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Vajrayāna Buddhism: An overview

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Introduction

Jñānasiddhi^[1] a treatise on Buddhist *tantra* is quite popular in Odisha. The author Indrabhūti happens to be a king of south Koshala (at present Sambalpur area of Odisha), who flourished in 712 AD. His sister Lakshmiṅkarā a great devout *Vajrayāni* lived around 722 AD. The legend believes that Indrabhūti was blind in his childhood and due to some natural calamity his kingdom was devastated. He was not happy with the royal life and his only son died untimely. This circumstance probably provoked him to become an ascetic by taking refuge under the holy Buddhist priests. The lord Padmavajra-Buddha his guru granted his prayer and returned back his sight by which he could see this mundane world. His adopted son Padmasambhava with his brother-in-law Śāntarakṣita, propagated Bauddha-Tantra-Yāna in Tibet. Guru, Padmavajra was the introducer of hevajra-tantra. Indrabhūti besides Jñānasiddhi has twenty-two works. What is Jñāna-siddhi? The real path of vajrayāna^[2] the Buddhist tantric way, is found to be discussed in this work. Indrabhūti shows here a path to attain the most significant realization of Truth in an off beaten track unknown to the rest of the world.

This overview of Buddhist practice is presented in three sections:

1. Getting Started (Hīnayāna)
2. Going Deeper (Mahāyāna)
3. Entering the *Maṇḍala* (Vajrayāna)

Hīnayāna

The Hīnayāna is the foundation of all Buddhist practice. Generally, we begin with meditation as a way to calm our minds and experience peace. As we begin to extend the peace we find in meditation into our daily lives, the practice of ethics becomes important as a way to maintain and develop our spiritual growth. Meditation and ethics are practiced by anyone, but someone who begins to have a certain level of understanding and appreciation of the Buddhist teachings may choose to formally become a Buddhist, through the ceremony called “taking Refuge”.

Mahāyāna

The meditation tames the mind, and provides a “vacation” from negative emotions. But to really permanently uproot the negative habits of mind that cause us suffering, we need to go farther and train the mind in compassion and emptiness, which are the true antidotes to ego, the root of all suffering. The mind that realizes compassion and emptiness is called *bodhicitta*, and one powerful practice for developing *bodhicitta*^[3] is there it becomes easier for the practitioner.

Vajrayāna

Through practicing meditation and developing compassion, our view of the world begins to change. Our ordinary, confused perception of the world is called “*saṃsāra*”^[4]. In a very real sense, “*nirvāṇa*” is just a change in perspective-developing a more enlightened outlook. Achieving *nirvāṇa* doesn’t mean that we abandon this world for a better one. In fact, two beings can be sitting side by side, whether on a peaceful retreat or in the middle of a traffic jam in a busy city, and one could be experiencing *saṃsāra* while the other experiences *nirvāṇa*.

0.2 Vajrayāna practice is based on the recognition that *nirvāṇa* is here now, if we could only change our perception. Our confused perception actually is not based in how things really are. By developing pure perception of our world and the beings in it, a practice known as deity

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yoga, we can rapidly transform our perception and unlock our enlightened potential. We also practice resting in the nature of the mind, which is called *mahāmudrā* [5].

Because these practices are so powerful, they are generally preceded by the preliminary practices which help prepare the mind of the practitioner so that these practices can be effective.

Vajrayāna (the thunderbolt vehicle) is the Buddhist system that incorporating tantric methods. It means that exercises, practices and rituals are handed down directly from teacher to student by word of mouth, though often with the aid of teaching materials in the form of pamphlets and pictures. Even though Buddha Shakyamuni rejected the notion of a permanent Self, he acknowledged the belief in rebirth. He said that this was not inevitable and he taught the methods that he, himself, had used to achieve enlighten and release from the bonds of the wheel of rebirth (Skt. *Sangsara* or *samsāra*) in a single lifetime.

Vajrayāna works to transmute one's "imperfections" and ordinary awareness by means of un-ordinary and also, some extraordinary methods. For example, the system of *chakras* and *nāḍīs* that some people know about from other contexts are also utilized in this system, where it is often called "working with the winds and drops." An advanced initiated student with an agreeable partner or consort can receive instruction in working with this energy as a couple. It must be stressed that the primary objective is not enhancement of physical sensation.

