

Study of Buddhist Tantra: An Impressionistic Overview

Richard K. Payne

Institute of Buddhist Studies

This is a revised version of a presentation made at the University of Calgary, Monday, 23 March, 2015, as the lecture portion of the Annual Leslie S. Kawamura Memorial Lecture and Symposium. The program was co-sponsored by the Numata Chair Lecture Series at the University of Calgary, established with the support of Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai, Japan. My sincere thanks to Prof. Wendi Adamek for her kind invitation to give this public lecture in memory of my teacher, friend, and colleague, the late Leslie Kawamura. Thanks also to the Department of Classics and Religion.

The subtitle, “An Impressionistic Overview,” is meant to convey two things. An essay of this scope cannot be comprehensive—there are many important works by excellent scholars working in the field that go unmentioned. What is pursued here are a number of methodological points, and the references are intended to exemplify those. Second, the field is very active, with several significant works having been published even in the short three years since this was given as a public presentation. This is in fact an important aspect itself worth highlighting—four decades ago, the scholarly study of tantric Buddhism in Europe and America was in its infancy and very little was available. There were, for example, less than a dozen publications total in European languages on Shingon. Today new works on Buddhist tantra appear frequently, such that there is a danger that overly narrow areas of specialization will inhibit our ability to see the forest.

INTRODUCTION

For well over a century tantric Buddhism was despised as a religious tradition and dismissed as an area of scholarly inquiry. Significant changes to these views began early in the second half of the twentieth

century. This first section will discuss the cultural assumptions that impeded the study of Buddhist tantra, assumptions that in many cases still inform scholarly inquiry today. The transition out of that attitude was effected by two major events: the exile of Tibetan teachers following 1959, and a change to the intellectual sensibilities guiding Buddhist studies and affecting the study of religion in general.

I. THE RECEIVED UNDERSTANDING

In order to consider the current state of the art of the study of tantric Buddhism, and to understand the significance and profundity of the changes that have taken place in the last half century, let me begin with a personal anecdote. Several years ago, I was a guest at a large dinner party hosted by a wannabe vineyard owner in the Santa Cruz *appellation* of coastal California. During the dinner conversation, the host learned that my area of study is tantric Buddhism. He found this “truly fascinating,” and much to my wife’s consternation asked if I was planning to lead workshops in tantric sex. The question was delivered with a highly suggestive tone—what is known as a wink wink nudge nudge tone. When I tried with some dismay to explain tantric fire rituals he very quickly lost interest and we were not invited back. More currently, a quick survey of Amazon reveals that the societal association of the words tantra and sex is pervasive. Although generally presented in luridly positive post-sexual-revolution tones today, this association is longstanding though historically with a more negative valorization.

Indeed, what has been called the most formative work for modern Buddhist studies, Eugène Burnouf’s *Introduction à la histoire du Bouddhisme indien*¹ (originally appearing in 1844), establishes for the next century and a half the dominance of the conception of tantra as decadent, that is, as crude, simple-minded, magical thinking, ritualistic, superstitious, immoral, and derivative from Śaivism—a characterization that eventually came to inform the idea that tantra was perhaps primarily responsible for the decline of Buddhism in India. Referring to the collection of works gathered and sent back to Europe from Nepal by Hodgson, Burnouf notes that the tantras were only provided to Hodgson after he had many other texts made available to him.

1. Very fortunately, the text has been translated quite elegantly into English, making it available for critical reflection.

Burnouf draws the conclusion from this that “If as the title *tantra* indicates...the impure and coarse cult of the personifications of the female principle, as accepted among the Śaivists, found a place in these books, one can understand that an honest [sic] Buddhist hesitated to reveal to a foreigner proofs of so monstrous an alliance.”² Integrating both the rhetoric of decadence and the dualistic understanding of religion as only appropriately concerned with the transcendent, Burnouf goes on to characterize the tantras as promising “temporal and immediate advantages; in the end, they satisfy this need for superstitions, this love of pious practices by which the religious sentiment expresses itself in Asia, and to which the simplicity of primitive Buddhism responded but imperfectly.”³ These presuppositions regarding history and ritual seem to me to reflect a sensibility informed by Christian theology, and Burnouf goes on to apply a similarly theologically informed conception of scripture. This is the conception that to be scripture means that a text is thought to be “inspired,” and, therefore, is held by a tradition to be immutable. Although no longer unchallenged this conception of scripture endures in religious studies. Further preconceptions include assuming a unitary author⁴ of a primal text (*Urtext*), and that variations between different extant versions of the text are the consequence of unintentional scribal errors or intentional but disreputable later alterations—both of which are to be corrected. The job of textual studies, under this conception of the nature of scripture, is to engage in the process of textual criticism so as to restore the primal text. Discussing a text written in Sanskrit, but which refers to Nepalese divinities, Burnouf says of it that “where there is this trace of a hand foreign to India, [it] is not regarded as an inspired book, and there is no reason to apply to it the severe rules of criticism to which it is necessary to submit books accepted into the canon of sacred scriptures.”⁵ In other words, from the perspective of religious textual criticism, it is not important that this work was compiled so as to include Nepalese deities. Rather, since it is not an “inspired” work (presumably he means that

2. Eugène Burnouf, *Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism*, trans. Katia Buffetrille and Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 480.

3. *Ibid.*

4. See Christian Lee Novetzke, “Divining an Author: The Idea of Authorship in an Indian Religious Tradition,” *History of Religions* 42, no. 3 (Feb. 2003): 213–242.

5. Burnouf, *Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism*, 480–481.

it is not *buddhavacana*, though he does not clarify who is making this judgment), it is, therefore, not on a par with other sacred scriptures—those which are considered so holy as to not be changed.

The historical views of tantra that informed perception of the tradition at the start of the last quarter of the twentieth century included two sets of ideas. First, there were the methodological conceptions regarding the nature and value of texts of particular kinds. Second, there was the moralistic evaluation that tantra was decadent and obscene, and therefore unworthy of serious study by scholars of religions. We now turn to some of the category systems and definitions that in the past had motivated the marginalization of tantra from academic study.

II. DEFINITIONS: SEEKING SOME PLACE TO STAND

One of the ongoing discussions, and sometimes disputations, in the study of tantra is about defining the term. The function of any definition is not only to identify something, but also to draw lines around it so that we know what it isn't. In other words, definitions let us know where we stand and where we shouldn't wander off to.

II.A. THE INCONVENIENCE OF THE CONVENIENT

Established categories, concepts, and concerns are seemingly more often employed because they are familiar and convenient, rather than being questioned for their relevance. In addition to frequently employing Protestant preconceptions of history, ritual, and text, academic Buddhist studies and popular Buddhist writing has also developed its own three-part historiography—Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna (commonly, though mistakenly, referred to as the “three *yānas*”). This same three-part system is frequently reflected in popular Buddhist works under the categories of insight or mindfulness (code for Theravāda), Zen, and Tibetan Buddhism.

The standard three-part model of Theravāda, Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna (as encountered for example in world religions textbooks) is convenient because it is so widely deployed, and structuring our thought along those lines is therefore the path of least resistance. Such categorizations should not be employed unreflectively, that is, simply based on common practice and received tradition.

