TANTRIC BUDDHISM

—NALINAKSHA DUTT

INTRODUCTION OF BUDDHISM INTO TIBET

It is a matter of common knowledge that a few centuries before the reign of King Songtsen-gampo, the warlike Tibetans were extending their sway over Kashgar, Kupe, Karakhan, and Khotan, and had occupied, though temporarily, these four garrisoned cities by defeating the Chinese army. Their occupation of Central Asia up to the borders of China is amply proved by the existence of a large collection of Tibetan manuscripts in the Chinese cave temple at Tun-huang. The district of the Central Asian inscriptions of the 7th Century A.D. discovered at Nya and other sites is also interspersed with Tibetan words. Now there can be no doubt that the Tibetans extended their territory before the 7th century A.D. not only to Central Asia but also up to Bactriana and Gilgit (Bri ché). Here evidently they came across Buddhist monks and monasteries, and realized the importance and wide popularity of the religion. At this period, the form of Buddhism prevalent there was mainly Tantric, and so it is quite likely that Tantric Buddhism percolated into Tibet before King Songtsen-gampo established it in his realm formally. His Nepalese queen brought with her the images of Akshobhya, Maitreyas, and Tara, that is, the gods worshipped by the Tantric Buddhists, and so it is evident that the form of Buddhism first introduced into Tibet from Nepal and Central Asia was Tantric. King Songtsen-gampo’s descendant Khri-srong-lde-btsan at the advice of Santarakshita invited the famous Tantric teacher Padmasambhava from Uddiyana of the Swat Valley on the K.W. borders of India (now West Pakistan). In order to re-orient the religion in his realm, the sect started by Padmasambhava, known as Nying ma pa, thenceforth became the recognized and state-patronized religion of Tibet.

TANTRIC BUDDHISM IN INDIA

In India, Tantricism has a long history. It may be as old as Vedism, for in theAtharvaveda there are incantations which are believed to produce supernatural effects. The belief in the efficacy of mantras has been prevailing in India from time immemorial and it is still prevalent widely among the Indians.

The mantras (phags-pa stong) do not perhaps always carry a meaning.
but their correct intonation was and is still considered and believed to have an effect. The earliest form of such mantras in the Buddhist literature is known as Dharani (དབྱངས་སོགས་) which are found in very early Mahayana texts. The corresponding compositions in Pali are called Pantras (ပ་နྲ་ yamag-sa-skro-ba).<ref>

Asanga in his Bodhisattvabhumi (Ch.VII, p.185) offers an exposition of the term Dharani. He writes that Dharani means that a Bodhisattva preserves in his memory Dharma, its artha and the mantras for an unlimited period of time. The first and second, Dharma-dharani and Artha-dharani mean that a Bodhisattva remembers the laws (pravrtta) as well as their meaning (da dhyana) on account of their sharp and excellent memory. The third is Mantra-dharani, by which is meant that a Bodhisattva can account of his control over meditations, can relieve the sufferings of beings by uttering spells (mantras), and the fourth is Ksanti Iabhaya dharani (කුත්තන්ති විධාය ප්‍රශ්ණස්) by which is meant that a Bodhisattva, who leads a highly restrained life, learns some spells by which he perfects himself in perseverance (Ksanti). The spells are like Hit miti sila-bhuti ksantipadani svaha (හිත මිට සිලා-බිම් මැද්‍රා ස්වහා), Though the words of the mantra do not convey any particular meaning, a Bodhisattva realizes their intrinsic value, viz., the nature of their indescribability (Sammika pravrtta), and hence he does not seek their literal sense. From such interpretations, it appears that the efficacy of a mantra depends more on the will-power of the mantra-reiter, who knows how to control his thoughts, than on the actual words composing the spells. The intonation and repetition of the spells may have a value of their own.

