

The Mahayana Buddhism Field Manual

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There are countless, countless people who have helped with this book, most often without realizing it. Simply by passing the Dharma on to others, through their generosity, this book is possible. I hope that someone in the future may similarly find value in this book, and pass on its content to others.

However, I would like to thank my wife in particular, who encouraged me not to give up, and who taught me much about Buddhism without ever saying a word.

Lastly, I would also like to thank “Reverend Jim”, whose tireless efforts and generous nature were a continued inspiration in those early years.

南無阿弥陀仏

Namu Amida Butsu

(“Praise to the Buddha Amida”)

Preface: What is Mahayana Buddhism?

Chances are, you probably have run into Mahayana Buddhism and didn't even know it. Many Buddhist traditions that are well-known to Western audiences are within the umbrella of Mahayana Buddhism. From Tibetan Buddhism to Japanese Zen, these are all Mahayana Buddhism.

From its humble beginnings in north-east India, near the border of modern day Nepal, in 500 BCE, Buddhism has spread time and again across many cultures and nations, and each one has contributed something to it. It was adopted by the Greek colonists in Bactria (northwest India) who designed the first statues, it was carried along the Silk Road by the Parthians who translated many critical texts, it was adopted by China who preserved many texts we now rely upon and expanded certain schools of thought, the Japanese who helped refine certain practices that we now practice in the West and so on. In short, countless generations of disciples of the Buddha have made contributions to the tradition as a whole, in spite of differing languages and cultures.

And now with modern technology it spreads once again to places that never encountered the Dharma of the Buddha.

Thus, Mahayana Buddhism is a living, breathing tradition that continues to grow and evolve as time and history unfold.

But what is Mahayana Buddhism, and why would you want to follow it?

This book is meant to be a field-guide, a practical document you can carry with you wherever you are and wherever you go, and provide basic guidelines to new Buddhists to help them along the path. It does not cover all details, nor does it delve too deep into the history, but it provides enough for you to do your own "field-work" if you choose. This includes the basics of Mahayana Buddhist teachings.

But for now, let's provide a quick summary.

If we had to summarize Mahayana Buddhism, based on teachings such as those found in the *Lotus Sutra*, and other foundational texts, it would be:

- **Universal potential for Buddhahood** or “full awakening” – from the Mahayana Buddhist standpoint, given enough time, all beings are capable of becoming fully-awakened buddhas themselves. Along the way, you will hear about *bodhisattvas* a lot: those who seek the path.
- **Emptiness and interdependence of all phenomena** – in ancient Sanskrit language, the word *shunyata* encapsulated both concepts: that nothing arises out of nowhere, and everything is inherently impermanent and has a contingent existence. Shunyata wasn’t just meant to be just an academic exercise, it ties directly into teachings regarding the Bodhisattva, Buddhahood, goodwill, conduct, and so on.
- **The existence of other Buddhas** – Buddhism has always understood that more than one Buddha exists across the vast span of time, not just our historical founder, Shakyamuni. This is explored in greater detail in Mahayana Buddhism, and we’ll be meeting a “who’s who” of Buddhas later.
- **Buddha lands** – Just as Mahayana Buddhism recognizes many different buddhas, the realms they create through their own vast merit and goodwill are recognized too. A “buddha land” is not a heaven-like realm as we know it, but a form of refuge for beings who want to go further along the Buddhist path.
- **Expedient Means** – Just as the historical Buddha taught different people in his lifetime according to their background, understanding or inclination, the various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and other figures strive to liberate all beings using a variety of means. Mahayana Buddhism is flexible, and adapts to the needs of people in its quest to help all beings become buddhas someday.
- **The appearance and decline of Buddhism** – a Buddha is said to “turn the wheel” of the Dharma when they teaches, but in time the wheel slows down and then stops. Then, another Buddha appears eventually to do the same. Thus, the Buddhist teachings arise, then seemingly fade.
- **The true Dharma is beyond description** – a frequent theme in Mahayana Buddhism is the idea that the true, unvarnished Dharma is beyond words and description. If you try to describe the taste of cinnamon to someone who has never tried it, it is pretty difficult. Now imagine trying to explain the notion of Nirvana (unbinding). Sometimes, you just have to see it yourself.

Put it another way, knowing the Buddhist teachings is like the man in Plato’s Parable of the Cave. Once you’ve stood outside and seen the sun, you can’t go back into the dark little cave.

But in Mahayana Buddhism, the goal is to not only go outside and see the sun, but also share it with others, and encourage them to see the sun, too. At the end of the day, each person in the cave is free to go outside and see the sun for themselves. But because Mahayana Buddhism thinks in terms of vast time, eventually all beings will step outside the cave some day, so there is no rush.

The Buddha-Dharma, that is the Buddhist religion and its teachings, is a vast, vast ocean, an ocean with many treasures. It takes time to explore. When exploring this ocean, everyone uses a different boat and different diving equipment, and some of that treasure is not always easily found. And yet, the more one dives into this ocean, the more treasures they find.

Please enjoy this book, and may you find some treasure too.

Chapter One: First Steps

In this chapter, we'll start on the Buddhist path. If you grew up Buddhist, or maybe explored Buddhism before, this chapter can still be helpful if you want to renew your pursuit of the Buddha-Dharma, or just need a shot in the arm.

Becoming a Buddhist means to take part in a tradition that has persisted across 2,500 years worth of generations of people, across many walks of life and civilizations, all dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge, wisdom, self-mastery and goodwill towards others.

Taking Refuge in the Three Treasures

Whether you're new to Buddhism or maybe rediscovering it from your youth, the process for becoming a Buddhist, or renewing your pursuit of the path, is very straightforward: you simply take refuge in the **Three Treasures**: the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

First off, what does it mean to take refuge?

Buddhism is like a clinic for those who are weary, lost or confused and in need of a stable rock to stand on amidst the ups and downs of life. Life can make you feel like you are being tossed about in stormy waters, and for this reason, we all seek refuge. The Buddha's teachings are like a safe harbor. Every one who comes to Buddhism by choice chooses to do so because they are weary or lost, or need a sense of direction, and by declaring this need you thus become a student on the Buddhist path. Simple as that.

The Three Treasures

First, we have **the Buddha**. The Buddha is the historical founder of Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama, who lived in India around 500-600 BCE. Buddhists usually do not call him by his given name, Siddhartha, though nor do we call him "Buddha" in English. The word "buddha" is a title meaning the awakened one. Thus, Buddhists refer to him by his title **Shakyamuni Buddha** ("the Buddha of the Shakya clan") or simply "the Buddha". The Buddha is the peerless teacher who uncovered the Dharma and taught it to others. This is called the Turning of the Wheel (of the Dharma) in the sense that a wheel which sat dormant, now is spinning again.

The Dharma is the principle of existence that the Buddha uncovered (or any buddha discovers as we shall see) and shared with the world. Gravity works the same regardless of whether people believe in it or not, and in the same way the Dharma as a fundamental “law” of existence permeates existence whether people understand it or not. For this reason, a Buddha’s role in Buddhism is vitally important because a buddha awakens to the Dharma, and has the skill, capacity, and goodwill to share it with others. Further, the appearance of a buddha is thought to be extremely rare, and eons may pass before another one comes and teaches the Dharma again.

