

Chinese Esoteric Buddhism

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Part of a series on
<u>Vajrayana Buddhism</u>

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v t e

Chinese Esoteric Buddhism refers to traditions of [Tantra](#) and [Esoteric Buddhism](#) that have flourished among the [Chinese people](#). The Tantric masters [Śubhakarasiṃha](#), [Vajrabodhi](#) and [Amoghavajra](#), established the Esoteric Buddhist *Zhenyan* ([Chinese](#): 真言, "true word", "[mantra](#)") tradition from 716 to 720 during

the reign of [Emperor Xuanzong of Tang](#). It employed [mandalas](#), mantras, [mudras](#), [abhiṣekas](#), and [deity yoga](#). The Zhenyan tradition was transported to [Japan](#) as [Shingon Buddhism](#) by [Kūkai](#) as well as influencing [Korean Buddhism](#). The [Song dynasty](#) (960 – 1279) saw a second diffusion of Esoteric texts. Esoteric Buddhist practices continued to have an influence into the late imperial period and [Tibetan Buddhism](#) was also influential during the [Yuan dynasty](#) period and beyond.

In Chinese these traditions are also termed *Mìjiào* (Chinese: 密教; Esoteric Teaching), *Mìzōng* (密宗; "Esoteric Tradition") or *Tángmì* (唐密; "Tang (Dynasty) Esoterica").



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Terminology

In China and countries with large Chinese populations such as [Taiwan](#), [Malaysia](#) and [Singapore](#), Chinese Esoteric Buddhism is commonly referred to as *Tángmì* (唐密 – "Tang Dynasty Esoterica"), or *Hànchuán Mìzōng* (漢傳密宗 – "Han Chinese Transmission of the Esoteric Tradition"), sometimes abbreviated as *Hànmì* (漢密 – "Han Mysteries"). Its manifestation through subsequent Japanese transmission is sometimes referred as *Dōngmì* (東密) "Eastern Esotericism", meaning [the succession of Tang Esoterica in Japan](#) (east of China) transmitted by the Japanese monk [Kūkai](#).

During the [Tang dynasty](#) the actual term widely used to refer to these teachings by Tantric masters was "mantra teaching" (*zhenyan jiao* 真言教) and "path of mantras" (*Zhenyan sheng* 真言乘, Mantrayana).^[1] Chinese tantric masters like Vajrabodhi and Amoghavajra also used the term [Vajrayana](#) (*Jin'gangsheng* 金剛乘).^[2]

In a more general sense, the Chinese term *Mizōng* (密宗) "Esoteric Tradition" and *Mìjiào* (密教, "Esoteric Teaching") are popular Chinese terms used when referring to any form of Esoteric Buddhism.

History

According to scholars such as Henrik Sørensen, Esoteric Buddhism emerged in India out of [Mahayana](#) Buddhist ritual and magical practices.^[3] Esoteric teachings followed the [Silk Road](#) and the Southeast Asian Maritime trade routes into China, linking Chinese Buddhism with Indian, South Asian and [Indonesian Esoteric Buddhism](#). The use of mantras and dhāraṇīs dates at least to the 2nd century.^[4] Tantric materials with mantras and dharanis begin to appear in China during the fifth century.^[5] Early Chinese Buddhists include the like of [Zhu Lüyan](#), who translated the first text containing dhāraṇīs, the *Modengqie jing* (T.D. no. 1300). Others such as [Fotudeng](#) (d. 348) served Chinese emperors with mantras and rituals.

The use of mandalas ([Chinese](#): 曼荼羅) in China as goes back to the sixth century.^[6] While these elements were present, it is with the rise of esoteric Buddhism during the Tang dynasty that a full ritual system arose.^[7]

Tang dynasty



Portrait of [Amoghavajra](#), fourteenth century, [Tokyo National Museum](#).

