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Transgression, Conversion, Reformation: Atiśa Dīpaṃkara and Tantric Hermeneutics in the Later Propagation of Tibetan Buddhism

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by

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ABSTRACT

Transgression, Conversion, Reformation: Atiśa Dīpaṃkara and Tantric Hermeneutics in the Later Propagation of Tibetan Buddhism

by

Patrick Georges Lambelet

This dissertation examines the tantric thought and writings of the Bengali master Atiśa Dīpaṃkara Śrījñāna (Tib. Jowo Jé; Jo bo rje, 982–1054), one of the most important figures of the later transmission of Buddhism (*tenpa chidar*; *bstan pa phyi dar*), the "renaissance" of Buddhism in Tibet. Atiśa is best known for composing works such as the *Lamp for the Path to Awakening* (*Bodhipathapradīpa*; *Byang chub lam gyi sgron ma*), which presented the exoteric Buddhist path (Sūtrayāna) in a concise, synoptic format. Such works formed the basis for the "stages of the path" (*lam rim*) tradition, which was central to the Kadam (*bka' gdams*) school, founded by Atiśa's disciple, Dromtönpa ('Brom ston pa; 1004–1064). The *Lamp*, however, also forbade monastics from practicing the higher classes of tantra (Mantrayāna or Vajrayāna), specifically the *yoganiruttaratantra*s, due to their antinomian, transgressive practices. As a result, Atiśa came to be considered a doctrinally orthodox monastic reformer, but this belied the fact that he was also a prolific author of works on the tantric vehicle. While his tantric works have received scant attention within either traditional or modern Buddhist scholarship, works such as the *Vajra Song of the Vajra Seat* (*Vajrāsana*

Vajragīti; *Rdo rje gdan gyi rdo rje'i glu*) and the *Song of Conduct* (*Caryāgīti*; *Spyod pa'i glu*) reveal Atiśa's fluency in the doctrines of the *yoganiruttaratantra*s and *yoginītantra*s, presenting an entirely different image from the ostensibly conservative reformer of Buddhism. These works also reveal Atiśa's indebtedness to the great adepts (*mahāsiddha*) of India as well a deep resonance with the meditative traditions of the great seal (*mahāmudrā*). These connections suggest a figure who was far more comfortable with antinomian tantric traditions than has previously been assumed.

The dissertation seeks to elucidate some of the historical, religious, and sectarian factors in the marginalization of tantric works in traditional portrayals of Atiśa. It looks first at the scholarly precedents for his ideas in Indic commentaries from between the ninth and eleventh centuries, examining how Buddhist authors wrote treatises grappling with the transgressive sexual elements of yoganiruttaratantras such as the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* and *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* within a wider Buddhist context. It then considers the religious and political currents in western Tibet during the later transmission, where reformist voices, such as Lha Lama Yeshé Ö (Lha bla ma ye shes 'od, 947–1019/1024) sought to halt what they saw as mistaken tantric practices and to purge false Tibetan tantric traditions. Following this, it engages in an analysis of several texts by Atiśa, including the *Vajra Song* and *Song of Conduct*, which reveal his largely unexplored views on the yoganiruttaratantras, including their erotic practices. Finally, it examines ways that works such as the *Book of Kadam* (*Bka' gdams glegs bam*) posthumously imagined Atiśa as a "reformer," marginalized his yoganiruttaratantra writings, and promoted the relatively tame "four Kadam deities" (*bka' gdams lha bzhi*) as the principal Kadam tantric tradition.

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Introduction

This dissertation focuses on the Bengali Buddhist master Atiśa Dīpaṃkara Śrījñāna (Tib. Jowo Jé; Jo bo rje, 982–1054), one of the most important figures in the history of Tibetan Buddhism. It considers Atiśa's role in the transmission, reception, and interpretation of the highest class of Buddhist tantras—the unsurpassed yoga tantras (*yoganiruttaratantra*; *bla na med pa'i rnal 'byor gyi rgyud*)—during the period commonly known as the "later dissemination of the teachings" (*tenpa chidar*; *bstan pa phyi dar*) in Tibet. This study examines Atiśa within a broader historical context, considering his tantric writing and thought from three historical angles. First it looks at the scholarly precedents for his ideas in Indic writings from between the ninth and eleventh centuries; then it considers the religious and political currents in Tibet during the twelve years of his tenure there; finally, it examines ways in which his views on tantra were posthumously interpreted by the Kadam (*bka' gdams*) tradition that was inspired by him as well as by later figures of the New Translation (Sarma; *gsar ma*) schools.

The dissertation employs a combined methodological approach to reach its conclusions, using historical analysis, biographical research, and textual exegesis. Using these methods, it first traces the development of Indian Buddhist views and debates about the controversial antinomian doctrines of the yoganiruttaratantras. These tantric lineages emerged as early as the seventh century in India[1] and include the mahāyogatantras (also

[1] The *Mañjuśriyamūlakalpa*, generally believed to be one of the earliest Buddhist tantric texts, has been dated to as early as the eighth century. See Alexis Sanderson, "The Śaiva Age," 129. However, Ronald Davidson identifies the second half of the seventh century, before the emergence of mahāyoga or yoganiruttara tantras, as the period in which a "mature" or "definitive" phase of tantric Buddhism developed. Davidson emphasizes the need to differentiate between the "employment of mantras, maṇḍalas, fire sacrifice, and other specific ritual items, on one hand, and the mature esoteric system, on the other." He cites a report of the Chinese Ch'an monk Wu-hsing, who remarked on esoteric Buddhism around 680 CE and reportedly brought back to China a copy of the *Mahāvairocanābhisambodhitantra*. See Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, 117–18.

known as "father tantras," or *pha rgyud*), such as the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*, as well as the later yoginītantras (also known as "mother tantras," *ma rgyud*), which include the *Hevajra Tantra* and the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*. Unlike *kriyātantra* texts, such as the *Mañjuśriyamūlakalpa*, many of the yoganiruttaratantras included transgressive antinomian practices, including sexual practices with consorts (*vidyā*; *rig ma*), either real or imagined, and ritual consumption of the "five meats" and "five nectars."[2] This section considers some of the different interpretative strategies employed by Indian scholars, including Abhayākaragupta, Āryadeva, Jñānākara, and Padmavajra, to reconcile such transgressive doctrines with exoteric Mahāyāna and Śrāvakayāna doctrinal and ethical principles. Specifically it examines discourses regarding the practice of these tantras by monastics.

The focus then shifts to the religious and political context in western Tibet during the later dissemination, a period of religious flourishing sometimes referred to as the "Tibetan renaissance."[3] The later dissemination followed the so-called "age of fragmentation" (*silbü dü*; *sil bu'i dus*), an era of political instability brought on in large part by the assassination of the king Lang Darma (Glang dar ma) in 842. Tibetan historians characterized this as a period of religious and moral degeneration, although modern scholars have argued that it was also a time of rich religious innovation and creativity.[4] The schools that emerged during this period, which placed greater emphasis on new translations of Indian texts as well as later Indian tantras, came to be known as Sarma, as opposed to the Nyingma (*rnying ma*), or "Ancient Schools," which followed translations of texts and tantric traditions from the imperial period.

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[2] The five meats (*pañcamāṃsa*; *sha lnga*) are elephant, human, horse, dog, and cow flesh; the five nectars (*pañcāmṛta*; *bdud rtsi lnga*) are excrement, urine, blood, flesh, and semen.
[3] See Ronald Davidson's groundbreaking study, *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture*.
[4] See, for instance, Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, Jacob Dalton, *The Taming of the Demons*, and José Cabezón, *The Buddha's Doctrine and the Nine Vehicles*.

Atiśa, one of the foremost scholars of India during this period, and a preceptor of the prestigious Vikramaśīla monastery, was repeatedly invited by the court in the kingdom of Gugé (in the western Tibetan region of Ngari [*mnga' ris*]) to teach on the Buddhist path. When he finally accepted the invitation and went to Tibet, the monarch Jangchub Ö (Byang chub 'od; 984–1078) requested him to explain how to correctly practice the exoteric doctrines of the Mahāyāna (*theg pa chen po*) and Śrāvakayāna (*nyan thos kyi theg pa*) in conjunction with the esoteric tantric path (Mantrayāna; *sngags kyi theg pa* or Vajrayāna; *rdo rje theg pa*). One of the principal concerns of Jangchub Ö was the perceived (and real) decline in Tibet of adherence to the *vinaya*, the monastic code of ethical conduct. This moral decline, according to traditional accounts, was accompanied by the widespread abuse of antinomian tantric doctrines, with unscrupulous, self-appointed "masters"—mainly followers of the so-called "Nyingma" schools—taking the tantras as literal instructions to engage in the most transgressive practices, including ritual sex and killing. While the actual situation on the ground was surely far more complex than such narratives suggest, it is clear that the Gugé court was eager to revitalize Buddhism in Tibet by establishing connections with authentic Indian masters and investing in the development of Buddhist institutions, especially monastic ones. They saw a figure with the exalted status of Atiśa as an indispensable ally in this cause.

In the twelve years that Atiśa spent in Tibet (from 1042 until his death in 1054), he taught widely and was extremely active in writing and translating texts on a vast range of topics, both exoteric and esoteric. He is best known, however, for his exoteric writings, especially for pithy instructions on the gradual path to enlightenment (*lamrim*; *lam rim*), such as the *Lamp for the Path to Awakening* (*Bodhipathapradīpa*; *Byang chub lam gyi sgron ma*). In this work specifically, he said relatively little about the tantric path, although he warned

that it was forbidden for celibate monastics to receive the higher consecrations (*abhiṣeka*; *dbang*) of yoganiruttaratantra, due to their ostensibly sexual nature. As such, he was seen as propounding a more "orthodox" vision of tantra, a view that was surely amenable to the wishes of his patrons at the Gugé court. This text is doubtless one of the factors in the creation of his image as a monastically focused reformer who seemingly placed little emphasis on the yoganiruttaratantras.

Previous studies of Atiśa and the Kadam school have focused primarily on Atiśa's exoteric Mahāyāna works rather than his writings on the Vajrayāna, or on broader historical issues, such as the lineages of the Kadampas.[5] This is despite the fact that Atiśa was also a prolific writer on Vajrayāna themes and doctrines. Exceptions include recent essays by James Apple and David Gray, both of whom have published articles examining Atiśa's writings on yoganiruttaratantra themes, particularly the Cakrasaṃvara tradition, one of the most important yoginītantra cycles.[6] Similarly, little scholarship has considered Atiśa's writings on the great seal (*mahāmudrā*; *phyag rgya chen po*), the meditative tradition that originated with the Indian great adepts (*mahāsiddha*; *grub thob chen po*) and flourished especially in Tibet in the Kagyü (*bka' rgyud*) school, although Apple has also translated some of the mahāmudrā works attributed to Atiśa.[7] This scholarly lacuna is likely due in large part to the fact that Atiśa and the Kadam tradition are primarily seen through the lens of the Geluk (*dge lugs*) school of the great polymath, Tsongkhapa Lozang Dragpa (Tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa, 1357–1419). The Gelukpas, who were also known as the "New Kadam" tradition (*bka'*

[5] See, for example, Richard Sherburne, *The Complete Works of Atīśa Śrī Dīpaṁkara Jñāna, Jo-bo-rje*; Alaka Chattopadhyaya, *Atīśa and Tibet*; Ulrike Roesler, "On the History of Histories: The Case of the Bka'gdams pas"; "Atiśa and the Bka' gdams pa Masters"; "The Kadampa: A Formative Movement of Tibetan Buddhism."
[6] See James Apple, "Atiśa's Teachings on Mahāmudrā"; David Gray, "The Visualization of the Secret."
[7] See Apple, "Atiśa's Teachings on Mahāmudrā"; Apple, *Atiśa Dīpaṃkara*; and Apple, *Atiśa's Stages of the Path to Awakening*.

gdams gsar ma), were the self-appointed heirs to the original Kadam tradition, modeling themselves on Atiśa's synthetic combination of the ethical foundations of the Śrāvakayāna, the exoteric teachings of the Mahāyāna, and the doctrines of the Vajrayāna. Despite being the ostensible successors to the Kadampas, however, Geluk commentators seem to have almost entirely avoided commenting on Atiśa's yoganiruttaratantra writings, for reasons that are not entirely clear.

To address this scholarly gap, the latter part of this study focuses on lesser-known tantric texts composed by Atiśa that have until now received minimal scholarly attention. These include two brief texts and their commentaries: the *Vajra Song of the Vajra Seat* (*Vajrāsana Vajragīti*; *Rdo rje gdan gyi rdo rje'i glu*) and the *Song of Conduct* (*Caryāgīti*; *Spyod pa'i glu*). Here we consider ways in which these texts enrich and complicate our understanding of Atiśa, one of the most important figures in the later development of Tibetan Buddhism, and one who was generally depicted as an austere, even "neo-conservative," reformer of Buddhism.[8] I argue, on the basis of analysis of these texts as well as consideration of historical and biographical accounts, that Atiśa was not only a highly trained tantric scholar, but that he quite possibly wished to disseminate his tantric teachings more widely. Historical accounts suggest that he was rebuffed in these efforts by more conservatively oriented figures, such as his principal Tibetan disciple, the layman Dromtönpa Gyalwai Jungné ('Brom ston pa rgyal ba'i 'byung gnas, 1004–64), founder of the Kadam sect.

The final part of the dissertation then seeks to better understand the factors leading to portrayals of Atiśa primarily as a "reformer" of Buddhism in Tibet. The *Book of Kadam*

[8] Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 154.

(*Bka' gdams glegs bam*), a mysteriously originated work that purported to record dialogues between Atiśa and Dromtönpa, was instrumental in elevating the image of Atiśa as the spiritual inspiration for the Kadam school, and Dromtönpa as the legitimate heir to Atiśa's lineage. The *Book* was also one of the main sources for explaining the tradition of the "four Kadam deities" (*bka' gdams lha bzhi*), a group of four *kriyātantra* deities that became the principal Kadam tantric lineage. The *Book* thus served multiple purposes, among which were clarification of the Kadam teachings, legitimation of Atiśa's and Dromtönpa's spiritual authority, and establishment of a distinct—and distinctly non-antinomian—Kadam tantric tradition.

There are a number of methodological issues to consider in undertaking this study. Since Atiśa is such a revered and well-known figure, who has had and continues to have such an outsized impact on Tibetan Buddhism, there is no shortage of published material on or by him. A number of his texts—especially his best-known work, the *Lamp for the Path to Awakening* (*Bodhipathapradīpa*; *Byang chub lam gyi sgron ma*)—have been translated and re-translated many times, into multiple languages.[9] There is also a substantial body of literature composed by his disciples and followers in the Kadam (*bka' gdams*) tradition. However, unlike Indian or Tibetan authors who were known for lengthy philosophical treatises—Nāgārjuna, Śāntideva, Tsongkhapa, Sakya Paṇḍita Kunga Gyeltsen (Sa skya pan di ta kun dga' rgyal mtshan), Longchen Rabjampa (Klong chen rab 'byams pa), and so forth—Atiśa is best known for brief works that synthesize essential points of practice, the basis of the genres of *lamrim* and *lojong* (*blo sbyong*; mind training). Further, much of the material on him has hewed close to emic presentations from traditional hagiographies, or

[9] See, for just a few examples, Thupten Jinpa, trans., *Mind Training: The Great Collection*; Jinpa, trans., *The Book of Kadam*; Apple, *Atiśa Dīpaṃkara.*

liberation stories (*rnam thar*), without critically considering some of the possible factors that led to construction of the specific image of him as a "reformer." As such, he has not drawn the same level of scholarly scrutiny as have the above authors, and there is relatively little work that delves more deeply into his role as a historical figure, much less within the broader context of Indian and Tibetan discourses on the interpretation of the tantras.[10] My wish is that this dissertation will contribute in some small way to filling that gap, in the hope that such scholarship will increase in the future.

Chapter Overview

Chapter one is a historiographical overview that looks at the broader context of discourses on tantric Buddhism in modern Western scholarship, from the nineteenth century to the present. This survey helps to set up and clarify some of the major themes that run through the dissertation. In brief, it examines how many (mainly) Western scholars viewed tantric traditions as degenerate esoteric cults having little to do with the "pure," "original" schools of early Buddhism; and how others sought to understand the antinomian practices of the tantric schools within the broader framework of exoteric Mahāyāna and Śrāvakayāna schools. The chapter considers the impact of Orientalist attitudes as well as Protestant suppositions on European views of Buddhism in general, and specifically on attitudes towards tantric Buddhism. It then considers ways in which scholarship in Buddhist tantric studies has evolved in recent decades from a purely doctrinal and textual focus to incorporate a wider range of methodologies, including critical historical research, studies of material

[10] Some exceptions include the work of Helmut Eimer, Ulrike Roesler, Franz-Karl Ehrhard, and, more recently, James Apple.

culture, and ritual studies.

Chapter two picks up from the theme of chapter one, considering ways in which the views of Indian and Tibetan thinkers from nearly a millennium earlier in some ways parallel those of modern Western scholars. They too confronted questions of the Mantrayāna as the esoteric "other" to exoteric Buddhist traditions, but for the most part, they sought to reconcile the viewpoints of these differing traditions, not to reject the tantras outright. The chapter examines some of the specific rhetorical and hermeneutical strategies that Indian and Tibetan Buddhist thinkers used to accommodate tantric discourses, focusing especially on authors from the ninth to eleventh centuries, when tantric Buddhism was flourishing in India. It focuses on the use of the concept of skillful means (*upāya kauśalya*) as a way to contextualize, accommodate, and synthesize the different levels of Buddhist teachings, even when they seem to be contradictory, into three "yānas." It then discusses some of the ways in which different Buddhist thinkers organized the vast range of tantras, eventually arriving at the widely used doxographical scheme of four classes: kriyātantra, caryātantra, yogatantra, and yoganiruttaratantra. It concludes by examining how tantric Buddhist scholars sought to legitimate the yoganiruttaratantras and to rationalize their most antinomian practices as advanced methods for superior disciples.

Chapter three looks at Tibet during the later dissemination, or "Tibetan Renaissance," considering the historical and political setting in Gugé as well as efforts by the Gugé court to "reform" Buddhism, that is, to identify inauthentic tantric treatises and clamp down on the proliferation of mistaken, "perverse" tantric practices. Here, again, we see parallels to modern characterizations of tantra as a debased form of the purer exoteric traditions. The chapter examines polemical decrees issued by Lha Lama Yeshé Ö (Lha bla ma ye shes 'od,

947–1019/1024) and Zhiwa Ö (late eleventh c.), both of whom were members of the Gugé monarchy, before considering a number of other polemical treatises by Gö Lotsāwa Khugpa Lhetse (Gos lo tsā ba khug pa lhas btsas; early to late eleventh c.), Chag Lotsāwa Chojé Pal (Chag lo tsā ba chos rje dpal; 1197–1263/4), and Lotsāwa Rinchen Zangpo (Lo tsA ba rin chen bzang po; 958–1055). These texts, several of which are known as "refutations of false [systems of] mantra (*sngags log sun 'byin*)," vary in their specific approaches. All of them, however, seek to distinguish between valid systems of mantra (that is, tantra, or Mantrayāna)—which they generally associate with Sarma schools, such as the Kadampas—and textual systems or doctrines that they either consider as apocryphal or as dangerous due to their antinomian doctrines. A central object of criticism of all these treatises is the so-called "Ancient" or "Nyingma" tantras (*rnying ma*),[11] indicating something of the doctrinal tensions that arose between the Nyingma and Sarma schools. The chapter also considers the rebuttals of some Nyingma scholars to the charges levelled against them.

Chapter four focuses on Atiśa Dīpaṃkara, looking at his tantric training, as recounted in traditional biographies, his views on tantra, and a selection of his tantric writings. It begins by examining his apparently restrictive views on tantric practice in *Lamp for the Path* and contrasts them with the more permissive views in his other writings on tantra, specifically on yoganiruttaratantra practices. It then considers the milieu of Vikramaśīla, where Atiśa served for several years as a preceptor before going to Tibet, where he was sure to have become conversant in that institution's thriving tantric commentarial tradition on tantras such as the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*. The chapter considers Atiśa's relationship with and admiration of the Indian mahāsiddha tradition, in particular his role in transmitting Saraha's dohās to Tibet. It

[11] It is not certain at what point the term "Nyingma" became associated with a particular school, or collection of schools.

then turns to an analysis of specific passages from several of his tantric texts, in particular the *Vajra Song of the Vajra Seat* and *Song of Conduct*. The form of the two "songs" (*gīti*) strongly suggests a formal link to the mahāsiddha songs (*dohā*), and their contents reveal an approach to tantric doctrine that is markedly different from the more "conservative" approach seen in texts such as the *Lamp*. In particular, they show Atiśa's creative hermeneutics with regard to doctrines of the clear light (*prabhāsa*; *'od gsal*) and illusory body (*māyākāya*; *sgyu lus*), as well as sexual practices with a tantric consort (*karmamudrā*; *las kyi phyag rgya*). The chapter also considers Atiśa's works on mahāmudrā and their relation to his views on the yoginītantras.

Chapter five examines the characterization of Atiśa in later works of the Kadam school, specifically focusing on the *Book of Kadam* (*Bka' gdams glegs bam*). In particular, it considers the crucial role that Dromtönpa, his principal disciple, may have played, not only as the seminal figure as the holder of Atiśa's spiritual lineage, but also in helping to forge the image of Atiśa as a doctrinally conservative reformer and even, most controversially, in actively working to limit Atiśa's tantric activities. This chapter also looks at the "four Kadam deities" (*bka' gdams lha bzhi*), the tantric lineage associated with the Kadampas that consists entirely of deities of the "lower"—that is, less antinomian—kriyātantra class. It uses this as a basis to ask how the propagation of these deities as the paradigmatic Kadam tantric practice may have been connected to the posthumous marginalization of Atiśa's yoganiruttaratantra writings. It suggests that this may have been part of a broader push to legitimize representations of the Kadam school as a reformist, Sūtrayāna-focused tradition, in the process re-imagining Atiśa as a strictly orthodox reformer.

Chapter 1: Tantric Buddhism through Western Eyes

Tantric Buddhism has consistently presented an interpretive conundrum to scholars of Buddhism, both those writing from an etic, modern perspective and from a traditional emic Buddhist perspective. In both cases, tantric Buddhist doctrines and practices have appeared as the "other" to supposedly purer, more authentic schools of Buddhism. The tantras have variously been characterized as apocryphal, degenerate, and idolatrous, or (mainly from an emic perspective) as sources of magical powers, fast paths to awakening, and the supreme of all Buddhist teachings.

In this chapter, I give a brief historical overview of the Western academic study of Indian and Tibetan tantric Buddhism, tracing the rough contours of its progression from some of the earliest scholarly engagements with these traditions in the nineteenth century until the present day.[12] In so doing, I consider prevalent scholarly attitudes and beliefs about tantric Buddhism and the ways in which they have shifted over time. In the chapter following this one, I will extend this historical investigation to consider the perspectives on Buddhist tantra of traditional Indian scholars between the ninth and eleventh centuries, focusing on emic Buddhist strategies of interpretation, synthesis, and accommodation of tantric discourses.

As we will see, scholars—both "modern" and "traditional," etic and emic—have expressed and argued a wide range of views on tantric Buddhism, ranging from horror and condemnation to enthusiastic endorsement. One general objection to tantric traditions has related to questions of their authenticity, with arguments that tantric traditions were apocryphal innovations, representing little more than a degeneration of the "original,"

[12] To be clear, the tantric Buddhist traditions I refer to throughout this dissertation are principally the Indian and Tibetan tantric traditions (Mantrayāna or Vajrayāna), not any of the many other forms of tantra, such as those in East Asia, Southeast Asia, Mongolia, and Nepal.

foundational Buddhist teachings. More favorable interpretations have (at least tentatively) accepted the "authenticity" of tantric Buddhism, seeking ways to reconcile the "unorthodox," antinomian, and often transgressive tantric doctrines with more "orthodox" exoteric doctrines. While the commentators within these two groups are separated by many centuries and exist in entirely different cultural and historical contexts, we will find similarities between their attempts to grapple with the complex questions raised by the doctrines and practices of tantric Buddhism. We will also find cases where deeply engrained cultural and religious attitudes and prejudices have served to obstruct deeper, more constructive engagement with their subjects.

The Construction of Tantric Buddhist Studies

The academic study of Indian and Tibetan tantric Buddhism has taken on myriad forms, with scholars employing an increasingly diverse range of methods to attempt to define, understand, and explicate what is by all accounts a highly complex matrix of religious, social, and cultural phenomena. Scholars in this area employ methods from multiple disciplines: philology, textual studies, philosophy, history, archaeology, anthropology, as well as various sub-fields of these disciplines. The study of tantric Buddhism, however, is a relatively recent offshoot of the broader area of tantric studies, which is itself closely related to Indic studies. As such, we can still identify certain tendencies in the study of tantra and tantric Buddhism that persist from the field's earlier stages of development.

For instance, rather than focusing on specific tantric traditions, both scholarly and popular works on tantra have often tended to treat "tantra" as a single category of Indian religion, only perfunctorily engaging the doctrinal and sectarian differences between the

broader traditions within which distinct tantric systems developed, such as Śaivism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Śāktism (even Islam).[13] [14] This has certainly been the case with earlier scholarship, when there was less reliable source material available and hence less sensitivity to the distinctions between these traditions. However, we do still see evidence of this tendency today. In the most recent (2024) call for proposals for the conference of the American Academy of Religion (AAR), for example, a unit on "Tantric Studies" is presented as an independent category, apparently encompassing all "tantric" traditions, while there is no tantra-specific panel under the conference's "Buddhism" unit (nor, it should be noted, are there such panels under the "Jainism" or "Hinduism" units).[15] One can certainly make the case that grouping together all tantric traditions under one umbrella is a way to highlight their common origins, as well as to draw attention to the porous boundaries and often contested distinctions between these traditions. However, we may also see this as an indication that a discrete field of "Buddhist Tantric Studies" is yet in its early stages of development. There have nonetheless been many important developments in the field of tantric Buddhist studies, including highly accurate translations of important tantric texts and rigorous philological, critical, and historical work.

The study of tantric Buddhism involves, as with any object of study, a process of interpretation through a particular conceptual filter, which is shaped by multiple factors, including culture, language, religion, class, gender, and race. As with the fields of Indology,

[13] See, for example, Narendra Nath Bhattacharyya, *History of the Tantric Religion: An Historical, Ritualistic, and Philosophical Study*, wherein tantra is largely treated as a category that subsumes these traditions. A somewhat more effective approach is taken by Geoffrey Samuel in *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra*, which takes a sociological-historical approach to the subject.
[14] For discussion of a syncretic form of Islamic tantra, see Dominique-Sila Khan, "Conversation between Guru Hasan Kabīruddīn and Jogī Kāniphā: Tantra Revisited by the Isma'ili Preachers," in David Gordon White, ed., *Tantra in Practice*, 285–95.
[15] https://papers.aarweb.org/pu/tantric-studies-unit

Buddhology, and their sub-disciplines, the early development of academic studies of tantric Buddhism, starting in the nineteenth century, was principally the product of European scholars, most, if not all, of whom were male, and who were members of an elite educated class. The development of this field was inextricably entwined with and shaped by Western social and historical forces, such as European expansionism, colonialism, and imperialism. It is thus impossible to speak of the history of the study of tantric Buddhism without considering the multi-pronged influence of these factors, particularly as regards the assumptions and attitudes fostered by such dynamics.

Orientalism, Buddhism, and Tantric Studies

In recent decades, scholars in the field of religious studies, as in the humanities more broadly, have increasingly engaged with the issues raised by cultural critics about the impacts of colonialism, imperialism, and Orientalism. The most prominent figure in relation to Orientalism has been Edward Said, whose influential critique of Orientalist discourses focused on Western attitudes towards "Eastern" cultures and the construction of an idealized East.[16] These critiques have impelled Buddhist studies scholars to wrestle with problems inherent in their own positionality and to address assumptions rooted in colonial histories, notions of Western cultural superiority, Protestant attitudes about the nature of religion, and essentialist images of a monolithic "mystical East." These have led to increasing engagement

[16] See Edward Said, *Orientalism*. Among the many works that directly take on these issues within the context of religious studies are Richard King's *Orientalism and Religion* and Tomoko Masuzawa's *The Invention of World Religions.* More directly related to Buddhist studies are Donald Lopez, Jr.'s *Curators of the Buddha* and, in the field of Tibetan studies, *Prisoners of Shangri-la*. While Said's critique remains extremely influential, it does not deal directly with South Asia or East Asia, but with Western attitudes towards Islamic cultures. As Lopez, Jr. writes, "An important element of Said's argument is that part of the fear and fascination that underlie Orientalism derives from the proximity of the Islamic world, a world that occupied the space immediately beyond the imaginary border between west and east, a border that had been violated by the Moors in Iberia and the Ottomans at the gates of Vienna. The Buddhist world was, in contrast, at the ends of the earth, representing no such threat." Lopez, Jr., *Curators of the Buddha*, 11.

with the fields of subaltern studies and post-colonial studies. Nonetheless, much of Western scholarship on tantric Buddhism retains biases rooted in colonialist views, where Buddhism continues to represent a mysterious, alluring "other" to Abrahamic religions and European philosophies, and tantric Buddhism its unruly (and possibly illegitimate) offspring.

The emergence of Buddhist studies as a discipline in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the work of scholars such as Eugène Burnouf (1801–52), Étienne Lamotte (1903–83), Louis de La Vallée Poussin (1869–1938), and others, arose in conjunction with European economic and political expansion into Asia and the "discovery" by Western scholars of religious beliefs and practices that seemingly bore little resemblance to their own Christian—predominantly Protestant—cultures. Widespread study of classical Asian languages such as Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan eventually led to a proliferation of translations of Buddhist scriptures into Western languages, but the views of European scholars largely reflected simplistic and exoticized notions about Buddhism. These views vacillated between revulsion and glorification, based on exoticized or demonized images of Buddhism. Many saw Buddhism as radically distinct from other major religions in a number of ways: a godless "religion" with a sophisticated ethical and rational framework that spurned the ritualistic bent of Brahmanism while emphasizing philosophical inquiry and meditative practice in a quest for salvation. For some, the rational, philosophical, and ethical orientations of Buddhism marked it as an enlightened and appealing alternative to both the dogmatism and faith of Abrahamic traditions and the ritualism of Hinduism. Henry Steel Olcott, for example—the co-founder of the Theosophical Society, and one of the first European-descended Americans to formally convert to Buddhism—saw Buddhism as a "scientific religion" that shared far more with modern secular thought, such as evolution

theory and psychology, than did the "revealed religion" of Christianity.[17] For others (Christians in particular), although Buddhism might have offered intriguing philosophical and psychological insights, its denial of a creator God, not to mention its supposed life-denying pessimism, made it an intriguing but unacceptably areligious anomaly among the "great religions" of the world. Such ambivalent attitudes toward Buddhism, not to mention Asian cultures and religions in general, have been described by Tomoko Masuzawa as "a series of bipolar characteristics, or a jumbled combination of striking extremes"[18] Buddhism, she writes,

> came to be viewed… as at once alien and familiar, its character rigorously philosophical and indulgently ritualistic, serenely ethical and diabolically corrupt, its adherents sagacious and stultified, austere and indolent.[19]

Idealized notions of ancient Oriental wisdom thus faced off with depictions of Buddhism as superstitious, idolatrous, or excessively ritualistic. The "East," as constructed in the Western imagination, was viewed with a combination of fascination and revulsion. This "bipolar" view would continue to hold sway not only in the field of Buddhist studies but, perhaps even more so, in the field of tantric studies.

Protestantism and the Textual "Essence" of Buddhism

Much of the early scholarship in Buddhist studies, while producing a wealth of valuable studies and translations, was shaped by an interpretative framework that we can now recognize to be rooted more in prejudices and ideologies than in clearly articulated scholarly methodologies. Among these biases was the exclusive focus on texts as representing the true

[17] Prothero, "Henry Steel Olcott and Protestant Buddhism," 286–7.
[18] Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 121.
[19] Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 121.

"essence" of Buddhism. This resulted in the exclusion of sources not directly related to texts and doctrines, including historical materials, art objects, architecture, ritual, and oral aspects of the tradition. One of the most trenchant critiques of the predominant scholarly methodologies in Buddhist studies and of the attitudes underlying them has been that of Gregory Schopen. Schopen faults scholars of Buddhist studies for their unchecked assumption that "'real' or 'correct' religion… resides in scriptural texts, in formal doctrine."[20] In his view, this total reliance on doctrinal texts creates a false sense that one can know what Buddhists actually *did* without considering physical artifacts, such as archaeological remains and epigraphical evidence. Scholarly ideas about Buddhism were framed almost entirely in terms of the philological study of texts and scriptures; that is, in terms of interpretations of normative doctrines rather than the complex historical realities of Buddhist cultures, institutions, and social relations.

As Masuzawa puts it, Buddhism "came to life, perhaps for the very first time, in a European philological workshop." An exclusive focus on texts meant that the "discovery" of Buddhism by Europeans was primarily as a textual construct whose "very essence… was in the hands of European learned society." The work of philologists, then, was dedicated to "reconstruction of 'original Buddhism' and subsequently to the study of its historical developments."[21] Richard King has argued in a similar vein that the "ongoing revision and editing of texts… has no doubt contributed to the claim that one can give an objective and definitive account of that which one is studying."[22] Attempts to locate Buddhism in classical texts, King continues, resulted in an image of a "radically ahistorical and textualized

[20] Schopen, "Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism," 15.
[21] Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 126–7.
[22] Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 65.

Buddhism," which "provided the normative standard by which all particular examples of Buddhism could be both defined and (negatively) assessed.[23]" Scholars constructed an image of Buddhism based entirely on textual sources, thus avoiding the messy work of studying the impact of historical, socio-economic, or political factors on religious belief and practice. In short, the field of Buddhist studies has, as Donald Lopez, Jr. puts it, "largely been a bibliophilic tradition, concerned above all with the collecting, editing, and translating of texts originating in an often ill-defined classical age, whose fluid borders exclude nothing but the present day."[24] As a result, translation and interpretation of sūtras and scholastic commentaries came to be seen as all that was needed to understand "true" Buddhism. In cases where physical artifacts seemed to contradict what was found in scriptures, they were simply not considered, and the study of the social or historical contexts in which the doctrines developed was considered only as an afterthought. In short, that which anthropologists now refer to as the study of "lived religion," or religion within its social and cultural context, was entirely missing from the research.

The bias towards textual sources can be attributed to a number of causes. Schopen and King argue that it derives from a Protestant emphasis on the written word as the location of religion, or the key to understanding God (and thus the essence of Christianity).[25] In Schopen's words,

> The methodological position frequently taken by modern Buddhist scholars, archaeologists, and historians of religion looks, in fact, uncannily like the position taken by a variety of early Protestant "reformers" who were attempting to define and establish the locus of "true religion."[26]

[23] King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 148.
[24] Lopez, "Foreigner at the Lama's Feet," in *Curators of the Buddha*, 252.
[25] See King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 62.
[26] Schopen, "Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism," 19.

For many scholars of Buddhism, then, the very core of Buddhism lay solely in the reading and translation of canonical scriptures.

This view of Buddhism and its various branches as entirely contained within texts is, of course, at odds with the historical reality: Buddhism originated and developed for centuries as an oral tradition, its historical founder not having committed anything to writing; further, Buddhist doctrines and beliefs continued to evolve, adapt, and transform in response to shifting historical, social, and religious contexts. Scriptural texts function normatively, allowing a view into Buddhist doctrine, practice, and belief, but they tell us little about what Buddhists actually did. Locating Buddhism entirely within texts thus reinforces Orientalist notions of Buddhism as ahistorical, transcendent, or mystical in nature. Or, as King puts it,

> Locating the essence of "Buddhism" in certain "canonical" texts… allows the Orientalist to maintain the authority to speak about the "true" nature of Buddhism, abstractly conceived. Such ahistorical constructs can then be contrasted with the corrupt and decadent practices of contemporary Asian Buddhists by a normative appeal to the purity of the "original texts."[27]

Such notions of "purity" or "originality" figure even more prominently in the study of tantric Buddhism, which, as we will see, was often seen by Western scholars as an inferior and degenerate cult, "Buddhist" in name only.

Mirroring the trends in Buddhist studies and other Indological disciplines, the bulk of early scholarship in the area of Buddhist tantra consisted of translations and exegeses of major Indian Buddhist tantras, such as the *Guhyasamājatantra* and the *Hevajratantra*, as well as their Indian and Tibetan commentaries.[28] In 1896, de la Vallée Poussin published a translation of the *Pañcakrama* (*Five Stages*), a principal work on the *Guhyasamājatantra*.

[27] King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 146.
[28] See, for example, Alex Wayman, *Yoga of the Guhyasamājatantra*; David Snellgrove, *The Hevajra Tantra*; Alex Wayman and Ferdinand Lessing, *Mkhas grub rje's Fundamentals of the Buddhist Tantras*, etc.

Eminent Buddhologists such as Alex Wayman, Ferdinand Lessing, and David Snellgrove produced translations of important tantric works, texts that were frequently transgressive, highly technical, and difficult to understand without extensive commentary. Such work focused predominantly on doctrinal, philosophical, and soteriological issues and largely avoided questions of the historical, social, institutional, or political forces that shaped the development of tantric Buddhist traditions. Such studies are undoubtedly valuable in giving us a clearer picture of the scriptures and doctrines of tantric Buddhism, illuminating interrelations and differences between different traditions and lineages of Vajrayāna. They also allow us to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which Vajrayāna differs from exoteric Buddhist doctrines, often resembling—and directly appropriating—Hindu traditions such as Śaiva tantra. However, a focus purely on the subtleties of doctrine, language, and ritual again reinforces the impression that Buddhist tantra was ahistorical, existing in an ideological vacuum, independent of social, political, and historical conditions.

Ronald Davidson, a scholar whose work has focused primarily on tantric Buddhism in its social contexts, is also critical of the tendency of scholars to rely solely on doctrinal sources. Writing of David Snellgrove and Yūkei Matsunaga (who has written extensively on tantric Buddhism and Shingon, the main school of Japanese esoteric Buddhism), Davidson writes that they produced "excellent descriptive works" in which they

> endeavor to explain the received system found in the documents, yielding an analysis with a diminished Indian historical—social, economic, political—horizon… to date this direction has often yielded textual descriptions with a curiously disembodied sense of authorship, and we are left asking questions of audience, language, teaching environment, or patronage.[29]

[29] Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, 10.

Challenging this "disembodied sense of authorship" is central to the issues that I wish to examine in this dissertation. I do not believe that we can separate a text from its author(s), from the conditions surrounding its composition, from its intended audience, or from the circumstances of its reception. The questions I address will certainly require careful analysis of Buddhist tantric texts, doctrines, and practices. However, I do not just consider the texts in and of themselves, but examine them as literary products of authors who existed and lived within a complex socio-historical framework that shaped and was shaped by institutional, social, and political realities.

Although an exclusively text-focused, philological model is still followed by many Buddhologists today, the field of Buddhist studies has in recent decades broadened to include historical, archaeological, anthropological, and socio-cultural data.[30] Numerous important contributions have been made in the field of tantric studies, including translations of major Indian and Tibetan commentaries on the *Kālacakratantra*, the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra*, and the *Guhyasamājatantra*, among others.[31] Such works draw not only on the scholars' expertise in classical Buddhist languages, but on a greater sensitivity and sophistication with regard to historical, social, and cultural contexts than many of the earlier Buddhologists. Such work has opened the way to understanding Buddhist traditions as operating within a complex matrix of doctrines, ritual practices, shifting social conditions, political and economic patronage, and the development of institutional identities. More recent scholarship on Buddhist tantra has tended to veer away from purely textual or doctrinal issues, relying

[30] For a comprehensive overview of recent developments in the field of Buddhist Studies (up to 2009), see José Cabezón, "The Changing Field of Buddhist Studies in North America."
[31] For just a few examples, see David Gray, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra*; Vesna Wallace, *The Kālacakra Tantra*; Gavin Kilty, trans., *A Lamp to Illuminate the Five Stages*; and Christian Wedemeyer, *The Lamp for Integrating the Practices*.

increasingly on historical and critical methods, archaeological data, paleography, and anthropology to unearth, among other things, the ways in which belief and doctrine interact with social and political realities. This has been particularly fruitful in the exploration of the early roots of Indian Buddhist tantra in relation to other, non-Buddhist tantric traditions, such as those of the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava tantras.[32]

"Pure" Origins and Tantric Deterioration: Buddhism's Fall from Grace

We have seen how Buddhist scholars sought to locate the essence of Buddhism within classical doctrinal texts, a tendency linked to Protestant notions about texts as the ultimate source of spiritual truth. In practice, this implied that it was possible to locate the very origins of Buddhism within its scriptures, leading to an utterly dehistoricized sense of Buddhism. In order to get an accurate representation of Buddhism, it was assumed that one needed look no further than scriptural texts. The scholarly obsession with origins, however, also took on historical dimensions. The Pali discourses, or the *tripiṭaka*, had long been assumed to the most accurate records of the Buddha's teachings and, consequentially, the most authentic, "pure" form of Buddhism. The later major Buddhist traditions—the Mahāyāna and the Mantrayāna—thus posed a significant problem for scholars.

The earliest roots of the Mahāyāna began to appear, as far as we know, as early as the first century BCE, while the tantric traditions likely began to emerge a few centuries later, around the fifth century CE. European scholars largely viewed tantric Buddhism as a deviant strain of "original" Buddhism, a degeneration of the ethics, practices, and beliefs of early Buddhism with little in common with the original teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha. Figures

[32] See, for example, Alexis Sanderson, "The Śaiva Age," which examines Śaiva-Buddhist interactions in great depth.

such as Brian H. Hodgson, who procured important Sanskrit manuscripts and sent them to Eugène Burnouf, one of the major early figures in Buddhist studies, subscribed to the idea that tantric Buddhism was little more than an inferior "admixture" of Śaiva practices with Buddhist ones.[33] This became a dominant lens through which Western scholars, including Burnouf, viewed tantric Buddhism. In this view, tantric Buddhism, a "later mixture of Buddhist elements with tantric elements developed elsewhere and incorporated perhaps as late as the twelfth century,"[34] was contrasted with the "original," rational, austere—and non-tantric—Pali Buddhism. Buddhist tantra was considered a historically late "admixture" of Buddhist and Śaiva views and practices, as Brahmanical as it was Buddhist. While this may have been historically accurate to a certain degree, tantra came to be seen as not only temporally distant from the Buddha's original teachings, but as a degeneration from the "purity" of the original teachings. This narrative of the decline of the Mahāyāna and tantric traditions became a standard trope in the Western scholarly understanding of Buddhism.

Another figure exemplifying this attitude was Monier Monier-Williams (1819–99), the eminent Sanskritist and Indologist, who in 1889 published an ambitious volume, entitled *Buddhism in Connexion with Brahmanism and Hinduism and in its Contrast with Christianity*. His original intention in this work was to "compress into six lectures a scholarly sketch of what may be called true Buddhism,—that is, the Buddhism of the Piṭakas or Pāli texts…"[35] It was only later that he decided it might be necessary to "embrace some of the later phases and modern developments of Buddhism" if he wanted to do justice to such a massive topic. As Monier-Williams wrote, "the tendency of every religious movement is

[33] Christian Wedemeyer, "Tropes, Typologies, and Turnarounds," 235.
[34] Christian Wedemeyer, "Tropes, Typologies, and Turnarounds," 240.
[35] Monier-Williams, *Buddhism*, vii.

towards deterioration and disintegration," the history of Buddhism providing a prime example. As Buddhists gave up the ethics and celibacy of the early doctrines of the Buddha, he wrote, the Mahāyāna devolved into "a congeries of heterogeneous doctrines, including the worship of Bodhisattvas, deified saints, and personal gods."[36] But perhaps worst of all, he argued, was the development of tantric Buddhism:

> Buddhism ultimately allied itself with Tantrism or the worship of the female principle (śakti), and under its sanction encouraged the grossest violations of decency and the worst forms of profligacy.[37]

Tomoko Masuzawa describes how Monier-Williams reflected in this work on how the "stubbornly undemocratic, hierarchical spirit of Asian peoples" produced the "hierarchical Buddhism" of Tibet and Mongolia, which became widely—and pejoratively—known as "Lamaism." She characterizes Monier-Williams' views of later developments in Buddhism as that of "a history not of development but of deterioration"; a history of how

> the original, august, severely ethical and philosophical (if also abjectly pessimistic) teaching of the founder was transmogrified in myriad ways, turning into so many popular debased, and hybrid local traditions.[38]

Another prominent Indologist, Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900), made no attempt to conceal his disdain for the *dhāraṇī* texts, esoteric Mahāyāna texts that are often considered "proto-tantric":

> Most of these Dhâraṇîs are prayers so utterly devoid of sense and grammar that they hardly admit and still less are deserving of a translation… [they can be seen] as marking the lowest degradation of one of the most perfect religions, at least as conceived originally in the mind of its founder… While the beautiful utterances of Buddha were forgotten, these miserable Dhâraṇîs spread all over the world, and are

[36] Monier-Williams, *Buddhism*, 159.
[37] Monier-Williams, *Buddhism*, 152.
[38] Masuzawa, *Invention of World Religions*, 128–9.

> still to be found, not only in Northern, but in Southern Buddhism also… Here, as elsewhere, the truth of the Eastern proverb is confirmed, that the scum floats along on the surface, and the pearls lie on the ground.[39]

Louis de La Vallée Poussin, one of the earliest scholars of tantric Buddhism,[40]initially criticized fellow scholars for sustaining the orthodox view that Theravāda was the only "pure" form of Buddhism, but later abandoned his work on tantra due to criticism from fellow scholars for his views on the dating of the tantras.[41]

Christian Wedemeyer has argued that the view of tantric Buddhism as degenerate has persisted in scholarship, and that this view is in need of "serious, sustained consideration."[42] Wedemeyer notes that these views build upon a persistent narrative of "civilizational decline," in which ostensibly earlier forms of Buddhism (e.g. Theravāda/Hīnayāna) were somehow more "pure" and that later movements—Mahāyāna, and then tantric Buddhism—represented a decline into philosophical speculation, idolatry, magic, and moral decay. Implicit in such views is the assumption that it is possible to construct a reliable historical picture that Buddhist traditions developed in a linear manner: from the "original" teachings to the later Mahāyāna traditions, with their newer doctrines, philosophical speculations, and doctrinal elaborations, to the last stage of Buddhist tantrism, which appropriated ideas, not to mention forms of worship and ritual, from non-Buddhist tantric traditions that had attained prominence in India. Wedemeyer is certainly correct in saying that we need to reconsider these views, as they repeat questionable, and heavily value-laden, claims about tantric Buddhism as a late, impure, and degenerate form of Buddhism. However, to counter this,

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[39] Müller, *The Ancient Palm-Leaves*, 31–32.
[40] In 1896, de la Vallée Poussin published a translation of the *Pañcakrama* (*Five Stages*), a principal work on the *Guhyasamājatantra*.
[41] Christian Wedemeyer, "Tropes, Typologies, and Turnarounds," 245.
[42] Wedemeyer, "Tropes, Typologies, and Turnarounds," 225.

Wedemeyer's criticism seems to be levelled largely at earlier generations of scholars, and there is now a steadily growing body of scholarship that examines tantric Buddhism using multiple methodologies, and which does not buy into antiquated Orientalist assumptions about the "decline" of Buddhism.

As to the question of the origins of tantric Buddhism—an enormous question that I will not attempt to answer fully here—it is certainly the case, as convincingly argued by scholars such as Alexis Sanderson, that tantric Buddhism borrowed heavily from Śaiva tantras. However, this does not unequivocally prove that tantric Buddhism was any less "authentic" or "Buddhist" than Mahāyāna, or even Theravāda, doctrines. What it does demonstrate is that the boundaries of tantric Buddhism were porous, that the authors of the tantras were engaged not only in religious discourses but in discourses of power and legitimation. This certainly does not appear to be a trait unique to tantric authors. It appears, in fact, to have been shared by figures in both the early Buddhist as well as Mahāyāna spheres. Further, as we will see in subsequent chapters, this was not a uniquely Western or modern point of view: Indian and Tibetan Buddhist scholars struggled from the earliest appearance of the tantric traditions with questions about their legitimacy, and of how to interpret them in the broader context of earlier Buddhist doctrines.

Tantra in the Western Imagination

There have been many attempts by scholars to define tantra, but all of them seem to fail in some respects to adequately capture the many dimensions of tantra.[43] The multiple layers of

[43] See, for example, David Gordon White, *Tantra in Practice*. In his introduction to the volume, White first cites a definition by André Padoux, saying that "[according to Padoux] the doctrinal aspect of Tantra 'is an attempt to place *kāma*, desire, in every sense of the word, in the service of liberation . . . not to sacrifice this world for liberation's sake, but to reinstate it, in varying ways, within the perspective of salvation'" (White, *Tantra in Practice*, 8). White then offers his own "working definition": "Tantra is that Asian body of beliefs and practices which, working from the principle that the universe we experience is nothing other than the concrete

what we call tantric Buddhism span many sub-disciplines, making it virtually impossible to define Buddhist tantra as a single "tradition" or "religion." Just as scholars of Buddhism now accept that as we cannot speak of a single "Buddhism," we also cannot speak of a single phenomenon called "Buddhist tantra" "Mantrayāna," or "Vajrayāna." The ways in which scholars define and think of these categories are circumscribed by their presuppositions, cultural assumptions, and implicit (or often explicit) biases. I take as axiomatic Jonathan Z. Smith's argument, familiar to scholars of religion, that "religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study." As Smith writes, religion

> is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. For this reason, the student of religion, and most particularly the historian of religion, must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study.[44]

As for religion, so for Buddhism, and as for Buddhism, so for tantric Buddhism. Just as when studying religion, we are really studying scholarly constructs of religion as much as the data "out there," similarly, when studying Buddhism, Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, or tantric Buddhism, it is important to be aware of the extent to which we are studying constructed narratives about these religious phenomena, narratives that depend on the cultures, ideas, and preconceptions of the scholars studying them. As Hugh Urban has put this, tantra,

> like "mysticism" … is to a large degree a social construction, a category that is by no means stable or fixed, but that has been "constructed in different ways at different times"; thus the current imagining of the category is only one in a series of

manifestation of the divine energy of the godhead that creates and maintains that universe, seeks to ritually appropriate and channel that energy, within the human microcosm, in creative and emancipatory ways" (White, 9). While both definitions may serve to highlight certain elements of tantra in general, the second one, in particular, would be inadequate as a definition of *Buddhist* tantra. White acknowledges that the definition would need to be modified for different doctrinal contexts, but this demonstrates the difficulty of settling on any adequate definition that covers all cases.

[44] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion,* xi

> constructions, and like the others it is "implicitly bound up with issues of authority and gender."[45]

Tantra, and specifically tantric Buddhism, cannot be seen as something separate from our own constructions. These constructions, in turn, are the product of many layers of culturally specific assumptions.

We have seen how the views of early Orientalist scholars often resulted in work that merely seemed to replicate their assumptions about the otherness, inferiority, or mysteriousness of the "East" or its belief systems, including Buddhism, Hinduism, and tantra. Scholars are still grappling with these views, and some, such as Wedemeyer, argue that inadequate rigor in challenging discredited notions about tantric Buddhism has often produced inferior scholarship. These notions include dubiously established chronologies and outdated ideas about the relationship between tantric Buddhism and "early" (or Theravāda/Hīnayāna) and Mahāyāna Buddhist schools. Echoing some of the points discussed above, Wedemeyer writes,

> given the exigencies of the modern academic regime (standing as it does in the thrall of history), if Indian and Buddhist studies were to take their places as legitimate fields for scholarly inquiry, Buddhism required a history... and so one was constructed for it.[46]

In this view, many Western scholars have uncritically accepted the narratives about tantric Buddhism as degenerate, impure, inauthentic, and so forth. As Wedemeyer writes, citing the work of historians such as Louis Mink and Hayden White, one of the most pressing problems in studying the history of tantric Buddhism—as indeed with any area of historical inquiry—is discerning the extent to which "facts" are arranged to suit a particular narrative. "In such

[45] Hugh Urban, *Tantra*, 18.
[46] Wedemeyer, "Tropes, Typologies, and Turnarounds: A Brief Genealogy of the Historiography of Tantric Buddhism" (2001), 224.

cases," he writes, "the historian—having decided (on extraevidential grounds) the 'lesson' to be derived from the history and its corresponding plot—then manipulates the scanty data available to fit the demands of the narrative archetype." And this, he argues, "has especially been the case in the historiography of Asia and… has been quite specifically the case with the historiography of Buddhist Tantrism."[47] Such critiques serve as an important reminder of the need to distinguish between historical scholarship rooted in reliable data and that which hews to ideological narratives.

However, it is worth noting that Wedemeyer's critiques focus mainly on the work of a specific subset of scholars, most of whom produced their most influential work in the mid to late twentieth century, and cannot be seen as a comprehensive picture of the whole of scholarship on Buddhist tantra in the decades since then.[48] The fields of tantric studies and its sub-field, Buddhist tantric studies, have in fact very much come into their own, with a number of important and wide-ranging studies employing multiple methodological approaches.

As we have seen, scholarly studies of Buddhism, and quite certainly studies of tantric Buddhism, were often motivated by exaggerated notions of these traditions' otherness, mystery, and even repulsiveness. It should come as no surprise that the study of tantric Buddhism carried with it many of the assumptions we have already discussed, including the idea that later Mahāyāna and tantric Buddhist works were of questionable authenticity and inferior to the "pure" Buddhist teachings. Many scholars viewed tantric Buddhism as a late arrival of questionable pedigree, a degenerate amalgamation of Hindu (especially Śaiva)

[47] Wedemeyer, "Tropes," 227.
[48] David Gordon White strongly criticized Wedemeyer for this narrowness of focus. White writes of Wedemeyer's "intentional errors of omission, and the rhetorical strategy of synecdoche as a means to tarring all scholars with the same brush." See White, "Buddhist Brainfarts," 2.

tantra and Buddhism. Despite such prejudices, tantric Buddhism, with its extensive pantheon of often grotesque deities, its manifold rituals, mantras, *maṇḍala*s, visualization practices, and yogic techniques, and the use of transgressive images and language—particularly in the *yoganiruttara-tantra*s and *yoginī-tantra*s—offered fertile soil for scholarly study. The study of tantric Buddhist traditions sparked heated debates about their historical and doctrinal origins as well as their relation to earlier Buddhist schools.

Creating a Timeline of Tantric Buddhism: An Impossible Task?

The emergence of tantric Buddhism—which came to be known variously as Mantranaya (the way of mantra), Mantrayāna (the mantra vehicle), or Vajrayāna (the vajra vehicle, or adamantine vehicle)—from around the seventh century CE in the Indian subcontinent brought a series of major shifts, over a relatively short period of time, in how Buddhists conceived of their own traditions, beliefs, and practices.[49] In particular, some of the more radical tantric doctrines compelled reconsideration of fundamental Buddhist doctrines and ethical principles and led to questions about what constituted orthodoxy, heterodoxy, and heresy in the broader corpus of Buddhist traditions. The tantric traditions would profoundly impact the development of Buddhism, both in India and Tibet, leading to both creative revitalization of the tradition and intense debate about what constituted authentic Buddhist doctrines as well as the boundaries of ethical norms.

One of the most vexing tasks for scholars of tantric Buddhism has been the establishment of an accurate chronological picture of its early development. This is a fraught

[49] With the term Mantrayāna and its synonyms, I intend the more "mature" form of tantric Buddhism, wherein it began to be recognized as a coherent corpus of Buddhist tantric works and traditions. Speaking more broadly, the term "tantric Buddhism" can refer to works or ideas from earlier periods, in which tantric (or proto-tantric) ideas were present, but not necessarily considered as part of a broader "vehicle" (*yāna*).

endeavor, with numerous gaps, ruptures, and ambiguities in the textual and historical record, often forcing us to piece together fragments in order to construct the least implausible of numerous possibilities. Early Western attempts to date the Buddhist tantras fluctuated widely, and we still have little certainty about their origins. Eugène Burnouf drew on the views of Csoma de Kórös (1784–1842) and concluded that tantrism could not have been introduced before the tenth century CE.[50] This timeline, however, has long since been discredited, as it relied solely on references to the *Kālacakratantra*, which is now believed to have been composed between 1025 and 1040 CE, and thus to be the latest addition to the Indian tantric corpus.[51]

The dating of tantric texts requires in-depth textual analysis, such as comparison of texts, identification of references to tantras in other texts, and so forth in order to create a semblance of continuity where there may only be a smattering of inconclusive hints. As David Snellgrove put it, "to give a date to a particular tantra is a difficult, indeed an impossible task, unless one is content to date it from the time that it became sufficiently accepted in scholarly Buddhist circles for commentaries to be written upon it."[52] This leaves scholars with the challenge of triangulating references to earlier texts in later commentarial literature, dating of which is itself highly problematic, leaving us with an imprecise patchwork of speculation about the dates of texts and thus more gaps than certainties in the history of tantric Buddhism.

The lack of verifiable historical data for tantric Buddhism represents a greater dilemma for modern scholars than for traditional interpreters of Buddhism, working from an

[50] Wedemeyer, "Tropes," 241.
[51] John Newman, "The Epoch of the *Kālacakra Tantra*," 343.
[52] Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, 147.

emic perspective. While the former seek to apply analytic methods that presume objective historical truths, traditional Buddhist scholars will more readily accept what appear to be quasi-mythological, supernatural explanations for historical or chronological anomalies. The tantras are believed to have divine origins and are said to be transmitted by various enlightened aspects of the Buddha, such as Akṣobhya or Vajradhāra, although they sometimes involve ostensibly real historical actors.[53] Claims that contradict "common-sense" scholarly interpretations can easily be framed as examples of more or less enlightened views of reality or, in tantric terms, of ordinary view versus "pure view."

One well-known example of such contrasting views is the story of Nāgārjuna, the great philosopher of the Middle Way (Madhyamaka) and author of the *Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way* (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*). Modern scholars believe that Nāgārjuna lived sometime between the second and third centuries CE. Traditional Buddhist scholars, such as the seventeenth-century Tibetan historian Tāranātha, however, believe that Nāgārjuna the Madhyamaka philosopher was the same Nāgārjuna who composed the *Five Stages* (*Pañcakrama*), a major commentary on the *Guhyasamājatantra*. The problem with this view, of course—at least from an "ordinary" perspective—is that the *Pañcakrama* was most likely composed at least seven centuries later than the time of the Madhyamaka Nāgārjuna, between 850 and 1000 CE. For many traditional commentators, the notion that Nāgārjuna lived for several centuries and authored both texts is not problematic; it is in fact evidence of his advanced spiritual attainments, in particular the *siddhi* of long life, obtained through his mastery of tantric and alchemical practices. Such anachronistic conundrums, however, pose

[53] Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, 121. See also Cabezón, *The Buddha's Doctrine and the Nine Vehicles*, 87–9. Here, a commentary by the Tibetan author Rog Bande Sherab describes various accounts of the transmission of the tantras. In one typical example, the Buddha manifests in the form of Vajradhāra while "dwelling in the *bhaga* of the Vajra Queen" and bestows empowerment onto King Indrabodhi.

challenges for scholars engaged in critical, historical scholarship, for whom accurate dating is crucial to establishing a reliable timeline. As in many spheres of Buddhist studies, scholars of tantric Buddhism have to accept the inconvenient fact that a great deal of historical ambiguity and uncertainty is simply par for the course.

The problem of settling on even a rough *terminus a quo* for Buddhist tantrism is further compounded by questions of definition. That is, should we only define tantra in terms of the first appearance of tantric texts? The question of origins is pertinent here, but it is not one we can answer: if we assume that tantric texts were composed *after* tantric practices had already become widespread within Buddhist communities, we have no way of knowing how much time elapsed before they were written down. This leads us to the question of how we define texts as tantric; even the earliest texts that self-consciously and explicitly identify themselves as tantric clearly drew on and expanded on ideas that appeared in earlier Buddhist scriptures and traditions, not to mention non-Buddhist ones, such as the Śaiva tantras. The exact dating of texts—even when original manuscripts are available—is nearly impossible and attempts to date them frequently rely on speculation regarding their literary styles, specific terminology, or references to them in other texts, whose provenance may be equally murky.

Conclusions

From its earliest iterations, the modern scholarly study of tantric Buddhism has been guided and shaped by Western intellectual trends, deeply held biases about culture, race, and religion, and the tremendous impacts of Western colonialism and imperialism. If Buddhism had already been seen by European scholars as the "other" to the Abrahamic religions, tantric

Buddhist traditions became the other to the early, mainstream schools of Buddhism. Whereas mainstream Buddhism came to be seen through a modernist lens as rationalist, non-theistic, and even "scientific" in its aims and orientation, many Western scholars of Buddhism saw the tantric traditions as apocryphal, degenerate, idolatrous, and superstitious.

As we will see in the next chapter, while these views were of course shaped by historical circumstances specific to European history, they were in many respects similar to views that were held more than a millennium earlier by Indian (and later, Tibetan) Buddhist authors and commentators. Some of these authors struggled with the implications of the radical new tantric doctrines and practices, particularly those of the highest tantric classes. The *yoganiruttaratantra*s and *yoginītantra*s often used antinomian language to prescribe behavior that appeared utterly antithetical to the doctrinal and ethical norms of mainstream exoteric Buddhism. We will examine the ways in which some of these figures sought to accommodate, reconcile, and synthesize the newer tantric doctrines with the dominant discourses of early Buddhism and the Mahāyāna.

