

*A brief introduction to Buddhism
and the Sakya tradition*

by Christian Bernert



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Preface

This booklet is the first of what we hope will become a small series of introductory volumes on Buddhism in thought and practice. This volume was prepared by Christian Bernert, a member of the Chödung Karmo Translation Group, and is meant for interested newcomers with little or no background knowledge about Buddhism. It provides important information on the life of Buddha Shakyamuni, the founder of our tradition, and his teachings, and introduces the reader to the world of Tibetan Buddhism and the Sakya tradition in particular. It also includes the translation of two short yet profound texts on mind training characteristic of this school.

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With our best wishes for everyone's path to peace and happiness,

Khenpo Ngawang Jorden

Director of the International Buddhist Academy (IBA), Kathmandu, Nepal.

1. *Why Buddhism?*

Buddhism is the path of awakening. It basically teaches us two things: compassion and wisdom, both of which are the natural expression of a mind awakened to its true nature. Buddhism is also a path of cultivation, offering various means of training the mind to unfold its natural potential. This training can be of great benefit to anyone—in the short term, and especially in the long term—covering all aspects of our being, from health to spiritual development:

- **Stress management:**
coping with stress and the demands of modern life.
- **Joy of living:**
cultivating a happiness that is not dependent on external conditions.
- **Personal development:**
understanding the functioning of one's own mind and its potential.
- **Cultivating the heart:**
opening the heart to let love and compassion unfold.
- **Insight:**
seeing things as they really are, beyond our personal projections.
- **Death and life:**
learning to accept death and giving deeper meaning to our lives.
- **Beyond wellness:**
the project of awakening gives us an orientation in life that goes far beyond the satisfaction of pleasurable experiences. It aims at a truly noble goal, the liberation from suffering.

2. *Buddhism 101*

2.1. The basics of Buddhism

A question of freedom

Even though freedom and happiness are fundamental values in our modern societies, it is important that we ask ourselves to what extent we actually embody these values in our own lives. Are we not to a certain extent, and often—unfortunately—to a rather large extent, internally unfree, our actions dictated by our likes and dislikes, our conditionings and habits? Is it not the case that the dream of a happy, peaceful life oftentimes remains nothing but a dream throughout most of our busy existence?

We can accept the status quo or we can take a closer look and question our approach to life. It is up to us. Buddhism, in all its diversity, offers exactly that: methods for close examination and for “rewiring” ourselves in skillful ways, ultimately leading to genuine inner freedom.

Why am I stressed, unhappy, unfree? The various answers to these questions and the methods used to resolve this fundamental problem have given rise to different approaches within the Buddhist traditions over time. One objective is common to them all: making the best use of our mind’s potential for our own benefit and for that of others.

A path of cultivation

Our body requires good food, hygiene, and regular exercise to maintain its health. Why would it be different with the mind? The

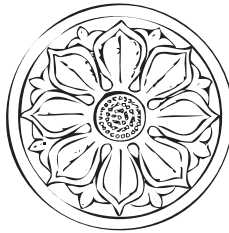
Buddhist path can be understood as a form of mental hygiene or exercise that allows us to digest well whatever we consume with our minds on a daily basis and to improve our inner life. The aim of the path is freedom—freedom from whatever it is that makes us unfree—and the flourishing of the human potential.

Buddhism is called the “Path of the Middle,” avoiding on the one hand the hedonistic extreme of a life spent in search for happiness based on the accumulation of pleasant sensations, and the ascetic extreme of self-denial and self-inflicted pain on the other hand. Instead, one is encouraged to adopt a balanced approach to life, based on the understanding that pleasure cannot constitute a reliable source of happiness and that one needs to take care of one’s body and mind to find true fulfillment.

The methods of training offered in the various Buddhist traditions address all aspects of our being, corresponding to our diverse dispositions. They include meditation, philosophical investigation, and prayer, as well as applied training in everyday life, nonviolent conflict management, and mindfulness.

Generally speaking, the Buddhist path can be divided into three aspects that mutually support each other: **ethical discipline** (*shila*), **meditative concentration** (*samadhi*), and **wisdom** (*prajna*). **Discipline** describes conduct that avoids harming oneself and others as the foundation for any form of wholesome development. Based on this conduct one cultivates the art of **meditative concentration** to settle the mind and find inner clarity. With a mind stable and clear one then learns to look deeply into the nature of reality. It is this **wisdom**, this insight into the nature of things, that brings about real freedom, a reliable form of happiness that does not depend on outer conditions.

For a balanced development, the cultivation of the mind should go hand in hand with the cultivation of the heart. In the Mahayana tradition in particular, the “Great Vehicle,” the importance of compassion is stressed from the very outset of the path. We do not aim at gaining freedom for our own benefit alone. Rather, we aim at developing our own abilities to the greatest possible extent so that we will be able to guide others to true freedom. Only when one has eliminated all limitations and developed the potential of the mind for its perfection is one able to help others in the best possible way. It is important to point out that in no way does this undermine the importance of social engagement. On the contrary, social engagement is an important part of the path, as long as it is based on proper understanding and does not lead one astray from the path.



