

The Tantric Perspective

In Indian Buddhism, a form of the Mahayana developed which in time saw itself as a new, more powerful 'vehicle' to salvation. This came to predominate in the lands of Northern Buddhism, while in Korea and Japan it exists alongside various other forms of the Mahayana.

The new approach was based on a large body of texts called *Tantras* – or later classified as of this type – which outline complex meditational 'systems' which incorporate ritual, magic, and a rich symbolism. Texts of a tantric type began to appear from the second century CE and were being translated into Chinese in the third and fourth centuries CE. They continued being composed in India until around 1200 CE. Nevertheless, some were said to have been taught by the historical Buddha, to a select band of disciples who had then passed them on; others were seen as taught by the tantric deity Vajradhara, seen as a form in which the Buddha appeared to legendary masters of the past.

The Mantranaya and the Origin of Tantric Buddhism

Tantric practice centres on the ritual evocation, especially through the use of *mantras* and visualization, of deities that are seen as in some sense awakened. Such methods were originally for worldly ends – part of the Mahayana aim of compassionately helping beings.

In time, they became part of advanced practices for those who had prepared themselves by prior Mahayana training. These aimed to generate deep religious experiences which can lead to Buddhahood more quickly than the hugely long *Bodhisattva* path. The emphasis on power and efficacy can be seen as a development of the idea of meditative psychic powers (Pali *iddhi*, Skt *rdhi*), which was there from the beginning in Buddhism.

The early phase of tantric Buddhism called itself the '*Mantra-naya*' or 'way of *mantras*' (the term *Mantra-yana* was a later coining), this being seen as a complement to the *Paramita-naya*, or 'way of the perfections', as part of Mahayana practice.

From the third century, *Sutras* contained *dharanis*, short formulas 'preserving' or 'maintaining' the *Dharma* and aiding its followers. The pre-Mahayana *Sutras* also contain *parittas*, or short protective chants. Building on such a basis, the practice of using *mantras*, or sacred words of power, was adopted from Hinduism, where they were originally used in the *Vedas*.

These 'mental instruments' were used to contact gods, or as spells to gain a good harvest, health, children or even to bewitch someone. In tantric Buddhism, they also became chanted in rites to aid visualizations, in which a particular holy being is conjured up out of emptiness, as a basis for developing the spiritual qualities that the being embodies.

Each tantric deity is seen to have its *mantra*, in short and long forms, which consist of a syllable, word or string of these that are seen to express and embody its nature. The most famous *mantra* is that of Avalokitesvara: *Om mani padme hum*, which is first found in the *Karandavyuha Sutra*. *Om* and *hum* are sacred sounds used in the *Vedas*, the first being seen as the basic sound of the universe. *Mani padme* literally means 'O jewelled-lotus lady'. In later exegesis, *mani* is seen as referring to the jewel that this *Bodhisattva* holds, while *padme* refers to his symbol, the lotus.

A complex set of symbolic explanations is also given to this *mantra*. For example, its six syllables are associated with the six perfections, or the six realms of rebirth. As it is recited, rays of light may be visualized as streaming out to the beings in these realms.

The elements which led to the rise and development of tantric Buddhism, in a context where tantric methods were affecting all Indian religions, were various.

Tantric forms of Indian religion were particularly strong within strands of Hinduism centred on the deity Shiva, a paradoxical figure seen to periodically re-create and later destroy the world, and an ascetic practitioner of yoga, dwelling in cremation grounds, whose symbol was the *lingam*, or phallus, emblem of creative power.

Tantric Buddhism developed in competition with tantric Shaivism, and, borrowing from its complex symbolism and ritual techniques, adapted them in Buddhist guise, geared to Buddhist goals. In doing so, it claimed that the Shaiva texts had originally been taught by the Buddha, or that the Hindu gods associated with them were forms in which Buddhas or advanced *Bodhisattvas* compassionately appear; it also described the subjugation of Shiva by the Buddhist deity Vajrapani. Alexis Sanderson sees Shaiva influence on all Buddhist tantric texts, this becoming more pervasive over time. For the *Yogini Tantras* (ninth to tenth centuries), 'almost everything concrete in this system [i.e. symbols etc.] is non-Buddhist in origin even though the whole is entirely Buddhist in its function'.

Tantric Buddhism more broadly augmented the magical side of Buddhism with elements drawn from the beliefs and practices common in agricultural societies, in addition to *mantras*. These were seen to aid 'success' (*siddhi*) in both worldly and spiritual matters. Rituals used in the monasteries to bring aid to their supporting communities, and as a preliminary to higher practices, came in time to play an increasing role within such higher practices, aimed at soteriological goals. Further, female 'deities' and reinterpreted Hindu ones were admitted into the greatly expanded pantheon of Buddhist holy beings.

Key Mahayana concepts were used to give a rationale for developing new methods for attaining spiritual realization. If the world was non-different from *Nirvana*, any object or action could potentially be used as a route to ultimate truth, if the motive and method were right, using skilful means. Rites could be used to harness the unconscious forces of passion or hatred and 'magically' transmute them into their opposites. If all was 'thought-only', complex and vivid visualizations could be developed as a new, and transforming, world of experience.

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