This classification is problematic for two reasons. First, it is not based in a specifically Buddhist set of categories, that is, it is not emic, and therefore requires its own kind of justification. For example, most

Tibetan systems of classification delineate not three separate traditions, but a system that includes two subsets of Mahāyāna—*pāramitāyāna* and *mantrayāna*, that is, the practice of the perfections and the practice of mantra, the latter being tantric in character. Conversely, *emic* is not in itself automatically authoritative.⁶ Both *emic* and *etic* definitions are located in particular discourses, and neither should be allowed to function without the qualification of locating their meaning within those discourses. In other words neither kind of categorization can be simply accepted as universal, since both are usually polemical in some fashion.

Second, in explicating this three-part system, doctrinal claims are often given priority. Consequently the predominance of doctrine shared between Mahāyāna and tantric Buddhism is ignored in favor of a few differences, which are then treated, sometimes formulaically, as definitive of a complex tradition with a long history. Focusing on the idea of awakening in this lifetime as the defining characteristic of tantra, for example, fragments otherwise integrated systems of thought. This is not to say that there are not such doctrinal distinctions, but that the differences that are more informative are those of practice—as mentioned above, for example, differences between the practice of the perfections and the practice of mantra.

II.B. TANTRA: A BIBLIOGRAPHIC CATEGORY

The difficulty that the field of Buddhist studies is having with terminology in this regard is reflected in two diametrically opposed evaluations, one made by Richard McBride and the other by Hiram Woodward. McBride, in discussing the terminology as appropriate to China, asserts that neither “Tantric Buddhism” nor “Esoteric Buddhism” are unproblematic terms.⁷ He rejects “Tantric Buddhism” on the grounds that it is “nothing more” than a creation of Western scholarship, and “Esoteric Buddhism” on the grounds that the textual record reveals no distinctly separate school that corresponds to that term. He examines text titles and commentaries and concludes that “esoteric” was simply used to identify and valorize the putatively higher teachings of the Mahāyāna.

6. For example, Nichiren’s characterizations of other Buddhist traditions in medieval Japan are explicitly polemical and need to be located in relation to the domain within which his discourse operates.

7. Richard D. McBride, II, “Is There Really ‘Esoteric’ Buddhism?” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 27, no. 2 (2004): 329–356.

Discussing this valorization, McBride asserts that

Seen from this perspective, one can see how to many Chinese Buddhists, the esoteric teachings of the *Sūtra on Mahāvairocana's Attaining Buddhahood*, which emphasize recreating the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha directly as the “esoteric teaching,” are no more esoteric than the teachings of the *Buddhāvataṃsaka Sūtra* or the *Lotus Sūtra*, because one could easily understand that acquiescence to the non-production of dharmas means fundamentally the same thing as acquiring or reproducing the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha.⁸

I find this claim that a Chinese Buddhist of the era would not have distinguished between the *goal* of realizing the emptiness of all dharmas and the *method* of identification between the practitioner and the deity to be a most problematic assertion. While it cannot be a perfect analogy, certainly many self-identified Buddhists in present-day United States would have difficulty seeing the identity of these two teachings.

In denying the existence of Esoteric Buddhism as a lineage, McBride similarly fails to take into account other practices, such as initiation—as noted by Woodward. Before considering Woodward on this topic, it is worth highlighting that Ronald Davidson specifically and purposely used the term “movement” to describe the object of his study, which shifts the conception of what we’re looking for away from a clearly delineated school or a lineage, pointing to something broader and more diffuse than the “Esoteric school” on which McBride focuses.⁹

In contrast to McBride’s rejection of both Tantric Buddhism and Esoteric Buddhism as indicating anything other than a polemic claim of superiority, Hiram Woodward asserts that “Esoteric Buddhism and Tantric Buddhism are both valid names, the first because it indicates a body of secret practices, necessarily passed down from master to pupil, and the second because it implies dependence upon a body of texts called *tantra*.”¹⁰

My own conclusion is that, as indicated by Woodward, the surest categorization is bibliographic, as well as descriptive generalizations

8. *Ibid.*, 350.

9. McBride’s opening claim (332) is that *mi* means both esoteric and higher, rather than identifying a sectarian institution.

10. Hiram Woodward, “Esoteric Buddhism in Southeast Asia in the Light of Recent Scholarship,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35, no. 2 (June 2004): 329–354; 329.

based on that bibliographic category. That is, there are a number of texts, the titles of which include the term “tantra.”¹¹ As a bibliographic category, these texts provide us a basis for delineating as a descriptive generalization the characteristic practices, beliefs, deities, etc. found in those texts, and thereby identify “tantric Buddhism”—stylistically using the lower case “t” to avoid any imputation of a unitary metaphysical entity, “Tantric Buddhism,” of which the various kinds are manifestations (i.e., not an Aristotelian category system of genus and species, nor a neo-Platonic one of essence and manifestation).¹² There is, I believe, a certain elegant simplicity to this approach to the question of how to identify tantra.

II.C. EMBRACING POLYTHESIS

Monothetic definitions are ones that depend on identifying the single defining characteristic of some set of things. One example of a monothetic approach is the focus on ritual identification. For instance, while not specifically promoting his view as a definition per se, Michel Strickmann noted that “...the officiant’s identification or union with the deity, is (in my view) the prime distinguishing feature of tantric Buddhism.”¹³ Monothetic approaches to defining tantra cannot be sus-

11. We should note that this approach is made somewhat more complex by the fact that the titles of some works when translated to Chinese simply used “classic” (*ching* 經), the same term used for *sūtra*. Also, see Megan Bryson, “Mahākāla Worship in the Dali Kingdom (937–1253): A Study and Translation of the *Dahei tianshen daochang yi*,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 35, nos. 1–2 (2013): 3–69; 6.

12. While it might be possible to compute a multidimensional space within which the various axes are measures of the identified characteristics and locate texts within that space, such an exercise—even speculatively—should not be taken to identify those texts at the center of the space as somehow more tantric than the others. That is, we should avoid any imputation of archetypal status to texts having more of some kind of list of characteristics, a status implying a more central or important status. That could implicitly evoke a hierarchical conception of superiority that runs counter to the goal of a descriptive generalization.

13. Michel Strickmann, “The Seal of the Law: A Ritual Implement and the Origins of Printing,” *Asia Major* 6, no. 2 (1993): 1–83; 29. I mention this monothetic definition in particular as it is the one I adopted for several years, depending on Strickmann’s authority. Over the many years of the irregularly scheduled

tained in the face of greater knowledge regarding the tradition—as our knowledge has expanded, what were formerly sharp edges have become increasingly fuzzy. Too sharp a delineation is an unproductive artifice, conveniently reducing ambiguity. In contrast to monothetic ideas about definition, some theorists, e.g., Rodney Needham, have made more general epistemological arguments in favor of polythetic definitions.¹⁴ Citing Needham, in an essay on the difficulties of defining religion in which Buddhism plays a key exemplary role, Martin Southwold explains the difference between monothetic and polythetic:

A monothetic class is a set of phenomena such that there is some set (or “bundle”) of attributes which is common to all of them—which is possessed by each and every member of the class. With a polythetic class there is again an associated bundle of attributes; but in this case it is not necessary that *all* the attributes in the bundle be possessed by a member of the class.¹⁵

Frequent recourse is made to polythetic definition by scholars aware of the complexity of such religious phenomena as tantra. It apparently has a *prima facie* appeal, that is, it seems to be intuitively satisfying, as well as carrying the potency of Wittgenstein’s name when equated with his notion of family resemblances.

