

Vajrayana

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"Esoteric Buddhism" redirects here. For the book by A. P. Sinnett, see [Esoteric Buddhism \(book\)](#).



Map showing the [three major Buddhist divisions](#).

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Vajrayāna, Mantrayāna, Tantrayāna, Tibetan Buddhism, Tantric Buddhism and Esoteric Buddhism are terms referring to the various [Buddhist](#) traditions of [Tantra](#) and "Secret [Mantra](#)", which developed in [medieval India](#) and spread to [Tibet](#), [Bhutan](#), and [East Asia](#). In Tibet, Buddhist Tantra is termed *Vajrayāna*, while in [China](#) it is generally known as [Tángmì](#) 漢密 (唐密, "Chinese Esotericism") or *Mizōng* (密宗, "Esoteric Sect"), in [Pali](#) it is known as *Pyitsayāna* (ပုတ္တယာန), and in [Japan](#) it is known as [Mikkyō](#) (密教, "secret teachings").

Vajrayāna is usually translated as **Diamond Vehicle** or **Thunderbolt Vehicle**, referring to the [vajra](#), a mythical weapon which is also used as a ritual implement.

Founded by [medieval Indian Mahāsiddhas](#), Vajrayāna subscribes to the literature known as the [Buddhist Tantras](#).^[u] It includes practices that make use of [mantras](#), [dharanis](#), [mudras](#), [mandalas](#) and the visualization of deities and Buddhas.

According to Vajrayāna scriptures, the term *Vajrayāna* refers to one of three vehicles or [routes to enlightenment](#), the other two being the [Śrāvakayāna](#) (also known pejoratively as the [Hīnayāna](#)) and [Mahāyāna](#).



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History[[edit](#)]



Mahasiddhas, Palpung monastery. Note the figure of the great adept Putalipa at center, seated in a cave and gazing at an image of the meditational deity Samvara and the figure at the bottom left holding a skull-staff ([*khatvāṅga*](#)) and a flaying knife ([*kartika*](#))

Mahasiddha movement[[edit](#)]

Tantric Buddhism can be traced back to groups of wandering yogis called [Mahasiddhas](#) (great adepts).^[2] According to Reynolds (2007), the mahasiddhas date to the medieval period in the North India (3 – 13 cen. CE) and used methods that were radically different than those used in Buddhist monasteries, including living in forests and caves and practicing meditation in [charnel grounds](#) similar to those practiced by Shaiva [Kapalika](#) ascetics.^[3] These yogic circles came together in tantric feasts ([ganachakra](#)) often in sacred sites (*pitha*) and places (*ksetra*) which included dancing, singing, sex rites and the ingestion of [taboo](#) substances like alcohol, urine, meat, etc.^[4] At least two of the Mahasiddhas cited in the Buddhist literature are comparable with the Shaiva [Nath](#) saints ([Gorakshanath](#) and [Matsyendranath](#)) who practiced [Hatha Yoga](#).

According to Schumann, a movement called [Saha ja-siddhi](#) developed in the 8th century in [Bengal](#).^[5] It was dominated by long-haired, wandering Mahasiddhas who openly challenged and ridiculed the Buddhist establishment.^[6] The Mahasiddhas pursued [siddhis](#), magical powers such as flight and [extrasensory perception](#) as well as liberation.^[7]

Ronald M. Davidson states that,

"Buddhist siddhas demonstrated the appropriation of an older sociological form—the independent sage/magician, who lived in a liminal zone on the borders between fields and forests. Their rites involved the conjunction of sexual practices and Buddhist mandala visualization with ritual accoutrements made from parts of the human body, so that control may be exercised over the forces hindering the natural abilities of the siddha to manipulate the cosmos at will. At their most extreme, siddhas also represented a defensive position within the

Buddhist tradition, adopted and sustained for the purpose of aggressive engagement with the medieval culture of public violence. They reinforced their reputations for personal sanctity with rumors of the magical manipulation of various flavors of demonic females (dakini, yaksi, yogini), cemetery ghouls (vetala), and other things that go bump in the night. Operating on the margins of both monasteries and polite society, some adopted the behaviors associated with ghosts (preta, pisaca), not only as a religious praxis but also as an extension of their implied threats.”^[8]

Tantras^[edit]

Main article: [Buddhist Tantras](#)



[Diamond Realm Mandala](#), based on the tantric [Vajrasekhara Sutra](#), and symbolizing the final realization of [Vairocana](#) Buddha in [Shingon](#).

Many of the elements found in Buddhist tantric literature are not wholly new. Earlier [Mahayana sutras](#) already contained some elements which are emphasized in the Tantras, such as [mantras](#) and [dharani](#).^[9] The use of protective verses or phrases actually dates back to the Vedic period and can be seen in the [early Buddhist texts](#), where they are termed [paritta](#). Mahayana texts like the [Kārandavyūhasūtra](#) expound the use of mantras such as [Om mani padme hum](#), associated with vastly powerful beings like [Avalokiteshvara](#). The practice of [visualization of Buddhas](#) such as [Amitābha](#) is also seen in pre-tantric texts like the [Longer Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtra](#).^[10] There are other Mahayana [sutras](#) which contain “proto-tantric” material such as the [Gandavyuha sutra](#) and the [Dasabhumika](#) which might have served as a central source of visual imagery for Tantric texts.^[11]

Vajrayana developed a large corpus of texts called the [Buddhist Tantras](#), some of which can be traced to at least the 7th century CE but might be older. The dating of the tantras is “a difficult, indeed an impossible task” according to [David Snellgrove](#).^[12] Some of the earliest of these texts, [Kriya tantras](#) such as the [Mañjuśrī-mūla-kalpa](#) (6th century), teach the use of mantras and dharanis for mostly worldly ends including curing illness, controlling the weather and generating wealth.^[13]

The [*Tattvasamgraha Tantra*](#), classed as a "Yoga tantra", is one of the first Buddhist tantras which focuses on liberation as opposed to worldly goals. In another early tantra, the [*Vajrasekhara Tantra*](#), the influential schema of the [five Buddha families](#) is developed.^[14] Other early tantras include the [*Mahavairocana Tantra*](#) and the [*Guhyasamāja Tantra*](#).^[15] The Guhyasamāja is a [Mahayoga](#) class of Tantra, which features new forms of ritual practice considered "left-hand" ([vamachara](#)) such as the use of taboo substances like alcohol, [sexual yoga](#), and [charnel ground](#) practices which evoke [wrathful deities](#).^[16] Indeed, Ryujun Tajima divides the tantras into those which were "a development of Mahayanist thought" and those "formed in a rather popular mould toward the end of the eighth century and declining into the esoterism of the left",^[17] this "left esoterism" mainly refers to the Yogini tantras and later works associated with wandering [antinomian](#) yogis. Later monastic Vajrayana Buddhists reinterpreted and internalized these radically transgressive and taboo practices as [metaphors](#) and [visualization](#) exercises.

These later tantras such as the [*Hevajra Tantra*](#) and the [*Chakrasamvara*](#) are classed as "[Yogini](#) tantras" and represent the final form of development of Indian Buddhist tantras in the ninth and tenth centuries.^[13] The [*Kalachakra tantra*](#) developed in the 10th century.^[18] It is farthest removed from the earlier Buddhist traditions, and incorporates concepts of [messianism](#) and [astrology](#) not present elsewhere in Buddhist literature.^[6]

According to Ronald M. Davidson, the rise of Tantric Buddhism was a response to the feudal structure of Indian society in the early medieval period (ca. 500–1200 CE) which saw kings being divinized as manifestations of gods. Likewise, tantric yogis reconfigured their practice through the metaphor of being consecrated ([abhiṣeka](#)) as the overlord (*rājādhirāja*) of a [mandala](#) palace of divine vassals, an imperial metaphor symbolizing kingly fortresses and their political power.^[19]

Relationship to Saivism[[edit](#)]



Vajrayana adopted deities such as [Bhairava](#), known as [Yamantaka](#) in [Tibetan Buddhism](#).



