

Theravada

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The [Thuparamaya](#) Stupa, the earliest Dagoba in [Sri Lanka](#), dating back to the reign of King Devanampiya Tissa (247 – 207 BCE).



Map showing the [three major Buddhist divisions](#) in [Tibet](#), [Mongolia](#), [Nepal](#), [East](#) and [Southeast Asia](#).

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Theravāda Buddhism



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Theravāda ([/ˈtɛrəˈvɑːdə/](#); [Pāli](#), lit. "School of the [Elders](#)")^{[1][2]} is the most commonly accepted name of [Buddhism's](#) oldest extant school.^{[1][2]} The school's adherents, termed Theravādins, have preserved their version of [Gautama Buddha's](#) teaching in the [Pāli Canon](#).^{[1][2]} The Pāli Canon is the only complete Buddhist canon surviving in a [classical Indian language](#), [Pāli](#), which serves as the school's [sacred language](#)^[2] and [lingua franca](#).^[3] For over a millennium, theravādins have endeavored to preserve the *dhamma* as recorded in their school's texts.^[web 1] In contrast to [Mahāyāna](#) and [Vajrayāna](#), Theravāda tends to be conservative in matters of doctrine and monastic discipline.^[4]

Modern Theravāda derives from the [Mahāvihāra](#) sect, a Sri Lankan branch of the [Vibhajjavādins](#), a sub-sect of the Indian [Sthavira Nikaya](#), which began to establish itself on the island from the 3rd century BCE onwards. It was in Sri Lanka that the [Pāli Canon](#) was written down and the school's [commentary](#) literature developed.

From Sri Lanka, the Theravāda [Mahāvihāra](#) tradition subsequently [spread to the rest of Southeast Asia](#).^[5] It is the dominant religion in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand and is practiced by minorities in India, Bangladesh, China, Nepal, and Vietnam. The [diaspora](#) of all of these groups, as well as converts around the world, also practice Theravāda.

During the modern era, new developments have included [Buddhist modernism](#), the [Vipassana movement](#) which reinvigorated Theravāda meditation practice^[web 1] and the [Thai Forest Tradition](#) which reemphasized forest monasticism.

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History

Origins



[Ashoka](#) and [Moggaliputta-Tissa](#) at the Third Council, at the Nava Jetavana, Shravasti

Part of [a series](#) on

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The name Theravāda comes^{[\[a\]](#)} from [Sthāvirīya](#), one of the [early Buddhist schools](#) from which Theravādins trace their school's descent. The Sthavira nikāya emerged from the first schism in the Buddhist sangha. At issue was its adherents' desire

to add new [Vinaya](#) rules tightening monastic discipline, against the wishes of the majority [Mahāsāṃghika](#).^[6] According to its adherents' accounts, the Theravāda school derives from the [Vibhajjavāda](#) "doctrine of analysis" group,^[7] which was a division of the Sthāvirīya.

[Damien Keown](#) denies that there is historical evidence of the Theravāda school's existence before around two centuries after the Great [Schism](#), which occurred at the Third Council.^[8] Theravadins' own accounts of their school's origins mention that it received the teachings that were agreed upon during the putative [Third Buddhist council](#) held around 250 BCE under the patronage of Indian Emperor [Ashoka](#). These teachings were known as the [Vibhajjavāda](#).^[9] Emperor Ashoka is supposed to have assisted in purifying the sangha by expelling monks who declined to agree to the terms of Third Council.^[10] The elder monk [Moggaliputta-Tissa](#) chaired the Third council and compiled the [Kathavatthu](#) ("Points of Controversy"), a refutation of various opposing views which is an important work in the Theravāda Abhidhamma.

Later, the Vibhajjavādins, in turn, is said to have split into four groups: the [Mahīśāsaka](#), [Kāśyapīya](#), [Dharmaguptaka](#) in the north, and the Tāmraparṇīya in South India. The Tambapaṇṇīya (later [Mahāvihāravāsins](#)), was established in Sri Lanka (at [Anuradhapura](#)) but active also in [Andhra](#) and other parts of [South India](#) (Vanavasa in modern [Karnataka](#)) and later across South-East Asia. Inscriptional evidence of this school has been found in [Amaravati](#) and [Nagarjunakonda](#).^[11] According to Buddhist scholar [A. K. Warder](#), the Theravāda.

spread rapidly south from [Avanti](#) into [Maharashtra](#) and [Andhra](#) and down to the [Chola](#) country ([Kanchi](#)), as well as Sri Lanka. For some time they maintained themselves in Avanti as well as in their new territories, but gradually they tended to regroup themselves in the south, the Great Vihara (Mahavihara) in [Anuradhapura](#), the ancient capital of Sri Lanka, becoming the main centre of their tradition, Kanchi a secondary center and the northern regions apparently relinquished to other schools.^[12]

Transmission to Sri Lanka



Sanghamitta and the Bodhi Tree

Theravāda is said to be descended from the Tāmraparṇīya sect, which means “the Sri Lankan lineage”. Missionaries sent abroad from India are said to have included Ashoka’s son [Mahinda](#) (who studied under [Moggaliputta-Tissa](#)) and his daughter [Sanghamitta](#). They were the mythical founders of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, a story which scholars suggest helps to legitimize Theravāda’s claims of being the oldest and most authentic school.^[10] According to the [Mahavamsa](#) chronicle, they arrived in Sri Lanka during the reign of [Devanampiya Tissa of Anuradhapura](#) (307 – 267 BCE) who converted to Buddhism and helped build the first Buddhist stupas. According to S. D. Bandaranayake:

The rapid spread of Buddhism and the emergence of an extensive organization of the sangha are closely linked with the secular authority of the central state ... There are no known artistic or architectural remains from this epoch except for the cave dwellings of the monks, reflecting the growth and spread of the new religion. The most distinctive features of this phase and virtually the only contemporary historical material, are the numerous Brahmi inscriptions associated with these caves. They record gifts to the sangha, significantly by householders and chiefs rather than by kings. The Buddhist religion itself does not seem to have established undisputed authority until the reigns of Dutthagamani and Vattagamani (c. mid-2nd century BCE to mid-1st century BCE) ...^[13]

The first records of Buddha images come from the reign of the King [Vasabha](#) (65 – 109 CE), and after the 3rd century CE the historical record shows a growth of the worship of Buddha images as well as [Bodhisattvas](#).^[13] In the 7th century, the Chinese pilgrim monks [Xuanzang](#) and [Yijing](#) refer to the Buddhist schools in Sri Lanka as *Shàngzuòbù* ([Chinese](#): 上座部), corresponding to the Sanskrit [Sthavira](#)

[nikāya](#) and Pāli *Thera Nikāya*.^[14] [Yijing](#) writes, "In Sri Lanka, the Sthavira school alone flourishes; the [Mahasanghikas](#) is expelled".^[15]

The school has been using the name *Theravāda* for itself in a written form since at least the 4th century, about one thousand years after the Buddha's death, when the term appears in the [Dīpavamsa](#).^[16]^[*need quotation to verify*]

Between the reigns of Sena I (833 – 853) and [Mahinda IV](#) (956 – 972), the city of [Anuradhapura](#) saw a "colossal building effort" by various kings during a long period of peace and prosperity, the great part of the present architectural remains in this city date from this period.^[17]

Development of the Pāli textual tradition

Main article: [Pali literature](#)



[Buddhaghosa](#) (c. 5th century), the most important Abhidharma scholar of [Theravāda](#) Buddhism, presenting three copies of the [Visuddhimagga](#).

The Sri Lankan Buddhist Sangha initially preserved the Buddhist scriptures (the [Tipitaka](#)) orally as it had been traditionally done, however during the first century BCE, famine and wars led to the writing down of these scriptures. The Sri Lankan chronicle The [Mahavamsa](#) records: "Formerly clever monks preserved the text of the Canon and its commentaries orally, but then, when they saw the disastrous state of living beings, they came together and had it written down in books, that the doctrine might long survive."^[18]

[Richard Gombrich](#) remarks that this is "the earliest record we have of Buddhist scriptures being committed to writing anywhere".^[18] With few exceptions, surviving Theravādin Pāli texts derive from the [Mahavihara](#) (monastic complex) of [Anuradhapura](#), the ancient Sri Lankan capital.^[19]

Later developments included the formation and recording of the Theravāda commentary literature ([Atthakatha](#)). Theravāda tradition holds that a tradition of Indian commentaries on the scriptures existed even during Mahinda's early days.^[20] Prior to the writing of the classic Theravādin Pāli commentaries, there were also various commentaries on the Tipitaka written in the [Sinhala language](#), such as the [Maha-atthakatha](#) ("Great commentary"), the main commentary tradition of the [Mahavihara](#) monks.^[21]

Of great importance to the commentary, tradition is the work of the great Theravāda scholastic [Buddhaghosa](#) (4th–5th century CE), who is responsible for most of the Theravāda commentarial literature that has survived (any older commentaries have been lost). [Buddhaghosa](#) wrote in [Pāli](#), and after him, most Sri Lankan Buddhist scholastics did as well.^[22] This allowed the Sri Lankan tradition to become more international through a [lingua franca](#) so as to converse with monks in India and later Southeast Asia.

Theravāda monks also produced other Pāli literature such as historical chronicles (e.g. [Mahavamsa](#)), hagiographies, practice manuals, summaries, textbooks, poetry, and Abhidhamma works such as the [Abhidhammattha-sangaha](#) and the [Abhidhammavatara](#). Buddhaghosa's work on Abhidhamma and Buddhist practice outlined in works such as the [Visuddhimagga](#) and the [Atthasalini](#) are the most influential texts apart from the Pāli Canon in the Theravādin tradition. Other Theravādin Pāli commentators and writers include [Dhammapala](#) and [Buddhadatta](#). Dhammapala wrote commentaries on the Pāli Canon texts, which Buddhaghosa had omitted, and also wrote a commentary called the *Paramathanjasa* on Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*.

Sri Lankan Theravāda sects



The restored Abhayagiri Dagoba (stupa) in [Anuradhapura](#)

Over much of the early history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, there were three subdivisions of Theravāda, consisting of the monks of the [Mahāvihāra](#), [Abhayagiri vihāra](#) and [Jetavana](#),^[23] each of which were based in [Anuradhapura](#). The Mahāvihāra was the first tradition to be established, while Abhayagiri Vihāra and Jetavana Vihāra were established by monks who had broken away from the Mahāvihāra tradition.^[23] According to A. K. Warder, the Indian [Mahīśāsaka](#) sect also established itself in Sri Lanka alongside the Theravāda, into which they were later absorbed.^[23] Northern regions of Sri Lanka also seem to have been ceded to sects from India at certain times.^[23]

When the Chinese monk [Faxian](#) visited the island in the early 5th century, he noted 5000 monks at Abhayagiri, 3000 at the Mahāvihāra, and 2000 at the Cetiypabbatavihāra.^[24]

The Mahavihara ("Great Monastery") school became dominant in Sri Lanka at the beginning of the 2nd millennium CE and gradually spread through mainland

Southeast Asia. It established itself in Myanmar in the late 11th century, in Thailand in the 13th and early 14th centuries, and in Cambodia and Laos by the end of the 14th century. Although Mahavihara never completely replaced other schools in Southeast Asia, it received special favor at most royal courts. This is due to the support it received from local elites, who exerted a very strong religious and social influence. ^[25]

Mahāyāna influence



Gilded bronze solid cast statue of the [Bodhisattva Tara](#), Sri Lanka, 8th century CE. This sculpture was found on the east coast of Sri Lanka between [Batticaloa](#) and [Trincomalee](#) and is evidence of the presence of [Mahayana Buddhism](#) in the [Anuradhapura period](#) of Sri Lanka.

[Abhayagiri](#) Theravādins maintained close relations with Indian Buddhists over the centuries, adopting many of the latter's teachings, ^[26] including many [Mahāyāna](#) elements, whereas [Jetavana](#) Theravādins adopted Mahāyāna to a lesser extent. ^[24]^[27] [Xuanzang](#) wrote of two major divisions of Theravāda in Sri Lanka, referring to the Abhayagiri tradition's adherents as "Mahāyāna Sthaviras" and those of the Mahāvihāra tradition as "[Hīnayāna](#) Sthaviras". ^[28] Xuanzang also wrote that the Mahāvihāravāsins reject Mahāyāna as heretical, whereas Abhayagirivihāravāsins study "both [Hīnayāna](#) and [Mahāyāna](#)". ^[24]

[Abhayagiri](#) was an influential university and center for the study of [Mahayana](#) from the reign of [Gajabahu I](#) until the 12th century. ^[29] It saw various important Buddhist scholars working in Sanskrit and Pāli. These include Upatissa (who wrote the [Vimuttimaggā](#)), Kavicakravarti Ananda (authored the *Saddhammopāyana*), [Aryadeva](#), Aryasura, and the tantric masters Jayabhadra, and Candramāli. ^[30]

Akira Hirakawa notes that the surviving Pāli commentaries (*Atthakathā*) of the Mahāvihāra school, when examined closely, also include a number of positions

that agree with Mahāyāna teachings.^[31] Kalupahana notes the same for the [Visuddhimagga](#), the most important Theravāda commentary.^[32]

It is known that in the 8th century, both Mahāyāna and the esoteric [Vajrayāna](#) form of Buddhism were being practised in Sri Lanka, and two Indian monks responsible for propagating Esoteric Buddhism in China, [Vajrabodhi](#) and [Amoghavajra](#), visited the island during this time.^[33] Abhayagiri Vihāra appears to have been a center for Theravādin Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna teachings.^[34]

Reign of Parakramabahu I



Parakramabahu I commissioned various religious projects such as [Gal Vihara](#) ('The Stone Shrine') in [Polonnaruwa](#) features three statues of the Buddha in three different poses carved from the same large rock.

