



## Buddhism in the Land of Snow



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# Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism

### Introduction

Tibetan Buddhism, the teaching of the Buddha as practiced and taught in Tibet, is at last becoming known to the world. Because of Tibet's secluded location, the Buddhist tradition developed there for fourteen centuries in relative isolation, unknown or misunderstood by the outside world. A turning point came in the late 1950s, when the Communist Chinese takeover precipitated the migration of Tibetan teachers to India. Since then Tibetan Buddhist teachers have traveled further abroad and have established teaching centers that are now flourishing in Japan, Southeast Asia, Australia, Europe, and North and South America. For the first time in history, people from all over the world are able to learn directly from authentic sources about how Tibetan Buddhism was practiced in Tibet. The Tibetan migration has found a particularly receptive audience in the United States – which is, after all, a country of immigrants. Buddhism is now one of the fastest growing religions in the United States – not least because of the rise in popularity of its Tibetan denomination.

### Life of the Buddha

The historical Buddha (named Siddhartha

at birth and commonly known as Shakyamuni Buddha) lived in northern India approximately five centuries before Christ. He was a prince who renounced a privileged royal life in order to search for ultimate peace and the highest good. He realized the highest level of enlightenment at the age of thirty-five. Through arduous practices, concentrated meditation, and deep reflection he became a fully awakened being – a Buddha. He then taught the path of spiritual liberation to numerous disciples for over forty years, until his passing at the age of eighty. Afterward the communities of monks and nuns that he founded dedicated themselves to preserving and upholding his teachings, thereby laying the foundations for what has become known as Buddhism.

The term “Buddha” means an “awakened” or “enlightened” one who has discovered true wisdom and attained nirvana (the cessation of desire) in this world. It is a descriptive title given to all fully enlightened beings, rather than being the exclusive name of a single individual. There have been Buddhas in the past (Kashyapa, Dipangkara, or Shakyamuni – the historical Buddha), and other Buddhas are expected in the future.

Tibetan Buddhism teaches that we are all potential Buddhas, because we are essentially pure and luminous at the most basic

level of existence. That purity, called Buddha-nature, is typically clouded over by a dense layer of ignorance and negativity, which dominates us and leads to suffering. The Tibetan Buddhist path encourages its practitioners to adopt the traits and characteristics of enlightened beings through the use of special meditational techniques, thereby realizing their innate Buddha-nature.



### Buddhist Values

Buddhism is a tolerant religion that places emphasis on practical methods for cultivating spiritual awareness and on the importance of finding the truth for oneself. It treasures loving-kindness, compassion, equanimity, clarity of mind, and wisdom. Its hope is to alleviate suffering and to create healing and transformation so that all beings may experience the highest peace (nirvana). Followers of the Buddha entrust their spiritual growth and well-being to 1) the Buddha as the perfect teacher, 2) his teaching (the Dharma) as the holy path to awakening, and 3) the lamas, tulkus, and the ordained (the Sangha). These three objects of refuge are collectively revered in Buddhism as the "Three Jewels," and are the basis for Buddhist spiritual commitment.



### The Development of Buddhism

Early in the history of Buddhism numerous denominations developed. The only early denomination that still exists today is Theravada Buddhism. It is the Buddhism still found in Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, and Cambodia. Monasticism is the cornerstone of Theravada Buddhism.

Around the first century BCE, a new form of Buddhism developed on the Indian subcontinent. It was called Mahayana (the "Great" or "Universal Vehicle"). The Mahayana movement brought a new religious ideal to Buddhism, that of the bodhisattva, an individual who works for the enlightenment and well-being of all, not just for him or herself. This form of Buddhism spread throughout China, Korea, and Japan.

Several centuries later a third Buddhist denomination emerged in North India. Called Vajrayana (the "Diamond Vehicle"), it spread throughout the Himalayan kingdoms of Tibet, Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan, and northwards into Mongolia. The "diamond" in the name refers to the supreme clarity of its vision and its crystalline hardness and strength.

Today, many refer to the Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhist branches as the Sanskrit tradition and the Pali Tradition, in order to avoid the misunderstanding of what "greater" and "lesser" connote. The Sanskrit language was used by scholars during the time of the Buddha, and the Pali was the common language.

## The Distinctive Character of Tibetan Buddhism

contrast, the path of the Vajrayana practitioner can be as short as one lifetime.

In order to accelerate the process of enlightenment, Vajrayana uses advanced yoga techniques in combination with elaborate meditations. The meditations incorporate visualizations of personified archetypes of enlightenment, frequently referred to as "meditational deities." These archetypes are often represented in Tibetan religious art in the form of bronze sculptures, or in painted portable scroll icons, known as thangkas. The scriptures containing the esoteric teachings for yogic practices (such as meditative visualizations) are called tantras, and are part of a larger body of Buddhist sacred texts, based on the public teachings of the Buddha, called sutras. (Vajrayana's use of tantric literature explains why it is sometimes referred to as "Tantric Buddhism.") Mantras (chanted sacred syllables or phrases), mudras (ritual hand gestures), and mandalas (symbolic representations of enlightened worlds) are all used as part of Tibetan Buddhist meditational practices.

Tibetan Buddhism draws upon the teachings, meditation techniques, and ordination vows of the Theravada, and the philosophy and cosmology of Mahayana. But it was in Tibet that many of the Vajrayana teachings were preserved, and most of the distinctive qualities of Tibetan Buddhism can be found in its Vajrayana heritage.

The Vajrayana largely follows the Mahayana philosophical teachings, but there are some variations in attitude. Whereas Mahayana seeks to destroy the poisons of craving, aggression, and ignorance, Vajrayana places an emphasis on transmuting them directly into wisdom. This is based in the Buddhist belief that the mundane world (samsara) is inseparable from enlightenment.

Tibetan Buddhism is distinguished by its many methods and techniques of spiritual development and for its great acceleration of the spiritual journey. Theoretically, the path of the Mahayana practitioner takes three incalculable eons to reach full awakening; by



*Monastics are trained in the ancient art of debate. Thorough training in logic and reason are a foundation to learning the very complex Buddhist philosophical teachings.*