Tibetan [Citipati](#) mask depicting [Mahākāla](#)

The question of the origins of early Vajrayana has been taken up by various scholars. David Seyfort Ruegg has suggested that Buddhist tantra employed various elements of a “pan-Indian religious substrate” which is not specifically Buddhist, Shaiva or Vaishnava.^[20]

According to [Alexis Sanderson](#), various classes of Vajrayana literature developed as a result of royal courts sponsoring both Buddhism and [Saivism](#).^[21] The relationship between the two systems can be seen in texts like the [Mañjusrimulakalpa](#), which later came to be classified under [Kriya tantra](#), and states that mantras taught in the Shaiva, Garuda and Vaishnava tantras will be effective if applied by Buddhists since they were all taught originally by [Manjushri](#).^[22]

[Alexis Sanderson](#) notes that the Vajrayana Yogini tantras draw extensively from the material also present in Shaiva [Bhairava](#) tantras classified as *Vidyapitha*. Sanderson’s comparison of them shows similarity in “ritual procedures, style of observance, deities, mantras, mandalas, ritual dress, [Kapalika](#) accouterments, specialized terminology, secret gestures, and secret jargons. There is even direct borrowing of passages from Saiva texts.”^[23] Sanderson gives numerous examples such as the *Guhyasiddhi* of Padmavajra, a work associated with the [Guhyasamaja tradition](#), which prescribes acting as a [Shaiva](#) guru and initiating members into [Saiva Siddhanta](#) scriptures and mandalas.^[24] The [Samvara tantra](#) texts adopted the [pitha](#) list from the Shaiva text *Tantrasadbhava*, introducing a copying error where a deity was mistaken for a place.^[25]

Ronald M. Davidson meanwhile, argues that Sanderson’s claims for direct influence from Shaiva *Vidyapitha* texts are problematic because “the chronology of the *Vidyapitha* tantras is by no means so well established”^[26] and that “the

available evidence suggests that received Saiva tantras come into evidence sometime in the ninth to tenth centuries with their affirmation by scholars like [Abhinavagupta](#) (c. 1000 c.e.)”^[27] Davidson also notes that the list of pithas or sacred places “are certainly not particularly Buddhist, nor are they uniquely [Kapalika](#) venues, despite their presence in lists employed by both traditions.”^[28] Davidson further adds that like the Buddhists, the Shaiva tradition was also involved in the appropriation of Hindu and non-Hindu deities, texts and traditions, an example being “village or tribal divinities like Tumburu”.^[29] Davidson adds that Buddhists and [Kapalikas](#) as well as other ascetics (possibly [Pasupatas](#)) mingled and discussed their paths at various pilgrimage places and that there were conversions between the different groups. Thus he concludes:

The Buddhist-Kapalika connection is more complex than a simple process of religious imitation and textual appropriation. There can be no question that the Buddhist tantras were heavily influenced by [Kapalika](#) and other Saiva movements, but the influence was apparently mutual. Perhaps a more nuanced model would be that the various lines of transmission were locally flourishing and that in some areas they interacted, while in others they maintained concerted hostility. Thus the influence was both sustained and reciprocal, even in those places where Buddhist and Kapalika siddhas were in extreme antagonism.^[30]

Davidson also argues for the influence of non-brahmanical and outcaste [tribal religions](#) and their feminine deities (such as [Parnasabari](#) and Janguli).^[31]

Philosophical background[[edit](#)]

According to [Louis de La Vallée-Poussin](#) and [Alex Wayman](#), the philosophical view of the Vajrayana is based on [Mahayana Buddhist philosophy](#), mainly the [Madhyamaka](#) and [Yogacara](#) schools.^{[32][33]} The major difference seen by Vajrayana thinkers is the superiority of Tantric methods, which provide a faster vehicle to liberation and contain many more skillful means ([upaya](#)).

The importance of the theory of [emptiness](#) is central to the Tantric Buddhist view and practice. The Buddhist emptiness view sees the world as being fluid, without an ontological foundation or inherent existence, but ultimately a fabric of constructions. Because of this, tantric practice such as self-visualization as the deity is seen as being no less real than everyday reality, but a process of transforming reality itself, including the practitioner’s identity as the deity. As Stephan Beyer notes, “In a universe where all events dissolve ontologically into Emptiness, the touching of Emptiness in the ritual is the re-creation of the world in actuality”.^[34]

The doctrine of [Buddha-nature](#), as outlined in the [Ratnagotravibhāga](#) of [Asanga](#), was also an important theory which became the basis for Tantric views.^[35] As explained by the Tantric commentator Lilavajra, this “intrinsic secret (behind) diverse manifestation” is the utmost secret and aim of Tantra. According to [Alex](#)

[Wayman](#) this "Buddha embryo" (*tathāgatagarbha*) is a "non-dual, self-originated Wisdom ([jnana](#)), an effortless fount of good qualities" that resides in the mindstream but is "obscured by discursive thought."^[36] This doctrine is often associated with the idea of the [inherent or natural luminosity](#) (Skt: *prakṛti-prabhāsvara-citta*, [T.](#) 'od gsal gyi sems) or purity of the mind (*prakṛti-parisuddha*).

Another fundamental theory of [Tantric practice](#) is that of transformation. Negative mental factors such as desire, hatred, greed, pride are not outright rejected as in non-Tantric Buddhism,^[citation needed] but are used as part of the path. As noted by French Indologist Madeleine Biardeau, the tantric doctrine is "an attempt to place [kama](#), desire, in every meaning of the word, in the service of liberation."^[37] This view is outlined in the following quote from the [Hevajra tantra](#):

Those things by which evil men are bound, others turn into means and gain thereby release from the bonds of existence. By passion the world is bound, by passion too it is released, but by heretical Buddhists this practice of reversals is not known.^[38]

The *Hevajra* further states that "one knowing the nature of poison may dispel poison with poison."^[37] As Snellgrove notes, this idea is already present in Asanga's [Mahayana-sutra-alamkara-karika](#) and therefore it is possible that he was aware of Tantric techniques, including sexual yoga.^[39]

According to Buddhist Tantra, there is no strict separation of the profane or [samsara](#) and the sacred or [nirvana](#), rather they exist in a continuum. All individuals are seen as containing the seed of enlightenment within, which is covered over by [defilements](#). [Douglas Duckworth](#) notes that Vajrayana sees [Buddhahood](#) not as something outside or an event in the future, but as immanently present.^[40]

Indian Tantric Buddhist philosophers such as [Buddhaguhya](#), [Vimalamitra](#), [Ratnākaraśānti](#) and [Abhayakaragupta](#) continued the tradition of Buddhist philosophy and adapted it to their commentaries on the major Tantras. Abhayakaragupta's *Vajravalī* is a key source in the theory and practice of tantric rituals. After monks such as [Vajrabodhi](#) and [Śubhakarasiṃha](#) brought Tantra to Tang China (716 to 720), tantric philosophy continued to be developed in Chinese and Japanese by thinkers such as [Yi Xing](#) and [Kūkai](#).

Likewise in [Tibet](#), [Sakya Pandita](#) (1182–28 – 1251), as well as later thinkers like [Longchenpa](#) (1308–1364) expanded on these philosophies in their Tantric commentaries and treatises. The status of the tantric view continued to be debated in medieval Tibet. Tibetan Buddhist [Rongzom Chokyi Zangpo](#) (1012–1088) held that the views of sutra such as Madhyamaka were inferior to that of tantra, as Koppl notes:

By now we have seen that Rongzom regards the views of the Sutrayana as inferior to those of Mantra, and he underscores his commitment to the purity of all phenomena by criticizing the Madhyamaka objectification of the authentic relative truth. ^[41]

[Tsongkhapa](#) (1357 – 1419) on the other hand, held that there is no difference between Vajrayana and other forms of Mahayana in terms of [prajñaparamita](#) (perfection of insight) itself, only that Vajrayana is a method which works faster. ^[42]

Place within Buddhist tradition[[edit](#)]



[Tangut](#) *Auspicious Tantra* of All-Reaching Union.