Chapter 2: Indian Responses to and Interpretations of Tantric Buddhism

Western scholarly perceptions of tantric Buddhism, as we have seen, ranged from fascination to disgust, exemplifying the "jumbled combination of striking extremes" described by Masuzawa.[54] The reasons for these responses were complex and included Orientalist and racist attitudes and Protestant-influenced biases against the ritualism and esoteric elements of tantra. Tantric Buddhism was widely seen as a degenerate "other" to the rationalist, austere, and proto-scientific Buddhism that had been constructed by Orientalist (mainly) Western discourses. We should not assume, however, that reconciling tantric antinomianism with the doctrines of exoteric Śrāvakayāna and Mahāyāna traditions[55] was a uniquely modern or Western problem; nor should we assume that Indian or Tibetan Buddhists automatically accepted tantric traditions as authentic Buddhist doctrines, or as the word of the Buddha (*buddhavacana*). As the many disparate tantric traditions began to develop and coalesce, from around the sixth century CE, to eventually become something resembling a new Buddhist "Mantra Vehicle" (Mantrayāna) or "Mantra Way" (Mantranaya), new interpretive challenges emerged for Buddhist scholars. In particular, the proliferation of tantric texts, practices, and doctrines tested any sense of there being a core set of universally accepted "Buddhist" beliefs or ethical norms, if any such sense had ever existed. While tantric movements ultimately led to a massive flourishing of Buddhist literature, they must surely have had a destabilizing effect on many followers of earlier, non-tantric traditions. In this chapter, we examine some of the ways that Indian and Tibetan Buddhist commentators from

[54] Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 121.
[55] Although it is historically anachronistic, I use the term Śrāvakayāna (Vehicle of the Listeners) to indicate all non-Mahāyāna schools who took the Pāli *Tripiṭaka* to be authoritative. Other terms for these schools—none of which perfectly encapsulate the historical reality—include the generally pejorative Hīnayāna (Lesser Vehicle), Theravāda (Way of the Elders), Mainstream Buddhism, Early Buddhism, and Nikāya Buddhism.

the ninth to eleventh centuries grappled with these challenges.

From the Margins to the Mainstream

Precise dating of tantric texts, much less the historically elusive traditions that gave rise to them, is notoriously challenging. We can, however, be fairly certain that the seeds of tantric Buddhism in India began to germinate during the Gupta Empire (ca. 319–550 CE) and that a more "mature Buddhist esoterism" began to form from about the sixth century.[56] The era of the Pāla Empire (750 to 1162 CE), which was centered in the northeastern regions of Bengal and Bihar, marked a period of strong official support for Buddhist teachings and institutions. Historians characterize the Pāla rulers—the best known being Dharmapāla (r. ca. 775 to 812)—as devoutly Buddhist, leading to a "golden age of Buddhism," especially tantric Buddhism, under their rule.[57] Under Pāla patronage, many important Buddhist *vihāra*s were constructed, including Vikramaśilā, Odantapuri, and Somapura. Pāla rulers also promoted a pluralistic approach to non-Buddhist, predominantly Brahmanical, traditions, patronizing and constructing Śaiva and Śākta Śaiva temples, receiving Śaiva initiation, and appointing Śaiva preceptors, from the eighth-century founding of the dynasty well into the twelfth century.[58] This ecumenical approach helped to maintain a delicate balance of power between traditions that were often in competition for patronage and popular support.

One might assume that tantric Buddhist traditions, with their often controversial antinomian practices, lay outside the religious mainstream, with the exoteric Śrāvakayāna

[56] Ronald Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, 25.
[57] Sahidul Hasan, "The Pala dynasty and Religious Pluralism in Bengal"; Niru Kumar Chakma, "Buddhism in Bengal: A Brief Survey," 40.
[58] See Alexis Sanderson, "The Śaiva Age," 108.

and Mahāyāna schools occupying the center. However, tantric Buddhism came to occupy a role at the center of Buddhist socio-political dynamics, in India as well as in Tibet. As Ronald Davidson has argued, the esoteric Buddhist traditions resulted from "a complex nexus of external social forces and internal Saṃgha dynamics," with the Mantrayāna being "at once the most socially and politically involved of Buddhist systems and the variety of Buddhism most acculturated to the medieval Indian landscape."[59] Thus, while tantric practices may have been the object of suspicion and frequent polemics, the Mantrayāna was also, somewhat paradoxically, closely associated with centers of religious and political power.

With tantric traditions being the newest arrivals to the Buddhist milieu, we might expect a certain amount of tension between followers of the newer traditions and those of the older, more established traditions. While there is some evidence of tensions between followers of the Śrāvakayāna, Mahāyāna, and Mantrayāna traditions at the major Indian *mahāvihāra*s,[60] however, it seems that for the most part these communities co-existed harmoniously. A number of influential positions, including abbacies, were held by prominent tantric scholars.[61] It was not uncommon for fully ordained *bhikṣu*s (who all held the same vinaya vows, regardless of which "yāna" they followed) to simultaneously identify as Mahāyāna practitioners as well as practitioners of the Mantrayāna. Indeed, as we will see, this triple identity came to be seen as a desideratum for a fully qualified practitioner of the

[59] Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, 76.
[60] According to Sukumar Dutt, as early as the seventh century, the Chinese missionary Xuanzang (Hiuen Tsang; 602–664 CE) recounted that at Nālandā *mahāvihara*, the Mahāyāna was derided by followers of the Śrāvakayāna as "sky-flower philosophy," that is, a philosophy of pure speculation and invention, no different, according to one account, than that of the Śaiva Kāpālika sect, who were known for their antinomian and heterodox practices. Dutt, *Buddhist Monks and Monasteries of India*, 334.
[61] It is worth emphasizing that although the different sects followed different scriptures and emphasized different doctrines, they followed the same monastic precepts of the vinaya, which all derived from early Pali scriptures. See Dutt, *Buddhist Monks and Monasteries of India*, 175–6.

Mantrayāna. Eventually, the wider embrace of Mantrayāna traditions was such that a number of major tantric figures, including Jitarī, Nāropa, Ratnākaraśānti, and Atiśa Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna taught at major institutions like Nālandā and Vikramaśīla, which became major centers of tantric scholarship. In Tibet, Vajrayāna lineages would come to play a central role, from the earliest transmission of Buddhism (*ngadar*; *snga dar*), beginning around the seventh century CE, through the later dissemination, or *chidar* (*phyi dar*), beginning in the eleventh century. During the chidar, native Tibetan schools began to develop their own distinct identities, which revolved both around their founding figures as well as their emphases on specific Vajrayāna lineages.

Orthodoxy: Some General Considerations

A primary aim of this chapter is to examine ways in which Indian Buddhist commentators addressed the doctrinal differences and seeming contradictions between the earliest schools of Buddhism (or Śrāvakayāna), the exoteric Mahāyāna schools, and the latest schools to emerge, the esoteric Mantrayāna, Mantranaya, or Vajrayāna.[62] Indian Buddhist exegetes had two interrelated goals: first, distinguishing correct Buddhist doctrines (orthodoxy) from heretical ones and second, delineating the ethical parameters and criteria of each of the three vehicles. I also suggest that the eventual doxographical classification of Buddhist tantras (for

[62] These are three of the most widely used terms for tantric Buddhism, which are for the most part interchangeable, although different authors gloss them slightly differently. The Mantrayāna (Tib. *sngags kyi theg pa*) is the vehicle (*yāna*) of mantra; Mantranaya (*sngags kyi tshul*), the way, or system (*naya*) of mantra; and Vajrayāna (*rdo rje theg pa*), the vehicle of the *vajra*, with the *vajra* representing, among other things, ultimate, indestructible reality. Other terms include Guhyamantrayāna (*sang sngags kyi theg pa*), the Secret Mantra Vehicle, and Mantramahāyāna (*sngags kyi theg pa chen po*), the Great Vehicle of Mantra. Isabelle Onians writes, "the Mantranaya is so-called precisely because it does not wish to set itself apart as a separate *yāna* from its direct predecessor, namely the Mahāyāna. The Mantranaya is thus a subdivision of the Mahāyāna, albeit claiming its status within that fold to be the highest." See Onians, *Tantric Buddhist Apologetics*, 72–3; see also Vesna Wallace, "A Brief Exploration of Late Indian Buddhist Exegeses of the 'Mantrayāna' and 'Mantranaya.'"

example, as *kriyātantra*, *caryātantra*, *yogatantra*, etc.) served not only as a didactic tool but as a strategy to legitimize the Vajrayāna as an integral part of the Mahāyāna, rather than a separate vehicle.

Let us first clarify what we mean here by "orthodoxy," as applied to the current context. The term *orthodox* derives from the Greek *orthodoxos* (*ortho* + *doxa*), meaning "right or correct opinion." Its antonym, *heterodox* (*heteros* + *doxa*), means the "other opinion." Orthodoxy, then, is a set of right, or correct, opinions deemed essential to establishing whether certain beliefs, or holders of beliefs, fall within the scope of a specific tradition or school of thought. Those propounding heterodox views—literally those with "other opinions"—are usually deemed heretics. Religious orthodoxy is often seen as fixed and inviolable, but such behaviors or views are not static; they exist in relation to numerous conditions and are often shaped by socio-cultural norms, which shift according to historical circumstances.[63] Even at a single place and time, there may be disagreement within a religious community about these norms, about which rules take precedence over others, and so forth. Different religions, of course, define orthodoxies according to their specific creeds, doctrines, and soteriological frameworks, but we can identify certain recurring traits. Religious studies scholar John B. Henderson, in his comparative study of orthodoxy in Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Neo-Confucianism, writes that the common feature of religious orthodoxies

> is that they were not fixed from the founding of their respective traditions; they were made, not born. But even this statement does not quite do justice to the dynamic

[63] This recalls the idea proposed by Jonathan Z. Smith, in which humanity's relation to religion is less a *homo religiosus* (in Mircea Eliade's terms), but a *homo faber*: a creator, or artisan, of religious ideas, truths, and orthodoxies, which are malleable and subject to adaptation. The establishment of orthodoxies thus derives from an interplay between numerous types of phenomena: those considered immutable or sacred, and those depending on historical and social contingencies. See Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 89.

> character of orthodoxy, since orthodoxy, unlike the canon in some traditions, is never entirely made, fixed, or closed.[64]

Henderson thus brings into focus a central dilemma in the study of religions, one pertinent to the study of tantric Buddhism. Religious orthodoxies, while ostensibly rooted in immutable principles, are themselves complex, interdependent phenomena, subject to the multiple conditions of the human societies in which they are created. The process of establishing orthodoxies is thus inextricably linked to hermeneutical strategies, that is, the continued evaluation, re-evaluation, and interpretation of new ideas or practices to determine if they are consonant with the accepted norms of the tradition. Such a process of re-evaluating norms in light of new interpretations has historically played a major role in Buddhist traditions. We now turn to a brief consideration of some of these strategies.

Buddhist Hermeneutics

Buddhism, of course, is not a monolithic tradition but a complex collection of constantly adapting schools and belief systems. As new texts emerged and different schools of Buddhism formed, it became far more complicated to maintain that there was anything resembling a "single" Buddhist tradition, with doctrines and rules that applied to all. However, Buddhists (and the Buddha) had from the beginning made it clear that the *dharma* could be taught in many ways to different disciples. From the earliest period of Buddhism in the centuries following the Buddha's death (in the sixth to fifth centuries BCE),[65] with the coalescence of discourses that would come to form the core of the Pāli canon, debates arose

[64] Henderson, *The Construction of Orthodoxy and Heresy*, 39.
[65] Estimates of the historical Buddha's dates vary, but the current scholarly consensus is that he lived sometime between 480 and 380 BCE.

about the interpretation of key points of doctrine and conduct. With the emergence of newer scriptures and the eventual rise of the Mahāyāna as a distinct "vehicle," from around the first century BCE, came an emphasis on newer doctrines, such as the bodhisattva ideal, the cultivation of the altruistic wish for awakening (*bodhicitta*), the practice of the *pāramitā*s, and the idea of a cosmic Buddha who was but one of many buddhas.[66] These changes raised questions of interpretation as well as doubts about the authenticity of Mahāyāna scriptures. With the later emergence of tantric scriptures and the Mantrayāna, from the middle of the first millennium CE, came even greater challenges, with doctrines and practices that often seemed to upend fundamental ethical norms of the Śrāvakayāna schools.

As the Buddha preached the *dharma* to listeners from every stratum of society, he is said to have tailored his teachings to each audience, based on his understanding of their varying dispositions. This is one of the principal ways in which the Buddha demonstrated his skillful means (*upāya kauśalya*), his capacity to discern the most effective means to lead sentient beings to liberation and awakening. Apparent discrepancies between the Buddha's discourses, however, led to divergent interpretations of questions related to philosophical doctrines, proper conduct, and ethical discipline. One of the earliest attempts by the Buddhist *saṃgha* to settle such controversies was the series of councils (*saṃgīti*) that were convened after the Buddha's passing. The first of these is reported by traditional sources to have taken place immediately after the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa* in order to codify the Buddha's teachings, classify them according to the three doctrinal baskets (*tripiṭaka*), and eliminate discrepancies regarding them.[67] Later councils sought to rectify doctrinal disputes such as different

[66] Regarding questions around the origins and dates of early Mahāyāna movements, see, e.g., Paul Harrison, "Searching for the Origins of the Mahāyāna"; David Drewes, "Early Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism I"; Jan Nattier, *A Few Good Men*.
[67] See Richard Robinson, *The Buddhist Religion*, 41–46.

interpretations of points from the vinaya. The *saṃgīti*s may have been the first wide-scale attempts by the saṃgha to address disputes regarding orthodoxy and orthopraxy and, by extension, to identify and expunge the "other" of orthodoxy: the heterodox views of heretics.

The councils are one illustration of what José Cabezón has referred to as Buddhism's "radically critical perspective."[68] Buddhist exegetical literature employs a variety of methods to establish the correct interpretations of ethical discipline, monastic conduct, or the "true" meanings of scriptures, including *sūtra*s and tantras. Buddhist literature on valid cognition (*pramāṇa*; *tshad ma*) identifies two principal forms of valid knowledge: direct perception (*pratyakṣa*; *mngon sum*) and inference (*anumāna*; *rjes dpag*). Scriptural authority is only considered a valid form of proof in exceptional cases, where it is impossible to determine the truth or falsity of a doctrinal question through reasoning or direct perception. Buddhist *śāstra*s frequently cite the parable of the goldsmith in order to illustrate that Buddhism is not a system based merely on faith, but one in which reasoned analysis is crucial. There was no fixed Buddhist canon, so what one group considered *buddhavacana*, another group might not. Hence, simply relying on the literal message of scripture was not an option in determining what is true. The parable reads:

> O Bhikshus, just as a goldsmith gets his gold,
> First testing by melting, cutting, and rubbing,
> Sages accept my teaching after full examination
> And not just out of devotion (to me).[69]

Following this model, Buddhist scholars devised sophisticated hermeneutical tools that

[68] José Cabezón, *Buddhism and Language*, 56.
[69] Translation by Robert A.F. Thurman, in *Tsong kha pa's Speech of Gold in the Essence of True Eloquence*, 190. According to José Cabezón, this verse is found in at least a dozen different treatises, the earliest dating to the eighth century. Several of these śāstras attribute the verse to the Buddha, implying that it originally comes from a sūtra, but if so, that scripture no longer exists. To date, the earliest work containing the goldsmith verse is Śāntarakṣita's *Tattvasaṃgraha*. Personal communication.

combined pragmatic ideological flexibility with a strong emphasis on analytical reasoning to deal with questions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. This approach remained crucial as new doctrines and forms of Buddhist literature emerged in the following centuries.

Buddhist texts may have no exact equivalent to the terms orthodox or heterodox, but they clearly differentiate between "insiders" to the tradition—that is, Buddhists (*bauddha*, *sangs rgyas pa*; or *ābhyantaraka*, *nang pa*)—and "outsiders" (*bāhyaka, phyi rol pa*) or heretics (*tīrthika*, *mu stegs pa*). However, even within the confines of those considered to be Buddhist—for example, those who have "taken refuge" in the Three Jewels (*triratna*; *dkon mchog gsum*)—there is a diversity of views, doctrines, and accepted forms of conduct. Disagreements often arose even within single Buddhist schools, so it goes without saying that significant differences occurred between traditions arising in entirely different social or historical contexts, as with the Mahāyāna schools and, later, the Mantrayāna. Broadly speaking, disputes can arise based on conflicting philosophical views (*dṛṣṭi*; *lta ba*) and soteriological claims, on questions of correct conduct (*caryā*; *spyod pa*), or in relation to questions of scriptural authority. When we examine debates between the Mahāyāna and Śrāvakayāna, or between the Mantrayāna and either the Śrāvakayāna or exoteric Mahāyāna, we find that these three types of claims frequently overlap. In the case of the Mantrayāna traditions, however, we will often find that the most profound disagreements regard correct conduct and questions of authenticity.

Upāya Kauśalya and Mahāyāna Hermeneutics

With the division of Buddhist schools into multiple traditions with often contradictory doctrines, fresh questions and controversies arose about their provenance and the authenticity of their teachings. For detractors, each newly appearing tradition may have represented little

more than fabrications seeking to present heretical innovations as Buddhist, while proponents saw them as fresh revelations of deeper levels of the Buddha's teachings and defended them using various arguments.

Here, again, the notion of skillful means was used to argue that Śākyamuni had in fact taught many levels of doctrine, even revealing them at different times, to suit the many proclivities of sentient beings. This allowed for substantial interpretive flexibility concerning doctrines that followers of the Śrāvakayāna, at least in the early phase of the Mahāyāna, often considered apocryphal. These are tensions, in the words of Donald Lopez Jr., "between what the Buddha taught and what he intended, between upāya and doctrine, between method and truth." The problem in understanding the myriad of Buddhist doctrines is, as he puts it, that

> the Buddha taught many things to many people, in accordance with their aspirations, capacities, and needs. How is one to choose among these myriad teachings, each "true" for its listener, to determine the final view of the teacher?[70]

In response to this question, numerous Mahāyāna authors composed śāstras seeking to prove the authenticity of the Mahāyāna. These included the *Ratnavālī*, by Nāgārjuna (ca. second c. CE), the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, by Asaṅga (ca. 320–390), the *Tarkajvāla*, by Bhāvaviveka (sixth c.), the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, by Śāntideva (ca. 685–763), and the *Munimatālaṃkāra*, by Abhayākaragupta (ca. 1064–1125).

The earliest work with a full reckoning of the question of the Mahāyāna's authenticity was the *Science of Exegesis* (*Vyākhyāyukti*), by Vasubandhu (ca. fourth–fifth c. CE). Here, Vasubandhu refutes the views of a (hypothetical) śrāvaka opponent who does not accept that the Mahāyāna is buddhavacana.[71] Vasubandhu quotes from the *Sūtra Eliciting the Superior*

[70] Donald Lopez, Jr., "On the Interpretation of the Mahāyāna Sūtras," 50.
[71] See Cabezón, "Vasubandhu's *Vyākhyāyukti* on the Authenticity of the Mahāyāna Sūtras," 221–243.

Thought (*Adhyāśayasañcodanasūtra*):

> Maitreya… whatever is spoken correctly (*subhāṣita*; *legs bzhad*) is the Buddha's word… the fact that it does not contradict reality is the proper definition (of the Buddha's word).[72]

According to Vasubandhu, then, the Buddha's word is that which is "spoken in accordance with the intellectual faculty of various human beings."[73] Such a formulation leaves ample room for interpretation; the question of whether the historical Buddha actually uttered the words becomes secondary to their soteriological effectiveness. As Cabezón puts this, this method is used to demonstrate that even if certain scriptural passages are not "unconditionally true," they are nonetheless "pragmatically true." That is, "they are all conducive to the spiritual development of those who hear them."[74] This of course has tremendous implications, setting the stage for the acceptance of texts that might otherwise be rejected as apocryphal, including Mahāyāna sūtras and tantric scriptures.

Definitive and Interpretable Meanings

Expanding on this idea of skillful means, a substantial body of Mahāyāna literature emerged that differentiate between scriptures of definitive meaning (*nītthārtha*; *nges don*)—that is, they could be understood literally as written—or of provisional meaning (*neyārtha*; *drang don*), meaning that they were given for the benefit of disciples who were temporarily unable to understand more profound levels of truth. Provisional sūtras were written with "intention" (*abhiprāya*; *dgongs pa*), or an ulterior motive to present a level of truth that, while not the final, ultimate truth (*paramārtha satya*; *don dam bden pa*), was still soteriologically useful.

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[72] Trans. Cabezón, "Vasubandhu's *Vyākhyāyukti*," 233.
[73] Cabezón, *Buddhism and Language*, 62. See also Lopez, "Authority and Orality in the Mahāyāna," 27.
[74] Cabezón, *Buddhism and Language*, 62.

Sūtras such as the *Laṅkāvatāra*, *Saṃdhinirmocana*, *Samādhirāja*, and *Akṣayamatinirdeśa* and later śāstras, such as Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā,* extensively dealt with the questions of definitive and interpretable sūtras.[75]

Other ways of establishing authenticity relied less on reasoning and more on supernatural explanations. A famous example is the story of the "retrieval" of the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* by Nāgārjuna. The legend recounts that after teaching the *Perfection of Wisdom in One Hundred Thousand Lines* (*Śatasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā*), the Buddha safeguarded it in the undersea kingdom of the nāgas, where Nāgārjuna eventually retrieved it and brought it back to the human realm. In other cases, it could be claimed that even if the Mahāyāna sūtras were not directly spoken by the Buddha, they were at least spoken by one of his disciples while in the presence of the Buddha. In the *Heart Sūtra* (*Bhagavatī-prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya-sūtra*), the Buddha's disciple Śāriputra questions the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara about the "profound perfection of wisdom" as the Buddha remains absorbed in *samādhi* nearby.[76] Although Avalokiteśvara gives the teaching, the Buddha's presence and tacit approval, including his concluding words ("Well done, well done, child of good lineage, it is like that…") establish the sermon as authentic.[77] As with the exoteric Mahāyāna, a number of narratives also emerged to explain how the tantras also suddenly, and often miraculously, made their appearance in the world.[78]

Development of the Mantra Vehicle

[75] See Cabezón, *Buddhism and Language*, 63–70, for an extensive explanation of this topic.
[76] See Lopez, Jr., *Elaborations on Emptiness*, vii–viii.
[77] Lopez, Jr., *Elaborations*, viii.
[78] One example is of King Dza, sometimes identified with King Indrabhūti of Oḍḍiyāna. He is said to have received empowerment into the mahāyoga tantras from the Buddha, who was in the form of Vajradhara in union with his consort. See Cabezón, *The Buddha's Doctrine and the Nine Vehicles*, 84n26; 88n38.

The early development of tantric Buddhism, as with the earlier Mahāyāna traditions, was a highly fluid, dynamic process that took place over several centuries. Buddhist tantric texts may have begun to emerge as early as the seventh century CE and to have coalesced into distinct traditions by the ninth and tenth centuries. Ronald Davidson identifies the second half of the seventh century, before the emergence of mahāyoga or yoganiruttara tantras,[79] as the period in which a "mature" or "definitive" phase of tantric Buddhism developed, a phase characterized by distinctly tantric elements such as the "immutable master-disciple bond… royal acts of consecration… and elaborate maṇḍalas in which the meditator was to envision himself as the Buddha in a field of subordinate Buddhas."[80] However, a number of typically tantric elements had already been present several centuries earlier in certain Mahāyāna texts. "Proto-tantric" Mahāyāna collections of *dhāraṇī*s date to as early as the fourth century CE, and key elements of kriyātantra and caryātantra rituals—recitation of *dhāraṇī*s to ward off sickness and increase merit, worship of Buddhist relics and stupas, and devotional practices focusing on bodhisattvas such as Avalokiteśvara and Mañjuśrī, could all be seen as extensions of already widespread Mahāyāna doctrines and practices.[81] As Matthew Kapstein writes,

> it seems plausible to hold that the practice of "incantation and ritual," directed to both ultimate and mundane ends, had become normal Mahāyāna practice, and not merely popular cult shunned by the learned clergy, prior to the sixth century, and probably as early as the third… It was only after this corpus [of ritual lore] had grown sufficiently massive to take on a life of its own, however, that conditions came to favor the

[79] It has long been a scholarly tendency in Indology and Tibetology to back-translate the Tibetan term *bla med rnal 'byor rgyud* into Sanskrit as *anuttarayoga tantra*. However, this term does not appear in Sanskrit texts, while the terms *niruttarayoga tantra yoganiruttara tantra* do. Thanks to Roger Jackson for pointing this out to me.
[80] Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, 117.
[81] See, for example, Bhattacharyya, *History of Tantric Religion*, 211–12, and Davidson, "Studies in Dhāraṇī Literature" (2009). Davidson also notes that typically "tantric" features, such as expression of "powerful phrases," arrangement of altars, and references to scepters (*vajra*s) all predate Buddhism. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, 117, 368n10.

> emergence of the mantranaya and later Vajrayāna as distinct ways of Buddhist practice, apart from the pāramitānaya, the ethico-philosophical tradition of the Mahāyāna.[82]

Thematically and structurally, tantric scriptures varied widely. Some introduced greater degrees of devotional ritual to buddhas and bodhisattvas but did not overtly reject established Buddhist orthodoxies; others, such as the later mahāyogatantras, yoginītantras, and yoganiruttaratantras, emphasized antinomian doctrines to such a degree that harmonizing them with Śrāvakayāna and exoteric Mahāyāna (Pāramitāyāna) doctrines presented a number of interpretative problems.

Tantric Doxography: Four Classes of Tantra

With the rapid proliferation of tantric scriptures, scholars devised a number of ways to classify this vast array of new texts. The tantras were a heterogeneous body of texts, and there was no single "tantric" soteriology. The process of categorizing the tantras into distinct classes suitable for varying levels of disciples can be seen as another deployment of the notion of upāya, the idea that the Buddha had taught different disciples in varying ways according to their capacities. This attempt to harmonize the tantras with normative Buddhist ethics—a sort of "taming" of the tantras—was part of a larger attempt within the Indian Buddhist world to establish the tantras as authentically Buddhist works and to establish a hierarchy that subsumed even the most transgressive tantric practices with a broader Mahāyāna ethical framework. Like other doxographical systems that became widespread in India and Tibet, such schemes rarely reflect the chronological emergence of these tantras, and often reflected sectarian concerns.[83] This is far too extensive a topic to cover in detail

[82] Kapstein, *Reason's Traces*, 245.
[83] Texts dealing with the categorization of Buddhist (and non-Buddhist) philosophical tenet systems were known as *siddhānta* (*grub mtha'*), literally "established conclusion." These texts generally divided non-tantric

here, but a brief overview will be useful.

Some of the earliest tantras, such as the *Mañjuśriyamūlakalpa*, the *Mahāvairocanābhisaṃbodhitantra*, and the *Sarvatathāgata-tattvasaṃgraha*, are believed to have been composed between the seventh and eighth centuries CE.[84] Only later were they classified as different classes of tantra, respectively as kriyātantra, caryātantra, and yogatantra. The *Guhyasamājatantra*, likely composed in the eighth century,[85] was one of the earliest of the antinomian tantras, explicitly teaching sexual rituals and other forms of transgressive conduct.[86] Although the *Guhyasamāja* was initially classified as a mahāyogatantra (*rnal 'byor chen po rgyud*), later classifications placed it within the yoganiruttaratantra class. The latest, most radical texts of tantric literature—the yoginītantras (*rnal 'byor ma'i rgyud*), which included the *Hevajra-tantra* and the *Laghuśaṃvaratantra* (also known as the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra*)—likely began appearing in the eighth century, gaining prominence in the ninth and tenth centuries.[87] The *Kālacakratantra*, the last of the yoganiruttaratantras, appeared in the eleventh century.[88]

The tantric classification system that eventually became standardized by later scholars divided the tantras into four classes: action tantra (*kriyātantra*; *bya rgyud*), performance or conduct tantra (*caryātantra*; *spyod rgyud*), yogatantra (*rnal 'byor rgyud*), and unsurpassed yoga tantra (*yoganiruttaratantra*; *bla na med pa'i rnal 'byor rgyud*). One of the common

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Buddhist tenets into four schools: Vaibhāṣika, Sautrāntika, Cittamatra, and Madhyamaka (the first two classified as Hīnayāna, the last two as Mahāyāna), which themselves had further sub-divisions. Among the most important Indian examples are Bhāvaviveka's *Tarkajvālā* and Śāntarakṣita's *Tattvasaṃgraha*. Tibetan authors developed these into an entire textual genre.

[84] Alexis Sanderson writes that the date of the *Mañjuśriyamūlakalpa* is "obscure," but according to Yukei Matsunaga, it was composed prior to 702 CE. See Sanderson, "Śaiva Age," 129n300.

[85] See earlier note. Wayman dates the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* as early as the fifth century, but this has been largely rejected as too early by other scholars. See Wayman, *The Buddhist Tantras*, 13–19.

[86] See Sanderson, "Śaiva Age," 141.

[87] See Shaman Hatley, "Converting the Ḍākinī," 37; Roger Jackson, *Tantric Treasures*, 10–15.

[88] Vesna Wallace, *The Inner Kālacakratantra*, 3.

rationales for dividing them into four rested on their differences in terms of emphasizing "external" or "internal" activities: the outer tantras (kriyā and caryā) principally emphasized cleanliness of the body, fasting, and elaborate rituals utilizing numerous offering substances, while the inner tantras (yoga and yoganiruttara) placed greater emphasis on meditation and internal yogic practices.[89] The tantras could also be divided in terms of the strength of desire used by the yogin, and the pleasure thus derived, within the context of tantric practice.[90]

The fourfold classification was initially developed by Indian scholars and later refined by Tibetan scholars, not becoming prevalent until the eleventh century.[91] As Dalton writes,

> the Tibetan tradition of tantric doxography was a very different creature from the Indian one, probably with much more at stake, and we should be careful when we apply these uniquely Tibetan doxographical categories to the history of tantric Buddhism in India. Fourfold schemes vaguely resembling the now classic system appear in a couple of Indian texts (along with a wide variety of alternative schemes), but the system as we know it was formalized in Tibet and for Tibetan interests.[92]

As newer tantric systems of the yoginī, mahāyoga, and yoganiruttara classes continued to appear, well into the eleventh century, the classification systems adapted in turn. This was a

[89] See Jeffrey Hopkins, *Tantric Techniques*, 321–357 for a detailed discussion of Bu ston rin chen grub (1290–1364) and Tsongkhapa's (1357–1419) views on this topic.

[90] One of the principal sources for this classification is the following passage from the *Saṃpuṭa Tantra*, a yoganiruttaratantra text: "The four aspects of smiling, gazing / Holding hands, and the two embracing / Reside as the four tantras / In the manner of insects." From the *Caturyoginī-saṃpuṭatantra* (*Rnal 'byor ma bzhi'i kha sbyor kyi rgyud*); P24, vol. 2. Trans. in Hopkins, *Tantric Techniques*, 335. The "manner of insects" here refers to a metaphor in which the tantric process of utilizing desire in the path to awakening is compared to the way a termite—said to be born from wood (or, in classical Buddhist beliefs, from "heat and moisture")—survives by consuming the very wood that gave birth to it.

[91] Jacob Dalton cites the tantric works of Kaṇha/Kṛṣṇacārin (ca. eleventh c.) as an early source for the fourfold classification. This later influenced the Sakya (Sa skya) school, where the fourfold scheme was first discussed in the works of Sachen Kunga Nyingpo (Sa chen kun dga' snying po; 1092–1158). See Dalton, "A Crisis of Doxography," 157–158. These classifications became the basis for an entire genre of texts by later masters, such as the *General Explanation of the Tantric Classes* (*Rgyud sde spyi'i rnam gzhag*) by Tsongkhapa's disciple, the great scholar Khedrup Jé (Mkhas grub dge legs dpal bzang po; 1385–1438). Translated as *Mkhas Grub Rje's Fundamentals of the Buddhist Tantras*, trans. Wayman and Lessing.

[92] Dalton, "Crisis of Doxography," 118.

dynamic process in which various scholars, often with specific sectarian perspectives, attempted to standardize a massive and variegated corpus of tantras and tantric śāstras. We can see parallels here with the process of standardizing the Tibetan canonical collections: the *Kangyur* (*bka' 'gyur*; words of the Buddha) and *Tengyur* (*bstan 'gyur*; canonical Indian commentaries)—a process that resulted in multiple divergent "canons."[93]

The earliest Tibetan attempts at systematizing the tantras are found in texts attributed to Padmasambhava (eighth century) and followers of the early Nyingma (*rnying ma*) schools. They devised a ninefold scheme, which included both the non-tantric and tantric "yānas," although they did not include the mahāyogas or yoganiruttaratantras.[94] Later classifications incorporated the newer tantras, leading to variations in enumeration. The *Explanation of the Three Vehicles* (*Triyānavyavasthāna*; *Theg pa gsum rnam par gzhag pa*), by (pseudo?) Ratnākaraśanti (late tenth to eleventh century), lists five classes;[95] while Atiśa Dīpaṃkara, one of the major figures of the later transmission (*chidar*) in the eleventh century, sometimes listed four or five tantric classes, but in his *Commentary on the Lamp for the Path to Awakening* (*Bodhimārgadīpapañjikā*; *Byang chub lam gyi sgron ma'i dka' 'grel*), a commentary on his *Bodhipathapradīpa*, he listed seven.[96] Other classification schemes include those by Abhayākaragupta, whose *Amnāyamañjari* divides the tantras into father and

[93] See, for example, Schaeffer and van der Kuijp (trans.), *An Early Tibetan Survey of Buddhist Literature: The* Bstan Pa Rgyas Pa Rgyan Gyi Nyi 'Od *of Bcom Idan Ral Gri*.
[94] The nine vehicles (*yāna*; *theg pa*) according to *rnying ma* systems, from lowest to highest, are the three non-tantric systems: Śrāvakayāna (*nyan thos kyi theg pa*), Pratyekabuddhayāna (*rang rgyal ba'i theg pa*), Bodhisattvayāna (*byang chub sems dpa'i theg pa*); and the six tantric classes: kriyātantra, Ubhayatantra (*u pa'i rgyud*; sometimes known as caryātantra), yogatantra, mahāyogatantra (*rnal 'byor chen po rgyud*), Anuyogatantra (*rjes su rnal 'byor rgyud*), and Atiyoga, the Great Perfection (*rdzogs pa chen po*). See Cabezón, *The Buddha's Doctrine and the Nine Vehicles*, 181ff., as well as Jacob Dalton, "A Crisis of Doxography."
[95] According to Ratnākaraśanti, "the vehicle that is both profound and lofty [i.e. the Mantrayāna] has five parts: (1) kriyā, (2) caryā, (3) Yoga, (4) Mahāyoga, and (5) Yoganiruttara." Ratnākaraśanti, (D 3712), 275. Trans. José Cabezón (unpublished). See also Dalton, "Crisis of Doxography," 156.
[96] The seven listed by Atiśa are kriyā, caryā, *kalpa, ubhayā (non-dual), yoga, mahāyoga, and yoganiruttara tantra. See Sherburne, *Complete Works of Atīśa*, 283–5; Dalton, "A Crisis of Doxography," 152.

mother tantras, and the anonymous author of the *Yānavakpradīpa* (*Theg pa gsung gi sgron ma*), which speaks of the divisions of the "causal" and "resultant" vehicles, that is the Perfection Vehicle (Pāramitāyāna) and Mantra Vehicle (Mantrayāna), and division of the tantras into four classes.[97]

The Yoganiruttaratantras and Yoginītantras

Within the tantric tradition, the yoganiruttaratantras were considered—as their name makes explicit—the supreme class of tantra, for a number of reasons.[98] With ritual elements that involved sexual practices, ritual violence, and overt transgression of norms of purity, the yoganiruttaratantras (which include the yoginītantras) were also the most difficult to reconcile with exoteric Buddhist doctrines and ethical norms. Many of these texts, especially the yoginītantras, also bore the distinct influence of non-Buddhist tantric traditions, such as the Śaiva and Śākta tantras, raising questions about their authenticity.[99] As an example of the overt eroticism of the yoganiruttaratantras, we need look no further than the *nidāna*, or introductory setting, of both the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* and *Hevajra Tantra*:

> Thus have I heard: at one time the Lord [Bhagavān] reposed in the vaginas of the Vajra-maidens—the heart of the Body, Speech and Mind of all Buddhas.[100]

Clearly, from the outset, this could be seen as a wildly unorthodox teaching when compared

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[97] Abhayakaragupta, *Amnāyamañjari*, Pedurma 1231, 1233, 1257, 1268. Anonymous, *Yānavakpradīpa* (*Theg pa gsung gi sgron ma*), D 2316, Pedurma, p. 1682.

[98] See Hopkins, *Tantra in Tibet*, 151–64, for a detailed summary of the characteristics of the four classes of tantra, including the ideal qualities of the disciples of each of the four sets. While Hopkins' presentation is that of Tsongkhapa, and thus from a later Tibetan perspective, I believe it accurately represents traditional Indian and Tibetan views on tantra.

[99] See Sanderson, "The Śaiva Age," 124–243, for an extensive discussion of the relation between Buddhist and Śaiva tantric traditions. A passage in the *Mahāvairocanābhisaṃbodhi* makes it clear that Buddhists were aware of doubts regarding the legitimacy of the Buddhist tantras: "O [Vajrapāṇi,] Lord of the Yakṣas, in time to come there will arise people of inferior understanding and no faith who will not believe this teaching… They will say that this is not the teaching of the Buddhas but belongs to the outsiders." Sanderson, "Śaiva Age," 128.

[100] Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism* (Vol. 1), 121.

to mainstream Śrāvakayāna and Mahāyāna doctrines.

The *Guhyasamāja Tantra*, which was initially classed as a mahāyoga tantra, divides yoganiruttaratantra practice into two stages: the stage of generation (*utpattikrama*; *bskyed rim*) and the stage of completion (*niṣpannakrama*; *rdzogs rim*). In the generation stage, the practitioner uses a process of visualization to simulate and purify the processes of death, the intermediate state (*antarābhava*; *bar do*), and rebirth, in which they imagine arising in the three bodies of a buddha: the *dharmakāya* (*chos sku*), *saṃbhogakāya* (*longs spyod sku*), and *nirmāṇakāya* (*sprul pa'i sku*). In the completion stage, they practice yogas in which they develop mastery over the inner winds (*prāṇa*; *rlung*), channels (*nāḍi*; *rtsa*), and drops (*bindu*; *thig le*) in order to attain the final state of union, or buddhahood.[101] In Nāgārjuna's *Pañcakrama* (*Five Stages*), the completion stage is divided into five stages: vajra recitation (*vajrajāpa*), mind isolation (*cittaviveka*), self-consecration (*svādhiṣṭhāna*), clear light (*prabhāsvara*), and union (*yuganaddha*). Once the yogin has sufficiently mastered the two stages, they are permitted to engage in various types of antinomian conducts (*caryā*, or *vrata-caryā*) that make use of sensual pleasures, including sexual practice with a consort (*vidyā vrata*).[102] Other yoganiruttaratantra and yoginītantra systems generally follow this overall pattern, with some variations.

While some classifications considered the mahāyoga tantras and yoginītantras as separate categories, the above fourfold classification subsumed them both in the yoganiruttaratantra class.[103] Some have suggested that the bifurcation into mahāyoga and

[101] See Wedemeyer, *Lamp for Integrating the Practices*, 63–65, and Tsongkhapa, *Lamp to Illuminate the Five Stages*, 3–8.
[102] Wedemeyer, *Lamp for Integrating the Practices*, 65.
[103] The earliest dateable example in which yoganiruttaratantra is presented as a distinct class of tantras is, according to Dalton, in the late tenth-century writings of Śraddhākaravarma, who worked with the Tibetan translator Rinchen Zangpo (Rin chen bzang po). See Dalton, "Crisis of Doxography," 156.

yoginī tantras may have been the basis for later divisions of the yoganiruttaratantras into mother tantra (*ma rgyud*), which emphasizes the yoga of clear light (*prabhāsvara*; *'od gsal*), and father tantra (*pha rgyud*), which emphasizes the yoga of the illusory body (*māyākāya* or *māyādeha*; *sgyu lus*).[104]

According to later commentarial traditions, such as Tsongkhapa's Geluk school, one of the principal objectives of yoganiruttaratantra practice is to manifest the subtlest level of consciousness, or clear light (*prabhāsvara*; *'od gsal*), and use it to realize emptiness, non-duality, or the innate (*sahaja*). According to the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*, the mind of clear light is normally obscured by grosser levels of mind, though it may become manifest on specific occasions, such as the time of death, when going to sleep, fainting, and experiencing sexual orgasm. When a yogin has sufficiently trained in both the generation stage and completion stage, thereby attaining mastery of both the mind and the internal energies, they are able, through sexual union with a consort (*vidyā*; *rig ma*), to cause the "melting" of the drops (*bindu*; *thig le*) and the absorption of the winds (*prāṇa*; *rlung*) into the central channel (*avadhūti*; *rtsa dbu ma*), thus causing the clear light mind to become manifest. [105] Using this extremely subtle, blissful mind to meditate on emptiness is believed to be a far more powerful, and quicker, means to achieve awakening than the methods explained in the exoteric Mahāyāna, or even in the three lower tantra sets. As Hopkins describes this process, it is "ordinary desire used in an extraordinary way."[106] However, it may well be, as some have argued, that such elements of tantric exegesis, or "Tantric 'mysticism,'" are later

[104] See Dalton, "Crisis," 156n90.
[105] Note that there is a great deal of variation and debate regarding whether the seal (*mudrā*) in such practices is to be an actual "action seal" (*karmamudrā*; *las kyi phyag rgya*) or a visualized "wisdom seal" (*jñānamudrā*; *ye shes phyag rgya*). We will return to this point in greater detail further on.
[106] See Hopkins, *Tantric Techniques*, 335–338 for more detail.

accretions, "second-order reflections… that in fact have, over time, brought Tantra back into the fold of more conventional forms of South Asian precept and practice."[107]

Buddhist Ethics

The preceding discussion helps us to understand how Mahāyāna traditions sought to systematize the vast body of tantric texts, and the criteria they used to do so. What we have not directly addressed, however, are the ethical questions that tantric practices raised, especially in their antinomian forms, and how such practices could be reconciled with the ethical norms of the Śrāvakayāna and Mahāyāna.

In terms of its ultimate aims, Buddhist soteriology is primarily concerned with the attainment of either the attainment of *nirvāṇa* (and the state of an *arhat*) or the state of full awakening of a *buddha*. Both goals come about through the abandonment of erroneous mental states and their imprints. Mahāyāna traditions claim to possess superior methods, such as generation of the mind of awakening (*bodhicitta*), practice of the bodhisattva path and the *pāramitā*s, and a more profound understanding of emptiness. The Mantrayāna is said to lead to the same result as the Pāramitāyāna, although it relies on special methods, such as deity yoga, practice of the two stages, recitation of mantras, rituals, and so forth.

However, neither the attainment of *nirvāṇa* nor *bodhi* is possible without a firm foundation in ethics (*śīla*; *tshul khrims*). The main source for Śrāvakayāna ethics is the vinaya, the corpus of texts on monastic conduct, in the context of the *prātimokṣa* (*so so thar pa*) vows.[108] While the cultivation of correct views about reality is crucial to achieving

[107] David Gordon White, *Kiss of the Yoginī*, 13.
[108] Peter Harvey lists three versions of the *prātimokṣa* (P. *pāṭimokkha*) that are still followed today: the *Theravādin* in Southern Buddhism (i.e. in *Theravādin* traditions), the *Mūla-Sarvāstivādin* in Northern

Buddhism's ultimate aims—the abandonment of the *kleśa*s, *nirvāṇa*, and buddhahood—such views are only effective to the extent that one has disciplined the body and speech. They are thus, in a general sense, more concerned with orthopraxy than orthodoxy.

Antinomianism and the Mahāyāna

The development and coalescence of Mahāyāna sects, beginning as early as the first century BCE, brought a re-evaluation of Śrāvakayāna ethical norms, as well as formulations of new ethical precepts reflecting their emphasis on the bodhisattva path. This new ethical framework, with its endorsement of a more flexible approach to ethics, presented challenges to followers of the Śrāvakayāna. Even actions considered unwholesome (*akuśala*; *mi dge ba*) in the Śrāvakayāna context could, if done with a motivation of compassion for others, be considered wholesome, even meritorious, in Mahāyāna contexts. In order to cultivate and train in bodhicitta, Mahāyāna Buddhists began to adopt the bodhisattva morality (*bodhisattvaśīla*), which could be assumed by either lay or ordained Mahāyānists.

In *Stages of Bodhisattvas* (*Bodhisattvabhūmi*), Asaṅga classified bodhisattva morality into three main categories: the ethics of restraint (*saṃvaraśīla*); the ethics of gathering virtuous qualities (*kuśaladharma-saṃgrāhakaśīla*); and the ethics for enacting the aims of others (*sattvārthakriyāśīla*).[109] The first group included the prātimokṣa precepts, while the second and third groups specifically related to Mahāyāna ethics. The bodhisattva precepts were eventually formulated into eighteen root vows and forty-six branch vows, drawing principally on texts such as the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*.[110]

Buddhism (esp. Tibetan and other Himalayan traditions), and the *Dharmaguptaka* in Eastern Buddhism (i.e. Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Buddhism). See Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, 93–94.

[109] See Paul Groner, "The Bodhisattva Precepts," 30–34, and Gareth Sparham, "Tantric Ethics," in *Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Ethics*, 250–1.

[110] See Groner, "The Bodhisattva Precepts," 29–48.

In these formulations of Mahāyāna ethics, we begin to see evidence of how employing upāya led to a kind of Mahāyāna antinomianism. With the emphasis on compassionate conduct taking precedence over the more rigid rule-governed morality of the prātimokṣa, Asaṅga makes it clear that a bodhisattva with a powerfully compassionate motivation could even commit what would normally—for śrāvakas, that is—be considered a moral downfall and still not incur any fault. As he writes in the *Mahāyānasaṃgraha*, bodhisattvas have

> a special training specific to them because they will break the rules and rule-governed morality. In their unique moral training, what is a moral downfall for a śrāvaka is not a moral downfall for a bodhisattva, and what is a moral downfall for a bodhisattva is not a downfall for a śrāvaka . . . In brief, free from moral evil, a bodhisattva engages in *any* action of body, speech, or mind that benefits any being. . . Their discipline is profound because if a bodhisattva with such qualities as skill-in-means engages even in the ten kinds of moral evil—like killing, etc.—they do not incur any fault, but instead generate immeasurable merit.[111]

In Asaṅga's telling, bodhisattvas are effectively "free from moral evil" as long as their actions are rooted in the cultivation of bodhicitta. In addition to the development of bodhicitta, however, the bodhisattva's ability to transcend notions of good and evil depends on their mastery of the wisdom realizing emptiness, the ultimate nature of phenomena. This wisdom is key to what is described as "a movement in the Mahāyāna from a strict adherence to the moral code of auditors [*śrāvaka*s] to an acceptance of the 'advanced' morality of the bodhisattva."[112] This is illustrated by a citation from Candrakīrti's *Entering into the Middle Way* (*Madhyamakāvatāra*):

> If he sees [in] moral purity an own-being,

[111] Trans. Cabezón, in *Sexuality in Classical South Asian Buddhism*, 285.
[112] Jan-Ulrich Sobisch (citing Ulrich Pagel), *Three-Vow Theories in Tibetan Buddhism*, 5.

By that very reason, his morality is not pure.[113]

In the "advanced" Mahāyāna perspective, then, the very act of grasping to an "own-being" (*svabhāva*; *rang bzhin*) in morality is seen as an impediment to pure morality. Thus, for a bodhisattva, even killing, when motivated by a heightened state of compassion and joined with *prajñā*, can become an act of virtue. It is not difficult to imagine how such acts could lead to misunderstandings or to charges of heresy.

The flexibility of Mahāyāna views regarding moral behavior, and in particular the stress placed on the possibility of obtaining positive results from (seemingly) negative actions has prompted some scholars to consider Mahāyāna ethics as a consequentialist type of ethics. That is, the consequences of one's conduct, not the actions themselves, are ultimately the basis upon which we judge actions to be right or wrong.[114] In all types of Buddhist ethics, however, the motivation for an action remains crucial; this is even more so in Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna contexts, where the ideal motivation is one of intense compassion.

The Mahāyāna emphasis on upāya allowed for a degree of interpretative flexibility regarding ethical questions that was both liberating and problematic. Greater freedom implied greater risks, and thus greater responsibilities. Describing the challenges implicit in this situation, José Cabezón writes,

> when we examine the Buddhist tradition as a whole, we find that what is proscribed by one law is often prescribed by another, higher law. Hence what is antinomian from the earlier Buddhist ethical perspective comes to be considered "pronomian"

[113] Cited by Sobisch, *Three-Vow Theories in Tibetan Buddhism*, 5. Tibetan text (ch. II, v. 3): *gal te de ni khrims dag rang bzhin lta / de phyir de ni tshul khrims dag mi 'gyur.* See Candrakīrti, *Madhyamakāvatāra,* edited by Louis de la Vallée Poussin (1907–1912: 37).

[114] See Vasen, "Buddhist Ethics Compared to Western Ethics," 329–330. Peter Harvey argues against this view, positing that Buddhist ethics is more teleological than consequentialist: while Buddhist ethics, like Aristotelian ethics, focuses on the end goal (*telos*), "an action is right because it embodies a virtue which conduces to and 'participates' in the goal of human perfection." Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, 50.

from the perspective of a new *nomos*—in this case, the law of the Mahāyāna.[115] This recalls our earlier discussion of orthodoxy, wherein "orthodoxies in most of the traditions surveyed here were at one time or another considered to be heretical, both by the prevailing political powers and the majority of the faithful."[116] Thus, while the increased moral flexibility of Mahāyāna doctrines implied a more open approach to ethics, it also led to interpretative dilemmas when those doctrines contravened Śrāvakayāna ones. These problems would become even more difficult when it came to later Vajrayāna scriptures, many of which appeared to upend cherished Śrāvakayāna and Mahāyāna ethical doctrines.

Mantrayāna Ethics

In the Mantrayāna, the principle of moral flexibility was often taken to its extreme. In its most radical forms, as we see in some yoganiruttaratantra, yoginītantra, and mahāyoga scriptures, tantric ethics often seemed to openly advocate violation of fundamental Buddhist ethical mores. The *Hevajra Tantra* and *Guhyasamāja Tantra* explicitly encourage disciples to engage in killing, stealing, lying, ritual sexual intercourse, consumption of bodily fluids and other "impure" substances, and even ritual violence and killing. One passage from the *Hevajra Tantra* reads:

> You should slay living beings; you should speak lying words; you should take what is not given; you should frequent others' wives. To practice singleness of thought is the taking of life, for thought is life. Saying "I will save the world" is interpreted as lying speech. Semen from women is what is not given, and another's wife is as fair as one's own.[117]

Taken literally, such a passage indeed seems to advocate the transgression of basic Buddhist

[115] Cabezón, *Sexuality in Classical South Asian Buddhism*, 286.
[116] Henderson, *Construction*, 39.
[117] Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism* (vol. 1), 173.

precepts, such as not killing, stealing, lying, and so forth. The text itself, however, immediately glosses these terms, showing that, in this case at least, they do not refer to actual transgressions of these precepts: "slaying living beings" refers to cultivation of a single-pointed mind; lying is saying "I will save the world," and so forth. This is but one of many examples of the use of "intentional language" (*sandhyābhāṣā* or *saṃdhyābhāṣyā*; *dgongs bshad* or *dgongs skad*) in the tantras, where multiple meanings may be conveyed by the same terms or phrases.

While passages such as the one above may seem on the surface to prescribe total transgression of Buddhist morality, however, Buddhist tantric traditions have their own specific formulations of ethical precepts. Different tantras give varying enumerations of the tantric vows (*saṃvara*; *sdom pa* or *samaya*; *dam tshig*). One of the primary sources for the systemization of Vajrayāna morality is the *Vajra Peak Tantra* (*Vajraśekhara Tantra*), itself a supplement (explanation tantra) to the *Compendium of the Reality of all Tathāgatas* (*Sarvatathāgata Tattvasaṃgraha*), one of the most important yogatantra texts.[118] Within the fourfold division of the tantras, there is no specific tantric morality for the kriyā and caryā classes; disciples of these tantras assume the bodhisattva precepts, as in the Pāramitāyāna.[119] When receiving consecration into the yogatantra and yoganiruttaratantra classes (including the yoginītantras), however, disciples receive commitments related to the five buddha families (*pañcatathāgata*; *de bzhin shegs pa lnga*), as well as the commitment to restrain from an additional fourteen downfalls (*āpatti*; *ltung ba*) and eight minor downfalls

[118] Sparham, "Tantric Ethics," 248.
[119] See Kirti Tsenshap Rinpoche, *Principles of Buddhist Tantra*, 28. Tsenshap Rinpoche comments on the text *Illumination of the Tantric Tradition*, by Ngawang Palden. A text attributed to Atiśa, which is, however, likely apocryphal—*Summary of All Pledges* (*Sarvasamayasaṃgraha*; *Dam tshig thams cad bsdus pa*)—claims that there are tantric vows for each class of tantra, but does not specify what they are. Thanks to José Cabezón for bringing this text to my attention.

(*sthūlāpatti*; *sbom po*).

The *Vajra Peak Tantra* explains the commitments of the five buddha families, or five tathāgatas, which represent the purified forms of the aggregates (*skandha*s) of the practitioners. These commitments integrate practices of Sūtrayāna and Mantrayāna, showing that harmonizing the esoteric and exoteric approaches was a central concern early in the tradition. Included in these, for example, are commitments to uphold the three jewels; practice the three types of ethics;[120] uphold the vajra, bell, and *mudrā*; practice four types of giving; and keep the "external, secret, and the three vehicles." The "external" and "secret" here include all the classes of tantra, while the "three vehicles" are the three exoteric Buddhist vehicles: the Śrāvakayāna, Pratyekabuddhayāna, and Bodhisattvayāna.[121] The fourteen *āpatti*s and eight *sthūlāpatti*s are explained in the *Summary of Vajrayāna Root Downfalls* (*Vajrayānamūlāpattisaṃgraha*), attributed in the Tibetan translation to Tayang (Rta dbyangs; a certain Aśvaghoṣa) or Bhavilha (Bhavideva; Bha bi lha).[122] Tsongkhapa's commentary on tantric ethics also cites a text called *Vajrayāna Gross Downfalls* (*Vajrayānasthūlāpatti*; *Rdo rje theg pa'i sbom po'i ltung ba*), which is attributed to "the master Nāgārjuna."[123] The *Summary of Vajrayāna Root Downfalls* summarizes the fourteen root downfalls as follows:

> Vajradhāra said *siddhis* flow from the masters, so the first root downfall is said to be disparaging them. The second downfall is said to be overstepping the command of the Sugatas. The Jinas say the third is displaying cruelty to vajra relatives out of

[120] The ethics of restraint, ethics of gathering virtuous qualities, and ethics for enacting the aims of others.
[121] See Sparham, "Tantric Ethics," 248–249. See also Tsongkhapa, *Tantric Ethics*, 49–59.
[122] Sparham writes that these codes were first formulated in northeast India towards the second half of the tenth century, and that Indian contact with Tibetans may have been a catalyst for their formulation. See Sparham, "Tantric Ethics," 251–252. See also Sparham, *Tantric Ethics*, 16–17.
[123] Tsongkhapa, *An Explanation of Tantric Morality Called "Clusters of Siddhis,"* in Sparham, *Tantric Ethics*, 21. This is obviously not the same Nāgārjuna who authored the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* and other Madhyamaka works, but the "tantric" Nāgārjuna, the author of the *Pañcakrama*, a major commentary on the five stages of the Guhyasamāja completion stage.

> anger, the fourth is giving up love for beings. The fifth is giving up *bodhicitta*, the root of dharmas. The sixth is criticizing the doctrine of your own or another tenet system, the seventh is speaking publicly about secrets to immature beings, the eighth is treating with contempt the *skandha*s that are in essence the five buddhas, and the ninth is to question the essential purity of dharmas. The tenth is held to be persisting in showing affection to the wicked, eleventh is the false imagination of dharmas without names and so on, twelfth is said to be spoiling the minds of living beings who have faith. Thirteenth is not resorting to pledges as they are found, and fourteenth is despising women whose essence is wisdom.[124]

Again, we see an integration of Sūtrayāna and Mantrayāna principles: disciples are exhorted to maintain typically Mahāyāna practices, such as not giving up love for beings and bodhicitta, as well as specifically tantric ones, such as maintaining respect for "vajra relatives," maintaining secrecy about tantric practices, and not "despising women, whose essence is wisdom," a vow specifically related to the yoginītantras.

Reconciling the Three Vows

These three levels of ethical discipline, or *trisaṃvara* (*sdom pa gsum*)—the prātimokṣa vows, bodhisattva vows, and tantric vows—deal with different formulations of Buddhist ethics that seem in many ways incompatible. While one practicing the Śrāvakayāna would adopt the prātimokṣa vows to abandon attachment to sensual pleasures and attain liberation, a follower of the Mahāyāna would place the welfare of others over their own. As Śāntideva so famously put it in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, the bodhisattva had to be willing to remain "as long as space endures and for as long as the world lasts" to liberate every living being from suffering.[125] The principle of upāya thus implied that a bodhisattva could effectively violate prātimokṣa precepts without *actually* committing an infraction, as long as they were motivated by

[124] Sparham, "Tantric Ethics," 251–252.
[125] Śāntideva, vv. 10.55 and 10.56, in *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. Translation by Vesna and Alan Wallace, in *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*, 144.

bodhicitta. Crucially, however, this was not just seen as a form of moral relativism, where one could pick and choose which vows to uphold and which to reject, based on their own wishes. Followers of the exoteric Mahāyāna were *obligated* by their precepts to act for the welfare of others, not just their own salvation, as much as possible; practitioners of the Mantrayāna, similarly, were morally committed to uphold the tantric precepts, or samayas.

Some of these, such as avoiding "giving up love for beings," were, for all intents and purposes, restating the essence of the Mahāyāna precepts. Others, however, related specifically to tantric conduct, such as maintaining secrecy or "treating with contempt the skandhas that are in essence the five buddhas." The latter would seem to directly challenge the strongly ascetic orientation of mainstream Buddhist doctrines. The Pāli *sutta*s, for example, contain multiple instances in which the Buddha exhorts his *bhikkhu*s to contemplate the three marks, or characteristics (P. *tilakkana*; *trilakṣaṇa*), of all conditioned phenomena: they should see the five skandhas (*khandha*; *skandha*) as impermanent (*anicca*; *anitya*), as suffering (*dukkha*; *duḥkha*), and as non-self (*anattā*; *anātman*). The aggregates, then, are viewed as the source of suffering, certainly not the source of happiness. The tantric approach, on the other hand, sees things quite differently. Here, it is a violation to treat the skandhas with contempt, as occurs in extreme fasting and other ascetic practices, since they are "in essence the five buddhas." It is also wrong in the tantric context to "question the essential purity of dharmas," an injunction that would seem to contradict the notion of the aggregates as impure, as suffering, and so forth. The stark contrast between these two views—one in which the skandhas are impure, contaminated, and the source of suffering, and one in which enjoyment of the skandhas provides the opportunity to attain enlightenment—would become one of the principal doctrinal and ethical conundrums that tantric Buddhists sought to

resolve.

To demonstrate that tantric doctrines did not contradict Śrāvakayāna ethics, Indian Mantrayāna scholars were faced with the complex hermeneutical task of reconciling the three levels of vows. They used diverse lines of reasoning to argue for their compatibility. The *Vajra Peak Tantra* clearly laid out the ideal characteristics of a qualified tantric practitioner:

> If he renounces,
> He remains correctly in the three restraints (*trisaṃvara*)—
> The *prātimokṣa*, the bodhisattva,
> And the supreme restraint of the *vidyādhara*s.[126]

This eventually became a standard formulation of the best qualifications for a practitioner of the mantra vehicle. According to this view, then, despite the obvious contradictions between the ascetically oriented prātimokṣa vows, the altruistically oriented bodhisattva vows, and the mantra vows, with their emphasis on the innate purity of all phenomena, it was possible—indeed necessary—to see them as compatible at a deeper level. As we will see, discussion of the compatibility of the *trisaṃvara* was a major concern for Indian and Tibetan *śāstra* writers, who sought to demonstrate how it was possible for a holder of prātimokṣa vows to practice the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna without incurring moral downfalls.

