

Transpositions of Metaphor and Imagery in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* and Tantric Buddhist Practice

David L. McMahan

Franklin & Marshall College

TANTRIC BUDDHIST *SĀDHANA*-S, the complex visualization practices in which a practitioner first visualizes and then identifies him- or herself with a buddha or bodhisattva, are no doubt the result of a confluence of many cultural, historical, and religious phenomena ranging from folk practices and re-appropriation of Vedic themes to a working out of the complex doctrines of the Mahayana in ritual form, the further elaboration of visualizations of buddhas (*buddhānusmṛti*), and even shamanic practices. In this paper, I would like to suggest one small piece of this historical puzzle that, I believe, helps elucidate one facet of the relationship between the early esoteric tantric tradition in India and the more mainstream Mahayana sutras. Specifically, I would like to point out a pattern of imagery found in a number of Mahayana sutras presenting narratives of the encounter of a disciple with a buddha or bodhisattva—narratives that, I argue, constitute the prototype for tantric *sādhana*-s. Moreover, *sādhana*-s constitute a ritualization of these narratives. The episodes in which this pattern is most obvious are in the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra*, a *circa* second-century Indian Mahayana text in which the hero of the story, Sudhana, encounters many bodhisattvas in his pilgrimage through South Asia. My contention is that there was a process in the development of *sādhana*-s—and perhaps in their incorporation into the elite traditions of Mahayana—that involved a transition from doctrine and metaphor to imagery in the Mahayana sutras, and then from imagery to ritual in tantra.

I will illustrate the first transition, which involves a literary device that I will call the “concretization of doctrine,” with a passage from the *Samādhirāja Sūtra*. In this sutra, the Buddha expounds a form of meditative concentration (*samādhi*) called “manifestation of the sameness of the essential nature of all dharmas.” He explains that the one characteristic necessary for acquiring a pure mind is that of sameness or evenness (*sama*) of mind toward all beings. This teaching brings earlier teachings of equanimity (*upekṣa*), as an attitude or disposition, together with the Mahayana understanding that all elements of existence are the same, that is that their basic nature is empty. After the Buddha gives several attitudes and practices entailed in this *samādhi*, a

number of events occur; many in the audience achieve various degrees of understanding and awakening, the earth quakes, and finally:

a boundless light flooded the world and the whole world system.... All living beings were suffused with that light. And the sun and moon, though powerful, mighty and strong, seemed not to shine at all. Even the pitch-dark spaces between worlds, even they were suffused by that light, and the beings who had been reborn there suddenly became aware of each other, saying, "What! Could it be that another being has also been reborn here!" And so it was down to the great Avīci Hell.¹

Here the idea of the sameness of all dharmas is rendered in the metaphor of light, which is turned into a display of visual imagery. Light flooding the world is a common image in Mahayana sutras, and in this particular case, the event of light suffusing and penetrating all corners of the world, from the highest realms in which the gods live to the lowest hell-realms equally, is a concrete symbol for the very doctrine of the sameness of all dharmas that is propounded by the Buddha just previous to this event. First, the Buddha preaches an attitude of equanimity toward all beings and an understanding of the sameness of the nature of all dharmas. Then, the light manifests as a symbol of this concept, permeating the highest and lowest worlds equally without any partiality or discrimination. This example suggests that symbolic visual imagery in this text is an attempt to evoke a sensual presentation homologous with a cognitive concept. A specific doctrine or idea is concretized in a visual image.

Visual imagery like this from the sutras becomes further concretized and embodied in tantric *sādhana*-s. These practices focus on *maṇḍala*-s containing a rich array of imagery and symbolism. Tantric *maṇḍala*-s depict a central buddha or bodhisattva in his or her buddha-field, and generally include the representation of a palace on a lotus coming out of the sea, the central figure in the palace, and buddhas and bodhisattvas arranged directionally around it, along with a variety of other scenes that vary from *maṇḍala* to *maṇḍala*. All of the details of the deities' gestures, dress, implements, positions, facial expressions, and surrounding environment are concretizations of specific Buddhist concepts. A *sādhana* entails the construction of a *maṇḍala* in the imagination of the meditator—often in explicit detail and with all of these cognitive concepts embodied in the *maṇḍala* in mind—and his or her symbolic transmutation into an awakened being by identifying body, speech, and mind with those of the represented deity. The process also includes a strong element of devotional practice and the abundant use of the symbolic vocabulary of tantric Buddhism, including visual symbols, *mudrā*-s, and mantras associated with individual buddhas.