TANTRICISM

Tantricism is essentially an esoteric form of religion in which meditation forms the core. The meditations were not of the type found in early Buddhist texts but needed many artificial aids, forms, and direct supervision of a perfect spiritual guide (gsang-ba-ma). There are five sections in the Tantric spiritual culture viz. (i) rites and ceremonies (sngags byed-rtsa), (ii) meditational practices and observances for external and internal purity (sde snying po), (iii) finger gestures and physical postures (gtum-ma sman-rig), (iv) utterance of spells (snyom pche-rgyas), (v) meditations (gsang-ba mdzad-pa ma-lha’gyur) to realize the oneness of the diverse beings and objects of the universe, that is, zang ’byur-ba.

The minimum requirements of a Tantric adept are the knowledge
of spells and their correct intonation, the various fingerpostures and sitting postures and various diagrams (भूमिक्षेत्र-श्रृंग) for the purpose of the rituals as also for securing from evil forces and lastly formal initiation (सिद्धि धोन्ग श्रुत्र) by a spiritual preceptor (Guru) into form of spiritual culture.

According to the Tantrics, the human body is the microcosm which contains the lowest and highest form of conceivable worldly existence. It can be turned into a hellish or a heavenly state. The process by which a human being can be raised spiritually is centred round the three veins in the backbone (cerebral-spinal axis) called in Hindu Tantras: Ida (कोश), Pingala (न्याय) and Susumna (सूक्ष्म), of which the corresponding Buddhist terms are Lataria (लतरा), Rasana (रसायन) and Avadhuthika (अवधूतिका). Ida is on the left side and Pingala on the right side of the central vein Susumna. The two side veins entwine the central one. Ida from left to right and Pingala from right to left without touching the Susumna. All the three, two of which in a spiral form rise from the anus (रुद्रपात) to the centre of the eye-brows, that is, Pinnae Gland (पुंज). In between the two there are four stations known as Lower Lumber region (पाँचवर्ण), Lumber region (छठवर्ण), Middle Thoracic region (पाँचवर्ण) and cervical region (ठावर्ण). The two side veins in Buddhist Tantras represent knowledge (स्वाधिकार) and expedient or compassion (प्रवर्तकार) (शोभाभूमि). The latter is dynamic representing worldly forces and the former is static (inactive, pure knowledge). The central vein Susumna or Avadhuthika, represents Bodhicitta or Vajra. In which the functions and effects of the two side veins are united into one, the perfect unity taking place when the mind force reaches through the central vein to the centre of the eye-brows. At this point oneness of the worldly forces and the Truth is fully realized. The Tantric adepts practice meditation with the artificial aids to push up the mind-force from the lowest (मलाद्व्यु) to the highest (ज्ञान) point and thereby achieve perfect knowledge or salvation. The merging of the two, Prana and Upaya, at the top in Avadhuthika (कर्म-दर्शन) is the image of Yab-yum in Tibet. It denotes the perfect Bodhicitta or Vajra, in which disappears the distinction between worldly activity and transcendental knowledge.

What has been stated above briefly may be explained in further details. The central object of Tantricism is the realization of worldly existence (शैशार-श्रुत्र) as non-existent in reality (वैद्यवर्णा) by means of breath control and regulation (स्वादिका) combined with concentration of thoughts. The philosophy of the identity of Samasara and Nirvana was first propounded by Nagarjuna in his Madhyamaka-karika.
XXV, 20). The Tantric saints adopted this philosophy and devised the psycho-physical process of identifying samsara and nirvana with the two veins on the right and left of the central vein. The right vein Rasana (रसना; रस-वृन्द) represents worldly existence (समसर) as it is this vein through which a Bodhisattva exercises his compassion (महाभक्ति; mahabhakti) for his own spiritual advancement as well as for the good of the worldly beings, which really have only conventional existence. Without the assumption of such existence a Bodhisattva cannot develop his compassionate mind, which must have a basis. The left vein Lalana (ललाना; ललाना-मंग) represents Nirvana, the culmination of soul-lessness (प्रार्थना; prarshanā) and substancelessness (निर्वाण; nirvāna) of worldly existence. The means for attaining Nirvana is knowledge (प्रेज्ञ; prajña) of real state of worldly objects and beings. A Bodhisattva develops Prajña through the left vein. By means of breathing exercises a Bodhisattva makes compassion and knowledge descend along the two veins to commingle at the bottom of the cerebro-spinal axis and ascend up-wards through the central vein, Avadhuthi (=Susumma) to the Brahmarandhra where the two forces, karuna and prajña, in union, produce the Bodhicitta (बोधिसत्त्व) for supreme enlightenment. It is this seed which fructifies into Sambodhi, making a fully enlightened Samyak Sambuddha.

