# Secret Drugs of Buddhism



READ

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# Introduction – 1

## Intriguing statements from diverse sources

> There was a certain *sadhaka* who frequented forest glades where he thought there were no other people. When he felt he was in total isolation, he wrapped his *siddhi* pills in three types of metal and secreted them beneath the roots of a tree… The *acarya* saw them and steadied his mind. About an hour later sounds and light spontaneously arose from the pills. When the *acarya* put them into his mouth he was able to see the realms of the gods and *yaksa*s, and he also found that he could travel to those places in a flash if he wished to.
>
> *- Life of Kṛiṣṇācārya* [1]

> There cannot be the slightest doubt that the Hindus and probably the Buddhists of earlier days did regard the taking of psychedelic drugs as part of the wide range of sadhanas which lead to enstasy.[2] The mythological and iconographical corollary to this is, apart from the personification of soma as the quintessence of all mind-affecting beverages, the frequent epithet of Śiva as the Lord of Herbs (*auṣadhīśvara*).
>
> *- The Tantric Tradition* [3]

> A traditional Tibetan doctor in Khatmandu had told me that there are particular mushrooms in Tibet that "bring bliss to the body and realization to the mind."
>
> *- The Heart of the World* [4]

> The fourth method of awakening [*i.e.* enlightenment] is through the use of specific herbs. In Sanskrit it is called *aushadhi*… knowledge of the herbs is a closely guarded secret…
>
> *- Kundalini Tantra* [5]

> The gods love that which is hinted at darkly and hate that which is uttered directly.
>
> *- Bṛihadāranyaka Upaniṣad, IV, 2, ii* [6]

> This idea of primitive secret societies reminds us of the Buddhist [tantra called] Guhya Samāja – the name itself has the same meaning. Tantric converts to early Buddhism, although they professed a belief in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, did not give up the traditional beliefs and rituals they used to practice in secret.
>
> *- History of the Tantric Religion* [7]

> Recently a Western student asked her guru whether such practices were still used.
> "They're secret practices," the learned *khenpo* replied, "so how can I know?"
>
> *- The Buddhist Handbook* [8]

**PREV**

# Introduction – 2

## Buddhism and Tibet

Perhaps it's due to the prominence and tireless activity of the exiled Tibetan leader and Buddhist teacher, H. H. the Dalai Lama, but it is commonly assumed these days that the Buddhism practiced in Tibet is representative of all Buddhism, that Tibetan Buddhism is the default, normative version of Buddhist practice. Some people I've met even think that Buddhism originated in Tibet, the birth-place, they say, of the Buddha.

I'd like to correct these misconceptions. Most forms of Buddhism are quite unlike the Tibetan version. In fact, Tibetan Buddhism is rather odd. Whereas the Buddhism of Śri Lanka, Cambodia and Thailand is totally non-theistic, the Vajrayāna Buddhism of Tibet recognizes literally hundreds of deities. And tradition has it that the Buddha was born near the border of India and Nepal.

Padmasabhava brought Vajrayāna Buddhism to Tibet.
He is the epitome of the Vajrayāna guru.
[From a Tibetan xylograph]

Another unusual feature of Vajrayāna Buddhism is its reliance upon spiritual guides (Sanskrit, *guru*; Tibetan, *bLa.Ma*, pronounced "lama") who may be male or female, monk or layperson. These spiritual guides instruct their students in meditation on these "tantric" deities in formal initiation rituals. They may also teach them yogic practices

involving energy centers within the body, called *cakras*. Again, these are features not encountered in other forms of Buddhism.

It should not be assumed, however, that because such differences as these are to be found in Tibet that they must have originated in Tibet. Unfortunately, Terrence McKenna fell into this trap and convinced many of his readers that this was the case. But, as anyone who studies its scriptures may see, Vajrayāna Buddhism was practiced in India for centuries before taking hold in Tibet. At one time, this kind of Buddhism was more widely popular, spreading as far as Sumatra. In Japan, the Shingon school of Buddhism is, in fact, Vajrayāna and the Tendai school is heavily influenced by its teachings. But only in Tibet is the Vajrayāna of India preserved in its entirety.

Padmasabhava is usually shown holding a skull-cup of *amṛita* in which stands a small *amṛita*-flask.

## A curious blind-spot

A glance at the titles of many Vajrayāna scriptures will find the word *amṛita* again and again. Many Vajrayāna deities have *amṛita* as part of their name and a liquid called *amṛita* is frequently visualized in Vajrayāna meditations. It is common to see two "skull-cups" of *amṛita* on Vajrayāna altars and a drink called *amṛita* is consumed at almost all Vajrayāna rituals. *Amṛita* is referred to throughout Vajrayāna literature and is regularly depicted in Vajrayāna art. And yet, despite all this, you may be forgiven for never having heard of it before. In fact, even scholarly works devoted to Vajrayāna Buddhism have managed to overlook it entirely.[1]

A jar of *amṛita* supporting a skull-cup of *amṛita*.
[From a Tibetan maṇḍala diagram]

The purpose of this book is, in part, to remedy this blind-spot. Not only does it emphasize the importance and ubiquity of *amṛita* within Vajrayāna Buddhism, it also offers suggestions for the ingredients of the original, psychoactive, *amṛita*. In telling the story of *amṛita*, this book provides a new perspective on the origins of the Vajrayāna. In the process, it also resolves a few puzzles of tantric iconography, (*e.g.* the role of peacocks, wheels and water-buffaloes) and suggests an explanation for the previously inexplicable "crown-bump" deities.

It must be said at the outset that, in many cases, Buddhist references to *amṛita* are simply an allusion to an "elixir of immortality" and nothing more. Such turns of phrase as "the nectar of my teacher's words" may be discounted as mere literary devices, not references to a physical potion. On the other hand, there are abundant instances in which *amṛita* (whether actually drunk or merely visualized in a meditation) is associated with "bliss" or even "intoxication". In these instances we may clearly perceive relics of a historical period when a draft of *amṛita* was expected to induce a state of "blissful" intoxication.

Yet, as we will see, the drinking of a drug potion called *amṛita* was an essential component of the original Vajrayāna practice. Granted, the *amṛita* as now employed in Vajrayāna rituals is merely symbolic, without perceptible psychoactive effect but it is quite apparent that this has not always been the case.

## *Amṛita* and *Soma*

Over the centuries there have been various potions called *amṛita*, the ingredients of which probably varied according to the prevailing traditions of location and period. However, it is probably safe to assume that anything called *amṛita* would have been called that because of its psychoactivity. The reason being that the earliest mention of *amṛita* is as the name of a drug in the ancient Hindu scripture, the *Ṛig Veda*. In that text, *amṛita* is the most frequently used synonym of a potent, plant-derived drug called *soma*.

The Ṛig Veda is not simply the oldest text of Hinduism but is the oldest scripture still in use by any religion.[2] It is a collection of hymns, many of which lavish praises on *soma*, a word which has three related yet distinct meanings. Firstly, it is the name given to a certain psychoactive liquid extracted from a plant, also it is the plant itself and, lastly, it is the name of a god, the plant-potion deified.

Not only did *soma* have an entheogenic effect on humans, the gods loved it too as it was the potion which kept them immortal. In the heavens, the moon was "the cup of *soma*," repeatedly filled and drained each month as the gods drank from it. The word *soma* is simply Sanskrit for "juice" (it comes from a verb meaning "to press out", "to squeeze"). The Vedic hymns also called it "the drop" (Skt., *indhu*), "the clear one" (Skt., *śukra*) or, somewhat more poetically, "immortality" (Skt., *amṛita*). Soma was equivalent to the nectar (a drink) and ambrosia (a food) from which the ancient Greek gods derived their immortality. Like *amṛita*, the Greek word *ambrosia* means "no death" (*i.e.* "[elixir of] immortality)."

In the course of their fire rituals, while chanting the appropriate hymns, the priests ground the plant between two stones, mixed it with water or milk, filtered it through sheep's wool, poured a little of it into the flames as an offering to the gods and drank the rest.
Only those of the highest caste, the priestly Brahmins, were allowed to participate in the "fire ceremony" (Sanskrit, *agni hotra*) and the verses of the Ṛig Veda recited during the ritual were thought to have magical power. These magical verses were called *mantra*, a word which, in a much later period, came to be associated with tantric practice and quite a different kind of recitation.

While the Vedic fire ritual was a very significant ceremony in ancient times, considered spiritually beneficial to the whole society and especially to the patron paying for it, it has continued to decline in importance since the Vedic period. The *agni hotra* is still occasionally performed, though as the *soma* now used shows no psychoactivity, we can only assume it to be a substitute for the original, truly active, plant.

As we shall see, there have been many suggestions as to the identity of the true *soma* of the Vedas but, fortunately, this is a question which I will not attempt to resolve in this book. Herein I merely summarize the various arguments as a preliminary to investigating the nature of *amṛita* in the context of Vajrayāna Buddhism.

## Secrecy

The nature of *amṛita* has always been secret and this book is an attempt to use all available clues to deduce the identity of its ingredients and, in doing so, offer a new perspective on the origin of Vajrayāna Buddhism. Although this research shows that the original rituals of Vajrayāna Buddhism made extensive use of psychedelic plants, it is not intended to disparage this school of Buddhism or, for that matter, any other spiritual tradition. This author, is a practicing Vajrayāna Buddhist and has deep respect for its philosophy and practice. On the other hand, this book does not divulge anything disclosed in any Vajrayāna initiation under conditions of secrecy. In fact, this author has had certain juicy tidbits revealed to him in this manner and deeply regrets that he may not share these with the reader. Suffice it to say that everything contained in the following pages is a result of my own independent research based on works available to the general public.

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# Select autobiographical details

## A teenage drug-fiend

My father and I were visiting his friend Tony who made a surprisingly honest living as a street trader and lived in an apartment near the center of Cardiff with his wife, a government social worker. He and my father shared two interests: listening to jazz and smoking a herb they called "ganj" – interests which were to be pursued simultaneously, if at all possible. *Ganj* is, of course, short for *ganja*, the word used for cannabis in the English-speaking islands of the Caribbean. Little did I know at the time that this is, in fact, the Sanskrit word *gañja*, brought halfway around the world by Indian workers.

Tony had the first real hi-fi setup I had ever seen and even before he turned it on I was impressed by its sheer size. He put an LP on the turntable – "Caravan" by Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers – and rolled a reefer on its sleeve as the notes of Wayne Shorter's tenor saxophone spilled out of speakers the size of phone booths. Tony, rapt in conversation with my father, absentmindedly offered me the joint. Uncertain whether to accept it, I looked to my dad. "Oh, why not?" he shrugged. "He's old enough."

Accepting the reefer, I took a decent drag and sucked down some air on top of the smoke. It was quite a struggle to hold it in without a coughing fit but I was eager to seem "cool" and desperately didn't want to disgrace myself in front of the grown-ups. Fortunately, I had been perfecting my dope-smoking technique for the past few months with stuff I had filched from my dad's stash. The year was 1962, the Beatles had their first single in the charts and I was 14 years old.

