Buddhist Thought

A complete introduction
to the Indian tradition

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with Anthony Tribe

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Introduction

As this book has demonstrated, scholarly understandings of, and attitudes towards, the history of Buddhist institutions and thought in India have changed considerably in recent years. Tantric Buddhism, with its focus on particular sorts of meditation and ritual, is no exception. The present chapter takes on the task of depicting the 'sort of animal' that tantric Buddhism is. It is a task that in a number of respects should deter the wise. One problem is the lack of availability of materials. A large number of primary texts—tantric scriptures, commentaries, and related works—survive in Sanskrit, and in Chinese and Tibetan translation, yet only a very few have either been edited (to give a reliable text from surviving manuscripts) or translated into European or other modern languages.[1] This has inevitably limited attempts to understand the nature and development of tantric Buddhism in India. The tantric tradition is also complex and multiform, containing what may appear to the beginner as a baroque and dizzying array of deities, practices, and symbols that challenge his or her previous understanding of Buddhism. As a result most introductory works make little more than passing reference to tantric Buddhism.[2]

A further problem concerns attitudes, both scholarly and popular. Until comparatively recently scholarly investigation of

tantric Buddhism has been unfashionable. One reason for this has to do with a series of presuppositions held by some scholars who were involved, particularly in the early period of Buddhist scholarship in the West, in what Donald Lopez (1996:99) has termed the 'European construction of an original Buddhism'.[3] In this perspective tantric Buddhism was seen as degenerate—typified by disgusting practices and a welter of gods—and far removed from the conception of (early and 'true') Buddhism as a rational, humanistic, and morally uplifting philosophy, free from the taints of magic and idolatry otherwise found in Indian religion. Buddhism was clearly not a tantric 'sort of animal'. To take just one example of this type of thinking, Louis de La Vallée Poussin (1922:193), one of the great Buddhist scholars of the twentieth century, concluded that tantric Buddhism was 'practically Buddhist Hinduism, Hinduism…in Buddhist garb'. Not surprisingly, evaluations such as these contributed both to the neglect of the field and the paucity of available materials.

Today, the academic study of tantric Buddhism is more acceptable. The project of reconstructing an 'original Buddhism' is seen to be misguided, as is the attempt to identify narrowly religion with soteriology. There is a growing interest in the ritual dimension of religion—a dominant feature of tantric Buddhism— allied with a recognition that understanding a religious tradition requires a balance of textual and anthropological perspectives. In consequence, a number of more recent (generally non-introductory) publications dealing with Buddhism and the religions of India give tantric Buddhism, and tantric traditions in general, a weighting that is more appropriate to their historical and religious importance.[4]

Non-scholarly attitudes, especially in the contemporary West, are also often problematic. Words like 'tantra', 'tantric', 'tantrism', have an array of popular, but on the whole misleading, connotations derived from a range of representations of Indian tantric traditions. The negative associations these words carried for scholars in the past are now largely absent. On the contrary, more often they carry a sense of allure and excitement. Contemporary connotations are generally sexual—i.e. 'Tantra' is about

(particularly exciting and unusual) sex, or sexual ritual. Perhaps it is the very antinomian and sexual elements in Indian (Buddhist and otherwise) tantric religion that have laid hold of both scholarly and popular imaginations and received contrary evaluations. The difficulty with such popular representations is not that there is no sex, or sexual ritual, in Indian tantric religion. There is— though it may not be the sort of thing constructed by (for differing reasons) past scholars or present popular imaginings. The problem is that any attempt to identify tantric religion with forms of sexuality (or transgressive behaviour) is to understand it too narrowly. In tantric Buddhism—and this is not the place to address the issue within Indian religion as a whole—sexual elements come to play a role comparatively late in the development of the tradition.

How significant is tantric Buddhism, then, to the understanding of Buddhism in Indiah If we provisionally define tantric Buddhism as the set of religious ideas and practices promulgated in or related to texts classed as tantras by the Buddhist tradition itself, then tantric texts appear by the third century CE.[5] They continue to appear until Buddhism's effective disappearance from India during the twelfth century. From approximately the beginning of the eighth century, tantric techniques and approaches increasingly dominated Buddhist practice in India. One reason for this is that tantric meditation and ritual start to be seen as powerful and effective tools in the quest for Buddhahood, as well as a means for attaining worldly powers and goals. In other words, tantric Buddhism develops a soteriological function. Historically tantric Buddhism also took root in China, as one of a number of schools, and from there spread to Japan where, as the Shingon school, it still flourishes. Tibet, inheriting Indian Buddhism between the eighth and twelfth centuries, developed a tradition that was thoroughly tantric in complexion, with the result that all schools of Tibetan Buddhism regard tantric Buddhism as its highest and most effective form.

Some idea of the importance of tantric Buddhism in India can be gained by the very large number of Indian Buddhist tantric texts that have survived in their original language or in Tibetan translation. More than one thousand five hundred Sanskrit texts

are known to survive and the actual total—the work of identifying and listing extant manuscripts continues—remains to be ascertained: Isaacson (1998:26) suggests it may be over two thousand. The Tibetan Kanjur *(bKa' 'gyur)* collection of scriptures— works regarded as the word of the Buddha— contains more than four hundred and fifty texts classified as tantras, and the Tenjur *(bsTan 'gyur)* collection of commentaries and other authored works has, in its tantric section, more than two thousand four hundred texts.[6]

Tantric Buddhism in India did not evolve in isolation from the rest of Indian religious culture. The development of tantric forms of religion was a pan-Indian phenomenon, which had a profound and pervasive effect on the group of traditions that have come to be known as 'Hinduism'. Much of contemporary Hinduism shows the influence of tantric ideas and practices. The Jains also developed a tantric tradition in western India, which has as yet been little studied. A sense of the broader Indian tantric tradition can give a deeper understanding of tantric Buddhism, and an encouraging feature of more recent scholarship is the recognition, and increasingly nuanced discussion, of the relationship of tantric Buddhism to this broader Indic context (see, for example, Nihom 1994; Sanderson 1994).

Returning to the question of what 'sort of animal' we are dealing with, it has been noted that tantric Buddhism is in general concerned with particular types of meditation and ritual that are seen as especially powerful and efficacious. The goals of these practices may be both worldly—alleviation of illness, protection from danger, control over weather—and (more latterly) soteriological. Tantric techniques are generally centred on the ritual evocation and worship of deities who are usually conceived of as awakened, enlightened. Key to this process is the use of mantras—utterances of various kinds understood to have especial power—and methods of visualisation. Successful evocation of a deity would give the practitioner power to achieve his or her desired goal. Access to tantric practice is not open to all, but restricted to those who have received initiation, a ritual that empowers the practitioner to evoke a particular deity. Monastic

vows are neither necessary nor sufficient qualification for tantric practice. Leaving aside for the time being the question of tantric Buddhism's origins, it is clear that these techniques were located within the context of Mahayanist soteriological and ontological thinking.[7] Over time, however, tantric Buddhist ritual and Mahayanist doctrinal categories can be seen modifying one another. None the less, insofar as tantric Buddhism is concerned largely with technique, it can be viewed—from within the perspective of Mahayana doctrine—as being primarily within the sphere of compassionate method or 'means' *(upaya)* rather than that of wisdom *(prajña)*.

A significant point in the history of tantric Buddhism occurs, probably sometime during the late seventh century, with the appearance of the term *Vajrayana,* 'The Diamond Way'. This expression, which was to become one of the standard self-descriptions of tantric Buddhism, emerged at a time when the word *vajra,* meaning equally 'diamond' and 'thunderbolt', had assumed a major symbolic role in certain texts, standing for the indestructibility and power of the awakened, enlightened, state *(bodhi)*. It is worth stressing that the term 'Vajrayana' was not employed before this period, and that, therefore, the expressions 'Vajrayana Buddhism' and 'tantric Buddhism' are not synonymous. What is true of Vajrayana Buddhism is not necessarily true of tantric Buddhism as a whole. Thus, while Vajrayana Buddhism has the speedy attainment of Buddhahood as a goal, this is not the case for tantric Buddhism overall, which had no such goal for perhaps its first four hundred years.

An earlier term used to distinguish tantric from other forms of practice was *mantranaya,* 'the path *(naya)* of mantras'. This expression was paired with *paramitanaya,* 'the path of perfections' (i.e. the path elaborated in the Mahayana Perfection of Wisdom literature).[8] Together, the two paths were considered to constitute the Mahayana. The value of the Mantranaya was understood to be its particular efficacy in aiding the bodhisattva's compassionate activity in the world for the benefit of suffering sentient beings. Two points should be noted here. First, the label 'Mantranaya' indicates that the use of mantras was perceived to be the

distinctive and distinguishing feature of tantric practice. Second, Indian tantric Buddhism, in its pre-Vajrayana phase at least, saw itself as part of the Mahayana, a fact that can be obscured by suggestions that Buddhism is comprised of three paths —the Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana.

Significant features of tantric Buddhism

Attempts to specify the nature of tantric Buddhism in any detail quickly run into difficulties since it proves hard to formulate a definition without excluding or including too much. Donald Lopez, who deals with the problem of defining tantric Buddhism at some length (1996:83 ff.), tables the possibility that a search for one common defining characteristic is misplaced. If this is the case then what makes something an example of tantric Buddhism is not the possession of a single feature but, according to this argument, the possession of a significant proportion of a set of features. This way of defining, rooted in Wittgenstein's notion of 'family resemblances', and which can be termed 'polythetic' as opposed to 'monothetic', leaves the problem of how to decide on the base set of features on which individual instances of 'tantric Buddhism' draw.

Despite the limitations of this approach, it is worth enumerating some of tantric Buddhism's more important features, if only for the purpose of gaining a better overview of tantric Buddhist terrain, before turning to examine the nature of specific texts and historical phases.[9] None the less, it is important to remember that, in accordance with the notion of polythetic definition, individual features may or may not be present at any given historical or functional level of the tradition. The central concern of tantric Buddhism with technique has been noted, as has the importance of the evocation and worship of deities, the use of mantras and visualisation, and the necessity for initiation before undertaking tantric practice. Other features, some of which (ritual use of mandalas, foul offerings and antinomian acts, and revaluation of the status and role of women) will be revisited at greater length later, include the following.[10]

Esotericism

Tantric Buddhism is often termed esoteric (see Wayman 1987), a notion that is related to the requirement of initiation. Some tantras threaten dire consequences to those who reveal their contents to the uninitiated. The *Vajrabhairava Tantra,* for example, after describing a number of rites, warns that 'these deeds must not be spoken of to others. Should the foolish devotee do this he will certainly fall into hell' (*Vajrabhairava Tantra,* trans. Siklós: 35). The same text (op. cit.: 43) also states that a painting of the deity Vajrabhairava should not be displayed openly. Another way in which secrecy was maintained was to use varying degrees of allusive, indirect, symbolic and metaphorical forms of language *(samdhyabhasa).*[11] This tradition can give rise to acute problems of interpretation. Not only is there the issue of whether statements are to be understood literally or not, there is also the question of how to understand them once it is agreed they are intended metaphorically. Indian tantric commentators themselves, aware of these problems, often failed to agree on an interpretation, as well as admitting that a passage could have multiple meanings.

Importance of the teacher

The role of the teacher *(guru)* or Vajra-master *(vajracarya)* in tantric Buddhism is especially important. It is the teacher who gives access to tantric practice and who transmits the teachings of the various tantric scriptures. The *Guhyasamaja Tantra* (see Snellgrove 1987a:177–8) identifies the tantric teacher as both the *bodhicitta* ('awakening mind'; q.v.) and as the father and mother of the Buddhas (in that the existence of Buddhas depends on their having teachers). That this text portrays the bodhisattva Maitreya being frightened on hearing this teaching suggests that the accordance of such high status to Vajra-masters was a new development.

Deriving from this status is the view that one should never speak ill of one's teacher. Again, the *Guhyasamaja Tantra,* while apparently recommending the contravention of all major ethical

precepts, adds the qualification that 'those who speak ill of their teacher never succeed despite their practice' (quoted in Snellgrove 1987a:170). In the later phases of tantric Buddhism the teacher's instruction is essential to the successful practice of what became quite complex psychophysical meditation techniques. Also the teacher is identified, in meditation, with the deity at the centre of the *mandala.*

Ritual use of mandalas

The employment of mandalas—two, occasionally three, dimensional representations (or creations) of a sacred space or enclosure, often understood as the particular domain of a deity— are a ubiquitous feature of tantric Buddhism, used both in initiation rituals and in post-initiatory practice.

Foul offerings and antinomian acts—the transgressive dimension of tantric Buddhism

It is apparent that not everyone accepted tantric Buddhism, more especially in its latter phases, as genuinely Buddhist. There is evidence that a number of monks at Bodhgaya found the tradition sufficiently offensive to warrant the destruction of tantric texts and images (Sanderson 1994:97). Controversial features included the use of impure and forbidden substances as offerings, the (seeming) advocacy of unethical behaviour, the employment of ritual sexual intercourse, and the worship of terrifying, wrathful, blood-drinking deities.

Revaluation of the body

It is not hard to find negative evaluations of the body in both Mainstream and Mahayana Buddhism (e.g. Chapter 8 of Santideva's *Bodhicaryavatara*) that often emphasise its impurity and disgustingness with a view to lessening the practitioner's attachment to it, and its cravings. Tantric valuations, on the other hand, are often highly positive.

