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CHAPTER

Buddhist Magic and Vajrayāna FREE

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Abstract

Key elements of the Vajrayāna, or tantric Buddhism, can be traced back to some of the earliest Buddhist scriptures, typically texts that give instructions for practices that culminate in worldly results, such as protection from supernatural beings, healing illness and curing poison, bringing rain, or ensuring the safe birth of children. These magical aspects of Buddhist practice include the recitation of spells (*mantra* and *dhāraṇī*), along with other techniques such as the delimitation of sacred space with magical items and the use of ritual gestures (*mudrā*). In Vajrayāna texts, these techniques are adapted to the purpose of the ultimate Buddhist goal, awakening, though their power to achieve worldly ends is also taught in many tantras.

Keywords: Buddhism, magic, Vajrayāna, mantra, dhāraṇī, mudrā, supernatural beings, medicine, weather control, childbirth

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Introduction

Magical practices are found in Buddhist sutras, as well as other kinds of scriptural texts specializing in magical rites, known as *vidyā* (lit. knowledge, or skill), *kalpa*, or *dhāraṇī* (mnemonic). In the study of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, there has been a debate about whether we should see these magical texts and practices as “proto-tantric.” Yet this really depends on how close a connection has to be demonstrated before the term “proto” becomes meaningful. Similarly, in the study of East Asian Buddhism, the term “esoteric Buddhism” has been the subject of many discussions, with some settling on “esoteric Buddhism” (with a lower-case “e”) for the magical texts, and “Esoteric Buddhism” (with an upper-case “E”) for texts closely related to the tantras. This does not work well for oral discussions and is imperiled by typographical errors, but more important, it obscures the fact that most magical texts were not considered esoteric or secret, such restrictions being associated specifically with the initiatory practices of the tantras.

Since these categories tend to be tweaked or redefined with each new publication, there is unlikely ever to be a consensus about them, and this may be fine if we consider them mere tools for the task at hand. On the other hand, such categorizations can be actively misleading, obscuring rather than revealing the nature of Buddhist practices. As some scholars have said, this approach tends to fall into a teleological fallacy, interpreting an historical phenomenon in terms of later developments (see Sharf 2002; Davidson 2002; McBride 2004). Here, I will look at magical elements in Buddhist literature that were later adapted in the tantras and their associated ritual texts, but rather than attempting to locate a point where non-Tantra becomes Tantra, or a transitional area of “proto-Tantra” or small-“e” esoteric Buddhism, I will suggest approaching this as a process without major disruption, with each development drawing upon what came before.

C43.P2

Categories developed within the Buddhist exegetical tradition can also mislead us if used inappropriately. Buddhist scholars who inherited more than a millennium of development in practices and texts developed strategies to situate them in hierarchical systems. Drawing on one of the most popular of these, the Tibetan tradition used a fourfold classification to categorize the texts of the Vajrayāna, from the lowest to highest level of tantra: *kriyā* (action), *caryā* (performance), *yoga* (union), and *anuttarayoga* (supreme union).¹ Much of the magical literature in Buddhist scripture was assimilated into the genre of *kriyā* tantra. This category contains many more texts than the other three, yet much of what is included here has nothing to do with the tantras and predated the emergence of the Vajrayāna as a genre of scripture. Most of the scriptures in the *kriyā* category do not have the word “tantra” in their title; many are sutras, and others are characterized as spells (*vidyā* or *dhāraṇī*) and ritual manuals (*kalpa*).

C43.P3

These anomalies in the category of *kriyā* are due to its being imposed retrospectively on texts that had already been circulating for centuries. That is, these texts predated the appearance of anything known as a tantra and the emergence of a way of Buddhist practice known as Vajrayāna. Traditional categories like these are important, because they have informed the way generations of Buddhists understand the scriptures; however, they may be poor guides to the contents of the scriptures themselves, and they should not be used to understand the historical development of these texts before the categories themselves became generally accepted. Therefore, the approach I take here is to gather examples from Buddhist scripture—regardless of how they have been categorized by traditional exegesis or modern scholarship—as a step toward a “thick description” of magical practices in these texts and see how this affects our understanding of the development of the Vajrayāna.

C43.P4

Magic in Buddhist Scriptures

C43.S2

To illustrate the way that elements of magical practice in early Buddhist literature developed and were adapted into tantric Buddhism, we will look at six scriptural texts as case studies. These include three texts that teach magical practices: (a) the *Sutra of Atanata*, which has come down to us in both Pali and Sanskrit versions, showing how early and widespread it was in Buddhist communities across the Indic world and beyond; (b) the *Great Destroyer of the Universe*, one of the “five protective texts” that is still popular in Tibetan and Nepalese Buddhism, and is well known in East Asian Buddhism as well; and (c) the *Vajra Beak*, a text that gives a series of ritual instructions on controlling the weather, a common theme in Buddhist magical literature. In these three texts, we see the central role of various non-human beings, monsters, ghosts, and the serpent creatures called *nāgas*; we see how they are controlled or destroyed through mantras taught or sanctioned by the Buddha; and we see how the Buddha is situated at the center of a symmetrical space that is both microcosm and macrocosm and comes to be represented as a physical maṇḍala. These maṇḍalas are arranged with sacred objects including jars, blessed strings, and statues.