A number of Indian masters wrote treatises in which they argued for the harmony of Sūtrayāna and Mantrayāna systems of ethics. Among them were Abhayākaragupta (died ca. 1125), one of the great masters of Vikramaśīla monastery, who had a lasting influence on Tibetan Buddhism; Vibhūticandra (twelfth to thirteenth century), another Vikramaśīla scholar who traveled and taught extensively in Tibet; and Niṣkalaṅkavajra (tenth to eleventh

[126] *Gal te de ni rab byung gyur / sdom pa gsum la yang dag gnas / so sor thar dang byang chub sems / rig 'dzin sdom pa mchog yin no*. Translation mine. Vidyādhara (*rig 'dzin*), literally "knowledge-holder," may refer to a class of semi-divine beings, but here it refers to practitioners of the Mantrayāna. *Vajraśekhara-mahāyogatantra* Peking: (Q 113) rgyud, nya 162b2-301b8 (vol. 4, 283; vol. 5, 1), 409B.

century). Among Vibhūticandra's numerous texts were *Garland of Rays of the Three Vows* (*Trisaṃvara Prabhāmala*; *Sdom gsum 'od kyi phreng ba*) and Niṣkalaṅkavajra composed *Stages of the Three Vows* (*Trisaṃvarakrama*; *Sdom pa gsum gyi rim pa*).[127] Of course we cannot ignore in this regard the role of Atiśa Dīpaṃkara, who sought to formulate a coherent framework for practicing the three levels of ethics. Certainly, this was one of the central concerns of his *Lamp for the Path to Awakening* (*Bodhipathapradīpa*; *Byang chub lam gyi sgron ma*), which we will examine later in greater detail. The *Lamp*, however, was principally a practical guide on how to progressively practice the stages of the path (*lamrim*), not a scholarly treatise seeking to resolve contradictions between the three vows. Further, in the text *Summary of All Commitments* (*Sarvasamayasaṃgraha*; *Dam tshig thams cad bsdus pa*), which has been attributed to Atiśa (probably incorrectly), we read as follows:

> Furthermore, the first vow [i.e. the pratimokṣa vow] is for the sake of oneself alone;
> the middle vow [i.e. the bodhisattva vow] is for the sake of others alone;
> and the last vow [i.e. the mantra vow] is for the sake of both.[128]

Although arguments for the harmony of Sūtrayāna and Mantrayāna doctrines were certainly central to works such as these, however, it does not appear that a discrete genre of texts commenting exclusively on the *trisaṃvara* developed until later in Tibet. Tibetan authors, from the twelfth century on, wrote many commentaries dedicated exclusively to reconciling the three vows, thus establishing a distinct genre of texts, known as the "treatises on the three vows" (**trisaṃvara śāstra*; *sdom gsum bstan bcos*). Jan-Ulrich Sobisch writes that among

[127] See Vibhūticandra, *Trisaṃvaraprabhāmalā*, D 3727, and Niṣkalaṅka, *Trisaṃvarakrama*, D 3978. See also Sobisch, *Three-Vow Theories in Tibetan Buddhism* (vol. 1.), 1, 18n52, 23–24. Regarding Abhayākaragupta, see also Kapstein, *Reason's Traces*, 393–394.

[128] *Yang dang po'i sdom pa ni bdag 'ba' zhig gi don no / bar ma'i sdom pa ni gzhan 'ba' zhig gi don no / phyi ma'i sdom pa ni gnyi ga'i don no.* Atiśa (attrib.), *Sarvasamayasaṃgraha*, P vol. 81, no. 4547, 211, 5-6. Trans. in Sobisch, *Three-Vow Theories in Tibetan Buddhism*, 44.

the earliest and most important Tibetan authors in this genre were Gampopa Sönam Rinchen (Sgam po pa bsod nams rin chen; 1079–1153) of the Marpa Kagyü (Mar pa bka' brgyud) sect; Kyobpa Jigten Gönpo (Skyob pa 'jig rten mgon po; 1143–1217) of the Drigung Kagyü ('Bri gung bka' brgyud) sect, and Jétsun Dragpa Gyältshan (Rje btsun grags pa rgyal mtshan; 1147–1216) of the Sakya (Sa skya) school.[129] One of the best-known works of this genre was Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyältshan's (Sa skya Paṇḍita Kun dga' rgyal mtshan; 1182–1251) *Clear Differentiation of the Three Vows* (*Sdom pa gsum rab tu dbye ba*), which was highly polemical in its approach to resolving doctrinal questions regarding the three sets of vows.[130]

At stake in all of these works was the very notion of a unified Buddhist tradition, in which varying levels of doctrinal and ethical norms were seemingly so at odds. How could a holder of monastic vows—with their emphasis on renunciation and abandoning desire—practice a path that sanctioned, in the case of the exoteric Mahāyāna, a highly contextual approach to ethics, and in the case of the Mantrayāna, the actual *use* of desire, the abandonment of dualistic notions of purity and impurity, and engagement in transgressive conduct? This was a question of both hermeneutical consistency and religious legitimacy. The Mahāyāna sūtras had emerged several centuries after the Buddha's passing, and the tantras several centuries after that, yet all claimed to be buddhavacana. Attempting to argue for the compatibility of such a divergent array of doctrines, which are multi-layered, frequently internally contradictory, and resistant to precise historical analysis, might seem like a fool's errand. And yet, this is precisely what certain Mahāyāna and tantric exegetes set out to do.

Ronald Davidson has discussed the trisaṃvara in terms of the notion of the "economy

[129] Sobisch, *Three-Vow Theories in Tibetan Buddhism*, 1.
[130] See Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltshen (trans. Rhoton), *A Clear Differentiation of the Three Codes*.

of previous forms," an argument that views the efforts to reconcile the three vows mostly from the point of view of institutional dynamics, rather than in doctrinal terms.[131] According to Davidson's argument, the "high monastic Buddhism" of the late Indian phase—that is, the amalgam of Śrāvakayāna, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna Buddhism that became deeply enmeshed with the fabric of Indian monastic institutions—sought to preserve the theoretical and practical developments of earlier forms of Buddhism, while incorporating, or at least accommodating, the newer doctrines. Such an approach served to maintain the legitimacy and viability of Buddhist institutions, which were threatened by many factors, both external and internal. From within, there is some evidence of tensions between the followers of different Buddhist sects, who frequently cohabitated in monasteries. At the same time, Buddhist institutions needed to demonstrate their utility and relevance to the broader Indian society on which they ultimately depended for patronage and sustenance.

As for the internal dynamics, Davidson writes that "institutions are inherently conservative, and Indian institutions tend to define their success by how well the past models of behavior have been integrated into present modes of operation."[132] Followers of the Mantrayāna, then, needed to demonstrate that their way was not, as some imagined, an outright rejection of earlier models of conduct, but one that built and expanded upon them, without contradicting them. Mahāyāna monasteries thus paid, in Davidson's words, "lip service" to the prātimokṣa ethical codes, being careful not to reject or disparage the philosophical and ethical doctrines of early Buddhist and Mahāyāna teachings, even as the new tantric traditions became more widely accepted. There are problems with this interpretation: Buddhist monasteries, after all, were governed by the rules of the vinaya, and

[131] Davidson, "Atiśa's *A Lamp for the Path to Awakening*," 291–293.
[132] Davidson, "Atiśa's *A Lamp for the Path to Awakening*," 290.

monks who violated those rules were not tolerated, meaning this was more than mere "lip service" to the rules. However, it may well be true, as Davidson suggests, that this attempt to present the different Buddhist traditions as compatible was in large part motivated by a "concern for survival": monasteries, after all, depended on local communities and rulers for financial support, and they were the only models for Buddhist institutions, there being no separate "Mahāyāna" or "Mantrayāna" centers where would-be bodhisattvas and tantric yogis lived and practiced together. Thus, even as the influence and popularity of tantric teachings increased, monastic communities had to demonstrate behavior befitting of what people expected of Buddhists. While Buddhist scholars could engage in nuanced philosophical debates about the lack of true existence, how this helped to justify shifting ethical norms, and how transgressive behavior might be appropriate for (some) monastics, it could not be assumed that the broader public would sympathize with the spectacle of monks engaged in what they saw as inappropriate conduct. In this sense, the vinaya—the one moral code that would have been shared by all the monks, regardless of their doctrinal affiliations or inclinations—played a strong unifying role.

The principle of economy—that is, the simultaneous maintenance of earlier ethical models and allowance for Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna innovations—was a complex task. The exemplar of the Śrāvakayāna—the ascetic monastic seeking liberation as an *arhat*—was clearly at odds with the image of unorthodox mahāsiddhas, with their often shockingly non-conformist behavior. It is unsurprising that tantric traditions, both Hindu and Buddhist, with their often flagrant subversion of ethical norms, would have been viewed with suspicion and hostility by more orthodox members of these traditions. Thus there was a risk, on one hand, that monastic institutions would be seen as encouraging antinomian conduct, which might

raise the ire of the broader religious culture of medieval India; on the other hand, if Buddhists were overly hostile towards the Vajrayāna, they might alienate their own communities of Vajrayāna practitioners. Even some Mahāyāna Buddhists, who generally accepted the legitimacy of the tantras, argued that literal engagement in their most transgressive practices could be more harmful than beneficial. Others, while generally sympathetic to tantra, believed that the present historical moment called for more traditional forms of ethics. And finally, some, as we will see, firmly believed that even the most antinomian tantric practices were meant to be taken, and practiced, quite literally.

As the disparate strands of tantric Buddhist lineages began to coalesce into a distinct tradition, there was already a long, well-developed tradition of Buddhist hermeneutical exegesis, particularly in Mahāyāna traditions. Much as Mahāyāna scriptures had introduced an "advanced morality," with doctrines that seemed to upend Śrāvakayāna doctrines and ethical norms, many texts in the rapidly expanding corpus of the Mantrayāna promoted transgressive ideas and practices that ran counter to the norms of exoteric Buddhist traditions. The task of establishing their legitimacy as authentic Buddhist texts thus presented numerous challenges. This required first convincingly demonstrating that tantric views and practices did not fundamentally violate basic Buddhist doctrines. Tantric commentators would, in fact, argue that the tantric path was simply an extension of the Mahāyāna, building upon the Sūtrayāna traditions with powerful, advanced techniques while maintaining its core philosophical doctrines. This was of course a delicate interpretative problem when it came to tantric practices that ostensibly involved sexual rituals or other transgressive practices that would violate monastic vows or ethical precepts.

The tantras used various means to convey their own legitimacy. One of these

paralleled the Mahāyāna approach, as in the case of the *Heart Sūtra*, of using the *nidāna*, or introduction to the sūtra, to introduce an interlocutor—usually a bodhisattva or one of the Buddha's disciples—to relay the teaching. The tantras, however, took this a step further. They often replaced the figure of Śākyamuni Buddha in his monastic guise with that of an emanation of a Buddha in the form of the central deity of the tantra's maṇḍala. Thus, for example, the *Sarvatathāgata-tattvasaṃgraha* portrays the cosmic buddha Vairocana, not Śākyamuni, giving the teaching. In yoganiruttaratantra texts such as the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* and *Hevajra Tantra,* the *nidāna* specifies that although the teaching is given by "the Lord (Bhagavān)," he is presented not as a monk, but as a deity in sexual union with his consort, as we saw earlier. Here, in the highest category of tantras, as Snellgrove notes, the Bhagavān is not named specifically as Śākyamuni Buddha, "but the connection exists in so far as he embodies all Buddhas, in this case through his hypostasis as the Buddha Imperturbable (Akṣobhya), with whom such great tantric Lords as Heruka, Hevajra and Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa are identified."[133] Thus, by directly linking the eroticized practices of the yoganiruttaratantras with the Buddha, these texts explicitly seek to establish themselves as buddhavacana.

Tantric Hermeneutics

Mantrayāna and Pāramitāyāna

It is difficult to get a detailed picture of the actual historical and social circumstances in Indian Buddhist communities between the sixth and twelfth centuries CE, roughly the period in which the tantras appeared and were formed into a distinct system. However, the wide

[133] Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, 121.

range of writings about tantric doctrines by Indian scholars suggests a dynamic and often contentious scene, where views about the relation between Pāramitāyāna and Mantrayāna doctrines were anything but uniform. Commentators often sought to establish two distinct points, which seemed to be at odds, but were in fact closely related: on one hand, the Mantrayāna was argued to be superior to the Pāramitāyāna, while on the other, their respective approaches were seen as non-contradictory. Thus, while the Mantrayāna was considered superior in a number of ways, it was seen not as entirely separate but as an esoteric branch of the Mahāyāna that made use of more advanced, but riskier, methods. Some scholars, as we will see, believed that while the tantric teachings were authentic teaching of the Buddha, they were simply too advanced to be practiced at all in an age of moral degeneration. Here, however, we will consider the arguments of those who endorsed the practice of the Mantrayāna.

Commentators enumerated the ways in which the Mantrayāna surpassed the Pāramitāyāna, presenting from as few as three to as many as eleven differences.[134] One of the most frequently cited of these works is *Lamp for the Three Modes* (*Nayatrayapradīpa*), by Tripiṭakamāla.[135] Here, in a verse frequently cited by later commentators, Tripiṭakamāla lists

[134] The Tibetan scholar Butön Rinchen Drup (Bu ston rin chen grub; 1290–1364), in his *Extensive General Presentation of the Tantra Sets, Ornament Beautifying the Precious Tantra Sets*, lists several Indian śāstras delineating ways in which the Mantrayāna is superior to the Pāramitāyāna. He lists four differences according to Tripiṭakamāla and his commentator Vajrapāṇi, eleven according to Jñānashrī, three according to Ratnākarashānti, six according to Nāgārjuna, seven according to Indrabhuti, three according to Jñānapāda, five according to Ḍombhiheruka, four according to Vajraghaṇṭapāda, and five according to Samayavajra. These were later condensed into one by Tsongkhapa. *Rgyud sde spyi'i rnam par gzhag pa: rgyud sde rin po che'i mdzes rgyan*. Bu ston rin chen grub, *Collected Works* (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture, 1969), vol. 15, 6.1–32.5. See Jeffrey Hopkins, *Tantra in Tibet*, preface.

[135] *Tripiṭakamāla's dates are unknown, and even his exact name is disputed (variant reconstructions from Tibetan include Tripiṭakamalla, Tripiṭakamala, Tripiṭakamāla, and Tripitakakamala). Szántó writes that he must have lived "quite early," since he does not refer to any texts later than the ninth century. See Szántó, 'Tantric Prakaraṇas,' 757. Although the more common sense of "three vehicles" (*triyāna*) or "three ways" (*nayatraya*) is the vehicle of the Śrāvakas, Pratyekabuddhas, and bodhisattvas, here Tripiṭakamāla explains it as the Śrāvakayāna, Pāramitāyāna, and Vajrayāna. See also Onians, *Tantric Buddhist Apologetics*, 93.

four ways in which the Mantrayāna surpasses the Pāramitāyāna:

> Although they have the same aim [as the Pāramitāyāna],
> The *mantra śāstras* are superior
> Due to non-obscuration,
> [Having] many methods, lacking difficulty,
> And being meant for those with sharp faculties.[136]

In this view, while the Mantrayāna and Pāramitāyāna have the same aim—buddhahood or, in tantric terms, the state of Vajradhara—they differ in four important ways: the Mantrayāna is superior in that its texts are not obscured; it possesses many methods, such as deity yoga and the four types of activities;[137] it lacks "difficulty," meaning it employs practices leading to bliss, rather than strict asceticism; and is meant for those with "sharp faculties," meaning those whose understanding of emptiness surpasses that of the Śrāvakayāna and whose understanding of methods surpasses the Pāramitāyāna.[138]

Such works aimed to clarify the relationship between the Pāramitāyāna and Vajrayāna vehicles as a whole, establishing the mantra path as superior. However, the most controversial elements of the Vajrayāna, those exclusive to the yoganiruttaratantra classes, were more problematic for Buddhist exegetes. Even if they accepted the legitimacy of the tantras as authentic Buddhist scriptures, some Indian scholars, and later Tibetan ones, were understandably wary of antinomian yoganiruttaratantra and yoginītantra doctrines, which prescribed behaviors far outside the norms of standard Buddhist ethics. Others not only

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[136] *Don gcig nyid na'ang ma rmongs dang / thabs mang dka' ba med phyir dang / dbang po rnon po'i dbang byas bas / sngags kyi bstan bcos khyad par 'phags*. From Tripiṭakamala's *Nayatrayapradīpa* (D 3707, rgyud tsu, 16b).

[137] The *caturkarman* (*las bzhi*) are four types of ritual activities set forth in Buddhist tantras: actions of pacification (*śānticāra*; *zhi ba*), increase (*pauṣṭika*; *rgyas pa*), control (*vaśīkaraṇa*; *dbang po*), and wrath, or destruction (*abhicāra*; *mngon spyod*).

[138] See Lopez, *Elaborations on Emptiness*, 90, n. 20; Isabelle Onians, *Tantric Buddhist Apologetics*, 107–114; and Tsongkhapa, *Tantra in Tibet*, 117–128. Tsongkhapa disagrees with Tripiṭakamala's explanation, identifying the primary difference between Pāramitāyāna and Mantrayāna as the practice of deity yoga (*devayoga*; *lha'i rnal 'byor*).

accepted these texts but enthusiastically endorsed the view that yoganiruttaratantra, yoginītantra, and mahāyoga practices were the most soteriologically efficacious path to enlightenment.

Antinomianism and Monasticism

The most overtly antinomian practices of the Vajrayāna, those employing eroticism, desire, and other transgressions of purity have proved the most controversial and, seemingly, the most fascinating to scholars, both traditional and academic. Controversies about these practices also proved to have wider political and social ramifications. We see this not only in polemical literature that wrestled with scholastic issues, such as correct interpretation of doctrine and soteriology, but in later debates that touched on religious and institutional legitimacy. Here, we are considering this mainly within the Indian scholastic context; in later chapters, we will examine the Tibetan context, seeing how these controversies shaped, and were shaped by, concrete institutional and political realities.

It is nearly impossible to get an accurate sense of the role that transgressive practices played in actual Buddhist tantric practice, or the extent to which they were or were not applied in a literal manner. In studying the early development of tantric Buddhism, we are necessarily limited by the types of materials that are available to us. Although recent scholarship has begun to incorporate a broader range of sources, including historical and anthropological data, the study of ritual, studies of archaeology, art history, and numismatics,[139] we are still mainly dependent on the study and analysis of texts. Much of what we know about antinomian tantric practice is thus understood primarily within a

[139] See, for example, the work of Ronald Davidson, etc., not to mention work on tantra more broadly, such as that of David Gordon White, et al.

Buddhist soteriological context, by reading texts that were likely composed long after such practices were introduced and had been assimilated into a Buddhist framework. We know that there were significant interactions between Śaiva and Buddhist tantric lineages, with entire sections of Śaiva texts appearing in Buddhist tantras, and vice versa.[140] However, these still leave us with an understanding of the Mantrayāna primarily through a scholastic lens, where transgressive practices were seen within the broader context of Mahāyāna Buddhism. In this view, the performance of the acts themselves may be less important than what the transgressions represent: the transcendence of dualistic, reified concepts, the realization of emptiness, non-duality, and attainment of the natural innate state (*sahaja*).[141] However, such views only tell us a part of the story, leaving us to speculate about what tantric Buddhists were "actually" doing.

A number of theories have been advanced to attempt to explain the origins of the tantras, and more specifically, the Buddhist tantras. There is general agreement that the highly stratified presentation of different "classes" of tantra, and the attribution of Buddhist doctrinal identity to the tantras, were later accretions. The proliferation of tantras and commentaries that framed antinomian tantric practices within a sophisticated Buddhist soteriological framework was thus the culmination of a long process of appropriation, adaptation, and legitimation. As to their origins, Buddhist tantric traditions certainly do not appear to have come from within monastic Buddhist communities; they may not even have

[140] Alexis Sanderson has convincingly argued that there was substantial overlap between Buddhist and Śaiva tantra, even showing how important yoginītantra texts such as the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* directly appropriate entire passages from the Śaiva *vidyāpīṭha* tradition. See Sanderson, "The Śaiva Age," 169, 187–189.
[141] This interpretative lens is central to the thesis in Wedemeyer's *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism*, where he extensively lays out the argument for understanding Vajrayāna antinomianism through a semiotic lens. See Wedemeyer, *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism*. Wedemeyer's view was harshly criticized by David Gordon White in his paper, "Buddhist Brainfarts: Making Sense of Christian Wedemeyer's Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism."

originated within Buddhist traditions at all. In at least one scholar's view, the tantras (speaking generally, and not just of "Buddhist" tantras) originated in ritualized sexual practices, and attempts to adapt them to specific soteriological frameworks had little to do with their original forms. Advancing this view, David Gordon White writes that

> sexualized ritual practice is the truly distinctive feature of South Asian Tantric traditions. All of the other elements of Tantric practice—the ritual use of maṇḍalas, mantras, and *mudrā*s; worship of terrible or benign divinities; fire offerings; induced possession; sorcery; and so on—may be found elsewhere, in traditions whose emic self-definitions are not necessarily Tantric.[142]

Śāstras in which antinomian practices were adapted to Buddhist doctrinal contexts, then, would represent later attempts to legitimize the tantras, not the original intentions of whatever groups were practicing them. White has described the other elements of tantric exegesis as "Tantric 'mysticism… second-order reflections… that in fact have, over time, brought Tantra back into the fold of more conventional forms of South Asian precept and practice."[143] In White's view, "tantric sex" was "originally… nothing more or less than a means to producing the fluids that Tantric goddesses… fed upon, without losing oneself entirely in the process."[144] White cites examples from Buddhist sources including the *Hevajra Tantra,* which explicitly detail sexual practices and ritual consumption of sexual fluids. In this view, antinomian practices, including elements of eroticism, violence, and various types of violations of purity, preceded the "second-order" reflections, the philosophical and soteriological elements of the later Vajrayāna traditions.

It is surely the case, as White would argue, that tantric traditions, including Buddhist Vajrayāna traditions, developed out of a complex and lengthy process that involved

[142] David Gordon White, *Kiss of the Yoginī*, 13.
[143] White, *Kiss of the Yoginī*, 13.
[144] White, *Kiss of the Yoginī*, 73.

numerous forms of co-optation and appropriation. It is also obvious that fitting these diverse traditions into an overarching "Buddhist" framework would have required a good deal of creative interpretation (some might say a form of "violence" to the earlier traditions). However, I think we must be cautious in speaking about "origins" or "truly distinctive features" of early South Asian tantric traditions, as the evidence for such claims is widely open to interpretation.

Making a point that would seem to support White's view, at least regarding the non-institutional (and non-monastic) roots of tantric Buddhism, Péter-Dániel Szántó hypothesizes that the antinomian practices of the early phase of Buddhist tantra were primarily the provenance of lay people, not celibate monks. Assuming this to be the case, it is clear that the issue of sexual rites in esoteric Buddhism would not have been nearly as controversial as when these traditions were more widely adopted by the monastic community. According to Szántó, celibate monastic authority over Mantrayāna practices only began in the late tenth century. At this point, debates about whether descriptions of sexual practices were to be taken literally or metaphorically would have been of far greater importance.[145] As tantric traditions gained broader acceptance (and perhaps notoriety) within the larger Buddhist community, then, we find a broad diversity of approaches from Indian commentators from the eighth century on: some endorsed antinomian practices as necessary components of the tantric path, while others viewed them with caution. Some argued that such practices should be restricted, especially for monastics, but at the same time affirmed the validity of the tantras, which most accepted as buddhavacana. We will briefly consider some of these views.

Indian Authors on Tantric Antinomianism

[145] Péter-Dániel Szántó, "The Case of the Vajra-Wielding Monk," 289–299.

With the flourishing of Buddhist tantric literature, and the need to address the apparent disparities between vinaya-based ethics and the radical ethics of the Vajrayāna, Indian authors began composing treatises on the tantras, either in the form of extensive *śāstra*s or briefer *prakaraṇa*s that sought to clarify the intention of transgressive practices within the context of the tantric path. Such texts played an important role in debates related to tantric practice and were often cited by later commentators. Some of the *prakaraṇa*s focus on a particular tantra, such as the *Guhyasamāja* or *Laghuśaṃvara*, while others use a more synthetic approach, considering general points of tantric practice.

Much of the debate in these texts revolved around the issue of which passages could be taken as literally true (*yathāruta*) and which were meant as intentional speech (*saṃdhyābhāṣā* or *saṃdhyāvacana*), that is, instructions with a metaphorical, symbolic meaning.[146] On the whole, the authors of these works can be divided into three categories: first, the tantric literalists, who take descriptions of antinomian practices as literal instructions, advocating them as soteriologically necessary elements of the path to enlightenment; second, those who accept the legitimacy of antinomian practices in the tantras but believe either that they are to be interpreted—that is, they are not actual instructions to engage in transgressive activities—or that they are meant only for advanced yogins following a gradual approach; and third, those who advocate extreme caution, believing that antinomian tantric teachings were to be avoided altogether. For some, that is, the antinomian elements of the tantras, being at the the fringes of orthodoxy and ethics, were the most challenging "other" to reconcile within the Buddhist fold; for others, they represented the most advanced and expedient path to liberation, transcending the dichotomies upon which the earlier

[146] See Wenta, "The Making of Tantric Orthodoxy,"' 514–19; also Wedemeyer, *Lamp Integrating the Practices*, 85, 112.

teachings were situated. These are of course generalizations, but a brief consideration of them will help us understand something of the diversity of views about tantric practices. Importantly, such discourses and controversies did not only shape the evolution of tantric traditions in India; they would also have a profound impact on the religious renaissance in Tibet known as the "later spread of the teachings" (*tenpa chidar*; *bstan pa phyi dar*), beginning in the eleventh century.

The Guhyasamāja commentarial tradition has two principal exegetical schools: the Ārya (Noble) Tradition (*'phags lugs*), named after Ārya Nāgārjuna ('Phags pa klu sgrub), author of the tradition's central commentaries,[147] and the Jñānapāda Tradition (*ye shes zhabs lugs*), named after its principal author, Jñānapāda (Ye shes zhabs; also known as Buddhajñāna, Buddhaśrījñāna, *Buddhajñānapāda, *Śrījñānapāda; fl. c. 770–820 CE). Nāgārjuna was the author of the *Five Stages* (*Pañcakrama*; *Rim lnga*), which explains the five stages of the Guhyasamāja completion stage discussed above.[148] The central idea of the Ārya tradition, per Wedemeyer, "is that the goal of Buddhist enlightenment is to be reached through a gradual yogic process, rather than through a 'sudden' or immediate experience."[149] While this might seem an uncontroversial position, tantric authors expressed a diversity of opinions on the suitability of antinomian practices.

One of the most important commentaries in the Ārya Tradition, the *Lamp That Integrates the Practices* (**Caryāmelāpakapradīpa*; *Spyod pa bsdus pa'i sgron ma*), by deutero-Āryadeva (probably early ninth century), advocates a gradual path of tantric practice

[147] On the dating of the "tantric" and Madhyamaka Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva, see Wedemeyer, *Āryadeva's Lamp*, pages 8ff.
[148] In the *Pañcakrama*, these are listed as: vajra recitation stage (*vajrajāpakrama*), universally pure stage (*sarvaśuddhiviśuddhi-krama*), self-consecration stage (*svādhiṣṭhāna-krama*), supremely-secret-bliss enlightenment stage (*parama-rahasya-sukhābhisambodhi-krama*), and communion stage (*yuganaddha-krama*). See Wedemeyer, *Āryadeva's Lamp*, 50.
[149] Wedemeyer, *Āryadeva's Lamp that Integrates the Practices*, 5.

as the culmination of the Mahāyāna. While this work and its commentaries do not entirely exclude transgressive practices such as *vidyāvrata* (*rig sngags brtul zhugs*), sexual union with a "knowledge-woman" (*vidyā*), they seek to frame them within the broader context of the five stages of the completion stage. Another text attributed to (deutero-) Āryadeva, The *Treatise on the Purification of Mind* (*Cittaviśuddhiprakaraṇa*; *Sems kyi sgrib pa rnam par sbyong ba rab tu byed pa*), is a defense of antinomian tantric practice that tries to show how it accords with exoteric Mahāyāna philosophy.[150] Presenting a freer approach, in the *Accomplishment of the Secret* (*Guhyasiddhi*; *Gsang ba grub pa*), a nine-chapter commentary on the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*, Padmavajra (a ninth-century figure considered one of the mahāsiddhas) advocates what Szántó calls "a complete, unapologetically antinomian spiritual programme."[151] The *Guhyasiddhi* dedicates two full chapters to the practice of the *vidyāvrata* and, as Isabelle Onians notes, it has no reference at all to monastic practitioners; "rather its ideal actor is an ascetic, living in a cave or forest and coming to town on the alms round or to act crazy and so perform their demonic practice." [152] Another important work arguing for the efficacy of transgressive practices is the *Accomplishment of Reality* (*Tattvasiddhi*; *De kho na nyid grub pa*), attributed to a certain Śāntarakṣita.[153] The *Tattvasiddhi*, per Onians, is an "in-depth apologetic for physical relations and sensuality in general" that strives to demonstrate that "objects of the senses are not *per se* causes of passion and hence of endless reincarnation."[154] As Szántó puts it, the text aims at the justification of antinomian and anti-

[150] Szántó, "Tantric Prakaraṇas," 756. Also see Onians, *Tantric Buddhist Apologetics*, 103–104.
[151] Szántó, "Tantric Prakaraṇas," 756. Also see Onians, *Tantric Buddhist Apologetics*, 184, 185, 190, 233, 242, 248, 335.
[152] See Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, 199 and Onians, *Tantric Buddhist Apologetics*, 184.
[153] This is most likely not the eighth-century founder of Samye (bsam yas) monastery in Tibet and author of philosophical works such as the *Tattvasaṃgraha*, but a deutero-Śāntarakṣita, who possibly wrote it in the ninth century. See Szántó, "Tantric Prakaraṇas," 757.
[154] Onians, *Tantric Buddhist Apologetics*, 100.

ascetic tantric practice, "promoting the idea that great bliss (*mahāsukha*), which is supposedly enjoyed by liberated beings, can only be produced by sensual bliss (*sukha*)."[155]

One might assume that such works indiscriminately sanction transgressive conduct (*caryā*, or *vrata-caryā*) in the context of yoganiruttaratantra traditions. A crucial point to bear in mind, however, as emphasized by Christian Wedemeyer, is that such conduct is not simply meant for anyone who has received initiation into the practice. Practices such as the *vidyāvrata* are intended only for elite, highly advanced practitioners who have undergone rigorous training in the Guhyasamāja completion stage. According to Padmavajra, the practitioner must first create the "mind-made body" (*manomayadeha*) of the self-consecration stage (*svādiṣṭhānakrama*), the third of the five stages of the completion stage. Only then can they engage in the *caryā* and the *vidyāvrata* with an actual consort.[156] This point will have important ramifications in our discussion of sexual tantric practices, which we will return to in more detail later. Another text seeking to differentiate between correct and mistaken approaches to tantric practice is the *Introduction to [the Way of] Mantra* (**Mantrāvatāra*; *Gsang sngags la 'jug pa*), by *Jñānākara (ca. eleventh century). Per Szántó, the stated intent of this text is to refute "perverted views," referring to views advocating literal interpretations of the tantras, promoted by what the author sees as false teachers.[157]

While these works indicate a general trend among Mahāyāna commentators to approach tantric antinomianism with some caution, and to situate it within a broader Mahāyāna framework, some authors were hesitant to endorse practice of the Vajrayāna at all,

[155] Szántó, "Tantric Prakaraṇas," 757.
[156] Wedemeyer, *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism*, 149.
[157] Szántó, "Tantric Prakaraṇas," 759. See also Hopkins, *Tantric Techniques*, 227–230. We will see in later chapters that such views were also the target of Tibetan polemical treatises, spawning an entire category of texts aimed at refuting them: the *sngags log sun 'byin*, or "Refutation of Errors Regarding Mantra."

believing that its doctrines were too advanced and the source of potential misinterpretation and harm. Such authors, however, did not dare reject the Vajrayāna outright. *Dharmendra (Chos kyi dbang po; possibly late eighth century), a relatively obscure author, and his student, *Udbhaṭa Coyaga (Mtho btsun btso yags; ca. late eighth century), wrote two such works. In *Compendium on the Essence of Reality* (**Tattvasāra saṃgraha*; *De kho na nyid kyi snying po bsdus pa*; ca. ninth century), *Dharmendra acknowledges that the tantric scriptures are buddhavacana, but writes, as Szántó summarizes, that "in this day and age there are no such 'supreme' persons who would be worthy for tantric practices, and chances are that there will not be any in the future either."[158] He therefore refuses to teach the Mantrayāna. *Dharmendra's disciple *Udbhata composed *Illumination of the Way of Mantra* (**Mantranayāloka*; *Gsang sngags kyi tshul gyi snang ba*; ca. ninth century) as an apology for his teacher's controversial views, writing that there are certain "dimwits" who, upon hearing that phenomena are without self, "engage in practices worthy of the Materialists (*cārvāka/lokāyata*; *rgyang phan*)."[159] Such dimwits, presumably, are those who engage in the transgressive practices of the Vajrayāna without adequate preparation, thus ensuring their own downfalls. While examples of Mahāyāna exegetes who entirely denied the propriety of teaching the tantras appear to be rare, Szántó speculates on the motives in composing such texts: "inviting the scorn of society and the displeasure of temporary authorities must have been a pressing social issue and a very strong reason" for composing these texts.[160]

With the foregoing examples, we see that by the time the Mantrayāna had become

[158] Szántó, "The Road Not to be Taken," 367.
[159] Szántó, "The Road Not to be Taken," 370. Cārvākas were an Indian philosophical school who subscribed to a type of hedonism, believing only in the material world and direct objects of the senses and rejecting doctrines such as karma and reincarnation.
[160] Szántó, "The Road Not to be Taken," 375.

established as a distinct branch of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India, Buddhist commentators had developed a range of discursive strategies to demonstrate the compatibility of the exoteric Mahāyāna (or Pāramitāyāna) and the Mantrayāna. Using the hermeneutic framework of *upāya*, interpreters of tantric traditions used various arguments to promote a pluralistic view that favored accommodation and reconciliation of seemingly contradictory doctrines. By showing that transgressive yoganiruttaratantra doctrines did not ultimately violate the ethical constraints of the Śrāvakayāna and Pāramitāyāna, they sought to synthesize apparently opposing views into an internally coherent Buddhist worldview. Some commentators directly highlighted the role of antinomian practices that utilized desire, such as sexual yogas, as the primary means to actualize the tantric path. Others advocated a more synthetic approach—not rejecting transgressive practices but framing then within the broader ethical and soteriological context of the Mahāyāna path. Finally, some, who were perhaps the minority within the wider world of Mahāyāna and Mantrayāna scholarship, saw the tantras as far too advanced for the beings of the current (of their time) degenerate age.

Conclusion

We have seen in this chapter the interpretive challenges inherent in understanding Buddhist tantric traditions within the broader framework of Buddhism, including exoteric Mahāyāna and Śrāvakayāna doctrines and ethical norms. Drawing on the hermeneutic principle of *upāya kauśalya*, proponents of the Mantrayāna set out to demonstrate that even the most transgressive doctrines of the yoganiruttaratantras, the highest tantric classes, did not contradict the austere ethics of the vinaya and the prātimokṣa vows. To bolster this view, Mahāyāna and Mantrayāna exegetes drew on tantras promoting the view that the exemplar of

tantric Buddhism was a holder of the three vows: the *trisaṃvara*.

In the next chapter, we shift our focus to Tibet during the period of the later dissemination of the doctrine (*tenpa chidar*; *bstan pa phyi dar*). We will consider the widespread anxieties, especially those of the Gugé court, concerning the antinomian doctrines of the yoganiruttaratantras and yoginītantras, before examining the pivotal role that Atiśa Dīpaṃkara occupied in attempts to "reform" Buddhism.

Chapter 3: Tantric Polemics and Reform during Tibet's Later Dissemination

The antinomianism of the Mantrayāna, especially the yoganiruttaratantra and yoginītantra classes, was not only a source of major controversy in India. Dispute over the correct way to understand the antinomianism of the Buddhist tantras was in fact one of the principal factors leading to the period known as the later dissemination of the doctrine in Tibet, or *tenpa chidar* (*bstan pa phyi dar*; hereafter *chidar* or later dissemination). The *chidar* is considered to have begun in the eleventh century, the period during which the king of the western province of Gugé (Gu ge), Lha Lama Yeshé Ö (Lha bla ma ye shes 'od, 947–1019/1024), sent Tibetan monks to India to train in the Buddhism of the subcontinent, and to bring back Indian Buddhist pandits who would aid in the revitalization of Buddhism in Tibet. The *chidar*, like the Song dynasty in China (960–1279), with which it was roughly contemporaneous, was a period in which "neglected literary and cultural expressions reemerged, with a narrative of recapturing the spirit of a lost age…"[161] It was a transitional period from one of political division to a coalescence of culture, largely facilitated by the translation and transmission of later Indian tantric traditions. This began nearly two centuries after the 842 CE assassination of King Lang Darma (Glang dar ma, or Üdumtsen; 'U dum btsan; ca. 803–42), an event that effectively signaled the end of the Tibetan empire and ushered in what historians characterize as the "era of fragmentation" (*silbü dü*; *sil bu'i dus*).

Although the later dissemination may have been characterized by a religious renewal and rich cultural exchange between Tibet and India, this was far more pronounced in some regions of Tibet, and it did not involve a return to the centralized political power of the

[161] Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 20.

imperial period. Tibet, in fact, would not come under centralized rule again until the thirteenth century, with the establishment of Sakyapa hegemony.[162] The central hub of the later dissemination, at least according to Tibetan historians, was the kingdom of Gugé, in western Tibet.

Reform and Reformers in the Later Dissemination

Both traditional and modern scholars have often spoken of the later dissemination as a period of religious and cultural renewal—a Tibetan "renaissance"—and have characterized the Sarma schools that developed from this period as "reformist" movements. While such characterizations are not entirely inaccurate, they have led to oversimplified depictions of some of the major figures of this period, such as Atiśa Dīpaṃkara and Rinchen Zangpo, as morally conservative reformers seeking to purge antinomian tantric elements from the Buddhist tradition. The Kadam tradition, founded by Atiśa's disciple Dromtönpa Gyalwai Jungné, was the earliest of the Sarma schools, and was closely identified with the new reformist tendencies, due to its emphasis on the Sūtrayāna as foundational and a relatively cautious, if not conservative, stance toward Vajrayāna doctrines. The Kadampas were an influence on all the later Tibetan schools, but they were particularly important to the development of Tsongkhapa's Geluk tradition. Tsongkhapa consciously saw his tradition—which was also known as the "New Kadam" (*bka' gdams gsar ma*) school—as a reformist movement. In particular, he emulated the Kadampas' emphasis on the importance of the exoteric path and of strict ethical discipline as foundational to Vajrayāna practice.[163] While

[162] Kapstein, *The Tibetans*, 85.
[163] Ulrike Roesler, "The Kadampa: A Formative Movement of Tibetan Buddhism," 1.

this was certainly the case for Tsongkhapa, however, it is less clear if, or to what extent, the Sarma figures who had inspired him—in particular Atiśa and Rinchen Zangpo—saw themselves as reformers.

The ways in which we think of reform movements and the reformers who drive them are inseparable from their specific social and historical circumstances. In general, we see religious reformers emerging in or following times of upheaval within their particular traditions, and they are distinguished by efforts to revitalize or rethink the orientation of the tradition, often calling for a return to its doctrinal or ethical foundations. As the sociologist of religion Joachim Wach wrote, religious reformers arise "in times of threatening decay or disintegration," and, as harbingers of change, they "are difficult to classify in the traditional historical schemes."[164] As Wach writes, "less original than the founder, yet more original than the… bearers of authority, the reformers in all religions represent an epoch in the life and action of their group and thus a type of religious charisma of great sociological consequence."[165]

The situation in Tibet in the tenth to eleventh centuries was certainly perceived by many as a time of moral decay and disintegration. Reform-minded figures, such as the members of the Gugé court, were suspicious of many of the older tantric traditions that were widely practiced during this period—collectively known as Nyingma, or the "Ancient School"—casting them as false, corrupt, or apocryphal degenerations of the Buddha's teachings. Calls arose for clarification of the "true" teachings of the Buddha—in particular, the proper way to integrate practice of the tantric traditions with exoteric Mahāyāna doctrines and monastic ethical precepts. Given the perceived dearth of Tibetan masters who were

[164] Wach, *Sociology of Religion*, 344.
[165] Wach, *Sociology of Religion*, 344.

sufficiently trained for such a task, it became necessary to invite scholars from India. It was also understood that a massive, coordinated effort would be required to translate Indian Buddhist texts that had not yet been translated or to re-translate ones that had been translated during the earlier transmission.

The reformers, however, were not only focused on correcting a perceived degeneration of morals. Questions of authenticity often trumped those of morality, and reforms were concerned with weeding out apocryphal texts and doctrines in order to preserve authentic Indian tantric lineages. Polemical tracts and decrees were issued by monarchs of the Gugé royal family as well as by translators and scholars. Such texts attacked both the perceived spread of inauthentic tantric lineages and the overly literal interpretations of antinomian practices. The eleventh century, then, was a period of intense debate about various aspects of tantric doctrine and practice, leading to different views of what "reform" might actually look like. Thus, while there was a general consensus on the need to devise ways to revitalize Buddhist traditions in Tibet—including establishing criteria for determining the authenticity of tantric treatises, identifying which practices were suitable for monastics, clarifying the relationship between exoteric Mahāyāna and esoteric Vajrayāna traditions, and producing more accurate translations of Indian texts—the figures of this period did not all have the same aims in mind when it came to reforming Tibetan Buddhism.

Lang Darma: The "Enemy of the Dharma"

Lang Darma, whose name means "Ox in his Prime," is traditionally depicted as a tyrannical anti-Buddhist emperor whose preference for the old Bön religion caused him to become an "enemy of the Dharma" who actively repressed Buddhism, even seeking to destroy it entirely. Traditional sources recount that Lang Darma initially supported Buddhist activities

before appointing a minister, Ba Gyelpo Tagna (Sba rgyal po stag sna), who was hostile towards Buddhism. Ba Gyelpo's appointment led to disastrous storms, crop disease, famine, and human and animal epidemics. Lang Darma then turned against the *dharma* entirely, becoming "possessed by a demon" and appointing ministers who wreaked havoc on Buddhist temples, burned texts, forced monks to disrobe, and caused large numbers of Buddhists to flee to India, Kham, or northeast Tibet.[166] Lang Darma was assassinated by the Buddhist monk Lhalung Pelgyi Dorjé (Lha lung dpal gyi rdo rje) in 842, making him the last emperor to rule over a united Tibet. This event precipitated the "era of fragmentation," a period in which the gaping hole left by the absence of centralized rule led to a breakdown of institutionalized monastic Buddhism and a proliferation of esoteric systems and doctrines that some decried as apocryphal Tibetan inventions. Matthew Kapstein summarizes traditional views of the age of fragmentation as "a period of cultural eclipse, when learning and letters were all but unknown."[167] The twelfth-century *terton* Nyang Rel Nyima Öser (Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer; 1124–92) stresses the breakdown in the social fabric: "a son did not listen to his father, a servant did not acknowledge his lord, and the vassal did not hear the noble."[168] Later authors and polemicists characterized it as a period in which there was not only a lack of centralized political authority, but a breakdown in monastic ethics and the transmission of the vinaya, a situation that seemed to threaten the very survival of Buddhism in Tibet. During this time, self-proclaimed teachers and mantrins spread false doctrines with the aim of increasing their own fame and wealth, and Buddhist doctrines and practices became confused with heretical ones.

[166] Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 65.
[167] Kapstein, *The Tibetans*, 85.
[168] Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 71.

The historical accuracy of the story portraying Lang Darma as a vengeful and brutal suppressor of Buddhism, not to mention the narrative of accompanying religious and moral decline, is a matter of considerable debate. He may in fact have been a Buddhist who was initially favored by the Buddhist clergy before engaging in drastic attempts to reign in government spending. Economic and political considerations, not just anti-Buddhist sectarianism, may thus have played a major factor in Lang Darma's repressive tendencies. As Kapstein has written, "the earliest available sources by no means establish the persecution of Buddhism by Lang Darma, a crucial event for Tibetan historical consciousness, ever in fact occurred."[169] Regardless of Lang Darma's motivations, however, it is clear that Buddhist monastic establishments were severely impacted as a result of his measures. Kapstein argues that Lang Darma's "persecution" of Buddhism was likely not a suppression rooted in anti-Buddhist ideology, but a decline in official patronage of Buddhist institutions, particularly monastic ones, which until that point had enjoyed generous support from the imperial court. This was "no doubt due to a poor current-accounts balance rather than to anti-Buddhist sentiment, that came to be very much exaggerated in its retellings."[170] Davidson cites as possible causes for Lang Darma's actions falling revenues from Buddhist estates, a decline in taxes due to an increase in monastic ordination, the erosion of aristocratic authority, and excessive expenditures on Buddhist ritual and monastic activities.[171] While these claims may be impossible to confirm, they suggest a far more complex picture than that obtained from traditional accounts.

Moral Degeneration and the Decline of Monasticism

[169] Kapstein, *The Tibetans*, 80.
[170] Kapstein, *The Tibetans*, 81.
[171] Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 66.

In the decades following Lang Darma's death came a series of uprisings in central Tibet. With the collapse of centralized monarchic power, clans that had held some sway under the monarchy now came to dominate certain regions of Tibet, resulting in a process of widespread fragmentation and balkanization.[172] The authority of the Tibetan empire had long been linked to the divine status of its emperors, meaning that this collapse led to a vacuum both in political and religious power. The first seven emperors, or *tsenpo* (*btsan po*), were believed to have been directly connected to the heavenly realm by way of a magical cord that drew them up to heaven at death, leaving behind no physical trace.[173] At its height, after the introduction of Buddhism, the empire was, in Davidson's words, "a verification of the union of temporal authority and spirituality inherent in the figure of the bodhisattva/king."[174] The collapse of the empire, and thus of political stability and unity, seemed "concomitant with the loss of monastic Buddhist practice, and while political unity might remain elusive, religious revival was an attainable goal."[175]

The period following Lang Darma's assassination was marked by the collapse of monastic institutions, and according to some sources, by an apparent decline in emphasis on foundational Buddhist ethical principles. Traditional historians and religious polemicists characterized the period as one in which "inauthentic" practices—principally referring to practices without a certified Indian pedigree—proliferated and antinomian tantric doctrines were taken literally, without any concern for the standards and controls that had purportedly

[172] Kapstein, *The Tibetans*, 82.
[173] Kapstein, *Tibetans*, 37.
[174] Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 73. This refers to *chos srid zung 'brel*, the notion of the "union of the religious (*chos*) and secular (*srid*)," an ideal form of governance in which political decisions are guided by enlightened religious (i.e. Buddhist) ideals. This is of course very different from the modern Western ideal of the separation of Church and state.
[175] Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 73.

existed in India in the past.[176] The prognosis for the monastic lineages is said to have become so dire that in the early tenth century, four men from the central provinces of Ü and Tsang (*dbus gtsang*) made the long journey to Domé, in the far northeast of Tibet, in order to receive ordination from the few monks who remained, revive the monastic lineage, and bring it back to central Tibet.[177] This event is considered to have marked the beginning of the *tenpa chidar*.

The Early Dissemination and Nyingma Traditions

While Buddhism in its institutional forms, especially monasticism, declined precipitously during this period, many Buddhist lineages and practices proliferated. The systems that had been carried down from the dynastic period came to be known as Nyingma, the schools of the "ancients," although this term was mainly used retroactively as a way of distinguishing the Nyingma from the Sarma, or new schools, that formed during the later dissemination.[178] The division of Tibetan Buddhist history into two major periods—the early dissemination of the doctrine, or *tenpa ngadar* (*bstan pa snga dar*), and the later dissemination (*tenpa chidar*) of the doctrine—overlaps for the most part with the divisions into Nyingma and Sarma and into the early and late translation periods (*ngagyur*; *snga 'gyur* and *chigyur*; *phyi 'gyur*).[179] Nyingma systems were divided into Kahma (*bka' ma*)—the "oral lineage," signifying

[176] Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 78–79.
[177] Kapstein, *The Tibetans*, 85–86.
[178] Interestingly, although the post-Lang Darma period is considered an age of political and religious fragmentation, the majority of Nyingma lineages that predominated during the *silbu dü* were associated with aristocratic clans descended from imperial families. This raises the question of how traditions linked to the most elite strata of Tibetan society came to be associated with moral "degeneration." As we will see, some of the most ardent promoters of the revival of monasticism from the tenth century on were also linked to the old dynasties, although they were often highly critical of Nyingma traditions and practices. See Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 76.
[179] See Raudsepp, "Rnying ma and Gsar ma: First Appearances of the Terms During the Early *Phyi Dar* (Later Spread of the Doctrine)."

teachings that had come down from the dynastic period, or the early dissemination—and Terma (*gter ma*). Termas (literally "treasures") were of two types: "earth treasures" (*sa gter*), which were physical texts or fragments of texts hidden in the ground or a physical structure, and "mind treasures" (*dgongs gter*), sacred treasure texts that were "buried" in the mind and revealed through the pure visions (*dag snang*) of *tertons* (*gter ston*), or "treasure-revealers." Although the Nyingma traditions are traditionally traced back to Padmasambhava (Pad ma 'byung gnas; ca. eighth c.), the earliest *termas* probably did not appear until the later dissemination, from approximately 1000 CE on.[180]

One of the primary criticisms that Sarma polemicists leveled at Nyingma teachings was their supposedly apocryphal status. Some vigorously questioned the authenticity of the Kahma texts—that is, their "Indian-ness"—which included linguistic elements and ideas that were clearly Tibetan, rather than Indian. Many of the Nyingma "tantras" emphasized philosophical ideas and meditative practices that seemed to have more in common with Bön traditions—especially the "religion of humans" (*mi chos*), which emphasized rituals for the dead, offerings to nature spirits, divination, and so forth—than with the more overtly soteriological aims of Buddhist ones. One of the primary traditions found in the Nyingma tantras was the practice of the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*), considered the pinnacle of Nyingma teachings, and this too was considered heretical by some Sarma apologists.[181]

Various historical accounts of this period describe people engaging in immoral behavior that clearly violated basic tenets of Buddhism. These particularly focused on acts of sex and violence, a common target of polemics related to tantra, but they also suggested a

[180] See Janet Gyatso, "Drawn from the Tibetan Treasury" and Matthew Kapstein, "The Purificatory Gem and its Cleansing," for a comprehensive discussion of termas and apocryphal texts.
[181] These issues are discussed in detail in "The Ordinance of Lha-bla-ma Ye-shes-'od" and "An Open Letter by Pho-brang Zhi-ba-'od," both translated by Samten Karmay in *The Arrow and the Spindle*.

general sense of anarchy and religious charlatanism. The *Great Chronicle* (*Lo rgyus chen mo*), by Khutön Tsöndrü Yungdrung (Khu ston brtson 'grus g.yung drung; 1011–75), one of Atiśa's primary disciples, is one of the main sources for accounts of this period, for which reliable historical documentation is scarce. Although a complete copy of the text is not available, fragments of the text are preserved in the *Scholars' Festival* (*Mkhas pa'i dga' ston*), a historical study of Buddhism in India and Tibet by Pawo Tsuglak Drengwa (Dpa' bo gtsug lag phreng ba; 1504–1566) and other works. The following passage from the *Great Chronicle* illustrates the view that many had of the period following Lang Darma's assassination:

> Now because many of the ministers who destroyed the Dharma [during Lang Darma's suppression] with various punishments had themselves died of disease, everyone agreed that it was retribution for destroying the Dharma. Accordingly, they set up the two Jowo statues in religious meetings dedicated to Maitreya, and made offerings. Then, taking as their own [signs] the symbols of the statues, [individuals] put on skirts tied with "collars" in a religious manner. They shaved part of their hair and tied up the rest in imitation of the statues' crowns. Then, saying that they were going to perform the three months of summer retreat, they stayed in temples and observed the five practices of the laity. Then, saying that they had performed the vinaya practices of the summer retreat, they returned to town and took up married life. So then, there arose many who were called "Arhats with hair knots," and they began to serve as chaplains for the people. For services at the death of a middle-aged man, they would recite the one hundred thousand (verse version of the *Perfection of Insight*); for a boy, they recited the twenty thousand; for a child they recited the eight thousand. Two readers having great insight while reading some commentary speculated on the future, saying that "this red-lettered text appears to summarize the meaning; this black-lettered one explains it in detail; and this little text investigates doubts." As a result of their pronouncements, little in the way of skill in explanation ensued. Mantrins in general did explain meditative systems without meditating but looked to the rituals of the Bonpo for examples, which they practiced. Singing texts [according to folk tunes], they studied village rituals. Since rites of sex and killing, as well as rituals of raising the undead (*vetāla*), had spread, some ritual murders occurred.[182]

[182] Trans. Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 77-78.

In this telling, which reflects a typical narrative of the events of this period, unscrupulous shams presented themselves as spiritually accomplished masters in order to boost their own status and wealth. The "arhats with hair-knots" (*dgra bcom gtsug phud can*) and other religious practitioners, or "occasional monks," combined traditional Buddhist practices with more worldly, possibly Bön-influenced, rituals, such as rites for the dead and so forth. Various Tibetan writers criticized the *ngakpa*s (*sngag pa*; *mantrin*), or "village mantrins" (*grong gi sngags pa*)—self-proclaimed tantric practitioners who may have had aristocratic ties but little in the way of formal Buddhist training. The consequence of all this, per Davidson, was

> a general sense of a religious tradition out of control, with the monastic clothing and outwards forms being maintained even while the actual behavior of Tibetan religious [practitioners] was slowly being accommodated to Tibetan village rites of blood sacrifice to mountain gods and to the marked Tibetan proclivity toward a greater sense of sexual license.[183]

The view that tantric traditions were synonymous with moral degeneration was certainly not a new idea. The *Pillar Testament* (*Bka' chems ka khol ma*), a text attributed to the seventh-century king Songtsen Gampo (Srong btsan sgam po; ca. 617–649/650)[184] that had been hidden in a pillar of the Jokhang (*jo khang*) temple in Lhasa and was later reported to have been discovered by Atiśa (ca. 1048),[185] alleged that *ngakpa*s engaged in various types of misbehavior, including granting tantric consecrations (*abhiṣeka*) without having received them themselves, engaging in ritual sexual union in exchange for payment, and promoting

[183] Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 79.
[184] See Kapstein, *Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism*, xvii, 26. Other sources (*Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*) cite an earlier birthdate of 605.
[185] Later biographies of Atiśa report that the text was retrieved from a pillar, but earlier ones explain that "a beggar woman indicated a place in the ground of the Jo khang Temple where Atiśa was to find the text." Ulrike Roesler, "The Kadampa," 7n25.

ritual slaughter.[186] The *Testament of the Ba Clan* (*Ba She*; *Dba' bzhed*) indicated that the emperor Tri Songdetsen (Khri srong lde'u btsan; 742–797), the first *tsenpo* to declare Buddhism the official religion of Tibet, who was claimed to be responsible for inviting Śāntarakṣita and Padmasambhava to Tibet and for commissioning the first translations of Indian Buddhist texts and treatises into Tibetan, was also opposed to the translation of certain tantric texts into Tibetan due to their antinomian doctrines. Specifically, he is said to have banned translations of the Mahāyoga class, despite having invited Padmasambhava, renowned as a great tantric adept, to Tibet to subdue interfering spirits.[187] In the ninth century, the emperor Ralpachen (Ral pa can; ca. 806–38), Lang Darma's predecessor and the grandson of Tri Songdetsen, forbade the translation of any tantras. He also declared that the Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya lineage was the only monastic tradition to be followed in Tibet.[188]

It is clear from these examples that the tantras—in particular those of the mahāyoga class, and later the yoginītantras—had long been associated with activities considered degenerate from the point of view of mainstream and Mahāyāna Buddhism. Such characterizations had concrete religious, social, and political ramifications, especially during the chidar, as ruling figures sought to consolidate the status and authority of monastic Buddhism, thus bolstering the influence of monastic institutions. We must recall, however, that accounts such as the ones from the *Great Chronicle*, which were written much later than the actual events, as well as the *Pillar Testament*, were likely used as later justification for a turn toward more "orthodox" doctrines and practices in the Kadampa and other Sarma

[186] Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 79.
[187] See Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 65 and Karmay, *Arrow*, 6. Jacob Dalton, however, argues that while the tantras were most likely closely monitored and censored during this period, it was almost certainly *not* the case that the Mahāyoga texts were not translated at all. See Dalton, *Taming of the Demons*, 54–57.
[188] This is the main reason, as we will see, that Atiśa Dīpaṃkara, who held the Mahāsāṃghika ordination, was unable to ordain monks in Tibet, despite his wish to do so.

schools. As such, while these may illuminate certain aspects of a tradition that was "out of control," we cannot simply take them as accurate, objective views of the state of Buddhism as a whole during this period.

Davidson characterizes the chidar's widespread suspicion of certain tantric traditions, and the movement to identify and purge non-authentic treatises, as a type of "neoconservative orthodoxy," a position that "represents a greatly restricted image of the authentic Dharma" and that "might be held as much by tantric authorities as by scholastic professors."[189] As we will see, however, this supposed conservatism was not simply a matter of moralistic reactions to objectionable doctrines and practices. It was also linked, perhaps more commonly, to questions about the authenticity of tantric texts that had formed the bulk of the earlier dissemination, that is, the so-called Nyingma tantras, which were eventually collected into the Nyingma tantric canon (*rnying ma rgyud 'bum*).

Tantric polemics during the later dissemination focused on two principal issues: (1) the composition and dissemination of apocryphal texts by Tibetans and (2) overly liberal (and literal) interpretations of antinomian Vajrayāna practices, regardless of whether or not they were recognized as coming from "authentic" Indian treatises. Numerous Tibetan authors during the later dissemination wrote polemical texts that attacked the authenticity of texts and lineages that had spread widely during the earlier dissemination. These authors deemed such texts false either due to their being composed by Tibetan authors rather than Indian ones or because their transgressive doctrines were seen as inappropriate for Buddhist monastics. They accused certain texts of mixing the doctrines of "*tīrthika*s"—heretics, whether Bönpos or Hindus—with Buddhist ones. Such polemical texts were often classified under the broad

[189] Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 154.

category of *gag len* (*dgag lan*), or literally, "refutation and reply." As Kadri Raudsepp writes, the purpose in composing such texts was ostensibly to "contribute to the purification of the teachings and stimulate religious activities." But, as Raudsepp continues, "we find that polemicists commonly become constrained by entrenched sectarian views and their arguments tend to be devoid of objectivity."[190] In all of these works, we see a concerted effort to undermine the credibility of lineages and translations from the earlier translation period, and to demonstrate the authenticity and superiority of ones from the later translation period. This generally appears to be the case in the texts we will consider, which span a period from the earliest stages of the later dissemination into the thirteenth century.

It is important to note that criticisms of the earlier traditions did not by any means go unanswered. One particularly scathing assessment of the differences between the Nyingma and Sarma traditions comes from the Nyingma scholar, Rog Bande Sherab, or Rogben Sherab Ö (Rog ban shes rab 'od; 1166–1244), in his *Lamp of the Teachings*. In differentiating the Nyingma from the Sarma translations, he wrote:

> Formerly, the Dharma was translated by lotsāwas who were emanations… The lotsāwas of today stay in Nepal during the winter and in Mang-yul in the summer. The various concocted forgeries of today are said to be different from the translations of the scholars of yore.

And:

> In former times, the Dharma was brought by bodhisattvas who dwelt on the high bodhisattva stages, by awareness holders… Today's pandits are a bunch of beggars who, unable to get enough food in India, come to Tibet in search of gold.[191]

The Sarma figures we will consider expressed a range of concerns, but they were

[190] Raudsepp, "Dating and Authorship Problems in the *sNgags log sun 'byin* Attributed to Chag lo tsā ba Chos rje dpal," 282.
[191] Rog Bande Sherab, trans. in Cabezón, *The Buddha's Doctrine and the Nine Vehicles*, 156–7.

united in their belief that the age of fragmentation had been marked by a dramatic increase in views and practices that were antithetical to what they saw as valid, authentic forms of Buddhism. Their objections took various forms. The earliest of these texts, the edict, or decree (*bka' shog*) of Yeshé Ö (Ye shes 'od; 947–1019/1024), focused mainly on aberrant behaviors by so-called tantric specialists, mainly from the Nyingma schools. Another decree written by Phodrang Zhiwa Ö (Pho brang zhi ba 'od; late eleventh c.) drew attention to tantric practices that violated monastic purity, even when they came from sources that were considered authentic Indian compositions. Lotsāwa Rinchen Zangpo (Lo tsA ba rin chen bzang po; 958–1055) wrote a text known as *Refutation of False Mantra* (*Sngags log sun 'byin*), the full manuscript of which was only recently found and has not yet been translated or published.[192] Gö Lotsāwa Khugpa Lhetse (Gos lo tsā ba khug pa lhas btsas; early to late eleventh c.) also composed a text entitled *Refutation of False Mantra,* and another text of the same name was attributed to Chag Lotsāwa Chojé Pal (Chag lo tsā ba chos rje dpal; 1197–1263/4), although this attribution has been challenged.[193] These "refutations" were primarily concerned with identifying and rejecting apocryphal texts composed by Tibetans, not with transgressive tantric behavior per se.

