Tantric Buddhism in East Asia

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Dedicated to the memory of my teacher,

Rev. Chisei Aratano
d. 26 September 2002

who persevered in the face of progressive kidney failure
to complete his year as Hōin-daikajō-i
for Kongōbuji, Kōyasan

Catalogue (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979). This catalogue is particularly useful as it also includes citations to other catalogues of the Chinese canon, including the Taishō, as well as locations of any Tibetan translation in the five versions of the Tibetan canon.

P. The most widely available edition of the Tibetan canon is the Peking version, reprinted in reduced photo-mechanical form in Japan. The catalogue numbers for Tibetan works in this edition are introduced by the capital letter P. The catalogue numbers are found in D. T. Suzuki, *Catalogue and Index of the Tibetan Tripitaka, Peking Edition* (Tokyo and Kyoto: Tibetan Tripitaka Research Institute, 1961).

In their translations of texts some contributors have enclosed clarifying or interpolating words or phrases in brackets or parentheses. Some of these brackets and parentheses have been removed in this volume to enhance readability. The volume editor's insertions are enclosed in braces.

Some contributors note that a Sanskrit name, title, or phrase is reconstructed from the Chinese, indicating this with an asterisk at the beginning of that name, title, or phrase. In some cases authors indicate the Sanskrit root of a term with the symbol used in mathematics to indicate a radical.

Introduction

RICHARD K. PAYNE

OUR SUBJECT IS TANTRIC, or Vajrayāna, Buddhism in East Asia—its history, practices, and influences on popular religious culture. Western scholars have recognized the importance of the Vajrayāna traditions of Buddhism since about the mid-1960s, when the Tibetan Vajrayāna tradition became much more accessible. Prior to that time—and living on in the spectral world of college textbooks—the common perception among students of Buddhism was that tantra constituted a decadent form of Buddhism in particular, and of Indian religion more generally.[1] (The "decadence" of tantric Buddhism is connected with the tendency to characterize tantra solely in terms of its transgressive quality, discussed below.)

This conception of Vajrayāna as the decadent phase of Buddhism is in large part a consequence of the deep influence that the Hegelian view of history as an organic process has had on the writing of history, historiography.[2] According to this view societies, religions, and social institutions have a life cycle which can be analyzed into a series of stages: birth and growth, maturity and stability, old age and decline, and death and dissolution. Given this assumption, the final stage of Buddhism in India must have been the most decadent form—and, indeed, some have suggested that Vajrayāna was responsible in some way for the disappearance of Buddhism from the Indian subcontinent.

Particularly after the flight of Tibetans from the Chinese conquest, greater attention began to be paid to tantric Buddhism, and it came to be recognized as a valid area of study in its own right. The connection, however, commonly made between tantric Buddhism and Tibet has led to a misunderstanding of both. On the one hand, Tibetan Buddhism is a wide-ranging tradition containing within it the entire spectrum of Buddhist scholasticism. On the other, tantric Buddhism is found not only in Tibet but much more widely throughout the Buddhist tradition. It is this latter

issue that this collection of essays hopes to address—at least to the extent of helping to establish Vajrayāna Buddhism in East Asia as a recognized field of study.[3] While this collection focuses on East Asian tantric Buddhism, there is also a historically important tradition of tantric Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia.[4] The study of this tradition is, however, outside the scope of this collection. South and Southeast Asian Vajrayāna, much less developed than the study of East Asian Vajrayāna, offers a rich field for future research.

Categories and Terms

Already here at the very beginning we find ourselves confronted with a terminological issue: What is the proper term for our subject? Or is there one? Although the terms "Vajrayāna" and "tantra" have already been used here, other terms are equally plausible.

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON CATEGORIES

Categories such as Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna, sūtra and tantra, are often simply presented as natural and unproblematic, as if the categories simply reflected some reality found out there. Critical reflection on intellectual categories and the schema they form starts with the insight that they are constructed, but much more than this needs to be recognized. José Cabezón has identified five aspects of intellectual categories which assist us to reflect on those categories critically.[5] First, we need to know whether the categories are those that the historical figures being studied themselves employed or are later imaginative reconstructions. Both kinds of categories—emic and etic as they are also known—have their utility. Second, the task is to see what the categories occlude and to elucidate their social utility. Third, category schemata are never universal, but rather diverge from one another, and these divergences reveal as much about those who formulate them as about the things being categorized. We will see this below, for example, in the discussion of two different bibliographic schema—that commonly employed in Tibet and that employed by the Shingon tradition of Japan. Fourth, the history of category schema needs to be seen as twofold: reflecting intellectual concerns—such as doctrine, logic, and belief—and also sociopolitical concerns. Fifth, it is necessary to critically reflect not only on traditional, or emic, categories but also on our own intellectual categories. For example, perhaps the most problematic of our own intellectual categories is

the distinction drawn between religion, philosophy, and psychology, which originates largely in nineteenth-century Euro-American institutions of higher learning, but which at best correlates with Buddhist thought only very loosely and at worst systematically distorts Buddhist thought and creates pseudoproblems. In the following several of these issues will be highlighted.

In the study of a religious tradition, terminological considerations are more than simply definitions. The "objects" of our study are not natural entities, not things that can be pointed to, but rather social entities, constructions. This means that we cannot use ostensive definitions, those that simply point out an exemplary instance of a category. We need rather to recognize that the terms and categories employed are in large part our own creation, and avoid reifying them by turning them into objects existing independently of our use. As such, we are responsible for the terms we use and for using them with adequate reflection on the presumptions they bring—often covertly—into the field of study. In particular, the three currently dominant approaches to the study of religion approach the question of terminology and definition in quite different fashions.

These three approaches are the comparative, the phenomenological, and the postmodern. Comparative studies are interested in similarities and continuities between religious traditions, and as a consequence terms are used as a means of identifying general characteristics of religion found in a variety of instances. For example, the term "shaman," which originated in the Siberian cultural zone, has come to be a general category for a wide range of what appear to comparativists to be fundamentally the same religious form. (The use of the term "form" here suggests the Platonic background to this approach.)

