Dan O'Huiginn

STRATEGIES OF LEGITIMATION
IN TANTRIC BUDDHISM

BA Dissertation,

Faculty of Oriental Studies,

Cambridge University

May 2005

Contents

INTRODUCTION

Buddhist Tantrism[1] draws its theology mostly from non-Tantric Buddhism, and its practices from broader Tantric activity. This has led to conflicts: Tantric practices contravened the injunctions of the Pāli canon and of Mahāyāna tradition. Here, I outline some of the strategies which the authors of Buddhist Tantras used to overcome this divergence, and more widely to justify Tantric practices.

The size of the Tantric literature makes an exhaustive study impossible. Most of the examples here are taken from the *Hevajra Tantra*, the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*, the *Vajrabhairava Tantra* and the *Mahāvairocanābhisaṃbodhi Tantra*, and their commentaries as appropriate. A thorough study of this limited corpus has enabled me to assess the relative importance of the various strategies of legitimation, and how the portfolio of strategies varies according to time, school, and situation. I have also included examples from other Tantric texts, taken either from the secondary literature, or from non-exhaustive readings of the texts themselves. These sources illustrate a wider range of techniques, but the price is that I cannot assess the importance of each technique.

---

[1] I use the terms 'Buddhist Tantrism', ''Vajrayāna', and 'Mantrayāna' interchangeably. By 'non-tantric Buddhism' and 'orthodox Buddhism' I refer to Indo-Tibetan Buddhism with the exclusion of Vajrayāna, while by 'early Buddhism', I mean the Hīnayāna religion expressed in the Pāli canon

A summary of existing research

Some work on syncretism and conflict in Indian religions is relevant to the topic at hand. There has been considerable examination of the historical development of Indian religion, and of borrowings between traditions. Some of these have a bearing on the history of Tantrism, such as the work of Jean Przyluski [1950] on the development of goddess cults under the influence of local and pre-Aryan religion, and the work of Bolle [1971:22-38] on the influence of pre-Aryan culture on various later traditions[2], and [1971:27-34] on the persistence within several traditions of 'yakṣas'[3]. However, even when these studies have a bearing on the history of Tantrism, they rarely give much attention to the techniques used to legitimise it.

Bethia Beadman [2003] has recently analysed strategies of conflict resolution in Indian religions. She finds three methods by which conflicts are resolved: individualism, internalisation, and a dissolution of duality. Of these, the dissolution of duality is the most prevalent in Vajrayāna texts, and will be discussed as part of the strategy of reversal. Her other two concepts are, in Tantric Buddhism, mostly approached by means of symbolism. They are quite commonly

---

[2] Of relevance to Tantrism is his argument that a 'proto-Shiva' can be found in the Indus Valley civilisation of early North India

[3] These were originally nature-spirits. As they were absorbed into mainstream Hindu traditions, Kubera (the leader of the yakṣas) became one of the lokapAlas (the 'world-protectors', or gods of the directions), while other yakṣas became vAhanas (vehicles) for other gods. The significance of this is that an alternative name for the yakṣas is the guhyas, a word which is also found in the title of the tantric 'guhyasamàja'. As Bolle notes [1971:29], 'it would not be impossible to understand guhyasamàja as 'assembly of the guhyas", at least as a secondary meaning

used tactics in commentaries which are embarrassed by the transgressive rituals of their root text, and so find an internalised meaning for them.

I also make some use of the work of   Mircea Eliade [1985; see also Phillips, 1986]. Eliade is concerned with the comparative study of religion worldwide. However, much of his work concerns India, and his theories are intended to be universally applicable. In particular, I adopt his idea of the 'coincidentia oppositorum', an mystical experience arising from awareness of the unity of contradictory ideas. This provides a partial explanation for those texts which highlight their contradictions with orthodoxy, rather than trying to explain them away. David McMahon [1998] has also written on strategies of legitimation in Mahāyāna Buddhism. However, he is mostly concerned with the transition from oral to written texts, a shift which was less important to Tantric Buddhism, since it had already taken place[4].

Studies of Tantrism itself have suffered from major impediments. Many key texts were not readily available, let alone edited or translated. Moreover those which have been available are frequently cryptic, since they assume that a guru will be available to elucidate the text. More seriously, some practices have disagreed with the sensibilities of more conservative scholars. So, B. Faddegon considered that 'we may regard this śaktism as an epidemic and social neurosis; as such it is not without significance for neurology' [quoted in Bolle, 1977: 3]. EJ Thomas was similarly nervous about the sexual content: 'It [Tantrism] consists in giving a

---

[4] This will be further discussed below

religious significance to the facts of sex. Such a development, at least in a certain stage of society, is not necessarily immoral. Its discussion, however, belongs to medical psychology' [quoted in Bolle, 1977: 3]. The result was a lack of attention given to Tantric studies.

The literature frequently considers two intertwined questions which have a bearing on strategies of legitimation, namely the origin of Tantric Buddhism, and the extent to which it diverges from other forms of Buddhism.

As for origin, Ruegg [1964] has considered the ways in which Buddhism was influenced by 'le substrat religieux', a basis of common, pre-existing practices which also influenced Hinduism. Both are 'religions qui plongent leurs racines dans le même fonds commun et dont les divinites peuvent par consequent avoir des noms et des nombreux traits communs' [1964:84]. He notes that incorporation of alien gods was already taking place in the Pāli Canon, where the *Lalitavistara* and the *Divyāvadana* incorporate non-Buddhist deities. He goes on to analyse the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* and the *Kāraṇḍanjūha*, and considers the significance of Tantric iconography which shows trampled Hindu gods.

Poussin (1898:174-5) considers that Buddhist Tantrism was Tantrism first, and then became Buddhism. Snellgrove [1987:117] concurs, writing that 'the conversion of Tantric rituals to orthodox Buddhist use', was 'dependent on other Indian religious movements'.

This issue of origin is connected with legitimation strategies insofar as it affects the audience. If Tantrism came first, we would expect to see more effort devoted to justifying the incorporation of Buddhist ideas within Tantrism. Conversely, if Buddhism came first, we would expect an attempt to justify Tantric practices to a

Buddhist audience. In practice, it may be hard to distinguish these two aims in a text. A clear example of the latter would be the *Soṇaśri* commentary to the *Vajramahābhairava Tantra*, which appears aimed at orthodox Buddhists. As Siklos [1996:19] writes, "it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Buddhicising of the texts is as much a priority as its exegesis". The same tendency to make orthodox appears in other commentaries. The root texts tend to be more ambiguous, but show more concern about justifying Buddhism to Tantrists than they do about justifying Tantrism to Buddhists. This is, then, weak evidence in support of the idea that Buddhist ideas were added to an existing Tantric framework, and that the resulting Buddhist Tantras were made less disturbing to orthodox Buddhists by commentators.

Turning to the question of which aspects of Tantrism can be considered Buddhist, several scholars have attempted to draw a line between doctrine which is Buddhist and practice which is not. Bolle [1971:39] argues that Tantrism should be thought of as a religious movement in history, rather than as a doctrinal system - that is, not as a religion, but as an approach to religion. Alexis Sanderson makes a similar distinction, although he considers the specifically Buddhist element to be not doctrine as a whole, but, more narrowly, soteriology and cosmology. By this more precise definition, Sanderson allows for the contradiction between orthodox and Tantric Buddhism in terms of ethics. He writes:

> ʹMy view is that everything concrete in this system is non-Buddhist in
> origin, that everything abstract is of Buddhist origin, and that the whole is
> so constructed and encoded that is [sic] nonetheless entirely Buddhist in its

function, even though the scope of what Buddhism can be expected to achieve for an individual has been extended in certain respects' [Sanderson, 1994:7]

"[Tantrism is] distinguishable from the rest of Buddhism principally by its ritual character, only secondarily by soteriological doctrine, and hardly at all by specific theories of ultimate reality". [Sanderson, 1994:2]

Reconciling practice and doctrine

This analysis is broadly supported by the texts I have examined. However, it is not a complete explanation. Doctrine and practice are not two separate spheres. Tantric rituals may involve sexual intercourse, the consumption or sacrifice of human flesh, animal flesh [e.g. VMT:29], and urine, or murder, in direct contravention of the doctrines laid out in the Pāli canon. Conversely, practice is justified by its doctrinal content. Many rituals are intricate blends of Buddhist ideas and images, with an aim such as perceiving the self as a Buddha.

