Buddhism

A brief introduction to Tibetan Buddhism

Over the course of his lifetime, Shakyamuni Buddha, who was born in the sixth century BCE, gave an enormous number of profound teachings to huge numbers of people. From the Buddhist point of view, these teachings express the truth and offer a complete path to Enlightenment. The path is multifaceted, flexible and offers teachings and practices to suit every kind of person.

Following his death, the Buddha’s teachings flourished in India and over the next thousand years spread to many other countries such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Burma, Nepal, Thailand, Laos, China, Korea and Japan. Buddhism developed into two main schools. The Theravadin School established itself in the south, while Mahayana spread north. Vajrayana is a subdivision of the Mahayana and is widespread in Tibet. It refers to systems of practice and meditation derived from esoteric texts that emphasise complete mental transformation through visualisation, symbols, and ritual.

The first successful transmission of Buddhism into Tibet occurred in the early part of the seventh century during the reign of the Tibetan king, Songtsen Gampo, who married two Buddhist princesses; one from Nepal, the other from China. Through their influence he became a Buddhist, and by building several temples, established a foothold for Buddhism in Tibet. There was no written language in Tibet at this time, so Songtsen Gampo also sent the scholar, Tonmi Sambota, to India with instructions to create a script so that Buddhist texts could be translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan.

Over the next several centuries, Buddhism spread throughout Tibet. However, at the beginning of the eleventh century, Tibetan Buddhism was in serious decline, with misleading teachings and degenerate practices gaining popularity. In response to this, King Lhalama Yeshe O invited the great Indian scholar, Atisha (982–1054) to reintroduce the pure teachings to Tibet. At the request of the king’s nephew and successor, Jangchub O, Atisha composed a text called A Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment, which clarified all of the teachings of the Buddha.

This was the first text in a body of teachings that came to be called, in Tibetan, ‘Lam-rim’, or ‘Steps of the Path to Enlightenment’. These teachings are a logical and sequential arrangement of the Buddha’s teachings and form a training manual to lead students to the full Enlightenment of Buddhahood. The text is enriched by analogies, formal logic, amazing stories of great practitioners, quotations and detailed explanations of symbols and rituals.

In the fifteenth century a great teacher emerged called Lama Tsong Khapa. He had studied with the famous teachers from the three main traditions of the time – the Nyingma, Kagyu and Sakya schools. Lama Tsong Khapa established a new tradition, the Gelug, which soon became the prevalent school of Buddhism in Tibet. This is the school to which the Dalai Lamas would come to belong.

Following nearly 10 years of the occupation of Tibet by the Chinese Communist Army, the Dalai Lama escaped into exile in India in 1959. Tens of thousands of Tibetans fled their country to join him, and settled in India and Nepal. Recognising that Tibetan culture was in danger of extinction, Tibetan leaders began to plan for an indefinite future outside Tibet. Although most of Tibet’s monasteries were destroyed or shut down, many of their inhabitants managed to escape to India and soon began the task of recreating their monasteries there. The great Tibetan monasteries of Drepung, Sera, and Ganden, and some monasteries from the other great Tibetan lineages, have been re-established in southern India, and thousands of young monks are pursing the traditional curriculum of studies and oral debate. Female monasticism has also been revived and nuns also have much greater access to study and debate.

Ironically, as Tibetan Buddhism is being systematically destroyed in its native land, it is having a growing impact in other countries. The Tibetan Diaspora has forced hundreds of eminent teachers to leave their country, resulting in their contact with other cultures. A number of Tibetan lamas have translated the philosophy and practices of their tradition for western audiences, and a number of western practitioners have become ordained, thus establishing communities of monks and nuns in the west. In the eighth century, the great teacher Padmasambhava predicted: ‘When the iron bird flies and
horses run on wheels, the Tibetan people will be scattered like ants across the face of the earth, and the dharma will come to the land of the red men’ (Powers, 1995, p. 186).

THINKING PROMPT

Rewrite this prediction in modern English and relate it to the events that took place in Tibet in the 20th century.

The framework for the following discussions is provided by the Lam-rim teachings composed by Lama Atisha and developed by Atisha’s followers – in particular, Lama Tsong Khapa – as well as commentaries by His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and other great teachers in this lineage.

