Ḍākinīs in Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhism: Some Results of Recent Research

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Introduction

Compared with earlier stages of Indian religious history, at least those traditions which are attested to in literary sources, two of the most characteristic features of Tantrism are the elements of the terrifying and of the erotic as inherent parts of the religious path. Prom the male point of view (which is the standpoint taken in nearly all scriptures) the terrifying female deity can therefore be regarded as a kind of symbolic figure or personification of Tantrism. This is indeed most obvious in Hinduism, where we see Durgā-Kālī and related goddesses residing in the very centre of Tantrism as well as of Śāktism, but not as obvious in Tantric Buddhism, whose pantheon at first glance seems to include many more male than female deities of central importance. But if there is any species of goddess in Tantric Buddhism equivalent to the Hindu Śakti, the Ḍākinīs are certainly one such. Amongst the eight classes of deities in the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon, for instance, the Ḍākinīs form the only purely female class, and, on the whole, they are probably the most important personifications of the feminine in Tantric Buddhism.[1]

In my research on Ḍākinīs in Hinduism and Buddhism, the results of which have only partly been published as yet,[2] I have tried to gather and interpret materials in the following fields: (1) religious history of the Ḍākinīs in Hinduism and Buddhism; (2) the role of Ḍākinīs as terrifying goddesses in Tantric Buddhism; (3) main sources for and the inherent structure of

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[1] Cf. Allione, *Women of Wisdom*, p. 25. [*Ed. note:* For technical reasons, full bibliographical details of works cited in the footnotes will be found under the respective authors and editors at the end of this article.]

[2] See Herrmann-Pfandt, *Ḍākinīs*. Another volume on the religious history of the Ḍākinīs in Hinduism and Mahāyāna Buddhism was due to be finished soon, but new results in the field of the early history of Tantric Buddhism produced by Alexis Sanderson (see below, page 49) made it necessary to rewrite parts of it. Some of my early results are included in my M.A. thesis, "Untersuchungen zur Religionsgeschichte und Mythologie der Ḍākinīs im indotibetischen Raum" (see Bibliography).

Ḍākinī mythology, including possible connections with a common "matriarchal" mythological structure; (4) the function of Ḍākinīs as personifications of the feminine in Tantric sexual symbolism as seen from the female in contrast to the male point of view (only the latter has been researched as yet). Some of my results are summarized in the following pages.

1. Religious History

The Ḍākinīs were originally a class of small non-Indo-Aryan malevolent imps or demonesses. The word Ḍākinī is explained in Tantric Buddhist texts as "Female Skygoer" (*ākāśagāminī*).[3] But nevertheless it is possible or even probable that the origin of this word is non-Indo-aryan. The word Ḍākinī was first mentioned in about 250 B.C. in Kātyāyana's commentary on Pāṇinī IV 2, 51, but a meaning of the word is not given there.[4] For the next 700 years, no source is known which mentions Ḍākinīs. The next earliest Hindu and Buddhist sources, beginning with the Gangdhār inscription of Viśvavarman (A.D. 423–5),[5] the *Mārkaṇḍeya-Purāṇa*[6] (a passage dating back to the 3rd to 5th century A.D.[7]), and the *Laṅkāvatāra-Sūtra*[8] (a passage translated into Chinese in A.D. 443[9]), show the Ḍākinīs haunting cemeteries, feeding on human flesh, bringing sickness[10] and harming people,[11] according to some

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[3] See, for instance, Jayabhadra's *Cakrasaṃvarapañjikā*, fol. 4b3f: *ḍākinyaḥ ākāśagāminyaḥ* (cf. the Tibetan translation (Pek. 2122), fol. 48b2: *mkha' 'gro ma ni mkha' la 'gro ba ste*). For more references, see Herrmann-Pfandt, *Ḍākinīs*, p. 115, n. 2.

[4] See Pāṇinī, *Aṣṭādhyāyī* (Böhtlingk); Patañjali, *Vyākaraṇa-Mahābāṣya* (Kielhorn and Abhyankar). According to Prof. Wilhelm Rau (Marburg), who was so kind as to discuss this passage with me, the reading *ūkinī* found in Kielhorn's edition is not necessarily to be rejected as a wrong reading because it does not occur elsewhere, since Kātyāyana more than once includes words which are not found in other texts. So the most ancient testimony for the word Ḍākinī is not at all certain.

[5] *Corpus inscriptionum Indicarum* (ed. Fleet), Vol. III, pp. 72–8 (No. 17), stanza 23. For another interpretation of this stanza, cf. A. L. Basham, "Notes", pp. 149f. None of the divergent opinions is satisfying as yet, and it is to be hoped that further research into the many unpublished Hindu Tantric texts will elucidate the mystery of this stanza.

[6] *Mārkaṇḍeya-Purāṇa* (ed. Banerjea) VIII, 108 = Śrīveṅkateśvara Steam Press Ed., VIII, 110.

[7] See Pargiter, "Introduction", in: *Mārkaṇḍeya-Purāṇa* (tr. Pargiter), p. XX.

[8] *Laṅkāvatāra-Sūtra* (ed. Nanjio), p. 258.

[9] See Pek. 775, fol. 312b8. This Tibetan text of the *Laṅkāvatāra* is a translation of the Chinese text of A.D. 443 (see Suzuki, *Studies in the Laṅkāvatāra Sutra*, pp. 13f).