Crucially, Tantric practices are often in direct contravention of earlier Buddhist doctrine. Consider how a Hīnayāna Buddhist would react to the practices required by the *Yogaratnamāla*:

Food and drink should be had as it comes and not be rejected by thinking in terms of what is acceptable and what is prohibited. One should not perform the rituals of bathing and cleansing or avoid vulgar behaviour....He should eat all kinds of meat....He enjoys all kinds of women having a mind free of

all trepidation....He must eat the Five Nectars [5], drink liquor made from

molasses, eat the poisonous Neem and drink the placental fluids. He must

eat foods which are sour, sweet, bitter, hot, salty, astringent, rotten, fresh

and bloody liquids along with semen. By means of the awareness of non-

dual knowledge there exists nothing inedible. Obtaining menstrual blood he

must place it in a skull-cup and mixing it with phlegm and mucus, the

holder of the Vow must drink it.[6] [Farrow/Menon, 1992:197-9[7]]

This is not an unusual passage - any number of similar paragraphs could be

extracted from the Buddhist Tantras, enjoining murder, lying, transgressive sexual

intercourse, and any number of equally controversial activities. I do not intend to

debate the extent of the contradiction between Tantric and non-Tantric Buddhism.

I take it for granted both that Mantrayāna is in some way Buddhist, and that it in

some way conflicts with non-Tantric Buddhism. My concern is with how

Mantrayāna texts and practices negotiate that divide, and justify their status within

the Buddhist religion.

The Tantras themselves, and in particular their commentaries, recognise and

attempt to overcome this conflict with orthodoxy. As an example, consider this

worried statement in the *Yogaratnamāla*:

---

[5] In Hinduism, the five nectars are usually milk, curds, ghee, honey, and sugar. However, in
this context the term probably means urine, faeces, semen, ovum, and brain marrow, each of
which is associated with one of the Buddhas

[6] in anticipation of the arguments to follow, it is worth briefly noticing some of the techniques
of legitimation found here. The five nectars are given both an exoteric and an esoteric
explanation, while 'non-dual knowledge' is an invocation of the yogācāra doctrine of mind-
only to show that the transgression is only at a level which has no ultimate reality

[7] I have elided some phrases which would be less shocking to an early Buddhist

What is the reason for uncertainties? They are uncertainties because the songs and dance are considered as unrefined and prohibited [in orthodox Buddhist traditions] [Farrow/Menon, 1992: 205]

I consider five main ways in which Buddhist Tantras justify their Buddhist status. The first is an explicit approach, of loudly mentioning Buddhist schools, Buddhist doctrines, and Buddhist practices, and stating the superiority of Buddhism over other religion. Then there is the attempt to find a place for the Tantric text within the Buddhist canon, and among the other schools. I do not consider here the history of the creation of the canon, just the textual strategies used to demand a place within it. A third tactic is to sidestep the question of orthodoxy, and simply to claim greater efficacy in the ease and speed of liberation offered, and in the granting of magical powers. Even here, appeals to Buddhist ethics and soteriology often lie in the background, as explanations for the great efficacy of Tantric religion. The fourth approach is, counter-intuitively, to emphasise the differences by directly contradicting the teachings of orthodox Buddhism. I draw on three sources to explain this paradoxical tactic. I adopt from David Snellgrove the term 'Reversal', and an explanation based around the history of doctrinal development. From Mircea Eliade I develop an explanation in terms of the mystical experience of the 'coincidentia oppositorum', the reconciliation of paradoxical ideas. And from Nāgārjuna I take the idea of the satyadvaya, the two levels of truth (the only aspect of this triad which would have been familiar to practitioners of Vajrayāna). Using these three explanations of reversals, I show that a text involving reversals

legitimises itself in three ways. The fifth, and probably the most intricate, approach is that of symbolism. Under this heading I consider the techniques used to create texts which allow multiple simultaneous interpretations, and suggest meanings on many levels through numerology, etymology, and the use of code languages. These patterns of symbolism can be found not only in texts, but also in mantras, maṇḍalas, rituals, and visualisation techniques, and have different features in each case.

Statements about non-Tantric Buddhism

The easiest way to demonstrate that you are Buddhist is to talk about Buddhism. For the disciple, a reference to Buddhism is an education in the doctrine which underlies Tantric ritual. To the orthodox Buddhist, it is a comforting confirmation of the underpinnings of ritual in orthodox theology. Thus any mention of Buddhism serves a function of legitimation, almost regardless of the actual content. This is one aspect of all the allusions to Buddhism in the pages that follow, and I will not comment on it in every instance. A more thorough approach might involve building a concordance of references, and analysing the frequency with which particular terms and ideas are used. Such an exercise would fall well beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Instead, I will simply give a few examples, and analyse some of their secondary didactic functions. One such function is education - mentioning other schools helps to elucidate the history of the religion. Another function is to highlight the similarities between Tantric and non-Tantric practice, or the place of Tantric Buddhism within the Tantric world.

Schools of Buddhism

Of the Buddhist schools and individuals mentioned in Tantric literature, Mahāyāna is easily the most prominent. Others are not neglected, but they are given less prominence and praised less vigorously. The *Hevajra Tantra* contains a fascinating reference to the schools of Buddhism [Farrow/Menon, 1992:225]

> The sthāvarī school is located in the centre of creation, for the act of creation is constant and age-old. The sarvāstivāda school is the centre of essential nature, for its viewpoints originate from the doctrine regarding the nature of things. The saṃvidī school is in the centre of enjoyment, for the sensation of enjoyment is in the throat. The mahāsaṅghī school is in the centre of great bliss, for great bliss is in the head [Farrow/Menon, 1992:225]

The interesting aspect of this is not the mention of schools, as much as the order given to them - each school has its own place, which is justified by their doctrines and a nirvacana analysis of their names[8]. They are conceived of as equal and alternative; as I will explain later[9], this acceptance of multiple paths is part of a strategy to neutralise condemnation of Tantrism. Tantrism is not mentioned explicitly in this passage, but the implication is that if all schools have their merits, so does Vajrayāna

---

[8] Nirvacana analysis is discussed below, page 40]
[9] Page 19

Doctrines

The literature of Tantrism contains references to almost every doctrine propagated by an Indian school of Buddhism. I will here list only two, and some of their implications; I focus on the saṅgha, on the doctrine of emptiness (śunyata).

The idea of the saṅgha is one which was important throughout the development of Buddhism, but was transformed and reinterpreted by each school. There was no sudden reversal in meaning, but rather a gradual change in connotations over time. In early buddhism, it simply referred to the community of believers, consisting of monks and nuns, and male and female lay followers. This was made inappropriate for later buddhism by a wider change, the shift from the communal to the personal. The saṅgha had been, along with the Buddha and the Dharma, one of the 'three refuges' of the believer - in other words, community was an almost essential part of the road to liberation. In Tantric Buddhism, the wider community is eclipsed in importance by the place of a single guru. We can see the repercussions of this in the Tantric approach to confession. In the Pāli canon this was a matter for the saṅgha, a communal confession of sins, a way of using social pressure to encourage merit among monks. In the *Mahāvairocanābhisaṃbodhi Tantra* confession becomes 'in the presence of all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas' [MVT: 417]. The terminology - and hence the legitimacy - is retained, but the meaning shifts to make allowances for the social situation. There is a more elaborate reinterpretation of the saṅgha in the *Hevajra Tantra*:

In fact the body is the school and the monastery the womb. the embryo comes into existence in the womb by the release of passion, its enclosing membrane being the ochre robe. The one who instructs is the mother and the salutation is the birth with hands touching the head. The rules of conduct are the worldly activities. The recitation of a mantra is the breathing of ahaṃ, a being in the centre at the navel and haṃ in the centre of great bliss [in the head]. Thus a monk is born, articulating mantra, naked and with shaven head and face. Having such components all beings are without doubt enlightened ones [Farrow/Menon, 1992: 226 (?)]

The *Mahavairocanabhisambodhi Tantra* further redefines the saṅgha, describing it as 'the saṅgha of the eight types of the noble individual'.

The figure of Nāgārjuna looms large in terms of doctrine. His concept of śunyata is crucial to many practices. For example in the *Hevajra Tantra*, the ritual implement known as a khaṭvāṅga (a spear or trident with a human skull attached) 'is conceived of as śūnyata' [Farrow/Menon, 1992 91]

These two terms, saṅgha and śunyata, are played upon throughout Tantric literature. Others are mentioned more fleetingly, such as the reference to pratītyasaṃutpāda (dependent co-origination) in the *Hevajra Tantra* [Farrow/Menon, 1992 49]. Similarly, Buddhist terminology is adopted to understand the nature of the body

ṣaḍindriyaṃ pañcaskandhaṃ ṣaḍāyatanaṃ pañcabhūtam svabhāvena viśuddham apy ajñānakleśair āvṛtam Although the six sense organs, their

six objects, the aggregate of the five components of phenomenal awareness and the five elements are by their intrinsic nature pure, they are veiled by ignorance and afflictions. [Farrow/Menon, 1992:111]

This traditional terminology is repeated by statements that there are six sense-objects and six sense-organs [Farrow/Menon, 1992:193-4].

