Appendix Chapter 4 The Spread of the Buddhadharma and Buddhist Cannons

The Buddha, a skilful teacher, gave multiple teachings to correspond to the variety of sentient beings. As the Buddhadharma spread across the Indian subcontinent and into other lands, people had access to different sūtras and found certain teachings more suitable for their minds than teachings in other sūtras.

Although all Buddhist teachings share the four truths, their selection of texts, imagery, rituals, textual interpretations, points of emphasis and religious institutions were influenced by the society in which they were produced.

We need to discern the actual Buddhadharma from cultural overlays, so that we can practice the true Dharma without confusing it with cultural traditions.

In this work, we will speak of two principal Buddhist traditions according to the language they came to be written in—the Pāli and Sanskrit traditions. The Buddha himself taught in some form of Prakrit, a group of languages spoken in India by the common people of his time. After his parinirvāṇa, the discourses were collated into groups and passed on orally for several centuries. The earliest written texts we have date from around the first century BCE and both Pāli and Sanskrit emerged as primary languages for transmitting the words of the Buddha.

Vehicles and Paths

Vehicle and path are synonyms. Here they are methods to lead us progressively out of saṃsāra. When our Teacher, Śākyamuni Buddha, lived in India, he turned the Dharma wheel (that is, he taught the Dharma) by giving teachings for beings of the three vehicles: the Śrāvaka[99] (listener); Solitary Realiser (Pratyekabuddha); and Bodhisattva vehicles. These are called vehicles (yāna) because they convey their respective practitioners to distinct spiritual attainments.

According to the Sanskrit tradition, the three vehicles are differentiated in terms of the motivation to attain a specific goal, their principal meditation object and the accumulation of merit and length of time necessary to attain their goals. Each vehicle leads to its own awakening. Both the Pāli and Sanskrit traditions contain teachings on all three vehicles, although the Pāli tradition places more emphasis on the Śrāvaka Vehicle and the Sanskrit tradition on the Bodhisattva Vehicle.

Sometimes the Śrāvaka and Solitary Realiser vehicles are subsumed under the name Fundamental Vehicle. Although both the Pāli and Sanskrit traditions explain the Bodhisattva Vehicle, in the Sanskrit tradition it is called the Universal Vehicle and relies on sūtras that were widely disseminated later. The Bodhisattva Vehicle is further divided into two according to method: the Perfection Vehicle and the Tantric

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[99] The Śrāvaka vehicle, also known as Śrāvakayāna, is one of the three main paths in Buddhism. Śrāvakayāna translates to the "vehicle of listeners" or disciples, focusing on individuals aiming for personal enlightenment primarily through listening to the teachings of the Buddha. They follow the Śrāvaka Dharma, utilise the Śrāvaka Piṭaka, and are dedicated to achieving liberation through detachment and understanding of the Buddha's teachings.

Practitioners of the Śrāvaka path are concentrating on their own liberation by attaining the state of an Arhat, a liberated being who has overcome all defilements but does not possess the omniscience of a Buddha.

The Śrāvaka path is regarded as foundational, providing essential teachings on ethics, meditation, and wisdom that are necessary for all practitioners, regardless of their ultimate goal. The emphasis is on overcoming self-centredness and developing a preliminary understanding of emptiness and the nature of reality as a basis for more advanced practices leading to full Buddhahood. Practicing the Fundamental Vehicle leading to arhatship who emphasises meditation on the four truths of the āryas.

The Śrāvaka vehicle represents an essential aspect of the Buddhist path, emphasising the importance of hearing, practicing, and embodying the teachings of the Buddha towards the goal of liberation from suffering.

Vehicle. The Tantric Vehicle can also be divided in different ways. One way is four tantric classes: action, performance, yoga, and highest yoga tantra.

Buddhist Traditions

Pāli Tradition
- Śrāvaka Vehicle
- Solitary Realiser Vehicle
- Bodhisattva Vehicle

Sanskrit Tradition
- Śrāvaka Vehicle
- Solitary Realiser Vehicle
- Bodhisattva Vehicle or Universal Vehicle (Mahāyāna)
  - Perfection Vehicle
  - Tantric Vehicle

Nowadays the vehicles of the śrāvakas and bodhisattvas are prominent. Although the teachings on the Bodhisattva Vehicle in the Pāli and Sanskrit traditions overlap in several ways, the name "Mahāyāna" refers to the bodhisattva teachings and scriptures in the Sanskrit tradition. Theravāda is the predominant form of Buddhism practiced today in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and so forth.

