

# PRINCIPLES OF BUDDHIST TANTRISM

—LAMA ANAGARIKA GOVINDA

The word *tantra* (तन्त्र) is related to the concept of weaving and its derivatives (thread, web, fabric, etc.), hinting at the interwovenness of things and actions, the interdependence of all that exists, the continuity in the interaction of cause and effect, as well as in spiritual and traditional development which like a thread weaves its way through the fabric of history and of individual lives. The term *tantra* (Tib. ,therefore can also stand for tradition, spiritual continuity or succession. The scriptures, however, which in Buddhism go by the title of *Tantra*, are invariably of a mystic nature and try to establish the inner relationships of things: the parallelism of microcosm and macrocosm, mind and universe, ritual and reality, the world of matter and the world of the spirit. This is achieved through exercises in which *yantra* (यन्त्र), *mantra* (मन्त्र), and *mudra* (मुद्रा), the parallelism of the visible, the audible, and the touchable, unite the powers of mind (चित्), speech (वाक्), and body (काय), in order to realize the final state of completeness and enlightenment.

Thus in applying the words of Guru Gampopa, it may be said that the Buddhist Tantras represent "a philosophy comprehensive enough to embrace the whole of knowledge, a system of meditation which will produce the power of concentrating the mind upon anything whatsoever, and an art of living which will enable one to utilize each activity (of body, speech, and mind) as an aid on the Path of Liberation"

Among all the aspects of Buddhism, its Tantric teachings have until now been the most, neglected and misunderstood. The reason for this was the fact that these scriptures cannot be understood merely philologically, but only from the point of view of *yogic* experience, which cannot be learned from books. Moreover, those books, from which information was sought, were written in a peculiar idiom, a language of symbols and secret conventions which in Sanskrit was called सन्ध्याभाषा (*Sandhyabhasa*, literally "twilight language", because of the double meaning which underlay its words).

This symbolic language was not only a protection against intellectual curiosity and misuse of yogic practices by the ignorant or the uninitiated, but, had its origin mainly in the fact that the ordinary language is not able to express the highest experiences of the mind. The indescribable,

which is experienced by साधक (*Sadhaka*, the true devotee) can only be hinted at by symbols, similes and paradoxes.

The influence of Tantric Buddhism upon Hinduism was so profound, that up to the present day the majority of Western scholars labour under the impression that Tantrism is a Hinduistic creation which was taken over later by more or less decadent Buddhist schools.

Against this view speaks the great antiquity and consistent development of Tantric tendencies in Buddhism. Already the early *Mahasanghikas* had a special collection of mantric formulas in their *Dharani-pitaka* (धारणीपिटक) ; and the *Manjusri-mulakalpa* (मञ्जुश्रीमूलकल्प), which according to some authorities goes back to the first century A. D., contains not only *mantras* and *dharanis* (धारणी) but numerous *mandalas* (मण्डल) and *mudras* (मुद्रा) as well. Even if the dating of the *Manjusri-mulakalpa* is somewhat uncertain, it seems probable that the Buddhist Tantric system had crystallized into definite form by the end of the third century A. D., as we see from the well-known *Guhya samaja* (गुह्यसमाज Tib *Tantra*).

To declare Buddhist Tantrism as an off-shoot of Saivism is only possible for those who have no first-hand knowledge of Tantric literature. A comparison of the Hindu Tantras with those of Buddhism (which are mostly preserved in Tibetan and which therefore for long remained unnoticed by Indologists) not only shows an astonishing divergence of methods and aims, in spite of external similarities, but proves the spiritual and historical priority and originality of the Buddhist Tantras.

*Sankaracarya*, the great Hindu philosopher of the 9th century A. D., whose works form the foundation of all Saivaite philosophy, made use of the ideas of *Nagarjuna* and his followers to such an extent that orthodox Hindus suspected him of being a secret devotee of Buddhism. In a similar way the Hindu Tantras, too, took over the methods and principles of Buddhist Tantrism and adapted them to their own purposes (much as the Buddhists had adapted the age-old principles and techniques of *yoga* to their own systems of meditation). This view is not only held by Tibetan tradition but confirmed by Indian scholars after a critical investigation of the earliest Sanskrit texts of Tantric Buddhism and their historical and ideological relationship with the Hindu Tantras.