That same year I met some older boys from my school. They too were interested in jazz and weed, though their interest in the latter was limited to theoretical discussion. They had never actually seen any. Needless to say, I saw a way of rectifying this deficiency and soon gained a new circle of friends. Over the next couple of years we extended our acquaintance with psychoactive substances and managed to assay all manner of drugs: amphetamines, barbiturates, ether, morphine, nutmeg, cocaine, amyl nitrite, opium. Of all the drugs we tried, whether natural or synthetic, none seemed as harmlessly entertaining as ganj. This may sound reckless but we were discriminating and many of these substances were abandoned after only one trial. At any rate, it does not seem to have occasioned any permanent harm.[1]

Some of our number were fans of Beat poetry and subscribed to small-press journals from the West Coast and New York. It was here that we first read of the drugs which were being called "psychedelic." They were relatively non-toxic and were often compared to Cannabis. We avidly read Huxley's two essays on the effects of mescaline and would have dearly loved to have tried it – or the newer synthetic compound, LSD. Then, in the fall of 1965, one of our number (John) came across a magazine article on the effects of morning glory seeds. According to the article, they contained various amides of lysergic acid: chemical compounds related to LSD, which is itself the "diethyl" amide of lysergic acid. These seeds, we read, were one of the few natural sources of lysergic amides and had similar effects to LSD. Before that afternoon was out we had bought every single Morning Glory seed in Cardiff. We cut open the packets, tipped them onto a table and counted them. There were almost a thousand dark brown seeds, rather like angular grape pips. The magazine said that you'd need 250 seeds for each person and that, like peyote, the experience may entail a certain amount of vomiting. Sean, Roger, John and I decided we would try it, and I offered to prepare the potion.

That evening, I ground all the seeds to a very fine powder in my parents' coffee grinder, mixed the powder with cold water and set it aside overnight to soak. Our intention had been to drink it the very next day but the adventure was postponed because John had family commitments. When we heard that he couldn't make the following day either, we

decided to go ahead without him. I strained the batch of powdered seeds through cheesecloth, bottled the liquor and took it to Sean's flat. At the last moment, due to the unappetizing appearance of the fluid, we decided to make lemon Jello with it. When this had been made and consumed, we sat around, listening to records, waiting for the effects. An hour went by – nothing. Another hour – still nothing. We came to the conclusion that either the morning glory high was a myth or that I had failed to prepare it properly. Accordingly, we changed our plans and went our separate ways around town.

A backstreet in Cardiff.

Wales was at home to England in a big rugby match that Saturday afternoon and everyone not actually in the stadium was at home, glued to the television. The streets were almost deserted and unnaturally quiet except for the occasional, distant roar from thousands of spectators responding to the game. As I wandered through the shabby back-streets, their mingled voices, following a myriad acoustic pathways, washed about me like waves, seeming to come from all directions. I stopped walking and stood still, the better to appreciate the sonic phenomenon. A long, exultant roar, followed by nothing but echoes signaled the end of the match and a home win. As I stood there, still listening, a blackbird, unseen but very close, opened his throat to the gathering darkness. His song unfolded in liquid trills and plangent grace notes that hung almost visibly in the air before reverberating through the dingy streets. The crystalline purity of this simple birdsong transformed the prosaic back-street into a thing of indescribable beauty, peeling posters, discarded cigarette packets and all.

At this point I hastily revised my opinion of the morning glory seeds and decided to seek the comfort and security of The Moulders' Arms, our favorite pub, before the full effects set in. The pavement beneath my feet was unaccountably elastic and spongy but I made it to the pub without incident. To my surprise, Sean had arrived before me and was seated next to the coal fire, staring intently into the flames, looking even higher than I felt. Sean had not bought a drink and the landlady was leaning across the bar, trying to catch his attention. Given his condition, this was no small feat but when, eventually, he emerged from his reverie I tried to explain that the landlady was asking what he'd like to drink. Sean smiled as if he had suddenly realized what we were talking about then turned to her and said brightly, "A cup of coffee would be great, thanks."

Regardless of what they may serve these days, coffee was not an option in Welsh pubs of the 1960s, not even Irish coffee. Alarmed at what the landlady might think of Sean's bizarre request, I mumbled an excuse about him having "had too much already" and dragged him out of the bar. It was very fortunate that Sean's place was only a short walk from the pub as, by the time we had climbed the stairs to his tiny third-floor flat, the effects had reached their full intensity. It was not that we were incapable of walking, or even climbing the stairs; no, our motor skills and coordination were fine, but a distinct tendency to lethargy was settling upon us and language was becoming strangely problematic.

The evening was chilly so Sean lit his little gas fire and we sat either side of it, he in the only armchair, I on his bed, both of us lost in silent introspection. My mind was perfectly clear although a lot of unfamiliar yet fascinating things seemed to be going on within it. For one thing, whenever I closed my eyes I found myself watching odd little stories. Surreal tales of unfathomable meaning and gratuitous intensity would play out in Technicolor and fully formed 3D. After a while I recognized themes and motifs from my

dream-life, still continuing during waking hours. It seemed as if dreaming were not merely a nocturnal phenomenon but a perpetual process of which we occasionally catch glimpses. These glimpses, which we call "dreams," usually happen during a state of consciousness normally induced by sleep but, apparently, a tablespoon of small black seeds works, too.

Occasionally Sean would speak and I would reply but it was difficult to look at him as the outlines of his face had a tendency to break up into multicolored neon threads. This didn't bother me too much but there was something else that did, a subliminal unease which, though vaguely familiar, I could not place. This problem was resolved when a visitor arrived. It was Jenny, my girlfriend, who came and sat beside me on the bed. As soon as she sat down, she reached back and shut the window behind us. Miraculously, the mysterious feeling of discomfort dissipated. Apparently, I had been sitting in a cold draft.

Jenny was amused by our condition and continued to minister to our needs, making cups of tea and changing records. The mood of the evening improved greatly but I was still not entirely enjoying the drug experience. Even with a comfortably warm back, there was still a little knot of anxiety deep inside me. Eventually the cups of tea worked their way through my system and I made a visit to the bathroom. To my utter surprise, I found that I couldn't urinate. I stood there, poised over the toilet bowl, and tried to analyze the problem: I definitely needed to go, so why couldn't I? In a moment of intuition I understood that my reluctance to let go of my urine was, in some way, analogous to my inability to "let go" and enjoy the experience. The instant this realization dawned, I was able to release a stream of piss. As I watched it merge with the water in the bowl I realized that just a moment before, this substance had been an integral part of my being, held inside my bladder. Now, as I flushed this portion of myself down the drain, a pint of me was extending myself into the watery realm to unite with the contents of the sewer, then the sea, and eventually to lap upon unseen shores beyond vast oceans.

As I resumed my position on the bed, I was no longer confined within my previous notions of what constituted "self." The cosmos was one – seamless, indivisible; by non-attachment with the part called "me," I had become the whole. Jenny put "Otis Blue" on the turntable, I fell back onto the bed and my body dissolved in a cloud of incandescent joy.

## A strange find

One Saturday afternoon in the autumn of 1966, in a pleasant suburban home on the outskirts of London, I first laid eyes on a small brass object without which this book might never have been written.

"Good grief, it's Tibetan!" I exclaimed.

"Nah, surely not. It's Mexican," said Les. "Some kind of imitation-Aztec, tourist thing."

"No, Les, I'm sure it's Tibetan. I'm reading this book about Tibetan Buddhism and it's got a picture of one of these."

According to the book, the object was called a *p'urba*. Apart from this single illustration, the only other item of information I had about *p'urba*s came from a book by Alexandra David-Neel, an extraordinary woman who explored Tibet (and converted to Buddhism) at the time of the First World War. She reported the Tibetan belief that some of these *p'urba* were endowed with consciousness and possessed the magical ability to fly into and out of people's lives, for their own *p'urba* reasons. Naturally, I considered this fanciful nonsense.

My interest in Buddhism had begun a few years earlier when I was at high school in Wales. To be precise, I can date it to an occasion when I decided to enliven an otherwise uninteresting afternoon by arguing with a visiting speaker. He gave a brief introductory talk on Buddhism which was followed by group discussion. As an avowed atheist, I initially felt very superior to this foolish fellow who had been taken in by some exotic god cult but what a surprise I had! It soon transpired that he, like most Buddhists, was an atheist, too. That was not all. Not only did he have no belief in god, he told us that Buddhists didn't believe in the soul either. Many of our problems, he explained, derive from an instinctive, yet misguided, attachment to this fictitious "self."

A self? Surely I had a self. Didn't I? What proof could I offer anyone (myself, even) that I had a self? It had never crossed my mind to ask such strange questions before but I found this new level of skepticism intoxicating. My habitual distrust of religion was difficult to shift and throughout the discussion I stubbornly challenged the speaker's

every statement but, in truth, I was fascinated. This calm, analytical philosophy was unlike any religion I had ever heard of.

When the discussion was over, I approached the speaker to ask him where I could learn more. Visibly astonished at my apparent *volte-face*, he explained that he was a volunteer for the Buddhist Society, which was based in London, and suggested that I begin my inquiries there. From that point on, whenever I made a trip to London, I made a point of visiting the Buddhist Society. I would pick up the latest issue of The Middle Way and a few of the numerous instructional pamphlets about this spiritual path that had no interest in a supreme being. One of these pamphlets taught how to calm the mind by simply observing the ebb and flow of my breath. I followed the instructions but each time it seemed that my mind, rather than calming down, was becoming more chaotic than ever. I assumed that I was doing something wrong and shelved the meditation for a while.[2]

In 1966, at the age of 18, I moved to the outskirts of London. This gave me the opportunity to visit the Buddhist Society on a weekly basis and borrow books from their extensive library. I found the simplicity and directness of Zen very attractive and, though I was convinced that this was the path for me, I was open to the teachings of other traditions and read voraciously. That was how I came to recognize the *p'urba*.

Les was one of my neighbors, a jovial fellow in his late forties who was fanatically devoted to weekend rummage sales. He had a great eye for quality and was steadily amassing an Aladdin's cave of antiques which he referred to as his "retirement fund." First thing every Saturday, Les set off on a frantic race around a circuit of church halls and Boy Scout huts, trying to spot any valuable item before antique dealers snatched it up. There were a few other enthusiasts like him and they would spend only a few minutes at each sale so that all the decent stuff was gone by mid-morning. Les would often stop by on his way home to show off his haul and after a few of these visits I was left in no doubt that he was going to enjoy a very comfortable old age. His finds were truly remarkable.

One week he came by with two items, the firs being a fur coat, which he presented to Sue, my girlfriend. Admittedly the lining was in tatters and it had cost him only pennies but the fur was Russian sable. It cost only a few pounds to repair and, that winter, Sue was among the best-dressed hippies in town. The other object Les brought that day was an immense, intricately ornamented Nepalese Hindu temple lamp, its metal glowing with a deep bluish-green patina. It simply took my breath away, both with its beauty and the sheer improbability of finding an immense, intricately ornamented Nepalese Hindu temple lamp in an English church sale. But after we had all gawped at it for half an hour Les took it away and carefully packed it, labeled it and hid it away in his attic until he retired.

