



**An Introduction to Buddhism  
The Path to True Awakening**

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*"Buddham Sharanam Gacchami  
Dhammam Sharanam Gacchami  
Sangham Sharanam Gacchami"*

*"To the Buddha I go for refuge  
To the teachings I go for refuge  
To the monks I go for refuge"*



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**BUDDHA IN ABHAYA MUDRA (ROBES DECORATED WITH THE  
SCENES FROM THE LIFE OF BUDDHA)**

Buddhism, more than a religion, is a philosophy and an actual way of life, embracing several beliefs, ritual practices and traditions. This system is based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, also known as the Gautama Buddha, the "Awakened One". The Buddha, believed to have lived between the 6th and 4th Centuries BCE, was an enlightened master, who shared his insights among his disciples and followers in order to liberate them from their worldly suffering and help them achieve the highest state of Nirvana or liberation from the unending material cycle of life and death.

There are different schools of Buddhism, each one following different traditions and paths to the ultimate goal of liberation. The two major schools of Buddhism are Theravada Buddhism ("The School of the Elders") and Mahayana Buddhism ("The Great Vehicle"). Theravada, the older school, is also the more widespread, covering Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. Mahayana schools of Buddhism are found throughout East Asia and include the sub-schools of Tibetan Buddhism, Pure Land, Zen, Nichiren Buddhism and so on. Vajrayana Buddhism, a sub-sect of Mahayana, is also practiced in parts of Mongolia and Tibet. This system is sometimes considered a third major branch of Buddhism.

Buddhism predominantly flourishes in the continent of Asia, but it can also be found throughout the world.

Buddhism, as a philosophy, bases itself on the foundation of the Three Jewels, that is, the Buddha, the Dharma (the teachings) and the Sangha (the Community). Other practices may include regular practice of meditation and a constant state of "mindfulness", joining a monastery, renouncing the material world, leading a life of celibacy, studying and/or teaching of scriptures, invocation of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and so on and so forth.

## An Introduction to Gautama Buddha

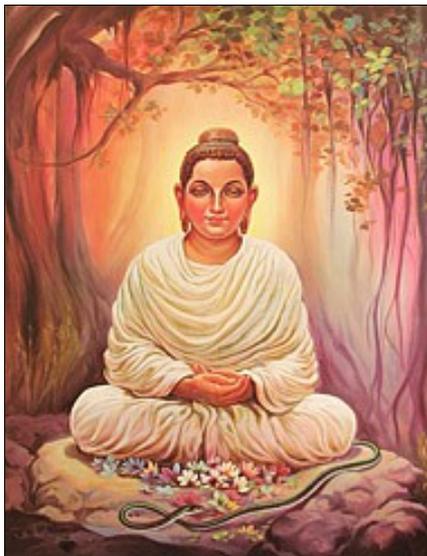
According to scriptures mentioned in the Theravada, the Buddha was born in Lumbini in modern-day Nepal, and was raised in Kapilavastu. He was born to King Suddhodana. Soon after his birth, an astrologer visited the king and prophesized that Siddhartha would either become a great King or a Mahatma or holy man, depending on his life's experiences outside the palace walls.

Since Suddhodana wanted to see his son becoming a great ruler, he decided he would not let him move out of the four walls of the palace, so that the young prince would not be able to see life outside his own quarters.

At age 29, however, Siddhartha managed to move out of the palace in a quest to experience life outside. In these encounters, he was witness to much suffering in others, old age, sicknesses and finally death. This touched him to such an extent that Gautama finally decided to abandon his life of royalty and gave up everything for his spiritual quest.

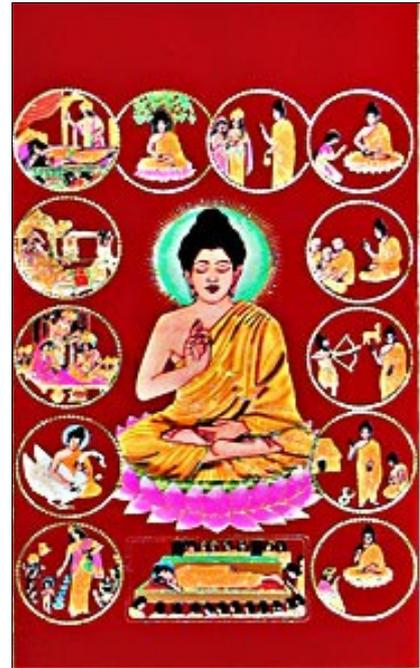
After studying under many great masters, Gautama started practising meditation and severe austerities. But he realized with time that though all these put his body through a lot of pain, it did not put an end to his mental suffering.

