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Buddhism: Schools and Sacred Texts

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Buddhism: Schools and Sacred Texts

The world’s oldest dated printed book is not a European Bible. It is a Buddhist scripture, printed in China in 868 CE, more than five centuries before Gutenberg.

Buddhism split into three main schools over the centuries. Each school keeps its own set of holy texts.



The ruins of Nalanda, Bihar. Founded in the 5th century CE, it was one of the great centres where Buddhist scriptures were studied, copied and debated for nearly eight centuries. Photo by Sarah Jamerson, CC BY-SA 2.0 (cropped), via Wikimedia Commons.

At a glance

Six key facts on this topic

01 **Three vehicles**Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana.

02 **Early schools**Tradition counts 18. Only Theravada lives on.

03 **Pali Canon**Three baskets, written down in Sri Lanka in the 1st century BCE.

04 **Tibetan canon**Kangyur (Buddha's words) and Tengyur (treatises).

05 **Nalanda**Founded in the 5th century CE. Sacked about 1200 CE.

06 **Diamond Sutra**Printed on 11 May 868, the oldest dated printed book.

Must Know · Understand the words

1 Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana

1.1 What are the three vehicles?

Buddhism today has three broad groupings: Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana. The word *yana* means vehicle, or path.

- **Theravada** means "The Teaching of the Elders". It is the oldest surviving school and stays closest to the earliest recorded teachings.
- **Mahayana** means "The Great Vehicle". It came later. It added new texts, a wider path to liberation.
- **Vajrayana** means "The Diamond Vehicle". It is Tantric Buddhism, often called an esoteric (hidden, for initiated students) form of

Mahayana. It uses mantras, mandalas and mudras, said to speed the path to enlightenment.

- Read Sects of Buddhism for the real doctrinal differences.

1.2 Why do books avoid “Hinayana”?

Older writing often calls Theravada “Hinayana”, meaning “lesser vehicle”. The term is a pejorative found in Mahayana sutras.

The World Fellowship of Buddhists resolved to drop the term for living Theravada Buddhism in 1950. Its founding conference opened at the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy on 25 May 1950. It then met in Colombo.

1.3 How did the early schools split?

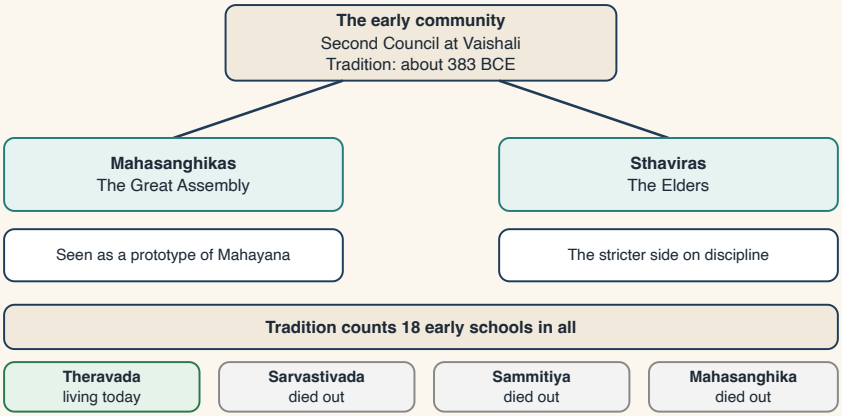
Tradition places the Second Council at Vaishali, about a century after the Buddha’s death. It dates the council to about 383 BCE, under King Kalashoka.

The council dealt with ten disputed monastic practices, including the handling of money. It declared all ten unlawful.

Some scholars link this council to the first big split. Others place the formal split about 37 years later.

The two sides were the Mahasanghikas (“Great Assembly”) and the stricter Sthaviras (“Elders”). Tensions over monastic discipline, lay followers and the nature of the arhat led to the split. An arhat is a person who has reached full liberation.

The Mahasanghikas saw the Buddha as an eternal, transcendental being. Scholars call their thought something of a prototype of Mahayana.



From one community to 18 schools. Only the Theravada branch is still a living school.

1.4 Which early schools survive?

Tradition counts 18 early schools. Theravada is the only one that survives as a living school today.

- Sarvastivada, Sammitiya and Mahasanghika have died out.
- Tibetan monks do still follow the monastic code of one other early school, the Mulasarvastivada.

To go deeper, read these lessons.