The Sangha is the Buddhist community, great and small. In the largest sense, it is all those followers who have carried forth the Buddha’s teachings across 2,500 years of history, across many cultures, people and places. In the simplest sense, it is your local Buddhist community (or online community) that helps you on the path to becoming Buddhist, supporting one another and learning from one another. The term “Sangha” can mean both. The Sangha is one of the Three Treasures because at the end of the day, we need one another for support, for insight, and to progress along the Buddhist path. In the Buddha’s own words, being surrounded by a healthy community of good, honorable people who similarly pursue the path is crucial to pursuit of the Buddhist path.

Thus taken together, the Buddha is the teacher, the Dharma is the teaching, and the Sangha is the community that preserves and reinforces the teachings.

How To Take Refuge

The process for taking refuge in the Three Treasures (i.e. becoming a Buddhist) is very simple:

1. Find an image of the Buddha. A statue, picture, or an illustration in a book is fine. There is no standard here. Find what is suitable and meaningful.
2. Stand before this image, and put your hands together, palm to palm, near your heart.
3. Next, recite the phrase below in your own native language, or using the ancient Pali language shown in parentheses:
 - a. **I go to the Buddha for refuge** : *Buddang saranang gacchaami*
 - b. **I go to the Dharma for refuge** : *Dammang saranang gacchaami*
 - c. **I go to the Sangha for refuge** : *Sangang saranang gacchaami*
4. With your hands still together, give one final bow by bending at the waist about 30-45°.

You are now a Buddhist!

When we look at home liturgy later, many people recite some variation of this at the start of the service. You can take refuge in the Three Treasures as often as you like.

What next?

This book can be roughly divided into two sections. The next few chapters cover a lot of DIY (“do-it-yourself”) Buddhism: building a home shrine, basic home liturgy, meditation, the precepts, and so on. Later chapters focus a bit more on Mahayana Buddhism at large, deities, buddhist schools, sutras, and so on. Feel free to jump around and find what you need.

Chapter Two: Home Shrines

This chapter covers one of the first steps that new (or returning) Buddhists often do: build a home shrine.

Why A Home Shrine?

If you're new to the Buddhist path, or returning to it, a home shrine might feel like a low-priority at first. Shouldn't you meditate? Shouldn't you chant something?

Part of the process of becoming a Buddhist is to develop a stable foundation first. This means things like studying the Dharma (through the sutras, or through your local community), taking up the precepts (more on that later), and also having a focal point for one's path. This is where a shrine really comes in handy.

A Buddhist shrine is something you build your practice around. An image of the Buddha is enshrined, but also you might keep books and sutras nearby, incense offerings, pictures of deceased loved ones, and so on. Each Buddhist culture and tradition has their own style for shrines, and local customs, so there's a lot of variations. In the example below, we'll try to use a somewhat generic example, but be aware if you are already part of a community (or aspire to be), they will likely do things differently. Feel free to adjust your shrine setup as needed.

When this author first started out as a Buddhist, I made a shrine using an old balsawood box lid. I taped an image of the Buddha on the inside of the box and stood it up. A little later, I added a small, cheap incense burner, and that was my shrine for years until I gradually expanded.

So, at the very least, a shrine includes an image of the Buddha. This can be any buddha, bodhisattva, or other figure. Some traditions even use Chinese characters for special phrases and chants. But if you're starting out, it's always a safe bet to find a statue or image of Shakyamuni Buddha, the founder, and make that your central image. You can change it later if need be, but please do treat it with respect.

Installing a Shrine

Some pointers on where to place a shrine:

1. If you have the space, set up a shrine in a quiet, clean corner of your home, free from distraction.
2. If you have space, a table with a cloth over it is fine. If not, a bookshelf or small box-enclosure works fine too. Some traditions have a small, elevated shelf for enshrining the Buddha. Others use a cabinet. Some traditions use neither.
3. Some traditions have particular rules about which direction a shrine should be facing. For now, it's safest to avoid directly facing other religious deities.
4. Finally, the area around the shrine should be neat and tidy. Think of it as welcoming a guest into the house.

Beyond that, you just need to enshrine the image you want, where you want. People will often put the statue or image on a small, elevated pedestal. Even a tiny box will suffice. This is like a seat of honor for a guest teacher.

It's also very common to provide certain offerings, among others:

1. Candles (for safety reasons, LED candles are often used now)
2. Flowers (even fake flowers work), and
3. A small incense burner.
4. A small dish for fruit, grains, and such. Meat is never served.
5. A small cup for water, tea or other drinks. Alcohol is never served.

You can include one or more of these. The incense burner is often placed just in front of the Buddhist image, and the other offerings will flank it, or be arranged in some way. Since this varies a lot by tradition, feel free to consult a nearby temple or community for suggestions.

Another thing not mentioned here is Buddhist rosaries. This will be covered in the liturgy section.

What to Enshrine

As discussed earlier in this chapter, people enshrine pictures or statues of the Buddha Shakyamuni, but also might enshrine other Buddhist deities. We'll cover some of these in greater detail later, but one very popular alternative is to enshrine the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara also known as Guan-yin, Chenrezig or Kannon. Another alternative is the Buddha Amitabha also known as Amida. Some people enshrine certain Tibetan deities instead. Some people even enshrine an image of a guru, or Chinese characters for a particular chant.

This is perfectly fine because each one of these embodies the Dharma in some way, so when you pay obeisance, in the end, it is the Dharma more than the particular figure that you pay homage to. It is the Dharma that forms the foundation of Buddhism, and the foundation of wisdom and freedom from fear.

Where to Obtain Shrine Goods

If you live outside a Buddhist country, your options for building a Buddhist shrine are somewhat limited and you have to be a little more resourceful. You may be able to get items shipped from an Asian import store, or a local market, but depending on where you live, this is not guaranteed.

On the other hand, most of the items listed above are easy enough to gather on your own over time. A vase of flowers is easy enough, as is a cup of water. I once met a devout Nichiren Buddhist who offered cornflakes (as in American cereal) to his shrine every morning.

Innovation and adaptation are perfectly fine in Buddhism, but it really helps to grasp the tradition first.

The Shrine as a Mirror

One other aspect of a home shrine that's often overlooked is that the shrine is also a kind of mirror to oneself and one's own mind.

This may sound strange at first, but will become more clear over time. How you approach things in life is a reflection of yourself. When a shrine is diligently maintained it reflects on you as a Buddhist. If it gets dusty and forgotten, it reflects on you as well. When you sincerely recite Buddhist liturgy before a shrine, it reflects on you as a disciple of the Buddha.

But also, taking this one step further, when you pay homage to, for example, Guan-yin, is that not also paying homage to the noble spirit of Guan-yin within yourself too?

Something to think about.

Chapter Three : The Precepts

Buddhism works best when it is seen as a tripod of wisdom, conduct and practice. We briefly touched on Buddhist practice above when we talked about the Buddhist shrine, and will cover it much more later, but for now we'll move on to Buddhist conduct.

Being a Buddhist Full-time

Buddhism is oftentimes a religion of doing things, less so a religion of faith. So, practice is central to Buddhism, but you can't practice Buddhism all the time. For that reason, conduct is also very important.

When we talked about the basic principles of Mahayana Buddhism in the preface, we briefly mentioned a Sanskrit word *shunyata* meaning the emptiness and interdependence of all things. Let's explore this a bit more.

When we look at a sheet of paper, the paper didn't just pop into existence. It was processed from a tree, and that tree grew from a seed, nurtured by sun and water, drawing nutrients from soil and so on. Then there's the hard-working people who hauled the lumber, processed the lumber, and then made paper. A lot of different things went into making that one sheet of paper. The paper is "empty" because it didn't just exist on its own, it exists through other things.

