A Brief History of Buddhism in India - Part 2

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:12:32

We left our little fledgling Indian religion about 400 years old after the death of its founder, struggling with all kinds of contentious issues and the splits into eighteen different schools over various doctrinal differences. But the biggest upheaval was yet to come. Somewhere around 100 BCE, the Mahayana emerged.

The start of the Mahayana movement is really shrouded in mystery. Nobody seems to know exactly why it arose or where it came from. There are speculations that it grew out of a focus that had started to shift from monastic practice to lay practice. I think this is an interesting point. As we explore these different schools that arose in Buddhism, I'd like to encourage us to look at them from the standpoint of our own lives and hearts and understanding. What I find is that each of the schools speaks to me in a different way, and they all have something important for my overall spiritual life.

This suggestion that the Mahayana grew out of lay people's practice is very interesting to me. We are, all of us, lay people here. Sogyal Rinpoche is a lay person. For those of you who don't know, he has a wife and two children. His oldest daughter is now seventeen and is in a Buddhist nunnery in India, which is a beautiful thing. She plans to stay there seven or eight years, he said. I think this must be every parent's dream—to have a child grow up in their footsteps. Mostly if you suggest a child go in your direction, they'll run the other way. But his daughter is a beautiful young woman.

As lay people, I think we can't withdraw from the world. We are always in contact through our work and through family with human relations. Because of this contact with human relations, we are often up against the dilemma of human suffering. Monastics can withdraw to a certain extent. Of course, then they have to live with other monastics, and that's not easy either, but they're a little bit withdrawn from some of the stress of the world. So it could be in this way that the Mahayana came out of the struggles of ordinary people like you and me and put more immediate emphasis on compassion as a direct response to the suffering that they saw around themselves.

There's another suggestion. These are all suggestions I've read from scholars, none of whom have a firm bead on the true answer. Another suggestion is that the Mahayana arose because it was not so easy to become an arahant anymore. The arahant ideal had fueled the explosion of Buddhism for many years. I'm sure you know how in the early days the Buddha would give one discourse and fifty people would become fully liberated. His third discourse, the Fire Sermon, he was addressing a group of Vedic fire worshipers of the god Agni. He gave a discourse called the Fire Sermon where he pointed out everything is burning—burning with the fire of greed, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of delusion. On completion

of that talk, all fifty people were fully liberated. As you read stories of people who came to practice with him, it happened a lot like that. They practiced for one week, two weeks, a few months—full liberation.

So the arahant ideal was strong and realizable then. You had living examples of people who in very short periods of time and moderate effort could completely wake up. But as time went on, that became less and less frequent. The Buddha even made this comment over the course of his lifetime that the quality of the practitioners as he was getting older had declined from the early days. So you can imagine after his death it became probably harder and harder to actualize the arahant ideal. There were fewer fully enlightened beings around to inspire.

There needed to be a new generative ideal, and that became the bodhisattva. Maybe we don't aim just to free ourselves in this lifetime, but we take a much more expansive view—that we aim to develop all the qualities of a Buddha over many, many lifetimes. It's said that the Buddha himself made his resolution four immeasurable eons previously and 100,000 kalpas on top of that. It took him that long to develop the qualities of heart and mind to be able to wake up fully in one lifetime.

The bodhisattva ideal then offers us a different way to view our path. Implicit within it is the notion of bodhicitta—that we carry on our own practice in order to bring enough wholesome qualities to fruition that we ourselves awaken and then can help bring others to awakening. I find this is an ideal that resonates very strongly for Westerners today. We are nominally at Spirit Rock, a Theravadan center, and yet the appeal of the bodhisattva and the quality of bodhicitta is so strong that for me it's hard to imagine teaching without them anymore. I find a great resonance with these qualities in us as laypeople today.

Another group of scholars felt that the Mahayana grew as a backlash to the Abhidhamma—that the Abhidhamma had gotten too dry, analytical, intellectual, divorced from heart qualities and the immediacy of liberation. The Mahayana was a way to bring that back to the center of the teachings.

In whatever way it grew, it grew as a very significant movement. Some suggest that it started in southern India, but I don't think there's clarity even about that. But it clearly grew and spread over the whole of India because there was something so powerful about it.

It's interesting to reflect how this bodhisattva ideal sprang to the center at this time period because it's not as though this is a new idea. Siddhartha Gautama was the bodhisattva in his lifetime and previous lifetimes who became the Buddha of our historical era.

All his followers knew that. He alluded to his previous lives throughout his teaching career. Yet throughout the entire Pali Canon, there is not a single record of Gautama Buddha recommending the bodhisattva path to any other practitioner. I find this quite remarkable. So either he did recommend it, perhaps on an individual basis, and it never got recorded because it wasn't considered a public teaching, or he simply never recommended it—leaving it up to individuals to recognize the possibility and make their own resolution.

There is a story in the Pali Canon that describes how the Buddha we know received his initial inspiration, and I'd like to share it because it illuminates another important aspect of the Mahayana. Four immeasurable eons and 100,000 kalpas ago, there was said to be an ascetic named Sumedha who had been practicing quite intensely. On this particular day, he was planning to attend a discourse by the Buddha of that era, whose name was Dipankara.

