A NOTE ON MAHACINATARA

The goddess Tara or Prajñāpāramitā is worshipped both by the Hindus and the Buddhists. In Buddhism, dedication of Prajñāpāramitā into the goddess Tara is not at all unusual, but the inclusion of a non-Vedic goddess into the Hindu pantheon indicates apparently partial absorption of Buddhism into Hinduism in the early medieval period. The Hindu authors have tried to explain, how the worship of the non-Vedic goddess Tara came into vogue among the Hindu Tantrics. The explanation is found in the Brahmā (Rajah, 1913): वैसलसिकान्त (Ch. XVII), वैसलसिकान्त (Ch. I-II), and नृत्यकुटुंबक (Ch. XVII). The tradition preserved in these texts is as follows:

Ascetic-sage Vasistha took the necessary instructions from his spiritual preceptor Brahama for visualization of the goddess Tara, but he failed to visualize the goddess, in spite of his long and arduous attempts through severe austerities and meditation in the Himalayas. He made another attempt on a sea-coast, probably in Assam and he could not succeed this time also. In disgust he began to curse the goddess Tara, when the goddess descended to appear before him and advised him to go to Mahacina, where he would find Buddha, an incarnation of Visnu. It is from him, that he would obtain the necessary instructions. Sage, Vasistha, then proceeded to Mahacina and found there his right spiritual preceptor, Sudhā. Evidently this Buddha, referred to in later texts of the medieval period cannot be the founder of Buddhism, but very probably a Buddhist saint like Bodhidharma, who became famous in China in the 6th Century A.D. as a piyastmaster of esoteric practices. The conversation between Vasistha and the so-called Buddha is given in these words in the तुलसीलात (Ch. XVII: वैसलसिकान्त) (Tyagi, 1947):

वैसलसिकान्त

कृमा जगदी घर्भपिथवित्त त्वम।

युधु जीवं तत्त्वं

यथौ व्याख्यायितं यथौ जीवात।

यथैं जीवात् यथैं जीवायत।

एकाकी विठ्ठनेन दितां जगकान्तप्रविष्टं!

सन्तो तत्त्वायुक्तं श्रीयतज्ञकाज्ञक्तं!

[Vasistha asked Buddha how can a person attain perfection without recourse to Vedic rituals.

In reply Buddha said, O Vasistha listen, there is the excellent path of the Kastes (a Tantric system), by knowing which a person becomes in a moment a god with a frightening look.]
[ A person should stay in a lonely place and get rid of desires and anger, and practise meditations without a break and remain always firm in accumulating experiences of meditations.]

The above tradition evidently has no historical basis but it has been invented to explain the importance of the Taratantram as also to offer an explanation for incorporating a non-Vedic goddess into the Hindu pantheon. This will be apparent from the stanzas quoted below from the Taratantram, in which Siva explains to Parvati how the Taratantram was learnt by Buddha and sage Vasishtha and what benefits they derived from the same.

गृह श्रावण सारमारी प्रसन्न| प्रज्ञा च विनम्र शर्म च | प्रवेशित-प्रायोगिका झूठ असरसज्ज यो | गृही-श्रावणिकुश-शर्म अश्लोल्लगायः ||

[ He is the greatest god, Visnu (Janardana) in the form of Buddha, By meditation and repetition of Ugratantramahamantra, he became the Lord, the Creator of the Universe and attained immortality. Vasishtha also by invoking her (through her mantra) was reborn in the sphere of stars.]

In his Indian Buddhist Iconography (pp. 189-190) Dr. B. Bhattacharyya has referred to the Buddhist and Hindu conceptions of the image of Mahacintarata, that is, Ugra-Tara as given in the Sadhananamala and the Taratantram of Krishnanandas Agamavagira of the 16th Century. He points out how the Buddhist conception was modified by the Hindu Tantrics.

In a few hymns invoking Tara and particularly in the hymn of Taratantram it is clearly indicated that Tara was identical with Prejnaparamita and this was recognized by the Hindus and the Buddhists alike.

The Hindu Tantras may have borrowed a few gods and goddesses from the Buddhists but their ways and methods of practices were different from those of the Buddhists. The propounder of the Hindu Tantras was invariably Siva, who is referred to in these texts as Bhairava. Likewise the interlocutor was always Parvati or Sakti who is referred to as Bhairavi. Hence the Hindu Tantras owe their origin solely to Bhairava and Bhairavi. In later days there appeared a number of authors and saints, to whom also is attributed the authorship of many Hindu Tantric texts.

NALINAKSHA DUTT