

TRENDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF BUDDHISM

Biswanath Banerjee

More than two thousand five hundred years ago Gautama, the Buddha, preached a doctrine unheard before and which in course of time spread over a large number of Asian countries to influence and mould the life, thought and works of the peoples of those countries. Gautama is said to have shown a Path which makes an end of suffering leading to emancipation. In course of centuries after the demise of the Founder Buddhism underwent so many far reaching changes and included within its folds so many diverse things that the original words of the Master became changed beyond recognition. What we mean by Buddhism today is not the essence or fundamentals of the teachings of the Buddha but a religio-philosophical system which adopted and assimilated new ideas and beliefs from the environments in which it developed.

To understand the background of Buddhism we must take into consideration the problem of the relation of Buddhism to Brahmanism. Brahmanism as developed from the religion of Aryan Indian and influenced by non-Aryan contacts had by the sixth century B.C. developed itself into an 'elaborate sacrificial and sacerdotal system'. It was in the midst of this Brahmanic system that Buddhism originated. Brahmanic ideal and principles have very much influenced and guided Buddhism particular in its later phases which are more akin to Brahmanism. The elaborate ritualistic systems of the Vajrayana and its offshoots have given the religion a totally different form and flavour.

The Buddha preached throughout his life but never put down anything in writing. So long a leader of his personality was alive there was no possibility of any dissension in any form in the Sangha but after his Mahaparinirvana in about 483 B.C. disputes arose in the matter of interpretations of the words of the Master leading to the emergence of as many as eighteen sects even before the time of Asoka. Actual dissensions, however, took place in the Sangha in the Second Council at Vaisali when the dissenters disagreed to consider all Arhats as perfect. Sects after sects appeared thereafter and the original words of the Master started conveying different and even contradictory meanings.

Ancient Buddhist Teachers have divided their religion into two broad divisions, Hinayana and Mahayana. This is based on the gradual development of the school of Buddhist thought. The Hinayanists are said to be the upholders of the traditional and conventional interpretations of the words of the Founder and are branded as conservatives and Hina i.e., lower or lesser. The eighteen sects mentioned above are essentially Hinayanic but they never mention themselves as

Hinayanists. The orthodox and conservative Buddhists are always mentioned as Theravadins. The Buddhists of Burma, Ceylon, Cambodia, Thailand etc. belong to the school of Theravada Buddhism, whereas those of China, Japan, Mongolia, Tibet etc. follow the ideals of Mahayanism. European scholars have sometimes described these two branches as Northern and Southern Buddhism which is hardly justifiable.

Mahayana with its great emphasis laid on maitri and karuna, and characterised by some more literal and progressive features and principles, may perhaps claim a place of superiority over the so-called Hinayanists who followed the words of the Teacher literally. The Mahayanic idea is that the doctrines of Hinayana were preached by Buddha as much as the Mahayana doctrines but Buddha used the former doctrines to satisfy the weak intelligence of his early disciples. Whatever be the Mahayanic opinion about the comparative inferiority of the Hinayanic teachings, Mahayana is in fact a later phase of Buddhistic thought and religion, — an advanced stage of Buddhism.' The teachings of Sakyamuni are the seeds, those of Hinayana are the branches and leaves, those of Mahayana are the blossoms and fruits'. Hinayana is also sometimes considered as a stepping stone to Mahayana.

The Mahayana on the whole emphasizes on the philosophical aspects of the religion and the Hinayanists are more ethical in their attitude. Both are so intimately related that any discussion on the one is incomplete without a look into the other.