Frequently, however, the problem with invoking polythetic definitions is that they are only invoked and then the definitional issues are quickly moved past in silence—creating a meaningful polythetic definition is almost never actually done. In most cases the best that is brought forth is a list—what I have called the *mantra, mudrā, maṇḍala* strategy, that is, claiming that these three typify all tantra and then treating this as adequately distinguishing the tradition.¹⁶ This, however, is not in fact an adequate way of employing a polythetic definition, as it does not actually identify what characteristics are not found

meetings of the Society for Tantric Studies, I came to understand that this one characteristic cannot be equally applied to the full range of tantric forms. As my friend Charles Orzech pointed out to me in relation to the Shingon hungry ghost rituals, ritual identification is also not a universal ritual action for tantric practices.

14. Rodney Needham, “Polythetic Classification: Convergence and Consequences,” *Man*, n.s., 10 (1975): 349–369.

15. Martin Southwold, “Buddhism and the Definition of Religion,” *Man*, n.s., 13, no. 3 (Sept. 1978): 369.

16. See for example, Bryson, “Mahākāla Worship in the Dali Kingdom,” 7.

in all members of the set, and therefore remains indistinguishable from a monothetic definition, as discussed by Southwold above.

In other words, what is generally not forthcoming when a polythetic approach is invoked is either a rationale for identifying the key elements or a demonstration of where the key elements start and end. One of the frequent metaphors used is that of a rope, which is made up of many strands, none of which run the entire length, but each of which contributes to the whole so that all together constitute the rope. However, as should be obvious, a metaphor is not an argument, no matter how convincing. To continue with the metaphor, however, we should ask about each strand, where it begins and ends, and how they came to be woven together to form this rope.¹⁷ Hence my purposely fuzzy bibliographic definition of tantra. But note that this is not an implicit metaphysical assertion of the existence of some “thing,” but rather highlighting the simple fact of a bibliographic label as a basis upon which certain generalizations may be made.

III. DUALISTIC PREJUDICES

Since the time of the Protestant Reformation, Western religious culture has been largely dominated by dualistic conceptions—a metaphysics that places the relative, this-worldly, natural, material, embodied on one side of a totalized divide from the absolute, other-worldly, supernatural, spiritual, mental on the other. The tradition of medieval Christianity that was displaced at that time was largely immanent in its religious conceptions, so that rather than the divine being located in some transcendent location outside, beyond, above this world, the divine was present here in our midst. The stark dualism of modern Western religious thought—both popular and scholarly—structures popular and academic representations of tantra specifically, and Buddhism generally.¹⁸

17. The best work I know of along these lines is Henrik Sørensen’s “Spells and Magical Practices as Reflected in the Early Chinese Buddhist Sources (c. 300–600 CE) and Their Implications for the Rise and Development of Esoteric Buddhism,” in *Chinese and Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism*, ed. Yael Bentor and Meir Shahar (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), 41–71; 45–47.

18. A pervasive dualistic neo-Platonism contributes to the common misunderstanding of Madhyamaka thought regarding the relation between *samsara* and *nirvana*, relative and absolute. Repeatedly in the *Karikas* Nāgārjuna

In relation to the study of tantric Buddhism these dualistic prejudices also inform value judgments about the goals of Buddhist praxis, and it is this that makes a critical understanding of those prejudgments relevant to the treatment of tantra. One of the traditional distinctions made in tantric thought is between powers related to the accomplishment of mundane goals (*laukika siddhi*, *shih-chien ch'eng-chiu*) and the attainment of the supreme goal of ultimate enlightenment (*anuttarasamyaksambodhi*, *lokottara siddhi*, *ch'u-shih sh'eng-chiu*, or *ch'eng-chiu hsi-ti*).¹⁹ In English language treatments, this distinction between types of attainments (*siddhis*) is not uncommonly interpreted in conformity with the Weberian this-worldly/other-worldly disjunction. The Weberian disjunction also carries a moral valence, one that induces a disdain for worldly goals in favor of transcendent ones. This distinction has become so well integrated into Western religious culture that it appears natural, although it is the product of the Protestant Reformation. It then prejudices the study of tantra, when scholars only consider the practice of monastics devoted to ultimate enlightenment worthy of consideration—such that non-monastic, folk, or popular practices are ignored, or at least marginalized.²⁰ This is one of the areas in which anthropological studies of religion in Buddhist societies provides a useful corrective to the prejudices of religious studies.

This is also part of a wider historical preference for “high” religion that makes well-developed and hierarchical institutions, written literatures (particularly those displaying “proper” spelling and grammar),

asserts the identity of the two, and yet Western/ized people seem to struggle with this. The very terms used—relative and absolute (*saṃvṛtisatya* and *paramārthasatya*)—seem to contribute to this confusion, and the assumption that Buddhism holds to the same kind of dualistic metaphysics that post-Reformation Christianity holds.

19. Charles D. Orzech, “Seeing Chen-yen Buddhism: Traditional Scholarship and the Vajrayāna in China,” *History of Religions* 29, no. 2 (Nov. 1989): 87–114; 100.

20. Important recent work has called attention to non-monastic practices, such as those of forest-dwelling ascetics, and domestic practices. See respectively, Daniel Boucher, *Bodhisattvas of the Forest and the Formation of the Mahāyāna: A Study and Translation of the Rāṣṭrapālapariṣcchā-sūtra* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), and Jessica Starling, *Guardians of the Buddha's Home: Domestic Religion in Contemporary Jōdo Shinshū* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, forthcoming).

and abstruse philosophies considered to be worthy objects of study.²¹ This tendency, long-standing though now less dominant in the field, had resulted in tantric practices being identified as popular or folk religion and therefore being ignored, dismissed, and denigrated, and the historical question of the continuity of these with institutional tantra, such as in East Asia, remaining unasked.

If, however, we do not privilege the “ultimate” along with practitioners and institutions who can be interpreted as taking it as their focus, and instead recognize that an important strain of Buddhist praxis in general and tantric Buddhist praxis in particular is not dualistically divided between absolute and relative, then the integration of realizations (*yuganaddha*) can be understood to involve a hierarchy of values but not an oppositional dichotomy. “The realization of one’s basic divinity is the realization of one’s own enlightenment and the simultaneous purification of one’s world.”²² An increasing awareness of the gap between a religion of transcendence and the fundamentally non-dual character of much of Buddhist thought provided one important opening for a re-evaluation of tantric Buddhism. Particularly relevant here is the recognition that tantra has an intellectual basis, one that is broadly based in Mahāyāna thought, and in that way drawing on both Madhyamaka and Yogācāra thinking. The other opening was the dramatic events of the 1959 invasion of Tibet by the People’s Republic of China. This led to the now well-known flight of so many Tibetan leaders, including the Dalai Lama, out of Tibet in 1959. Although much of the scholarly attention focused on the scholastic traditions as a resource for understanding Indian Buddhist thought, evidencing the continuing prejudice in favor of doctrine (particularly in its Indian forms), some scholars did begin to inquire into tantric Buddhist praxis as well.²³ At around this same time, there was increasing awareness of not only the existence of Buddhist tantra in East Asia, such as Shingon

21. Historically, this dynamic was informed by missionaries who, with their seminary training valuing their own role in religion, think that theology is essential and look for their peers in other religions.