The Buddha's Life

Buddhism in our world began with Śākyamuni Buddha who was born Siddhārtha Gautama, a prince from the Śākya clan, most likely in the fifth century BCE near what is today the India-Nepal border.[100] His kind heart and great intelligence were evident from childhood. Despite a sheltered life in the palace, he ventured into the town, where for the first time he saw a sick person, an old person, and a corpse. This prompted him to reflect on the suffering living beings experience, and after seeing a wandering mendicant (beggar), he aspired to be free from the cycle of constantly recurring problems called saṃsāra. Disillusioned with the pleasures of palace life and seeking liberation, at the age of twenty-nine he left his family and royal position, shed his elegant clothing, and adopted the lifestyle of a wandering mendicant.

He studied and mastered the meditation techniques of the great teachers of his time, but he saw that they did not bring freedom from cyclic existence. For six years he practiced severe asceticism, but realising that torturing the body doesn't tame the mind, he relinquished this for the middle path of keeping the body healthy without indulging in sensual pleasure.

Sitting under the bodhi tree in what is present-day Bodhgaya, India, he determined to arise only after attaining full awakening. On the full moon of the fourth lunar month—the Buddhist holiday of Vesak—he completed the process of cleansing his mind of all obscurations and developing all good qualities and became a buddha, a fully awakened one. Thirty-five years old at that time, he spent the next forty-five years teaching what he had discovered through his own experience to whomever came to hear.

The Buddha taught men and women of all ages, races, and social classes—royalty, beggars, merchants, officials, thieves, farmers, musicians, and prostitutes. Many of his students chose to relinquish the householder's life and adopt the monastic life, and thus the saṅgha community of ordained beings was born. As his followers attained realisations and became skilled in teaching the Dharma, he asked them to share with others what they had realised "for the welfare of the multitude, for the happiness of the multitude, out of compassion for the world; for the benefit, welfare, and happiness of gods and humans". Thus the Buddha's teachings spread throughout the Indian subcontinent, and in subsequent centuries to

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[100] Theravāda Buddhists place the Buddha as living 563–483 BCE, while many people following the Sanskrit tradition often date the Buddha as living 448–368 BCE. Having analysed traditional historical records from a different angle, Richard Gombrich, professor of Sanskrit at Oxford University, has placed the Buddha's life at 485–404 BCE.

present-day Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, Indonesia, China, Korea, Japan, Central Asia, Tibet, Mongolia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. In recent years, Dharma centres have opened in locations all around the world.

Personally speaking, I feel a deep connection to Śākyamuni Buddha as well as profound gratitude for his teachings and the example of how he lived his life—abiding in the pure ethical conduct of a monastic and sharing the teachings impartially. The Buddha had insights into the workings of the mind that were previously unknown on the Earth. He taught that our experiences of suffering and happiness are intricately related to our minds and emotions. Suffering is not thrust upon us by other people; it is a product of our ignorant views and beliefs. Happiness is not a gift from the gods; it is a result of our cultivation of wisdom and compassion.

The Buddha's life is a teaching in itself: he questioned the meaning of worldly life and reached the decision to practice the Dharma while facing pressure from his family and society to inherit the kingship. Despite the hardships he encountered, he practiced diligently and did not give up until he had attained full awakening. He dealt compassionately with the people who berated him or criticised his teachings. Sometimes his followers were uncooperative and belligerent, but he did not give up on them, although he sometimes had to address them sternly. The sūtras show that he engaged with many different kinds of people with great skill and compassion, and he was completely uninterested in fame or praise. Reflecting on the kindness of the Buddha for providing teachings that suit the various dispositions and interests of the variety of sentient beings, I feel deep reverence. I hope that you, too, by learning and practicing the Buddha's teachings, will develop this sense of personal connection with our Teacher, the Buddha.

Early Buddhist Schools

The historical evolution of Buddhism is a fluid and dynamic process that brought forth various schools, traditions, and tenet systems. No clear boundaries. We see this even today with Theravāda monastics who take the bodhisattva precepts, practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism who are ordained in the Dharmaguptaka vinaya lineage followed in Taiwan, etc.

It is important to keep in mind that we can't say for sure what happened in the past. In our present lives, our memories differ person to person as each person selects certain details and interpretation of those details Nevertheless it is useful to have a general knowledge of the historical background of the Dharma we study.

