

Pali & the Tipitaka: The Language and Texts of Theravada Buddhism

Pali, which literally means "text," is a language that was probably spoken in central India during the Buddha's time, and it is known as the sacred language of Buddhism. After the Buddha's death, his teachings were passed down orally within the monastic community.

By 250 BC they were compiled into three divisions, and together they are known as the *tipitaka*, the "three baskets." Later, monks from Sri Lanka wrote a series of written commentaries about the tipitaka, and these were translated into Pali beginning in the fifth century.



Pali was originally a spoken language without an alphabet. It wasn't until about 100 BC that the tipitaka was fixed in writing by Sri Lankan scribe-monks who wrote the Pali phonetically using their own Sinhala alphabet. Since then, the tipitaka has been transliterated into many different scripts (including Devanagari, Thai, Burmese, and Roman). To this day in Thai Buddhist temples, most group prayers and mantras are pronounced in Pali, but read by the congregation in Thai script. The "wai khru" for traditional Thai massage and Thai medicine, sometimes known as the "Om Namò", contains mostly Pali words, mixed with a few hybridized Thai words. Pali became extinct as a literary language in mainland India in the 14th century, but it survived in other regions until the 18th century. Today Pali is usually studied to be able to read Buddhist scriptures, and it is frequently chanted in ritual ceremonies.



Unlike the religious scriptures from Christianity, Judaism and Islam, the tipitaka is not perceived as a set of undeniable truths revealed by a God or prophet that should be accepted purely on the basis of faith. Instead, Buddhist teachings are meant to be assessed first, and then to be practiced in order to see if they bring positive results. It is the truth revealed in the words that ultimately matters, not the words themselves.

Written by Bob Haddad for Thai Healing Alliance, based on traditional sources