

FUNDAMENTALS OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM

Rebecca McClen Novick

A stylized sunburst graphic in shades of orange and yellow, positioned in the lower half of the cover. It features a semi-circular arc at the bottom and several sharp, triangular rays extending upwards and outwards.

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Tibetan Buddhism

by
Rebecca McClen Novick



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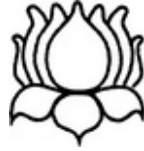
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*This book is dedicated to the
nuns, monks, and people of Tibet
who continue to be persecuted for their beliefs.*



I am deeply grateful to Geshe Tsultim Gyeltsen for his radiant example, to all the teachers of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition for making their wisdom available, and to Lotsawa Tenzin Dorjee for his unwavering generosity of time and knowledge. Thanks is also due to Ven. Thubten Chödrön, Jesse Fenton, and John Jackson for sharing their superior knowledge of Dharma. Any errors in this book are mine, not theirs. I am also grateful to Bill Kane, to everyone at The Crossing Press for their support and to my husband, Ronny, for his love, patience, humor, and cooking throughout this project.

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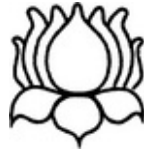
Glossary

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*When the Iron Bird flies and horses run on wheels,
the Tibetan people will be scattered like ants across the world.*

—EIGHTH CENTURY TIBETAN PROPHECY



My first contact with Tibetan Buddhists was as an interviewer working in the Tibetan refugee communities of Northern India. I was recording testimonies of torture and brutality in Chinese-run prisons in Tibet. The survivors I spoke with displayed an uncanny ability to come to terms with the agonies they had experienced. Their suffering was undeniable, and yet neither were they vengeful nor were their spirits broken. They remained radiant and resilient, often even expressing compassion for their oppressors. What was their secret? They answered again and again, “It was my faith in Buddhism.”

A true test of any spiritual practice must be whether it can help you in times of crisis. It was clear from the Tibetans with whom I spoke that their worldview provides a perspective from which a deep and holistic understanding of existence, with its joys and its sufferings, can be built. For Tibetan Buddhists, daily life is an aspect of spiritual practice rather than the other way around—as is so often the case in Western society, and it is both inspiring and challenging to experience a culture in which the highest ambition is to become a human embodiment of compassion and the highest vocation is to develop the necessary wisdom to achieve this.

This book does not attempt to be a comprehensive guide, for Tibetan Buddhism is a vast and multifaceted arena (the Buddhist canon from which Tibetan Buddhism evolved is larger than the *Encyclopedia Britannica*). I have, however, attempted to cover the fundamentals of this system within the limits of my understanding, in a straightforward and informative manner as a foundation for further study. Ironically, the treasure of Tibetan Buddhism has come into our hands because it is being destroyed in its homeland. The Chinese occupation of Tibet has caused a spiritual diaspora of Tibetan Buddhist teachings around the planet. In these times, we have an unprecedented opportunity to learn from this tradition, and whichever spiritual path we ultimately follow, I believe that we will forever be richer for having done so.

Introduction

My religion is loving kindness.

—DALAI LAMA XIV

In Tibetan, the word for Buddhist means “insider”—someone who looks not to the world but to themselves for the source of peace and happiness. The purpose of Buddhism is to relieve suffering; it begins with the premise that all suffering, however real it may seem, is the product of our own minds. Buddhism offers a remedy for every spiritual ailment. In fact, the language of medicine is often used in Buddhist scriptures as a metaphor for the spiritual journey: The spiritual mentor is the doctor, the practitioner is the patient, the negative mental and emotional states are the illnesses, and the antidotes to those conditions are the teachings.

