



Cakrasamvara and Vajravārāhī

Dance artists: Tara Manandhar and Timila Gopali

Photo: Bijaya Maharjan

Genesis of *Vajrayāna Caryā*

Arun Shrestha

Abstract

Latent intent of praxis magnifies the importance of the work performed. Arrows held by Manjuśrī needs a target defined. Seemingly a physical tool has divine objective to penetrate. Existence of humans in the cosmos is the prime mark for mystical persona. Analytical and interpretative mind of the intellectually alert has put an effort to diagnose the human nature and has come to find skandha, among many other concepts, to dissect and apply to enlighten the man of the world. With a concealed aim to alleviate the plight of the human existence the whole gamut of process has been invented in the form of worship amalgamated by symbolic manifestations to visualize and realize. Pañca skandha and pañca Buddha are merely characters or personalities in the construction of the edifice. Spirituality is the final path to reach the destination. And this is where vajrayāna caryā originates.

Keywords: *Evam, bhaga, pañca Buddha, caryā, pañcaskandha, skandha, vīgyān, rūp, vedanā, sangyā, sanskāra, āryasatya, dukha āryasatya, dukha skandha*

Introduction

Evam mayā śrutam – thus I heard, and thus it all begins.

Guhyasamājantra, the textual root of the *vajrayāna* doctrine where the inception of *vajrayāna* philosophical religious ideas took place, a *bhaga*, begins with these words – *evam mayā śrutam*.

E is a *bhaga* or *yonī* (vulva) and *vam* is the teacher.ⁱ *Mayā* (me or I) is *māyā*ⁱⁱ,

the illusion, since omniscience is located therein. *Śrutam* is what we hear.

It is all about ‘me’ who ‘hears’ what is told by the ‘teacher’ when in ‘fetus’ or *ayoni* (unborn).

Guhyasamājantra begins by the phrase ‘thus it was heard by me’ and narrates about the one yet to be born and how it begins to give birth to an idea profound and all encompassing.

Thus have I heard: once the Blessed One

was dwelling in the vagina of the *Vajra* Consort of the Essence of the Body, Speech and Mind, of all the *Tathāgatas*.ⁱⁱⁱ

As many as the specks of dust in the *sumeru* Mountains of Buddha-lands entirely beyond expression; and *tathāgatas* pervading the realm of space -- the *tathāgatas vajra akśhohya*, *vajra vairocana*, *vajra ratnaketu*, *vajra amitābha*, *vajra amoghasiddhi* and so on, pervading the whole realm of space, all together, so that the whole realm of space completely filled with *tathāgatas* appeared like a sesame-seed.^{iv}

Thus *pañca* Buddhas were born as manifestations in *guhyaśamājantra* for the *vajrayāna* philosophical religious practice or *caryā*.

The *pañca* Buddhas are certainly manifestations as *guhyaśamājantra* clearly defines it as *pañcaskandha*.^v The five *skandhas* are proclaimed in short to be the five Buddhas.^{vi} From the emergence of *pañca* Buddha to proclamation of *pañca skandha* to be *pañca* Buddha, the whole edifice of *vajrayāna* is built on. As is known, all the deities of *vajrayāna* emanate from *pañca* Buddha.^{vii}

Now, what then is *skandha*?

Guhyaśamājantra refers to five *skandhas* – *vigyan*, *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saṅgyā* and *saṅskāra* and describes it thus:

Vigyanā is called ‘hatred’ because it is hostile to both cause and effect. *rūpa*

is called ‘delusion’ because its nature is insentient bondage. *vedanā* is called ‘stirring pride’ because its nature is egoism. *saṅgyā* is ‘lust’ having the character of attachment to things. *saṅskāra* is always ‘envy’, being the instigation in dependence. (Their) intrinsic nature is *bodhichitta*, the source of gestation everywhere.^{viii}

These are the five different characteristics of five different *skandhas* represented by five manifested Buddhas.

Guhyaśamājantra clearly mentions *pañca* Buddha being filled with *pañca skandha*.^{ix}

In seemingly mysterious manner, *guhyaśamājantra* mentions slaying of *skandhas*^x and non-existence of *skandhas*^{xi}, after giving birth to a phenomena.