Various classifications are possible when distinguishing Vajrayana from the other Buddhist traditions. Vajrayana can be seen as a third *yana* , next to [Śrāvakayāna](#) and [Mahayana](#). ^[6] Vajrayana can be distinguished from the [Sutrayana](#). The *Sutrayana* is the method of perfecting good qualities, where the *Vajrayāna* is the method of taking the intended outcome of [Buddhahood](#) as the path. Vajrayana, belonging to the mantrayana, can also be distinguished from the paramitayana. According to this schema, Indian Mahayana revealed two vehicles (*yana*) or methods for attaining enlightenment: the method of the perfections (*Paramitayana*) and the method of mantra (*Mantrayana*). ^[43] The *Paramitayana* consists of the six or ten [paramitas](#), of which the scriptures say that it takes three incalculable [aeons](#) to lead one to Buddhahood. The tantra literature, however, claims that the *Mantrayana* leads one to Buddhahood in a single lifetime. ^[43] According to the literature, the mantra is an easy path without the difficulties innate to the *Paramitayana*. ^[43] *Mantrayana* is sometimes portrayed as a method for those of inferior abilities. ^[43] However the practitioner of the mantra still has to adhere to the vows of the [Bodhisattva](#). ^[43]

Characteristics[[edit](#)]

[Manjushri](#), the [bodhisattva](#) associated with [prajñā](#).

Goal[[edit](#)]

The goal of spiritual practice within the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions is to become a [*Sammāsambuddha*](#) (fully awakened [Buddha](#)), those on this path are termed [Bodhisattvas](#). As with the [Mahayana](#), motivation is a vital component of Vajrayana practice. The Bodhisattva-path is an integral part of the Vajrayana, which teaches that all practices are to be undertaken with the motivation to achieve Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings.

In the Sutrayana practice, a path of Mahayana, the "path of the cause" is taken, whereby a practitioner starts with his or her potential Buddha-nature and nurtures it to produce the fruit of Buddhahood. In the Vajrayana the "path of the fruit" is taken whereby the practitioner takes his or her innate Buddha-nature as the means of practice. The premise is that since we innately have an enlightened mind, practicing seeing the world in terms of ultimate truth can help us to attain our full Buddha-nature.^[44] Experiencing ultimate truth is said to be the purpose of all the various [tantric techniques](#) practiced in the Vajrayana.

Esoteric transmission^[edit]



Monks attending the 2003 [Kalachakra](#) empowerment in [Bodhgaya](#), India. Some empowerment ceremonies can include large numbers of initiates.

See also: [*Pointing-out instruction*](#)

Vajrayana Buddhism is esoteric in the sense that the transmission of certain teachings only occurs directly from teacher to student during an [empowerment](#) (*abhiṣeka*) and their practice requires initiation in a ritual space containing the mandala of the deity.^[45] Many techniques are also commonly said to be secret, but some Vajrayana teachers have responded that secrecy itself is not important and only a side-effect of the reality that the techniques have no validity outside the teacher-student lineage.^[46] In order to engage in Vajrayana practice, a student should have received such an initiation or permission:

If these techniques are not practiced properly, practitioners may harm themselves physically and mentally. In order to avoid these dangers, the practice is kept "secret" outside the teacher/student relationship. Secrecy and the commitment of the student to the vajra guru are aspects of the [samaya](#) (Tib. *damtsig*), or "sacred bond", that protects both the practitioner and the integrity of the teachings."^[47]

The secrecy of teachings was often protected through the use of allusive, indirect, [symbolic](#) and metaphorical language ([twilight language](#)) which required interpretation and guidance from a teacher.^[48] The teachings may also be considered "self-secret", meaning that even if they were to be told directly to a person, that person would not necessarily understand the teachings without proper context. In this way, the teachings are "secret" to the minds of those who are not following the path with more than a simple sense of curiosity.^{[49][50]}

Because of their role in giving access to the practices and guiding the student through them, the role of the [Guru](#), [Lama](#) or [Vajracharya](#) is indispensable in Vajrayana.

Affirmation of the feminine, antinomian and taboo[\[edit\]](#)



Tibetan [Chakrasamvara](#) statue in [Yab-Yum](#) union with his consort [Vajravārāhī](#)

Some Vajrayana rituals include the use of certain taboo substances, such as blood, semen, alcohol and urine, as ritual offerings and sacraments, though these are often replaced with less taboo substances in their place such as yogurt. Tantric feasts and initiations sometimes employed substances like human flesh as noted by Kahha' s *Yogaratanmala*.^[51] The use of these substances is related to the [non-dual](#) (*advaya*) nature of a Buddha's wisdom (*buddhajñāna*). Since the ultimate state is in some sense non-dual, a practitioner can approach that state by "transcending attachment to dual categories such as pure and impure, permitted and forbidden". As the Guhyasamaja Tantra states "the wise man who does not discriminate achieves Buddhahood".^[51]

Vajrayana rituals also include [sexual yoga](#), union with a physical consort as part of advanced practices. Some tantras go further, the *Hevajra tantra* states 'You should kill living beings, speak lying words, take what is not given, consort with the women of others' .^[51] While some of these statements were taken literally as part of ritual practice, others such as killing were interpreted in a metaphorical sense. In the Hevajra, "killing" is defined as developing

concentration by killing the life-breath of discursive thoughts.^[52] Likewise, while actual sexual union with a physical consort is practiced, it is also common to use a visualized mental consort.

Alex Wayman points out that the symbolic meaning of tantric sexuality is ultimately rooted in [bodhicitta](#) and the bodhisattva's quest for enlightenment is likened to a lover seeking union with the mind of the Buddha.^[53] [Judith Simmer-Brown](#) notes the importance of the psycho-physical experiences arising in sexual yoga, termed "great bliss" (*mahasukha*): "Bliss melts the conceptual mind, heightens sensory awareness, and opens the practitioner to the naked experience of the nature of mind."^[54] This tantric experience is not the same as ordinary self-gratifying sexual passion since it relies on tantric meditative methods using the subtle body and visualizations as well as the motivation for enlightenment.^[55] As the *Hevajra tantra* says:

"This practice [of sexual union with a consort] is not taught for the sake of enjoyment, but for the examination of one's own thought, whether the mind is steady or waving."^[56]

Feminine deities and forces are also increasingly prominent in Vajrayana. In the Yogini tantras in particular, women and female yoginis are given high status as the embodiment of female deities such as the wild and nude [Vajrayogini](#).^[57] The *Candamaharosana Tantra* states:

Women are heaven, women are the teaching (*dharma*)

Women indeed are the highest austerity (*tapas*)

Women are the Buddha, women are the [Sangha](#)

Women are the Perfection of Wisdom.

Candamaharosana Tantra viii:29 – 30^[57]

In India, there is evidence to show that women participated in tantric practice alongside men and were also teachers, adepts and authors of tantric texts.^[58]

Vows and behaviour^{[[edit](#)]}

Main article: [Samaya](#)

Practitioners of the Vajrayana need to abide by various tantric vows or [samaya](#) of behaviour. These are extensions of the rules of the [Prātimokṣa](#) and [Bodhisattva vows](#) for the lower levels of tantra, and are taken during initiations into the empowerment for a particular [Anuttarayoga Tantra](#). The special tantric vows vary depending on the specific [mandala](#) practice for which

the initiation is received and also depending on the level of initiation.
[Ngagpas](#) of the [Nyingma](#) school keep a special non-celibate ordination.

A tantric [guru](#), or teacher is expected to keep his or her *samaya* vows in the same way as his students. Proper conduct is considered especially necessary for a qualified Vajrayana guru. For example, the *Ornament for the Essence* of Manjushrikirti states:^[59]

Distance yourself from Vajra Masters who are not keeping the three vows

who keep on with a root downfall, who are miserly with the Dharma,
and who engage in actions that should be forsaken.

Those who worship them go to hell and so on as a result.

Tantra techniques^{[[edit](#)]}



[Play media](#)

A video of the [Cham dance](#), a traditional practice in some sects of Tibetan Buddhism.



"[om mani padme hum](#)" prayer wheels.