On his way to the teaching, Sumedha caught sight of the Buddha Dipankara and was so moved by his nobility, radiance, and dignified bearing that he experienced a profound shift. In that moment, he no longer wanted to become enlightened simply as Sumedha. Instead, he gave up his own immediate awakening to aspire toward becoming a Buddha in a future era. He made this aspiration in the presence of Dipankara, who read his thoughts and affirmed that Sumedha would indeed continue in his growth to become a future Buddha.

The text tells us that if Sumedha had proceeded to listen to Dipankara's teachings that day, he was spiritually ripe and would have attained full enlightenment. But he willingly gave that up. He then retired to a cave for meditation and reflection, contemplating what he would need to cultivate in order to prepare himself for future Buddhahood. The list he developed became known as the Ten Paramitas.

Interestingly, the Theravadan texts enumerate ten paramitas, while the Mahayana tradition lists six. The Mahayana list isn't simply a subset of the Theravadan version—they differ somewhat in their specifics. Nonetheless, these paramitas represent qualities of heart and mind that can be developed both through formal meditation practice and through engaged living in the world. This framework fits beautifully with lay life, unlike other traditional lists such as the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, which develop most effectively only in intensive retreat practice.

The paramitas include qualities like generosity, ethical conduct, patience, and equanimity—virtues we can cultivate whether in retreat or in the midst of daily life. These became the structural foundation for the Mahayana path and form the heart of Shantideva's Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life.

The other crucial element the Mahayana brought to prominence was placing the notion of emptiness at the very center of its philosophical framework. The concept of emptiness wasn't new—it appears throughout the early texts, the Pali Canon, and the teachings of the other eighteen schools of Buddhism. However, it wasn't given such central importance. More commonly, the Buddha spoke of what he called the three characteristics of conditioned existence: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness. These occupied the central position in the early teachings.

These three characteristics can be understood as aspects of emptiness, and the Buddha did indeed use the term "emptiness" to describe both the emptiness of self and the emptiness of phenomena. Both concepts appear in the early texts, but they weren't positioned as the primary organizing principle.

The first texts to present emptiness in this new, central way were the Prajnaparamita Sutras, which began

appearing between 100 BCE and 50 CE, right around the turn of that millennium. Much of my commentary on the Mahayana draws from the work of translator Edward Conze, a distinguished British scholar who translated most of the Prajnaparamita texts. He maintained great sympathy for the Mahayana—these translations represented, in many ways, the crown of his life's work. Yet I appreciate his balanced perspective on all schools of Indian Buddhist thought.

Conze's assessment is that there was nothing entirely new in the early Mahayana teachings on emptiness, compassion, or the possibility of becoming a bodhisattva. As he puts it, there was simply a "new emphasis on commonly accepted traditional material." Nevertheless, this reconfiguration—the centrality given to compassion and emptiness—created a sufficiently distinct flavor that the Mahayana emerged as a recognizably new school. The Prajnaparamita writings crystallized these differences in viewpoint.

Prajnaparamita means, as you likely know, the perfection of wisdom or the transcendent quality of wisdom. It represents one of the paramitas in both Theravada and Mahayana traditions. In the sutras, it's viewed as an innate capacity that each of us already possesses—a subtle but significant shift from some of the original texts. This wisdom is sometimes described as the mother of all Buddhas because it's the factor of wisdom inherent in every mind that enables awakening.

Prajnaparamita takes a feminine form, and you can see her represented in the statue at the back of our meditation hall. Typically, we place her on the front altar alongside the Buddha because we appreciate the balance of masculine and feminine principles this represents.

One time a Theravadan monk came in, looked at that assortment and said, "Oh, Mr. and Mrs. Buddha." So for that retreat, we moved her away. This retreat, a little more traditional, just the Buddha is up front.

Just another side note, an interesting side note on Prajnaparamita. I've read from a Tibetan scholar and I've also heard Rinpoche say that Rigpa is considered identical with Prajnaparamita.

Now, the Prajnaparamita Sutras took an interesting form. They have the Buddha delivering most of them as though they were delivered by the historical Buddha. The Heart Sutra, for instance—the Buddha makes a comment. He's not the main speaker, but he makes a comment. But it's set on a classical location from the Pali texts, which is Vulture's Peak in Rajgir. It's a place where the historical Buddha delivered a lot of discourses. So the impression is given that these are also the words of the historical Buddha.

And if you ask a traditional Mahayana follower, in Asia particularly, they will tell you that, oh yes, the Mahayana sutras, Prajnaparamita sutras, and so forth, were delivered by the historical Buddha, but to a different group than the Pali suttas. The Pali suttas were delivered to people of lesser capacity because they really couldn't get it. And these pithy teachings were delivered to the people of higher capacity. And that's why they're separate and why they don't appear in the Pali canon.

Western scholars say there is no evidence for that. Western scholars say that these texts were composed by unknown authors—again, the kind of mystery of the evolution of the Mahayana in the period between

about 150 BCE and 50 CE. They say that there is no record of any Mahayana schools between the death of the Buddha and this period of around 100 BCE.

And some of the records that they look at, just because you might be curious—they looked at the words that were written on the scrolls or the pillars of King Asoka. He planted pillars all around India that carried Dharma messages. And they sometimes mentioned different schools that were local to that area. There's no mention of a school that fits the Mahayana. There were also records kept from donations by kings to religious groups. And so it enumerates some of the eighteen schools of early Buddhism, but there are no records of Mahayana schools.

