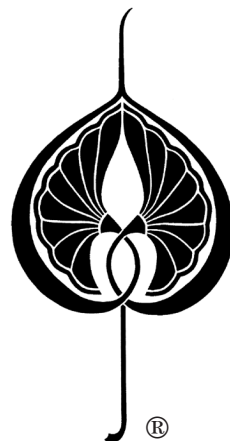


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Fractal Journeys: Narrative Structure of the Path and of Tantric Practice

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INTRODUCTION¹

Perhaps the way in which Buddhism is represented most frequently in both popular and scholarly literature is by equating it with meditation. Such representations marginalize the vast array of other kinds of practice found throughout the Buddhist tradition—so much so that the legitimacy as “Buddhist” of non-meditative forms of Buddhist practice is called into question. This is certainly the case with the recitative practices of Pure Land Buddhism (Jp. *shōmyō nenbutsu* 称名念佛), and with the ritual practices found in the tantric Buddhist tradition, where “ritualized meditation” (Skt. *sādhana*) is sometimes understood as efficacious, while other kinds of rituals, such as offerings (*pūjā*), may be treated as pious additions. This essay argues that the ritual practices of tantric Buddhism have a fractal self-similarity to the path (*mārga*), and as such have their own rationale for efficacy, distinct from that commonly given for silent, seated meditation.

The argument proceeds in three steps:

1. Drawing on the work of Hayden White, an argument that praxis has a narrative structure;
2. An analysis of the narrative structure of Buddhist praxis in terms of a three-part structure of ground, path, and goal; and
3. An analysis of tantric ritual structure as reflecting the narrative structure of ground, path, and goal.

While many expositions of the efficacy of silent, seated meditation employ a psychologized concept of how meditation works, the fractal self-similarity of ritual practice and the path reveals a different conception of the efficacy of practice. The goal here is to understand how the practices of tantric ritual may be seen as efficacious from within the tradition, rather than attempting to apply an external theoretical

orientation with the presumption that the latter is in fact somehow fundamentally more explanatory than the traditions' own ways of conceiving efficacy.

I. THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE

The idea of narrative as it relates to the formation of the self most often focuses on “personal narrative”:² the stories about ourselves that we tell ourselves and others.³ However, I would like to propose that we also consider religious praxis—the relation between practice, doctrine and experience—as narrative, particularly in order to consider how engaging in religious practice produces effects consistent with that narrative. The link between doctrine and practice is sometimes presented as if it is direct, with each and every doctrinal point directly supported by a specific experience generated by practice. Such formulations usually privilege experience as the irreducible and universal⁴ foundation on which practice, first, and then doctrine are constructed as superstructures. In contrast to this exegetical rhetoric, however, the relation is looser and much more interrelated, with the three elements mutually supporting one another as a system. The term “praxis” is used here to identify the complex and dynamic mutual dialectics between practice, doctrine, and experience.

Like narratives, religious doctrines provide an understanding of the world, information about how to act, what to think, how to feel. I want to extend the category of “narrative” to include religious praxes (including doctrinal descriptions of the nature of the self and practices related to that description) in a fashion similar to the way in which Hayden White demonstrated the narrative structure of historiography. White employs four modes of emplotment to analyze the narrative structures in accord with which histories have been written: romance, comedy, tragedy, and satire. Drawing on his descriptions of these four narrative modes, we can provide a preliminary reflection on the relation between narrative and religious thought.

“The Romance is fundamentally a drama of self-identification symbolized by the hero’s transcendence of the world of experience, his victory over it, and his final liberation from it.”⁵ White exemplifies the Romance narrative structure with the legend of the Grail and the story of Christ’s resurrection—mythoreligious narratives, of which the latter is particularly significant in the formation of Christian doctrinal

conceptions. To the extent that the hero's quest (the principal form of the Romance) has been generalized to the life of the Buddha, as, for example, in the work of Joseph Campbell, the Romance narrative structure has been imposed onto Buddhist thought in the process of its integration into Western popular religious culture as well.⁶

Comedy is characterized as a "provisional release from the divided state in which men find themselves in this world." Not transcendence, victory, or liberation, but reconciliation in which "the condition of society is represented as being purer, saner, and healthier as a result" as a result of apparently "inalterably opposed elements" being harmonized with one another.⁷ The comedic dimension of religion seems to have received far too little attention, perhaps because it has been considered part of folk tradition—since it is not serious it must not be worthy of the attention of serious scholars.⁸ Consider, however, the importance of Trickster figures such as Coyote in Native American myth and Uncle Tonpa in Tibetan lore, whose plans seem to always backfire, leaving everyone, including, at times, the Trickster, better off than if the original plan had succeeded.⁹

The contrast to Comedy is Tragedy,¹⁰ a state of affairs in which the conditions of human existence are inalterable, implying "that man cannot change them but must work within them."¹¹ In this regard, we may appropriately think of the Stoics, and also the Stoic interpretations of Buddhism that were prominent in the wake of Arthur Schopenhauer's representations of both Buddhism and Hinduism. Regardless of how the plots unfold, White sees all three of these modes (he distinguishes them from genre as such) taking the agonistic or conflicted character of human existence seriously, such that the primary frame of experience is contestation. The fourth mode, Satire, however, treats contestation and conflict ironically. Satire for White operates "in the atmosphere generated by the apprehension of the ultimate inadequacy of consciousness to live in the world happily or to comprehend it fully."¹² This would seem to be how many religious people think of scientific, postmodern, relativist, or atheist worldviews. While the purpose here is not to systematically match different religious praxes with one or another of these specific categories, these suggestions can help us understand that religious praxis can be interpreted in terms of narrative structures.¹³