Occasionally, Les would bring home an object he couldn't identify. In this case it was a dagger-like object made of brass, about eight inches long. At its top were three angry faces, surmounted by a horse's head. At the other end was a point composed of three (very blunt) blades. Its central portion, the part by which it must have been held, was something resembling the thunderbolts classical artists used to place in the hands of the sky gods Zeus and Jupiter.

"Nah, I still think it's Mexican," opined Les.

"The book's in my room," I said. "Hang on, I'll go get it."

The book, borrowed from the library of the Buddhist Society, had a photograph of something it called a *p'urba* which it further identified as a "Tibetan Buddhist ritual implement." Les looked back and forth from the illustration to the object in his hand. When he had satisfied himself that they were nearly identical, Les handed the *p'urba* to me, telling me to take it. He stifled my protests by observing that I obviously had "an interest in these things," and that, furthermore, it had cost him only two pence. It was, he assured me, now mine. Naturally, I was thrilled to be the owner of an actual "Tibetan Buddhist ritual implement" but now I had to find out what on Earth I had. In what kind of ritual was it used? What was that thunderbolt-like thing? Whose were those angry faces and why on Earth did it have the horse's head?

My first move, naturally, was to take it to the Buddhist Society. I showed it to Pat Wilkinson, the well-traveled and knowledgeable librarian and asked if there were any books about *p'urba*s. She told me that I had already read every book they had on the subject of Tibetan Buddhism but she had another idea. A Tibetan monk had just arrived in London. He would obviously be the best source of information. After a brief phone call she handed me a piece of paper with an address, telling that the monk was expecting me.

## Meeting the lama

It was only a short ride on the Underground to the hostel for foreign students where he was staying. One of the first lamas to arrive in the west following the Chinese invasion of Tibet, he was in London to study English. At 26, he was only 8 years older than myself. The young lama, though formally attired in the maroon robes of a Tibetan monk, was not one to stand on ceremony and soon produced two steaming mugs of very English tea. He introduced himself as Lama Yungdrung, I explained why I had come, and showed him the *p'urba*. He looked rather taken aback that I should turn up with such a thing in a land so far from Tibet, its origin but, as he obviously knew what a *p'urba* was, I felt satisfied that I'd brought it to the right place. As we sipped our tea, the lama explained that the Tibetan word *p'urba* literally means "nail" or "peg" and the part which looked like Jupiter's thunderbolt was actually supposed to be (you guessed it) a thunderbolt. This, in Tibetan, is called a *dorje*, so the object is correctly called a *dorje p'urba*. It symbolized, he said, the protective power of enlightenment and told me I should always carry it on my person.

Despite his peculiar pronunciation and a rather startling disregard for English syntax, Lama Yungdrung's answers were carefully considered and clearly stated. I quickly concluded that, during his brief acquaintance with westerners, he had patiently answered these same questions many, many times. I was informed that, though he was indeed a monk, that is not the meaning of *lama*. *Lama* (Tib., *bLa.Ma*) is Tibetan for "guru." Some monks and nuns are lamas but most are not. In his school, apparently, even laypersons could become lamas. He explained that the essence of his lineage was meditation and that monastic vows were not necessary to teach it – anyone with enough experience could do it.

Sheepishly, I told him of my failed attempts at watching my breaths and asked if he offer any suggestions as to what I might be doing wrong. Minutes later, after he had shown me a comfortable sitting posture, Lama Yungdrung taught me a new version of the practice. Rather than simply watching the breath, each "out" and "in" is synchronized, in the imagination, with the sounds of certain meaningless syllables which are visualized or, rather, "heard" as clearly as possible. We then sat together and put the instruction into practice. It was just ten minutes or so but the effects amazed me. In hindsight, I realize that I had merely dipped a toe into the sea of consciousness-exploration, but it granted me a brief glimpse of the calmness and clarity which had hitherto eluded me.

As I left, I asked Lama Yungdrung if I could visit him again and ply him with more questions. To my delight, he agreed. Accordingly, on the next occasion I took a list.

"Ah, you bring the Christians."

"I beg your pardon."

"Christians. You have the Christians on the papers."

"Oh, you mean 'questions'."

"Yes, 'Christians.' You ask me Christians now."

This time, I brought up the subject of Tibetan "gods." Most accounts of Tibet mentioned that, unlike other forms of Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism included the worship of many gods and goddesses. As an atheist who was on the verge of defining myself as a Buddhist, I found this objectionable. How could all these deities fit with Buddhist philosophy?

In reply the lama asked me if I had the *p'urba* with me. Naturally, I had – he had said to carry it always. (Besides which, what modish young hippie-about-town wouldn't want such an exotic object tucked in his belt?) I handed him the *p'urba* and he pointed out the three angry faces. He said they were the faces of a "god" called Tamdin [3] which in Sanskrit is Hayagariwa [4] and that both names mean "horse-neck." He went on to explain that Tamdin is a "protector" who has four faces: three human and a horse's head that grows out of the crown of his head. Tamdin is not really angry; the fierce faces symbolize his energetic activity. Also, the lama explained, the horse symbolizes speed and means that he works very quickly. On the other hand, he said, it is very important that we should not think of Tamdin as some kind of god who exists in a heaven somewhere. Rather than being an external deity, he is a quality of intensely focused compassion, which it is possible to discover in our own minds. The physical *p'urba* is just a reminder of this state of mind.

When I complimented Lama Yungdrung on his exceptional knowledge of Tibetan

Buddhism he explained that when he was very young he had been identified as the reincarnation of a deceased lama. He had therefore been raised in a monastery and had been instructed in all aspects of Buddhist philosophy and monastic life since early childhood. Accordingly, he conceded that his knowledge of Buddhism was "not bad." Then he laughed.

"In the Tibets, monk are always the modesties. No monk are ever say 'I have the knowledges.' That not the good."

His mouth widened into a huge grin. "One time I visiting the London Buddhism Societies, and a ladies – Australian ladies – she say 'You growing up in the monasteries, you are knowing everythings about the Tibet Buddhisms.' I very the modesties so I say, 'Oh, no… I know nothing about the Buddhisms.' So she say, 'You no bloody good, then!' and walk away."

The memory of this incident caused him to explode in gales of laughter. "But it the true!" he gasped, "If I know the nothings, I no bloody good!"

During one of these early interviews with this young man who was to become my guru, I asked about what I considered the most fascinating aspect of Tibetan Buddhism – the tantric tradition called Vajrayāna. I had read passing references to magic, mantras and, most intriguing of all, sexual yoga. This was my chance to get the inside story.

"Hmm." The lama wrinkled his brow. For a moment it looked as if the name rang a bell. "It is call the Badzrayanas?"

"Yes, Vajrayāna. At first, I thought that there were only two branches of Buddhism – Hinayāna and Mahāyāna – but I've read that, in Tibet, Nepal and Mongolia, there is another 'yāna' and its scriptures are called *tāntra*s. They're supposed to have some kind of secret teachings."

The lama slowly shook his head. "No," he said, ruefully, "I am never hear of it."

Of course, the lama had a very well developed sense of humor and the joke was entirely on me. Before very much longer, I came to realize that the meditation practices he had been teaching me had been Vajrayāna techniques all along and the *dorje p'urba* itself was a very tantric implement, especially so as the *dorje*, or "thunderbolt," which formed its central portion is called, in Sanskrit, a *vajra*.

Over the next few years, Lama Yungdrung's English gradually improved and, at the same time he began to teach me some Tibetan. Also, a chance meeting with a retired Sanskrit professor on London's Underground led me to take a few lessons in the classical language of ancient India. At the same time, many more lamas were fleeing Tibet, refugees from the Chinese occupation of their homeland. The "Cultural Revolution" had reached Tibet and the Red Guard was attempting to suppress all expressions of religion there. Ironically, the Chinese attempts at suppressing Buddhism in Tibet (dynamiting monasteries, forcing monks and nuns to marry) caused their religion to spread across the globe. Centers of Tibetan Buddhism may be found in most major cities of the world. Even Bön, Tibet's indigenous religion, has found new adherents in India, Europe and North America. Most surprising of all, the Jonang lineage, long thought to have been extinct, came out of hiding in the 21st century. This tradition, which did not reveal itself for centuries, now has centers in New York and Atlanta, Georgia.

## Psychedelics

I was fortunate in that I was able to explore my consciousness with LSD before it was made illegal in the U.K. Two of my friends had, separately, acquired a quantity from Sandoz, the Swiss pharmaceutical company. The LSD came as a solution in small glass ampoules marked "Delysid 1mg" which we would split four ways. The effect was somewhat similar to Morning Glory seeds but while the seeds were slightly sedating, we found LSD to be a mild stimulant and, to our great relief, none of the nausea which plagued our later trials of Morning Glory seeds. Eventually, the government expressed its disapproval of such pharmacological exploration by banning the possession of this remarkable molecule, even for doctors. Realizing that the legislators were sorely misinformed, I continued to engage in synaptically enhanced introspection every few months even though such activities were now deemed "illegal" and my sources of LSD were not as reliable.

Fortunately, in the late 1960s, my friends and I learned that the classic psychedelic mushrooms *Psilocybe mexicana* and *Ps. cubensis* had a cousin, *Ps. semilanceata*, which grew in Britain. After a few hours in various University libraries we were sure that we knew where it grew, how to identify it and, most importantly, that there were no

dangerous look-alikes. (This is not true in North America where the deadly *Galerina autumnalis* not only resembles *Ps. cyanescens* but frequently grows alongside it.) We found nothing on our first few forays but eventually, after a few lucky finds, realized that we had not been looking closely enough. Once we learned to spot them, we found them everywhere: in parks, on hillsides, in meadows and off-season cricket pitches. It was not uncommon for us to pick several thousand mushrooms in an afternoon.

*Ps. semilanceata* is a small mushroom, rather bitter and, weight for weight, considerably more potent than *Ps cubensis*. Older textbooks describe it as poisonous but although it is highly psychoactive it is quite non-toxic. Its activity is due to the alkaloids psilocin and psilocybin, the effects of which are somewhat similar to those of LSD but last only four to five hours, rather than eight.[5] They retain their potency well when dried and in those days we would typically eat 40 to 50 dried mushrooms. This dosage allows access to ineffably blissful states beyond "self" and "other" where the knower and that which is known form a seamless continuum. This merging with the cosmos is not inevitable however and, even when encountered, is not necessarily joyful. On the contrary, anyone who expects to maintain a rigid distinction between "me" and "everything else" is in for a bumpy ride. One who stubbornly clings to the narrative called "me" might even perceive the trip as a descent into a paranoid hell-realm where slavering demons clamor to devour their "soul". Rather surprisingly, this all seemed to be documented in a text from an old Tibetan funerary ritual.

