

Buddhism

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson will give you an overview of the main principles of Buddhism. It will also look at the different schools of Buddhism and how they differ. You will see how these schools are distributed. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. History of Buddhism
2. Main Doctrines
3. Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism
4. Doctrine of Dependent Origination
5. Distribution

1. History of Buddhism

Unlike some of the other Eastern religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism does have a founder. His name is the Buddha. It's a Sanskrit word that means "enlightened one" or "awakened." He was also given the name Shakyamuni Buddha or Sakyamuni Buddha. His birth name was Siddhartha Gautama, and he was born in the fifth century before the Common Era into relative comfort and protection from the world around him.

His father made sure that he didn't go outside the palace gates. When he was older and finally did, he discovered that there was great suffering and injustice in the world, and he was committed to understanding why. When he finally attained enlightenment and understanding, he developed a following. Followers along the way of the Buddha are called Buddhists.

2. Main Doctrines

Buddhists reflect on the teachings of the Four Noble Truths:

- Life is suffering, or dukkha.
- Suffering is caused by various attachments and cravings, which are guided by ignorance.

- Release from suffering is possible.
- The truth out of the way of suffering is attainable.

The Buddha was a teacher who taught that enlightenment was possible to attain in this life. He taught through his actions, his words, his silence, and his presence. The principal commitments of a Buddhist are known as the three jewels: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, meaning “community.” These commitments, along with the Four Noble Truths, help keep one on the path toward ultimate release from suffering. This is a state or a condition of being or a state of consciousness that is known as nirvana.

The Three Jewels of Buddhism include:

- Buddhāṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi (I go to the Buddha for refuge.)
- Dhammāṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi (I go to the Dharma for refuge.)
- Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi (I go to the Sangha for refuge.)

The other central elements of Buddhist teaching are called the Five Precepts. They are:

- Do not take life
- Do not steal
- Do not overindulge in sensual or sexual pleasure
- Do not lie
- Do not abuse the mind with intoxicating substances.

3. Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism

Buddhism originated on the Indian subcontinent with the life and the wisdom teachings of the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. It quickly spread in all directions, and in the process, it took on different forms. There are two major schools of Buddhism: Theravada and Mahayana

The Mahayana school emerged in the second century of the Common Era and is generally referred to as the “greater vehicle.” Theravada is often called Hinayana by Mahayana Buddhists and means “lesser vehicle.” This can sometimes be a derogatory reference, but it’s also a way of distinguishing the two in terms of how the teachings of the Buddha might be applied toward the goal of maximum enlightenment for the greatest number of people.

There was a concern that Buddhism was becoming too academic and scholarly, making it inaccessible to the common folk. In response, many of the Theravada Buddhist scriptures were rewritten to reflect the teachings in a light that many felt would shine more broadly, making Buddhism more accessible. Among other changes, five precepts were added to the list you just saw.

The devotional aspects of Buddhism are more emphasized in the Mahayana tradition. While most Mahayana schools, like their Theravada predecessors, use the term “Buddha” to refer to the historical man who became **enlightened**, they also understood Buddha in a cosmic sense as a divine being, receptive and responsive to devotional activities such as prayer and worship.

In connection with this, many Mahayanas believe all beings to possess Buddha nature, a state of pure being and perfection that is merely clouded in illusion. However, this Buddhahood and the devotional elements are more of a cosmic principle and archetype of being and not a deity as it is sometimes understood more generally under the concept of supernatural.

This is the general orientation among all Buddhist schools, Theravada and Mahayana combined, and it is considered a type of **non-theism**. It has no single god in the way of the monotheistic god, the deities of the West.



TERMS TO KNOW

Enlightened

Wise; deeply insightful; divinely inspired.

Non-theism

Generally, the belief either that God does not exist or that the question of existence of God or gods is not relevant to human existence, including religion.

4. Doctrine of Dependent Origination

One of the major innovations that came with the emergence of Mahayana Buddhism had to do with the doctrine of what is called dependent origination. This is the idea that everything is in some way dependent upon something else, and is, therefore, essentially empty of self.