So the scholars that I've read say there's not even any controversy about the fact that these sutras were written later, authored later. But they put them in the mouth of the Buddha to give them authenticity, I believe, and to make them appear as original.

The early Prajnaparamita Sutras have one particular focus, which is ultimate truth. Over and over and over again, they are statements of the nature of ultimate truth. The Pali texts have mostly teachings about gradual path, developing, cultivating, application of practice. The Mahayana Sutras go back over and over again to the ultimate.

This is also from Conze: "The lengthy writings on perfect wisdom are one long declamation in praise of the absolute. Everybody knows, of course, that nothing can usefully be said about the absolute. This had prompted the Theravadans to keep silent, or at least nearly silent about it. The Mahayanas, on the other hand, consider everything that might reasonably be said about it and then expressly reject it as untrue and inadequate."

So I love this description. It kind of explains where the paradox comes from in our tradition. And if you listen to Zen teachings, you know they are full of paradox. Zen basically built a dynasty on paradox and the apparent contradictions between the conventional truth of things and the ultimate truth. If you answer from the conventional, the Roshi will show you the ultimate. If you answer from the ultimate, he'll show you the conventional so that you don't get stuck in adhering to either one.

So I love the way that this plays out, for example, in the Heart Sutra, the combination of the affirmation and negation that is in the Heart Sutra. In a lot of Japanese monasteries, this is chanted three times a day with meals. And the chant of the Heart Sutra includes things like the negation of a lot of common doctrine.

One of the lines is, "no form, no feeling, no perception, no formations, no consciousness," which you'll probably recognize as the five aggregates. Then it goes on, "no ignorance and so on up to no end of ignorance," which you probably recognize as the chain of dependent origination in forward order—ignorance creating suffering, and then backward order to end of suffering leading to end of ignorance.

So what's so curious about the Heart Sutra is it affirms the basic tenets of classical Buddhism. So they're in

people's minds as the sutra is chanted, and then it negates them. So it says, yeah, here are the teachings, and you get familiar because you're chanting them all the time, but then it takes them away.

So I think this is a beautiful technique. It exposes the practitioner to the basic teachings, and then it negates them to drop the practitioner into emptiness and cut through any clinging—clinging to view, clinging to doctrine.

So one of the interesting flavors you get moving from the Theravada worldview to the Mahayana worldview is you move from kind of a human realm into an archetypal realm.

When you read the stories of the Buddha in the Pali Discourses, you encounter a very human portrait of the man. He had to work with kings who were often in conflict with one another, or the Sangha wouldn't have been supported. He had troublemakers in his community. He had an angry cousin who tried to kill him on a couple of different occasions. When he first awakened, as I think Rinpoche mentioned yesterday, he contemplated not teaching at all. What he said about this was, "If I teach, I think no one will understand it, and that would be a vexation for me." That's a remarkably human emotion to express.

On another occasion, he was visiting a group of monks at a location called Kosambi. The monks were in a very tense period of conflict, having separated into two factions. I don't even remember what they were arguing about, but they were butting heads in quite a mean-spirited way. The Buddha was drawn in and tried to make peace, attempting to get the two factions to drop their complaints and become harmonious, but he was unable to succeed. What he said at the end was, "This is too much of a vexation for me," and he withdrew. Even the Buddha couldn't heal the split within his own sangha.

Late in life, as he was traveling around the countryside on his way to the Parinirvana, he would arrive at a town with his attendant, Ananda, and say, "My back is aching tonight. I need to rest. Ananda, you give the Dharma talk." And the Buddha would go off and rest. You see these very human sides of him in the Pali texts, in the early texts.

When you move into the Mahayana texts, it shifts into a much more archetypal realm. You enter realms of great cosmology and vast expanses of time and space. Let me read a brief excerpt from the Avatamsaka Sutra, The Flower Ornament Sutra, to give you a flavor of this Mahayana vision:

"At that time, the Buddha's lion seat, its round platform of exquisite flowers and many jewels, its base, steps, doors, and all its embellishments, each produced as many great bodhisattvas as there are atoms in a Buddha land. Their names were Oceanic Wisdom, Sovereign King of Occult Powers, Thunder Shaking All, Topknot of Light of Many Jewels, Bold Intelligence of the Sun of Knowledge..."

There's no more Sariputta and Moggallana in there.

"At the same time that they appeared, these bodhisattvas each produced clouds of offerings—clouds of flowers, of all jewels, clouds of all different fragrances, of lotus blossoms, clouds of orbs of jeweled light,

clouds of fragrant flames of boundless realms, clouds of jewel-like light spheres from the treasury of the sun..."

That kind of Buddha doesn't get a backache.

It's fascinating. You receive this very inspiring, vast, imaginative view of the cosmos, which offers a perspective on our human life and our work within it. But at the same time, you lose something of the rooted, bare reality of human existence in these sutras.

Another quality of the early Mahayana texts—I'll again let Conze speak to it—he says another characteristic as the Mahayana sutras evolved was an increasing spirit of sectarianism. This is where you begin to feel the tension between the new school that was emerging and the schools that were already established. The Mahayanas criticized the existing schools for being too self-absorbed, too selfish, too dry, too withdrawn. Again, you can sort of see the lay-monastic flavor in that way of looking.