The [Tang dynasty](#) saw the growth to prominence of Chinese Tantric Buddhism.^[8] Early Tang translators such as [Atikūta](#), [Bodhiruci](#), [Yijing](#), and [Manicintana](#) worked on esoteric texts promoting mantras and dharanis such as the *Tuoluoni jī jīng* 陀羅尼集經 or *Collection of Coded Instructions* (*Dhāraṇīsaṃgraha sūtra*, T. 901).^[9] During the eighth century, three great masters ([acaryas](#)) came from India to China: [Śubhakarasiṃha](#) (637 – 735), [Vajrabodhi](#) (671 – 741) and [Amoghavajra](#) (705 – 774). These three masters brought the esoteric teachings to their height of popularity in China.^[10] Major tantric texts introduced by these masters included the [Mahavairocana Tantra](#) and the [Vajrasekhara Sutra](#), as well as numerous commentaries and ritual manuals.^[11]



Buddhist temples at [Mount Wutai](#).

Charles D. Orzech outlines the growth of this tradition as follows:

We first see the translation of a variety of texts representative of the growing interest in mantra and dhāraṇī. Many of these texts promote a particular dhāraṇī, ritual, and deity. Second, we see the advent of texts representing distinct and comprehensive systems that are meant to codify the swelling tide of mantric texts, deities, and techniques. Full entry into these systems was accessed only through abhiseka, effecting the ritual transformation of a disciple into a cosmic overlord. Third, these overarching systems were given what amounts to imperial imprimatur during the twenty year period from the 760s into the 780s. During this period, particularly during the period of Daizong's 代宗 (r. 762 – 779) support of Amoghavajra (Bukong jin'gang 不空金剛 704 – 774), significant religious and institutional infrastructure was put in place, including imperially sanctioned altars for abhiseka in certain monasteries and imperial palaces for the performance of rituals to benefit the state; construction projects, including the renovation of Jin'ge Monastery 金閣寺 on [Mount Wutai](#) 五台山; and the installation of Mañjuśrī as the patron in official government monasteries.^[12]

According to Geoffrey C. Goble, [Amoghavajra](#) was the most influential of these and is to be considered as the true founder of the *Zhenyan* or Mantra Tradition. He translated the largest number of texts (second only to [Xuanzang](#)), performed rituals for the royal family, taught disciples from Japan and Korea and was the first to be bestowed Tang imperial titles.^{[13][14]} Goble also argues that the reason that Tantric Buddhism became popular in this period lies in the similarity between their Buddhist rituals and pre-existing Tang state rites which were supposed to support the emperor by granting political stability and imperial longevity.^[15]

There is less information about the Tantric Buddhists that came after [Amoghavajra](#), like his descendants [Huilang](#) and [Huiguo](#). Prajña ([Chinese](#): 般若; [pinyin](#): *Bōrě*; 744 – ca. 810) was one of the last great translators of the Tang, known for his translation of the Gaṇḍavyūha sūtra.^[16] Despite lacking the strong patronage it enjoyed under Emperor Daizong (r. 762 – 779), there is evidence that Zhenyan practices and rituals continued to be a key part of Chinese Buddhism throughout the ninth century.^[17] Even after the [Great Anti-Buddhist Persecution](#) (845 CE) initiated by [Emperor Wuzong of Tang](#), the Zhenyan tradition continued to transmit and practice the yoga of Mantrayana well into the early Song Dynasty, as shown by the records of Japanese pilgrims.^[17]

Influence

Due to this new found influence and prestige, esoteric Buddhism strongly influenced the rest of [Chinese Buddhism](#) during the [Tang dynasty](#). This prestige also drew East Asian pilgrims to esoteric centers such as Qinglong 青龍寺 and Xingshan 興善寺.^[18] The Mantrayana tradition also influenced other Chinese Buddhist schools like [Tiantai](#), [Chan Buddhism](#) and [Pure Land Buddhism](#), through the adoption of mantras, [dhāraṇīs](#), ritual forms as well as the construction of altars.^[19] This prestige also influenced the popularization of esoteric deities such as various forms of Avalokiteśvara and Vajrapāṇi which became the focus of wider devotion.^[20]

In Chinese Buddhism there was no major distinction between exoteric and esoteric practices and the [Northern School of Chan](#) even became known for its esoteric practices of [dhāraṇīs](#) and [mantras](#).^{[21][22]} Śubhakarasiṃha's most eminent disciple, [Yi Xing](#), who was an influential Zhenyan figure in his own right, later practiced [Chan Buddhism](#). The followers of the Baotang school of Chan, founded by [Baotang Wuzhu](#) also seem to have had a strong affiliation with the Zhenyan tradition.^[23]

