

# **BUDDHISM PRIMER**

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Buddhism is a **dharmic religion** – a member of the family of religions originating on the Indian subcontinent which includes: Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism and Buddhism

It is the world's **5<sup>th</sup> largest** religion (if one considers it a religion- views vary) with **over 1 billion adherents** (#1-Christianity 2-Islam 3-Hinduism 4-Chinese traditional folk religion 5- Buddhism)

## **The 5 most common *mudras* (symbolic hand gestures of The Buddha):**

**Dhyana** mudra: MEDITATION – palms up, R over L, in lap

**Bhumisparsa** mudra: ENLIGHTENMENT, “calling the earth to witness” – R hand draped over R leg and touching ground, palm down; L hand at waist level, palm up. Refers to the Buddha's moment of Enlightenment – Siddhartha Gautama called on the earth to be his witness. The most common mudra.

**Dharmachakra** (aka **Vitarka**) mudra: TEACHING – R hand raised, L hand lowered, palms up, thumb and forefingers touch to create a wheel shape which signifies the wheel of dharma = the Buddha's teaching

**Varana** mudra: CHARITY– R hand palm facing outward, fingers down – usually standing.

**Abhaya** mudra: FEARLESSNESS, BUDDHA AS PROTECTOR – raised R hand, lowered L hand, palms up “have no fear”; usually standing; the Laotian Phrabang Buddha uniquely has both R & L hands raised

## **THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS:**

**Life is suffering.**

**The cause of suffering is craving. \***

**The cessation of suffering is the cessation of craving.**

**The way leading to cessation of suffering is The Noble Eightfold Path.**

**When asked if he could distill all his teaching to one essential thing, the Buddha said:**

***“Nothing whatsoever should be clung to.”***

## **THE EIGHTFOLD PATH (=The Path To Nirvana/End of Suffering)**

**RIGHT:**

**SPEECH, ACTION, LIVELIHOOD, EFFORT,  
MINDFULNESS, CONCENTRATION (MEDITATION) , UNDERSTANDING, and THOUGHTS**

## **THE FIVE PRECEPTS (= The Moral Code of Buddhism)**

**Refrain from: 1- taking life, 2-stealing, 3-lying, 4-sexual misconduct, 5-intoxicants**

**Full monastic life adds over 200 more rules!**

**[e.g, do not handle money, avoid mimes, do not sit on high chairs]**

## **THE FOUR VIHARA (SUBLIME STATES to which we should all aspire):**

**Loving Kindness**

**Compassion/Mercy**

**Happiness for Others/No Envy**

**Equanimity/Peacefulness (accept the ups and downs of life with equal dispassion)**

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\*the Pali word is *tanha*, also translated as thirst, desire, clinging, wanting, greed or lust

**Amitabha (Amida** in Japanese) 'Pure Land' Buddha of Infinite Light in Mahayana tradition –associated with salvation, carries the dead to paradise. Amida is the key Buddha in Japan's largest Buddhist sect, 'Pure Land' *Jodo* Buddhism.

**bodhi** or **bodddhi** or **buddhi** – enlightenment, awakening

**bodhi tree** – the fig (*Ficus religiosa*) tree under which Siddhartha Gautama gained enlightenment

**bodhisattva-** (**bosatsu** in Japanese) – an enlightened being who remains in this existence to help others ; saint; demigod; often bejeweled in art, unlike the simply dressed Buddha

**Buddha** = Enlightened/Awakened One      **Ch'an** – Chinese for Zen

**dana-** generosity, charity – intrinsic to the Buddhist culture of giving

**doen** – the bell-ringer (marks the beginning and end of Zazen meditation sessions)

**dharma** or **dhamma** – teachings of the Buddha      **dukkha** – suffering – due to attachment

**Esoteric Buddhism** - Buddhist teachings that are conveyed secretly or implicitly and are held to be beyond the understanding of ordinary persons. Esoteric Buddhism by necessity involves extensive study with a master who can impart secret and special knowledge and insight. Tibetan Buddhism (Lamaism), and the Japanese Shingon and Tendai Schools, are the best known examples of Esoteric Buddhism.

