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From Yama to Vajrabhairava: an overview of the history of the Yamāntaka tantric tradition



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Illustration on the front page depicts Solitary Hero Vajrabhairava of the Gelug tradition; accessed:
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Introduction

Among the many religions of the contemporary world, Tibetan Buddhism is one of the most recognizable ones. Despite being one of the smaller denominations within Buddhism, its rich culture, complex philosophy and artistic tradition have drawn to it considerable amount of attention in the West both from scholars and the interested public since the forceful opening of the country by the Chinese invasion of 1950.

The Vajrayāna (skt. *Diamond Vehicle or Thunderbolt Vehicle*) Buddhism of Tibet and Mongolia is the heir of an expansive tradition of Indo-Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism, which evolved during one of the most dynamic periods of Indian history – the tumultuous feudalization of India after the fall of the great Gupta Empire in the 6th c. CE. During this period of political and cultural transformation, a new type of religious philosophy and practice emerged – the tantras (skt. *tantra*, ‘weave’, ‘continuum’). The tantras were among the chief factors that shaped contemporary Hinduism, and their influence was also present in the Mahayana milieu, which quickly developed an esoteric, tantric form of Buddhism which syncretically incorporated various philosophical notions and beliefs drawn from Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava and animistic sources, organizing them in the overarching framework of Mahayana philosophy. Complex rituals involving the visualization of Buddhas and other figures and recitation of their secret mantras were developed and the scriptures detailing these practices were organized into groups based on their main deity and the general mode of cultic practice. This form of Buddhism, called the Vajrayāna (after the *vajra*, a ritual scepter which became the symbol of sovereignty and power) expanded quickly, becoming an important social and political force in early medieval India as well as exerting an important influence on other religious traditions of the region. However, after around the 11th c. Indian Buddhism lost some of its vitality, losing following among the laity to reformed Hinduism and finally disappearing almost completely from public life in the wake of the Muslim invasions of India in the 12th c.

Vajrayāna was however preserved and exponentially developed in Tibet, to which it was transferred twice – for the first time by a tantric adept called Padmasambhava in the 8th c. and for the second time in the 11th c. by groups of independent scholars journeying to the great Buddhist universities of Nālandā and Vikramaśīla in order to access and translate the scriptures still unknown in the Himalayas. The various traditions of practice and initiatory lineages transferred to Tibet have adapted to their new social context and coalesced over time into the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Since around the 17th c. the reformed Gelug (tib. *dge lugs*) school gained political supremacy in Tibet and consequently, its interpretation of the Buddhist Dharma spread over the region, coming to almost monopolize the Buddhism of Mongolia and thrive under Qing patronage in China. Among the Gelug practices, a triad of systems is most widespread – the Supreme Yoga Tantra (skt. *anuttarayogatantra*) traditions of the

Buddhas Cakrasaṃvara, Guhyasamāja and Vajrabhairava. Of the three, Vajrabhairava is considered most powerful, both in terms of philosophically containing the essence of the other two systems and in terms of the purported magical power to be gained through the system's utilization. Vajrabhairava, which means The Indestructible Terrifying One, is depicted as a buffalo-headed wrathful figure sporting an impressive number of limbs and surrounded by a fiery halo. He is considered a part of a broader category of deities called Yamāntaka, The Ender of Death, all understood to be various forms of the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, the embodiment of wisdom and the Buddhist teaching, emanated in order to subjugate the pre-Buddhist god of death and the underworld, Yama. As is common in the syncretic Indian religions, the subjugating deity gained some of the attributes and traits associated with its victim and Yamāntaka inherited the complex and very archaic symbolism of Yama. At the same time, this particular form of the figure was developed as a Buddhist response to the then-dominant cult of Śiva Bhairava, one of the first major fierce gods to emerge from the tantric margin to the religious mainstream of India. Thus, multiple streams of religious and ritual thought intermixed in the figure which in time took the place of one of the supreme ritual systems of esoteric Buddhism in general. The god which emerged into history in the Vedas as the first human being to die and the lord of the afterlife after almost three and a half millennia is still at the heart of a living tradition of ritual practice and mystical exegesis.

The goal of this paper is to provide an integrated overview of the history of the Yamāntaka tantras in their religious and social context, which is surprisingly still lacking in the academic literature. To achieve this, the constituent ideas of the tradition will be presented chronologically, beginning with the complex of Yama as it is expressed in the foundational texts of Indian religion, the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Mahābhārata in Chapter I. Chapter II will describe the emergence of the original Yamāntaka tradition in relation to the then-current tantric movements of Northern India; while Chapter III will focus on the origins of the Vajrabhairava tradition, its transmission to Tibet and the indigenous Tibetan developments of the practice. Since the focus of the tantric traditions is always the ritual, sādhanā will be provided and explained as an illustration of the manner in which the discussed religious ideas and philosophical abstractions are combined to create detailed meditational liturgies intended for daily practice.

The meaning of the discussed symbolic forms and cultic practices will be approached on the basis of the emic commentary corpus. I believe that the philosophical profundity and scholarly discipline of the indigenous tradition is far too great in this case to reasonably attempt a reductionist explanation of the researched religious phenomenon's intricacies on the basis of particular social or psychological theories. While such approaches are indispensable for researching specific aspects of the tradition and serve to greatly increase our understanding of Indo-Tibetan religious history, they are by nature particularistic, while the vastness of the subject to be covered in the limited volume of this paper requires a more

general approach, able to discern patterns of religious development and transformation of chosen ideas over large areas and time periods. Because of these considerations, the methodological sensitivity of this paper is primarily phenomenological, attempting to present the dynamisms and structure of a religious tradition using its own concepts and syllogisms, in order to facilitate the understanding of the mentality and worldview it expresses.

A note on Transcription

Less common Sanskrit and Tibetan words will be given in italics on their first appearance in the text with the transliteration given in brackets. The transliterations are prepared according to the standard IAST system for Sanskrit and Wylie for Tibetan. In quoted passages, the original spelling is kept. For clarity, words and phrases rendered differently between quoted sources are given in a uniform Sanskrit spelling in the text. Tibetan given names are provided in a phonetic rendering for ease of reading (e.g. *Rigdzin Chökyi Dragpa* instead of *rig 'dzin chos kyi grags pa*)

Chapter I: Yama

Yama in the Vedas

It is commonly said that the Vedas, composed ca. 1200 – 600 BCE,¹ form the textual basis of Hinduism. While it is not exactly true, since most forms of contemporary Hinduism derive primarily from later sources, such as the *itihasa* and the puranic literature, it is however certainly true that the Vedas are the first document of Indo-Aryan religion extant. For this reason, we have to provide an overview of the Vedic view of Yama as a textual fundament on which the later philosophies accreted over time. Yama however does not play a prominent role in the *Rigveda* (skt. *Ṛgveda*), mostly due to its strong focus on the soma sacrifice, with which he is not directly connected. Because of this, we have chosen two hymns from *Rigveda*'s tenth mandala, which is a relatively late addition to the corpus, closer in chronology to the *Atharvaveda* than the core *Rigveda*² and closer in the choice of subjects to everyday life than the sacrificial core of the brahmanical religious culture. The first of the hymns concerns Yama's relationship with his twin sister and the other, a funeral hymn, provides some clues as to his place in the larger Vedic ideological system.

Hymn 10.10. Dialogue of Yama and Yami.

This particular hymn is relatively well-known due to both its literary and linguistic perfection and the uncommon theme of incest it is based upon. It presents a dynamic dialogue between the first mortals, the twins Yama and Yami. Yami, desiring children to continue the lineage of humankind, tries to persuade Yama to have sex with her. He refuses on the grounds of incest being forbidden by the gods, whose servants are always watchful: "They do not stand still; they do not blink - the spies of the gods who roam about here."³ Yami answers that they have already been a married couple while within the womb of Tvaṣṭṛ, who bore them. While that argument still does not persuade Yama, she reminds him that the relationship between Heaven and Earth is similarly incestuous, the divinities sharing the same parents. The emotional intensity of the text rises unquestionably, when in the 11th verse Yami exclaims: "What will "brother" [mean] when there will be no refuge. And what will "sister," if Dissolution will come down? Driven by desire many times I murmur this: mingle your body with my body."⁴ After Yama refuses

¹ Flood, Gavin (1996), *An Introduction to Hinduism*, p. 37-38

² Jamison, Stephanie and Brereton, Joel (2014) *The Rigveda. The Earliest Religious Poetry of India*, vol. III, p. 1367

³ Jamison and Brereton, op.cit., p. 1383

⁴ Jamison and Brereton, op.cit., p. 1383

for the last time, his sister snaps at him angrily, upon which verse the translators of the excellent new edition of the *Rigveda* have commented: “(...) Yami breaks off her speech in frustration in a very short *pāda* containing two occurrences of a word (*bata*) found nowhere else and exhibiting aberrant phonology. Our rendering of the word aims at the level of slangy insult to which *bata* appears to belong.”⁵ Thus, the hymn ends in a frustrating impasse with the following verses:

“13. [Yami:] You jerk, you really are a jerk, Yama! Truly we have not found mind and heart in you.

Another (woman) will surely embrace you, like a girthband a yoked (horse), like a vine a tree.

14. [Yama:] You (will embrace) another, Yami, and another will embrace you - like a vine a tree.

Seek his mind-or he yours. Then make yourself a very happy compact.”⁶

The theme and extraordinary emotional temperature of this hymn seem to suggest an allusion to an earlier stratum of incest taboo mythology within the Vedic religious complex. While incestuous relationships between the divinities are rather common in many mythologies and may be interpreted with various degrees of literalism, in this particular case it is salient to note that, firstly, Yama and Yami are humans, not gods, therefore they are not exempt from human laws; secondly, that it is canonical that the twins had sex eventually, becoming the first parents of humankind;⁷ and finally, that strong parallels as well as commonality of source mythologem exist between Yama and the Iranian Jamshid (*Yima* in original Avestan)– and it is established that royal and priestly siblings used to marry each other within the Zoroastrian tradition.⁸ One may thus be excused to think that the hymn now discussed represents a later, more morally self-aware, rendition of a far older topic, created in an attempt to defuse the transgressive quality of the story and to make it fit better into the wider collection of the *Rigveda*.

⁵ Jamison and Breteton, op.cit., p. 1382

⁶ Jamison and Breteton, op.cit., p. 1383

⁷ Jamison and Breteton, op.cit., p. 1382

⁸ Skjærvø, Prods Oktor (2013), *Marriage II. Next Of Kin Marriage In Zoroastrianism* in: *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/marriage-next-of-kin> (accessed on 20. 06. 2019)

Hymn 10.14. Funeral oblations

The fourteenth hymn marks a funeral celebration and is mostly directed to Yama. The first six verses praise Yama as the pathfinder, who, having been the first to die, found a way to the underworld imagined as a pleasant and well-watered pasture,⁹ and is willing to lead next generations of mortal men along his way. In order to lead the newly deceased person's soul (skt. *ātman*) to the *pitrloka*, a sacrifice is performed to three groups of recipients: the ancestors (skt. *pitr*), the gods and Yama himself. The fact that Yama is considered outside of the two groups can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, his importance for the success of the rite, as the deity of the underworld, is paramount – thus he receives a separate offering in order to gain his benevolence and help for the newly deceased. On the other hand, Yama used to be a mortal man and became a god, thus being both an ancestor – and the first and oldest of all the forefathers at that – and a god. This liminal status of Yama could also be a reason for such a form of the hymn. However, nothing is explicitly said in the text that would support such an interpretation, and the general tone of the *Rigveda* is centered far more on the offering ritual than the ontology of the recipients of the offering. Thus, what is communicated through the separate offering to Yama is probably not his liminal status, but rather his crucial importance for the rite at hand. While the details of how the hymn's anonymous authors imagined their afterlife are of less importance for this paper, one particular passage should be noted:

7. Go forth, go forth along the ancient paths on which our ancient forefathers departed.

You will see both kings becoming exhilarated on the svadhā (-cry), Yama and Varuna the god.

8. Unite with the forefathers, unite with Yama, with what has been sacrificed and bestowed, in the highest distant heaven.

Having left behind imperfection, come home again. Unite with your body in your full luster.¹⁰

There are three main points of interest in the quoted verses. Firstly, Yama is called a king – a title that would become so intimately tied to his name in later times, that in contemporary Hindi it is arguably more common to say *Yamraj* than just *Yam*. The epithet conveys his authority and, as can be seen, in a way equates him with Varuna. Varuna, while relatively forgotten in later forms of Indian religion, served

⁹ Jamison and Breteton, op.cit., p. 1390

¹⁰ Jamison and Breteton, op.cit., p. 1392

an important role in the Vedic corpus, being both a guardian and personification of *ṛta*,¹¹ the primordial cosmic order that is beyond the gods and humans alike and that allows the world to manifest. While roughly comparable in its early renditions to the related concept of Fate in the Greek religion, the interpretations of it that arose in the Indian culture were markedly different – what is of most import in this case, *ṛta* came to signify the immutable laws that make the sacrifice work, feeding the gods power which they need both to continue existing and to support the existence of the manifest world. Thus, the brahminical fire offering became more important than the gods themselves, who were believed to grow weak and impotent without *soma* offerings. Varuna, as the guardian of that order, served a function of both a patron of universal justice and a deity important to the fire-sacrifice complex. Putting Yama together with Varuna and on the same level of importance thus signifies their shared role in upholding the cosmic law and the Dharma that springs from it in the human world. It supports the view that justice, cosmic order and the cycle of life and death were connected with Yama even at the relatively early historical period of the Vedas' composition, where he is relatively a less important deity.

Secondly, it is interesting to see that both Yama and Varuna are "*exhilarated on the svadhā (-cry)*."¹² What that means is that the sacrifices, which feed and support them, are to be offered with the accompaniment of mantras ending with *svadhā!* – an untranslatable mantric word used in offerings reserved for the ancestors¹³ (in opposition to the *svāhā* reserved for the gods, which is today still one of the most widespread endings of Hinduist and Buddhist mantras). It is strange to see that cry in relation to Varuna, who was not thought to have been a human, and while it suits Yama better, it is still very uncommon to see *svadhā* used outside of rites directed strictly at the *pitrs* and it may suggest some sort of more pronounced connection between Varuna and the forefathers that was extant in earlier strata of the religion, but lost importance and in time was forgotten.

Thirdly, the exhortation with which the eighth verse ends is interesting due to the uncommon imagery presented. What does the *home* mentioned mean? While in the Vedic corpus the concept of reincarnation is not yet as firmly established as it is in the later writings, the other popular concept of the afterlife was that the ancestors, *pitrs*, reside in the *pitṛloka*, the hidden meadows mentioned earlier in the hymn and similar to the basic idea of the afterlife present in related cultures. It is known from other passages in the Vedas¹⁴ that a belief was extant that the soul of the deceased would reunite with their body, which would also appear in the afterworld after being burned with proper ceremony on earth. However, the usage of the word "home" in regard to the *pitṛloka* is rather strange, the soul neither originating there nor having spent there any time before death. Alternatively, the *home*

¹¹ Flood, op.cit., p. 45

¹² Jamison and Breteton, op.cit., p. 1392

¹³ Jamison and Breteton, op.cit., p. 1391

¹⁴ Compare: Jamison and Breteton, op.cit., p. 1466-1468

mentioned could be tentatively connected to heaven (skt. *svarga*), where the gods reside and from where souls may come (a subject which is not unanimously agreed upon in the Vedas) – in such a case, the *body in full luster* could signify a rudimentary concept of what is in later Indian writing called the subtle body or the body of light, an attribute primarily of gods and highly advanced spiritual practitioners. However one may interpret this passage, it is interesting to note it in order to show the heterogeneous nature of the source material and suggest that it only partially renders the vast body of oral tradition from which it arose.

The hymn ends on a note once again stressing the importance of Yama and his equality with other gods, who enjoy much more attention in the bulk of the Vedas:

“The triṣṭubh, the gāyatrī, the meters - all these are established in Yama”¹⁵

These are the poetic forms and meters used in the Vedas – and since the Vedas are purportedly the sum of all knowledge (as their name itself asserts) and the compendium of rituals that support the very existence of the world and the gods that govern it – the importance of the meters to the Vedic-age Brahmin is impossible to overstress. They were considered the essential structures of the *yajñá* rites and the apex of human learning, combining linguistic, poetical and mathematical perfection and symmetry. It must be stressed that the sound of hymns and mantras was of crucial importance to the early Indian worldview, in later traditions established as the divine force that creates the universe.¹⁶ Thus, the rhythm and structure of those sacred chants was understood as isomorphic to the structure of the world at large, and its contemplation had the power to liberate an individual from the suffering of mortal life, whether that was understood as securing a place in a heavenly afterlife or as *moksha*, liberation from the cycle of reincarnation, in the later texts. Thus, the verse once again stresses the connection of Yama with the order of the universe and its laws.

As can be seen, in the Vedic corpus Yama serves primarily the role of the god of the underworld and the ancestors who reside therein. As the first man to die, he is also the guide who can lead the souls of the deceased to their proper places in the afterlife; a role which is the foundation of his understanding as a wise judge and a peer of Varuna, the god of the *ṛta*. Since in later centuries the *ṛta* concept started giving way to the somewhat broader idea of *dharma*, the guardian thereof became the Dharmaraja. We can see Yama taking on this new role, with which naturally comes the status of a wise teacher, a guru who truly understands the dharma. Additionally, the propitiation of the ancestors lost its central place in Indian religious practice and after the end of the Vedic age it had only a marginal place in the cultus. The focus of the religious life was shifted to the worship of gods and the quest for personal liberation;

¹⁵ Jamison and Breteton, *op.cit.*, p. 1392

¹⁶ Padoux, André (1990), *Vāc, The Concept of the Word in Select Hindu Tantras*, p. 86-88

the key to which is always a knowledge of the dharma. Thus, the association with dharma became Yama's central feature, the role of the First Ancestor being practically forgotten. This evolution is clearly expressed in the *Kaṭhōpaniṣad*, a discussion of which follows.

Kaṭhōpaniṣad: Yama as Dharmaraja

The chronology of the *Kaṭhōpaniṣad*, as with Indian texts in general, is somewhat unclear; since there are no clear clues present within the text in regard to its period of composition, all scholarly claims regarding it are based on the linguistic analysis of the text and the supposed history of ideas in the post-Vedic philosophical milieu.¹⁷ Roughly, based on various academic opinions, it can be said that the *Kaṭhōpaniṣad* was composed in the 5th ct. BC or earlier, though not before the turn of the first millennium BC.¹⁸ As can be deduced, the most contested opinion in that regard is that of precedence of the *Kaṭhōpaniṣad* or the early Buddhist literature; some consider the *Kaṭhōpaniṣad* to be an answer to Buddhist philosophy from a more orthodox brahmanical standpoint, others consider the Upanishad to be one of the texts that may have paved the way for the arrival of Buddhism¹⁹ with its more individualistic, knowledge-based way of practice and what may be called its general *śramana* sensibility – the stressing of personal effort in practice rather than ritual precision.

The name of the Upanishad is not completely clear, which may be intentional – the word *kaṭha* means “distress”,²⁰ there is however a very closely pronounced word, *kathā*, meaning “story, legend, speech”.²¹ Considering the fact that the upanishadic literature has grown out of oral tradition, as well as the aptitude of the Indian poets for wordplay and puns, it must be ascertained that the homophony was, if not intended, at least noticed and known. The name of the main character of the narrative, Nachiketa, seems to be intentionally ambiguous in meaning too. The phrase *na ciketa* means “I do not know”²², which fits well with his role as the spiritual seeker asking his teacher insistent questions. On the other hand, there are other puns possible, also fitting the theme of the text – Paul Deussen suggests *Na kṣiti* and *Na akṣiyete*, “that which does not decay”.²³ In a similar vein he also suggests *Na jiti*, “the

¹⁷ Olivelle Patrick (1996), *The Early Upanishads: Annotated Text & Translation*, Introduction chapter

¹⁸ Compare: A.L. Basham in Paul Williams, (ed.), *Buddhism: Buddhist origins and the early history of Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia*, p. 61; Phillips Stephen (2009), *Yoga, Karma, and Rebirth: A Brief History and Philosophy*, Chapter 1

¹⁹ Upadhyaya, Kashi Nath (1998), *Early Buddhism and the Bhagavadgītā*, p. 103–104,

²⁰ कठ, Monier-Williams' Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Cologne Digital Sanskrit Lexicon, Germany

²¹ कथा, Monier-Williams, op. cit.

²² Whitney, W. D. (1890) *Translation of the Katha-Upanishad*, in: Transactions of the American Philological Association, Vol. 21, p. 91

²³ Deussen, Paul (1897) *Sixty Upanishads of the Veda*, Vol. 1, p. 269-73

unconquered”, relevant especially in relation to the third boon Nachiketas gains from Yama, namely that of moksha.

The Upanishad consists of two main chapters, each divided into three sections called *valli*, a term which is also used in the structuring of the Taittiriya Upanishad and the Yajurveda, denoting a kind of a medicinal vine. It has been theorized that the name reflects the roots of the first upanishadic text in the *Kṛṣṇayajurveda*, a text largely independent of the main Yajurveda and grafted onto it in a later period.²⁴

The narrative opens with the giving away of possessions by Nachiketas’ father – an act criticized by his son as meaningless due to the possessions being already used up and worthless, such as cows that “have eaten their hay” and “drank their water” and are barren.²⁵ Nachiketas asks then, several times, to whom will he be given by his father as a gift, since he is too his possession and needs to be given away. After the third time he asks, his father, having become angry, says that he will “give him away to death”.²⁶ Thus, Nachiketas enters the abode of death, i.e. Yama. The god is however not at home, and Nachiketas has to wait three days and nights for his host; a situation that is greatly inauspicious for Yama, Nachiketas being a Brahmin and the law of hospitality being sacred even among the gods. Thus, when Yama returns, to mitigate the bad karma, he offers three wishes to the boy. The first wish is for the father to become calm and not be angry when the son returns. As the second boon, the boy asks for the instruction in a fire sacrifice that leads one to heaven. He receives the method of offering together with the teaching that one who faultlessly respects their parents and teacher and constantly practices study, ritual and almsgiving will surely attain immortality in heaven after death.²⁷

It should be noted that this seems to be a remnant of an earlier belief stratum – the moral precepts are far less individualistic and stern than in the roughly contemporary yogic texts, and seem to have been authored more with social coherence than personal liberation in mind; the reliance on the traditional fire offering as the quintessential form of worship and the metaphor of creation itself is also a Vedic sentiment, and although it was most definitely present in the Upanishads and later traditions, it tended to be reinterpreted as a metaphor or an internalized yogic exercise rather than the literal offering to the gods.²⁸

²⁴ Deussen, op. cit. 217-9

²⁵ F. M. Müller, *Sacred Books of the East - Volume 15/Katha-upanishad*, v. 3, in: Wikisource, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Sacred_Books_of_the_East_-_Volume_15/Katha-upanishad (accessed on 17.06.2019)

²⁶ F. M. Müller, op. cit., v. 4

²⁷ F. M. Müller, op. cit., v. 17

²⁸ Skorupski, Tadeusz (2015) in: Michael Witzel (ed.) *Homa Variations: The Study of Ritual Change Across the Longue Durée*, p. 78–81

As his third wish, Nachiketas asks Yama, “What happens after a person dies? Does he continue to exist in another form? Or not?”²⁹ Yama avoids a direct answer, saying that even the gods are unsure about it and urges the boy to pick another wish. Nachiketas replies that if even the gods do not know precisely, what happens after death, than who but the God of Death himself could provide him with a better answer? Yama replies offering all sorts of wealth and pleasure instead of the teaching; Nachiketas however passes the test, rejecting the gifts as vanities and asking his question again. Thus ends the introduction and with the opening of the second *valli*, the main text begins.

The teaching begins with the differentiation between what is pleasant or dear (skt. *preya*) and what is worthwhile or good (skt. *śreya*). The ignorant man chases after the transient pleasures, while not willing to take up the effort of learning and realizing what is truly good. Thus, on a note somewhat reminiscent of Plato’s *Phaedrus*, a working definition of the most important axiological axis of the text and the post-Vedic traditions in general, that of knowledge (skt. *vidyā*) and ignorance (skt. *avidyā*) is founded. Yama proceeds to teach Nachiketas about the *atman* and the means to comprehend it through yoga. That is one of the first mentions of yoga in Indian religious literature,³⁰ which points us to the historical importance of the text in question. Asserting the immortality of the *atman-brahman* Yama teaches not to fear anything, even himself (i.e. death), for nothing can truly be lost. These ideas, forming the philosophical core of the teaching, are expounded in greater detail later in the text, and while fascinating, they bear no great relevance to the main matter of this paper, and as such will not be discussed. It is however interesting to mention a second passing similarity to *Phaedrus* – the third *valli* contains a metaphor of the human psyche and behavior as a chariot, rather similar structurally to that of Plato.

