The History of Buddhism in India - Part 2

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:04:32

Tonight I want to continue the history of Buddhism in India that I started last evening. In yesterday's story, we had reached the point about 400 years after the death of the Buddha where there had been significant splintering among the schools of early Buddhism. History relates that there were eighteen different schools formed in these four centuries—the splintering was that great. Of those eighteen schools, only one has survived to today, and that is the Theravada, which traces its lineage back to the very early days of the Sthaviras. All the other schools were basically lost as Buddhism continued to evolve.

Around 100 BCE, the first intimations of the Mahayana came into evidence. You are probably very familiar with the difference in emphasis that the Mahayana offered to the classical teachings. They placed great emphasis on the Bodhisattva path and the paramis as the main foundation for development of the Bodhisattva path. The other primary emphasis was on the concept of emptiness.

The Mahayana claimed that it was a new kind of revelation of emptiness. In the original teachings in the Pali, or rather the Nikayas, there had been pointings to the emptiness of self through the doctrine of anatta, or not-self, but there had not been a clear pointing to the emptiness of objects, the lack of solidity, the lack of inherent existence in the phenomenal world.

In fact, you do find pointings to this in the early texts. In the Pali texts, there's one particularly striking sutta called "A Lump of Foam," in which the whole material world is compared to a mass of foam floating on a river. Other parts of our experience are compared to mirages and juggler's tricks or magic tricks. But these passages are rare, and the emphasis in the early teachings was certainly not on the emptiness of the phenomenal world—it was much more on the emptiness of self.

The qualities of the paramis were discussed in the Nikayas, but they weren't assembled as a list and put together as a primary vehicle to awakening or particularly to Buddhahood. Of course, the concept of the Bodhisattva was in the early texts because the first Bodhisattva in that era was Siddhartha Gautama, who became the Buddha. He talked about his journey over lifetimes.

There are many stories recorded after his death, one of which recounted what is supposedly the moment at which he decided to become a Buddha—the moment at which the bodhisattva aspiration was awakened in that being. It's said that he was an ascetic named Sumedha, who was practicing very diligently and close to full awakening. He caught a glimpse of a Buddha of his era who was called the Buddha Dipankara. He was so impressed by the Buddha's bearing and his majesty and the vision of compassion that he was manifesting in bringing the teaching to an era that didn't have the message of liberation that Sumedha gave up his aspiration to become enlightened and aspired instead to become a Buddha in a future era.

It's said that Dipankara recognized that wish in Sumedha's mind at that moment and validated that he would indeed become a Buddha in some future time. Sumedha went away and meditated: "How can I become a Buddha? What is the path?" He came up with the list—in Theravadan language—of ten paramis and then set out to practice those over something like four aeons in innumerable kalpas to become Siddhartha Gautama, who awakened in our time as the Buddha.

It's interesting, isn't it, that having practiced the path of the Bodhisattva, there is no record in the Nikayas—at any rate, in the early suttas—of the Buddha promoting that as a path to any of his followers. The same path he himself had taken, yet no record of that being promoted or offered or suggested as a path for his followers to take up themselves. That's curious. I don't know why. Perhaps that kind of aspiration, he felt, had to come from deep within one's own volition.

At any rate, when the Mahayana philosophy came along, this was the first recorded instance of the Bodhisattva path being promoted as a general guideline for all dedicated practitioners. This was something really new. But otherwise, many of the elements of the Mahayana can be found in the Pali Canon, just with different emphases. There's not so much that's totally new.

When I speak about the Mahayana, I'm going to quote extensively from Edward Conze. Conze was a British scholar of the last century who did most of the main translations of key Mahayana texts. He's very familiar with the Mahayana and has also studied extensively the earlier schools, with a very good understanding of the history of Buddhism. What Conze says is that the Mahayana placed new emphasis on commonly accepted traditional material—new emphasis, and some of the terminology was definitely new.

The first Mahayana texts that really surfaced were the texts called the Sutras on the Prajnaparamita. These came into evidence somewhere between around 100 BCE and 50 CE—in about a 150-year span, the Prajnaparamita texts were coming into evidence.

Prajna means wisdom in Sanskrit. Paramita means perfection. So the quality of Prajnaparamita means the quality of wisdom that's brought into perfection, or it's sometimes translated as transcendent wisdom. This feature of the mind, transcendent wisdom, is represented in the iconography as a female. There's a statue on the back altar which is the female icon of Prajnaparamita. She is female because she is considered to be the mother of the Buddhas. Buddhas are born by perfecting the quality of prajna or wisdom. This factor of mind which lies within all of us is the factor that gives birth to all the Buddhas.