Tibetan Buddhism is a way of experiencing the world, more than it is a religion or a philosophy. The Buddha did not teach a theory describing the universe; he taught a method—a prescription—for how to live in it. These teachings entice us to give up our defense against change. They inspire us to realize a completely courageous approach to life, without divine authorities, without even familiar psychological concepts of self-identity, and from that point of fearlessness to reach out to those still caught in the web of suffering. The Tibetan form of Buddhism goes a step further than the more ascetic schools, which emphasize a denial of worldly experience. It allows for a person to get completely involved in human affairs—in family, politics, art, and business—while fostering a fundamental awareness that it is all cosmic theater. Being free from the world illusion allows one to act freely in it. Tibetan Buddhism is, therefore, an attractive and sympathetic path for those who have chosen not to enter monastic life but to remain in the world to pursue their spiritual goals.

The historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, has taken on divine properties in Tibetan Buddhism, and serves as a template for the boundlessness of humanity’s spiritual potential. This potential for Buddhahood is said to lie within every one of us. The Dalai Lama says that it is “something we have always had, from time without beginning.... We are not talking about something completely foreign to our nature, which might suddenly appear like a mushroom, as though without seed or cause.” There are no limits; everything is possible once we fully recognize and comprehend at the deepest level who we truly are. A Buddha is nothing less than a living realization of this understanding.

Such thinking might seem like an impossible dream, because presently we are the product of deeply ingrained habits that have become reinforced, say the teachings, through lifetimes of imprinting and social conditioning. It is

only when we attempt to escape this mechanical behavior that we realize how trapped we have become. Buddhism offers a way out—a way that begins with our own awareness of our captivity and the desire to be free. Buddhism is like a hologram. Each part eventually leads one to the realization of the whole. Through whatever door you approach the teachings, whether it be impermanence, compassion, emptiness, or the karmic law of cause and effect, you will ultimately arrive at the same place, for each aspect of the teachings is just one facet of an integrated and interdependent understanding of oneself and one's place in the universe. Buddhism is highly evolutionary, offering the possibility for everyone to completely transform themselves—the “evolutionary momentum” in this case being one's own aspiration for Enlightenment.

Buddhists believe in the principles of love and compassion, but they do not believe in a creator god. In fact, questions as to how the universe was created and whether or not it is eternal are considered unimportant. Instead, the Buddhist attempts to answer the more immediate questions of how to overcome the problems and difficulties of life. Someone who spends time on such questions while ignoring spiritual practice is compared to a person who refuses to let a doctor pull an arrow out of his or her body until s/he knows everything about the person who shot it.

No one path suits everyone, and so there are practices for every kind of person. The Dharma (the teachings of Buddhism) adapts to the individual character and aptitude of the practitioner. The Dalai Lama has said that the Dharma can be practiced without conflict by Christians, Moslems, Jews, and Hindus. When the Buddha's disciples asked him how people would be able to differentiate between their master's words and the words of another after he was gone, he replied, “Whatever is well spoken is the word of the Buddha.” In other words, if a teaching leads in the direction of lasting peace and happiness, then it has value no matter what its origin. This, plus the Buddha's refusal to appoint a successor, paved the way for a variety of interpretations of Buddhist doctrine, leading to a tradition of lively debate and an integral ability to adapt to changing circumstances. It also reflects Buddhism's highly pragmatic and nondogmatic approach, which generates not only a tolerance of but a respect for other spiritual traditions.

Buddhism has evolved through twenty-five hundred years of debate, inquiry, and analysis. The history of Buddhism can be seen as the history of a philosophical dialogue between teachers and students—a dialogue that is still going on today. The mind is seen as a vast laboratory, and Buddhist literature is full of experiments. Critical inquiry is considered indispensable, and personal experience the final test of truth. We should not accept the teachings merely on faith. The Buddha said, “Just like examining gold in order to know its quality, you should put my words to the test. A wise person does not accept them merely out of respect.” The Sutras (the discourses of the historical Buddha) speak of the “four reliances”:

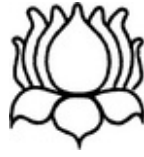
Do not rely on individuals, rely on the teachings.

Do not rely on the words, rely on the meaning.

Do not rely on the adapted meaning, rely on the ultimate meaning.

Do not rely on intellectual knowledge, rely on wisdom.

