



The *Cakrasamvara Tantra*: Its History, Interpretation, and Practice in India and Tibet

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Abstract

This essay explores the history of the *Cakrasamvara Tantra* and its related practice traditions. Beginning with the traditional *Cakrasamvara* origin myths, it introduces evidence concerning social context in which it was likely composed, and explores the debate concerning the degree to which it was influenced by Hindu Shaiva tantric traditions. It argues that the development of this tradition cannot be fully understood without taking into consideration the political ramifications of the tradition's mythology and iconography. The essay also overviews both the major practices associated with this tradition, and provides a short history of its transmission to Nepal and Tibet.

1. *The Yoginītantras*

The form of Buddhism that came to be known as the 'adamantine vehicle' (*vajrayāna*), and which is also known in Western literature as 'tantric' or 'esoteric' Buddhism, has received increasing academic attention over the past generation, partly as a result of the Tibetan diaspora. Tantric Buddhism developed within the larger Mahāyāna tradition, and it developed gradually, over the course of several centuries beginning no later than the sixth century. By approximately the seventh century, its advocates began to conceive of esoteric Buddhism as a distinct methodology, the 'method of mantra' (*mantranaya*), distinct from the 'method of the perfections' (*pāramitānaya*) of the early Mahāyāna (Kapstein 2001, p. 245).

Early Buddhist tantras generally followed the scriptural model of Mahāyāna sūtras. By the late eighth century, Indian Buddhist authors began composing a genre of tantric Buddhist scripture that departed radically from earlier Buddhist textual models (Gray 2005a). These texts were known as *Yoginītantras*, largely on account of their focus on a class of female deities known as *yoginīs* and *ḍākinīs*. They were an ambiguous group of entities and were generally seen as horrific quasi-human or non-human beings, notorious for their love of human flesh, and associated with black magic. However, in this literature they gained a more positive association as enlightening goddesses, at least for the initiated men brave

enough to interact with them (Herrmann-Pfandt 1992, 1996). The Yoginītantras were also infamous for their descriptions of transgressive ritual practices, involving violence and sexuality. They tended to be less obviously 'Buddhist', in part because of their departure from earlier Buddhist textual models. For these reasons, the Yoginītantras gave rise to considerable controversy within Buddhist communities (Gray 2005b).

The earliest known Yoginītantra, the *Sarvabuddhasamayoga-ḍākinījālasamvara-tantra*, was likely composed by the late seventh or early eighth century, as evidenced by its inclusion in Amoghavajra's *Index of the Vajrasekharasūtra-yoga in Eighteen Sections*, which he composed shortly after his return to China from South Asia in 746 CE (Giebel 1995). It was followed by two influential tantras, the *Cakrasamvara* and *Hevajra Tantras*, both of which were composed *ca.* the late eighth or early ninth century,¹ and were influenced by this text. The composition of the Yoginītantras continued for centuries, ending with the demise of Buddhism in India *ca.* the thirteenth century.

2. The Cakrasamvara Tantra and Its Contents

The *Cakrasamvara Tantra*, as it now stands, is a relatively short work of approximately 700 stanzas in 51 chapters.² It is a text that is known by several different titles. It refers to itself, at the end of each chapter, as the *Discourse of Śrī Heruka (śrīherukābhīdhāna)*. The colophon at the end of the text refers to it as the 'Binding of the Wheels', *Cakrasamvara*; this is the name by which it is most commonly known in the Tibetan tradition. In India, it was commonly called 'Samvara Light', *Laghusamvara*. As it currently stands, the text lives up to its 'light' designation. It is a rather cryptic text, focusing on elements of practice, but generally failing to give sufficient information to enable one to successfully undertake these practices. This is typical of esoteric Buddhist literature, and was almost certainly intentional. Scriptures such as the *Cakrasamvara Tantra* were not meant to provide a full accounting of the tradition's practices, but merely hint at these, as the 'secret' to be attained by those who are properly initiated by a master. Only then would the master disclose the full details of practice to the initiated adept (Gray 2005a).

Like most tantras, the *Cakrasamvara Tantra* is not a doctrinal, but a practice-oriented text. There are references to important Buddhist doctrinal teachings, such as the threefold embodiment (*trikāya*) of a buddha, which is briefly discussed in Chapter 10. However, these brief references in no way contributed to the development of Buddhist philosophy and theology. We might take, for example, in the following verse in Chapter 13: 'One should experience everything, whatever comes naturally within the path of the sense powers, as being composed of buddhas, through the yoga of ultimate equipoise.'³ This verse occurs, rather anomalously, in the middle of descriptions of magical rituals that can be performed with

the protective ‘armor’ (*kavaca*) mantras of the chief deity, Heruka. It evokes the advanced yogic practices in which one imagines the constituents of one’s body, as well as the elements of one’s experience, as composed of buddhas. This is a practice that is designed to radically transform the way in which conceives of oneself and experiences the world.

