

## Chapter 20

### The Arising of Various Buddhist Schools

The Buddhist schools are in most cases established by eminent monks with great virtue who discover various approaches or cultivating methods to help their disciples quickly attain enlightenment. In the second half of this chapter, I will introduce some of the schools and their histories of establishment.

Why are there so many different schools? I would like to make several conjectures about this phenomenon and list them here. Readers could have your own opinions too.

1. In principle, Buddhism does not approve the idea of adhering to one opinion. This attitude creates free space for interpretations of Buddhist theories. Everyone can help investigate Buddhist philosophy with an open mind. This avoids sectarian conflicts in the long run.
2. Since ancient times, China has never had an authoritarian agency to centralize the control of Buddhist ideology. Meanwhile, Buddhist principles never consider one type of ideology superior to another.
3. There is no central institute to govern and supervise activities and cultivations of Buddhism.

4. Charismatic Buddhist leaders usually expect to reach consensus through establishing their own schools. There are other incentives for founding a new school. For instance, setting up a new school would help leaders maintain independence while developing a benign relationship with a particular government.
5. Chapter 6 has mentioned the three treasures of Buddhism—the Buddha, the Dharma, and the saṃgha. In effect, it is the underlying qualities that are cherished by Buddhism. A new religious sect may take a fresh perspective to understanding such values and provide itself a theoretical foundation to support their fresh perspective.
6. This situation is rather similar to learning martial arts. A kung fu practitioner may study judo, taekwondo, taichi, wing chun, aikido and many other kinds of martial arts. The ultimate goal for one to learn martial arts is to have the ability to protect oneself and beat opponents during fights. The ultimate purpose of following any one of the Buddhist schools is to learn how to attain enlightenment. In other words, all the seemingly distinctive schools share a common goal, despite their having adopted variegated approaches.

The schools of Buddhism can be categorized into three types:

### **Type 1: sudden cultivation**

This approach teaches students the ways to attain enlightenment immediately. For example, one could achieve a real breakthrough straightaway rather than cultivating through

a gradual process. (A breakthrough is not exactly equivalent to enlightenment. This is because one could quickly advance in understanding Buddhist theories but still might not be able to attain enlightenment due to certain attachment to the mundane world.)

### **Type 2: gradual cultivation**

In this type of cultivation, through the gradual learning of precepts and classics, one will steadily obtain a correct understanding of Buddhism and finally make a breakthrough.

### **Type 3: purified cultivation**

Schools that teach this type of cultivation focus on purity and tranquility, which are the two essential factors for us to make breakthroughs.

When we begin to study Buddhist principles, we could accept any school's approach. After learning all the contents taught by different schools, you will realize that their differences are minimal, as all of them share the identical goal of restoring the student's "intrinsic nature."

Among the seven famous Buddhist schools, there is one school of sudden cultivation (the Chan School), two schools of purified cultivation (the Pure Land School and Esoteric Buddhism), and four schools of gradual cultivation (the Lotus Sutra school, the Tiantai School, the Flower Ornament School, and the Three Treatise school). Although these schools belong to different types of cultivation, they all engage in the same issue of Buddhism.

## **The First Sect - The Tiantai School**

Now I am going to explain the process of establishing a typical school. Let us imagine ourselves as someone living in imperial China over 1,400 years ago. At the time, anyone who wanted to promulgate a certain religion must first get permission from the emperor. After being granted authority, one would want to keep a distance from other cultivators in order to ensure one's own status. The most efficient way to do so would have been to establish a school and build a harmonious relationship with the political ruler. It would be ideal if the school could offer some unique interpretations of Buddhist philosophy.

When establishing the Tiantai School, the first systematic school of Buddhist thought in China, what the founder did exactly matches the process described above.

During the reign of Emperor Wu of Zhou (560-578), many Buddhist cultivators become extremely immoral and corrupt. Having decided not to tolerate this anymore, Emperor gave orders to close all the monasteries and confiscated their properties. After the death of Emperor Wu, a renowned scholar Zhiyi (538-597) seized the opportunity to restore Buddhism through developing a new Buddhist theory, which proposes that “phenomena are no different from reality.”<sup>1</sup> In promulgating Buddhism, Zhiyi introduced new rules and methods of his teaching.

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<sup>1</sup> This indicates that the truth of any theory must be tested with respect to its application to contemporary practices.

The founder of the Tiantai School built a close relationship with the supreme ruler and consolidated his school in China.

### **Esoteric Buddhism**

The Esoteric School was established by three eminent monks: Śubhakarasiṃha (637-735), Vajrabodhi (669-741), Amoghavajra (705-774), who introduced new concepts of cultivation while maintaining the core theme of Buddhism. It is said that the first esoteric temple in China is the Great Xingshan Monastery in Shaanxi province. Different schools usually base their studies on different Buddhist sutras. The primary classic of the Esoteric School is the *Mahavairocana Tantra*.

What is even more interesting is the fact that the Esoteric School is divided into five branches—the Nyingma School, the Gelug School, the Kagyu School, the Sakya School, and the Black School—which all share the same core principles. For instance, the Black School offers the so-called cultivating method of “a cicada sloughing off its skin” in order to return to one’s true nature. This method exactly corresponds to the restoration of “intrinsic nature.”