- Buddhism: The Buddha's Life and Councils for the earliest councils.
- The Buddhist Councils and the Spread of Buddhism for the wider spread.
- Buddhism: Historical Timeline and Present-Day Status for the fuller timeline.

- **Why it matters:** exam questions test which school a text, monk or doctrine belongs to.
- **Example:** Thailand follows Theravada, so its monks use the Pali Canon.

- **Misconception:** “Eighteen schools” does not mean eighteen living schools.

> **Quick check 1.** True or false: Theravada is the only one of the 18 early schools still living as a full school. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: courses.lumenlearning.com; wfbhq.org

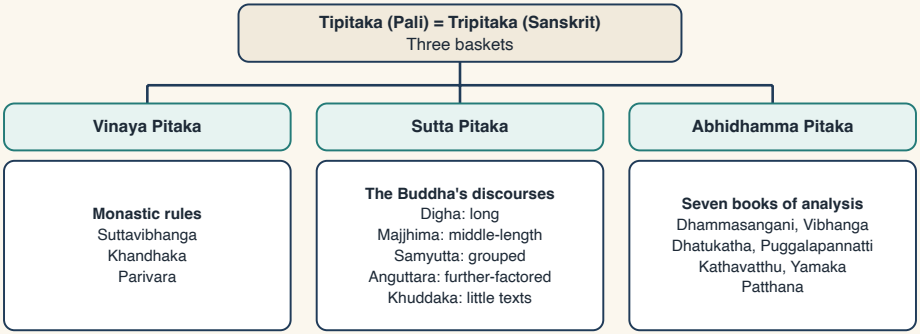
2 The Three Baskets

2.1 What is the Tripitaka?

The Tripitaka means “three baskets”. It holds the core scriptures of early Buddhism. Tripitaka is the Sanskrit word, and Tipitaka is the Pali word, for the same thing.

The Theravada canon, the Tipitaka, survives complete in Pali. Pali is the old Indian language of these texts.

- **Vinaya Pitaka** holds the rules of monastic discipline, for monks and nuns. It has three parts: Suttavibhanga, Khandhaka and Parivara.
- **Sutta Pitaka** holds the Buddha’s own discourses and sermons. It has five nikayas (collections): Digha, Majjhima, Samyutta, Anguttara and Khuddaka.
- **Abhidhamma Pitaka** holds systematic philosophical and psychological analysis. It has seven books: Dhammasangani, Vibhanga, Dhatukatha, Puggalapannatti, Kathavatthu, Yamaka and Patthana.



The Pali Canon at a glance.

2.2 What do the five nikayas mean?

- **Digha** is the “long collection”. It holds 34 long discourses.
- **Majjhima** is the “middle-length collection”. It holds 152 discourses.
- **Samyutta** is the “grouped collection”, and **Anguttara** is the “further-factored collection”.
- **Khuddaka** is the “collection of little texts”. It includes the Dhammapada, Udana, Sutta Nipata, Jataka and Therigatha.
- The Kathavatthu, in the Abhidhamma, means “Points of Controversy”.

2.3 How was the canon saved?

The Pali Canon was passed on orally first. It was written on palm leaves in Sri Lanka in the first century BCE. Theravada tradition calls this the Fourth Council.

A different “fourth council” met about 100 CE under Kanishka. Theravada Buddhists do not accept it as authentic.

2.4 Where does Sanghabhuti fit in?

The Sarvastivada school kept its own Vinaya. Sanghabhuti, who arrived in China around 381 CE, wrote a commentary on it.

This Vinaya survives in Chinese translation. It is not part of the Pali Canon, which is Theravada.

Do not mix the baskets with the Three Jewels. The Triratna is the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, the community of practitioners. For the full textual history, read The Tripitaka.

- **Why it matters:** the three baskets are the base for every later canon.
- **Example:** A rule for monks sits in the Vinaya. A sermon sits in the Sutta.
- **Misconception:** Tripitaka and Tipitaka are not two different books.

> **Quick check 2.** True or false: The Dhammapada belongs to the Digha Nikaya. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: accesstoinsight.org; newworldencyclopedia.org; aisixiang.com

Good to Know · Follow the texts and centres

3 Mahayana in Brief

3.1 What is Mahayana?

Mahayana means “Great Vehicle” or “Great Path”. Its core ideal is the bodhisattva. A bodhisattva puts the needs of others before their own.

Mahayana never bound itself to a closed canon. It kept adding new sutras, so its libraries grew over time.

3.2 Where is Mahayana the main form?

Mahayana is the main form of Buddhism in four places.

