

Sept. 17, 2021

Sutrayana: Part 1, The View of Hinayana

Course Syllabus

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Course Description

The purpose of this course is to increase our literacy and competence in the “View” of the traditional dharma and, more specifically, of the practicing lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, focusing on the foundational, pre-Mahayana teachings. (There will be a part two in the winter of 2022, focusing on the Mahayana.) As is said, without an accurate understanding of the View, meditation is blind and the journey is easily derailed. It’s like trying to make your way through a dense and dangerous jungle with your eyes closed.

Part of the purpose of our Sutrayana study is to help us understand key Buddhist aspects of the View with more clarity, precision, and confidence. Equally important, though, we hope that engaging this material will also enable us to see how to work actively and creatively with the View in our own practice and understanding, in relation to our friends, students, mentors, and teacher peers, and in speaking for the teachings in a materialistic world where there may often be very little understanding of authentic spirituality at all. This is a reading and study course focusing on the primary ideas and texts of our Tibetan and larger Buddhist tradition, exploring them in both prerecorded talks and live gatherings.

This Hinayana Sutrayana course is organized according to five units, each of which is two weeks in length. Then, an optional week for those wishing to participate in oral (“warrior” style) and written exams. You might wish to do so just out of interest or to fulfill one of the requirements for *Entering the Vajra World* course, the gateway to further, Vajrayana study in Dharma Ocean. Each of the five units will lead off in the first week with a prerecorded talk and then include a second week

with a live session where we will have the chance to explore together the talk and the unit readings.

Some more detail for you:

- 1) All of the reading assignments for each two-week unit are given to you in this syllabus and they are listed under week one of the unit. There is sometimes quite a bit, so you will likely need to spread your reading over the two weeks. It would be best if you are able to begin digging into the reading for each unit prior to its opening. Both the talks and the live gatherings will be referring to the readings for that unit.
- 2) This course is more akin to a graduate seminar than an undergraduate level class. From the beginning, as in graduate school, it is assumed that you will take primary responsibility for studying, learning, and mastering the material. The staff is here to assist you in that process. This means that it will be assumed that each of us has completed the reading on our own ahead of time, so that we understand what we have read, had a chance to think about it, and assimilated the material at least to some extent. The talks will not review or go over the reading, but will take the reading as a beginning point and seek to lead us toward further understanding. The live sessions will provide an opportunity to clarify some of the more challenging ideas and perspectives turning up in talks and the readings.
- 3) Each unit will open on Saturday with the pre-recorded talk. In these talks, Reggie will select a few themes from the readings and some that are merely implied in the readings, and explore these in more detail, emphasizing their importance for the journey of the “practicing lineages.” It would be ideal if you can take careful notes since we will be looking closely at some aspects of each talk.
- 4) To help you, there are study questions for each of the talks given in this syllabus. There are often quite a few and it will clearly not be possible to discuss all or even very many of them in our live gatherings. However, they should serve to focus your attention and help you connect more deeply with the talks, as well as stimulate your own thinking and reflection. It would be wonderful if, after listening to a talk, you were able to give a try at addressing each of them, to assess your own understanding, and see what you might want to say in relation to them.

- 5) You can watch the talk when it opens or, if you prefer, make a little more headway on the readings and watch at your convenience. Either way is fine. However, it would be optimal for you to have the input from the talks early in the unit in order to inform your contemplation and thinking about the unit and the readings. In any case, the talk should have been listened to and the readings completed sufficiently ahead of the live gathering the following week.
- 6) The live gathering will occur on Saturdays, 12:00-1:30 MDT, in order to accommodate the schedules of folks in North and South America, western and eastern Europe, and further east. For those in Australasia and Asia, depending on enrollments there, we hope to offer a live session at a more convenient time.
- 7) There will also be optional “office hours” offered by Justin Dituri, to provide an opportunity for those wishing it to explore the teachings and their application more specifically and in further depth.
- 8) Should the suggested “Additional Readings” listed on the course website be mentioned?

Course Readings

We will read much or all of the following books—please try to purchase them if you do not already own them:

Khenpo Tsültrim Gyamtso, Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness, Srimala Trust, 2016.

(Note: The PDF version can be purchased for download at Nammo Buddha Publications.)

Thrangu Rinpoche, Twelve Links of Interdependent Origination, Nammo Buddha.

(Note: The PDF version can be purchased for download at Nammo Buddha Publications.)

Walpola Rahula, What the Buddha Taught, Grove Press, 1974.

Reginald A. Ray, Indestructible Truth, Shambhala, 2000.

