

The Provocative Character of the “Mystical” Discourses on the Absolute Body in Indian Tantric Buddhism

Vesna A. Wallace

University of California Santa Barbara

IN THIS PAPER I wish to shed some light on the interpretative framework through which Indian tantric Buddhism fashions its esoteric identity in relation to its construction of the notion of the embodied ultimate truth. The main goal of this analytical endeavor is to demonstrate that in Indian esoteric Buddhism, two analytical categories that are central to the discourse of scholars of religion—the category of the “absolute body” and the category of the “esoteric” or “mystical” tradition—are brought together in the conception of the “gnostic body,” or the “body of gnosis” (*jñāna-kāya*). I also hope to illuminate the degree to which the Buddhist esoteric discourse on the “absolute body” is related to its exoteric Mahayana milieu. Before I embark on the analysis of the constructions of the “absolute body” in Indian tantric Buddhism, I would like to give a brief historical overview of the earlier Mahayana model of the embodiment of ultimate reality.

In Indian Mahayana Buddhism, the category of the “absolute body” is discussed in terms of the “dharma-body” (*dharma-kāya*), invariably equated with spiritual awakening. In the earliest Mahayana literature, specifically in the *Perfection of Wisdom* literature, the dharma-body is the Buddha’s spiritual body, which is distinct from the Buddha’s physical body (*rūpa-kāya*). It is the nature of buddhahood, the true reality (*dharmatā*), or suchness (*tathatā*), of all phenomena. But it is also the perfection of wisdom (*prajñā-pāramitā*) that realizes that true reality. Thus, it is both the object and subject of knowledge. The dharma-body is the realm of phenomena (*dharma-dhātu*), the cosmic domain, from which nothing is separate. Its ultimate nature is emptiness (*śūnyatā*), which is not something other than form (*rūpa*). Thus, all forms are of the same nature as the dharma-body, including linguistic ones. The dharma-body is also the body of the Buddha’s teaching, his doctrine (dharma), which expresses and embodies the true nature of phenomena. It knows itself as it is—as being empty of inherent existence and non-dual from all things. Therefore, it is called the “knowledge of all aspects” (*sarvākāra-jñatā*). In early Mahayana literature,

the emptiness of the dharma-body is discussed in terms of its existence by mere conceptual designation and its equality with all phenomena in terms of their common emptiness. As we shall see later, this early Mahayana conception of the “absolute body” serves as a basis for the elaborate theory of the gnostic body in esoteric Buddhism. However, Indian esoteric Buddhism interprets the emptiness of the gnostic body primarily in terms of its lack of atomic matter and the infinitude of its aspects, and not in terms of its existence by mere conceptual designation.¹ Likewise, it identifies the gnostic body with all phenomena not only in terms of their shared emptiness but in terms of bliss.

In the later Mahayana works of the Mind-Only school (*citta-mātra*), the dharma-body also became known as the self-contained “essential body” (*svābhāvika-kāya*). Although the terms “dharma-body” and “essential body” designate the same ultimate reality (non-dual, enlightened awareness), they specify two of its aspects. The dharma-body represents the support of all the qualities of buddhahood, whereas the essential body refers to its stainless, unconditioned nature, which is the suchness of all phenomena. As in the earlier Mahayana literature, here too, the dharma-body is the undifferentiated reality, which is the domain of all phenomena (*dharmadhātu*). In this later Mahayana tradition, we encounter a threefold classification of the Buddha’s body, according to which the other two bodies—namely, the “enjoyment-body” (*saṃbhoga-kāya*) and “emanation-body” (*nirmāṇa-kāya*)—are in fact the dharma-body manifesting in different planes of existence. This threefold classification of the Buddha’s body and the introduction of the concept of the essential body prepared the way for the later fourfold classification of the Buddha’s body in Indian esoteric Buddhism, where the fourth body, the gnostic body, is at times also referred to as the essential body.