- China
- Japan
- Korea
- Vietnam

Most of mainland Southeast Asia follows Theravada. This is a common exam trap.

- Thailand
- Myanmar
- Cambodia
- Laos

- **Why it matters:** it tells you which school a country follows.
- **Example:** Thailand's monks follow Theravada, while Japan's main schools are Mahayana.
- **Misconception:** "Southeast Asia is Mahayana" is wrong as a blanket statement.

> **Quick check 3.** True or false: Mahayana is the main form of Buddhism in Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: lionsroar.com; ipcr.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp

4 Sutras Beyond the Tripitaka

4.1 Which texts did Mahayana add?

Mahayana produced its own scriptures. They were composed later and sit apart from the Tripitaka. They date from about the 1st century BCE onward, mostly in India.

4.2 What is the Lotus Sutra?

The Lotus Sutra is among the most influential Mahayana texts. It was likely composed between the 1st century BCE and the 2nd century CE.

4.3 What is the Perfection of Wisdom family?

The Prajnaparamita sutras began appearing around the second or first century BCE. The Heart Sutra and Diamond Sutra belong to this “Perfection of Wisdom” family.

Their claim to be the words of the historical Buddha is controversial. They taught that all phenomena are empty. The Sanskrit word for emptiness is **shunyata**.

The Heart Sutra is very short. Xuanzang’s Chinese version has only about 260 characters. Books count its Sanskrit lines differently.

4.4 Who is Nagarjuna?

Nagarjuna is the philosopher closely tied to this literature. He taught emptiness.

- He founded the Madhyamaka, or Middle Way, tradition.
- He and Asanga are called the “Two Great Charioteers”.

4.5 What about Vajrayana texts?

Vajrayana Buddhism has its own distinctive texts, the Tantras. They deal with esoteric ritual practice.

- **Why it matters:** exams ask whether a text is inside or outside the Tripitaka.
- **Example:** The Diamond Sutra is a Mahayana text, not a Pali one.
- **Misconception:** Later does not mean fake. These are simply a separate body of scripture.

Sources: lionsroar.com; newworldencyclopedia.org

5 Chinese and Tibetan Canons

Mahayana lands built their own huge collections. The Chinese and Tibetan versions are not usually translations of the Pali. Most of their bulk is Mahayana sutras and tantras.

5.1 What is in the Chinese canon?

The Chinese canon holds Vinaya texts of four schools.

- Sarvastivada
- Mahasanghika
- Dharmaguptaka
- Mahisasaka

The Sarvastivada school kept its own Abhidharma Pitaka in seven books. Six survive in Chinese and one in Tibetan.

The first printed Chinese Buddhist canon was the Kaibao canon, made in 971-983. The standard modern edition, the Taisho, runs to about a hundred large volumes.



Tripitaka Koreana at Haeinsa Temple, South Korea. A Korean woodblock set of the Buddhist canon. Photo by Bernard Gagnon, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons.

5.2 What is in the Tibetan canon?

The Tibetan canon has two parts. The Kangyur keeps the Mulasarvastivadin Vinaya.

- **Kangyur** means “translated words of the Buddha”. It has 101 to 120 volumes, depending on the edition. The 84000 translation project estimates about 1,169 texts.
- **Tengyur** means “translated treatises”. It has 220 to 250 volumes. It explains the Buddha’s words using the works of Indian masters. The 84000 project estimates about 4,093 texts.

Text counts differ by edition, so treat these totals as estimates.



Three canons side by side.

- **Why it matters:** it shows why the same school can be known from a different language.
- **Example:** A Sarvastivada rulebook is read in Chinese, not in Pali.
- **Misconception:** The Tengyur is not the Buddha's own word. It is Indian masters' commentary.

Sources: newworldencyclopedia.org; ntireader.org; scholar.84000.co

6 Vajrayana Basics

Vajrayana means "Diamond Vehicle". The vajra is a ritual sceptre that stands for method. The bell stands for wisdom.

- Tantric teachings were kept secret. A guru (teacher) passed them to a disciple.
- **Mudras** are ritual hand gestures.
- **Mandalas** are sacred enclosures of a deity's essence.
- In Tibetan Buddhism, the esoteric texts are called **Tantras**.

Nalanda became a centre for Vajrayana theory.

- UNESCO says its art finalized the iconography of the Vajrayana pantheon.
- Iconography means the standard way of showing deities in art.

