Śākta Critique of Vajrayana

Subhasis Chattopadhyay Ph.D.

This is an excerpt from a larger project. All citations have been removed here, and the citations are many; all footnotes/endnotes have been removed. For instance, the very thorough work of Tola and Dragonetti defending Buddhist views of emptiness was in response to certain comments of Pope John Paul II; this has not been mentioned here. The sudden shift into Tola and Dragonetti and why they are necessary for studying Vajrayana too has not been discussed here but have been discussed in the 'work in progress' manuscript. In the blog post, Tola and Dragonetti have been entirely skipped for brevity. The treatment of emptiness remains cursory here. A fuller treatment is to be found in the manuscript.

This analysis argues that Vajrayāna Buddhism, far from being a unique or supreme 'vehicle' to enlightenment, is a philosophically strained and historically dependent system that reinterprets and selectively appropriates core principles of Tantra. The authentic tantric path, as revealed in the Hindu Āgamas and perfected in Śākta traditions, is founded on a metaphysics of affirmative non-dualism: the recognition of the world as the real, conscious, and blissful expression of the Divine. Vajrayāna's foundation in the doctrine of śūnyatā (emptiness) departs from this life-affirming vision and attempts to graft tantric methods onto a soteriological framework that is frequently world-negating.

This assessment proceeds in three parts. Part I outlines the philosophical distance between Śākta realism and Buddhist phenomenalism. Part II adduces textual, historical, and iconographic indications that Vajrayāna drew extensively on Śaiva–Śākta sources. Part III examines key Vajrayāna rituals and practices, suggesting that many are later, often symbolic, reinterpretations of robust Hindu antecedents.

Vajrayāna is not an independent tantric revelation but a Buddhist scholastic re-reading of an older and more coherent system of Hindu Tantra, as codified in the Āgamas. Its appeals

to a primordial Buddha such as Vajradhara as the source of its tantras are historically difficult to sustain and function as legitimating narratives that obscure a significant indebtedness to Śaiva–Śākta traditions.

Part I. The Philosophical Distance: Pūrṇatva versus Śūnyatā

The Metaphysics of Affirmation: Śākta Non-dualism and the Reality of the Cosmos

Śākta Tantra teaches a non-dual (advaita) reality distinct from the illusionism of Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta. In the Śākta worldview, the static, conscious principle—Śiva or Brahman—is eternally and inseparably one with its dynamic, creative energy, Śakti. Śakti is not an illusory power (māyā) that veils a distant, inactive Brahman; she is Brahman in its active, manifest state. The world is not an illusion (mithyā) to be transcended but the very body and play (līlā) of the Divine Mother. In this theology of pūrṇatva ('fullness'), every facet of existence—from the highest spiritual planes to gross matter, including the human body with its passions and limitations—is a real, vibrant manifestation of the Divine.

In this affirmative vision, Brahman is a positive, substantive, and eternal reality (satya), the uncaused cause that is the source, support, and final destination of the cosmos. The universe emanates from Śakti and dissolves back into her in great cosmic cycles, a ceaseless process of divine self-expression. Because the world is real and divine, engagement with it through the body, the senses, and ritual action is not bondage but a direct means of liberation.

Part I. The Soteriology of Negation: Vajrayāna's Foundation in Śūnyatā

Despite its elaborate ritualism, Vajrayāna rests on the philosophical foundations of Mahāyāna Buddhism, specifically the Madhyamaka doctrine of śūnyatā. This is a theology of absence, not fullness. Śūnyatā maintains that all phenomena—from a stone to a Buddha—are 'empty' of inherent, independent, or essential nature (svabhāva); an apophatic, negative method negates every attempt to posit a substantive reality. From a Śākta standpoint, this tends toward a non-substantialist stance that many critics read as quasi-nihilistic and renders the tantric project unstable. Tantra's power derives from the premise that the world is real and divine; thus, engagement with its energies is a valid path to liberation. Vajrayāna nonetheless applies these world-affirming methods to a reality its own philosophy treats as non-substantial. The result is a persistent tension: one seeks enlightenment by visualizing and uniting with deities and universal forces that, by one's own doctrinal lights, are ultimately empty—a palace raised on an ontological premise of non-substantiality.