> Without bodily form how should there be bliss? Of bliss one could not speak. The world is pervaded by bliss, which pervades and is itself pervaded. Just as the perfume of a flower depends on the flower, and without the flower becomes impossible, likewise without form and so on, bliss would not be perceived.
>
> (*Hevajra Tantra* II: ii, 36–7, trans. Snellgrove)

Two related factors are at play in the creation of such revaluations. First, the use of the expression 'great bliss' *(mahasukha)* to describe the goal, and second, the employment of a yogic model of the body as the basis for generating blissful experience that is seen as functioning as the stepping-stone to the great bliss of awakening. The model of the body is essentially one shared by the Indian tantric tradition as a whole, and sees the body as possessing a subtle anatomy comprised of energy channels *(nadi)* and centres (*cakra;* literally 'wheel'). Through this system the vital energy *(prana)* of the body flows, and under certain circumstances it can be yogically manipulated to generate a transformation in the awareness of the practitioner.[12] A range of meditation methods employing this model were developed, and came to form part of what was known as the 'perfection stage' *(nispannakrama)* of tantric Buddhist meditation. In the later tradition practices of this type were seen by some as an indispensable part of the path to Buddhahood.

Revaluation of the status and role of women

In the later phases of tantric Buddhism female deities become increasingly prominent, either at the centre of the mandala as sole principal deity, or as the (wild and dancing) attendants of the central figure or figures. In scriptures women are given high status, and regarded as the embodiment and source of wisdom. In the milieu of tantric practice there is evidence that women functioned both as practitioners and teachers.

Analogical thinking

Employment of sets of correspondences and correlations is characteristic of much of tantric Buddhism. This approach involves the systematic elaboration of connections between the features of key aspects of tantric practice—such as deities, mandalas, mantras, practitioners' bodies—and other elements or factors that they are seen to symbolise or embody. As Wayman has noted (1973:30), this sort of thinking can be observed in India from as early as the (pre-Buddhist) *Rg Veda*.[13]

One of the more developed and better known sets of correspondences is based on a group of five cosmic Buddhas. These become associated with a whole range of other sets of five: directions, colours, hand-gestures, elements, aspects of awakened cognition or gnosis *(jñana),* aggregates *(skandha),* negative mental states ('taints'; *klesa*), to name but a few (see Table 1, p. 211). Significantly, some of these correlations link samsara, or that which is unawakened—for example, the aggregates and negative mental states—to what is awakened, i.e. the five Buddhas. This is a connection that can be seen as reflecting a view that it is possible to use negative mental states to help traverse the path.

More generally, iconographical features of deities are encoded in terms of doctrinal categories. For example when the deity Cakrasamvara is portrayed trampling on Hindu deities, it might be explained as symbolising the destruction of craving and ignorance, or as the avoidance of attachment to either samsara or nirvana. Correspondences can also be established between microcosmic and macrocosmic levels. Thus, a mandala and its deities may be identified as the body of the practitioner and as symbolising the cosmos as a whole. Identifications may also be multi-layered. The yogin's staff can symbolise his female partner, who in turn symbolises awakened wisdom *(prajña)*. Analysed into its components, the staff may then be the subject of further identifications.

Revaluation of negative mental states

The notion that mental states ordinarily conceived of as negative could be employed as a means of effectively traversing the path to Buddhahood becomes an significant feature of the Vajrayana phase of tantric Buddhism. The *Hevajra Tantra* (II: ii, 51) declares that 'the world is bound by passion, also by passion it is released'. It gives a homoeopathic argument by way of justification: 'One knowing the nature of poison may dispel poison with poison, by means of the very poison that a little of which would kill other beings' (op. cit: II: ii, 46).

Of the passions, it is sexual craving and pleasure that tend to be placed in the foreground, sexual bliss being homologised with the great bliss of awakening. In a general discussion of tantric religion, André Padoux (1987:273) cites the French Indologist Madeleine Biardeau's summary of tantric doctrine as 'an attempt to place *kama*, desire, in every meaning of the word, in the service of liberation'. Although this will not do for tantric Buddhism as a whole, it satisfactorily epitomises much of later Vajrayana ideology.

Tantric texts: classification and characteristics

The very large number of Indian Buddhist tantric texts that survive in their original language, as well as in Chinese, Tibetan, and Mongolian translation, has been noted. These texts are of diverse kinds. There are the scriptures, many of which have one or more commentaries devoted to them, some of considerable length. There are ritual manuals and compendia that contain detailed prescriptions for a range of rituals associated with the consecration of monasteries, temples, and statues, the preparation and construction of mandalas, initiation and empowerment *(abhiseka),* and the evocation of tantric dieties *(sadhana)*.[14] There are also collections of tantric songs, hymns to individual deities, as well as texts on doctrine.

The classification of scriptures by the Indian commentarial tradition is not a straightforward matter. There are a number of

classifications and no wholly consistent terminology. To complicate matters, the classification used in most secondary sources (i.e. books on Buddhism) appears not to be one used in the Indian context. Some categorisation of tantric scriptures into classes had occurred at least by the late eighth century, when a tripartite division of texts as either *Kriya* ('Action'), *Carya* ('Practice'), or *Yoga* ('Union') tantras is found.[15] This division is broadly chronological. Kriya tantras are generally earlier than the Carya, with the Carya generally preceding the Yoga tantras. Scriptures appearing from the time of the Yoga tantras—approximately, from the early to mid-eighth century onwards—are often conscious of the classification tradition. What one sees is a development and expansion of categories, particularly of the Yoga tantra class. Scriptures begin to use these categories to describe themselves as tantras of particular kinds.

A classification that appears to have been fairly widely adopted by the end of the development of tantric Buddhism in India, at least as suggested by its usage in commentaries, is a fivefold division of scriptures into Kriya, Carya, Yoga, *Yogottara,* and *Yoganiruttara* tantras. This classification may be seen as an expansion of the earlier tripartite division, accomplished by a sub-division of the Yoga tantra class into three by the addition of two 'superior' categories, Yogottara ('Higher Yoga') and Yoganiruttara ('Highest Yoga'). Alternative terminology is found for these two categories. Yogottara tantras are also known as *Mahayoga* ('Great Yoga'), and the term 'Yoganiruttara' may have sometimes been replaced by its synonym *Yoganuttara*. The Yoganiruttara tantras were also known as *Yogini* tantras, a name that is descriptive of the focus these scriptures have on female figures (*yogini* is the feminine of *yogin,* 'a practitioner of yoga').

This fivefold classification continues broadly to reflect historical developments in Indian tantric Buddhism. Thus scriptures called Yogottara or Mahayoga generally appear before those called Yoganiruttara or Yogini, and both types generally appear after the Yoga tantras. In what follows, I shall use this division to structure discussion of the different sorts of tantric texts, and in particular tantric scriptures. I shall also generally use the terms Mahayoga

and Yogini rather than Yogottara and Yoganiruttara for the fourth
and fifth classes. This is largely for the reason that for one who
does not read Sanskrit the former terms are probably more
distinctive. It should be remembered, however, that some
commentators used other categorisations of tantric scriptures,
though these can generally be related to the fivefold division. For
example, the great teacher Atisa, writing in the mid-eleventh
century, distinguishes seven categories, adding *Upaya* ('Means')
and *Ubhaya* ('Dual') tantras between the Yoga and Mahayoga
tantras of the fivefold system. The different classes, moreover, are
not discrete. A number of texts are clearly transitional, and there
was not always agreement as to how to assign individual cases, or
what were the defining features of the different categories. The
project of classification is essentially scholastic in nature, and
reflects the attempts of exegetes to give some order to the
extensive and growing array of tantric texts they were faced with.
None the less, bearing these factors in mind, the fivefold division
can help clarify some of the key features and historical
development of tantric Buddhism in India. It also has the
advantage of being a significant self-representation developed by
the Indian tantric tradition itself.

   It should perhaps be noted that this fivefold division into Kriya,
Carya, Yoga, Mahayoga, and Yogini tantras is not generally found
in books on Buddhism. The most common classification is
fourfold, into Kriya, Carya, Yoga, and Anuttarayoga ('Highest
Yoga') tantras. The Anuttarayoga class is further divided into
Father tantras and Mother tantras, sub-divisions that broadly
correspond to the Mahayoga and Yogini categories of the fivefold
classification. Despite its ubiquity there are disadvantages in using
this fourfold categorisation to understand the nature and
development of tantric Buddhism in India. First, the amalgamation
of the Mahayoga and Yogini classes into one Anuttarayoga class
tends, despite their recognition as Father and Mother subdivisions,
to obscure similarities between Yoga and Mahayoga texts as well
as differences between Mahayoga and Yogini texts. Second, the
fourfold classification appears to be Tibetan rather than Indian in
origin, and one that represents a particular Tibetan

conceptualisation of the Indian tradition. Moreover, the term *anuttarayoga* has not been found in any of the surviving Sanskrit manuscripts (Isaacson 1998:28).[16]

Kriya tantras

The Kriya class is by far the largest. Over four hundred and fifty works are assigned to this category in the tantra section of the Tibetan Kanjur.[17] The earliest Kriya texts probably date from the second century CE.[18] They continue to appear until at least the sixth century. They form a miscellaneous collection of largely magical texts that contain an array of rituals designed to achieve a variety of worldly *(laukika)* goals. No suggestion appears that they can be used to attain awakening. The range of pragmatic ends is wide. Among other things, the user of these texts and their rituals aims to alleviate illness, control the weather, generate health and prosperity, oppose enemies, placate deities, and protect himself and others from an array of dangers. Kriya rituals employ mantras and early forms of mandalas. However, the word 'tantra' —the common term for tantric texts in the later period, and literally meaning little more than 'text' —rarely occurs in the title of Kriya texts. A variety of other names are more common: *dharani, kalpa, rajñi,* or *sutra.* Thus the *Mahamegha Sutra,* 'Great Cloud Sutra', a work concerned with the control of weather, is classified as a Kriya tantra despite it being called a sutra. One reason for such anomaly is that the exegetical classification of these texts as 'tantras' was most likely retrospective. The rationale for the designation of a text as a tantra was also as much to do with content—prominence of rituals employing mantras etc. —as with its particular title. Indeed, it is not until the period of Yoga and Mahayoga texts that the title 'tantra' comes into general use.

An important type of Kriya text is the *dharani,* and many works classified in the Kriya class are either dharanis or texts that locate dharanis within a ritual context in texts called *kalpas.* A dharani is seen as having a particular power when read or recited, a power either in the world or on the mind of the reciter. They may be shorter or longer strings of words, and are understood to

bear in condensed form a particular meaning or intention, often of a teaching of the Buddha. Yukei Matsunaga (see de Jong 1984:95–6) has distinguished two principal meanings of *dharani:* 'memorisation' (of texts) and 'magical spell'. A number of non-tantric Mahayana sutras contain dharanis—for example the *Lotus Sutra,* and the Perfection of Wisdom text, the *Heart Sutra*—and these generally use the term in its sense of memorisation.[19] The link between this and the second meaning is found in the idea that the memorised dharani contains the power of the word of the Buddha, which is able to protect one from harm and overcome enemies. The word *dharani,* found only in Buddhist contexts, derives from the verbal root *dhr,* meaning 'to support' or 'to hold' (the word *dharma* derives from the same root). Strings of words, taken as summarising or holding the teaching of the Buddha, can therefore function as utterances of magical power, much in the same way as do the *paritta* ('pirit') verses of early Buddhism and contemporary Theravada. As utterances of power dharanis resemble mantras and the terms are indeed sometimes used synonymously.

One of the few Kriya texts that has been even partially translated into a European language is the large and heterogeneous *Mañjusrimulakalpa,* 'The Root Ritual Instruction of Mañjusri', in which the bodhisattvas Mañjusri and Avalokitesvara play important roles. The bodhisattva Tara is also mentioned, in possibly the earliest textual reference to this important female figure (see Willson 1986:39–43). The *Mañjusrimulakalpa* is significant in representing an early stage of development of the notion that deities can be grouped into 'families'. Depicted within a somewhat sprawling non-symmetrical mandala are three groups of figures comprising the Buddha, Lotus *(padma)* and Thunderbolt *(vajra)* families, with peaceful and fierce deities assigned to the Lotus and Thunderbolt families respectively (for a translation of the relevant passage see Snellgrove 1987a:192–4).

The history of translations of Kriya texts (especially into Chinese; see Matsunaga 1977:169–71) suggests that they were not superseded in importance by later Indian tantric developments, in the way that the rituals of the Carya and Yoga texts were, by the

supposedly more advanced methods of the Mahayoga and Yogini tantras. On the contrary, individual Kriya texts can be seen expanding and developing over a number of centuries. Such sustained interest may be the result of the worldly focus of these texts—the very reason why they have been little studied by western scholarship. Kriya rituals addressed needs that continued to be important, especially perhaps for non-monastics. In locating these Kriya texts in broader context, Snellgrove (1987a:232–4) has argued against taking them as anything more than an aspect of Mahayana practice. They should not, he believes, be seen as constituting a separate Way *(yana).* On the contrary they should be placed within the normal Mahayana Buddhist world and the bodhisattva's practice of altruism. If this is the case, and the issue of tantric Buddhism as a separate *yana* will be taken up later, then the performance of Kriya type tantric rituals by monks for the benefit of householders can be seen as a way in which the monastic community could act altruistically. Such activity involves a shift in the traditional role of monks functioning as a passive source of merit for householders (see Lewis 1995). A more active function, however, could be effective in attracting needed patronage, especially if Kriya rituals were seen as powerful and efficacious.

