

Embodying the divine in tantric ritual practice: examples from the Chinese Karakhoto manuscripts from the Tangut empire (ca. 1038–1227)*

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Belatedly, but gratefully dedicated to Heiner Roetz.

1. Theme

According to Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine, enlightened beings are said to be omnipresent, all-pervading like space and enduring much beyond the *parinirvāṇa* of the historical Buddha. However, this Mahāyāna-type ideal is rather difficult to fathom, i.e. it has to be experienced; nonetheless, it becomes more concrete and maybe easier to comprehend in the performance of a (Tantric) ritual context—where buddhas, bodhisattvas and meditational deities (Tib. *yi dam*) are localized in a *specific* time and place, and in *specific* objects such as images, *stūpas* or even within one’s own body. As Yael Bentor, among others, has already shown,¹ it is by means of a consecration ritual that an ordinary object is transmuted into an enlightened being or a Buddha. Its sacred presence within the realm of *samsāra* then allows human beings to continue to interact with such enlightened beings—be it through aspirational prayer and worship, for apotropaic reasons, or as a means to accumulate merit, even attaining supreme, soteriological goals.

In this context I use the distinction made by Robert Sharf to employ the term ‘icon’ for such a “specific sort of religious image that is believed to partake or participate in the substance of that which it

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¹ Bentor 1996a.

represents. In other words, an icon does not merely bear the likeness of the divine but shares in its very nature."² This is how Buddhists found their way to overcome the gap between the signifier and the signified—that any such pure object, non-referential by nature, is believed to be inherent in the sign itself.

Thus, a consecrated icon (or any other consecrated item) becomes an *expression of an ongoing enlightened process*.³ Once a Buddhist image is transformed from simple likeness to divine presence (or enlightened nature) by means of consecration, it is reiterated through regular invocation rituals so that the divine presence is perpetuated within the icon⁴ and within this realm of *samsāra*. And it is in these very rites that we may discern the intimate relationship that is established between the divinity on the one hand, in a divine icon in this case, and the (Tantric) Buddhist practitioner on the other.

However, the more crucial question remains to be dealt with: How does the Tantric practitioner herself or himself subsequently, actually come to embody the divine? The divinity (in an icon) is usually attributed with a body, senses and sensibility just like a human being⁵—I will present a concrete example further down. Although the human aspects of divine incarnations or icons are very prominent in Tantric Buddhism, they are at the same time given a transcendental dimension surpassing time and space, so that the divinity seems to have a foot in both worlds, in this one and in the transcendental one, inviting the practitioner to follow her or his footsteps as well.

For a Tantric practitioner the textual description of the divine being, as it is commonly found in a ritual manual is the main source for building first of all a devotional representation of this very sensual deity. A ritual manual features a normative description of the divinity in her sacred space and an instruction on how to activate her divine presence in this world and in one's own body through a stereotyped performance. Rituals in a narrower sense are patterns for action and organisation which are usually consciously created, following a certain set of rules, and are relatively stable and rich in their symbolism, yet may be continuously adjusted through performance and

² Sharf 1999: 75–99; the quote is found on p. 81.

³ This is quite similar to what John Strong has proposed for relics, namely, to view relics as “expressions and extensions of the Buddha’s biographical process.” See Strong 2004: 5.

⁴ Sharf 1999: 82.

⁵ Colas 2014: 52–63, here particularly p. 54.

actualisation.⁶ Furthermore, a religious ritual has the specific quality of being embedded in a soteriological context; i.e., it aims at providing a means to salvation. Therefore, I suggest that in our context it is through ritual performance with a strong sense of devotion that the identification of an icon as a living one possessing body and senses arises. What is crucial, however, is that a religious ritual, simply by focusing on a prescribed action, schematizes sensory experiences in a new way: It deviates from everyday, subjective, sensory experiences in order to get to a divine, non-subjective, non-referential, yet sensorial, fully integrative experience. Within the frame of the ritual action, the sensory orientation of the practitioner is diverted from ordinary objects and subjective emotions, and instead the senses are directed to the deity herself; ideally, the ritual action is said to be free from any ordinary sensual emotions. Such a view is said to enable the practitioner to obtain the mental and physical perception of the deity through non-ordinary senses with the result that the external icon and the image of the deity are united within the body of the practitioner herself or himself.⁷ Thus the senses are the interface between the practitioner's body on the one hand and the divine environment on the other. The result of such ritual action, the divine presence within one's own body, is said to be actualized by continuously carrying out the prescribed action.

