

Tibetan Buddhism: Overview

Three forms of Buddhism developed in India before the end of the 4th century CE:

Theravada - devotees must practice severe austerities to attain enlightenment, which is achieved only by the few. Called “The Way of the Elders,” Theravada Buddhism requires a secluded life as a monk, practicing intense spiritual meditation.

Mahayana - enlightenment is available to all feeling beings. Believers call upon *bodhisattvas*, spiritual beings who delay nirvana and remain on earth to help others. Practitioners go through several lifetimes of performing various daily rituals.

Vajrayana/Tantric - enlightenment can be attained in one lifetime through certain practices, called *tantras*. Tantras are mental exercises that help believers understand how it feels to be enlightened. Teaching aids such as mandalas, thangkas, or sculptures depict deities that help visualize what is beyond one’s own experience. Teachers help devotees learn to internalize the nature of the deity. After many years, the goal is to no longer need the visual aids. Tibetan Buddhism is a form of Mahayana Buddhism.

The Dalai Lama is a manifestation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion (Chenrezig in Tibetan; also known as Avalokiteshvara, Guanyin, Kannon). He is considered a living Buddha who was chosen to be reborn (when found by the previous Dalai Lama) to help people.

“When we are concerned mainly with our own interests, inevitably we tend to neglect others’ interests. Because of this, preoccupation with our own interests—our own narrow desires, ambitions, and goals—undermines our ability to be compassionate. And since compassion is the source of happiness, self-centeredness prevents us from attaining that spiritual peace—peace of heart and mind—which is the principal characteristic of lasting happiness. Conversely, the more we concern ourselves with providing for others’ well-being, the more meaningful our lives become and the happier we ourselves will be.”

–The 14th Dalai Lama

All sentient beings have the “Buddha nature” or “Buddha mind” within them. Deities, whether benign, terrifying, wrathful, or serene, help the unconscious mind uncover all these aspects of the Buddha mind.

Home and temple shrines are central to the practice of Vajrayana Buddhism. They connect the world of the sacred and the ordinary. Shrines are used for:

- performing important rituals and meditation
- making daily offerings
- repeating of mantras - a request for blessings as well as a way to progress on the path to Buddhahood