

BUDDHISM IN PRISONS

A Brief History of Vajrayana Buddhism

Vajrayana Buddhism represents one of the primary sects of Buddhism, alongside Theravada and Mahayana, and has had a profound impact on the evolution of Buddhist teachings, practices, and cultures within Tibet, Mongolia, Bhutan, Nepal, and parts of the Himalayan region. Today, this form of Buddhism is also practiced in several countries across the globe.

Vajrayana is often translated as the “Diamond Vehicle” or the “Thunderbolt Vehicle,” suggesting a particular path that is direct, powerful, and transformative. Mahayana Buddhism also considers Vajrayana a specialized subset, with a greater emphasis on particular techniques aimed at accelerating one’s spiritual growth. Nevertheless, Vajrayana, like other Buddhist traditions, is the result of an extended process of evolution and not the sudden emergence of a self-contained tradition.

The historical roots of Vajrayana can be traced back to India, several centuries after the time of the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, who lived around the 5th century BCE. Early Buddhism emphasized ethical discipline, meditative concentration, and the cultivation of wisdom. As Buddhism spread and evolved, new teachings and practices emerged. One of the branches was Mahayana Buddhism, which began to center around fostering compassion and the ideal of the bodhisattva, which is seeking awakening for all living beings. Vajrayana practices began to form within this broader Mahayana context. Vajrayana practices include the use of mantras, mudras and mandalas, as well as the visualization of various Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and deities. Mantras are recited to focus the mind and invoke divine presence, while mudras, symbolic hand gestures, are used in meditation and rituals to embody particular qualities associated with awakening. Mandalas, intricate geometric designs, serve as visual aids for meditation, representing the universe and the mind’s journey toward awakening. These practices collectively provide a highly symbolic and experiential path, allowing practitioners to internalize teachings in ways that transcend purely intellectual understanding.



A vajra and a bell

A Vajrayana monk in the flower-offering mudra, holding a vajra, a symbol of compassion, and a bell, a symbol of wisdom and emptiness, during ritual practice.

Photo Source: [pexels.com](https://www.pexels.com)

One important feature of Vajrayana Buddhism is the emphasis on the teacher–student relationship. The role of the teacher, or guru/lama, is fundamental to the disciple’s proper and safe spiritual development. This focus stems from the fact that the techniques of this branch are particularly effective and, therefore, require, in the tradition of this branch, a careful set of instructions, ethical discipline, and the intentionality of bodhicitta, the aspiration to attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings.

From India, Vajrayana Buddhism gradually spread to other regions. Its transmission to Tibet, occurring mostly between the 7th and 12th centuries, was particularly influential. Tibetan kings invited Indian Buddhist teachers to help establish Buddhism in their territories. Indian masters such as Padmasambhava and Shantarakshita are traditionally remembered for introducing Vajrayana teachings to Tibet. Eventually, Tibet was able to establish its own Buddhist schools, literature, practices, and rituals, adapting Indian teachings to its local culture.

Vajrayana also spread to Nepal, Bhutan, Mongolia, and parts of China, blending with local cultures and

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The Noble Eightfold Path - Part I

As we have seen with the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha offers us a structured path which naturally guides us towards the realization of our spiritual awakening, Nibbana. This is accomplished through liberation from our attachments and illusions, and this, therefore, helps us understand the innate truth of all things. In Buddhism, we place great emphasis on the application of the teachings because our liberation can only be achieved through practice and not through rational understanding alone.

The path is divided into three sections which contain all eight topics that will be presented. It is divided into sections on wisdom, ethics, and meditation. The “wisdom” section includes Right Viewpoint or vision and Right Thought or intention; the “ethics” section includes Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood; the “meditation” section includes Right Effort, Right Attention, and Right Concentration.

The noble eightfold path proposed by the Buddha involves our commitment to:

1. Right View or Right Vision

What we call “views” are the set of our beliefs, our mental associations and our internal thought patterns, which together are our vision of life and which condition us in the face of our decisions, our aspirations and our actions. One of the first things to do as a Buddhist is to let go of our “points of view,” at least let go enough to hold them lightly, if we want to be able to grow and have a more global vision of life

around us. Our beliefs, or our frozen attachment to our beliefs, can create a lot of rigidity which will then give rise to suffering when we encounter different beliefs, and also prevent us from seeing the beliefs of others with wisdom or compassion.

Traditionally, right view is what connects the two components of Buddhism, namely doctrine and practice. Our right vision will therefore begin with an intellectual understanding of the Four Noble Truths, then be practiced concretely by beginning to “see the dukkha” in our lives, the impermanence, and the emptiness of all things. This leads to the awareness that nothing is more responsible for our suffering and attachment than wrong views, and that nothing is more productive of beneficial states and happiness than right views.