The specific narrative structure that informs much of Buddhist praxis is the system known as "ground, path, goal," that is, a description

of the ordinary human condition and its problematic nature (ground), the way in which one moves out of that condition (path), and the nature of what one seeks to ultimately attain (goal).¹⁴ “Ground, path, goal” reveals the underlying narrative structure of Buddhist praxis in the sense of narrative as a temporally developing trajectory (i.e., causally coherent), in which change is reframed as meaningful.¹⁵

While ground, path, and goal provide a narrative framework, each of the three terms needs to be identified more clearly to give it some content. Here we are in the familiar territory of nearly every introductory exposition of Buddhism, yet it bears repeating in order to highlight the narrative framework provided by these ideas. First, ground: the self-reinforcing repetition of actions (Skt. *saṃsāra*, Jp. *rinne* 輪廻) that lead to frustration and dissatisfaction (*duḥkha*, 苦) due to our mistaken conceptions (*jñeyāvaraṇa*, *shochishō* 所知商障) and misplaced affections (*kleśāvaraṇa*, *bonnōshō* 煩惱障). What is important in this diagnosis of the human condition is that the relation between mistaken conceptions and misplaced affections, that is, between thought and emotion, does not set them up as a disjunct pair but rather as a closely integrated system in which each reinforces the other.

The question, then, for the second stage, the path, is: What is the point of entry that allows for disrupting the close systemic relation between mistaken conceptions and misplaced affections? Emotional reactions occur very quickly, and are therefore very difficult to hold onto long enough to engage with critically. Ideas about how things are in the world move more slowly, and can, therefore, be more easily engaged. (This is substantiated by current understandings of neural processing. Emotions are primarily processed by the hippocampus, and are much quicker to arise than reflective thought, which is processed through the neocortex.)¹⁶ Thus, despite the rhetoric of Buddhist modernism, which interprets reflective thought as an obstacle to awakening, the best entry point into the system for effecting transformation is addressing mistaken conceptions.

As Jeffrey Hopkins puts it,

Because of this basic perspective, namely that false ideation traps beings in a round of suffering, *reasoned* investigation into the nature of persons and other phenomena is central to the process of spiritual development, though not its only concern.¹⁷

Unlike the common anti-intellectual notion that such learning is empty of any significance because it is “merely theoretical,” this kind

of training in Buddhist philosophy is “primarily studied not to refute other systems but to develop an internal force that can counteract one’s own *innate* adherence to misapprehensions.”¹⁸ Hopkins points out that such doctrinal training is part of a three-stage discipline. First, one hears, or in contemporary terms, reads a classic text.¹⁹ Second, one thinks about the meaning of the text. And, third, one reflectively meditates on the meaning in order to grasp it fully, so that it changes one’s apprehension of the world. In other words, what is transformative is specifically practice that is focused on and directed by doctrine. One has moved from the emotional turmoil and cognitive error of the ground, where ignorance is the driving factor, into a disciplined and systematic reflection on and integration of the truths of the doctrinal system.

The notion is sometimes presented that Buddhist practice is both free from doctrinal constraints and has as its goal freedom from doctrinal constraints—that it is (somehow) a pure reflection on the nature of consciousness that will spontaneously produce insight into the nature of reality and liberate one from suffering, automatically making the practitioner more compassionate and ethical in his or her relations with others. This is one of the fundamental errors in many modernist representations of Buddhist practice. This misapprehension preserves an almost behaviorist conception of the mind as a mechanism that can be modified at will, and of meditation as one of a variety of context- and value-neutral mental technologies that can be employed to effect such changes. Such conceptions of the mind constitute the rhetorical frame for the idea that practice and doctrine are separate and independent of one another. If we accept the notion that all existing things are interdependent as foundational for Buddhism generally, then the modernist Buddhist idea that practice and doctrine are independent of one another is contrary to that fundamental teaching. Of course, this argument, based on the idea that interdependence is foundational for Buddhism, is basically a doctrinal argument, and as such is significant only for those who already accept the truth of interdependence. However, from a broader perspective than Buddhist thought *per se*, all practice always has a doctrinal context, whether it is made explicit, as with Buddhist philosophy, or left implicit, as in the societal values of personal success that informs much self-help literature.

The ease with which the idea that Buddhist practice is free of doctrinal constraints has been accepted is a consequence of it being overdetermined by (1) the high valuation placed on spontaneity in the

creative or religious genius in Romantic²⁰ and neo-Romantic religious thought, pervasive in contemporary popular religious culture; and, (2) the plentiful rhetoric in Buddhism that the purpose of practice is the attainment of “higher, non-conceptual states.”²¹ We might note first that these putative “higher, nonconceptual states” are specific levels of being postulated within a medieval cosmology, and second that within traditional Buddhist descriptions of the path attainment of such states is predicated upon systematic and sophisticated intellectual training.

In contrast to neo-Romantic modernist representations of Buddhist praxis as “pure” unreflective spontaneity, this idea of higher, non-conceptual states is not anti-intellectual abandonment of reflective thought. Doctrine is integral to practice itself, and is not merely a set of claims to be believed because they bear the authority of a religious figure or institution. In fact, the two—doctrine and practice—cannot be treated separately. Practice is always contextualized by doctrine. This is the case even if it is claimed that the actual practice is simply a mental exercise (what used to be called “mental hygiene”), or when it is claimed that there is no doctrinal commitment required for practice. (The second is paradoxical since it is itself a doctrinal claim.) The integrity and inseparability of ritual and practice is key to understanding the narrative structure of tantric Buddhist practice.