In the Tantric texts the above mentioned process of the union of compassion and knowledge has been explained by metaphors, similes and symbols taken from unsophisticated and vulgar language, being wildering to an average reader, who is prone to interpret them literally or etymologically. For example the term Candali does not mean a woman of Candala caste but the highest stage of perfection. Candali is a combination of Candra (चन्द्र; moon) and Ali (आली; vowel system—अ). It denotes the union of Upanyasa and Prajña or Samsara and Nirvana, producing the Bodhicitta, for which the term Bij is used. In short, Bij is produced by the union of Candra and Ali. The saintly authors of the Tantric texts did not adhere also to the grammatical rules, particularly those of gender. They used, as and when necessary to suit the purpose of expressing their ideas, feminine terms for masculine and vice versa. A few instances of such uses are given below:—

i. तात्त्विक—तात्त्विक—कार्य—कार्य—रूप—रूप (कृत; कृत्य) : गुण—गुणम्

ii. तस्य—तस्य—अन्तर—अन्तर—रूप—रूप (कृत्य; कृत्य) : गुण—गुणम्

iii. तस्य—तस्य—अन्तर—अन्तर—रूप—रूप (कृत्य; कृत्य) : गुण—गुणम्

(Pure Mind)-विविधविभाजनम्

[कृत्य is rendered in Tibetan in three forms: skye-rdo-rje, dpes-pa-mdo-rje, dpyes-pa-cho-rje].
IDENTITY OF THE WORLDLY FORCES
AND THE TRUTH

The Buddhist Tantrism may have borrowed a few lines of spiritual practices from the Hindus but it retained the Mahayana philosophy of बुद्ध ज्ञाति शौलो निवृत्ति (Characteristicslessness) or ज्ञाति ज्ञेयता (Truthness/Sameness) or बुद्धिर्मृग्यज् रीतिपरतात्त्वाति (Pure Consciousness apart from Sense-consciousness). In the Guhyasamaja, an early Tantric text, Vajra is defined as the Reality or the highest Truth. It is explained as the oneness of the diverse objects and beings of the universe, i.e., Thatness of the Madhyamika. It says that in reality, there is no such distinction as male and female, good and bad, foul and sweet. The distinction made between one object or being and another is conventional. Likewise, the distinction made between a householder and a recluse is conventional. This realization of oneness of everything of the universe is the aim of a Vajrayanist, to whom the phenomenal world of desires derived through the six sense- organs is identical with the Reality/the Truth/the Sunyata. As space exists everywhere and is neither contaminated nor uncontaminated by foul odour or sweet scent so does the Truth/the Vajra which remains ever unaffected by worldly enjoyments or aversion to same. A Bodhisattva must attempt to develop a mental state (Bodhicitta—Vajra) in which will vanish the distinction between the two opposite extremes. He should realize that acts of passion are not apart from the Truth and so it is stated in the Tantric texts that hatred, delusion and attachment as well as the practices (dharma) for realizing the Truth and the Truth (Vajra) constitute the five means of escape from the world of desires (समाधि धर्म विशेष). The Guhyasamaja offers a detailed exposition of the oneness of the diverse universe and the highest Truth. Its contention is that the universe with its multiform objects and beings as also their activities good or bad is an emanation of the Adi-Buddha, Vairocana. Hence, a person’s acts of merit or commission of offences have only a conventional value of their own in this world of existence, though they have none in reality. It is this fact that the text wants to drive home into the minds of Tantrics adepts and ascetics. The text abounds in passages depicting the most unsocial and immoral life of a person as well as the extreme lila of asceticism of a Tantric adept to show that in reality there is no difference between the two modes of life. A few extracts are given here by way of illustration :
[Transl. A Tantric ascetic, who can partake of urine and excrement as food becomes spiritually advanced even if he kills living beings, speaks falsehood, becomes prone to stealing other's properties and keeps himself immersed in worldly pleasures.