The Constructed Union: Deconstructing Emptiness (Śūnyatā) and Compassion (Karuṇā)

To accommodate tantric emphases on union, Vajrayāna posits a central dyad: the union of Wisdom (prajñā), defined as the realization of śūnyatā, and Method (upāya), expressed primarily as universal Compassion (karuṇā), symbolized by the sexual embrace of male and female deities (yab-yum). From a Śākta perspective, the dyad is a scholastic construct—an attempt to resolve a doctrinal problem of Buddhism's own making.

The Śākta union of Śiva and Śakti is organic and ontological; it names the inseparable, non-dual reality of pure consciousness (Śiva) and its inherent power, energy, and bliss (Śakti). Creation, manifestation, and salvific action are spontaneous expressions of this single divine reality. There is no need to 'add' a principle of action or compassion to a static Absolute; the Absolute is inherently dynamic.

By rejecting a substantive Absolute like Brahman or Śiva, Buddhist philosophy was left with a purely negative ultimate (śūnyatā) and a separate ethical path (the Bodhisattva's compassion). To adopt psycho-sexual techniques predicated on the union of polarities, it reverse-engineered a dyad: śūnyatā was mapped to the feminine principle of wisdom, and karuṇā to the masculine principle of method. This pairing is functional rather than ontological; it joins a philosophical view to a practical imperative. In a universe devoid of a substantive self (anātman), the basis for universal compassion becomes philosophically tenuous. The yab-yum is thus an intellectual construction, whereas the Śaiva–Śākta union describes cosmological reality itself.

Śaiva-Siddhānta Anchors: Pati–Paśu–Pāśa, Śakti as Will, and the Five Acts

Classical Śaiva-Siddhānta clarifies why Śākta non-dualist pūrṇatva is world-affirming. First, reality is structured as Pati–Paśu–Pāśa: the Lord (Pati), the bound selves (Paśu), and the bonds (Pāśa), notably mala, māyā, and karma. Liberation is the Lord's gracious removal of bonds, not the disclosure of an already-liberated emptiness. Second, Śakti is not a metaphoric adjunct but the Lord's will-power—a theogonic initiative through which knowing, acting, and manifesting occur. Hence the cosmos is intelligible as the Lord's fivefold activity (pañcakṛtya): emanation, maintenance, withdrawal, concealment, and grace. This framework preserves personality, agency, and value while grounding tantric praxis in a substantive, affirmative metaphysics. Within this horizon, ritual, mantra, and yogic transformation engage an actually real, divinely-suffused world—precisely what a non-substantialist reading of śūnyatā struggles to underwrite.

Interlude: Engaging Yogācāra's "Only Mind" within Vajrayana

Tola and Dragonetti's *Being as Consciousness: Yogācāra Philosophy of Buddhism* (2004) lays out the most sympathetic case for Yogācāra's thesis that the empirical world is "mind-only" (cittamātra/vijñaptimātra) and that ultimate reality is the absence of duality (śūnyatā). Taking their own presentations as the point of engagement, the following Śākta response

shows why these formulations remain philosophically apophatic and soteriologically fragile when read as the basis of Tantra.

1) From abolishing analysis to a constructed mind-only

First, Tola–Dragonetti depict Nāgārjuna's analysis as dissolving empirical reality into voidness, with "normal knowledge" barred from access to what truly is. Yogācāra then infers "only mind" in order to re-ground experience. Yet this "ground" immediately appears as abhūta-parikalpa; an "unreal mental construction" branching into imagined object and imagined subject. This is an epistemic device rather than an ontological plenitude. In Śākta terms, it offers no positive account of Being as creative Consciousness (Śiva) inseparable from Power (Śakti).

2) Pariniṣpanna as negation rather than fullness

Tola–Dragonetti emphasize that the perfected nature (pariniṣpanna) is precisely the "existence of the inexistence of duality". This definition is rigorously apophatic. It tells us what the ultimate is not (no two-ness) but not what it is. Śākta pūrṇatva, by contrast, is affirmative: the cosmos is a real, blissful manifestation of Consciousness-Power. A purely negative criterion cannot serve as the ontological basis for tantric sacralization of body, cosmos, and rite.

3) The flowing storehouse and the problem of an abiding ground

Yogācāra's ālayavijñāna ("flowing like a river"), is a conditioned stream that carries seeds of desire (vāsanā) forward. As a ceaselessly conditioned flux it cannot function as a stable metaphysical ground for the permanence and value of the world that Tantra presupposes. Śākta metaphysics situates change within the abiding fullness of Śiva–Śakti; Yogācāra situates apparent stability within a perpetual stream with no substantial source.