On the other hand, while the [East Asian Yogācāra](#) school of Xuanzang and the Tiantai of [Zhiyi](#) already included certain esoteric practices and texts before the rise of Tang Mantrayana, the influence of esoteric elements of these schools seems to have grown during the era of Tang esoterica.^[24]

There is also evidence that esoteric Buddhist practices also influenced developments in [Daoism](#).^[25]

The growth of esoteric practice in the Tang era is also evident outside the Chinese heartland such as in [Dunhuang](#), [Central Asia](#), [Yunnan](#) and [Nanzhao](#).

Spread outside China

Before the Great Anti-Buddhist Persecution, Master [Kūkai](#) (774 – 835) from Japan came to Tang China to learn the complete esoteric teachings expounded by the

three Indian masters. Kukai was taught by the great master Hui-kuo (746 – 805; Japanese: Keika). It is claimed that he learned the complete teachings in two years before returning to Japan. The transmission to Japan later became [Shingon Buddhism](#) (真言宗), which is often referred to in Chinese as Dōngmì (東密), “Eastern Esoterica,” because Japan is east of China geographically. Some said it is so named due to the temple [Tō-ji](#) (東寺, literally *Eastern Temple*) at [Kyoto](#), Japan, where Master Kūkai established the Shingon school of Buddhism. Master [Saichō](#) (767 – 822) also brought a few esoteric teachings to Japan that were related to the [Japanese lineage](#) of [Tiāntāi School](#) (天台宗), which are referred to in Chinese as Tāimì (台密), “Tāi Esoterica”, where Tāi means the *Tāi* of Tiāntāi. Dōngmì and Tāimì became the two main systems of Esoteric Buddhism in Japan.

Esoteric Buddhism also entered the Korean kingdom of [Goryeo](#) (918 – 1392).

Liao, Song and Jinn era

The Zhenyan tradition continued through the end of the Tang into the early [Song dynasty](#) (960 – 1279), though in a more limited capacity than under the Tang, as noted by [Zanning](#) 贊寧 (919 – 1001), a Chan Buddhist of the [Fayan school](#) who also embraced esoteric teachings, unlike Linji Chan who championed a Chan that was “outside the scriptures”.^[26] Song emperors did continue to patronize Buddhism and translations efforts. Esoteric deities like Mahavairocana, Thousand-armed [Guanyin](#) and [Mārīcī](#) also continued to be popular as well as the use of spells and dharani.

Esoteric Buddhism was also present in the Khitan [Liao dynasty](#) and the Tangut [Western Xia](#). The Xia in particular adopted Tibetan Buddhist influences and produced many translations into the [Tangut language](#) and artistic works, many of which have been preserved in the findings at [Khara-Khoto](#). Following the Liao, the [Jinn dynasty](#) saw a continuation of the forms of Buddhism that existed in the Liao.^[27]

Yuan dynasty Vajrayana



Mongolian Sita Mahakala (Gonggor), [Erdene Zuu Monastery](#)

[Vajrayana](#) had also become the major religion of Tibet and the [Western Xia](#) by the time of the rise of the [Mongol Empire](#) in the thirteenth century. As the [Tibetan](#) and [Tangut peoples](#) came under the rule of Mongol leaders during the reign of [Möngke Khan](#) (1209 – 1259), they increased their missionary activity in Mongolian lands, eventually converting the leadership and much of the population as well aiding in the translation of Buddhist texts into Mongolian. So it is no surprise that after the [Mongol conquest of China](#) and their establishment of the [Yuan dynasty](#) (1271 – 1368), the Yuan emperors made [Tibetan Buddhism](#) the official religion of China, and Tibetan monks (or, as they were called in Chinese, “barbarian monks from the West”, [Chinese](#): 西番僧) were given patronage at the court.^[28] Lamas of the [Sakya](#) school like [Sakya Pandita](#) and also of the [Kagyu](#) became imperial preceptors of the Mongol Khans. The tantric deity [Mahakala](#) was used in military campaign to protect the armies during their war against China and became the protector deity of the Yuan state. They were granted unprecedented status and privileges such as temple offerings and shrines.^[29]