In the same way, you didn't pop into existence one day: many people and many things came together in just the right way to make you who you are. For that reason, you are unique, and through many small acts of kindness you may never know about, you are who you are.

But this also works in reverse. The acts you do also benefit (or harm) others even if you don't see it directly. This is what it means to be "interdependent". We depend on others for our continued existence, and they depend on us.

In a famous story from India, the god Brahma (sometimes Indra) is said to adorn his celestial palace with a great net, where each node is adorned with a gorgeous jewel. The light of each

jewel is said to reflect the light of every other jewel. This principle is used throughout Buddhism and is encapsulated in *shunyata*.

So, Buddhist conduct is really important on the path. When you speak wholesome and true words, it affects things around you, like the jewels reflecting light from one another. When you lie or badmouth others, it poisons things around you, even if only a little.

Also, it's important to sometimes reflect and weigh your conduct to see if it is helpful or harmful. Chances are it's a bit of both. To help you weigh your conduct, the Buddha taught his lay followers **five precepts** to use as a benchmark.

The Five Precepts

The Five Precepts of Buddhism are a set of voluntary training rules the Buddha encouraged lay disciples to undertake. Monastic disciples (i.e. monks and nuns) were given a much stricter set of rules, which increased over time when certain disciples would do something stupid or betray the trust of the lay community.

But for the lay community, the Buddha kept it simple and encouraged them to take up five rules:

1. Not to take life.
2. Not to steal (lit. "take what is not given")
3. Not to commit sexual misconduct (this will take a bit of explanation)
4. Not to speak falsely, and
5. Not to consume or use intoxicants.

Let's cover these in more detail.

The First Precept: Not Taking Life

This precept is fairly straightforward, but some interpretations are more strict than others. The basic interpretation is to not kill sentient beings (including animals), or encourage others to do so. Sometimes this gets conflated with the practice of vegetarianism, which is part of the Buddhist tradition, but this precept above is more narrowly focused on the specific act of taking life. For me, I've learned to suppress my arachnophobia, and scoop up spiders in the house with a cup, or just leave them be, rather than killing them.

In practice many Buddhists eat vegetarian meals at least some of the time, but not all Buddhists are vegetarian full-time. In traditional Mahayana-Buddhist cultures, vegetarianism is usually limited to monastic disciples (since it's explicitly in the monastic rules of conduct) and devout lay-followers. As with all things Buddhist, it's a personal choice, and an extension of one's practice.

The Second Precept: Not Taking What's Not Given

This one is pretty self-explanatory: if someone isn't giving it to you, don't take it.

The Third Precept: Not Committing Sexual Misconduct

This one is tricky because it varies by cultural and social mores somewhat, but in essence the Buddha is encouraging people to live a blameless life, so avoiding things like debauchery, infidelity, or anything else that you probably wouldn't want printed on the front page of the news. Being homosexual or LGBTQ is not included here. It's how one *uses* their sexuality, not their identity.

Put another way, if your sexual conduct harms another, or oneself, it's a good idea to abstain from it.

The Fourth Precept : Not To Speak Falsely

In the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism, the Buddha taught that speech should be true, timely and with good intentions. False speech definitely does not fit this.

Of course, sometimes people will bring up the hypothetical situation of lying to protect someone or for example a surprise party. But these are done for the benefit of someone else, and not for one's own benefit. One should weigh their choices carefully.

In general, honest speech with good intentions is more often than not the right choice.

The Fifth Precept : Not To Consume Intoxicants

The Buddha's final precept was to avoid situations where consuming intoxicants causes heedlessness, and thus violating the other four precepts, harming oneself or others. The specific intoxicants used in ancient India would differ somewhat from what we have today, but the end result is the same. A sober life is often the safer, less problematic one.

This one can be surprisingly difficult to uphold especially in countries where drinking is very commonplace, especially at work or other environments. This one may require retraining of habits more than any other, especially if you use intoxicants to relax or decompress.

Nonetheless, the Buddha discouraged their use, and thus in order to walk the Buddhist path these have to be put aside some day.

The Precepts Are Too Hard

When starting a new exercise routine, some can do ten pushups right away. Some can barely do three. Some new Buddhists uphold the precepts right away, some really struggle with it. If you grew up with a strict religious upbringing, the last thing you want to do is follow another set of rules.

The key to understanding Buddhist conduct is twofold.

First, the five precepts are meant to be understood as training rules. If a person wants to follow the Buddhist path, self-mastery and restraint are essential to one's own wellbeing, and increased self-confidence. Further, it has long-term benefits. It would be nice if we could eat pizza and hamburgers daily, but that sort of diet leaves us both broke and obese, and nothing positive to show for it. Instead, restraining oneself and eating only occasionally means fewer long-term health problems, and a more balanced budget. So the precepts encourage long-term positive habits over quick, impulsive ones. In effect, you are training to live a quasi-monastic life along the Buddhist path.

Second, the benefits of the five precepts to others shouldn't be ignored. If you are honest with those around you and don't steal, they'll trust you more, and likely be more honest with you too. If you do not abuse others sexually, it will avoid a lot of pain and trauma. If you are sober, you don't get into situations with others that can destroy relationships.

Hence the Buddha said in the ancient *Dhammapada* (more on this later):

"361. Good is restraint in the body; good is restraint in speech; good is restraint in thought. Restraint everywhere is good. The monk restrained in every way is freed from all suffering."
([source](#))

Undertaking the Five Precepts

Choosing to undertake the Five Precepts is an almost universal practice, and something lay Buddhists choose to do sooner or later. If you feel you cannot do so now, maybe consider undertaking one, two, three or four of the precepts for now. If unsure, you can also consult a teacher you trust.

As for undertaking the precepts, much like taking refuge in the Three Treasures, you can simply declare it before your Buddhist shrine, or you can formally declare them in a Buddhist ceremony if you attend a temple. Many traditions also allow you to take the precepts before an ordained monk. I once took the five precepts before a monk-friend of mine in the Theravada tradition, and it was a nice experience. I also took them many years later in a Japanese temple too.

Note that some Buddhist traditions in Mahayana-Buddhism have a slightly different set of precepts. If unsure, you can ask your local temple for more information. You can start with the five precepts on your own (since they are training rules), and move on to the bodhisattva precepts (more on that in the sutras chapter), or other similar rules later when you wish to commit to a certain tradition.

Thinking Long Term

Before we move onto the next chapter, the precepts are an underrated tool to help one along the Buddhist path, and I highly recommend them. Even if you don't get things right, that's OK. It's a gold-standard to follow, and as we'll see in the section on Buddhist liturgy, people make mistakes all the time. It's part of the growing process. The point is to keep at it, and not give up.

This continuous effort, in spite of ups and downs, is the bodhisattva way of Mahayana Buddhism.

Chapter Four : Buddhist Liturgy

As a lay-Buddhist, cultivation and training are just as important as monastic disciples, but the nature of that practice may differ because of circumstances. And yet, across the entire Buddhist tradition one thing is common: chanting and reciting the Buddhist teachings. To understand this, let's look at something called "the sutras".

A Super Brief History of the Sutras

Instead of a particular religious book, the Buddhist tradition is founded on a collection of sermons called **sutras**. Sutras are transmitted sermons of the Buddha, passed down from one generation to the next. Hence they nearly always start with the phrase "thus have I heard".

