

Buddhist Denominations Cheat Sheet

Version 3.0

Denominations	Details
Theravada [teh-rah-vah-dah]	"School of the Elders;" a very old and conservative school; most important texts are the Pali Canon, named for the language in which they are written; common in southeast Asia
Mahayana [mah-hah-yah-nah]	"Great(er) Vehicle;" more widespread than Theravada, and with many subdivisions (see below); differs from Theravada in the fundamental belief that any person may strive for buddhahood
Pure Land	practitioners repeat the name of Amitabha Buddha in the hopes of reaching the Pure Land, a different plane of existence where they can achieve buddhahood, after death; in some Chinese Pure Land schools, the "bodhisattva of compassion," Guanyin (the Chinese name for Avalokiteshvara) guides soul to the Pure Land after they die
Tibetan	named for the country where it is primarily practiced; led by the Dalai Lama, an inherited religious position that is passed on through reincarnation; the current (14th) Dalai Lama is Tenzin Gyatso; traditionally led from the Potala Palace in Lhasa
Zen	commonly practiced alongside Shinto in Japan; focuses on spiritual calm through meditation, often aided by the repetition of koans, which are syllables, words, phrases, or questions that focus the mind