While the precise instructions given to Nachiketas by Yama are not relevant for this particular paper, it is however important to note the characterization of Yama himself in regard to the worldview he expounds. He appears as at worst an ambiguous figure, without a trace of malevolence present in some of his other depictions, as well as being common in many religions in regard to the divinities governing death and the underworld. Not only is *Kāṭhapaniṣad*’s Yama courteous towards the young Brahmin, but before teaching him (which is the role most important from the point of view of researching Yama in relation to the later development of Yamāntaka) he tests him by offering him riches. This test of ethical maturity and accumulated karmic merit is a motif that will be used extensively in later texts, especially the *Mahābhārata* and show Yama as a judge of character – a role implied by his common epithet, Dharmaraja (skt. *Dharmarāja*), the Lord of Dharma. The text states clearly, that even the gods do not know fully the mysteries of death, and so the god of death himself is the best imaginable teacher of

²⁹ Deussen, op. cit. 278-9

³⁰ Deussen, op. cit., p. 298-9

Dharma – which in this text is understood as the realization of the primordial unity of the individual soul, the atman, and the universal godhead, the Brahman.³¹ This realization leads one to a state “beyond joy and sorrow”, and while there is no systematic exposition of cosmology within the text, one may be excused to think that this means a goal comparable to the achievement of liberation, or moksha, as it is called in the later texts.

Thus, in the *Kaṭhōpaniṣad* death is seen primarily as the gate to an afterlife, the quality of which depends on one’s previously accumulated karma. The main means to achieve a rebirth in the heavens is, as in the Vedas, the proper execution of the prescribed fire offering. However, a novel idea is introduced – namely, that the “essence of the Vedas” is the path of knowledge on how to disassociate oneself from the cravings of everyday mind and realize the unity of the atman and Brahman, thus securing oneself in the highest possible state beyond all change. This knowledge is hidden even from the gods, from which one may infer that the gods themselves are subject to the laws of karma and reincarnation – a view common in later forms of Indian religions and fundamental to the Buddhist understanding of reality, however absent from the Vedas, which see the gods as immortal. Thus, it is only Yama – and now, of course, through Nachiketas, the students of the Kaṭhōpaniṣad too – that knows the highest goal to be achieved and the path to achieve it. Thus, Yama becomes truly Dharmaraja, a master of the knowledge and execution of the karmic law and the holder of the Dharma that transcends it. It is the view, that with certain changes resulting from the fleshing out of the Hindu cosmology and the addition of much artistic embellishment, forms the basis of the *Mahābhārata* Yama.

Mahābhārata

Mahābhārata, together with the *Rāmāyana*, the second great epic of the Indian literary tradition, forms the so-called *itihasa*, or *history*. The name signifies the central importance of the texts (at times, the *Puranas* are included, too) for the traditional Indian narrative concerning the semi-mythical beginnings of the cultures and states known better from later records - in this respect it can be compared to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Europe. Due to both the ancient origin and great popularity of the texts, they are extraordinarily difficult to date at all, and rather impossible to date precisely. Many regional variations are known, some containing episodes unknown to others; a phenomenon made possible to that extent by the frame narrative structure of the *Mahābhārata*, allowing easy introduction of new material, presented as a tale-in-a-tale. Generally speaking, the earliest material present in the epic dates to the final centuries of the Vedic period (ca. 1500 - 500 BCE),³² while the whole narrative takes place not later

³¹ Deussen, op. cit, p. 293-5

³² Brockington, J. (1998), *The Sanskrit Epics*, p. 26

than before the Maurya period in the 3rd c. BCE. The text is explicitly mentioned for the first time in Pāṇini's *Aṣṭādhyāyī* in the 4th c. BCE. It is theorized that a version more or less consistent between regions was extant in the Gupta period, i.e. 4th c. CE at the earliest.³³ The source publication on which the majority of contemporary editions are based is the *Critical Edition of the Mahābhārata*, produced between 1919 and 1966 by the scholars at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune.

The historical importance and cultural influence of the epic on contemporary Hinduism and Indian culture at large cannot be overstated. While it is still commonly stated that the Vedas constitute the textual basis of Hinduism, it is a view based more on a national sentiment as well as a rather successful attempt to present Hinduism in its recognizable contemporary form as an amazingly ancient religion, the *sanātana dharma*; however the non-centralized and eclectic approach characteristic of Indian religions makes them very dynamic and heterogeneous systems. The deities most commonly worshipped today are prevalent in the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyana*, while almost completely absent from the Vedas; the myths ingrained during early religious and cultural education in Hinduist children are mainly those of the epics and Puranas. The lasting vitality of those mythical stories in India can be recognized even in the constant production of Bollywood movies based on the themes introduced by the *itihasa*. Additionally, after decolonization and the gaining of independence by India, the epics have served as a rallying point for a common national identity and a common historical narrative. Thus, in order to research the roots of contemporary - and much more so medieval - ideas of Yama and his place in a larger model of reality, reference to the Vedas cannot suffice without a study of the *Mahābhārata*. We will present four distinct episodes from the *Mahābhārata* featuring Yama and providing a point of reference in order to establish a more general view of how Yama was understood and approached in the period of the epic's composition. As will be discussed in the concluding part of the chapter, the specific take the *Mahābhārata*'s authors take on the guiding principles of the Indian worldview are clearly visible in a description of Yama, in this text indeed most aptly called Dharmaraja.

The story of the Pandava brothers begins long before their birth with their parents' story. Their father, Pandu (from whose name the epithet *Pandava* is derived), king of Hastinapur, had two wives - the first, Kunti, bearing far more import within the epic, and the second, Madri, taken to secure the vassalage of the state of Madra. He however could not have any children due to the curse of Kindama, a forest-dwelling ascetic, whom Pandu has mistakenly killed. The rishi, together with his wife, have shapeshifted into deer in order to have sex. When the king saw the copulating deer on a hunting trip, he has shot them. The dying Kindama, turning back into a human, cursed the king not only for killing (and especially

³³ Buitenen, J.A.B. (1992), *The Mahābhārata*, vol. 1, p. xxv

for killing creatures engaged in sex, which requires a higher degree of cruelty), but also for showing no remorse about it - Pandu would die if he was to ever engage in sex himself. Thus, not able to produce a heir, Pandu renounced his kingdom and together with his two wives went into the woods to seek the advice of other yogis. When he expressed his despair at the vision of dying childless to Kunti, she advised him that it is the time to utilize a secret mantra she has received from Durvasas. Durvasas, a powerful sage featuring also in mythical stories outside the *Mahābhārata*, has long before their marriage visited Kunti's family, and delighted with her hospitality, kindness and devotion, awarded her with a mantra allowing her to invoke the gods and have children with them. The teenage Kunti has used the mantra out of curiosity and after a visit by Surya, the sun god, has born Karna; ashamed and wanting to hide the evidence, she abandoned the child, which later grew to become a powerful warrior and fought on the opposing side of the *Mahābhārata* war. The prospective adoptive parents are troubled by moral concerns - does the use of such a spell constitute infidelity? Would the children thus born be rightful heirs? Would the people accept such children of uncertain pedigree as lords? In order to clarify those doubts, they decide to invoke Yama first - reasoning that if Dharma himself would allow such an act, than it is by nature lawful. When invoked, Yama indeed agrees and fathers Yudhisthira - the oldest, most responsible and ethically aware of the Pandava brothers.³⁴ The stories of his brothers are of less concern to this paper, what is however most interesting is the identification of Yama and Dharma itself - a concept far stronger than the idea of Yama being the *lord of Dharma*. Instead of being the judge over mortals and executor of their karmic fate, Yama becomes the personification of the immutable laws of the universe and the perfect moral conduct that arises out of them within the social context. This idea, to my knowledge, does not appear before the *Mahābhārata*, and is of prime importance for the gaining of a deeper understanding of the role of Yama in Indian popular religious culture and the context in which later the cult of Yamāntaka arose.

Another important story is that of Savitri and Satyavat. Savitri, a virtuous and beautiful daughter of a brahmin, has to choose a husband. Heeding a wise man's advice, she seeks one as virtuous as herself, finding only Satyavat. However, she has the future told by a rich - Satyavat is bound by karma to die in exactly a year's time. Savitri decides that it is only rightful to marry him nevertheless; and as can be easily deduced from the structure of the story, the following marriage is a perfectly happy and fulfilling one. When the appointed time passes, Savitri to purify herself and gain spiritual power (tapas) engages in a difficult vow of ascetism, abstaining from food or rest for three full days. On the third day, the foretold date of Satyavat's death, when he decides to leave for the forest to collect fruit and firewood, she insists on following him despite her weakness. In the forest he grows weak, collapses and dies. The

³⁴ Regarding the whole episode: Buitenen, op.cit., p. 253-259

grieving Savitri is faced with a „black, handsome man” with „red, glimmering eyes” - while not explicitly stated at this point of the story, both the reader of this paper and the original audience of the epic as it was performed traditionally will correctly assume that it is Yama himself - who using his noose takes Satyavat’s soul and leaves with it for his abode in the underworld. Savitri follows, and asked why, answers Yama, that it is her duty as a wife to follow her husband wherever he goes. Yama replies that since her husband is dead, the marriage vow is no longer binding, at the same time clearly expressing his admiration of her loyalty and spiritual discipline. She follows nevertheless until Yama decides to grant her three wishes as both a reward and a way to pacify her and let him leave with her beloved’s soul. As her first wish, she chooses to return her old father to health and his earlier privileged status. Yama grants the wish, admiring Savitri’s selflessness. As her second, she asks to bear a hundred healthy and strong sons - which Yama grants, allowing her to choose a special and „incomparable” boon with her third wish. Rather predictably, she wishes for Satyavat to be resurrected, claiming that there is no rightful, dharmic way for her to bear the sons granted to her by „Dharma himself” with anybody else than her husband. Yama obliges, returning him to life.³⁵

In another episode a similar plot structure can be noted. A deer has carried a brahmin’s fire-making equipment on its antlers and ran into the forest. The Pandavas chase after it in order to retrieve it and thus let the brahmin perform the sacrifices. Losing the sight of the animal, the exhausted heroes send Nakula to fetch some water while they rest. Nakula goes off into the forest and, finding a lake, hears a disembodied voice, saying „Commit no violence, friend. This is my old property. Answer my questions, Mādreya, then you may drink and fetch.”³⁶ Disregarding the voice, Nakula proceeds to drink and subsequently falls down dead. When the other brothers come looking after him in the typical mythological fashion, the same events repeat. When only Yudhisthira is left, he himself goes looking for his brothers, and finding their bodies by the lake, examines them. Seeing no wounds nor signs of poisoning, he exclaims: “Who but Yama who finishes in Time could best these superb men with the force of a flood one by one?”³⁷ The stage being set, Yama appears in the form of a *yakṣa*, a kind of nature spirit inhabiting the earth, rocks, trees and forests, usually appearing as either an unusually large or dwarf-like humanoid. In this case, the figure is towering „ (...) as a palm, fiery like fire and sun, unconquerable and mountainous”³⁸. Explaining that it is he who caused the death of Yudhisthira’s brothers, he proposes a challenge - he will bring them back to life, if Yudhisthira answers his questions right. The questions concern, as one could expect, the nature of Dharma and ways of its execution in

³⁵ Buitenen, J.A.B. (1975), *The Mahābhārata*, vol. II, p. 760-778

³⁶ Clifton, Wolf (2013), *The Yama Paradox*, p. 30

³⁷ Clifton, op.cit., p. 30

³⁸ Clifton, op.cit., p. 30

one's individual life, a theme that could be seen as the main problem of the Mahābhārata. Yudhisthira's answers being satisfactory, Yama lets him choose one brother to be resurrected. Similarly to other similar episodes in the epic, the final proof of one's virtue lies in the ability to choose what is Dharma in strongly personal, emotionally loaded situations: while Bhima is Yudhisthira's favourite and Arjuna is the most skilled as a warrior, the son of Yama chooses Nakula instead. His rationale is that since the brothers come from two different mothers, out of compassion he should choose either Nakula or Sahadeva, in order for both the mothers to be left with one son. Appreciating his son's understanding of the intricacies of Dharma and its stern application, Yama rewards him not only with bringing all the Pandavas back to life, but also allowing him to make three wishes. The first is to retrieve the stolen fire-making tools, the second is to grant invisibility to his brothers for a year in order to better evade the Kauravas and the third, importantly, is to gain perfection in the practice of Dharma and triumph over greed, folly and anger.³⁹

The last episode of the epic to be mentioned in this paper is the final scene in which Yudhisthira ascends Mount Meru to reach Heaven together with his wife, brothers and one stray dog. The further up they ascend, the negative karma accumulated during life weighs them down more strongly, eventually making them fall to their deaths. Only Yudhisthira and the dog are able to reach the very peak. There, Indra descends to take the hero up to Heaven and assuring him that he will meet his wife and brothers there. Yudhisthira however refuses to leave the dog behind, saying that the loyal creature has followed him up to the top and that it would indicate a complete lack of understanding and compassion to leave it there, without reward and alone. While Indra tries to persuade him with promises of bliss and immortality, Yudhisthira sternly refuses to abandon a devoted creature. The dog then reveals it was in fact Yama and the whole situation was in fact, once again, a test of moral integrity. Having entered Heaven he is appalled to see Duryodhana among the gods. A sage explains that since Duryodhana has fulfilled his dharma as a warrior and died in battle, it is only just that he has gained heaven. Requesting to see his brothers, he is led into a hellish realm, hot and insect-ridden; there he finds his loved-ones in a wretched state, tortured and exhausted. Terrified, he decides to stay with them to alleviate their suffering. Subsequently, the hell dissolves and the gods appear, telling the Yudhisthira for the last time that he has passed the test perfectly. Now, he may ascend into heaven together with his loved ones - he has completed what was expected of him in his life and truly fulfilled his dharma.⁴⁰

³⁹ Buitenen, *op.cit.*, vol. II, p. 795-807

⁴⁰ Regarding the whole episode: Mahābhārata 17:1-3, trans. Kisari Mohan Ganguli, from *The Mahābhārata*, Internet Sacred Texts Archive, <https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/m17/index.htm> (accessed 14.05.2019)

The Mahābhārata comes from a time of social and religious transformation of the cultures of the Indian subcontinent, marking a textual threshold between the post-Vedic, brahmanical religion and the rigidly stratified societal structure it sanctioned on the one hand and the heterogeneous array of traditions that would centuries later be subsumed under the name „Hinduism“ on the other. There are certain core concepts present in all dharmic religions, the attitudes to which tend to be the most important issues discussed by these traditions and delineating their differences. Among these concepts one must speak of karma, the universal law of cause and effect making all intentional actions sooner or later bear fruit according in nature to the action as well as the state of mind of the actor; of samsara, the continuous cycle of rebirth, fueled by unfulfilled karma accumulated during the lifetimes; moksha, or liberation from that cycle and the only way to attain a state of peace and satisfaction; and dharma, or the worldview (darśana) and conduct leading to moksha. The system of the Mahābhārata, in relation to the above extremely simplified explanation, sees the nature of dharma very differently to the brahmanical tradition; the Mahābhārata, created primarily among and for the Kshatriyas, the nobles and rulers, proposes a worldview in which it is not necessary to be born as a Brahmin or to become a wandering ascetic and engage in all sorts of austerities meant to develop *tapas*, the inner heat resulting from yogic exercises, to purify one’s karma and attain liberation. Instead, a new interpretation of dharma is proposed, one in which dharma is always individual and intimately connected to one’s karma; or, to put it differently, it is one’s particular existential and social standing that defines one’s prescribed behavior - executing that behavior perfectly is perfect dharma, and as such it leads to moksha. Thus, a noble warrior fighting loyally in a just war doesn’t incur negative karma from killing, because the act of killing does not stem from his personal aggression or lack of mental discipline but from his strict adherence to the oaths of loyalty binding a warrior to his lord, and so, from dharma. That kind of personal way of conduct is called *svadharmā*, or “one’s [own] dharma” in the Mahābhārata. Such inclusiveness in understanding ethics and soteriology became very influential in Indian religions in the following centuries. Yama, as portrayed by the epic, is not so much a guardian of the dead, but through being the judge of deceased souls becomes closely associated with the whole dynamic of karma, personal dharma and moksha, becoming a bipolar symbol of death (and thus samsara) and liberation. It is probably this conceptual tension that rendered this concept attractive to the early Buddhist tantriks, who started accommodating Yama in their iconography and mythology, and who thus paved the way for the later emergence of a Buddhist variation on the theme – Yamāntaka.

Chapter II. Yamāntaka

The sociopolitical context of the early tantras

In order to understand the Yamāntaka tantras, the social and political context of their origins should be discussed. The tantras emerge primarily after the fall of the expansive Gupta Empire in the 6th century CE, which can be considered the beginning of the Indian Middle Ages.⁴¹ The Gupta age was a time of great development in all fields of culture, science and social life and is often considered the Indian Golden Age.⁴² It is during that time that some of the best-known classical Indian authors and scholars, such as the great poet Kālidāsa, the mathematician and astronomer Āryabhaṭa or the encyclopedist Vārāhamihira worked. The expansive state which unified most of the Indian subcontinent under one rule provided the environment in which commerce and cultural intermingling thrived and the cults of the progressively richer and more important craftsmen and traders gained importance. When the Gupta dynasty fell, the empire quickly fractured into a multitude of princely states connected by a quickly-changing net of alliances and waging regular wars of conquest against each other. Due to the resulting chaos, trade dwindled and the influence of the craftsmen's guilds, which used to patronize Buddhist institutions lessened. The lords of the newly-formed fiefdoms aspired to rule their whole regions or India at large, creating a new culture of kingship based upon military adventurism⁴³ and a concept of divine royalty.⁴⁴ It became not only acceptable, but normative for rulers to wage wars of conquest, interpreted as an element of the divine play of the king manifesting as a wrathful deity.⁴⁵ During this time of social instability, new forms of spirituality began to appear in the Indian religious milieu. Along with other notions, such as the bhakti movements, the tantric movements emerge during this time concurrently in the Śaiva and Buddhist circles. While some scholars have argued that the traditions have their original source in Śaivite groups while their Buddhist counterparts were only engaging in an imitation of the rites of their more politically successful neighbors, this does not seem to be the case in the light of current findings. What must be considered in this case is the inherent fluidity and lack of hard divisions between Indian religious movements, and especially among their more devout and less orthodox practitioners, which - as wandering yogis and ascetics - were the primary groups behind the development of the tantric movements.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Rowland, Benjamin (1967), *The Art and Architecture of India: Buddhist, Hindu, Jain*, p. 273

⁴² Jayapalan, N. (2001), *History of India*, Vol. I, p. 130.

⁴³ Davidson, Ronald (2002), *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, p. 67

⁴⁴ White, David Gordon (2003), *Kiss of the Yogini*, p. 123-6

⁴⁵ Davidson, op. cit., p. 177

⁴⁶ White, David Gordon (1996), *The Alchemical Body*, p. 1-5

Defining tantra satisfactorily may be impossible due to the great variety within the corpus of traditions labeled with the name; what is common to them is more of a mentality or approach to religiosity in general, rather than a set of fixed and easily discernible dogmas. It is better, then, to point to the family resemblances of the tantric traditions, a list of characteristic traits that are present in most tantric texts. Thus, the tantras tend to be based upon ritual which is intended to provide the practitioner with experiences leading to liberation from samsara as well as develop the magical capacity (skt. *siddhi*). Such a ritual is often internalized, that is either the outer ritual actions, such as for example pouring of libations into the fire, are interpreted as happening analogously in the mind and subtle body of the practitioner, or the whole ritual action is considered to be primarily mental with the outer actions understood primarily as supports for meditation. This idea of internalizing ritual worship is a development of the idea of analogous structure of the individual (microcosm) and reality (macrocosm).⁴⁷ Based on that assumption, one may manipulate outer realities such as the gods or one's life situation through the manipulation of one's own body, energy and mind. The process of internalization of Vedic and Puranic ritual, especially the all-important soma offering, coupled with the non-dualist philosophies of the Upanishads were among the chief factors that led to the development of Indian alchemy and tantric yoga. These practices tend to involve intense visualization, prayer, breathing techniques and recitation of mantras. Theologically they are centered on a deity (or a group of connected deities) which is invoked by the aforementioned ritual means and placated by (often visualized) offerings. The power of the divinity is roused and activated by the recitation of the mantra, considered do bring about both the soteriological goal of liberation and the attainment of *siddhi*. The deities are usually visualized in palaces, surrounded by retinues of subservient gods and local spirits. Such a structure is visualized on the plane of the deity's mandala, which is also a diagrammatic representation of the deity's nature and power.⁴⁸ In the case of the Buddhist tantras, the aforementioned elements as well as the texts' broader aesthetics have arisen under a strong influence of the post-Gupta new feudal culture. That is discussed in more detail later in the text.

The Siddhas

The paradigmatic tantric practitioners, especially in the Buddhist context, are the *siddhas* – that is, the *perfected ones* or *those endowed with siddhi*, which has led to translation as *magician* in some cases.⁴⁹ The *siddhas* usually came from the margins of society, such as the lowest castes or the marginalized tribal communities, although practitioners from among the wealthy are also present in the literature. Among this extremely varied group many were itinerant ascetics and sorcerers, some however mingled

⁴⁷ White, *op.cit.*, p. 15-19

⁴⁸ White, *op.cit.*, p. 78-80

⁴⁹ Heruka, Tsangnyon, trans. Quintman, Andrew (2010), *Life of Milarepa*, p. 54

with the political elite of the princely courts, gaining patronage for their religions or themselves and spreading the tantric religious ideas to a broader audience.⁵⁰ The siddhas engaged in transgressive actions, such as using items considered impure in ritual, consorting with the untouchables of the lowest castes or utilizing sex in rituals aimed at a soteriological goal. While the precise interpretations of siddha behavior differ between the traditions, the general ethos of mad saints (skt. *avadhūta*, tib. *ye shes chol ba*) unfettered by social convention is a strong and lasting feature pervading all the tantric tradition even to this day. The antinomian practices coalesced over time into a precise symbolic iconography and definitive sets of vows, connected by the charnel grounds (skt. *Śmasana*) mythos invented within the Śaiva paśupata and Kāpālika traditions. The practitioners would smear their bodies with cremation ashes, use skull cups (skt. *Kāpāla*), carry symbolic tantric staves, originally fashioned from the legs of cremation biers (skt. *Khaṭvāṅga*) and utilize in their rituals all sorts of human remains and bodily substances. The extreme nature of these practices led to their de-radicalization when they entered the mainstream religious culture. All those practices form the imaginative foundation of the Vajrayāna wrathful deities imagery, however are never practiced literally, being instead visualized during sādhana performance.