Some commentators chose to interpret verses such as these in doctrinal terms. For example, the early tenth century commentator Bhavyakīrti interprets it in terms of the Pramāṇa and Yogācāra schools of Buddhist philosophy, which constituted the dominant schools of Indian Buddhist thought at this time (Davidson 1999; Lindtner 1994, 1997). He commented as follows:

Regarding [the verse quoted above] – **whatever** is explained as referring to all of the realms of the world without exception. That which is of **the path of the sense powers** is analyzed with wisdom by means of both direct perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inference (*anumāna*). Whatever is realized **comes naturally**. **Through the yoga of ultimate equipoise** in this sort of reality or nature, that is, through the application of expedience and wisdom, **everything should be experienced as being composed of buddhas**, meaning that all things should be regarded as the reality of the buddhas. This is because, as was said by the scions of the Victor, ‘These three worlds are mind only.’ That is, everything exists as mind only.⁴

Commentary such as this is fascinating, and it served an important purpose, namely, providing a doctrinal contextualization, for a text that was almost entirely bereft of doctrinal exposition.

The *Cakrasamvara Tantra* is largely dedicated to describing ritual, magical, and meditative practices. These practices can be categorized with respect to the type of ‘achievement’ (*siddhi*) that their successful application is thought to yield. These are the supramundane achievement (*lokottarasiddhi*) of complete awakening, and the mundane powers (*laukikasiddhi*) of flight, invisibility, pacifying enemies, and so forth.

The former, awakening, is achieved by the advanced meditative practices that are usually grouped under the rubrics of ‘creation stage’ (*utpattikrama*) and ‘perfecting stage’ (*niṣpannakrama*) practice.⁵ The *Cakrasamvara Tantra*, however, is extremely secretive concerning advanced meditative practices, about which it only provides vague hints. For example, a central element of ‘creation stage’ meditation is the practice of visualizing oneself as a deity, and visualizing the mandala with its complete array of deities. The text does not provide a full, detailed description of the mandala itself. The central deities, Heruka and his consort Vajravārahī, are described, but their descriptions are scattered throughout several chapters. The other 60 deities of the mandala are not described at all, but only mentioned by name. There is no coherent description of the meditation practices in which you visualize yourself as the deity, or of the mandala itself. The advanced perfection stage meditation practices, which focus on the subtle body, are not mentioned all, except perhaps in vague hints that are unpacked by the commentators.

The text primarily focuses on the mundane powers, and the ritual practices that can achieve them. The key element to these practices is the recitation of mantras. The *Cakrasamvara Tantra* dedicates many chapters to the esoteric coding of mantras and the description of their ritual applications. Mantras are ‘repeated’ (*jāpa*), recited either silently or audibly. During the consecration ceremony, the master teaches the adept the mantras of the tradition’s deities. The *Cakrasamvara Tantra* relates, directly or indirectly, many dozens of mantras. The central deity, Heruka, has a set of three mantras, a long ‘root mantra’ (*mūlamantra*), a shorter ‘essence mantra’ (*hṛdayamantra*), and an even shorter ‘quintessence mantra’ (*upahṛdayamantra*). The text also presents the essence and quintessence mantras of Vajravārāhī, his consort. Both also have a set of very short mantras known as ‘armor mantras’ (*kavaca*). The remaining 60 deities in the mandala each have their own mantra. The text also relates several other mantras, such as the ‘laughter mantra’ and ‘victory of the triple world’ (*trailokyavijaya*) mantras.

Mantras are recited in the context of the creation stage practices, in which the meditator identifies with one or more of the deities and recites the mantra in conjunction with visualization practices. The mantras are also recited to invoke the deities in various ritual practices. The *Cakrasamvara Tantra* also describes numerous ritual applications of the mantras, in which they are used to enchant objects or individuals in order to perform various magical operations.⁶ Overall, 23 of the *Cakrasamvara Tantra*’s 51 chapters are directly concerned with the selection of the mantras and/or their magical applications. The use of mantras is indirectly implied by many of the other chapters. Judging by the large number of chapters devoted to the description of these magical rites, they appear to have been an important element of the practice tradition in India.