It is said that the philosophy is best explained when contradicted.

Skandhas are known to be the pile or aggregate of the human experiences and *pañca skandha* is a group of five which make up the human experiences.

Explanation of the doctrine reaches its crescendo in the *gīti supratimaṇḍita* and accompanying dance to protect what has been placed for adherence of the practice in *vajrayāna*. *Caryāgīti* is placed on the high pedestal – *mahāsukha* is said to contain in *śrāvakayāna* (a vehicle of Buddhist thought) adhering to *bhikṣoh* (service) and arousal of the true nature (*tattva*) is to awaken Buddha by the destruction of spiritual

ignorance or delusion. Know that the *pañcabuddha*, who are the manifestation of *pañcaskandha*, are brutes (*paśo*), un-lustrous (*kurāḍa*), bad intended (*kucitta*) and un-divine (*kudivyam*). Rise above and be *Brahman* (*svayambhu*), proclaims the fourteenth act, contrasting the reverence bestowed to *pañcabuddha*, the manifestation of *pañcaskandha*. One is incited to kill *pañcaskandha*, source of suffering or *dukkha* arising from ignorance, symbolized in *pañcabuddha*. A dramatic turning point to what is ahead in path to salvation – *sūnyaniranjana* and ultimate *nirvāṇa*.^{xii}

Hevajratantra, a prominent *vajrayāna* religious text supports what we find in a *caryāgīti*.^{xiii}

Hevajratantra has a simpler explanation of what *skandha* means:

*viṣayavaiṣayikābhyām ca
dvādaśāyatanam. bhavet II*

*pañcaskandhas ca rūpādyā vijñānāntā
mahākṛpa II (34)*^{xiv}

From spheres and faculties together we then have the twelve bases of consciousness. The five *skandhas* are bodily form, feeling, impulses, power of perception and consciousness. (34)

Buddhacaryā^{xv} has an elaborate explanation of *pañca skandha*:

Pañca skandha is *dukha* (sorrow).

Buddha says: Till he realized the wisdom of *āryasatya*^{xvi}, *pañca skandha*^{xvii} and *ṭṣṇā*^{xix} he never claimed he has gained *samyak sambodhi*. Only then he realized

that he has acquired *gyāna* (wisdom), his *mukti* (emancipation) is eternal, this is his last birth and he will not be born again.^{xx}

Bhikshus remain alert to the knowledge of *pañca skandha* even when they roam around.^{xxi}

Buddha explains *pañca skandha* to *bhikshus* as ‘*dukha āryasatya*’ at par with birth, old age, death, bereaving, crying, etc. Birth is taken as rise of *skandha* and death as departure of *skandha*.^{xxii}

How does a ‘*dukha skandha*’ rise (*samudaya*) is narrated in a sequential order:

ṭṣṇā is the reason for *upādāna*. Likewise, *vedanā* is the reason for *ṭṣṇā*, *sparśa* is the reason for *vedanā*, *nāma-rūpa* is the reason for *sparśa*, *vigyāna* is the reason for *nāma-rūpa* and *nāma-rūpa* is the reason for *vigyāna*. Thus *vigyāna* is the reason for *nāma-rūpa*, *nāma-rūpa* is the reason for *vigyāna*, *nāma-rūpa* is the reason for *sparśa*, *sparśa* is the reason for *vedanā*, *vedanā* is the reason for *ṭṣṇā*, *ṭṣṇā* is the reason for *upādāna*, *upādāna* is the reason for *bhava*, *bhava* is the reason for *janma* (birth), *janma* is the reason for *jarā maraṇa* (death), *jarā maraṇa* is the reason for *śoka* (bereaving), crying (*parideva*), *dukha* (sorrow), grief (*dairmanasya*, *mana santāpa*), bother (*pareśānī*, *upāyāsa*). This is the way *dukha skandha* (the world of sorrow or *rūpī loka*) rises (*samudaya*).^{xxiii}

Summing up, *pañca skandha* is something to be destroyed, annihilated or eliminated. Thus is the manifestation

during the ritual. Build the edifice for the ritual and destroy at the end, once the goal is achieved.