II. RITUAL IDENTIFICATION AND DEITY YOGA

One of the characteristics found in one form or another throughout the tantric traditions is the practice of identifying oneself with the deity.²² David Germano has placed the origin of these kinds of practices in the Upaniṣadic period, and notes that we can trace

a gradual shift from pure encounters with an autonomous Buddha appearing in the field of vision, to an ideology of identity-transference where the Buddha descends as a gnostic spirit (*ye she babs*) directly into the practitioner’s own body, which has already been imaginatively transfigured into the Buddha’s surface body image: from encounter to identification. This profoundly non-Vedic element of standard and widespread self-identification with deity of course had already entered post-Vedic forms of discourse and practice from the Upanishadic literature onwards.²³

It has been claimed that the motivation for such practices, and one of the main forces motivating the development of Mahāyāna

generally, was the absence of the Buddha from this realm. Within the early Mahāyāna Buddhist movement there is the desire for a direct encounter with a buddha in order to receive a prediction about one's attainment of full awakening in the future. (The desire to receive new teachings rather than a personal prediction of future awakening seems to be a later development following from visionary experiences.) The trajectory of development traced by Germano falls into three broad (non-mutually exclusive) stages. (1) Their trajectory begins with Pure Land practices intended to lead to birth in a buddha field (*buddhakṣetra*) where one can directly encounter a buddha and become a member of his retinue. (2) On that basis, meditative practices of intense concentration intended to create spontaneous visionary encounters with a buddha develop, such as those found in the *Pratyutpannasamādhisūtra*.²⁴ (3) These tantric practices of identification then move the buddha from an external presence that is experienced to one's own being in the world, that is, the experience and identification of oneself as an awakened one.

Although practices involving ritual identification are widespread in the tantric world, these are only one of a variety of related visualization practices. Addressing the range of practices related to deity yoga, Germano has proposed a three-part progression based on a reading of Tibetan doxography, specifically extrapolating from the Mahāyoga text "An Esoteric Precept: The Garland of Views" (late ninth century, attributed to Padmasambhava) which adds a "great perfection mode" to the more familiar two-part generation and perfection modes of practice. The practice under consideration here is the first of these three, which he describes as "the visualization practices that involve scripted imaginal evocations (*sādhana*, *sgrub thabs*) of pre-described forms of a Buddha located either external to oneself, or, in what came to be known as deity yoga, transmuting the practitioner's own bodily self-perception."²⁵ We are here considering just the first mode, which can also be considered a form of "guided imagery."

Identification of the practitioner with the main deity (Jp. *honzon*, 本尊) forms the symbolically central act in many Shingon rituals.²⁶ Similarly, Tsongkhapa distinguished the practices of *sūtra* Mahāyāna (also known as the "perfection vehicle" because of its foundation in the teachings of the Perfection of Wisdom literature) from tantra Mahāyāna (also known as the "mantra vehicle") on the basis of the absence of ritual identification, or deity yoga, in the former and its presence in the latter. The Tibetan expression that is equivalent to ritual

identification, *lha'i rnal 'byor* (ལྷའི་རྣམ་འབྱོར་) is usually glossed in English as “deity yoga.” (Daniel Cozort gives the Sanskrit as *devatā yoga*.)²⁷

Hopkins describes deity yoga, rather succinctly, as “the meditative practice of imagining oneself to be an ideal being fully endowed with compassion and wisdom and their resultant altruistic activities.”²⁸ Elsewhere, summarizing the Fifth Dalai Lama’s explication of Tsongkhapa’s discourse, Hopkins writes that “Deity yoga means to imagine oneself as having the Form Body of a Buddha now; one meditates on oneself in the aspect of a Buddha’s Form Body.”²⁹ Greater emphasis is placed on the fact that it is the “form body” (*saṃbhogakāya*) with which the practitioner identifies, as distinct from the “truth body” (*dharmakāya*), which is the nature of *sūtra Mahāyāna* meditation.

In the Perfection Vehicle, there is meditation similar in aspect to a Buddha’s *Truth Body*—a Buddha’s wisdom consciousness. A Bodhisattva enters into meditative equipoise directly realizing emptiness with nothing appearing to the mind except the final nature of phenomena, the emptiness of inherent existence; the wisdom consciousness is fused with that emptiness.³⁰

Daniel Cozort describes the *sādhana* of Kālacakra, in which the ritually central action is the union between the deity evoked and the practitioner. Kālacakra, a manifestation of Akṣobhya, is visualized as “an impressive black or dark blue man” residing at the center of the cosmos, standing on a huge lotus, embracing his consort Viśvamātā, who is yellow in color, in sexual union (*yabyum*).³¹ They are in the middle of a large mandala palace, surrounded by a retinue of over 700 emanations of themselves, in a landscape enclosed by a boundary of *vajras*. Working through the various preparatory ritual steps and the seven stages of *pūjā* offerings,

One imagines that Kālacakra dissolves into one’s crown and that one now is Kālacakra in the brilliant circle of mansion and deities, emanating fierce protective deities from one’s heart and uttering the divine speech associated with all deities. The deities melt, dissolving into oneself; oneself also dissolves, but then re-forms as Kālacakra, whereupon one renews one’s vows and pledges.³²

Many of the rituals in the Shingon tradition’s ritual corpus have a central action known as “visualizing entering me, me entering” (Jp. *nyū ga ga nyū kan*, Skt. *ahaṃkara*, 入我我入觀). In this, just as in Tibetan deity yoga practices, the practitioner visualizes becoming identical with the chief deity of the ritual.

