A Study on Oral Transmission from Early Buddhism to Vajrayāna

By Ven. Choten Dorji

Introduction

Vajrayāna Buddhism is esoteric in the sense that the transmission of certain teachings only occurs directly from teacher to student during an empowerment and cannot be simply learned from a book. Many techniques are also commonly said to be secret, but some Vajrayāna teachers have responded that that secrecy itself is not important and only a side-effect of the reality that the techniques have no validity outside the teacher-student lineage.[1] In order to engage in Vajrayāna practice, a student should have received such an initiation or permission.

Regardless of the particular level of teaching or practice that we are discussing in the Buddhist tradition, whether it be Theravāda, Mahāyāna or Vajrayāna, the process of spiritual development is one of the student relying upon a teacher. We may call that teacher a *bla ma*, a guru, or whatever, but the essential point is that there is an oral transmission that takes place in which a teacher teaches the student, the student listens to the teachings, absorbs their meaning and puts them into practice. There is a reason for this emphasis on oral transmission. From the time of the Buddha up to the present day, the Buddha Dharma has always been transmitted and meant to be transmitted orally, ensuring that there is a living tradition that is still imbued with the blessing and power of the original teachings. It also guards against the possibility of so-called teachers simply coming up with their own ideas. Instead, the teacher passes on a proven tradition of teachings based on Sūtras and Tantras.

This makes the Buddha Dharma different from other kinds of learning where it may be possible for people to innovate. In such realms of learning it may be appropriate to come up with new systems of thought or to introduce new ideas. But when we are talking about the Buddha Dharma, every teaching must connect with the original teachings of the Buddha in order for a teaching to be valid. The teachings cannot be something that someone has simply come up with

[1] Dhammasavaka. *The Buddhism Primer: An Introduction to Buddhism*, p. 79.

on their own. The teachings are something that the teacher passes on. And so, without the oral transmission being transmitted, he or she is not authorized to enter into the Tantric practices.

Similarly, in other types of human knowledge it may be permissible to present information in a manner as entertaining and pleasing as possible. Although it is important for Dharma teachings to be presented in a manner which is pleasant to hear, it is most important that the transmitted teachings have the power to bless and influence those who hear them in a positive way, not only in this lifetime, but in future lifetimes as well. So even though the teaching of the Dharma should be elegant and well-presented, what is most important is the blessing of the essential message.

Oral Transmission of Early Buddhism

Our knowledge of early Buddhism depends entirely upon the canonical texts which claim to go back to the Buddha's life and soon afterwards. These texts, contained primarily in the Sūtras and Vinaya collections of the various sects, are of questionable historical worth, for their most basic claim cannot be entirely true, all of these texts, or even most of them, cannot go back to the Buddha's life. There are at least two reasons for disputing this. Firstly, although the different Buddhist sects claim that their canons were compiled at the First Buddhist Council of Rājagrha (shortly after the Buddha's death), there is a general disagreement about the extent and classification of this canon. And secondly, it is hard to believe that all the doctrinal teachings of the various Sūtra-pitakas could go back to the same teacher, or even the same period, for they include diverse and sometimes mutually exclusive ideas.[2]

In these circumstances, it is clear that an accurate history of early Buddhism depends upon the stratification of the canonical texts. The early Buddhist literature was oral, and before we attempt to stratify it, we must have some idea about how it was composed and transmitted. This is not a straightforward task. The stratification of literature based on a manuscript tradition is relatively straightforward, for with written documents we can assume an original text that may have been altered for various reasons but with the literary remnants of an oral tradition, we are

[2] For discussions of some of the different doctrinal strands, see La Vallée Poussin, Schmithausen 1981, Bronkhorst 1985 and 1993, Gombrich 1996 (in particular, chapter 4'Retracing an Ancient Debate: How Insight Worsted Concentration in the Pali Canon') and Wynne 2002

denied even this most basic premise. For it may be the case that the early Buddhist tradition produced a sort of literature very different from one that is based on the written word, i.e. one that never had an 'original' text. If so, the stratification of the early Buddhist literature would be difficult, and perhaps even impossible.

Theories of the oral composition and transmission of the early Buddhist literature fall into two categories. Some have emphasized the role of improvisation, and argued that the early Buddhist literature was changed and adapted according to the particular conditions of performance. This theory is based upon Parry and Lord's study of Homeric epic literature in Yugoslavia, and has been formulated as follows:

> In practice they would have to be tailored to the needs of the particular situation - shortened or lengthened as required. An experienced chanter would be able to string together many different traditional episodes and teachings so as to form a coherent, profound and moving composition. It has been clearly shown that in many cases a traditional oral singer does not have a fixed text for a particular song. He can for example be recorded on two different occasions and the result may vary in length.