Although tantric *sādhana*-s vary considerably in content, using many different deities as objects of meditation, most show basic structural similarities. The following is an outline of the stages that are often standard in Buddhist *sādhana*-s. I am drawing primarily from three visualizations of Tārā found in the *Sāadhanamāla*, a collection of disparate *sādhana*-s compiled in the eleventh century, but containing many practices dating from the earlier phases of tantric Buddhism.² The basic stages include preliminary practices such as purifying both the practitioner and the site, uttering “seed syllables,” paying homage to relevant buddhas and bodhisattvas, confessing sins, dedicating merit from the practice to all beings, and pronouncing the three refuges. The main visualization generally consists of envisioning in the mind’s eye a buddha or bodhisattva, often in fairly explicit detail, with various symbolic implements and physical characteristics. This “generation phase” is essentially the construction of a *maṇḍala* in the imagination. In some *tantra*-s, detailed instructions are given for visualization of quite intricate *maṇḍala*-s. Some have a multi-leveled palace with pillars, banners, and jewels. The *Guhyasamāja maṇḍala* has thirty-two deities, all of whom are to be envisioned having precise postures, gestures, colors, and ornaments. All of these are to be maintained in the mind’s eye in detail. A passage from a Tārā *sādhana* gives a flavor of the language:

Then one should visualize the blessed, holy Tārā proceeding from the yellow seed syllable *tām* situated on the spotless sphere of the moon, which is inside the filaments of a lotus in full flower, in the middle of the moon already visualized in one’s heart. One should conceive her as deep green in color, with two arms, a smiling face, endowed with every virtue, and free of all defects, adorned with jewelry of heavenly gold, rubies, pearls, and jewels. Her two breasts are decorated with beautiful garlands, her arms wrapped in bracelets and bangles.... She is a radiant and seductive figure in the prime of youth, with eyes like a blue autumn lotus, her body dressed in heavenly garments, seated in a half-lotus posture in a circle of light rays as large as a cart-wheel. With her right hand, she makes the sign of granting wishes; in her left she holds a blue lotus flower in full bloom. One may cultivate this image of the blessed one as long as one wishes.

Then, the [image of] the blessed one [Tārā] is led away on numerous bundles of light-rays illuminating the triple world. [The rays] issue from the yellow seed syllable *tām*, which is in the filaments of the lotus in the circle of the moon situated in one’s heart. Then one sees the blessed one, perfect since beginningless time, as the essence of truth (*jñānasattva*), brought forth from empty space. When she has been brought forth and established on the firma-

ment, one should receive her by offering oblation at her feet with scented water and fragrant flowers in a jeweled vase. One should worship her ... with flowers, incense, lamps, food, scents, garlands, perfumes, garments, umbrellas, flags, bells, banners, and so on.³

The culmination of the practice is the "completion phase," the identification of the practitioner with the deity. In some *sādhana*-s, such as the one above, the practitioner achieves this identification envisioning the *maṇḍala* in front of him or her and then "entering" the *maṇḍala* and merging with the deity. Others avoid the initial duality altogether and instruct the practitioner to envision him- or herself from the outset as the deity.⁴ In the Tārā *sādhana* quoted above, the visualization ends with the instruction to see the entire universe and oneself as Tārā. The entire scene is then dissolved back into emptiness through a series of stages.

