

The body in Buddhist tantric yoga (1)

Handout

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I. Plausible (?) *pūrvapakṣa*: The body is of (virtually) no importance in tantric Buddhist yoga. Yoga is purely mental. For:

IA. Yoga is commonly defined as/equated with *bhāvanā*, implying that it is chiefly or entirely mental (activity of *citta/vijñāna* rather than of the body), and associating it with insight/wisdom (*prajñā*), since that is said to be of three types, the highest of which is *bhāvanāmayī prajñā*. And it is *bhāvanā/bhāvanāmayī prajñā* (alone) which is directly soteriologically effective. Cf. e.g.:

śrutam asati na bodhe nāsrute cāsti cintā
dvayavipadi na yogo yogahānau na siddhiḥ
iti ciram iha tantre tāpam utkaṅṭhitānām
haratu ḥṛdi nibaddhā hanta muktāvaliyam¹

For *prajñā* as alone directly soteriologically effective see e.g.

muktis tu śūnyatādrṣṭes tadarthā śeṣabhāvanā²

or

imaṃ parikaram sarvaṃ prajñārtham hi munir jagau|
tasmād utpādayet prajñām duḥkhanirvṛtikāṅkṣayā³

¹The sixth opening verse of Ratnākaraśānti's *Muktāvalī*.

²Dharmakīrti, *Pramāṇavārttika* Pramāṇasiddhi 255cd; quoted by several tantric authorities, including Advayavajra/Maitreyaṅgā and Vilāsavajra.

³Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 9.1; the first three pādas are quoted in Samantabhadra's *Sāra-māñjarī* (edition by Péter-Dániel Szántó forthcoming).

IB. The importance of mind and body respectively is comparable to that of a wish-fulfilling jewel and a heap of garbage:

kāyopakaraṇavyāsaṅginām dīrghaduṣkaradānādicaryaikasādhanām
ca bodhiṃ manyamānānām bodhau protsāhanāya saṃkārakūṭopa-
maḥ kāyo narāṇām cittaṃ tu cintāmaṇiprakhyam iti khyāpayitum
āha ...⁴

IC. The (ordinary) body is often taught as being/having to be removed, i.e. dissolved, through meditation, into emptiness, in the preliminaries of tantric yoga/sādhana. E.g.:

... jñānālokavajrasamādhiyogena prakṛtaśarīrābhāvaṃ dṛṣṭvā ...⁵

ID. Philosophical underpinning.

The fact that the philosophical/theoretical basis of Buddhist tantric yoga is, for the overwhelming majority of teachers (perhaps without exception), either Yogācāra or Madhyamaka, might also be taken by the *pūrvapakṣin* to support the position that the body, or at least the ‘ordinary’ body, is of much less importance than the mind. Within the Yogācāra fold, the *nirākāra* or *alikākāra* view, appears to have been more widely held by tantric teachers, and this too might be taken as supporting the *pūrvapakṣa*.

II. Siddhānta: The yogin’s body as essential means to gaining awakening/Buddhahood.

IIA.

From a commentary on the *Vyavastholī* of Nāgabuddhi, explaining the word *sūkṣmayogārthatattvajña* (in a quotation in the *Vyavastholī* from the *Sandhyāvyākaraṇatantra*):

tathāgatebhyo ’nyeṣām ūhāpagatatvāt sūkṣmaṃ samyaksambodhi-
hetubhūtaṃ yoginaḥ śarīram, tad eva vairocanaḍibhir yujyata iti yo-
gaḥ, arthyata ity arthaḥ, aviparītatvāt tattvaṃ; taj jānātīti tajjñāḥ.

⁴Ratnākaraśānti’s *avataṛaṇikā* to the first verse of the *Sarvarahasyatantra* in his commentary *Rahaḥpradīpa* on that scripture.

⁵Rāhulagupta’s *Hevajraprakāśa* (quoted from draft edition by Torsten Gerloff).