[10] See *Garuḍa-Purāṇa* (ed. Vidyasagar) I 180, 9–10, for a *ḍākinījvara* (a fever caused by Ḍākinīs). The most comprehensive text about fever caused by Ḍākinīs is the so-called *Ḍākinīkalpa*, an undated, but seemingly recent Hindu Tantric text on medicine containing much astrological material. Its second chapter (fol. 2a4–6a3) enumerates fourteen different kinds of fever caused by fifteen Ḍākinīs of the fifteen *tithi*s (Codex unicus in the Library of the Raghunath Temple Library of Jammu; see M. A. Stein, *Jammu Catalogue*, No. 1202).

[11] See, for instance, *Viṣṇupañjara* (ed. Lévy), 56–8; *Skanda-Purāṇa* (Śrīveṅkateśvara Steam Press Ed.) IV 45, 42–3.

sources also by practising fearful rites.[12]

As early as the first half of the 7th century A.D., *Ḍākinītantras* seem to have been extant, since they are mentioned by the Buddhist Philosopher Dharmakīrti (A.D. 600–60) in his autocommentary on the *Pramāṇavārttika*.[13] As the existence of Hindu Tantras could, according to Groudriaan,[14] not be proved for the period before A.D. 800, this passage seems to be highly important. Future research may even show that the fact that the word *tāntra* or *tāntra* (depending on the reading) is already mentioned in the Ḍākinī passage of the Gangdhar inscription (A.D. 423–5, see above) is not to be seen as an isolated instance (and could therefore be relevant for the dating of the Tantras.[15] At least, it is remarkable that two of the earliest sources on Tantra also mention the Ḍākinīs.

In Indian, and more so in Tibetan, religious geography of Buddhism, the mytho-historical kingdom of Uḍḍiyāna (nowadays mostly identified with the Swāt Valley in Northern Pakistān) is famous as the "Land of the Ḍākinīs".[16] Since local goddesses and fairies play an important role even today in the Islamic Swāt valley, Tucci suggested that this region was the original home of the Ḍākinīs,[17] from where, as he suggested, they were adapted into Tantric Buddhism. This hypothesis was followed, or at least not doubted, by many other scholars.[18]

However, fairies and goddesses are important not only in the Swāt region, but all over the Indian subcontinent, and other sources on the early history of the Ḍākinīs do not at all support Tucci's view. Hindu sources, for instance, often mention Uḍḍiyāna as one of the four (or more) holy places of Tantrism;[19] they also mention deities connected with that place, but among them, to the best of my knowledge, never Ḍākinīs. On the other hand, Hindu sources on Ḍākinīs never mention Uḍḍiyāna. With Buddhist sources, it is a little more complicated, but a close analysis reveals the following: Uḍḍiyāna is a famous Tantric centre, it is the "Land of the Ḍākinīs" in the sense that Ḍākinī rites and Ḍākinī tantras were practised there, but the origin of these rites as well as of these tantras is mostly located in other places,[20] for instance in Bengal

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[12] The most important source for this motif is without doubt the *Kathāsaritsāgara* by Somadeva Bhaṭṭa (11th cent. A.D.). See, for instance, Ch. III 20, *passim*; VI 32, 156 and 169; XII 75, 59–185; XIV 108 51; etc.

[13] See the *Svārthānumāna-pariccheda* chapter of the *Pramāṇavārttika* (ed. Māla-vāṇiyā), p. 109 (*ad* 311–12): *ḍākinībhaginītantrādiṣu*. This passage was pointed out to me by Prof. Alexis Sanderson (Oxford), in April 1993.

[14] See Goudriaan, *Hindu Tantric Literature*, p. 22.

[15] *ibid*., p. 20.

[16] Indian sources: for instance, *Ḍākinītanugīti* (Pek. 3279), fol. 110b6; see also Tucci, "On Swāt", p. 25, n. 25, with a quotation from Nāropa. Tibetan sources: for instance, *Padma bka'i thaṅ yig*, fol. 34a5–b4, cf. translation by Douglas and Bays, Vol. I, pp. 78–81.

[17] Tucci, "On Swāt", p. 69.

[18] See, for instance, Hoffmann, *Symbolik der tibetischen Religionen*, p. 23.

[19] See Goudriaan, *Hindu Tantrism*, p. 38; Gupta, *Hindu Tantrism*, p. 185.

[20] The legend of the Mahāsiddha Kambala as told by Abhayadattaśrī (*Caturaśītisiddhapra-*

or Assam.

Hindu as well as Buddhist sources do show connections of the pre-Buddhist Ḍākinīs to another place: to Mālva in Central India, and especially to Ujjain, the ancient Ujjayinī. According to one of the earliest sources on Ḍākinīs, the Gangdhār inscription of Viśvavarman dated A.D. 423–5, Ḍākinīs were expected to inhabit a newly built temple of the Mothers some fifty miles north of Ujjain. Since this temple had supposedly been built by the local king in response to the religious needs of the people,[21] it is very probable that the Ḍākinīs were local godlings connected to the cult of the Seven Mothers. In the *Kathāsaritsāgara* by Somadeva Bhaṭṭa (11th cent. A.D.), Ḍākinīs under the leadership of a certain Kālarātrī are shown as attendants of Mahākāla, a form of Śiva-Bhairava worshipped as the main deity of Ujjayinī.[22] This connection between Ḍākinīs and Mahākāla must already have been valid in the 7th century or earlier, since it is mentioned in Yixing's (683–727) Chinese commentary on the Buddhist *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*.[23] Yixing's commentary is based on information obtained from his Indian teacher Śubhākarasiṃha (637–735), who was a native of another part of Central India (Magadha) and may have seen the Mahākāla temple and cult of Ujjayinī with his own eyes during his extensive travels through the subcontinent.[24] Yixing tells us that the Ḍākinīs were meat-eating and flying Yakṣinīs who waited on Śiva-Mahākāla. Thus the information given by the *Kathāsaritsāgara* is not only supported but dated back by about four centuries by the Chinese source.

