

Mahayana sutras



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The **Mahayana sutras** are a broad genre of [Buddhist](#) scriptures that various traditions of [Mahayana Buddhism](#) accept as [canonical](#). They are largely preserved in the [Chinese Buddhist canon](#), the [Tibetan Buddhist canon](#), and in extant [Sanskrit](#) manuscripts. Around one hundred Mahayana sutras survive in Sanskrit, or in Chinese and Tibetan translations.^[1]

Mahayana Buddhists typically consider the Mahayana sutras to have been taught by [Gautama Buddha](#), committed to memory and recited by his disciples, in particular [Ananda](#), which were viewed as a substitute for the actual speech of the Buddha following his [parinirvana](#) (death).^[2] This claim is based on

[parinirvana](#) (death).^[2] This claim is based on oral tradition rather than on historical evidence.

^ History and background



Origins and early history



The origins of the Mahayana are not completely understood.^[3] The earliest views of Mahayana Buddhism in the West assumed that it existed as a separate school in competition with the [Theravada](#) schools. Due to the veneration of buddhas and bodhisattvas, Mahayana was often interpreted as a more devotional, lay-inspired form of Buddhism, with supposed origins in [stūpa](#) veneration^[4] or by making parallels with the [Reformation](#). These views have been largely dismissed in modern times in light of a much broader range of early texts that are now available.^[5][\[page needed\]](#) These earliest

Mahayana texts often depict strict adherence to the path of a bodhisattva, and engagement in the ascetic ideal of a monastic life in the wilderness, akin to the ideas expressed in the *Rhinoceros Sutra*.^[6] The old views of Mahayana as a separate lay-inspired and devotional sect are now largely dismissed as misguided and wrong on all counts.^[7] The early versions of Mahayana sutras were not written documents but orally preserved teachings.^{[8][9]} The verses which were committed to memory and recited by monks were viewed as the substitute for the actual speaking presence of the Buddha.^[10]

The earliest textual evidence of the Mahayana comes from sutras originating around the beginning of the common era. Jan Nattier has noted that in some of the earliest Mahayana texts such as the *Ugraparipṛcchā Sūtra* use the term "Mahayana", yet there is no doctrinal difference between Mahayana in this context and the early schools, and that "Mahayana" referred rather to the rigorous emulation of

referred rather to the rigorous emulation of [Gautama Buddha](#) in the path of a bodhisattva seeking to become a fully enlightened buddha.^[11]

There is also no evidence that Mahayana ever referred to a separate formal school or sect of Buddhism, but rather that it existed as a certain set of ideals, and later doctrines, for bodhisattvas.^[12] Paul Williams has also noted that the Mahayana never had nor ever attempted to have a separate [Vinaya](#) or ordination lineage from the [early Buddhist schools](#) and therefore each [bhikṣu](#) or [bhikṣuṇī](#) adhering to the Mahayana formally belonged to an early school. This continues today with the [Dharmaguptaka](#) ordination lineage in East Asia and the [Mūlasarvāstivāda](#) ordination lineage in [Tibetan Buddhism](#). Therefore, Mahayana was never a separate rival sect of the early schools.^[13]

The Chinese monk [Yijing](#) who visited India in the seventh century, distinguishes Mahayana

These Mahayana teachings were first propagated into [China](#) by [Lokakṣema](#), the first translator of Mahayana sutras into Chinese during the second century.^[15]

Scholarly views on dating



It cannot be determined by whom the Mahayana sutras were composed; many can only be dated firmly to the date when they were translated into another language.^[16]

Andrew Skilton summarizes a common prevailing view of the Mahayana sutras:

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by Mahayana tradition to be *buddhavacana*, and therefore the legitimate word of the historical Buddha. The śrāvaka tradition, according to some Mahayana sutras themselves, rejected these texts as authentic buddhavacana, saying that they were merely inventions, the product of the religious imagination of the Mahayanist monks who were their fellows. Western scholarship does not go so far as to impugn the religious authority of Mahayana sutras, but it tends to assume that they

Mahayana sutras, but it tends to assume that they are not the literal word of the historical Śākyamuni Buddha. Unlike the śrāvaka critics just cited, we have no possibility of knowing just who composed and compiled these texts, and for us, removed from the time of their authors by up to two millenia, they are effectively an anonymous literature. It is widely accepted that Mahayana sutras constitute a body of literature that began to appear from as early as the 1st century BCE, although the evidence for this date is circumstantial. The concrete evidence for dating any part of this

although the evidence for this date is circumstantial. The concrete evidence for dating any part of this literature is to be found in dated Chinese translations, amongst which we find a body of ten Mahayana sutras translated by Lokaksema before 186 C.E. – and these constitute our earliest objectively dated Mahayana texts. This picture may be qualified by the analysis of very early manuscripts recently coming out of Afghanistan, but for the meantime this is speculation. In effect we have a vast body of anonymous but relatively coherent literature, of which individual items can only be

individual items can only be dated firmly when they were translated into another language at a known date.^[16]