22. Orzech, “Seeing Chen-Yen Buddhism,” 100.

23. Herbert Guenther, Leslie Kawamura, Ferdinand Lessing, and Alex Wayman were some of the leading figures in this reorientation of scholarly attitudes toward tantric Buddhism from the mid-twentieth century on.

in Japan, but of its pervasiveness and centrality to the development of much of East Asian Buddhism.²⁴

IV. CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

There are also several issues that can be corrected through the use of alternative conceptions. These include: (1) understanding tantric phenomena as existing not only in clearly tantric settings, but also in penumbral areas in which they are in interaction with other religious elements; (2) shifting from a historiography of linear trajectories to one of networks and nodes; (3) similarly, the use of regional studies instead of the usual default to contemporary nation-states; and (4) thinking not of institutional sects as the primary category of analysis, but instead in terms of discourses.

IV.A. FROM INVISIBILITY TO PENUMBRAS

When studying in Japan, I found what I now think of as “the invisibility of tantra.” One exemplary instance is the existence of elements in Zen monastic practices that are quite easily thought of as simply “Zen.” They are naturalized as part of the Zen tradition and therefore no further thought is given to them. For example, I once visited a small Sōtō Zen hermitage that was being taken care of by a Zen student from the U.S. whom I’d gotten to know in the expatriate circles in Kyoto. Upon entering I found a statue of one of the four directional guardians (*lokapālas*) opposite the doorway, together with a *dhāraṇī*. Similarly, in the toilet there was a *dhāraṇī* for protection. Now, while as Richard McBride has warned, we cannot simply equate *dhāraṇī* with tantra, this cannot, however, be taken as an ahistorical dictum.²⁵ The presence of a *dhāraṇī* does not of itself establish that the hermitage was somehow “tantric,” any more than the presence of *dhāraṇī* in the *Lotus Sutra* turn

24. Celebration of the 1150th anniversary of the establishment of Kōyasan, the training center for Shingon Buddhism in the mountains of the Kii Peninsula of Japan, seems to have been pivotal in this change. One of the many scholars attending those events was Joseph Kitagawa, whose essay “Master and Saviour” appeared as the first essay in Kōyasan University’s conference proceedings volume (1965), but was also reprinted in the collection of Kitagawa’s essays *On Understanding Japanese Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

25. Richard D. McBride, II, “Dhāraṇī and Spells in Medieval Sinitic Buddhism,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 28, no. 1 (2005): 85–114.

it into the *Lotus Tantra*.²⁶ However, the history of how the *dhāraṇī* got there does indicate connections with tantra. Another example is the idea of inherent awakening, which although again is not somehow uniquely tantric does form a central tenet of tantric praxis, including that on Mt. Hiei where Dōgen, the founder of Sōtō, was originally trained.

One reason for the invisibility of tantra is the lack of training of scholars. Some, perhaps many, scholars are only trained in one field, that which is their area of specialization. Being unfamiliar with tantra, they cannot recognize that what they're looking at has a tantric origin, and they may think of it as simply (unproblematically) part of whatever tradition they are looking at, as in this case Zen. So one of the reasons that tantra has not been recognized is that it is invisible to those who, lacking an adequate breadth of training or familiarity, can only accept what they see as a normal part of whatever tradition they are examining.

In the case of directional guardians and their accompanying *dhāraṇīs* in Zen temples, there is an explicitly historical question that should be pursued: What in the world are these things doing here? They are not the kind of thing that Dōgen is known to have brought back from China, so how do they wind up in a small Sōtō Zen hermitage in a village outside Kyoto? The answer is that they derive from the tantric dimension of Tendai Buddhism. Does this make Zen tantric? No, but it does put Japanese Zen in what I've called the penumbra of tantra.²⁷ The penumbra is one of two areas of shadow cast when two light sources are shining on the same object. Where both light sources cast shadows, that is the darker, inner shadow, the umbra. But where

26. Richard K. Payne, *Language in the Buddhist Tantra of Japan: Indic Roots of Mantra* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), chap. 8, 117–125.

27. Charles D. Orzech, Richard K. Payne, and Henrik H. Sørensen, introduction to *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia*, ed. Charles D. Orzech, Richard K. Payne, and Henrik H. Sørensen (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 12–13; Charles D. Orzech, “After Amoghavajra: Esoteric Buddhism in the Late Tang,” in *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia*, 330; Richard K. Payne, “From Vedic India to Buddhist Japan: Continuities and Discontinuities in Esoteric Ritual,” in *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia*, 1044, 1047, 1054; also, Payne, “Conversions of Tantric Buddhist Ritual: The Yoshida Shintō *Juhachishintō* Ritual,” in *Transformations and Transfer of Tantra in Asia and Beyond*, ed. István Keul (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2012), 365–398.

the shadow of one and the light of the other mingle, that is the penumbra. The penumbra of tantra includes such things as directional protectors (*lokapāla*) and their *dhāraṇī* when they show up in Zen temples. Likewise, the idea that just sitting is itself awakening has its own roots in Chinese Chan. However, not only is it at least resonant with tantric ideas of awakening in this very body (*soku shin jōbutsu* 即身成佛) in Japan, but the origin of those Chinese roots themselves need to be reconsidered. The tendency toward a hermetic conception of lineages as distinct, separate, and sources of authority in their purity is historically dysfunctional—despite its service to sectarian claims, both religious and academic.

IV.B. NETWORKS, NOT LINEAR TRAJECTORIES

One pervasive style of historiography is to trace a single, linear progression, a movement from some privileged center outward. This is a historiography of “diffusion” and is exemplified in the way that the history of Buddhism is often written. That is, the standard representation is that Buddhism began in India and then spread out from there in a series of separate linear trajectories—India to Sri Lanka, India to Southeast Asia, India to China and then to Korea and Japan, India to Tibet and then Mongolia. And now additional stages are added at the end of these trajectories, e.g., Europe and the U.S. The actuality seems to be, however, that there were networks, and influences moved in both directions along the strands connecting the nodes of those networks.

The historiography of distinct linear trajectories, it seems to me, is often a reflection of sectarian historiography. Sectarian historiography is itself motivated by the desire to conclusively connect a contemporary form of Buddhism with the authority of the source. Such linear treatments then oversimplify complex historical actualities, such as the tantric environment of medieval Tendai being written out of the stories of Dōgen or Hōnen, or similarly being placed under erasure as in the Theravādin history of Buddhism in Southeast Asia.