The later Mahayana literature that is concerned with the buddha-nature (*buddhadhātu*) present in all sentient beings introduced a new mode of discourse on the “absolute body.” In this body of literature, the non-duality of the dharma-body and all sentient beings is discussed here *via positiva*, that is, in terms of the omnipresence of buddha-nature or the Buddha’s gnosis (*buddhajñāna*), instead of in terms of their emptiness of inherent existence. Buddha-nature is said to be the cause of the purity of the dharma-body and the domain of sentient beings (*sattvadhātu*). This conception of the naturally pure, unitary, and blissful buddha-nature, which due to being inherent to all sentient beings is the source and the result of their spiritual aspirations, shows the closest resemblance to the Buddhist tantric conception of the gnostic body as the innate bliss of all sentient beings.

In Mahayana literature, the discourse on the “absolute body” is primarily focused on the inexpressible transcendence of the dharma-body.

Consequently, the Mahayana resorts exclusively to analogical descriptions of the dharma-body, comparing it to a dream, an illusion, the sun covered by the clouds, and so on. However, Indian Buddhist *tantra*-s, specifically, the *Unexcelled Yoga* tantras (*anuttara-yoga-tantra*), are concerned with the gnostic body in both of its aspects—ultimate and phenomenal. In lieu of this, they talk about it not only by analogies but also in terms of the correspondences of its ultimate and multileveled phenomenal manifestations. According to the *Unexcelled Yoga* tantras, it is imperative to know the correspondences between the ultimate and conventional aspects of the gnostic body to conceptually understand the unitary nature of ultimate reality. Although Mahayana discourses on the dharma-body either implicitly or explicitly point to the all-pervasiveness of the “absolute body,” their characterizations of the “absolute body” as a domain of phenomena are not concerned with its multileveled, phenomenal aspects.

In Indian esoteric Buddhism, the “absolute body” is classified into ultimate and phenomenal bodies in accordance with the Mahayana theory of two realities—the ultimate and conventional. The ultimate gnostic body is a luminous, non-material, empty form, identified with ultimate reality itself. Hence, it is the ultimate source of all the other buddha-bodies. It is a single, unitary reality, which manifests on the multiple planes of existence. All the phenomenal bodies—cosmic, human, social, and others—correspond to the domain of conventional reality and are presented as phenomenal manifestations of the gnostic body. This view of the multifaceted gnostic body allows the Indian Buddhist *tantra*-s to speak about it not only in terms of the indescribable ultimate reality but also in cosmological, psycho-physiological, and social terms. In this respect, the Buddhist tantric formulations that pertain to the nature of the gnostic body, its manners of manifestation, and even some general methods of its realization bear features that correspond more to those of the non-Buddhist esoteric systems than to those of the Mahayana tradition.

Nevertheless, as Buddhist scholars are becoming more familiar with Indian esoteric Buddhism, they are discovering that although Indian Buddhist exoteric and esoteric traditions operate within differing theoretical and practical frameworks, they are not of a radically different nature, since they are rooted in similar religious, social, and cultural contexts. Furthermore, internal evidence shows that esoteric Buddhism in India did not see itself as utterly separated from its exoteric milieu. Rather, it saw itself as an integrative tradition, encompassing both exoteric and esoteric systems—that is, the system of perfections (*pāramitā-naya*) and the system of mantras (*mantra-naya*).² In the *Litany of the Names of Mañjuśrī* (*Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti*), which associates itself with the *Māyājālatantra*, it is said that the esoteric being Vajrasattva ascends the system of Mahayana and is the highest in that system.³ This assertion indicates that Indian esoteric

Buddhism understood itself as an expansion of the Mahayana system, as an implementation of a certain paradigm shift within the Mahayana tradition, which gave a new esoteric dimension to the Mahayana.

