

Theravada Buddhism, Origins, Characteristics, Spread

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Theravada Buddhism, also known as the "*Doctrine of the Elders*," is one of Buddhism's oldest and most influential traditions. It adheres to "*vibhajjavada*," which means "analytical instruction." Theravāda is renowned for preserving the Buddha's teachings and practices in their most authentic form.

Theravada is one of the two major schools of Buddhism, the other being Mahayana, with some considering Vajrayana as the third school, though it is based on Mahayana philosophy.

About Theravada Buddhism

Theravāda Buddhism is the oldest surviving school of Buddhism, tracing its origins to the First Buddhist Council held shortly after the Buddha's passing. During this council, the Buddha's teachings, known as Buddha Dhamma, were compiled and organised. *Sthaviravadin* or *Thervadins*, the followers of this tradition, have preserved these teachings in the Pāli Canon for over a thousand years.

The Pāli Canon (Tripiṭaka)	- The Pāli Canon, also known as the Tripiṭaka ("Three Baskets"), is the foundation of Theravāda Buddhism. It consists of three primary sections: • Vinaya Piṭaka: It details the monastic code of conduct, including rules and regulations for monks and nuns. • Sutta Piṭaka: It contains the discourses and teachings of the Buddha, addressing topics such as ethics, meditation, and philosophical inquiry. • Abhidhamma Piṭaka: It provides a systematic analysis of the Buddha's teachings, focusing on the nature of reality, consciousness, and the path to enlightenment.
Monastic Tradition and Sangha	- The Sangha (community of monks and nuns) plays a vital role in Theravāda Buddhism: • Members take vows of celibacy, non-violence, and poverty, dedicating their lives to studying and practising the Buddha's teachings. • The monastic community is crucial for preserving and transmitting the Dharma, offering spiritual guidance and education to lay followers.
Doctrine of Karma and Rebirth	- Karma: Actions, whether physical or mental, shape one's future experiences and rebirth. - Saṃsāra: The cycle of rebirth continues until enlightenment is attained, breaking free from this cycle.
Core philosophical concepts	- Impermanence (Anicca): All conditioned phenomena are in a constant state of flux. - Non-Self (Anattā): There is no permanent, unchanging self or soul.
Theravāda Abhidhamma	- The Abhidhamma is a comprehensive, scholarly system of the highest Buddhist teachings: • It reflects the analytical approach (Vibhajjavāda) used by the Buddha and early Buddhists to examine phenomena. • Abhidhamma literature spans various textual levels, from the earliest works in the Pāli Canon to later sub-commentaries written across different historical periods.

Theravada Buddhism Characteristics

Theravāda Buddhism is widely regarded as the most historically grounded and conservative form of the tradition. It is distinguished by several key characteristics that set it apart from other schools of thought:

- **Conservative approach:** Unlike Mahāyāna and Vajrāyāna, Theravāda emphasises a more orthodox doctrine (pariyatti) and strict monastic discipline (Vinaya).
- **Rejection of Mahāyāna Sūtras:** Theravāda regards the Mahāyāna texts, which emerged around the 1st century BCE, as non-authentic.
- **Doctrinal core:** It is founded on the Buddha's teachings as preserved in the Pāli Canon which continues the Hinayāna ("Lesser Vehicle") tradition.
- **Ultimate objective:** Theravāda Buddhism aims at achieving Nirvāna, the cessation of kleshas (mental afflictions such as fear, jealousy, and depression) and the cycle of suffering (samsāra). This is achieved by following the Noble Eightfold Path, which incorporates:
 - **Samatha:** Mind-calming practices.
 - **Vipassanā:** Insight into the three marks of existence—impermanence, suffering, and non-self.
- **Core tenets:**
- **Vibhajjavāda (Instruction of Analysis):** Advocates analytical understanding and direct experience of the teachings.
- **Visuddhimagga (The Path of Purification):** A seminal text by Buddhaghosa (5th century CE) outlines the seven stages of purification (Satta-visuddhi) for salvation.
- **Theravāda's view on the Arhat:** An Arhat in Theravāda has attained nirvāna through deep insight into existence. In Mahāyāna, an Arhat is considered to be on the path toward nirvāna but has not yet fully achieved it.
- Buddha chose Sixteen Arhats from among his disciples to safeguard the Dharma until the arrival of Maitreya, the future Buddha. Their names are:

1. Pindolabharadvāja 2. Kanakavatsa 3. Kanakapura Dhvaja 4. Subinda 5. Nakula 6. Bhadra 7. Kalika 8. Vajraputra	1. Svapaka 2. Panthaka 3. Rāhula (Buddha's son) 4. Nāgasena 5. Inḡada 6. Vanavāsi 7. Ajita 8. Culapanthaka
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Theravada Buddhism Spread

Theravāda Buddhism, originating around 250 BCE from the **original disciples of the Buddha**, gained prominence under King Ashoka, who embraced and promoted it. It spread from India to Sri Lanka in the 3rd century.

- To address corruption in the Sangha, Ashoka convened the **Third Buddhist Council (250 BCE)**, chaired by **Moggaliputtatissa**, which documented the **Tipitaka (Three Baskets)**.
- Ashoka's son, **Mahinda**, helped spread Theravāda to Sri Lanka, where it flourished.
- Theravāda is prevalent in countries like **Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia**.
 - Modern movements like **Vipassanā (mindfulness)** have also emerged from this tradition.

- **Influence:** Theravada Buddhism has significantly influenced the cultures and societies of these regions, shaping their art, architecture (**Shwedagon Pagoda**), literature (**3 Tripitaka**) and social structures (**Sangha**).
 - It has also played a role in shaping their political and economic systems.

Today, Theravada Buddhism remains the dominant form of Buddhism in much of Southeast Asia and continues to be an important part of the cultural and religious landscape of the region.

Theravada Buddhism UPSC PYQs

Question 1: With reference to the religious history of India, consider the following statements: (**UPSC Prelims 2020**)

1. Sthaviravadins belong to Mahayana Buddhism.
2. Lokottaravadin sect was an offshoot of Mahasanghika sect of Buddhism.
3. The deification of Buddha by Mahasanghikas fostered the Mahayana Buddhism.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

1. 1 and 2 only
2. 2 and 3 only
3. 3 only
4. 1, 2 and 3

Answer: (b)

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