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Edited by David Gordon White: Tantra in Practice

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INTRODUCTION

Tantra in Practice: Mapping a Tradition

David Gordon White

As with all the books in this series, the present volume has the word “practice” in its title. Practice is impossible without agents of practice, that is, practitioners, and the first four sections of this volume comprise those contributions that focus on Tantric practitioners or actors. These include Tantric preceptors (*gurus*) and their followers; kings and priests; and devotees and the Tantric gods they worship (for the gods too are Tantric actors). These relationships were not static, however, and the fourth section contains accounts of traditions in transition and conflict. The last three sections of the volume are devoted to the practices themselves. Those contributions which describe the broad general practice of an entire tradition or region of the Tantric world make up the fifth section. A wide gamut of types or elements of Tantric practice, both external rites and their internal correlates, is explored in sections six and seven.

It may be that the ideal medium for a presentation of Tantric practice (or any practice, for that matter) would be a video or CD-ROM, in which one could actually view Tantric practitioners practicing their Tantra. This is impossible for a number of reasons—Tantric secrecy, the fact that many of the practices detailed here disappeared centuries ago, the practical limitations of scholarly publishing—so the reader is presented with a thick book. But books have their advantages as well, and the Tantras themselves (which are texts) clearly state that scripture is the necessary complement to the oral teachings one receives from the mouth of one’s guru. Furthermore, “pure” practice without interpretive theory is like a map without a legend: if you don’t know what the various elements of the practice mean, then it is nothing but empty gestures. The reader should therefore not be surprised to find that this volume on Tantric practice contains a significant amount of material on Tantric theory. Very often, this is built into the structure of the Tantric texts themselves: instructions for practice are contextualized in the theories—of man, the universe, and everything—that undergird them. Yet these theories can be as impenetrable as the practices themselves, especially in such

esoteric traditions as these. Therefore, a second level of interpretation is in order, and this is the invaluable contribution of the thirty-nine scholars whose chapters are presented here, for not only have they translated the many languages of the Tantras into English but they have also translated the multifaceted Tantric world-view into comprehensible language in their introductory essays.

I have attempted to do the same in this general introduction, and the reader will find that my analysis is based in no small part on the work of these same scholars, whose publications I cite. In this introduction, names in [square brackets] refer to contributions found in this volume; references in (parentheses) refer to works found in the bibliography to this essay.

Can Tantra Be Mapped?

The contributions brought together in this volume all treat of Tantra, a body of religious practice that has long defied scholarly attempts at definition. There are many who maintain that Tantra or “Tantrism” is a Western category, imposed upon Asian traditions in much the same way that the term “Hinduism” was applied, some centuries ago, to a wide swath of mainstream religious beliefs and practices found on the Indian subcontinent. As Gertrude Stein did for the city of Oakland, such persons assert on the subject of Tantra that there is no “there” there. One could make the same claim regarding much of the terminology we live with, of course: the categories of “religion,” “democracy,” and “art,” for example, prove to be quite nebulous when exposed to the glare of critical scrutiny. Others would maintain that the Indian parable of the blind men and the elephant is applicable to Tantra. Depending on which part of the elephant (which specific Tantric tradition) a given blind man (scholar) is touching (studying), his account of the animal (Tantra) will vary widely from that of his fellow blind man. The scholar examining the fine hard tusk of pure Buddhist esotericism in modern-day Japan would find herself hard pressed to recognize that the deeply furrowed hide of the medieval Indian Kāpālika’s (Skull-Bearer’s) practice [Lorenzen] is a part of the same Tantric organism.

Then there are the Western dilettantes, the self-proclaimed Tantric entrepreneurs, who have hitched their elephant-wagons to the New Age star to peddle a dubious product called Tantric Sex, which they (and their clientele) assume to be all there ever was to Tantra. It is certainly the case that the earliest accounts of Tantra to reach the West were colonial descriptions from India, penned by missionaries or administrators who presented its practices as particularly abominable excrescences of South Asian superstition. Their descriptions often included shocking images of wholesale orgy in which every taboo was broken and all human propriety perverted. Over the past two hundred years, there have been three sorts of reactions to these distorted images. The first of these is that of India itself: colonial and postcolonial Indians simply deny that such has ever existed; or if it has, that it has had anything to do with Hinduism (another term that defies categorization). The second is that of Tantric scholar-practitioners, both Asian

and Western, who, in an attempt to rehabilitate this image of Tantra, have emphasized the refined (“right-handed”) philosophical speculation that grew out of preexisting (“left-handed”) Tantric practices—some of which were of a sexual or transgressive nature—while generally denying the foundational importance of transgressivity or sexuality to the traditions themselves. The third, already mentioned, is that of the for-profit purveyors of Tantric Sex, who have no compunctions about appropriating a misguided nineteenth-century polemic to peddle their shoddy wares.

All three interpretive strategies may be viewed as legacies of the original “text” of colonial misrepresentations of Tantra in India. All three tend to imagine Tantra as a timeless, unalterable essence or excrescence that did not undergo any changes either prior to or since its nineteenth-century “coming out,” and that remained constant as it was carried outward from India into every part of Asia. As the variety of contributions to this volume show, neither the sensationalist colonial representations nor the unsatisfactory monothetic responses to them, either “for” or “against,” stand up against the empirical data. The picture that emerges is rather one of a complex array of ritual, theoretical, and narrative strategies that are specific to their various religious, cultural, sociopolitical, geographical, and historical contexts. Yet for all this, there nonetheless exists a grouping of common denominators that should permit us to classify these as so many varieties of a single tradition, the “there” of Tantra.

In the pages that follow, I attempt to tease out the parameters and lineaments of this thing called Tantra from a number of perspectives. The first of these is thematic or phenomenological. This is mainly a comparative endeavor, in which the common elements of many types of Tantric theory and practice are juxtaposed and synthesized. This sort of outsider’s assessment of Tantra is an etic one: made from a variety of perspectives, it will tend to characterize Tantra in ways not necessarily recognizable to Tantric practitioners themselves. The Tantric insider’s or emic view must of necessity also be incorporated into our description. These two perspectives, when juxtaposed with one another, ought to provide us with a Tantric “ideology”—that is, a set of categorical “lenses” through which Tantric practitioners have made sense of their practice within their broader worldview (their ontology) and understandings of power in the world (their religious polity), and human salvation in or beyond this world (their soteriology). Systems of practice that are incompatible with or unadaptable to lived experience on the one hand, and to an imagined ontology, polity, and soteriology on the other, will not persist through time. Perhaps unbeknownst to themselves, practitioners are constantly testing their traditions against lived reality, and although religious change is notoriously slow, it is nonetheless inexorable. Therefore, if there is still something called Tantra that has persisted since its origins in the middle of the first millennium of the common era down to the present day—and I contend that there is—its architectonics should be discernable through its emic categories. Our approach, then, will consist of an inductive linking of the most salient features of Tantric practice to specific and general Tantric precepts.

The second perspective adopted here is historical. It is the case that every South

and East Asian religious tradition has had a Tantric phase or component, and many of these continue down to the present day. However, none of these have continued unchanged since the original Tantric impetus, and it is for this reason that our account of Tantra must be historical. No synchronic taxonomy of the salient features of Tantric theory and practice will suffice; only through a diachronic or evolutionary overview of the various schools, sects, scriptures, bodies of practice, and lines of transmission that have comprised Tantra will we be able to make sense of this tradition. Such a historical accounting must not, moreover, be limited to a simple history of ideas. It must engage as well with ground-level practice, imagery, institutions, political realities, and the interface between public and private religion.

Third, our approach must attend to the human agents or actors in the dissemination and transformation of Tantric doctrines and practices. Here the following questions must be addressed. Which Tantric practitioners have practiced for themselves, and which have practiced for others as Tantric specialists? What have been the social and religious backgrounds of the latter? Who have constituted their clienteles? What have been their clients' motives for engaging them to perform their functions? When a king or other potentate is a Tantric practitioner, what impact does his patronage have on religious institutions and the religious and political life of his subjects? What has been the nature of the interface between "popular" and "elite" forms of practice? How do theory and practice change when practice becomes individual as opposed to collective?

Finally, a word about the scope of this endeavor. Because this is a comparative enterprise (in which different forms of Tantra, from different historical periods, religious traditions, and sociopolitical contexts are being compared), the question of parameters arises: where does one draw the line between "Tantra" and "not-Tantra"? In other words, if we are attempting to delimit Tantra from other forms of religious practice in Asia, what are our criteria to be for determining Tantra's specificity? What is it that has made Tantra stand out from the mainstream (or in some cases, *as* the mainstream) as a body of practice to live for—and sometimes to fight for, to kill for, or to die for? Throughout the fifteen hundred years of its history, Tantra has rarely left people indifferent, and this has been precisely due to the fact that it has been viewed as something *different*.

Our definition of Tantra must therefore attend to Tantra's difference, but here as well we must tread with caution. We may speak in terms of a "hard core" and a "soft core" of Tantra. The former, composed solely of those elements of Tantric doctrine and practice that are not found anywhere else in the Asian religious traditions under study, would provide us with a sharply defined but very limited account of Tantra—and one that would, moreover, probably exclude many of the doctrines and practices that practitioners have themselves deemed to be Tantric. A more inclusive, "soft core," definition tends to break down, however, because its parameters will encompass doctrines and practices found in nearly all forms of the various Asian traditions, from the Vedas and early teachings of the Buddha and Mahāvīra down through conventional forms of Hinduism, Jainism,

Buddhism, Daoism, and Shintō, as well as in many nonelite forms of Asian religious practice. For example, much of mainstream Hindu devotional ritual—preliminary purifications, the use of mantras for honoring the deity, forms of worship, and so on—has its origins in the scriptures of the “soft core” of Hindu Tantra, the Śaiva Āgamas. Elsewhere, the Tantric dictum that the human being (as opposed to an animal or a deity) is the creature best suited to salvation or liberation through Tantric practice differs little from anthropocentric doctrines of the broader Hindu, Buddhist, or Jain mainstream. The danger here is that everything becomes Tantra, and our category loses its specificity.

Yet, at the same time, if we were to deny that this “soft core” is authentically Tantric, we would fly in the face of the emic understandings of householders and ritual specialists from the modern-day Tantric mainstream, including Hindu Śrīvidyā practitioners in India and Nepal, Buddhist Gelugpa practitioners in Tibet and the Tibetan diaspora, and practitioners of pure Buddhist esotericism (*mikkyō*, from the Chinese *mijiao*, “esoteric teaching”) in Japan. If these practitioners consider their daily religious observances as well as their life-cycle rites and post-mortem rituals to be Tantric, who are we to say they are wrong?

A Working Definition

Tantra has persisted and often thrived throughout Asian history since the middle of the first millennium of the common era. Its practitioners have lived in India, China, Japan, Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Korea, and Mongolia, as well as in the “Greater India” of medieval Southeast Asia: Cambodia, Burma, and Indonesia. No form of medieval Hinduism, Buddhism, or Jainism [Dundas] has been without a Tantric component; and some South Asian Islamic traditions have, as well, borne a Tantric stamp [Khan]. In Hindu India, the Pāñcarātra [Flood], Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava, Sahajiyā, Pāśupata, Kāpālīka, Śaiva Siddhānta, Siddha Kaula, Yoginī Kaula, Krama, Trika, Śrīvidyā, Paścimāmnāya, Nāth Siddha, Aghori, Bengali Śākta-Vaiṣṇava and Bāul traditions, and Tamil Nāyaṇār and Ālvār traditions [Hudson], have all been Tantric or heavily colored by Tantra.