Chögyam Trungpa, Glimpses of Abhidharma, Shambhala, 1975.

Note: Audio versions are available on Audible for these titles: Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness, and What the Buddha Taught.

Selections will be taken from the following books. Some of you may already own them. For those who do not, we will scan the relevant pages or articles and make them available online a week before they are assigned:

- Thich Nhat Hanh, “The Sun My Heart,” from Thich Nhat Hanh, Essential Writings, Orbis Books, 2001.
- Reginald A. Ray, “The Five Skandhas of the Illusory Ego” and “How the Practice of Pure Awareness Addresses the Skandhas,” The Practice of Pure Awareness, Shambhala Publications, 2018, pp. 52-74.
- Reginald A. Ray, “Vajrayana in the Context of the Three Yana Journey” and “The View of Vajrayana,” Secret of the Vajra World, Shambhala Publications, 2002.

Hinayana

NOTE: The page numbers for the reading assignments refer to specific hard copy editions. Please refer first to chapter/section headings.

UNIT ONE, Weeks 1 and 2: Basic Principles of the View

Unit 1 of the curriculum opens Saturday, October 1.

UNIT ONE, Week 1: Prerecorded Talk

Questions from the talk for Reflection:

- What is the basic approach to the spiritual life of Vajrayana Buddhism as a “practicing lineage” tradition?

- What role does a clear and accurate understanding of "the View" play in the spiritual journey of mediation? Why is it considered essential to our ability as practitioners to pursue the path?
- In what ways do you see a good understanding of the View protect the inner spiritual journey?
- How would you compare and contrast the way the intellect and conceptual understanding function within the conventional ego world and how they (ideally) function within Buddhism? How does the View serve vertical rather than the more conventional horizontal development?
- "The purpose of the View is constantly to bring us back into our non-conceptual experience...to actually bring us back into the awakened state." Does this statement make sense to you? If so, how would you explain it to someone else?
- When a solid understanding of the View is absent what kinds of problems, obstacles, and even harms can occur to us in our own personal growth and development? What is our vulnerability as practitioners, what can happen, if we don't have a good understanding of the View?;
- How can a lack of understanding of the View compromise our ability as dharma practitioners to offer something meaningful to the larger culture?
- And how might it damage our ability to protect—or even understand—the integrity and unique message of authentic Buddhism itself, as it is being understood in the modern world and particularly the Western and North American environment?
- Why is the "View" not a fixed entity—"the truth"—throughout our journey, but one that continually has to evolve, becoming more and more subtle and sophisticated as we go along? Why is this necessary?
- When we use the term "Hinayana," exactly what are we referring to? What relationship does this term have to the historical "18 Schools" of the pre-Mahayana period and, specifically, the Theravada?
- What is the first "prajna," "hearing," how does it work, and how is it related to the second (contemplation), and third (meditation) prajna? What if the first prajna is undeveloped or missing entirely? What is likely to occur? In brief, what role does each play in our unfolding journey as practitioners?

UNIT ONE: Reading Assignments

1) View and the Buddhist Approach to "Truth": Buddhist Empiricism

Reading Assignment:

- Rahula, WBT, Chapter 1 (pp. 1-15).

Questions from the reading for Reflection:

- Buddhism claims to know a lot about both relative and ultimate things. On what basis is this claim made?
- Modern culture appeals to two sources of valid knowledge: logical reasoning and scientific conclusions based on verifiable evidence. How would you respond to the assertion that Buddhist views are based on neither?

2) The Three Prajnas (Three types of understanding)

Reading Assignment:

- Khenpo Tsültrim Gyamtso, PSME, “Introduction” (pp. 5-12);
- Ray, IT, Part Three, “Core Teachings,” from start until top of “The Three Yanas,” (pp. 229-236).

Questions from the reading for Reflection:

- Our Tibetan lineage emphasizes the three prajnas, including a precise and refined conceptual understanding, as critical aspects of the spiritual journey. What does prajna actually mean? What differences do you notice between the presentation in the talk for this unit and the presentation in the readings?
- It is not uncommon in Buddhist practice communities to find a kind of anti-intellectualism and resistance studying the View as “too scholarly” and not relevant to the practitioner. Have you seen any of this? Why do you think this has been so?

3) View in the Three Yanas

Reading Assignment:

- Ray, IT, “The Three Yanas” (pp. 236-240).