In the Buddha's time, religious teachings were not written down, since that was only for mundane things like receipts, and business transactions. Instead, the monks had a sophisticated process for memorizing and verbally reciting the sermons of the Buddha, often working in groups to correct one another. When the Buddha died, the monastic community gathered and went through all the Buddha's old sermons, recited them, and passed them down to future generations. Generations later, these sutras were finally written down in Sanskrit language, and passed along the Silk Road to China and beyond, where Sanskrit was converted to Chinese language. Additional sutras were composed later, especially in the Mahayana-Buddhist tradition, to help restate or compile disparate teachings into a cohesive narrative.

Nonetheless, this tradition of reciting the sermons of the Buddha (the sutras) continues to this day in many ways and many languages. People usually recite from a sutra book now, instead of memorizing, but reciting Buddhist liturgy remains as important now as it was back then.

So, the core practices of home liturgy is to recite a sutra, or a key passage from a sutra. Oftentimes, there are verses you'll recite before and after the sutra, but these are optional "window dressing".

Which Sutra to Recite?

The list of sutras in the Buddhist canon is far too long to list here. Also, some traditions favor one sutra, or set of sutras, while another tradition favors a different sutra. However, for the purposes of this field-guide, there are some popular choices that people often recite. If unsure, please consult a nearby temple or the tradition you prefer. We'll also explore these in more detail later in this guide.

One generic choice that is universally popular is the ***Dhammapada***. In terms of textual history, the Dhammapada is probably one of the very oldest recorded collections of the sayings of the Buddha. It is not technically a sutra in that it doesn't start with "thus have I heard", but instead is a compilation of sayings by the Buddha. It is very accessible, and you can recite verses that you like from it (the whole text is a bit too long for liturgy).

Within Mahayana-Buddhism, the most popular sutra is probably the **Heart Sutra**. It is a small sutra, readable from start to finish in about one minute, and there are many good translations available. The sutra is somewhat cryptic in topic, but profound as one follows the Buddhist path to fruition.

Another popular choice is the **Lotus Sutra**. The Lotus Sutra is quite long, with many chapters, but people like to recite key passages, such as those from the second chapter, the sixteenth chapter and so on. As we'll see later, people devoted to Avalokiteshvara (aka Guan-yin, Kannon or Chenrezig) also recite passages from the twenty-fifth chapter which introduces Avalokiteshvara.

Finally, those devoted to the Pure Land path often recite passages from either the **Immeasurable Life Sutra** or **Amitabha Sutra**, while Zen followers might prefer passages from the **Diamond Sutra**, the Heart Sutra, or the Platform Sutra.

Rosaries

Buddhism has a long tradition of using rosaries for both lay and monastic followers. The typical rosary is a string of 108 beads (symbolizing the 108 forms of mental delusion one has), but over time various smaller, wrist-sized or even ring-sized rosaries have come into existence. In certain Pure Land traditions (see chapter on Buddhist traditions) a double-ring rosary is sometimes employed to help one count recitations.

Some rosaries are worn daily around the wrist, others are only used during liturgies. This varies considerably by tradition, but there is no requirement to have a rosary, nor a specific kind of rosary. It is simply a tool to help one on the Buddhist path, so you are welcome to employ it or not. If you need further guidance consult the tradition you are interested in.

For the purposes of Buddhist liturgies, it is a common practice to drape a rosary over both hands, or at least your left hand, when reciting from a sutra book aloud. When you pray, and put your hands together near your heart, the same rosary might drape over both hands. Again, this is optional, but a common practice.

Home Liturgy Basics

Having said all that, let's talk about the basics of home liturgy. Reciting a liturgy at home, whether daily, or on certain occasions, helps reinforce the Buddhist teachings, generates good merit for the future (which people often dedicate to others), and can be tailored to suit one's life. Both monastic followers and lay followers recite some form of Buddhist liturgy, only the length and detail may differ.

For a new Buddhist, it is often best to start out small, and get familiar with your chosen tradition, chosen sutra, and so on. Make that your foundation. In time, you can expand, adjust, change, or do what you feel is needed. There is no 100% right way to do it; it's a form of personal practice.

The basic liturgy format, typical across most of Mahayana Buddhism is follows:

1. Taking refuge in the Three Treasures
2. Optional: repentance of one's faults
3. Optional: verses for opening the sutras
4. Reciting a sutra
5. Optional: devotional verses or mantra
6. Optional: verses for dedicating merit
7. Optional: the four bodhisattva vows

We won't cover these in detail here, since it varies by tradition, but let's look at a brief overview.

Taking Refuge in the Three Treasures

Just like the earlier ceremony for becoming a Buddhist, many Buddhists reaffirm taking refuge in the Three Treasures from time to time. The verses will vary, but the sentiment is the same.

Repentance of One's Faults

This is a common practice, especially in Mahayana Buddhism, where one acknowledges that one has committed acts that were based on anger, greed or ignorance, and that these were harmful to others, or to oneself. The goal is not to flog yourself, but instead to use the Dharma as a benchmark and weigh your actions accordingly, almost scientifically.

In Mahayana Buddhism it is thought that by confessing such things, the karmic burden is lightened or nullified altogether. It helps to wipe the slate clean, as it were.

Verses for Opening the Sutras

A common verse recited is acknowledging that encountering the Dharma is extremely rare in this world, since you can spend many countless lifetimes being reborn as a non-human, and even as a human you are not guaranteed to encounter the Buddha-Dharma. Thus, it is a moment to reflect, and be grateful.

Reciting the Sutra

Many traditions recite sutras in different ways, but generally you read aloud in a steady voice, not too long, not too soft, and you might do it in your native language, or using a 'liturgical language' whether that be Sanskrit, Classical Chinese, and so on.

There are many videos online as well as CDs and other media you can use to learn how to chant in your chosen tradition. Oftentimes, you'll feel awkward and self-conscious at first, but soon it becomes as easy as extending one's arm.

Verses for Dedicating Merit

A very common practice especially in Mahayana Buddhism is to dedicate any good merit you've accumulated by doing this home liturgy towards others. This is in keeping with the Mahayana-Buddhist spirit that we're all in this together, and thus one's Buddhist path is for the benefit of others too.

Many people traditionally dedicate merit towards one's ancestors, parents and loved ones. Others dedicate the merit to all sentient beings everywhere, in hopes that this will help them follow the Buddhist path someday. Sometimes people also dedicate merit toward future rebirth in the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha, or a different buddha.

The Four Bodhisattva Vows

The Four Bodhisattva Vows are a particularly important liturgy in Mahayana Buddhism, and one that is very commonly recited in many Buddhist traditions. The four vows express the Mahayana-Buddhist spirit of a **bodhisattva** who pursues Enlightenment to the very end. We'll see examples of archetypal bodhisattvas in the chapter on buddhist deities.

One translation of the Vows is as follows:

1. Sentient beings are innumerable, and yet I vow to save them all.
2. My mental defilements are innumerable, I vow to extinguish them all.
3. The gates of the Dharma are without measure, I vow to master them all.
4. The path to Buddhahood is peerless, I vow to fulfill it.

These are not literal vows like the Five Precepts, but an expression of the will to carry on the Buddhist path to fruition. It also expresses the Mahayana-Buddhist teachings as we saw in the Preface.

Final Words on Liturgy

Reciting a Buddhist liturgy at home is something you can do as often as you like (daily, weekly, monthly, etc), and as long as you need to. It helps to think of it like tilling the garden in your mind. The more you tend the garden, the more it grows and prospers.

In the next chapter, we'll explore a brief introduction to various deities in the Mahayana-Buddhist tradition, and their significance.