1.1 Vajrayāna (Sanskrit: "Diamond Vehicle" or "Thunderbolt Vehicle") or Mantrayāna (Sanskrit "path of the sacred Formulas"), also known as Tantric Buddhism, first emerged in various parts of India and Sri Lanka. The esoteric nature of Tantric doctrine and practice makes identifying the origins of the Vajrayāna school difficult, but some Buddhist traditions associate them with Nagarjuna and Asanga and therefore suggest that Vajrayāna began to develop quietly in the 2nd or 4th century CE. Vajrayāna was prominent in India and Tibet, and a form of it, which does not seem to have emphasized sexo-yogic practices, spread to China and then to Japan. Although Vajrayāna texts describe numerous yogic or contemplative stages that must be experienced before enlightenment can be achieved, they preserve the Mahāyāna identification of nirvana and *samsāra* as a basic truth.

Moreover, Vajrayāna teaches that nirvana as *Śūnyatā* ("voidness") is one side of a polarity that must be complemented by *karuṇā* ("compassion of the bodhisattva"). *Śūnyatā*⁶, according to the Vajrayāna tradition, is the passive wisdom (*prajñā*) that possesses an absolutely indestructible or diamond like (*vajra*) nature beyond all duality and *karuṇā* is the means (*upāya*) or dynamic aspect of the World. Enlighten arises when these seeming opposites are understood to be one. This realization, which is known experientially and not cognitively, is portrayed in Vajrayāna imagery and practice as the union of the passive female deity, which signifies wisdom or voidness, with the dynamic male, signifying compassion without attachment.

1.2 Vajrayāna Buddhist believes that, as all things are in truth of one nature-the void-physical-mental processes can be used as a vehicle for enlightenment. According to the *kālacakra Tantra*, the Buddha taught that, in this age of degeneration, enlightenment must be achieved through the body, which contains the whole cosmos. Vajrayāna specialists warn, however that the first step toward enlightenment is

taken by undergoing instruction by a master who has been initiated into the mysteries and can teach the correct use of the body's process. The master directs every step so that the pupil learns to control mental and physical processes instead of being dominated by them. The master, it is believed, leads the student to compassion through meditation on the transitoriness of life, the relation of cause and effect of one's actions, and the suffering of humanity.

After sympathy for human suffering has been aroused, the student is taught yogic, or contemplative, exercises that help to produce inner experiences corresponding to the various stages of spiritual growth. Advancement toward enlightenment involves the identification of the initiate with deities that represent various cosmic forces. These gods are first visualized with the help of *mudrās* (meditative gestures and postures), *mantras* (sacred syllables and phrases), and icons portrayed in a *maṇḍala* [7], all of which are believed to possess the essence of the divinities to be invoked. After this visualization the initiate identifies with the divinities finds that each in turn is *śūnyatā* ("voidness"). According to Vajrayāna traditions, the culmination of this process, called *vajrasattvayoga* [8], gives the initiate a diamond-like body beyond all duality.

1.3 The four stages in the process are described in four different groups of tantras (the *Kriyā-tantra*, *Caryā-tantra*, *Yoga-tantra*, and *Anuttarayoga-tantra*) that are compared with the fourfold phases of courtship (the exchange of glances, a pleasing or encouraging smile, the holding of hands, and consummation in the sexual act.) The first stage involves external ritual acts, and the second combines these outward acts with contemplation. The third stage involves only contemplation, and the fourth is the unification of all dualities in the sexual act, symbolically or effectively. The last stage is divided into two phases. In the first the initiate uses controlled imagination to experience the union on an ideational level.

The second phase is the *maithuna*, or sexual coupling. Unlike the ordinary sexual act, which gives only momentary pleasure, the *maithuna* is considered a technique to attain enlightenment and eternal bliss because the initiate has already realized the voidness of all things, allowing perfect control over emotions and a complete absence of attachment. These vajrayāna practices have been condemned by some Buddhists and some modern scholars as degenerate, a view ostensibly borne out by the *Guhyasamāja-tantra*, which states that adultery and eating of human flesh are actions of the *bodhisattva*.