I would like to exemplify this point by looking at specific Tantric, Chinese-language, ritual manuals transmitted in the 12th century within the Tangut Empire (ca. 1038–1227, known as Xixia 西夏 in Chinese sources). These manuals are found in the Karakhoto Manuscript Collection—a collection which probably evidences the earliest extensive transmissions of Tantric materials, and particularly ritual manuals, transmitted from Tibetan to Chinese.⁸ The texts I will present are ritual manuals concerning meditation on the female deity Vajravārāhī (Tib. rDo rje phag mo, Chin. Jingang haimu 金剛亥母). Here, I will present a close reading of passages relevant to the senses and analyze how a transcendental/divine sphere is constructed within the text, and how a practitioner is guided to induce the described transformative experience within herself or himself—namely, how the

⁶ I follow here the definition of ritual provided in Brosius, Michaels and Schrode 2013: 15.

⁷ Colas 2014: 55, 57.

⁸ Although a great number of Tantric materials are available in the Dunhuang Collection of manuscripts (see e.g. Eastman 1983, Dalton and van Schaik 2006), which predates the Karakhoto manuscripts, to my current knowledge the majority of such texts is transmitted in Tibetan language and not as systematically and broadly in Chinese.

practitioner, like the deity in the icon, is also transformed into an enlightened being, i.e. that the practitioner is actually able to embody the divine.

2. *Chinese Tantric Manuscripts from the Karakhoto Collection*

Let me briefly sketch the historical context underlying the materials presented here as a way of introduction. After the demise of the Tibetan Empire in 842 the truly cosmopolitan and multi-cultural oases on the periphery of the former Tibetan dominion in Eastern Central Asia, with a long history of documented Buddhist exchanges, came under the local rule of various ethnic groups. The Tibetan language continued to be practiced as a *lingua franca* at least for two more centuries—a fact that is evidenced in the Tibetan Dunhuang manuscripts.⁹ Eventually, the Tanguts established their kingdom in the first half of the 11th century with its centre along the great bend of the Yellow River, but also conquering the oasis of Dunhuang at the westernmost fringes of their territory. Over the course of two centuries the Tanguts acted as outstanding patrons of Buddhism, of both the Sinitic and Tibetan varieties.¹⁰ The presence of (Tibetan) Tantric masters at the Tangut court in the 12th century¹¹ and Tangut, Chinese, and Tibetan Tantric texts document that Tibetan Tantric Buddhism continued to be practiced by Central Asian people far beyond the Tibetan cultural and religious influence of the region, and in fact, played a major role in a process of (cultural and religious) exchange on an international scale.¹²

The collection of manuscripts from Karakhoto was discovered by the Russian explorer Koslov in 1907 together with around 3500 objects

⁹ For Tibetan manuscripts from Dunhuang see e.g. Dalton and van Schaik 2006. Given the evidence of Tibetan manuscripts from Karakhoto which postdate the Dunhuang Collection, it is not unlikely that Tibetan continued to be used among Tantric Buddhist communities in Eastern Central Asia, in fact, much beyond the 11th century. Takeuchi and Iuchi (2016: 10) have dated the Tibetan texts from Karakhoto provisionally to three time periods: the 11th to 12th c., the 12th to 13th c., and the 13th to 15th c.

¹⁰ For the dual Buddhist orientation of the Tangut rulers, see Linrothe 1995.