Chapter Five : Buddhist Deities

Within the Buddhist religion, Mahayana Buddhism in particular has a large number of deities that express various aspects of Buddhism, and represent the notion of “expedient means” discussed in the preface: that many paths within Buddhism all lead to the same teachings, so whatever one can follow will work.

Before we look at these deities, let's clarify some basic terms.

Understanding Buddhas and Bodhisattvas

Within Mahayana Buddhism you will often hear about both **buddhas** and **bodhisattvas**. A buddha is one who has fulfilled that path and become enlightened, attaining the state of **nirvana** (unbinding, liberation), while a bodhisattva is someone who is determined to attain that state, but hasn't yet. Shakyamuni Buddha, the historical founder, is the most well-known example of a buddha. In the Buddhist tradition, and in the words of the Buddha himself via the sutras, he was a bodhisattva for many lifetimes before culminating in the life of Siddhartha Gautama (a.k.a. The Buddha). Side note, if you hear the word **tathagata** (“tuh-tah-ga-ta”, a thus come one”), that is just another word for a buddha. A buddha is a tathagata, a tathagata is a buddha, in other words.

Interpretations about who counts as a bodhisattva vary somewhat, but broadly speaking a person who has experienced a moment of total commitment to the Buddhist path, and aspires to become a buddha, no matter how long it takes, is a bodhisattva. This is often called **awakening the bodhi mind** (the mind that strives for “bodhi” or enlightenment).

However, some bodhisattvas are legendary, evergreen figures and thus part of the Buddhist “pantheon”. Similarly, some buddhas are also popular focuses of devotion. Let's look at these figures now.

Famous Buddhas

Let's look at some example buddhas.

Shakyamuni Buddha

- **Featured sutras:** The Dhammapada, the Diamond Sutra, the Lotus Sutra, etc.
- **Aspects:** Wisdom, the Dharma
- **Aliases:** Siddhartha Gautama, Shakyamuni

The historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, founder of the religion, is of course a popular choice of devotion. However in Buddhism, we call him **Shakyamuni Buddha** as in the buddha of the Shakya clan. As a prince in India 2,500 years ago, he lived a posh lifestyle, but then realized the futility of it, and sought answers to life and the Universe. In popular tradition, including his own description of events as recorded in the sutras, he pursued many teachers as a wandering ascetic, but was unsatisfied with the answers. Eventually, he pursued the answers himself, sat under the famous Bodhi Tree and meditated through the evening. Through deep meditation, he saw all his past lives laid out *ad nauseum*, pierced through the veil of existence, and fully awakened.

As a buddha, he lived until age 80 teaching both laypeople (including kings) and monastic disciples of all kinds. After consuming tainted food, he laid under two *sala* trees, and breathed his last.

In the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni Buddha is depicted somewhat differently in that there's the physical, historical Buddha, but also a more timeless version of himself teaching the Dharma lifetime after lifetime for countless eons. One can interpret this "eternal version" of the Buddha as representing the Dharma itself, less the historical person, and is said to reside on Vulture Peak in India for all time (where the historical Buddha often preached), thus functioning as his own buddha land.

Amitabha Buddha

- **Featured sutras:** The Immeasurable Life Sutra, the Amitabha Sutra, the Contemplation [of Amitabha] Sutra
- **Aspects:** Wisdom, Compassion, Emancipation
- **Aliases:** Amitayus, Amida, Emitufo

Another very popular buddha in the Mahayana tradition is **Amitabha Buddha** (“ah-mee-tah-bah”). This buddha, introduced in the Immeasurable Life Sutra, is said to have been a king countless eons ago, and encountered a buddha named Lokeshvararaja (“world sovereign”). So impressed by the Dharma, the king renounced his throne and vowed to be a refuge for all beings. Through countless lives and efforts (similar to Shakyamuni Buddha above) Amitabha accumulated so much good merit that he fulfilled his path and established a realm called the Pure Land to serve as a Buddhist haven for all beings. Unlike heaven in the traditional, Western sense, this Pure Land is meant to be a safe refuge on the Buddhist path, not a contradiction of it.

Further, as part of Amitabha’s vows to rescue all beings, he made the Pure Land very easy to be reborn into. One need only to recite the buddha’s name ten times. Hence, Amitabha Buddha has been particularly popular among those who lacked confidence about their ability to continue the Buddhist path, such as illiterate peasants, women, or monastics who were unsure of their progress.

In the Tibetan tradition, Amitabha is often depicted with the color red, but in the Chinese tradition he is depicted in gold color.

The Medicine Buddha

- **Featured sutras:** The Medicine Buddha Sutra
- **Aspects:** Compassion, Fortitude
- **Aliases:** none

The Medicine Buddha is featured in only one sutra, but is another popular figure of devotion. Like the other buddhas above, the Medicine Buddha strove to help all beings, though his vows

are more focused on mundane needs in this life, unlike Amitabha Buddha who focuses on the life to come. The vows of the Medicine Buddha include such things as healing from illness or relief from poverty, but also helping Buddhist followers stay true to the path, upholding the precepts, and so on. Thus, many people pay homage to the Medicine Buddha for worldly needs, but might pray to Amitabha Buddha to be reborn in the Pure Land in the next life.

Similar to Amitabha Buddha, the Medicine Buddha established his own “pure land”, but to the east, not to the west. The Medicine Buddha is often associated with a deep blue (lapis lazuli) color, especially in the Tibetan tradition, and like Amitabha Buddha, he is flanked by two bodhisattvas named Sunlight and Moonlight.

In many temples, the Medicine Buddha is also flanked by the Twelve Heavenly Generals, celestial guardians from Indian religious tradition.

Vairocana Buddha

- **Featured sutras:** The Brahma Net Sutra, The Flower Garland Sutra, various esoteric sutras
- **Aspects:** Wisdom, the Dharma embodied
- **Aliases:** The Buddha of the Sun, Maha-Vairocana Buddha

This buddha is somewhat unusual because rather than a person with a historical (or pseudo-historical) backstory, **Vairocana** (“vie-ro-cha-na”) exists for all time. Vairocana is central to many esoteric traditions (but less exoteric ones), and represents the totality of the Dharma, the totality of all phenomena. In the Brahma Net Sutra, he is introduced as the source of all buddhas, a personification of the Dharma itself.

In the esoteric traditions, Vairocana is often surrounded by four other buddhas, for each of the cardinal directions, or the Five Wisdom Kings (see below), and is often prominently displayed on mandalas as the central figure. In some sutras, he is preaching to his disciple, Vajrasattva, in a timeless version of turning the wheel of the Dharma. In an esoteric context, Vairocana is often called Maha-Vairocana (“Great Vairocana”).

Famous Bodhisattvas

We've looked at various buddhas above, but let's turn our attention to example bodhisattvas.

Avalokiteshvara

- **Featured sutras:** The Heart Sutra, the 25th chapter of the Lotus Sutra
- **Aspects:** Compassion, Expedient Means, Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land
- **Aliases:** Guan-yin, Kannon, Chenrezig, etc.

Arguably the most popular bodhisattva in all of Buddhism is **Avalokiteshvara** ("ah-vah-lo-kee-tesh-va-ra"). From Tibet to Japan and beyond, you will see shrines and statues of Avalokitesvara everywhere, and in many forms. Even some in the Theravada tradition pay homage to Avalokiteshvara. Why is this?

The twenty-fifth chapter of the Lotus Sutra introduces Avalokiteshvara, whose name means "the one who regards the cries of the world". Avalokiteshvara, according to the sutra, expends countless efforts to help all beings out of various crises, and does so through a variety of forms. More importantly, Avalokiteshvara takes on whatever form is most appropriate to aid and guide this person: a monk, nun, layperson, among other mundane forms.