While Atiśa Dīpaṃkara did not author a text specifically criticizing "false" mantra systems, his works and those of his Kadampa followers were a vital part of the reformist zeitgeist that characterized the Sarma period. Some of his works became associated with a current of doctrinal conservatism, an issue that we will examine in more depth later. Atiśa's principal disciple, Dromtönpa, is also believed to have had a significant impact on Atiśa's

[192] See Van der Kuijp, "The Bird-faced Monk," 450. He mentions that "Rin chen bzang po's *Sngags log sun 'byin* has recently been recovered by way of a fifty-two-folio *dbu med* manuscript."
[193] Raudsepp's "Dating and Authorship Problems in the *sNgags log sun 'byin* Attributed to Chag lo tsā ba Chos rje dpal" deals with this question in detail. See Raudsepp, 290.

reticence to teach more widely on the Mantrayāna. As we will see, then, views regarding the Vajrayāna during the later transmission, in which Atiśa played such a crucial role, varied widely, reflecting a broad array of concerns, from the purely religious to the political.

Anti-Nyingma Polemics and the Quest for Authenticity

Yeshé Ö's Decree on False Tantras

One of the regions of Tibet that thrived during the later transmission, becoming in many ways the center of the later dissemination, was the western kingdom of Gugé, or Puhrang Gugé (Pu hrangs gu ge). Here, the decline of monasticism and the proliferation of permissive interpretations of antinomian tantric doctrines was of particular concern to the recently installed monarchs of the region. One of the most significant figures of Gugé, and of the later dissemination, was the monarch Tri Pel Song Nge (Khri dpal srong nge), better known by his Buddhist monastic name, Yeshé Ö.[194] Yeshé Ö was the son of Trashigön[195] (Bkra shis mgon), who had founded the kingdom of Gugé. Yeshé Ö came to be considered a bodhisattva by many Tibetan Buddhists for his activities in promoting and spreading Buddhism. Among his notable achievements was sending the great translator Rinchen Zangpo to Kashmir in order to study the tantric teachings and certify their validity. Ironically, given Yeshé Ö's avid promotion of monastic Buddhism, he was a descendant of none other than Lang Darma and the Yarlung Kings of central Tibet, by way of the lineage of Ö Sung ('Od srung), one of

[194] Samten Karmay addresses possible confusion relating to the names of Song Nge and his brother, Khor Re. Karmay cites Kathog Rigdzin Tshewang Norbu (Ka thog rig 'dzin tshe dbang nor bu) as a source confirming that Yeshe Ö was Song Nge, not Khor Re. See Karmay, *Arrow and the Spindle*, 4.
[195] This is according to Matthew Kapstein; another source says his father was Detsuk Gon (Lde gtsug mgon), who took over Guge, while Trashi Gön took over Puhrang. See Lowell Cook, "Lha Lama Yeshe Wo," Treasury of Lives, accessed February 23, 2023, http://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Lha-Lama-Yeshe-O/11056.

Lang Darma's sons.[196] The monarch seeking to revive Buddhist monasticism in Tibet was thus directly descended from the very person that many believed had nearly destroyed it. According to some traditional accounts, Yeshé Ö was captured by an invading force of Karluks (Gar log)[197] and held for ransom, but selflessly sacrificed his own life, ordering that the ransom money be used instead to invite Atiśa Dīpaṃkara to Tibet. However, this telling of events is contradicted by other contemporary sources, such as the biography of Rinchen Zangpo and a later biography of Yeshé Ö.[198]

Although Yeshé Ö is said to have composed a number of texts, the only one that survives is his official decree, which was written in the form of a letter criticizing mistaken interpretations of antinomian tantric practices. Samten Karmay dates the text to a few years prior to 985.[199] The only extant version of the work is included in a text called *Thunderous Sound of the Definitive Meaning* (*Nges don 'brug sgra*), a polemical work written several centuries later in defense of the legitimacy of Nyingma texts by Sogdogpa Lodrö Gyaltsen (Sog zlog pa blo gros rgyal mtshan; 1552–1624).[200] Although Yeshé Ö's decree was untitled, it is likely the same as the *Refutation of False Mantra* (Sngags log sun 'byin; hereafter, *Refutation*), which the famed Tibetan scholar Butön Rinchen Drup (Bu ston rin chen grub; 1290–1364) later attributed to him.[201]

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[196] See "Lha Lama Yeshe Wo," *Treasury of Lives*.
[197] Karluks were a powerful confederacy of Turkic tribes.
[198] Karmay, "The Ordinance of lHa Bla-ma Ye-Shes-'od," in *The Arrow and the Spindle*, 3. See also van der Kuijp, "A Fifteenth Century Biography of Lha bla ma Ye shes 'od (947-1019/24)."
[199] Karmay, "The Ordinance of lHa Bla-ma Ye-Shes-'od," 5, 8–9.
[200] Sog bzlog pa blo gros rgyal mtshan. "Lha bla ma ye shes 'od kyi bka' shog gi dgongs 'grel." *gSung 'bum blo gros rgyal mtshan*, vol. 1, Sanje Dorje, 1975, pp. 435–44. *Buddhist Digital Resource Center* (BDRC), purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW8870_AC4781. See also James Gentry, "Tracing the Life of a Buddhist Literary Apologia: Steps in Preparation for the Study and Translation of Sokdokpa's *Thunder of Definitive Meaning*."
[201] Karmay, "The Ordinance of lHa Bla-ma Ye-Shes-'od," 5. Later sources sometimes referred to the decrees of the Guge kings (*kashog*s) variously as *cham yig* (*'byams yig*; a scholastic letter meant for distribution), *tring yig* (*springs yig*; a letter that is sent), or even *ngag log sun 'byin* (Refutation of False Mantra). See Raudsepp, "Dating and Authorship Problems," 282.

As we will see, the debates in Yeshé Ö's text, as well as those in the other texts we will consider, did not just concern competing views about religious doctrine, but had direct implications for how Tibetans conceived of Buddhism as a source of institutional, political, and cultural power. They were debates that many saw as crucial in establishing the authenticity and validity of tantric traditions that had shaped and defined Tibetan Buddhism, and thus the very identity of many Tibetans, for centuries. Yeshé Ö, as both a monk and a monarch, was in a unique position to influence events. For Yeshé Ö, as well as his descendants Jangchub Ö and Zhiwa Ö,[202] the union of religious and secular power was of paramount importance to bolstering the legitimacy of both the Buddhist religion and the monarchy. The direct involvement of a monarch in religious affairs, especially a monarch who had formally declared his allegiance to the Buddhist doctrine by taking monastic vows, also represented a significant development in the Tibetan notion of the perfect union of religion and state (*chos srid zung 'brel*), a doctrine that would become central to Tibetan political theory.[203]

Apocrypha and Heretical Doctrines

Yeshé Ö's *Refutation* is divided into three parts: a general summary of Buddhism and its three vehicles (the Śrāvakayāna, Pratyekabuddhayāna, and Bodhisattvayāna); a criticism of those erroneously interpreting the tantric teachings; and an admonition of those subscribing to such mistaken views and practices. We will focus on the second and third of these sections.

Yeshé Ö principally seeks to address the issue of errant tantric practices, using

[202] According to Karmay, Zhiwa Ö was likely the younger brother of Jangchub Ö. See Karmay, "An Open Letter by Pho-rang Zhi-ba-'od," in *Arrow and the Spindle*, 17.
[203] See Dalton, *Taming the Demons*, 100; Dalton, "Power and Compassion," 101–3.

dramatic rhetoric to frame the situation in Tibet as one of rampant moral degeneration. Like the other polemicists we will consider, he lays the blame for this situation largely at the feet of those practicing the "false doctrines" of the Nyingma schools, namely the systems of the Great Completion (Dzogchen; *rdzogs chen*). Dzogchen was a non-conceptual meditative system resembling, not entirely coincidentally, the non-conceptual methods of Chinese Chan traditions. Such practices had been a source of Tibetan polemics at least as far back as the debate at Samyé (*bsam yas*) monastery, in which traditional accounts reported that the Indian scholar-monk Kamalaśīla (740–95), a proponent of a gradualist meditative system to reach awakening, was said to have defeated the Chinese monk Hashang Moheyan (Hva shang ma ha ya na; late eighth c.), who advocated a non-conceptual, subitist approach to awakening. The Great Completion was also frequently characterized by adherents of the later Sarma schools as more Bön than Buddhist.

Yeshé Ö is more concerned with the supposedly deviant behaviors of the tantric practitioners than the specifics of which texts or lineages he sees as false or apocryphal. In order to set the scene for the *Refutation*, Yeshé Ö identifies those he sees as culprits for the moral decay that he would seek to expurgate from Tibet through his own reforms. He writes:

> The abbots and mantrins living in villages
> Lack any connection to the three vehicles [of the śrāvakas, pratyekabuddhas, and bodhisattvas]
> But say, "We are Mahāyānists;"
> Without maintaining the conduct of the Mahāyāna,
> They say, "We are Mahāyānists."
> This is like a beggar claiming to be a king.
> For those who are not Mahāyānists to claim to be Mahāyānists
> Is like an ass wearing a lion's skin.
> If even Ārya Maitreya, the regent on the tenth *bhūmi*
> Who has abandoned [grasping to] both subject and object
> And completed the two great collections,
> Has still not purified the obscurations to knowledge,

How are the sentient beings of [this age of] degeneration superior to him?[204]

Here, Yeshé Ö harshly reprimands Tibetans who claim to be Mahāyāna practitioners while failing to uphold Mahāyāna conduct, not to mention that of the vinaya. In the view of Yeshé Ö and others, preceptors and lay mantrins living in villages (*grong na gnas pa'i mkhan po sngags pa*) who followed the older tantric traditions (i.e. those of the Nyingma) had incorrectly taken the antinomian practices encoded in the secret language of the tantras (*sāndhyābhāṣā*; *dgongs pa'i skad*) as literal instructions. The proliferation of such practices, and the general sense of moral and political chaos during the post-Lang Darma period, was one of the principal factors that led to perceptions of this era as a "dark age." We also see here a critique common in Mahāyāna literature—that simply receiving Mahāyāna teachings or espousing Mahāyāna ideals has little to do with the actual *behavior* of a Mahāyānist, that is, the manifestation of the altruistic mind of awakening, or bodhicitta, and practice of the deeds of a bodhisattva. Even Maitreya, the tenth-ground bodhisattva who will return as the future Buddha, is said to still possess some of the subtle obscurations to omniscience (*jñeyāvaraṇa*; *shes sgrib*) that are not abandoned until full awakening. How, then, are these "sentient beings of this age of degeneration" superior to Maitreya?

Yeshé Ö's *Refutation* continues, depicting a general pattern of moral decline in Tibet and hearkening back to the glory days of the Tibetan empire, when Buddhism was first introduced in Tibet. This golden age of unsullied practice of the Buddha's teachings is

[204] *Grong na gnas pa'i mkhan po sngags pa rnams / theg pa de gsum gang dang 'brel med par / nged cag theg chen yin zhes zer ba ni (dang) / theg pa chen po'i tshul spyod gtan med par / theg pa chen po yin zhes zer ba ni / sprang po (pos) rgyal po yin zhes zer ba 'dra / theg chen min pa theg chen khas 'che ba / bong bu (bus) seng ge'i phags (pags) pa gron pa 'dra / bzung (gzung) 'dzin gnyis spang (spangs) tshogs chen gnyis rdzogs pa' / sa bcu'i rgyal tshab 'phags pa byams pa yang / shes bya'i sgrib pa da dung ma byang na / de bas snyigs ma'i sems can 'phags sam ci.* (Karmay: NgD, 438–443) Translation mine. See also Karmay, *Arrow and the Spindle*, 8–9; Kapstein, *The Tibetans*, 92.

contrasted with the current dark age in Tibet, where false doctrines and heretical views predominate. Yeshé Ö writes,

> Previously, the Dharma arose in the center of Tibet.
> It taught how to close the door to the lower realms and [how to practice] the path to liberation.
> The three precious scriptural collections spread and flourished.
> The previous bodhisattva-kings eliminated false doctrines (*chos log*) in accordance with the [Buddha's] word,
> Corrected all [false] views, and opened the door to the higher realms,
> Causing many beings to enter the unsurpassed path.[205]

Yeshé Ö leaves no doubt as to what these "false doctrines" are, or who propagates them:

> Now, due to the exhaustion of karma and the degeneration of royal customs,
> The mistaken doctrine known as the Great Completion (*rdzogs chen*) has spread in Tibet;
> It is a view obstructed by mistaken states.
> The false [systems of] mantra known as "Dharma" that have spread in Tibet (*bod du dar*)
> Have brought ruin upon the kingdom.[206]

Here, the monarch's scorn is bluntly directed at the propagation of the Great Completion, a doctrine that was considered the epitome of the Nyingma school. In addition to the general polemics directed toward the contested provenance of proto-Nyingma lineages, Yeshé Ö addresses questions about the suitability of engaging in certain antinomian tantric practices, especially those taught in the mahāyogas and yoginītantras (also known as *ma rgyud*, the mother tantras). Even if the Nyingma tantras were accepted as being of Indian origin and as

[205] *Mna' sngon bod yul dbus su chos byung ba* / *ngan song sgo gcod thar ba'i lam ston pa* / *sde snod rin chen gsum po dar zhing rgyas* / *sngon gyi rgyal po byang chub sems dpa'i yi* / *bka' dang bstun nas chos log 'di bkag ste* / *kun gyi lta bsrang mtho ris sgo phyes bas* / *sems can mang po bla med lam du chud*. Translation mine. See also Karmay, *Arrow and the Spindle*, 10.
[206] *Da lta las zad rgyal po'i khrims nyams pas* / *rdzogs chen ming btags chos log bod du dar* / *lta ba phyin ci log gi sar thogs pa* / *chos par ming btags sngags log bod du bar (dar?)* / *de yis rgyal khams phung ste 'di ltar gyur*. Translation mine. See also Karmay, *The Arrow and the Spindle*, 10; lines 44-48.

being buddhavacana, the question of *literally* engaging in antinomian practices was extremely controversial, even as it had been for earlier Indian commentators. In particular, Yeshé Ö focuses on the practices of "union" (*sbyor*), referring to ritual sexual union, and "liberation" (*sgrol*), referring to ritual killing, or animal sacrifice. Mention is also made of the *gaṇacakra* (*tshogs kyi 'khor lo*), the tantric ritual feast often said to involve ritualized sexual practices and consumption of intoxicants.[207] The *Refutation* continues:

> The spread of "liberation" (*sgrol*) has caused goats and sheep to become alarmed;[208]
> The spread of "union" (*sbyor ba*) has caused the mingling of different classes [of beings];
> The spread of medicine rituals has caused the sick to be deprived of medicines;
> The spread of corpse rituals has caused offerings not to be made in charnel grounds;
> The spread of offering rituals has caused humans to be "liberated" alive…
> The worship of cannibal-demons (*rākṣasa*; *srin po*) and flesh-eaters (*piśāca*; *sha za*) has brought plagues to men and animals.[209]

The supposed spread of these practices would certainly have been a concern in the case of monastics, whose adherence to the vinaya and vows of celibacy would prohibit them from engaging in any sexual acts, not to mention any form of killing, violence, or consumption of intoxicants.

While Yeshé Ö was clearly critical of the misinterpretation of Vajrayāna doctrines, however, he did not completely reject the validity of the Mahāyogas and other higher tantric classes in the case of those who were qualified to practice them. In a later biography by the fifteenth-century Sakyapa author Gugé Panchen Dragpa Gyaltshen (Gu ge paṇ chen grags pa rgyal mtshan; 1415–1486), Yeshé Ö was quoted as saying,

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[207] See Karmay, *The Arrow and the Spindle*, 6.
[208] The meaning of this term *nyal thag bcad* is unclear; Karmay translates it as "afflicted."
[209] *Sgrol ba dar bas ra lug nyal thag bcad* / *sbyor ba dar bas mi rigs 'chol ba 'dres* / *sman grub dar bas nad pas gso rkyen chad* / *bam sgrub dar bas dur sa'i mchod pa stong* /*mchod sgrub dar bas mi la gson sgrol byung* / *srin po sha za mchod pas mi nad phyugs nad byung*. Translation mine. See Karmay, 10–11.

> As for those who already have studied, and have faith in, the path of Mahāyoga, how could it ever be suitable for them, who have such faith in that, now to give it up? [So] they must continue to strive earnestly at cultivating [that path], in accordance with the scriptures.[210]

In the case of Yeshé Ö, we see that the anxieties of the Gugé court were not limited just to questions of proper religious practice or monastic conduct, but to a larger sense of the breakdown of social order associated with the diffusion of heterodox doctrines and practices. His preference for the exoteric Mahāyāna traditions was closely linked to efforts to assert a greater level of control over problematic practices. As Jacob Dalton puts it, "it is… not surprising that his approach to tantric practice emphasises controlling information, proper procedure, and careful step-by-step study."[211] Yeshé Ö even expressed the wish that there be greater control over who was recognized as authentic tantric teachers, asserting that they should not just possess the prerequisites for practice or be appointed haphazardly, but should be recognized by other certified tantric authorities. As Dalton writes, "the unchecked proliferation of local tantric teachers that had occurred during the preceding 'dark age,' in other words, was no longer permissible."[212]

As we saw in the previous chapter, the question of whether antinomian tantric doctrines were to be practiced as literally described was not a new controversy for Buddhists. Yeshé Ö's decree, however, signals a renewed concern with purging Tibetan Buddhist traditions of polluting influences and re-establishing monasticism as the heart of the Buddhist tradition. The impetus behind such polemics was largely, and quite transparently, a desire to

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[210] *Rnal 'byor chen po'i lam sngar thos shing yid ches ste de la mos pa rnams kyis phyis dpang [spang] du ga la rung / gzhung dang mthun par bsgom pa la nan tan bgyid 'tshal*. *Rnam thar rgyas pa* 33a.4–5. Translation in Dalton, "Power and Compassion," 104.
[211] Dalton, "Power and Compassion," 104–5.
[212] Dalton, "Power and Compassion," 104–5.

return to a clearly demarcated hierarchy of religious institutional authority and an aura of respectability for Buddhism, as exemplified by the push to revitalize Buddhist monasticism. For Yeshé Ö, who ordained as a Buddhist monk in 989, it was crucial that royal power be sustained by Buddhist principles. He in fact made it a requirement that all potential heirs to the throne (except one, to ensure the continuation of the bloodline) ordain as monks.[213] In an edict from 995, he writes that "The [benefits] of ordination within my family line are inconceivable and would take years to count…" and that "ordained [royalty] will not create factions among the people. The empire will be made into a Buddhist community, and [its people] into pious subjects."[214] The fact that Yeshé Ö was both a Buddhist monk and a monarch—the embodiment of the "union of religion and state"—and his criticisms were framed within the context of an official decree naturally meant his words carried a great deal of weight. The words of a temporal ruler who also happened to be a monk would surely be expected to have significant influence over how controversial Buddhist doctrines would be received, interpreted, and ultimately controlled.

The Decree of Zhiwa Ö

Phodrang Zhiwa Ö (Pho brang zhi ba 'od; late eleventh c.), a later member of the Gugé royal dynasty, also issued a decree questioning the authenticity of a number of tantric treatises.[215] Very little is known about Zhiwa Ö, but he is believed to have been the grandson of Yeshé Ö and the younger brother of Jangchub Ö, the monarch responsible for bringing Atiśa to Tibet.[216] Zhiwa Ö was a Buddhist monk, referring to himself in his writings as "*dge slong bla*

[213] Dalton, "Power and Compassion," 108.
[214] Cited in Dalton, "Power and Compassion," 108–9.
[215] Karmay, *Arrow,* 17.
[216] Karmay, *Arrow,* 17–18. According to some sources, Zhiwa Ö was the nephew, not grandson, of Yeshé Ö. See *Treasury of Lives.*

ma" (*guru bhikṣu*) or "*śākya'i dge slong lha bla ma*" (the divine [i.e. royal] *guru bhikṣu* of the Śākyas). He appears to have been an important member of the royal family and may have had some political authority, but it is unclear if he actually served as a monarch.[217] He was a prolific translator, likely the first in the Gugé royal family, who translated a number of important tantric texts, as well as a generous sponsor of translations.[218] Zhiwa Ö, like his grandfather Yeshé Ö, also composed a text seeking to identify "false treatises," that is, apocryphal tantric texts composed by Tibetan authors that were claimed to be of Indian origin. Like Yeshé Ö's decree, this treatise, which Karmay dates to 1092,[219] also came to be known as *Refutation of False Mantra,* although it is not likely that this was its original title.

Like the other *Refutation*s, Zhiwa Ö's *Refutation* focuses principally on so-called Nyingma tantras and Dzogchen treatises. Unlike Yeshé Ö's decree, however, Zhiwa Ö says little about the contents of the texts or the specific practices that he finds problematic. Rather, he lists the ostensibly false works and divides them into categories, such as "outer tantras of former times" (*sngar gyi dus kyi phyi rgyud*) and "inner" tantras (*nang pa*).[220] Whereas Yeshé Ö highlighted the errant behavior of tantrists in general, saying nothing about what might constitute acceptable forms of tantric practice, Zhiwa Ö presents a more nuanced view, seeking to show that it is possible—perhaps even preferable—for monastics to practice the tantric path. This is in keeping with the general principle of the *trisaṃvara* (*sdom gsum*), the view that the ideal practitioner of the Mantrayāna is one possessing all three vows: the pratimokṣa, bodhisattva, and mantra vows. Zhiwa Ö first reiterates the point that tantric

[217] Karmay, *Arrow*, 18.
[218] Karmay lists the tantric texts translated by Zhiwa Ö as *Śrīvajramalatantra*, *Śrīparamādyatantra*, *Sahajamaṇḍala*, *Dpal mchog dang po'i rgya cher bshad pa* (a commentary on the *Śrīparamādyatantra*), *Tattvasamgrakārika*, and *Kālapalaghuvṛttanśiṣyahitā*. Karmay, *Arrow*, 19–22.
[219] Karmay, *Arrow*, 30.
[220] Karmay identifies these as mahāyoga tantras, such as the *Kīlaya Tantra*.

traditions can only be considered authoritative if they are composed by Indian, not Tibetan, authors. Zhiwa Ö states,

> These tantras, commentaries, and *sādhana*s, both old and new, which are fabrications in the guise of the Buddha's word (*buddhavacana*), were written in Tibet by Tibetans and designated as Indian [texts]. None of these is a correct path, and since they do not bring about the attainment of unsurpassed awakening, it is not suitable for anyone to take them as a refuge or a path.[221]

Having established this point, he describes the correct way for an ordained person to approach the practice of the Mantrayāna:

> Those who are ordained should protect the monastic discipline (vinaya; *'dul ba*), and those who engage in the Secret Mantra of the [Buddha's] word (*guhyamantra*; *bka'i gsang sngags*) should rely on monastic discipline and strive to maintain, without contradiction, the [tantric] pledges (*samaya*; *dam tshig*) of kriyā tantra, upāya tantra, yoga tantra, Guhyasamāja, and so forth, without corrupting them.[222]

Interestingly, while Zhiwa Ö appears to tentatively approve of the lower tantras, as well as the Guhyasamāja—the earliest of the overtly antinomian mahāyoga tantras—he is especially critical of the so-called mother tantras (*ma rgyud*), or yoginītantras, owing to the apparent difficulty in understanding the intended meanings of their words. This is despite the fact that at the time of his composing the *Refutation*, many of these tantras had already been translated into Tibetan from Sanskrit, and were thus presumably already well-known, leaving little

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[221] *Sangs rgyas kyi bka' ltar bcos pa'i rgyud dang / 'grel pa dang / sgrub thabs snga phyi bod du / rgya gar ma'i ming btags shing bod kyis byas pa ni 'di dag ste / 'di rnams gang yang / yang dag pa'i lam ma yin zhing / bla na med pa'i byang chub thob par mi 'gyur bas / skyabs gnas dang lam du sus kyang byar mi rung ngo*. Translation mine. See Karmay, *Arrow*, 31; Tibetan, 38. This is also cited in Wedemeyer, "Sex, Death, and Reform," 243.

[222] *Rab tu byung ba rnams kyis kyang 'dul ba ltar bsrung zhing / bka'i gsang sngags la zhugs pa rnams kyis kyang 'dul ba la brten pa dang mi 'gal bar / kri ya dang / upaya dang / yo ga dang / gsang ba 'dus pa la sogs pa'i bar la / dam tshig ma nyams par byas la 'bad do*. Translation mine. See Karmay, *Arrow*, 37; Tibetan, 40.

doubt as to their authenticity. After having listed the many texts he considers apocryphal,[223] Zhiwa Ö continues:

> Although the wisdom tantras (i.e. yoginītantras; *prajñātantra*; *shes rab kyi rgyud*) are excellent, many [monks] give up the monastic training due to not understanding the meanings of words that have [a different] intention (*dgongs pa can gyi tshig*). Therefore, it is not a violation if they are not practiced.[224]

It seems then that Zhiwa Ö sees the "wisdom tantras," that is, the yoginītantras, with their overtly antinomian and sexual doctrines, as presenting the greatest threat to maintaining the monastic vows. This raises a further question, an answer to which we may not easily find: why is it that Zhiwa Ö and others would have found the antinomianism of the yoginītantras to be so much riskier than that of the mahāyogatantras, such as Guhyasamāja, to the point that it was better not to practice them? It would seem that in either case, the dangers of the purported misinterpretation or abuse would be equal.

As with Yeshé Ö, we see once again that the texts and doctrines that Zhiwa Ö considers the most problematic are those that eventually form the basis for the Nyingma schools, in particular those associated with the Dzogchen teachings. These are claimed to be adulterated with the teachings of heretics; that is, Bönpos and non-Buddhist Indian sects: "In particular, the view of the Great Perfection is mixed with the stages [of practice] of the *tīrthika*s."[225] This repeats the common suggestion that such texts were impure, corrupted by

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[223] He divides the apocryphal texts into outer tantras, inner tantras (i.e. mahāyoga tantras), Kīlaya tantras, texts on the "mind section" (*sems sde*), tantras of *yakṣa*s (*gnod sbyin gyi rgyud*), works on the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*), texts on *ma mo* spirits, texts on *rgyal po* spirits, works on "recent tantras" (that is, those from the "new translation" period [*gsar 'gyur*]), and works on mahāmudrā (*phyag rgya chen po*). See Karmay, *Arrow*, 31–7.

[224] *Shes rab kyi rgyud ni mchog tu gyur pa yin yang / dgongs pa can gyi tshig don ma shes nas / rab tu byung ba bslab pa dang phral ba mang bas ma byas kyang 'gal ba med pa tsam*. Translation mine. See Karmay, *Arrow*, 37; Tibetan, 40.

[225] *Khyad par du rdzogs pa chen po'i lta ba mu stegs kyi rim pa dang bsres pas…* Karmay, *Arrow*, 37; Tibetan, 40.

their blend of Buddhist doctrines with either Bön or Hindu doctrines.

In concluding the *Refutation,* Zhiwa Ö leaves no doubt as to which tradition he considers to be authoritative:

> Furthermore, since there are many sādhanas that have been composed by Tibetans, it is unsuitable to depend on them. They are the path to the bad migrations of saṃsāra. Those [who follow] the renowned Kadam tradition should not practice these false doctrines.[226]

We see that the Kadam tradition, which was becoming well-established by the time of the writing of Zhiwa Ö's decree, had already acquired a reputation as a reformist tradition that advocated strict ethical discipline and rejected the excesses of the schools of the earlier dissemination. With Zhiwa Ö, we see the ideological lines between the "ancient" and "new" traditions being defined ever more clearly. While it seems highly possible that Zhiwa Ö would have met Atiśa, I am unaware of any account of this, and Karmay states that "absolutely nothing is known with regard to his personal life."[227]

Rinchen Zangpo and Sarma Orthodoxy

Another figure whose name is virtually synonymous with the later dissemination is the "great translator," Lotsāwa Rinchen Zangpo (Lo tsA ba rin chen bzang po; 958–1055). In the words of Giuseppe Tucci, Rinchen Zangpo was "an apostle of Buddhism in the Land of Snows."[228] According to the *Blue Annals*, "the 'later' spread of the Tantras in Tibet was greater than the 'early' spread (of the Tantras), and this was chiefly due to this translator."[229] Rinchen Zangpo

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[226] *Gzhan yang bod kyis byas pa'i sgrub thabs mang du yod pas blo btad du mi btub / 'khor ba ngan song gi lam yin no / bka' gdams kyi chos rgyud du grags pa 'di rnams kyis / chos log 'di rnams nyams su mi blang ngo*. Karmay, *Arrow*, 38; Tibetan, 40.
[227] Karmay, *Arrow,* 17.
[228] Tucci, *Rin-chen-bzan-po and the Renaissance of Buddhism in Tibet Around the Millennium,* 5.
[229] Roerich, Gzhon-nu-dpal, *Blue Annals*, 68.

spent many years studying sūtra, tantra, and Sanskrit language with numerous masters in Kashmir and India. In the realm of exoteric Mahāyāna texts, Zhonnu Pel writes that "the spread of the profound Prajñāpāramitā [doctrine] is also due to him."[230] Rinchen Zangpo's translations into Tibetan included the *Aṣṭasahāsrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (*Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand* [*Lines*]) and the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* (*Ornament of Clear Realization*). In terms of translating and teaching the Vajrayāna, Zhonnu Pel reports that Rinchen Zangpo translated (or re-translated) most of the "father tantras" (*pha rgyud*) of the yoganiruttaratantra class, including the *Tattvasaṃgraha* (a.k.a. *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha*) and the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*, and was especially active in the diffusion of the yogatantras.[231] Zhonnu Pel also writes that Rinchen Zangpo was instrumental in the propagation of the teaching and practice of the yoginītantras, particularly the tantra of Śrī Cakrasaṃvara.[232] He was not only a prolific translator of both Sūtrayāna and Mantrayāna texts, but a renowned master who formed a translators' school, assisted in the construction of multiple temples and stūpas (traditionally said to be 108, an auspicious number), and sponsored numerous large-scale devotional Buddhist events, such as one hundred thousand recitations of the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti*.

Like the other authors we are considering, Rinchen Zangpo was concerned with delineating the boundary between "false" and "authentic" tantric traditions. As Leonard van der Kuijp writes, "the lo tsā ba-translator Rin chen bzang po, this bird-faced son of Mnga' ris, may very well have been the very first individual in Tibetan religious history to essay to bring some form of 'orthodoxy' and structure in Vajrayāna praxis and its textual

[230] Roerich, Gzhon-nu-dpal, *Blue Annals*, 209.
[231] Roerich, Gzhon-nu-dpal, *Blue Annals*, 205, 351. Although the *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha* is generally considered a yogatantra text, Zhonnu Pel here categorizes it as a yoganiruttaratantra.
[232] Roerich, Gzhon-nu-dpal, *Blue Annals*, 380.

foundations."[233] Rinchen Zangpo composed the first text that actually had the title *Refutation of False Mantra*. According to van der Kuijp, Rinchen Zangpo's *Refutation* "may thus have been the very first Tibetan attempt at separating the orthodox from the heterodox and at setting things straight as far as 'false' and counterproductive practices were concerned."[234] The text, a copy of which has only recently been recovered (though not yet been published or translated), consists of 52 folios, some portions of which have been cited by other later Tibetan authors. According to van der Kuijp, "the main thrust of this work involves a detailed explication of the way in which the expression *sgrol sbyor* ought not be taken literally."[235] We can assume, then, that unlike the works of Go Lotsāwa Khugpa Lhetse and Chak Lotsāwa Chojé Pal, Rinchen Zangpo's text is more concerned with identifying mistaken, literal approaches to yoganiruttaratantra practice than apocryphal, Tibetan-authored texts.

Gö Khugpa Lhetse's Refutation

Two other texts that ostensibly pushed the "neoconservative" view towards tantra both bear the same title: *Refutation of Mistaken Mantra* (*Sngags log sun 'byin*). The first is by Gö Lotsāwa Khugpa Lhetse ('Gos lo tsā ba khug pa lhas btsas; early to late eleventh c.), the second by Chag Lotsāwa Chojé Pal (Chag lo tsā 113ac hos rje dpal; 1197–1263/4).

Khugpa Lhetse was a contemporary of other major Sarma figures, including Atiśa, Marpa Chökyi Lodro (Mar pa Chos kyi blo gro; 1012–97), and Ra Lotsāwa (Rwa lo tsā ba; 1016? –1128?). Although the text we are discussing by Gö Khugpa Lhetse is a polemical

[233] Van der Kuijp, "The Bird-faced Monk and the Beginnings of the New Tantric Tradition, Part One," 406.
[234] Van der Kuijp, "The Bird-faced Monk," 444–45.
[235] Van der Kuijp, "The Bird-faced Monk," 445, 445n122. In the postscript, van der Kuijp adds that "Rin chen bzang po's *Sngags log sun 'byin* has recently been recovered by way of a fifty-two-folio *dbu med* manuscript… The main thrust of this work involves a detailed explication of the way in which the expression *sgrol sbyor* ought not be taken literally (*sgra ji bzhin pa*)." Van der Kuijp, "The Bird-faced Monk," 450.

work purporting to identify and refute mistaken, or perverse, tantric systems (*sngags log*), Khugpa Lhetse was also a prolific translator who translated dozens of tantric texts, including works on deities such as Hevajra, Cakrasaṃvara, Mahāmāyā, Vajraḍāka, and Catuṣpīṭha.[236] As an author, he is best known for composing two significant works: *Survey of the Guhyasamāja* (*Gsang 'dus stong thun*) and the aforementioned *Refutation of Mistaken Mantra.*[237] He was instrumental in the translation and teaching of the texts and traditions of Guhyasamāja and the first of these texts, a commentary on the *Guhyasamāja Tantra,* is considered his magnum opus. He may be best known, however, as a "fierce adversary of the old school," owing to his composing the *Refutation,* which challenged the validity and authenticity of many of the Nyingma tantras.[238] Given his ostensibly "neoconservative" stance, one might assume that these texts present fundamentally irreconcilable viewpoints: one a commentary on one of the most antinomian tantric systems, the other a text vigorously criticizing false, or mistaken, Mantrayāna systems. In fact, however, these perspectives are complementary, underlining his status as an avid promoter of the Sarma traditions, for whom the Guhyasamāja system was of major importance, and a critic of the old schools.

A reading of the *Refutation* certainly does not support the notion that Khugpa Lhetse may have been a zealot simply seeking to cleanse the tradition of impure tantric conduct. Whereas treatises such as Yeshé Ö's decree focused primarily on the excesses of "lay mantrins living in villages" who practiced the rites of "union" and "liberation" and thus contributed to the "ruin of the kingdom" (*rgyal khams phung*), Khugpa Lhetse seems to have

[236] See Wedemeyer, "Sex, Death, and Reform," 247. Tib. p. 24.
[237] Akhu Sherab Gyatso (A khu shes rab rgya mtsho; 1803–1875) mentions a third text composed by Gö, *Presentation of the Tantric Sets* (Rgyud sde'i rnam zhag). According to Wedemeyer, this has not been found to date. See Wedemeyer, "Sex, Death, and Reform," 243, 245.
[238] Raudsepp, "Dating and Authorship Problems in Sngags log sun 'byin," 284.

been relatively unconcerned with such transgressions. The *Refutation* makes no mention of concerns about practices of sexual yoga or ritual killing but consists, as Christian Wedemeyer writes, "s*olely* of criticism concerning the older Tantric literature as Tibetan innovations"; that is, Khugpa Lhetse's main concern appears to regard the origins of these texts, not their supposedly transgressive content.[239] In fact, Wedemeyer notes that Khugpa Lhetse's *Survey of the Guhyasamāja* "quite prominently features a frank and straightforward discussion of the varieties, nature, and undertakings involved in the special type of erotico-antinomian Tantric observance known as 'The Practice' (*caryā*; *spyod pa*) as well as a significant presentation of rituals of wrathful destruction (*abhicāra*, *mngon spyod*)."[240]

The actual text of the *Refutation* is only available to us because it is quoted in a much later polemical treatise by the Nyingma scholar, Sogdogpa Lodrö Gyaltsen (Sog zlog pa blo gros rgyal mtshan; 1552–1624). The portions of the *Refutation* cited by Sogdogpa contain virtually no argumentation, instead simply categorizing texts according to whether they are "undefiled teachings" (*dri ma med pa'I chos*)—authentic Indian-authored texts—or "mistaken, defiled teachings created by Tibetans" (*bod kyis byas pa'i chos log dri ma can*).[241] Khugpa Lhetse's strategy involves rejecting the authority of Tibetans who purportedly authored these apocryphal works and showing, in a style typical of Sarma polemicists, that the majority of older tantras that flourished in Tibet during the earlier dissemination were "mistaken" and "defiled." Like Zhiwa Ö, Khugpa Lhetse places most of the blame for Buddhism's degeneration in Tibet on figures associated with the earlier imperial period. As Wedemeyer has argued, both Zhiwa Ö's and Khugpa Lhetse's rejection of "proto-rNyingma

[239] Wedemeyer, "Sex, Death, and 'Reform' in Eleventh-Century Tibetan Buddhist Esoterism," 248.
[240] Wedemeyer, "Sex, Death, and 'Reform,'" 249.
[241] Wedemeyer, "Sex, Death, and Reform," 246. *Snags log*, 24.

tantras" during the chidar "was based largely—if not solely—on criticism of their place or person of origin, not questions of sensuality or aggression."[242] Khugpa Lhetse's criteria for authenticity are clear: "texts are authentic if commentaries, *sādhana* or *maṇḍala* rituals written by Indians exist about the text."[243] The "questions of sensuality or aggression," highlighted most prominently in Yeshé Ö's ordinance and Rinchen Zangpo's *Refutation,* concern the aforementioned union and liberation (*sbyor sgrol*) practices and involve a separate issue, that of misinterpreting otherwise authentic scriptures. Such questions are virtually absent from Khugpa Lhetse's *Refutation,* leading Wedemeyer to conclude that we thus see "no evidence of a 'puritanical reformer'" in this work.[244] I concur with this assessment, as it is clear that the reasons for composing the *Refutation,* as with the other works we have seen, were more complex.

The objects of Khugpa Lhetse's attacks include authors who were seminal figures in the Nyingma traditions, particularly those associated with the Dzogchen teachings: the great lotsāwa Vairocana (Bai ro tsa na or Ba'i ro tsa na; eighth–ninth c.?), Nub Sangye Rinchen (Gnubs sangs rgyas rin chen, presumably Gnubs sangs rgyas ye shes; b. 844?), the "great" Zur (Zur chen shAkya 'byung gnas; 1002–1062), and "lesser" Zur (Zur chung shes rab grags pa; 1014–1074).[245] In perhaps his most audacious accusation, Khugpa Lhetse claims that the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* (*Gsang ba snying po'i rgyud*)—a Mahāyoga text that is one of the foundational tantric cycles of the Nyingma tradition—was not an Indian text, but was composed by Ma Rinchen Chog (Rma rin chen mchog; early to late eighth c.), one of

[242] Wedemeyer, "Sex, Death, and 'Reform,'" 249.
[243] Raudsepp, "Dating and Authorship Problems in *Sngags log sun 'byin*," 285.
[244] Wedemeyer, "Sex, Death, and 'Reform,'" 249.
[245] Wedemeyer, "Sex, Death, and 'Reform,'" 248. *Sngags log,* 21–22.

Padmasambhava's first Tibetan disciples.[246] The only tantric texts that Khugpa Lhetse deems acceptable are traditions that became prominent in the Sarma schools, such as the aforementioned *Guhyasamāja Tantra*.

The fact that Khugpa Lhetse—a recognized expert in tantra, especially the yoginītantras and mahāyogatantras—composed the *Refutation* clearly demonstrates that Sarma polemics against certain tantric lineages (and authors) were not merely seeking to sanitize the tradition by removing any parts that might violate exoteric Buddhist ethics. Their aim was tied to a larger project that sought to revitalize a tradition they saw as having strayed from its spiritual and philosophical roots in authentic Indian tantric traditions. In drawing a stark distinction between the earlier and later transmissions, these authors were clearly positioning the translations of the later period as the only reliable sources for tantric lineages.

The proliferation of unchecked tantric lineages in Tibet was seen as dangerous not just because of the supposedly widespread engagement in transgressive practices, but because misguided Tibetans were accused of composing their own treatises and attempting to pass them off as authentic Indian traditions. What mattered most was the provenance of the texts, the litmus test being whether the author was Indian or Tibetan.

Chag Lotsāwa Chojé Pal's Refutation

[246] It is believed that Ma Rinchen Chog translated the *Guhyagarbha* into Tibetan, not that he wrote it. Karmay writes that questions about the *Guhyagarbha*'s authenticity were put to rest when a Sanskrit original of the text was discovered in the thirteenth century at Samyé monastery. See Arthur Mandelbaum, "Ma Rinchen Chok," Treasury of Lives. http://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Rinchen-Chok/3660. See also Karmay, *Arrow*, 7; Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 153; and Raudsepp, "Dating and Authorship Problems," 285. Both Karmay and Davidson assert that the *Guhyagarbha* was found at Samyé by the Kadampa master, Chomden Rigrel (Bcom ldan rig ral), and possibly re?-translated by him. A contemporary author has compiled a variety of small texts and added them to Chomden's recently discovered Sungbum about the authenticity of the *Guhyagarbha*. A note to the first text says, "We have not found the actual text, only a condensed version cited [elsewhere]." Thus it seems that some (or most) of these small works are not actually by Chomden Rigral. The story of his finding the Guhyagarbha at Samye is found in this collection (see pp. 150ff). See the collection at BDRC: https://library.bdrc.io/show/bdr:MW00EGS1017426_63A986#open-viewer.

Another text seeking to distinguish between "correct" and "false" doctrines is the homonymous *Refutation of Mistaken Mantra* attributed to the scholar-monk Chag Lotsāwa Chojé Pal (Chag lo tsA ba chos rje dpal; 1197–1263/4), also known by his Indian name, Dharmasvāmin.[247] According to his biography, Chojé Pal traveled and studied extensively in India and Nepal, spending time at Bodhgayā, Nālandā, and Rājagṛha just as Buddhism was in its final phase in India. He is reported to have witnessed the final tumultuous days of Nālandā as it fell to Muslim invaders. He became an expert in Sanskrit and well-versed in both exoteric and esoteric Buddhism, translating dozens of Sūtrayāna and Mantrayāna texts from the Kangyur and Tengyur.[248] He was associated with both the Sakya and Kadam schools and lauded by the great polymath Sakya Paṇḍita as "the most learned of the translators after Rinchen Zangpo."[249] However, despite the importance of this text to our argument, there are, as we will see, compelling reasons to believe that this text was falsely attributed to Chojé Pal.

Like Khugpa Lhetse and the others we have considered, the author of this *Refutation*––if it was indeed Chojé Pal—was deeply concerned about the widespread diffusion of apocryphal, "false" tantric texts composed by Tibetan authors. These texts were largely, though not exclusively, associated with the Nyingma schools, again indicating the author's concerns to establish the superiority and validity of the Sarma scriptures and translations. The author's view of many of the works associated with the Nyingma schools is evident when he writes, "In general, the secret mantra [texts] that did not exist in India that were fabricated by Tibetans and not taught by the Buddha are those known as Nyingma ('ancient')."[250] His

[247] This Gö Lotsāwa, it should be noted, is not the famed Gö Lotsāwa Zhonnu Pel ('Gos lo tsA ba gzhon nu dpal; 1392–1481) who authored the *Blue Annals* (*Deb ther sngon po*).
[248] See Chos-rje-dpal, Roerich, *Biography of Dharmasvāmin*, Introduction.
[249] Roerich, Gzhon-nu-dpal, *Blue Annals*, 1058.
[250] *Spyir bod kyis byas shing sangs rgyas kyis ma gsungs la / rgya gar na med par gsang sngags rnying mar ming btags pa rnams so. Sngags log sun 'byin gyi skor*, 6.

condemnation of major Nyingma figures and texts is blunt and scathing, to put it mildly. For example, he assesses three revered figures of the Nyingma tradition, So Yeshé Wangchuk (So ye shes dbang phyugs; dates unknown), Zurchen Shakya Jungné (Zur chen shAkya 'byung gnas; 1002–62), and Nubchen Sangye Yeshé (Nub chen sangs rgyas ye shes; b. 844?), as follows:[251]

> Spirits entered into the three, So, Zur, and Nub. They mixed up the scriptural systems of outsiders, the higher and lower *sādhana*s of Buddhists, the tantras of worldly devils, and the Bönpo scriptural systems, but designated them as according with the Dharma.[252]

Here, the author uses the common trope of spirit possession as a way to ridicule these figures. In his view, the works of such authors are utterly unreliable because of their indiscriminate mixing of authentic Buddhist doctrines with those of "outsiders," Bönpos, and "worldly devils." Writing about the Eight Sādhana Teachings (*sgrub pa bka' brgyad*), another major cycle of Nyingma teachings revealed as terma by Nyangral Nyima Özer (Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer; 1124–92), the author writes that "not a single thing within these is correct."[253] He frequently makes similar assertions about renowned Nyingma teachings throughout the *Refutation*. Tantras of deities such as the *Lotus Great Power* (*Pad ma dbang chen*, referring to the deity Hayagrīva), he writes, contain "many self-created deities and secret mantras of heretics (*tīrthika*s)."[254] Texts on the gathering of peaceful and wrathful deities are "a mix of

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[251] All three were considered major Nyingma masters and lineage-holders. The *Dung-dkar Tshig-mdzod Chen-mo* dictionary identifies these three as So nam mkha'i snying po, Zur chos dbyings rang grol, and Gnub sangs rgyas ye shes.

[252] *So zur snubs gsum gyi khongs su rgyal po zhugs te / phyi rol pa'i gzhung lugs dang / nang pa'i sgrubs thabs gong 'og dang / 'jig rten pa'i dregs byed rams kyi rgyud bon po'i gzhung lugs rnams bsres nas ming chos dang mahun par btags nas*. *Sngags log sun 'byin gyi skor*, 7.

[253] *'Di rnams la yang dag gcig kyang med do*. *Sngags log sun 'byin gyi skor*, 7–8.

[254] *'Di rnams la mu stegs kyi lha dang gsang sngags rang ches mang bar 'dug.* (Read *rang byas* for *rang ches*.) *Sngags log sun 'byin gyi skor*, 8.

Bönpo scriptures, Buddhist tantras, and Brāhmaṇa tantras; nothing in them is correct."[255] The translator Vairocana once again comes under attack, with the author alleging that he composed "countless" Dzogchen texts that "mix up the nihilistic views of the heretics, [the doctrines of] Ārhata (Mchod 'os pa; the founder of Jainism), and the Buddhist [practice] of the six unions of Kālacakra."[256] Again citing spirit possession as the cause for the errors of these Tibetan scholars, the author directs his readers to consult the *Ornament of Realization* (*Abhisamayālaṃkāra*) to fully understand how one comes under the influence of the māras:

> Spirits having entered into the hearts of these Tibetan teachers, they desired [only] food, drink, and material things within the world. This is the magical power of demons who are attracted to negativity and to Tibetans with little merit. This should be known from the chapter on analyzing the māras in the *[Prajñā]pāramitā* (i.e. the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*).[257]

Again, as in the works of Zhiwa Ö and Khugpa Lhetse, we see no mention here of practices such as "union" and "liberation," practices that Yeshé Ö's ordinance had strongly linked to the degeneration of Buddhism in Tibet.

Despite the largely anti-Nyingma stance of the text, however, the *Refutation* also criticizes a number of teachers who were more identified with the Sarma, such as Padampa Sangye (Pha dam pa sangs rgyas; b. eleventh c.; d. 1117), the founder of the Zhije (*zhi byed*) tradition. Kadri Raudsepp identifies the teachers listed in the *Refutation*, other than Vairocana, as "principal masters or founders of certain new lineages with gSar ma

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[255] *'Di bon po'i gzhung dang / nang pa'i rgyud dang bram ze'i rgyud dang bsres par 'dug pas / yang dag pa gcig kyang med do*. *Sngags log sun 'byin gyi skor*, 8.
[256] *'Di rnams mu stegs chad lta ba dang / mchod 'os pa dang nang pa'i dus 'khor gyi sbyor drug bsres*. *Snggags log sun 'byin gyi skor*, 10.
[257] *'Di rnams bod rgan rnams kyi snying du 'dre zhugs nas / 'jig ten 'dir zas skom dang / zang zing 'dod pa dang / bod rnams bsod nams chung ba dang nag phyogs la dga' ba'i bdud kyi mthu yin / phar phyin gyi bdud brtags pa'i le'u las shes par bya'o*. *Sngagslog sun 'byin gyi skor*, 11.

background."[258] Notwithstanding the sectarian affiliations of these figures, an additional motivation for the author's criticisms becomes clear: they were associated with lay religious movements from the eleventh to twelfth centuries, movements that were "opposing new monastic institutions." Raudsepp writes that "the fact that the practices were propagated by teachers who did not want to be part of the monastic system and who declared direct visionary contact with religious authority... was sufficient to classify their teachings as false dharma."[259] There is thus a clear preference for the reformist tendencies of the Sarma, in particular their greater emphasis on monasticism.

A number of factors support the hypothesis that Chojé Pal did not actually compose the *Refutation*. One of the main arguments against his authorship comes from the influential Geluk scholar Tukwan Lobzang Chokyi Nyima (Thu'u bkwan blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma; 1737–1802). As Raudsepp explains, after refuting some of the arguments in the *Refutation*, Tukwan concludes that the text "cannot have been composed by such an erudite like Chag lo, but composed by someone crazy, full of attachment and hatred and it looks like he has taken the name of Chag lo."[260] As Raudsepp points out, the tone of the *Refutation* is markedly different from other texts written by Chojé Pal. Whereas the *Refutation* is almost devoid of philosophical argumentation, Raudsepp notes that in Chojé Pal's questions to Sakya Paṇḍita (Sa skya pan di ta kun dga' rgyal mtshan; 1182–1251), "Chag lo's *Zhu ba* (questions) are presented in a sophisticated style, his interests are clearly connected to philosophical issues; he doesn't look like somebody who could be fascinated by banal refutations of different Buddhist schools."[261] Another point in support of this view is the fact that the opening section

[258] Raudsepp, "Dating and Authorship Problems," 287.
[259] Raudsepp, "Dating and Authorship Problems," 287–8.
[260] Raudsepp, "Dating and Authorship Problems," 290.
[261] Raudsepp, "Dating and Authorship Problems," 290.

of the *Refutation* is written in the third person, speaking of Chojé Pal in grandiose terms that strongly suggest that it was a later insertion.[262] Raudsepp suggests that the text may have been composed later, around the end of the thirteenth or beginning of the fourteenth century, when texts such as the *Refutation* could have been used to justify the omission of certain problematic texts from the Kangyur (*bka' 'gyur*), the Tibetan Buddhist canon. As Raudsepp writes, "This *NgL* (*Sngags log sun 'byin*) could be one of the examples of these compositions that worked as ideological tools and were written according to the interests of those in power."[263]

Notwithstanding questions about the authorship of this text, it stands as an important document that contributes to our understanding of the intellectual and political environment of the later dissemination. The spread of new translations of later tantric systems as well as re-translations of older ones provided momentum for what Sarma proponents saw as a much-needed revitalization of Tibetan Buddhist traditions. This spiritual flourishing combined with a strong emphasis on Indian-rooted authenticity and a return to the fundamental doctrines of Buddhism, as well as the rigorous discipline (and institutional authority) of monasticism. As we can see in these polemical texts, however, while their authors were generally in agreement that Buddhism in Tibet had degenerated, succumbing to a number of erroneous doctrines and practices, they had a wide range of views as to what exactly these errors were.

Although the authors we have discussed can all be seen as displaying some "reformist" tendencies, their motives and aims in composing polemical treatises seem to vary

[262] The text begins by speaking in quasi-hagiographical terms of "the great lama, Chak lo chos rje—a scholar of grammar and logic, scripture and reasoning, the scriptural basket, the tantra sets, commentaries, and tenets; [who is] learned especially in the six sets of tantric scriptures, [who had] visions of limitless deities, actual attainment of a prophecy from Venerable Tārā, [and] a vision in a dream of the greatly compassionate Khasarpaṇi." *Sngagslog sun 'byin gyi skor*, 2–3.
[263] Raudsepp, "Dating and Authorship Problems," 291.

widely. Further, they often occupied multiple roles: as translators, monks, teachers, scholars, monarchs, and policymakers. While religious reformers may lack the charisma or authority of a tradition's founding figure, they can still significantly influence the development of the tradition. By characterizing them simply as "neoconservative," with all that such a term implies, we risk reducing their views to exclusively moralistic objections, where the primary concern is simply a return to "traditional" values. As we can deduce from these texts, however, multiple overlapping concerns were at play: doctrinal accuracy, monastic ethics, institutional and political legitimacy, and textual authenticity.

In addition, while these authors may have agreed on the importance of reining in the purported excesses of Tibetan tantric authors and clarifying the parameters of tantric orthodoxy, none of them seems to have endorsed the outright rejection of tantric practice. Even Yeshé Ö, the most doctrinally conservative of these authors, acknowledged the difference between "heretical" and valid tantras, although he clearly believed that a firm foundation in exoteric Mahāyāna practice was indispensable for practice of the Vajrayāna. Zhiwa Ö rejected Tibetan-composed "tantras" but argued that practitioners of Secret Mantra needed both to protect monastic discipline and uphold the tantric pledges without corrupting them. Gö Lotsāwa Khugpa Lhetse and Chag Lotsāwa Chojé Pal (if he was indeed the author of the *Refutation*) focused exclusively on questions of scriptural authenticity and purity of lineage, expressing little concern about the supposed abuses of the "village mantrins." As highly regarded translators and paṇḍitas with deep training in the mahāyoga and yoganiruttaratantra traditions, they could leverage their prestige and authority as translators to disseminate their views and bring about changes that favored their own Sarma tradition.

Atiśa Dīpaṃkara and Tantric Reform

While all of the above figures played significant roles in articulating the concerns and religious tensions of the later dissemination, perhaps the most hallowed figure associated with this period and with the inception of the Sarma schools is Atiśa Dīpaṃkara. As one of the most prominent figures of the later dissemination, Atiśa had his own way of navigating this complex terrain so as to promote a coherent vision of Buddhism that incorporated and synthesized the many different strands of Buddhist doctrine. The Kadam tradition, founded by his followers and based on his teachings, is often described as a reformist movement. The central pillar of the Kadampas' "reforms" was a back-to-basics approach: one that emphasized central exoteric Buddhist doctrines, such as renunciation, impermanence, the mind of awakening (*bodhicitta*), and the realization of emptiness.

A central focus of our inquiry in the following chapters will be a re-examination of the factors underlying this characterization of Atiśa. While there is no question about the enormous impact that Atiśa came to have on Tibetan Buddhist traditions, both during and after his lifetime, facile characterizations of him as a morally conservative, anti-tantric reformer raise questions about traditional accounts of his life and obscure significant aspects of his views, particularly with regard to antinomian tantric traditions, both from the earlier and later disseminations. We will consider some of these traditional depictions before examining texts composed by Atiśa that problematize such representations.

The issue of representation of Atiśa as a conservative reformer who almost single-handedly restored Tibetan Buddhism to its former glories does not simply derive from traditional Tibetan scholarship in which the narratives of quasi-hagiographical biographies (*rnam thar*) or traditional histories (*chos 'byung*) are repeated uncritically. As is frequently

the case with studies of premodern religious figures, modern scholarship in the field of Buddhist studies (and study of Asian religious traditions more broadly) has tended to rely rather unquestioningly on traditional sources without rigorously applying historical critical methods. Perhaps this is a remnant of Orientalism, wherein exoticized notions of a "mystical East" that is a repository of secret knowledge preclude deeper critical analysis. Whatever the case may be, both traditional and modern scholars have often repeated, with little further investigation, tropes of Atiśa as a doctrinal conservative who rejected the tantras outright. As with the figures we have examined above, however, Atiśa was a complex figure whose views, and his ability to share them, were shaped by his circumstances. As Wedemeyer has noted, there are notable parallels between ways in which Atiśa has been characterized and another great (albeit much later) reformer, Tsongkhapa:

> This notion of a "reformer"—the hero who saves the religion from magic and sex—is not the sole prerogative of Tsong kha pa. Indeed, the man rJe Rin po che styled himself after, Atiśa, has also frequently been cast in this role by modern writers. Gösta Montell writes, "Out of the constantly increasing degeneration efforts to reform sprang up. In the eleventh century, Atiça, a Hindoo monk, attempted to limit the practice of black art and to restore the purer Mahayana doctrine."[264]

Of course, the cited characterization by Montell (1899–1975), a Swedish ethnographer, is crude, and he refers to Atiśa as a "Hindoo," reflecting the all-too-common tendency of early Western scholars to confute Buddhist and Hindu doctrines and figures. However, this view of Atiśa as the great reformer who rejected the tantric path is shared by other, more recent scholars. Alaka Chattopadhyaya, in her work *Atiśa and Tibet*, wrote that,

> unlike the Siddhācaryas, under some of whom he received his early spiritual training,

[264] Wedemeyer, "Sex, Death, and 'Reform' in Eleventh-century Tibetan Buddhist Esoterism: *'Gos Khug pa Lhas btsas, spyod pa* (*caryā*), and *mngon par spyod pa* (*abhicāra*)," 256.

> Dīpaṃkara himself, as is evident from his mature writings like the *Bodhi-patha-pradīpa*, did not consider Vajrayāna (or for that matter, any form of the so-called later Tāntrika Buddhism) as representing the true spirit of the Buddha.[265]

Chattopadhyaya writes that the traditional usage of Atiśa's monastic name, Dīpaṃkara Śrījñāna, instead of his tantric name, Jñānaguhyavajra or Guhyajñānavajra (Ye shes gsang ba'i rdo rje), is an indication that his "Buddhist ordination meant for him a serious break with the earlier Tāntrika career."[266] Chattopadhyaya writes that while Atiśa did not reject the tantras outright, he became a "strong critic" of tantra, arguing that while he had a formal allegiance to the tantras, "the philosophical view and the codes of ethical conduct he eventually championed were really far from the theory and practices of the Vajrayāna of the Siddhācaryas."[267] While it is certainly true that Atiśa championed the ethical conduct of the vinaya and Bodhisattvayāna, it is inaccurate to say that these forms of ethics were—at least in Atiśa's perspective—"really far from the theory and practices of the Vajrayāna of the Siddhācaryas."

As I intend to show, Atiśa may well be considered to be a reformer, but this did not entail a rejection of the tantras, not even the most transgressive ones. Rather, it involved a hermeneutical process by which certain tantric doctrines could be seen as mistaken *if they were practiced in mistaken ways*, not as entirely faulty doctrines to be rejected. His views, however, did not always appear to be consistent on these points. We will consider the historical context for each of the texts he was writing and the teachings he was giving, a context that likely included social and political pressures that were outside Atiśa's control. In the following chapter, we go into further detail about Atiśa and his role in the chidar,

[265] Chattopadhyaya, *Atiśa and Tibet*, 79.
[266] Chattopadhyaya, *Atiśa and Tibet*, 78.
[267] Chattopadhyaya, *Atiśa and Tibet*, 79.

especially considering his views on the Vajrayāna.

Chapter 4: Atiśa, Tantra, and the Internalization of Yogic Practice

Atiśa's arrival in Gugé in 1042 proved to be a pivotal event that would be of enormous consequence to the development of later Tibetan schools. Atiśa represented the apex of Indian Buddhist learning and practice during the Pāla dynasty, as a renowned scholar-practitioner who had studied and held prominent roles at the most important Buddhist institutions: he received monastic ordination at Nālandā, studied at Somapura[268] and Odantapura,[269] and was eventually appointed to one of the most important positions of the famed monastic university Vikramaśīla.[270] Atiśa was a rigorous adherent to the monastic ethical ideal, a devoted practitioner of the bodhisattva path, and a highly trained tantric adept. The Kadam tradition, which was founded by Atiśa's closest disciple, Dromtönpa Gyalwai Jungné, largely shaped the trajectory of Tibetan Buddhist traditions in the wake of the upheavals of the ninth and tenth centuries. While leading figures of both Sakya (Sa skya) and Kagyü traditions studied with Kadam teachers, however, their impact was most obvious on the later Geluk school.

The concerns of the Gugé monarchs who had invited Atiśa had both political and religious dimensions, for the perceived degeneration of Buddhist teachings and the decline in

[268] Alternately spelled Somapurī.
[269] Alternately spelled Odantapuri, Odantapurī.
[270] While it seems clear that Atiśa occupied a prominent position at Vikramaśīla, what exactly that role was is a point of some debate. According to Dutt, Atiśa was the "head," or *adhyakṣa*, of Vikramaśīla (Dutt, *Buddhist Monks and Monasteries of India*, 353, 361). Chattopadhyaya, on the other hand, cites Sarat Chandra Das, who refers to Atiśa as the "high priest" of Vikramaśīla (Chattopadhyaya, 127). According to Chattopadhyaya, Sumpa Khenpo Yeshe Peljor (Sum pa mkhan po ye shes dpal 'jor), in his historical work *Paksam Jonzang* (*Dpag bsam ljon bzang*), refers to Atiśa as the *mkhan po* (*upādhyāya*; abbot or preceptor) or *dge skyos* (enforcer of monastic discipline). Gö Lotsāwa ('Gos lo tsA ba), on the other hand, refers to Atiśa as the *gnas rtan chen po* (*mahāsthavira*, or "great elder"), but Chattopadhyaya writes that there are "clear grounds to doubt" that Atiśa ever actually held this post (Chattopadhyaya, 128). While the terms *mkhan po* and *dge skyos* "seem to suggest that Atiśa was some kind of academic head of Vikramaśīla," they do not, per Chattopadhyaya, necessarily mean that he was the head of the monastery (Chattopadhyaya, 127–9). Apple states that Atiśa "may have arrived at Vikramaśīla after being appointed 'preceptor,'" and that he served in an "administrative role related to upholding discipline" (*Atiśa Dīpaṃkara*, 21, 22).

monasticism following Lang Darma's assassination went hand in hand with the vacuum of centralized political and religious power. For an establishment seeking to revitalize Buddhist institutions and reestablish monasticism as central to the Buddhist tradition, the unchecked proliferation of antinomian tantric practices was understandably perceived as a threat. Arriving in Tibet under such circumstances, Atiśa took up what must have been an enormous challenge: to fully transmit and teach the vast range of authentic Indian Buddhist traditions while honoring the requests of the patrons who had invited him. He was surely eager to share the teachings that he himself had studied, practiced, and mastered, but in the highly politicized atmosphere of eleventh-century Tibet, there was a clear need to proceed judiciously, particularly with regard to controversial tantric doctrines and practices.

