

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

David J. Kalupahana

ŚRAMAṆA VIDYĀ Studies in Buddhism, PROF. JAGANNATH UPADHYAYA
COMMEMORATION VOLUME I, SAMYAG – VĀK SERIES – III

Edited by N. H. Samtani

GENERAL INSTITUTE OF HIGHER TIBETAN STUDIES
SARNATH, VARANASI

2531 B.E./1987 A.D.

THE BUDDHIST TANTRIC DECONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION : THEIR SŪTRA ORIGIN

David J. Kalupahana

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

and Hinduist Tantricism are quite distinct from each other, and any similarities are purely accidental, not at all essential. Hinduist Tantricism, due to its association with the Sankhya system, reflects a psychology of subjectivistic dominance, but tampers it by infusing the human with the divine and vice versa; Buddhist Tantricism aims at developing man's cognitive capacities so that he may *be*, here and now, and may enact the harmony of the sensuousness and spirituality.²

This is the analysis of the Buddhist Tantric tradition by a scholar who is genuinely interested in retaining the Buddhist identity of that tradition and recognizing fundamental differences between Hinduism and Buddhism that Wayman is reluctant to admit. However, Guenther remains faithful to another view that has survived for centuries, a view that highlighted a distinction between Theravāda and Mahāyāna and one that totally ignores the continuity in the mainline Buddhist philosophical tradition. The incident that gave rise to the Theravāda-Mahāyāna conflict is very old. Historically it may be traced back to the second Buddhist Council believed to have been held about one hundred years after the demise of the Buddha. The Mahāsāṅghikas are generally considered to be the precursors of Mahāyāna. However, the prejudice with which the Mahāyāna tradition looks upon the Theravāda, and the suspicion with which the Theravāda treats of Mahāyāna did not reach a climax until the compilation of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra*, a text that belongs to the second century A.D. It is the first Mahāyāna treatise that condemned even the immediate disciples of the Buddha, disciples like Sāriputta and Moggallāna, as men of "low dispositions" (*hīnādhimukti*).³ It was natural for the Theravādins to be indignant about this criticism, for they held these early disciples of the Buddha in great esteem. Even though the story of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* represents a sectarian conflict that took place more than six centuries after the demise of the Buddha which, as

-
2. *The Tantric View of Life*, Boulder and London : Shambhala, 1976, p. 2
 3. *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra* IV. 36, ed. P. L. Vaidya, Darbhanga : Mithila Institute, 1960, p. 80

noted by E. J. Thomas, was only a meeting of the Mahāyāna with some Sarvāstivādins present,⁴ subsequent interpreters of the Buddhist doctrine have blown this distinction out of all proportions. This distinction and mutual suspicion seem to have kept the two traditions apart thereby preventing them from examining the philosophical ideas of one another in order to see whether they are compatible or not. As a result, Guenther has made no attempt to look at the Tantras from a historical perspective and to see whether they have any relationship to the original teachings of the Buddha. Following the traditional interpretation, Guenther has simply assumed that Tantricism is the "culmination of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism."⁵

In the following pages we propose to suggest a third alternative explanation of the Tantras, namely, that they truly represent a continuation (*tantra*) of the process of deconstruction of absolutistic metaphysics as embodied in the Buddha's own doctrine of non-substantiality (*anatta*),¹ faithfully adopted by the major philosophers of both Theravāda and Mahāyāna schools.

If the Tantras are to be looked upon as continuations of the Buddha's teachings, then they cannot at the same time be seen as mystical treatises, for the teachings of the Buddha represent a complete denial of the mystical phenomena as recognized by the Brahmanical tradition, the precursor of Hinduism. Mysticism has been an extremely important and pervasive component of Brahmanism and its successors. That mysticism can be traced back to the early *Upaniṣads*, if not to the Vedas themselves. Even if the conception of a unitary self (*ātman*) was initially a product of rational thinking,⁶ sooner or later it became necessary to provide empirical justification for it. Ordinary sense experience failed to provide such justification, for sense experience is generally associated with duality or multiplicity. Thus, the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, after a criticism of several views about the nature of existence, most of which appear to be based upon sense experi-

4. *History of Buddhist Thought*, London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959, p. 181

5. Guenther, op. cit. p. 5

6. See, K. N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, London : Allen and Unwin, 1963, p. 32

ence or rational reflection, puts forward the view that divinity (*deva*) is experienced directly in the highest state of yogic contemplation.⁷ In the history of Hinduism, this divinity is understood in a variety of ways. Often it is referred to as the self (*ātman*); sometimes as God (*deva*, *puruṣa*, *iśā*, etc.) relating itself to the world as a spiritual energy (*śakti*), at other times as a primordial substance (*prakṛti*) permeating everything in the universe. While rational reflection or sense experience is capable of providing only a vague glimpse into the nature of that ultimate reality, complete awareness is afforded by yogic insight, often defined as the culmination of intense abstract meditation (*samādhi*).⁸ It is mystical knowledge in the sense that it constitutes a leap beyond the threshold of discriminative consciousness or awareness (*vijñāna*).⁹

While there were many secular and religious traditions in India such as the Materialist, the Ājīvika and even the Jaina, that rejected such mysticism, the most formidable opposition came from Siddhārtha Gautama or the Buddha. After experimenting with the method of yogic concentration for several years, the Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment. He did not describe his enlightenment as an absorption in an ultimate reality or the perception of a unitary self (*ātman*). His explanation is as follows :

