Non-Dual Awareness: Bridging Theravāda and Vajrayāna Understanding

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:02:56

In all the areas of integration of the Dzogchen view into the Vipassana world, I think there's one concept that strikes more fear into the heart of committed Theravādans than any other: the concept of non-duality. As soon as the non-dual teaching started to appear in the West, different Theravādan scholars sprang up to refute the view that non-duality could be a legitimate philosophical perspective in Buddhism.

I've been in some of these conversations myself. Recently, I had a conversation with a Pali scholar about non-duality. I have to say, it's taken me a while to figure out exactly what this word means—I don't know if you've really looked into it. It's used in many different senses in Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna writings. In fact, in the Vimalakīrti Sūtra, one of the Mahāyāna sūtras, there's a whole chapter on non-duality that goes into many of the dualities that are negated by the Mahāyāna view.

During our conversation, the scholar asked, "Well, non-duality doesn't mean they're trying to say that consciousness and its object are one, does it?" Well, unfortunately, that is what is meant. I want to talk about that a little bit and then see how that leads to the other aspects of non-duality.

This is a term that I've puzzled over considerably. You'll hear Rinpoche use it. You'll hear it in Vajrayāna teachings—the concept of a non-dual awareness. One obvious meaning is egolessness: that there's not a separate observer who's standing apart from experience and observing it. This is a view held within the Theravāda—essentially the view of anattā. The observer is not separate.

But in all the Pali texts, as I think we talked about the other night, consciousness is a dhātu, one of the eighteen dhātus or elements of the sense doors, that's separate from phenomena. So there's consciousness of sight, and that's different from the sight itself. The Theravādan view states that sense experience arises—called contact—when three things come together. In the case of the eye: a visible form, a working eye, and the factor of eye consciousness. These are considered to be three distinct things. When those happen, contact arises. That means we see one another, we see a tree or whatever. This is described in the suttas, the original words of the Buddha as recorded in the Pali suttas.

In the Abhidhamma, this concept got strengthened even further. Remember, the Abhidhamma is that piece of the Pali Canon that takes these original sutta concepts and systematizes them, laying them out in a very detailed and consistent map. In the Abhidhamma, things that are directly experienceable were given the name ultimate reality. Anything that's directly experienceable is called an ultimate, and things that aren't are called conventional.

Just as an example, "turkey" is a conventional reality. It's only a conventional designation for that creature. The actual experienceable aspects of turkey are the five aggregates or the six sense bases and their consciousnesses. Those are the discrete elements that make up turkey—or human being, for that matter. But the concept "human being" is a conceptual invention. You can't experience a human being directly. You actually experience their form, their consciousness, their mental formations, and so forth.

In the Abhidhamma, when it classified these things as ultimate reality, it gave them a kind of independent existence. In the literature, this is referred to as "own being" or svabhāva. It had an independent existence all of its own. The elements specifically that the Abhidhamma gave this independent existence to and called ultimate were: form, or matter (rūpa); the factors of mind—all the different mental elements that operate both emotionally and cognitively, including feeling and perception and attention, as well as all the unwholesome emotions, the afflictive emotions of greed, envy, hatred, delusion, as well as the refined and sublime meditative states and qualities that Rinpoche was talking about today—compassion, faith, renunciation, loving-kindness, joy. These are all in a category called cetasikas, or mental factors.

The third of these ultimates in the usual realm is called citta, or consciousness—the thing that knows all the others. Those are in the realm of existence. The fourth ultimate reality is nibbāna.

Matter, mental factors, and consciousness—that's a pretty concise map. I mean, that's a good map for what exists.

But as the Abhidhamma view evolved over time, people really concretized these things until they acquired more importance than they should have. Particularly, this notion of their independent existence became too entrenched, and people lost track of the emptiness truth. Or you could say they lost track of the unifying truth that holds all existence together.

This was the very notion that Nagarjuna attacked in his central work that we've discussed several times: *Verses on the Fundamental Middle Way*. He showed that all these dhammas—all these different kinds of elements—are dependently arisen, except for nibbana. All the others are dependently arisen and therefore empty. He goes to great lengths to demonstrate that none of them actually has an independent existence. They all depend on other things.