Already in the early centuries of the Christian era Buddhism started adjusting itself to the pressure of its environments. Mahayanism with its promise to deliver all beings and with the idea of making Buddhism acceptable to all classes of people, began to incorporate all sorts of popular ceremonies and practices in their religion and the ethico-religious nature of Buddhism started changing. In the 8th century and thereafter Buddhism underwent a great change when *mantra*, *mudra*, *mandala* and many other popular religious practices began to make their way into Buddhism. An altogether new form of Buddhism called the Vajrayana appeared with much emphasis on rituals, meditational practices, gods and goddesses etc. Various groups or sects like the Sahajayana, Kalachkrayana etc. began to grow within its fold with different interpretations of the cardinal principles of Buddhism. This new phase of Buddhism is more or less a kind of Buddhist Tantrism and the general appellation Mantrayana or Tantrayana is given to all the sects taken together, as their principles and doctrines are based on *mantras*, *mudra* etc. The elements on which the whole system of Tantrayana was based were not evolved by Buddhism out of its own materials but was the growth of the soil utilised both by Hindus and Buddhists. With our present state of knowledge in the subject it is difficult to trace any organic relation between Buddhism and Tantrism.

The general name of Vajrayana is derived from the *Boddhicitta* which is considered as the *Vajra (bodhicittam bhavet Vajram)*. After intense practices (*sadana*) the *Boddhicitta* of a sadhaka may attain the state of tranquillity. It then

becomes of the nature of the *Vajra*, as invincible and indestructible as the *Vajra*. A *Sadhaka* realises the *bodhi* when his *bodhicitta* attains this state.

The *Sunyata* of the Mahayanists is transformed by the Vajrayanists into the idea of *Vajra*. '*Vajra* is *Sunyata* which is firm, substantial, indivisible, invincible, impenetrable, can not be burnt or destroyed'. One who realises the *Vajra*-nature of the *Dharma* realises the ultimate void-nature of things. Through all the paraphernalia of *mantra*, *tantra*, *mudra* etc. a Vajrayanist aspires only after the realisation of the imperishable void-nature of the self and not-self.

The Lord Supreme of the Tantrik Buddhists has been called the *Vajrasattva* who is identical with *sunyata* in the form of the absence of subjectivity and objectivity.' '*Sunyata* is *Vajra*, all manifestation in form is *sattva*, and the unity and identity of the two is the *Vajrasattva*! '*The Vajrasattva* is free from all existence and non-existences, but is endowed with the potency of all forms and existences. He is without origin and decay, abode of all merits, the essence of all, embodiment of pure wisdom, the Lord Supreme. The *Dharmakaya* of the Mahayanists seems to have been replaced by the conception of *Varasattva* or the *Vajrakaya*. Sometimes, however, *Vajrakaya* has been conceived as the fourth kaya.

The conception of the *Vajrasattva* is almost the same as the monotheistic conception of the godhead of the Hindus. All Buddhist Tantras, opening with a *sangit*, introduce the Buddha, Bodhisattvas and innumerable other beings as listening to the words of the *Vajrasattva*, the Lord Supreme, and these Tantras begin with salutations to Him. A *sadhaka* realises the *Vajrasattva* when he realises that all existence is nothing but *sunyata* in its pure nature and he himself becomes the *Vajrasattva* through this realisation. The *Vajrasattva* is variously called as *Mahasattva*, who is full of infinite knowledge; as *Samayasattva*, who is engaged in the right form of religious observances; as *Bodhisattva*, who is associated with the disciplines necessary for the realisation of *bodhi*; as *Jananastva* who is associated with pure wisdom.

The conception of the *Vajrasattva* and his various excellences as propounded in Vajrayanic texts indicates the importance attached to the self by these Buddhists. This is very much similar to the Upanisadic conception of the Brahman who is to be realised within as the self. When the *Sadhaka* realises the *Vajrasattva* he realises the universalised self as the universal perfectly-enlightened one. This realisation of the self is the realisation of the God and it is directed that all *mudras*, *mantras*, *mandalas* are to be applied to the worship of the self. The self is verily the God and it is prescribed in most of the *Sadhanas* that gods and goddesses are to be first place on the disc of the sun or of the moon or on the lotus and then the whole group is to be meditated on as identical with the self.