Main article: [Tantra techniques \(Vajrayana\)](#)

While Vajrayana includes all of the traditional practices used in [Mahayana Buddhism](#) such as [samatha](#) and [vipassana meditation](#) and the [paramitas](#), it also includes a number of unique practices or "skillful means" ([upaya](#)) which are seen as more advanced and effective. Vajrayana is a system of [lineages](#), whereby those who successfully receive an [empowerment](#) or sometimes called initiation

(permission to practice) are seen to share in the [mindstream](#) of the realisation of a particular skillful means of the *vajra* Master. Vajrayana teaches that these techniques provide an accelerated path to [enlightenment](#) which is faster than other paths. ^[60]

A central feature of tantric practice is the use of [mantras](#), seed syllables ([bijas](#)), words or a collection of syllables understood to have special powers and hence is a 'performative utterance' used for a variety of ritual ends. Mantras are usually associated with [specific deities or Buddhas](#), and are seen as their manifestations in sonic form. They are traditionally believed to have spiritual power, which can lead to enlightenment as well as supramundane abilities ([siddhis](#)). ^[61]

Mantras are central to the practice of Buddhist tantra. They are taught in the context of an initiation ceremony by tantric gurus or [acharyas](#) to the tantric initiate, who also makes a formal commitment (*samaya*) to recite them and also not to disclose them to the uninitiated. ^[61] In tantric meditation, mantras or bijas are used during the ritual evocation of deities which are said to arise out of the uttered and visualized mantric syllables. After the deity has been established, heart mantras are visualized as part of the contemplation in different points of the deity's body. ^[62]

According to Alex Wayman, Buddhist esotericism is centered on what is known as "the three mysteries" or "secrets": the tantric adept affiliates his body, speech, and mind with the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha through [mudra](#), [mantras](#) and [samadhi](#) respectively. ^[63] Padmavajra (c 7th century) explains in his *Tantrararthavatara* Commentary, the secret Body, Speech, and Mind of the Tathagatas are: ^[64]

Secret of Body: Whatever form is necessary to tame the living beings.

Secret of Speech: Speech exactly appropriate to the lineage of the creature, as in the language of the yaksas, etc.

Secret of Mind: Knowing all things as they really are.

Deity yoga[\[edit\]](#)



A mandala of the Buddha [Amitayus](#)



A Tibetan style [thangka](#) of the eleven-headed and thousand-armed form of Avalokiteshvara.

The fundamental, defining practice of Buddhist Tantra is “[deity yoga](#)” (*devatayoga*), meditation on a chosen deity or “cherished divinity” (Skt. *Iṣṭa-devatā*, Tib. [yidam](#)), which involves the recitation of mantras, prayers and visualization of the deity along with the associated [mandala](#) of the deity’s [Buddha field](#), with consorts and attendants.^[65] According to [Tsongkhapa](#), deity yoga is what separates Tantra from sutra practice.^[66]

A key element of this practice involves the dissolution of the profane world and identification with a sacred reality.^[67] Because Tantra makes use of a “similitude” of the resultant state of [Buddhahood](#) as the path, it is known as the effect vehicle or result vehicle (*phalayana*) which “brings the effect to the path”.^[68]

In the [Highest Yoga Tantras](#) and in the [Inner Tantras](#) this is usually done in two stages, the [generation stage](#) (*utpattikrama*) and the [completion stage](#) (*nispannakrama*). In the generation stage, one dissolves oneself in emptiness and meditates on the divinity, resulting in identification with this divinity. In the completion stage, the visualization of and identification with the deity is

dissolved in the realization of [luminous emptiness](#). [Ratnakarasanti](#) describes the generation stage cultivation practice thus:

[A]ll phenomenal appearance having arisen as mind, this very mind is [understood to be] produced by a mistake (*bhrāntyā*), i.e. the appearance of an object where there is no object to be grasped; ascertaining that this is like a dream, in order to abandon this mistake, all appearances of objects that are blue and yellow and so on are abandoned or destroyed (*parihṛ-*); then, the appearance of the world (*viśvapratiḥhāsa*) that is ascertained to be oneself (*ātmaniścitta*) is seen to be like the stainless sky on an autumn day at noon: appearanceless, unending sheer luminosity. ^[69]

This dissolution into emptiness is then followed by the visualization of the deity and re-emergence of the yogi as the deity. During the process of deity visualization, the deity is to be imaged as not solid or tangible, as "empty yet apparent", with the character of a [mirage](#) or a [rainbow](#). ^[70] This visualization is to be combined with "divine pride", which is "the thought that one is oneself the deity being visualized." ^[71] Divine pride is different from common pride because it is based on compassion for others and on an understanding of emptiness. ^[72]

Following mastery of the "generation stage", one practices the "perfection stage". The tantric commentator [Buddhaguhya](#), in his commentary on the [Mahavairocana Tantra](#), outlines the "perfection stage" practices thus:

First you should actualize all the four branches of recitation for a while as before, and then analyze the manifestation of the created (*parikalpita*) colour, shape, and so on, of your tutelary deity who is identical to yourself, breaking them down into atoms. Or it is also acceptable to do this by way of the reasoning that is unborn and unarising from the very beginning, or similarly by way of the technique of drawing-in the vital energy (*prana*) through the yoga of turning your mind inside, or by way of not focusing on its appearance [as colour and shape]. In accordance with that realization, you should then actualize the mind which is just self-aware, free from the body image of your tutelary deity and without appearance [as subject and object], and mentally recite your *vidya* mantra as appropriate. ^[73]



A Tibetan depiction of the perfection stage practice called [Tummo](#) (Skt. *candali*, inner heat).

As noted by [David Germano](#), the practices which are associated with the "perfection stage" actually cover two distinct rubrics, "an earlier body of practice focused on the absence of images and a later system of techniques focused on the human body as a directly sensed reality."^[74] Germano outlines these thus:

The first aspect indicates form-less types of contemplation directly on the ultimate nature of one's mind utterly devoid of any fabricated or spontaneous visual images. Often discussed as the dissolution of visual images back into the visionary, one could explain them as a felt experience of being grounded in the body, guided by the felt gravity of the body's presence without any [cathexis](#) to external images. They can also be understood in part as attempts to formally incorporate the non-esoteric styles of meditation on emptiness (that were increasingly normative in orthodox monastic environments) into Tantric practice and ideology....

The second rubric of perfection phase contemplation signifies internal meditations on a subtle or imaginal body image through visualizing its triune elements known as "the channels, winds, and nuclei" (*rtsa rlung thig le*). This is in contrast to focusing on external visualizations of deities in front of oneself, or as one's self, or even internal visualizations of constellations of such deities as a "body mandala." These types of perfection phase meditations are innovative and distinctive in the history of Buddhist Tantra in that they introduce overtly sexual symbolism as the basis for contemplation through reliance on non-anthropomorphic representations of a subtle body.

Correspondingly, they mark a move towards felt tactile sensations (especially sexual bliss and the sensation of warmth) rather than exclusive reliance on our capacity for vision. In this way it marks a movement toward embodiment and processes internal to our body, with sexuality involving intensely tactile felt presences in contrast to vision, the coolest and most metaphysical of our senses. ^[75]

The practices associated with the completion stage which make use energetic systems of human psycho-physiology composed of "energy channels" (Skt. [nadi](#), Tib. *rtsa*), "winds" or currents (Skt. *vayu*, Tib. *rlung*), and "drops" or charged particles (Skt. *bindu*, Tib. *thig le*) include [Trul khor](#) and [Tummo](#). These [subtle body](#) energies are seen as "mounts" for consciousness, the physical component of awareness. They are said to converge at certain points along the spinal column called [chakras](#).^[76]

Other practices[\[edit\]](#)



[Play media](#)

Video of a Shingon Goma Fire Ritual at Yakuōin Yūkiji, [Mount Takao](#)

Another form of Vajrayana practice are certain meditative techniques associated with [Mahamudra](#) and [Dzogchen](#) often termed "formless practices". These techniques do not rely on deity visualization per se but on direct [pointing-out instruction](#) from a master and are often seen as the most advanced forms.^[77]

In [Tibetan Buddhism](#), advanced practices like deity yoga and the formless practices are usually preceded by or coupled with "preliminary practices" called [ngondro](#) which includes [prostrations](#) and recitations of the [100 syllable mantra](#).^[78]

Another distinctive feature of Tantric Buddhism is its unique [rituals](#), which are used as a substitute or alternative for the earlier abstract meditations.^[79]^{*[citation not found]*}^[80] They include death rituals (see [phowa](#)), tantric feasts ([ganachakra](#)), initiations or empowerments and [Homa fire ritual](#), common in East Asian Tantric Buddhism.

