



Offering Traditional Buddhist Teachings to Enrich Our Contemporary Lives

Tibetan Buddhism Fact Sheet

- Tibetan Buddhism shares the same foundations as every Buddhist tradition. It regards the Buddha Shakyamuni (known in his early life as Siddhartha Gautama) as an awakened being who taught for 45 years to a wide variety of people a path to freeing our minds from greed, hatred, and delusion. It studies the teachings of the Buddha, along with commentaries passed down over the millennia, and preserves and honors the monastic community of monks and nuns as a core facility dedicated to these teachings and this path. Like all other Buddhist traditions in Asia, its practices focus on training the mind to become more calm and stable in order to free it from afflictive emotions and to strengthen its capacities for deep insight and engaged and compassionate living. One of the unique features of Tibetan Buddhism is the centrality of Tantric, or Vajrayana, practices (also known as Esoteric Buddhism). While other Buddhist traditions also developed Tantric or Vajrayana lineages (especially in China and Japan), no other Buddhist land has emphasized these teachings as strongly as have the Tibetans.
- Vajrayana Buddhism employs theories and methods that aim to rapidly transform our minds and bodies toward greater freedom, joy, and skillful engagement in the world. One chief feature of Vajrayana practice in Tibet is meditations based on visualizing the powerful energies of “deities”—such as the bodhisattva of compassion Chenrezig, the bodhisattva of wisdom Manjushri, or the female Buddha Tara who represents the healing force of love—as energies of light that emanate from these “deities” into oneself, and imagining, vividly, that one’s body and speech and mind have all been completely cleansed by this purifying light. The tradition thus urges us to imagine that we are not merely ordinary beings caught up in our usual problems and that, by effort, we can learn to see and feel ourselves as being potentially much more: learn to energize our deeper potential for strong wisdom and compassion. Thus the colorful paintings of the Tibetan thangka scrolls are vehicles for this kind of visualization practice, which is understood to help catalyze—more effectively than a simple calming meditation might—the energies of mind and spirit needed to break us free from unsatisfactory habitual patterns and to mobilize our best resources toward genuine fulfillment of the needs of both our self and others for true contentment. Tibetan Buddhism thus employs a multitude of methods in order to achieve the common Buddhist aims of liberation and compassionate skillful action in the world.