As the sutras were expounded, some of the early disciples who were very well respected in the Pali texts became the whipping boys in the Mahayana sutras. They became the butt of the jokes. In the Prajnaparamita sutras, it's typically Sariputta who becomes the object of gentle condescension. I mentioned he was the chief disciple in terms of wisdom in the classical texts, but here he becomes the one who needs to be educated because he doesn't quite grasp the new teachings.

In the Prajnaparamita Sutras, the person who most often delivers the message to educate Sariputta is another bhikkhu named Subhuti. Subhuti appears in the classical texts, but he doesn't figure very prominently. The reason he becomes so elevated in the early Mahayana is that he was the Buddha's foremost disciple in loving-kindness. As the quality of heartfulness and compassion became elevated, so Subhuti became elevated as the exemplar of that.

A controversy then arose about what to call the new schools. In the beginning, the new school was called, quite logically I think, the Bodhisattvayana—a name we don't hear very much anymore, but it was the first term that emerged. The old schools were called Sravakayana. Sravaka is a Sanskrit term; the Pali word is savaka, found often in the original Pali texts, meaning "listener." So the disciples of the Buddha were called the savakasangha, the assembly or sangha of those who listened—meaning in this case, listened to the Buddha. You'll hear this in Pali chants: "supatipanno bhagavato savakasangho," the sangha of listeners. This term was applied to the early schools.

But in not too long a time, it evolved into the terms we have today: Mahayana on the one hand and correspondingly Hinayana. I don't think the term Hinayana was invented by the Sravakas themselves. The Mahayanas applied that term to the earlier schools in a somewhat pejorative sense.

This division between Mahayana and Hinayana has persisted to this day. You'll still hear practitioners of Mahayana traditions refer to Theravadans as Hinayanas, likely because there has been so little genuine dialogue between these schools over the centuries. Just to set the record straight, we prefer to be called

Theravadans.

Of course, the Theravadans couldn't let it rest there either, so they developed their own counter-term for the Mahayanas. They called them Vaitulikas, meaning "illusionists." I won't delve into that any further.

From this early Mahayana tradition emerged one of the towering figures in all of Buddhism—perhaps as an individual second only to the Buddha himself. This was a man named Nagarjuna. Not much is known of his life; he lived sometime around the first century CE. I consider him the greatest philosopher in the entire Buddhist tradition after the Buddha.

His key work is called the *Mula Madhyamaka Karika*, or *Root Verses on the Middle Way*. It comprises twenty-seven chapters, each taking a different aspect of life and teaching to reveal where conception tends to form a sense of solidity around the existence of that area—and then cutting it away through rigorous analysis so that we are brought back to the point of emptiness.

He begins with simple things like moving and acting. Is there a doer separate from the action being done? Is there a walker separate from the walking? This isn't too radical—the early schools had this kind of outlook as well. But then he applies this same analysis directly to the Buddha's teachings themselves.

So if you thought you were going to find relief from emptiness by taking refuge in the path, Nagarjuna cuts that out from under you too. Basically, everywhere the mind turns to find some ground, his dialectical inquiry cuts yet again, until finally every place you could go to rest or reify has been taken away.

I think that's both the purpose and the power of his writing—it leads us nowhere else but to emptiness, because any concept we could cling to gets dismantled somewhere along the way.

The philosophical school formed from his teachings is called the Madhyamaka, or Middle Way school, and it remains prevalent in virtually all Mahayana traditions today. He laid a foundation that still endures. All the Tibetan schools revere him for his contribution. In fact, he's probably the single most important philosophical figure in the Gelug school—he's at the very heart of their view of reality.

Let me share a few passages from this pivotal work. There are several good English translations available. If you're just beginning and want something more poetic, Stephen Batchelor's translation is recommended. If you're more philosophically inclined and ready for serious study, Jay Garfield's translation is excellent.

One of the verses states: "Emptiness stops conceptual proliferation." This is remarkably similar to something Rinpoche said this morning when he explained that one meaning of the word *dzog* or *dzogpa* is "end"—and in the practice of Dzogchen, fixations come to an end. This same principle appears in Nagarjuna: when we see the emptiness of things as they actually are, we don't tend to spin off into elaborating thoughts.

Another passage declares: "That to which language refers is denied." This is quite a strong statement. That to which language refers—things like floor, chair, mat—is denied. There's no real object there. How about person? How about sentient being? How about suffering? How about the path itself?

"That to which language refers is denied, because an object experienced by the mind is denied." Nothing ever exists firmly enough to be truly called an object. Things appear only fleetingly, and there's no solid existence there. We cannot say there really is such a thing as an object.

He continues: "The unborn and unceasing nature of reality is comparable to nirvana." This is a radical statement—the very nature of reality is comparable to nirvana.

Normally reality is considered as more like samsara. But Nagarjuna says because it cannot really ever be said to have been born, it can also be said to pass away. Therefore, all things are unborn and unceasing. That which is unborn and unceasing is nirvana. So the nature of reality is like that of nirvana.