A. K. Warder notes that the Mahayana sutras are highly unlikely to have come from the teachings of the historical Buddha, since the language and style of every extant Mahāyāna sūtra is comparable more to later Indian texts than to texts that could have circulated in the Buddha's putative lifetime.^[17] Warder also notes that the Tibetan historian Tāranātha (1575–1634) proclaimed that after the Buddha taught the sutras, they disappeared from the human world and circulated only in the world of the *nagas*; in Warder's view, “this is as good as an admission that no such texts existed until the 2nd century A.D.”^[18]

John W. Pettit, while stating, “Mahayana has not got a strong historical claim for representing the explicit teachings of the

concepts of Mahayana do occur in the [Pāli Canon](#) and that this suggests that Mahayana is "not simply an accretion of fabricated doctrines" but "has a strong connection with the teachings of Buddha himself".^[19]

Mahayana has not got a strong historical claim for representing the explicit teachings of the historical Buddha; its scriptures evince a gradual development of doctrines over several hundred years. However, the basic concepts of Mahayana, such as the bodhisattva ethic, emptiness (sunyata), and the recognition of a distinction between buddhahood and arhatship as spiritual ideals, are known from the earliest

sources available in the Pali canon. This suggests that Mahayana was not simply an accretion of fabricated doctrines, as it is sometimes accused of being, but has a strong connection with the teachings of Buddha himself.^[19]

Others such as [D. T. Suzuki](#) have stated that it doesn't matter if the Mahayana sutras can be historically linked to the Buddha or not since Mahayana Buddhism is a living tradition and its teachings are followed by millions of people.^[20]

However weak the claim to historicity that the Mahayana sutras hold, this does not mean that all scholars believe that the Pāli Canon is historical.^{[21][22][23]}

The earliest extant Mahayana sutras



Some scholars have traditionally considered the earliest Mahayana sutras to include the very first versions of the [Prajñāpāramitā](#) series, along with texts concerning [Akshobhya](#), which were probably composed in the 1st century BCE in the south of India.^{[26][27]} Some early Mahayana sutras were translated by the [Kushan](#) monk [Lokakṣema](#), who came to China from the kingdom of [Gandhāra](#). His first translations to Chinese were made in the [Eastern Han](#) capital of [Luoyang](#) between 178 and 189 CE.^[15] Some Mahayana sutras translated during the 2nd century CE include the following:^[28]

1. *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*
2. *Infinite Life Sutra*
3. *Akṣobhyatathāgatasyavyūha Sūtra*
4. *Ugraparipṛcchā Sūtra*

-
4. *Ugrapariṣcchā Sūtra*
 5. *Mañjuśrīpariṣcchā Sūtra*
 6. *Drumakinnararājapariṣcchā Sūtra*
 7. *Śūraṅgama Samādhi Sūtra*
 8. *Bhadrupāla Sūtra*
 9. *Ajātaśatrukaukṛtyavinodana Sūtra*
 10. *Kāśyapaparivarta Sūtra*
 11. *Lokānuvartana Sūtra*
 12. An early sutra connected to the
Avatamsaka Sutra

Some of these were probably composed in the north of India in the 1st century CE.^[29]

Thus scholars generally think that the earliest Mahayana sutras were mainly composed in the south of India, and later the activity of writing additional scriptures was continued in the north.^[30] However, the assumption that the presence of an evolving body of Mahayana scriptures implies the



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Although there is no definitive Mahayana canon as such, the printed or manuscript collections in Chinese and [Tibetan](#), published through the ages, have preserved the majority of known Mahayana sutras. Many parallel translations of certain sutras exist. A handful of them, such as the [Prajñāpāramitā](#) sutras like the [Heart Sutra](#) and the [Diamond Sutra](#), are considered fundamental by most Mahayana traditions.

The standard modern edition of the Buddhist Chinese canon is the [Taisho Tripitaka](#), redacted during the 1920s in Japan, consisting of eighty-five volumes of writings that, in addition to numerous Mahayana texts, both canonical and not, also include [Āgama](#) collections, several versions of the [vinaya](#),



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Modern canons



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both canonical and not, also include *Āgama* collections, several versions of the *vinaya*, *abhidharma* and *tantric* writings. The first thirty-two volumes contain works of Indic origin, volumes thirty-three to fifty-five contain works of native Chinese origin and volumes fifty-six to eighty-four contain works of Japanese composition. The eighty-fifth volume contains miscellaneous items including works found at *Dunhuang*. A number of apocryphal sutras composed in China are also included in the *Chinese Buddhist canon*, although the spurious nature of many more was recognized, thus preventing their inclusion in the canon. The Sanskrit originals of many Mahayana texts have not survived to this day, although Sanskrit versions of the majority of the major Mahayana sutras have survived.

