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Summary

One in a series of writings about Buddhist Iconography this article is a brief introduction to the Buddhist Ariya Bodhisattva Vajrasattva with reference to a traditional Vajrasattva bronze image which is located at the Buddhist Discussion Centre Australia.

BUDDHIST ICONOGRAPHY AND PRACTICES



Vajrasattva

Over many years the Buddhist Discussion Centre Australia has collected a number of Buddhist Images and Sacred Artifacts. A knowledge of Buddhist Iconography can be very beneficial as an aid in the development of certain wholesome types of consciousness.

One of the Images at the Buddhist Discussion Centre Australia is a representation of the Tantric deity Vajra Sattva (Tib. Rdo-rje-sems-dpah) or Dorje Sempa. The name Vajra Sattva could be translated as the Adamantine Warrior or "The Indestructibly Minded One."

To facilitate an understanding of the place occupied by Vajra Sattva within the Buddhist pantheon, it is first necessary to establish a relationship between the Teaching of the historical Buddha Sakyamuni, 6th Century B.C. and the emergence of Buddhist Tantra Practices in India toward the end of the 5th Century C.E.

The Buddha Sakyamuni revealed his Teaching in the form of a Path or Way leading to the complete cessation of suffering and qualified this Path as being the Middle Way by repudiating two extreme views relating to the practice: exaggerated asceticism and an easy secular life. (2)

He revealed the cause of suffering as the inevitable effects of unwholesome actions created in the past due to hate, greed and ignorance, the latter being the root cause of unenlightenment. This understanding could be viewed as the heart of all Buddhist Practices leading to Wisdom and Enlightenment.

About 250 C.E. the powerful Indian Emperor Asoka adopted Buddhism as the official state religion. (4) Prior to this time, the community of Monks (Sangha) with no institutionalized hierarchy was homeless, begging for its daily meals in accordance with Buddhist Practice.

Asoka perceived a need to consolidate the now flourishing Buddhist religion and commissioned the construction of the first Buddhist retreats (Viharas), which incorporated cells for the Monks and a vaulted hall for group discourses. Asoka vigorously propagated Buddhism throughout his vast empire and sent missionaries into neighboring countries to the North and South. Toward the end of the 1st Century C.E., under the auspices of King Kanishka of the Kusana kingdom in Northern India, the Great Council held at Jalandhar secured orthodoxy for a new way of perceiving the Buddha and the essential points of his Teaching. This new doctrine called the Mahayana, or Great Vehicle, was based on a treatise attributed to the Scholar Monk Nagarjuna entitled "The Prajna Paramita", or The Perfection of Wisdom.

The heart of the Mahayana doctrine could be described as that of the Enlightened Bodhisattva who, out of great compassion, remains in the world, (samsara), to lead other beings on the same path by his Teaching and example. In contrast to this were the aims of the earlier Sarvastradin, Sammitiya and Theravadin schools, whose final goal was that of the Arhat, i.e. the man who obtains liberation from cyclical existence (samsara) and passes into Nirvana. (1)

The second practical difference concerns the person of the Buddha. For the established schools, he is viewed as the Perfect Teacher, superior in attainment and ability. For Mahayana he is seen as a symbol of the absolute. His historical figure becomes incorporated into a complex system of symbolic interpretations which gives rise to a rigid but luxuriant iconography. (1)

The Mahayana doctrine, aided by King Kanishka, who rivalled Asoka in his Buddhist zeal, quickly became the dominant form in practice in India, Nepal, Afghanistan, and later in China, South East Asia, and Tibet. (4)

Early in the 2nd Century C.E., the Indian Scholar Monk Nagarjuna established a new interpretation of the early Mahayana school, called "Prajna

Paramita" (the Perfection of Wisdom), the core of the Mahayana doctrine. Nagarjuna showed that no object has any inherent existence of its own. Objects only have a relative existence in so far as they appear in relationship with other things. All objects are void (sunya) of true existence. (1)

The Madhyamika position was carried still further in the 4th century by Asanga, a Buddhist Monk from the Ghandara district of Northern India. This new school, called the Vijnanavadin or Yogacara, asserted that objects are a non-real projection of subjectivity, the latter being void (sunya), not in itself, but in its mode of manifestation, i.e: its relationship with objects. (1)

Toward the end of the 5th Century C.E., Buddhist Tantra first appeared in India. Buddhist Tantra Practices were absolutely esoteric in character and were only taught to advanced students. (4). To explain the Practice of Tantra in the most general terms, it aims at obtaining direct access to fundamental Enlightenment by the medium of the latter's manifestations in the phenomenal world, i.e: The Buddha, Dharma, Sangha and Guru.