Hopkins identifies one of the concerns that may arise in relation to such practices by the term “inflation,”³³ a negative condition of grandiosity, such as “thinking that one is God.” He borrows this term from Carl Jung’s works, especially those that address the potentially dangerous consequences of Westerners engaging in yogic practices. Hopkins argues, however, that the fundamental corrective for inflation is already built into the larger religious context of such practices: specifically, the preliminary ethical practices (*śīla*), and the doctrinal emphasis on emptiness (*śūnyatā*), both of which serve to moderate the tendency of the ego toward self-aggrandizement.

III. THE CONTEXT OF PRACTICE: ŚĪLA AND EMPTINESS

Buddhist praxis was codified as an integrated system by many different Buddhist thinkers. One rather widespread system for organizing praxis is that employed by Buddhaghosa as the overall structure of his *Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*: ethical training (*śīla*), contemplation (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*prajñā*).³⁴ Ethical training (*śīla*) is a preliminary foundation for any kind of meditative practice (*samādhi*, *dhyāna*, *śamatha-vipaśyanā*, *pūjā*, or any of the other variety of practices developed over the course of Buddhist history). On the basis of these two, the practitioner is able to develop wisdom (*prajñā*)—insight into emptiness.

Buddhist conceptions of ethics are for the most part based on the idea of karma. By paying attention to the consequences of one’s actions, the practitioner will be motivated to desist from engaging in actions that impede realization, and to engage in actions that are conducive to awakening. This in turn points to the importance of the intent to attain awakening (*bodhicitta*). In *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, Tsongkhapa explains that the practitioner who is motivated by the desire for awakening, and committed to its attainment, takes the karmic process itself as an object of reflection.

Thus, having understood virtuous and nonvirtuous karma and their effects, do not leave it at just an understanding but meditate on it over and over, because this is a very obscure subject and it is difficult to acquire certainty about it.³⁵

Tsong kha pa goes on to demonstrate the integral nature of Buddhist praxis by linking his discussion of karma with emptiness:

Some, who claim that they have acquired certain knowledge of emptiness, are uncertain about karma and its effects and do not value it. This is a mistaken understanding of emptiness. For, once you understand emptiness, you will see that it is the meaning of dependent-arising, and it will assist you in becoming certain about karma and its effects.³⁶

As indicated by Hopkins, then, all types of meditation—including the ritualized practice of tantric *sādhana* in which the practitioner identifies with the deity—is framed by the dual teaching of karma: ethical training (*śīla*) and emptiness, that is, wisdom (*prajñā*).

In the form associated with the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi-sūtra* alluded to above, identification is firmly conditioned by contemplation of emptiness, and this is central to understanding the significance of the practice of the identity of practitioner and buddha. Germano summarizes:

In this context, there are extended discussions of emptiness which strongly stress the importance of integrating concentration on the Buddha's visual form with an understanding of emptiness. This integration of Buddha cults and emptiness is an important precursor to the ideology of deity yoga, where the mind perceiving emptiness is none other than that which appears in the form of the deity's body.³⁷

This emphasis on emptiness continues into the identification practices of tantra, and may serve as at least a general marker distinguishing Buddhist tantra from Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava forms of tantra. In the practice of identifying with the deity, emptiness being of a single nature, the mutual emptiness of self and deity is understood as that which makes the identification possible.³⁸ Thus, emptiness is not primarily understood as a metaphysical doctrine that somehow comes to be applied to practice, but rather as that which is the very nature of existence and which makes practice effective. It is simply a label that we employ to describe the character of existence—that all existing entities exist solely as the result of causes and conditions.

While it is one thing to be able to understand the imaginal body as “like a dream or a mirage,” the visionary unification of practitioner and deity, so that the practitioner experiences existing as the awakened one, reflexively creates an awareness of the practitioner's own emptiness as well. Georgios Halkias has described the conception of identification in relation to the realization, literally, the “making real,” of the practitioner's intrinsic nature as already being awakened (that is, their buddha-nature):

In deity-yoga the practitioner visualizes himself or herself to be already fully enlightened in the body and with the speech and mind of a particular Buddha or chosen deity (*vidam*) drawn from the Vajrayāna pantheon. Vajrayāna is also called the vehicle of fruit or result (Phalayāna), for it presupposes the inherent Buddha-nature of the practitioner working to a state of realization from inside out—exemplified in the union of “acting like a Buddha” and “being one.”³⁹

We have mentioned that ritual identification constitutes the central ritual action in many Shingon tantric ritual practices. This identification is based upon a foundation of moral training (*śīla*), and is held within the conceptual system of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). As a ritual action, identification takes place within the narrative structure of the ritual.

IV. GROUND, PATH, AND GOAL AS THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF TANTRIC RITUAL

We have suggested above that the three-part structure of ground, path, and goal provides a narrative frame for Buddhist praxis—including doctrinal analyses of the ordinary human condition, expositions of the stages of the path, and considerations of the efficacy of practice, as well as reflections on the nature of awakening and of buddhahood. More specifically, however, the ground, path, and goal schema provides the narrative structure of tantric Buddhist practice. Such practices, then, are not simply items to be placed within the category of “path” but rather recreate within the ritual practice itself the entire narrative of awakening. This “reflection in miniature,” as it were, is what I am referring to by the term “fractal” in the title of this essay.