Hence, he decided to break his days of fast and devoted himself instead to Anapanasati meditation, which gave rise to what Buddhists now term as the Middle Way, which is the middle path between extreme self-indulgence and self-torture by way of intense austerities.



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**TALES FROM THE LIFE OF BUDDHA  
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At the age of 35, Gautama sat in meditation under a Bodhi (sacred fig) tree in the Indian town of Bodh, Gaya, and decided he would not rise before he achieved enlightenment. Many days later, he arose from the cycle of suffering and emerged as a completely enlightened Master. The Buddha then spent the rest of his life travelling throughout Northeast India, teaching this path of awakening. The Buddha left his mortal shell in Kushinagar, India, at the age of 80.

# The Three Main Concepts in Buddhism

## 1. Karma

The mainstay of Buddhism comes from the law of Karma, the belief that past actions and deeds give rise to your present life as it is. According to this philosophy, much like in Hinduism, good deeds or kusala and bad deeds or akusala give birth to particular seeds in the mind, which bear corresponding fruit either in this life or the next. The desirable thing, hence, would be to cultivate 'sheelas' or positive thoughts and actions in this present life, so as to eliminate suffering later.

Karma in Buddhism not only refers to physical action, but also actions of the "chetana", meaning thoughts that arise from the mind.

In Theravada Buddhism, there can be no salvation from one's Karma, as it is all a cosmic process that has to end by itself. But some sutras in Mahayana Buddhism and Vajrayana Buddhism state that you can rid yourself of Karma either by reading the texts or by recitation of specific Mantras for cutting off previous negative Karma.



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## 2. Rebirth

Buddhism does not believe in the concept of a permanent Self or Eternal Soul. Instead, Buddhism states that rebirth has to occur in the form of subsequent lives, so as to fulfil the laws of Karma. Hence, the being has to take rebirths in order to finally be able to break away from his or her past Karmas.

According to the Theravada and many other schools of Buddhism, a being could reincarnate within one of many realms of existence, such as Naraka (one of many Hells), Preta (hungry souls which most people cannot see), animals, human beings, Asuras (demons) or Devas (divine beings).

Those taking rebirths in some higher worlds known as Suddhavaśa Worlds would be some of the Anagamis, the highest Buddhist practitioners, who would never return to the material world as we know it. Those who meditate on the Arupajhanas would take rebirths in the arupa-dhatu or formless realms.

## 3. Samsara

According to Buddhism, living beings are constantly being subject to suffering and pain in the material world or samsara. These beings always crave for pleasure and try to avoid pain and this constant tussle is what creates situations for their karma and subsequent rebirths.

Each rebirth is a repeat of the previous conditioning and paves its way for more rebirths, till the being can finally realize the ultimate truth and break away from the sufferings of the samsara.

The whole endeavour of Buddhism is to get to the root cause of the suffering, eradicate it and finally free the follower from the traps and travails of this samsara.

## The Four Noble Truths



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**THE FOUR HEADS OF  
BUDDHA OR THE FOUR  
NOBLE TRUTHS OF  
BUDDHISM**

According to some of the Agamas of the earliest Buddhist schools as also the Pali Tipitaka, the Buddha, after having attained Nirvana, first started teaching the Four Noble Truths. These are considered to be the very essence of Gautama's teachings and are as follows:

- Material life leads to dukkha or suffering in some way or another
- Dukkha is caused by desires and craving and is expressed in terms of clinging on to a certain kind of existence, attachment to the self and to external material objects.
- Suffering ends the minute desire ends. One can therefore become a Bodhi (enlightened) only if one lets go of material delusion.
- Liberation can be attained by faithfully following the teachings of the Buddha.

This school of thought is propounded by Buddhist masters all over the world, including the Dalai Lama.