Skillful means and the multitude of deities

The great vitality of the tradition was founded partially on the siddhas' ingenuity in suiting the teachings to their particular needs and life situations - a sentiment institutionalized in the Vajrayāna concept of skillful means (skt. *upāya kauśalya*). The phrase denotes action that is perfectly aligned to the situation and effecting the best possible result, and is considered the mode of action of enlightened beings.⁵¹ The principle of skillful means is crucial to the Vajrayāna thinking – a sentiment reflected in the triad of most important bodhisattvas, embodying together the main principles of the Awakened Mind - Avalokiteśvara, who embodies compassion, Mañjuśrī embodying insight and Vajrapani embodying skillful action. The magical actions are considered a prototypical example of such skillful action, the capacity for siddhi being seen as a natural result of spiritual progress⁵² - the tantric practitioner, progressively less and less bound by the logic of the manifest world and closer to the absolute reality as embodied by their chosen tutelary deity (skt. *iṣṭadevatā*, tib. *yi dam*) was expected to be able to efficaciously perform rituals with intended results in the external world - works such as divination, healing and expelling of noxious spirits, wealth and love magic as well as cursing or bringing misfortune and destruction onto chosen individuals or states. Works such as these were seen as trainable skills and

⁵⁰ Davidson, op. cit., p. 184

⁵¹ Mipham, Jamgon (2009), *Luminous Essence. A Guide to the Guhyagarbha Tantra*, p. 130-8

⁵² Senge, Ra Yeshe, trans. Cuevas, Bryan (2015), *The All-Pervading Melodious Drumbeat. The Life of Ra Lotsawa*, p. 20-27

their performance was requested from ritual specialists regardless of their professed denomination, thus further entrenching the position of tantric sadhus within the mainstream religious institutions. This in turn led to a fast promulgation of esoteric teachings and their adoption by monastics and lay householders (skt. *gṛhastha*) as well. The skillful means approach resulted in instrumentalist treatment of the tantric deities and practices. The deities were seen as tool-like, focusing through their symbolic form the potentially unlimited power of the absolute (be it considered Shiva or the Awakened Mind) into a particular kind of influence. Their associated mantras, considered to be the salvific power of the Godhead encapsulated in sound form,⁵³ were deemed inherently efficacious due to their use of seed syllables (skt. *bījā*) that were interpreted as the essential energies comprising the invoked divinities. Thus, the temptation to use other traditions' specialized or particularly famous mantras was naturally present; the Buddhist tantric tradition has already at a very early stage expressed its acceptance of the use of Śaiva mantras on the basis of its non-dualistic philosophical foundation. In the very early *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, the eponymous bodhisattva explains that all efficacious mantras proceed from the Awakened Mind, of which he is the embodiment. Thus, all mantras have been primordially taught by Mañjuśrī in the forms of the so-called worldly (skt. *laukika*) deities in order to provide beings of lesser intellectual faculties with effective practices and their practice by Buddhists is permitted.⁵⁴ That approach is readily observed in the characteristic mode of evolution of the tantric literature – the later traditions expand the soteriological and magical claims of the preceding systems, which is reflected in the progressively more complex and transgressive imagery of their central deities. That phenomenon is very well illustrated by the inflation of Yamāntaka from the relatively standard six-armed, three-headed form present in the Nyingma tantric corpus as transmitted by Padmsambhava in the 8th c. into the bizarrely complicated nine-headed, 34-armed Vajrabhairava as transmitted by Ra Lotsawa in the 11th c. The same mentality permitted the appropriation of neighboring traditions' popular deities by the reinterpretation of their mythos and translation of their iconography – within the Vajrayāna pantheon there are many such “converted” deities to be encountered. Some have their origins in a local cult that rose to prominence, like it in the case of the popular protective feminine spirit from Bengal, Tara, which in time became interpreted as a fully awakened bodhisattva striving in a motherly way for the benefit of all beings, her authority confirmed by a myth that describes her origin as being born from a tear shed by the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteśvara, at the sight of the suffering of beings trapped in the hell realms.⁵⁵ In a similar vein, a tribal goddess of love, sex and witchcraft, Kurukulla, becomes the embodiment of the allure of the Buddhadharma and the primary Buddhist divinity utilized in love magic

⁵³ Padoux, op.cit., p. 372-376

⁵⁴ Sanderson, Alexis (2009), *The Saiva Age: The Rise and Development of Saivism during the Early Medieval Period*, p. 129-130

⁵⁵ Chodron, Thubten (2005), *How to Free Your Mind. Tara the Liberator*, p. 18

- a pursuit as popular in medieval India as it was and still is in all societies believing in the efficacy of magic. Kurukulla, as well as many other female goddesses stemming from regional cults as well as the vast Śaktist pantheon, become syncretized with Tara and are considered either her retinue or a multitude of her emanations.⁵⁶ Other deities have an explicitly Śaivist pedigree, Vajrabhairava being arguably the most important one, being probably a buddhicized form of Śiva Bhairava himself; the connection of those deities is discussed in more detail later in the text. Ganeśa, the ever-popular elephant-headed god of scholars, magicians, merchants and thieves becomes enshrined as Ganapati⁵⁷ (a name used also in the Hindu context, meaning roughly the same thing as Ganesś - the Lord of Hosts, the Hosts in question being the myriad lesser gods and nature spirits in the retinue of Shiva). Within the strictly Tibetan context many deities stemming from Bön are present. Particularly the so-called local guardians (skt. bhūmipati, lit. "earth masters"), lesser deities and nature spirits enshrined in monasteries in a servitor role, are frequently of shamanistic origin.⁵⁸ Such examples could be multiplied, the point is however that the non-dualistic philosophical foundation of the tantras coupled with their open endorsement of magic caused a great proliferation of divinities and rituals of progressively more sophisticated character, the most popular and enduring of which were gradually systematized and compiled into what became the Vajrayāna tantric corpus.

The imperial metaphor

Another important notion which had a strong influence on the shape tantric ritual practice took was what Sanderson called the "imperial metaphor",⁵⁹ which was mentioned before in the context of the royal trappings present in the bodhisattvas' iconography. The multitude of newly-developed deities was unified through the standardization of their iconography, and the general framework of this new standard was the court culture of the period. It is during the post-Gupta time that the Indian *samānta* feudalism develops alongside a new ideology of kingship.⁶⁰ The king becomes divinized, being understood as a reflection of a god (usually Shiva, Shaivism being the most politically successful religious system of the time) realizing his activity through his reign. The idea is reflected in the development of elaborate rituals of coronation, granting the new king not only the authority to rule, but also an investiture of the divinity's power. Such coronations were performed repeatedly, in shortened form, before attending court or leading an army to battle, thus regularly reinforcing the king's identification with the deity.⁶¹ The princes of the vassal states were interpreted as the royal retinue and were depicted

⁵⁶ Beyer, Stephan (1974), *The Cult of Tara. Magic and Ritual in Tibet*, p. 279

⁵⁷ Beer, Robert (1999), *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, p. 309

⁵⁸ Nebesky-Wojkowitz, René de (1993), *Oracles and Demons of Tibet. The Cult and Iconography of Tibetan Protective Deities*, p. 538-553

⁵⁹ Davidson, op.cit., p. 113-115

⁶⁰ Davidson, op.cit., p. 118-122

⁶¹ Davidson, op.cit., p. 123-130

positioned concentrically around their overlord in the central point of the mandala. This new understanding of power is closely mirrored in the Buddhist tantric movement, which used this moving imagery as one of its central metaphors. The royal coronation and the tantric initiation are designated by the same word, *abhiṣeka*,⁶² and indeed there is clear isometry between the various initiations comprising both the royal and the tantric investiture. The chronologically first important wrathful Buddha, Vajrapani, is described using military terminology, putting him in the place of the general – in fact it should be noted that the vajra he holds was at the time the attribute of the leader of armies. Similarly, the word *kula* is used both as a designation of vassal lineages and of the so-called Buddha families⁶³ comprising the Vajrayāna pentadic pleroma, meditating between the apophatic purity of the Awakened Mind and the multitude of particular meditational deities and bodhisattvas. The typical crowns and ornaments worn by the Bodhisattvas, later interpreted as symbolizing the Paramitas or other attributed of appropriate number, are fashioned after then-contemporary royal regalia. According to Davidson,⁶⁴ it is this „imperial metaphor” that became the axial concept of the budding *mantrayana* movement within Buddhism. The fundamental ritual structure, the concept of transmission of lineage through rituals bestowing divine power on the participants, the vision of the universe in terms of interrelated fields of power (skt. *Buddhakṣetra*, lit. “buddha field”) characteristic of tantric Buddhism are all based on the political culture of the period. This should not be taken as a reductionist argument, but as a movement towards a more complete image of the intellectual environment and social situation that produced the cornerstones of the Vajrayāna.

The evolutionary stages of tantra

The main period of development of tantric literature corpus happened in a relatively short time, between roughly 5th c. CE and about 10th c. CE. These developments can be understood as a process of synthesis and systematization of the tantric notions that became accepted in the mainstream institutions of Buddhism and Shaivism. Many of the evolutions of those traditions at the time can be seen as primarily exhausting the logical conclusions of newly accepted dogmas; e. g. The acceptance of the *tathagatagarbha* concept naturally led to the subitization of Buddhist philosophy, of which the furthest development can be seen in the Zen traditions. Concurrently, the tantras underwent a process of domestication, that is of making them palatable to the regular devotee by keeping their essential theology and ritual structure intact, but removing the most transgressive elements.⁶⁵ In the Buddhist

⁶² Davidson, op.cit., p. 126-7

⁶³ Davidson, op.cit., p. 122

⁶⁴ Davidson, op.cit., p. 118-122

⁶⁵ Sanderson, Alexis (1988), *Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions*, in: *The World's Religions*, ed. Stewart Sutherland et al., p. 662

context, this process was very pronounced due to the importance of the monastic community who would be breaking their vows by engaging in the rituals prescribed by the tantras in a literal manner. Thus, all references to blood offerings, use of substances derived from corpses and such are by default interpreted as symbolic representations to be visualized in the heuristic context of confusing the dualistic mind. The sexual practices prescribed in the text were accepted to a greater degree than the violent ones, however they have also undergone a far-reaching de-radicalization. The sexual yoga is considered a largely optional, if powerful, system of the Anuyoga class called the *karmamudra*, or “seal of action”. It is not practiced often and is rather the domain of advanced *ngakpas*, who are the non-celibate tantric practitioners; the whole act can also be visualized and such a technique, called *jñānamudra* (skt. “seal of gnosis”) is more prevalent among monks, though it is still considered a very advanced and potentially dangerous technique. Thanks to the domestication process, the tantric traditions could leave the margins of society and enter the monasteries and royal courts, while keeping the aura of transgression and mystery that made them so interesting to their prospective followers and patrons. In fact, modern Indian ritual, while not explicitly tantric, is pervaded by the ritual structures, mantras and divinities that were developed within the tantric tradition.⁶⁶

In order to place the Yamāntaka tantras in their original context, we will first present the main developmental phases of the Śaiva tantras and then proceed to their probable Buddhist equivalents, that is the Buddhist systems that arose in response to the same theological and philosophical stimuli that caused the emergence of the respective Śaiva traditions. The traditions in question emerge primarily out of the Atimārga division of Śaivism, which was reserved for ascetics and its only goal was complete salvation.⁶⁷ From the Atimārga, the Pāśupata and the Lākula emerged, the first of which is in a way the most important of these divisions, having for the first time introduced the all-important charnel grounds imagery. The Pāśupata, which were probably present from about the 2nd c. CE,⁶⁸ introduced transgressive practices, such as acting like a madman and talking nonsensically, as a way to purify karma. It should be noted that an interesting mechanism of karma purification was proposed by the Pāśupata sadhus. In the orthodox śrauta system, those who have undergone initiation (skt. *dīkṣā*) and taken on a set of observance vows (skt. *vrāta*) in order to be able to perform the soma sacrifice, was a holy man, and thus protected from others’ malice by his status – whoever spoke ill of him would not only incur bad karma upon themselves, but it was believed that they in fact provoked an exchange in which the bad karma of the initiate would be transferred upon them. The Pāśupatas exploited this orthodox idea by, having undergone their initiations, dressing and behaving like a madman, thus

⁶⁶ Sanderson, op.cit., p. 662-663

⁶⁷ Sanderson, op.cit., p. 664

⁶⁸ Flood, Gavin (Editor) (2003), *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, p. 206

provoking verbal and physical abuse from others – who unknowingly purified them of past evil deeds due to their sanctified status.⁶⁹ This illustration shows clearly the mentality underlying Indian esoteric traditions – the dogmatic underpinnings of the system are treated as a natural law and taken to their logical conclusions, however inconsistent with the exoteric interpretation of the tradition such conclusions may seem.

The Lākula intensified that tendency by introducing the practices that became the archetypal image of the Śaiva ascetic, who:

„ (...) should wander, carrying a skull-topped staff (khaṭvāṅga) and an alms-bowl fashioned from a human cranium. His hair should be bounded up in a matted mass (jaṭā) or completely shaved. He should wear a sacred thread (upavīta) [the emblem of orthodox investiture (upanayana)] made from snake-skins and he should adorn himself with a necklace of human bone. He must smear himself with ashes and decorate himself with the ornaments of his God. Knowing that all things are Rudra in essence he should hold firmly to his observance as Rudra’s devotee. He may eat and drink anything. No action is forbidden to him. For he is immersed in contemplation of Rudra, knowing that no other deity will save him.” (Niśvasatattvasamhita, ch.4).⁷⁰

It should be noted that many of the aforementioned attributes are also present and central in the Vajrayāna iconography of wrathful Buddhas. The khaṭvāṅga becomes one of the central symbols, especially in the Sarma traditions, and principally denotes the consort - if it is held by a female, it means the method aspect of her consort, while carried by a male, denotes wisdom. At the same time its various parts are interpreted as denoting the structure of reality itself.⁷¹ The skull-bowl, usually called the kāpāla (from which word a later branch of the Śaiva family, the Kāpālikas takes its name) serves as the ritual chalice and container, holding the sacrificial “blood” (that is, consecrated tea or sometimes barley wine) or “flesh” (torma cakes made of butter, flour and dyes, usually sculpted into flowers or body parts, appropriate for peaceful and wrathful Buddhas respectively). In the iconography, kāpāla is a multivalent symbol, always retaining the basic meaning of receiving and holding, and is held by almost all ḍākinīs, usually filled with blood.⁷² Ḍākinīs drinking blood from their kāpālas are explained to mean the acceptance of the totality of the human experience without dualistic distinction into the good and the bad. The khaṭvāṅga and kāpāla, together with the ḍāmaru hand drum not mentioned in the Lākula passage above form the triad of essential attributed not only of Śaiva, but also of tantric Buddhist

⁶⁹ Sanderson, op.cit., p. 665

⁷⁰ Sanderson, op.cit., p. 666

⁷¹ Beer, op.cit., p. 252-257

⁷² Beer, op.cit., p. 263-265

ascetics. In the Tibetan context, a practitioner carrying those ritual implements outside of the monastic ceremonies is usually a *chöpa* (tib. *gcod pa*), practicing his yoga in the places where bodies are left to be eaten by carrion birds and wolves in the traditional sky burial. Thus, even in traditions with tentative connection to the Indian Buddhist community, such as chö, the originally Lākula attributes still retain their fundamental reference to charnel grounds practice of solitary ascetics.

The various notions invented within the Pāśupata and Lākula lineages have been syncretized and expanded within the Mantramārga, which in opposition to them accepted bhoga, the attainment of satisfaction in life, as an equal goal with salvation. While more accommodating of the home-dwelling (skt. *gṛhastha*) devotees, who in time have become the majority of its following, its original core was among the yogis seeking magical power through the esoteric teachings.⁷³ It is mainly for that audience that the variety of rites characteristic of the movement was developed. This difference of motivation was behind a division in philosophy between the branches of Śaivism – while the solitary Atimārga ascetics worshipped the solitary Rudra-Śiva, the mantramargins revered the Śiva accompanied by bands of wild female spirits, somewhat reminiscent of Dionysus with the bacchantes. From that appreciation gradually grew the cult and philosophy of śakti, the female creative and destructive power of a god as well as the god's female consort as its embodiment. The later branches of the tradition put progressively greater focus upon this idea, giving way to Śakta traditions and ultimately paving the way for the emergence of the cult of Kali around the beginning of the 7th c.⁷⁴

The vast literature of the Mantramārga can be divided into two broad groups: the rather homogeneous corpus of the Śaiva Siddhanta and the more varied Bhairava Tantras. While Śiva is imagined as a skull-bearing ascetic in both of these complexes, only in the more radical tradition does he fully take on the characteristic of the Bhairava, the Terrible. Imagined in a mandala of cremation grounds he is ornamented with jewelry made of human remains and accompanied by his śakti, Bhairavi.

Later developments of the tradition are based primarily on the rising importance of the female divinities. The first major branch of Śaivism to accept and worship them as equal to their male counterparts is the Vidyāpīṭha (skt. *The seat of knowledge*). Within this expansive tradition a practitioner would find Bhairava paired with his consort, goddesses with male counterparts acting only as support and finally the wrathful solitary Kali. At this point, to a relatively standardized charnel grounds iconography one last crucial element (from the point of view of the Vajrayāna) was added – the human and spirit female practitioners, called yoginis in the Śaiva context and more often (though with important exclusions, such as the important Sarma female yidam, Vajrayogini) *ḍākinīs* in the Buddhist circles. These wrathful

⁷³ Sanderson, *op.cit.*, p. 667

⁷⁴ Kinsley, David (1997), *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine: The Ten Mahavidyas*, p. 70

females were considered to form bands, called *gaṇa* and to assist advanced practitioners as well as the gods themselves. Philosophically, they were understood as various manifestations of the one śakti which manifests the concrete world; mythologically, they absorbed the expansive North and Eastern Indian folklore concerning witches and *matṛkas*, dangerous local goddesses of the wilderness and all things impure. This new invention proved to be an extremely fecund soil for the development of (then-)new religious movements appealing both to the popular masses and the educated elite – as was noted in 1923, the religious Śakta poetry was known popularly far better than that of the celebrated Rabindranath Tagore:

“But the Śakta poems are a different matter. These have gone to the heart of a people as few poets' work has done. Such songs as the exquisite 'This day will surely pass, Mother, this day will pass,' I have heard from coolies on the road or workers in the paddy fields; I have heard it by broad rivers at sunset, when the parrots were flying to roost and the village folk thronging from marketing to the ferry. Once I asked the top class in a mofussil high school to write out a song of Rabindranath Tagore's; two boys out of forty succeeded, a result which I consider showed the very real diffusion of his songs. But, when I asked for a song of Rāmprasād's, every boy except two responded.”⁷⁵

The later developments of the Vidyāpīṭha form a vast and internally varied tradition themselves; since they have little bearing on the immediate subject of this paper, their description will be omitted.

Buddhist tantric developments

The same religious ideas and innovations that have stimulated the development of tantric Śaivism have influenced Vajrayāna. The notions discussed above have coalesced in the Buddhist circles into a multi-tiered canon of esoteric revelation. There are two major classification systems of those scriptures, one used by the Nyingmapas and the other by the Sarma schools; the second system, compiled some two and a half centuries later, is closer to the chronological order of development of the traditions, and for this reason will be used in this overview. The kriya-tantras (skt. *Tantras of action*) and carya-tantras (skt. *Tantras of observance or behavior*) together with the yoga-tantras (skt. *Tantras of union*) are considered the Lower Tantras. The first of those groups is a collection of various rituals that historically formed the intermediary stage between the Mahayana orthopraxy and the tantric innovation; putting its value for a historian aside, it has been very rarely practiced since the arrival of the more advanced yantras, especially the Tantras of Union. The carya-tantras are more concerned with everyday behavior of the practitioner than with explicit rituals. Texts such as the already mentioned *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, the *Vajrapanyabhīṣekatantra* or the *Mahāvairocana Abhisambodhi Tantra* are considered carya-tantras. All these texts introduce concepts which are foundational for later Buddhist tantric literature, they

⁷⁵ Thompson, Edward. J. and Spencer, Arthur Marshman, (1923) *Bengali Religious Lyrics*, p. 19

however provide few concrete sādhanas and are in consequence considerably underrepresented in the Tibetan canon. Their and yoga-tantras' main divinity is Vairocana, imagined as a rightful universal monarch. This idea proved important, among other reasons, because it was used as the basis for introducing Buddhism as an imperial religion in Tibet during the rule of Songtsen Gampo (tib. *srong btsan sgam po*, ruled ca. 629-649 CE).⁷⁶ Vairocana seems to be the equivalent of Sadaśiva⁷⁷ – the peaceful universal ruler residing in the center of the mandala depicting the whole of reality.

The Higher Tantras are divided between the Higher Yoga (skt. *Yogottaratantra*) and the Supreme Yoga (skt. *Yogānuttara-tantra*). Their crucial difference from the preceding systems lies in fuller affirmation of their non-dualistic paradigm, realized ritually through their sādhanas centered upon visualizing oneself as a Buddha. The Supreme Yoga system encompasses the practices subsumed by the Nyingmapas both under Mahāyoga and Anuyoga; it is thus this class which is practiced almost exclusively in contemporary Tibetan Buddhism, especially among the Western initiates lacking a gradual monastery education. The deities of this class are all considered identical in nature and thus all their associated practices are intended to lead to the same goal of supreme awakening; the central character of Vairocana is however not completely lost. It is in fact partially transferred to the Buddha Akṣobhya, the embodiment of the Awakened Mind from which all forms proceed and the main Buddha of the Vajra family. Most of the wrathful deities practiced within Tibetan Buddhism are part of the Supreme Yoga class; among them are all forms of Heruka as well as, what is not surprising, the female Buddhas such as Vajravārāhī or Vajrayoginī, being the Buddhist reflection of the Śakta cults.

Emergence of Yamāntaka

The lineages of Yamāntaka practice alive today are broadly divided into two branches: the Nyingma branch, basing on the scriptures transmitted to Tibet in the 8th c. by Padmasambhava, and the various lineages of the Sarma traditions, transmitted principally by Ra Lotsawa during the Second Dissemination of Buddhism in Tibet in the 11th c. The forms practiced vary considerably, which is the reason for the division of their discussion in this paper into two chapters.

Padmasambhava taught an extensive body of various teachings which is difficult to pin down precisely today because of his mythical status – considered a fully enlightened Buddha, he is believed by the adherents of Nyingma to have brought the complete Dharma and hidden some of the teachings away (tib. *gter ma*) for later practitioners to find in more appropriate times. Among the teachings of Padmasambhava a central role was occupied by the so-called Kagye (tib. *bka' brgyad*), or "Eight

⁷⁶ Shakabpa, Tsepon (1984), *Tibet. A Political History*, p. 25-29

⁷⁷ Sanderson, op.cit., p. 678

Pronouncements". The system is a group of eight main deities ordered into a mandala and considered to be a set of transmissions given to Padmasambhava by eight prominent Indian vidyādhara, thus forming a set of Mahāyoga practices sufficient for complete awakening. The system comes from a transitional time in Indian esoteric Buddhism, already equipped with firmly non-dualistic philosophy and ripe complicated wrathful yidams, but not systematized in the manner known from contemporary practice, which is (even among contemporary Nyingmapas) under strong influence of the teachings transmitted in the Second Dissemination. The kagye mandala is comprised of five main deities representing the five aspects of the sum total of the Awakened Mind and three accompanying worldly deities of lesser import. The five are Yamāntaka (enlightened body), Hayagrīva (enlightened speech), Yangdak Heruka (tib. *yang dag he ru ka*) (enlightened mind), Chemchok Heruka (tib. *che mchog he ru ka*) (enlightened qualities) and Vajrakīlaya (enlightened activity).⁷⁸ These associations are rather atypical and their original context, to my knowledge, has not been elucidated in print. Since all of these deities have their own traditions of practice and philosophical commentary, they will not be discussed here. Yamāntaka, however, appears in Tibet for the first time in this grouping and for this reason it is noted here. His association with the enlightened body is somewhat obscure, since being the wrathful form of Mañjuśrī (an identification which is also explicitly present in this tradition) he would be more obviously identified as the enlightened speech, Mañjuśrī being the embodiment of Dharma teachings. This association however seems to not have influenced the deity's later history, being omitted from discussions of the nature of Vajrabhairava altogether. The kagye Yamāntaka seems to never have enjoyed a particularly wide following, and there are no extant commentaries or sādhanas pertaining to him translated to Western languages. In fact it is difficult to find any information on this particular form of the deity, a situation which definitely merits future research on the topic. The only aspect of the original deity that we are currently able to analyze is its form, as it is depicted on a thangka from the Tendrel Nyesel terma cycle.⁷⁹ The deity, dark blue in color and three-faced is depicted standing in the standard wrathful position, embracing his sky-blue consort. The central face is the same color as the body (signifying his main mode of activity as fierce), the left face is red and the right face is white (signifying magnetizing and pacifying as his supporting modes of activity). He is depicted winged, which is a rather rare occurrence and brings to mind Vajrakīlaya, who is the only major deity thus depicted; in the Vajrakīlaya tradition the wings are interpreted as meaning the union of compassion and skillful means resulting in the pervasiveness of the deity's action.⁸⁰ This form of Yamāntaka is six armed, the

⁷⁸ Dhondhup, Garje Khamtul Jamyang and Dorjee, Tenzin Lotsawa (1990), *The Eight Practice-Instructions of Sugatas (Bde-gshegs sgrub-pa bka'-brgyad) in the Nyingma Lineage* in: *The Tibet Journal* Vol. 15, No. 2; p. 63

⁷⁹ <https://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=File:TNYamantaka.jpg> (accessed on 1. 06. 2019), courtesy of the Rigpa Sangha

⁸⁰ Sherab, Khenchen Palden and Dongyal, Tsewang Khenpo (2008), *Dark Red Amulet. Oral Instructions on the Practice of Vajrakīlaya*, p. 75

lowest pair embracing his consort – the upper right hand holds a sword, the middle right hand an axe, the lower right a wheel of Dharma, the upper left a blood-filled *kāpāla*, the middle left a spear and the lower left is empty and shows the destroying *tarjani* gesture. The sword signifies victory over ignorance,⁸¹ or sometimes just fierce action. While it would be tempting to construe the sword as the same with the one held by Mañjuśrī in his peaceful form, where it signifies *prajña*, it is probably erroneous, the sword of Mañjuśrī being depicted flaming, an attribute that would probably not be omitted from a wrathful deity's depiction without a substantial reason. The axe symbolizes fierce removal of negative notions from the mind⁸² and is commonly held by deities connected with the removal of obstacles to practice, which is the main magical application of the wrathful Buddha forms in general. The wheel of Dharma signifies teaching, the *kāpāla* as has already been mentioned signifies receptivity in general and usually the acceptance of the totality of experience without any dualistic judgement. The spear is obviously connected with wrathful activity, its particular meaning varies between divinities, for which reason we cannot say what was its precise meaning in this case. The *tarjani* gesture is the prototypical mudra of fierce ritual action and is particularly connected with destroying obstacles, the demons causing them and ignorance, from which they arise.⁸³ The consort in turn is one-faced and two-armed, the left hand holding a blood-filled *kāpāla*, while the right is not shown, but in all probability holds a flaying knife (skt. *kartri*, tib. *gri gug*), which are together the standard attributes of wrathful *ḍākinī*-consorts. Together they signify wisdom and method, reversed in association when held by female deities.⁸⁴ Together symbolizing the female wisdom polarity of the Awakened Mind. The figures are ornamented in the typical charnel grounds manner, dressed in tiger and leopard skins respectively (the tiger skin being considered masculine and the leopard feminine due to the shape of their markings⁸⁵) and stand upon prostrate humans, whose precise meaning is also impossible to ascertain without further emic commentary. The form, as can be seen, does not differ substantially from the typical Heruka model. In an attempt to roughly ascertain the chronology of this form's emergence into the Vajrayāna mainstream, we should consider that the deity could not appear before the popularization of wrathful meditational deities, which happened during the Bhairava stage of the Śaiva tantric development, and the pronounced presence of the consort points at the Vidyāpīṭha stage at the earliest. The latter half of the 7th c. or turn of the 8th c.⁸⁶ seem to be a probable period of emergence of this particular form of Yamāntaka. The transmission of Padmasambhava happening in end of the 8th c.,

⁸¹ Beer, op.cit., p. 277

⁸² Beer, op.cit., p. 300

⁸³ Beer, op.cit., p. 154-156

⁸⁴ Beer, op.cit., p. 264-266

⁸⁵ Beer, op.cit., p. 316

⁸⁶ Sanderson, op. cit. 678

it seems that the Yamāntaka featured in his teaching was a relatively fresh addition to the still actively developed Vajrayāna canon.

