



# TURNING THE WHEEL

WIM VAN DEN DUNGEN

WIM VAN DEN DUNGEN

*Turning the Wheel*

# *Turning the Wheel*

© 2019 Wim van den Dungen

All Rights Reserved. Except for brief quotations in a review, this book, or parts thereof, must not be reproduced in any form whatsoever without permission from the publisher.

First edition in 2019 by Taurus Press

POD Publication

Published for Taurus Press

by LULU.com

ISBN : 978-0-359-36379-7

BISAC : REL007020

RELIGION / Buddhism / Rituals & Practice

Frontispiece : Desktop Lotus Wheel, Nepal, late 20<sup>th</sup>-century

Back cover : *Bhavacakra Tankha*, private collection, late 20<sup>th</sup>-century



TAURUS Press

Brasschaat – Belgium

*dedicated to Guru Rinpoche*

Please spread the benefits of the wheel,  
for doing so is the same as preserving and spreading  
the Buddhadharma.

Fourth Panchen Lama : *Benefits of the Six-Syllable Prayer Wheel*

---

## Table of Contents

Preface	9
Introduction	13
1   The <i>Maṇi</i> Mantra	53
2   The Buddha of Compassion	63
3   The <i>Maṇi</i> Wheel	79
4   The Wheel of <i>Sam̐sāra</i>	93
5   The Path of Accumulation	153
6   The Hand Wheel	175
7   Traditional Benefits	185
8   The <i>Maṇi</i> Wheel Revisited	199
9   Turning Woe into Smoke	245
10   The Practice of the <i>Maṇi</i> Wheel	289
Epilogue	319
Bibliography	321
About the Author	326



Padmasambhava

OM ĀḤ HŪḤ VAJRA GURU PADMA SIDDHI HŪḤ

---

## Preface

This book is written for Mahāyānist interested in Dharma wheel practice. The prayer wheel entered my life in 1978. I was 17. I bought it in an old Antwerp occult bookshop together with a *thangka* of Padmasaṃbhava. The attraction was immediate. It was an old *maṇi*-wheel that made a penetrating shrieking noise when turned. It had been clumsily filled with a dirty paper roll of nearly effaced mantras. I did not know how to use it, but later, the shop owner –who called Guru Rinpoche ‘the magician’– noted that, when turning it for the first time, I had done so correctly. He was amazed my nearly unnoticeable wrist movement had caused the wheel to continuously spin, i.e., without stopping on the way, as often happens with beginners. When asked about its use, he told me it had a ‘purifying effect,’ but could or would not convey more.

In the following decades, this prayer wheel stood on its wooden stand and caught dust. In those days, no books were available informing me about its actual use in spiritual practice. Besides the fact that it belonged to the Vajrayāna, the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, I had no idea of its ways or spiritual benefits. Still, the strange contraption continued to fascinate me.

In 2005, and this for various mainly philosophical reasons, I stopped theist practice, embraced the Buddhadharma, studied the *Pāli Canon*, and initiated mindfulness practice. In 2006, I took refuge in the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha), commenced



Analytical Meditations (or *Lam Rim*) and the practice of the Preliminaries, the preparatory or foundational practices (Tib. *ngöndro*) common to all four schools of Tibetan Buddhism. It was paralleled by Calm Abiding (*śamatha*). In that same year, I read Lorne Ladner's *The Wheel of Great Compassion* (2000) and began to understand what prayer wheel practice is all about. Experience would teach me about its many virtues and areas of application.

In the following three years, I completed the set of 100,000 *maṇi*-mantras, conjointly with other foundational practices. Next came Emptiness Meditation (*vispaśyanā* or Insight Meditation), leading up to the writing of *Thirty Verses on Conscious Life* (2016), *Ten Ox-Herding Images* (2016) and *Emptiness Panacea* (2017).

I testify for the amazing benefits of reciting the *maṇi*-mantra while turning the Dharma wheel or *maṇi* practice. Using it often inspired me to devise my own set of visualizations of *saṃsāra*, as well as a specific use of the *mālā*, the 'rosary' used to 'count' the number of mantras recited.

I turned to *maṇi* practice not only to clear hindrances and to boost my daily practice, but also to benefit the residents of the six worlds of suffering, to assist those that passed away, and to help my friends. The benefits of this practice can indeed not be put into words and to try to 'explain' how it works seems rather vain.

My special thanks go to Lama Zopa Rinpoche, who introduced the prayer wheel in the West. He inspired Lorne Ladner to write *The Wheel of Great Compassion*, which he co-authored,

---

allowing us to find out the extraordinary benefits of *maṇi* practice for ourselves.

As a Western philosopher, my approach to the history of the *maṇi*-wheel differs from the, at times, mythical and legendary take of some native Tibetans. Also, my interpretation of the origins of the Vajrajāna, the Tibetan form of Buddhism, may strike a false chord. I'm sorry if that is the case, but my academic training cannot eliminate facts or alter history to satisfy the wrong ideas of others.

That said, the power of Tibetan spiritual technology is outstanding. When stripped from the restrictive cultural overlay and sectarian overtones, Tibetan Vajrajāna is a vast storehouse of living spiritual teachings and practices. While it takes a lot of dedication to finding the *nugget of gold*, the effort is rewarded by uncovering effective methods, as well as the wisdom realizing emptiness.

If *maṇi* practice seems something worthwhile, then my counsel to You is to buy a prayer wheel and learn how to turn it properly, experiencing its benefits first hand. This book may assist.

May *maṇi* practice generate great compassion to the advantage of all sentient beings.

Wim van den Dungen  
Brasschaat  
February 2019.



Four-Armed Avalokiteśvara

---

## Introduction

As will become apparent in the following chapters, the heart of the practice of the prayer wheel, the *maṇi* mantra, can be traced back to the *Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra*, a work composed in Kashmir around the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup>-century CE. This earliest textual source for any mention of *Oṃ Maṇi Padme Hūṃ* ‘represents the reconfiguration, by the Mahāyāna monastic establishment, of a practice first propagated by *lay Buddhist Tantric practitioners*.’<sup>(1)</sup> The *Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra* reached the Land of Snows during the reign of king Lha Thothori Nyantsen, the 28<sup>th</sup> king of Tibet, arriving either in a casket which fell from the sky onto the roof of the king’s palace or, more likely, by way of missionaries from Li, modern-day Khotan.<sup>(2)</sup> King Lha lived between the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> and the end of the 5<sup>th</sup>-century. That much of the *Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra* reflects the interaction between Śaivism and Buddhist Tantra in its formative stage (cf. *infra*), sheds light on the historical origins of the Vajrayāna. This is the Diamond Vehicle, also called Tantrayāna, Mantrayāna, or Guhyamantrayāna, advancing, to boost practice, Deity Yoga, and antinomianism. According to some Lamas, Buddhist Tantra was first taught thousands of years before the Buddha, ascribing the original Tantric teachings to another awakened being, the Buddha Tenpa Shenrab, believed to have lived 18.000 years ago.<sup>(3)</sup> A myth with no evidence backing it.

Before unfolding, in the next chapters, the meaning of the *maṇi*-mantra, the fact of *saṃsāra*, the role of the Buddha of Compassion, and the practice of the prayer wheel, this introduction offers a concise historical introduction to Indian Tantra, Hindu as well as Buddhist. This history differs from what the Lamas teach ...

‘Tantric religion from early on was a pan-Indian movement that cut across religious boundaries. In the resulting environment of ritual and literary exchange, the lines that long had distinguished religious traditions were blurred and sectarian competition for royal patronage intensified.’<sup>(4)</sup> Adhering to the idea of *a single underlying principle (eka)*, the Sanskrit word ‘*tantra*’ means ‘weft, loom, warp, continuum, ... text, context’. Its earliest documented use is found in the *Rig Veda* (X.71.9). In Tibetan, ‘*tantra*’ is ‘*ju*’ (*rgyud*), meaning ‘thread, string, cord,’ or ‘that which joins things together.’ The word ‘*tantra*’ breaks down into the roots  $\sqrt{tan}$ , or ‘propagate, elaborate on, expand on’ and  $\sqrt{tra}$ , or ‘save, protect.’

