

The Practices of Tibetan Buddhism

By Kathy Wesley. Draft copy. Last revision 3.12. 00

Introduction

When we first approach Tibetan Buddhism, it's rather like approaching a house with several front doors. Not only do we not know which door to enter, we don't know what to say or do when we go inside.

Tibetan Buddhism, with its many practices, colorful temples and hosts of meditational deities, may at first seem confusing to the new student. But when we understand how the different deities and practices fit together, the picture isn't so confusing.

Part of our difficulty in approaching Tibetan Buddhism is cultural. In Old Tibet, students grew up in the Buddhist tradition, and its practices were as familiar as the lama (teacher) down the road or the gumpa (temple) in the next river valley. In the West, however, Buddhism is still new, and the progression of practice—how students progress from one level to another—is neither obvious nor logical in its outward appearance. We haven't grown up in Buddhism, so its Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and its practices seem strange and exotic—and inaccessible—to us.

But with guidance, it's easy to see the patterns in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, and see how the practices develop in a logical, step-by-step fashion. This understanding gives us the confidence to go on in our practice, and progress along the path as the practitioners of the past have done.

That is the purpose of this booklet: to introduce the varying practices of Tibetan Buddhism, and show how they progress from one level to another. It is by no means an exhaustive explanation; there is much in Tibetan Buddhism that is not covered in this book. But this guide will give a general idea of the basic types of practices, so the new student can add to his or her understanding of, and confidence in, the Tibetan tradition.

The Working Basis

All students start at the same place: understanding Enlightenment and how important it is to attain spiritual awakening.

When he was alive 2,500 years ago, the historical Buddha, named Shakyamuni, taught that the mind was the seat of all experience—that everything we experience, happiness and sadness, pleasure and pain—is perceived, framed and experienced by the mind.

He also taught that our minds have a basic nature of enlightened sanity and goodness—that the mind is basically clear and without limit—but that it is difficult for the average person to experience this basic nature because of afflictive emotions, or kleshas.

Afflictive emotions, like all thoughts, arise continually in the mind, and create a sort of emotional fog that keeps us from seeing our basic nature. Because we don't understand the fleeting, temporary nature of these thoughts and emotions, and don't realize them as mere manifestations of mind's deeper basic nature, we tend to cling to these thoughts and emotions, using them to build a self-identity we come to call "I."

Because we are preoccupied with this "I" and its superficial thoughts and emotions, it is difficult for us to perceive our basic enlightened nature. So we tend to think that the sources of personal happiness and well-being are outside ourselves, and spend most of our time pursuing temporary physical and mental happiness from these outside sources.

But if we would recognize thoughts and emotions for what they are—mere waves on the surface of a deeper, basically happy and sane mind—we could clear the way for a different sort of life, a life in which we experience, from moment-to-moment, the innate enlightened nature of the mind. This, the Buddha said, was called enlightenment.

The practices of Buddhism, then, lead us step by step from confusion to enlightenment, a process which takes many years and much sincere effort to accomplish. But even if enlightenment may seem far away, it isn't - the Buddha, himself a simple human being, achieved it, and taught that everyone else could, too.

That's because everyone has a mind—which the Buddha called the working basis for enlightenment.

The Choice

Every person, then, has a choice to make - to decide whether to pursue enlightenment, and the lasting happiness that goes along with it, or to stay in the world of confusion and conflicting emotions, which the Buddha called samsara. In making this choice, people have to begin to understand the benefits of enlightenment, and the drawbacks of staying in the samsaric world.

The greatest immediate benefit of enlightenment, the Buddha taught, is the elimination of suffering. And this suffering is eliminated by doing away with its cause—selfish action. In our average, confused state of mind, we are very selfish—we do everything to make ourselves happy and comfortable, even if it means hurting others. But the actions that we take against others—even minor ones like lying to other people, or snubbing their attempts to offer us caring and affection—actually can rebound on us and cause us more pain. The Buddha called this the law of karma.

