

# The Evolution of the Buddhist Yama

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### *Preface*

Selected evidence is presented here in the form of an ‘evolutionary history’ of the deity Yama. The intention is to provide a coherent picture of the development of Yama into an object of devotion for Buddhists. The stages identified here are perhaps not the only ones that could be used, and much depends on how widely the researcher is prepared to cast his net for evidence from Indo-European (IE) groups other than the Aryans and their Iranian relatives. Further comparisons of the IE Yama figure to similar Mesopotamian, Egyptian and Greek gods or heroes might be possible, but even without such expansion, the amount of Indo-Iranian and Buddhist material ensures that only a proportion of the references to Yama can be treated here.

### *1. The Early Yama*

#### *a. Yama as Puruṣa and Yama as Bull*

The *R̥g-veda* (X.90.1-16) contains a creation myth in which a primordial being known as the Puruṣa (‘Man’) is sacrificed by the gods to produce a new world. The Puruṣa is described there in these terms:

“The Puruṣa has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet. He pervades the earth everywhere and extends beyond for ten fingers’ breadth. The Puruṣa himself is all this, whatever has been and whatever is to be... Al. him; three quarters are the immortal in heaven.”

The sacrifice of the Puruṣa is then performed by the gods, *sādhyas*<sup>1</sup> and sages, and the creative result is described thus:

“From that sacrifice in which everything was offered, the ghee was obtained, and they [= the gods *etc.*] made it into those beasts who dwell in the air, in the forest and in the villages. From that sacrifice in which everything was offered, the sacred verses (*ṛg*) and the chants (*saman*)

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<sup>1</sup> The *sādhyas* are a group of 12 celestial beings inhabiting the region between the sun and the earth. Dowson describes them as the personified rites and prayers of the *Vedas*. J. Dowson, *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology*. London. 1957, 271.

were born, the metres were born and the formulas (*yajur*) were born... When they divided the Puruṣa, into how many parts did they disperse him? What became of his mouth, what of his arms, what were his two thighs and his two feet called? His mouth was the priest (*brāhmin*), his arms were made into the warriors (*kṣatriya*), his two thighs were commoners (*viś*) and from his feet the servants (*śūdra*) were born. The moon was born from his mind; the sun was born from his eye. From his mouth came Indra and Agni, from his vital breath the wind was born; and from his head the heaven appeared. From his two feet came the earth and the regions of the sky from his ear. Thus they fashioned the worlds”.<sup>2</sup>

The equivalent Iranian myth splits the creative act into two:

“It is said in the religion [=Avesta] ; when the sole-created [=created apart from other creatures] ox passed away, there where it sent forth its marrow, the fifty-five species of grain grew up, and the twelve types of healing plants... the semen of the ox was borne up to the moon. There they purified it and he [Ohrmazd] created animals from it”.<sup>3</sup>

Then:

“I created men in ten species. The first was that which was radiant and white of eye, namely, Gayōmart, and the ninth from Gayōmart was Gayōmart again. The tenth was the monkey, said to be the least of mankind. When illness came over Gayōmart he fell on his left side. From his head, lead became manifest; from his blood, tin; from his marrow, silver; from his legs, iron; from his bones, copper; from his fat, crystal; from his arms, iron; and from his soul’s departure, gold... From the left death entered the body of Gayōmart. [Therefore] death comes over all creatures until the Renovation”.<sup>4</sup>

The text goes on to describe the creation of the ten types of mankind from Gayōmart’s semen.

The Norse version of this IE myth<sup>5</sup> tells of the dual being Ymir (the word is cognate to Skt. Yama) who was produced from the meeting of heat and cold

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<sup>2</sup> W.D. O’Flaherty, *Hindu Myths, A Sourcebook Translated from the Sanskrit, Harmondsworth, 1975, 28.*

<sup>3</sup> B. Lincoln, *Priests, Warriors and Cattle: A Study in the Ecology of Religions, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London, 1981, 72.*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> There are still more versions of this myth in the IE world, but perhaps only the heavily modified Old Irish and Roman versions of the tale can be considered primary. The first of these is preserved as a short section at the end of the epic poem the Cattle Raid of Cooley (the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*; trs. by C. O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cuailnge from the Book of Leinster, Dublin, 1967, 270-2*) and tells of a conflict between two bulls, one of which kills the other and tosses the remains to the four quarters creating the landscape of Ireland. Echoes of the Puruṣa myth are equally faint in Livy’s account (I.6.3-7.3) of the founder twins of Rome, Romulus and Remus (*geminus* is again a cognate word to *yama*). Romulus kills Remus and on this possibly sacrificial basis Rome can be founded. The Greek and Russian versions seem to be secondary (see the discussions in A. Olerud, *L’idée de macrocosmos et de microcosmos dans le Timée de Platon, Uppsala, 1951*, and S. Schayer, “A Note on the Old Russian Variant of the Purushasukta.”, *AO, 7, 1935, 319-23.*)

(originating from lands to the north and south) in the void between known as Ginnungagap. Ymir is the ancestor of both humans and giants, who first emerged from his left armpit and feet respectively. But Ymir is also the world itself, since he was slain by the gods Odin, Vili and Ve, taken to Ginnungagap, dismembered and used to make the world. The vault of the sky is his skull, the sea his blood, the earth his flesh, the clouds his hair—and as in the case of Yama it seems his death was the first in this creation. Ymir’s primary slayer Odin was a result of the union between a giantess and a man licked into existence from the salted ice by the cow Auumbla on whose milk Ymir had been fed.<sup>6</sup>

The equivalences are so clear that there can be little doubt concerning the identity of the Vedic Puruṣa, the Iranian Gayōmart/Bull combination and the Norse Ymir. While the Puruṣa alone is sacrificed in the Vedic version, the Iranian account describes a dual dismemberment of the primordial man and a bovine. Perhaps it is only to be expected that a scholarly solution incorporating a bovine element into the Vedic story should have been proposed. J. Otrebski argued that *puruṣa* be understood as a compound *pu-* ‘man’ (as in *pu-mān* ‘human’, *pu-tra* ‘son’) + *vṛṣa* ‘bull’ (>*ruṣa* by metathesis);<sup>7</sup> this interpretation brings the Aryan myth into line with the Iranian and Norse versions. The bovine association is to stay with Yama in some form or another<sup>8</sup> for the rest of his history.

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<sup>6</sup> The primary source is Snorri’s *Gylfaginning* 4-9 (relying on the *Voluspá*, 3 ff.); Ellis Davidson Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, Harmondsworth, 1964, 27–8.

<sup>7</sup> J. Otrebski, “Aind, Puruṣaḥ, Pumān und Verwandtes”, *ZVS*, 82, 1968, 252–3.

<sup>8</sup> Yama is associated with bovines of several different types in the course of his history. The Puruṣa Man/Bull is one, the *mahiṣa* associated with Yama, originally the Aurochs but later the Water Buffalo, is another. The Water Buffalo identification for the *mahiṣa* provides a clear link with the Dravidian myths surrounding the slaying of the monstrous Mahiṣa by Durgā (a comprehensive bibliography and summary of the South Indian buffalo sacrifice is given by Hildebeitel (“Rāma and Gilgamesh: the Sacrifices of the Water Buffalo and the Bull of Heaven”, *HR*, 1980, 188ff). The *mahiṣa* has also been associated with the horse (A. Wayman, “Studies in Yama and Māra.” *IJJ*, 3, 1959, 49) though I am not convinced by the argument. In addition to the *mahiṣa*, Yama is also associated with a black decrepit barren cow (equated with the *anustaraṇī* cow slaughtered at funeral ceremonies) which in turn has a counterpart in the barren cow offered to Varuṇa at the conclusion of the soma sacrifice. The *anustaraṇī* cow, the pieces of which are burnt along with the corpse, is intended as an offering for Yama’s dogs, Śyama and Śabala (equivalent to the Graeco-Latin Cerberus), enabling the deceased to pass them by safely en route to the Underworld.