The introduction of “the secret teaching of supreme bliss” (tantric sexual practice) caused quite a scandal among Chinese literati.^[30] A common perception among some Chinese was that this patronage of lamas caused corrupt forms of tantra to become widespread.^[28] When the Mongol Yuan dynasty was overthrown and the [Ming dynasty](#) was established, the Mongol sponsored lamas were expelled from the court and Vajrayana Buddhism was denounced by some as not being an orthodox path.^[28] It was demonized as a form of sorcery and licentiousness that led to the downfall of the Yuan.^[31]

However despite these attacks Tibetan Vajrayana continued to spread in China after the downfall of the Yuan. The rulers of the Ming were also enthusiastic about Tibetan tantric Buddhism.^[31] Many translation of Tibetan texts into Chinese were also made during the Yuan and texts associated with Sakya [lam bras](#) teachings have been identified as having been disseminated during the Ming (1368 – 1644) and Qing (1636 – 1911) periods, and in the Republic of China (1912 – 1949).^[32]

Ming and Qing dynasties



A section of the Manchu edition of the [Kangyur](#) canon



[Xumi Fushou Temple](#), [Chengde](#).

During the [Ming dynasty](#) (1368 – 1644), the emperors such as the [Yongle Emperor](#) (r. 1402 – 1424) continued to support and invite Tibetan lamas to court, including [Deshin Shekpa, 5th Karmapa Lama](#).^[33] Tibetan Buddhism thus continued to spread among the elite and the wider populace. The rule of the Yongle emperor also saw the carving of printing blocks for the first printed [Kangyur](#) known thus far, known as "the Yongle Kanjur."^[34] This was the earliest and one of the most authoritative versions of the Tibetan canon, and it contributed to the further spread of Tibetan Buddhism in China, Tibet and Mongolia.^[35] There were also many translations of Tibetan tantric works into Chinese during this period. Another edition of the Tibetan canon was further printed in [Beijing](#) in 1606.^[36]

During the Xuanzong reign (1398 – 1435), Tibetan monks were allowed back into the palace and also allowed to live in Beijing. The [Zhengde Emperor](#) (r. 1491 – 1521) was known as a Vajrayana practitioner and a promoter of Tibetan Buddhism, but his successor, the [Jiajing Emperor](#) (r. 1521 – 1566), was a Daoist who persecuted Buddhists.^[37]

Among the common populace Tibetan Buddhism seems to have grown in popularity. A profitable business was the selling of Dharma instruments at the capital and one report states that "men and women in the capital filled the street" for Tibetan monks in Beijing.^[38] Tibetan-style ceremonies also became fashionable for weddings and funerals of the rich. Many Ming literati and courtiers continued to attack and ridicule the religion as demon worship and sorcery.^[39]

The [Qing dynasty](#) (1636 – 1912) court promoted the [Gelug](#) school of Tibetan Buddhism, which was the official religion of the Manchu state.^{[40][41]} The [5th Dalai Lama](#) visited Beijing during the reign of the [Shunzhi Emperor](#) and likewise [Lobsang Palden Yeshe, 6th Panchen Lama](#) visited the Qianlong emperor during his 70th birthday at [Chengde](#) in 1780 showing the importance of Tibetan Buddhism during this era. To mark the occasion, the [Qianlong Emperor](#) had the [Xumi Fushou Temple](#) built in Tibetan style and showered the Panchen Lama with riches.^[42] The Tibetan style [Puning Temple](#) and [Putuo Zongcheng Temple](#) were also built during the reign of the Qianlong Emperor. The Qianlong Emperor was also a promoter of the arts which flourished in his reign, and he was particularly fond of Tibetan [thangkas](#).^[43]

The wars and rebellions which racked the later Qing saw the weakening of state-sponsored esoteric Buddhism. Robert Gimello has observed that in late imperial China esoteric dharani practices continued and esoteric practices associated with [Cundi](#) were extremely popular among both the populace and the elite.^[44]

Modern era



[Nenghai](#) Lama (能海喇嘛, 1886–1967)