2. Right Thought or Intention

Right thinking is thinking that is unconditioned, free, without greed, jealousy, anger, hatred and cruelty. I find that the most important thing is our intention, which determines whether our words and actions will create good or bad karma.

Right thinking is not dogmatic or rigid thinking, but it is more a thought that is the expression of right understanding, of an awakened mind. So, it is a thought which is the expression of our heart, of compassion and kindness. Right intention comprises three main aspects: the intention to renounce desires, the intention to renounce anger and violence, and the intention to renounce ignorance.

3. Right Speech

Right speech is one of the things I find most difficult because it is

something we are engaged with almost all the time, so can we bring it under the influence of our spiritual practice? Not always easy or obvious, at least for me.

So what exactly does it mean to have positive speech? The Buddha asks us to refrain from telling lies, avoid attacking someone’s reputation, avoid speaking hatefully, avoid speaking rudely, avoid frivolous speech or futile chatter such as gossip. Right speech allows us to speak in a noble, true and authentic way that creates harmony.

4. Right Action

Right action is directly linked to right intention and right speech. It means we act with respect for others and for ourselves, while avoiding creating suffering for others and for ourselves. Right action is therefore action which respects the precepts, and which respects the expression of awakening. Right action, to put it simply, means acting in perfect harmony with the present moment and without ego, being completely detached from outcomes, and not seeking credit for what is achieved.

In summary, we do not act out of our own ego, and we do not act to take credit or reward for a “good” action; we act appropriately in the present moment with what best represents a free spirit filled with wisdom and compassion.

Right action is the basic precept that we must follow as Buddhists, this helps us progress on the path of the Five Precepts refrain from killing, refrain from stealing, refrain from lying, refrain from irresponsible sexual activity, and abstain from

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The Sutra of Forty-Two Chapters

佛說四十二章經

In the year of 67 C.E., at the special invitation of Emperor Ming of the Later Han Dynasty, two Indian Buddhist masters from India, Kashyapa-matanga and Gobharana, arrived at Luoyang (洛陽), China. They came with white horses, bearing precious sutras, Buddha statues, and relics.

The emperor built them a monastery, the very first Buddhist monastery in all of China, aptly named The White Horse Monastery (白馬寺). There, they undertook the great task of translating The Sutra of Forty-Two Chapters – the first Buddhist text translated into the Chinese language.

In the Sutra, there are aspects of Theravada and Mahayana; expedient means and ultimate reality; gradual cultivation and sudden enlightenment. Even more importantly, all of the various teachings in the Sutra of Forty-Two Chapters are ultimately one single vehicle pointing to one single goal: enlightenment. Today, one can go on a pilgrimage to the graves of these two great Buddhist masters in the ancient White Horse Monastery in Luoyang, China. Generations of Buddhists are forever indebted to Venerable Kashyapa-matanga and Venerable Gobharana for this monumental scripture.

We have selected some chapters from the Sutra of Forty-Two Chapters with their English translations from buddhagate.org to be shared in this newsletter.



White Horse Temple in Luoyang, China

The White Horse Temple was the first Buddhist temple built in China. The Sutra of 42 Chapters was translated by two Indian masters residing in this temple.

Photo Source:
commons.wikimedia.org

Chapter 2: No-mind Is the Way

The Buddha said, “Those who renounce the secular life to become shramanas eradicate desire and lust, recognize the source of their own mind, penetrate the profound doctrine of the Buddha, and awaken to the unconditioned Dharma. With nothing to gain from within and nothing to seek from without, their minds are not attached to the Way, nor do they accumulate karma. With no thought, no action, no cultivation, and no attainment, they transcend the successive stages and reach the loftiest state of all. This is called the Way.”

第二章 斷欲絕求

佛言：出家沙門者，斷欲去愛，識自心源，達佛深理，悟無為法。內無所得，外無所求。心不繫道，亦不結業。無念無作，非

修非證。不歷諸位而自崇最，名之為道。

Chapter 4: The Ten Evils and Ten Virtues

The Buddha said, “In sentient beings, ten actions are virtuous and ten are evil. What are they? Three pertain to the body, four to the mouth, and three to the mind. Killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct pertain to the body. Malicious, abusive, false, and frivolous speech pertains to the mouth. Envy, anger, and ignorance pertain to the mind. These ten deeds, known as the ten evils, are not in accord with the Noble Way. To renounce the ten evils is to practice the ten virtues.”

第四章 善惡並明

佛言：眾生以十事為善，亦以十事為惡。何等為十？身三、口四、意三。身三者，殺、盜、淫。口四者，兩舌、惡口、妄言、綺語。意三者，嫉、恚、癡。如是十事，不順聖道，名十惡行；是惡若止，名十善行耳。

Chapter 5: Reducing the Severity of Offenses

The Buddha said, “If a person with many faults fails to repent and cease immediately the thoughts that cause harm, his offenses will consume him, just as waters return to the sea which becomes ever deeper and wider. If a person with faults realizes his errors, corrects his actions and cultivates virtue, his offenses will naturally dissolve, just as sweating enables a sick person to recover gradually.”