After the Buddha's passing (parinirvāṇa), the arhat Mahākāśyapa gathered five hundred arhats together at Rājagṛha to recite the Buddha's discourses at what came to be called the first council. In the early centuries, these sūtras were passed down orally principally by bhāṇakas, monastics whose duty was to memorise and recite the scriptures. Each group of bhāṇakas had a group of scriptures to memorise and teach to others. The Buddha did not repeat verbatim every talk he gave on a particular topic, however, important themes and passages were standardised for ease in memorisation. There are stock phrases and passages—and some almost identical sūtras. A famine in the first century BCE threatened the continued existence of the scriptures in present-day Sri Lanka, and monks began to preserve them in writing, and other groups of bhāṇakas continued to orally disseminate the Buddha's discourses throughout India.

In the centuries following the second council in 383 BCE, 18 different Buddhist sects appeared indicating a great profusion of Buddhist lineages in the Indian sub-

continent and nearby areas. Many factors influenced the development of these different śrāvaka schools—eg, isolation, language, culture, and availability of sūtras and teachings. Each school developed slightly different versions of the Tripiṭaka—the three baskets of Vinaya, Sūtra, and Abhidharma texts[101]—with the majority of the material was shared in common.

Little is known about many of these eighteen-plus schools.[102]

Indian and Sri Lankan sages began composing commentaries, unpacking the meaning of what the Buddha said in the sūtras.

Buddhists in northern India in the medieval period said there were four main śrāvaka schools that subsumed all eighteen: (1) the Sarvāstivāda school, which used Sanskrit, (2) the Mahāsāṃghika, which used a Prakrit dialect, (3) the Saṃmitīya, which used Apabhraṃśa, another Prakrit dialect, and (4) the Sthavira, which used Paiśācī (written Prakrit or Pali). Most of the early scriptures do not self-identify as being from one or another of the eighteen schools, so modern scholars must make intelligent guesses about which school newly found manuscripts are from.

We don't know exactly how long each of the ancient schools existed and why they ceased. The schools in present-day Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asian republics became extinct first. They may have died out due to economic, political, and social changes, invasions, or natural disasters in their locales. The remnants of some schools may have merged with others. Because Buddhism was heavily concentrated in monasteries and not in village homes, once the monasteries were destroyed in India during the Turkic invasions in the thirteenth century, Buddhism all but vanished in India.

Early Buddhism in Sri Lanka

Buddhism was transmitted to Sri Lanka by the son and daughter of the Indian king Aśoka in the third century BCE. Some Indian commentaries came, too; they were preserved and augmented in the old Sinhala language by Sinhalese monks. In the fifth century CE, the Indian monk Buddhaghosa traveled to Sri Lanka, where he compiled and edited the contents of these ancient commentaries when writing his own numerous commentaries in Pāli. Due to Buddhaghosa's translation work, Pāli became the "scriptural language of all Theravāda Buddhists.

Buddhism flourished in Sri Lanka, and three major sects—the Mahāvihāra, Abhayagiri, and Jetavana—evolved, each with its own monastery. Chinese pilgrims recorded that Abhayagiri, the largest and wealthiest monastery, followed both the early scriptures and the Mahāyāna scriptures; some of the Mahāyāna sūtras in the Chinese Tripiṭaka were obtained in Sri Lanka. There were also many bodhisattva statues and Mahāyāna art on the island, and there is evidence that some tantric teachings were present there as well.

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[101] The Tripiṭaka, or "Three Baskets," is the collection of the earliest Buddhist scriptures, consisting of the Vinaya (monastic code), the Sūtra (discourses), and the Abhidharma (philosophical and doctrinal analyses). These texts constitute the Buddhist canon and are foundational to the practice and understanding of Buddhism, detailing the Buddha's teachings, ethical conduct, and the theoretical framework of the Buddhist path. The Tripiṭaka is preserved in different traditions, including the Theravāda, Chinese Buddhist, and Tibetan Buddhist canons .

[102] The names of some of these eighteen schools are today preserved in the three extant lineages of monastic precepts: the Theravāda (descended from the Sthavira sect and Mahāvihāra Monastery); the Mūlasarvāstivāda (a branch descended from the Sarvāstivāda); and the Dharmaguptaka. In ancient times, the Theravāda flourished in South and Southeast Asia, the Sarvāstivāda was located primarily in northern India and Kashmir, and the Dharmaguptaka was prominent in Gandhāra and Central Asia, from where it was transmitted to China. The Mūlasarvāstivāda school may have been located in Mathurā in northern India and may have later moved to Kashmir, and from there to Tibet, where its vinaya became the dominant monastic code.

