Gemini Deep Research

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Buddhism: Ahimsa (अहिंसा) , Schools, Transformation

Reasoning

Core Buddhist Principle
I'm starting my research by focusing on the foundational principle of non-harm, or Ahimsa (अहिंसा), which is central to all Buddhist traditions. I'll be looking into the earliest mentions and interpretations of this concept to understand its fundamental role.
Interconnected Concepts
Next, I plan to explore the interconnected ideas of dependent origination, or Pratītyasamutpāda (प्रतीत्यसमुत्पाद), and compassion, or Karuṇā (करुणा). I want to understand how these concepts provide the philosophical basis for the emphasis on non-violence across the different schools of Buddhism.
Exploring Different Schools
I will then investigate the specific ways in which Ahimsa is understood and practiced within the major Buddhist schools: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. This will involve looking at their core ideals, such as the path to Arhatship (अर्हत्) in Theravada and the Bodhisattva (बोधिसत्त्व) ideal in Mahayana, and how these relate to non-harm.
Vajrayana's Unique Approach
For Vajrayana, I will focus on its distinctive methods for transforming negative emotions, or Kleshas (क्लेश), into wisdom. I aim to understand how this transformative process aligns with the overarching principle of Ahimsa.
Symbolism and History
I also intend to research the symbolism of Wrathful Deities in Vajrayana, like Mahakala (महाकाल), Vajrakilaya (वज्रकीलाय), and Palden Lhamo (पालदेन ल्हामो), to understand their embodiment of fierce compassion. Additionally, I will explore the historical development of Vajrayana, including its interaction with the Bön (བོན་) tradition in Tibet, to provide context for its unique practices.
Unconventional Wisdom
Finally, I will delve into the concept of 'Crazy Wisdom,' or Yeshe Chölwa (ཡེ་ཤེས་སྨྱོལ་ལྡན་), within Vajrayana. My goal is to understand how this seemingly unconventional approach serves to challenge rigid thinking and promote compassion.
Next Steps
To begin this detailed exploration, I will start by searching for academic resources that specifically discuss the principle of Ahimsa in early Buddhist texts.

Researching websites

Ahimsa's Foundation
My initial research confirms that Ahimsa (अहिंसा), or non-harm, is indeed a core principle in Buddhism, shared with other ancient Indian traditions. It's not just about physical actions but extends to our thoughts and words, stemming from a belief in the interconnectedness of all life and the impact of our actions.
Interdependent Existence
I've also found that Pratītyasamutpāda (प्रतीत्यसमुत्पाद), the concept of dependent

origination, is central to Buddhist philosophy. It highlights that nothing exists in isolation and that all phenomena arise due to a web of interconnected causes and conditions. This understanding of interdependence is key to comprehending the Buddhist view on suffering and the path to liberation.
The Role of Compassion
Karuṇā (करुणा), which translates to compassion, is another vital aspect. It represents the desire to alleviate the suffering of others and is closely linked to Ahimsa and loving-kindness. This feeling of interconnectedness and empathy forms a strong ethical basis in Buddhism.
Further Exploration
To gain a more nuanced understanding, I will now investigate how these fundamental principles are specifically interpreted and practiced within the different schools of Buddhism, namely Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana.

Researching websites

School Interpretations
I'm now synthesizing the information I've gathered to understand how the core principles of Ahimsa (अहिंसा), Pratītyasamutpāda (प्रतीत्यसमुत्पाद), and Karuṇā (करुणा) are viewed across the major Buddhist schools. It seems that while Ahimsa is fundamental in all schools, Mahayana and Vajrayana introduce the concept of skillful means (upāya) which might lead to actions that appear to deviate from strict non-harm in certain situations for the greater good. The understanding of Pratītyasamutpāda as interconnectedness is shared, but Mahayana delves deeper into the concept of emptiness (śūnyatā) in relation to it. Karuṇā is crucial in all schools, but Mahayana elevates it significantly with the Bodhisattva ideal, and Vajrayana sometimes expresses it as fierce compassion through wrathful imagery.
Next Steps
To further clarify these distinctions, I plan to investigate specific examples of skillful means in Mahayana and Vajrayana, explore the connection between emptiness and these core principles, and understand the symbolism of wrathful deities in Vajrayana.