Sādhana analysis

Since sādhanas centered on the Kagye Yamāntaka are neither accessible nor really practiced nowadays, to illustrate the non-Vajrabhairava Yamāntaka ritual practice I have chosen a Drikung Kagyu sādhana based on a very similar form, differing from the one analyzed before mainly in the held hand implements and the lack of consort. The practice is conceived as an extremely abbreviated version of the main sādhanas of the *Razor Blade of Extreme Repelling* cycle. The main sādhana of the cycle, sharing its author with the concise version analyzed below, Rigdzin Chökyi Dragpa (tib. *rig 'dzin chos kyi grags pa*), is around 120 pages long in the translated edition⁸⁷ and is an extraordinarily complex ceremony intended mainly as a protective and repelling rite; that is, in effect of its adequate execution, the sadhaka should be protected from all kinds of obstacles to practice, illness, bad luck and other misfortune, while his enemies (both human and supernatural) should either be destroyed or banished never to return. The power that was attributed to the practice is evidenced by its very length and difficulty, which did not deter practitioners from learning and accomplishing it. For these reasons, the extremely concise version of the practice analyzed in full below has been chosen to represent the particular manner in which the Vajrayāna worldview and ritual practice is expressed in the Yamāntaka tradition. The text, accessed in Polish, is given in English translation prepared by the paper's author; in unclear passages, the original Tibetan is provided for clarification.

Quintessence of Practices of the Cycle of the Flaming Blade of Extreme Repelling and the Sky of Blazing Lightning Bolts Known as 'The Magical Music of the Perfectly Pure Vajra'

Preface

"Namo Yamari! With reverence I give homage to the supreme Yamāntaka. I have condensed the essence, dear to me like my very own eyes, of innumerable Yamāntaka sādhanas as a respectful and devoted support for practice."⁸⁸

It is interesting to see Yamari in this particular passage; other deities of the Yamāntaka group are relatively seldom mentioned in the ritual texts of the corpus. Being invoked in the preface, the deity is

⁸⁷ Dragpa, Rigdzin Chökyi, trans. Gyatso, Eric Yonten (2005), *Yamāntaka's Blazing Razor of Extreme Repelling*

⁸⁸ Dragpa, Chökyi Rigdzin; trans. Matraszek, Tomasz and Nitka, Krzysztof (2018), *Kwintesencja Praktyk z Cyklów Płomiennego Ostrza Niezmiernego Odpierania i Nieba Płomiennych Błyskawic znana jako „Czarodziejska Muzyka Doskonale Czystej Wadźry”*, p. 1

probably understood as essentially identical to Yamāntaka, both being manifestations of the same one Buddha Mind as well as being linked by ties of kula. It is probable that the author of the sādhanā was a Yamāntaka devotee, taking one or more of the deities of the corpus as their personal yidam and, in accord with the Vajrayāna orthodoxy, considering them representative forms of the primordial Awakened Mind.

Refuge and Bodhicitta

“I take refuge in the perfect Buddha, the sacred Dharma and the Supreme Assembly.
To all of you, the ocean of qualities, I offer my body. For the welfare of beings I take
a pure vow to attain awakening. I dedicate all merit towards the perfect awakening.
In order to bring benefit to all beings, I will destroy the famed Yama, Lord of
Death.”⁸⁹

The refuge and Bodhicitta verses are a staple of all Vajrayāna sādhanas, always present in some form at the beginning of practice. The refuge consists of affirming one’s trust in the principles and institutions of Buddhism – the Triple Gem consisting of Buddha, the goal to be attained; Dharma, the way to attain it; and Sangha, the community of those who attempt to do so. The formula of refuge serves multiple purposes in a ritual: it affirms the practitioner’s lineage and thus, forms trust in one’s ability to perform the ritual effectively. At the same time, similarly to the way the sign of the cross is used in folk Christianity as an apotropaic gesture, the formula of refuge serves to provide protection for the practitioner by “reminding” the Bodhisattvas that he or she is also part of the tradition and thus a worthy recipient of blessings and support.⁹⁰ At the same time, while there is no exact analogue to Christian baptism within Buddhism (mostly due to a different understanding of what it means to be a follower of the movement in question), Western followers wanting to receive some sort of ritual confirmation of their conversion to Buddhism generally treat their first official taking of refuge in the presence of a lama as a functional analogue to baptism; the tradition of giving Dharma names to designate the transformation of the individual also fits into this interpretation, reinforcing it. Thus, it may be concluded that the recitation of the refuge formula serves to reaffirm the practitioner’s identity as a Buddhist as well as request protection and help in the effectuation of the ritual from the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. In the second verse, the “ocean of qualities” refers to the sum of the Triple Gem as the pure manifestation of the Awakened Mind, possessing all desirable qualities and able to perform all desirable actions; the offering of the body is in turn an affirmation of the practitioner’s complete engagement in

⁸⁹ Dragpa, Chökyi Rigdzin, op.cit., p. 1

⁹⁰ Beyer, Stephan, op.cit., p. 219; Powers, John (1995), *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, p. 298

the work of awakening. The act of offering one's own faculties, usually the triad of body, speech and mind is a common trope in Tibetan Buddhist literature, sometimes interpreted quite literally, as in the extremely popular and influential hagiography of the 11th c. mystic Milarepa, whose master Marpa commanded him to do back-breaking physical work on the basis of Milarepa's body being his possession and tool since the initiatory offering. The narrative interprets this as an expedient mean used by the awakened Marpa to purify Milarepa's negative karma caused by past misdeeds;⁹¹ such a heuristics is common and points to the inability of a non-awakened being to understand what is really best for them in terms of spiritual advancement and thus, the prudence of offering one's constituent parts to the awakened pantheon of the Dharma.

The subsequent verses serve to generate Bodhicitta and also are a staple of all tantric Buddhist sādhanas. Bodhicitta, meaning literally 'the mind of awakening', is one of the crucial and most complex concepts of Vajrayāna, but for the purpose of this analysis must be defined succinctly. It is both the Awakened Mind of the Buddhas (absolute bodhicitta) and thus the ontological basis of reality and epistemological state to be attained by practitioners, and its expressions in the relative world (relative bodhicitta), the essential nature of which is altruistic compassion.⁹² In the context of everyday practice, the generation of Bodhicitta consists of cultivating sādhanā, (usually translated as *wisdom* in the ritual context) mostly through objectless meditation and the study of philosophical commentaries, and of cultivation of karuṇā (compassion) through meditations on loving-kindness and developing an altruistic motivation as a fundament for all actions.⁹³ In the ritual context, the verses of Bodhicitta serve to firmly set the intention of liberating all beings, the crucial point of Mahayana Buddhism, as the main goal of the working. It is especially important in texts utilizing wrathful and sexually provocative symbolism which could be considered un-Buddhist. Since Buddhist ethics are far more concerned with the intention than the act itself, such a ritual action is needed to establish tantric ritual within the scope of orthodoxy. In the final verse, the practitioner vows to destroy Yama for the benefit of all sentient beings. That concept shows the understanding of Yama within the scope of this practice – Yama is here interpreted unequivocally as the embodiment of death and its root cause – ignorance. Yamāntaka, on the other hand, is the power of wisdom (Mañjuśrī) conquering ignorance. In this way, the practice, though as will be seen focusing more on protection from worldly dangers, is understood as a complete practice that can bring one to attain the Buddha state.

Visualizing the mandala

⁹¹ Heruka, Tsangnyon, op.cit., p. 84-85

⁹² Norbu, Namkhai (1996), *Bodhicitta*, p. 6-8

⁹³ Norbu, Namkhai, op. cit., p. 11-12, 30-31

“OM SVABHAVA SHUDDHA SARVA DHARMA SVABHAVA SHUDDHO HAM. Out of the state of great voidness of all dualistic phenomena, the foundation of all phenomena, the great compassion, appears. The essence of bodhicitta, my own consciousness, appears as a dark blue syllable HUNG. Out of it, the syllables E, YAM, RAM, BAM and LAM emanate. Out of them, one stacked on the other, the black mandala of space, green mandala of air, red mandala of fire, white mandala of water and yellow mandala of earth appear.”⁹⁴

The first mantra in the passage is standard interjection between the preliminary (skt. *prayoga*) part of refuge and bodhicitta and the visualization itself. Since the visualization is structured isometrically to the idealized model of the universe present in the tantric corpus, it must begin with the undifferentiated state of voidness (skt. *śūnyatā*). The SVABHAVA... mantra’s function is to establish the cognition of that primordial state of reality through contemplation of its meaning – it can be literally translated as “OM, the innate nature of all phenomena is pure, my innate nature is pure.” The “purity” refers to the nature of all phenomena being the clear light and voidness of the Buddha Mind, the ontological stance of the dominant philosophical school of Madhyamaka. The setting of the I of the practitioner along with all other phenomena alludes to the central concept of *anātman*, the lack of an independent soul or ego. The common nature of the external phenomena and the I suggests the monistic, interpenetrating vision of reality based on the concept of *pratītyasamutpāda*, or dependent arising. Thus, the mantra serves as a contemplative reminder of the essential nature of reality as construed by the Vajrayāna orthodoxy, and the contemplative act serves as a basis on which later visualizations may be projected.

Out of this state of unmanifest potentiality emerges the seed-syllable (skt. *bījā*) of the Buddha to be evoked, consubstantial to the practitioner’s consciousness and being both a symbol and a direct manifestation of bodhicitta. It takes the shape of the letter HUM, rendered in Tibetan as HUNG, which symbolizes the Vajra-family (skt. *vajrakula*) of Buddha Akṣobhya, and thus the individual’s cognitive power transformed into the mirror-like wisdom, an aspect of the Awakened Mind. Most wrathful Buddhas possessing blue and black bodies are included in this family; what is interesting, Yamāntaka is a manifestation of Mañjuśrī, whose seed-syllable is DHIH.⁹⁵ This change of *bījā* between the emanator and the emanated is not unfounded, but rather uncommon, and it definitely hints at the high degree of independence that Yamāntaka has gained from the peaceful Mañjuśrī in the eyes of tantric practitioners. The following seed-syllables and colors mandalas are typical representations of the elements (skt. *pāñcamahābhūta*) of which the universe and the individual are similarly composed

⁹⁴ Dragpa, Chökyi Rigdzin, op.cit, p. 2

⁹⁵ Dharmabhadra, Ngulchu; Trinley, Losang Lungtog Tenzin (2012), *Roar of Thunder. Yamāntaka Practice and Commentary*, p. 89

according to Vajrayāna cosmology. It is important to note that at this stage of the sādhanā, the practitioner is essentially creating a mental model of reality before later drawing the deity to inhabit it; thus, the structure should not be reduced to the function of symbolizing reality; for the practitioner it is a real, though simple, universe shaped from his consciousness. Such an understanding allows to understand the later use of this mandala as a magical device able to influence the everyday life of the practitioner, or as Beyer called it, the “public non-reality”.⁹⁶

“Above them, from the syllable BHRUM, emerges a diamond stupa of great awakening, radiating light, having the nature of Sanskrit vowels and consonants. In the vase of the stupa, out of HUNG, a double golden vajra emerges. In its center is a sphere, within which, on a seat of stacked lotus, sun and the moon, is a five-pronged crystal vajra radiating light. In its center is HUNG, emanating rays of light causing Yama and his consort to appear together with the male and female water buffalo. Above them, a stacked lotus, sun and the moon [are situated], and above them, the dark blue syllable of cause – HUNG. It emanates light completing the two goals, which then reabsorbs and transforms.”⁹⁷

The seed syllable BHRUM connotes manifestation and it is from this syllable that many mandala-palaces of Vajrayāna deities arise.⁹⁸ The structure being visualized is concentric, each element having far smaller elements inside. This, as most other aspects of the sādhanā, serves multiple purposes at once. From the point of view of meditational practice, the progressively smaller points of focus are used in order to train the sharpness of practitioner’s focus.⁹⁹ At the same time, the spheres and stupas nested within each other create a feeling of vastness, which is also a desired quality of the visualization, evoking awe before the appearance of the central deity. Additionally, since (as will be more clearly seen in the following parts of the ritual) the ritual has a strongly accented protective function, the multiple layers of indestructible spheres can also serve to strengthen the feeling of magical protection gained from the practice.

The first layer is in the form of a diamond (or rather, *adamantine* - since the original *vajra* connotes the quality of indestructibility more than a real substance) stupa, which seems to be understood as the body covering the Buddha Mind inside, a concept common in Mahayana Buddhism.¹⁰⁰ The stupa is however not construed as a physical object - it having the nature of the alphabet connects it with the principle of

⁹⁶ Beyer, Stephan, op.cit., p. 85-99

⁹⁷ Dragpa, Chökyi Rigdzin, op.cit., p. 3

⁹⁸ Compare: Beyer, Stephan, op.cit., p. 308, 420

⁹⁹ Gyatso, Tenzin; Tsongkhapa; Hopkins, Jeffrey (1981), *Deity Yoga in Action and Performance Tantras*, p. 25-32

¹⁰⁰ Zapart, Jarosław (2017), *Tathagatagarbha. U źródeł koncepcji natury buddy*, p. 164-180

speech (skt. Vāc) and the textual nature of the Dharma. The Sanskrit and Tibetan alphabets are considered sacred in Vajrayāna, being the basic elements out of which all mantras are constructed, and thus representing the fundamental building blocks of the universe, a concept common to mystical systems of text-based religions. A recitation of the alphabet as a mantra (the so-called Ali-Kali mantra) is considered to purify mistakes made while reciting other mantras¹⁰¹ (by „replacing” the wrong letters), while the primary mantra of Mañjuśrī, OM A RA PA CA NA DHIH, is a set of first syllables from a writing system that has by now fallen out of use.¹⁰² Thus, the stupa may be interpreted as having the nature of Dharma itself.

The double vajra connotes completeness (since it has four prongs and a center, corresponding with the five Buddha families) or enlightened action (mainly as the symbol of Amoghasiddhi and his Karma (i.e. literally *Action*) Buddha family; the prongs and center may in that case be understood as the five wisdoms, the All-Accomplishing Wisdom being the last in the chain of manifestation). In this case it most probably is understood as a stand-in for the Buddha (or the personal *tathagatagarbha*, the Buddha nature inherent in all sentient beings), being a symbol of completeness hidden within the stupa of the Dharma. The crystal vajra inside most probably refers to the Buddha Mind in particular, crystal being a common symbol of clarity both within Tibetan Buddhism¹⁰³ and in other religious traditions. The lotus, sun and moon stacked together form a typical throne of awakened beings as imagined in the Tibetan tradition; while the triad forms a multivalent symbol with reference to basically all other triads within the system, the most important connotations are that of respectively the Body, Voice and Mind; Renunciation, Compassion and Wisdom; Union, Method and Wisdom; and the Central, Female and Male subtle channels together with their corresponding drops (skt. *bindu*, Tib. *Thig le*). The HUM inside serves as the seed syllable of the main deity; the radiating and reabsorbing of lights is a standard visualization implying absorbing all deities within the seed syllable, the deity practiced becoming a manifestation of the sum total of the Awakened Mind and all its potencies relevant for the particular *sādhana*.¹⁰⁴ In this case, however, before Yamāntaka, the two connected couples of Yama and Yami and the male and female buffalos appear. In one form or another such a visualization is common within the Yamāntaka corpus (compare with the analogous place in the Vajrabhairava *sādhana* analyzed in Chapter 3) and it is interpreted as implying the domination of Yamāntaka over Yama, or Wisdom over Ignorance. The couple of buffalos is however less obvious than the Yama-Yami pair; while they seem to indicate the same thing, there almost certainly must have been a special significance to them, or they would not be included in the ritual process. While I have failed to find any information on this particular detail it may be

¹⁰¹ Wangyal, Tenzin (2011), *Tybetańska Joga Ciała, Mowy i Umysłu*, p. 193-196

¹⁰² Buswell, Robert; Lopez, Donald (2014), *Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, p. 188

¹⁰³ Norbu, Namkhai (2000), *The Crystal and the Way of Light. Sutra, Tantra and Dzogchen*, p. 99-102

¹⁰⁴ Dharmabhadra, Ngulchu; Trinley, Losang Lungtog Tenzin, op.cit., p. 91-95

suggested, that the two couples are a symbolic extension of the buffalo copulating with a human present as a mount (skt. *vāhana*) in some Yamāntaka and Krishnayamari depictions.¹⁰⁵

The HUM above the couples is the last one in the sequence, which is signaled by the phrase „syllable of cause” referring to the syllable being the cause for the arising of the deity. The concept is rooted in the understanding of development stage practice (Tib. *kye rim*) as a set of practices meant to purify the karmic traces functioning as causes of death, the intermediate state (tib. *bar do*) and rebirth into the causes for attaining the Three Kayas of the Buddha, that is respectively the Dharmakaya, the Sambhogakaya and the Nirmanakaya.¹⁰⁶ In such an interpretation, the practice of the state of voidness preceding and following any visualization leads to the realization of the ultimate voidness and the subsequent attainment of the Dharmakaya at the moment of death; the arising of the seed-syllable corresponds with the attainment of the pure Sambhogakaya form, visible only to highly developed practitioners and divinities; while the final and most concrete form of the deity corresponds with the Nirmanakaya, that is a purified rebirth - not as a karmically bound sentient creature, but a pure illusory body of the Buddha.¹⁰⁷ The „two goals” mentioned refer to the attainment of perfect awakening by the practitioner and the leading of all other beings to the same goal.¹⁰⁸

Visualizing the Deity

„OM A KRO TEKA Yamāntaka HUNG PHAT. I appear as Mañjuśrī Yamāntaka, whose body and main face are dark blue. My right face is white and the left is red. I have nine wide open eyes red with blood. As earring I wear black poisonous vipers. My faces and noses are wrinkled with a wrathful grimace. My mouths are wide open with rolling tongues. I have twelve bared fangs and I roar: Arali! My eyebrows and mustache are red and glow with light. Hair the color of dark gold rise upwards. In the three right hands I hold: [in the upper one] a wheel of blades, [in the middle one] a sword and [in the lower one] a nine-pronged vajra. In two left hands I hold [in the upper one] an iron hook, [in the middle one] a wooden pestle and with the third hand a blazing mudra of destroying. I have four legs, the right ones bent and the left ones straightened forward. As an ornament, on each of my heads I wear five dry skulls, within which the five Heruka families reside.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Siklos, Bulcsu (1990), *The Vajrabhairava Tantras. Tibetan and Mongolian Texts with Introduction, Translation and Notes*, p. 67

¹⁰⁶ Dharmabhadra, Ngulchu; Trinley, Losang Lungtog Tenzin, op.cit., p. 222-228

¹⁰⁷ Zopa, Lama Rinpoche (2000), *A Chat About Yamāntaka*, p. 13-16

¹⁰⁸ Khedrub, Je; trans. Lessing, F. D. and Wayman, A. (1968), *Introduction to Buddhist Tantric Systems*, p. 216

¹⁰⁹ Dragpa, Chökyi Rigdzin, op.cit, p. 4-5

The main mantra of the text is somewhat mysterious. All mantras begin with OM, and it is common for a mantra to be structured as follows: OM (Deity's name) (Seed syllable) (SVAHA for peaceful deities, PHAT for wrathful deities), e.g. OM Yamāntaka HUM PHAT, OM KURUKULLE HRIH SVAHA etc. There are also customary injections that can be added into a mantra for magical purposes, for example in order to subject somebody to magical enchantment and subjugation one could add (object's name) VASHYAM KURU (Sanskrit for "subjugate", "tame") between the deity's name and concluding phrase, e.g. OM KURUKULLE (Name) VASHYAM KURU HRIH SVAHA.¹¹⁰ The mantra we are presented with in this text however seems to be a different case: the A KRO TEKA part seems to be an epithet of Yamāntaka, not being any recognizable mantric command like the example and seemingly not being a shortened prayer or *dhāraṇī*. I propose to analyze the phrase as follows: the AH can be considered as a seed syllable and to be structurally linked more with the OM before than the KRO TEKA that follows; in such a case it would probably be considered the seed syllable of Speech and used in similar manner as the OM AH HUM formula used as blessing or for example in the very common mantra of Padmasambhava (OM AH HUM VAJRA GURU PADME SIDDHI HUM). In such a case, KRO TEKA could be interpreted as a Tibetan rendition of the Sanskrit word *krodha*, meaning "wrathful" and being both a common epithet and an early generic name for wrathful beings in bodhisattva's retinues. In such a case, the (supposed) original Sanskrit mantra could be: OM AH Krodha Yamāntaka HUM PHAT, which fits the general structure well. The depiction of Yamāntaka that follows must be considered in the broader context of the standard wrathful deities' iconography in general as well as the specific meaning of particular traits or implements, which are to suggest to the practitioner the particular qualities of the deity and question, serving as a kind of mnemonic aid supporting greater focus in meditation. The dark blue color is typical of wrathful deities as well as Vajra-family deities in general; the white and red correspond with pacifying and magnetizing activities respectively.¹¹¹ Thus, in a single verse the main mode of action of the deity together with the two supporting modes have been introduced. Three eyes, or rather the presence of a third eye in particular, as with having multiple limbs, suggest that the depicted being is in Sambhogakaya form and not a creature of physical matter. The eyes themselves have symbolic connotations with other triads, most commonly with the three main channels of the subtle body, that is however of lesser importance in this case. The "Arali!" cry is once again somewhat unclear. The phrase, written in Tibetan as *a ra li* does not have any immediate meaning and does not seem to be of Sanskrit origin. It is however to be found in offering context in various sādhanas, e.g. in the Gelugpa form of Chö practice the following exhortation figures several times at the conclusion of invocation prayers: A LA LA, LA LA HO, AH EE AH HA AH RA LI HO.¹¹² It should be noted that the A LA LA HO phrase

¹¹⁰ Beyer, Stepahn, op.cit., p. 208-211

¹¹¹ Beyer, Stepahn, op.cit., p. 277-278

¹¹² Zong, Kyabje Rinpoche, ed. Molk, David (2006), *Chod in the Ganden Tradition*, p. 187

is used in offerings as a standardized exclamation of ecstasy,¹¹³ which probably explains the glossolalic character of the formula. Moreover, in a tormā offering practice used in the Gelug-splinter group, the New Kadampa Tradition, the phrase OM VAJRA AH RA LI HO¹¹⁴ is used. It's author, geshe Kelsang Gyatso, explains the phrase as "please enjoy" in another book;¹¹⁵ while this explanation may be functionally valid, it seems somewhat undetailed, other exhortations (such as PUJA HO, KHARAM KHAHI etc.) being used in different offering rites at similar point. What can however be surmised is that the cry is somehow related to the enjoyment of offerings.