Then he elaborated this one other step: Samsara does not have the slightest distinction from nirvana. Nirvana does not have the slightest distinction from samsara. This really opens the doorway for the non-dual. This is the first pointing in any literature that I know of to the ultimate non-duality—that between samsara, the condition one might wish to move out of, and nirvana, the goal to which one might wish to move.

This sort of laying of the foundation, although I don't believe he used the word non-dual, set the stage for the elaboration of the non-dual. The first appearance of which I know in literature is in the Vimalakirti Sutra, which has a whole chapter on non-duality and different ways to view non-duality.

So Nagarjuna was a brilliant, creative, powerful force in Buddhism. The school of the Madhyamaka gained great weight over the centuries. But as was commented this morning, one of the shortcomings is because they were so involved in cutting, cutting, cutting, taking away, taking away, taking away, they didn't put forth any of their own positive teachings. And that's why sometimes other schools will look at this school and say it's a little nihilistic. All it does is take away. It doesn't give us anything to put our faith in or move forward into.

In fact, Nagarjuna himself embraced all of the Buddha's teachings, so that is implicit in his argument. So it's truly not nihilistic, but that's the criticism that other schools will make of it—that it's not positive enough.

Somebody commented last night that Nagarjuna has been claimed as a Mahayanist. Is that actually the case? From my point of view, not necessarily. The language that he used in this root text is completely open to both Theravada and Mahayana views. His use of the word emptiness is more complete than you find in the early texts, but it's just an elaboration. It's not really a new pointing. There's not a single mention in this key text of the word bodhisattva, for instance. There's very little stress on compassion or the paramitas. So it is a text that could fit very comfortably right into the Pali Canon. And I think some

Theravadans are beginning to appreciate this now and to begin to claim Nagarjuna as their own. Because he was so early in the Mahayana, it's hard to know whether he was coming from a Theravada or a Mahayana viewpoint. But he's had tremendous impact on the tradition, particularly in the Mahayana.

So this opening of the equality of samsara and nirvana really lays the groundwork for the next major school that comes into Mahayana, the next major school in India, which is that of the Yogacara. Yogacara doesn't mean a whole lot by itself—it just means the conduct of union. But they're much better known by their central doctrine, which is Chittamatra or mind only. So this is the same as the mind only school that Rinpoche was talking about this morning.

There are a few kind of central theses in the Yogacara philosophy. The first is that of Buddha nature. They were the first to clearly enunciate this teaching. In Sanskrit, the words are tathagatagarbha, which literally means the womb of the tathagatas. So they considered that this innate purity is the birthplace of the Buddhas, somewhat similar to the Prajnaparamita pointing. But the term didn't originally use the word nature. Just like prajnaparamita, it's a very feminine evocation. And it didn't get called nature until the concept migrated to China. Somewhere in China, the translation turned into nature. Then some teacher who was translating Asian concepts to Western in the last 100 years began to use the term Buddha nature. I can't remember who did that. So now that's what's come down to us.

But remember that that's not the way that it was originally stated. Buddha womb would be a clearer way to state it—our Buddha womb. But it does inhere in each of us. It is identical with the concept of the three kayas—the dharmakaya, the sambhogakaya, and the nirmanakaya, which we've been chanting, which I think Rinpoche will explain more about in the next day or two.

Another key feature of the Chittamatra philosophy was an attempt to answer the same question that the Sarvastavadins tried to answer: where are your karmic seeds? Remember the Sarvastavadins tried to answer it by saying that past and future are both existent now? The Chittamatrans answered it by saying, oh, they're in a different layer of the mind. And they created or assumed or discovered, I don't know which—

another layer of consciousness that they say holds the karmic seeds, called the alaya-vijnana, the storehouse consciousness or ground consciousness.

Actually, in their system, it's considered the eighth layer. The seventh consciousness is considered to be, I think it's mana-vijnana. Does anybody know, is that the right designation for the seventh? Seventh. And the idea of that, as I understand it, is that that is where the ongoing ego sort of continues from.

So these two extra consciousnesses, in addition to the five physical consciousnesses and the mind consciousness, help explain how things happen that otherwise were hard to explain, such as the continuation of the sense of self and the continuation of karmic seeds. So these are all part of Yogacara.

They also invented the term of the three turnings of the wheel, which you may have heard. So this comes

out of Chittamatra philosophy. They say the first turning of the wheel was the Buddha's first teaching of the Four Noble Truths. It happened in Sarnath shortly after his awakening. The discourse in which that teaching was given is known as Dhammacakkha-pavatana-sutta, the discourse on setting in motion the wheel of the Dhamma. So that's where this concept of the Dhamma wheel and the turning of the wheel comes from.

Then they said the second turning of the wheel was the Prajnaparamita Sutras with the focus on emptiness. And they considered that their teachings, specifically on Buddha nature and the three kayas, were the third turning of the wheel. So if you hear this phrase, three turnings of the wheel, that's specifically from the Chittamatrins.

They became a very influential school also because they became the textual basis for a lot of later developments, including, to some extent, their influence on Dzogchen, Mahamudra, Chan, and Zen. So although Rinpoche said their view is not identical with that of Dzogchen, it provided a philosophical basis for some of the Dzogchen view.

The Chittamatrins peaked in their influence and popularity around the fourth century. So they continued, but they kind of built up and then their influence went on, but they themselves didn't evolve much more. And in fact, philosophically, this is the end to the development of Buddhism in India. It didn't evolve philosophically beyond this school, apart from small variations.