Carya tantras

In contrast to the Kriya, very few texts are standardly assigned to the Carya Tantra class. In the Tibetan Kanjur classification there are just eight, making it the smallest of the five categories. The most important Carya text is the *Mahavairocana Sutra,* known more fully as the *Mahavairocanabhisambodhi Sutra,* which was probably composed during the early to middle seventh century (see Hodge 1994:65). Also in this group, and probably earlier than the *Mahavairocana Sutra,* is the *Vajrapanyabhiseka Tantra.* Apart from occasional quotations in commentaries, neither of these works survives in its original language of composition. An important commentary on the *Mahavairocana Sutra* was written by the mid-eighth century figure Buddhaguhya, who also composed commentaries on Kriya texts.

A significant feature of Carya tantras is the role played by the Buddha Vairocana, 'The Luminous One'. In the *Mahavairocana Sutra* he is depicted at the centre of a symmetrical mandala, with four other Buddhas placed in the cardinal directions. It has been observed (Orzech 1987) that Vairocana's centrality is founded on his role as a symbol of ultimate reality developed in two non-tantric Mahayana scriptures, the *Gandavyuha* and *Dasabhumika Sutras*. These are both part of the large composite work the *Avatamsaka Sutra* (q.v.). For the *Gandavyuha* Vairocana is *the* Buddha, residing in a transcendent world of luminosity, fluidity, and magical transformation, while simultaneously being present at all levels and in all things. From this perspective Sakyamuni, the historical Buddha, is a magical transformation produced for the benefit of suffering sentient beings. In the *Mahavairocana Sutra* Vairocana is presented as the cosmic Buddha. Moreover, he appears as all deities and as revealing all religions, suggesting the omnipresence of Buddhism.

The world of the *Gandavyuha Sutra* can be transformed at will by the mental acts of Buddhas and advanced bodhisattvas. It provides an eminently suitable perspective for the tantric practitioner, who from this point onwards is increasingly concerned to transform, within the context of visualisation meditation, the appearance (and hence the reality) of him- or herself and of the external world. The idea of the tantric practitioner developing intense meditative identification with the deity being evoked appears to develop during the period of the Carya texts. Practitioners identify themselves, visualise themselves, as the awakened deity occupying a luminous universe that can be magically transformed, precisely in the way that it can be transformed in the *Gandavyuha Sutra*. It appears that soteriological goals continue to be absent from the Carya Tantras. The powers *(siddhi)* and purposes pursued remain worldly. Yet, conceptually at least, it is a small step from identifying oneself as a Buddha in order to gain worldly ends to using that identification to accelerate the process of actually becoming such a Buddha.

Yoga tantras

The number of texts usually designated as Yoga tantras makes it a slightly larger class than the Carya (some fifteen works in the Tibetan Kanjur). The key text in this class is the *Tattvasamgraha Sutra,* also known as the *Sarvatathagatatattvasamgraha Sutra.* Other works in this category include the *Sarvadurgatiparisodhana, Sarvarahasya,* and *Vajrasekhara Tantras,* and the short but influential *Namasamgiti,* 'The Litany of Names'. This last text enumerates the dimensions or 'Names' of wisdom as embodied in the figure of Mañjusri, who is conceived of as the non-dual wisdom underlying all phenomena.[20] Yoga tantra commentators of the eighth century include Buddhaguhya, Mañjusrimitra, and Vilasavajra. Buddhaguhya wrote a *Tattvasamgraha* commentary, the *Tantravatara,* which has a sub-commentary by Padmavajra. Mañjusrimitra and Vilasavajra wrote commentarial and other works focused on the *Namasamgiti.*[21]

Historically, it appears that the Yoga tantras closely followed the Carya. Matsunaga (1977:177–8) dates the *Tattvasamgraha* in its earliest form to the beginning of the eighth century. More recently Yoritomi (1990) has argued that it was virtually complete by the latter half of the seventh century, and that in its original form it is older than the *Mahavairocana Sutra.* The centrality of Vairocana continues in the Yoga tantras, as does the use of mandalas with a symmetrical arrangement of five principal Buddhas. The names and directions assigned to Buddhas vary somewhat from text to text in the Yoga tantras. Over time, the arrangement of the *Vajradhatu* mandala in the *Tattvasamgraha* became standard, with Vairocana in the centre surrounded by Buddhas Aksobhya (east), Ratnasambhava (south), Amitabha (west), and Amoghasiddhi (north).[22]

The most significant development in the Yoga tantras is their concern with soteriology. Awakening is included as a legitimate goal of tantric practice and from this period tantric Buddhism begins to promote itself not only as an effective way to gain worldly ends and powers. It is also an especially powerful way to gain Buddhahood.[23] Other developments include an increase in the

number of Buddha-families. Initially, it appears this was from three (as found in the Kriya texts) to four in the *Tattvasamgraha,* by the addition of a Gem *(ratna)* family. Yoritomi (1990) suggests that a fifth, Action *(karman)* family, first appears in the *Vajrasekhara Tantra*. At this point each of the five principal ('cosmic') Buddhas of the mandala was thus considered to have its own retinue or 'family', comprised of bodhisattvas, offering goddesses, and so on. The system of five families developed, therefore, after the system of five Buddhas onto which it was mapped. The *Vajrasekhara Tantra* also contains a reference to a sixth family, that of Vajradhara, a Buddha (or principle) seen as the source, in some sense, of the five Buddhas. From this perspective Vajradhara takes on the foundational role played by Vairocana. This is a function also given in some contexts to the figure of Vajrasattva. A further shift that occurs with the expansion of the number of Buddha-families is that all five (or six) families can be conceived of as Buddha-families in that they each have a presiding Buddha surrounded by awakened or near-awakened figures. In the three-family system of the *Mañjusrimulakalpa* only members of the central Buddha family were recognised as awakened. Members of the Lotus and Thunderbolt families were unawakened peaceful and fierce deities that had none the less allied themselves with the Buddhist tradition.

The combination of the five-Buddha and five-family system encouraged the establishment of sets of correspondences between the Buddhas, their families, and other sets of five. Table 1 gives some of these, though not all shown were established by the Yoga tantras. The correlations with the aggregates *(skandha)* and poisons ('taints'; *klesa*) were made by the *Guhyasamaja Tantra* (a Mahayoga tantra) and the *Hevajra Tantra* (a Yogini tantra) respectively (Yoritomi 1990).

Mahayoga tantras

Historically, Mahayoga tantras, appearing by the end of the eighth century, have clear connections with Yoga tantras. Indeed, there is evidence that these texts were not initially seen as distinct from

	Vairocana	*Akṣobhya*	*Ratnasambhava*	*Amitābha*	*Amoghasiddhi*
Family (*kula*)	Buddha	Vajra	Gem (*ratna*)	Lotus (*padma*)	Action (*karma*)
Direction	Centre	East	South	West	North
Colour	White	Blue	Yellow	Red	Green
Hand Gesture (*mudrā*)	Teaching	Earth-touching	Giving	Meditation	Fearlessness
Throne	Lion	Elephant	Horse	Peacock	Garuḍa
Seed-Mantra	*oṃ*	*hūṃ*	*traṃ*	*hrīḥ*	*āḥ*
Offering Goddess/ Consort	Vajradhāteśvarī	Locanā	Māmakī	Pāṇḍaravāsinī	Tārā
Element	Consciousness	Water	Earth	Fire	Air
Cognition ('consciousness'; *vijñāna*)		Store	Defiled Mind	Mental	Five Senses
Wisdom ('awakened cognition'; *jñāna*)	Perfectly Pure Dharma-sphere	Mirror-like	Sameness	Discrimination	Practice
Aggregate (*skandha*)	Consciousness	Form	Sensation	Perception	Volition
Poison ('taint'; *kleśa*)	Ignorance	Hatred	Envy	Craving	Pride

the Yoga tantras.[24] As has been noted, and as their name suggests, Mahayoga tantras can be seen as an additional division of the Yoga tantra class. The most influential work classified as Mahayoga is the *Guhyasamaja Tantra*.[25] Also included in this class are the *Vajrabhairava*[26] and *Mayajala Tantras,* the latter of which is seen by Yoritomi as the exemplar for the *Guhyasamaja*. The Father tantra section of the Tibetan Kanjur—the equivalent class of the Mahayoga tantras—contains thirty-seven texts.

The Mahayoga tantras maintain the five-Buddha and five-family system of the Yoga tantras. However, the *Guhyasamaja Tantra* has Aksobhya as its central deity. This reflects a general shift in the Mahayoga tantras away from the Carya and Yoga tantra emphasis on Vairocana. Aksobhya and his Thunderbolt family move to the foreground, paving the way for the ascendance of semi-fierce and fierce deities that dominate the last period of development of tantric Buddhism in India as represented by the Yogini tantras. Two other features of the Mahayoga tantras should be noted: the use of sexuality and the (ritual) consumption of forbidden and impure substances. The sexual elements are immediately apparent in the iconography of the five cosmic Buddhas, who are depicted sitting (peacefully and multi-armed) in sexual union with female partners. Also, according to the ritual manuals, the person to be initiated was required to engage in ritualised sexual intercourse as part of initiation into the observances and practices of this class. Although ritualised sexual activity is not completely new—it has a marginal presence in some Yoga tantras—it is in the Mahayoga tantras that it is first given prominence. The male and female figures in sexual union—whether in iconographical or ritual contexts—are given symbolic value, as are all elements of a mandala, a process known as 'purification'. The female figure is equated with wisdom *(prajña)* and the male with compassionate method ('means'; *upaya*). Their union represents the union of wisdom and method, the twin aspects of awakened cognition.

Use of impure or otherwise forbidden substances appears in descriptions of post-initiatory practice, where the consumption of alcohol, meat, and bodily substances such as urine and faeces are recommended. The issue of transgressive activity is discussed later.

For the present, it can be noted that one reason for such behaviour lies in the idea of non-dual *(advaya)* practice, that is, practice that transcends dualistic categories such as permitted and forbidden, pure and impure. This idea is in turn rooted in the view that the true nature of cognition is in some sense nondual, and that this non-dual and awakened state can appropriately be approached through non-dual practice.

Within the Mahayoga commentarial literature, two traditions of *Guhyasamaja Tantra* exegesis evolved, known as the *Arya* and *Jñanapada* schools. The Arya school, which emphasised the importance of the oral tradition in its interpretations (Wayman 1995:148), was founded by (the tantric) Nagarjuna. His work on the stages of tantric meditation, the *Pañcakrama,* is available in Sanskrit, as is a *Guhyasamaja* commentary, the *Pradipoddyotana,* by (the tantric) Candrakirti. The Jñanapada school stressed the importance of interpreting the *Guhyasamaja Tantra* within the doctrinal context of the Mahayana. According to tradition its founder, Buddhajñanapada, had studied with the famous Perfection of Wisdom exegete Haribhadra (mid-ninth century CE).[27]

Yogini tantras

Texts designated as Yogini tantras are generally thought to have appeared during the ninth and tenth centuries, and may be taken as representing the final phase of tantric Buddhism in India. The Mother tantra division of the Tibetan Kanjur, the equivalent of the Yogini class, contains some eighty-two works, making it the second largest category of tantric scriptures. Yogini tantras take a variety of figures as the principal deity of the mandala, some of whom have more than one tantra associated with them. As a result, it is possible to speak of the Yogini tantras as comprising a number of different tantric 'cycles' (i.e. comprised of a number of tantras that centre on particular figures).[28] Thus the *Hevajra Tantra,* the first major tantra to be translated into English, is centred on Hevajra ('Oh Vajra!'). The *Candamaharosana Tantra,* on the other hand, also named after its principal deity, places Candamaharosana at the centre of the mandala. The tradition

associated with Candamaharosana became established in Nepal where there are still shrines dedicated to him (see Gellner 1992:256). A major Yogini tantric cycle, centring on the important figure of Cakrasamvara, includes the *Laghusamvara* (also known as the *Herukabhidhana*), *Abhidhanottara, Samvarodaya, Yoginisamcara, Vajrahaka* and *Dakarnava Tantras.* Although mostly surviving in Sanskrit, of these texts only parts of the *Sahvarodaya Tantra* have been edited and published in English translation.

The Yogini tantras continue to place most importance on Aksobhya's Thunderbolt family, and all the deities mentioned above are fierce or semi-fierce in appearance. Employment of sexual and transgressive elements also continues. What is distinctive about the Yogini class is its incorporation of symbolism, deities, and practices associated with cremation grounds. These are traditions that were strongly influenced, if not dominated, by tantric Saivism (i.e. traditions focusing on the 'Hindu' god Siva as the ultimate deity). It is this context that determines the appearance of Yogini tantra deities. Mahayoga figures such as Guhyasamaja, though multi-headed and multi-armed, wear the ornaments and attire of royalty, typical of non-tantric Mahayana Buddhas and bodhisattvas, and are generally peaceful in appearance. The multi-limbed Yogini tantra deities, on the other hand, have human bones for ornaments, flayed human and animal skins for clothes, are garlanded with strings of skulls or severed heads (fresh or decaying), and drink blood from cups made of human skulls. They are generally portrayed standing, often in a dancing posture, in sexual union with a female partner of similar appearance. Grimacing expressions, protruding and bloody fangs, flaming hair and eyebrows, and a third eye in the centre of the forehead, indicates their 'Hindu' ferocious nature.

The title given to the Yogini tantras derives from the importance and distinctive roles accorded to female figures in them. The central mandala deities, whether alone or in sexual union, are generally surrounded by dancing female figures called *yoginis* or *dakinis,* whose appearance mirrors that of the central figure or figures. Thus, Hevajra and his consort Nairatmya ('Selfless') are

standardly encircled by eight yoginis. Yogini tantra mandalas can also have female figures as their central deity. For example, Cakrasamvara's consort, Vajravarahi, is important in her own right as a deity who appears without a male consort at the centre of the mandala.[29] Vajrayogini, Vajradakini, and Kurukulla, often seen as a form of Tara, are among a number of other female figures that also function in this way.