2.2. Buddha, the Awakened One

The Buddhist path goes back to Siddhartha Gautama, a teacher who flourished in northern India in the sixth century BC. Siddhartha was born in the beautiful gardens of Lumbini in present-day Nepal. Of royal descent, he grew up in the isolation of his family's noble court but chose to leave his estate with all its privileges at the age of twenty-nine in search for real freedom.

The trigger for this decision was his disillusionment with life as he knew it. Realizing that each and every one of us has to face the realities of sickness, ageing, and death, a life lost in distraction from these facts and in the pursuit of shallow forms of happiness seemed pointless to him. On his spiritual quest for freedom from suffering he studied and practiced with different masters of his time, yet was unable to find satisfaction. He eventually came to understand that neither a life in abundance nor the strict asceticism he had learned would lead him to achieve his goal.

Based on the art of meditative absorption he had mastered in the course of his previous training, Siddhartha used extremely refined states of mind to gain deep insight into the true nature of human experience, the true nature of reality. At the age of thirty-five he finally attained enlightenment in Bodhgaya, in present-day Bihar, India, and was henceforth known as Buddha, "the Awakened One."

A few weeks after his awakening the Buddha walked to the Deer Park in Sarnath near Varanasi. There he met a group of five renunciants he used to practice with before he had abandoned the path of ascetic discipline. Inspired by the undeniable radiance of his presence, and the clarity and truth that emanated from his words, these five renunciants became his first disciples, taking refuge in the Buddha as their guide and the Dharma—his teaching—as their path. From this time onward Gautama continually helped others on their quest for

freedom. He accepted thousands of men and women into his Sangha—the monastic order he established—and also supported an important following of lay disciples, which included kings as well as prostitutes. Anyone seeking his guidance in both worldly and spiritual matters was welcome to listen to his wisdom and free to follow his advice. Under his skillful and compassionate guidance and with the support of local rulers the community thrived. The Buddha wandered the land of India for forty-five years, walking from kingdom to kingdom, offering his guidance to anyone interested in his Dharma. At the age of eighty the Buddha passed away peacefully in Kushinagar, in North India, leaving behind him the legacy of his teaching, a path of peace and liberation.



2.3. His teaching: the Four Noble Truths

In his first teaching the Buddha taught what are called the “Four Noble Truths,” laying out the foundation for the path to freedom. The structure of this teaching follows the principles of a medical examination, starting with (1) a precise diagnosis of the disease, followed by (2) the identification of its cause, (3) the assessment of the possibility of recovery, and (4) the outline of the treatment to be followed.

The Four Noble Truths are: the truth of suffering, the truth of the origin of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering, and the truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering. These four are called “truths” because, for the Buddha, these are facts that are independent of personal belief systems, and they are “noble” because a deep insight into these four truths truly ennobles our being, leading us along the path to liberation.

The Four Noble Truths form the basis for all the teachings and practices of Buddhism, be it according to the Theravada school, the Zen tradition, the Pure Land or the Tibetan schools.

Noble Truth of:	Consists of:	How to relate to it?
Suffering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical and mental suffering and dissatisfaction • Impermanence and uncertainty 	Understand
Origin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental afflictions (klesha) • Actions contaminated by them (karma) 	Abandon
Cessation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nirvana, perfect peace 	Actualize
Path	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethical discipline (shila) • Meditative concentration (samadhi) • Wisdom (prajna) 	Cultivate

The truth of suffering (*duhkha*)

The Sanskrit term *duhkha*, which is generally translated as “suffering,” covers a broader semantic field than its English equivalent, from obvious pain and stress, to dissatisfaction and, ultimately, to the inability to find complete fulfillment and lasting happiness. *Duhkha* is everything we don’t want, yet are at this stage unable to transcend. It is also the fact that nothing we do want lasts forever and that anything can change at any given time. There is absolutely no certainty. Our existence basically consists of uncontrolled, repetitive cycles of ever-changing pleasant and unpleasant experiences. This is called “samsara,” the cycle of existence.

The starting point of the Buddha's teaching is, therefore, a rather realistic view of our current situation, provided we admit to ourselves that the reality of *duhkha* is undeniable in our experience. The Buddha was neither unworldly nor pessimistic, quite the contrary in fact. The discourses contain many passages that show how he expressed his joy and where he gave his disciples excellent advice on worldly matters. One could say that Buddha was a tough realist. He spoke his mind and addressed the problems in a straightforward manner, but only to point to a solution with the next breath. And what greater optimism than to say that it is possible to put an end to suffering?

The truth of the origin of suffering

Buddha realized that suffering has a twofold origin: on the one hand it is our actions (*karma*) rooted in a misunderstanding of reality and in particular of the law of cause and effect, and on the other hand it is the mental afflictions (*klesha*) that trigger these actions.

Karma means "action" and also refers to the connection between the cause and the effect of any physical, verbal, or mental deed. In this context, the intention behind our actions is of central importance. The quality of the intentions behind one's actions will condition and determine the effect they will have on oneself. In other words, everything we do—whether we are reciting prayers, driving a car, or washing dishes—every action we engage in has an effect on our own experience, and this effect depends to a large extent on the quality of the intention and the awareness we bring to our deeds. Not being able to clearly distinguish between the true causes of happiness and of suffering, we continually get ourselves into trouble. But if we learn to understand how our mind actually works, how our intentions condition our experience and what brings about happiness and unhappiness, we allow ourselves to enter a clearer path out of the foggy terrain of confusion and dissatisfaction.

