

THE SPIRIT OF  
TIBETAN  
BUDDHISM

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To Lama Jampa Thaye



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## CHAPTER ONE



# INTRODUCTION

## The Practice of Tibetan Buddhism

*Tibetan Buddhism* is a name for all the Buddhist texts and practices that have come from Tibet and are now practised not just in Tibet but also across the world. In fact, Tibetan Buddhism has been an international religion for centuries, flourishing in China, Mongolia, Bhutan, and Nepal as well as Tibet. More recently Tibetan Buddhism has gained global popularity and is being taught not only by teachers from these Asian countries, but also by those from Europe, the Americas, and elsewhere. As Tibetan Buddhism grows and changes, in time the name ‘Tibetan Buddhism’ may become redundant, but it still makes sense for now, as these practices remain closely linked to their Tibetan heritage.<sup>1</sup>

Practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism include both monastics (monks and nuns) and lay people. The Tibetan tradition accords as much respect to accomplished lay teachers and meditators as it does to ordained ones, so the two types of practitioner form no sort of hierarchy. In general, monks and nuns live in monasteries and follow the Buddhist monastic vows, which, among other things, commit them to celibacy. Their day-to-day life is largely determined by the schedule of the monastery, which usually involves several daily recitation practices.

Lay practitioners, who often have jobs and families, express their commitment in different ways, such as regular meditation practice at home, group practices at a Tibetan Buddhist temple or centre, studying Buddhist texts, and other meritorious activities. Whereas in Asian cultures lay Buddhists tend to have been brought up with the religion, in Western cultures they are more likely to be converts,

although some Asian countries, such as China, Taiwan, and Nepal, are increasingly seeing converts to Tibetan Buddhism.

Those who make a commitment to Tibetan Buddhism usually have a teacher, and that teacher will belong to one or more of the main schools of Tibetan Buddhism: Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu, and Gelug. Each school has its own lineages of teachings, passed down through the centuries, and a teacher's affiliation with a particular school will determine the nature of their students' meditation practice and the texts that they study. The relationship between teacher and student is taken very seriously and is often compared to that between a patient and a doctor, with the Buddha's teachings, or *dharma*, being the medicine.<sup>2</sup>

In a wider circle around the teacher and his or her lay students is the Buddhist community or *sangha*. In its broadest and most inclusive sense, the *sangha* includes all Buddhists, all over the world. But the word is more often used to refer to smaller communities, the monks and lay people associated with a particular monastery, teacher, or Buddhist centre. It is these groups that will come together for the regular practices of listening to teachings, meditation, recitation of prayers, and other ritual activities. Thus Tibetan Buddhism is far from the inward-looking, self-involved practice that images of meditating monks might suggest.

What, then, is Tibetan Buddhism for? Or, to put it another way, what is the attraction for those who were not born into this tradition? Like all other Buddhist traditions, Tibetan Buddhism is informed by the original motivation expressed by the Buddha in his early sermons: to escape the cycle of suffering by losing one's illusions and 'waking up' (Sanskrit, *budh*) to the way things really are. The will to become an awakened person (Skt. *buddha*) is motivated by love and compassion, and the wish to free all sentient beings from suffering.

As in other Buddhist traditions, investigation into the nature of the mind and reality plays an important part in Tibetan Buddhism. In fact it is probably the most philosophically sophisticated modern Buddhist tradition, not only having preserved the major philosophical schools that developed in India, but also with a vibrant tradition of philosophical thought, commentary, and debate. Sometimes it is asked



whether Buddhism should be considered a religion or a philosophy. That question is based on a distinction between religion and philosophy that arose in seventeenth-century Europe; in Buddhism it makes little sense to try to tease them apart. Philosophy is present in Buddhism, but always in the service of liberation from suffering. Thus, despite certain similarities, comparisons between Buddhist philosophies and modern academic philosophy are likely to be unsatisfactory because of their quite different aims.