Two further Yogini tantras should be mentioned. These are the *Kalacakra Tantra* and one sometimes alluded to, somewhat confusingly, as the *Samvara Tantra,*[30] a short form for the rather daunting *Sarvabuddhasamayogadakinijalasamvara Tantra*. The *Kalacakra Tantra,* which refers to the threat of Muslim incursions and is generally therefore dated to the early eleventh century, is probably the most recent major tantra of Indian tantric Buddhism. This tantra is familiar to some in the West as a result of the large initiations given into its practice by the present Dalai Lama. It contains a myth of a Buddhist world saviour hidden in the land of Shambhala (prototype for the Shangri La of James Hilton's 1936 novel *Lost Horizon*) and a prophesy of future world peace and harmony. As well as having a highly elaborate mandala the *Kalacakra Tantra* differs from other Yogini works in being composed in a fairly sophisticated Classical Sanskrit verse-form. This contrasts with the Sanskritised Middle Indo-Aryan dialects and irregular Sanskrit typical of most Yogini tantras. It is also a religiously syncretistic text and may therefore represent an attempt to form an alliance with Hinduism against the threat of Islam.[31]

The *Samvara Tantra,* in contrast, may well be one of the earliest Yogini works and also the exemplar for the *Hevajra Tantra* (Yoritomi 1990). The second part of its full title, *dakinijalasamvara,* 'the assembly of the host of dakinis', is a key expression for the Yogini tantras. It denotes both the assembly of practitioners, who come together for ritual celebrations *(ganacakra),* and also the mandala, or assembly, of Buddhas and their emanations that the assembly of practitioners mirrors and recreates.[32] The full title of the *Samvara Tantra*—'the assembly of the host of dakinis, which is the fusion of all the Buddhas' —

denotes the (ritual) identity of these two assemblies. Moreover, the unified gathering of all the Buddhas, equated with that of the dakinis, can also be seen as identical with, or emanating from, a single Buddha. This is an idea articulated in the *Hevajra Tantra's* full title, *Srihevajradakinijalasamvara Tantra*, 'The Assembly of the Host of Dakinis, [namely] the Glorious Hevajra'.

Also, implicit in the understanding of these titles is a play between the meanings of *sahvara* ('assembly') and *sahvara* ('bliss'). These are words that were not always distinguished in the script. The assembly of dakinis, or of practitioners, was also one that gave rise to bliss, which could be homologised with the great bliss *(mahasukha)* that was seen as characterising the experience of awakened cognition. Another expression found in these texts to describe this non-dual and blissful state is the rather opaque term *mahamudra* ('The Great Seal'). The sense of this is derived from the use of the word *mudra* (seal) to denote the yogin's tantric consort who, as the symbol of wisdom, is also known as the *prajña* (wisdom). The experience of *mahamudra* is thus the awakened blissful experience engendered by one's consort *(mudra)*, which is identical with wisdom *(prajña)*.

Practitioners of the Yogini tantras were generally known as *siddhas* ('accomplished ones') or 'great siddhas' *(mahasiddha)*. A late account of their legendary and often unconventional lives is found in Abhayadatta's *Caturasitisiddhapravrtti* ('Lives of the Eighty-four Siddhas'). An important term, or principle, employed by the siddhas is *sahaja*, literally meaning 'born-together'. This was taken to denote the innate and spontaneous nature of the awakened mind. This idea underlies much of the unconventional behaviour of the siddhas. From the perspective of conventional society, they appeared to be crazy. From their point of view, however, they were delighting in the spontaneity of non-dual cognition.[33]

A number of works composed by siddhas survive. These include the song cycles of Saraha, the *Dohakosa*, a collection of variously attributed songs, the *Caryagiti*, which were used in ritual contexts,[34] as well as commentaries on tantras such as

Kanha's *Yogaratnamala* (on the *Hevajra Tantra*) and Naropa's *Sekoddesatika* (on a section of the *Kalacakra Tantra*). Altogether, there are a very large number of commentarial and other secondary works on the Yogini tantras, mostly preserved in Tibetan. Important authors include the towering and prolific figure of Abhayakaragupta,[35] whose work includes invaluable summaries of mandalas and mandala rituals *(Nispannayogavaliand Vajravali),* Advayavajra *(Advayavajrasamgraha),* and Ratnakarasanti, also known as Santi pa, the Yogacara exegete. The large anonymous *Kalacakra Tantra* commentary, the *Vimalaprabha,* quickly became an influential work and in Tibet was given canonical status.

Vajrayana—how distinct a way?

We have seen that tantric Buddhism from the time of the Yoga Tantras conceived of itself as the Vajrayana, 'The Diamond Way'. The Sanskrit word *vajra* has two primary meanings, 'thunderbolt', the weapon of the Vedic god Indra, and also 'diamond'. Both are significant in the context of its emerging importance within tantric Buddhism. The power of the thunderbolt was seen as symbolic of the power of tantric methods to achieve both worldly and trans-worldy goals. In the Pali suttas the vajra appears as the weapon of Sakymuni's *yaksa* (demigod) guardian Vajrapani, a name meaning 'Vajra-in-hand'. Vajrapani, after undergoing a transformation of status into an advanced bodhisattva, becomes a prominent figure in Vajrayana texts, often functioning as the Buddha's principal interlocutor. The meaning 'diamond' for *vajra* also has important connotations. Diamonds are the hardest of gems. They are also precious, beautiful, and translucent. In the symbolic language of the Yoga Tantras the ultimate nature of things was also diamond-like, pure and radiant, but also strong and indivisible. The *Tattvasamgraha,* in a reworking of the story of Sakyamuni's awakening, has him visualise an upright vajra in his heart. The visualised vajra is portrayed as stabilising—giving indestructible strength to—the *bodhicitta* ('awakening mind') in Sakyamuni's

heart, and also as symbolising his inner nature. As a result Sakyamuni is given the name *Vajradhatu,* 'Vajra-Sphere', on his attainment of the state of Buddhahood.

In the Kriya Tantras the word *vajra* in a deity's name indicated a wrathful nature. Moreover, there was no assumption that such figures were awakened. By the time of the Yoga Tantras, however, the word tended to indicate a deity's awakened, or vajra-, nature. Their appearance may or may not be wrathful. From this point on one sees a proliferation of vajra names. For example, the mandalas of the *Tattvasamgraha* have Vajrapuspa ('Vajra-flower') and Vajranrtya ('Vajra-dance') as offering goddesses, bodhisattvas such as Vajraratna ('Vajra-gem'), Vajraraja ('Vajra-king'), and Vajraraga ('Vajra-passion'), and gate-keepers named Vajrapasa ('Vajra-noose') and Vajrankusa ('Vajra-hook'). The importance of the ex-yaksa Vajrapani has been noted. Two other figures with vajra names should be mentioned: Vajradhara ('He who holds a vajra') and Vajrasattva ('Vajra-being'). Both of these have central and complex roles as Tathagatas in a range of Vajrayana texts. Vajrapani's rise to prominence has been traced by Snellgrove (1987a:134 ff.), who suggests that Vajrapani is essentially the same figure as Vajradhara.

In its adoption of the vajra as a symbol for the nature of reality the Vajrayana sets about what may be called a vajra-isation of Buddhism. Thus the name *Vajradhatu,* given to Sakyamuni in the *Tattvasamgraha,* vajra-ises the Mahayana concept of the *Dharmadhatu,* the 'dharma-realm' or 'dharma-sphere', the totality seen as it truly is by the awakened, enlightened, mind. The vajra-ised *bodhicitta* of the *Tattvasamgraha* is embodied as the Tathagata Bodhicittavajra, an important (albeit transitional) figure of Yoga and Mahayoga Tantras. The role of the vajra as a core symbol in tantric Buddhism continues for the remainder of its history in India, vajra names being characteristic of both Mahayoga and Yogini Tantra deities. For example, the principal figures of the Mahayoga Guhyasamaja cycle are Aksobhyavajra and Mañjuvajra (based, respectively, on Aksobhya and Mañjusri). Hevajra (from the *Hevajra Tantra*), Vajrayogini, and Vajravarahi are all major figures of the Yogini tantras.

The vajra also became a key ritual object for the Vajrayana. Generally made of metal, it is comprised of a central sphere from which two prongs emerge at one hundred and eighty degrees to each other. These prongs may each be surrounded by a number of other prongs—usually four, though occasionally two or eight —which also emerge from the central sphere, curving away from and then back towards the central prongs. Held alone, usually in the right hand, the vajra stands in general for the non-dual and indestructible nature of awakened awareness. In particular, the unity of the two sets of prongs in the central sphere is seen as representing the unity of wisdom *(prajña)* and compassion *(karuna)*. Held along with a bell, the latter usually in the left hand, the vajra now symbolises compassion and the bell wisdom. Together they stand for the non-dual unity of the awakened mind. As has been noted, this unity can also be symbolised by the sexual union of male and female tantric deities. This sexual unity can itself be symbolised by holding the vajra and bell in a particular way, known as the embrace gesture *(mudra)*. The vajra thus comes to be associated with the male figure in sexual union. In some contexts the vajra stands more specifically for the penis, a process of association probably aided by the phallic shape of the ritual object. The bell, on the other hand, did not come to stand for the vagina. This is a role often taken by the lotus flower, anatomical comparisons again probably being influential in the choice.

It is not until this period, then, that the vajra appears to have been accorded any symbolic status in Buddhism. Its rise to prominence within tantric Buddhism probably led to the use of the term *Vajrayana* for the path followed by its proponents. The new nomenclature raises the question of the relationship between the Vajrayana and the Mahayana. How distinct a 'way' *(yana)* is the Vajrayanah Is it a special path that is none the less part of the Mahayana, or is it a path that is distinct from and supersedes the Mahayanah The classical hierarchy of three *yanas*—Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana, (where 'Hinayana' is, of course, the pejorative Mahayanist term for mainstream non-Mahayana Indian Buddhism) —seems to suggest that Vajrayanists saw themselves as

following a path distinct from the Mahayana. But, as we have seen, pre-Vajrayana tantric Buddhism—the Mantranaya—took itself to be a branch of the Mahayana. On the whole, Vajrayanist commentators maintained this position, locating the Vajrayana as a special path within the Mahayana. Nevertheless, the inclusion of Buddhahood as a legitimate tantric goal made the Vajrayana an especially significant, for some even necessary, aspect of the Mahayana.

Just as the Mantranaya was an especially efficacious way of attaining this-worldly goals, so the Vajrayana saw itself as also especially efficacious in the task of attaining the goal of awakening. In particular, it was seen as enabling the practitioner to traverse the path at a much faster rate than before. The *Namasamgiti* describes itself as 'the quick success of those bodhisattvas implementing their practice by means of mantras, and the realisation in contemplation for those intent on the perfection of insight'.[36] Instead of taking three incalculable aeons to attain Buddhahood—the time generally required according to non-tantric Mahayana texts—one could collapse the process into a single lifetime by following the Vajrayana.

What, then, made the Vajrayana so effective? One answer, developed in the later Vajrayana, was to depict its efficacy as owing to its being a 'Result-Path'. In contrast, the non-Vajrayana is typified as a 'Cause-Path'. A non-Vajrayanist, in this light, pursues the goal of Buddhahood through the careful maturation of the causes *(hetu)* that lead to it, for example through the practice of the six or ten Perfections *(paramita)*. That is, he or she attains Buddhahood through following the classical bodhisattva path. Vajrayanists, on the other hand, following the result-path, assume that they have achieved the 'result' *(phala)* — the goal of Buddhahood—already. They perceive themselves, through visualisation and other techniques, as fully awakened, and as inhabiting a pure and radiant world (i.e. the world 'as it really is'), the external reflex of their awakened cognition. In other words, Vajrayanists, through the process of tantric ritual and meditation, are said to make the result (Buddhahood) part of the path. That is what, according to this view, is unique to the Vajrayana and what

makes it so particularly effective. It should perhaps be reiterated that this conception of the Vajrayana still locates it as part of the Mahayana.