第五章 轉重令輕

佛言：人有眾過，而不自悔，頓息其心，罪來赴身。如水歸海，漸成深廣。若人有過，自解知非，改惡行善，罪自消滅。如病得汗，漸有痊損耳。🌸



Photo Source: facebook.com/walkforpeaceusa

The Walk for Peace

A group of about 20 Buddhist monks and their loyal dog, Aloka, began a 120-day Walk for Peace on October 26, 2025, from the Huong Dao Vipassana Bhavana Center in Fort Worth, Texas. They expect to arrive at their destination in Washington, D.C., before mid-February 2026.

According to their Facebook page: “This journey will span approximately 2,300 miles (3,701 kilometers), at a mindful pace of 20–23 miles per day. This is not a protest — it is a living expression of hope. Each step is taken with mindfulness, carrying a message of harmony, kindness, and resilience... we believe that change begins with each of us. Every act of kindness, every moment of peace, and every bit of mindful support bring us closer to a more compassionate world.”

Their path has included schools, churches, temples, libraries, state capitol buildings, historical sites, and monuments related to the American Civil Rights movement. They have been escorted and welcomed by local police and politicians.

The Walk for Peace has received growing support from people who donated food, drinks, shelters, medical care, and money. They also attended the monk’s group talks and meditation. As of January 30, they have reached Virginia and have these followers: 2.3 M on Facebook, 1.2 M on TikTok, 1.7 M on Instagram, and 24 M views of the live map that shows their next stops. 🌸

Martha is a volunteer with Buddhism in Prisons Canada.

About Buddhism in Prisons Newsletter

This monthly newsletter is published by Buddhism in Prisons Canada. It is intended to help inmates learn and practice Buddhism and for prison chaplains to provide Buddhist spiritual care. Authors of the articles published herein share teachings they learned from their own particular schools and traditions. These teachings may not necessarily be exactly the same as those taught in another Buddhist school or tradition. The three major traditions in Buddhism are Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana.

This newsletter is sent electronically to prison chaplains. Copies can also be downloaded from BuddhismInPrisons.ca. Prison chaplains may also email or write to us to receive this newsletter.

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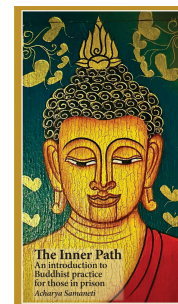
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traditions. In the contemporary era, Vajrayana has gained global attention not only for its elaborate rituals but also for its practical meditation techniques and emphasis on personal spiritual transformation. Centers in North America, Europe, and Australia offer teachings adapted to modern lifestyles while preserving traditional lineages. Many Western practitioners are drawn to its integration of philosophy, ritual, and contemplative practice, finding both spiritual depth and practical guidance for everyday life. 🌸

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intoxicants. Right action is there to help us truly advance our practice and cultivate kindness and compassion towards all beings, no matter who (this includes guards and all people who may represent difficulties in our lives).



This article has been excerpted with permission from The Inner Path: an introduction to Buddhist practice for those in prison (Sumeru Press Inc., 2024).

Acharya Samaneti is a Canadian Buddhist prison chaplain, philosopher,

lover of the written word and seeker of truth. He wishes to bear witness to the universality of suffering and actions of love that awaken hearts.

MARCH



2026

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
1 Monlam Chenmo Great Prayer Festival (Vajrayana) until March 8	2	3 🌐 Makha Bucha Day (Thera- vada) — Com- memorates the gathering of the Fourfold Assembly	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19 🌙	20	21
22	23	24	25	26 Shakyamuni Buddha's Renunciation Day (Mahayana)	27	28
29	30	31				

Note: The 1st and 15th days of the lunar calendar are traditionally observed by Buddhists as times for spiritual practice.

“Defeat anger with kindness, villainy with virtue,
stinginess with giving, and lies with truth.”

- Buddha (the Dhammapada ~ suttacentral.net)

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
			1	2  Shakyamuni Buddha's Nirvana Day (Mahayana) Theravada New Year	3	4
5	6 Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva's Birthday (Mahayana)	7	8 Samantabhadra Bodhisattva's Birthday (Mahayana)	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16 	17 	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30		

Note: The 1st and 15th days of the lunar calendar are traditionally observed by Buddhists as times for spiritual practice.

“Let us live so very happily, loving among the hostile.
Among hostile humans, let us live with love.”
- Buddha (the Dhammapada ~ suttacentral.net)