Although Buddhism disappeared from India in the thirteenth century, India was the source of the Buddhist Mahāsiddha tradition [Kapstein] and the cradle of Buddhist Tantra in its Mahāyāna, Mantrayāna, and Vajrayāna (including Kālacakra [Newman]) forms. In Java, the layout of the massive Borobudur monument, begun in the eighth century, is that of a massive cosmogram, perhaps the dharmadhātu-maṇḍala, a Buddhist Tantric rendering of the enlightened universe. The late tenth-century author of the Buddhist *Kālacakra Tantra*, although he may have been born in Java (Newman 1985: 85), probably composed his work, which contains a number of references to Islam, in what is now central Pakistan (Orofino 1997). Tibetan Buddhism is by definition a Tantric tradition: this applies to the four major orders (the Nyingmapas, Kagyupas, Sakyapas, and Gelugpas), as well as to the Dzogchen [Klein] and other syncretistic traditions. Much of the ritual

of the medieval Chinese state was Tantric, and it was from China that nearly all of the Buddhist Tantric traditions of Japan were transmitted. In China, Tantra has survived since the twelfth century C.E. within Daoist ritual practice, and it has been said that Daoism is the most enduring Chinese monument to Tantric Buddhism (Strickmann 1996: 49). Elsewhere, the Chinese Chan (a Sinicization of Sanskrit *dhyāna*, “meditation”) school lives on in Japan as Zen Buddhism [Bodiford]. In Burma, the Zawgyis, Theravāda monk-chemists, have for centuries combined elements of Theravāda Buddhism, Daoism, and Tantric alchemy in their practice. Cambodian inscriptions indicate the presence of Hindu tāntrikas (practitioners of Tantra) there in the medieval period. Present-day Balinese Hinduism betrays its medieval Indian Tantric origins, and Sri Lankan cults of the “demonic” beings known as *yakkhas* (*yakṣas* in Sanskrit) and of Kataragama (the equivalent of Skanda/Maṅjuśrī) contain elements that may be qualified as Tantric. In Japan, all of the eight schools of Buddhism have a Tantric pedigree, although Shingon and Tendai have been Japan’s most successful exponents of “Pure Buddhist Esotericism.”

Finally, the constitutional monarchies of Nepal and Bhutan are the world’s sole surviving “Tantric kingdoms”; their state ceremonial comprises Hindu Tantric liturgies and rituals, and nearly all of their deities are Tantric. One of these, Bhairava, is a Tantric god found in every part of Asia, and worshiped in a Tantric mode by Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists alike. Similarly, the goddesses and gods Tārā, Ambikā, Akṣobhya, Mahākāla, Gaṇeśa, Avalokiteśvara-Lokeśvara-Guanyin-Kannon, and Skanda-Maṅjuśrī, as well as numerous groups of multiple Tantric deities, are found throughout much of Asia. It is the pan-Asian existence of deities such as these that supports an argument that medieval and precolonial Asian religions, rather than having been discrete Tantric Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions, were, to a great extent, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain varieties of an overarching tradition called “Tantra.”

On what theoretical basis or bases may we term all of these medieval, precolonial, or modern traditions “Tantric”? I will begin by borrowing a definition proposed by Madeleine Biardeau and broadened by André Padoux. Padoux (1986: 273), citing Biardeau, begins by saying that the doctrinal aspect of Tantra is “an attempt to place *kāma*, desire, in every sense of the word, in the service of liberation . . . not to sacrifice this world for liberation’s sake, but to reinstate it, in varying ways, within the perspective of salvation. This use of *kāma* and of all aspects of this world to gain both worldly and supernatural enjoyments (*bhukti*) and powers (*siddhis*), and to obtain liberation in this life (*jīvanmukti*), implies a particular attitude on the part of the Tantric adept toward the cosmos, whereby he feels integrated within an all-embracing system of micro-macrocosmic correlations.”

This definition concentrates on the goals of Tantric practice (*sādhana*). Here, I wish to add a consideration of the nature of Tantric practice itself. Tantric practice is an effort to gain access to and appropriate the energy or enlightened consciousness of the absolute godhead that courses through the universe, giving its creatures life and the potential for salvation. Humans in particular are empowered to

realize this goal through strategies of embodiment—that is, of causing that divine energy to become concentrated in one or another sort of template, grid, or mesocosm—prior to its internalization in or identification with the individual microcosm. With this, I offer the following working definition of Tantra:

Tantra is that Asian body of beliefs and practices which, working from the principle that the universe we experience is nothing other than the concrete manifestation of the divine energy of the godhead that creates and maintains that universe, seeks to ritually appropriate and channel that energy, within the human microcosm, in creative and emancipatory ways.

This definition, however, must be modified according to its contexts, given that it would probably be rejected out of hand by many Tantric practitioners, who would find it at variance with their own particular doctrines and perspectives. Buddhists, for example, would be inclined to replace the term “energy” with “teaching” or “enlightened consciousness,” whereas a village-level practitioner would, if asked, probably feel more comfortable with the term “beings.” However, when this definition is shown to be applicable to major forms of Tantric practice across the gamut of its regional and vernacular Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain forms in Asia, it becomes a valuable organizing principle.

The Tantric Maṇḍala

The key to understanding Tantric practice is the maṇḍala, the energy grid that represents the constant flow of divine and demonic, human and animal impulses in the universe, as they interact in both constructive and destructive patterns. Like the Vedic sacrificial altar of which it is a streamlined form, the maṇḍala is a mesocosm, mediating between the great and small (the universal macrocosm and the individual microcosm), as well as between the mundane and the sublime (the protocosm of the visible world of human experience and the transcendent-yet-immanent metacosm that is its invisible fount). This grid is three dimensional, in the sense that it locates the supreme deity (god, goddess, celestial buddha, bodhisattva, or enlightened tīrthaṅkara), the source of that energy and ground of the grid itself, at the center and apex of a hierarchized cosmos. All other beings, including the practitioner, will be situated at lower levels of energy/consciousness/being, radiating downward and outward from the maṇḍala’s elevated center point.

Because the deity is both transcendent and immanent, all of the beings located at the various energy levels on the grid participate in the outward flow of the godhead, and are in some way emanations or hypostases of the deity himself (or herself). For Hindu Tantra, this means that the world is real and not an illusion; this is an important distinguishing feature of Hindu Tantric doctrine. Rather than attempting to see through or transcend the world, the practitioner comes to recognize “that” (the world) as “I” (the supreme egoity of the godhead): in other words, s/he gains a “god’s eye view” of the universe, and recognizes it to be

nothing other than herself/himself. For East Asian Buddhist Tantra in particular, this means that the totality of the cosmos is a “realm of Dharma,” sharing an underlying common principle (the teachings of the buddhas), if not a common material substance [Rambelli]. More generally, this means that buddhahood is virtual within all creatures. In the words of the *Hevajra Tantra* (2.4.70, 75), “All beings are buddhas” and “there is no being that is not enlightened, if it but knows its own true nature.” To render this blissful Buddha nature manifest is the purpose of Tantric practice—whether externalized in rites or internalized in yoga (Kværne 1975: 128)—and the body is “the indispensable organ for contact with the absolute” (Faure 1998: 61). Rather than being impediments, the world and the human body become channels to salvation.

At popular levels of practice throughout Asia, this means that the world of everyday life can only be negotiated by transacting with myriad beings extending from the spirit world of the recently deceased to the fierce protector deities that are the lower emanations or simply the servants of the high gods at the center of the elite maṇḍalas. Here, embodying the divine is less a goal than a ritual technique (inducing a state of possession) for combatting demons. We will turn to the nonelite Tantric practice of the maṇḍala in Part Two of this essay; here, we concentrate on elite theory and practice.

The energy levels of the Tantric universe are generally represented as a set of concentric circles (*cakras*) of hypostasized forms of the divine energy which, in addition to appearing as an array of divine, enlightened, perfected, demonic, human, or animal beings, also manifest themselves on an acoustic level, as garlands or piled-up aggregates of phonemes (*mantras*); on a graphic level, as the written characters of the hieratic alphabets; and as the hierarchized cakras of the yogic body. These same configurations constitute the flow charts of Tantric lineages, with the flow of divine energy (but also the fluid, acoustic, or photic essence of the godhead; or the teachings of enlightened buddhas) streaming downward and outward through a succession of male and female deities and demigods—the latter often portrayed in an animal or demonic mode—into “superhuman” gurus [Padoux] and their human disciples.

In every case, one detects “fractal” patterns, in which the original bipolar dyad of the godhead in essence and manifestation (usually male and female) proliferates into increasing orders of multiplicity. Unity in multiplicity is a hallmark of Tantra, and in this respect, it is an extension of earlier, less complex, Asian metaphysical systems. There is, in Tantra, an exponential explosion of all preexisting pantheons of deities, and together with these, an expansion of every sort of category—family, number, color, direction, aspect, and so on—into an intricate cosmic calculus. With its perfect geometric forms and elaborately interwoven lines, the maṇḍala is the ideal conceptual tool for plotting the multi-leveled and polyvalent interrelationships between these categories. As such it can, and often does, become self-referential, a transcendent and ideal “utopia,” entirely abstracted from the “real world” of which it is the invisible, theoretical ground. Perhaps the best-known maṇḍala-cum-plotting device in the Tantric universe is the Śrī Cakra or Śrī Yantra of Hindu Tantric practice, a perfectly balanced three-dimensional geometric di-

agram comprising of a series of eleven interlocking and embedded triangles (also called cakras) radiating downward and outward from a center point, and enclosed by a circle and a square. The maṇḍalas of Buddhist and Jain Tantric practice follow similar structural and dynamic principles.

Even at this level of abstraction, the Tantric maṇḍala remains a template through which humans may interact with the divine, and thereby come to experience reality from a superhuman perspective. The practice of the maṇḍala generally involves a meditative or performative projection of both the metacosmic godhead and the protocosmic self into its vortex, followed by an implosion of the entire grid into its center point. Here, the underlying assumption is that this implosion is a reversal of the original cosmogony—that is, of a primal impulse or flow (*samsāra*) into manifest existence—back into the source of energies mapped on the grid. One’s self-projection into the maṇḍala and gradual return to the center is therefore a return to the source of one’s being; at each level, one is gnoseologically transformed into a higher, more divine, more enlightened being, until one becomes the god or buddha at the center (except in some dualist forms of Tantra). As we will show, there is an implicit notion of biological succession here, from the supreme godhead down through a guru-disciple lineage, which makes initiation and consecration central features of Tantric theory and practice.

Although the name, attributes, and entourage of the deity located at the center of the maṇḍala vary from one tradition to another, nearly all Tantric practice of the maṇḍala has this same goal, of transacting with and eventually identifying with that deity. In this practice, movement toward the center, effected through a combination of external ritual and internal meditative practices, entails harmonizing one’s own energy or consciousness level with that of the (deities of the) circle in which one finds oneself. First encountered as obstacles, these divine, demonic, or animal impulses are eventually overcome, that is, transformed into positive sources of energy that carry one closer and closer to the deity at the center. Alternatively, one may, having overcome them, also coerce those same potentially destructive lower-level beings to do one’s bidding through various ritual technologies, about which more below. Here, the true sense of the term *yantra* (as in the Śrī Yantra) is brought to the fore: a yantra is a mesocosmic device or machine for controlling (from the Sanskrit root *yam*) one’s conceptual reality [Rabe].