When we hurt others, we hurt ourselves—we make our personal world more brutal, more lawless—just as the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. once taught that racist thoughts and actions enslaved whites as well as blacks. Some people like to say that karma is a sort of cosmic justice, a sort of “what goes around, comes around,” but it boils down simply to this: we create our own world with our thoughts and actions. The more brutal and selfish our actions, the more brutal and selfish our world—and its sufferings—become.

And because the Buddha taught reincarnation (the continuation of experience from life to life) as an extension of the law of karma, it's easy to see that the

fruition of this “creating our own world” can happen at any time—in the current lifetime, or a lifetime to come. Thus, a person who has been brutal to others for many lifetimes has created a world of brutality and suffering that will last for a long, long time—perhaps several more lifetimes—until the negative effects of that brutality and selfishness are countered by positive, selfless action. Selfless action creates a world of peace and gentleness around us—positive people have a particular kind of pleasant, happy energy about them, and tend to make others feel at ease as well.

That's why the Buddha gave the teachings on karma. To show us that what we do is very important for our future happiness and to make us care about our future life (or rather, lives). If we care about our future lives and see the truth of karma, we will want to practice any discipline that reduces our selfishness, also called ego-clinging, and increases our selflessness. By increasing our selflessness, we weaken the grip of conflicting emotions, and this enables us to “see” and experience the basically sane and good nature of our minds. This leads to lasting happiness and enlightenment.

An enlightened being, the Buddha taught, has no selfishness, and so can help other people in a perfect way and be a beacon of inspiration to others who seek enlightenment. That is why images of the Buddha are so prominent on Buddhist shrines; to serve as an inspiration to seek out the hidden perfection (called Buddha nature) that we all carry within ourselves.

How the practices work

The practices of Tibetan Buddhism start with this working basis and choice and follow in a step-by-step fashion. The first practices calm the mind so it can glimpse its own Buddha nature, and then follow with a series of other practices that root out ego-clinging and replace selfish habits with selfless ones. Lastly, when selfless action has begun to clear more suffering and negativity from the mind, the practitioner is ready to undertake deeper practices that quicken the pace of realization and put total enlightenment within reach.

It is important that these practices be followed in the correct order. If people decide for themselves that they don't need mind-calming practices like tranquility meditation and jump immediately into the deeper practices without the proper preparation, they run the risk of damaging themselves both mentally and physically and creating "ego-hood" instead of "Buddhahood."

The Spiritual Friend

Because there are so many practices and so many ways to apply them, it is important to have a spiritual friend—a teacher or lama—to guide us on the path. The spiritual friend, who already has traversed the path and understands its hidden dangers, can safely take us through the practices and give us advice that will help us transform ourselves. Giving in to and taking the advice of a qualified spiritual friend actually is an important step on the path; if we stubbornly insist that only we know what is best for us, that's actually a form of selfishness and pride that can be a strong obstacle to our spiritual development.

We need, then, to find a spiritual friend who is right for us, who knows our minds and has a certain amount of selflessness so they can guide us in the correct way.

In evaluating a spiritual friend, we have to ask ourselves some questions. What is this person like? Do their actions match their teachings? Do they appear to be pursuing a path of selflessness, or do they appear to be pursuing a path of ego-clinging? After asking these questions, and reviewing a teacher carefully, we then can decide whether to accept this teacher's advice.

Particularly trusted teachers can become known as our gurus, meaning they have a special place in our lives. The teacher who gives us the instructions that do the most toward developing our minds is known as our tsawai lama or root guru. This person plays a pivotal role in our spiritual development.

Shinay (Tranquility meditation)

One of the very first practices of Tibetan Buddhism is Shinay (a Tibetan word, which in Sanskrit is called Shamata), also called Tranquility meditation. In

shinay, we sit quietly and comfortably and rest our awareness either on the breath or an external object, such as a flower or a statue of the Buddha. By settling our awareness and calming our minds, we come to see that thoughts and emotions in the mind arise and disappear as easily as clouds form and dissipate in the sky. This helps us understand that our self-concept is not a solid, changeless entity, and that our minds actually are quite workable and changeable. This understanding—and the gradual mental stability that comes from regular practice of shinay—can help us work with all the other practices of Tibetan Buddhism.