### b. Yama as Twins

While the Vedic Puruṣa is equated with Yama on the basis of internal evidence and of the related Norse myths where the name Ymir (=Yama) is preserved, in the *Ṛg-veda* the deity named Yama appears as one of a pair of twins born to Vivasvat the Sun and Saranyū the daughter of Tvastṛ the divine artisan. His younger twin sister is given the name Yamī.<sup>9</sup> His twin nature is his defining characteristic—the Sanskrit word *yama* means ‘twin’. And again the twin characteristic has a specific creative meaning, one that is different to the creative dismemberment of the Puruṣa/ Bull version of Yama. An interesting passage in the *Ṛg-veda* (X.10.1-14)<sup>10</sup> tells of Yamī’s attempted seduction of her twin Yama. She speaks thus in one verse:

“the desire for Yama has come upon me, Yamī, the desire to lie with him upon the same bed. Let me open my body to him as a wife to her husband. Let us whirl about together like the wheels of a chariot”.

Yama resists successfully:

“Never will I agree to unite my body with your body. They call a man who unites with his sister an evil man. Seek your pleasures with some other man than me”.<sup>11</sup>

This ‘anticlimactic’ tale is apparently not discussed further in Hindu mythology. It seems that the extant version is a prudish alteration of an earlier, more complex tale in which the incest does occur.<sup>12</sup> The Iranian Yasna suggests that Yamī’s powers of seduction were originally greater—she and Yama had after all had intercourse before while in the womb, she persuasively argues. Yama does in fact succumb, creating mortality by the sexual act:

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<sup>9</sup> In his discussion of Vedic sacrifice Aguilar concludes that Yama “no more than repeats at another level the creative immolation of the Puruṣa” (*The Sacrifice in the Ṛgveda (Doctrinal Aspects)*), Delhi, 1976, 144); he is however probably wrong to claim that it is on account of Yama’s self-sacrifice—that is to say the abandonment of his immortality as described in *Ṛgveda* X.13.4—that he is called ‘Twin’ since he is the twin of god, the perfect image of Prajāpati, the Lord of Creatures. The Iranian, Vedic and Scandinavian evidence has been presented and discussed in detail by Lincoln (*Priests, Warriors and Cattle: A Study in the Ecology of Religions*, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London, 1981, 69ff).

<sup>10</sup> *Ṛgveda*, X.10, is analyzed in detail, both philologically and mythologically, by Schneider (“Yama und Yamī (RV, X, 10)”, *IJ*, 10, 1967, 1–32.) who also discusses the comparable Egyptian myths involving the twin Osiris (*ibid.*, p19–22).

<sup>11</sup> W.D. O’Flaherty, *Hindu Myths, A Sourcebook Translated from the Sanskrit*, Harmondsworth, 1975, 64.

<sup>12</sup> S. Bhattacharji, *The Indian Theogony, A Comparative Study of Indian Mythology from the Vedas to the Purāṇas*, Cambridge, 1970, 94; also U. Schneider, *op. cit.*, 19.

“And when these two spirits [good and bad; called *yīma* ‘twins’ in the previous verse] first met, they instituted life (*gaya-*) and death, and how life should be in the end”.<sup>13</sup>

Yama consequently becomes the first mortal and, as the first being to experience death, also becomes the first being in the Underworld.<sup>14</sup> His position as ruler of this realm, a role which gradually comes to supersede his other roles, is thus based on his twin aspect (the creation of mankind and of death) rather than on his Puruṣa/Bull aspect (the creation of the universe).

The two identifications of Bull and Twins for the same deity may seem contradictory. However there is one other location where this pairing occurs: the zodiacal constellations.

The earliest indisputable Mesopotamian evidence for astrological thinking dates from c. 4400 years ago, though doubtless much had been worked out earlier.<sup>15</sup> Evidence for the full celestial zodiac, the twelve zones into which the ecliptic is divided, appears somewhat later (indisputably from c. 700 BC). The zodiac is not merely applied on the annual scale (the year divided into 12 zodiacal months) but is also used to mark out periods of about 2160 years (cosmic months), this being the time it takes for the spring point of the sun to

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<sup>13</sup> B. Lincoln, *Priests, Warriors and Cattle: A Study in the Ecology of Religions*, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London, 1981, 76. Consideration of theories of genetics might lead to conclusions reminiscent of the twin myth of Yama and Yamī. In organisms which reproduce asexually, there occurs a simple duplicating process (cloning) whereby the organism genetically manufactures identical copies of itself. A colony of such organisms, bacteria for example, is made up not of many individuals but of many copies of the same ‘individual’. In organisms which reproduce sexually, the procedure involves the alternation of haploid phases (where the nucleus contains a single set of chromosomes) and diploid phases (where the nucleus contains a double set). Sexual reproduction thus involves the union of two haploid cells from two different individuals of two different mating types (called male and female) to produce a single unique organism, composed of diploid cells, which produces, in turn, haploid gametes (sex cells). In the case of simple organisms, which reproduce asexually by repeated fission, it makes little sense to speak of the ‘death’ of individuals since these are all identical copies of the (hypothetical) source organism and can, in a sense, be traced back to it. In the case of sexually reproducing organisms, the mixing of chromosomes from two parent individuals ensures the uniqueness (and hence individuality) of the offspring—but at the cost of the eventual dissolution of that particular individual organism. As Lyall Watson puts it, “the price we have had to pay for sex is death” (*The Romeo Error: A Matter of Life and Death*, Falmouth, 1974, 30). But looked at from this point of view, Yama’s creation of death must be concurrent with the creation of a new and complex type of life—life as lived by individuals.

<sup>14</sup> *Atharvaveda-saṃhita*, 18,3,13; A. Parpola, “The Sky-Garment, A Study of the Harappan Religion and its Relation to the Mesopotamian and Later Indian Religions”, *SO*, 57, Helsinki, 1985, 65.

<sup>15</sup> L. Kákósy, *Egyiptomi és antik csillaghit*, Budapest, 1978, 111.

transit one zodiacal sign (these following each other in the reverse order to what we find in the ‘normal’ yearly cycle). Twelve of these 2160 year periods make up a cosmic year of 25,920 years, this being the time it takes for the precession of the spring point to complete a full round of the zodiac. The history of the universe is made up of a sequence of these cyclical cosmic years. The precession of the spring point in more recent human history has marked out, in sequence, the following periods: Gemini (c. 6700–4500BC), Taurus (c. 4500–2350BC), Aries (c. 2350–200BC), Pisces (c. 200 BC–1960AD) and Aquarius (c. 1960–). At around 4500 BC according to this scheme a cosmic transition from the Twins to the Bull took place, and this is reflected in a similar ritual and religious transition in some ancient civilisations in this period, as in the later transitional periods (2350 BC for Taurus-Aries and so on).<sup>16</sup> Whether or not these transitions did actually take place in the religious life of a particular prehistoric group—such as the Aryans prior to their entry into India—at the astrologically predetermined time would be hard or impossible to ascertain. Nonetheless, the existence of Yama as Bull and Yama as Twins—consecutive signs in the zodiac—within Indo-Iranian mythology may suggest that knowledge of astrology had been acquired either directly or indirectly from a civilised source (Mesopotamia, Egypt or the Indus Valley).<sup>17</sup> This astrological aspect of Yama is not necessarily in conflict with his death and knowledge-of-death associations discussed below (these being the philosophical-religious reflexes of the scheme). The fact that both the Twins and the Bull are bound up in the figure of Yama (and not some other figure) suggests the prominence of the deity amongst the early Aryans and

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<sup>16</sup> Such transitions can be detected at least in the Egyptian case. Egyptian civilization (the First Dynasty) begins, along with a new calendrical system, at c. 4000 BC with a fully fledged Bull cult, that of the bull Hapi, better known as Apis. This follows a Twins period apparently characterized by human sacrifice. Apis is associated with Osiris, who like Yama is a twin of solar origin (*cf.* note 4). The Amun ram cult officially replaces that of Apis after two thousand years or so at the time of the accession of the XIIth Dynasty and just after the era of the pyramids comes to an end; this cult in turn comes to an official end with the start of the Ptolemaic era (c. 300 BC) and the gradual rise to power of monotheism in the Near and Middle East (and it is no accident that the early Christians chose the Greek word *ἰχθύς* ‘fish/Pisces’ to summarize their doctrine). This discussion relies primarily on Várkonyi (Sziriát oszlopai, Budapest, 1972, 176ff). It is not necessary to involve the Zodiak to explain the Bull-Twins link since the original non-zodiacal Twins constellation is Orion (also next to Taurus in the sky). This association is millenia older than the early evidence for the Zodiak.