It is the nature of this grid or template, together with the chosen medium—that is, the mediating substance—of this process of divine embodiment that, more than anything else, differentiates one form of Tantra from another. When the template is the body of a naked maiden and the medium her sexual or menstrual discharge, we are in the presence of the Tantra of the old Hindu “clans” (the Kula or Kaula) and their inner and East Asian Buddhist Tantric homologues. Once we leave these traditions behind, however, the template will more often be a body of sound, of organized space, or of a deity—either in the form of a concrete or abstract worship support, a buddha’s “pleasure body” (*sambhogakāya*), one’s own subtle body, the person of the Tantric guru or lama, or the empty sky.

Often, templates and media will be combined. By far the most prevalent and

most important example of this is the practice of identifying the deity with his or her “seed mantra” (*bīja-mantra*): this notion, that the sound shape of a mantra exactly renders a given deity’s energy level, is the basis for mantric practice across all Tantric traditions. Elsewhere, maṇḍalas will have mantras inscribed on them; mantras infused into water will transform it into nectar and other fluids worthy of the gods; configurations or positions of the practitioner’s hands or body (*mudrās*) will represent a deity’s energies; maṇḍalas will be projected onto the subtle body, while the practitioner identifies with the deity at the center (as in Buddhist “deity yoga” [Lopez]); using mantras, deities will be transferred from the subtle body into a concrete image for worship; or maṇḍalas with their arrays of deities will be reproduced by human participants in ritual choreographies (Brooks 1992: 418–28; Samuel 1993: 266). Much of Tantric yogic practice combines nearly all of these elements, embodying the energy of the godhead on the grid of the subtle body through solid, fluid, acoustic, and photic media.

Generally speaking, the more subtle the medium (sound and light), the more internal, meditative, and sublimated the practice; conversely, concrete (fluid and solid) media imply external and more body-related practice, including sexual ritual, alchemy, and haṭha yoga. Internal practice, although it may incorporate the lower demonic and animal forms of divine energy, will tend to focus on the deity in sublime, even abstract, ways; external practice, which often implies sacrificial offerings, possessed states, and ritual technologies, will more often focus on fierce forms or hypostases of the deity, which it seeks to coerce and control. Much of the “soft core” of mainstream Tantric practice combines external ritual manipulations with internal meditative practice, through the templates of maṇḍala, mantra, and mudrā, and often in a devotional mode [Gupta].

One might characterize the range of Tantric uses of these templates and media as a continuum extending from “doing” to “knowing.” At one extreme, we find the concrete external utilization of blood offerings, human bones, bodily fluids, sexual intercourse, and so on, that characterize the mortuary practices—or at least the imagery thereof—of the early Hindu Kaula, early Jain Tantra, and the Buddhist Tantras of Supreme Yoga. At the other, we find a meditative ritual construction and mental enactment of generally less horrific or erotic practices, which Douglas Brooks has referred to as the “prescriptive imagination,” and Glen Hayes the “imaginative structuring of experience.” We also find a correlation between these bodies of practice, with their variable media and templates, and their goals. Practitioners who “do” their Tantra will emphasize the somatic goals of bodily immortality (*jīvanmukti*), pleasure (*bhukti*), and power (or “powers,” *siddhis*) in the world. Those who “know” their practice will tend to focus on self-deification at a more cognitive or psychological level: the transformation of human consciousness into divine consciousness [Muller-Ortega] or the perfection of wisdom and realization of one’s own inherent Buddha nature. Here, ritual practice mainly serves as a catalyst for a spiritual breakthrough, a transformation of consciousness; the Zen koan is a well-known case in point. In Buddhist Tantra—and in this it differs from Hinduism or Jainism—the ultimate goal of both those who

“do” and who “know” their practice will be to enlighten and thereby liberate all other creatures from suffering existence. This ethical parameter is by and large absent from Hindu Tantra (Samuel 1993: 243). Finally, the goals of “soft-core” Tantric householders will differ little from those of their “non-Tantric” counterparts: liberation into the godhead, the extinction of suffering, purification, health, wealth, long life, and a strong family unit.

What is important to remember here is that the basic structure and dynamics of the maṇḍala itself remain constant, regardless of variations in the media that flow through it or the names and iconographies of the deities found within its boundaries. Although it is mainly on the basis of these important details that various Tantric lineages, sects, and traditions distinguish themselves from one another, it is their common use of the maṇḍala, more than any other feature of their practice, that makes them Tantric. Viewed in this way, the varieties of Tantric practice exhibit a certain uniformity. Practitioners located outside or at the margins of the mesocosmic energy grid project themselves into the maṇḍala and work their way back to the deity at the center, with whom they identify (in nondualist Tantric systems) or with whom they enter into immediate proximity or contact (in such dualist systems as Śaiva Siddhānta, which maintained that one could never become Śiva; at best, one could become a “second Śiva,” and experience the world in the same way as god). Now, it is true that all of these media (with the possible exception of sexual fluids) may also be found in non-Tantric forms of practice throughout Asia, ranging from mainstream devotional traditions to the “ritual technologies” of shamans and other nonelite religious specialists. The ritual use of these media, however, in combination with the maṇḍala as matrix for the energy flow between the protocosmic and metacosmic levels of cosmic reality is, I would argue, specific to Tantra.

Tantric Initiation

The theory and practice of the Tantric maṇḍala operates on a mesocosmic level, that is, on the level of a mediating template between protocosm and metacosm as well as between macrocosm and microcosm. Quite often, Tantric practitioners will project the maṇḍala upon the internal grid of the “heart,” the subtle or yogic body, or a body that has been modified to embody enlightenment. This process of internalization generally begins with initiation, which plays two complementary roles. On the one hand, it transforms a biologically given individual into a vessel capable of receiving, channeling, or actualizing the divine energy of the godhead; on the other, it initiates her or him into a particular Tantric lineage and body of teachings that extend back, through the guru or lama and his predecessors, to the godhead itself. Initiation is effected by the teacher, who has been previously transformed and empowered through his own initiation (*dīkṣā*) and consecration (*abhiṣeka*), who plants in the initiate’s body a “seed” or “seme” of the essence of the godhead. This seed takes a number of forms, ranging from a drop of bodily or sexual fluid to a mantra, a photic image, or a drop or seed of consciousness

or the bodhisattva's "thought of enlightenment" (*bodhicitta*). Vital breath (*prāṇa*) is generally the dynamic element in this transfer, just as it is in the animation of external images for worship and the internal practices of yoga. Through this "in-semination" process, the guru or lama makes the initiate a part of the flow chart of the Tantric lineage, which radiates outward in maṇḍala fashion from the godhead or buddhahood that is its center and source. In many Tantric traditions, this process involves a transfer of the guru or lama's feminine energy (*śakti*) or wisdom (*prajñā*) into his disciple. The form that that transfer takes, ranging from the actual participation of a female consort in ritual sex to more sublimated transfers effected through food (yogurt, for example), mantras, or other media, varies according to tradition. The pivotal and transformative role of the guru in initiation has led to an equation in most Tantric traditions between guru and godhead, and meditation will often involve visualizing the guru as god at the center of the maṇḍala.

This very concrete notion of lineage is so fundamental to Tantra in the Tibetan tradition that two similar terms (both pronounced *gyi*) are used for "teaching lineage," "genealogical lineage," and "Tantra" in the Tibetan language. Similarly, in Indian Hindu and Buddhist Tantra, the term *kula* ("family," "clan") is applied to the entire maṇḍala [Brooks]: initiation into the maṇḍala is initiation into the divine family of Śiva, Vajradhara, and so on, and the maṇḍala of the monastery constitutes a sort of microcosmic household (Samuel 1993: 150–51). This intimate relationship between spiritual lineage and biological lineage is based in no small part in socioreligious reality; very often, one is initiated into a Tantric tradition by one's biological father. The same rule often applies at the state level; lineages of princes and kings are initiated by parallel lineages of royal Tantric gurus, with the lineage god or goddess of both king and priest—that is, the deity at the heart of the maṇḍala—being the same for both. In cases of theocratic government, as in Tibet, the interpenetration of biological, spiritual, and royal lines become more pronounced.

Yoga and Tantra

Crucial to the initiation process is the notion that within the gross body of the human microcosm or protocosm there is a subtle, yogic body that is the mesocosmic replica of the divine, universal macrocosm or metacosm. As such, yoga constitutes a vital component of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain [Qvarnström] Tantric theory and practice. This body, which comprises energy channels (*nāḍīs*) and centers (*cakras*), drops, and winds, is itself a maṇḍala. If it were to be viewed from above, the vertical central channel of the subtle body, which mediates the bipolar (and sexually gendered) internal dynamic of the godhead, would appear as the center point of the maṇḍala, with the various cakras aligned along that channel appearing as so many concentric circles, wheels, or lotuses radiating outward from that center. Often, each of the spokes or petals of these cakras will have male and female deities, as well as Sanskrit phonemes and graphemes, as-

signed to it. As such, initiation and all forms of yogic practice involve, once again, an effort on the part of the practitioner to return to the elevated center point of the emanated maṇḍala. Once the practitioner has succeeded in centering all of the energies coursing through his subtle body—energies that flow through the myriad subtle channels in the form of fluids, phonemes, and graphemes—the final phase of his practice will effect the reimplosion of feminine energy into (a usually) masculine essence or pure consciousness. This final phase is often portrayed as the merging of the inner female energy—called Kuṇḍalinī (the coiled serpent energy, in Hinduism) or Avadhūtī or Cāṇḍālī (in Buddhism)—situated in the lower half of the body, with a masculine principle (Śiva in Hinduism, Upāya in Buddhism) located in the cranial vault. This union is represented in terms not only of energies but of sexual fluids, as well. In Hindu practice, the sanguinary Kuṇḍalinī rises to join the seminal Śiva in the cranial vault, with the “nectar” produced from their union optimally being held there by the practitioner, as a means to becoming a Siddha, a “self-made god” (White 1996: 320)

Buddhist yogic imagery is similar to that of the Hindus. A number of early Vajrayāna works speak of red and white sexual fluids being united into the thought of enlightenment in the central channel; one of these texts, the *Hevajra Tantra* (1.32), portrays the internal feminine energy as the Cāṇḍālī (“Outcaste Woman”) who blazes upward into the cranial vault. The male “moon” residing there is made to melt by her heat, and their conjoined fluid—now the bodhicitta—flows down through the cakras, suffusing the practitioner as it does with the bliss of their union. Later Buddhist traditions more closely follow the dynamic of Hindu haṭha yogic practice, with feminine energy being made to rise through the cakras to the “Lotus of Great Bliss” in the head (Kværne 1975: 120–21). The Completion Phase of Supreme Yoga visualization [Bentor]—in which the maṇḍala is incorporated into the subtle body—is rife with the imagery of both sexuality and death; however, as in all of Buddhist practice, these transformative experiences are but means to the higher end of enlightenment and buddhahood.

“Tantric Sex”

Both historically and conceptually, yoga is in many ways an internalization of sexual intercourse between a man and a woman [Hayes], which brings us back to the vexed matter of Tantric sex. Tantric art abounds in representations of couples (and sometimes larger groups) engaged in all manner of sexual intercourse (*maithuna*, *yab-yum*, and so on), and most Tantric scriptures include extended discussions of sexual practice. Śiva and Vajrasattva, the high gods of Śaiva Hindu Tantra and Buddhist Vajrayāna, are themselves depicted as engaging in endless sexual marathons with their consorts, when they (and a number of other supernatural beings) are not portrayed as actually dwelling inside the female organ itself. If the Tantric practitioner’s goal is to replace mundane human thought with enlightened god-consciousness, and if sexuality is the divine path to enlightenment, then the practitioner’s imitatio dei should, quite reasonably, be enacted in

a sexual mode. Yet, over the centuries, the debate has raged as to whether Tantric sexual imagery is to be taken literally or simply as so much figurative symbolization of exalted, dispassionate, even disembodied, states of consciousness.

