



SANES BODHI TRUST



FOR SPIRITUAL EDUCATION, INC.

What Is Theravāda Buddhism?



*A Beginner Lesson in the Theravāda
Buddhist Tradition*



Offered freely for educational purposes

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A Beginner's Introduction to the Teaching of the Elders

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WELCOME

How to Use This Booklet

This booklet is written for someone who is completely new to Buddhism — no prior knowledge is assumed. You do not need to be a Buddhist, or intend to become one, to read it with benefit. It is simply an honest, respectful introduction to one of the world's oldest living spiritual traditions.

Each chapter builds gently on the one before it. Pāli words — the ancient language of the tradition's earliest texts — appear in italics with a plain-English explanation the first time they're used, and are also collected in the glossary near the end. You don't need to memorize them; understanding will come with time and practice, not with vocabulary alone.

At the end of the booklet you'll find a short set of reflection questions. These aren't a test. They're an invitation to sit with what you've read and notice how it meets your own experience.

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CHAPTER ONE

What Is Buddhism? What Is Theravāda?

Buddhism is a tradition of teaching and practice that began more than 2,500 years ago in ancient India. At its center is a simple, honest observation: life contains suffering, and suffering has a cause that can be understood — and released. Everything else in Buddhist teaching grows out of that starting point.

Over the centuries, this teaching developed into several major traditions as it spread across Asia and, later, the world. Theravāda Buddhism is one of these — and it is the oldest school that survives largely intact today.

The word Theravāda comes from two words in Pāli, an ancient Indian language closely related to the one the historical Buddha is believed to have spoken. Thera means “elder,” and vāda means “teaching” or “doctrine.” Together, Theravāda means the Teaching of the Elders — a name that points to this school’s central commitment: carefully preserving and living out the earliest recorded teachings attributed to the Buddha.

Today, Theravāda Buddhism is the majority tradition in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Burma), Cambodia, and Laos. In the last century, it has also taken root in Europe, the Americas, and elsewhere — carried both by Asian immigrant communities and by teachers from traditions such as the Thai Forest Tradition.

Theravāda is not simply a set of beliefs to accept. It is a path of practice — a way of observing one's own life closely, and gradually growing in wisdom and peace.

It's worth saying clearly, from the very beginning: Theravāda is one respected branch of a much larger Buddhist family. Other major traditions — including Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism, found throughout East Asia, Tibet, and the Himalayan region — trace their own roots to the same historical Buddha and carry their own profound teachings, practices, and scriptures. This booklet focuses on Theravāda because it is the tradition this Trust teaches from, not because it is the only valid door into the Buddhist path.

CHAPTER TWO

The Teaching of the Elders: A Brief History

To understand why this tradition calls itself “the Teaching of the Elders,” it helps to know a little about what happened after the Buddha's life ended.

The tradition holds that shortly after the Buddha's passing — an event referred to as his Parinibbāna, or final passing beyond suffering — a group of his senior monastic disciples gathered to formally recite and preserve everything he had taught over his roughly forty-five years of teaching. This gathering is remembered as the First Council, and its account is preserved within the Vinaya Piṭaka itself, in a section called the Cullavagga.

In an oral culture, with no printing and no easy way to duplicate written texts, the monastic community's solution was memorization. Monks were assigned to memorize and chant different portions of the teaching in structured, repeated group recitation — a method built for accuracy across generations of oral transmission, long before any of it was written down.

According to the tradition's own historical record, the teachings were eventually committed to writing in Sri Lanka, preserving in fixed form what had been carried orally for centuries. This is part of why Theravāda communities have long placed such emphasis on textual precision and on the monastic sangha — the community of ordained monks and nuns — as the living custodians of that transmission.

The name “Teaching of the Elders” reflects this whole lineage of careful, communal preservation: not one person's private memory, but a tradition maintained collectively and passed down with the intention of staying faithful to what the historical Buddha, Gotama Buddha, actually taught.

CHAPTER THREE

The Three Baskets: The Pāli Canon

The scriptural foundation of Theravāda Buddhism is a collection of texts called the Tipiṭaka — a Pāli word meaning “Three Baskets.” The name comes from the original practice of storing bundled palm-leaf manuscripts in three separate baskets, one for each collection.

I. The Vinaya Piṭaka — Basket of Discipline

This collection contains the rules and guidelines that govern life in the monastic community of monks (bhikkhus) and nuns (bhikkhunīs), along with the stories and reasoning behind them.

II. The Sutta Piṭaka — Basket of Discourses

This is the largest collection: thousands of individual discourses recording teachings the Buddha gave in conversation with monks, nuns, laypeople, kings, and skeptics, in the ordinary circumstances of daily life.