Is there, none the less, a case for saying Vajrayana goals (and therefore paths) differ from those of the Mahayanah Although new conceptions of the goal are found in the Vajrayana, it is hard to say whether these amount to the goal changing. The use of the expression 'great bliss' *(mahasukha)* as descriptive of the goal has been noted, as has the fact that it signposts a Vajrayana revaluation of the significance of pleasure. Also, Vajradharahood is sometimes used in lieu of Buddhahood, though, again, it is not clear that becoming a Vajradhara is essentially different from becoming a Buddha. Snellgrove, who argues that the Vajrayana is 'as distinguishable from the Mahayana as this is distinguishable from the so-called Hinayana' (1987a:129), takes the view that the word *Vajrasattva* ('diamond being') denotes the Vajrayanist conception of the highest state. It is formed on analogy with its Mahayana equivalent *bodhisattva* ('awakening being') (op. cit.: 131). However, this equation seems problematic, in that, practically speaking, the term 'bodhisattva' stands not for the goal but for one who is aiming at the goal. Technically at least, the bodhisattva is precisely one who had not attained the goal. Approaching the issue of *yanas* from a different direction, Gellner (1992:261) has suggested that separate soteriological ideals arhat, bodhisattva, and siddha—can be assigned to the Sravakayana (Mainstream Buddhism), Mahayana, and Vajrayana respectively. The siddha is perhaps a better Vajrayanist equivalent of the bodhisattva, and the typology serves to give a sense of the differing emphases of the traditions (though the siddha is not present as a type during the early Vajrayana). Strictly speaking, however, the three ideals are not equivalent. This is because the siddha and arhat have attained the highest goals of their *yanas,* whereas even the most advanced bodhisattva has not (though some Mahayana sutras point out the futility of trying to distinguish a tenth stage *(bhumi)* bodhisattva from a Buddha).[37]

Although the Vajrayana is more often than not seen as part of the Mahayana, it may, none the less, be seen as a necessary part,

in which case tantric initiation and post-initiatory practice become mandatory. But if this view is to be consistently maintained, the historical Buddha cannot be an exception. He too should have been initiated into tantric practice. Yet none of the traditional Mahayanist or Mainstream accounts of the life of Sakyamuni refers to such an event. This omission is remedied by reworking the life-story of the Buddha. The first and paradigmatic tantric version of the Buddha's awakening may well be the one found in the *Tattvasamgraha*.[38] Here, the future Buddha, known by the variant name 'Sarvarthasiddhi' (rather than Siddhartha), seated on the seat of awakening under the bodhi-tree, is visited by a host of Tathagatas who tell him that he will not gain awakening by acting like that. Sarvarthasiddhi asks for instruction and the Tathagatas give him a number of mantras to recite. These generate a series of visual images in his heart, which produce and then stabilise the *bodhicitta,* the 'awakening mind'. Next, all the Tathagatas enter Sarvarthasiddhi's heart and he is empowered with their combined wisdom. At this point he too becomes a Tathagata, and is given the name *Vajradhatu* ('Vajra-Sphere'). The newly awakened Buddha, accompanied by all the Tathagatas, is then taken to a palace on the summit of mount Meru where he is installed on a lion-throne. Around him four other Tathagatas each takes a place in one of the cardinal directions to form a mandala of five Buddhas. Later in the text, the Buddha returns to the bodhi tree on the banks of the river Nairañjana and the traditional awakening story is resumed.

This retelling of the Buddha's awakening is remarkable in a number of ways. Not only does it legitimise the place of tantric practice as a key part of the Buddhist path, it also provides the exemplar for tantric initiation and practice. Thus, the tantric practitioner can be seen as rehearsing the actions and experience of the Buddha. The centrality of vajra symbolism is repeatedly underscored: Sarvarthasiddhi sees a vajra in his heart, understands his vajra-nature, is consecrated as a Tathagata by all the Tathagatas entering the vajra in his heart, and given a vajra name.

Elements of practice

Mantras

Despite the vajra's symbolic centrality, the use of mantras was at the heart of actual Vajrayana practice. This is just as it was for pre-Vajrayana tantric Buddhism which, as we have seen, identified itself precisely as the Mantranaya, the 'Way of Mantras'. But what exactly are mantras? In the introduction they were provisionally described as utterances understood to have especial power. They may consist of a syllable or a word, or a series of syllables, or a series of words, and they may or may not make sense. What is important about a mantra is that it has some effect (or power) beyond that of just uttering the sounds of which it is composed. Mantras may be understood as a form of what the philosopher J.L.Austin called 'performative utterance'. This is an utterance that does something, that is action as well as speech.[39] In the right context the action of a mantra is guaranteed. The mantras given to Sarvarthasiddhi in the *Tattvasamgraha* retelling of his awakening are described as 'successful by nature'. Accordingly, he has only to utter the mantra *om bodhicittam utpadayami,* '*Om* I generate the *bodhicitta*', and the *bodhicitta* arises in his heart.

The 'right context' for the use of mantras—outside narrative contexts found in scriptures—is that of ritual, and mantras have a range of functions in the effecting of a variety of ritual ends within tantric Buddhism. One common enumeration of (worldly) rituals lists four: pacifying, prospering, subjugating, or destroying. The narrative of the *Tattvasamgraha* provides an example of a mantra's use to subjugate, in this case to subjugate Hindu gods.

> Then Vajrapani pronounced his own vajra-syllable: HUM! As soon as he pronounced this, all the great gods who belong to the threefold world, fell down on their faces, emitting miserable cries, and they went to Vajrapani for protection.
>
> (Trans. Snellgrove 1987a:137)

Perhaps the most important use of mantras in tantric Buddhism is in the ritual evocation and visualisation of deities and the universes they inhabit. Mantras—appropriately called 'seed-mantras' —generate both the mandala and its deities. Following the primacy of sound over image in Indian religion, the utterance of the mantra almost invariably precedes the visual form. Thus the mantra *bhrum* creates a floor made of vajras for the mandala, and Tara and Mañjusri emerge from—are transformations of— their respective seeds, *tam* and *dhih*.

Once a deity has been fully visualised different mantras—often called 'heart-mantras' —are employed for its contemplation or for performing functions as the deity. These mantras are generally flanked by mantra particles, which may function independently in other contexts. Thus, a heart-mantra often opens with *om* and may close with *svaha, hum,* or *phat*. The heart mantras of Tara and Mañjusri are *om tare tuttare ture svaha* and *om a ra pa ca na dhih,* respectively. The former is usually understood to be a set of variations on her name. The central five syllables of Mañjusri's are regarded as the opening of an esoteric syllabary. Uses of mantra particles include the empowering of objects and deities (with *om, ah,* and *hum,* that represent the triad of body, speech, and mind) and the introduction of deities into a mandala. Thus we have *jah* to summon them, *hum* to draw them in, *vah* to bind them, and *hoh* to ensure they pervade the mandala. *Phat* can be put to use as a weapon mantra. Also, mantras are frequently accompanied by ritualised hand gestures *(mudra),* as in making visualised offerings to a deity (for diagrams of some of these see Beyer 1973:147 ff.).

Historically, the use of mantras is not restricted to tantric forms of religion, and they certainly predate their development. Their origin can be traced at least as far back as the Vedic period where, within the context of brahmanical ritual, they were employed for inviting the various gods to the sacrifice. It would be a mistake, however, to think that the existence of mantras in tantric Buddhism simply represents a borrowing from Hinduism. There are significant continuities between the non-tantric and tantric Buddhist traditions. In Pali and Theravada Buddhism *paritta* verses function similarly to mantras, being used as protective formulae

and as talismanic or auspicious words.[40] In the non-tantric Mahayana context, the use of dharanis in sutras has been noted. Also, the 'recollection the Buddha' *(buddhanusmrti)* practices of sutras such as the *Pratyutpanna* and the *Saptasatika Prajñaparamita* recommend single-minded mantra-like repetition of a Buddha's name in order to evoke a vision of that Buddha.

Visualisation and self-identification with the deity

Visualisation plays a central role in tantric practice. Whether the goal is awakening or the protection of a locality's crops, the relevant ritual usually requires the visualisation of a deity or set of deities, often located within the sacred space of a mandala. Underlying this process is the notion that visualisation transforms the world of appearances to accord more closely with its actual nature, thereby allowing greater opportunity for the practitioner to enact change. This idea becomes prominent from the period of the Carya tantras, which took the luminous, translucent, magical world of the *Gandavyuha Sutra* as the measure for how awakened cognition would perceive the world.

The employment of visualisation as such in tantric practice is nothing new. Visualisation plays an important role in Mainstream and Mahayana 'recollection of the Buddha' practices (see Beyer 1977 for a broader contextualisation). Arguably, what is new is the self-visualisation of the practitioner as the deity. Doctrinally, this transformation is underpinned by the Mahayana doctrine of emptiness *(sunyata)*. This is the view that the individual is not a fixed entity but a changing process that is empty of—depending on ones allegiance—either own-existence (Madhyamaka) or subject-object duality (Yogacara). In this perspective, the practitioner is not adopting the identity and powers of an external deity when visualising him or herself as a deity. On the contrary, the practitioner when seen with the eyes of awakened perception *is* the deity. Moreover, if the universe is characterised by emptiness then the fluid world of appearances created by tantric visualisation is more real than the hard-edged world of ordinary perception. As Beyer (1973:69) comments, 'In a universe where all events

dissolve ontologically into Emptiness, the touching of Emptiness in the ritual is the re-creation of the world in actuality'. Without the metaphysical context, however, such self-identifications, and the ritual processes by which they are achieved, look very similar to the local traditions of possession found throughout South and Southeast Asia (Gombrich 1996:155). Also, the doctrine of emptiness can cut both ways. While the deity is no more real than the practitioner, it is also no less real. It is not inconsistent with the Mahayana perspective, therefore, to consider tantric dieties as actual external entities.

The process of tantric visualisation can be strikingly dynamic. Visual elements transform into one another, or are transformed out of mantras, also visualised. Light rays emanate from and return into deities, acting for the benefit of and transforming the world. The central figure or figures generally dominate a tantric visualisation, and their appearance may be prescribed in minute detail. The *Sahvarodaya Tantra* instructs the practitioner to visual the deity Cakrasamvara as follows (for a description of Tara, see Gomez 1995:320):

> He should imagine the auspicious *Heruka* situated in the midst of the solar disc. He is the hero, three-faced, six-armed and standing in the posture of *alidha*. His central face is deep black; his right face is like a *kunda*-flower; and his left face is red and very terrible, and is adorned with a crest of twisted hair. Treading on *Bhairava* and *Kalaratri,* he abides in the great pleasure *(mahasukha),* embracing *Vajravairocan*i in great rejoicing of desire of compassion.
>
> (*Sahvarodaya Tantra,* trans. Tsuda: 283)

Mandalas

The use of mandalas is one of the distinctive features of tantric Buddhism, and they play an important role in initiation rituals as well as in post-initiatory observance throughout the tradition. The word *mandala* is the common Sanskrit term for a circle, a disc, or a halo. Within a religious context it came to denote the generally

circular diagram representing, or delineating, a sacred and auspicious space or enclosure. For tantric Buddhism the mandala is primarily understood as the domain of the deity located at its centre. Yet, to the extent that such deities are fully awakened, the mandala also represents the universe as perceived by awakened cognition. Within this base meaning there are some variants. As well as being the abode of deities—their 'residence' —a mandala can be the deities who occupy the abode—its 'residents'. Often the term is taken to cover both residence and residents.

Commentarial discussions of mandalas reinforce and elaborate on the notion of a mandala as a sacred space. Employing the tradition of hermeneutical etymology *(nirukti),* one account explains that the word mandala means 'that which receives *(-la)* an adornment *(manda-)*', deriving the word from the Sanskrit root *mand,* to adorn. For this explanation to make sense one needs to understand that the Indian Sanskrit (especially poetical) tradition did not view an adornment as something arbitrary. On the contrary, an adornment is seen as an elaboration, or organic expression, of that which is being adorned. In this interpretation then, a mandala is an expression of the nature of the central deity. An alternative, though not incompatible, explanation is that *mandala* means 'that which contains *(la-)* the essence *(manda)*', *manda* being taken in its sense of 'essence' or 'best part'.[41] A mandala, in this reading, is that which envelopes the central deity as its essence.

Some features of any given mandala depend on the nature of its central deity, the 'lord of the circle'. Others are common to most Buddhist mandalas, especially those from the period of the Yoga tantras onwards. Thus, the mandala as a residence is conceived of as a temple-palace, comprised of a square courtyard, with a gateway in the centre of each side. The central courtyard will occasionally have one or more other courtyards surrounding it concentrically, each with four gates. For instance, the mandala of the *Kalacakra Tantra* has three major courtyards (see Brauen 1998). The gateways are surmounted by more or less elaborate archways, which like the courtyard walls are adorned and ornamented. In addition there may be an inner circular pillared

space within the main courtyard. The whole complex rests on a
floor composed of interlinked vajras, and is enclosed within a
protective circle, which is frequently composed of three subcircles
of lotus-flower petals, vajras and, on the outside, flames. Once the
residence has been constructed, the mandala deities can take their
place, with the main deity, or deity and consort, enthroned at the
centre, surrounded by the remaining figures of the 'retinue', such
as yoginis, Buddhas, bodhisattvas, offering goddesses, and gate-
keepers.[42]

Mandalas were created (and still are, in Tibetan Buddhism) for
use within ritual contexts in which a deity was evoked. They could
be created either physically or mentally through visualisation (or
both). Their design might be simple or highly elaborate, with a
few or hundreds of mandala deities. Occasionally three-
dimensional mandalas were built, but two-dimensional
representations were more common. More permanent mandalas
would be painted on cloth, or onto temple walls as murals. Less
permanent were mandalas constructed from coloured powder or
sand and used for the duration of a particular ritual. It can take a
little practice to 'read' two-dimensional mandalas since they
represent the three-dimensional temple-palace (minus the roof but
with the door archways) viewed simultaneously in plan and
section view. Descriptions of mandalas are found in both tantric
scriptures and commentarial material. Important sources for the
study of mandalas and their associated rituals are
Abhayakaragupta's *Nispannayogavali* and *Vajravali,* composed
during the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. The first
contains detailed descriptions of twenty-seven mandalas from
across the range of tantric texts. The second deals with rituals that
precede initiation into a deity's mandala.