Before I venture into the discussion of the “mystical” discourse of the gnostic body in esoteric Buddhism, I would like first to turn to the Buddhist tantric interpretation of the notion of “mystical” or “esoteric.” Our prevalent usage of the term “esoteric” as an attribute to the set of ideas and practices that are secretly or privately taught to a group of the selected initiates in some degree corresponds to the way in which the Indian Buddhist tantric tradition defined itself. According to the *Stainless Light (Vimalaprabhā)* commentary on the *Kālacakrat Tantra*, a secret (*guhya*), or a mystery (*rahasya*), is the Vajrayāna, and the master (*adhipati*) of that secret is a *vajra*-being (*vajra-sattva*), known also as a *vajrī* (one who has a *vajra*), *vajra*-holder (*vajra-dhara*), or the bearer of secrets (*guhya-dhṛk*).⁴ To fully understand this self-definition of the Buddhist esoteric tradition, we must first look at its interpretations of the terms *vajra* and *vajrī*. The *vajra* is defined in the *Unexcelled Yoga* tantras as the non-emitted gnosis (*acyuta-jñāna*) of indivisible, supreme, and imperishable bliss. It is called “non-emitted” because it is associated with bliss that is not generated through sexual emission. One who has this gnosis of bliss is called a *vajrī*, or a *vajra*-holder;⁵ however, the *vajrī* is not something other than this immutable bliss that is self-aware. It is said to abide concealed in the womb of the *vajra*-lady (*vajra-yoṣit*), which is the body, speech, and mind of all the buddhas, also referred to as the three secret collections (*guhya-saṃhāra*).⁶ These three secret collections that constitute the *vajra*-holder are referred to as a womb of the *vajra*-lady because they are considered to be a source of all phenomena (*dharmodaya*). In the *Hevajrat Tantra*,⁷ this *vajra*-holder is said to be the most secret of all secrets (*guhyaṭiguhyatara*) for several reasons: it is the inconceivable non-duality, the inconceivable form of the Buddha, and it does not reveal itself to those who do not follow the path of *tantra*.⁸

Already in the early as well as in the later Mahayana literature, the dharma-body is compared to a *vajra* since it is the non-dual and indestructible reality.⁹ Since the time of the *Vedas*, according to which the god Indra slayed with a *vajra* (thunderbolt) the demon of darkness, called Vṛtra, the *vajra* has been understood as a symbol of unobstructed power in the indigenous religious traditions of South Asia. According to this Vedic mythological account, the demon Vṛtra, taking possession of clouds, obstructed the clarity of the sky and prevented the waters of life from falling on earth until he was struck by Indra’s *vajra*.¹⁰ As we shall see soon, there is no doubt that Indian esoteric Buddhism borrowed this symbol of a *vajra* as the symbol of the unhindered power and in part built on it its own interpretation of the qualities of enlightened awareness. In Indian esoteric Buddhism, a *vajra*, or a *vajrī*, is given different names. It is called the “*vajra*-

being," since it is unobstructed, authentic, and invincible awareness. It is unobstructed because it has the unlimited power to fully penetrate and eliminate one's afflictive and cognitive obscurations (*āvaraṇa*), which, like clouds, hinder the innate luminosity of one's own mind. For this reason, mental obscurations are often referred to as one's own internal demons, or Māras ("death"). I believe it is not incidental that both Sanskrit words, the demon's name *Vṛtra* ("coverer") and the word *āvaraṇa* ("obscurations")—which are etymologically related, as derived from the same Sanskrit verbal root *√vr*, meaning "to cover" or "to obscure"—are used in these two analogous contexts. Both the demon *Vṛtra* and one's mental obscurations, or Māras, represent the forces of death that can be destroyed only by an invincible *vajra*. Since this invincible *vajra* destroys mental obscurations, it is also called the *bhagavan*, "one who has the victory" (*bhaga*). Likewise, the Sanskrit word *saṃvṛti*, which designates provisional, conventional reality, is related to the same verbal root *√vr*, and its literal meaning is "covering" or "concealment." Its literal meaning implies that the conventional reality is that which obscures the true, ultimate reality, and therefore the goal is to eliminate it by the *vajra* of gnosis so that ultimate reality may be revealed.

