

Differences Between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism

Snapshots of Buddhism: Summaries of Teachings and Topics

#	TOPIC	THERAVADA BUDDHISM	MAHAYANA BUDDHISM
1	The Buddha	Only the historical Gautama (Sakyamuni) Buddha and past buddhas are accepted.	Besides Sakyamuni Buddha, other contemporary buddhas like Amitabha and Medicine Buddha are also very popular.
2	Bodhisattvas	Only Maitreya bodhisattva is accepted.	Avalokitesvara, Manshuri, Ksitigarbha and Samanthabhadra are four very well known bodhisattvas besides Maitreya.
3	Objective of training	Arahant or pacceka-buddha.	Buddhahood (via bodhisattva path).
4	Organization of Buddhist scriptures	The Pali Canon is divided into 3 baskets (Tipitaka): Vinaya Pitaka of 5 books, Sutta Pitaka of 5 collections (many suttas) and Abhidhamma Pitaka of 7 books.	The Mahayana Buddhist Canon also consists of Tripitaka of disciplines, discourses (sutras) and dharma analysis. It is usually organized in 12 divisions of topics like Cause and Conditions and Verses. It contains virtually all the Theravada Tipitaka and many sutras that the latter does not have.
5	Concept of Bodhicitta	Main emphasis is self-liberation. There is total reliance on one-self to eradicate all defilements.	Besides self-liberation, it is important for Mahayana followers to help other sentient beings.
6	Trikaya concept	Very limited emphasis on the 3 bodies of a Buddha. References are mainly on nirmana-kaya and dharma-kaya.	Very well mentioned in Mahayana Buddhism. Samboga-kaya or reward/enjoyment body completes the Trikaya concept.
7	Transmission route	Southern transmission: Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Laos and Cambodia and parts of Southeast Asia.	Northern transmission: Tibet, China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Mongolia and parts of Southeast Asia.
8	Language of dharma teaching	Tipitaka is strictly in Pali. Dharma teaching in Pali supplemented by local language.	Buddhist canon is translated into the local language (except for the 5 untranslatable), e.g. Tibetan, Chinese and Japanese. Original language of transmission is Sanskrit.
9	Nirvana (Nibbana in Pali)	No distinction is made between nirvana attained by a Buddha and that of an Arahant or pacceka Buddha.	Also known as 'liberation from Samsara,' there are subtle distinctions in the level of attainment for the three situations.
10	Sakyamuni Buddha's disciples	Basically historical disciples, whether arahants or commoners.	A lot of bodhisattvas are introduced by Sakyamuni Buddha. Most of these are not historical figures.
11	Rituals and liturgy	There are some rituals but not heavily emphasized as in Mahayana schools.	Owing to local cultural influences, there is much more emphasis on the use of rituals; e.g. Rituals for the deceased, feeding of Petas, tantric formalities (in Vajrayana).
12	Use of Mantras and Mudras	Some equivalent in the use of Parittas.	Heavily practiced in the Vajrayana school of Mahayana Buddhism. Other schools also have included some mantras in their daily liturgy.

13	Dying and death aspects	Very little research and knowledge on the process of dying and death. Usually, the dying persons are advised to meditate on impermanence, suffering and emptiness.	The Vajrayana school is particularly meticulous in these areas. There are many inner and external signs manifested by people before they die. There is heavy stress in doing transference of merit practices in the immediate few weeks following death to assist in the deceased's next rebirth.
14	Bardo	This in-between stage after death and before rebirth is ignored in Theravada school.	All Mahayana schools teach this after death aspect.
15	One meal a day practice	This norm among Theravada sanghas.	This is a highly respected practice but it is left to the disposition of each individual in the various sanghas.
16	Vegetarianism	This aspect is not necessary. In places like Thailand where daily morning rounds are still practiced, it is very difficult to insist on the type of food to be donated	Very well observed in all Mahayana schools (except the Tibetans due to the geographical circumstances). However, this aspect is not compulsory.
17	Focus of worship in the temple	Simple layout with the image of Sakyamuni Buddha the focus of worship.	Can be quite elaborate; with a chamber/hall for Sakyamuni Buddha and two disciples, one hall for the 3 Buddhas (including Amitabha and Medicine Buddha) and one hall for the 3 key bodhisattvas; besides the protectors, etc.
18	Schools/Sects of the tradition	One surviving major school following years of attrition reducing the number from as high as 18.	8 major (Chinese) schools based on the partial doctrines (sutras, sastras or vinaya) of the teachings. The four schools inclined towards practices like Pure Land/Amitabha, Ch'an, Vajrayana and Vinaya (not for lay people) are more popular than the philosophy based schools like Tien Tai, Avamtasaka, Yogacara and Madhyamika.
19	Non Buddhist influences	Mainly pre-Buddhism Indian/Brahmin influences. Many terms like karma, sangha, etc. were prevailing terms during Sakyamuni Buddha's life time. References were made from the Vedas and Upanishads.	In the course of integration and adoption by the people in other civilizations, there were heavy mutual influences. In China, both Confucianism and Taoism exerted some influence on Buddhism which in turn had an impact on the indigenous beliefs. This scenario was repeated in Japan and Tibet.
20	Buddha nature	Absent from the teachings of Theravada tradition.	Heavily stressed, particularly by schools inclined practices.

[Compiled by Tan Swee Eng]

Courtesy Buddhnet

Theravada vs. Mahayana Buddhism

	Theravada	Mahayana
Location	Southern (Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, parts of Southeast Asia)	Northern (Tibet, China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, parts of Southeast Asia)
Schools and Sects	One surviving school (as many as 18 existed at one time) 8 major schools: four practice-based (Zen, Pure Land, Vajrayana, Vinaya); four philosophy-based (Tendai, Avamtsaka, Yogacara and Madhyamika)	
Buddhist Scriptures	Pali Canon/Tripitaka only	Books of the Theravada Tripitaka plus many other sutras (e.g. Lotus Sutra)
Buddhas	Historical Buddha (Gautama) and past Buddhas only	Gautama Buddha plus Amitabha, Medicine Buddhas, and others
Bodhisattvas	Maitreya only	Maitreya plus Avalokitesvara, Mansjuri, Ksitigarbha and Samanthabadra
Goal of Training	Arhat	Buddhahood via bodhisattva-path
3 Buddha Bodies (Trikaya)	Very limited emphasis; mainly on nirmanakaya and dharma-kaya	Emphasized, including the samboga-kaya or reward/enjoyment body
Original Language	Pali	Sanskrit
Language of Transmission	Tripitaka is only in Pali. Teaching in Pali supplemented by local language.	Scriptures translated into local language.
Buddha's Disciples	Historical disciples described in Scriptures	Many bodhisattvas that are not historical figures
Mantras and Mudras	Some equivalent in the use of Parittas	Emphasized in Vajrayana; sometimes incorporated in other schools

Bardo (Limbo)	Rejected	Taught by all schools
Non-Buddhist Influences	Mainly pre-Buddhist Indian influences like concepts of karma, sangha, etc.	Heavily influenced by local religious ideas as transmitted to new cultures (China, Japan, Tibet).
Buddha Nature	Not taught	Emphasized, especially in practice-based schools
Rituals	Very few; not emphasized	Many, owing to local cultural influences

Courtesy ReligionFacts