This debate, both pro and con, may be somewhat misplaced, when one considers the possible origins of “Tantric sex.” In early Hindu Tantra, sexual intercourse was often simply the practical means for generating the sexual fluids that constituted the preferred offering of the Tantric deities. Elsewhere, there can be no doubt that an early and persistent form of Tantric initiation and practice involved transactions in sexual fluids between a male initiate and a female consort—termed *yoginī*, *dūtī* (the female “messenger”), or *śakti* (“energy”) for Hindus; and *ḍākinī*, *prajñā* (“wisdom”), or *mudrā* (the “seal”) for their Buddhist counterparts. Here, the male initiate was physically inseminated or insanguinated with the sexual emissions of the female consort (sometimes together with the semen of the male guru or lama), as a means of transforming him, reproductively as it were, into a son of the clan (*kula-putra*, in Hindu Tantra). Here, the role of the female consort is vital, because the clan fluid (*kula-dravya*) or clan nectar (*kulāmṛta*), vulval essence (*yoni-tattva*), or thought of enlightenment (*bodhicitta*) is understood to flow naturally through her womb. Because she is herself the embodiment of the energy of the godhead (or Wisdom, the complement to male Skill in Means), her sexual or menstrual discharge is considered to be the germ plasm of the godhead or enlightened consciousness itself. Human males, through whom this divine fluid does not naturally flow, can only gain access to it through the conduit of the female sexual organ (White 1998). As such, “Tantric sex” would originally have been a matter of generating, offering, and ingesting transformative sexual fluids. It was only later that bliss itself would come to take center stage, replacing the notion of sexual orgasm as a means to an end with a more psychologized understanding of the same as an end in itself—a blissful expansion of consciousness (Sanderson 1988: 679–80).

Transactions in and the consumption of sexual fluids also served as means for affirming the doctrine of identity in difference, or the identity of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, in Hindu and Buddhist Tantra. In tenth- to eleventh-century Hindu Tantra in Kashmir, for example, a recognition of the consciousness-expanding effects of orgasm was accompanied by an understanding of the psychological effects of the oral consumption of such an impure—and thereby powerful and dangerous—substance as female discharge (sexual emissions and menstrual blood), as well as the other prohibited substances: the five *makāras*, the five nectars, and so on. Here, in a socioreligious system in which “you are what you eat,” the potentially self-destructive act of ingesting such substances was deemed sufficient to effect a breakthrough from limited conventional thought to expanded, enlightened god-consciousness (Sanderson 1995: 85–87). The Siddhas and “crazy yogis” of Vajrayāna tradition are legendary for having resorted to alimentary and sexual transgression as means of teaching the identity of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. One of these, the Bhutanese Drukpa Kunley, made a career of converting demonesses to Buddhism with his “flaming thunderbolt of wisdom,” that is, his

penis, about which he then sang songs in public meetings. For those who had eyes to see and ears to hear, this would no doubt have been a consciousness-raising experience (Dowman 1980).

Erotico-mystical practices such as these were not present in every form of early Tantra, and most Tantric traditions have, over time, refined them into more sublimated forms of practice, on a mantric, mandalic, ritual, or yogic level; some traditions have played down their importance or eschewed them as too dangerous for all but the supremely qualified. Many later Hindu and Buddhist Tantric schools have valued visualization of the Tantric consort over actual intercourse with her; and in spite of explicit references to emission of the bodhicitta in most Supreme Yoga Tantra consecrations, Buddhist Tantra has generally emphasized seminal retention and the reversal of sexual energy within the body of the male practitioner (Kværne 1975: 108). In fact, the great bulk of Buddhist Tantric discourse on sexuality—as well as on alchemy, which is the union of male and female reagents—has long since been internalized into descriptions of the yogic union of female Wisdom with male Skill in Means, within the subtle body.

Yet the sexual referent has nearly always remained present in even the most “cosmeticized” or “semanticized” forms of Tantric discourse (Sanderson 1995: 79). If Michel Strickmann (1996: 203) is correct when he asserts that Tantric art is Tantric ritual, and that Buddhist Tantric ritual is [sexual] union with an icon, then there is little to Tantric practice that has not borne some occult or explicit sexual valence. This is as it should be. The soteriological value of passion or desire itself has always been a watchword of Tantra: on this basis alone, “salvific sexuality” ought to lie at the heart of Tantric practice. However, the extent to which precept has been reproduced in practice varies from one Tantric tradition to another, and has changed over time within every one of those traditions.

Here, a general statement on the place of the feminine in Tantra is in order. Many if not most Tantric traditions emphasize the role of women and (or as) goddesses on a number of levels. One of the distinguishing features of Tantra is, in fact, its proliferation of goddesses—sometimes benign like the compassionate Guanyin, or ambiguous like the hunchbacked Kubjikā [Goudriaan], but most often fierce, like the terrible black Kālī [McDermott]. In such traditions, the hypostases or energies of the male (or sometimes female, in “pure Śākta” forms of Hindu Tantra) godhead are generally female, as are the inner energies of the subtle body, the body of the Tantric consort, Buddhist Wisdom (*prajñā*), and the sacred geography of the world itself. In the Hindu Tantric worldview, the world is the body of the goddess, and its myriad religious landscapes her many physical features. This understanding lies at the heart of the networks of the goddess’s pīṭhas (“benches”) in South Asia (Sircar 1973; Dyczkowski 1999), as well as of the many “womb-caves” of the Tantric goddesses that dot the Tibetan and inner Asian Buddhist landscape (Stein 1988). Elsewhere, exceptional women have risen to prominence in certain Tantric traditions—the Tibetan Yoginī Ma gcig Lab sgron being a case in point [Orofino]—and women have been praised and often worshiped as goddesses in many Tantric scriptures.

It would, however, be incorrect to say that all Tantric traditions have placed this stress on the power of the feminine. Japanese Tantra generally identifies the “six elements” of our world as the body of the male buddha Vairocana, and Japanese sacred mountains are generally male. Elsewhere, a number of early “clerical” Tantric traditions, discussed below (especially Hindu Śaiva Siddhānta and the Buddhist Tantras of Action and Observance), portray the expansion of the godhead into the world as a predominantly masculine affair. Furthermore, it would be hasty to conclude, on the basis of the general Tantric exaltation of feminine energy, that female practitioners have ever dominated the religious or political Tantric sphere. Even in her transformative initiatory role, the Tantric consort has remained instrumental to the requirements of the male practitioners she transforms.

Historical Parameters

As Geoffrey Samuel (1993: 7–10) has argued for Tibetan Buddhist society, the body of doctrines and practices that are grouped under the heading of Tantra all draw, to varying degrees, upon two types of sources. These are the “shamanic” magical practices or ritual technologies of nonelite religious specialists and their clientele; and the speculative and scholasticist productions of often state-sponsored religious elites (which Samuel terms “clerical”). The history of Tantra is the history of the interaction between these two strands of practice and practitioners, whose clientele, comprising commoners and political elites, have nearly always overlapped. There can be no doubt that the relationships among Indian kings and the Tantric specialists they chose over other alternatives (generally Vedic) are key to understanding the origins and history of this interaction. These specialists would probably have included professional priests of emerging temples of Tantric deities; royal chaplains seeking enhanced religious protection for their royal clients; court astrologers, physicians, and magicians; “shamanic” itinerant Siddhas and their female consorts or śaktis (Gupta-Hoens-Goudriaan 1979: 29–35); and the leaders of important monastic orders.

Apart from the fact of its Indian provenance, the “origin” of Tantra will not be treated here. Depending on whether one’s criteria are text- or iconography-based or grounded in practice, deities, lineages, or sociopolitical contexts, one’s dating and account of Tantra’s origins will vary significantly. Here, we limit ourselves to stating that Tantra was an orthogenic development out of prior mainstream (but not necessarily elite) traditions, that nonetheless also drew on both foreign (adstratal) and popular (substratal) sources. So, for example, the homa (fire) rites common to most Tantric traditions are direct heirs of the Vedic homa sacrifices (an orthogenic development), whereas certain elements of Tibetan Buddhist Tantra clearly draw on both Iranian (adstratal) and indigenous (substratal) traditions. In Japan, the sanrinjin (literally, “three bodies with discs”) theory, which divided the Buddha’s appearances in the phenomenal world into three types, was an

explicit means for incorporating the (adstratal) Indian deities of Hinduism into the Buddhist fold as “propagators of Buddhism” (a strategy introduced in India), as well as for Buddhicizing (substratal) indigenous Japanese kami deities (Matsunaga 1987: 52). The question nonetheless remains as to when and by what means these deities and the rituals and beliefs associated with them became “Tantric,” as opposed to “Vedic,” “non-Tantric Buddhist,” “non-Tantric Jain,” “popular Indian,” “popular Chinese,” “popular Japanese,” and so on.

When subjected to close scrutiny, these sorts of distinctions nearly always break down. We may take as an example the multiple goddesses—called *yoginīs*, *ḍākinīs*, “vixen” spirits, and so on—that are found in nearly every Tantric tradition. In the Indian context out of which so much of Tantra arose, cults of multiple goddesses were already present, prior to the common era, in the *apsarasas* (nymphs), *yakṣinīs* (female dryads), *mātr̥s* (Mothers), and *grahaṇīs* (female seizers), who were generally propitiated with animal sacrifices and early forms of devotional worship. Although it is true that such powerful and petulant beings (devouring when ignored, but nurturing when honored) were rarely if ever qualified as high gods by the Hindu, Buddhist, or Jain elites, nevertheless, whenever any woman—whether the wife of a brahman, king, or commoner—was about to give birth, an image of one or more of these female deities would have been painted on the walls of the birthing chamber. That these goddesses were mainstream is further attested by the fact that such Mothers or female seizers as *Ṣaṣṭhī* and *Hārītī* were depicted on Kushan and Gupta-age coinage and sculpture throughout greater India. Moreover, groups of goddesses of this type figure prominently among the “export deities” that took root and flourished in foreign soil, in Inner and East Asia—making theirs a truly cosmopolitan cult.

When persons from every level of Asian society were worshiping these multiple female deities, is it proper to call this a “folk” or “popular” cult? And where does one draw the line between “indigenous” and “foreign”? Often the sole changes that have historically occurred in the cults of these groups have been their group name and the use to which they have been put in religious practice. Thus *Pūtanā*, one of the multiple Mothers or female seizers of Hindu epic tradition, is later listed as a *yoginī* in the Hindu *Purāṇas* and *Tantras*. The name *Pūtanā* also appears as the name of a class of disease demonesses in such Buddhist sources as the early Mahāyāna *Lotus of the True Law* (Filliozat 1937: 160) and the early seventh-century Chinese version of *Collection of the Dhāraṇī Teachings* (Strickmann 1996: 156). In these later developments, *Pūtanā* the Hindu *yoginī* or *Pūtanā* the Buddhist *ḍākinī* is no longer merely propitiated as a means of preventing miscarriage or childhood diseases; she has now become a part of the “enshrinement and employment of demigods as instruments of power” (Sutherland 1991: 146) that was and remains one of the hallmarks of Tantric practice. One calls her and her dangerous host down upon oneself, and through ritual manipulation, compels them to do one’s bidding.

