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Vajrayāna Buddhism: Its Place in Traditional Bhutan and Its Future Prospects

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There are two main things that I hope to do in this paper. The first is to provide a brief introduction to Vajrayāna Buddhism, and to its place in the Bhutanese society of the past. The second is to ask whether Vajrayāna Buddhism might have a place in the Bhutan of the future, and in the world as a whole.

From a Vajrayāna Buddhist point of view, the Vajrayāna teachings are an expression of the wisdom of the Buddha in one or another of his Tantric forms. This revelation of the Buddha's wisdom takes place beyond and outside our ordinary world of space and time. Although it is sometimes spoken of as manifesting in particular places and times, such as the Dhānyakaṭaka stupa in South India where the Kālacakra and other Tantras were said to have been revealed.

For the Gsar ma pa or 'New Tantra' traditions, dating from the 11th and 12th centuries C.E. onwards, this revelation of the Buddha's wisdom is preserved in many Tantric lineages, initially transmitted from India to Tibet and Bhutan in the 11th to 12th centuries. These New Tantra traditions include the 'Brug pa Bka' brgyud pa, who are intimately bound up with the creation of the Bhutanese state and remain the official tradition throughout the country. The Rnying ma pa or Old Tantra traditions, which are also widespread and important within Bhutan, claim to go back to the earlier period of the early spread (*snga dar*) of the Dharma in the Himalayan regions, in the 7th and 8th centuries C.E. For the Old Tantra traditions, there are teaching lineages that were brought to Bhutan

by the great lama Gu ru Rin po che (Guru Padma 'Byung gnas, Padmasambhava) and his associates and disciples in the 8th century, as well as many further revealed treasure teachings or *gter ma* that have been transmitted in later times, and are also believe to have their source in Gu ru Rin po che.

There are different ways of understanding these processes of transmission and revelation. For both Rnying ma and Gsar ma traditions, however, the Vajrayāna is an expression of the Buddha's enlightened nature, the Dharmakāya. That enlightened nature is present not only in the historical activity of the Buddha Śākyamuni. It is also an intrinsic part of the world in which we live. Ordinarily we see the world from the perspective of impure vision, clouded by the *nyon mongs*, *kleśas* or obscurations, which form part of the ordinary human condition, of which desire, hatred and ignorance are the most fundamental. However, there is always the possibility of achieving the state of pure vision and seeing the world in its true nature, that of the Dharmakāya, within which *bodhicitta*, the altruistic motivation of Buddhahood, the desire to bring all beings to awakening in order to relieve them from suffering, is the central motive force.

This true inner nature of the world is expressed through the activity of the Tantric deities. We can seek to contact those deities and to evoke them within ourselves, within our mind-body complex, our body, speech and mind to use the usual Vajrayāna formulation. This is a vital step on the path to reducing and eliminating the *kleśas*, and making our body mind into a pure channel through which the *bodhicitta*, the compassion that is at the centre of the Buddhist teachings, can flow freely and effectively. Along with other practices such as the various purificatory and preparatory exercises (*sngon 'gro*), and the various yogas of dreaming, *bar do*, psychic heat generation (*gtum mo*) and so on, this is the core of the Vajrayāna path to Buddhahood.

Vajrayāna is thus in a sense outside time, but always accessible. But we can ask why Vajrayāna Buddhism might be taken up and adopted in a particular part of India, Central Asia or the Himalayas at a specific time. What did Vajrayāna Buddhism mean to those people, at that time, such that they were prepared to commit to it the massive human and economic resources that supported the great monasteries of Buddhist Asia? Western scholars are perhaps more likely to ask this question than are traditional Buddhist scholars from Asian societies. Such questions form part of the disciplinary training of a Western academic, whereas for a traditional Buddhist scholar the value of Buddhism tends to be taken for granted. Nevertheless, the question is not trivial. The future of Vajrayāna, at least for the foreseeable future, does not depend only on the intrinsic value of the teachings, but also on whether the world in which we now live will appreciate that value and provide the level of support needed for Vajrayāna to become a vital and ongoing part of the new global civilization within which we live today. If we understand how such an appreciation and

support developed in the past, in Bhutan and elsewhere, this can perhaps help us to see the possibilities for the Vajrayāna in today's world.

