Tibetan Buddhism

The Schools of Tibetan Buddhism

The schools of Tibetan Buddhism focus on particular lineages of teachings passed from teacher to disciple, and not on different monastic ordination lineages. Four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism survive today, with, as one might expect, a number of sub-schools.

The **Nyingmapas** trace their roots back to the first diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet and the legendary figure of Padmasambhava, many of whose teachings were considered to have been concealed as 'hidden treasures' (*Terma*) to be subsequently found and taught by a series of 'treasure finders' (*Terstons*). The Nyingmapas preserve a distinctive classification of Buddhist teachings into nine 'vehicles'. The first three are the conventional vehicles of the disciple, solitary buddha, and bodhisattva; the middle three concern lower tantric practice, while the final three concern highest tantric practice, called by the Nyingmapas *Dzogchen* or 'great fulfilment', and understood as the realization of the primordial and spontaneous purity of mind. Characteristic of the Nyingma school, although not confined to it, is a strong tradition of lay trantric teachers known as *Ngagspas*.

The **Kagyudpas** look back to the Indian yogin Nāropa (956–1040), and trace the lineage of their teachings through Mar-pa (1012–96), Mila Raspa (1040–1123), and Gampopa (1079–1153). Their gradual path teachings derive from Atiśa's Kadampa tradition and were set out classically by Gampopa in his *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*; their tantric teachings centre on the 'Great Seal' (*mahāmudrā*/*phyag-chen*). The Kagyudpa spawned various sub-schools. The Karma Kagyudpa sub-school is headed by a teacher given the title Karmapa; the first of these, Dusgsum-mkhyenpa (1110–93), is said to have prophesied the manner and circumstances of his future birth, so that his *spruls-skus* or 'creation body' (*nirmāna-kāya*) could be identified and installed as the next Karmapa. This custom whereby a teacher gives instructions for recognizing his reincarnated successor is now most famously associated with the office of the Dalai Lama of the Gelugpa school.

Sakyapa origins and history are intimately connected with the 'Khon family. 'Khon Kon-mchog Gyalpo founded the Sakyapa monastery in south-west Tibet in 1073.

Characteristic of the Sakyapa school is a monastic tradition in association with a specifically 'Khon family lineage of married yogins passing the teaching from father to son or from uncle to nephew. From the beginning of the twelfth until the middle of the fourteenth century the Sakyapas enjoyed considerable political influence in Tibet. Five 'great masters' are recognized, the most important of which is usually regarded as Saskya Pandita (1182–1251). The Sakyapa gradual-path 'sūtra' teachings, known as the 'Leaving behind the Four Desires' (*zhen-pa bzhi bral*), revolve around the exegesis of four lines said to have been uttered by the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, Mañjuśrī, to the 11-year-old Kundga' snying-po (1092–1158), the second of the five masters:

> If you desire this life, you are not a religious person.
> If you desire the round of existence, you have not turned around with conviction.
> If you desire benefit for yourself, you do not have the thought of awakening.
> If grasping ensues, you do not have the view.

The other main teaching of the school is a combined sūtra and tantra teaching called 'Path and Fruit' (*lam-'bras*), which is associated with the *Hevajra* tantra. This teaching is traced to the Indian tantric yogin Virūpa (c. ninth century), one of the eighty-four *siddhas*.

In more recent Tibetan history it is the powerful **Gelugpa** school that has been politically dominant. The Gelugpa school sees itself as the principal inheritor of the Kadampa tradition. Founded in the fourteenth century by the scholar-monk Tsong-kha-pa (1357–1419), the school reaffirmed monasticism and is famed for its scholarship, particularly its exegesis of Madhyamaka thought. Its sūtra and tantra teachings are based on Tsong-kha-pa's two principal works: *The Great Gradual Path (Lam-rim chen-mo*), a commentāry on *Atiśa's Lamp*, and *The Great Path of Mantra* (*sngags-rim chen-mo*), which centres on the *Kālacakra* and *Guhya-samāja* tantras . . .

Chinese troops invaded Tibet in 1950; by 1959 the Dalai Lama had little option but to flee to India. In Tibet first the People's Liberation Army and then the Red Guard continued the systematic destruction of Tibetan Buddhist culture involving the death of perhaps a million Tibetans and the destruction of over 6,000 monasteries.

Buddhist Thought in Tibet

Tibetan Buddhism has not developed distinctively Tibetan traditions of Buddhist philosophy quite in the manner of Chinese T'ien-t'ai and Hua-yen.

Generally the Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness is regarded as the highest and final philosophical statement of Buddhist teaching, though ideas and teachings associated with the Yogācāra remain influential, and the precise interpretation of Madhyamaka is nuanced in various ways.

The most significant philosophical debate centred on the question of whether behind appearances there is some reality that can be characterized as ultimately existing or not, a true 'Absolute'.

The view that there is such an ultimately existing reality is known as 'empty of what is other' (*gzhan stong*); that is to say, true reality is empty in so far as it is empty of everything other than itself. The view was expounded by Dolpopa Shes-rab Gyal-mtshan (1292–1361) and has found considerable support within Tibetan Buddhism.

The more mainstream Madhyamaka view is known as 'empty of itself' (*rang stong*), emphasizing that ultimate truth about the nature of reality is that it is empty even of its own existence. This is a discussion that once more reflects the problems Buddhist thought has had in arriving at a proper statement of the middle between the two extremes of eternalism and annihilationism.

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