IV.C. REGIONAL STUDIES, NOT CONTEMPORARY NATION-STATES

All too often, our fields of study tend to be defined by contemporary nation-states, which effectively distorts our inquiries in a variety of

ways.²⁸ We need to stop naturalizing contemporary nation-states as the default categories defining our fields of study, and one way to do that is to focus on regional forms of religion.²⁹ While certainly not the only possible organizing principle that can serve as an alternative to contemporary nation-states, it is a useful antidote to the dysfunctional privileging of contemporary nation-states as the primary category for organizing the study of Buddhism.³⁰

One example is the study of tantric Buddhism in the Kingdom of Dali, which lasted from 937–1253 (approx. contemporaneous with the Song dynasty).³¹ While tantric practices in Dali do seem to derive primarily from Tang and Song, they take on a unique character of their own, a distinct reformulation. Specifically, while Mahākāla does not appear to have played a significant role in Tang or Song, he did become a central part of Dali tantra. Megan Bryson summarizes the nature of the interactions between Dali and surrounding regions, saying that “Mahākāla worship in the Dali kingdom draws on textual and iconographic traditions from surrounding areas, but also constitutes a distinctive tradition with its own rituals, texts, and images.”³² Bryson emphasizes the agency of people in the Dali kingdom in forming their own religious traditions, rather than simply being derivative from those of the surrounding cultures. She has also argued that it is because

28. See Richard K. Payne, “Buddhist Studies beyond the Nation-State,” Oxford Handbooks Online (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935420.013.13).

29. See Jeff Wilson, *Dixie Dharma: Inside a Buddhist Temple in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2012).

30. Bryson points out that ethnicity, which might be thought to provide a reliable alternative to contemporary nation-states as an organizing principle, is also problematic. Although the people of Dali are often called “Bai,” this was neither their own self-categorization, nor did it provide an organizing principle for Dali religiosity. “It is as a part of [the] politico-religious dimension of the Dali Kingdom that Mahākāla worship should be approached, not as part of a distinctive ‘ethnic’ religion” (“Mahākāla Worship in the Dali Kingdom,” 13).

31. I wonder how much the choice of identifiers contributes to the privileging of contemporary nation-states. Does the idea of the Song dynasty of China not automatically reify China as the enduring category—in contrast to the Dali Kingdom, which we can easily think “no longer exists”?

32. Bryson, “Mahākāla Worship in the Dali Kingdom,” 10.

Mahākāla was not already a prominent part of Tang or Song Buddhism that he could therefore be appropriated as a protector for Dali.

In addition to recognizing the agency of regional actors and examining the conditions involved in the development of a regional tradition, such as that of Mahākāla in Dali, Bryson has pointed out a pattern of religious development that becomes visible when viewing religious history from the perspective of regions. That pattern of religious development is the creation of groups of gods. In Dali, Mahākāla has seven manifestations. He is also one of a group of five “brother deities,” and there is a complementary set of seven “sister deities” headed by Hārītī. Similar regional patterns of forming groups of deities include the set of seven (sometimes eight) “little mothers” (*mātrkā*) known from pre-Buddhist India, and in Japan the Edo-period development of the seven gods of good fortune—a set that itself includes Mahākāla. While the formation of groups of gods is not unique to pre-Buddhist India, Dali, or Edo-period Japan, the regional specificity of such a process is suggestive and deserving of further research. Treating Dali as just peripheral to China would, however, simply obscure such phenomena. When considered from the perspective of theory, what needs to be avoided when taking the perspective of either nation-states or regions is the mistaken attribution of causality to the category. In other words, being part of either a nation-state or a region is not a causal explanation as to why some form of Buddhism has some particular characteristics.

IV.D. DISCOURSES, NOT SECTS

One of the lingering influences of nineteenth century scholarship in Buddhist studies has been a conceptualization of religion primarily in terms of institutional forms (churches) based on and distinguished from one another by doctrinal claims. The history of Christianity is largely written in terms of schisms created by differences in doctrinal interpretation. This is not to say that there are not important studies of the social, economic, and political dimensions of this history, but, for scholars of religious history in the West, these seem to often be instrumental for the establishment of doctrinally distinguished institutions. While historians of religion may acknowledge that other factors are important, representations of religions are usually structured so as to highlight doctrinal matters. Doctrines are usually treated as the defining characteristics that distinguish one religion from another.

It is relatively natural, therefore, that Western/ized scholars of religion project the same kind of doctrinally motivated institutional historiography onto the history of Buddhism as well. In other words, Buddhist history as presented in Western treatments is often written in the same fashion, that is, as a series of institutional forms marked by doctrinal positions that distinguish them from one another.

It is now coming up on two centuries of study of that history, and scholars are better able now to call into question that fundamental presumption. Looking at the history of Buddhism as presented, rather than a sequence of doctrinally inflected institutional entities, we may be seeing a wide range of different kinds of organizations that have all been rather magically transformed into institutions by the reductionist presumptions of Western religious historiography.³³

For example, Aaron Proffitt, discussing how Kuroda Toshio's ideas, which have already revolutionized the study of medieval Japanese Buddhism, suggested that those ideas can be extended:

Kuroda's theory may be employed to suggest, as scholars of Tibetan, Indian, and Chinese Buddhism have suggested, that the traditions often subsumed under the rubric of Esoteric/Tantric Buddhism [were] likely never understood as a thing unto itself, as a "kind" of Buddhism, but was rather a Mahāyāna polemical sub-discourse used

33. Not only is this artificial, but it leads to mistaken inquiries. Let us take as an example the *abhidharma* (which I now refuse to capitalize). This is primarily a bibliographic category, despite which it seems quite natural for people to speak of it as the Abhidharma school. This is ambiguous enough to work, in that there are self-identified groups in medieval India, such as the Vaibhāṣika, who do seem to have had some institutional coherence. That, however, does not apply so well to the earlier forms (and there is certainly no "founder" in the sense of someone who had a religious realization that transformed their life!).

But the idea that the Abhidharmikas constitute an identifiable institution marked by doctrinal positions leads to questions such as: What was the meditation practice of the Abhidharmikas? This is a seemingly natural question if your view is that institutions with doctrinal identity are primary, and secondly the additional assumption from Western religious historiography that such institutions move toward a state of being religiously comprehensive (churches rather than sects, though note that even the latter is a doctrinally marked institution).

by Buddhists to draw upon and critique other Mahāyāna strategies and technologies.³⁴

This fits, then, with Davidson's intentional use of the term "movement" in his work on tantra, as mentioned above. Similarly, there are considerations of how to understand *zong* (Skt. *siddhānta*, Jpn. *shū* 宗) so as not to read Christian religious institutional categories, such as sect, onto the structures of Buddhist organization.³⁵ This is not to say that all of the institutions discussed in the Western historiography of Buddhism are inventions, rather that each one needs to be critically re-examined, the nature of its institutional status at particular times and places being directly the object of critical inquiry.

V. TANTRIC BUDDHISM IN EAST ASIA

Hopefully it will seem odd to say this, but until relatively recently there was little attention paid to tantric Buddhism in East Asia, and not even consensus on something as fundamental as whether there was anything worth studying there.³⁶ Indeed in 1989, Charles Orzech could state that "Chen-yen (*mi-chiao*, 'esoteric Buddhism') Buddhism was among the most important Buddhist traditions in the history of Chinese religion, yet many historians of religions, sinologists, and Buddhologists have never heard of it."³⁷ While much has changed in the study of tantric Buddhism in East Asia since then, greater attention needs to be given to the ritual texts, as well as to figures and institutions that have been excluded from scholarly attention. Also requiring rethinking is the question of how to discuss figures such as Dōhan, who wrote an esoteric interpretation of *nenbutsu* recitation. Treatment of figures such as this requires not reifying Pure Land and Esoteric

34. Aaron Proffitt, "Mysteries of Speech and Breath: Dōhan's 道範 (1179–1252) *Himitsu Nenbutsu shō* 秘密念佛抄 and Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2015), 196–197.

