

# Sutra

Not to be confused with **Sutrah**.

This article is about texts in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. For the divisions of the Quran, see **Sura**.

A **sutra** (Sanskrit *sūtra* Pali: *sutta*, Ardha Magadhi: *sūya*) is an **aphorism** or a collection of **aphorisms** in the form of a manual or, more broadly, a text in **Hinduism** or **Buddhism**. Literally it means a thread or line that holds things together and is derived from the verbal root *siv-*, meaning *to sew*.<sup>[1]</sup> The word “sutra” was very likely meant to apply quite literally to these texts, as they were written down in books of palm leaves sewn together with thread. This distinguishes them from the older sacred **Vedas**, which until recently were only memorised, never committed to paper.

In ancient Indian literature, *sutra* denotes a distinct type of literary composition, based on short aphoristic statements, generally using various technical terms. This literary form was designed for concision, as the texts were intended to be memorized by students in some of the formal methods of scriptural and scientific study (Sanskrit: *svādhyāya*). Since each line is highly condensed, another literary form arose in which commentaries (Sanskrit: *bhāṣya*) on the *sutras* were added, to clarify and explain them. For discussion of the literary form for *sutras*, their terse nature as a summary of ideas for memorization, and the rise of the commentarial literary form as an adjunct to *sutras*, see: Tubb & Boose 2007, pp. 1–2.<sup>[2]</sup>

In Brahmin lineage, each family is supposed to have one **gotra** and one **Sutra**, meaning that a certain **Veda** (*Śruti*) is treasured by this family in way of learning by heart. One of the most famous definitions of a *sutra* in Indian literature is itself a *sutra* and comes from the *Vayu Purana*:

alpākṣaram asandigdham sāravad viśvatomukham  
astobham anavadyam ca sūtram sūtravido viduḥ.  
Of minimal syllabary, unambiguous, pithy, comprehensive,  
continuous, and without flaw: who knows the *sutra* knows  
it to be thus.

In Jainism, *sutra* or *suya* refers to canonical sermons of **Mahavira** contained in the **Jain Agamas** and to some later (post-canonical) normative texts.

In Buddhism, *sutra* or *sutta* refers mostly to canonical scriptures, many of which are regarded as records of the oral teachings of **Gautama Buddha**. The Pali form of the word, *sutta*, is used exclusively to refer to the scriptures of the early Pali Canon, the only texts recognized by

**Theravada Buddhism** as canonical. In **Chinese**, these are known as 經 (pinyin: *jīng*). These teachings are assembled in part of the **Tripitaka** which is called the *Sutta Pitaka*. There are many important or influential **Mahayana** texts, such as the *Platform Sutra* and the *Lotus Sutra*, that are called *sutras* despite being attributed to much later authors.

Some scholars consider that the Buddhist use of *sutra* is a faulty Sanskritization of the Prakrit or Pali word *sutta* and that the latter actually represented Sanskrit *sūkta*, “well spoken, good news”.<sup>[3]</sup> The early Buddhist *sutras* do not present the aphoristic, nearly cryptic nature of the Hindu *sutras* even though they also have been designed for mnemonic purposes in an oral tradition. On the contrary, they are most often lengthy, with many repetitions which serve the mnemonic purpose of the audience. They share the character of sermons of “good news” with the **Jaina** *sutras*, whose original name of *sūya* in Ardha Magadhi can derive from Sanskrit *sūkta*, but hardly from *sutra*.

## 1 Sutras primarily associated with Hinduism

### 1.1 Vedanga

- **Chandas** (metrics)
- **Jyotisha** (astrology)
- **Kalpa** (ritual)
  - **Smarta Sutras**
  - **Srauta Sutras**, performance of sacrifices
    - **Samayacarika** or **Dharma Sutras**
    - **Grhya Sutras**, covering domestic life
      - **Sulba Sutras**, architecture of sacrificial area
- **Nirukta** (etymology)
- **Shiksha** (phonetics)
- **Vyakarana** (grammar)
  - **Ashtadhyayi** (**Pāṇini**), discussing grammar

## 1.2 Hindu philosophy

- Brahma Sutras (or Vedanta Sutra) (Badarayana)
- Narada Bhakti Sutra
- Nyaya Sutras
- Purva Mimamsa Sutras
- Samkhya Sutra
- Shiva Sutras
- Vaisheshika Sutra
- Yoga Sutras

## 2 Sutras primarily associated with Buddhism

Further information: [Buddhist texts](#) and [List of suttas](#)

## 3 Sutras primarily associated with Jainism

### 3.1 Jain philosophy

- Acaranga Sutra (Agamas)
- Kalpasutra
- Tattvartha Sutra

## 4 Other sutras

- Jesus Sutras (related to Church of the East in China )

## 5 See also

- Ananda Sutram
- Heart Sutra
- Kama Sutra
- Sastra
- Shulba Sutras
- Smriti
- Sutra copying
- Sutram

- Chinese Buddhist canon
- Tibetan Buddhist canon
- *Lotus Sutra*
- *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*
- List of Majjhima Nikaya suttas

## 6 Notes

- [1] MacGregor, Geddes (1989). *Dictionary of Religion and Philosophy* (1st ed.). New York: Paragon House. ISBN 1557780196.
- [2] "Tubb, Gary A.; Emery B. Boose, Scholastic Sanskrit. A Manual for Students - Springer". Springerlink.com. Retrieved 2013-03-16.
- [3] K. R. Norman: *A philological approach to Buddhism: the Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai Lectures 1994*. (Buddhist Forum, Vol. v.) xx, 193 pp. London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1997. p. 104

## 7 References

- Arthur Anthony Macdonell (1900). "The sūtras". *A History of Sanskrit Literature*. New York: D. Appleton and company.
- Monier-Williams, Monier. (1899) *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*. Delhi:Motilal Banarsidass. p. 1241
- Tubb, Gary A.; Boose, Emery R. (2007). *Scholastic Sanskrit: A Handbook for Students*. New York: Columbia University Press. ISBN 978-0-9753734-7-7.

## 8 External links

- [Buddhist Scriptures in Multiple Languages](#)
- [More Mahayana Sutras](#)
- [The Hindu Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, and Vedanta Sacred-texts.com](#)
- [A Modern Sutra](#)
- [Digital Sanskrit Buddhist Canon](#)
- [Ida B. Wells Memorial Sutra Library \(Pali Suttas\)](#)

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