Existence

Buddha taught that our present existence is only one in a beginningless series of rebirths. Each of us has a body and mind. Our body is a physical entity made of atoms and molecules. We can see, hear, smell, taste and touch it. Our mind, however, is quite different. From the Buddhist point of view, it is not the physical organ of the brain, but is that part of us that experiences, perceives, recognises and emotionally reacts to our environment. While the body is physical in nature, the mind is formless and conscious.

Because the mind and body are separate entities, they each have separate causes. The body is material and physical; its cause is physical substance. Our body is the result of the union of the sperm and egg from our parents which develops into our physical form, grows and eventually dies.

The mind is not physical; its cause, therefore, is also not physical. Our present mind depends on the previous moment of mind. Our present thought arises from our previous thoughts. Because each moment of mind is a product of a previous moment, the cause of the mind at the moment of conception is a previous moment in that mental continuum. Thus, our mind existed before entering into this particular body and will continue to exist after the body’s death. From the Buddhist point of view we have had infinite previous lives, when our mind inhabited other bodies in the six realms of existence.
Buddha taught that living beings have been circling in this wheel of life since beginningless time, but by perfecting our wisdom and compassion we can eliminate the causes for rebirth and attain buddhahood.

**THINKING PROMPT**

How does one escape from circling in the wheel of life? What does this really mean?

**The origins and purpose of human life**

At first, Buddha was reluctant to discuss the beginning of the world because he said that people would argue about it forever, and this would not help them in their quest to find happiness and avoid suffering. Later, he explained that conscious life has always existed in a beginningless universe, and the physical world of forms was produced by previous moments of form. This understanding accords with the scientific view that our particular universe was created from subtler physical elements that, in turn, were a continuation from universes that existed before ours. In this way, we can trace the continuity of form back infinitely.

When asked about the purpose of life, his Holiness the Dalai Lama always answers that the purpose of life is to be happy. Mahayana Buddhism describes the purpose of four categories of people. The first includes those who strive solely for the happiness of this life. The second category has a purpose that looks beyond the pleasures of this life and they strive for happiness in future lives. The third category aspires to go beyond the pleasures of higher rebirths in cyclic existence to gain personal liberation or nirvana. Those with the highest purpose go beyond even the wish to attain nirvana. They seek great compassion that rejects seeking one’s own liberation and takes responsibility to help every living being to become free of suffering. In order to be fully qualified to help all beings, their aim is to achieve the state of full Enlightenment or Buddhahood. From the Mahayana Buddhist point of view, every being has the potential to become enlightened for the purpose of helping ever other living being.

**Human nature**

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has explained that if we look at basic human nature, we can see that our nature is more gentle than aggressive. If we look at various animals, we can see that ‘animals of a more peaceful nature have a corresponding body structure, whereas predatory animals have a body structure that has developed according to their nature’ (The Dalai Lama, 1995, p. 9). Compare the tiger and the deer. Because of our physical characteristics we belong to the gentle-animal category. Our fundamental human nature is shown by our basic physical structure.

Buddhism believes that as human beings we share fundamental goals; we all want happiness and do not want suffering. In this, we are no different from every other living being; animals and insects share this same basic wish, but they have no ability to consider how to achieve deeper happiness. Human beings are endowed with intelligence and discernment and have the unique ability to achieve their highest human potential.

As ordinary beings our minds contain the seeds of positive behaviour and harmful behaviour, so to achieve our greatest potential we have to completely remove all negative states of mind such as anger, resentment, greed and jealousy, and develop to the highest degree the minds of compassion, concentration and wisdom. From the Buddhist point of view, we all have the potential to become fully enlightened.
Good
Buddhism presents notions of good and evil in terms of virtuous or non-virtuous action or karma. Virtuous action refers to positive actions that bring about a beneficial long-term result. A virtuous action can only produce a positive result. For example, if we make a donation to benefit people who are starving, with an attitude of compassion and generosity, that action will be imprinted on the mind as a potential that will ripen into a similar experience in future lives. Beneficial actions arise from the minds of compassion, generosity, morality, patience, enthusiastic perseverance, concentration and wisdom.

Evil
Similarly, Buddhism describes evil as non-virtuous or harmful action which can only lead to the experience of suffering in the future. For example, if we verbally abuse another person, with an attitude of hatred and resentment, that action will be imprinted on the mind as a potential that will ripen into a similar experience for us in future lives. Underlying destructive actions are disturbing emotions or delusions such as ignorance, hatred, intolerance, greed and jealousy.