That's why lamas call shinay the foundation of all practice. Without developing some mental stability, it will be impossible for us to deal with ego-clinging and conflicting emotions. We will see every thought and emotion as being solid and "real," which will catch us in a constant web of hope and fear - hoping for a certain outcome, or fearing another. We won't be able to relax and deal with our lives and experiences calmly - we'll always be locked in some sort of struggle. Shinay shows us we don't have to struggle to gain awareness, and that awareness itself can be a powerful tool for spiritual transformation.

The ultimate goal of shinay is a sense of calm abiding, in which the mind is undisturbed by (although not devoid of) thoughts and emotions. It is in this state that one can gain a glimpse of the true nature of mind and phenomena—an experience called Lhaktong in Tibetan, Vipassana in Sanskrit or "insight."

Refuge

The first big step for a practitioner on the path of Tibetan Buddhism is the taking of refuge. Anyone, Buddhist or non-Buddhist, can learn to meditate and use the practices of awareness, but to continue on and use the other practices of the Tibetan tradition takes a sort of commitment.

So the beginning Buddhist takes refuge by coming before before a lama and publicly affirming his or her trust in the Buddha, the Buddha's teachings (called the Dharma) and the community of spiritual prac-

titioners (called the Sangha). The practitioner then gains several things: the beginnings of confidence and faith, and objects of refuge (the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha) that can act as sources of inspiration and protection. How can the sources of refuge protect us? When we are buffeted to and fro by conflicting emotions, we may feel alone and defenseless, but if we think of the Buddha or his teachings or his community of practitioners, we realize we are not alone and that we have methods to deal with the things that make us feel alone and without defenses.

This is where prayer can be of value to us. When we feel upset or without a strong center, we can pray to the Buddha for strength and inspiration. The Buddha's only wish was that all beings become enlightened, and he dedicated his life to accomplishing that goal. That wish in itself means that he is constantly with us, and that the strength of his example is always open to us. Knowing this, our prayers are successful and our confidence is bolstered.

Constructive action—precepts and vows

Once we have dedicated ourselves to the Buddhist path through Refuge, it's important to re-direct our energies to pursuing constructive activities. Because we understand karma, and know that selfishness and selfish action are the causes of suffering and confusion, we try to pursue activities that decrease our ego-clinging and increase our selflessness. The Buddhists call these actions virtuous actions because they nullify ego-clinging.

The Buddha gave a list of virtuous and non-virtuous activities to serve as a guide in helping us follow a selfless life. He taught that killing, lying, stealing, sexual misconduct, drunkenness, gossip, slander, covetousness, resentment and non-spiritual views lead to more selfishness and suffering. He also taught that protecting life, generosity, living ethically, telling the truth, patching up quarrels, speaking with gentleness, discussing things helpfully, rejoicing in the fortune of others, thinking of others' benefit and not denouncing the beliefs of others produce more peace and happiness, not only for ourselves, but for others, as well.

Although it is never required, some Buddhists choose to formalize their commitment to constructive activities by taking the Lay Precepts. In taking these precepts, we vow not to kill, steal, lie, take intoxicants or indulge in sexual misconduct. By making this formal commitment, we cut down on external distractions that contribute to wild emotional swings and ego-centered grasping and increase our sense of inner stability and strength.

Bodhicitta and the Bodhisattva Vow

As we practice shamata and constructive activity, we will find that our minds begin a gradual change. We are less worried about ourselves and our personal possessions and "territory" and are more open to others. We begin to see that other beings are just like us in their wish for happiness, but are held down by their conflicting emotions and selfishness, just as we have been. We begin to see the reasons for their sufferings, and begin to take more interest in helping them reach enlightenment themselves.

In the Tibetan tradition, this re-direction of interests and energies is formalized in a practice called Bodhicitta. Bodhicitta is a Sanskrit word meaning, "Mind of Awakening," and is defined as both the wish to gain enlightenment for the sake of others and the activity that leads to that enlightenment.

As we gain more experience through our practice, we see that while our former motivation of gaining enlightenment solely for ourselves was helpful in getting us to practice, that we eventually need to broaden our horizon and shake off the last traces of selfishness in our motivation to reach enlightenment.