Tibetan Buddhism

During the [Republic of China \(1912 - 1949\)](#), the government believed that esoteric Buddhism had become weakened after the Tang and thus sought to revitalize it by returning to either Tibet or Japan to revitalize Chinese Buddhism.^[45]

During this period, Tibetans traveled to China to teach, and Chinese monks traveled to Tibet to study, including influential monks like [Nenghai](#) (能海喇嘛, 1886 - 1967) and Master Fazun (法尊, 1902 - 1980), who played major roles in the spread of Tibetan Buddhism and translation of scriptures into modern Chinese.^[46] These two figures, both of the [Gelug](#) school, were key in what is known as the "Chinese Tantric Buddhist Revival Movement" ([Chinese](#): 密教復興運動). Chinese Buddhists like Dayong (1893 - 1929) also went also to Japan to learn and bring back the complete teachings of Tang Mysteries passed down in Tendai and Shingon Buddhism.^[47]

Most of this movement's work was severely damaged by the [Cultural Revolution](#).^[48] But Tibetan Buddhism continued to flourish outside communist China in places like Hong Kong and Taiwan, and since the 80s and 90s, in mainland China itself. However, Tibetan Buddhists remain under serious government surveillance and control in the mainland.^[49]

[Monica Esposito](#) has also written about a Chinese lama who taught [Chan Buddhism](#) and the [Nyingma Dzogchen](#) tradition, known as Fahai Lama (1920 - 1991). Fahai attempted to reconcile Tantrism and Chan, claiming that Dzogchen "can be aligned with the overcoming of the last barrier in Chan".^[50] Fahai Lama also built a monastery for [nuns](#) on [Tianmu Mountain](#) in [Zhejiang](#).^[51]

According to Dan Smyer Yu's recent monograph on the subject, Tibetan Buddhism is currently experiencing a revival in certain regions such as [Qinghai](#) and [Sichuan](#), which he describes as "trans-cultural, cross-regional, tech-savvy, conversant with modern science and familiar with the economic system".^[52] Gray Tuttle has noted that [Mount Wutai](#) has experienced a growth of religious activity since the 1990s, led by Han, Tibetan and Mongol followers of Tibetan Buddhism. Temples, monasteries and stupas have been built or repaired in the area.^[53]

There are also some newer Chinese tantric Buddhists that do not have direct association with traditional institutions, one of the most successful (and controversial within other organized Buddhist groups) being [Lu Sheng-yen's True Buddha School](#), a [new religious movement](#) that identifies as Vajrayana Buddhist while also adopting local Chinese and Taiwanese popular religious ideas.^[54]

Tangmi revival

In contemporary China, Taiwan, and elsewhere in East Asia where Chinese populations are prevalent, there is an ongoing revival of Tang Esoteric Buddhism, largely through connections and support from [Kongōbu-ji](#), the head temple of the [Kōyasan Shingon-shū](#) (the school of Shingon Buddhism of [Mount Kōya](#)) and its affiliate temples.

Common practices



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

According to Charles D. Orzech and Henrik H. Sørensen, "Buddhist practice involving the use of [mudra](#), [mantra](#) and [mandala](#) are often regarded as the primary hallmarks of esoteric Buddhism."^[55] These "three modes of action" or "ritual technologies" are often tied to the concept of the "Three Mysteries" (sanmi 三密), the "secrets" of body, speech and mind and to the ritual of [abhisheka](#) or consecration where tantric vows of [samaya](#) were undertaken by initiates.^[56]

According to Śubhākarasiṃha, "The three modes of action are simply the three secrets, and the three secrets are simply the three modes of action. The [three bodies](#) are simply the wisdom of tathāgata [Mahāvairocana](#)."^[7]

Orzech and Sørensen describe the tantric ritual of abhiseka as follows:

The vows are whispered in the ear of the candidate as he or she first prepares to enter the mandala. While blindfolded, the aspirant tosses a flower onto the mandala to establish a karmic affinity with a particular deity of the mandala. The blindfold is removed and the aspirant then glimpses the mandala for the first time. On the following day the initiate will begin the process of learning how to visualize the deities of the mandala—usually Mahāvairocana and [Vajrasattva](#).^[56]

Afterwards, the initiate is taught the secret mudras and mantras of his deity, and these secrets are revealed to be none other than the expression of the mind of the Buddhas. Through the use of the "three mysteries" the initiate is seen to ritually replicate the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha; and through the ritual of abhisheka, one becomes a living Buddha.^[57]

Other features that are uniquely esoteric include [homa rituals](#), *ajikan* (阿字觀) and dharani. The use of ritual magic and spells for spiritual and worldly benefit was also a feature of Chinese esoteric Buddhism.^[58] There was also the practice of astrology, demonology, the use of talismans and mediumship.