One of the earliest translations of a Tibetan text into English was the (so-called) *Tibetan Book of the Dead* in which various visionary gods and Buddhas are described. The Tibetan name is *Bar.Do.Thos.Grol* (pronounced "Bardo T'ödol") which is understood as "[that which, when] heard, liberates [from the] gap [between death and rebirth]." The first English language edition was named in imitation of the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*. The book explains that visions of these deities may occur in certain meditative states and that they appear to each of us after death. It advises us to maintain meditative detachment when confronted with these apparently powerful beings, whether peaceful or wrathful, as they are all merely projections of one's own, fundamentally enlightened, mind. Timothy Leary, prophet of LSD, read this and recognized it to be excellent advice for anyone experiencing the effects of LSD, psilocybin or similar substances. Such good advice, in fact, that he wrote an updated edition of the Tibetan Book of the Dead, expressly intended as a guide to entheogenic exploration, called *The Psychedelic Experience*.

As I became familiar with the effects of psychedelics I could see many similarities to the *bardo* state as described in the Tibetan Book of the Dead in which successive visions of peaceful and wrathful deities arise in the consciousness of a recently deceased person. The book instructs the dead person not to become involved in these visions, even the serene and peaceful Buddhas, as all these appearances are all the play of our own mind. The more emotion we feel, the more intense and "wrathful" the visions appear. We are told that if we remain detached from the visions as they reveal themselves, we may be able to merge with the wordless, concept-less state of bliss-consciousness known as "the white light." Those familiar with the effects of psychedelics will find the parallels striking. To anyone else, the link between some drug-induced hippie fantasies and the solemn death rites of Tibet it must seem an unlikely stretch. After all, where does death come into all this?

The answer lies in a common response to the effects of psychedelic drugs. I have already described how, at the peak of the experience, the boundaries of the "self" dissolve. In the 1960s a growing body of literature spoke of this phenomenon as "ego death," an expression which at first, I took to be merely a striking metaphor. In fact, it is not uncommon for people to have this experience and actually believe that they have died. In 1970 I met such a person and he told me all about it.

> Craig was from Cardiff, a friend of a friend. He had missed out on the earliest batches of LSD to reach the city but was eager to catch up. The person who gave him his first tablet asked him if he'd ever taken it before. If Craig had simply told the truth, he would have been advised to take it in the company of an experienced user. As it was, Craig claimed to have taken LSD many times and went home to take it alone and with no idea what to expect.
>
> An hour or so after swallowing the tablet, while making himself a cup of tea, Craig was seized with the conviction that someone had died. He was, as one might expect, rather concerned about this turn of events and, being a responsible citizen, decided that the death should be reported to the authorities. So, leaving the kettle boiling on the stove and the front door open, he wandered out of the house looking for a policeman on his beat. It was not long before he found one and informed him of the "death".
>
> "Were you acquainted with the deceased, sir?" inquired the constable.

> This stumped Craig for a few seconds, then it dawned...
>
> "Oh, yes," he replied, "It's me."
>
> Fortunately, this was before public awareness of psychedelics and their effects, so the copper merely thought Craig harmlessly insane. He escorted Craig back to his home, chided him for leaving the door open, told him to sit down and proceeded to finish making the pot of tea. After politely admonishing Craig not to "go wandering off like that again" the policeman left.
>
> Having thus fulfilled his civic obligation, Craig began to enjoy his first LSD trip.

*The Tibetan Book of the Dead* describes a sequence of events: first, an ineffable state of transcendence, then there are visions, which may be divine or demonic, and finally re-entry into the mundane world (re-birth). This is uncannily similar to a psychedelic "trip." Obviously, the ancient Tibetans had no LSD, so how are we to explain these similarities? My original assumption was that some Tibetan yogins had discovered a technique, probably through meditation or yoga, for inducing a psychedelic state. As we shall see in the chapters which follow, Tim Leary's interpretation of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* as a "tripping manual" may have been more insightful than he ever realized.

## Initiations

By the 1970s a few Tibetan lamas had founded centers around Britain and across the country small groups of newly converted "Tibetan" Buddhists would meet regularly to meditate. Those of us who had officially adopted Buddhism in the ceremony of "taking refuge in the triple gem" were given new, Tibetan, names. Some of us also took the five basic vows of a lay practitioner.

An old school friend turned up at my home one day, back from a trip to India and Nepal. Naturally, I was curious about his experiences in the Himalayas and told him about my becoming a Buddhist. He told me that, although not a Buddhist himself, he'd met several westerners in Nepal who had received what he called "initiations." We both supposed that they were the same thing as "taking refuge." It turned out that this was incorrect.

Eventually, high-ranking lamas began to visit London in order to give initiations into certain "deities". There was still a lot about the Vajrayāna that mystified me and I hoped these initiations would help clarify matters. Some quite simple issues had no readily available explanation. I was still puzzled as to the significance of its principal symbol the *vajra* which, in Sanskrit, may mean either "thunderbolt" or "diamond." Frequently, in iconography and ritual, the *vajra* is paired with a bell. Why should this be so? A bell is hardly a natural match for either a thunderbolt or a diamond. Apart from such questions, I was quite fascinated by these "deities" who existed somewhere within my own consciousness (they sounded like Jungian archetypes). In order to study and practice the Buddhist tantric path one must first be "empowered" in an initiation. Accordingly, I attended every initiation which came along, hoping to glean some vital philosophical or yogic tidbit that would grant me enlightenment – right here, right now.

In each initiation ceremony we were introduced to a deity, told how to visualize the deity and how to say the deity's mantra. There were usually four phases to each initiation (or "empowerment" as I had learned to call them): in the first we were given water to drink; in the second, a yellowish, watery liquid called *amṛita*,[6] both liquids being received in the palm of one's hand. By watching the monks, I soon picked up some of the incidental customs, such as wiping my hand on the crown of my head after lapping up the *amṛita*. The ritual hand gestures took longer, though eventually I even figured out how to twist all ten fingers into a *maṇḍala* for the gesture of offering the universe to the officiating guru.

At one empowerment, I was seated next to an obvious first-timer. He seemed unnecessarily nervous and earnestly inquired how much experience I'd had with these "Tibetan initiations". When I assured him that I'd attended a few, he asked, "What will they make us do?"

"Well, they're Buddhists so they don't make you do anything. I think it's polite to observe the customs, though, bowing and the like."

"No, I mean to get initiated... What do they make you do?"

I must confess that I wasn't catching his drift at all but, as luck would have it, it was time for the *amṛita* and the demands of ritual rescued me from having to formulate a

response. Everyone stood and began to file past the monk who was dispensing the elixir with a spoon. I was just about to lap up my dose of *amṛita* when the anxious first-timer addressed me again.

In the palm of his right hand he held a tiny puddle of yellowish fluid which he was regarding with considerable suspicion. “What are we supposed to do we do with… this?” he asked.

“Well… drink it.” I thought this much was obvious. The people ahead of him had already finished theirs and were now dabbing their palms on their crowns.

“But it…” he began his objection and stopped, then leaned closer to confide his fears in a whisper. “But it looks like… er… pee.”

He had a point; it did look like urine. I sniffed at the yellowish water in my hand. As far as I could tell, it was the same saffron-colored infusion of grains, herbs and grasses we always received. Then it dawned on me that, to this individual, the word initiation implied an ordeal of some kind. As with an initiation into a fraternity, he imagined that he would be subjected to something humiliating or disgusting. Seized by a mischievous impulse, I assumed a straight face, looked him in the eye and said, “Well, what do you know? I believe you could be right.” With a what-the-hey shrug, I proceeded to slurp up my portion with exaggerated enthusiasm and, grinning, wiped a damp hand on my hair.

Of course, that was before I learned more about *amṛita* and discovered that on certain historical occasions it has indeed been the guru’s urine.

**PREV** **NEXT**

Administration Panel

# Prehistory 1

## Northern India, 50 mya

India is often referred to as "the sub-continent" and this title reflects a geological truth. At one time, it was an island continent floating in the Indian Ocean. Tectonic forces caused it to drift slowly northwards until, about 50,000,000 years ago, it collided with the continent of Asia, creating a crumple-zone we call the Himalayas. And this collision is not yet over. At the initial crunch, the Indian continental plate slid down underneath the Asian plate and has continued to travel 2,000 kilometers northward, doubling the thickness of the earth's crust. It is the combined buoyancy of the two plates that has raised the Tibetan Plateau (and with it, the Himalayas) to such immense heights. If we think of the Himalayan range as being shaped rather like a smile, then the greatest geological activity is to be found at the corners of the mouth. At each corner (or "syntaxis" as geologists like to call them), mountain ranges are folded double, mountains pile up and are eroded again. Despite this continuous erosion, parts of the Himalayas are growing higher at the alarming rate of 30 millimeters a year.

From each syntaxis rises a great river, the Brahmaputra in the east and the Indus in the west, both rivers carrying a rich cargo of minerals, silt and nutrients to the ocean, creating the world's two largest dirt piles, albeit beneath the waves.

## Pakistan, 7,000 to 2,500 BCE

Situated near Mehrgarh, on the Kachi Plain in the Balochistan region of modern Pakistan, is one of the earliest sites in the Indian sub-continent to show evidence of arable farming (wheat and barley) and herding (cattle, sheep and goats). The 500 acre site has been known only since 1974 when it was discovered by French archaeologist Jean-François Jarrige.


Mehrgarh figurine - 3000BCE

The earliest Mehrgarh settlement was a small farming village which lasted from 7000 BCE to 5500 BCE. It was around 5500 BCE that the first pottery was made in Mehrgarh. They buried their dead with grave goods such as jewelry (beads, bangles, pendants) and more utilitarian items such as baskets, stone and bone tools. Occasionally, remains of animal sacrifices are found in graves. This may well have been a religious rite, possibly for a deceased priest or other person of status.

