

LANDSCAPE OF DHARMA: AN OVERVIEW OF BUDDHISM AND AN APPRECIATION OF OUR TRADITION

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In the time since Sakyamuni Buddha awakened and gave his first teaching at Deer Park, in Sarnath, India, 2500 years ago, the Buddhist tradition has flourished in many countries all over the world and developed many schools, sects, and lineages. Buddhism was the most populous religion in the world about seventy years ago, before the advent of Communism in Asia decimated Buddhism in China and Southeast Asia. Like other religions, the Buddhist tradition and its teachings evolved, adapted, and developed in different ways as they encountered and became at home with different cultures and countries in various times and places; thus, over the centuries, there arose numerous schools of Buddhist thought and traditions of practice, emphasizing different aspects of the teachings. Despite the incredible variation, all have the same goal of leading beings to enlightenment.

Trying to understand this can be perplexing: Japanese Buddhism looks quite different from Thai Buddhism, which looks quite different from Tibetan Buddhism, and so on. It also can seem difficult to see how our own tradition fits in to the greater Buddhist landscape. For these reasons, I want to lay out an overview of Buddhist practice, which can help you understand Buddhist theory and practice in whatever form, country, language, or center in which you might experience it, and see how it all stems from the Buddha and his original teachings, with different skillful means, philosophical elaborations, and cultural accretions developed and added on along the way.

Today there are many different kinds of Buddhism in the United States. Besides the kind of centers which mainly provide meditation and intensive silent cloistered retreats, there are many Chinese, Thai, Burmese, Vietnamese, and other Buddhist temples which mainly serve people of Asian descent, and which have all kinds of congregational and family activities,

including holiday celebrations, as well as Buddhist studies and practice, often in their own native languages and led by an Asian-born priest. There are also Asian Theravadin monasteries, Mahayana monasteries, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhist monasteries here and in other Western countries. But for our purposes here, as Buddhist meditators studying the landscape of Dharma mainly in terms of practice, all could be grouped, according to my teachers, under the three broad traditions of the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. These three traditions have come down to us today in America and the Western countries mainly in the form of three practicing lineages: Vipassana (Insight Meditation), Zen, and Dzogchen/ Mahamudra. The current cross-fertilization and amalgamation of these three practicing lineages is beginning to feel like a sort of revitalized Ekayana or One Dharma approach, especially in this country. If you go to Buddhist meditation retreats in America and Europe, conducted in the native languages of our countries, probably you're going to Vipassana retreats, Zen retreats, or Tibetan Buddhist retreats whose main meditation practice is Mahamudra or Dzogchen, and there are most likely both students and teachers present with at least some familiarity with and experience of more than one of these great traditions.

Our teacher Sakyamuni Buddha lived 2500 years ago in India. He said: "My Dharma has the single savor of liberation, whether you taste it in the beginning, the middle, or the end." Wherever you taste the ocean of Dharma teachings, which traditionally number 84,000, it has the single savor of liberation. Dharma is like the ocean: whichever ocean among the seven seas that you taste, wherever you taste it, it has the single savor of saltiness. Buddha said, "My Dharma, Ekayana, has the single savor of liberation, of release, of freedom, the heart's pure release -- liberation." The one vehicle, the unique way--originally known as Ekayana, the One Dharma or Unified Dharma-- over time evolved into the three main traditions: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana.

The Branches of One Bodhi Tree: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana

The Theravada, the Tradition of the Elders, is the venerable ancient school of Buddhism, dating to the time of Sakyamuni Buddha. It is sometimes mislabeled the Hinayana, a term which is both incorrect and pejorative. When referring to the Theravada path of individual liberation, my own Tibetan teacher Nyoshul Khenpo Rinpoche often called it the Root Vehicle, or the original Teachings. He used to say that you should venerate even a small piece of cloth the color of the Buddhist robes, and never criticize a monk or nun who has dedicated their entire life to the path. Theravada is also known as "Southern Buddhism," since it is predominantly practiced in South Asian countries like Burma, Thailand, and Sri Lanka.

Historically speaking, then the Mahayana, or Great Vehicle, then arose; it is renowned as the path of universal liberation, because its teachings emphasize that all practice must be dedicated to the liberation of all beings, since we are all inseparable. The main teachings of the Mahayana arose as the Buddha appeared in the form of various meditation deities through various visions. These Mahayana teachings laid the groundwork for a lay revolution, stressing integrating the Dharma practices and principles into everyday life through practicing wisdom and compassion, the two wings of enlightenment. Mahayana is now familiar to Americans in the form of Zen Buddhism.

The Vajrayana, or Diamond Vehicle, emerged later among the Indian and Himalayan siddhas (spiritual adepts), probably around the sixth and seventh centuries CE. This Lightning Path of the non-dual Tantric Vehicle taught enlightenment in one life, that nirvana is right here and now, and that it is experienceable now. This is the profound, esoteric, mystical path of tantra. This is the Vajrayana, the lightning-bolt path-- the quick path, the rocket path. The Vajrayana is predominantly associated with Tibetan Buddhism, which developed in Tibet and the greater trans-Himalayan region.

Teachings of the Three (or Four) Traditions

The main teachings of the Theravada are the “sutras,” or teachings traditionally held to be spoken by Sakyamuni Buddha, the historical Buddha of our time. Sakyamuni (“Sage of the Sakya Clan”) was born in Lumbini, Nepal, around 543 BCE. Soon after his death, or parinirvana, in 483 BCE, his teachings were recited by his close attendant Ananda and other learned monks and nuns, collectively verified and categorized, memorized, and passed down orally from generation to generation; fortunately, through meditation, samadhi and yoga many of them had developed prodigious memories. “Sutra” literally means “thread,” which refers to the thread that held together the palm leaves on which the teachings were finally written down centuries later. These original sutras are in the Pali language, which we still use, for example, when we chant “Namoh tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa” (Homage to the Enlightened One, the Perfectly Awakened One--blessed is He) at the beginning of our retreats and in certain practices.