With this ritual in mind, let us turn to the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra*. The text was composed in India, and by the time of its translation into Chinese by Buddhahadra in the early fifth century, it had been incorporated into the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, a large collection of a number of sutras. The *Gaṇḍavyūha* and the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra*, another text within the *Avatamsaka* collection, circulated in India as separate texts before this incorporation.⁵ The *Gaṇḍavyūha* itself was composed between the first and early third centuries.⁶ The location of its initial composition was likely in southern India, where most of the story takes place; however, the *Gaṇḍavyūha* and the *Avatamsaka* as a whole were important in northern India and Central Asia, and portions of the extant versions were likely composed and augmented there. When the latter was originally brought to China, it was from Khotan rather than from India, and historically later portions of the text refer to Kashgar and even China.⁷ Thus it is a composite product of the cosmopolitan, multi-cultural milieu of South and Central Asia in the early centuries of the common era. The *Gaṇḍavyūha* itself, however, is a product of India.

The extent of the *Gaṇḍavyūha*'s influence in the Indian cultural sphere is unclear. There is relatively little surviving commentary from India on the text in comparison to that on works such as the Perfection of Wisdom literature. Nevertheless, it was undoubtedly part of the Buddhist curriculum in the great Buddhist universities and was widely read by Indian scholars, as it is referred to in a number of prominent commentarial texts including the **Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśaśāstra*, Śāntideva's *Śikṣasamuccaya* and *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Kamalaśīla's first *Bhāvanākrama*, and Bhāvaviveka's *Madhyamakahrdayakārikās*.⁸ It occupies a prominent place in the Nepalese canon as one of the nine *Vaipulya* texts, but made its greatest impact in East Asia, where the *Avatamsaka* became the basis for the Hua-yen school in China and the Kegon in Japan. The *Gaṇḍavyūha* was evidently important during the Buddhist period in Indonesia, as extensive scenes from it are represented on the great Buddhist monument Barabudur.⁹

The contents of the sutra are full of luxuriant—even extravagant—visionary imagery. In the opening passage of the text we find the Buddha in Jeta Grove at Rājagṛha, the place of many of the Buddha's sutra dialogues. In the Pāli suttas, the Buddha is often surrounded by a group of his disciples, is asked a question, and gives a discourse in reply. The *Gaṇḍavyūha* begins in this standard way, except that he is in a palace or peak-roofed building (Skt. *kūṭāgāra*). But the simple scene immediately gives way to a lavish visionary episode in which the dwelling expands, becoming infinitely vast.

The surface of the earth appeared to be made of an indestructible diamond, and the ground covered with a net of all the finest jewels, strewn with flowers of many jewels, with enormous gems strewn all over; it was adorned with sapphire pillars, with well-proportioned decorations of world-illuminating pearls from the finest water, with all kinds of gems, combined in pairs, adorned with heaps of gold and jewels, with a dazzling array of turrets, arches, chambers, windows, and balconies made of all kinds of precious stones, arrayed in the forms of all world-rulers, and embellished with oceans of worlds of jewels, covered with flags, banners, and pennants flying in front of all the portals, the adornments pervading the cosmos with a network of lights.... The Jeta grove and buddha-fields as numerous as particles within untold buddha-fields all became co-extensive.¹⁰

The entire first chapter slowly develops this scene that had suddenly arisen before the group in Jeta Grove. There are endlessly winding rivers of fragrant water that murmur the teachings of the buddhas; palaces that float by in the air; countless mountains arrayed all around; clouds laced with webs of jewels and raining down diamonds, garlands, flowers, and multi-colored robes; celestial maidens flying through the air trailing banners behind them while countless lotus blossoms rustle in the incense-filled air. After the initial description of the scene, bodhisattvas from distant world-systems in the ten directions begin to arrive, and with each of their appearances, more miraculous scenes emerge. The wonders of what has now become a buddha-field are described in rich detail, and by the end of the chapter, we have a geometrical array of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and disciples in a circle—and the text actually uses the term “*maṇḍala*,” no doubt in its primary meaning as simply “circle”—surrounding Śākyamuni Buddha in an idealized, mythical landscape filled lights, jewels, rivers, and palaces.