When, indeed, things appear before a brahman who is exerting and contemplating, his doubts disappear as he understands their causal nature.¹⁰

The knowledge referred to here is of dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*) of phenomena. There is no mysticism involved. What is described as enlightenment is the absence of doubts (*kañkhā*). Absence of doubt does not mean the attainment of absolute certainty, rather it is the renunciation of the search for mystery. A person who is not satisfied with the given experience and who continues to worry about something (*kiñcit*) hidden or

7. *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 1.3; see S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads*, London : Allen and Unwin, 1953, p. 710

8. *The Bhagavadgīta* ii. 44

9. *ibid.*, ii. 58

10. *Udāna* p. 1

mysterious tends to raise the question "How is it? How is it?" (*katham-katham*). In the Buddha's words, a person who doubts in this way is referred to as¹¹ (*kathamkathī*).ⁱⁱ Such doubts are not looked upon by the Buddha as genuine forms of doubt. One who has abandoned such rational doubts is the enlightened one who, therefore, receives the appellation of *akathamkathī*.¹² Genuine doubts arise when a person is confronted with new situation, new events and new phenomena or when he is faced with conflicting evidence, not when he presupposes the existence of some mystery and refuses to accept even the available evidence. The Hindu conception of an eternal self or a spiritual energy represents such mystery. The rejection of such mystery is the primary purpose of the Buddha's doctrine of no-self (*anātman*). For him there exists no entity that is not seen, heard or conceived.¹³ Thus Hinduism and Buddhism differ radically regarding what they recognize as knowledge and also what they assume to be truth or reality.

The Hindu conception of a permanent and eternal self, an immutable and mysterious substance or even an inexhaustible source of energy were attractive ideas especially for the ordinary tender-minded persons who, confronted by the riddles and hazards of existence, are more often in a state of anxiety¹⁴ (*paritassanā*).ⁱⁱⁱ The Buddha's doctrine of no-self or no-substance and his rejection of any potential energy, physical or spiritual, are tough-minded approaches to the understanding of man and nature. It is a view that can produce fear and trembling in the tender-minded.

While the Buddha was certainly concerned about the temperaments of his listeners and wanted to create the least amount of trepidation in their minds when presenting his ideas, he was not prepared to compromise his ideas too much in order to satisfy the yearnings of his audience. Thus, even though the conception

-
11. *Dīgha-nikāya* (abbr. *D*) 2.287; *Chang A-han Ching* (abbr. *Chang*) 10.2 (*Taisho* 1.63c).
 12. *Majjhima-nikāya* (abbr. *M*) 1.181; *Chung A-han Ching* (abbr. *Chung*) 36,2 (*Taisho* 1.657)
 13. *Sutta-nipāta* verse 1122
 14. *M* 1.136; *Chung* 54.1 (*Taisho* 1.765a)

of self as a permanent and eternal entity was palatable to the ordinary person, yet realizing the unfortunate consequences of such a view, the Buddha was determined to eliminate it from philosophical or even ordinary discourse. The result was the deconstruction of all human thinking and conceptualization in order to get rid of a permanent, eternal and, therefore, metaphysical subject as well as the similarly metaphysical object. A major portion of the Buddha's discourses is devoted for this purpose.

The Buddha's deconstruction of the "subject" came to be known in the later Buddhist tradition as (*puḍgala-nairātmya*).^{iv} This is based upon the Buddha's own analysis of the human person into five aggregates (*pañcakkhandha*)^v material, body, feeling, perception, disposition and consciousness.¹⁵ Sometimes the personality is reduced to six elements¹⁶ (*cha-dhātu*).^{vi}

The purpose of the analysis of the human personality into five aggregates was to show that there is no perceivable entity that possesses these aggregates (*n'etaṃ mama*).¹⁷ The reference here is to the Hindu conception of a mysterious self (*ātman*) that functions not only as the possessor but also the inner controller of the five aggregates. The Buddha thereupon proceeds to deny that this particular self is what he generally means by 'I' (*n' eso aham asmi*) or 'self' (*na m' eso attā*).¹⁸ What is most significant in this negative description is that it specifies the particular conception of 'I' (*ahaṃ*) or self (*attā*) that is negated. It is only the deconstruction of the eternal and mysterious self.

However, the rejection of the eternal and mysterious self of the Hindu thinkers did not mean that the Buddha was prepared to accept the view of the Materialists whose search for ultimate objectivity culminated in the theory that the self is identical with the physical body.¹⁹ The Buddha's definition of a human person

15. *M* 1.299; *Chung* 58.1 (*Taisho* 1.788a)

16. *M* 3.239; *Chung* 42.1 (*Taisho* 1.690b)

17. *Saṃyutta-nikāya* (abbr. *S*) 3.18 ff; *Tsa A-han Ching* (abbr. *Tsa*) 2.11 (*Taisho* 2.10c-11a)

18. *ibid*

19. *M* 1.426; *Chung* 60.6 (*Taisho* 1.804a-b)

in terms of six elements—earth, water, fire, air, space and *consciousness*—was thus intended to refute the Materialist claim.

If the Buddha were to conclude his discourse with such analyses, he would be justifiably criticized as an annihilationist (*ucchedavādi*), for he was not providing an alternate explanation of a conscious human person.²⁰ But this is not the case. The Buddha was not merely an analytical philosopher with no positive explanation to offer. His method of deconstruction was followed by a process of reconstruction.

This reconstruction was undertaken with meticulous care so as not to re-introduce the very conception of self he was rejecting.