There is a Tibetan story about Gampopa, the founder of the Kagyu school. He was a monk and a doctor who became a disciple of the poet-saint Milarepa. Gampopa spent all his time meditating in a cave. One day, Milarepa asked him what he experienced during his meditations. Gampopa replied that he experienced nothing—only a great void. Milarepa exclaimed that if this were the case then the monk had not understood the teachings and was not truly meditating at all! Gampopa was so disillusioned that he decided to forgo his monastic robes and dress like Milarepa. Once again, Milarepa chastised him, declaring that copying others was not the answer. “Everyone must follow their own path. Heal yourself, good physician monk; then you will naturally heal others. My teaching is mine; yours must be yours. Do whatever is necessary in order to evoke it from within.”



Origins of Tibetan Buddhism

***Whether a Buddha appears or does not appear,
the true nature of things remains forever.***

—PRAJNAPARAMITA SUTRA

The origins of Tibetan Buddhism are found in India. The historical Buddha was the son of a Hindu king who ruled a region of Nepal around the sixth century B.C.E. He was not the first *Buddha*, nor will he be the last. According to tradition, he is the fourth Buddha of this eon, and there are still 996 to come. The Buddha is known by a number of different names: Gautama, Siddhartha, and Shakyamuni. Gautama was his family name, and this was the title that most people of the time would have used, whereas the name his parents gave him was Siddhartha, which means “one who reaches his goal.” Shakya was the clan to which the Buddha’s family belonged. *Muni* means “sage,” and in Tibetan Buddhism the Buddha is most often referred to as Shakyamuni, or “the Sage of the Shakyas.” The Buddha before his *Enlightenment* is usually referred to as Siddhartha, and after his Enlightenment as the Buddha, a term that he used to describe himself that simply means “awake.”

As a young prince, Siddhartha enjoyed a life of endless luxury. His father was so protective of him that he arranged life at the palace so that his son would never have to lay eyes on anyone who was not young, healthy, and beautiful. Thus, Siddhartha grew up knowing nothing of sickness, old age, or even of death. When he accidentally discovered these realities of life at the age of twenty-nine, he realized how little he understood about life and resolved to leave the palace and become a *Saddhu*, a homeless seeker of truth. Siddhartha studied with a number of great meditation masters and gained high levels of spiritual realization, but he always felt that he had more to learn. For many years, he lived as an ascetic, surviving on a few grains of rice a day. When, in spite of these extreme practices, he found that he was no closer to realization, he decided to stop denying his body and find a more balanced path to Enlightenment, a *Middle Way*.

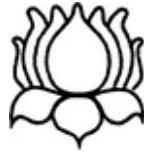
Siddhartha sat down under a pipal tree (known as the *Bodhi* —“Enlightenment”—tree) and there he meditated for three days and three nights. He underwent all manner of spiritual trials and endured the doubts and mockery of his ego, but eventually he attained complete Enlightenment

and became a Buddha. At first, he was reluctant to teach, thinking that the path to realization could not be communicated so that ordinary people could understand it. The texts say that the gods Indra and Brahma came down to plead with him to turn the *Wheel of Dharma*, to teach what he had learned, and finally he acquiesced.

The Buddha expounded a total of eighty-four thousand different sections of teachings, to offer many different kinds of individuals the means for attaining Enlightenment. As much ink as an elephant can carry on its back is said to have been used to write the texts contained within each section. The three great teachings that the Buddha expounded are referred to as the “three turnings of the wheel of Dharma.” The first “turning,” or teaching, that the Buddha gave occurred at Varanasi (formerly Benares) in Northern India. Here he gave instructions on the Four Noble Truths, common to both the *Hinayana* and *Mahayana* schools of Buddhism. The second turning of the wheel of Dharma took place at Rajagriha, where the Buddha gave his teachings on emptiness: The *Prajnaparamita* (“perfection of wisdom”) *Sutra*, which is a central document of Mahayana Buddhism, records these teachings. The third turning was given at Shravasti and covers teachings concerning the qualities of Buddhas. These three teachings are collectively called the *Sutras* and refer to the discourses that the Buddha gave directly to his disciples after his Enlightenment.