There was a little discussion this morning about the relationship between the Dzogchen view and the Madhyamaka view. And I was curious about this, so I asked Mingyur Rinpoche when he was here on his first teaching trip to the West. It was almost 10 years ago now, I think. Mingyur Rinpoche is Tsoknyi Rinpoche's younger brother, who's now also a wonderful teacher.

He had just done a retreat in Santa Rosa and my wife and I had the privilege of taking him around a little bit to see some of Marin County. We thought he would enjoy the sights and we had a translator who was Tashi, who many of you know from Tsoknyi Rinpoche's monastery. So we thought we'll take him up to the top of Mount Tam, a beautiful day and beautiful viewpoint.

And as we were driving along, I tried to make a little conversation. And I asked Rinpoche how he found the West. And he said, "Square and clean." And that was it. He didn't elaborate any further. He lived in India, so I could sort of understand why it would look square and clean to him. Didn't elaborate anymore.

Well, I tried another time, and I said, "Rinpoche, do you think Tibetans are happier than Westerners?" He said, "Yes." Didn't elaborate anymore.

So we got up to the top of Mount Tam and we were walking around the path at the top, looking at the view of San Francisco and the coastline. There was not much conversation happening. So I thought, I'll try a different tack. I said, "Rinpoche, what is the difference between the Madhyamaka view and the Dzogchen view? The view of Nagarjuna's school and the view of Dzogchen."

Then his eyes lit up. He said, "Ah!" And he started talking. He said, "The first thing you have to understand is there are 18 different kinds of emptiness." And then he talked and talked and he wanted to sit down. So we sat down right on the path. It's a path that only two people can walk by. But four of us sat down and we had about a 10-minute conversation about the difference between these two views.

And what he said in the end was that the Madhyamakas believe that the Dzogchenpas believe that something exists, but we don't actually believe that it exists. Can you get that? It's this emptiness-luminosity union. The Madhyamakas believe that the mind-only school or the Dzogchen school or somebody

is attributing more reality to that than they actually are. And that's the basis of the dispute. But in Minju Rinpoche's understanding, the Dzogchen school isn't attributing any more reality to that. So they're off the hook.

But there's a beautiful way that the Yogacarans responded to these attacks. They were basically unfazed by the criticism. And they said, "We're not worried about the theory. It's all constructed, and it all dissolves when you realize emptiness." This is a wonderful view, I think, to hold to.

When we talk about how to appreciate the spirit of these different schools in our own practice, this is one I've come back to again and again. Because the Madhyamakas, truth to tell, are not very far apart from some Theravadans. Practitioners who follow the Abhidhamma and the Visuddhimagga particularly would level the same criticism of the Yogacarans: they're positing something that doesn't truly exist.

I was teaching one part of a three-month course at a center in Massachusetts, and this fellow knew that I was practicing Dzogchen and sometimes taught with a Dzogchen master. He said to me, "How can you do that? Because it says very clearly in the words of the Buddha that if you begin to propagate the false dharma, then it will start to erode the true Dhamma in the world, and the words of the Buddha will be lost."

And what I said to him is, "Well, I don't know about that, but this method really works."

I find that a very helpful thing to come back to again and again. Any philosophical view that is put out, ask yourself: Number one, do you really know how it is? Do you know from your own direct experience that emptiness and clarity are indivisible and the way, the extent to which they exist or clarity exists and the extent to which it doesn't? I think Rinpoche said it's only when one has realized emptiness directly for oneself that one could understand that. Even if one has realized emptiness, one's memory may not be so good.

So I think it's important to keep asking on these philosophical questions: Do I know that absolutely from my own immediate experience? Or am I taking that as someone's teaching, someone else's view that I'm adopting? And if I don't know it absolutely from my own experience, then there's a possibility that both views could have some validity. Maybe not that either one has to be absolutely right, but they're both

different ways of validly describing some truthful experience.

Then, if we're willing to live with a little bit of ambiguity, we can say, "Oh, could this view be useful in my practice?" Because all these views are meant to lead to our awakening. They're not meant for us to take philosophical stands on and make arguments about. They're meant to be helpful to lead to awakening, nothing else.

So, can I make use of this view? If you can, then it's a useful and skillful means for you. That's the way I approach the different views that I hear. If I can learn something from all of them, then I'll use them. But I don't have to make a final judgment until I know in my direct experience the way things are.

So one of the things I appreciate a lot in Buddhism is lots of different schools, and therefore they suit different people, different personalities. Some people are drawn to the Yogacara school because it has a great basis for faith. Like Rinpoche, I also feel Westerners need a basis for faith. We've lost our ability to believe in anything transcendent, anything that has the nature of ultimacy, through our intellect. And this presents a very refined philosophical exposition that gives a basis for faith in something ultimate. I find its impact on Westerners very uplifting—gives confidence, hope, strength. A very helpful view to have.

But other people are so logical, like Nagarjuna was, that they absolutely need to cut away anything that they can't directly experience. And then it doesn't work so well for them. So for them, just resting in the quality of emptiness is the useful way forward—not taking up any other view, just emptiness of direct experience. That's useful for them.