Most of the rites described in the text are magical operations involving the mantras. For example, Chapter 12 relates the following procedure for becoming invisible employing Heruka’s quintessence mantra:

Take the skin of the sole of the foot of the corpse of a hero, pulverize it with human blood, and insert antimony in the middle of the ball. Saturate it with realgar, bovine concretion, saffron, and blood. Dry it in the shade and encase it in the three metals, and also make it habitable. It is, moreover, prepared during the Puṣya lunar mansion; ensure it is made during Puṣya. Putting it in Śrī Heruka’s mouth, cover his mouth with one’s left hand. Furthermore, one should repeat [the mantra] one hundred and eight times. From that moment one is rendered invisible without any shadow. As one cannot even be seen by gods, how much less [is the chance of being seen] by humans? Taking it out of one’s mouth, one will be visible.⁷

As one can see, this description, while somewhat detailed, is deliberately ambiguous, and does not provide sufficient information for its practice. The expression ‘make it habitable’ is an oblique reference to the rite of consecration (*adhivāsana*), which involves the invocation of deities to

inhabit the object being consecrated. Moreover, the expression ‘Śrī Heruka’s mouth’ is deliberately ambiguous. According to the late ninth-century commentator Bhavabhaṭṭa, it is the yogī who, visualizing himself as Heruka, puts the pill in his own mouth to achieve invisibility (Pandey 2002, p. 88). However, the fifteenth-century Tibetan commentator, Tsongkhapa, understands this rite as involving a ‘zombie’ (*vetāla*), a corpse in a charnel ground that is reanimated via the insertion of the pill in its mouth.⁸ There is considerable uncertainty regarding the practice of most of the rituals described in this text. Contemporary Tibetan traditions appear to pay little heed to these rites, and instead focus on the ‘secret’ practices that are thought to rapidly lead to the attainment of awakening. These will be discussed in more depth in Section 5 below.

3. Mythic History of the Cakrasamvara Tantra

According to the tradition, the *Cakrasamvara Tantra* is a revealed text, originating in the teaching activity of the cosmic Buddha Mahāvajradhara. It was revealed in the distant past, at a time when the Hindu deity Bhairava and his followers were allegedly causing problems in the world through their immoral behavior, namely, violence and wanton sexuality. According to the myth, Bhairava and his consort Kālārātri seized control of Mount Sumeru, and their retinue seized 24 other power places located throughout South Asia and the Himalayan region. In response to this, Mahāvajradhara and his retinue manifested in the world in the Śaiva guise. They then subdued the Hindu deities, and took control of these power places. They thus established the Cakrasamvara mandala on earth, and they continue to reside there, in occult forms, accessible to the faithful (Davidson 1991; Gray 2007, pp. 44–54).

At this time, Heruka taught the *Discourse of Heruka*. Originally, it was taught as a massive text of 100,000 or more stanzas in length. Out of compassion for the sentient beings of the future, who would have short life spans and even shorter attention spans, he also taught it in an abbreviated form, as the *Laghusamvara*, ‘*Samvara Light*’. This is the form that has survived to the present day. One should note that there is no evidence that the longer text ever existed and that many tantric Buddhist traditions claim that their root texts originated as texts of 100,000 or more stanzas.

According to the tradition, the *Cakrasamvara Tantra* is a teaching that is preserved by the deities, who abide in the power places as well as in Buddhist pure lands (Gray 2005a). When the karmic circumstances are right, they periodically reveal it to humans. According to the Tibetan historian gZhon-nu-dpal, the scripture and its associated practice tradition has been revealed not once, but twice, in the current historical era. The tradition was revealed by Heruka to his consort Vajravārāhī, who taught it to the *siddha* or ‘tantric saint’ Lūipa. It was revealed again by Vajradhara

to the bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi, who taught it to the *siddha* Saraha (Roerich 1976, pp. 380–97). Both of these lineages converge on the figures of the *siddha* Tilopa and his disciple Nāropa (956–1040 CE), who evidently played a very important role in the preservation of this tradition in India.⁹ And as Nāropa had several students from the Kathmandu valley and Tibet, he also played a key role in its dissemination to these regions (Lo Bue 1997).

4. *The Origin and Development of the Cakrasamvara Tantra*

Academic scholarship cannot confirm the legendary accounts of the *Cakrasamvara Tantra's* origin. However, the notion that it was revealed to the *siddhas* Lūpa and Saraha more or less matches the period in which the scripture was likely composed, in the late eighth or early ninth century. While an exact date for the text's composition cannot be pinpointed, the mid-to-late eighth century is suggested by references to the text in a dateable commentary (Davidson 1981, pp. 7–8; Gray 2007, pp. 13–14). It was composed no later than the early ninth century. Jayabhadra, the third abbot of the Vikramaśīla monastery who was active *ca.* this time period, composed a commentary on the text.¹⁰

