

What is Tibetan Buddhism

By Reginald A. Ray

In Tibet, Buddhism provided the basis of a unique civilization. It offered a vision of a meaningful life, an ethical system that enjoined decency and humanity, a profound philosophical tradition, and a comprehensive spiritual path. The expressions of Buddhism in Tibet could be found everywhere—in the devotion of virtually all Tibetans for their religion; in the multitude of small and large monasteries scattered throughout the country; in the shrines located in every home, monastery, and retreat cell; in the rituals that shaped and guided everyone's life; in the ever-present color and vividness of Tibetan painting, sculpture, music, dance, and theater; and even in the government organization and its operation. In Tibetan Buddhism, there was a place for everyone. If you were an ordinary lay person, preoccupied with making a living and raising a family, your "dharma" consisted in cultivating kindness toward others, receiving teachings from your mentor or guru, regular rituals and festivals, and maintaining contact with respected friends and relatives who followed the monastic life. Those wishing the renunciative life of a monk or nun could focus on ethical behavior, study of the scriptures, and service to the monastic community. Finally, those aspiring to enlightenment in the present life could follow the example of Tibet's greatest saints and enter the retreatant's way, meditating in solitude in the mountains. It is interesting that as Tibetan Buddhism moves Westward, all three of these lifestyles are being reproduced among communities of modern people following the Tibetan traditions.

Buddhism came to the "land of snow" from India during two major periods, integrating with the ancient Tibetan shamanic religion to produce a vivid, dynamic, and vigorous synthesis. The first spreading of the dharma occurred from the seventh to the ninth centuries CE; the lineages from this period are held by one of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism, that of the Nyingma or "Ancient School." The second influx took place between the late tenth to the end of the eleventh centuries, its lineages being held by the three other major schools, the Sakya, the Kagyü, and the Kadam/Gelug. The Nyingmapas are known as the "Ancient Translation School," while the other three lineages are called "New Translation Schools."

Tibetan Buddhism is unique among living Buddhist traditions in the breadth of lineages, teachings, and practices that it encompasses. This abundance reflects the unusual historical circumstances under which the dharma came to Tibet. When Tibetans journeyed to India in search of the dharma from the eighth to the twelfth centuries CE, Buddhism was in full flower. Among lay folk, monastics, wandering holy men and women, and meditating yogins one found several different streams of Buddhism flourishing, including lineages of the early, pre-Mahayana schools with their basic teachings on meditation and focus on monastic life which the Tibetans called "Hinayana," the "Lesser Vehicle"; the Mahayana or "Great Vehicle" emphasizing the altruistic ideal of the bodhisattva or "enlightenment-being" and the teachings on emptiness (shunyata); and Tantric or Vajrayana Buddhism characterized by yogic practice and the ritualized meditation of the tantras, designed to open the mind to its most profound, luminous depths and to reveal the sacredness and power of reality itself. The Tibetans studied, practiced, and brought all of these "yanas" or vehicles back to their country and transplanted them into their native soil.

From the Tibetan point of view, you can't appreciate the sacredness and power of reality (Vajrayana) until you have truly freed your mind and learned how to love others (Mahayana). And you can't do this until you have tamed your mind through meditation and established a life of decency through ethical behavior (Hinayana). Based on this recognition of the necessity of levels in one's spiritual training, and drawing on Indian models, the Tibetans established a path defined by three general stages.

First is the Hinayana, in which you officially become a Buddhist, taking refuge in the three jewels (buddha, dharma, and sangha), committing yourself to follow the five precepts (to refrain from killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, and clouding your mind with intoxicants); and establishing a basic practice of meditation. The purpose of the Hinayana is to tame and stabilize the mind, so that it is no longer so chaotic and overrun with thinking, and to cultivate the awareness that naturally emerges from a clear mind. The second stage is Mahayana, in which you take the bodhisattva vow to work for the welfare of others. At this stage, practitioners are trained in the six paramitas, a set of practices that have the effect of dissolving the rigid concept of self and of awakening genuine love for other people. The third and final stage is that of the Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism, the epitome and capstone of the dharma in Tibet. As in India, many people received tantric initiations and teachings, and some were fortunate enough to be able to enter retreat and practice them to completion.