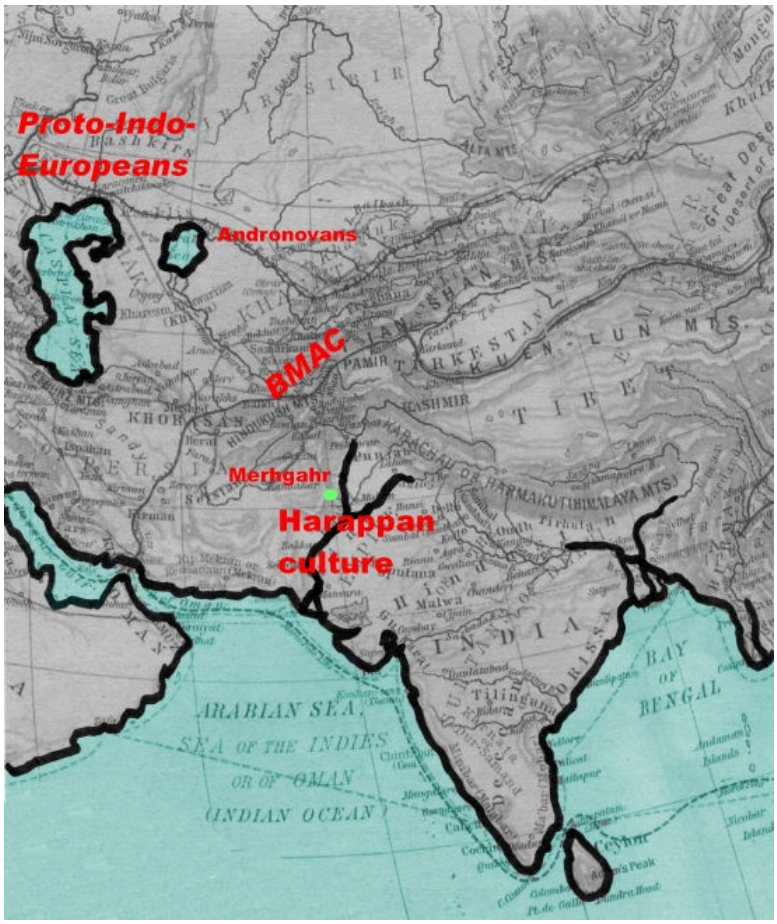
With tools of stone and local copper they made jewelry from sea shells, limestone, turquoise, lapis lazuli, sandstone and polished copper have been found, along with simple figurines of women and animals. Ornaments made from sea shells and lapis lazuli indicates wide-ranging contacts from contemporaneous cultures in northern Afghanistan, to northeastern Iran and as far as southern central Asia.

The inhabitants of ancient Mehrgarh lived in houses of mud brick, they stored their grain in granaries and fashioned tools from local copper ore. They raised barley, einkorn and emmer wheat, jujubes and dates, and herded sheep, goats and cattle. They were a settled, prosperous community who had the leisure and skill to develop such arts as pottery, bead-making and, amazingly, dentistry. The oldest (9,000 – 7,000 BCE) extant evidence for the drilling of teeth in living persons has been found in Mehrgarh. [1] I suppose that as long as you have a few large persons to hold the patient down, it's not all that different from drilling beads.

Between 2600 BCE and 2000 BCE, the population drifted away from the city – just when the cities just to the East, in the Indus Valley Civilization were on the ascendent.

# Indus Valley, India/Pakistan (4,000 to 2,300 BCE)

About 6,500 years ago, during the Bronze Age, the broad, fertile floodplain of the Indus River was home to one of the most advanced societies of its time. Evidence of several small population centers has been found throughout the Indus Valley and beyond, but the jewels of this civilization were its two great cities, remains of which were found at Mohenjo-Daro, on the banks of the Indus River, and Harappa, on the Ravi. The names Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa are, of course, those of the closest modern towns to these sites. We have no way of knowing what these cities were called by their inhabitants but the culture may have called itself something like "Meluhha", the Sumerian word for the area.



The Indus Valley and its neighbors

Unlike all other cities of the ancient world, these seem to have been carefully planned from their inception, with streets arranged in an orderly, a rectangular grid. Each brick-built house had its own bathroom, a supply of fresh water and a drain which was connected to the municipal sewer. Such a feat of urban planning might be unremarkable today but all this was accomplished 500 years before Stonehenge and a thousand years before the first Egyptian pyramid. Unfortunately, much valuable information about Harappa was lost in the 19th century when the bricks of its houses were recycled to create the rail-bed of a railroad. The bricks were so well-formed that the engineers assumed that they were of fairly recent manufacture.

The inhabitants of the Indus Valley were a peaceful people; their defensive walls were built against floods, not invading armies. At least part of the population was literate; the most common artifact discovered at archeological sites is the personal seal. These small intaglio signets show that they raised, and traded in, cattle and that they held "bull-fights". That is, they performed acrobatic stunts over the backs of bulls, rather like the scenes shown in Minoan murals. Their artisans made fine pottery and graceful bronzes. All the houses were approximately equal in size, no palaces have been found and no caches of gold or jewelry. They had at least one port.

Their seals also bear inscriptions in a set of symbols which has yet to be deciphered. As the average length of an inscription is only five symbols they probably represent a names or titles. Without a lengthy text or bilingual inscription, the problem seems insoluble.

Most scholars assume that the people of the Indus Valley were a dark-skinned, curly-haired people who spoke a Dravidian language similar to those spoken in southern India today. Some linguists have even proposed grouping the ancient Sumerian tongue with the Dravidian languages of southern India in a language super-group called Elamo-Dravidian. Whether or not they were related to the Sumerians they were certainly connected with Mesopotamia by trade as Indus Valley beads and other artifacts have been found in Iraq.

## Harappan Religion


An early version of Śiva? [From an Indus Valley seal.]

While there is no evidence of kings or autocratic rulers, many of the seals show priests (often naked priests worshiping naked gods) so it has been suggested that their religion was the cohesive factor in this complex and extensive culture. [2]

Their dead were buried with pots which, although always empty when excavated, may have originally contained food for the after-life. They made many earthenware images of a female figure wearing an elaborate headdress. This may have been a priestess or goddess. Earthenware figures have been found with soot stains on the front, suggesting that they had oil lamps placed in front of them. Some of their clay seals show what appears to be a god or priest, sitting in a yoga posture, with either horns or an elaborate headdress, surrounded by animals. It has even been claimed that this god-priest is an early depiction of the god Śiva or that he is a man practicing yoga. Both of these are intriguing suggestions but any perceived link between modern Hinduism and the culture of the Indus Valley civilization is mere supposition. It is noteworthy that, as yet, nothing resembling a temple has been found. It has been suggested that, like modern Hindus, the Indus Valley people practiced their religion in the home. [3] There is also the possibility that, like modern *sadhus* and *yogins*, they practiced their religion out of doors, in the cow-fields

The most common subjects for personal seals were a single-horned creature which archeologists have dubbed "the unicorn" and strange object with apparent religious significance known as "the cult object". I should point out that the unicorn is always shown in profile so the possibility remains that it depicts a normal, two-horned animal with one horn hidden although, admittedly, all four legs are shown. It is, perhaps, a composite of several animals. Somewhat like an elongated bull, it lacks the hump which is characteristic of Indian cattle and the folds on its fore-parts resemble the "armor-plating" of the rhinoceros.


The so-called "cult object" (left) and "unicorn" (right) [From an Indus Valley seal.]

Professor Mahadevan has made some very interesting observations regarding the so-called "unicorn" which appears on many Harappan seals. [4] After examining examples of these objects on "more than a thousand unicorn seals" he came to the conclusion that the "object" is a filter. More specifically, he has identified certain seals as showing drops of liquid falling from the filter. Some artifacts of ceramic and one of ivory found at archeological sites in the Indus Valley have been identified as the "colander" part of the "cult object". Professor Mahadevan has expressed the opinion that what was filtered was either the sacred drug soma or a local equivalent.

The problems which this hypothesis presents to the prevailing theories of *soma* will be addressed when we discuss the religion of the Aryans.

## Harappan Drugs

The well-known psychedelic mushroom, *Psilocybe cubensis* is indigenous to India where it grows on the dung of several species, most typically that of cattle. It would be surprising if the people of the Indus Valley civilization, a culture that had spent hundreds, if not thousands, of years raising cattle, were not aware of this mushroom and its psychoactivity. After all, at least one community in modern India (the Santal tribe, of Bihar State) claims to be aware of a psychoactive mushroom which grows on cow-dung. [5]There is one species native to India which answers this description and that is *Ps. cubensis*. The smaller, but exceptionally potent, species *Panaeolus camboginiensis* grows on the dung of the water-buffalo. [6]

One other mushroom species known to contain psilocybin is found in northern India and that is *Ps. semilanceata* which grows on mats of decaying grass. *Ps. semilanceata* is reported to be "moderately active to extremely potent". [7] Another possible species is *Ps. kashmiriensis*, the psychoactivity of which is unknown. [8] Interestingly, *Ps. kashmiriensis* saprophytizes clumps of lemon grass (*Cymbopogon jawarancus*) so it should be familiar, if only by sight, to any culture which gathers that herb.

In their long, stable occupation of northwestern India, the Indus Valley people undoubtedly discovered the medicinal virtues of many of the wild plants available to them. We may confidently assume that they were also aware of psychoactive plants such as the tranquilizing snakeroot (*Rauwolfia serpentina*), the deliriant datura (*Datura metel*) and the slightly sedative but powerfully psychedelic climbing plant Hawaiian baby wood-rose (*Argyreia nervosa*).[9]

The civilization of Harappa and the other Indus Valley cities lasted about two thousand years, then fell into decline and disappeared around 4,500 years ago. The very same tectonic processes that had raised the Himalayas, creating the Indus River and its fertile valley now raised the seabed, slowing the flow of the Indus and causing frequent, catastrophic floods. Agriculture suffered due to waterlogged soil and the cities underwent rapid population increase as they took in refugees from the floodplain. Already deprived of their agrarian base, the cities' downfall was hastened by this overpopulation. In its last phase, the once-great metropolis of Mohenjo-Daro was abandoned by all but a handful of families. [10] Finally, after a massacre by an invading tribe, it was abandoned entirely. Over the centuries that followed, the brick-built cities of the Indus Valley civilization crumbled, leaving us few clues to their everyday life. Most informative is the art on their elegant pottery and intriguing clay seals. This art shows that they kept several kinds of domesticated animal including cattle, sheep and goats. However, there is not a single depiction of a horse from this period. Horses arrived a few centuries after the demise of the Indus Valley civilization. They came with the Aryans, fair-skinned invaders from the North, whose priests used a sacred drug called *soma*.

## Oxus Valley, central Asia (2,300 – 1,700 BCE)

East of the Caspian Sea, to the north of the Hindu Kush and west of the Pamir range lies the area of the Oxus civilization. It is usually referred to in academic literature by the unlovely name Bactria-Margiana Archeological Complex, or BMAC for short. Unsuspected until the late 1970s, BMAC was discovered by the Soviet archeologist, Viktor Sarianidi. The earliest, mud-brick dwellings have been dated to around 6,000 BCE but it was in the 23rd century BCE that they began to erect monumental stone structures and great edifices which must have been palaces or temples.

As one might expect from their masonry, these were a sedentary people. They settled around oases and irrigated their fields of barley and wheat. There were trade links with the Indus Valley as Harappan items have been found here and BMAC artifacts have been discovered in Mohenjo-Daro.

It is probable that the original BMAC people were not Indo-European though BMAC culture seems to have influenced the IE migrants through their territory. There is evidence that the later phase of BMAC was infiltrated by Indo-Europeans of the Andronovo culture. The consequent hybrid seems to have been the peoples we call as the Indo-Iranians.