- **Why it matters:** Vajrayana is the third “vehicle” in the exam trio.
- **Example:** A monk makes a hand gesture in ritual. That gesture is a mudra.
- **Misconception:** Vajrayana is not a separate religion. It is often described as an esoteric form of Mahayana.

Sources: newworldencyclopedia.org

7 Nalanda and Vallabhi

These texts were studied and copied at great monastic universities. They were not only kept in isolation.

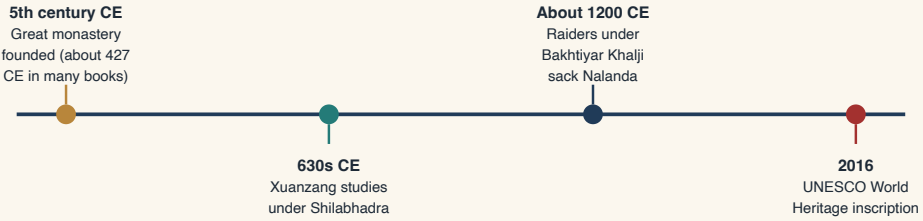
7.1 What was Nalanda?

Nalanda lies in present-day Bihar. Its great monastery was founded in the 5th century CE under the Gupta king Kumaragupta I. Many books give the year as about 427 CE.

It drew students from across Asia. UNESCO says it worked as a centre of learning from the 5th to the 13th century CE.

The Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (Hiuen Tsang) studied there in the 630s CE under the abbot Shilabhadra. Sources disagree on how long he stayed. He later carried hundreds of Sanskrit texts back to China.

Around 1200 CE, raiders under Bakhtiyar Khalji sacked Nalanda and burned it.



Nalanda in four dates.

7.2 Why is Nalanda a World Heritage Site?

- UNESCO inscribed Nalanda Mahavihara in 2016, at the 40th World Heritage Committee session.
- It calls Nalanda “the earliest university of early medieval India”.
- The site covers 23 hectares, with 11 viharas and 14 temples.
- The Archaeological Survey of India owns and manages the site.
- UNESCO says its building plan influenced monasteries across South and Southeast Asia.

7.3 What about Vallabhi?

Vallabhi (Valabhi), in present-day Gujarat, was another major centre of Buddhist learning in the same era.

7.4 Chaitya or Vihara?

A **Chaitya** is a Buddhist prayer hall. A **Vihara** is a monastery where monks live.

- **Why it matters:** these two sites explain how scriptures survived and spread.
- **Example:** Xuanzang carried texts from Nalanda to China.

Sources: whc.unesco.org

Great to Know · Printing and Tantra

8 The Oldest Printed Book

The Diamond Sutra is the world's oldest dated complete printed book. It was printed in China on 11 May 868 CE. That is more than five centuries before Gutenberg's press in Europe.



Frontispiece of the Diamond Sutra of 868, the world's earliest dated printed book. Provided by the British Library, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons.

8.1 How was it made?

It was printed from carved woodblocks onto seven sheets of paper. The sheets were glued into a scroll about 16 feet long.

8.2 How did it survive?

The scroll survived by accident. It was sealed inside a hidden chamber at Dunhuang, known as the Library Cave, around 1000 CE. It stayed hidden for roughly nine centuries.

The Daoist monk Wang Yuanlu found the cave in 1900. Aurel Stein bought the Diamond Sutra from him in 1907. The cave held tens of thousands of documents. The British Library now holds the scroll.

8.3 Why does it matter?

This one object joins three threads: a Mahayana scripture, an act of religious devotion, and the early history of printing.

- **Why it matters:** it proves printing was used for religion long before Europe.
- **Example:** The Diamond Sutra is a Mahayana scripture, printed as an act of religious devotion.
- **Misconception:** The cave was found in 1900. Stein's purchase in 1907 is a separate event.

> **Quick check 4.** True or false: The Library Cave at Dunhuang was found in 1907. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

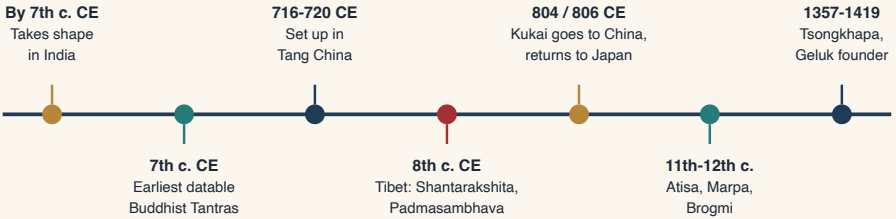
Sources: lindahall.org; lrb.co.uk

9 Vajrayana's Roots

9.1 When did Vajrayana take shape?

Vajrayana took shape inside Indian Buddhism by about the 7th century CE. Buddhist practice absorbed elements of Hindu Tantra in this period.