In Buddhist Tantrism, most sources texts concerning Ḍākinīs are found in the Cakrasaṃvara cycle, much less in the Hevajra and Ḍākinījālasaṃvara cycles.[25] The Cakrasaṃvara cycle probably originated in Eastern India around the eighth or ninth century[26] and without doubt under strong influence of the cult of Śiva-Bhairava, perhaps even under that of the Mahākāla of Ujjayinī. According to a myth told by the Tibetan historiographer Bu-ston

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vṛtti, tr. Robinson, *Buddha's Lions*, pp. 119f; Tib. text, pp. 141,2,–145,2), for instance, informs us that Kambala went to Uḍḍiyāna to conquer the local demonesses (Tib. *phra men ma*). For this he used a ritual which contains a Ḍākinī invocation. If we interpret this in terms of religious history, the Ḍākinīs, coming from outside, had to fight against the original demonesses of that place before their cult could be established there.

[21] See Tiwari, *Goddess cults*, p. 101, n. 34.

[22] Somadeva, *Kathāsaritsāgara* XII 48, 7–9; III 20, 110.

[23] Yixing, *Dapilozhena chengfo jing shu* (T. XXXIX/1796, p. 687b17–c11).

[24] For the biography of Śubhākarasiṃha (Chin. Shan Wu Wei), see Chou, "Tantrism in China", pp. 251–72. From the dated events included in this biography (cf. pp. 253, 263), it has to be supposed that he started his travels not long after the year A.D. 650.

[25] See Herrmann-Pfandt, *Ḍākinīs*, pp. 19–29.

[26] The earliest and most important teachers of this cycle are traditionally located in Bengal, for instance Śāvarīpa, Lūyipāda, Ghaṇṭāpāda (Vajraghaṇṭa), Kṛṣṇacārin, etc. See Abhayadattaśrī, *Caturaśītisiddhapravṛtti*, and Bu-ston, *bDe mchog spyi rnam don gsal*, foll. 36ff. (This work by Bu-ston is an introduction into the Cakrasaṃvara cycle and contains a history of this cult). Nevertheless, it is quite possible that the cult originated elsewhere and was brought to Bengal before the lifetimes of the above teachers.

(1290–1364)[27] and going back to Indian sources,[28] Cakrasaṃvara established his cult by conquering the couple Bhairava and Kālarātrī, together with their retinue. To this day, on every cult image of Cakrasaṃvara and of Vajrayoginī (his female counterpart and the main Ḍākinī of the whole pantheon), the Hindu deities Bhairava and Kālarātrī are trampled under the feet of the Buddhist deities, thus reminding us of their origin in Śaivism and especially in the Bhairava cult. The influence of the Ujjayinī form of the Bhairava cult (or of any other cult of Bhairava in connection with a Ḍākinī retinue[29]) on the formation of the Cakrasaṃvara cycle might also be the reason why Ḍākinīs are so much more important in Tantric Buddhism than they are in common Hinduism. Since Alexis Sanderson recently identified some texts of the Vidyāpīṭha tradition of Śaiva Tantrism as direct sources for the formation of the Cakrasaṃvara *mūla* texts,[30] it is at least not impossible that the texts investigated by Sanderson include information about still another combined Bhairava-Ḍākinī cult which could have been the pattern for the Cakrasaṃvara-Ḍākinī cult, or which at least could explain the importance of Ḍākinīs in Tantric Buddhism.

There are different levels on which Ḍākinīs appear in Tantric Buddhism: (1) in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, they form one of the eight traditional classes of deities in the pantheon,[31] besides Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Gurus (Lamas), Yi-dams, Dharmapālas, and various types of low deities. The *prajñās* or female consorts of the male deities are also classified as Ḍākinīs. (2) Like all other tantric deities, Ḍākinīs are identified with certain metaphysical aspects, and also with energies within the practitioner him- or herself, which are to be awakened and used in the course of meditation; Ḍākinīs especially embody metaphysical voidness (*śūnyatā / stoṅ pa ñid*) on one hand[32] and the energies of inspiration and transformation on the other hand.[33] (3) Last but not least, Ḍākinīs can be reborn as women: Tibetans

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[27] Bu-ston, *bDe mchog spyi rnam don gsal*, fol. 27b2ff.

[28] A similar myth is, for instance, contained in the *Gorakṣasiddhāntasaṃgraha* (ed. Kaviraj, p. 20); cf. Lorenzen, *Kāpālikas*, pp. 38f.