<sup>17</sup> Mesopotamian and Egyptian astrology are certainly linked; the direct evidence for astrology (as for most else) in the Indus Valley may be slight but as Mesopotamian influence on the Indus Civilizations can clearly be detected in other areas, knowledge of astrology as a fundamental component of civilization is only to be expected. Fairservis (*The Roots of Ancient India*, London, 1971, 296–98) has a summary of the evidence for Mesopotamian influence on the Indus Civilizations.

points to a gradual ‘demotion’ in rank as the later Hindu pantheon coalesced from Aryan and Dravidian elements.

## 2. *The Iranian and Kafir Yamas*

### a. *The Iranian Yima*

Since the rest of this essay will be taken up with the discussion of Yama in Hindu and Buddhist contexts, a brief account of the Iranian Yima and the Kafir Imra would help complete the Indo-Iranian picture, especially as the Kafir information has a bearing upon the evolution of the Buddhist tantric deity Yamāntaka as discussed in the closing section. Both the Gayōmart and the twin legends of Yama have been preserved in Iran. Yima as a creator-figure (initially bound up with Gayōmart) and as the first mortal has been present from earliest times providing opportunities for reinterpretation as religious conceptions changed. Yima may have lost his creative role but he did—and still does—survive in a heroic role. Earlier texts such as the Avesta (Yasna 9.3–5) describe Yama as the first king ruling over our world which was a deathless paradisaical place at that time.<sup>18</sup> In subsequent literature he drops to third in the list of early kings. His thousand-year reign ends with the loss of his immortality which, though seen as sacrificial in India, was interpreted as punishment for sin by Zoroastrianism. Zoroaster hints darkly at some deception perpetrated by Yima concerning the bull sacrifice as the sin in question (Yasna 32.8). Later sources (Pahlavi texts and Persian epic) say that Yima’s claim to be creator was the lie that led to his fall.<sup>19</sup> Yama as first worldly king is conspicuously absent from the Indian myths though the progenitor of the human race Manu, a half-brother of Yama in Indian tradition, shows certain similarities.<sup>20</sup>

Yima’s kingly role ending in death is altered in a curious legend preserved in the second chapter of the Vendidad. Yima is instructed by the gods to build an underground *var* (fortification) as a refuge from an ice age which will destroy the world above ground. Like the ark, the *var* is inhabited by pairs of the best men, women and animals and seeds of the most fragrant and delicious plants. This underground world has its own sun, moon and stars to provide light and the people live long, happy and secure lives. Yima still exists in his secret abode biding his time through our age waiting for the opportunity to re-emerge (this

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<sup>18</sup> A. Christensen, *Les types du premier homme et du premier roi dans l’histoire légendaire des Iraniens*, I–II, Stockholm, 1917, II, 3.

<sup>19</sup> *cf.*, M. Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, Leiden & Koln, 1975, 93, and note 56.

<sup>20</sup> *Markandeya-purāṇa*, 103, I; trs., W.D. O’Flaherty, *op. cit.*, 66. Perhaps as Dumézil suggests (*The Destiny of a King*, Chicago & London, 1973, 7), the less rigorous Iranian opposition to incest enabled Yama to make the twins—earthly king transition without the loss of status that characterises Yama’s Vedic role.

being one of the events of the Zoroastrian apocalyptic in later descriptions.<sup>21</sup> It is this Arthurian role which enables Yima—now known as Jamšed—to become a standard hero of Iranian storytelling and thereby to survive the Islamicisation of Iranian religion.<sup>22</sup>

*b. The Kafir Imra*

Additional evidence for Yama's prominence in earlier (pre-Vedic) times can be adduced from his central role in the religions of the Kafirs of the Hindu Kush of Afghanistan and Pakistan. These groups are linguistically intermediate between their Iranian and Aryan neighbours forming a distinct third language family and possessing a 'third tradition' of Indo-Iranian myth existing only in orally-transmitted form. This tradition seems to retain Yama, known in Kafir as Imra, in a supreme role, while both Indian (whether Hindu or Buddhist) and Iranian traditions required Yama's demotion and altered his status. Robertson describes a tripartite cosmology ruled over by Imra for the Afghan Kafirs:

“In the Kafir theology there appears to be both a heaven and a hell. It divides the universe into Urdesh, the world above, the world of the gods; Michdesh, the earth; and Yurdesh, the nether world. Both the heaven and the hell for mortals is in Yurdesh, which is reached through a great pit at the mouth of which a custodian named Maramalik [=Māra], specially created by Imra for the purpose, is always seated. He permits no one in Yurdesh to return to the upper world”.<sup>23</sup>

As creator of Maramalik, Imra is master of death. He rules by proxy in Yurdesh and in person in Urdesh since all the other gods were brought to life by his breath. He is also creator of humanity whom he churned into existence inside a golden goat skin. Robertson gives the following description of the eight imposing wooden images of Imra which once stood in the main temple at Kushteki:

“The figures are probably seven feet high and represent Imra seated and working a goat-skin butter churn. The face of each is prodigious. The square-cut chin reaches within a hair's-breadth of the goat-skin on the god's knees. The brows and nose are, in the majority of the figures, scored with lines, while those on the two practicable doors [of the temple] have rough iron bells suspended between the eyes... above the faces of the images a large circular head-dress appears with a horizontal

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<sup>21</sup> *cf.*, M. Boyce, *op. cit.*, 95–6.

<sup>22</sup> A. Christensen, *op. cit.*, II, 81ff, provides a full listing and summary of the Islamic works featuring Yima/Jamšed.

<sup>23</sup> G.S. Robertson, *The Kafirs of the Hindukush*, London, 1896, 380.



line of carving across the middle and vertical cuttings running upwards and downwards from it.”<sup>24</sup>

The most interesting question concerning the Kafir Imra is whether his identity as supreme creator god is a relic of some earlier pre-Vedic period when the Indo-Iranians worshipped Yama as supreme, or whether Imra’s rise in rank has been of more recent origin. Karl Jettmar has proposed opposition to Buddhism as the goad for Imra’s rise:

“The Kafirs perhaps knew of a deity with the name and the attributes of Yama; but then they learnt that by the Buddhists this god was regarded as supreme ruler of all worldly affairs, full of temptation and splendour and therefore detested by the followers of the Saviour [=Buddha]. If they were already Kafir-minded in those days, *i.e.* reluctant to accept foreign values involving renunciation of their traditions, we may infer that they saw Yama as their ‘chosen god’, expressing their distinct group personality”.<sup>25</sup>

It will be noticed that the Buddhist evidence discussed later does not support this view in the form stated since the Buddhist view of Yama (as opposed to that of Māra) was not a particularly hostile one. The closing paragraphs of this essay propose a different and distinct type of Buddhist influence on the Kafirs and Imra—but any such influence, whether Iranian, Hindu or Buddhist, does not rule out the possibility of the Kafir Imra being a direct continuation of the creator Yama, whether Puruṣa or Twin—of pre-Vedic times.

### 3. *The Hindu Yama*

We have seen how the Yama/Yamī legend has been sanitised in the *Ṛg-veda* in response to the rise of the incest taboo; Yama’s role in the *Vedas* is consequently relatively minor. To find an effective way back into the Indian pantheon Yama has to abandon his Twin identity and adopt a new persona.<sup>26</sup> In the *Brāhmaṇas* he is no longer *yama*—‘twin’ but instead grows in stature and dread with the adoption of the etymology *yam*, ‘restrain, curb, subdue’. This new Yama is

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, 1896, 389–90.

<sup>25</sup> K. Jettmar, *The Religions of the Hindukush*, Vol. I: The Religion of the Kafirs, New Delhi, Bombay & Calcutta, 1986, 133.