Characteristic of fractal patterns is that each smaller element replicates the same pattern as a larger one. Such patterns are familiar from the visual images generated mathematically known as Mandelbrot sets, which are now used extensively in computer animation. These patterns are described as “self-similar.” The whole has the same shape as one or more of its parts. Such self-similarity is familiar in nature, both in physical structures, such as coastlines, and in organic structures, such as the relation between a head of broccoli and its florets. A related concept is recursion, as, for example, in generative linguistics when a rule is applied repeatedly to the previous product of that same rule. This fractal relation of self-similarity also holds between the structure of the path and the structure of tantric ritual practice. Both employ the

structure of ground, path, and goal, and thus ritual practice is “self-similar” to the path. I believe that this fractal self-similarity explains the understanding of ritual efficacy in tantric traditions that employ rituals of these kinds, and in other traditions that have adopted similar doctrinal understandings.

The pattern of many Shingon ritual practices may be briefly summarized as follows.

The practitioner enters the hall of practice as a normal human being, a simple foolish person (*prthagjana*, *bonbu* 凡夫), and enters onto the path. Most clearly, the generation of *bodhicitta* marks entry onto the path, not only in path schemas but also as a specific ritual act. Having entered onto the path, the tantric practitioner then proceeds with various other ritual acts that are informed by the Buddhist use of the more general Indian offering ritual practice *pūjā*,⁴⁰ which differ from the more familiar emphasis on silent, seated meditation but are nonetheless a form of practice on the path. At the culmination of the ritual performance, the practitioner ritually identifies with the chief deity. Doing so, he or she *becomes* the buddha evoked in the ritual, experiencing the view of the world, him- or herself, and others in the way that buddhas do, as empty, and thus attains the goal.

In this abbreviated description of tantric Buddhist rituals, the narrative structure of ground, path, and goal is evident. Following the central act of ritual identification, which is attainment of the goal understood as the direct experience of one’s own awakened nature, that is, being a buddha, the practitioner repeats the practice in roughly reverse order and ends the ritual. This is not, however, an isolated instance of this larger, symmetrical narrative structure of ground, path, goal, path, ground.

This five-part version of the narrative structure implicitly conveys a conception of the relation between wisdom (*prajñā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*) that leads the practitioner back into his or her conventional self-identity. It is perhaps not uncommon to think of the path as leading to some static endpoint of unmoving, unchanging, absolute awareness—a dead-end, though the term might seem impious. But when the goal of buddhahood is conceived of as a state to be attained permanently, an absolute state without change, then the end of the path has been reached and forward motion stops.⁴¹ This would be the condition of an arhat or *pratyekabuddha*, soteriological states that are critiqued as inferior in many Mahāyāna texts.

In the ritual schema, however, the closing sequence following the act of identification requires the practitioner to “dis-identify” from the chief deity, close the ritual, and leave the hall to return to his or her present involvement with the world, as well as to their conventional, socially defined self-identity. A dismissive interpretation of this would be that the ritual didn’t work and a permanent transformation of the practitioner into a buddha was not achieved. I believe, however, that such a facile interpretation entirely misunderstands the dynamics of both practice and path as understood within the Mahāyāna conception of awakening as *both* wisdom and compassion.

Four examples drawn from other Mahāyāna traditions may help the reader see the nature of tantric ritual practice as closely adhering to more general conceptions of practice and awakening as dynamic. The first is based on a personal experience in Zen training. As a short-term lay practitioner at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center in California, I was informed that work in the temple and its grounds—cleaning the temple hall, sweeping the walkways, weeding the garden, and the like—was also meditation. There was a systematic progression from seated meditation to walking meditation, to doing simple chores, to doing more complex ones. Awareness developed on the cushion was not intended to stay on the cushion but was to be carried out into one’s daily activities in the world. This extension of meditation practice into daily activity was graduated in accord with the practitioner’s ability. Indeed, as a beginner I had been responsible for very easy tasks that were not particularly demanding or disruptive of a calm and centered state of mind. However, when driving out from Tassajara I noticed road maintenance work being done, including moving boulders that had fallen onto the roadway during a recent rainstorm, and I was surprised to see that the most senior students were engaged in this physically demanding project, one potentially most disruptive to their meditative equipoise.

Similarly, in some portrayals of the ten, or twelve, ox-herding pictures⁴² of the Chan/Zen tradition familiar to many readers, the sequence ends with a portrayal of the practitioner “returning to the marketplace.” We can understand this as the same idea regarding the necessity for the practitioner not to remain in an exalted state of absorption once achieved, but rather to return to live in the world with the awareness generated by meditative practice itself.

The same basic idea is also expressed in Shin Buddhist thought by the pairing of the desire to go to Sukhāvati (*ōsō* 往相) with the desire

to return (*gensō* 還相). Taitetsu Unno has interpreted “returning to samsaric existence” (*gensō-ekō* 還相廻向) as the “ultimate manifestation of compassion,” which “completes the progression on the path to enlightenment.”⁴³ Last, the *Jōdo-ron* (浄土論, T. 1524), attributed to Vasubandhu, is structured into five “gates,” the last of which is characterized as “leaving the garden” (the Pure Land), and returning to the world of ordinary life. Thus, not only does the narrative structure of ground, path, and goal found in tantric ritual practice reflect that of the path generally, the section of the ritual that follows the identification of practitioner with deity, in which the ritual is closed and the practitioner returns to “ordinary” life, is also reflected in the understandings of practice as leading to an awakened engagement with the samsaric realm found in other Buddhist traditions as well.