35. T. Griffith Foulk, "The Ch'an *Tsung* in Medieval China: School, Lineage, or What?" *Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies*, n.s., no. 8 (Fall 1992): 18–31.

36. And this despite the work of Michel Strickmann, no doubt largely in part because his published work on the topic was in French and the fact that much of his scholarship was left unpublished at his untimely death. Bernard Faure has made a great contribution to English-language scholarship by his posthumous translations and editing of Strickmann's work.

37. Orzech, "Seeing Chen-yen Buddhism," 87.

Buddhism as distinct from one another—in other words, not as separate lineages whose histories are traced in a unilinear fashion as sectarian scholarship encourages. Such an intellectual framework creates the misleading impression that figures such as Dōhan are engaged in syncretic merging of elements from autonomously distinct traditions.

In addition to the metaphor of a network for thinking about historical relations, the metaphor of saturated solutions may be useful in thinking about works like Dōhan's, as well as those of the other major figures of medieval Buddhism. The elements dissolved in the solution are crystallized by a creative figure and then fall out of the solution as a distinct crystalline form. The various elements floating in the solution are available to be formed and reformed over time in different ways.

While the crystallization metaphor is one I've found useful, in her work on death and dying in medieval Japan, Jacqueline Stone has suggested another metaphor that can be applied equally well to the study of Buddhist tantra in all its forms. That metaphor sees a religious culture as comprising a "repertoire of resources," what we might also call the toolbox metaphor. Like the crystallization metaphor, the toolbox allows for understanding that Buddhism is not a closed system bounded by doctrinal orthodoxies, but instead a highly porous part within the larger system of a religious culture.

Stone notes that a lingering rhetoric of authenticity and purity continues to create pseudoproblems about the

intersection of Buddhism as a pan-Asian tradition with local religious culture.... Thinking of Buddhism as a shifting repertoire of resources, one with porous boundaries, allows us to give due attention to these interactions without getting caught up in clumsy and misleading normative distinctions about which elements constitute "true" or "authentic" Buddhism and which are mere local accretions.³⁸

Stone goes on to note that "the notion of Buddhism as a set of resources helps us to understand how, together with local variation, remarkable thematic continuity is to be found across Asia," while at the same time the prominent role of Buddhism "has rested in no small measure on its

38. Jacqueline I. Stone, *Right Thoughts at the Last Moment: Buddhism and Deathbed Practices in Early Medieval Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016), 5.

conceptual capacity to encompass disparate elements with a compelling, if not always internally consistent, ritual program.”³⁹

VI. TANTRIC BUDDHISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

One of the problems for the study of tantra in Southeast Asia is the relative paucity of written works. The simple ravages of time and neglect alone have led to the loss of written works, which decay more rapidly in tropical climates than elsewhere and for most of Buddhist history required constant recopying. The shift to Theravādin Buddhist traditions as state religions led to other works, Mahāyāna and tantric, no longer being copied. Probably at least as significant was the purposeful destruction of texts resulting from intra-Buddhist sectarian conflicts supported by kings.

As a consequence of the relative paucity of textual record for Southeast Asia, much of the recent re-evaluation of the place of tantra in the region has depended on archaeology, art history, and epigraphy—sources that classically trained Buddhist scholars have for the most part not been taught even to consider and are therefore not comfortable with. Though anthropologists had been studying Buddhist societies for decades, for Buddhist studies the revolution in this area can be marked by the 1991 publication of Gregory Schopen’s essay “Archeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism.”⁴⁰

The dominant model in the field remains philological and textual, with an almost exclusive focus on substantial philosophical and doctrinal works. This reflects the Protestant biases of religious studies that privilege doctrine and the grounding of doctrine in revealed religious texts—sacred scripture. This is the intellectualist fallacy, the idea that thought is the sole determinant of action. This relic of the Enlightenment should have been abandoned after the work of Freud and Marx. It continues to play a role in religious studies, however, as for example in rational choice theory.

What this means for the study of Buddhist tantra in Southeast Asia, despite its paucity of texts, is the felt need to root everything in texts. Discussing the Kelurak inscription (782 CE) from Central Java, for

39. *Ibid.*, 5.

40. Gregory Schopen, “Archeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism,” *History of Religions* 31, no. 1 (Aug. 1991): 1–23.

example, Hiram Woodward comments that it “has been called ‘the first inescapably “tantrist” inscription,’ but in fact the [kind of] Tantrism is not easily characterised without an associated text.”⁴¹ Woodward goes on to describe the inscription, which relates the installation of an image of Mañjuḥṣa, one of the forms of Mañjuśrī, and who is also identified with Vajradhara, clearly a tantric figure. Although the inscription is technically a text, i.e., a paleographic text, Woodward seems to want to definitively connect the inscription with one of the tantras, such as perhaps the *Sarvatathāgatattvasaṃgraha* or the *Hevajra*. In other words, the epistemological assumption is that to “characterise” the tantrism of the inscription means to relate it to one of the major tantric texts. The expectation seems to be that texts are the stable element or provide a stable reference point for defining or understanding what is going on.⁴² But what more would we know were we indeed able to say that the Kelurak inscription is related, for example, to the *Sarvatathāgatattvasaṃgraha*? Does that allow us to make any further claims that are of interest or value? Or have we simply been trained to take a text as the end point of inquiry, are we accustomed to being satisfied in our questioning by identifying a text?

What textual studies have revealed, however, is that texts are not stable, not even the “sacred scriptures” that Burnouf held as the standard of what is deserving of the “severe rules” of textual criticism. Rather than a textual tradition, tantric praxes might better be understood as overlapping, semi-autonomous traditions of different kinds, including traditions of art and architecture, ritual, practice, music, literature, poetry, and so on—and also including, but not defined by, textual traditions. Thus, in Southeast Asia the archeological, art historical, and epigraphic records display one kind of continuity of tantric practice, sometimes running parallel to and at other times bumping up against the textual traditions.

41. Hiram Woodward, “Esoteric Buddhism in Southeast Asia in the Light of Recent Scholarship,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35, no. 2 (June 2004): 329–354; 340. Internal quote is from Max Nihom, *Studies in Indian and Indo-Indonesian Tantrism: The Kuñjarakarnadharmakathana and the Yogatantra* (Vienna: Sammlung De Nobili Institut für Indologie der Universität Wien, 1994), 70.

42. Note, however, that texts are also not themselves stable, providing an unchanging foundation for historical categorization—texts themselves are networks.

VII. RELATIONS BETWEEN BUDDHIST TANTRA AND ŚAIVA TANTRA

One of the theoretical issues that has emerged in the discussions of the historical relations between Buddhist and Śaiva tantra is how to understand the similarities between the two traditions. How do we explain the similarities between Buddhist and Śaiva tantra? For the most part, answers have been formulated in terms of either assertions of cross-tradition appropriations or substratum theory.

