

Tibetan Buddhism, Vajrayana, and the lineage of Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche

The Vajrayana is the third major yana or vehicle of buddhadharma. It is built on and incorporates the Foundational teachings (Hinayana) and the Mahayana. It is also known as the Secret Mantra. The Vajrayana teachings are secret teachings, passed down through lineages from teacher to student. They were preserved and developed extensively in Tibet over 1200 years.

The beginnings of Vajrayana are in India, initially spreading out through areas of Mahayana Buddhism and later the Kushan Empire. By the 12th century most of the Indian subcontinent was overtaken by the Moghul Empire and almost all of Buddhism was suppressed. The majority of Vajrayana texts, teachings and practices were preserved intact in Tibet.

Vajrayana is characterized by the use of skillful means (upaya), expediting the path to enlightenment mapped out in the Mahayana teachings. The skillful means are an intensification of meditation practices coupled with an advanced understanding of the view. Whereas the conventional Mahayana teachings view the emptiness of self and all phenomena as the final goal on the path to Buddhahood, Vajrayana starts by acknowledging this goal as already fully present in all sentient beings. The practice of the path is to actualize that in ourselves and all beings through transforming confusion and obstacles, revealing their natural state of primordial wisdom. This is accomplished through sacred outlook (view), and employing meditation techniques such as visualization in deity practice and mantra recitation.

One major stream of Vajrayana is known as Mahamudra (Great Seal), which incorporates the techniques noted above in a process of creation (visualization, mantra) and completion (yogas) leading to the Great Seal. The other stream is called Dzogchen (Great Completion), also known as atiyoga or maha ati. Atiyoga views everything as complete in itself as it is, requiring recognition and resting in the absolute (emptiness and luminosity) as the view, practice and action of awareness itself.

Buddhism in Tibet

Buddhism was declared the religion of the Tibetan Empire by King Trison Detsen in the 8th century C.E. This established it as being linked with political power. To study and understand the history of dharma in Tibet the lacing of politics and dharma teachings is necessary. The dharma had been brought from India, most notably by two teachers, Shantarakshita and Padmasambhava. Shantarakshita brought the Mahayana teachings in general.

Padmasambhava brought the Vajrayana and Dzogchen teachings. Padmasambhava came to be known as Guru Rinpoche, the patron and guru of Tibetan Buddhism. Buddhism was centered in a monastic system from the start, but also included lay practitioners and ngagpas (married lamas not attached to monasteries),

Initially the Vajrayana teachings were practiced only in secret, as was the case in India. By the middle of the 10th century they were practiced more openly, having integrated more fully with Tibetan culture at large.

By the mid 1100s new teachings began coming to Tibet, chiefly by Marpa the Translator and the Khön family. Atisha brought teachings of the Mahayana and established the Kadampa tradition. Marpa and others brought tantras from the Mahamudra lineage. Marpa and his students (Milarepa, and through him, Gampopa) founded the Kagyu lineage. The Khön family founded the Sakya lineage. All these later teachings are called the Sarma, and meant to clarify and renew the dharma teachings already present. Later the Gelug school was founded by the followers of the teacher Tsongkhapa.

Each of the major schools in Tibet has hallmarks, specific emphases that developed over time. The Kargyü school is recognized for devotion and sharpness, the Sakyas for incorporating the path with governance and administration, the Gelugpas for emphasis on conduct, intellect and polemics. The Nyingma (“Old Ones”) is the lineage stream from Padmasambhava; it stands out for understanding and articulating the view of the ultimate reality.

The lineage of Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche incorporates both the Kargyü and Nyingma lineages. Both of these streams were incorporated early on in fact.

Chögyam Trungpa was born in 1939 or 1940 in the Mekong riverhead area of Eastern Tibet (Kham). He was recognized as the tulku (reincarnation) of the previous abbot of the Dütsti-til Monastery of Surmang (Tibetan Zurmang). He was the 11th tulku* of this line of teachers. The founder of this lineage was Trunmgase (ca. 1400s) who established the Kargyü monasteries in Surmang.

*Tulku is a system of recognizing reincarnated teachers that was developed in Tibet. It began with the Karmapas, who are the dharma sovereigns of the Karma Kargyü lineage. It subsequently was incorporated by all the other schools and became the accepted method of continuing leadership and authority in Tibet.

Trungpa Rinpoche was considered extraordinarily bright and realized very early on. He studied with his root teacher Sechen Kongtrul (Jamgon Kongtrul tulku of Sechen Monastery) and later with Khenpo Gangshar. Both of these teachers were Nyingma Lamas and they both carried another aspect of enlightenment known as crazy wisdom. Crazy wisdom was something that emerged in the Nyingma lineage from Padmasambhava. It has a parallel in the Mahasiddha tradition of India and specifically in the Kargyü forefathers such as Tilopa. They are noted for freedom from conventional mores or political correctness of the day, difficult to characterize and unpredictable in behavior, but importantly they are also known for the efficacy of their teachings. These are very direct and fresh, bringing the dharma in a manner that is highly pertinent to the state of the world and completely consistent with the dharma itself.

China had annexed and occupied Tibet in 1950. By the mid 1950s the Chinese military

established control of much of the outlying regions and began to oppress the Buddhist system of government through jailing many of the tulkus and heads of the monasteries. All this came as the Chinese asserted control through arbitrary detention and in some cases destruction of sacred sites, monasteries and religious communities. Trungpa Rinpoche had skills in divination and foresaw the end coming. Together with a great number of students and friends he fled Tibet under very difficult conditions in 1959, arriving in India after 8 months.

Arriving in India, he was appointed by the Dalai Lama to set up a school for exiled tulkus and lamas. Soon he received a scholarship to attend Oxford University where he studied Western thought and culture for several years; at the same time he founded a retreat center in Scotland with his bursar from Dudtse-til, Akong Rinpoche.

In 1970 he left the UK and came to the United States, initially settling in Boulder CO. He began a different method of teaching after he encountered and befriended Suzuki Roshi in California, which focused on traditional training in the three yanas. He established numerous practice and study centers both in the USA, Canada and Europe called Dharmadhatu. He introduced Shambhala Teachings in 1977, a secular approach to meditation and a vision for enlightened society.

Trungpa Rinpoche died in April 1987.