Questions from the reading for Reflection:

- Why do we have a sequential, progressive path?
- How is the concept of the three yantras related to historical Buddhist schools, the early traditions (among them, the Theravada), the various Mahayana lineages, and the Vajrayana?
- Discuss the relationship of the various schools to the development of the individual practitioner and their location on the path.

UNIT ONE, Week 2: Discussion of Week 1 Talk and Discussion of Readings

The Week 2 Live Gathering is Saturday, October 9 at 11:30 a.m. MDT (see website for Zoom link).

UNIT TWO, Weeks 3 and 4: Foundations Teachings of the Hinayana

Unit 2 of the curriculum opens Saturday, October 16.

UNIT TWO, WEEK 3: Prerecorded Talk

Questions from the talk for Reflection:

- Is it possible to live life with no view whatsoever? What would you say to a meditator who claims that when they meditate they have no need for any view and in fact have no view whatsoever?
- What happens if we try to meditate but have no deep familiarity with the View of dharma?
- The talk mentioned that ‘the Buddhist teachings are already in us and in our life experience. How do you understand this statement?
- What is “Buddhist empiricism”? In what sense does it stand at the heart of the meditative journey?
- What does Buddhist empiricism tell us about the essential nature of Buddhist spirituality? How is this empiricism distinctive in relationship with how (this sentence is incomplete) Do you think that that term might be understood in modern science and conventional thinking?
- What is authentic or genuine spirituality, as seen in the practicing lineages?
- How might you describe a purely empirical approach in the practice of meditation?
- “The four noble truths are not doctrines but descriptions of what we find when we take a strictly empirical approach and look deeply into our everyday

experience.” Does that make sense to you? To what extent do you think it is a correct statement? How would you explain this point of view to someone else?

- Please describe the empirical discoveries opened up by taking each of the first three noble truths.
- In what way might the fourth noble truth, the truth of the path, also be seen as an empirical teaching?
- Is it possible to use the four noble truths as a religious doctrine or belief of “the truth” rather than as an empirically based, experiential report? In that case, what might that look like?
- What does Buddhism look like when it veers into Spiritual Materialism?

UNIT TWO: Reading Assignments

1) Four Noble Truths

Duhkha (pali: dukkha)

Samudaya (samudaya)

Nirodha (nirodha)

Marga (magga)

Reading Assignment:

- Rahula, WBT, Chapters 2-5 (pp. 16-50).

Questions from the reading for Reflection (some of these repeat themes from the talk):

- What are the key themes in Rahula’s presentation of the four noble truths?
- What is meant by dukkha, the first noble truth?
- What happens when we explore dukkha as an hypothesis and an empirical challenge? What do we find out about each of the three types of suffering?
- Is there anything in Rahula’s discussion that was previously unfamiliar to you?
- What themes stand out for each as most important?

2) The Four Reminders

Reading Assignment:

- Ray, IT, Chapter 10 (pp. 241-279).

Questions from the reading for Reflection:

- It is uncommon to find a book on Tibetan Buddhism, by Tibetans or Westerners, that does not stress the enormous importance to the Four

Reminders. Why do you think that so much importance is attached to this teaching?

- Some people have not found these teachings very compelling and have a hard time relating to them. Have these ever been helpful to you? Do they play any significant role today in your practice? How could these teachings be presented so that more people could deeply connect with them and use them?
- The Four Reminders are sometimes said to be a summary of the essential teachings of the four noble truths. Do you think this is a correct statement? If not, where do these teachings overlap and where do they differ?

3) The Five Skandhas

Reading Assignment:

- Rahula, WBT, Chapter 2, Section: *The Five Aggregates* ending with “...has persisted from the earliest time to the present day” (pp. 20-23);
- Ray, PPA, Chapters 6+7 (pp. 52-74).

Questions from the reading for Reflection:

- What is the clearest picture you can give of each of the skandhas and how they are related to one another?
- It is said that the five skandhas are both a linear explanation and also a simultaneous one—meaning that when any skandhas appears, the other four are already there. How do you understand this notion that the five skandhas are “simultaneous?”
- The five skandhas are said to be a comprehensive summary of the entirety of our conditioned experience. Does this make sense to you? How would you explain it to a beginning practitioner or non-Buddhist?
- How would you compare these two ways of presenting the five skandhas? What do they share? Where are they different?

UNIT TWO, Week 4: Discussion of Unit Two Talk and Discussion of Readings

The Week 4 Live Gathering is Saturday, October 23 at 11:30 a.m. MDT (see website for Zoom link).

UNIT THREE, Weeks 5 and 6: The First Turning of the Wheel of Dharma

Unit 3 of the curriculum opens Saturday, October 30.