That's why she is sometimes called the mother of the Buddhas.

The Prajnaparamita Sutras focus almost exclusively on this quality of wisdom in its transcendent aspect. They are essentially statement after statement about this factor of mind which, in their interpretation, has an ultimate quality. As Rinpoche has been describing the ground over the last couple of days—that facet of Buddha nature which is at the basis of our minds—Prajnaparamita is an aspect of that ground. So the sutras point again and again to the transcendent and undying nature of Prajnaparamita, the ultimate

nature.

This is from Conze: "The lengthy writings on transcendent 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 Mahayanists, on the other hand, consider everything that might reasonably be said about the absolute and then expressly reject it as untrue and inadequate."

I like the flavor of this. It's quite true. The Theravadans had kept nearly silent about the nature of the Absolute. When you read the Pali Suttas, very little is said about Nibbana, the actual experience of the unconditioned. It's mostly described in negative terms—called the unborn, the undying, the unceasing, the unchanging, the unconditioned. But rarely is it described in anything like positive terms.

I don't think that's because the Buddha was unfamiliar with its qualities. But why did he choose to keep so silent about it? My speculation is that you see this through a lot of his teachings—he uses negative description again and again as a way of expressing teachings that is incontrovertible. No one can argue with a negative expression. Moreover, it's impossible to make a concrete goal out of a negative expression. So in a way, his reluctance to speak in any sort of flowery language about the great mental and heart qualities of the unconditioned acted as a way to keep people from grasping after it and possibly imitating it.

There's this famous story in the Pali texts where the Buddha was walking through a forest with a group of his monks. One of the monks asked a question about some abstruse philosophical doctrine. The Buddha said, "I've chosen not to talk about that." The Buddha picked up a handful of leaves off the forest floor. He said, "Which do you think is greater, O monks, the number of leaves in my hand or the number of leaves on all the trees in this forest?" And the monks were no dummies. They said, "Venerable sir, of course the number of leaves in the forest is far greater than the number of leaves in your hand." He said, "Just so. What I have revealed to you is like this handful of leaves compared to all that the Tathagata knows. The mind of the Tathagata is omniscient and knows many, many things. What I have revealed to you is only this handful of leaves. But this handful of leaves, which I have shared with you, is enough for you to become liberated, to walk the path to freedom."

So that explains a little of why the Buddha was so reticent to talk about these other topics.

The Mahayanists were not, and they haven't stopped talking since. Quite thankfully, actually, because I believe that the Mahayana emphasis on these transcendent qualities was an attempt to correct some of the dryness that had crept into the early schools of Buddhism based on the importance of the Abhidhamma. I think that the schools had gotten too dry and technical and had lost some of the living spark of awakening. That's my guess, and some of the scholars hint at this too.

So the Mahayanists found a way to re-inject that creative vitality into the Buddhist lineage. I find that very

inspiring. I love to read these sutras today for their pointing to the magnificent possibilities of the human heart and mind that they come back to again and again and again. I think it really orients our practice in the right direction and the right spirit. I think it was very, very important.

You can also see that as the Mahayana points to the Absolute, which cannot be touched or changed, it provides a striking counterpoint to the developmental model of the early Nikaya teachings. The early Nikaya teachings are all about development from a state of suffering and ignorance through the purification of heart and mind through meditation practice to reach the unstained state of purity. The Mahayanists come in at the unstained state of purity and say fundamentally, "This is all that is."

So there's been a tension and continues to be a tension really throughout spiritual life, through all denominations, between those who look at the pure aspect of our nature—the natural great perfection of the world the way it is—and those who look at the suffering that exists and wish to move out of the suffering and the defilements that cause it toward that purity. There's a tension that exists between the Mahayanists and the Theravadans that exists today in many different schools, and it's the heart of the paradox within true spiritual life.

We talked last night about the Heart Sutra, how it restates the teaching on the five aggregates, dependent origination, and the four noble truths, and then negates every one of them. This is the difference between the ultimate view, which recognizes innate purity, and the conventional view, which is development as progress over time from defilement to purity.

