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Initiation and the Chinese *Hevajra-tantra* (T. 18, 892)¹

Charles Willemen

International Buddhist College, Thailand

ETYMOLOGICALLY “SUTRA” MEANS the weft of a cloth, and “tantra” is its warp. Both are needed. Sutras are the ideological guides, and tantras give the actual practices, the rituals. The most important ritual is initiation, *abhiṣeka*. Initiation is essential in esotericism. As is well known, ever since Bu-ston (1290–1364 CE) one commonly distinguishes four kinds of tantras: (1) *Kriyā* (action) tantras deal with external practices, for example, snakebites, the making of rain, curing eye-diseases, and so on. (2) *Caryā* (practice) tantras show an equilibrium of external practice and inner yoga. Buddhahood may be obtained after a long period of accumulating moral and intellectual merits. Such texts include, for example, the *Vairocanābhisambodhi-sūtra*, written either in the early seventh century in Central India in Nālandā² or in Lāṭā on the Kathiawar Peninsula,³ or, according to Wayman, in the mid-sixth century in Mahārāṣṭra.⁴ (3) Yoga tantra, in which *upāya*, means (practice), is joined with wisdom, *prajñā*. Vairocana’s three ways of acting are united with the individual’s three ways of acting, within one’s lifetime. An example of yoga tantra is the *Tattvasaṃgraha-tantra* (Compendium of Truth), dating from the end of the seventh century in southern India but completed at the end of the eighth century. One finds this stage in a text by Vajrabodhi (Jingangzhi, 金剛智; 671–741 CE) of 723 CE, T. 18, 866, and in a text by his ambitious disciple, Amoghavajra (Bukong, 不空; 705–774 CE), ca. 754 CE, T. 18, 865. Dānapāla translated the complete text in 1015 CE in the Translation Bureau of the Northern Song (960–1127 CE), T. 188, 882. (4) *Anuttarayoga* (unsurpassed yoga) tantras. An example is the *Guhyasamāja* from the early eighth century (translated by Dānapāla in 1002 CE, T. 18, 885), and also the *Hevajra-tantra* from the end of the eighth century (translated by Dharmapāla in 1054–1055 CE).

During the final decades of the tenth century and the first half of the eleventh century, texts were translated in the Song Translation

Bureau in Bianliang 汴梁 (Kaifeng, 開封), established in 982 CE. At the end of the tenth century many Indian monks arrived in China. Why? One important reason may have been the uncertain times after the fall of the Pāla dynasty in Bihar and Bengal. Most translated texts in China belonged to esoteric Buddhism. In 1071 CE the printing activities in the capital Bianliang were brought to the Xiansheng 顯聖 Temple there. The Japanese monk Chōnen 裔然 was in Bianliang in 984 CE, and he sent the new texts to Japan. The Japanese Tendai monk Jōjin 成尋 did likewise in 1073 CE. But it is not clear what happened to these texts. Did they arrive? Anyway, their influence on existing Shingon 真言 and Tendai 天台, which were already well organized at the time, was very limited. In China itself the new texts did not have a significant impact. Chinese esotericism, esoteric yoga, was established in the eighth century, the most influential figure being Amoghavajra. He was the teacher of Kūkai's (空海, 774–835 CE) teacher, Huiguo 慧果, in the Qinglong 青龍 Temple in Chang'an 長安. The situation in China had its own characteristics that differed from the Indian situation. Weinstein has established that even in the thirteenth century esotericism was called *yuqie* (yoga) *mizong* (瑜伽密宗, esoteric lineage).⁵ He found his information in two Tendai chronicles: *Shimen zhengtong* (釋門正統, Jpn. *Shakumon shōtō*), written during the Jiaxi 嘉熙 era (1237–1240 CE) of the Southern Song by Zongjian (宗鑑, Jpn. *Shūkan*); and *Fozu tongji* (佛祖統記, Jpn. *Busso tōki*) of 1269 CE (T. 49, 2035), i.e., *Xianchun* 咸淳 5, by Zhipan (志磐, Jpn. *Shiban*). Here the names of Vajrabodhi, Amoghavajra, and Huilang 慧朗, one of the six main disciples of Amoghavajra, are mentioned, but not Śubhākara, Shan Wuwei 善無畏. These mentioned Chinese scholars are representative of yoga tantra. So, esotericism in China was seen as a yogic tradition, requiring initiation by a guru. Also Amoghavajra's *Jingangding jing yuqie shiba hui zhigui* (金剛頂經瑜伽十八會指歸; T. 18, 869), outlining eighteen yoga gatherings (fifteenth is the *Guhyasamāja*), mentions (*anuttara*) yoga texts. It is only Japan's Kūkai who changed the emphasis to mantra, *shingon*. Was he partially influenced by Huiguo and Amoghavajra?