### Hindu Tantra : an Appraisal.

The word ‘Hinduism’ was invented by the Europeans. Overwhelmed by the *complexity* of the indigenous religions and cultural traditions of India, the Europeans of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century simply referred to all non-Muslim Indian people as ‘Hindoos’ (from the Persian, meaning ‘people East of the Indus River’). In the early 1800s, educated Indians also began to use the term ‘Hinduism’ to

---

denote all lineages, sects, and traditions accepting the four *Vedas* (*Rigveda*, *Samaveda*, *Yajurveda*, and *Artharvaveda*) as the ultimate spiritual authority, the *Rig Veda* (or 'knowledge of praise') being the oldest. The *Vedas*, originally an oral tradition, were composed prior to 1900 BCE, probably long before. Hinduism excluded Jainism and Buddhism, deemed unorthodox. 'The Tantric claim to a Vedic origin is controversial and disputed by orthodox brahmins. They not only deny the Vedic origin of Tantra but consider Tantric teachings to be corrupt, if not altogether heretical. Their evaluation lags behind actual social reality, however, for Tantra has been an integral part of Hindu culture since at least the turn of the second millennium BCE.'<sup>(5)</sup>

Dating the *Rig Veda* before 1900 BCE makes the Vedic civilization portrayed therein contemporaneous with the late Indus Valley civilization (ca. 3000 – 1900 BCE), the sophisticated Harappan culture, covering modern-day northwest India and Pakistan. Unearthed were figurines seated in what seems a 'yogic posture.' Famous among these is the square seal in steatite depicting a nude male with three faces, seated with crossed legs on a throne, wearing bangles on both arms, and an elaborate headdress. While the association with the Lotus posture (*padma āsana*) seems unmistakable, some scholars read this as bull worship.

Except for the orthodox pundits, educated Hindus look upon Tantra 'as running parallel and in close interaction (rather than merely in opposition to) the Vedic heritage. They distinguish

---

between Vedic and Tantric –*vaidika* and *tāntrika*– currents of Hindu spirituality. This distinction demonstrates the massive success of Tantra as a tradition or cultural movement within Hinduism.<sup>(6)</sup>

‘There was neither non-existence nor existence then ;  
 there was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond.  
 What stirred ?  
 Where ?  
 In whose protection ?  
 Was there water, bottomlessly deep ?  
 There was neither death nor immortality then.  
 There was no distinguishing sign of night nor of day.  
 That one breathed, windless, by its own impulse.  
 Other than that there was nothing beyond.’  
*Rig Veda*, Creation Hymn, 1 - 2.

The Indo-Aryan migratory movements to the South (caused by climate change resulting from a major tectonic shift ca. 1900 BCE, reducing the Sarasvatī river to a mere trickle) were not an ‘invasion’ by an advanced ‘Aryan’ culture of a ‘primitive’ aboriginal population (the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Aryan invasion theory), but rather the gradual acculturation of less developed nomadics blending in with a sophisticated urban civilization in decline.<sup>(7)</sup> This is infiltration and mutual adaptation, slowly forging *a new cultural identity* based on the interaction between different currents.

The Aryans did not conquer the South all at once, but slowly infiltrated and advanced more sophisticated solutions, changing the ways of the native Indians. Little is known about the culture of these original, pre-Aryan natives. One would expect their spiritual practices to be less intellectual and refined than the Vedic. No doubt it took a few centuries to finalize the integration.

The underlying soteriology of Hinduism seeks to liberate the soul (*ātman*, *puruṣa*) from suffering and so from cyclic existence (*saṃsāra*), the wheel of becoming (*bhavacakra*). This soul (or seer) is *not* ordinary consciousness, conventional, nominal mind (*buddhi*, *citta*, *manas*), and *not* part of Nature (*prakṛti*), but embedded in it. Mind is indeed *an integral part* of Nature (the seen). So to separate seer and seen (*vi-yoga*) is the goal of (Pātañjala) Yoga. The metaphysical union of the Divine in each of us (*ātman*) with the Absolute Being (Brahman) is deemed a fact of direct experience, not merely a philosophical abstract. Given this sordid entanglement of consciousness with Nature, this ever-changing continuum of woeful transformations –believed the root cause of ignorance and so suffering– the yogi is required to altogether *retire* from Nature.

*Grosso modo*, Indian spirituality rooted in the *Vedas* advanced three paths towards this aim to be liberated (*mokṣa*) from suffering : (1) ritual activity (as in the Vedic, Brahmanical tradition), (2) pure mystical devotion (*bhakti*) and (3) Yoga, calling upon the will and powers of the ascetic.<sup>(8)</sup> These strands promoted different approaches and influenced one another.



The relationship between Hindu Tantra and Śiva is unmistakable. While *not* rooted in the *Vedas*, Śaivism became an integral part of Hinduism. This process happened in steps. The *Rig Veda* mentions the term *śiva* merely as an epithet for ‘kind, auspicious’ and the deity resembling the later Śiva (Rudra) is only mentioned in 3 out of the 1028 hymns. However, proto-Tantric overtones can be found in the Vedic Rudra and the goddesses Nirriti and Yamī. The Vedic seers used ‘*mantras*, sacrificial formulas, animal sacrifices, magical diagrams (*yantra*), and visualisation in their rituals, as do the Tantric initiates.’<sup>(9)</sup>

At the end of the Vedic period (6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>-centuries BCE), with the advent of the Śramaṇa Movement, Śiva Tantra, based on the *kuṇḍalinī* mentioned in the *Upaniṣads*, slowly became one of the corner-stones of the eternal tradition (*sanātana-dharma*).<sup>(10)</sup> Rudra’s evolution from a *minor* Vedic deity to Supreme Being (like Brahman) is first attested in the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, dated between 400 and 200 BCE.

Finally, starting around ca. 2<sup>nd</sup>-century CE, Śaivism matured and developed exoteric and esoteric branches. The former was influenced by the Vedic line with its *Epics* and *Purāṇas*, while the latter, the theology of Śiva as Supreme Being, taught the practice of the Tantra of Śiva and Śakti. Śaivism claimed Tantra to be the ‘fifth’ *Veda*, i.e., the continuation of the *Vedas* and the Brahmanical texts based on them, the *Brāhmanas*, the *Āraṇyakas*, the *Upaniṣads*, the *Purāṇas*, and the *Bhagavad-Gītā* ...

The earliest yogic and Tantric practices, defined as methods or skillful means (*upāya*) to transform body, energy, and mind (cf. ‘technologies of the self’ – Foucault), were first *systematically* developed in the early Śramaṇa Movement (6<sup>th</sup>-century BCE), *before* the traditional date of the historical Buddha (ca. 563 – 483 BCE) and *before* Mahāvīra (ca. 599 – ca. 527).

The term ‘śramaṇa’ is generic and used by members of *different* ascetic groups of *wandering renunciants*. Vedic or non-Vedic, they shared the view of a radical and profound change of mind, reshaping the individual and his social relationships. Such a total transformation led either to the life of a wanderer (an ascetic) or to that of a householder, a lay. Presumably, these ‘new’ Vedic ascetics authored the early *Upaniṣads* and made no clear distinction between Yoga and Tantra. These ascetics viewed spiritual practices in terms of a return to the *source* of the *Vedas*. They sought direct experience, not merely ritual activity.

The origin of the *Vedas* was the state of mind of the Vedic seers (*ṛṣi*) of old, those who had directly received the Vedic revelation. Like them, these ascetics among the Brahmins lived austere (dry) lives in forest hermitages. Desiring to share in the experience of the seers, knowledge of how to do so, and the actual realization of this spiritual fact (or genuine *direct* experience of absolute reality) were the *leitmotifs* of these ascetics and authors, each following a path based on a view regarding the fruit ; rebirth in heaven and liberation from rebirth (cf. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*).

Amongst the ascetics were also *non-Vedic* practitioners ! Followers of Śiva, Buddha Śākyamuni, Mahāvīra, Makkhali Gosala, and others were also part of this *heterodox* Śramaṇa Movement. Perhaps at some point, some of them, like the Kāpālikas, an early sect of Śaivite ascetics, adopted an extreme kāpālika-style practice (*kapāla* means skull), denying the householder and introducing *transgressive* practices inspired by Śiva, walking the ‘left hand path’ and avoiding everyday society, meditating in uncommon, ghostly places.

