

Pali: The Language of Theravada Buddhism

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The language of the Theravada canonical texts is Pali (lit. "text"). Pali is based on a dialect of Middle Indo-Aryan that was probably spoken in central India during the Buddha's time. Ananda, the Buddha's cousin and close personal attendant, committed the Buddha's sermons (*suttas*) to memory and thus became a living repository of these teachings. Shortly after the Buddha's death, (ca. 480 BCE), five hundred of the most senior monks — including Ananda — convened to recite and verify all the sermons they had heard during the Buddha's forty-five year teaching career. Most of these sermons therefore begin with the disclaimer, "*Evam me sutam*" — "Thus have I heard."

After the Buddha's death the teachings continued to be passed down orally within the monastic community, in keeping with an Indian oral tradition that long predated the Buddha. By 250 BCE the Sangha had systematically arranged and compiled these teachings into three divisions: the Vinaya Pitaka (the "basket of discipline" — the texts concerning the rules and customs of the Sangha), the Sutta Pitaka (the "basket of discourses" — the sermons and utterances by the Buddha and his close disciples), and the Abhidhamma Pitaka (the "basket of special/higher doctrine" — a detailed psycho-philosophical analysis of the Dhamma). Together these three are known as the Tipitaka, the "three baskets." In the third century BCE Sri Lankan monks began compiling a series of exhaustive commentaries to the Tipitaka; these were subsequently collated and translated into Pali beginning in the fifth century CE. The Tipitaka plus the post-canonical texts (commentaries, chronicles, etc.) together constitute the complete body of classical Theravada literature.



An ancient stone tablet inscribed in the Pali language.

Pali was originally a spoken language without an alphabet of its own. It wasn't until about 100 BCE that the Tipitaka was first 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 (Devanagari, Thai, Burmese, Roman, Cyrillic, to name a few). Although English translations of the most popular Tipitaka texts abound, many students of Theravada find that learning the Pali language — even just a little bit here and there — greatly deepens their understanding and appreciation of the Buddha's teachings.

No one can prove that the Tipitaka contains any of the words actually uttered by the historical Buddha. Practicing Buddhists have never found this problematic. Unlike the scriptures of many of the world's great religions, the Tipitaka is not regarded as gospel, as an unassailable statement of divine truth, revealed by a prophet, to be accepted purely on faith. Instead, its teachings are meant to be assessed firsthand, to be put into practice in one's life so that one can find out for oneself if they do, in fact, yield the promised results. It is the truth towards which the words in the Tipitaka point that ultimately matters, not the words themselves. Although scholars will continue to debate the authorship of passages from the Tipitaka for years to come (and thus miss the point of these teachings entirely), the Tipitaka will quietly continue to serve — as it has for centuries — as an indispensable guide for millions of followers in their quest for awakening.



Left: Students, Practitioners and teachers of mud boran from 8 countries gather at the THAI reception at the Chiang Mai YMCA in February, 2007.

Right: Thai massage teachers Aimee, Nang and Aom pose with a student.