Thus Benoytosh Bhattacharya in his *Introduction to Buddhist Esoterism*, has come to the conclusion, "it is possible to declare, without

fear of contradiction, that the Buddhists were the first to introduce the Tantras into their religion, and that the Hindus borrowed them from the Buddhists in later times, and that it is idle to say that later Buddhism was an outcome of Saivism". (p.147)

To judge Buddhist Tantric teachings and symbols from the standpoint of Hindu Tantras, and specially from the principles of Saktism is not only inadequate but thoroughly misleading, because both systems start from entirely different premises. Although both make use of the methods of *yoga* and of similar technical philosophical terms, there is little justification for declaring Buddhism to be identical with Brahmanism and therefore in interpreting the Buddhist Tantras in the light of the Hindu Tantras, or vice versa.

The main difference is that Buddhist Tantrism is not Saktism. The concept of *Sakti* (शक्ति, divine power) of the creative female aspect of the Highest God (*Siva*, शिव), or his emanations does not play any role in Buddhism: in fact, the term *Sakti* never occurs in Buddhist Tantras in this connection, while in the Hindu Tantras, the concept of power (शक्ति) forms the focus of interest. The central idea of Tantric Buddhism, however, is *prajna* (प्रज्ञा=*prajna*=knowledge, wisdom).

To the Buddhist, *Sakti* (शक्ति) is *maya* (माया), the very power that creates illusion, from which only *prajna* can liberate us. It is, therefore not the aim of the Buddhist to acquire power, or to join himself to the powers of the universe, either to become their instrument or to become their master, but on the contrary, he tries to free himself from those powers, which for aeons kept him a prisoner of *samsara* (संसार). He strives to perceive those powers, which have kept him going in the rounds of life and death, in order to liberate himself from their dominion. However, he does not try to negate them or to destroy them, but to transform them in the fire of knowledge, so that they may become forces of enlightenment which, instead of creating further differentiation, flow in the opposite direction: towards union, towards wholeness, towards completeness.

The attitude of the Hindu Tantras is quite different, if not contrary. "United with the *Sakti*, be full of power" says कुलचूडमणितन्त्र (*Kula-cudamani Tantra*). "From the union of *Siva* (शिव) and *Sakti* (शक्ति) the world is created". The Buddhist, on the other hand, does not want the creation and unfoldment of the world but the realization of the "uncreated, unformed" state of *sunyata* (शून्यता), from which all creation proceeds, or which is prior to and beyond all creation (if one may put the inexpressible into human language).

The becoming conscious of this sunyata (शून्यता Tib. , is *prajna* (प्रज्ञा) Tib. ), or highest knowledge. The realization of this highest knowledge in life is enlightenment (बोधि ), i.e. if *prajna* (प्रज्ञा) or *sunyata* (शून्यता), the passive, all embracing female principle, from which everything proceeds and into which everything recedes, is united with the dynamic male principle of active universal love and compassion, which represents the means (उपाय Tib. ) for the realization of *prajna* and *sunyata*, then perfect Buddhahood is attained. Intellect without feeling, knowledge without love, and reason without compassion lead to pure negation, to rigidity, spiritual death, to mere vacuity, while feeling without reason, love without knowledge (blind love), compassion without understanding, lead to confusion and dissolution; but where both are united, where the great synthesis of heart and head, feeling and intellect highest love and deepest knowledge has taken place, completeness is re-established, perfect enlightenment is attained.

The process of enlightenment is therefore represented by the most obvious, the most human and at the same time the most universal symbol imaginable: the union of male and female in the ecstasy of love, in which the active element (*upaya*) is represented as a male, the passive (*prajna*) by a female figure, in contrast to the Hindu Tantras, in which the female aspect is represented as *Sakti*, i. e., the active principle, and the male aspect as *Siva*, the pure state of divine consciousness or 'being', i. e., the passive principle, or the 'resting in its own nature'.