The process of reconstruction is attempted on the basis of dependent arising²¹ (*paṭiccasamuppāda*).^{vii} This is embodied in the Buddha's doctrine of the human personality consisting of twelve factors²² (*dvādasāṅga*),^{viii} as expounded in the famous discourse to Kaccāyana, the only discourse referred to by Nāgārjuna.²³ In the conceptual reconstruction of the human personality it was necessary for the Buddha to avoid the reintroduction of metaphysical concepts as well as to explain why such concepts are introduced at all by the metaphysicians.

The Buddha seems to have realized that such metaphysical concepts are the results of cognitive errors as well as emotive entanglements. It is for this reason that he begins his explanation of the human person with references to ignorance (*avijjā*)^{ix} and dispositions (*saṅkhāra*)^x According to the Buddha, human dispositions play a major role as individuating factors. While the physical body helps to identify an individual, the individuality of the body itself, within certain constraints imposed by physical nature, is conditioned by dispositions. The manner in which a person maintains his physical frame, how he develops it

20. *Vinaya Piṭaka* 1.235

21. *M* 1.91; *Chung* 7.2 (*Taisho* 1.467a)

22. *S* 2.17; *Tsa* 12.19 (*Taisho* 2.85c)

23. *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* XXV. 7; see David J. Kalupahana, *Nāgārjuna. The Philosophy of the Middle Way*, Albany : The State University of New York Press, 1986, pp. 232

or allows it to deteriorate, is determined by the dispositional tendencies. Thus, one can speak of bodily dispositions (*kāya-saṅkhāra*)^{xi} as well as verbal dispositions (*vacī-saṅkhāra*).^{xii} Of course, the role of dispositions in determining the human personality appears most prominent in the context of the human mind²⁴ (*mano-saṅkhāra*).^{xiii}

This individuation carried to its extreme limit can result in the formation of a concept or a belief in a permanent and eternal self or soul. And in such cases, the Buddha perceived the disposition as being determined by ignorance or perversion.²⁵ This represents the emergence of the metaphysical conception of the "subject."

The personality so individuated maintains continuity as long as it is associated with consciousness (*viññāna*).^{xiv} Consciousness, with memory as an important constituent, enables a person to co-ordinate his life and respond to the world. Therefore, the Buddha perceived the "stream of consciousness"²⁶ (*viññāna-sota*)^{xv} as the most significant elements in the explanation of personal continuity. It is not a static stream but one that flows in different directions depending upon the individual interest and experiences.

The human person (*nāmarūpa*)^{xvi} conditioned by dispositions (*saṅkhāra*)^{xvii} and consciousness (*viññāna*)^{xviii} comes into contact (*phassa*)^{xix} with the objective world with which he gradually becomes familiar (*vedanā*).^{xx} At this point, an ordinary tender minded person, who is unable to discriminate and understand the nature of the objective world, just as much as he failed to understand the subject, because of his ignorance, generates craving (*taṇhā*)^{xxi} for the objective world and continues to cling on to it (*upādāna*)^{xxii} thereby paving the way for further becoming (*bhava*)^{xxiii} birth (*jati*)^{xxiv} and the consequent suffering (*dukkha*)^{xxv} in the form of decay (*jarā*)^{xxvi} death (*maraṇa*)^{xxvii} sorrow (*domanassa*)^{xxviii} dejection (*upāyāsa*)^{xxix} etc.

24. S 2.4; Tsa 12.16 (Taisho 1.85a)

25. See S 2.17; Tsa 12.19 (Taisho 2.85c)

26. D 3.105; Chang 12.2 (Taisho 1.77b)

While the process of deconstruction would naturally give rise to fear and trembling on the part of human beings, the process of reconstruction emphasizing the need for the development of wisdom through the elimination of ignorance, and the restraining or appeasing of dispositions without allowing them to grow into monstrous proportions in the form of beliefs in eternal entities, enables a person to attain peace and happiness.

The deconstruction of the subject went hand in hand with the deconstruction of the object. Where the Hindu tradition believed that the self (*ātman*) as the reality of the subject is identical with the self (*ātman*) as the reality of the objective world, the Buddha admonished his disciples to abandon the search for mysterious entities or substances when perceiving an object through the five physical organs of sense or when conceiving of them with their minds. Perception and conception are to be adopted only to the extent that they provide for practical knowledge, not for the sake of satisfying an insatiable search for mystery. The restraint of the senses *indriyaśamvara* calls for the avoidance of hidden substances *nimitta*)^{xxx} in which perceived qualities (*anuvyañjana*)^{xxx}ⁱ are supposed to inhere,²⁷ not for abandoning the functions of the senses altogether. The perception of the objective world should be confined to what is given, what has come to be *yathābhūta*)^{xxx}ⁱⁱ, not what is hidden and mysterious. A passage in the *Udāna* embodying the Buddha's admonition to a disciple names Bāhiya Dārucīriya confirms this :

Then, Bāhiya, thus must you train yourself : "In the seen there will just be the seen; in the heard, just the heard; in the conceived, just the conceived; in the cognized, just the cognized." This is how, Bāhiya, you must train yourself. Now, Bāhiya, when in the seen there will be to you just the seen;....just the heard;....just the conceived;....just the cognized then, Bāhiya, you will not identify yourself with it. When you do not identify yourself with it, you will not locate yourself therein. When you do not locate yourself therein, it follows that you will have no "here" or "beyond" or "midway between," and this would be the end of suffering.²⁸

27. *M* 1.80; *Chung* 36.2 (*Taisho* 1.657c)

28. *Udāna* p. 1

The Buddha's perspective regarding the subject as well as the object is summarized in one brief statement: "All experienced phenomena are non-substantial" *sabbe dhammā anattā*²⁹.

