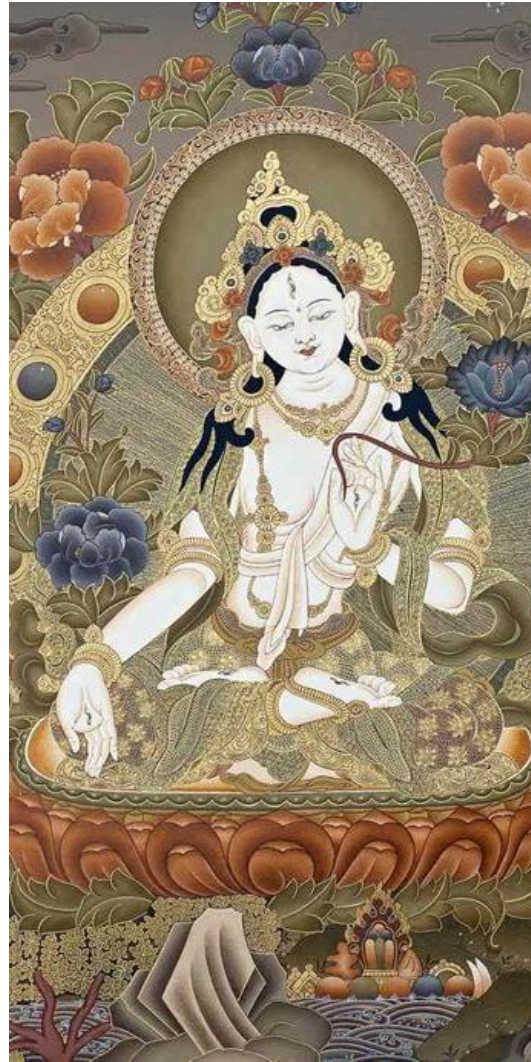


Theurgy and Tantra – some perspectives on traditional ecological knowledge

Dr Dawn H. Collins



The Emergence of Theurgy

“During the first few centuries CE, there arose many mystic religious movements that combined elements of Platonic philosophy, practices drawn from traditional cult, and newer doctrines that adherents claimed were revealed to them directly by the gods. One of the earliest and most influential of these movements was theurgy, which particularly emphasized the importance of worshiping the gods through ritual...”

Sarah Iles Johnston (ed.), *Religions of the Ancient World: A Guide* (Cambridge, MA 2004), p.649

- It covered a range of religious and philosophical practices, including the use of divination and oracles.
- It was based on a synthesis of ancient Greek, Egyptian and Syrian (or Chaldean) religious traditions

Summary - Theurgy

- **Theurgy** = literally “god work” - a lifelong endeavour incorporating a set of (polytheistic or ‘pagan’) ritual practices alongside the development of ethical and intellectual capacities ...
- Used by and written about by later Neoplatonist philosophers during the late antique period (Iamblichus, Proclus etc.)
- Main texts: Chaldean Oracles, Iamblichus’ *On the Mysteries* and Proclus’ *On the Sacred Art*
- Theurgy as a lifelong endeavour of devotion and endurance: a way of life or a way of being.
- It used and drew on traditional ritual practices: divination and oracles, sacrifice, prayer and invocations

The Goals of Theurgy

- Main purpose: **to use ritual practices to encourage the ascent of the soul to the divine** (a spiritual, mystical goal) in **cumulative stages**:
 - Contact with the gods
 - Assimilation to the gods ('becoming like a god')
 - Union with the divine
- **Main purpose 2: the manifestation (or expression) of the divine in human, embodied life** (concrete, practical goals)
 - *Philanthropia*: the theurgist's care or love of humanity
 - The theurgist as seer or diviner (Iamblichus, Sosipatra etc.)

How did theurgy work?

The 'locative' Worldview

- 1/ There is a cosmic order that permeates every level of reality.
- 2/ This cosmic order is the divine society of the gods.
- 3/ The structure and dynamics of this society can be discerned in the movements and patterned juxtapositions of the heavenly bodies.
- 4/ Human society should be a microcosm of the divine society.
- 5/ The chief responsibility of priests (and theurgists) is to attune human order to the divine order.