The earliest Buddhist Tantras that can be dated come from the 7th century CE.



How Vajrayana travelled.

9.2 How did it reach China and Japan?

Indian masters set up Tantric (Esoteric) Buddhism in Tang China between 716 and 720 CE.

Kukai sailed to Tang China in 804 CE. He returned to Japan in 806 and went on to found the Shingon school.

9.3 How did it reach Tibet?

In the 8th century, the Indian master Padmasambhava travelled to Tibet at the invitation of King Trisong Detsen. He helped found Samye, Tibet's first monastery. Shantarakshita was also invited to Tibet by Trisong Detsen.

Older books give 747 CE for Padmasambhava, but that date is traditional only. Trisong Detsen was born in 742 and ruled from 755 until about 797.

9.4 What was the second wave?

A second transmission in the 11th and early 12th centuries came through Atisa, Marpa and Brogmi. It produced the Kadam, Kagyu and Sakya schools.

The Geluk school grew out of the Kadam later. Tsongkhapa (1357-1419) founded it.

- Read The Buddhist Councils and the Spread of Buddhism for the wider story.
- **Why it matters:** Tibetan Buddhism has two waves, not one.
- **Example:** Samye was Tibet's first monastery. The Geluk school came much later.
- **Misconception:** The Geluk school is not a product of the 11th-12th century wave.

> **Quick check 5.** True or false: King Trisong Detsen could have invited Padmasambhava in 747 CE. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 6.** True or false: Kukai returned to Japan from Tang China in 804 CE. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: newworldencyclopedia.org; tricycle.org

Exam Practice

10 Exam Patterns

Exams test precise attribution. They ask which school a text, monk or doctrine belongs to, since Buddhist and Jain terms can sound alike.

Distractors often swap in a real term from a neighbouring tradition, such as Jainism for a Buddhist school. Others pair a real figure with the wrong text.

Eight traps and their answers

Trap	Safe answer
Tripitaka and Tipitaka	Same word: Sanskrit and Pali.
Sarvastivada Vinaya	Survives in Chinese. It is not in the Pali Canon.
Living early schools	Of the 18, only Theravada lives on.
Dhammapada and Jatakas	Khuddaka Nikaya, not Digha.
Mahayana countries	China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam. Not mainland Southeast Asia.
Kukai dates	804 he sailed out. 806 he returned.
Diamond Sutra dates	Cave found 1900. Stein bought the scroll 1907.
Padmasambhava	8th century. The date 747 is traditional only.

11 UPSC 2024: Sanghabhuti

UPSC asked which text the Indian monk Sanghabhuti wrote a commentary on after travelling to China. The answer is the Sarvastivada Vinaya.

UPSC stands for Union Public Service Commission. The label below links to the paper.

12 UPSC 2017: Not Jainism

12.1 Who were the Sammitiya?

The Pudgalavada was a group of five early schools. They held that the person (*pudgala*) is real. Other Buddhists saw this view as conflicting with the doctrine of non-self.

The Vatsiputriya was the original school. The Sammitiya was one of four schools derived from it. The Sammitiya became the most prominent Pudgalavada school, eclipsing its parent.

In the 7th century CE, Xuanzang reported that the Sammitiya was then the largest Shravakayana school. Shravakayana means the non-Mahayana schools.

12.2 What did UPSC ask?

UPSC asked whether Sautrantika and Sammitiya were Jain sects. It also asked whether Sarvastivadin held that phenomena exist eternally in latent form. Only the second statement is correct.

Sources: iep.utm.edu

Remember this

- **Vehicles:** Theravada (Elders), Mahayana (Great Vehicle), Vajrayana (Diamond Vehicle).
- **Early schools:** 18 by tradition. Only Theravada lives on as a full school.
- **Pali Canon:** three baskets, written down in Sri Lanka in the 1st century BCE. Dhammapada and Jatakas are in the Khuddaka.
- **Mahayana:** main form in China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam. Mainland Southeast Asia is mostly Theravada.
- **Tibetan canon:** Kangyur (101-120 volumes) and Tengyur (220-250 volumes).
- **Vajrayana:** took shape by about the 7th century CE. Kukai left in 804 and returned in 806.
- **Nalanda:** founded in the 5th century CE, sacked about 1200 CE. UNESCO inscribed it in 2016.
- **Diamond Sutra:** printed 11 May 868. Cave found 1900, scroll bought by Stein 1907.