Although Yeshé Ö's efforts to invite Atiśa ultimately failed, Yeshé Ö succeeded in bringing other Indian pandits, such as Dharmapāla, to Tibet in order to explain monastic conduct according to the vinaya and to reestablish the Mulasarvāstivāda ordination lineage in Western Tibet.[271] Yeshé Ö also reportedly sent twenty-one Tibetans to India to study Buddhism with Indian pandits. Only two of them—Rinchen Zangpo and Ngog Lekpai Sherab (Rngog legs pa'i shes rab; tenth c.)—returned alive from the arduous journey. Rinchen Zangpo became one of the most important lotsāwas of the later dissemination, translating a number of texts with Atiśa himself. Yeshé Ö died before Atiśa finally accepted the invitation and made the journey to Tibet, but Yeshé Ö's descendant (possibly his nephew), Jangchub Ö, was more successful. Jangchub Ö first sent the translator Gya Tsondru

[271] While some traditional sources, including the *Blue Annals*, report that Yeshé Ö sacrificed his life in order to invite Atiśa to Tibet, this is likely an apocryphal account. According to van der Kuijp, it results from confusing Lha Bla ma ye shes 'od with his nephew, Lha lde, "the father of his great-nephews Pho brang Byang chub 'od (984-1078) and Lha btsun Zhi ba 'od (1016-1111)." See van der Kuijp, "A Fifteenth Century Biography of Lha bla ma Ye shes 'od," 2. See also Gö Lotsawa, Roerich trans., *Blue Annals*, 244–5.

Sengé (Rgya brtson ’grus seng ge; tenth c.) to invite Atiśa. Gya Tsondru Sengé was unsuccessful, but later returned to Vikramaśīla to continue his studies. Jangchub Ö then sent another translator, Nagtsho Lotsāwa Tshultrim Gyelwa (Nag tsho lo tsA ba tshul khrims rgyal ba; 1011–64), who arrived at Vikramaśīla in 1038. According to traditional accounts, Atiśa was told by a yoginī that if he went to Tibet, his life would be shortened by twenty years, but that it would be beneficial for Tibetans, so he eventually agreed to go.[272] According to Gö Lotsāwa, Atiśa left for Tibet with Nagtsho and their entourage in 1040, staying in Nepal on the way, and arriving in Ngari (Mnga’ ris), in western Tibet, in 1042.[273]

According to traditional accounts, Jangchub Ö specifically sought clarification on a number of doctrinal points, posing seven questions to Atiśa. Two of the questions pertained to the Sūtra and Mantra vehicles in common, two to just the Pāramitāyāna, and three specifically to Mantrayāna practices.[274] Regarding the Mantrayāna, he asked Atiśa whether there were conditions under which it would be suitable for celibate monastics to fully receive the second and third yoganiruttaratantra consecrations (the secret consecration, or *guhyābhiṣeka*, and the knowledge-wisdom consecration, or *prajñājñānābhiṣeka*), since they ostensibly required initiates to participate in ritual sexual acts; whether it was permissible for those who had not received the Vajrācārya consecration to explain the tantras;[275] and whether those who had not received any tantric consecrations could engage in the practice of Secret

[272] Apple, *Atiśa Dīpaṃkara*, 28.
[273] Chattopadhyaya discusses the variation between dates cited by modern scholars but concludes that these dates reported by Gö Lotsāwa and Sumpa are the most reliable. Chattopadhyaya, *Atīsa and Tibet*, 307–9.
[274] Apple, *Atiśa Dīpaṃkara*, 44, 44n21; Karmay, *Arrow and the Spindle*, 8. Both cite the work *Byang chub lam gyi sgron me’i grel ba phul byung dgyes pa’i mchod sprin*, a commentary on Atiśa’s *Lamp for the Path* (*Byang chub lam sgron*), by Konchog Gyaltsen (Dkon mchog rgyal mtshan).
[275] The master consecration (*ācaryābhiṣeka*; *slob dpon gyi dbang*), also known as the vajra master consecration (*vajrācaryābhiṣeka*; *rdo rje slob dpon gyi dbang*), is the final part of the vase consecration (*kalaśābhiṣekaḥ*; *bum dbang*), the first of the four principal yoganiruttaratantra consecrations. Having received the master consecration, the initiate is permitted to teach the tantra to others. See Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism* (vol. 1), 229–32.

Mantra. According to the *Blue Annals*, Jangchub Ö requested Atiśa to compose a treatise that would address these questions, thus serving as an "antidote" to the disagreements on these points.[276] In response, Atiśa composed the *Lamp for the Path to Awakening* (*Bodhipathapradīpa*; *Byang chub lam gyi sgron ma*), the text with which he has since been most closely identified.

The *Lamp for the Path* (*Bodhipathapradīpa*)

As a writer and scholar, Atiśa is most frequently associated with the genres of the stages of the path (*lam rim*) and mind training (*lo jong*; *blo sbyong*) as well as for pithy writings that give practical instructions on the exoteric doctrines and practices of the Buddhist path. Unlike earlier Indian Mahāyāna scholastics, such as Asaṅga, Vasubandhu, Nāgārjuna, Āryadeva, and so on, he did not compose lengthy, scholastic, philosophical works. He is hardly known as a commentator on tantra, much less on the highest classes of tantra, the yoginītantras and yoganiruttaratantras. Nonetheless, his output was prodigious, covering a vast range of subjects, including not only Sūtrayāna topics and treatises, but tantric rituals, practices, and even the great seal (mahāmudrā).

The *Bodhipathapradīpa*, or *Lamp for the Path to Awakening* (henceforth, *Lamp*) is unquestionably Atiśa's single most influential and popular work. The *Lamp* is admired both for its brevity (comprising a mere sixty-eight verses) and its synthetic style, succinctly presenting the major doctrinal points of the Śrāvakayāna, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna in a format that renders even profound topics in an accessible way. The *Lamp* presents an all-encompassing model of Buddhism that became a blueprint for the stages of the path genre,

[276] Roerich, trans., *Blue Annals*, 248.

both in the Kadam tradition and in the later Sarma sects, especially the Geluk order (which was also known as the "New Kadam" tradition). The *Lamp* is considered so seminal in the later dissemination that no less a figure than Tsongkhapa, founder of the Geluk sect some 400 years after Atiśa's passing, began his most renowned work, the *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path* (*Lam Rim Chen Mo*), with a lengthy praise of Atiśa. In it, he writes,

> In particular, the text for this work is Atisha's *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*; hence, the very author of the *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* is also the author of this [work].[277]

Tsongkhapa goes on to list the qualities establishing Atiśa as an exemplary master of all the Buddhist teachings, a flawless holder of the pratimokṣa, bodhisattva, and Vajrayāna vows (the *trisaṃvara*), and, perhaps most importantly, as someone who "reestablished the practices of the Buddhist system that had disappeared… reinvigorated those that remained only slightly; and… removed corruption based on misconceptions."[278]

The Tibetan text of the *Lamp* has been preserved and transmitted through three principal lines: in the Madhyamaka (*dbu ma*) section of the Tengyur (*bstan 'gyur*); in the section on "brief religious treatises" (*chos chung*) of Atiśa (*Jo bo'i chos chung*), included in the Dergé, Narthang, and Peking versions of the Tengyur; and in numerous paracanonical manuscripts and blockprints.[279] To date, the *Lamp* has been translated too many times to list here, into English as well as multiple European and Asian languages, including Hindi.[280] The

[277] Tsong kha pa, *Great Treatise*, vol. 1, 36–7.
[278] Tsong kha pa, *Great Treatise*, vol. 1, 41.
[279] Eimer, "Again: On Atiśa's *Bodhipathapradīpa*," 7.
[280] See, for a few examples, Das, "Bodhi Patha Pradīpa by Dīpaṅkara Śrī Jñāna"; Chattopadhyaya, *Atīśa and Tibet*; Rinchen, *Atisha's Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*; Davidson, "Atiśa's *A Lamp for the Path to Awakening*"; Sherburne, *A Lamp for the Path and Commentary of Atīśa*; Apple, *Atiśa Dīpaṃkara; and* Gyatso, *Illuminating the Path to Enlightenment*. See Eimer, "Again: On Atiśa's *Bodhipathapradīpa*," for a useful, if now dated, summary of translations of Atiśa's text.

earliest English translation appears to have been done in 1893 by the Bengali Tibetologist (and British spy), Sarat Chandra Das. The *Lamp* has also been back-translated into Sanskrit from Tibetan, the original Sanskrit manuscript (if there ever was one) having been lost to antiquity.[281] To this day, the *Lamp* remains a hugely popular source for commentaries by contemporary Tibetan teachers, including Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama.[282] Atiśa composed the *Lamp,* his first work written specifically for a Tibetan audience, at Tholing (*mtho lding*), a monastery in Ngari that had been founded by Rinchen Zangpo in 996. It was presumably written in Sanskrit and translated into Tibetan by Atiśa and the translator Gewä Lodrö (Dge ba'i blo gros; eleventh c.), who translated numerous texts by Atiśa or co-translated other texts with him.

Atiśa begins the *Lamp* in a manner that is unusual for Indian texts: by acknowledging the "good disciple," Jangchub Ö, who requested the text and who was effectively his patron. This may have had the purpose of showing his validation for Jangchub Ö's aims, and those of the Ngari court. "Having been requested by the good disciple, Jangchub Ö," he writes, "I shall illuminate the *Lamp for the Path to Awakening*."[283] Given the socio-political circumstances at the time in Gugé, we know that Atiśa did not write the *Lamp* in a vacuum. He was surely aware of the specific concerns of the Gugé establishment, his patrons and benefactors. Given the conservative stance of the Gugé court on tantric matters, and the nature of Jangchub Ö's request, Atiśa would certainly have wanted to compose a text that

[281] A Sanskrit "restoration" of the text was done by Mrinalkanti Gangopadhyaya. See Chattopadhyaya, *Atīśa and Tibet*, 545–9. Eimer also discusses a Sanskrit restoration done in 1984 by Losang Norbu Shastri, as well as the many problems involved in such a translation. Eimer concludes that "at the present time a correct restoration of the *Byang chub lam gyi sgron ma/Bodhipathapradīpa* is not possible." See Eimer, "Again: On Atiśa's *Bodhipathapradīpa*," 15.
[282] See Tenzin Gyatso, *Illuminating the Path to Enlightenment*.
[283] *Slob ma bzang po byang chub 'od kyis skul gyur pas / byang chub lam gyi sgron ma rab tu gsal bar bya*. Atiśa, *BPP*, 2a.

would not only lay out the main points of the general Buddhist path in a comprehensive way, but would also discourage misinterpretations of ostensibly dangerous tantric practices, particularly those of the yoganiruttara tantras and yoginītantras.

The *Lamp* was written with a specific objective: to respond to the concerns of a political establishment that was seeking to restore (or impose) a holistic vision of Buddhism, one that would reaffirm and bolster the central role of Buddhist monasticism in Tibet, and thus support the building of institutions with such a view. From the time that Buddhism had begun to take hold in Tibet—possibly as early as the seventh century, with the official support of the ruler Songtsen Gampo (Srong btsan sgam po; ca. 617–50)[284]—the Vajrayāna was seen as an integral part of its cultural and religious fabric. However, the reframing, even rejection, of orthodox Buddhist ethical principles in some Vajrayāna traditions may have threatened a vision that sought to impose unity and stability onto a decidedly untidy social and religious landscape. Traditions that found their inspiration in the antinomian teachings of the Indian mahāsiddhas, with their rejection of social conventions and orthodoxy, would surely have been viewed with suspicion by those keen to reinvigorate the practice of exoteric Mahāyāna doctrines and the monastic roots of Buddhism. Any move to reconcile such seemingly divergent doctrines was a delicate process. As we have seen, such a synthesis had been a central concern for numerous Indian Buddhist commentators, some of whom had been Atiśa's contemporaries or teachers at Vikramaśīla. While Atiśa's composition of the *Lamp* and other *lamrim* and Sūtrayāna texts may have eased some anxieties of the Gugé establishment, they left crucial elements of these questions only partially resolved. Hence, to

[284] Tibetan historians credit Songtsen Gampo with establishing Buddhism as the predominant religion in Tibet, although the extent of his commitment to Buddhism has been questioned in recent scholarship. See, for example, Kapstein, *Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism*, 51 ff.

get a full appreciation of the scope of Atiśa's work, we need to consider not only his better-known works, such as the *Lamp*, but his works on tantra, specifically the yoganiruttaratantras. Before wading into the second area, let us briefly look at the contents of the *Lamp*.

In the *Lamp*, Atiśa subsumes the Buddhist path under the framework of three types of beings (*skyes bu gsum*): those of small capacity (*skyes bu chung ba*), middling capacity (*skyes bu 'bring ba*), and great capacity (*skyes bu chen po*). The lesser being is concerned with "only the pleasures of saṃsāra by whatever means possible and pursuing their own benefit";[285] the middling being is concerned with the attainment of liberation, "turning away from the pleasures of existence and reversing unwholesome deeds";[286] and the great capacity individual is the follower of the bodhisattva path who, "because of personal suffering, seeks the complete extinction of others' suffering."[287] One of the hallmarks of the Kadampa school, according to the *Blue Annals*, was that "they believed and preached that an individual should practice the entire teaching of the Jina (the Sūtra and Tantra/Theravāda and Mahāyāna)."[288] More broadly, one of the *Lamp*'s concerns, in keeping with Jangchub Ö's questions regarding the compatibility of exoteric and esoteric doctrines, is to reconcile the three different levels of Buddhist ethics, the *trisaṃvara*—the prātimokṣa, bodhisattva, and Vajrayāna vows—a topic we considered in chapter 2. In terms of the *Lamp*, the prātimokṣa

[285] *Gang zhig thabs ni gang dag gis / 'khor ba'i bde ba tsam dag la / rang nyid don du gnyer byed pa / de ni skyes bu tha mar shes.* Atiśa Dīpaṃkara Śrījñāna, *Byang chub lam gyi sgron ma*, 4. Apple, trans., *Atiśa Dīpaṃkara*, 182.
[286] *Srid pa'i bde la rgyab phyogs shing / sdig pa'i las las ldog bdag nyid / gang zhig rang zhi tsam don gnyer / skyes bu de ni 'bring zhes bya*. Atiśa Dīpaṃkara Śrījñāna, *Byang chub lam gyi sgron ma*, 4. Apple, trans., *Atiśa Dīpaṃkara*, 182.
[287] *Rang rgyud gtogs pa'i sdug bsngal gyis / gang zhig gzhan gyi sdug bsngal kun / yang dag zad par kun nas 'dod / skyes bu de ni mchog yin no.* Atiśa Dīpaṃkara Śrījñāna, *Byang chub lam gyi sgron ma*, 4–5. Apple, trans., *Atiśa Dīpaṃkara*, 182.
[288] Roerich, trans., *Blue Annals*, 264.

discipline aligns principally with the doctrines of the Śrāvakayāna, that is, the emphasis on liberation from saṃsāra, which comprises the aims of the "middling" being; the bodhisattva discipline aligns with the Pāramitāyāna, and thus the "superior" being; and the Vajrayāna discipline naturally aligns with the Vajrayāna, the esoteric aspect of the Mahāyāna. Atiśa's aim here is thus the reconciliation of the practices of all three beings, and all three levels of ethics, into a single, coherent Buddhist path. Once one has developed the realizations of the small capacity being, one progresses to the medium capacity level, and so on. Although these three levels do not explicitly include the Vajrayāna, the framework of the *trisaṃvara* does. It assumes that a fully qualified vessel for the Vajrayāna is one who possesses all three types of vows, not just, for example, the bodhisattva or Vajrayāna vows.[289] In other words, it presumes that it is possible for a holder of the vinaya, including a fully ordained monk, to practice the Vajrayāna. In this view, the monastic and tantric paths were not, as some Tibetans seemed to believe, mutually exclusive paths.

The *Lamp* begins, following Buddhist scholastic tradition, with a verse of homage to Mañjuśrī, the deity of wisdom, and to the "victorious ones" (*jina*; *rgyal ba*). Following this (vv. 2–5) is the presentation of the aforementioned three beings. The main focus of the *Lamp* is the third of these levels, the superior Mahāyāna disciple who, impelled by awareness of their own personal suffering, generates bodhicitta, the mind of awakening, and "seeks the complete extinction of others' suffering." Verses 6 through 18 focus on the merits of developing bodhicitta and refuge in the triple gem. In verses 19 through 21, we find the first explicit mention of the bodhisattva and pratimokṣa vows. Here Atiśa makes the case that "only those who maintain any of the seven kinds of prātimokṣa vows are fit for the vows of a

[289] As the pratimokṣa vows include the lay vows, not only monastic vows, a lay vow-holder (*upāsaka*) holding the bodhisattva and tantra vows would also be a "holder of the three vows."

bodhisattva."[290]

The next sections expand on the main topics of the "great capacity," or Mahāyāna, disciple. These verses explain the process for generating bodhicitta and performing the ritual for taking the bodhisattva vow; accomplishment of the accumulations of skillful means (*upāya*; *thabs*) and wisdom (*prajñā*; *shes rab*); and generation of the mind of quiescence (*śamatha*; *zhi gnas*) and the extrasensory knowledges (*abhijñā*; *mngon shes*). Following the attainment of quiescence, the yogin strives to attain the perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*; *shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa*), that is, the realization of emptiness, in order to abandon the two types of obscurations—the afflictive obscurations (*kleśāvaraṇa*; *nyon sgrib*) and knowledge obscurations (*jñeyāvaraṇa*; *shes sgrib*). Atiśa briefly indicates the various reasonings used by Mādhyamikas to establish selflessness and emptiness in treatises such as Nāgārjuna's *Root Verses on the Middle Way* (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*; *Dbu ma rtsa ba'i tshig le'ur byas pa shes rab*) and *Seventy Stanzas on Emptiness* (*Śūnyatāsaptatikārikā*; *Stong pa nyid bdun cu pa'i tshig le'ur byas pa*). Concluding the section on wisdom, Atiśa explains how the bodhisattva will traverse the various paths (*mārga*; *lam*) and stages (*bhūmi*; *sa*), culminating in the awakened state of buddhahood.

Interestingly, the latter verses of the section on *prajñā* suggest significant differences between Atiśa's presentation of the view of emptiness and later Tibetan Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka interpretations of the view, especially those of Tsongkhapa and his Geluk followers.[291] Atiśa alludes to a view that became central to the tantra and mahāmudrā

[290] Apple, trans., in *Atiśa Dīpaṃkara*. The seven gradations, or categories of vows, of the prātimokṣa are the vows of (1) a fully ordained monk (*bhikṣu*; *dge slong*); (2) a fully ordained nun (*bhikṣuṇī*; *dge slong ma*); (3) a female probationer (*śikṣamānā*; *dge slob ma*); (4) a male novice (*śramaṇera*; *dge tshul*); (5) a female novice (*śrāmaṇerī*; *dge tshul ma*); (6) a layman (*upāsaka*; *dge bsnyen*); and (7) a laywoman (*upāsikā*; *dge bsnyen ma*).
[291] Apple's translation of verses 55 and 56 reads: "This existence, arisen from conceptualization, has conceptualization as its nature. Therefore, the elimination of all conceptualization without exception is the highest nirvāṇa. In this way, the Blessed One has said, 'Conceptualization is the great ignorance; it immerses us

traditions in India and Tibet, one that seems to have more in common with the dohās of Saraha and other mahāsiddhas than with the dialectical approaches of Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, and other scholastic Madhyamaka exponents. We will consider this topic in greater detail when we look at Atiśa's spiritual poems, or gītis.

The Lamp *on Vajrayāna and Yoganiruttaratantra Consecrations*

Only after presenting a comprehensive map of the bodhisattva path according to the Sūtrayāna does Atiśa turn to discussion of the Vajrayāna, dedicating a mere nine verses to the subject. Although Vajrayāna literature abounds with grandiose claims of the impossibility of attaining full awakening without entering the mantra path, since the *Lamp* was written in response to Jangchub Ö's specific request to eliminate misconceptions about tantric practice, it is clearly intended as a corrective to such interpretations and thus focuses mainly on exoteric doctrines. In Tibet, as we have seen, there was a great deal of concern to call out and put an end to the "perverse" practices of "union" (*sbyor*) and "liberation" (*sgrol*)—sexual rituals and slaying rituals—that had supposedly become so widespread in Tibet before Atiśa's arrival. The brevity of the *Lamp*'s Vajrayāna section hints at Atiśa's aim, that is, to show that the tantric path was only truly efficacious when practiced in conjunction with Sūtrayāna methods. Given this, it is no surprise that the Vajrayāna section of the *Lamp* is short on specifics of how to actually enter into or practice the tantric path. Atiśa gives only a brief summary of the general requisites for practicing the mantra path, beginning with the following verses:

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in the ocean of saṃsāra, abiding in nonconceptual concentration, nonconceptualization is lucidly clear like the sky'" (Apple, *Atiśa Dīpaṃkara*, 188). Such a view, which bears some similarity to the views of Mahāmudrā (*phyag rgya chen po*) and Dzogchen (*rdzogs chen*), would likely have been anathema to Gelukpas. This aspect of Atiśa's work has only recently begun to receive more scholarly attention. See, for example, Apple, "Atiśa's Open Basket of Jewels"; and Apple, *Jewels of the Middle Way*.

If one wishes to create with ease
The collections for awakening
Through activities of pacification,
Increase, and so forth, gained by the power of mantra, (60)

And also through the force of the eight
And other great attainments like the "Good Vase";
If you wish to practice secret mantras,
As explained in the action and performance tantras, (61)

Then, to receive the *ācārya* consecration,
One must please an excellent spiritual teacher
Through service, precious gifts, and so forth,
And follow their instructions. (62)[292]

Here, we see mention of the four activities and eight attainments, as well as the master consecration (*ācaryābhiṣeka*). The four activities (*catuṣkarmāṇi*; *las bzhi*) refer to ritual activities of pacification (*śānti*; *zhi ba*), increase (*puṣṭi*; *rgyas pa*), overpowering (*vaśya*; *dbang*), and wrath (*abhicāra* or *māraṇa*; *drag po*), in which tantric practitioners are expected to become proficient. The eight attainments (*siddhi*; *dngos grub*) are the special "worldly" powers obtained through tantric practice, such as flying in space or walking underground.[293] It is worth noting that among the four activities, overpowering and wrath are often equated with the aforementioned activities of union and liberation, the objects of the fiercest polemics

[292] Trans. Apple, *Atiśa Dīpaṃkara*, 189–90. *Sngags mthu nyid las grub pa yi / zhi dang rgyas sogs las rnams kyis / bum pa bzang grub la sogs pa / grub chen brgyad sogs stobs kyis kyang / bde ba yis ni byang chub tshogs / yongs su rdzogs par 'dod pa dang / bya ba spyd sogs rgyud gsungs pa'i / gal te gsangs sngags spyod 'dod na / de tshe slob dpon dbang bkur* (D: *bskur*) *phyir / bsnyen bkur rin chen sogs sbyin dang / bka' bsgrub* (D: *dka' sgrub*) *la sogs thams cad kyis / bla ma dam pa mnyes par bya*. *BPP*, 22–3.

[293] See Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism* (vol. 1) for a general discussion of the eight siddhis (235–6) and four activities (238–40). Snellgrove cites the *Durgatipariśodhana*, presumably referring to the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana Uṣṇīṣa Vijaya Dhāraṇī Sūtra*, as a source for the grouping of four activities. Dan Martin lists eight "common attainments": attainment of the pill (*ril bu'i dngos grub*); attainment of eye medicine (*mig sman gyi dngos grub*); attainment of walking underground (*sa 'og gi dngos grub*); attainment of the sword (*ral gri'i dngos grub*); attainment of flying in space (*mkha' la 'phur ba'i dngos grub*); attainment of invisibility (*mi snang ba'i dngos grub*); attainment of immortality (*'chi ba med pa'i dngos grub*); and attainment of conquering illness (*nad 'joms pa'i dngos grub*). Martin cites this list from the Tibetan scholar Konchog Jigmé Wangpo (Dkon mchog 'jigs med dbang po; 1728–1791). It is not clear which list Atiśa is referring to, which includes the "good vase" (*bum pa bzang po*).

by Jangchub Ö and other Tibetans against the abuse of tantric practices, as discussed in the previous chapter.[294] Engaging in such practices, assuming they are actually performed, would obviously violate monastic injunctions against killing, resulting in a *pārājika* (*pham pa*), the most serious downfall for a monk.

As for the master consecration, this falls under the traditional fourfold classification of yoganiruttaratantra consecrations: the vase consecration (*kalaśābhiṣeka*; *bum dbang*), secret consecration (*guhyābhiṣeka*; *gsang dbang*), knowledge-wisdom consecration (*prajñājñānābhiṣeka*; *shes rab ye shes kyi dbang*), and word consecration (*śabdābhiṣekha*; *tshig dbang*).[295] The master consecration is bestowed as the final part of the vase consecration, which permits the disciple to practice the generation stage and perform other activities, such as explaining the tantra to others.[296] Receiving the master consecration, as Atiśa stresses, requires reliance on a qualified spiritual teacher, an indispensable prerequisite for practice of the Vajrayāna. This prepares the disciple to receive the higher consecrations, and has significant soteriological implications:

> Having obtained the complete *ācārya* consecration,
> By a spiritual teacher who is pleased,
> One becomes purified of all transgressions
> And fortunate to accomplish the siddhis. (63)[297]

Overall, we can see in these verses that while the *Lamp* strongly emphasizes the exoteric

[294] See Onians, "Tantric Buddhist Apologetics," 262–3; Snellgrove, *Hevajra Tantra*, 38. One of many examples in tantric literature of wrathful action can be seen in the text *Activities of Destruction* (**Abhicārakarman*; *Mngon spyod kyi las*), found in the Kangyur, which describes the process for engaging in destructive activities by performing a wrathful *homa* rite (See **Abhicārakarman*; *Mngon spyod kyi las*; Toh 484, Degé Kangyur, vol. 85 (rgyud, ta), folios 96a3–96a7.
[295] See Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism* (vol. 1), 229–32.
[296] See Jackson, *Mind Seeing Mind*, 28.
[297] Trans. Apple, *Atiśa Dīpaṃkara*, 190. *Bla ma mnyes par gyur pa yis* / *yongs rdzogs slob dpon dbang bskur bas* / *sdig kun rnam dag bdag nyid ni* / *dngos grub sgrub pa'i skal ldan 'gyur*. *BPP*, 23–4.

path, particularly the path of the celibate ascetic, it is by no means a polemic against tantric practice. Even the fact that Atiśa discusses the four tantric activities, if only briefly, suggests his clear belief in the efficacy of the Vajrayāna, as well as his tacit acknowledgment of the tension between exoteric Sūtrayāna practices and transgressive Mantrayāna conduct.

The following verses in the *Lamp* bring these tensions to the fore. Following his advice regarding the four activities and the common siddhis, Atiśa addresses one of the most vexing issues in relation to tantric Buddhism, one central to the polemics regarding tantric practice. The debate regards the role of transgressive conduct, specifically sexual conduct, in the conferral of the yoganiruttaratantra consecrations. This consists of two principal questions: first, whether it is necessary to engage in sexual practices in order to fully receive the yoganiruttaratantra consecrations; second, whether or not it is acceptable for celibate monastics to receive the yoganiruttaratantra consecrations in their entirety.[298]

The secret and knowledge-wisdom consecrations ostensibly involve ritualized sexual union: in the secret consecration, the guru enters into union with their consort; in the knowledge-wisdom consecration, the disciple enters into union with the guru's consort.[299] Assuming, as Atiśa seems to do in this case, that the second and third consecrations are to be understood literally—that is, with the disciple actually entering into sexual union with a physical consort—it would clearly be a violation of ethical discipline if a celibate monastic were to receive these consecrations. Thus the *Lamp* states,

> Because it is strictly forbidden by the *Great Tantra of the Ādibuddha*,[300] those

[298] See Onians, "Tantric Buddhist Apologetics," 195ff. on sexual initiation; 253ff. on Atiśa and sexual initiation; 300ff. on whether initiation is suitable for monks. See also Gray, "Visualization of the Secret," especially on Atiśa and the interiorization of sexual/transgressive practices in the context of yoganiruttaratantra.
[299] Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism* (vol. 1), 243–5.
[300] *Dang po'i sangs rgyas rgyud chen*; presumably this refers to the *Laghukālacakra Tantra Rāja*, the root tantra of the *Kālacakra Tantra*. However, this attribution has been questioned; see Davidson, "*Atiśa's* Lamp for the Path," 301.

> practicing celibacy (*brahmacārya*) should not receive the secret and wisdom consecrations. (64)
>
> If they receive those consecrations, because of abiding in the asceticism of celibacy and engaging in forbidden conduct, their ascetic vow degenerates. (65)
>
> Those ascetics will incur a defeat[301] and will certainly fall into the lower realms, whereby there is no possibility of accomplishment. (66)[302]

Here, Atiśa's admonition serves to warn those seeking to engage in the yoganiruttaratantra path without the requisite qualifications. It would seem to follow from these verses that yoganiruttaratantra practice is exclusively the domain of lay householders, forcing Atiśa into an awkward position: he would have to admit that the highest, most powerful vehicle (in fact, the *only* vehicle that leads to full awakening, according to some sources) is in fact off limits to monastics. Excluding monastics from yoganiruttaratantra practice would thus imply the superiority of lay tantric householders to monastics, an obviously unwanted consequence for Atiśa, an enthusiastic proponent of the virtues of monastic ethics.[303] While such restrictive language may have placated doctrinally conservative figures, such as Jangchub Ö, however, it raised important questions. In the *Lamp*'s final verse on the Vajrayāna, Atiśa seems to offer a loophole allowing for greater flexibility in interpreting such categorically prohibitive language. One with "knowledge of reality" (*de nyid rig*), he suggests, is "without fault."

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[301] *Pham pa*; *pārājika*.

[302] Translation mine. *Dang po'i sangs rgyas rgyud chen las* / *rab tu 'bad pas bkag pa'i phyir* / *gsang ba shes rab dbang bskur ni* / *tshangs par spyod pas blang mi bya* / *gal te dbang bskur de 'dzin na* / *tshangs spyod dka' thub la gnas pas* / *bkag pa spyad par gyur pa'i phyir* / *dka' thub sdom pa de nyams te* / *brtul zhugs can de pham pa yi* / *ltung ba dag ni 'byung 'gyur zhing* / *de ni ngan song nges ltung bas* / *grub pa nam yang yod ma yin. BPP*, 24. See *Panjika* 290a, where he says that his interpretation of these lines is "based on "the instructions of my lamas Dge slong bsod snyoms pa and Gser gling pa."

[303] As verse 21 of the *Lamp* says: "The Tathāgata explained the seven types of prātimokṣa vows; glorious celibacy (*tshangs spyod*; *brahmacarya*) is the best; that is, the vow of the *bhikṣu*." *So sor thar pa rigs bdun du* / *de bzhin gshegs pas bshad pa la* / *tshangs spyod dpal ni mchog yin te* / *dge slong sdom pa dag tu bzhed*. *BPP*, 10.

> [One who has] received the *ācārya* consecration
> May listen to and explain all the tantras,
> Perform *homa* rites, make offerings, and so forth;
> When there is knowledge of reality, there is no fault. (67)[304]

Here, seemingly almost as an afterthought, Atiśa makes an assertion with intriguing implications: one who has received the master consecration is able to engage in various activities related to the tantras; and "when there is knowledge of reality (**tattvajñāna*; *de nyid rig*), there is no fault." Let us examine this in more detail.

"Knowledge of Reality" and Tantric Conduct

Whereas the *Lamp*'s discussion of the mantra path is brief and its meanings often expressed in ambiguous terms, Atiśa's autocommentary, *Commentary on the Difficult Points of the* Lamp for the Path to Awakening (*Bodhimārgapradīpapañjikā*; *Byang chub lam gyi sgron ma'i dka' 'grel*), is far more expansive, dedicating seven entire folios to the *Lamp*'s eight verses.[305] First, Atiśa reviews the basic points of the Mantrayāna, stating that the mantra path is a quick and effective method for amassing the two collections of merit and wisdom as well as the four activities and the siddhis; listing examples of the seven classes of tantra;[306] and stressing the importance of receiving initiation from a qualified guru. He then delineates two

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[304] Translation mine. *Rgyud kun nyan dang 'chad pa dang / sbyin sreg mchod sbyin sogs byed pa / slob dpon dbang bskur brnyes 'gyur zhing / de nyid rig la nyes pa med*. *BPP*, 24–25.
[305] *Bodhimārgadīpapañjikā*; *Byang chub lam gyi sgron ma'i dka' 'grel*, ff. 286b–293a. For a translation of this section (which is in some ways problematic), see Sherburne, *The Complete Works of Atiśa*, 281–307.
[306] Atiśa's *Bodhimārgadīpapañjikā* classifies the tantras into seven classes rather than four, the more widely accepted doxographical scheme in Tibetan commentarial literature. He classifies them as (1) *kriyātantra* (*bya ba'i rgyud*), (2) *caryātantra* (*spyod pa'i rgyud*); (3) *kalpatantra* (*rtog pa'i rgyud*), (4) *ubhayātantra* (*gnyi ga'i rgyud*), (5) *yogatantra* (*rnal 'byor gyi rgyud*), (6) *mahāyogatantra* (*rnal 'byor chen po'i rgyud*), and (7) *yoganiruttaratantra* (*rnal 'byor bla na med pa'i rgyud*). For the highest class he mentions as examples: *Śrī Khasamatantra*; *(Dpal nam mkha' dang mnyam pa*); *'Bum pa chen po* (?); *Cakrasaṃvara* (*'Khor lo sdom pa*); *Vajraḍāka* (*Rdo rje mkha' 'gro*); Catu…? (Rdo rje gdan bzhi pa); *Mahāmāyā* (*Ma hA mA yA*); *Sarvabuddha Samayoga* (*Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor*); *Buddhakapāla* (*Sangs rgyas thod pa*); *Five Hundred Thousand [Verses on the*] *Hevajra* [*Tantra*]. Derge pp. 286b-287b. For further discussion of this classification, see Dalton, "A Crisis of Doxography," 152–3.

main types of misunderstandings that arise in relation to the mantra path: the errors of superimposition (*samāropa*; *sgro 'dogs*), that is, wrongly taking all tantric instructions as literal; and deprecation (*apavāda*; *skur pa 'debs pa*), meaning total rejection of the tantras.[307] Someone making the first mistake would think:

> "We are mantrins. We do all practices as we like, and will quickly attain the siddhi of mahāmudrā." They who say and believe this will go to bad rebirths, for by denigrating the Tathāgata's words and defiling *brahmacarya*, they cause the disappearance of the Buddha's teaching; and by practising fierce sorcery (**krūrabhicāra*) and resorting to women they commit pārājika offences.[308]

By avoiding these extremes of superimposition and deprecation, one may find the correct "middle way" approach to the practice of tantra. We may glean from this what may be Atiśa's main aim: to establish the validity of the mantra path while dispelling notions of it as simply a justification for any type of debauched behavior.

He then explains that "there are two types of consecration: those for householders and those for celibates."[309] Here, again, the only appropriate consecration for celibates is the master consecration, not the higher consecrations:

> If a celibate mantrin wishes to listen to the tantras, explain [them] to others, view [them], [perform] *homa* rites, [offer] *bali* (*gtor ma*; ritual offering cakes), recite [mantras] and so forth, it is clearly explained in all the tantras and all maṇḍala rituals to be appropriate by way of [having received] the vase consecration known as the *ācāryābhiṣeka*.[310]

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[307] See Onians, *Tantric Buddhist Apologetics*, 261; Sherburne, *Complete Works*, 294.
[308] *Bdag cag ni gsang sngags pa'o / bdag cag ni spyod pa thams cad bag yangs su byed cing phyag rgya chen po'i dngos grub kyang myur du thob par 'gyur ro zhes sgrogs shing gnas pa de dag ni ngan 'gror 'gro bar 'gyur te, de bzhin gshegs pa'i bka la skur pa btab pa dang, tshangs par spyod pa dag sbags pas sangs rgyas kyi bstan pa nub par byas pa dang, mngon spyod drag po byas pa dang, bud med dag bsten bas pham pa byung ba'i phyir ro*. *BoPaPraPan*, D f.289b5-7. Onians, trans., "Tantric Buddhist Apologetics," 264.
[309] *De la dbang ni rnam pa gnyis te / khyim pa'i phyogs la brten pa dang /tshangs par spyod pa'i phyogs la brten pa'o. BMPP*, 290a7–290b1. Adapted from Onians, trans., "Tantric Buddhist Apologetics," 264.
[310] Translation mine. *Gal te tshangs par spyod pa'i sngags pas rgyud la sogs pa nyan pa dang / gzhan la 'chad pa dang / blta ba dang / sbyin reg dang / gtor ma dang / bzlas brjod dag byed par 'dod na ni slob dpon dbang bskur zhes pa bum pa'i dbang gis rung ba rgyud thams cad dang / dkyil 'khor gyi chog thams cad nas gsal bar*

The reasons for this are as follows:

> All the virtues that arise do so as a result of relying on the Buddha's dharma. They all come about due to the fact that the teachings still exists. The continued existence of the teaching depends entirely on *brahmacarya*. And the two [higher] initiations are known to be incompatible with *brahmacarya*. Thus, the two initiations bring an end to *brahmacarya*, and if *brahmacarya* ceases, the Buddha's teaching will disappear. By that disappearance the accomplishment of merit will come to an end, and so there will be limitless non-virtuous [factors]. That is why those two [initiations] are excluded for a *brahmacārin*.[311]

Having laid out the basic premise of his argument, the *Commentary* returns to the assertion from the root text: "[As it says in the *Lamp*,] 'when there is knowledge of reality, there is no fault.'"[312]

What is this knowledge of reality? Isabelle Onians glosses the meaning of the root verse from the *Lamp* as follows (adding her own interpolations):

> Provided he understands reality [even a celibate may perform the higher initiations, which will bring him a higher entitlement than that granted by the Teacher Initiation which is only really for preliminary Generation Stage practice and rather basic tantric ritual] without [fear of incurring any] fault [as regards his vow of celibacy].[313]

As she notes, however, "the ambiguity remains, and must be deliberate on the part of Atiśa, an author carefully responding to his patron's wishes while staying true to his understanding

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gsungs so. *BMPP*, 290b.

[311] *'Di ltar sangs rgyas kyi chos la brten nas dge ba ji snyed cig 'byung ba de dag thams cad ni bstan pa gnas pa las 'byung ba yin la / bstan ba gnas pa yang tshangs par spyod pa kho na? la ltos shing / dbang bskur ba gnyis ni tshangs par spyod pa'i mi mthun pa'i gnas su mthong ba'i phyir ro / de bas na dbang bskur ba gnyis ni tshangs par spyod pa zad par byed pa yin la / tshangs par spyod pa zad na sangs rgyas kyi bstan pa nub par gyur zhing / de nub pas bsod nams mngon par 'du bya ba rnams rgyun chad par gyur la / gzhi de la dge ba ma yin pa dpag tu med pa 'byung ba'i phyir de gnyis tshangs par spyod pa rnams la spangs so zhes gsungs so*. *BMPP*, f291a2–4. Adapted from Onians trans., "Tantric Buddhist Apologetics," 265.

[312] *BMPP*, 291a.

[313] Onians, "Tantric Buddhist Apologetics," 269.

of his tradition."[314] While it is certainly plausible that Atiśa chose to leave room for interpretation regarding this point, however, the *Commentary* goes on to spell out more clearly what is meant by one with knowledge of reality:

> As for the meaning of this, my gurus have given many instructions. According to some excellent lamas,[315] for a bodhisattva who, due to compassion, knows the aims of sentient beings and whose mind is under the influence of compassion, there is no fault regarding their [practice of] tantra no matter what they do (*ci byas kyang*) and in the wake of that, their merits will greatly increase.[316]

The claim that a bodhisattva who has attained such a level of compassion would have "no fault" in their tantric practice, "no matter what they do" suggests the radical possibility that no behavior would be off limits, as long as the yogin has the qualifications. Atiśa then cites a range of possibilities from various authoritative sources, explaining them in terms of the five Mahāyāna paths (*mārga*; *lam*) and stages (*bhūmi*; *sa*), as described in Mahāyāna literature. The person with knowledge of reality, according to Atiśa, is one who has "attained the small [level of] forbearance," which is the third of four levels of the path of preparation (*prayoga mārga*; *sbyor lam*).[317] The second possibility, according to "other excellent lamas," is that "for a yogin who knows all phenomena as illusions and knows their reality (*tattva*; *de kho na nyid*), there is no fault at all."[318] This means, according to Atiśa, that there is no fault for a

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[314] Onians, "Tantric Buddhist Apologetics," 270.
[315] The use of the term "some excellent lamas" (*bla ma dam pa kha cig*) could suggest that Atiśa does not totally share these views. However, the following statements seem to imply that he does, indeed, consider them as valid interpretations.
[316] Translation mine. *De nyid rig la nyes pa med / ces pa 'di' don ni bdag la bla ma dag gis nye bar bstan pa gnang ba mang du yod de / bla ma dam pa kha cig gi zhal nas snying rjes sems can gyi don rig cing sems snying rje'i dbang du song ba'i byang chub sems dpas ci byas kyang de'i rgyud la nyes pa med cing de'i rjes la yang bsod nams mang du 'phel bar 'gyur ro zhes gsungs so*. *BMPP*, 291a.
[317] *De ni bzod pa chung ngu thob pa yin no*. *BMMP*, 291a. The path of preparation (*prayoga mārga*; *sbyor lam*) is the second of the five paths of a bodhisattva. The path of preparation is further sub-divided into four levels: the levels of heat (*ūṣman*; *drod*), peak (*mūrdhan*; *rtse mo*), forbearance (*kṣānti*; *bzod pa*), and supreme qualities (*dharmottara*; *chos mchog*).
[318] *Dam pa la la'i zhal nas chos thams cad sgyu mar shes shing de'i de kho na nyid rig pa'i rnal 'byor pa las la?*

bodhisattva who has attained the small level of "supreme qualities," the highest point of the path of preparation.[319] Finally, in the least restrictive interpretation, Atiśa cites one of his own teachers, the "guru-bhikṣu Paiṇḍapātika" (bla ma dge slong Bsod snyoms pa),[320] writing, "as for [there being no fault], even if one is presently a beginner (*ādikarmika*; *las dang po pa*), there is no fault."[321] Although it is not specified here, the "beginner" generally refers to one on the "beginner's path" (*ādikarmika mārga*; *las dang po pa'i lam*), an alternative name for the path of accumulation (*sambhāra mārga*, *tshogs lam*). As such, while these statements seem to suggest that it is possible for a celibate yogin to receive the second and third consecrations without incurring a downfall, this is only the case if they meet the above criteria.

As we will see in our analysis of selected tantric writings by Atiśa, the reconciliation of tantric and sutric approaches was an ongoing concern for him, and we will see him considering a range of perspectives regarding the questions we have seen here. While *lamrim* texts such as the *Lamp* and the *Commentary on the Difficult Points of the* Lamp may reflect a sūtra-centered approach to Buddhist practice, his writings on Vajrayāna doctrines, particularly in the context of yoganiruttaratantra, reveal a tantric hermeneutic that presents transgressive acts in veiled language, rather than literal terms.

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nyes par 'gyur pa gang yang med de. *BMMP*, 291a.

[319] *Chos kyi mchog chung ngu thob pa la nyes pa med pa'o*. *BMMP*, 291a.

[320] Chattopadhyaya, citing Gö Lotsawa's *Blue Annals*, identifies Paiṇḍapātika as Avadhūtipa. Avadhūtipa is reported to have been one of Atiśa's earliest tantric gurus, under whom Atiśa "took part in Tantric feasts (*gaṇacakra*) in the company of *ḍākinī*s in the country of Oḍḍiyana, and listened to numerous secret (*vajra*) songs." Chattopadhyaya also cites Sankrityayan, who claimed that Paiṇḍapātika/Avadhūtipa was also called Advayavajra and was "the same as Maitri-pā, the *guru* of Bodhibhadra of the Nālandā vihāra." See Chattopadhyaya, *Atīśa and Tibet*, 73–4. Such statements present problems with regard to other accounts, in which Atiśa is said to have ejected Maitrīpa from Vikramaśīla for transgressing his vows. Tatz, for example, points out the direct contradictions between accounts of Maitrīpa as one of Atiśa's gurus and as a tāntrika monk whom Atiśa expelled from Vikramaśīla for alleged misbehavior. See Tatz, "Matrī-pa and Atiśa." For more on this story, see also Chattopadhyaya, *Atīśa and Tibet*, 134–7.

[321] *'Di ni las dang po pa da lta nyid na yang nyes pa med pa'o*. *BMPP*, 291a.

A central feature of the *Lamp* is its employment of the framework of the *trisaṃvara*, the triple vow or discipline, to demonstrate the compatibility of the varying levels of Buddhist doctrine and ethics. As we have already seen in chapter two, such attempts to reconcile the exoteric and esoteric doctrines of Buddhism were not new, and Atiśa was certainly conversant in the views of earlier Indian scholars on the three vows. Prompted by the request of Jangchub Ö and the specific needs of his Tibetan disciples, Atiśa wrote the *Lamp* as a way to bridge the perceived gap between exoteric and esoteric Buddhist traditions and to establish them as internally coherent. The *Lamp* may in fact be one of the first Tibetan sources to explicitly attempt such a move. Later Tibetan texts commenting on the *trisaṃvara* included works by Gampopa, Kyobpa Jigten Gönpo, and Jétsun Dragpa Gyaltsen.[322] Later commentators would argue that while the three vows seemed not only distinct, but antithetical, they actually pertained to three overlapping, even complementary, dimensions of Buddhist practice.[323]

Buddhist traditions invariably maintain that their own canonical texts—from the earliest Pāli texts of the Tripiṭaka to the latest tantras to appear in India—ultimately derive from the historical Buddha Śākyamuni. Even the tantras purport to have been spoken by some form of the Buddha, usually as the central deity of the specific tantra, such as Akṣobhya (in the case of Guhyasamāja), Avalokiteśvara, Kālacakra, and so forth. From a strictly historical perspective, any attempt to argue for the compatibility of this vast range of texts, which are multi-layered, frequently internally contradictory, and resistant to precise historical analysis, would seem absurd. And yet, in composing a text such as the *Lamp*, this is

[322] See chapter 2.
[323] See Sobisch, *Three-Vow Theories in Tibetan Buddhism*, for discussion of Indian and Tibetan debates on the *trisaṃvara* from the eleventh century on.

precisely what Atiśa set out to do. According to the schema of the *Lamp,* one could sequentially practice all the Buddha's teachings, beginning as a follower of the Śrāvakayāna, progressing to the Bodhisattvayāna, and eventually entering the Mantrayāna, following it to enlightenment.

As we have seen, however, it would be easy to conclude, based solely on consideration of the *Lamp*, that Atiśa sought to dissuade unqualified? monastics from engaging fully in yoganiruttaratantra practice. We can only come to a fuller reckoning of his views on the Mantrayāna, however, by considering more carefully his background in relation to the tantric teachings as well as his literary output in this regard.

Atiśa's Tantric Views and Training

Both traditional and modern scholarship have tended to promote the view of Atiśa as an orthodox reformer who championed a return to the foundational doctrinal and ethical standards of Buddhism. His emphasis on monastic ethics, coupled with his conservative approach to Vajrayāna practices in works such as the *Lamp,* seems to strengthen the view that he saw antinomian Vajrayāna traditions as problematic. In large part, this view has been bolstered by biographical literature on Atiśa, which frames his trajectory as one from a precocious tāntrika, fully engaging in tantric rituals and practices, to a *bhikṣu* and aspiring bodhisattva who sought to return Buddhism to its monastic roots. This perception has been reinforced by traditional and scholarly characterizations of Buddhist tantra as a debased form of Buddhism, inferior to the "pure" exoteric Buddhism of the Theravāda and Mahāyāna.

One modern example of such a perception that we have already considered is that of Alaka Chattopadhyaya, who sees Atiśa's later turn to a more orthodox Buddhist approach, especially his monastic ordination, as "a clear break from his earlier Tāntrika career, or at

least from that form of Tantrism to which he was devoting himself so long with great enthusiasm."[324] While she acknowledges that he commented on, composed, and translated tantric treatises, and that he "retained a formal allegiance to the tantras," she writes that "the philosophical view and the codes of ethical conduct he eventually championed were really far from the theory and practices of the Vajrayāna of the Siddhācaryas."[325] Developing this point further, she writes,

> Under the influence of the prevailing ideas of his time, Atiśa himself began his spiritual career as a full-fledged Tāntrika. He, too, sat in the company of the ḍākinīs and participated at their Tāntrika feasts. However, the Buddhist ordination meant a decisive turning point for his spiritual career and it is quite conceivable that as a result of this he developed strong support for the traditional codes of monastic conduct with which such Tāntrika practices did not agree.[326]

Chattopadhyaya sees Atiśa's ordination as a "turning point" where he effectively abandoned his tantric career in favor of a monastic one, "with which such Tāntrika practices did not agree."[327] The stages of Atiśa's life story, in this view, are evidence of a positive evolution from the less developed view of a follower of the Vajrayāna to a presumably wiser, more evolved view of Buddhism. This is a familiar, if highly simplified, view of the incompatibility of the sūtra and tantra paths, or more specifically, the paths of monastic conduct and the transgressive conducts of the yoganiruttaratantras. Chattopadhyaya's view can be ascribed not simply to a lack of academic rigor, but to the widespread scholarly acceptance of traditional Buddhist views that see the esoteric and exoteric Buddhist vehicles as divergent paths. As we have seen, this is not just a modern view, but one that surely

[324] Chattopadhyaya, *Atīśa and Tibet*, 78.
[325] Chattopadhyaya, *Atīśa and Tibet*, 79.
[326] Chattopadhyaya, *Atīśa and Tibet*, 137.
[327] Chattopadhyaya, *Atīśa and Tibet*, 137.

extends back to the earliest stages of the appearance of Buddhist tantras in the first half of the first millennium CE. It is also one with which Atiśa would have already been quite familiar by the time he went to Tibet and wrote the *Lamp*.

The notion that Atiśa somehow turned his back on tantric traditions in favor of monastic asceticism, however, is fundamentally flawed. Both biographical accounts and ample textual evidence show that he was not only actively involved in writing and translating Vajrayāna works, both in India and Tibet, but that he played a central role in transmitting important tantric lineages, as well as tantric dohās and mahāmudrā doctrines, to Tibet. Later depictions of Atiśa, especially in the works of authors such as Tsongkhapa, who envisioned the Geluk school as a "New Kadam" tradition, often praised Atiśa for his synthesis of Buddhist doctrines, from the Śrāvakayāna to the Vajrayāna. However, the Geluk school, with its strong emphasis on the importance of monasticism, focused primarily on Atiśa's lamrim texts such as the *Lamp*, which highlighted foundational doctrines such as karma, impermanence, ethical discipline, and the cultivation of bodhicitta and the view of emptiness. As Gö Lotsāwa famously reports in the *Blue Annals*, "because of his holding in high esteem the fruits of deeds, the Master [Atiśa] was known as paṇḍita Las 'bras pa—'Paṇḍita of karma and its effects.'"[328] Later Geluk authors as well seem to have paid little attention to Atiśa's views on Vajrayāna, much less his writings on the dohās or mahāmudrā traditions. As we shall see, this may have been due to efforts within the Kadam tradition to minimize, or even suppress, such writings.

Tibetan sources, however, also report that Atiśa had been immersed in the Vajrayāna from an early age. He is described as having become a highly realized tantric adept long

[328] Gö Lotsāwa, *Blue Annals*, 248.

before entering the celibate life of a fully ordained *bhikṣu*. Gö Lotsāwa reports that in his childhood, Atiśa had a vision of Ārya Tārā,[329] then proceeding, "under her influence," to request the tantric yogin Rāhulaguhyavajra (Sgra gcan gsang ba'i rdo rje; tenth–eleventh c.)[330] for initiation into the yoginītantra cycle of Hevajra. He received the exposition of the tantra and its precepts and trained in the two stages of practice related to the deity.[331] Tsongkhapa, primarily citing the *Eighty Verses of Praise* (*Bstod pa brgyad cu pa*) by Nagtsho Tshultrim Gyelwa (Nag tsho tshul khrims rgyal ba; 1011–1064), also writes of these events in his *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path* (*Lam rim chen mo*). Notably, however, Tsongkhapa emphasizes Atiśa's tantric training within the context of training in the three types of ethics, the *trisaṃvara*. He states that "by training through his twenty-ninth year in the Vajrayāna with many gurus who had achieved spiritual attainments, [Atiśa] became skilled in all the tantric texts and instructions."[332] Tsongkhapa again cites the *Eighty Verses*:

> Having entered the door of the Vajrayāna,
> You saw yourself as a deity and possessed the *vajra* mind.
> Lord of contemplation, Avadhūtipa,[333]
> I bow down to you who engaged in the secret conduct.[334]

Tsongkhapa then refers to Atiśa as a "chief of yogis due to his reaching the concentration of the stage of generation, in which he saw his body as divine, and the concentration of the

[329] Gö Lotsāwa, *Blue Annals*, 241.
[330] Also known as Rāhulaguptavajra (Sgra gcan 'dzin sbas pa'i rdo rje), Rāhulagupta (Sbas pa'i rnal 'byor sgra gcan 'dzin pa), and Rāhula-bhadra (Sgra gcan 'dzin bzang po).
[331] Gö Lotsāwa, *Blue Annals*, 241.
[332] Tsongkhapa, *Great Treatise* (vol. 1), 37.
[333] Here, the term *avadhūtipa* (*rtsa dbu ma pa*) appears to refer to Atiśa as a practitioner of the yoga of the central channel (*avadhūti*) rather than to his guru, Avadhūtipa, mentioned above. See *Great Treatise* (vol. 1), 39n32.
[334] Tsongkhapa, *Great Treatise* (vol. 1), 39. See also Eimer, *Testimonia*, 33–34. Secret conduct (*guhyavrata*; *sbas pa'i brtul zhugs*) may refer to the transgressive conducts of the higher tantric classes, including sexual union.

stage of completion, whereupon he attained the *vajra* state of mind."[335] In addition, as Tsongkhapa writes, Atiśa

> reached a very stable stage of generation due to having practiced the deeds of proficient conduct for six or three years. At that time, after hearing the secret tantric songs sung by ḍākinīs in Oḍḍiyāna, he committed them to memory.[336]

Even in Tsongkhapa's account, then, Atiśa was seen as an accomplished tāntrika. Gö Lotsāwa's account is similar, stating that Atiśa served as the attendant of the mahāsiddha Avadhūtipa for seven years, after which

> for three years he practiced rigorous mental training, took part in Tantric feasts (*gaṇacakra*) in the company of dākiṇīs in the country of Oḍḍiyāna, and listened to numerous secret (vajra) songs. These were the secret songs which were written down in later times.[337]

While we must be careful not to take hagiographical references to "secret conduct," "proficient conduct," "secret songs," and "tantric feasts in the company of *ḍākinī*s" as conclusive evidence that Atiśa actually engaged in sexual tantric practices, they confirm that as far as the tradition was concerned, he was well-versed in the most esoteric aspects and conducts of the yoginītantras and other yoganiruttaratantra traditions. In Apple's biography of Atiśa, he states that

> Atiśa engaged in the tantric practice of the awareness observance during this time, a practice where the yogin wears the ornaments of the deity, relies on a consort, and uses code language. Atiśa also heard a number of tantric teachings from *ḍākinī*s and had visions of many tantric deities during this phase of his life.[338]

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[335] Tsongkhapa, *Great Treatise* (vol. 1), 39.
[336] Tsongkhapa, *Great Treatise* (vol. 1), 40.
[337] Gö Lotsawa, *Blue Annals*, 242. See Chattopadhyaya, *Atīśa and Tibet*, 71–74 for further details on Atiśa's tantric training.
[338] Apple, *Atiśa Dīpaṃkara*, 14.

While we cannot take these reports as historical accounts, they play an important role in the construction of subsequent portrayals of Atiśa. Such accounts raise important questions concerning later views of Atiśa primarily as a reformist who seemingly rejected the idea that celibate monastics could fully practice the path of yoganiruttaratantra and yoginītantra. Did Atiśa's views about Vajrayāna change? If so, what brought about such a change? Were such changes evidence, as Chattopadhyaya suggests, of "a clear break from his earlier Tāntrika career"? Or were his views in the *Lamp* only one way for Atiśa to frame controversial Vajrayāna practices in order not to alienate his doctrinally conservative patrons and his Tibetan students? In order to answer these questions, we need to better understand the religious milieu in which Atiśa had lived and trained before going to Tibet.

Cakrasaṃvara and the Yoginītantra Traditions

Not only was Atiśa initiated into and trained in yoganiruttaratantra and yoginītantra systems from an early age, if we are to believe the biographical accounts, but in his time at Vikramaśīla, which may have spanned from ten to fifteen years, he would surely have been aware of the tantric commentarial traditions thriving there, particularly those related to the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*. The *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*—alternately known as *Śrīcakrasaṃvara-nāma-mahāyoginī-tantra-rāja* (*The Great King of Yoginītantras Known as Śrī Cakrasaṃvara*), *Śrīherukābhidhāna* (*The Discourse of Śrī Heruka*), and *Laghusamvara* (*The Light Saṃvara* [*Tantra*])—is, as the extended form of its name implies, one of the most important cycles of the yoginītantras. It was likely composed during the eighth century, and certainly no later than the late tenth century. The Cakrasaṃvara tradition played a major role

at Vikramaśīla,[339] having become firmly established as a part of the monastery's curriculum by the time Atiśa went there in the mid-eleventh century. Numerous Vikramaśīla scholars wrote works attempting to reconcile the antinomianism of the yoginītantra traditions with monastic discipline. Five of the eleven commentaries on the entire root tantra were composed by authors associated with Vikramaśīla.[340] Laṅka Jayabhadra, a tantric preceptor at Vikramaśīla, wrote the earliest commentary, probably during the early- to mid-ninth century. In this work, as David Gray reports, Jayabhadra provides "an early view into the process of the adaptation of the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* to the Buddhist monastic context," a process that also involved "elision of non-Buddhist elements (such as the names of Śaiva deities)" from the text, and their replacement with Buddhist equivalents.[341] Other Vikramaśīla figures who wrote commentaries on Cakrasaṃvara include Bhavabhaṭṭa (ca. late ninth c.), Bhavyakīrti (ca. early tenth c.), Durjayacandra (late tenth c.), and Tathāgatarakṣita (late eleventh c.). Another six commentaries on the complete tantra were composed by authors not associated with Vikramaśīla.[342]

It is thus reasonable to conclude that Atiśa was already well-versed in discussions and controversies related to Cakrasaṃvara and other yoginītantra traditions well before his voyage to Tibet and the controversies he sought to address in the *Lamp* would already have been familiar to him. He was also probably well-versed in older textual debates that were independent of what was happening at Vikramaśīla: questions regarding whether tantra and consort practice were appropriate at that particular time, or even in the age of degeneration at

[339] Gray, *Cakrasamvara Tantra*, xv.
[340] Tāranātha lists the "twelve Tāntrika teachers of Vikramaśīla": Jñānapāda, Dīpaṃkara-bhadra, *Laṅkā-Jayabhadra, Śrīdhara, *Bha-va-ba (Bhavabhadra), Bhavyakīrti, *Līlavajra, Durjaya-candra, Samaya-vajra, Tathāgata-rakṣita, Bodhibhadra, and Kamalarakṣita. See Tāranātha (trans. Chattopadhyaya), *Tāranātha's History of Buddhism in India*, 18.
[341] Gray, *Cakrasamvara Tantra*, 21.
[342] Gray, *Cakrasamvara Tantra*, 21–23.

all. In addition, the great Lotsāwa Rinchen Zangpo, who became Atiśa's disciple and close collaborator, translated the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* into Tibetan, along with his Kashmiri mentor, Padmākaravarman.[343] Atiśa himself composed at least two texts related directly to Cakrasaṃvara,[344] and included Cakrasaṃvara in the homage at the beginning of the *Commentary on the Difficult Points of the Lamp for the Path to Awakening*,[345] discussed above.