The trend of the Abhayagiri Vihara being a dominant sect changed in the 12th century, when the Mahāvihāra sect gained the political support of [Parakramabahu I](#) (1153 – 1186), who completely abolished the Abhayagiri and Jetavanin traditions.^{[35][36]} The Theravāda monks of these two traditions were defrocked and given the choice of either returning to the laity permanently, or attempting reordination under the Mahāvihāra tradition as "novices" (*sāmanera*).^{[36][37]} [Richard Gombrich](#) writes:^[38]

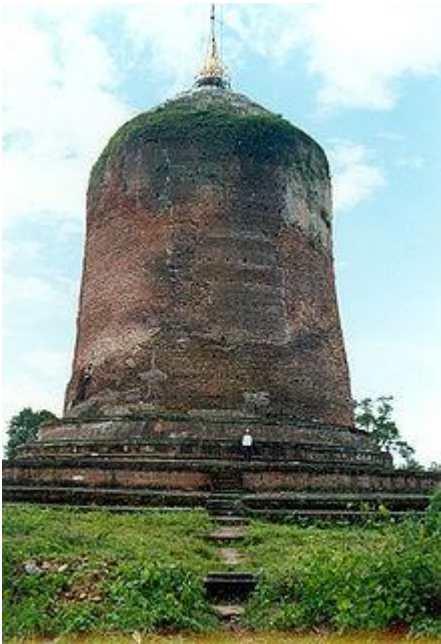
Though the chronicle says that he reunited the Sangha, this expression glosses over the fact that what he did was to abolish the Abhayagiri and Jetavana Nikāyas. He laicized many monks from the Mahā Vihāra Nikāya, all the monks in the other two – and then allowed the better ones among the latter to become novices in the now 'unified' Sangha, into which they would have in due course to be reordained.

It seems that part of the reason for these radical moves was that [Parakramabahu I](#) saw the Sangha as being divided, corrupt and in need of reform, especially the Abhayagiri.^[39] The [Cūlavamsa](#) laments that at this time Theravāda monks had "turned away in their demeanor from one another and took delight in all kinds of strife".^[40] This chronicle also claims that many monks in the Sri Lankan Sangha had even begun to marry and have children, behaving more like lay followers than monastics.^[41] Parākramabāhu's chief monastic leader in these

reforms was [Mahathera](#) Kassapa, an experienced monk well versed in the [Scriptures](#) and the [Monastic discipline](#).^[42]

[Parakramabahu I](#) is also known for rebuilding the ancient cities of [Anuradhapura](#) and [Polonnaruwa](#), restoring Buddhist [stupas](#) and [Viharas](#) (monasteries).^[43] He appointed a [Sangharaja](#), or "King of the Sangha", a monk who would preside over the Sangha and its ordinations in Sri Lanka, assisted by two deputies.^[38] The reign of Parakkamabāhu also saw a flowering of Theravāda scholasticism with the work of prominent Sri Lankan scholars such as Anuruddha, [Sāriputta Thera](#), [Mahākassapa Thera](#) of [Dimbulagala Vihara](#) and Moggallana Thera.^[43] They worked on compiling of [subcommentaries on the Tipitaka](#), texts on grammar, summaries and textbooks on Abhidhamma and Vinaya such as the influential [Abhidhammattha-sangaha](#) of Anuruddha.

Spread to Southeast Asia



Bawbawgyi Pagoda at [Sri Ksetra](#), prototype of Pagan-era pagodas

According to the [Mahavamsa](#), a Sri Lankan chronicle, after the conclusion of the [Third Buddhist council](#), a mission was sent to [Suvarnabhumi](#), led by two monks, Sona and Uttara.^[44] Scholarly opinions differ as to where exactly this land of Suvarnabhumi was located, but it is generally believed to have been located somewhere in the area of [Lower Burma](#), Thailand, the Malay Peninsula, or [Sumatra](#).

From the 8th to the 12th centuries Indian Buddhist traditions arrived in Southeast Asia via the [Bay of Bengal](#) from India.^[45] Before the 12th century, the areas of Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia were dominated by Buddhist sects from India, and included the teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism.^{[46][47]} In the 7th century, [Yijing](#) noted in his travels that in these areas, all major sects of Indian Buddhism flourished.^[46]

After the 12th century Buddhism mostly disappeared from India and Theravāda Buddhism came to dominate Southeast Asia.^[48]

Myanmar



Ruins of [Bagan](#), an ancient capital of Myanmar. There are more than 2,000 [kyaung](#) there. During the height of Bagan's power, there were some 13,000 kyaung.^[web 2]

Though there are some early accounts that have been interpreted as Theravāda in Myanmar, the surviving records show that most Burmese Buddhism incorporated Mahāyāna, and used [Sanskrit](#) rather than [Pāli](#).^{[47][49][50]} After the [decline of Buddhism in India](#), missions of monks from Sri Lanka gradually converted [Burmese Buddhism](#) to Theravāda, and in the next two centuries also brought Theravāda Buddhism to the areas of Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, where it supplanted previous forms of Buddhism.^[51]

The [Mon](#) and [Pyu](#) were among the earliest people to inhabit Myanmar. The oldest surviving Buddhist texts in the Pāli language come from [Pyu city-state](#) of [Sri Ksetra](#). The text, which is dated from the mid 5th to mid 6th century, is written on twenty-leaf manuscript of solid gold.^[52] Peter Skilling concludes that there is firm evidence for the dominant presence of Theravāda in "the [Irrawaddy](#) and [Chao Phraya](#) basins, from about the 5th century CE onwards", though he adds that evidence shows that [Mahāyāna](#) was also present.^[53]

The Burmese slowly became Theravādin as they came into contact with and conquered the Pyu and Mon civilizations beginning in the 11th century during the reign of the Bamar king [Anawrahta](#) (1044 – 1077) of the [Pagan Kingdom](#). He acquired the Pāli scriptures in a war against the Mon as well as from Sri Lanka and build stupas and monasteries at his capital of [Bagan](#).^[54] Various invasions of Burma by neighboring states and the [Mongol invasions of Burma](#) (13th century) damaged the Burmese sangha and Theravāda had to be reintroduced several times into the country from Sri Lanka and Thailand.

Cambodia and Thailand



Stairway to [Wat Phnom](#) guarded by [Nagas](#), the oldest Buddhist structure at the Cambodian capital of [Phnom Penh](#).



[Sukhothai Historical Park](#), Thailand.

The [Khmer Empire](#) (802 – 1431) centered in Cambodia was initially dominated by [Hinduism](#); Hindu ceremonies and rituals were performed by [Brahmins](#), usually only held among ruling elites of the king's family, nobles, and the ruling class. Tantric [Mahayana Buddhism](#) was also a prominent faith, promoted by Buddhist emperors such as [Jayavarman VII](#) (1181 – 1215) who rejected the Hindu gods and presented himself as a Bodhisattva King.

During his reign, King [Jayavarman VII](#) (c. 1181 – 1218) sent his son Tamalinda to Sri Lanka to be ordained as a Buddhist monk and study Theravāda Buddhism according to the Pāli scriptural traditions in the [Mahavihara](#) monastery. Tamalinda then returned to Cambodia and promoted Buddhist traditions according to the Theravāda training he had received, galvanizing and energizing the long-standing Theravāda presence, which had existed throughout the Angkor empire for centuries. During the 13th and 14th centuries, Theravādin monks from Sri Lanka continued introducing orthodox Theravāda Buddhism, which eventually became the dominant faith among all classes.^[55] Monastics replaced members of the local priestly classes, purveying religion, education, culture, and social service for Cambodian villages. This change in [Cambodian Buddhism](#) led to high levels of literacy among Cambodians.^[56]

In Thailand, Theravāda existed alongside Mahayana and other religious sects before the rise of [Sukhothai Kingdom](#).^[57] During the reign of King [Ram Khamhaeng](#) (c. 1237/1247 – 1298) Theravāda was made the main state religion and promoted by the king as the orthodox form of [Thai Buddhism](#).

Despite its success in Southeast Asia, Theravāda Buddhism in China has generally been limited to areas bordering Theravāda countries.

Tantric and esoteric innovations

Main article: [Tantric Theravada](#)

During the pre-modern era, Southeast Asian Buddhism included numerous elements which could be called [tantric](#) and [esoteric](#) (such as the use of [mantras](#) and [yantras](#) in elaborate rituals). The French scholar [François Bizot](#) has called this "[Tantric Theravāda](#)", and his textual studies show that it was a major tradition in Cambodia and Thailand. ^[58] Some of these practices are still prevalent in Cambodia and Laos today.

Later Theravāda textual materials show new and somewhat unorthodox developments in theory and practice. These developments include what has been called the "Yogāvacara tradition" associated with the Sinhala [Yogāvacara's manual](#) (c. 16th to 17th centuries) and also [Esoteric Theravāda](#) also known as *Borān kammattḥāna* ('ancient practices'). These traditions include new practices and ideas which are not included in classical orthodox Theravāda works like the [Visuddhimagga](#), such as the use of [mantras](#) (such as *Araham*), the practice of magical formulas, complex rituals and complex visualization exercises. ^{[59][60]} These practices were particularly prominent in the [Siam Nikaya](#) before the modernist reforms of King [Rama IV](#) (1851–1868) as well as in Sri Lanka.

Modernisation and spread to the West

See also: [Buddhist modernism](#) and [Vipassana movement](#)



Henry Olcott and Buddhists (Colombo, 1883).

In the 19th century began a process of mutual influence of both Asian Buddhists and Hinduists, and a Western audience interested in ancient wisdom. Theravāda was also influenced by this process, which lead to Buddhist modernism; especially [Helena Blavatsky](#) and [Henry Steel Olcott](#), founders of the [Theosophical Society](#), had a profound role in this process in Sri Lanka. Simultaneously, *vipassana*-meditation was re-invented, and in Theravāda countries a lay vipassana practice developed. This took a high flight in East Asia from the 1950s onwards with the *vipassana*-movement, and from the 1970s also in the west, with western students who popularized *vipassana*-meditation in the west, ^[61] giving way to the development and popularisation of mindfulness-practice. ^[62]

Reaction against Western colonialism

Buddhist revivalism has also reacted against changes in Buddhism caused by colonialist regimes. [Western colonialists](#) and [Christian missionaries](#) deliberately imposed a particular type of Christian monasticism on Buddhist clergy in Sri Lanka and colonies in Southeast Asia, restricting monks' activities to individual purification and temple ministries.^[63] Prior to [British colonial](#) control, monks in both Sri Lanka and Burma had been responsible for the education of the children of lay people, and had produced large bodies of literature. After the British takeover, Buddhist temples were strictly administered and were only permitted to use their funds on strictly religious activities. Christian ministers were given control of the education system and their pay became state funding for missions.^[64]

Foreign, especially British, rule had an enervating effect on the [Sangha](#).^[65] According to [Walpola Rahula](#), Christian missionaries displaced and appropriated the educational, social, and welfare activities of the monks, and inculcated a permanent shift in views regarding the proper position of monks in society through their institutional influence upon the elite.^[65] Many monks in post-colonial times have dedicated themselves to undoing these changes.^[66] Movements intending to restore Buddhism's place in society have developed in both Sri Lanka and Myanmar.^[67]

One consequence of the reaction against Western colonialism has been a modernization of Theravāda Buddhism: Western elements have been incorporated, and [meditation](#) practice has opened to a lay audience. Modernized forms of Theravādan practice have spread to the West.^[61]

Sri Lanka

See also: [Buddhism in Sri Lanka](#)



The [Temple of the Tooth](#) was renovated during the Buddhist revival.

