Buddhism is the religion of the majority of people in the Mekong region. Buddhism originated in India and, in the first millennium C.E., spread to Southeast Asia and China. Tibetans in north-west Yunnan Province, China, belong to the Vajrayana branch of Mahayana Buddhism, while most Khmer, Laos, and Thais belong to the Theravada school. Vietnamese Buddhism integrates elements of several schools. All Buddhists focus their faith on the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha.

Although “the Buddha” refers to past and future Buddhas, it primarily refers to Gautama Buddha, the historical individual who discovered the truths of the Buddhist religion. Images of Gautama Buddha are found throughout the region, from temple halls to restaurant altars. The dharma are teachings of the Buddha, which are chanted in temples and taught in thousands of monastery classrooms. The sangha is a community of believers, especially one of monks or nuns. Buddhism remains a strong cultural force in Southeast Asia and has recently found new adherents among Vietnamese and Chinese.