An important element in some of these rituals (particularly initiations and tantric feasts) seems to have been the practice of [ritual sex](#) or sexual yoga ([karmamudra](#), "desire seal", also referred to as "consort observance", *vidyavrata*, and euphemistically as "[puja](#)"), as well as the sacramental ingestion of "power substances" such as the mingled sexual fluids and uterine blood (often performed by licking these substances off the [vulva](#), a practice termed *yonipuja*).^[81] The practice of ingestion of sexual fluids is mentioned by numerous tantric commentators, sometimes euphemistically referring to the penis as the "vajra" and the vagina as the "lotus". The Cakrasamvara tantra commentator Kambala, writing about this practice, states:

The seats are well-known on earth to be spots within the lotus mandala; by abiding within it there is great bliss, the royal nature of nondual joy. Therefore the lotus seat is supreme: filled with a mixture of semen and uterine blood, one should especially kiss it, and lolling with the tongue take it up. Unite the vajra and lotus, with the rapture of drinking [this] liquor. ^[82]

According to David Gray, these sexual practices probably originated in a non-monastic context, but were later adopted by monastic establishments (such as [Nalanda](#) and [Vikramashila](#)). He notes that the anxiety of figures like [Atisa](#) towards these practices, and the stories of [Virūpa](#) and [Maitripa](#) being expelled from their monasteries for performing them, shows that supposedly celibate monastics were undertaking these sexual rites. ^[83] Because of its adoption by the monastic tradition, the practice of sexual yoga was slowly transformed into one which was either done with an imaginary consort visualized by the yogi instead of an actual person, or reserved to a small group of the "highest" or elite practitioners. Likewise, the drinking of sexual fluids was also reinterpreted by later commentators to refer subtle body anatomy of the perfection stage practices. ^[84]

Other unique practices in Tantric Buddhism include [Dream yoga](#), the yoga of the intermediate state (at death) or [Bardo](#) and [Chöd](#), in which the yogi ceremonially offers their body to be eaten by tantric deities in a ritual feast.

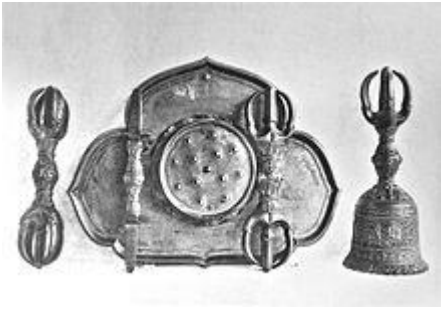
Symbols and imagery[\[edit\]](#)



[Dagchen Rinpoche](#)'s hand holds a [vajra](#) drawing lines that close the [Hevajra Mandala](#), after the empowerment, Tharlam Monastery of Tibetan Buddhism, Boudha, [Kathmandu](#), [Nepal](#).

The Vajrayana uses a rich variety of symbols, terms, and images that have multiple meanings according to a complex system of [analogical](#) thinking. In Vajrayana, symbols, and terms are multi-valent, reflecting the microcosm and the macrocosm as in the phrase "As without, so within" (*yatha bahyam tatha ' dhyatmam iti*) from [Abhayakaragupta](#)'s *Nispannayogavali*. ^[85]

The Vajra[\[edit\]](#)



Bronze Vajras and Bell from [Itsukushima](#), Japan

The [Sanskrit](#) term "[vajra](#)" denoted a [thunderbolt](#) like a legendary weapon and divine attribute that was made from an [adamantine](#), or an indestructible substance which could, therefore, pierce and penetrate any obstacle or [obfuscation](#). It is the weapon of choice of [Indra](#), the King of the [Devas](#). As a secondary meaning, "vajra" symbolizes the ultimate nature of things which is described in the tantras as translucent, pure and radiant, but also indestructible and indivisible. It is also symbolic of the power of tantric methods to achieve its goals. ^[86]

A vajra is also a scepter-like ritual object ([Standard Tibetan](#): དོར་ཇེ *dorje*), which has a sphere (and sometimes a [gankyil](#)) at its centre, and a variable number of spokes, 3, 5 or 9 at each end (depending on the [sadhana](#)), enfolding either end of the rod. The vajra is often traditionally employed in tantric rituals in combination with the [bell](#) or [ghanta](#); symbolically, the vajra may represent [method](#) as well as great bliss and the bell stands for [wisdom](#), specifically the [wisdom realizing emptiness](#). The union of the two sets of spokes at the center of the wheel is said to symbolize the unity of wisdom (*prajña*) and compassion (*karuna*) as well as the sexual union of male and female deities. ^[87]

Imagery and ritual in deity yoga[[edit](#)]



[Chöd](#) ritual, note the use of [Damaru](#) drum and hand-bell, as well as the [Kangling](#) (thighbone trumpet).

Representations of the deity, such as statues ([murti](#)), paintings ([thangka](#)), or [mandala](#), are often employed as an aid to [visualization](#), in Deity yoga. The use of visual aids, particularly microcosmic/macrocosmic diagrams, known as

"[mandalas](#)", is another unique feature of Buddhist Tantra. Mandalas are symbolic depictions of the sacred space of the awakened Buddhas and [Bodhisattvas](#) as well as of the inner workings of the human person.^[88] The macrocosmic symbolism of the mandala then, also represents the forces of the human body. The explanatory tantra of the *Guhyasamaja tantra*, the *Vajramala*, states: "The body becomes a palace, the hallowed basis of all the Buddhas."^[89]

Mandalas are also sacred enclosures, [sacred architecture](#) that house and contain the uncontainable essence of a central deity or *yidam* and their retinue. In the book *The World of Tibetan Buddhism*, the Dalai Lama describes mandalas thus: "This is the celestial mansion, the pure residence of the deity." The [Five Tathagatas](#) or 'Five Buddhas', along with the figure of the [Adi-Buddha](#), are central to many Vajrayana mandalas as they represent the "five wisdoms", which are the five primary aspects of primordial wisdom or [Buddha-nature](#).^[90]

All ritual in Vajrayana practice can be seen as aiding in this process of visualization and identification. The practitioner can use various hand implements such as a *vajra*, bell, hand-drum ([damaru](#)) or a ritual dagger ([phurba](#)), but also ritual hand gestures ([mudras](#)) can be made, special chanting techniques can be used, and in elaborate offering rituals or initiations, many more ritual implements and tools are used, each with an elaborate symbolic meaning to create a special environment for practice. Vajrayana has thus become a major inspiration in traditional [Tibetan art](#).

Texts[\[edit\]](#)

Three leafs from a manuscript of the *Vajrāvalī*, a ritual compendium compiled by [Abhayakaragupta](#), abbot of the Vikramashila monastery around 1100 CE.