2.1 Vajrayāna literature

The *tantras*, the genre of texts unique to the Vajrayāna tradition, are written in a highly figurative and symbolic language to enable individual spiritual development. Because of this symbolic character, the *tantras* have usually been kept secret, and a literalist interpretation of such texts has usually failed to make any sense out of them. The *Guhyasamāja-tantra* ("Treatise on the Sum Total of Mysteries"), also called the *Tathāgataguhyaka* ("The Mystery of *Tathāgata* hood [Buddhahood]"), is the earliest-known *tantra* and is traditionally ascribed to Asanga (c. 4th century CE), the renowned Indian scholar and propounder of the Yogācāra philosophy. Unlike most *tantras*, which do not explain the technical or symbolic terms that they employ, the *Guhyasamāja-tantra* devotes a very long chapter to the elucidation of these terms.

An important feature of all *tantras* is a polarity symbolism, which appears on the physical level as the union of male and female, on the ethical level as the union of beneficial activity and an appreciation of what there is as it is, and on the philosophical level as the synthesis of absolute reality and absolute compassion. The richness of this symbolism is apparent in the opening of the *Guhyasamāja*, where the absolute, which is depicted as a polarity, manifests itself in various *maṇḍalas* (circular diagrams that have both a psychological and a cosmic reference), each related to one of the celestial Buddhas Aksobhya, Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, Amitabha, and Amoghasiddhi. Each of these Buddhas gain represents a polarity that is often portrayed in iconographic works through their union with female consorts.

The *tantras* may emphasize either “beneficial activity” or “appreciate awareness” or their “unity”, and, therefore, Tantric literature has been divided into the so-called Father *Tantra* (emphasizing activity), the Mother *Tantra* (emphasizing appreciation,) and the Nondual *Tantra* (dealing with both aspects unitively). The original Sanskrit versions of most of these works have been lost, but their influence is noticeable in works such as *Jñānasiddhi* (“Attainment of Knowledge”) by the great Vajrayāna teacher Indrabhūti (c. 687-717), *prajñopāyavinīcayasiddhi* (“The Realization of the Certitude of Appreciative Awareness and Ethical Action”) by the 8th –century writer Anangavajra, and the songs of the 84 *mahāsiddhas* (“masters of miraculous powers,” who were considered to have attained the Vajrayāna goal).

2.2 Like the Nathas, Shaktas, and Shaivites, the Vajrayanists postulated a subtle or iconographic body, made up of *cakras*, *nāḍīs* and subtle winds (*vāyu*). And like their Indian counterparts they worked on manipulating the forces of this subtle body through *yoga* ^[9] in order to attain spiritual enlightenment. But Vajrayānatāntra diverged very early from Indian *tantra*. Instead of the later seven-*cakra* model, they retain an earlier four *cakra* schema of navel, heart, throat, and head centers.

Starting from this four-*cakra* foundation, the Vajrayanists-like the Indian tantrics-built up a very elaborate system of correspondences. There are a number of other important differences to Indian (shaktas) *Tantra* as well. In Indian *tantra* one start form the base *cakra* and progresses up. In Tibetan *tantra* one starts from the head, which is the “lowest” level of consciousness (body, waking consciousness, wrathful deities), and progresses down to the heart, which is the highest level of consciousness. With Indian *tantra* the *kuṇḍalīni* is awakened through specific breathing practices and *yoga*-postures. The *prāṇa* or vital-force of the subtle body is thus manipulated through the breath and the physical body; through an extension of *Hathayoga* which, the reader will recall, as associated from the beginning with Indian *tantra*. In contrast, Vajrayāna practice involves manipulating the vital force through the mind and concentration.

As a result of the tumo-heat, the drops melt and enter the central channel. The red “female” drops in the navel *cakra* ascend to the heart *cakra*, while the white drops in the crown *cakra* descend to the same *cakra*. The bliss of the drops flowing in the central channel is said to be a hundred times greater than that of orgasm. The drops, moving up or down the central channel, finally enter the “indestructible drop” in the heart *cakra*, so called because it is said to be drop that passes from life-time to life-time, taking with it the “very subtle mind” and “very subtle wind”.

The experience of the mystery of the body involves the use of *mudrās*: devotional gestures of the hands and fingers, postures of meditation, and the handling of such sacred instruments as the *vajra* (“thunderbolt” and “diamond”) and the lotus. The mystery of speech involves the recitation of *dharāṇīs* or *mantras*, mystical verses and sounds believed to be the essence of the cosmic forces with which one wishes to commune. Attaining the mystery of the mind involves yogic contemplation of and absorption in the Buddha Mahavairocana and his attendants.

