

WHAT IS VAJRA ?

The Sanskrit form 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 explanatory the word Adamant has been used. Vide Anagarika Govinda: *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism* (London 1959) and D.L. Snellgrove: *Hevajrat Tantra* (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 contributions from Tibetan context are expected for *Bulletin of Tibetology*. For the non-specialist reader of this *Bulletin* I seek to preface the discussion with a historical note from Sanskrit/Indic context.

The concept of Vajra is early Vedic. It is the weapon of Indra which could prevail upon or destroy the mightiest adversary of the Devas. It was described to be made of stone and alternately of iron. Kalyan Kumar Ganguly, Calcutta University, suggests that this marks the transition 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 a 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 1968) and J.N. Banerjea: *Development of Hindu Iconography* (Calcutta 1956) may be seen.

Originating as a weapon for destruction Vajra came to be prized 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 Katha Upanishad (2-3-2) 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 Sakya 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

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 Rdo-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 Graeco-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 Rdo-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 Sunyata. The treatise *Advayavajrasangraha* says:

"Sunyata 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)

Nirmal C. Sinha