After the deconstruction of the subject, and the object both of which appeared as self (*ātman*) in the *Upaniṣads*,³⁰ the Buddha proceeded to deconstruct the most fundamental of the Hindu concepts, namely, the moral Absolute (*brahman*).³¹ The Buddha was inclined to use the term *dharma* to refer to the moral ideal since he had very little sympathy with the Hindu caste-system which gave meaning to the Upanisadic term *brahman*. For him, the term *dharma*, used in an ethical sense, denoted good, both in its concrete and ideal forms.³² Its negation, *a-dharma* meant bad or evil. For the Buddha, good is what produces good consequences³³ (*attha*)³⁴, and such consequences are dependently arisen, i.e., depend upon various factors operating within each context. A pragmatic criterion of good, therefore, has to be contextual as well. For this reason, *dharma* as the moral ideal was never looked upon as an Absolute. Indeed, grasping on to any conception of good as the ultimately real, the universally valid and eternally existent is criticized by the Buddha. This idea is clearly expressed by the Buddha in his discourse on the "snake-simile" addressed to a monk named Arittha available both in Pali and Chinese.³⁴ He insists that a person has to "abandon even the good, let alone evil." Utilizing an appropriate simile, the simile of the raft (*kulla*)³⁵, the Buddha argues that a person builds a raft only for the purpose of crossing over a stream. If, after crossing over, the person were to carry the raft on his shoulders wherever he goes insisting that the raft was useful and, therefore, he should not abandon it, that person would not be one who

29. *M* 1.228; *S* 3.113; 4401; *Tsa* 10.7 (*Taisho* 2.66b-67a); *Tseng-i A-han Ching* (abbr. *Tseng-i*) 23.4 (*Taisho* 2.668c); *Chang* 1.1 (*Taisho* 1.9b)

30. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.1-9

31. *ibid.*, 1.4.10-14

32. See David J. Kalupahana, *A Path of Righteousness (Dhammapada)*, Lanham : The University Press of America, 1986, p. 36

33. *ibid.*, pp. 39-40

34. *M* 1.130-142; *Chung* 54.1 (*Taisho* 1.763b-766b)

understands the function of the raft.³⁵ This means that the usefulness of the raft is contextual and concrete. Apart from the context, the raft has no meaning, and it is not possessed of absolute value. A modern philosopher from the pragmatic tradition, William James, struck a similar note when he said that “there is always a pinch between the actual and the ideal which can be gotten rid of by leaving part of the ideal behind.”³⁶

If such be the Buddha’s conception of the subject, the object as well as the ultimate moral ideal (*paramārtha*)^{xxxvi}, there is no reason to believe that there is a permanent, ultimate and transcendental happiness (*sukha*)^{xxxvii}, that can be achieved as the happiness of freedom (*nibbāna*)^{xxxviii}. Indeed, the Buddha discounted such an eternal and permanent state of happiness in the discourse on “Multiple Experiences” (*Bahuvēdāniya-sutta*),³⁷ and explained the happiness of freedom as an experience that is not present to the individual every moment of his life, whether he is sleeping or awake, whether perceiving the world or not. Instead, there are moments when even a Buddha has to experience pleasant and unpleasant sensations, painful feeling and happiness.³⁸ However, his happiness is more stable compared with the happiness and suffering experienced by the ordinary human beings, especially because he has abandoned greed and hatred³⁹ which often make life miserable and intolerable. A Buddha can enjoy his needs, but he shuns desires. Comfortable living, decent food, clean clothes as well as amicable friends and beautiful environment are not necessarily evil and the enlightened ones have always enjoyed them without developing excessive greed or desire for them.

35. *M* 1.35; *Chung* 54.1 (*Taisho* 1.764c)

36. William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt, Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1979, p. 153

37. *M* 1.396-400; also *S* 4.223-228; *Tsa* 17.32 (*Taisho* 2.123c)

38. *Itivuttaka* p. 38; *Tseng-i* 7.22 (*Taisho* 2.579a)

39. *ibid*

If human experiences, in bondage or in states of freedom, in *samsāra* or in *nirvāṇa* are dependently arisen and are not absolute, even the conceptualizations of such experiences could not be absolute. Thus, even the language in which such experiences are expressed cannot have absolute meanings; instead its meaning will be contextual. For this reason even the Buddha's statements, the body of literature consisting of discourses (*sutta*), recitations (*geyya*), expositions (*veyyākaraṇa*), verses (*gāthā*), paeons of joy (*udāna*) reports (*itivuttaka*), birth stories (*jātaka*), statements about unusual phenomena (*abbhutadhamma*) and analyses (*vedalla*), are to be looked upon as being contextual and not absolute.⁴⁰ *Dhamma* as the true statements are not absolutely true, but true in so far as they are meaningful in the contexts. Hence it would be wrong to grasp on to the conceptual as the ultimate and absolute. They are to be looked upon as means to cross over the flood of existence. The metaphor of the raft applies not only to the doctrine but also to the language or the conceptualization in which that doctrine is expressed.