Researching websites

Skillful Means Examined
I've been looking into the idea of skillful means (upāya) in Mahayana Buddhism and how it relates to the principle of Ahimsa (अहिंसा). It appears that while non-harm is a fundamental teaching, skillful means allows for some flexibility. This could involve actions that might seem contrary to strict non-violence if they ultimately lead to a greater benefit or help someone on their path to liberation from suffering. For instance, a teacher might use a startling method to break a student's harmful attachment.
Emptiness and Compassion
My research also highlights the profound connection between the concept of emptiness (śūnyatā) and the motivation for compassion (Karuṇā). In Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, understanding that all things lack inherent existence, including ourselves, fosters a deep sense of interconnectedness. This realization diminishes the illusion of separation and strengthens the desire to act with compassion and avoid harm, as the well-being of others is seen as intrinsically linked to one's own.
Wrathful Compassion
I'm also gaining a clearer understanding of wrathful deities in Vajrayana. These figures, while appearing fearsome, are not evil. Instead, they embody a powerful and active form of

compassion. Their terrifying imagery and symbolic weapons represent their ability to fiercely combat negative emotions, ignorance, and obstacles that prevent enlightenment. This wrath is directed at these hindrances, not at sentient beings, and is ultimately motivated by a deep wish to liberate all from suffering.
Further Investigation
To deepen my understanding, I will now search for specific examples of how skillful means might be applied in practice, potentially in ways that seem to challenge Ahimsa on the surface. I also want to explore further the relationship between the realization of emptiness and the cultivation of compassion in both Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions. Finally, I will look into the symbolism associated with specific wrathful deities to better grasp their role as expressions of fierce compassion.

Researching websites

Nuances of Skillful Action
I've found examples illustrating how skillful means (upāya) can manifest in ways that might initially seem to contradict the principle of Ahimsa (अहिंसा). For instance, Zen masters might use physical actions or harsh words to jolt a student into a moment of awakening. These actions are not driven by anger but by a deep compassion and wisdom aimed at breaking through conceptual barriers. However, it's important to note that this approach requires genuine wisdom and compassion to avoid misuse.
Emptiness Fuels Empathy
My research continues to emphasize the crucial link between the understanding of emptiness (śūnyatā) and the development of compassion (Karuṇā). Recognizing that all beings and phenomena lack inherent, independent existence dissolves the illusion of separateness. This insight fosters a profound sense of interconnectedness, making the suffering of others feel like our own and naturally leading to a strong motivation to act with kindness and prevent harm. The idea that 'voidness is the womb of compassion' beautifully captures this relationship.
Symbolism of Fierce Protection
The wrathful deities in Vajrayana, such as Mahakala (महाकाल), Vajrakilaya (वज्रकीलाय), and Palden Lhamo (पालदेन ल्हामो), are not malevolent figures. Their terrifying appearance and the weapons they wield are symbolic representations of their power to overcome negative emotions, internal obstacles to enlightenment, and external forces that cause suffering. Their wrath is a manifestation of fierce compassion, acting as a forceful means to guide beings towards liberation.
Concluding Thoughts
Having explored skillful means, the role of emptiness in cultivating compassion, and the symbolism of wrathful deities, I feel I have a comprehensive understanding of the core meanings of Buddhism and their school differences in relation to pacifism and non-harm. I am now ready to synthesize this information into a final report.

The Foundational Principles of Pacifism and Non-Harm (अहिंसा, Ahimsa) in Buddhism and Their Diverse School Interpretations

Buddhism, originating in ancient India with Siddhartha Gautama (सिद्धार्थ गौतम), who became known as the Shakyamuni Buddha (शाक्यमुनि बुद्ध), has since spread across

Asia and the world, evolving into diverse schools of thought and practice.[1] While these schools—primarily Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana—exhibit a wide array of philosophical interpretations and ritual practices, they are fundamentally unified by a core ethical commitment to pacifism and non-harm, encapsulated by the principle of Ahimsa (अहिंसा).[1] This report aims to analyze the core meanings of Buddhism and the distinctions between these major schools, demonstrating that despite their differences, they all ultimately emphasize Pacifism and Non-Harm (Ahimsa), rooted in a shared understanding of interconnectedness and motivated by compassion.

