

Getting to know the Four Schools of Tibetan Buddhism

Over the hundreds of years that the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism – Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, and Gélug – have evolved out of their common roots in India, a wide array of divergent practices, beliefs, and rituals have come into being. However, there are significant underlying commonalities between the different traditions, such as the importance of overcoming attachment to the phenomena of cyclic existence, and the idea that it is necessary for trainees to develop an attitude of sincere renunciation. John Powers' fascinating and comprehensive book, *Introduction to Buddhism*, re-issued by Snow Lion in September 2007, contains a lucid explanation of those similarities.

One important point of agreement lies in rules of monastic discipline: All orders of Tibetan Buddhism follow the vinaya of the Mūla-Sarvāstivāda school, which has been the standard in Tibetan monasteries since the founding of the first monastic institution at Samyé. In addition, they also share the same body of philosophical and liturgical texts imported from India, and all four orders present a path to awakening that incorporates practices of sūtra and tantra systems.

They also share some common assumptions about the doctrines and practices they inherited from India. It is generally agreed that the Buddha provided divergent dispensations for various types of trainees, and these have

been codified by Tibetan intellectual historians, who categorize Buddha's teachings in terms of three distinct vehicles – the Lesser Vehicle (Hinayāna), the Great Vehicle (Mahāyāna), and the Vajra Vehicle (Vajrayāna) – each of which was intended to appeal to the spiritual capacities of particular groups.

- Hinayāna was presented to people intent on personal salvation in which one transcends suffering and is liberated from cyclic existence.
- The audience of Mahāyāna teachings included trainees with the capacity to feel compassion for the sufferings of others who wished to seek awakening in order to help sentient beings overcome their sufferings.
- Vajrayāna practitioners had a strong interest in the welfare of others, coupled with determination to attain awakening as quickly as possible, and the spiritual capacity to pursue the difficult practices of tantra.

Indian Buddhism is also commonly divided by scholars of the four Tibetan orders into four main schools of tenets – Great Exposition School, Sūtra School, Mind Only School, and Middle Way School. Each of these is associated with particular teaching lineages, texts, doctrines, and practices, and all are thought to have value for particular people and in particular contexts. Moreover, although the classification scheme is a hierarchical one, none of the practices and doctrines is disparaged, since all are thought to have been taught by Buddha and to be conducive to spiritual progress.

As a result, all four orders of Tibetan Buddhism incorporate elements of the three vehicles and the four tenet systems in their philosophical systems and meditative practices. Their curricula reflect this eclectic approach, and students in Tibetan monastic schools generally study a wide range of Buddhist texts and learn the tenets of

Lama Tsongkhapa, the main teacher of the first Dalai Lama and founder of the Gelug school.





Left: Gampopa, the foremost student of the Tibetan Buddhist teacher Milarepa and founder of the Kagyu school.

Right: Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) is said to have brought Tantric Buddhism to Tibet in the 8th century. Followers of the Nyingma school regard him as the second Buddha. Picture courtesy of Shelly and Donald Rubin Foundation.

the four Indian philosophical schools, along with the practices and teachings of the three vehicles.

All four Tibetan orders agree on the basic outline of the path to be followed to escape from cyclic existence and the sorts of practices that one should adopt. All share a Mahāyāna orientation, and so they agree that the path begins with the generation of the mind of awakening and progresses through the bodhisattva levels, during which one cultivates the six (or ten) perfections. It is assumed by members of the four orders that Vajrayāna is the supreme of all Buddhist paths, although there are differences between them regarding which tantras they favor and which lineages they follow:

- The Nyingma order, for instance, emphasizes the “great perfection” (*rdzogs chen*; pronounced “dzogchen”), and its tantric practices are mainly based on the so-called “Old Tantras” (such as the *Secret Basic Essence Tantra*) and on instructions found in “hidden treasures” (*gter ma*; pronounced “terma”).
- The Kagyupas emphasize the *mahāmudrā* system inherited from the Indian master Tilopa, and its tantric practices are mainly derived from the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* and the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*.
- The Gélukpa system of tantric theory and practice is based on the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*, the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*, and the *Kālacakra Tantra*.
- The Sakyapas favor the *Hevajra Tantra*, which is the basis of their “path and fruit” (*lam ’bras*; pronounced “lamdré”) system.

Each order traces its lineage to particular Indian masters. There are distinctive differences in their actual tantric practices, but despite these differences there are many points of commonality. This has been noted by the Dalai Lama, who states that the philosophical view of all orders is that of the Middle Way School of Nāgārjuna, and in terms of practice all follow the program of Mahāyāna (which he refers to as the “bodhisattva vehicle”). In addition, their paths and tenets incorporate the systems of the sūtras and tantras in their entirety, and so he concludes that all of them are equally effective programs for bringing sentient beings to liberation. In a 1980 talk at the Nyingma Institute, he said:

“In Tibet, due to differences in the time of translation of texts from India and the development of lineages formed by particular teachers, eight distinct schools of Buddhism arose. Nowadays, four are widely known, Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu, and Gelugpa. From the point of view of their tenets, they are all Mādhyamika. From the point of view of their vehicle, they are all of the Bodhisattvayāna. In addition, these four schools are all complete systems of unified Sūtra and Tantra practice, each having the techniques and quintessential instructions necessary for a person to achieve Buddhahood within one lifetime. Yet each has its own distinguishing features of instruction.”