In Tibetan Buddhism, the fundamental teachings of the Root Vehicle are referred to as the First Cycle or First Turning of the Wheel, which Lord Buddha began in Deer Park at Sarnath, outside Benares, by giving his Fire Sermon to five wandering ascetics. The First Cycle includes the basic teachings of the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the Three Trainings, the three characteristics of existence, the training precepts, and so forth.

This First Cycle emphasizes renunciation, impermanence, the unsatisfying nature of worldly pursuits and desires, simplicity, virtue, mindfulness and lovingkindness, and the possibility that anyone could eventually achieving enlightenment by walking the path of awakening.



The Second Cycle or Turning of the Wheel, the Mahayana teachings, further developed what Buddha had already taught by strongly emphasizing compassion, mind training and attitude transformation, and the Bodhisattva Vow of striving for universal enlightenment, while adding on more devotional practices and philosophical doctrines, including the doctrine of Buddha nature, the notion of innumerable Buddhas and Buddhiverses, as well as the vital doctrine of sunyata (emptiness) and the illusory nature of reality.

The Mahayana sutras were written and transmitted in Sanskrit, the sophisticated, highly venerated Indian “Language of the Gods.” Among these are the Heart Sutra, on the subject of the about ultimate reality (Sunyata: emptiness), said to be spoken by the Buddha to his monks and nuns when he appeared in the guise of Avalokiteshvara on Vulture Peak in Rajgir, several miles from Bodh Gaya. I will never forget my first visit to Vulture’s Peak with my guru, the late meditation master Venerable Kalu Rinpoche, in January of 1974; it was as if the Buddha in the form of Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva (The Buddha of Compassion) was still sitting there, radiating teachings and blessings. During that visit, Vipassana master U Goenka and Fuji Gururji of Japan were also there, so there were many enlightening ones present.

We also have in Sanskrit the Diamond Sutra, the Lotus Sutra, the Flower Garland Sutra, and many others taught and transmitted in this mystical fashion. So that’s what “appearing in the guise of various other forms or meditational deities” means. If you read the Heart Sutra, a classic sutra of Buddhism, you’ll see it says, “Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, when practicing deeply the transcendental wisdom, prajna paramita, perceived that all five skandhas (or components of individuality) are empty, and was liberated from all suffering and confusion.” That great sutra was spoken by Avalokiteshvara-- Buddha appearing in the form of Avalokiteshvara, that is-- on Vulture Peak, where the Buddha himself had meditated during his earthly life. This is one example of a Mahayana sutra. There are many other sublime sutras, which I would recommend for your study and reflection, including the Surangama Sutra, the Lankavatara Sutra, the Diamond Sutra, and the Vimalakirti Nirveda Sutra.



The Third Turning of the Wheel is the Vajrayana, or resultant vehicle, which takes the power of nirvana as path, using the result as path. Vajrayana explains how to achieve perfect Buddhahood in a single lifetime through the assistance of a guru combined with spiritual practice. We find in the Vajrayana teachings on innate Buddha-nature, the Clear Light, and pure perceptions, as well as many other tantric practices.

The Vajrayana scriptures came down to us as the tantras. The tantras were received through visions and revelations, or from higher spiritual epiphanies and realizations. Many, including the seventeen Dzogchen tantras, were received in secret “twilight” languages like Dakini script (Devanagiri), rather than Pali or Sanskrit. The tantras include a whole array of teachings on the nondual teachings of Mahamudra and Dzogchen, as well as teachings on such topics as Kalachakra, bardo, dream yoga, tantric energy yoga, visionary practices, and the rainbow light body.



Though Dzogchen is part of the Vajrayana in general terms, it’s also complete and coherent as a system in and unto itself. In the Tibetan Buddhist scheme of the four progressive Turnings of the Wheel, Dzogchen is separated out from the rest of the Vajrayana, into the Fourth Turning. Dzogchen means Innate Great Perfection or Natural Great Completeness. It is the highest teaching of the Nyingmapa ("Ancient") School of Tibetan Buddhism. The Dzogchen tradition is comprised of the teachings of nondual, innate Buddha-ness, which directly introduce and unveil the true nature of mind (innate awareness, or rigpa in Tibetan). This Fourth Turning comes mainly from the tantras, as well as from termas, which are the hidden teachings of Padma Sambhava, his disciple Yeshe Tsogyel, and other teachers who secreted them in various ways for future generations. Termas are “The Hidden Teachings of Tibet,” as contemporary Buddhist teacher and scholar Tulku Thondup calls them; they include the numerous splendid visions, revelations, and initiation cycles written down by such enlightened masters as Longchenpa and Jigme Lingpa of the Nyingmapa lineage. It is interesting and remarkable to note that some of our own recent teachers, such as Dudjom Rinpoche, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, Kangyur Rinpoche and others have in our own time uncovered terma revelations. They thus join the 108 Tertons of Tibet (revealers of hidden teachings) chronicled by the nineteenth century saint and Rime (nonsectarian practice lineage) master and saint Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche as part of the Terton (treasure-master) lineage.



The Nyingmapa school of Tibetan Buddhism breaks Buddhist teachings out from the typical Tibetan scheme of the Three Yanas ("Hinayana", Mahayana, and Vajrayana) into the Nine Yanas (Nine Vehicles of Teaching and Practice). The first and second of the Yanas correspond to the First and Second Turnings of the Wheel, the Theravada and Mahayana cycles. The Vajrayana, the Third Turning, is further broken out into the six Tantrayanas, going from external tantra where you visualize the meditational archetype or deity in front of you and receive blessings and empowerment from them; to the internal Tantras, where you realize yourself as the deity--visualizing yourself as Tara, Manjushri, Buddha, or whoever the archetype is. Finally, there are the non-dual Tantras, where every arising in your mind is recognized as the spontaneous display of Buddha mind, or the innate deity-ness. So there are the outer, inner, and non-dual Tantras.