The wise, who is free from all misconceptions, attain Buddhahood by desiring to enjoy the mother (i.e., Prajna or Prajnaparamita) of the Lord, the Buddha but without clinging to her (i.e., wisdom knowledge) as something to be attained.]

The underlying idea of these extracts is that killing and stealing are as much conventional (non-existent) as is the acquisition of knowledge (prajna).

In the same text there are also numerous passages giving an exposition of the Madhyamika philosophy. One or two extracts are given below by way of illustration:

अनुप्रयोग है माता न धर्म, न बुद्धी प्रसिद्ध है।
अवज्ञात नैसर्गिकों श्रीमतियों दृष्ट है।
अनुप्रयोग है माता न धर्म, न बुद्धी प्रसिद्ध है।
अवज्ञात नैसर्गिकों श्रीमतियों दृष्ट है।
अनुप्रयोग है माता न धर्म, न बुद्धी प्रसिद्ध है।
अवज्ञात नैसर्गिकों श्रीमतियों दृष्ट है।

[Transl. All that exist are without origin, hence there are neither objects nor their inherent nature. Substantialness is similar to open space; this is the firm law of Bodhi. All objects are non-existent and bereft of characteristics as they are produced from “non-substance” (वैद्युत); this is the firm law of Bodhi. Objects without origin can neither have existence nor be objects of thought, it is by using the word “open space” (धार्मिक) that existence is attributed to it.]

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APOTHEOSIS OF PHILOSOPHICAL CATEGORIES

The important terms used in Buddhist philosophy—like प्राण, वायु, युद्ध, शास्त्र, तंत्र, देवदेवी, विद्वान—and अनुभवावलोकित (constituents of a being, elements and sense-organs, stages of spiritual progress, knowledge, and moral purities and impurities) have been apothecized into Buddhism, Vajra, Sakta, goddesses and Bodhi/Ratnas. By such apotheosis it is indicated that everything worldly issued out of Adi-Buddha. It can be compared to Vedantic conception of the identity of the universe and the Brahma.

In the Guhyasamaja and Nizparnayogasvat almost all Charms of any importance have been apothecized and their location in the Mandala have been determined with description of their form, colour and mudra. A few of these are mentioned here:

ELEMENTS (आकार = Akhar)

पुर्व = दक्षिण = पूर्व (गृह, पुर्व, दक्षिणी)

एक = दक्षिण = एक (गृह, पुर्व, दक्षिणी)

सूर्य = दक्षिण = सूर्य (गृह, पुर्व, दक्षिणी)

सूर्य = दक्षिण = सूर्य (गृह, पुर्व, दक्षिणी)

SENCE OBJECTS (उदाहरण = skye-mchog-lod)

विज्ञापन = दक्षिण (गृह, पुर्व, दक्षिणी)

काम = दक्षिण (गृह, पुर्व, दक्षिणी)

ताप = दक्षिण (गृह, पुर्व, दक्षिणी)

सेव = दक्षिण (गृह, पुर्व, दक्षिणी)

CONSTITUENTS OF A BEING (उदाहरण = Prang-po)

काम = दक्षिण (गृह, पुर्व, दक्षिणी)

काम = दक्षिण (गृह, पुर्व, दक्षिणी)