Saddharma Puṇḍarīka



The *Lotus Sutra* is generally accepted to be the earliest text mentioning *Avalokiteśvara*.^[43] *Ajanta cave* no 1, 5th century

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This sutra is called the *Lotus Sutra*, *White Lotus Sutra*, *Sutra of the White Lotus* or *Sutra on the White Lotus of the Sublime Dharma*; Sanskrit: *Saddharma-pundarīka-sūtra*; 妙法蓮華經 Cn: *Miàofǎ Liánhuā Jīng*; Jp: *Myōhō Renge Kyō*. Probably written down in the period 100 BCE – 150 CE, the *Lotus Sutra* proposes that the three *yānas* (*śrāvakayāna*, *pratyekabuddhayāna* and *bodhisattvayāna*) are not in fact three different paths leading to three goals, but *one path*, with one goal. This doctrine defines the enlightenment of a Buddha as the ultimate goal and the sutra predicts that all those who hear the Dharma will eventually achieve this goal. The earlier teachings are said to be *skillful means* to teach beings according to their capacities.^{[44][45]} The sutra is notable for the (re)appearance of the Buddha *Prabhutaratna*, who had died several aeons earlier, because it suggests that a Buddha is not inaccessible

who had died several eons earlier, because it suggests that a Buddha is not inaccessible after his *parinirvāṇa* and also that his life-span is said to be inconceivably long because of the accumulation of merit in past lives. This idea, though not necessarily from this source, forms the basis of the later [doctrine of the three bodies](#) (*trikāya*). Later it became associated particularly with the [Tien Tai](#) school in China ([Tendai](#) in Japan) and the [Nichiren](#) schools in Japan.

In some East Asian traditions, the Lotus Sūtra has been compiled together with two other sutras which serve as a prologue and epilogue, respectively the [Innumerable Meanings Sutra](#) and the [Samantabhadra Meditation Sutra](#). This composite sutra is often called the *Threefold Lotus Sūtra* or *Three-Part Dharma Flower Sutra*.^[46]

Pure Land sutras



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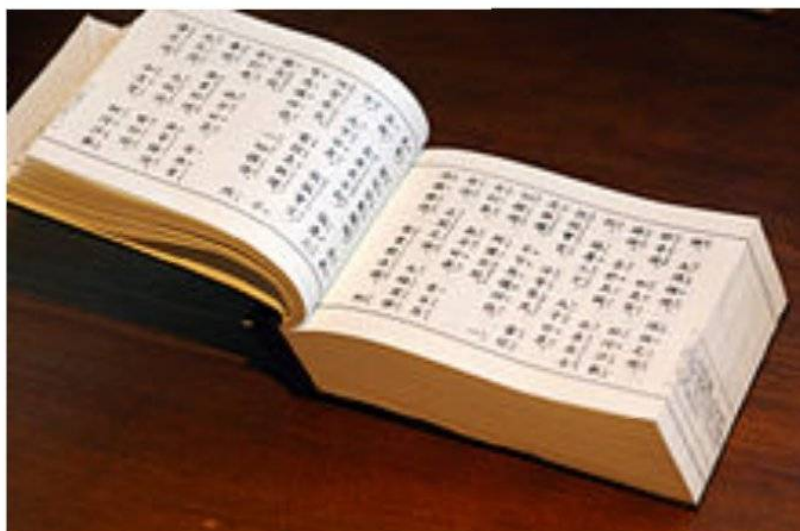
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The Pure Land teachings were first developed in India, and were very popular in [Kashmir](#) and [Central Asia](#), where they may have originated.^[47] Pure Land sutras were brought from the [Gandhāra](#) region to China as early as 147 CE, when the [Kushan](#) monk [Lokakṣema](#) began translating the first Buddhist sutras into Chinese.^[48] The earliest of these translations show evidence of having been translated from the [Gāndhārī language](#), a [prakrit](#) descended from Vedic [Sanskrit](#), which was used in Northwest India.^[49]



Book open to the [Shorter Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra](#)

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The Pure Land sutras are principally the *Shorter Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra*, *Longer Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra*, and the *Amitāyurdhyāna Sūtra*. The shorter sutra is also known as the *Amitābha Sūtra*, and the longer sutra is also known as the *Infinite Life Sūtra*. These sutras describe Amitābha and his Pure Land of Bliss, called *Sukhāvatī*. Also related to the Pure Land tradition is the *Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sūtra*, which describes the practice of reciting the name of Amitābha Buddha as a meditation method. In addition to these, many other Mahayana texts also feature Amitābha Buddha, and a total of 290 such works have been identified in the *Taishō Tripiṭaka*.^[50]

Pure Land texts describe the origins and nature of the Western *Pure Land* in which the Buddha *Amitabha* resides. They list the forty-eight vows made by Amitabha as a

focus on the salvific power of faith in the vows of Amitabha.