<sup>26</sup> It was also impossible for Yamī to maintain any kind of effective religious role in post-Vedic India without transformation. She comes to be identified with the destructive earth goddess, Nirṛti, prior to the Epic-*Purāṇic* age; afterwards, Nirṛti’s functions are distributed amongst various dread goddesses, both Aryan and Dravidian—Kālī (*cf.* Yama’s *persona* as Kāla), Camuṇḍa (Yama’s tantric consort in some later manifestations), Cinnamastā and Mānasa. In the *Purāṇas*, Yamī is identified with the river Yamunā bathing in which is said to prevent rebirth in Yama’s realm. Full details are given in the fourth chapter of Bhattacharji’s monograph (see note 12).

called Death (Mṛtyu) and Ender (Antaka); he is now the god of Death itself, not merely god of the dead. He grows in significance and menace along with the doctrine of transmigration which, in the *Brāhmaṇas*, is invariably seen as an unpleasant succession of deaths:

“Verily there are deaths connected with all the worlds and were he not to offer oblations to them, Death would get hold of him in every world; when he offers oblations to the Deaths he wards off death in every world.”<sup>27</sup>

As Death Yama has knowledge of death and knowledge of the means of escaping its clutches. Occasionally, he can be made to reveal aspects of this knowledge, which he does in ways which belie his dread nature. The most significant Hindu source revealing Yama in this role of guru is the *Katha-upaniṣad* in a tale based on an episode of the *Ṛg-veda* (X.135). The young brahmin Naciketas sent by his father finds his way to Yama who after much persuasion reveals certain secrets:

“I know, Naciketas, that sacred fire which leads to heaven. Listen. That fire which is the means of attaining the infinite worlds, and is also their foundation, is hidden in the sacred place of the heart... and Death [=Yama] told him of the fire of creation, the beginning of the worlds, and of the altar of the fire-sacrifice, of how many bricks it should be built and how they should be placed.”<sup>28</sup>

Performing the fire-sacrifice or burnt offering (*homa*) three times leads the officiant to the heavens where immortality can be enjoyed and death—Yama—can be avoided. Yama then discusses death. His attitude to reincarnation seems favourable (in contrast to the *Brāhmaṇa* attitude):

“The soul may go to the womb of a mother and thus obtain a new body. It even may go into trees or plants, according to its previous wisdom and work. There is a spirit who is awake in our sleep and creates the wonder of dreams. He is Brahman, spirit of light, who in truth is called the Immortal. All the worlds rest on that spirit and beyond him no one can go.”<sup>29</sup>

These dialogues take place in the after-death state and Yama’s frank revelations to the self-sacrificing seeker after the truth are connected with the same righteousness that had made him fit to judge the deceased who follow him into death, the state which he pioneered:

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<sup>27</sup> *Śatapatha-brāhmaṇa* XIII, 5, 1, 2.

<sup>28</sup> *Katha-upaniṣad*, I, 14ff; trs., Mascaró, *The Upanishads*, Harmondsworth, 1965, 56.

<sup>29</sup> *Katha-upaniṣad*, V, 7-8. *ibid.*

“Because he has the eye of *dharma* he is impartial to both the kindly and the harmful. Therefore the dispeller of darkness, his father, the lord, appointed him lord of the south<sup>30</sup> and made him a world protector, the overlord of the ancestors.”<sup>31</sup>

Yama is further elaborated in the epic literature in which he appears with the additional persona of Time (Kāla) alongside Mṛtyu and Antaka, his *Brāhmaṇa* personalities. Bhattacharji describes the relationship between these various forms thus:

“When a man’s action nears final fruition, his span of life is measured accordingly—if his actions demand that his opportunities of life-on-earth are over, then Kāla, Time, comes in. Death as the Ender (Antaka) announces the end and Death as Mṛtyu carries him off to the other world. But who is to guarantee fair play in all this? This is the special province of Yama as Dharmarāja whose code of justice is immutable and infallible.”<sup>32</sup>

In the *Mahābhārata* (XII.92: 38), Yama is subordinate to Śiva by whose appointment he becomes Lord of the Ancestors (Pitṛpati)—in other words Yama loses his automatic right to this position which he had initially earned through blazing a trail to the underworld as the first mortal. He does however gain compensation in other areas. As Bhattacharji observes:

“Yama on his own is a minor god with limited jurisdiction confined to the after-life and consequently he cannot directly control the land of the living. Whereas by being associated with the Śiva-complex<sup>33</sup> he becomes an organic part of a much bigger whole, for, although Yama is frequently called Kāla, it is only as he imbibes the attributes of the Śiva-complex more and more that he becomes the true representative of Time, for Śiva is Mahākāla. And behind this we have the tremendously power-ful philosophical concepts of Karman, rebirth and metempsychosis.”<sup>34</sup>

The path to the underworld of the ancestors through the gateway of death is called the Pitṛyāna; from the epic period onwards this is increasingly seen as contrasting with the Devayāna which involves liberation from existence through

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<sup>30</sup> Along with Indra (E), Kubera (N) and Varuṇa (W).

<sup>31</sup> *Markandeya-purāna*, 105, 18-19; trs., W.D. O’Flaherty, *op. cit.*, 70.

<sup>32</sup> S. Bhattacharji, *op. cit.*, 61.

<sup>33</sup> This relationship to Śiva seems to supersede one with Varuṇa, the god of the waters. Both Yama and Varuṇa are recorded as appearing together before the deceased (*R̥gveda*, X.14.7). The sacrificial animal associated with Varuṇa is the black ram—perhaps there is an astrological aspect to be clarified here. For further details on the Yama-Varuṇa link see A. Parpola, *op. cit.*, 64ff.

<sup>34</sup> S. Bhattacharji, *op. cit.*, 53.

wisdom (*jñāna*). This division into ancestral (lunar) and divine (solar) ‘vehicles’ corresponds to the two sects Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava:

“Devayāna is Viṣṇu’s path, the path of the Pitṛyāna is dark; these are the two paths after death—the one leading upwards, the other below.”<sup>35</sup>

The issue at this stage is whether or not Yama’s new multiple persona can harmonise with the workings of *karma*. The ancestral Yama of the Underworld remains secure but one could argue that Yama as Time, as Ender, as Judge—Yama as *karma* itself—is in fact an emasculated Yama with no function apart from this vague identification with *karmic* processes. But this identification also results in a deification of *karma*—and with the rise of both Vedantic and Buddhist movements, both dominated by *karma* theories, Yama has to remain in place.

#### 4. *The Buddhist Yama*

##### a. *Yama in early Buddhism*

While Yama as judge (Dharmarāja) of the intermediate state plays a not insignificant role in early Buddhism as a component of a common Indian cosmology, it would seem that the workings of *karma* according to any Buddhist interpretation might be in conflict with any judgement given by an external being. Marasinghe summarises the Devaduta-sutta in which the deceased is brought before Yama who questions him as to whether he has seen the appearance of the three messengers of old age, disease and death.<sup>36</sup> A negative answer implies that grave sins have been committed since these are avoided by taking heed of the messengers. Yama then cautions the sinner that only he is responsible for the consequences of his actions since these were committed by himself. Infernal beings then drag the sinner off to various tortures. Marasinghe comments:

“that Yama neither does ‘preside over judgement and punishment’, nor is in charge of the tortures inflicted in the Niraya is quite clear from the above sutta... Yama appears as a sympathetic onlooker who does not interfere in any serious way with the operation of the karmic law. The commentary goes even further in saying that Yama’s questions are intended to explore any possible chance of averting the suffering in Niraya [= the hells]... the vagueness in [Yama’s] position also goes to show the subtlety of his adaptation by Buddhism: he appears to be almost the same, but yet [is] quite different.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, 74, 76. *Mahābhārata*, XII, 315, 30.

<sup>36</sup> G. Marasinghe, *Gods in Early Buddhism*, Kelaniya, 1974, 268; *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, I, 138.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, 269.

Buddhism seems to have avoided expelling Yama from the after-death state despite having an apparent excuse—the theory of *karma*—to do this. This may in part have been connected with a desire to give Yama his due as Lord of the Ancestors and—in so far as early Buddhism concerned itself with the laity—to provide the bereaved with intercessionary opportunities not available in the case of pure *karma* propelling the deceased towards a possibly unfavourable existence (a factor which came to dominate the human relationship to Yama in China). Cults of spirits or gods were in any case confirmed as suitable for humans by Śākyamuni Buddha himself in the *Suttanipāta*:

“Whatever beings have come together, whether earthly or those of the intermediate space, let them be glad. Therefore, all spirits, all of you, take care of mankind and be friendly [to them] who bring you offerings day and night; therefore do protect them assiduously” (222-223).

There could be no reason therefore for the removal of Yama from the Buddhist intermediate state. Piatigorsky comments on the *Suttanipāta* passage thus:

“the worship of spirits is not denied or rejected by Buddha here, but rather neutralised, ousted into the sphere of cult, of natural religion. And by this, the worship of spirits finds its place as a thing naturally appropriate to all sentient beings who have not yet realised the calm state.”<sup>38</sup>

This would be particularly true of a being such as Yama who functions as Lord of the Ancestors since it is ancestral spirits just as much as local spirits or higher gods who were, and still are, chief objects of devotion for most Indians whether Hindu or Buddhist.<sup>39</sup> In this regard the *Vimalaprabha*'s use of the word *preta* ‘ghost, spirit’ (Tib. *yi dwags*) to describe Yama is noteworthy.<sup>40</sup> Yama's position is therefore secure in the earliest stages of Indian Hīnayāna and thereafter in a way in which no other Indian deity's position can be.