Allusions to earlier Buddhist doctrines may be much less explicit. Consider the consecration ritual of the *Hevajra Tantra*

svasaṃvedyād bhaved jñānaṃ svaparavittivarjitamkhasamaṃ virajaṃ śūnyaṃ bhāvābhāvātmakaṃ param prajñopāyavyatimiśraṃ rāgārāgavimiśritam

From direct personal experience arises this knowledge, free of notions of self and other, space-like, undefiled, void, the essence of existence and non-existence and the supreme. This knowlede is a blending of wisdom and means and a fusion of passion and the absence of passion. [Farrow/Menon, 1992 121-2]

In these words we can trace allusions to several commonplaces of non-Tantric Buddhism. svasaṃvedya, or personal knowledge, is not an exclusively Buddhist term, by any means. MW finds svasaṃvid in the bhagavata purana meaning 'the knowledge of one's own or the treu Essence', and svasaṃvedana ('knowledge derived from one's self') in Hemacandra's *Yogaśāstra*, as well as in Buddhist

literature. svasaṃvedya, in the sense of 'inteligible only to one's self', is found in the rājataraṃgiṇī, daṣakumāracarita and the pañcarātra.

But the word svasaṃvedya has much richer and more particular associations in Buddhist, and particularly mādhyamika, philosophy, as one of the means of knowledge (pramāna). We can see this clearly in the way that Bhāvaviveka uses it in his prajñāpradīpa commentary on Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 18.9. Here, he is defending Nāgārjuna against the charge of vitaṇḍā (sophistry without the establishment of a counter-position). To do so, he claims that tattva, in the sense of ultimate truth, was known to Nāgārjuna through direct experience (svasaṃvedya), and that that the fallability of his verbal account of tattva is not a fault in the form of vitaṇḍā [Eckel 1978:331]. The *Yogaratnamālā* offers a further explanation, which ties this orthodox idea down into ritual (which is what is meant by 'direct personal experience')

> svasaṃvedyād iti ata eva samarasāt svasaṃvedyaṃ jñānaṃ bhavet [Snellgrove, 1959.II:132]
>
> svasaṃvedyāt: because of the samarasaṃ (the flavour of essential similarity ritual), there should arise knowledge which is from direct personal experience

ESTABLISHING CANONICITY

If a Tantric text could succeed in being accepted within its followers' conception of the Buddhist canon, and within their mental schema of the schools of Buddhism, then it had would have achieved a high degree of efficacy. Texts could attempt to achieve this legitimacy by imitating the style of other canonical texts, by providing an explanation of their history, or by highlighting a theology of multiple paths of Buddhism, which allowed Tantric texts to co-exist with their non-Tantric counterparts.

The importance of canonicity within Buddhism may not have been as great as in other Indian religions, but it was certainly very significant. If we understand the term 'dharma-kaya' to be a reference to the body of scriptures, then it is theoretically as important as the Buddha or the saṅgha. Moreover, as McMahan [1998] has argued, the importance of written texts had increased with the greater importance of writing in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Written texts did indeed replaced the memorisation performed by the monks, and thus usurped the position of the saṅgha. But this shift was less important in Tantric Buddhism, the esoteric nature of which highlighted the role of the guru. The texts of Vajrayāna were only of any use once the guru had explained the symbolism, the code language, the performance of the rituals, and the pronunciation of the mantras. Indeed, Tantric texts could usually only be read by those who had found a teacher and had undergone initiation. So strategies focussed on the texts themselves were not as

crucial as they were in Mahāyāna Buddhism. But legitimation of the texts implied legitimation of the practices, and so canonicity remained important.

Multiple paths

Other forms of Buddhism are accepted to be valid (albeit inferior) by Mantrayāna texts. This approach was based on a conception that different and conflicting paths could be valid, and thus that differences between Tantric and non-Tantric Buddhism were unproblematic. The approach was possible because it had such deep roots in Indian religions of all kinds. An example would be the incorporation of Buddhism into Hinduism. More elaborately, the pratyabhijñāhṛdayam of kṣemarāja states that the doctrines all other religions are inferior stages of the pratyabhijña system ('tadbhūmikāḥ sarvadarśanasthitayaḥ'), and gives a detailed explanation of how they are all incorporated into a hierarchy of different paths [pratyabhijñāhṛdayam, sūtra 8. Singh, 1982:65-71]. The use of this technique in Buddhism took advantage of particular supports drawn from the doctrine of other schools, such as the concept of the four turnings of the wheel. This was a development of an earlier scheme of three turnings, namely the original teachings of the Buddha, the 'perfection of wisdom' literature, and the teaching of emptiness. A fourth turning was added, to incorporate Tantrism within the scheme. Another doctrine used to defend multiple paths was the doctrine of the three bodies of the Buddha. As the *Guhyasamājatantra* states, "the protector [i.e. the Buddha] well taught the three bodies as being different. Moreover, unity occurs through [Tantric practice]"

The most common arrangement of the multiple paths in Vajrayāna is even simpler than this, taking the form of a distinction drawn between the Pāramitāyana and the Mantrayāna [Snellgrove 1978:118]. Like the earlier distinction between Mahāyāna and Hīnayana, this division is usually one made to enhance the status of one school over the other, although sometimes there is at least a rhetorical acceptance that they are equal.

A more elaborate scheme is found in the *Hevajra Tantra*, where the method for disciplining 'hard to tame, unworthy persons' is:

> Fist give them the injunctions for conduct and then instruct upon the fundamental moral precepts. Then instruct upon the Vaibhāṣya doctrine and after that the Sūtrānta doctrine. Then instruct upon the Yogācāra doctrine followed by the Madhyamaka doctrine. After teaching all the practices of mantra, then commence with the instruction on the Hevajra practice. Should the discipline attentively grasp this, he will succeed without doubt.

This hierarchy of schools is not an arbitrary one, but is a scheme which contributes to the performance of rituals. As Sanderson [1994:2] explains, Tantrism draws on the Mahāyāna doctrine of niḥsvabhāva, in the particular form of Yogācāra-Svātantrika-Madhyamaka. This doctrine states that, at an ultimate level, phenomena are niḥsvabhāva, or without any essence, but that this truth cannot be reached by conventional logic. The highest point achievable by mere logic is the

Yogācāra position of cittamātra, or 'mind only'. Here, the unreality of the universe is understood, but it is replaced by a conception of the universe as consisting of mental projections. The final step to understanding the unreality of the universe requires meditation on the emptiness of the mind. This meditation is something easily applicable to Tantric meditative practices, which might begin as discriminative thought, but then ascend to a level beyond this.

The Mantrayāna may be considered suited for more advanced practitioners. Snellgrove (1987:118-9) quotes a formulation from the writings of advayavajra, which accepts non-Tantric Buddhism, but damns it with faint praise by portraying it as the vehicle for mediocre students: 'It [the Tantric path] is superior because of freedom from confusion due to singleness of meaning, because of its many methods, because it is not difficult to do and because of its suitability for those with keen senses'

quotations of texts

Tantric texts copy the style and vocabulary of non-Tantric Buddhism in order to present themselves as part of the same tradition. A good example of this is the opening of the *Hevajra Tantra.* It is among many Tantras[10] which open with the words 'evaṃ mayā śrutam' (thus have I heard). This is equivalent to 'evam me suttam', the usual opening of texts in the Pāli Canon.

---

[10] An exception is the vajrabhairava, which omits the opening. See the comments on this in Siklos [1996]

The significance of this form of opening was as a claim of direct transmission from those who heard the Buddha speaking in person. In the case of the Pāli canon, this was laboriously established at the First Council. This standard interpretation is made explicit by the gloss of the *Yogaratnamāla*:

> tad   atra   kecit   śrutam   ity   anena   saṅgītiṃ   sūcayanti |
> anyathā śrutiparamparayā śrute saṃgītir apramāṇikī syāt

> "with 'śrutam' here the fact that it was heard by somebody refers to the devotees who heard the proclamation of the doctrine in bhagavān's assembly. On the other hand, if the proclamation of the doctrine was heard through some other orally transmitted tradition, it would not be considered authoritative. (Farrow/Menon 1992:4)

The *Yogaratnamāla* goes on to explain that the exact wording emphasises that 'the writer of this treatise has himself heard this proclamation of the doctrine in the assembly of devotees and that it was not heard from a handed-down tradition.' (Farrow/Menon 1992:4). Other commentaries on Tantric texts which use the 'evaṃ mayā śrutam' opening gloss it in more mystical or ritual terms, explaining the power of each of the syllables.