Theurgic Symbols and Rituals

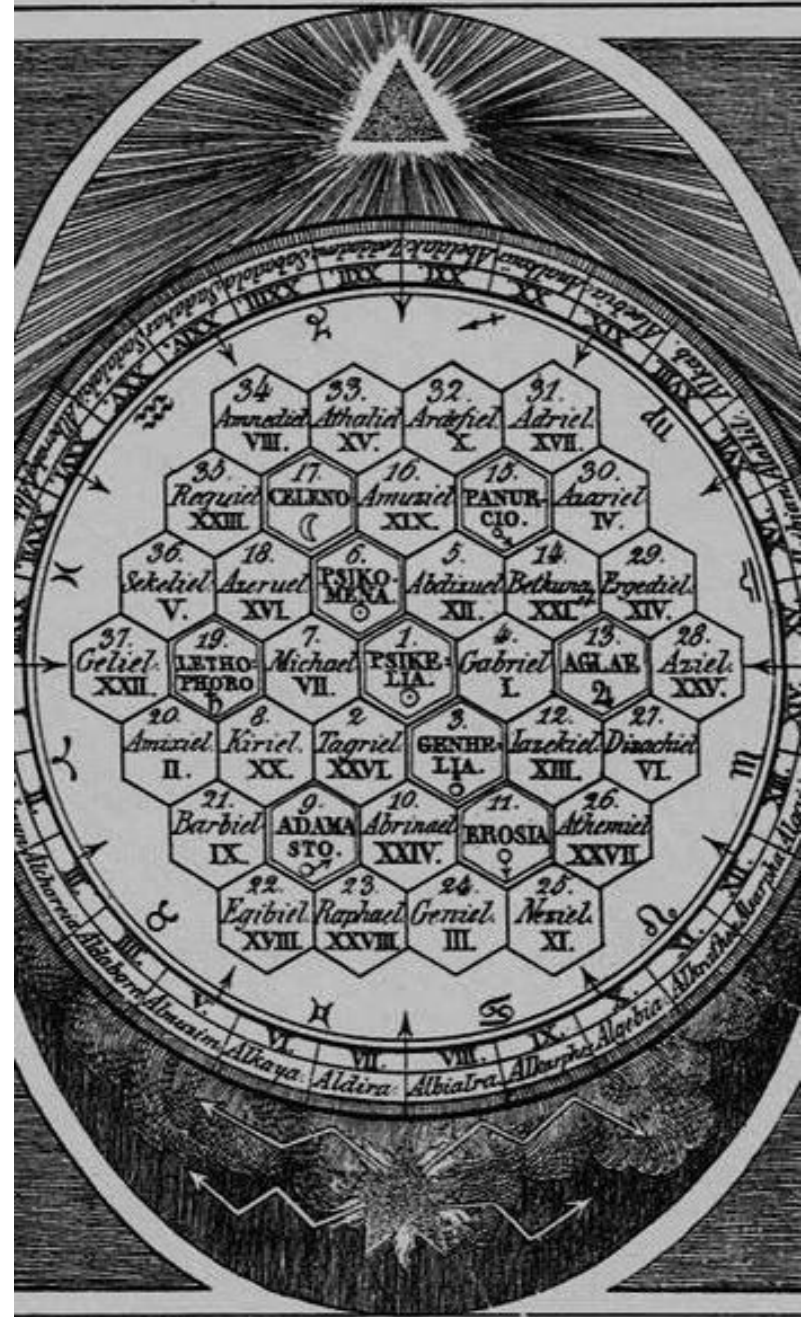
- Animals, plants, gemstones, incense and any natural entity or object that was considered to be permeated by the divine.
- Written texts and characters, including oracles themselves
- These symbols were used within theurgic ritual: placed in statues of the gods, worn or spoken by the theurgist.
- Theurgic views of the 'connected cosmos': all things are connected to each other and the gods