In Sri Lanka, Theravādins were looking to Western culture for means to revitalize their own tradition^[68]. Christian missionaries were threatening the indigenous culture.^[69] As a reaction to this, Theravādins became active in spreading Buddhism and debating Christians. They were aided by the [Theosophical](#)

[Society](#), whose members were dedicated to searching for wisdom within ancient sources. [Anagarika Dharmapala](#) was one of the Theravāda leaders with whom the Theosophists sided. Dharmapala reached out to the middle classes, offering them religious practice and a religious identity, which were used to withstand the British imperialists. As a result of Dharmapala's efforts, lay practitioners started to practise meditation and study Buddhism, which had been reserved specifically for the monks. ^[70]

The [Pali Text Society](#)'s translation and publication of the Pāli Canon improved its availability to lay audiences in the both the West and the East. The Theosophical Society promoted western-lay interest in Theravāda Buddhism, which endured until the beginning of the 20th century. Interest rose again during the 1970s, leading to a surge of Westerners searching for enlightenment, and republication of the Pāli Canon, first in print, and later on the Internet.

Myanmar

See also: [Buddhism in Myanmar](#)



Convening of the Sixth Buddhist council at the Great Cave.

An influential modernist figure in Myanmar Buddhism was king [Mindon Min](#) (1808 – 1878). He promoted the [Fifth Buddhist council](#) (1871) and inscribed the Pali canon into marble slabs, creating the [world's largest book](#) in 1868. During his reign, various reformist sects came into being such as the Dwaya and the Shwegyin, who advocated a stricter monastic conduct than the mainstream Thudhamma tradition. ^[71] During colonial Burma, there were constant tensions between Christian missionaries and Buddhist monks (which included one of the first Western convert monks, [U Dhammaloka](#)). After independence, Myanmar was also the place for the [Sixth Buddhist council](#) ([Vesak](#) 1954 to Vesak 1956), which was attended by monks from eight Theravāda nations to recite the Pāli Canon. The Council synthesized a new redaction of the Pāli texts ultimately transcribed into several native scripts. In Myanmar, this *Chatṭha Saṅgīti Piṭaka* (Sixth council Pitaka) was published by the government in 40 volumes.

Modern [vipassanā](#) meditation practice was re-invented in Myanmar in the 19th century. The "New Burmese method" was developed by [U Nārada](#) and popularized by his student [Mahasi Sayadaw](#) and [Nyanaponika Thera](#). Another prominent teacher is [Bhikkhu Bodhi](#), a student of Nyanaponika. The New Burmese Method strongly emphasizes vipassanā over [samatha](#). It is regarded by traditionalists as a simplification of traditional Buddhist meditation techniques, suitable not only for monks but also for lay practitioners. The method has been popularized in the

West by teachers of the [vipassana movement](#) such as [Joseph Goldstein](#), [Jack Kornfield](#), [Tara Brach](#), [Gil Fronsda](#) and [Sharon Salzberg](#).

The Ledi lineage begins with [Ledi Sayadaw](#).^[72] [S. N. Goenka](#) is a well-known teacher in the Ledi-lineage. According to S. N. Goenka, vipassana techniques are essentially nonsectarian in character, and have universal application. Meditation centers teaching the vipassanā popularized by S. N. Goenka exist now in India, Asia, North and South America, Europe, Australia, Middle East and Africa.^[73]

Thailand and Cambodia

See also: [Buddhism in Thailand](#) and [Buddhism in Cambodia](#)



From 1824 - 1851 Prince [Mongkut](#) spent his life as a monk.

With the coming to power in 1851 of King [Mongkut](#), who had been a monk himself for twenty-seven years, the sangha, like the kingdom, became steadily more centralized and hierarchical, and its links to the state more institutionalized. Mongkut was a distinguished scholar of Pāli Buddhist scripture.^[74] Moreover, at that time the immigration of numbers of monks from Burma was introducing the more rigorous discipline characteristic of the Mon sangha. Influenced by the Mon and guided by his own understanding of the Tipitaka, Mongkut began a reform movement that later became the basis for the [Dhammayuttika Nikaya](#). Mongkut advocated a stricter adherence to the [Vinaya](#) (monastic discipline). He also emphasized study of the scriptures, and rationalism.^[75] His son [King Chulalongkorn](#) created a national structure for Buddhist monastics and established a nationwide system of monastic education.^[75]

In the early 1900s, Thailand's [Ajahn Sao Kantasīlo](#) and his student, [Mun Bhuridatta](#), led the [Thai Forest Tradition](#) revival movement. In the 20th century notable practitioners included [Ajahn Thate](#), [Ajahn Maha Bua](#) and [Ajahn Chah](#).^[76] It was later spread globally by Ajahn Mun's students including Ajahn Thate, Ajahn Maha Bua and Ajahn Chah and several Western disciples, among whom the most senior is [Luang Por Ajahn Sumedho](#).

Modern Buddhism in Cambodia was strongly influenced by Thai Buddhism. The [Dhammayuttika Nikaya](#) was introduced into the country during the reign of King [Norodom](#) (1834 - 1904) and benefited from royal patronage.^[77] The rule of the [Khmer Rouge](#) effectively destroyed Cambodia's Buddhist institutions by disrobing and killing monks and destroying temples.^[78] After the end of the regime the Sangha was re-established. An important figure of modern Cambodian Theravāda is [Maha Ghosananda](#) who promoted a form of [engaged Buddhism](#) to effect social change.

Modern developments



A man meditates in [Myanmar](#)

The following modern trends or movements have been identified.^{[79][web 3]}

- Modernism: attempts to adapt to the modern world and adopt some of its ideas; including, among other things:
 - Green movement, ecological work.^[80]
 - [Syncretism](#) with other Buddhist as well as Hindu (in Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, Bali and Thailand) traditions
 - Universal inclusivity
- Reformism: attempts to restore a supposed earlier, ideal state of Buddhism; includes in particular the adoption of Western scholars' theories of original Buddhism (in recent times the "Western scholarly interpretation of Buddhism" is the official Buddhism prevailing in Sri Lanka and Thailand).^[81]
- Ulmatism: tendency to concentrate on advanced teachings such as the [Four Noble Truths](#) at the expense of more elementary ones
- Neotraditionalism; includes among other things
 - Revival of ritualism
 - Remythologization
- Social and political action, including [engaged Buddhism](#), protesting and participating in election politics.^[82]
- [Devotional religiosity](#)
- Reaction to Buddhist nationalism
- Renewal of [forest monks](#)
- Revival of meditation practice (by monks and laypersons), emphasizing meditation centers and retreats. [Ledi Sayadaw](#) (1846 - 1923) is particular important in this regard.
- Revival of the Theravāda [bhikkhuni](#) (female monastic) lineage (not recognized by some male sangha authorities).

- [Convert Buddhism in Western countries](#), establishment of Western monastic orders (especially the [Thai forest tradition](#)) and development of Pāli scholarship in Western languages.

Texts

Pāli Canon

Main article: [Pali Canon](#)



One of the 729 large marble tablets of the Pali Canon (the [world's largest book](#)) inscribed using the [Burmese alphabet](#) at the [Kuthodaw Pagoda](#) in [Mandalay](#), Myanmar.

According to Kate Crosby, for Theravāda, the Pāli Canon is "the highest authority on what constitutes the Dhamma (the truth or teaching of the Buddha) and the organization of the Sangha (the community of monks and nuns)." ^[83]

The [Sutta](#) and [Vinaya](#) portion of the Tipitaka shows considerable overlap in content to the [Agamas](#), the parallel collections used by non-Theravāda schools in India which are preserved in [Chinese](#) and partially in [Sanskrit](#), [Prakrit](#), and [Tibetan](#), and the various non-Theravāda Vinayas. On this basis, both these sets of texts are generally believed to be the oldest and most authoritative texts on [pre-sectarian Buddhism](#) by scholars. It is also believed that much of the Pāli Canon, which is still used in Theravādin communities, was transmitted to [Sri Lanka](#) during the reign of [Ashoka](#). After being orally transmitted (as was the custom for religious texts in those days) for some centuries, the texts were finally committed to writing in the last century BCE, at what Theravādins usually reckon to be the fourth council, in Sri Lanka. Theravāda is one of the first Buddhist schools to commit its complete Canon to writing. ^[84]

Much of the material in the Canon is not specifically "Theravādan", but the collection of teachings that this school's adherents preserved from the early, non-sectarian body of teachings. According to Peter Harvey:

The Theravādans, then, may have *added* texts to the Canon for some time, but they do not appear to have tampered with what they already had from an earlier period.^[85]

The Pāli Tipitaka consists of three parts: the [Vinaya Pitaka](#), [Sutta Pitaka](#) and [Abhidhamma Pitaka](#). Of these, the Abhidhamma Pitaka is believed to be a later addition to the first two pitakas, which, in the opinion of many scholars, were the only two pitakas at the time of the [First Buddhist Council](#). The Pāli Abhidhamma was not recognized outside the Theravāda school.

The Tipitaka is composed of 45 volumes in the Thai edition, 40 in the Burmese and 58 in the Sinhala, and a full set of the Tipitaka is usually kept in its own (medium-sized) cupboard.

Vinaya (monastic discipline) and *Abhidhamma*

According to Kate Crosby:

Since much Sutta material overlaps with that found in the Sūtra collections of other Buddhist traditions, it is the Vinaya (monastic discipline) and Abhidhamma that are the most distinctive formal aspects of Theravāda Buddhism, unique to Theravāda.^[86]

The [Vibhajjavāda](#) school (‘the analysts’), the branch of the [Sthāvira](#) school from which Theravāda is derived, differed from other [early Buddhist schools](#) on a variety of teachings.^[87] The differences resulted from the systematization of the Buddhist teachings, which was preserved in the [Abhidharmas](#) of the various schools.^[88] The unique doctrinal positions of the Theravāda school are expounded in what is known as the [Abhidhamma-piṭaka](#), as well as in the later [Pāli](#) commentaries (*Attha-kathā*) and sub-commentaries (*ṭīkā*). Because of the size of this canonical and commentarial literature the Pāli tradition developed a tradition of handbooks and doctrinal summaries, the most influential of which are the [Visuddhimagga](#) and the [Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha](#).^[89]

The Pāli [Abhidhamma](#) is “a restatement of the doctrine of the Buddha in strictly formalized language ... assumed to constitute a consistent system of philosophy”.^[90] Its aim is not the empirical verification of Buddhist teachings,^[90] but “to set forth the correct interpretation of the Buddha’s statements in the *Sutra* to restate his ‘system’ with perfect accuracy”.^[90] Because Abhidhamma focuses on analyzing the internal lived experience of beings and the intentional structure of consciousness, the system has often been compared to a kind of [phenomenological psychology](#) by numerous scholars such as [Nyanaponika](#), [Bhikkhu Bodhi](#) and [Alexander Piatigorsky](#).^[91]

The Theravāda school has traditionally held the doctrinal position that the canonical [Abhidhamma Pitaka](#) was actually taught by the Buddha himself.^[92] Modern

scholarship in contrast, has generally held that the Abhidhamma texts date from the 3rd century BCE.^[93] However some scholars, such as [Frauwallner](#), also hold that the early Abhidhamma texts developed out of [exegetical](#) and [catechetical](#) work which made use of doctrinal lists which can be seen in the suttas, called *matikas*.^{[94][95]}

Non-canonical literature

Main article: [Pali literature](#)

In the 4th or 5th century [Buddhaghosa](#) Thera wrote the first [Pāli commentaries](#) to much of the [Tipitaka](#) (which were based on much older manuscripts, mostly in old Sinhala), including commentaries on the [Nikayas](#) and his commentary on the [Vinaya](#), the *Samantapāsādikā*. Buddhaghosa wrote as part of the [Mahavihara](#) tradition in Sri Lanka, a tradition which came to dominate the island and all of Theravāda after the 12th century.^[96]

After him many other monks wrote various texts, which have become part of Theravāda's heritage. These texts do not have the same authority as the Tipitaka does, though Buddhaghosa's [Visuddhimagga](#) is a cornerstone of the commentarial tradition.