The next important thing is the set of implements Yamāntaka is holding. In general, these signify particular potencies of the deity, both in the larger soteriological sense and in the magical sense of being useful for inducing specific changes in the practitioner's life. The first implement Yamāntaka is holding is a wheel of blades, which first suggests protection, such a wheel being visualized as a protective mandala in many, especially older, sādhanas.¹¹⁶ Additionally, it brings to mind the *Wheel of Sharp Weapons*, the devotional poem centred on the idea of Yamāntaka being able to stop and purify the wheel of karma, liberating the sadhaka. These concepts may be synthesized into an idea of cutting the karmic roots of danger and outside threats, thus providing protection. The sword, outside of being an obvious instrument of attack, is also linked with repelling – e.g. Virudhaka, the divine guardian of the southern direction, is said to brandish a sword in order to scare away sentient beings, who would immediately die upon touching his (also blue-black) body. The sword can also signify the granting of siddhis, the siddhi of the sword being the first of them.¹¹⁷ The vajra held in the next hand is a common symbol, held by almost all wrathful deities, and in such a context usually signifying the irresistible power of the Awakened Mind. Its nine prongs may be understood in various ways, and lacking an emic commentary I can only suggest a possible interpretation. Some forms of Vajrakīlaya hold two vajras, one five-pronged and the other nine-pronged.¹¹⁸ The first is connected with the five wisdoms, and thus the female wisdom polarity of the Awakened Mind, while the second is connected with the nine vehicles of practice, and thus the male method polarity.¹¹⁹ It could be suggested that the nine-pronged vajra held by Yamāntaka, a male deity visualized without a female consort in this ritual, signifies him being an embodiment of the method polarity of Awakening. The iron hook held in his upper left hand signifies the power to draw and control, being the Tibetan representation of the Indian elephant goad,¹²⁰ held

¹¹³ Norbu, Namkhai (2017), *Teachings on Thun and the Ganapuja*, p. 206-208

¹¹⁴ Gyatso, Kelsang, (2011) *Modern Buddhism. The Path of Compassion and Wisdom*, p. 302

¹¹⁵ Gyatso, Kelsang, (1991) *Guide to Dakini Land. A Commentary on the Highest Yoga Practice of Vajrayogini*, 197

¹¹⁶ Compare: Sherab, Khenchen Palden and Dongyal, Tsewang, op.cit., p. 69

¹¹⁷ Beer, op.cit., p. 293

¹¹⁸ Sherab, Khenchen Palden and Dongyal, Tsewang, op.cit., p. 76

¹¹⁹ Beer, op.cit., p. 235

¹²⁰ Beer, op.cit., p. 302

e. g. by Ganesha. In the Vajrayāna pantheon it is a common attribute of the magnetizing Padma-family deities, supporting its connection with overpowering and leading sentient beings towards awakening. The pestle in his middle left hand is an attribute of some Śaivite deities as well as Buddhist deities with strong Śaivite ties, such as Yamāntaka (especially as Vajrabhairava).¹²¹ According to Beer, it signifies “revitalisation of memory as the concentration of intuitive perception or knowledge, through the grinding of a compound to a paste 'of one taste' (Skt. *ekarasa*).”¹²² In the same passage Beer also hints at an alluded connection between the sense of smell stimulated by the grinding of ingredients and the sudden rekindling of memory, a phenomenon known to evolutionary psychology and based in the direct connection of the olfactory bulb and the limbic area of the brain. The last hand of Yamāntaka is held in the destructive TARJANI mudra and blazes with fire; the symbolism of forceful repelling of negative forces is clear in this case. The position of the deity’s legs is also typical of wrathful deities. It signifies dynamic movement and is based on the classical Indian dance tradition. The headdress of skulls is a typical attribute of Tibetan yidam deities and signifies their unity with the five Buddha families and their wrathful equivalent in the five Heruka families; it is a reminder of the total nature of the deity which, though specific in appearance in function, is essentially identical with all other such deities, all being manifestations of the same Awakened Mind.

„Above my head there is a wrathful black Garuda of primordial wisdom. He has a vajra-beak and two eyes, one of the sun and one of the moon. He has a dark yellow mane rising upwards and within it, between two horns of meteorite iron, he wears a jewel. He devours the heads of two serpents, one white and one black, which he holds in his iron talons. He flies on wings of razor-sharp feathers radiating apocalyptic fire. In each pore of my body there are black Garudas with wings of fire filled with sparking five-pronged vajras.”¹²³

The Garuda (skt. *Garuḍa*, tib. *Khyung*) is a mythological bird-human hybrid rooted in Vedic folklore and present in Hinduism usually as the mount of Vishnu. In the Tibetan context the being became very popular, probably at least partially because of the sympathy shamanistic Bönpas would have for an eagle spirit. The main elements of the Garuda narrative are its never-ending feud with the serpentine naga spirits (skt. *nāga*, tib. *klu*) and him being hatched already as a fully mature being. The first characteristic made him a popular protective and healing deity, many diseases being attributed to the nagas’ malice; the second was used by Dzogchen practitioners as a metaphor of the wisdom of the primordially Awakened Mind – which, once found and “set free” is already fully mature and complete, regardless of

¹²¹ Beer, op.cit., p. 308-309

¹²² Beer, op.cit., p. 309

¹²³ Dragpa, Chökyi Rigdzin, op.cit, p. 5

the earlier history of the practitioner.¹²⁴ The Garuda, when figuring in other deities' *sādhana*s (a phenomenon far more widespread outside the Gelug tradition) represents the naturally awakened state of *rigpa* (tib. *rig pa*). The details of the Garuda's appearance will not be analyzed here, since they do not add to the aforesaid meaning in this particular context. What must be mentioned, however, are the Garudas visualized in Yamāntaka's body's pores: a meditational exercise serving to increase the practitioner's focus by imagining multiple detailed, very small objects, while at the same time reminding of the penetrating nature of the Awakened Mind as well as providing additional protective symbols in the practitioner's visualized body.

„I have a necklace of 21 skulls and a garland of 50 freshly cut heads dripping blood on my shoulders. On the upper part of my body I wear an elephant skin, my waist is girt with a human skin and beneath the hips I have a skirt of tiger skin. My hair is bound with white snakes, I wear yellow snakes as shoulder ornaments, red snakes around my waist, green snakes around my ankles and black snakes on my forearms. Between my eyebrows, on my legs and arms human ash is smeared. Drops of human blood ornament my cheeks and forehead. My throat and chest are anointed with human fat. Messengers emanate from the pores of my body. I am surrounded by innumerable yamas of activity. I stand amidst a mass of blazing primordial wisdom-fire bursting from my body.“¹²⁵

Major part of this passage's content is the classic list of the Eight Charnel Grounds Ornaments, the wrathful analogue to the crowns and jewelry of the peaceful bodhisattvas. The ornaments are as follows: marks of cremation ash, blood and human fat; the flayed skins of an elephant, human and tiger; a crown of skulls and snakes worn as ornaments.¹²⁶ While all of those objects have their symbolic connotations, these are common to all fierce deities and as such will not be analyzed in this paper. The wisdom-fire surrounding the deity is common to all wrathful and semi-wrathful deities and symbolizes the power of the Buddha mind to destroy all afflictive emotions and karmas impending sentient creatures from awakening; it is also connected to the fire visualized within the yogi's central channel during intense Anuyoga practice of tummo (tib. *gtum mo*). The "messengers" mentioned (skt. *duta*) are worldly spirits subservient to Yamāntaka through his dominance over Yama; these are the same as the "yamas of activity" of the next verse. These spirits, called "yamas" in the plural (similarly to, for example, "brahmas" in the plural understood as a class of beings similar to the prototypical Brahma) form one of several classes of spirits present in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism; while not much elaborated upon in Tibet,

¹²⁴ Sogyal, Rinpoche (2012), *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, p. 109

¹²⁵ Dragpa, Chökyi Rigdzin, *op.cit.*, p. 6

¹²⁶ Beer, *op.cit.*, p. 315

their contemporary Hinduist equivalent, the Yamduts (hind. *yamdut*) serve a role similar to the European folk concept of the Grim Reaper – a spirit coming to the deathbed in order to take a person’s soul and guide it to the afterlife.¹²⁷

“Within my heart there is a four-spoked golden wheel. On each spoke sits a golden-colored Mañjuśrī with a sword in the right hand and a collection of [Sādhanaparamita] texts in the left hand. They are sitting in the vajra posture. Their faces are calm and joyful, their hair bound in a knot at the top of their heads. They are wearing silks and jewels. Facing the axis of the wheel they are in the activity of protection. Inside the wheel, on a stacked lotus, moon and sun sits a stupa made of precious materials, radiating light. In the stupa’s vase, on a stacked lotus, moon and sun there is a golden five-pronged vajra. The five upper prongs hold five [male] buddhas of the five families, while the five lower prongs hold five female buddhas. In the vajra’s center a moon appears out of vowels and a sun appears out of consonants. Where the moon and sun meet, the syllable BHRUM appears with a HUM inside. Around the HUM a garland of the Yamāntaka mantra appears, and in the HUM’s circle [the anuśvara] is the Guru and the lamas [of the lineage]. E KA YA MA DURU TSA KRA.”¹²⁸

The concentric layers of stupas and stacked seats in my opinion function in the same way as similar visualizations before, serving to sharpen the sadhaka’s focus and provide additional protective images. What is fascinating, however, is the depiction of the central golden vajra – the upper and lower prongs represent the five families buddhas and their consorts, thus representing the whole of the Vajrayāna pleroma – all the specific potencies branching out from the clear light which is the absolute nature of reality. This elegant and moving symbol of totality of the Mind is then connected to the Voice of the practitioner – the vowels and consonants that are the building blocks of speech, melt together to form the moon and sun, which represent the polarity of one’s subtle energies as represented by the channels. Only the fusion of those energies at the center of the vajra creates the seed syllable of manifestation – BHRUM – within which (that is, within the empty space inside the *ba* letter) a HUM appears. It is from this HUM that an elaborate system of protective spheres will be emanated – it is important to note, that the outermost parts of the mandala are emanated from the innermost parts of the deity’s heart – thus at once providing a visualization of the deity’s often stressed transcendence of space, being at once able to manifest as minute and extremely vast¹²⁹ and allowing for the creation of a magical barrier (in a way

¹²⁷ Blackmore, Susan (1999), *The Meme Machine*, p. 180

¹²⁸ Dragpa, Chökyi Rigdzin, op.cit, p. 7-8

¹²⁹ Khyentse, Dzongsar Jamyang (2012), *Not for Happiness. A Guide to the So-Called Preliminary Practices*, p. 77-78

the main point of this protective ritual) from the most concentrated and symbolically loaded spot in the whole complex visualization. The deity's seed syllable circled by the mantra is typical of all Mahāyoga sādhanas; during mantra recitation the garland is imagined to rotate around the central *bījā*, radiating lights, deity's symbols or miniature versions of the deity itself in order to pervade the world with the buddha's compassion as well as to bring about the mantra's magical effect.¹³⁰ The HUM is however embellished in this case by the presence of the Guru and the lineage lamas within its anuśvara; the meaning of this is a reminder of one of the most-stressed ideas of Tantric Buddhism that is that the Guru is the root of all attainments.

The E KA YA MA DU RU TSA KRA formula is however less clear; evidently, the texts translators were baffled by it, since it is left within the text without any commentary, as well as not marked as a mantra. While lacking an oral commentary that could elucidate the passages precise meaning and function, a general interpretation could be proposed as follows. In the original Tibetan given in the text, the verse is rendered as *e ka ya ma du ru tsa kras bskor ba*. The last word, *bskor ba* means "to encircle, surround, revolve" and is omitted from the translation. The phrase before it seems to be a Tibetan rendition of Sanskrit *ekayama duru śakra*, meaning "*duru* wheel of the One Yama". The phrase *ekayama* could point to his depiction without a consort, a form commonly called *ekavira*, or "Solitary Hero". While there is no immediate meaning to the word *duru*, there is however a precedent for a phrase structured this way. The *Demon-Dispelling Dhāraṇī of the Thirteen Cakras* begins with "Duru duru śakra, vajraya vajraya śakra, hana hana śakra..."¹³¹ Similarly, in the long mantra of Avalokiteshvara, following a brief prayer section one encounters " (...) OM DHARA DHARA, DHIRI DHIRI, DHURU DHURU, ITTI VATTE, CALE CALE..."¹³² In both these cases, there is no particular meaning to the word, but it figures in a context of repeated recitation of glossolalic formulas in a state of intense focus; in the first case, additionally, it is done in the context of creating magical protective circles, as in the analyzed sādhanā. It may be suggested, then, that the phrase is an additional mantric affirmation of the protective character of the visualized structure, meaning roughly "encircled by the protective wheel of the Solitary Yama".

"In the center of the HUNG there is a NRI syllable surrounded by the initials of me and those that are to be protected. In the base of the HUNG there is retinue, wealth and riches. From the HUNG in my heart appear wrathful deities, male on the left side and female on the right, facing inwards, creating a sphere of protection. Outside the stupa 13 layers of protection appear. From

¹³⁰ Norbu, Namkhai (2017), *Teachings on Thun and Ganapuja*, p. 83-85

¹³¹ Tsiknopoulos, Erick, *The Demon Dispelling Dhāraṇī of the Thirteen Cakras*, <https://tibetan-translations.com/2012/04/07/the-demon-dispelling-dhara%E1%B9%87i-of-the-thirteen-cakras/> (accessed on 26.05.2019)

¹³² Chodron, Thubten (2003), *Cultivating a Compassionate Heart: the Yoga Method of Chenrezig*, p. 28

BHRUM a golden protective sphere of vajras appears. Further away, out of HUNG, OM, TRAM, HRIH and A appear respectively protective spheres of: blue vajras, white chakras, yellow jewels, red lotuses and green double vajras. Further away, out of TIKSHNA appears a protective sphere of wheels of sharp swords, vehemently rotating leftwards. Further away, out of the syllables YAM, RAM, BAM, LAM and E appear, respectively: dark green sphere of wind, red sphere of fire, white sphere of water, yellow sphere of earth and black sphere of space. Further away, from the union of the syllables of Yamāntaka's mantra and the Sanskrit vowels and consonants, the spontaneous sound of voidness thunders: 'Death to all enemies and obstacle-makers!' creating a protective sphere."¹³³

The NRI syllable is a representation of the life-force; in this case, both the life-force of the practitioner and of the persons he chooses to include in the deity's protection. The syllable itself has no strictly protective connotations however, being also used as a stand-in for the target's prana (skt. *prāṇā*, tib. *rlung*) in offensive rituals.¹³⁴ The riches at the bottom of the HUM suggest an accumulation of wealth and followers as a byproduct of the practice. As can be seen, the heart is protected by all the fierce deities together, forming an ultimate barrier. Around it, the multiple concentric spheres of protection appear. While spectacular in scale, this part of the ritual is rather self-explanatory. What should perhaps be noted is that the inner set of layers consists of symbols of the Buddha families, while the outer ones consist of the elemental energies. The seed syllable (or rather seed word, in this case) of the intervening sphere of bladed wheels, TIKSHNA (skt. *tikṣṇa*) means simply "sharp" in Sanskrit. What is somewhat atypical is that the order of the elements is changed a little in this case. The typical emanatory order from the subtlest to the grossest elements is kept, however space (which should in this case be the first) is placed at the outer end and is followed by sound.

Invocation

"On my forehead there is a white OM, on my throat a red AH and in my heart a blue HUNG. Light radiates from them in the ten directions, inviting from their natural abodes the primordial wisdom-beings in the form of Yamāntaka together with their spheres of protection."¹³⁵

The placing of the three seed syllables of the Body, Voice and Mind in their respective places is always present after the visualization is complete and serves as a consecration of the mental image to make it fit for invocation of the wisdom beings. Wisdom beings (skt. *jñānasattva*) are the true forms of the

¹³³ Dragpa, Chökyi Rigdzin, op.cit, p. 9

¹³⁴ Marcotty, Thomas (1987), *Dagger Blessing. The Tibetan Phurpa Cult: Reflections and Materials*, p. 77

¹³⁵ Dragpa, Chökyi Rigdzin, op.cit, p. 9

deities, which are formless and identical with the Dharmakaya; they are invited to pervade the visualization, or the pledge-being (skt. *samayasattva*) and animate it.¹³⁶ In this way, for the practitioner the visualization ceases to be only a symbol and becomes the deity in a very real sense. The passage reminds the sadhaka once again that the wisdom beings are essentially the Buddha mind itself, which only appears “in the form of Yamāntaka”. What follows is the set of mantras and mudras invoking the deities and performing visualized offerings to them; since they are executed in a standard way that does not add any information on Yamāntaka in particular, these are omitted.

“The Praise. With a terrifying body and bared fangs you conquer the arrogant Lord of Death. I praise and prostrate to Yamāntaka. [The 100-syllable mantra follows.] I have the power of subjugating the eight classes of demons into servitude and of compassionate, immediate annihilation of all evildoers. I have the power of dispelling curses and spells with the mantras of the Vidyādhara. The whole outer world is a sphere of protection. All sentient beings living within it are Yamāntaka. All sounds are the sound of the mantra. All thoughts are the always spontaneously present nature of the primordial wisdom deity, Yamāntaka.”¹³⁷

The 100-syllable mantra, originally connected with Vajrasattva, is primarily considered to purify the mantrin’s mental continuum of afflictive emotions and karmic traces. In time it began to be used with other deities name inserted instead of the name of Vajrasattva. In this case, the name “Yamaraja”¹³⁸ is inserted. Unfortunately there is no commentary or other clues that could explain if the author chose that name instead of the regular “Yamāntaka” for some particular reason. The affirmation of the deity’s power to subjugate harmful spirits and remove negative magical influences are self-explanatory. The latter part of the praise is however much more interesting due to the firmly non-dualistic view of reality being expressed and at the same time presented as the ultimate magical protection. The whole of reality is identified with the protective spheres of the deity’s mandala; that is technically correct from the point of view of the Anuyoga teachings,¹³⁹ but what is really implied is that nothing can be a threat to the practitioner that has completely identified themselves with Yamāntaka – the buddha mind is perfectly indestructible and immovable (which are the basic qualities of the vajra, the most common symbol of awakening) and thus no harm can come to the sadhaka who truly understands and realizes his identity with the Awakened Mind. The following assertion that all beings are Yamāntaka refers to the

¹³⁶ Dharmabhadra, Ngulchu; Trinley, Losang Lungtog Tenzin, op.cit., p. 303

¹³⁷ Dragpa, Chökyi Rigdzin, op.cit, p. 12

¹³⁸ Dragpa, Chökyi Rigdzin, op.cit, p. 12

¹³⁹ Nyima, Alak Zenkar Rinpoche Thubten, *A Brief Presentation of the Nine Vehicles*, sub ‘The Vehicle of Scriptural Transmission Anuyoga’; <https://www.lotsawahouse.org/tibetan-masters/alak-zenkar/nine-yanas> (accessed on 16.06.2019)

tathagatagarbha inherent in all sentient beings; that is, the only true self any being can have is that of the Buddha, and seen from the point of view of this particular ritual, of Yamāntaka. The identification of all sounds with the sound of the mantra and all thoughts with manifestations of the clear-light mind are other aspects of the same concept, usually included as parts of the so-called pure view, the development of which is the final goal of the Mahāyoga.¹⁴⁰

The Activity and Mantra Recitation

“The lights from my heart emanate innumerable messengers. They destroy all harmful beings, who have stolen in the form of the NRI syllable mine and the protected persons’ life-force, and have dispersed it in the ten directions. When the life-force is regained, the NRI syllable transforms into a radiant blue HUNG, which now melts into me and the protected ones. The lights once again emanate messengers, who bring blessing of all the Buddhas, bodhisattvas, gurus, yidams, dakas, dākinīs and dharmapalas, as well as the life-force of gods and the demons of the eight classes, as well as longevity, merit, wealth and glory of the six kinds of beings together with the essence of the five elements. When all of these are gathered, they dissolve into my heart. In effect I gain great radiance, splendor and power. Around me, having the form of the deity, the mantra rotates clockwise radiating light.”¹⁴¹

Following the self-identification with Yamāntaka, the practitioner utilizes his power in order to first retrieve and reabsorb the life-force stolen by harmful beings and then to gather blessings from the whole Buddhist pantheon. The gathering of blessings is a traditional part of the sending and reabsorbing lights practice which was mentioned earlier in this chapter; the additional parts about gathering the prana and powers of various worldly divinities together with wealth and other desirable qualities are however atypical and point to the strongly magical character of the practice, centered around the repelling of harmful forces, forming protection and reestablishing order.

“My three faces, thirteen protective spheres, the whole outside world and all the beings living within it vibrate with the sound of the mantra, resounding like a thousand thunders. [The first purification] Through the sound of the mantra and the rays of light innumerable fierce messengers are emanated which causes all enemies, evil spirits, gods, rakshasas and demons of the eight classes to be conquered and destroyed. [The second purification] All the negativities of gods and demons of the eight classes directed towards me with and without conscious

¹⁴⁰ Nyima, Alak Zenkar Rinpoche Thubten, op.cit., sub ‘The Vehicle of Tantra Mahāyoga’

¹⁴¹ Dragpa, Chökyi Rigdzin, op.cit., 13-14

intent are repelled. [The third purification] All black magic directed against me is repelled. [The fourth purification] The enemies' secret paths of evil are blocked. [The fifth purification] All harmful magic is repelled. [The sixth purification] Body, voice and mind of all humans and other creature plotting with malice are subjugated. [Focus on the thought:] The activity that will never allow them to reappear is completed."¹⁴²

This passage, while its outward magical function is self-explanatory, provides an interesting view into the causes of misfortune, negative states of mind and illness as imagined by the tantric yogis of Tibet. The first obstacle-makers to be dealt with are the immaterial spirits of the eight classes, which are in general connected with various features of the natural world, such as rivers, mountains or winds and specific places with particularly sinister or liminal reputation, such as charnel grounds and cemeteries, crossroads, caves and so on.¹⁴³ These beings are not considered inherently more powerful than humans and since they represent other states of rebirth (such as those of pretas, asuras and devas), they may not be aware of the existence of humans. For this reason, some of their negativities may be generated unconsciously, which is referred to in the second purification verse. As can be seen in the progression of the purifications, the intents become progressively broader and more universal, ending with the annotated instruction to focus on the thought of having completed all required actions to become fully protected. The psychological impact of such a meditation at the end of a lengthy series of visualizations detailing the protective barriers around oneself is rather obviously conducive to obtaining a feeling of cleanliness and safety at the conclusion of the ritual. Recitation of the deity's main mantra follows without any additional instructions.

The Dissolution and Dedication of Merit

"Out of the HUNG in my heart light radiates. The visualization of the outside world, the beings living within it, the protective spheres and the deities dissolves into light which melts into my thirteen protective spheres. The spheres in turn dissolve into light, which melts into me. My body dissolves from the bottom up and from the top down into the HUNG. The HUNG dissolves from the bottom up; that is, the "foot" dissolves into the "belly", which dissolves into the "head", which dissolves into the half-moon, which dissolves into the *bindu*, which dissolves into the *nada* at the very top. The *nada* dissolves into radiant voidness."¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Dragpa, Chökyi Rigdzin, op.cit., 14-15

¹⁴³ Norbu, Namkhai (2017), *Sang Offering and Serkyem of the Eight Classes*, p. 43-45

¹⁴⁴ Dragpa, Chökyi Rigdzin, op.cit., 16-17

The dissolution is not different from the traditional form it takes, but its importance should be reiterated: it is the contemplation of the state of voidness, from which the visualisations emerge and into which they dissolve, that grants the practitioner the possibility to attain the Dharmakaya, that is, to attain Awakening at the moment of death or earlier. The dissolution of the HUNG is also a traditional formula, each step connected with a step of the dying process as analyzed by the tantric texts.¹⁴⁵

“Once again, like a magical illusion, I appear as the dark blue Mañjuśrī Yamāntaka with one face and two arms, holding the wheel and the hook. I wear the eight charnel grounds ornaments, standing with the right leg bent and the left straightened. [Dedication of merit] Let in this way, through the merit of this practice and recitation and through the activity of the fierce Noble Mañjuśrī, all beings without exception become one with Yamāntaka.”¹⁴⁶

The reappearance as the deity form is needed in order for the practitioner to keep the identification with the deity at all times, which allows him to ground himself in the resultant purity of vision, which was discussed in the earlier sections. The following dedication of merit is a staple of tantric sādhanas, always figuring at the end and firmly establishing the practice in the Mahayana ethical view of striving for the ultimate benefit of all sentient beings.

