



A Brief Introduction to the Three Yanas

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In Tibetan Buddhism, the spiritual journey is framed as a progression through three approaches, which are typically referred to as "vehicles" or "*yanas*." Tibetan Buddhists practice these various approaches as a unity. Lower vehicles are not dispensed with in favor of supposedly "higher" teachings, but rather integrated into a more refined and holistic approach to spiritual development.

Each vehicle contains three distinct components: view, meditation, and conduct. The view refers to a set of philosophical tenets espoused by a particular approach. On a more experiential level, the view prescribes how practitioners of a given vehicle should "see" reality and its relative manifestations. Meditation consists of the practical techniques that allow practitioners to integrate Buddhist principles with their own lives, thus providing a bridge between theory and experience, while conduct spells out the ethical guidelines of each system.

The following sections outline the features of each approach. Keep in mind, however, that each vehicle is a world unto itself, with its own unique philosophical views, meditations, and ethical systems. This array of new concepts and terminology can be bewildering to the novice practitioner. The following presentation is meant as a brief introduction to these rich traditions.

The Two Sutra Vehicles ~ The Hinayana and Mahayana

The Sutra Vehicle, or *Sutrayana*, contains two distinct approaches: the Foundational Vehicle, or *Hinayana*, and the Great Vehicle, or *Mahayana*. The former contains the most basic teachings of the Buddhist tradition, including the Four Noble Truths, impermanence, and interdependence. The Great Vehicle expands the view and scope of the Foundational Vehicle with concepts like bodhichitta and emptiness. In this approach, the outcome of spiritual practice is the attainment of buddhahood, whereas the end

point of the Foundational Vehicle is a lesser level of realization known as the state of the foe destroyer, or *arhat*.

The Foundational Vehicle is broken down further into the Vehicles of the Listeners and Solitary Buddhas—the Shravakayana and Pratyekabuddhayana. The basic mind-set of these vehicles is the same, in that both approaches focus on individual liberation, rather than the liberation of all beings. There are, however, subtle differences when it comes to the level of realization and the style of practice espoused by each system.

The Foundational Vehicle

As stated above, practitioners of the Listener Vehicle are primarily motivated by a desire to free themselves from the suffering of samsara. The starting point in this approach is the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha’s very first teaching. The first two truths highlight the unsatisfactory nature of samsara and the factors that generate suffering. As an alternative to this cycle of ignorance and misery, the last two truths present the possibility of the cessation of suffering and the path that leads to this cessation.

The view of the Listener Vehicle focuses on the absence of self. More specifically, practitioners of this approach aim to realize that there is no independent, unitary, and lasting identity to be found in any aspect of our physical or mental existence. Through analysis and direct observation, they come to see the mind and body as an ever-shifting constellation of individual components, none of which constitutes a “self.”

Meditation in the Listener Vehicle involves two forms of meditation: tranquility and insight, which are also known by their Sanskrit names—*shamata* and *vipashyana*. Tranquility is designed to pacify destructive emotional patterns and bring the mind to a point of stillness, while insight elicits an understanding of the nature of the focal point of one’s meditation. All the various approaches to Buddhist practice employ these two forms of meditation, yet there is a great degree of variability when it comes to specific techniques. In the Foundational Vehicle, there are many forms of tranquility meditation, which may involve focusing on the breath, absorbing oneself in states of love, compassion, joy, and equanimity, or concentrating on the physical body, sensations, the mind, and phenomena. Insight meditation relates primarily to realizing the various

facets of the Four Noble Truths, and basic principles like impermanence and the absence of self, in particular.

The ethical code of the Listener Vehicle stresses strict discipline and nonviolence. Followers of this approach often take various sets of vows to ground their ethical practice. These vows range from relatively straightforward lists of five or eight precepts, all the way up to the incredibly detailed monastic rules of fully ordained monks and nuns that number in the hundreds. In addition to such vows, they also pledge to live by the principle of nonviolence. In practical terms, this means abstaining from the “ten forms of vice”: (1) killing, (2) stealing, (3) sexual misconduct, (4) lying, (5) sowing discord, (6) idle chatter, (7) harsh speech, (8) malice, (9) envy, and (10) distorted beliefs.

The Mahayana

The Great Vehicle, or *Mahayana*, builds upon the renunciation and insights of the Foundational Vehicle. One distinct feature of this approach is the principle of *bodhichitta*—the wish to bring all beings to the state of buddhahood and the activities engendered by this wish. Unlike the Foundational Vehicle, in which practitioners strive to liberate only *themselves* from the suffering of samsara, adherents of the Bodhisattva Vehicle work to awaken *all* beings. Those who have pledged to do so are known as *bodhisattvas*—enlightened warriors.

