

***Conjuring the Buddha: Ritual Manuals in Early Tantric Buddhism.* By Jacob P. Dalton. Columbia University Press, 2023. 334 pages. \$35.00 (paperback). ISBN 9780231205832.**

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In *Conjuring the Buddha: Ritual Manuals in Early Tantric Buddhism*, Jacob P. Dalton employs both material and textual archaeologies to illustrate a tantric Buddhist tradition in flux at various transitional points in its development. He does this through an examination of practical ritual manuals recorded in Tibetan that were recovered from the invaluable trove at Dunhuang. These extracanonial ritual texts were private and reveal versions of tantric Buddhist ritual that do not fit neatly within established doxographical categories, either at the time of their production or today. Dalton implies that practices found in ritual manuals that predate their supposed emergence in the received chronology of Vajrayāna might therefore provide material that the authors of subsequent revelatory tantras detailing those same rituals employed in these narrative compositions. The unique status of the Dunhuang material lends Dalton considerable support in making his argument; the texts taken from this unsealed time capsule are the only contemporaneous ritual manuals possessed by living practitioners to which we have access. They therefore offer a snapshot of a moment in time largely obscured in the normative tradition.

Chapter 1, “Ritual Manuals and the Spread of the Local,” traces the evolution of ritual traditions made up of disparate *dhāraṇī* manuals that coalesced into sutras. The *dhāraṇī* sutras are sometimes little more than collections of these *dhāraṇī* spells and procedures with a narrative frame to stitch them together. Dalton’s main thrust in this chapter is to illustrate a precedent in the production of Buddhist literature that followed a clear trajectory of evolution wherein the ritual texts appeared on their own and separated prior to the revelatory text that would

present them as part of a unified tradition and teaching. These *dhāraṇī* manuals demonstrate the choices and alterations to rituals made by individual actors as well as the preferences specific to their authors' locality. They are evidence of a crucial stage of innovation that was not possible once the rituals were calcified after appearing in sutra literature. These manuals, "thanks to their fluid and individualizable character, could allow for the innumerable creative mutations that were necessary for the tantras to evolve" (p. 49).

Chapters 2 through 5 center around a particular ritual manual and are followed by an English translation of the text that was examined in the respective chapter. Although the Tibetan original is not included, images of the manuscripts are all hosted online,¹ and Dalton provides all relevant bibliographic information for all manuscripts used. An appendix containing an English translation of a *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana* initiation manual follows chapter 2; an appendix containing an English translation of the *Tattvasaṃgrahasādhanopāyika* follows chapter 3; an appendix containing an English translation of *The Generation of Fortune Sādhana* follows chapter 4; an appendix containing an English translation of an unnamed *sādhana* along with one of its two commentaries follows chapter 5.

Chapter 2, "From *Dhāraṇī* to Tantra: The *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana*," continues the argument laid out in the previous chapter. Specifically, Dalton connects the *Uṣṇīṣavijayā* and *Vimaloṣṇīṣā dhāraṇī* sutras to the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana* of the Vajrayāna Yoga tantra class. The overlaps between these two texts blur the demarcation between *dhāraṇī* sutra and tantra, which Dalton argues allowed authors of tantras to stitch together desirable portions of ritual manuals for content in a similar way that *dhāraṇī* sutras contain a tapestry of preexisting *dhāraṇī* ritual pulled from satellite esoterica.