Between these various renunciate movements, the fundamental divide lay between those maintaining the ‘Vedic fire’ (*homa*) and those who practiced *without it*. In the mind of the early Śaiva Tantrics, the *Vedas* had lost their salvic power, making Brahmanism obsolete. Yoga brought the end of fluctuations of consciousness (cf. *Yoga-Sūtra*, I.2), whereas Tantra implied specific (often transgressive) ritual practices, sacred formulae (*mantra*), spiritual diagrams (*yantra*), gestures (*mudrā*), postures (*āsana*), initiations (*dikṣā*), and specific practices involving afflictive desire and sexual-erotic activity.

Buddha Śākyamuni is renowned for having gone through austerities and extreme ascetic (Vedic) practices and for having rejected them. It means Brahmins, Jains, materialists, and others had already been around long enough to become organized. So Yoga and Tantra, as *different methods of Hindu practice*, were probably not earlier than the age of the earliest *Upaniṣad*, the

---

*Jaiminīya*, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, and *Chāndogya*, i.e., mid-first millennium BCE, while the Śramaṇa Movement may at least have started a few centuries earlier.

Can an underlying cultural connection between, on the one hand, (a) Vedic ritual, (c) subsequent Brahmanism, (c) native Indian religion and, on the other hand, mid-first millennium, late Vedic Brahmanical practice (priestly and ascetic) be plausibly denied ?

While the *Keśin Hymn* (*Rig Veda*, X.136) mentions ‘breath’ and the ‘fire and poison’ endured by the extraordinary figure of the ‘long-haired one,’ called the ‘wind’s steed,’ the *Rig Veda* offers little textual evidence for an early Vedic *system* of Yoga or Tantra. It does not preclude prefigurations and resemblances. Note the similarities between Vedic Shamanism and Tantra : the naked sage ‘drinks from the cup, drinking the drug with Rudra.’ The latter is the prototype for Śiva, who is linked with the later ‘skull-cup’ ascetics, but who remained somewhat estranged from the traditional Vedic pantheon.

The original Vedic seers communicated with the gods in ecstatic trances or altered states of consciousness, often induced by the ritual consumption of *soma*. Their visionary power resulted from *direct contact* with the Divine, the absolute. Yoga and Tantra were not yet distinct and differentiated, but seem resonating practices assisting the continuum of the trance of the Vedic *shaman-seer*. The *Vedas* bring us in touch with the Shamanism of the Vedic religion, involving the direct experience of the absolute, and

this is a direct, trance-induced, clan-based way. It created powerful symbolic tools, used to integrate the native religion during and after the Indo-Aryan migrations.

Vedic inner technology focused on the visionary revelation of sacred knowledge (in hymns), used in ritual contexts. At times *soma*-induced, this Shamanism was eventually lost. But, as said, they also used *mantra*, sacrificial formulas, animal sacrifices, *yantra* (magical diagrams), and visualizations. There is evidence of the eagerness to acquire knowledge about the hidden planes of existence. Even the Tantric *kuṇḍalinī* may have been present, as the term *kunamnamā* (*Rig-Veda*, X.126.7) testifies. Indeed, meaning 'she who is badly bent' may be a reference to the dormant serpent power, also called *kabjikā* or 'crooked one.' In the *Brāhmanas*, as in the *Vedas*, sexual symbolism is pervasive, but the former was first to introduce *bīja*-mantras or 'seed mantras.' Vedic religion clearly integrated a 'wild side' (Rudra). Did this transgressive aspect facilitate the integration of the popular religion of the natives (the cultures of the subcontinent before the start of the Indo-Aryan migratory movements)? We don't really know ...

So the emergence, in the late Vedic period, of an ascetic movement inspired by the *Vedas* (the 'new' Vedic *sramaṇas*) coincided with the redaction of the *Upaniṣads*, probably composed by these Brahmin renunciants. In these texts, union with 'the One,' hylc pluralism, and the subtle anatomy with its subtle bodies, channels, wheels, and breaths pertain.

---

These authors, as said, returned to the life of the Vedic seers, and experienced the visions for themselves, i.e., directly, without intermediaries. As ritualists, they offered fire, and most of them sought rebirth in (the Vedic) heaven. Their texts mention the various subtle bodies, but not yet a technology to ‘move’ subtle energy. In the early *Upaniṣads*, perhaps as early as the 6<sup>th</sup>-century BCE, Yoga as a way to *transform the mind* emerged.

At the time of Siddhārtha Gautama (recently, scholars dated the *parinirvāṇa* of Buddha at ca. 400 BCE !), various groups practiced renunciation. Some of these wandering Vedic and non-Vedic (heterodox) ascetics alike were in the process of becoming more integrated (with resulting discussions and conflicts between their various views). Gautama followed their ways (cf. the austerities and the *jhānas*) but found these unsatisfactory to end suffering. He discussed it with many of them. His disciples did not keep a Vedic fire and wanted release from rebirth as such. They dropped the whole theo-ontology of Brahmanism and the *Vedas*. Indeed, the wisdom of the Buddha rejected any form of self-sufficiency (*anātman*), and, with one roar, this process-based view cleared millennia of henotheist substance-thinking.

Did Hindu Tantra begin as a ‘special’ way introduced by non-Vedic, skull-cup Śiva-styled renunciants? ‘... the earliest group of Śaivite ascetics known to us are the Pāśupatas. The Pāśupatas do not seem, initially, at any rate, to have been involved in “Tantric” religion as such, but they were practitioners of a style of spirituality

that involves deliberately shocking behavior and the conscious courting of disrepute, elements that we also find in the Tantric context.<sup>(11)</sup> Hindu Tantra became foremost associated with Śiva. This deity (like Rudra) had always retained a *transgressive, antinomian side*. So the earliest Śaivite ascetics (leaving the *vrātyas*, the Vedic ‘fighting men,’ aside) were the *Pāśupatas* (cf. *Pāśupata Sūtra*), first mentioned in the *Mahābhārata* and known for their deliberately shocking behavior.<sup>(12)</sup> They were held to achieve the magical powers of a *siddha* (an ‘accomplished one’). Their legendary founder, Lakulīśa or Nakulīśa, is placed ca. 100 CE, but Śiva renunciates no doubt existed centuries earlier (cf. *Upaniṣads*). They were part of the non-Vedic renunciates of the early (poorly organized) Śramaṇa Movement (6<sup>th</sup>-century BCE). Skull-cup styled Śaivite yogis, and *tāntrikas* (Kāpālikas, Bhairavas) were usually ‘wilder’ than the ascetics practicing purification and the worship of the Divine Śakti. This proto-Tantric form of Śaivism of the Pāśupatas (limited to male Brāhmin renunciates shunning the community) is also called ‘*Atimārga*’ (the Higher Path). They practiced Yoga, rose through the planes of existence to realize liberation, and transcended *karma* through *antinomian forms of behavior*. On the other end, our first textual evidence for a *system* of Śaiva Tantra is the voluminous *Niśvāsa-tattva-saṃhitā*, written around 500–550 CE, clearly drawing on Atimārga teachings. Given the complexity of this text, is it not unreasonable to suppose Śaiva Tantra, acquiring its *systematic* and *textual* Śaivite form in the

6<sup>th</sup>-century CE, was initiated at least four centuries earlier by the Atimārga ? Conjecture oral lineages bringing the latter in contact with the earlier Kāpālikas and other non-Vedic renunciants moving against the truth of the *Vedas*, taking us at least back to the early Śramaṇa Movement, yes even before Lord Buddha taught ...

Śaiva Tantra has three outstanding components, much later readapted by Buddhist Tantra :

- (1) the identification of the practitioner with a powerful and transgressive male resident Shaman-God such as the wild Śiva (placed in a residence, the *maṇḍala*). In the highest Śaiva tantra (the *Vajñāna-Bhairava Tantra*, or *Scripture of the Wisdom-Bhairava* of the 6<sup>th</sup>-century CE), He is identified with reified empty space ;
- (2) the cult of the fierce Goddess (Śakti) burning the knots in the subtle channel connecting Her with Her spouse, identified, with energy and Nature (*prakṛti*) as a whole, and
- (3) Kuṇḍalinī Yoga, involving the conscious manipulation (leading) of *prāṇa* or the subtle energy (wind) upon which the mind 'rides', causing (a) accomplishments (a *siddha* has paranormal powers) and finally (b) the union of Lord Śiva with His Goddess, the ultimate goal of this Tantric technology.

