Vajrayana Buddhism
Origins & History

A Story of Two Kings:

- King Songtsen Gampo (reigned from 617-650 CE) – had 5 wives, two of which were Buddhist - Tritsun was Nepalese and Wenzheng was Chinese. He built the Jokhang, Tibet’s first Buddhist temple to honor the practices of his wives.

- King Trisong Detsen – a Buddhist who in an effort to quell hostile priests and nobles who followed the indigenous religion of Tibet – Bon – invited Mahayana Buddhist teacher, Padmasambhava to his court. Padmasambhava found a way to accommodate both Buddhist dharma and Bon traditions so that both could be seen as compatible.
Religious and Philosophical Origins

- Tibetan Buddhism is a syncretic result of three major influences:
  - Mahayana Buddhism – via Padmasambhava – carrying the core doctrines of historical Buddhism with a heavy emphasis on Karuna and the role of the Bodisattvas
  - Tantrayana Buddhism/Tantric Hindu Darshana – which emphasizes the role that one’s body and senses can play in the awakening of the mind (yes, it is Tantric traditions that bring us the Kama Sutra)
  - Bon – the indigenous religious tradition of Tibet – which emphasizes the mystical and animistic nature of the world
How Vajrayana Got its Name:

- In Sanskrit, *vajra* is the weapon of the god Indra – sometimes referred to as the thunderbolt weapon.
- For Indian Buddhists, *vajra* is also translated as “diamond” while *yana* is a raft or vehicle.
Key Features of Vajrayana Buddhism:

- There is an emphasis on the unity of wisdom (*prajna*) and compassion (*karuna*) as the ideal—two symbols of this unity are found in the *Yab Yum* (the sexual union of male and female) and the *dorje* or *vajra*.

- As with Mahayana, the *Prajnaparamita* is the philosophic foundation of Tibetan Buddhism. However, they have added to this work a collection of writings called the *Sadhanas* which are derived from Tantric texts. These *Sadhanas* prescribe various meditation exercises which distinguish Vajrayana dramatically from Theravada Buddhism.

- The goal of Tibetan Buddhists is to become awakened or to experience *Tharpa*. “Awakening is seen as the opening of consciousness to the ultimate reality of emptiness.” (Bresnan, p.289) This process is not the slow scholarly route of the Theravada school which seeks to deny the ultimate reality of the body and substantial world. Instead, it is a dynamic process, “grappling with life,” and involving the spirit, the mind and the body. Because of this a diverse number of practices evolved which were designed to assist one in these efforts.

- The emphasis on the humanity of the historic Buddha is replaced with the notion of various transcendent Buddhas (the Five Celestial Buddhas) and Bodhisattvas. Two are the Amitabha Buddha who reigns over Sukhavati (The pure land of the Western Paradise) and Avalokitesvara the Bodhisattva of Infinite Compassion.
Key Meditation Practices:

- **Visualizations** – one identifies with a particular Buddha or Bodhisattva in order to attain the quality that it manifests.

- **Mantras** – a mantra represents a force or deity and the chanting of the mantra is a way of connecting the practitioner with that force/deity. (Most well known mantra is “Om mani padme hum” which is translated as Om- the sound of creation, the jewel in the lotus- hum –closure) the Tibetans have developed a tradition of singing that involves producing the lowest possible notes in the vocal range while simultaneously singing high overtones. ([The Gyuto monks - Tibetan tantric choir](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hCev1LzdZs&feature=related)

- **Mudras** – postures or hand gestures representing various deities and virtually every state of consciousness.
Key Meditation Practices:

- **Mandalas** – symbolic representations of themes in meditations – central mandala is the kalichakra which is a representation of perfection in sand – are usually swept up immediately upon completion to remind one of the impermanence of all things.
Key Meditation Practices:

- **Thangkas**: these are also mandalas but are wall paintings and also usually represent some theme in Buddhist teachings. Are also used as meditation aids.
Key Meditation Practices:

- Prostrations – a method of meditation which helps involve the body as a vehicle of enlightenment
Key Meditation Practices:

- Bells & Horns & Drums – all used to help one attain a certain level of consciousness
- Debating – part of the scholarly pursuit of prajna
- Dances & Use of Masks – remnants of Bon
- Prayer Flags – part of a new year celebration
- Prayer Wheels – used to generate good karma
- Circumambulation – the walking meditation – always clockwise – encourages mindfulness
The Bardo Thodol

- Originally translated into English by W.Y. Evans-Wentz as the “Tibetan Book of the Dead”
- More properly referred to as *The Liberation Through Hearing During The Intermediate State* (Tibetan: bardo *liminality*; *thodol* as "liberation")
- Tibetan Buddhism teaches that until *Tharpa* is experienced, the spirit will be reborn (within 7 to 49 days after death) after passing through various planes of consciousness called Bardos. These bardos all require some sort of response (think of it as a midterm or final exam) which then determines the kind of life one will have the next go round.
The Bardo Thodol

- The goal of this process is to be reborn into the Pure Land of Sukhavati (refer to discussion of Pure Land Buddhism). If Tharpa is not achieved then one is born into this reality.

- Some very compassion beings – very learned teachers or lamas – may choose not to go the Sukhavati and instead return to this reality in order to continue teaching others. These are called Tulkus or reincarnated lamas.

- The notion of rebirth is not thought to be in conflict with Anatta. The spirit is not permanent nor is it enduring – that is identical over time with itself. It is a process – like a wave – where only the pattern itself gives rise to the illusion of permanence and identity.

- Buddha’s analogy of the lotus is also emphasized: Various people will interpret this notion in various ways depending on their stage of growth and enlightenment. A more literal interpretation may be needed in the earlier stages and one may use a more metaphoric reading later.
The current Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso (shortened from Jetsun Jamphel Ngawang Lobsang Yeshe Tenzin Gyatso, born Lhamo Dondrub, 6 July 1935), is thought to be the 14th incarnation of Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of infinite compassion.

During the 1959 Tibetan uprising, which China regards as an uprising of feudal landlords, the Dalai Lama, who regards the uprising as an expression of widespread discontent, fled to India, where he denounced the People's Republic and established a Tibetan government in exile. A charismatic speaker, he has since traveled the world, advocating for the welfare of Tibetans, teaching Tibetan Buddhism and talking about the importance of compassion as the source of a happy life.

He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989.
The Dalai Lama

- This process begun with the nephew of Tsong Khapa who renewed energy in the movement by constructing the Tashi Lhumpo – a beautiful monastery which became the center of Tibetan Buddhism. This nephew, Gendun Grubpa became the first Grand Lama of Gelug-pa (a sect called the yellow-hats).

- His successor, Gendun Gyatso, was the second,

- Sonam Gyatso was the third tulku/Grand Lama and the first to be called Dalai Lama and he retroactively applied this title to his two previous predecessors.

- Yontan Gyatso, a great grandson of the mongol leader, Altan Khan, was the third – a neat political move since it reconciled the Khan to Buddhism.

- The most important was the “great fifth” Nagwan Losang Gyatso (b. 1617CE) There was a good deal of unrest among the other sects of Tibetan Buddhism and he called upon his allies, the Mongols to help put down this insurrection. Because of the Mongol conquest of Tibet the Fifth was then the uncontested spiritual and political leader of Tibet and resistance was crushed. He went on to declare that not only was he a tulku but that he was also a reincarnation of Avalokitesvara. This further solidified his position.
The Dalai Lama

- Not all Dalai Lamas have such illustrious rules: the sixth was a libertine and both his regent and he were killed. The selection over the 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th Dalai Lamas was also hotly contested and they died early suspicious deaths perhaps at the hands of their regents or perhaps at the hands of rival sects.