While many canonical Buddhist texts, both Theravāda and Mahāyāna, refer to the hells either extensively or in passing, the number of direct references to Yama is fewer. In the Pali Tipiṭaka, apart from the *Devadūta-sutta* of the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* quoted above, there are references in the *Kathāvatthu* (a rare datable text contemporary with the so called Council of Patna of 246BC) where

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<sup>38</sup> A. Piatigorsky, *The Buddhist Philosophy of Thought: Essays in Interpretation*, London & Dublin, 1984, 25.

<sup>39</sup> Reference may be made to the study by D. Shastri, *Origin and Development of the Rituals of Ancestor Worship in India*, Calcutta, 1963, who provides details of all the traditional rites of ancestor worship in India.

<sup>40</sup> *cf.* note 69.

the question of the reality of Yama and the guardians of the hells is raised.<sup>41</sup> There are also references in the late text, the *Petavatthu* of the *Khuddaka-nikāya*,<sup>42</sup> and in the *Mahāsamaya-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya* (II, 259). The third book of the Sanskrit *Abhidharmakośa* of Vasubandhu (c. 316-396) contains several references to Yama,<sup>43</sup> as does the Mahāsāṅghika text, the *Mahāvastu* (properly part of the Jātaka literature) in which Yama is also invoked by the Buddha for the protection of some travelling merchants.<sup>44</sup> References are similarly scant in the non-tantric Mahāyāna literature. The *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* mentions Yama in passing as ruler of the hells;<sup>45</sup> similarly the large *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*<sup>46</sup> and book VII of the *Śūraṅgama-samādhi-sūtra*.<sup>47</sup>

By the time of the formation of the Tibetan *Bar do* (intermediate state) literature (7–8th c.) tantric influence is evident, though a judgement involving Yama is still present. In the Rnying ma (Old School) versions of the *Bar do thos grol* (Liberation through hearing in the intermediate state) Yama appears to the deceased after the appearance of the directional colours (those of the five Tathāgatas (*pañcatathāgata*) to supervise the (*karmic*) judgement. The judgement itself does not fundamentally differ from the earlier Hinayāna accounts, though the appearances of the directional colours of the five Tathāgatas are a tantric addition. After the black and white pebbles representing the bad and good actions of the deceased have been counted out, the deceased may prevaricate or attempt to lie:

“I have not committed any evil deed’. Then the Lord of Death will say, ‘I will consult the mirror of Karma’. So saying he will look into the mirror wherein every good and evil act is vividly reflected. Lying will be of no avail. Then the Lord of Death will place round thy neck a rope and drag thee along; he will cut off thy head, extract thy heart, pull out thy intestines, lick up thy brain, drink thy blood, eat thy flesh and gnaw thy

<sup>41</sup> XX, 3; Aung and Rhys Davids, trs., *Points of Controversy or Subjects of Discourse, Being a Translation of the Kathāvatthu from the Abhidhamma-Piṭaka*, London, 1915, 345–6.

<sup>42</sup> 11, 9; Gehman, tr., *The Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon, Pt. IV: Vimāna-vatthu: Stories of the Mansions; Peta-vatthu: Stories of the Departed*. London, 1942, 163.

<sup>43</sup> L. de La Vallée Poussin, *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*, II, (Eng. tr.), Berkeley, 1988, 458, 460.

<sup>44</sup> J.J. Jones, *The Mahāvastu*, Vol. 3, London, 1956, 81.

<sup>45</sup> H. Kern, *The Saddharma-puṇḍarīka, or the Lotus of the True Law*, SBE, XXI, Oxford, 1884, 233, 248, 402, 415.

<sup>46</sup> II, 11, 2; E. Conze, tr., *The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom*, Berkeley, 1975, 289.

<sup>47</sup> C. Luk, tr., *The Śūraṅgama Sūtra*, London, 1964, 184.

bones; but thou will be incapable of dying. Although thy body be hacked to pieces, it will revive again.”<sup>48</sup>

This text does not hesitate to make a Buddhist addition, following the lead of the *Kathāvatthu*:

“In reality thy body is of the nature of voidness... the Lords of Death are thy own hallucinations.”<sup>49</sup>

But with this new role as *karmic* supervisor—hallucination or otherwise—in the intermediate state Yama has doubled his functions. He still remains ruler of the hells (*niraya*), one of the six major divisions of the Wheel of Transmigration; but he also appears whenever any being transmigrates from one life to the next regardless of which of the six divisions is the source or destination for that being. These two roles are occasionally merged.

Yama does have another, exclusively Buddhist, manifestation: Māra, the enemy of Buddha.<sup>50</sup> Buddhism in its earlier forms as a means for preventing rebirth through wisdom is a type of *devayāna* (divine vehicle) opposed to that which encourages continued transmigration. Encouragement for continued existence is provided by practices of the *pitṛyāna* (ancestral vehicle) type—practices which are sacrificial, which express gratitude for life, which generate more *karma* and rebirth, and which fuel *saṃsāra*. The personification of all such saṃsāric, or more emphatically, anti-*nirvāṇic* temptations is Māra (= Mṛtyu = Death = Yama). In the *Samyutta-nikāya*, Māra in the guise of a deity comes to the Buddha and says:

“He who hates austerity and does not like to stay alone, who is addicted to beautiful forms and wishes to go to the heavenly realms, is competent to give advice regarding the attainment of the next world.”<sup>51</sup>

Māra is shown repeatedly to have confidence in his own position as a promoter of the *pitṛyāna* (to use the Hindu terminology for a moment). The Buddha’s primary adversary is thus not Ignorance nor Desire nor Aversion as

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<sup>48</sup> *Zab chos zhi khro dgongs pa rang grol las bar do'i thos grol chen mo chos nyid bar do'i ngo sprod*, II; trs., W.Y. Evans-Wentz, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Oxford, 1927, 166.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, 166–7.

<sup>50</sup> This extensive and complex topic can only be touched on here. For further information and references, the standard account of Windisch (*Māra und Buddha*, Leipzig, 1895) and Law’s essay (“The Buddhist Conception of Māra”, *Buddhistic Studies*, Calcutta & Simla, 1931, 257–283.) may be referred to. Though it is true that the Māra-Yama association is purely Buddhist, Hindu sources suggest Yama’s association with Kāma (‘Love’), who is identified with Māra (S. Bhattacharji, *op. cit.*, 107). Āśvaghōṣa calls Māra Kāmadeva ‘God of Love’ in the *Buddhacarita* (XIII, 2); trs. & ed. by E.B. Cowell, *Buddhist Mahāyāna Texts*, SBE, XLIX, Oxford, 1894.

<sup>51</sup> Rhys Davids, tr., *The Book of the Kindred Sayings*, PTS, 1917, I, 67.

one might expect. Death fulfils this role—but Life, as the other side of the coin, would be just as good a name for a being encouraging transmigration and discouraging *nirvāṇa*. Life would be a much harder name to demonise, however. So it would seem that Buddhism possesses two Yamas with the first in two sub-forms: 1a. The *karmic* judge Dharmarāja (from a Buddhist point of view a ‘neutral’ being since there is just *karma*); 1b. Yama, the Ruler of the Hells; and 2. the pro-*samsāra* Māra (considered negative and anti-*dharma*).

*b. Yen-lo*

From the beginning, Buddhism took for granted many aspects of a common Indian heritage. A basically tripartite Indian cosmology was one of the most significant of these features. Buddhism without lower realms or hell realms is simply inconceivable since much of its moral teaching—not to mention its central *karmic* philosophy—would collapse without the provision of the ‘natural justice’ of *karmically* dispensed punishment. Such conceptions were however alien to peoples such as the Chinese who possessed cosmologies which excluded hell-type realms and to whom the concept of transmigration was unknown. In Chinese thought, the two components which remained after death started independent existences in differing realms. The ‘heavy’ part of the ‘soul’ (*p’o*) which initially stayed close to the corpse, eventually sank down to the underworld while the ‘light’ component (*hun*) could be induced to stay by a wooden tablet inscribed with the name of the deceased to partake of offerings left by descendants. The *hun* of a person of exceptional virtue would ascend to Heaven from where it would periodically visit the tablet.<sup>52</sup> All ancestors were able to help the living if properly tended; if ignored, they became pitiable and possibly vengeful ghosts. Descriptions of the various levels of the Buddhist cosmos including the hells were of particular interest to those concerned with the implications for their ancestors. The possibility that they might suffer terribly in a hell realm or in the realm of the *pretas* on account of their own misdeeds rather than merely being guaranteed well-being through filial offerings was disturbing enough to ensure that the possibility of Buddhism being right also had to be covered.

