

**Tantra Occluded:
The 1992 Conference of the Society for Tantric Studies**

After having been postponed a couple of times (see Vols. 2 and 3 of *SCEAR*) the Tantra Occluded conference was held at the Vallombrosa Conference Center, Menlo Park, California, from Thursday 28th May to Sunday 31st May 1992, and my colleague in Marburg, Ms. Herrmann-Pfand, informs me that a merry and fruitful time was had by all. What follows is a resume of a selection of the papers held, based on the literature distributed at the conference and kindly supplied to me by the organizer, Dr. Richard K. Payne.¹

The programme for the event was as follows:

Thursday, 28th May

Frits Staal, University of California, Berkeley:

“Veda and Tantra in Kerala: Reflections and a Proposal”

Friday, 29th May

Gavin D. Flood, St. David’s University College, Wales:

“Body and Cosmology in the Jayākhyā Saṃhitā and Related Systems”

Rebecca J. Manring, University of Washington:

“Advaitācārya’s Mañjari Sādhana: Tantric Influences on Orthodox Bengali Vaishnavism”

Paul E. Muller-Ortega, Michigan State University:

“On the Appropriation of the Hindu Tantra: Reflections on the Tantra in Popular Culture”

Adelheid Herrmann-Pfand, Philipp’s University, Marburg:

“Dākiṇīs in Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhism: Some Results of Recent Research”

Elisabeth Benard, University of Hawaii at Manoa:

“Heads, Lost and Found”

Vesna Wallace, University of California, Berkeley:

“Karma and Associated Issues in the Second Chapter of the *Kālacakratantra*”

Miranda Shaw, University of Richmond:

“Sacred Bodies in Sacred Space: Female Dancers and Tantric Buddhism”

André Padoux, CNRS, Paris:

“What Do We Mean By Tantrism?”

¹ The reader will remember that SBS representation was planned, but I am afraid that the German rules and procedures for acquiring funding for the trip proved ultimately to be too esoteric for me and I had to stay at home!

Saturday, 30th May

Patrick A. George, University of Pennsylvania:

“Illustrating Occluded Realms: Tantric Geometry and the Approximation of Perfection”

Katherine Harper, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles:

“On the Socio-Historical Context of the Cult of the *Śaptamātrikā*”

Mark Tatz, Institute of Buddhist Studies:

“The Buddhist Technical Term *A-manasikāra*”

Nathan Cutler, California Institute of Integral Studies:

“The Presence of Tantrism in the Preliterate Traditions of Western Tibet”

John Stevens, Tōhoku Fukushi University (Japan):

“Aikidō as Tantra”

Fabio Rambelli, University of Venice:

“Signs in Recursive Cosmos: On the Esoteric Semiotics of Kōgyō Daishi Kakuban (1095–1143)”

James H. Sanford, University of North Carolina:

“Jewels in the Lotus: Spiritual Gestation in Japanese Buddhism”

Sunday, 31st May

Mark Unno, Stanford University:

“Dreams of Pilgrimage: Myōe Kōben as a Tantric Figure”

Richard K. Payne, Institute of Buddhist Studies:

“*Ajikan*: Meditation and Ritual Syntax”

David Komito, John F. Kennedy University:

“Buddhist Tantra in Jungian Context”

The variety of themes dealt with in the papers offered testifies to the rapid expansion in the field of tantric studies which we have witnessed in recent years. Geographically, however, the spread of material was not quite as broad as one might have wished or hoped. This is of course no criticism of the organization of the conference, more a comment on the emphases to be found in institutions of higher institutions around the world. There must be much that might have been said at such a gathering on the role of tantric teachings and practices in the cultures of South-east Asia; and the role of esoteric teachings in Chinese Buddhism as well as along the trade routes of Central Asia would also have both broadened and deepened the perspectives of the conference.