Mental afflictions are the forces active in the mind that tarnish its clarity, thus disrupting the experience of its natural peace. The three principal afflictions are desire, hatred, and ignorance. They distort our perception of reality and prevent us so from reacting appropriately to our experience. This causes us to engage in unskillful, unwholesome actions that bring about the experience of unrest, stress, and suffering—for ourselves and for others.

This is why the Awakened One never labeled the objects of our experience as absolutely good or bad. Everything hinges on the way we relate to them. An unwise, unskillful relationship with whatever it is we are experiencing will create tension, stress, and ultimately suffering for us and others. And as long as the root causes of suffering have not been eliminated, the stream of consciousness will continually experience the resultant forms of suffering in one way or another, day after day, life after life. Relating to the objects of our perception in a wise and skillful way, on the other hand, will lead to the experience of a profound sense of satisfaction and ultimately complete freedom from suffering.

The truth of the cessation of suffering

The third Noble Truth is the acknowledgment of the simple fact that suffering ends with the elimination of its causes. As we have seen above, the causes of suffering are the mental afflictions and the actions contaminated by them. Since these two are rooted in the misunderstanding of reality, the elimination of this fundamental ignorance is tantamount to the cessation of suffering, a state in which the mind, this uninterrupted stream of consciousness, is completely purified of its adventitious stains and its pristine nature is revealed. This state is called “nirvana.”

The truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering

As we have seen, the cessation of suffering is achievable. To take the correct measures towards achieving this noble goal is then the truth of the path. Since suffering is ultimately rooted in a mistaken perception of the world, the goal is to know things as they really are and this, in turn, is achieved by removing all the veils that might impede or distort the mind's perception. To this end, Buddha revealed a wide variety of methods, which over time led to the emergence of different traditions of Buddhism. All these traditions share the threefold training in ethical discipline (*shila*), meditative concentration (*samadhi*), and insight (*prajna*).

The training in ethical discipline consists of leading a life that is in harmony with the path of liberation, a life of kindness and inner clarity. This training has two components: abstaining from unwholesome actions that cause suffering for oneself and others, and cultivating deeds that bring about clarity, happiness, and freedom from suffering. Any action rooted in desire, hatred, or ignorance is fundamentally unwholesome and needs to be purified and ultimately abandoned. Deeds coming from a mind free of these are by definition good and are cultivated on the path. The essence of ethical discipline is not harming any sentient being.

The training in meditative concentration consists of cultivating wholesome states with undistracted attention. By familiarizing oneself in meditation with one's mental patterns one learns to skillfully apply the antidotes appropriate to letting go of any obstruction, be it this constant inner chatter, fear, fantasy, or simply dullness. Anything that disrupts the mind's stability and clarity is abandoned and one learns to rest in the mind's natural state of pristine lucidity. The essence of meditative concentration is nondistractedness.

The training in insight consists of learning to see clearly. With a stable and clear mind one investigates the reality of phenomena, of the objects of attachment and aversion, of one's own identity and of the nature of the mind. By seeing things as they really are one cuts through the fundamental delusion, thus becoming free from the bondage of mental afflictions and contaminated actions. The essence of insight is not clinging.

The essence of the path as a whole lies in learning to deal with one's experience in a skillful way. For this purpose we befriend our own mind, learn to understand its patterns, and work with the various means at our disposal to free it from all conflicting emotions and limitations. In this respect there is absolutely no difference between meditation and everyday life: both are mutually supportive aspects of the training ground.



3. *Tibetan Buddhism: compassion and skillful means*

Compassion: the way of the bodhisattva

Tibetan Buddhism follows the Mahayana tradition, or “Great Vehicle.” (For an overview of the different Buddhist traditions, please see Appendix 1 at the end of this booklet.) The Mahayana’s special feature is the bodhisattva ideal. A bodhisattva is an individual that strives not for nirvana in the sense of an individual liberation from suffering, but for the state of buddhahood, the complete flourishing of the mind’s potential, the greatest attainable perfection. Out of deep compassion and profound understanding a bodhisattva makes the resolve to help all beings to become free from suffering. In order to accomplish this noble goal a bodhisattva aspires to become a buddha since only a buddha has the abilities to help beings in the best possible way. This resolve is called “bodhicitta,” the heart of awakening or mind of enlightenment. There are basically two ways to achieve this goal: the Paramitayana and the Vajrayana.

The Vehicle of Perfections: the Paramitayana

The Paramitayana, or “Vehicle of Perfections,” accomplishes the goal of buddhahood through the cultivation of certain virtues called “perfections”—the paramitas. They are: giving, ethical discipline, patience, diligence, meditative concentration, and wisdom.

