



The Potala palace is the traditional residence of the dalai lamas in Lhasa, Tibet. © Corbis. Reproduced by permission.

flight into exile in India. Since then, much of the Shol village, a frequent destination of the flamboyant sixth Dalai Lama (1683–1707), located at the palace’s foot, has been systematically dismantled. Although the Potala’s structural damage was subsequently repaired, the vacant palace remains a potent symbol for the absence of Tibet’s principal religious and political leader.

The Potala’s massive structure also continues to play a central part in contemporary Tibetan religious practice. It forms the northern boundary of the large circumambulation route around Lhasa called the *gling skor* (pronounced ling khor) or sanctuary circuit. Pilgrims visit the palace daily, winding through its many inner chambers, reciting prayers and presenting offerings at its many hundreds of shrines. In 1994 the Potala was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

See also: Tibet

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PRAJÑĀ (WISDOM)

With KARUṆĀ (COMPASSION), prajñā (wisdom) is one of two virtues universally affirmed by Buddhists. Broadly, prajñā is correct discernment of any object; specifically, it is intellectual and experiential insight into soteriologically significant truths, whether metaphysical (e.g., categories of DHARMAS, the functioning of KARMA, the realms of SAṂSĀRA) or ontological (e.g., no-self, emptiness, the natural purity of mind). Virtually all Buddhist traditions affirm that wisdom is a prerequisite to enlightenment, and that a buddha possesses the maximum possible wisdom, or gnosis (jñāna).

Like many Indian religious teachers of his era, the Buddha apparently regarded the “sentient condition” (repeated, uncontrolled REBIRTH in unsatisfactory realms) as rooted primarily in misapprehension of

reality. For early Buddhists, ignorance (*avidyā*) was, with desire and aversion, one of the three poisons that perpetuate *SAMSĀRA*, the cycle of rebirth; it was also the first of the twelve factors of *PRATĪTYASAMUTPĀDA* (DEPENDENT ORIGINATION) that account for continued rebirth. This ignorance misconstrues both the details and the ultimate nature of the world and of persons. In particular, the belief that one is or has a permanent, independent self leads to desire and aversion, thence to unskillful actions and unpleasant results, including rebirth. In fact, both philosophical and meditative investigation reveals that, because there is nothing anywhere in the conditioned world that is permanent, there can be no such self. The recognition of this fact of no-self (*anātman*) is the antidote to ignorance, that is, wisdom. When one realizes experientially, with insight *MEDITATION* founded on one-pointed concentration, that there is no self, one no longer creates desire or aversion for the sake of that self, and one begins to uproot defilements, becoming an *ārya*, whose enlightenment is assured.

In *THERAVĀDA* and other mainstream Buddhist texts, both canonical and commentarial, wisdom is, with morality (*śīla*) and concentration (*samādhi*), one of three indispensable Buddhist trainings. Wisdom itself is commonly divided into that gained through study of written and oral teachings, reflection upon the meaning of those teachings, and meditative internalization of those meanings. This list and its sequencing show that in most Buddhist contexts both philosophical and experiential wisdom were valued, but that experiential wisdom, gained through insight meditation, was considered superior. Most great Theravāda and Śrāvakayāna texts—from the *Sūtra* and *ABHIDHARMA* *Piṭakas* to scholastic masterworks such as *BUDDHAGHOSA*'s *Visuddhimagga* (*Path to Purification*) and *VASUBANDHU*'s *ABHIDHARMAKOŚABHĀṢYA* (*Treasury of Abhidharma*) (both ca. fifth century C.E.)—provided a more or less systematic categorization of the dharmas or phenomena into which Buddhists analyze reality, while also stressing the limitations of intellectualism and the necessity for meditative scrutiny of oneself and the world, especially so as to negate the idea of a subsisting self.

Despite caveats about scholasticism, Theravāda and Śrāvakayāna philosophers sometimes reified dharmas and their categorizations, and many *MAHĀYĀNA* texts evidently were written to counter this tendency. The earliest and most influential was the *PRAJÑĀPĀRAMITĀ* *LITERATURE*, which focused on wisdom as the sixth and culminating *PĀRAMITĀ* (PERFECTION) that a *BOD-*

HISATTVA must master en route to full buddhahood. This literature described wisdom as the nonconceptual realization that not just the self, but the very dharmas that constitute the person and the world are intrinsically empty. The *bodhisattva* must also perfect such methods (*UPĀYA*) as generosity, morality, patience, effort, and contemplation, but does so while bearing in mind their emptiness. Other *Mahāyāna* *sūtras* promoted wisdom in other ways, seeing it as the realization of nonduality, sameness, lack of intrinsic nature, mind-only, the interpenetration of all dharmas, or the stainless primordial mind. However they described the object of wisdom, these *sūtras* shared an emphasis on the ultimate inconceivability of reality and the primacy of experiential over intellectual approaches to wisdom.

