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A Word on the Mantrayāna

There are two principal forms of Buddhism, the Śrāvakayāna and the Bodhisattvayāna, otherwise known as the Hīnayāna and the Mahāyāna. The Mahāyāna has two divisions, the Pāramitāyāna and the Mantrayāna. The Pāramitāyāna consists in the practice of the six *pāramitās* over a huge number of successive lives and for an inconceivable period of time. Its goal is Supreme Perfect Enlightenment. The follower of the Mantrayāna, also known as the Vajrayāna, may practise the *pāramitās* and even the ethics and meditation of the Śrāvakayāna but what really propels him or her along his or her chosen path is the fact that he or she practises with the help of mantras. It is the mantras that do the work, so to speak. Not only do they do the work, but mantras have the effect of shortening the time in which the Bodhisattva or Mantrin takes to achieve his or her goal. Indeed, with the help of mantras one may be able to achieve Supreme Perfect Enlightenment within the compass of a single human lifetime, as Milarepa is believed to have done.

But what is a mantra? In the Vajrayāna or Mantrayāna it is a group of words or sounds imbued with a certain spiritual power. A mantra may also consist of a single word, or even a single sound, and it may or may not possess a meaning in the ordinary sense of the term. A western scholar has therefore suggested that the Mantrayāna should be known in English as the Path of Magic. A mantra ‘works’ by virtue of the fact that it is the locus of a power or energy which is unknown to science and cannot be measured by ordinary means. To the non-Buddhist observer and even to the follower of the Śrāvakayāna, the Mantrayāna may seem to be little more than a web of fantasies and delusions and even a means of exploiting the credulous and gullible. It may also be charged that the Mantrayāna represents, sociologically speaking, a regression to the old pre-Buddhist, Vedic way of thinking. However, there are people who find this ‘magical’ Buddhism very attractive, especially when the mantra is experienced within a context of light and colour and in association with an archetypal Buddha or Bodhisattva.

With the help of a mantra or mantras one passes through the various stages of the Vajrayāna path. These stages correspond to the stages of the Bodhisattva path, to which they are in fact equivalent. What would take a Bodhisattva hundreds or thousands of lives to achieve is achieved by the Mantrin within a comparatively short period, and it is for this reason that the path of the mantra is said to be the short path. Thus, between the path of Mantra and the Bodhisattva path there is a correlation similar to that between the stages of the Śrāvakayāna and the number of lives remaining to the practitioner, except that for the Arahant who attains Nirvana there are no further lives. One therefore sees that, from a certain point of view, the Mantrayāna path parallels the Śrāvakayāna. At the same time, there is an important difference, and that difference gives rise to a difficulty. The goal of the Mantrayāna is Supreme Perfect Enlightenment. This is also the goal of the Bodhisattvayāna, but the Mantrin achieves it much more quickly than the Bodhisattva, which is probably one of the reasons for the popularity of this path. But what is a Samyaksambuddha?

A Samyaksambuddha is a Bodhisattva who, after traversing the entire Bodhisattva path, achieves Samyaksambuddhahood in his last existence and thereafter teaches the Dharma in a world where all trace of it has been lost. Thus, there can be only one Buddha at a time in the world. There can no more be two Buddhas at once than there can be two suns in the sky or two universal rulers on earth. But where does this leave Milarepa? He is believed to have achieved the highest goal of the Vajrayāna, which of course is Samyaksambuddhahood, and this would appear to contradict the general Buddhist teaching about the nature of Samyaksambuddhahood. So far as I am aware, no Vajrayāna teacher has addressed this problem, but there may well be a solution to it hidden away in the esoteric depths of the tradition.

There is also Maitreya Buddha i.e. Maitreya Samyaksambuddha who is thus styled proleptically, he not having yet attained to the end of the Bodhisattva path. Nonetheless, many Buddhists worship and meditate upon him. Indeed, it has been pointed out that the worship of Maitreya is common to both the Theravāda and the Mahāyāna, so that his worship could be a means of union for all Buddhists.

A mantra does not come to one by accident. It comes to one from a qualified guru who has received it from their own teacher and so on, back along a line that may begin with an archetypal Buddha or Bodhisattva. The transmission of the mantra from guru to disciple generally takes place within a ritual context and creates between them a *samaya* or bond which binds the disciple to the guru for life and even beyond. It pledges the disciple to accept whatever treatment they receive at the hands of the guru, however contrary the treatment may be to the usages of society. A breach of *samaya* on the part of the disciple entails serious, even terrible consequences. According to some authorities it entails rebirth in the Vajra Hell and a stay there for a very long time, but I find it difficult to believe how a teaching of this kind could have arisen within the Vajrayāna, however serious some teachers may have considered any breach of *samaya* by the disciple to be.

There is also the question of whether the occult energy or ‘power’ generated by the practice of the Mantrayāna could be used for the furtherance of mundane interests or for the protection of Buddhism. In the early 1950s I was living in Kalimpong, a small town in the foothills of the eastern Himalayas. The Chinese troops had crossed the border with Tibet and were on their way to Lhasa, the capital. Kalimpong was then full of Tibetans, some of whom told me that the Dalai Lama had ordered the lamas of the Tantric College, who were advanced practitioners of the Mantrayāna, to employ ritual magic to prevent the Chinese troops from reaching the holy city. On 9 September 1951, however, the first contingent of Chinese troops reached Lhasa. For me, this did not mean that the ritual magic of the Tantric College had necessarily failed or was a fantasy. White or black, magic depended upon the power of thought which undoubtedly could be either positive and beneficial or negative and destructive. The practice of the metta bhavana, in which metta or loving kindness is directed first to oneself and finally to all living beings, is a positive example of the power of thought, which can transform for the better relations between individuals and between groups.

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