The *Gaṇḍavyūha* is by no means unique in constructing such “proto-*maṇḍala*-s”; quite a number of Mahayana sutras contain such visionary episodes that establish a sacred, mythical space by arranging buddhas and bodhisattvas in a geometric pattern. The *Suvarṇaprabhāsottama Sūtra* offers

a more succinct account of such a transformation of an ordinary scene into a *maṇḍala* in the story of a devout bodhisattva named Ruciraketu. Interestingly, the following episode appears to take place while Ruciraketu is practicing recollection of the Buddha (Skt. *buddhānusmṛti*), a visualization exercise not unlike later *sādhana*-s in which the practitioner envisions the Buddha in front of him or her, contemplating his qualities.

While Ruciraketu was recollecting the qualities of the Buddha, his house became immense and extensive, made of cat's eye, adorned with numerous divine jewels, and, transformed by the tathāgata, it was filled with fragrance beyond the divine. And in the house there appeared in the four directions, seats made of divine gems. On those seats were divine cushions covered with fine cotton cloth, and on the cushions were divine lotuses adorned with jewels, transformations brought about by the tathāgata. And on those lotuses appeared four blessed buddhas: in the east appeared the tathāgata Akṣobhya; in the south appeared the tathāgata Ratnaketu; in the west appeared the tathāgata Amitāyus; in the north appeared the tathāgata Dundabhisvara.

Then, as the great city of Rājagṛha was pervaded with a great light, the great three-fold multiple world system and world systems in the ten directions as numerous as the grains of sand in the Ganges river became pervaded with light. Divine flowers rained down, heavenly musical instruments were heard, and the beings in the great three-fold multiple world system became, by the Buddha's power, possessed of divine bliss.¹¹

Here we see a similar theme of a dwelling becoming infinitely vast and transforming into a Pure Land with buddhas appearing in each of the cardinal directions, unmistakably suggesting *maṇḍala* imagery.¹² Such imagery serves various functions in Mahayana sutras. It establishes the place as a *tīrtha*, a sacred place conducive to communion between sacred and ordinary beings. It also suggests a "buddha's-eye view" of the scene, thus inviting the reader to see the world as a buddha does by participating in his or her vision. Moreover, it makes up for a certain lack of credibility that Mahayana sutra writers must have experienced when writing "Thus have I heard" by suggesting that the events of the sutra occurred on a supernatural plane of existence and thus were not available to those who had long ago established the Pāli Canon. In fact, such scenes are a common literary device in Mahayana sutras.¹³

Having established the setting of the sutra as a buddha-field, the subsequent chapters of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* narrate the story of Sudhana visiting numerous colorful bodhisattvas around South Asia trying to discover the

“practice of the bodhisattvas.” These include monks, nuns, ascetics, practitioners of various crafts, goddesses, children, and quite a few laywomen, including even a prostitute who draws men to the dharma using “kisses and embraces.” All illustrate and exemplify some facet of Buddhist thought or practice. Many of Sudhana’s encounters are variations on the initial visionary scene produced by the Buddha, and include approaching a seemingly ordinary setting only to find it suddenly transformed into an extraordinary display in the presence of the bodhisattva. Although each bodhisattva is especially skilled in some element of dharma practice, they all (except the last two) send Sudhana to the next teacher, claiming that they ultimately don’t know the practice of the bodhisattva.

In the final two climactic encounters, Sudhana presumably finds what he is looking for when he visits Maitreya and Samantabhadra. Upon encountering Maitreya, the buddha of the future, Sudhana finds himself before the immense “tower [or palace—again, a *kūṭāgāra*] of the adornments of Vairocana.” The palace represents the *dharmadhātu*, the realm of suchness wherein all phenomena interpenetrate and the microcosm and macrocosm become co-extensive. Maitreya leads Sudhana through the door into the palace, and within it Sudhana sees that it is immeasurably vast, filling all of space, and adorned with the lavish scenery that is by now a common motif in the *Gaṇḍavyūha*: jewels, banners, flowers, and immense mansions with archways, mirrors, turrets, chambers, sculptures, lush vegetation, singing birds, and lotus ponds. He also sees hundreds of thousands of other similar structures symmetrically arrayed in all directions. Sudhana bows reverently and at that moment, sees himself in all of the structures. Then he sees Maitreya’s entire career as a bodhisattva with different episodes and lifetimes visible in each of the palaces. Among them he then sees one tower in the center, larger than the rest, and in it he beholds a billion-world universe, within which are one hundred million sets of four continents. Within each of these he sees Maitreya enacting the career of a bodhisattva. On the walls of the towers, within each piece in the vast mosaic patterns covering the surface, he sees similar scenes. Just as he perceives infinite spatial depths, he sees into vast stretches of time, both past and future, and seems to experience countless eons in just a few moments. Then, with a snap of his finger, Maitreya causes the entire spectacle to disappear, declaring: “This is the nature of things; all elements of existence are characterized by malleability and impermanence, and are controlled by the knowledge of the bodhisattvas; thus, they are by nature not fully real, but are like illusions, dreams, reflections.”¹⁴