UNIT THREE, Week 5: Prerecorded Talk

Questions from the talk for reflection:

- In the meditative path of the dharma, what does it mean to say that “we must penetrate relative truth?” And why is this so important for the journey?
- How does this overriding priority to penetrate relative truth impact the way we practice meditation? How might it differ from some more conventional approaches that are out there?
- Why did the Buddha find the teachings he had previously received from Arada Kalama and Udraka Ramaputra and others inadequate? What was missing?
- Some students have reported that the teaching of the twelve nidanas make them feel incredibly claustrophobic. How do the twelve nidanas describe the enlightenment of the Buddha? How is it that seeing them the Buddha attained complete freedom from any sense of “self?”
- How does the set of the twelve nidanas actually describe three distinct lifetimes: the one immediately preceding the present one, the current lifetime, and the future lifetime? And how does it equally describe the sequence of three moments of present experience, the immediately preceding moment, the present moment, and the subsequent moment?
- In relation to the current lifetime or current moment, discuss the difference between karmic result and karma producing.
- Why might it be said that there is “a cataclysmic and catastrophic gap” between nidanas 7 and 8?
- What are some of the ways in which we may take advantage of the gap between nidanas 7 and 8?
- In this context, how would you explain the importance of devotion in the practicing lineage of Tibetan Buddhism?
- From one point of view, a full recognition of the nidanas could be said to involve that “life makes no sense,” “it has no purpose and no meaning.” From another, “everything is imbued with profound meaning and significance and import.” How would you explain the seeming contradiction in these two?

- Conventional logic might see one's own karmic situation, especially with its pain, limitations, and feeling of imprisonment as a negative thing, a great big problem. In the dharma, why are we encouraged to see our karmic situation first, exactly as it is without judgment, second as the basis of compassion, and third, as sacred? These correspond to the way karma might be viewed in each of the three yanas.
- Explain your understanding of the statement, "Facing constraints, settle in and look upon them with awe."

UNIT THREE: Reading Assignments

1) Abhidharma

Reading Assignment:

- Ray, IT, Part Four, "Buddhist Philosophy," from start until top of "The Twelve Nidanas" (pp. 363-391).

Questions from the reading for Reflection:

- What are trangdön and ngedön? And how are they related?
- Please give a brief summation of what the first turning of the wheel includes.
- What is the abhidharma? What are its main features? In what way is it the "view" of Hinayana?
- What is a "dharma" and how is this related to "the Dharma"?

2) The Twelve Nidanas

Reading Assignment:

- Rahula, WBT, Chapter 6 (pp. 51-66);
- Ray, IT, "The Twelve Nidanas" through end of Chapter 14 (pp. 376-391);
- Thrangu Rinpoche, TLIO, Chapters 1+2 (pp. 13-34);
- Thich Nhat Hanh, "The Sun My Heart," Essential Writings, Chapter 2 (pp. 53-77).

Questions from the reading for Reflection:

- Consider the questions related to the talk about the twelve nidanas in relation to the unit readings. How do the readings fill in your understanding? How, based on the readings, would you answer the questions? What issues remain unclear?

- The twelve nidanas are considered to be one of the most important of all Buddhist teachings in both the Hinayana and the Mahayana. Why do you think this is so? How might understanding them help you in your practice?

UNIT THREE, Week 6: Discussion of Unit Three Talk and Discussion of Readings

The Week 6 Live Gathering is Saturday, November 6 at 11:30 a.m. MDT (see website for Zoom link).

UNIT FOUR, Weeks 7 and 8: The Shravaka Meditation on Non-self

Unit 4 of the curriculum opens Saturday, November 13.

Unit Four, Week 7: Prerecorded Talk

Questions from the talk for reflection:

- How would you define the “view” of ego in this contemporary world? What do you see as its features? How does this contrast with the View in the dharma?
- As you see it, what are the liabilities of taking a strictly ego centered view of reality, people, and human interactions?
- In the talk, Reggie said, several times, “It all comes back to us.” How have the teachings of the twelve nidanas and the five skandhas impacted or how might they impact how you look at yourself and our own practice?
- How do we see the teaching of Pratityasamutpada—the 12 nidana teaching—illustrated in the life of the Buddha?
- How do you see it illustrated in your own life?
- What happens when we begin to meditate in relation to our “precious ego?” How do spontaneously arising memories, especially unwanted ones, contribute to our spiritual unfolding?
- If the purpose of meditation is not, according to the View, to become peaceful, then what is it’s purpose?