C43.P5

We then look at three successively later texts: (a) the *Sutra of Great Vairocana*, which, despite its name, came to be considered a key scripture of the Yoga tantra category of the Vajrayāna; (b) the *Tantra of the Secret Assembly*, one of the most influential tantras in the Mahāyoga or Supreme Yoga tantra; and (c) the *Tantra of Siddhaikavira*, a lesser-known tantra that is essentially a grimoire or book of spells. Through three texts, we can trace some of the ways in which the heritage of Buddhist magic was adapted in the emerging tantric Buddhist tradition. As we will see, this happens in two ways. The first is the incorporation of the technologies of magical practice into Buddhist soteriological models. The scriptures and ritual manuals of the Vajrayāna build on the techniques of Buddhist magic, which included mantras, maṇḍalas, visualization, and the harnessing of negative energies and wrathful beings for the benefit of the Buddhist community. The main differentiating factor is that these techniques are now put to the service of the ultimate Buddhist goal of awakening. The other way in which Buddhist magic informs the Vajrayāna is more direct and can be seen in most tantras, which teach magical practices for worldly ends such as enrichment, enchantment, and the subjugation of enemies right alongside practices aimed at enlightenment itself.

C43.P6

The Sutra of Atanata

C43.S3

The *Sutra of Atanata* (*Āṭanāṭiya* or *Āṭanāṭika sūtra*) is one of the earlier scriptural texts in Buddhism. It is one of the texts in the Pāli canon, specifically in the Dīghanikāya, which may date from the fourth century BCE, though no written versions exist from as early as this. This sutra has been found in manuscript fragments from ancient Buddhist cave sites in Eastern Central Asia, dating from the third to fifth centuries CE, written in Sanskrit rather than Pāli, showing its popularity across the early Buddhist world, and its importance in the spread of Buddhism (Sander 2007). The *Sutra of Atanata* belongs to the category of protective texts or *rākṣa*. In Theravada cultures, where they are also known as *paritta*, they are the best known and most frequently recited texts in all the Pali canon. These texts were the subject of an influential article by Peter Skilling (1992: 168), who emphasized their fundamental nature in early Buddhism:

C43.P7

The chanting of certain auspicious verses or texts for protection against disease or malignant spirits and for the promotion of welfare was no doubt a “pan-Nikāya” practice, common to all branches of the saṃgha, from an early date; indeed, on the internal evidence of texts like the *Dhvajāgra* and *Āṭanāṭika Sūtras*, the practice should predate the early schisms.

C43.P8

As Skilling and others have argued, there is no reason to consider the *Sutra of Atanata*, and other *paritta* texts, to be later than others in the Pali canon, on the assumption that magical texts must be more recent additions than ethical and philosophical teachings. The *Sutra of Atanata* begins with the scene of the Buddha seated on the mountain known as Vulture’s Peak and receiving as visitors the Four Great Kings and their armies. The kings approach from the north, south, east, and west and station their armies in each of these four directions before drawing closer to the Buddha and sitting around him, again situated in each of the four directions. Then the king of the north, Vaiśravaṇa, speaks to the Buddha, telling him about the presence of monsters such as *yakṣa*, who are a threat to monks spending time in forests and other secluded places. In order to help these monks, Vaiśravaṇa teaches a spell to neutralize the threat of monsters, ghosts, and other nonhuman creatures, as well as the threats from human thieves, murderers, and the like.

C43.P9

The *Atanata* spell begins with homage to five buddhas: Vipassī, Vesabhū, Koṇāgamana, Kāśyapa, and Gautama. The invocation of five buddhas here mirrors the center and four-directions model set up at the beginning of the sutra, with Gautama, to whom the spell offers the greatest praise, occupying a central position surrounded by four other buddhas. The spell continues with an invocation of each of the four directions in turn, first east and west (following the rising and setting of the sun) and then north and south. First, the invocation describes the inhabitants of each direction and then how they all pay reverence to Gautama. The spell works by causing these threatening beings to pay homage to the Buddha, essentially bringing them under his power and into the fully controlled sacred structure of the center and four

C43.P10

directions. The power of the buddha, harnessed by the recitation of the spell, transforms these negative factors into positive ones: the protection brought by the spell and the cosmos it describes harnesses the power of monsters to defeat monsters.

After reciting the spell, Vaiśravaṇa assures the Buddha that any monk, nun, and male or female lay follower will be protected by reciting it themselves, so that any monster that threatens them will be cast out of any city or town in these four directions (one of these cities, Atanata, gives the sutra its name). Not only will the monster be cast out, but the inhabitants of the city or town will be so enraged that they will destroy the monster completely by splitting its head into seven pieces. Vaiśravaṇa also promises that anyone assaulted by monsters can call for help from the commanders of the monsters themselves; these commanders are all named; this ends the teaching by Vaiśravaṇa. The sutra concludes with a dissolution of the teaching scene. The Four Great Kings and their entourages each in turn circumambulate the Buddha before returning to their respective realms in the four directions (Walshe 1995: 471–478).

C43.P11

The sutra, and especially the spell detailing the four directions and their inhabitants, offers a vivid cosmological picture, one that can be visualized, as Sarah Shaw (2021: 228) has argued: “The *Āṭṇāṭṭiya-sutta* is one of several in the *Dīghanikāya* that are explicit visualisations: it suggests that listeners imagine these supernatural beings, but, importantly, under protected conditions within an organized cosmos.”

C43.P12

Shaw, and others who have studied the *Sutra of Atanata* (Shulman 2019) refer to this visualized cosmos with the Buddha at its center as a maṇḍala, though the text itself does not use this word. Shaw identifies visualized maṇḍala arrangements elsewhere in the *Dīghanikāya* as well, for example, in the *Mahāsudassana Sutta*, which describes the realm and palace of King Sudassana, a city surrounded by seven walls made of gold, silver, and various gemstones and entered by four gates; at the center is an exquisite, glittering royal palace. As S. Shaw (2021: 171) writes: “the listener is encouraged to create in the mind’s eye the four corners of the kingdom, the city, the palace, the inner chamber, in a three-dimensional maṇḍala.”