Another important genre of Theravādin literature is shorter handbooks and summaries, which serve as introductions and study guides for the larger commentarial works. Two of the more influential summaries are Sariputta Thera's *Pālimuttakavinayavinicchayaśāṅgaha*, a summary of Buddhaghosa's Vinaya commentary and Anuruddha's [Abhidhammatthasāṅgaha](#) (Manual of Abhidhamma).^[89]

The Pāli texts and language are symbolically and ritually important for many Theravādins; however, most people are likely to access Buddhist teachings through vernacular literature, oral teachings, sermons, art and performance as well as films and Internet media.^[97] According to Kate Crosby, "there is a far greater volume of Theravāda literature in vernacular languages than in Pāli."^[98]

An important genre of Theravādin literature, in both Pāli and vernacular languages are the [Jataka](#) tales, stories of the Buddha's past lives. They are very popular among all classes and are rendered in a wide variety of media formats, from cartoons to high literature. The [Vessantara Jātaka](#) is one of the most popular of these.^[99]

Theravāda Buddhists consider much of what is found in the Chinese and Tibetan Mahāyāna scriptural collections to be apocryphal, meaning that they are not authentic words of the Buddha.^[100]

Study (*pariyatti*)

See also: [Early Buddhism](#) and [Abhidhamma](#)



Painting of Buddha's first sermon from [Wat Chedi Liem](#) in Thailand

Theravāda traditionally promotes itself as the [Vibhajjavāda](#) "teaching of analysis". This doctrine holds that insight must come from the aspirant's experience, application of knowledge, and critical reasoning. However, the Theravādin school's scriptures also emphasize heeding the advice of the wise, considering such advice and evaluation of one's own experiences to be the two tests by which practices should be judged. ^{[[citation needed](#)]} Yet, in its actual praxis, according to Braun, "the majority of Theravadins and dedicated Buddhists of other traditions, including monks and nuns, have focused on cultivating moral behavior, preserving the Buddha's teachings (dharma), and acquiring the good karma that comes from generous giving." ^{[[web 1](#)]}

Core doctrines

The core of Theravāda doctrine is contained in the [Pāli Canon](#), the only complete collection of [Early Buddhist texts](#) surviving in a classical [Indic language](#). ^{[[101](#)]} These ideas are shared by other [Early Buddhist schools](#) as well as by [Mahayana](#) traditions. They include central concepts such as:

- The [Middle Way](#)
- [The four noble truths](#)
- [The Noble Eightfold Path](#)
- [Three marks of existence](#) ([impermanence](#), [suffering](#), [not-self](#))
- [Five aggregates](#)
- [Dependent arising](#)
- [Karma](#) and [rebirth](#)
- [Jhana](#)
- [The Bodhipakkhiyādhammā](#) (37 factors conducive to awakening)
- [Kleshas](#) (mental defilements) and [asavas](#)

- [Avidyā \(Ignorance\)](#)
- [Nirvana](#)

Dhamma theory

In the Pāli Nikayas, the Buddha teaches through a method in which experience is explained using various conceptual groupings of physical and mental processes, which are called dhammas. Examples of lists of dhammas taught by the Buddha include the twelve sense 'spheres' or [ayatanas](#), the [five aggregates](#) or khanda and the eighteen elements of cognition or [dhatus](#).^[102]

Expanding this model, the Pāli Abhidhamma concerned itself with analyzing "[ultimate truth](#)" (*paramattha-sacca*) which it sees as being composed of *all possible* dhammas and their relationships. The central theory of the Pāli [Abhidhamma](#) is thus known as the "[Dhamma theory](#)".^{[103][104]}

Characteristics

"Dhamma" has been translated as "factors" (Collett Cox), "psychic characteristics" (Bronkhorst), "psycho-physical events" (Noa Ronkin) and "phenomena" ([Nyanaponika Thera](#)).^{[105][3]} Dhammas are defined by the Theravāda commentary, the [Atthasālinī](#), as:

Dhammas bear their own particular natures ([sabhāva](#)). Alternatively, dhammas are borne by conditions, or according to particular natures.^[106]

According to Y. Karunadasa, a dhamma, which can be translated as "a 'principle' or 'element' (*dharma*)", is "those items that result when the process of analysis is taken to its ultimate limits".^[103] However, this does not mean that they have an independent existence, for it is "only for the purposes of description" that they are postulated.^[107] Noa Ronkin defines dhammas as "the constituents of sentient experience; the irreducible 'building blocks' that make up one's world, albeit they are not static mental contents and certainly not substances."^[108] Noa Ronkin also argues that there was gradual shift from the early canonical texts which tended to explain experience in terms of changing [processes](#), to the Abhidhamma tradition which analyzed these processes into distinct mental [events](#).^[109]

Dhammas are not permanent, discrete and separate entities, they are always in dependently conditioned relationships with other dhammas and always changing, arising and vanishing. It is thus only for the sake of description that they are said to have their "own nature" ([sabhāva](#)).^[110] Alternatively, Theravāda commentaries sometimes equate the two terms, such as the [Visuddhimagga](#) which states that 'dhamma means sabhava'.^[106] According to Peter Harvey, the Theravāda view of a dhamma's [sabhāva](#) is that it refers to an individualizing characteristic (*salakkhana*) that "is not something inherent in a dhamma as a

separate ultimate reality, but arise due to the supporting conditions both of other dhammas and previous occurrences of that dhamma".^[111] Noa Ronkin argues that in Theravāda Abhidhamma, "*sabhava* is predominantly used for the sake of determining the dhammas' individuality, not their existential status".^[112] Ronkin also adds:

the concept of *sabhava* attests to the Theravadins' interest in unveiling the nature of conscious experience: this, they presumed, could be carried out by enumerating the possible types of those events constituting one's experience and by individuating them. To individuate the dhammas the Abhidhammikas had to provide a method for determining what any given dhammic instance of every possible event-type is and what makes it so, and for this purpose they used the concept of *sabhava*.^[113]

Thus, while in Theravāda Abhidhamma, dhammas are the ultimate constituents of experience, they are not seen as [substances](#), [essences](#) or independent particulars, since they are empty (*suñña*) of a self (*attā*) and conditioned.^[114] This is spelled out in the [Patisambhidhammagga](#), which states that dhammas are empty of [svabhava](#) (*sabhavena suññam*).^[115]

According to Ronkin, the canonical Pāli Abhidhamma remains pragmatic and psychological, and "does not take much interest in [ontology](#)" in contrast with the [Sarvastivada](#) tradition. Paul Williams also notes that the Abhidhamma remains focused on the practicalities of insight meditation and leaves ontology "relatively unexplored".^[116] Ronkin does note however that later Theravāda sub-commentaries (*ṭīkā*) do show a doctrinal shift towards ontological [realism](#) from the earlier epistemic and practical concerns.^[117]

Classification of dhammas

The Theravāda Abhidhamma holds that there is a total of 82 possible types of dhammas, 81 of these are conditioned ([sankhata](#)), while one is unconditioned, which is [nibbana](#). The 81 conditioned dhammas are divided into three broad categories, consciousness ([citta](#)), associated mentality ([cetasika](#)) and materiality, or physical phenomena (*rupa*).^[118] Since no dhamma exists independently, every single dhamma of consciousness, known as a *citta*, arises associated (*sampayutta*) with at least seven [mental factors](#) ([cetasikas](#)).^[119] In Abhidhamma, all awareness events are thus seen as being characterized by [intentionality](#) and never exist in isolation.^[118]

Much of Abhidhamma philosophy deals with categorizing the different consciousnesses and their accompanying mental factors as well as their conditioned relationships (*paccaya*).^[119] The [mental factors](#) for example, are divided into:

1. Universal mental factors (*sabbacittasādhāraṇa cetasikas*), which are basic and rudimentary cognitive functions.

2. Occasional or particular mental factors (*pakiṇṇaka cetasikas*).
3. Unwholesome mental factors (*akusala cetasikas*), accompanied by one or another of the [three unwholesome roots](#) - greed, hatred, and delusion.
4. Beautiful mental factors (*sobhana cetasikas*), accompanied by the wholesome roots - non-greed or generosity, non-hatred or loving-kindness, and non-delusion or wisdom.

Two truths

According [Y. Karunadasa](#), for the Theravāda, the [two truths theory](#) which divides reality into *sammuti* (worldly conventions) and *paramattha* (ultimate, absolute truths) is a doctrinal innovation of the Abhidhamma, but it has its origins in some statements from the early [Pāli Nikayas](#). This can mainly be seen in the distinction made in the [Aṅguttara-nikāya](#) between statements (not truths) that are *nītattha* (explicit, definitive) and *neyyattha* (requiring further explanation). ^[120] Karunadasa notes that in the Nikayas, "no preferential value judgment is made between *nītattha* and *neyyattha*. All that is emphasized is that the two kinds of statement should not be confused." ^[120] Another early source of this doctrine is the Saṅgīti-sutta of the [Dīgha-nikāya](#), which lists four kinds of knowledge: (a) the direct knowledge of the doctrine (*dhamme ñāna*), (b) the inductive knowledge of the doctrine (*anvaye ñāna*), (c) knowledge of analysis (*paricchede ñāna*), and knowledge of (linguistic) conventions (*sammuti-ñāna*). ^[120] However, in the earlier Nikayas, as opposed to the Abhidhamma, *sammuti* (linguistic conventions) is not analyzed down into existents called *paramattha* (ultimate). ^[120] In the Theravāda Abhidhamma, the distinction does arise, referring to:

two levels of reality, namely that which is amenable to analysis and that which defies further analysis. The first level is called *sammuti* because it represents conventional or relative truth or what is called consensual reality, and the second is called *paramattha* because it represents the absolute truth or ultimate reality. ^[121]

Thus, in orthodox Theravāda Abhidhamma, when a situation is explained in terms of what cannot be empirically analyzed further into smaller components with different characteristics (*lakkhana*) that explanation is *paramattha-sacca* (ultimate truth), and when it is explained in terms of *what is* analyzable further due to being dependent on the mind's synthesizing function (i.e. *paññatti*), that explanation is *sammuti-sacca* (truth by convention), which exists in a relative or conventional sense due to mental conception (*attha-paññatti*) and linguistic construction (*nama-paññatti*). ^[120] However, even these ultimate components (i.e. *dhammas*) are [dependently originated](#), "necessarily co-existent and positionally inseparable (*padesato avinibhoga*)". ^[120] Unlike in the Sanskrit-based Buddhist tradition which refer to the conventional truth as [samvrti](#) (which has the meaning of concealing or covering), the Pāli Abhidhamma term *sammuti* just means human convention and does not have this connotation of an inferior

truth hiding a higher truth.^[120] Therefore, as pointed out by [K.N. Jayatilleke](#), the Theravāda version of two truths “does not imply that what is true in the one sense is false in the other or even that the one kind of truth is superior to the other”.^[122] As Karunadasa writes:

the distinction between *sammuti-sacca* and *paramattha-sacca* does not refer to two kinds of truth as such, but to two ways of presenting what is true. Although they are formally introduced as two truths, they are explained as two modes of expressing what is true. They do not represent two degrees of truth, of which one is superior or inferior to the other. Nor do they represent two parallel truths.^[120]

Because of this, in Pali Abhidhamma, even *paramattha-sacca* is explained through concepts, though the ultimate itself is not a product of the mind’s conceptual function (*paññatti*), it cannot be explained without the medium of *paññatti*.^[120] Furthermore, according to Tse Fu Kuan, the [Dhammasaṅgani](#), “does not appear to uphold that dhammas are ultimate realities as against conventional constructs like persons.” This text also states that “all dhammas are ways of designation (*paññatti*)”, that “all dhammas are ways of interpretation (*nirutti*)” and that “all dhammas are ways of expression (*adhivacana*)”.^[121] Therefore, the canonical [Abhidhamma Pitaka](#) does not uphold the interpretation of the two truths as referring to primary ontological realities (as seen in the later commentarial Theravāda and also in [Sarvastivada](#)).^[121]

Doctrinal differences with other Buddhist schools

The doctrinal stances of the Theravāda school vis-a-vis other [early Buddhist schools](#) is presented in the [Pāli](#) text known as the [Kathāvatthu](#), “Points of Controversy”, which said to have been compiled by the scholar [Moggaliputta-Tissa](#) (c. 327 – 247 BCE). It includes several [philosophical](#) and [soteriological](#) matters, including the following.