2.3 Although Vajrayāna texts describe numerous yogic or contemplative stages that must be experienced before enlightenment can be achieved; they preserve the Mahayāna identification of *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* as a basic truth. Moreover, Vajrayāna teaches that nirvana as *sūnyatā* (“voidness”) is one side of a polarity that must be complemented by *karuṇā* (“compassion of the bodhisattva”). *sūnyatā*, according to the Vajrayāna tradition, is the passive wisdom (*prajñā*) that possesses an absolutely indestructible or diamond-like (*vajra*) nature beyond all duality and *karuṇā* is the means (*upāya*) or dynamic aspect of the world. Enlightenment arises when these seeming opposites are understood to be one.

We learn active compassion by empathizing with the sufferings of our own mother and by truly trying to reduce this as well as to eliminate whatever is causing her pain. Active compassion is the wish and intent to relieve others from misery and form whatever is causing them anguish. These two are the very core of the teachings of the Mahayāna, the great vehicle, which is the Buddha’s second turning of the wheel of the teaching. No matter what esoteric meditations of the Vajrayāna one may engage in, we must base ourselves in the essence of Mahayāna Buddhist teaching, the practice of loving kindness and compassion. This will lead to a point where we are actually able to renounce our own self-interest in favor of cherishing the welfare of others. This is genuine altruism. Even if one is not quite ready or able to adopt such a noble attitude, we train ourselves step by step to really consider what will help others as much as we look out for our own welfare.

3.1 Having understood what is the basis of the Mahayāna or greater vehicle of Buddhism, one may now ask where the Vajrayāna, the esoteric tantric vehicle, fits in to the Buddhist tradition. Vajrayāna, the diamond vehicle, is a branch of the Mahayāna tradition. If one has developed a good basis of loving kindness and compassion, one may make use of the methods that are the special skillful means of the Vajrayāna. The benefit of these methods is that they provide a far more skillful and much swifter means of attaining enlightenment that can be gained by relying on the other vehicles on their own.

It is said that even if one follows the perfection of wisdom or *Prajñāpāramitā* of the Mahayāna, still it will require three incalculable actions to attain enlightenment. On the other hand, resorting to the skillful methods of the Vajrayāna diamond vehicle, it is taught that it is even possible to attain enlightenment is one lifetime. There have been a great number of practioners of India and Tibet who through following Vajrayāna Buddhism have indeed attained complete enlightenment in a single lifetime. It is for this purpose of greatly accelerating the path to enlightenment that the Vajrayāna path is available as a special means within the great Mahayāna vehicle.

Vajrayāna (*the thunderbolt vehicle*) is the Buddhist system that incorporates tantric methods. It means that exercises, practices and rituals are handed down directly from teacher to student by word of mouth, though often with the aid of teaching materials in the form of pamphlets and picture. Even though Buddha Shakyamuni rejected the notion of a permanent Self, he acknowledged the belief in rebirth. He said that this was not inevitable and he taught the methods that he, himself, had used to achieve enlightenment and release from the bonds of the wheel of rebirth (Skt. *Saṅgasa* or *samsāra*) in a single lifetime.

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Conclusion

The Mahāyāna tradition developed a systematic way of rituals which is similar with the tantric ideas of Hindu tradition. By the gradual period it has undergone several changes and developed in to various ways of tantric practices. In Odisha it has contributed to the Mahāyāna tradition which travelled later on to South-East-Asia.

Vajrayāna practices and the imagery of its texts, however, were designed to shock the complacency and self-righteousness of more traditional Buddhists. Moreover, the imagery of the texts was based on the belief that voidness alone exists and that is beyond good or evil in the usual sense. The imagery is also based on the belief that any acts that bring about this realization are acts that benefit the practitioner and all sentient beings. The contribution of Vajrayāna is significant and noteworthy so far as the Western Odisha is concerned, the places like- Ranipur-jharia, Padmapur, Sonapur, Bolangir and Sambalpur are the foundation of Vajrayāna tradition of Buddhism. A lot of researches need to be done in this area which can prove and establish new milestones in the above field of Buddhism.

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