C43.P13

Equally important to the *Sutra of Atanata* as the maṇḍala-like arrangement is the figure of Gautama the Buddha at the center. This Buddha has not passed out of this world and into *parinirvāṇa* but is an ever-present enlightened being who guarantees the effectiveness of the spell. According to Shulman (2019: 237), the logic of *paritta* spells relies on the idea of an enlightened, cosmological buddha at the center of the universe, and always accessible to practitioners through the recitation of the *paritta* itself:

C43.P14

The Buddha is positioned at the core of the cosmos, so that he controls malevolent forces and has a positive influence on all natural and supernatural powers. ... The full-blown expression of this cosmological picture is when the Buddha is understood to embody and provide access to the inner, benevolent realities of the cosmos: Truth (*sacca*), Care/Love (*metta*) and Blessing (*maṅgala*).

C43.P15

How was the *Sutra of Atanata* used? From the text itself, we can see that it was intended to provide a spell for the use of monks and nuns, as well as male and female laypeople, when they were in places where they feared for their safety. S. Shaw (2021: 235) writes that its use must have varied over time and place, but in Southeast Asia “nowadays, the *Āṭṇāṭṭiya-sutta* itself is in constant use practically and medically as a protective text, its *paritta* verses used at times of great distress, sickness or division.”

C43.P16

The Great Destroyer of the Universe

C43.S4

The *Great Destroyer of the Universe* (*Mahāsāhasrapramardanī*) is the name of both a scriptural text, and the spell that the Buddha teaches in this text (Gentry and Doctor 2021).² Like the *Sutra of Atanata*, it contains a narrative that functions to show the context of the spell in the Buddhist universe, and its efficacy. The *Great Destroyer of the Universe* is one of the *rākṣa* texts contained in a collection known as the *pañcarākṣa* (five protective texts), which are still popular in Nepalese and Tibetan Buddhism. The texts circulated separately before being brought together into this collection. Some of the individual texts were translated into Chinese and became very popular in East Asian Buddhism as well.³

C43.P17

While the *Great Destroyer of the Universe* is not preserved in the Pāli canon, Peter Skilling (1992: 141) has shown that it has its roots in the tradition of protective sutras known in the Pali canonical tradition as *Ratana* (for Sanskrit *ratna*) sutras:

C43.P18

The Mahāsāhasrapramardanī enshrines a complete **Ratna-sūtra*, concealed by a tangled overgrowth of *mantras* and long verses. That this is its original kernel is clear from the narrative framework, which belongs to the “*Ratna-sūtra-Vaiśālī* miracle” tradition: the Buddha at Rājagṛha, the calamity at Vaiśālī, and the assembly of deities; the Buddha’s departure for Vaiśālī, the offering of divine umbrellas, the decorations of the route, and the *indrakīla*; the appeasement of the calamity.

C43.P19

The *Great Destroyer of the Universe* begins with the Buddha teaching at Rājagṛha, when he perceives a great disaster occurring in and around the city of Vaiśālī, with malignant spirits descending on the people from the sky, signaled by thunder, lightning, and hail. The Buddha summons the gods of the realm and the kings of the four directions and tells them that such things cannot happen where the dharma has been taught. The Four Great Kings then each stand up in turn to speak to the Buddha; each describes the symptoms of a specific type of spirit possession and gives a mantra for dealing with the affliction. After this, the Buddha himself proclaims, with a roar like a lion, the eponymous spell of the *Great Destroyer of the Universe*.

C43.P20

As is suggested by the name, the *Great Destroyer of the Universe* is characterized by violent imagery. The dynamic of the text, like the *Sutra of Atanata*, is primarily about conversion, bringing the threatening forces of the universe under the sway of the Buddha’s dharma. In that sutra, those who did not surrender were threatened with having their heads smashed into seven pieces. In the *Great Destroyer of the Universe*, the monsters are bound by the Four Great Kings and brought before the Buddha, to whom they swear allegiance. But for those who will not, the threat of violence occurs more often, and with more variation. The introduction of the spell itself is more threatening; when the Buddha first shouts it out, like a lion roaring, it fills the whole world and strikes fear into ghosts and monsters, causing them to run about in a panic. After this, the Four Great Kings threaten punishment on all those who do not heed the spell, including the severing of limbs and the cutting out of tongues.

C43.P21

A range of non-human beings is described in the *Great Destroyer of the Universe*, including *yakṣas*, *gandharvas*, *pretas*, and *nāgas*; for example, the *bhūta yakṣas* are described as follows (Gentry and Doctor 2021: 1.106–1.108):

C43.P22

Terrible ones with four arms,
With many feet, or one foot,
With four feet, or two feet,
With feet above and face below,
With many bodies and one head,
With one body and four heads,
With many eyes and half a body,

C43.P23

C43.P24

C43.P25

C43.P26

C43.P27

C43.P28

C43.P29

With one eye and twelve stomachs,
With the heads of ass, camel, and elephant,
With arms above and head hanging,
With weapons for teeth, arms, and feet.

C43.P30
C43.P31
C43.P32
C43.P33

Less absurd and more threatening are the *rakṣāsas* (Gentry and Doctor 2021: 1.119, 1.128):

C43.P34

With sharp teeth, red hands,
And lips spattered with blood
They filled their hands
With half-eaten bodies,
And with kidneys, hearts, and other internal organs.
Those with four arms carry torches,
Knives, sticks,
And vajra spears.
Vanquishing fierce armies,
They bring terror everywhere.