Explain it back: Why is “Hinayana” avoided today, and which early school is still alive?

Practice MCQs

1. Why do modern Buddhist scholars generally avoid the term "Hinayana"?

A. It is a modern political label with no historical basis

B. It is simply an older spelling of 'Mahayana'

C. It was coined by Mahayana writers as a term meaning 'lesser vehicle', never self-applied by the schools it describes

D. It refers only to Vajrayana, not any early school

See answer ↓

2. Tradition counts 18 early Buddhist schools.

Which one survives today as a living school?

A. Sarvastivada

B. Theravada

C. Mahasanghika

D. Sammitiya

See answer ↓

3. In the Pali Canon, which collection holds the Dhammapada and the Jataka tales?

A. Digha Nikaya

B. Abhidhamma Pitaka

C. Khuddaka Nikaya

D. Majjhima Nikaya

See answer ↓

4. Which statement about the Diamond Sutra of 868 CE is correct?

A. Aurel Stein found the Library Cave in 1900 and bought the scroll in 1907

B. Wang Yuanlu found the Library Cave in 1907 and Aurel Stein bought the scroll in 1900

C. It was printed in Europe a century before Gutenberg's press

D. Wang Yuanlu found the Library Cave in 1900, and Aurel Stein bought the scroll in 1907

See answer ↓

5. Which of the following areas mainly follows Theravada Buddhism?

A. Korea

B. Vietnam

C. Mainland Southeast Asia, such as Thailand and Myanmar

D. Japan

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **C.** The answer is **it was coined by Mahayana writers**. Hinayana means ‘lesser vehicle’. Older writing used it for Theravada. The term is a pejorative found in Mahayana sutras. The World Fellowship of Buddhists resolved to drop it for living Theravada Buddhism in 1950. Why the others fail: it is not a modern political label, because it is found in old Mahayana sutras. It is not a spelling of Mahayana, since it means the opposite. Memory hook: a label from outside, now seen as a slight. ↑ Q1
2. **B.** The answer is **Theravada**. Of the 18 early schools, Theravada is the only one still living as a full school. Why the others fail: Sarvastivada, Sammitiya and Mahasanghika have died out. Tibetan monks still follow the monastic code of the Mulasarvastivada, but that is a code, not a living school. Memory hook: eighteen began, one remains. ↑ Q2
3. **C.** The answer is **Khuddaka Nikaya**. Khuddaka means the ‘collection of little texts’. It includes the Dhammapada, Udana, Sutta Nipata, Jataka and Therigatha. Why the others fail: the Digha holds 34 long discourses and the Majjhima holds 152 middle-length ones. The Abhidhamma Pitaka is a separate basket of analysis. Memory hook: little texts, big names. ↑ Q3
4. **D.** The answer is **Wang Yuanlu found the cave in 1900, and Aurel Stein bought the scroll in 1907**. Two dates belong to two events. The scroll, dated 11 May 868, is the world's oldest dated complete printed book. Why the others fail: Stein did not find the cave, and the 1907 purchase came after the 1900 discovery. The scroll was printed in China, more than five centuries before Gutenberg. Memory hook: found 1900, bought 1907. ↑ Q4
5. **C.** The answer is **mainland Southeast Asia**. Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos mostly follow Theravada. Why the others fail: Mahayana is the main form of Buddhism in China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam. Calling all of Southeast Asia Mahayana is a common exam trap. Memory hook: Thailand is Theravada, Japan is Mahayana. ↑ Q5

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** The others, such as Sarvastivada and Sammitiya, have died out. Only a Mulasarvastivada monastic code lives on in Tibet. ↑ 1

2. **False.** The Dhammapada and the Jatakas sit in the Khuddaka Nikaya. The Digha holds 34 long discourses. ↑ 2
3. **False.** These mainland Southeast Asian countries mostly follow Theravada. Mahayana leads in China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam. ↑ 3
4. **False.** Wang Yuanlu found the cave in 1900. Aurel Stein bought the Diamond Sutra from him in 1907. ↑ 4
5. **False.** He was born in 742 and ruled only from 755. So 747 is a traditional date, not a safe one. ↑ 5
6. **False.** Kukai sailed to China in 804 CE. He returned to Japan in 806 and founded the Shingon school. ↑ 6

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