Thus, Avalokiteshvara is depicted in various forms:

- An effeminate princely figure
- A gentle motherly figure
- A being with a thousand arms (symbolizing various efforts to help others) and eleven heads.
- Bearing a mani (wish-fulfilling jewel) with two or more arms
- Bearing a lotus blossom and stem, flanking Amitabha Buddha above.
- A fearful horse-headed being (esoteric tradition only)

Thus, Avalokiteshvara exemplifies the Mahayana-Buddhist concept of expedient means ("helping others through whatever means is appropriate") more than any other bodhisattva.

Finally, Avalokiteshvara is often portrayed in a kind of “trinity” with Amitabha Buddha, and a second, lesser-known bodhisattva named **Mahasthamaprapta** (“mah-ha-stah-mah-prap-tah”) who exemplifies the virtue of Buddhist practice (especially towards rebirth in the Pure Land).

Within Buddhist folklore, there are many stories of people being rescued or guided by Avalokiteshvara too. Further in many non-Buddhist temples in Asia, Avalokiteshvara is revered too.

Ksitshigarbha

- **Featured sutras:** The Earth-Store Bodhisattva Sutra
- **Aspects:** Protection (esp. children), Liberation From Evil States of Rebirth
- **Aliases:** Jizo, Dia Tang, Jizang

Ksitshigarbha (“Ki-shee-tee-gar-buh”) also known as the “Earth Store Bodhisattva”, is another popular figure, and is introduced primarily in the Earth-Store Bodhisattva Sutra. This sutra explains that Ksitshigarbha was originally a high-caste (“brahmin”) girl who foresaw her mother burning in hell for her terrible conduct. She resolves to rescue her mother from the Buddhist hell realms and thus seeks the Buddhist path.

For this reason, Ksitshigarbha is often associated with efforts to liberate beings reborn in the lower realms of rebirth (hell, hungry ghosts, etc). Indeed, Ksitshigarbha vows to empty out the hell realms before completing their own path to Buddhahood. This bodhisattva is often invoked for protection of children or travellers too.

Ksitshigarbha is often portrayed as a bald, male monk with a tall, ringed staff. The staff is a traditional staff used by monks in China to scare off animals to avoid trampling them.

Manjushri

- **Featured sutras:** The Shurangama Sutra, the Lotus Sutra, The Vimalakirti Sutra
- **Aspects:** Wisdom, Cutting Through Delusion
- **Aliases:** Monju

Manjushri (“mahn-joosh-ree”) reflects a different aspect of Buddhism, and is frequently depicted with a sword. The sword “cuts” through ignorance and delusion, thus enabling the Buddhist disciple to pierce through the veil of ignorance.

Manjushri, among other places, appears in the twelfth chapter Lotus Sutra alongside the Dragon Princess. When conservative disciples declare that a girl, further a non-human, cannot be enlightened, Manjushri urges them to watch, and in the wink of an eye, the Dragon Princess fulfills the Buddhist path.

Thus, Manjushri is associated with enlightenment and wisdom. He often appears in another Buddhist “trinity” with Shakyamuni Buddha and another bodhisattva named Samantabhadra, shown below. This trinity is often popular in the Zen tradition.

Samantabhadra

- **Featured sutras:** The Lotus Sutra (epilogue), The Flower Garland Sutra
- **Aspects:** Wisdom, Mastery of Buddhist Practice
- **Aliases:** Fugen

Samantabhadra (“Sah-man-tuh-bah-druh”) is another bodhisattva with an emphasis on wisdom, but more importantly mastery of Buddhist practice. Within the massive tome, the Flower Garland is a lengthy chapter called the Gandhavyuha (“Gan-da-view-ha”) Sutra, where Samanthabadra guides the main character, Sudhana, through his epic quest to attain the Buddha way. Samanthabadra is introduced in the epilogue of the Lotus Sutra, the Samantabhadra Meditation Sutra, which teaches a detailed method for visualizing this bodhisattva in order to gain awakening for oneself.

Samantabhadra is particularly popular in esoteric-Buddhist traditions, and is often depicted riding atop a massive white elephant.

Maitreya

- **Featured sutras:** The Pali Canon (Theravada Buddhism), The Lotus Sutra, The Immeasurable Life Sutra, The Golden Light Sutra
- **Aspects:** The Future Buddha
- **Aliases:** Metteya (Theravada), Miroku

Maitreya (“my-tray-yuh”) is the bodhisattva expected to become the next buddha someday, once he has fulfilled his vows. In the Buddhist tradition, Maitreya dwells in one of the celestial realms, and looks down on this world in anticipation of their final rebirth in this world (i.e. as a buddha). This event is expected to happen many eons from now, when the Buddhist religion as we know it is long gone and forgotten. Artwork for Maitreya often depicts him seated in the heaven realms, contemplating.

Devotees of Maitreya aspire to be reborn someday alongside Maitreya when he finally begins his birth in this world. Maitreya is unusual in that he is the only one of the figures above (Shakyamuni Buddha notwithstanding) to be explicitly mentioned in the Theravada canon of sutras (a.k.a. the Pali Canon) as well as the Mahayana-Buddhist canon.

The Wisdom Kings

One other aspect of Mahayana-Buddhism, especially the esoteric tradition are the so-called Five Wisdom Kings. These wrathful-looking beings are neither buddhas nor bodhisattvas, and are found in some traditions and not others. Such beings are fierce-looking and bear weapons, or ropes for binding. These are meant to symbolize (among other things unique to the esoteric traditions) freedom from evil, staying true to the Buddhist path, and so on.

Because esoteric teachings, in particular, require a mentor who can safely guide the student, it is best to consult a teacher for further details.

Choosing a Deity

Which deity you enshrine in your altar, or pay homage to is partly influenced by whichever tradition you choose to follow. If unsure, people universally pay homage to Shakyamuni Buddha, and thus it's always a safe bet to start with him.

Having looked at different deities and sutras, let's see the Buddhist sutras that introduce them, followed by the schools and practices within Mahayana Buddhism.

Chapter Six: Buddhist Sutras to Know

This chapter is a brief summary of important sutras within the Buddhist tradition, and how they relate to various schools and traditions. Some have very broad appeal, while others are more topical and specific to a tradition. Some esoteric sutras are obscure and require training under a teacher to make sense of the vivid symbolism.

How to Read a Sutra

The sutras of the Buddha are not written like modern books, nor do they read like religious texts in other traditions. For this reason, they can be a little daunting at first glance.

Because sutras are purportedly the words of the Buddha passed down orally generation after generation, they almost always begin with the phrase “Thus have I heard” or alternatively “This is what I heard”. From there, the sutras often describe who’s in attendance, which can include the immediate, historical disciples of the Buddha such as Shariputra, Ananda, Maudgalyāyana, among others. The sutras may also introduce various bodhisattvas, Indian gods, and sometimes other legendary beings.

From here, the Buddha will then go into the topic at hand. Sometimes, this is a straightforward sermon, other times it can span chapters. The *Flower Garland Sutra*, a massive tome, spans 30 chapters or more, with some describing things in excruciating detail. On the other hand, the entire *Heart Sutra* can be read in less than two minutes.

Most sutras will then end with the assembly being satisfied by the teaching, possibly reaching some state along the path (due to their grasp of the teaching), and leaving satisfied. Sutras often contain lengthy lists as well, since they were originally orally transmitted, and thus the lists were easier to memorize and transmit. Later sutras tend to use a more narrative style since they were written down, and thus the authors had freedom to focus on style more.