The evolution of the conception of *Vajrasattva* gave rise to the pantheon in Vajrayana. It is altogether new for a religion in which gods had no place. We hear

of a deified Buddha for the first time in the Mahavastu but no other deities were yet introduced. Later the liberal and universal attitude of the Mahayanists with their ideas of the all-compassionate Buddha and Bodhisattvas almost paved the way for the introduction of gods and goddesses into the religion; An elaborate description of worship of Buddha is found in the *Prajnaparamitas*, and the Manjusrimulakalpa describes a number of gods and goddesses.

The practical side of the Tantras is the fundamental side in which most emphasis is laid on the body. The tantras consider the body as the medium in and through which the truth can be realised; body is the epitome of the universe, the abode of all truths, it is the microcosm. Many tantras like the Kalacakratantra identify the universe completely with the body and locate the seas, rivers, mountains, and even planets in different parts of the body. "As a science of religious methodology the Tantras analyse the body, discover all truths in the nervous system and in the plexus and makes the body 'a perfect medium' for realising the ultimate absolute.

We have already heard of the Sahajayana or the Sahajiya School and the Kalacakrayana or the Kalacakra school. These are two important branches or offshoots of Vajrayana though on many occasions the Buddhist Tantras have been generally divided into three schools, viz. Vajrayana, Kalacakrayana, and Sahajayana. The basis of such division of the Vajrayana-School into different *yanas* is not clear from any source. We know of some texts now which give us an idea of the tenets of the Kalacakra school and show that Kalacakra school is not an independent *yana* but phase of Vajrayana. We have no exclusive literature of the Sahajayana excepting the dohas and songs of famous Sahajuya poets who, again, recognise the important principles and texts of Vajrayana authority.

The Sahajiya-Sadhanas decry all formalities of life and religion. They do not think it possible to realise the ultimate goal with the help of innumerable rituals as prescribed by the Vajrayanists. They want to realise the truth in the most natural way and are in favour of adopting a path through which they can easily realise the ultimate innate nature (*Sahaja*) of the self and of the *dharmas*. The natural path is the easiest one and a sahajiya-sadhaka chooses a path through which human nature itself leads him. An intuitive approach to Reality is made by Sahajayana but the function of intuition and modes of operation here are different from that of the intellect.

The Tantrik phase of Buddhism is supposed to have reached its extreme development with the Kalacakrayana. The Lord Supreme is called by these Buddhists as Kalacakra. He is saluted as the unification of *sunyata* and *karuna*, bereft of origination and destruction, the unitary embodiment of knowledge and knowable embraced by Prajna (transcendent Wisdom), who is both endowed with and bereft of forms (contents). He is the *Sublime Bliss* and devoid of all pleasures. He is the creator of all the Buddha and is the Adi Buddha, the only Lord.

It is a system which in keeping with the traditions of the Vajrayana attempts to explain the whole creation within this body. An elaborate system of sexo-yogic practice has found a place in the system and the control of the vital winds in the body has been regarded as a very important Factor in realising the truth which is in the form of the Lord Kalacakra. A Kalacakrayanist wants to keep himself above the influence of the cycle of *time* which is ever moving to cause decay, death and rebirth. The flow of *time* is nothing but the working of the vital winds in the body. It is in the action of the vital winds that *time* can reveal itself and if a *sadhaka* can stop this action he can stop the flow of time and can thereby raise himself up to the state of *mahasukha*. With the help of the *sadanga-yoga* they produce and realise the *mahasukha* and in his yogic practices a Kalacakrayanist is associated with his *prajna* who is also known as *mahadudra*.

In the opinion of this school the factors working in the external world causing creation, existence and dissolution are also to be considered as operating in this body which is nothing but an epitome of this universe. The ancient belief in the identity of the microcosm and macrocosm might have been responsible for such a thesis of these Buddhists. They naturally attach much importance to the astronomical conception of *yoga*, *karana*, *tithi* etc. and to the movements and positions of the Sun, the planets and constellations. Experts in astronomy and astrology, they interpret all the principles of Buddhism in relation with *time* and its different units.

The system exercised a potent influence in the life and thought of the Tibetan people. The Lamaist religion has been fully influenced by it and a large number of treatises have written by Tibetan scholars mostly in the form of commentaries to original Sanskrit works.