In his final encounter, Sudhana approaches the bodhisattva Samantabhadra. After a number of preliminary signs and displays of light, Sudhana, in a state of profound concentration and with all his energy and senses directed toward the vision of Samantabhadra, sees the great bodhisattva seated on a

lotus. Light rays emanate from Samantabhadra's body illuminating all the worlds throughout the cosmos, and upon contemplation of Samantabhadra's body, Sudhana sees within it billions of buddha-fields in all their detail, with rivers, oceans, jewel mountains, continents, villages, forests, and countless different orders of life. He also sees the succession of all of these worlds simultaneously in the endless past and infinite future eons.¹⁵

Seeing this vision, he attains the "ten states of perfect knowledge" and, upon Samantabhadra's laying his hand on Sudhana's head, attains even deeper forms of awakening, seeing in the countless world-systems now visible to him countless Samantabhadras laying hands on countless Sudhanas. In the final phase of Sudhana's encounter with the great bodhisattva, upon contemplating Samantabhadra's body, he is able to see inside it, wherein he sees countless buddha-fields containing numerous buddhas surrounded by assemblies of bodhisattvas all teaching the dharma. He sees countless universes inside the pores of Samantabhadra's body, all containing various orders of sentient beings. Then he enters into Samantabhadra's body and the worlds therein, and begins enacting the career of a bodhisattva, thus attaining his sought-after practice of the bodhisattvas.

Then, Sudhana, contemplating the body of the bodhisattva Samantabhadra, saw in each pore untold multitudes of buddha-fields, each filled with countless buddhas. And in each of the buddha-fields, he saw the buddhas surrounded by assemblies of bodhisattvas. He saw all of these multitudes of lands situated and arranged in various ways, in various patterns, with multiple manifestations, mountain ranges, clouds in the sky, various buddhas arising, and various proclamations of the wheel of dharma. And just as he saw in one pore, he saw in every pore, in all of the marks [of a superior person], in the limbs and parts of Samantabhadra's body. In each he saw multitudes of worlds, and from them emerged clouds of created buddha-bodies, as many as the number of atoms in all buddha-fields, pervading all worlds in the ten directions and bringing developing beings to full awakening.

Then Sudhana, guided by the words and teachings of the bodhisattva Samantabhadra, entered into all the worlds within Samantabhadra's body and cultivated beings there toward maturity.... As he entered one buddha-field with qualities as many as atoms in untold buddha-fields within Samantabhadra, so with each moment of awareness he entered more such buddha-fields; and as in one pore, so it was in all pores. In each moment of awareness he proceeded further among worlds as countless as atoms in untold buddha-fields, going into worlds of endless eons—and still he did not come to an end.... He moved through one buddha-field in an

eon. He moved through another in as many eons as atoms in untold buddha-fields without moving from that field. In each moment of awareness he cultivated beings toward full awakening. Thus he continued until he achieved equality with Samantabhadra in his practices and vows, and with all tathāgatas in their pervasion of all buddha-fields, in their fulfillment of practices, in their full awakening, visionary transformations, and visions, in their turning of the wheel of dharma, in their purity of knowledge, in their voice and speech, in their level of awakening, in their great friendliness and compassion, and in the inconceivable enlightening transformation of the bodhisattvas.¹⁶

This vivid passage describes a collapse of spatial and temporal categories as Sudhana enters many worlds simultaneously and, in a single moment of awareness, spends eons in each world. As he moves through Samantabhadra's cosmic body, he attains "equality with Samantabhadra," becoming identified with him with respect to dharma practice.