Canonicity and non-Buddhist religions

Buddhism was not the only source of legitimacy for Mantrayāna. There was a parallel strategy of legitimation with reference to śaivism, Yoga, and other non-Buddhist religion. This used some of the above techniques, with the twist that the aim was not to demonstrate the Hinduism of Vajrayāna, but to explain the Hindu

elements as subordinate to the Buddhist. The *Hevajra Tantra* denies that there is any release without Buddhism:

> samastavedasiddhāntaiḥ karmaprasaraṇādibhiḥ siddhir na syād bhavec chuddhyā punarjananma bhavāntare na ca tena vinā siddhir iha loke paratra ca na jñātaṃ yena Hevajraṃ vyarthas tasya pariśramaḥ
> There is no accomplishment attained by following all the Vedas, Siddhānta and traditions of ritual. By following their purifications, there is rebirth in another cycle of existence. Without this knowledge there is no accomplishment possible in this or any other world. The effort of the one who does not know Hevajra is all in vain [Farrow/Menon, 1992:107-8]

Elsewhere, it explains these religions as incomplete understandings arising from Buddhism:

> sarvaṃ vijñānarūpaṃ ca puruṣaḥ purāṇa iśvaraḥ ātmā jīvaṃ ca sattvaṃ ca kālaḥ pudgala eva ca sarvabhāvasvābhāvo 'sau māyārūpī ca saṃsthitaḥ
> The concepts of other traditions such as 'everything has the form of consciousness' [the vedānta view], 'primordial man' [the sāṃkhya view], 'supreme being' [the eternal creator of the world, a reference to the siddhānta tradition], 'self' [non-Buddhist traditions which consider it to be the ātman which is born, dies, and is liberated], 'life-form' [the digaṃbara jaina approach], 'pure essence' [the view that sattva is supreme], 'time'[the view that 'time ripens all elements, time destroys all mankind, it is time that dreams and awakens and time is the insurmountable'] and 'person' [the

pudgala Buddhist tradition, whose distinguishing feature is their acceptance of the existence of an entity which is similar to - although not - a self]. all originate from this knowledge. This knowledge is the intrinsic nature of all there is and it also exists as illusory forms. [Farrow/Menon, 1992 123-4. The glosses in square brackets are those offered by the *Yogaratnamāla* commentary]

The *Yogaratnamāla* attempts to explain non-orthodox deities as forms of Buddhas. On a text which reads:

Nairātmya is marked by the seal of wrath, the yoginī Vajrā by delusion, Gaurī by malignity, Varī by passion, Vajraḍākinī by envy, Pukkasī by wrath, śavarī by delusion, Caṇḍālī by malignity, ḍombī by passion, the other Gaurī by wrath, Caurī by delusion, Vetālī by malignity, Ghasmarī by passion, Bhūcarī by delusion and Khecarī by passion

It comments:

Here wrath refers to Akṣobhya, delusion to Vairocana, malignity to Ratnasambhava, passion to Amitābha and envy to Amoghasiddhi

Other gods may be represented as defeated or inferior. In the Vajrabhairava Tantra, Vajramahābhairava is visualised "devouring Indra, Brahma, Mahezvara, Vishnu, the spirits, and so on" [VMT:38]

Efficacy

Tantras may justify themselves without reference to Buddhism. They do so by highlighting their greater efficacy, in terms of speed of liberation, ease of liberation, and the offering of magical powers. Yet even here there is often an underlying Buddhist element to the scheme of legitimation, either in the goal aimed for, or in a sense that the Buddhist underpinnings of practice are what provide the efficacy.

Speed, ease and magic

Vajrayāna texts offer fast liberation. In Tibet, this was perhaps a result of competition with the 'instant liberation' offered by Chinese forms of Buddhism [Eliade, 1985:272]. Whatever the reason, enlightenment in one lifetime was considered possible from the time of the Yoga-Tantras onwards [Sanderson, 1994:3]. Some attempt is made to explain how the Tantric route to enlightenment can be so much shorter than the non-Tantric route. It is claimed that direct visualisation of the state of Buddhahood removes the need for long processes of purification [Sanderson, 1994:3]. The *Yogaratnamāla* has a similar attitude

> Even for those yogis who are constantly devoted to the practice of emanation there is no quicker means to enlightenment than by the Application of the Vow (caryā) [Farrow/Menon, 1992:60][11]

The *Vajrabhairava Tantra* emphasises the material benefits it can offer, in the form of magic powers, rather more than it mentions the likelihood of liberation[12]:

> 'The yogin who has received the empowerment of this Vajra-wheel Tantra of Vajramahābhairava will, by means of these rites, succeed in consecration, summoning, killing, driving away, separating, immobilising; in the sword, the eye-ointment, subterranean journeys, pills, transmutation, the elixir vitae, treasure; and in ghosts, zombies, ghouls, male and female serpents, etc' [Siklos, 1996:27-8]

In contrast with the life of dedication and virtue required by non-Tantric Buddhism, Vajrayāna offers liberation even for the weak-willed, lazy or immoral. The *Hevajra Tantra* claims that even 'pañcānantaryakāriṇaḥ...siddhyante' (those who have committed the five ignoble deeds' accomplish). [Farrow/Menon, 1992: 157[13]]

Buddhism underpinning efficacy

---

[11] Snellgrove's text [1959, vol II:119] reads 'idānīṃ satattvasaṃniratasya yoginaḥ * caryayā vinā nāsti śīghratarā bodhir'

[12] Its commentators do, however, give a slightly more enlightenment-focussed approach to the text

[13] the more rigorous may be calmed by the following verse, which states that daśakuśalābhyāsī....siddhyate dhruvam' (he who perseveringly practises the 10 virtues...definitely accomplishes)[Snellgrove 1959: II:119]

What is the place of Buddhism in this strategy of legitimation through efficacy? On one level, there is none: this strategy sidesteps the question of whether a practice is Buddhist or not. But in many cases, the goal is itself Buddhist, or the efficacy comes about because of the Buddhist underpinnings of the ritual.

Buddhist goals might include liberation from saṃsāra, or the attainment of a state of Buddhahood. A mantra in the *Mahāvairocanābhisaṃbodhi Tantra* is called 'that which reveals the arising of Buddhas in world-systems where there are no Buddhas' [MVT: 420]

There is also a role for the ethical teachings of non-Tantric Buddhism, which are adopted not for their own sake, but as a means to success in the performance of rituals:

> The mantrin who bathes, confesses his sins, who is devoted to solitude. and imagines the mudra and garland of letters will accomplish steadfast attainments. [MVT: 415. See also MVT:421]

The same text [MVT:424] specifies requirements for trainees: "They should have great faith, be very pure, exert themselves in the Dharma, be of noble lineage and be highly motivated".

Confession is, in the same way, adapted from earlier Buddhism and tailored to the end of increasing ritual efficacy:

> 'First of all, you should confess each of your sins with this ritual: "May all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas think of me! I, [name], confess in the presence of all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas all those sins, those unwholesome deeds which I have done, caused to be done, or have

consented to be done in this and earlier lives, while wandering in samsara,

from now until I reside in the core of enlightenment!" This should be recited

a second and a third time.' [MVT: 417]

Reversals

Stark contradiction between Tantric practice and orthodox doctrine is justified, and even praised, in several ways. Considering the issue in terms of the history and development of Tantrism, Snellgrove terms these contradictions 'reversals' [1987:125]. His basic approach is followed by several other scholars [e.g. Gellner, 1992] In contrast, Mircea Eliade's focus is on the mystical experience involved in Tantric ritual. He analyses the use of contradiction as a 'coincidentia oppositorum'. A third justification comes from Nāgārjuna. This time the angle is theological, and the theories are the concepts of the satyadvāya (two levels of truth) and 'skillful means'. Developed by Nāgārjuna, these became major aspects of Vajrayāna thought. These three perspectives - Sanderson's historical, Eliade's mystical, and Nāgārjuna's doctrinal - overlap in their sphere of application: they all explain how Vajrayāna can embrace its conflict with orthodoxy. But the theories do not contradict each other. If we consider them in terms of the strategies of legitimation they imply, it emerges that they justify practices in different ways. These three justifications are not mutually exclusive, but can coexist in the thought - or the religious experience - of the Tantric adept. From Sanderson's standpoint, the justification would be historical, and textually based: it is about how what harms inferior schools can aid those at a higher level of awareness. For Eliade, the justification is at an individual level, and is more concerned with efficacy: the adept has faith in Vajrayāna because, through the coincidentia oppositorum, there is offers him a profound religious experience. In Nāgārjuna's thought, the justification is a theoretical and doctrinal one: Vajrayāna is a further level of a

dialectic between conventional and ultimate truth, where neither the Tantric nor the orthodox level are necessarily true, but are 'skillful means' leading the follower gradually closer to enlightenment.