At the heart of Buddhist ethics lies the principle of Ahimsa (अहिंसा), a Sanskrit term meaning non-harm or non-violence. This principle serves as the cornerstone of ethical conduct across all Buddhist traditions, extending its imperative to all living beings, encompassing not only physical actions but also thoughts and words.[3] The origins of this profound ethical ideal can be traced back to ancient India, with its clear articulation predating Buddhism, notably by Vardhamāna Mahāvīra, the revered Jain teacher and a contemporary of the Buddha.[6] The scope of Ahimsa in Buddhism, much like in Jainism and Hinduism, is vast, urging practitioners to refrain from causing injury or suffering to any being that possesses the spark of life.[4] This reverence for life stems from the fundamental understanding of Pratītyasamutpāda (प्रतीत्यसमुत्पाद), or dependent origination. This core Buddhist doctrine elucidates the interconnected nature of all phenomena, asserting that nothing exists in isolation; every event and entity arises in dependence upon a multitude of causes and conditions.[3] Consequently, the act of harming another being is not an isolated event but one that reverberates throughout the entire web of existence, ultimately affecting the perpetrator as well. This intrinsic interconnectedness forms a crucial philosophical basis for the ethical commitment to non-violence.

Complementing the understanding of interconnectedness is the profound motivation of Karuṇā (करुणा), or compassion. This deeply felt empathy and the aspiration to alleviate the suffering of all sentient beings serve as the driving force behind the practice of Ahimsa in its fullest sense.[3] Karuṇā inspires Buddhists to actively cultivate thoughts, words, and deeds that promote well-being and prevent harm. The principle of Ahimsa, therefore, is not merely a passive avoidance of violence but an active engagement with the world rooted in a deep understanding of our shared existence and a heartfelt desire to mitigate suffering. Mahatma Gandhi, who extensively utilized the concept of Ahimsa in his philosophy of non-violent resistance, understood it as encompassing non-harm in thought, word, and deed, coupled with profound love and compassion for all living creatures.[14] This interpretation underscores the active and benevolent nature of Ahimsa within the broader ethical framework of Buddhism.

Theravada Buddhism, often referred to as the "School of the Elders" (Theravāda) and a major branch of the tradition, centers its teachings and practices on the pursuit of individual liberation from suffering (Dukkha (दुक्ख)).[1] This path to liberation is achieved by the individual practitioner through diligent adherence to the Noble Eightfold Path, a comprehensive guide for ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom. Within this framework, the principle of Ahimsa holds a position of paramount importance, particularly within the monastic discipline and the ethical guidelines for lay followers.[3] Early Buddhist texts, such as the Pali Canon (Pāli Canon), which serves as the primary scriptural collection for Theravada, consistently emphasize the significance of non-harming and the cultivation of compassion towards all beings.[3]

The ethical conduct of Theravada Buddhists is largely guided by the Five Precepts (Pañcasīla), which lay the foundation for moral behavior. The first and foremost of these precepts is prāṇātipāta veramaṇī (पाणातिपाता वेरमणी), the commitment to abstain from taking the life of any living being.[18] This precept extends beyond humans to encompass all creatures, reflecting the broad scope of Ahimsa in Buddhist thought. Alongside this commitment to non-violence, Theravada practitioners are encouraged to cultivate Karuṇā (करुणा) and Mettā (mettā) as integral aspects of their spiritual development.[3] These qualities of compassion and loving-kindness serve to nurture a mindset of non-harm and empathy towards all. While Ahimsa is undeniably a cornerstone of Theravada ethics, some scholarly perspectives suggest that its initial emphasis in early Buddhism might have been more closely tied to the individual's spiritual progress and the avoidance of negative karmic consequences rather than a primary concern for the well-being of others.[17] This does not diminish the importance of non-violence but offers a nuanced understanding of the motivations that underpinned its early practice. Regardless of the initial emphasis, the commitment to Ahimsa and the cultivation of compassion remain fundamental ethical principles in Theravada Buddhism, guiding practitioners on their path to individual liberation.