Tantra Practices could be divided into four stages or levels of understanding:

Kriya Tantra - Action

Carya Tantra - Thought, Action, Balance

Yoga Tantra - Application

Maha Yoga Tantra - Absolute

See footnote 1.

Vajra Sattva Practices form an important part of the Vajra Yana or Tibetan Path. The Image of Vajra Sattva at the Buddhist Discussion Centre Australia was purchased at an exhibition of Asian Artifacts in Melbourne, 8 June 1979. The organizers of the exhibition acquired the Image from the Nepal Craft Emporium, Khatmandu, Nepal. The Image stands 13.5 cm high with a width of 9cm and depth of 6.2 cm, cast in bronze with ornate brass overlays. It is set with turquoise and coral gems around the necklace, headdress and earrings. The face and headdress have been traditionally decorated with gold leaf, and other substances of red and blue colour. The base of the Image is sealed by a brass plate depicting a Double Dorje. This generally indicated that a precious Relic or Mantra has been placed within the Image. In his right hand he holds a Vajra or Dorje which represents the active nature of the Enlightened Mind.

It is difficult to determine the origins of the Vajra. Iconographers theorize that it is derived from the lightning bolt of Jupiter or symbolic of some ancient solar system. (5) In his left hand he holds a Vajra Bell (Skt. Ghanta) which represents the void nature of all phenomena. Viewed another way, it could represent the passive aspect of Wisdom Energy.

His legs are crossed in the Vajra position (right leg on top of left). and he is seated on a double lotus throne.

The most common Tantra Practices associated with Vajra Sattva involve reciting his One Hundred Syllable Mantra, which is said to purify the negative effects of unwholesome actions and, more specifically, to remove obstructions to learning caused by breaking vows or words of honour that have been undertaken by the student as a necessary part of certain Tantric Initiations. (3)

Mantra Practices must be approached as a precious opportunity to accumulate Vast Merit. Furthermore, this great opportunity, being the result of lifetimes of wholesome actions, may never appear again due to impermanence. With a mind of vast respect for the Buddha, the Dharma and the community of Monks (Sangha), the Five Training Precepts of No Killing, No Lying, No Stealing, No Sexual Misconduct and No Intoxicants which cloud the mind should be taken. Once a certain level of moral purity permeates the mind, the Mantra can be expected to bring many benefits (7).

Vajra Sattva Practices could be viewed as one method by which the student can come to the end of hate, greed and ignorance in this very life.

Footnote 1

Depending upon the particular school of Buddhism under discussion, the Tantras can be divided into either four or six classes.

1. bya-ba'i rgyud (Kriya Tantra) - Activity
2. spyod-pa'i rgyud (Carya Tantra) - Stabilization
3. rnal-'byor rgyud (Yoga Tantra) - Inner Awareness
4. rnal-'byor bla-na-med pa'i gyud - (Father Tantra)
5. anuyoga (Mother Tantra)
6. atiyoga (Great Perfection) (6)

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7. See this Newsletter, 100 Syllable Mantra p.23

R.A.

The following Mantra was translated by John D.Hughes on 27 July, 1987.

The Hundred Syllable Mantra of Vajrasattva.

Om Vajrasattva Samaya who	I welcome my Deva Protectors
Manupalaya	welcome (me) to and from Vajrasattva
Vajrasattva Tvenopatishta	Protector of all Human Beings
Drdho Me Bhava	Vajrasattva qualities come near me
Sutosyo Me Bhava	Make firm this Mind-Body House (which is myself)
Suposyo Me Bhava	Fill up this Mind-Body House (which is myself) with Gladness
Anurakto Me Bhava	Fill up this Mind-Body House (which is myself) with Pleasure
Sarva Siddhim Me Preycha	Fill up this Mind-Body House (which is myself) to Fulfilment
Sarva Karma Sucha Me	Give me the Siddhis to achieve (beneficial) Perfections
Chittam Sreyah Kuru Hum	Purify all my karma (bringing Para Nirvana)
Ha Ha Ha Ha Hoh	Make me a better mind Laughter
Bhagavan Sarva Tathagata	Blessed all Buddhas
Vajrama Me Munca	Liberate me Vajra like Ones
Vajri Bhava	Mind-Body House Attain Vajra State
Mahasacnayasattva	Knower of Great Connections
Ah Hum Phat	Destroy (impure) Speech and Body Actions

Dedication

May all Beings be Well and Happy.