Snellgrove: reversals

The term 'reversal' may be taken from David Snellgrove, but the idea is not uniquely his. David Gellner reaches a similar conclusion in his research into modern Tantric practices in Nepal, and quotes M. Allen's assessment that Vajrayāna is:

> based on a simple inversion of orthodox monastic Buddhism - sex in place of celibacy, long hair instead of shaven pates, indulgence instead of abstinence, drunkenness instead of sobriety [quoted in Gellner, 1992:321]

Taking the question first from this perspective of 'reversals', it is easy to find examples of practices being justified because they reverse earlier ideas. In the *Hevajra Tantra*, this is explained by the medical idea that the cure is similar to the cause:

> If an ordinary man who does not know the nature of poison eats it, he falls senseless. But the one who is devoid of delusion knowing the truth destroys the affliction. Similarly, those who know the means for release and have been diligent in the Hevajra practices are neither gripped by ignorance etc. nor by the bondage of delusion and so on. [Farrow/Menon, 1992:229]

The same idea occurs elsewhere in the Tantra, combined again with this theory of homeopathic medicine. It begins with a general statement, perhaps proverbial, in favour of reversals: 'Those things by which evil men are bound, others turn into means and gain thereby release from the bonds of existence.' Hence 'By passion the world is bound, by passion too it is released', and this is justified by a medical analogy:

> yenaiva viṣakhaṇḍena mriyante sarvajantavaḥ tenaiva viṣatattvajño viṣeṇa sphoṭayed viṣaṃ

> By using that very poison, a tiny amount of which would kill any living being, the one who knows the nature of poisons dispels the poison using that very poison

> yathā vātagṛhītasya māṣabhakṣyaṃ pradīyate vātena hanyate vātaṃ viparītauṣadhikalpanāt bhavaḥ śuddho bhāvenaiva vikalpapratikalpanāt

> Just as the one who is afflicted by flatulence is given beans to eat, for afflictions caused by wind are destroyed by wind by homeopathic medicine, similarly phenomenal existence is purified by utilising phenomenal existence itself, utilising notions to counter notions. [Farrow/Menon, 1992: 171]

The Tantra goes on to give further examples of the cure being similar to the cause: removing water from the ear, and treating burns with fire.

Eliade: coincidentia oppositorum

Let us now turn to the ideas of Mircea Eliade [1969, 1985]. Eliade is concerned not just with Buddhism, but with all the world's religions. He attempts to find the themes which underlie the growth or decay of religions both in India and elsewhere, as part of a "dialectic of the sacred" leading over time to improved religious experiences. Eliade's analysis emphasises the development of syncretism, mysticism, and religious practice through this dialectic process. While Eliade's enthusiasm for mysticism is a welcome counterpart to those who see Tantrism as an obscene aberration to be glossed over, it is also clear that some of his theories are fairly controversial. Both his view of religion improving over time, and his view that mysticism is the central aspect of religion, have been strenuously critiqued [e.g. Phillips, 1986]. But, without accepting Eliade's overall thesis, it is still possible to make use of his concept of the "coincidentia oppositorum" This term is drawn from Christian theology in early modern Europe, in particular from the work of Nicholas Cusa [Rennie, 1998]. It refers to a union of paradoxical ideas. While conflicting at a mundane, logical level, the adept can reconcile them through faith and religious practices. Eliade finds this theme in several areas of Indian religion and philosophy. It underlies, in his view, the duality of puruṣa and prakṛti found in saṅkhya [1969:14], the breathing exercises of Hatha Yoga [1969:270] and the 'middle path' of Buddhism [1969:163]. He vigorously applies the concept to Tantrism, which, he argues, consists of "the techniques of meditation and the rituals aiming at the realisation of the coincidentia oppositorum at all levels of existence" [Eliade, 1985:295]. Thus, he claims that

> Most of the excesses, cruelties, and aberrations referred to as 'Tantric orgies' spring, in the last analysis, from the same traditional metaphysics, which refused to define ultimate reality otherwise than as the coincidentia oppositorum. [Eliade, 1969:272]

Eliade is here discussing Tantrism in general, rather than Vajrayāna specifically. He finds the union of opposites in the juxtaposition of śakti with śiva, prajña with upāya, sun with moon, day with night, feminine with masculine, and passive with active. These pairings, and many others, do indeed occur in the Buddhist Tantras. Perhaps they contribute to a religious experience, which justifies the religion in the eyes of the mystic, but that theme is too large and complex to examine here. But in Vajrayāna, most of the 'excesses, cruelties and aberrations' are contrasts to orthodox Buddhism. In other words, the coincidentia oppositorum is an explanation for the opposition between the orthodox and the Tantric. If Eliade's understanding of the coincidentia oppositorum is correct, the conflicts between the two doctrines could give rise to a mystical experience. In this way the contradiction would not only be rendered harmless, but would help to justify and legitimiser Vajrayāna.

Yet a consideration of Buddhism in a longer historical framework shows not just the coincidentia oppositorum, but its mirror image, the differentiation of the seemingly identical. This strategy for conflict resolution has recently been examined in several Indian traditions by Bethia Beadman, who termed it a 'dissolution of duality' [Beadman:2003]. In particular, a play between duality and non-duality is part of the legitimation technique of most forms of Buddhism. The

same techniques apply not just for the description of the universe, but in every aspect of doctrine. If an earlier school has proclaimed the unity of two things, a later school will argue that they are really distinct. If an earlier school has proclaimed that two things are separate, a later school will argue that they are the same. Thus, through the history of Buddhism - and religions linked to it - we find an alternation between dualist and non-dualist rhetoric.

Nàgàrjuna: satyadvaya

The third perspective is that of Nāgārjuna. Revered by many as a 'second Buddha', Nāgārjuna provided the intellectual foundations for the madhyamaka school. In particular, he developed a theory of the satyadvaya, or two levels of truth: conventional (saṃvṛti-sat) and ultimate (paramārtha-sat). He writes in the mūlamadhyamakakārikā:

> dve satye samupāśritya buddhānāṃ dharmadeśanā | lokasaṃvṛtisatyaṃ ca satyaṃ ca paramārthataḥ || ye 'nayor na vijānanti vibhāgaṃ satyayor dvayoḥ | te tattvaṃ na vijānanti gambhīraṃ buddhaśāsane || vyavahāram anāśritya paramārtho na deśyate | paramārtham anāgamya nirvāṇaṃ nādhigamyate [MMK: 24.8-10] 'A doctrine relying on two levels of truth is taught by the Buddhas: the conventional/worldly truth, and the ultimate truth. Those who do not understand the division of the two truths do not understand the profound essence of the Buddha's teaching. The ultimate

truth is not taught without a foundation of conventional truth; without turning to the ultimate, nirvāṇa is not achieved.[14]'

An example

We can see all these processes at work in a passage from the *Hevajra Tantra*. The vinaya-piṭaka of the Pāli canon had laid down four pārājikas (defeats). These were the ultimate sins for monks, those which would destroy the merit of the monk, and would bring the saṅgha into disrepute. Committing one of these sins would mean automatic dismissal of the monk from the saṅgha. They were sexual intercourse, theft, homicide and falsely claiming spiritual merit [Gethin, 1998:89]. The *Hevajra Tantra* demands that initiates commit the pārājikas, providing what Snellgrove would understand as a reversal:

> prāṇinaś ca tvayā ghātyā vgaktavyaṃ ca mṛṣāvacaḥ adattañ ca tvayā grāhyam sevanaṃ parayoṣitaḥ [Farrow/Menon, 1992 192] You should kill creatures, tell lies, steal what has not been given, and fornicate with other men's wives

Having produced such a shocking contradiction of some fundamental principles of Buddhism, the Tantra then offers a synthesis:

---

[14] Nāgārjuna's doctrine was foreshadowed in the Pāli canon, which differentiates between nītattha (having a clear meaning) and neyyattha (requiring interpretation). Moreover, the Buddha's doctrine of the middle way appears to use a similar style of dialectic reasoning, and division between two opposites. For example in the kaccāyanagotta-sutta, the Buddha says "'Everything exists,' - this, Kaccāyana, is one extreme 'Everything does not exist,' - this, Kaccāyana, is the second extreme. KaccAyana, without approaching either extreme,t he tathāgata teaches you a doctrine by the middle"

ekacittaṃ prāṇivadhaṃ proktaṃ prāṇa cittām yato matam lokān uttārayiṣyāmī mṛṣāvādañ ca śabditam yoṣicchukram adattañ ca paradārāḥ svābhasundarī focus of thought is the kiling of creatures, for thought is life; to vow to save all living beings is the speaking of lies; the sexual fluid of the woman is that which is not given and others' wives are the beautiful ones who are one's own

For Eliade, this would be a reconciliation of a paradoxical situation: the practitioner is aware of both following and transgressing the Buddhism. This, if Eliade is correct, leads to a religious experience, and thus gives a justification through spiritual efficacy. In Nāgārjuna's terms, the play between the Tantric practice and the orthodox doctrine it contravenes would be one of skillful means: neither statement need be true, so long as they allow spiritual progression.

Furthermore, the *Yogaratnamāla* commentary offers gloss which provides some theological background to the passage, while removing a transgressive element from the text. yoṣicchukram is 'non-dual knowledge', and is 'adattam' (not given) because it is 'attained by means of a non-dual emanation' [Farrow/Menon, 1992 192-3]. It is hard to know exactly what doctrine is referred to by 'non-dual knowledge' (advayajñāna). It could imply the teachings of the advaita vedānta school. Alternatively, it could be a reference to Yogācāra Buddhism, in which a knowledge of non-duality is achieved by the realisation that the universe consists merely of mental projections.