Phenomenological studies are informed by two different understandings of the goal of study. One usage, more classical for the study of religion, is basically concerned with typology, that is, creating comprehensive systems of categories according to which the phenomena of religion may be understood.[6] Much of the usual work of Buddhist studies, such as the textual studies included in this collection, can be seen as having been motivated by the traditional understanding of the "history of religions" *(Religionswissenschaft)* as serving to provide "data" for this kind of phenomenology of religions.

The other understanding of phenomenology is specifically informed by Husserlian phenomenology. In this approach the goal is the accurate description of experience so as to be able to characterize the objects of

experience. Both understandings of the phenomenology of religion are often either in service of or not distinguished methodologically from the comparative understanding of the study of religion. For example, the term "mysticism" is used both as a category of religious experience (Husserlian phenomenology of religion) and as a religious form having a specific location in relation to other religious forms such as worship and sacrifice (comparative religion).

In contrast to both the comparative and phenomenological approaches, the postmodern approach focuses on the specific instance and its social, historical, and cultural locatedness. This emphasis on the location of the specific arises from a self-reflective awareness of our own involvement in the creation and imposition of categories, often for reasons other than purely intellectual ones.[7] For example, the lingering category of "primitive" religions is inherited from the religious imperialism of the colonial era in which colonialism was often justified by reference to the duty of the colonizers to assist in replacing primitive religions with the higher religion of Christianity.[8] For postmodern studies, terms are in the service of making distinctions, and not with identifying similarities or establishing value-laden hierarchies. The anthropological distinction between emic and etic categories seems at least congruent with, if not having directly informed, the postmodern approach.[9] Emic categories are those used by a specific social group, while etic ones are those used by those outside that group to talk about that group.[10] A postmodern approach, for example, would distinguish between the emic significance of the Japanese term *kami* used in a specific social, cultural, and historical setting such as the Heian era from an etic category such as "nature spirit," and value the former over the latter.

Each of these three approaches has its own validity as a distinct intellectual project, and a fully informed study of religion considers all three as complementary and mutually corrective. This collection seeks to bring together several complementary methodological and theoretical approaches.

For our purposes here, we should note the incredible complexity of the terminological issue. For East Asian Vajrayāna we have a variety of source languages—Sanskrit, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese—each of which implies a different religious culture. As a consequence, even those terms used as translations have different semantic ranges, or as Cabezón puts it, the category schemata diverge from one another. Further, within these different religious cultures there are a variety of specific traditions, lineages, and schools of thought that have employed different terminologies or used

the same terms in different ways.[11] In an English-language study, the terms also carry connotations from such sources as the popular understandings of Tibetan Buddhism (e.g., the lama as the fourth jewel), the lingering effects of colonial categories (e.g., tantra as decadent), and New Age religiosity with its own strong neo-Platonic foundations (e.g., etheric energies). Because of this complexity, the following discussion can at best provide some preliminary terminological considerations as a basis for an informed reading of the essays included in this collection. As the field of East Asian Vajrayāna Buddhism develops it can be expected that the terminology and categories will become more refined.

KEY TERMS

Tantra. The term "tantra" originates as a bibliographic one, that is, it identifies a category of texts. According to Herbert Guenther, the first appearance of the term tantra in English in 1799 was with just this meaning.[12] Like the term sūtra, tantra also seems to have been drawn from the imagery of sewing and weaving. Where sūtra is a thread used to string or sew things together, and also the warp on a loom (the lengthwise threads), tantra identifies the weft (also, woof, the crosswise threads) on a loom. As religious texts, sūtras and tantras string together teachings.[13] According to Hugh B. Urban, "the oldest texts bearing the title 'tantras' are Buddhist, beginning with the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*, which is thought by some to have been written possibly as early as the third century CE."[14] Problems arise, however, when a bibliographic term such as "tantra" is employed to identify a religious tradition. As Donald S. Lopez, Jr., has expressed it, "The problems of definition multiply exponentially when the term 'tantra' is excised from its place in the colophon of a Sanskrit manuscript and allowed to float free as an abstract noun."[15] The use of tantra, or tantric, as a category for religious praxis originates in the nineteenth-century European study of Indian religion and culture.[16] Thus, the difficulty of defining tantra as anything other than a bibliographic category results from there being no object to which it refers. This is not to say that it has no existence at all, but rather to point out that it exists solely as a social convention, an intersubjective entity, specifically, as a category within our own academic discourse. Intersubjective entities do have ontological and epistemological status, but exist solely in the realm of society and its discourses.

Urban has described how the category of tantra arose within Orientalist discourse as a means of delineating Indian religions for colonialist purposes.

In this discourse Indian mentality was conceived as "essentially passionate, irrational, effeminate," and set in opposition to the "progressive, rational, masculine, and scientific" mentality of modern Europe. "'Tantrism,' it would seem, was quickly singled out as the darkest, most irrational core of this Indian mind—as the extreme Orient, the most Other."[17]

Despite this, the category seems to have become so well entrenched in the religious studies discourse that it will probably not go away. It appears in several of the essays compiled here. But although in the following discussions "tantra" will be used as largely synonymous with Vajrayāna, we will attempt to indicate its bibliographic origins by not capitalizing it.

Mantranaya. Although not widely used in contemporary scholarly discourse, "Mantranaya" is important as one early means to distinguish this newly developing form of practice. The term is a compound of *mantra*, the evocative verbal formulae that take a central role in the new practices, and *naya*, meaning a principle, system, or method in the sense of both organizing and motivating.[18] The traditional "system of perfections" (Skt. *pāramitānaya*), now considered to define the Mahāyāna, required heroic efforts over many lifetimes before one could attain awakening. In contrast, the new "system of mantra" opened the opportunity for more direct attainment. As David Snellgrove puts it, "there were in general two approaches toward buddhahood, the slower but surer way as taught in the Mahāyāna sūtras, i.e., the way of the Bodhisattva . . . and the risky way as taught in the tantras, which could result in buddhahood in this very life, but which employed methods which only those of strong faculties should dare to use."[19]

Mantrayāna. Like "Mantranaya," the term "Mantrayāna" highlights the central role of mantras in this new praxis, that is, the interaction between practice and doctrine. *Yāna*, usually rendered as "vehicle," fits this new form into the rhetorical structure already established by the appellation "Mahāyāna," and used to distinguish Mahāyāna from what was thereby defined as a lesser vehicle, the "Hīnayāna." In such a usage, Mantrayāna asserts itself as the third, and even higher, vehicle carrying one to awakening. While the division into three *yānas*—Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna—has become commonplace, there are other ways of construing the history of the Buddhist tradition.