In the Nine Yana scheme of the Tibetan commentators, Dzogchen, or Ati Yoga Tantra in Sanskrit, is the Ninth or ultimate yana. "Ati" means peak or summit. That's why the Dalai Lama, who himself studied Dzogchen with my own guru the late great Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, calls it "the practice of Buddhas." It is rigpa (Buddha-mind, Dharmakaya) practice, not mind practice such as concentration or visualization.



Despite this division of Buddhism into the different traditions, again, we should not consider these as hard and fast categories. We can certainly find elements of each path in the Buddhist traditions of most Asian countries; and in Buddhism in the West, these classifications and compartmentalizations are blurring around the edges, as many Americans and Europeans practice in and learn from more than one tradition and pursue the Buddhist path of enlightenment through the Three Trainings common to all schools and traditions of Buddhism--sila (ethical self-discipline), samadhi (meditation and mindfulness), and prajna (wisdom and love training). Many learn mindfulness here, chanting there, and receive empowerments or study Buddhist philosophy elsewhere.

Root of the Bodhi Tree: The Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path

Despite the incredible variety of scriptures, practices, languages, cultures, and approaches, we find at the core of all the traditions of Buddhism the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. As the Dalai Lama said, "There is no Buddhism without the Four Noble Truths. If you want to know Buddhism, you must know the Four Noble Truths." These are the basic teachings of Buddhism, the Buddha's own teachings, which comprise the fundamentals of

all the schools. If you keep them in mind, you can begin to understand the essence of the various forms of Buddhism found in different countries-- Tibetan, Japanese, Burmese, Thai, and so on. Wherever you go, and whatever you study, you'll find these vital teachings and principles as the backbone of Buddhist training, no matter how different the forms and approaches. This is laid out in the Table of Contents of my book *Awakening the Buddha Within*.

The Four Noble Truths are the facts of life from a Buddhist perspective. The first truth is called dukkha or dissatisfaction: it states that unenlightened life is difficult, unsatisfying, and fraught with struggle and anxiety. The second truth states the cause of dukkha, which is craving-attachment, stemming from ignorance into the nature of reality. These first two are known collectively in Tibetan Buddhism as the "Truths to be known;" the third and fourth truths are known collectively as the Truths to be practiced, experienced, and realized. The third truth is that the cessation of dukkha is possible, and this end is liberation, nirvana or enlightenment-- bliss and inner freedom. Finally, the fourth truth is the path to the cessation of dukkha--the Noble Eightfold Path, which forms the backbone of the entire way of awakening.

The Eightfold Path is to be practiced through the Three Trainings of ethics training (sila); meditation and mindfulness training, (samadhi); and wisdom and love training (prajna). These three trainings are the tripod-like base that supports all the Buddhist practices on the path of enlightened living.

Ethics training, or sila (literally: "cooling") includes self-discipline, morality, virtue, unselfishness, service, and so on. Mindfulness training includes the intentional cultivation of self-observation and awareness, training the attention and concentration, presence of mind, and meditation training. The third training, prajna, means wisdom, discrimination, and discernment. I like to say wisdom (truth) and love, for completeness' sake, since truth and love, or wisdom and compassion, are inseparable. So sila, samadhi and prajna are the three fundamental ways we train and develop ourselves on the spiritual path. The Three Trainings are actually put into practice through the Eightfold Path.

Wisdom Training is broken out into the first and second practices of the Eightfold Path: (1)Wise View: seeing things as they are, not as they ain't, and (2)Wise Intentions, including unselfishness and the like. Ethics Training consists of the next three: (3)Wise Speech, (4)Wise Action, and (5)Wise Livelihood or wise vocation-making a life, not just a living. Meditation Training is broken out into the practices of (6)Wise Effort, which means appropriate and balanced effort rather than compulsive drive, workaholism or spiritual materialism; (7)Wise Attention, or mindfulness and presence of mind; and (8)Wise Concentration, or focus. This is

the entire Eightfold Path, laid out for practice and training. This is the path to enlightenment, according to Buddhism.

Different Emphases, Many Practices

The Buddhist traditions have developed different emphases and means to practice these most fundamental teachings. The Theravada relies upon the original sutras, in which we find ways of cultivating our spiritual nature and purifying and transforming ourselves and our lives. The emphasis is mostly on renouncing samsara, realizing the defects and the limits of unenlightened worldly life—that it is unsatisfying and unfulfilling in the long run. The teaching is practicing the path that leads us from here, in samsara, to there, nirvana. It's a dualistic, developmental path, leading over the course of many lifetimes from here in samsara to the so-called “other shore” of nirvana. The path is seen as like a bridge across troubled waters, to a nirvanic paradise, like a raft that can carry us across the dangerous, boiling ocean of samsara to the tranquil, safe, and serene continent of nirvana.

Practices center on renunciation and simplicity, quieting and concentrating the mind, and cultivating virtue and contentment. One practice is that of the Four Immeasurables or Four Boundless (“Brahma Viharas”), which is a way of contemplatively cultivating lovingkindness and compassion, love, joy, forgiveness, and detachment, and opening up our good heart and nobility of mind. In terms of self-discipline, we find the Five Training Precepts or basic lay vows (refraining from killing, lying, stealing, sexual misconduct and intoxication); the Eight Precepts; the Thirty-five Precepts for novice monastics, and the 253 vows for fully ordained monks and 364 vows for fully ordained nuns.



The core of the Mahayana approach is the Bodhisattva vow, the wish for universal liberation, and the cultivation of Bodhicitta, the awakened Buddhist heart, which my own master Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche always called “the luminous heart of the Dharma.” The emphasis is very much on compassion and service, helping others while awakening ourselves through the practice of the Six Perfections or Six Transcendental Virtues (Paramitas). The Mahayana teaches the *inseparability* of samsara and nirvana—or S and N, as I like to call it just to keep things light. This implies that nirvana is found within samsara—that peace and freedom, or enlightenment, is available and accessible here and now, not just elsewhere or in another lifetime. This was a radical development of Buddhist thought and practice, which arose several centuries after the Buddha's time.