Iamblichus on Theurgy

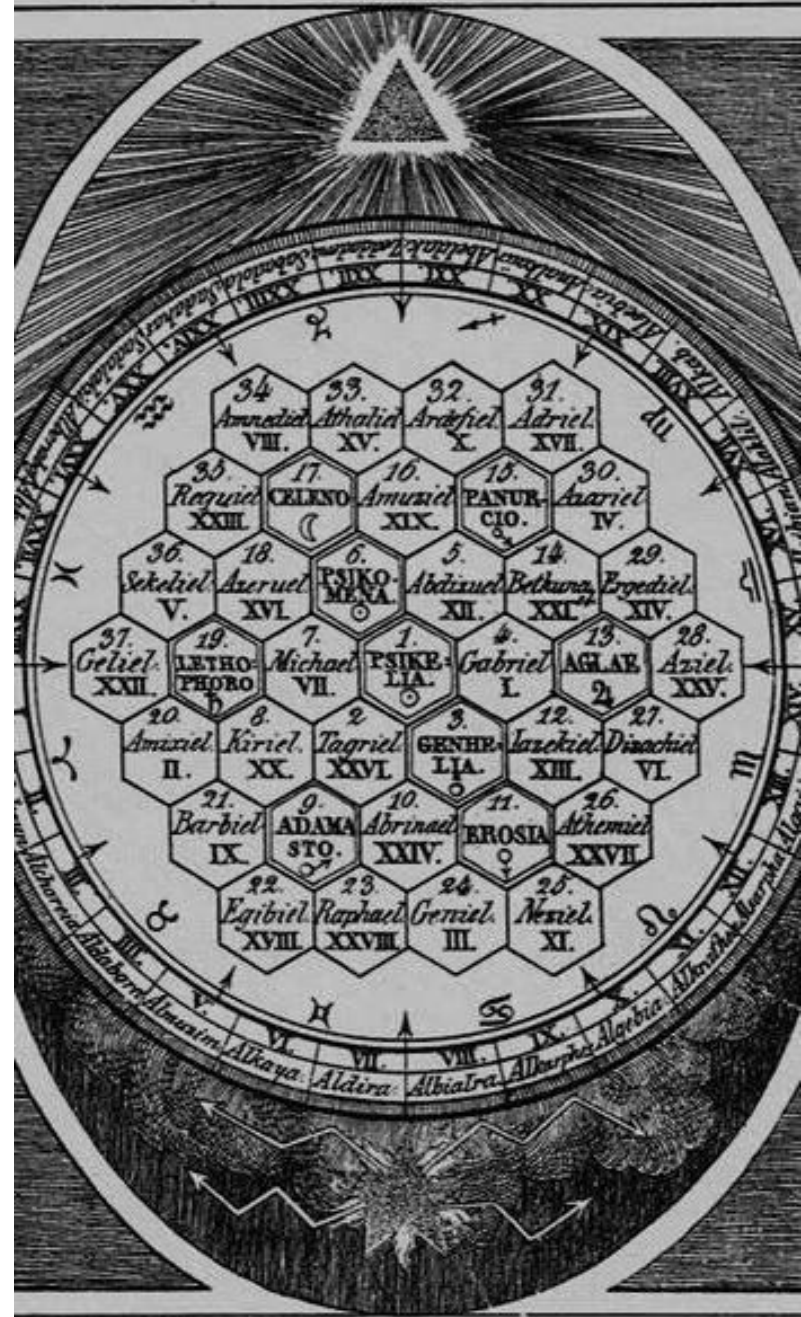
“Observing this, and discovering in general, in accordance with the properties of each of the gods, the receptacles adapted to them, the theurgic art in many cases links together stones, plants, animals and aromatic substances, and other such things that are sacred, perfect and godlike, and then from all these composes an integrated receptacle.”

On the Mysteries 5.23



Proclus on Theurgy

Proclus, *Platonic Theology* 1.25.7-10 (ed. Saffrey and Westerink 113; trs. Dodds 1951, 291), states that theurgy is a: “power greater than all human wisdom and knowledge, embracing the blessings of divination, the purifying powers of initiation, and in a word all the operations of divine possession.”