- How does an awareness of Pratitya-samutpada (“Conditioned Co-production,” “Interbeing,” or whatever you want to call it) show us how to work with the limitations, obstacles, and frustrations of our own personal karmic situation?
- How does it—particularly as seen in the Interbeing teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh—impact the way we see ourselves in relation to others in how we understand them, feel toward them, and interact with them?
- How does selfless compassion come about from an understanding and realization of Pratitya-samutpada?
- “Human life is not personal” and “our human life is not a personal thing.” How do you understand this aspect of the view? How would you explain it to someone else?
- “Liberation is not and cannot be a personal thing. It can only occur on the cosmic level.” How do you understand this teaching?
- How do you understand the instruction to “identify, without judgment, with whatever happens and whatever state of mind we find ourselves in?”
- How does resting in the gap — “doing nothing” — accelerate the unfolding of the spiritual journey?

UNIT FOUR: Reading Assignments:

- Thrangu Rinpoche, TLIO, Chapters 3-5 (pp. 35-54);
- Rahula, WBT, review Chapter 4 (pp. 35-44) and Chapter 6 (pp. 51-66);
- KTG, PSME, “Stage One” (pp. 15-36).

Questions from the reading for Reflection:

- How, precisely, is “egolessness” or absence of an “identity center” (anatman) understood in the Hinayana?
- How does Khenpo Tsultrim’s discussion of the five skandhas compare with that of the other readings we have had on this topic?
- How is this teaching of non-self related to the human person and personality?
- What aspects of the readings on the twelve nidanas took you beyond the presentation in the talk? What areas in relation to the nidanas still seem unclear to you?

UNIT FOUR, Week 8: Discussion of Unit Four Talk and Discussion of Readings

The Week 8 Live Gathering is Saturday, November 20 at 11:30 a.m. MDT (see website for Zoom link).

UNIT FIVE, WEEKS 9 AND 10: Taking the Five Skandhas Further

Unit 5 of the curriculum opens Saturday, November 27.

UNIT FIVE, Week 9: Prerecorded Talk

Questions from the talk for reflection:

- Why do you think the “narcissism epidemic” of modern, especially American culture, is such an obstacle for would-be dharma practitioners?
- What is “editing the teachings.” How would a practitioner go about doing this? Why is doing so such a deal breaker for our journey in this lineage?
- Drawing on this talk, how would you revisit the three prajnas and describe each and its role on the journey?
- How do you understand the statement “meditation has no agenda”? Looking at your own experience, what are the implications for how you yourself go about practicing?
- The talk mentions three quite different ways in which we human beings experience “reality.” What are these three different ways? How do you see them as operational in your own life?
- How does meditation stand in relation to each of these three? How do we work with each in our practice?
- What would happen if we only had the first and third ways? What would happen if we did not have the second, “pure relative truth”?
- According to Altered Traits (Richie Davidson and Danny Goldman), how are meditation experience and drug experience the same? And how are they fundamentally different? Specifically, what different results do they each lead to?
- In what way is realization a “cosmic event”? How would you explain to someone what this means? How would you approach someone for whom the narcissistic view of modern culture was the only view they knew?

- In what way is the human body related to the cosmic totality? Why is this so important for the practitioner?
- In what way is ignorance, the first nidana, dependent upon the awakened state?
- Discuss the two different kinds of skandhas, the skandhas of grasping which form our ego identity and the skandhas that are awakened (an-upadana skandhas).
- How do you see the role of ego in our spiritual development, beginning with its initial formation in childhood?
- How do the eight consciousnesses operate at the level of the first skandha, Form? And how do they operate at the level of the fifth skandha, Consciousness?
- How is consciousness the same and different from our basic awareness (the awakened state)?

UNIT FIVE: Reading Assignment

- Chögyam Trungpa, Glimpses of Abhidharma, entire text (pp. 1-117).

Questions from the reading for Reflection:

- What is “form” for Rinpoche?
- How is form related to the basic space of the natural state?
- How do feeling, perception, intellect, and consciousness arise?
- What is the sequential process?
- Why do you think Rinpoche translates the fourth skandha (samskara, “karmic formations”) as “intellect”?
- What is your understanding of the fifth skandha, consciousness?
- How does Rinpoche present the nature of these “dharmas”? Is it different from the presentations in our other readings?

UNIT FIVE, Week 10: Discussion of Unit Five Talk and Discussion of Readings

The Week 10 Live Gathering is Saturday, December 4 at 11:30 a.m. MDT (see website for Zoom link).

Week 11: Exam Week