Giving is the expression of nonattachment, the willingness to give away anything and everything for the benefit of others, including one’s time and care. **Ethical discipline** means abstaining from harming others and helping them instead. **Patience** is the welcoming

acceptance of any obstacle one might encounter on the path, be it another person, a situation, or one's own limitations. **Diligence** is the enthusiasm in pursuing the wholesome path and the heroic attitude of never giving up, no matter what. **Meditative concentration** is the undistracted mind focused on the cultivation of wholesome states such as loving-kindness and compassion. **Wisdom**, finally, is the correct understanding of reality, the liberating insight into the true nature of things free of conceptual fabrications. Each of these virtues is wholesome by nature. They become a path to buddhahood when imbued with the wisdom that understands ultimate reality.

These qualities are perfected on the path and function as the cause of buddhahood, which is why this path is termed the “causal vehicle.”

The Vehicle of Skillful Means: the Vajrayana

The other way is called Vajrayana, or “Vajra Vehicle.” Here the result—the state of complete buddhahood—is integrated into the path itself by means of particular practices such as deity yoga. This path emphasizes the practice of skillful means to effectively integrate all experiences into the path, allowing the qualified practitioner to swiftly realize the state of perfect enlightenment.

This path is entered by receiving a tantric empowerment (or “initiation”) from a qualified master. The importance of the teacher on this path cannot be overemphasized. It is therefore crucial not to engage in this path hastily or out of mere curiosity. One should carefully examine the teacher before entering into a spiritual relationship with him or her.

The practice itself then consists of the cultivation of what are called “the stages of creation and completion.” These are tantric methods of meditation which emphasize work with the creative potential of the

mind and with the subtle energies of the body, respectively.

These various paths and methods of practice do not contradict each other. They are complementary and offer the practitioners different means of liberation appropriate to their individual dispositions. In this sense, all vehicles deserve the same respect and should be regarded as equally precious.

Study, practice, and everyday life

Tibetan Buddhism is known for its great scholars and accomplished yogis. In the Indian Buddhist texts the path is described as a sequence of study, contemplation, and meditation. Accordingly, the Tibetan traditions emphasize the study of authentic scriptures in order to gain a good understanding of the path, a stable foundation for the practice of meditation.

On top of formal education, mind training in everyday life is emphasized as a means for developing mindfulness and compassion when one is off the meditation cushion. Without this integration of the teachings it is impossible to make steady progress on the path. Meditation and daily life are not two unrelated aspects of the practitioner's life: they are part of the same continuum of experience.

The isolation of formal meditation practice is important in order to allow the mind to settle, to find the clarity and stability necessary to generate and strengthen wholesome states of mind. With these inner resources it will be easier to skillfully deal with our experiences in everyday life, allowing us to translate our insight and compassion into our actions.

On the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism

His Holiness the Dalai Lama explains: “Four major traditions—Nyingma, Kagyü, Sakya and Gelug—emerged as a result of the earlier and later dissemination of the Buddhist teachings in Tibet, and also because of the emphasis placed by great masters of the past on different scriptures, techniques of meditation and, in some cases, terms used to express particular experiences... What is common to all the four major traditions of Tibetan Buddhism is their emphasis on the practice of the entire structure of the Buddhist path, which comprises ... the essence of not only the Vajrayana teachings, but also the Mahayana practices of the bodhisattvas, and the basic practices of the Fundamental Vehicle.”¹



1 His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *Dzogchen: The Heart Essence of the Great Perfection* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 2000), p. 108.

4. *The Sakya tradition*

4.1. A brief history

The Sakya tradition is one of the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Its history goes back to the eleventh century with the founding of a monastery in the town of Sakya in southern Tibet and is closely linked to the Tibetan Khön family.

This family, the ancestors of which are said to have come from the divine realm of clear light, played an important role in the dissemination of the Buddha's teachings in Tibet since its very early days. In the eighth century Khön Lu'i Wangpo was among the first seven individuals chosen to be ordained in Tibet as Buddhist monks and became one of the twenty-five principal students of the great Indian master Padmasambhava. In this way he and his descendants became important lineage holders of the earliest transmissions of the Dharma in the Land of Snows.

In 1073 Khön Könchog Gyalpo fulfilled the predictions of the Indian masters Padmasambhava and Atisha by establishing a monastery in a place named after the "grey earth" (*sa-kyā*) of its surrounding hills. This laid the foundation for the Sakya tradition. Khön Könchog Gyalpo himself had studied under the translator Drogmi, who brought the new tantras from India to Tibet, making him an upholder of both the ancient and the new transmissions.

His son, **Sachen Kunga Nyingpo**, the "Great Sakyapa" (1092-1158), and four of his descendants, are regarded as the five supreme founders of the tradition. Sachen Kunga Nyingpo was responsible for collecting many teachings of the sutras, tantras, and oral traditions which formed the basis for the canon of the Sakya school. His two sons,

Lopön Sönam Tsemo (1142-1182) and **Jetsün Drakpa Gyaltsen** (1147-1216), were the next lineage holders and crucial for the development of the tradition. Drakpa Gyaltsen's nephew was the prolific **Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltsen** (1182-1251), whose fame resounded far beyond the borders of Tibet. Due to his unparalleled erudition in all the major and minor fields of the classical Indian sciences and his spiritual realization he was even summoned to the court of the Mongol lord Godan Khan. Sakya Pandita's nephew, **Drogön Chögyal Phagpa** (1235-1280), was declared Imperial Preceptor by Kublai Khan, the emperor of China, and was offered the thirteen provinces of Tibet. In this way Tibet was united under a single spiritual and political authority. This represented the culmination of the secular and spiritual influence of the Sakya tradition in Tibet.