The yoginītantras were the latest class of tantras to emerge in India, and are often considered the most transgressive because of their emphasis on sexual yogas. As David Gray writes,

> One common element in both the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* and the perfecting stage practices (*niṣpannakrama*; *rdzogs rim*) is the emphasis placed on sexuality as an essential element of the spiritual path. This notion was a radical one, directly at odds with the practice of celibacy that Buddhists had emphasized for over a millennium.[346]

According to later Tibetan classifications, the yoginītantras were one of the two principal divisions of the yoganiruttaratantras: the "father tantras," which included the *Guhyasamājatantra*, and the "mother tantras," that is, the yoginītantras, which included the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra*, the *Hevajratantra*, and the *Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇatantra*. From among the two primary factors in the attainment of enlightenment—method (*upāya*; *thabs*) and wisdom

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[343] Gray, "Visualization of the Secret," 2.
[344] The *Abhisamayavibhaṅga* (*Analysis of Clear Realization; Mngon par rtogs pa rnam par 'byed pa*), which we will consider in more detail below, and the *Śrī Cakrasaṃvarasādhana* (*Dpal 'khor lo sdom pa'i sgrub thabs*).
[345] The full verse of homage reads:
"Homage to noble, venerable Tārā;
Homage to youthful Mañjuśrī;
Homage to Cakrasaṃvara, lord of the three samayas;
Homage to Lokeśvara and Tārā." Translation mine. *'Phags ma rje btsun sgron ma la phyag 'tshal lo* / *'jam dpal gzhon nur gyur pa la phyag 'tshal lo* / *bde mchog 'khor lo dam tshig gsum rgyal po* / *'jig rten dbang phyug sgrol ma phyag 'tshal 'dud*. *BMMP*, 241a. See also Sherburne, *Complete Works of Atīśa*, 22.
[346] Gray, *Cakrasamvara Tantra*, 68.

(*prajñā*; *ye shes*)—the "father tantras" mainly emphasize the cultivation of method through the practice of the illusory body (*māyādeha* or *māyākāya*; *sgyu lus*), that is, the generation of the deity's body from the subtle winds (*prāṇa*; *rlung*) of the yogin's body. The yoginītantras, on the other hand, are primarily concerned with practices aimed at the cultivation of the clear light (*prabhāsvara*; *'od gsal*), which is correlated to wisdom.[347]

Atiśa's Tantric Writings

Atiśa was clearly not interested in discarding the Vajrayāna teachings, but in demonstrating that they were, in the final analysis, entirely compatible with the exoteric Buddhist path. He was also a prolific translator and author of texts on tantric subjects. These include *sādhana*s, ritual manuals, praises (*stotra*; *bstod pa*), songs (*gīti*; *glu*), and commentaries, many related to yoganiruttaratantra and yoginītantra deities. Numerically, the tantric texts attributed to Atiśa far outnumber texts he composed in any other category. In one edition of the Dergé Tengyur (*bstan 'gyur*), fifty-five of the 131 texts attributed to Atiśa are included in the Madhyamaka (*dbu ma*) section, two in the Prajñāpāramitā (*shes phyin*) section, one in Sūtrānta (*mdo 'grel*), one in letters (*lekha*; *spring yig*), one in the category of "miscellany" (*viśvavidyā*; *sna tshogs*), and one is uncategorized, while a whopping seventy are included in the tantra (*rgyud*) section.[348] According to Chattopadhyaya's count, 122 texts are attributed to Atiśa, with sixty-two of them—more than half—categorized as tantra. Chattopadhyaya lists a

[347] Mahāyāna tenets emphasize that both method and wisdom are necessary for the attainment of awakening; thus, this does not mean that practitioners of the mother tantras *only* generate wisdom or those of the father tantras *only* generate method. Rather, it is a matter of emphasis in the different classes of tantras. See, e.g., Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, 281–88; Tsongkhapa, *Lamp to Illuminate the Five Stages*, 25–41.
[348] See the Buddhist Canons Research Database of the American Institute of Buddhist Studies (AIBS). http://databases.aibs.columbia.edu.

further seventy-seven works with Atiśa as translator only, fifty-five of which are tantric. She also lists seven works "connected with Dīpaṃkara in other ways," five of which are tantric; and five works that "are to be attributed to the same Dīpaṃkara," with variations on his name, four of which are tantric.[349] Of course, some of these tantric works are very brief—many of the praises or ritual texts comprise less than a single folio. Furthermore, we cannot confirm without further research which of these texts might have credibly been authored by Atiśa. However, it is clear that Atiśa was highly productive as an author and translator of works on tantra, spanning a broad range of genres and topics.

One might assume that since Atiśa is best-known for propagating kriyātantra deities, such as Avalokiteśvara and Tārā,[350] the majority of his tantric works would focus on these practices. However, taking a closer look at the titles and contents of these works, we see that this is not the case at all. Many of his works deal with deities from the yoganiruttaratantra or yoginītantra classes, either specifically or in a more general sense. Among them, we find one text related to Hevajra;[351] two to Cakrasaṃvara;[352] five to either Vajrayoginī or Vajravārahī;[353] two to Guhyasamāja;[354] eight to various forms of Yamāntaka, or Vajrabhairava;[355] and one to

[349] See Chattopadhyaya, *Atīśa and Tibet*, 441–502. Variations in numbering of texts can depend on various factors: cataloging of the texts in different sections, title variations, or doubts about attribution of the author.
[350] As Matthew Kapstein notes, "there can be little doubt that the first great figure to actively promote the practice of meditational techniques focusing on Avalokiteśvara was Dīpaṃkara Śrījñāna, better known as Atiśa." According to Kapstein, Atiśa was the source of three major systems of instruction (*khrid*) on Avalokiteśvara. Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism*, 148.
[351] *Śrī hevajrasādhanaratnapradīpa nāma* (*Dpal dgyes pa rdo rje'i sgrub thabs rin po che'i sgron ma zhes bya ba*), D 1268.
[352] *Abhisamayavibhaṅga* (*Mngon par rtogs pa rnam par 'byed pa zhes bya ba*), D 1490; and *Śrī Cakrasaṃvarasādhana* (*Dpal 'khor lo sdom pa'i sgrub thabs*), D 1491.
[353] *Vajrayoginīstotra* (*Rdo rje rnal 'byor ma la bstod pa*), D 1587;
Vajravārāhīsādhana (*Rdo rje phag mo'i sgrub pa'i thabs*), D 1592; *Śrīvajrayoginīsādhana* (*Dpal rdo rje rnal 'byor ma'i sgrub thabs zhes bya ba*), D 1593;
Vajrayoginīstotra (*Rdo rje rnal 'byor ma la bstod pa*), D 1594; and *Vajrayoginīsādhana* (*Rdo rje rnal 'byor ma'i sgrub thabs*), Q 4671.
[354] *Śrīguhyasamājalokeśvarasādhana* (*Dpal gsang ba 'dus pa 'jig rten dbang phyug gi sgrub pa'i thabs*); *Śrīguhyasamājastotra* (*Dpal gsang ba 'dus pa'i bstod pa*).
[355] *Vairocanayamāryabhisamaya* (*Gshin rje gshed rnam par snang mdzad kyi mngon par rtogs pa*); *Ratnasaṃbhavayamārisādhana* (*Gshin rje gshed rin chen 'byung ldan gyi sgrub thabs*);

Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa,[356] one of the most antinomian and overtly sexual of the yoginītantras. Of the explicitly tantric texts that we can affirm with some confidence were authored by Atiśa, the longest include *Analysis of Clear Realization* (*Abhisamayavibhaṅga*; *Mngon par rtogs pa rnam par 'byed pa*), comprising 293 lines, or twenty folios; the *Sādhana of Glorious Guhyasamāja-Lokeśvara* (*Śrī Guhyasamāja-lokeśvara Sādhana*; *Dpal gsang ba 'dus pa 'jig rten dbang phyug gi sgrub pa'i thabs*; 230 lines, or fifteen folios); the *Commentary on the Vajra Song of the Vajra Seat* (*Vajrāsana Vajragīti Vṛtti*; *Rdo rje gdan gyi rdo rje'i glu'i 'grel pa*; 106 lines, or seven folios); and the *Extensive Commentary on the Root [Tantric] Downfalls* (*Mulāpattiṭīkā*; *Rtsa ba'i ltung ba'i rgya cher 'grel pa*; 103 lines, or eight folios). In addition, he composed three works on tantric view (**darśana*; *lta ba*) and meditation (**bhāvanā*; *sgom*): the *Great View and Meditation* (*Lta sgom chen mo*), *Middle View and Meditation* (*Lta sgom 'bring po*), and *Small View and Meditation* (*Lta sgom chung ngu*). These three texts, which appear to be lecture notes, discuss the view according to the Cakrasaṃvara system, focusing in particular on how to integrate practices of the clear light with the Cakrasaṃvara completion stage.

In addition to being proficient in a broad range of tantric traditions, Atiśa was evidently steeped in the traditions of the mahāsiddhas, in particular the *dohā*s, or spiritual songs, of Saraha. Saraha's dohās are not only closely linked to the yoganiruttaratantra traditions, especially the yoginītantras; they are also considered foundational to the traditions of mahāmudrā (*phyag rgya chen po*), the great seal, which would become one of the major

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Amitābhāhṛdayarāgayamārisādhana (*'Od dpag tu med pa'i snying po 'dod chags gshin rje gshed sgrub pa'i thabs*); *Vajratīkṣṇayamārisādhana* (*Gshin rje gshed rdo rje rnon po zhes bya ba'i sgrub thabs*); *Mudgarakrodhayamārisādhana* (*Khro bo tho bo gshin rje gshed kyi sgrub thabs*); *Daṇḍadhṛgvidārayamāri-sādhana* (*Dbyug pa gshin rje gshed rnam par 'joms pa'i sgrub thabs*); *Gaṇḍakhadgayamārisādhana* (*Ral gri gshin rje gshed gtum po'i sgrub thabs*); *Prajñāsukhapadmayamārisādhana* (*Padma gshin rje gshed shes rab bde ba can gyi sgrub thabs*).

[356] *Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇasādhanaparamārtha* (*Gtum po khro bo chen po'i sgrub pa don dam pa*).

practice lineages in later Tibetan traditions, the Kagyü school in particular. One of the principal themes in the dohās is meditative cultivation of the innate (*sahaja*; *lhan skyes*), or focus on the clear light nature of mind, rather than reliance on philosophical analysis and complex ritual systems. Reflecting the influence of such mahāsiddha literature, Atiśa composed several gītis (*glu*), or songs, that appear to have been directly modeled on Saraha's dohās and that explored yoginītantra and yoganiruttaratantra doctrines.

Below we examine portions of several of Atiśa's works that elucidate tantric themes—these include *Analysis of Realization* (*Abhisamayvibhaṅga*), a work on the Cakrasaṃvara completion stage; *Song of Conduct* (*Caryāgīti*) and the *Commentary on the Song of Conduct* (*Caryāgīti Vṛtti*); and *Vajra Song of the Vajra Seat* (*Vajrāsana Vajragīti*) and its commentary, *Commentary on Vajra Song of the Vajra Seat,* which are songs (*gīti*; *glu*) related to yoganiruttaratantra themes.

Atiśa and the Cakrasaṃvara Tradition

Some of the clearest evidence of Atiśa's engagement with the Cakrasaṃvara tradition comes in the form of commentaries attributed to him, several or all of which may have been composed before he went to Tibet in 1042. Not only do these demonstrate his expertise in these traditions, but they suggest that his views on yoganiruttaratantra practice were markedly different from those we find in texts such as the *Lamp.*

These texts include the *Analysis of Clear Realization*, a commentary on the Cakrasaṃvara sādhana text *Clear Realization of Cakrasaṃvara* (*Cakrasaṃvarābhisamaya*), attributed to the great mahāsiddha Lūipa, as well as the three *View and Meditation* (*Lta sgom*) texts mentioned earlier. Apple suggests that the *Analysis of Clear Realization* was composed while Atiśa was still in India; Gray, on the other hand, describes it as one of

Atiśa's works written in Tibet.[357] The text's colophon reveals nothing about the date or location of its composition, only that it was composed by Atiśa and translated together with Nagtsho Lotsāwa. We can be fairly certain, on the other hand, that the *View and Meditation* texts were indeed composed in India. This is because the colophon of *Great View and Meditation* indicates that it was composed at the behest of Rinchen Zangpo and later translated into Tibetan by Tsondrü Sengé (Brtson 'grus seng ge). However, Tsondrü Sengé passed away while Atiśa was en route to Tibet, indicating that, at the very least, *Great View and Meditation* was composed in India.[358] The three *View and Meditation* texts provide "exegesis on the view and meditation of clear light" for advanced students of the Vajrayāna, specifically centered on the Cakrasaṃvara tradition.[359] If we accept that the *Analysis of Clear Realization* was composed in India, it would be reasonable to conclude that these texts were written with quite a different audience in mind than Atiśa's later works, such as the *Lamp*. That is, they would likely have been composed for an audience of monastics who were already well-trained in the Cakrasaṃvara commentarial tradition of Vikramaśīla.

The text by Lūipa' that Atiśa comments on in the *Abhisamayavibhaṅga* is a ritual meditation manual (*sādhana*) that does not specifically discuss the four consecrations. However, Atiśa's commentary does, a point that Gray sees as significant. Indeed, given Atiśa's ostensibly more conservative stance toward tantra in the *Lamp,* one would think he would avoid this topic unless he felt it was absolutely necessary. *Analysis of Clear Realization* describes the qualifications of a practitioner of this tradition, stating that s/he has

[357] See Apple, "Atiśa's Teachings on Mahāmudrā," 4–5, and Gray, "Visualization of the Secret," 4. Neither author, unfortunately, provides sources or reasons for their claims.
[358] As Apple notes, the colophon of the *Lta sgom chen mo* states that the text was later translated into Tibetan by Tsondrü Sengé (Brtson 'grus seng ge), who passed away while Atiśa was en route to Tibet. See Apple, "Atiśa's Teachings on Mahāmudrā," 5–8; also Jackson, *Mind Seeing Mind*, 69–70.
[359] Apple, "Atiśa's Teachings on Mahāmudrā," 6.

> first… stabilized the perfected spirit of awakening which arises from the power of compassion, and has obtained through the grace of the guru the consecrations, the jar [i.e. the vase], secret, and so forth.[360]

We see here that the *sādhaka*, the practitioner, needs to have stabilized the mind of awakening and to have obtained the four consecrations. We do not see any suggestion, however, that the consecrations can only be received by householders or that they are off-limits for monastics. Further on, Atiśa describes the visualizations involved in the consecrations. Following a detailed description of the body maṇḍala (*dehamaṇḍala*; *lus kyi dkyil 'khor*), Atiśa gives a detailed description of the process of union with the consort:

> Then, Heruka takes Vārāhī as his consort (*mudrā*), and through being equipoised, their winds dissolve. Relying on that, contemplate the experience of the natural (*sahaja*). Then you, a child of the clan, unite with the consort as Heruka, and, depending on that, meditate on clear light, that wisdom that is attained in visionary experience. This is the very essence of the Transcendence of Wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) which is the purity of the three consciousnesses, and which is liberation from birth due to the non-existence of body, speech, and mind. This is the ultimate truth that has the characteristic of always appearing completely luminous like the moon, sun, fire, and jewels.[361]

Here, we see what seems to be an early formulation of ideas that would become central to Atiśa's views on yoganiruttaratantra, as we will see in our consideration of his later writings below. That is, the identification of the wisdom consort (*vidyā* or *mudrā*) with the innate (*sahaja*) and the perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*). Gray writes of these passages:

> He [Atiśa] takes visualization practice, which for centuries has been invested with

[360] Gray, trans., in "Visualization of the Secret," 5.
[361] *de nas he ru kas phag mo mu dra gnang ste snyoms par zhugs pas rlung thim /de la brten nas lhan cig skyes pa myong bar bsam mo / de nas dpal he ru kas rigs kyi bu khyed kyis mu dra dang gnyis sprod pa la brten nas myong ba snang ba thob pa'i shes rab de 'od gsal bar sgoms shig / de ni rnam par shes pa gsum rnam par dag pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i ngo bo nyid lus dang ngag dang sems med pa las dang/ skye ba las grol ba/ zla ba dang/ nyi ma dang/ me dang/ nor bu ltar shin tu gsal ba rtag tu snang ba'i mtshan nyid can don dam pa'i bden pa.* Gray, trans., in "Visualization of the Secret," 6.

> tremendous soteriological potency in Buddhist circles, and uses it to bring about what must have been one of his major goals in Tibet. This is facilitating the transmission of tantric Buddhist traditions to Tibet, by assuaging doubts about the transgressive aspects of these traditions. In this case, this is done by relegating the transgressive practices to the safe, internalized arena of tantric visualization, rather than the messy and open performance of the actual ritual practices.[362]

Gray's reading here seems to operate on the assumption that this text was composed not only after Atiśa went to Tibet, but with the specific intention to bring about "one of his major goals in Tibet…," that is, "assuaging doubts about the transgressive aspects of these traditions… by relegating the transgressive practices to the safe, internalized arena of tantric visualizations." Whatever the case may be, it will become clearer as we discuss these points that Atiśa's views on yoganiruttaratantra practice were a great deal more nuanced than just a reading of the *Lamp* or of traditional biographies might indicate. In order to better understand the influences on Atiśa's tantric views, we will now consider his engagement with the mahāsiddha traditions.

The Mahāsiddha Traditions

The Pāla dynasty, as has already been discussed, is widely seen as a "golden age" of Buddhism in India, characterized by generous royal patronage of Buddhism and the founding of many great *vihāra*s, including Odantapuri, Vikramaśīla, and Somapura. The flourishing of Mahāyāna Buddhism and the later proliferation of tantric teachings led to doctrinal tensions between earlier schools of Buddhism, the exoteric Mahāyāna traditions, and the newer tantric traditions, with their frequently antinomian doctrines. One way in which these tensions found

[362] Gray, "Visualization of the Secret," 7.

expression was in the ideal type of the *mahāsiddha*s (or just *siddha*s): the "great accomplished ones," or great adepts, of tantric Buddhism.[363] While there are abundant references to siddhas in post-Vedic and Brahmanical literature, these earlier contexts generally describe siddhas as a class of celestial (or quasi-celestial) beings, not as humans. In Buddhist contexts, the siddhas are human, even if they are portrayed as having attained extraordinary powers (siddhis) through meditative practice.[364] They are closely associated with tantric lineages, especially the yoganiruttaratantras, and the practice of mahāmudrā.

One of the main sources for biographical accounts of the siddhas is *Stories of the Eighty-Four Siddhas* (**Caturaśītisiddhapravṛtti*; *Grub thob brgyad bcu rtsa bzhi'i lo rgyus*), which is ascribed to the early twelfth-century Indian author, *Abhayadattaśrī.[365] Despite the highly idealized accounts of the siddhas found in such works, however, there is little historical evidence to indicate that there was actually a coherent siddha "movement," or even if many of the siddhas actually existed as described. Attempting to locate the siddhas as actual historical persons is, as Szántó puts it, "a futile exercise, for they are complex and fluid characters created by varying measures of historical reality, pious veneration, glorification, visionary experience, and artistic genius."[366] While many writings have been attributed to various siddhas, it is in many cases impossible to confirm who the actual authors

[363] The term siddha derives from the verbal root *sādh* (to succeed, or accomplish), referring to those who have attained siddhis, or yogic accomplishments. Although Sanskrit sources use the term *siddha* far more frequently than *mahāsiddha*, the term *grub thob chen po* (*mahāsiddha*) is widely used in Tibetan literature. Szántó, "Siddhas," 443.
[364] Szántó, "Siddhas," 443.
[365] This has been translated into English as *Masters of Mahāmudrā* (Dowman, 1986) and *Buddha's Lions: The Lives of The Eighty-Four Siddhas* (Robinson, 1979). It has also been translated into German by Grünwedel as *Die Geschichten der vierundachtzig Zauberer (Mahāsiddhas) aus dem Tibetischen übersetzt*. Leipzig: Teubner, 2018. While Abhayadattaśrī's version of the text is the one most cited, Jackson also mentions alternate enumerations, including one by Abhayākaragupta, a Nepalese version, and a Tibetan version. See Jackson, *Tantric Treasures*, 5.
[366] Szántó, "Siddhas," 443.

were, or whether the texts were composites written by different authors and subsequently compiled under a single author's name. As elusive as the siddhas may be as actual historical figures, however, they are important in terms of what they represented and how they were depicted—as peripatetic, socially marginal, but spiritually advanced figures devoted to the most profound tantric teachings of the yoginī, mahāyoga, and yoganiruttara tantra traditions. Such characterizations underscore some of the tensions between "monastic" Buddhism, especially in its institutional forms, and the esoteric traditions.[367] The siddhas also connect directly to the questions that a figure like Atiśa, who ostensibly espoused the more conventional monastic forms of Buddhism, was attempting to respond to in his works.

Putting aside the complex questions regarding the provenance and authorship of individual siddha works, a topic that has been covered extensively elsewhere,[368] there is a wealth of literature written by various "siddhas." In their writings, the siddhas mocked social and religious mores, not only of traditional Brahmanical society, but of Jains, Sikhs, and even fellow Buddhists. Although some of the siddhas were, or had been, monks, many were depicted as wild yogins, practicing meditation in cremation grounds, mountain retreats, and other forbidding places, consorting with low-caste women, and engaging in forms of antinomian conduct (*caryā*) that "appeared to turn brahmanical—and Buddhist—values upside down."[369] The siddhas came to be revered as highly attained beings who occupied a liminal space between orthodox, institutional forms of monastic Buddhism and esoteric

[367] Ronald Davidson has argued that the popular idea of the siddhas as entirely unconcerned with social or institutional status is likely inaccurate. The notion that the siddhas "represented a purity of religious expression devoid of scholastic hairsplitting and legal wrangling" (Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, 169), he writes, masks a far more complex social reality, in which they too were also involved in more mundane institutional dynamics. See Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, 169–235.
[368] See, for example, Jackson, *Tantric Treasures*; Schaeffer, *Dreaming the Great Brahmin*; Braitstein, *Exploring Saraha's Treasury of Adamantine Songs.*
[369] Jackson, *Mind Seeing Mind*, 41.

tantric traditions that drew heavily from non-Buddhist traditions such as the Śaiva tantras. While the siddhas' writings represented an alternative to the path of the austere arhat or bodhisattva, they exhibited at once a willingness to challenge traditional Buddhist ideals and a firm grounding in classical Buddhist doctrines.

Principal Siddha Themes: Mahāmudrā, Yoginītantras, and Sahaja

Although the contents of the siddhas' writings vary greatly, we can identify a few prevalent themes in them. One of the most frequently discussed of these is mahāmudrā, the "great seal," or "great gesture," the meditative tradition that focuses primarily cultivating awareness and realization of the nature of the mind. The term mahāmudrā has a number of different referents in Indian traditions, including a type of ritual hand gesture (*mudrā*), a sexual consort in tantric practice, the experience of transcendent bliss, the emptiness of all persons and phenomena, a meditative system focused on the mind and its luminous nature, and the final state of buddhahood (*mahāmudrāsiddhi*).[370] As a practice lineage, mahāmudrā later became one of the central practice traditions in the Kagyü school, as well as other Tibetan schools.[371] It is often equated with the ultimate, with emptiness, or with *sahaja* (*lhan skyes* or *lhan cig skyes pa*), the innate, natural, or "simultaneously born" (*saha + ja*) nature. Mahāmudrā is closely linked in the siddhas' works with tantric practices of the mahāyoga and yoginītantra classes, especially those related to Guhyasamāja, Cakrasaṃvara, and Hevajra. Many of the siddhas' writings were incorporated into later anthologies of

[370] Jackson, *Mind Seeing Mind*, 1, 41.
[371] See Jackson, *Mind Seeing Mind*, for an extensive study of mahāmudrā in the Geluk tradition. The book gives an excellent, thorough overview of the religious and philosophical background of mahāmudrā, both in India and Tibet.

mahāmudrā literature, such as the Seven Attainment Texts, the Essential Trilogy, and the Twenty-Five Works on Non-Mentation.[372]

Many of the eighty-four siddhas were also closely associated with the practice of the yoginītantras, including the [*Cakra*]*saṃvaratantra,* the *Hevajratantra,* the *Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇatantra,* and the *Buddhakapālatantra*.[373] Authors identified as siddhas were credited as authors of some of the most important practice manuals for the yoginītantra traditions, including Saroruha for the Hevajra (*Hevajrasādhanopāyikā*); Lūyipāda, Ghaṇṭāpāda, and Kṛṣṇācārya for the *Cakrasaṃvara*; and Āryadeva for the *Catuṣpīṭha*.[374] In compilations such as the *Treasuries* of Saraha, Kāṇha, and Tilopa, the thematic focus is largely on doctrines and practices central to the yoginītantras, such as cultivation of the mind of clear light (*prabhāsvaracitta*; *'od gsal gyi sems*) and the closely related notion of *sahaja*.[375]

Like mahāmudrā, the term sahaja is polysemous, its meanings shifting according to different contexts. The term may first have appeared in Brahmanical sources, with one scholar locating one of its earliest appearances in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (ca. second c. BCE), where it refers to inborn (*sahaja*) caste-specific behavior.[376] In its use in exoteric Buddhist sūtras and śāstras, such as the *Laṅkāvatāra,* the *Bodhisattvabhūmi,* and the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, sahaja relates to qualities that are "natural" or "essential," not necessarily to a specific state attained through meditation. In later contexts, sahaja can be

[372] See Jackson, *Mind Seeing Mind,* 41–64 for a clear overview of the mahāsiddhas and mahāmudrā in India.
[373] Keith Dowman reports that nearly forty of the siddhas were initiated into yoginītantras such as the *Hevajratantra* or *Saṃvaratantra,* while only seven were initiated into the *Guhyasamājatantra*, which is a primary example of mahāyogatantra, classified by later Tibetans as a "father tantra." Dowman, *Masters of Mahāmudrā,* 389.
[374] Szántó, "Siddhas," 448.
[375] See Jackson, *Tantric Treasures,* 10–14.
[376] Davidson writes that "sahaja was a preclassical word that became employed in scholastic, particularly Yogācāra, literature as an adjective describing conditions natural or, less frequently, essential with respect to circumstances encountered in an embodied state" ("Reframing *Sahaja*,"46). "Reframing *Sahaja*," 52–6.

thought of as both an ontological category—"the true nature of the world,"[377] akin to *śūnyatā*, or emptiness—as well as what Per Kværne refers to as a "psychological category," that is, the subjective aspect of bliss that realizes emptiness.[378] The use of sahaja in a tantric sense is a relatively late development, dating to as early as the ninth century, in relation to the *Guhyasamājatantra*. In its tantric usage, however, sahaja is most closely connected to yoginītantras such as the *Hevajratantra*, from the ninth to tenth centuries on, as well as the *Kālacakratantra*, from the tenth to eleventh centuries.[379] In the context of yoginītantras such as the *Hevajratantra*, sahaja is the culmination of the four ecstasies (*ānanda*) of the completion stage, and as such is equated with the resultant state of mahāmudrā. One description of Sahaja is as a state "in which the mind's natural purity and luminosity, its nondual realization of emptiness, and an experience of great bliss or ecstasy are indissolubly interfused."[380] It is particularly in the context of the *Hevajratantra* that the term came to be articulated as "a technical term to identify the culminating experience of sexual practice."[381]

Saraha and the Dohākoṣa

The siddha most relevant to our present discussion is Saraha, the elusive Bengali figure also known as the Great Brahmin (*Bram se chen po*). Saraha is perhaps the best-known of the siddhas, and like the others, he is shrouded in myth and paradox. He has been described as the "greatest single individual in the history of Indian tantric Buddhism,"[382] and yet "almost nothing factual is known about Saraha."[383] He has been variously dated to between the third

[377] Braitstein, "Saraha's Adamantine Songs," 47–9.
[378] Kværne, *An Anthology of Buddhist Tantric Songs*, 62.
[379] Davidson, "Reframing Sahaja," 46–7.
[380] Jackson, *Tantric Treasures*, 12.
[381] Davidson, "Reframing Sahaja," 48.
[382] Jackson, *Tantric Treasures*, 7.
[383] Herbert Guenther, cited in Schaeffer, *Dreaming the Great Brahmin*, 13.

century BCE and the twelfth century CE, although the current consensus is that he lived in the final centuries of the first millennium.[384] Saraha is traditionally credited as the author of the *Treasury of Dohās* (*Dohākoṣa*), one of several compilations of the same name by different authors (the others being the *Dohākoṣa*s of Kāṇha, or Kṛṣṇācārya, and Tilopa, the guru of Nāropa and direct human source of the Kagyü tradition). Saraha's *Treasury* is a collection of dohās, or rhyming couplets, a common medium of expression for many of the siddhas that present a range of Buddhist themes in direct, but often paradoxical, terms. The dohās frequently present tantric themes, with Szántó commenting that

> the songs sometimes have two meanings. The superficial meaning is often mundane and sometimes shockingly antinomian. The deeper meaning always refers to some kind of doctrine, most often elements of tantric practice.[385]

As a literary form, dohās are also found in songs of conduct, or "performance songs" (*caryāgīti*) and vajra songs (*vajragīti*).[386] Saraha's *Treasury* comprises three sections: the *People Dohā*, the *King Dohā*, and the *Queen Dohā*.[387] These writings were likely composed originally in various Apabhraṃśa dialects native to Bihar and Bengal, compiled into manuscripts with multiple and overlapping versions, and later translated into Tibetan.[388] Some are extant only in Tibetan or Sanskrit, often only in fragments whose dates cannot be confirmed easily, if at all.[389]

Like most of the mahāsiddhas, Saraha was closely associated with tantric lineages,

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[384] Schaeffer, *Dreaming the Great Brahmin*, 13.
[385] Szántó, "Siddhas," 447.
[386] Jackson, *Tantric Treasures*, 7–8, 10.
[387] Also known as the *Dohā Treasury Song* (*Dohākoṣagīti*), *Dohā Treasury Instruction Song* (*Dohākoṣopadeśagīti*), and *Performance Song Dohā Treasury* (*Dohākoṣanāmacaryāgīti*). See Jackson, *Mind Seeing Mind*, 44.
[388] On problems concerning the script in which Saraha's dohās were written, see Szántó, "Siddhas," 446.
[389] Jackson, *Tantric Treasures*, 7–9.

especially those of the yoginītantras. As Jackson reports, the *Dohākoṣa*s of Saraha, Kāṇha, and Tilopa present clear evidence that their authors were "familiar with, and probably… practitioner[s] of, the Yoginī tantras."[390] This connection between the mahāsiddhas and the yoginītantras seems to be confirmed by a passage in the introduction to the index (*dkar chag*) of the Degé Tengyur (*Sde dge bstan 'gyur*), in which Shuchen Tsultrim Rinchen (1697–1774) states that the teachings of the dohās, as well as those associated with them, specifically refer to the mother tantras, that is, the yoginītantras.[391] Nonetheless, we should not assume that Saraha was an advocate of systematic adherence to any system, tantric or otherwise. Like the other siddhas, he was not known for promoting any one philosophical or religious system, but rather for flouting religious and moral conventions of all sorts, including the ritualism of the Vajrayāna.

Saraha was also one of the most important and earliest figures in the transmission of mahāmudrā traditions. Indeed, Gö Lotsawa wrote that "the great brahmin Saraha was the first to introduce the Mahāmudrā as the chief of all paths."[392] In addition to the *Dohākoṣa*, he is credited with several works that deal more directly with mahāmudrā, including the *Body Treasury* (*Kayākoṣa*), *Speech Treasury* (*Vākkoṣa*), and *Mind Treasury* (*Cittakoṣa*).[393] Like many mahāsiddha works, Saraha's writings combine insights ostensibly derived from meditative experience with critiques of religious norms, often in paradoxical, irreverent, or scathingly humorous terms. Rather than attempting to present Buddhist teachings through scholastic categories or philosophical reasoning, the dohās are meant to reflect both the

[390] Jackson, *Tantric Treasures*, 10–11.
[391] Braitstein, "Saraha's Adamantine Songs," 53. See Jackson, *Tantric Treasures*, 10–14, for a useful summary of the principal points of the yoginītantras.
[392] Gö Lotsāwa, *Blue Annals*, 841. Jackson describes Saraha as the "fountainhead for lineages of practice related to the Yoginī tantras and to meditation on the 'great seal' of reality, mahāmudrā…" *Tantric Treasures*, 7.
[393] Jackson, *Mind Seeing Mind*, 45.

immediacy and ineffability of the siddhas' experience.

In the *Treasury,* Saraha often uses a mocking, adversarial tone to attack any type of rigid dogmatism or excessive reliance on ritual. He attacks followers of every religious tradition, beginning with Brahmins, and continuing on to Śaivas, Jains, monastic Buddhists, Mahāyāna Buddhists, and even tāntrikas, with their excessive reliance on ritual:[394]

> If you're not satisfied
> in your practice,
> how will meditation
> set you free?
> What use are lamps?
> What use is offered food?
> What is mantra practice
> supposed to do?[395]

Saraha, like many of the other mahāsiddhas, unsparingly uses his wit to attack virtually every aspect of Buddhist doctrine, assuming the role of an instigator who fervently rejects any shred of grasping to ritual, philosophical argumentation, esoteric practice, and even meditation. We might say that Saraha, like Nāgārjuna, holds no view at all. However, by condemning monastic scholars who "dry up intellect" by commenting on sūtras, Mahāyānists who turn to "sophistry and wordplay," or tāntrikas who "contemplate the maṇḍala circle" and rely on offerings of food, lamps, and so forth, Saraha simultaneously opposes the reification (and institutionalization) of Buddhist doctrines and practices and endorses the view that one can only achieve awakening by transcending conceptual categories and directly knowing the ultimate—the innate.

[394] See Jackson, trans., *Tantric Treasures,* 53ff.
[395] Jackson, trans., *Tantric Treasures*, 60.

Atiśa, the Dohās, and Mahāmudrā

The reader may well wonder at this point how this discussion of Saraha relates to Atiśa. In traditional accounts, after all, the mahāsiddhas are portrayed as renegade figures deeply critical of the stultified, institutionalized forms of Buddhism, while Atiśa is regarded as an exemplar of just such institutions. There is, however, a very direct connection between them, and that is the subject to which we now turn.

Atiśa is known to have been a great admirer of Saraha's dohās and to have played a major role in their transmission to Tibet, reportedly bringing Saraha's *Treasury* to Tibet for the first time.[396] However, he was reportedly dissuaded from teaching on them by Dromtönpa, his principal disciple, a situation that seems to have been a source of frustration for Atiśa, an important point that we will return to later.[397] Karma Trinleypa (Kar ma 'phrin las pa; 1456–1539), the Karma Kagyü author of a commentary on Saraha's dohā trilogy, reports that Atiśa began teaching the dohās soon after his arrival in Ngari. However, according to Karma Trinleypa, when Atiśa began to teach lines from the dohās, such as "What use are lamps? What use is offered food?"—whose intention was to criticize the tendency to overly rely on the performance of ritual offerings—he was requested to desist, lest such teachings be construed as encouraging Tibetans to abandon their ethical discipline.[398] Similar accounts are reported by Gö Lotsawa, to which we will return later.

Atiśa also composed a number of works in which he commented on aspects of

[396] Kurtis Schaeffer, *Dreaming the Great Brahmin*, 61.
[397] Kurtis Schaeffer quotes Karma Trinlaypa (1456–1539), author of a commentary on the *Dohākoṣa*, on Atiśa's attempts to teach on the dohās: "Jowoje [Atiśa] heard them [the dohās] from Maitripa, and when he arrived in Ngari, he began teaching dohas such as, 'What use are butter lamps, What use offerings to gods?' He explained them literally, and out of fear that ethical conduct practiced by the Tibetans would become debased, he was requested not to recite them. Therefore, though he was somewhat displeased, he is not known to have taught them henceforth." Schaeffer, *Dreaming the Great Brahmin*, 61.
[398] Schaeffer, *Dreaming the Great Brahmin*, 61.

mahāmudrā, the meditative practice lineage closely identified with the mahāsiddha traditions as well as with later Kagyü traditions. Atiśa is credited as the author or source of a number of works that frequently employ terminology relating to the practice of mahāmudrā. These include the *Hidden Teaching* (*Lkog chos*), also known as *Essential Instructions on the Stages of the Path to Awakening* (*Byang chub lam gyi rim pa'i man ngag*);[399] *Pointing-Out Instructions in Sets of Five* (*Ngo sprod lnga tshoms*); and the *Great Seal Given by the Great Lord [Atiśa] to Gönpawa* (*Jo bo rjes dgon pa ba la gnang ba'i phyag chen*[400]). The *Hidden Teaching* includes instructions on "pointing out" the nature of the mind (*sems ngo sprad pa*) in the context of the development of serenity (*śamatha*; *zhi gnas*), a form of practice closely associated with the mahāmudrā and great completion (*rdzogs chen*) teachings of the Kagyü and Nyingma schools. As Apple notes, even the instructions that Atiśa gives on insight (*vipaśyanā*; *lhag mthong*) in his *Stages of the Path to Awakening* (*Byang chub lam gyi rim pa*)—a text far less known than *Lamp on the Path*—differ significantly from the *Lamp* in that they "focus on pointing out the connate nature of one's own mind, a nature equivalent to the Dharma body (*dharmakāya*)."[401] Many of these ideas relate directly to the dohās and the yoginītantra teachings.

Atiśa clearly admired the dohās, for he composed a number of his own works that were evidently inspired by Saraha's works, even calling them "dohās" and "gītis." Among these are *Song of the View of the Sphere of Dharma* (*Dharmadhātudarśanagīti*; *Chos kyi*

[399] A third title for the text is *Practical Guidance on the Special Instructions of the Stages of the Path to Awakening* (*Byang chub lam gyi rim pa'i gdams ngag dmar khrid*). Translated in Apple, *Atiśa's Stages of the Path to Awakening* (forthcoming), as *Instructions for Select Disciples*.
[400] The first two texts are included in *Byang chub lam gyi rim pa*, a collection of *lam rim* texts authored by (or attributed to) Atiśa. See BDRC W1KG506. Both are translated in Apple, forthcoming., 172ff. The third text is translated by Apple as *Essential Condensed Summary of the Special Instructions on Coemergent Union* (*Jo bo rjes dgon pa ba la gnang ba'i phyag chen*). See Apple, *Atiśa Dīpaṃkara*, 245–50.
[401] See Apple, "Atiśa's Teachings on Mahāmudrā," 22; also Jackson, *Mind Seeing Mind,* 70–1.

dbyings su lta ba'i glu), *Song of Conduct* (*Caryāgīti*; *Spyod pa'i glu*), *Vajra Song of the Vajra Seat* (*Vajrāsana Vajragīti*; *Rdo rje gdan gyi rdo rje'i glu*), as well as commentaries (*vṛtti*) on the latter two texts.[402] The first of these, *Song of the View of the Sphere of Dharma,* is a summary of Buddhist and non-Buddhist philosophical views (*darśana*; *lta ba*), but does not deal directly with any tantric subjects. The *Song of Conduct* touches on tantric themes in a general way, but is principally centered on a series of reasonings and metaphors for emptiness, ultimate reality. Of these texts, the *Vajra Song of the Vajra Seat* (henceforth *Vajra Song*) is the most overtly tantric, and thematically the closest to Saraha's dohās. We will now consider some specific points from these texts.

The Song of Conduct

The *Song of Conduct* (*Caryāgīti*), as well as its autocommentary, the *Commentary to the Song of Conduct* (*Caryāgītivṛtti*), demonstrates a close affinity with the dohās and gītis of Saraha and the other mahāsiddhas, both in terms of its style and content.

While it may be impossible to determine precisely where or when Atiśa composed these gītis, James Apple, citing the *Extensive Biography*, reports that both the *Song of Conduct* and the *Vajra Song*, along with other works, were composed while Atiśa was staying in Nyethang (*Snye thang*), in Ü (central Tibet), the village near Lhasa where he spent his last years and passed away.[403] While the colophon of the *Song of Conduct* gives no specific information about where or when the text was composed, it does say that it was "composed by the great *ācārya* Dīpaṃkara Śrījñāna" and "translated and finalized by Pandita

[402] For translations of the *Dharmadhātudarśanagīti*, see Apple, *Atiśa Dīpaṃkara*, 133–58 and Brunnhölzl, *Straight from the Heart*, 75–89. The *Caryāgīti* has been translated twice, but both translations have numerous issues: Chattopadhyaya, in *Atīśa and Tibet*, 505–10; and Sherburne, in *The Complete Works of Atīśa*, 407–13. Chattopadhyaya has also translated the *Caryāgītivṛtti* (*Atīśa and Tibet*, 511–18). To my knowledge, there are no published translations of the *Vajrāsana Vajragīti* or its commentary.
[403] Apple, *Atiśa Dīpaṃkara*, 70, 70n202, 70n203.

Vajrapāṇi and Lotsāwa Gelong Chökyi Sherab (Dge slong chos kyi shes rab)."[404] The colophon to the *Commentary*, meanwhile, states simply that "The *Commentary to the Song of Conduct* is completed." Following Apple, and the *Extensive Biography*, we can be fairly confident that the *Song of Conduct*, along with the *Vajra Song* and both of their commentaries, were some of the last texts composed by Atiśa, representing a distillation of his views on Vajrayāna doctrine and practice.

As for their contents, both *Song*s comment on a range of tantric themes, specifically focusing on yoganiruttaratantra doctrines. While the *Song of Conduct* is less explicitly tantric in its focus than the *Vajra Song*, it is clearly intended as a commentary on tantric conduct in general, especially that of yoganiruttaratantra. This is suggested in the first lines of the homage and promise to compose, where we read:

> Homage to the body of union,
> Possessing the supreme of all aspects.
> With the thought of benefiting others,
> I compose the differentiation of the meaning of the *Cāryagīti*.[405]

Here, the "body of union" (**yuganaddhakāya*; *zung 'jug sku*) likely indicates the state of union that is the final result of the yoganiruttaratantra path, as explained in systems such as the Guhyasamāja. The following verse indicates that the *Song of Conduct* and *Vajra Song* are to be understood as a complementary pair, each dealing with one of the two truths, as defined in tantric literature. Atiśa sets out the aims of the two main types of songs, or gītis (*glu*):

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[404] *Slob dpon chen po dpal mar me mdzad ye shes kyis mdzad pa'i tshul krims kyi spyod pa glur blangs pa rdzogs so* / *paṇ ḍi ta ba zra pā ṇi dang* / *lo tsā ba de gslong chos kyi shes rab kyis bsgyur cing zhus te gran la phab pa'o*. *CG*, 1609. Note the alternative title given here for the text: the *Song of Ethical Conduct* (*Tshul krims kyi spyod pa glu*).

[405] *Rnam pa kun gyi mchog ldan pa* / *zung 'jug sku la phyag 'tshal lo* / *spyod pa glu yi don dbye ba* / *gzhan la phan pa'i blo yis bri*. *CGV*, 1611.

> Here, in terms of the two aspects of correct view, the vajra songs (*vajragīti*) mainly indicate clear light, the truth of cessation, and the ultimate truth; the songs of conduct (*caryāgīti*) teach self-blessing, the truth of the path, and conventional truth.[406]

Here, Atiśa shows how the two types of gītis connect with the two main aspects of yoganiruttaratantra practice. He correlates each of them to one of the two truths: caryāgītis to conventional truth (*saṁvṛti satya*; *kun rdzob bden pa*) and vajragītis to ultimate truth (*paramārtha satya*; *don dam bden pa*). In Pāramitāyāna literature, while explanations and definitions of the two truths vary widely, depending on the various philosophical tenet systems, they can generally be said to relate to the ontological status of persons and phenomena, and are together said to include all phenomena. Madhyamaka thinkers, for example, drawing on the works of Nāgārjuna, Śāntideva, and so forth, posit ultimate truth as the emptiness of true existence and conventional existence as the dependently arisen, "conventional" aspect of persons and phenomena.[407] In the yoganiruttaratantra context, the two truths are explained in a narrower sense, in correlation with the two principal levels of practice of the completion stage: conventional truth is associated with "conventional" phenomena, such as the visualized deities, the maṇḍala, and the illusory body (*māyākāya*; *sgyu lus*), and ultimate truth with the clear light (*prabhāsa*; *'od gsal*), which is roughly co-extensive with emptiness (although it can also refer to the clear light consciousness). Applying this tantric hermeneutic to the classification of two types of songs, Atiśa explains here that the vajragītis "mainly indicate clear light, the truth of cessation, and the ultimate

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[406] *'Dir yang dag pa'i lta ba rnam pa gnyis kyi dbang du byas nas / rdo rje'i glus 'od goal ba dang / 'gog pa'i dang don dam pa'i bden pa gtsor bstan nas / spyod pa'i glus dag byin gyis brlab pa dang / lam gyi bden pa dang / kun rdzob kyi bden pa bstan pa'i phyir*. *CGV*, 1611.

[407] See, for example, Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, IX.2: "This truth is recognized as being of two kinds: conventional and ultimate. Ultimate reality is beyond the scope of the intellect. The intellect is called conventional reality." Trans. in Wallace and Wallace, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*, 115.

truth," while the caryāgītis correspond to "self-blessing, the truth of the path, and conventional truth." In the Guhyasamāja tantric literature, the term "self-blessing" or "self-consecration" (*svādhiṣṭhāna*; *bdag byin gyis brlab*) is often used as an epithet for the illusory body (*māyākāya*; *sgyu lus*), the third of the five stages of the completion stage.[408]

Within this bipartite division of the two types of gīti, then, we understand that Atiśa's *Song of Conduct* relates principally to conventional truth, the practices related to generating the illusory body, and the *Vajra Song* to the clear light. The *Song of Conduct*, however, is relatively brief in its exposition of specifically tantric practices, whereas the *Vajra Song* expounds at some length on practices meant to bring about the manifestation of the clear light. Instead, much of the *Song of Conduct* is devoted to analyzing the view of emptiness through a series of metaphors, such as the reflection of a face in a mirror. For example, as we see in the root text,

> The self and all migrators clearly appear
> in the stainless sky and the extensive jeweled mirror.
>
> Why remain in the error of differentiating self and others,
> like childish beings who are deceived by their own reflection?
> Whoever knows and realizes a reflection as permanent,
> that person is like an animal fighting against their shadow.[409]

Other passages illustrate Atiśa's unusual mode of presenting emptiness. Here, as in other passages, he seems to favor a view that emphasizes the non-duality of subject and object, an approach recalling both Yogācāra doctrines and the mahāmudrā emphasis on realizing the nature of mind, rather than Madhyamaka analyses, which emphasize the emptiness of true

[408] See Tsongkhapa, *Lamp to Illuminate the Five Stages*, 63, 115–16, 153, 383, 393.
[409] *Dri med mkha' dang rgyas pa'i nor bu me long la / de la gsal bar snang ba bdag dang 'gro ba kun / ji ltar byis pa rang gi gzugs brnyan la 'khrul ltar / bdag gzhan 'byed pa'i 'khrul ba la ni ci phyir gnas*. *CG*, 1606.

existence. In the following example, he cites a sūtra passage, before providing his interpretation of it:

> "The mind itself does not have an object;
> the mentality that is disturbed due to latencies (*vāsanā*)
> arises with the appearance of [having] an object."
>
> Having taught this, [both] the knower that sees the self and the things of the three realms on this side, as well as all objects of knowledge, are to be known in that way, like a flower in the sky.[410]

Following this analysis, Atiśa turns to one of the principal topics of tantric practice, meditation on the maṇḍala circle, saying

> Having stabilized meditation on the maṇḍala circle,
> The yogin who knows reality does not remain in it.
> Cherishing great bliss as the supreme object,
> They absorb the maṇḍala into that and stabilize it.[411]

Commenting on the first line, Atiśa explains the practice of meditating on the deity's maṇḍala, which is itself a "dependent arising" (*pratītya samutpāda*; *rten 'brel*, or *rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba*). Through knowledge of and meditation on the maṇḍala as a dependent arising, he writes, there is the "arisal of blessings."[412] He then explains in greater detail the process by which one generates the illusory body, one of the main topics of the completion

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[410] *Don yod ma yin sems nyid de* / *bag chags kyis ni dkrugs pa'i yid* / *don du snang ba byung ba yin* /*zhes gsungs pas* / *bdag dang khams gsum pa'i dngos po tshu rol mthong ba'i shes pa dang* / *shes bya ma lus par nam mkha'i me tog ltar shes par bya'o*. *CGV*, 1612–13. I have been unable to identify the source of the sūtra passage.

[411] *Dkyil 'khor 'khor lo bsgom pa bstan par bya ba ste* / *de nyid shes pa'i rnal 'byor pa yis der mi gnas* / *mtshon par bya ba mchog tu bde chen gces pa ste* / *dkyil 'khor de la bsdus te brtan par bya ba yin*. *CG*, 1606–7.

[412] "With regard to that, there are five [points]: (1) dependent arising has power; (2) that [maṇḍala] is that; (3) knowledge [of the maṇḍala] as that; (4) meditation [on the maṇḍala] as that; (5) the arisal of blessings." *Zhes bya ba de la lnga ste rten 'brel la mthu yod pa dang* / *de yin pa dang* / *der shes pa dang* / *der bsgom pa dang* / *byin gyi rlabs 'byung ba'o*. *CGV*, 1613.

stage, referring to it as the "illusion-like mental body" (*yid kyi lus sgyu ma lta bu*):

> When one has thus cleared away non-existent objects, and both mind and wind (*prāṇa*) are enhanced by uncontaminated qualities, there is appearance as the supporting and supported wheel of deities; then, from the conjunction of the three—the substantial cause, mind; the cooperative condition, wind; and the uncontaminated qualities—the illusion-like mental body, and so forth, appear.[413]

The maṇḍala and the illusory body, however, are themselves merely conventionalities, and the root text adds,

> Having stabilized meditation on the maṇḍala circle,
> The yogin who knows reality does not remain in it.
> Cherishing great bliss as the supreme object,
> They absorb the maṇḍala into that and stabilize it.[414]

This indicates the union of the two: the conventional truth, that is, the maṇḍala and illusory body, and the ultimate truth, the clear light. Finally, concluding Atiśa's summary of the practices of the completion stage, the root text says,

> How can you achieve unsurpassed enlightenment
> as long as the essential nature of reality is not known?[415]

These lines, he explains in the *Commentary*, indicate the stages of clear light and union (*yuganaddha*; *zung 'jug*), which are respectively the fourth and fifth levels of the completion stage.[416] The remainder of the *Song of Conduct* and the *Commentary* mainly consists of a

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[413] *De ltar yod pa ma yin pa'i don bsal nas sems rlung gnyis zag med kyi yon tan gyis khyad par du byas pa'i tshe / rten dang brten pa'i lha'i 'khor lor snang ba ste nyer len gyi rgyu sems lhan cig byed pa'i rkyen rlung zag med kyi yon tan gsum 'dus pa las yid kyi lus sgyu ma lta bu la sogs par snang ngo*. *CGV*, 1613.
[414] *Dkyil 'khor 'khor lo bsgom pa brtan par bya ba ste / de nyid shes pa'i rnal 'byor pa yis der mi gnas / mtshon par bya ba mchog tu bde chen gces pa ste / dkyil 'khor de la bsdus te brtan par bya ba yin*. *CG*, 1606–7.
[415] *Ji srid de nyid rang bzhin yongs su ma shes pas / de srid byang chub bla na med pa ji ltar 'grub*. *CG*, 1607.
[416] *Ji srid de nyid rang bzhin yongs su ma shes pas / de srid byang chub bla na med pa ji ltar 'grub / ces bya ba ni 'od gsal dang zung 'jug go*. *CGV*, 1613–14.

more extensive discussion of emptiness and a summarized presentation of exoteric doctrines, such as karma, the eight mundane dharmas, ethical discipline, and the cultivation of samādhi.[417] We now turn to a discussion of the *Vajra Song of the Vajra Seat* and its commentary.

Vajra Song of the Vajra Seat

Whereas the *Song of Conduct* gives no specific information about where or when it was composed, the *Vajra Song* does at least provide some more detail in its colophon. Like the *Song of Conduct*, it appears to have been written towards the end of Atiśa's life, when he was staying in Nyethang. As the colophon tells us,

> In order to teach others the actual meaning as it was seen by the mahāpaṇḍita, Dīpaṃkara Śrījñāna, the *Vajragīti* was completed at the time of departing for the abode of Vajradhara, in Namoché at Kyishöd Nyethang Tashi Päl.[418]

This seems to suggest that Atiśa completed the *Vajra Song* shortly before he died, that is, before "departing for the abode of Vajradhara."[419] The lack of mention of a translator also suggests that Atiśa may have both composed it and translated it (or composed it directly in Tibetan). Of course, if this colophon is accurate, and Atiśa died soon thereafter, it presents some difficulty in terms of the timing of the composition of the *Commentary*, whose colophon provides no clues regarding the time or place of its composition. Atiśa may have

[417] José: there's obviously a good deal more I could say about this, but it felt like the chapter was already getting too long; I do plan to include the full text in an appendix. Your thoughts?
[418] *Mkhas pa chen po dpal mar me mdzad ye she kyi dngos po'i don nyid kyis ji ltar gzigs pa de ltar gzhan la bstan pa'i phyir rdo rje 'chang gi gnas su gshegs pa'i tshe skyi shod snye thang bkra shis dpal gyi na mo cher rdo rje'i klu blangs pa rdzogs so. VV*, 1588.
[419] Although the colophon does not mention a translator, Chattopadhyaya, BDRC, and the AIBS database all list Nagtsho Tshultrim Gyalwa as the co-translator. The source for this attribution is unclear. See Chattopadhyaya, *Atīśa in Tibet*, 459; BDRC: https://library.bdrc.io/show/bdr:MW23703_1494, and AIBS Buddhist Canons Research Database: http://databases.aibs.columbia.edu.

composed the commentary simultaneously with the *Vajra Song* at Nyethang, before passing away. While the *Vajra Song* does not mention a translator, the *Commentary*'s colophon states that it was translated and edited by Atiśa together with Gelong Tsultrim Gyälwa (Dge slong tshul khrims rgyal ba), that is, Nagtsho Lotsāwa. We are left with the question of whether Nagtsho Lotsāwa also helped translate the *Vajra Song*, a question to which we unfortunately do not have an answer.

Neither the *Vajra Song* nor its commentary are explicitly framed as commentaries on a specific tantric system. Both texts, however, discuss tantric doctrines using terminology that clearly references yoganiruttaratantra and yoginītantra practices and. Further, as we saw in the *Song of Conduct*, "the vajra songs mainly indicate clear light, the truth of cessation, and the ultimate truth." Specifically, we find in the *Vajra Song* a number of elements suggesting a close connection to Cakrasaṃvara. The *Vajra Song* begins with an homage to Mañjuśrī, the Buddha, and Vajradhara, the inclusion of Vajradhara alluding to its identity as a tantric text,[420] while the *Commentary*'s homage specifically references Cakrasaṃvara:

> Homage to youthful Mañjuśrī.
> Homage to glorious Tārā,
> Who dispels the gathered waves of birth and so forth,
> And the suffering of [cyclic] existence,
> And whose compassion fulfills hopes like a wish-fulfilling jewel.
>
> May the one with experience of the nine moods (*gar dgu*),[421]
> Who is like the moon [reflected] in water,
> The foremost teacher, Glorious Blood-Drinker (Śrī Heruka),[422]

[420] *Dpal ldan rdo rje gdan spor sangs rgyas dang / bla ma rdo rje 'dzin dngos bdag nyid can / zab pa'i don ldan glu 'di ston gyur pa / yon tan kun rdzogs de la phyag 'tshal lo. VV*, 1585.
[421] The nine moods (*gar gi nyams dgu*) are explained as the nine moods, or dance expressions, of a deity, specifically a wrathful deity (*heruka*). The *Rangjung Yeshe Dharma Dictionary* divides these into three groups: three moods of the body (*sku'i gar*), three moods of speech (*gsung gi gar*), and three moods of mind (*thugs kyi gar*). The nine are erotic, heroic, disgusting, furious, humorous, frightful, compassionate, wonderful, and tranquil. See https://rywiki.tsadra.org/index.php/Main_Page.
[422] The term *heruka* can refer to wrathful, blood-drinking deities in general, but here it almost certainly refers to

> The Victorious Hero (*vīrarāja*),
> Always protect us.[423]

Paying homage to Mañjuśrī and Tārā, both commonly classified as kriyātantra deities, is not unusual at the beginning of a Mahāyāna text, even a non-tantric one. However, the explicit homage to Cakrasaṃvara confirms the *Vajra Song*'s close connection to and emphasis on yoginītantra practices.[424]

Sahaja in the Vajra Song

As we have seen, the dohās of Saraha and other mahāsiddhas frequently refer to the "innate," sahaja, or variants of it (*saha*; *sa ha dza*; *lhan cig*); likewise, the innate plays a central role in both the *Vajra Song* and the *Commentary*. While it is only named once in the *Vajra Song* (in its abbreviated form: *lhan cig*; *saha*), it appears multiple times in the *Commentary*, and clearly plays a crucial role in Atiśa's exposition of yoginītantra doctrines. The *Vajra Song*'s verse of homage reads as follows:

> Homage to the Buddha, in the place of the glorious vajra throne (Śrī Vajrāsana);
> And to the lama, who has the actual nature of Vajradhara,
> Who has taught this song (*gīti*) of profound meaning,
> and who has perfected every quality.[425]

The *Commentary* immediately relates this verse to the innate (or innately arisen):

> Regarding the phrase, "[the lama] who has taught this song of profound meaning and

Cakrasaṃvara.

[423] *'Jam dpal gzhon nur gyur pa la phyag 'tshal lo / skye la soks pa'i bra rlabs 'khrigs / srid pa'i sdug bsngal sel mdzad cing / thugs rjes yid bzhin nor ltar re skong ba / rje btsun sgrol ma de la phyag 'tshal lo / chu yi nang gi zla ba ltar / gar dgu'i nyams dang ldan pa ste / ston pa'i gtso bo khrag 'thung dpal / dpa' bo'i rgyal pos tag tu skyong gyur cig*. *DDG*, 1590.

[424] As noted earlier, Atiśa's opening verse of the *Commentary on the Difficult Points of the Lamp for the Path to Awakening*, which is mainly a Sūtrayāna text, also mentions these three deities.

[425] *Dpal ldan rdo rje gdan spor sangs rgyas dang / bla ma rdo rje 'dzin dngos bdag nyid can / zab pa'i don ldan glu 'di ston gyur pa / yon tan kun rdzogs de la phyag 'tshal lo. VV*, 1585.

> who has perfected every quality" (1cd), the elucidation of the meaning of the innately arisen (*sahaja*; *lhan cig skyes pa*) is as deep as the ocean; due to authentically expressing the meaning of that [i.e. the innate], it is called a "song." With regard to the expression, "has perfected every quality," the qualities of the lama that were explained are utterly perfect; that is said because due to the nature of that, the qualities of a buddha are perfected. Therefore, I pay homage to that excellent being.[426]

Here, Atiśa immediately confirms the centrality of the innate to the *Vajra Song*. First, he explains that the very reason it is known as a "song" (*gīti*; *glu*) is because it is an authentic expression of the innate. He then posits a direct link between realization of the innate and the realization of buddhahood: "due to the nature of that, the qualities of a buddha are perfected."

The text then takes a more overtly tantric turn, alluding to the practice of union with a consort as a means to attain awakening. As the *Vajra Song* reads,

> Through taking a supreme maiden, one accomplishes thoroughly and swiftly;
> By engaging blissfully on the banks of the Nairañjanā river, there is union.
> Seated on the roots of the bodhi tree at Vajrāsana,
> [They] remain in the samādhi exemplified by a vajra. (3)[427]

Here, Atiśa invokes an important site in the life story of the Buddha: the Nairañjanā River, the river close to Bodhgayā, where the Buddha attained awakening. This passage, as explained in the *Commentary*, is richly imbued with tantric symbolism and fundamentally reframes the standard narrative of awakening. According to Buddhist tradition, the Nairañjanā is the site where Siddhārtha Gautama and his five companions practiced intensive fasting and meditation for six years until Siddhārtha decided to renounce extreme austerities

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[426] *Zab pa'i don ldan glu 'di ston 'gyur ba / yon tan kun rdzogs zhes bya ba ste lhan cig skyes pa'i don gsal ba de ni rgya mtsho ltar zab la / de'i don rnal du mtshon pas glu zhes bya'o / yon tan kun rdzogs zhes bya ba la bla ma'i yon tan bshad pa ma lus pa rdzogs pa dang / de la rang bzhin gyis sangs rgyas kyi yon tan rdzogs pas de skad ces bya'o*. *VVV*, 1591.

[427] *Mdzes ma mchog ldan khyer nas rab tu myur bsgrubs pas / nai ranydza na'i 'gram du bde bar 'jug pas 'dus / byang chub shing rtsar rdo rje gdan bzhugs nas / rdo rje dper byas ting nge 'dzin la gnas*. *VV*, 1585.

and seek the middle way to awakening. In the traditional (exoteric) telling, Siddhārtha's strength is restored when the young woman Sujātā offers him rice porridge. In this tantric adaptation of the story, Atiśa employs the Nairañjanā as a setting for the practice of sexual yoga, and the "supreme maiden" (*mdzes ma mchog ldan*) becomes his sexual consort.