The great Tibetan exegete Tsong kha pa considers there to be only two major forms, Hīnayāna and Mahāyana. The latter he divides into the Perfection Vehicle *(pāramitayāna)* and Secret Mantra Vehicle *(guhyamantrayāna)*.[20] While at first this might appear to be a distinction that makes

no difference, it does serve to place tantric Buddhism firmly within the philosophy and practice of Mahāyāna.

A different kind of distinction is drawn by Luis O. Gómez, who identifies three strands of tantric Buddhism. It is the earliest of these that he calls Vajrayāna. Although perhaps originating as early as the fourth century, he uses the term "to describe the early documented manifestations of Tantric practice, especially in the high tradition of the Ganges River valley after the seventh century." Traditionally attributed to the Kashmiri yogin Lūi-pa (c. 750–800), the earliest documented form of Sahajayāna is from early ninth-century Bengal. Gómez considers the *Kālacakra Tantra* as a third, distinct form of Buddhist tantra.[21] Vesna A. Wallace places the *Kālacakra* in the early eleventh century, and notes that while it may have originated in south India, its "sphere of influence in India was confined to Bengal, Magadha (Bihar), and Kaśmīr, wherefrom it was transmitted to Nepal, Tibet, and eventually to Mongolia."[22]

Herbert Guenther, one of the pioneers in the contemporary study of Vajrayāna Buddhism, preferred the term "Mantrayāna" to "tantra." In his view "the philosophical significance of Mantrayāna has been much obscured by applying to it the name 'Tantrism,' probably one of the haziest notions and misconceptions the Western mind has evolved." He goes on to explicate the negative view of tantra "as a degenerative lapse into a world of superstition and magic," pointing out, however, that "nothing of what is thus fancied about Tantrism is borne out by the original texts."[23] Despite these reservations, he acknowledges that "tantra" is now the commonly accepted term. Common acceptance, however, does not obviate the need for critical reflection on the consequences of a particular set of categories and terms.

Zhenyan and Shingon. The categories of mantranaya and mantrayāna form the background for the Chinese term *zhenyan*, pronounced *"shingon"* in Japanese. The characters for these terms translate literally as "true word," referring to mantra. This rendering of mantra points to the Indian philosophy of language in which mantras are effective because they make the primal creative energies manifest. This idea is expressed in the Mīmāṃsā theory that the eternal text of the Vedas exists as the foundational energy creating the phenomenal universe. Through proper ritual use, this energy can be manifested, making the ritual effective.[24] Although formulated as a distinct philosophy of language in the context of Hindu tantric thought, many of these ideas about extraordinary language were also integrated into

Buddhist conceptions of mantra and were transmitted to East Asia. For example, in his justification of the efficacy of reciting the name of the Buddha Amitābha, Danluan (476–542) distinguishes two kinds of words: those that are meaningful by reference to some object and those, such as the names of buddhas, that are identical with what they identify. In this way the name of Amitābha is understood in a manner entirely congruent with some of the understandings of mantra found in Indian philosophy of language.

Mijiao, Mikkyō, and "Esoteric" Buddhism. Our subject is sometimes referred to in English as "esoteric" Buddhism. This conveys the meaning of the Chinese term *mijiao,* and its cognates in Korean, *milgyo,* and Japanese, *mikkyō.* To the extent that Vajrayāna tradition itself maintains that access to practice properly requires initiation by a properly ordained representative, the term "esoteric" is appropriate. In other words, the practices of the tradition are not openly or publicly available—no weekend workshops—without both an expression of commitment and an acceptance into the tradition. As is discussed more fully below, however, to advertise that something is esoteric or secret is a way of claiming that it is superior, special, and desirable.

However, caution in the use of the term "esoteric" is advisable. This is because in contemporary Western religious culture "esoteric" can carry connotations unwarranted in the East Asian Buddhist context. These take the form of preconceptions regarding a universal category of "the esoteric"—or mystical, or occult, or gnostic—which manifests through the particular forms of different religious traditions. This is the view of Perennialism, which holds that there is a mystical core to all religions, and that that core mystical experience—open only to "true initiates"—is the same in all religions.[25] Differences in the expression of this essence are explained away as simply the unavoidable consequence of expressing an ineffable experience of the higher reality through the contingencies of a particular language and culture. In this book we are concerned not with "Buddhist esotericism," not, that is, with the Buddhist form of the Perennialist conception of the universal category of the esoteric, but with "esoteric Buddhism," the form of Buddhism that presents itself as constrained by concerns for the transmission of its powerful psycho-spiritual technologies only to those capable of using those technologies properly.[26]

Identifying Vajrayāna: Definitions, Characteristics, and Issues

Having introduced some of the key terms, we are now ready to examine the issues involved in attempting to define and characterize Vajrayāna Buddhism. We begin by examining two different strategies for defining Vajrayāna. Then we discuss several issues in the study of Vajrayāna: phonic mysticism, the three sets of vows, proto-tantra, scholastic classifications, and transgression.

STRATEGIES FOR DEFINING VAJRAYĀNA

One approach to defining Vajrayāna is to focus on specific elements of practices, such as mantra, mudrā, maṇḍala, and abhiṣeka. One of the elements that has frequently been taken as the defining characteristic of tantra has been "ritual identification" (Skt. *ahaṃkāra,* rendered into Jpn. as *nyu ga ga nyu,* literally "entering me, me entering"), that is, the ritual act in which the practitioner becomes one with the deity evoked. For example, Michel Strickmann has claimed that identifying ritual practices as tantric is possible "if we accept as a minimal definition of this imprecise but useful term that they center upon the visualization by the officiant of a deity to whom the rite is addressed, with whom the officiant then proceeds to identify himself or otherwise unite."[27]

One problem with an approach that attempts to define tantra in terms of its elements is that each of the elements commonly associated with tantra is found in earlier and in non-tantric religious movements. Robert Brown has said of this approach that while "the pieces of Tantrism (doctrines and practices) can be listed, none is exclusively Tantric, and all are components of other religious systems."[28] Or, conversely, elements may be absent from traditions that are clearly tantric. As noted previously, mantra dates back to the Vedic sacrificial tradition. Similarly, abhiṣeka is drawn from royal consecration rites, and in the form of yantras maṇḍalas were used in Ayurvedic medicine. This kind of problem is reflected in debates in Tibet regarding the status of the Heart Sūtra (the Prajñāpāramita Hṛdaya Sūtra). Does the mantra found at the end of the sūtra, "Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha," mean that the text is to be classed in the category of tantra? Or, given that it falls into the category of *Prajñāpāramita* texts, is it to be classified as a sūtra?[29] *Ahaṃkāra* is an instance of the absence of a supposedly definitional element, in that the tantric, but dualist, tradition of Śaiva Siddhanta does not employ ritual identification in its practices.