C43.P35
C43.P36
C43.P37
C43.P38
C43.P39
C43.P40
C43.P41
C43.P42
C43.P43
C43.P44

The recitation of the fearsome qualities of these monsters serves a double purpose. On the one hand, their terrifying nature shows the need for a powerful spell such as the *Great Destroyer of the Universe*. On the other hand, once the monsters are brought to the side of the Buddha by the spell, they are here to protect his followers against all threats. Thus the physical features of these monsters and the like provided models for the wrathful deities of tantric Buddhism, while the early notion of monsters being bound to vows to protect the Buddha and his followers developed into a pantheon of specific *dharmapālas* (dharma protectors).⁴

C43.P45

In the *Great Destroyer of the Universe*, King Vaiśrāvana describes his four-gated palace, in the same lush and poetic terms that we have seen in the Pāli canon; here, the king tells us that the gates are manned by *yakṣas* wielding vajras, and he is also surrounded by a retinue of *bhūtas*, all bound to his service. Outside the palace there are eight mansions, all inhabited by women wearing fine clothes and jewelry and making music with a variety of instruments. Outside the city walls roam the untamed and wild monsters, and the king vows to bind or destroy them all. Here again we see many elements of tantric maṇḍalas: the king at the center of a four-gated palace within the wider boundary of a city, himself surrounded by a retinue of wrathful beings, gate protectors, and women offering music.

C43.P46

The second half of the *Great Destroyer of the Universe* provides spells and simple procedures for specific purposes. Among these, the longest is the protection of embryos and children from possession, which was believed to be the cause of miscarriage and sickness and death in ancient India (Smith 2006). Specific deities resembling animals are mentioned by name, and then instructions are given for a ritual for a woman who is childless or pregnant. In this ritual the sacred space is delimited with five-colored threads, and the woman enters the space at midnight, when she is blessed by having mustard seeds placed on her head. The text also gives instruction for the preparation of a magical ointment that provides protection when applied to the eyes, to a shrine, or to ensure wider protection or to a drum which is to be beaten, or to the wings of birds that are to be sent flying far away.

C43.P47

A ritual for the protection of the kingdom is also described briefly, which involves setting out a ritual space with four young women holding swords, as well as four bells, and vessels filled with scented water, flowers, and fruits. The spell is then recited and copied onto cotton cloth and mounted on stupas, trees, and flagpoles (Hidas 2013). Similar rituals, involving the delimitation of an area of sacred space with objects such as swords, arrows, threads, and banners, are found in the other *pañcarākṣa* texts.

C43.P48

Whether as part of the scriptural text itself or as ritual manuals associated with (and often translated alongside) the text, the descriptions of these rituals seem to have become more complex over time. Initially, the details of the ritual practice must have accompanied the text in the form of a teacher's oral instructions, as we see in the earliest version of the *Great Peacock Queen of Spells* (*Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*), translated into Chinese in the fourth century CE, in which there is an instruction to delimit the ritual space but none of the necessary details on how this is to be done or what materials are to be used (Sørensen 2009: 95). Later translations into Chinese show that more complete ritual instructions were incorporated into the text over time. After the emergence of the tantras, some of these magical texts incorporated maṇḍala practices that were essentially the same as those found in the tantras themselves (Shinohara 2014; Overbey 2016).

C43.P49

Another development in the magical literature was the deification of the spell. All of the *pañcarākṣa* texts, including the *Great Destroyer of the Universe*, were at some point turned into a deity. There is no such deity in the texts themselves, where their titles only refer to the spell, and their deification was again linked to the development of tantric Buddhism, in which spells or mantras were associated specific deities rather than having been taught by the Buddha or one of the Four Great Kings for a specific practical purpose (Mevissen 2010).

C43.P50

The Vajra Beak

C43.S5

As we have seen, Buddhist magical scriptures tend to target a wide range of monsters, ghosts, and other non-human beings. An exception to this pattern is those scriptures that deal with the weather. Since rain (and other forms of precipitation) was believed to be controlled by the serpent-like beings called *nāgas*. Shrines to *nāgas* appear throughout the Indic world, and as Julia Shaw has shown, their existence near Buddhist monasteries show that the practice of propitiating or controlling *nāgas* was present in early Buddhism (J. Shaw 2013). Controlling the weather is a concern of one of the earliest Buddhist scriptures with detailed ritual instructions, the *Great Cloud Sutra* (*Mahāmeghā sūtra*).

C43.P51

Though less well known than the *Great Cloud Sutra*, the *Vajra Beak* has remained popular in Nepal, mainly copied in compendiums of rituals for controlling the weather. Its full name is *The Vajra Beak's Vow: King of Ritual Manuals* (*Vajratuṇḍasmayakalparāja*), which refers to the deity Garuḍa, the traditional enemy of the *nāgas*. Dating to the fourth or fifth century CE, the *Vajra Beak* consists mainly of a series of ritual manuals and is notable for being one of the earliest texts to use the term *maṇḍala* (or *maṇḍalaka*) for a sacred space created as part of a Buddhist ritual. Its ritual instructions are similar to those found in the *Great Destroyer of the Universe* and the other texts in the *pañcarākṣa*, although only one of those texts, the *Great Amulet Spell*, also uses the term *maṇḍala*.

C43.P52

The *Vajra Beak* begins in a similar way to other Buddhist magical scriptures. The Buddha is teaching at Vārāṇasī and is approached by a local Brahmin who has suffered his crops and his own body being burned by the *nāgas* because he made a mistake in the ritual to appease them. The Buddha comforts the Brahmin, and Vajrapāṇi suggests that he teach a spell to protect people and their crops against the *nāgas*. The Buddha recites a dharani spell called "Nāga Assailing and Impeding Vajra," and this causes the *nāgas* to have splitting headaches and foul-smelling bodies. They crawl to the feet of the Buddha and vow never to harm anyone again. Following this narrative, the *Vajra Beak* proceeds to give detailed instructions on ritual practice. The majority of the text comprises a series of ritual instructions, justifying the name "king of ritual manuals" (*kalparāja*). The similarly titled *Amoghapaśakalparāja* is also composed of a series of ritual instructions.