The Heart Sutra is one of the body of Prajnaparamita texts. There are a number of them extant today, and the Heart Sutra is one. So this quality of paradox comes into the Buddhist tradition around this time, and you can see how as this migrated into Zen, they built a dynasty on paradox. Every time a question came up, you couldn't answer it rightly because if you spoke from the conventional view, you'd be hit; if you spoke from the ultimate view, you'd be hit. Your answer had to combine both.

There are, of course, great differences between the expression of the Mahayana and the expression of the Theravada.

In this vast cosmic presentation, such a Buddha will not have a backache. Such a Buddha will not be unable to resolve a quarrel between mere mortals. This is the flavor of the Buddha in the Mahayana sutras—a movement from the human dimension into a very vast cosmological dimension in which the Buddha becomes an archetype, so perfected that he is really removed from the human realm, even from the discomfort of backaches.

One of the other qualities that emerged with the Mahayana sutras—and again, I'm going to quote Conze, so you know this didn't come from me—was an increasing spirit of sectarianism. Another characteristic, as the Mahayana sutras evolved, was this growing sectarian tendency.

This is quite interesting, because one might think that as spiritual teachings develop and mature, they

would become more inclusive and embracing. Yet what we see in the evolution of the Mahayana literature is actually the opposite—a growing emphasis on distinguishing the Mahayana path as superior to what they called the Hinayana, or "lesser vehicle." This sectarian quality became woven into the very fabric of many Mahayana texts, creating a kind of spiritual hierarchy that placed the bodhisattva ideal above the arhat ideal of the early teachings.

The irony is profound: here are teachings about universal compassion and the liberation of all beings, yet they're presented in a way that subtly—or sometimes not so subtly—denigrates other approaches to awakening. It's as if the very impulse toward the ultimate and the absolute began to create a kind of spiritual pride, a sense that "our way" is not just different, but inherently superior.

This tension between inclusion and exclusion, between the universal and the particular, runs through much of religious history. Even as the Mahayana proclaimed the emptiness of all phenomena and the interconnectedness of all beings, it simultaneously created new forms of spiritual division. The very teachings that pointed toward the dissolution of all boundaries ended up creating new ones.

And you will find this as you read through the Prajnaparamita Sutras. The early Mahayana Sutras, and the Heart Sutra is no exception, start to cast aspersions on some of the central figures in the Nikaya schools of Buddhism.

The main victim, the chief butt of all the jokes, becomes Sariputta. Sariputta was one of the two chief disciples of the Buddha in the Pali texts, on a par with Moggallana. These were his two main disciples. Moggallana was said to be very advanced in psychic powers, therefore the power of concentration, which gives rise to psychic powers. Sariputta was the most developed of all the disciples in wisdom, in pañña.

But Sariputta's name became associated with the Abhidhamma. I don't know if this is true or not. We don't know historically if Sariputta did have a hand in creating the Abhidhamma, but his name has become linked to it. So as the early Mahayanas wanted to push back against the formalism of the Abhidhamma, they chose Sariputta as their whipping boy. So he who was formerly foremost among all the Buddha's disciples in wisdom becomes the object of scorn in the Prajnaparamita, in the teachings on wisdom sutras.

In these sutras, Sariputta has to get lectured to because he believes that things exist substantially. That's the crime of which he is accused. Things exist substantially. So he has to be lectured to, to be corrected of that deviant view. And this is the criticism that is launched of the later Abhidhamma, that it's too substantialist and that it reifies these phenomena called Dhammas, which it said were the irreducible units of experience. We'll come back to this later.

So, who lectures Sariputta? In the Heart Sutra, and I think other Prajnaparamita sutras too, the lecturing is handed out by Subhuti. Subhuti is also a figure from the Nikaya canons, but he is the disciple of the Buddha who is foremost in loving-kindness. So as the Mahayana elevated the quality of compassion and put it at the center, Subhuti is the ideal spokesperson because he represents the four immeasurable states,

the Brahma-viharas—loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. It is the centrality of compassion for the Mahayana that makes Subhuti the ideal spokesperson to Sariputta.

Also, the sort of pejorative terms emerged around this time. Originally, when the Mahayana came into existence, their name for their school, as it was forming as a new school, was the Bodhisattvayana. This was really the new spirit—that we could all become bodhisattvas. The name for the existing schools was Sravaka Yana. Sravaka means listener. It's a word that the Buddha himself used of his Sangha in the time that he was alive because his disciples were hearing the Dharma through listening to him. So in the Pali you hear the term Sawakasangha, the listener Sangha. This is a term that they were quite comfortable with as applied to themselves.