Atiśa writes that the supreme maiden is a metaphor for "Lady Selflessness" (*bdag med ma*).[428] Commenting on the phrase "by engaging blissfully on the banks of the Nairañjanā river," he writes that "through having achieved in that way, the innate, the clear light (**sahaja prabhāsvara*; *sa ha dza 'od gsal*), is said to be experienced."[429] The *Commentary* continues,

> That Lady Selflessness, which is illustrated—the supreme maiden—is the clear light and the innate. "Possessing" is possessing uncontaminated qualities.[430]

Here, Atiśa explicitly correlates the female consort with the feminine aspect of wisdom—"Lady Selflessness" (*nairātmyā*)—which, in turn, is related to the clear light and the innate. We may recall from earlier the standard classifications of the yoganiruttaratantras into two types: the father tantras, or mahāyoga tantras, such as Guhyasamāja, and the mother tantras, or yoginītantras, such as Hevajra and Cakrasaṃvara[431]. These classifications expand upon standard masculine-feminine dichotomies in tantric exegesis, where male and female are respectively correlated to method (*upāya*; *thabs*) and wisdom (*prajñā*; *shes rab*), bliss

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[428] Interestingly, the Sanskrit for *bdag med ma* is Nairātmyā, which also happens to be the name of the consort of Hevajra, one of the most important yoginītantra deities. However, Atiśa does not elaborate on this point, and it is not clear if the reference is deliberate.

[429] *Pas shes bya ba ni de ltar bsgrubs pas sa ha dza 'od gsal nyams su myong zhes bya'o*. *VVV*, 1592.

[430] *Mtshon bya'i bdag med ma de ni mdzes ma mchog ni 'od gsal dang sa ha dza'o /ldan pa ni zag med kyi yon tan dang ldan pa'o. Vajrāsana Vajragīti Vṛtti*, 1592. Here, "possessing" refers to the term *ldan* (possessing) in *mdzes ma mchog ldan*, which literally means "maiden possessing supremacy," but which I have translated simply as "supreme maiden."

[431] See, e.g., Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, 281–88; Tsongkhapa, *Lamp to Illuminate the Five Stages*, 25–41.

(*sukha*; *bde ba*) and emptiness (*śūnyatā*; *stong pa nyid*), and—specifically in the yoganiruttaratantra context—the yogas of the illusory body (*māyā-kāya*; *sgyu lus*) and clear light (*prabhāsvara*; *'od gsal*). In general, the goal of all the yoganiruttaratantras is to attain the final state of union (*yuganaddha*; *zung 'jug*), which comes about through uniting the clear light with the illusory body, but various tantras differ in terms of their presentation of the paths leading to that goal. The yoginītantras emphasize the yoga of clear light, which is closely correlated to, if not synonymous with, the innate. This passage, then, by placing the emphasis on the clear light and the innate, seems to confirm that the *Vajra Song* is primarily a work belonging to the corpus of? the yoginītantras.

Atiśa's commentary then explains the result to be obtained:

> Those who quickly accomplish union of the two in that way are said to obtain the result, mahāmudrā. [432]

Here, the "result, mahāmudrā" (*bras bu ma hā mu dra [sic]*) refers to buddhahood, the final state of awakening. It is not obvious what "those two" are; this may refer to the union of the subjective clear light (i.e. the blissful awareness) and the objective clear light (i.e. emptiness), or to the clear light and the uncontaminated qualities, or to the two sexual organs. What is certain is that this verse, with its emphasis on realization of the innate, reveals a clear link between the *Vajra Song*, the yoginītantras, and the mahāmudrā traditions of Saraha and the mahāsiddhas.

Lady Selflessness as Sahaja

One of the noteworthy points of the *Vajra Song* and the *Commentary to the Vajra Song* is

[432] *De ltar de gnyis zung 'jug tu rab tu myur du bsgrubs pas 'bras bu ma hā mu dra 'thob ces bya'o. Vajrāsana Vajragīti Vṛtti*, 1592.

description of the female consort, Lady Selflessness—the "supreme maiden"—in terms of the clear light and the innate; she is, in effect, the principle of wisdom.

In the root verses, we read:

> Hey! This path of unsurpassed samādhi,
> Subdues all the great fears of the four māras.
> Form is not abandoned; through the play of the innate,
> One unites with the nature, Lady Selflessness; (4)
>
> From this comes one's queen, insubstantial and beautiful.
> Due to the peace of non-attachment, there are no afflictions at all;
> Due to this, the errors of birth, death, and existence are abandoned;
> One receives and grants faultless great bliss. (5)
>
> In that, there is no color, no shape, nor even measure;
> No action, no desire, no birth, and no pride;
> When the mind remains in selflessness,
> No distinction at all is seen between self and other. (6)
>
> There is no going, no coming, nor any remaining anywhere.
> Just like the thoroughly pure entity of space,
> The excellent, capable yogi delights in all, without exception.
> That, I call "the queen, [Lady] Selflessness." (7)[433]

In typically paradoxical tantric terms, the queen, Lady Selflessness, is described here as "insubstantial and beautiful"; the source of abandoning the afflictions, yet also the bestower of great bliss. In terms recalling the negative dialectics of Prajñāpāramitā texts such as the *Heart Sūtra*, she is described as having "no color, no shape, nor even measure," and so forth; and finally, she with whom the "excellent, capable yogi delights" is called "the queen, Lady

[433] *Ting nge 'dzin bla na med pa'i lam 'dis kye / bdud bzhi'i 'jigs pa chen po gang de bcom / gzugs ni ma spangs lhan cig rnam rol pas / rang bzhin bdag med ma dang 'dus gyur nas // dngos med yid 'ong bdag gi brtsun mo de / chags med zhi bas nyon mongs med gang gis / skye dang 'chi ba srid pa'i 'khrul pa spong / 'khrul med bde ba chen por len cing ster // de la kha dog dbyibs dang tshad kyang med / byed med 'dod med skye med nga rgyal med / bdag med gang la sems ni zhugs gyur na / bdag gzhan dbye ba ma lus mi mthong ngo // 'gro dang 'ong dang gar yang gnas pa med / nam mkha'i ngo bo yang dag ji lta bar /rnal 'byor thub mchog ma lus rnam par rol / de ni bdag med btsun mo zhes nga smra. VG*, 1585–6.

Selflessness."

In his explanation of these verses, Atiśa refers to Lady Selflessness as the "action seal" (*karmamudrā*; *las kyi phyag rgya*), which generally indicates a physical tantric consort. In yogatantra and yoganiruttaratantra contexts, the *karmamudrā* is one of four types of seal (*mudrā*). One of the most widely used classifications comes from the *Compendium of the Reality of all the Tathāgatas* (*Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha*). Here, the four seals are the action seal (*karmamudrā*; *las kyi phyag rgya*), commitment seal (*samayamudrā*; *dam tshig gi phyag rgya*), dharma seal (*dharmamudrā*; *chos kyi phyag rgya*) or wisdom seal (*jñānamudrā*; *ye shes kyi phyag rgya*), and great seal (*mahāmudrā*; *phyag rgya chen po*). This fourfold classification is also used in mahāyoga and yoginī tantras and the commentarial literature on them, including the treatises on Guhyasamāja, Cakrasaṃvara, and Hevajra traditions.[434] In the *Hevajra Tantra* and other yoginītantras, the karmamudrā is often presented as an actual physical consort, or "knowledge woman" (*vidyā*; *rig ma*) with whom the yogin engages in sexual union as opposed to the wisdom seal, or visualized form of the consort. During the secret consecration (*guhyābhiṣeka*), the initiating master enters into union with the consort, while in the knowledge-wisdom consecration (*prajñājñānābhiṣeka*), the initiate follows suit. In the yoganiruttaratantras, mahāmudrā is generally considered the highest of the four, but its attainment depends on the other three.

Here, however, Atiśa's language seems to emphasize her nature as a representation of ultimate reality, or clear light. This suggests the possibility of a flexible interpretation of consort practice that eschews a strictly literalist approach in favor of a metaphorical one, allowing for the possibility that practitioners may engage in yoganiruttaratantra practices

[434] See Snellgrove, *Hevajra Tantra*, 136–7; Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, vol. 1, 264–6; Jackson, *Mind Seeing Mind*, 32, 38–9.

through a process of visualization. Atiśa's description of the consort as "symbolic Lady Selflessness, the action seal" (*mtshon byed kyi bdag med ma las kyi phyag rgya*) allows for various possible interpretations. His *Commentary* explains Lady Selflessness as follows:

> In terms of the symbolic Lady Selflessness, the action seal: [she has] beautiful color and shape, oblong eyes, and so forth; is evenly proportioned; has the six action commitment wheels;[435] and strongly desires bliss. In dependence on that [consort], the arising of the blissful mind is generated; in dependence on possessing the pride of mantra, dharma, and so forth, one places the mind and wind in the central channel; then, having cultivated[436] and stabilized the blissful mind, one meditates on the symbolic Lady Selflessness as the clear light.[437]

Of course, one might take the description of the consort's physical characteristics—her color, shape, eyes, and so forth—to mean that she is a physical being, not one cultivated through visualization. However, the term translated here as "symbolic" (*mtshon byed*), which can also signify "denoting," "illustrating," "exemplifying," etc., seems to suggest Atiśa's attempt to posit a middle way between the outright literal antinomianism of the tantras and the strict celibacy of the vinaya. Taken together with the root verses, it seems that Lady Selflessness is not necessarily who she appears to be, at least to ordinary perception.

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[435] It is unclear how the verbal noun *byed pa* (translated here as "action") is to be understood here. The "six action commitment wheels" (**samayacakra*; *dam tshig gi 'khor lo*) may refer to the classification of the cakras (*'khor lo*) of the psychophysical body into six, an enumeration frequently found in yoganiruttaratantra literature; it may also refer to six spheres or wheels in a less esoteric sense. While the term *dam tshig gi 'khor lo* appears in some canonical Mahāyāna sources, including the *Daśacakrakṣitigarbhanāma Mahāyānasūtra*, it appears frequently in tantric sources, especially those related to mahāyoga and yoginītantra traditions. These include the *Śrīmahāsaṃvarodayatantra*, the *Sarvatathāgatakāyavākcittarahasyoguhyasamājanāmamahākalparāja*, as well as commentaries including *Hevajrapiṇḍārthaṭīkā*, *Śrīhevajrasya vyākhyāvivaraṇa*, and numerous other texts related to Hevajra.

[436] *Brlabs* emended to *blangs*.

[437] *Mtshon byed kyi bdag med ma las kyi phyag rgya'i dbang du byas nas / kha dog dang dbyibs legs pa mig gi dkyus ring ba la sogs pa dang phra sbom tshad mnyam pa dang / byed pa dam tshig gi 'khor lo drug dang / bde ba mngon du 'dod pa dang / de la brten nas sems bde ba'i rnam par skye ba'i skye ba dang / sngags dang chos la sogs pa'i nga rgyal yod pa de la brten nas sems rlung rtsa dbu mar bcug nas sems bde ba'i rnam par blangs pas brtan por gyur nas / mtshon bya'i bdag med ma 'od gsal bar bsgoms pas… VVV*, 1594.

Interiorization of Tantric Practice

The possibility of replacing physical erotic practices with visualization is an example of what David Gray has called the "interiorization of ritual practices." In Gray's reading, Atiśa's presentation of tantra in the *Lamp* had the "unfortunate consequence" of excluding monks from full participation in what was considered the highest system of tantric practice, a situation that Atiśa would surely have recognized as problematic.[438] In works such as the *Vajra Song* and the *Song of Conduct*, however, it would seem that Atiśa proposed a way to rectify this problem, both affirming the supremacy of the yoganiruttaratantras and protecting monastic ethical conduct. By allowing for the possibility that such practices could be done with a visualized consort, he may have been presenting his final distillation in which he synthesized the practices of the Pāramitāyāna and the Vajrayāna into a coherent whole.

The use of visualization in tantric practice already had precedents in the Indian tradition. Gray notes that Buddhaśrījñānapāda and Nāgārjuna—both[439] integral figures in the commentarial traditions of Guhyasamāja—argued that visualization practice was key to the tantric path to awakening.[440] Abhayākaragupta[441] was another Vikramaśīla scholar who advocated the use of visualization in tantric practice. Regarding the question of when it is appropriate to rely on an action seal (*karmamudrā*) or a wisdom seal (*jñānamudrā*), Abhayākaragupta states that in the case of an "evil being" (**durjana; skye bo ngan pa*), it is appropriate to use a wisdom seal, while for others—presumably even monks maintaining

[438] Gray, "Visualization of the Secret," 3.
[439] Also referred to as Jñānapāda, Buddhajñāna, Buddhaśrījñāna, *Buddhajñānapāda, or *Śrījñānapāda. He was the principal figures in the Jñānapāda commentarial tradition of Guhyasamāja. See chapter 2 for more on Jñānapāda and Nāgārjuna in relation to Guhyasamāja.
[440] Gray, "Visualization of the Secret," 4.
[441] See chapter 2.

pure conduct—engaging in union with an action seal would be allowable.[442] Abhayākaragupta, however, lived after Atiśa, meaning that Atiśa could not have been influenced by his thought.

Using visualization as a substitute for actual engagement in sexual practices would conveniently circumvent the question of whether celibate practitioners could receive the secret and wisdom consecrations, and reliance on a visualized consort in the bestowal of yoganiruttaratantra consecrations would eventually become common practice within Tibetan traditions, especially the monastically oriented Geluk order. Several centuries after Atiśa, Tsongkhapa would argue in his *Great [Treatise on the] Stages of Mantra* (*Sngags rim chen mo*) that action seals were taught "for those whose desire is very great, whose knowledge of suchness is not great, and whose minds cannot attain equipoise through other methods," while those of greater faculties would rely on wisdom seals, and those of the highest faculties would rely on the great seal.[443] There is a great deal more to be said about these points, however, and we do not have the space to fully address them here.

Conclusion

While Atiśa's advice in *Lamp for the Path* regarding the second and third consecrations of yoganiruttaratantra suggests that he understood such practices, along with other forms of tantric antinomianism, as requiring actual, not symbolic, sexual union, it is evident from the points we have examined in the *Song of Conduct*, the *Vajra Song*, and their commentaries, that he clearly understood that it was possible for monastics to fully engage in yoganiruttaratantra practice without compromising their celibacy. His prolific work in the

[442] Gray, "Visualization of the Secret," 4.
[443] See Hopkins, *Tantra in Tibet*, 146–8, 147n72, n73.

translation, transmission, and composition of tantric texts demonstrates that he held the tantras, specifically the yoginītantras, in high regard. Why, then, would Atiśa have argued so forcefully in the *Lamp* that celibates should not receive yoganiruttaratantra empowerments? A simple answer might be that it was in order to avoid misleading Tibetan disciples who lacked the sufficient preparation to make such distinctions. In order to fully understand the complex dynamics at play here, we will need to examine some of the factors that led to the construction of Atiśa's image as a reformer. We will turn to these in the next, and final, chapter.

Chapter 5: The Construction of Atiśa the "Reformer"

Atiśa's writings on yoganiruttaratantra and yoginītantra traditions, his admiration of Saraha's tantric dohās, and his works on mahāmudrā have been largely ignored, both in traditional and scholarly literature. His emulation of the gītis suggests that we could well consider Atiśa to have as much in common with the mahāsiddhas as with more exoteric and monastically inclined Buddhist figures. However, the apparent marginalization, even erasure, of such esoteric works and ideas from standard accounts of Atiśa's life raises important questions about how he and the Kadam tradition came to be perceived in the decades and centuries following his death in 1054. A standard narrative emerged in which Atiśa came to be seen primarily as a moral reformer dedicated to the reinvigoration of foundational Buddhist doctrines and monastic ethics and the synthesis of the three *yāna*s into a unified whole. In such accounts, his works on Vajrayāna, particularly those related to yoganiruttaratantra traditions such as Guhyasamāja and Cakrasaṃvara, seem to have faded into the background to the point that even the most erudite Tibetan scholars seem largely unaware of, or indifferent to, their existence.[444] To the extent that Atiśa was known at all for his teachings on tantra, it was for his role in propagating traditions of kriyātantra deities such as Avalokiteśvara and Tārā, not for yoginītantra or yoganiruttaratantra deities. The main tantric practice associated with the Kadam tradition was the practice of the "four Kadam deities" (*bka' gdams lha bzhi*): Śākyamuni Buddha, Avalokiteśvara, Acala, and Tārā.

The factors leading to representations of Atiśa as a reformist figure are complex, and

[444] A Tibetan geshe with whom I read portions of Atiśa's gītis seemed surprised at my interest in these texts and admitted that he had never studied them. Yet, like any traditionally trained Tibetan scholar, he was thoroughly familiar with Atiśa's works on *lamrim* and other Sūtrayāna topics, works whose authority and importance are beyond question.

we can only speculate about explanations. For a figure like Atiśa, who was charged with clarifying the ways in which Tibetans had misinterpreted tantric doctrines and bolstering the practice of the Sūtrayāna, it may have seemed obvious that propagating kriyātantra practices such as Avalokiteśvara and Tārā was a wiser choice than teaching the yoginītantras or the dohās. After all, it may have seemed easier to show the compatibility between Sūtrayāna doctrines and the relatively mild kriyātantra practices than with the yoganiruttaratantras. These are largely hypotheticals, however, and a study of Atiśa's actual textual output in parallel with an investigation of the widespread image of him as an orthodox proponent of Sūtrayāna doctrines makes it clear that certain later figures promoted a specific image of him that supported their own religious and institutional aims. To get a better sense of this process, in this chapter we look into biographical and hagiographical accounts of Atiśa that were written in the decades and centuries following his death in 1054.

The boundaries between history, myth, and hagiography are extremely fluid in Tibetan accounts of religious figures. Historical representations necessarily involve a process of construction, arising through a selective process that includes certain elements and excludes others. In the case of religious histories and biographies, such constructed images may serve a number of interrelated purposes, including legitimation of particular sectarian identities, maintenance of political or institutional authority, and promotion of specific soteriological and religious ideals. In the case of a figure like Atiśa, who was significant as both a historical, even political, actor during a time of upheaval in Tibet and as a revered religious figure, there was a heightened need to promote a specific and selective image of him as a savior of the pure Buddhist teachings. Accounts of Atiśa as the great reformer who inspired the Kadampas—exemplars of the fusion of monasticism with Mahāyāna ideals of

the bodhisattva path—came largely to be accepted as historical fact. I will argue that an essential aim of biographical literature about Atiśa was to highlight his role as a Buddhist reformer single-pointedly committed to purging Tibetan Buddhism of corruption, whereas the actual situation was surely more complex.

Besides the many texts written or translated by Atiśa, either alone or with collaborators, we have ample testimony of his activities in Tibet, including writings of his disciples, accounts of his contemporaries, evidence of his travels and teaching, and posthumous biographies. Historical works such as the *Blue Annals* (*Deb ther sngon po*) dedicate entire sections[445] to Atiśa and to the Kadam tradition. While Atiśa was surely revered as a saint during his lifetime (as evidenced by attempts to coax him to Tibet with massive offerings of gold), the tendency to depict Atiśa in near-messianic terms may have reached its apex in Tsongkhapa's Geluk tradition, which made Atiśa and the Kadam tradition central to its very identity. In a typical description of Tibet's dark age, the eighteenth-century Geluk scholar Thukwan Losang Chokyi Nyima (Thu'u bkwan blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma; 1737–1802) described it as a period in which "those who adhered to pure view and conduct were few, while those who pursued perverted Dharma conduct were many."[446] With Atiśa's arrival in Tibet, according to Thukwan, "the darkness of misconduct such as crude behavior claimed to be mantra, and of misconceptions such as holding sutra and mantra to be opposed like hot and cold, naturally disappeared when the sun of Atiśa's teaching rose."[447] In this chapter, we examine ways in which various biographical accounts of Atiśa, as well as other sources such as the *Book of Kadam* (*Bka' gdams glegs bam*), helped to establish and promote

[445] See Roerich, trans., *Blue Annals* (vol. 1), 241–327.
[446] Thuken Losang Chokyi Nyima, *The Crystal Mirror of Philosophical Systems*, 99.
[447] Thuken Losang Chokyi Nyima, *The Crystal Mirror of Philosophical Systems*, 102.

the image of Atiśa as the great reformer, and the Kadam order—especially its founder, Dromtönpa—as the keepers of this tradition.

Buddhist Biography

Buddhist biographical and hagiographical literature plays a major role in the promotion and diffusion of Buddhist traditions, beliefs, and practices, as well as in the legitimation of specific doctrinal views and interpretations. As Buddhism spread throughout the Indian subcontinent, starting around the fifth century BCE, tales recounting the life and activities of the Buddha and other major Buddhist figures began to emerge and were eventually gathered into collections that became integral parts of the Pāli canon and later Sanskrit Buddhist literature. Works such as the *jātaka*s (*skyes rabs*) and *avadāna*s (*rtogs par brjod pa*) recounted the deeds of the Buddha in his previous lives as a bodhisattva on the path to awakening, illustrating his striving over many lifetimes in fundamental practices such as the ten pāramitās.[448] Works such as the *Buddhavaṃsa*, or "chronicle of the buddhas," recount the life histories of the twenty-five buddhas, culminating with the life of Gautama Buddha, while the *Buddhacarita* (*Sangs rgyas kyi spyod pa*), or "Buddha's deeds," recounts the life of prince Gautama from his birth until his death and *parinirvāṇa*.[449]

[448] The *jātaka*s constituted one of the principal categories of scripture in the Pāli canon and were later gathered into collections such as Āryaśūra's *Jātakamāla* (*Skyes pa'i rabs kyi rgyud*), the garland of birth stories. In the Sanskrit tradition, they were gathered into the twelve branches of excellent speech (*gsung rab yan lag bcu gnyis*). These are also known as the twelve sections of sūtra, and are the twelve main divisions of the Buddhist canon: general discourses (*mdo sde*); proclamations in song (*dbyangs su bsnyad pa*); prophecies (*lung du bstan pa*); poetic pronouncements (*tshigs su bcad pa*); special aphorisms (*mched du brjod pa*); declarations (*gleng gzhi*); narratives (*rtogs pa brjod pa*); parables (*de lta bu byung ba*); succession of former lives (*skyes pa'i rabs*); extensive sayings (*shin tu rgyas pa'i sde*); marvels (*rmad du byung ba*); and established doctrines (*gtan la dbab pa*).

[449] *Buddhacarita* refers to two works from the first and second centuries CE, one composed by Saṅgharakṣa (ca. first c. CE), and the other by Aśvaghoṣa (ca. second c.).

These stories serve not only to construct historical narratives of the Buddha and his activities but also to promote Buddhist ideals of spiritual attainment and the path to their realization, in addition to sectarian and institutional aims. Although through critical textual analysis and philology, we might be able to glean information about the historical or cultural circumstances in which such tales were written, they are clearly not meant to be read as factually objective histories. They are forms of edification, meant to imbue readers with faith toward their subjects and the qualities that they embody, to enter into and practice the Buddhist path. One would not read a *jātaka* tale—such as the account of a previous incarnation of the Buddha offering his own flesh to a starving tigress—in order to learn biographical details about the historical prince Siddhārtha Gautama. We should be wary, then, of looking to traditional biographies as sources of historical "truth," as ways of getting to know the *real* Buddha (or, in s a similar sense, the real Atiśa, Nāgārjuna, Tsongkhapa, etc).

While we might extract certain biographical facts about these figures from their biographies, my interest here is to understand something more about the reasons behind the promotion of certain views of Atiśa to the exclusion of others. We need to consider, then, the various registers of "truth" contained within sacred Buddhist biographical literature. As Ulrike Roesler puts this,

> biographies and hagiographies contain different types of truth, not just historical ones, and in order to understand these different truths we must consider when and why biographies are written. Life stories are only told if there is a reason to tell them. In a religious context, it is usually an exceptional person, a saint or "spiritual hero" whose story is considered worthy of being rendered, serving to instruct and edify the audience.[450]

[450] Covill, Roesler, Shaw, *Lives Lived and Lives Imagined*, 2.

The questions of *when* and *why* biographies are written are crucial in the case of our consideration of Atiśa, how his image was constructed, and how he was subsequently perceived by later Tibetan figures.

While we may encounter similar questions in relation to any historical writing, traditional Buddhist "histories" have little to do with what modern Western readers would consider history. The Tibetan term frequently translated as "history," in fact—*chos 'byung*—is literally a source, or origin (*'byung ba*), of the doctrine (chos); thus a *doctrinal* history. As a specifically religious, or doctrinal, history, its authors are presumably less interested in precisely reporting dates, places, and events than in showing ways in which the protagonists express or embody Buddhist teachings and values. These frequently involve magical or supernatural elements and the display of siddhis, such as flying, clairvoyance, and the discovery of hidden treasures and divinely revealed texts. This is not to say that traditional Buddhist historians have no interest in historical accuracy at all, but such works freely blend together objectively verifiable "facts" with mythological, supernatural, and magical elements. As Roesler explains about historical and biographical writing within the context of Asian Buddhist literature,

> both genres share the same complex status with regard to the "truth" contained therein, because just as life stories are narrations with multiple purposes and various kinds of truth, so is history, even if authors of both genres claim to render the events as they have happened. History and biography are equally situated in between the factual and the fictional; they are ways of explaining what has happened, and why, and may contain a truth or a moral without exactly mapping the events that have occurred. With regard to literary genre, we should moreover keep in mind that Asian literatures do not necessarily observe a distinction between works on science or history that are written in a sober prose, as opposed to works of fiction that may be written in a poetical style.[451]

[451] Covill, Roesler, Shaw, eds., *Lives Lived and Lives Imagined*, 5–6.

Our aim in this chapter, then, is not the identification of an objective truth about Atiśa or the Kadam tradition, but to gain a clearer understanding of the factors that shaped the construction of specific characterizations of Atiśa—as a reformer, a promoter of orthodoxy, a moral purist—and that excluded other elements of his story that may have been seen as inconvenient to the promotion of certain institutional or sectarian aims.

Genres of Tibetan Buddhist Biography

While the subject of Tibetan biographical writing, not to mention historical writing, is far too vast to discuss in detail here, we can briefly consider some of the main forms of it.[452] Doctrinal histories, such as the *Blue Annals* by Gö Lotsāwa Shönu Pal ('Gos lo tsa ba gzhon nu dpal; 1392–1481) and *History of the Doctrine in India* (*Rgya gar chos 'byung*) by Tāranātha (1575–1634), are wide-ranging in their scope, combining historical analysis, genealogies of Buddhist schools and teaching lineages, and biographical information on major Buddhist figures. A Buddhist reader of such texts, moreover, would certainly expect more than just a systematic recounting of historical details about their subjects' lives. As in the case of the *jātaka* tales or other accounts of the Buddha's life story, they would expect to find inspiration that allowed them to emulate the great Buddhist masters of the past. Such works are also often sources for biographical information that situates their authors within the broader framework of a transmission lineage (*brgyud pa*) of awakened beings. In all these genres, we find a fluid blend of the categories of history, myth, and doctrine.

*Namthar*s (*rnam thar*), or "liberation stories," exclusively deal with biographical or

[452] An excellent, wide-ranging resource on this field is Dan Martin's *Tibetan Histories*. Other briefer resources include James Robinson's "The Lives of Indian Buddhist Saints" (in Cabezón and Jackson, eds., *Tibetan Literature*) and Ulrike Roesler's introduction to *Lives Lived, Lives Imagined*.

hagiographical material.[453] These, along with many briefer praises of Buddhist teachers (*stotra*; *bstod pa*), are the most overtly religious and soteriological forms of biographical writing. The *namthar* is not simply a literary genre but a hagiographical account—a writing (*graphia*) about a saint or holy being (*hagios*) that inspires faith in Buddhists by modeling the Buddhist ideal of liberation[454]. *Namthar*s can be read on a number of levels: as history, as biography, as myth, and as doctrinal teaching. Ostensibly historical data, such as significant dates, family information, authorship of texts, and religious activities, frequently intermingle with highly idealized descriptions of saints' meditative achievements, supernatural powers, and direct interactions with buddhas, deities, ḍākinīs, and other non-human entities. Like hagiographies of saints in other religious traditions, *namthar*s typically include a number of standard elements: the start of the figure's life in a quasi-mythical context or timeframe, an account of the miraculous events accompanying their birth, and signs of precociousness and even predestination for spiritual greatness. These are frequently followed by detailed descriptions of their religious training and education, meditative experiences, meetings with venerable teachers, personal "mystical" experiences, teaching career and students, good works for humankind, and the events surrounding their death.[455] The principal aim of hagiography is not historical veracity, but the promotion of an idealized view of a holy figure in order to emphasize their spiritual qualities and inspire faith in the followers of the tradition.

Magic and Mantra: Biographies of the Mahāsiddhas

[453] See Covill, Roesler, Shaw, eds., *Lives Lived and Lives Imagined*, 5–6.
[454] Gyatso, *Apparitions of the Self*, 6n8.
[455] See Janice Willis, "The Life of skyong-ru sprul-sku: An Example of Contemporary Tibetan Hagiography," 24.

While supernatural, miraculous elements can be found throughout the vast range of Buddhist biographical literature, there are clear differences in terms of the extent to which such aspects are emphasized. I propose a broad (and tentative) division of Buddhist biographies into two main categories, corresponding to their emphasis on Vajrayāna or Sūtrayāna practices. In the first are those in which the primary emphasis of the narrative is on the main figure's tantric attainments (*siddhi*; *dngos grub*), and in the second are those where the subject is portrayed in terms of exoteric doctrines and practices and their cultivation of moral virtues, such as ethical discipline, humility, and compassion. Those in the first category are predominantly laypeople, highlighting the frequent association of tantric traditions with lay practitioners, while those in the second are often monks (or, less frequently, nuns). These categories are by no means exclusive of each other, as we will see, but they are a convenient way for us to think of the characteristics of these texts.

The first category includes the stories of the Indian mahāsiddhas, such as Saraha, Kāṇha, Tilopa, and Nāropa. These are among the best-known and most beloved hagiographies in South Asian Buddhist literature. The principal source for the siddha hagiographies is the twelfth-century *Histories of the Eighty-Four Siddhas* (**Caturaśītisiddhapravṛtti*), by *Abhayadattaśrī.[456] As with many hagiographies, this text may have post-dated the "actual" siddhas by as much as two centuries. The *Caturaśītisiddhapravṛtti* lists eighty-four mahāsiddhas, but other texts give different enumerations. The life stories of the mahāsiddhas, as proposed by Richard Robinson, may be read in three "ascending and mutually enriching ways": as history, as hagiography, and as myth.[457] The hagiographical and mythical dimensions are easy to identify, with the siddhas

[456] See discussion of the mahāsiddhas in chapter 4.
[457] Robinson, "The Lives of Indian Buddhist Saints: Biography, Hagiography and Myth," in *Tibetan Literature,*

depicted frequently as wild, unconventional practitioners of the most esoteric, transgressive tantric traditions who openly display siddhis that arise from their mastery of tantric practices or their understanding of emptiness, or the innate (*sahaja*; *lhan skyes*). Among the many stories recounting the mahāsiddhas' miraculous feats are those of Virūpa resurrecting pigeons and stopping the sun with a dagger in order to keep drinking beer; Nāgārjuna (the later, tantric alchemist Nāgārjuna) fending off the attacks of female demons; and Saraha drinking molten copper and plunging his hand into boiling oil, without suffering any injury, to prove his purity and yogic attainments to a crowd of nonbelievers.[458] In these stories, the boundary between myth and biography is virtually non-existent. It seems unlikely that traditional readers would read such works for their historical content in the same way that a modern reader would read them. The primary objective would be to locate their subjects within the broader context of Buddhist—especially Vajrayāna—lineages. The stories of the mahāsiddhas may thus be read as tales of edification, as parables intended to inspire faith in the dharma.

While the hagiographical and mythical dimensions of these stories are evident, it is a more complicated matter to extract historical truths from such stories, which revel in their protagonists' abilities to shirk conventional laws of time, space, and physics. Keith Dowman, referring to Tibetan accounts of the mahāsiddhas, aptly sums up the purpose of such seemingly fanciful biographical writings:

> All these Tibetan works suffer from the same faults—or virtues. The religious didactic imperative intrudes everywhere, as it does at every level of Tibetan culture, and wherever historical fact existed invariably it has been subjected to a philosophical or moral argument. Thus historical anecdote has become legend, and

61.

[458] Robinson, "Lives," 61; Dowman, *Masters of mahāmudrā*, 46, 67–8, 114.

> history a means to a soteriological end. When considering lineal history, from the Guru's point of view, time is an illusion and human progress a delusion; personality is the detritus of existence and an anonymous embodiment of Buddha nature[,] the reality upon which to focus and which to underscore. Disdain for history is reflected in the lineages' failure to record an exact record of lineal succession, despite the respect for their founders who are worshiped as Buddhas.[459]

Making a similar point about the mahāsiddhas, Roger Jackson writes,

> despite their importance and influence, the siddhas… remain profoundly elusive, especially to the historian. We don't know exactly who they were, what religious allegiance they claimed, where or when—or even if—they lived, or how many of the works attributed to them really are theirs.[460]

Given this elusiveness, we may ask, as Jackson suggests, if the siddhas were "literary inventions, no more reliably 'historical' than stock characters in epics and folktales the world around."[461]

Although the figures we encounter in the *Caturaśītisiddhapravṛtti* are exclusively of Indic origin, the tradition of the mahāsiddhas was a major influence on the Tibetan Vajrayāna and mahāmudrā traditions. A robust Tibetan tradition of hagiographic literature developed that in many ways drew on the paradigm of the stories of the eighty-four siddhas. Some of the best-known namthars are those of Marpa Chökyi Lodrö (Mar pa Chos kyi blo gros; 1012–97), his disciple Milarepa (Mi la ras pa; 1028/40–1111/23), Drukpa Kunleg (Brug pa kun legs; 1455–1529), and Tsang Nyön Heruka, the "Madman of Tsang" (Gtsang smyon He ru ka; 1452–1507). Like their Indic counterparts, these highly idealized accounts emphasize their subjects' mastery of the Vajrayāna traditions and their attainment of siddhis. An indispensable trope here is also that of the enlightened madman, whose bizarre behavior and

[459] Dowman, *Masters*, 387.
[460] According to Jackson, Saraha, along with other major siddhas such as Kāṇha and Tilopa, "probably lived in northern India sometime around 1000 C.E." Jackson, *Tantric Treasures*, 4.
[461] Jackson, *Tantric Treasures*, 6.

appearance is an indication of his transcendence of dualities, of worldly conventions, of ordinary moral strictures. Perhaps the most famous namthar in Tibetan literature is the *Life Story of Milarepa* (*Mi la ras pa'i rnam thar*), the story of Milarepa, the great yogi-saint who was one of the principal figures of the Kagyü school.[462] Milarepa's namthar, composed by Tsangnyön Heruka (himself renowned as a highly attained "mad" yogin), is mythologized in terms of its structure and contents, serving as an allegory of moral and spiritual teaching. Milarepa as the quintessential exemplar of the Buddhist sinner-turned-saint, whose journey takes him from committing mass murder in his youth to attaining enlightenment by following his teacher, Marpa.

These stories serve as archetypal models illustrating the dedication required for one wishing to master the Vajrayāna teachings. Like the Indian stories of the mahāsiddhas, these Tibetan namthars are apparently less concerned with historical "accuracy" than with recounting the archetypal spiritual journeys of their heroes: their triumph over adversities, their rigorous (often dangerous) training in the teachings, their accomplishment of siddhis, and ultimately, their attainment of full awakening.

The Biographical Tradition of Atiśa: Origins and Overview

In stark contrast to the fantastical, magical stories of the mahāsiddhas and their tantric siddhis, biographies of Atiśa and later Kadam masters seem decidedly tame, reflecting the Kadampa emphasis on the foundational practices and ethics of the Sūtrayāna path. The Kadampas, after all, modeled themselves on the austere example of Atiśa, the paradigmatic Mahāyāna bhikṣu whose declared purpose in Tibet was to purge the country of moral

[462] See Quintman, trans., *The Life of Milarepa*.

degeneration and mistaken interpretations of tantric doctrines.

This is not to suggest that esoteric elements are wholly absent from accounts of the lives of Atiśa or other Kadampa masters. Tantric themes, in fact, figure prominently in Atiśa's biographies. As we have seen, he is reported to have practiced the Mantrayāna from an early age, receiving initiation from great mahāsiddhas such as Rāhulagupta, Jetāri, Nāropa, and others, and to have experienced visions of ḍākinīs and deities such as Tārā and Hevajra.[463] In addition, one of the most famous episodes associated with Atiśa's life story is his discovery in 1048 of the *Pillar Testament* (*Bka' chems ka khol ma*), a magical text concealed inside a pillar of the Jokhang temple in Lhasa. The *Pillar Testament* contains the story of the founding of the Jokhang by the seventh-century king Songtsen Gampo (Srong btsan sgam po; r. 618–641).[464] Atiśa's discovery of this text is seen as proof of his extraordinary powers, specifically his ability to find hidden spiritual treasures, or *terma* (*gter ma*)—an ability typically associated with the treasure-revealers (*gter ston*) of the Nyingma schools.

The *Book of Kadam*, which we will discuss shortly, had similarly miraculous origins. It originally appeared as a "magical book" (*'phrul pa'i glegs bam*), much like a *terma*, only later being recorded as a written text, although accounts vary as to when it was actually written down.[465] On the status of the *Book of Kadam*, Roesler writes, "while of course not being a *gter ma* proper, which would require a prescribed process of hiding and

[463] See Chattopadhyaya, *Atiśa and Tibet*, 67 and Tsongkhapa, *Great Treatise* (Vol. 1), 40, 42.
[464] According to Roesler, early biographies describe how a beggar woman indicated to Atiśa a place inside the Jokhang temple, where he would find the text, while later biographies state that he retrieved it from a pillar. See Roesler, "Kadampa," 7, 14, and 14n25; Roesler, "Atiśa and the Kadampa Masters," 1148; and Martin, *Tibetan Histories*, 24, no. 4.
[465] As Roesler notes, "While this 'magical book' seems like an inspirational, nonmaterial object, one passage mentions a concrete number of pages, which makes 'the book' oscillate between a material and an immaterial object." Roesler, "The Kadampa," 14.

rediscovering the text, the *'phrul pa'i glegs bam* is certainly conceived as a book with special supernatural properties, and the process of its transmission is described with revelatory overtones."[466] Accounts of such events are clearly meant to emphasize Atiśa's special qualities, a vision that is entirely consistent with traditional Buddhist biographical literature. From such accounts, the reader understands that Atiśa, like the mahāsiddhas, was no ordinary mortal; that despite his appearance as an ordinary monk, he too possessed the *siddhi*s of great adepts such as Saraha, Nāropa, and Milarepa.

However, while accounts of Atiśa's life include elements that would seem fantastical to most modern readers, such as the discovery of the pillar text, for the most part they convey the image of a far more conventional figure than any of the Indian siddhas or Tibetan yogis like Milarepa. Atiśa was closely associated with the great Buddhist institutions; he was an integral part of the monastic "establishment," holding a number of prominent posts at India's greatest monastic universities. He is known for his rigorous observance of the vinaya, emphasis on Sūtrayāna practices, compassion, humility, and outward austerity. The mahāsiddhas and other tantric figures, on the other hand, are regarded as peripheral to the institutional structures of Buddhism, as peripatetic (mostly) laypeople who rejected the regulated confines of Buddhist monastic life, preferring instead to display the outward signs of tantric yogins. When we view Atiśa's story in contrast to the siddha biographies, it is worth asking why a particular type of story was told about him, and what the factors were in choosing to emphasize that story.

Of course, we should not take Tibetan biographical representations of Atiśa entirely at face value. Buddhist hagiographies, as we have seen, function on a number of levels. One

[466] Roesler, "The Kadampa," 14.

of their primary aims is to instill faith towards the exalted exemplars of the Buddhist teachings. These texts, however, also serve purposes that are of a more mundane nature. In addition to recounting the great deeds and qualities of figures like Atiśa, *namthar*s serve ideological purposes, constructing images that serve broader institutional and sectarian goals. They are, in short, deeply intertwined with questions of religious legitimacy, power, and authority. The mythification, even deification, of such figures is inextricably linked to efforts to garner support for ideals that have little to do with soteriological aims. Judging solely by the elements of Atiśa's biography that are historically verifiable—his official positions, his studies, travels, and writings, and the accounts of his contemporaries—he was undoubtedly a remarkable figure who was one of the most admired exponents of Buddhism in the tenth to eleventh centuries. There is thus an abundance of biographical literature on him, which I will only briefly summarize.

Biographical works on Atiśa range from brief eulogies (*stotra*; *bstod pa*) and prayers (*adhyeṣaṇa*; *gsol 'debs*) to more extensive prose liberation stories (*rnam thar*). The earliest sources of the biographical tradition of Atiśa can be traced to Nagtsho Tshultrim Gyelwa (Nag tsho tshul khrims rgyal ba; 1011–64), the translator who was the main person responsible for bringing Atiśa from Vikramaśīla to Tibet and who studied with Atiśa for at least sixteen years.[467] After Atiśa's death, Rongpa Lagsorpa (Rong pa lag sor pa; 1044?–d.u.), who had not met him directly, sought to clarify points about Atiśa's life and teachings from several of Atiśa's disciples. He found that their accounts differed on key points.[468] To rectify

[467] According to traditional accounts, Nag tsho studied with Atiśa for nineteen years. However, this figure is not possible if Nag tsho arrived at Vikramaśīla in 1038 and Atiśa died in 1054, as is generally accepted. See Thinlay Gyatso, "Naktso Lotsāwa Tsultrim Gyelwa," *Treasury of Lives*, accessed April 05, 2023, http://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Naktso-Lotsawa-Tsultrim-Gyelwa/5801.
[468] Eimer, "The Development of the Biographical Tradition Concerning Atiśa," 42–43; also Eimer, *Testimonia for the* Bstod-pa brgyad-cu-pa, 8–9.

these differences, he sought out Nagtsho, who composed the *Eighty Verses of Praise* (*Bstod pa brgyad cu pa*) in response to Rongpa's request. Nagtsho is believed to have composed the *Eighty Verses* shortly after Atiśa's death, in 1054 or 1055, writing the verses on the back of a scroll depicting Atiśa and the main events of his life.[469] Rongpa passed these teachings on to four of his disciples: Geshé Zulphuwa Cha Dulwa Dzinpa (Dge bshes zul phu ba bya 'dul ba 'dzin pa, 1091–1166 or 1100–1174), Rog Ching Phuwa (Rog mching phu ba; d.u.), Namparwa (Gnam par ba; d.u.), and Geshé Zhulenpa (Dge bshes zhu len pa; d.u.). Each of these authors also composed texts on the stages of the doctrine (*tenrim*; *bstan rim*), and Geshé Zulphuwa gathered the notes of the other three disciples and composed the first extensive prose biography of Atiśa, the *Extensive Life Story* (*Rnam thar rgyas pa*),[470] which was likely composed sometime after 1150.[471] The *Extensive Life Story* and the *Widely Renowned Life Story* (*Rnam thar yongs grags*),[472] by Chim Namkha Drak[473] (Mchims nam mkha' grags; 1210–1285/1289), are the most extensive *namthar*s of Atiśa available. The *Widely Renowned Life Story* is also included in the *Book of Kadam,* which includes other works related to Atiśa's biography.[474] These include one attributed to Atiśa himself (*The Story of Atiśa's Voyage to Sumatra*) and two to Dromtönpa (*How Atiśa Relinquished his Kingdom and Sought Liberation* and *Biography and Itinerary of Master Atiśa*).[475] Another

[469] Eimer, "The Development of the Biographical Tradition Concerning Atiśa," 46.
[470] Also known as *Jo bo rje dpal ldan mar me mdzad ye shes kyi rnam thar rgyas pa*.
[471] Eimer, *Testimonia for the* Bstod pa brgyad cu pa, 9–10; also Eimer, "Development of the Biographical Tradition Concerning Atiśa," 43.
[472] *Jo bo rin po che rje dpal ldan a ti sha'i rnam thar rgyas pa yongs grags*.
[473] See Eimer, *Testimonia*, 10.
[474] For a partial translation, of the *Book of Kadam*, see Jinpa, trans., *The Book of Kadam*. See also Vetturini, *The bKa' gdams pa School of Tibetan Buddhism* and Amy Sims Miller, *Jeweled Dialogues: The Role of The Book in the Formation of the Kadam Tradition within Tibet*.
[475] See Jinpa (trans.), *Book of Kadam,* 21. Eimer notes that the *Biography and Itinerary* could not have been composed by Drom, since it refers to events that took place after his death. Eimer, "Development of the Biographical Tradition Concerning Atiśa," 41–42.

famous eulogy to Atiśa, the *Thirty Verses of Praise* (*Bstod pa sum bcu pa*), has traditionally been attributed to Dromtönpa, but this is considered by most scholars to be spurious.[476] Helmut Eimer also mentions another eulogy by Paṇdit Sai Nyingpo (Sa'i snying po), who he simply identifies as "an Indian paṇdit in the retinue of Atiśa."[477]

Many other texts contain either complete biographies of Atiśa or accounts of selected events in his life. Tsongkhapa's *Lamrim Chenmo*, which begins with a section on Atiśa, mainly cites Nagtsho's *Eighty Verses*. Tsongkhapa here shows his deep reverence for Atiśa, crediting him as the "author of the teaching," that is, the source of the teachings on the gradual path, the *lamrim*.[478] The *Auspicious Wish-Fulfilling Tree* (*Dpag bsam ljon bzang*), by the eighteenth-century historian Sumpa Khenpo Yeshé Peljor (Sum pa mkhan po ye shes dpal 'byor; 1704–88), includes a brief biographical section on Atiśa, which the author mainly based on Nagtsho's *Eighty Verses* and Drolungpa's (Gro lung pa; eleventh–twelfth c.) *Thirty Verses of Praise* (*Bstod pa sum cu pa*).[479] Sumpa Khenpo reports that Tsongkhapa's account in the *Lamrim Chenmo* was "very good."[480]

In addition to biographies of Atiśa, there are many histories of the Kadam order and its main figures, especially Dromtönpa, Atiśa's principal disciple. The earliest known of these is the *Golden Rosary of the Narthang Tradition* (*Snar thang gser phreng*), also by Chim Namkha Drak.[481] A number of Kadampa histories (*bka' gdams chos 'byung*) emerged in the late fifteenth century, a period in which the Gelukpas—the self-proclaimed heirs of the Kadam tradition—were competing with other schools for influence. These include Kadam

[476] See Roesler, "The Kadampa," 4.
[477] Eimer, "The Development of the Biographical Tradition Concerning Atiśa," 46n66.
[478] Tsongkhapa, *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path*, vol. 1, 35–43.
[479] Trans. in Chattopadhyaya, *Atīśa and Tibet*, 377–84.
[480] Chattopadhyaya, *Atīśa and Tibet*, 384.
[481] Roesler, "The Kadampa," 5.

histories by Yeshé Tsemo (Ye shes rtse mo) in 1484, Sonam Lha'i Wangpo (Bsod nams lha'i dbang po) in 1484, Lechen Kunga Gyaltsen (Las chen Kun dga' rgyal mtshan) in 1494, and Panchen Sonam Dragpa (Paṇ chen Bsod nams grags pa) in 1529.[482] *The Crystal Mirror of Philosophical Systems* (*Grub mtha' shel gyi me long*), by the third Tukwan Lobzang Chokyi Nyima (Thu'u bkwan blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma; 1737–1802), a renowned Geluk scholar and historian, is a general exposition of Buddhist and non-Buddhist doctrinal systems (*siddhānta*; *grub mtha'*) that also includes a succinct but clear summary of the main points concerning the Kadam tradition.[483]

Atiśa as Reformer and Innovator

Although biographical accounts of Atiśa vary in their emphasis, they are aligned in depicting him as an extraordinarily dedicated and charismatic scholar-practitioner, a Buddhist *bhikṣu* par excellence who dedicated his life from a young age to the practice of dharma and who embodied the Mahāyāna ideal of the bodhisattva. A common view in these accounts is that his teachings brought about an epochal shift in the trajectory of Buddhism in Tibet, introducing (or rather re-introducing) doctrines and practices that had degenerated during the age of degeneration. These narratives emphasize Atiśa's role as a doctrinally conservative figure who advocated a return to Buddhism's moral and doctrinal foundations. This was also, in a sense, both an innovative position and a reformist one. As we have seen, Atiśa's presentation of the three yānas as free of contradiction was not the result of entirely new or unique insights. Indeed, he drew on a vibrant intellectual tradition that had already been thriving in Indian tantric scholarship, especially at Vikramaśīla. Tibetan scholars continued

[482] See Roesler, "The Kadampa," 5–6.
[483] See Sopa and Jackson, *The Crystal Mirror of Philosophical Systems*, 98–116. Also Chattopadhyaya, *Atīśa and Tibet*, 385–96.

to debate the compatibility of the three *yāna*s, and questions regarding the interpretation and practice of antinomian Vajrayāna practices, especially for monastics, remained (and remain still) highly contentious.

The view of Atiśa as an orthodox reformer is perhaps most clearly illustrated by an account in the *Widely Renowned Life Story,* by Chim Namkha Drak, which famously relates an exchange between Atiśa and Jangchub Ö, the Gugé ruler who facilitated Atiśa's voyage to Tibet. Jangchub Ö is reported to have said, "instead of some so-called profound or amazing teachings, pray sustain us in the land of Tibet with the teaching of karma and its effects," to which Atiśa responded, "the law of karma and its effects alone is the most profound teaching."[484] The same text reports that Atiśa was given the epithet of the "teacher of karma and its effects" (*las rgyu 'bras kyi ston pa*), in addition to the "teacher of the awakening mind (*bodhicitta*)."[485] The *Blue Annals* relates that Atiśa responded to this approvingly: "This mere name was of benefit."[486] Atiśa's emphasis of the teachings on karma can be seen as an attempt to dissuade Tibetans from prematurely engaging in the "so-called profound or amazing teachings"—presumably antinomian Vajrayāna doctrines—and towards building the foundations for such practices. To this end, strict observation of the doctrine of *karma* was considered the indispensable basis for ethical practices, such as following the vinaya and maintaining *pratimokṣa* vows. Without such a basis, one could not be considered a qualified vessel for tantric practice.

Atiśa's reputation as the "great reformer," of course, relied on the widely accepted narrative that in the period prior to his arrival in Tibet, Buddhist traditions had degenerated

[484] Thupten Jinpa, *The Book of Kadam*, 3. Original quote from *Universally Known Life Story* (*Rnam thar yongs grags*), Chim Namkha Drak, 135.
[485] Jinpa, *Book of Kadam*, 3. *Rnam thar yongs grags*, 136.
[486] Gzhon-nu-dpal (trans. Roerich), *Blue Annals*, 248–9.

so badly that drastic measures were required to restore them to their former glory. This narrative was essential to Tsongkhapa's Geluk order, some four centuries later. In the opening section of his *Great [Treatise on the] Stages of the Path* (*Lam Rim Chen Mo*), Tsongkhapa describes the circumstances leading up to Atiśa's arrival in Tibet, following his invitation by Jangchub Ö:

> When they welcomed him there [in Ngari; *Mnga ris*], his hosts prayed that he might purify the Buddhist teaching. Based on this prayer, he furthered the teaching through activities such as composing the *Lamp for the Path to Awakening* [*Bodhipathapradīpa*; *Byang chub lam gyi sgron ma*], a text that brings together the stages of practice, condensing all the key points of the sūtra and mantra vehicles. Moreover, for three years at Nga-ri, nine years at Nye-tang (sNye-thang), and five years at other places in Ü (dBus) and Tsang (gTsang), he taught all the instructions for the texts of the sūtra and mantra vehicles to fortunate students. The result was that he reestablished the practices of the Buddhist system that had disappeared; he reinvigorated those that remained only slightly; and he removed corruption based on misconceptions. Thus, he made the precious teachings free of defilement.[487]

Clearly, Tsongkhapa seeks to highlight Atiśa's capacity to "bring together the stages of practice," and to "condens[e] all the key points of the sūtra and mantra vehicles." However, the principal reason for which Tsongkhapa held Atiśa in such high regard seems not to have been his achievements (or writings) in the field of Vajrayāna, but because of his ability to "reestablish" Buddhist practices that had disappeared, to "reinvigorate those that remained only slightly," and to "remove corruption based on misconceptions." In this characterization, Atiśa's views on tantra are secondary to his ability to revive emphasis on foundational sūtra practices, such as teachings on karma and ethics. In fact, Atiśa is better known for his apparent reticence to teach on topics related to yoganiruttaratantra or yoginītantra doctrines than for his works written specifically about them.

[487] Tsongkhapa, *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, vol. 1, 41.

Tsongkhapa certainly revered Atiśa for his expertise in the entire range of Buddhist doctrines, both exoteric and esoteric. His *Great Treatise* liberally quotes from Nagtsho's *Eighty Verses*, which proclaim Atiśa's mastery of the generation and completion stages of yoganiruttaratantra[488] and refer to his having visions and empowerments from tantric deities, including Hevajra, Trisamayavyūharāja, Avalokiteśvara, and Tārā.[489] It is also true that the *Great Treatise* is exclusively dedicated to the *lamrim*, and thus makes no pretense of teaching Mantrayāna topics. However, the tantric lineages with which Atiśa was most widely associated were kriyātantra deities, such as Avalokiteśvara and Tārā, despite his having composed, as we have seen, numerous works on yoganiruttaratantra deities, such as Cakrasaṃvara or Guhyasamāja, as well as on mahāmudrā. Moreover, the fact that *lamrim* works such as *Lamp for the Path* occupied such a central role in the Geluk tradition, while Geluk commentaries on Atiśa's yoganiruttaratantra and mahāmudrā writings were virtually non-existent, suggests that there was a process of selection (and exclusion) that bolstered the image of Atiśa as a reformist champion of Buddhist orthodoxy. Recent scholarship has also shown that Atiśa's presentation of emptiness was often substantially different from the later views of Tsongkhapa and his Geluk followers.[490]

Another prominent Geluk figure promoting the view of Atiśa as a moral reformer was the aforementioned Tukwan Lobzang Chokyi Nyima, author or *Crystal Mirror of Philosophical Systems*. Once again invoking the familiar trope of Tibet as a land overcome by debauchery during the "dark age," Tukwan describes that period as one in which

> some who admired the vinaya deprecated mantra, while others who admired mantra deprecated the vinaya, so the teaching became polarized. Most people merely

[488] Tsongkhapa, *Great Treatise*, vol. 1, 39.
[489] Tsongkhapa, *Great Treatise*, vol. 1, 42
[490] See, for example, Apple's *Atiśa's Open Basket of Jewels*.

> bickered about philosophical systems… they didn't know how to put the complete teaching of the Muni into practice. Even partial understanding became rare.[491]

In Tukwan's reckoning, notorious figures such as the "Red Preceptor" and the "Blue-Cloaked Sage" were responsible for

> spread[ing] such perverted versions of Dharma as uniting and freeing (*sbyor sgrol brtul zhugs*): sex with women was called "uniting," (*sbyor*) and killing sentient beings such as one's enemies was called "freeing" (*sgrol*). They also spread many types of crude behavior that were designated as "mantra."[492]

The result, in his words, was that few adhered to "pure view and conduct," while many pursued "perverted Dharma conduct." Quoting Tsongkhapa's *Great Treatise*, Tukwan distills earlier biographical sources (especially Nagtsho's *Eighty Verses*) in another clear example of the Geluk depiction of Atiśa as a reformer.

It is impossible to recover any single, "true" Atiśa from among the many narratives that were woven around his life story following his death. We can, however, gain a more nuanced understanding of him following two principal routes: first, by examining facets of his work that have previously been ignored or marginalized, as we have done in the previous chapter; second, by considering the process through which he was effectively beatified posthumously, paying particular attention to the construction and concretization of the image of him as a "reformer" in later Tibetan traditions. Evidence that we will consider within the biographical tradition strongly suggests that Atiśa's views on certain points, especially antinomian tantric traditions, adapted and evolved over time, possibly in order to suit shifting audiences and contexts. From an emic perspective, this would simply confirm Atiśa's use of skillful means (*upāya kauśalya*) to adapt his teachings to varied audiences. However, we

[491] Thuken Losang Chokyi Nyima, Sopa and Jackson, trans., *The Crystal Mirror of Philosophical Systems*, 99.
[492] Thuken, *Crystal Mirror*, 99–100.

must also consider the possibility—indeed, the likelihood—that Atiśa's decisions in what to teach and what to exclude were not always entirely up to him.[493] As we have already seen, the near omission of controversial tantric doctrines from his published works may have been influenced not just by his concern with the spiritual well-being of his audiences, but by political and economic factors. After all, the person requesting him to clarify the intent of the Buddhist teachings was Jangchub Ö: a powerful and wealthy patron whose wishes would have been hard to refuse. Moreover, as we will see, Atiśa's closest disciple, Dromtönpa, is reported to have played a significant role in curtailing his teachings on the mother tantras and tantric dohās. Taken together, we will see how these factors helped to shape later perceptions of him as a "reformer," a label that we cannot be sure Atiśa himself would have embraced.

The *Book of Kadam* and the Formation of Kadam Identity

Of the biographical works mentioned above, one of the most important in terms of establishing the identity of the Kadam order and the primacy of both Atiśa, who inspired it, and Dromtönpa, who effectively founded it, is the *Book of Kadam*.[494] The *Book of Kadam*, a disparate collection of biographical, doctrinal, and legendary sources, is significant for our understanding of Atiśa and the Kadam tradition for a number of reasons. First, it serves as a compendium of the principal doctrines emphasized by the Kadampas, including advice on

[493] When I asked a Tibetan geshe with whom I was translating some of Atiśa's tantric writings whether he thought Atiśa might have changed his views on Vajrayāna doctrines over time, he seemed surprised by the question. He immediately and firmly responded that Atiśa's views had surely not changed. For a follower of Atiśa accustomed to considering him from a traditional perspective—that is, as a bodhisattva or even a buddha—such a question might seem unthinkable. However, it would be entirely possible to think that while Atiśa's *views* had not changed, his way of teaching them did, for different audiences in different contexts. Indeed, this might well be seen as confirmation of his mastery of skillful means.

[494] This is partially translated in Jinpa, trans., *The Book of Kadam*. See also Vetturini, *The bKa' gdams pa School of Tibetan Buddhism* and Amy Sims Miller, *Jeweled Dialogues: The Role of The Book in the Formation of the Kadam Tradition within Tibet*.

how to integrate exoteric and esoteric Mahāyāna practices. Second, it confirms Atiśa's role as the central spiritual figure of the Kadam tradition. Third, it establishes Dromtönpa as Atiśa's main heir and the de facto founder of the Kadam tradition, as well as enshrining his status as an emanation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara.

The third of these reasons is perhaps the most interesting in terms of the construction of a specific Kadam identity after Atiśa's passing, with Dromtönpa assuming the mantle as the "father" of the Kadam tradition. The *Book of Kadam* promotes the view of Dromtönpa as a doctrinally orthodox reformer who generally emulates Atiśa's role as a model of Buddhist ethics and strict adherence to the vinaya. As Roesler writes, "The overall agenda of the *Bka' gdams glegs bam* is the promotion of 'Brom ston pa, who is portrayed as a manifestation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and reincarnation of King Srong btsan sgam po (seventh century), who honed and demonstrated his bodhisattva qualities over many previous lifetimes."[495] Indeed, it can be said that in large part, the *Book of Kadam* served to legitimate and canonize not only the doctrines of the Kadam tradition, but the specific teaching lineage of Dromtönpa.[496] The *Book of Kadam* not only aims to establish the Kadampa tradition as an authentic lineage deriving from an enlightened source, but it explicitly links Dromtönpa (and Atiśa) to Tibet's mythic royal past, thus imbuing them with a sense of both divine and worldly authority. The figure of Avalokiteśvara plays a major role in the *Book of Kadam* and in the Kadam tradition as a whole: Atiśa played a major role in the promotion of texts and

[495] Roesler, "The Kadampa," 5.
[496] As Franz-Karl Ehrhard puts it, "one has the impression that this work, said to have been set down by its author in writing despite the reservations of 'Brom-ston Rgyal-ba'i 'byung-gnas, takes on, in the long narratives of the early and later transmission, the function of a sacred authorization of this specific teaching lineage. It seems that up to the end of the 13th century this lineage had spread only among a limited group of persons: for the most part, the Bka'-gdams-pa monastery of Stabs ka and members of the 'Bram family, the birthplace of 'Brom-ston Rgyal-ba'i 'byung-gnas being a favourite spot for spiritual practices in the initial phase." Ehrhard, "Transmission of the *Thig-le Bcu-drug* and the *Bka' Gdams Glegs Bam*," 44.

practices related to Avalokiteśvara in Tibet, and Dromtönpa, like earlier Tibetan kings and the later Dalai Lamas, was identified as an emanation of Avalokiteśvara.[497]

The textual history of the *Book of Kadam*, as with any premodern Tibetan religious text, is difficult to pin down precisely, as it is steeped in esoteric lore. It appears that the book was originally passed down in a highly restricted manner, reserved only for select disciples. One of the main sources of information on the transmission of the book is the *History of the Book* (*Glegs bam gyi chos 'byung*) by Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen (Mkhan chen Nyi ma rgyal mtshan; 1225–1305), the ninth abbot of Narthang (Snar thang) monastery, in Tsang.[498] A colophon to the Father Teaching, the first section of the book, reports that the "precious book" (*glegs bam rin po che*) originated when Atiśa's student Ngok Lekpai Sherap (Rngog legs pa'i shes rab; 1059–1109) requested Atiśa and Dromtönpa to engage in a series of dialogues based on Atiśa's *Bodhisattva's Jewel Garland* (*Bodhisattvamaṇyāvalī*; *Byang chub sems dpa' nor bu'i phreng ba*).[499] Ngok is then reported to have set these teachings down in the form of a "book" (*glegs bam*), and to have transmitted them to Ngari Sherab Gyaltsen (Mnga' ris pa shes rab rgyal mtshan, eleventh century) as a "miraculously manifested book" (*sprul pa'i glegs bam*).[500] According to tradition, this was then passed down orally, in a

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[497] Atiśa transmitted three major systems of instruction (*khrid*) on Avalokiteśvara in Tibet: the *Bka' gdams lha bzhi'i spyan ras gzigs* (*Avalokiteśvara in the* [*Tradition of the*] *Kadam Four Deities*), *Skyer sgang lugs kyi spyan ras gzigs* (*Avalokiteśvara in the Kyergang Tradition*), and *Dpal mo lugs kyi spyan ras gzigs* (*Avalokiteśvara in the Tradition of* [*Gelongma*] *Palmo*). See Kapstein, *Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism*, 148, n53. He also composed a sādhana for Jangchub Ö with a combined form of Avalokiteśvara and Guhyasamāja. See Las chen, *Bka' gdams chos 'byung*, 68b.