> It has become increasingly clear that if one wishes to argue for Indo-Iranian migrations from the steppe lands south into the historical seats of the Iranians and Indo-Aryans that these steppe cultures were transformed as they passed through a membrane of Central Asian urbanism. The fact that typical steppe wares are found on BMAC sites and that intrusive BMAC material is subsequently found further to the south in Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan, may suggest then the subsequent movement of Indo-Iranian-speakers after they had adopted the culture of the BMAC.
>
> *Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture.* [11]

This, then, would explain why the Indo-Iranian cultures have distinctive traits not shared with other Indo-European peoples. These traits include fire-worship and the sacramental use of drugs. But even though the Indo-Iranians may have acquired these traditions from BMAC it seems entirely possible that the fledgeling BMAC culture learned of such practices from the Indus Valley people, their prosperous neighbors to the south.

## Oxus Valley drugs

Excavations at a BMAC site have turned up evidence of mind-altering plants. Piles of seeds were found which looked like cannabis and a pot was found to contain poppy pollen. Several pots had traces of ephedra, a stimulating plant. [12] The pots were found in an inner rooms of a structure believed to have been a temple, in association with

what seems to have been a fire-altar. The leading archeologist of this site, V. Sarianidi, regards this as a precursor to the *haoma* cult of Iran and the *soma* cult of the Vedas. Both religions involved animal sacrifice, a drug and a fire. He suggests that this complex of practices originated with the BMAC culture and was acquired by the Indo-Iranians.

## But is it True?

On the other hand, Sarianidi's findings are not universally accepted. Two independent researchers have declared the "cannabis" seeds to be millet. While there are over two hundred species of poppy, only a handful contain any opiates at all and only one of those (*Papaver somniferum*) has opiates in any pharmacologically significant amount. No poppy has psychoactive pollen and there is no pharmacological reason why poppy pollen may have been accumulated. Also, in the vicinity of BMAC, ephedra is a common plant and, as such, contributes to the composition of the local dust. Anything dusty found thereabouts is more than likely to include trace quantities of ephedrine, an amphetamine alkaloid characteristic of the ephedra plant. Finally, many buildings other than temples have inner rooms. An inner room is not necessarily an "inner sanctum" and a fire-pit is not necessarily a "fire-altar".

## Cultural diffusion

That being said, the idea that the Indo-Iranians may have picked up the *haoma* and *soma* cults from the BMAC is certainly attractive as it offers an explanation for one of the traits which distinguishes the Indo-Iranians from the rest of the Indo-Europeans – the sacrifice-drug-fire cultus. Doubtless, the Indo-Iranians' earliest acquaintance with this kind of ritual came from their encounters with the BMAC. That does not, however, mean that the entire *soma*/*haoma* complex originated with the BMAC though the fire element may have. Other elements of the BMAC ritual may have their ultimate origins in the Indus Valley…

> In the adjoining room of the same inner sanctum were found ten ceramic pot-stands which appear to have been used in conjunction with strainers designed to separate the juices from the twigs, stems and leaves of the plants. In another room at the other end of the shrine a basin containing remains of a considerable quantity of cannabis was discovered, as well as a number of pottery stands and strainers that have also been associated with making psychoactive beverages.
>
> - *Encyclopedia of Psychoactive Substances* [13]

Another such strainer has been found at a BMAC site which dates from around 1,500 BCE. These strainers are remarkably suggestive of the ceramic strainers found in the Indus Valley and which formed part of the "cult object" of the Harappan seals. Prof. Mahadevan, you will recall, believes that the "cult objects" were used to strain soma.

There is evidence of trade between the early phases of BMAC with the Indus Valley cities, especially through an Indus Valley outpost in northern Afghanistan. It would appear that the "crushing and straining a drug" part of the soma/haoma ceremonies originated in the Indus Valley, even if the fire-worship component came from the BMAC. The issue of which drugs were used when and where is a matter of considerable debate. Except that we do know that the early BMAC people used cannabis and probably in a ritual context, at that.

Rudgley opines that this has settled the question of the identity of *haoma*, the Iranian sacrament, even though he claims it must have been two concoctions, one being compounded of cannabis and ephedra, the other, opium and ephedra. (Presumably, the stimulating ephedra would counteract the soporific qualities of the other two drugs.)

Part of Rudgley's argument is that the fire-temples of the BMAC culture predate those of Iran by a thousand years. But surely, the ceramic strainers of the Harappan civilization predate those of the BMAC by the same distance in time. The prototype for both *haoma* and *soma* may, therefore, have been the "Indus Valley Sacrament".

## Central Asia (3,000 BCE)

These similarities in language and myth, first pointed out by Parsons and Jones, are evidence that the far-flung peoples of Europe, Persia and northern India are descended from a single ancestral stock who spoke a common language and worshiped the same gods. Not knowing what this ancient race called themselves, modern scholars call them the "proto-Indo-Europeans."

It is now believed that these people lived on the Russian steppes, near the Caspian Sea, in wattle-and-daub huts where they grew grain, raised cattle, pigs, sheep, goats and, a local animal they had domesticated, the horse. They lived there for thousands of years, riding ox-carts and eating boiled horse-meat, when someone tried using horses to pull wagons. Another crucial innovation was the invention of the spoked wheel. After that it was only a short step to the first horse-drawn wagons to the light, maneuverable chariot.[14] Around 5,000 years ago, these people, armed with this devastating new battle system began their horse-powered expansion. The speed and agility of the new, horse-drawn transport gave the proto-Indo-Europeans a technological advantage that resulted in their colonization of Europe, Asia Minor, Central Asia and northern India.

Even before his work on the Indo-European languages, Sir William Jones had spotted the the kinship of certain Indian gods to the deities of classical antiquity and suggested a common origin. He explained it in his address to the Asiatick Society of 1785, entitled Gods of Greece, Italy, and India. We will now explore some of that territory which Sir William Jones opened up.

## Indo-European gods

The following table lists four IE deities, three gods and a goddess, along with some of their European counterparts. Reading across each row, the similarities of name are striking, especially if we make allowances for the usual variation in vowels between languages.

| | **Indic** | **Greek** | **Roman** | **Teutonic** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| order | Varuna | Ouranos | Uranus | Woden |
| sky | Dyaus | Zeus | Ju-piter | Tiwas |
| sun | Surya | Helios | Sol | Sol |
| dawn | Uśas | Eos | Au[s]rora | Eostre |

Even more similarities become apparent when consider that a Greek initial *h* frequently corresponds to a Latin or Sanskrit *s*. Compare, for instance, the words for six, seven and snake in Latin (*sex*, *septem*, *serpens*) and Sanskrit (*ṣad*, *sapta*, *sarpa*) with their Greek equivalents (*hex*, *hepta*, *herpes*). Also, it is well known in linguistics that an *l* may turn into an *r* and *vice versa*. Armed with these facts, it is easy to see how Helios is, essentially, the same as Surya and Sol.

Another less than obvious parallel is the Roman god Jupiter (or *Jupitter*). When his name is revealed to be *ju pater* ("the sky father"), from an earlier *dio pittar*, we can easily see the similarity to Dyaus and Tiwas. This latter god, Tiwas (or Tiw, or Tir), was the original sky god of the northern Europeans and was displaced in later myths by Odin/Woden. We still remember him every week on Tiw's day. If you can't quite remember where you heard of a dawn-goddess called Eostre before, let me remind you that she had her festival in early spring. Easter takes its name from her.

Many other deities with names related to those of Indian gods are to be found in Iranian, Hittite, Norse, Celtic and Slavic pantheons. The water god called Apam Napat ("water's nephew") who appears in both Hindu and Persian myth brings to mind Neptunus, the Roman water god who has "nephew" (Latin nepos, nepot-, as in nepotism) in his name. According to Indian myth, Manu was the first man and gave his name to the Vedic legal code, the Laws of Manu. Surely this is the same person as Mannus, legendary founder of the German race. Also, the Celts of ancient Gaul worshiped a deity called Ario-manus. He has a counterpart in the Indian god Aryaman. Further confirmation that all these myths had a single origin is evident from recurrent themes of Indian, Persian and European mythology. These include cattle-raids such as the Táin Bó Cúalnge ("Cattle-Raid of Cooley") of Irish legend, horse-riding twins, and a final battle.

The horse-twin theme is an odd one. What is the connection between twins and horses? Perhaps an equi-centric culture would especially prize twin foals and, somehow, this was transferred to the riders. One can only hazard a guess. What is certain is that a pair of semi-divine, twin horsemen is a curiously consistent feature of Indo-European mythology. To the ancient Greeks they were the Dios-curi (literally, "the sons of Zeus" [15]). Even if these two are not recognized by name (Greek, Kastor and Polydeukes; Latin, Castor and Pollux), they known to all readers of newspaper horoscopes as the "twins" (Latin, *Gemini*) of the zodiac. Their equivalents in Vedic India were the Aśvins (literally, "horsemen"). In Irish myth, Macha gave birth to twins after competing in a horse-race and, according to Anglo-Saxon legend, the first Englishmen were twin brothers with the unlikely names of Hengist and Horsa (Old English for "stallion" and

"horse").

As for the apocalyptic battles, we may compare the Battle of Kurukṣetra of Indian myth, Ireland's Second Battle of Mag Tured and the Norse Ragnarøk to name but three. Also on the martial front, most Indo-European mythologies tell of a war between the gods and another race of equally powerful beings. These anti-gods, whether the titans of Greece, the *daeva*s of Persia or the *asura*s of Indian legend, may be a mythologized account of resistance by the various indigenous peoples who were over-run by Indo-European settlers. But, while the Greek gods had just the titans to contend with, the Aryans had several. The *Ṛig Veda* and its commentaries speak of groupings of "demons". There were the *dasyu*s, *danava*s, *daitya*s, *nāga*s, and *asura*s, all of whom are constantly at war with the devas, the gods of the Aryans. If we are to believe that the titans, *daeva*s and so forth are indigenous, non-IE peoples then it is quite possible that these are mythologized accounts of hostile encounters with separate indigenous groups.

They spread out in all directions except due North. To the west, bands of Celts and Teutons occupied northern Europe while the Hellenes displaced the Mycenaean culture in Greece. The Tocharians migrated northeast to the central Asian oases of Khotan where they flourished until the Taklamakan desert engulfed their territory in the 7th century. One branch, the Hittites, invaded the Middle East while another went north and east to the far side of the Caspian Sea where they prospered as the culture we know as Andronovo. Eventually these people migrated south into what is now Afghanistan and from there into Iran and Pakistan. It is this latter group which most concerns us as it is the one which, in the third millennium BCE, crossed the Khyber Pass into the northern plains of India. Their presence in India and their lasting effect on Indian culture is discussed in the next chapter.

**PREV** **NEXT**

Administration Panel

# Prehistory 2

## Northwestern India (c. 2,500 BCE)

The Aryans arrived a couple of centuries after the collapse of the Indus Valley civilization but probably encountered remnants of the Indus Valley people. In contrast to the dark-skinned Dravidians, the newcomers were fair-skinned, perhaps even blond, and their language, an early form of Sanskrit, was unlike anything previously spoken in India.


Pre-Aryan swastika. Harappan seal

Initially their society was divided into three castes but upon settling in India they confronted an indigenous people of a totally different culture. These were the "*dasyu*s" of the Vedas, "enemies of gods and men",[1] who came to form a fourth, "untouchable", caste.