So we have the early Mahayana as the Bodhisattvayana. We have the classical group as the Sravakayana. Those are not yet pejorative. But very soon thereafter, the term Sravakayana got transformed into Hinayana, which means lesser school, and the Bodhisattvayana got elevated into the term Mahayana, which means the great vehicle. And so those are the terms that have really persisted as defined by the Mahayana.

Just so everybody knows, Theravadans don't particularly appreciate being called Hinayanists. We don't mind the Theravadan term, which means way of the elders. Hinayana doesn't rest so comfortably with us. But of course, the classical schools couldn't resist from name-calling either. So they had a name back for the Mahayanas, which was Vaitulika. Vaitulika means illusionist. I think it's probably because the Mahayanas seemed to be positing this quality of Prajnaparamita as an expression of innate purity that the Buddha himself had not described in that way. So they were called illusionists.

Now, the next very interesting development around this period of time, and it made a great impact on the Mahayana, was the emergence of a person I consider the greatest philosopher in the history of Buddhism after the Buddha himself. That was an Indian teacher named Nagarjuna.

Nagarjuna came in somewhere around 100 CE. The details of his life are not known. The exact time that he lived is not known. Even some of the works that are attributed to him were not necessarily written by him. This comment came from a book written by Stephen Batchelor who translated Nagarjuna's central work and had done a lot of research on his life. But the one work that is attributed to him that we can feel confident he did write was called Mula Madhyamaka Karika. And this means verses on the fundamental middle way. Stephen's book translates it as root verses on the middle way.

This is an incredibly brilliant work. It's hard to describe what an unbelievable piece of writing it is, written close to two thousand years ago. It's been compared in modern times to the work of the philosopher Wittgenstein, but preceded him by about two thousand years.

The Sanskrit form has survived and been translated into numerous languages—Tibetan, Chinese, Japanese—and several good English translations now exist. I find it a mind-blowing work. I believe

Nagarjuna's purpose in writing it was precisely to blow our minds—to stop our conceptual thought processes entirely. In this cessation of conceptualization, he seeks to open us to the direct experience of emptiness. I believe that's why he wrote it, and I find that this is exactly how it functions when I read it.

His method involves taking the factor of emptiness and demonstrating it repeatedly, anywhere the reader might be inclined to find a resting point, a secure foothold, a solid place to take a stand. He begins with the usual Buddhist descriptors—the six sense bases, internal and external, the aggregates—and reveals the emptiness of each of these dhammas. The first part of the book clearly refutes the Abhidhamma's tendency to reify these dhammas, these existents as substantial things.

After dismantling these foundational concepts, you might think, "Okay, I can handle this. This is the essential meaning of the lack of solidity within the created world, but I still have the path. I still have the Buddha's teachings to rest upon." Then Nagarjuna does something extraordinarily original: he applies the concept of emptiness to all of the Buddha's teachings themselves.

He applies it to the Four Noble Truths, to dependent origination, even to awakening and nirvana. As you progress through the book's twenty-seven chapters, each one pulls another rug from beneath your feet. By the end, the mind literally has nowhere to take a stand. This is the freedom from view that truly opens us to the experience of emptiness.

The Buddha taught the emptiness of the phenomenal world, but he didn't teach the emptiness of his own teachings. Why would he? Until you had taken refuge, he wouldn't want that rug pulled from underneath you. But once you have committed, there's a tendency to solidify a view around that to which you've committed. This is the rug that Nagarjuna wants to pull away.

His writings are intended for a sophisticated audience—those who have already taken refuge and committed themselves to the path. This becomes a way of opening beyond adherence to any particular view.

Let me share some of the pith statements from Nagarjuna's work. "Emptiness stops conceptual proliferation." When you realize immediately the truth of emptiness, your mind stops wandering. This itself places you in a state of non-clinging to view. If the mind stops wandering, it naturally and completely rests in the present moment.

Another quotation: "That to which language refers is denied." Look around this room at the things language refers to—woman, man, floor, ceiling, painting, statue. What would it mean to deny all of that? Nagarjuna points to the fact that none of these conventional realities exist independently, substantially, or solidly. This is what Rinpoche indicated yesterday when he spoke of even pure perception of phenomena containing an element of illusion. We need to see through the illusion to the lack of solidity.

Here's another: "The unborn and unceasing nature of reality is comparable to nirvana." We normally take reality to be the physical world, characterized by impermanence—arising and passing. But Nagarjuna

says the true nature of reality is unborn and unceasing, and because of this, it resembles nirvana, the unconditioned.