The Dīpavaṃsa (Island Chronicle) and Mahāvaṃsa (Great Chronicle) presented Buddhist history according to the narrative of the Mahāvihāra. The Dīpavaṃsa was probably authored by Mahāvihāra monks in the third or fourth century and the Mahāvaṃsa in the second half of the fifth century. Their authors claimed to be the true Theravādins, the spiritual descendants of arhats of the first council. The historical chronicles also spoke of the lineage of Sri Lankan kings and events occurring during their reigns, mythology, and legend. They portrayed Sri Lanka as the island where the Buddha prophesied that his teachings would be purely preserved. Claiming that other monasteries followed sūtras that were not from the original transmission of sūtras to Sri Lanka, and thus were not the Buddha's word, the Mahāvihārans emphasised that they held the one true canon with the complete Buddhavacana (Buddha's word), free from the degenerations of the Mahāyāna present in the Abhayagiri and Jetavana monasteries.

The Dharma developed in Sri Lanka over several centuries with the appearance of written sūtras and commentaries, the formation of a closed canon of scriptures, the establishment of authoritative commentaries, and the creation of official histories in the two chronicles. While helping to preserve the Dharma in Sri Lanka, these factors also served to legitimise and reinforce the authority of the Mahāvihāra sect as the one that preserved the true Dharma with authentic scriptures.

It is not clear what the term Theravāda referred to historically or when it came into common use. While it is often presented nowadays as referring to "original Buddhism," in fact the term Theravāda is rarely found in Pāli literature. It seems the term Theravāda first appeared in Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, in southeastern India, where "proto-Mahāyāna views were promulgated. The term Theravāda seems to have indicated a school originating in Sri Lanka, not a school in India prior to Buddhism having gone to Sri Lanka

Historically, Theravāda has not been a monolithic religious or institutional entity in South and Southeast Asia. When the ordination lineage was extinguished in Sri Lanka during the Chola invasion in the early eleventh century, Sri Lankan kings requested monks from Burma to come and restore it. This began a trend in South and Southeast Asia that continues to this day. Whenever a group of monastics is deemed corrupt, the king invites monastics from another Theravāda country who practice well to come and give the ordination again. Still, the Sri Lankan ordination lineage commands great respect.[103]

Much of the Pāli literature consists of the commentaries that were compiled or written beginning in the fifth century. The Pāli scriptures were transmitted in different scripts according to the country; the words were pronounced and recited differently. Different lineages and nikāyas (traditions) developed in each country. The monks also were not a unified whole: those who dwelled in the cities and in the forests lived very differently. Nevertheless, most Buddhists in South and Southeast Asia saw themselves as related in many ways, even though a unifying and common identity as Theravādins may not have developed until the twentieth century.

Sinhalese historical documents portray the Pāli canon as equivalent to early Buddhism and Theravāda Buddhism as the unique upholder of early Buddhism.

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[103] In recent years academics revised their idea that the Theravāda tradition contains the oldest and most authentic scriptures of the eighteen schools. Some say Theravāda is a modern term and a recent school derived from the Sthaviras but not identical to it. Others say Theravāda is descendant from the Mahāvihāra or was derived from the Indian school, Vibhajyavāda.

The Pāli canon is usually presented by Theravāda Buddhists as a closed collection of texts that present the Buddha's own words.

Apart from some specific texts mentioned in Aśoka's inscriptions, we don't know what texts were recited during various councils and communal recitations. The Pāli canon wasn't closed and fixed until the fifth century CE, so for about a millennium after the Buddha, the collection of scriptures was open. While the bhāṇakas had strict standards for what they considered to be the Buddha's teachings, there was some fluidity in the contents of this collection if for no other reason than differences in geographical locale.

Academic scholars now question that Theravāda originated at the first council, Sri Lankan Theravāda is and has always been a descendant of only this early Buddhism, and the Mahāvihāra was the original and true upholder of these teachings. Whatever the historical truth, the Theravāda is a noble Buddhist tradition that has inspired faith in millions of people, led to their individual betterment and the improvement of society, and produced many highly realised holy beings.

Growth of the Mahāyāna

Mahāyāna sūtras, which emphasised the bodhisattva path, began to appear publicly in India in the first century BCE. Some were transmitted to Central Asia—Buddhism began to spread to Central Asia in the third century BCE and later flourished there for many centuries—and from there to China where they were translated into Chinese by the second half of the second century CE. The Āgamas preserved in the Chinese canon are very early sūtras that are remarkably similar to those in the Pāli Nikāyas. With newly discovered Vinaya texts and other scriptures that date from early on, the Pāli canon is no longer seen as the only literature of early Buddhism, although it is the only canon preserved in an Indic language.