¹¹ An overview of activities at the Tangut court, including the presence of Tibetan masters, is provided in numerous articles by Ruth Dunnell, e.g. Dunnell 1992, 2009, 2011.

¹² A catalog of Tibetan texts from Karakhoto can be found in Takeuchi and Iuchi 2016. Chinese manuscripts from Karakhoto are available here: Shi Jinbo, Wei Tongxian and E.I. Kychanov 1996–1998.

in and around *stūpas* at the outpost of Karakhoto in the northern periphery of the Tangut Empire.¹³ The majority of the texts are Buddhist in their contents: 220 out of 374 Tangut texts (according to the catalog by Kychanov)¹⁴ and 284 out of 331 Chinese texts have Buddhist content.¹⁵ The Tantric materials are particularly valuable for documenting the story of Tantric Buddhism in the Tangut Kingdom. Among these the Chinese Tantric manuscripts represent the very first transmission of Tantric materials from Tibetan to Chinese currently available to us at all. According to the Russian scholar Kirill Solonin the manuscripts of Tantric Buddhist content mirror the popular aspect of Buddhism in the Tangut Empire¹⁶ and were primarily transmitted through Tibetan masters.

Shen Weirong has already pointed to the great popularity of the Vajravārāhī cult in the Tangut Empire.¹⁷ Among the Chinese Karakhoto manuscripts are numerous texts related to it, some of which are not easily identified on the basis of their titles alone. The same holds true for the Tangut manuscripts.¹⁸ The easily identifiable manuscripts are the following five texts found in the publication by Shi Jinbo, Wei Tongxian and E.I. Kychanov:

- (1) A 14 *Jinganghaimu jilun gongyang cidu lu* 金剛亥母集輪供養次第錄 [Stages of Making Offerings to and the Feast Gathering of Vajravārāhī] (vol. 5, pp. 241–244 (1–7));
- (2) A 19 *Jingang haimu chanding* 金剛亥母禪定 [The Meditation on

¹³ For a good recent introduction to the site and maps of Karakhoto see Takeuchi and Iuchi 2016: 3–18.

¹⁴ Kychanov 1999.

¹⁵ Shen 2010: 344.

¹⁶ At a presentation during an internal meeting of the team members of the ERC project BuddhistRoad on February 13th, 2018 in Bochum, Kirill Solonin differentiated three dimensions of Buddhism in the Tangut Empire: (1) official Buddhism as represented in the Tangut Law Code with mainly Chinese Mahāyāna *sūtras*, discovered in Karakhoto as printed books; (2) imperial Buddhism with its connection to the Maitreya cult, also transmitted in printed books; and (3) popular Buddhism with ritual manuals related to various Tantric deities and other materials, preserved mostly as manuscripts (from Karakhoto). However, I add to Kirill Solonin's classification that Tantric materials were also practiced in elite circles, i.e. by the emperor. I provide an example of this in my forthcoming publication, Meinert 2019. It thus seems that the boundaries between the three sections would have been extremely porous.

¹⁷ Only the Mahākāla cult seems to have been equally popular. See Shen 2010: 348. It should be further pointed out that we find the first evidences of the Vajravārāhī cult in Eastern Central Asia in the manuscripts from Karakhoto. There are no traces of the cult in the Dunhuang materials.

¹⁸ According to a conversation with Kirill Solonin, about 30 texts belong to the Vajravārāhī system.