Mahayana Buddhism, often known as the "Great Vehicle" (Mahāyāna (महायान)), expands the scope of Buddhist practice beyond individual liberation to encompass the enlightenment of all sentient beings.[19] The central ideal in Mahayana is that of the Bodhisattva (बोधिसत्त्व), an individual who postpones their own attainment of Nirvana to work tirelessly for the liberation of others. This profound commitment is deeply rooted in the understanding of emptiness (śūnyatā), a key philosophical concept in Mahayana that posits the ultimate nature of reality as devoid of inherent existence.[19] This realization of emptiness, by dissolving the illusion of a fixed and separate self, naturally fosters a sense of interconnectedness and fuels the Bodhisattva's boundless compassion.

To effectively guide beings towards enlightenment, Mahayana Buddhism emphasizes the concept of Upāya (उपाय), or skillful means.[19] Upāya refers to the ability of enlightened beings, particularly Bodhisattvas, to adapt their teachings and actions to the specific needs and capacities of their audience. This can sometimes involve seemingly unconventional actions that, on the surface, might appear to contradict the principle of Ahimsa. However, these actions are always motivated by deep compassion and the ultimate aim of leading beings away from suffering and towards awakening. The Korean Buddhist monk 원효 Wonhyo (원효 Wonhyo (Daeseung banyeolgyeong so (대승반열경소), ca. 670–686 CE.)) was a prominent figure who beautifully articulated Mahayana ideals, emphasizing universal enlightenment and the harmony of different perspectives. His teachings focused on realizing the non-dual nature of reality and applying profound compassion in all endeavors. The primary motivation for the Bodhisattva's skillful actions, even those that might appear forceful or unconventional, remains Karuṇā (करुणा).[21] The Mahayana understanding of emptiness (śūnyatā) provides a profound philosophical basis for this universal compassion.[33] By recognizing the lack of inherent existence in all beings and phenomena and their fundamental interconnectedness, the rigid boundaries between self and other dissolve, giving rise to deep empathy and the aspiration for the liberation of all from suffering. The doctrine of Upāya, therefore, while allowing for flexibility in methods, is always anchored in this compassionate intention to guide beings towards ultimate well-being.

Vajrayana Buddhism, often referred to as the "Diamond Vehicle" (Vajrayāna (वज्रयान)), represents a further evolution of Buddhist thought and practice, building upon the foundations of Mahayana philosophy while introducing unique and powerful tantric methods aimed at achieving rapid enlightenment within a single lifetime.[19] A distinctive feature of Vajrayana is its approach to working directly with Kleshas (क्लेश) [negative emotions], seeking to transform their energy into wisdom rather than merely suppressing or avoiding them.[19] This transformative process is understood within the framework of Ahimsa, as it focuses on redirecting the potent energy of negative emotions towards constructive ends, ultimately benefiting oneself and others.

Perhaps the most misunderstood aspect of Vajrayana is the symbolism of its Wrathful Deities, such as Mahakala (महाकाल), Vajrakilaya (वज्रकीलाय), and Palden Lhamo (पालदेन ल्हामो).[19] These deities, often depicted in terrifying forms wielding weapons and adorned with skulls, are not malevolent beings. Instead, they are understood within the Vajrayana tradition as manifestations of fierce compassion, embodying the powerful energy needed to overcome ignorance, ego-clinging, and other obstacles to enlightenment.[19] Their wrath is directed not at sentient beings

but at the illusions and negative forces that perpetuate suffering. Vajrayana Buddhism emerged in India around the 5th to 7th centuries CE, drawing from Mahayana sutras and incorporating elements from existing Indian Tantric traditions.[19] When it was introduced to Tibet starting in the 7th century, it underwent a significant synthesis with the indigenous Bön (བོན་) tradition, which had its own complex pantheon and shamanic practices.[19] This historical fusion contributed significantly to the unique practices and symbolism characteristic of Vajrayana. Another intriguing aspect of Vajrayana is the concept of "Crazy Wisdom" (Yeshe Chölwa (ཡེ་ཤེས་ཆོས་པ་)), where highly realized masters sometimes act in unconventional and seemingly shocking ways.[19] These actions are not intended to be harmful but rather serve as skillful means to shatter students' conceptual frameworks and egoic attachments, ultimately guiding them towards deeper realization. The transformative methods and intense symbolism of Vajrayana, while appearing divergent from more conventional approaches, are ultimately rooted in the fundamental Buddhist commitment to non-harm and the compassionate aspiration to liberate all beings from suffering. The historical interplay with the Bön tradition further enriched this unique expression of Buddhist principles.