## The Noble Eightfold Path

The fourth of the Buddha's Noble Truths is further divided into eight sections, each one starting with the word, "samyak", meaning, "properly" or "correctly". This eightfold path includes the following:

1. Drishti - the perception of reality as it is and not merely as it appears to be
2. Samkalpa - the focused desire on achieving liberation, renunciation and freedom
3. Vacha - speaking sweetly, yet in a truthful, honest manner
4. Kammanta - acting in a way that does not cause harm or sorrow to others
5. Ajeevana - a form of livelihood that does not cause harm to others
6. Vyayama - training both mind and body in an effort to improve the self

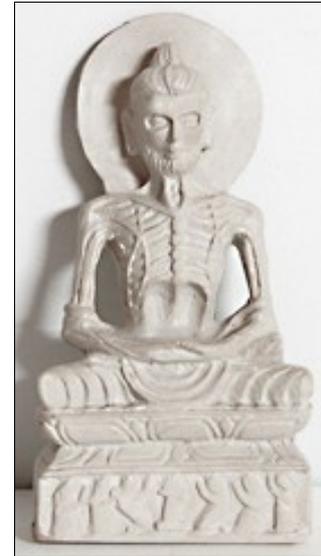
7. Smriti – the awareness to see ourselves as we are, being in the present constantly, without either craving or aversion
8. Samadhi – following the right path of meditation and concentration, leading ultimately to nirvana

This Noble Eightfold Path as stipulated by the Buddha can be either taken up all at a time or can be practised in chronological order, dealing with just one aspect at a time.

## The Middle Way

The Middle Way is yet another vital aspect of Buddhism and is believed to have been discovered by Gautama just before his attaining the state of Nirvana. The Middle Way has many connotations to different people:

- The practice of moderation – staying away from the extremes of self-indulgence and self-torture
- The middle road to certain metaphysical views and beliefs
- The state of Nirvana, at which point all apparent dualities in this world as we know it, come to an end
- The experience of nothingness and emptiness – of the lack of inherent existence



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**EMACIATED BUDDHA  
CAUSED BY EXTREME  
ABSTINENCE**

## The Three Marks of Existence

According to Buddhism, it is the samsara that is the cause of all mental stress and sufferings experienced by human beings. Negating the effects of this samsara, therefore, would be the only way to break away from the incessant cycles of rebirths and finally attain Nirvana. In order to achieve this state, the Buddha recommended viewing things in the light of the Three Marks of Existence, which are as follows:

### 1. Impermanence

Everything in this world is constantly changing and in a state of impermanence. Nothing is constant and steady. Nothing ever lasts and there is nothing that does not change in this world. Hence, attachment to anything is futile, as it is bound to create dukkha when it ultimately changes at some point of time.

### 2. Suffering

Suffering or dukkha manifests in many forms in the life of a human being. It can include states such as pain, misery, frustration, anxiety, fear and so on. Very often, Buddhism seeks to view this aspect realistically, without being judgemental about it. Also, this term is left largely untranslated in the English version of Pali texts, as it encompasses too wide a range of emotions to be interpreted appropriately.

### 3. Not-Self

There is no real phenomenon such as "Me", "I", or "Mine" in this illusory world. All these concepts are the result of our hyperactive minds. As is typical with Buddhism, there is no assertion for either of the statements "There is a Self" and "There is No Self". Since nothing really exists and nothing is really permanent, the attitude of not-self is central to Buddhism.

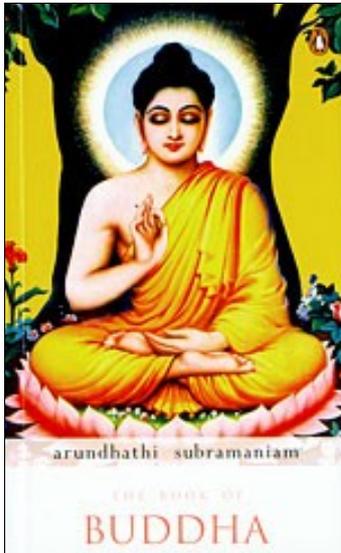
### Pratityasamutpada and the Twelve Nidanas