काम = दक्षिण (गृह, पुर्व, दक्षिणी)

काम = दक्षिण (गृह, पुर्व, दक्षिणी)

DOORS OF ACTION (उदाहरण = lha-khyi-po)

काम = दक्षिण (गृह, पुर्व, दक्षिणी)

काम = दक्षिण (गृह, पुर्व, दक्षिणी)

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ROOT CAUSES OF IMPURITIES (dug-gtse-m)  

In this way there are apotHEses of the Bhumis (stages of spiritual progress), Paramitas (perfections). Vastitas (controls obtained by a Bodhisattva) and so forth.

By making worldly forces and factors as emanations of the Adi-Buddha attempt has been made to impress upon the Tantric adepts that they should develop such a mental state that they would not distinguish between samsara and nirvana. In order to realize such oneness an adept should be well trained in meditation. As a matter of fact, the Tantrik method produced quick effects and helped many saints to realize the Truth. It also conferred many supernatural powers on many adepts who could not rise up to the highest spiritual stage. Many of these succumbed to the worldly temptations and indulged in drinks and debauchery. It is this class of false Tantrics who debased the religion and its sublime esoteric practices.

Peadsasamohava succeeded in training up a number of Tibetan Lamas who rose to the highest stages of perfection. For his saintliness and mastery expositions Padmasambhava is revered by the Tibetans as the Second Buddha. Through the help and guidance of these Lamas the Tantric religion became popular all over the country.
In later times many of the adepts failed to imbibe the true spirit of Tantricism and abused their privileges. To counteract such abuses in Tibet, Tsong-kha-pa made an attempt to reform the religion by eliminating the chances of lapses and making monks observe strictly the ecclesiastical laws of the pre-Tantric period of Buddhism. Tsong-kha-pa did not deify Tantricism as a whole and was fully aware of its noble ideal and quick method of realization but he felt that it would be difficult for the young trainees to keep the actual object in sight, and hence the exoteric system might do more harm than good for the lack of true spiritual guides. For this reason he and his disciples started the Ge-lug-pa sect.

MANTRA OF SIX SYLLABLES  y-ge-drug-ma

The wide prevalence of Tantricism in Tibet is proved by the fact that the Mantra ओम-निप्पम-नुम / Om-ma-ni-pa-mo-nu is on every body’s lips and is found to be written at all religious sites. The Mantra appears for the first time in the Sanskrit text Kurandavyuha in which the following interpretation of the Mantra is given: Mani—Perfect Knowledge (Prajna or Vajra) the producer of Tathagatas, who are seated on Padma=Lotus=Avalokitesvara. The Mantra of six syllables is the innermost core (ggos spyi-she-pa) of Avalokitesvara. It is also called बुध-नारायण “the queen of knowledge consisting of six letters”. It is believed that its repeated utterance induces concentration of mind and brings about spiritual elevation and leads even to the highest knowledge. To the householders its utterance confers all the conceivable earthly and heavenly blessings.

TANTRIC IMAGES

In India from the 7th century onwards Perfect Knowledge (Prajna) derived from the well-known text Prajnaparamita was deified into a goddess called Prajnapada (phom-chen-ma). An alternative name of this goddess was Tara, that is, she who rescues beings from the ocean of misery. Thus Prajna which makes a being a Buddha became the goddess Tara and was regarded as the mother of Buddhas. In consequence of such deification there was, at this time an exuberance of Tara statues.