Vajravārāhī] (vol. 5, pp. 257–258 (1–4));

(3) Q 249, Q 327 *Jingang haimu xiuxiyi* 金剛亥母修習儀 [Ritual of the Yogic Practice of Vajravārāhī] (vol. 6, pp. 106–108 (1–5));

(4) no. 274, *Jingang haimu lue shishi yi* 金剛亥母略施食儀 [Ritual of Food-Offering to Vajravārāhī] (vol. 6, pp. 275 (1–2, 8/1–8/2));

(5) no. 274 *Jingang haimu zisheshou yaomen* 金剛亥母自攝授要門 [The Quintessential Instruction of Self-Blessing of Vajravārāhī] (vol. 6, p. 276 (1–2, 8/3–8/4)).¹⁹

Before I turn to the contents of some of these manuscripts, one other point is of importance. Considering the fact that that these manuscripts, together with printed texts and other visual objects were stored in and around *stūpas* in Karakhoto, a well-known and widespread Buddhist practice, one may consider what the embodied significance of these religious objects were. I suggest that such stored objects may serve three functions: they (1) preserve knowledge; (2) lend an aura to a religious site; and (3) have an inherent transformative function.

We may assume that the people responsible for the consecration of the *stūpas* in Karakhoto did not think about the aspect of preservation of knowledge in the first place when storing religious objects in a Buddhist site, e.g. on the occasion of a funerary practice. However, it turns out that an auxiliary effect of their activities is that such objects provide us today with a window into materials that constituted central features of their religious lives and practices.

With regard to the second suggested function, it is worthwhile to consider what the practical and religious implications for placing religious objects into such *stūpas* were. Just as a consecrated *stūpa* is regarded as a representation of the body of the Buddha on the level of absolute truth, its being filled with Buddhist scriptures represents the Buddha's teachings and the scriptures may be seen as "the bases for the realization of Buddhist ideas and accumulation of merit on the level of relative truth."²⁰ They serve as an inspiration for the

¹⁹ Shen 2010: 349. In February this year (2018) this author read and translated another Chinese manuscript related to the Vajravārāhī cult with Shen Weirong during his visit to Bochum: TK 329 *Sizi kongxingmu* 四字空行母 [The Four Syllable-*dākinī*], published in Shi Jinbo, Wei Tongxian and E.I. Kychanov 1996–1998: vol. 5, pp. 116–120 (1–9). Attention to this manuscript was first brought to the fore by Sun Penghao 2012. This manuscript is a Chinese commentary to a Vajravārāhī text which probably had the Sanskrit title *Vajrayoginīsiddhi* (cf. fol. 4, line 7/8 of the manuscript). It is not clear yet whether this commentary was produced directly in Chinese or whether it is a translation from another language (e.g. a Tibetan or Tangut commentary).

²⁰ Bentor 1996b: 303.

practitioner and lend an aura to the site, charging it with religious meaning. Yael Bentor has also pointed out on the basis of textual evidence from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition that scriptural fillings of *stūpas*—as one type of relic, namely as relics of the *dharma*—may be seen as part of a process of approaching a transcendental reality and enabling the continuous interaction with the Buddha beyond his *parinirvāṇa*,²¹ regardless of whether the context of the scriptures is known or even understood. These are, in fact, as John Strong convincingly argued for any type of relic, a means to continue the powerful narrative of the biography of the Buddha beyond his *parinirvāṇa*²² and allow the Buddhist community to approach him.

Thirdly, the very contents of the scriptures represent the mind of the Buddha, an enlightened mind which is thought to possess an inherent transformational power. I suggest that we regard such scriptures placed in consecrated *stūpas*, and thereby any consecrated religious object, as having an agency in themselves²³—even without being actively used. I would tend to regard it as a type of dormant agency, agency defined as the potential to transform the world²⁴ and the mind of the practitioner.

This third function is particularly important for my argumentation. Because the above mentioned Chinese ritual manuals related to the Vajravārāhī cult from Buddhist monuments in Karakhoto do show, in fact, traces of usage, we may assume that the content of the ritual

²¹ Bentor 1994: 16.

²² Strong 2004: 17.