The discovery in Pakistan and Afghanistan over the last few decades of many Buddhist manuscripts that date from the end of the first century BCE has changed academic scholars' view of the Mahāyāna. The newly found manuscripts written in Gāndhārī Prakrit are older than any previously discovered. Many of them are from the Dharmaguptaka school, and some are Mahāyāna sūtras. Although some of these texts are called "early Mahāyāna," their ideas and presentation of the bodhisattva path are mature. With the revision in the dates of the Buddha's life to later than previously thought and the discovery of older Mahāyāna texts, modern scholars are reconsidering their ideas concerning the Mahāyāna sūtras.

For several centuries after previously unknown bodhisattva sūtras first appeared publicly, Mahāyāna was not identified as a separate tradition within Buddhism. Initially the term Mahāyāna referred to the goal of the path—buddhahood—rather than the attainment of arhatship that was prominent in the early sūtras. Gradually, Mahāyāna began to refer to a body of literature, and in the fourth century Asaṅga used it to indicate scriptures explaining the path of a bodhisattva. By the sixth century, people were calling themselves Mahāyānists, ie they saw themselves as a distinct Buddhist group. However, it seems that they did not become a single unified group in India, nor was any Mahāyāna canon ever compiled in India.

Mahāyāna was not a religion and did not have distinct institutions. It had no specific geographical location where its hierarchy was predominant. Monastics following the Śrāvaka Vehicle and Bodhisattva Vehicle lived together and probably recited the prātimokṣa, the monastic precepts, together. In the fifth to twelfth centuries, the great Buddhist universities such as Nālandā, Vikramaśīla, and Odanta-

purī, where Buddhism flourished, were inhabited by monastics and lay practitioners from many different branches, sects, and schools of Buddhism. They studied and debated the Buddha's teachings, learning from each other.

Mahāyāna scriptures contain many philosophical positions and practices; it has never been a monolithic doctrine, although those who self-identify as Mahāyānist share beliefs in the bodhisattva path and practices. Although many Mahāyāna scriptures were in Sanskrit, not all Sanskrit scriptures are Mahāyāna.

Mahāyāna did not dismiss the Śrāvaka Vehicle texts or teachings; in fact, it taught that the bodhisattva practice is based on a thorough understanding of the four truths of the āryas, the thirty-seven aids to awakening, the three higher trainings, the four immeasurable, serenity, and insight. Many ideas are held in common between the Śrāvaka Vehicle and the Mahāyāna, and all Buddhists, no matter what tradition they belong to, take refuge in the Three Jewels.

Although most Mahāyāna sūtras publicly appeared after Pāli sūtras, some appeared before scriptures in the Pāli canon. The Pāli canon contains texts from many time periods, ranging from the Buddha's time until it became a closed canon ten centuries later. Buddhadharma was, and still is, a living, dynamic tradition.

Mahāyāna is not an ordination order or lineage. There is no such thing as "Mahāyāna Vinaya" or a "Mahāyāna monastic ordination." From early times until the present, Mahāyāna practitioners have ordained in the Vinaya traditions of the eighteen schools. Mahāyāna monastics live in monasteries, follow the ethical conduct prescribed in the Vinaya, and conduct monastic rites in accordance with the Vinaya. Practicing the Bodhisattva Vehicle does not make one ethically lax; in fact, in addition to the various sets of prātimokṣa precepts such as the five lay precepts and monastic precepts, Mahāyāna practitioners also take bodhisattva precepts.

Calling Theravāda "mainstream Buddhism" is incorrect and confusing. In each location and at each time period, one or another school may be more well established. There were at least eighteen schools that all saw themselves as mainstream Buddhism in their own locales. Mahāyāna was well received and flourished all over India and Central Asia, and spread to East Asia, Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, and Indonesia. Contrary to being a minority movement, it was mainstream.

Both the Mahāyāna and Śrāvaka Vehicle include rituals, chanting, mantras, and dhāraṇis. Both show reverence in the presence of stūpas, statues, paintings, and relics. Many Mahāyāna sūtras emphasise the importance of copying those sūtras, and practitioners of both vehicles copy sūtras.

In India and sometimes in Sri Lanka before the twelfth century, the Śrāvaka Vehicle and Mahāyāna flourished together. Practitioners of both vehicles often lived in the same monastery, received monastic ordination in the same lineage, and performed the Vinaya rituals together. They shared many common texts and tenets and debated their unique ones. Both developed commentary traditions, although interpretations sometimes differed. The two vehicles had differences. Most of the Śrāvaka Vehicle lineages in India disappeared over time due to a variety of conditions such as the political rise of the brahmins, changes in governmental structure, the popularity of Hinduism, and the monastics' lack of involvement in the lives of the lay people. Later, many of these same factors affected Mahāyāna groups. While Buddhism largely disappeared in India by the early thirteenth century, both the Sanskrit and Pāli traditions have spread widely throughout Asia and beyond.