Symbolism

My final concern is symbolism. This occurs in texts, mantras, maṇḍalas, visualisations of deities or other practices. Although each of these has specific characteristics and functions - mantras function as spells, maṇḍalas operate as mnemonic techniques, commentaries 'spin' some root-text to a particular audience - their techniques of symbolism are very similar. A link is made between two or more ideas through similarity of sound or appearance, through etymology or numerology, through symbolic links adopted from other religions, or simply through a tradition which equates two symbols. This allows the same action, word or image to bear more than one interpretation, and so can be understood or explained on multiple levels.

The significance of this is understood by Eliade in psychological terms. Thinking primarily of Hindu Tantrism, he writes:

> In general, symbolism brings about a universal porousness, opening beings and things to transobjective meanings. But in Tantrism 'intentional language' becomes a mental exercise, forms an integral part of sadhana. The disciple must constantly experience the mysterious process of homologization and convergence that is at the root of cosmic manifestation, for he himself has now become a microcosm and, by 'awakening' them, he must become conscious of all the forces that, on various planes, periodically create and absorb the universes. [Eliade, 1969:250-1]

Eliade notwithstanding, there is little need to resort to ideas of 'cosmic manifestation' to understand the power of symbolism. The same idea could be understood in psychological terms (for example, through the term 'apophenia', which refers to the "unmotivated seeing of connections" accompanied by a "specific experience of an abnormal meaningfulness" [Karl Conrad, quoted in Brugger, 2001:14]), or through numerous works on literary theory (for example the "symbolic code" of Barthes). Considered through any of these lenses, it is clear that such a highly-developed system of symbolism has the power to induce powerful mental and emotional experiences, which can in itself provide a justification for the religion.

If this is true for symbolism in general, it is equally true for symbolism which combines motifs from Tantric and non-Tantric Buddhism. But this latter form also legitimises Vajrayāna in other ways. Through including symbolic links to earlier forms of Buddhism, Vajrayāna can prove its Buddhist roots, and appeal to Buddhist theology and soteriology. If these images can be simultaneously interpreted in more Tantric senses, Vajrayāna can also demonstrate the consistency of its practice with orthodox doctrine. Further, it has a didactic function: in performing rituals rich in Buddhist symbolism, the disciple cannot help but imbibe some Buddhist theology. More importantly, he can experience, and so become convinced of, the unity between different levels of Buddhism.

It is particularly appropriate for reconciling two belief-systems, because the reader or listener will understand the meanings appropriate to his own background and inclinations, while remaining oblivious to those intended for other schools.

This is not simply another form of the reversal or coincidentia oppositorum, because frequently the Tantric and non-Tantric explanations do not contradict each other. Sometimes one level explains theology and another explains practice. At other times one meaning provides a support or justification for another. This may be the case in mantras, for example, where the overall mantra is justified in terms of its effects, but where words and phrases might draw their power from the sūtras in which they were originally written.

I first consider some of the general techniques used to develop symbolism: etymology, numerology, terminology. I then look at the specific aspects of mantras, maṇḍalas, and meditation techniques

Devices

Numerology

Numerology is used to some extent in most Tantric texts, but is particularly prominent in the *Mahāvairocanābhisaṃbodhi Tantra*. Here, each number has many resonances, which will arise in the mind of the disciple when he comes across the number in a ritual context. Three, for example, would represent the three samayas of knowledge of phenomena, non-conceptualisation and non-objectification [MVT:373]. This is a doctrine developed in the *Mahāvairocanābhisaṃbodhi Tantra* itself. Three would also refer to the triple refuge in Buddha, dharma and saṅgha [MVT:375], which dates back to the Pāli canon. It refers to the three bodies of the Buddha. This is a theory developed by the Yogācāra school, in which the Buddha

has three emanations (the dharmakāya, sambhogakāya and nirmānakaya). Then there are the three ways, the paths of śrāvakas, pratyekabuddhas and bodhisattvas. This in itself is a syncretic list - when the *Mahāvairocanābhisaṃbodhi Tantra* praises 'Vairocana...who has completely perfected the three ways' [MVT:413] it is reconciling schools of Buddhism which differ on whether the aim should be to become an arhat, a pratyeka Buddha (a Buddha who does not teach after his enlightenment) or a full Buddha in the model of śakyamuni. Thus when the number three is mentioned, a disciple would be aware of a large amount of Buddhist theory. A similar list could be made for the connotations of many other numbers. The same technique is used in the *Hevajra Tantra*, which requires visualisation of things associated with the number four: the four noble truths are joined by the four moments, the four principles (self, divinity, mantra and knowledge), the four joys, and the four doctrinal schools (FwM 16-17). In other cases he reference is less explicit. When the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* says that "he should contemplate vividly at the tip of his nose an eight-petalled lotus" [Wayman, 1977:27], we should perhaps understand an allusion to the eight bodhisattvas, and to the eightfold path.

Nirvacana analysis

Nirvacana is a tradition of semantic analysis which grew out of Yaska's *Nirukta*. It is explained, and applied to Tantric discourse, by Eivind Kahrs [1999]. It justifies the meanings of words or names on the basis of similarities, derivations from

roots, and mythological stories. We can see it in used to Buddhicise a listing of Hindu gods:

vairocanākṣobhyāmoghāś ca ratnārolika ca sāttvikaḥ brahmā viṣṇuḥ śivaḥ sarvo vibuddhas tattvam ucyate brahmā nirvṛtito buddhaḥ viṣaṇād viṣṇur ucyate śivaḥ sadā sukalyāṇāt sarvaḥ sarvātmani sthitaḥ satsukhatvena tattvaṃ ca vibuddho bodhanāt rateḥ dehe saṃbhavatīty asmād devateti nigadyate

The deities [which are aspects of the undifferentiated] are known as Vairocana, Akṣobhya, Amogha, Ratna, Ārolika, Sāttvika, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva, Sarva, Vibuddha and Tattva. From being the release, brahmā is the enlightened one (budhaḥ). Viṣṇu is so called because of entering. Śiva is so called because of always being auspicious; Sarva, because of abiding in all things; tattva because of being true bliss; Vibuddha because of the awareness of erotic bliss. the deity originates in the body and so it is called devatā

The equations of gods with ideas here are all based on nirvacana. 'Vibuddha', for example, means 'awareness', and, in light of the code-language discussed below, could well have carried connotations of awareness of bliss. 'Tattva' means 'truth' or 'essence', and is also used by religions such as sāṃkhya to refer to the fundamental levels of existence, or basic components of the universe. Bliss, as explained below[15], is considered equivalent to śunyata, and so could be considered a tattva in this sense.

Jargon

---

[15] Page 43

Buddhist terms were given completely new meanings as part of the secret language of the Tantras. In part, this functioned as a code, keeping some of the more transgressive elements of Tantrism concealed from the uninitiated. But, like other symbolism, it also served a deeper purpose of legitimation by linking the Tantric and the non-Tantric. Shahidullah [1928:9-15] provides a useful list of some of the equivalences used. Although he is concerned not with Vajrayāna itself, but with the later 'dohākoṣa' texts written by kāṇha and saraha, much of the terminology is the same. Many other scholars give less systematic consideration to the meanings of terms as they occur [e.g. La Vallee Poussin, 1898; Siklos, 1996]. Here, I list only a few of these terms, and the significance of their multiple meanings.

'Padma' literally means 'lotus', which is a common theme in Buddhism and in Buddhist art, where the Buddha is often given a lotus-seat. In the dohākoṣa it is interpreted as bhaga (vulva) [Shahidullah, 1928:9]. This meaning can also be seen, for example, in the famous mantra 'oṃ maṇi padme hum', which can be understood at one level as a reference to sexual intercourse (maṇi can refer to the penis). Vajra, which gives its name to Vajrayāna, can refer to a particular ritual object, or can mean 'diamond' or 'thunderbolt'. It can also represent śunyata [VMT: 28] or the penis (a meaning foregrounded in phrases such as 'vajrābha saṃyogah' [Pañcakrama 3.40]).

The Buddha himself is given secret meanings. According to the Hevajra Tantra, 'bhagavān [i.e. the Buddha] is of the nature of semen' [Farrow/Menon, 1992 105]. For kāṇha (or more precisely, for one of his commentators), bodhicitta is equivalent to 'samvṛta-spanda-rūpa-śukra' (semen, in the form of covered activity)

[Shahidullah, 1928: 11]. In other words, 'sahaje bodhicittam jāyate śukram utpadyate' (when an innate Buddha-mind is born, then semen arises) [Shahidullah, 1928: 11]. The Buddha is also linked to more Tantric gods - the *Yogaratnamāla* (103) glosses bhagavān as 'Hevajramūrtir vajradhara' (vajradhara in the form of Hevajra), and describes Hevajra as 'sarvabuddhaikavigrahaḥ' (the single form which is all of the Buddhas) [Farrow/Menon, 1992 126]. The *Yogaratnamāla* explains bhagavan as a derivation from bhaga, which in turn is explained as 'lordliness, abundance, grace, excellence, splendour and meaningful application of knowledge' (FwM 4).