[29] It does not seem to be mere coincidence that a Hindu (Śākta) text which devotes much more space to the Ḍākinīs than to any other text to my knowledge, is called *Mahākālasaṃhitā*. (MKS); see, for instance, MKS, *Guhyakalīkhaṇḍa*, VII 271–332; X 1108–27; XII 1237–44. Of course it has to be taken into account that this text is relatively late (at least post-Buddhist) and shows some influences of Buddhist Tantrism; see, for instance, the name of one of the Ḍākinīs enumerated in MKS, Vajriṇī, *Guhyakalīkhaṇḍa* XII.

[30] See, for instance, Sanderson, "Purity", p. 214, n. 106; "Śaivism", p. 147.

[31] Robert Bleichsteiner, *Die gelbe Kirche*, Wien 1937, pp. 144f; Günther Schulemann, *Geschichte der Dalai Lamas*, Leipzig 1958, p. 153.

[32] See, for example, Bāpabhaṭis *Cakrasaṃvarapañjikā*. (Pek. 2119), foll. 162b8–163a1: *mkha' 'gro ma ni stoṅ pa ñid do* |, "The Ḍākinī is voidness". Cf. also Vajragarbha, *Hevajrapiṇḍārthaṭīkā* (Pek. 2310), fol. 87a6–7, where the Ḍākinī**'s** nature is compared to heavenly space.

[33] Govinda, *Mystik*, p. 228: "[Die Ḍākinīs] sind die Impulse der Inspiration, die naturhafte Kraft in schöpferischen Genius verwandeln". Cf. John Blofeld, *Tantric Mysticism*, p. 114: "… a man's **ḍ**ākinī is the universal urge to Enlightenment as it acts in him."

believe that mothers of great Lamas[34] as well as great women practitioners[35] are human Ḍākinīs. The tantric vows include even the duty to see and treat every single woman as a Ḍākinī.[36] Without going too far, one can say that Tantric Buddhism regards the Ḍākinī not only as a specifically female force, but also as the embodiment of the feminine as such.

2. Ḍākinīs as Terrifying Goddesses

This central role of the Ḍākinīs in Tantric Buddhism seems quite remarkable if we consider the fact that at the time when they were incorporated into Buddhism, the Ḍākinīs had been representatives only of the negative and dark aspects of the mythological female, namely death and a very threatening sexuality. But in fact, Ḍākinīs do still represent all this in Tantric Buddhism; there are many hagiographical as well as cultic texts which show them as true embodiments of death and of all the threatening aspects of earthly life,[37] but at the same time they now exhibit friendly, helpful, and even enlightening characteristics.

The main reason for this change appears to lie in the new approach that Tantrism shows towards the negative and threatening aspects of life, which a Tantric should not flee or try to overcome, as in earlier stages of Buddhism, but go through them and accept them as a necessary part of life. Tantrism after all is a great new effort to take reality as such, without illusions and without trying to escape uncomfortable truths. Enlightenment is reached not detached from mundane reality but within it and by going through it. So this reality as such gains the quality of a Buddha field, helpful in gaining enlightenment. And the terrific deities who are representatives of the unpleasant parts of reality become helpers and guiders who are to be treated with respect and devotion. They are experienced as friendly mothers even when they threaten and look furious, because it is just this aspect of their nature which is the most helpful for the practitioners in their effort to see and accept reality as it is.

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[34] Earliest examples: Abhayadattaśrī, *Caturaśītisiddhapravṛtti*, pp. 41 and 118 in the translation by Robinson, *Buddha's Lions* (Tib. text, pp. 29,2 and 140,5). In Tibetan historiography, the Ḍākinīship of the mother becomes a topos in vitas of extraordinary religious persons. See Herrmann-Pfandt, *Ḍākinīs*, pp. 174–6.

[35] In this context it is even possible that a new-born girl can exhibit the thirty-two primary and eighty secondary marks of a future Buddha; see *Padma bka'i thaṅ yig*, Chapter 37, foll. 83a6–b2 (translation by Douglas and Bays, Vol. I, p. 237). Cf. Herrmann-Pfandt, *Ḍākinīs*, pp. 172f.

[36] Dhargyey, *Kālacakra Tantra*, p. 26.

[37] Many stories about encounters with terrifying Ḍākinīs are found in Tāranātha's *bKa' babs bdun ldan* (cf. tr. Templeman) and in other vitas of well known Tibetan religious figures. See Herrmann-Pfandt, *Ḍākinīs*, pp. 184–205, for references, as well as translations and interpretations of some stories.

3. Main points of Ḍākinī mythology

One of the most remarkable characteristics of the Ḍākinīs is their connection with the religious biographies of the practitioners. There are characteristic differences between the Indian and the Tibetan view in this field.

In the Indian Mahāsiddha legends written by Abhayadattaśrī, Ḍākinīs always appear at turning points in the formers' lives, bringing about or fostering a decisive change. The story of the Tantric saint Saraha as told by Abhayadattaśrī[38] is a very good illustration of this.

Saraha lives in a cemetery together with a woman who is described as his servant: she begs for him and prepares his meals. One day he tells her to prepare a radish curry for him. Before he is able to eat it he enters a *samādhi* which lasts for twelve years. On returning from his ecstasy, his first question is, "Where is my radish curry?" She answers that of course she could not keep it. He is frustrated and announces that he wants to go to the mountains for a retreat. But then she says, "Bodily separation from the world does not make any sense if you do not detach yourself from the objects and conceptions in your mind. If in twelve years of *samādhi* you did not even manage to cut off the idea of this small radish, what use is there of going to the mountains?" Saraha recognizes the truth of these words and therefore reaches liberation within a short time. Through the intervention of this woman who acts as an embodied Ḍākinī, his life acquires a new direction.