Mahayana spiritual life is based on the Three Trainings of the Eightfold Path, and further developed through the Six Perfections, the living principles practiced by the Bodhisattva, the awakening spiritual being. These Six Perfections are six transcendental virtues: generosity (dana paramita); ethics (sila paramita); patience and forbearance (kshanti paramita); effort, diligence, and courage (virya paramita); meditation and mindfulness (dhyana paramita); and wisdom and discernment (prajna paramita). These are the main practice of the Bodhisattvas, the code of the awakening spiritual seeker.

The Mahayana preserves and upholds the monastic and lay vows, but the main emphasis is on the Bodhisattva vows. There are eighteen Bodhisattva vows, the main vow being selflessness or unselfishness, including the aspirational vow to awaken oneself in order ultimately to effect the awakening of all.



Vajrayana is the path of skillful means, which is why it is called the “Sangak Dorje Tekpa” or “Secret Mantra Vajrayana.” Vajrayana is the resultant vehicle, which reveals that Buddha nature (tathagatagarbha) is innate and can be heard from and utilized through practices of purification and invocation and evocation. Central practices include ngondro (foundational practices); guru yoga; empowerment, transmission, and pith instructions; kye-rim and dzog-rim visualization; the Six Yogas; Mahamudra; and many more. Vajrayana utilizes many powerful means for dismantling delusion, and it is considered both risky and extraordinarily effective and fast. It’s much less risky to be a virtuous monk avoiding the seamier sides of life and practicing mindfulness than it is to be a non-dual Tantric practitioner risking passionate practices that might propel us to enlightenment yet also might distract us while we’re trying to integrate everything into the path. This is one reason a teacher is considered important in the Vajrayana: to help guide us through the risks and facilitate swift spiritual progress.

In the Theravada, enlightenment is seen as a process over many lifetimes, through the Four Stages of Awakening, stream-enterer and so on, up to Arhat. Likewise in the Mahayana, where the practitioner progresses through the Ten Bhumis (Levels) of the Bodhisattva to reach full Buddhahood. In the Vajrayana, the promise is to reach siddhi-spiritual power and ability far beyond that of mortal men and women in one lifetime. That’s the promise of the Vajrayana: Enlightenment in one lifetime. Tantrayana or Vajrayana is said by Tibetans to be like a rocket ship, not just an ordinary earthly conveyance. One can use the intense energies of tantric practice like rocket fuel propellant, which can drive one’s spiritual development if skillfully utilized, or can burn us up if mistakenly applied. Another image of tantra likens it to alchemy, in

which poison can be used as medicine, as in inoculation-an extremely effective but tricky business.

The vows in the Vajrayana are the tantric samaya bonds. Tantric bonds and commitments bind us to reality, to truth, to the natural state... things just as they are. These do not lead us to the other shore, so that we might get there one day, or in the next life, in the Pure Lands, the Buddha-fields, or the heavens. The efficacy of the path depends upon a radical disassembling of our illusions and projections, which is accomplished through the force of tantric samaya, especially that which binds together guru and disciple through many lifetimes.

Tantric samaya bind us to pure vision, to sacred vision, seeing the Buddha in everyone and everything right now. Sacred outlook or sacramental vision, which entirely transforms our perception of things, is one of the main practices of the Vajrayana. It swiftly helps us to perceive everything as part of the radiant, luminous mandala (hologram) of completeness, wholeness, oneness. Keeping your samaya is extraordinarily profound, powerful, and efficacious. This is where initiations, guru yoga, pure vision, and faith and devotion come into play as skillful means.

Tantric samaya is not well understood among Western Buddhists, I feel, although it is one of the cornerstones of Tibetan Buddhism and plays a significant role in Vajrayana practice. It is traditionally taught that in order to be able to undertake tantric practices one needs the transmission of “wang”, “lhung” and “trid”-empowerment, oral transmission, and instructions; and furthermore, one needs the transmission of “gyud”, “lhung” and “mengak”-tantra, authorization/energy transmission, and oral pith-instructions. When people participate in an initiation or empowerment ceremony with a lama, they are committing themselves to certain tantric samaya, such as practicing the sadhana (tantric meditation) daily, reciting the mantra a certain number of times, committing themselves to that lama as a teacher, and so forth.

These commitments vary depending on the lama and particular empowerment, and they should not be undertaken lightly. My late teacher Urgyen Tulku Rinpoche used to joke that people today are receiving so many empowerments with blessed ritual objects being placed upon their heads that their heads were getting flat!

Tantric samaya include many subtle levels of commitment, including practicing pure perception and sacred outlook, which involves learning to see everything and everyone as like deities in mandalas or Buddhas in perfect Buddhiverses, not in the ordinary way we usually perceive people and things in our quotidian world. This is an advanced Vajrayana practice, which includes seeing your guru and vajra master as a perfect Buddha, as well as seeing our

spiritual brothers and sisters in a similar light. This helps transform our experience of both the world and ourselves. We learn to look into the mirror of emptiness, and see Buddha there.

Other tantric samaya include practicing non-discrimination and non-judging. One way in which these principles are expressed is in the vow not to look down on and disparage other religions. Another samaya is not to look down on women, which is remarkable since this precept dates back to ancient times, not just to the last hundred years and the arising of the Women's Movement.

The holy siddha Tilopa, the crazed Bengali riverbank yogi of old, sang, "He who keeps tantric vows, yet discriminates, betrays the spirit of samaya vow." So if you think there's clean and unclean, as many of us do, then that betrays the spirit of samaya, of non-discrimination, of pure perception/sacred outlook.

Our Tradition: Dzogchen Practice and "Samaya"

Longchenpa, the greatest Dzogchen master of Tibet, in the 14th century sang:

Since things are perfect just as they are,
far beyond good and bad, adopting and rejecting,
one might as well burst out laughing.

That is why the traditional Dzogchen teachings talk about the Twelve Great Laughs of the Primordial Buddha: there is plenty to laugh about!