How can this be? When you remove the solid, objective nature of things, there's a way of seeing in which no objects ever come into being. There are only momentary flashings of sense experience, not lasting long enough to be considered objects at any sense door. When one sees like this, one perceives that no objects are arising and passing. Therefore, reality is unborn and unceasing—like the unconditioned.

This opens the door to what I consider the strongest statement in the entire work: "Samsara does not have the slightest distinction from nirvana. Nirvana does not have the slightest distinction from samsara."

Once one reaches this unified understanding that samsara and nirvana are one, this marks the beginning of non-duality. When we dissolve the duality between samsara and nirvana, we dissolve the distinction between path and goal, between ordinary beings and enlightened beings, and naturally between subject and object. This lays the groundwork for the later developments in Buddhist philosophy we'll explore next.

But before we leave Nagarjuna, I want to mention something I find quite fascinating. The Mahayanists have claimed Nagarjuna for many centuries because his teachings are such direct pointings to emptiness. Yet the intriguing thing is that all his vocabulary comes from Nikaya Buddhism. The only references he quotes are to early suttas. All his terminology is completely compatible with early Buddhism, and there is not a single mention of the concept of bodhisattva.

So was Nagarjuna a Theravadan, or was he a Mahayanist? I don't know. But what's starting to happen is that the Theravadans are beginning to reclaim him as one of their own, because there is nothing in his language that is out of step with Theravadan understanding.

Nagarjuna laid the foundation for understanding the non-dual. It took some time for a new school to emerge which synthesized the Mahayana teachings with this new school that Nagarjuna had created, called the Madhyamaka school—the middle way school. The group that accomplished this synthesis was the Yogacara school.

The Yogacarins are extraordinarily influential in the history of Buddhist philosophy, though they're often not known by that name. They had several names. Yogacara itself is not very evocative—it simply means "the conduct of union." But the name that better captures their philosophy is Chittamatra, which means "mind-only." So the Yogacarins are also called the mind-only school.

You hear this flavor in Rinpoche's teachings when he speaks of everything proceeding from the mind—even how we perceive objects of the external world depends on having this particular kind of mind with this particular karma.

The Yogacarins were the ones who developed the concept of Buddha nature. Buddha nature is this

intrinsic sense of purity. Rinpoche has been describing it as the ground—the union of emptiness and cognizance and compassionate, unceasing activity. But Buddha nature is not actually found in the Mahayana Sutras. This term does not appear in any of the Prajnaparamita texts or other earlier works. It's a very key concept in Buddhism, but it's a later development.

Buddha nature is our English translation of a Sanskrit term that actually means something slightly different. The Sanskrit is Tathagatagarbha. Tathagata is another name for the Buddha. Garbha means womb. So what this is actually called is "the womb of the Buddhas"—very similar to Prajnaparamita. Buddha nature is called the womb of the Buddhas because it is that element from which all awakened beings and all Buddhas spring forth.

The other key doctrine that the Yogacarins introduced was what's called the three kayas. We've read about these in the chant, and I think Rinpoche will discuss them further—the dharmakaya, the sambhogakaya, and the nirmanakaya. These correspond to empty essence, natural clarity, and manifest compassion. These are three aspects that together make up a unity, which is the Tathagatagarbha, the Buddha nature. But the three kayas were first articulated this way in Chittamatra philosophy.

They were also the school that developed the alaya philosophy—the eighth consciousness, the storehouse of karmic imprints or the karmic bank that Rinpoche has discussed. Remember, the Sarvastivadins tried to answer the question of where karmic imprints reside by saying that past, present and future all still exist in the present. The Yogacarins answered that same question with the concept of the storehouse consciousness, or alaya vijnana.

It was also the Yogacarins who coined the term "the third turning of the wheel." They said the first turning of the wheel was the original teaching at the Deer Park of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. The second turning of the wheel were the Prajnaparamita Sutras. And the third turning of the wheel were their own teachings on Buddha nature, the three kayas, and so forth.

The Chittamatrins claimed that all these were taught by the historical Buddha, but scholars understand it differently. Scholars say that these teachings evolved in India at different stages—400 years of the classical teachings, then the emergence of the Mahayana. The Chittamatrins arose around 200 to 300 CE, just a few hundred years after the arising of the Mahayana.