If one should single out any one contribution, it seems to me that the honour should fall to André Padoux’ basic meditations on our using the term “tantrism” at all. A cardinal point made by the French scholar is that tantrism is an etic and not an emic entity. That is, the term is a label attached by western observers to selected aspects of Indian culture, but the

criteria which formed the basis of this selection do not reflect anything in that culture which is organized or internally related in the manner suggested by our use of such a term. The problem revolves in part round the fact that fully “tantric” practices are only present in certain, clearly definable, Indian sub-cultural groups, consisting mainly of *śaiva/śākta* cults and some Vaiṣṇava and Buddhist groups. If one widens the scope of one’s definition of what tantrism is, then one enters the field of what Padoux calls “tantrized Hinduism”, which as will be immediately apparent is far too broad to admit of circumscription. Still, in order to do justice to the importance of elements which are clearly tantric in origin and which have played and still play an important role in other cultural spheres than the Indian, it is desirable to maintain some kind of breadth in one’s definition of tantrism. Padoux would then apply this understanding to “a wider Asian religious field, and especially to Chinese Buddhism”. The concluding paragraph of the introduction to his paper is perhaps worth quoting:

But finally and more fundamentally, are we not led into difficulties simply by the word tantrism? Having coined the term, we want it to mean something specific. Is this right? Is there indeed such a thing as tantrism? I mean, as something apart from the different forms taken by Hinduism and Buddhism as they have evolved in the course of centuries both by an internal process of transformation and, mainly, under the influence of various factors coming from the milieu (Indian or more generally Asian) where they developed? This question is perhaps worth considering.

It is to be hoped that Dr. Payne will have success in his attempts to publish the papers delivered at this conference, since despite the above mentioned (and at the moment not easily surmounted) problems in covering the whole field thematically and geographically the contributions will undoubtedly do much to stimulate the study of the topic among a wider, international community. Speaking of which, just under a quarter of the papers delivered were given by scholars from outside the United States: my hope—and I trust that it will be shared by Dr. Payne and the participants—is that it will be possible in the next couple of years to bring together as motley a crew of tantric students as possible for a conference that in its spectrum of themes and geographical areas dealt with will do justice to the breadth, complexity, and cultural importance of the subject matter. Besides, our journal hardly seems complete without some kind of plug for a major international conference on the subject!

(IAK)

SBS Activities in 1992–3

Apart from the seminar on Korean religions, on which Henrik Sørensen reported above, SBS activities in 1992 and 1993 are somewhat curtailed in comparison to previous years. This is due to the fact that two members, Per Sørensen and Ian Astley, are now working in Germany, the former as a Humboldt Scholar at the University of Bonn and the latter as Visiting Professor at Philipp's University, Marburg. For this and other reasons it has not yet been possible to organize a senior seminar on the reading of Chinese Buddhist texts, which we had hoped to hold in the summer of 1992. This is now being tentatively planned for the summer of 1993, either in Copenhagen or on Samso. As for travel, Henrik Sørensen is going to China again in the autumn of 1992; Ian Astley is hoping to get to Taiwan and Japan in the spring of 1993; both are planning on participating in the ICANAS conference in Hong Kong in August 1993.

Urs App's electronic projects are coming on well: attention is drawn once again to the advertisement at the back of this journal for his *Electronic Bodhidharma*. This newsletter, available free of charge on application, has information on the various projects being conducted at the International Research Institute for Zen Buddhism, Hanazono College, and the related software products which the Institute publishes. I should also point out that these products are *free*, so the chronic impecunity usually associated with our noble pursuit is no excuse for not availing oneself of the opportunities presented by this venture.

The Electronic Bodhidharma, No. 2 (February 1992), gives useful information about the available hard-and software which can be used for constructing databases of materials relevant to the study of Buddhism and other religions in East Asia. It also has a useful description of the four corner system of identifying Sino-Japanese characters. A cornerstone of Dr. App's projects is Optical Character Recognition (OCR) technology, and the Institute has issued an OCR Toolset with Utilities to help the individual in the arduous, but potentially immensely rewarding task of converting Chinese texts into electronic form without the trouble of re-typing whole canons. This process, when set up properly, also eliminates the possibility of further typing errors that can arise in the intermediate stage. Further products that will be of interest are the *VJE Kana-Kanji Dictionary for Zen Terms and Names* (available for NEC 9801 and Epsion, Macintosh, and IBM), the *VJE Four-Corner Kanji Dictionary*, Prof. Yanagida's *Zenseki-kaidai* in electronic form, and electronic indexes to some major Zen reference works. The Institute's address is to found in the relevant advertisement, as is the BITNET address, which I managed to mis-type in the last issue of *SCEAR* (p. 135).

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