The two truths, another hallmark of the Great Vehicle, offer a model of reality that encompasses both the distorted perceptions of ordinary beings and the Buddha’s deep insight into the true nature of existence. The *relative truth* refers to the confused minds of ordinary beings and all that they perceive through the distorted lens of dualistic fixation, the belief that self and other truly exist. The *ultimate truth*, on the other hand, refers to reality itself and the wisdom that beholds this reality once the mind has been divested of ignorance.

In terms of view, the Mahayana stresses the importance of realizing emptiness, or *shunyata*. In realizing emptiness, one comes to see that all phenomena, both the external material world and the mind that perceives it, lack any essential existence. No basic building blocks of matter or eternal mind can ever be found. In other words, the seemingly solid and stable world around us, and even our own minds, are utterly

ephemeral and illusory. Nevertheless, this does not mean that there is nothing at all, for while we may not find anything when we take the time to investigate, the entire range of relative appearances still manifests. In fact, it is precisely because these appearances have no true existence that they can manifest at all. If they truly existed, they would be fixed and static, stuck with an essence that is immutable and incapable of change.

Another principle in this approach is *sugata-garbha*, or buddha nature. The theory of buddha nature stipulates that all sentient beings possess the innate potential to achieve perfect and complete awakening. From this point of view, there is no essential difference between buddhas and ordinary beings. Though buddhas have actualized this potential and ordinary beings have not, the fundamental nature of both remains the same. Buddha nature does not get worse in samsara, nor does it improve in nirvana. Rather, the process of awakening is simply a matter of removing the destructive emotions and habitual patterns that block the radiance of this innate nature, like removing mud from a piece of gold.

In terms of meditation, once again we have the two core practices of tranquility and insight. As in the Foundational Vehicle, tranquility serves to concentrate the mind and provide a solid foundation for the cultivation of insight. In this approach, insight involves realizing that all phenomena are unreal and illusory, and that both subject and object lack inherent existence. In other words, one gains insight into the empty nature of the entire universe and its inhabitants.

In postmeditation, one uses the six perfections, or *paramitas*, to work for the welfare of all beings. These six—generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, meditative stability, and wisdom—are the main practices of the bodhisattva. The sixth perfection, wisdom, is of particular importance because all the remaining five perfections become transcendent when linked with the wisdom of emptiness.

The Vajra Vehicle

The Vajra Vehicle contains the tantric teachings of the Buddhist tradition. On the surface, the practices and philosophies of the Vajra Vehicle seem a world apart from the accessible teachings of the Foundational and Great Vehicles. These differences, however,

are merely superficial. The end result of both vehicles is the state of complete awakening—buddhahood. Renunciation and bodhichitta, moreover, are indispensable elements of both approaches, as are the view of emptiness and the enlightened potential of buddha nature.

The two approaches do diverge, however, in terms of technique. The methods of the Vajra Vehicle speed up the process of spiritual growth, and at the same time involve less hardship than the practices of the Sutra Vehicle. They are so efficient, in fact, that it is said that the Vajra Vehicle enables the practitioner to attain in a single life and single body what would otherwise take three immeasurable eons to accomplish—the state of buddhahood itself.

The supreme efficiency of the Vajra Vehicle lies in its willingness to use all the various facets of human existence as aids on the spiritual path. Whereas emotions and sense pleasures are often viewed as impediments in the Foundational and Great Vehicles, the Vajra Vehicle harnesses their power and channels it in a more constructive direction. This open attitude allows the Vajrayana practitioner to skillfully use all activities and experiences—even negative thoughts and emotions—as fuel for the fire of awakening.

Though there are many different styles of practice in this vehicle, the development stage and completion stage are often viewed as the hallmarks of tantric practice. The development stage uses visualization, mantra recitation, and deep states of concentration to disrupt the habitual tendency to view the world and its inhabitants as impure and truly existent. The imaginary process of visualizing oneself as a deity in a pure realm, for example, allows the practitioner to experience directly the fluid, ethereal nature of perception.

The completion stage has two components: the conceptual completion stage and nonconceptual completion stage. The first aims to harness the subtle energies of the body and consciously bring them into the central channel. These practices, which often involve intense yogic postures, focus on the link between the energetic body and the mind, the idea being that by controlling the former one will be able to undo the negative conditioning of the latter. The nonconceptual completion stage, by contrast, is an effortless approach. Often associated with the Great Perfection and Mahamudra, this

form of completion stage practice emphasizes recognizing the nature of mind and experiencing its pure expressions without the filter of dualistic fixation.

The gateway to tantric practice is empowerment, or *abhisheka*. Conferred by a guru, empowerments authorize students to practice the teachings of the Vajra Vehicle. Each lineage and style of practice has its own unique empowerments, which are said to “ripen” the students’ entire being and prepare them for tantric practice. The commitments of each empowerment are known as *samaya* vows.

- Adapted from *Entrance to the Great Perfection: A Guide to the Dzogchen Preliminary Practices*