So whether you want to say they were all taught by the Buddha or whether you want to understand them as stages of unfolding, these represent three distinct stages of Buddhist philosophy that remain alive today and are profoundly important. It's very helpful to understand what each contributed: the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path, the emptiness teachings, and the teachings on Buddha nature.

The Chittamatra view then became the foundation for what migrated into Tibet and became Dzogchen, and also what developed in China as Chan and later Huayan, migrating to Japan as Zen.

The influence of the Chittamatrans peaked around the 4th century. After that, their influence and

popularity didn't grow any further. But what I find even more fascinating is that Buddhist philosophy stopped developing after the Chittamatrans. There have been no important developments in Buddhist philosophy since about 500 to 600 CE. That's 1,500 years ago. It's basically been the same since then. This doesn't mean the practices have remained static, but the philosophical foundations have stayed consistent.

The Chittamatrans and the Madhyamakas have some differences of opinion because Nagarjuna's approach was to cut away everything. Wherever you took a stand, he would cut it away, cut it away, cut it away. The Chittamatrans came and postulated this quality called Buddha nature. Well, the Madhyamakas simply wanted to cut, cut, cut that away too. This kind of debate continues today in Tibetan schools.

Let me share a story that illustrates this ongoing philosophical discussion. Mingyur Rinpoche is the younger brother of Sogyal Rinpoche and was visiting Marin for the first time a few years ago. Marianne kindly asked if Sally and I would like to take Mingyur Rinpoche out for an afternoon of touring Marin. We thought it would be wonderful to spend time with him. Perhaps he'd be interested in seeing some of the natural beauty of the county.

So we got in a car with him and Tashi-la, who many of you know. Tashi-la often travels with Sogyal Rinpoche and has helped assist and teach on these retreats many times. Tashi speaks good English. There were four of us in the car, and we thought we would take him to Mount Tamalpais, which is the highest point in Marin County at about 2,400 feet. You get a great view of San Francisco, the ocean, and the shoreline all the way down almost to Santa Cruz. We thought he'd be really impressed.

As we're driving, I'm trying to make polite conversation because I hadn't met the Rinpoche before. So I asked him through Tashi, who was translating, "How do you find the West?" It was his first trip to America. He said, "Square and clean." End of response. And it is. If you come from Kathmandu or India, where he lives, it is very square and clean. That was his impression of the West.

I waited a while and thought I'd better try again to make conversation. I said, "Do you think that Tibetans tend to be happier than Westerners?" He said, "Yes." End of conversation. We drove in silence for a while.

We got to the top of Mount Tam and decided to walk around the peak. There's a path that takes about twenty minutes to circumambulate, and we started to walk it. It was quite silent. I thought, well, I'd like to find a way to connect with him. He's such an esteemed teacher and an incredible yogi. Mingyur Rinpoche had completed two three-year retreats by the time he was nineteen years old.

So I decided to try a different approach. As we were walking around, I asked Tashi to put this question to him: "What's the difference between the Madhyamaka view and the Dzogchen view?" Mingyur Rinpoche's eyes lit up. He said, "Ah! The first thing you have to understand is there are eighteen different kinds of emptiness."

He kept talking, and the first thing he did was plop right down on the path. Now, the path is only wide enough for two people to walk side by side. Mingyur Rinpoche plops right down on the path. So of course,

the other three of us also plop down. He talks very excitedly for about five to ten minutes about the differences in these two views.

He summed it up by saying that the Madhyamakas believe that the Dzogchenpas believe something really exists, but "we don't really believe that. It's just a misunderstanding." And that was the end of our conversation.

We picked up and walked again.

So this kind of tension—that the Madhyamakas cut everything away and are only left with emptiness, and the Chittamatrans posit this notion of Buddha nature in the three kayas—that tension still exists today in the Tibetan world. It is also the same kind of tension that will exist between an orthodox Theravadan looking at the view of Dzogchen.

I've had this discussion with many Orthodox Theravadans. I related one of them yesterday who was not inclined to accept the view of Dzogchen. I said, "But this stuff really works." And that didn't sway him.

This is where I think the interesting point about the controversies comes together. The Yogacharans were aware that they were stirring up controversy in the way they presented the Dharma. And what I think is beautiful is they didn't care. Because what they said is, "What does the theory matter anyway? It all dissolves when you come into emptiness. So what helps you come into emptiness?" That's what they cared about.

I think that's a beautiful guideline for us. What helps you come into the state of emptiness? Many different skillful means may help. We don't need to argue about the arcane philosophical points of their existence or non-existence.