Furthermore, according to Indian Buddhist *tantra*-s, although the *vajra*-being is the authentic basis of both phenomenal existence (*samsara*) and spiritual liberation (*nirvana*), it remains unaltered by them. Therefore, it is considered invincible and immutable. It is also regarded indivisible on the basis that it cannot be attained through debate because it is the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of all phenomena (*dharma*),¹¹ and that emptiness is also called *vajra* due to its indestructibility, indivisibility, and inability to be consumed. Likewise, this *vajra*-being is referred to as the "innate body" (*sahaja-kāya*), because the gnosis of innate bliss is said to be inherent to all sentient beings. It is also known as the gnostic body or a gnostic being (*jñāna-sattva*) on the ground that it is the self-produced, formless body of unobstructed gnosis. Moreover, it is called the "pure body" (*visuddha-kāya*) on the ground that it is radiant by nature, incorruptible, and invulnerable to karma, mental afflictions (*kleśa*), and their habitual propensities (*vāsanā*). It is also termed the "great seal" (*mahā-mudrā*), for there is nothing beyond it that one could achieve. It is the assurance of one's ultimate spiritual achievement. Lastly, just like the *dharma*-body in the early Mahayana literature, it is called the "perfection of wisdom," for it is the state of perfected gnosis.

One may rightly ask here, why does Indian tantric Buddhism consider the *vajra*, or gnosis of imperishable bliss, as secret, or esoteric? I see several possible answers to this question. First, it is stated in the Buddhist esoteric literature that the *vajra*, or the gnosis of sublime bliss, dwells hidden everywhere—not only within every sentient being, but also in sentient beings' natural and social environments, and in the *maṇḍala*.¹² Being concealed there by the elements, sense-faculties, sense-objects, and symbolic

representations, its true nature remains imperceptible, unknowable, and therefore secret. Second, it transcends all conceptual classifications such as “existence” and “non-existence.” Being self-awareness, it transcends the duality of subject and object, for it is simultaneously both knowledge and the object of knowledge. In this way, it is free of conceptualizations and inaccessible to the conceptual minds of others. Thirdly, since the gnostic body is devoid of atomic particles, it does not have a perceptible form; but it is not characterized by formlessness either, because its form is emptiness. Thus, transcending the duality of form and formlessness, it is hidden from ordinary visual and mental faculties. Consequently, as in the case of the dharma-body in the literature of Mahayana, its ultimate aspect can be talked about only in similes, being compared to space, an illusion, a dream, an illusory city, or a reflection in a prognostic mirror. All that one can say about its ultimate, empty form is that it is self-arisen from space and therefore similar to space in its all-pervasiveness and eternity. Since the gnostic body is an empty, immaterial form, it can assume all aspects, shapes, and colors. It can have an appearance of fire although it is not fire; it can appear with a liquid aspect, while not being water; or it can appear as being of the color white, despite the fact that it is devoid of any color due to its absence of matter. Thus, even though the gnostic body manifests in all aspects, forms, and colors everywhere, it remains hidden from those who are not trained in Buddhist esoteric yoga. However, it does not remain a mystery to those who are engaged in Buddhist tantric yoga, particularly in the six-phased yoga (*ṣaḍ-aṅga-yoga*). Due to the purificatory power of that yoga, the signs of its emergence spontaneously appear to the mind of the *yogī*, marking a gradual transformation of his or her psycho-physical constituents into the blissful and immaterial body of gnosis. Thus, the gnostic body can be directly realized only by fully awakened adepts who know the secret of the methods of achieving it and the accompanying signs of its emergence.