By contrast, the invaders called themselves *ārya* (Sanskrit for "noble") and, because of this, we call them Aryans. It should be made quite clear, however, that this usage has but little connection with the Nazi notion of Nordic "Aryans" – a flagrant misuse of the name. It is indeed ironic that Hitler's symbol of "Aryan" identity, the *swastika*, predates the Aryan invasion of India. While the name, *swastika* comes from the Aryan's language, Sanskrit (from *su-vasti-kara*, roughly "good luck symbol"), the shape had already been used by the Indus Valley civilization (i.e. the hated, non-Aryan *dasyu*s).

## But did it really happen?

There exists a minority (albeit vociferous) opinion which denies that there ever was an Aryan invasion, claiming the Indus Valley region as the Indo-European (IE) homeland and deriving all IE languages from Sanskrit. It cannot be denied that, apart from an increase in the occurrence of horse bones, there is little direct archeological evidence for the Aryan invasion. However, while the archeological evidence in India may be slight, there is much more evidence of IE expansion elsewhere which does not support the notion of an Indian homeland.

The most convincing argument against an Indian origin of all IE peoples is linguistic. The inhabitants of India speak hundreds of different languages. Many of these, as pointed out by Sir William Jones, belong to the IE language group. But there exist other, utterly different families of languages such as the Dravidian and Munda groups. Due to cultural interchange between neighbors, the classical Aryan language, Sanskrit, has acquired several words from these languages. Now, if all IE languages had their origin in Sanskrit one would expect to find traces of these Dravidian and Munda "loan words" in European languages but no such words have yet been identified.

## Aryan religion – the Vedas

Between 2,000 and 1,500 BCE, a group of Aryan poet-priests composed a body of ritual verse known as the Ṛig Veda. A significant number of its hymns sing the praises of *soma*, a psychoactive potion that was made and consumed during a ritual sacrifice. Using 108 bricks, a hearth was constructed in the shape of a bird. within which priests would build a fire. An animal, tethered to a post was beheaded and the main part of the ritual began. The priests would lay out a leather mat and place upon it two circular grinding-stones. A certain plant was crushed between these stones with an admixture of milk or water to make an inebriating drink which was then consumed. As this process allows no time for fermentation we must infer that *soma* (also called *amṛita* "immortality") was a decoction of a psychoactive plant, and not alcohol. Alcohol was certainly known to the Aryans but it was allowed only to the caste of warriors and kings (Skt., *kṣatriya*).

The Sama Veda consists of the *soma*-hymns from the Ṛig with some additional prose. The *Yajur Veda* is also derived from the Ṛig, with its hymns re-arranged for ritual recitation. For reasons now lost, there arose two, quite different, versions of the *Yajur*, known as the "*White*" and "*Black*" *Yajur Veda*s, both of which having its devoted adherents.

These three collections of hymns and prose, the *Ṛig*, *Sama* and *Yajur Veda*s are referred to in the Laws of Manu (an early Aryan code or ethics) as "the three Vedas". However, another Veda, the *Atharva Veda* was added at a later date. Some (roughly one-sixth) of the Atharva is based on the *Ṛig Veda* but there is much which is new and has its own very distinctive style. As a Victorian scholar observed:

> In the [three earlier Vedas], the gods are approached with reverential awe indeed, but with love and confidence also; the demons embraced under the general name Rākshasa are objects of horror whom the gods ward off and destroy; the divinities of the Atharva are regarded rather with a kind of cringing fear, as powers whose wrath is to be deprecated and whose favour is to be curried, for it knows a whole host of imps and hobgoblins, in ranks and classes, and addresses itself to them directly, offering them homage to induce them from doing harm. The Mantra prayer, which in the older Veda is the instrument of devotion, is here the tool of superstition; it wrings from the unwilling hands of the gods the favours which of old their good-will to men induced them to grant…
>
> *- quoted in A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology*[2]

So we see that verses of the Vedas are known as mantra but that this word takes on a different meaning in the later Veda as these verses are used as spells for the coercion of benign forces and subjugation of the malign. We shall return to the subject of mantra (but with yet another meaning and function) later, in the context of *tāntra*.

Despite the modern Hindu trend to view the Vedas as the well-spring of all spirituality, they lack the truly profound philosophy of later developments like the Upanishads. Other than poetic observations on the grandeur and magnificence of cosmic events (such as the sunrise) there is nothing transcendent in these verses. This is essentially the same religion with the same mundane concerns (more cattle, faster horses, prettier wives, better luck at dice) as its sister religions in Greece and Rome. In fact, if we look closely we may see that their gods were, fundamentally, the same ones we learned of in European mythologies though they did have some local peculiarities. For instance, the Aryan gods were sometimes called "friends of *amṛita*"[3]

## Varuna

God of ethics and cosmic order, Varuna is the Aryan equivalent of the Greek Ouranos and Roman Uranus. He is also lord of the waters. Perhaps this is why he carries an umbrella.

## Indra

More hymns of the Ṛig Veda are addressed to Indra than any other deity. Not only king of the gods, Indra is the deified sky, ruling all celestial and atmospheric phenomena. Like his Greek counterpart, Zeus, his weapon is a thunderbolt (Skt. *vajra*) made for Indra by Kāvya Uśanas, a celestial *soma*-drinking-buddy of his. As lord of the atmosphere, he governs the weather and dispenses rain. The ancient historian Strabo described the Indians as "worshiping Jupiter Pluvius" (*i.e.* Jupiter of the rains). No doubt he had been listening to travelers' tales of Indra.

"Indra, king of the gods, covered with a thousand "eyes"
[From a 19th century drawing.]

Indra's eternal enemy is Vṛitra (otherwise known as Ahi, "the snake"), whom he subjugates with his thunderbolts. Ancient Vedic commentaries offer two explanations for Vṛitra: (a) that he is a demon and (b) that he represents the monsoon clouds which hold on to the rain until forced to disgorge it by Indra. He also released the cows which the Panis (another indigenous group?) had hidden in the cave of Vala. But before embarking on either task, Indra first quaffed copious amounts of *soma*.

The hare in the moon makes the elixir of immortality. [From a Chinese fabric.]

Indra is often called *somapati* ("lord of soma") and it is even said that he drank soma within an hour of his birth. It would seem that this god drinks *soma* before doing anything. Indeed, his very name has been derived from *indhu* "a drop [of *soma*]" but that is only one of several suggestions.

Over a decade before his work on *soma*, R. Gordon Wasson published a paper on the world-wide belief that mushrooms are engendered by thunderstorms.[4] That being the case, Indra, as wielder of thunderbolts (i.e. lightning) was the god who caused mushrooms to sprout. Specifically, it was believed in India that the sound of the thunder caused mushrooms to appear. In the 4th century CE, the great Indian poet Kalidaśa composed his poem The Cloud-Messenger (Skt. *meghadūta*). In it, a *yakṣa* (a kind of subterranean, supernatural being, something like a gnome) has been exiled to the far South and, seeing a monsoon cloud drifting North, begs it to carry a message. He tells the cloud how excited the people will be to see it:

> When they eagerly hear thy sweet-sounding, fertilizing thunder, which can cover the ground with mushrooms…
>
> - *The Cloud-Messenger* [5]

A myth tells how "hare" was thrown onto the moon by Indra, where he can be seen to this day (in the orient they see the hare-, not the man-, in-the-moon). If you look carefully you can see him too. He stands beneath a camphor tree, pounding drugs in a mortar to make *amṛita* for the gods.

## Aditī

Aditī was Indra's mother, she had earrings which dripped *amṛita*. When she is portrayed as the "cosmic cow", it is said that her udders give *soma*, rather than milk.[6] This is especially noteworthy given that the psychedelic mushroom *Psilocybe cubensis* typically grows from a substrate of cow-dung.

## Soma

The sacred elixir of the fire-sacrifice was so highly revered that it is addressed as a god. He is called "child of the thunder-storm"[7] which reinforces the suggestion that soma was a mushroom. In Vedic thought of the moon as the "cup of soma" which wanes as the gods drink from it. Presumably, while the moon is waxing, during that half of the month when the "cup" is being refilled, either the gods refrain from quaffing or the hare works overtime.

## Rudra

With a name that could be interpreted as "The Howler", Rudra is the wild man of the Vedic pantheon. Another, equally valid, take on his name would be "Reddish" or tawny. He is:

> Lord of Soma juice... coloured blue and red...
>
> - *White Yajur Veda, XVI, 47* [8]

Could this be a Harappan precursor to Rudra?
[From an Indus Valley seal.]

He is Śarva, the cosmic archer with fire-tipped arrows. According to legend, Brahma, the creator was about to copulate with his daughter. The other gods were aghast at this and created Rudra to slay Brahma. Brahma and his daughter changed into deer but Rudra shot them with his fiery arrows. The slain deer became a constellation in Indian astronomy (Mriga, the deer) and Rudra took the deerskin as a shawl. Although he was shot by Rudra, this was not the end of the immortal god Brahma. There seems to be a long-running antipathy between these two deities, however. In another myth, Śiva (as Rudra later became known) cuts off Brahma's head and is cursed with having it stick to his hand

Some seals from the Indus Valley show a horned, tailed figure with bow and arrows. Could this be a Harappan precursor to Rudra?

Like Indra, Rudra is said to have one thousand eyes but, in even closer congruence with the fly-agaric mushroom, Rudra is said to be the "red-coloured, who has a thousand eyes."[9] But even though he "takes aim, with a thousand eyes and a thousand arrows",[10] he is also the physician of the gods. In one hand he holds a bow and his lethal, flame-tipped arrows; in the other, a pitcher containing the remedy for all ills.

It has been suggested[11] that Rudra is a Dravidian deity, acquired by the Aryans after their arrival in India. Indus Valley seals sometimes show an archer with horns and a tail. Could this possibly a proto-Rudra?

He is frequently equated to Agni ("fire") and to the god Soma:

> Homage to Soma and to Rudra,
> homage to the copper-coloured and to the ruddy One.
>
> - *White Yajur Veda, XVI, 39* [12]

Given the close linkage between Rudra and soma, and Parpola's hypothesis that Rudra originated in the Indus Valley, we must consider the possibility that soma had its origin there also.

Related to Rudra are his "mind-born sons", the rudras, sometimes said to be eleven in number. They are variously said to be dwarfish, misshapen and having (you guessed it) a thousand eyes.

And there are lots of them:

> Innumerable thousands are the Rudras on the face of earth
>
> - *White Yajur Veda, XVI, 54* [13]

They are white and blue:

> Rudras are dwelling in the sky, whose necks are blue, whose throats are white...
> Śarvas ["archers" – another name for rudras] haunt realms beneath the

But also earth... [Emphasis added]

*- White Yajur Veda, XVI, 56-57* [14]

May he... whose neck is azure, and whose hue is red,
He whom the herdsmen, whom the girls who carry water have beheld, may he when seen be kind to us.
Homage to the Azure-nested, the thousand-eyed, the bountiful,
Yea, and his spirit ministers – to them I offer reverence.