### **The Flower Ornament School**

The Flower Ornament School has made significant contributions to Buddhist philosophy and Mahayana Buddhism in China. This school’s teachings and theories are based on the *Flower Ornament Sutra*. The core concept in this school is conventionally epitomized in two key phrases: the “dependent

arising from the Dharma-realm”<sup>2</sup> and “perfect interpenetration without obstruction.”<sup>3</sup>

The meaning of the first key phrase is identical to a concept in the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* that the “intrinsic nature” could create myriad dharmas. The second key phrase illustrates that the Buddhist ideas among various schools are compatible.

The Flower Ornament School considers that “one is all and all is one.” This is a concept that can be puzzling for beginners. It can be explained as follows: before attaining enlightenment, everyone considers what they see with their eyes as reality, including birth, aging, sickness, and death, separation between loved ones in life or death, fame and wealth. Buddhism considers that this mindset runs counter to the Buddha’s teaching. For example, the *Diamond Sutra* says, “All conditioned phenomena are just like an illusion, a bubble, a shadow.” Since all conditioned phenomena are like a bubble and a shadow, they are not different in essence. The concept of “one is all and all is one” from the *Flower Ornament Sutra* is fundamentally identical to the idea of “one truth is all truth” in the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*. As long as one obtains thusness, one is able to realize all dharmas.

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<sup>2</sup> Dharma-realm = “one true realm of reality” = “pure mind of the tathāgatagarbha” = “intrinsic nature.” (法界緣起)

<sup>3</sup> “Perfect interpenetration without obstruction” = “perfection without fault, integration of everything.” (圓融無礙)

## **The Chan School**

Among all the Buddhist schools, the Chan School is the most popular and sinicized in China. People are mostly familiar with Huineng the Sixth Patriarch, whose teachings are systematically recorded in the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*. The Chan School takes “idealessness” as its object, “formlessness” as its basis, and “non-attachment” as its fundamental principle.

“Idealessness” does not mean to stop thinking and reject all ideas. Rather it means to eliminate deluded and distracting thoughts. “Formlessness” reminds us to realize the illusory nature of the myriad perceptual forms and maintain an unlimited and pure “intrinsic nature.” “Non-attachment” asks us not to cling to external objects and not to be defiled by mundane forms, sounds, and tastes. Realizing “idealessness,” “formlessness,” and “non-attachment” is the fundamental principle of the Chan approach. Through fulfilling the above requirements, one could eliminate afflictions, transcend the mundane world, and penetrate all dharmas without hindrance. One’s spirit will thus be liberated, and one’s heart will obtain the supreme wisdom. This is the ideal human condition in Chan Buddhism.

## **Pure Land School**

The Pure Land School is also very popular in Chinese societies, domestic and abroad. The features of this School can be summarized as follows:

1. This school relies on the noted “five classics and one treatise” to teach its students.

2. Maintaining a pure condition of mind is of the utmost importance. This school advocates verbal chanting of the Buddha's name as the cultivating method.
3. Its practitioners recognize the necessity of their rebirth in the realm of ultimate bliss.
4. Faith, aspiration, and practice are the recommended methods of cultivation. "Faith" involves believing in oneself, others, causes and effects, phenomena, and principles. To have faith in oneself is to be self-confident, (as "intrinsic nature" is not different from Buddha-nature). To have faith in others is to believe in the Buddha's teaching. Having faith in causes and effects is to believe in one's own capability of analyzing causes and effects. Chanting the Buddha's name is the cause, while realizing Buddhahood is the fruit. Having faith in phenomena and principles is to believe that chanting the Buddha's name could help one to reborn in another world. Therefore, we ought to concentrate on cultivating our rebirth in another world and vow to return to save all sentient beings. Practice means to constantly chant the Buddha's name. This eliminates evil and cultivates benevolence.

### **Facing Different Views**

We should not be surprised to see the emergence of other new schools in the future, for this condition is understandable, as long as the core principle of Buddhism does not change.

You might ask: which school should I join? There is no single answer. As long as a school provides you with effective



cultivating methods to understand Buddhism, the school is a suitable match.

Since new students of Buddhism do not need to have a deep understanding of a certain school's particular theories, here I have only provided some general introductions to these schools. If a believer, after having studied Buddhism in a certain school, finds that some ideologies and cultivating methods are not acceptable to him, is he obliged to follow this school regardless of his own feeling? Or could he hold a dissenting opinion? In the previous chapters I have talked about the tolerance Buddhism has towards accommodating various views. Students are therefore free to choose whatever school that suits them. I mention this point because the approach of karmamudrā (a Vajrayana Buddhist technique of sexual practice with a physical or visualized consort) might come to my mind. For obvious reasons, many people would find this practice unacceptable.

After understanding basic concepts of Buddhism, readers will understand the reason why different schools must respect each other. The very first lesson we learn from Buddhism is to avoid delusion, discrimination, and attachment. Each school takes its own approach to cultivation. No one is authorized to judge which school is right or wrong. Nonetheless, when you see things go awry, you need to express your criticism.