Principle	Theravada	Mahayana	Vajrayana
Ahimsa (Non-Harm)	Fundamental precept, first of the Five Precepts for lay and monastic practitioners. Emphasis on abstaining from taking life and causing harm to all living beings.	Integral ethical principle, emphasized within the context of the Bodhisattva ideal. Extends to all sentient beings.	Foundational principle, practiced through the transformation of negative energies. May involve seemingly forceful actions motivated by fierce compassion.
Pratītyasamutpāda (Dependent Origination)	Explains the interconnectedness of all phenomena and the cycle of suffering. Understanding it leads to detachment and ethical conduct.	Key philosophical basis for emptiness (śūnyatā) and the understanding of the lack of inherent existence in all phenomena and beings, motivating universal	Underpins the understanding of the interconnectedness of all phenomena, including the potential for transformation of negative emotions into wisdom.

		compassion.	
Karuṇā (Compassion)	One of the four Brahmaviharas (divine abodes), cultivated alongside Mettā (loving-kindness), Mudita (sympathetic joy), and Upekkhā (equanimity). Motivates ethical conduct and the desire to alleviate suffering.	Central motivation for the Bodhisattva path and the use of Upāya (skillful means) to liberate all sentient beings.	Manifests as both peaceful and fierce compassion. Wrathful deities embody the intense energy needed to overcome obstacles to enlightenment.
Key Concepts	Arhat, Five Precepts, Noble Eightfold Path, Pali Canon	Bodhisattva, Upāya (Skillful Means), Śūnyatā (Emptiness), 원효 Wonhyo	Transformation of Kleshas, Wrathful Deities (Mahakala, Vajrakilaya, Palden Lhamo), Yeshe Chölwa (Crazy Wisdom), Tantra, Bön
Key Texts	Pali Canon (Dhammapada, Sutta Pitaka)	Mahayana Sutras (Lotus Sutra, Heart Sutra), Daeseung banyeolgyeong so (원효 Wonhyo)	Tantras (Guhyagarbha Tantra), Bodhicaryavatara (Śāntideva)

In conclusion, despite the diverse philosophical frameworks and practical expressions found across the major schools of Buddhism, the fundamental commitment to Pacifism and Non-Harm (Ahimsa) remains a constant and unifying principle. Rooted in the profound understanding of interconnectedness (Pratītyasamutpāda) and driven by the universal aspiration to alleviate suffering (Karuṇā), this ethical foundation guides the conduct of practitioners in Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions alike. Whether through the individual pursuit of ethical conduct in Theravada, the compassionate engagement of the Bodhisattva in Mahayana, or the transformative practices of fierce compassion in Vajrayana, the legacy of Ahimsa as the heart of Buddhist teachings endures, offering a timeless framework for fostering peace, understanding, and compassion in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.[1]

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Prompt:

Hello, I need deep research to crystallize the core meanings of buddhism and their school differences, but that in the end they are all Pacifism and Non-Harm (Ahimsa).

When a term, concept or thinker appears, I want it in the original language, translated always; in cases where more than one translation needs to appear, add as well. For example ‘’Wonhyo” will be always ‘’원효 Wonhyo”, ‘’Mahayana Sutra” will be always ‘’Mahayana Sutra (Mahāyāna-sūtra)”. and also mention the original name of the work, even if from another country in East Asia, like the following structure ‘’원효 Wonhyo (Daeseung banyeolgyeong so (대승반열경소) [Commentary on the Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra (Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra)], ca. 670–686 CE.)”. Here the basic context from Gemini 2.5 Pro Experimental.

The Foundation: Pacifism and Non-Harm (Ahimsa)

At its core, Buddhism universally emphasizes Ahimsa – non-harming or non-violence – as a fundamental precept. This arises from the understanding of interconnectedness (pratītyasamutpāda or dependent origination) and compassion (karuṇā). The goal is to alleviate suffering (dukkha) for oneself and all beings. This is the bedrock upon which all major schools – Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana – are built. Thinkers like Wonhyo (a key figure in Korean Buddhism, which is part of the Mahayana tradition) beautifully articulated Mahayana ideals of universal enlightenment and the harmony of different perspectives. His emphasis was on realizing the non-dual nature of reality and applying compassion.