View of the Arhat

Theravādins believe that an awakened [arahant](#) (lit. *worthy one*) has an “incorruptible nature”, unlike other early Buddhist schools like the [Mahāsāṃghika](#), whose adherents believed that [arahants](#) could regress.^[123] Theravādins also reject the idea that an arahant may lack knowledge, harbour doubts, or have nocturnal emissions, thereby still exhibiting some residual attachment to sensuality.^[124] They also argued against the Uttarapathaka school’s view that a layperson can become an arahant and continue to live the household life.^[124]

View of the Buddha

The Theravāda school rejected the view of the [Lokottaravada](#) schools which held that even the [Buddha's](#) conventional speech was supramundane or transcendental.^[125] They also rejected the proto-[Mahayana docetic](#) view of the Vetulyaka school that the Buddha himself did not teach the Dharma, but that it was taught by his magical creation or "phantom" while he himself remained in [Tavatimsa](#) Heaven.^[126]

Insight is sudden and perfect

According to the Theravāda, "progress in understanding comes all at once, 'insight' (*abhisamaya*) does not come 'gradually' (successively - *anapurva*)", a belief known as [subitism](#).^[127] This is reflected in the Theravāda account on the [four stages of enlightenment](#), in which the attainment of the four paths appears suddenly and the defilements are rooted out at once. The same stance is taken in the contemporary [vipassana movement](#), especially the "New Burmese Method".^[citation needed]

Philosophy of time

On the [Philosophy of time](#), the Theravāda tradition holds to [philosophical presentism](#), the view that only present moment dhammas exist, against the [eternalist](#) view of the [Sarvāstivādin](#) tradition which held that dhammas exist in all three times - past, present, future.^[128]

The early Theravādins who compiled the [Kathāvatthu](#) also rejected the doctrine of momentariness (Skt., *kṣāṇavāda*, Pāli, *khāṇavāda*) upheld by other Buddhist Abhidharma schools like the Sarvāstivāda, which held that all dhammas lasted for a "moment", which for them meant an atomistic unit of time, that is the shortest possible time interval.^[129] According to Noa Ronkin, Theravādins meanwhile used the term "moment" (*khāṇa*) as a simple expression for a "short while", "the dimension of which is not fixed but may be determined by the context".^[129] In the *Khanikakatha* of the [Kathavatthu](#), the Theravādins also argue that "only mental phenomena are momentary, whereas material phenomena endure for a stretch of time".^[129]

Rebirth and Bhavanga

Orthodox Theravādins, following the [Kathavatthu](#), rejected the doctrine of the [intermediate state](#) between death and [rebirth](#) (*antarabhāva*), holding instead that rebirth is immediate.^[130] However, some Theravādin monks, such as Ven. [Balangoda Ananda Maitreya](#), have recently written in favor of the idea.^[131]

The doctrine of the [Bhavanga](#) ("ground of becoming", "condition for existence") is an innovation of the Theravāda Abhidhamma, where it is a passive mode of consciousness (*citta*). According to [Rupert Gethin](#), it is "the state in which the mind is said to rest when no active consciousness process is occurring", such as

that which prevails during deep, dreamless sleep.^[132] It is also said to be a process conditioning future rebirth consciousness.^[132]

Rupa (the physical)

Orthodox Theravāda's position on the nature of the physical (*rupa*) is that it is one of the two main [dependently originated](#) processes of a person (as part of the mind-body complex called [nama-rupa](#)). However, there is no dualism between these two, they are merely clusters of interacting processes, each depending on the other.^[133] As noted by [Buddhaghosa](#) ([Vism.](#) 596), each can only occur "supported by" (*nissaya*) the other, they are like a blind man that carries a crippled man, or two sheaves of reeds which lean on each other and support each other.^[133]

Rupa is mainly defined in terms of the four [mahabhuta](#), the four 'primary' physical phenomena: solidity (literally 'earth'), cohesion (literally 'water'), heat (literally 'fire') and motion (literally 'air').^[133] In the Pāli Abhidhamma, the four primaries began to refer to the irreducible factors or data that make up the physical world.^[107] These basic phenomena come together to make up secondary physical phenomena, such as the sense organs. Thus, according to [Y Karunadasa](#), Pāli Buddhism does not [deny the existence of the external world](#) and thus is a kind of [realism](#). However, Theravāda also follows the view that rupa, like all skandhas, is void ([suñña](#)), empty (*ritta*) and essence-less (*asara*).^[134] Rupa dhammas are thus not atomic ontological substances and are merely outlined as a pragmatic descriptions of the world of experience.^[135] According to Karunadasa, this steers a middle course between the view that "all is an absolute unity" (*sabbam ekattam*) and that it is absolute separateness (*sabbam puthuttam*).^[136] Also, according to Noa Ronkin, Theravāda Abhidhamma:

did not incorporate the Northern [Buddhist atomistic](#) theory as such into their system. As Karunadasa indicates, the Theravadin canonical texts do not mention the idea of a unitary atom or the term [paramanu](#). Rather, the post-canonical texts employ the term [kalapa](#) (literally 'package'), which corresponds to the collective atom of the [Sarvastivada-Vaibhasika](#), that is, the smallest material unit that contains the eight elements.^[137]

Furthermore, the term kalapa for the collective atom only became standard in the sub-commentarial literature and it is not a singular particle, but a collection of *rupa-dhammas*, which are inseparable from each other and always occur simultaneously (*sahajata*).^[137]

Modern trends

The modern era saw new developments in Theravāda scholarship due to the influence of Western thought. As Donald K Swearer writes:

Although monastic education is still grounded in the study of Buddhist texts, doctrine, and the Pali language, the curricula of monastic colleges and universities also reflect subject matter and disciplines associated with Western education. ^[138]

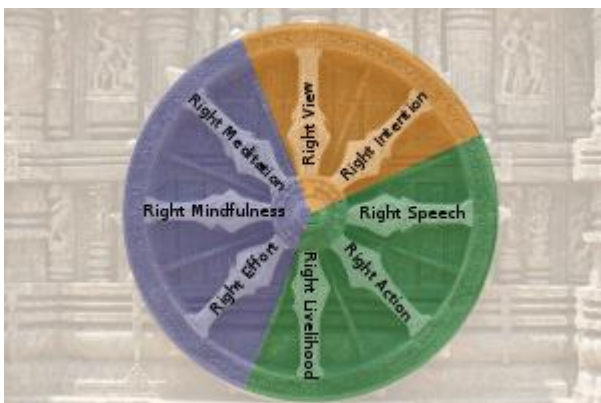
[Buddhist modernist](#) trends can be traced to figures like [Anagarika Dhammapala](#) and King [Mongkut](#). ^[139] They promoted a form of Buddhism that was compatible with rationalism and science, and opposed to superstition. [Walpola Rahula](#)'s, [What the Buddha Taught](#) is seen by scholars as an introduction to modernist Buddhist thought and this book continues to be widely used in universities. ^[138] Another phenomenon is Buddhist philosophers educated in the West, such as [K. N. Jayatilleke](#) (a student of [Wittgenstein](#)) and [Hammalawa Saddhatissa](#), going on to write modern works on [Buddhist philosophy](#) (*Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, 1963 and *Buddhist Ethics*, 1987 respectively).

The colonial clash with Christianity also led to debates (such as the [Panadura debate](#)) and doctrinal works written in defense of Buddhism or attacking Christian ideas, such as Gunapala Dharmasiri's *A Buddhist critique of the Christian concept of God* (1988).

Another development has been modern literature promoting socially [Engaged Buddhism](#) and [Buddhist economics](#) from thinkers such as [Buddhadasa](#), [Sulak Sivaraksa](#), [Prayudh Payutto](#), [Neville Karunatilake](#) and Padmasiri de Silva.

Modern scholarship by Western Buddhist monks such as [Nyanaponika Thera](#) was also a new development in the modern era.

Practice (*paṭipatti*)



The [Dharma wheel](#) with eight spokes usually symbolizes the [eightfold path](#).

Textual basis

In the [Pāli Canon](#), the path (*magga*) or way (*patipada*) of Buddhist practice is [described in various ways](#), one of the most widely used frameworks in Theravāda is the [Noble Eightfold Path](#):

The Blessed One said, "Now what, monks, is the Noble Eightfold Path? Right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration."^[web 4]

The Noble Eightfold Path can also be summarized as the Three Noble Disciplines of [sīla](#) (moral conduct or discipline), [samādhi](#) (meditation or concentration) and [paññā](#) (understanding or wisdom).^{[web 5][140][web 6]}

Theravāda orthodoxy takes the [seven stages of purification](#) as outlined in the [Visuddhimagga](#) as the basic outline of the path to be followed. The [Visuddhimagga](#), a Sinhala Theravāda doctrinal [summa](#) written in the fifth century by [Buddhaghosa](#), became the orthodox account of the Theravāda path to liberation in Sri Lanka after the 12th century and this influence spread to other Theravāda nations.^[96] It gives the sequence of seven purifications, in three sections:

- The first section (part 1) explains the rules of discipline, and the method for finding a correct temple to practice, or how to meet a [good teacher](#).
- The second section (part 2) describes [samatha](#) (calming) practice, object by object (see [kammattthāna](#) for the list of the forty traditional objects). It mentions different stages of [samādhi](#).
- The third section (parts 3–7) is a description of the five [khandhas](#), [ayatanas](#), the [Four Noble Truths](#), [dependent origination](#), and the practise of [vipassanā](#) (insight) through the development of wisdom. It emphasizes [different forms of knowledge](#) emerging because of the practice. This part shows a great analytical effort specific to [Buddhist philosophy](#).

This basic outline is based on the threefold discipline. The emphasis is on understanding the [three marks of existence](#), which removes [ignorance](#). Understanding destroys the ten [fetters](#) and leads to [nibbana](#).

Theravādins believe that every individual is personally responsible for achieving his or her own self-awakening and liberation, each being responsible for his or her own [kamma](#) (actions and consequences). Applying knowledge acquired through direct experience and personal realization is more heavily emphasized than beliefs about the nature of reality as revealed by the Buddha.

Moral conduct



Giving (Dana) is an important Buddhist virtue. The community of monastics is seen as the most meritorious field of karmic fruitfulness.

[Sila](#), meaning moral conduct, is mainly defined as [right speech](#), [right action](#), and [right livelihood](#). It is primarily understood through the doctrine of [kamma](#). In Theravāda, one's previous intentional actions strongly influence one's present experience. Whatever intended actions are carried out will have future consequences, whether in this life or subsequent lives.^[141] Intention is central to the idea of kamma. Actions done with good intentions, even if they have bad results, will not have negative kammic consequences.

Several sets of precepts or moral trainings (*sikkhāpada*) guide right action. After taking [refuge](#) in the three jewels, lay Theravādins traditionally take the five precepts (whether for life or for a limited time) in the presence of a monastic.^[142] Laypeople also sometimes take an extended set of eight precepts, which includes chastity during special occasions such as religious holidays.

Performing good deeds is another important feature of Theravāda ethics. Doing so is said to make "merit" ([puñña](#)), which results in a better rebirth. The "ten wholesome actions" is a common list of good deeds:^[143]

1. Generosity (dāna); This typically involves providing monks with "the four requisites"; food, clothing, shelter, and medicine; however, giving to the lay needy is also considered dāna.
2. Moral conduct (sīla); Keeping the five precepts and generally refraining from doing harm.
3. Meditation (bhāvanā).
4. Transferring merit; doing good deeds in the name of someone who has died or in the name of all beings.
5. Rejoicing in merit of good deeds done by others, this is common in communal activities.
6. Rendering service to others; looking after others.
7. Honoring others; showing appropriate deference, particularly to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, and to seniors and parents. Usually done by placing the hands together in [Añjali Mudrā](#), and sometimes bowing.
8. Preaching [Dhamma](#); the gift of Dhamma is seen as the highest gift.
9. Listening to Dhamma
10. Having correct views; mainly the [four noble truths](#) and the [three marks of existence](#).

Meditation

Main article: [Buddhist meditation](#)



Theravādin monks meditating in [Bodhi Gaya](#) ([Bihar](#), India)

Meditation (Pāli: *Bhāvanā*, literally “causing to become” or cultivation) means the positive cultivation of one’s mind.

Forms

Theravāda Buddhist meditation practice varies considerably in technique and objects.^[144] Currently, there are also various traditions of Theravāda meditation practice, such as the [Burmese Vipassana tradition](#), the [Thai Forest tradition](#), the esoteric [Borān kammattḥāna](#) (‘ancient practices’), the Burmese [Weikza](#) tradition, [Dhammakaya meditation](#) and the Western [Insight Meditation](#) movement.