According to Hsuan Hua, the most popular example of esoteric teachings still practiced in many Chan monasteries of East Asia is the [Śūraṅgama Sūtra](#) and its dhāraṇī, the [Śūraṅgama Mantra](#), along with the [Nīlakantha Dhāraṇī](#).^[59]

Deities



[Vairocana](#) at Buddha Tooth Relic Temple and Museum, [Singapore](#).

The esoteric Buddhist pantheon was mostly imported from India, but also came to include local influences. The major Buddha figures such as Mahavairocana were revered along with the retinues of their mandalas. Esoteric Buddhism saw shift from the historical [Gautama Buddha](#) to the transcendental Mahavairocana, also termed the "Great Sun". Gautama was considered a form of Mahavairocana, the eternal Buddha and [dharmakāya](#).^[60] The major Buddhas of the esoteric pantheon are the [Five Tathagatas](#).

Other Buddhist deities in Chinese esotericism included [Bhaisajyaguru](#), [Avalokiteśvara](#) (especially the thousand armed form), [Hayagrīva](#), [Tārā](#), [Vajrapāṇi](#), [Vajrasattva](#), [Samantabhadra](#), [Mañjuśrī](#) and [Cundī](#). The cult of [Acala](#), the wrathful

Vajrapani was very influential during the Tang, while the Cundī cult was very important during the Song period.^[61]

The Five [Wisdom Kings](#) were also important protector figures in Zhenyan Buddhism.

Besides Buddhas and bodhisattvas, there are also deities such as [Śakra \(Indra\)](#) (Yintuoluo 因陀羅), [Brahma](#) (Fantian 梵天), [Vāyu](#) (Fengtian 風天) and [Candra](#) (Yuetian 月天).

Texts

The major Tantric texts of this tradition are part of the [Chinese Buddhist canon](#) found in volumes 18 to 21 of the [Taishō Tripitaka](#). They include:^[62]

Volume 18

1. [Mahavairocana Tantra](#) and related texts (Dainichikyōrui 大日經類)
2. [Vajraśekhara Sūtra](#) and related texts (Kongōchōkyōrui 金剛頂經類), including the [Guhyasamāja Tantra](#) and the [Hevajra tantra](#)
3. Susuddhikara sūtra and related texts (Soshitsujikyōrui 蘇悉地經類)
4. Homa manuals (Goma gikirui 護摩儀軌類)
5. Texts dealing with initiation rites (Jukaihōrui 受戒法類)

Volume 19

1. Ritual texts for buddhas (Shobutsu gikirui 諸佛儀軌類)
2. Ritual texts for buddha-crowns (Shobutchō gikirui 諸佛頂儀軌類)
3. Ritual texts for sūtras (Shokyō gikirui 諸經儀軌類)

Volume 20

1. Ritual texts for Avalokiteśvara (Shokannon gikirui 諸觀音儀軌類)
2. Ritual texts for bodhisattvas (Shobosatsu gikirui 諸菩薩儀軌類)
3. Ritual texts for Mañjuśrī (Monju gikirui 文殊儀軌類)

Volume 21

1. Ritual texts for vidyārājas (Shomyōō gikirui 諸明王儀軌類)
2. Ritual texts for gods, etc. (Shotentō gikirui 諸天等儀軌類)
3. Dhāraṇī sūtras (Shodaranikyōrui 諸陀羅尼經類)

There are other Chinese esoteric works outside the Chinese Tripitaka, including material found at Dunhuang, and from the texts found in Yunnan.