So different approaches suit different people. We kind of have a joke in our scene. Of the three major schools of Buddhism that are around in the West today, different people tend to be drawn to them differently. And the joke in our scene is that the artists go to Tibetans, the carpenters go to Zen, and the therapists go to Vipassana.

A little overgeneralized, but you can get the flavor.

So on the whole, Guenther says that the Theravadans tend to be a little more rational and the Mahayanas tend to be a little more mystical. This is a distinction I do see in what draws different people. But then he qualified that. He said it's because they're not exclusively one way or the other. The difference is really between the rational mysticism of Mahayana and the mystically tinged rationalism of Theravada.

They had much common ground in the middle ranges of the path where the ascetic strove for emancipation in a quite rational and business-like manner. That is, if you look at practitioners from the outside, you may not see much difference in what they were doing, but a little bit of difference in personality, and so a little bit of difference in emphasis and philosophy. But the basic work of liberating the mind looks much the same.

Again, the two have a little bit different perspective on how the path unfolds. The Mahayana tends to view

it from the point of view of intrinsic purity, which is only covered by obscurations. The obscurations need only to be removed like clouds parting so that the sun can shine through. The Theravada looks more from the point of view of the defilements as being front and center—how do we work with the defilements in such a way as to eliminate them? What this involves is building up strong qualities of mind, the beautiful qualities of mind: mindfulness, concentration, equanimity, loving-kindness, and compassion that can release the defilements.

So do you start from the purity going out, or do you start from the defilements working against them to develop strength? From the point of view of moment-by-moment experience, it may not feel very different, but the flavor is a little different for the practitioner. Just the perspective the practitioner has on their practice may feel a little different.

As Shabkar taught, "Butter is made of the essence of milk, but if the milk isn't churned, the butter won't form"—the butter being the awakened mind, milk being where we are today. In either case, there's a lot of work to be done.

Another thing I was curious about: when the Mahayana came, did the Hinayana schools wither away? They didn't. In many cases, the two lived together in shared monasteries quite happily, practicing side by side. Then there were other monasteries dedicated to one or the other. A Chinese pilgrim who went to India around 400 CE reported that about 60% of the monasteries he found were early school, about 24% were Mahayana, and 16% were mixed, where the two were living together. Again, a later visitor, a pilgrim in the 7th century, came back and reported that the majority of monasteries were early schools, and a minority were Mahayana at that time.

Then came one final development, a big development: the Vajrayana. This is, to me, a very interesting story. I found this story mostly in a terrific book called *Indestructible Truth*, written by Reggie Ray, who's a student of Trungpa Rinpoche and a professor at Naropa for a long time, and now a dharma teacher in his own right. *Indestructible Truth* is a really wonderful overview of Tibetan Buddhism. If you're new to the subject, it's a really good way to get a read on the whole range of systems in there.

The emergence of the Vajrayana is not a new school philosophically. There's no new philosophical ground being broken, but it's the development of an incredibly powerful bag of tricks—or as one of my friends put it, incredible implements in the technology of consciousness. Tantra and Vajrayana are more or less synonymous, as I understand. So if we talk about tantric teachings in Buddhism or Vajrayana, we're talking about the same body of techniques.

But they actually started in Hindu schools and not in Buddhist. They started in the Hindu worship of the god Shiva. Shiva had been an old fertility god going way, way back, but the growth of Brahmanic culture overshadowed Shiva for a long time. Shiva was not part of the Brahmanic culture. As Buddhism started to grow up in India, it started to wear away some of the tight hold that the Brahman caste had, and this allowed the influence of Shiva to come back up into the culture.

So on an informal basis, people in probably villages all over the country started doing forms of worship to the god Shiva. The style was that they would visualize themselves as Shiva or as his female consorts, goddesses, and dance together. In this visualization, imagining themselves as the god, they would start to feel that they were channeling Shiva's energy or the energy of the goddesses who were his female counterparts. This started to be enacted in a ritual way and was called deva yoga—union with the god in the Hindu tradition.

Then some of these practitioners said, "Hmm, this is pretty good stuff. I'm feeling a lot of energy from this. Pretty strong, pretty powerful. What if we actually enacted the intercourse of Shiva and his consort?" Well, this was not a public kind of thing to do, but they went off into private settings and began to enact ritual intercourse between those who were visualizing themselves as Shiva and those who were visualizing themselves as Shiva's consort or goddess. This became a powerful way to practice.

Eventually this drew Buddhist practitioners as well. The Buddhist practitioners started to understand how they could use the bodily energies that were generated either through the visualization or through intercourse to speed their journey to enlightenment. Some of the tantric practices are clearly about generating different kinds of bodily energy and using that generated energy for awakening—not simply for pleasure. The purpose is not pleasure; the purpose is awakening.

So this began to be taken up in Buddhist schools, both the visualization and the ritual intercourse. What do you suppose the classical monks and nuns thought about this? They were not too keen.

They faced a dilemma: either lose all their practitioners to this vibrant new scene that was far more dynamic than what was happening in the celibate monasteries, or make some adaptation. So they chose to adapt, incorporating the visualization aspects of these practices while bringing them into the celibate monastic context.

Since that time, this has been part of the Buddhist tradition called Vajrayana. It can involve either visualization or actual sexual union—both threads have continued down to the present day.