²³ In recent years there has been a debate in scholarship on the 'agency of objects'. It is discussed e.g. in Knappett 2005: 29: "Agency is not something we confer on objects in a one-way relationship; it emerges reciprocally as humans and nonhumans merge." See also Knappett 2008: 146–154 for a discussion of the term 'material agency'. Most influential in this debate is certainly the work by Bruno Latour who broadened the concept of agency previously only reserved for humans to the non-human realm by applying the term 'actant' for any type of source of action. The presence of any human or non-human factor may alter the course of some other's action, with its absence leading to different results (Latour 2005: 54, 71). According to his view, objects are no longer acted upon and attributed with meanings by humans; they are relational in the sense that they are acted upon as well as acting in exchange with other human and non-human actants. Latour's analysis is further developed by Jane Bennett (2016) who argues on the basis of an object-oriented theory in favor of potencies of matter above and beyond the realm of human endeavor. Moreover, for a recent study discussing in great detail the agency of objects in Tantric Buddhist ritual practice see Gentry 2017, particularly pp. 1–29 (introduction) for an overview of related theories.

²⁴ Sax 2013: 28.

manuals was actually practiced,²⁵ thereby allowing their inherent transformative power to be activated before they were stored in a Buddhist site, i.e. used for ritual practice. Among the signs of usage are certain highlights (or crossing outs?), corrections, writing beyond the margin, and most importantly, interlinear insertions. Whereas sometimes insertions seem to have been done as corrections of characters (maybe by a proofreader?), others could have only been prepared by someone knowledgeable in the ritual practice as a meaningful addition to the context. I will provide a concrete example below (fig. 1).

3. Senses and Ritual: Karakhoto Manuscripts Related to the Meditation on Vajravārāhī

Turning to the contents of the abovementioned ritual manuals related to Vajravārāhī we may discern two ways in which Buddhist practitioners could interact with the divinity: on the individual level and on the communal level. The former, the individual dimension of the soteriological function, is represented in the following three ritual manuals: (2) *Meditation on Vajravārāhī*, (3) *Ritual of the Yogic Practice of Vajravārāhī*, and (5) *The Quintessential Instruction of Self-Blessing of Vajravārāhī*. Meant as a regular (or even daily) exercise, these practices demand a certain degree of discipline and thus influence the conduct of the practitioner's life. The latter, the social dimension of the soteriological function, is found in the following two ritual manuals: (1) *Stages of Making Feast Offerings to Vajravārāhī*, and (4) *Ritual of Food Offering to Vajravārāhī*. These are conducted only on specific dates of the month and need different framing and certainly aim at strengthening the Tantric community as such. There is a lot more to discover about these categories, though it should be sufficient for the present purpose to mention that we find references to the senses in both types of ritual manuals. I will present one example from each

²⁵ It should be noted, however, that we have no exact information of how these texts were used historically and there might have been considerable variations of usage by different readers. It is nonetheless noteworthy that we do have visual depictions of deities within the Karakhoto Collection that match quite well the textual descriptions. E.g. the description of Vajravārāhī as I present it in the translation of the text (2) *Meditation on Vajravārāhī* below, can be found in numerous thangkas of the deity from Karakhoto, e.g. x2393, mentioned in my forthcoming article Meinert 2019 (fig. 10.9).

category, from texts (2) and (1).

Ritual Manual for Individual Use: Example of text (2) Meditation on Vajravārāhī

In the ritual manual *Meditation on Vajravārāhī*, we can already see how the senses are to be employed by the practitioner as a means of contact with the divinity in order to attain results through the ritual performance, namely, salvation through the activation of the deity's potential within one's own very body. I will exemplify how the senses of *sight* and *sound* are used here in the description of a visualization process:

After the practitioner has done some preparatory actions (including the taking of refuge, the generation of *bodhicitta*, the visualization of the root guru), a stereotyped performance is required in vividly generating the presence of the *ḍākinī*. Here, the visualization is based on *insight*, which does not involve sight of external phenomena, but an internal vision. However, if the practitioner follows the prescriptive performance correctly, it is said that the sense of sight will be transformed, leading to a new way of seeing, a divine sight. The text reads as follows, giving a procedure that should be quite familiar to a scholar of Tibetan ritual manuals:

[One should visualize oneself and] immediately turn into Vajravārāhī. She is naked, of red colour, has two faces, two arms, and each face has three eyes. Her hair is hanging down loosely on the back. Her right face is a boar head and the left face is a wrathful face. The right boar head looks upwards, the left wrathful face looks downwards.²⁶

As mentioned above, the deity clearly has a human appearance—at least at first glance (one human face, arms, legs, long hair hanging down her back etc.). However, she also has a super-human or transcendental dimension surpassing time and space connected to her appearance: a second face, a boar's face, three eyes—the wisdom eyes opened, etc. It is this very dual appearance and capacity that allows her—and once the transformational power of the ritual manual is activated, the accomplished practitioner as well—to go beyond this world to a transcendental one to embody the divine.

If we move on in the ritual manual, we encounter a further description of her likings—just like a human being she has preferences

²⁶ Shi Jinbo, Wei Tongxian and E.I. Kychanov 1996–1998: vol. 5, p. 257 (fol. 1.5–1.8).

as well: Vajravārāhī likes a vajra blade, she likes to drink blood, she loves to dance, she is fearless, and overall is a pretty strong lady.

On the forehead she wears a five-skull crown. She bites the teeth together. The right hand holds the *vajra* chopper, in her left hand she holds a skull cup filled with blood, and it looks like as if she is drinking it. On the left side she is holding a Tantric staff (Skt. *khaṭvāṅga*). The crown is adorned with an eight-spoked wheel (?); earrings, necklace, bracelet and armband, belt and so on are all made of human bones. The left leg is bent, the right is lifted, like in a dancing gesture. She is standing on a corpse and a sun disc.

Her body is soft, her appearance is so perfect with her nine characteristics: The first is a body with three characteristics, namely [her body is] enchanting, strong, and wrathful. Then three speech characteristics, namely [she is] laughing *ha ha*, yelling *hi hi*, and threatening *hu hu*. Then the three mind characteristics, namely [she is] kind, very sharp, and extraordinary. These are her nine characteristics.

From each pore of the whole body emanates red flaming lights (?). She is surrounded by a flaming mandorla like the fire at the end of the *kalpa* [which will destroy the whole world]; visualize like this.²⁷

And it is this presence of a powerful deity which is induced in the practitioner as well. This enables the practitioner to access the following second step (the most crucial passage in the ritual text), namely the description of how to attain accomplishment within this very body. Here we have a description of a sensory, fully integrated bodily experience.

Then [in Vajravārāhī's navel is] a triangle. And in the four corners of the intermediate directions of the triangle are bliss swirls with multiple colours.²⁸ On the triangles visualise the three syllables AN A HONG [唵阿吽 om āḥ hūṃ] and on their left side, there is the syllable BANG [𑖀 baṃ] surrounded counter clockwise by the HE [合 ha] syllable mantra.²⁹

It is striking how the sound of seed syllables comes into play here. Anyone familiar with Tantric ritual manuals knows that deities or in

²⁷ Shi Jinbo, Wei Tongxian and E.I. Kychanov 1996–1998: vol. 5, p. 257 (fol. 1.9–2.2).

²⁸ The text is here illegible, and it seems that the passage in light grey was highlighted on purpose, much as Tibetans still do by highlighting important sections in a ritual manual (or the section was crossed out—but for what reason?). The reading is a guess. Cf. below fig. 1, line 3.

²⁹ Here is meant the mantra of Vajravārāhī. Shi Jinbo, Wei Tongxian and E.I. Kychanov 1996–1998: vol. 5, p. 257 (fol. 2.3–2.4).

certain cases entire worlds are generated from such syllables.³⁰ Sounds are generally used to stimulate and embody religious feelings. They can be conceived of as the 'performative embeddings' that stage and perform their cultural meanings in rituals and capture the imagination of the reader or practitioner.³¹

If we move on in the text, we get to the most crucial passage, namely, that which describes a thoroughly bodily experience of the divine. The instruction reads as follows (again highlights and interpolations in the manuscript are written in grey):

Hold up the lower part³² [energy], close down the upper energy³³, then swiftly turn the triangle³⁴ [in the navel] counter clockwise. Because of the power of turning the surrounding *mantra* syllables red lights emanate. These touch the syllable BANG [𑖀𑖳𑖪 bam], then from the syllable BANG also emanate red [lights]. [...highlighted passage not readable...]