See also

- [Buddhist deities](#)
- [Chinese Buddhism](#)
- [Religion in China](#)
- [Shingon Buddhism](#)
- [Tibetan Buddhism](#)
- [Vajrayana](#)

Notes

1.

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密教 (Jpn [Mikkyo](#)) esoteric Buddhism ([zhen-yan-zong](#)) represents both the open teachings of [exoteric Buddhism](#) and the [secret teachings](#) of the [Buddha](#) that are only available to those who have received proper [initiation](#) from a true [Vajra Master](#).

[Shakyamuni Buddha](#) transmitted these [secret teachings](#) to His [son Rahula](#) and the [Shambala King](#), [Suchandra](#). He continued to transmit them after His [death](#) to [adepts](#) who were able to receive them.

It includes the five divisions of [esoteric practice](#) ([mantras](#), [mudras](#), [visualizations](#), [mandalas](#), and inner and [outer tantra initiation](#) or [empowerment](#)) and [rituals](#) as well as the sixth [division](#) of all the [exoteric teachings](#).

It is not true esoteric Buddhism if it does not include the teachings of [exoteric Buddhism](#).

It is sometimes referred to as [vajrayana Buddhism](#) or [tantra](#). It includes the [Lineage](#) of the [Elders](#) of the [Hinayana](#), the Profound and Method [Lineages](#) of the [Mahayana](#), and the Practices and [Blessings Lineages](#) that are unique to the [Vajrayana](#).

The [Chinese form](#) is called [Chen-yen Tsung](#) while the [Japanese form](#) is called [Shingon](#). [Tibetan](#) esoteric Buddhism offers the [highest forms](#) of [practice](#).

See [discourse](#) on [Kalachakra](#).

Also, [Esoteric teachings](#). Those [Buddhist teachings](#) that are conveyed secretly or implicitly and are held to be beyond the [understanding](#) of ordinary persons. They are defined in contrast to the [exoteric](#) teachings, or those teachings that are explicitly revealed and accessible to all.

According to the [True Word](#) (Jpn [Shingon](#)) school, the [Esoteric teachings](#) are those teachings that [Mahavairochana Buddha preached](#) secretly to [Vajrasattva](#), who compiled them and sealed them in an [iron](#) tower in southern [India](#).

The school holds that they contain the [enlightenment](#) of [Mahavairochana Buddha](#), which is said to be beyond ordinary understanding.

The line of [transmission](#) of Esoteric Buddhism is held to be from [Vajrasattva](#) to [Nagarjuna](#), and then down through [Nagabodhi](#), [Chin-kang-chih](#) (Skt [Vajrabodhi](#)), [Pu-k'ung](#) ([Amoghavajra](#)), [Hui-kuo](#), and finally to [Kobo](#), the founder of the [True Word school](#) in [Japan](#).

The school also lists eight [patriarchs](#) who upheld Esoteric Buddhism: [Nagarjuna](#) and [Nagabodhi](#) who spread it in [India](#); [Chin-kang-chih](#), [Pu-k'ung](#), and [Shanwuwei](#) ([Shubhakarasiṃha](#)) who introduced and established it in [China](#); [I-hsing](#) and [Hui-kuo](#) who propagated it in [China](#); and [Kobowho](#) brought it to [Japan](#).

Esoteric Buddhism in [India](#) was a [Form](#) of [Tantrism](#) that incorporates indigenous [magical](#) and [ritualistic elements](#) such as [symbolic](#) gestures ([mudras](#)) and [spells](#) ([mantras](#)), as well as diagrams ([mandalas](#)) and the [worship](#) of numerous [deities](#).

[Shanwuwei](#), [Chin-kang-chih](#), and [Pu-k'ung](#) introduced Esoteric Buddhism to [China](#). [Kobo](#) (774–835), who went to [China](#) and studied under [Hui-kuo](#), a [Disciple](#) of [Pu-k'ung](#), brought these teachings to [Japan](#).

He systematized them as the [Japanese True Word](#) school.

According to this school, the [Esoteric teachings](#) are the three [mysteries](#) the [Mind](#), [mouth](#), and [Body](#) of [Mahavairocana Buddha](#). [Mahavairocana](#) is believed to be [omnipresent](#), constantly expounding the Law for his [own enjoyment](#).