Christian Wedemeyer has noted that cross-tradition appropriation by tantric Buddhist practitioners from Śaiva traditions has been a theme not only from the time of Burnouf as we saw above, but also in the work of Louis de la Vallée Poussin, and more recently in the work of David Snellgrove.⁴³ Alexis Sanderson is no doubt the most influential contemporary proponent of the theory of cross-tradition appropriation. A section title from one of his most important works summarizes this thesis quite clearly: “The Development of Tantric Buddhism through the Adoption and Adaptation of Śaiva and Śākta Śaiva Models.”⁴⁴ It is worth quoting his claims at the beginning of this section *in extenso*. Noting that Buddhism and Śaivism shared royal patronage, he explains that this

was surely facilitated by the fact that the form of Buddhism adopted and developed was one that equipped itself not only with a pantheon of ordered sets of deities that permitted such subsumptive equations [as the equation of Buddha and Śiva, as discussed at the end of the preceding section] but also with a repertoire of Tantric ceremonies that paralleled that of the Śaivas and indeed had modelled itself upon it, offering initiation by introduction before a Maṇḍala in which the central deity of the cult and its retinue of divine emanations have been installed, and a system of regular worship animated by the principle of identification with the deity of initiation (*devatāhaṃkāraḥ*, *devatāgarvaḥ*) through the use of Mantras, Mudrās, visualization, and fire-sacrifice (*homaḥ*); and this was presented not only as a new and more powerful means of attaining Buddha-hood

43. Christian K. Wedemeyer, *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism: History, Semiology, and Transgression in the Indian Traditions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 22.

44. Alexis Sanderson, “The Śaiva Age: The Rise and Dominance of Śaivism during the Early Medieval Period,” in Shingo EINO, ed., *Genesis and Development of Tantrism* (Tokyo: Institute of Oriental Culture, University of Tokyo, 2009), 41–349; 124.

but also, as in the Śaiva case, as enabling the production of supernatural effects (*siddhiḥ*) such as averting danger (*śāntiḥ*), the harming of enemies (*abhicārah*), and the control of rain (*varsāpaṇami* and *ativr̥ṣṭidhāraṇam*), through symbolically appropriate inflections of the constituents of these procedures.⁴⁵

Those who follow his argumentation regarding cross-tradition appropriation have further propagated the idea that the direction of appropriation was from Śaiva to Buddhist tantra.⁴⁶ There are other scholars, however, who disagree with this as a blanket claim. Gudrun Bühnemann, for example, has noted several goddesses who originate as Buddhist and are then borrowed into Śaiva tantra.⁴⁷ Wedemeyer has asserted that “there is substantial evidence of sustained and intense interaction between contemporaneous esoteric Śaiva and Buddhist communities. That said, it seems equally clear that the influence was mutual, with each tradition leaving significant traces of their own thought and practice on currents in the other.”⁴⁸

In a very important recent essay, Ronald Davidson has placed the theory of cross-tradition appropriation into a larger theoretical context.⁴⁹ He has pointed out four problematic presumptions inherent in the background of much of the scholarship on the origin of Buddhist tantra to date. “First, and most important, there is the supposition that the origins of tantrism are grounded in elite, intellectual formulae.” The second point is effectively the inverse: since by definition there is no extant literature from non-literate traditions, “such individuals cannot be reasonably postulated.”⁵⁰ Third, since “authentic tantric sources must be grounded only in literate intellectualist textual traditions, any reports about alternative non-literate groups must be considered fallacious or inconsequential.”⁵¹ Davidson’s fourth point is

45. Anderson, “The Śaiva Age,” 124.

46. See for example, Elizabeth English, *Vajrayoginī: Her Visualization, Rituals, and Forms* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2002), 37, 38.

47. Gudrun Bühnemann, *The Iconography of Hindu Tantric Deities*, 2 vols. (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 2000).

48. Wedemeyer, *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism*, 31. His arguments in this regard are given in chap. 5, part 3.

49. Ronald Davidson, “Magicians, Sorcerers and Witches: Considering Pretantric, Non-sectarian Sources of Tantric Practices,” *Religions* 8, no. 10 (2017): 2.

50. *Ibid.*, 2.

51. *Ibid.*, 2.

very telling for its insight into the nature of some of the current work on the history of tantra. It is that the arguments made by scholars that follow from the preceding three presumptions are also developed on the basis of the “literate traditions that survive to this day,” together with claims to priority made by members of those traditions, and the presumption that other systems are derivative.⁵² This latter point recalls a version of what I have termed elsewhere “retrospectivist historiography,” in which history is written in terms of those forms prominent in the present on the projection of the idea that the tradition forms an integral unity from reaching its inception.

In the points made by Davidson above, those relating to the discounting of non-literate traditions connect with the idea of a substratum of Indian religious culture, as described by David Ruegg.⁵³ As already noted above, it is a long-standing characteristic of religious studies to only value religious traditions that are scriptural in nature, that is, claim to be based on revealed texts.⁵⁴ Categories related to religious substratum are those of “folk religion,” “popular religion,” and “lived religion,” though each emphasizes different dimensions of a large field of phenomena. My own understanding of the idea of a cultural substratum of religion is influenced by Anna Seidel’s Evans-Wentz lecture given at Stanford University in 1988.⁵⁵ The image she used for describing the cultural bases for the “three religions” of China was islands rising above the waters of the ocean. Above the waves, the three appear distinct from one another. This is the institutionalized realm of professional priests, monks, literati, and so on, who are like life forms dwelling on the surfaces of each island. Each religious group has a vested interest in marking off their own island as distinctly separate from the others, and this becomes increasingly important the higher up the institutional hierarchies one goes. Below the waves, however, they are not only all connected at the ocean’s floor, but a vast

52. *Ibid.*, 2.

53. David Seyfort Ruegg, *The Symbiosis of Buddhism with Brahmanism/Hinduism in South Asia and of Buddhism with “Local Cults” in Tibet and the Himalayan Region* (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2007).

54. Richard K. Payne, “‘Japanese Buddhism’: Constructions and Deconstructions,” in *The Dao Companion to Japanese Buddhist Philosophy*, ed. Gereon Kopf (Heidelberg: Springer, 2018), 33.

55. “Corruptible Body, Incorruptible Body, Substitute Body: Modes of Immortality in China.”

array of other forms—independent mediums, healers, etc.—swim in the waters that surround all of the islands, waters from which the specialists themselves not only originate (largely) but to which they must constantly refer in order to maintain the support they need. One of the benefits of the metaphor of saturated solutions introduced above is that it need not be taken dichotomously, as several of the categories discussed here are. It is the broadly shared religious conceptions that constitute part of the culture of a society, what as we noted above Stone describes as a reservoir of resources.

Davidson has provided a very insightful critique of Ruegg's formulation of a "pan-Indian religious substratum," calling attention not only to the historical bases of the idea but also to the unsustainable metaphysical claims it involves.⁵⁶ While Davidson does not frame his own critique in this way, it is again worth highlighting that metaphors are not theories. Metaphors, such as substrata, reservoirs, and saturated solutions, may serve to make the unfamiliar familiar by analogy, but theories entail causal explanations. Metaphors may play key roles in the constitution of theories, but the two are distinct.

VI. JAIN TANTRA

While often overlooked because of the dominance of Hinduism in India, the origins of the Jain tradition are roughly contemporaneous with those of Buddhism. And, just as tantric forms of both Hinduism and Buddhism were created in the early medieval period, so also are there Jain forms of tantra.

Paul Dundas gives an explanation for these developments in medieval India, irrelevant of tradition.