Similarly, I think with Theravada, Mahayana, and Tibetan getting along in the world today, there are a lot of opportunities for potential philosophical conflict. But that's a good thing also, because all these schools have different styles and different personalities gravitate to the different styles. That's a good thing because there are more options for each of us.

Actually, one of the riffs I've heard along this theme is that in the West, the artists gravitate to Tibetan, the carpenters gravitate to Zen, and the psychotherapists gravitate to Vipassana. So there's a school for everybody.

Conze said that the real difference between the Theravadans and the Mahayanins is that the Theravadans tend to be rationalists and the Mahayanins tend to be mystics. But he elaborated it a little further. He went on to say, "But the difference is really between the rational mysticism of Mahayana and the mystically tinged rationalism of Theravada." So it's not so opposed. Again, it's just a different emphasis. Both of the schools have both aspects.

Conze went on: "The two schools had much common ground in the middle ranges of the path where the

renunciates strove for emancipation in a quite rational and businesslike manner." I love that quote—the renunciate striving for emancipation in a rational and businesslike manner.

Again, when we come down to practice, the philosophical differences fall away. And we realize that as we put our heart and soul and body into our practice, we're all heading in the same direction. In one of the suttas of the Pali Canon, the Buddha says, "All the Dhammas have one taste, just like the ocean has one taste, which is the taste of salt. All the Dhammas have one taste, which is the taste of liberation."

A couple of other small points. I've reached the end of most of the philosophy part, but the bodhisattva tradition is still alive in Theravadan countries. There are bodhisattva practitioners today in Burma, which generally is a pretty orthodox Theravadan country. What they have done in order to be able to live lifetime after lifetime is they have renounced their entry into the first stage of enlightenment. In the Theravadan view, once one attains the first stage of enlightenment called stream entry, one is destined for Arahantship within seven lifetimes. So these practitioners renounce the entry into the stream—as they renounce the realization of nibbana—in order that their rebirths will continue for a long, long time while they're developing all the paramis. This tradition exists also in Theravadan countries.

Another curiosity I came across in my reading is that there was a school in early Sri Lanka called the Mahayana Theravadins. I think this is beautiful because—personal opinion—this is the way that the Dharma is evolving here at Spirit Rock. I think that there's a commitment here to Theravadan practice because it's so simple and down to earth and immediately applicable for people. But the philosophy or the spirit that is accompanying it here has more of a Mahayana flavor than a strict Theravadan flavor. So I think this combination is going to be useful in the West.

The next stage of development was the Vajrayana. The Vajrayana, interestingly enough, according to the histories that I read—including by Tibetan authors—did not represent a new departure philosophically. It rested on the philosophy of all the earlier schools: the Chittamatra, the Mahayana, the Theravada. But what it was was a whole new bag of tricks—a whole new range of meditation techniques that could work on, as one of my friends put it, the technology of consciousness. And the variety, the creativity, the refinement of the Vajrayana methods are amazing, unparalleled in the history of spiritual life that I know of. There's such an incredible range of teachings and practices and options within that tradition.

The term vajrayana, as I understand it—and now I'm not speaking as any kind of expert, I'm just sharing what I've found in my studies—the term vajrayana is more or less synonymous with tantra, as understood in the Buddhist sense. The earliest tantras developed in Hindu practices, so they were borrowed and then elaborated upon originally from the Hindus. So I want to talk a little bit about how they came into being.

This is probably around the 5th or 6th century C.E., when the cult of Shiva was starting to grow. Shiva had been a fertility god in the Indus Valley for a long time, but his influence had lessened because of the Brahmanical influence founded in the Vedas. The earlier fertility gods were more or less put aside. But because of the influence of Buddhism and the rise of Buddhist teachings, the Brahmanical tradition

started to decline, and that allowed this earlier fertility cult of Shiva to spring back up.

As adepts began to relate to Shiva, they started to perform sacred dances. In these sacred dances, they would channel the energy, trying to identify their consciousness with the qualities of Shiva or of his consort—particularly Kali. Once they felt they had channeled that energy and put their mind state into the mind state of the god or goddess, they would carry out their sacred dances so that these dances sprang from a divine origin within the practitioners. This started to become widely popular in northern India.

Then some groups began getting another idea about the god and his consort. They decided: if there's a God and his consort and we're in that divine place, what would it feel like actually to have that sexual union taking place? So these practitioners went off in secret and began to have ritual intercourse when both parties had put their minds into the frame of the god or goddess, practicing the union in intercourse of those two beings.