Through the fusion of the common [mortal](#)'s [three categories](#) of [action Mind](#), [mouth](#), and [Body](#) with [Mahavairocana](#)'s three [mysteries](#), [people](#) can understand The [Buddha](#)'s teachings. [Kobo](#) taught that, by forming [mudras](#) with one's hands, [Chanting mantras](#) with one's [mouth](#), and [concentrating](#) one's [Mind](#) on [mandalas](#) as [objects](#) of [devotion](#), one could become [identical](#) with [Mahavairocana Buddha](#).

That is, [Kobo](#) said that the [practice](#) of the three [mysteries](#) enabled one to attain [Buddhahood](#) in one's [present Form](#). [Thus](#) his teachings are referred to as [esoteric](#).

[Shakyamuni Buddha](#), on the other hand, who appeared in this [World](#) as a [human being](#), expounded his teachings in accordance with the people's capacity.

The [True Word](#) school claims that, because these teachings were expounded explicitly within the reach of the people's [understanding](#), they are to be called [exoteric](#) and are [inferior](#) to the teachings of the [transcendent Mahavairocana Buddha](#).

[Esoteric teachings](#) were also endorsed by the [Tendai](#) school.

[Tendai Esotericism](#) was developed by [Jikaku](#), the third [chief priest](#) of the [Tendai](#) school, [Chisho](#), the fifth [chief priest](#), and others.

Unlike [Kobo](#)'s [True Word](#) school, [Tendai Esotericism](#) holds that [Shakyamuni](#) and

[Mahavairochana](#) are two aspects of the same [Buddha](#). [Tendai Esotericism](#) [views](#) the [Three Vehicles](#) as [exoteric](#) teachings, and the one [vehicle](#) as the [esoteric teaching](#).

It classifies such [Sutras](#) as the [Lotus](#) ([Lotus Sutra](#)) and the [Flower Garland Sutra](#) as one [vehicle](#), and therefore [esoteric](#), [Sutras](#).

Because they do not mention [mudras](#) and [mantras](#), which constitute [esoteric practice](#), however, those [Sutras](#) are called [Esoteric teachings](#) in [theory](#), while the [Mahavairochana](#) and [Diamond Crown Sutras](#) are called [Esoteric teachings](#) in both [theory](#) and [practice](#).

[Tendai Esotericism](#) claims that, while the [Lotus](#) and [Mahavairochana Sutras](#) are [equal](#) in terms of [principle](#), the [Mahavairochana Sutra](#) is [superior](#) in terms of [practice](#).

A general term for certain [Buddhist](#) schools and practices originally developing in parallel with [Hindu](#) (see [Hinduism](#)) [tantra](#) with mutual influence at a later stage.

It is [distinguished](#) from [exoteric Buddhism](#) by its secrecy; rather than being given openly these teachings are available only to students who have received a proper [initiation](#) ([abhiseka](#)) from a [guru](#) who stands in a valid [lineage](#) of [masters](#) and [disciples](#).

Practice will then make use of a number of techniques in which the [student visualizes](#) a guardian [Buddha](#), [Bodhisattva](#), or [deity](#) with whom he or she has a special relationship established at their [initiation](#), and then realizes his or her [non-duality](#) with that being.

This appropriation of the [divine](#) guardian's role involves the establishment and [spiritual](#) fortification of a special place of [practice](#) and the use of [ritual](#) formulae ([mantras](#)), gestures ([mudrās](#)), and [visualization](#) techniques.

Occasionally, this also makes use of [sexual imagery](#) or actual [ritualized sexual](#) practices as a way of harnessing the [physical energy](#) and the [feeling](#) that one has transcended personal [boundaries](#) and merged with another that come with [orgasm](#).

[Esoteric Buddhist](#) schools, including many [Tibetan lineages](#), [Chen-yen](#) in [China](#), and [Shingon](#) and [Tendai](#) in [Japan](#), claim that these techniques represent a short-cut to [enlightenment](#) and enable one to attain [Buddhahood](#) in this [lifetime](#).

Many of the techniques are also used for other this-worldly purposes such as weather control and [healing](#).

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