II.B. The case of sexual yoga: merely imagined union (yoga = samāpatti), with an imagined/meditatively produced consort, is not sufficiently effective.

A statement of our pūrvapakṣa:

Another consequence of sahaja's dissociation from the physical would be found with the complete interiority of the practice, so that no longer any physical partner (karmamudrā) would be needed or even desirable. Instead, the real goddess – whose form is gnosis – will be invited as a gnostic partner (jñānamudrā). An excellent example of this direction is found in Ratnākaraśānti's Sahajayogakrama, where the good monk discusses a practice only marginally out of place in the secluded halls of the monastery.

Davidson 2002, 67.⁶

What the 'good monk' actually taught is however different. See e.g.:

asyāṃ bhāvanāyāṃ adhikṛto vīraḥ kvacid ekākī rahogata āsane niṣadya svabhāvaśuddhāḥ sarvadharmā iti niścīyātmānaṃ herukarūpam adhimucya manasā kāmcid ānīya nirātmikāṃ tām adhimucya kakkole bolavilāsaṃ yadi vā bolabile svanābhihṛdayād avatīrṇaprajñopāyavilāsaṃ bhāvayan bhāvanābalena paramārtham abhimukhikuryāt.

...

ayaṃ ca yogo 'vasthābhedāc caturdhā bhavati—meghopamo māyopamaḥ svapnopamaḥ svapnajāgaropamaś ceti. prāk siddher meghopamas tanumeghacchannapūrṇacandravad aparispḥuṭatvāt. siddhau māyopamo manonirmitavidyābalena vyaktam udayāt. tataḥ svapnopamo bolākṣarayogabalena yoganidrāgatasya sahasotpatteḥ. tadanu svapnajāgaropamaḥ. katham jāgaropamaḥ? bahirvidyāyogajanitatvāt. katham svapnopamaḥ? svaparayor anupalambhāt. ete ca yathot-taraṃ viśiṣyante, pūrvapūrvabalād uttarottaranīṣpatteḥ. katham antimaḥ sarvottaraḥ? saty api vikṣepahetāv atyantasaṃhitatvāt samagrasamayatvāc ceti.⁷

And:

mudrāyogī adhikṛtabāhyavidyāsaṃyuktaḥ. ... vidyāpuruṣasiddhiś ca mahāmudrāsiddhir iti nāsau kulavidyayā vinā syāt. prathamasaṃdhitrāye tu sā neṣyate, tadānīm vikṣepakāraṇatvāt tasyāḥ.⁸

⁶Ronald Davidson: Reframing *Sahaja*: Genre, Representation, Ritual and Lineage. In: JIPh 30 (2002), 45–83.

⁷From Ratnākaraśānti's *Hevajrasahajasadyoga*.

⁸Ratnākaraśānti's *Muktāvalī* ad *Hevajratantra* I.x.20.

II.C. Philosophical underpinning.

The basic mistake of the assumptions of ID.: cultivation of *prajñā* alone can only result in an inactive state of freedom from rebirth, not in the *apratiṣṭhitanirvāṇa* that is the goal of Mahāyāna Buddhism, both non-tantric and tantric. See e.g. the long excursus, with a *pūrvapakṣa* that is close to our *pūrvapakṣa* of I and with an answer to that, in Ratnākaraśānti's *Muktāvalī* on the first chapter of the first kalpa of the *Hevajratantra*. The idea of the union/identity of the two truths, conventional and ultimate, is also relevant.

IID. Without a body ...

dehābhāve kutaḥ saukhyam?⁹

From Ratnākaraśānti's commentary on the first chapter of the *Hevajratantra*, explaining the name of the chapter, *vajrakulapaṭala*:

sahajamahājñānarūpo hevajra eva vajras tasya kuḷam grhaṃ yogi-
naḥ svadehas tasya tathaiva yad bhāvanam tad iha vajrakulālam-
banatvād vajrakulam ucyate. taddyotakaḥ paṭalo vajrakulapaṭalaḥ.

⁹*Hevajratantra* II.ii.35a.