Pratityasamutpada is yet another central aspect of Buddhist metaphysics. According to this concept, certain phenomena arise together because they are mutually interdependent with each other. The Twelve Nidanas of Buddhism best explain this concept. These are as follows:

1. Avidya - spiritual ignorance
2. Samskaras - thought processes as a consequence of past Karma
3. Vijnana - consciousness, the power of discrimination
4. Namarupa - name and form; identity of the person
5. Sadayatana - the six senses of a being
6. Sparsha - contact, stimulation, physical or spiritual impression
7. Vedana - feeling, whether pleasant or unpleasant
8. Trishna - thirst or craving of the being
9. Upadana - clinging or grasping at things, which leads to the cycle of samsara
10. Bhava - existence of the being or the tendency to develop Karma
11. Jati - birth, sometimes also understood to begin right at conception
12. Jaramarana - old age, sorrow, pain, suffering and finally, death

The being suffers the travails of samsara only because of the experience of the Nidanas. But the absence of the first Nidana automatically leads to the negation of all the twelve Nidanas. This way, one can go beyond the material world and attain Nirvana.

### The Concept of Nirvana



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Nirvana or the Pali Nibbana essentially means "extinction" or "cessation" of ignorance and craving, hence of suffering. This Bodhi or "calmed" stage hence leads to enlightenment or awakening, hence liberating the practitioner from the involuntary cycles of the samsara.

In original parlance, bodhi and nirvana meant the same thing. But the Mahayana tradition made a distinction between these states, referring to nirvana only as the extinction of craving, saying that the bodhi state was the actual stage of enlightenment. Hence, according to the Mahayana, the arahant only attained nirvana, but the bodhisattva attained nirvana and also freedom from delusion as well. The bodhi would hence become a Buddha. Theravada Buddhism still gives the same connotation to both these words.

The term parinirvana applies to the arahant who attains complete nirvana at the time of shedding his or her mortal body, that is, at the time of physical death.

## Buddha Eras

According to Buddhism, Gautama Buddha was the first one to attain enlightenment and therefore, he is considered to have established Buddhism. The Buddha Era, would end when all the teachings of the earliest Buddha are wiped out from the face of the earth. Gautama Buddha is hence considered the Buddha of this era.

While Theravada believes that there is only one time in this world that there occurs a Buddha era, Mahayana Buddhists state that there are several other unaccountable Buddhas in other universes.

## Bodhisattvas

The Bodhisattva is an enlightened being on the path toward Buddhahood. Theravada Buddhism uses this term in relation with the earlier incarnations of Gautama Buddha, but also acknowledges the bodhisattva path as well.

Mahayana Buddhism, on the other hand, centres round the concept of the bodhisattva and believes that everyone has the potential to become one, provided that they follow the right path of discipline, forbearance, giving, meditation and so on.

A bodhisattva is also sometimes referred to as a bodhisattva-mahasattva, as his aim is as enlightened as himself.



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## The Practice of Buddhism



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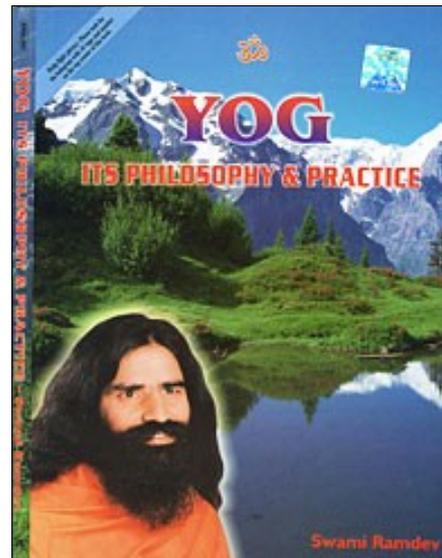
**AMITABHA BUDDHA**

The practice of Buddhism mainly revolves around devotion and meditation. Pure Land Buddhism believes in the worship of the Buddha Amitabha, whereas Nichiren Buddhism centres on devotion to the Lotus Sutra. Buddhism stipulates the practice of the following aspects:

## Yoga

Buddhism incorporates the practice of dhyana or meditation. Yoga is of main importance in this philosophy and it is an actual way of life to followers of that discipline. As against the traditional Brahminic approach to yoga, where the follower aims at achieving complete cessation of thoughts, Buddhism believes that there should be a mental activity taking place; a cognition that bases itself on mindful awareness and finally aims at attaining liberation.

