commitment required to pursue the Noble Eightfold Path to its end. It is up to each of us individually to put that claim to the test.

### [Theravada comes West](#)

Until the late 19th century, the teachings of Theravada were little known outside of Southern and Southeast Asia, where they had flourished for some two and one-half millennia. In the last century, however, the West has begun to take notice of Theravada's unique spiritual legacy and teachings of Awakening. In recent decades, this interest has swelled, with the monastic Sangha from the various schools within Theravada establishing dozens of monasteries across Europe and North America. In addition, a growing number of lay meditation centers in the West, operating independently of the Sangha, currently strain to meet the demands of lay men and women -- Buddhist and otherwise -- seeking to learn selected aspects of the Buddha's teachings.

The turn of the 21st century presents both opportunities and dangers for Theravada in the West: Will the Buddha's teachings be patiently studied and put into practice, so that they may be allowed to establish deep roots in Western soil, for the benefit of many generations to come? Will the current popular climate of "openness" and cross-fertilization between spiritual traditions lead to the emergence of a strong new form of Buddhist practice unique to the modern era,

or will it simply lead to the dilution and confusion of these priceless teachings? These are open questions; only time will tell.

Fortunately, the Buddha left us with some very clear and simple guidelines to help us find our way through the perplexing maze of purportedly "Buddhist" teachings that are available to us today. Whenever you find yourself questioning the authenticity of a particular teaching, heed well the Buddha's advice to his stepmother:

The qualities of which you may know, 'These qualities lead to passion, not to dispassion; to being fettered, not to being unfettered; to accumulating, not to shedding; to self-aggrandizement, not to modesty; to discontent, not to contentment; to entanglement, not to seclusion; to laziness, not to aroused persistence; to being burdensome, not to being unburdensome': You may definitely hold, 'This is not the Dhamma, this is not the Vinaya, this is not the Teacher's instruction.'

As for the qualities of which you may know, 'These qualities lead to dispassion, not to passion; to being unfettered, not to being fettered; to shedding, not to accumulating; to modesty, not to self-aggrandizement; to contentment, not to discontent; to seclusion, not to entanglement; to aroused persistence, not to laziness; to being unburdensome, not to being burdensome': You may definitely hold, 'This is the Dhamma, this is the Vinaya, this is the Teacher's instruction.' -- AN VIII.53

The truest test of these teachings, of course, is whether they yield the promised results in the crucible of your own heart. The Buddha presented us with a challenge; it is up to each of us individually to put that challenge to the test.

<https://www.budsas.org/ebud/ebdha143.htm>