

## Module 3: Historical Survey of Buddhist Thought

Lecture No.

### The emergence of Tantrayāna (aka Mantrayāna then Vajrayāna)

**1. Time frame:** circa 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D

#### 2. Conditions

Like the emergence of Mahāyāna, the emergence of Vajrayāna is the result of many complex conditions, both within and without Buddhism. Listed below are some of the more palpable conditions:

- (External factor)  
Revival of Hinduism under royal patronage and the assimilation of Buddhism by Hinduism → Hinduism as mainstream religion in India, heavy borrowing of Hindu ideas in some Buddhist mystical practice; prevalence of Śaiva cults
- (Internal factors)
  1. Mahāyāna entering matured phase philosophically, attention turned to mystical aspects, exploring the possibilities described in the sūtras with mental practice?
  2. Logical development of Mahāyāna concepts of *sūnyatā*, *tathāgatagarbha*, *trikāya* and the potentiality of Buddhahood in every sentient being
  3. Reaction against Bodhisattva-ideal of perfecting *pāramitās* for eons and returning to the Buddha's teaching in *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* in *Majjhima-nikāya* that if a person should put in effort in the practice of the four foundations of mindfulness, he could attain enlightenment in 7 years, nay, 7 days. → concept of 即身成佛: attainment of Buddhahood in this very life (cf. Blofeld, p.46)
  4. Some Buddhists *yogis* blended Buddhist methods with tantric practice and achieved spiritual attainments; they then transmitted their own experience to selected disciples via oral instruction, thus forming a spiritual lineage not unlike the early *Upaniṣadic* traditions; the tantric-sūtras probably originated from these accomplished *yogis*. (cf. 印度佛教思想史 p.390)
  5. Interaction with Dravidian culture in South India; Dravidians seemed to be adepts in the use of *mantras* (cf. 印度佛教思想史 p.396f)

#### 3. Some Tantric practice and culture

1. emphasis that this path is dangerous but swift (or swift but dangerous) like lightning hence the name 'Vajra' (thunderbolt?) → not for ordinary people → esoteric (for the qualified few only) → teacher to student (oral tradition) → stress on lineage and faith in Teacher (Guru)
2. Initiation rites ('empowerment'): Sanskrit original: *abhiṣekha*, meaning 'sprinkling', 'watering', specifically sprinkling water on an area of earth such as a field (originally an enthronement/crowning rite in Indian royal customs.)  
'In Vajrayāna, the purpose of *abhiṣekha* is to enliven or quicken the disciple's progress toward enlightenment, just as we might sprinkle water on a field in which seeds have been sown, and by that sprinkling enliven and quicken the growth of the seeds.' We should not take it at face value, regarding it as a sort of initiation into a secret society or the like. (cf. Santina, p. 254)  
Generally there are two types of initiation:

*jenang* – this is like a blessing or permission to do the practice while *wong* entails actually imagining ourselves entering into the *mandala* of a deity.

(cf. Thubten Chodron, *Buddhism for beginners*, p.81)

Note that Vajrayāna disciples are required to undertake Vajrayāna precepts together with Bodhisattva precepts before qualifying for the Initiation.

3. Left-hand tantra versus right-hand tantra (tantras with non-Buddhist associations versus tantras relatable to Mahāyāna sūtras) (cf. Snellgrove, p.147ff)
4. Using negativities as conditions for practice → sensual pleasures (greed: *rāga*, not only *lobha*) as seen in *yab-yum* practice (sexual yoga), anger (wrathful forms of Bodhisattvas); but these must be backed by realization of *śūnyatā*
5. Visualizations (*śamatha* practice) – of tutelary deity (*Yidam*); transforming oneself into *yidam*
6. Controlling of physiological responses via the practice of ‘winds and drops’ – mental-physical synthesis to attain concentration and heightened awareness → psychic powers are by-products
7. Why choose the swift but dangerous path? *Bodhicitta*

#### 4. Spread of Vajrayāna

In India, Buddhist tantric practice probably originated in Udyāna near Kāśmīra (Northern India) where thick deserted woods were the ideal hermitage for *yogis* and among the Dravidians (original natives of India) in Southern India. By 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D, although Buddhism as a whole suffered great setbacks under two Hindu scholars enthusiastic in persecuting Buddhism (Śaṃkāra and Kumāri), Buddhism in the form of Vajrayāna enjoyed the patronage of the eastern kingdom of Pāla Dynasty. The famous (Śrī-)Vikramaśīla (University) sponsored by the Pāla royalty included 54 Mahāyāna temples and 53 Vajrayāna temples, outshining Nālanda University in size and grandeur.

In 747, Śāntarakṣita who originated in East India but studied in Nālanda was invited to propagate Dharma in Tibet by the Tibetan king Khri-sroṅ-lde-btsan, bringing the first wave of Buddhism to Tibet. Śāntarakṣita was a Svātāntrika-Mādhyamika who tried to reconcile Yogācārin doctrines within the Madhyamaka framework. At the same time, he was also influenced by Vajrayāna. As such, the Buddhism he transmitted to Tibet would have the elements of all these forms of Mahāyāna. Vajrayāna was further established as the predominant type of Buddhism practiced in Tibet when Padmasaṃbhava, a Buddhist tantric adept, was able to subjugate resistance to Buddhism put up by native Bon-adherents. Tibetans were converted to Buddhism under the guidance of both Śāntarakṣita and Padmasaṃbhava.