This ritual strategy forms the core of the so-called Buddhist *dhāraṇī* texts (Matsunaga 1987: 47–48), collections of spells and ritual techniques that, composed

in India in the second to sixth centuries C.E., were in the centuries that followed the calling cards of the Tantric masters who became the most powerful and prestigious ritualists of the Chinese imperial court (Strickmann 1996: 30). In Japan, a Shingon legend concerning Kamatari, the seventh-century founder of the Fujiwara lineage, relates that he was, in his youth, abducted by a vixen that was a manifestation of a deity named Dakini. After having had sexual relations with the vixen, he received from her the magic formula and the insignia of power (*kama*) that became part of his name (Faure 1998: 262). In modern-day rural Japan, certain types of vixens, termed “witch animals,” are brought under the control of solitary male ascetics through a rite formerly known as the Daten or Dagini rite (Blacker 1975: 51–55)—this latter term clearly being a Japanese rendering of the Sanskrit *dākinī*. If it were possible to determine the precise dates of appropriations such as this into an explicitly Tantric classification schema and body of practice, one could, perhaps, pinpoint the century of the “origins” of this element of Tantra. As this is impossible, however, I will close this digression by simply stating that Tantra emerged out of the South Asian elite and popular mainstream some time in the middle of the first millennium C.E.

The origins of Tantra are, from both emic and etic perspectives, Indian. All authentic Tantric lineages—of deities, scriptures, oral teachings, and teachers—claim to extend back to Indian sources. Perhaps the earliest reference to sects that have subsequently come to be classified as Tantric is a passage from a fourth-century C.E. portion of the great Hindu epic, the *Mahābhārata* (12.335.40), which names the (Śaiva) Pāśupatas and the (Vaiṣṇava) Pāñcarātras as “non-Vedic.” The founders of every major Tantric tradition, school, or sect either trace their guru-disciple lineages back to an Indian source or are considered to be incarnations of bodhisattvas of Indian “origin.” The exploded pantheon of Tantra—its principal multiheaded and multiarmed deities and their burgeoning families or clans—are generally Indian, or at least traceable to Indian prototypes. The same holds for scriptural traditions: all Asian Tantric traditions are explicit concerning the Indian origins of their teachings, and the transmission of their teachings from India; this includes the Tibetan Treasure—*gter ma*, pronounced “terma”—traditions which, while “discovered” in Tibet, were nonetheless “hidden” there by the Indian teachers Vimalamitra and Padmasambhava [Germano-Gyatso]. Much of Tantric legend concerns the Indian “shamanic culture heroes” (Samuel 1993: 19) known as Siddhas or Mahāsiddhas. The hieratic language of Tantra generally remains the Sanskrit of medieval Indian Hinduism and Buddhism. That is, for any lineage-based Tantric body of practice (*sādhana*) to be legitimate in Chinese, Japanese, or Tibetan Tantric traditions, its translated root text must be traceable back to a Sanskrit original. In these translated sources, mantras—whose efficacy resides in their sound shape—will not be translated but rather frozen (at least in theory) in the original Sanskrit. Furthermore, Indic characters form the basis of the hieratic Siddham script employed in Chinese and Japanese Tantric maṇḍalas and texts. The yogic practice that is so central to Tantra is also of Indian origin (albeit influenced by Daoist techniques)—and the list goes on.

As for the history of Tantra, it may be approached from both emic and etic

perspectives. By way of presenting the problems of Tantric historiography, I begin by presenting an emic dilemma in Japan. Here, of course, we are in the presence of “export” Tantra, in this case Mahāyāna traditions brought to greater Asia from India by monks and other religious specialists from the fifth century C.E. onward. What we find, in fact, is that the historical time frame in which the transmission (to China, Tibet, Korea, Japan, Southeast Asia) of various Indian Tantric paradigms occurred has invariably proven definitive for the structure and content of the “export” Tantric tradition in question. It is as if the original revelation remained fossilized, like an insect in a block of amber, in the export tradition. This is manifestly the case, for example, with Japanese Shingon—founded by Kūkai (774–835 C.E.)—whose core revelations are the seventh-century C.E. *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* and the *Tattvasaṃgraha-sūtra*. It was precisely these two south Indian Mahāyāna texts—brought to China by Śubhakarasiṃha (637–735 C.E.) for the *Mahāvairocana*, and Vajrabodhi (671–741 C.E.) and Amoghavajra (eighth century C.E.), for the *Tattvasaṃgraha*, and taught to him in China by Amoghavajra’s disciple Huiguo—that formed the core of Kūkai’s Shingon teachings. Shingon practice remains, in many respects, a preserved specimen of those enshrined in seventh-century Indian paradigms, but with a Japanese overlay. Following this eighth-century watershed, subsequent Indian developments in Tantra had limited or no impact on Shingon for four centuries (Matsunaga 1987: 50–52; Yamasaki 1988: 3–12, 19–20). Similarly, Tibetan Buddhism, with its preponderance of Vajrayāna practice based on revelations found in what would later be classified as the Tantras of Yoga and Supreme Yoga, preserves the Tantric status quo of eighth-century India, from which it was introduced into Tibet by the legendary Vimalamitra and Padmasambhava.

Shingon is one of the two most important mainstream forms of Japanese Tantra, the other being Tendai, founded by Saichō (767–822 C.E.). Together, Shingon and Tendai are widely considered to constitute mikkyō, the “esoteric Buddhism” or “pure esotericism” of Japan. Here, mikkyō is held to be “pure” in contradistinction to the “mixed esotericism” of Tantra, of which two medieval movements were termed *jakyō* (heresies) (Faure 1998: 126). One of these, injected into Shingon from Tibet via Chinese Daoism, was the Tachikawa-ryū [Faure]. In Tachikawa—which equated sexual bliss with Kūkai’s doctrine of “bodily buddhahood”—Tantric practice took a new (for Shingon) highly sexualized coloring, typical of Supreme Yoga Tantra consecrations (described in Snellgrove 1987: 257–61). Here, “Skull Ritual” initiations—real or imagined—that involved the union of (male) Skill in Means and (female) Wisdom, enacted through sexual intercourse and the subsequent collection of sexual fluids, were very close in style to *Hevajra* and *Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa Tantra*-based consecrations that had, in the tenth and eleventh centuries, been incorporated into the Tibetan Tantric “clerical” mainstream. By the mid-thirteenth century, the doctrines of this school had become so popular as to necessitate an orthodox Shingon backlash against the “Tachikawa heresy,” which culminated in its effective suppression by the late fifteenth century (Sanford 1991: 1–4, 9–18; Strickmann 1996: 245).

Yet, as Bernard Faure has indicated, Japanese mikkyō, like Indo-Tibetan Vaj-

rayāna, feminized a number of Buddhist deities; and ritual sex with them (or their human substitutes) was part of the ritual. In the same vein, the *Bizei betsu* (Particular Notes on the Abhiṣeka) of Jien, an “orthodox” twelfth- to thirteenth-century Tendai text, describes a cognate rite of sexual union between the emperor and his consort, in the role of Tantric adepts (Faure 1998: 126). In spite of the historical presence, within their own traditions, of these elements of Indo-Tibetan Tantric practice, Shingon and Tendai apologists have for centuries tried to distance themselves from—if not deny the existence of—the darker magical (and in particular sexual) components of Tachikawa-ryū and other Tantric “heresies.” How can their emic claims to purity prevail against the etic historical data presented here?

Here, let us turn to a set of emic categories that, although they originated in India, have been used widely to classify all the Buddhist Tantric sects and schools. These are the categories of the Tantras of Action (Kriyā Tantras), Tantras of Observance (Caryā Tantras), Tantras of Yoga (Yoga Tantras), and Tantras of Supreme Yoga (Anuttarayoga Tantras). These categories are used in reference to bodies of revealed texts, ritual practice, and especially to types of consecration, with the latter two being far more esoteric than the former two forms of Buddhist Tantric practice. Within more esoteric Buddhist traditions, this means that Yoga and Supreme Yoga consecrations follow or are “higher” than those of Action and Observance. In the more conventional or exoteric Buddhist Tantric schools, these Yoga and Supreme Yoga texts, rituals, and consecrations are simply omitted.

This emic hierarchy or ordering does not, however, necessarily imply a historical evolution. As Geoffrey Samuel (1993: 411–12) has argued, the Tantras of Action and Observance, which grew up as extensions of ritual, yogic, and devotional tendencies already present within earlier Mahāyāna traditions, were probably well ensconced within Indian Buddhist monastic communities by the eighth and ninth centuries. As for the more esoteric and antinomian Tantras of Yoga and Supreme Yoga—the core of Vajrayāna Buddhism (so-called for its “diamond,” that is, vajra, families of deities)—their origins were probably coeval with if not prior to those of the Tantras of Action and Observance. However, these remained the preserve of the more independent and solitary “shamanic” Siddha-type practitioners until the tenth and eleventh centuries. For this reason, there are relatively few texts of the Yoga and Supreme Yoga variety prior to their insertion, as “higher” or more esoteric initiations, into “clerical” Tantric traditions. Whatever the case, the patterns of development of these hierarchized revelations appear to fall into lockstep with similar evolutions taking place within the Hindu Tantric schools in India; this parallel evolution has been clearly delineated by Alexis Sanderson (1988: 678–79) as follows:

By the eighth century C.E. the Buddhists had accumulated a hierarchy of Tantric revelations roughly parallel in its organisation and character to that of the [Hindu] Mantramārga [whose textual canon comprises the *Śiva-Āgamas* and *Rudra-Āgamas* of the Śaiva Siddhānta and the *Bhairava-Āgamas* of Kāpālika Śaivism]. Their literature

was divided in order of ascending esotericism into the Tantras of Action (*kriyā-tantras*), of Observance (*caryā-tantras*), of Yoga (*yoga-tantras*), and Supreme Yoga (*yogānuttara-tantras*). . . .

[W]e can compare the relatively orthodox cult of the mild Vairocana Buddha in the Tantras of Observance (*Mahāvairocanasūtra*, etc.) and Yoga (*Tattvasamgraha*, *Par-amādyā*, etc.) with the Śaiva Siddhānta cult of Sadāśiva, and the more esoteric and heteropractic traditions of the Higher Yoga (*Guhyasamāja*, etc.), and Supreme Yoga (*Abhidhānottara*, *Hevajra*, *Ḍākiṇīvajrapañjara*, etc.) with the [more orthoprax male-deity-oriented] Mantrapīṭha and [the heteroprax female-deity-oriented] Vidyāpīṭha of the Tantras of Bhairava. Just as the Svacchandabhairava cult of the Mantrapīṭha is transitional between the more exoteric Śaiva Siddhānta and the Kāpālika Vidyāpīṭha, so that of Akṣobhya in the Higher Yoga stands bridging the gap between the Vairocana cult and the feminised and Kāpālika-like cults of Heruka, Vajravārāhī and the other *khaṭvāṅga* (skull-rattle)-bearing deities of the Supreme Yoga.

At the lower levels of the Buddhist Tantric canon, there is certainly the influence of the general character and liturgical methods of the Śaiva and Pāñcarātra-Vaiṣṇava Tantric traditions. But at the final (and latest) level the dependence is much more profound and detailed. As in the Vidyāpīṭha cults these Buddhist deities are Kāpālika in an iconic form. They wear the five bone-ornaments and are smeared with ashes (the six seals [*mudrās*] of the Kāpālikas). They drink blood from skull-bowls (*kapāla*), have the Śaiva third eye, stand on the prostrate bodies of lesser deities, wear Śiva's sickle moon in their massed and matted hair (*jaṭā*). And, just as in the Vidyāpīṭha, their cults are set in that of the Yoginīs. Those who are initiated by introduction into the *maṇḍalas* of these Yoginī-encircled Buddhist deities are adorned with bone-ornaments and given the Kāpālika's *khaṭvāṅga* and skull-bowl to hold.