The Chinese texts that directed early conceptions of this novel Indian cosmology are in the main apocryphal (at least in the sense that their Sanskrit originals are not known). Significant material on Yama can be found in book VIII of the *Sutra of the Past Vows of Kṣitigarbha* (apparently not preserved in Sanskrit) where Yama appears before the Buddha with many other powerful hell-beings and spirits. Yama asks the Buddha why, given the power of

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<sup>52</sup> H. Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism 1900–1950*, Cambridge, Mss., 1967, 182.



Kṣitigarbha to save the damned, so few worshipped the Bodhisattva.<sup>53</sup> The Buddha gives human stubbornness as the reason. Yama and the assembled hosts of hell then pledge to protect all Buddhist worshippers from misfortune in this life and bad rebirths in the next. Pleased, the Buddha replies by placing Yama under the protection of Hindu gods:

“It is excellent, excellent, that all you ghost kings and Yama are able to protect good men and women in this way. I shall tell Brāhma and Sakra to cause you to be protected as well.”<sup>54</sup>

Also amongst these apocrypha is the 5th century *Consecration Sutra* which contains, amongst other material, an early version of the Mu-lien (Sk. Maudgalyāyana) legend.<sup>55</sup> Maudgalyāyana, one of Śākyamuni’s disciples, is given permission by the Buddha to visit his deceased mother in the next world. He visits each realm in turn, first meeting Yama who is regretfully unable to release his mother from the hells due to the large number of sins she had committed. Eventually, Maudgalyāyana, with Avalokiteśvara’s help, manages to liberate his mother from the hells and she is reborn in the ghost (*preta*) realm. A sequence of such visits takes place until the mother is born as the daughter of a wealthy man whom the Buddha himself instructs in the Dharma. The Buddha concludes by predicting the daughter’s ultimate enlightenment and thereby her liberation from cyclic existence.<sup>56</sup>

The Maudgalyāyana legend and related descriptions of the transmigratory cycle introduced Yama to a Chinese audience in the early Buddhist *karmic* judge/ruler of the hells form.<sup>57</sup> A further development was the subdivision of the single judgement into a sequence of ten judgements taking place in ten different

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<sup>53</sup> H. Ching, *Sutra of the Past Vows of the Earth Store Bodhisattva*, New York, 1974, 180.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, 183.

<sup>55</sup> The *Consecration Sutra* is evaluated by Strickmann (“The *Consecration Sutra*: A Buddhist Book of Spells”, in R.E. Buswell, ed., *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*, Honolulu, 1990, 75–118.) in the context of a set of studies by different authors on the Chinese apocryphal tradition. One can assume that other Chinese material touching upon Buddhist cosmology and Yama’s place in the process of reincarnation will be uncovered as these apocrypha become better known to the Western academic world.

<sup>56</sup> Summarized on the basis of the Mongolian translation edited by L. Lőrincz, *Molon Toyin’s Journey into the [sic] Hell*, Altan Gerel’s Translation, Budapest, 1982.

<sup>57</sup> There is some confusion between these two separate functions of Yama. The description of Chinese folk cults given by C.B. Day, *Chinese Peasant Cults, Being a Study of Chinese Paper Gods*, Taipei, 1974, 117ff. suggests that the deceased initially travels to Yama’s realm and thence passes through the various cosmological levels above this before incarnation in Heaven.

courts of the world of the dead.<sup>58</sup> Each such court has its own king<sup>59</sup> and each king judges the deceased in turn with the judgements of the first seven kings occurring at seven-day intervals (= the standard 49 days of the intermediate state). The eighth king judges on the hundredth day, the ninth after one year, and the tenth three years after death (corresponding to the standard memorial days for the deceased). Of these ten kings Yen-lo (Yama; Jap. Enma), though of primary importance, is only the fifth. It is said that he used to be king of the first court but was demoted (by the Taoist Supreme Ruler of Heaven, Yu Huang Shang Ti) on account of his lenience.<sup>60</sup> Yen lo is also dominated by the Bodhisattva Ti tsang (Kṣitigarbha; Jap. Jizō) who descends to hell to rescue the damned:

“With his magic wand he opens the portals of this dismal land and rescues tortured souls from the grasp of Yama (Yen-lo wang)... on [Ti tsang’s] birthday which falls on the 30th of the seventh month, all the judges of the Ten Courts of Hades come and offer him their congratulations. On this occasion, he grants special favours to the damned.”<sup>61</sup>

In the later Japanese assimilative *honji suijaku* (true nature-trace manifestation) theorizing each of the Ten Kings is associated with a Buddha or Bodhisattva whose manifestation each one is. According to this scheme Yama is a manifestation of Kṣitigarbha.<sup>62</sup> In Japan the Ten Kings were further discussed and promoted by popularizing teachers such as Nichiren (1222–1282), founder of the eponymous Lotus Sutra based sect which became numerically the most significant Japanese Buddhist school. A later Muromachi-period (15th–16thc) development saw the number of Kings increase to thirteen, possibly in response to the thirteen sections of the tantric Taizōkai (Sk. Garbhadhātu) *maṇḍala*.<sup>63</sup>

### c. Yama in Indo-Tibetan Vajrayāna

A brief text from the Tibetan Kanjur with the appended Tibetan title *Gtam rgyud*<sup>64</sup> provides a description of Yama’s entry into the Buddhist fold. According to this text, Vajrabhairava (a variant of the deity Yamāntaka, ‘Ender of

<sup>58</sup> A. Matsunaga, *The Buddhist Philosophy of Assimilation*, Tokyo, 1969, 37–38.

<sup>59</sup> The full list is given in Matsunaga (*ibid.*, 37–8). Taiser has contributed an as yet unpublished study and translation of a primary Japanese apocryphal source for the Ten Kings.

<sup>60</sup> C.B. Day, *op. cit.*, 121.

<sup>61</sup> Fr. H. Doré, *Researches into Chinese Superstitions*, Vol. VII, Shanghai, 1911–34, VII, 252.

<sup>62</sup> Matsunaga (*op. cit.*, 1969, 234) gives the full list of Kings with their corresponding Buddhas or Bodhisattvas.

<sup>63</sup> S.F. Taiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese Buddhism*, Honolulu, forthcoming, 75.

<sup>64</sup> The Myth, Peking edition, no. 108.

Yama') went to the city of Yama across the Southern Ocean and subdued the deities there:

“With his unendurable sixteen feet he trod on the sixteen gateless iron dwellings. With his single-pointed organ of wisdom he crushed the central great iron dwelling... the eight classes of gods offered their life-essences to him—Yama offered YA, the divine mothers MA, the ghouls offered RA, the spirits KṢE, the humans offered NR, the lords of the earth SA, the demons offered CCHA and the Maras offered DA.”<sup>65</sup>

It is only from this moment onwards that Yama becomes a suitable object for Buddhist tantric worship.<sup>66</sup> His conversion enables him to take his place amongst the great protective divinities of Tantric Buddhism. He is found as one of the eight wrathful protectors of religion (Tib. *drag gshed brgyad*) along with (amongst others) Yamāntaka, the generalized title of the Mañjuśrī emanation which converted him. In the Gsar ma (New) tradition of Lamaism, the three forms of the converted Yama called Dharmarāja (Tib. Chos rje) are known as the Outer, Inner and Secret Forms.<sup>67</sup>

The Outer Form (Tib. *phyi sgrub*) is blue, naked, ithyphallic and buffalo-headed. He stands on a buffalo which is crushing—or, in certain representations, copulating with—a corpse. His right hand wields a club topped with a skull (Tib. *thod dbyug*) and his left, a noose. To his left, his twin sister Yamī offers him a blood-filled skull-cup with her left hand while holding a trident in her right.

The Inner Form (Tib. *nang sgrub*) is blue, *rākṣasa* (ghoul)—headed and wears a tiger skin. He holds a chopper and a skull-cup and tramples on a corpse.

The Secret Form (Tib. *gsang sgrub*) is red, buffalo-headed, naked, ithyphallic and tramples on a buffalo. He holds a jewel (a chopper, Sk. *kartari*, Tib. *gri gug*), in some illustrations), in his right hand and a skull-cup in his left.