Tantric practices have tended to flourish in India whenever a religious establishment that claims a monopoly on purity of behavior has erected boundaries against what it perceives to be the encroaching dangers of society and nature. The response that is generated

56. Ronald Davidson, review of *The Symbiosis of Buddhism with Brahmanism/Hinduism in South Asia and of Buddhism with "Local Cults" in Tibet and the Himalayan Plateau*, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 129, no. 1 (2009): 115–117. My thanks to Ron for calling this review to my attention.

would see true religiosity in radically experiential terms, linked to deliberate breaching or ignoring of those boundaries.⁵⁷

As he points out, this is not, however, congruent with the kind of continuing emphasis on purity found in the Jain tradition—“there cannot be found within Jainism any serious claim that conventional social and moral values should be turned upside-down by engaging in antinomian sexual and ritual practices,”⁵⁸ and thus challenging the monothetic definitions of tantra that focus on antinomianism. Of what then does a tantric dimension of the Jain tradition consist, and what do those characteristics imply regarding the constraints on possible Buddhist–Jain exchanges of tantric praxis?

According to Dundas, with the increasing dominance of Śaiva forms of practice, “by around the eleventh century the Jains had evolved their own particular brand of *mantrasāstra* and attendant ritual.”⁵⁹ Ellen Gough describes the response to the increasing dominance of Śaiva as a “remodeling [which] meant the widespread acceptance of tantric practices such as the use of esoteric *mantras* and elaborate ritual diagrams (*maṇḍala*, *yantra*, *cakra*, etc.)”⁶⁰ Specifically, within the Jain tradition Gough explores the influence of Śaiva tantra on the colors employed in the representations of *tīrthaṅkaras* in the Jain *Rṣimaṇḍala*, which has the seed syllable HRĪM at its center.

Like Dundas, John Cort indicates that tantric practices were understood by Jains as solely effective in the mundane realm. “What is not found in Jain Tantra is the development of a full-scale alternative Tantric path to liberation such as is found in some Hindu and Buddhist Tantric schools.”⁶¹ In addition Cort notes that “Jain Tantric rites rarely

57. Paul Dundas, “The Jain Monk Jinapati Sūri Gets the Better of a Nāth Yogi,” in *Tantra in Practice*, ed. David Gordon White (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 231–238; 231.

58. Dundas, “The Jain Monk Jinapati Sūri Gets the Better of a Nāth Yogi,” 231. See also, Paul Dundas, “Becoming Gautama: Mantra and History in Śvetāmbara Jainism,” in *Open Boundaries: Jain Communities and Cultures in Indian History*, ed. John E. Cort (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 31–52; 45.

59. Dundas, “The Jain Monk Jinapati Sūri Gets the Better of a Nāth Yogi,” 232.

60. Ellen Gough, “Shades of Enlightenment: A Jain Tantric Diagram and the Colours of the Tīrthaṅkaras,” *International Journal of Jaina Studies* 8, no. 1 (2012): 1–47; 1.

61. John Cort, “Worship of Bell-Ears the Great Hero, a Jain Tantric Deity,” in *Tantra in Practice*, ed. David Gordon White (Princeton: Princeton University

involve any elaborate form of meditation or visualization; usually the simple repetition of mantra suffices.”⁶² The understanding of mantra in the Jain tradition lacks, however, the kind of theorizing found in the other tantric traditions.

Jain metaphysicians throughout the medieval period were to insist that sound, as an atomic modification, could not be eternal, with the consequence that brahman claims for the non-created nature of the Veda, regarded as the ultimate source of all *mantras*, were viewed as bogus. It may well be that as a result of their substance-based approach to linguistic utterance the Jains were unwilling to ascribe to any form of speech an exclusively transcendent role which might otherwise have smoothed the way to a general acceptance by them of a Vedic-style phonic absolute conceived as the central creative force in the universe.⁶³

Buddhist philosophical emphasis on the impermanence of sound, well-known in the paradigmatic examples of reasoning given by Buddhist epistemologists, is comparable to the Jain substance theory. Tantric Buddhists, however, negotiated this theoretical problem in a fashion that allowed them to adhere to the doctrinally central teaching of impermanence and still argue for the efficacy of mantra.⁶⁴ The metaphysical issues, however, did not create an insuperable barrier to the “mantricization” of Jainism, which eventually accepted “what had become the generalized Indian attitude that the careful manipulation of sanctified sound in a ritual or meditative context could ensure accelerated advancement towards a variety of goals.”⁶⁵

In addition to the use of mantra, there is a potentially important similarity between Buddhist and Jain tantra in the form of ritual identification. Gautama is the disciple of Mahāvīra (fl. early sixth century BCE), the twenty-fourth *tīrthaṅkara*, that is, one who makes a ford across to liberation. Mahāvīra is considered to have reestablished the Jain tradition in the current age. Gautama himself becomes cult figure and in the “Śvetāmbara *sūrimantra* ritual...the presiding guru can

Press, 2000), 417–433; 417.

62. *Ibid.*, 417.

63. Dundas, “Becoming Gautama,” 34.

64. Richard K. Payne, *Language in the Buddhist Tantra of Japan* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 55–62.

65. Dundas, “Becoming Gautama,” 35.

summon and identify with Gautama, [which] provides a markedly different method of advancing towards the goal, more akin to Tantrism than anything else found in Jainism.”⁶⁶ The practices that Dundas describes are limited within the tradition—“it must be stressed that the Jain religion has never entertained the possibility of utilizing ritual manipulation of sexual activity and concomitant varieties of antinomian behavior generally associated with the phenomenon known as Tantrism.”⁶⁷ If we look at practices associated with tantra that do not fall within the narrow conceptions of tantra as antinomian and degenerate, it turns out that the Jain tradition includes many aspects in common with tantric traditions.

VII. LOOKING OVER THE OVERVIEW

Beginning with the problems inherent in the received conceptions of tantra, we then moved on to consider some of the approaches taken to its definition. Avoiding both monothetic and polythetic approaches, I have suggested a bibliographic approach. There is a corpus of works identified as tantras, and tantric Buddhism can be identified as the praxes found in those texts. This is a definition in the rather sense of delimiting a field of discourse, rather than the more common ones of listing characteristics or thinking in terms of essence and manifestation or genus and species. While it is a stipulative definition, it is not arbitrary or idiosyncratic.

Some of the contemporary issues identified include the invisibility of tantra to those who, lacking the necessary background knowledge, fail to recognize it for what it is. Linear historiographies too often streamline our understanding, sometimes even in the service of sectarian ends. The rhetoric of center and periphery, and defaulting to categorizing according to contemporary nation-states, can obscure connections that would otherwise bring tantric aspects into the discussion. And the common approach of religious studies to presume autonomous sectarian institutions, rather than networks and discourses, reinforces the exclusion of tantra from sectarian histories.

While the importance of tantric Buddhism in East Asia has been acknowledged for almost a decade, tantric strains in Southeast Asia have only more recently become recognized areas of scholarly research. The

66. *Ibid.*, 44.

67. *Ibid.*, 45.

association between Śaiva tantra and Buddhist tantra remains an area of scholarly contestation, along with the nature and role of popular religious culture as an ongoing source for the development of Buddhist tantra. Newly opened to scholarly attention is the role of tantra in the Jain tradition.

Addressing methodological issues has allowed for both an increase in the breadth of inquiry into tantric Buddhism and also the deepening of those studies.