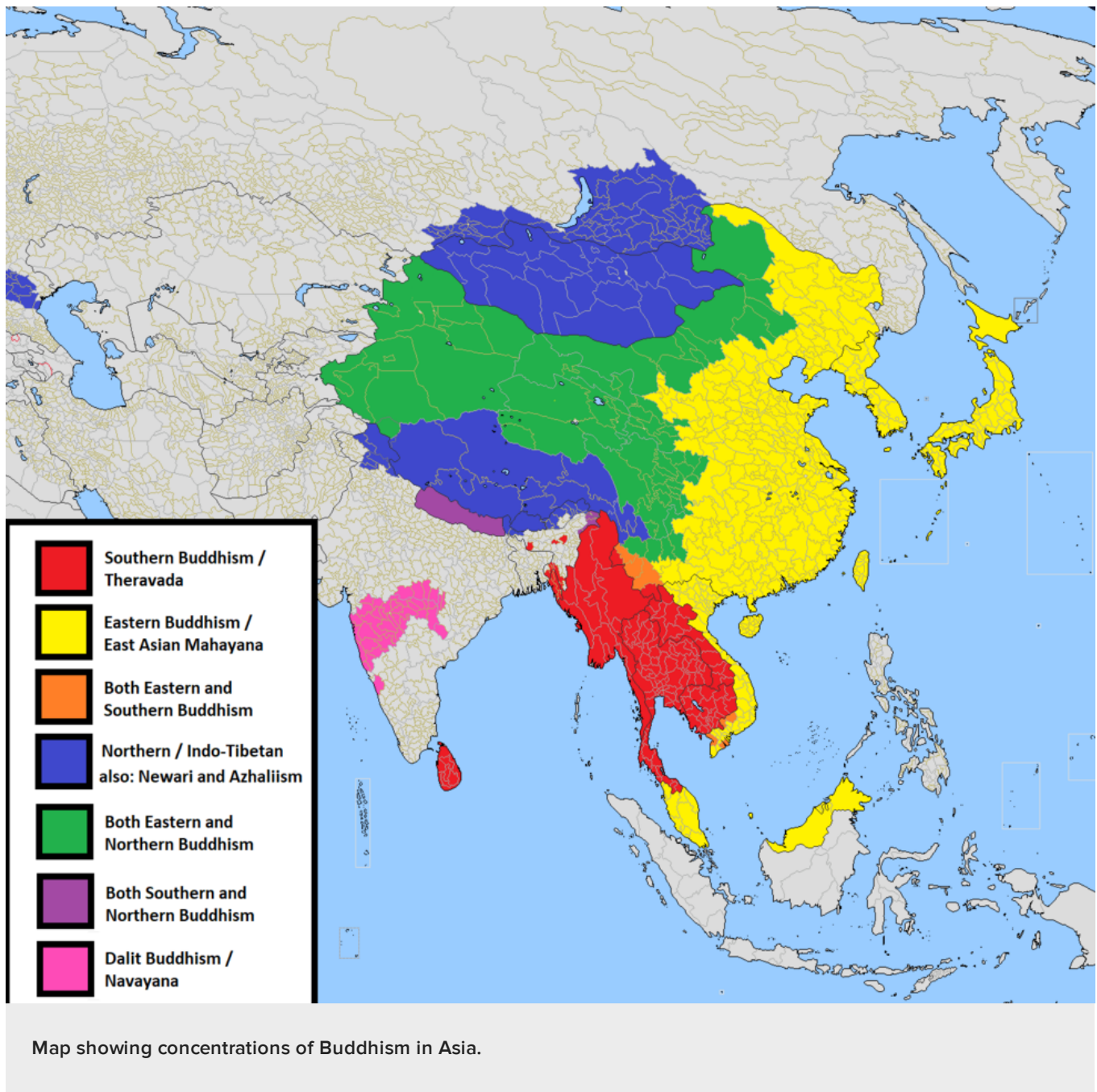
Mahayanas applied greater emphasis to this aspect of emptiness, or Sunyata. The practical effect of this was to apply the concept of emptiness, itself also empty, as a tool to free oneself from the habit of attaching ultimacy, fixity, or truth to all other aspects of reality, including most concepts, fears, desires, et cetera.

Emptiness, or Sunyata, is a central feature of many of the Mahayana schools, including Chan Buddhism, which emerged in China in the sixth century of the Common Era. This later spread south and east reaching Japan, where it was called Zen. Zen is a term that means “meditation” or “meditative state,” an essential element that supports the Buddhist along his or her path.

5. Distribution

The map below gives you a look at the strongest concentrations of Buddhist practitioners in the East and Asia. You see that Theravada Buddhism is dominant in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Burma. The language of the scriptures that are used in Theravada Buddhism is generally Sanskrit or Pali.

Mahayana Buddhism is concentrated mostly in China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Vietnam. The Vajrayana Buddhism is a school of Buddhism that includes Tibetan Buddhism and tantric Buddhism. This is predominant in Mongolia, Tibet, Nepal, and Bhutan.



There are approximately 124 million adherents of Theravada Buddhism, and there are anywhere between 500 million and one billion Mahayana Buddhists. There are approximately 20 million adherent followers of Vajrayana Buddhism.

And of course, Buddhism has spread around the globe. If you live in a major city, there's a good chance that there's some school of Buddhism that has a temple or meditation center in your town or city.



Buddhist temple in Paris, France



SUMMARY

The history of Buddhism is different from that of other Eastern religions because it has a founder. Buddhism is based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha. He attained enlightenment and gathered a following. The **main doctrines** of the religion include the three jewels, the four noble truths, and the five precepts. **Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism** are the two main schools of Buddhism, but there are others. **The doctrine of dependent origination** states that everything is dependent on each other and therefore devoid of self. The **distribution** of Buddhism is focused mainly in Asia, but Buddhism has spread throughout the world.

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