What makes Tibetan Buddhism different from other Buddhist traditions, such as the Theravada, or the Zen schools of Japan, is the great variety of practices that were brought to Tibet from India and incorporated into the Buddhist path. These practices comprise the three ‘vehicles’ (so called because each represents a way of travelling the path to enlightenment): the early teachings of the Buddha, known in Tibet as the vehicle of the hearers, or the lesser vehicle (*hīnayāna*); the scriptures and practices of the greater vehicle (*mahāyāna*); and the full range of practices of the diamond vehicle (*vajrayāna*). Since the practices of *vajrayāna* derive from texts known as tantras, *vajrayāna* is also commonly known as ‘tantric Buddhism’.

A little more should be said about these three vehicles. The *hīnayāna* refers to teachings that are now practised by the Theravada sect in South and Southeast Asia, but since members of the Theravada certainly do not consider their path to be ‘lesser’, they do not accept it as a description. Thus the term *hīnayāna* is only used by those who consider themselves as belonging to the *mahāyāna*, as a way of distinguishing the scriptures (*sūtra*) and practices that are specific to their ‘greater’ vehicle. The main differentiating feature of the *mahāyāna* is the importance of the ideal of the bodhisattva, who strives for liberation not only for him or herself, but for all living beings, and the practices associated with bodhisattvas such as Tārā, the embodiment of compassionate activity.<sup>3</sup>

For most people it is the artwork, material culture, and ritual practices of the *vajrayāna* that give Tibetan Buddhism its distinct character. Yet the *vajrayāna* is considered to be an extension of the

*mahāyāna*, not a departure, as the *vajrayāna* is still based on the motivation to save all sentient beings from the cycle of suffering, but with more powerful practices to accomplish this aim. Thus there is no great disconnect from other Buddhist traditions. The great success of the practitioners and scholars of Tibet was to integrate the tantric practices of the *vajrayāna* with the aims and philosophy of *mahāyāna* in coherent systems of practice (or ‘paths’), starting at the beginning of spiritual practice and ending with the state of enlightenment itself. This idea of an integrated practice is expressed by this verse from a nineteenth-century teacher’s letter to his students:

From the difficulty of obtaining leisure and endowment,  
Through to the development and perfection stages of secret  
mantra,  
And the direct path of *dzogchen*, the practice of cutting through,  
There is no teaching not included here.<sup>4</sup>

In the chapters of this book I hope to give a sense of this rich variety in Tibetan Buddhism and the way the spiritual path is set out in a clear and coherent fashion. It is the nature of this progress that nothing is left behind. Each stage includes the last, but adds more subtlety and depth. In the end, the state of enlightenment includes everything that came before, and is found always to have been there from the beginning.<sup>5</sup>

### **Buddhism in Tibet**

Tibetan Buddhists have been historians of their religion since at least the tenth century. A millennium of historical writing has therefore resulted in an extremely rich tradition of history from which to draw. For Tibetan Buddhists, the writing and reading of religious histories is also a form of practice; an approach quite different from the Western post-Enlightenment idea of what history should be. The Tibetan historians did believe that a historical account should be true, but equally important to them was the role of history in religious practice.

Every teacher and every practice is part of a lineage, and histories of Tibetan Buddhism are above all histories of lineages. It is said that one should begin by examining a teacher, then develop an attitude of devotion towards them and their lineage, and finally begin to emulate their realization and activities.<sup>6</sup>

It is because of the importance of the teacher–student relationship that the Tibetan Buddhist tradition emphasizes the importance of assessing prospective teachers before asking to be taught by them. Part of this process is assessing whether the practices that the teacher is offering have a genuine provenance. This is one of the functions of reading religious histories. Once a student has identified a teacher and received teachings from him or her, putting those teachings into practice consistently requires an attitude of devotion (in modern terms, we might instead say respect and commitment). This too is a function of reading histories, which are written to support a student’s respectful attitude towards teachers from his or her own practice lineage, and towards his or her own teacher as their representative.

Traditional Tibetan histories of Buddhism always begin with the Buddha Śākyamuni and the beginnings of Buddhism in India. Śākyamuni taught during the fifth or fourth centuries BCE; after his death his teachings, or *dharma*, were gathered into collections of *sūtras*, which were transmitted orally. Later, the rules for Buddhist monks were collected and standardized in the *vinaya*. Around the second and first centuries BCE, philosophical elaborations of the Buddha’s teachings, known as *abhidharma*, began to be written down. These are the ‘three baskets’ (*tripiṭaka*) of the Buddha’s teaching accepted by all schools of Buddhism.