Through careful study of the text, its commentaries, and related literature, it is clear that this work was not composed as a singular work by a single author. Rather, the text was composed over time, by at least several hands and drawing on numerous sources. The earliest version of the *Cakrasamvara Tantra* was a somewhat shorter text that exhibited significant influence from Śaiva Hindu sources and relatively little Buddhist influence. Alexis Sanderson, in a series of articles, has demonstrated the dependence of the *Cakrasamvara Tantra* on a closely related set of Śaiva scriptures, the *Jayadrathayāmala Tantra*, the *Picumata*, the *Tantrasadbhāvatāntra*, and the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* (1994, 2001). These scriptures were apparently produced by a quasi-heretical Śaiva sect, the Kāpālikas. This association strongly suggests that the *Cakrasamvara Tantra*, in its initial stage of development, was composed outside of normative monastic Buddhist institutional settings. The text also drew upon several Buddhist sources.¹¹

Despite its dependence on several Buddhist texts, the *Cakrasamvara Tantra*, as it existed in the early ninth century, was noticeable for the conspicuous presence of Śaiva deities and terminology and absence of Buddhist terminology. In fact, the segments of the text that exhibit the strongest use of Buddhist terminology appear to be later additions. These segments include the opening of Chapter 10, which consists of five verses dealing with theory of the triple body (*trikāya*) of a Buddha, awkwardly attached to a prose chapter that addresses the ritual applications of Heruka's essence mantra. They also include the second half of Chapter 50. This chapter opens with another description of the ritual uses of mantras, and then shifts abruptly to a passage associating the ten classes of

pilgrimage places with the ten bodhisattva grounds. The fifty-first chapter is also thoroughly Buddhist in character.

Interestingly, only the first of these sections were present in the early ninth century version of the text, as attested by Jayabhadra's commentary, which does comment on the first five verses of Chapter 10, but does not comment on the latter half of Chapter 50 or Chapter 51. This lacuna is confirmed by one of the *Cakrasamvara Tantra's* 'Explanatory Tantras' (*vyākhyātantra*), the *Ḍākāṃṇava Tantra*, which states that the *Laghusamvara* has 50 chapters.¹² However, Bhavabhaṭṭa, the fifth abbot of Vikramaśīla who was active ca. 900 CE, does comment on these passages. Evidently, the heavily Buddhist conclusion of the text was composed after the text had been adopted in Buddhist monastic institutions such as Vikramaśīla during the ninth century. This would have occurred during the latter half of the ninth century, after the composition of the *Ḍākāṃṇava Tantra* and Jayabhadra's commentary, but before the composition of Bhavabhaṭṭa's.

By the beginning of the tenth century, the scripture had reached a form very similar to what has come down to us, in the surviving Sanskrit manuscripts and Tibetan translations. In fact, the first Tibetan translation was made less than a century later, by the Tibetan Rin-chen-bzang-po and the Kashmiri pandit Padmākaravarma.

The social context in which the *Cakrasamvara* and related tantras were composed has been the subject of considerable controversy. The evidence of Śaiva influence and the numerous breaks with earlier Mahāyāna Buddhist textual models exhibited in this literature imply that they may not have been composed in normative monastic Buddhist contexts. These factors led David Ruegg to posit a non-sectarian 'religious substratum' from which both Buddhist and Hindu traditions drew elements of their practice traditions (Ruegg 1964, 2001). This argument has been criticized by Alexis Sanderson, who contends that there is no evidence for a 'religious substratum' or 'common cultic stock', and has argued that there is strong evidence for Buddhist textual dependence on Śaiva scriptures (1994, pp. 92–3). Davidson, on the other hand, has argued that tantric Buddhism does not derive from a singular source, be it a generic substratum or a rival Śaiva tradition. Instead, he holds that it derives from diverse sources, including 'local, tribal, and outcaste groups existing in a fluid state outside the formal institutions of religious authority' (2002, p. 173).

According to the traditional histories, traditions such as the *Cakrasamvara Tantra* originated with the *siddhas*, who appear to have constituted an alternate locus of authority, positioned outside of the established religious institutions. The *siddhas* are highlighted as key figures in both Buddhist and Hindu tantric lineage lists (White 1996, Chapter 4). Appearing in Buddhist literature during the eighth century, just as the Yoginītantras were being composed, *siddhas* are portrayed as powerful but morally ambiguous figures, strongly associated with magical power, liminal spaces (such as wilderness, charnel grounds, etc.), and non-Buddhist traditions

(Davidson 2002, Chapter 5). Given these associations, it seems reasonable to conclude that these texts were not composed within mainstream Buddhist institutions.