4) Internal re-actualization and the missing object

Dignāga's model, adopted by Yogācāra and presented favorably by Tola–Dragonetti, explains cognition as the re-actualization of latent traces without any external object. But if intentionality never finally meets a real other, ritual relation to deity, cosmos, and

community risks becoming a closed circuit of projection. Śākta ritual presupposes encounter with a real, divine other who also pervades the self.

5) Emptiness/compassion as scholastic dyad, not ontology

Even in later Buddhist tantra, the union of emptiness (prajñā/śūnyatā) and method (upāya/karuṇā) is presented as a pedagogical dyad, a strategy for practice. Śākta non-dualism requires no such grafting: agency and awareness are intrinsic to one reality (Śiva–Śakti).

In sum, if we adopt Tola–Dragonetti's strongest articulations of Yogācāra, we still receive a negational ontology (defined by the removal of duality), a constructed account of experience (abhūta-parikalpa), and a conditioned stream of consciousness (ālayavijñāna). None of these, even at their strongest, supply the positive, value-bearing substrate that Tantra requires and that Śākta metaphysics provides—namely, a real cosmos as the body and play of the Divine Mother.

Part II. The Unacknowledged Debt: Historical and Textual Derivations

Vajrayāna's philosophical tension is compounded by the factuality of dependence on Hindu Tantra. Rather than an independent revelation, Vajrayāna appears as a latecomer that systematically adapted structures, deities, and practices from the pre-existing and culturally dominant Śaiva–Śākta traditions of medieval India. Its claims to unique origins are not well supported by textual and archaeological evidence and point instead to a clear, one-way flow of influence.

The Śaiva Matrix: Alexis Sanderson's The Śaiva Age and a Borrowing Model

Alexis Sanderson's long essay *The Śaiva Age: The Rise and Dominance of Śaivism during the Early Medieval Period* advances a carefully argued borrowing model that moves beyond vague appeals to a 'shared cultic stock' and shows substantial, often verbatim adaptation of Śaiva–Śākta ritual systems, iconography, and passages—especially from the

Vidyāpīṭha and Kaula streams—into the Buddhist Yoginītantras. He situates this process in what he calls the 'Śaiva Age' (approximately the sixth to thirteenth centuries CE), when Śaivism, supported by royal patronage and popular cults, was the subcontinent's dominant religious force.

Examples of Adaptation in the Yoginītantras

Illustrative cases underline the pattern: *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha* opens the door to Śākta-Śaiva motifs (possession rites, goddesses, sexual sacralization); *Guhyasamāja* develops copulating deities and initiations; and the Yoginītantras incorporate Vidyāpīṭha materials, with Heruka/Vajravārāhī recasting Bhairava and his consort. The repertoire mirrors Śaiva praxis—maṇḍalas, mantras, fierce deities, and transgressive feasts—while textual interweaving strengthens the case for sustained adaptation rather than coincidental parallel. The later reflux of Buddhist Śāktism into regional Hindu Śākta milieus (e.g., Bengal) further indicates ongoing bidirectional contacts built atop an originally Śaiva matrix.

The pantheon of fierce feminine figures in Vajrayāna—ḍākinīs and retinues—thus appears as a rearticulation of Yoginīs and Mātṛkās known from Śākta/Śaiva contexts. Vajrayāna maṇḍalas also frequently stage ritual subjugation of rival Hindu deities, a sign of symbolic conversion that tacitly acknowledges the standing prestige of the Śaiva source.

Part III. The Ritual Echo: Vajrayāna Praxis as a Reinterpretation of Śākta Rites

Vajrayāna's adaptive character appears equally in ritual. Many of its signature rites are later, often symbolic, internalizations of originally literal and physically enacted Śākta practices. The shift from the literal to the symbolic is less a spiritual refinement than a philosophical accommodation—an attempt to reconcile world-affirming methods with world-negating premises.