Theravāda Buddhist meditation practices or [bhavanas](#) (cultivations) are categorized into two broad categories: [Samatha](#) bhavana (calming), and [Vipassanā](#) bhavana (investigation, insight).^[web 7] Originally these referred to effects or qualities of meditation, but after the time of [Buddhaghosa](#), it also referred to two distinct meditation types or paths (*yāna*).^{[145][146][web 8]}

Samatha (“calm”) consists of meditation techniques in which the mind is focused on a single object, thought, or mantra, leading to [samadhi](#). In traditional Theravāda, it is considered to be the base for *vipassanā* (“insight”). In the Theravāda-tradition, as early as the [Pāli Nikayas](#), the four [jhānas](#) are regarded as a *samatha*-practice. The eight and final step of the Eightfold Path, Right Samadhi, is often defined as the four jhanas.^[147] In the [Pāli Nikayas](#), Jhānas are described as preceding the awakening insight of the Buddha, which turned him into an awakened being.^[web 9] Yet, the interpretation of *jhana* as single-pointed concentration and calm, may be a later re-interpretation, in which the original aim of *jhana* was lost.^[148]

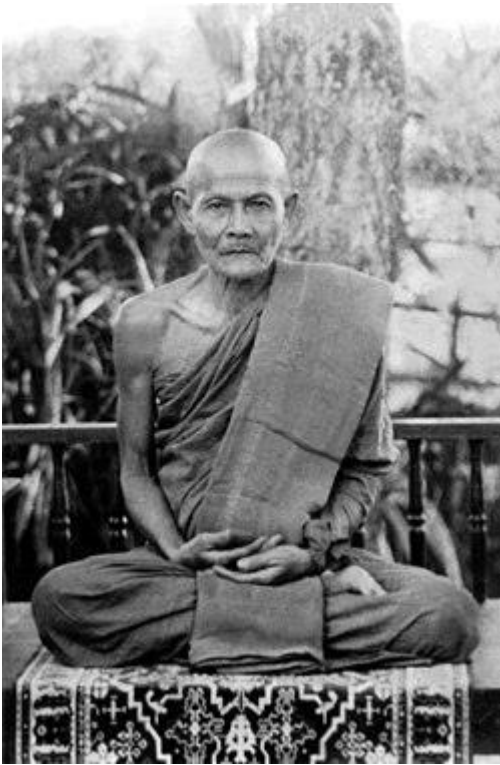
Vipassana (“insight”, “clear seeing”) refers to practices which aim to develop an inner understanding or knowledge of the nature of phenomena (*dhammas*), especially the characteristics of [dukkha](#), [anatta](#) and [anicca](#), which are seen as being universally applicable to all constructed phenomena (*sankhata-dhammas*).

Vipassana is also described as insight into [dependent origination](#), the [five aggregates](#), the [sense spheres](#) and the [four noble truths](#).^{[149][146]} It is the primary focus of the modernist Burmese Vipassana movement. In western countries, it is complemented with the [four divine abidings](#), the development of loving-kindness and compassion.^{[150][151]}

Vipassana practice begins with the preparatory stage, the practice of [sila](#), morality, giving up worldly thoughts and desires.^{[152][153]} The practitioner then engages in [anapanasati](#), mindfulness of breathing, which is described in the [Satipatthana Sutta](#) as going into the forest and sitting beneath a tree and then to simply watch the breath. If the breath is long, to notice that the breath is long, if the breath is short, to notice that the breath is short.^{[154][155]} In the "New Burmese Method," the practitioner [pays attention](#) to any arising mental or physical phenomenon, engaging in [vitaka](#), noting or naming physical and mental phenomena ("breathing, breathing"), without engaging the phenomenon with further conceptual thinking.^{[156][157]} By noticing the arising of physical and mental phenomena, the meditator becomes aware how sense impressions arise from the contact between the senses and physical and mental phenomena,^[156] as described in the five [skandhas](#) and [paticcasamuppāda](#). The practitioner also becomes aware of the perpetual changes involved in breathing, and the arising and passing away of mindfulness.^[158] This noticing is accompanied by reflections on [causation](#) and other Buddhist teachings, leading to insight into [dukkha](#), [anatta](#), and [anicca](#).^{[159][158]} When the three characteristics have been comprehended, reflection subdues, and the process of noticing accelerates, noting phenomena in general, without necessarily naming them.^{[160][161][162]}

According to Vajiranāṇa Mahathera, writing from a traditional and text-based point of view, in the Pāli Canon whether one begins the practice by way of samatha or by way of vipassanā is generally seen as depending on one's temperament. According to Vajiranāṇa Mahathera, it is generally held that there are two kinds of individuals. Those of a passionate disposition (or those who enter the path by faith), attain Arahantship through vipassanā preceded by samatha. Those of a skeptical disposition (or those who enter by way of wisdom or the intellect), achieve it through samatha preceded by vipassanā.^[146]

Aims of meditation



Ajahn Mun, a key figure in the founding of the [Thai Forest Tradition](#), is widely considered to have been an Arahant in Thailand. ^[163]

Traditionally, the ultimate goal of the practice is to achieve mundane and supramundane wisdom. Mundane wisdom is the insight in the [three marks of existence](#). ^[web 8] The development of this insight leads to four supramundane paths and fruits, these experiences consist a direct apprehension of Nibbana. ^[web 10] Supramundane (*lokuttara*) wisdom refers to that which transcends the world of [samsara](#). ^[web 10]

Apart from [nibbana](#), there are various reasons why traditional Theravāda Buddhism advocates meditation, including a good [rebirth](#), [supranormal powers](#), combating fear and preventing danger. Recent modernist Theravādins have tended to focus on the [psychological benefits](#) and psychological [well being](#). ^[164]

Four stages of enlightenment

According to Theravāda doctrine, liberation is attained in [four stages of enlightenment](#). ^{[web 11][web 8]}

1. [Stream-Enterers](#): Those who have destroyed the first three [fetters](#) (false [view](#) of *Self*, doubt, and clinging to rites and rituals); ^{[web 12][web 13]}
1. [Once-Returners](#): Those who have destroyed the first three fetters and have lessened the fetters of lust and hatred;
1. [Non-Returners](#): Those who have destroyed the five lower fetters, which bind beings to the world of the senses; ^[165]

1. [*Arahants*](#): Those who have reached [Enlightenment](#) - realized Nibbana, and have reached the quality of deathlessness - are free from all defilements. Their ignorance, craving and attachments have ended. ^[165]

Historical development and sources

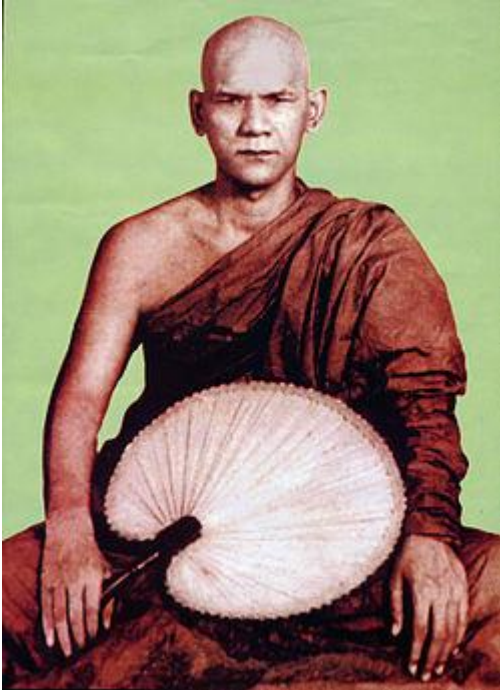
The practice of Theravāda meditation can be traced back to the 5th century exegete [Buddhaghosa](#), who systematized the classic Theravāda meditation, dividing them into samatha and vipassana types and listing [40 different forms](#) (known as "*kammaṭṭhānas*", "workplaces") in his magnum opus, the [Visuddhimagga](#). ^{[166][167]} This text has remained central for the study and practice of Theravāda meditation. Buddhaghosa's commentary on the [Satipaṭṭhana sutta](#) ("Bases of mindfulness discourse"), as well as the source text itself, are also another important source for meditation in this tradition. ^[168] Buddhaghosa's work drew heavily on the Pali suttas as well as the Pali [Abhidhamma](#). Kate Crosby notes that Buddhaghosa's work also "explicitly refers to the contemporaneous existence of secret meditation manuals but not to their content." ^[168]

Regarding post Visuddhimagga Theravāda meditation, according to Kate Crosby,

In the period between the Visuddhimagga and the present, there have been numerous meditation texts, both manuals and descriptive treatises. Many of the texts found in manuscript collections relate to meditation, some on a single, simple subject such as the recollection of the qualities of the Buddha, others more complex. Little research has been done to assess their variety. One difficulty is that meditation manuals as such are often in a mixture of a classical language, that is, Pali, and a vernacular that may or may not be a currently used language. Also, actual manuals often contain prompts or reminders rather than an in-depth explanation. In recent years it has emerged that there is still extant a relatively high number of manuals and related texts pertaining to a system of meditation called - among other things - *borān kammaṭṭhāna* or *yogāvacara*. Its core text, the *Mūla-kammaṭṭhāna* "original, fundamental or basic meditation practice," circulated under a number of different titles, or without a title, throughout the Tai-Lao-Khmer and Sri Lankan Buddhist worlds. Some versions of this text are simple lists of *kammaṭṭhāna* and from that perspective look entirely in accord with the Visuddhimagga or Theravada Abhidhamma texts. Other versions contain extensive narratives, explanations of symbolism, and of the somatic locations involved in the practice that make it clear that we are dealing with techniques of practice not described in the Canon or Visuddhimagga. ^[169]

According to Crosby, the esoteric *borān kammaṭṭhāna* or *yogāvacara* meditation tradition was the dominant form of meditation in the Theravāda world during the 18th century, and may date as far back as the 16th century. Crosby notes that this tradition of meditation involved a rich collection of symbols, somatic methods and visualizations which included "the physical internalisation or manifestation of aspects of the Theravada path by incorporating them at points

in the body between the nostril and navel.”^[170] In spite of the novel elements in this meditation tradition, close study of *borān kammaṭṭhāna* texts reveals that they are closely connected to Theravada Abhidhamma and the works of Buddhaghosa.^[171] Modernist reforms which emphasized Pali Canon study, a shift in state support to other traditions and modern wars in Indochina led to this tradition’s decline, and it now only survives in a few Cambodian and Thai temples.^[172]



[Mahasi Sayadaw](#)

During the 19th and 20th centuries, the Theravāda world saw a modernist revival and reinvention of meditation practice, as exemplified by the Burmese Vipassana movement.^{[173][174]} According to Buswell *vipassana*, “appears to have fallen out of practice” by the 10th century, due to the belief that Buddhism had degenerated, and that liberation was no longer attainable until the coming of *Maitreya*.^[175] The practice was revived in Myanmar (Burma) in the 18th century by [Medawi](#) (1728 – 1816) and by later figures such as [Ledi Sayadaw](#) and [Mahōsī Sayadaw](#) during the 19th and 20th centuries. These Burmese figures re-invented *vipassana*-meditation and developed simplified meditation techniques, based on the [Satipatthana sutta](#), the [Visuddhimagga](#), and other texts, emphasizing [satipatthana](#) and bare insight.^{[173][174]} These techniques were globally popularized by the [Vipassana movement](#) in the second half of the 20th century.

Similar revival movements developed in [Thailand](#), such as the Thai forest tradition and Dhammakaya meditation. These traditions are influenced by the older *borān kammaṭṭhāna* forms.^[176] Thailand and Cambodia also saw attempts to preserve and revive the ancient “*borān kammaṭṭhāna*” tradition of meditation.^[177] In Sri Lanka, the new Buddhist traditions of the [Amarapura](#) and [Rāmañña Nikāyas](#) developed their own meditation forms based on the Pali Suttas, the

Visuddhimagga, and other manuals, while borān kammaṭṭhāna mostly disappeared by the end of the 19th century. ^[178]

Though the *Vipassana movement* has popularised meditation both in traditional Theravāda countries among the laity, and in western countries, "meditation plays a minor if not negligible role in the lives of the majority of Theravāda monks." ^{[179][180][web 1]} Meditation is especially popular laypersons, ^[181] especially during special religious holidays or in their old age, when they have more free time to spend at the temple. ^[180] Buddhist modernists tend to present Buddhism as rational and scientific, and this has also affected how Vipassana meditation has been taught and presented. This has led in some quarters to a playing down of older non-empirical elements of Theravāda, associated with '[superstition](#)'. ^[182] Strains of older, traditional Theravāda meditation known as "borān kammaṭṭhāna" still exist, but this tradition has mostly been eclipsed by the [Buddhist modernist](#) meditation movements. ^[183]

Other practices



[Circumambulation](#) around a temple or a stupa is also a common devotional practice.

Laypersons and monks also perform various types of religious practices daily or during [Buddhist holidays](#). One of these is keeping a [Buddhist shrine](#) with a picture or statue of the Buddha for devotional practice in one's home, mirroring the larger shrines at temples. ^[184] It is common to offer candles, incense, flowers and other objects to these shrine. ^[184] Gestures of respect are also done in front of Buddha images and shrines, mainly the respectful salutation with the hands (*añjalikamma*), and the five-limb [prostration](#) (*pañc'anga-vandana*). ^[184]

[Buddhist forms of chanting](#) is also widely practiced by both monks and laypersons, who may recite famous phrases such as the taking of [refuge](#), the [metta sutta](#) and the [mangala sutta](#) in front of their shrine. Chanting may also be part of the practice of recollection ([anussati](#)), which refers to contemplating various topics such as the sublime qualities of [the Buddha](#), Dhamma and Sangha or the [five subjects for daily recollection](#).^[184] This may be done as part of a daily [puja](#) ritual.

Another important religious practice for the devout is the keeping of special religious holidays known as [Uposatha](#) which are based on a lunar calendar. Laypersons commonly take the eight precepts while visiting a temple or monastery and commit to focusing on Buddhist practice for the day.^[184]

Study (*ganthadhura*) of the Buddhist texts and listening to [Dhamma talks](#) by monks or teachers are also important practices.