In possible support of Ruegg's thesis, their milieu appears to have been far more fluid than the institutionalized forms of Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Often antinomian, it does not seem to be a safe assumption that the *siddhas* advocated strong sectarian identities. Despite this caveat, Sanderson's argument seems particularly compelling. While there are many gaps in our knowledge concerning the social context in which scriptures such as the *Cakrasamvara Tantra* arose, it may be naïve to presuppose an 'enlightened' and apolitical *siddha* elite for whom religious identity would not be a compelling issue, as Richard Cohen has argued (2006). The political and sectarian nature of the tradition is apparent in its origin myth, and vividly depicted in its iconography. In written descriptions and visual depictions, the central deities, Heruka and Vajravārāhī, are portrayed as trampling upon the supine Hindu deities Bhairava and Kālarātri. The tradition exhibits the processes of assimilation, transformation, and subordination that characterize the inter-sectarian appropriation in South Asia, as John Holt has argued in the context of Sri Lanka (1991, 2004).

Ruegg is correct that this iconography is commonly interpreted by Buddhists in terms of the 'supramundane/mundane' (*lokottara/laulika*) dichotomy. However, he is mistaken when he characterizes as 'etic' the 'idea of a hostile – and more or less historicized and secular – encounter "Buddhism *vs.* Hinduism"' (2001, p. 735). While we cannot anachronistically project modern constructions of Buddhist and Hindu identities into the early medieval period, there are numerous premodern Buddhist accounts that portray this iconography in political terms. For example, Tāranātha's hagiography of the *siddhi* Kṛṣṇācārya describes religious conflict between Buddhists and Hindus triggered by this iconography, indicating that it was seen as offensive by some Hindus (Templeman 1989, pp. 34–6). Ruegg also fails to note that the inclusion of Hindu deities in the subordinate position of the Buddhist 'supramundane/mundane' dichotomy is invariably political, in that it attempts to include the Hindu deities within a totalizing cosmic hierarchy that privileges the Buddhist perspective.

Buddhist accounts of the lives of the *siddhas* routinely portray them as engaging in political activities designed to establish or maintain Buddhist identities and institutions, such as defending contested pilgrimage sites and Buddhist monasteries from usurpation by non-Buddhists.¹³ Naturally, it is not clear if these accounts reflect sectarianism on the part of the *siddhas* themselves or on the part of their hagiographers, who were writing in different time periods and social contexts. The mythic accounts of the tradition's origin clearly suggest sectarian tension, although these were composed after the root tantra itself. Moreover, it may be possible to link the worship of certain deities with distinct traditions, with deities such as

Mahākāla and Bhairava indicating Hindu sectarian identities, and deities such as Vajrapāṇi and Heruka indicting Buddhist sectarian identities. But these assumptions are not always safe, as there was clearly a great deal of back and forth appropriation of deities among these traditions. For example, while Mahākāla and Bhairava originated as Śaiva deities, they were appropriated quite rapidly into tantric Buddhist pantheons (Granoff 1979). Heruka, too, originally a Buddhist transformation of Bhairava, later appears in a tenth-century Hindu scripture, the *Kālikā-purāṇa* (Davidson 2002, p. 213). The Hindu deity Viṣṇu and the Buddha have also been subject to back and forth appropriation (Holt 2004).

5. Practice Traditions

Within the context of tantric Buddhist traditions, in order to practice the meditative and ritual practices described in the tantras, one must first receive the consecration rites (*abhiṣeka*) that initiate one into the tradition. Accordingly, the *Cakrasamvara Tantra* covers the ritual of drawing the mandala in its second chapter; this establishes the sacred precinct in which the consecration rites are performed.

The Cakrasamvara mandala is structurally simple, consisting of a series of concentric rings. It centers upon the divine couple of Heruka and Vajravārāhī, united in sexual embrace. Surrounding them is the 'gnosis wheel' (*jñānacakra*), which consists of the four 'essence yoginīs', Ḍākinī, Lāmā, Khaṇḍarohā, and Rūpiṇī. They are surrounded by three additional wheels known (respectively, from inner to outermost) as the 'mind', 'speech', and 'body' wheels. Each of these wheels consists of eight deity couples, for a total of 16 deities each. These deities are colored blue, red, and white, respectively, and the 24 couples are understood to correspond to the 24 sacred spaces conquered by these deities in the distant past. These three wheels are understood to correspond to the 'triple world' (*trailokya*) cosmos of ancient India, consisting of the heavens, surface world, and underworld. They are also understood to correspond to the three bodies of a Buddha. These, in turn, are surrounded by the 'commitment wheel' (*samayacakra*), which consists of eight fierce goddesses who guard the gates and quarters of the mandala palace. The periphery of the mandala is often illustrated with the 'eight great charnel grounds'.

According to the *Cakrasamvara Tantra*, the mandala should be drawn with colored powders on purified ground in an isolated spot, using pigments derived from a charnel ground, such as ground charcoal, bone, and brick. In contemporary Tibetan traditions, it is drawn with colored sand particles, a practice that apparently maintains an old Indian tradition (Boord 1998).