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<sup>65</sup> *Gtam rgyud*, 158v of the Peking version.

<sup>66</sup> This converted Yama is called Dharmarāja (with Dharma interpreted as the Buddhist doctrine rather than as ‘righteousness’). Such acceptance of subordination by Yama is mentioned in several other *tantras*, eg. the *Sarvadurgatīpariśodhana*, (ed. & tr., T. Skorupski, Delhi, 1983, 52) where Yama bestows longevity on and obstructs untimely death for the initiate. It would seem that when the name Yama (Tib. Gshin rje) appears in Buddhist texts, it indicates that the deity is playing an earlier pre-Buddhist role. This is borne out by Yama’s appearance in a list of divine mounts in the *Hevajra-tantra* (II, v) alongside Brahmā, Indra, Viṣṇu, Śiva, Kubera, Nairṛti and Vemacitrin (D.L. Snellgrove, *The Hevajra Tantra: A Critical Study*, I–II, London, 1959, 112).

<sup>67</sup> See the detailed descriptions in R. Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Oracles and Demons of Tibet*, Graz, 1975, 82ff.

These three forms<sup>68</sup> may seem to be the elaborations of later Tantric exegesis, but they are intended to be understood in terms of various aspects and consequences of death itself. Jaya Paṇḍita quotes the *Vimalaprabha* as saying that the three Yamas are:

“the *preta* dwelling in the place, the lord of death which is in the body, the defilements (*kleṣa*) which are in the mind.”<sup>69</sup>

Thus the Outer Form is the Dharmarāja who resides across the Southern Ocean. The Inner Form is personal mortality, the path which Yama was the first to follow. The Secret Form is mental defilement, those obscurations (desire, aversion and ignorance) which produce the sufferings of birth, old age, sickness and death (as opposed to the Inner Form, which is itself death and consequent birth, sickness and old age).

As protective deities of Lamaism, the three Dharmarājas are ritually invoked and worshipped mostly without a yogic union taking place between the practitioner and the deity. The offerings made to Yama are similar to those made to other protectors,<sup>70</sup> though with some small differences. These offerings are sometimes illustrated separately in Lamaist paintings of the type known as ‘collection of ornaments’ (Tib. *rgyan tshogs*) or ‘materials for the banquet’ (Tib. *bskang rdzas*). One such example from the Yung-ho-kung is described by Lessing as showing these offerings for Yama:

1. Offerings (Tib. *mchod rdzas*). These are the usual ‘eight offerings’ (minus one) in their tantric form offered in skull-cups: i. blood (= water for the face); ii. human organs, eyes *etc.* planted in a brain (= flowers); iii. smoke of burnt flesh (= incense); iv. lamp fed by human fat (= lamp); v. clotted blood and bile (= perfumed water) vi. human flesh (= food); and vii. the music of trumpets and drums made from human bone and skin. The missing item is urine (= water for the feet).<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> According to Klong rdol bla ma, the Outer and Inner forms have retinues composed of yet more forms. The Outer form has a retinue of eight Yamas and eight Yamis (Tib. *gshin rje pho brgyad mo brgyad*) or alternatively a retinue of twelve *ma mo* (this alternative is given by Tucci, *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, I–III. Rome, 1949, II, 582). The Inner form has a retinue of four Yamas, one each for the activities of calming, increasing, controlling and for fierce activities (R. Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *op. cit.*, 1975, 82–3). In addition, there are other forms of Yama found in the Rnying ma literature, for which see Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *op. cit.*, 83ff.

<sup>69</sup> *Thob yig*, I, 272a ff. The relevant material from Jaya Paṇḍita’s *Thob yig* has been presented and translated by A. Wayman in his extensive article on “Yama and Māra; Studies in Yama and Māra”, 44–73, 112–31.

<sup>70</sup> R. Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *op. cit.*, 398–408.

<sup>71</sup> Lessing relates a popular tale according to which the ‘water for the feet’ was withdrawn from Yama by the founder of the Dge lugs pa school Tsong kha pa (1357–1419) as a punishment for the deity’s lateness in completing an errand (F.D. Lessing, *Yung-ho-kung: An Iconography of the Lamaist Cathedral in Peking*, Stockholm, 1942, 105). The reason for the omission is probably far earlier—Yama, according to the *Mārkaṇḍeya-purāṇa* (103, 1, 3–40), was cursed by the shadow of his mother for raising his foot against the shadow. The sun Vivasvat, Yama’s father, was unable to undo the curse (“there is nothing anywhere that can dispel the curse on those who have been cursed by a mother”) and Yama’s foot was devoured by worms (W.D. O’Flaherty, *op. cit.*, 65–7); consequently, no offering of water for the feet (= urine) is made.

2. Special dough offerings (*bali*; Tib. *gtor ma*) in a human skull surmounted by an arrow with a black veil with various ornaments.
3. The Inner offering. This is a boiling skull-cup containing the five types of flesh (those of the five domestic animals: cow, dog, horse, elephant and human) and the five nectars (blood, urine, excrement, marrow and semen).
4. Various animals as offerings to gratify the sight of a god.
5. Various goddesses making oblations.
6. The symbolic cosmos.<sup>72</sup>

*d. Yamāntaka*

The presentation of offerings befitting a great protective divinity does not in itself ‘activate’ Yama to perform any specific tasks assigned by a devotee. Yama can be generally propitiated by these offerings—but he may be commanded to perform desired tasks by the superior deity, Yamāntaka (‘Ender of Yama’),<sup>73</sup> in one of his several forms (in a Gsar ma context, Kṛṣṇayamāri, Raktayamāri and Vajrabhairava) since it is Yamāntaka who binds Yama by oath to protect Buddhism. Since Yamāntaka/Vajrabhairava is a *yoga-tantra* deity (belonging to the Gsar ma category of the *anuttara-yoga-tantra*), the devotee is able to command Yama when correctly united with Yamāntaka. This adds an immediate active aspect to Yama which cannot be seen outside Tantrism:

“If the devotee wants to drive someone away he should make a camel out of earth from the seven places and should then imagine on its back a wind-mandala in the shape of a half-moon transformed from the syllable YAM. Above this he imagines the victim and on [the victim’s] back he imagines the form of Yama holding a staff in his hand. [The devotee] thinks that the victim is beaten with that staff and is led off towards the south.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> F.D. Lessing, *op. cit.*, 100–1.

<sup>73</sup> The name Yamāntaka is perhaps better translated as ‘Ender of Yama’ rather than ‘Slayer of Yama’ since, as the *Gtam rgyud* tells us, Yama merely becomes a protector of Buddhism (Dharmarāja) through Vajrabhairava’s appearance and is not killed in the process. In Tibetan we find both Gshin rje gshed (Slayer of Yama) and Gshin rje mthar byed (Ender of Yama). The two Yamāri forms (Red and Black) are both ‘Enemies of Yama’.

<sup>74</sup> *Vajramahābhairava-tantra*; Peking edition, 137r.

The cycle of Vajrabhairava, clearly a tantric Buddhist equivalent of Śiva-as-Bhairava, has always played a major part in the religious life of the various Gsar ma ('New') schools of Tibetan Buddhism though other schools prefer to evoke Yamāntaka in different forms. Amongst the Dragon Bka' brgyud and the Rnying ma pas, Yamāntaka appears as the Black Poison-faced One (Dug gdong nag po), also called Quicksilver (Khro chu), while the Kar ma bka' brgyud cultivate Yamāntaka in a form known as the Black Master of Life, Tshe bdag nag po.<sup>75</sup> Amongst those schools which relied on canonical works sanctioned by the primary compiler of the Kanjur Bu ston (1290–1364) and who therefore cultivated the *tantras* of Vajrabhairava, the two Yamāris and the Yamāntakas of the *Khrodavijāyakalpāgūhya-tantra*, the Sa skya school was particularly noted for its mastery of Vajrabhairava's cycle (with notable works by 'Phags pa, Ngor chen kun dga' bzang po, Go ram bsod nams seng ge and others).

