Introduction

Perhaps it's due to the prominence and tireless activity of the exiled Tibetan leader and Buddhist teacher, H. H. the Dalai Lama, but it is commonly assumed these days that the Buddhism practiced in Tibet is representative of all Buddhism, that Tibetan Buddhism is the default, normative version of Buddhist practice. I've even met people who are under the impression that Buddhism originated in Tibet, the birth-place, they believe, of the Buddha.

To the best of our knowledge, the man known as the Buddha was born in India, near the border of Nepal, *circa* 563 BC. Tibet adopted Buddhism approximately one thousand years later, in the early 7th century AD. There were several flavors of Buddhism current in India at this time, most of which found their way into Tibet.

Around the 6th century AD, a popular movement arose in India with texts called *tantra*s. It influenced all the major spiritual traditions in India: Śaiva, Śaktā, Vaishnava, Jain, and Buddhist. It spread beyond India to other parts of southern Asia – Hindu tantra is practiced in Bali and monumental evidence of its influence may be seen at Angkor Wat.

Vajrayāna, as the form of Buddhism which embraced the tantric movement is called, combines a profound philosophical viewpoint with a sophisticated array of meditations, including the contemplation of deities derived from Hindu and folk traditions (albeit given a Buddhist spin). When Tibet decided to import Buddhism, it took everything India had to offer, including Vajrayāna.

Cambodia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand had adopted

Figure 2: Padmasabhava brought Vajrayāna Buddhism to Tibet. Tibetans consider him a "second Buddha" and he is the epitome of the Vajrayāna guru. He is usually depicted carrying the psychoactive sacrament amṛita in a human skull,in a flask or, as here, in both. Tibetan woodblock print, detail. [lc]

Buddhism much earlier than this tantric syncretism. As a result they have a Buddhism which, officially, has no gods (although some local folk-deities have crept in). By contrast, the Buddhism of Tibet recognizes literally hundreds of deities. Though, as we shall see, these "gods" are not what we normally associate with the term. Indeed, there is a Tibetan saying that "Indians have hundreds of gods, all of which they believe to have physical existence; we Tibetans have thousands of gods, none of which we believe to exist."

Another unusual feature of Vajrayāna Buddhism is its reliance upon spiritual guides (Sanskrit, *guru*; Tibetan, *Bla.Ma*,* pronounced "lama") who may be male or female,

* Tibetan, བླ་མ་

monastic or lay. These spiritual guides instruct their students in meditation on these "tantric" deities in formal initiation rituals. They may also teach them yogic practices involving energy centers within the body, called *cakra*s. Again, these are features not encountered in other forms of Buddhism but were prevalent in Indian Buddhism from the 6th century AD until c. 1300 AD when the Muslim conquest of India was complete.

It is not uncommon for those unfamiliar with the history of Indian Buddhism to conclude that because Tibetan Buddhism is unlike other forms of Buddhism, its anomalies must have originated in Tibet. It is further argued that it must have been influenced by Bön, the older Tibetan religion. However, this reasoning fails in its first premise: that Tibetan Buddhism is anomalous. The earliest evidence of Vajrayāna Buddhism is from India, centuries before it took hold in Tibet. At one time, the Vajrayāna movement enjoyed extensive popularity, spreading as far as central Asia, Sumatra, and Japan.[10]

Figure 3: Many Vajrayāna deities and, as here, saints are shown holding a skull-cup of amṛita. Tibetan print [lc.]

In Japan, an early form of Vajrayāna survives as Shingon Buddhism and its influence may also be seen in the Tendai school. Nepal has a hereditary version of Vajrayāna in which a father initiates his sons (it is male-only), rather like the Brahmanic transmission in Hinduism.

Figure 4: A human skull-cup full of turbulent amṛita. Tibetan maṇḍala, detail [lc]

At present, Tibetan Buddhism, that is, the Buddhism which is derived from Tibet and uses Tibetan as its liturgical language, such as is found in Ladakh, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Mongolia, preserves the broadest range of Indian Vajrayāna schools and traditions. However, I would like to make it clear that, although this book may draw many examples from Tibet, this is only due the paucity of other sources; its main focus is on the early years of Vajrayāna Buddhism in India.