These five masters—Sachen Kunga Nyingpo, Sönam Tsemo, Dragpa Gyaltsen, Sakya Pandita, and Chögyal Phagpa—are revered as the most important founding figures of the tradition, known in Tibetan as the “Jetsün Gongma Nga.”

Since the time of Könchog Gyalpo in the eleventh century the head of the Sakya tradition has been a member of the Khön family whenever possible, and this tradition has been continued until today. His Holiness the Forty-First Sakya Trizin lives with his family in Dehra Dun in North India, frequently traveling abroad to offer the teachings of the Sakya tradition to students from all over the world. In 2014 His Holiness announced that after his retirement the new head of the school will be chosen from among the members of the Khön family on the basis of seniority and qualification, and hold the position for a period of three years, after which it will be turned over to the next candidate in line.

The Sakya tradition has two main subschools and one minor subschool: the Ngor and Tshar traditions, established by Ngorchon

Kunga Sangpo (1429-1489) and Tsarchen Losal Gyatso (1502-1566), respectively, and the Dzongpa tradition, established by Dzongpa Kunga Namgyal (1382-1456). The difference between these four traditions, i.e., Sakya, Ngorpa, Tsharpa and Dzongpa, mainly lies in the various rituals and transmissions they specialized in.



4.2. The teachings of the Sakya school

Mind training: *Parting from the Four Attachments*

The principal mind training teaching of the Sakya school is known as the instructions on *Parting from the Four Attachments*. Received in a vision by the young Sachen Kunga Nyingpo from Manjushri, the embodiment of wisdom, these instructions encapsulate the essence of the Buddha's teachings in just four lines:

*If you are attached to this life, you are not a genuine
Dharma practitioner.*

*If you are attached to samsara, you do not have
renunciation, the wish to become free.*

*If you are attached to your personal benefit, you do not
have bodhicitta.*

If there is mental grasping, it is not the correct view.

These pith instructions are guidelines for a comprehensive and gradual training of the mind. The first two lines include the main topics of the preliminary contemplations:

Our life is precious: It is important not to take anything for granted. Instead, we can learn to gratefully appreciate the opportunities we have and decide to really make the most of them. In this contemplation we reflect on how difficult it is to obtain a human life where one can more or less do as one likes, and how valuable it is to have the conditions necessary to practice the Dharma.

Nothing lasts forever: This precious opportunity we are given now will not last; one day we will die. Since, however, it is impossible to know when this will be, it is important not to waste our life in shallow

pursuits, but to take advantage of every day to the fullest by actively changing our heart and our mind.

Everything depends on causes and conditions: Just as a lemon seed can never give birth to an oak tree, actions rooted in desire, hatred, and ignorance cannot produce real happiness. Only a mind free of these afflictions is a reliable guide in our pursuit of lasting happiness. Here, we contemplate the importance of learning, as a basis for our practice, to distinguish the real causes of happiness from those of suffering.

Where can we find true happiness? As long as our mind is under the power of afflictions, any happiness we may experience can only be a fleeting sensation. If, on the other hand, we could liberate the mind from these disturbing emotions, we could finally know true peace, a happiness that does not depend on outer conditions.

The last two lines of the instructions cover the following topics for cultivation:

Loving-kindness: Loving-kindness is the wish for others to enjoy real happiness and to possess the causes of happiness. We learn to gradually unfold this sincere care and friendship for others, starting with those close to us and eventually including all beings, even those with whom we currently have difficulties.

Compassion: Compassion is the wish for others to be free of suffering and of the causes of suffering. Once we see that, despite their wish for happiness, beings constantly have to face all kinds of hardships and pain, the wish to do something about this will be born in us. This compassion is cultivated gradually, just like loving-kindness.

Bodhicitta: We might want others to be happy, but as long as we ourselves are in the grip of afflictions and karma there is no way we

can lead them out of the conditionings of samsara to achieve lasting happiness. From this understanding is born bodhicitta, the wish to become a buddha in order to help beings in the best possible way. It is cultivated both in meditation and in daily life through various means of mind training.

Meditative concentration: To become a buddha, to achieve ultimate liberation, it is necessary to see the reality of things as they are. This seeing, in turn, depends on having developed mental stability and clarity, which is the path of meditative concentration.

Superior insight: With a well-trained mind it becomes possible to cut through all conceptual elaborations and limitations to see the true nature of reality. This, it is said, lies beyond the scope of the ordinary mind, which holds on to labels and concepts. This training in superior insight, or *vipashyana*, represents the culmination of the meditative training. To be effective, however, it is important to train in all the preceding aspects of the path and to follow the guidance of a qualified teacher.

To give the reader a taste of these teachings on *Parting from the Four Attachments*, we have translated two short texts included in an appendix to this volume.