So you could say that Nagarjuna's real motive in writing his central work was to refute the philosophical position that the Abhidhamma had come to occupy in early Buddhism. Remember, this is about 100 CE. The Abhidhamma view had become too concretized, too entrenched. Nagarjuna came along and basically destroyed it as a philosophical view because his logic was so impeccable. That really opened up the gates for emptiness—and also non-duality.

But I want to stress: it's not that this idea of emptiness is absent from the Pali suttas, the original teachings of the Buddha in Pali. I want to read a couple of passages that really draw this out.

This is from a sutta in the Samyutta Nikaya called the Kacchinagotta Sutta. Someone named Kacchinagotta

approaches the Buddha and asks, "What do you mean by right view?"—this being the first factor of the Eightfold Path. He's asking the Buddha to explain what constitutes right view.

And this is the Buddha's answer: "This world, Kacchinagotta, for the most part depends upon a duality—upon the notion of existence and the notion of non-existence. But for one who sees the origin of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of non-existence in regard to this world. And for one who sees the cessation of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of existence in regard to this world."

Isn't that beautiful? If you see the arising correctly, you don't cling to the idea of non-existence. In other words, forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, thoughts do arise. There is not zero here. There is something. Because there is something, the notion of non-existence is not right—it's one extreme.

"But for one who sees the cessation of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of existence in regard to the world." In other words, if we look closely at our experience in meditation, any object that we think exists—you can take that sound as an example—if we stay with it, we see its disappearance. And when we see its disappearance, we know the world doesn't have a solid or permanent or stable kind of existence. No sense phenomenon does.

So the Buddha continues: "'Everything exists,' Kacchinagotta—this is one extreme. 'Everything does not exist'—this is the second extreme. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathagata teaches the Dhamma by the middle. With ignorance as condition, volitional formations come to be. With volitional formations as condition, consciousness comes to be..." And he goes into the chain of dependent origination. You can recognize this as the twelve links of dependent origination. "Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering. But with remainderless fading away and cessation of ignorance comes cessation of formations..." and so forth. "Such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering."

So the key insight here is this: to hold the view that things really exist is wrong. And you can see this is where the world is caught up. If you go to the person on the street and say, "Does this world exist or not?" they'll say yes. If you say it doesn't, you're likely to get carted off somewhere and administered drugs. So in actual fact, the ordinary worldview is that this physical world is the ultimate reality—this is the ultimate reference point. And that is expressive of the view of solid existence.

But philosophers then came along and said, "No, no, nothing exists." But the Buddha said that's too far. So this is the whole idea of things being dependently arisen and existing in an empty way. You can't say they exist and you can't say they don't exist.

There's another way that this is expressed in another sutta in the Samyutta Nikaya that I really love. The Buddha, again, is denying this idea of permanence. He took up a little bit of soil in his fingernail and said, "Bhikkhus, there is not even this much form that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, and that will remain the same like eternity itself. If there was this much form that was permanent, stable,

eternal, not subject to change, the living of the holy life for the complete destruction of suffering could not be discerned."

Isn't that interesting? Liberation would not be possible if there was even a speck of matter that was permanent and enduring. Why? Because the universe would get jammed up with existence and nothing could change enough for us to become liberated. So even the path and our liberation depends on emptiness, depends on nothing being fixed within us.

This is kind of a radical statement. I don't know if you've thought about the implications of this, but what does it do to the conventional idea of God? If you think of God as the old man up in the sky with the gray beard who is ever-existent and has created the rest of this, this makes a clear statement about that kind of understanding of God. So that's why it's said that the Dalai Lama has said that Buddhism is atheistic. It's atheistic in the sense of a permanent creator God having any possibility. So this is the statement in the suttas where the Buddha makes that claim. I find that really interesting.

This is Samyutta 22, Sutta 97, called "The Fingernail." The Blessed One took up a little bit of soil in his fingernail and said to the bhikkhus, "Because there is not even this much form that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, and that will remain the same just like eternity itself. If there was this much form that was permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, the living of the holy life for the complete destruction of suffering could not be discerned." Basically it means it could not be found in this world. So the living of the holy life is only possible due to emptiness.