In Tibet the *Hevajra-tantra* was translated by 'Brog-mi in the mid-eleventh century. He taught it to the founder of the Sa-skya Monastery (1073 CE). So, the Chinese and Tibetan versions are very close in time. 'Phags-pa (1235–1280 CE), a most important figure in this lineage, was Qubilai's preceptor. The text was quite influential in Yuan 元 China (1279–1368 CE).

It has often been said and written that the Chinese versions of the tantras are quite different from the Indian and the Tibetan versions. This, however, does not mean that a Chinese version is faulty. I am convinced that the Chinese had to render the original Indian text while adapting it to the Chinese environment, but in such a way that the message was understandable and correct for the initiated. The Chinese text mentions four initiations, but never explains them one by one. One might even have the impression that just the first initiation is known.

The first initiation is called *ācāryābhiṣeka*, master initiation, usually explained as an initiation to become an *ācārya*, master.⁶ It now consists of five plus one parts, i.e., water, crown, *vajra*, bell, and name, all accompanied by sprinkling rites. This first initiation is also known as the jar (*kalaśa*) initiation, because all parts include the use of a jar or jars. It is said that *kriyā* texts only had water and crown, that *caryā* texts had all five, and that *yoga* and *anuttarayoga* texts had five plus one; the *ācārya* initiation gave its name to the complete set. The contents of these parts may have known an evolution too, but in the sixth part eight girls are made to enter the mandala. The Chinese *Hevajra-tantra* calls them *vidyā* (esoteric knowledge), *prajñā* (wisdom) or *yoginī* (ascetic), *vidyārājñī* (knowledge queen), and *mudrā* (seal). The Chinese text briefly explains the set of five (plus one) in chapter four, and also in chapter fifteen. In chapter fifteen the eight girls are called: wife, sister, daughter, niece, maternal uncle's wife, and maternal aunt. The last two are phonetically rendered as four, although the Indian text has mother-in-law and paternal aunt as seven and eight. In this chapter the author refers to the *Tattvasaṃgraha-tantra* for a complete explanation of the mandala ritual. The second initiation is called secret, *guhya*. Here the *ācārya* as adamant being, *vajrasattva*, unites with a girl in menstruation. The essence of this great bliss, a drop of *bodhicitta*, thought of enlightenment, consisting of *śukra*, semen, i.e., *upāya*, and of *rakta*, blood, i.e., *prajñā*, is given to the disciple with thumb and fourth finger. The disciple may now look at the *mudrā*, the *yoginī*. It may be expected that the preliminary practices are faithfully explained or, at least, clearly mentioned. The choice of a site, its protection, the triple refuge, the four immeasurables or pure abodes, the fourfold *vajra*, all these are mentioned in the Chinese text in chapters six and seven. It is clear that the second initiation cannot be openly described in a text written by a religious official working for the Chinese government. Zhipan's *Fozu tongji* (T. 49, 2035, 406a1) mentions that in 1017 CE a *Vināyaka-sūtra* was

