

The authentic teachings of Gotama the Buddha have been preserved and handed down to us and are to be found in the Tipiṅka. The Pāli word, Tipiṅka, literally means 'the three baskets' (ti=three + piṅka=collections of scriptures). All of the Buddha's teachings were divided into three parts.

1. The first part is known as the **Vinaya Piṅka** and it contains all the rules which Buddha laid down for monks and nuns.
2. The second part is called the **Suttaṅga Piṅka** and it contains the Discourses.
3. The third part is known as the **Abhidhamma Piṅka** and comprises the psycho-ethical teachings of the Buddha.

It is known, that whenever the Buddha gave a discourse to his ordained disciples or lay-followers or prescribed a monastic rule in the course of his forty-five year ministry, those of his devoted and learned monks, then present would immediately commit his teachings word for word to memory. Thus the Buddha's words were preserved accurately and were in due course passed down orally from teacher to pupil. Some of the monks who had heard the Buddha preach in person were Arahants, and so by definition, 'pure ones' free from passion, ill-will and delusion and therefore, was without doubt capable of retaining, perfectly the Buddha's words. Thus they ensured that the Buddha's teachings would be preserved faithfully for posterity.

Even those devoted monks who had not yet attained Arahantahood but had reached the first three stages of sainthood and had powerful, retentive memories could also call to mind word for word what the Buddha had preached and so could be worthy custodians of the Buddha's teachings. One such monk was Ānanda, the chosen attendant and constant companion of the Buddha during the last twenty-five years of his life. Ānanda was highly intelligent and gifted with the ability to remember whatever he had heard. Indeed, it was his express wish that the Buddha always relate all of his discourses to him and although he was not yet an Arahanta he deliberately committed to memory word for word all the Buddha's sermons with which he exhorted monks, nuns and his lay followers. The combined efforts of these gifted and devoted monks made it possible for the Dhamma and Vinaya, as taught by the Buddha to be preserved in its original state.

The Pāli Tipiṅka and its allied literature exists as a result of the Buddha's discovery of the noble and liberating path of the pure Dhamma. This path enables all those who follow it to lead a peaceful and happy life. Indeed, in this day and age we are fortunate to have the authentic teachings of the Buddha preserved for future generations through the conscientious and concerted efforts of his ordained disciples down through the ages. The Buddha had said to his disciples that when he was no longer amongst them, that it was essential that the Saṅgha should come together for the purpose of collectively reciting the Dhamma, precisely as he had taught it. In compliance with this instruction the first Elders duly called a council and systematically ordered all the Buddha's discourses and monastic rules and then faithfully recited them word for word in concert.

The teachings contained in the Tipiṅka are also known as the Doctrine of the Elders [Theravāda]. These discourses number several hundred and have always been recited word for word ever since the First Council was convened. Subsequently, more Councils have been called for a number of reasons but at every one of them the entire body of the Buddha's teaching has always been recited by the Saṅgha participants, in concert and word for word. The first council took place three months after the Buddha's attainment of Mahāparinibbāna and was followed by five more, two of which were convened in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These collective recitations which were performed by the monks at all these Dhamma Councils are known as the 'Dhamma Saṅgītis', the Dhamma Recitations. They are so designated because of the precedent set at the First Dhamma Council, when all the Teachings were recited first by an Elder of the Saṅgha and then chanted once again in chorus by all of the monks attending the assembly. The recitation was judged to have been authentic, when and only when, it had been approved unanimously by the members of the Council. What follows is a brief history of the Six Councils.