The Development of Tantra

The teachings of Buddhist Tantrayāna were practiced and passed down in a circumspect, private way until the sixth century, when they became more widespread. By the ninth century, tantric studies were recognised as a scholarly discipline. At Nālandā Monastic University, the Prajñāpāramitā teachings were conjoined with tantric practice, indicating that tantra has a firm basis in the Perfection Vehicle and is not a separate teaching unrelated to other teachings of the Buddha.

Buddhist tantra flourished in northern India and spread to Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, and Indonesia, where many tantric artefacts have been found. It later faded in these areas as Sri Lankan and Thai kings made Therāvāda the dominant tradition and Muslims occupied and converted much of the Malay Peninsula and Indonesia.

Kukai introduced tantra to Japan in the ninth century, where it became known as the Shingon school. Because tantra's public dissemination coincided with the introduction of many Buddhist scriptures to Tibet, tantra became very popular there. Tantra did not become widespread in China.

Hinduism and Jainism also have tantric adepts, but their tantric systems differ considerably from Buddhist tantra, which is rooted in the four truths, refuge in the Three Jewels, renunciation of saṃsarā, bodhicitta, and the wisdom of emptiness.

Many misconceptions about tantra exist due to lack of information.

Buddhist Canons

Considering the vast number of Buddhist sūtras and the complexity of establishing their authenticity, we can understand the reasons to form canons. At present three Buddhist canons exist: Pāli, Chinese, and Tibetan. Each of these has been translated into other languages or written in various scripts. Eg, the Tibetan canon has been translated into Mongolian, the Pāli canon into English, and the Chinese into Japanese and Vietnamese. Each canon is divided into three "baskets" of teachings, which correspond to the three higher trainings. The Vinaya Basket deals chiefly with monastic discipline, the Sūtra Basket emphasises meditative concentration, and the Abhidharma Basket is concerned with wisdom.

The Pāli canon

The Pāli canon was codified first, but as we saw above, it was not a closed canon until the fifth century. Its Vinaya Piṭaka has three books that contain the monastic code and stories of the Buddha's disciples. These are (1) the Suttavibhaṅga, which contains the pāṭimokkha precepts, (2) the Khandhaka, which consists of two parts and (3) the Parivāra, which is an appendix. The Sutta Piṭaka has five Nikāyas, or collections of suttas and the Abhidharma Piṭaka consists of seven scholastic works that are unique to the Pāli tradition.

The Chinese Canon

Buddhism came to China in the first century CE, about seven centuries before it entered Tibet. It entered first from Central Asia via the Silk Road and later by sea from India and Sri Lanka. Buddhist texts began to be translated into Chinese by the second century. Many of the early translations employed Taoist terminology, leading to some misunderstanding of Buddhist thought. By the fifth century, translation terms were more standardised. The early fifth century also marked the translation of many more Vinaya texts, which furthered the development of the saṅgha.

In 983 the first Chinese canon was published, with other renditions following. Currently, the Taisho Shinshu Daizokyo, published in Tokyo in the 1920s, is the

canon commonly used in China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, and parts of Vietnam. It consists of four sections: the first three—sūtras, vinaya, and śāstras (treatises)—were translated from Sanskrit and Central Asian languages into Chinese. The fourth, miscellaneous texts, were originally written in Chinese.

The Chinese canon is very inclusive and extensive, containing a vast array of scriptures, including the Āgamas, which correspond to the first four of the five Nikāyas of the Pāli canon. The Āgamas were translated not from Pāli but from Sanskrit sūtras, mainly from the Sarvāstivāda school, although some came from other Indian Buddhist schools. The Chinese canon contains many Fundamental Vehicle sūtras that were popular during this early period and are not found in the Tibetan canon. It also contains a plethora of Mahāyāna sūtras and Indian commentaries as well as some tantras. Many of these are found in the Tibetan canon as well. Initially, most of the Indian sūtras were translated into Mandarin from Gāndhārī, until the fifth and sixth century, when more Sanskrit texts arrived in China. The monk Xuanzang famously traveled to India and Nālandā Monastery by way of Gandhāra in the seventh century and returned home seventeen years later with hundreds of texts, especially from the Yogācāra school. His translations from Sanskrit are now part of the Chinese canon as well.

While the majority of translation into Mandarin occurred in these earlier centuries, there continued to be an active interest in and translation of valuable Buddhist texts into the Song (960–1279) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties. In the early twentieth century, translations were made of Buddhist scriptures from other countries, including Tibet.