C43.P53

The first ritual is specifically for the Nāga Assailing and Impeding Vajra spell; it involves setting up a complex maṇḍala on the ground in the area that is to be protected from the *nāgas* (1.11; trans. Hidas 2019: 46):

C43.P54

Then the spell-master should prepare a square *maṇḍalaka* in the middle of the field or forest. Four filled jars should be placed [in the four directions]. Flowers should be scattered. Seven coiling figures should be made and rice spirals. Twenty-one figures should be prepared one after the other. Boiled rice, milk rice, a dish of rice and peas, yoghurt and thickened milk should be placed. Fruits and flowers should be placed. Four jars should be placed. Preceded by a great offering, barley-meal should be placed as foremost. A bowl should be placed in the middle of the *maṇḍalaka*. It should be filled with the five products of the cow, thickened milk and water. Mustard seeds and parched grain should be cast. Four stakes made of khadira wood and iron [should be placed] after they have been enchanted with the mantra sixty times. All stakes should measure eight *aṅgulas*. There should be four *Nāgas* made of brownish cow dung in the four corners of the *maṇḍalaka*. Stakes made of khadira wood should be driven into the ground over their heart completely. The mantra should be recited 108 times.

C43.P55

Here the main features of the *maṇḍala* are the use of jars placed in the four directions and the scattering of flowers to delimit the sacred space. Then figures of *nāgas* are placed in the four directions; like the Four Great Kings in the earlier Buddhist magical texts, these *nāgas* guarantee the taming of the hostile forces in all directions. The other main feature of the *maṇḍala* is the placement of various types of food offerings. These food offerings are for the pacification of hostile forces, and shortly after the passage above, the text gives instructions for a pacification rite to be performed by offering barley, sesame, mustard seeds, and rice grains anointed with ghee (1.13; Hidas 2019: 49). Other rituals in the *Vajra Beak* are more violent; in one, enchanted mustard seeds are to be flung toward the sky and a wrathful mantra is to be recited (3.15; Hidas, 2019: 91): “One should utter ‘*phat*’ wrathfully. After uttering ‘*phat*’ three times, the *Nāgas* fall down with their faces downwards. The bodies of the *Nāgas* crumble to small pieces and fall onto the ground.”

C43.P56

Another ritual focuses on warding off the *nāgas*; here another *maṇḍala* is set up, and the ritual master stands at its center making warding gestures. For this purpose, the text describes a *mudrā* (4.1; Hidas 2019: 99): “A *Nāga* cross-legged hand gesture should be made. The index finger should be like a serpent head. The little finger should be extended.”

C43.P57

Many of the key elements of later tantric Buddhist practice are already present here in this magical ritual: the master of the ritual is situated at the center of a *maṇḍala*, reciting a mantra and making a *mudrā* gesture. A remaining question is who this ritual master might have been. In the *Vajra Beak*, they are called a *vidyādhara* (lit. a holder of spells). As Gergely Hidas has pointed out, references in this text to them wearing a robe and performing rituals at a monastery suggest that the *vidyādhara* was a monk or nun. A prophecy in the text also mentions monks using spells to ward off cold, winds, and thunderbolts. There is nothing in the *Vajra Beak*, or other texts that we have looked at here, to support the assumption that Buddhist magic was provided specifically for laypeople, or as Stephen Hodge (2003: 7) argues, “for the benefit of unsophisticated ordinary people beyond the confines of the great monasteries such as Nālandā.” This seems to be based on an assumption that Buddhist monastics, at least those in the major monasteries, were rationalists focused on scholarship and meditation, with no interest in magic and medicine. We can understand the development of tantric Buddhism better if we see magic as a part of the lives of most if not all Buddhist monks and nuns.

C43.P58

The Sutra of Great Vairocana

C43.S6

Though it came to be considered one of the fundamental texts of Yoga tantra, the *Sutra of Great Vairocana* was not originally considered a tantra. It was a sutra, and therefore part of the same scriptural continuum as the other sutras which also contained spell and ritual content such as the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Sutra of Golden Light*. The *Sutra of Great Vairocana*'s debt to the magical tradition in Buddhism is both implicit and explicit. In this sutra, the maṇḍalas resemble those used in magical rituals for worldly ends, but they are now spaces in which a teacher bestows empowerment (*abhisekha*) upon a disciple. These empowerment rituals draw on earlier magical rituals, with a maṇḍala laid out on the ground, deities situated within it represented by vases; however, the purpose is now enlightenment itself.

C43.P59

An explicit reference to the magical heritage of the practices in the *Sutra of Great Vairocana* can be seen in the sixth chapter, on the nature of accomplishment. Here, Vairocana convinces his audience of the power of mantras used in the practice of deity yoga, using only examples drawn from magic. This teaching begins with Vairocana telling his audience about a mantra used by the gods of the realms of desire, which causes them to experience such intense sensual pleasure that they faint. Vairocana goes on to explain how other mantras allow the gods to create whatever they desire at will. Then there are mantras that create illusions, mantras for curing sickness, those for extinguishing a fire, and so on. "By these examples," Vairocana concludes, "you should have faith in the power of mantras" (Hodge 2003: 169). In an influential commentary on the text, the eighth-century scholar Buddhaghuhya explained the purpose of this passage (Hodge 2003: 169):

C43.P60

In the following section he gives teachings about the power of mantras. Also, the doubts of *sādhakas*, who are sceptical about the *sādhana* and wonder whether they will accomplish attainments or not, will be cleared away by teaching the power of mantras.