See also: [Tantras \(Buddhism\)](#) and [Tibetan Buddhist canon](#)

There is an extended body of texts associated with Buddhist Tantra, including the "tantras" themselves, tantric commentaries and [shastras](#), [sadhana](#)s (liturgical texts), ritual manuals (Jp. *gikirui*, 儀軌類), [dharanis](#), poems or songs ([dohas](#)), [termas](#) and so on. According to Harunaga Isaacson,

Though we do not know precisely at present just how many Indian tantric Buddhist texts survive today in the language in which they were written, their number is certainly over one thousand five hundred; I suspect indeed over two thousand. A large part of this body of texts has also been translated into Tibetan, and a smaller part into Chinese. Aside from these, there are perhaps another two thousand or more works that are known today only from such translations. We can be certain as well that many others are lost to us forever, in whatever form. Of the texts that survive a very small proportion has been published; an almost insignificant percentage has been edited or translated reliably.^[91]

Vajrayana texts exhibit a wide range of literary characteristics—usually a mix of verse and prose, almost always in a Sanskrit that “transgresses frequently against classical norms of grammar and usage,” although also occasionally in various Middle Indic dialects or elegant classical Sanskrit.^[92]

In Chinese Mantrayana (*Zhenyan*), and Japanese [Shingon](#), the most influential esoteric texts are the [Mahavairocana Tantra](#) (*Dainichi Kyo*) and the [Vajraśekhara Sūtra](#) (*Kongokai Kyo*).^{[93][94]}

In [Tibetan Buddhism](#), a large number of tantric works are widely studied and different schools focus on the study and practice of different cycles of texts. According to Geoffrey Samuel,

“the [Sakyapa](#) specialize in the [Hevajra Tantra](#), the [Nyingmapa](#) specialize in the various so called [Old Tantras](#) and [terma](#) cycles, and the most important [Kagyudpa](#) and [Gelugpa](#) tantras are [Guhyasamāja](#), [Cakrasamvara](#) and [Kālacakra](#).”^[95]

Dunhuang manuscripts[\[edit\]](#)

The [Dunhuang manuscripts](#) also contain Tibetan Tantric manuscripts. Dalton and Schaik (2007, revised) provide an excellent online catalogue listing 350 Tibetan Tantric Manuscripts] from [Dunhuang](#) in the Stein Collection of the [British Library](#) which is currently fully accessible online in discrete digitized manuscripts.^[web 1] With the Wylie transcription of the manuscripts they are to be made discoverable online in the future.^[96] These 350 texts are just a small portion of the vast cache of the [Dunhuang manuscripts](#).

Schools[\[edit\]](#)

Although there is historical evidence for [Vajrayana Buddhism in Southeast Asia](#) and elsewhere (see [History of Vajrayana](#) above), today the Vajrayana exists primarily in the form of the two major traditions of [Tibetan Buddhism](#) and [Japanese Esoteric Buddhism](#) in [Japan](#) known as [Shingon](#) (literally “True Speech”, i.e. [mantra](#)), with a handful of minor subschools utilising lesser amounts of esoteric or tantric materials.

The distinction between traditions is not always rigid. For example, the [tantra](#) sections of the [Tibetan Buddhist canon of texts](#) sometimes include material not usually thought of as tantric outside the [Tibetan Buddhist](#) tradition, such as the [Heart Sutra](#)^[97] and even versions of some material found in the [Pali Canon](#).^{[98][a]}

Tibetan Buddhism[\[edit\]](#)



[Larung Gar Buddhist Academy](#), in [Sêrtar County](#), [Garzê](#), [Sichuan](#), [China](#). It is the largest Tibetan Buddhist community in the world.

Main article: [Tibetan Buddhism](#)

Vajrayana Buddhism was established in Tibet in the 8th century when [Śāntaraksita](#) was brought to [Tibet](#) from [India](#) at the instigation of the Dharma King [Trisong Detsen](#), some time before 767. Tibetan Buddhism reflects the later stages of Indian tantric Buddhist developments, including the Yogini tantras, translated into the Tibetan language. It also includes native Tibetan developments, such as the [tulku](#) system, new [sadhana](#) texts, Tibetan scholastic works, [Dzogchen](#) literature and [Terma](#) literature.

The Tibetan Buddhist schools, based on the lineages and textual traditions of the [Kangyur](#) and [Tengyur](#) of [Tibet](#), are found in [Tibet](#), [Bhutan](#), northern [India](#), [Nepal](#), southwestern and northern [China](#), [Mongolia](#) and various constituent [republics](#) of [Russia](#) that are adjacent to the area, such as [Amur Oblast](#), [Buryatia](#), [Chita Oblast](#), the [Tuva Republic](#) and [Khabarovsk Krai](#). Tibetan Buddhism is also the main religion in [Kalmykia](#).

Nepalese Newar Buddhism[[edit](#)]

Main article: [Newar Buddhism](#)

Newar Buddhism is practiced by [Newars](#) in [Nepal](#). It is the only form of Vajrayana Buddhism in which the scriptures are written in [Sanskrit](#) and this tradition has preserved many Vajrayana texts in this language. Its priests do not follow celibacy and are called [vajracharya](#) (literally "[diamond-thunderbolt](#) carriers").

Tantric Theravada[[edit](#)]

Main article: [Tantric Theravada](#)

Tantric Theravada or "Esoteric Southern Buddhism" is a term for esoteric forms of Buddhism from [Southeast Asia](#), where [Theravada Buddhism](#) is dominant. The monks of the Sri Lankan, [Abhayagiri vihara](#) once practiced forms of tantra which were popular in the island.^[99] Another tradition of this type was [Ari Buddhism](#), which was common in [Burma](#). The Tantric Buddhist 'Yogāvacara' tradition was a major

Buddhist tradition in [Cambodia](#), [Laos](#) and [Thailand](#) well into the modern era.^[100] This form of Buddhism declined after the rise of Southeast Asian [Buddhist modernism](#).

Indonesian Esoteric Buddhism^[edit]

Main article: [Indonesian Esoteric Buddhism](#)

A painting by G.B. Hooijer (c. 1916—1919) reconstructing the scene of Borobudur during its heyday

Indonesian Esoteric Buddhism refers to the traditions of Esoteric Buddhism found in the Indonesian islands of [Java](#) and [Sumatra](#) before the rise and dominance of [Islam](#) in the region (13–16th centuries). The Buddhist empire of [Srivijaya](#) (650 CE – 1377 CE) was a major center of Esoteric Buddhist learning which drew Chinese monks such as [Yijing](#) and Indian scholars like [Atiśa](#).^[101] The temple complex at [Borobudur](#) in central [Java](#), built by the [Shailendra dynasty](#) also reflects strong Tantric or at least proto-tantric influences, particularly of the cult of [Vairocana](#).^{[102][103]}

Philippine Esoteric Buddhism^[edit]



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Main articles: [Philippine Esoteric Buddhism](#) and [Buddhism in the Philippines](#)

The [Agusan golden image](#), one of the significant examples of Buddhist iconography in the [Philippines](#).

Although no written record exists about early [Buddhism](#) in the [Philippines](#), the recent archaeological discoveries and the few scant references in the other nation's historical records can tell, however, about the existence of Buddhism from the 9th century onward in the islands. The Philippines' archaeological finds include a few Buddhist artifacts, most of them dated to the 9th century. The artifacts reflect the iconography of the [Srivijaya](#)'s Vajrayana Buddhism^{[104][105][unreliable source?]} and its influences on the Philippines' early states. The artifacts distinct features point to their production in the islands and hint at the artisans or goldsmiths knowledge of Buddhist culture and Buddhist literature because the artisans have made these unique works of Buddhist art. The artifacts imply also the presence of Buddhist believers in the places where these artifacts turned up.^[citation needed] These places extended from the Agusan–Surigao area in Mindanao island to [Cebu](#),^[citation needed] [Palawan](#),^[citation needed] and [Luzon](#) islands.^[citation needed]

Chinese Esoteric Buddhism^[edit]



The [Womb Realm mandala](#) used in [Śubhakarasiṃha](#)'s teachings from the [Mahāvairocana Tantra](#). [Vairocana](#) is located in the center.

Main article: [Chinese Esoteric Buddhism](#)

Esoteric and Tantric teachings followed the same route into northern [China](#) as [Buddhism](#) itself, arriving via the [Silk Road](#) and Southeast Asian Maritime trade routes sometime during the first half of the 7th century, during the [Tang dynasty](#) and received sanction from the emperors of the Tang dynasty. During this time, three great masters came from India to China: [Śubhakarasiṃha](#), [Vajrabodhi](#), and [Amoghavajra](#) who translated key texts and founded the *Zhenyan* (真言, "true word", "[mantra](#)") tradition.^[106] *Zhenyan* was also brought to [Japan](#) as [Shingon](#) during this period. This tradition focused on tantras like the [Mahāvairocana tantra](#), and unlike Tibetan Buddhism, it does not employ the antinomian and radical tantrism of the [Anuttarayoga Tantras](#).