What we are seeing in the fractal relation between tantric ritual practice and the path is effectively a ritualized version of the doctrinal view described by Paul Groner as “the shortening of the path.”⁴⁴ This shortening of the path is found throughout Kamakura-era Buddhism in one form or another, all of which may have derived from the tantric teachings that came into Japanese Buddhism through Kūkai’s Shingon and the tantric portion of Saichō’s Tendai. Known in Kūkai’s terminology as “becoming awakened in this very body” (*sokushin jōbutsu*, 即身成佛), this radical claim, common to all tantric Buddhism, holds that the practices are effective enough to lead to awakening in a single lifetime.

This notion is based on the belief that one is in fact already awakened and needs only to engage in the proper practices to realize that fact. Thus, in one sense, the ground is already identical with the goal. This suggests that Japanese understandings of tantric practice share a common Indian source with the Tibetan conception of tantric practice as the “resultant vehicle”⁴⁵ (literally, “the path of the fruit,” *phalayāna*); in other words, the path is itself the goal. These ideas are themselves part of the larger concept of “sudden awakening” found in many forms of Buddhist conceptualizations of the path.

CONCLUSION: FRACTAL RELATIONS BETWEEN PRACTICE AND PATH

Throughout the tradition, Buddhist praxis has a shared narrative structure: the three stages of ground, path, and goal, which in Buddhist thought are commonly understood as frustrating repetitive behaviors (ground), attention to the nature of one’s existence and the

consequence of one's mental, verbal, and bodily actions (path), and freedom from the delusions that drive the round of frustrating repetitive actions (goal). This narrative structure is also the organizing structure of tantric Buddhist ritual practices such as ritual identification, or deity yoga. The practitioner begins as an ordinary person, engages in practices (such as *pūjā* offerings) that lead to entering into union with the deity evoked, made possible by the uniformity of the emptiness of both deity and self, as well as of all existing things; then, separating, he or she returns to being themselves but with an awareness of the emptiness of the self. The fractal self-similarity of ritual practice and the path provides an understanding of why tantric Buddhist ritual is structured in the way that it is.

NOTES

1 This is a revised and, it is hoped, much more coherent version of the paper "The Self is a Self-Constructing Construct: Narrative and Buddhist Praxis," given as part of the conference "The Storied Self: Buddhist Narrativity in Comparative Context" organized by Mark Unno at the University of Oregon, Eugene, October 19–21, 2012. My thanks to Prof. Unno for inviting me to participate in that conference, and to Prof. Jared Lindahl for his responses to my presentation. I also want to thank Mr. Cody Bahir for reviewing the earlier draft and offering his reflections on these topics as well. The conference presentation draft was published under the title "The Self is a Self-Constructing Construct: Narrative and Buddhist Praxis," Center for Humanities, Science, and Religion, *Annual Report of 2012* (Kyoto: Ryukoku University, 2013), pp. 360–371.

2 See, for example, Timothy D. Wilson, *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), Chapter 8: "Introspection and Self-Narratives," pp. 159–181.

3 Dan McAdams has done extensive work on the narrative construction of the self, for example in *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1993). In his own study of narratives in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*, Shubha Pathak summarizes this concisely, noting that McAdams "equates identity with a 'life story,' a 'personal myth' that an individual invents over the course of his late adolescence and adulthood to make sense of the events of his past, present and future. Although this narrative is inside him, it incorporates elements from his social environment. Among these elements are the stories he hears being passed down as part of his cultural tradition" ("Why do Displaced Kings Become Poets in the Sanskrit Epics? Modeling *Dharma* in the Affirmative *Rāmāyaṇa* and the Interrogative *Mahābhārata*" *Hindu Studies* 10 (2006): 145). We should also note that the "narrative milieu" within which a person matures is not cleanly delineated

between stories of the cultural tradition and those of familial tradition.

4 See James L. Fredericks, "A Universal Religious Experience? Comparative Theology as an Alternative to a Theology of Religions," *Horizons* 22/1 (1995): 67–87.

5 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), p. 8.

6 While the hero's journey or quest has been taken as paradigmatic, broader conceptions of the Romance narrative can perhaps provide a better understanding of the emplotment of the Buddha's life, rather than forcing it into the mold formed from tales of Osiris, Prometheus, and Gawain. Rather than abstracting out aspects of the life of the Buddha to match the framework of the hero's quest, the way in which the Buddha's life narrative has provided a model for religious practice in Buddhism itself would provide a methodologically more appropriate approach. An initial effort in this direction can be found in my "Individuation and Awakening: Romantic Narrative and the Psychological Interpretation of Buddhism," in Mark Unno, ed., *Buddhism and Psychotherapy Across Cultures: Essays on Theories and Practices* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006), pp. 31–51.

7 White, *Metahistory*, p. 9.

8 Exceptions include David Shulman's *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), many of Wendy Doniger's studies, and the works of Lee Siegel, especially his *Laughing Matters: Comic Tradition in India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

9 The provisional character of resolution noted by White is perhaps why there are so many such stories, in which the Trickster continually goes on to another scheme.

10 White's fourfold categorization of narrative to comparative studies cannot be applied uncritically to crosscultural comparisons. For example, Siegel contends that the view that comedy and tragedy are opposites, as indicated by the paired comedic and tragic masks, a widespread theatrical convention in the West, is a cultural convention. "The comic sentiment is not understood in India as a dichotomous principle in relation to a tragic one; it is rather a mood which arises out of an opposition to, or parody of, any of the aesthetic flavors" (Siegel, *Laughing Matters*, p. 8).