While in the Indian Mahāsiddha hagiographies, the activity of the Ḍākinīs is more or less confined to such turning points, their role has been widely extended in Tibetan hagiography: from conception and birth until death and through the intermediate state to birth again, Ḍākinīs accompany the adept's life and guide it, so to speak, as forces from within. I have previously found it convenient to arrange the material about Ḍākinīs in terms of the typical vita of a tantric practitioner, with special stress not only on the outer, but also on the inner life, including mystical experiences. The most common stages of such a vita are the following.[39]

(*i*) *Conception and birth*

The conception of a great tantric, male or female, is accompanied by visions in which his or her mother and relations are told by Ḍākinīs what a wonderful child will be born to them. In some cases the mother-to-be has to undergo certain symbolic purifications carried out by Ḍākinīs so that she will be a worthy vessel for the venerable child. The mother herself and also the child—if it is a girl—are regarded as incarnated Ḍākinīs. As soon as such a girl is

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[38] Abhayadattaśrī, *Caturaśītisiddhapravṛtti* (tr. Robinson, *Buddhist Lions*, pp. 41–3; Tib. text, pp. 29,1–33,5).

[39] The following paragraphs correspond to Chapters 4–12 of my monograph, *Ḍākinīs*. Since, apart from a few exceptions, the source texts with translations are easily found there, it has not been necessary to repeat the references here.

born, or sometimes even before her birth, she will demonstrate her Ḍākinī nature by gestures or words.

(*ii*) *Entering the religious life*
At an early period in the child's life, a Ḍākinī may appear and tell the parents or the child that he or she has been allotted the task of taking up the religious life. The Ḍākinī shows the way or arranges for a teacher; it is through her prophecies and advice that teachers meet the right disciples at the right time.

(*iii*) *Mystical death*
Necessarily, and often at quite an early stage of their religious path, Tantrics have to cope with the frightful aspect of the Ḍākinīs in one form or other: for instance, by protecting him- or herself against Ḍākinīs who try to swallow up practitioners in cemeteries. Or by walking a long way guarded by bloodthirsty Ḍākinīs in order to find the teacher or a mystical consort.[40] The famous Indian tantric and missionary to Tibet, Padmasambhava (8th cent. A.D.) is said to have actually been swallowed by a Ḍākinī.[41] Inside her, he receives several initiations at her *cakra*s, and afterwards he is reborn through her womb as a Buddha. This elucidating symbolic story shows what all these stories of man-eating Ḍākinīs essentially mean: the Tantric has to strive after death and rebirth through the Ḍākinī because it is through the mystical experience of death and rebirth that enlightenment is reached. Thus, the Ḍākinī is the "Mother of all Buddhas", a very frequent epithet of Ḍākinīs borrowed originally from the goddess Prajñāpāramitā.[42]

(*iv*) *Receiving revelations from the Ḍākinīs*
It is the Ḍākinīs who protect the texts and traditions of Tantric Buddhism; many Tantric texts were brought to earth and entrusted to man by a Ḍākinī; she enables one to read and write texts, fixes the way in which a text has to be handed down or kept secret, and punishes abusers. If a text or tradition has been lost, for instance by fire or war, it is kept immaterially in the heavenly field of the Ḍākinīs in order to be brought back to earth in due time. The whole *gter ma* tradition of the rÑiṅ-ma-pas is based on this idea.[43] Ḍākinīs

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[40] A very interesting long story of this kind is contained in the *skyes rabs* of the disciple of Atiśa, 'Brom-ston (1005–64), in the *bKa' gdams glegs bam II* (*Bu-chos*)**,** Chapter 5. It was translated from the Mongolian very early (1829) by Isaac Jacob Schmidt, in the appendix to his translation of the *Erdeni-yin tobči* by Saγang Sečen, pp. 424–88, under the erroneous title, "Norwu-p'rengwa". An exhaustive interpretation of this highly esoteric symbolic story (of which I could give only a very short résumé, see *Ḍākinīs*, pp. 215–19) would be a very interesting undertaking. Another story of this kind is to be found in the different versions of the vita of the Mahāsiddha Tilopa.

[41] Padma *bka'i thaṅ yig* Chapter 34, foll. 75b5–76b2 (cf. the translation by Douglas and Bays, Vol. I, pp. 219–21, and by Herrmann-Pfandt, *Ḍākinīs*, pp. 220–3).

[42] *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (ed. Vaidya), Chapter 12, pp. 253–5; tr. Conze, *Perfection*, pp. 209f.

[43] See also Thondup, *Hidden teachings*.

are perhaps the most important deities who act as protectresses of the texts and as guides of the *gter ston*s during their search for those "treasure" texts. Thus in fact the whole relationship of a Tantric with the tradition he or she practises is kept and protected by the Ḍākinīs.

Besides that, practising Tantrics may receive from the Ḍākinīs material as well as spiritual food, shelter, and every kind of help according to their needs. This is another aspect of the "mother" function of the Ḍākinīs in Tibetan literature.