C43.P61

At the end of this chapter, Vairocana tells his audience that it is thanks to the inherent power of mantras that *sādhana* practice allows its practitioners to achieve enlightenment in a single lifetime. So, here we have a situation where the teachings on achieving enlightenment through empowerment and the subsequent meditation on the deity through *sādhana* practice are in question and need to be argued for, while the magical power of mantras is not in question, and is in fact the main argument for the efficacy of *sādhana* practice.

C43.P62

Furthermore, like most tantras, the *Sutra of Great Vairocana* teaches magical methods alongside the swift path to enlightenment. In the sixth chapter, along with instructions on how to meditate to achieve purification and to awaken the mind (*bodhicitta*), the Buddha gives instructions on how to achieve long life and how to remove poisons through specific visualizations in meditation. There is also a visualization for a love spell (Hodge 2003: 181):

C43.P63

In order to control a lover, he should make himself into an A and likewise the person to be controlled into a Va. He should place a lotus in himself and in the other he should place a conch, with each looking at the other, then at that instant he will gain control.

C43.P64

Along with this controlling spell, in the *Sutra of Great Vairocana* the Buddha teaches visualization techniques for attracting followers, for subduing rival teachers, and for enriching oneself. The *Supplementary Tantra of Great Vairocana* (*Mahāvairocana Uttaratānta*) gives detailed ritual instructions for these four activities through a fire altar (*homa*) practice (Hodge 2003: 395–442). In Vajrayāna literature, these four kinds of magical spells became known as the "four ritual activities" that were considered to encompass the range of tantric techniques that were not focused directly on enlightenment but rather on worldly achievements.

C43.P65

The Tantra of the Secret Assembly

C43.S7

As tantric Buddhism developed in India, violent and sexual imagery featured more heavily. Tantras with these characteristics came to be categorized as “great yoga” (*mahāyoga*) and other terms indicating their supremacy over earlier forms of Vajrayāna (Dalton 2005). One of the earlier and best known examples of this is the *Tantra of the Secret Assembly* (*Guhyasamāja tantra*). Like the *Sutra of Great Vairocana*, the *Tantra of the Secret Assembly* teaches practices for the purpose of swift enlightenment, using maṇḍalas, mantras, and mudrās. Both texts also feature magical practices, using the same technologies but aimed at worldly ends such as enrichment, bewitchment, and the subjugation of enemies.

C43.P66

Instructions on constructing a maṇḍala in the *Tantra of the Secret Assembly* include drawing the maṇḍala on the ground and delimiting it with string, setting out physical objects and paintings, and visualization. For example, the “maṇḍala of mind” is taught in chapter four thus (4.11–4.17; trans. Freemantle 1971: 40):

C43.P67

Meditating on body, speech and mind, the wise man should lay it out with a fair new thread, well twisted and of the right length; twelve cubits he should fashion the holy maṇḍala of Mind, four-sided, four-cornered, with four gates; within it he should draw a circle, perfectly round, then place the symbols in it with the prescribed ritual action.

C43.P68

The tantra goes on to explain which symbols are to be drawn on the maṇḍala: a vajra in the center, a wheel in the east, a jewel in the south, a lotus in the west, and a sword in the north. The tantra makes it clear that this maṇḍala is laid out on the ground, for it is also decorated with perfumes and flowers, before the practitioner enters the maṇḍala himself with a woman and practices sexual yoga. In another development characteristic of Mahāyoga tantras, the offerings made to the buddhas of the maṇḍala are excrement, urine, semen, and blood. Yet despite these apparently new and shocking features of the practice, the maṇḍala itself is established in very much the same way as in earlier magical scriptures such as the *Vajra Beak*.

C43.P69

The *Tantra of the Secret Assembly* also contains a wide range of magical practices. For example, in chapter thirteen, when the Buddha is asked to teach the meaning and use of mantras, he mentions the four kinds of worldly ritual activity, the magical acts of pacification, enrichment, subjugation, and wrath, a similar set to the one seen in the *Sutra of Great Vairocana*. Most of the rest of the chapter consists of the Buddha’s teachings on subjugating and destroying enemies. These enemies are not anyone but must be “those who have no devotion, those who blame the Vajra Teacher, and other evil-doers” (13.43; Freemantle 1971: 75). The visualization for this killing practice presents a process that was already in place at the time of the *Sutra of Atanata*; from a central position, the Buddha uses his powers to subdue and destroy those who threaten the Buddhist community. In this case the embodiment of all buddhas is Vajrasattva, and the site of the practice is the practitioner’s own body (13.44–13.50; Freemantle 1971: 75–76):

C43.P70

At the centre of space imagine a vajra, five-pointed, four-faced, Vajrasattva possessing all the divine aspects; on the right-hand side visualise the circle of Buddhas arising from the Samaya of the Three Times, this Buddha-circle of great Power; distinguishing between the forms of the Buddhas, draw together the beings from the ten direction into a ball, and make them enter your body; then send out again the Buddhas of the circle of wisdom, wrathful, enraged with anger, ugly and terrifying, bearing various weapons, their thoughts intent on killing—they destroy great evildoers, even Vajrasattva himself.