The process of deconstruction is symbolized by the diamond (*vajira*)^{xxxix}. The discourses of the Buddha refer to a demon named Vajirapāṇi ("diamond-in-hand") who threatens disciples of other faiths such as Brahmanism and Jainism whenever they confront the Buddha with dogmatic views and refuse to answer the questions raised by the Buddha.⁴¹ Since the primary means by which he dealt with dogmatic views is "analysis" or "deconstruction," the term *vajira* in these contexts is more appropriately understood as a diamond rather than a "thunderbolt."⁴² This is also confirmed by a disciple of the Buddha, Migajāla by name, who defines the noble eightfold path as a "diamond-like wisdom" (*ñāṇa-vajira*) that disintegrates the graspings of consciousness (*viññāṇānaṃ pariggaha*), i. e. ontological commitment.⁴³

40. *M* 1.135; *Chung* 54.1 (*Taisho* 1.764c)

41. *M* 1.231; *D* 1.95; *Tsa* 5.8 (*Taisho* 2.36a)

42. See *Pali Text Society's Pali English Dictionary*, ed. T. W. Rhys Davids and W. Stede, London : PTS, 1959, p. 593, see under *vajira*.

43. *Theragāthā* verse 419

The *Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā* generally referred to as a Mahayana treatise, represents an extremely interesting synthesis of the symbolism of the diamond (*vajra*)^{XL} and the metaphor of the raft (*kolopama*)^{XLI} the latter being a direct quotation from the discourse on “the “snake-simile” (*Alagaddūpama-sutta*) referred to earlier.⁴⁴ Statements in the *Vajracchedikā* that seems to have caused much confusion and bafflement can be easily understood if the symbolism of the diamond and the metaphor of the raft are kept in mind. For example, in the *Vajracchedikā* we find statements such as :

Personal existence, personal existence, as no-existence that has been taught by the Tathāgatas; for not, O Lord, is that existence non-existence. Therefore it is called “personal existence.”⁴⁵

This represents the earliest reformulation of the Buddha’s method of deconstruction and reconstruction of language and conceptual thinking avoiding the ontological commitments of Buddhists like the Sarvāstivādins and the Sautrāntikas. The process is presented in three steps and has led to much confusion and misunderstanding among Buddhist scholars. The three steps may be explained as follows :

1. Personal existence = ontological commitment.
2. No personal existence = deconstruction.
3. Therefore, “personal existence” (in quotes) = reconstruction or restatement without ontological commitment.

It will be shown that any recognition of a mysterious entity (*kiṃcit*) beyond the conventional use of language that gives it its meaning will be contrary to the Buddha’s doctrine of non-substantiality and will represent a return to the Hindu doctrine of *ātman*.

A careful study of the primary philosophical treatises of the three major philosophers of the Buddhist tradition, the *Kathāv-atthu* of Moggaliputta-Tissa (3rd century B. C.), the *Mūlamadhy-*

44. *Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā*, ed. and tr. Edward Conze, Serie Orientale Roma 13, Rome : Istituto italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1957 p. 32

45. *ibid.*, p. 36

amakakārikā of Nāgārjuna (2nd century A.D.) and *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi* of Vasubandhu (4th century A.D.), without allowing the sectarian rivalries to prejudice one's perspective, it is possible to discover the link between the early discourses or *sūtras* and the later *tantras*. Since it is not possible to deal with all three philosophers within the limited time available to me I shall concentrate on Nāgārjuna primarily because his name is also associated with the Tantric tradition. Even if the famous Nāgārjuna was not the actual author of some of these treatises, it is most probable that those who attributed works to him were convinced that the Buddhist Tantras were extensions of the Nāgārjunian method.

The first twenty five chapters of Nāgārjuna's *Kārikā* appears to be totally negative in character. This is inevitable because no other philosophers in the tradition had to deal with so many substantialist views expressed by the Buddhists themselves. In the hands of the Sarvāstivādins, the Sautrāntikas and the Lokuttaravādins, the Buddha's non-substantialist teachings in the areas of knowledge and experience, change and causality, human person and the world, suffering, freedom and happiness were gradually being given substantialist explanations. The most prominent among them were the Sarvāstivāda theory of self-nature (*svabhāva*), the Sautrāntika doctrine of moments (*kṣaṇa*) giving rise to a metaphysical notion of a person (*pudgala*) and the Lokuttaravāda conception of a transcendental Buddha. These were not ordinary beliefs or conventions but extremely sophisticated substantialist philosophical theories.

Realizing that causality (*pratītyasmutpāda*) and change (*anityavipariṇāma*) were the two conceptions utilized by the Buddha to reject substantialist metaphysics, Nāgārjuna begins his treatise with two chapters devoted to them. His primary task in these two chapters is not to deny causation and change, but rather to expose the substantialist implications of the Sarvāstivāda and Sautrāntika views. After such an endeavor one would expect Nāgārjuna to outline the philosophical standpoint of the Buddha at least regarding these two issues. Instead, he simply concludes both chapters on a negative note. The reason for this is obvious. It is not because Nāgārjuna was not interested in explaining the positive aspects of the Buddha's conception of

causation and change, but because he could not do so without first dealing with many other substantialist theories relating to knowledge and experience, nature of the human personality and the world, suffering and freedom, etc. The next twenty three chapters are devoted precisely for this purpose.

