WHAT IS VAJRA?

The Sanskrit term Vajra (or its Tibetan form Rdo-rje) has been
all along rendered as Thunderbolt in English. That Thunderbolt is not
a fully satisfactory translation has been however admitted and as expla-
natory the word Adamant has been used. Vele Anagirika Gavinda: 
Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism (London 1938) and D.L. Snellgrove: 
Hevajratantra (London 1959). As Vajra is an object as adamantine as
Adamant this explanatory has been found satisfactory by Sanskritists.
Recently an eminent scholar has introduced a coinage, namely, Powerbolt.
Several English reading Lamas object to the construction Powerbolt
since Thunder, and not Bolt, is the essence of Thunderbolt. Some con-
tributions from Tibetan context are expected for Bulletin of Tibetology.
For the non-specialist reader of this Bulletin I seek to preface the discus-
tion with a historical note from Sanskrit/Indian context.

The concept of Vajra is early Vedic. It is the weapon of Indra
which could prevail upon or destroy the mightiest adversary o the Devas.
It was described to be made of stone and alternately of iron. Kalyan
Kumar Ganguly, Calcutta University, suggests that this marks the transit-
tion from stone to metal. The essence of the weapon was thus its
hardness, that is, its adamantine attribute. The shape or form of the
weapon is obscure. The wonder of Vajra being in its attribute, the image
did not matter in rituals. So in iconography the weapon of the Weather
God, as Indra was in stage of evolution, was thunder or thunderbolt
as in current imagery. The missile was drawn in various forms: discus,
bar, two transverse bars, spike or spear with three or five prongs.
Gopinatha Rao: Elements of Hindu Iconography (Madras 1914/Delhi
1964) and J.N. Banerjea: Development of Hindu Iconography (Calcutta
1946) may be seen.

Originating as a weapon for destruction Vajra came to be prised as a talisman for protection e.g. a stone which baffled evaluation or adequate description. This imagery was carried into stipulations about Brahman or Absolute. In Khala Upanishad (2.1.2) Brahman is likened to Vajra. The relevant words may be rendered into English as "a thunderbolt uplifted" (Aurobindo), "the upraised thunderbolt" (Radhakrishnan), or "a poised thunderbolt" (Nikhilananda).

In Buddhism, the attainment of Bodhi by Saky Prince, Gautama
Siddhartha, was described as attainment of Vajra which is same as Ratna or Mani. The seat under the Bodhi Tree came to be called Vajrasana.
Meanwhile the Mani or shining stone, which can cut asunder similar

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shining objects but cannot itself be cut, was found; that was diamond. Thus in Buddhism Vajra came to be equated with diamond. In Tibet, diamond is described in hybrid phrase as Palo-rje Phalam (fruit of thunder). In Buddhism also the shape of Vajra was not so important as its import, that is, its adamantine attribute. The form which Vajra took in Mahayana iconography bears, in my submission, distinct Greco-Roman imprint. I would not press this point as the description ‘bolt’ is wide enough to apply to any of the known shapes of Vajra as weapon. Besides, bolt is not the essence of thunderbolt as Rupa is not the essence of Vajra.

Secondly, the attribute symbolized by Vajra is not Power. Power may be Sakti or Bala, each Sanskrit word having its equivalent in Tibetan. In Tibetan Vajra is Palo-rje, that is, the lord of stone or precious stone. In Tibetan, as in Sanskrit, Sakti or Bala is used in special restricted sense and is not used as the attribute of Vajra.

In Buddhism, that is, in Mahayana, Vajra symbolized the attribute Samyata. The treatise Abhyamapayana-graha says:

“Samyata is designated as Vajra because it is firm and sound, and cannot be changed, cannot be pierced, cannot be penetrated, cannot be burnt and cannot be destroyed”. (trans. Bhattacharyya)

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