The Colophon

„Continue the prayers of aspiration. In all everyday activities, such walking, standing, sitting and lying down, never release the divine pride. That is the profound instruction! E-ma! From the Mañjuśrī Yamāntaka practice cycles called the “Iron Scorpion”, the “Blazing Blade of Protection” and others surpassing [even] imagination, I have extracted the essence like one extracts sweet cream out of yoghurt, and have placed here only the practice and recitation, without engaging in all the ritual preliminaries. It is possible that other practices equally profound exist, but I say: If I hid anything, the supreme deity would be angry with me! In order to continue the practice of the perfect vajra, which I hold dearer than anything else, I have written it down, I, “the old Drikungpa”, Yogi Tagpa Dorje [= Rigdzin Chökyi Dragpa], as a text for the people of Mangre Sumdo. Because those, who seek such instruction, will be happier with it than with all the riches of the three thousand worlds, I give straight from my heart – let them rejoice! If I will still rely upon You, Yamāntaka, as my tantric deity, it may bring great benefit to the world and the sentient creatures within it. May those criminals that break their vows be crushed! (This prayer

¹⁴⁵ Zopa, Lama Rinpoche, op.cit., p. 59-67

¹⁴⁶ Dragpa, Chökyi Rigdzin, op.cit., 17

has been written down in the back rows of the retinue of Dharma students of the Great Gar, by an altruistic monk from Gar, the mendicant Tsering.) Let us all conquer Death!"¹⁴⁷

While the colophon is rather self-explanatory, it was included for the context which it provides about the original intent behind publishing this text and the environment in which it circulated. It shows both the devotional attitude of the author towards Yamāntaka, his main yidam, and the technical approach to ritual which is not seen as a sanctified liturgy, but a set of religio-magical tools to be knowingly designed and utilized for specific aims. The aspiration expressed in the very last sentence sums up the honesty and freshness of the Mahayana ideal which is the ideological foundation of Vajrayāna, repelling the once-popular judgements of Tibetan Buddhism as a degenerate form of the religion divorced from its teachings on compassion for all beings.

¹⁴⁷ Dragpa, Chökyi Rigdzin, *op.cit.*, 18

Chapter III: Vajrabhairava

Emergence of the Vajrabhairava system

The emergence of Yamāntaka, described in the second chapter, marked the development of a fascinating symbolic complex. The deity embodied Mañjuśrī subjugating Yama, which is to say – Wisdom wrathfully subjugating Death. To grasp this concept fully, one must first understand the logic of symbolic association characteristic of the Indic religions, in which each used symbol can be fleshed out in detail by referring to other symbols sharing the same main semiotic field. Thus, Mañjuśrī is not only the abstract notion of wisdom or insight, *prajñā* – he is the also what leads one to the realization of *prajñā* (so, the Buddhist *sādhana* itself) and what proceeds from it (so, all sorts of teachings and commentaries), as well as the skills associated with those activities, such as perfect memory retention, intelligence, eloquence and so on.¹⁴⁸ The next point to be understood is the nature of death as understood in the Buddhist canon. Death is seen as an inevitable consequence of birth, a prototypical example of the impermanence (skt. *anitya*) and dissatisfaction (skt. *dukkha*) marking all phenomena of *saṃsāra*. It is one of the links in the chain of co-dependent origination (skt. *pratīyasamutpāda*), which describes the karmic sequence which begins in the grasping of the mind after phenomena, leads to birth, suffering and death, which once again leads one to birth. It is thus a succinct symbol of *saṃsāra* as such. Incidentally, since the axis of the whole samsaric cycle is ignorance of one's true nature (skt. *avidyā*), the symbolism of darkness, suffering and loss associated with death comes also to pervade the representations of ignorance in the Buddhist scriptures. And there is only one way to overcome ignorance, which is to gain insight, *prajñā*, through study and meditation. As can be easily seen, this sequence of ideas is brilliantly expressed in the form of Mañjuśrī subduing Death – in a way, it is a depiction of the process of awakening *in toto*, as seen from the perspective of the ignorance – insight polarity.

The symbolic fecundity of the above metaphor was developed greatly when it was situated in the context of the tantric developments of the Śaiva circles that were described in more detail in the last chapter. The wrathful Śiva Bhairava, as conceived during the evolution of the *vidyāpiṭha* canon, was the ultimate male wrathful deity – subsequent developments in the milieu favored goddesses more, in time practically ceasing to produce new male divinities.¹⁴⁹ In a way, Vajrabhairava may be understood as stemming from a high point in the Bhairava theology, the final development of a notion of mystical exegesis that was later transformed fundamentally. This is reflected in the unparalleled complexity (both

¹⁴⁸ Dharmabhadra, *op.cit.*, p. 140-141

¹⁴⁹ Sanderson, Alexis (1988), *Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions*, in: *The World's Religions*, p. 669 and further

iconographical and theological) of the deity, which is essentially a devotional depiction of the salvific power of the Vajrayāna itself. The charnel grounds symbolism of Bhairava, imagined in the k̄apālika fashion as an ash-smeared ascetic with a retinue of ghosts and wilderness spirits, resonated with Yama's status as the lord of the hungry ghosts resulting in a deeper conflation of the complexes, visible especially in the transferring of Yama's attributes onto Yamāntaka in Tibetan Buddhism.

The probable period of this practice's emergence can be narrowed down to the first half of the 9th c. CE, less than a century later than that of Yamāntaka. The reason for such a datation is the presence of both ekavira forms of the deity and forms with a consort, characteristic of the emerging śakta cults. In no case however the ḍākinī is considered the primary deity, the text cannot thus stem from the later layer of the tradition, expressed in the Buddhist canon in divinities such as Vajravaraḥi. Also, in the popular Thirteen Deity Vajrabhairava practice, the deities in question are predominantly male¹⁵⁰ (being emanated aspects of the central Vajrabhairava), while in the Śakta sources the mandalas are dominated by female figures¹⁵¹ even if the central divinity is male. All these point to the aforementioned date as the most probable period of composition. Contemporarily the system is known almost exclusively from Tibet, where it has appeared only in the 11th c. (as opposed to Yamāntaka's turn of the 8th and 9th c.), the sources however indicate that the system is somewhat older than that.

The vitality of the system was attested in its' devotees' approach to the next generation of practices, focused on the yoginis and their associated practices of the generation stage, especially the Six Yogas of Naropa. While these so-called Mother Tantras are usually taught as complete systems focused on female deities or as "female-centric" advanced stages of practice co-opted with one's main sādhana, in this case a different and unique hermeneutical path was taken. Since Vajrabhairava is the embodiment of the activity of the Buddhadharmā, than all sorts of Buddhist practices are a part and attribute of his – thus, the completion stages were included in Vajrabhairava teachings and the system itself found a unique place in the Tibetan classification system as a Father Tantra (focusing on method, that is the visualizations and mantras) that also encompasses the Mother systems (focusing on wisdom, that is the breathing techniques and objectless contemplation).¹⁵² This uniquely syncretic position of the system is reflected in the visualized form of Vajrabhairava itself, possessing a bizarrely complex array of weapons and ritual tools, dancing upon all sorts of creatures and having, on the top of his nine stacked wrathful heads breathing fire, a smiling face of Mañjuśrī.

¹⁵⁰ Dharmabhadra, op.cit., p. 105-107

¹⁵¹ Sanderson, op.cit., p. 679-681

¹⁵² Dharmabhadra, op.cit., 26-28

Ra Lotsawa Dorje Drak and the transmission of Vajrabhairava into Tibet

After the fall of imperial rule in Tibet central authority dissolved, and with it, the patronage given to monastic institutions disappeared. Teaching lineages were kept mostly by hereditary families of *ngakpas* (tib. *sngag pa*), non-celibate tantric priests. During this period the influence of Bön became stronger again and in the central regions of Ü and Tsang Buddhism in general declined. In the western regions, however, the situation was different¹⁵³ – independent kingdoms existed where the interest in Buddhism remained strong due to the continued presence of monastic institutions and the Indian cultural influence and which could provide the needed patronage for scholars. In the latter half of the 10th c., the king of Guge, who became a monk himself, Yeshe Ö, sponsored an expedition of twenty one Tibetan scholars to the great Buddhist universities of Nalanda and Vikramaśīla. In the year 978, of the twenty one scholars, only two returned, bringing with them a wealth of newly-translated, authoritative texts prepared together with the pre-eminent panditas of India.¹⁵⁴ This event marks the beginning of a period of Buddhist renaissance called in Tibetan texts The Second Dissemination of Buddhism (tib. *phyi dar*). During this period many scholars and practitioners, the best of which were titled Lotsawa (tib. *lo tsa ba*, ‘Translator’), travelled to India and brought new tantric scriptures and commentaries developed there since the 8th c., when Padmsambhava brought the teachings to Tibet for the first time. The systems of Hevajra, Cakrasamvara, Vajrayogini and Vajrabhairava appeared and quickly gained a great number of followers. The practitioners of the new systems began to refer to the lineages stemming from the Imperial Period as Nyingma (tib. *rnying ma*), ‘The Ancient Ones’, and referring to themselves as Sarma, (tib. *gsar ma*) ‘The New Ones’. Within the Sarma milieu new orders began to arise, forming the contemporary image of the Four Main Orders of Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya and Gelug;¹⁵⁵ to which grouping Jonangpa and Bön were admitted by the XIV Dalai Lama.

During this period of rapid transformation hagiographies (tib. *rnam thar*) of great yogis began to circulate in the broader population, forming the popular understanding of the Dharma and the archetypal images of practitioners. The most celebrated saint of the era is unequivocally Milarepa, the student of Marpa Lotsawa. Marpa brought the teachings of Naropa and Tilopa which formed the foundation of the Kagyu school, but it was Milarepa who became the ideal image of how to practice them. The sorcerer who became a devoted student and finally an awakened yogi-poet, was however accompanied in the popular imagination of Tibetans by a more sinister figure embodying the wrathful

¹⁵³ Powers, John (1995), *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, p. 155

¹⁵⁴ Powers, op.cit., p. 156

¹⁵⁵ Senge, Ra Yeshe, trans. Cuevas, Bryan (2015), *The All-Pervading Melodious Drumbeat. The Life of Ra Lotsawa*, p. xii-xiii

activity of the Buddhas and the ethical conundrums of tantric Buddhism. This figure was Ra Lotsawa Dorje Drak, better known as Ralo, a scholar and Vajrabhairava yogi who brought the tradition from India and spread it in Tibet in spite of religious and political opposition. Renowned as a sorcerer and master of the fierce magical rites, he was reported to kill multiple rivals by ritual means, engage in magical duels with yogis of different schools, gain considerable wealth and influence and use it to build roads and hospitals in Tibet as well as fund scholarships for students and practitioners.¹⁵⁶ This ambivalent figure became the anti-hero of a *namthar* second in popularity only to the *Life of Mllarepa*, called which could provide patronage to scholars and *The All-Pervading Melodious Drumbeat*, and formed the archetypal image of a tantric sorcerer capable of miracles and transgressing standard ethical norms due to his superior understanding of reality.¹⁵⁷ The tension between compassion seen as supreme virtue and the tantric endorsement of fierce action is one of the most easily misunderstood aspects of the tradition and it provoked many philosophical commentaries, but also served the enduring popularity of the story of Ralo's life. It should be noted that the hagiography does not attempt to whitewash the hero, instead presenting his proneness to violence transformed into clear and decisive Buddha activity as a study of the effectiveness of the tantric methods, able to sanctify even the worst sinner through honest practice. Indeed, in the story Ralo's quickness to anger is constantly balanced with descriptions of his generosity and compassion, creating a psychologically compelling picture which undoubtedly served both the popularity of the *namthar* and of the hero's main practice – Vajrabhairava.

The structure of the *namthar* is relatively typical, featuring such common tropes as a miraculous birth, the child prodigy's amazing wisdom, the quest for the guru and a depiction of the moment of awakening; these well-known motifs are utilized in a narrative reminiscent of a travelogue, featuring Ralo's extensive travels in colorful details and describing the various adventures he had, while constantly reiterating the salvific power of the Dharma – and especially of the Vajrabhairava tantras, which is presented as unequivocally the most supreme tantric system. The prose is interspersed with forty four *caryāgīti* poems, purportedly in Ralo's own words. This is rather improbable, taking into account the text was written probably around four hundred years after its main protagonist's death; it however resonates with the clearly intended depiction of Ralo as a classic mahāsiddha. Because of the story's importance in creating a following of the Vajrabhairava system as well as its great influence on the religious imagination of Tibetans in general, it will be presented in a very concise synopsis.

Ralo was born around the year 1016¹⁵⁸ to a couple of ngakpa practitioners from an old lineage in PLACE. His father was a Nyingmapa yogi proficient in the systems of Yangdag Heruka and Vajrakīlaya, while his

¹⁵⁶ Senge, Ra Yeshe, op.cit., p.xxiv-xxv

¹⁵⁷ Senge, Ra Yeshe, op.cit., p. 9

¹⁵⁸ Senge, Ra Yeshe, op.cit., p. xxviii

mother was described as being the best kind of a tantric consort. The child's birth, as is typical in the Vajrayāna literature, was preceded by a prophetic dream his mother had. In it, she was led to a marvelous place by a red ḍākinī, where she was purified and witnessed the coming of Mañjuśrī, who dissolved into her womb.¹⁵⁹ Other dreams followed, featuring such fanciful imagery as the sky filling with rainbows, streams of medicinal elixirs pervading the country and a gleaming sword emitting thousands of Buddhas emerging from Ralo's mother's belly. When the child was six months old, the guardian goddess of Tibet, Palden Lhamo (tib. *dpal ldan lha mo*), appeared and took him for a magical journey around Tibet, prophesizing that in time he will find followers in all the visited places. As the hagiographer ascertains, during the time of the journey Ralo grew miraculously to the size of a five year old and upon his return, the mystified parents nicknamed him Chime Dorje Drak, the Deathless Vajra Lightning Bolt.¹⁶⁰ The author follows to describe at length the prodigious talents of the child, which understood without learning all the core philosophical tenets of Buddhism and memorized with ease all texts he read, as well as mastered all sorts of mundane sciences only by listening and carefully observing those who practiced them. His father initiated him into the mandalas of Yangdak Heruka and Vajrakīlaya at the age of nine; not surprisingly, Ralo is said to have easily mastered those practices, although it is later explained that their nature did not suit his personality well, urging him to find more appropriate teachings later on.¹⁶¹

When Ralo was eleven, his parents arranged a marriage with a girl called Jomo Gemajam coming from an influential and wealthy family, most probably to seal an alliance between the families. According to the text, Ralo rejected her explaining that he has no need for a girl; his father attempted to persuade him to marry, saying that in order to practice the highest karmamudra teachings, he needs a proper consort. Unfortunately, as the text says: "(...) due to his extremely obstinate disposition, no one could dissuade him from doing whatever he chose to do."¹⁶² In order to tame the adolescent son's fits of anger, he placed Ralo in a meditational retreat. However, as the text's translator Bryan Cuevas notes, alternate sources paint an even less favorable picture of the event. According to the *Sunlight Illuminating All of Mañjusri's Dharma: An Eloquent History of the Sacred Tantra Cycle of Glorious Yamāntaka* (1633), the girl found Ralo ugly and unkind, which offended him – so in retribution he ambushed her and cut off her nose. In turn, in the account of the famous historian, Taranatha, Jomo ran away with another man. It is difficult to ascertain which of these versions is closest to the truth; it could be said that the more violent version is the most probable, since an account like this would not be included in a hagiography. This would be only partially true, since as has been noted above, the

¹⁵⁹ Senge, Ra Yeshe, op.cit., p. 5

¹⁶⁰ Senge, Ra Yeshe, op.cit., p. 6-7

¹⁶¹ Senge, Ra Yeshe, op.cit., p. xxix

¹⁶² Senge, Ra Yeshe, op.cit., p. 8

tantric hagiography tends towards exaggerating the hero's transformation more than his original virtuousness, thus depicting the Dharma as more powerful. In fact, the nose-cutting episode is described in a text which is also devotional towards Vajrabhairava, and as such sees Ralo as one of the honorable lineage gurus of the transmission; the interpretation of the episode was therefore probably not as damning as it may naturally seem to a contemporary Western reader. What really happened is however of little import; what is most important in this paper's case is that the Vajrabhairava tradition recalls the Jomo Gemajam episode primarily as an illustration of Ralo's volatile nature, which was still to be tamed by his practice.

The episode with Jomo results in a feud between the families during which Ralo leaves his home for Nepal in order to obtain a special transmission of Dharma. As the translator notes, in the alternate accounts mentioned above the goal of this journey is to receive teachings on black magic in order to prevail in this feud; a practice which was probably well-established, concerning a strikingly similar episode in the life of Milarepa, Ralo's younger contemporary.¹⁶³ In the version present in the *All-Pervading Drumbeat...* Ralo struggles with his Yangdak sādhana when he receives a vision of ḍākinīs urging him to travel and find a special transmission better suited to his nature. After some time spent persuading his parents, Ralo leaves for Yerang in the Kathmandu Valley, where he finds his root guru, Guru Bharo. The name is somewhat generic, Bharo being a title awarded to wealthy merchants, the teacher is however identified by the commentary tradition more precisely as Guru Bharo Chakdum, meaning Guru Bharo Maimed Hand.¹⁶⁴ Ralo receives the Vajravarahi transmission from him. Soon an occasion to use the new teachings presents itself when Ralo rebukes a Śaiva yogi, Purna the Black, near the Svayambhu Stupa. The yogi performs rituals to kill Ralo, sending magical nailing daggers (skt. *kīla*, tib. *phur ba*) after him. Ralo keeps his guru's advice and hides in a vase sealed with appropriate mantras, which the daggers are unable to penetrate.¹⁶⁵ The humiliated Purna commits suicide, while Ralo returns to his guru to ask for additional transmissions, excited by the power he quickly gained. The guru however replies that he has no more teachings and vanishes. Thus begins a prolonged episode detailing Ralo's search for his master, which not only shows the devotion and respect towards the guru which is of paramount importance in Vajrayāna, but also reinforces the unique character and power of the Vajrabhairava tantras, which the guru purposefully withholds in order to test if Ralo is worthy to receive them. After a prolonged search, during which Ralo uses all his resources and wanders destitute around the region, he descends from the mountains to a desert, which he attempts to cross. During the journey he faints and, too exhausted to stand back again, is suddenly visited by ḍākinīs and revived. Soon

¹⁶³ Heruka, Tsangnyon, op.cit., p. 28-35

¹⁶⁴ Senge, Ra Yeshe, op.cit., p.xxx

¹⁶⁵ Senge, Ra Yeshe, op.cit., p. 15

enough, after witnessing several symbolic scenes, Ralo is reunited with Guru Bharo who introduces him into the mandala of Vajrabhairava.¹⁶⁶ Returning home with his first follower, Ralo finds his family engaged in a war with the family of Jomo Gemajam, his unwanted bride imprisoned together with his brothers and his parents attacked. Deploying his newly learned sorcery of Vajrabhairava, Ralo causes his family to be released and devastates the rival family, compassionately sending the killed ones' streams of consciousness into the realm of Mañjuśrī, thus rendering the event as a compassionate action.¹⁶⁷ The terrified survivors, as well as his own family and Jomo become sure of his attainment and request transmission of his practice, which he freely gives. The conferring of Vajrabhairava empowerment on all followers and moved witnesses of his miracles becomes a pattern in the story; while it may seem strange to give away the teachings that were established by the preceding narrative to be so secret and powerful, this missionary impulse seems to be a real trait of Ra Lotsawa, whose better part of life was spent travelling all around Tibet spreading the teaching, as it seems in an altruistic belief that all should have access to the most powerful pith instruction of Dharma.

As Ralo's influence rises, opposition begins to form. Khön Shakya Lodrö, a master of Yangdak Heruka and Vajrakīlaya (aptly the same rites that were unfit for Ralo) launched a magical attack against Ralo, who countered it with his magic. Having failed, Shakya Lodrö began to attack Ralo's disciples and preach that the practice of Vajrabhairava leads to a hellish rebirth, it being "some Hindu god with an animal's head".¹⁶⁸ As can be deemed from this passage, Śiva Bhairava was known to (at least some) Tibetan scholars which could lead them to rejecting the new transmission as essentially a Śaiva practice. The point about the animal's head is not without merit too, most animal-headed deities in the Vajrayāna pantheon indeed stemming from the Śaiva – Śakta religious imaginarium (with the notable exception of Hayagrīva stemming ultimately from a Vaiṣṇava source). The persecuted students ask Ralo to retaliate magically, which he refuses as unethical. However, Avalokiteśvara appears and delivers a short poem in which he explains how in fact the use of fierce magic is in this case completely justified. Unfortunately it is impossible to verify if this episode seemed just as artificial to the contemporary listeners as it does to the modern reader, what can however be ascertained is that such visionary interludia have been used in hagiographical literature of Tibet to explain the philosophical intricacies of a particular scene in an authoritative manner. Without further ado, Ralo proceeds to prepare a fire ritual (skt. *homa*, tib. *sbyin sreg*) in which he kills Shakya Lodrö by summoning his consciousness into a magic effigy (tib. *lin gam*) and burning it as an offering. When his rivals' stream of consciousness is safely dispatched into Mañjuśrī's own heart, his disgruntled followers begin mobilizing an army to strike Ralo; he disperses the

¹⁶⁶ Senge, Ra Yeshe, op.cit., p. 27-28

¹⁶⁷ Senge, Ra Yeshe, op.cit., p. 38-40

¹⁶⁸ Senge, Ra Yeshe, op.cit., p. 44

army with mighty winds, ending the episode in complete victory.¹⁶⁹ Not much later however he encounters another hostile scholar, Langlap Jangchup Dorje, a renowned Vajrakīlaya master. When the men meet, Langlap accuses Ralo of spreading a “deviant dharma” and deceiving beings with “some ghostly spirit with an animal’s head”.¹⁷⁰ In return, Ralo sinks his hand into solid stone, showing his siddhi, which initiates a miracle contest between the yogis. No clear winner to be chosen, they part, but soon after their departure, Langlap caused a storm of nailing daggers to descend on Ralo and his retinue. While he himself remained unharmed, his magic was not powerful enough to protect his followers, which were decimated. The goddess Tārā appeared to him in a vision, urging him to travel to his Guru and retrieve new empowerments which should be translated into Tibetan for the benefit of beings. This episode is particularly interesting, showing for the only time in the whole text Ralo’s failure to subjugate another practitioner. While in the *All-pervading Drumbeat...* Ralo returns after an extended pilgrimage to defeat Langlap, the same story is recounted in sources related to Vajrakīlaya practice with a predictably different ending – Ralo, unable to produce miracles in the vicinity of Langlap becomes terrified with a vision of Vajrakīlaya conjured by him and surrenders, learning to be less moody.¹⁷¹ This seems to be the more probable version, Ralo’s later triumphant return being a propagandist invention of the hagiographer. In fact, even in the *namthar*, a gossip is said to have circulated among the common people that “the Yama scholar succumbed to the Nailing Dagger”.¹⁷²

Following this episode, Ralo travels to Nepal again to meet his guru, who in turn advises him to travel directly to India to receive more complete teachings and to bring them back to Nepal and Tibet. In India Ralo visits the main pilgrimage sites of Bodh Gaya, Varanasi and Sarnath and stays at Nalanda, where he receives full ordination as a monk from his second root guru, Mahakarunika, receiving a new Dharma name – Śrī Vajrakirti (tib. Dorje Drakpa) under which he is sometimes mentioned. The text details the various teachings he received at Nalanda, among which were the many then-current Mahayana philosophical scriptures as well as tantric transmissions of most important deities of the time.