With *evam* it begins and in skandha it ends. In the womb the teacher delivers a sermon to eradicate the sorrows caused by the birth of a human and shows the path to salvation through propagation of *āryasatya*. This is the root of *vajrayāna caryā* philosophy and its practice.

Research Methodology

A literature review of *ahorātrapadasādhanavidhi*, a manual of *vajrayāna* religious practice, played a major role in the research work on *caryā* based on thorough investigation of *caryāgīti*, prominent *vajrayāna* religious texts and some authentic work on *vajrayāna* Buddhism by scholars of repute.

In depth study of *caryāgīti* opened a horizon of knowledge of *vajrayāna* philosophy and its application in a ritual form. Aimed at an exhilaration of the human condition, it paved the way for examination of its concepts and application in a wider dimension. Exploration of the hidden intention of the practice has led to new avenues. And, this is the base of the research

Discussion

Now we are trying to look into answer of a question and question of an answer-issues and its application.

When we pronounce *caryā* what we mean by it?

In a simple terminology what it means is a practice. When it combines itself with *vajrayāna* Buddhism, it means religious practice. What then are the practices? A *vajrācārya* who practices *vajrayāna* Buddhism includes the religious and ritual practice of worship, singing and dancing in the accompaniment of music. That is what *caryā* is all about. When it is so simple then it becomes complex!

In its simplicity lies the depth. *Caryā* is a way of life. It is a life itself. How? When you practice the religion you adopt the philosophy of the religion that is put across you while practicing the ideas imbibed through different mode of practice. Let us simplify what is being narrated just now. *Vajrayāna* propagates certain ideas. Now these ideas are brought to the practitioners through varied actions to be performed. What are those actions? As has been mentioned earlier it is worship, singing and dancing in the accompaniment of music.

Let us begin by explaining worship.

In *vajrayāna* worship, worship of deities takes up a prominent place. But, *vajrayāna* does not accept the concept of god. Then who these deities are? They are a symbolic representation of the idea and its personification. Then which deity represents which idea and how are they personified? The foremost deities are *pañca* Buddha – *Akshobhya*, *Amitābha*, *Amoghsiddhi*, *Vairocana* and *Ratnasambhava*. The ideas they represent is *pañca skandha* and *pañca* Buddha is a personification. Regarding worship the issue is while Buddhism rose against

the practice of worship why it persists on worship? The answer is simple but the issue is complex. The practice of worship is the easiest way to reach the lay man and keep him entangled in religious practice and introduce him to the idea inherent in the religion through the practice of worship. To simplify the expression, worship is just a tool. Excess of it creates a problem and blurs the vision for which the worship was envisaged. A worship performed without the knowledge nullifies the purpose of its performance. Now the pertinent question is- what are the different worships, which are the varied forms of deities and the ideas they represent, including *pañca skandha*. As for the deities, *sāadhanamālā* and *niṣpannayogāvalī* are the main textual source of deities described and prescribed.

In the process of religious practice, *vajrayāna* accepts the existence of the human being in the body form. Unlike some other religion its focal point is body as a means to achieve the target set. Man in his physical existence is thoroughly examined and the result reached is put into application for the purpose of religious goal. The importance given to body or physical existence is reflected in the non-acceptance of the existence of the soul. Yoga in the process is used as *sādhana* or tool and so are *maṇḍala*, *mudrā* and *mantra* utilized. *Vajrayāna* practice offers a kaleidoscopic presentation of religious elements in its worships. All those materialistic things which form the part of the ritual have spiritual significance. The whole

scenario is pictured in a physical format but the aim remains spiritual. Therefore the deities are nothing but manifestation of ideas devised for the emancipation of humans. Once the spiritual goal is assured, the physical structure is dismantled.

To sum up, aestheticism is mainly a subject matter of senses, or in other words body and spiritualism is of the mind. The religious practice aims at controlling *pañca indriya*, in other words body, and ultimately to kill it to achieve *nirvāṇa* or final state of the mind. Aesthetics emanating from the movement of the body is merely a tool to reach the spiritual target of the mind.^{xxiv}

Conclusion

The rise of Buddhism was based on an opposition to *yagya* or *homa* but in a later phase of the religion it got itself entangled in once rejected practice of worship. The practice of the religion relies on manifestations which are the symbolic representation of the thought process. Symbolism plays a prominent role in the practice of the religion. The process consists of dual elements reflected in visualization and realization. For realization of the philosophy of the religion, symbolic manifestations are presented in the form of deities for visualization inherent in the worship. For that matter, *pañca skandha* represents the philosophy, *pañca Buddha* is representative of the symbolic manifestation and the ultimate goal is *nirvana*.