barred from inclusion in the *Tripitaka*, and that from that moment on it was forbidden to translate such texts. Anyway, it is hard to speak of esotericism if one informs the whole of East Asia. Furthermore, one must not forget that there already was an esoteric tradition in China. It already had its fundamental texts. It is the merit of Dharmapāla that he translated this explicit Indian text in such a way that those who know understand the proceedings. For example, chapter ten, “Abhiṣeka,” talks about the relative *bodhicitta* (thought of enlightenment), *śukra*, semen, without actually explaining what has happened. The same may be seen at the end of chapter twelve. When in chapter thirteen the text says, “with thumb and fourth finger he explains how to understand the great symbol” the second initiation is meant, without explicitly saying so. In chapter thirteen the four joys and moments, experienced by the *yogin*, are explained. Adornment, *vicitra*, is the expedient explanation of various principles. Development, *vipāka*, is said to be nothing else but perfect joy, *paramānanda*, knowing blissful contact. Reflection, *ālocana*, is said to be nothing else but joy of cessation, *viramānanda*. Note that the common term *vimarda*, rubbing, is avoided. The absence of characteristics, *vilakṣaṇa*, is simultaneously-arisen joy, *sahajānanda* (i.e., simultaneous with the third joy), free from the three: passion, absence of passion, and a middle state. This passage in chapter thirteen talks about the *guhyaḥbiṣeka* without explicitly saying so. The word “semen” is never used. Instead we see, for example, in chapter fourteen: “Worldly bliss is like a *kunda*-flower (white jasmine) in the shadow of the white moon.” This is the explanation of the *bodhicitta* in its relative form. In chapter fifteen the *yogin* sprinkles camphor, i.e., *śukra*. This happens in the second initiation. It seems to me that the four stanzas at the end of chapter fifteen can all be understood in the context of the second initiation:

1. This quality [i.e., of being Hevajra] is neither of the three periods of time, nor of samsara nor nirvana. It is without self or other. It is perfect bliss.
2. If someone raises his hand, stretches his two fingers, thumb and fourth finger, and presses them together, the two are recompensed [i.e., *lalanā* and *rasanā*, *prajñā* and *upāya*, etc.]. This is certain.
3. If originally one does not have this characteristic [*scil.*, of being Hevajra], how could the thought that one may have it arise? If later, when knowledge has arisen as if in a fool’s dream,

4. he relies on the void, the true end, since he is free from desire in this most excellent end, he is called One With Knowledge of the Void [Hevajra].

In the third initiation, *prajñāñāna*, knowledge of wisdom, the disciple unites with the *mudrā*, *prajñā*, wisdom, practicing seminal retention and promoting the *bodhicitta* in his body. The *mudrā*, a girl, is not even explicitly mentioned as a girl. She is referred to as a youth. The ignorant do not even understand a female youth is meant. She is helpful in order to realize the absolute thought of enlightenment, the great bliss. This is mentioned in chapter fourteen.

The fourth initiation is just called *caturtha*, fourth. At the moment of the third one the disciple experiences this fourth one. It arises simultaneously. *Sahajānanda*, simultaneously-arisen joy, means the fourth initiation for the disciple, i.e., great bliss, *mahāsukha*. The Chinese *Hevajra-tantra* does not distinguish four *mudrās*: Karma° (action), dharma°, *samaya*° (convention), and *mahā*°. It only mentions *mudrā* (seal), *yoginī*, *mahāmudrā* (great seal), and *mahāsukha* (great bliss).