The Charnel Ground and the Skull-Bearer: The Kāpalika Legacy

The aesthetic and ritual complex of Vajrayāna's wrathful deities descends from the Kāpalikas, radical Śaiva ascetics devoted to Śiva–Bhairava. The Kāpalika vrata involved dwelling in cremation grounds, smearing the body with human ash, and using a human skull (kapāla) as ritual vessel and begging bowl—acts intended to shatter conventional identity and force a direct union with Bhairava.

Vajrayāna absorbed this complex but transformed it largely into a symbolic system: wrathful iconography; the Tibetan rite of Chöd ('cutting') that internalizes Kāpalika themes by visualizing the offering of one's own body; and ritual implements such as the kapāla (skull-cup) and kartika (curved knife), whose meanings are reinterpreted as wisdom realizing emptiness and the cutting of ignorance, respectively.

Kāpalika Continuities in Early Śaiva Sources

Early Śaiva sources preserve the material and mythic grammar of the kāpālika complex in detail: the skull-staff (khaṭvāṅga), the origins of the skull implements, and charnel-ground observances that bind asceticism to ritual power. They also attest to coital asceticism in the form of the 'razor's-edge' observance (asidhārāvrata), an early template for later erotic-ascetic syntheses. Reading Vajrayāna through this lens clarifies which elements are inherited (implements, sites, erotic asceticism) and which are re-signified (emptiness-wisdom hermeneutics) once taken into a Buddhist scholastic milieu.

The Feast of the Circle: From Cakra-pūjā to Gaṇacakra

Vajrayāna's communal rite, the gaṇacakra ('assembly-circle'), descends from the Śākta vāmācāra ('left-hand path') rite of cakra-pūjā ('circle-worship'). The Hindu source rite employs the pañcamakāra ('Five Ms'): wine (madya), meat (māṃsa), fish (matsya), parched grain (mudrā), and sexual union (maithuna). Transgressions forbidden in orthodox Brahmanism were ritually harnessed to transmute poison into nectar and channel worldly energies upward. In most Tibetan Buddhist contexts this rite is domesticated: symbolic substitutes replace the Five Ms, and sexual union is transposed into an internal visualization of the union of method/compassion and wisdom/emptiness. A passing note: Mata Lona Chamarin, as her surname indicates was not born a Brahmin and yet she became one of the

greatest practitioners of Hindu Tantra. Further, in a digression it must be noted that contemporary India's obsession with vegetarianism is not what Tantra advocates. The Divine Mother is not averse to fish and meat. If the Vaishnava is scandalized by this, let the true devotee of Hari remember that Krishna and Kaali are one.

The Maṇḍala: From Āgamic Cosmos to Buddhist Palace

The primary ritual diagram of Tantra also reveals adaptation. The term maṇḍala has pre-Buddhist Vedic antecedents as a cosmic diagram. In the Hindu Āgamas and Tantras, the key diagram is the yantra—a minimalist, geometric map of cosmic force and the deity's energetic body. The Vajrayāna maṇḍala adopts the yantra's foundational geometry—a central bindu within concentric circles and a square enclosure with four gates—but elaborates it into a pictorial celestial palace populated by a vast pantheon. This shift marks a move away from direct, intuitive engagement with pure energy (as in the yantra) toward a more scholastic visualization technology (bhāvanā), as Tantra was absorbed into Buddhist monastic universities such as Nālandā.

Conclusion: Reassessing Originality and Affirming the Source

On philosophical, historical, and practical grounds, the Vajrayāna conception of Tantra appears historically contingent on Hinduism and rests upon a deep tension. Philosophically, its reliance on the negative principle of śūnyatā sits uneasily with the affirmative, world-embracing spirit of Tantra rooted in Śākta non-dualism. Historically, the record indicates substantial adaptation—from texts and deities to ritual structures and esoteric anatomy—from older and more culturally dominant Śaiva–Śākta traditions, while appeals to a primordial Buddha such as Vajradhara function as legitimating narratives. Practically, signature rites—from Chöd and the gaṇacakra to the elaborated maṇḍala—are best read as symbolic internalizations or scholastic elaborations of older, more literal Śākta rites.

The adamantine vehicle, rightly understood, is the Śākta path that recognizes the indestructible, vajra-like reality of the divine cosmos and provides means to realize oneself

as a participant in its blissful, conscious play. To seek the source of Tantra, one looks not to the scholastic creations of Buddhist vihāras, but to the primordial revelation of the Hindu Āgamas and the living embodiment of that truth in the Divine Mother, Śakti.