(*v*) *Mystical union*

An intimate relationship with a Ḍākinī normally takes place in the adept's life after a considerable period of practice. In the hagiographical literature it often serves as the introduction to the last stage before enlightenment. The relationship may be a mystical one, with a goddess appearing in an involuntary vision or being deliberately visualized (called *jñānamudrā*), or it may be a real sexual relationship with a woman practitioner (*karmamudrā*). In both cases it provides the experience of the union of the two cosmic poles, which is another symbol for reaching enlightenment. A special cult for experiencing this in a group of practitioners is the so-called *gaṇacakra*, which is the Buddhist counterpart of the Hindu *cakrapūjā*, and which is known as the "rite of the Ḍākinīs" in Buddhist Tantric hagiography.[44]

The reader may already have noticed that in my exposition, the role of an intimate, mystical partner is the first function of a Ḍākinī mentioned here which does not have the same meaning for female as it does for male practitioners. Those whose notice it has escaped will be far from alone, since nearly all scholars, and indeed feminist authors, concentrate on "the erotic relationship between the Ḍākinī and the adept"[45] without realizing

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[44] Chapter 10 of my book on Ḍākinīs (pp. 369–424) is an attempt to describe the *gaṇacakra* ritual (Tib. *tshogs 'khor*), following the manuals *Tshogs 'khor cho ga*, by Sa-skya-paṇ-chen Kun-dga'-rgyal-mtshan (1182–1251/2), and *Tshogs 'khor lag len*, by Bu-ston Rin-chen-grub (1290–1364). Only occasionally did I use Indian sources, of which there are several included in the Kanjur and Tanjur, because as a rule they are written in a very esoteric language and do not give a picture of the actual practice of the ritual at all. Both Sa-skya-pan-chen and Bu-ston seem to rely on the practice of the *gaṇacakra* in its original form, i.e. including the use of wine, meat, and sexual practices. In the following centuries of Tibetan religious history, the bodily practice of all this seems to have been spiritualized, or at least much reduced. Certainly, in some rituals practised nowadays, "*gaṇacakra*" means nothing more than an offering of food to the Ḍākinīs or to other deities. See, for instance, Helmut Eimer and Geshey Pema Tsering, "Sun-zlog – Abwenden von Störungen", Ziff. 4.4.4. The *sun zlog* ritual, which is practised to avoid the death of certain persons by asking the Ḍākinīs not to guide them to the other world, includes a "*gaṇacakra*" in the form of a symbolic offering to the deities invoked. In this form, the ritual seems to have lost even the symbolic form of the Tantric union it originally symbolized in Indian and early Tibetan Tantric Buddhism.

[45] Some examples are: Blofeld, *Mysticism*, p. 115; Katz, "Anima and mKha'-'gro-ma" (the author compares the Ḍākinī with C. G. Jung's *anima* without pointing out that the *anima* is a phenomenon of the male psyche only); and the feminist author Janice Willis, "Ḍākinī", pp. 66f. She asks the question why the Ḍākinī is feminine and answers by giving a definition of the

that (leaving aside homosexual or lesbian relationships, which as far as I can see do not occur in Tantric Buddhism) the adept has to be male to suit this constellation. Thus, most of the research done in this field does not enquire into to the specific situations of female Tantric practitioners.

One example will suffice to illustrate this. In the widely practised *gtum mo* meditation belonging to the "Six Doctrines of Nāropa"[46] which results in the production of so much internal heat in the body that one is able to melt the snow on which one is sitting, there is a part of the meditation in which the practitioner is advised to visualize a Ḍākinī as a very beautiful woman awakening one's sexual desire.[47] With his lust aroused in this way, the meditator has to work tantrically, i.e. to sublimate it and transform it into the energy which he needs for producing the mystical heat. One may ask the question, in what way women could perform this meditation—after all, women are normally not as sexually excited by the sight of a beautiful woman as one would expect from a man. Not even Alexandra David-Néel, who was famous for her success in practicing *gtum mo*,[48] has told us anything about that. Perhaps there is a simple solution to this problem, but the remarkable fact remains that as yet nobody seems to have seen this as a problem at all, whether it be the available authors on *gtum mo* practice, or western observers, or the practitioners themselves. I do not have the space to discuss this at length here, but I am constrained to point out that whenever androcentric meditation practices are investigated by androcentric research methods alone, the results are liable to miss the point of view of one half of (wo)mankind.

The same critical view has to be applied to the interpretation of several other aspects of Tantric Buddhism, for instance the *yab yum* pairs, which at first glance seem to be a balanced representation of the tantric sexual polarity. However, they are nearly always male-dominated[49] and therefore attributing at least unconsciously the secondary position to the women amongst their meditating worshippers who, while identifying with this deity, enter a male-female hierarchy with the male deity dominating the female. Men, on the contrary, normally never enter a meditational situation in which their

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Ḍākinī as "the necessary complement to render us (whether male or female) whole beings", apparently without noticing that this includes a rather sexist definition of the function of the female gender in the Tantric context. Cf. Herrmann-Pfandt, *Ḍākinīs*, pp. 485–9.

[46] For a translation of one of the most popular texts on the "Six Doctrines", see Evans-Wentz, *Tibetan Yoga*, pp. 171–252 (Tib. text: Padma-dkar-po, *Chos drug bsdus pa'i zin bris*).

[47] See p. 46,3 in the above mentioned Tibetan text (Evans-Wentz, *Yoga*, p. 204, no. 165).

[48] David-Néel, *Heilige und Hexer*, pp. 182–92.