United in the central channel [the lights] go upward, touch the great bliss *cakra* [= crown *cakra*] HONG [頤 hūm]³⁵ syllable. Then the drop of white and cool *bodhicitta* melts down, and immediately one visualizes the emptiness and great bliss [experience of union].³⁶

Here the ritual describes the union of emptiness and bliss: What is meant here is, in fact, the unity of the empty and luminous nature of mind experienced on a bodily level. The ritual manual seems to guide the practitioner not to grasp the Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine of the cultivation of wisdom (emptiness) and compassion (actualisation) intellectually as a philosophical doctrine, but instead to experience it in one's own body—very sensually.

³⁰ It is interesting that the Tibetan script is *not* used for 'sacred sounds' (as was done, for instance, in translations of Tibetan Tantric texts into Chinese in the 1930s to 1950s). A number of examples of Tibetan seed syllables used in Chinese translations of Tibetan Tantric texts from the 1930s to 1950s are provided in Zhou Shaoliang and Lü Tiegang 1995.

³¹ Michaels and Wulf 2014: 14.

³² That means to close the lower *cakras*.

³³ That is, to close the breathing from the nose.

³⁴ There is again a passage highlighted in fol. 2.5 which, however, is not readable.

³⁵ It is interesting to note that in the texts two different characters are found for the representation of the Sanskrit sound hūm, namely here in the interpolation the character 頤 and in the above quoted passage 吽 (see footnote 27 above). Could this be a hint that maybe more than one person edited the text?

³⁶ Shi Jinbo, Wei Tongxian and E.I. Kychanov 1996–1998: vol. 5, p. 257 (fol. 2.5–2.8).

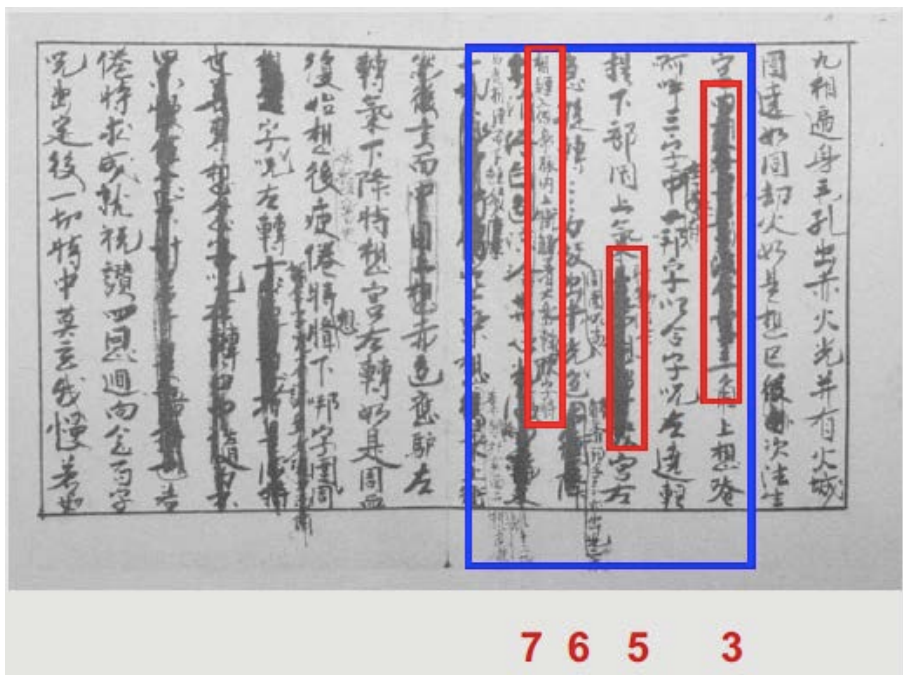


Fig. 1: Text (2) A 19 *Jingang haimu chanding* 金剛亥母禪定 [The Meditation on Vajravārāhī]. Published in: Shi Jinbo, Wei Tongxian and E.I. Kychanov 1996–1998, vol. 5, p. 257 (A 19, fol. 2). The squares and line nos. are added by me.