The last chapter (Chinese chapter 20) of the text is called “Sahajārtha” (“Meaningfulness of the Simultaneously-Arisen”). Here four stanzas refer to the four initiations. One is supposed to know that there are four initiations and also what happens in them. I quote:

Then Vajragarbha Bodhisattva pronounced four *gāthās* on initiation:

1. “Excellent it is, o adamantine *ācārya*, to see to it that all pupils are received, holding the great *vajra* and the great fine bell, and dwelling within the adamantine great mandala!
2. “Give them my secret initiation! Because they are initiated they hold the thought (of enlightenment). It is like the *bodhi* of a buddha. O great leader, bring about perfection for the sons of the endless true law!
3. “Have pity! Have pity, o *mahāsattva*! Because of your great pity you are worshipped. You are skillful in innumerable forms, and you fulfill all wishes.
4. “The adamantine circle is like the sky, free from impurity and essentially pure. It is called the gate to salvation of the friendly father. Concerning this great knowledge, few share in it!”

The Chinese text has three additional final stanzas, not found in either Tibetan or Sanskrit, warning against the dangers of the ritual and praising the benefits when correctly understood.

As for the places of pilgrimage that are visited by the *yogin* after initiation, these places are mentioned in chapter seven, but the Chinese text seems to adapt the contents to China. While the Indo-Tibetan versions have twelve places, the Chinese has ten, a number that is associated with the ten stages of bodhisattvahood. The Chinese leaves out places seven and eight of the Indian original. This seems to be the result of the Sanskrit *samāsenābhidhīyate*, “called for short.” While eight places are located outside of China, in India, the last two (nine and ten) may be anywhere. Nine: The places in which the congregation rejoices, or the ocean’s shore. Ten: Groves with fine fruits and pure ponds. So, the Chinese differs from the Indian versions, but there always is a reason for these differences. Ignorance and inability alone are no satisfactory explanation. Cemeteries are nowhere explicitly mentioned as places for the ritual. When in chapter three, stanza four, the *yogin* should sit on a corpse, the Chinese phonetically says *mṛtaka*, corpse. I cannot imagine that any ordinary Chinese intellectual understands such word. It is equally untrue that, as one theory goes, the originally “correct” translation was later cleansed and adapted. No Chinese scholar suspected the existence of such a word as *mṛtaka*. When in the same chapter, stanza nineteen, we read: “. . . his [i.e., Hevajra’s] second left arm then, and his second right hand [hold] the teaching of *prajñāpāramitā* (perfection of wisdom). She may have an appearance similar to the Buddha,” this passage mentions the female consort, the *prajñā*, and her appearance. To any ordinary reader it would seem that Hevajra holds a *pustaka*, a book, or scroll, not a consort. So, there is a reason for this so-called wrong translation.

I could give many more instances showing that the so-called mistakes can always be explained. There always is a good reason for what seems to be a mistake. It is this phenomenon that made me pay closer attention to the four initiations, especially two and three. The conclusion is that in the Chinese *Hevajra-tantra* the proceedings of the four initiations can be detected only if one already knows what happens. The need for a teacher who orally explains the proceedings is there. The Chinese text continues a fine esoteric tradition.

NOTES

1. The Chinese source for the whole explanation is Charles Willemen, *The Chinese Hevajratantra* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004). The following text is based on a lecture delivered at the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Berkeley, 2004.
2. Yūkei Matsunaga 松長有慶, *Mikkyō Kyōten Seiritsu-shi Ron* 密教經典成立史論 (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1980).
3. Shōun Toganoō 桐尾詳雲, *Toganoō Shōun Zenshū* 桐尾詳雲全, vol. 1 (orig. pub. 1933; repr., Kyoto: Rinsen Book Co., 1982), 30.
4. Alex Wayman and Ryūjin Tajima, *The Enlightenment of Vairocana* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1992), 10–11.
5. Stanley Weinstein, “Buddhism, Schools of: Chinese Buddhism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. M. Eliade, vol. 2 (New York: McMillan Publishing Co., 1987), 482–487.
6. By far the most useful explanation of initiation in Indo-Tibetan sources is Per Kværne, “On the Concept of Sahaja in Indian Buddhist Tantric Literature,” *Temenos* 11 (1975): 88–135.