Although the subtle underlying anatomy (of what Buddhist Tantra would later call the 'Vajra Body') can be found in the earliest *Upaniṣads* (like the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup>-century BCE), the art of circulating life-force (*ch'i*) was probably derived from Chinese Taoism. The transgressive, antinomian spirit of Śaiva



Tantra called for rituals involving cremation grounds, polluting substances associated with sex and death (feces, urine), fierce Gods and Goddesses, and initiations involving the consumption of the 'essences' of the male Guru and his female consort.

The central theme of Śaiva Tantra involved the union of Śiva with Śakti, of the masculine (Solar) transcendence (void, inherently existing space) with feminine, immanent (Lunar) energy. Śaiva Tantra made the Lunar *Kuṇḍalinī-Śakti* or 'serpent power' (at the base of the spine) rise and (re)unite with the Solar Śiva at the crown of the head. She is Earth, and He is Heaven. They unite and then form an agreement 'in the heart,' making all things of 'one taste.'

In Śaiva Tantra, the negative effects of the overall spiritual degeneration taking place in the dark age (*kali-yuga*) are countered by powerful, radical methods breaking through the attachment to conventional relationships and worldly concerns. Indeed, for the *tāntrikas*, the *Vedas* were an earlier revelation that had lost efficacy. As mentioned, Brahmins regarded this view as heretical, for the Vedic heritage was deemed Divine revelation. But Śaiva Tantra avoided any direct conflict by claiming its tradition originated from the same source. Their methods were adapted to the present age in which desire, craving, grasping, and hatred run amok. Confronting afflictive emotions instead of renouncing them, the *tāntrikas* integrated practices unacceptable to the Brahmins. While a fast track to liberation, Tantra was deemed impure. As a result, two separate strands emerged : *vaidika* (Vedic) and *tāntrika* (Tantric).

Antinomianism is one of the features of Śaiva Tantra, i.e., *going against the law, vow, or accepted norm*. It refers to going against the grain, inversion, or reversal and may lead to eccentric, extravagant, or extremist behaviors calling for sexual yoga and weird rituals (like coprophagy) ; mad, wild wisdom at work. The contrast with the sober and 'clean' way of life of the Brahmin could not be more pronounced.

Śaiva Tantra developed two schools : (1) the perilous 'left-hand path' of Vāmāchāra, a *kāpālīka*-style practitioner associated with the skull he wore, devoted to transgressive practices involving fear, danger, pain and sexuality, and (2) the 'right-hand path' (*dakṣiṇāchāra*), featuring purification rituals and total surrender to the Divine Mother (Śakti in all her forms).

Although antinomianism ran against the consolidation of power by rulers and kings, Tantra got associated with the art and science of *dominating the forces of Nature*. Identifying the 'residence' of the king as the *maṇḍala* of the resident deity, and amply using morbid and military symbols in their rituals, both point to the importance of the powers of these Tantrics (*siddhis*) in the affairs of state, sexuality (marriage, children, etc.), wealth and longevity. Even in Buddhism (because of the invading Muslims), Tantra was used to control and if necessary destroy 'the enemies of the Dharma' (cf. the *Kālacakra Tantra*, covering the whole spectrum of esoteric Buddhism, also aimed at destroying the Muslim barbarians by way of 'Dharma magick').

Śaiva Tantra targets a vast and profound understanding arising as a result of the direct experience of higher states of consciousness during meditation and ecstasy. But the distinction between *vaidika* (Vedic) and *tāntrika* (Tantra) always remained pertinent. Both poles of Hindu spirituality continued to interact, giving Brahmin worship (*pūjā*) Tantric features, or explaining Tantric processes in terms of Vedic theology (cf. the pair Śiva/Śakti reminding us of the distinction between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*).

By contrast, the earliest trace of the use of visualizations *outside* the Theravāda triggering encounters with the ‘Buddhas of the Present,’ with the intent of being in that Buddha’s presence and listening to his teachings, is found in one of the first Mahāyāna *sūtras*, the *Pratyutpanna-Buddha-Saṃmukhāvasthita-Samādhi Sūtra*, or ‘Samādhi of the Direct Encounter with the Buddhas of the Present,’ translated into Chinese in the first century CE, probably a century after it was written.<sup>(13)</sup> This text is one of the earliest witnesses for the practice of meditation on the Buddha in front of images or paintings (other texts are the *Amitāyurdhyāna Sūtra* and the *Sukhāvotīvyūha Sūtra*).<sup>(14)</sup> Such visionary procedures ‘have provided the mechanism by which the Mahāyāna *sūtras* in general were received and held to be the authentic word of the Buddha.’<sup>(15)</sup> In this way, *buddhānusmṛti* meditation contributed to what would later become Buddhist Tantra. Indeed, both *kriyā* and *caryā* classes of Buddhist Tantra are later monastic extensions and formalization of this procedure. But the first *systematic* Higher Tantras, the

*Guhyasamāja Tantra*, integrating transgressive elements, most probably only emerged in the early 7<sup>th</sup>-century. It does not mention the subtle channels of the Vajra body and is relatively short. So, this chronology undermines the claim Buddhist Tantra brought Hindu Tantra into being, nor is the latter later than the former, on the contrary. Lamas seldom mention this and mostly teach the mytho-legendary origin of their Tantras instead of the historical facts.

While both Hindu and Buddhist *tāntrikas* extensively borrowed from each other (scholars are divided who influenced who), the roots of Śaiva Tantra do plunge deeper down, namely to (late) Vedic times *predating* the arrival of Buddha, if not earlier (cf. the Vedic Rudra). Therefore, it is reasonable to suppose Buddhist Tantra emerged (as part of the Mahāyāna) *after* proto-Śaiva and *after* Śaiva Tantra had already been practiced and found efficient. Even the *Pāśupata Sūtra* (2<sup>nd</sup>-century) and the start of Buddhist proto-Tantra (the visualization of the Buddha in the first century CE and earlier) are not *co-emergent*. In the long formative stage that followed, Buddhist Tantra adapted pre-existing Śaiva methods based on a spiritual heritage bringing us back to late Vedic times and the Vedic proto-Śaiva Tantra. The Śaiva *tāntrikas* of the Śramaṇa Movement formed highly cultivated experts in various branches of the 'inner science' (*adhyaत्मavidyā*). When the first systematic Buddhist Tantras (*Guhyasamāja*, *Cakrasaṃvara*, and *Hevajra*) appeared from the 7<sup>th</sup>-century onwards, Śaiva Tantra had already bolted. It sheds new light on the origin of the Vajrayāna.

The historical fact regarding Tantra which interests me here is its presence in India *before* Buddhist Tantra saw the light. Did Buddhist Tantra start as a minority interest when Śaiva Tantra already had a foothold? The evidence shows this to be the case.

The Vedic proto-Śiva (Rudra), the Śiva devotees part of the early Śramaṇa Movement, as well as the antinomic skull-cup practitioners, all point to the fact that Hindu Tantra, *in casu* Śaiva Tantra, developed *before* an elite among the small early groups of lay Mahāyānist visionaries decided, to swiftly attain Buddhahood, to integrate specific *new methods* in their Buddhist practice.

