

*THE BUDDHIST TANTRIC DECONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION : THEIR
SŪTRA ORIGIN*

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The survival of the non-substantialist teachings of the Buddha in the context of enormously substantialist ideas, especially in the Indian context, represents a remarkable story. For more than two thousand five hundred years from the day he delivered his first discourse to the five ascetics at Sarnath until the present day, the Buddha as well as his disciples and followers had to make enormous efforts to ward off the influence of substantialist thinking. The present paper will be devoted to an analysis of the long-drawn struggle on the part of Buddhist non-substantialism to survive in the context of Hindu substantialism. Our attention will be focussed on the Buddhist Tantric method as a direct challenge to the Hindu Tantric system indicating how the former derives its inspiration from the non-substantialist teachings of the Buddha.

Two different interpretations of the Buddhist Tantras are popular in the West. Both interpretations are based upon studies of the Tibetan Tantric tradition. One is by Alex Wayman who, after devoting a good part of his academic life to the study of the Buddhist Tantric tradition, makes the following remark :

In short, the Buddhist Tantra incorporated a large amount of the mystical ideas and practices that have been current in India from most ancient times, and preserved them

just as did the Hindu Tantra in its own way, while both system had mutual influence and their own deviations. The Buddhist Tantra is deeply indebted to certain later Upaniṣads such as the Yoga Upaniṣads, which were probably composed in the main form about 1st century B. C. to the beginning of the Gupta period, and which are a primitive kind of Hinduism. But these mystical practices were so thoroughly integrated with Buddhist dogma, that it is a most difficult matter to separate out the various sources of the Buddhist Tantra.¹

If Wayman's interpretation is correct, then Tantric Buddhism will remain far removed from the teachings of the Buddha as embodied in the Pali Nikāyas and the Chinese Āgamas as well as the ideas expressed by many of the Buddhist luminaries such as Moggaliputta-Tissa, Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu. If, as Wayman claims, it has "incorporated a large amount of the mystical ideas and practices" from the Hindu tradition, ideas that are totally opposed to the non-substantialist teachings and the non-mystical practices of the Buddhist tradition, it will fail in its claim to be a genuine form of Buddhism. It remains to be seen whether this position is acceptable to the Tibetans as well as some of the Chinese, Korean and Japanese schools that look upon the Tantras as "continuations" of the Buddha's doctrine. The Tantric school of Buddhists, not their Western interpreters, should decide about their relationship to other traditions; whether they belong to the Buddhist tradition that began with the Buddha or whether they prefer to associate themselves with the Hindu tradition.

The second interpretation is by another reputed Buddhist scholar, Herbert V. Guenther, who insists upon making a clear distinction between the Hindu and Buddhist Tantras. He remarks :

The word Tantra is used differently, and hence does mean different things to Hindus and Buddhists. This is also borne out by the underlying metaphysics so that Buddhist

1. *The Yoga of the Guḥyasamājatantra. The Arcane Lore of Forty Verses. A Buddhist Tantra Commentary*, Delhi : Motilal Banarsidass, 1977. p 52