[498] See Ehrhard, "Transmission," 39ff.

[499] See Jinpa, trans., *Book of Kadam*, 61–64. Tibetan: Toh 3951, dbu ma *khi*. Interestingly, the sixteenth-century Tibetan historian Tsuglag Trengwa (Gtsug lag phreng ba; 1504–1566) claimed that the *Byang chub sems dpa' nor bu'i phreng ba* was "a condensed version of the words of Jo-bo [Atiśa] by 'Brom[-ston Rgyal ba'i 'byung gnas']," and that it was similar to an epistle to King Neyapāla that Atiśa had written in 1040. Tsuglag Trengwa surmised from this that Dromtönpa and the king were "of one mind-stream." Per Ehrard, this leaves the possibility that "the *Bka' gdams pha chos* was open to interpretation in the interest of political and religious ideologies." Ehrhard, "Transmission," 35–36.

[500] Ehrhard cites this from Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen's *History of the Book*. See Ehrhard, "Transmission of the Thig-le Bcu-drug and the Bka' Gdams Glegs Bam," 39–40. See also Jinpa, *Book of Kadam*, 22. (Tibetan: Bka'

restricted one-to-one transmission, only later taking the form of a written book that was more widely accessible. A text attributed to Phuchungwa (Phu chung ba gzhon nu rgyal mtshan; 1031–1106), Sherab Gyaltsen's student, indicates the existence of an archaic form of the Father Teaching as early as the eleventh century.[501] As for the book's latest possible dates, the present version of the Father Teaching derives principally from three main figures: Namkha Rinchen (Nam mkha' rin chen; 1214–86), Drom Kumāramati ('Brom ku ma ra ma ti; d.u.),[502] and Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen. According to the colophon, the final version of the book was compiled in 1302 (the Water Tiger year) by Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen at Narthang Monastery (Dpal snar thang).[503] Thupten Jinpa suggests that the systematic presentation of the tradition of the "Sixteen Drops" (*thig le bcu drug*), a central topic of the *Book*, originated with these three figures, although earlier iterations of the lineage included elements of the practice, including visualizations of drops in the form of light circles in the visualization of specific deities.[504]

We should naturally treat claims about the book's historical origins with some skepticism. While many of the text's specific themes and teachings may well have emerged out of dialogues between Atiśa and Drom, it is hard to imagine that they would have come about precisely in the form in which they were subsequently described, much less that Ngok would have been able to perfectly memorize them and write them down in their entirety. Much of the book is presented as a series of visions, internal dialogues, encounters with bodhisattvas and buddhas, and various miraculous occurrences. The revelation of the four

gdams glegs bam las btus pa'i chos skor, 230 ff.)
[501] Jinpa, trans., *Book of Kadam*, 25. Jinpa does not provide the title of the text by Phuchungwa.
[502] Not to be confused with Atiśa's disciple, Dromtönpa.
[503] Jinpa, trans., *Book of Kadam*, 21–2. See also Ehrhard, "Transmission," 32.
[504] Jinpa, trans., *Book of Kadam*, 26.

deities, for example, comes by way of Drom's "opening the doors of his heart" and revealing the divine realms of the deities: Śākyamuni, Avalokiteśvara, Tārā, and Acala.[505] The stories surrounding the book's origins highlight the enlightened qualities of Atiśa and Dromtönpa and are surely intended to instill faith in them and the tradition, not to supply a precise, objectively verifiable historical timeline.

Tantra and the Book of Kadam

While the Kadam tradition is mainly known for its promotion of Sūtrayāna doctrines and practices, *The Book* is one of the earliest Kadam works that seeks to codify a distinctly Kadam tantric tradition. In particular, we see this in the context of the Sixteen Drops, the paradigmatic Kadam tantric tradition. The *Book* focuses primarily on the four Kadam deities, with particular emphasis on Avalokiteśvara. Significantly, however, the four Kadam deities all come from the kriyātantra class, the "lowest" (and least transgressive) of the tantric classes, not from the antinomian yoganiruttaratantra classes, giving the impression that the Kadam tradition sought to avoid the open dissemination of yoganiruttaratantra practices.[506]

One of the most interesting aspects of the *Book* is what it reveals about the sometimes ambivalent stance in the Kadam tradition on the role of Vajrayāna practice and its relation to Sūtrayāna practices in a broader Mahāyāna context. Dromtönpa, as we will see, appears to have been one of the main protagonists in the move to establish the Kadampas as a tradition of austerity, moral purity, and doctrinal conservatism. Atiśa, on the other hand, was strongly committed to transmitting and teaching Indian Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions in their entirety, not only those elements that conformed to an orthodox exoteric vision of Mahāyāna

[505] Jinpa, trans., *Book of Kadam*, 87–8.
[506] Jinpa, trans., *Book of Kadam*, 12–3; 80–7.

Buddhism. While Atiśa certainly emphasized the central role of Sūtrayāna doctrines in texts such as the *Bodhipathapradīpa*, essentially forbidding monastics from taking the higher yoganiruttaratantra consecrations, as we have seen, he was also extremely active in the propagation and dissemination of yoganiruttaratantra and yoginītantra traditions. He was also a major figure in the early transmission of teachings on mahāmudrā and, in all likelihood, the first person to have transmitted the dohās of Saraha to Tibet.[507] However, evidence suggests that Atiśa's efforts in these areas were actively hindered by Dromtönpa, who was concerned that the possibility that Tibetans would misinterpret such teachings was too great a risk to take. The *Book of Kadam* thus provides an essential piece of evidence demonstrating that Dromtönpa—and other, later Kadam figures—played a crucial part in the construction of the Kadam tradition as a neoconservative, reformist movement.

The "Father Teaching" and the Four Kadam Deities

The two principal sections of the *Book of Kadam* are the "Father Teaching" (*pha chos*), framed as a dialogue between Atiśa and the "father" Dromtönpa, and the "Son Teaching" (*bu chos*), consisting of Atiśa's replies to two of his spiritual "sons"—Ngok Legpai Sherap and Khutön Tsöndrü Yungdrung (Khu ston brtson 'grus g.yung drung; 1011–75)—regarding the previous lives of Dromtönpa. The Son Teaching recalls the *Jātaka Tales*, which recount the previous lives of the Buddha. It focuses primarily on Dromtönpa's identification with Avalokiteśvara and Avalokiteśvara's special relationship with Tibet.[508] We will here focus mainly on the Father Teaching and its role in clarifying Kadam views on the relationship between exoteric and esoteric practices.

[507] See Schaeffer, *Dreaming the Great Brahmin*, 61–62.
[508] Jinpa, *Book of Kadam*, 11.

The Father Teaching is mainly an extended, twenty-three-chapter commentary on the *Bodhisattva's Jewel Garland* (*Bodhisattvamaṇyāvalī; Byang chub sems dpa'i nor bu'i phreng ba*), a brief text on the bodhisattva path that Atiśa composed while in Tibet. The *Bodhisattvamaṇyāvalī* consists of twenty-six verses on the main doctrines and practices forming the core of the Mahāyāna path: cultivation of renunciation, the practice of ethics, the elimination of negative mental states, meditations on love, compassion, and emptiness, and so forth. In addition to commenting on the root verses, the Father Teaching addresses questions of how to integrate exoteric Mahāyāna doctrines with those of the Vajrayāna. In particular, it focuses on the practice of the four principal tantric deities of the Kadam tradition (*bka' gdams lha bzhi*): Śākyamuni Buddha, Avalokiteśvara, Acala, and Tārā.[509] We will treat the topic of how it sought to integrate Sūtrayāna and Vajrayāna approaches below.

While the *Book of Kadam* may be read as an exposition of the Kadam school's core beliefs and tenets, it functions on multiple levels as a text. The Father Teaching—indeed the *Book of Kadam* as a whole—promotes the divine origins of the Kadam tradition and the enlightened qualities of both Atiśa and Dromtönpa, thus serving to bolster the legitimacy of both figures, much as the *Maṇi Kabum* (*ma Ni bka' 'bum*; "Collected teachings on Maṇi") did for the image of Songtsen Gampo and the Tibetan emperors. The *Book of Kadam* highlights Drom's role as Atiśa's closest disciple, thus positioning him as the heir to Atiśa's lineage and the legitimate successor and promulgator of the Kadam tradition. While the central focus is on Atiśa's teachings, the book also suggests ways in which the master and disciple may have diverged in their interpretations of certain key points, offering differing but complementary perspectives. One such point, which we will consider in the following sections, concerns the

[509] See Jinpa, trans., *Book of Kadam*, 12–13; 80–87.

way in which the two thought about the relation between Sūtrayāna and Vajrayāna practices in the context of the Mahāyāna path. We will consider how this tension between Drom's and Atiśa's views on secret mantra may have shaped Kadam approaches to tantra as a whole, leading to the widespread—and I will argue inaccurate—perception of the Kadam tradition as a "reformist" school and Atiśa as its principal "reformer." As such, we will consider ways in which the *Book of Kadam* advocates for certain tantric traditions and, implicitly, how it marginalizes others. Despite the claims of some modern (and traditional) scholars that Atiśa's turn to a more "orthodox" (i.e. monastic) approach to Buddhism after his earlier years as a lay tāntrika signified, in Chattopadhyaya's words, "a clear break from his earlier Tāntrika career,"[510] the *Book of Kadam* shows that this is a vast oversimplification.

Chapter two of the Father Teaching focuses mainly on the four Kadam deities and the practice of the Sixteen Drops, which would become the paradigmatic tantric practice of the Kadam tradition. The centrality of kriyātantra deities reflects the characteristically conservative approach of the Kadampas toward Vajrayāna practices. It also stands in sharp contrast to not only some of the early Nyingma traditions, but later Sarma traditions, particularly the Kagyü, that emphasized traditions such as Cakrasaṃvara, Guhyasamāja, and Hevajra, all of which contained highly antinomian elements, and practices such as mahāmudrā and the Six Dharmas of Nāropa (*nA ro chos drug*). This is not to say, of course, that the Kadampas did not study and practice yoganiruttaratantra deities. As we have seen, Atiśa, Rinchen Zangpo, and even Dromtönpa were deeply versed in yoganiruttaratantra and yoginītantra traditions. However, the Kadampa emphasis on austerity and strict adherence to ethical precepts must have played a significant role in their choice to highlight the "tamer"

[510] See Chattopadhyaya, *Atiśa and Tibet*, 78.

kriyātantra traditions.

While the views of Atiśa and Dromtönpa were generally closely aligned, their attitudes about whether and how to transmit yoganiruttaratantra practices appear to have diverged in significant ways. Atiśa is renowned for his exoteric teachings, but we have seen that he was also fluent in tantric traditions such as the yoginītantras, the dohās, and the practice of mahāmudrā. Dromtönpa, it seems, harbored concerns about the wisdom of imparting these traditions to Tibetans, fearing that they would be misunderstood. For some major Sarma figures, Dromtönpa's views on Vajrayāna came to be seen, fairly or not, as excessively severe, even repressive. A brief examination of the tradition of the four Kadam deities may help us to understand how the Kadampas sought to highlight the importance of Vajrayāna practice while framing it within the broader context of Sūtrayāna ethics.

In the *Book of Kadam*, Atiśa's explanation of the four deities comes in response to Drom's request for advice on the most efficacious tantric meditational deities (*devatā*; *yi dam*) for actualizing spiritual attainments in the degenerate age:

> In this degenerate age obstacles are plentiful;
> Scarce are the meditation deities who grant higher attainments;
> Rarer still are those who receive the higher attainments;
> So I request an excellent meditation deity.

Atiśa responds by listing the four deities:

> Listen, you who seek [the fulfillment of] all wishes.
> They are Śākyamuni and the inseparable Lokiteśvara,[511]
> The protector Acala[512] and Tārā—[513]
> Golden, white as snow or a conch,

[511] *Spyan ras gzigs*. An alternate rendering of Avalokiteśvara.
[512] *Mi g.yo ba*.
[513] *Sgrol ma*.

Smoky blue, and green—their colors are beautiful.[514]

This is one of the earliest sources to enumerate and explain these four deities as the core of Kadam tantric practice. In this dialogue, Atiśa extols the qualities of the four deities: Śākyamuni, or "the sage" (*thub pa*), the "most supreme" of the Three Jewels; Avalokiteśvara, the "eye of all innumerable sentient beings"; Tārā, the "goddess unsullied by all faults"; and Acala (literally "unwavering"), "the lord who does not waver in the face of anything."[515] As the text says,

> These [then] are the four divinities of Drom.
> Most excellently, they were given by Atiśa.
> Their streams of blessings remain ever present.[516]

Following the descriptions of the four deities, the text explains the practice of the Sixteen Drops, one of the central tantric practices of the Kadam school.[517] The practice is explained within the context of a series of visions experienced by Dromtönpa, in which he reveals the maṇḍalas of these four deities within his own heart (*thugs kha*), or heart lotus (*thugs kyi pad*).[518] In one passage, upon the conclusion of Atiśa's explanation of the qualities of the four deities, the lords of the five buddha lineages directly exhort Drom as follows:

> O Drom, as you are the inner palace of great compassion,

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[514] Jinpa, trans., *Book of Kadam*, 80 (Tib. p. 35). *Snyigs ma'i dus 'dir bar chad mang / dngos grub ster ba'i yi dam dkon / de bas dngos grub 'dzed pa nyung / nga la bzang po'i lha cig zhu // nor bu rin chen 'di skad gsung / 'dod dgu gnyer ba nga la gson / thub pa dbyer med spyan ras gzigs / mi g.yo mgon dang sgrol ma yin / gser dang kha ba dung ltar dkar / mthing kha ljang khu ka dog mdzes*.

[515] See Jinpa, trans., *Book of Kadam*, 82–84.

[516] Jinpa, trans., *Book of Kadam*, 84 (Tib. 37).

[517] The sixteen drops are: 1. the drop of the outer inconceivable array; 2. the drop of this Endurance World; 3. the drop of the realm of Tibet; 4. the drop of one's abode and the drawn maṇḍala; 5. The drop of Perfection of Wisdom Mother; 6. the drop of her son, Buddha Śākyamuni; 7. the drop of Great Compassion; 8. the drop of Wisdom Tārā; 9. the drop of her wrathful form; 10. the drop of Acala, their immutable nature; 11. the drop of Atiśa; 12. the drop of Dromtön Gyalwai Jungné; 13. the drop of the vast practice; 14. the drop of the profound view; 15. the drop of the inspirational practice; and 16. the drop of great awakening. (See Jinpa, trans., *Book of Kadam*, 13–14.) Also see Ehrhard, "The Transmission of the *Thig-le Bcu-drug* and the *Bka' Gdams Glegs Bam*," for further discussion.

[518] Jinpa, *Book of Kadam*, 87 (Tib. 38–9).

Reveal here your countless manifestations.

In response, we read that

> Drom's heart opened up,
> As if the skies were replete with the five buddha families—
> The actuality of our Sage—
> And the sky in Drom's heart became filled with the conquerors.
> "This is the maṇḍala of the conquerors," he said.[519]

In the practice of the Sixteen Drops, as explained by Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen (Mkhan chen Nyi ma rgyal mtshan; 1223–1305) in his *Clarification of the Heart-Drop Practice*,[520] the yogin engages in a series of visualizations of sixteen drops, one inside the other, each one subtler than the previous one. The yogin begins the actual meditation by dissolving the world into emptiness and arising in the form of Avalokiteśvara, with the thousand-armed form of Avalokiteśvara at their own heart. This is followed by the "drop of this endurance world," with Buddha Śākyamuni in the center; the "drop of the realm of Tibet," with four-armed Avalokiteśvara at the center; the "drop of one's abode and the drawn maṇḍala," with a maṇḍala at its center; the "drop of the Perfection of Wisdom Mother," with the "Great Mother" at its center; the "drop of her son, Buddha Śākyamuni," with Buddha Śākyamuni at the center; the "drop of great compassion," with one thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara at its center; the "drop of Wisdom Tārā," with green Tārā at its center; the "drop of Tārā's wrathful form," with dark green wrathful Tārā at its center; the "drop of Acala, their immutable nature," with blue Acala at its center; the "drop of Atiśa," with Atiśa at its center; the "drop of Dromtön Gyalwai Jungné," with Dromtönpa at its center; the "drop

[519] Jinpa, *Book of Kadam*, 87 (Tib. 38–9).
[520] *Nyams len snying gi thig le'i gsal byed zung 'jug nyi zla'i thig le*. Trans. in Jinpa, *Book of Kadam*, 395–452 (Tibetan 233–76).

of the vast practice lineage," with Maitreya at its center; the "drop of the profound view lineage," with Nāgārjuna at its center; the "drop of the inspirational practice lineage," with Buddha Vajradhara at its center; and "the drop of great awakening," where one concludes with a series of visualized dissolutions, absorptions, and emanations of deities and drops, all the time remaining aware that they are manifestations of indivisible wisdom and compassion.[521]

These passages confirm Dromtönpa's central position in the Sixteen Drops practice, and hence in the Kadam tradition. Not only does he reveal the four deities emanating from his own heart-center, but he assumes the status of a lineage master on par with the most exalted figures of the tradition: he follows his master, Atiśa, and precedes Maitreya, the master of the vast practice lineage; Nāgārjuna, master of the profound view of emptiness; and Vajradhara, the *sambhogakaya* form of the Buddha in tantric form, who represents the inspirational practice lineage. There is no question, then, that the *Book of Kadam*—and the Sixteen Drops tradition more broadly—not only functions as a Kadam practice manual but elevates Drom to the level of a buddha or high-level bodhisattva, confirming his status as the "father" of the Kadam tradition. Writing of the later period, in which the *Book of Kadam* began to be transmitted as a series of written texts, Ehrhard writes, "one has the impression that this work, said to have been set down by its author in writing despite the reservations of 'Brom-ston Rgyal-ba'i 'byung-gnas, takes on, in the long narratives of the early and later transmission, the function of a sacred authorization of this specific teaching lineage."[522] Dromtönpa's status then, comes to be seen as equal, or even superior, to that of Atiśa. This

[521] Summarized from "Elucidation of the Heart-Drop Practice," by Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen, in Jinpa, trans., *Book of Kadam*, 427–41 (Tib. 255–69).
[522] Ehrhard, "Transmission of the Thig-le Bcu-drug and the Bka' Gdams Glegs Bam," 44.

has profound implications for the development and legacy of the Kadam tradition.

The *Book of Kadam* thus serves not only as an important doctrinal text that lays out the foundations of the Kadam tradition, but as a source establishing Dromtönpa's status as both the primary heir of Atiśa's legacy and the spiritual founder of the Kadam tradition. As we will see, Dromtönpa appears to have had an extraordinary influence on the way the Kadam tradition, its doctrines, and even the figure of Atiśa, would come to be viewed.

Atiśa and Dromtönpa on the Superiority of Mantrayāna

After explaining the instructions on the four Kadam deities and the Sixteen Drops in chapter two, chapter three of the *Book of Kadam*—"How to choose among the three collections of the [Buddha's] word" (*bka' sde snod gsum la 'dam kha ji ltar btang ba'i le'u*)—further expands on what are ostensibly Atiśa's and Dromtönpa's views on the relationship between the Mantrayāna and Sūtrayāna. Here, Dromtönpa initially requests instruction from Atiśa on the three scriptural collections (*tripiṭaka*): the collections of sūtra, abhidharma, and vinaya, traditionally considered to contain all the Buddha's teachings.

> I, the eldest son[523] of an excellent father,
> Have been blessed by the four excellent deities
> And I recall the ultimate aim of the excellent teachings.
> Having cycled [in saṃsāra] many times, desire increases;
> The great house of saṃsāra, bestowed by many forefathers,
> Is the source of a thousandfold suffering;
> Because of hosting many guests on the excellent path,
> I request [your teaching on] the immeasurable [three] scriptural collections;
> [You who are] said to be the precious source of all wishes,
> Please teach [this].[524]

[523] *Sras kyi thu bo*: this can also have the more specific sense of an heir.
[524] Translation mine. *Pha bzang sras kyi thu bo nga* / *lha bzang bzhi yis byin brlabs nas* / *chos bzang gtan gyi mdun ma dran* / *'khor 'dab che bas 'dod pa 'phel* / *pha tshan du mas byin pa yi* / *'khor ba'i khang chen bsdug bsngal stong* / *kun 'byung mgron po du ma la* / *lam rab bzang po'i mgron byed pas* / *sde snod dpag tu med ba zhu* / *dgos 'dod 'byung ba rin chen gsung. Bka' gdams glegs bam*, 43. Also see Jinpa, *Book of Kadam*, 95.

Here, following what appears to be a straightforward request for a teaching on the *tripiṭaka*, Atiśa responds:

> The scriptural collections are the Conqueror's words and the treatises (*śāstra*).
> The Conqueror's words are innumerable.
> The doors of entry to the vehicles (*yāna*) are inconceivable.[525]

In essence, Atiśa's response that the doors of entry are "inconceivable" (*bsam mi khyab*) suggests a more expansive view of the *tripiṭaka*, one that goes beyond the traditional understanding that only Sūtrayāna scriptures are included in the three collections:

> [That which] teaches well the profound [meaning of what to] adopt and discard,
> Completes abandonment and realization, and brings about buddhahood
> Is also a treatise (*śāstra*).[526]

Concluding the passage, Atiśa says:

> Jungné [*'Byung gnas*; that is, Dromtönpa], generate the conqueror that you aspire to, and bond with it well."[527]

Dromtönpa then requests Atiśa for "an ultimate teaching that is close to complete buddhahood, for the sake of future generations."[528] In response, Atiśa restates his view that the teachings of secret mantra are the supreme path to buddhahood:

> O Drom, what are the causes of this [awakening]? If you seek to approach awakening, you should [engage in] the profound secret mantras. In particular, you should place the dohās in your mind. There is no [means] other than that to approach

[525] Translation mine. *Sde snod ni / rgyal ba'i bka' dang bstan bcos yin / rgyal ba'i bka' yang grangs mang zhing / theg pa'i 'jug sgo bsam mi khyab. Bka' gdams glegs bam*, 43. See Jinpa, *Book of Kadam*, 96.

[526] Translation mine. *Blang dor zab mo legs bstan nas / spangs rtogs mthar phyin sangs rgyas su / 'chos pa byed pa'ang bstan bcos yin. Bka' gdams glegs bam*, 43. See Jinpa, *Book of Kadam*, 96.

[527] Translation mine. *'Byung gnas rang nyid gang mos par / rgyal ba bskyed la legs par 'doms. Bka' gdams glegs bam*, 43. See Jinpa, *Book of Kadam*, 96.

[528] Translation mine. *'Brom rje'i zhal nas 'di skad gsung / rdzogs sangs rgyas la gang nye ba'i / mthar thug chos cig zhu lags te / phyi rabs don du 'gyur ba'ang 'tshal. Bka' gdams glegs bam*, 43. See Jinpa, *Book of Kadam*, 96.

> awakening. It is similar to the ripening[529] of an autumn harvest. It is the practice of the great siddhas. In particular, if you put all these dohās into practice in a desolate place, it is possible for you to become a fine yogi who dances to the sound a *ḍamaru*. For someone of the highest faculties, the highest teaching is suitable.[530]

Here, Atiśa leaves no doubt about the efficacy of the mantra path, the "highest teaching" for those of the "highest faculties." Moreover, he makes it clear that he sees the dohās as the perfect encapsulation of the essential points of the Mantrayāna:

> Listen! Secret mantra is the apex of all the vehicles.
> In particular, the profound teachings of the dohās
> Were given to me by Master Saraha.[531]
> Son, nurture this in the kernel of your heart.[532]

The path of secret mantra, then, is the culmination of the vehicles. The "ultimate teaching" that Dromtönpa is seeking is not included in the *tripiṭaka* (at least, not as understood by earlier Buddhist traditions): in order to obtain buddhahood, according to Atiśa, one must enter the secret mantra path. Leaving no doubt, Atiśa then gives specific instructions that refer to the two stages of yoganiruttaratantra practice: the generation stage (*utpattikrama*; *bskyed rim*) and the completion stage (*niṣpannakrama*; *rdzogs rim*).

> The mode of engaging in secret mantra is as follows:
> The outer is the palace of incalculable divinities;
> The inner is the reality of male and female deities.
> Yet this is only the generation stage.

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[529] Jinpa's translation of *kham rum me ba.* See Jinpa, *Book of Kadam,* 96.
[530] Translation mine. *'Brom de'i rgyu ci yod / 'tshang rgya ba la nye ba cig dgos na gsang sngags zab mo rnams la 'doms / khyad par du do ha sems la tshud / 'tshang rgya ba la de las thag nye ba med / ston dus kyi lo tog kham rum me ba de dang 'dra / grub thob chen po rnams kyi nyams len yin / khyad par du'ang do ha 'di kun byas na lung stong na phar la rnal 'byor pa bzang po nyams gar rtse zhing ḍa ma ru khrol le ba 'ong srid / blo rab la chos rab 'tsham*. *Bka' gdams glegs bam*, 43–44. See Jinpa, *Book of Kadam,* 96.
[531] It is interesting, though not necessarily significant, that Atiśa says specifically that the teachings were "given to me by Master Saraha" (*rje sa ra ha yis nga la byin*). It is unclear if Atiśa is claiming that he received these teachings directly from Saraha, or if he is referring to a more "mystical" type of transmission, such as a direct vision of Saraha. While there is no scholarly consensus on Saraha's dates, I am unaware of any claims that Atiśa and Saraha ever met in person.
[532] *Gson gsang sngags theg pa'i yang rtse yin* / *dgos dam chos zab mo do ha de* / *rje sa ra ha yis nga la byin* / *bu thugs kyi dkyil du 'di chongs gsung*. Bka' gdams glegs bam, 44. Jinpa, *Book of Kadam,* 97.

> O vajra holder, supreme Drom Jé.
> The profound Dharma of primordial emptiness and spontaneity
> Is the completion stage, so practice this.[533]

The succeeding passages mention other quintessential completion stage practices, such as yogas of the winds, channels, and drops:

> The channels and awareness, the winds and mind, abide in the central channel.
> This is the essence drop of an excellent mind.
> Put these points into practice, supreme Drom Jé.[534]

Dialogues such as these highlight the inherent complexities of attempting to reconcile Sūtrayāna and Mantrayāna traditions. Here, Atiśa's endorsement of the practice of the yoganiruttaratantra completion stage, along with his enthusiastic endorsement of the tantric path as the "apex of vehicles" (*theg pa'i yang rtse*), may seem at odds with his more restrictive views in the *Lamp for the Path*. This may partly be due to the intimate format of the dialogues in the *Book of Kadam*: they are presented as one-on-one discussions between Atiśa and his closest disciple, not texts intended for a broad audience, such as the *Lamp*. The statements in the *Book of Kadam*, moreover, are consistent with the view of Vajrayāna as the pinnacle of Buddhist systems, an idea permeating both Atiśa's and Dromtönpa's thinking. Here, we see once again Atiśa's malleability in adapting different levels of Buddhist teaching to different audiences and circumstances. He does not categorically reject esoteric doctrines. Rather, he sees Mantrayāna practices as an integral part of a greater whole when they are understood and applied through the correct ethical and hermeneutical lens.

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[533] *Lar gsang sngags theg pa'i spyod tshul ni / phyi dpag med lha yi gzhal yas khang / nang pho mo lha yi rang bzhin te / de bskyed pa'i rim pa tsham du zad. Kye rdo rje 'dzin pa 'brom rje mchog / chos ye stong lhun grub zab mo de / don rdzogs pa'i rim pa yin no bsgoms*. *Bka' gdams glegs bam*, 44. Jinpa, *Book of Kadam*, 97.
[534] *Rtsa rig pa rlung sems dbu mar gnas / sems bzang po thig le nyag gcig yin / don nyams su long zhig 'brom rje mchog*. Jinpa, trans., *Book of Kadam*, 98; *Bka' gdams glegs bam*, 44.

Atiśa's flexibility, however, is tempered by his characteristically cautious approach. We soon find both Atiśa and Dromtönpa expressing concerns about how, or if, to divulge the highest tantric teachings to disciples, highlighting one of the central points of tension within the Kadam tradition. Advanced tantric practices are not for all, and one must fulfill a number of conditions in order to be qualified to engage in higher tantric practice—obtaining empowerment, training in pure perception, cultivating the generation and completion stages, and so forth. Atiśa warns that anyone attempting to engage in secret mantra without these prerequisites runs the risk of becoming "like a young child nibbling at an animal carcass."[535] In the end, in fact, he seems to moderate his enthusiastic endorsement of the Mantrayāna, reminding Dromtönpa of the importance of secrecy in tantric practice. While the Mantrayāna may be the highest teaching, he advises Dromtönpa to approach it with care and to regard the three baskets as the most important teachings:

> Even if you protect the secret mantra,
> Tāntrikas in the future will be deceived by the fame of the profound Dharma,
> Without becoming firm in the antidotes.
> Due to being anchored by saṃsāric actions, they will have doubts.
> You should rely on the profound secret mantra,
> But do not widely proclaim the secret mantra.
> In the service of the glorious teachings in general,
> Son, the precious collections (*piṭaka*) of teachings are the best.
> In the end, they are excellent, O supreme Drom.[536]

Of course, the view here that the "the precious collections (*piṭaka*) of teachings are the best," if taken at face value, would seem to contradict claims of secret mantra's superiority, but

[535] Jinpa, *Book of Kadam,* 102; Tibetan 47.
[536] Translation mine. *Mi khyod kyis gsang sngags skyong na yang / phyis gnyen po brtsan sa ma zin pa'i / chos zab mo'i grags pas sngags pa 'khrul / las 'khor ba'i gting rdo byas kyis dvogs / khyod gsang sngags zab mo rgyud la bsten / ngag gsang sngags khas len ma che zhig / dpal bstan pa spyi yi zhabs tog tu / chos sde snod rin chen che 'o bu / de phugs su dge'o 'brom rje mchog*. *Bka' gdams glegs bam,* 47. See also Jinpa, *Book of Kadam,* 102.

here we can see it as one more example of the hermeneutics of *upāya kauśalya*: this is only the case "in the service of the glorious teaching in general" (*dpal bstan pa spyi yi zhabs tog tu*). That is, in order not to deceive tāntrikas who have not become "firm in the antidotes" to afflictions and so forth, Atiśa urges Dromtönpa to emphasize the exoteric trainings of the *tripiṭaka*.

Dromtönpa and Kadam Identity

The seeming vacillation on Atiśa's part regarding the role of secret mantra in the Mahāyāna path hints at factors that contributed to later perceptions of the Kadam tradition as being particularly conservative regarding the open teaching of Mantrayāna doctrines. As we have seen, Atiśa's approach to presenting Vajrayāna topics varied widely, according to different contexts. In works such as the *Lamp*, he emphasized foundational exoteric topics, and his attitude toward tantra was, for the most part, deeply cautious.[537] In the *Book of Kadam*, his hearty endorsement of the secret mantra path and the tantric dohās was tempered by a sense of restraint in terms of teaching them; and in his tantric gītis, along with yoganiruttaratantra texts like the *Abhisamayavibhaṅga*, we see his expertise in yoganiruttaratantra and mahāmudrā practices.

Perceptions of the Kadampas as endorsing an orthodox, anti-tantric approach, however, focused more on Dromtönpa, who some regarded as an overzealous moral enforcer. Various passages in the *Book of Kadam* suggest Dromtönpa's ambivalence towards divulging

[537] Although, as we have seen, both the *Lamp* and the *Commentary on the Difficult Points of the Lamp* provide a loophole for those with "knowledge of reality": "when there is knowledge of reality, there is no fault (*de nyid rig la nyes pa med*)." See *Lamp*, v. 67.

tantric teachings. Atiśa's endorsement of secret mantra as "the apex of all the vehicles" appears to have troubled Dromtönpa, who favored a more cautious approach to the Vajrayāna, apparently dissuading Atiśa from teaching on it openly. In his response to Atiśa (or rather, in his own inner dialogue), Dromtönpa appears deeply ambivalent about divulging esoteric teachings openly. The path of secret mantra, he muses, "is indeed an extremely swift [path] and an apex of all vehicles. If one can succeed in its practice, there is nothing faster than this."[538] Such a path, however, comes with great risks for those who misuse or misunderstand it, thinking it is a quicker, easier path than the exoteric practices of the three baskets. He considers what would occur if he himself were to "master the dohās" and transmit them to his three principal disciples, the "three brothers."[539] Although he considers that they could gain experience and the "blazing of clear light awareness"[540] through their meditative practice, he also sees the danger inherent in spreading Vajrayāna teachings more openly:

> Later [I might decide], "I will make certain to master the dohās and take some [students] such as the three brothers [into retreat]." So when people will hear the announcements that there are some excellent beings in an uninhabited region, they will say, "There are some amazing perfected adepts there; we must go receive teachings." They might bring some material gifts and come to me. At such time, I could reveal [the dohās] to them on the basis of examining whether they are pure receptacles.[541]

Revealing these teachings, however, comes with great risks, both for the teacher and students:

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[538] Jinpa, *Book of Kadam,* 102.
[539] The "three brothers," or "three Kadam brothers," are Dromtönpa's closest disciples: Potowa Rinchen Sal (Po to ba rin chen gsal; 1027/1031–1105), Chengawa Tshültrim Bar (Spyan snga ba tshul khrims 'bar; 1038–1103); and Phuchungwa Shönu Gyaltsen (Phu chung ba gzhon nu rgyal mtshan; 1031–1106).
[540] Jinpa, *Book of Kadam,* 103.
[541] Jinpa, *Book of Kadam,* 103.

> Some [false teachers], thinking that the presence of one or two favorable conditions is adequate, might feel amazed and exclaim, "You have accumulated great merits and have thus come to listen to such [teachings of] the Great Vehicle." And without examining what kind of vessels they are, might pour the contents into themselves? indiscriminately. Or, later, some might assert that this is the tradition of the teacher Drom, and they might consume the profound secret mantra's permitted food [such as meat and alcohol] while not undertaking the requisite rites. Calling it by the name "ambrosia," they might drink alcohol without restraint. Calling it "skillful means," they might consume meat with no restraint. When actually consuming [the meat], because they have failed to understand death on the basis of other sentient beings, the great tantric adepts, the so-called vajra-holders, would be slaying with their own hands the parents of bodhisattvas and the divinities of tantric practices. At such times, one risks engaging in [deeds similar to] rites of cattle sacrifice![542]

In an argument that is now familiar, Dromtönpa worries that through taking tantric teachings literally, ill-prepared and deluded disciples would engage in an array of misbehaviors: "Calling it a ritual feast, heedless, many would congregate and dance without restraint. Many so-called perfected ones would fall down drunk." They would succumb to dangerous pride, saying, "How can you [Drom] and I, if asked, not be equal? I am the son of such and such teacher; I am the nephew of so and so. Who is there that is more powerful than me in this monastery? Who is there in this region that I have not conferred empowerments upon?"[543] They would disparage the Śrāvakayāna, which is also a violation of one of the root bodhisattva vows:

> Some, while claiming to be Mahayanists, assert that you cover no ground by means of the lesser meditation practice of the disciples [Śrāvakas]. They label others who adhere to a disciplined lifestyle, such as the teacher Atiśa—who are pure in their morality, modest in their desires, and easily contented, who are outwardly appealing due to practicing the twelve cultivated qualities in places of utter solitude, who are internally endowed with the awakening mind, and whose mindstreams are enriched

[542] Jinpa, *Book of Kadam,* 103.
[543] Jinpa, trans., *Book of Kadam,* 104. Tib. 48.

> by the perfect factors of secret mantra—as [practitioners] of the Lesser Vehicle, [calling them] "disciples" and so on.[544]

Here, Dromtönpa repeats the refrain that we have now seen many times: that those who enter the path of secret mantra without upholding the ethical discipline of the vinaya are doomed to failure. He continues,

> Others, while discarding for the time being the precious ethical discipline as found in the three scriptural baskets—the ultimate foundation of all higher qualities—pretend to enter the Mantra Great Vehicle. Though failing to succeed in its practice, they claim to be tantric adepts, maintain a household, and clad themselves in saffron robes [as well]. With arrogance they go to [sit at the] head of a row. With no shame they call the fruit of their moral degeneration "noble sons" and seat them at the head of the rows of fully ordained monks of Śākyamuni's order.[545]

Here, the allusion is clearly to self-proclaimed tāntrikas who maintain the appearance of monks, while placing their own sons—"the fruit of their moral degeneration," their downfalls from celibacy—ahead of other monks. And yet, asks Dromtönpa,

> What greater wonder is there than the Secret Mantra Great Vehicle? If you were to become a great glory and savior of beings as described in the tantras on the basis of the auspicious confluence of good karmic fortune and readiness, nothing would be greater… If, on the contrary, you were to commit many acts that undermined the pledges, then there are mechanisms [in the tantra that would result in] epidemics of numerous illnesses across the land. Rains could fail to fall on time, wars and internal strife could proliferate. With no gain at all people could be swept away by dangers.[546]

The conclusion is clear:

> The profound secret mantra must be concealed well from those who are unsuitable vessels. Since no [path] is hailed more than this for the attainment of buddhahood, it should be revealed to those who are suitable vessels in secluded places. Engage in the three rites of praising, honoring, and hailing, and create the maṇḍala within. No matter how profound it may be, [this secret mantra] is encompassed by the three

[544] Jinpa, trans., *Book of Kadam*, 104. Tib. 49.
[545] Jinpa, trans., *Book of Kadam*, 104–5. Tib. 49.
[546] Jinpa, *Book of Kadam*, 105. Tib. 49.

scriptural baskets.[547]

This recalls the point made by Atiśa from his earliest days in Ngari, that the yoganiruttaratantras are only to be practiced by qualified disciples, and then, only in a secret manner. Here, Dromtönpa gets to the heart of the matter: while the Mantrayāna is indeed central to the Kadam school, secrecy with regard to its practice is paramount; the teachings are not to be revealed haphazardly to unqualified disciples. In this respect, we see clear parallels between Drom's conclusions and those in the polemical works of earlier figures, such as Yeshé Ö, Zhiwa Ö, and Jangchub Ö. We have also seen these concerns repeated in the works of later polemicists, such as Gö Lotsāwa Khugpa Lhetse and Chag Lotsāwa Chojé Pal.

Dromtönpa and the Enforcement of Morality

Passages such as these from the *Book of Kadam* are among the principal Kadam sources hinting at Dromtönpa's doctrinally conservative stance in relation to esoteric practices. Other sources suggest that he may have inhibited the transmission of tantric doctrines within the Kadam school, even putting pressure on Atiśa to refrain from teaching them. A primary account for this view is Gö Lotsāwa's *Blue Annals*. While we should certainly not take Gö Lotsāwa's account as an objective record of alleged interactions from several centuries earlier, it gives us a sense of how Dromtönpa came to be represented by later Tibetan figures. In Gö Lotsāwa's account, shortly before passing away, Atiśa granted Dromtönpa and other close disciples numerous tantric transmissions, including those of Saraha's dohās. According to Gö report, Dromtönpa's role on this occasion was not just as Atiśa's disciple, but as a disciplinarian charged with expelling those of "immoral conduct":

[547] Jinpa, *Book of Kadam,* 105. Tib. 49.

> While staying at bSam-yas, the Master bestowed on 'Brom at 'Chims-phu numerous methods (*thabs*) of conduct of Secret Mantra, (Saraha's) dohās, and many profound instructions. 'Brom's chief intention was to expel crude persons who were practicing according to the literal word (*sgra ji bzhin par*) [of tantra], from the class held by the Master. Therefore he told them [the crude persons] not to study the profound at all.[548]

Those who "were practicing according to the literal word [of tantra]" would presumably be those who engaged in the antinomian tantric conducts, such as sexual union. Although it is difficult to imagine students engaging in such practices while receiving teachings from Atiśa, this account provides a clue into how some may have later come to view Drom: as a moral enforcer who not only refused to publicly reveal tantric teachings, but who claimed not to practice them so as to discourage those who wished to practice them literally. As we can glean from the above passages in the *Book of Kadam*, however, Dromtönpa most certainly was a practitioner of the Vajrayāna, although he may have struggled to settle the issue of the extent to which it was appropriate to reveal tantric teachings publicly.

Dromtönpa's ostensibly conservative stance toward tantra became the focus of pointed criticisms by major figures of the Sarma schools, some of whom are reported to have characterized him in the harshest of terms. In one well-known passage from the *Blue Annals*, Milarepa, the tantric yogin and forebear of the Kagyü school, is particularly severe in his assessment of the Kadampas, especially Dromtönpa. If Dromtönpa really "pretended not to have studied secret texts," as Gö reported, such a stance would have been consistent with the Kadam emphasis on austerity and tantric secrecy, but it would have been alarming to

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[548] Adapted from the translation by Roerich, *Blue Annals*, 261. Translation of the underlined portion is tentative. (Translated as "'Brom's chief intention was to expel crude persons who were practicing according to the literal word (*sgra ji bzhin par*) [of tantra], from the class held by the Master. Therefore he told them [the crude persons] not to study the profound at all".) *Bsam yas su bzhugs pa'i zhar la gsang sngags kyi spyod ba'i thabs mang po dang / do ha la sogs pa'i gdams pa zab mo rnams 'chims phur 'brom la gnang / 'brom ni sngags* [233] *sgra ji bzhin par spyod ba'i spyod rtsing rnams jo bo'i drin las med zhig byung na dgongs pa gtso che bas / zab mo rnams ye ma gsan pa skad du mdzad*. 'Gos lo tsā ba gzhon nu dpal, *Bod gangs can yul du chos dang chos smra ji ltar byung ba'i rim pa bstan pa'i deb ther sngon po* (Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1984), 232-3.

members of the Kagyü sect and others for whom yoginītantra and yoganiruttaratantra practices were not only central to their religious identity, but were the supreme (and only) means for attaining buddhahood. While few would question the importance of secrecy in transmitting these doctrines, the Kadampas may have appeared excessive in their zeal for ethical rigor and tantric secrecy. This could even have had the consequence of interrupting the transmission of important tantric lineages.

Indeed, according to Gö, Milarepa objected strenuously to Dromtönpa's attitude toward tantra. As Gö writes, "in relation to this [claim by Dromtönpa not to have studied secret texts], when Jetsun Mila met Dagpo Lhajé [i.e. Gampopa], he scolded him slightly."[549] This refers to Milarepa's first meeting with Gampopa Sönam Rinchen (Sgam po pa bsod nams rin chen; 1079–1153), also known as Dagpo Lhajé (Dwags po lha rje), the erudite monk and physician who became one of Milarepa's principal disciples, as well as one of the founders of the Kagyü tradition. Gampopa had trained extensively with Kadam teachers, including Potowa Rinchen Sal, one of the "three brothers," Dromtönpa's main disciples.[550] It seems, however, that Gampopa's Kadam bona fides and his strict observance of the vinaya did not exactly impress the great yogin. Gö reports that in their first meeting, Milarepa declined Gampopa's gift of tea, offering him in return a skullcup filled with liquor, which he insisted Gampopa drink, thereby violating his monastic vows. Gö continues as follows:

> When Gampopa requested Milarepa's profound instructions, Milarepa asked whether he had received empowerments. Gampopa answered, "I received many empowerments of Cakrasaṃvara and others, listened to numerous Kadampa instructions, and have experienced resting in samādhi for thirteen days." Milarepa laughed out loud and said, "The gods of the form and formless realms are more

[549] Translation mine. *'Di la rje btsun mid las kyang dags po lha rje dang mjal ba'i tshe cung zad bkyon*. 'Gos lo tsa ba gzhon nu dpal, *Deb ther sngon po*, 233. See also Roerich, *Blue Annals*, 261.
[550] See *Treasury of Lives*. See also Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 283–5.

> advanced than you then—they rest in samādhi for many eons. However, none of this is of any benefit for attaining buddhahood, just as pressing sand will not produce liquid butter. The Kadampas have instructions (*gdams ngag*), but they lack pith instructions (*man ngag*).[551] Because a demon had entered the heart of Tibet, Atiśa was not allowed to teach the Mantrayāna. If he had, Tibet would now be filled with siddhas.[552]

In this view, Dromtönpa's alleged suppression of Atiśa's tantric activities marked him as a "demon" who prevented Tibetans, particularly those who followed the Kadam tradition, from practicing the most esoteric instructions of the Mantrayāna and becoming full-fledged tantric siddhas. On Gampopa's attempts to integrate the Kadam and tantric approaches, Davidson writes that after beginning his training with Milarepa, "it became clear that the esoteric teachings he had received [from Milarepa] did not entirely accord well with the Kadampa Mahāyānist perspective, and Gampopa would struggle with the tension between tantric perspectives and Mahāyānist insight for some time."[553] However, Gampopa did not reject the Kadam teachings outright. In establishing the Kagyü lineage, Gampopa combined the Kadam monastic and scholastic traditions, including their *lamrim* teachings, with Indian mahāsiddha practices brought to Tibet by Marpa and the mahāmudrā teachings he had received from Milarepa.[554] This tension, however—between esoteric and exoteric practices, between

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[551] Both *gdams ngag* and *man ngag* may be translations of the Sanskrit *upadeśa*, or *avavāda*. Here, Milarepa is suggesting that because the Kadampas lack secret oral instructions (*man ngag*), their teachings on Mantrayāna are inferior. Assuming that Gö's account is true, it is not clear if Milarepa would have been aware of the *Book of Kadam* at this time, since it was transmitted in secret.

[552] Brunnhölzl, trans., *When the Clouds Part*, 191. See also Roerich, trans., *The Blue Annals*, 455; Jinpa, trans., *Book of Kadam*, 6. *De nas gdams pa zab mo rnams bdag la gnang bar zhus pas / khyod kyis dbang thob bam gsung / mar yul blo ldan la rin chen rgyan drug dang bdem chog la sogs pa'i dbang mang po thob / dbu ru byang phyogs su bka' gdams kyi gdams ngag kyang mang du mnyan / zhag bcu gsum du mi 'chor ba'i ting nge 'dzin zhig kyang yod zhus pas / ha ha zhes bzhad mo chen po zhig mdzad / de 'dra ba'i ting nge 'dzin pas gzugs dang gzugs med pa'i (543) lha la bskal ba'i bar du mi 'chor ba'i ting nge 'dzin yod de / 'tshang rgya ba la mi phan / bye ma btshir bas mar khu mi 'ong ba dang 'dra / bka' gdams pa la yang gdams ngag yod te / man ngag med / bod kyi snying la 'dre zhugs pas / jo bo rje gsang sngags 'chad du ma bcug / de bcug na da lta bod grub thob kyis gang 'ong ba yin. Deb ther sngon po*, 542.

[553] Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 285.

[554] See Roerich, trans., *The Blue Annals*, 451–62.

monasticism and lay tantric practice, or between what Geoffrey Samuel has referred to as the "clerical" and "shamanic" dimensions of Tibetan Buddhism—would continue to play out in various ways in the later development of Tibetan Buddhist schools.[555]

Milarepa's criticism of the Kadampas specifically takes aim at their approach to the two stages of tantric practice—or the lack thereof—likely referring to the tradition of the four Kadam deities:

> "The Kadampa generation stage involves only single yidam deities, and their completion stage consists only of dissolving the surrounding and its contents into luminosity. Now, you [Gampopa] need to cultivate my caṇḍālī."[556] Following that, he conferred the empowerment of Vajravārahī upon Gampopa, who then practiced accordingly.[557]

As we have seen, Atiśa and other Kadampas were quite active in relation to tantric traditions, composing and translating numerous works on Guhyasamāja, Cakrasaṃvara, and other yoganiruttaratantra traditions. We have also discussed Atiśa's role in bringing Saraha's dohās to Tibet. However, in terms of Vajrayāna lineages, the Kadampas were mainly known for their practice of kriyātantra deities, or what Milarepa refers to as the "deities without consorts" (*lha pho reng*),[558] the four Kadam deities being the primary example. These

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[555] See Samuel, *Civilized Shamans*, 5–10. While Samuel's use of these categories has been justly criticized, especially for the problematic and anachronistic use of the term "shamanic," it provides a useful lens through which to consider tendencies in Tibetan Buddhism in a very broad way.

[556] *Gtum mo*; often translated as "inner heat" or "psychic heat." One of the principal *niṣpannakrama* practices of yoginītantras such as Cakrasaṃvara, it is also included in the "Six Dharmas of Nāropa," a practice tradition that Milarepa famously mastered and propagated.

[557] Brunnhölzl, trans., in *When the Clouds Part*, 191. Roerich translates this as follows: "The bKa'-gdam-pas' utpannakrama degree consists only of meditations on tutelary deities in the 'widower' aspect (i.e. without their śaktis; lha-pho-reṅ-po/the Text, fol. 24a has lńa-pho-reṅ-po/), and their sampannakrama degree consists only of meditations on the margins of the World and its inhabitants into the sphere of ābhāsvara (here śūnyatā is meant). Now you should meditate on my gTum-mo A-thuṅ…" *Blue Annals (Part I)*, 455–6 (interpolations are Roerich's). As Roerich notes, the Tibetan reads *lnga pho reng po* (or, in the edition I consulted, *lnga pho red po*); he takes this as *lha pho reng po*, the deity without a consort, or the deity in its "widower" aspect. *Bka' gdams pa la bskyed rim lnga pho red po re dang / rdzogs rim snod bcud 'od gsal du bsdud pa re las med / da khyod rang nga'i gtum mo a thung bsgoms dang gsung / … / nga rang gi lugs zhig kyang byed dgos gsung nas / phag mo'i byin rlabs kyi bka' cig gnang*. *Deb ther sngon po*, vol. 1, 543.

[558] See previous note.

practices lacked the advanced methods of the two stages of yoginītantra traditions such as Cakrasaṃvara or, in the above case, Vajravārahī.[559]

The claim attributed to Milarepa that the Kadampas lacked pith instructions, or secret oral instructions (*man ngag*), however, raises further questions. Kadampas considered the *Book of Kadam* to be the principal part of their esoteric oral transmission tradition, which would seem to contradict Milarepa's accusation that they lacked such instructions.[560] It is not clear, however, whether Milarepa would have been aware of the *Book of Kadam*, which was only passed down in secret and perhaps in a much more abbreviated format. In either case, the fact that the four Kadam deities and the Sixteen Drops tradition involved kriyātantra deities without consorts suggests that his criticism may have referred specifically to a lack of oral instructions on yoganiruttaratantra and yoginītantra practices, not to the *total* absence of oral instructions. Since Milarepa and the Kagyü tradition placed great emphasis on yoginītantra and yoganiruttaratantra practices, as well as the practice of mahāmudrā, the idea that the Kadampas would have restricted or discouraged such practices would certainly have bolstered their view that the Kadam path was insufficient as a path to buddhahood.

Another source where we see Dromtönpa characterized as a heavy-handed enforcer of tantric secrecy is Chim Namkha Drak's *Widely Renowned Life Story* (*Rnam thar yongs grags*). Atiśa inquires about introducing the Mahāsaṁghika (*dge 'dun phal chen pa'i sde*) lineage, but is discouraged from doing so by Dromtönpa:

> Lord [Atiśa] asked: "Should I establish the Mahāsāṃghika [ordination lineage in Tibet]?"

[559] *Rdo rje phag mo*, a.k.a. "Diamond Sow," a female deity related to Vajrayoginī.
[560] The three main Kadam transmission lineages, deriving from Dromtönpa's three main disciples (the "three brothers"; *sku mched gsum*), are the lineage of scriptures (*gzhung pa*), from Potowa; the lineage of instructions (*man ngag pa* or *gdams ngag pa*), from Chengawa; and the lineage of the *Book of Kadam* (*Bka' gdams glegs bam*), from Puchungwa. See Roesler, "The Kadampa," 9–10; and Miller, *The Jeweled Dialogues*, 212–14.

> Geshé Tönpa replied to this, "Please Lama, do not do this. It would be inappropriate in Tibet."[561]

Here, Dromtönpa may simply have been following the official Tibetan injunction established by the emperor Tri Relpachen (Khri Ral-pa can; 815–36 CE) that prohibited the diffusion of any ordination lineages besides the Mūlasarvāstivāda (*gzhi thams cad yod par smra ba*) lineage.[562] It seems, however, that along with Dromtönpa's restrictions on tantric teaching, this was a source of frustration for Atiśa. He responds to this denial with apparent exasperation, saying, "I am unable to explain the vows of Secret Mantra, the dohās, the vajra songs (*vajragīti*), and so forth; if I am even unable to establish a [monastic] lineage, there has been no purpose in my having come to Tibet!"[563]

Taken at face value, such statements appear to confirm Milarepa's view—that Dromtönpa actively sought to suppress, or at least significantly limit—Atiśa's tantric activities. However, while this may have been the perception in some circles, the picture of both Atiśa's and Dromtönpa's attitudes toward tantra is undoubtedly more complex. As Davidson points out, in the cases of both Atiśa and Dromtönpa, there was often a disparity between what they taught publicly and their more private study, practice, and translation:

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[561] Translation mine. *Jo bo'i zhal nas ngas phal chen po'i sde cig gzugs sam gsung ba la / dge bshes ston pas bla ma de mi mdzad par zhu / bod du 'di mi legs lags zhus pas*. *Rnam thar rgyas pa*, 179.

[562] Ulrike Roesler has suggested a connection between Atiśa's Mahāsāṃghika lineage and his tantric training, but this requires further research. (See translation of Eimer/NTGP in "Tantra and monasticism" section, ch. 4 notes). She writes, "The passage mentioned by Thubten Jinpa (*Book of Kadam*, 6) is episode 334 in H. Eimer's edition of the *Rnam thar rgyas pa* (yongs grags)… According to the *Rnam thar rgyas pa*, Atisha himself was ordained into the Mahāsāṃghika vinaya because of his tantric training (Eimer, episode 129). This makes me wonder whether the remark in episode 334 is also making a link between the Mahāsāṃghika vinaya and the ability to practice tantra: since he was not allowed to introduce the Mahāsāṃghika vinaya he felt he could not pass on tantric instructions and dohas to Tibetan monastics. On the other hand, we know that he did pass on tantric teachings, translated tantric texts, and practised tantra (apparently mostly rituals of the lower tantra classes) on various occasions while in Tibet. Also, the early Kadampas passed on Guhyasamaja." Roesler, email communication, 7/23/23.

[563] Translation mine. *Jo bo'i zhal nas / gsang sngags kyi sdom pa dang / do ha rdo rje'i glu la sogs pa yang bshad dbang med / sde gzugs ('dzugs?) dbang yang med na / kho bo bod du 'ongs pa la don ma mchis gsung*. *Rnam thar yongs grags*, 179. See also Jinpa, *Book of Kadam*, 6; Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 111.

> When we compare his [Atiśa's] teaching schedule with the tantric texts that he and his Tibetan followers were translating at this time, we can appreciate the difference: while Atiśa was teaching the *Ratnagotravibhāga* in Sölnak Tangpoché, he and Dromtön were translating tantric ritual manuals—Cakrasaṃvara, Yamāntaka, and so forth.[564]

We have already seen abundant evidence of Atiśa actively translating and composing tantric commentaries, commenting on mahāmudrā, and disseminating Saraha's dohās. The scope of these texts goes well beyond the well-known image of Atiśa as primarily a promoter of sūtra-oriented traditions, or even of lower tantric deities, such as Avalokiteśvara and Tārā. We can also see that characterizations of Dromtönpa as merely a puritanical reformer are overly reductive. Dromtönpa clearly *was* a recipient of important tantric lineages from Atiśa, including, as we have seen in the *Book of Kadam*, transmissions of the dohās, which focused largely on yoginītantra doctrines and practices. At the same time, he appears to have exercised extreme caution regarding the dissemination of these teachings. One way to read this, as expressed by Thupten Jinpa, is that Dromtönpa was

> not only… following in the noble tradition of the early Tibetan monarchs, who imposed restrictions on the dissemination of the highest yoga class of tantra, but also, more importantly, he may have been keeping vigilant about one of the express purposes of bringing Atiśa to Tibet—to help reform and restore the Buddhadharma in light of the misconstrual and abuse of some Vajrayana teachings, especially sexual practices.[565]

Whether or not Milarepa (or other Kagyüpas) really held the views about Atiśa, Dromtönpa, and the Kadam tradition that Gö attributes to him is a subject that merits further investigation. Based on these statements, however, we can at least consider the strong possibility that some saw Dromtönpa not as a champion rescuing the Buddhist teachings

[564] Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 111.
[565] Jinpa, *Book of Kadam*, 6.

from moral degeneration, but as an anti-tantric puritan who hindered the transmission of higher tantric teachings in the Kadam tradition.

Conclusions

As we have seen, while posthumous biographical representations of Atiśa varied widely, they consistently portrayed him as a figure who focused principally on the transmission of Sūtrayāna doctrines, despite ample evidence of his expertise in yoganiruttaratantra traditions and mahāsiddha dohās and his apparent desire to transmit them more widely. The *Book of Kadam*—whose historical origins remain obscure—complicated this view somewhat, depicting Atiśa in dialogue with Dromtönpa on the relationship between the Sūtrayāna and the Vajrayāna, among other subjects. The *Book* also served to affirm Drom's exalted status—as spiritual heir to Atiśa, founder of the Kadam tradition, and a central figure in the maṇḍala of the Sixteen Drops. The related tradition of the four Kadam deities, consisting only of kriyātantra deities, seemed to confirm that the primary mission of the Kadam tradition—at least as constructed by the *Book of Kadam*—was the transmission of exoteric doctrines and uncontroversial tantric lineages. Many questions remain to be explored regarding the processes and figures involved in this particular telling of the history of the Kadam tradition, and the reasons it was told in this way.

Conclusion

As should be clear from the preceding chapters, Atiśa was a figure who was far more complex than widely accepted traditional biographical narratives would seem to indicate. We see, in both hagiographical and modern depictions of him, a master who, despite his undisputed expertise in the tantras, dedicated his twelve years in Tibet to teaching almost exclusively on Sūtrayāna practices, apart from his well-known dedication to the kriyātantra deities Avalokiteśvara and Tārā. He is known as one of the principal protagonists of the later dissemination, a period largely characterized by a wave of translations of Indian tantras, including the then recently emerged yoginītantras; yet, paradoxically, he is also associated with the movement to control and limit the dissemination of those very tantric teachings. As we have seen, he was highly engaged with those very traditions that more conservative reformists saw as a threat, composing commentaries on tantric systems such as Cakrasaṃvara and Guhyasamāja, on Saraha's dohās, and on the mahāmudrā traditions so closely associated with the mahāsiddhas (who were considered anything but conservative). Despite his expertise and erudition in these traditions, however, the Kadam tradition, as well as the later Geluk, or "New Kadam" tradition, held him up as an exemplar of monastic ethical discipline, saintly humility, and austerity, largely ignoring (or selectively marginalizing) a significant portion of his corpus. A master who we know from his writings to have had a great affinity for the teachings of the radically unconventional mahāsiddhas became seen as an ally of those who sought to limit those very teachings. If we are to accept the accounts of later historians, such as Gö Lotsāwa, Atiśa and the Kadampas were even criticized by later Kagyüpas for their supposedly parsimonious attitude towards teaching and transmitting the innermost doctrines of the tantras.

The reasons for this disparity of views regarding Atiśa are surely difficult to unravel, and here we have only begun to scratch the surface in our understanding. We can, however, determine some of the possible motives for ignoring Atiśa's potentially controversial writings and selectively representing him as a neo-conservative reformer. Among these were the reformist views of the Gugé monarchs, who sought to legitimate their own institutional ambitions by highlighting their own ties to Indian monastic Buddhist lineages; and the closely linked aims of figures such as Dromtönpa, who sought to present the Kadam tradition as a tradition emphasizing ethical rigor and mastery of Sūtrayāna doctrines, not freewheeling tantric abandon. In the background of this story were the simmering tensions between the more strident of the Sarma reformers, who were concerned with boosting their own legitimacy, authenticity, and purity, and the followers of the old traditions—the Nyingmapas—who represented, for many Sarma polemicists, the degeneration of the fundamentals of Buddhism. In the end, we may have only begun to peek beneath the layers of mythologization that have created the revered figure known simply as the "Great Lord Atiśa."

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