The prestige of this tradition influenced other schools of [Chinese Buddhism](#) such as Chan and [Tiantai](#) to adopt esoteric practices.^{[107][108][109]}

During the [Yuan dynasty](#), the [Mongol](#) emperors made [Tibetan Buddhism](#) the official religion of China, and Tibetan lamas were given patronage at the court.^[110] Imperial support of Tibetan Vajrayana continued into the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Another form of esoteric Buddhism in China is [Azhaliism](#), which is practiced among the [Bai people](#) of [China](#).^{[111][112]}

Korean *milgyo*[\[edit\]](#)

Esoteric Buddhist practices (known as *milgyo*, 密教) and texts arrived in [Korea](#) during the initial introduction of Buddhism to the region in 372 CE.^[113] Esoteric Buddhism was supported by the royalty of both [Unified Silla](#) (668–935) and [Goryeo Dynasty](#) (918–1392).^[113] During the Goryeo Dynasty esoteric practices were common within large sects like the [Seon school](#), and the [Hwaeom](#) school as well as smaller esoteric sects like the Sinin (*mudra*) and Ch'ongji (*Dharani*) schools. During the era of the Mongol occupation (1251–1350s), Tibetan Buddhism also existed in Korea though it never gained a foothold there.^[114]

During the [Joseon dynasty](#), Esoteric Buddhist schools were forced to merge with the Son and Kyo schools, becoming the ritual specialists. With the decline of Buddhism in Korea, Esoteric Buddhism mostly died out, save for a few traces in the rituals of the [Jogye Order](#) and [Taego Order](#).^[114]

There are two Esoteric Buddhist schools in modern Korea: the Chinŏn (眞言) and the [Jingak Order](#) (眞覺). According to Henrik H. Sørensen, "they have absolutely no historical link with the Korean Buddhist tradition per se but are late constructs based in large measures on Japanese Shingon Buddhism."^[114]

Japan[[edit](#)]



Iwama-dera or *Shōhō-ji*, a Shingon Buddhist temple in [Ōtsu](#), [Shiga](#), [Japan](#).

Shingon Buddhism[[edit](#)]

Main article: [Shingon Buddhism](#)

The Shingon school is found in [Japan](#) and includes practices, known in Japan as [Mikkyō](#) ("Esoteric (or Mystery) Teaching"), which are similar in concept to those in Vajrayana Buddhism. The lineage for Shingon Buddhism differs from that of Tibetan Vajrayana, having emerged from [India](#) during the 9th–11th centuries in the [Pala Dynasty](#) and [Central Asia](#) (via [China](#)) and is based on earlier versions of the Indian texts than the Tibetan lineage. Shingon shares material with [Tibetan Buddhism](#) – such as the esoteric sutras (called [Tantras](#) in Tibetan Buddhism) and [mandalas](#) – but the actual practices are not related. The primary texts of Shingon Buddhism are the [Mahavairocana Sutra](#) and [Vajrasekhara Sutra](#). The founder of Shingon Buddhism was [Kūkai](#), a Japanese monk who studied in China in the 9th century during the Tang dynasty and brought back Vajrayana scriptures, techniques and mandalas then popular in China. The school mostly died out or was merged into other schools in China towards the end of the Tang dynasty but flourished in Japan. Shingon is one of the few remaining branches of Buddhism in the world that continues to use the [siddham](#) script of the [Sanskrit](#) language.

Tendai Buddhism[[edit](#)]

Main article: [Tendai](#)

Although the Tendai school in China and Japan does employ some esoteric practices, these rituals came to be considered of equal importance with the exoteric teachings of the [Lotus Sutra](#). By chanting [mantras](#), maintaining [mudras](#), or practicing certain forms of meditation, [Tendai](#) maintains that one is able to understand sense experiences as taught by the Buddha, have [faith](#) that one is innately an enlightened being, and that one can attain enlightenment within the current lifetime.

Shugendō[\[edit\]](#)

Main article: [Shugendō](#)

Shugendō was founded in 7th-century Japan by the ascetic [En no Gyōja](#), based on the *Queen's Peacocks Sutra*. With its origins in the solitary *hijiri* back in the 7th century, Shugendō evolved as a sort of amalgamation between Esoteric Buddhism, Shinto and several other religious influences including [Taoism](#). Buddhism and Shinto were amalgamated in the *shinbutsu shūgō*, and Kūkai's syncretic religion held wide sway up until the end of the [Edo period](#), coexisting with Shinto elements within Shugendō^{[\[115\]](#)}

In 1613 during the [Edo period](#), the [Tokugawa Shogunate](#) issued a regulation obliging Shugendō temples to belong to either Shingon or Tendai temples. During the [Meiji Restoration](#), when Shinto was declared an independent state religion separate from Buddhism, Shugendō was banned as a superstition not fit for a new, enlightened Japan. Some Shugendō temples converted themselves into various officially approved Shintō denominations. In modern times, Shugendō is practiced mainly by Tendai and Shingon sects, retaining an influence on modern [Japanese religion](#) and [culture](#).^{[\[116\]](#)}

Academic study difficulties[\[edit\]](#)

Serious Vajrayana academic study in the Western world is in early stages due to the following obstacles:^{[\[117\]](#)}

Although a large number of Tantric scriptures are extant, they have not been formally ordered or systematized.

Due to the esoteric initiatory nature of the tradition, many practitioners will not divulge information or sources of their information.

As with many different subjects, it must be studied in context and with a long history spanning many different cultures.

Ritual, as well as doctrine, need to be investigated.

Buddhist tantric practice is categorized as secret practice; this is to avoid misinformed people from harmfully misusing the practices. A method to keep this secrecy is that tantric initiation is required from a master before any instructions can be received about the actual practice. During the initiation procedure in the highest class of tantra (such as the Kalachakra), students must take the tantric vows which commit them to such secrecy. ^[web 2] "Explaining general tantra theory in a scholarly manner, not sufficient for practice, is likewise not a root downfall. Nevertheless, it weakens the effectiveness of our tantric practice." ^[web 3]

Terminology^[edit]

The terminology associated with Vajrayana Buddhism can be confusing. Most of the terms originated in the [Sanskrit](#) language of tantric [Indian Buddhism](#) and may have passed through other cultures, notably those of Japan and Tibet, before translation for the modern reader. Further complications arise as seemingly equivalent terms can have subtle variations in use and meaning according to context, the time and place of use. A third problem is that the Vajrayana texts employ the tantric tradition of [twilight language](#), a means of instruction that is deliberately coded. These obscure teaching methods relying on [symbolism](#) as well as [synonym](#), [metaphor](#) and [word association](#) add to the difficulties faced by those attempting to understand Vajrayana Buddhism:

In the Vajrayana tradition, now preserved mainly in Tibetan lineages, it has long been recognized that certain important teachings are expressed in a form of secret symbolic language known as *saṃdhyā-bhāṣā*, 'Twilight Language'. [Mudrās](#) and [mantras](#), [mandalas](#) and [cakras](#), those mysterious devices and diagrams that were so much in vogue in the pseudo-Buddhist [hippie](#) culture of the 1960s, were all examples of Twilight Language [...]^[118]

The term Tantric Buddhism was not one originally used by those who practiced it. As scholar Isabelle Onians explains:

"Tantric Buddhism" [...] is not the transcription of a native term, but a rather modern coinage, if not totally occidental. For the equivalent Sanskrit *tāntrika* is found, but not in Buddhist texts. *Tāntrika* is a term denoting someone who follows the teachings of scriptures known as Tantras, but only in [Saivism](#), not Buddhism [...] Tantric Buddhism is a name for a phenomenon which calls itself, in Sanskrit, Mantranaya, Vajrayāna, Mantrayāna or Mantramahāyāna (and apparently never Tantrayāna). Its practitioners are known as *mantrins*, *yogis*, or *sādhakas*. Thus, our use of the anglicised adjective "Tantric" for the Buddhist religion taught in Tantras is not native to the tradition, but is a borrowed term which serves its purpose. ^[119]

See also^[edit]



Buddhism[[edit](#)]

[Buddhism in Bhutan](#)

[Buddhism in the Maldives](#)

[Buddhism in Nepal](#)

[Buddhism in Russia](#)