The *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra*



Vimalakīrti debating Bodhisattva
Mañjuśrī. Dunhuang Caves, Tang
Dynasty

In the [Vimalakīrti sutra](#), composed some time between the first and second century CE,^[51]

the bodhisattva [Vimalakīrti](#) appears as a layman to teach the Dharma. This is seen by some as a strong assertion of the value of lay practice.^[52] The sutra teaches, among other subjects, the meaning of [nondualism](#), the doctrine of the true body of the Buddha, the characteristically Mahāyāna claim that the appearances of the world are mere illusions, and the superiority of the Mahāyāna over other paths. It places in the mouth of the [lay practitioner](#) Vimalakīrti a teaching addressed to both [arhats](#) and [bodhisattvas](#), regarding the doctrine of [śūnyatā](#). In most versions, the discourse of the text culminates with a wordless teaching of silence.^[53] This sutra has been very popular in [China](#) and [Japan](#).^[54]

Confession Sutras



The *Triskandha Sūtra* and the [Golden Light Sutra](#) (*Suvarṇaprabhāsa-sūtra*) focus on the practice of confession of faults. The *Golden Light Sutra* became especially influential in Japan, where its chapter on the universal

Third turning sutras



These sutras primarily teach the doctrine of Representation Only (*vijñapti-mātra*), associated with the [Yogacara](#) school. The [Sandhinirmocana Sutra](#) (c 2nd century CE) is the earliest surviving sutra in this class. It divides the teachings of the Buddha into three types, which it calls the "three turnings of the wheel of the Dharma." To the first turning, it ascribes the *Āgamas* of the *śravakas*, to the second turning the lower Mahayana sutras including the *Prajñā-pāramitā* sutras, and finally sutras like itself are deemed to comprise the third turning. Moreover, the first two turnings are considered to be provisional in this system of classification, while the third group is said to present the final truth without a need for further explication (*nītārtha*). The well-known [Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra](#), composed sometime around the 4th century CE, is sometimes included in this group, although it is somewhat syncretic in nature combining

sometimes included in this group, although it is somewhat syncretic in nature, combining pure Mahayana doctrines with those of the *tathāgatagarbha* system and was unknown or ignored by the progenitors of the Mahayana system. The *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* was influential in [Chan Buddhism](#).

***Tathāgatagarbha* class sutras**



These are especially the [*Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*](#), the [*Śrīmālā Sūtra*](#) (*Śrīmālādevi-simhanāda Sūtra*) and the [*Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*](#) (which is very different in character from the [*Pāli Mahaparinibbana Sutta*](#)).

Collected Sutras



These two large sutras are, again, actually collections of other sutras. The [*Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra*](#) contains 49 individual works, and the *Mahāsamnipāta-sūtra* is a collection of 17 shorter works. Both seem to

have been finalised by about the 5th century, although some parts of them are considerably older.

Esoteric Sūtras



Esoteric sutras comprise an important category of works that are esoteric, in the sense that they are often devoted to a particular [mantra](#) or [dhāraṇī](#). Well-known dhāraṇī texts include the [Uṣṇīṣa Vijaya Dhāraṇī Sūtra](#) and the [Cundī Dhāraṇī Sūtra](#).

Transmigration sutras



A number of sutras focus on actions that lead to existence in the various spheres of existence, or expound the doctrine of the twelve links of [dependent-origination](#) (*pratītyasamutpāda*).

Discipline sutras



These focus on principles that guide the behaviour of bodhisattvas, and include the

Kāshyapa-parivarta, the *Bodhisattva-prātimokṣa Sutra*, and the *Brahmajāla Sutra*. For monastics, the [Bequeathed Teachings Sutra](#) is a necessary manual that guides them through the life of cultivation.

Sutras devoted to individual figures



A large number of sutras describe the nature and virtues of a particular Buddha or bodhisattva and their pure land, including [Mañjusri](#), [Kṣitigarbha](#), the Buddha [Akṣobhya](#), and Bhaiṣajyaguru, also known as the [Medicine Buddha](#).

Vaipūlya Sūtras devoted to all Tathāgatas



The most widely used (in liturgy) of these is the [Bhadra-kalpika Sutra](#), available in various languages (Chinese, Tibetan, Mongolian, etc.) in variants that differ slightly as to the number of [Tathāgatas](#) enumerated. For example, the

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