Tibetan Buddhism

Tibetan Buddhism is a religion in exile, forced from its homeland when Tibet was conquered by the Chinese. At one time it was thought that 1 in 6 Tibetan men were Buddhist monks.

Norbulingka Palace

The best known face of Tibetan Buddhism is the Dalai Lama, who has lived in exile in India since he fled Chinese occupation of his country in 1959.

Tibetan Buddhism combines the essential teachings of Mahayana Buddhism with Tantric and Shamanic, and material from an ancient Tibetan religion called Bon.

Although Tibetan Buddhism is often thought to be identical with Vajrayana Buddhism, they are not identical - Vajrayana is taught in Tibetan Buddhism together with the other vehicles.

History

Buddhism became a major presence in Tibet towards the end of the 8th century CE. It was brought from India at the invitation of the Tibetan king, Trisong Detsen, who invited two Buddhist masters to Tibet and had important Buddhist texts translated into Tibetan.

First to come was Shantarakshita, abbot of Nalanda in India, who built the first monastery in Tibet. He was followed by Padmasambhava, who came to use his wisdom and power to overcome "spiritual" forces that were stopping work on the new monastery.

Groups within Tibetan Buddhism

- Nyingmapa: Founded by Padmasambhava, this is oldest sect, noted in the West for the teachings of
the Tibetan Book of the Dead.

- Kagyupa: Founded by Tilopa (988-1069), the Kagyupa tradition is headed by the Karmapa Lama. Important Kagyupa teachers include Naropa, Marpa, and Milarepa.
- Sakyapa: Created by Gonchok Gyelpo (1034-1102) and his son Gunga Nyingpo (1092-1158).
- Gelugpa: (The Virtuous School) Founded by Tsong Khapa Lobsang Drakpa (also called Je Rinpoche) (1357 - 1419), this tradition is headed by the Dalai Lama.
- New Kadampa Tradition: one of the major Buddhist schools in the UK, founded by the Tibetan-born Geshe Kelsang Gyatso. Some Buddhists and non-Buddhists regard the NKT as outside the mainstream tradition.

**Special features of Tibetan Buddhism**

- the status of the teacher or "Lama"
- preoccupation with the relationship between life and death
- important role of rituals and initiations
- rich visual symbolism
- elements of earlier Tibetan faiths
- mantras and meditation practice

Tibetan Buddhist practice features a number of rituals, and spiritual practices such as the use of mantras and yogic techniques.

Supernatural beings are prominent in Tibetan Buddhism. Buddhas and bodhisattvas abound, gods and spirits taken from earlier Tibetan religions continue to be taken seriously. Bodhisattvas are portrayed as both benevolent godlike figures and wrathful deities.

This metaphysical context has allowed Tibetan Buddhism to develop a strong artistic tradition, and paintings and other graphics are used as aids to understanding at all levels of society.

Visual aids to understanding are very common in Tibetan Buddhism - pictures, structures of various sorts and public prayer wheels and flags provide an ever-present reminder of the spiritual domain in the physical world.

Tibetan Buddhism is strong in both monastic communities and among lay people.

The lay version has a strong emphasis on outwardly religious activities rather than the inner spiritual life: there is much ritual practice at temples, pilgrimage is popular - often including many prostrations, and prayers are repeated over and over - with the use of personal or public prayer wheels and flags. There are many festivals, and funerals are very important ceremonies.

Lay people provide physical support to the monasteries as well as relying on the monks to organise the rituals.

**Aspects of faith**

**Lamas**
A lama is a teacher. They are often a senior member of a monastic community - a monk or a nun - but lay people and married people can also be lamas. They are very often reincarnations of previous lamas.

As well as being learned in Buddhist texts and philosophy, lamas often have particular skills in ritual.

The Dalai Lama

Dalai is a Mongol word meaning ocean, and refers to the depth of the Dalai Lama's wisdom.

The first Dalai Lama to bear the title was the 3rd Dalai Lama, Sonam Gyatso. (The two previous incarnations were named "Dalai Lama" after their deaths.)

The current Dalai Lama (2002), Tenzin Gyatso, was born in Amdo, Tibet in 1935 and is the fourteenth Dalai Lama.

The Karmapa Lama

Karmapa means "one who performs the activity of a Buddha". The current incarnation (2002) is the 17th Karmapa. Two individuals have been declared the 17th Karmapa; Orgyen Trinley Dorje is generally and officially recognised as the official 17th Karmapa, however a rival Buddhist group give their allegiance to Trinlay Thaye Dorje.

Tantra

Tibetan Buddhism was much influenced by Tantra, and this has brought in a wealth of complex rituals and symbols and techniques.

Tantra originated in India and appears in both the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. It brings Tibetan Buddhism a magical element and a rich portfolio of heavenly beings. It also brings a wide variety of spiritual techniques such as mantras, mandalas, ceremonies, and many varieties of yoga.