The earliest Buddhist texts talk in detail about these meditation techniques, relating the states which existed before the Buddha and also those that came into being during the Buddhist eras.



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## Adherence to the Three Jewels



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The first step the follower has to take is adherence to the Three Jewels or the Tri-ratna of Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. The Buddha is the one who has attained nirvana. The Dhamma refers to the teachings expounded by Gautama Buddha. The Sangha is a congregation of monastic practitioners, who have attained any of the four stages of enlightenment.

Some texts of Tibetan Buddhism add on a fourth jewel of the Lama. According to Mahayana Buddhism, the Three Jewels are unchanging and eternal and just like real jewels. The follower taking refuge in the principle of the Three Jewels too would attain a quality of brilliance, compassion and

immortality, which in turn would protect him from falling prey to the sufferings of the samsara.

## Ethics in Buddhism

Buddhism strictly stipulates Sila or adherence to "virtuous behaviour", "ethics" or "morality". Sila implies actions committed intentionally by thought, word and deed. The preconditions of sila include calmness, quiet, chastity and extinguishment.

Sila forms the foundation of Samadhi or Bhavana, which means "mind cultivation". This promotes peace not only within the mind of the practitioner, but also transfers to peace within the community, finally giving rise to peace both within and without.

Sila refers to certain principles of ethical behaviour. The basic concept of sila revolves round five precepts, whereas those choosing the path of eight or ten precepts also undertake certain principles of asceticism, along with the basics of ethical behaviour.

The basic five precepts, which are most commonly undertaken by followers, include:

1. Ahimsa or the act of refraining from violent acts
2. Refraining from committing theft
3. Refraining from sensual or sexual misconduct
4. Refraining from lying
5. Refraining from intake of drugs, alcohol and other inebriating substances

The eight precept path includes the following:

6. Refraining from eating at times other than from sunrise to noon
7. Refraining from dancing, playing music and wearing cosmetics and jewels
8. Refraining from using very luxurious seating or bedding

The ten precept path includes:

9. Refraining from using garlands, perfumes and all other artificially beautifying agents
10. Refraining from accepting gold and silver

## Monastic Life

Buddhism stipulates strict rules for monks and nuns. The Vinaya, which is the moral code for monks and nuns, includes the Patimokkha, which comprises a set of 227 rules. Different schools of Buddhism follow slightly different rules for their monastic order.

While most schools actively encourage vegetarianism, Buddhist schools in Japan, which have almost displaced the Vinaya, even allow the clergy to marry.



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## Prajna

Prajna or Pali Panna means wisdom, which is based on dependent organization, the three marks of existence and the Four Noble Truths. Prajna helps in extinguishment and gives rise to the bodhi state. Prajna also features as the last of the six paramitas of the Mahayana. Initially, prajna develops as a consequence of the follower listening to, reading and studying the dhamma sermons in detail. Once he understands the underlying concepts, he then learns to apply the same in his everyday life.

# Buddhism in India

## Early Buddhism in India



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Early Buddhism, developed during the second half of the first millennium BCE, had its roots in religious philosophy of ancient India. Vedic Brahminic laws had experienced a downswing at the time, due to general discontent and a certain degree of confusion among Hindu Brahmins. There was a certain sect that challenged the authority of the Vedas and the Brahmanas. It is believed that this group, called the shramanas, were the earliest to develop the philosophy of Buddhism.

Studies indicate that Buddhism first came to be in Greater Magadha, the land of the Aryas. This region and its people were generally looked down upon, as they were not Brahminized. Gradually, a wave of Brahminic philosophical thought spread eastward during the second or third centuries BCE, in this particular region.

Parallel movements also developed simultaneously, thus giving rise to many schools of philosophical thought. Most of these schools shared the same terminology of

traditional Hindu philosophy, such as the Atman (Self), Karma (action), Dharma (righteousness), Yoga and so on. The word Buddha was also used to connote the "Awakened One".

The shramanas, though, completely rejected the Vedas and the supreme authority of the Brahmins at that time. They even went on to openly declare that Brahminism was fraudulent and merely a vehicle for Brahmins to enrich their own lives by extorting money from others for performing ritual rites and so on. They particularly denigrated the act of Vedic animal sacrifice.