Sanderson goes on to argue that it was the Buddhists who borrowed from the Hindus in these forms of Tantric practice, an argument that has been expanded by Robert Mayer (1996: 102–32) with specific reference to Tibetan Buddhism. This is not the place to discuss the issue of who borrowed from whom; the point is that Tantra was a body of religious practice that evolved through similar phases both within India and throughout its expansion into greater Asia. For any given period, there has been a certain uniformity to Tantric practice that would have been identifiable as “Tantra,” both within India and across Asia.

Within India, we may take the example of an early tenth-century Jain Tantra entitled the *Jvālīnī Kalpa*. This text—which features yakṣiṇīs as consorts of the tīrthaṅkaras; Tantric sorcery (*ṣaṭkriyā*); yoga and alchemy; erotic practice involving the use of a female partner's sexual fluids as power substances (*caṇḍālī vijjā*); use of maṇḍalas, mudrās, and mantras; nyāsa (imposition of the deity's body on the practitioner's); and cult of the Eight Mothers (Nandi, 1973: 147–67)—is in nearly every respect identical to Hindu and Buddhist Tantric sources of the same period. Nothing but the names of the deities invoked, visualized, or manipulated in these practices is specifically Jain; all the features, however, are specific to tenth-century Indian Tantra, whether Hindu, Buddhist, or Jain. Most of these “hard

core” practices disappeared from Jain Tantra in the centuries that followed, just as they did from Hindu and Buddhist Tantra; however, in this tenth-century stratum, Jain, Hindu, and Buddhist Tantra were largely identical.

Outside of India, we may return to the emic conundrum of the Japanese proponents of mikkyō, who have had to grapple with (or who more often simply deny) the problem of the presence, within the historical development of their own tradition, of elements of the Tachikawa “heresy.” The same principle that applies within Indo-Tibetan Buddhism also applies to “export” Tantra. Both the exoteric Mahāyāna form of Tantra that was central to the formation of Shingon in the eighth century and the esoteric Vajrayāna form of Tantra central to Tachikawa practice were forms of Tantric practice that were normative for their respective times. In the light of this, the Shingon emic category of mikkyō as well as the broader Tantric emic category of the four types of revelation (encompassing both Shingon as “pure esotericism” and the Tachikawa “heresy”) that fell within the purview of some twelfth-century Shingon practices are both admissible, when viewed through the etic lens of historical development.

Tantric Actors

Tantric actors, who include Siddhas, gurus or lamas, monks and nuns, yogins, sorcerers, witches, rulers, royal preceptors and chaplains, spirit mediums, visionary bards, oracles, astrologers, healers, and lay- or householder-practitioners, may be classified into three main groups: Tantric specialists who have received initiation into a textual, teaching lineage and their generally elite clients; Tantric specialists lacking in formal initiation, whose training tends to be through oral transmission (or divine possession) alone, and their generally nonelite clients; and householder or lay nonspecialists whose personal practice may be qualified as Tantric. Although the third category is numerically the largest, lay or householder Tantric practice is generally “soft core,” and will therefore not enter significantly into our discussion. There is overlap among these groups, of course, with householder practitioners, for example, calling upon one or another type of specialist for teachings, guidance, and ritual expertise and practice. The purview of the Tantric actor par excellence, the Tantric ruler—usually a king or emperor but, in the case of Tibet, a head of the monastic theocracy—covers all three of these categories. Apart from the kings of Nepal and Bhutan, there are no Tantric rulers remaining in the world, and it is perhaps for this reason that most twentieth-century scholarly and popular accounts of Tantra tend to view it either as little more than popular superstition or “sympathetic magic,” on the one hand, or as a sublime theoretical edifice on the other, without seeking to describe the relationship between these types of practice and their practitioners. In this final section, I argue that the person and office of the Tantric ruler is the glue that holds together all three levels or types of Tantric practice, without whom an integrated

understanding of Tantra cannot be gained. As before, the Tantric maṇḍala will serve to map the tradition.

The View from the Center

In our working definition of Tantra, we identified the maṇḍala as the hallmark of Tantric theory and practice, the mesocosmic template through which the Tantric practitioner transacts with and appropriates the myriad energies that course through every level of the cosmos. Here, it is important to note that the maṇḍala was, in its origins, directly related to royal power. The notion of the king as cakravartin—as both he who turns (*vartayati*) the wheel (*cakra*) of his kingdom or empire from its center and he whose chariot wheel has rolled around its perimeter without obstruction—is one that goes back to the late Vedic period in India. A cognate ideology of the emperor, the “son of Heaven,” as center was already in place in China in the same period. Basic to these constructions of kingship is the notion that the king, standing at the center of his kingdom (from which he also rules over the periphery) mirrors the godhead at the center of his realm, his divine or celestial kingdom. However, whereas the godhead’s heavenly kingdom is unchanging and eternal, the terrestrial ruler’s kingdom is only made so through the “utopia” of the maṇḍala. As such, the idealized “constructed kingdom” of the maṇḍala is the mesocosmic template between real landscapes, both geographical and political (the protocosm) and the heavenly kingdom of the godhead (metacosm), with the person of the king as god on earth constituting the idealized microcosm. Ruling from his capital at the conceptual center of the universe, the king is strategically located at the base of the prime channel of communication between upper and lower worlds, which he keeps “open” through the mediation of his religious specialists.

This royal ideology of “galactic polity” (Tambiah 1976: 102–31) or the “exemplary center” comprising the king, his deity, and the capital city, has been mediated by the maṇḍala in nearly every premodern Asian political system. In India, the practice of the maṇḍala is tantamount to the royal conquest of the four directions (*digvijaya*) which, beginning with a fire sacrifice (*homa*), has the king process through the four compass points, around the theoretical perimeter of his realm, before returning to his point of origin, which has now been transformed into the royal capital and center of the earth (Sax 1990: 143, 145). This last detail is an important one, because it highlights the king’s dual role as pivot between heaven and earth. On the one hand, he is the microcosmic godhead incarnate, ruling from the center; on the other, he is the protocosmic representative of Everyman, struggling against myriad hostile forces that threaten him from the periphery. It is here that, in terms of the maṇḍala and Tantric practice in general, the king constitutes the link that binds together elite and nonelite practitioners and traditions.

In reality, the king’s hold on the maṇḍala of his realm has often been more

utopian than real. Conversely, given the intrinsically utopian (belonging to “no-place”) nature of the maṇḍala, Tantric practitioners have often flourished, or at least survived, in situations of political anarchy or oppression; that is, in the absence of a religiously sanctioned ruler. In this latter case, religious power, when forced to operate on a clandestine level, controls the invisible forces of the universe from the hidden “center” of the tāntrika’s “peripheral” shrine, monastery, or lodge. It is not for nothing that in India, the abbot of a powerful monastery or leader of a religious order continues to be addressed, in the present day, as guru-rāja, “preceptor-king.”

In this sense, the Tantric practitioner is a crypto-potentate, transacting like a king with the boundless energy of the godhead that flows from the elevated center of his worship maṇḍala. The early history of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas, arguably a Tantric sect in its origins, is a remarkable example of this strategy. Finding themselves in a world without a Vaiṣṇava king following the fall of the Gajapati dynasty in Orissa in 1568 C.E., the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas created a ritually ordered cosmos for themselves in which the cultic centers of Nabadwip and Vrindaban came to be identified, through the architectonics of the maṇḍala, with the descent of the celestial realm (*dhāman*) of the royal god Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa. Since that time, Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava practitioners have visualized themselves at the center of a utopian kingdom, meditatively envisioning the power relationship between features of these cult centers’ natural landscape and the divine realm of Kṛṣṇa’s Goloka heaven (Stewart, 1995: 5).

Here, then, we see that the utopia of the Tantric maṇḍala may serve both to ground legitimate royal authority and power when the king is a Tantric practitioner, and to subvert illegitimate power or create a covert nexus of power when the wrong king or no king is on the throne. This is precisely the strategy of the present Dalai Lama’s government in exile vis-à-vis the occupation of Tibet by the People’s Republic of China. The role of the lama in Tibetan Buddhist religious polity stands out as a unique case in the history of Tantra inasmuch as the lamas have actually exercised temporal power, governing, protecting, and working for the enlightenment of their country and its people. This is a pattern that began in the thirteenth century with the establishment of a relationship between the Sakya order and the Mongol emperors, whereby the former became the Tantric initiators of the latter. In terms of religious ideology, however, this pattern goes back to the twelfth century, at which time certain Nyingmapa “Treasure” scriptures had begun to portray the seventh-century Tibetan monarch Song-tsen Gampo as a Tantric manifestation of Avalokiteśvara, and created an elaborate national mythos around this theme (Kapstein 1992: 79–93). This was institutionalized (also with Mongol support) with the establishment of the fifth Dalai Lama as the temporal and spiritual ruler of Tibet in 1642; for the next 308 years, the Gelugpa Dalai Lama, the incarnation of the celestial bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, “ruled” Tibet from his Potala palace (Samuel 1993: 488, 527, 544). Since 1950, the maṇḍala of the Dalai Lama’s rule has once more become a utopian one.

In the entire history of Tantra, the Tibetan theocracy alone has succeeded in

collapsing the three types of Tantric practitioners mentioned at the beginning of this section—as well as the dual (spiritual and temporal) role of the Tantric ruler—into the single person of the lama. In the remainder of the Tantric world, the division of labor outlined above has remained the rule, with the royal courts of Hindu and Buddhist kings constituting the privileged clientele of Tantric specialists. This symbiotic relationship between Tantric “power brokers” and their power-wielding royal patrons is particularly apparent in Tantric rituals of initiation (*dīkṣā*), and consecration or empowerment (*abhiṣeka*). Tantric consecration has long been the special prerogative of Asian rulers. In fact, royal participation in Tantric ritual colors the totality of Tantric literature; and “it is no mystery that central ritual of Tantra—consecration—was modeled on the ancient Indian ritual of royal investiture, [which] not only transformed monks into Tantric kings, but also kings into Tantric masters” (Strickmann 1996: 40).

In fact, *abhiṣeka* itself may well have had a sexual connotation, from the time of the royal consecrations of the Vedic period. As Per Kværne has argued, the verbal root of this term is *sic*, which means “sprinkle,” “wet,” “soak,” and the original sense of consecration was one of a *hieros gamos*, a sacred marriage between king and earth. As such, the distant origins of this core element of Tantric practice may lie in a notion that the sex act and the ritual act were in some way equivalent (Kværne 1975: 102–9). The practices of the Tachikawa-ryū that so shocked the Shingon mainstream in Japan should also be viewed in this light: the sexual symbolism of the imperial accession ceremony was the same as that of the Tachikawa ritual, although it is not clear which influenced the other. These cult practices may also have had a pre-Tantric precedent in Japan, in which the ancient enthronement ceremony included a secret rite wherein an imitation of the hierogamy between the emperor and a goddess may have been enacted with a sacred prostitute (Faure 1998: 125–29, 169–70).

In India as well, the role of the person of the queen—and of her sexual emission—as the source of her husband’s energy is one that predates the emergence of Tantra by several centuries. A particularly evocative description of such is found in a ca. 100–300 C.E. Tamil poem, the *Neṭunalvātai*, which has been summarized and interpreted by Dennis Hudson (1993: 133–34) as follows:

Inside the house of the Pāṇḍya king there stood another “house,” in which *aṇaṅku*, the sexual and sacred power of the *ūr*, the territory of his kingdom as a person, was present. This house, called the *karu* (“embryo”)—like the inner sanctum, the “womb house” (*garbha-gr̥ha*) of the Hindu temple—was a bedroom into which the sole male that entered was the king himself. In the place of the temple altar was a large round bed replete with symbols of marital and fertile power. On the bed sat the queen, naked save for her wedding necklace, awaiting her king who had gone into battle. One of her maidservants prayed to the Mother goddess for his victory.