Now let’s look at some broad examples.

The Lotus Sutra

The Lotus Sutra, composed in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE is one of the foundational texts of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. Its central messages are the ones listed above in the preface, but if we had to summarize it further, the Lotus Sutra teaches unity of all the Buddhist traditions as part of the “umbrella” of Buddhism, and that the Dharma always exists whether we see it or not.

What makes the Lotus Sutra so influential is not so much the specific teachings (which are often found in other sutras too), but how they’re expressed: through similes, symbolism and vibrant imagery. The story of the Dragon Princess is meant to show that anyone, man or woman, can achieve full awakening, the parable of medicinal plants shows how the array of different teachings accommodate different people, and the parable of the burning house shows that there is no lasting refuge in this world.

Since this sutra is over 28 chapters long, and mixed with both verses and narrative sections, it is far too long to recite in Buddhist liturgies. However, key verse sections in the second, sixteenth, and twenty-fifth chapters are frequently recited in home liturgies.

The Perfection of Wisdom Sutras

The Perfection of Wisdom Sutras are a collection of sutras, each exploring the same topic which in Sanskrit is called ***Prajñāparamita*** (“praj-nya-pah-rah-mee-ta”), or “perfection of wisdom”. However, these sutras are composed in varying lengths: 8,000 verses in Sanskrit, 15,000 verses, 25,000 verses, and so on. In time, the sutras got shorter and more compact down to the Diamond Sutra, popular in the Zen (meditation) tradition, and finally the Heart Sutra.

The Heart Sutra has near universal appeal in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition because it summarizes the concept of *Prajñāparamita* very succinctly. The emptiness and interdependence of all phenomena is of central importance to Mahayana Buddhism, and one who fully grasps this attains the perfection of wisdom. One note on the Heart Sutra is that, unusually, it ends with a short Buddhist mantra, a feature of the esoteric Buddhist tradition, probably one of the most famous. This tendency to add esoteric chants to Buddhist sutras would continue over time, blending exoteric and esoteric teachings.

The Pure Land Sutras

Amitabha Buddha and his Pure Land are supposedly in 40% of the Mahayana-Buddhist canon (including the Lotus Sutra), but there are three sutras that are considered the core of the Pure Land tradition: the Immeasurable Life Sutra, the Amitabha Sutra, and the Contemplation of Amitabha Sutra.

These sutras introduce Amitabha and his Pure Land, why someone would want to be reborn there, features of the Pure Land, and how one can do so. The Immeasurable Life Sutra is a lengthy introduction to Amitabha, the Amitabha Sutra describes the Pure Land visually, while the Contemplation Sutra provides a visual meditation exercise.

It is not unusual for Mahayana-Buddhist sutras to describe a particular buddha or bodhisattva (the Lotus Sutra introduces several), but it is somewhat unusual to see so many sutras cover the same topic.

One last note, while not as short as the Heart Sutra, the Amitabha Sutra is short enough that it is often recited whole in some Buddhist traditions, including funerals. Otherwise, key parts of the Immeasurable Life Sutra are recited as well. Also, much like the Lotus Sutra, its vivid imagery has become a part of Buddhist culture.

The Esoteric Sutras

The esoteric sutras are a tradition within a tradition. Within the Mahayana-Buddhist canon are sutras that are devoted entirely to esoteric subjects, that is to say, they cover topics using very elaborate imagery, or go into great detail about rituals to perform to attain a benefit, or a level of wisdom.

Because of the emphasis on direct experience in esoteric Buddhism, it is difficult to explain what the meaning behind these rituals and visualization exercises is without training by a teacher. Much of the symbolism has hidden meanings, and thus while on the surface such sutras can seem almost nonsensical, with the right guidance, it can convey the Buddha-Dharma in a way that goes beyond words.

One note is that the esoteric tradition in Tibet (and Mongolia) differs considerably from the esoteric tradition in Japan, hence they will emphasize entirely different sutras and rituals.

Other Sutras

Some other sutras are not necessarily part of a particular tradition or school within Mahayana Buddhism, but may have influence for one reason or another.

The Golden Light Sutra

The Golden Light Sutra is an influential sutra historically, but not as well-known to audiences today outside of certain Tibetan schools. The sutra's focus is on good-governance, but also includes a very elaborate chapter on repentance (worth a read in this author's opinion), and also its second half shows a lot of examples of esoteric rituals. In this case, the rituals were thought to help a ruler avert future disasters, and earn the protection of the Four Heavenly Kings who frequently appear in Buddhist culture as defenders of all that is good.

The Virmalakirti Sutra

Historically, one of the earliest Mahayana-Buddhist sutras, the Virmalakirti ("vir-mah-lah-keer-tee") Sutra is culturally significant in that its imagery has become a part of Buddhist culture, but its rather pointed criticism of "old guard" Buddhism contrasts somewhat from the more ecumenical tone of the Lotus Sutra. This sutra centers around a layperson, Virmalakirti, who displays great wisdom and a thorough grasp of the Mahayana Buddhist teachings, while historical Buddhist disciples such as Shariputra struggle to comprehend. It is also an early exploration of various buddha lands within Buddhist cosmology.

The Flower Garland Sutra

Put simply, the Flower Garland Sutra is a tome. This massive volume is thought to be a collection of smaller sutras that were compiled into a single collection featuring the Buddha Vairocana, and also the central theme of Shunyata: the emptiness and interconnectedness of all phenomena. The twenty-sixth chapter is a deeply detailed explanation of the ten stages of progression a bodhisattva, while its 30th chapter is a short but fascinating demonstration of

mathematics, while the final chapter, the Gandhavyuha Sutra is an epic tale of a man named Sudhana who goes on a quest for Enlightenment, and meets various deities in Buddhism. The Flower Garland Sutra was a central text for the medieval Hua-yan school in China.

The Brahma Net Sutra

This short sutra introduces Vairocana Buddha, who is described as the source of all buddhas. The sutra introduces another set of precepts called the “Bodhisattva Precepts”, which include 10 major precepts, and 48 minor ones. The ten major ones are frequently upheld in various Buddhist traditions with only minor variations. The sutra’s name is derived from a popular imagery in Indian culture of the god Brahma (sometimes Indra), whose palace is adorned with a great net of jewels, described previously in the chapter on precepts.

Conclusion

We have only looked at only a small handful of sutras in the Mahayana-Buddhist canon. The corpus of literature is huge, and far beyond our ability to cover here, but this shows how various texts were composed to cover different concepts in Buddhism, and because of this we also see a growth in various Buddhist schools and traditions which use one or more sutras as their basis.

Attempting to read the entire Mahayana-Buddhist canon is daunting, and probably not a good use of your time. Instead, staying with the theme of “expedient means” we discussed previously, any sutra can be a starting point for one’s path. The Dhammapada, which is not technically a sutra, but is historically close to the time of the Buddha, is a good starting point to get a taste of Buddhism. From there, one can look at any of the sutras above. Many have free translations online.

However, since the tone may differ from earlier teachings like the Dhammapada, one can feel a disconnect. How is this still Buddhism? The challenge is learning to see past the creative narrative styles, or vivid imagery to see the continuity of Buddhist teachings within. Reading Western religious texts such as the Bible introduce similar challenges: finding the continuity of teachings across many generations of writing.

But if you just need a starting point, consult the tradition you are interested in, and make that your foundation first. Once you become comfortable with those sutras, branch out as you see fit.