The same situation is found in East Asian Buddhism. Robert Sharf notes that the problem with characterizing Vajrayāna in terms of "invocation, worship, and meditative communion with deities in elaborately scripted ceremonies" or in terms of "the trope of sacred kingship" is that "the use of *dhāraṇī*, mantra, and the invocation of deities, coupled with a quest for divine grace and thaumaturgical powers, have been a staple of Chinese Buddhist monastic practice since its inception."[30]

More sophisticated than such a listing of elements is the listing of characteristics. In his study of Hindu Śākta tantra, Douglas Renfrew Brooks suggests ten characteristics "shared across sectarian lines [and which] involve both speculative and theoretical elements."[31] Summarizing and paraphrasing these:

1. Tantric texts and traditions are not part of the Vedic tradition, which is often considered the touchstone of orthodoxy in India. Brooks calls this characteristic "extra-Vedic."
2. Special forms of yoga and spiritual disciplines are taught, usually based on esoteric physiologies.
3. In general the tradition is religiously theistic and philosophically nondual (we should note, however, that there are dualist tantric traditions, for example, Śaiva Siddhanta).
4. The tradition includes elaborate speculations on the nature of sound and the use of extraordinary language, for example, mantra.
5. It employs diagrammatic representations, e.g., yantras and maṇḍalas.
6. It gives particular emphasis to the authority of the teacher (guru).
7. It employs "bipolar symbology," including, for example, imagery of conjugal union.
8. As a path it is secret, that is, limited to initiates judged qualified by teachers of the tradition, and is dangerous and expeditious.
9. It transgresses social standards through the use of conventionally prohibited substances and antinomian acts.
10. Initiation—the key giving access to the practices—does not reflect the usual established criteria of caste and gender.[32]

Stephen Hodge employs this approach in the introduction to his translation of the Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi Sūtra (frequently also referred to as the Mahāvairocana Sūtra), confining himself "to a summary of those features which characterize the spirit of Buddhist tantric thought."[33] As a review of the kinds of characteristics that scholars have thought worth noting in

relation to Vajrayāna, and calling attention to the similarities with Hindu tantra as described by Brooks, it is worth citing this list in its entirety:

1. Tantric Buddhism offers an alternative to the standard Mahāyāna path to awakening.
2. Its teachings are particularly intended for lay practitioners, and not for monks and nuns.
3. As a consequence, it validates mundane aims and attainments, and it employs practices that are more magical than spiritual.
4. It teaches unique types of meditation *(sādhana)* as the path to awakening, practices that are understood to transform the individual into an embodiment of the awakened mind of the buddhas quickly, either in this lifetime or shortly thereafter.
5. Such meditative practices make extensive use of maṇḍalas, mudrās, mantras, and dhāraṇīs as concrete expressions of reality.
6. Visualization of various deities, either externally or internally, is central to tantric meditation practice.
7. There is an exuberant proliferation in the number and types of buddhas and other deities.
8. The guru is very important because of the necessity of receiving instruction and appropriate initiations for the *sādhanas* from him.
9. Speculation on the nature and power of language, particularly in relation to the Sanskrit syllabary, is prominent.
10. Various customs and rituals, often of non-Buddhist origin, are incorporated into the tradition and adapted to the Buddhist goal of awakening.
11. A spiritual or esoteric physiology is seen as facilitating the process of awakening.
12. The tradition stresses the importance of the feminine and employs sexual yogas of various kinds.[34]

This kind of approach has antecedents in the Tibetan scholastic tradition as well. Commentaries on the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*, the paradigmatic tantra for Nyingma Mahāyoga, analyze "ten or eleven 'practical principles of tantra' *(rgyud kyi dngo po)*."[35] Mipham, the nineteenth-century Nyingma scholar and *ris med* (eclectic) reformer, employs this system, listing eleven aspects of tantra: "the triad of view, contemplation, and conduct; the triad of maṇḍala, empowerment, and commitment; the triad of actualization, offering, and enlightened activity; and the dyad of seals and mantra."[36]

While such an approach may be useful for a general orientation, it is not without its problems: (1) All of the characteristics are unlikely to be found in every instance of the subject of interest. This is true of both the modern, Western lists and those of the Tibetan scholastic tradition itself. (2) These characteristics do not exist separately from our own use of them as generalizations. In a commentary on the *Kun byed rgal po*, kLong chen rab 'byams pa notes that "these aspects can not be found upon analysis to exist as discrete tangible essences."[37] (3) Some of the characteristics identified are not unique to the subject. As has been noted, the use of mantra originates in Vedic religious praxis. Even more generally, such aspects as the importance of a teacher and of the feminine may be found in a variety of religious traditions around the world. (4) Some of the characteristics may reflect the self-understandings promoted by the religious tradition of the compiler of the list, rather than those of the tantric traditions themselves. (5) Some of the elements may be more speculative than well grounded on historical evidence, as in the assertion that tantra originates as a lay movement. Finally, (6) taken uncritically, such a list cannot reflect, and indeed obscures, the differences in the various bodies of tantric literature that result from historical development. Instead, such a conception implies a monolithic, unchanging, essentialized conception of tantra and the view that any variation from this normative vision constitutes a failing of some sort—deviancy, degeneracy, inadequacy, or inferiority.