The third chapter then describes the process of consecration. As in the case of other tantras in the 'unexcelled yogatantra' class, the *Cakrasamvara Tantra* is understood to require the performance of four rites of consecration:

(i) the ‘vase consecration’ (*kalasābhiṣeka*), (ii) ‘secret consecration’ (*guhyaābhiṣeka*), (iii) ‘gnosis of the consort consecration’ (*prajñājñānābhiṣeka*), and (iv) the ‘fourth consecration’ (*caturthābhiṣeka*). The first of these, the vase consecration, is a multistep ritual process that includes all of the consecrations developed within the earlier strata of Buddhist tantra known as the Yogatantras (Snellgrove 1987, pp. 213–43).

The subsequent consecrations, developed in the Mahāyoga and Yoginītantras from the late seventh century onward, called for the master and adept to sexually unite with a female consort. In the first of these, the ‘secret consecration’, the master engages in sexual union with a consort, and then places a drop of the mixed sexual fluids produced from this union on the adept’s tongue. Next, in the ‘gnosis of the consort consecration’, the adept is instructed in sexual union with a consort. This is then followed by the cryptic ‘fourth consecration’, which is not mentioned at all in the *Cakrasamvara Tantra*. It is understood by commentators to be the disclosure of the tradition’s secret oral instructions to the adept.

These consecrations are thought to authorize the adept to practice the tradition’s advanced yogic practices. These include the sexual yoga of the ‘four joys’ (*caturānanda*), which involve an orgasm transformed and experientially heightened through the use of yogic techniques. They also include the process of ‘self-consecration’, in which the adept visualizes his or her body as being pervaded by the wheels of the mandala, as well as the practice of the ‘fury fire’ (*caṇḍālī*), in which this internally visualized geography is consumed in a blaze of internal fire, that ascends the central channel and transforms the internally visualized subtle body (Davidson 2002, pp. 197–8).

Once the adept has been consecrated, he or she is obligated to begin a daily practice of meditation, using one of the tradition’s meditation manuals (*sādhana*). The Cakrasamvara tradition, like other tantric Buddhist traditions in the ‘unexcelled yoga’ class, calls for its practitioners to begin with ‘creation stage’ meditation practices. These involve visualization of the mandala, and oneself as a mandala deity. Once one has achieved mastery of this form of meditation, one can then progress to the ‘perfecting stage’ meditation practices, which involve the manipulation and mastery of the channels (*nāḍī*) and energy centers (*cakra*) of the inner subtle body, and the control of the subtle ‘winds’ (*prāṇa*) and ‘drops’ (*bindu*) that move within them.

The characteristic meditation technique in the Cakrasamvara tradition is ‘body mandala’ (*kāyāmaṇḍala*) practice. It is a technique that integrates the creation and perfecting stages, as it begins with visualization techniques, but later progresses to meditation processes concerning the subtle body. In this practice, the meditator visualizes his or her body as pervaded by the Cakrasamvara mandala. As this mandala is also seen as pervading the universe, this meditation tradition truly envisions the body as a

microcosm, with the mandala as the link that integrates the multiple levels of reality. Through this, one can achieve the gnosis of the ‘reality body’ (*dharmakāya*) of a buddha, ‘an enlightened form in which one is pantheistically identical with the entire universe’ (Wedemeyer 2007, p. 399).

These practices are also understood to purify one’s conception of one’s body, transforming it from a vessel of ‘filth’ into a divine abode. This reconceptualization of the body is a prerequisite for the advanced perfecting stage practices involving the networks of channels that constitute the subtle body.¹⁴ In the advanced stages of practice, the ‘network of *ḍākinīs*’ (*ḍākinījāla*), which designates in the early stages of practice to the hosts of goddesses who inhabit the mandala’s wheels, refers to the channels of the subtle body, which must be ‘bound’ or ‘united’ (*samvara*), subjected to control via yogic postures (*yantra*) and special breathing techniques.