Lay and monastic life

See also: [Buddhist monasticism](#)



Young Burmese monk

Distinction between lay and monastic life

Traditionally, Theravāda Buddhism has observed a distinction between the practices suitable for a [lay person](#) and the practices undertaken by ordained [monks](#) (in ancient times, there was a separate body of practices for nuns). While the possibility of significant attainment by laymen is not entirely disregarded by the Theravāda, it generally occupies a position of less prominence than in the [Mahāyāna](#) and [Vajrayāna](#) traditions, with monastic life being hailed as a superior method of achieving [Nirvana](#).^[185] The view that Theravāda, unlike other Buddhist schools, is primarily a monastic tradition has, however, been disputed.

Some Western scholars have erroneously tried to claim that Mahāyāna is primarily a religion for laymen and Theravāda is a primarily monastic religion. Both

Mahāyāna and Theravāda have as their foundation strong monastic communities, which are almost identical in their regulations. Schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism without monastic communities of fully ordained monks and nuns are relatively recent and atypical developments, usually based on cultural and historical considerations rather than differences in fundamental doctrine. Both Mahāyāna and Theravāda also provided a clear and important place for lay followers.

— Ron Epstein, *"Clearing Up Some Misconceptions about Buddhism"*^[186]

This distinction between ordained monks and laypeople – as well as the distinction between those practices advocated by the Pāli Canon, and the folk religious elements embraced by many monks – have motivated some scholars to consider Theravāda Buddhism to be composed of multiple separate traditions, overlapping though still distinct. Most prominently, the anthropologist [Melford Spiro](#) in his work *Buddhism and Society* separated Burmese Theravāda into three groups: Apotropaic Buddhism (concerned with providing protection from evil spirits), Kammatic Buddhism (concerned with making [merit](#) for a future birth), and Nibbanic Buddhism (concerned with attaining the liberation of [Nirvana](#), as described in the Tipitaka). He stresses that all three are firmly rooted in the Pāli Canon. These categories are not accepted by all scholars, and are usually considered non-exclusive by those who employ them. ^[citation needed]

The role of lay people has traditionally been primarily occupied with activities that are commonly termed [merit-making](#) (falling under Spiro's category of kammatic Buddhism). Merit-making activities include offering food and other basic necessities to monks, making donations to temples and monasteries, burning incense or lighting candles before images of the Buddha, and chanting protective or merit-making verses from the Pali Canon. Some lay practitioners have always chosen to take a more active role in religious affairs, while still maintaining their lay status. Dedicated lay men and women sometimes act as trustees or custodians for their temples, taking part in the financial planning and management of the temple. Others may volunteer significant time in tending to the mundane needs of local monks (by cooking, cleaning, maintaining temple facilities, etc.). Lay activities have traditionally not extended to study of the Pāli scriptures, nor the practice of [meditation](#), though in the 20th century these areas have become more accessible to the lay community, especially in Thailand.



Thai monks on [pilgrimage](#) in their orange robes.

A number of senior monastics in the Thai Forest Tradition, including [Buddhadasa](#), [Ajahn Maha Bua](#), Ajahn Plien Panyapatipo, [Ajahn Pasanno](#), and [Ajahn Jayasaro](#), have begun teaching meditation retreats outside of the monastery for lay disciples. [Ajahn Sumedho](#), a disciple of [Ajahn Chah](#), founded the [Amaravati Buddhist Monastery](#) in Hertfordshire, which has a retreat center specifically for lay retreats. Sumedho extended this to Harnham in Northumberland as [Aruna Ratanagiri](#) under the present guidance of [Ajahn Munindo](#), another disciple of Ajahn Chah. ^{[[citation needed](#)]}

Lay devotee



The ceremony walks with lighted candles in hand around a temple on [Vesakha Puja](#) in [Uttaradit](#), Thailand.

In Pāli the word for a male lay devotee is [Upasaka](#) and a female devotee is Upasika. One of the duties of the lay followers, as taught by the Buddha, is to look after the needs of the monk/nuns. They are to see that the monk/nuns do not suffer from lack of the four requisites: food, clothing, shelter and medicine. As neither monks nor nuns are allowed to have an occupation, they depend entirely on the laity for their sustenance. In return for this charity, they are expected to lead exemplary lives.

In Myanmar and Thailand, the monastery was and is still regarded as a seat of learning. In fact today about half of the primary schools in Thailand are located in monasteries. Religious rituals and ceremonies held in a monastery are always accompanied by social activities. In times of crisis, it is to the monks that people bring their problems for counsel. Traditionally, a ranking monk will deliver a sermon four times a month: when the moon waxes and wanes and the day before the new and full moons. The laity also have a chance to learn meditation from the monks during these times.

It is also possible for a lay disciple to become enlightened. As [Bhikkhu Bodhi](#) notes, "The Suttas and commentaries do record a few cases of lay disciples attaining the final goal of Nirvana. However, such disciples either attain Arahantship on the brink of death or enter the monastic order soon after their attainment. They do not continue to dwell at home as Arahant householders, for dwelling at home is incompatible with the state of one who has severed all craving." ^{[[187](#)]}

In the modern era, it is now common for lay disciples to practice meditation, attend lay meditation centers and even aim for awakening. The impetus for this trend began in Myanmar and was supported by prime minister [U Nu](#) who himself established the International Meditation Center (IMC) in [Yangon](#).^[188] Modern lay teachers such as [U Ba Khin](#) (who was also the Accountant General of the [Union of Burma](#)) promoted meditation as part of a laypersons daily routine.^[188] According to Donald K Swearer, another development in modern Theravāda is "the formation of lay Buddhist associations that have partially assumed the social service responsibilities formerly associated with the monastery".^[188] These include social service and activist organizations such as the Young Men's Buddhist Association of Colombo, the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress, the [Sarvodaya Shramadana](#) of A. T. Ariyaratne, the NGO's founded by [Sulak Sivaraksa](#) such as Santi Pracha.^[189]

Monastic vocation



A cave *kuti* (hut) in the Sri Lankan forest monastery [Na Uyana Aranya](#).

Theravāda sources dating back to medieval Sri Lanka (2nd century BCE to 10th century CE) such as the [Mahavamsa](#) show that monastic roles in the tradition were often seen as being in a polarity between urban monks ([Sinhala](#): *khaamawaasii*, Pāli: *gamavasi*) on one end and rural forest monks ([Sinhala](#): *aranyawaasii*, Pali: *araññavasi*, *nagaravasi*, also known as *Tapassin*) on the other.^[190] The ascetic focused monks were known by the names *Pamsukulikas* (rag robe wearers) and *Arañnikas* (forest dwellers).^[191]

The Mahavamsa mentions forest monks associated with the [Mahavihara](#). The Pāli [Dhammapada](#) Commentary mentions another split based on the "duty of study" and the "duty of contemplation".^[192] This second division has traditionally been seen as corresponding with the city - forest split, with the city monks focusing on the vocation of books (*ganthadhura*) or learning (*pariyatti*) while the forest monks leaning more towards meditation (*vipassanadhura*) and practice (*patipatti*).^[168] However this opposition is not consistent, and urban monasteries have often promoted meditation while forest communities have also produced excellent scholars, such as the [Island Hermitage](#) of [Nyanatiloka](#).^[168]

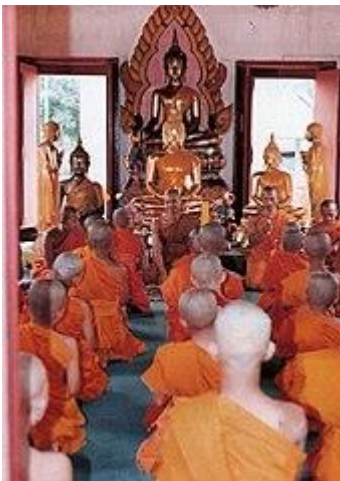
Scholar monks generally undertake the path of studying and preserving Theravāda's [Pāli literature](#).^[193] Forest monks tend to be the minority among

Theravāda sanghas and also tend to focus on [asceticism](#) (*dhutanga*) and meditative praxis. ^[194] They view themselves as living closer to the ideal set forth by the Buddha, and are often perceived as such by lay folk, while at the same time often being on the margins of the Buddhist establishment and on the periphery of the social order. ^[195]

While this divide seems to have been in existence for some time in the Theravāda school, only in the 10th century is a specifically forest monk monastery, mentioned as existing near [Anuradhapura](#), called "Tapavana". ^[196] This division was then carried over into the rest of Southeast Asia as Theravāda spread.

Today there are forest based traditions in most Theravāda countries, including the [Sri Lankan Forest Tradition](#), the [Thai Forest Tradition](#) as well as lesser known forest based traditions in Burma and Laos, such as the Burmese forest based monasteries (*taw"yar*) of Pa Auk Sayadaw. ^[197] In Thailand, forest monks are known as *phra thudong* (ascetic wandering monks) or *phra thudong kammathan* (wandering ascetic meditator). ^[198]

Ordination



Candidates for the Buddhist monkhood being ordained as monks in Thailand

The minimum age for ordaining as a Buddhist monk is 20 years, reckoned from conception. However, boys under that age are allowed to ordain as novices ([sāmanera](#)), performing a ceremony such as [shinbyu](#) in Myanmar. Novices shave their heads, wear the yellow robes, and observe the Ten Precepts. Although no specific minimum age for novices is mentioned in the scriptures, traditionally boys as young as seven are accepted. This tradition follows the story of the Buddha's son, Rahula, who was allowed to become a novice at the age of seven. Monks follow 227 rules of discipline, while nuns follow 311 rules.

In most Theravāda countries, it is a common practice for young men to ordain as monks for a fixed period of time. In Thailand and Myanmar, young men typically ordain for the retreat during [Vassa](#), the three-month monsoon season, though

shorter or longer periods of ordination are not rare. Traditionally, temporary ordination was even more flexible among Laotians. Once they had undergone their initial ordination as young men, Laotian men were permitted to temporarily ordain again at any time, though married men were expected to seek their wife's permission. Throughout Southeast Asia, there is little stigma attached to leaving the monastic life. Monks regularly leave the robes after acquiring an education, or when compelled by family obligations or ill health.

Ordaining as a monk, even for a short period, is seen as having many virtues. In many Southeast Asian cultures, it is seen as a means for a young man to "repay" his parents for their work and effort in raising him, because the merit from his ordination accrues to them as well. Thai men who have ordained as a monk may be seen as more fit husbands by Thai women, who refer to men who have served as monks with a colloquial term meaning "ripe" to indicate that they are more mature and ready for marriage. Particularly in rural areas, temporary ordination of boys and young men traditionally gave peasant boys an opportunity to gain an education in temple schools without committing to a permanent monastic life.

In Sri Lanka, temporary ordination is not practised, and a monk leaving the order is frowned upon. The continuing influence of the [caste system in Sri Lanka](#) plays a role in the taboo against temporary or permanent ordination as a bhikkhu in some orders. Though Sri Lankan orders are often organized along caste lines, men who ordain as monks temporarily pass outside of the conventional caste system, and as such during their time as monks may act (or be treated) in a way that would not be in line with the expected duties and privileges of their caste. ^{[[citation needed](#)]}

Men and women born in Western countries, who become Buddhists as adults, wish to become monks or nuns. It is possible, and one can live as a monk or nun in the country they were born in, seek monks or nuns which has gathered in a different Western country or move to a monastery in countries like Sri Lanka or Thailand. It is seen as being easier to live a life as a monk or nun in countries where people generally live by the culture of Buddhism, since it is difficult to live by the rules of a monk or a nun in a Western country. For instance, a Theravāda monk or nun is not allowed to work, handle money, listen to music, cook and so on, which are extremely difficult rules to live by in cultures which do not embrace Buddhism. ^{[[citation needed](#)]}

Some of the more well-known Theravādan monks are [Mun Bhuridatta](#), [Ajahn Chah](#), [Ledi Sayadaw](#), [Webu Sayadaw](#), Ajahn Plien Panyapatipo, [Ajahn Sumedho](#), [Ajahn Khemadhammo](#), [Ajahn Brahm](#), [Bhikkhu Bodhi](#), [Buddhadasa](#), [Mahasi Sayadaw](#), [Nyanaponika Thera](#), [Preah Maha Ghosananda](#), [U Pandita](#), [Ajahn Amaro](#), [Ajahn Sucitto](#), [Thanissaro Bhikkhu](#), [Walpola Rahula](#), [Henepola Gunaratana](#), Bhante Yogavacara Rahula and [Luang Pu Sodh Candasaro](#).

Monastic practices



A Buddhist Monk chants evening prayers inside a monastery located near the town of [Kantharalak, Thailand](#).

