



SANES BODHI TRUST



FOR SPIRITUAL EDUCATION, INC.

What Is Theravāda Buddhism?



*A Beginner Lesson in the Theravāda
Buddhist Tradition*



Offered freely for educational purposes

What Is Theravāda Buddhism?

A gentle introduction for those who are new to Buddhism and curious about this ancient path of wisdom and compassion.

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Part One

A simple explanation

Buddhism is a tradition of teachings and practices that began over 2,500 years ago in ancient India. At its heart, Buddhism is about understanding the nature of suffering — why it arises, and how it can come to an end.

Theravāda Buddhism is one of the oldest surviving schools of this tradition. The word *Theravāda* comes from two Pāli words: *thera*, meaning "elder," and *vāda*, meaning "teaching" or "doctrine." Together, they mean the Teaching of the Elders — a name that reflects this school's commitment to preserving and practicing the earliest recorded teachings of the Buddha.

Today, Theravāda Buddhism is practiced widely across Southeast Asia, particularly in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Burma), Cambodia, and Laos. In recent decades it has also taken root in the West, carried by both Asian communities and teachers from traditions such as the Thai Forest Tradition.

Theravāda is not simply a set of beliefs to hold. It is a path of practice — a way of living, observing, and gradually awakening.

Part Two

Why it is called "the Teaching of the Elders"

Shortly after the Buddha passed away — an event the tradition calls his *Parinibbāna* — his senior disciples gathered to recite and preserve everything he had taught. This gathering is known in the tradition as the First Council. The teachings were memorized, organized, and passed down orally from teacher to student across many generations.

The name Teaching of the Elders reflects this lineage of careful preservation. The Theravāda tradition holds faithfully to what the historical Buddha — Gotama Buddha — taught during his

lifetime. It places great importance on the original texts, on living according to those texts, and on the monastic community that has carried this transmission across centuries.

It is worth saying with honesty and respect that other Buddhist schools — including Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions — also trace their origins to the Buddha and carry their own profound teachings. Theravāda does not claim to be the only valid expression of the Buddhist path. It offers one carefully preserved form of the ancient teaching.

Part Three

The role of the Pāli Canon

The scriptural foundation of Theravāda Buddhism is the *Tipiṭaka* — a Pāli word meaning "Three Baskets." These are the three great collections of the Buddha's recorded teachings:

I The Vinaya Piṭaka — Basket of Discipline
The guidelines and rules for the monastic community of monks and nuns.

II The Sutta Piṭaka — Basket of Discourses
Thousands of teachings the Buddha gave in conversation with monks, nuns, laypeople, and others.

III The Abhidhamma Piṭaka — Basket of Higher Teaching
A systematic philosophical and psychological analysis of mind and reality.

The Pāli Canon is written in *Pāli*, an ancient Indian language closely related to the one the Buddha likely spoke. For practitioners and scholars in the Theravāda tradition, the Pāli Canon is the primary reference for understanding the Buddha's teaching — though commentaries, teacher explanations, and living practice also play important roles.

Part Four

The Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path

According to the Pāli Canon, the very first teaching the Buddha gave after his awakening was a presentation of the Four Noble Truths. This teaching is recorded in a discourse called the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* — "The Discourse on Setting the Wheel of the Dhamma in Motion."

Dukkha — There is suffering

- 1** Life contains difficulty, impermanence, and a subtle unsatisfactoriness. This is an honest observation, not pessimism.

Samudaya — Suffering has a cause

- 2** The cause is craving (*taṇhā*) — our habitual grasping for pleasant experience and resistance to unpleasant experience.

Nirodha — Suffering can cease

- 3** When craving ceases, suffering ceases. This is the possibility of liberation — called *Nibbāna* in the Theravāda tradition.

Magga — There is a path

- 4** The way to the cessation of suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path — a practical guide for living wisely, ethically, and with clear awareness.

The Noble Eightfold Path (*Ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga*) organizes practice into three dimensions — wisdom, ethical living, and meditation — with eight interconnected factors:

WISDOM Right Understanding <i>Sammā-diṭṭhi</i>	WISDOM Right Intention <i>Sammā-saṅkappa</i>
ETHICS Right Speech <i>Sammā-vācā</i>	ETHICS Right Action <i>Sammā-kammanta</i>
ETHICS Right Livelihood <i>Sammā-ājīva</i>	MEDITATION Right Effort <i>Sammā-vāyāma</i>
MEDITATION Right Mindfulness <i>Sammā-sati</i>	MEDITATION Right Concentration <i>Sammā-samādhi</i>

These eight factors are not a checklist to complete in sequence. They support and strengthen one another — like the spokes of a wheel, each one necessary for the wheel to turn smoothly.

Part Five

Meditation, generosity, and ethical living

One of the most beautiful aspects of Theravāda Buddhism is that it offers a complete way of life — not just a philosophy to understand, but a practice to live. Three qualities are especially central:

Dāna — Generosity

- ◆ The practice of giving — of time, resources, kindness, and attention. Generosity softens the grip of self-centeredness and cultivates joy in the heart.

Sīla — Ethical living

- ◆ Living by the Five Precepts: refraining from harming living beings, from taking what is not given, from sexual misconduct, from false speech, and from intoxicants. These are voluntary training rules — expressions of care for oneself and others.

Bhāvanā — Meditation and mental cultivation

- ◆ The systematic training of the mind through practices such as mindfulness of the breath (ānāpānasati), loving-kindness (mettā), and insight meditation (vipassanā).

Generosity and ethical living create a foundation of inner peace from which meditation can deepen. And meditation, in turn, makes ethical living more natural and generous giving more joyful. These three support and nourish one another.

These practices are not reserved for monks and nuns. They are fully available to laypeople — to anyone willing to take one careful step at a time.

Part Six

A gentle closing reflection

In the Theravāda understanding, the Buddha is honored not as a creator god or savior, but as an awakened human teacher who discovered and taught the path to the end of suffering. He was a human being — like us — who looked honestly at the nature of his own mind and, through sustained effort and clarity, came to understand suffering and its end.

His teaching — the *Dhamma* — is an invitation rather than a demand. It asks us to look carefully at our own experience: to notice where suffering arises, to observe what feeds it, and to explore whether there is a gentler, wiser way to meet the moments of our lives.

Whether you are drawn to Theravāda Buddhism through curiosity, through difficulty, through a desire for greater peace, or simply through an open heart — you are welcome here. The path begins exactly where you are.

A REFLECTION TO CARRY WITH YOU

May you be well. May you be at ease. May you find in this teaching whatever nourishment your heart needs — and may your own understanding, cultivated slowly and honestly, be a light for those around you.

SOURCE BASIS

Sutta	The Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path are drawn from the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11) and related discourses, following Bhikkh
Sutta	The framework of dāna, sīla, and bhāvanā, and the Five Precepts, are attested throughout the Aṅguttara Nikāya and other Nikāyas as the standard description of la
Vinaya	The account of the First Council reflects the tradition's own record as preserved in th
Educational	All plain-language explanations and the closing reflection are original educational synthesis. No quotes are attributed to the Buddha or any named teacher. No sutta references or Pāli definitions are invented.

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Offered freely for educational purposes. Intended to introduce, not replace, study with qualified teachers and the primary sources of the Theravāda tradition.