The ‘sexual practices’ that the *Cakrasamvara Tantra* and related literature appear to advocate inspired considerable controversy. The *Cakrasamvara Tantra* itself briefly describes the sexual components of the second and third consecrations. Having received consecration, the male adept needs to find a female partner for sexual practices, called a ‘messenger’ (*dūtī*). The *Cakrasamvara Tantra* then describes in some detail the ‘families’ (*kula*) of female practitioners whom the adept must seek out. Over the course of ten chapters (Chapters 15–24), it relates their characteristic appearances so that he can identify them, as well as the physical signs and verbal codes that he must display to correctly identify himself and win their favor. The text also evokes, without providing any detailed descriptions, the sexual practices that he should conduct with her. This is the ‘great worship of the consort’ (*mudrāmahāpūjā*), which involves sexual union for the purpose of producing mixed male and female sexual fluids, which are then consumed by the couple in order to give rise to magical powers (*siddhi*) such as flight. This tradition thus seems to mirror the earlier traditions of Hindu tantric practice, which have been studied in detail by David White (2003). No mention is made in the *Cakrasamvara Tantra* of the more complex ‘sexual yogas’ involving the ‘four joys’, the retention of the sexual fluids, and their redirection into the central channel of the subtle body. However, several commentators interpret the *Cakrasamvara Tantra* in terms of these practices.

These practices triggered considerable controversy, largely because they would entail a violation of the monastic vow of chastity. As a result, Buddhist masters such as Atīṣa Dipaṃkaraśrībhadrā (982–1054 CE) urged Buddhist monks to refrain from participating in these practices. Alternative practices were developed that did not require union with a physical consort (*karmamudrā*). These would entail practicing with a visualized partner, known as a ‘symbolic consort’ (*samayamudrā*) or ‘gnosis consort’ (*jñānamudrā*). There was also debate regarding which of these forms of practice was superior (Gray 2007, pp. 103–31). Although there is

considerable secrecy surrounding the sexual practices, there are reports by 'insiders' that they are still practiced by some contemporary Tibetan lamas (Campbell 1996).

It is important to note, however, that the only evidence we have concerning these practices (in the premodern period) is textual. As a result, we only have firm evidence for the rhetoric of sexual practices, and it is thus not possible to confirm whether these textual passages accurately reflect the practice of members of the Buddhist community, past or present. In fact, both David White and Ronald Davidson have been criticized for inconsistencies in their interpretation of the tantric literature. Both appear to interpret descriptions of the sexual practices literally, while elsewhere rejecting literal interpretive strategies (Doniger 2004; Wedemeyer 2006). However, in the case of tantric traditions such as the *Cakrasamvara*, we have sufficient evidence to conclude that sexual practices were practiced by some communities, even as they were rejected by others. This evidence includes not only the ambiguous passages in the tantras, but also the detailed accounts in the commentaries. We also have criticisms by masters such as Atīṣa, who was almost certainly motivated to write his critique by the perception that some monks were indeed undertaking these practices. The reports of contemporary practitioners such as June Campbell suggest that the silence on the part of many of the authority figures of contemporary Tibetan traditions may be strategic, a manifestation of the veil of secrecy that traditionally shrouds these practices.

6. *The Dissemination of the Cakrasamvara Tradition to Tibet*

As discussed above, the *Cakrasamvara Tantra* appears to have entered the curricula of Indian Buddhist monastic institutions such as Vikramaśīla monastery during the ninth century. When Tibetans resumed their travels to India in the late tenth century in search of Buddhist teachings, they discovered that the *Cakrasamvara Tantra* was one of the most popular traditions there. They also encountered there many students of the great saint Nāropa, a number of whom were involved with the dissemination of the tradition to Tibet (Lo Bue 1997).

Two distinct Tibetan translations of the *Cakrasamvara Tantra* were made. The earliest was undertaken by the Tibetan Rin-chen bZang-po and the Kashmiri scholar Padmākara-varma while Rin-chen bZang-po was studying in Kashmir, sometime between 975 and 988 CE (Tucci 1988, pp. 3–4). Their original translation appears to be lost. However, it was revised three times by the later generations of Buddhist scholars. The best-known revised translation, which is preserved in the Tibetan canon, was produced by the Tibetan Marpa Chos-kyi dbang-phyug, usually known as Marpa Dopa or Mardo (1043–1138), together with the Indian scholar Prajñākīrti.¹⁵

Lastly, the Tibetan translator Mal-gyo bLo-gros-grags produced an independent translation. He traveled to Nepal during the late eleventh century and studied with some of the disciples of Nāropa who were living there (Roerich 1976, p. 382). After returning to Tibet, he served as a guru to Sa-chen Kun-dga' sNying-po (1092–1158 CE), one of the early lamas of the Sakya school of Tibetan Buddhism (Davidson 2005, pp. 293–315). Although this translation is not preserved in the Tibetan print canons, it served as the basis for the Cakrasamvara tradition as studied and preserved by the Sakya school.

