

The Mahayana Councils and the Sutras, Tantras and Shastras

*How the Bodhisattvas authentically
preserved the Buddha's Teachings*

by Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche

This history of the three councils actually relates more directly to the way in which the *Hinayana* teachings were preserved, particularly, the hinayana tradition of the Vinaya.

But a similar councils occurred in the Mahayana tradition. Some time after the passing away of the Buddha, one million bodhisattvas met together under the leadership of the three great bodhisattvas Vajrapani, Maitreya and Manjushri on the top of mount Vimalasvabhava, which lies south of Rajagriha in southern India.

All the teachings of the Buddha were also collected in the three same sections of Sutras, Vinaya, and Abhidharma. The bodhisattva Vajrapani recited the Sutras. The bodhisattva Maitreya recited the Vinaya, and the bodhisattva Manjushri recited the Abhidharma. So in this meeting they also collected all the teachings of the Buddha and classified them into these three main categories.

A similar thing took place with the Vajrayana teachings. The Buddha taught four categories of tantras: the kriya tantra, the carya tantra, yoga tantra, and anuttarayoga tantra.

With the lower three tantras, i. e. the kriya tantra, the carya tantra, and

yoga tantras there was a special meeting of all the bodhisattvas in the god realm to gather all of these teachings led by Vajrapani. For this reason, in the vajrayana tradition he is known as “the Lord of Secrets,” with secrets referring to the secret mantra, that is, the vajrayana. How did he come to be the Lord of Secrets? First he was the one who requested the Buddha to turn the profound Dharma wheel of the tantras and then when it was turned, he was the most prominent of the disciples. Later when there was this meeting of all the bodhisattvas to collect all the lower tantras, Vajrapani was the leader of this gathering and it is through his action that the tantras have been preserved up to now.

As far as the anuttarayoga tantras, the father tantras and mother tantras were mostly requested and received by dakinis such as Vajrayogini, and it was also the wisdom dakinis who collected and preserved these teachings. The Hevajra Tantra was transmitted mostly to the bodhisattva Vajragarbha. He later on gathered the teaching and transmitted them in their integrity.

The Kalachakra Tantra was transmitted mostly to the Dharma King Sucandra. He was actually an emanation of Manjushri. He was the one who also kept the teaching, collected them, and passed them on.

What follows is an explanation of the Sutras, Tantras and Shastras.

The Sutras

Now the first turning of teachings were given in Varanasi which you can visit in India nowadays. The Buddha taught in the deer park (which is now called Sarnath) which at the time was a very remote and very solitary place.⁹ After the Buddha reached his enlightenment, he remained completely silent and didn't teach for seven weeks. The reason for this was to show that the Dharma is very rare, very special, very valuable, and this is why the Buddha just remained silent for some time and until he was

requested to teach. The request was made by many gods including Brahma.¹⁰ Having had the request to teach, the Buddha went to Varanasi and gave the teachings in the deer park. He gave the teachings to five men who were called “the five good followers” who were connected by previous karma to the Buddha and who through this link, were the first ones to receive his teaching.

The subject matter of this first turning of the wheel of Dharma was the teaching of the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha expounding these Four Noble Truths to make it very clear to all those who were going to follow the Buddha’s path what the teaching was, why one needed to practice it, and what kind of results one could be expected from the practice. So to clarify the path the Buddha laid it out in a very clear form of the four truths.

He showed that if we don’t practice the path of Dharma, we will wander on and on in samsara, but if we practice the Dharma, we will gain the liberation of nirvana. The Buddha first taught that suffering is inherent to samsara and that this is what we must really overcome. Secondly, he taught that the cause of this suffering are the disturbing emotions or kleshas and karma. To counteract samsara we must engage in the aspect of nirvana which again has two parts. The third noble truth of cessation or peace shows what we can achieve. Nirvana is cessation of suffering. And fourth the way to achieve this is the truth of the path.

Since samsara is by nature suffering, we have to go beyond samsara to eliminate samsara. Since nirvana is peace, this is what we have to try to achieve. But achieving nirvana and eliminating samsara can not be done automatically. So it is done through working on the causes of these that we can achieve our goal. This is why the Buddha expounded on the four truths in the form of causes and their effects. The causes of the suffering of samsara are the disturbing emotions such as lust, anger, and ignorance

and karma which need to be overcome. In the same way, the cause of peace and bliss of nirvana is the path which needs to be practiced.

So this is how the Buddha gave the whole outline of his teaching in the form of these four truths. Within each aspect of samsara and nirvana, there is this causal relationship between cause and effect. This series of teachings which began in Varanasi were called the turning of the first wheel of dharma.