The individual, society and the community
As individuals, we have all been born on this planet as part of one human race. Whether we are rich or poor, educated or uneducated, living in the East or in the West, ultimately each of us is a human being like everyone else. We possess unique characteristics and yet we all share the same potential for engaging in positive actions to benefit others, or negative actions to cause harm.

Buddhism suggests that to maintain harmony and happiness in our families and communities, we need to transform negative mind-states such as anger, jealousy, hatred and intolerance, and cultivate positive qualities such as patience, tolerance and loving kindness. Each of us shares a responsibility to do this.

Looking at our world today, we can see that countries are inextricably connected through multinational groups, international trade, the global economy and worldwide communications. We are all affected by the serious environmental problems that our planet faces: overpopulation, degradation of the environment, pollution, global warming, and the disappearance of habitat resulting in the extinction of flora and fauna.
From the Buddhist point of view, if we are to solve the world’s problems, each one of us has to develop a greater sense of universal responsibility. We need to work not just for ourselves, our families and communities, but also for the benefit of the whole planet and all mankind. Today, events in one part of the world eventually affect the whole planet, so we have to treat each major local disaster as a global concern.

Now more than ever, universal responsibility is essential for human survival and is the foundation for world peace, protection of the environment and the equitable use of natural resources. For a more secure, happier and peaceful future, it is essential that we develop a heartfelt and sincere feeling of universal brotherhood and sisterhood.

**THINKING PROMPT**

Reflect on an example of human suffering which you have seen or read about in news reports. What kind of approach does Buddhism suggest?

**The place of reason**

In Buddhism in general, and particularly in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, it is extremely important to analyse, investigate and test the teachings. Through reason, if we find that the teaching is logical and we can apply it to our lives, then we can accept it.

At the same time, it is important to realise that there are teachings of a very subtle nature that are difficult to grasp because of their subtlety and because of our presently limited level of understanding. In such a case we may not be able to establish their validity with reason and logic at the moment. But being unable to prove them does not mean that we should discard them. In some cases we have to persevere to find further techniques or processes to understand the truth of these teachings.

**Truth**

The first teaching given by the Buddha described the four noble truths:

The first is the truth of suffering, which points out that the nature of our lives is unsatisfactory. As human beings with a body and mind we will all experience problems at one time or another. We will all suffer illness, aging and death; sometimes we won’t get what we want, and what we don’t want will come our way. Eventually our closest relationships will end through separation or death.

The second truth is the truth of the cause. Buddha recognised that suffering has causes, and he identified these causes as negative attitudes such as craving, anger, jealousy and pride and the actions that these negative attitudes motivate.

The third noble truth is the truth of cessation. It indicates that it is possible to bring all suffering to an end through overcoming negative emotions and harmful actions.

The fourth noble truth is the truth of the path, which indicates a method for training the mind to bring suffering to an end and to reach perfect happiness and peace as exemplified by the Buddha. Taken together, the four noble truths are a summary of the Buddhist path.

**Authority**

Buddhists seek guidance from three ultimate objects of refuge. The first is the Buddha, a person who has attained the perfection of wisdom and compassion, is completely free from suffering, and is, therefore, qualified to guide us to the ultimate spiritual goal of enlightenment.

The second object of refuge is Dharma, which refers generally to the teachings of the Buddha and more specifically to the true understanding of the path that leads us away from suffering to perfect happiness.
The third object of refuge is the Sangha: practitioners who have realised the teachings within their own minds and who guide others on the path to buddhahood.

The Buddha, however, advised his students not to accept his teachings on blind faith, but to test them as a goldsmith would test gold. We are encouraged to use our intelligence to test the teachings with our own wisdom and experience. A number of lamas have commented after giving public teachings, ‘If you find these teachings to be sound and useful, then put them into practice. If you don’t, then look elsewhere.’ This is the Buddhist approach; in the end it is our own decision to investigate the truth of the teachings, and in this way our beliefs will be well founded on reason.