In Dzogchen there is a great deal of emphasis on naturalness and spontaneity, authenticity, openness, joy, and lightness. These qualities imply a levity, a sense of the cosmic absurdity of things, which suffuses the Dzogchen teaching and practice with a delightful buoyancy. That is why they are termed in Tibetan as the Luminous Innate Great Perfection, or Swift and Comfy Dzogchen teachings and pith-instructions.

Dzogchen itself is always explained according to the Three Vital Points of View (outlook), Meditation (practice), and Action (conduct). The View is seeing things as they are, in all their radiant purity and perfection. The Meditation is called non-meditation, for it emphasizes being more than doing--"resting in the View," in technical terms. Having glimpsed even once how things are, perfect and of one wholly complete nature, then we can let them be as they are, free from pushing and pulling, or attachment-desire and aversion-aggression. The simple and subtle Dzogchen Meditation of getting used to that View is called non-meditation-- in other words, not so much do-ing as Be-ing. Sometimes in meditation we get involved in many do-ings; here, the meditation is more about be-ing. And then from that naturally evolves the Action-

-not pre-meditated, compulsive karmic action, but pro-active, spontaneous Buddha activity, appropriate to needs and circumstances. One's conduct in life becomes not mere habitual, conditioned, karmic activity, which is more often mere reactivity, but pro-active, spontaneous, helpful, unimpeded Buddha activity.

That is why my own late guru Nyoshul Khenpo Rinpoche always stressed these three pithy instructions for meditation practice:

'Not doing;
not constructing or fabricating;
and not-distracted.'

In the Dzogchen practice path we practice this non-dual approach, introducing and realizing our own original, inherent, immanent Buddha nature-our intrinsic Buddha-ness. This is not just your own personal Buddha nature, but transpersonal spiritual nature. Not your own thoughts and meditation, but Dzogchen meditation, which is natural meditation, since it relies more on being and on resting in the View than on doing and becoming something other than what you are. Dzogchen is not conceptual contemplation or fabricated, mental meditation; nor is it concentrating one-pointedly so that later we can gain insights and eventually realize enlightenment. Dzogchen is about realizing the inherent freedom and perfection of being in itself, as it is right now, which can be experienced as the inherent completeness of our true nature, our Buddha nature. Awakening to that is the direct path of Dzogchen. That is why Dzogchen masters say that we are all Buddhas by nature; we just have to recognize that fact.

Dzogchen can't really be taught or learned from books; it can't be taught, but it can be caught; it can be transmitted and realized. This is where transmission, through connection with an authentic master, comes in. In order to realize enlightenment through the path of Dzogchen, it is traditionally taught and emphasized that one needs an authentic and qualified lineage-holding master to introduce one to the Dzogchen View, Meditation, and Action. All Dzogchen masters stress this essential point, which distinguishes the Mahamudra and Dzogchen tradition from some of the other, non-Vajrayana Buddhist vehicles, in which the teacher and transmission is far less stressed. Some of us emphasize the role of the teacher a little less today, so as to simplify the entry process for Western students, demystify some of the terms and stages, and provide more direct access to the profound depths of our practice tradition. But for those of us with the karmic affinity, inclination, and opportunity to benefit by that unique relationship, the spiritual teacher plays a vital role in our path of awakening.

In the Dzogchen tradition specifically, one needs to be empowered to practice the three main Dzogchen practices of Ru-shen (Subtle Discernment); Trekchod ("Cutting Through, or

Seeing Through); and Togonal (Leap Over, or Being There). Trekchod is mainly what I teach at my Dzogchen Center and its intensive meditation retreats, along with the supportive practices of chanting, sitting, self-inquiry, and Mahayana attitude-transformation (lo-jong), and lovingkindness and compassion meditations (such as Chenrayzig and Tara practices).

We don't really talk much in terms of vows and samaya in Dzogchen, because the principle is to stabilize your realization of the View; if you're in the View, you're in accordance with your own true nature, which is Buddha nature. In Dzogchen the commitment is to the subtle, profound, mystical principles of enlightened vision such as "one-taste" (tse-chik) and "beyond-action" (ja-drel). Ja-drel or "free from action and inaction" is similar to wu-wei in Taoism and Zen, which means nonaction or beyond striving—that is, beyond action and also beyond inaction. Thus we have the famous Dzogchen notion of Buddhahood without meditation—the title of one of Dudjom Lingpa's books. Another way of putting it is, Buddha nature does not depend on our cultivation of it. Buddha nature is innate, inherent, immanent in us. It's our true original nature. It doesn't depend on our construction projects, on building a bridge across the ocean of samsara to get to "the other shore". Buddha nature is human nature, as Zen master Suzuki Roshi put it in his classic *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. When you become truly you, then Buddha becomes Buddha, and zen becomes true zen. Until then, it is all fabrication. Dzogchen thought reminds us that we may feel far from It, but It is never far from us.

Another way of talking about Dzogchen samaya--about commitment to reality as it truly is beyond our projections--is in terms of the Four Rivets of the View and the Two Principles of Dzogchen. The Four Rivets of the View are: medpa (not-a-thing), chikphu (oneness, coherence), chelwa (all-pervasiveness), and lhundrup (spontaneous presence or perfect manifestation). These are qualities of the View, and studying and experiencing them allows us to recognize when we're deviating from it.

The Two Principles of Dzogchen--which, incidentally, are not written about much in English--are kadak, or Primordial Purity, and lhundrup, or Spontaneous Perfection/Perfect Manifestation-Appearance. Kadak means primordial purity, or primordial perfection--pure and immaculate from the beginningless beginning; this introduces the radiant perfection of things as they are, as well as the immaculate wholeness and spiritual splendor of our innate true nature. Lhundrup means that this blessed reality is spontaneously present and perfectly manifesting every moment unimpededly, throughout inconceivable Buddhiverses of time and space. In other words, the teaching is that our true nature is primordially empty, open and void (sunyata),

groundless, and not-a-thing, while it's also primordially manifesting its perfect and boundless, spontaneous splendor as everyone and everything, and as any and every form and occurrence. In this splendid, overarching View, everything is It.