Later the Buddha taught the second wheel of Dharma at Vulture Peak in Rajagriha, India.¹² The people who were present during this teaching were arhats and bodhisattvas in great numbers. The teaching itself was mostly the exposition of the Prajnaparamita. This is when the Buddha gave the teachings on emptiness and on the conduct of a bodhisattva through the teachings on the six paramitas.

In the first turning of the wheel of Dharma, the Buddha showed that one had to abandon samsara to achieve nirvana. But how is this possible? Does it mean that we have to go on a long journey to where we have never been before to find nirvana? Does it mean that we have to create something new called nirvana? In fact, it doesn't mean that at all. All it means is that we have to understand the actual nature of phenomena¹³ that we have to understand that our present view of reality is mistaken, and we have to remove our impurities. And once we see things as they really are, this is when we can achieve Buddhahood.

The third turning of the wheel of Dharma is also called the teachings that gave complete clarification. These teachings were given in Shravasti and other places in India in the presence of all the great bodhisattvas. These teachings revealed that Buddha-nature is present in the mind of all beings. We may wonder why this was taught last. The reason is that in the second

turning, the Buddha taught that everything was empty of inherent nature. This teaching could lead to the belief that the goal of the Buddhist path—nirvana—is actually simply complete emptiness or annihilation. To avoid this mistake, the Buddha gave this third set of teachings showing that the mind is not just nothingness. When one achieves Buddhahood, the original intrinsic luminosity of the mind becomes manifest. This luminosity or clarity of the mind means that the mind is not a dark, obscure thing by nature, but it has its own inherent, intelligent clarity. Once one has removed the veils, the thick shroud of ignorance, the inherent clarity of the mind, this brilliance of the intelligence of mind, will shine in its fullness. Once this clarity of the mind has manifest, then one can understand all things of nirvana and samsara very clearly. One has the understanding of phenomena and this knowledge is accompanied by the greatest of bliss and peace.

The Tantras

The three turnings of the wheel of Dharma that have just been described correspond to the sutras taught of the Buddha. The Buddha also taught the tantras which are the teachings of the vajrayana. The Buddha gave four tantras: the kriya tantras, the carya tantras, the yoga tantras, and the anuttarayoga tantras.

These teachings were given in many places. Sometimes the Buddha gave these teachings in some of the god realms such as Tushita and some of the teachings were given in physical places in India. Those receiving these teachings were bodhisattvas and dakas and dakinis practicing the secret mantas. The sutras already provided very deep and vast teachings on the nature of phenomena. But with the vajrayana, the Buddha was able to give people the possibility to achieve the fruition of the Buddhist path very quickly and without major hardships. The vajrayana can do this by providing special skillful means such as the meditation on the generation

stage and the completion stage of a deity, and using meditation techniques of looking at the nature of the mind directly.

So the Buddha turned the wheel of Dharma and gave all the various teachings of the hinayana, the mahayana, and the vajrayana¹⁴ in different places with different people and at all different times. But also because he was teaching students of vastly different abilities, at times it seemed to them as if the Buddha was mainly spreading the hinayana; at times it seemed to them as if he was teaching the mahayana and sometimes as if to the vajrayana. Of course, this was just a matter of the way in which the people were perceiving the teachings of the Buddha; it seemed to some that the Buddha was giving completely hinayana teachings and to others that he was giving completely mahayana teaching. The Buddha could also be somewhere else and through his miraculous powers giving other teachings to others.

Because of this, some people started having the impression that the Buddha had only given the hinayana teachings, and had not given the maha-yana teachings which were made up by someone else. Others believed that the Buddha had given the mahayana teachings, but had not given the vajrayana teachings and that these vajrayana teachings had been fabricated by his followers. The belief that the mahayana and the vajrayana teachings were created by someone else is based on the belief the Buddha was just an ordinary man with no extraordinary qualities of enlightenment instead of seeing a Buddha as being a very exceptional being who came into the world to help people out of his great compassion and to lead them to liberation. Once one thinks of the Buddha as an ordinary Indian man, then next one will have doubts as to whether he actually gave the various teachings attributed to him and one begins picking and choosing between teachings of the various vehicles.

It is a mistake to identify the Buddha as an ordinary person and to start thinking that maybe the Buddha didn't have complete knowledge, or was not able to teach a complete range of teachings or that the Buddha could have taught in this place, but not in that place. It is not worth entertaining such doubts because the Buddha was not an ordinary person nor was he a god who if pleased with you will send you to heaven and if displeased throw you into the hell realms. But at the same time, saying the Buddha is not a god doesn't mean that we should think of the Buddha as someone devoid of any special qualities of knowledge, intelligence, and understanding or without any special direct intuition and insight. He was indeed a very special being who gave the complete set of Dharma teachings which were not in contradiction to each other. Each has its own relevance. Whoever practices a teaching of any level or vehicle properly will be able to achieve the respective result of that particular path. So this was the eleventh deed to the Buddha, the turning of the wheel of Dharma.