The practices usually vary in different sub-schools and monasteries within Theravāda. But in the most orthodox forest monastery, the monk usually models his practice and lifestyle on that of the Buddha and his first generation of disciples by living close to nature in forest, mountains and caves. Forest monasteries still keep alive the ancient traditions through following the Buddhist monastic code of discipline in all its detail and developing meditation in secluded forests.

In a typical daily routine at the monastery during the 3 month vassa period, the monk will wake up before dawn and will begin the day with group chanting and meditation. At dawn the monks will go out to surrounding villages bare-footed on alms-round and will have the only meal of the day before noon by eating from the bowl by hand. Most of the time is spent on Dhamma study and meditation. Sometimes the abbot or a senior monk will give a Dhamma talk to the visitors. Laity who stay at the monastery will have to abide by the traditional [eight Buddhist precepts](#).

The life of the monk or nun in a community is much more complex than the life of the forest monk. In the Buddhist society of Sri Lanka, most monks spend hours every day in taking care of the needs of lay people such as preaching *bana*,^[199] accepting alms, officiating funerals, teaching *dhamma* to adults and children in addition to providing social services to the community.

After the end of the Vassa period, many of the monks will go out far away from the monastery to find a remote place (usually in the forest) where they can hang their umbrella tents and where it is suitable for the work of self-development. When they go wandering, they walk barefoot, and go wherever they feel inclined. Only those requisites which are necessary will be carried along. These generally consist of the bowl, the three robes, a bathing cloth, an umbrella tent, a mosquito net, a kettle of water, a water filter, razor, sandals, some small candles, and a candle lantern.

The monks do not fix their times for walking and sitting meditation, for as soon as they are free they just start doing it; nor do they determine for how long they will go on to meditate. Some of them sometimes walk from dusk to dawn whereas at other times they may walk from between two and seven hours. Some may decide to fast for days or stay at dangerous places where ferocious animals live in order to aid their meditation.

Those monks who have been able to achieve a high level of attainment will be able to guide the junior monks and lay Buddhists toward the four degrees of spiritual attainment.

Bhikkunis

See also: [Women in Buddhism](#), [Ordination of women in Buddhism](#), and [Criticism of Buddhism § Women in Buddhism](#)



[Dhammananda Bhikkhuni](#).

A few years after the arrival of [Mahinda](#), the bhikkhu [Saṅghamittā](#), who is also believed to have been the daughter of Ashoka, came to Sri Lanka. She ordained the first nuns in Sri Lanka. In 429, by request of China's emperor, nuns from [Anuradhapura](#) were sent to China to establish the order there, which subsequently spread across East Asia. The [prātimokṣa](#) of the nun's order in [East Asian Buddhism](#) is the [Dharmaguptaka](#), which is different than the prātimokṣa of the current Theravāda school; the specific ordination of the early Sangha in Sri Lanka not known, although the Dharmaguptaka sect originated with the Sthāvirīya as well.

The nun's order subsequently died out in Sri Lanka in the 11th century and in Burma in the 13th century. It had already died out around the 10th century in other Theravādin areas. Novice ordination has also disappeared in those countries. Therefore, women who wish to live as renunciates in those countries must do so by taking eight or ten precepts. Neither laywomen nor formally ordained, these women do not receive the recognition, education, financial support or status enjoyed by Buddhist men in their countries. These "precept-holders" live in Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Nepal, and Thailand. In particular, the governing council of Burmese Buddhism has ruled that there can be no valid ordination of women in modern times, though some Burmese monks disagree. Japan is a special case as, although it has neither the bhikkhuni nor novice

ordinations, the precept-holding nuns who live there do enjoy a higher status and better education than their precept-holder sisters elsewhere, and can even become Zen priests.^[200] In Tibet there is currently no bhikkhuni ordination, but the [Dalai Lama](#) has authorized followers of the Tibetan tradition to be ordained as nuns in traditions that have such ordination.

In 1996, 11 selected Sri Lankan women were ordained fully as Theravāda bhikkhunis by a team of Theravāda monks in concert with a team of Korean nuns in India. There is disagreement among Theravāda [vinaya](#) authorities as to whether such ordinations are valid. The [Dambulla](#) chapter of the [Siam Nikaya](#) in Sri Lanka also carried out a nun's ordination at this time, specifically stating their ordination process was a valid Theravādin process where the other ordination session was not.^[201] This chapter has carried out ordination ceremonies for hundreds of nuns since then.^[citation needed] This has been criticized by leading figures in the Siam Nikaya and [Amarapura Nikaya](#), and the governing council of [Buddhism in Myanmar](#) has declared that there can be no valid ordination of nuns in modern times, though some Burmese monks disagree with this.^[202]

In 1997 [Dhamma Cetiya Vihara](#) in Boston was founded by Ven. Gotami of Thailand, then a 10 precept nun; when she received full ordination in 2000, her dwelling became America's first Theravāda Buddhist bhikkhuni vihara.

A 55-year-old Thai Buddhist 8-precept white-robed maechee nun, Varanggana Vanavichayen, became the first woman to receive the going-forth ceremony of a novice (and the gold robe) in Thailand, in 2002.^[203] On February 28, 2003, [Dhammananda Bhikkhuni](#), formerly known as Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, became the first Thai woman to receive bhikkhuni ordination as a Theravāda nun.^[204] Dhammananda Bhikkhuni was ordained in Sri Lanka.^[205] The Thai Senate has reviewed and revoked the secular law passed in 1928 banning women's full ordination in Buddhism as unconstitutional for being counter to laws protecting freedom of religion. However Thailand's two main Theravāda Buddhist orders, the Mahanikaya and Dhammayutika Nikaya, have yet to officially accept fully ordained women into their ranks.

In 2009 in Australia four women received bhikkhuni ordination as Theravāda nuns, the first time such ordination had occurred in Australia.^[206] It was performed in Perth, Australia, on 22 October 2009 at Bodhinyana Monastery. Abbess Vayama together with Venerables Nirodha, Seri, and Hasapanna were ordained as Bhikkhunis by a dual Sangha act of Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis in full accordance with the Pāli Vinaya.^[207]

In 2010, in the US, four novice nuns were given the full bhikkhuni ordination in the Thai Theravāda tradition, which included the double ordination ceremony. [Henepola Gunaratana](#) and other monks and nuns were in attendance. It was the first such ordination ever in the Western hemisphere.^[208]

The first bhikkhuni ordination in Germany, the ordination of German woman Samaneri Dhira, occurred on June 21, 2015 at Anenja Vihara. ^[209]

In Indonesia, the first Theravāda ordination of bhikkhunis in Indonesia after more than a thousand years occurred in 2015 at Wisma Kusalayani in Lembang, [Bandung](#) in [West Java](#). ^[210] Those ordained included Vajiradevi Sadhika Bhikkhuni from Indonesia, Medha Bhikkhuni from Sri Lanka, Anula Bhikkhuni from Japan, Santasukha Santamana Bhikkhuni from Vietnam, Sukhi Bhikkhuni and Sumangala Bhikkhuni from Malaysia, and Jenti Bhikkhuni from Australia. ^[210]

Monastic orders within Theravāda



Thai monks blessing the [King of Thailand](#) in Wat Nong Wong, [Amphoe Sawankhalok](#), [Sukhothai](#), Thailand.

Theravāda monks typically belong to a particular *nikaya*, variously referred to as monastic orders or fraternities. These different orders do not typically develop separate doctrines, but may differ in the manner in which they observe monastic rules. These monastic orders represent lineages of ordination, typically tracing their origin to a particular group of monks that established a new ordination tradition within a particular country or geographic area.

In Sri Lanka caste plays a major role in the division into nikayas. Some Theravāda Buddhist countries appoint or elect a [sangharaja](#), or Supreme Patriarch of the Sangha, as the highest ranking or seniormost monk in a particular area, or from a particular nikaya. The demise of monarchies has resulted in the suspension of these posts in some countries, but patriarchs have continued to be appointed in Thailand. Myanmar and Cambodia ended the practice of appointing a sangharaja for some time, but the position was later restored, though in Cambodia it lapsed again. ^[citation needed]

- [Bangladesh](#):
 - [Sangharaj Nikaya](#)
 - [Mahasthabir Nikaya](#)
- [Myanmar](#) (Myanmar):
 - [Thudhamma Nikaya](#)
 - [Shwekyin Nikaya](#)
 - [Hngettwinn Nikaya](#)
 - [Dwara Nikaya](#)

- [Sri Lanka](#):
 - [Siam Nikaya](#)
 - Rohana
 - Malwaththa
 - Asgiriya
 - Waturawila (or Mahavihara Vamshika Shyamopali Vanavasa Nikaya)
 - [Amarapura Nikaya](#) has many Sub orders including
 - Dharmarakshitha
 - Kanduboda (or Swejin Nikaya)
 - Tapovana (or Kalyanavamsa)
 - [Ramañña Nikaya](#)
 - [Sri Kalyani Yogasrama Samstha](#) (or 'Galduwa Tradition')
 - Delduwa
- *Thailand and Cambodia*
 - [Maha Nikaya](#)
 - [Dhammayuttika Nikaya](#)

Festivals and customs

1. [Magha Puja](#)
2. [Vesakha Puja](#)
3. [Asalha Puja](#)
4. [Uposatha](#)
5. [Vassa](#) (Rain Retreat)

Demographics

Rank	<u>Country</u>	Population	<u>Buddhist %</u>	<u>Buddhist total</u>	<u>Importance of religion</u>
1	 <u>Thailand</u>	66,720,153 ^[web 14]	95% ^[web 15]	63,117,265	97% ^[web 16]
2	 <u>Myanmar</u>	56,280,000 ^[web 17]	89% ^[web 18]	50,649,200	96% ^[web 16]
3	 <u>Sri Lanka</u>	20,277,597	70%	14,222,844	100% ^[web 16]
4	 <u>Cambodia</u>	14,701,717 ^[web 19]	96% ^[web 19]	14,172,455	95% ^[web 16]
5	 <u>Laos</u>	6,477,211 ^[web 20]	67% ^[web 20]	4,339,731	98% ^[web 16]

Theravāda Buddhism is practiced in the following countries and by people worldwide:

- In [South Asia](#):
 - [Nepal](#)

- [Sri Lanka](#) (by 70% of the population)
 - [Bangladesh](#) (by 2% of the population) mainly in [Chittagong Hill Tracts](#) and Kuwakata, Barishal
 - [India](#), traditional Theravāda mainly in the [Seven Sister States](#)
- In [Southeast Asia](#):
 - [Cambodia](#) (by 95% of the population)
 - [Laos](#) (by 67% of the population)
 - [Myanmar](#) (by 89% of the population)
 - [Thailand](#) (by 90% of the population, 94% of the population that practices religion)
 - [Vietnam](#) (by the [Khmer Krom](#) in the south and central parts of Vietnam and [Tai Dam](#) in northern Vietnam)
 - [Malaysia](#) (in peninsular Malaysia especially north-western parts of Malaysia, primarily by the [Malaysian Siamese](#) and [Malaysian Sinhalese](#))
 - [Indonesia](#)
 - [Singapore](#)
- In [East Asia](#):
 - [China](#) (mainly by the [Shan](#), [Tai](#), [Dai](#), [Hani](#), [Wa](#), [Achang](#), [Blang](#) ethnic groups mainly in [Yunnan province](#))
- Theravāda has also recently gained popularity in the [Western world](#).

Today, Theravādins number over 150 million worldwide, and during the past few decades Theravāda Buddhism has begun to [take root in the West](#)^[b] and in the [Buddhist revival in India](#).^[web 22]

See also

- [Buddhahood](#)
- [Buddhism in Cambodia](#)
- [Buddhism in China](#)
- [Buddhism in India](#)
- [Buddhism in Myanmar](#)
- [Buddhism in Nepal](#)
- [Buddhism in Sri Lanka](#)
- [Buddhism in Thailand](#)
- [Buddhist pilgrimage](#)
- [Gautama Buddha](#)
- [Schools of Buddhism](#)
- [Supreme Patriarch of Thailand](#)
- [Thai Forest Tradition](#)

Notes

- 1.

- [Source](#) says, "Technical terms from Sanskrit were converted into Pali by a set of conventional phonological transformations". Vowels and diphthongs from Sanskrit to Pali follow this pattern. Thus 'Sthavira' in Sanskrit becomes 'Thera' in Pali. Sanskrit 'avi' becomes Pali 'e' (i.e. Sthavira → ai → Thera).

2. • John Bullitt: "In the last century, however, the West has begun to take notice of Theravāda's unique spiritual legacy and teachings of Awakening. In recent decades, this interest has swelled, with the monastic Sangha from the schools within Theravāda, establishing dozens of monasteries across Europe and North America."^[web 21]

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