In the Tibetan schools, the Geluk tradition, of which the Dalai Lama is representative, has tended to favor the celibate monastic path ever since the time of Tsongkhapa. They have maintained their inclination toward monastic discipline and celibacy, so they tend to use only the visualization form. But the other schools, particularly the Kagyu and Nyingma, employ both the visualization form and the ritual enactment of intercourse for non-monastics. Monks in those traditions may also follow a completely celibate path, but lay practitioners are able to use both forms of tantric practices.

There are a range of practices that constitute the Vajrayana. I don't know enough about them to speak knowledgeably, but obviously the visualizations of deities, the mantras, and the mandalas are all part of that system. Dzogchen is a tantric practice. In the Nyingma school, there are considered to be six levels of tantric practice, many having to do with bodily energy—altering and raising bodily energy. Dzogchen is

considered the highest of the six tantras and is called Ati Yoga in that system. So Dzogchen is indeed a Vajrayana practice, a tantric practice.

One of the most beautiful things that can be said about these practices—and you'll especially appreciate this as Rinpoche unfolds the meditation instructions over the next day or two—is that the Vajrayana takes as the basis of the path the awakened mind itself. Let me say that again because it's very significant: the Vajrayana takes as the basis of the path the awakened mind.

Someone asked a question yesterday about a direct path versus a gradual path. I think possibly one reason Dzogchen might be considered a direct path is that we start from the point of view of awakening and then simply don't let go of it. That will be the instruction, essentially, in Dzogchen meditation. We start with awakening as closely as we can intuit it, and that becomes our path. You'll hear more about this, but I wanted to illustrate how dramatic the Vajrayana approach is, how revolutionary, and point to some of the power inherent in it.

So when did Dzogchen come along? Dzogchen was a later development. The story of its transmission, which I repeat from a scholar named John Reynolds—a Westerner, I believe British, who speaks Tibetan and is a scholar of the old texts—says that from what he understands, Dzogchen originated in a being named Samantabhadra. Samantabhadra is a deity in the Vajrayana system. Let me read you who Samantabhadra is:

Samantabhadra is the ultimate Dharmakaya aspect of Buddhahood, beyond conception by the finite intellect, being without limitation and all-pervading like infinite space.

You got him? So this is where the Dzogchen view originated.

He then transmitted it to a being who was only slightly less connected to our realm, slightly more connected to our realm, named Vajrasattva. Vajrasattva is one of the key deities in the Nyingma lineage—he's the statue behind me on the altar in front of the Buddha—also a being of great purity. This is a description of Vajrasattva: he represents the principle of Buddha enlightenment which is beyond the cycle of conditioned existence, beyond all time and history. So Vajrasattva also exists on a somewhat different level than you and I.

It's said that Vajrasattva transmitted the Dzogchen instructions to Garab Dorje. Garab Dorje was considered to be from Uddiyana, the same area as Padmasambhava, and the times are very tentative, but perhaps around the 6th century CE. Uddiyana, by the way—I don't know if I mentioned this the other night—is considered to be northwest of what's currently India, perhaps in Pakistan or Afghanistan.

Garab Dorje had students who included Vairochana, Vimalamitra, and Padmasambhava. It was these three who took the Dzogchen teachings into Tibet. Particularly Padmasambhava is revered as the founder of the Nyingma lineage in Tibet and the one who primarily instructed Tibetans in Dzogchen.

Interestingly, as a sort of confirmation of that time frame, Padmasambhava went into Tibet around the 8th century. Two Dzogchen texts were found in caves in China in a place called Dunhuang. If any of you have heard of it, it's an amazing archaeological find where practitioners lived for years. There are beautiful frescoes still on the walls because it's so dry—desert-like conditions have preserved the paintings. You can still visit there. Two Dzogchen texts were found in a library that was sealed in the 10th century, so there's clear evidence of Dzogchen teachings in China from the 10th century. It's believed to have been in Tibet from the 8th century.

So that brings us to where we are today—here we are with a Dzogchen master from Tibet.

Here we are today with a Dzogchen master from Tibet instructing us in these meditation practices.

To complete the story in India, as I mentioned last night, Buddhism was essentially wiped out between the 8th and 12th centuries. Invasions from the West began in the 8th century and had swept completely across the Gangetic plain by the 12th century. Buddhism disappeared from India at that time. The monasteries were destroyed, many of the monks and nuns were killed, and the texts were burned. Who knows how many irreplaceable texts were lost—all those early canons from the Sarvāstivādins and the Sautrāntikas and so forth. All of those gone. Who knows how many Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna texts were lost. We rely now on the pieces that remained in Sri Lanka, Tibet, and China primarily.

So here we are today. What can we take from the past? I think we can understand that philosophical disputes are conceptual and don't need to divide us personally, that we can respond to the different points of view in the various schools and use them in our own practice and teaching. There is in the foundation of the Nikāya schools—the classical schools—very clear and concrete step-by-step instructions for a gradual path. In the Mahāyāna schools, we find deep philosophical pointings to the ultimate truth of things and inspiring visions of cosmology. And in the Vajrayāna, there is a very powerful set of tools to transform consciousness, should we wish to explore them.

I think we're very fortunate to be at a position in history when all of this is available to us. All of it is possible.

So we'll stop there.

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