The rise of the Mahāyāna itself is also remarkable and often not well taught. Scholarship evidences the considerable *lay influence* on the growth of the Great Vehicle (Harakawa, 1990).<sup>(16)</sup> Early Mahāyāna (100 BCE – 200 CE) was composed of lays, renunciates, and monks centered on *stūpas*, relic mounds, and relic shrine worship. The lays administered the *stūpas*. Thus developed 'an alternative religious tradition centred on Bodhisattvas and Buddhas, showing some hostility to the conduct and aspirations of the monasteries, particularly in respect to the definitely inferior status given to the laity in monastic Buddhism.'<sup>(17)</sup>

Early Mahāyāna involved a *doctrinal widening* initiated by small groups of lays –several Early Mahāyāna *sūtras* stress the role of the laity–, renunciants and monks. The earliest mention of the word 'Mahāyāna' in Indian inscriptions dates from the 6<sup>th</sup> -century CE, while other terms indicate Mahāyāna monks and lay

---

followers had been there from about the 4<sup>th</sup>-century. ‘This is a very long time after the earliest Mahāyāna literature, and indicates that while doctrinally there may have been a growing idea of Mahāyāna as an alternative aspiration and spiritual path from, say, the first century BCE, nevertheless the notion of a clear separate group identity among Mahāyāna followers, represented by their using a separate name for themselves as a group, took centuries to develop. To a monk in the first or second century CE the Mahāyāna as a visible institution may have been scarcely evident.’<sup>(18)</sup> According to Shopen (2005)<sup>(19)</sup>, Early Mahāyāna consisted of (a) small Mahāyāna groups within the existing Theravāda monasteries, (b) small, lay groups and (c) isolated, forest-based renunciants at odds with mainstream monastic orders. According to Harrison (1995),<sup>(20)</sup> the influence of the *wilderness* on Early Mahāyāna is pertinent. The ‘vision quest,’ i.e., *actually seeing* Buddhas and their Fields, empowered practice (cf. the *Pradaḥṣinā Sūtra*, on the merits of worshipping *stūpas*). I conjecture that *buddhānusmṛti*, the ‘recollection of the Buddha,’ visualizing the presence of a Buddha, led to particular yogic absorption (*samādhis*) whereby the Bodhisattva *envisions* a Buddha and receives his or her teachings. Only superior (*ārya*) meditators were capable of such visions. Training on the Ten Grounds (*bhūmis*), they were able to ‘communicate’ with the Buddhas (using this particular yogic operator). This new *visionary yoga* was crucial in the inception and ongoing history of the Mahāyāna, Sūtric as well as Tantric.

---

### The Rise of Buddhist Tantra

In the later Vajrayāna classification of the teachings of the Buddha as a series of 'turnings' (a didactical device introduced by the Yogācāra, the Yoga Practice School or second branch of the Mahāyāna next to Madhyamaka, made up of only three turnings), Tantra was considered to be the 'Fourth Turning' (the First Turning being the foundational teachings, the Second Turning putting in place compassion and emptiness and the Third Turning the very subtle mind or Buddha-nature, Inner Buddha or Buddha Within).

The Fourth Turning is deemed exceptional and is not universally accepted. In the traditional account, to bestow his own Tantra, Lord Buddha, after his *parinirvāṇa*, appeared as Vajradhāra to the superb minds of Superior (*Ārya*) Bodhisattvas. They initiated a variety of Buddhist Tantras. No doubt this legendary story refers to the activities of these early visionary lay Mahāyānists practicing *buddhānusmṛti*, imaginal techniques leading up to Tantra, if not also to most Mahāyāna *sūtras*. Hence, the Mahāyānists of the first hour are to be divided in those who, after having visionary received *sūtras*, practiced their worship, and those who, inspired by what they experienced by their encounter with Śaiva Tantra, integrated new methods like Deity Yoga, adapting it to the process-based ontology of the Buddhadharma,<sup>(21)</sup> as well as 'wild,' antinomic approaches. The lovers of *Sūtra* developed both Madhyamaka and Yogācāra. Did Tantra become the practice of an elite ?

---

When Tantra started as the *special* method used by these secretive groups of mostly lay Mahāyānists (all together but a subset of those adhering to the new, widening approach), Theravāda monasticism was already centuries old and shunned Tantra. However, Tantra did *not* introduce a new view on reality and so accepted *anātman* as adamantly as Lesser Vehicle practitioners and *sūtra*-based Madhyamakas or Yogācārins. The crucial difference being the exceptional methods used. Starting with *buddhānusmṛti* meditation and a visionary yoga in the first centuries of the emergent Great Vehicle, these Mahāyānists interested in *the high-speed track* to Buddhahood, slowly developed Deity Yoga, whereby the presence of a meditational Buddha could be called upon and manifested (in one's own body and mind), and they integrated the use of afflictive emotions, erotic power and particular substances (like hallucinogens). This process of assimilation and adaptation ran parallel with the rise of Mahāyāna monasticism and Buddhist universities. 'Ray suggests that we need a threefold model of Buddhism in India, which incorporates urban monastics, forest renunciates, and lay people.'<sup>(22)</sup> We saw that *buddhānusmṛti* meditation, practiced by early lay and ascetic Mahāyānists, is one of the crucial factors determining the rise of Buddhist Tantra. This new proto-Tantric technique was visionary and also explained how the first Mahāyāna *sūtras* saw the light. No doubt, these 'vision quests' were also made by the renunciants, integrating elements from Hindu Tantra, to be 'cleaned-up' later.



---

In Buddhist Tantra, by filling the two ‘baskets’ of merit (compassion) and wisdom (insight into reality) *simultaneously* (and not sequentially, as in *sūtra*-based practice), the crucial threshold, after which final enlightenment can be attained speedily, could be reached with greater ease. *Sūtra* (exoteric Mahāyāna) is *causal* (working to accumulate merit and wisdom separately), while Tantra (esoteric Mahāyāna) is *resultant* (integrating the fruit of the path, Buddhahood, into the path). While the former worked by accumulating merit and wisdom separately, Tantra made the practitioner rise as a Buddha (Deity Yoga). This new method, no doubt an extension of the visionary meditational practices of the founders, became the heart of all Buddhist Tantra and is represented by the union (*eka*) of wisdom (*e*) and method (*-vam*), leading to the highest powers (*siddhi*) and Buddhahood (*bodhi*). The Tantric is transformed into Heruka (‘*he*’ or emptiness, ‘*ru*’ or compassion, and ‘*ka*’ the union of both). Deity Yoga (generation stage) and the manipulation of the anatomy of the subtle bodies (completion stage) are the methods by which Heruka is generated. Calling, in the Great Perfection Vehicle, for three countless eons of hardship, Buddhahood could now be attained *in a single lifetime*.

In Buddhist Tantra, the conditions are set for swift, irreversible and radical transformation of impure body, speech, and mind into pure (enlightened) body, speech, and mind (this is ‘producing Heruka’ and is considered the supreme yoga). The more this production-process, this exceptional skillful means was

perfected, the more powerful the Tantric became, i.e., able to *liberate others* by the Four Vajra Actions of pacification, increase (decrease), control, and wrath (destruction). Turned into one with magical feats (*siddha*), this Superior Tantric Bodhisattva or Vajra Master soon to become a Buddha only sought *to benefit all sentient beings*.

The rise of Buddhist Tantra can be divided into three phases : incipient, institutional, and mahāsiddhic :

(1) Incipient Phase (ca. first to 8<sup>th</sup>-century CE) :

This phase has two stages : ‘proto-Tantric’ (between the first and the 6<sup>th</sup>-century) and ‘formative’ (between the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 8<sup>th</sup>).

The emergence of the first subphase of the Vajrayāna or ‘Adamantine Vehicle,’ the third phase of Indian Buddhism (after Theravāda and contemporary with Sūtric Mahāyāna), probably dates from the first century, if not a century earlier. Its earliest, more systematic texts are from the *kriyā* tantra class (Action Tantra) and were translated into Chinese in the 3<sup>rd</sup>-century. This was a minority movement of gifted laics and renunciants part of the ‘widening’ brought about by the Great Vehicle.

No doubt, these practitioners were in close contact with what was happening in Hindu Tantra. Their visionary yogic techniques may also have provided the spirito-mental mechanism by which Mahāyāna *sūtras* were held to be the authentic words of the Buddha (Tantric practice had been absent in the Lesser Vehicle).

Although in this first stage of the incipient phase of the Vajrayāna, there seems to be an incorporation of ‘special methods’ into regular practice (based on *sūtra*). It is only proto-Tantra, for there are no erotico-sexual practices, nor transgressive symbols, only a more *visionary way* to interact with Buddha and awakening. Neither does the meditator *identify* with the visualized Buddha as in later Deity Yoga, making the Buddha rise out of emptiness in front or in the yogi. ‘There is no reason to suppose the employment of sexual practices, let alone the “transgressive” aspects of *kāpālīka*-style practice. Nor are there indications of actual identification with the Buddha or another deity.’<sup>(19)</sup>

With the *mahāyoga* of the *Guhyasamāya Tantra* (late 6<sup>th</sup> to early 7<sup>th</sup> century), the integration of these more radical approaches initiated the second, formative stage of the incipient phase. After a time, *esoteric* Buddhism rose. At first, a secretive, unsystematic, and private minority interest (well *after* Hindu Tantra had already been canonized), it became more organized. Its main object was wisdom, Buddha’s teaching on the ultimate nature, and its union with bliss.