This practice altogether—both the dances and the ritual sexual practices—became known as deva yoga, or union with the god. This was how Buddhist practitioners first developed this concept, according to the history books. Originally it was done as visualization because the practitioners weren't dancing so much, but they could visualize. They would start to visualize different deities, borrowing some from the list of bodhisattvas and some attributes from the Hindu pantheon.

But as the practices of tantra grew in Buddhism, some of the lay practitioners also began enacting ritual intercourse. They would take the tantric visualizations and carry them out in living form. This practice started to spread.

Imagine what the monks thought about this. This was going on alongside well-established monastic communities completely committed to celibacy. You can imagine as well as I—there's not a record of what was actually said, but you can imagine.

Even the monastic communities adopted the visualizations. The visualizations have come down and are practiced today, even by the Reformed sect, the Gelug order within Tibet, of whom the Dalai Lama is the titular head. Those monks also carry out the visualization part. As far as I know, the celibate monks within the Gelug order do not carry out any actual reenactment of the union of deity and consort. But in other lineages—Nyingma and Kagyu, for example, which Rinpoche mentioned today—practitioners do both the visualization and the actual union with the consort in physical form. These practices are still alive and practiced in the world today.

Around the 6th century, different levels of tantra had emerged that worked on different energies within the subtle body, which Rinpoche was talking about today. In time, in the lineage from which Dzogchen came, there came to be six levels of Tantra, of which the highest was Dzogchen, also called Ati Yoga, peak yoga.

The first records of the Dzogchen teachings in India show it emerging about the 6th century AD. The best

history I've found on this topic comes from a Western scholar who's a well-known Tibetan translator and practitioner named John Reynolds, in a book called Golden Letters, which is very interesting.

The Dzogchen practice was originally transmitted from Samantabhadra, who is the ultimate Dharmakaya aspect of Buddhahood beyond conception of the finite intellect, being without limitation and all-pervading like infinite space—the archetypal essence of mind that has never departed from the ground. Samantabhadra transmitted the essence of Dzogchen in a mind transmission without words to another pure being named Vajrasattva.

Vajrasattva is the being represented in this statue on the altar, a symbol of purity and intrinsic awakening. Vajrasattva transmitted it to a human being named Garab Dorje, who was the first human holder of the Dzogchen teachings around the 6th century. Garab Dorje has a famous teaching called "The Three Words That Strike the Vital Point," which Rinpoche often talks about in these retreats and may well in the next few days.

Then Garab Dorje passed it on to a few disciples who transmitted it to Padmasambhava, Vairochana, and Vimalamitra. These were the Indian teachers who carried it into Tibet. The Dzogchen teachings were said to come into Tibet in about the 8th century, and the name Padmasambhava is particularly linked with the Dzogchen lineage as it's carried out through the Nyingma school.

This takes us up into the 8th century. In India in the 8th century, Buddhism was on the decline.

By the 8th century in India, Buddhism was beginning its decline while Hinduism experienced a resurgence. Buddhism would survive in its homeland for only a few more centuries, as around this time, Muslim invasions began from the west and northwest. Turkish Muslim forces entered the subcontinent, and from historical accounts, they pursued what can only be described as a scorched earth policy toward other religious traditions.

These invaders first established their dominance in the western and northwestern regions, systematically destroying monasteries and nunneries while burning countless sacred texts. They then advanced steadily eastward across the subcontinent. By the 12th century, they had conquered the entire upper Ganges Valley, and at that point, Buddhism was essentially eradicated from its birthplace.

The great monasteries lay in ruins. Renowned centers of learning like Nalanda University were completely destroyed. Countless precious texts and teachings vanished forever in the flames—we can only imagine the magnitude of wisdom that was lost during this dark period. From the 12th century until roughly the last century, Buddhism remained virtually non-existent in India.

Remarkably, one of the most significant revivals of Buddhism in India today comes through the Tibetan diaspora. The tragic displacement of Tibetan refugees has brought an unexpected blessing to the world—the reestablishment of Buddhist teachings in the very land where they first flourished. Among all the places experiencing a Buddhist renaissance, India may be the most remarkable.

This brings our historical journey to the present day. Tomorrow, we'll shift our focus to the practical aspects of meditation, diving into the actual methods and techniques. But I wanted to establish this historical foundation first, as it will help illuminate the philosophical principles we'll explore over the coming days as we delve into the meditation practice itself.

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