The concept of God is negated in *vajrayāna* Buddhism but deities are conceptualized in abundance. These deities represent the concept of *vajrayāna* philosophy. The motive of the process can be clarified by the explanation of these three words – *sādhana*, *sādhyā* and *sāghanā*. *Deities are the tool or sādhana*^{xxv}, philosophy of the religion to be enforced is the immediate goal or *sādhyā* and the practice of the religion involves *sāghanā* or extremely dedicated devotion.

In the absence of the concept of divinity in the form of God, reliance on faith is relegated to the background. A pure rational approach is adhered to by the adoption of *sādhana* which is just a tool to achieve the designated goal. The magnificent edifice is built in the process of the worship embodying an aesthetic dimension in the practice of the religion and destroyed at the end to signify the ultimate spiritual goal. Thus, *caryā* becomes an aesthetic spiritualism.

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End Note

i. Evam defined:

1. E is the secret place for teaching the doctrine (dharma), such as the sky, the bhaga ('female organ / metaphorical), the dharmodaya (source of natures), the lotus, and the lion's seat. VAM is whoever the Tantra sets forth as the Teacher, be he vajradhara, heruka, and so on, who dwells in the bhaga, lion's seat, and so on. (These deities symbolize the inseparable union of the void and compassion).

2. E is 'insight' (pragyā), 'voidness' (śūnyatā). VAM is 'means' (upāya), 'great compassion' (mahākaruṇā). Together they constitute the bindu.

3. E is the other's bhaga place (ādharma). VAM is the father's vajra ('male organ', metaphorical) placed (ādheya) therein.

Yoga of Guhyasamājantra by Alex Wayman p.183 (presented in his 'Female Energy and Symbolism in the Buddhist Tantras,' p.82)

ii. The two-syllabled Evam is illusion (māyā); since omniscience is located therein.... Vajrayāna is summarized by the three meanings of Evam – (1) the fruit to be attained, (2) the path of attainment, and (3) the signs guiding that path.

iii. evam māyā śrutam ekasminā samaye bhagavāna sarvatathāgata kāyavākacittahṛdayayoṣidabhageṣubijahāra Guhyasamājantra edited by Swami Dvarikadas Shastri p.1

iv. evam pramū khairā nabhilāpyai sarva buddha kṣetra sumeru paramāṇu rajah samair bodhisatva irmahāsattvairākāśadhātusamādhmātāiśca tathāgataih

l tadhathā l akṣobhyavajreṇ ca nāma tathāgaeta l
vairocanavajreṇaca nāma tathāgatena l ratnaketu vajreṇ
ca nāma tathāgatena l amitavajreṇ ca nāma tathāgatena l
amoghavajreṇ ca nāma tathāgatena l

Guhyasamājantra edited by Swami Dvarikadas Shastri
p.1

v.pañcaskandhā samāseṇa pañcabuddhāḥ prakīrtitāḥ l
vajra-āyatanānyeva bodhisattvāgruyamaṇḍalamiti ll 50 ll
sarva tathāgata samaya samvara vajra jrādhiṣṭhāna paṭalaḥ
saptadaśaḥ

The Five Buddhas, in short, are proclaimed as the five
skandhas, the great maṇḍala of Bodhisattvas is the vajra
senses.