In the formative stage, Tantra involved the adoption of additional methods rather than advancing ‘new’ wisdom. The early, visionary proto-Tantrics had also introduced an inclusive Buddha, a symbol of the universality, timelessness, and completeness of the enlightened mind. Tantra integrated and eventually transformed this into the Buddha of the enlightened mind of all the Buddhas, later elevated in the *Kālacakra Tantra* as

the *Ādi-Buddha* (11<sup>th</sup>-century), but already precluded much earlier in figures like Akṣobhya, Samantabhadra, Vajrasattva, and Vajradhāra. In these formative centuries, a wide range of visualizations of the Buddhas, intended *to bring about their actual presence*, became part of Tantric practice. The details of these early assimilations, elaborations, and adaptations are unknown.

The start of the embryonic phase of Buddhist Tantra and the emergence of core Mahāyāna *sūtras* run parallel. Were both aspects of the Great Vehicle the outcome of the visionary activities of the same lay practitioners and renunciants? There are good reasons to believe this was indeed the case, shedding new light on how intimate Mahāyāna *sūtra* and Buddhist Tantra were related.

## (2) Institutional Monastic Phase (ca. 8<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup>-century CE)

‘From the seventh century, Tantric rites grew increasingly elaborate, until the mid-eighth century, when the new Mahāyoga tantras introduced the so-called liberation rite and a whole new ethos of extreme behavior and transgressive violence.’<sup>(23)</sup> The first formal sets of Buddhist Tantras (Action and Performance Tantras) may be understood as later *monastic* formalizations of the early imaginal practices, involving extensive worship of the chosen Deity (as a manifestation of *Bodhi*-mind). But with the rise of *mahāyoga* in the formative years of Tantra, leading up to the early 7<sup>th</sup>-century *Guhyasamāya Tantra*, identification with the Deity is

actively sought, and 'novel' training methods ensue. In particular, extensive rituals, specific antinomic yogic techniques, and the use of Deity Yoga became outstanding. Transgressive elements got incorporated, as well as afflictive desires and the senses. The practitioner brings the fruit (Buddhahood) into the path, and this by identifying with *Bodhi*-mind and its infinite manifestations, all of 'one taste.' No doubt, sexual yoga was still a great part of the 'package' as evidenced by the 'relic' of *karmamudrā* (sexual yoga done with a partner).

The *Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra* was composed in this period (end 4<sup>th</sup> – beginning 5<sup>th</sup>-century). Remarkably, this is a monastic text written with the intent to incorporate lay Tantric teachings infiltrating the community. An early attempt at 'adapting' Tantric practice to monastic rule using a Śaivite template? These monastics believed Tantra to be potent and did what institutions do best : assimilate and adapt.

No doubt, the use of sexual yoga had to be limited, perhaps the intake of entheogens too. But Deity Yoga, as well as the manipulation of the subtle winds, became standard practice, as was the extensive use of ritual.

*Guhyasamāya Tantra* – early 7<sup>th</sup>-century

'Then glorious Vajradāra, Teacher of all truth, spoke of the supreme secret, the best and purest of all practices : The wise one should

---

meditate with form, sound, and taste for six months, fully offering the supreme worship of the secret essence ; he who desires the fruit of *siddhi* should make excrement and urine his food, and he will attain the highest truth, faultless Buddha-enlightenment ; he should eat meat imagining it as human flesh, and he will attain all the *siddhis* of secret body, speech, and mind ; he should eat the flesh of elephants, horses, dogs, and cows as his food, but he should eat no other food and he will be dear to the Buddhas and the wise Bodhisattvas ; by this practice he will quickly attain the Buddha-nature, in this world he will become a lord of the realm of desire and perform work of high rank, he will become splendid, powerful, exalted, radiant, delightful to behold ; without rituals of arousing, by look alone he subdues this whole world. This is ultimate enlightenment, the secret of all the Buddhas, this is the true secret of *mantra*, transcending body, speech, and mind.'<sup>(25)</sup>

The *Guhyasamāya Tantra*, the *Tantra of the Secret Community*, became the literary 'constitution' of Buddhist Tantra. From that point onwards, all Tantras introduced Deity Yoga and the trappings of an antinomic methodology in 'twilight language' (*sāndhyābhāṣā*), working with alternative 'hidden' meanings and rituals, each Tantra having its own tradition, iconography, and transmissions. The Buddhist *tāntrikas* integrated the methods of the Kashmiris, but *not* their substantializing mythology.

At the end of the 8<sup>th</sup>-century, with the arising of the Pāla dynasty of Bihar and Bengal (760 – 1142 CE), the Vajrayāna finally

entered the great universities (*vidyālaya*) like Sārnāth, Nālandā, Vikramaśīla, and Vajrāsana, initiating its institutionalization. Tantra was purged (erotic connotations internalized) and strictly formalized. At the same time, given the magical work done by *tāntrikas* for the central authorities (a ‘good’ reason to turn Tantra into an institution ?), the Vajra deeds, in particular destruction (ritual violence and killing, magic of war) were elaborated. In due course, many other Tantras rose. The most important were :

- the *Hevajra Tantra* – ca. late 8<sup>th</sup> or early 9<sup>th</sup>-century, used by the Sakya order of Tibetan Buddhism ;
- the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* – ca. late 8<sup>th</sup> or early 9<sup>th</sup>-century, developed in a non-monastic setting, used by the Kagyu ;
- the *Kālacakra Tantra* – 11<sup>th</sup>-century, the monastic Tantra loved by the Gelugpas.<sup>(26)</sup>

Both the *Hevajra Tantra* and the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* got classified as Yoginī Tantras. ‘The term *yoginī* in the name *Yoginī Tantra* points to the unusual social context in which these texts arose. It appears almost certain that the Yoginī Tantras, with their focus on sexual practices, the transgressive consumption of “polluting” substances such as bodily effluvia, female deities such as yoginīs and ḍākinīs, and fierce male deities, such as the Heruka deities –who are closely modeled on Śaiva deities such as Mahākāla and Bhairava and bear the accouterments of charnel

---

ground-dwelling yogins– did not solely derive from a mainstream Buddhist context. Instead, they seem to have developed among and/or been influenced by liminal groups of renunciant yogins and yoginīs, who collectively constituted what might be called the “siddha movement.” (...) Of particular interest here is *the strong influence of the Śaiva groups, including the Kāpālikas, on the development of the Buddhist Yoginī Tantras ...*<sup>(27)</sup>

In this institutional phase, the adaptation of Tantric methods (necessary to accommodate monastic vows) called for limitations imposed upon sexual yoga, arrived at by symbolizing and internalizing the union between compassion (method, bliss) and wisdom (emptiness, space). It may be conjectured this dressing-up limited the effectiveness of the new method, eventually leading to the third phase of Buddhist Tantra, which I call ‘mahāsiddhic.’ ‘By the end of the first millennium, tantra increasingly had become to dominate Indian Buddhist life and practice and, for that matter, to affect life and practice in nearly all Indian religious communities.’<sup>(28)</sup>

Despite this ‘purging,’ male-dominated sexual yoga and transgressive symbolism (Buddhist adaptations of Śaiva Tantra) were never completely out, in fact, sexual yoga re-emerged as an essential factor in the *Kālachakra Tantra*, the culmination of the monastic Tantric tradition in the 11<sup>th</sup>-century. ‘The Buddhists in particular had reason to avoid too strong a commitment to a supreme inclusive deity-figure. Arguably, they did not really reach



this point until the *Ādi-Buddha* concept came in with the Kālacakra Tantra in the early eleventh century.<sup>(29)</sup> Institutional Tantra remained active in India until the final onslaughts of the Muslim invaders laid waste the great monastic establishments in the Ganges Valley and Bengal. This attack was so ruthless that Buddhism disappeared in India in the 13<sup>th</sup>-century. Tantra went to Tibet, and the New Translation School founded new monasteries preserving Indian Tantra.