C43.P71

The visualization here presents a process that was already in place at the time of the *Sutra of Atanata*: from a central position, the Buddha uses his powers to subdue and destroy those who threaten the Buddhist community. Here, the central figure is Vajrasattva, who is the deity most emblematic of the state of awakening in Mahāyoga practice, and the form in which the practitioners most often will visualize themselves. The four directions are symbolized by a four-headed crossed vajra, and instead of being

C43.P72

summoned to stand before the Buddha, beings from all directions are absorbed into the body of Vajrasattva (and by implication, the practitioner-as-Vajrasattva). Then wrathful beings are dispatched to destroy the evildoers. In a trope common in the *Tantra of the Secret Assembly*, this wrathful practice is said to be powerful enough to kill even Vajrasattva himself.

So while we see here developments in the nature of the visualization, especially the internalization of the maṇḍala into the body of the practitioner, the basic practice is a development from earlier Buddhist magical scriptures. Another aspect of early Buddhist magical literature that is adopted in the *Tantra of the Secret Assembly* is the harnessing of the power of monsters (13.87–13.90; Freemantle 1971: 80):

Imagine vajra space filled with rākṣasas, violent, burning in fierce wrath, and with various jackals, crows, vultures and wild dogs. Always visualise the enemy in the maṇḍala of fire, harming all the Buddhas, and then perform the yoga: imagine that they all overpower him, bearing many kinds of weapons, and tear out his entrails, marrow, blood and so on, and the enemy will die. Even if the Buddha or Vajradhara is visualised in this way he will die within a fortnight, there is no doubt.

The combination of sacred and profane, the transgression and boundary crossing is striking in the *Tantra of the Secret Assembly* and other Mahāyoga tantras. Yet as we have seen, many of these features, such as the Buddha using the language of violent threat, had already featured in much earlier Buddhist literature.

The Tantra of the Solitary Hero

Some tantras offered a direct continuation of the earlier magical tradition of Buddhist scripture. The *Tantra of the Solitary Hero* (*Siddhaikavīra tantra*) is essentially a grimoire, or book of spells; rather than offering a mixture of practices, some aimed at awakening and others at worldly ends, like the *Sutra of Great Vairocana* and the *Tantra of the Secret Assembly*, this text simply provides a long list of spells for different purposes. The tantra survives in Sanskrit manuscripts from Nepal and in Tibetan translation, but its history is unclear. It could have been an earlier text that was given a few cosmetic changes and the title of “tantra,” or a compilation dating from the period when the major tantras were composed (i.e., seventh to tenth centuries), gathering spells from existing magical traditions.

The Solitary Hero does not play a major role in the tantra itself but seems to be an epithet of Mañjuśrī in this text. The framing narrative at the beginning of the tantra has it spoken by Mañjuvajra, a form of Mañjuśrī, and some rituals require the practitioners to visualize themselves as “the Solitary Hero Mañjuvajra.” The spells invoke many other deities, including Vāgīśvara, Tārā, Parṇaśabarī, and Gaṇapati. As in other magical literature, the deities associated with magic are often female, and deities more commonly associated with non-Buddhist Indian traditions. The *Tantra of the Solitary Hero* teaches fifty-five mantra spells; some work merely by recitation, some require other actions, and a few require visualization of oneself as a deity. The first two spells are for stopping hailstorms, and the second mantra invokes Garuḍa, a continuation of the tradition of Garuḍa as the patron deity of weather control which we saw in the *Vajra Beak*. This second spell suggests inscribing the mantra on a drum and reciting over a drumstick, and then beating the drum to stop a hailstorm. The third spell is for binding (Skt. *bandha*) and has many uses, including stopping your enemies from speaking, stopping mice from chewing and mosquitoes from biting, and stopping thieves, armies, vomiting, and hiccups. One of these brief rituals for stopping a pregnant woman from giving birth is as follows (1.11; trans. Mical and Doctor 2021):

One should inscribe this mantra on a rag that has been discarded in a charnel ground, together with the name of a pregnant woman, enclose it in beeswax, place it in a charnel ground in a pot, seal it, and bury it. This will make the woman unable to give birth. Digging it up again, rinsing it with milk, and floating it on water will alleviate the problem.

C43.P73

C43.P74

C43.P75

C43.S8

C43.P76

C43.P77

C43.P78

Other rituals for this particular mantra include writing it onto a clay pot, filling the pot with ashes, and burying it; writing it on birch bark with turmeric or yellow orpiment, tying it with string, enclosing it in beeswax, and inserting it into a hollow effigy of a ram; writing it in saffron and wearing it around one's neck or arm for protection; and writing down the mantra, surrounded by other syllables of power, a maṇḍala diagram and a double vajra, placing it in belly of a clay figure of Gaṇapati, and placing this inside a cremation urn and burying it in a cemetery.

C43.P79

The *Tantra of the Solitary Hero* contains magical spells for many other purposes, including attracting women, mastering eloquence, and divination by having a child look into a mirror, a popular Buddhist divination practice known elsewhere as *prasena* (2.6). A number of spells are notably aggressive, such as the following spell for targeting a person with a molded doll (1.51; Mical and Doctor 2021):

C43.P80

One should make a beeswax effigy, four fingers long, and insert this mantra, written along with the name of the person targeted, into its heart. If one pierces its mouth with a thorn the opponent's mouth will be nailed. If one pierces its feet, one will stop him moving. If one pierces its heart, it will quell his anger. Whichever body parts one seizes and pierces with a splinter of human shinbone or an iron nail, his equivalent body parts will decay. If one buries the effigy under an enemy's door, one will drive him out.