One part of the answer to why Vajrayāna Buddhism was valued and supported in Bhutan and other Himalayan countries is that it was seen as a source of practical help in daily life. The Vajrayāna was not only seen as a form of wisdom that could lead to Enlightenment, to the ultimate goal of Buddhahood. It was also understood to be a source of practical techniques to maintain prosperity and good health among the human beings of countries such as Bhutan. Vajrayāna rituals protected the fields from hail and maintained fertility among crops. Vajrayāna practices defended communities against the attacks of human beings or of the spirit-world. Himalayan communities came to accept the need for such ritual practices as part of their ongoing existence, and the masters of the Vajrayāna largely replaced, or incorporated under their supervision, the village priests and spirit-mediums who had dealt with such concerns in earlier times.

Local and regional rulers also accepted the need to support the Vajrayāna. Among such rulers were the kings of Gu ge and Mang yul who played such an important part in the early years of the *phyi dar* or later spread of the Dharma in Tibet, the Rlangs dynasty which dominated central Tibet in the 14th and 15th centuries, the various local and regional rulers of Bhutan before the coming of the Zhabs drung Ngag dbang dbang rgyal in the 17th century, and many others, including the Mongol and Manchu emperors of China. These emperors, kings and local big men were doubtlessly often motivated mainly by Buddhism as an ethical system that could help maintain stability and order within the lands where they had authority, but the historical record suggests that many of them were also impressed by the personal qualities of Vajrayāna gurus and lamas, and developed personal faith in the Vajrayāna teachings. In these ways Buddhism in Bhutan and other Himalayan countries became part of the fabric of everyday life, and part of the way in which people understood the world in which they lived. In the course of this process, the central ethical dimension of Vajrayāna Buddhism, the altruistic impetus of *bodhicitta* also became an integral part of these societies, along with the ideal of Buddhahood as the ultimate goal of human existence.

As Vajrayāna Buddhism became established within a country such as Bhutan, the landscape also became conceived of in ways that reinforced a sense of a specifically Buddhist universe. The mountains and lakes were now homes of protector deities that had vowed to guard the Buddhist teachings. The holy places of Bhutan became sites of temples, *stūpas*, monasteries, and meditation-caves, infused with the ideas and personalities of Vajrayāna Buddhism. If you grew up in traditional Bhutan, Vajrayāna Buddhism made sense in a way that it does not, if you grow up in contemporary London, New York or Sydney.

Even today, though Bhutan is in many ways a modern country, many ancient temples and meditation sites that are associated with Gu ru Rin po che, Zhabs

drung Ngag dbang rnam rgyal, Padma gling pa and their successors are still a constant reminder of a power that is intrinsic in the landscape, and that could be accessed by the lamas and yogis of later times. The stories of these lamas and holy men of the past are still a strong presence within the land, familiar in one form or another to most Bhutanese people.

There are many other ways in which someone living in pre-modern Bhutan would have been constantly reminded of the truths and teachings of Vajrayāna Buddhism. Proverbial wisdom, folk songs and dances, the stories of yogis and lamas and their powers, the *ma ni* walls around *stūpas* or along mountain passes, the various clothing of lay and monastic practitioners, all these were part of the texture of daily life. The great monastic and civic festivals of the *tshe chu* demonstrated the presence and power of the *yi dam* and protector deities (Samuel and David, 2016). Life and death were understood in terms of *karma* and rebirth. Buddhist expressions and ideas pervaded the everyday languages of the peoples of Bhutan. This is important because when a Bhutanese, especially in pre-modern times, took up an interest in Buddhist practice he or she had grown up in a world that supported that interest in many obvious and also more subtle ways.

Consider for example a practice such as the 'Chi med srog thig, a well-known Tantric practice (*tshe sgrub*) for achieving long life and health (Samuel, in press, 1). The 'Chi med srog thig was discovered or revealed in Bhutan in 1904 at the sacred location of Seng ge Rdzong by the *gter ston* lama Zil gnon Nam kha'i rdo rje, and passed on by him initially to the 15th Rgyal dbang Karma pa and then to the well-known Rnying ma pa lama Bdud 'joms rin po che ('Jigs bral Ye shes rdo rje, 1904-1987). Bdud 'joms rin po che wrote liturgical and explanatory texts for the practice and transmitted it onwards to his family members and disciples, many of them are active in Bhutan in the present day.

