



Richard K. Payne, ed., *Tantric Buddhism in East Asia*

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IN THE INTRODUCTION to *Tantric Buddhism in East Asia*, Richard Payne asks all the right questions: “Are we talking about a specific, clearly delineated lineage of transmission? A more general movement? A ritual technology? Or a diffuse set of practices and doctrines that permeate Buddhism throughout its East Asian history?” In other words, how can one pin down the meaning of the floating signifier *tantra*? Though the bibliographic term “tantra” is now widely accepted and largely unquestioned, “tantra” standing in for a category of religious practice is highly problematic.

The particular usage in question originated in the nineteenth century as a kind of communal fiction shared by European novelists, colonial administrators, and schol-

ars in the study of Indian religion and culture. (Payne cites as his source Hugh B. URBAN's rich study of Indian tantra from ancient to New Age forms in both East and West.) More often than not, the substantive noun they invented—"tantrism"—served as a projection of their own fantasies of a radical religious path that involved a dangerous quest for ecstasy but also signified the decadent stage of a venerable tradition within a taken-for-granted Hegelian framework. According to this view, social institutions develop organically through stages from birth to dissolution. Thus, the tantric tradition represented the colorful finale of Indian Buddhism. Payne boldly interrogates the host of meanings accumulated over time and in widely diverse social contexts in an attempt to establish the integrity of a subject frequently misunderstood and largely neglected when not focused on either ancient India or Tibet past and present. In short, this edited volume is a testimony to a potentially fertile new field of inquiry—the study of Vajrayana or tantric Buddhism in East Asia.

The Vajrayana tradition gained recognition in the mid-1960s around the same time that it became far more accessible to Western scholars due largely to the Tibetan diaspora in the wake of the Chinese conquest of Tibet. Pioneering studies by Giuseppe Tucci and Herbert Guenther paved the way for today's Tibet-focused Buddhist scholars such as Donald Lopez, Georges B. J. Dreyfus, Melvyn C. Goldstein, Janet Gyatso, and Robert Thurman. The confluence of academic studies on Tibetan Buddhism and the popular fascination with Tibet (a topic explored by Donald Lopez, Frank Korom, and Harvey Cox), contributed to the almost exclusive association of Tantric Buddhism with Tibetan culture. For this reason, knowledge of the tantric tradition in East Asia has remained in the shadows where it has been relegated to a niche of specialists.

Given the limited state of knowledge of the East Asian versions of Vajrayana Buddhism, the present collection represents a significant contribution to the field and could well serve as a course reader. While providing a wealth of information about East Asian Vajrayana, it also has the ancillary advantage of placing the Tibetan version of Vajrayana in a larger framework than has been the norm in English-language scholarship to date. The book brings together a number of articles previously appearing in a wide range of journals published between 1945 and 1999 that deal with both the popular and monastic aspects of the East Asian tantric tradition. Read together, these gems form a composite picture of diversity within the continuity of a shared tradition. East Asian tantra (Ch. *mijiao*, Jap. *mikkyō*, and Kor. *milgyo*) manifests in a variety of source languages—Sanskrit, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese—located within diverse religious cultures, lineages, and schools. The comparative scope of the articles in this collection, both within and between cultures and diachronically across time, makes for fascinating reading.

Tantric Buddhism in East Asia is divided into three sections: "History: China, Korea, Japan," "Deities and Practices," and "Influences on Japanese Religion." Given the book's title, a reader may expect a balanced regional distribution, yet the book weighs heavily in favor of Japan. Just one of its ten chapters deals with China, while two focus on Korea, and the remaining seven deal with Japan. Given the marked

Japanese emphasis, it comes as a surprise that only one of Japan's two schools of tantric Buddhism—Shingon—is represented at all in the collection. While the omission of Tendai is lamentable, compensation comes in the form of two excellent chapters by Helen Hardacre and Byron Earhart devoted to the tantric-infused mountain asceticism of Shugendō. Hardacre's contribution explores the gendered specificity of religious experience in relation to a pilgrimage to Mt. Ōmine, drawing in part on Hardacre's own participant observations, and Earhart explores the historical figure of En no Gyōja central to Shugendō tradition.

Perhaps more than anything else, this Japano-centric collection reflects the state of Vajrayana Buddhism itself in East Asia. The tradition has largely faded in China, and the two Korean schools of Vajrayana—Sinin and Ch'ongji—became absorbed into a syncretistic amalgamation with Pure Land that grew to dominance in late Korean Son as discussed by Henrik H. Sorensen in two illuminating chapters. Only in Japan has Vajrayana remained a robust tradition with adherents numbering over 12 million today in the Shingon sect alone according to the *Shūkyō nenkan* (2003). The focus on Shingon in the present volume is clear evidence of the growing popularity of the subject in recent decades. In-depth studies by Yoshito Hakeda, Taikō Yamasaki, George Tanabe Jr., Ryuichi Abe, Minoru Kiyota, Hayao Kawai, Mark Unno, Adrian Snodgrass, and Richard Payne himself have all contributed to a growing range of studies on Vajrayana in East Asian Buddhism.

