

## Rinzai Zen Buddhism: A Short History

In the sixth century BCE, according to Buddhist tradition, Siddhartha Gautama was promised a bright future as a warrior prince, set to inherit status and wealth. But after witnessing the realities of aging, sickness, and death for the first time, he was compelled to renounce his title and possessions, leaving home to live humbly as a wandering nomad in northern India. Over time, Gautama came to recognize that suffering is rooted in desire, and that by limiting desire, one could reduce suffering and eventually achieve enlightenment. He articulated these insights in what are known as the Four Noble Truths. By the end of his journey, Siddhartha Gautama had earned his name, the Buddha, and his teachings and insights developed into the basis of the Buddhist religion.<sup>1</sup>

As Buddhism spread across Asia, two major traditions emerged: Theravāda and Mahāyāna. Both share the same core teachings, but Theravāda emphasizes individual attainment of enlightenment, while Mahāyāna emphasizes attaining enlightenment in order to help others do the same.<sup>2</sup> From India to China, Buddhism traveled along trade routes like the Silk Road around the first century CE, where Mahāyāna teachings blended with Chinese culture and developed into Chan Buddhism, a tradition focused on meditation. This practice later spread to Japan, where it developed into Zen Buddhism, the Japanese pronunciation of Chan.<sup>3</sup>

In Japan, Zen Buddhism developed into two main schools known as the Sōtō and Rinzai traditions. Both traditions use sustained, meditative sitting to achieve mental clarity and enlightenment, but the Rinzai tradition pairs this practice with kōans while the Sōtō tradition

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<sup>1</sup> Eman M. Elshaikh, *Buddhism*, OER Project, <https://www.oerproject.com/OER-Materials/OER-Media/HTML-Articles/Origins/Unit4/Buddhism>

<sup>2</sup> *Change and Evolution*, in *Buddhism: A Supplemental Resource for Grade 12 World of Religions: A Canadian Perspective*, Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, accessed March 3, 2026, [https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/docs/support/world\\_religions/buddhism/change-evolution.pdf](https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/docs/support/world_religions/buddhism/change-evolution.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Elishaikh, *Buddhism*.

focuses on shikantaza, “sitting for sitting's sake.” Kōans are short and often paradoxical stories or questions from earlier Zen masters that aim to disrupt habitual dualistic thinking, such as good versus evil, and transform ordinary perception into enlightenment. Additionally, the Rinzai school relies heavily on one-on-one guidance from a teacher.<sup>4</sup>

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Japanese and Chinese immigrants carried Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions, including Rinzai Zen, to the West as they settled in places such as Hawai‘i and California, establishing temples to serve their communities.<sup>5</sup> Hawai‘i became one of the most significant centers of Japanese Buddhism outside of Japan. For example, Daihonzan Chozen-ji, a Rinzai Zen temple, was co-founded in 1972 by Omori Sogen, a Japanese native, and Tenshin Tanouye, who was born and raised in Hawai‘i. Drawing on their expertise as renowned Zen masters, swordsmen, and calligraphers, Sogen and Tenouye developed a practice that integrated meditation with martial and fine arts, emphasizing the unity of both mind and body.<sup>6</sup> Although 98% of Buddhists reside in the Asia-Pacific region, the religion’s global presence has expanded significantly. Today, Buddhism is the world’s fourth-largest religion, with established communities across North America and Europe, where its practices continue to evolve and adapt according to new cultural contexts.

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<sup>4</sup> B. Alan Wallace, “The Spectrum of Buddhist Practice in the West,” in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism beyond Asia*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2002), 40, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1ppbhv>.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Change and Evolution*.

<sup>6</sup> *Chozen-ji*, International Zen Dojo of Hawaii, accessed March 3, 2026, <https://www.chozen-ji.org>