



Key concepts

- Largest collection of Buddhist scriptures in the ancient Indian language of Pali with the first written version 1st century BCE.
- Tipitaka ('three baskets') refers to the storage of the texts: the three 'baskets' (pitaka), are the Vinaya Pitaka, the Sutta Pitaka and the Abhidhamma Pitaka.
- The, ('basket of discipline'), contains within it the Patimokka, the rules and regulations governing the monastic sangha.
- There are 227 rules for bhikkhus and 311 for bhikkhunis these are thought to have been introduced by the Buddha and developed during his lifetime.
- In the Vinaya, there are detailed rules and regulations and guidance on how to settle disputes in the monastic sangha including the four parajikas (rules against sexual intercourse, stealing, murder and falsely declaring supernatural powers) the breaking of which leads to expulsion from the monastic sangha.
- Within the Theravada monastic sangha, the Vinaya and its three parts (the Suttavibhanga, the Khandhaka and the Parivara) have normative authority over the individual and their interaction with others.
- The Sutta Pitaka contains teachings such as the Four Noble Truths which are Buddha vacana ('word of the Buddha') and the Dhammapada and Jataka Tales which are accessible and applicable to the fourfold Sangha.
- The suttas show the Buddha's various teaching strategies adapted to his audience – this shows him using upaya ('skilful means').
- From the five collections of sayings and sermons in the Sutta Pitaka, the life of the historical Buddha can be constructed.
- The Dhammapada presents a summary of the Buddha's wisdom and is very popular, whilst the Jatakas are stories in which the Buddha appears as both human and animal in illustrating key Buddhist beliefs and ethical teaching.
- The Abhidhamma Pitaka contains philosophical teachings which are complex and regarded as advanced teaching mainly for those in the monastic sangha.
- The seven sections of the Abhidhamma Pitaka present a detailed account of Buddhist doctrine particularly of samsara and of the mind.
- The Abhidhamma Pitaka is regarded as commentary and interpretation of the Buddha's teaching put together by the 3rd century CE at the Third Council.
- The Pali Canon is easily accessible via the internet and other media and has therefore become more important in Buddhism particularly in the West.
- Its three parts have varying significance for the different members of the fourfold sangha depending on the level of Buddhist practice.
- Sangiti ('rehearsal') refers to the meeting of Buddhists and recitation of the dhamma as found in the Pali Canon – this continues in the monastic sangha today and shows the role of the Pali Canon particularly in Theravada.
- All Buddhists would accept the importance of the Pali Canon in that it presents in detail the fundamentals of what the Buddha taught.

Key quotes

'Should any bhikkhu, angered and displeased, raise the palm of his hand against (another) bhikkhu, it is to be confessed. Should any bhikkhu charge a bhikkhu with an unfounded offence, it is to be confessed.' (from the Vinaya Pitaka)

'Take refuge in the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha, and you will grasp the Four Noble Truths: suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the Noble Eightfold Path that takes you beyond suffering. That is your best refuge, your only refuge.' (from the Dhammapada)

'The Pali Canon is a complex tapestry of linguistic and rhetorical styles...with conflicting ideas, doctrines and images, all assembled and elaborated over about four centuries. The canon does not speak with a single voice.' (Batchelor)

Key words

Canon
Paravira
Tipitaka
Upaya
dhammas
Theravadin
sima

Suttavibhanga
parajikas
Khandhaka
suttas
Patimokka
Dasa sila
Buddha vacana

Key arguments/debates

Some focus on the Pali Canon as central to Buddhist belief and practice.

Others focus much more on the Buddha, the dharma or the sangha.

Key questions

Should the Pali Canon be seen as of significance only for the monastic sangha?

Could the Vinaya Pitaka (given its patriarchal background) be updated?

Do the different approaches taken to the Pali Canon by some Mahayana schools of Buddhism, convert Buddhists and heritage Buddhists undermine its role today?

Issues for analysis and evaluation