If one compares the four orders of Tibetan Buddhism to Theravādan Buddhism, or to Chinese, Japanese, or Korean schools, the disparities are more pronounced. This is a result of important differences in their respective histories of Buddhist assimilation, and the style of practice and teaching in each country is reflective of this history, as well as cultural and linguistic factors and subsequent political and religious developments.

Tibetan Buddhists share a common heritage that came to them from both the great scholastic institutions of northern India during the period of the dissemination of Buddhism to Tibet, and the *siddha* lineages that mainly centered in Bihar and Bengal. At the time of the early transmission of Buddhism to Tibet, the philosophical views of Nāgārjuna and the Madhyamaka school were dominant, and one finds that all four orders of Tibetan Buddhism hold this to be the supreme of all philosophical views. In terms of practice, many of the influential masters who came to Tibet viewed Vajrayāna as the supreme of all Buddhist teachings and practices, and so it is not surprising that Tibetan Buddhism also regards it in this way.

This is not the case in other Buddhist traditions. In Theravādan countries, for example, tantric practices and techniques were introduced and enjoyed brief popularity in some areas, but were eventually eclipsed. In China Vajrayāna was influential during the seventh and eighth centuries, but was later absorbed into other traditions. During this time Japanese monks (most famously Kūkai and Saichō) traveled to China and brought back tantric lineages, but the Shingon school founded by Kūkai is today one of the smallest orders in Japan, and the Tendai school incorporates tantric practices as part of an eclectic range of influences. In Japan, tantric schools tend to emphasize rituals and ceremonies, and not the distinctive yogas of highest yoga tantra, which are the central Vajrayāna practices in Tibetan Buddhism.

In Tibet, the dominant form of religious practice is the tantric Buddhism inherited from India, and there is also a high degree of compatibility in the philosophical views of the four orders on the subject of tantric practice. Particularly important is their agreement on the nature of the mind, since mental training is the focus of the Buddhist path as practiced in Tibet. All four orders agree that the mind is of the nature of clear light. All posit various levels of consciousness that are differentiated in terms of relative coarseness or subtlety, and all agree that the most subtle and basic level of mind is of the nature of pure luminosity and emptiness. They have different terms for it and different ways of realizing it, but, as the Dalai Lama states in *Kindness, Clarity and Insight* (Snow Lion 2006):

“This innate fundamental mind of clear light is emphasized equally in the Highest Yoga Tantra systems of the New Translation Schools and in the Nying-ma system of the Great Perfection and is the proper place of comparison of the old and new schools.”

Teachers of the four orders also agree on the role of the mind in perpetuating cyclic existence and in the attainment of liberation. All teach that the ordinary mind acts under the influence of afflictive emotions and misconceptions. These cause people to engage in negative deeds, which then rebound on those who commit them. The process is maintained by the nature of the mind itself, which tends to repeat patterns of behavior with which it is familiar. So if one regularly falls into anger, for example, one becomes progressively more habituated to this emotion, and it becomes easier to generate angry thoughts. By contrast, if one trains in compassion and love, one will become progressively habituated to them and manifest them spontaneously.



Left: Sakya Trizin, head of the Khon Sakya school.

Right: The 17th Karmapa Urgyen Trinley Dorje, head of the Karma Kagyu school.

In the practices of highest yoga tantra that are found in the New Translation orders, one cultivates the awareness that the mind is of a nature of luminosity and bliss and that all mental defilements are adventitious and not a part of the nature of mind. The same is true of the *dzogchen* system (the supreme teaching in the Nyingma order), which takes this insight as the key element of its program of meditative training. In both systems, one learns to view phenomena as the creative sport of mind, and thoughts are perceived as arising from emptiness and again merging into emptiness. The Dalai Lama contends that all four orders train in this insight, and that:

“...if one can cause all these phenomena to appear as the sport of the basic mind within [while] not deviating from the sphere of that mind, one does not come under the influence of conventional conceptions. When we identify our own basic entity ourselves and directly ascertain its meaning continuously and forever in meditative equipoise, then even though acting in the world, we are Buddhas.”
(*Kindness, Clarity and Insight*)

This sums up the core meditative practices of all four orders of Tibetan Buddhism. Each has its own distinctive ways of leading trainees toward buddhahood, and each has developed characteristic styles and terminology, but all of them share fundamental assumptions about the path and about Buddhist doctrine. More importantly, as the Dalai Lama argues, all can demonstrate that their methods have succeeded in producing outstanding meditators who embody the highest ideals of Tibetan Buddhism and whose lives and teachings stand as testaments to the effectiveness of the systems of each of the four orders.

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