



CIS Bulletin: The Buddhist Scriptures

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There are many different Buddhist scriptures. Buddhists worship the texts of some scriptures and dismiss the texts of others as false teachings.

Buddhist scriptures can be categorized in several ways.

- ◆ Canonical and non-canonical texts.
- ◆ Sanskrit and Pali texts. Sanskrit are sacred languages of India and the Asian subcontinent. Pali texts, used by Southern or Theravada Buddhists, were first written down in the 1st century B.C. in what is now called Sri Lanka, an island off the southern coast of India. Mahayana Buddhists use Sanskrit as their sacred language. Theravada Buddhism is often called “Southern” because its adherents are found mostly in Sri Lanka and southeastern Asia (Laos, Burma, and Thailand). Mahayana Buddhism is more predominant in Tibet, China, Japan and Hawaii, i. e., more northerly countries. Few Buddhists are found in India, probably because of the Muslim invasion in the 11th century.

Of the two major sects, Mahayana is far larger, probably due in some part, to its teaching allowing women to achieve Buddhahood, and to its teaching on Bodhisattvas, a term referring to a person who achieves enlightenment, but delays his/her entry into Nirvana in order to help others achieve enlightenment. Tibetan Buddhism is a sub-sect of Mahayana Buddhism.

Tibetan Buddhism sets itself apart with its teaching about Dalai Lamas, a name meaning “great ocean of wisdom.” The current Dalai Lama, who regularly visits the United States since he was forced into exile by Communist China in 1959, is believed to be the 14th Dalai Lama, each of whom is believed to be a reincarnation of the previous Dalai Lama.

- ◆ Theravada, Mahayana and Tibetan texts. These three refer to the three major schools of Buddhism. Tibetan, also called Tantric, texts contain other texts and commentaries. Versions of the Tibetan text fill between 40 and 270 volumes, depending on version and commentaries on the verses.

Since they reject the divinity of The Buddha, Theravada Buddhists do not consider Buddhist scriptures to be a divine, infallible revelation from a god, every word of which we must believe. Rather, they claim the scriptures are a record of a great teacher’s sayings which should be checked against personal experience.

Often considered in the West as a collection of sexual practices, Tantrism, is a collection of rituals practiced by several faiths, including Hinduism that involve the visualization of a

deity (sometimes in the act of sexual union with a *consort*), offerings (real or visualized) and the chanting of a *mantra*. A *mantra* is a word or phrase used in devotion to a deity, or religious ceremonies to remove karma, accumulate wealth, avoid danger, or destroy enemies.

A well-known *mantra* is the one practiced by the Hindu sect, Hare Krishnas. It is reportedly chanted 1,726 times each day by devotees of the Hare Krishna movement.

*Hare Krishna Hare Krishna
Krishna Krishna Hare Hare
Hare Rama Hare Rama
Rama Rama Hare Hare*

The most popular *mantra* is *Om* or *Aum*.

Canonical Texts

Canonical texts are called *sutras* (Sanskrit language) or *suttas* (Pali language). Canonical texts are said to be the actual words of The Buddha, or those of one of his closest disciples. The Buddha is not believed to have actually written any of the texts, but passed his teaching down orally to his disciples. There are a multitude of *sutras*, none of which are accepted by all Buddhists.

Canonical texts are divided into three types: discourses (or *sutras*), rules of monastic discipline (*vinaya*) and explanatory texts (*abhidharma*). Together, these three make up what is known as the **Tripitaka** (in Sanskrit) or *Tipitaka* (in Pali).

Tripitaka means three baskets; three referring to the number of divisions. One theory states “baskets” refer to baskets used by construction workers to carry material from one place to another. While some believe the early Buddhist scriptures were kept in baskets, a more realistic theory is that “baskets” referred to the human mind, which like the workers carrying materials from place to place, carried the oral tradition from The Buddha from place to place. The texts were not written down until several hundred years after The Buddha’s death.