From this point onward, the hagiography details Ralo’s travels over all of Tibet and his constant teaching and charity effort. In a relatively similar pattern, in most visited places he performs miracles solving various local problems and feuds, gathers followers, from among which a number is always said to have achieved various levels of awakening very quickly due to the unique power of Vajrabhairava practice. The rich gifts he receives in return for empowerments are enumerated in great detail and always said to have been directed towards the common benefit through the building of roads, hospitals and mountain bridges, the foundation and renovation of stupas and monasteries, the ransoming of animals

¹⁶⁹ Senge, Ra Yeshe, op.cit., p. 46-47

¹⁷⁰ Senge, Ra Yeshe, op.cit., p.52

¹⁷¹ Sherab, Khenchen Palden and Dongyal, Tsewang Khenpo, op.cit., p. 143-144

¹⁷² Senge, Ra Yeshe, op.cit., p. 53

intended for slaughter and other works of charity. During this time the transmission of Vajrabhairava spreads throughout Tibet and becomes a recognized system of practice; indeed practically all lineages of Vajrabhairava extant nowadays trace their transmission to Ralo. This long period, as is customary in Buddhist hagiographies, ends with the master perceiving his impending death. Ralo prepares himself for it by gathering his followers, delivering certain prophecies as to their future and the future of his lineage, appointing his nephew Ra Chörap as his successor and providing instructions on how to properly memorialize his passing by building a stupa to house his remains.¹⁷³ After his death he appears to his disciples in visions in various forms, once again reinforcing his status as a fully awakened Buddha who has transcended his physical death.

The life of Ra Lotsawa Dorje Drak is of paramount importance to the Vajrabhairava lineage, the siddha being almost singularly responsible for the bringing of the tradition into Tibet and its promulgation in spite of opposition on the side of older lineages. Not only is Ralo remembered as the paradigmatic master of tantric sorcery, it is his reputation that reinforced Vajrabhairava transmission's unique status. The bold claims of the system as a singular Tantra encompassing all other traditions in completeness while surpassing them in power was supported by the legendary status of his Tibetan founder. Although the tradition truly dominated the Tibetan religious milieu only after its adoption by the Gelugpa and their subsequent rise to political power that probably would not have happened if the system did not already have an aura of ritual power and soteriological supremacy. Additionally, the *All-Pervading Drumbeat...* being a popular text, the common man's image of Vajrabhairava in the regions of Tibet under Nyingma control was shaped more by this narrative than by the practice or learned commentary regarding it.

Tsongkhapa and the spread of Vajrabhairava practice

While the activity of Ra Lotsawa firmly established the practice of Vajrabhairava in Tibet, it was popularized on a greater scale largely by the Gelug order. The system's prevalence within the Gelug tradition stems from its central place in the private practice of Tsongkhapa, the order's famous founder, considered by his followers to have been the Second Buddha, a title awarded by the Nyingmapas to Padmasambhava. Tsongkhapa (1357-1419¹⁷⁴), who was undoubtedly one of the greatest Tibetan scholars of his time, was educated by representatives of all major Tibetan traditions of his time. During this time he developed the view that the teachings of various schools represent various degrees of purity of the original Buddhist teachings. He disputed the authenticity (and thus authority) of Nyingma lineages he considered largely corrupted by the lack of monastic discipline and organization that led to their

¹⁷³ Senge, Ra Yeshe, op.cit., p. 302-209

¹⁷⁴ Siklos, , op.cit., p. 74

provintialization and decline of scholarly understanding. Basing his doctrine in the Sarma translations, which he considered closer to their Indian source, he attempted at a large-scale synthesis and systematization of their doctrines. He stressed the study and strict execution of the monastic discipline (skt. *vinaya*) and the study of the Tripitaka, which was largely absent from other traditions' curricula. His writings are known for his style of exposition, where each subsequent point of an argument is related to the whole of Buddhist philosophical structure, with particular attention to the *sūtrayāna*. His *opera magna* are the two books forming the fundament of Gelugpa education – the *Lamrim Chenmo* (tib. *lam rim chen mo*, [The] Great Gradual Path) and the *Ngagrim Chenmo* (tib. *sngags rim chen mo*, [The] Great Mantra), being encyclopedic expositions of sutra and tantra respectively. The community of his students gathered in the monastery of Ganden (from the name of which they are also called the Gandenpas) he founded in 1409 has expanded rapidly, forming the Gelug order which came to dominate the Tibetan spiritual and political landscape for the coming centuries.

Tsongkhapa's main yidam was Mañjuśrī, of whom some considered Tsonkhapa to be an emanation.¹⁷⁵ Vajrabhairava, being the wrathful form of Mañjuśrī and a tantra of a particularly high mystical claims attracted his attention, becoming one of his main *sādhana*s. After a retreat he took when he was 29 years old, Tsongkhapa was reputed to be in regular visionary communication with Mañjuśrī, who was said to come to transmit teachings, provide explanations on hazy passages as well as advise Tsongkhapa on his personal practice and everyday decisions.¹⁷⁶ This made Vajrabhairava one of the three main yidams of the Gelugpa, spreading most widely the version of his practices as systematized and explained by Tsongkhapa.

Thus, Vajrabhairava is understood as part of a group of deities collectively called Yamāntaka, which also includes Krishnayamari and Raktayamari, two similar divinities brought to Tibet by Ra Lotsawa. The two Yamaris have never achieved much success, being always overshadowed by the much more developed practice of Vajrabhairava, they have however enjoyed some moderate success within Gelug as supporting practices of the main form. Very little information is available on these deities, because of which they are omitted from this overview. The triad is interpreted as representing various aspects of the same force or being, called respectively the Outer, Inner and Secret Dharmaraja. The Outer Form (tib. *phyi sgrub*) is similar to the classic depiction of Yama, holding a club topped with a skull and a noose; he stands on a buffalo which either copulates with a woman lying underneath or crushes her, depending on the version. He is often accompanied by a woman who is understood to be Yami, his sister.¹⁷⁷ In this somewhat surprising form, a very archaic image of Yama reappears in the Tibetan tradition as a second-

¹⁷⁵ Gyatso, Geshe Kelsang (1997) *Heart Jewel: The Essential Practices of Kadampa Buddhism*, p. 3

¹⁷⁶ Repo, Joona (2011), *Tsongkhapa Lobzang Drakpa*, in: *The Treasury of Lives*; <https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Tsongkhapa-Lobzang-Drakpa/8986>, accessed on 19. 06. 2019

¹⁷⁷ Nebesky –Wojkowitz, op.cit., p. 82

order form of Yamāntaka. In fact, the tradition that he was once the first mortal to die, is preserved.¹⁷⁸ The Inner Form (tib. *nang sgrub*) has a wrathful rākṣasa face, hold a flaying knife and a skullcup and tramples upon a corpse.¹⁷⁹ The Secret Form (tib. *gsang sgrub*) is bull-headed, stands upon a bull and holds a jewel and a skullcup.¹⁸⁰ The forms are understood to be, respectively “the preta dwelling in the place, the lord of death which is in the body, the defilements which are in the mind.”¹⁸¹ That is, the Outer Form is understood to be literal Yama ruling over the Hells and pretaloka; the Inner Form is one’s own mortality and the fear of it; and the Secret Form is the root cause of it, the mental obscurations which produce the vicious cycle of birth and death. Each of these aspects of Yama are countered by an appropriate aspect of Yamāntaka – The Outer is conquered by Vajrabhairava, the Inner by Krishnayamari and the Secret by Raktayamari. This classification is of course somewhat artificial, being a product of the scholastic exposition characteristic of the Gelug tradition and was not reflected in actual practice, in which as has been already said Vajrabhairava clearly overshadowed the two Yamaris. Nevertheless, it has introduced a clarified picture of the nature and cosmological role of Yama and the various aspects of Yamāntaka which came to all be subsided within Vajrabhairava.

The Vajrabhairava tantra is, in turn, one of the three main tantric systems most appropriate to counter the three root poisons of ignorance, attachment and aversion (the latter two of which are sometimes translated as lust and hatred). The system associated by Tsongkhapa with ignorance is the Guhyasamāja, on the tantric system of which he wrote more than on any other in his life. Clinging to phenomena is in turn countered by the Cakrasaṃvara system, while Vajrabhairava is the form most suited to transform aversion.¹⁸² Being the most wrathful of the three beings Vajrabhairava became the yidam used by Gelug in all practices related to working with the Dharmapalas and potentially aggressive local spirits, making at least a cursory knowledge of the Vajrabhairava system an inevitable point of the Gelug monastic curriculum. Additionally, since Vajrabhairava is considered to encompass both Father and Mother tantric systems, it became a more general framework into which the particular practices and techniques of the other deities could be inserted, enriching one’s practice, but staying within the scope of one yidam, which is considered desirable as it does not disperse one’s devotion on multiple forms, which are anyway essentially identical. Thus, the claims of superior universality of the Vajrabhairava system were accepted by Tsongkhapa and woven into the structure of his very influential presentation of the Buddhist Dharma.

¹⁷⁸ Siklos, op.cit., p. 69

¹⁷⁹ Nebesky – Wojkowitz, op.cit., p. 82-83

¹⁸⁰ Nebesky – Wojkowitz, op.cit., p. 83

¹⁸¹ Siklos, op.cit., p. 67

¹⁸² Dharmabhadra, op.cit., p. 218

His approach towards the system is best expressed in a piece of commentary called the *Five Unique Qualities* of the system¹⁸³, which are frequently discussed as a preface to Yamāntaka commentary in the Gelug tradition. The First is that the modern era is a time of widespread corruption, expressed as the so-called Five Degenerations: the degeneration of (philosophical) view; the degeneration of afflictive emotions; of time; of life (in the sense of shortening of the human lifespan) and of living beings (in the sense of them having weaker mental faculties than they used to in earlier times). In such a corrupt time, the conditions are very adverse to Dharma practice and in consequence a supremely powerful tantric deity is needed to break through the obstacles and allow one to practice devotedly and attain the Awakening.¹⁸⁴ The Second is expressed in two of Vajrabhairava's held instruments, the mass of intestines and brazier he holds. The intestines symbolize the practice of inner yogas of the illusory body (tib. *sgyu lus*),¹⁸⁵ while the brazier symbolizes the practice of clear light (tib. *'od gsal*) which crowns the Six Yogas of Naropa. Together, they mean that the system encompasses Guhyasamāja instruction, which focuses on these subjects. The Third Quality is expressed in the khaṭvāṅga Yamāntaka holds, symbolizing the mother tantras (mainly of Cakrasaṃvara and Hevajra) and the practice of tummo which is their foundation.¹⁸⁶ The Fourth Quality is that Vajrabhairava is incomparable in conferring wisdom and attainment, which is expressed through four of his attributes: a brazier, symbolizing the constant increase of wisdom; a person impaled on a spear, symbolizing the total purification of all past karmas, even that of most heinous crimes; and the two hands pointing upwards and downwards with the threatening mudra, symbolizing the quick attainment of siddhis and the protection from mundane obstacles.¹⁸⁷ The fifth Quality is that the practice of Vajrabhairava is essentially also the practice of Mañjuśrī, and one who completes the sādhana of Vajrabhairava attains supreme understanding of Mañjuśrī as well. This is not true of the Krishnayamari and Raktayamari tantras.

With the expansion of Gelugpa lamas into Mongolia, Vajrabhairava was introduced as one of the main deities, approach in popularity only by Hayagrīva,¹⁸⁸ what is understandable, since his mundane role is to be the protector of horses and horsemen. The practices became widespread in the population to a greater degree than in Tibet, where empowerments were deemed necessary to practice even among the common people. In Mongolia, however, the Tüsiyetü Khan gave horses to those who would learn a summary of Dharma and cows to those who would learn a Yamāntaka dhāraṇī, thus leading the poorest strata of Mongolian society to learn the new teachings. This has naturally led to a popular magical use

¹⁸³ Dharmabhadra, op.cit., p. 25

¹⁸⁴ Dharmabhadra, op.cit., p. 26

¹⁸⁵ Dharmabhadra, op.cit., p. 218

¹⁸⁶ Dharmabhadra, op.cit., p. 26

¹⁸⁷ Dharmabhadra, op.cit., p. 26

¹⁸⁸ Siklos, op.cit., p. 75

of the mantras, leading to the emergence of texts such as *buu-yin tarni* and *buu-yin sang*, the dhāraṇī and incense offering rite meant to bless one's rifle.¹⁸⁹

During the rule of the Manchu Qing Dynasty, Gelug influence spread to China. The phonetic similarity led the Manchus to designate Mañjuśrī as their national tutelary deity (in turn associating Avalokiteśvara with Tibet and Vajrapāṇi with Mongolia). The wrathful form of the bodhisattva of wisdom was naturally seen as a protector of the dynasty and Qing China at large, which led to a promulgation of Vajrabhairava practice understood as an imperial cult.¹⁹⁰ While the practice did not spread among common Chinese Buddhists as it did among the Mongolians, the association of the deity with the imperial capital remained – seeing Vajrabhairava as the protector god of Beijing has remained even until today.¹⁹¹ The city's layout is associated with the deity's mandala – the Forbidden City corresponds to the innermost ring of the mandala, the deity's own palace; the Imperial City corresponds to the middle ring, the circle of wisdom fire surrounding it; and the Outer City corresponds with the outer mandala of charnel grounds, populated by lesser deities subordinate to Vajrabhairava.¹⁹² The deity himself was to be represented either by, according to some sources, a still extant statue in Beihai shrine,¹⁹³ or by the emperor himself, considered an emanation of Mañjuśrī.¹⁹⁴ The associations are reflected in architectural details of the central temple which are designed after the deity's mandala. During the reign of the Qing dynasty, Vajrayāna was supported financially and much patronage was directed to the ritual specialists of the Yamāntaka tradition, whose expertise was seen as an essential supernatural support of the imperial court's rulings.

Sādhana analysis

A sādhana analysis of Vajrabhairava, in order to be truly complete, should be based on one of the extensive liturgies, which are the source material from which the more popular brief sādhanas have been extracted. The complexity and sheer length of those texts prevents them from being analyzed within the scope of this paper (the full text of the *Extensive Sādhana of Solitary Hero Vajrabhairava*, composed by Pabongka Rinpoche (1878-1941), is around forty pages long). On the other hand, the concise sādhanas lose some of the particular characteristics of the tradition, keeping only the essentials which are relatively uniform between systems. Because of these reasons, a general structure of the

¹⁸⁹ Siklos, op.cit., p. 75

¹⁹⁰ Siklos, op.cit., p. 76

¹⁹¹ Bianchi, Ester (2008), *Protecting Beijing. The Tibetan Image of Yamāntaka-Vajrabhairava in Late Imperial and Republican China*, in: Monica Esposito, *Images of Tibet in the 19th and 20th Centuries*; p. 330

¹⁹² Bianchi, op.cit., p. 333

¹⁹³ Siklos, op.cit., p. 76

¹⁹⁴ Bianchi, op.cit., p. 331

extensive sādhanā will be provided with a short commentary and only few interesting passages will be provided in full and analyzed. The purpose of this part of the paper is to show how the various complex philosophical and mythological strains of the Yamāntaka tradition come together in a single ritual structure, which is at the same time understood to be the practice of a total system of tantra, at least theoretically encompassing the whole of the Dharma as understood by the Gelug tradition. The text used is in the translation of Sharpa Tulku with Richard Guard, prepared in 1990.

A Long Sādhanā of the Transcendental Destroyer Solitary-Hero Yamāntaka

1. General Preliminaries
 - a. Refuge and Bodhicitta
 - b. Hundreds of Deities of the Joyful Land
 - c. Lamrim Prayer
 - d. Request to root and Lineage lamas
 - e. Instant Self-Generation
2. Specific Preliminaries
 - a. Consecrating the Inner Offering**
 - b. Consecrating the Preliminary Outer Sense Offering to the Direction Protectors
 - c. Consecrating the Torma Offering to the Direction Protectors
 - d. Invocation of the Direction Protectors and Offering the Torma, Sense and Inner Offerings to them
 - e. Consecration of Sense Offerings for the Self-Generation
 - f. Meditational Recitation of Vajrasattva
3. Actual session
 - a. Inviting the Field of Merit
 - b. Seven Limb Practice
 - c. Holding the Tantric Vows and the Four Immeasurables
4. Three Kaya Practice
 - a. Transforming Death into the Dharmakaya
 - b. Common Protection Wheel
 - c. Uncommon Protection Wheel of the Ten Wrathful Deities
 - d. Transforming the Bardo into the Sambhogakaya
 - e. Transforming Rebirth into the Nirmanakaya**
 - f. Blessing of the Sense Organs, Body, Speech and Mind

- g. Meditating on the Three Beings
 - h. Inviting the Wisdom Beings
 - i. Inviting the Empowering Deities
 - j. Initiating and Sealing by the Empowering Deities
 - k. Presenting Outer Offerings to Oneself as Yamāntaka
 - l. Presenting the Inner Offerings to the Lineage Lamas, the Yidams, protectors and all Beings
 - m. Extensive Praise
 - n. Brief Praise
 - o. Recollection of Purity
 - p. Consecrating the Mala
 - q. Mantra recitation
 - i. Mantra of Mañjuśrī
 - ii. Root Mantra of Yamāntaka
 - iii. Action Mantra of Yamāntaka
 - iv. Essence Mantra of Yamāntaka
 - v. Hundred-Syllable Mantra
 - r. Final Offerings and Praise
5. Conclusion of the Session
- a. Consecration of the Torma Offerings to Yamāntaka and the Direction Protectors, who are respectively the Transcendental and Worldly Deities, as well as to Karmayama
 - b. Presenting Offerings and Praise to Front Generated Yamāntaka
 - c. Offerings and Praise to the Front Generated Direction Protectors
 - d. Generation of Karmayama, inviting the Wisdom Beings, Initiating and Sealing Karmayama, Binding Karmayama to Samaya
 - e. Offering Torma and Inner Offering to Karmayama, Chamundi and Entourage
 - f. Requesting Karmayama to Perform Activities
 - g. Thanksgiving Offering and Praise
 - h. Extensive Prayer, Short Prayer
 - i. Requesting forbearance, Requesting the Guests to depart
 - j. Instant Self-Generation as Yamāntaka for Daily Activities

The first part of the sādhana, entitled *General Preliminaries*, follows a recognizable pan-Tibetan structure rendered in specifically Gelug way. The standard verses of refuge and bodhicitta are followed by the long Tsongkhapa guruyoga prayer called *The Hundred Deities of the Joyful Land* (tib. *gan den lha*

gyai ma). Similarly to the Nyingmapa Padmasambhava guruyoga practices at the beginning of ritual, the prayer serves to establish the practitioner in the correct lineage, thus empowering him to successfully and authoritatively perform the *sādhana*. It is patterned after the classic *Seven-limbed Practice* which involves invoking the lineage and performing prostrations and offerings to them, followed by the confession of one's faults, the expression of rejoicing with the success of others, requesting the gurus to teach sentient beings and to remain living long for their benefit and closes with a dedication of merit.¹⁹⁵ The prayer is meant as a universal preliminary, serving as guruyoga, purification and merit-making activity at once, preparing the mind of the practitioner for the actual devatayoga session.

The Consecration of the Inner Offering

The *Specific Preliminaries* are concerned primarily with the pacification of potentially obstructive forces and purification of the *sadhaka*. Following a purificatory visualization which will be analyzed in more detail due to its uniqueness and presence in most Vajrabhairava liturgies, several sets of offerings are visualized and consecrated to be later presented to the invoked directional protectors – the worldly gods ruling at the periphery of Vajrabhairava's mandala. Worldly gods, although subjugated by the wrathful Buddha, are not enlightened themselves and thus are subject to error and moodiness. As such, they must be propitiated with correct ritual measures, pacifying their aggression and subjugating them to the practitioner to serve as his own protectors and servants in magical workings. Such a pacification is usually accomplished by the offering of a physical or visualized torma,¹⁹⁶ which in this case is imagined as emerging out of the *amṛta* nectar generated in the Consecration of the Inner Offering.

“OM HRIH SHTRIH VIKRITA NANA HUM PHAT

OM SVABHAVA SHUDDHA SARVA DHARMA SVABHAVA SHUDDHO HAM

Everything becomes empty. Within a state of emptiness, from a YAM comes a blue bow-shaped wind mandala marked with banners, on top of which from a RAM comes a red triangular fire mandala. On top of that, from AH's comes a grate of three human heads, on top of which from an AH comes a white skull-cup. Inside it, in the east from a BHRUM comes the flesh of a bull marked with GO. In the south from an AM comes the flesh of a dog marked with a KU. In the west from a JRIM comes the flesh of an elephant marked with a DA. In the North, from a KHAM

¹⁹⁵ Compare: <http://multimedia.lamayeshe.com/the-seven-limb-practice> (accessed on 18.06.2019)

¹⁹⁶ Compare: Sherab, Khenchen Palden and Dongyal, Tsewang Khenpo, *op.cit.*, p. 165-166

comes the flesh of a horse marked with a HA, and in the center, from a HUM comes the flesh of a human marked with a NA.”¹⁹⁷

The HRIH SHTRIH mantra is the action mantra of Vajrabhairava¹⁹⁸ and as such is used in this sādhanā in all functions related to the practical manifestation of the deity’s power, such as purification, consecration, chasing away obstructing spirits or empowering magical visualizations. Situated atypically before the SVABHAVA mantra of voidness which usually marks the visualisation’s start, it puts the whole ritual procedure in Vajrabhairava’s mandala, setting the deity as the ultimate nature of reality within which the visualization may take place. The structure which arises from the emptiness is principally a hearth. Each element arises from its seed-syllable, which in the later part of the passage hints at the secret nature of the visualized impure substances. The sequence begins with wind and fire mandalas which support a kapāla lying on three human heads. The heads and kapāla arise from AH’s, the seed-syllable of Speech and inner energy, which hints at their interpretation on the Inner level of the tantric triad. Thus, the three heads probably refer to the three main subtle channels with their associated energies of ignorance, clinging and aversion which are alchemically transformed into knowledge, compassion and skillful action through tantric practice. Other interpretations are also possible, since all the symbolic triads in tantric Buddhism are more or less isomorphous, such an interpretation is however the most obvious, since it allows to interpret the whole hearth structure as representing synchronically the outer world, its inner perception supported by the subtle winds and its secret essential nature. The substances in the kapāla are a collection of what was traditionally considered impure, chosen to be imaginatively transformed into the immortality nectar, thus transforming the practitioner’s perception to the pure mode trained by the Anuttarayogatantra. The meats, which come from seed syllables are authoritatively interpreted as representing the five Buddha families, which are marked by the seed syllable whence they arise.¹⁹⁹ The syllables with which they are marked are the first syllables of their Sanskrit names as rendered in Tibetan – e. g. GO refers to a bull, KU (as in *kukkura*) refers to a dog, HA (as in *haya*) refers to a horse and so on. The intended purpose of these markings is explained as follows: “They serve the purpose of revealing that the substances are merely imputed through names and conception and are not established through their own entity.”²⁰⁰

“In the southeast from a LAM comes feces marked with a BI. In the southwest from a MAM comes blood marked with a RA. In the northwest from a PAM comes white bodhicitta [i.e.

¹⁹⁷ Pabongka, Je Rinpoche, trans. Sharpa Tulku and Richard Guard (1990), *A Long Sādhanā of the Transcendental Destroyer Solitary-Hero Yamāntaka*, p. 6

¹⁹⁸ Dharmabhadra, op.cit., p. 284

¹⁹⁹ Dharmabhadra, op.cit., p. 45

²⁰⁰ Dharmabhadra, op.cit., p. 44

semen] marked with a SHU. In the northeast from a TAM comes marrow marked with a MA. And in the center from a BAM comes urine marked with a MU.”²⁰¹

Having established the meats’ meaning as the Buddhas of the five families, we are not surprised that a symbolic representation of their śaktis follows. The impure liquids (as opposed to the meats, impure solids) arise from the seed syllables of the consorts, respectively: LAM for Lochana, MAM for Mamaki, Pam for Pandaravasini and so on.²⁰² As in the previous case, the letter added later are the first syllables of the respective liquids’ Sanskrit names. Together, the mass of meats and liquids represents the nature of reality – the Five Wisdoms (Buddhas) and their manifestation as the Five Elements (Consorts) – as seen through a neurotic mind riddled with grasping and fear. The same impurities are then transformed into amṛta, not by a change of essence, but by a change of perspective – the point of the practice is that the nature of all phenomena, however disgusting they may appear, is equally pure and radiant and should be treated as such.