(3) Mahāsiddhic Phase (ca. 10<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup>-century CE) :

Around 1000 CE, with the Yoginī Tantras as background, the *dohākoṣas* or 'treasuries of *dohā*' were written by extraordinary men and woman collectively called '*mahāsiddhas*.' They were deemed *vajrācaryas* or 'tantra experts' and in Tibet, Mongolia, Ladakh, Sikkim, and Bhutan, they were 'seen as charismatic, powerful, wise, and compassionate exemplars of the Tantric Buddhist approach to life and as the crucial sources for many important lineages of spiritual practice ...'<sup>(30)</sup> The most renowned of these *dohā siddhas* were Sarāha, Tilopa, and Kāṇha, but equally famous were Śavaripa, Virūpa, Nāropa, Garab Dorje, Mañjuśrīmitra, Śrī Simha, Valamamitra, Padmasambhava etc.

In the 12<sup>th</sup>-century hagiographic collection by the Indian scholar Abhayadattaśrī, eighty-four 'great' *siddhas* are mentioned. They 'seem closely related to Śaivite ascetics like the Paśupatas

(first mentioned in the *Mahābhārata*) and Kāpālikas ; tāntrikas like the Kashmiri Śaivas and Bengali Śaktas ; or the wonder-working Nāth siddhas and Rasa siddhas.<sup>'(31)</sup> The *mahāsiddhas* were said to *subvert* the religious order represented by the great monastic universities practicing a 'cleaned-up' version of Tantra. It is said that Sarāha was a drop-out from these institutions. He wrote : 'Self-proclaimed novices, monks and elders, these dress-up friars and ascetics ! Some sit writing comments on the *sūtras*, others seek to dry up intellect.'<sup>(32)</sup>

While a monastically 'acceptable' Tantra continued to be practiced at the great monasteries, featuring 'transposed' symbolism, terminology and ritual, and culminating in the *Kālacakra Tantra*, an 11<sup>th</sup>-century Buddhocratic text promoting monasticism and written by and for monks, the *siddha* movement was crucial in the dissemination of the actual practice of Tantra. The Buddhadharma was taken to Tibet by monastic scholars (cf. the *sūtra*-based approach of Śāntarakṣita founding Samye in the 8<sup>th</sup>-century) and Tantric *mahāsiddhas* alike (cf. Padmasaṃbhava). So the assimilation of the Vajrayāna happened in two main stages : in the first (the Old Translation School or 'Nyingma'), *mahāyoga*, *anuyoga*, and *atiyoga* Tantra (the Indian classification) got integrated (cf. Padmasaṃbhava in the 8<sup>th</sup>-century). In the second (the New Translation School or 'Sema'), *Siddha*-based Yogas (the *Six Yogas* of Naropa) entered Tibet, and the monastic *sūtra*-based way introduced by Śāntarakṣita (8<sup>th</sup>-century), Virupa (9<sup>th</sup>-century), Atiśa

(982 – 1054) and others developed. So while Tibetan Tantra was mainly monastic, ‘wild’ *siddha* type exceptions (cf. ‘mad wisdom,’ and ‘secret yogis’) endured. In the 11<sup>th</sup>-century, under the pressure of the devastating Muslim invasions, the Buddhadharmā was brought to the Land of Snows. It would remain there and be institutionally practiced in terms of a Buddhocracy without interruption until 1959 (when the XIV<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama fled Tibet). At this point, the Vajrayāna entered the West, and under the leadership of exceptional teachers as Lama Yeshe, hundreds of monasteries were built in Europe and in the States.

Buddhist Tantra started with lay practice. This was the choice of a small, secretive group among the incipient Mahāyāna. They wished to boost their meditation, moving beyond the mere recollection of the Buddhas, actually *identifying* with a Buddha, bringing the enlightened continuum into the path, making it actual. The trappings of this were derived from Śaiva Tantra and adapted to Buddhist process-ontology. Because of the origin of the new method, some rejected the Fourth Turning. Over time, seeking the fast track to Buddhahood with *bodhicitta* motivation, i.e. enlightenment benefitting *all sentient beings*, the *tāntrikas* among the early Mahāyānists adapted the Hindu Śiva/Śakti division, turning it into the union of wisdom and bliss, the end result of having generated Heruka. They integrated the liberation rites, the sexual yoga, and the trapping of *kāpālīka*-style ritual and meditation. The special methods of Indian Vajrayāna were cleverly derived from

Śaiva Tantra, but all its (substance-based) essentialism (Brahman, *ātman*, *puruṣa*, etc.), as well as all references to the original myth were eliminated ; only operational factors were maintained.

As a *special* method (*upāya*), Tantra does not bring a new assessment of the wisdom realizing emptiness, the absolute nature of all phenomena. It merely *empowers* practice by introducing a new method so that Buddhahood can be attained faster than three *kalpas* so one can be of benefit to others more quickly. Those only adhering to *Sūtra* may well reject Tantra on the basis it was derived from Śaiva methods. Still, they should do well to remember that the ‘abodes of Brahman’ (*brahmavihāras*), used to generate the *bodhicitta* of the Mahāyānists, are also rooted in Brahmanism. The same can be said of Theravāda Jhāna Yoga, derived from *Upaniṣadic* Element Meditation !<sup>(33)</sup> Moreover, the actual practice of Tantra is demanding. While it may promote itself as a fast track, it is a narrow one, one only a few good climbers dare to take, limiting the actual effectiveness of its salvic intent. For if only a small number are capable, only a few numbers of Herukas can be generated !

Finally, I would like to mention these two underestimated factors : (1) the influence of women in Tantric Buddhism and (2) the use of *psychedelic sacraments* in Vajrayāna Buddhism. It is not my intent to elaborate on these here. Excellent studies have recently become available, and I limit myself to two quotes reflecting the core of the argument. ‘Although it is commonly held that Tantric Buddhism was created only by men, such as Sarāha, Kāṇha,

Virūpa, Luipa, Tilopa, Padmavajra, Kambala, Maitrīpa, and Ghaṇṭapa, evidence reveals that it was created by women like Vajravatī, Lakṣmīṅkarā, Mekhalā, Kanakhalā, Siddharājñī, Padmalocanā, Jñānalocanā, Kambala's mother Gaṅgādhārā, the Arrow-making Yogini, Tilopa's lifelong female mentor, and their students.<sup>(34)</sup> This collaboration between male acceptance of female guidance was a *distinctive religious discipline* involving, among other things, a *sexual yoga* that women and men perform together to achieve enlightenment. This ran counter the monastic vow of celibacy. But *karmamudrā*, sexual yoga done with a partner, was crucial, and practicing Tantra without it was deemed as useless as *churning water to make butter*. Sacred union (*maithuna*), or sex done to awaken, remained central in the final stages of the transformation into Heruka. It brings the winds in the central channel, unwinding the knots of the *cakra* of the heart, opening the indestructible drop, releasing the very subtle mind (mounted on the very subtle wind).

Regarding the use of psychedelics by *tāntrikas*, a recent study formulates this as follows : 'Access to *Vajrayāna* texts and permission to perform its rites and meditations is restricted to those who have received initiation from an accomplished master (Skt. *guru*, Tib., *Bla.Ma*). This initiation begins with the consumption of *amṛta* (the Buddhist term for the entheogenic sacrament) by the master and those being initiated. During it, the master describes certain meditations using visualization and mantra and points out

the nature of mind. Finally, the initiates vow to practice the meditation every day and to keep the nature of the initiation secret.<sup>(35)</sup> A renowned scholar like Dowman even speculates Padmasaṃbhava may have partaken of *Cannabis* and *Datura*.<sup>(36)</sup> The reasons why such drugs were taken is evident : ‘From a yogic perspective, a truly valuable property of such psychedelic plants is that they provide an easy way to experience (if the term “experience” is even valid here) the state of non-duality, the state of “bliss-void” in which one may, for instance, see a flower (and see it in profound and vivid detail) without there being any concept of “flower” or “seeing” or even “seer”.’<sup>(37)</sup>

Note these crucial points :

- (1) Early Mahāyāna (100 BCE – 100 CE) was rooted in lay and ascetic spiritual practice. From the first century onwards, if not earlier, integrating proto-Tantric visualizations and special yogic absorptions (*samādhis*), these Mahāyānists ended up with a ‘vision quest’ in which they received teachings from a Buddha canonized in a *sūtra*. The latter then became an object of worship in its own right. The Great Perfection Vehicle (Prajñāpāramitā) practiced the perfections and shunned Tantra (a tendency still observed in subsequent traditions like Chinese Ch’an and later Japanese Zen).
- (2) Between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup>-century, the secretive *tāntrikas* among the early Mahāyānists began integrating the transformation of basic

human emotions, sexual yoga (charged initiations received from a *guru* to whom one pledges absolute obedience) and other transgressive methods, hand in hand with *identification* with a Buddha. These Tantric Mahāyānists adapted elements from Śaiva Tantra. It led, between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>-centuries, to institutional Tantra. In the 9<sup>th</sup>-century, reacting against this canonization, to the *siddha* path.

