Notes & Topics

WHAT IS VAJRA? — 2

In the previous issue (Vol VII, No. 2) of this Bulletin I wrote in protest of the new fangled Thunderbolt in place of the customary Thunderbolt as the English rendering of Sanskrit Vajra. Several scholars write in support. Some think that I have overstated in my zeal of writing English. My expression "Thunder and not Bolt is the essence of Thunderbolt" is suspected as an exercise in English.

My knowledge of Sanskrit (language) is poor and my knowledge of English (language) is poorer. I happen to read and write English as a student of history. For writing I try to follow the ideal of Japanese English and never care to practice Indian English or Chinese English. For translation I try to follow the Tibetan tradition e.g. Nirmamkaya as Sprul-sku and not Avatara or Living Buddha. I thus say that Thunder is the essence of Thunderbolt and that Bolt is not its essence.

In Sanskrit Vajra begins as the weapon of Indra, and both in Brahmanism and Buddhism this weapon is Thunder or Thunderbolt. One of the many names of Indra is Vajrapani.

In the most important Upanishad, Brihadaranyaka, occurs an interesting dialogue about the king of gods.

Q. Who is Indra? A. Indra is thunder (staniyazhi). Q. What is thunder? A. Thunder is thunderbolt (saanith-lightning). [Sankara renders "saanith" as "vajram" and derives "vajra" from "viryā" which is destructive like Indra.]

Brihadaranyaka III, 9, 6, with Sankara’s commentary is reproduced below.

मन्यं इहः ततः प्रायस्विद्धीणिति नमो ततामः प्रायस्विद्धीणिति कथम् यदि इति शरीरः

श्वेताभ्यासकृतिनिः १. ९, ६

कथम् इहः ततः प्रायस्विद्धीणिति, सनांविद्धीणिती कथम् प्रायस्विद्धीणिति

सनांविद्धीणिती सनांविद्धीणिती। अभाविः गोम ततः न वाहिनं म्याहति, स इहः

द्वादश इह तस्मि कथम्। तस्मि यदि इति यह इति—सत्त्व व सार्वत्त्मिन् तदाद्वः

वर्णाकारहः सुप्रभाविणाम् यदो यद्युपुनोऽति

शास्त्रधारमः

Nirmal C. Sinha
WHAT IS VAJRA? — 1

In Sakya Kahun (ས་དཔལ་བྱུང་) we find four meanings of rDo-rje (Vajra) — 1. Dharma Vajra (ཨོ་རྒྱུན་་) 2. Lakshana Vajra (ལྷེེསོ་པོ་ཤེས་) 3. Guhya Vajra (སྒྲུལ་ཤེས་) and 4. Rupa Vajra (ཤེས་་). The Dharma Vajra is Sunyata itself. In Kanjur the question is posed, "You say Vajra Vajra. What you mean by Vajra?" and the answer is offered "Vajra is hard, void, imperishable, indestructible, which can not be cut, which can not be born, that is, what it is called Sunyata Vajra." In Kanjur an more precise definition is found, "Vajra is Dharmanirguna which is like Akasa (space)."

Lakshana Vajra that is the symbol of Vajra is made of iron, bronze or some sacred metal. The form of the symbol may be with nine spokes, five spokes, three spokes and sometimes with even unlooked spokes. The spokes represent virtues and functions. In a Vajra with nine spokes, the central spoke stands for Dharmanirguna. A Vajra with five spokes represents the five Jinas or Buddhas in upper half and the five mother goddesses in lower half. The five Buddhas are Vajrayogini, Arhugasiddhi, Akshobhya, Ramaanadhipati, and Amitabha, that is the Five Wisdoms ( རྣ་གི་). The five deities are Mamaki, Panchavastu, Tara, Lachana, and Vajradhatuvati, that is the Five Elements ( རྣ་གི་). The two sumits, called Dharmanirguna, are the two vanishing points and thus also known as Sunyata. The spokes are known to represent the horns (་) projecting from crocodile's mouth and are regarded as instruments to draw out the sufferings of transmigration.

The secret Vajra as its name suggests has no known appearance. The Substantial Vajra is also a matter more for meditation than for portrait. Diamond has two names in Tibetan: rDo-rje rin-poche and rDo-rje-phel-lam ( རྫོ་རྒྱུན་་་བོ་ལྔ་), and in hardness it is compared to the bones of Skru-thong (ཨུ་ཐོང་) that is Dagli-chi. Hindu legends describe Indra's weapon, thunder or thunderbolt, as made of Dagli-chi's bones. In Tibetan legends and literature rDo-rje is thought of as material form as thunder or thunderbolt. I give below the extracts from Kanjur, Tanjur and Sakya Kahun describing rDo-rje as rTon-pam-ri or Sunyata.
GILGIT IN ANCIENT TIMES

Professor Buddha Prakash, in a learned account of ancient Gilgit (pp 1546), has narrated the fascinating events of political history. For a non-specialist reader of the bulletin it is necessary to state that the English renderings of Chinese terms like "tribute" or "tribute-bearer" are not to be understood in modern sense. The Han diplomatic diction has its own terms to describe protocol, gifts, etc. Vide Hugh Richardson's article on Fish Bag in Bulletin, Vol VII No. 1.

Gilgit (Gurza), belonging to Tibet-Buddhist complex, has an equally fascinating cultural history. A non-specialist reader may read Nalimakha Dutta, Gilgit Manuscripts (Srinagar 1939), Vol 1, pp 1-46.

Nirmal C. Saha