For example, contemporary Shingon Buddhism, which certainly considers itself to be an instantiation of Vajrayāna, does not have any emphasis on esoteric physiology, nor on "the feminine," and does not employ any form of sexual yoga. This is not to say that such strains are not found anywhere in East Asian Vajrayāna—for example, the Tachikawa-ryū of medieval Japan appears to have actively used sexual practices[38]—but rather that as a general characterization, these do not apply to all the forms that are of interest.

The category of magic, found in many characterizations of tantra, is problematic. The concern with "mundane aims and attainments," often claimed to distinguish magic with its worldly and profane concerns from (true) religion with its spiritual concerns, is hardly unique to Vajrayāna. Attempts to control weather and disease have been almost universal to religions around the world. Similarly, such practices as rites for the safe construction of buildings are found widely. In the same vein, dhāraṇī practice is now found in Thai Buddhism,[39] and it pervades the Lotus Sūtra—forms of Buddhism that would hardly be considered Vajrayāna.

The notion that there is a clear distinction between religion (otherworldly, spiritual, good) and magic (this-worldly, materialistic, bad) is a Western one, not reflected outside the scope of the three Western monotheisms. The rhetorical use of the term "magic" as a category for religious studies is in large part a modern one, arising in the nineteenth century in the context of discussions about the relation between religion and science.[40] Science was identified as having effective instrumental knowledge, allowing for control of the material world. In contrast religion become identified with spiritual concerns, or with the mistaken notion that intercession in this world could be achieved through petitionary prayer. As the third term of contrast, magic was identified with the mistaken notion that religious practices were directly instrumental, having direct control of the material and spiritual worlds. In keeping with nineteenth-century notions of progress, the three terms were often not simply contrasted but set up as a sequence: the failures of magic as instrumental control were thought to give rise to religious petitionary appeals to spiritual powers, which were then replaced by the true instrumentality of science.

Similarly, the question of the use of "various customs and rituals, often of non-Buddhist origin," implies a problematic preconception of purity and authenticity. It suggests that there are two categories that can be clearly delineated: Buddhist practices and non-Buddhist practices. Does the fact that Śākyamuni Buddha utilized yogic meditation mean that he employed "non-Buddhist" practices? If he did so, might we not consider such use and adaptation to be very Buddhist?

Hodge gives no evidence for the claim that Vajrayāna teachings are particularly "aimed at lay practitioners." One is perhaps justified in thinking that the claim is simply circular and speculative, rather than based on any historical evidence.[41] The circularity would be that, having identified Vajrayāna with magic, it is assumed that monks and nuns would be concerned with "true spirituality" and that therefore such "magical" teachings must have been intended for the laity. That presumption then becomes offered as the cause for such "magical" practices. Once we call into question the presumption that the distinction between spiritual and materialistic is appropriate in this context, the basis for the assertion that Vajrayāna teachings are primarily aimed at the laity begins to look almost purely speculative.[42] More concretely, we do in fact know that many monks were actively involved in the study and practice of Vajrayāna.[43] It would be presumptuous and insulting to suggest, as might be done in order to explain

such involvement, that they only did so as a cynical response to the mistaken conceptions of the laity.

Hodge himself is certainly cognizant of the problematics of historical development: "During the proto-tantric and early tantric phase only a few of these elements may occur together in any given text, but as we enter the middle and late phases, we find that an increasing number of them, in one form or another, are incorporated into the texts. This process of synthesis and development extended over several centuries, from the earliest proto-tantric texts down to the elaborate *Kālacakra Tantra*, which was possibly the last tantra to be developed in India."[44] We should note, however, that the historical actualities are much more complex than the single, uniform line of development that might be read from Hodge's description. There are texts with some of the elements, and therefore "proto-tantric" in this use, which are written well after some of the classic texts identified clearly as tantric.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PHONIC MYSTICISM

Tantric traditions all seem to have a concern with the power of speech, and in East Asia the power of writing.[45] André Padoux has described the pervasive presence of phonic mysticism throughout tantric practices: "Such is the case in ritual, every act of which will be accompanied by formulas (mantras), and more specially syllabic formulas (*bīja:* the phonic 'seeds,' which will almost entirely supersede the Vedic-type mantra), sometimes endlessly repeated loudly or softly, or only mentally, and which are used for the worship of the deity, for vivifying its image, for identifying the adept with the deity, for purifying him, and so forth."[46] The use of mantras derives from the Vedic sacrificial tradition in which fragments from the texts of the Vedas are used in ritual to identify a ritual action with an action of the deities. Extraordinary uses of language, that is, uses other than for ordinary communication, are found throughout the Buddhist tradition. The Pāli contains several texts known as *parittas* or *rakṣās*, which are recited for protection, and are often accompanied by ritual.[47] Such extraordinary language use continued in a variety of forms in Mahāyāna and tantric Buddhism.[48]

Three terms for the extraordinary language found in tantric Buddhist ritual texts are "mantra" (Jpn. *shingon*), "dhāraṇī" (Jpn. *darani*), and "vidyā" (Jpn. *myōshu*). Mantra are verbal formulae that are sometimes used as objects of mental concentration. However, in the context of tantric ritual they play an instrumental role, usually in combination with a hand gesture,

mudrā. Dhāraṇī originated in Indian Buddhism as a mnemonic device, or as a condensed and therefore powerful version of the teachings found in a sūtra. In later Mahāyāna texts they are treated as the possessions of bodhisattvas evidencing their accomplishments. Found extensively in such non-tantric texts as the *Lotus Sūtra*, the common assumption that dhāraṇī alone constitute evidence of a tantric presence or influence is mistaken.[49] Recently, Jacob Dalton has suggested, however, that manuals for the ritual recitation of dhāraṇīs formed an important phase in the creation of texts identified as "tantras."[50] Despite these qualifications, it is also fair to say that dhāraṇī are in fact often treated as if they are mantra, or even simply as a kind of magical formula. This is particularly understandable in East Asia, where any meaning to be derived from the Sanskrit, even a mnemonic stimulus, would have been lost to the vast majority of practitioners. For them the transliteration would simply be a series of meaningless sounds, much as an English-speaking practitioner unfamiliar with Sanskrit would experience upon encountering the following:

> tadyathā ane ane ane mukhe mukhe mukhe samantamukhe dsyotisome satyārāme sauti yugate nerugate nerugate prabhe hili hili kalpe kalpe si sāre sarvati buddhavati hili hili hile hile hile hile mahāhilile hili dunḍe tsaṇḍe tsarā tsarāṇe atsale matsale anante anantegate anantegate arene nirmare nirbhavane nirvartane nirdante dharmadhare nihare nihara vimale viśodhane śīlavoṣhane prakritidhīpane bhavane bhavavi bhavani asaṃge asaṃgavihare dame śame vimale vimalaprabhe saṃgarśane dhire dhidhire mahādhidhire yaśe yaśovate tsal atsale matsale samatsale ḍeḍhasandhi susthare asaṃge asaṃghavihare samghanirhare nirharanivimale nirharaviśoshani ḍiḍhi some sthara sthama sthama vati mahāprabhe samantaprabhe vipulaprabhe vipularaśmi saṃbhave samantamukhe sarvatrānugate anantshedye pratibane dhāraṇīdhāṇe dharmanidhanitre samantabhadre sarvatathāgata-adhiṣṭhāna-adhiṣṭhite svāhā.[51]

It is commonly noted that dhāraṇī are generally longer than mantra.

While "mantra" and "dhāraṇī" are used almost interchangeably in the East Asian tantric Buddhism, Michel Strickmann has asserted that whereas mantras are found throughout Indian texts, dhāraṇīs are only used in Buddhism.[52] Jan Nattier refines this by pointing out that dhāraṇīs are only found within the realm of Mahāyāna Buddhist discourse.[53] She goes on to point out that while both mantras and dhāraṇīs are formulae used in

ritual contexts, "dhāraṇī" has the additional, and probably more original, meaning of "mnemonic device."[54] In the East Asian context, Strickmann identifies this along with two other meanings for the term "dhāraṇī." Referring to the *Dazhidu lun* (attributed to Nāgārjuna and bearing the reconstructed Sanskrit title *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra*), Strickmann identifies three functions of dhāraṇīs: "Memory, perception and protection of the equilibrium of the spirit: these are the three principal functions of dhāraṇī for our author."[55] The *Dazhidu lun*, translated by Étienne Lamotte, expands on the protective uses of dhāraṇīs by identifying two functions, holding together and holding off. Dhāraṇīs are capable of holding together that which is beneficial and holding off that which is not.[56] Dhāraṇīs are repeatedly identified as possessions of a bodhisattva, an idea found repeatedly in such texts as the Lotus Sūtra. Vidyās are a subset of mantras, and yet at the same time refer to "feminine deities that were appropriated by Buddhists,"[57] also known as vidyās. Ritually, vidyās function in the same way as other mantras, being accompanied by mudrā.

THE THREE SETS OF VOWS

One of the ways in which a distinct identity has been created for esoteric Buddhism is through the use of three sets of vows, or what are also called the three great codes of discipline.[58] These are the prātimokṣa vows, the bodhisattva vows, and an additional distinct set of mantrayāna vows. Kūkai, founder of the Japanese Vajrayāna tradition of Shingon, presents the mantrayāna vows (Jpn. *samaya*) as a set of four: not to abandon the correct Dharma or to develop any incorrect behavior, not to give up the aspiration to attain enlightenment, not to be tight-fisted about any of the teachings, and not to go without benefiting all sentient beings.[59]

These three sets of vows are found in both Tibetan tantric and Japanese tantric traditions.[60] (It is unclear, to me at least, as to whether or not the three sets of vows were used in China.) This may serve as a criterion for identifying where an institutionalized form that identifies itself as Vajrayāna Buddhism actually exists, rather than simply the use of those elements identified as typical of the tradition, such as mantra, mudrā, dhāraṇī, and maṇḍala, within a broader Buddhist praxis.

ON "PROTO-TANTRA"

With all of the definitional vagaries outlined in this introduction, it should be apparent that there are no clear dividing lines by which we can delineate

what is or is not tantra. For this reason the attempt to identify a category of "proto-tantra" is problematic. As Robert Sharf notes, "Without a coherent notion of 'pure Tantra'—be it a self-conscious tradition, lineage, or school—the anachronistic and teleological category of miscellaneous or proto-Tantra threatens to lose its historical or analytical purchase."[61] Similarly Ronald Davidson comments that the use of the idea of proto-tantra as a bibliographic category "provides us with a misleading sense that somehow these collections understood that they were anticipating the later, mature system, which was certainly not the case."[62] The same issue—assuming that earlier forms only exist as preliminary to later higher developments—is found in the scholastic categorization of tantric texts.

SCHOLASTIC SYSTEMS OF CLASSIFICATION: SHINGON (HETEROPRAX VS. ORTHOPRAX) AND TIBETAN (FOUR TANTRAS)

The history of Buddhist thought has frequently been marked by scholasticism, that is, attempts to organize and systematize the vast textual heritage.[63] Perhaps the best-known East Asian scholastic systematization is that of Tiantai Zhiyi, with his organization of the canon into "five periods and eight teachings"[64]—a system that had broad influence in Japan as well as China. It should be noted at the outset of our discussion, however, that all such systems are constructed with polemic intent.

In contemporary Western scholarship the most frequently presented Vajrayāna scholastic system derives from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. This is the fourfold system of Action tantras (Skt. *kriyā*, Tib. *bya*), Performance tantras (Skt. *caryā*, Tib. *spyod*), Yoga tantras (Skt. *yoga*, Tib. *rnal 'byor*), and Supreme Yoga tantras (Skt. *anuttara yoga*, Tib. *bla na med pa rnal 'byor*). The Action tantras are characterized as being focused on "a wide range of externally performed ritual activities." In contrast, the Performance tantras focus on "ritual activities in balance with meditative practices." This shift away from ritual practice continues in the Yoga tantras, which "are predominantly oriented towards meditative and yogic practices." Finally, the Highest Yoga tantras consider the mind to be the "chief agent of all human activities" and, therefore, give their attention to its purification and control.[65]