Ritual Manual for Communal Use: Example of text (1) Stages of Making Feast Offerings to Vajravārāhī

Finally let me briefly turn to ritual manual no. (1) *Stages of Making Feast of Offerings to Vajravārāhī*, which is for a communal practice. It offers a rather detailed description on how to perform a communal gathering led by an accomplished ritual master, done in order to invite the presence of the divinity and provide food offerings to her. And it is here that we can understand the importance of *taste* within the invocation and pleasing process of a divine presence. In the introduction to their book *Exploring the Senses*, Axel Michaels and Christoph Wulf differentiate between the public ‘far senses’ of vision and hearing and the ‘nearby senses’ of tasting, smelling and touching.³⁷ Taste is an intimate sense and as such the feeding of a deity functions as a moment of intimate exchange—in our case between the ritual master and Vajravārāhī.

³⁷ Michaels and Wulf 2014: 13.

There is actually much we can say about this ritual manual, though here I shall limit myself to one last important passage regarding the feeding of the deity. Eventually the ritual master identifies *himself* with the divinity (Vajravārāhī's wisdom aspect), becoming Vajravārāhī and in this form accepts the offering for Vajravārāhī. Here our ritual manual reads as follows:

The guru opens the palm of his left hand and places the three-pronged *mudrā* with the right hand on top of it and answers [to the ritual servant]:

"Now this true pure *dharma* of the *tathāgatas* is separate from all stains of greed and liberates one from all attachments.

To this true nature I pay homage." [Recite] trice.

The guru makes the lotus *mudrā* to accept the offering. At that time the ritual servant says: "A [a] la la ho" and the guru responds: "Siddhi ja ho".

[Then the guru] receives these two kinds of food. He uses the ring finger of the left hand to accept the alcohol, and first offers it to the guru [sitting on] his crown. Then he offers it to the guru [sitting at] at his navel *cakra*. Then he offers it to the *ḍākinīs* to taste, who [are sitting] on his tongue.

At that time eat the two kinds of food, visualise the mouth as a fire *maṇḍala* and the two hands as the two fire *puja* spoons, and visualize eating the food as *amṛta* offered to the meditational deity.

What is most striking about this passage is the fact that multiple emanations of the divine presence appear: Vajravārāhī is not simply present in the *maṇḍala* in front of the ritual master (mentioned in the preceding passage); the ritual master himself becomes Vajravārāhī and, more importantly, she sits on his or her tongue as well to taste the offering. Here likes and dislikes, approvals and disapprovals with regard to the offering could be expressed immediately. And when the community of practitioners is invited to follow the example of the guru and to practice likewise, multiple emanations of Vajravārāhī are present—so that the feast offering, in fact, becomes a feast offering of a community of Vajravārāhīs. It is not simply one buddha that is venerated through a food offering; it is a *multitude of female buddhas that are pleased*.

To sum up, what I have tried to show in this case study is how a Tantric Buddhist practitioner is enjoined to *sense* the world around

herself or himself as well as her or his own body. As a multi-sensory experience of a divine presence, with various senses covering different functions from distant contact (the in-sight or view of the deity) to very close exchanges with a divinity (in the case of taste), the senses operate in relation to each other and may express different ways of contact. Such types of prescriptive ritual manuals, as presented here, guide a practitioner to develop an intimate relationship with her/his deity and to stimulate the imagination for further interactions with a divine or transcendental sphere.

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