During these centuries, Buddhism spread throughout India, thanks in part to the patronage of the emperor Aśoka (304–232 BCE). In the first centuries of the new millennium, Buddhism began to spread even further afield, to Central Asia, China and Southeast Asia. The *sūtras* of the *mahāyāna* began to circulate, and new commentaries and treatises (*śāstra*) were written. From around the sixth century CE onward, the new practices of the *vajrayāna* began to be circulated in texts known

as *tantras*. Thus, by the time Buddhism arrived in Tibet in the seventh century, it had been through more than a thousand years of development in India.

Traditional accounts of Buddhism in Tibet begin with the reign of the emperor Songtsen Gampo, in the first half of the seventh century. Songtsen Gampo, whose empire stretched from northern India and Nepal to the kingdoms of the Silk Road, is said to have married two foreign princesses, one from Nepal and the other from China. Both princesses brought statues of the Buddha from their homelands, and Songtsen Gampo built temples to house the statues. The Tibetan tradition considers the beginning of Buddhism in Tibet to be the bringing of these Buddhist art objects into the country and the architectural response to their presence.

Modern historians cast doubt on aspects of this story; for example, the Nepalese princess may or may not have existed. But there is little doubt that the Jokhang temple, which still stands in Lhasa, was built during the reign of Songtsen Gampo, with the help of Nepalese architects and craftsmen. It was not until a century later, in the reign of Tri Song Detsen (r.756–c.800) that Buddhism was adopted as the state religion of Tibet. Thanks to the efforts of the emperor and his court, a great translation bureau was established to translate the *tripiṭaka* and the *śāstras* into Tibetan. A major monastery was built in Samye, and the first Tibetan monks were ordained. Two foreign teachers were of great importance in this effort: the scholarly abbot Śāntarakṣita, and the *vajrayāna* master Padmasambhava. While Śāntarakṣita was important in the transmission of scholastic Buddhism to Tibet, Padmasambhava became a kind of cult hero, seen as a second Buddha.

Despite the gradual collapse of the Tibetan empire in the second half of the ninth century, Buddhism continued to gain popularity in Tibet, especially the tantric practices of *vajrayāna* Buddhism. Beginning in the late tenth century, the popularity of the *vajrayāna* led Tibetans to travel to India in search of new teachings and practices. Some of these Tibetan teachers and translators gained large followings and

were able to establish their own monasteries. Gradually these monasteries became the new centres of power, both religious and political. This became known as ‘the second diffusion of Buddhism’ in Tibet, while those who remained faithful to the lineages from the imperial period, ‘the first diffusion’, came to be called the *Nyingma* (‘old ones’).<sup>7</sup>

### The schools of Tibetan Buddhism

#### *Nyingma*

The Nyingma were never really a school as such, although since the re-configuring of Tibetan Buddhism outside of Tibet, they are now more like a school, with a recognizable identity and a head lama. In the past, the name Nyingma referred to teachers who traced their lineages back through the first diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet during the time of the empire. The greater part of the *tripitaka* was translated into Tibetan during this time and is shared by all of the schools, so it is only in the tantric texts and practices that the old and new schools differ from each other. The Nyingma tantric tradition includes texts that have been transmitted from the time of the empire, known as *kama* (Tibetan, *bka’ ma*) or ‘Buddha’s word’, and revealed texts known as *terma* (*gter ma*) or ‘hidden treasures’.

From the eleventh century through to the present day, treasure revealers or *terton* (*gter ston*) have revealed these new teachings, discovered in physical hiding places or in visionary experiences. Most of these are attributed to Padmasambhava. After concealing a treasure teaching, Padmasambhava is said to have given one of his disciples a blessing and a prophecy that the disciple would be the one to discover it in a future life. The teachings revealed by these *terton* are thought to be particularly effective for the time in which they were discovered, and although the *terma* are generally from the Nyingma school, other schools have accepted some of them as well.<sup>8</sup>

The tantric texts and practices of the Nyingma are not especially different from those of the new schools. The exception is *dzogchen*, ‘the great perfection’, a complex of practices that are only found in the