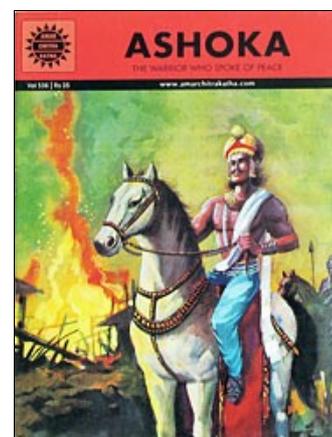
Hinduism was itself going through a sea change at that point of time and many Brahmins then adapted to the new changes and also adopted many of the new philosophical ideologies presented before them.

## The Spread of Buddhism in India

Buddhism in India, it is believed, spread only till the time of the Mauryan Emperor, Ashoka's rule. Ashoka, an avid supporter of Buddhism, worked to propagate the philosophy and built several Stupas (Buddhist religious monuments) and even did his bit to bring the religion to neighbouring countries, such as Central Asia, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan. Thus, the movement slowly spread into China and from Sri Lanka, entered Southeast Asia.

As Buddhism spread into other countries, it was influenced by those other cultures too, such as Persian and Greek cultures. This created a sort of fusion of philosophies, thereby giving a new flavour to each territory the religion touched. The development of the Greco-Buddhist art of Gandhara is one fine example of this occurrence.

During the 2nd Century CE, Mahayana Buddhism spread



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WHO SPOKE OF PEACE  
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to China, Korea and Japan. From the 8th Century onward, the religion spread from India to Tibet and finally, to Mongolia.

## Types of Buddhism

### Zen

Zen Buddhism is a type of Buddhism that developed and became popular in Japan, Korea and China. This philosophy is not purely textual and bases itself instead on meditation techniques and actual spiritual evolvment.

Zen Buddhism is divided into Rinzai and Soto; the former relying on meditating on the koan or a riddle; the latter depending on shikantaza or "merely sitting and meditating". This form of Buddhism is rather abstract, as it aims to reach the Formless Self, which is equated with the Buddha himself.

Zen Buddhism, though not hinging completely on texts, does refer to them occasionally to initially tutor the lay follower.

### Vajrayana or Tantrayana Buddhism



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Based on the Mahayana, Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhism practices Vajrayana or the "Diamond Vehicle", which is also referred to as Tantrayana, Tantric Buddhism or Esoteric Buddhism. Including all the tenets of the Mahayana, it also encompasses many physical, spiritual and ritual practices to enhance a follower's endeavours.

The Vajrayana essentially harnesses metaphysical energy and develops the mind by way of physical exercises, visualization and meditation. It is believed that a practitioner can attain Buddhahood in as little as three years using Vajrayana techniques.

The Tibetan tradition of Vajrayana rarely includes sexual yoga. But this can be seen only with very advanced practitioners.

### Buddhism at Present

According to one particular survey, Buddhism is the fourth-largest religion in the world and follows Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. The Sangha or the monk order is considered to be among the oldest such organizations among the religions of the world. In 1951, Buddhism was regarded as the world's largest religion, with 520 million followers.

At present, Buddhism, comprising all three branches of philosophy, that is, Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana, exists all over the world. The Buddhist religious texts are now being translated in more and more international languages.



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In Asia, Buddhism is already well-organized and well-funded as well. In many Asian countries, it is even regarded as the official religion and receives full governmental support.

Though Buddhism has been flexible enough and adopted itself to the culture of each land it has entered, it still manages to retain its original flavour and fervour, to emerge as an actual, practical, way of life; and not remain merely as a religion or body of philosophical thought.

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This article was written by Priya Viswanathan, a teacher/performer of Bharata Natyam, Classical Music and Classical Instrumental Veena. A recipient of several awards for both music and dance, Priya is also a freelance writer online. She currently writes for About.com, a subsidiary of the New York Times Company (<http://mobiledevices.about.com>)

Our efforts have been directed at making this article informative and refreshing for you. We will truly appreciate all forms of feedback. Please send your feedback to [info@dollsofindia.com](mailto:info@dollsofindia.com).

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