Philosophy

In general, the Sakya tradition closely follows the great Indian masters in their exposition of the theory and practice of the Buddhist path. The studies in this school are based on eighteen important works on the five major branches of Buddhist thought. These five fields of knowledge are (1) Pramana—epistemology and logic, (2) Madhyamaka—the philosophy of the Middle Way, (3) Abhidharma—

phenomenology and Buddhist psychology, (4) Prajnaparamita—the various paths and stages on the path to awakening, and (5) Vinaya—monastic discipline and ethical conduct. To this is added the study of the three sets of vows based on Sakya Pandita’s *Clear Differentiation of the Three Vows*.

Important masters of the Sakya school include the “Six Ornaments of Tibet”: Yaktön Sangye Pal (1350-1414), famous for his writings on the Prajnaparamita teachings; Rongtön Sheja Künrig (1367-1449), a student of Yaktön instrumental for practically all scholastic lineages transmitted in Tibet; Ngorchen Kunga Sangpo (1429-1489), the founder of the Ngor subschool of the Sakya tradition; Dzongpa Kunga Namgyal (1382-1456), founder of the Dzongpa subschool of the Sakya tradition; Gorampa Sönam Senge (1429-1489), one of Rongtön’s main students, instrumental in consolidating the philosophical teachings of the tradition; and Shakya Chogden (1428-1507), also a student of Rongtön, famous for his unique and brilliant philosophical views.

Other famous masters are Rendawa Shönnu Lodrö (1349-1412), prolific author famous for his writings on the philosophy of emptiness; Tagtshang Lotsawa (1405-?), prolific writer on all aspects of Buddhist thought; and Tsarchen Losal Gyatso (1502-1566), founder of the Tsar subschool and famous for his writings on Tantra.

The Lamdré cycle

A unique feature of the Sakya school, and also the heart of this tradition, is the Lamdré cycle of teachings, The Path Including Its Result. These teachings are based on the *Hevajra Tantra* and go back to the Indian master Mahasiddha Virupa. They were introduced to Tibet in the eleventh century by the yogi Gayadhara and consist of two

parts: a general Sutra part, the “three perceptions,” and an esoteric Tantra part called the “three tantras” or “three continua.” The “three perceptions” describe three levels of perception dependent on the level of spiritual realization: the perception of ordinary beings, the perception of yogis on the path, and the perception of fully realized buddhas. The “three perceptions” teach how an individual can enter the path of liberation by developing faith in the Buddha and his path, and disillusionment with samsara together with the heartfelt wish to become free from it. They then explain in detail how to gradually cultivate loving-kindness, compassion, and bodhicitta, as well as meditative concentration and insight. The teachings on the “three continua” are based on the particular philosophical view of this system called the “nondifferentiation of samsara and nirvana.” Based on this view one studies the causal continuum of our experience, which is none other than the continuum of our most fundamental consciousness; the continuum of the path, which explains in detail the profound tantric methods of practice; and the continuum of the result, final buddhahood.

Other tantric teachings

Another unique feature is the cycle on the Thirteen Golden Dharmas, a collection of thirteen tantric practices, which among other important teachings contains the transmission of the Vajrayogini teachings according to the tradition of Mahasiddha Naropa. Furthermore, the Sakya tradition preserves special teachings and practices of the protector Mahakala going back to the master Vararuchi, a unique transmission for the practice of Vajrakila going back to Padmasambhava, and the teachings on the *Guhyasamaja Tantra* by Nagarjuna.

These represent only a selection of the Sakya tradition's most important teachings. Thanks to the tireless efforts of the founders and lineage holders of this tradition these transmissions have been preserved and are now part of Tibet's living spiritual heritage. In terms of spiritual training, the Sakya tradition attaches great importance to a balanced approach of study and practice. This ideal, embodied by many teachers of the past and present, gave the Sakyapas the reputation of being a tradition of great scholars and enlightened masters.



5. Appendices

Appendix 1: A brief overview of different paths to awakening

The Buddha is believed to have given eighty-four thousand types of teachings in order to remedy the eighty-four thousand kinds of afflictions obstructing our minds. Given at various places and times, these teachings were always adapted to the particular needs of his audience, but all are said to have one thing in common: the taste of liberation.

After the Buddha's passing, members of his community—the Sangha—gathered repeatedly over the course of the centuries to codify and consolidate his teachings. These councils were important to ensure the authenticity of the Buddha's discourses and the monastic code he laid down. Since the followers, however, did not always agree during these meetings, the community split into different groups, giving birth to various schools of Buddhist thought and practice.

Theravada, Zen and others

As a result of these historical developments we can distinguish two broad traditions thriving today: the **Theravada** (“Way of the Elders”), prevalent in countries like Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, and Laos, and the **Mahayana** (“Great Vehicle”), which spread in the northern countries of East Asia. Within the Mahayana we find various schools, including the **Chan** (or **Zen**) traditions and the **Pure Land** schools, both of which are prevalent in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam; and the **Vajrayana** traditions practiced today mainly in Tibet, Nepal, Mongolia, Bhutan, and Japan.