These translators were important, but they were not the only contributions to the transmission of the tradition to Tibet. There were a great many additional texts associated with the Cakrasamvara tradition translated into Tibetan, including a dozen commentaries on the root tantra, a number of closely related 'explanatory tantras' and their commentaries, and many dozens of ritual texts. In addition to this textual corpus, masters such as Marpa 'the translator', Mardo, and Malgyo also acquired the oral instructions and lineage transmissions for the ritual and meditative practices associated with the Cakrasamvara, which they in turn passed on to their disciples. The practice transmissions of the Cakrasamvara and related traditions constitute the core of the 'Sarma' or 'new' traditions of Tibetan Buddhism that formed over the course of the twelfth through fifteenth centuries. The Cakrasamvara tradition plays a prominent role in all three of the 'new' schools, the Kagyu, Sakya, and Geluk schools.

The *Cakrasamvara Tantra* is a short but fascinating work. It is a text predominantly focused on ritual, which apparently was composed outside of the mainstream Indian Buddhist monastic centers, with significant dependence on Śaiva Hindu sources. In spite of its unorthodox origin, it became, by the tenth century, the locus of one of the most important Indian tantric Buddhist practice traditions. This timing was excellent, as this was the beginning of the 'second transmission' of the dharma to Tibet. This ensured its successful transmission to Tibet and its continued practice in Tibetan Buddhist communities around the world.

Short Biography

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Notes

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¹ For a discussion of the dating of the *Cakrasamvara Tantra*, see Gray (2007, pp. 11–14). For discussions of the dating of the *Hevajra Tantra*, see Snellgrove (1959, pp. 12–16), and Willemsen (1983, pp. 20–2).

² Seven hundred stanzas is the length traditionally attributed to this text. It is not possible to confirm this, as all known *Cakrasamvara Tantra* Sanskrit mss. are incomplete. Pandey (2002) contains a complete Sanskrit edition of the *Cakrasamvara Tantra*; this was accomplished by back translating from Tibetan to Sanskrit to fill in the gaps of the existing manuscripts.

³ My translation of *Cakrasamvara Tantra* 13.5, from my forthcoming edition of the Sanskrit and Tibetan texts. For an annotated translation, see Gray (2007, p. 215).

⁴ My translation of Bhavyakīrti's *Śrīcakrasamvarapañjikā-śūramanojñā-nāma*, To. 1405, D rgyud 'grel vol. ma, 19b. Bhavyakīrti here quotes directly from the third chapter of the *Ārya-Pratyutpanna-buddhasaṃmukhāvasthitasamādhi-nāma-mahāyānasūtra*, To. 133, D mdo sde vol. na, 15a. Note that in my translations of commentarial literature, I indicate the words being commented upon with bold font.

⁵ For a discussion of these stages as presented by the Geluk school of Tibetan Buddhism, see Cozort (1986).

⁶ For an excellent study detailing the uses of mantras in tantric Buddhist ritual and meditative practices, see Beyer (1973).

⁷ My translation of *Cakrasamvara Tantra* 12.2.3, from my forthcoming edition of the Sanskrit and Tibetan texts. For an annotated translation, see Gray (2007, pp. 209–10).

⁸ See Tsong Khapa's *bde mchog bsdus pa'i rgyud kyi rgya cher bshad pa sbas pa'i don kun gsal ba* in the *rje yab sras gsung 'bum*, bkra-shis lhun-po ed. (reprint, Delhi: Ngawang Gelek Demo, 1980), vol. nya, 101b–2a, as well as my forthcoming translation of this text.

⁹ If one accepts Wylie's (1982) dating of Nāropa (956–1040 CE), his guru Tilopa would have been active ca. the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. For more information about them, see Torricelli and Naga (1995) and Guenther (1986).

¹⁰ Regarding the dating of Jayabhadra and other early *Cakrasamvara* commentators see Gray (2007, pp. 11–12, 21–4).

¹¹ Much of *Cakrasamvara Tantra* chapter 1 is intertextually dependent upon the *Sarvabuddhasamayoga-dākinījālasamvara Tantra*. I have also identified intertexts with the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* at *Cakrasamvara Tantra* 1.8 and 31.1. See my annotated translations of these passages in Gray (2007).

¹² This passage occurs in the *Dākārṇava-mahāyoginītantrārāja*, To. 372, D rgyud-'bum, vol. kha, 242b–3a.

¹³ Buddhist hagiographies of the *siddhas* are replete with antagonistic episodes. These include the figures of Kṛṣṇācārya and his disciples (Templeman 1989, pp. 29, 32–9, 65–7) and Tilopa (Torricelli and Naga 1995, pp. 48–9). For many other examples, see Templeman (1983).

¹⁴ For further discussion of the 'body mandala', see Gray (2006). For an excellent study and translation of a *sādhana* in this tradition, see English (2002).

¹⁵ This translation occurs in all of the print editions of the Kanjur. In the sDe-dge canon, it occurs at To. 368, rgyud 'bum vol. ka, 213b–46b.

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