III. The Abhidhamma Piṭaka — Basket of Higher Teaching

This collection offers a highly systematic philosophical and psychological analysis of the mind and of experience — a more technical companion to the more narrative Sutta Piṭaka.

The Pāli Canon is written in Pāli, and for Theravāda practitioners and scholars it serves as the primary reference point for understanding what the Buddha taught. That said, the canon has never stood alone. Generations of commentaries, teacher explanations, and — most importantly — lived practice have always worked alongside the texts to keep the tradition alive rather than merely preserved.

Two respected, freely accessible resources for readers who wish to explore the Canon directly are Access to Insight (accesstoinight.org) and SuttaCentral (suttacentral.org), both of which host English translations of many discourses referenced in this booklet.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Four Noble Truths

According to the Pāli Canon, the very first teaching the Buddha gave after his awakening was a presentation of the Four Noble Truths, recorded in a discourse called the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta — “The Discourse on Setting the Wheel of the Dhamma in Motion” (Saṃyutta Nikāya 56.11).

1. Dukkha — There is suffering. Life contains difficulty, impermanence, and a subtle unsatisfactoriness, even in its pleasant moments. This is offered as an honest observation about experience, not as pessimism about life.

2. Samudaya — Suffering has a cause. The Buddha identified this cause as craving, or *taṇhā* — the mind's habitual grasping toward pleasant experience and its resistance to unpleasant experience.

3. Nirodha — Suffering can cease. When craving genuinely ceases, so does the suffering it produces. This is the possibility of liberation, known in the Theravāda tradition as *Nibbāna*.

4. Magga — There is a path. The way toward the cessation of suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path — a practical, livable framework rather than an abstract theory.

Taken together, the Four Noble Truths are often compared to a doctor's method: identify the illness, understand its cause, confirm that recovery is possible, and follow the treatment that leads there. Nothing here asks for belief without investigation — the invitation, throughout, is to test these truths against one's own honest experience.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Noble Eightfold Path

The Noble Eightfold Path — *Ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga* — organizes Buddhist practice into three broad dimensions: wisdom, ethical conduct, and meditation. Within these three dimensions are

eight interconnected factors, each given the qualifier “right” (sammā), meaning something closer to “wise,” “skillful,” or “whole,” rather than “correct” in a narrow moral sense.

Wisdom (Paññā)

- ◆ Right Understanding (Sammā-diṭṭhi) — seeing experience clearly, including the truth of suffering and its causes.
- ◆ Right Intention (Sammā-saṅkappa) — orienting the mind toward renunciation, goodwill, and harmlessness.

Ethical Conduct (Sīla)

- ◆ Right Speech (Sammā-vācā) — speaking truthfully, kindly, and constructively.
- ◆ Right Action (Sammā-kammanta) — acting in ways that avoid harm to oneself and others.
- ◆ Right Livelihood (Sammā-ājīva) — earning a living through work that does not cause harm.

Meditation (Samādhi)

- ◆ Right Effort (Sammā-vāyāma) — steadily cultivating wholesome states of mind and releasing unwholesome ones.
- ◆ Right Mindfulness (Sammā-sati) — sustaining clear, non-judgmental awareness of the present moment.
- ◆ Right Concentration (Sammā-samādhi) — developing a settled, unified, and steady mind through meditation.

It's important not to picture these eight factors as a checklist to complete in order, one after another. They are better understood as the spokes of a single wheel — mutually supporting, developing together, each one necessary for the whole to turn smoothly.

CHAPTER SIX

Living the Path: Generosity, Ethics, Meditation

Theravāda Buddhism offers a complete way of life, not only a philosophy to understand intellectually. Three qualities sit at the heart of everyday practice, for laypeople and monastics alike.

Dāna — Generosity

The practice of giving — of time, resources, attention, and kindness. In Theravāda communities, dāna is often the very first practice a newcomer is invited into, long before formal meditation instruction. Generosity gently loosens the grip of self-centeredness and cultivates genuine joy.

Sīla — Ethical Living

Sīla is most commonly expressed through the Five Precepts, voluntary training commitments undertaken by lay Buddhists: to refrain from harming living beings, from taking what is not freely given, from sexual misconduct, from false speech, and from the use of intoxicants that cloud the mind. These are not imposed commandments but chosen disciplines — acts of care for oneself and for others.

Bhāvanā — Meditation and Mental Cultivation

Bhāvanā refers to the systematic training of the mind, most often through practices such as mindfulness of the breath (ānāpānasati), loving-kindness meditation (mettā), and insight meditation (vipassanā), which cultivates direct, experiential understanding of impermanence.