When Buddhism was persecuted by an evil king in 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D, the kings that succeeded him worked hard to bring about the second wave of Buddhism from India. This was when Indian scholars like Atiśa came to Tibet and brought about the revival of Buddhism. He also reformed much of the corrupted practices prevalent in Buddhism at that time.

By late 12<sup>th</sup> century to early 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D the morose Buddhism in India disappeared completely from its native land, yet before its demise, its many forms were exported to regions like China, South-east Asia and Tibet. To date, Chinese and Tibetan sources were invaluable in providing information on sectarian-Buddhism and Mahāyāna-Vajrayāna flourish in India.

## 5. Vajrayāna sects in Tibet

Nyingmapa (lit. the Old Order) – traced its lineage to Padmasambhava. Few of the lamas in this sect take monastic vows, most are married clergy identified by special attire. The Nyingmapas are tantric adepts though less schooled in Mahāyāna scriptural studies. Famous doctrine: Dzogchen (*mahāmudra*, 大手印)

Kargyupa – traces its lineage to Milarepa and through him, Lama Marpa (11<sup>th</sup> century) and his Indian teacher Naropa. Many of its members pass much of their lives in lonely caves absorbed in tantric meditations. Kargyupas tend generally to be austere; they adhere more strictly to the Vinaya rules than do the Nyingmapas and often practice a kind of meditation that is almost identical with Zen. (Famous contemporary Kargyupa: the 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa)

Sakyapa – traces its lineage back to Atiśa who spent his last years in Tibet (died A.D 1052). Of the Red Hat sects, it is nearest to the Gelugpa.

Gelugpa – (The only Yellow Hat sect) traces its lineage back to Tsong-kapa (15<sup>th</sup> century) and beyond him to Atiśa. Tsong-kapa was a reformer who gave the sect its present form. It encourages monastic discipline and learning, postponing the Tantras until the end of a long course of study (the Geshe degree takes 25 years to complete, Hlarampa degree – attained after going through an exhausting series of public debates and examinations at different monasteries, culminating in a session before the Dalai Lama and his teachers at the Norbulingka Summer Palace).

## 6. Four Classes of Tantric Practice

The Vajrayāna tutelary deities can be divided into four classes of ascending power or efficacy in bringing about the transformation from an unenlightened mode of existence to an enlightened mode of existence:

1. Kriyā-tantra (事續)
2. Cārya-tantra (行續)
3. Yoga-tantra (瑜伽續)
4. Anuttara-yoga-tantra (無上瑜伽續) – ‘father-tantra’ (父續) e.g. Yamantaka  
- ‘mother tantra’ (母續) e.g. Hevraja, Kālacakra

Initiation is the introduction of a disciple into the sacred universe of tutelary deity of one of these classes of tantra.

The *kriyā* class refers to a group of tutelary deities and practices primarily concerned with externalized rituals and practices. *Kriyā* means ‘action’, ‘ritual’, ‘ceremony’. The tutelary deities who belong to this class are associated with practices that are, by and large, external and ritualistic that often involve vegetarianism, regular and even ritual bathing and ritual offering.

In contrast, the tutelary deities of the *cārya* class are associated with practices that have to do primarily with the internal attitudes, intentions and conceptions of the practitioner. *Cārya* practices are usually internal, to the exclusion of external practices. Practitioners of *cārya* class often present a much less sociable appearance than those of the *kriyā* class of tantra.

The *yoga* class of tutelary deities is associated with a combination of practices belonging to the *kriyā* and *cārya* classes. Practices associated with the *yoga* class seek to arrive at a balance between the external and internal practices. This balance, or union, between the internal and external practices is reflected in the term ‘*yoga*’, which means ‘combination’ or ‘union’.

In the case of the *anuttarayoga* tutelary deities, we have a transcendence or dissolution of the barriers that define the first three classes of practice. Thus the *anuttarayoga* class of tutelary deities and practices is most highly developed within the Vajrayāna tradition. It is at this level that we achieve, in its fullest sense, complete integration of experience into the Vajrayāna path, integration that leads spontaneously to the transformation of being. (Adapted from Santina, p255f)

Reference:

1. David Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism – Indian Buddhists and their Tibetan successors* (London: Serindia Publications, 1987)
2. Ven. Yinshun, 初期大乘佛教之起源与开展 *The Origins and Development of Early Mahāyāna-Buddhism* (Taipei: Zhengwen Publishers, 1980)
3. John Blofeld, *The Tantric Mysticism of Tibet – a practical guide to the theory, purpose and techniques of Tantric meditation* (Arkana: Penguin Books, 1992)
4. Peter D. Santina, *The Tree of Enlightenment*, (Taipei: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation 1998, reprint)