In Mahayana literature, the dharma-body is conceived as consisting of emptiness, or the liberating wisdom (*prajñā*) that sees the true nature of all phenomena, and of compassion (*karuṇā*) for all sentient beings. In contrast, in Indian Buddhist *tantra*-s, even though the gnostic body is represented as the indivisible unity of emptiness and compassion, these two facets of enlightened awareness are interpreted in a different way. The gnostic body is described as embodying the mutual absorption of wisdom and compassion, and is therefore said to be neither wisdom nor compassion. Furthermore, as we have already seen, in the *Unexcelled Yoga* tantras, emptiness is understood to be the form of the gnostic body, and compassion is said to be its mind of indestructible bliss. This non-dual empty form and blissful mind are figuratively described as a couple, as the primordial father and mother, whose union is the indestructible, androgynous state, the *vajra*-being, who is not only present in all things but is also their origin. This tantric conception of

the non-dual ultimate reality as androgynous, male-and-female, provides the basis for an androgynous model of humanity, of the social order, and of the cosmos as a whole. Scriptural evidence¹³ indicates that the neuter noun *vajra*-being is intentionally used here as a synonym for the gnostic body to reflect this androgynous image of ultimate reality. The mother and the father are the wisdom and method aspects of the gnostic body. A sign of the wisdom aspect is a lotus, symbolizing space, which is a support (*ādhāra*) of gnosis; and a sign of the method aspect is a *vajra*, symbolizing the gnosis of bliss, which arises in space and is therefore supported (*ādheya*) by space. Their indestructible unity is called the “imperishable *vajra-yoga*,” or the “*vajra*-being.” The term “*vajra*-being” itself is seen as the expression of the non-duality of the gnostic body, since the term “*vajra*” designates gnosis, or the knowledge of all aspects, and “being” (*sattva*) designates the body of knowledge of all aspects, the object of knowledge. The unity of these two is established as the *vajra*-being.¹⁴

Indian esoteric Buddhism does not reserve this imagery of a lotus and a *vajra* for the description of the unitary nature of the gnostic body in its ultimate aspect alone. It also applies this figurative language to the cosmic and human domains, where the lotus and the *vajra* represent the sun and the moon or the female and male sexual organs. Indian Buddhist *tantra*-s employ the same figurative language in their characterizations of ultimate and conventional realities for heuristic purposes, namely, to reveal that even the multifaceted phenomenal reality is unitary in itself and non-dual from the gnostic body.

In the context of esoteric Buddhism, the gnostic body differs from the dharma-body also in that it is the attainment of its own well-being and self-aware bliss, whereas the dharma-body, along with the enjoyment-body and the emanation-body, is the aspect in which the gnostic body appears for the sake of the well-being of others. For the benefit of highly realized bodhisattvas, it does not remain the self-aware bliss but appropriates the sign of the dharma-body, consisting of both gnosis (*jñāna*), or the non-conceptual apprehending mind, and consciousness (*vijñāna*), or the knowledge of someone else’s conceptual mind, which is the object of gnosis. These two—gnosis and consciousness—are seen as the wisdom and method aspect of the dharma-body. Thus, in Indian esoteric Buddhism, the conception of the wisdom and method aspects of the dharma-body does not directly correspond to that in Mahayana, where the dharma-body is said to be accessible only to the fully realized buddhas. Moreover, in the exoteric Mahayana tradition the dharma-body is the ultimate attainment of one’s own well-being, and the other two bodies are for the sake of others.

Furthermore, in the Mahayana discourse on the “absolute body,” the Buddha’s non-abiding in samsara or in nirvana is explained in terms of his invulnerability to samsaric suffering and his compassion for sentient be-

ings, out of which he remains engaged in the world. In Mahayana literature, although the Buddha engages in the world and shares the same emptiness of inherent existence with the world, the world is not his phenomenal body. According to Indian esoteric Buddhism, the gnostic body, which is the source of both nirvana and samsara, does not abide in either one of these, because in its empty aspect it is devoid of nirvana, and in its blissful aspect, it transcends the phenomenal world. Nevertheless, it is called samsara when it appears to sentient beings as the cosmos and its inhabitants. Thus, every domain of human experience is the misperceived gnostic body, which appears to ordinary sentient beings as impermanent, material forms, and in this way its true nature remains secret. The phenomenal aspects of the gnostic body—whether cosmic, social, or individual—are reflections of one's own spiritual ignorance whereby an ordinary person perceives a material form where actually there is none and identifies it as "I" or "mine."