This ultimate teaching about absolute truth or reality builds upon the Mahayana notions of the inseparability of form and emptiness, samsara and nirvana. From the Mahayana scriptures, The Heart Sutra of Transcendental Wisdom says: "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form. Form is no other than emptiness, emptiness shapes up as form." This unified vision theory helps us awaken to the stunning mystical fact that the sublime and the mundane, the sacred and the profane, are inseparable--not necessarily one, but not two either. Accordingly, in the ultimate teaching about absolute reality, its purity, completeness, and perfection are emphasized. This is the conceptual, Buddhological support for practical cultivation of the pure perception or sacramental vision that everything is Buddha-ness, everyone is Buddha by nature, and everything is essentially radiant luminosity. What an amazing and marvelous way to experience the world, to the extent that we can learn to do so authentically!

This luminous View of the Natural Great Perfection transcends the dualism of perfect and imperfect. It implies that everything is primordially complete as is, and uninhibitedly, inexhaustibly, spontaneously manifesting. We don't have to inhibit, alter, or adulterate anything in our experience; we can simply appreciate it as it is, and make more wise and informed decisions about how skillfully to work with things according to conditions and circumstances. We don't have to try to become perfect or stop thinking and feeling--not to mention try to make others change according to our own notions of how they could or should be! The nature of the mind is primordially perfect as it is, and all its myriad manifestations are as well--thoughts, feelings, perceptions, memories, or whatever arises in the body-mind complex.

This understanding has tremendous implications for our meditation practice and helps develop, deepen, and eventually stabilize our View, our Meditation, and our Action. When we realize the immaculate, primordial perfection of things, we do not fall into perfectionism nor become oblivious to what needs to be done or what is broken and in need of repair, either internally or externally. Realizing the View of natural perfection, wholeness, and completeness *naturally* results in the uninhibited outflow of spontaneous, selfless, proactive Buddha activity. Compassionate responsiveness naturally springs from recognizing the View of things as they are; in fact, there is less of oneself to get in the way of unconditional loving responsiveness, according to needs and circumstances. The inner sun of wisdom--the View--naturally radiates its boundless rays of warm lovingkindness and service to all, everywhere, without bias.

Who Am I and Where Am I?: Approaches from the different traditions

Part of the magic of Buddha's teaching is that each and every part of it contains the entirety, and leads to liberation. If you consider any major theme of the Buddha's teachings, you can find Dzogchen addresses it within the simple formula of the Dzogchen View, Meditation and Action. To illustrate this, I want to look at the question "Who am I?" or "What is identity?" or "What is the nature of self?" and briefly lay out how each of the Buddhist traditions would philosophically approach its answer.

The original teachings of Theravada characterize the nature of what we conventionally experience through our projections as "self" as anatman, or "not-self." Anatman means there is no independently existing, permanent, separate entity or self. Upon close inspection and introspection, no eternal, independent, separate, concrete entity or identity such as an eternal soul or self can be found. Lord Buddha taught that our body, our mind, our sense of self, and our consciousness--just like external phenomena--are impermanent (anicca), selfless and unowned, (anatta), and unreliable or unsatisfying in the long run, (dukkha). These three facts of life from a Buddhist perspective help us realize upon examination that all things are fleeting, transitory, and insubstantial, and therefore not in the long run worth over-investing in or holding on to too much. This understanding leads to non-attachment, as we learn to let go of that which is in any case slipping through our fingers. This letting go of clinging and grasping alleviates the irritating sense of rope burn we experience from holding on too tight.

In the Mahayana, the ultimate nature of self and reality as unowned, ungraspable, and selfless is expanded into the concept of sunyata. Sunyata really means "not-a-thing-ness"—that things are not what we think they are. Sunyata is one of the most difficult Buddhist concepts to comprehend--a great mystery into which one can delve both through the study of Buddhist logical philosophy (Madhyamika) as well as through meditation practice. Sunyata as the nature of reality means infinite openness as much as emptiness. The Mahayana characterizes our true nature as sunyata-intangible, open, and infinite. The Heart Sutra says, "All things are characterized by emptiness. They are not born, not destroyed, not tainted or dirty, not pure, beyond gain, beyond loss." In the Mahayana, the notion of sunyata and karuna (compassion) are spoken of as inseparable.

In the Vajrayana, the nature of identity is characterized in terms of the inseparability of emptiness and blissful awareness or luminosity. It's a little subtler and more non-dual in Vajrayana pure vision, so that not even compassion or the aspiration for enlightenment is as much emphasized. In the Vajrayana practice of pure perception, we recognize ourselves and all

beings as Buddhas by nature, and as inseparable. That is why Buddha said that when he was enlightened, all were enlightened.

In the Vajrayana perspective, there is less doing and saving all beings than in the Bodhisattva Path with its marvelous Six Perfections. This is because pure vision is a reflection of the inconceivable, unconditional grace of being or the naturally divine state just as it is: things are perfect--in the sense of being complete and naturally unfolding--just as they are, according to the mandala (holograph) principle. Through the direct experience of the non-duality of everyone and everything, we see that everything fits, perfectly coherently. In this sacred vision, we recognize that everything is a perfect part of the lawful karmic unfolding, and that all beings are like Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, dakas and dakinis, gods and angels on the altar that is this Earth. According to the mandala principle of Tantrayana, every part of the mandala *is* the center. There is nowhere to go and nothing to get that is not already present within our own true nature. Of course, we must truly experience pure vision, not just say it or cognize it, and so Vajrayana has a multitude of practices for cultivating it and purifying the karmic patterns that obscure its recognition. The Vajrasattva practice with its one-hundred-syllable purification mantra is one of the most important.

From the perspective of Dzogchen, the reality of our own identity is beyond even the views of selflessness and sunyata. Dzogchen scriptures say that we're all Buddhas by nature; we just have to recognize that fact, and realize it through and through. In this mystical practice tradition, we learn to intuit directly the nature of self and stabilize that realization. This is what awakening, or bodhi, is all about: awakening to who and what we truly are.