In Buddhist symbolism, the Knower (Buddha) becomes one with his knowledge (*prajna*), just as man and wife become one in the embrace of love, and this becoming one is the highest indescribable happiness, *mahasukha* (महासुख Tib. ) The Dhyani-Buddhas (ध्यानीबुद्ध i. e., the ideal Buddhas visualized in meditation) and the Dhyani-Bodhisattvas (ध्यानी बोधिसत्त्व), as embodiments of the active urge of enlightenment which finds its expression in *upaya*, the all-embracing love and compassion, are therefore represented in the embrace of their *prajna*, symbolized by a female deity, the embodiment of highest knowledge.

This is not the arbitrary reversal of Hindu symbology, but the consequent application of a principle which is of fundamental importance for the entire Buddhist Tantric system.

By confusing Buddhist Tantrism with the Saktism of the Hindu Tantras, a basic misconception had been created, which up to the present

day has prevented a clear understanding of the *Vajrayana* and its symbolism, in iconography as well as in literature, especially that of the *Siddhas*. The latter used a particular form of symbology, in which very often the highest was clothed in the form of the lowest, the most sacred in the form of the most profane, the transcendent in the form of the most earthly, and deepest knowledge in the form of the most grotesque paradoxes. It was not only a language for initiates, but a kind of shock therapy, which had become necessary on account of the over-intellectualization of the religious and philosophical life of those times.

Though the polarity of male and female principles is recognized in the Tantras of the *Vajrayana* and is an important feature of its symbolism, it is raised upon a plane which is as far away from the sphere of mere sexuality as the mathematical juxtaposition of positive and negative signs, which is as valid in the realm of irrational values as in that of rational or concrete concepts.

In Tibet the male and female Dhyani-Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are regarded as little as "sexual beings" as in certain schools of Japan; and to the Tibetan even their aspect of union (युगनद्ध Tib. ) is indissolubly associated with the highest spiritual reality in the process of enlightenment, so that associations with the realm of physical sexuality are completely ignored.

We must not forget that the figural representation of these symbols are not looked upon as portraying human beings, but as embodying the experiences and visions of meditation. In such a state, however, there is nothing more that could be called 'sexual', there is only the super-individual polarity of all life, which rules all mental and physical activities, and which is transcended only in the ultimate state of integration, in the realization of *sannyata*. This is the state which is called *mahamudra* (महामुद्रा Tib. ), the "Great Attitude" or "the Great Symbol", which has given its name to one of the most important systems of meditation in Tibet.

In the earlier forms of Indian Buddhist Tantrism, *Mahamudra* was represented as the 'eternal female' principle, as may be seen from *Advaya-vajra's* definition: "The words 'great' and 'mudra' form together the term 'mahamudra'. She is not something (नःस्वभाव); she is free from the veils which cover the cognizable object and so on; she shines forth like the serene sky at noon during autumn; she is the support of all success; she is the identity *samsara* and *nirvana*; her body is compassion (करुण)

which is not restricted to a single object ; she is the uniqueness of Great Bliss (महासुखैकरूप)'”<sup>1</sup>

If in one of the most controversial passages of Anangavajra सप्रज्ञोपाय विनिश्चय सिद्धि<sup>2</sup> it is said that all women should be enjoyed by the *sadhaka* in order to experience the *mahamudra*, it is clear that this can not be understood in the physical sense, but that it can only be applied to that highest form of love which is not restricted to a single object and which is able to see all ‘female’ qualities, whether in ourselves or in others, as those of the Divine Mother (प्रज्ञापारमिता Tib.

Another passage, which by its very grotesqueness proves that it is meant to be a paradox and is not to be taken literally states that “the *sadhaka* who has sexual intercourse with his mother, his sister, his daughter, and his sister’s daughter, will easily succeed in his striving for the ultimate goal (तत्त्वयीग)’”<sup>3</sup>

To take expressions like ‘mother’ ‘sister’, ‘daughter’ or ‘sister’s daughter’ literally in this connection is as senseless as taking literally the well-known *Dhammapada* verse (No. 294), which says that, after having killed father and mother and two Ksatriya kings, and destroyed a Kingdom with all its inhabitants, the *Brahmana* remains free from sin.<sup>4</sup> Here ‘father and mother’ stands for ‘egoism and craving’ (Pali : अस्मिन्न and तण्हा) the ‘two kings’ for the erroneous views of annihilation or eternal existence (उच्छेद वा सारसत दिङ्गि), the kingdom and its inhabitants’ for the twelve spheres of consciousness’ (द्वादशायतनानि) and the *Brahmana* for the liberated monk (भिक्षु).