Frequently these are presented as a sequence of increasingly more sophisticated and powerful teachings such that the lower stages can be abandoned at the upper levels. David Snellgrove has noted that "one finds it asserted

that these four grades have been taught to suit the capabilities of various beings, whose faculties may be categorized as inferior, mediocre, superior or truly excellent, as though all four grades were available at all times."[66] He goes on to note, however that "those who come latest onto the historical scene tend to grade the various phases that preceded them as descending stages of inferiority, and it is precisely this that occurs with the later categorizing of all the accumulated masses of tantras and the various consecrations that they bestow. Thus in order to make some sense of the various explanations offered by traditional scholars for the existence of such a variety, one needs to keep in mind the all-important factor of historical development."[67]

Rather than employing the fourfold system found in Tibet, the Shingon system works on a distinction between those texts that present "proper practice" ("orthopraxy"), and those which present practices which are both proper and improper, that is mixed ("heteropraxy").[68] The contemporary Shingon terminology for these two categories are "pure" esoterism (Jpn. *seijun mikkyō*, or *junmitsu*) and what is variously translated as "mixed," "miscellaneous," "diffuse," or "impure" esoterism (Jpn. *zōbu mikkyō*, or *zōmitsu*). Orthopraxy is associated with the texts of the Dainichikyō (Skt. Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi Sūtra) and Kongōchōgyō (Skt. Vajraśekhara Sūtra), together with their attendant cycles of rituals and maṇḍalas. It was these two traditions of practice that Kūkai reports he was initiated into during his sojourn in China, and which have provided the organizational structure for Shingon praxis since.

In much of Western-language scholarship on Vajrayāna Buddhism, the fourfold system of the Tibetan scholastic tradition is taken as normative.[69] Thus we find, for example, Reginald Ray noting that Shingon and Tendai Vajrayāna "are based on the practice of Kriya and Charya tantras, understood in Tibet as the 'lower' or more conventional tantras."[70] While strictly accurate as far as it goes, to categorize the Shingon and Tendai tantras according to the Tibetan categories is only valid from the Tibetan perspective. It would be equally valid—from the Shingon or Tendai perspective—to classify the Tibetan tantras according to the Japanese categories. From that perspective the vast majority of tantras in use in Tibet—that is, other than the Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi, Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha, and Susidhikara—are heteroprax.[71]

For the critical scholar, however, both systems of classification are simply information about the respective traditions. On the one hand, they are instances of the scholastic efforts of each tradition. On the other, they reflect

polemical efforts to establish relations of superiority and inferiority between different textual traditions and schools. The critical scholar can take neither system, not the Tibetan fourfold nor the Shingon twofold, as normative for the entire Vajrayāna tradition, but must, as Snellgrove suggests, attend to the actual textual history.[72]

RUNNING WITH SCISSORS, PLAYING WITH MATCHES: THE ROMANCE OF THE TRANSGRESSIVE

While "tantra" serves as a bibliographic category, "tantrism" as a religious category was formed by Europeans—novelists, colonial administrators, and scholars. Formative in the creation of the idea of tantrism was transgression. All transgressions were seen as tantric, and all tantrism transgressive. Virtually the only image of tantric practice presented in the highly influential *Philosophies of India* by Heinrich Zimmer is one that is transgressive. Zimmer presents the notorious "five m's" ritual as emblematic of the entirety of tantra. This is the practice of sacramental transgression involving five elements, all of which begin with the letter *m:* the consumption of wine *(madya),* meat *(māṁsa),* fish *(matsya),* and parched grain *(mudrā),* prior to sexual intercourse *(maithuna).*[73] Serinity Young notes that "the first four are described as aphrodisiacs and lead up to the fifth, actual or symbolical sexual union."[74]

This is a very problematic issue, however, requiring a great deal of attention to the specific social context. André Padoux expresses serious reservations, for example, in his discussion of the role of sex in tantric practice. Noting that in the Brahmanic tradition sexual activity and its representations are justified by their auspiciousness, he goes on to suggest that such significance "should also be their purpose in the Tantric sphere is far from impossible, much to the contrary. Transgression would thus be confined to cases where impurity is sought as a path toward a sacrality that transcends social norms, and as a means of conquering the supernatural powers that are associated with anomic deities. The transgressing of usual norms of conduct (ritual or otherwise) should however not always be taken as expressive of some kind of 'transgressive sacrality.'"[75]

In his study of tantric ritual in Bhaktapur, Nepal, Robert I. Levy comments on two issues relevant to the question of transgression. First, the idea of there being special tantric powers entails for the uninitiated the projection of a variety of fantasies about the nature of those powers and the practices that produce them. These fantasies are "encouraged by the Tantric

strategy of protecting esoteric doctrines through multiple veilings and obfuscations of its doctrinal and symbolic implications."[76] Thus it is that noninitiates "often believe that Tantric *pūjās* are associated with major violations of ordinary moral and religious regulations such as the eating of forbidden foods and overt sexual intercourse—including (according to one informant) even the incestuous intercourse between brothers and sisters."[77] Second, there is the related issue of secrecy. Although tantric practices may be secret, and outsiders are therefore able to project their own denied desires onto them,[78] at the same time the fact that secrets exist has to be known. "The secrecy of a group becomes a *mystery* for those who know there is a secret, but do not know what it is. To turn a secret into a mystery means that there often have to be ways of signaling, of advertising the presence of secrets."[79]

Transgression is indeed a characteristic of tantra as broadly understood. Hugh Urban asks rhetorically, "Do these texts really contain any of the scandalous, sexy, and transgressive materials that we today associate with the category of 'Tantra'?" His short answer is "Yes, of course they do."[80] One of the earliest translations of a Buddhist tantra into English is *The Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa Tantra*, which contains the following instructions to the yogi who is in the "Variegated" position with his consort:

> Optionally he may secrete or not
> secrete, having his mind solely on
> pleasure. If he does, he should
> lick the Lotus, on his knees.
>
> And he should eat with his tongue,
> the white and red of the Lotus. And
> he should inhale it through a pipe
> in the nose, to increase his power.
>
> After washing the Lotus with the
> tongue, he should have Wisdom stand
> up and he should kiss her. And,
> after hugging her, he should eat meat
> and fish.
>
> He should drink milk or wine, in
> order to increase his desire. After