A range of factors appears to have contributed to the evolution
of the standardised and stylised symmetrical mandalas depicted by
Abhayakaragupta. Part of the process of development may have
involved the symbolism and circular architectural form of the
stupa—an important type of Buddhist monument, in origins a
burial mound—combining with Mahayanist conceptions of Pure
Lands and cosmic Buddhas (Leidy 1997:17 ff.). The oldest

surviving Buddhist mandala is arguably the remarkable monument at Borobudur, in central Java, which dates to around the late eighth or early ninth century. Although Borobudur clearly shows the influence of the Yoga tantras (Wayman 1981), it is none the less a composite work that can equally be seen as a complex form of stupa. Temple murals of Yoga and Mahayoga type mandalas, dating from the late eleventh to early twelfth century, have survived at Alchi in Ladakh, and Tabo in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh.[43]

Sadhana—the framework of practice

Mantras, visualisation, and mandalas are brought together in texts called *sadhanas* (literally, 'means of accomplishment'), works specifically designed to guide the tantric practitioner through a sequence of practice focused on a particular deity.[44] Most sadhanas came to have a basically similar structure. The components of the sadhana may be more or less elaborated, depending on factors such as the tantra class of the principal deity, the sadhana's purpose, and the interpretive perspective (and enthusiasm) of the author. Three main phases can be distinguished: (i) preliminaries; (ii) main visualisation; (iii) conclusion. The preliminaries often have as their main function the situation of the main ritual within a Mahayanist ethical and doctrinal context. This involves what Beyer (1973:29, 33) has appropriately called the 'ritualization of moral attitudes', and 'the ritualization of metaphysics'. The ethical setting is characteristically established by a liturgy that develops the positive emotional and altruistic attitudes embodied by the 'divine abodes' (or 'abidings') *(brahmavihara),* and that generates the 'awakening mind', the *bodhicitta*. Also, a more or less elaborate worship *(puja)* may be offered, using mantras and ritual hand-gestures *(mudra)* to a visualised assembly of Buddhas and bodhisattvas.[45] To set the doctrinal context, an experience of the ultimate nature of things—its emptiness or natural purity—is ritually evoked. This is achieved by the recitation of one or more mantras. For example, the pure nature of things is evoked with

the mantra *om svabhavasuddhah sarvadharmah svabhavasuddho 'hah* ('*Om* all things are pure by nature, I am pure by nature').

The visual evocation of the main deity—either identified with or as distinct from the *sadhaka* ('one who practices a sadhana') — follows these preliminaries. It may be more, or less, complex. When the deity is fully evoked the ritual purpose of the sadhana, worldly or otherwise, may then be effected. The conclusions bring the sadhaka out of the ritual space, back to the ordinary world of 'public non-reality' as Beyer nicely puts it (ibid.: 130). Two ways of structuring the main visualisation phase of a sadhana should be mentioned. One employs a distinction between what is called the 'conventional being' *(samayasattva)* and the 'knowledge being' *(jñanasattva)*. The former expression is used to refer to the main deity as initially visualised. This figure is understood to be the deity in appearance only, i.e. the deity 'by convention'. This 'conventional being' is seen as preparing the way for the actual deity (or the actuality, the *jñana,* of the deity), the *jñanasattva*. Often sadhanas have a phase where the *jñanasattva* ritually descends into the *samayasattva,* merging with it. At that point the sadhaka becomes the deity, or the deity 'really' appears.

The other structuring method divides the main visualisation into two phases, a 'generation stage' *(utpattikrama)* and a 'perfection (or 'completion') stage' *(nispannakrama)*. From the perspective of this distinction, the merging of the *samayasattva* and *jñanasattva* is seen as preparatory. It becomes part of the generation stage. The business of 'really' becoming the deity now falls to the perfection stage. This stage in turn can be sub-divided into a phase 'with signs' and a (subsequent) 'without signs' phase.[46] In the former can be found a whole range of yogic practices that involve manipulation of the energies *(prana)* of the subtle body, thought to 'underlie' the gross physical body, with a view to generating a subtle awareness often characterised as radiant and blissful. These yogas—a well known set is the 'six yogas of Naropa' —are termed 'with signs' since the sadhaka continues to visualise him or herself as the deity. In the 'without signs' phase the visualisation of the deity is dissolved and the sadhaka remains in a blissfully radiant and awakened but formless state. This is not the end,

however, for now the sadhaka emerges from this formless state, arising instantaneously as the deity, 'like a fish leaping from water', in order to relieve the suffering of sentient beings. Now the sadhaka really is the deity.[47]

Access to tantric practice: initiation and empowerment

As has been emphasised earlier tantric practice is not available to anyone simply by virtue of their being a Buddhist who has taken either lay or monastic vows. In addition to any such vows, it is necessary to receive consecration or empowerment *(abhiseka)*[48] through a ritual of initiation. In any given initiation ritual the pupil, who has previously requested initiation from a tantric teacher or—within the context of the Vajrayana—Vajra-master, will receive a number of empowerments. These have the function of introducing the pupil to the deity, and legitimising and requiring post-initiatory practice. The empowerments take place within a ritual space that contains the mandala of the appropriate deity. The precise number of empowerments bestowed depends on the nature of the tantric cycle involved. Generally speaking, initiations into Mahayoga and Yogini tantras require more empowerments than those into Yoga, Carya, and Kriya tantras.

In detail empowerment rituals are often complex. The history of their development is as yet only partially understood. Despite considerable overlap, the number of empowerments, as well as their interpretation, varies somewhat from text to text in each phase of the tradition. Nevertheless, by the time of exegetes such as Abhayakaragupta some standardisation is apparent. His *Vajravali* describes a set of six or seven empowerments regarded as preliminary for initiation into Mahayoga and Yogini tantras. These may be taken as typifying those required for Yoga tantra initiation.[49] The set of seven is composed of the garland, water, crown, vajra, bell, vajra-name, and Vajra-master empowerments. Omitting the Vajra-master empowerment, which is required only for those intending to conduct tantric rituals themselves, gives the set of six.

The first empowerment, the garland, which determines the initiand's Buddha-family and follows a number of preliminary rites, broadly proceeds as follows. The pupil is led blindfold before the mandala and given a flower. He (or, more occasionally, she) imagines himself to be the flower, visualises the central mandala deity in front of him, and casts the flower to the deity. The place where it lands on the mandala—east, south, west, or north of the centre, or on the centre—reveals the identity of his Buddha-family. The flower is then fastened in the initiand's hair as part of the garland from which the empowerment takes its name. Next, the blindfold is removed and the rest of the empowerments continue. As they do so, the Vajra-master is engaged in what may be quite complicated visualisations that accompany the external ritual actions. Thus, an empowerment ritual into the Hevajra mandala contains the following instructions to the Vajra-master for the water empowerment:

> Then from the three places (forehead, throat and heart) of Hevajra he [the Vajra-master] envisages manifestations coming from lightrays and filling the sky, and the (eight) goddesses thus manifest hold a jewelled jar and they consecrate the pupil on the top of the head with a stream of *bodhicitta*. Thus he envisages it, as he takes the water in the scoop and bestows the Water Consecration, reciting the mantra: OM Vajra-Jar consecrate HUM!
>
> <div align="right">(Prajñasri, *Abhisekavidhi,* quoted in Snellgrove 1987a:254)</div>

The water empowerment is clearly linked with ideas of purification, and in Prajñasri's text water is homologised with *bodhicitta,* the latter understood as being what is truly purifying. Prajñasri also links the water empowerment and the four that follow with the five Buddhas (Aksobhya etc.), giving the ritual an extra layer of symbolism. Thus, in the fourth and fifth empowerments the person being initiated is given the vajra and bell. As the two major Vajrayanist ritual implements, these already carry a heavy load of symbolic meaning. Onto this

Prajñasri adds all that Amitabha and Amoghasiddhi stand for. The mandatory part of the ritual culminates with the Vajra-name empowerment. Here, the pupil is given a new name, which is determined in part by his or her Buddha family as identified during the first empowerment.

If one desires initiation into the mandala of a Mahayoga or Yogini deity, for example Guhyasamaja or Cakrasamvara, further empowerments are required. The earlier set of six or seven is taken now together and counted as a single empowerment, sometimes known as that of the jar. To this two or three further, or 'higher', empowerments are added. These additional empowerments are generally known as 'the secret', 'the knowledge-of-wisdom' —or just 'wisdom' *(prajña)* —and, when it occurs, 'the fourth' *(caturtha)*. This nomenclature of the final empowerment does no more than describe its place in the new fourfold series that starts with the (multiple) jar empowerment.

The secret and wisdom empowerments were controversial in India for the sexual elements in them. They may still seem shocking today. The secret empowerment, which follows the completion of the jar empowerments, requires the person being initiated, who in the texts is generally presumed to be male, to lead the woman who will be his tantric partner to the Vajra-master. The Vajra-master sexually unites with her. After ejaculating, the Vajra-master collects some of the combined sexual fluids, which is symbolically equated with *bodhicitta,* from the woman's vagina. This he places on the tongue of the person being initiated who must swallow it without hesitation, exclaiming 'O Bliss!' (*Candamaharosana Tantra* iii). For the wisdom empowerment the Vajra-master returns the woman to the person being initiated who in turn unites with her. As he does so, he (in theory) should experience a series of four states of bliss *(ananda)*. These are understood to arise progressively as a result of this union of wisdom (i.e. the female partner) with compassionate method (i.e. the male partner). The fourth empowerment, when it occurs, consists of an explanation by the Vajra-master of the nature of the four blisses that the person being initiated has just experienced. During this the Vajra-master may quote from tantras and songs composed by the siddhas.[50]

This highly abbreviated description of Mahayoga and Yogini tantra empowerments broadly follows the more extended summary of Abhayakaragupta's *Vajravali* given by Sanderson (1994: 90). It should be sufficient to indicate the reason for their controversial nature. One reaction to such practices and the texts that justified them was to argue that they could not be Buddhist. This was the response of at least some Indian Buddhists, as it was of Chinese Buddhists, including those who followed the Vajrayana of the (somewhat expurgated) Yoga tantras (Sanderson 1994: 97). If, however, they are accepted as Buddhist practices, then for a monk to receive the secret and wisdom empowerments as described would be to infringe monastic vows of celibacy. Moreover, if it is accepted that this form of tantric Buddhism is necessary for the attainment of the highest goal an especially awkward consequence follows. It appears that the goal is now only available to non-monastics or laypersons. Even if these practices are regarded as no more than highly efficacious means of realising the goal, they still appear to be closed to the monastic Sangha.

Aside from the rejection of the controversial empowerments and their associated practices as non-Buddhist, it is possible to distinguish three sorts of strategy that evolved in India in response to these problems. The first takes the position that sexual elements are a mandatory part of the secret and wisdom empowerments. Monks therefore should not receive them. Atisa takes this stance in his *Bodhipathapradipa,* but qualifies it by adding that as long as the Vajra-master empowerment has been taken a monk may listen to and explain all tantras, and may practice and officiate in appropriate tantric ritual. He further states that the omission of these empowerments does not impair a monk's wisdom in any way (see Sherburne 1983:176–8).[51] This tactic, while admitting the necessity of sexual activity in the secret and wisdom empowerments, downplays their value.

A second strategy was to argue that monks could take the secret and wisdom empowerments, but only by using an imagined *(jñanamudra)* rather than an actual *(karmamudra)* partner. This approach rests on reading textual descriptions of outer physical actions (i.e. of sexual acts) as symbolising, or as ideally

symbolising, internal actions and experiences. Thus, texts can be interpreted either as intending visualised partners, or as intending physical partners only for those of poor spiritual capacities.[52] Downplaying the importance of actual sexual activity becomes increasingly typical of the later, and largely monastic, exegetical literature. (The tantric) Nagarjuna exemplifies this perspective: 'He who does not indulge in the union of Vajra and Lotus according to common practice gains success due to mastery of *yoga,* even if he has experienced it only once' (*Pañcakrama,* quoted by Kvaerne 1975:103).

Abhayakaragupta *(Vajravali)* and Darpanacarya *(Kriyasamuccaya)* adopt a third approach. They argue that monastics (as well as non-monastics) can take all the 'higher' empowerments, understood literally, i.e. as requiring ritualised sexual intercourse. They can do so, moreover, without contravening the monastic code. This is provided they have attained insight into the empty nature of things. The purpose of this qualification is to ensure that candidates' motives are pure and that they will be capable of benefiting from the empowerments. The relativist ethics of the Mahayana permits that 'even the forbidden is allowed in the case of the man who is compassionate and intent on the welfare of others' (*Kriyasamuccaya,* quoted by Sanderson 1994:101). Thus, according to these authors at least, there is no contradiction between an individual's vows as a monk and as a Vajra-master.

Impure substances and antinomian acts: the transgressive dimension of tantric Buddhism

The sexual elements in initiation rituals and post-initiatory practice were not the only aspects of the Vajrayana that had the potential to shock. The existence of a transgressive dimension as a feature of tantric Buddhism has been noted, as has the use of impure or forbidden substances as a characteristic of Mahayoga tantras. Mahayoga tantras are also striking for their seeming recommendation that the practitioner should contravene

fundamental Buddhist ethical precepts. Passages referring to both of these types of activity are also prominent in Yogini tantras.

Post-initiatory gatherings *(gahamandala)* —often referred to as 'tantric feasts' —of tantric practitioners can be seen to particularly focus on the impure and forbidden. The *Hevajra Tantra* (II: vii) recommends corpses or corpse-shrouds for the participants' seats, both highly impure because of their association with death. For the feast itself the text specifies that there should be alcohol to drink (forbidden to monks), and to eat there should be 'spiced food' —a mixture, according to Kahha's *Yogaratnamala* commentary, of cow, dog, elephant, horse, and human meat—as well as 'kingly rice'. This 'kingly rice' is the flesh of particular sorts of humans. Consumption of impure substances is also emphasised in descriptions of individual post-initiatory observance. As a part of yogic practice with his female partner, the practitioner is enjoined (among other things) to 'drink her mouth-wash and wash-water of her Lotus', and to 'wash his mouth with the wash-water of her anus' (*Candamaharosana Tantra* vii:9–10, trans. George).

