

# The Dharma (Teaching)

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The Buddha's teaching is generally called *dharma* or *buddha-dharma*. As it is clear from the narratives of his spiritual quest, Gautama the Buddha felt he had achieved a realization above and beyond the teachers of his time. He formulated his teachings based directly upon his enlightenment. The Buddha's actual teaching can no longer be ascertained with absolute certainty. There is a great divergence between the teachings of the three great branches of Buddhism—Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna. Of course, they also share much common ground.

The Pali canon, which is the scriptural basis of the Hīnayāna branch of Buddhism, is thought to contain the sermons (*sutta*=*sūtra*) of the Buddha, as collected by his early followers. Undoubtedly, however, these scriptures have undergone varying degrees of editing. The Mahāyāna Buddhists consider the Sanskrit *Sūtras* as likewise embodying the original teachings of the enlightened master—a claim that is rejected by the Hīnayāna monastics. The Vajrayāna practitioners, again, rely primarily on scriptures called *Tantras*, composed primarily in Sanskrit or Tibetan, but today mostly available only in Tibetan.

The Pali canon is composed of three great divisions or "baskets" (*pitaka*): *Vinaya*, *Sūtra*, and *Abhidharma*, which basically correspond to the three aspects of the Buddhist path, namely ethics, wisdom, and meditation/reflection respectively. The *Vinaya* "basket" contains the rules of monastic discipline, while the *Sūtras* (Pali: *Sutta*) are collections of the Buddha's sermons, and the *Abhidharma* "basket" consists of technical and analytical treatments of the Buddha's teachings. The *Abhidharma*, which is an elaboration of the Buddha's teachings, was completed between 300 B.C. and 200 A.D. The *lam rim* (Tibetan: "stages of the path") teachings of Tibetan Buddhism are perhaps the most systematic practical presentations of the *Abhidharma*.

The adherents of Mahāyāna rely not on the Pali canon but on a comprehensive corpus of Sanskrit scriptures, specifically the *Prajñā-Pāramitā* ("Perfection of Wisdom")-*Sūtras*. Many commentaries were written on these works, and there also is a vast scholastic literature produced by the various Mahāyāna schools. A portion of this literature was transported to China, Japan, and Tibet, where it gave rise to new schools and scriptures.

The Mahāyāna literature was very extensive, and the oldest extant Chinese catalogue of *Sūtras*—the *Ch'u san-tsang chi-chi* completed by 518 A.D.—lists more than 2,000 works. Scholars generally distinguish between the early Sanskrit *Sūtras*, or *Āgama-Sūtras* (composed three to four centuries after the Buddha's *parinirvāna*), and the later Mahāyāna *Sūtras*. While the earlier group of *Sūtras* can be said to at least have been derived from the Buddha's original sermons, the later *Sūtras* represent innovations. Still, in the tradition of Vajrayāna, they too are regarded as the authentic teachings of the Buddha.

The Vajrayāna, or Mantrayāna, branch of Buddhism emerged about the third century A.D. *Mantras* are employed in the recitation of texts and in ritualistic settings, as a form

of prayer, and as objects of meditation. Sometimes Mantrayâna is regarded as one of two major branches of Mahâyâna, the other branch being Pâramitâyâna, after the Perfection of Wisdom scriptures. Pâramitâyâna focuses on the perfection of virtues, notably the perfection of wisdom (*prajñâ-pâramitâ*). When contrasted with Mantrayâna, Pâramitâyâna is designated as a "cause vehicle," because practitioners aspire to perfection by cultivating wisdom and compassion. Mantrayâna, in this context, called an "effect vehicle," because practice is a matter of realizing our innate perfection. Hence, practitioners of Mantrayâna typically practice what is known as "Deity Yoga" (*devatâ-yoga*). In Deity Yoga, the practitioner visualizes himself or herself as a Buddha with all of a Buddha's enlightened qualities.

The major foundational doctrines of Buddhism accepted by all three branches are as follows.