The Shastras

All the different categories of the Buddha's teaching including the sutras and the tantras were transmitted to disciples who didn't just hear these teachings, but who practiced and preserved them so that they were transmitted all the way down to the present time without any defect, alteration, or loss.

There are two main categories of the Dharma. First there are the actual teachings of the Buddha (the sutras) and there are the *shastras* which are the works that elucidate the meaning of the Buddha's teaching. We've seen how the twelve deeds of the Buddha and the three councils and how this allowed all the actual teachings of the Buddha to remain intact and faultless up to now. As Buddh-ism developed and spread in India, many different scholars wrote works trying to elucidate and clarify the meaning of the

Buddha's teachings for others. So these works are what we call the shastras.

The shastras are intended to make the original teaching of the Buddha easier to understand. They do not contain any personal ideas of the writer and do not put forward the author's own theory about anything. So when a teaching of the Buddha was very long and very detailed, the shastras may present a more summarized easier to understand form of these teachings. Then when the teaching of the Buddha was rather complex, the shastras may make these teachings much more easily understandable. Finally, when a teaching of the Buddha on a particular topic was scattered in many different sutras, then a shastra might take all these different points concerning the same subject and collect them in one place.

So the importance of the shastras is to present the meaning of the Buddha's teaching in a form that was easy for people to understand. One could say that the meaning of these shastras is so close to the Buddha's teaching that it could almost be counted as being part of the actual teachings of the Buddha.

Some people have doubts because they think that maybe the shastras were just concoctions by different writers and scholars that don't really have anything to do with the Buddha's teaching. They also make too much between what is in the scriptures of the Buddha and what is in the shastras.

But one shouldn't think that there is a great difference between what the Buddha taught and the shastras and the meditation instructions and the spiritual songs. They should be thought of as a whole, as the same teaching which originated from what the Buddha taught. So whether dealing with the actual words of the Buddha or the instructions of realized masters, we should consider them as all having the same value.

Whether we practice the teachings given by the Buddha or the teachings laid out in the shastras, there is no difference except that maybe we will find the shastras a little easier to understand. This is why Tibetans favored the shastras so much.

The Buddha taught the various levels of the Dharma by giving teachings of the hinayana, the mahayana, and the vajrayana. It is said in a sutra of the Buddha that whenever the Buddha speaks even one word, that word can be heard in different places, in different times, in a different ways by the various people according to their spiritual maturity.

This means that when the Buddha was teaching, those who are ready for the hinayana received his teaching from the hinayana viewpoint and accordingly were able to practice this path and be able to achieve the hinayana fruition. Simultaneously, someone who is ready for the mahayana received the teaching from the mahayana point of view and through practicing this was able to achieve the mahayana fruition. The same applies also to the vajrayana.

In the hinayana tradition it is the Buddha's teachings that are most important. But in Tibet, the shastras became extremely important. One might think that this was rather strange because these shastras in Tibet became even more important in a way than the actual sayings of the Buddha.

But this shouldn't lead us to think that the Buddha's teachings were forgotten and put aside and replaced by the shastras that were just fabricated by scholars who lived after the Buddha. In fact, what happened was that some individuals practiced the Buddha's teaching. They assimilated the meaning of his teachings so well that through the power and blessing of the teaching, they managed to achieve the fruition of the path; so that if they practiced the shravaka aspect of the path, they became

arhats. If they practiced the mahayana, they achieved the bodhisattva levels from the first up to the tenth bodhisattva level. Or if they practiced the vajrayana, they achieved the ordinary and the supreme spiritual accomplishments, in particular, the power of direct, intuitive knowledge.

Once they had achieved this fruition of the path they were then able to write a shastra which is a landmark, a guidebook for others who were to follow to show them that if they understood the Buddha's teaching very well and practiced properly, this is what would happen this is how one could go about it, and this is how one should understand it and so on. So the shastras that they wrote were not a contradiction of the Buddha's teaching, but a reinforcement of the Buddha's teaching.

Those scholars or panditas who wrote the shastras didn't necessarily write from their realization. If they wrote from their experience, the result was the same as teachings of the Buddha because they were so completely penetrated with the meaning of the Buddha's teaching and they had assimilated it so perfectly that whatever they wrote was out of total conviction in the validity of the Buddha's teaching.

Whatever they wrote wasn't just their own ideas put down on paper, but it was to make the Buddha's teaching more easily understandable to most people. This is why we should consider the shastras as being the same as the Buddha's teaching, not as being something foreign to the teaching.

The Development of Buddhism in India