The Dunhuang collection offers significant evidence for the creative agency of individual authors, especially in the case of the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana*. In addition to highlighting several manuscripts containing images of variations of *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana maṇḍala* amulets (among both the Chinese and Tibetan documents), Dalton examines an unnamed manual for consecration into the *maṇḍala* of the aforementioned tantra. This manual, likely an eighth-century

1. E.g., the British Library's <http://idp.bl.uk/> and the Bibliothèque nationale de France's <http://idp.bnf.fr/>.

Tibetan composition scribed in the ninth or tenth century, showcases a tantric shift towards aesthetic experience through an emphasis on poetic language and elaborate visualizations or real illustrations (often the distinction between an imagined or physical creation is left ambiguous). Critically the utilitarian text, made to serve the worldly need for initiation into the funerary *maṇḍala* of the root tantra, demonstrates an interplay between the narrative of the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana* and the real-world application of the text. Furthermore, its status as a local text (Tibetan rather than Indic) allows us direct access to ritualists operating productively within their received tradition. Dalton suggests that this trend of ritual manuals of a particular *maṇḍala* tradition being in a sort of conversation with the foundational revelatory texts from which they draw their authority is a critical part in the production of both textual media. The fully-formed revelatory text did not emerge from the proverbial vacuum; it is a product of an already-existent ritual tradition open to interpretation and creativity before (and after) being standardized in a tantra.

Chapter 3, “Evoking Possession: The *Sarvatathāgata-tattvasaṃgraha*,” is an examination of the **Tattvasaṃgrahasādhanopāyika*, a manual on *sādhana* practice for the *Sarvatathāgatattvasaṃgraha* (tantra) that Dalton argues is a Tibetan translation of an Indian original. Dalton assigns a *terminus ante quem* of the late eighth century to the text itself, and of the ninth century to the manuscript witnesses found in Dunhuang based on paleographic evidence. He supplements his study of this text with the aid of a commentary that is likely a Tibetan original, as well as a related and similar *sādhana* manual, the “slightly later [...and] considerably more elaborate” (p. 105) **Vajrahūṃkārasādhana*. The text of the *Vajrahūṃkārasādhana* shares at least one manuscript with a copy of the *Tattvasaṃgrahasādhanopāyika*. Dalton demonstrates that each of these texts represent transitional moments in the development of the Yoga tantras marked by shifts from external *maṇḍala* practice to entirely internalized *sādhana*s that may not even utilize *maṇḍala*s at all. The *Vajrahūṃkārasādhana* in particular is “suspended between worlds” (p. 110); while it intimates that the practitioner may optionally construct an external *maṇḍala*, it places emphasis on entirely internalized *maṇḍala* practice.

Dalton notes a redundancy in the *Tattvasaṃgrahasādhanopāyika* that may illustrate the transitional status of the text. After the *yogin* has already unified with *Vajrasattva*, he is later instructed to effect the

descent of *buddhajñāna* in order to change his ordinary body into that of a buddha.

The redundancy in our *sādhana* thus may reflect changes that [Buddhist] tantric practice was undergoing in the eighth century. Two models are at work. In the earlier one, the officiant constructs a mandala as a physical or imagined space, then enters it and invites the consecrating deities to take their places within the mandala. In the later, the ritual subject transforms onto the buddha, then invites the consecrating deities into his body. The ritual subject was gradually taking center stage upon an imagined altar. (p. 111)

The *Tattvasaṃgrahasāadhanopāyika* “does not even mention the mandala, perhaps reflecting the fading importance of physical mandala altars” (pp. 110–111). In the *sādhana* detailed in the text the *yogin* is to visualize the summoning of deities into himself. These deities are summoned and bound with mantras and *mudrās* as the *yogin* visualizes this process along with a series of colored objects at various points around his body and in the space. Dalton notes that the composition of the ritual shares many parallels with the opening narrative of the *Sarvathāgatātattvasaṃgraha*. The theme of consecration shared by both the tantra and the ritual manual “of a vajra upon a moon disc is key to both the narrative and early ritual practice. The tantra’s opening narrative might even have been written specifically to explain the power of consecration” (p. 117). If this is the case, it should be noted that the tantra’s opening narrative would not be framed around the *Tattvasaṃgrahasāadhanopāyika* since that manual postdates the tantra. In any case, Dalton makes clear how, stripped of its storytelling characteristics, this opening narrative contains a ritual that plainly maps directly onto the one preserved in the manual under investigation.