**Guanyin** – Chinese name for the *bodhisattva* of compassion (Vietnam: Quan Am, Japan: Kannon). In India and Cambodia this deity is male and is known as Avalokiteshvara or Lokeshvara –his beatific visage greets you at the Bayon

**'Laughing Buddha'** – A 10<sup>th</sup> century itinerant Ch'an (Chinese Zen) monk, revered as a bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism; known as **Ho-tei** in Japanese, **Pu-tai** or **Budai** in Chinese, and **Bo Dai** in Vietnamese. He symbolizes plenitude and contentment. Westerners often confuse him with The Buddha.

**jatakas** – 500 parables demonstrating some element of the Buddha's life and teaching

**karma**, or **kamma** – intentional or willed act      **karuna** – compassion, central to Buddhist philosophy and ideology

**koan** – an image, concept, question or brief story demonstrating the paradoxical nature of dualistic intuitive non-rational thinking. Used in Zen meditation.

**Lamaism-** another name for Tibetan Buddhism which is a unique syncretic blend of Mahayana Buddhism and ancient Tibetan shamanistic Bon religion; also referred to as Tantric (from the looms known as *tantra* which are used to weave scriptural wall hangings) or Vajrayana Buddhism. Lama, as in Dalai Lama, is a Tibetan Buddhist master.

**lotus** - ubiquitous Buddhist symbol- a thing of purity & beauty emerging from muddy waters -metaphor for enlightenment

**Mahayana-** later derivative form of Buddhism emphasizing bodhisattava demigods and acts of worship, called the "Greater Vehicle" by its adherents; prevalent in north and east Asia

**Maitreya** – the Buddha-to-come of the future epoch, a parallel to the messiah of Abrahamic western religions

**metta** – loving kindness

**nagas** – great water serpent-gods in Hindu & Buddhist mythology–particularly prominent in Angkorian art and mythology. In Hinduism, variably associated with good (water, creation, protection) and evil (deceit & destruction). Benign in Buddhism: The Naga King Muchalinda protected the Buddha from a storm. Nagas always have an odd number of heads, classically 5.

**Nichiren** - a major school of Japanese Buddhism which arose in the Kamakura Period, founded by... Nichiren

**nirvana** or **nibbana**– literally "extinguishment" (of desire) = enlightenment/awakening, liberation from cycle of **samsara**

**Pali** – An ancient Indo-Aryan language similar to and contemporary with Sanskrit, thought to be less elitist than Sanskrit and thus used in recording early Theravada Buddhist scripture, as a more populist approach

**Rinzai Zen** – Japanese Zen sect that makes extensive use of koans      **Roshi** – Zen master

**saca** - truthfulness

**samsara** – the wheel of cyclic existence: birth-life-suffering-death-rebirth – endless if one does not achieve nirvana

**sangha** – the community of Buddhist monks      **Sanskrit** – the early literary language of northern India

**Satori** – Japanese Zen term for enlightenment; it is synonymous with another common term, **kensho**

**Shingon** -a major school of esoteric Buddhism in Japan, founded by Kobo-Daishi in the 9th century

**Siddhartha Gautama** – The historical Buddha; "He who has reached his goal"

**Stupa** - shrine, reliquary, symbol of Buddha's enlightenment; Hindu origins, very prominent in Buddhism; should be circumambulated clockwise. Typically contains putative relics (hair, bone) of Buddha, or a statue-

Note synonyms: pagoda (pan-Asia), chedi (Thailand), zedi (Myanmar), paya (Myanmar), dagoba (Sri Lanka)

**Sutras** – holy texts      **tanha** – desire, craving, "thirst" – the root cause of all suffering (dukkha)

**Tendai** - A major school of esoteric Buddhism in Japan, eclectic but also centered on The Lotus Sutra. Founded by Saicho in the 9th century as an outgrowth of Shingon. Saicho is also credited with introducing tea from China to Japan

**Theravada-** Sri Lankan Buddhism brought to southeast Asia by traders and prevalent in Indochina excluding Vietnam; Literally "Words of the Elders". Formerly called "Hinayana" or "Lesser Vehicle" by non-adherents but this term is now strongly out of favor. It is closer to the original Indian Buddhism, more philosophical and personal.

**Tripitaka** – "three baskets" – early Buddhist scriptures, a.k.a. the Pali canon

**Una** or **urna** – circular dot on Buddha's central forehead – represents his ability to see and understand all

**ushnisha** – Buddha's topknot or other projection from the top of his head – represents great knowledge **Zazen** – Zen meditation – practiced in a **zendo** hall      **Zen-** Mahayana sect focusing on meditation; Chinese (called Ch'an) in origin