There exist some marked similarities between the imagery and structure of the visionary episodes of the *Gaṇḍhavyūha* and those of tantric *sādhana*-s. If we look only at the three visionary episodes I have mentioned in the *Gaṇḍhavyūha*—the opening scene with Śākyamuni, Maitreya's palace, and the merging with Samantabhadra—we see the basic components of a *sādhana*. The first is the visionary construction of an idealized, sacred environment—a geometrically arrayed *maṇḍala* with a central buddha or bodhisattva and various other figures surrounding him or her. Introductory passages in which the Buddha creates (or reveals) a Pure Land in the midst of the ordinary world are common in Mahayana sutras and must surely have been models for the *maṇḍala*-s used by *tantrika*-s.

Although the Tārā *sādhana* quoted above does not contain one, the palace (Skt. *kūṭāgāra*) is a prominent theme in both the *Gaṇḍhavyūha* and tantric *sādhana*-s. This architectural structure appears to have had a special significance to Indian Buddhists. The Buddha appears in one at the beginning of the sutra, and Sudhana's vision under the guidance of Maitreya is that of the cosmos presented as an immense *kūṭāgāra* with multiple *kūṭāgāra*-s inside. In some *tantra*-s, part of the generation phase is "generation of the residence," which contains a *kūṭāgāra* with seats for four deities.¹⁷ Indeed, many *maṇḍala*-s are themselves conceived of as palaces that are at the same time models of the cosmos or a buddha-field, and the visual representations of these palaces often contain the three-story, peaked-roof design of Indian *kūṭāgāra*-s. The palace-cosmos homology is quite prominent in the *Gaṇḍhavyūha*, which may contain its earliest extant representation in Buddhist literature.

The prominence of the palatial dwelling in Mahayana sutras is closely related to another homology that becomes widespread in Buddhism as it

becomes integrated into classical Indian culture: that of buddha and king. In both text and *maṇḍala*, buddhas preside over buddha-fields as ruler and as object of devotion. As the creator and leader of the realm, the buddha, although he or she is not described as a monarch in the literature, implicitly assumes the place of royalty. That buddhas were strongly associated with royalty is clear from the royal imagery in descriptions and artistic depictions of buddhas in their buddha-fields and especially the way the *kūṭāgāra* is represented as a magnificent royal palace. Similarly, tantric *maṇḍala*-s are full of royal symbolism and are directly related to royal power. The *maṇḍala* represents not only the cosmos, but the cosmic kingdom of a deity who inhabits the center of the *maṇḍala*, as the king stands at the center of the kingdom. The conquest of a kingdom was sometimes symbolized in India by the conquering king going to the four compass points in his realm, traveling the periphery, then coming back to the capital in the center.¹⁸ The royal imagery common to *maṇḍala*-s and sutras also draws on the prominent theme in India of the *cakravartin*, the divine king who turns the wheel of the kingdom from the center. Much of the other imagery found in both tantric *maṇḍala*-s and the *Gaṇḍhavyūha* is also suggestive of royalty, such as jewels, banners, garlands, and emanations of light from the bodies of buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Aside from the mere resemblance in imagery, though, the connection between the *Gaṇḍhavyūha* and *sādhana*-s is evident in crucial narrative and structural elements. For instance, when Sudhana approaches the various bodhisattvas on his journey, they often become radiant, supernatural beings, emitting lights and performing miraculous acts. Such transformations and displays call to mind tantric visualization in front of the practitioner, in which the meditator envisions a resplendent deity in front of him or her in terms similar to those used in describing the bodhisattvas in the *Gaṇḍhavyūha*. Most striking, however, is the theme of "entering," found in the *Gaṇḍhavyūha* and acted out in *sādhana*-s. Entering (Skt. *praveśa*) and related concepts, such as "penetration," are key metaphors in the Buddhist vocabulary of practice and awakening.¹⁹ In many Buddhist texts, they serve as metaphors for knowledge and discernment, denoting the penetration of insight through illusory forms and ideas to the truth of things as they are. Such metaphors are especially important in the *Gaṇḍhavyūha*; in fact, the entire text could be read as a rendering of such metaphors in visionary imagery, through its repeated images of the interpenetration of all phenomena as well as the final two chapters in which Sudhana enters first Maitreya's *kūṭāgāra*, and finally, Samantabhadra's body, thereby attaining full awakening. When Sudhana sees the world as it is, he sees each phenomenon as distinct and at the same time entering into every other phenomenon. In order to attain this unimpeded vision of all things in one thing and of one thing in all, he himself must enter the *dharmadhātu*, represented by Maitreya's palace, and