**(1) The Four Noble Truths (*catur-ârya-satya*):**

- *duhkha-satya* — the truth about suffering (*duhkha*), meaning suffering is universal
- *samudaya-satya* — the truth about the cause, meaning the cause of suffering is ignorance (*avidyâ*) or desire springing from ignorance
- *nirodha-satya* — the truth about the cessation, meaning suffering can be overcome
- *mârga-satya* — the truth about the path, meaning the noble eightfold path is the way out of suffering

**(2) Inessentiality (*anâtman*):** The Buddha characterized conditioned existence by the terms *duhkha* (suffering), *anitya* (impermanence), and *anâtman* (nonself). The *anâtman* doctrine represents a distinct break from the Upanishadic *âtman* teaching and characterizes the Buddhist *dharma* as a whole: There is no stable self, or soul, that migrates from one physical form to another. Instead everything is impermanent, composite, and interdependent.

**(3) The composite nature of everything:** According to Buddhism, all conditioned things are impermanent they are unstable configurations of five distinct and shortlived factors or groups (*skandha*):

- body (*rûpa*)
- sensation (*vedanâ*)
- perception (*samjñâ*)
- mental activity (*samskâra*)
- consciousness (*vijnâna*)

**(4) Causation is understood as a conditioned nexus (*pratîtya-samutpâda*)** discovered by the Buddha. The important idea of moral causation is given formal expression in the well-known Buddhist symbol of the wheel of life (*bhava-cakra*), which has the following twelve links (*nidâna*):

1. ignorance (*avidyâ*) leads to
2. action-intentions (*samskâra*), giving rise to
3. consciousness (*vijnâna*) from which arise

4. name and form (*nâma-rûpa*); from this originates
5. the sixfold base (*shad- âyatana*), that is, the objective world, which, in turn, yields
6. sense-contact (*sparsha*); this leads to
7. sensation (*vedanâ*), which effects
8. craving (*trishnâ*), and this gives rise to
9. grasping (*upâdana*), which leads to
10. " becoming" (*bhava*), from which results
11. birth (*jâti*), followed by
12. old age and death (*jarâ-marana*)

**(5) Karma** is the principle of causality operating at the moral/mental level, which is one of the corner stones of Buddhist, Hindu, and Jaina spirituality alike. The Buddhists do not, however, explain *karma* as a substance with qualities as does Jainism.

**(6) Ârya-ashtângika-mârگا**, or the noble eightfold path, comprises the following spiritual practices:

- *Samyag-drishti*, or "right vision," is the realization of the transiency of conditioned existence and the understanding that there is indeed no self
- *Samyak-samkalpa*, or "right resolve," is the threefold resolution to renounce what is ephemeral, to practice benevolence, and to not hurt any being
- *Samyag-vâcâ*, or "right speech," is the abstention from idle and false talk
- *Samyak-karmantâ*, or "right conduct," consists mainly in abstention from killing, stealing, and illicit sexual intercourse
- *Samyag-âjîva*, or "right livelihood," is the abstention from deceit, usury, treachery, and soothsaying in procuring one's sustenance
- *Samyag-vyayama*, or "right exertion," is the prevention of future unwholesome mental activity, the overcoming of present unwholesome feelings or thoughts, the cultivation of future wholesome states of mind, and the maintenance of present wholesome psychomental activity
- *Samyak-smriti*, or "right mindfulness," is the cultivation of awareness of the psychosomatic processes by means of such practices as the favorite Theravâda (Hînayâna) technique of *sati- patthâna*, consisting in the mindful observation of otherwise unconscious activities, like breathing or body movement
- *Samyak-samâdhi*, or "right concentration," is the practice of certain techniques for the internalization and transcendence of consciousness.

**(7) Nirvâna:** Rebirth in the Buddhist doctrine is likened to the passing on of a torch. Life is successively fueled by the causes and conditions of previous existences. *Nirvâna* (Pali: *nibbâna*) is negatively characterized as the blowing out of the flame of desires. In positive terms, the appellation *tathâgata* ("thus-gone") is used to refer to a fully awakened being, or *buddha*, who has realized " Suchness" (*tathâtâ*). *Tathâtâ* ("Thusness" or "Suchness") is the ineffable, ultimate nature of all things.

See also [buddha](#), [sangha](#), [refuge](#)

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