If one receives the empowerments for this practice, studies the liturgical and commentarial texts, and undertakes the practice itself, even at a basic level, it soon becomes clear how undertaking such a yogic regimen is supported by and interlaced with the wider spiritual energies and assumptions of the Bhutanese world. The main text of the practice is introduced, like many *gter ma* texts, by the words of Gu ru Rin po che himself, who tells the reader and practitioner of his spiritual activities in the Himalayas of which this specific revelation is a part. The text itself is infused with references to the wider pantheon of deities of Rnying ma pa Buddhism. These names would be very familiar to a Bhutanese practitioner undertaking the 'Chi med srog thig, particularly in the past, as would the caves and other locations where Gu ru Rin po che practiced in Bhutan and the Himalayas, and the temples and monasteries where his activities have been continued throughout the centuries.

In the course of undertaking this practice, the environment around is transformed through pure vision into a transfigured landscape inhabited by Tantric deities, which can act as a source of replenishment and nourishment

for the practitioner and be passed on its turn to others (Samuel 2013a; Samuel in press, 1). That transfigured landscape is understood and something deeper and more real than the everyday world around us, as closer to the intrinsic Buddha-nature underlying all apparent phenomena. Yet the ability to bring about such a transformation is surely reinforced and catalyzed by the practitioners' awareness of the history of sacred activity within the everyday world around them, and the many places, legends, buildings and images that bear witness to that activity.

Similarly for the yogic practices of the 'Brug pa Bka' brgyud tradition, with their own grounding in the stories of Mar pa, Mi la ras pa, Sgam po pa and Gtsang pa rgya ras, the original founding figure of the 'Brug pa Bka' brgyud tradition, or Pha 'Brug sgom Zhig po who first established the tradition in Bhutan in the 13th century, the great Zhabs drung Ngag dbang rnam rgyal who created the 'Brug pa state in Bhutan, and the many other lamas, yogis and sacred locations associated with the 'Brug pa in Bhutan.

This kind of presence of power within the landscape which can be accessed to assist and support those who live their today has a specifically Vajrayāna expression, but it is of course something shared by most, if not all, cultures of the past. It was particularly strong and alive within Australian Aboriginal cultures, for example, where the sense of 'country' was intimately linked to the identity of the people who were born in and lived in that country (e.g. Strehlow, 1947; Stanner, 2011). Much of that sense of connection still survives today and animates the struggles of indigenous Australians to defend what is left of their ancestral homelands and to retain a viable life and identity in the present world. So it is also for many other indigenous cultures and societies.

The people of Europe too once had a similar grounding in the land where they lived. Living as I did in many years in South Wales, I gradually discovered how the mythology of the past, of Arthur, Myrddin (Merlin) and the heroic figures of the *Mabinogion*, was still marked on the British landscape in pre-Christian sacred sites throughout the region. Much the same is true of Ireland, where the mediaeval Dindsenchas stories have preserved a sense of how stories and legend were layered within the land and its ancient monuments. It was doubtless truth of many other parts of Europe as well. Christianity added its own layering of places of power, sacred sites, shrines and pilgrimage centres throughout these lands, associated with the great saints of the past. Yet today this background has lost its meaning for most of those who dwell within these countries. Even for those who are aware of the power that was understood to be within the landscape, there has been a drastic break of continuity. Myrddin may once have been a figure of power with more than a passing likeness to Gu ru Rin po che. There are no living lineages of initiation and understanding, however, that have come down to us from that time as there are from Gu ru Rin po che in Bhutan and other Himalayan countries. The fragmentary texts that have been passed down to us are at best material for an imaginative

reconstruction of a long-lost past (see for example Dames 1992 for Ireland, Dames 2002 for Wales).

In any case, while the landscapes of Europe might in the past have supported the spiritual practices of European paganism, or of Christianity, they did not encode messages about the transformative power of the Buddha. And much of the fabric of ideas, practices, buildings, ways of behaving, which it once supported, vanished into the past long before the memory of present generations.

I make these points in part to emphasise that Bhutan is a special place, both for its own people and for the rest of the world. Indeed, as far as Vajrayāna Buddhism is concerned, since the incorporation of most of Tibet into the People's Republic of China, and the devastation of the Cultural Revolution, Bhutan is one of the very few locations where a deep and meaningful connection of this kind has survived, and has some chance of retaining its viability into the future. We need to recognize nonetheless that even in Bhutan much is changing, and at a very rapid pace. The great religious sites and festivals of the past are being transformed into resources for the tourist industry, while the growing social problems among the unemployed and underemployed youth of Thimphu and other urban centres witness a rapid process of disaffiliation from the Buddhist universe of the past. We may regret the change to a universe where mobile phones are of deeper value and significance than Buddhist *mālās*, but there is not a great deal that we can realistically do to prevent it. Indeed most of us are thoroughly complicit with it.