Tibet was unique among the world's Buddhist civilizations in that the Vajrayana provided its overarching framework, basic spiritual orientation, and culminating set of teachings and practices. The basic purpose of Vajrayana Buddhism, as indeed all forms of Buddhism, is the actualization of the inherent goodness and wakefulness within each person, known in Tibet as the buddha nature. On entry into the Vajrayana, practitioners are assigned a "personal deity" (yidam), a male or female buddha figure that represents their own inner, enlightened nature. They will then meditate upon this buddha in daily practice and in retreat, accomplishing a certain number of recitations of his or her mantra (syllables representing the deity's sound embodiment). Through this, the practitioner gradually discards the conventional concept of self that is the basis of all ignorance and selfishness, leaving only the unimpeded wisdom and compassion of an awakened one.

A second method for the realization of the buddha nature is the practice of the inner yogas, most notably the "six yogas of Naropa," which purify the subtle, karmic blockages to wisdom. The inner yogas involve developing a heightened awareness of one's actual (as opposed to conceptualized) experience of the body. Through the yogas, one begins to realize that the experience of the body as tangible, solid, and physically real is actually a projection. Our actual experience of our bodies is open, ever changing, and basically intangible (empty). Within this emptiness, there is a continual play of energy (prana), as our consciousness (bindu) moves along certain pathways (nadi).

Finally, Vajrayana practitioners may pursue the formless meditations, known as Dzogchen (the Great Perfection) in the Nyingma lineage and Mahamudra (the Great Symbol) among the New Translation Schools. Because these practices are so refined, for many they become accessible only after completion of some yidam meditation and also engagement in the inner yogas. Mahamudra and Dzogchen both involve resting in the nature of the empty, open, luminous awareness that is our essential nature. Through abiding in this state of "peace beyond peace," one is able to respond

to the suffering of others in a most natural way and to live a life that is uncontrived and endlessly creative.

This spiritual path was never considered an individualistic one. Tibet was a Mahayana culture, and any person pursuing the dharma did so not only for his or her own welfare. Everyone felt themselves called and obliged, ultimately, to bring their gifts and accomplishments to the table for the benefit of others. Thus, Tibetan Buddhist teachings, practices, and attainments were applied in a most practical way throughout Tibet, in personal, family, and social life; in every walk of life and lifestyle that Tibetans followed; and at every stage from birth to death and dying, and beyond.

One illustration of this social orientation is the remarkable and unique Tibetan institution of the tulku or reincarnate lama in which the Buddhist teachings were brought fully into the social and political arenas. When a realized lama died, his disciples, devotees, and followers would search to find the new incarnation. As realized bodhisattvas, such lamas were understood to possess the power to choose the time and place of their rebirth and, because of their bodhisattva vow, it was believed they would reincarnate in a place where they could be rediscovered, reinstalled in their previous position, and continue their compassionate activity. Newly discovered tulkus were typically brought to the monastic seat of the predecessors, usually as small children, and rigorously trained in the reading, writing, scholarship, ritual, meditation, and teaching, administrative, and leadership roles. It was primarily the tulkus who carried the Tibetan teachings from one generation to another and maintained the integrity of the tradition. Many fascinating aspects of the tulku institution resist explanation within modern paradigms, including the recognition of their former associates, memories of previous lives, and sometimes an apparently preexisting knowledge of Buddhism and of the practice of meditation.

In recent decades, Tibetan Buddhism has increasingly drawn the attention of the Western world and many feel that it directly addresses many of the more intractable problems of our contemporary situation. Many millions feel deep respect for the Dalai Lama, Tibet's religious leader, and for his tireless efforts to bring a peaceful resolution to the suffering of his people. Beyond this, an untold number of Westerners have read books on Tibetan Buddhism and met refugee lamas and received teachings from them. And tens of thousands have taken initiation (abhisheka) and entered the traditional practice. One now finds large teaching centers, retreat facilities, city "dharma communities," and rural study groups among non-Tibetans, not only throughout Europe, the Americas, and Australia, but in other places as well. There seems little question now that Tibetan Buddhism will survive, in exile at least. For a country as small, technologically primitive, and out of the way as Tibet was, this is a remarkable accomplishment indeed. And it points to the very remarkable phenomenon that is Tibetan Buddhism.