The height of this desire to rid ourselves of selfishness is shown in taking the Bodhisattva Vow, in which we vow to work toward enlightenment for the benefit of all beings. This means we have recognized the importance of others to our path, and that we know our field of working on ourselves includes our relationships to others.

We generate Bodhicitta by saying prayers of aspiration (bolstering the "wish" part of our practice) and by counteracting our ego-clinging through practic-

ing loving-kindness and compassion for others and through practicing the Six Perfections: Generosity, Patience, Ethics, Diligence, Meditation and Wisdom (fulfilling the “activity” part of Bodhicitta).

And while realizing Ultimate Bodhicitta, a complete understanding of the limitless nature of mind, is difficult to practice and understand, Relative Bodhicitta—the practice of compassion—is easy to grasp and practice.

By developing compassion—first for ourselves, and then for others—we break down the barriers of ego-generated prejudices, which makes it easier to accept ourselves and others and work for their benefit.

Through these practices of Bodhicitta, we become Bodhisattvas—which is translated as “awakening beings.” We commit ourselves to achieving enlightenment, and we take proper steps to accomplish the goal, just like the spiritual seekers of old who set their objectives and then persevered to achieve them.

In this way, our commitment to the path of mental and emotional stability becomes deeper and the resultant rewards become richer.

The Preliminary Practices: Ngondrö

After taking this step of dedicating ourselves to the Bodhisattva path, we can then practice the deeper meditation methods of the Vajrayana (or diamond path) and can more quickly realize our own innately enlightened natures.

In the Vajrayana, we use visualization and mantra to enhance our appreciation (and experience) of our Buddha nature. Through the practices of the Vajrayana, we imagine ourselves to be fully awakened buddhas or bodhisattvas and our world to be an enlightened paradise—essentially relating to ourselves as we really are, rather than the way we appear right now.

But before embarking on this profound and complex path, we need to make sure our motivation (and our practice) is pure and selfless, and that our commitment to the path is complete.

To accomplish this, the next step in the Tibetan tradition is Ngondrö, or the Preliminary Practices. These

consist of two parts: Ordinary and Extraordinary preliminaries.

Ordinary preliminaries are contemplative meditations on the preciousness of human life, the impermanence of all existence, the truth of karma and the unsatisfactoriness of samsaric, confused life. Once these contemplations are done properly, a person’s mind is firmly turned toward the Dharma, and they are ready to begin the Extraordinary foundations;

Extraordinary preliminaries consist of liturgical practices in which a person re-affirms their refuge vow and intention; says purification mantras; mentally offers themselves and all the world’s treasures to the lineage teachers and to the Enlightened beings; and affirms their connection to the lineage through the relationship with their personal teacher. Each of these things is done in a ritual manner 111,111 times—a number said to firmly implant the ideas in a person’s spiritual being.

After completing ngondrö, several practices can be given, depending on the student. Although there are many practices, the main ones taught to students in the West are the Vajrayana practices called deity yoga and Mahamudra.

Deity yoga: Yidam practices

Even after practicing shamata, Bodhicitta and the Preliminaries, we are still subject to confusion and conflicting emotions. To help root out these conflicting emotions quickly, teachers of the past have passed on the transmission of sadhanas (liturgies) on the various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the Tibetan tradition.

Through practicing these rituals, we can quicken our understanding of the basic nature of mind (which, as we explained before is limitless, clear and unimpeded). We do this by visualizing a perfectly enlightened being and then mentally re-creating ourselves in the image of this enlightened being. Through this, we recognize that our bodily form is without inherent existence (like the body of the deity); that our speech is pure dharmic communication (like the sacred mantras spoken by the deity); and that our minds are the

vast expanse of open awareness without the stain of conflicting emotions (like the mind of the deity).

These practices are called Vajrayana or Tantrayana because they use the principle of tantra, which means “thread” or “connection,” referring to the thread of wakefulness that runs through all of our experiences. By recognizing our unity with the enlightened being of our meditation, we discover a connection between everything—good happenings, bad happenings, all our thoughts, emotions and experiences—and enlightenment. We see ourselves as sacred, and our world as a sacred place filled with the manifestations of enlightenment, and our thoughts as the play of enlightened awareness. In this way, our practice of meditation can proceed continuously throughout even the mundane activities of our daily lives, and we can achieve enlightenment more rapidly.