The Ecocentric nature of Theurgy

- Note the ecocentric nature of the theurgic worldview and view of the cosmos (cosmology)
- This worldview extends further than the biocentric view (biocentrism), since even stones are connected to the gods and the divine
- This worldview sees the cosmos as an interconnected, holistic entity (ecocentrism)
- All things are connected and everything in the universe communicates – internal self-communication of the universe



The Emergence of Tantra

“Tantra has persisted and often thrived throughout Asian history since the middle of the first millennium of the common era...No form of medieval Hinduism, Buddhism, or Jainism [Dundas] has been without a Tantric component; and some South Asian Islamic traditions have, as well, borne a Tantric stamp...

”On what theoretical basis or bases may we term all of these medieval, precolonial, or modern traditions ‘tantric’?... Padoux (1986:273), citing Biardeau, begins by saying that the doctrinal aspect of Tantra is “an attempt to place kāma, desire, in every sense of the word, in the service of liberation... This use of kāma and of all aspects of this world to gain both worldly and supernatural enjoyments (bhukti) and powers (siddhis), and to obtain liberation in this life (jīvanmukti), implies a particular attitude on the part of the Tantric adept toward the cosmos, whereby he feels integrated within an all-embracing system of micro-macrocosmic correlations.”

David Gordon White, ed., *Tantra in Practice*. Princeton University Press, 2000, pp. 7-8

- Tantra is focal to Tibetan Buddhism – with its esoteric nature, Initiatory lineage, coded texts (tantra), deity yoga - Realisation a process of becoming, embodying deity
- Adepts in Tantric practice develop deity-like capacities, such as other realms, clairvoyance and divination

Summary - Tantra

- **Tantra** = term for a wide range of esoteric practices known to have been in existence since early first century CE and spanning a wide range of religious traditions in Asian regions
- For Tibetan Buddhists, there are four main schools of tantric practice, all having their own textual traditions
- Tantra is central to the practice of Tibetan Buddhism and its practice is thought to usually require many lifetimes to perfect
- Tibetan Buddhist Tantric practice uses and draws on Buddhist philosophy, and ritual practices: deity yoga—visualisation, mantra and invocations

The Goals of Tibetan Buddhist Tantric Practice

- Main purpose: **to use ritual practices to merge with or become the divine** (a soteriological goal) **in cumulative stages:**
 - Connecting to the deities through ritual relationship
 - Becoming Deity
 - Going beyond the realms of rebirth and, as Bodhisattva great beings, leading others to enlightenment (the ultimate soteriological goal of Buddhism)



- **Main purpose 2: the manifestation (or expression) of divine energies in human, embodied life** (concrete, practical, 'worldly' goals)
- The Tantric adept as seer or diviner, with ability to control weather and so on.

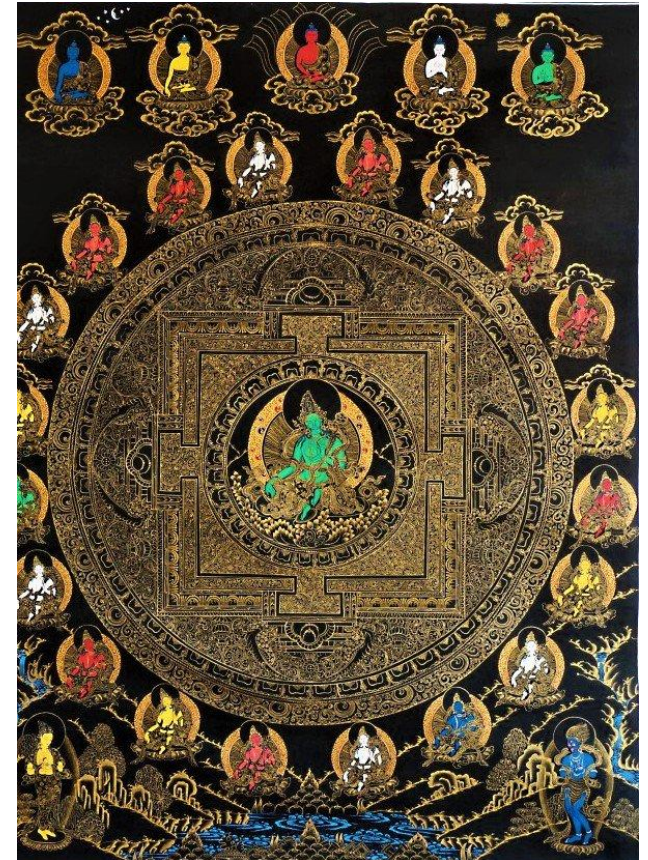
Tibetan Deity Yoga:

Core Aspects and Process

- Initiatory lineage – coded texts (tantra)
- Purification
- Imagination – Visualisation
- Macro/micro correspondence
- Mandala cosmos
- Union with the divine

21 Tara Praises

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KbwNPVg_mTE



Tibetan Deity Yoga: Ritual Process

- Preparatory phase – preparing grounds and
- evocation of the Lineage for inspiration and blessing (refuge)
- Elimination of obscuration/defilements to view (purification)
- Setting the motivation - bodhicitta (well-being)
- Front and Self Generation (Imagination)
- Dissolution, Offerings to protectors, Ablution,
- Dedication (well-being)





Tantric Symbols — The Tibetan Tantric Mandala

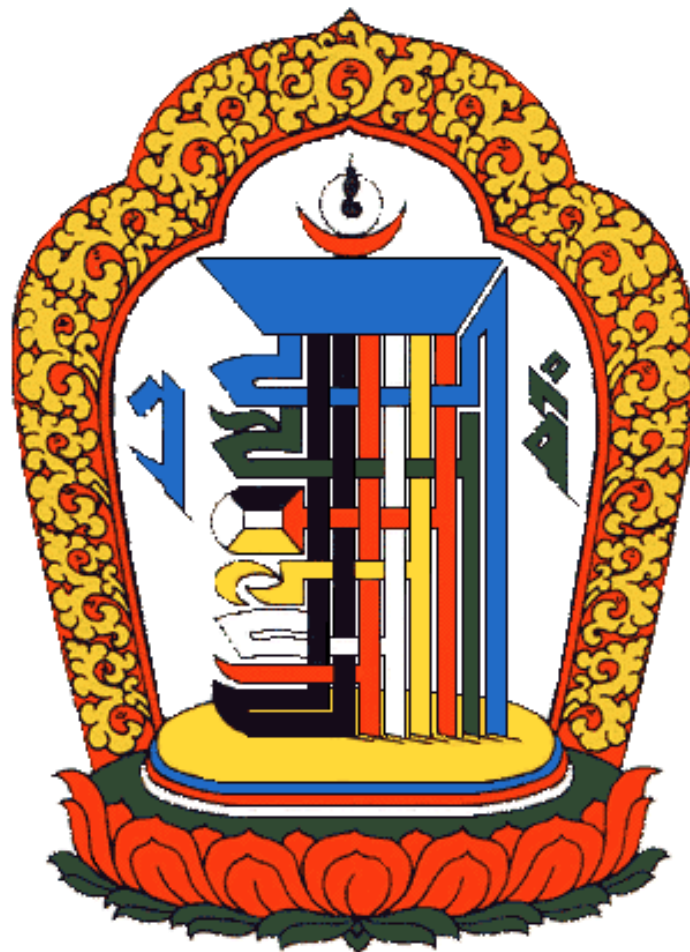
Medicine Buddha Mantra—
meaning and use in practice:

<https://www.drepunggomang.org/dharma-topics/130-mantra-of-the-medicine-buddha>

His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Gylwa Rinpoché on Tantra

“A person who has practised the stages of sutra and wishes to attain quickly the state of a blessed Buddha *should* enter into the Secret Mantra Vehicle that can easily bestow realisation of Buddhahood.”