In the earlier discussion of the Mahayoga tantras, it was suggested that an important notion underlying the use and consumption of what was considered impure or forbidden was that of non-dual *(advaya)* practice. This is the idea that since awakened cognition *(jñana)* is in some sense non-dual, the tantric practitioner can approach that non-dual state by transcending attachment to dual categories such as pure and impure, permitted and forbidden. Thus the *Candamaharosana Tantra* (op. cit: vii:18–19) states that 'never should the practitioner think in terms of "edible" or "inedible", "to be done" or "not to be done"'; on the contrary, he 'should remain with a composed mind, the embodiment of Innate Bliss alone'. The *Guhyasamaja Tantra* concurs, declaring that 'it is thus that the wise man who does not discriminate achieves buddhahood' (quoted by Snellgrove 1987a:171). From this perspective, since contact with what was considered impure would be repulsive to most Indians at this time, it was precisely such contact that needed to be practised.

Another factor possibly at play here is related to a view that tantric forms of religion are at heart concerned with the quest for

power or, more precisely, powers *(siddhi),* whether worldly or soteriological. One sphere where power is to be found is in those things or activities that are seen as impure. As Gombrich (1996: 155) notes, Indian (largely Brahmanical) ideas and rules of purity presume 'that the world is full of dangerous forces' that have to be controlled and contained. One way of doing this is by designating them as impure. From this perspective, contact with the impure is a means to harness its inherent power. Within a ritual context it can be drawn upon, but in a controlled way. The power and benefit of using the impure is acknowledged in the *Candamaharosana Tantra* (vii:14–5) when it explains that eating unclean things is like applying manure to a tree so that it will become fruitful.

The apparent endorsement of unethical behaviour found in Mahayoga and Yogini tantras can be illustrated by Vajradhara's declaration in the *Guhyasamaja Tantra* that 'those who take life, who take pleasure in lying, who always covet the wealth of others, who enjoy making love, who purposely consume faeces and urine, these are the worthy ones for the practice' (quoted by Snellgrove 1987a:171). Almost identical recommendations are found in the *Hevajra Tantra* (II: iii 29): 'You should kill living beings, speak lying words, take what is not given, consort with the women of others'.[53] How should these passages be understood? Should they be taken literally, as further instance of non-dual practice, or of the drawing of power from the forbidden? The passages quoted invert the universal Buddhist precepts concerning killing, stealing, lying, and sexual activity. The intention seems, in part at least, to be to shock. In the *Guhyasamaja Tantra* the assembled bodhisattvas all faint and fall to the ground on hearing Vajradhara's words.

Whether these recommendations were ever taken literally or not, non-literal interpretations are often found in adjacent passages of the same texts. Thus, the *Hevajra Tantra* follows its statement with explanations. For example, to kill is to develop one-pointed cognition by destroying the life-breath of discursive thoughts. To lie is to vow to save all living beings. The whole device—of saying something that appears shocking and then explaining what is really meant—is reminiscent of passages from the Perfection of

Wisdom sutras. An alternative interpretive strategy is to see such passages in the light of the expanded and relativistic perspective of Mahayanist ethics. Under certain circumstances precepts may be broken if compassion is the motive. Both of these approaches are found in the commentarial literature. For instance, by using the Mahayana device of explicit (or definitive, *nitartha*) and implicit *(neyartha)* meanings, the *Vimalaprabha* commentary to the *Kalacakra Tantra* gives two explanations for each exhortation to unethical activity. Hence, at the explicit level, killing denotes a Buddha's ability to kill in some specific situations. At the implicit level, killing refers to the (yogic practice of) retaining of semen (Broido 1988). In conclusion, the recommendations to transgress Buddhist ethical norms seem not intended to be taken in their most literal sense. In contrast, those advocating association with what is impure do seem, for the most part, so intended.

Tantric practitioners

If we ask who were the practitioners of tantric Buddhism, the answer will depend, as so often, on the phase of tantric Buddhism being considered. The evidence suggests that the practitioners of the Kriya and Carya tantras were probably monks. We have seen how these texts tend to speak of their rituals as valuable tools for the bodhisattva following the Mantranaya, the 'Way of Mantras', conceived of as part of the Mahayana. Despite the existence of late Indian texts describing the practices of householder bodhisattvas, these forms of tantric Buddhism probably had their primary location in the monastic arena. It is not clear whether this changes at all with the appearance of the Vajrayana as a self-conscious tradition in the Yoga tantras. The issue of the origins of tantric Buddhism, to be discussed in the next section, should not be confused with the question of who its practitioners were. Although it may well be the case that a number of the rituals found in these three classes of tantras had their origins outside the Buddhist monastic context it is still likely that they were in the large practised by monastics. Significantly the major figures in the

transmission of the Carya and Yoga tantras to China in the eighth
century—Subhakarasimha, Vajrabodhi, and Amoghavajra—were all
monks.

With the Mahayoga and the Yogini tantras the characteristics of
the practitioner change. The ideal of the Yogini tantras is the
siddha, portrayed in Abhayadatta's *Caturasitisiddhapravrtti* ('Lives
of the Eighty-four Mahasiddhas'), as typically a non-monastic,
non-celibate yogin or yogini, living on the margins of society,
frequenting cremation grounds, and generally behaving in an
unconventional manner. Abhayadatta's text, however, is written
perhaps some two hundred years after many of the figures it
portrays were living, and has a somewhat stylised and stereotyped
presentation. In consequence, as historical evidence, its
descriptions have to be treated with caution.[54]

Nevertheless, it is clear that the Yogini tantras were also
practised in a monastic setting—witness the debate over whether
monks should or should not take the secret and wisdom
empowerments. That both householder and monastic Vajra-masters
coexisted during this period is also clear from a passage in the
Vimalaprabha that—revealing its monastic bias—criticises monks
who take a householder Vajra-master as their teacher in preference
to a monk Vajra-master when one was available (Sanderson
1994:92). The same text also denounces the use of married Vajra-
masters to perform rituals of consecration for monasteries.
Scholars disagree on the issue of whether the Yogini tantras were
initially practised by monastic or non-monastic Buddhists. The
tendency of some Yogini tantra commentaries to give internal or
symbolic readings of the more controversial material in the
primary texts can be taken as evidence of monastic Buddhism
incorporating forms of practice that were initially non-monastic.
Alternatively, some practices may have been incorporated directly
into a monastic context from outside the Buddhist tradition.

Women in tantric Buddhism

The introduction to this chapter suggested that the high status
and crucial roles given to women and to female deities could be

counted as one of tantric Buddhism's distinctive features. This characterisation seems applicable, essentially, to just the phase of the Mahayoga and (more especially) the Yogini tantras. The earlier discussion of the Yogini tantras observed that they were so named as a result of the central role played in them by female figures. As yoginis and dakinis, they comprise the mandala deities surrounding the central figure. As (among others) Tara and Vajrayogini they may function as the central deity.[55] There is no question as to the high status accorded to female figures in the Yogini texts:

> Women are heaven, women are the teaching *(dharma)*
> Women indeed are the highest austerity *(tapas)*
> Women are the Buddha, women are the Sangha
> Women are the Perfection of Wisdom.
>> (*Candamaharosana Tantra* viii:29–30)

This same text warns (in Chapter 6) that those who slander women will be tortured in hell for three aeons. Rather, women should be honoured and respected as embodiments of female deities. Non-tantric Mahayana texts often take a perspective that appears—in spite of the rhetorical intent—to contrast vividly:

> You have plenty of filth of your own. Satisfy yourself with that!
> Glutton for crap! Forget her, that other pouch of filth!
>> (Santideva, *Bodhicaryavatara,*
>> trans. Crosby and Skilton 8:53)

The shift in attitude towards women exemplified in the *Candamaharosana Tantra* can be seen as part of the broader revaluation of (sexual) pleasure and the body found in these texts. Moreover, if what is impure is not to be seen as disgusting but is equally to be embraced with the pure, then Santideva's emphasis on the impurity of women becomes counterproductive.

Despite the status given to women in the Yogini tantras there is controversy as to whether this status was mirrored 'on the ground'

in the world of tantric practitioners. Freedom from social subordination does not necessarily follow from high ideological status.[56] One perspective is that tantric Buddhism, whatever its rhetoric, was generally for men. This is the view of Snellgrove (1987a:287), who argues that 'despite the eulogies of woman in these tantras and her high symbolic status, the whole theory and practice is given for the benefit of males'. It has further been suggested that not only were the practices of these tantras essentially for men but that, in the process, women—particularly low-caste women used as tantric consorts—were often exploited. A very different view of the role of women in late tantric Buddhism has been advanced by Miranda Shaw (1994).[57] Shaw argues that not only did women have a key role in tantric theory but that they were prominent as adepts in tantric circles, and that they figured as founders and pioneers in tantric Buddhism's history. She suggests, moreover, that their position in relation to male tantric practitioners was not one of being exploited but, on the contrary, one of intimacy and equality, if not of superiority (as their teacher).

The paucity of historical evidence makes the assessment of the social realities of eighth to twelfth century tantric Buddhism especially problematic, and the issue of the actual role of women in this phase of the tradition is likely to remain controversial. In support of Shaw's case, there is evidence of women functioning as tantric teachers as well as practitioners, and a number of tantric texts are attributed to women. Many of the siddhas in Abhayadatta's *Caturasitisiddhapravrtti* receive decisive teachings from their female tantric partners, who are often also portrayed as their long-term companions.[58] That there was no restriction on the full involvement of women in tantric practice is suggested by later Tibetan histories of tantric Buddhism in India. For example, Kanha's foremost disciple is said to have been a woman, and among the disciples of Naropa who gained awakening it is stated that one thousand were women whereas just two hundred were men.

On the other hand, the Mahayoga and Yogini tantras generally (the *Candamaharosana Tantra* is a partial exception) fail to

provide for women taking the secret and wisdom empowerments, and although women play key roles as tantric partners in Abhayadatta's 'biographies', only four of the eighty-four siddhas are women. Given the difficulties associated with straightforwardly viewing Abhayadatta's text as a historical document, such roles that women have may be as much symbolic as actual. Also, despite the existence of some tantric texts written by women, the vast majority are written (or at least attributed) to men. Such qualifications notwithstanding, it does appear, however, that tantric Buddhism in this period did to some extent provide opportunities for women to function in a more egalitarian fashion than was possible in the broader (Buddhist) social and religious context.

Origins and influences

That tantric Buddhism did not evolve in isolation from the broader religious culture of its time has been noted. The devotional *(bhakti)* traditions focused on the gods Siva, Visnu, and Devi were a prominent part of Indian religion from at least the fourth century. Also significant, especially from the seventh century, were tantric forms of religion centred on these gods. In particular, tantric Saivism had a following in areas, such as Kashmir, that were centres for tantric Buddhism. Indeed, by the seventh century, in the face of such competition, Buddhism seems to have been somewhat in decline. This, at least, is the picture conveyed by the journal of the famous seventh century Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Hsüan-tsang. In any case, it is clear that Buddhism was vying with other traditions for patronage and followers.

   In response to the competing attractions and soteriologies of these non-Buddhist traditions, tantric Buddhism adopted a number of strategies. Essentially all of these can be seen as forms of inclusion, whereby non-Buddhist deities and rituals are incorporated as forms of Buddhism. One approach was to contend that the traditions concerned were never anything but Buddhist. Thus the *Mañjusrimulakalpa* reveals that the rituals of the non-Buddhist deities Tumberu and his sisters were originally taught

many aeons ago by the Buddha. It is only recently that they have been taught by Siva. A more general form of this strategy is found in the *Mahavairocana Sutra*. Here non-Buddhist traditions are presented as having been taught by Buddhas who, out of their compassionate skill in teaching according to individuals' differing needs, took the form of figures such as Mahesvara (Siva) and Narayaha (Visnu). From this perspective, all religion becomes Buddhist.

A second type of strategy is the (sometimes forcible) subjugation of non-Buddhist deities. Subjected deities go for refuge to the Buddha, after which their rituals may be incorporated though with new mantras substituted for the non-Buddhist ones. A highly vivid, as well as influential, example of this form of incorporation occurs in the *Tattvasamgraha*. This text contains a detailed narrative of the subjugation of Siva by Vajrapani. Siva is particularly resistant to conversion, however. He has to be killed and revived, and finally trampled underfoot, along with his wife Uma, by Vajrapani. After receiving tantric empowerments in this position from Vajrapani's foot, Siva achieves awakening and, renamed, becomes a Buddha in a distant world-system.[59] Davidson (1995a) has suggested that this story, which was to become one of Tibetan Buddhism's central myths, had its origins in the story-telling of itinerant Buddhist teachers who had to deal with competing religious traditions as they wandered from village to village. Only later, he believes, was it incorporated into the textual and monastic traditions.

With the Mahayoga and Yogini tantras, questions of origins arise in somewhat different form. Some scholars argue that these texts, and especially the Yogini tantras as typified by the *Hevajra Tantra* with its adoption of cremation-ground practices, represent a radically new form of tantric Buddhism (see, for example, Snellgrove 1987a:180–1). According to this view, such texts have their origin amongst groups of wandering non-celibate yogins that gathered, especially in cremation-grounds, to practise their rituals. Only later were they incorporated into the sphere of monastic Buddhism. It is further argued that this is the source not only for Buddhist Yogini tantras, but also for Saiva tantras

that contain similar features, and that it represents a common yogic substratum that both traditions drew upon.[60] More recently Alexis Sanderson (1994) has questioned the validity of this sort of model. Sanderson, though agreeing that certain Saiva and Buddhist tantric texts share a large number of features, argues that, in specific instances at least, this can be explained as the result of borrowing on the part of the Buddhists. He has been able to demonstrate convincingly that extensive passages in Cakrasamvara cycle tantras such as the *Laghusahvara,* the *Abhidhanottara,* and the *Sahvarodaya,* were redacted from tantras in the Vidyapitha section of the Saiva canon. Sanderson also quotes a Saiva text, the *Haracaritacintamahi,* which makes it clear that the Saiva tradition was quite aware that their texts had been used in this way (op. cit.: 93).