The gnostic body also expresses itself in linguistic forms, although it itself is unutterable and has abandoned all verbal expression. As the sublime breath, it is recognized as the source of all utterances and as the progenitor of all the meanings of mantras. It is identified as the *vajra*-word, which is characterized by the absence of syllables, and as the omniscient language having two aspects—phenomenal and ultimate. In its phenomenal aspect, namely, in the form of syllables and mantras, the *vajra*-word grants mundane accomplishments (*siddhi*); and in its ultimate aspect, devoid of syllables, it brings about the ultimate accomplishment, or spiritual awakening. In accordance with this dual aspect of the *vajra*-word, Indian esoteric Buddhism distinguishes two types of articulated signs (*saṃketaka*): the mantra-sign and the suchness-sign (*tathatā-saṃketaka*). The mantra-signs, which are articulated through the pronunciation of the vowels and consonants by means of the throat, palate, tongue, and lips, are considered mundane (*laukika*), whereas the suchness-sign, or the letter "a," stands for suchness, or ultimate reality, since it is devoid of oral pronunciation and is thus primordially unborn. It is the insignia of the beginningless gnostic body, inherent in all of existence. Already in the early Mahayana literature, the vowel "a," due to being the first letter of the Sanskrit alphabet and inherent in every Sanskrit consonant, represents the all-pervasive emptiness and the perfection of wisdom. In Indian Buddhist esoteric writings, this insignia of the unoriginated sound, the primary cause of all expressions, is referred to as a "mystery" (*rahasya*) and a "secret" (*guhya*). It symbolizes the space-element, the abode of sublime bliss, which is the source of all phenomena (*dharmodaya*). We are told in the Buddhist tantric literature that due to signifying the locus of the gnosis of immutable bliss, the letter "a" is put in the locative case; thus, in conjunction with the added locative suffix "i," it becomes the letter "e."¹⁵ The gnosis of immutable bliss, which abides in space as its *vajra*-throne,

is represented by the syllable *vaṃ*. The unity of these two, the space and gnosis of imperishable bliss, or the letter “e” and the syllable *vaṃ*, is expressed in the term *evaṃ*, which in Sanskrit literally means “thus,” “so,” or “in this way.” Thus, this two-syllable word *evaṃ* is a linguistic symbol of the androgynous gnostic body, of the non-dual yoga of the gnosis and its empty form. Its two emblems are a lotus and a *vajra*. In terms of its phenomenal manifestations in the forms of the cosmic and human bodies, the vowel “e,” having a lotus as its emblem, represents the sun and the female sexual organ; and the syllable *vaṃ*, having a *vajra* as its emblem, is the moon and the male sexual organ. Due to the unutterable nature of its ultimate referent, this linguistic contraction of the *vajra*-yoga, or the gnostic body, is considered not to be a term.

With the exception of the *Kālacakratantra*, *evaṃ* is the beginning of all Indian Buddhist tantric discourses, which begin with the phrase that is common to Buddhist sutras and *tantra*-s: “Thus I have heard” (*evaṃ mayā śrutam*). “*Evaṃ*” expresses the source and the epitome of all Buddhist esoteric discourses. Even the *Kālacakratantra*, which does not begin with the word *evaṃ*, sees *evaṃ* as the synthesis of the essence of its entire discourse. It interprets its own body of discourse as the linguistic representation of the *vajra*-yoga, which is without partiality, as the gnosis of the Buddha, embodied in language, whose empty form is represented by vowels, and its gnosis of sublime bliss by consonants. In light of this view, the structural organization of this tantric treatise corresponds to its conceptual construction of the gnostic body. Comprised of the five chapters dealing with the cosmic, human, social, visually imagined, and ultimate aspects of the gnostic body respectively, it reflects the structure of the path of the discovery of the unitary gnostic body, hidden in various forms.