This really prefigures Nagarjuna. Nagarjuna's whole work is very much along these same lines. So I just want to really make clear that this idea of emptiness, of the mode of existence being between the extremes of solidly existing and not existing at all, is in the early texts from the very beginning. Later Mahayana philosophers drew this out and made it central in the teachings, but it was there from the very early days of the Pali suttas.

In the early days this was understood, but I think what happened is that the Abhidhamma somewhat got elevated over the years, and this kind of emptiness was a little bit lost track of. I think this still goes on today. One of the history books that I read said that in some schools, particularly in Burma and Sri Lanka today, the Abhidhamma is elevated above the suttas as an authoritative reference. I found that really interesting.

Again, I've said this before, but what's so beautiful about the Pali suttas is that they can go with all the different schools. They go with the Theravada, they go with the Mahayana, they go with the Vajrayana. And I haven't really found any contradictions from that base.

So let's take a look at this question again of the non-dual awareness and what this means. The suttas do talk about consciousness and its object as two things. But let's investigate that a little further. We talked about consciousness the other night, but let's look at it again.

As you're listening to this sound, the sound is an object in the physical world. It's one of the sense objects. But within you, as you're hearing, there's a hearing consciousness going on. That's a mental activity or function, because you're not dead. If you were a corpse, or if you were fast asleep, there wouldn't be hearing consciousness going on even though the sound was present. Is that clear? Or if you were deaf—if the ear wasn't working.

So consciousness is there along with the sound in every moment. The consciousness is what holds the sound, and that's what reveals the experience. So the question I want to ask is: Is that one experience or two? You're hearing the sound, right? As you pay attention to the sound, you know there's a physical thing there and there's consciousness. Is that one experience or two?

Let's assume the mind is clear, so we won't introduce defilement, ego, and all that. We're just looking at the bare level of sense consciousness. In hearing, how many objects do you hear? Does the majority vote for one? Any that vote for two?

I also experience it as one, and I want to reconcile that with the teachings. I take it as one experience, and I'll use this bowl to illustrate something. Is this bowl round or is it gold?

Good answer. We could make two statements about it, couldn't we? We could say the roundness is different from the goldness. That's true, isn't it? Roundness is one thing and color is another. But how many bowls are there? There's only one bowl.

So what I'd say is that in the hearing, there's only one experience, but we could pull out two different aspects of it. One's mental and one's physical. Just like with the bowl, there are two different aspects, but it's one unity. That's the way I understand it. In fact, it's the way I often talk about it in teaching Vipassana retreats—that sense experience is one experience, but has two aspects: a mental aspect and a physical aspect.

This is the way I understand awareness being non-dual, even in the classic Theravadan view of consciousness of an object. We don't even have to go to the Rigpa understanding of cognizance and emptiness. Just in the simple Theravadan view of consciousness and object, I actually experience it as a lack of duality. But it can be analyzed into two parts if you want to look that way.

This makes sense. It makes sense to talk about roundness and gold. It makes sense to talk about consciousness and sound, but originally they're not two things. So I encourage you to play with this in your practice when you're doing analytical practice—not when you're resting in the view. Just rest. But as you're looking into your experience, take a look and see if you can get a sense of how awareness and its contents are really one thing.

It's not like awareness is in our brain and the objects are out there and somehow they come together. Rather, awareness and the object are one event which has two aspects to it. I think this is part of the understanding of Rigpa. In the tradition, they often say that appearances and emptiness are inseparable.

Awareness and emptiness are inseparable. In the same token, awareness and appearances are inseparable. This is really what's meant by cognizance—the unity of the awareness and its contents.

I think this is also, if you look into your experience, the experience pointed to by the Theravadan analysis. So I believe that the term non-dual awareness can be really comfortable for Vipassana practitioners and doesn't have to seem foreign or even all that obscure. It was strange to me for a long time.

Now, once we get into that level of non-duality—the non-dual awareness—other things fall out of that. Let's just do a short exercise. Think back to why you took up the spiritual path.