So we have a big question about the Vajrayāna in the future. The methods of the Vajrayāna may well be beyond time, place, and culture, but can the Vajrayāna survive without a world that supports it, without people whose world is built around it? If we live in the materialist world of most modern science, can we get beyond the superficial Buddhism of Happiness Festivals and of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction? These things may not be useless, but they do not necessarily go very deep (Samuel, 2015b; Samuel, in press, 2). There are many dharma centres and numerous lamas scattered throughout the world today, but there is also real doubt about how much serious practice is possible and is taking place. One reason for that doubt, surely, is that Westerners, and increasingly most citizens of our globalised world, do not live in an environment in which spiritual practice has much meaning.

If Vajrayāna Buddhism is to continue as a source of wisdom and enlightenment within the contemporary global environment, and even within lands like Bhutan which have still preserved some of the Vajrayāna's past grounding in the living landscape, then this will happen because the Vajrayāna will be seen as having something real and necessary to offer to today's world, as it had something real and necessary to offer to the Bhutanese and other Himalayan peoples in the eighth to twelfth centuries, when it initially became established

in those regions. Since for most people ultimate concerns such as Buddhahood are relatively distant from their everyday lives, that is likely, as in Bhutan, to be something that is more directly relevant to people's everyday lives.

I am not suggesting that we discount the Vajrayāna's ultimate goal of the liberation of all beings from suffering. I think however that it is worth looking at ways in which the Vajrayāna's deep wisdom in dealing with more proximate and pragmatic matters might serve as a basis for it to gain a more prominent and respected place within our secularized society. That in its turn, as in Bhutan in the past, could help provide the basis on which people might find their way to deeper levels of practice within the Vajrayāna Buddhist tradition. In the remainder of the paper, I would like to suggest four areas in which the Vajrayāna could have some real traction in today's world, and which might help to build up a background of understanding within which Buddhist spiritual practice could seem more meaningful.

The first is **health and illness**. The Vajrayāna has a great deal of practical and effective technology in relation to healing. I have mentioned above the *tshe sgrub* longevity practices. Elsewhere I have suggested that we can see the *tshe sgrub* and related practices such as the empowerment of medicinal substances (*sman sgrub*), and the *tshe dbang* or life-empowerment rituals performed by lamas and yogic practitioners on behalf of others, as very sophisticated ways of awakening and encouraging the intrinsic healing powers of the human mind-body complex (Samuel, 2008; 2012; in press, 1).

Western medicine of course itself includes a very advanced body of therapeutic practices, and most of us have reason to be genuinely grateful for its achievements. I would argue though that Vajrayāna has developed its own complementary approach, an approach that can liberate natural healing powers that are often inhibited or blocked by the highly technological nature of contemporary biomedicine (Samuel, 2015a). As the very procedures of 'evidence-based medicine' make clear, even the most advanced and sophisticated medical technology cannot guarantee a successful outcome. Healing also depends on the inner strength and resources of the patient. Such resources can be strengthened or weakened, intentionally or unintentionally, by the environment within which treatment takes place, by the words and behavior of medical staff, and so on. Studies of the role of subjective meaning within the so-called 'placebo effect' indicate the immense contribution that such factors can make to the success or failure of medical procedures (Moerman, 2002; Wilce, 2003). Skillful doctors learn to encourage and assist the healing process through their own behavior; they attempt to address the patient's illness as well as to treat the disease (Kleinman, 1980). Arguably, *tshe grub* practices such as the 'Chi med srog thig operate in the same realm of meaning, and in a highly-sophisticated way. They bring together the complex symbolic resources of Vajrayāna Buddhism to promote ongoing health. Increasingly, too, they are being used both in traditional Buddhist societies and

elsewhere to reinforce the healing procedures of contemporary medicine, to bring about within the patient the will to recover and the conviction that recovery is possible. For the skilled practitioner, they also offer the ability to channel and direct the inner flows within the body and so aid the healing process directly.

Health is important to all of us, and as people around the world come to appreciate the deep wisdom of Tantric methods of healing, I believe that the Vajrayāna as a whole will be taken more and more seriously. I think that the huge popularity of mindfulness-based approaches within psychiatry and increasingly also within other areas of medicine, and the growing interest in neuroscientific approaches to consciousness, is only the beginning of a shift of this kind (Samuel, 2015b; Samuel, in press, 1). As the riches of the Vajrayāna's approach to healing become part of many people's everyday experience, then the Vajrayāna's wider horizons will also become less alien and more approachable for many millions of people.