[49] This can be seen, for instance, in the fact that the male deity is nearly always larger, and endowed with greater numbers of heads, arms, legs, and attributes. Whilst one finds male and female deities represented singly in similar postures, in dual representations, namely *yab yum* iconography, it is always the posture of the female deity that is adapted to that of the male, almost never the other way round.

own sex is symbolically subject to the opposite sex.[50] Therefore one can say that the meditation on *yab yum* deities (which is one of the most central meditation practices in Tantric Buddhism) has the effect of reassuring a man in his sexual identity and at the same time separating a woman from hers. This situation has indeed much in common with the claim of several Mahāyāna texts that women have to change their sex first to be able to gain enlightenment.[51]

Thus, when dealing with the role of the Ḍākinīs as female partners of the male yogins, one should include the question as to whether there are any male deities or humans who may play this role for female practitioners. Any answers the tradition might contain are as yet in no way explored or even solicited, as far as I can see.

(vi) Reaching worldly perfection and enlightenment

The attainment of worldly perfections (*siddhi*) or enlightenment (*mahā-mudrāsiddhi*) at the end of a long path of practice is often praised as a gift received from the Ḍākinīs. Reaching perfection is described in Tantric texts as actually becoming identical with the deity meditated upon, and for women this means becoming a Ḍākinī incarnate, while men normally identify with male deities. This is at least the rule with meditations performed by men and women together. Meditation practices performed by a single person alone can also imply the identification of a woman with a male deity and of a man with a female one.

(*vi*) *Death and rebirth*

The demise of great tantrics is often prophesied by Ḍākinīs. Their death process can be accompanied by dances of Ḍākinīs and Ḍākas in the sky, flowers raining down and other omina, and Ḍākinīs conduct the dead lamas to their Buddha-field, which is sometimes identified with the mystified Ḍākinī land Uḍḍiyāna. According to the so-called "Tibetan Book of the Dead" (*Bar do thos grol*), Ḍākinīs also are amongst the deities who lead the dead through the intermediate state between death and rebirth.[52] And Ḍākinīs prophesy and procure a new rebirth for great teachers whom they want to be reborn for the sake of all living beings. Thus at this point, the circle of birth, death and rebirth under the guidance and protection of the Ḍākinīs starts at the beginning again.

Actually the motherhood of the Ḍākinī comprises not only one but two different cycles of birth and death: on the level of mundane life, Ḍākinīs guide and protect the normal corporeal lifespan, which represents *saṃsāra*. Buddhism

[50] There are some very few exeptions from this rule, i.e. some female-dominated *yab yum* deities; see Herrmann-Pfandt, *Ḍākinīs*, pp. 318–31.

[51] For this motif in the Mahāyāna see Herrmann-Pfandt, **"**Vorgeburtsgeschichte".

[52] See especially the description of the second *bar do* in the different editions of the *Bar do thos grol*.

has always regarded women to be more closely connected with *saṃsāra* and even to promote the cycle of birth and death through bearing children. The role of the Ḍākinī in the context of the material life of the adepts—from being born of a Ḍākinī mother, being given motherly protection and fed during meditation, until being accepted at the end of life by the Ḍākinī functioning as what may be termed a "death mother",[53] who later gives rebirth again—fully reflects the Great Mother as a symbol figure of the whole of the world, as a symbol of Nature emanating and swallowing her children again in constant birth and death.[54] And according to Tantric rules, this *saṃsāra* aspect of existence is no longer seen as causing suffering only: the negative picture of woman reproducing *saṃsāra* is replaced by the Ḍākinīship of woman giving birth to a future Buddha.

The second cycle of birth and death which is represented by the Ḍākinī is actually a cycle of death and (re)birth: it comprises the mystical death and spiritual rebirth which is held to be necessary for gaining Buddhahood in this very life; or rather, which in the symbolic language of the Ḍākinī mythology is the description of the very act of gaining enlightenment. The above story of Padmasambhava becoming a Buddha by being swallowed by and then reborn from the womb of a Ḍākinī is a fascinating example of the fact that the new attitude towards the feminine in Tantrism also contains a tendency to accept the facts of corporeal existence not only as such but as legitimate images of spiritual reality.

4. Ḍākinīs and Female Equality in Tantric Buddhism

The great importance of the feminine in Tantrism has brought many westerners, even feminists, to the opinion that Tantrism fosters the religious equality of women,[55] and, as I have already remarked, in Tantric Buddhism, at least in its Indo-Tibetan form, Ḍākinīs have been said to be the most important embodiment of the feminine. But, as the critical observer has to ask, are women really so much more important, for instance, in the monk-dominated society of traditional Tibet than they are in other societies? Is not Tantric Buddhism at least in its present form as male-dominated as any religion, with the exception of those few extraordinary women whom one also finds in all other patriarchal religions? An examination of the textual and cultic traditions of Tantric Buddhism shows the following.

Firstly, women are very often described as good or even excellent practitioners and praised in the role of mothers of great lamas. Tantrics are told not to blame women because of their sex but to honour them as Ḍākinīs

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[53] This is a reference to the figure of the devouring mother in Jungian psychology, for which see Neumann, *Die Groß**e** Mutter*, pp. 148f.
[54] *ibid*., p. 147.
[55] See, for example, Anne Klein, **"**Primordial purity", p. 132; Aziz, "Moving Towards a Sociology of Tibet", p. 73; Gross, "Yeshe Tshogyel", pp. 9, 15.

and as embodiments of the transcendent wisdom that forms one pole of the Tantric polarity.