Around 200 B.C.E., texts appeared claiming to be the word of the Buddha. They were separated into three divisions and became known as the *Tripitaka*, or the “three baskets,” and they make up the entire Buddhist canon. The *Sutras* were guides to meditation practices. The *Vinaya* were teachings that the Buddha gave regarding ethics and monastic discipline, and the *Abhidharma* texts deal principally with wisdom and with the nature of reality. Practitioners committed spiritual teachings to memory, as this was thought to inspire a more profound understanding than learning from written texts. Thus, everything in Buddhism is taught in sets of numbers: the *Four Noble Truths*, the *Six Perfections*, and so on.

After the Buddha’s death at the age of eighty, Buddhism began gradually to spread throughout Asia. The great Indian emperor, Ashoka, widely encouraged its dissemination, and, due to the seminomadic nature of Buddhist monastics, the Buddha’s teaching soon found its way to new lands. The origins of Mahayana (the school to which Tibetan Buddhism belongs) are very obscure, but scholars agree that the Mahayana scriptures date from approximately 100 B.C.E.—500 C.E. It was the great Indian philosopher, Nagarjuna, who founded the Madhyamaka, or Middle Way, school of Buddhism and established a framework for the Mahayana teachings of emptiness and the path of the *Bodhisattva*—a person who is traveling the path to full *Buddhahood*.



Buddhism in Tibet

*There were three most kind to Tibet: the Precious Guru,
Padmasambhava;
the Lord Master, Atisha; and Precious Master, Tsong Khapa.*

—TIBETAN SAYING

Buddhism in Tibet has a history that spans more than a thousand years. The trade routes of Asia skirted Tibet's mountains, never penetrating her natural barriers, and for centuries the country remained largely isolated from the rest of the world. Little is known about Bon, Tibet's indigenous pre-Buddhist religion. Many scholars suggest that it was originally shamanic in nature, and indeed its magical and animistic practices and the ritual use of human bones suggest shamanic influence. Bon still survives today and has been reinterpreted within a Buddhist framework.

Tibetans view the history of Tibet as the story of how the Buddhist Dharma tamed their country's primitive energies. In a Tibetan myth, the land of Tibet rose above the waters of the ocean (an event that actually took place forty million years ago when the Indian subcontinent collided with Asia). The only inhabitants were a monkey and an ogress. The monkey, who was an incarnation of Avalokiteshvara, the Buddha of compassion, was a peaceful being and enjoyed meditating by himself in his cave. The ogress, on the other hand, had a wild and passionate nature. She had no idea that the monkey existed, and she desperately desired a companion. When, from the silence of his cave, the monkey heard her howls of loneliness, he felt enormous compassion for her and agreed to become her mate. This unlikely couple became Tibet's Adam and Eve. They had six children together, and it was from them that the entire population of Tibet descended. The ogress and the monkey are said to symbolize the conflicting character traits of the Tibetans themselves, who throughout history have been both aggressive and peaceful.

By the sixth century, Tibet began to develop militarily. At this point in history, the country was completely surrounded by Buddhist nations. These became the focus of raids by Tibetan fighters, who were known as the "red faces" because of their custom of using war paint made from red ochre. Under the leadership of the emperor, Songtsen Gampo, Tibet became a powerful empire that lasted for two hundred years. The "red faces" conquered vast

regions of Central Asia between Tibet and China, and were considered such a threat that the rulers of the Chinese and Ottoman Empires united to try to halt the Tibetan expansion.

In 635 C.E., Tibet attacked China and later annexed Nepal. Songtsen Gampo married both a Chinese and a Nepalese princess from his conquered lands. These women, who were later regarded as incarnations of the goddess Tara—the emanation of all the Buddhas’ wisdom and compassion who is often called the “mother of the Buddhas.” The princesses were both devout Buddhists and brought Buddhist ideas and images from their homelands. Their influence on the king, and through him Tibetan society, largely inspired the spread of the Dharma in Central Asia.