It appears, in conclusion, that the strategy of dealing with the threat of competing traditions by incorporating aspects of them continues into the period of the Yogini tantras. The question of whether the Buddhist redactors of these texts were wandering yogins or monks remains to be settled, though whoever they were, they needed access to a range of Saiva texts. Whatever the case—and paralleling earlier phases of Buddhism (tantric or otherwise)—the borrowed elements were assimilated into the Buddhist context, making tantric Buddhism, as Sanderson comments 'entirely Buddhist in terms of its function and self-perception' (op. cit.: 96).

progress had become delayed through guilt due to previous misdeeds. Misdeeds, while clearly wrong, are empty of inherent existence and do not condemn one as an inherently wicked person. Since misdeeds and their karmic effects are empty of *inherent* existence all can make progress and become enlightened.

7 Mantranaya/Vajrayana—tantric Buddhism in India

1 For details of surviving Sanskrit manuscripts see Tsukamoto *et al.* (1989).
2 A number of useful (and generally) introductory discussions of tantric Buddhism in India can, however, be found in Eliade (1987) *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. See articles by Gomez, Hirakawa, Orzech, Ray, Snellgrove, and Wayman. Samuel (1993) and Snellgrove (1987a), especially the latter, are important sources for more detailed discussions.
3 See Urban (1999) for a perspective on the 'orientalist' dimension to early understandings of tantrism.
4 See, for example, Lopez (1995a and b).
5 As with early Mahayana Buddhism, dated Chinese translations supply some of the hardest evidence of the early textual history of tantric Buddhism. The third century date for the appearance of tantric Buddhist texts is based on the existence of a third century translation of the *Anantamukhasadhakadharani* by Chih-ch'ien. Hodge (1994) lists other Kriya texts translated by Chih-ch'ien.
6 Precise numbers vary depending on the edition of the Kanjur and Tenjur consulted.
7 The existence of a non-Mahayana (Theravada) form of tantric Buddhism in Southeast Asia should be noted (see Cousins 1997).
8 Though the term *mantrayana* is often used in preference to *mantranaya* in (academic) discussions of tantric Buddhism, it does not appear in texts until well after the appearance of the term *Vajrayana* (see de Jong 1984:93), upon which it is probably modelled. As a result *mantranaya* is the more appropriate term to describe the self-perception of pre-Vajrayana tantric Buddhism.
9 See Hodge (1994:59), and Snellgrove (1988:1359) for alternative lists of significant features.
10 Of the following features, probably only ritual use of Mandalas and analogical thinking are found in all historical phases of tantric Buddhism.
11 See Elder (1976), Wayman (1973:128–35), Newman (1988), and Samuel (1993:414–19) for discussion of the problems associated

with the use of allusive language in tantric Buddhism.

12 On the body in tantric Buddhism (and Hinduism) see Samuel (1989).

13 For example, in the Purusasukta (*Rg Veda* x:90) where the body of the sacrificial cosmic man *(purusa)* is correlated with a series of categories.

14 See Skorupski (1998) for a summary of the contents of Kuladatta's ritual compendium the *Kriyasamgraha*.

15 For example, in Vilasavajra's *Namasamgiti* commentary, the *Namamantrarthavalokini*. Buddhaguhya, also eighth century, lists *Kriya, Ubhaya* ('dual'), and *Yoga* as the three categories (Hodge 1994:58).

16 A fourfold categorisation is found in the Indian texts, but into Kriya, Carya, Yoga, and Yogottara tantras (see Parahitaraksita's commentary on Nagarjuna's *Pañcakrama,* ed. de la Vallée Poussin: 39), surely the precursor of the fivefold list ending with the Yoganiruttara tantras.

17 The numbers of texts assigned here and below to the various Kanjur tantra categories is taken from the Tohoku catalogue of the Derge (sDe dge) edition. See Ui (1934).

18 See note 5.

19 See Lopez (1996:165 ff.) for a discussion of the dharani at the end of the *Heart Sutra (gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha),* which is often taken by Indian commentators as a summary of the Mahayana path.

20 The *Namasamgiti* is significant in part because, unlike most of the Yoga tantras, it was not supplanted by later developments in India. It was interpreted not only as a Yoga Tantra but also both as a Mahayoga and as more than one type of Yogini tantra. For a discussion of this text see Tribe (1997a).

21 For Vilasavajra's *Namasamgiti* commentary, which may be the earliest tantric commentary that survives in Sanskrit, see *Namamantrarthavalokini.*

22 For a detailed study of the evolution of the five Buddhas, the Buddha families and the system of correlations and correspondences see Yoritomi (1990). Unfortunately, this work is mainly in Japanese, although there is an English summary (1990:693–716). See Snellgrove (1987a:209–213) for discussion and diagrams of the Vajradhatu Mandala.

23 See Tsuda (1978) for a detailed discussion of the different perspectives of the *Mahavairocana Sutra* and *Tattvasamgraha Sutra.*

24 Though Vilasavajra, in his *Namasamgiti* commentary, written in the late eighth century, enumerates just three categories of tantras, Kriya, Carya, and Yoga, he cites a number of works, such as the *Guhyasamaja* and *Vajrabhairava Tantras,* subsequently classed as Mahayoga tantras. The eleventh to twelfth century murals at Alchi in

Ladakh depict Yoga and Mahayoga mandalas side by side, also suggesting that these two classes of texts may have coexisted as a single phase in the development of tantric Buddhism (see Pal and Fournier 1988; Goepper and Poncar 1996).

25 There is no scholarly consensus on the date of the *Guhyasamaja Tantra*. Wayman has argued since 1968 (see 1973:12–23) for an early fourth century origin and continues to do so (1995:141). Matsunaga, in the introduction (1978:xxvii) to his edition of the *Guhyasamaja Tantra* argues convincingly for a mid to late eighth century origin.

26 The fierce deity Vajrabhairava, who has the head of a bull, is a form of Yamantaka, related (as his destroyer) to Yama, the bull-headed god of death (see Siklós 1996).

27 For a detailed study of the *Guhyasamaja Tantra* and its exegetical traditions see Wayman (1977).

28 A composite text that does not fit this characterisation is the *Samputa Tantra*. For an overview of its contents see the introduction to Skorupski's edition of the text of Chapter 1.

29 Vajravarahi's importance is demonstrated by the existence of a collection of some forty-six sadhana texts devoted to her in a work with the title *Vajravarahisadhanasamgraha*. This also appears to be known as the *Guhyasamayasamgraha,* or *Guhyasamayasadhanamala*. Doctoral research into some of these texts has been carried out by Elizabeth English at Oxford University.

30 For example, with Cakrasamvara cycle texts such as the *Laghusamvara Tantra*.

31 There is a growing literature on the *Kalacakra Tantra*. See Bahulkar (1995), Brauen (1998), Cicuzza and Sferra (1997), Newman (1995), Simon (1985), and Wallace (1995).

32 As the gathering contains both female and male practitioners, the term *dakini* has to be understood to include dakinis and their male counterparts, *dakas*. See Tsuda (*Samvarodaya Tantra,* 54–60) for a discussion of the meaning of *dakinijalasamvara* within the context of the *Samvarodaya Tantra*. At another level the 'assembly' occurs within the body of the practitioner, in which case the dakinis are identified with the energy channels *(nadi)* of the subtle body.

33 This tradition of 'crazy wisdom' was transmitted to Tibet where it continued to sound as an underlying note in Tibetan Buddhism that was often critical of institutional monasticism. For a study of *sahaja* in India see Kvaerne (1975).

34 See Templeman (1994).

35 For information on Abhayakaragupta see the introduction to the facsimile edition of the *Nispannayogavali* by Gudrun Bühnemann.

36 *Namasamgiti* (trans. Davidson, in Lopez: 120).

37 The terms *Sahajayana* and *Kalacakrayana,* sometimes found in discussions of tantric Buddhism (e.g. Gomez 1987:376), can be misleading. They denote separate *yanas* even less than the term *Vajrayana* does. Rather, they can be seen as representing competing emphases (or even, competing soteriologies) within the phase of Vajrayana Buddhism typified by the Yogini tantras.

38 See Snellgrove (1987a:240–2) for a translation of this important passage. See Lessing and Wayman (1968:25 ff.) for a Tibetan account of how the awakening of the Buddha is understood to have occurred according to the different classes of tantras and their commentators.

39 For Buddhism, speech is always a form of action. Thus mantras have to be understood as a particular form of speech act. Discussion of the nature of mantras can quickly become philosophically complex. See Lopez (1996:165 ff.) on some of the issues, within the context of his examination of the *Heart Sutra's* mantra.

40 See Wayman (1975) and Alper (1989) for discussions of mantras in the broader Indian context. For 'tantric' features of early and Theravada Buddhism, see Skilling (1992), Jackson (1994). There are philosophical issues connected with the use of mantras in Buddhism, however. In particular, it is hard to see how they work (in the sense of having guaranteed efficacy). Mahayana Buddhism generally sees language as having a contingent relationship with phenomena ('the world'), whereas the use of mantras appears to be predicated on the existence of necessary connections (a view generally acceptable to non-Buddhists in India).

41 See *Namamantrarthavalokini* (trans. Tribe: 127) and Lessing and Wayman (1968:270) for these two explanations. In fact, the two meanings—'adornment' and 'essence' —are not unrelated and probably derive from a more basic meaning in which *manda* denotes the scum of rice broth. The scum is both regarded as the best part of the broth, the cream (hence 'essence'), as well as adorning it (hence 'adornment'). Commentaries are often termed 'ornaments' *(alamkara),* i.e. works that elaborate or express the meaning of the root text.

42 Useful material on mandalas, including some good reproductions, can be found in exhibition catalogues by Leidy and Thurman (1997) and Rhie and Thurman (1991). See also Brauen (1998), Cozort (1995), Lalou (1930), Macdonald (1962), Vira and Chandra (1995).

43 See Pal and Fournier (1988) and Goepper and Poncar (1996).

44 See *Sadhanamala* and *Sadhanasataka/Sadhanasatapañcasika* for collections of sadhanas in Sanskrit. For a study a Buddhist tantric iconography based on the *Sadhanamala,* see Bhattacharyya (1958, also 2nd edition).

45 Tantric ritual is said to engage all facets of the practitioner since body, speech, and mind (the standard tripartite analysis of the individual) are occupied with mudras, mantras, and visualisation, respectively.

46 This series of divisions may well reflect the historical development of tantric meditation traditions, whereby stages previously seen as final are incorporated by revaluing them as preparatory.

47 On the two stages of tantric mediation see Beyer (1973:108 ff.). On Naropa's yogas see Guenther (1963).

48 Scholars differ on how to best translate the term *abhiseka,* literally meaning 'sprinkling', and which has associations with royal consecration. It is for this reason that Snellgrove, for example, prefers 'consecration' as a translation. I follow others (e.g. Sanderson 1994) in adopting 'empowerment', which gives some sense of the intended empowering function of tantric *abhiseka*. For a discussion of the role of notions of royalty in tantric Buddhism, see Snellgrove (1959).

49 For two examples of Yoga tantra initiation rituals, see *Sarvadurgatiparisodhana Tantra* (trans. Skorupski: 100–7), and Snellgrove (1987a:217–20), from the *Tattvasamgraha*.

50 It is often assumed that the fourth empowerment is an invariable feature of Mahayoga and Yogini tantra initiations. However, Isaacson (1998) has pointed out that wider examination of the literature reveals a more complex picture. The *Guhyasamaja* contains no reference to a fourth empowerment. While 'mainstream' Yogini tantras such as the *Hevajra* and those of the *Cakrasamvara* cycle do, others, for example the *Candamaharosana,* do not. Isaacson observes, moreover, that there is no commentarial consensus as to the nature or status of the fourth empowerment.

51 Although the *Bodhipathapradipa* was essentially composed for a Tibetan audience, Atisa's solution to the problem of the secret and wisdom empowerments was not generally adopted in Tibet. Monks did (and do) take these empowerments, but symbolically rather than literally. See also Davidson (1995b).

52 For example, Munidatta's commentary on *Caryagiti* 5:2, which takes it as stating 'By abandoning, o yogins, the delusion of the woman of flesh-and-blood, obtain the perfection of the Great Seal!' (trans. Kvaerne 1975:105).

53 This verse is also found in the *Guhyasamaja Tantra* (xvi:60).

54 The same is true for the late Tibetan biographies of siddhas, for examples of which see Guenther (1963) and Templeman (1989).

55 See Beyer (1973) and Willson (1986) for material related to Tara. On Chinnamunda, a form of Vajrayogini, see Benard (1994).

56 This is vividly exemplified, in the context of (near) contemporary Indian society, in Satyajit Ray's powerful film *Devi,* in which a young

girl's freedom is lost as a result of her being recognised as an embodiment of Devi, 'the goddess'.

57 See also Ray (1980).

58 See, for example, the story of Saraha, author of the *Dohakosas* (*Caturasitisiddhapravrtti,* trans. Dowman: 68).

59 For English translations of this episode see Davidson (1995a) and Snellgrove (1987a:136–41). Also see Davidson (1991) for further analysis and interpretation of the developing myth.

60 See Beyer (1973:42), Gomez (1987:375–6), and Ruegg (1989b:173) for examples of this view.