Far from ending philosophical debate, however, the *Mahāyāna* *sūtras* spawned countless commentaries and treatises, which systematically analyzed both the subjective and objective aspects of wisdom, from *YOGĀCĀRA* *SCHOOL* enumerations of types of consciousness, to *Pramāṇa* school analyses of epistemic authority, *MADHYAMAKA* *SCHOOL* debates about the place of reason in arguments for emptiness, and *TATHĀGATAGARBHA*-tradition evocations of a pure buddha-wisdom lying dormant in every sentient being. Scholar-monks examined the relation of wisdom to *bodhicitta*, compassion, and skillful means; the way to arrive at a “middle view” that avoided the extremes of eternalism and nihilism; the balance to be struck in meditation between concentration and analysis; and what is known by a buddha's perfect gnosis. By the late first millennium C.E., north India was dotted with great monastic universities emphasizing a scholarly approach to wisdom.

Not surprisingly, countercurrents developed. East Asian Chan traditions focused on direct transmission and nonconceptual realization of perfect wisdom. Indian and Tibetan tantric movements developed dramatic ritual and meditative practices to bring about a wisdom consciousness that simultaneously realizes emptiness, sees forms, and experiences bliss. Chan and tantric traditions themselves sometimes embraced scholasticism, and were in turn reformed by contemplatives, such as *HUINENG* (638–713) in the *CHAN* *SCHOOL* and *Saraha* (late first millennium C.E.) in *TANTRA*, who sought to return wisdom to its home in nonconceptual meditative experience. Meditative schools, however, sometimes adopted irrationalism or antinomianism, and so were opposed by others, including *ZONGMI* (780–841) in China and *TSONG KHA PA* (1357–1419) in Tibet, who insisted that philosophical

training was a prerequisite to attaining experiential wisdom through meditation.

Wisdom was not restricted to philosophers and contemplatives; it became accessible to ordinary Buddhists through art and ritual. Content aside, texts were often believed to impart wisdom and protective power simply by virtue of being containers of the dharma, and they were worshipped accordingly. Certain doctrinal formulas were inscribed on steles and statuary; for example, “Of those dharmas arising from causes, the tathāgata has described the cause, and also their cessation—thus spoke the Great Ascetic.” Wisdom was condensed into DHĀRAṆĪS and MANTRAS, which evoked power and knowledge in the practitioner, and served as purifiers in confession rituals. Wisdom also was deified, sometimes as male, as in the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, whose widespread cult is centered at Wutaishan in China, but more often as female, as in Prajñāpāramitā, who is “mother of the Buddhas,” or Vajrayoginī, who symbolizes the tantric gnosis experiencing emptiness and bliss simultaneously.

Wisdom remains central to contemporary Buddhism, especially as Buddhist traditions enter the modern world. Insight meditation (*vipassanā*) is practiced more widely than ever before, Buddhist views are compared with one another and with Western ideologies, and old debates continue about how to describe the object of wisdom, balance intellectual and experiential approaches to wisdom, and apply wisdom to living life in the world with real intelligence and freedom.

See also: **Bodhicitta (Thought of Awakening)**

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PRAJÑĀPĀRAMITĀ LITERATURE

One of the earliest records of the MAHĀYĀNA school’s discourse in Indian Buddhism is to be found in the family of texts known as the Prajñāpāramitā, often translated as “Perfection of Wisdom.” These texts appear in several forms. Some were similar in content but were characterized by expansion. Titles were later added to these expansions, based on the length of each. The oldest of this group was designated as 8,000 lines and the largest as 100,000. There were those numbering 18,000 and 25,000 lines. Another group of texts was formed in the opposite fashion, by contraction. The great length of the earlier texts created problems of how to preserve and use documents that covered hundreds of palm leaves or strips of birch bark. One solution was to look for ways to present the core of the teaching in shortened formats. Out of this grew the texts that are most often recited in monasteries and Buddhist ceremonies in East Asia, the so-called DIAMOND SŪTRA and HEART SŪTRA. One further development was added by the tantric movement. In this form, MANTRAS and DHĀRAṆĪ dominated, and the smallest of the contractions appeared in which the doctrine of the Prajñāpāramitā was contained in the single letter A.

There is very little known about the community of monastics who produced these texts that were to become a primary source for Mahāyāna development. The lack of inscriptions, archeological finds, and mixed reports from early Chinese pilgrims suggest that the documents were not the result of a large institutional structure. From internal evidence within the texts that gave high praise to the practice of making written copies, it may be that this discourse was transmitted mainly through the emerging technology of writing. The early years of Buddhism, after the time of the Buddha, was based on an oral tradition and a large organization of monasteries. The use of written manuscripts may have allowed a small group to dis-