then Samanabhadra's cosmic body, where he sees himself reduplicated endlessly in all the vision's forms. As the *Samādhirāja* concretizes the notion of the sameness of all dharmas, the *Gaṇḍhavyūha* concretizes the metaphors of entering and penetration by presenting them in narrative visionary imagery. Tantric practitioners, in turn, embodied these metaphors and imagery by ritualizing such narratives and envisioning their own entry into the deity. Indeed, the encounter of Sudhana and Samantabhadra—with Samantabhadra's extraordinary appearance and Sudhana's entering into his body, thereby identifying himself with the great bodhisattva—is identical in its basic structure to the completion phase of a *sādhana*.

Even the phase of dissolution in the *sādhana*, in which the practitioner dissolves the image back into emptiness, appears to be prefigured in the *Gaṇḍhavyūha*. Maitreya, after showing Sudhana the spectacular vision of the cosmic *kūṭāgāra*, snaps his finger and makes the entire scene disappear, claiming that the world-appearance is controlled by the buddhas and bodhisattvas, and can be dissolved by them. It is just such a claim that is enacted in the *sādhana* when the practitioner ritually creates and dissolves a world, thereby appropriating the powers of the awakened beings.

From the similarity between tantric *sādhana*-s and such visionary episodes in the *Gaṇḍhavyūha* and other Mahayana sutras, I am led to believe that such episodes are not only a precedent to, but also a prototype of, tantric *maṇḍala*-s and visualizations, and that these practices are ritualizations of encounters such as those in the *Gaṇḍhavyūha*. That is, tantric *sādhana*-s are ritual reconstructions of the face-to-face encounter of disciple and awakened being represented in the sutras—an encounter that allows the practitioner to become symbolically identified with an awakened being, as Sudhana becomes identified with Samantabhadra.

While finding a great deal of the imagery common to tantric practices and *maṇḍala*-s present in the *Gaṇḍhavyūha*, a circa second century text, is surprising, finding the basic elements of the *sādhana* is quite unexpected given the lack of evidence for tantric Buddhism until centuries later.²⁰ It is on the issue of dating, however, that a potential problem with this argument occurs, for it is well-known that Mahayana sutras often contain interpolations from later dates and are, therefore, cumulative creations. Thus even though scholarly consensus puts the date of the *Gaṇḍhavyūha*'s composition around the second century, that does not mean the versions that we have in our libraries today accurately reflect early versions of the text. In fact, one could be tempted on the evidence I have presented to make precisely the opposite argument—that the *Gaṇḍhavyūha* was amended after the emergence of tantra by tantric-influenced scholars, and that the encounters described above reflect the later influence of the tradition (although tantric influence hardly seems necessary to explain the contents of the text). Nevertheless, although the sutra has, in fact, been appended and different versions of the

text have circulated in India, China, and Tibet, Luis Gomez's study of the extant manuscripts, as well as early references to the text in other Buddhist literature, show that early versions of the sutra, ones that clearly pre-date any known tantric traditions, *do* in fact contain all of the elements I have mentioned.²¹ We have, then, a second-century text containing the basic elements of the defining ritual of a tradition for which there is no evidence until hundreds of years later.