Another very popular god of the Tantrics was Bodhiavata Avalokitesvara the embodiment of mercy (Rg-hbyams-pa) and compassion (sems/ snying-pa). The Bodhisattvas after initiation are asked to develop Bodhicitta i.e. the resolution to attain Bodhi and for that to dedicate the life to the service of others, in other words, they are not only to fulfill the first
five perfections (paramitas) but also to exercise amity and compassion to all beings. So long they exercise these two functions they retain the notion of the world (sahára) and its beings and objects. By gradual extension of the scope of amity and compassion towards all beings of the four corners of the world, they realize the sameness of all beings. Through this realization they are in a fit and proper mood to acquire perfect knowledge (prajñaparamitā) or the Bodhi. In early Buddhism there is the prescription for monks to practice "four immeasurables" (caturāgāramānasampadā): viz. love (Pīti), compassion (Karuna), joy at others' success (Upekkhā) and equanimity (Upekkhāaya). A monk is required to extend these four mental states towards all beings including his enemies and thereby realize that he is identical with others. Out of these four immeasurables the Mahayanaists picked up only the first two. All of these are meant for adepts only who are struggling to rise above worldly discrimination. The Tantrayanaics retained the underlying principles and magnified their importance and defined them as Avalokiteśvara who is believed to have preferred to remain a Bodhisattva in order to be able to render service to all worldly beings through the exercise of amity and compassion. Consequently he continues to be ever in Samāja and does not aspire to attain Nirvāṇa or Sunyata in which case he would cease to be active. He therefore represents worldly altruistic activity. All Bodhisattvas aspiring to attain Bodhi must at first go through this training of exercising universal amity and compassion, which practices are called Upayā in Tantric texts. In other words he enganges himself in altruistic functions in the world. It is after attaining perfection in these that he may unlike Avalokiteśvara aspire to attain perfect knowledge (Prajñā) represented by the goddess Tara. It follows therefore that the worldly means (Upayā) and w merge in perfect knowledge (Prajñaparamitā) when one is said to attain Bodhi and become a Buddha. This merging of Upayā in Prajñā is the ideal of the Tantrayanaists, who, however as explained above, widened the scope of worldly activities but retained the underlying principle.

In Hindu Tantra also there is similar conception. Sakti, the female god, is represented as the cause of liberation while Siva, the male god, represents the forces of bondage (samsāra) corresponding to Tara and Avalokiteśvara respectively of the Buddhist Tantra. These two parallel conceptions in the Hindu and Buddhist Tantric systems brought about the coalescence of the two systems in South-East Asia. In India particularly it is one of the many causes for the merging of Buddhism in Hinduism leading ultimately to the disappearance of Buddhism from
With this introductory paper by Professor Nalinnaksha Dutt we open in these pages a symposium on the Tantras: the different systems and their contents, their origins and affinities. Contributions on the various issues and facets will be published from time to time.

Dutt is categorical about exchange of ideas between mystics of different schools, Buddhist and Brahminical (later Hindu). Some Western scholars (e.g. Lama Anagarika Govinda: Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism, London, 1958) reject the possibility of exchange between Buddhist and Hindu systems as in their opinion the nature and the purpose of the two are fundamentally different. Such scholars reject the description of the deity Prajna as Sakti (e.g. Snellgrove: Heretical Tantras, London, 1959).

On the other hand some Western scholars describe the feminine consort of Buddhist Tantra as Sakti without any reservation (e.g. Hoffmann: The Religions of Tibet, London, 1961, Marco Pallis: Peaks and Lamas, New York, 1949, and Nebesky-Wojkowitz: Oracles and Demons of Tibet, London, 1956).

Scholars who reject the possibility of the two Tantras influencing each other do not notice the coalescence in South-East Asia and the active exchanges between mystics of India and Tibet independent of their denominational labels, as pointed out by many Indian scholars (e.g. Bagchi: Studies in the Tantras, Calcutta, 1939).

Recently exchanges between Indian (Buddhist as well as Hindu) and Chinese (Tao) esoteric systems have been emphasized (e.g. Needham: Science and Civilisation in China, Cambridge, 1954-55 and Suniti Kumar Chatterjee's Address at the XXV International Congress of Orientalists, Moscow, 1960). Dutt's "A Note on Mahacinarata" is appended at the end of this issue of the Bulletin.

Our obituary of Dr. Benoyishch Rattanacharya also contains relevant matter.—NCS

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