The Tibetan Canon

Tibetans had been collecting Buddhist scriptures from the inception of Buddhism in Tibet in the seventh century, and the Tibetan canon as we know it today took shape in the early fourteenth century through the editorial efforts of Buton Rinpoche (1290–1364) and other scholars. The first full rendition was printed in Beijing in 1411. Later editions were printed in Tibet itself, notably in Narthang in 1731–32 and in Derge in 1733. Although today there are multiple versions of the canon, the contents overall are very similar.

The Tibetan Buddhist canon is composed of the Kangyur (108 volumes of the Buddha's word) and the Tengyur (225 volumes of Indian commentaries). The canon of the Nyingma tradition differs somewhat from that of the other Tibetan traditions in that it contains tantras from the first transmission of Buddhism into Tibet. The Tibetan system for translation customarily involved an Indian translator and a Tibetan translator working in tandem, which greatly improved the quality of the translations. A number of modern scholars working on these texts have observed that translations from Indian sources into Tibetan are, in general, very accurate.

About twenty-four sūtras in the Tibetan canon correspond to the suttas of the Pāli Nikāyas, and a few Śrāvaka Vehicle sūtras absent in the Pāli and Chinese canons are found in the Tibetan canon. About one hundred sūtras in the Tibetan canon do not have the word Mahāyāna in their titles and are probably Śrāvaka Vehicle sūtras, principally of the Sarvāstivāda school.

About ten or twenty sūtras in the Tibetan canon were translated from Chinese. Among these are the Sūtra of the Golden Light, the Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra, and the Descent into Lanka Sūtra, and several sūtras from the Heap of Jewels collection, all of which are seminal Mahāyāna sūtras. Some commentaries in the Tibetan

canon—notably Kuiji's commentary on the Lotus Sūtra and Wonchuk's commentary on the Sūtra Unraveling the Thought—were also translated from Chinese.

More Prajñāpāramitā sūtras were translated into Chinese than into Tibetan, and many early sūtras in the Pāli canon are not found in Tibetan.

Texts on the stages of the path authored by Tibetan masters contain much material that is also found in the Pāli suttas and Chinese Āgamas. Many passages shared with Pāli suttas and Chinese āgamas made their way into Tibet through the commentaries and treatises of the great Indian sages.

A Tibetan monarch issued a decree establishing a convention that enables readers to immediately identify which of the Three Baskets a scripture belonged to. Translators composed a verse of homage placed at the beginning of the text. An homage to the omniscient Buddha indicated texts from the Vinaya Basket that dealt with the higher training of ethical conduct; homage to the buddhas and bodhisattvas showed the text belonged to the Sūtra Basket and concerned the higher training of concentration; homage to Mañjuśrī, the embodiment of wisdom, indicated texts from the Abhidharma Basket, which deals with knowledge and wisdom.

Vinaya Basket

The Chinese canon contains the Vinayas of five early schools. It also contains Buddhaghosa's commentary on the Vinaya, Entirely Pleasing. The Tibetan canon contains the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya and the Pāli canon, the Theravāda Vinaya.

Sūtra Basket

Outside of India, sūtras dealing with the bodhisattva practices were mainly transmitted in the Chinese and Tibetan languages. The Chinese and Tibetan canons contain the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras, the Ratnakūṭa sūtras, the Flower Ornament Sūtra, Vimalakīrti's Instructions, and many other Mahāyāna sūtras. Because Buddhism was rooted in China several centuries before its resurgence in Tibet in the eleventh century, which brought the translation of many later Indian texts into Tibetan, the Tibetan canon contains the works of Candrakīrti and later Mādhyamikas, as well as Dignāga and Dharmakīrti's works on logic, while the Chinese canon does not.

Based on the Chinese canon, the Buddhadharma spread to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Relying on the Tibetan canon, Buddhism developed in Mongolia, four areas in Russia—Tuva, Aginsky, Buryatia, and Kalmykia—and in the Himalayan region. Today, the Chinese and Tibetan languages are the richest living languages that transmit all the practices and teachings of the bodhisattva vehicle.

Abhidharma Basket

The Pāli, Chinese, and Tibetan canons have different perspectives on the origin of the Abhidharma Piṭaka and the texts contained in it. According to one Theravāda account, the Buddha spent a rainy season—about three months—teaching six of the seven Abhidharma works in the celestial realm of the Thirty-Three (gods) to thousands of devas (celestial beings), including his mother Maya, who had passed away a week after his birth. Each day the Buddha would go back to the human realm and repeat to his disciple Sāriputta what he had taught in the celestial realm that day. Sāriputta then organised the Abhidharma literature, which was recited at the first council and passed down orally until the third council (circa 250 BCE), when it was included in what became the Pāli canon.