Core values and principles
The heart of the Buddhist teachings is: If you can, help others; if you cannot, at least refrain from harming others. Within Buddhism, there are two main groups: Theravada and Mahayana. The aim of Theravada is concerned mainly with self-liberation. In Mahayana Buddhism, a greater emphasis is placed on compassion for others. This is known as Bodhicitta: ‘the desire to achieve buddhahood in order to be of greatest benefit to living beings’ and free all sentient beings from suffering. The essence of Buddhist conduct and philosophy is non-violence and the theory of interdependence; that all things are interrelated. Compassion, love, and forgiveness are essential for the creation of happiness for ourselves and every other living being.

Special characteristics compared with other religious/philosophical traditions
Mahayana Buddhism also teaches that every being with a body and mind has the potential to attain complete and perfect enlightenment by practicing the path that was taught by the Buddha. The Tibetan Buddhist path is rich in symbolism and ritual, the purpose of which is to help practitioners diminish and eventually completely abandon negative attitudes and actions on the one hand, and develop every positive quality on the other.

An example of ritual is the setting up of an altar, which reminds us of the qualities of the enlightened beings. Images of the Buddha or Buddhist deities are placed on the altar as a symbol of the Buddha’s enlightened physical form. To the Buddha’s right is a text, representing the Buddha’s enlightened speech and to his left is a bell or stupa ‘reliquary monument’, symbolising the Buddha’s enlightened mind. In the Tibetan tradition, offerings of water, flowers, incense, light, perfume, food, and music are placed in front of the Buddha. Flowers represent the qualities of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, incense is the fragrance of pure ethics, light symbolises wisdom and perfume represents confidence in the holy beings.
Stance with regard to other world views
From the Buddhist point of view, people with different mental dispositions need different religions. One religion simply cannot satisfy everyone. For a peaceful world we need to accept the value of different religions and different truths – pluralism. That they have different views and fundamental differences does not matter because all religions are meant to help in bringing about a better world. Through different philosophical explanations and approaches, all religions have the same goal, and the same potential. Every tradition works for the welfare of beings, according to their particular need. They all offer spiritual strength and transformative power, and they all promote the deepest form of love and compassion. If we study the different religions and understand their potential to produce inner transformation, we will develop genuine respect for each one.

Glossary – Buddhism

Bodhicitta: the desire to achieve buddhahood in order to be of greatest benefit to living beings.
Bodhisattva: a person who strives to attain enlightenment in order to free all sentient beings from suffering.
Buddha: a fully enlightened being. ‘The Buddha’ refers to Shakyamuni Buddha, who lived 2500 years ago in India.
Cessation: the total elimination of suffering.
Cyclic existence: being reborn continually and uncontrollably due to the influence of disturbing emotions and karma.
Dharma: a Sanskrit word which generally refers to the Buddha’s teachings.
Enlightenment: the complete state of buddhahood. In Tibetan, ‘enlightenment’ is byang chub, which roughly translates as ‘purified and perfected’.
Esoteric texts: texts that contain profound teachings intended for practitioners who have received initiations.
Karma: a Sanskrit term that means action. It refers to the actions of body, speech and mind and the consequences of these actions.
Lama: Tibetan equivalent of the Sanskrit word ‘guru’; someone who can be trusted as a teacher or spiritual guide, and who can reveal the pure path to enlightenment.
Liberation: freedom from cyclic existence.
Mahayana: the name given to the Bodhisattva vehicle. The goal of the Mahayana Buddhist is to attain Buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings.
Nirvana: ‘passed beyond sorrow’ or liberated from suffering. It is the abandonment of disturbing emotions and their causes. Having attained it a person enjoys unchanging happiness, but, according to the Mahayana viewpoint, has not yet attained the enlightenment of buddhahood.
Sangha: in a general sense Sangha refers to the communities of ordained monks and nuns. Any person who directly realises ultimate reality.
Sentient beings: according to Buddhism, beings are either buddhas or sentient beings. A sentient being is a being whose mind is still subject to mental obscurations. Buddhas have no mental obscurations.
Six realms of existence: The six types of lives that beings can be reborn in according to their karma. These are: human, animal, hungry ghost, hell realms, demi-god and god realms.
Theravada: the Tradition of the Elders. A Buddhist tradition widespread in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka. The goal of a Theravadin practitioner is to attain nirvana or liberation from suffering.
Vajrayana: a subdivision of the Mahayana.