Chapter 4, “Secretary Secrets: Sexual Yoga in Early Mahāyoga,” is a study of *The Generation of Fortune Sādhana*. Dalton dates this text to the second half of the eighth century, and the manuscript witness of the text to the tenth century. This *sādhana* preserves early evidence of completion stage (*utpannakrama/niṣpannakrama*) practices in Vajrayāna, and Dalton especially places emphasis on traces of sexual yoga located in the text. The *Generation of Fortune Sādhana* and other ritual texts examined in this chapter exhibit inchoate Mahāyoga practices allowing for “the possibility that large numbers of short, unaffiliated *sādhana*s may

have been circulating throughout India and Tibet in the late eighth century” (p. 142).

Another later “elaborated version” of the same text, located in a different Dunhuang manuscript, “pushes the [sexual] instructions in the direction of the imaginary, away from a physical union” (p. 151). Such a document, featuring a repurposed version of *The Generation of Fortune Sādhana*, offers “glimpses of the reworking of the sexual rites in action. Although many Indian and Tibetan authors of the tenth and eleventh centuries specified that monastics should restrict themselves to performing the sexual yogas in their imagination, the Dunhuang manuscripts include close-up local efforts to alter earlier *sādhanas*” (p. 152). That is to say, this elaborated version provides a snapshot of someone in the tradition repurposing an extant ritual in a way to better fit with the trends of his later period.

The *Generation of Fortune Sādhana* and related ritual manuals preserve early versions of some important later developments. Dalton argues that not only do the texts anticipate more developed subtle yogas and sexual practices, but they preserve a version of the Tibetan Great Perfection (*dzog chen*) tradition. This earlier version differs from the well-known version insofar as the emphasis that the latter puts on ritual experience. The production of *bodhicitta* during a completion stage that is followed by a period of contemplation hints at this earlier Great Perfection. The “idea that the great perfection followed the perfection stage suggests that, in its earliest days at least, it may have been associated with a specific ritual moment, the state resulting from receiving the sacred sacrament” (p. 157) (i.e., the *bodhicitta*, or seminal fluid).

Chapter 5, “Circles of Blazing Breaths: Mantra Recitation,” takes the form of an investigation of a *sādhana* practice that demonstrates not only an arguably inchoate form of a Mahāyoga practice, but also the eclectic intellectual scene that thrived at Dunhuang. The *sādhana* under analysis is unnamed, and two locally-composed commentaries offering differing interpretations of it illustrate the creative ritual environment in place. Based on paleographic evidence Dalton speculates that the commentaries are by the same author, trying his hand at multiple approaches to the practice described. The practice, the unnamed *sādhana*, contains descriptions that appear drawn from traditions ranging from Chinese Chan to Mahāyoga sexual practices. In the midst of these two, which function as bookends to the *sādhana* (it opens

with a Chan-like meditation practice that involves emptying the mind of all conceptions and closes with a Mahāyoga-like practice of seminal emission), are complex breathing practices done by the *yogin* and his consort, practices which themselves anticipate the highly-complex systems of channels and winds that eventually came to dominate late Vajrayāna.

The unnamed *sādhana* was produced either in Dunhuang or central Tibet with a date of composition estimated to be in the tenth century. The commentaries, due to their exhibition of intertextuality and “idiosyncratic” (p. 176) subject matter, were likely produced in, or near, Dunhuang. All three of these texts provide examples of tantric Buddhist actors considering the practices of their cult and employing different methods of approach. On its own this is not unique; differing interpretations are the hallmarks of the Buddhist commentarial tradition. But in the case of this great commentarial tradition, we see different camps offering their respective interpretations of established, authoritative texts, with commentators aiming to set a normativity with accurate interpretation of tradition as their defense. The unnamed *sādhana* and its commentaries are different. Instead, they illustrate participation in a developing tradition, one for which normativity is yet to be set. Rather than interpreting the ritual manual according to established tradition, the commentator(s?) are active participants in working out what the tradition should become.