--*Tantra in Tibet, p.18*

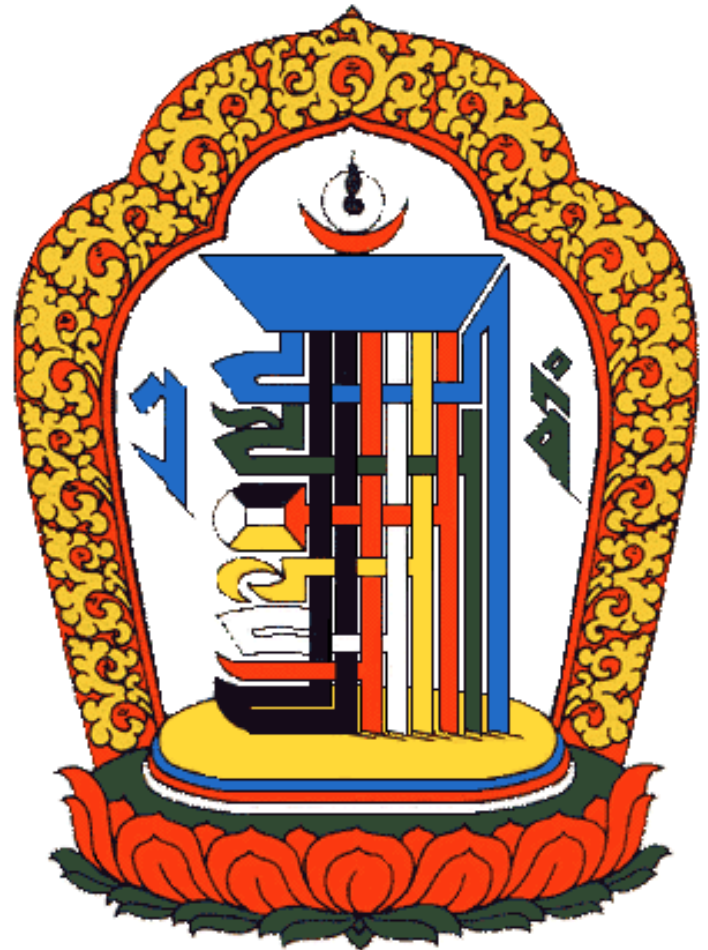


From the first chapter of the Vajrapañjara Tantra...

“The Conquerors teach emptiness
To overcome the conceptions of self
In those who from [right] views have turned away
And in those who seek the view of self.

Therefore it is the ‘circle of a mandala’
It is a binding of the blissful method.
Through the yoga of Buddha pride
Buddhahood will not be distant.”

--*Tantra in Tibet*, p.117



The Ecocentric nature of Tibetan Buddhist Tantric Traditions

- “During this era of planetary crisis, the negative effects of both climate change and the pandemic may be considered in a Tantric worldview as a retributive response by the spirited agency of the natural world. In this context, it does seem important to highlight here that Tantric adepts and dream yoga practitioners suggest Tantric visualisation practices as a remedy.”



Collins, D. H. 2023. 'Becoming the Gods: Visualisation and Healing in Tibetan Deity Yoga,' in *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review*. Vol. 14, Issue 1, pp. 108-9



Practicing Theurgy and Tantra in Nature – Rituals
for Apollo and Chenrezig in Pratale (2018)

Theurgy Further Reading: ancient sources (Primary sources)

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- Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*. Translated by Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon and Jackson P. Hershbell (Atlanta 2003) [186 IAMB]

Theurgy Further Reading (secondary sources)

- Addey, Crystal, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism: Oracles of the gods* (Farnham, 2014) [203 ADDE]: see Chapters 1 and 7
- Blakeley, Donald N., “Plotinus as environmentalist?” in Laura Westra and Thomas M. Robinson, *The Greeks and the Environment* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), 167-184 [363.7 WEST]
- Iles Johnston, Sarah (ed.), *Religions of the Ancient World: A Guide* (Cambridge, MA 2004) [200.9 JON]: see especially **pp.649-650 on theurgy.**
- Mahoney, Timothy A., “Platonic ecology, deep ecology,” in Laura Westra and Thomas M. Robinson, *The Greeks and the Environment* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), 45-54 [363.7 WEST]
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