The round bed is the round Vedic fire altar that symbolizes the earth and the queen the Vedic fire, awaiting the oblation of soma-semen from her husband. Known as “The Goddess Who Finds the Family” (*kula-mutalēvi*), she embodies the

“Mother” to whom the maidservant prays for victory, and the *aṅāṅku* that pervades the fortress. That *aṅāṅku*, transmitted by her to the king each time they have sexual intercourse (*kūṭal*), is carried inside of him as the *śakti*, the energy, that wins him victory in battle.

Yet the king must exile himself to the periphery of his kingdom, to the borderlands where the battleline is constantly being drawn, to protect the center.

The View from the Periphery

As we have noted, the role of the king in the practice of the Tantric maṅḍala is a dual one. In Chinese parlance, the emperor is the “son of Heaven” when he rules from the center of his palace in the heart of the middle kingdom; at the same time, he is the representative of Everyman, battling to protect the periphery of his realm against eruptions of barbarian demons, monsters, epidemics, and so on. Here, it may be helpful to introduce the typology of the “transcendental” and “pragmatic” aspects of religion. This typology, first proposed in the 1960s by the anthropologist David Mandelbaum (1966) in relation to village-level religious practice in India, should help us to understand the dual role of the Tantric king, and serve as a theoretical bridge between what appear today to be two distinct types of Tantric specialists and their clients, and two distinct and generally disconnected types of Tantric practice in Asia.

When practitioners pay homage to the great gods of their tradition in the controlled atmosphere of a religious festival or periodical ritual observance, this is an example of a “transcendental” religion. When, however, an uncontrolled epidemic breaks out in their village or territory, and the local or regional deity of the disease in question is worshiped to protect and save them from their affliction, this is an example of “pragmatic” religion. Tantric elites—kings and their priestly specialists, householder practitioners, and so on—will generally take a “transcendental” approach to their religion, transacting with high gods through the controlled template of the maṅḍala. On the other hand, Tantric specialists from lower levels of society—healers, exorcists, spirit-mediums, and so on—will generally be called upon by their clients for their “pragmatic” abilities to transact with a malevolent spirit world that has already erupted into their lives, far away from the maṅḍala’s quiet center. By and large, the transcendental approach is proactive, while the pragmatic approach is reactive.

From the transcendent perspective, the maṅḍala is a utopia (“no-place”) as geometrically perfect as the Hindu Śrī Yantras or Tibetan Buddhist sand maṅḍalas. But real life always occurs “someplace,” and it is here, at the pragmatic fringes, that the world of the maṅḍala becomes somewhat messier. More than any other Tantric actor, the king is obliged to adopt both transcendental and pragmatic strategies in his transactions through the maṅḍala. We have already outlined the transcendental side of his practice: in the latter role, he is Everyman, not only because he is the representative and protector of every one of his people, but also because he is himself his own person, subject to many of the same trammels of

existence as everyone else in his realm. Like them, he has a home and a family, a body that is prey to disease and death, and deceased relations who come to visit him in his dreams. In this respect, he must transact with the same gods, ghosts, and ancestors as have most Asian individuals from time immemorial—beings which, because they are closer to the human world than are the high gods, are generally viewed as having a more immediate impact on human life.

Most pragmatic religious life in Asia revolves around family gods, that is, those deceased family members, distant or recent, who have died untimely or unusual deaths. Such a death has barred their path to the protected world of the ancestors—the happy dead—and as such, these unhappy and unsettled spirits find themselves condemned to a marginal and dangerous existence. Because these spirits inhabit the world between the living and the dead, they are most readily encountered in the places at which they departed from this world: graveyards and charnel- and cremation- grounds [McDaniel]. As such, these sites become the privileged venues of certain types of pragmatic Tantric practice (exorcism, subjugation, killing, and so on), and are described in gruesome detail in Tantric literature and graphically illustrated on the lower portions or borders of Buddhist maṇḍala art, in particular.

In their unhappy situation, these beings will often seek to avenge themselves against their family, clan, or village, and so become malevolent ghosts, the bhūtprets of India or kwei of China. The semantic field of this latter term is particularly telling, extending as it does to not only the mesocosm of the household and the malevolent deities that threaten it but also to that of the empire, and the barbarian-monsters (*kwei*) that would overrun the center were the king's armies not vigilantly patrolling the periphery. The protean horde of these lesser deities form or hem in the outermost fringes of the great maṇḍala that the king, as an incarnation of the godhead, rules from the center. Yet it is one and the same maṇḍala, the same mesocosm of interpenetrating energies; all that changes is the perspective from which it is viewed.

Over the past two millennia, Asian traditions have generated a remarkably unified taxonomy of these malevolent deities, based for the most part on origin, form, and function. They are a highly volatile and capricious group, by turns hostile and friendly, terrible and benign, semidemonic and semidivine, with changes in demeanor corresponding directly to the ritual attention given them by humans. Capable of changing bodily containers—that is, of possessing the bodies of both the living and dead—their host fills the sky, earth, waters, stones, and trees, as well as the bodies of every type of living creature. Their names are legion, as are their forms and functions. In South Asia alone, one encounters—across Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and Muslim traditions alike—cults of and practices relating to female yoginīs, ḍākinīs, śaktis, Mothers, yakṣiṇīs, rākṣasīs, piśācinīs, and vidyārājñīs; and male bhairavas, Siddhas, vīras, gaṇas, bhūtas, pretas, vetālas, rākṣasas, piśācas, māras, and vidyārājas. Many of these classes of beings were carried from India, in the first wave of export Tantric literature and liturgies, into Inner and East Asia, where they came to jostle and often merge with already

existing indigenous pantheons. They continue to be found in myriad regional and vernacular forms throughout all of Asia. Yet, as has already been stated, we must not conclude from this that Asian belief systems and practices concerning these hosts of beings constitute the “origins” of Tantra. They have always been with the Asian peoples: when their cults became “Tantric”—or when “Tantra” emerged out of their cult practices—is a chicken/egg question that is impossible to resolve.

At the pragmatic outer fringes of the maṇḍala, possession, exorcism, divination, and healing have historically been the most pervasive forms of Tantric practice [Erndl], and it has been in their roles as ritual healers, “psychoanalysts,” clairvoyants, and ground-level problem solvers [Walter] that nonelite Tantric specialists—whether they be called Ojhas or Bhopas in India, Gcod-pas (pronounced “chōpa”) in Tibet, or even Daoists in China, or Shintō priests in Japan—first established and have continued to maintain their closest ties with every level of Asian society. The dark counterpart to these practices is ritual sorcery or black magic, the manipulation of the same low-level deities or demons to strike down enemies with the same afflictions as those they are called upon to placate or eliminate. Most often, practitioners gain access to and control over these malevolent deities by entering into a possessed state or mediumistic trance, and it must be allowed that at this level, Tantric specialists rarely make explicit use of the maṇḍala. Nonetheless, it informs their practice, since they know themselves to be transacting with deities that are in some way the emanations, sons, daughters, or servants of the transcendent godhead at the distant center. This is the case, for example, with the multiple Bhairavas of popular Hindu traditions in South Asia. In Jain Tantric practice, these beings are termed “unliberated deities,” as opposed to the enlightened and liberated tīrthaṅkaras [Cort]; in Buddhist Tantra, they are conceived as ordinary worldly deities who have vowed to protect the Dharma, as opposed to enlightened buddhas or bodhisattvas.

We should bear in mind here that the transcendent/pragmatic religion typology is just that: an ideal construct employed to classify types of Tantric practice. In fact, the world of Tantric practice is a continuum that draws on both the transcendent and the pragmatic approaches. This is the strategy of the Tibetan lamas, who are both teachers of the Dharma and protectors of their people from malevolent deities. Lay practitioners too will often combine the two approaches, appealing directly to semidivine intermediaries for protection and succor in their daily lives while focusing their meditative practice on the godhead at the center of the maṇḍala. An example of such a combinatory practice is the preliminary Tantric ritual process known as bhūtaśuddhi, the “cleansing of the five elements” but also “the purging of the demonic beings.” Prior to meditatively constructing the god at the center of the worship maṇḍala, and then identifying it with their own subtle bodies, practitioners must first purge their bodies of these lower elements/malevolent beings (*bhūtas*). In some Hindu practice, this process culminates in the dramatic expulsion of a black “Sin Man” (*pāpapurūṣa*)—a condensation of all the malevolent beings inhabiting the mandalic mesocosm of his body—through the practitioner’s left nostril.

What differentiates elite Tantric specialists from their nonelite counterparts is

not the basic structure of the maṇḍala as transactional mesocosm, but rather the name and attributes of the deities with whom they transact. Elite practitioners—by virtue of their higher Tantric empowerments, textual lineages, and formal instruction—are able to transact with the supreme transcendent-yet-immanent deity of the Tantric universe at the center to control all of the beings of the maṇḍala—divine, semidivine, and demonic—for the protection the king, his court, and the state as a whole. The principal deity with whom the nonelite specialist or practitioner will interact—some low-level “lord of spirits”—will not be absent from the elite maṇḍala; rather, he or she will be relegated to a zone nearer to the periphery of that maṇḍala, as a fierce protector deity guarding the maṇḍala of the king’s (and supreme deity’s) utopian realm from incursions by malevolent spirits from the outside, that is, enemies.

In this, his protective role, the ruler will call upon his elite Tantric specialists to perform rituals generally considered to fall within the purview of their nonelite counterparts (or, in some cases, simply call upon the latter to perform them). “Binding the directions” (*dig-bandhana*) to fence out demons from the maṇḍala, a standard preliminary to nearly every type of Tantric ritual, is a practice that betrays this concern with the dangerous boundary between inside and outside, “us” and “them” [Gardiner]. Yet this is but one of a body of ritual technologies—for driving away, immobilizing, confusing, and annihilating “demonic” enemies of the state—that elite Tantric specialists have marshaled on behalf of their royal clients for over a millennium. From this royal perspective as well, the fierce and heavily armed deities pictured at the borders and gates of the Tantric maṇḍalas are recognized as protectors of the realm. Very often, those fierce deities have been female—circles of wild animal- or bird-headed goddesses—a reminder once again that the activated energy that flows through the Tantric maṇḍala is nearly always feminine.

Contributions to this volume amply illustrate this intimate relationship between various types of Tantric specialists, their royal clients, and the protection of the state throughout Asia, including Tang China [Orzech-Sanford], Heian Japan [Grappard], Malla Nepal [Bledsoe], and Kalacuri central India [Davis]. Here, elite ritual technologies have been backed up by military force: as in the West, fighting monastic orders have long been a part of the Asian landscape, and the orders in question, in both South and East Asia, have generally been Tantric (Strickmann 1996: 41; Lorenzen 1978: 61–75). In South Asia, tāntrikas were power brokers throughout the medieval period, and one may even see in the presence, in the early 1990s, of the Nāth Siddha leader Avaidyanāth on the ruling council of the Hindu-nationalist organization known as the Viśva Hindu Pariṣad, an attempt to reclaim that role in postcolonial India (White 1996: 304–13; 342–49).

Where is the Mainstream?