While Europe was plunged into the cultural turmoil of the “Dark Ages,” Tibet was undergoing a renaissance. It was the thirty-eighth Tibetan King, Trisong Detsen (740–798 C.E.), who established Buddhism as the state religion. The king was an enthusiastic convert to the new philosophy, and he asked the Indian tantric yogi, Padmasambhava, to come to Tibet to give teachings. Padmasambhava was a dynamic and charismatic character who is said to have possessed superhuman powers. He wandered the Tibetan countryside, subjugating the local demons and deities, instructing the local people and converting them to Buddhism. Together with Trisong Detsen, he founded the first Tibetan monastery at Samye, where he supervised the early translations of the Buddha’s teachings from Sanskrit into Tibetan.

Later, around the middle of the ninth century, the great conqueror king, Relbachen, continued to spread the Buddhist faith throughout the land. During his reign, the great spiritual exchange that began with Padmasambhava reached new heights. Many Indian scholars came to Tibet to help translate Buddhist texts, and Tibetans went to India to study Buddhism. Relbachen was murdered by his ministers, who replaced the king with his brother, Lang Darma, an ardent supporter of the old Bon religion. Lang Darma destroyed Buddhist scriptures, closed down monasteries, and forced the monks to marry. He was eventually assassinated, but before his death he had almost succeeded in wiping out Buddhism from Tibet. The mighty Tibetan empire collapsed into chaos as tribal conflicts led to instability and separatism, and China was able to take back the areas it had lost. Tibet did not unite around a common leadership again for another three hundred years.

The second dissemination of Buddhism in Tibet was brought about by Yeshe Ö, a monk-king who ruled a western region of the country. In 1042, he invited the renowned Buddhist scholar, Atisha, to Tibet. Atisha had a profound impact on Tibetan society. He reformed the monasteries and emphasized the mentor-student relationship of lamas and disciples. He was dearly beloved by the general population, who embraced his teachings, and by the end of his career Buddhism was firmly established in Tibet. Dawa Norbu writes, “Perhaps no religion in the world has changed a people’s way of life so dramatically as Buddhism did in Tibet. The Tibetans, who had been the most dreaded and fiercest warriors in Central Asia, literally ‘put down

their weapons at the lotus feet of lamas' and followed the 'white path of peace' pointed to by the Buddha."

Indigenous Buddhist schools emerged as Tibetans began to interpret the dharma in slightly different ways. Four of these schools survive today: the *Nyingma*, founded by Padmasambhava, the *Kagyü*, the *Sakya*, and the *Gelug* (see [Chapter 20](#)). In the twelfth century, Genghis Khan led Mongolia to a position of total dominance in Central Asia. In the middle of the thirteenth century, the Mongolian army invaded and overran the militarily vulnerable Tibet. In 1244 C.E., the Mongolian warlord Prince Godan, grandson of Genghis Khan, invited the head of the Sakya school, Sakya Pandita, to his camp. Sakya Pandita was a legendary and learned lama reputed to be the holiest monk in Tibet, and when Godan met him, the prince was so impressed that he converted to Buddhism. This marked the beginning of the extraordinary priest-patron relationship between the two countries, where Mongolia offered military protection in exchange for Tibet's spiritual knowledge. However, although the Mongols were nominally the rulers of Tibet, they left the day-to-day affairs of the country to the Tibetan people.

In 1253, Sakya Pandita's nephew, Pagpa, became the spiritual teacher of Kublai Khan, who installed him as the ruler of Tibet. Kublai Khan later became the Mongol emperor of China and declared Buddhism the state religion of Mongolia. The Tibetan lamas and Mongol khans continued their close relationship, but by 1307 the Mongols had lost much of their interest in Tibet, which was rife with internecine conflicts. Sakya power began to wane, and the country again fell to the rule of Tibetan warlords. Mongol power too began to decline, and in 1368, China was in a position to overthrow the Mongolian dynasty.