The identification of the linguistic discourse with its content and primary origin, namely, the “absolute body,” is not invented by or unique to esoteric Buddhism. It is also characteristic of many Mahayana sutras, which identify the content and meaning of their discourse with the primary teacher, the dharma-body of the Buddha, seeing it as an expression of the qualities of buddhahood and as a primary condition for one’s spiritual awakening.¹⁶

In the context of esoteric Buddhism, even though the gnosis of immutable bliss is embodied in the esoteric discourse and is revealed through its linguistic representations, its true meaning remains an impenetrable mystery to those who are not initiated into the semantic alternatives of Buddhist tantric discourse. Its accurate meaning is comprehensible only to those who know the distinction between literal (*ruta*) and non-literal utterances (*aruta*), between intentional language (*saṃdhyā-bhāṣā*) and that which is not, and between definitive (*nītārtha*) and provisional meanings (*neyārtha*), as revealed through the oral instructions of a spiritual mentor.

The discovery of the meaning, which is derived from the esoteric discourse and spiritual mentor's instruction, is indispensable but insufficient as the sole condition for the complete penetration into the mystery of the gnostic body. It must be accompanied by subsequent insights into the meaning of the signs that appear in the meditation on a *maṇḍala* and the signs arising to the non-conceptual mind engaged in esoteric yoga. A *maṇḍala*, which is a blueprint of the multifaceted gnostic body and its universal form, is a more subtle sign than the linguistic one, as it corroborates the linguistic signs in the experience of a mental vision. The visual signs of the gnostic body appearing to the mind in meditation on a *maṇḍala* accord with its linguistic signs employed in a tantric discourse in the content, structure, and in the nature of being conceptual constructs. In esoteric Buddhism, all symbols are recognized as conceptual constructs, which are powerful and efficacious in constructing one's reality. Therefore, they are implemented on the Buddhist tantric path as epistemological tools, by means of which one deconstructs one's own unchallenged preconceptions and misperceptions of the world and constructs a new model of the world, envisioned as a spiritual reality. However, Indian esoteric Buddhism recognizes that due to being conceptually and socially constructed, symbols give rise only to mediated, or dependently arisen, knowledge, which is the domain of the limited sense-faculties. Therefore, despite their immense ability to transform one's experience of reality, their qualities and functions are ascertained as limited. Contemplation of one symbol can bring about only the result that corresponds to that symbol. Confining oneself to the world of symbols, one remains bound by conceptual fabrications and is unable to see ultimate reality as it truly is. In lieu of this, those who seek the full realization of the gnostic body, which evades all conceptual constructs, are advised eventually to abandon all symbols and to engage in yogic non-conceptual practices. In contrast to the meditation on symbols, in the non-conceptual esoteric yoga the signs of the genuine realization of the gnostic body arise spontaneously as the reflections of one's own purified mind until there is the final emergence of the gnostic body as the signless ultimate reality.

There is no doubt that Indian tantric Buddhism developed its own system of semiotics, by means of which it problematizes its own modes of the presentation of the gnostic body and points to the methods of searching for what is hidden beneath the obvious presentations. Its claim to the knowledge of the soteriologically significant meanings of the particular signs of the gnostic body and to the knowledge of the ways of controlling and transcending those signs into the signless reality is what fashions it as an esoteric tradition. Its secret knowledge is the body of gnosis, which is both the signifier and the signified, and yet transcends all the systems of signification. Thus, according to the semiotics of Indian esoteric

Buddhism, there is an escape from signs, and that deliverance marks the final liberation from the world of mental constructs and its accompanying suffering and is termed here as the gnostic body. Perhaps this particular semiotical theory can help us more accurately assess the category of the “esoteric tradition” and the category of the “absolute body,” since it brings them together in a unique way. Its emphasis on the possibility and soteriological necessity of knowing things independently of their signs and penetrating into unmediated reality shows that any reality built on sign-systems can be challenged and transcended. In this way, it invites scholars of contemporary semiotics to reassess their view that although things may exist independently from signs, they can be known only through the mediation of signs. Likewise, its two-part method of transcending signs, which consists of collapsing all signs into a single sign and dissolving that one sign into signlessness, brings a new kind of discourse to the field of semiotics.