Throughout this essay, I have made ambiguous use of the term “mainstream,” sometimes referring to the “Tantric mainstream” and at others contrasting Tantric with non-Tantric “mainstream” practices, albeit with the mitigating heuristic de-

vice of “hard-core” and “soft-core” Tantra. This ambiguity is one that flows (to stay with a fluid metaphor) from the ambiguity of the Tantric maṇḍala itself. As has been argued, the Tantric maṇḍala becomes “utopian” when there is no temporal ruler to be identified with the godhead at the center. In such cases, Tantra is outside the mainstream, potentially subversive and antinomian, the province of the practitioner as crypto-potentate. When, however, the ruler is himself a Tantric practitioner/client, then the maṇḍala takes on a real-world referent, and stands as the mesocosmic template between politicoreligious realities and their metacosmic prototype, the realm of the divine. In the first instance, the Tantric maṇḍala is covert and occulted; in the latter, it is overt and hegemonic. The anonymous author of the *Āgama Prakāśa* [Rinehart-Stewart] states this aphoristically: “Every city has one-fourth part of its population as Śāktas [that is, tāntrikas]—and the ceremonies are performed very secretly in the middle of the night; if a king be a supporter, they are also observed publicly.”

It is this bivalency of the portable Tantric maṇḍala that has both ensured the survival of Tantra in times of religious and political subjugation and rendered an accounting of it so difficult for the scholar. When the king is a Tantric practitioner, Tantra is a protective bulwark of the state, and its specialists are power-brokering bearers of religious authority. Geoffrey Samuel (1993: 34) sums up this situation in the following terms: “[A] practitioner can relate directly to the sources of power and authority, by contacting the Tantric ‘deities’ and other central ‘culture-heroes.’ Once the practitioner becomes a lama, this direct contact with power legitimates a social role that can as easily extend into the political sphere.” When, however, there is no ruler, or when the “wrong king” is on the throne, the Tantric specialist becomes a covert operative, an occult cosmocrat, controlling a universe in which he is, through his identity with the god at the center of the maṇḍala, the creator, preserver, and destroyer. This latter state of affairs is, of course, threatening to the “wrong king” in question, and Siddha mythology is replete with accounts of the triumph of Tantric masters over wrong-headed temporal rulers. There are, however, other possible scenarios, giving rise to other strategies on the part of Tantric actors, which need to be explored. These concern relationships among power elites—Tantric specialists and their royal or aristocratic clients—in which the former, whether they consider their royal client to be legitimate or not, seek to find ways by which to assert their authority over the latter. These are the strategies of secrecy and dissimulation.

Until recent times, Tantric ritual constituted a bulwark for the state in the Indianized and Sanskritized monarchies of Asia, from Nepal to Bali (Strickmann 1996: 348). Reciprocally, it has especially been through royal support (protection, land grants, tax-exempt status, and so on) that the various Tantric orders have been empowered both to propagate their sectarian teachings and to consolidate their socioeconomic position in the realm. In this symbiotic relationship, Tantric lineages—of families, teaching traditions, and royal, priestly, and monastic succession—have often been closely intertwined. It is particularly in Nepal—where the royal preceptor (*rāj guru*) has, since the thirteenth century, been the king’s

chief religious advisor, initiating his royal client into the circles of deities that comprise and energize the nepāla-maṇḍala (Toffin 1989: 24–25)—that the relationship between the tāntrika and his king has remained in force down to the present day.

This modern-day survival of a medieval Tantric legacy has been the subject of the important research of Mark Dyczkowski, the fruits of which will appear shortly in the context of a forthcoming massive study of the Kubjikā Tantras. According to Dyczkowski's analysis, control of the cult of the great royal goddess Taleju (whose secret worship and liturgies are based on those of the Tantric Hindu goddess Kubjikā) lies at the heart of the power relationship between that goddess's Newar priesthood and the royal family of Nepal. After reviewing the cults of the gods of the Newars' public religion, the gods of the "civic space" or "mesocosm" (Levy 1992), Dyczkowski (2000: 2–3) presents the following scenario:

But there is an inner secret domain which is the Newars' "microcosm." This does not form a part of the sacred geography of the Newar *civis*, although, from the initiate's point of view, it is the source and reason for much of it. The deities that populate this "inner space" and their rites are closely guarded secrets and, often, they are the secret identity of the public deities known only to initiates. The two domains complement each other. The outer is dominantly male. It is the domain of the attendants and protectors of both the civic space and the inner expanse, which is dominantly female. In the public domain . . . the male dominates the female, while the secret lineage deities of the higher castes [of the elite Tantric specialists] are invariably female accompanied by male consorts. . . . The inner domain is layered and graded in hierarchies of deepening and more elevated esotericism that ranges from the individual to the family group, clan, caste, and out through the complex interrelationships that make up Newar society. Thus the interplay between the inner and outer domains is maintained both by the secrecy in which it is grounded and one of the most characteristic features of Newar Tantrism as a whole, namely, its close relationship to the Newar caste system.

The outer domain is that of the pragmatic boundary of the maṇḍala, discussed earlier; here, the multiple Bhairabs (Bhairavas) who guard the boundaries of villages, fields, and the entire Kathmandu Valley itself are so many hypostases of the great Bhairabs of the royal cultus: Kāl Bhairab, Ākāś Bhairab, and so on. As we have noted, however, it is only by transacting with the transcendent deity at the heart of the maṇḍala that one gains and maintains supreme power. Here secrecy becomes a prime strategy. The Taleju brahmans offer Bhairava initiations to the king as the maintainer of the outer, public state cultus; however, it is only among themselves that they offer initiations and empowerments specific to their lineage goddess—and it is precisely through these secret initiations and empowerments that they maintain their elevated status vis-à-vis all the other castes in the Kathmandu Valley, including that of their principal client, the king himself. Because the goddess at the center of that maṇḍala is their lineage goddess, and theirs alone, and because her higher initiations are their secret prerogative, the

Newar priesthood is able to “control” the king and the nepāla-maṇḍala as a whole. Higher levels of initiation into the Kubjikā Tantras, accessible only to these elite tāntrikas, afford them hegemony over the religious life of the kingdom, which translates into an occult control of the Nepal royal administration—the political edifice that protects the kingdom from all malevolent spirits, both internal and external—which in turn enhances their social status and economic situation. A comparison with the world of espionage is perhaps useful: only those of the privileged inner circle (heart of the Tantric maṇḍala) have the highest security clearance (Tantric initiations) and access to the most secret codes (Tantric mantras) and classified documents (Tantric scriptures). The Taleju brahmins of Kathmandu, tāntrikas to the king, are the “intelligence community” of the kingdom, and their secret knowledge affords them a symbolic and real power greater than that of the king himself. In this way, the political power that the Newars lost through the eighteenth-century invasion of the Kathmandu Valley by the founder of the Shah dynasty has been recovered through their control of the goddess at the heart of the royal maṇḍala and their control of the administration of the kingdom.

When one looks at the strategy of secrecy employed by the Taleju brahmins of Nepal to exert occult control over a kingdom whose political power they lost over two centuries ago, one is not far from the practice of dissimulation, of pretending to be someone other than who one is. Dissimulation is a particular strategy for maintaining secrecy that is most often employed when the “wrong king” is on the throne, and practitioners are forced “underground.” Basically the same aphorism, found in both Hindu and Buddhist Tantric traditions, expresses this strategy: “outwardly Vedic, a Śaiva at home, secretly a Śākta [that is, a tāntrika]”; “externally a Hīnayāna, internally a Mahayāna, secretly a Vajrayāna,” in the Buddhist version. This strategy is altogether comprehensible in a situation of political or religious oppression. Curiously, or not so curiously, it is a strategy employed in times of relative freedom, as well. This is the stuff secret societies are made of the world over. The question of why one would wish to dissemble when fear of oppression is not one’s principal motivation may again be approached by borrowing terminology from the world of espionage. Dissimulation allows for covert operatives to possess a double (or triple) identity, and to inhabit more than one world at the same time. It is also a means for “insiders” to recognize one another without being recognized by “outsiders,” through the use of secret signs (mudrās), language (mantras), codes (forms of mantric encryption), and so on. It is a means for creating an elite, even if its eliteness is known to none but the insider community.

The Broken World of Tantra

The Tantric ruler is the Tantric actor par excellence, with galactic polity operating on the level of maṇḍalas of deities as well as that of agglomerations of peoples, clans, and territorial units. The royal palace is located at the center of a maṇḍala

that is the master grid controlling and encompassing all the beings—human, subhuman, and superhuman—within its purview; at the same time, the king polices and protects the boundaries of his royal maṇḍala from outside incursions. As such, the office and person of the king have constituted the vital link between elite and nonelite forms of Tantric practice. Without him, the center is missing, and the phenomenon that is Tantra becomes cloven into two bodies of practice—the one transcendent and quietistic and the other pragmatic and “shamanistic”—that appear to have little or no relationship to one another. Yet, as we have noted, with the possible exceptions of Bhutan, Nepal (now a constitutional monarchy), and Tibet (a theocracy in exile), there are no Tantric systems of galactic polity remaining on the planet.

What effect has this loss of the center had on Tantra? Generally speaking, it has apparently split Tantra into two bodies of practice whose connections are barely recognizable to either practitioners or scholars. On the one hand, the powerful Tantric rites of subjugation, immobilization, annihilation, and so on—the “Six Practices” or “Six Rites of Magic” (*ṣaṭkarmāṇi*) [Bühnemann]—have become the sole province of individuals practicing for their own prestige and profit, or on behalf of other individuals on a for-cash basis. In the absence of state patronage, deployment of these ritual technologies often amounts to little more than black magic. When no longer employed in the service of the state, what had previously been a coherent body of practice for the state’s protection can appear to be little other than a massive “protection racket” against supernatural thugs. It is in this context that many Hindus in India today deny the relevance of Tantra to their tradition, past or present, and identify what they call “tantra-mantra” as so much mumbo-jumbo.

The second body of practice that has emerged from this loss of a political center generally involves Tantric elites. When there no longer is a royal client to support them, many of those elite specialists who had been royal chaplains or preceptors have tended to turn their energies toward “perfecting” the rituals and liturgies for which a performance arena no longer exists. Closed into monasteries or other conventicles, these specialists have tended to scholasticize Tantric theory and internalize, sublimate, or semanticize external Tantric practice. Taken to its extreme, this scholasticizing tendency has removed Tantra from its this-worldly concerns and transformed it into an idealized and intellectualized inner exercise generally reserved for an elite group of insiders. Minutely categorizing every facet of the universe of experience and practice is the mark of scholasticist Tantra, and a great number of the passages translated in this volume betray that mindset. This tendency has been further catalyzed by a gradual loss of touch with the original clan lineage-based ground for Tantric ritual (Gupta-Hoens-Goudriaan 1979: 124; White 1998: 192–95).

There have been two major upshots of these developments. On the one hand, much of Tantra has become highly philosophical, and many of the most brilliant Tantric summa have been the work of “pure theoreticians.” Even when the language of such forms of Tantra remains antinomian, this is a purely ritual or

philosophical antinomianism, one cut off from the outside world, that is being espoused. On the other, as we have already noted, Tantric specialists have often, in the absence of politically powerful patrons, adopted the strategy of dissimulation, of hiding their “true” Tantric identity behind a façade of conventional behavior in the public sphere. In this context, elite “Tantra has moved towards the doctrinally orthodox and politically unobjectionable. . . . The magical and shamanic powers have lost their importance, the ‘disreputable’ sexual practices are avoided, and Tantric ritual has become little more than a supplement to the ordinary Brahmanic cult. Much the same . . . appears to be true for Buddhist Tantra among the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley, and in Japan, and for both Buddhist and Hindu Tantra in Bali” (Samuel 1993: 432).

These two strategies, of appropriating Tantric ritual technologies as means to self-promotion, and of dissimulation combined with scholasticist theorization, only appear to be the legacy of two different traditions. In fact, they are two sides of the same coin; however, the coin is one that no longer bears a royal head or device on its face. Such is the broken world of Tantra at the dawn of the new millennium.

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