Around 1400, Tsong Khapa spearheaded a renaissance of Buddhism in Tibet and founded the Gelug school, whose name means "system of virtue." This school, known as the "Yellow Hats," became extremely popular in Mongolia as well as in Tibet. In 1578, a profound event occurred in Tibetan history, when Sonam Gyatso, the second reincarnation of Tsong Khapa's main disciple, visited the court of the Mongol ruler, Alta Khan. Echoing the auspicious meeting three hundred years earlier between Prince Godan and Sakya Pandita, the monk's demeanor, learning, and spiritual accomplishment deeply moved the great khan. He became a Buddhist and bestowed the title "Dalai"—the Mongolian word for ocean—on Sonam Gyatso, as a gesture acknowledging the depth of the lama's knowledge. Thus the priest-patron relationship was reestablished and the institution of Dalai Lama was created.

Sonam Gyatso is known as the Third Dalai Lama, as his previous two incarnations (Gendun Gyatso and Gendun Druba) were given the title posthumously. The Fourth Dalai Lama came from Alta Khan's own family, and this cemented the relationship between the two countries. By the end of the sixteenth century, Tibetan warlords had become increasingly defensive against the rise of monastic power, and they began a period of religious persecution. The Mongols came to the aid of the monastics and, buoyed by

huge popular support, the Fourth Dalai Lama became the political as well as spiritual leader of Tibet.

The “Great Fifth” founded a government in 1642, and became the first Dalai Lama to lead a united Tibet. He wrote numerous books, mastered the tantric arts, and was a powerful ruler. He abolished serfdom by dismantling the private forces of the nobility and revoking their rights to determine the fates of the peasantry, who were at that time no better off than the medieval serfs of Europe. While monastic power in Northern Europe was dwindling and its military was on the rise, in Tibet the opposite was true. Tibet was the only place in the world where religious leaders gained hegemony over the military. The first Manchu emperor invited the Fifth Dalai Lama to his palace; he became, as did many subsequent Dalai Lamas, the spiritual guide to the Chinese leaders. As Tibet stabilized, it began to shut itself off from the countries surrounding it, and for three hundred years an uninterrupted succession of Dalai Lamas ruled peacefully in Tibet. China, which now ruled Mongolia, left Tibet more or less alone, only interfering in periods of civil tension. The religious landscape in Central Asia had completely reversed, and Tibet was now the only Buddhist nation in the region.

TIBET IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The Thirteenth Dalai Lama (1876–1933) was an exceptional man and a great ruler. He laid plans to bring Tibet into the modern era: to build roads, to improve the educational system, to reform the monasteries (some of which had become corrupt), and to bolster Tibet’s military defenses. In some areas he was successful, but he came up against an intransigent conservative lobby that blocked many of his proposals. In 1903, a British expedition arrived in Tibet to forge a trade agreement that fully exploited the Tibetan government’s economic naiveté. Seeing how easy it was for a foreign power to march into the capital, the Chinese general Chao Erh-feng began organizing a number of brutal raids into Tibet. His plan was to annex the country and capture its leader, but the Thirteenth Dalai Lama got wind of his plan and fled to India. Chao proclaimed that he had removed the Dalai Lama as the head of the country, but the Tibetan people ignored him and continued to view the Thirteenth as their leader.

As the Nationalists gained power in China, Chao lost his support, and the Tibetan government banished all Chinese officials and soldiers from its soil. However, when the Chinese Nationalists took political control of China, they began to recognize Tibet’s strategic significance and its vast mineral wealth. Tibet’s right to self-rule had not been questioned for more than three hundred years, but in 1912, the new Chinese leaders began claiming historical rights over their neighbor. In 1933, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama died, but not before he had prophesied the imminent destruction of his country.