Chapter Seven : Buddhist Schools and Practices

We've covered a lot about the basics of Mahayana Buddhism, its deities, and its collection of *sutras* or sacred texts. Next we'll look at basic trends in Mahayana Buddhism, and how things have been historically put into practice: namely the meditation (Zen) schools, Pure Land schools, Lotus Sutra schools, and esoteric schools.

The descriptions below are very brief overviews, and meant to provide a quick summary for reference. These schools vary in customs, practices and beliefs depending on the country and culture, and even within subschools and traditions, so it is hard to describe in any great detail. Each one can fill volumes of books. So, if something interests you, I highly encourage you to experience them firsthand whenever possible. Some things are simply hard to convey in words, and first-hand experience matters.

Meditation Schools

The meditation schools (a.k.a. Zen, Chan, etc) emphasize the primacy of recreating Shakyamuni Buddha's experience through the practice of meditation. Meditation is a pretty universal practice across all traditions, but is especially prominent in the meditation schools, sometimes to the exclusion of other practices. Since the Buddha meditated under the Bodhi Tree in India and attained awakening, the belief is that through similar discipline, training, and efforts, the same ineffable wisdom that the Buddha uncovered (see preface) can be attained by anyone.

Some meditation schools add "koan" (nonsensical riddles) to test one's understanding of the teachings, or they may add a mix of other esoteric, or Pure Land, practices to bolster one's efforts. Other schools do not. But these schools all have in common two important themes: that the Dharma is beyond words, and only through the experience of meditation, can one fully perceive and grasp it.

Pure Land Schools

By contrast, the Pure Land schools emphasize compassion of Amitabha Buddha in a world that is so far removed from Shakyamuni Buddha's time (see preface on the decline of the Dharma), that pursuit of Enlightenment is nearly impossible now. The Pure Land schools do not negate the importance of other Buddhist practices, such as meditation, but due to the decline of Buddhism, feel that they are no longer effective. In such schools, the most common practice is reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha, sometimes called the *nian-fo* or *nembutsu*. It is thought that by being reborn in Amitabha's Pure Land, one can continue the Buddhist path more easily since they are in the presence of a living buddha.

The simplicity of the teaching and the accessibility of its practice makes the Pure Land schools the largest tradition within Mahayana Buddhism. Some traditions focus entirely on reciting the name, others focus a broader program of practices such as reciting sutras, good conduct, reciting the name and so on. Sometimes the meditation schools and Pure Land practices blend too, sometimes Pure Land practices are blended into the esoteric schools.

Together, the meditation and pure land schools represent the largest portion of Buddhist followers in East Asia.

Lotus Sutra Schools

The Lotus Sutra schools emphasize the Lotus Sutra's central place within Mahayana-Buddhism, and thus other Buddhist practices are often subsumed under it. Practices like meditation, devotion to Amitabha Buddha, esoteric mantras and such are seen as expedient means of putting the Lotus Sutra into practice. Thus, the Lotus Sutra schools will include a mix of all of them, but with the Lotus Sutra as a "capstone". Through history, the Lotus Sutra schools have gradually been replaced by the meditation schools and pure land schools, but these later generation teachings often inherit practices and teachings from the Lotus Sutra.

Conversely, the Nichiren schools of Buddhism in Japan emphasize the Lotus Sutra to the exclusion of others, focusing on a practice called the *odaimoku* ("Praise to the Lotus Sutra") which means to chant the title of the Lotus Sutra.

Esoteric Schools

Esoteric schools, often called **Vajrayana** (“vaj-rah-yah-na”), are similar to meditation schools in that they emphasize the direct experience of awakening. However, the application differs. Through a fusion of mantras, secret hand-gestures, and visualizing complex images in your mind, this can jar one’s mind out of complacency to awakening. There are two unrelated traditions, one that took root in Tibet and neighboring countries, and the other in Japan. Apart from the general outline of their teachings, they have little in common with one another.

Esoteric schools often emphasize “buddhahood in this lifetime”, but such a direct path to awakening requires careful guidance from a teacher. Similarly, the sutras used in the esoteric traditions are not usually widely accessible, and require guidance to understand the complex imagery and descriptions. The esoteric schools also employ visual *mandalas*, diagrams of the cosmos, to explain their teachings but these too require a teacher who can fully guide someone along.

Which Practice And School Is Right For Me?

This is a tough question to answer. It is a combination of what you want to explore, but also what resources you have available. Speaking from the author’s personal experience, practicing alone can be difficult, and it’s easy to lose heart and eventually give up, while spending time in a temple community, even if it differs from your own, can be hugely helpful. Hence the sangha (the community) is one of the Three Treasures of Buddhism.

However, this also means that one can fall prey to Buddhist cults, which are eager to accept new members, but not always willing to let them go, especially in places where traditional Buddhist communities are often too few, or haven’t taken root yet. For this reason, sometimes it’s best to do some research first. As the Latin phrase goes, *caveat emptor* (“Let the buyer beware”). Put another way, if a group is surrounded with controversy, there may be some basis in it, or if their promises seem too good to be true, they probably are.

Buddhism is a long, slow path, that can be frankly quite boring or staid to some. It is fruitful in the long-run, but requires a slow, steady progress to fully appreciate. Eating a salad is not as

fun as fried chicken, nor is exercise as fun as sitting on the couch and watching TV, but the long-term benefits eventually become clear.

Another thing to keep in mind is that Buddhist temples don't necessarily have weekly services like Western religions do. The idea of "weekly services" is a mostly Western-religious concept. Instead, many Buddhist communities only meet during certain holidays and events, or may hold seminars from time to time. Even when there are services or events, one is not obligated to go, but there is definitely value in meeting other Buddhists, comparing experiences, or learning tips from others. There are just some things that can't be explained in a sutra. Thus, it helps to think of Buddhist temples like a clinic one can go to when they need medical advice, healing and so on.

Finally, when one chooses to follow a certain school or temple community, you are not locked in for life. Over time, one's practice and outlook may change, and a different school or temple may be suitable. Do not hesitate to try something different. If nothing else, you learn to appreciate your earlier practice more.

Chapter Eight : Next Steps and Final Thoughts

In this field-guide we've walked through the first steps as a Buddhist, and explored various facets of Mahayana Buddhism.

One does not “convert” to Mahayana Buddhism. Instead, these existing traditions have inherited a set of beliefs, teachings, sutras and deities that began in ancient India and have diffused to many other cultures since then. Each culture in turn has found novel ways to put these into practice, and keep the tradition going. Mahayana Buddhism is incredibly broad, and has been applied and practiced by countless generations across countless cultures in various ways and methods. This is what Mahayana Buddhism is all about: the spirit of “whatever works”. It helps to think of them as all part of the same Mahayana “family”.

If the mind is a garden, you have to tend the seedling carefully at first so that it grows, but as it takes root, it becomes a mighty tree providing food and shade for others. Each tree is unique, and so is one's path. But the Dharma, through the sutras, provides the basic instructions for nurturing that tree. If it all feels daunting, let me pass along some advice that someone gave this author once: take it slow and absorb the tradition as it is (at face-value) first, then feel free to make changes or alterations as you see fit. Like a pair of jeans, it may feel a little stiff at first, but in time becomes very comfortable. The Dharma works much the same way.

So there's no need to rush, as long as you remember that it is a balance of wisdom, conduct (precepts) and practice. Buddhism thinks long-term, so any effort you make, like exercise, pays for itself in the long-run.

Good luck to you and your path.