The most formidable substantialist view the Buddha had to contend with was the Upaniṣadic idea of a permanent and eternal self (*ātman*) in a human person, not the substantialist view of the external world. Hence he devoted more time to the refutation of the conception of self, without at the same time neglecting the substantialist view of the world. However, for Nāgārjuna, the problem was reversed. He had to deal with the Sarvāstivāda view of phenomena (*dharma*) as possessing substance (*svabhāva*), before he proceeded to analyse the Sautrāntika version of the person (*puḍgala*) which, in fact, was advocated by them with much less enthusiasm. Thus, chapters III to XV of the *Kārikā* are intended to establish the non-substantiality of phenomena (*dharma-nairātmya*), the XVth being specifically devoted to an examination of "self-nature" or substance (*svabhāva*). As in the first two chapters, Nāgārjuna refrains from clearly outlining the positive teachings of the Buddha regarding the various topics examined. At this stage he is simply focusing his attention on the process of deconstruction in order to avoid such metaphysical dichotomies as "self-nature" and "other-nature", identity and difference, of existence and non-existence. Indeed, he seems to have baffled every *sectarian* Buddhist scholar by quoting the Buddha's own discourse to Kātyāyana in order to reject the substantialist extremes of "existence and non-existence" (*asti-nasti-iti*).⁴⁶

Chapters XVI to XXV are utilized for the purpose of establishing the non-substantialism of the human person (*puḍgala-nirātmya*). As is well known, the substantialist conception of a person was gradually emerging in the Buddhist tradition, first as a result of the analysis of experience into atomic impression which made it difficult for the Buddhist to explain several problems, problems such as the identity as well as the continuity of the human person, the questions regarding action (*karma*) and moral

46. *Kārikā* XV. 7

responsibility (*phala*), and the problems of bondage and freedom, in the same way as the Buddha himself did. Secondly, in addition to these difficulties, the Buddhists were developing an enormous respect for their teacher, the Buddha, which gradually led to the emergence of transcendentalism. Nāgārjuna is thus compelled to resort to the process of deconstruction of the substantialist views regarding the conception of a person, both in bondage (*saṃsāra*) and in the state of freedom (*nirvāṇa*). Interestingly, in this section Nāgārjuna makes many more positive statements than he did previously. What is most significant is the manner in which he concludes the XXVth chapter.

The Buddha did not teach the appeasement of all objects, the appeasement of obsession and the auspicious as some thing to some one at some place.⁴⁷

This is the climax of the process of deconstruction for which Nāgārjuna uniformly employed the doctrine of “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*). What he is deconstructing is not the ordinary conventional truth or language, but rather the conception of a mysterious some thing (*kaścid dharmāḥ*).

Had he concluded his treatise with the previous statement, Nāgārjuna deserved to be looked upon as a nihilistic thinker. But this was not to be the case. In twelve beautifully composed verses, Nāgārjuna presented the positive teachings of the Buddha, his doctrine of dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*) embodied in the twelve-fold formula (*dvādasāṅga*). It is the process of reconstruction adopted by the Buddha himself.

The final chapter indeed is an explanation of reasons for the emergence of substantialist metaphysics. Nāgārjuna’s source for this chapter is undoubtedly the Buddha’s discourse on “Brahman’s Net” (*Brahmajāla*) where sixty-two such views are listed. After listing almost all the views mentioned by the Buddha, Nāgārjuna highlights the most significant and useful advice given by the Buddha, namely, abandoning of all views (*sarva-dṛṣṭi-prahāṇa*)^{XLII} without grasping on to any one as the absolute or ultimate truth. The sole purpose of deconstruction being the avoidance of ontological commitment, one should be prepared

47. *ibid.*, XXV. 24

to give up a theory when it is no longer useful. This certainly is the implication of the metaphor of the raft (*kulla*)^{XLIII} as appropriately utilized by the Buddha.

We have so far examined the method of deconstruction and reconstruction adopted during three periods in the history of Buddhism. First, the method adopted by the Buddha where mysterious entities are denied after a careful philosophical analysis followed by a more constructive process explained in terms of the principle of dependence. There is an abundance of positive doctrines all of which are couched in non-paradoxical straightforward language. When we come to the second stage represented by the *Vajracchedikā*, negations are highlighted, with the positive doctrines formulated in more paradoxical forms. The third stage is represented by Nāgārjuna who follows the negative method of deconstruction throughout his treatise. Yet without resorting to paradoxes, he concludes the work in a positive note. What is missing in Nāgārjuna's treatment is the extremely important psychological content of the Buddha's doctrine and it was left to Vasubandhu to fill in this lacunae.

Thus, anyone proceeding to examine the final phase of Buddhism represented by the Tantras need to take a comprehensive look at the entire history of Buddhist thought and practice, without making up his mind prematurely in order to maintain that the Buddhist Tantras are either a mixture of Hindu and Buddhist mysticism (Wayman) or simply as a culmination of the Indo-Tibetan Buddhism (Guenther).

After all, the Tantras belong to the so-called Vajrayāna. If so it would be necessary to analyse the meaning of the term *vajra* and trace the history of the concept. The information we have provided above would indicate that *vajra* symbolized analysis or deconstruction of substantialist metaphysics and that this significance can be traced back to the Buddha himself who was the most radical non-substantialist to appear in the philosophical world. However, that analysis or deconstruction was followed by a reconstruction without reintroducing that substantialism. This was the function of the simile of the raft. If the Vajrayāna is to be genuine Buddha-yāna it needs to accommodate these two processes of deconstruction and reconstruction.