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1. अद्वयवज्र : चतुर्-मुद्रा quoted in *Yuganaddha* by H. V. Guenther (Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, Banaras, 1952).
  2. प्रज्ञोपायविनिश्चयसिद्धि in *Two Vajrayana Works*, Gaikwad Oriental Series, No. XLIV, p. 22.
  3. प्रज्ञोपायविनिश्चयसिद्धि V, 25, quoted in *Yuganaddha*, p. 106. A similar statement is found in the *Guhyasamaja Tantra*.
  4. मातरं पितरं हन्त्वा, राजानो द्वे च खत्तिये ।  
रुद्रं सानुचरं हन्त्वा, अनीघी याति ब्राह्मणे ॥

To maintain that Tantric Buddhists actually encouraged incest and licentiousness is as ridiculous as accusing the *Theravadins* of condoning matricide and patricide and similar heinous crimes. If we only take the trouble to investigate the living tradition of the Tantras in their genuine, unadulterated forms, as they existed still in our days in thousands of monasteries and hermitages of Tibet, where the ideals of sense-control and renunciation were held in the highest esteem, then only can we realize how ill-founded and worthless are the current theories which try to drag the Tantras into the realm of sensuality.

From the point of view of the Tibetan Tantric tradition, the above mentioned passages can only be meaningful in the context of *yoga* terminology.

'All women in the world' signifies all the elements which make up the female principles of our psycho-physical personality which, as the Buddha says, represents what is called 'the world'. To these principles correspond, on the opposite side, an equal number of male principles. Four of the female principles form a special group, representing the vital forces (गण) of the Great Elements (महाभूत), Earth, Water, Fire, Air and their corresponding psychic centres (चक्र) or plans of consciousness within the human body. In each of them the union of male and female principles must take place, before the fifth and highest stage is reached. If the expressions 'mother', 'sister', 'daughter', etc., are applied to the forces of these fundamental qualities of the *mahabhutas*, the meaning of the symbolism becomes clear.

In other words, instead of seeking union with a woman outside ourselves, we have to seek it within ourselves ("in our own family") by the union of our male and female qualities in the process of meditation. This is clearly stated in Naropa's famous "Six Doctrines" (

) upon which the most important *yoga* method of the Kargyupa ( ) school is based, a method which was practised by *Milarepa*, the most saintly and austere of all the great masters of meditation (whom certainly nobody could accuse of 'sexual practices'). Though we cannot here go into the details of this *yoga*, a short quotation may suffice to prove our point. "The vital force of the Five Aggregates (Tib. Skt. स्कन्ध) in its real nature, pertaineth to the masculine aspect of the Buddha-principle manifesting through the left psychic nerve (Tib. Skt. ईडा नाडि). The vital force of the Five Elements (Tib. Skt. धातु), in its real nature, pertaineth to the feminine aspect

of the Buddha principle manifesting through the right psychic nerve (Tib.

Skt. विज्ञान नाडि). As the vital force with these two aspects of it in union, descendeth into the median nerve (Tib. Skt. सुषुम्ना) gradually there cometh the realization....." and one attains the transcendental boon of the Great Symbol (*mahamudra*).<sup>5</sup> the union of the male and female principles ( as *upaya* and *prajna* ) in the highest state of Buddhahood.

Thus, only if we are able to see the relationship of body and mind, of physical and spiritual interaction in a universal perspective, and if in this way we overcome the "I" and "mine" and the whole structure of egocentric feelings, opinions, and prejudices which produce the illusion of our separate individuality, then only can we rise into the sphere of Buddhahood.

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5. W. Y. Evans-Wentz and Dawa Samdup : *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines*, p. 220ff.