C43.P81

Because the *Tantra of the Solitary Hero* is really just a book of spells, it lacks the framework of tantras like the *Secret Assembly*, which give a soteriological and ethical content to their aggressive spells, even if that context is an explicit transgression of conventional Buddhist ethics. Here the ethics are simply absent, and an aggressive ritual like the one above is presented as merely one among many useful spells. This feature of the *Tantra of the Solitary Hero* is also seen in spell books compiled in Tibet. The earliest of these is a manuscript from Cave 17 in Dunhuang, dating from before the eleventh century, a compendium of brief ritual texts from a variety of Buddhist scriptural sources, including the *Great Cloud Sutra* (*Mahāmegha sūtra*), the *Great Destroyer of the Universe* (*Mahāsāhasrapramardanī sūtra*), the *Dhāraṇī of the Blue-Necked One* (*Nilakaṭha dhāraṇī*), and a *Tantra of Bhṛkūtī* (*Bhṛkūtī tantra*, apparently no longer extant).⁵

C43.P82

The sources of the compendium range from the earlier Buddhist magical texts to later tantras; there is no particular rationale or hierarchy, and the spells seem to have been chosen for practical purposes. The spell book also bears the name of its owner, written on the cover, a Bhikṣu Prajñāprabhā. Thus it is likely that this was a working collection of spells culled from various sources used by a Buddhist monk in or around Dunhuang, in the tenth century. Other books of spells have been preserved in Tibet, usually with the name *Be'u 'bum* in the title, including a major collection attributed to the Sakya master Bari Lotsawa (1040–1111). Showing the continuing popularity of this format, another well-known collection of spells was compiled by the Nyingma scholar Mipham Gyatso (1846–1912). It seems, although many tantras contained at least some magical spells, in Tibet at least, the tantras themselves were less used for this purpose than books of spells extracted from them and other sources (van Schaik 2020: 84–88).

C43.P83

Conclusion

C43.S9

The purpose of this brief review of a selection of Buddhist scriptures has been to give an idea of how Vajrayāna scriptures developed from Buddhist magical literature. As we have seen, this can be traced in two ways, the first being how the tantras adapted and developed the techniques and material culture of previous Buddhist magical rituals, turning them into practices aimed at the ultimate goal of awakening. The second is how the tantras simply continued the existing magical tradition in Buddhism by incorporating instructions for rituals aimed at worldly achievements alongside those aimed at awakening. We have seen that tantric literature codified magical practice by developing four categories, which were not the same in every tantra but usually encompassed the magical acts of pacification, enrichment, enchantment, and violent action. Another way in which the tantras and their commentators dealt with the presence of magic alongside practices for worldly ends was to distinguish between ordinary accomplishments (*siddhi*), such as those bestowed by magical practice, and the ultimate accomplishment of full awakening.⁶

C43.P84

Given how closely the practices of the tantras were modeled on early magical practices, can we distinguish Vajrayāna or tantric Buddhism from the magical literature that preceded it, and continued to be practiced alongside it? Any definition is likely to raise exceptions, but a significant difference is the emphasis in most tantras on the ultimate Buddhist goal of awakening. This goal is occasionally mentioned in the magical texts, but even when it is, it is far from being the focus. A second key difference is that the Vajrayāna is an initiatory tradition, with permission or empowerment opening the way to secret practices and creating a community of practitioners.

C43.P85

Yet as we have seen in the example of the *Tantra of the Solitary Hero*, there are exceptions, and thus there is no clear line on which we can place Vajrayāna texts on one side and non-Vajrayāna magical literature on the other. It is equally difficult to define what might fall within or outside the category of “proto-tantra” or “esoteric Buddhism.” The wider view enabled by a thick description of Buddhist texts and practices over the centuries gives us a strong sense of a gradual and organic development without radical breaks. Thus I agree with Jacob Dalton’s critique of the idea that the Vajrayāna emerged suddenly, in the course of a few decades and presented a break with the Buddhist past (Dalton 2016: 220):

C43.P86

Surely we would do better to understand the appearance of the Buddhist tantras as the culmination of a much longer and more gradual process. By highlighting the role of ritual manuals, a more nuanced story is revealed, one that unfolds over a period of two hundred years, from the mid-fifth to the mid-seventh centuries.

C43.P87

Yet even a span of two centuries is too brief when we look at the importance of magical rituals to the evolution of what became the Vajrayāna. As we have seen, some key aspects of Vajrayāna Buddhism, such as visualization and maṇḍalas, are at least implicitly present as far back as the texts of the Pali canon. One general trend in the gradual development of Buddhism that does seem clear is the increasing complexity of magical techniques over time, and their eventual adaptation to the ultimate goal of Buddhism, awakening itself, in the Vajrayāna path.

C43.P88

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Notes

- 1 The Tibetan phrase “bla na med pa’i mal ‘byor rgyud” rendered here as “supreme yoga” tantra is generally translated from the Tibetan into Sanskrit as “anuttara-yoga” tantra. There is, however, no agreed Sanskrit for this term and some scholars today prefer “nirutta-yoga” or “yoga-niruttara” tantra. See, for example, Dalton (2005: 152 n.84). C43.N1
- 2 Gentry and Doctor (2021) renders the title of this text as “The Sūtra ‘Destroyer of the Great Trichiliocosm.’” C43.N2
- 3 The five texts are *Mahāpratisarā*, *Mahāsāhasrapramardanī*, *Mahāmāyūrī*, *Mahāmantrāṇusāraṇī*, and *Mahāśītavatī*. C43.N3
- 4 Illustrations of creatures looking something like these descriptions can be seen in some Dunhuang manuscripts; see Pelliot tibétain 37, for example. C43.N4
- 5 The manuscript is in the British Library, IOL Tib J 401; see van Schaik (2020) for a translation. C43.N5
- 6 See Wallace (2001: 198–200) for an example of this distinction in the *Vimalaprabhā* commentary on the *Kālachakra tantra*. See Davidson (2002: 200–01) for a discussion of lists of magical *siddhis*. C43.N6