A rather cursory glance at the Tantra literature has convinced the present writer that there are at least three notable characteristics in its literary style. First is the paradoxical nature of description. Second is the profuse use of symbolism to express various positive categories in the Buddhist doctrine. Third is the concluding statements which often give expression to a feeling or experience of peace and happiness.

The paradoxical statements in the Buddhist Tantras do not have the same implications they carry in the Hindu Tantras. The Hindu system of thought, as is well known, emphasizes the idea that ultimate truth transcends linguistic description. Thus a statement appearing in the form of assertion-negation-assertion, if it were to occur in the Hindu Tantras, would mean that the first assertion refers to the empirical or the worldly, the negation is a rejection of that empirical reality and the second assertion stands for the ineffable reality. However, when this form of description occurs in the Buddhist literature, as in the case of the *Vajracchedikā*, we have seen that the first assertion represents ontological commitment, the negation stands for its rejection and the second assertion indicates conceptual reconstruction without ontological commitment. Indeed, if we are to combine the two complementary systems of the Mādhyamikas and the Yogācārins, the paradoxical statements of not only the *Vajracchedikā*, but also of the Tantras are easily explained. For instance, Nāgārjuna highlights the conception of emptiness (*śūnyatā*)^{XLIV} without totally ignoring the idea of convention (*vyavahāra*).^{XLV} Vasubandhu, on the contrary, underscores the idea that all reality is "mere conception" (*viññapti-mātra*)^{XLVI} without at the sametime neglecting the conception of non-substantiality (*niḥsvabhāva*).^{XLVII} Putting together Nāgārjuna's view of emptiness with Vasubandhu's notion of non-substantiality, and Nāgārjuna's idea of convention with Vasubandhu's theory of conception, we have a complete story of Buddhism as propounded by the Buddha. Any attempt to read the Tantric texts without keeping in mind their primary philosophical sources, that is, a combination of Mādhyamika deconstruction and Yogācāra reconstruction will lead us nowhere. For example, note the substantialist and mystical interpretation resulting from the trans-

lation of a key term in the Tantras such as *ābhāsa* as “spread”⁴⁸ instead of “appearance,”⁴⁹ the latter being its technical use in the epistemological speculations of Vasubandhu. This means that the proper rendering of the Buddhist Tantras, whether it be from Sanskrit or Tibetan or Chinese into any modern language can be done only after a careful conceptual analysis of the Tantras in the light of the processes of deconstruction and reconstruction in the Buddhist philosophical tradition, especially those of Mādhyamika and Yogācāra.

The second and the more vexing problem in the study of the meaning and significance of the Tantras arise as a result of their profuse use of symbolism. There seems little doubt that the introduction of symbolism is intended to popularize the Buddhist teachings at a time when the Hindu Tantras were gradually becoming popular and posing a challenge to the Buddhists. The ordinary pious Buddhist devotee who was unable to understand the abstruse doctrinal points, craved for rituals comparable to those provided for in the Hindu tradition. As in the Hindu system where the Tantras served as Mantras (i.e., recitations), the Buddhist Tantras were to be recited at religious ceremonies. Thus, the substitution of demons, gods and *bodhisattvas* proved to be a more effective way of retaining the attention of the ordinary listener rather than pouring out philosophical jargon which he would normally not understand. The demons often appear as the embodiments of evil, the gods as the personification of the pleasurable experiences and the *buddhas* and *bodhisattvas* as representations of the noble life. To take an example of the last form of symbolism, we have the five aggregates of the human personality substituted by five Buddhas and their functions, as follows :

- body (*rūpa*)—Vairocana—ethic
- feeling (*vedanā*)—Ratnasambhava—concentration
- perception (*saṃjñā*)—Amitābha—appreciation
- dispositions (*saṃskāra*)—Amoghasiddhi—freedom
- consciousness (*vijñāna*)—Akṣobhya—vision in freedom.⁵⁰

48. Wayman, op. cit., pp. 3 ff

49. Guenther, op. cit., p. 17

50. *ibid.*, p. 105

Such symbolism carefully interpreted would certainly illustrate the nonsubstantialist interpretation of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* presented by Nāgārjuna :

The life-process has no thing that distinguishes it from freedom. Freedom has no thing that distinguishes it from the life-process.⁵¹

Presenting the five Buddhas in relation to the five aggregates of the human personality, the Tantras were simply denying the mysterious “something” (*kiṃcit*) that the substantialist thinkers were looking for, and at the sametime emphasizing the ideas expressed by Nāgārjuna in the above quotation which, furthermore, is not different from the statement of the Buddha that the world (of suffering) (*loka*), its arising (=cause, *taṇhā*), its cessation (=freedom, *nibbāna*) and the way leading to its cessation (=path, the moral life, *magga*) are all within this fathom-long conscious body, a statement that is traceable to the historical Buddha himself.⁵²

The introduction of symbolism in order to retain the attention of the *listener* when the Tantra is recited can cause enormous difficulties for the *learner*, the student of the Tantras, for he will be baffled by such statements as quoted above where the body (*rūpa*) is equated with the Buddha Vairocana, feeling (*vedanā*) with the Buddha Ratnasambhava, etc. The Tantric statement is less straightforward in explaining the relationship between the ordinary human life (*saṃsāra*) and the life of freedom (*nirvāṇa*) than the statements found either in early Buddhism or in Nāgārjuna. The explanations of such Tantric statements require a comprehensive knowledge of Buddhist tradition on the part of a teacher (*guru*). He should be well conversant with the process of deconstruction represented by the Buddha’s doctrine of non-substantiality (*anātman*), the process of reconstruction embodied in the theory of dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*) as well as the meaning and purpose of the symbolism so profusely utilized in the Tantras. Equipped with such knowledge and understanding, he could carefully guide the student into the intri-

51. Kalupahana, *Nāgārjuna*, p. 366

52. S 2.62; Tsa 49.14 (*Taisho* 2.359a-b)

cacies of the Tantric methodology. What is *not* required of him is any mystical experience which, assuming that it is beyond any linguistic expression, is not easily communicated from teacher to pupil except through an equally mystical way of instruction, as in the Upanisadic tradition.