From its origin, tantric Buddhism has offered an alternative to the standard Mahayana path of awakening. Of these two approaches to buddhahood, the Mahayana sutras advocated the slower way of the bodhisattva path while the tantras taught that enlightenment could be achieved in a person's present lifetime, or as Kūkai expressed "in this body" (*sokushin jōbutsu*). For Kūkai, the tantric practitioner could activate the supra-personal energy of empowerment that leads quickly to the attainment of enlightenment through concentrated activity of the body, speech, and mind. Hisao Inagaki provides an annotated translation of Kūkai's most important work in this regard: "The Principle of Attaining Buddhahood with the Present Body" (*Sokushin-jōbutsu-gi*).

In order to achieve this accelerated enlightenment, practitioners have long employed unique types of meditation coupled with extensive use of mandalas, mudras, mantras, and dharanis. Ian Astley examines one such practice: the ritual known as the "Five Mysteries of Vajrasattva" linked to the *Rishukyō*, a major sutra of the Shingon school. Through this ritual the practitioner transmutes the passions for the purpose of enlightenment. Dale Todoro offers a translation of another ritual, a five-stage meditation visualization (deriving from the *Tattvasaṃgraha*) that Kūkai introduced and recommended all Shingon followers cultivate to perfection. James H. Sanford surprises with a discussion of a *nenbutsu* practice (normally associated with the Pure Land schools) unique to Shingon and advocated by the priest Kakuban. According to a founder-model paradigm, Chou Yi-Liang explores within the context of China the lives of the three founders of East Asian tantric Buddhism: Śubhakarasiṃha, Vajrabodhi, and Amoghavajra.

While the contributions deal with various historical periods and personages, they are predominantly textual studies. With the exception of Hardacre's chapter, as a whole the collection leaves the reader in a state of suspension. After all, a person unfamiliar with the region could easily finish the book and still wonder if Tantric Buddhism was a living or dead religious tradition in East Asia today. For example, Pol Vanden Broucke explores the cult of Daishō Kongō, a deity invoked in Shingon for victory in warfare. The scriptural source for the related ritual is the *Yugikyō*, a major text in both Shingon and Tendai. In addition to winning wars, Vanden Broucke explains that the ritual is effective for easy childbirth and winning horse races. The sources cited range from the twelfth to the fourteenth century with several pages devoted to the translation of key excerpts.

While Vanden Broucke's chapter represents a rich textual study, I found myself wishing that the author had developed the subject within a broader theoretical framework that might shed light on the practice even in modern times. For instance, was this deity invoked during the Pacific War, or is the deity invoked today in transnational conflicts? While unreasonable to expect a study to deal with a subject it has not set itself to undertake in the first place, I wish only to point out what appears to be a necessary direction for future research in the field. An age characterized by transnational cultural flows such as the present one has rendered many of our categories antiquated, hermeneutically problematic, and in need of reflecting the profound interconnectedness of the current globalized world in which we must live. Among other things, this would require carefully examining the concrete struggles and relations of power that buttress various religious practices especially now but also in the past. Even an exceedingly brief fieldwork visit to engage with contemporary practitioners of the tradition would greatly enrich such textual studies.

To clarify my point, I would like to conclude with a personal observation. On a visit in 2004 to the Shingon school's administrative headquarters at Koyasan, I noticed a striking innovation since my previous visit in 2001. Two enormous mandala murals representing the Diamond World and the Womb World had been erected in the entranceway to the building with colorful revolving lights and a recording of the New Age composer Kitarō's music playing softly in the background. This concession to popular culture struck me then, as it does now, as an example of what Agehananda Bharati once described as the "pizza effect" in terms of the ostensibly Italian products of dough and tomato sauce exported to the U.S. where they had been configured into something called "pizza." This "pizza" then returned to Italy where it was popularized and again returned to the US where it was reconfigured as something specifically "Italian."

In a similar fashion, might not a comparable phenomenon be at work in the present to the once sequestered Shingon? Could popular new religious forms of Buddhism that have drawn heavily from Shingon such as Shinnyō'en and Agonshū have grown robust enough to exert a reciprocal influence on that great monastic tradition? Or what sorts of exchanges occurred during and after Koyasan's designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2004? Future research might explore these com-

plex multi-directional cultural flows and their impacts and meaning. For despite its seeming remoteness on top of Mt. Koya, Shingon is not suspended in time. The lobby of its administrative center leaves us with an intriguing suggestion for future directions in the field of East Asian Tantric Buddhism. The present volume serves to draw attention to an area neglected in Buddhist studies and barely heard of in the larger field of religious studies except perhaps glimpsed at through the mass media's representations of Tendai's "marathon monks." Richard Payne has established an exceedingly sound and stimulating theoretical framework that should invite a whole new range of studies for many years to come.

REFERENCE

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