A curious blind-spot

A glance at the titles of Vajrayāna scriptures will find the word *amṛita* again and again. Many Vajrayāna deities have *amṛita* as part of their name and a liquid called *amṛita* is frequently visualized in Vajrayāna meditations. Almost all the early teachers of the Vajrayāna are depicted holding skull-cups of *amṛita*. Two "skull-cups" of *amṛita* adorn Vajrayāna altars and a drink called *amṛita* is consumed at all major Vajrayāna rituals. Hundreds of Vajrayāna deities are said to carry *amṛita* in some form, whether in a skull-cup, vase, flask or bowl.

Consider, for example, the prominent meditation-deity Hevajra. He is usually described and depicted as having sixteen arms with every hand holding a skull-cup filled with *amṛita* and in one of his several variants (Fig. 5) he and his tantric consort arise out of the *amṛita* itself.

Figure 5: In this variant, Hevajra and consort emerge from a skull-cup of amṛita. Tibetan print, enhanced for clarity by the author. [lc]

And yet, despite multiple references in Vajrayāna literature and near-ubiquitous depictions in Vajrayāna art, you may be forgiven for never having heard of *amṛita* before. If you are, as I am myself, a practicing Vajrayānist, then you may have performed the Vajrasattva purification practice in which the body is (mentally) filled with *amṛita*. But the actual nature of *amṛita*, its origin and history, are rarely discussed, if at all. In fact, even a standard textbook which provides a detailed account of Vajrayāna Buddhism as practiced in India and Tibet has managed to overlook it entirely.[11]

The purpose of this book is, in part, to remedy this blind-spot. Not only does it stress the importance and ubiquity of

amṛita within Vajrayāna Buddhism, it also offers suggestions for the ingredients of the original, psychoactive, *amṛita*.

In telling the story of *amṛita*, this book provides a new perspective on the origins of the Vajrayāna itself and, in the process, it resolves a few puzzles of tantric iconography, (*e.g.* the role of peacocks, wheels and water-buffaloes) as well as offering an explanation for the previously inexplicable "crown-bump" deities.

It must be said at the outset that, in many cases, Buddhist references to *amṛita* are simply an allusion to a legendary "elixir of immortality" and nothing more. Such turns of phrase as "the nectar of my teacher's words" may be considered as expressions of devotion or mere literary tropes, but not references to a physical potion. On the other hand, there are abundant instances in which *amṛita* (whether actually drunk or merely visualized in a meditation) is associated with "bliss" or even "intoxication". In these instances we may clearly perceive indications that a draft of *amṛita* was expected to induce a state of "blissful" intoxication – at least in the historical past. Yet, as we will see, the drinking of a drug potion called *amṛita* was an essential component of the original Vajrayāna practice.

To be sure, the *amṛita* as now employed in Vajrayāna rituals is usually symbolic, without perceptible psychoactive effect but it is quite apparent that this has not always been the case.

Amṛita and the Vedas

Over the centuries there have been various potions called *amṛita*, the ingredients of which may have evolved over time and by ecosystem as the use of *amṛita* migrated to new locations. However, it is probably safe to assume that anything called *amṛita* would have been called that because of its psychoactivity. The reason being that the earliest mention of *amṛita* is as the name of a drug in the most

ancient Hindu scripture, the *Ṛig Veda*. In that text,* *amṛita* is the most frequently used synonym of a potent, plant-derived drug called *soma*.

The *Ṛig Veda* is not simply the oldest text of Hinduism but is the oldest scripture still in use by any religion. It is a collection of hymns, many of which lavish praises on *soma*, a word which has three related yet distinct meanings. Firstly, *soma* is the name given to a certain psychoactive liquid extracted from a plant. It is also the plant itself. And, lastly, it is the name of a god - the plant-potion deified.