As you reflect on the origins of your spiritual journey, there was likely some degree of suffering that catalyzed your entry onto the path. Perhaps intellectual curiosity drew you initially, and the suffering revealed itself later. But at some point, if you're still engaged in this work, it's probably because of an encounter with suffering.

That suffering, for most of us, generated a desire or aspiration to be free—to reach a place in life beyond that suffering. This marked the beginning of our entry onto the path, which we have sustained over time, many of us for years, with great effort and diligence. Along the way, we have felt results, experienced changes in ourselves.

This narrative of the seeker entering upon the path, exerting effort over time, and realizing transformation is an integral part of spiritual life. Without that motivation and sense of progression, none of us would be here tonight. So bear this in mind.

Now I'd like to invite you into a moment of rigpa practice. You don't need to change your position. Simply, as you're sitting there, look back at the nature of mind. See the empty essence and the cognizant nature. Feel the openness of this moment.

Where is the seeker? Where is the one who has journeyed along the path for years? Where is the one who has changed, who has realized results? Can they be found?

Good. That's what I hoped you would discover.

In a manner of speaking, we could say that the seeker, the path, progress, and the end of suffering are all conventional truths. When we actually look for the seeker, the progress, and the path, they're not really there in any solid way. These are conventional truths.

If you examine the bare experience of this moment, there is no seeker, no path, no goal. This is stated explicitly in the Dzogchen teachings, which declare that there is no difference between Buddhas and ordinary beings on the level of ultimate nature. We share the same ultimate nature with the Buddha. The difference, the teachings say, is that the Buddha realizes this and we don't. But the ultimate nature itself is identical.

When we look back at this empty essence and luminous clarity, the Buddha sees this. We see this. This is the way things truly are. When we look in this way, we dissolve the duality between an ordinary being entering the path and a fully enlightened one. We dissolve the duality between the path and the goal. Ultimately, we dissolve the duality between samsara and nirvana.

These represent additional significances and meanings of the term non-duality. They emerge naturally from the implications of non-dual awareness and the absence of ego in the present moment.

Of course, this is on the level of ultimate seeing. On the level of conventional truth—and I appreciate how Gendun mentioned that the statues often appear with arms crossed, emphasizing the unity of conventional and ultimate truth, their inseparability—something beautiful occurs.

One aspect I love about the Buddhist path is that ultimate truth does not negate conventional truth. The conventional truth doesn't disappear. We understand that there is a seeker, there is a path, there is progress, there is movement toward the end of suffering on the conventional level. We honor and respect this through our practice, with our body, speech, and mind.

Simultaneously, we recognize on the ultimate level that our fundamental nature is identical to the Buddha's. On the level of ultimate nature, there is no distinction between Buddhas and beings, no distinction between path and goal, no distinction between samsara and nirvana.

This completes the first area I wanted to explore—some reflection on non-duality. What I find particularly meaningful is the genuine congruence between the Pali texts and the Mahayana and Vajrayana teachings on this matter. I don't believe this represents an area of conflict for us as practitioners.

We can pause here for some questions.

"I want to ask about your last point. In the moment of suffering, when the seeker arises, when there is teaching—at the moment of suffering when the seeker appears, then there is a seeker, right?"

Yes, it appears that way. And if we believe completely in that appearance, we tend to perpetuate the suffering.

When we examine this closely, we see that what gives rise to the sense of the seeker is some kind of clinging. What's actually there is grasping and some identification with it that creates the sense of a seeker and the sense of someone who is suffering. But when we look really closely, there's not actually a separate being there—there is grasping, yes, but no separate self.

At such moments there may be the activity of seeking. If there's grasping, there's some form of craving going on. So it would be accurate to say there's the activity of seeking rather than a seeker.

Someone asked about the distinctions between Hindu and Buddhist views, particularly where Vedanta fits into this understanding. The Advaita Vedanta view comes very close to the non-dual perspective found in

Dzogchen. My sense is that there may be slightly more investment in the existent nature of the Self with a capital S in Advaita than there is in the quality of Rigpa—perhaps a bit more attribution of inherent beingness to the Self than to Rigpa. But the philosophies and practices are remarkably similar, and I wouldn't be surprised if Advaita developed alongside Mahayana Buddhism historically, as indeed it did. The Dharma may be one, but there is both Hindu non-duality and Buddhist non-duality.