It is, however, amongst the Dge lugs pa that the cycle was most prominent. Vajrabhairava counts as one of the three central Highest Yoga Tantra cycles preferentially cultivated by Dge lugs pa yogins; the Tibetan phrase *gsang bde 'jigs gsum* is used to refer collectively to the three deities in question, ie. *Guhyasamāja* (*Gsang bsodus*), *Samāvāra* (*Bde mchog*) and of course *Vajrabhairava* (*Rdo rje 'jigs byed*). It is said that the cultivation of these three tantric cycles amongst the Dge lugs pa derives from the originator of the school Tsong kha pa (1357–1419) who performed the full evocations (Sk. *sādhana*; Tib. *sgrub thabs*) of these three deities as part of his daily practice, and who also performed an extensive retreat on the Vajrabhairava practice in his 55th year.<sup>76</sup> The Dge lugs pa also considered Vajrabhairava to be the special protector of the *anuttara-yoga-tantra* while Yama as Dharmarāja was pressed into service as the special (Tib. *thun mong ma yin pa*) protector of the Dge lugs pa themselves.<sup>77</sup> Numerous lamas and yogins of this school, including several of the Dalai Lamas, wrote commentarial and ritual works on Vajrabhairava and the related forms of Yamāntaka. The Yamāntaka cycle was equally important to the monks and yogins of Mongolia. It seems that the few members of the Dge lugs pa pantheons with animal connections were particularly popular in Mongolia, with only the deity Hayagrīva (Tib. *Rta mgrin*; 'Horse-necked') approaching the buffalo-headed Vajrabhairava in popularity. Perhaps more so than in Tibet, we find the practices of Yamāntaka widespread amongst the wider populace to whom these were dispensed by proselytizing monks or local princes without the full set of initiations required, much to the dismay of the Dge lugs pa establishment:

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<sup>75</sup> S. Beyer, *The Cult of Tārā, Magic and Ritual in Tibet*, Berkeley & London, 1978, 42–4.

<sup>76</sup> R.F. Thurman, *The Life and Teachings of Tsongkhapa*, Dharmasala, 1982, 28.

<sup>77</sup> F.D. Lessing, *op. cit.*, 76.

“In order to begin the spread of the Buddha’s doctrine with benevolent intention, the Tüsiyetü Khan of the Khorcin [Mongols] let it be publicly known: ‘I will give a horse to whoever learns by heart the summary of the Doctrine, and a cow to whoever can recite the Yamāntaka dhāraṇī by heart!’ Thereupon from the moment that they heard this announcement, all the poor and have-nots learnt the prayers according to their intellectual capacity. And since the Khan, as he had announced, gave horses and cows to those who had already learnt the prayers from other people, there were many believers...”<sup>78</sup>

Amongst the Mongols one therefore finds Yamāntaka invoked in spells for various worldly purposes—for example for adjusting one’s gun and making it shoot straight (*qv.* the Mongolian texts entitled *buu-yin tarni* (gun-*dhāraṇī*) and *buu-yin sang* (gun incense offering)).<sup>79</sup>

Yama’s first appearance in Mongolia predates that of Yamāntaka since Yama’s Mongolian name Erlik seems to be an early loan from Uighur. *The Ten Kings Sūtra* exists in early Uighur versions translated from Chinese, (in the 11–13th century) according to von Gabain,<sup>80</sup> but though the borrowing may have taken place in a Buddhist context, the time separating pre 13th c. Mongolia from the heavily Buddhicized 17th c. Dge lugs pa environment enabled Yama as Erlik to find his way into the shamanic pantheon as well<sup>81</sup> thereby adding meaning to the Yamāntaka cycle in Mongolia.

Yamāntaka/Vajrabhairava was also one of the most prominent deities evoked by the Manchu-supported Dge lugs pa community in Peking and associated Lamaist centres in China and Manchuria. The deity had a close relationship with the Manchu imperial family on the basis that the phonetic similarity between the words Mañjuśrī (the Bodhisattva of wisdom whose manifestation Yamāntaka/Vajrabhairava is considered to be) and Manchu (the wisest nation in the Empire) was no accident. Mañjuśrī came to be considered the special patron of the Manchus (just as Vajrapāṇi and Avalokiteśvara protected Mongols and Tibetans respectively, power and compassion being the characteristics which these nations saw in themselves). It is immediately understandable why Vajrabhairava as the wrathful form of Mañjuśrī should have been pressed into Imperial service. The sixth hall of the great Yung-ho-kung (Palace of Harmony) in Peking was devoted entirely to the evocation of Vajrabhairava and the other

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<sup>78</sup> W. Heissig, *The Religions of Mongolia*, London & Henley, 1980, 3–7; from a biography of the Mongol monk, Neici Toin, 1557–1653.

<sup>79</sup> Rinchen, *Les matériaux pour l’étude du chamanisme mongol I. Sources littéraires*, Wiesbaden, 1959, 38–40.

<sup>80</sup> A. von Gabain, “The Purgatory of the Buddhist Uighurs”, *Colloquies on Art and Archaeology in Asia*, 2, ed., W. Watson, London, 1972, 25.

<sup>81</sup> W. Heissig, *op. cit.*, 54; Rinchen, *op. cit.*, 26.

forms of Yamāntaka as was an entire temple in Peking (Yamāntaka-yin sūme). During Manchu times, the city of Peking itself was topographically identified with Vajrabhairava and his *maṇḍala* as a means of protection (with a famous statue in Pei-hai representing the deity himself), and the Forbidden City, the Imperial City and the Outer City three concentric *maṇḍalas*.<sup>82</sup>

It remains to be explained why this particular relationship between Yama and Yamāntaka should have achieved such prominence in Tantric Buddhism. Other Indian deities, Brahmā for example, also have a place within Tantrism as protectors, but the status of their converters (if any) was never equal to that of Yamāntaka who remains one of the three primary *anuttara-yoga* deities cultivated by the Dge lugs pa. Yet Yamāntaka cannot be independent of Yama—the name and iconographic similarity are enough to prove this—and it is interesting in the light of Yama’s long history to find the largest school of Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhism preferentially evoking a deity whose defining function is dominance over Yama—and thereby dominance over transmigration, over *karma* and indeed over Māra.

A clue to understanding the conditions in which the Yamāntaka cycle rose to prominence is provided by observing that the place of origin of the Yamāntaka *tantras* is given as U rgyan in the colophon of the *Vajramahābhairava-tantra* (147v of the version in the Peking Kanjur) and in the history of Jo-nang Tāranātha (b. 1575).<sup>83</sup> U rgyan is the Tibetan equivalent of the Sanskrit toponym Oḍḍiyāna which is usually identified with the Swat region of northern Pakistan.<sup>84</sup> This area is precisely that inhabited to this day by the Kafirs who stubbornly maintain the worship of Yama as supreme deity. K. Jettmar made a case for the opposition between Buddhists in the larger valleys and the Kafirs in the mountains encouraging the promotion of the Kafir Imra to supreme status.<sup>85</sup> Consideration of the Yamāntaka *tantras* might suggest that the Kafir Imra represents the earlier Indo-European ‘primary deity/creator’ phase rather than a later demoted phase since the Tantric Buddhists of 8th c. Swat would hardly

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<sup>82</sup> F.D. Lessing, “The Topographical Identification of Peking with Yamāntaka”, *CAJ*, 2, 140; also in his *Ritual and Symbol: Collected Essays on Lamaism and Chinese Symbolism*, Taipei, 1976.

<sup>83</sup> D. Chattopadhyaya, ed. & tr., *Tāranātha’s History of Buddhism in India*, Calcutta, 1980, 243.

<sup>84</sup> Lokesh Chandra has argued for a South Indian location for Oḍḍiyāna (“Oḍḍiyāna: A New Interpretation”, in M. Aris & A.S. Suu Kyi, eds., *Tibetan Studies in Honour of Hugh Richardson*, Warminster, 1980, 73–8) but the Swat interpretation is more likely. The faunal references (to camels and wild asses, for example) in the *Vajramahābhairava-tantra* certainly suggest Swat rather than South India as the point of origin.

<sup>85</sup> K. Jettmar, *The Religions of the Hindukush*, Vol. I, the Religion of the Kafirs, New Delhi, Bombay & Calcutta, 1986, 52–3.



have bothered to promote a Slayer of Yama unless that Yama had been supreme amongst their opponents. They were engaged in the promotion of the same type of Śaivaite domination over Yama that had taken place in Hindu contexts. And since the devotees of the Slayer of Yama were engaged in yogic practice, they ended up being individually dominant over Yama (and all his manifestations—Death, Karma, Māra and so on) who could be made to perform desired tasks on account of his subjection to Yamāntaka. One can hardly imagine a stronger inducement to Yamāntaka practice than this.