If the early Buddhist literature was formed in this manner, it is hard to see how it could be stratified. For what appear to be different strata according to the text critical method may in fact have been formed through the vicissitudes of oral performance, perhaps because of a singer's inclination on any given day.

Against this theory, others have argued that the early Buddhist literature is different in many ways from the sort of oral material that is formed in performance. Norman has pointed out the following:

> The great majority of Pali canonical texts, however, are in prose, and complete accuracy of reproduction is required at each recitation. In these circumstances the findings of modern investigators of oral epic literature seem to have little relevance.[3]

[3] Norman (1997), p. 49.

The early Buddhists wished to preserve the words of their great teacher, texts very different in character from the general run of oral literature, for they presented logical and sometimes complex arguments. The precise wording mattered.[4]

The Evidence of a Relatively Fixed Oral Transmission

The *bhikṣu* and *bhikṣunī Prātimokśa*

It is at least clear that certain parts of the early Buddhist literature must have been transmitted word for word during the earliest times. The *bhikṣu* and *bhikṣunī Prātimokśa*, for example, can hardly have been subject to an improvisational method of oral transmission, for their content (monastic rules) is hardly the sort of material suitable for improvisation and performance. The following passage on the qualities of a 'knower' of the Vinaya (*vinayadhara*) shows that the *Prātimokśas* were probably always transmitted verbatim:

> Endowed with seven qualities, *bhikṣus*, is a *bhikṣu* a knower of the Dharma. Which seven? He understands what is a transgression and what is not, he understands what is a trifling transgression and what is a serious one, both *prātimokśas* are well learnt (*svagatani*) by him in detail, well analyzed, they are well set out and are well determined, down to the Sūtra (*sūtraso*), down to the letter (*anuvyañjaso*); he attains the four *jhanas*, higher states of mind, pleasant abidings in this life, when he desires, easily and without difficulty, and because of the fading away of the corruptions, he passes his time having realized, witnessed and attained for himself, in this very life, the corruption-less release of mind, the release through insight.

At a very early date then, the *bhikṣu* and *bhikṣunī Prātimokśas* must have been memorized and transmitted word for word. Both these texts are examples of a genre of early Buddhist literature not governed by the conventions of improvisation and/or performance.

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[4] Gombrich (1990), p. 21.

Word for Word Recitation of the Dharma in the *Bhikṣu Prātimokśa*

Further evidence supports the idea that the conventions governing the transmission of not just the *Prātimokśas*, but also most of the early Buddhist literature, similarly involved word for word repetition. For example, one of the *pracittiya* rules in the *bhikṣu-Prātimokśa* forbids a *bhikṣu* from teaching the Dharma 'word for word' to someone who has not received full monastic ordination:

> If any *bhikṣu* should make someone who is not ordained (*anupasampannam*) recite (*vāceyya*) the Dharma word by word (*padeśa*), there is an offence entailing expiation.[5]

The word Dharma is often contrasted with the word Vinaya in the Pali Canon to distinguish the doctrinal discourses from the ecclesiastic law, and so it seems that in this *prācittya* rule, the word refers to the doctrinal teachings included in the Sūtra Pitaka rather than the Vinaya rules. This much is obvious, for the law forbids the instruction of a non-monastic in a certain way: if non-monastics were taught in certain ways by members of the Saṃgha, they cannot have been taught the Vinaya rules, but only the doctrinal discourses, i.e. Dharma. And if a non-monastic was not supposed to recite the Dharma word for word, it suggests that this was exactly how monastics did recite it. This evidence suggests that the Sūtra (Sūtta) portions of the early Buddhist literature were learnt verbatim among the ordained. While the extent of the material covered by the word Dharma is not made clear, and although the passage does not rule out the use of improvisational methods, we have important evidence showing that the basic literacy training in early Buddhism consisted of word for word repetition, and that some portion of the Sūtra Pitaka was transmitted in this manner.

Historical Perspective on Later Oral Transmission of Different Schools

Three lineages in Tibetan Buddhism describe themselves as *rdo rje theg pa*, or Vajrayāna. These are the *rNying ma*, *bKa' brgyud* and *Śākya* transmissions. The *rNying-ma* arrived with Padmasaṃbhava around the year 750 and was crushed by the king glang darma, a

[5] The Prātimokśa p. 46.13 (*bhikśuprātimokśa, suddhāpācittiyā* 4 = Vin IV.14.20ff): *yo pana bhikkhu anupasampannaṃ padaso dhammaṃ vāceyya pācittiyam*. (Norman's translation in Pruitt and Norman 2001 p. 47).

shamanist, around year 800. Left from this first flowering of the teachings were Padmasaṃbhava *termas* or hidden treasures, which have been discovered over many centuries.