(3) These *vajrayoginī tāntrikas* adapted Śaiva Tantra to their process-based ontology, retaining visualization, the manipulation of the subtle bodies, Deity Yoga, antinomic behavior, and practices (like consuming urine, excrement and taking drugs), the use of afflictive emotions, sexual yoga, etc. A wide variety of ritual and meditative methods were used, 'including mantras, supplication prayers, material, and immaterial offerings, and the practice of the extraordinary degree of one-pointed concentration required for seeing oneself and the cosmos in an entirely different way.'<sup>(38)</sup> These *mahāsiddhas* were the root of Tibet's 'New Translation School.'

(4) For both *Sūtra* and Tantra, all phenomena are empty (*śūnyatā*). Emptiness has three interlocking meanings :

(a) everything lacks substantial, permanent, independent nature (Madhyamaka's self-emptiness). Both a substantial soul (*ātman*, *puruṣa*) nor a substantial phenomenon possessing its own-form (*svabhāva*) from its own side, cannot be found. All phenomena depend on other phenomena and so do not self-exist. To think one apprehends a substance (a self-existing entity) is like seeing a rope

---

as a snake. This is like superimposing the false, non-existent idea of permanent subsistence (an underlying self-sufficient 'ground' or *hypokeimenon*) on what is always impermanent. Hence, substance-thinking is entertaining the existence of something non-existent ;

(b) the perceived cannot be differentiated from the perceiver (Yogācāra), implying that emptiness is the case when duality is no longer a datum of experience ; and

(c) the naturally stainless and radiant mind (*tathāgatagarbha*) lacks the defilements appearing to stain it (Mahāmadhyamaka's other-emptiness). Here, we have turned inwards and recognized the very subtle mind. Then, and only then, do we realize its enduring enlightened properties (other than the stains covering them). They exist as uncontaminated dependent arisings, as the dance of enlightenment of a Buddha. This 'other-emptiness' does not provide an objective definition of emptiness but focuses on direct yogic experience (*jñāna* instead of *prajñā*).<sup>(39)</sup>



## Notes

- (1) Studholme, A. : *The Origins of Oṃ Maṇi Padme Hūṃ*, State University of New York Press – New York, 2002, p.5, my italics.
- (2) Obermiller, E. : *History of Buddhism, Being an English Translation of Bus-ton's "Chos 'bgung"*, Satguru – Delhi, 1986.
- (3) Norbu, N. : *Dream Yoga and the Practice of Natural Light*, Snow Lion Publications – New York, 1992, p.35.
- (4) Dalton, J.P. : *The Taming of the Demons*, Yale University Press – London, 2011, p.11.
- (5) Feuerstein, G. : *Tantra : the Path to Ecstasy*, Shambhala – Boston, 1998, p.10.
- (6) Feuerstein, G. : *Ibidem*, p.12.
- (7) Feuerstein, G., Kak, S. & Frawley, D. : *In Search of the Cradle of Civilisation : New Light on Ancient India*, Quest – New York, 1995.
- (8) Eliade, M. : *Yoga : immortality and freedom*, Bollingen (1954) and Princeton, 1973, p.76.
- (9) Feuerstein, G. : *Op.cit.*, 1998, p.15.
- (10) Samuel, G. : *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra*, Cambridge University Press – Cambridge, 2008, p.8.
- (11) Samuel, G. : *Ibidem*, p.240.
- (12) Lorenzen, D.N. : *The Kāpālikas and Kālāmukhas : Two Lost Śaivite Sects*, Motilal – Delhi, 1991, pp.171-192.
- (13) Karlsson, K. : *Face to Face with the Absent Buddha : The Formation of Buddhist Anaconic Art*, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis – Uppsala, 1999, pp.68-70.
- Harrison, P. : *The Samādhi of Direct Encounter with the Buddhas of the Present*, The International Institute for Buddhist Studies – Tokyo, 1990.
- (14) Beyer, S. : *Notes on the Vision Quest in Early Mahāyāna*, in : Lancaster, L. : *Prajñāpāramita and Related Systems*, University of California Press – Berkeley, 1977.
- (15) Samuel, G. : *Op.cit.*, 2008, p.220.
- (16) Hiraka, A. : *A History of Indian Buddhism*, Honolulu University Press – Hawai's Press, 1990. Shopen (1990) failed to find any *widespread* association of the laity with the origin and spread of the Great Vehicle. It does not imply the laity had no role to play ...
- (17) Williams, P. : *Mahāyāna Buddhism : The Doctrinal Foundations*, Routledge – London, 2009, p.22.
- (18) Williams, P. : *Ibidem*, pp.29-30.

- 
- (19) Schopen, G. : *Figments and Fragments of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India*, University of Hawai'i Press – Honolulu, 2005.
- (20) Harrison, P. : *Searching for the origins of the Mahāyāna : What are we looking for ?*, in : *The Eastern Buddhist*, series 27 (1), 1995, pp.48-69.  
Regarding the 'vision quest' dubbed by Beyer (1977), three stages pertain (1) an initial visionary experience, (2) an inspiration to go on the 'quest' and (3) another vision representing the end of the path, the attainment.  
Beyer, S. : *Art.cit.*, 1977, pp.329-340.
- (21) van den Dungen, W. : *Emptiness Panacea*, Taurus Press – Brasschaat, 2017.
- (22) Samuel, G. : *Op.cit.*, 2008, p.213.
- (23) Samuel, G. : *Ibidem*, p.220.
- (24) Dalton, J.P. : *Op.cit.*, 2011, p.10.
- (25) Fremantle, F. : *A Critical Study of the Guhyasamāja Tantra*, London, 1971, chapter 6, verses 18-25, p.45.
- (26) Snellgrove, D. : *The Hevajra Tantra*, Oxford University Press – Oxford, 2010.
- Gray, D.B. : *The Cakrasamvara Tantra*, Columbia University Press – New York, 2007.
- (27) Gray, D.B. : *Ibidem*, p.7, my italics.
- Davidson, R. : *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, Columbia University Press – New York, 2002.
- (28) Jackson, R.R. : *Tantric Treasures*, Oxford University Press – Oxford, 2004, p.11.
- (29) Samuel, G. : *Op.cit.*, 2008, p.213.
- (30) Jackson, R.R. : *Op.cit.*, 2004, p.4.
- (31) Jackson, R.R. : *Ibidem*, p.5.
- Dowman, K. : *Masters of Mahamudra : Songs and Histories of the Eighty-Four Buddhist Siddhas*, State University of New York Press – New York, 2015.
- (32) Jackson, R.R. : *Ibidem*, p.57.
- (33) van den Dungen, W. : *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, Taurus Press – Brasschaat, 2016, p.198.
- Wynne, A. : *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation*, Routledge – London, 2007.
- (34) Shaw, M. : *Passionate Enlightenment*, Princeton University Press – Princeton, 1994, p.138.
- (35) Crowley, M. : *Secret Drugs of Buddhism*, Amrita – Hayfork, 2016, p.312.
- (36) Dowman, K. : *Guru Pema Here and Now*, Dzogchen Now! Books – Middletown, 2015, pp.25-26.
- (37) Crowley, M. : *Op.cit.*, 2016, p.295.
- (38) Jackson, R.R. : *Op.cit.*, 2004, p.13.
- (39) van den Dungen, W. : *Op.cit.*, 2017.