Rituals

Rituals and simple spiritual practices such as mantras are popular with lay Tibetan Buddhists. They include prostrations, making offerings to statues of Buddhas or bodhisattvas, attending public teachings and ceremonies.
Tibetan temple ceremonies are often noisy and visually striking, with brass instruments, cymbals and gongs, and musical and impressive chanting by formally dressed monks. It takes place in strikingly designed temples and monasteries.

**Advanced practices**

Tibetan Buddhism also involves many advanced rituals. These are only possible for those who have reached a sophisticated understanding of spiritual practice.

There are also advanced spiritual techniques. These include elaborate visualisations and demanding meditations. It's said that senior Tibetan yoga adepts can achieve much greater control over the body than other human beings, and are able to control their body temperature, heart rate and other normally automatic functions.

**Living and dying**

Tibetan Buddhism emphasises awareness of death and impermanence. Everything is always dying - the cells of our bodies are dying even while we live, reminding us of our own impermanence. And all the living things around us are dying, too.

This awareness should not produce sadness or despair, nor should it cause a Buddhist to start a frantic pursuit of the impermanent pleasures of life. Instead, it should lead the Buddhist to see the value of every moment of existence, and be diligent in their meditation and other religious practice.

Awareness of death, combined with the understanding of the impermanence of everything, leads the Buddhist to realise that only spiritual things have any lasting value.

**Preparing for death**

Tibetan Buddhists use visualisation meditations and other exercises to imagine death and prepare for the bardo. They work towards a holistic understanding and acceptance of death as an inevitable part of their journey.

Another way of preparing for death is to take part in helping those who have died through their experience in the bardo. This not only aids the dead, but enables the living practitioner to gain a real experience of the bardo, before they themselves enter it.

Even those who cannot gain the spiritual awareness to have a consciousness of the bardo are helped by achieving a greater experience of the impermanence of everything.

**Tibetan Book of the Dead**

This is one of the great texts of Tibetan Buddhism, and a big seller in the west. The English title is not a translation of the Tibetan title - the book's true name is *Great Liberation through hearing during the intermediate state*, commonly known in Tibet as *Liberation through hearing*.
The book deals with the experiences of a person as they pass between death and rebirth.

**Bardo**

*Bardo* is the state between death and rebirth. The different schools of Tibetan Buddhism have different understandings of this state which is regarded as lasting for 49 days.

The experience of a person during bardo depends on their spiritual training during life. An untrained person is thought to be confused as to where they are, and may not realise that they have died. People are often unwilling to give up attachment to their previous life - and their negative emotions - may cause their rebirth to be less good than it would otherwise have been.

In traditional Tibetan Buddhism, the dead person is helped through bardo by a lama who reads prayers and performs rituals from the Book of the Dead, advising the deceased to break free from attachment to their past life and their dead body. In some schools of Tibetan Buddhism, the lama will actively help the dead person to transfer their consciousness from their body, in preparation for rebirth.

Many Tibetan Buddhists believe that it is possible for those left behind to assist the dead person on their journey by doing spiritual work that increases the merits of the deceased and thus helps them to a better rebirth.

During the 49 day period the dead can see clearly into the minds of those left behind, which allows the living to help the dead by thinking good thoughts, meditating on Buddha and other virtuous beings, and engaging in spiritual practices.

**New Kadampa Tradition**

The New Kadampa Tradition

Atisha reintroduced Buddhism into Tibet

The New Kadampa Tradition emerged from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and is one of the major Buddhist schools in the UK. Some Buddhists and non-Buddhists regard the NKT as outside the mainstream tradition.
Origins and history

The New Kadampa Tradition is one of the fastest growing Mahayana Buddhist traditions in the West, with 900 meditation centres in 37 countries. Founded by the Tibetan-born meditation master, Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, supporters claim it offers local access to Buddha's teachings, meditation practice and an alternative view to life that promotes peace and harmony.

Kadampa Buddhism was founded in 11th Century Tibet by the Indian Buddhist Master Atisha (982 - 1054 CE). He was invited by King Jangchub Ö, a ruler of Ngari region of Tibet, to reintroduce Buddhism to Tibet. It had first been introduced by Padmasambhava and Shantarakshita 200 years earlier, but was largely destroyed by the anti-Buddhist purges of the Tibetan king, Lang Darma, who was a follower of Bön, the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet.

Atisha did revive Buddhist practice in Tibet, and founded what is now the tradition of Kadampa Buddhism. Ka means word and refers to the teachings of the Buddha and dam refers to Atisha's special presentation of them, known as Lamrim or stages of the path to enlightenment. Lamrim literally means Stages of the Path and encompasses all Buddha's teachings. Atisha showed how the paths of Sutra and Tantra were not separate and could be practised together.