Now, the Tantras, recited as *mantras*, are bound to create problems for the *listener* who does not have the opportunity of learning the Tantras and making sense out of their doctrinal content. One would assume that the ordinary uneducated Buddhist will have to recognize a mysterious power in the words, an idea which is embedded in the Hindu Tantric thought. On the contrary, the danger of the Tantras leading to ontological commitment, the belief in substances, is less in the case of the *listener* than in the case of the *learner*. Substantialist thinking arose more among intellectuals and rational Buddhists than among the ordinary followers. Thus, the process of deconstruction and reconstruction taking effect in the uneducated listener is less complicated than in the disciple who is being initiated into the meaning and significance of the Tantras. In this case, one has to bear in mind the extreme psychological impact of the *mantras* (that is, the recited Tantras) on the ordinary person even though he may not understand one word of it except being familiar with the names of the demons, gods, *bodhisattvas* and the *buddhas*. The listener is put through a rather tedious process of listening to a string of statements, almost meaningless to him uttered in unison by a group of monks involved in the ritual. His patience may wear out in the end and he would wonder why these statements are recited at all. However, as the recitation comes to a close, the agitated mind is appeased by a series of statements that are extremely meaningful and relate to peace and happiness of mind. The psychological significance of that appeasement of mind cannot be overestimated.

Indeed, this is a basic principle embodied in the Buddha's own method of communication and conversion. His contemporaries who failed to understand the psychological significance of his method of discourse looked upon him as a person possessed of the magical power of conversion⁵³ (*āvattani māyā* XLVIII). Yet, there was no magic or mystery involved. All that the

53. *M* 1.375; *Chung* 32.1 (*Taisho* 1.629)

Buddha did was to pay careful attention to the psychological constitution of the human person. His method of instruction is described in four terms, sometimes wrongly understood as synonyms, but which indicate four distinct stages.

In the first stage, the Buddha is represented as "pointing out" (*sandasseti*XLIX), that is, indicating the present status of the individual. This is followed by the stage where the Buddha causes "agitation" (*samuttejeti*)L, in the person by pointing out his destiny, the unfortunate consequences of his present life. If the person is left at this point, he may end up being a neurotic. The agitation is immediately appeased (*sampahaṃseti*)LI, by pointing a way out of the problem. At this stage, the Buddha does not have to make an effort to convert him to his way of thinking, for the individual tends to accept his explanation without much ado (*samādapeti*),⁵⁴ The Chinese version of the Āgama passage rightly refers to this as the "skill in means"(LII). Agitation (*samuttejana*LIII) and appeasement (*sampahaṃsana*LIV), are the most significant steps in this process. The reader of the Tantras as well as the hearer of the *mantras* go through these two processes. Continued reading of statements that are often not very meaningful can lead the reader of the Tantras to realize that one can be misled by language, that every word and every statement in the Tantra or, for that matter, any other literature, need not be taken as descriptions of ultimate reality. Once that form of ontological commitment to language is eliminated, then it is possible for the reader to understand more clearly the meaning, limits and purpose of language. In itself this is freedom, and the Tantric texts often conclude with a statement that expresses that form of freedom and peace. It is for this reason that one can maintain that the Buddhist Tantras are undoubtedly extensions (*tantra*) of these two processes of disconstruction and reconstruction.

(All references to Pali texts are to the editions of the Pali Text Society. In the case of the Chinese versions of these discourses the references are to the *Taisho Shinshu Daizokyo*.)

Note : Figures in roman numerals in brackets indicate reference to Chinese characters for which see *Addenda : (Ed.)*

54. M 2.55; *Chung* 31.1 (*Taisho* 1.623b)

(B)
 Chinese Characters
 in
 THE BUDDHIST TANTRIC DECONSTRUCTION AND
 RECONSTRUCTION : THEIR SŪTRA ORIGIN
 (pp. 305-327)

I	無我	IX	無明
II	何人	X	行
III	狂癡	XI	身行
IV	人無我	XII	口行
V	五陰	XIII	意行
VI	六界	XIV	識
VII	因緣法	XV	心識在
VIII	十二因緣	XVI	名色

XVII	行	XXX	想
XVIII	識	XXXI	味
		XXXII	如實
XIX	觸	XXXIII	切法無我
XX	受	XXXIV	果
		XXXV	椽
XXI	愛	XXXVI	第一義
XXII	取	XXXVII	樂
XXIII	有	XXXVIII	涅槃
XXIV	生	XXXIX	金剛
XXV	若	XL	金剛
XXVI	老	XLI	椽喻
XXVII	死	XLII	悉斷一切見
XXVIII	惱	XLIII	椽
XXIX	亂	XLIV	空

XLV	谷諫。	L	渴仰
XLVI	唯識	LI	歡喜
XLVII	無自性	LII	方便
XLVIII	幻化呪	LIII	渴仰
XLIX	勸發	LIV	歡喜