The second area is **death and dying**, the area of what is nowadays rather evasively called 'end of life care'. The inadequacies of Western materialistic understandings of death and dying have long been clear. Death and rebirth have always been important matters for Buddhism, but the Vajrayāna has a depth of knowledge and experience in relation to the process of dying, and is becoming a growing presence in contemporary societies around the world. Western societies have alienated themselves from the experience of dying, and from much of their own traditional spiritual resources. The Vajrayāna is already beginning to fill the gap. The salience of the *Bar do thos grol* ('Tibetan Book of the Dead') as probably the best-known and most-translated of all Vajrayāna texts in Western languages is perhaps not accidental (e.g. Karma Lingpa 1987, 2005). This is an area where many people in the West have looked to Tibetan Buddhism for both understanding and practical help. The *'pho ba* practices, in which people learn how to direct consciousness at the time of death, are culturally specific, but they also have potential for adaption to people from many different backgrounds (e.g. Tromge 2003). As this happens, Vajrayāna Buddhism will become less foreign and more of a natural presence within global societies.

A third area is perhaps less obvious, that of our relationship to the **planetary environment**, both physical and living. I suggested that much of the sense of the landscape as animated, as encoding spiritual messages, has vanished into the past in contemporary societies. It has not vanished entirely, perhaps, but it is hard to recapture. But the Vajrayāna has another aspect, to which I have already alluded, which has a strong environmentalist potential.

This is the idea of pure vision, which forms a key part of all Tantric practices, including the *tshe sgrub* and *tshe dbang*, the long life attainment and empowerment practices. At the centre of these practices is the transfiguration of our experience of our universe – of ourselves and the surrounding

environment of people and places - into the pure vision of deities and of the mandala. It is this that enables us to access the healing power of the deities. This same process also trains us into seeing the environment as potentially sacred, as a source of healing and nourishment, as something essential to our being (Samuel, 2010; 2013a).

But a similar kind of awareness is also arising more generally in relation to the environment, as people, especially the younger generations, come to think of themselves as living on a finite and vulnerable planet that is essential to our being, the source of health and nourishment, and in need of our constant awareness and protection. We are learning, through necessity, to regard the earth as sacred, and of all the world's major religious traditions, the Vajrayāna is one that has a great deal to say about this. This too, I think, has the potential to move the world in directions in which Vajrayāna Buddhism may start to seem to many people as a natural and obvious way in which to develop spirituality relevant to contemporary times.

A fourth area is as yet more tentative, but may in time prove particularly significant. This is the dialogue between **Western science and Vajrayāna understandings of reality**. This has been under way for many years by now, and it is a more difficult process than some of its initial proponents may have envisaged. There are certainly points of convergence between these two bodies of knowledge, but there are also deep differences in their fundamental assumptions about the nature of reality. This focus in particular on the dominance of the materialistic reduction within central areas of Western science, and the explicit denial within the Vajrayāna that consciousness can be reduced to physical processes within the body (Samuel, 2014). The evidence against the materialistic reduction as a default position is however beginning to seem increasingly convincing (Kelly et al., 2007), and the likelihood of a major paradigm shift seems likely.

If this happens, then the bodies of knowledge possessed by traditional Asian cultures are likely to be primary resources on which Western science will need to draw to understand the new territories into which it is moving. It is unlikely that the Vajrayāna will prove to have all the answers here, but it is certainly one of the most complex and sophisticated of these traditional bodies of knowledge. We are already seeing significant numbers of Western scientists who are taking concepts such as the subtle body and the associated flows or currents within and beyond the human organism much more seriously (Samuel, 2013b). If these developments continue, we can expect traditions of knowledge such as the Vajrayāna, which have a long history of exploring such concepts, to become much more central to ongoing developments within the Western and global economy of knowledge. That in its turn will make it much easier and more natural for people to see the Vajrayāna as a source of useful and valid wisdom in a wider sense.

I hope that these ideas may be useful to some of you in thinking about the future of the Vajrayāna within its new global environment. The issue is, I think, not just about how our own appreciation of the value of the Vajrayāna, but of how the world might be transformed in a way such that people will increasingly be drawn naturally towards the depths and resources within the Vajrayāna tradition, as so many were in Bhutan in the past. We could see such a development as part of the richness of methods, the skill in means, which is a traditional attribute of all Mahāyāna Buddhism, but also as the working through in its new global context of the compassionate force of *bodhicitta* which has always been at the centre of the Vajrayāna's vision for the liberation of sentient beings.

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