Yoga of the Guhyasamājantra by Alex Wayman P.229
vi. Yoga of the Guhyasamājantra by Alex Wayman
P.229

vii.Caryā-dancing away to nirvana by Arun Shrestha

viii. vigyāna dveṣamākhyaṭam deti veti
dvavayairdviṣāma l

rūpam mohamiti khyātamjadabandhasvabhāvataḥ ll45ll
vedanāghaṭtamānākyā ahañkārasvabhāvataḥ l

saṅgyā sañrāgamātmānam vastutah śaktilakṣaṇam ll46ll
guhyasamājantra / aṣṭādaśaḥ paṭalaḥ / pānā 124

Yoga of the Guhyasamājantra by Alex Wayman P.207-
208

ix.tatra katham kāyānusstibhāvanā l

yatkāyam sarvabuddhānam pañcasakandha prapūritam l
buddhakāyakhamāvena mamāpi tādrśam bhaveta ll28ll
guhyasamājantra / saptamah paṭalaḥ / pānā 23

What is meditation on recollection of Body? That body
of all the Buddhas, filled with the five skandhas, - may
mine become such through the nature of the Buddha-
Body!

x.skandhavajreṇayāvantaḥ sattvāstīṣṭhanti maṇḍala l
dyotanātmagatām cintedevam tuṣyanti nānyathā ll96ll

duddha vajradharah śāstā vajradharmaopi cakriṇḥ l

bhiyate vyādayogena cittavajraco yathā ll96ll

guhyasamājantra / pañcadaśaḥpaṭalaḥ / pānā 84

Think of all the beings dwelling in the maṇḍala as
your own vajra skandhas which you slay; thus and no
otherwise do they rejoice. The Buddha, the Teacher,
vajradhara, vajra dharma and the vajra-possessor will
die by this yoga of meditation, according to the word of
vajra Mind.

Guhyasamājantra by Francesco Fremantle p.86-97

xi.khavajrasamayatyatvāt sarvadharmāṇām na
rūpaskandho na vedanāskandho na saṅgyāskandho na
sañskāraskandho na vigyānaskandho na dhātuskandho na

rāgo nadveṣo namoho na dharmo nādharmā iti l

O blessed Tathāgatas, for all dharmas are like Samaya
of vajra space; there are no skandhas of form (rūpa),
(vedanā) feeling, (saṅgyā) perception, (sañskāra)
impulses and (vigyāna) consciousness, there are no
senses and spheres of sense, there is no passion, hatred
and delusion, there is no Dharma and non-Dharma. Then
all the Tathāgatas were silent.

Guhyasājantra by Francesco Fremantle p.118

xii. Caryā-dancing away to nirvāṇa by Arun Shrestha
p.33

xiii.ṣaḍindriyama pañcaskandhama ṣaḍātatanama
pañcabhūtaḥ ll

svabhāvena viśuddhama (apya) añjānakleśairānvartana
ll (2)

Hevajrantra Text Part I. Chapter IX-2/p.32

The six faculties of sense, their six spheres of operations,
the five skandhas and five elements are pure in essence,
but they are obscured by molestations of ignorance.

Translation Part I Chapter IX- The Spheres of
Purification -2/p.78-79

Hevajrantra by David Snellgrove

xiv.Text Part II.Chapter III/ p.56

Yoga of the Guhyasamājantra by Alex Wayman p.98

xv.Buddhacaryā by Rahul Sankrityayana

xvi. Buddhacaryā by Rahul Sankrityayana p.23

xvii.dukha, dukha samudaya, dukha nirodha, dukha
nirodha gāminī pratipada

xviii.rūpa,vedanā,saṅgyā,sñskāra,vigyāna

xix.kāma,bhava,vibhava

xx. Buddhacaryā by Rahul Sankrityayana p.24

xxi. Buddhacaryā by Rahul Sankrityayana p.121-122

xxii. Buddhacaryā by Rahul Sankrityayana p.122-124

xxiii. Buddhacaryā by Rahul Sankrityayana p.128

xxiv. Caryā-dancing away to nirvāṇa by Arun Shrestha
p.426

xxv.Sādhanaḥ are the tools for visualization of deities
for the ultimate realization of the doctrine. In vajrayāna
Buddhism caryā or practice of the religion, sādhana
plays a pivotal role of a vehicle on which sādhaka rides
towards his journey of ultimate nirvāṇa. Buddhism is
a godless religion but vajrayāna Buddhism abounds
in pantheon of deities. These deities are nothing but
manifestations which begin with pañca Buddha and all
the other deities emanate from them.

Caryā-dancing away to nirvāṇa by Arun Shrestha p.50