Not only did *soma* have an entheogenic effect on humans, the gods loved it too: it was the potion which kept them immortal. In the heavens, the moon was "the cup of *soma*," repeatedly filled and drained each month as the gods drank from it. The word *soma* is simply Sanskrit for "juice" (it comes from a verb meaning "to press out", "to squeeze"). The Vedic hymns also called it "the drop" (Skt., *indhu*), "the clear one" (Skt., *śukra*) or, somewhat more poetically, "immortality" (Skt., *amṛita*). *Soma* was equivalent to the nectar (a drink) and ambrosia (a food) from which the ancient Greek gods derived their immortality. Like *amṛita*, the Greek word *ambrosia* means "no death" (*i.e.* "[elixir of] immortality").

In the course of their fire rituals, while chanting the appropriate hymns, the priests ground the *soma* plant between two stones, mixed with it water or milk, filtered it through sheep's wool, poured a little of it into the flames as an offering to the gods and drank the rest.

Only those of the highest caste, the priestly Brahmins, were allowed to participate in the "fire ceremony" (Sanskrit, *agni-hotra*) and the verses of the Ṛig Veda recited during the ritual were thought to have magical power. These magical verses were called *mantra*, a word which, in a much later period,

* The words "text" and "scripture" imply writing but it should be borne in mind that the Vedas were composed long before writing reached India and are still an essentially oral tradition.

came to be associated with tantric practice and quite a different kind of recitation.

While the Vedic fire ritual was a very significant ceremony in ancient times, considered spiritually beneficial to the whole society and especially to the patron paying for it, it has continued to decline in importance since the Vedic period. The *agni hotra* is still occasionally performed but the *soma* now used shows no psychoactivity. We can only assume it to be made with a substitute for the original, truly active, plant.

As we shall see, there have been many suggestions as to the identity of the true *soma* of the Vedas but, fortunately, this is a question which I will not attempt to resolve in this book though I do summarize the various arguments as a preliminary to investigating the nature of *amṛita* in its Vajrayāna Buddhist context.

Secrecy

As with all aspects of Vajrayāna Buddhism, the precise formulation of *amṛita* has always been secret and this book is an attempt to use all available clues to deduce the identity of its ingredients and, in doing so, offer a new perspective on the origin of Vajrayāna Buddhism. Although this research shows that the original rituals of Vajrayāna Buddhism made extensive use of psychedelic plants, it is not intended to disparage this school of Buddhism or, for that matter, any other spiritual tradition. This author is a practicing Vajrayāna Buddhist and has deep respect for both its philosophy and practice.

On the other hand, this book does not divulge anything disclosed in any Vajrayāna initiation under conditions of secrecy. In fact, I have received certain juicy tidbits in this manner and deeply regret that I may not share these with the reader. Suffice it to say that everything contained in the following pages is a result of my own independent research based on works available to the general public.

Methods

Unlike the visual art of many other spiritual traditions, Vajrayāna Buddhism rarely leaves one guessing about the symbolism of a painting or sculpture. Almost all depictions of deities are derived from the detailed visualization instructions in the deity's meditation practice (Skt., *sādhana*) text. This means that there is little room for perusing a painting and simply declaring that one of its elements looks like a mushroom. Any dubiety is dispelled by looking up the appropriate *sādhana*. Thus, when I say that "deity X holds attribute Y", please understand this to mean "the liturgy describes deity X as holding attribute Y".

How to read this book

The **Investigations** section is the meat of the book so, if you really think you must, you may read just that. However, unless you are very well-versed in this field there are probably one or two items in the **Background** section which have heretofor escaped your attention. And if you are at all curious as to my opinions regarding all this, why not check out my **Conclusions**, too?

As for the biographical section entitled **The author**, I happily concede that my personal history is utterly irrelevant, both to the arguments I advance and to the conclusions I draw from them. Yet, on the other hand, many parts of it foreshadow points made later in the book.