11 White, *Metahistory*, p. 9.

12 White, *Metahistory*, p. 10.

13 Two important questions arise in thinking about religious doctrine generally, and Buddhism specifically, within this analytic framework. The first is whether or not there are more narrative structures appropriate for the analysis of religious doctrine than these four, which White has identified

as relevant for the analysis of the narrative character of historiography. The second is whether or not there is something uniquely “Western” about these modes.

14 Although discussed here as a specifically Buddhist formulation, I believe that it can be extended to describe other religious systems as well—as an interpretive device, if not as a necessarily accurate reflection of an emic organization of a religious system other than Buddhism.

15 I note that this structure—ground, path, goal—differs from the three-part structure at the basis of Christianity and much of other Western religions, philosophy, and psychology—that of unity, fall, and redemption. While the latter projects backward in time to an originally pure and harmonious past, contributing no doubt to a persistent mode of nostalgia, the Buddhist system starts with the present condition, the ground of human existence as it is found now. (This difference gives Buddhist thought some similarity to existentialism, and perhaps helps to highlight the distinction between existentialism, eschewing metaphysics as it does, and other forms of Western thought, informed by the three-part structure of unity, fall, and redemption.)

16 One rationale for quiet contemplative reflection on the working of the mind is to slow it down enough to be able to grasp clearly the link between one’s own mistaken conceptions and misplaced affections and the ongoing round of repetitive suffering.

17 Jeffrey Hopkins, “The Tibetan Genre of Doxography: Structuring a World-view,” in José Ignacio Cabezón and Roger R. Jackson, eds., *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre* (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion, 1996), p. 171.

18 Hopkins, “The Tibetan Genre of Doxography,” p. 171.

19 This suggests an important difference between substantive texts and ones that merely reinforce existing prejudices and preconceptions. The effort involved in sustained attention and reflection on a difficult text may be a reflection of its transformative potential. Of course, what constitutes a difficult text that requires sustained attention and reflection will differ depending on the reader. When I read J. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy at the age of 13, sustained attention and reflection was required. Now, however, I would probably find these works unchallenging.

20 See Tim Blanning, *The Romantic Revolution: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2011), pp. 24–29.

21 See Michel Bitbol, “The Co-Emergence of the Knower and the Known: A Comparison between Madhyamaka and Kant’s Epistemology,” in D. K. Nauriyal, Michael S. Drummond, and Y. B. Lal, eds., *Buddhist Thought and Applied Psychological Research: Transcending the Boundaries* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 132.

22 This should not be understood as the defining characteristic of tantra for two reasons. First, as a polythetically unified tradition there are various strands that make up tantra. Ronald Davidson, for example, has shown that the mandalic symbolism equating the emperor and his court with a buddha and his retinue is at least equally “definitive.” Ronald Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), Chapter 4: “The Victory of Esoterism and the Imperial Metaphor.” Similarly, there are forms of tantra in which the theology is strongly dualistic, and the nature of identification in those traditions differs from the kinds being discussed here. See Richard K. Payne, “Ritual Studies in the *Longue Durée*: Comparing Shingon and Śaiva Siddhānta Homas,” *Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies*, third series, no. 13 (Fall 2011): 223–262. Second, other forms of tantra such as Jain tantra, and Islamic forms have only begun to be studied and written about, and these materials have only recently become accessible, thus precluding any definitive claims about ritual identification in those forms of tantra.

23 David Germano, “The Shifting Terrain of the Tantric Bodies of Buddhas and Buddhists from an Atiyoga Perspective,” in Ramon Prats, ed., *The Pandita and the Siddha: Tibetan Studies in Honour of E. Gene Smith* (Dharamsala, India: Amnye Machen Institute, 2007), p. 53.

24 One codification of such practices is found in the Tiantai school. In his *Mohe zhiguan* (T. 1911; 摩訶止觀, Jp. *Makashikan*) Zhiyi (538–597, 智顛, Jp. Chigi) identified four *samādhis* (Jp. *shishu zammai* 四種三昧): constant sitting (Jp. *jōza zammai* 常坐三昧), constant walking (Jp. *jōgyō zammai* 常行三昧, associated with the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi-sūtra*), both walking and sitting (Jp. *hangyō hanza zammai* 半行半坐三昧, associated with the *Lotus Sutra*), and neither sitting nor walking (Jp. *higyō hiza zammai* 非行非坐三昧). See Paul Swanson, “*Ch’an* and *Chih-kuan*: T’ient-t’ai Chih-i’s View of ‘Zen’ and the Practice of the *Lotus Sutra*,” paper presented at “The *Lotus Sutra* and Zen,” 2002 International Lotus Sutra Conference, Tokyo. Of the four meditation practices, the constant walking *samādhi* is a particularly rigorous, indeed grueling, 90-day practice still performed on occasion on Hieizan, the center of Tendai Buddhism in Japan. See the lecture series by Tesshin Michimoto, “Mt. Hiei and the Pure Land,” 2013 Ryūkoku Lecture Series, Institute of Buddhist Studies, March 13, 20, 27 (audiofiles available soon on the IBS electronic archive, <http://podcast.shin-ibs.edu/>). The incredibly demanding constant walking *samādhi* as practiced on Hieizan is expected to produce visions of Amida and his Pure Land.