Hinayana and Mahayana

Another way to present the paths laid out by the Buddha is to distinguish two so-called “vehicles” based on (a) the motivation of the individual practitioner and (b) his or her philosophical view. This is the distinction between Hinayana and Mahayana. The **Hinayana** (“Lesser Vehicle”) is characterized by a motivation limited to one’s own individual liberation from suffering and a limited understanding of ultimate reality. A follower of the **Mahayana** (“Great Vehicle”) practices for the benefit of all sentient beings and cultivates a more profound view of no-self, or emptiness. On top of that, followers of this vehicle also incorporated another set of scriptures, the Mahayana sutras, into the corpus of their canonical literature, most of which are not held to be authoritative by followers of the Hinayana. We would like to point out that the term “Hinayana” was used by followers of the Mahayana to point out the limitations of certain approaches to the path. It is important not to conflate the term “Hinayana” with the present-day tradition of the Theravada.

Three paths

Yet another presentation of the Buddhist paths common in the Tibetan tradition is the classification into three vehicles: the foundational **Vehicle of the Hearers** (Shravakayana)² with its emphasis on renunciation and outer discipline, and based on the first set of the Buddha’s teachings on the Four Noble Truths; the **Vehicle of Perfections** (Paramitayana) with its emphasis on compassion and profound wisdom, and based on the Buddha’s second and third sets of discourses on the Perfection of Wisdom and Buddha nature; and

2 We include in this foundational path the Vehicle of the Self-Realizers (Pratyekabuddhayana), which is similar to the Vehicle of the Hearers in many regards.

the **Secret Mantra Vehicle** (Guhyamantrayana) with its emphasis on skillful means, and based the Buddha's tantric teachings (the latter being synonymous with Vajrayana).

The following chart illustrates some of the basic principles of these three approaches:

Path	Motivation	Method	Result
Vehicle of the Hearers (Shravakayana)	to liberate oneself from suffering	noble eightfold path	arhat
Vehicle of Perfections (Paramitayana)	to become a buddha for the benefit of all beings	six paramitas (perfections)	buddha
Secret Mantra Vehicle (Guhyamantrayana)	to become a buddha for the benefit of all beings	tantric methods of creation and completion	buddha



Appendix 2: Two short texts on Mahayana Mind Training*Instructions on
Parting from the Four Attachments**by Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltsen*

I prostrate to the feet of my holy master.

Generally speaking, once we have obtained a body endowed with freedoms and conducive conditions, encountered the precious teachings of the Buddha, and are sincere about what we are doing, it is important that we put into practice the Dharma in an unmistakable manner. To this end we need to bring into our experience what is called “parting from the four attachments.”

What does this entail, you ask? Letting go of attachment to this life, letting go of attachment to the three realms of samsara, letting go of attachment to one’s personal benefit, and not mentally holding on to things and characteristics.

To explain this further:

This life is really like a bubble on the surface of the water and we just don’t know when we will die. You see, to be attached to this life is not worth one’s while.

This samsara with its three realms of existence is really like a poisonous fruit: it seems delicious at first, but in the end it hurts. Whoever is attached to that is just confused.

To be attached to one’s personal benefit is really like taking care of

the child of one's enemy: it makes one happy at first, but eventually it is sure to bring harm upon oneself. In the same way, although attachment to our own good might initially bring some happiness, in the end it will lead us to the lower realms.

To mentally hold on to things and characteristics as truly existent is really like mistaking a mirage for water: at first sight there seems to be water, but there is nothing there to drink. Though this samsara may appear to the deluded mind, when scrutinized with wisdom nothing whatsoever is found to exist inherently. Thus, having come to an understanding where the mind engages neither with the past nor with the future, and consciousness does not engage with the present, recognize how all things are free of conceptual elaboration.

Practicing in this way, letting go of attachment to this life, one will not be reborn in the lower realms; letting go of attachment to the three realms of samsara, one will not be reborn in this cycle of existence; letting go of attachment to one's personal benefit, one will not be reborn as a hearer or self-realizer; and letting go of holding on to things and characteristics, one will swiftly attain true and complete buddhahood.

This completes the unmistakable instructions on Parting from the Four Attachments, the intent of the great master from Sakya, the glorious Sachen Kunga Nyingpo.

*Essential Nectar:
A Melody of Experience
Based on the Instructions on
Parting from the Four Attachments*

by Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo

By the blessings of our Lord Guru Manjughosha
may all beings throughout endless space come to practice the
sacred Dharma.
May they take the Dharma as their path, pacify all confusion on the path,
and may all appearances rooted in confusion dawn as the basic
expanse.

You have the support of this body with freedoms and conditions so
difficult to obtain,
but attached to this life you are not a Dharma practitioner.
Everything is momentary, impermanent, perishes constantly.
Please, make the effort, do good and give up those evil deeds.

Your mind may now have turned to the sacred Dharma,
but as long as you are attached to the three realms of existence you
have no renunciation.
Please, give rise to a sincere wish to be free of samsara,
this cycle that is really nothing but suffering and dissatisfaction.

You may seek peace and happiness,
but if you are attached to your personal benefit you have no
bodhicitta. Understand: all beings have been your kind parents,
so please cultivate loving-kindness, compassion, and bodhicitta.

You may be trained in conventional bodhicitta,
but as long as there is grasping you do not have the view.
To sever the root of this belief in a self
please rest in the expanse free of conceptual fabrication.

These words convey the essence of Lord Manjughosha's instructions
to our glorious and loving master.