In the *bKa' brgyud* tradition, the story of the cultural hero Marpa is more psychological and easier to identify with. It focuses especially on transforming attachment. Around year 1050 he crossed the Himalayas three times to study in India. Staying almost seventeen years in that culture, he collected what came to be called the "new" Diamond Way teachings. It was during the centuries when Muslim armies—following their holy God were destroying the high spiritual culture of northern India and the *yogis* wanted their teachings to survive. At that time practitioners only received one initiation and were expected to practice it throughout one's life, Marpa however was able to obtain a vast amount of teachings that utilize mind's awareness, mind's energy, and mind's ability to identify with its perfect nature, the so-called *Guru* Yoga.

In the prevailing atmosphere of impermanence, it is stated that Marpa could learn from 108 *gurus* and later introduced their teachings into Tibet. Most important were his two outstanding *blamas*: Naropa, who gave him the six teachings on inner energies and the experience of the Great Seal,[6] and Maitripa, who gave him the logical structure of the four states of the Great Seal.[7] Marpa brought this richness to Tibet when he revived Buddhism there around year 1050. Most of the practitioners today, actually belongs to Marpa-*bKa' brgyud*. The monks are Dags po *bKa' brgyud*, because they follow Mila ras-pa's student sGam po pa, the so-called physician who was the first *bKa' brgyud* monk.

After Marpa came Mila ras-pa, the ultimate ascetic. He received Marpa's transmission through his devotion. Practicing in caves day and night, he actually became enlightened because

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[6] The six yogas generally conform to the following conceptual list:
1. *gtum mo, caṇḍālī* – the yoga of inner heat (or mystic heat)
2. *sgyu lus, māyākāyā* – the yoga of the illusory body,
3. *'od gsal, prabhāsvara*– the yoga of the clear light or radiant light,
4. *rmi lam, svapnadarśana*– the yoga of the dream state,
5. *bar do, antarābhava*– the yoga of the intermediate state, and
6. *pho ba, saṃkrānti*– the yoga of the transference of consciousness to a pure Buddhafield.

[7] The Four Seals which define a Promulgation are as follows:
1. The *saṃskāras* are all impermanent (*anitya*)
2. Everything with flux (*sāsrava*) is suffering (*duḥkha*)
3. All natures (*sarvadharmaḥ*) are devoid of self.
4. *Nirvāṇa* is tranquil and solitary.

of his fear of dying with 35 family enemies on his conscience, whom he had killed at his mother's insistence. It is obviously an unusual event, but that is what all sources say. Mila raspa had two main students. One was Ras Chung-pa, who continued the *yogi* tradition and had great compassion on lonely ladies. In the meditation on the second Ka rma-pa he is seated in his human form under Guru Padmasaṃbhava and behind Karma Pakśī, which is an unusual honor. The other student of Mila ras-pa was sGam po-pa, who is mentioned above. He was the first monk in the lineage and established that side of the lineage. A realized meditator himself, he organized things, making sure that the accumulated knowledge of the lineage would be preserved and protected.

Conclusion

During this flow of methods, wisdom, and experience from India to Tibet, the feeling of openness, trust and devoted thankfulness remained intact—as is evident from the life-stories of the "golden mala" of our *blamas*. Today, an unbroken line of fine teachers led by the successor to the throne had secured a Diamond Way Buddhist transmission with the absolute minimum of politics needed for its protection. Known as the "oral transmission," or *lung* it reaches fine and free minds worldwide. The *rNyingma, bKa' brgyud* and *Śākya* traditions use this term, while the state church, the *dGe lug-pa* "virtuous" yellow-hat lineage, which arose 400 years later around 1450, prefers the term "Great Way." This mirrors their teaching and practice, which stresses celibacy, debate, and logical thinking over transformative meditation experiences, at least for the vast majority of their adherents.

This kind of empathy and openness is the lifeblood especially of the *bKa' brgyud* lineage, where the lives of many past and several present teachers are certainly not boring. From Naropa in India, who was intellectualized and authenticated through 12 major and 24 minor catastrophes at the hands of his teacher Tilopa. From Marpa fighting his way over the Himalayas three times and from Mila ras-pa in Tibet building seven houses in symbolic forms only to have to tear them down again, to the adventures and excitement of today's idealists in our Diamond Way centers, the experience of those going beyond their limits is certainty and joy.

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