The first two types of canonical texts include a variety of discourses on the *Dharma* (a Sanskrit word meaning duty, truth, right conduct or reality), commentaries on other teachings, and stories of the Buddha’s previous lives. In Pali, the word is spelled Dhamma.

Various Canonical Texts

Buddhist scriptures were written over many centuries, and as recently as A.D. 1000.

◆ The *Dhammapada*, or Path of the Dhamma, contain 423 verses on a variety of subjects, most of which deal with ethics.

◆ The *Lotus Sutra* or *Sutra on the White Lotus of the Sublime Dharma* is one of the most popular and influential Mahayana sutras. The lotus is a flower which grows in water and has a white or pink bloom. The symbolism to the Buddhist is that if a beautiful white flower can grow out of mud, so can a pure, enlightened mind grow out of ignorance. The Lotus Sutra is the main scripture of the Pure Land Sect of Buddhism, a subsect of Mahayana Buddhism.

Pure Land Buddhists accept The Buddha as Amitabha or Amida Buddha (Amida means refers to a Buddha of Limitless Light or Limitless Life.). Amida Buddha is said to accept everyone who calls his name regardless of their worthiness, religion or worldly status. This all-acceptance is the basis of his great popularity. Amida Buddha saves all who have faith and trust in him.

Pure Land Buddhists have taught that in order for a devotee to be reborn in Amitabha's Western Paradise or Western Pureland, he/she should chant or repeat a *mantra* to Amitabha as often as possible to develop and keep a proper and sincere state of mind. They repeat the mantra, "Namu Amida Butsu" or "Adoration to the Buddha Amitabha."

Homage to the Buddha of the Western Pure Land,
Kind and Compassionate Amitabha (3x)
Namo Amita Buddha (recite at length)

◆ The *Diamond Sutra*, written in Chinese and dated A.D. 868, this is the oldest printed existing book. It, measuring 16-foot-long, is said to be a part of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*, a sermon preached by The Buddha. It has 8,000 verses.

◆ *MahaSamaya Sutra* or *The Great Gathering* "consists mainly of an ancient hymn in which all the beings of the upper realms gather in the Buddha's presence. All the devas including Indra and Shiva, mentioned by their epithets — titles or/and 'nicknames' — along with the nagas [half human-half snake supernatural beings], garudas, and even Mara and his "dark army" though they do not stay, meet in a state of suspension of conflict to do honour to the One who can teach the way out of samsara."

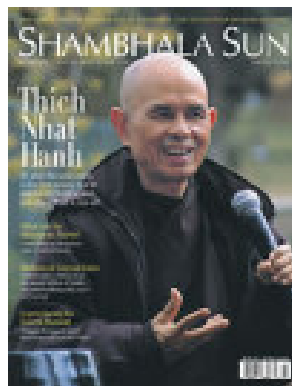
Regulate yourselves by eating at the appropriate time and by living in purity. You should not participate in worldly affairs or act as an envoy, nor should you become involved with magical spells and elixirs of immortality, or with making connections with high ranking people, being affectionate towards them and condescending towards the lowly.

Non-Canonical Texts

The non-canonical texts are the various commentaries, quotations, histories, and grammars said to be based on the ca-



Amida Buddha



nonical texts.

Divisions between canonical and non-canonical texts are arbitrary and specific divisions are not accepted by all Buddhists.



Miao-Se-Shen Buddha (statue second from right): This Buddha's symbolic direction is south. His hands are in a mudra of touching the ground which symbolizes Sakyamuni Buddha's resolve to overcome the temptations of Mara and thereby gain supreme enlightenment. He represents beauty and dignity.

Tibetan prayer flags: The Tibetan word for prayer flag is "Lung ta", meaning, "Wind Horse". When wind blows (expressing the quality and nature of mind) the sacred prayer flag flaps in the breeze. The prayers contained on the flag are carried out to all beings as a blessing.

Thich Nhat Hanh offers a guided meditation to relax our body and mind and return to the here and now. Fully present, fully alive, we find we are already home.