The interpretation of mahāsukham (great joy, especially sexual pleasure) as śunyata [Sanderson, 1994:2] provides a justification for rituals of maithuna (intercourse). karuṇā, or compassion, is redefined as equivalent to existence [Shahidullah, 1928: 13]. Thus, presumably, the route to escaping existence is by destroying compassion, which may justify certain ritual practices. Nāgārjuna's concept of śunyata (emptiness) is alluded to in Tantric works by the term makāsukham (great joy) [Sanderson, 1994:2]. The *Yogaratnamāla* glosses 'dharma' as that revealed in Tantras, seemingly excluding exoteric ideas of dharma [Farrow/Menon, 1992 167] It might be thought that there is a danger of over-interpretation here. The *Hevajra Tantra* praises Tantric practise 'ekavṛkṣe' (meaning under an isolated tree, according to the *Yogaratnamāla*). Is this an echo of the enlightenment of the Buddha under such a tree? It may seem tenuous, and it is unlikely to have been the main meaning of the text, but even if the allusion only reminded a few disciples of the enlightenment of the Buddha, it still served a

purpose of legitimation. Similarly, the term chakra is frequently used in Tantras. In the Hevajra Tantra [Farrow/Menon, 1992:191] it is described as 'purifying sense objects, etc' (viṣayādīmāṃ viśodhanam), and it appears in the name of the *Kalachakra Tantra*. It brings to mind numerous Buddhist connotations: the sermon on the turning of the wheel, the eightfold path (often represented as an eight-spoked wheel). But not all the connotations here are Buddhist These redefinitions of Buddhist terminology were interconnected with the secret terms used in other parts of Tantrism. So semen (śukra) and menstrual fluid (rajas) are linked to the moon and the sun respectively, and thence to the left and right nostrils (as channels for vital energy, or prāṇa)

Other redefinitions of terminology were to reconcile Buddhism with the other systems underlying Tantrism. So kamala (also meaning lotus) was interpreted as the uṣṇīṣa-kamala, or 'lotus of the crown of the head'. In yogic meditation, this is a bundle of nerves at the top of the head.

Locations for symbolism

Mantras

Mantras are central to Tantrism, to the extent that Tantric Buddhism is often termed mantranayaḥ or mantracaryānayaḥ (the way of mantras, or the way of the practice of mantras) [Sanderson, 1994:3]. They are peculiar in that they require to be memorised and then repeated, often many hundreds or thousands of times. They are also very short. The consequence of these two features is that mantras

contain a great amount of meaning compressed into a tiny space, requiring detailed exegesis not only of the words, but of every letter.

Mantras are therefore very hard to analyse from the texts we possess, which are the secret code (saṃdhāya bhāṣā) without the explanation that would be provided by an oral tradition. Many seem to be little more than jumbles of recurring syllables (sometimes referred to as guhyatara, or 'secret' syllables). Moreover, many of the elements are non-Buddhist in origin. The frequently-occurring syllables khaṭ, phaṭ and jahi can be traced back to the brahmanas, svāhā can be found in the vedas and upaniṣads, and oṃ is important in many religions, including Buddhism [Poussin, 1898:123]. They have developed non-Buddhist senses: for example, svāhā is a personification of an offering, whit six limbs corresponding to the vedaṅgas. Moreover, it is apparent that many mantras were copied between śaiva and Buddhist Tantras. For all these reasons, we cannot expect to find any key with which to unpack the meaning of every Buddhist mantra. Nevertheless, the mantras are not random, and have some form of logic, both in themselves and as schemes of legitimation. As Poussin writes [1898:123], "Posséder et savoir les mots, n'est-ce pas comprendre, fixer, s'assimiler les idées?" In this function of reminding the adept of basic doctrinal points, a mantra performs the same function as the lists interspersed throughout the Pāli canon. At a basic level, a mantra may highlight key features of Buddhism. For example the mantra "oṃ śunyata-jñāna-vajra-svabhāvātmako 'ham" is repeatedly found in the pañcakrama [Poussin, 1898:123]. It might be translated 'oṃ, my own nature is the diamond which is knowledge of the void". 'Śunyata' is a reference to Nāgārjuna's

theory of emptiness, knowledge of which would be reinforced by repetition of the mantra. The 'spell of intrinsic purity' found in the *Vajrabhairava Tantra* is close to being a meditation on a Buddhist principle. It reads, "svabhava zuddha sarvadharma svabhava zuddho'ham" (all dharmas are intrinsically pure, I am intrinsically pure)

At a lower level, the mantras can be given a Buddhist analysis letter by letter. The *Vajrabhairava Tantra* visualises A as the seed for a solar disc from which lights emanate and invite tathāgatas and bodhisattvas [VMT:37-8]. According to the pañcakrama [11.42, quoted in Poussin, 1898:90], "akāroddeśakam jñanam buddhasya" (knowledge of the Buddha is signified by the letter A). This form of analysis is taken to an extreme by the *Mahavairocanabhisambodhi Tantra*, which, stating that "the letter is the deity" [MVT:370], develops a detailed exposition of how letters arise from each other. Here again the explanation raises explicitly Buddhist themes - the letter A is explained as 'the seed-syllable of the eternal non-arising of phenomena' and as 'emptiness', and it is said that 'through it liberation will be attained'

Maṇḍalas

Maṇḍalas, or ritual diagrams, assimilate and justify themselves by means of Buddhist symbols and terms in much the same way as mantras do. I will consider three approaches to legitimation in maṇḍalas: seeing Buddhist entities, understanding Buddhism in order to visualise a maṇḍala, and visualising something non-Buddhist, which is then understood as code for something

Buddhist. A particular form of this last approach is the use of maṇḍalas as memory aides, by attaching points of doctrine to aspects of a maṇḍala.

The first approach can be achieved by the incorporation of names alone:

> Then Vajrapāni, the lord of the secret ones, bowed down at the feet of the Bhagavat and tehn asked him this, 'Bhagavat! What is the name of this Maṇḍala?' When he had asked this, the Bhagavat said to Vajrapāni! The name of this Maṇḍala is 'That which reveals the arising of Buddhas in world systems where there are no Buddhas' [MVT:420]

Alternatively, a Tantra (or, more likely, a commentary), may offer a more systematic explanation. For example the *sonaśri* commentary explains that the four gates into a maṇḍala in the *Vajrabhairava Tantra* symbolise emptiness, signlessness, wishlessness and effortlessness, while its recesses represent the four meditative states.

The second approach, where understanding of Buddhism is a prerequisite is exemplified in the *Vajrabhairava Tantra*:

> 'one should visualise the deity [Vajrabhairava] by the prior understanding of the selflessness of all phenomena, so first one makes all phenomena selfless in nature by reciting the spell of intrinsic purity' [VMT: 37]

What is visualised may be the process of enlightenment: "one brings sentient beings to maturation and places them in the state of enlightenment" [VMT:38]

Finally, there are those cases where the iconography of the figures visualised owes little to Buddhism. This does not prevent the process of visualisation being essentially Buddhist, given that the surface appearance of the god is only a minor aspect of visualisation. Consider the visualisation of Vajramahābhairava. Outwardly, there is nothing Buddhist about this god, whose iconography is seemingly drawn from Durgā cults involving worship of the buffalo Mahiṣa. Vajramahābhairava is, according to the root text of the *Vajrabhairava Tantra:*

> Terrible indeed, roaring 'PHAT', adorned with skull ornaments, with sixteen legs, naked, ithyphallic, left legs extended, with a great belly, with hair standing upright, causing great fear, roaring 'pheṃ', with thirty four arms and holding a fresh elephant skin

Yet the commentator provides a Buddhist gloss for this:

> He is ornamented with skull ornaments because he is born from the sphere of dharmas...his sixteen legs are the complete ascertainment (T rnam par dag pa) of the sixteen emptinesses...he is naked because he understands without obscuration all dharmas....he is ithyphallic because he becomes the great bliss...his left legs are extended because all dharmas are individually penetrated by emptiness...His hair standing up is a sign of his freedom from suffering....The thirty-four

arms are the complete ascertainment of the thirty-four aspects of

bodhi

Following the exegesis offered by the commentator, the outwardly non-Buddhist aspects of Vajrabhairava become little more than an aide-memoire for a compilation of Buddhist philosophy. This interpretation of maṇḍalas as memory techniques is important, and helps to explain the divergence between an outwardly terrifying iconography and a gentler inner doctrine. The more dramatic the appearance, the easier it will be to visualise and remember.

In this way, the maṇḍala is analogous to the "ars memorativa" visualisation techniques used by Roman orators such as Cicero and Quintilian, or renaissance scholars such as Robert Fludd and Giordano Bruno. Perhaps a closer analogy could be found in other religions which placed a high value on the use of images to assist memory of doctrine: medieval Catholicism or the mysticism of the Jewish Kabala. In all these traditions, the image visualised is of secondary importance to the doctrines underlying it. In other words, comparison to other traditions hints at the explanation in the commentary being more important than the description in the root text, at least from a mnemonic perspective.