While it is risky to make historical assertions of "influence" based primarily on internal evidence and resemblance, I believe the similarities between the visionary encounters in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* and *sādhana*-s are clear enough as to constitute solid evidence of a historical connection. We must rely mostly on internal evidence for this assertion because so little is known about the history the *Gaṇḍavyūha* in India or of how it was used in that cultural context. It is apparent that it directly influenced at least one tantric text, the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*, but it is impossible to say from any other evidence, except from the text itself, that it contains "proto-tantric" material. Of course, these elements in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* do not provide an exclusive "explanation" for the emergence of tantric *sādhana*-s, which no doubt had a number of sources. They do, however, suggest a resource that *tantrika*-s likely drew upon in developing their rituals. In short, the Buddhist tantric *sādhana* is, among other things, a ritualization of narrative encounters between disciple and buddha or bodhisattva—an attempt to ritually re-create a mythical world and re-enact this ideal situation of encounter and identification with an awakened being in ritual time and space.

NOTES

1. Louis O. Gómez and Jonathan Silk, eds., "The Sūtra of the King of Samādhis," in *Studies in the Literature of the Great Vehicle: Three Mahāyāna Texts* (Ann Arbor: Collegiate Institute for the Study of Buddhist Literature and Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 1989).
2. Benoytosh Bhattacharya, ed., *Sādhnamāla* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1968). Some translations of Tārā *sādhana*-s from this text exist; see Edward Conze, ed., *Buddhist Meditation* (New York: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1956), pp. 133–139; Luis O. Gómez, "Two Tantric Meditations: Visualizing the Deity," in *Buddhism in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 318–327; and Martin Willson, *In Praise of Tārā: Songs of the Saviouress* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1986), pp. 337–350.
3. Bhattacharya, *Sādhnamāla*.
4. Tibetans sometimes divide visualizations into "generation in front" and "self-generation." See H. H. the Dalai Lama, Tsong-ka-pa, and Jeffrey Hopkins, *Deity Yoga in Action and Performance Tantras* (Ithica: Snow Lion Publications, 1981).
5. Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).
6. Hajime Nakamura, *Indian Buddhism: A Survey with Bibliographical Notes* (Japan: Kufs Publication, 1980); Luis O. Gómez, "Selected Verses from the *Gaṇḍavyūha*: Text, Critical Apparatus and Translation" (doctoral dissertation, Yale University, 1967).
7. Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism*.
8. Gomez, "Selected Verses from the *Gaṇḍavyūha*."
9. Luis O. Gómez, ed., *Barabudur: History and Significance of a Buddhist Monument*, Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series 2 (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1981).
10. P. L. Vaidya, ed., *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra* (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute, 1960).
11. S. Bagchi, ed., *Suvarṇaprabhāsa Sūtra*, Buddhist Sanskrit Texts No. 8. (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute, 1967).
12. Other Mahayana sutras containing such imagery include the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*, *Śūraṅgama*, *Pañcaviṃśatikasahasrika Prajñāpāramitā*, and *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*.
13. David L. McMahan, "Orality, Writing, and Authority in South Asian Buddhism: Visionary Literature and the Struggle for Legitimacy in the Mahāyāna," *History of Religions* 37, no. 3 (1998).

14. Vaidya, *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra*.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Geri H. Malandra, *Unfolding a Maṇḍala: The Buddhist Cave Temples at Ellora* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).
18. David Gordon White, introduction to *Tantra in Practice*, ed. David Gordon White (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
19. For an examination of the importance and function of these and other metaphors in Buddhism, see David L. McMahan, *Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahāyāna Buddhism* (New York and London: Routledge Curzon, 2002), chap. 2.
20. Scholarly consensus puts the emergence of tantra no earlier than the sixth or seventh century. See Stephen Hodge, "Considerations on the Dating and Geographical Origins of the *Mahāvairocanaḥbhisambodhi-sūtra*," in *The Buddhist Forum III*, eds. Tadeusz Skorupski and Ulrich Pagel (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1994), p. 59. The earliest extant Buddhist *maṇḍala*-s are at the Ellora Caves (11 and 12) and date from the seventh or early eighth century.
21. For a discussion of the history and translations of the text, see Gómez, *Selected Verses from the Gaṇḍavyūha*, pp. xxiii–xxxvii. I wish to thank Professor Gómez for confirming my information with respect to Chinese manuscripts.