25 Germano, “The Shifting Terrain,” p. 52. For the interested reader, the other two are described by Germano as “(ii) non-conceptual and image-free meditation following the dissolution of imaginal processes, the transition of visualizations into spontaneous naturally occurring visions, or subtle body praxis involving detailed representations of the body’s interior that goes hand

in hand with the explosion of horrific and sexual imagery; and (iii) the radical deconstruction of complex deity-yoga centered tantric contemplation that tends to aestheticize the cruder aspects of tantric focus on sexuality, violence and death, while contemplatively favoring either strict non-conceptual states, simple visualizations or imaginal processes that are centered around more spontaneous image flow” (p. 52). In terms from psychology, we may consider the first two to correspond to “guided imagery” and “active imagination.” The third seems to correlate to a transformation of the primitive/emotional material that is manifested objectively in the visualization in the service of psychological wholeness (in psychological terms) or awakening (in Buddhist terms).

26 Dale A. Todaro, an important contributor to the study of Shingon thought in Western languages, has already suggested the unity of Shingon ritual identification and Tibetan Vajrayāna deity yoga in “A Study of the Earliest *Garbha Vidhi* of the Shingon Sect,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 9/2 (1986): 118.

27 Daniel Cozort, “Sādhana (sGrub thabs): Means of Achievement for Deity Yoga,” in José Ignacio Cabezón and Roger R. Jackson, eds., *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1996), p. 332. As this is the only instance of rendering this term as *devatā yoga* that I have encountered in researching deity yoga, I wonder whether it is a back-translation into Sanskrit from the Tibetan.

28 Jeffrey Hopkins, “Paradigm Change in Meditation on Selflessness in Tibetan Buddhism: The Progression from Space-Like Meditative Equipoise to Deity Yoga,” in *Proceedings of Conference on Modern Tibetan Studies* (Taipei: Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs Commission, 2003), p. 235.

29 Jeffrey Hopkins, “Reason as the Prime Principle in Tsong kha pa’s Delineation of Deity Yoga as the Demarcation Between Sūtra and Tantra,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 7/2 (1984): 99–100. Note that at this point Hopkins in turn cites Tsong-Ka-Pa (Tsong kha pa), *Tantra in Tibet: The Great Exposition of Secret Mantra*, Jeffrey Hopkins, tr. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1977), pp. 61–65, 115–116.

30 Hopkins, “Reason as the Prime Principle,” p. 100.

31 Cozort, “Sādhana,” p. 331.

32 Cozort, “Sādhana,” p. 336.

33 Hopkins, *Tantric Techniques* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2008), Chapter 3: pp. 65–82.

34 Cf. Jared Lindahl, “Self-Transformation According to Buddhist Stages of the Path Literature,” *Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies* 3/14 (2013): 241–285.

35 Tsong-kha-pa, *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2000), pp. 247–248.

36 Tsong-kha-pa, *The Great Treatise*, p. 248.

37 Germano, “The Shifting Terrain,” p. 54.

38 The relation between deity yoga and emptiness was contradictory for some in the tradition. Deity yoga, since it involved focusing on a conceptual formation, could not lead to insight into emptiness. According to Thomas F. Yarnall, a key issue for Tsong kha pa’s tantric discourse, “The Great Stages of Mantra,” is the integration of conceptual and nonconceptual yogas; in other words, the integration of deity yoga and emptiness (“The Emptiness that is Form: Developing the Body of Buddhahood in Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Tantra” [Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 2003], esp. pp. 219 ff.).

39 Georgios Halkias, “Buddhist Meditation Traditions in Tibet: The Union of the Three Vehicles, a Tibetan Perspective,” in Sarah Shaw, ed., *Introduction to Buddhist Meditation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 161.

40 For a discussion of the organizing structures of *pūjā*, see Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton, trans. (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 10–11. It is worth pointing out that Crosby and Skilton discuss in the commentary to the first chapter the use of the organizing structure of the *pūjā* for structuring the text of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, i.e., a ritual structure being employed as a narrative structure.

41 This raises many problematic issues within Buddhist thought regarding the nature of a buddha, and while the scope of this essay cannot incorporate a review of the issues, two basic conceptions can be mentioned here. In one conception, upon death a buddha who has attained complete awakening (*anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi*) simply ceases to exist; all karmic consequences of his life has been extinguished, and there will be no further rebirth. In the other conception, as “unconditioned” (*asamskrta*), nirvana is interpreted as a permanent, eternal, absolute, unchanging nature or status. This latter interpretation supports the imagery of cosmic buddhas presently existing and accessible to us. It seems to me that it may be impossible to resolve these two understandings, and that there is a philosophical incoherence in arguing for an understanding of buddhahood that is both permanent, eternal, absolute, and unchanging, and at the same time compassionate and active. Ultimately, however, these are simply intersubjective entities, conceptual in existence and consensual in character—there is no objective referent against which such claims may be either validated or invalidated.

42 Cf. Paramita Paul, “Wandering Saints: Chan Eccentrics in the Art and Culture of Song and Yuan China” (Ph.D. dissertation, Universiteit Leiden, 2009), pp. 237–245.

43 Taitetsu Unno, "The Concept of Gratitude in Shin Buddhism," *Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies*, n.s. 1 (Fall 1985): 30.

44 Paul Groner, "Shortening the Path: Early Tendai Interpretations of the Realization of Buddhahood with this Very Body," in Robert E. Buswell, Jr. and Robert M. Gimello, eds., *Paths to Liberation: The Mārga and Its Transformations in Buddhist Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1992).

45 Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, p. 367, n. 2. See also Halkias, "Buddhist Meditation Traditions," p. 161. For an extensive treatment of the system developed on this basis in Tibet, known as *lam 'bras* (ལམ་བླ་མ་), see Cyrus Stearns, trans., *Taking the Result as the Path: Core Teachings of the Sakya Lamdré Tradition* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006).