A student shared that she had asked Rinpoche about the difficulty of staying in Rigpa when experiencing physical pain from illness, and he emphasized how important it is to practice this way to prepare for death, which can be a very painful time. Rinpoche has mentioned that he actually likes to practice when he's sick because he wants to discover whether his ability to rest in Rigpa is conditioned by the clarity of his five physical senses. When we're ill, our physical senses become dull, and he wants to ensure that the clarity of Rigpa isn't dependent on the clarity of the five senses in his practice and understanding. This is indeed an important point for practitioners to consider.

Now I'd like to shift our focus to Tibetan Buddhism itself. Having spent about ten years around the edges of these traditions, I've come to feel that you can't tell the players without a scorecard. There are numerous schools and sub-schools, countless different Rinpoches and teachings and deities. So I want to provide you with a simple overview that will help orient you within the landscape of Tibetan Buddhism.

But first, let me share some of the extraordinary stories that fill this tradition—tales of magic and mystery that seem almost incomprehensible. I want to tell you about the founding of the Kagyu lineage, which connects to the life story of Milarepa, one of Tibet's greatest yogis.

In the Kagyu lineage, but the founder was an Indian teacher named Tilopa. Tilopa was born in 988, about a hundred years before the signing of the Magna Carta, when Europe was a mess of chaos plunging into the Dark Ages. Actually, the Mahasiddhas of India were probably at their peak. Buddhism was flourishing in India around this time.

Tilopa was born in a Brahmin family but joined a monastery and took up the monastic Buddhist life when he was relatively young. But in the middle of his monastic life, he was visited by a vision. A dakini came and gave him an initiation or an empowerment and delivered this message: "Speak like a madman, leave the robes, and practice in secret."

He took it to heart—just from the vision of a dakini that appeared to him. So he left the monastery and went out to practice very raw ascetic methods. He became reviled for having cast aside his Brahman heritage and the monastic life. But he continued with these rather ascetic practices for over ten years, just wandering around. But he hadn't yet realized.

Then he decided to retire to a small hut in Bengal and just meditate. While he was living in this small hut in Bengal, he had another vision—this time of Vajradhara. Vajradhara is one of the deities in the Yidam practice. And Vajradhara communicated to Tilopa the essence of reality. At that moment, Tilopa became

fully realized and began to teach. This was happening in India, so it hadn't gotten to Tibet yet.

Then a little bit later, Naropa came along. Naropa was born in 1016, so he's about thirty years younger than Tilopa. Naropa was born to a wealthy family, ordained, and became a great scholar. He really fell in love with studying and rose to the position of abbot of Nalanda University, which was the great Buddhist institution in northern India. He continued his course of study.

One day he was sitting out in the courtyard at Nalanda studying a text, just continuing the scholastic track. This old woman appeared next to him. The old woman had a dark blue complexion to her skin. Her eyes were red and really sunken. Her mouth was gaping and her teeth were all rotten. She was leaning on a cane.

She said, "Oh, what text are you studying?"

Of course, Naropa was very polite—she may have had bad breath too, but he didn't recoil. He told her the text that he was studying.

She said, "Do you understand that text?"

He said, "Yes, I understand the written words."

And she started laughing, very happy, joyful. "Oh, he understands the written words!"

Then Naropa wanted to please her even further, so he said, "I also understand the deeper meaning."

Then the old woman started crying. Tears just started rolling down her face. She just started weeping.

He said, "Why are you unhappy? I thought you would be happy that I understand the deeper meaning."

She said, "I was so happy when you told me the truth—that you understand the words. But then you lied. You lied and said you understand the deeper meaning, and you don't. You're just a scholar, and you haven't put these teachings into practice to realize them. You need to find my brother and get him to instruct you. That's my order to you."

And then she disappeared on the spot, vanished. He realized that she was a dakini.