Each of these multiple levels of Dharma teachings has the single savor of liberation, as Buddha said in his teachings on Ekayana. Each is a gateway into realizing the others. Not one of them leads anywhere except to purification and transformation, to freedom from conceptualization, and to the ultimate realization of deathless ease and peace--nirvana, "the sure heart's release", as it says in the original scriptures.

For example, through contemplating impermanence alone and fathoming the ephemeral nature of things, we can experience the truth of not-self and the dissatisfactory nature of all fleeting things. Buddha himself said that Death was his guru, his greatest teacher; he said that meditating and reflecting on death and impermanence, and especially one's own mortality, is the greatest meditation. Through realizing anicca (impermanence) we can realize enlightenment. Likewise, through realizing not-self (no governor, no owner), we can realize enlightenment; we

can realize anicca, impermanence, and dukkha, the dissatisfactoriness of all phenomena and noumena. All conditioned things are impermanent, unreliable, off the mark, and therefore ultimately unsatisfying. Each of these teachings is transparent to and leads toward realization of the others.

Similarly, if we realize sunyata, or the great openness, ungraspability, and emptiness of things through the Mahayana practice path, we'll realize selflessness, and we'll realize that we are not who we think we are, which is profoundly liberating. When we realize selflessness and the true nature of reality as our own authentic identity, compassion naturally springs forth for those who labor under illusion about it and thereby greatly suffer. Through realizing sunyata, one realizes selflessness and compassion, understands karma, and directly cognizes how things happen.

Ekayana: The common ground

Here in the West, we come down often to One Dharma or Ekayana. Of course, the three great traditions and the various schools, sects, and lineages will remain in some form. But the emphasis in practice and retreat centers is on meditative practices, mindfulness, and virtue, whether through the basic Vipassana practices of choiceless awareness and bare attention; the basic Zen practice of just-sitting (shikantaza), resting in the original mind; or the practice of Mahamudra and Dzogchen, where the emphasis is on natural mind or natural meditation. We can see the common ground here of all three though engaging in the practice tradition. The essence, when you boil all the Foundations of Mindfulness and all the Zen koans and stories, and the Vajrayana too, comes down to the practice and the realization of our true nature-of finally reaching unshakable, authentic experience of innate Buddha nature. This is awakening-- the sole purpose and goal of all Buddhist practice.

The Buddha taught One Vehicle, liberating in the beginning, middle, and end, regardless of the particular form of the practices. Many of us practice in different traditions, and we rub shoulders with each other, with Dharma centers on every other corner of major cities, especially on the East and West coasts of America. This is American karma; there a great melting pot of Dharma unfolding here, a non-sectarian contemporary Dharma. Of course, each school and lineage preserve the specialties of each of their different traditions; yet, it is easy for us to practice and learn together and thus recognize the common ground that we all share as students of our teacher, the enlightened Buddha.

If we get too caught up in the forms of practice, we can get confused, thinking: How long I should do my concentration and how long my prayers and chants? Or, How long should I do

my Zen, and how long should I do my Dzogchen, and how long should I do my yoga each morning during my meditation session? More to the point would be simply to practice the luminous heart of the Dharma that *is* the luminous heart of the Dharma, in each session. Practice is perfect; just do it. The simple cultivation of awareness in the present moment that is taught at the core of each of these three great streams eventually meets in the sea of Ekayana, or One Dharma.

As I've pointed out, this notion of the common ground goes back to Sakyamuni Buddha. Within our Tibetan Buddhist tradition, this notion of nonsectarianism and appreciation for the different schools has a history going back to the great nonsectarian masters of the 19th century. Tibetans call this approach Rimé, meaning unbiased or impartial. The Dalai Lama often stresses this ecumenical approach as invaluable for our time. Rimé comes from understanding each of the traditions and practices in their own light. It is not that it's all simply blended together into one homogenized soup, but that we recognize and understand the common ground and intent of all the teachings as emerging from Buddha's wisdom mind. Thus, we begin to intuitively comprehend that each and every Buddhist teaching and practice is directed towards bringing us back to that: they are various means and different approaches suitable for different kinds of beings in a multitude of times and places, all with the same end. This is a simple point, actually, but it needs to be stressed, for sometimes we all feel as if we are lost in a dense thicket of teachings and doctrines, and can't find the sunlit clearing at the center of it all, or feel the warm sun of Dharma through the dense foliage.

Each Dharma teaching has its own distinct specialties and emphases, and is preserved, practiced, or understood in its own unique way, according to its own tradition. According to Tibetan commentators, there are different kinds and levels of teachings for different kinds of beings, who have varying capacities, affinities, aptitudes, and inclinations. That is why we see such a variation among strands of Buddhism, not only externally in the various Buddhist languages and cultures, colors and styles of robes, rituals, chants, altars, and iconography, but also in often noticeably different styles of behavior, practice, and even cosmology and philosophy. This variation was once astonishing to me, but now I see this abundance of Dharma customs and traditions as like the many patches of cloth out of which the Buddha's own robe was woven--or like the many multicolored strands of one single, marvelous tapestry.

My own beloved late teacher Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, who served as the Dalai Lama's Dzogchen teacher, used to say that when he taught the Sakyapas, he taught in the Sakyapa way, just as he had received it from his Sakyapa gurus and just as he himself had practiced and realized it; and when he taught the Kagyus or Nyingmas, he taught accordingly, just as he had

received the teachings from his own Kagyu and Nyingma gurus, without mixing or adulteration. This is truly nonsectarian Dharma-learning from all, recognizing the common ground, but being careful to preserve the precious particular ways of practicing and transmitting means to realizing it. I try to follow that example today, in my own teaching and practice, within my own limits. The important thing, I have found, is to stay true to one's own experience.