The Thirteenth had foretold that he would be reborn in Eastern Tibet, and the search began for his reincarnation. In 1937, the ruling regent, Reting

Rinpoche, in a sacred lake named Lhamo Lhatso, saw visions revealing the house where he would find Tibet's new leader. Following various signs and portents, Reting Rinpoche and his party found a house in the northeastern province of Amdo that matched the vision he had seen. The officials disguised themselves as merchants and began to question the two-year-old son of the family who lived there. The boy passed a number of intricate tests designed to determine if he was really the Thirteenth's true incarnation. The state oracles confirmed the discovery, and in 1940, at the age of four, the boy was enthroned as the new Dalai Lama.

By 1948, the Chinese leadership had fallen to Communist control, and the new government began publicly to question Tibetan sovereignty. Once again, suspicious of their intentions, the Tibetan government expelled Chinese officials from the country. Tibet's fears were realized when on New Year's Day, 1950, Peking Radio reported its intention to "liberate" Tibet from Western imperialists, even though there were only six Westerners known to be living in Tibet at the time. At five million strong, China's army was almost the size of the entire Tibetan population. Due to the pressing circumstances, the government decided to officially inaugurate the sixteen-year-old Dalai Lama earlier than was customary.

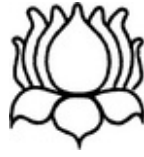
After gaining control of the East, the Communists marched on Lhasa in 1951. By 1959, the country was suffering brutally under the Chinese rule. Torture was endemic; thousands of people were executed; *struggle sessions* (interrogations involving physical torture, psychological bullying, and public humiliation) were conducted in towns and villages to encourage Tibetans to turn against their neighbors; monks and nuns were forced to copulate in public; children were forced to shoot their parents. The violence could not have been a sharper contrast to the peace that had existed previously in Tibet. Before the invasion, about one-sixth of the male population of Tibet were monks, and almost every family had either a son or a daughter who had taken the monastic vows. (Although monks far outnumbered nuns, there were between six hundred and eight hundred nunneries in Tibet before the invasion.)

The monastic system allowed for a person from the humblest of origins to attain a privileged position through merit rather than birthright, but it was a system so utterly foreign to the communists (who despised all religion) that they could see it only as an example of feudalism with the monastics as overlords. If the Chinese found the Tibetan system incomprehensible, the Chinese Communist ideology was equally foreign to the Tibetans and contradicted the values they had held sacred for a thousand years. The young Dalai Lama tried to mediate and negotiate but to no avail. In his autobiography, he describes his inner struggle during this difficult time:

Only the thought of my responsibility to the six million Tibetans kept me going. That and my faith. Early every morning, as I sat in prayer in my room before the ancient altar with its clutter of statuettes standing in silent benediction, I concentrated hard on developing compassion for all sentient

beings. I reminded myself constantly of the Buddha's teaching that our enemy is in a sense our greatest teacher. And if this was sometimes hard to do, I never really doubted that it was so.

On March 10, 1959, thirty thousand people swarmed around the Dalai Lama's summer palace to thwart what they suspected was a Chinese plot to kidnap their leader. Disguised as a soldier, the Dalai Lama fled to India to establish his government in exile. With their beloved spiritual leader gone, the monasteries and nunneries reduced to rubble, thousands of people dead and imprisoned, and the rest in grief and shock, Tibetan independence came to an end. China proclaimed that it had successfully annihilated the "darkest feudal serfdom in the world."



Mahayana

All these diverse systems are worthy of respect, since they all have the potential to bring about great benefit to a large number of sentient beings.

—DALAI LAMA XIV

Mahayana is one of the two main *yanas* or “vehicles” of Tibetan Buddhism, the other being Hinayana. (In Tibet these two vehicles, plus the Tantric vehicle of *Vajrayana*, which incorporates the main aspects of both, were preserved and practiced.) The evolution of Mahayana as distinct from Hinayana was a very gradual one. With the growing popularity of the idea of the Bodhisattva—a person who evolves from an ordinary condition to that of a Buddha—the lay practitioner gained in status, and the monastics were no longer the sole spiritual heirs to the Buddhist tradition. The path of the Bodhisattva spans all Buddhist traditions, but Mahayana emphasized this path above all others and developed it into the ultimate religious goal (see [Chapter 14](#)). By the time Buddhism reached Tibet, Mahayana had become an established and vital movement with its own texts and practices and a unique spiritual character.