By the merit of composing this song based on whatever experience
I have
may all mother sentient beings swiftly attain awakening.

*This was composed by Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, an aimlessly wandering
yogi free of worldly concern, at the Dharma school of Sakya, source of
bountiful precious qualities. He wrote these lines in the cave of the Self-Arisen
Vajra Cliff (Rangjung Dorjedrag), where Lord Manjughosha appeared and
spoke to the Great Lama Sakyapa (Sachen Kunga Nyingpo).*

Sarvamangalam! May all be good!



Appendix 3: A mini-glossary of important terms

aggregates, five (skandhas) The five groups of phenomena that characterize human experience: one group of physical phenomena (i.e., the aggregate of form) and four groups of mental phenomena (feelings, discriminations, formative factors, and consciousness). It is on the basis of these five aggregates that the concept of a self is generated.

arhat A person who has achieved the spiritual goal of liberation from samsara, the cycle of existence. Arhathood is the highest goal on the Hinayana path.

bodhicitta The mind of awakening, or enlightenment thought. Bodhicitta is of two types—relative and ultimate. Relative bodhicitta refers to the resolve to attain buddhahood for the sake of all beings and the practice motivated by this intention, whereas ultimate bodhicitta refers to the realization of emptiness, or ultimate reality.

bodhisattva Literally, “heroic being with an awakened mind.” The name given to an individual who has generated the resolve to attain the state of complete buddhahood for the sake of all beings.

buddha A person who has attained buddhahood (i.e., true and complete awakening) perfectly free of all obscurations and endowed with perfect wisdom.

Dharma The Buddha’s teachings, the path of practice, and the realizations based on those teachings.

Hinayana The foundational Buddhist system of theory and practice based on the first turning of the Dharma wheel (i.e., the teaching of the Four Noble Truths). It is also defined as the path of individual liberation, emphasizing renunciation and is taken by individuals of

lesser abilities who are concerned mainly with their own liberation from suffering. This path can thus be defined on the basis of (a) the philosophical system adhered to or (b) the motivation of the practitioner. It should not be conflated with the Theravada tradition, which may be practiced with the motivation to attain buddhahood for the sake of all beings.

Mahayana The Great Vehicle, the system of Buddhist theory and practice based on the second and third turnings of the Dharma wheel (i.e., the profound teachings on emptiness and the teachings on the discrimination between the definitive and the provisional teachings). This vehicle is also termed “the bodhisattva path,” taken by those motivated by great compassion and the wish to attain perfect awakening, or buddhahood, for the sake of all beings.

nirvana The state beyond sorrow, the end of suffering and dissatisfaction obtained by practicing the Buddhist path through to its end. Generally speaking, two types of nirvana are distinguished. The nirvana of the Hinayana refers to cessation, i.e., the liberation from samsara. The Mahayana nirvana refers to perfect buddhahood, a state that is beyond both ordinary samsaric existence and the cessation of the Hinayana.

noble eightfold path The eight branches of the path laid out by the Buddha: 1) right view, 2) right intention, 3) right speech, 4) right action, 5) right livelihood, 6) right effort, 7) right mindfulness, and 8) right concentration.

paramita The practices which a bodhisattva cultivates in order to attain complete buddhahood. They are the paramitas of giving, discipline, patience, diligence, concentration, and wisdom. To this list are sometimes added the paramitas of skillful means, aspiration, power, and gnosis.

samsara The beginningless and ceaselessly repetitive cycle of uncontrolled birth and death which beings are subject to as long as they are not enlightened. This perpetual cycle of worldly existence is characterized by suffering, unsatisfactoriness, and a lack of true freedom.

Sangha The community of those practicing the Buddha's path. In the Mahayana this term refers in particular to realized bodhisattvas. It is the third object of refuge, one of the Three Jewels.

skandhas, five See *aggregates*.

sutras Scriptures believed to contain the actual words of the Buddha. The sutras have been commented on in the *shastras*, or commentarial treatises, and the essential points for practice have been extracted in the *upadeshas*, or pith instructions.

Tantra A form of Buddhist practice based on a collection of texts called "tantras." Also called *Vajrayana* (or "Vajra Vehicle").

Three Jewels The three objects of refuge: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

twelve links of dependent origination The twelve links of dependent origination are ignorance, formative factors, consciousness, name and form, sense sources, contact, sensation, craving, grasping, becoming, birth, and old age and death.

Vajrayana See *Tantra*.

Appendix 4: Some reference books

Life and teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni:

- Rahula, Walpola: *What the Buddha Taught*. Rev. ed. New York: Grove Press, 1974.
- Thich Nhat Hanh. *Old Path White Clouds: Walking in the Footsteps of the Buddha*. Berkeley, Calif.: Parallax Press, 1991.
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- Chogye Trichen Rinpoche. *Parting from the Four Attachments: Jetsun Drakpa Gyaltsen's Song of Experience on Mind Training and the View*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 2003.
- Deshung Rinpoche. *The Three Levels of Spiritual Perception: An Oral Commentary on The Three Visions (Snang gsum) of Ngorchen Konchog Lhundrup*. Translated by Jared Rhoton. 2nd ed. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003.

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