These three qualities — generosity, ethics, and meditation — are not separate achievements to check off, but mutually reinforcing supports. Generosity and ethical living build a foundation of inner steadiness from which meditation can deepen; meditation, in turn, makes ethical living feel more natural and giving feel more genuinely joyful. And crucially, none of this is reserved for monks and nuns. All three are fully available to laypeople, one careful step at a time.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Who Was the Buddha?

In the Theravāda understanding, the Buddha is not regarded as a creator god, a savior, or a supernatural being to be worshipped. He is honored as an awakened human teacher — a person who, through his own sustained effort, honest self-observation, and clarity of mind, came to understand the nature of suffering and the way beyond it.

His given name was Siddhattha Gotama; “Buddha” is a title meaning “the Awakened One,” used after his awakening rather than as a personal name from birth. His teaching, known as the Dhamma, is offered as an invitation rather than a demand: to look honestly at one's own experience, to notice where suffering quietly arises, to observe what feeds it, and to explore whether a gentler, wiser way of meeting each moment is possible.

Whether you come to this teaching out of curiosity, out of difficulty, out of a longing for greater peace, or simply through an open and searching heart, the tradition holds that the path begins exactly where you already are — nowhere else.

A Closing Reflection

This booklet has offered only the barest outline of a tradition that has sustained and guided millions of people across twenty-five centuries. There is a great deal more to learn — and, far more importantly, a great deal more to experience directly through practice, patient study, and the guidance of qualified teachers.

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, become a steady light for those around you.

Reflection Questions

Take these slowly. There are no correct answers — only what is honestly true for you right now.

- ◆ Where in your own life have you noticed the subtle unsatisfactoriness the Buddha called *dukkha*, even in moments that were otherwise good?
- ◆ When you look closely at a recent moment of frustration or disappointment, can you identify a craving or an expectation underneath it?
- ◆ Of the eight factors on the Noble Eightfold Path, which one already feels most natural to you? Which one feels most unfamiliar or difficult?
- ◆ What would it look like to practice one small act of *dāna* — generosity — this week, without expecting anything in return?
- ◆ What questions has this booklet left you with that you'd like to explore further, whether through reading, meditation, or conversation with a teacher?

REFERENCE

Glossary of Terms

Bhāvanā — Meditation and mental cultivation.

Bhikkhu / Bhikkhunī — An ordained Buddhist monk / nun.

Dāna — Generosity; the practice of giving.

Dhamma — The Buddha's teaching; also, the truth or nature of things.

Dukkha — Suffering, stress, or the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned experience.

Gotama Buddha — The historical Buddha, Siddhattha Gotama, honored as the founder of the tradition.

Magga — The path; specifically, the Noble Eightfold Path.

Mettā — Loving-kindness; a meditation practice cultivating goodwill toward all beings.

Nibbāna — The cessation of suffering; liberation from craving.

Nirodha — The cessation of suffering, the third Noble Truth.

Pāli Canon / Tipiṭaka — The “Three Baskets” of scripture: Vinaya, Sutta, and Abhidhamma.

Parinibbāna — The Buddha's final passing beyond suffering at the end of his life.

Samudaya — The origin or cause of suffering, the second Noble Truth.

Sangha — The Buddhist community, especially the monastic order of monks and nuns.

Sīla — Ethical conduct; virtue; the Five Precepts.

Taṇhā — Craving; the grasping and resistance identified as the cause of suffering.

Theravāda — “The Teaching of the Elders”; the oldest surviving Buddhist school.

Vipassanā — Insight meditation; direct investigation of impermanence and the nature of mind.

REFERENCE

Source Basis

Sutta. The Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path are drawn from the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (Saṃyutta Nikāya 56.11), following Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation in The Connected Discourses of the Buddha (Wisdom Publications, 2000).

Sutta. The framework of dāna, sīla, and bhāvanā, and the Five Precepts, is attested throughout the Aṅguttara Nikāya and other Nikāyas as a standard description of lay Buddhist practice; it is presented here at the level of general framework, not as a single specific discourse.

Vinaya. The account of the First Council reflects the tradition's own record as preserved in the Vinaya Piṭaka (Cullavagga XI).

Further reading. Walpola Rahula, What the Buddha Taught; Bhikkhu Bodhi, ed., In the Buddha's Words (Wisdom Publications, 2005); Access to Insight (accesstoinsight.org); SuttaCentral (suttacentral.org).

Educational. All plain-language explanations, framing, and the closing reflection are original educational synthesis prepared by Sanes Bodhi Trust for Spiritual Education Inc. No quotations are attributed to the Buddha or to any named teacher. No sutta references or Pāli terms have been 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.*