Three centuries later (in the 13th century) the Tibetan Buddhist master Je Tsongkharpa, one of Tibet's saints, developed and promoted Kadampa Buddhism throughout the country. He reformed the monasteries, emphasizing the practice of moral discipline, systematic study and meditation, which characterize the three Kadam lineages. He also wrote commentaries to many sacred Buddhist texts, clarifying their meanings, and taught the union of Sutra and Tantra. His life was an example of purity in body, speech and mind. His followers became known as New Kadampas or Gelugpas (The Virtuous Ones) who strived to become great Bodhisattvas and Buddhas themselves, so they could help release others from the suffering of cyclic existence.

The New Kadampa Tradition in the West

In 1976 Geshe Kelsang was invited to teach in the UK by Lama Yeshe, the headteacher of the FPMT, Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition.
Kelsang Gyatso

He taught at FPMT-Centre Manjushri Institute which was based at Conishead priory, Ulverston, Cumbria, England (now called Manjushri Kadampa Meditation Centre) with the blessing of the Dalai Lama.

In the late 1970s Geshe Kelsang took the controversial decision of opening his own Buddhist Centre in York. He was asked to resign his post at Conishead Priory but resisted pressure to leave after a group of his closest students pleaded with him to stay.

Critics claim this was the beginning of a rift between Kelsang and the FPMT. They also accuse Kelsang of starting a breakaway movement and argue that the New Kadampa Tradition, as it is known today, is not part of the ancient Kadampa Tradition but a split from the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism.

Disagreement with the Dalai Lama

Despite the popularity of the New Kadampa Tradition - often known as the NKT for short - the organisation was involved in a public dispute with the Dalai Lama which began in 1996.

The problem centres on the emphasis placed on the Dharma Protector Dorje Shugden by Kelsang.

According to the NKT's website: "A Dharma Protector is an emanation of a Buddha or a Bodhisattva whose main functions are to avert the inner and outer obstacles that prevent practitioners from gaining spiritual realizations, and to arrange all the necessary conditions for their practice".

Kelsang teaches that the deity Dorje Shugden is the Dharma protector for the New Kadampa Tradition and is a manifestation of the Buddha.

The spirit Dorje Shugden is described by some as a "wrathful, sword-waving deity with big ears and menacing fangs" or as "a ...warrior figure, riding a snow lion through a sea of boiling blood".

The New Kadampa Tradition offers this description: "In his left hand he holds a heart, which symbolises great compassion and spontaneous great bliss... His round yellow hat represents the view of Nagarjuna, and the wisdom sword in his right hand teaches us to sever ignorance... Dorje Shudgen rides a snow lion ...and has a jewel-splitting mongoose perched on his left arm, symbolising his power to bestow wealth on those who put their trust in him... His wrathful expression indicated that he destroys ignorance, the real enemy of all living beings, by blessing them with great wisdom."
The NKT venerates Dorje Shugden as its protector deity. The Dalai Lama, however, has rejected and spoken out against this practice. He has described Shugden as an evil and malevolent force, and argued that other Lamas before him had also placed restrictions on worship of this spirit.

After the Lama made these statements public in 1996 some followers of Dorje Shugden protested against the Dalai Lama in London, accusing him of suppressing their religious freedom.

Today members of the New Kadampa Tradition continue to worship Dorje Shugden.

**Growth of the movement**

Although some Buddhists and non-Buddhists regard the NKT as outside the mainstream tradition, the organisation has continued to grow.

Based on Lama Tsongkhapa's influential works, Geshe Kelsang has written 20 books in English, and these have in turn been translated into other languages. The proceeds of these books are fed into the 'NKT International Temples Project', a Buddhist charity building temples dedicated to world peace.

Alongside this Kelsang has set up study programmes to encourage a Western audience to understand the Buddha's teachings.
The first New Kadampa Temple was built in 1998 at Manjushri Centre, Cumbria.

Geshe Kelsang has also been the driving force behind the building of the first New Kadampa Buddhist temple at the Manjushri Centre in Cumbria, England.

A second temple was opened in Glen Spey, New York in 2005. Work is underway on a third temple near Sao Paulo in Brazil, which will be known as the Centro de Meditacao Kadampa do Brasil. Plans are afoot for additional temples at Tara Centre in Derby, England and in Melbourne, Australia.

NKT members hope to build a Buddhist temple in every major town and city in the world. This project is known as the International Temples Project for World Peace.

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**Related Links**

**Articles**

- Dalai Lama - [http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/people/dalailama_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/people/dalailama_1.shtml)
- Sacred Mandala - [http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/customs/mandala.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/customs/mandala.shtml)
- Mantras - [http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/customs/worship_2.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/customs/worship_2.shtml)

**BBC Links**

- In pictures: Samye Ling monastery - [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_pictures/6725607.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_pictures/6725607.stm)

**External Web Links**

- Buddhanet - death and dying in the Tibetan tradition - [http://www.buddhanet.net/deathtib.htm](http://www.buddhanet.net/deathtib.htm)
- Buddhanet - Tibetan Buddhist art - [http://www.buddhanet.net/tibart.htm](http://www.buddhanet.net/tibart.htm)