“On top of this are a white OM, a red AH and a blue HUM stacked one atop the other. From the HUM at my heart light rays emanate, striking the wind, whereby the wind moves, the fire blazes and the substances inside the skull-cup melt and boil. From the three syllables, light rays emanate successively, hooking back the Vajra-body, Vajra-speech and Vajra-mind, which dissolve into the three syllables. These then fall into the skull-cap and melt. By means of the HUM, the faults of color, odor and potential are cleansed. By means of the AH, it is transformed into nectar. By means of OM it increases and becomes inexhaustible. OM AH HUM.”²⁰³

The beginning sequence animates the whole visualized structure, introducing movement initiated by the light radiating from Vajrabhairava’s heart. The seed syllables of the three *buddhakayas* represent the totality of the awakened Body, Speech and Mind. The syllables “hooking back” these awakened faculties mean that the practitioner visualizes all the Buddhas appear in the appropriate aspects of Vairocana, Amitābha and Akṣobhya and melt into the syllables, becoming one with them.²⁰⁴ The syllables then unite with the impure substances, purifying them and changing them into nectar. This, as is now easily understandable, represents the impure perception of the world and its inherent suffering transformed to a pure and blissful perception through the recognition of the essential nature of all phenomena as one with the perfect Awakened Mind. This essential idea of the Vajrayāna is here depicted in a dynamic visualization, which at the same time reinforces the philosophical idea, uses it as a basis for ritual purification and a technique to induce a deep and calm state of focus – the practitioner,

²⁰¹ Pabongka, op.cit., p. 6

²⁰² Dharmabhadra, op.cit., p. 44

²⁰³ Pabongka, op.cit., p. 6

²⁰⁴ Dharmabhadra, op.cit., p. 45

once acquainted with the symbolism, is expected to consider the principles he visualizes in a personal manner in order to purify his own afflictive emotions and psychological problems.²⁰⁵ Thus, the particular meats become one's own neuroses and wisdoms, the liquids become one's own constituent skandhas and the whole boiling mass becomes one's own suffering, purified by the practice into a state of blissful focus. This visualization is characteristic, to my knowledge, only of the Vajrabhairava tantras, and is a perfect illustration of the vastly syncretic approach they represent – all the tantric Dharma is condensed to a set of essential points, which are represented in visualization and ordered as sādhanas to be practiced daily.

The remaining part of the *Specific Preliminaries* involves generating various offerings from the transformed amṛta and their consecration through a set of mantras. The *Actual Session*, somewhat misleadingly, is the preparation for the most important and time-consuming part of the ritual, which is the *Three Kaya Practice*. The *Actual Session* follows a very similar pattern to the *General Preliminaries*, only this time the seven-limb practice is directed towards Vajrabhairava, visualized in front and conceived as the union of all gurus.²⁰⁶

The *Three Kayas Practice* refers to the core idea of practicing the stages of a sādhana as antidotes purifying the causes of ordinary death, bardo and rebirth.²⁰⁷ That is, by visualizing oneself dissolving into emptiness and staying within that state in meditative concentration is the purification of the death process. It is believed that mastery over that ritual process allows one to stay conscious during one's actual death and to avoid entering the intermediate state of the bardo, instead attaining awakening and staying within the Clear Light.²⁰⁸ Because of that, the first section is called *Transforming Death into the Dharmakaya*. Similarly, the manifestation of the mandala palace, the central seed-syllable and the peaceful bodhisattva Mañjuśrī is a purification of the Bardo state into Sambhogakaya²⁰⁹ – since at some point the practitioner's focus will waver and they will again begin to experience thoughts and mental images, which in time after death are believed to create the hallucinatory worlds of the bardo, this process is utilized in the sādhana. After one's concentration on voidness weakens, one immediately proceeds to visualize the structure of the deity's mandala. Repeated practice of the process is believed to imprint itself in the mental continuum of the individual, preparing him to perform the same ritual after death and the leaving of the Clear Light, thus arising as Mañjuśrī instead of getting lost in one's karmic projections. The third and final part of the Three Kaya practice is the arising of the final, active

²⁰⁵ Zopa, Lama Rinpoche, op.cit., p. 48-50

²⁰⁶ Zopa, Lama Rinpoche, op.cit., p. 44-50

²⁰⁷ Zopa, Lama Rinpoche, op.cit., p. 11-16

²⁰⁸ Zopa, Lama Rinpoche, op.cit., p. 59-67

²⁰⁹ Dharmabhadra, op.cit., p. 89-91

form of Mañjuśrī, that is of Vajrabhairava, which is a purification of ordinary rebirth.²¹⁰ This manner of understanding the sādhana is crucial – the practice follows the process of death and rebirth in all the details listed in the tantric literature and it construes its ultimate goal as the transcendence of death – something that could be technically said to be the goal of all Vajrayāna, which is however that much more appropriate in the practice of the Ender of Yama.

The main form of Ekavira Vajrabhairava

The main form of Vajrabhairava, visualized in great detail in the Nirmanakaya section of the practice will be overviewed to illustrate both the changes the practice underwent since the six-armed Yamāntaka form analyzed in Chapter II and to explain the form of the deity most prevalent in contemporary depictions. Since the array of weapons and ritual implements held in the deities thirty-four hands is truly overwhelming (and somewhat redundant in meaning), only the more important or atypical attributes will be commented upon.

“Description of Vajrabhairava. With the ability to devour the lords of the Three Realms, I chortle HA HA, with my tongue darting, my fangs bared, my mouth having wrinkles of anger, my brow also wrinkled in anger, with my eyes and eyebrows ablaze like the eon of destruction and my orange hair bristling upward. I make threatening mudras at both the worldly and transcendental gods, frightening even the frightful ones, and thunder the sound PHEM like a dragon. I eat human blood, grease, marrow and fat, and have five dried fearsome skulls crowning each of my heads. Adorned with a skull mala of fifty moist human heads, I wear two black snakes as Brahmin threads. I am also adorned with ornaments made of human bones, such as wheel shaped crowns, earrings and so forth. My belly is bulging, my body is naked; my phallus stands erect. My eyelashes, eyebrows, moustache and body hairs blaze like the fire of the eon of destruction.”²¹¹

The first person used in the text should be noted – at this point of the ritual the practitioner imagines himself as the deity, reciting the above verses as a support for detailed visualization. The “devouring of the three realms” means encompassing all of existence, since even the highest of worldly gods are still confined to their abodes in the Formless Realm, the highest of the three worlds. The “HA HA” laughter, rather surprisingly, is almost not without a specific meaning – the commentary explains that this is a menacing laughter, as opposed for example to the enchanting HI HI or the overpowering HO HO.²¹²

²¹⁰ Zopa, Lama Rinpoche, op.cit., p. 68-69

²¹¹ Pabongka, op.cit., p. 17

²¹² Dharmabhadra, op.cit., p. 95

While this association may seem unnecessarily forced, it reinforces one important point – nothing in a sādhana is accidental and nothing is without meaning. The description of the wrathfully wrinkled face is rather standard; additional details, such as sparks of fire emitted from bodily pores or other such “wrathful phenomena” can be inserted in private practice for the intensification of sensations during practice.²¹³ The frightening mudras have been touched upon in the section on the Five Unique Qualities of the Vajrabhairava system; the frightening of the transcendental gods is thought to make them more eager to bestow siddhi on the practitioner, while the frightening of the worldly gods is said to keep them from causing obstructions in practice.²¹⁴ The sound PHEM is a modification of the seed-syllable PHAT which is connected to wrathful action and usually inserted at the end of fierce mantras as a kind of a “trigger” that releases the accumulated power.²¹⁵ PHEM, while meriting additional study, seems more strongly connected to the female divinities, being mentioned in Kurukulla sādhanas and explained in the commentary as summoning all the ḍākinīs at once.²¹⁶ The deity’s attributed that follow are fairly standard for a wrathful divinity of the New Translations canon.

“My main face is that of a black buffalo, extremely furious and having two sharp horns. On top of it and between my horns is a red face, extremely horrific with blood dripping from its mouth. On top of that is a yellow face of Mañjuśrī with a slightly wrathful expression. Adorned with the flower ornaments of youth, his hair is tied in five knots on the crown of his head. As for my faces to the right of the base of my horns, the first or central face is blue, the face to its right is red and the face to its left is yellow. As for my faces to the left of the base of my horns, the first or central face is white, the face to its right is gray and the face to its left is black. These faces are very wrathful and each of my nine faces has three eyes.”²¹⁷

All the body parts of the deity have particular associations – since the deity is the Dharma, its constituent parts are parts of the Dharma. Thus, the two horns of the characteristic buffalo head of Vajrabhairava refer to the two truths of tantric Buddhism.²¹⁸ The Mañjuśrī head has hair tied in five knots to symbolize the five Buddha families that are supported by the one Wisdom – this motif is reflected in the Buddhist folklore of China, where the five-peaked Wutai Mountain, a popular pilgrimage spot connected with Mañjuśrī, are interpreted as his hair tied in five buns. The nine faces are, as the commentary explains, “the nine limbs of the scripture”,²¹⁹ I however have not encounter any commentary that would detail the meaning of the faces’ colors; while these could be interpreted through the typical color scheme as

²¹³ Zopa, Lama Rinpoche, op.cit., p. 98-99

²¹⁴ Dharmabhadra, op.cit., p. 97

²¹⁵ Marcotty, op.cit., p. 35

²¹⁶ Dharmabhadra, op.cit., p. 95-6

²¹⁷ Pabongka, op.cit., p. 17

²¹⁸ Dharmabhadra, op.cit., p., 281

²¹⁹ Dharmabhadra, op.cit., p., 281

referring to the activities of pacifying (white), increasing (yellow), magnetizing (red) and fierce (blue and black), that leaves out the grey face, grey having no clear symbolic association in the system.

“With my first right and left hands I hold the moist skin of an elephant stretched open by the skin of its left front and hind legs, with its head to my right and its hairy back facing outward. As for my other right hands, I hold in the first a curved knife, in the second a dart, in the third a wooden pestle, in the fourth a fish-knife, in the fifth a harpoon, in the sixth an axe, in the seventh a spear and in the eighth an arrow. In the back row in my ninth hand I hold an iron hook, in the tenth a skull club, in the eleventh a khaṭvāṅga, in the twelfth a wheel of sharp weapons, in the thirteenth a five-spoked vajra, in the fourteenth a vajra-hammer, in the fifteenth a sword and in the sixteenth a changteu hand-drum.”²²⁰

In general, the right hands represent method while the left hands represent wisdom.²²¹ The curved knife has already been commented upon before. The dart (skt. *bhindipala*, tib. *bhi dhi pa la*) consists of a *phurba*, a three-sided ritual dagger, topped with peacock feathers. The *phurba* is an extremely complex and ancient symbol itself,²²² for the sake of this passage it can however be summed up as an icon of the fierce activity pinning down and immobilizing the three poisons; the three peacock feathers are said to represent Yamāntaka’s victory over the three realms of existence.²²³ It should be noted, however, that the peacock feather is a long-used Dzogchen symbol of the energy manifesting the visible world out of the Radiant Void; peacock feathers are put into ritual vases (tib. *bum pa*) with a similar meaning. Thus, the dart could be interpreted as the wrathful purifying activity of the energy of reality itself. The fish knife (skt. *churika*, tib. *chu gri*) is a special knife for flaying and gutting fish, intended for holding it with one’s feet and manipulating the fish by hand. Its Tibetan iconography is similar to a kris-type dagger with a wavy blade. It means the cutting away of conditioned existence, fishes being a common symbol for the meaningless, flowing cycles of saṃsāra.²²⁴ The harpoon carries similar meaning, having been brought together with an important part of tantric literature from the coastal regions of Bengal, where most people used to be fishermen. The axe and spear have been already discussed in Chapter II. The arrow is in itself a surprisingly deep symbol, having been used not only as the rather obvious symbol of swift action, but also among others as a metaphor of the central channel, a phallic symbol and a symbol of knowledge, based on the ritual use of arrows in indigenous Tibetan modes of divination.²²⁵ While it is difficult to determine which of the meanings were intended in this particular case, it is of no real

²²⁰ Pabongka, op.cit., p. 17

²²¹ Beer, op.cit., p. 257

²²² Compare: Marcotty, op.cit; Sherab, Khenchen Palden and Dongyal, Tsewang Khenpo, op.cit.

²²³ Beer, op.cit., p. 280

²²⁴ Beer, op.cit., p. 282

²²⁵ Beer, op.cit., p. 270-274

consequence, since all of these are more or less appropriate and the system being inherently inclusivistic. The skull-club is a traditional attribute of Yama, which may have facilitated the conflation of Yama with Bhairava due to the similarity of the implement with the tantric khaṭvāṅga. In this case it refers to the subsiding of Yama's attributes and powers in the deity that managed to subjugate him. The vajra-hammer is associated with the destruction of avarice, covetousness and miserliness²²⁶ while the drum is an attribute of the charnel ground yogis. The remaining implements have been already explained before.

“As for my other left hands, in the first I hold a skull-cup filled with blood, in the second a four-faced, yellow head of Brahma, in the third a shield, in the fourth a leg, in the fifth a lasso, in the sixth a bow, in the seventh intestines and in the eighth a bell. In the back row in my ninth hand I hold a hand, in the tenth a cloth shroud, in the eleventh a person impaled on a stick, in the twelfth a triangular brazier, in the thirteenth a scalp, in the fourteenth a hand in the threatening mudra, in the fifteenth a trident with a three-curved banner, and in the sixteenth a homa-fire fan.”²²⁷

The cut head of Brahma is the attribute of Śiva Bhairava, who according to the founding myth of the kāpālikas decapitated the creator god and undertook penance for the sin by wandering alone with his victim's head affixed to his hand. The shield represents protection from obstacles and obstructions, the lasso symbolizes *vaśīkaraṇa*, the magnetizing or subjugating magical activity. The leg and hands are said to correspond to the fast “walking” along the path to awakening and the hands the skill in performing the practical ritual activities.²²⁸ The intestines refer to the practice of inner yogas and the resultant realization of the voidness of phenomena; just as intestines transform whatever is put into them into a uniform mass.²²⁹ The bell is one of the main ritual implements, which paired with the vajra represents the female polarity of wisdom. The cloth shroud symbolizes victory over death,²³⁰ although it should be mentioned that it appears in the original tantras of Vajrabhairava as the fabric on which mandalas should be painted.²³¹ The impaled person and brazier have been explained in the context of the Five Unique Qualities; the scalp, to my knowledge, lacks one particular meaning, instead appearing liberally as a terrifying addition to the various collections of fierce symbols. The three-curved banner is a military insignium of the imperial Tibetan army which is held by fierce deities and especially worldly Dharma Protectors, meaning that they lead hosts of spirits to war.²³² The homa-fire fan means the ritual fan used

²²⁶ Beer, op.cit., p. 305

²²⁷ Pabongka, op.cit., p. 17

²²⁸ Beer, op.cit., p. 313

²²⁹ Beer, op.cit., p. 313

²³⁰ Beer, op.cit., p. 313

²³¹ Siklos, op.cit., p. 112

²³² Beer, op.cit., p. 284

for strengthening fire during homa offering, which is the main ritual means of accomplishing the magical activities.

“As for my right feet, the first treads on a human, the second a buffalo, the third a bull, the fourth a donkey, the fifth a camel, the sixth a dog, the seventh a sheep and the eighth a fox. As for my left feet, the first treads on a vulture, the second an owl, the third a crow, the fourth a parrot, the fifth a hawk, the sixth a kite, the seventh a mynah bird and the eighth a swan. Also trod under my feet with their faces down are Tsangpa, Wangpo, Khyabjug and Dragpo under my right and Zhonu Dongdrug, Logdren, Dawa and Nyima under my left, as I stand in the midst of a furious conflagration.”²³³

While the particular animals have their own mythological and folklore connotations, these are secondary here; what is important is that the legs of the deity trample both upon the beings of the earth (mammals) and of the sky (birds). The deities sixteen legs are understood as the sixteen divisions of emptiness;²³⁴ while this highly scholastic attribution certainly was not present in the primary sources, what is essentially meant by that is that the deity is supported by a complete understanding of emptiness which dominates the various modes of mundane life. The names that follow are various Indian deities, considered by the Buddhists to be worldly deities and thus dominated by the Buddhas. They are, as follows: Brahma, Indra, Vishnu, Shiva, Kumara, Ganesha, Chandra and Surya.²³⁵ These together represent not only the victory of the Buddhist Dharma over its competitors, but also the superior status of the practitioner identified with Vajrabhairava over the forces understood to rule the visible world.

The remaining parts of the sādhana

Following the visualization, the practitioner proceeds to invite the jñānasattvas and bind them with the imagined figure, empowering it and presenting offerings to the now-manifest deity. This follows a similar pattern as the one discussed in Chapter II, is however longer and more detailed. When the deity is stabilized, the sadhaka proceeds to recite the mantras, which are as follows: the mantra of Mañjuśrī, who is the essence of Vajrabhairava and the source of his power; the root mantra of Yamāntaka, which is considered to draw the practitioner closer to the deity (and by itself merits further investigation, being rather unclear in meaning and origins); the action mantra, which accomplishes the projection of the deity’s power; and finally the simple essence mantra – OM YAMĀNTAKA HUM PHAT. After the mantra recitation is finished, the sādhana mirrors itself, repeating earlier preliminary activities in a reverse order

²³³ Pabongka, op.cit., p. 17

²³⁴ Dharmabhadra, op.cit., p. 281

²³⁵ Dharmabhadra, op.cit., p. 275

with certain minor changes; the offerings are given again, this time as a token of gratitude for the accomplishment of the mantra's power and the deity is again praised. Finally, the worldly deities are again given a pacifying torma, this time however in a minor sādhana of their own, which contains all the essential points of invocation, binding and offering. The whole liturgy is completed with the recitation of prayers dedicating the produced merit to the end of suffering of all sentient beings.

Concluding remarks

The goal of this paper was to provide readers with a general overview of the history of the Yamāntaka tantras in relation to their religious and social context. To recapitulate the findings briefly, the foundation of the system lies in the transformations of the Vedic god of the underworld, Yama. Yama was part of the earliest stratum of Indo-Aryan mythology, having verifiable parallels in other related cultures, such as the Iranian Jamshid. In the Vedic corpus, he is believed to have been the first mortal man, whose death granted him a special divine status. As the first to die, Yama had to scout out the way to the pleasant afterlife, over which he began to rule as the lord and judge of the dead. Serving the role of a psychopompos, he led the souls of the worthy deceased to his domain, protecting them from getting lost on the way or being attacked by malevolent spirits. As the focus of the Indian religion during the Vedic period gradually shifted away from the propitiation of the ancestors to the worship of deities and individual spiritual practice with the aim of achieving personal liberation, Yama's role changed. The role of the judge of the dead took on a new meaning, rendering Yama the master of Dharma, the world order which is reflected in the human realm as perfect moral conduct. The idea of Yama as a wise spiritual teacher, which originated in the *Kaṭhōpaniṣad*, was transformed by the Mahābhārata, in which Yama becomes identified with Dharma itself. As Yama Dharmaraja, he becomes an embodiment of the proper way of behavior which leads to fulfillment in life and to liberation after death. This understanding of Yama is also most prevalent in contemporary Hinduism.

The combination of wisdom and death in one personage proved to be a point of creative tension for the Mahayana Buddhists, who began incorporating various strands of non-Buddhist religious belief in the developing universalist framework of tantric philosophy from around the 5th c. CE. Death is understood in Buddhism as a link in the chain of co-dependent origination, which is the inner mechanism of samsara, the cyclical existence characterized by suffering. Death, as well as sickness and old age, have been used in Buddhism as prototypical symbols of the inevitable dissatisfaction of mundane existence since the first days of the tradition. On the other hand, the Buddhist Dharma is understood as the body of teachings and practices that is able to lead one to Awakening, which is the liberation from samsara. Buddhist Dharma is, in a way, symbolically inimical to death. This tension has been utilized by the anonymous practitioners who developed the early forms of Yamāntaka – a fierce emanation of *Mañjuśrī*, the Buddha of wisdom and Dharma, which conquers death by subjugating Yama. While the name of the deity was mentioned in the early *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, we lack more detailed descriptions or practices of the deity until the 8th c., when then-current system of esoteric Buddhism is transferred to Tibet by Padmasambhava. In the corpus of teachings he is believed to have transmitted, an important role was played by a system of practices of eight interrelated deities, called the Kagye. Five of the Kagye deities represented the enlightened faculties of all Buddhas – Body, Speech, Mind, Qualities and Activity;

while the three remaining deities played a supporting and protective role. Yamāntaka was a manifestation of the Enlightened Body, and indeed in the context of this teachings is sometimes called Manjuśri Body (tib. *'jam dpal sku*). This meditational form did not enjoy a broad popularity, being obscured in practice by other deities of the system, especially Vajrakīlaya, Yangdak Heruka and Hayagrīva.

Between roughly the 7th and 11th c. the Indian tantric Buddhism underwent something of a Golden Age, when a vast corpus of literature was developed and systematized and the Buddhist institutions received royal patronage which allowed them to train large groups of scholars and tantric practitioners. During this time, the inspiring *coincidentio oppositorum* of death and Dharma present in the concept of Yamāntaka was greatly developed: the deity was intentionally conflated with a wrathful form of Śiva, called Bhairava, which was at the peak of its popularity at the time. The reasons for choosing Yamāntaka as the basis for introducing Vajrabhairava are not entirely clear. Certainly the symbolism of Bhairava, who was depicted as an ash-smeared ascetic wandering the charnel grounds in a retinue of hungry ghosts and spirits of the wilderness resonated with the complex of the Lord of Death; the primary attribute of Yama, a club topped with a skull, could also be conflated with the khaṭvāṅga, a slightly more complicated staff topped with a skull carried by Bhairava and his human worshippers alike. The newly invented deity had an extremely complex form highlighting its unprecedented array of powers as well as its soteriological completeness – being the embodiment of the salvific power of the Buddhist teaching, Vajrabhairava was considered to be the sum of all ritual practices. This form was transmitted to Tibet in the 11th c. by a scholar, yogi and sorcerer Ra Lotsawa Dorje Drak, who became a popular figure in the Tibetan folklore due to the influence of his highly readable hagiography, *The All-pervading Melodious Drumbeat*. Ra Lotsawa, popularly called Ralo, was reputed to have achieved awakening through the practice of Vajrabhairava and to have thus gained considerable magical powers, which he used to subdue his enemies and propagate his teachings. While indeed his missionary efforts have secured a stable foothold in Tibet for the Vajrabhairava practice, which was initially viewed with suspicion, the great popularization of the system was only to come with the work of Je Tsongkhapa. Tsongkhapa, who was one of the leading scholars and philosophical authorities of the 14th c., created extensive treatises describing the whole of the Buddhist Dharma in a logical way, especially stressing the relationship of the sutrayana and tantrayana and the need for a strict adherence to the monastic rules of conduct. Vajrabhairava was among the three main systems of practice Tsongkhapa followed and his commentaries on the tradition became highly influential, reinforcing its unique status as able to utilize at the same time techniques characteristic of the two main vertical classes of tantra, the Father and Mother tantras. His students, who have after his passing began to refer to themselves as the Gelug order, which has in time gained a great following and political power in Tibet, based their practices on

the founder's recommendations, thus greatly increasing the number of Vajrabhairava initiates and spreading the practice to Mongolia, where it became very popular, and Qing China, where it was considered an imperial cult due to the association of Manjuśri with the ruling Manchu dynasty. Since that time, the practice did not substantially change, most sādhanās used today being composed by the 19th c. Gelug scholar Pabongka Rinpoche, preserving Tsongkhapa's general view of the deity's role in the wider Vajrayāna pantheon.

The discussed subjects could have only been touched upon in the limited volume of this paper. Certain problems need further research in order to be fully understood; especially the chronology and context of the emergence of the original Yamāntaka figure is somewhat unclear; the deity's name being mentioned several centuries earlier than any extant liturgies, we have no means of ascertaining the way the character was interpreted before the wide-scale endorsement of tantric scriptures in the Indian Mahayana circles. Another important topic meriting further study is the context of Yama's and Bhairava's conflation in the form of Vajrabhairava. While I have proposed some of these deities' aspects and attributes that make such an identification easier or more obvious, these are nothing more than conjectures which need to be verified on the basis of original scriptures and comparative study. I hope that this paper will prove useful to scholars interested in this field of research and that the unclear areas left by it will be elucidated more fully in the future.

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