So what do you do if you're the abbot of Nalanda and a strange-looking old woman comes and tells you you don't understand anything and then vanishes? Well, a lesser being would probably have said, "Oh, too much curry for lunch. I better go have a nap." But it's really a testament to Naropa that he didn't. He took her message as real.

So he went and announced to the monastic community that he was going to leave his post as abbot, give up his monk's robes, and wander looking for this brother whose location she never told him. Didn't tell him the name of her brother, didn't tell him the location. And so Naropa did it. All the other monks were

saying, "You can't do this. You're going to be considered a fool. You've risen to such a place of eminence. You're the highest monk in this whole district. The patron is going to be extremely disappointed if you do this. He'll take away our grants." But Naropa had such conviction that he did it.

So he went off and wandered to the east. For years he was wandering in the forests, in the jungles, in the mountains, everywhere he could looking for this brother whose name he didn't know, whose location he didn't know. And he had many, many trials, many difficult situations. He didn't see any relevance to them. He thought they were all just obstacles, wastes of time, not learning anything. Later, of course, they all turned out to be really crucial dharma teachings. But he didn't see it at the time. He thought he was just wandering in bad fortune, and he didn't feel he was learning anything.

Finally, he became so despairing that he gave up hope. "I'm never going to learn anything. I'm never going to find a brother. I'm never going to become realized." And he decided to kill himself. Just at that moment, Tilopa appeared.

Tilopa was the "brother" that he had been instructed to find, although he didn't know the name. Tilopa appeared as a blue-black figure, cotton trousers and a topknot, big eyes shot with blood, red eyes. And Tilopa told him that he had actually been accompanying him all the way. He knew that Naropa was actually a practitioner of great capacity and that he shouldn't give up, that he was very capable of realizing the teachings.

So Naropa became Tilopa's disciple and practiced with him for twelve years, went through many, many hardships that were said to be the result of his past karma—physical suffering, emotional suffering, spiritual suffering—awful, for twelve years, not really realizing.

Finally, Naropa came to Tilopa. Tilopa said, "Okay, the time is ripe. I'm going to give you the final teaching, the final oral teaching." So he said, "But first you have to make an offering to me." Naropa said, "I don't have anything but my body." So he cut off his fingers and gave Tilopa his fingers and the blood from his fingers as his offering.

And then Tilopa said, "That'll do." And he picked up a dirty sandal and smacked Naropa in the face with it. At that moment, Naropa lost consciousness. But when he came back into consciousness, he realized. He saw the ultimate truth and his mind was liberated. From then on, he was a great mahasiddha who taught many, many people.

One of the people he taught was a Tibetan named Marpa. Marpa is the one who really brought the lineage into Tibet and established the Kagyu lineage. Marpa became the teacher, the root teacher of Milarepa. And that then is the line of descent for the rest of the Kagyu lineage. But it arose out of the mahasiddha lineage in India.

So these mahasiddhas are wild, wild people. And that wild energy and the mysterious, crazy, irrational, unconventional defying of social conventions—all those things pervade, particularly the Kagyu lineage

and the Nyingma lineage of Tibetan Buddhism.

And we can take a couple of questions. Annabelle?

Yes. I don't know whether he knew of the existence of Vajradhara, the deity, or not, but it came to him spontaneously in the vision and transmitted the teaching directly. Vajradhara is a very highly regarded deity in the Tibetan system.

As you receive this overview sheet, notice that across the top are the names of the four primary schools in Tibetan Buddhism. I put this together primarily based on one book that I've really appreciated—*Indestructible Truth* by Reginald Ray, a professor at Naropa University. We have two faculty members of Naropa here, actually. Would you want to raise your hands so people can find you if they have questions? Here we have the dean and a professor at Naropa.

This is truly a fantastic introduction to Tibetan Buddhism, the best overview I know of. It will be on the book list, highly recommended. Though not all the information came from this book—some is my own research, so any errors are mine.