Secondly, in several texts, for instance from the traditions of Padmasambhava as well as of Mi-la-ras-pa, women are nevertheless discriminated against as they were in pre-Tantric times, and again with the argument that because of their being women they were neither able to practice as successfully as men, nor to reach enlightenment.[56] With very few exceptions, women do not have high posts in the religious hierarchy, and the whole historiography of as important a sect as the dGe-lugs-pas does not know a single famous woman practitioner amongst thousands of nuns.[57] There are even some reasons to believe that the relatively free position of women in Tibetan society had its origin not so much in Buddhism as in the pre-Buddhist roots of Tibetan culture which seem to have been much more favourable to women than were for example the cultures of China or India, from where Buddhism was imported into Tibet.[58] A Tibetan woman author has formulated this in a very characteristic way, saying that in traditional Tibet women had the same rights as men in every respect—except religion, which in her opinion was a purely male business.[59]

If one analyses very closely the texts and traditions of Tantric Buddhism as far as women are concerned, one soon recognizes what has actually changed during the development of Tantric Buddhism: it is not the attitude towards women as such but the contents of this attitude. What might this mean? In traditional Hindu as well as Buddhist society a contradictory image of women prevails: as a faithful wife, as the mother of her sons or as a chaste nun, a woman is highly respected, while as far as her sexual desires and her alleged man-killing tendencies are concerned, she is scorned at the same time.[60] So the whole role of a woman is defined from the male point of view. And this is more or less still the same with the Tantric view of woman, with the only exception that the contents have shifted. What was despised in women before, is now praised: be it female sexuality, be it the dark and fatal aspect now venerated in the terrifying goddesses. As a Hindu husband never scorns the one aspect of his wife he sorely needs for procuring progeny, namely motherhood, so a male Tantric never discriminates against the erotic and "dark" female, because it is precisely this that he needs for reaching enlightenment. Adoring all women as Ḍākinīs tends to mean nothing more than using a certain image of woman (and not infrequently using women themselves) for reaching certain cultic aims. And this is quite a different matter from creating an equal position for women in religion and

[56] For references see Herrmann-Pfandt, *Ḍākinīs***,** pp. 75–9, and Chapter 13.
[57] See Allione, *Women of Wisdom***,** pp. 14f.
[58] See Janet Gyatso, **"**Down with the demoness"; Herrmann-Pfandt, "Zwangsabtreibung".
[59] Pema, "Himmel", p. 57. Cf. Herrmann-Pfandt, "Zwangsabtreibung".
[60] For references and primary sources, see Wintemitz, *Frau*; Paul, *Women***;** Herrmann-Pfandt, *Ḍākinīs*, pp. 35–65.

social life. The custom of male Indian Tantrics of practising together with low-cast women is a very good example of this: it aims at a change in the male practitioners *attitude* towards cast rules and towards the despised female, but not in the least at a change of those rules as such or at removing contempt as such.

The Tantric ideal of the feminine which is embodied in the Ḍākinī nevertheless offers a chance for women which other patriarchal religions do not contain. This is understood more easily if we again consider the fact that Tantrism originated in antithesis to a society in which, like in many traditional societies, women were put under the force of a very oppressive ideal of the feminine. This ideal demands from women selfless motherliness and pure marital love, and tries to suppress any aspect of the feminine which could threaten the male side, like demanding sexuality, wrath or any other "dark" emotion. Since, as modern psychology has shown, not being allowed to have certain feelings does not mean not having them at all, a woman's life according to such an ideal meant suppressing large and vital parts of her own inner life. Compared to this, the image of the Ḍākinī (and of any other terrifying goddess) proves to be a more "complete" female role model, which allows women to have and to stand by these formerly forbidden aspects and emotions—do not the goddesses themselves have them? And as part of the same process, men are enabled to cope with these frightening aspects of the feminine in the course of their Tantric practice.[61]

Even if Tantrism did not interrupt the male practice of making use of women but only changed the *image* of the women whom one used, nevertheless, with such a role model in mind, it would seem to be much more difficult to reduce women to the status of obedient, friendly and purely motherly creatures than it was before. This effect of the image of the terrifying goddess can be verified in India as well as in Tibet in the form of a quite undeniable female power working more or less under the surface of the patriarchal societies. It is precisely the use of dark goddesses in the quest for liberation that is also responsible for the growing interest of Western women in the Ḍākinīs and other goddesses of that kind. Such role models are seen in such circles as a corrective to the Madonna-oriented Western ideal of the feminine as well. Since Buddhism in the West is being confronted with the ideas and wishes of Feminism,[62] it is not inconceivable that within Buddhism the dark goddesses, and above all the Ḍākinīs,[63] may assume even greater importance in the future.

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[61] I have examined this aspect of the Ḍākinī figure more closely in: "Die 'Furchtbare Mutter'".

[62] See Gross, "Buddhism and Feminism: Towards their Mutual Transformation".

[63] An interesting attempt at employing the Ḍākinī teachings of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism for women and men in the West is practised by Tsultrim Allione. Since 1987, she has been working in a therapeutic way with the dark goddesses, combining a traditional Ḍākinī *sādhana* with elements of Western psychotherapy. The basic ideas of this are already found in her *Women of Wisdom*, which has grown to be a kind of classic of Buddhist Feminism.

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