Nyingma school. In *dzogchen* it is said that there is no difference between an enlightened buddha and an ordinary person; the nature of mind is pure from the start (*ka dag*). The basic method of *dzogchen* is an introduction to this enlightened state of awareness (*rig pa*) given by a master to a student. This introduction does not invalidate further practice, but provides the basic view of reality that informs that practice. The *dzogchen* teachings, most of which have appeared as *terma*, were systematized by Longchenpa (1308–63) and are commonly practised in the present day through the texts of Jigme Lingpa (1730–98).<sup>9</sup>

### *Kadam*

The Kadam school was established by disciples of the Indian master Atiśa (see chapter three) in the eleventh century. Beginning at the monastery of Radreng in central Tibet, the Kadampas quickly spread throughout Tibet, even reaching the Tangut kingdom in Central Asia in the twelfth century. The Kadampas were exclusively monastic and had a strong scholarly bent. They are also known for their development of the ‘mind-training’ genre of practices (see chapter four). The Kadampas also popularized the idea of a graduated path (*lam rim*) incorporating the teachings of the *hīnayāna*, *mahāyāna*, and *vajrayāna*. The Kadampas began to decline by the middle of the fourteenth century and soon disappeared as an independent school. Yet Kadam teachings and lineages remained hugely influential in Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>10</sup>

### *Sakya*

The Sakya school began with the founding of a temple in the region of Sakya by Khon Konchog Gyalpo (1034–1120). Attracted to the new tantric lineages being taught in Tibet, such as those of the *Hevajra Tantra*, Konchog Gyalpo studied with the translator Drogmi Lotsawa, while maintaining some of the older teachings as well. He passed on his lineage to his son, Kunga Nyingpo, known as Sachen, ‘the great Sakyapa’. Sachen specialized in the practices of the *lamdre*, meaning ‘the path that includes the result’, an advanced system of meditation based on the *Hevajra Tantra*.

Sachen passed the lineage to his two sons, Dragpa Gyaltsen and Sonam Tsemo (the author of the text translated in chapter six). The Khon family has remained at the head of the Sakya school to the present day, and this family lineage means that the head of the Sakya school has generally not been a monk. After Dragpa Gyaltsen and Sonam Tsemo, the next head of the school, Sakya Paṇḍita (1182–1251) was renowned throughout Tibet for his scholarship. He was invited to the court of the Mongol emperor in 1244, as a representative of the religious and secular leaders of Tibet, and remained there until his death. His nephew, Chogyal Pagpa (1235–80), became a favourite of Kubilai Khan, who granted him suzerainty over all Tibet in exchange for a *vajrayāna* initiation.

After this heyday, the political fortunes of the Sakya school declined somewhat, though two new branches of the school appeared in the fifteenth century: the Ngor school, based at the monastery of that name; and the Tshar school, based at Nalendra monastery. The Sakya school continued to be known for expertise in both tantric practice and scholasticism, with teachers such as Gorampa Sonam Senge (1429–89; see chapters four and five) embodying both of these aspects of practice.<sup>11</sup>

### *Kagyū*

This name actually describes a whole group of lineages, of which all but one trace back to the translator Marpa Lotsawa (1012–97). Marpa travelled to India three times, where he received tantric teachings from the Indian masters Naropa and Maitripa. From the former he received the advanced tantric practices of the ‘six yogas of Naropa’; from the latter he received the instructions of *mahāmudrā*, ‘the great seal’, on resting in the natural state of mind, from which realization arises. *Mahāmudrā* is similar to the *dzogchen* of the Nyingma school, and the two have been combined by some Kagyū and Nyingma teachers.

Although Marpa intended to pass on his lineage to his sons, it was his famous disciple Milarepa, a hermit who had previously committed murder with black magic, who carried on the teachings of Naropa and

Maitripa, and passed them on to a Kadampa monk called Gampopa. The latter brought monasticism and Kadam scholasticism to the Kagyu, though it remained primarily a meditation-oriented tradition. After Gampopa, the Kagyu lineage split into schools founded by his disciples: (i) the Phagmodru Kagyu, which later split into eight further schools; (ii) the Barom Kagyu; (iii) the Tsalpa Kagyu; and (iv) the Karma Kagyu. The last of these is the most widespread of the Kagyu schools, headed by the reborn lamas known as the Karmapas. Among the schools that split from the Phagmodru Kagyu, the Drugpa Kagyu became the state school of Bhutan.<sup>12</sup>

### *Gelug*

This school, also known as Ganden, after its first major monastery, is based on the teachings of Tsongkhapa Lozang Dragpa (1376–1419). It was the last of the major schools to be founded in Tibet and differs from the others in that it is not based on lineages brought from India. Instead, the Gelug adopted most of their tantric practices from the Sakya school. Tsongkhapa also studied philosophy in the Sakya curriculum, which dominated Tibetan scholasticism at the time, and later developed his own interpretations.