> his fatigue has decreased, he should
> desire with pleasure, etc.
>
> And, in the foregoing manner, the
> couple should begin again with each
> other. By this repeated practice,
> Great Pleasure is attained, and in
> this very lifetime the practitioner
> gains the title of Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa.[81]

While the practice prescribed in the *Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa* is an individual one, there were also group rites. These tantric feasts, or sacramental circles *(gaṇacakra)*, formed a significant part of Indian tantric Buddhist practice. Davidson points out that there can be "little doubt about the general purpose of its exercise: acquisition of the sorcerer's *(vidyādhara)* powers through the community's sacramental experience of otherwise forbidden items."[82] He also notes the effects of what he calls the "domestication" of these rites, in which the rites are explained simply as actions to be visualized, or are in some other way sanitized (or deodorized, as Urban calls this process). Such sanitizing of the instructions for transgressive rites in the tantras is not at all limited to the representation of tantra for modern Western audiences; it seems to be long-standing. In the case of Newari tantra, David Gellner notes that "while it is likely that most would accept only a symbolic interpretation of the antinomianism implied by Tantric ritual, it also seems certain that some took it literally."[83] While acknowledging the emphatic literalism of the *Kriyāsamuccaya*—"that sacramental circle *(gaṇacakra)* that is without [sex with] a female partner *(prajñā)* is a [mere] meeting of rice scum"—Elizabeth English goes on to assert that the instructions of the *Vajravārāhī Sādhana* are metaphoric and that the tantric feast is to be performed as a visualization.[84]

The tantric Buddhist texts, like their Hindu counterparts, clearly do contain instructions regarding transgressive practices.[85] Beyond this, however, context becomes everything. As suggested by Padoux, the meaning of sex in medieval India may have had a different value than it does for us today. Similarly, different practitioners may look at the same text and interpret it differently, as literal instructions for physical actions or as metaphoric instructions for visualized actions. Indeed, texts do not in fact indicate that the practices prescribed in them were actually engaged in—they could be

little more than the pornographic fantasies of their authors. Generalities based on an idealized view of Buddhist tantra, or on a colonialist denigration of tantra as simply decadent, do nothing to assist in untangling the issue of the transgressive in tantra. Rather, attention to specific texts and their specific locations—social, cultural, historical, economic, and political—will probably reveal a wide-ranging diversity of practices, some transgressive, others not, some actualized, some visualized.

Historical Considerations

Having outlined some of the issues involved in characterizing the tantric Buddhist tradition, our next step is to raise a series of historical considerations about our understanding of the tradition. We begin with theories regarding the origin of tantra. Then comes an examination of the two different kinds of Buddhist practitioners who contribute to different forms of Buddhist tantra—monks and siddhas. Lastly, brief attention will be given to problematizing the historiographic narrative of the "three countries," which structures much of our understanding of East Asian Buddhism generally.

THEORIES OF ORIGINS

The two theories regarding the origins of tantra that appear most frequently are the "pre-Aryan/tribal-origin narrative" and the "Vedic-origin narrative."[86] The first argues that tantra is the reemergence of autochthonous, pre-Vedic religious culture into the historical record. This theory also tends to see a continuity between particular aspects of the archeological record of Indus Valley sites and the tribal religions of India—most especially the emphasis on goddesses. It is this latter characteristic, the centrality of the feminine, that has come in the minds of many scholars to be the defining characteristic of tantra. For example, Narendra Nath Bhattacharyya considers the basis of tantra to be "a primitive worship of the reproductive power of the Earth, imagined in female form, which is tied to the powers of sexuality."[87] Similarly, when J. G. de Casparis and others asserted that there was no tantric background to Borobudur—either as symbolism or as organizing principle—it was because of the absence of the feminine, that is, the explicitly sexual.[88] It should be noted that the presence of such elements alone, however, does not itself establish a direct, historical connection between the pre-Vedic and autochthonous religions of India and Buddhist tantra. The pre-Aryan/tribal-origin narrative is appealing because it would seem to explain why there are tantric traditions within each of the three dominant traditions—Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain.

An example of this first narrative is M. C. Joshi's identification of tantra as a whole with devotion centering on "supreme power," that is, *śākti*. Implicitly, tantra simply is Śākta tantra. With this conception of tantra as focused on the feminine hypostatization of power, Joshi is able to assert that "Śākta Tantrism has its roots in prehistoric concepts of a fertile mother goddess and ancient systems for her worship."[89] He locates the origins in the Upper Paleolithic. In this reading of the origins of tantra, it is indigenous to India and continuous from the earliest times. One of the common characteristics of this theory is a questionable equation of prehistoric Indus Valley religion—about which very little uncontested knowledge exists—with medieval tribal religion. Despite this, it has been a very popular theory, being employed by Mircea Eliade and, more recently, Miranda Shaw and Luis O. Gómez.[90] Eliade says that "the irresistible tantric advance also implies a new victory for the pre-Āryan popular strata."[91] Shaw for her part emphasizes the connection with tribal and lower-caste religion, suggesting that "practices that had great antiquity in India's forests, mountains, and rural areas, among tribal peoples, villagers, and the lower classes, were embraced and redirected to Buddhist ends."[92] Commenting on the symbolic interpretations of the sexual symbolism of the tantras, such as semen being a symbol for *bodhicitta* (the aspiration for awakening), Gómez goes on to say, "Behind the Buddhist interpretation, of course, one discovers the non-Aryan substratum, with its emphasis on fertility and the symbolism of the mother goddess."[93]

In contrast to Joshi's delimitation of tantra to Śākti worship, Thomas McEvilley chooses to focus on esoteric physiology—the flow of energy up or down the spinal channel, together with conceptions of the control of that flow—and finds parallels not only in pre-Indo-European seal motifs from the Indus Valley, but also throughout the ancient world, including Greek, Sumerian, Egyptian, and Chinese instances. His gaze expands to include Australian aboriginal rituals, as well as !Kung Bushmen. Not surprisingly, perhaps, he says that such evidence "seems to direct our gaze into the darkest depths of human prehistory."[94] Like Joshi, McEvilley's reading gives tantra prehistoric origins, but instead of Indic ancestry it is a panhuman phenomenon dispersing from African origins.

Like many others, these two studies depend on the argument by analogy: two things appear to be similar, so there must be some significant