Mahayana: The Great Vehicle & Skillful Means

Mahayana Buddhism expands the goal from individual liberation (Arhatship, emphasized in Theravada) to the liberation of all sentient beings (Bodhisattvahood). This introduces a vast array of "skillful means" (upāya) – methods employed by Bodhisattvas out of compassion to guide beings according to their capacities. While generally gentle, the concept of skillful means allows for actions that might seem unconventional if they ultimately lead to liberation from suffering. This school deeply explores emptiness (śūnyatā) and the idea that defilements (kleshas – greed, hatred, delusion) are not inherently real but can be understood and purified.

Vajrayana: The Diamond Vehicle & Transformation

Vajrayana, which flourished notably in Tibet, builds upon Mahayana philosophy but introduces unique and powerful tantric methods designed for rapid enlightenment within a single lifetime. It's often called the "result vehicle" because practitioners are encouraged to identify with the enlightened state itself. This is where the elements you encountered likely stem from:

Historical Context: Vajrayana emerged in India around the 5th-7th centuries CE, drawing from Mahayana sutras and incorporating existing Indian Tantric traditions (which sometimes involved practices considered taboo in mainstream society). When introduced to Tibet starting in the 7th century, it synthesized with the existing indigenous Bön religion, which had its own complex pantheon and shamanic practices. This historical fusion contributed to Vajrayana's unique character.

Working Directly with "Poisons": Unlike approaches that emphasize primarily avoiding or suppressing negative emotions (kleshas), Vajrayana takes a radical stance: these powerful energies can be transmuted into wisdom. Anger can be transformed into mirror-like wisdom, desire into discriminating wisdom, ignorance into the wisdom of the ultimate reality (dharmadhātu), etc. This is not about endorsing negativity but recognizing its energetic potential and redirecting it through specific meditative techniques, visualizations, and yogas. This relates to the "exploration of thinking bad things" you mentioned – it's about seeing their empty nature and transforming their energy, not dwelling on them Malevolently.

Wrathful Deities: This is often the most misunderstood aspect. Deities like Mahakala, Vajrakilaya, or Palden Lhamo appear terrifying – surrounded by flames, wielding weapons, adorned with skulls. However, in Vajrayana context, they are not evil forces. They are manifestations of enlightened energy, embodying the fierce compassion needed to destroy the real enemies: ignorance, ego-clinging, hatred, and obstacles to enlightenment. Their wrath is directed at illusion and suffering, not sentient beings. They represent the power to cut through delusion decisively. Encountering these images without understanding their

symbolism can indeed be frightening.

Transgressive Symbolism (Tantra): Some Tantric practices involve symbolism related to sexuality, death (skull cups, bone ornaments), and substances typically forbidden (meat, alcohol, symbolically). Historically, this was partly a way to break conventional attachments and societal taboos, demonstrating that enlightenment transcends ordinary dualistic concepts of pure/impure, good/bad. The inner meaning is about harnessing powerful life energies (like desire) and confronting the reality of impermanence and death directly as part of the path. These practices are highly esoteric and require initiation and guidance from a qualified guru (teacher) precisely because they are easily misunderstood and can be dangerous if practiced incorrectly or with the wrong motivation. The explicit mention of "evil things" you encountered might be a severe misinterpretation or a reference to these highly symbolic, advanced practices taken out of context.

"Crazy Wisdom" (Yeshe Chölwa): Some highly realized masters in Vajrayana history acted in unconventional, sometimes shocking ways that seemed to violate norms (the yeshe chölwa tradition). This wasn't about being "evil" but using spontaneous, unpredictable actions to shatter students' conceptual frameworks and egoic complacency. Again, this is easily misinterpreted.

The core Buddhist commitment to non-harm remains. Vajrayana methods, while appearing "dark" or transgressive on the surface, are understood within that tradition as powerful, albeit potentially perilous, skillful means aimed at the ultimate compassionate goal: liberating all beings from suffering. They operate on the principle of transformation rather than mere suppression.