Dalton is also able to connect practices preserved in the *sādhana* to the Mahāyoga *Guhyasamāja tantra* via interlinear notes on a manuscript of that text, thereby demonstrating a thread between the practices of the unnamed *sādhana* and Mahāyoga tantra. Such notes, written for the sole purpose of aiding the user in his practice, allow us to “catch a glimpse of how [the text was] understood in early Tibet” (p. 198) in a way that the received textual record does not typically preserve. The commentaries and data such as interlinear notes show the historical process located in the gaps between doxographical categories.

Although he does not engage Śaiva-Śākta materials directly, Dalton’s exposure of inchoate sexual and subtle yogas uncovers fertile ground for further examination of interreligious exchange in South Asia. For example, he notes the novelty of the breathing practices found in his unnamed *sādhana* in the development of Vajrayāna, and especially the novelty of the *sādhaka* and his female partner performing breathing practices in concert. The fourth *ṣaṭka* (sixfold division)

of the Śaiva-Śākta *Jayadrathayāmala tantra* features an episode in a *dīkṣā* in which the initiating *ācārya* matches the breathing of another before descending this other individual's central channel, wrangling his *jīva*, and then ascending back up and out through the crown of his head before liberating him by beheading him with a sword. Although this is far from matching the breathing of one's sexual partner, the goal of dissolution of individuality is in place. Dalton notes the shift in Vajrayāna practice from encouraging ejaculation in ritual sexual practices to physical seminal retention to entirely sublimated visualization practices (of course, literal ejaculation did remain a practice in some tantric Buddhist circles). The seventh-century Śaiva-Śākta *Brahmayāmala tantra* contains instructions both for seminal retention (the razor's edge observance, *asidhārāvratā*) and full-blown sexual practices that culminate in ejaculation.²

The on-the-ground ritual manuals Dalton examines allow us to peer directly into moments of transformation and witness the innovations present in a pre-normative environment. To put it more bluntly: ritual manuals belonging to actual practitioners offer as much or more reliable data than received, normative texts through, for example, the accumulation of interlinear notes, intertextuality, unsanctioned mixing of traditions, and drawings of *mudrās* and deities-to-be visualized. Even lines scratched out, or media reused to record additional, separate texts, shows a religion in process that is not so easily staked down. *Conjuring the Buddha* demonstrates the importance of widening the parameters of philological investigation to tread onto new ground rather than continue to pass back and forth on well-trodden trails (and texts) through the direct access Dalton gives to the manuals of practitioners who were navigating a tantric Buddhism that was in flux and allowed for creativity to progress its evolution. The emphasis on examining ritual manuals that saw regular use by their owners provides a model for textual criticism not limited to the documents preserved at Dunhuang. At the intersection of manuscriptology, textual studies,

2. See Csaba Kiss, *The Brahmayāmalatantra or Picumata: Volume II, The Religious Observances and Sexual Rituals of the Tantric Practitioner: Chapters 3, 21, and 45* (Pondicherry: Institute de Français de Pondichéry. 2015), 256–270; and Shaman Hatley, *The Brahmayāmalatantra or Picumata: Volume I, Chapter 1–2, 39–40 & 83, Revelation, Ritual, and Material Culture in Early Śaiva Tantra* (Pondicherry: Institute de Français de Pondichéry 2018), 195–212.

and ritual studies, *Conjuring the Buddha* provides a model for taking seriously the texts that never became known and demonstrates that the famous texts of the Buddhist tradition relied on local and individual innovations to construct the authority of later *buddhavacana*. This book will be of interest to scholars specializing across a range of areas from premodern Central, South, and East Asia to questions of the validity of doxographical categories and would also serve as a guide to graduate students on how to approach primary sources as products of living traditions in flux.