

Tripitaka

After the Buddha's final *nirvana*, his disciples wished to preserve the Buddha's teachings. Over a number of Buddhist councils, the teachings were compiled, edited, and eventually divided into three divisions: the collection of discourses, the collection of monastic rules, and the collection of treatises. This became known as the *tripitaka* in Sanskrit, meaning "three collections", encompassing the threefold division of the sacred texts of Indian Buddhism.

Collection of Discourses

In Sanskrit, this collection is called *sutra*, meaning "concordant scriptures". The basic meaning here is that the teachings of the sutras are mutually in accord with one another, just as all the flowers on a stringed garland are interconnected.

The sutras contain all that accords with the principles of the Buddhas above, and all the teachings of the Buddha that accord with the spiritual capacity of sentient beings below. There is a verse that describes the various types of teachings the Buddha delivered across his forty-nine year teaching career:

Flower Adornment the first three weeks. *Agamas*, twelve years; *vaipulya*, eight years. Twenty-two years teaching *prajna*, *Lotus* and *Nirvana* totaled eight years.

Among these, the *vaipulya* scriptures include various Mahayana scriptures beyond those listed above, such as the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, the *Queen Srimala Sutra*, and the *Sutra of Golden Light*.

Collection of Monastic Rules

In Sanskrit, this collection is called *vinaya*, which means "discipline and restraint". This is the body of monastic rules the Buddha instituted to discipline the minds of his disciples and correct their bad habits. In Chinese, the *vinaya* is also called *mie*, "extinguish", for the Buddhist precepts can extinguish the faults and wrongdoings of physical, verbal, and mental karma.

There are three types of vinaya texts: expansive vinaya, precept texts, and vinaya commentaries. Expansive vinaya, like the *Ten Recitation Vinaya*, the *Four-Part Vinaya*, the *Mahasamghika Vinaya*, and the *Five-Part Vinaya*, explain the origins of how the Buddha formulated the monastic precepts and their finer details.

Precept texts, like the *Bhiksu Precepts* and *Bhiksuni Precepts*, only contain a list of monastic rules, and are for the purpose of recitation. Vinaya commentaries, like the *Treatise on the Sarvastivadin Vinaya* and others, comment upon the monastic rules.

Collection of Treatises

In Sanskrit, this collection is called *abhidharma*, which means "analysis of the Dharma", and showcases the wisdom to be gained from explicating the Dharma. The *abhidharma* is a collection of texts by disciples of the Buddha to discuss, explain, and organize the doctrines of the sutras. Some such texts that many people are familiar with include the *Treatise on the Middle Way*, the *Treatise of the Twelve Aspects*, the *Treatise on the Perfection of Great Wisdom*, the *Treatise in a Hundred Verses*, the *Treatise on the Stages of Yogacara Practitioners*, the *Treatise on the Awakening of Faith in Mahayana*, and the *Treatise on the Ten Stages Sutra*.

In sum, the texts of the Tripitaka constitute the teachings and doctrines of the Buddha, and Buddhists rely upon them to guide their cultivation.

Consider the Triple Gem: It was because of the Dharma that the Buddha was able to attain awakening, and the Sangha is able to teach us because it maintains the true Dharma. Thus, among the Triple Gem, the Dharma is the most revered.

The *Diamond Sutra* states, "Wherever this sutra can be found, there also is the Buddha; and it should be honored as if it were one of his disciples." This shows how we should revere the Dharma.

Source: Chuang, Venerable Tzu. *Faxiang: A Buddhist Practitioner's Encyclopedia*. Translated by Robert Smitheram. Los Angeles, California: Buddha's Light Publishing, 2012. (Pages 353-356.)