[Drukpa Lineage](#)

[Gyuto Order](#)

[Tawang Taktshang Monastery](#)

[Kashmir Shaivism](#)

[Category:Tibetan Buddhist teachers](#)

Notes[[edit](#)]

- [↑] Skilling, *Mahasutras*, volume I, parts I & II, 1997, Pali Text Society, page 78, speaks of the tantra divisions of some editions of the [Kangyur](#) as including Sravakayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana texts

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Religion

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Major religious groups and denominations¹

Abrahamic

Judaism

Orthodox

Haredi

Hasidic

Modern

Conservative

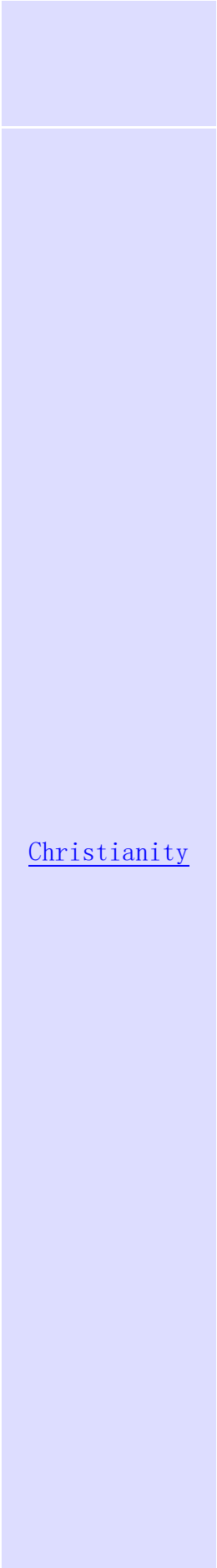
Reform

Karaite

Samaritanism

Haymanot

Reconstructionist



Christianity

Renewal

Humanistic

Catholicism

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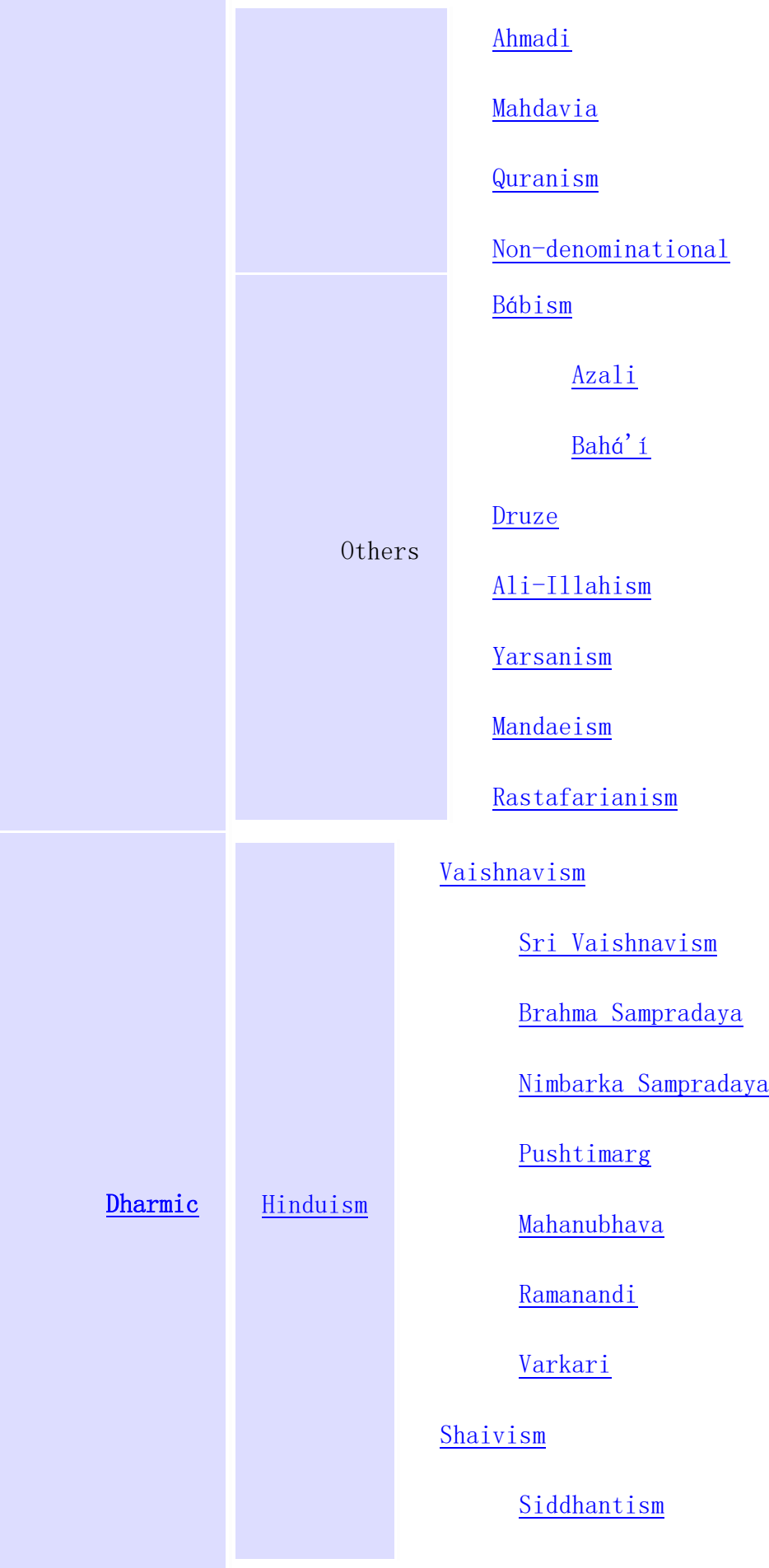
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		<u>Kashmir</u>
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		<u>Ayyavazhi</u>
Others		<u>Jainism</u>
		<u>Digambara</u>

		Śvētāmbara
		Ravidassia
		Sikhism
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		Sects
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	Slavic	
	Yazidism	
Uralic	Ossetian	
	Kalash	
	Estonian	
	Finnish	
	Hungarian	
	Mari	

	Mordvin
	Sámi
	Udmurt
Altaic	Turko-Mongolic
	Tengrism
	Burkhanism
	Vattisen Yaly
	Tungusic
	Manchu
	Evenki
Chinese	Confucianism
	Taoism
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	Yao Taoism
	Nuo
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	Xiantiandao
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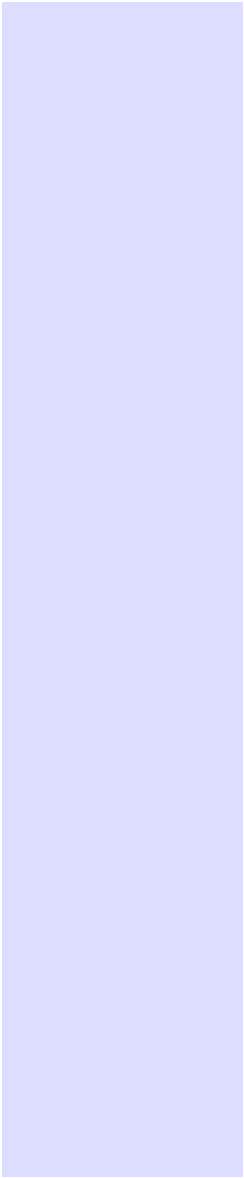
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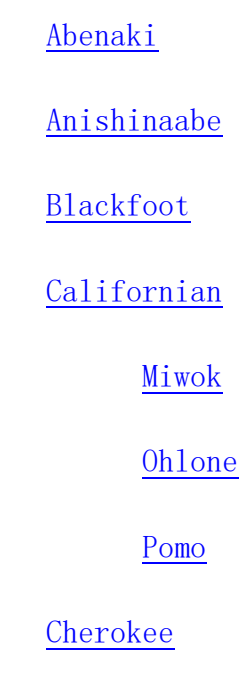
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Note:¹ The main source: [Eliade, Mircea](#), ed. (1987). *The Encyclopedia of Religion. 1 - 16.* New York: MacMillan.

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