The Buddhas and bodhisattvas (deities) used in these tantric practices, called yidams in Tibetan, are used as the focus for meditations in which we recognize the true enlightened nature of our minds.

Yidams are considered emanations of enlightened mind, and some actually refer to people who lived either before or after the time of the Buddha. Externally, they have many appearances, and their very forms symbolize their enlightened activity. There are peaceful yidams (such as Chenrezig, the bodhisattva of compassion) pleasant in appearance, which symbolize the calm and clear aspects of our inner minds, and there are wrathful deities, which symbolize the more active aspects of our minds.

To properly practice these meditations, preparation is needed. Among these preparations are Empowerment (called wang in Tibetan), in which a teacher ritually blesses and introduces the student to the deity; Reading transmission, (called lung) in which the text of the sadhana is ritually read to the student as an authorization; and Practical Instruction (called tri), in which the Development (visualization) and Fulfillment (meditation) stages of the practice are explained in detail. Without these three parts, it is difficult to fully practice a particular deity.

Some dharma students, after finishing ngondrö, are given a yidam for life; others are given several yidam practices to do.

Mahamudra

In Sanskrit, Mahamudra means “great symbol” or “great seal.” In Tibetan, the word is chak ya chenpo. It refers both to the basic limitless, clear, unimpeded nature of mind and to the methods used to achieve the realization of that mind. Mahamudra is the main meditative practice of the Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, and has been handed down from teacher to student in an unbroken line for more than 1,000 years.

These practices are given only when a teacher is certain a student is both ready and able to practice them. The teachings generally are given after a student completes ngondrö, and they may or may not be given at the same time as yidam meditation instruction.

The Monastic Path; The Three-Year Retreat

While most practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism in the West remain householders, monastic communities of celibate monks and nuns are developing. In these settings, practitioners who wish to devote their entire lives to practice are able to pursue their practice with extraordinary dedication.

Another practice setting Western students can participate in is the Three-Year Retreat, where students leave homes and families for three years and three phases of the moon and practice intensively, following a set pattern of progressive Vajrayana practices. The retreat is designed to give students a complete set of dharmic tools for the accomplishment of enlightenment in one lifetime. It also allows some of them to become lamas and teach others.

Summary

This discussion of the practices of Tibetan Buddhism focuses on the Kagyu tradition, one of four existing lineages of Tibetan Buddhism. It is meant as an overview of the progression of teaching, to show that the practices of the Tibetan tradition build upon one another in a logical sequence that anyone can follow.

The danger in presenting this type of overview, however, is that by reading about the later practices of Buddhism, students may wish to skip the earlier phases, wrongly thinking they are “just for beginners.” But in actuality the earlier phases are critical to accomplishing the later ones. To be tempted to “skip ahead” and try other practices before current ones are finished can only fuel the fires of the conflicting emotions of impatience and pride, making us more confused and less able to practice effectively.

The best method for following these practices is to find a Dharma center and a qualified lama or teacher, and to begin learning the proper methods of study and practice. After studying the methods carefully and asking questions to clear up any lingering doubts, students should practice diligently until understanding is reached.

The preciousness of our human life is not to be taken lightly; soon death will overtake us and we will no longer be able to practice, being instead pushed by our karmic accumulations into a future life that may not be as favorable as the one we now enjoy. That we have encountered the teachings of the Buddha at all means we are very, very fortunate to have what the Tibetan tradition calls a “precious human birth;” all we must do now is decide how best to use it.

Whether we know it or not, we all are already on a spiritual path of some kind; we seek happiness and wish to avoid suffering, and have the beginnings of feelings of compassion for ourselves and others. So it’s up to us to start from where we are and decide whether to go forward into enlightenment or backward into confusion. As the Buddha said, we alone are the ones who can save ourselves, and we must work on our own salvation with diligence.