Tsongkhapa developed a form of the graduated path that incorporated the mind-training of the Kadampas with tantric practices from Sakya lineages, all informed by his own philosophical writings. The most distinct aspect of Tsongkhapa's teaching was this philosophy; it is perhaps for this reason that later Gelug scholars have tended to hold to a consistent philosophical position based on Tsongkhapa's works, rather than the pluralism observable in most other Tibetan schools.

Tsongkhapa and his students were monks, and, unlike the other Tibetan Buddhist schools, the Gelug has been exclusively monastic and has built Tibet's largest and most populous monasteries. In the seventeenth century the fifth Dalai Lama established Gelug rule over central and western Tibet with the military backing of the Mongols and later the Manchus. Afterwards, the Gelug school dominated Tibetan Buddhism throughout Tibet (apart from in the eastern



regions of Kham and Amdo), and the Dalai Lamas were, at least in theory, the supreme rulers of Tibet.<sup>13</sup>

### Reading the texts

This book is an introduction to the path of Tibetan Buddhism. I have based each chapter on a significant text that is still read and put into practice, and although my translations of these texts can only offer glimpses of the manifold world of Tibetan Buddhism, I believe they will give a better sense of it than an attempt to simplify and synthesize could achieve.

I have set the chapters out in a rough approximation of the path itself, beginning with the basic ethical code shared by all Buddhists (chapter two), and proceeding to the self-examination and transformation practised in *mahāyāna* Buddhism (chapters three and four). This is followed by an introduction to the role of philosophical investigation in Tibetan Buddhism (chapter five), and to the nature and practices of the *vajrayāna* (chapter six). The last two chapters are about two aspects of the whole path: the function of prayer and other rituals (chapter seven); and the biographies of previous masters as a focus for devotion and inspiration (chapter eight).

The chapters are also roughly chronological (only chapter six is out of chronological order), so I hope they will also give a sense of the progress of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition over more than a millennium – from the time of the Tibetan emperors in the eighth century through to the twentieth century. The twenty-first century is also included, as all of these texts contain teachings that are being put into practice across the world today. Most of the texts are from one of the main schools of Tibetan Buddhism, the Sakya. I have selected these texts in order to give the path they take us on a sense of coherence. Yet they speak to the whole of the tradition as well, something I emphasize by beginning with a text that was written before there were any distinct schools of Tibetan Buddhism, and by ending with the life of the originator of the non-partisan movement in Tibetan Buddhism, who sought to break down false distinctions between the schools.

Every text has a context, and each chapter of this book has an introduction in which I try to provide adequate context for the translation that follows. For a practitioner, the context would be supplied by the teacher, and by the practitioner's own previous experience. The text would usually be heard first in a teaching session, embedded in the commentary of the teacher, or of a previous teacher from the textual lineage. At the least, a ritual of transmission is usually required in which the teacher simply reads the text, sometimes at great speed, to the student. This ritual emphasizes the importance of the lineage of transmission and the fact that even texts are prescriptions given by the teacher to a student, as a doctor prescribes medicine to a patient.<sup>14</sup>

Texts like these are not always easy to understand on the first reading. For one thing, Buddhism incorporates much more than can be explained in a book such as this, and I have therefore annotated the translations where a brief explanation seems helpful. More significantly, however, our modern reading practices are fundamentally different from the traditional way of reading a text in Tibet (and indeed in any pre-modern culture). These are not texts written to be read through once, as a source of information and inspiration, and put away again. They were written to be read slowly and often, to absorb and internalize their messages. This experience, a progressive deepening of understanding, is key to the process of reading Buddhist texts.