I've placed the Nyingma school first because it was the earliest chronologically. Padmasambhava is the figure considered to have brought the first teachings into Tibet in the eighth century, so he appears here as the founder. The current lineage head, formerly Dudjom Rinpoche, is now Penor Rinpoche following Dudjom's passing. I did run this chart by both Gerardo and Sokdny Rinpoche to verify its accuracy.

Among the main historical teachers from the Nyingma lineage, you'll encounter Yeshe Tsogyal, who was Padmasambhava's consort; Longchenpa, sometimes called the Omniscient One, who lived in the fourteenth century and wrote many books now available in English translation; and Patrul Rinpoche, whom Rinpoche mentioned the other day as that wandering beggar who humbly referred to himself as "an old dog."

I've also listed some current teachers in the Nyingma lineage. Some of these figures could actually appear under Kagyu as well, as they're sometimes considered non-sectarian or Rime teachers. But I've placed them in the Nyingma category because they primarily teach Dzogchen as their main meditation practice. These are names you might encounter as you explore books and teachings from recent masters. A couple of Western teachers in the Nyingma lineage—Lama Surya Das and Sultrum Allione—are currently active.

Then I've included the central deities, important monasteries connected with this lineage, and the core teachings. In this lineage, Vajrasattva is truly central, as Gerardo explained this afternoon in the Ngondro practice.

Both the Kagyu and Nyingma schools are extremely practice-oriented. As Gerardo mentioned, if you enter these schools, they'll have you meditating very quickly. They also emphasize lay practitioners strongly, so many lamas in these two schools are married. Sokdny Rinpoche, as you know, is married, though his

brother Mingyur Rinpoche is monastic. In these two lineages, you'll find both monks and lay people serving as primary teachers.

The two schools are very closely related in their view. The central meditation teaching within Kagyu is called Mahamudra, which includes a component that Kalu Rinpoche says is identical with Dzogchen—called Essence Mahamudra. There are several different Kagyu schools. Sokdny Rinpoche and his father actually belong to the Drukpa Kagyu lineage, but also hold Nyingma transmission, so they maintain both. The Kagyu and Nyingma schools overlap significantly and remain on very friendly terms.

The next school, the Gelug, represents a different approach entirely. I initially thought the Dalai Lama was the lineage head of the Gelug school, but Rinpoche corrected me—the Ganden Tripa, the head of Ganden Monastery, holds that position. Ganden is one of the most important Gelug monasteries. The Dalai Lama, however, is indeed a Gelugpa monk.

In the Gelugpa tradition, the emphasis remains firmly rooted in monasticism, which is why I include the Vinaya as one of their central teachings. In fact, Gerardo mentioned he couldn't think of a single Gelugpa Lama—a traditional Lama—who's married. Virtually all Gelugpa Lamas are monastics, reflecting their very strong emphasis on monastic life.

There's significant adherence to Mahayana teachings. They eventually engage with Tantra, but generally much later in their training. The emphasis falls heavily on Mahayana teachings, on bodhisattva vows, on bodhicitta. While these elements exist within the Nyingma and Kagyu traditions as well, they're more at the heart of the Gelug approach.

Stephen Batchelor shared that he trained in the Gelugpa tradition as a monk under Geshe Rabten for seven or eight years and never learned how to meditate. This is not atypical. In the Gelugpa tradition, you might go twenty years before they actually allow you to sit on a cushion and receive meditation instructions. Stephen felt he had to leave the Gelugpa tradition to learn meditation, which led him to Korea where he became a Zen monk.

There's tremendous emphasis in the Gelugpa tradition on study. Monasticism, study, strict adherence to the Vinaya—these are the defining characteristics. Actually, someone mentioned yesterday that they were with Lama Yeshe at one of his monasteries in England and they were meditating. They definitely have all the tantric practices and they engage with them, but primarily through visualization. Where the Nyingma and Kagyu traditions—with their lay lamas and married lamas—practice through both visualization and actual practice with a consort, the Gelugs maintain their celibate approach.

The Sakya lineage presents an interesting case. It's the least visible of the four schools in this country. None of us could think of any Western teachers from the Sakya lineage, and only Rinpoche could identify contemporary teachers within that tradition. I'm uncertain whether it's simply smaller in this country or just less prominent, but it remains alive and thriving.