Furthermore, the investigation of the multileveled constructions of the gnostic body can shed new light on the categories and models of embodiment. Indian esoteric Buddhist discourse on the “absolute body,” as in the Mahayana, can contribute to contemporary studies of the body in philosophy by extending recent critiques of the hierarchical dichotomies fostered by Cartesian dualism—spirit/matter, mind/body, subject/object. However, the Buddhist esoteric discourse on the “absolute body” is even more relevant for the broader spectrum of the contemporary discourses on the body than such discourses in the Mahayana. Its androgynous model of the “absolute body” and its phenomenal reflections is relevant to certain trends of analysis in gender studies, which are focused on dismantling the gendered dualism of mind/body and male/female that sustains asymmetrical relations of power. Likewise, its discourses on the absolute body as manifesting in society can contribute to theories of the body in the social sciences by positing a reconstituted social body that is based on gnosis rather than on gender and class distinctions. These particular facets of the Buddhist esoteric discourse on the “absolute body,” which are not only absent in Mahayana literature, but also undermine some of the traditional readings of Mahayana scriptures, are the salient features of its esotericism.

NOTES

1. The *Vimalaprabhā* commentary on the *Kālacakratantra*, eds. Vrajavallabh Dwivedi and S. S. Bahulkar, *Rare Buddhist Texts Series Vol. 2, Nos. 12 and 13* (Sarnath, Varanasi: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 1994), chap. 5, v. 120.
2. The *Vimalaprabhā* commentary on the *Kālacakratantra*, ed. Jagannatha Upadhyaya, *Bibliotheca Indo-Tibetica Series Vol. 1, No. 11* (Sarnath, Varanasi: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 1986), chap. 1.
3. The *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṅgīti*, v. 41, line b: *mahāyānārūḍho mahāyānanayottama*.
4. The *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṅgīti*, v. 14.
5. The *Vimalaprabhā* commentary on the *Kālacakratantra*, Vrajavallabh Dwivedi and S. S. Bahulkar, *Rare Buddhist Texts Series*, chap. 5, v. 127.
6. The *Yogaratanmālā* commentary on the *Hevajatantra*, chap. 1, v. 1.
7. D. L. Snellgrove, *The Hevajra Tantra: A Critical Study, Vols. 1–2*, London Oriental Series, Vol. 6. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), chap. 1, v. 2.
8. The *Yogaratanmālā* commentary on the *Hevajatantra*, chap. 1, v. 2.
9. Edward Conze, trans. and ed., *The Large Sūtra of the Perfection of Wisdom: With the Divisions of the Abhisamayālaṅkāra* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 494 (*tathāgatasya vajrakāyaḥ*).
10. See the *Ṛg-Veda*, 3.33, where the Rivers speak to Viśvamitra in this way: “Īndra who wields the *vajra* dug our channels: he killed Vṛtra, who blocked our streams. . . .(6) That heroic act of Īndra should be eternally praised; he tore Ahi [“snake”] into pieces. He destroyed the obstructions with his *vajra*, and the waters flowed in the directions they desired.(7)”
11. The *Yogaratanmālā* commentary on the *Hevajatantra*, chap. 1, v. 4.
12. The *Vimalaprabhā* commentary on the *Kālacakratantra*, Vrajavallabh Dwivedi and S. S. Bahulkar, *Rare Buddhist Texts Series*, chap. 5.
13. *Ibid.*
14. The *Vimalaprabhā* commentary on the *Kālacakratantra*, Jagannatha Upadhyaya, *Bibliotheca Indo-Tibetica Series*, chap. 1, v. 2.
15. *Ibid.*, chap. 1. See also the *Yogaratanmālā* commentary on the *Hevajatantra*, part 1, chap. 1.
16. The *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra*, *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, and so on.