In our own lineage we have countless inspiring stories about how these radiant teachings came down through the Tibetan Rimé masters of the 19th century, including Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, the Jamgon Kongtrul the Great, Choling Rinpoche, and Mipham Rinpoche, all of whom intentionally studied, practiced, taught, and transmitted together all the extant practices and lineages of the numerous schools of Buddhism in Tibet and sparked a spiritual renaissance when lassitude and degeneration had begun to creep in. From those four great Rimé lamas of Tibet, the lineage reaches us today through great masters of our day, including the Sixteenth Gyalwa Karmapa, Kyabje Kalu Rinpoche, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, Deshung Rinpoche, Nyoshul Khenpo Rinpoche, Ugyen Tulku Rinpoche, Sakya Trichen, Thrangu Rinpoche, Jatral Rinpoche, Tenga Rinpoche, and many others, exemplified by the most visible of them all, the great Fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet, Tenzin Gyatso.

I first encountered such appreciation and nonsectarian Rimé spirit in my own first lama, the Gelugpa geshe (abbot) Lama Thubten Yeshe, perhaps the first lama to teach Westerners in India and Nepal. He was from the great Gelugpa Sera Monastery in Lhasa, and later Kopan Monastery in Nepal; founder of Wisdom Publications and the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT); and the guru and surrogate father of Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche. Lama Yeshe taught in the nonsectarian fashion; he always used to say that his two favorite Tibetan Buddhist philosophers were Tsong Khapa, founder of his Gelugpa school, and Longchenpa, the Nyingma Dzogchen master and scholar. He inspired in many of us a great love and respect for all great Dharma traditions.

All this wealth of Buddhist wisdom and experience comes down through these Tibetan masters and their disciples to us today in an unbroken lineage transmission, for which we must remain forever grateful. Now many of them have passed on and again taken birth to continue their work in this world, and so we have their reincarnates, like the Seventeenth Karmapa, who just recently escaped from Tibet to India at age fifteen. In this way the living flame of enlightenment continues to be passed on, as if from torch to torch, from Sakyamuni Buddha until our time today.

The Rimé outlook helps us understand that it is all one Dharma, Ekayana, and to grok the common ground as well as the differences. I think that's the essence of inter-faith dialogue:

understanding the common ground *and* the differences. Therefore the Rimé or non-sectarian approach is very important. My own teachers, like Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, the Dalai Lama, Nyoshul Khenpo, Kalu Rinpoche, Tulku Pema Wangyal, and Deshung Rinpoche, always emphasized this non-sectarian approach of Rimé.

This nonsectarian approach is one of the best ways to preserve all the various traditions of Buddhism, in our own time and place, where they all exist side by side on one city street, for the first time in history. With Buddhism still fairly new in this country, I don't think we need to import sectarian bias and dogma along with Dharma, although I sense it has already begun to infect us. We could be more aware of this kind of problem, so we better understand what we are doing, how, and why. No matter our looks, practices, or philosophy, we as Buddhists share a common teacher and fundamental teachings. We must maintain some level of mutual understanding, friendliness and respect; if we don't pull together, we will probably pull ourselves apart. There is no real need to criticize teachings and teachers, nor much benefit in it, for ourselves or for the longevity and purity of the noble Dharma.



It is both interesting and helpful to see how all the teachings fit together and come down to us, especially as exemplified by the wonderful living teachers we have today from the various Asian traditions and countries, all of whom are represented among the twenty five hundred Buddhist centers in North America.

We have all the Buddhist traditions, teachers, and teachings, like an inexhaustible mine of wisdom for us to explore. We can and must find our own place for practice and spiritual growth in the vast and abundant landscape of Dharma. What we actually do with this mine of wisdom makes all the difference.



For further study and reflection:

For a complete history of Buddhism and its three yantras, and the Nyingmapa explication of the Nine Yantras evolved from them, study Dudjom Rinpoche's monumental book *History and Fundamentals of the Nyingmapa*; Thinley Norbu Rinpoche's *Small Golden Key*; or Dr. Reginald Ray's *Indestructible Truth: The Living Spirituality of Tibetan Buddhism and Secret of the Vajra World: The Tantric Buddhism of Tibet*.

Teachings of the Root Vehicle, or Theravada, can be found in Buddhist classics such as *What the Buddha Taught*, by Walpola Rahula; *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, by Nyanaponika Thera; *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, by Thich Nhat Hanh, and in any of the books by the fine Insight Meditation teachers in this country including Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg, and Jack Kornfield.

You can find Mahayana teachings in English in innumerable books today by the Dalai Lama and other lamas and Tibetan scholars, as well as by many Zen masters such as Suzuki Roshi. Specifically on the Six Perfections and the Bodhisattva path are Shantideva's classic, *Entering the Path of the Bodhisattvas*, the Seven Points of Mind Training in Atisha's tradition, and all the fine books of the contemporary nun Pema Chodron. The appendix to my *Awakening the Buddhist Heart* is a translation and commentary on an ancient, timeless Tibetan text called "The Thirty Seven Practices of the Bodhisattvas," one of my favorite Tibetan texts.

Among Tibetan Buddhist classics, one cannot overlook *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*. Three of my favorite books in English from the ancient Nyingmapa tradition are *The Heart Treasure of the Enlightened Ones*, by my own late guru Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche; *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, by Patrul Rinpoche; and *Shabkar: The Autobiography of a Tibetan Yogin*. The many books of the late great Buddhist pioneer lama Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the founder of Naropa University in Boulder, also deserve to be studied and enjoyed again and again.

You can read about the principles of Dzogchen in wonderful classic books like *The Treasury of Abiding* by Longchenpa (Longchen Rabjam), or in more accessible and less abstruse modern books by Tulku Urygen Rinpoche (especially *As It Is*, volumes I and II), Tsoknyi Rinpoche, Tulku Thondup, and Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche. My late master Nyoshul Khenpo Rinpoche and I wrote a book together called *Natural Great Perfection* to explain Dzogchen. The tenth chapter, "The Innermost Essence," of Sogyal Rinpoche's *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* is also an excellent introduction to Dzogchen.

Three Vital Points of Dzogchen View, Meditation, and Action are laid out in the Tsiksum Nedek of Patrul Rinpoche. The text, along with extensive commentary, is translated into English by John Reynolds as *The Golden Letters*.