I find it helpful when listening to Tibetan teachings to identify which school they originate from, because the flavor changes distinctly with each tradition. This was one of my motivations for covering these differences. As you begin exploring readings from this tradition, notice which school you're engaging with and observe their particular flavors.

Regarding Sakya's characteristics, Gerardo told me it resembles Geluk in emphasizing extensive study before meditation practice. And to answer the question about lineages—Lama Palden, who teaches locally, belongs to the Kagyu tradition.

A lama's consort in these traditions, if they're lay practitioners, is typically their wife. They often marry someone who shares their commitment to practice in that style. There are countless stories of solitary lay practitioners living remotely with consorts who are also dedicated practitioners.

There are also many accounts—I can't recall the specific book—of women Vajrayana practitioners who chose their consorts deliberately. These women lived in remote places and possessed profound spiritual power. The dynamic doesn't flow in just one direction.

"For example, how does the Dalai Lama have such elevated status?" Nancy asks. It's an excellent question. If the chart shows four schools on equal footing, how did the Dalai Lama attain such an exalted position? He serves as both the head of the government in exile and the spiritual head of all schools.

Politics. It was essentially political maneuvering. For many centuries, the Kagyus actually held political leadership in Tibet. Then an alliance between the Gelugs and the Mongolians—I believe it was with Genghis Khan—shifted the balance of power and elevated the first Dalai Lama to overall leadership. This happened during the time of the Fifth Dalai Lama, long ago. Our current Dalai Lama is the Fourteenth.

Power struggles have persisted throughout Tibetan history because Tibet functioned as a theocracy. Tremendous wealth connected with the monasteries and their heads created ongoing conflicts for control of that wealth and power.

This brings us to recent controversies, like the recognition disputes. After the Sixteenth Karmapa died, two candidates were put forward as his reincarnation. The Dalai Lama designated one—the young man who recently escaped from Tibet and is now being trained in Dharamsala. Another candidate was favored by the Sharmapa. This represents an obvious power struggle, because whoever gains recognition as the Karmapa will wield enormous influence—monasteries, donations, students, visibility.

The Dalai Lama's endorsement carries tremendous weight, but supporters of the other candidate remain. Sometimes even the Tibetans themselves are uncertain. The majority of the time, however, the Dalai Lama's recognition proves decisive.

"What does the word tantra refer to?" Lee asks. I think Gerardo touched on this today, and I mentioned it the other night. The tantras are practices that take the awakened state as the basis for the path. All

Vajrayana practices are considered tantric practices, with underlying texts called tantras. The practices Gerardo discussed—the ngöndro, visualization, and nature of mind practices—are all part of the tantric tradition.

Vajrayana tradition and encompass the profound methods of working with awakened awareness itself.

The word "tantra" itself carries deep meaning - it refers to the continuity or thread that weaves through all experience, connecting the relative and absolute dimensions of reality. In the context of Buddhist practice, tantra represents those teachings and methods that work directly with the nature of mind as it already is, rather than seeking to purify or transform it into something else.

A student inquired whether tantric practices exist in Buddhist schools other than Vajrayana. While tantra is indeed primarily synonymous with Vajrayana Buddhism, it does appear in the Japanese Shingon school, which is itself considered a form of Vajrayana. However, Shingon maintains only a portion of the full range of Vajrayana practices, primarily focusing on certain deity visualizations rather than the complete spectrum of tantric methods.

It's worth noting that tantra extends beyond the Buddhist context entirely - Hindu tantric traditions also exist, representing their own profound spiritual methodologies and understandings of the sacred dimensions of existence.

The exploration of these various approaches to awakening - whether through the gradual cultivation of the Sutrayana path or the direct recognition methods of the Vajrayana - reveals the extraordinary skillfulness of the Buddha's teaching. Each approach offers its own gateway to liberation, meeting practitioners wherever they are in their spiritual journey and providing the precise methods needed for their particular temperament and capacity.

What remains constant across all these traditions is the fundamental recognition that awakening is our birthright - not something foreign to be attained, but our very nature to be discovered and embodied in each moment of our lives.

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