Theravada, the only surviving school of Hinayana, is the most widespread form of Buddhism in the world and is dominant in the countries of Southeast Asia, such as Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Sri Lanka. Mahayana Buddhism is practiced in East and Central Asia in countries such as Korea and Mongolia, and also in China, Japan, and Tibet. Tibetans refer to Hinayana as the *Individual Vehicle* and to Mahayana as the *Universal Vehicle*. In Hinayana there are two subvehicles, *Hearers* and *Solitary Realizers*. The Hearers are those who gain *Liberation* from listening to the teachings of buddhas; Solitary Realizers are more advanced individuals who, in their last life before *Liberation*, attain this state independent of a Buddha’s direct influence. The goal of the followers of the Individual Vehicle is to become an *Arhat*, a “foe-destroyer,” one who has destroyed the enemy of delusion. Such a person gains liberation from cyclic existence and attains the peace of nirvana. This *Liberation* is not complete *Buddhahood*, however, which Mahayana teachings say can only be attained by following the path of the bodhisattva. Full Buddhahood is attained when one has eliminated the extremely subtle influences and imprints in one’s psyche that cause a dualistic view of reality—

one that perceives a distinction between subject and object and that misapprehend all things as possessing independent and inherent existence. It is characterized by a condition of omniscient *wisdom*, wherein all phenomena can be simultaneously and directly perceived, and all obstructions to knowledge are overcome. Mahayanists emphasize altruism, and the liberation of others is their main objective. They regard their path as more inclusive than that of the Individual Vehicle, offering religious practices for the layperson as well as for the monastic.

Unlike followers of Mahayana, Theravadins do not regard the Mahayana Sutras as the words of the Buddha himself, but as those of later interpreters of his teachings. They also believe that the Buddha encouraged individual Liberation rather than universal responsibility. It is wrong to assume, however, that followers of the Individual Vehicle are not altruistic. Arhats are said to possess extraordinary means to help others, but this is not their central purpose. Theravadins acknowledge and respect the spiritual ideal of the Bodhisattva, but they feel that only a limited number of extraordinary individuals can achieve it. They suggest that because the journey to full Buddhahood is so arduous and difficult (taking three “countless eons” to complete—a period of time so vast that it is akin to infinity) that most people should content themselves with pursuing their own personal salvations. Mahayanists, on the other hand, set themselves the infinite task. They claim that the seed of Buddhahood lies within each creature and that there is no fundamental difference between the Buddha and other people, or even other sentient beings such as animals and insects. Mahayana Buddhism emphasizes the presence and possibility of Buddhahood, but Theravadins believe that we will see no living Buddhas for another few millennia.

The “Perfection of Wisdom” Sutras, which appeared around 200 C.E., are the earliest Mahayana texts. In these texts, it is the Bodhisattva (rather than the Hearer or Solitary Realizer) who is presented as the spiritual role model. This literature also expounds upon the doctrine of *emptiness* as the ultimate nature of all reality. In Mahayana, the person of the Buddha is viewed as a superhuman figure who is not bound by the common laws of nature. Even his death is said to have been merely appearance, carried out as a teaching on the impermanence of phenomena, and the Buddha is believed still to reside in another dimension of reality, continuing to intervene in people’s lives.

Followers of Mahayana regard their path as more complete than that of Theravada in its motivation, its ultimate aim, and the degree of understanding that it can inspire. However, Mahayana scriptures often caution the reader against disparaging Hinayana. In fact, one of the Bodhisattva vows is never to denigrate the Hinayana path. The Individual Vehicle is, after all, the foundation for the Universal Vehicle, and a Mahayanist must study and practice it fully. The great Tibetan meditation master, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, said that it was better “to follow the outward model of Theravada Buddhism, inwardly to have the altruistic motivation of a Bodhisattva, and secretly to practice the vehicle of *Tantra*. That way all three vehicles become a