According to this traditional Theravāda account, six of its seven Abhidharma texts are the Buddha's literal word, and the Buddha himself also outlined the Points of Controversy, the seventh text.

Not all contemporary Theravādins agree that the Pāli Abhidharma originated as described above. Some say that the seven Abhidharma works were spoken by arhats; others concur with academic scholars that they developed gradually over several centuries and were later incorporated into the Pāli canon. Most other schools see the Abhidharma Piṭakas as the works of later generations of scholars.

While Tibetans are aware of the seven Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma works, they do not consider them to be the Buddha's word. Only part of one of the seven is included in the Tengyur section of the Tibetan canon. Passages belonging to the Abhidharma Basket are interspersed in other sūtras in the Kangyur section of the Tibetan canon.

The level of importance given to the Abhidharma differs among Theravādin practitioners. In Sri Lanka and Myanmar, it is considered very important, whereas in Thailand, it is not emphasised as much.

Tantra

Spoken by the Buddha when he assumed the form of Vajradhara or a tantric deity, tantras describe Vajrayāna practice. The Tibetan canon contains the most comprehensive collection of Buddhist tantras and tantric commentaries by Indian adepts. While the Chinese canon contains some yoga tantras such as the Vairocana Tantra and Vajra Peak Tantra, it does not have any highest yoga tantras. It seems that tantric texts arrived in China during a period of social turmoil and were not included in the Chinese canon. The Chinese canon contains the sūtras of Amitābha, the Medicine Buddha Sūtra, and scriptures about other bodhisattvas that have been widely read and practiced in the Chinese community for centuries. While these are considered sūtras in China, in Tibet the practices of these same bodhisattvas are included in the Tantrayāna.

From this summary of the three Buddhist canons, it is clear that no one canon contains everything the Buddha taught or all the great commentaries. Nevertheless, there is more than enough in each canon for us to study, contemplate, and meditate. The teachings necessary to gain realisations are there in the three canons. A respected Thai Theravāda master told me (Chodron), "With both Theravāda and Mahāyāna, the Buddha's teachings are complete," and "Mahāyāna is just a name, Theravāda is just a name. When we see emptiness, there's nothing to cling to."

The various Buddhist traditions share many scriptures and practices in common. Although each has its unique qualities, we should not think of them as separate and unrelated. All three canons contain the Buddha's teachings and must be respected as such. They all contain teachings to be practiced.

Philosophical Systems

In the initial centuries after the Buddha's parinirvāṇa, the Abhidharmikas rose to prominence as they developed intricate taxonomies of phenomena and explored the relationships among phenomena. This included material and cosmological phenomena, but even more so the facets of the mind, such as afflicted mental states and the states of meditation and insight. Their focus was on identifying the building blocks of sentient beings' experience rather than on constructing cohesive interpretations of Buddhist doctrine.

Philosophical systems came about in later centuries, when questions arose about topics that were not clarified in the scriptures themselves, and sages began to explain the meanings of teachings that were not evident to most people. These commentators did not see their writings as new interpretations of the Buddha's teachings but as in-depth explanations of what the Buddha actually meant. They saw themselves as clarifying in an expanded form what the Buddha had expressed in an abbreviated form.

Another factor bringing about different philosophical tenet systems was the challenge presented by non-Buddhist logicians and scholars. Debate was a widespread Indian custom, and the loser was expected to convert to the winner's school. Buddhist sages had to develop logical arguments to prove the validity of Buddhist doctrine and to deflect philosophical attacks by non-Buddhist scholars. The renowned Buddhist debaters were also great practitioners. Not all Buddhist practitioners were interested in this approach; many preferred to study the sūtras or practice meditation in hermitages.

From the viewpoint of philosophy, Tibetans have categorised Buddhist tenets into four general systems: (1) the Vaibhāṣika (Followers of the Mahāvibhāṣā), (2) Sautrāntika (Followers of Sūtra), (3) Yogācāra or Cittamātra (Mind Only), and (4) Madhyamaka (Middle Way). These four schools are mentioned in the Hevajra Tantra, indicating that all four schools existed in India before coming to Tibet. Each system has further subdivisions.

Even though not all the Indian texts were translated into Tibetan, many were. Among these, we find texts presenting the philosophical views of all four tenet systems, texts presenting the paths of all three vehicles, and texts presenting the practices of both Sūtrayāna and Tantrayāna.