Rituals

Ritual use of Buddhist symbols functions in much the same way as visualisation of them, but with the added immediacy of physical objects. The *Hevajra Tantra* (Sanderson, 1959, vol. 1:65) expects a yogin to adorn his head with

'pañcabuddhakapalāni' (the skulls of the five Buddhas). This image, presumably

originating from the Kāpālika form of Śaivism, is interpreted by the *Yogaratnamāla*

[Sanderson, 1959, vol. 2:120] as 'akṣobhyādipañcabuddhasvabhāvāni kalpāni'

(skulls whose svabhāva is the five Buddhas beginning with Akṣobhya). Here we

could perhaps translate svabhāva as 'underlying nature': the skulls themselves are

presumably undistinguished, but in a ritual context absorb the nature of the

Buddhas.

The incorporation of philosophy into Tantric rituals has a triple function. Firstly, it

is an instruction in, or statement of, the philosophy concerned. Secondly it

demonstrates, to participants and to observers, that the ritual is in accordance with

Buddhist cosmology. Through this demonstration of orthodoxy, the ritual is both

made acceptable to Buddhists, and given a theoretical underpinning which can

help to explain its efficacy. Thirdly, the incorporation of particular aspects of

Madhyamaka philosophy may increase the religious experience of the ritual.

Sanderson [1994:2] writes that " doctrine is written into the text of ritual itself", and

his approach is reiterated by others. Yael Bentor [Bentor, 1996; Sparham. 1998]

examines the incorporation of philosophy into a modern Tibetan ritual to

consecrate a stupa. She finds, for example, use of Nāgārjuna's distinction between

conventional truth (saṃvṛti-sat) and ultimate truth paramārtha-sat[16]. This division

is incorporated into modern rituals of Tibetan Tantrism, using the equivalent terms

dam-tshigs sems-pa (conventional truth) and ye-shes sems-pa (ultimate truth).

---

[16] This is analysed further on page 34

Bentor finds that this is given a ritual meaning, in the process of consecration of a stupa. The statue itself is dam-tshigs sems-pa, while the thing symbolised by it is ye-shes sems-pa.

More generally, Bentor explains the ritual as a synthesis of pieces taken from a variety of sources in earlier texts. In the words of a reviewer [Sparham, 1998]:

> Tibetan ritualists feel comfortable with any number of different strategies which tradition has deemed efficacious, and present day rituals bring them all into one larger ritual with- out feeling any contradiction.

Commentaries

Commentaries function in much the same way as the contexts above, in terms of symbolism. One of their peculiarities is that they are often providing a key to their root text, by introducing more levels of symbolism. Moreover, the symbolism they add is often slanted towards offering orthodox Buddhist explanations for transgressive rituals, and so making them less illegitimate.

> He does not create discord means he does not stir up crude erotic play. He eats meat means he consumes the notion of the self, that is, he makes it non-substantial. He drinks liquor means he drinks the nectar of Great Bliss arising from the union...Faeces refers to the Form component of the aggregate of phenomenal awareness; urine to the sensation component; menstrual blood to the conceptualisation

component and semen to the component of the awareness of

phenomena [Farrow/Menon, 1992:208]

Conclusion

In the pages above, I have outlined some of the main methods by which Buddhist texts demonstrate their legitimacy - by their symbolism, their reversals of doctrine, their claims of speed and efficacy, their attempts to fit within the canon and within schemes of the schools of Buddhism, and by simply talking about Buddhist ideas. My approach has been almost entirely textual, and has been limited to the texts of, and commentaries on, a few basic Tantras. A more complete approach would require the consideration of other textual evidence which bears the influence of Vajrayāna's search for legitimacy: the corpus of Shaiva Tantrism, mythology, popular stories, histories and hagiographies. It would require an analysis of the development of compilations of texts, especially in Tibet and China. It would require an anthropological study of the ideas and practices of Buddhists both now and, by extrapolation, in the past. It would require an attempt to reconstruct the social and intellectual milieu within which the quest for legitimacy was taking place. Such an investigation is well beyond the scope of this dissertation, and must await the work of others.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bolle, Kees W, 1971: *The persistence of religion - an essay on Tantrism and Sri Aurobindo's philosophy*. Leiden: EJ Brill

- Beadman, Bethia, 2003: *Conflict and resolution in three Indian traditions* [Cambridge BA theological and religious studies dissertation]

- Brugger, P, 2001: 'From Haunted Brain to Haunted Science: A Cognitive Neuroscience View of Paranormal and Pseudoscientific Thought'. In *Hauntings and Poltergeists: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by J. Houran and R. Lange. North Carolina: McFarland. http://philosophy.ucsd.edu/ Faculty/HauntedBrain.pdf

- Chakravarti, C: 1984. *Guhyasamājatantrapradīpodyotanaṭikāṣaṭkoṭīvyākhyā*. [tibetan sanskrit works series 25]. Patna: Kashi Prasad Jayaswal Research Institute

- Coghlan, Ian J, 2004: 'A survey of the sources of Buddhist ethics', *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 11. http://jbe.gold.ac.uk/11/cogh0402.html

- Eckel, MD, 1978: 'Bhāvaviveka and the early Mādhyamika theories of language'. *Philosophy East and West* 28:4, 323-27

- Eliade, M, 1969: *Yoga, Immortality and Freedom*. Princeton, 1969.

- Eliade, Mircea, 1985: *A history of religious ideas (vol. 3)*. Chicago: University of Chicago

- Farrow, G. W. and Menon, I, 1992: *The Concealed Essence of the Hevajra Tantra.* Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass

- Gellner, D, 1992: *Monk, Householder, and Tantric Priest: Newar Buddhism and its Hierarchy of Ritual* (Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology 84). Cambridge:CUP

- Gethin, R, 1998: *The foundations of Buddhism*, Oxford:OUP

- Hodge, Stephen:2003, *The Mahāvairocanābhisaṃbodhi Tantra with Buddhaguhya's commentary*, London: RoutledgeCurzon

- Kahrs, Eivind, 1999: *Indian Semantic Analysis: The Nirvacana Tradition.* Cambridge:CUP

- Kalupahana, D, 1986: *Nāgārjuna, the philosophy of the middle wa*y, New York:SUNY.

- McMahon, D, 1998: 'Orality, writing and authority in South Asian Buddhism: visionary literature and the struggle for legitimacy in the Mahāyāna',. *History of religions*, 37.3, pp 249-274. http://ccbs.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-EPT/mc.htm

- MMK = *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*

- MVT: *Mahāvairocanābhisaṃbodhi Tantra*. Page references are to Hodge [2003]

- Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārika*. Online edition, input by Douglas Bachman and Richard Mahoney. http://www.sub.uni-goettingen.de/ebene1/fiindolo/gretil/1sanskr/6sastra/3phil/buddh/nagmmk_c.txt

- Phillips, Stephen H, 1886: *'A history of religious ideas by Mircea Eliade' (review)*, Philosophy East and West v.36 (April, 1886), pp 177-184. http://ccbs.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-PHIL/ew33346.htm

- Valee-Poussin, Louis de la:1898, *Bouddhisme, etudes et materiaux*, London

- Rennie, B, 1998: *'Mircea Eliade'* in Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Routledge

- Ruegg DS, *'sur les rapports entre le Bouddhisme et le 'substrat' religieux indien et tibétain'* Journal Asiatique 252 (1964): 77-95

- Robinson, RH and Johnson WL, 1997, *The Buddhist religion: a historical introduction (fourth edition)*, Wadsworth

- Sanderson, Alexis, 1994: *Vajrayāna - origin and function*, unpublished manuscript

- Sanderson, Alexis, forthcoming: Religion and the State: Initiating the Monarch in Saivism and the Buddhist Way of Mantras. Unpublished manuscript

- Shahididullah, M, 1928: *les chants mysterieux de kAGka et de saraha - les dohākoṣa*, Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve

- Siderits, Mark, 1996: *'Buddhism and language: a study of indo-tibetan scholasticism by Jose Ignacion Cabezon'* (review). Journal of Buddhist Ethics 3, pp131-5.

- Siklos, B, 1996: *The Vajrabhairava Tantras*, Trink:institute of Buddhist studies

- Singh, J, 1982: *pratyabhijñāhṛdayam,t he secret of self-recognition (4th edition)*, Delhi:Motilal Banarsidass

- Snellgrove, David L: 1959 - *The HevajraTantra, a critical study* (2 volumes). Oxford:OUP

- Snellgrove, David L: 1987, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Indian Buddhists and their Tibetan successors*, London: Serindia

- Sparham, G, 1996: *'consecration of images and stūpas in Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, by Yael Bentor'* (review). Journal of Buddhist Ethics, v.5:334-338. http://jbe.gold.ac.uk/5/sparham.htm

- VMT: *Vajramahabhairava Tantra*. Page references are to Siklos [1996]

- Wayman, A: 1977, *Yoga of the guhyasamāja, the arcane law of forty verses - a Buddhist Tantra commentary*, Delhi:Motilal Banarsidas