*- White Yajur Veda, XVI, 7* [15]

We are told that rudras are numerous, they are red, they have blue necks and white throats while some are said to have a "purple hue". We must ask ourselves, do these descriptors apply equally to all rudras, or are there several kinds?

There is an unexplained association between Rudra and the number eleven. Of the thirty-three gods who live on the cosmic axial mountain, Mount Meru, one third (i.e. eleven) are said to be *rudras*.

The number eleven accompanies Rudra through his later transformation into (or assimilation with) the Puranic god Śiva and even survives into Buddhism. The version of Avalokiteśvara, who is the patron deity of Tibet (and is clearly a Buddhist version of Rudra/Śiva) has eleven heads. In astrology, Rudra rules the 11th lunar mansion (it is called Bhava, "existence", one of Rudra's names).

It is quite remarkable how many attributes of Rudra persisted through his transformation into the Buddhist bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, especially considering the time-span of over two thousand years. Avalokiteśvara has Rudra's blue throat, his bow and arrow, his antelope-skin shawl and his flask of medicine. In fact, when Avalokiteśvara was imported into Chinese Buddhism, many features of this deity were lost (he even changed his sex) but the flask was retained – Kuan Yin (as s/he is known in China) is rarely seen without her flask of medicine.

Kuan Yin holds a flask of medicine.

## Aryan drugs

According to the Aryan priests (Skt., *brahmana*, English "brahmin"), the plant-juice that they drank during their fire rituals was the very same *soma* ("juice") which gave their gods immortality. Thousands of miles away, the Greeks believed that their gods derived their immortality from drinking *nektar* and eating *ambrosia*. It has been assumed, therefore, that the priests of the ancestral proto-Indo-Europeans ritually drank a psychoactive potion, believed to be an elixir of immortality, which was remembered by various descendant communities as *haoma*, *soma* and *nektar*. This notion of the widespread use of psychoactive sacraments among Indo-European communities has been brought into question by Prof. Mahadevan, who states that we know of only two such traditions in fact: those of *soma* in Vedic India and *haoma* in Iran.

As in other Indo-European societies, the priestly caste of the Aryans claimed access to divine power by means of ritual. Given the crucial role of horses in the Indo-European expansion, it is hardly surprising that the pre-eminent and most elaborate ritual was a horse sacrifice called the *aśvamedha* ("horse-intoxication"). This extravagantly expensive ceremony was performed on behalf of kings. It was presided over by four priests and took over a year to complete. The rite began with the selection of one of the king's most prized stallions. This horse was then allowed to roam at large for an entire year while being followed by the king's courtiers (who also removed any mares from the stallion's path). At the end of the year the stallion was suffocated and the king's favorite wife would simulate sexual intercourse with its corpse (tastefully, though... under a blanket) while male courtiers stood around making lewd and obscene remarks. Finally, the horse's body was cooked, its meat divided in three (for the three castes) and shared among the tribe along with other cooked meats.

Other examples of horse sacrifice are to be found throughout Indo-European culture (e.g. the Roman *October Equus*). As late as the 12th century CE, the coronations of the kings of Ulster featured a ritual with many parallels to the *aśvamedha*. In this case, though, a contemporary account states that the would-be king actually copulated with a horse. As in the *aśvamedha*, the horse flesh was boiled and distributed but only after the new king had bathed in a tub of its broth.[16]

It is assumed that the subsequent feasting involved intoxication. The Sanskrit word *medha* in *aśvamedha*, literally means "intoxication," showing that some form of inebriation was a significant and integral feature of this ritual. The reason for this is not entirely clear – was it the priests, the people or the horse who got drunk at the sacrifice?

A somewhat tenuous connection between horses and elixirs may be found in the story

of Zephyros, Greek god of the west wind, who was said to have made his horses immortal by giving them ambrosia to eat and nectar to drink, though may easily be seen as a metaphor for the ceaseless (i.e. immortal) nature of wind. In a subsequent chapter we will consider the story of the Indian alchemist Vyāli who, having discovered the secret of the elixir of immortality, made his wife and his horse immortal, too. At the other extreme of the Indo-European world, an echo of *aśvamedha* may be found in a personal name from ancient Gaul: Epomeduos or "horse-mead".

Although the Sanskrit suffix -*medh*a ("drunk, intoxicated") is related to the English word *mead* (a fermented honey drink) and to many words for alcoholic beverages in other Indo-European languages, we should not, however, jump to the conclusion that the intoxicant used in the aśvamedha was necessarily alcohol. *Medha* is also related to the English *medicine*, to the Welsh *metheglyn* (a medicinal brew) and, curiously, to the chemical affix *methyl*-. More significantly, it is known that the Indo-Iranians also used drugs (Avestan *haoma*, Vedic *soma*) derived from plants. We can only surmise what these plants may have been.

## Vedic decline and the rise of Post-Vedic systems

Although the Aryans had many profound effects on the culture of India, such as the introduction of the caste system and the use of Sanskrit as a sacred language, few of the Vedic gods are still worshiped and the old sacrifices are rarely held. Even in ancient times the frequency of sacrifices declined as horses became scarce. By 500 BCE the value of priestly ritual was openly doubted and new religious movements (no doubt at the time they would have been thought of as anti-religious movements) begin to emerge: the profound and subtle philosophies of Vedanta, the non-violence of Jainism, the compassion and wisdom of Buddhism. These new religions rejected the magic verses and ritual gestures of the priests as meaningless and offered instead spiritual paths based upon individual motivation and effort.

Around the same time, the great Indian epics were composed and collections of myth and legend called *purāṇa*s ("ancient [tales]") began to be compiled. These legends feature previously unheard-of gods: dark-skinned deities (including a blue-skinned flautist who seduces cow-girls), ten different mother goddesses and a menagerie of divine animals: monkey, turtle, horse and boar, all with their own legends.

It is unlikely that these complex cycles of myth, with all their many variants, originated during this period when they were first given written form. In all probability, they represent indigenous Indian oral traditions, already ancient when the Aryans arrived, newly dusted off and retold in the Aryan language, Sanskrit.

From the advent of the *purāṇa*s to the present day, the three great gods of Hinduism have been Brahma the creator, Vishnu the all-pervading preserver, and Śiva, a drug-using, ascetic/hedonist who destroys universes. From this point onward Agni, Soma and the other Vedic deities play greatly diminished, almost insignificant roles. There are some curious exceptions, however. The great god Vishnu, for instance, began as a minor aspect of the Vedic sun god and the all-powerful, destructive goddess Kalī may have originated as one of seven named tongues of flame in the sacrificial fire. The once-great Vedic gods Varuna, Agni, Soma and their peers are now relegated to representing the points of the compass in various lists of "eight directional gods", the *dikpāla*s.

One of the pivotal myths of this next phase of Hinduism is the "churning of the ocean" which describes how the gods and demons collaborated to make *soma*. It sufficiently important for us to examine it in some detail in a later chapter.

PREV NEXT

# *Soma* theories

## Wasson

The *agni-hotra* is still occasionally performed and during this ceremony a form of *soma-pavamana* is prepared and consumed. The brahmin priests remain entirely sober throughout, however, as the modern *soma* is no longer psychoactive. The plant it is made from is *Asclepius acidum*, a vine with no detectable psychoactivity. It has been obvious for some time that this cannot be the *soma-pavamana* spoken of in such exalted terms in the *Ṛig Veda*.

There was considerable scholarly debate in the latter half of the 19th century regarding the identity of the original *soma* plant but most authorities assumed that *soma* was some kind of alcoholic brew and, lacking hard evidence, the controversy petered out.

By the 20th century, apart from occasional crackpottery in the letters columns of learned journals, the issue was no longer discussed. Then, in the mid-1950s, R. Gordon Wasson, a New York banker and his wife, both amateur mushroom enthusiasts, took a fungus-foraging vacation in Mexico. While there, they made the momentous discovery that a local mushroom species, *Psilocybe mexicana*, was capable of inducing profound visionary states. As the effects seemed similar to what he had heard of LSD, Wasson sent samples of the species to Albert Hofmann, LSD's inventor, for analysis. Hofmann determined that the active principles were the previously unknown alkaloids psilocin and psilocybin.

Up to this point, the only known psychoactive mushroom was the fly-agaric mushroom, *Amanita muscaria*. This latter, with its bright red cap and white spots, is familiar to most of us from illustrations of children's stories even if we have not seen it growing in the wild.

Fly agaric (*Amanita muscaria*), beautifully rendered in water-color.

From the cover of Wasson's *SOMA*.

A decade later in his monumental work *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality*, Wasson made the claim that *soma*, the sacred plant of ancient India, was fly-agaric. In several books and articles, he defended his position against its detractors. At the same time he tentatively proposed a hypothesis that ancient entheogen use was the ultimate source of all ecstatic religion.

Wasson presented several arguments for *Amanita muscaria* being the *soma*-plant, the chief of which are:

- Soma is a plant yet no leaves, roots or branches are mentioned in the Vedas.
- Vedic synonyms for soma include terms which suggest a mushroom.
- The *Ṛig Veda* describes the *soma*-plant as "tawny."
- The *Ṛig Veda* mentions urine in connection with *soma*.

The fact that the Vedas have no mention of *soma*'s leaves, roots or branches is, on the face of it, a fairly weak argument. Yet, given the Vedas" extensive use of poetic trope, if *soma* were a vascular plant one would expect it to be addressed as "many-leaved," "slender-branched," "stout-stemmed" or something of that nature.

The term *aja ekapad* ("not-born, one-foot") is used in the *Ṛig Veda* and is understood to be a poetic synonym for lightning. To Wasson, the phrase suggested a mushroom which, springing up mysteriously without visible seed, could be said to be "not-born". Also, if thought of in anthropomorphic terms, its stipe (stem) could be conceived of as its "one foot". Conversely, as the word *aja* ("not-born") is the same as *aja* which means "goat", the term *aja ekapad* could be translated as "one-legged goat". Surprising as it may seem, this is the conventional translation even though it seems to make far less sense than Wasson"s suggestion.

While the main topic of the *Ṛig Veda* is *soma* and the fire ritual, it is also filled with references to the weather, especially storms, clouds and rain, hence the many references to lightning. This in itself might lead one to suspect that the monsoons are, in some causal manner, connected with the *soma*-plant. Could it be that, in India, it grows only after the monsoons, as is the case with mushrooms?

The Ṛig Veda describes the soma-plant with the Sanskrit color-word *hari*. This rather vague term is asserted by Wasson to encompass a range of colors from bright red to tawny-brown. While these are not colors normally associated with vascular plants they quite accurately describe the colors of *A. muscaria* both when fresh (bright red) and dried (tawny-brown). On the other hand, Wasson"s critics have suggested that *hari* might have represented a much wider range of colors, including green.

The significance of urine being mentioned in connection with *soma* relies on a peculiar property of *Amanita muscaria*: the urine of someone who has eaten this mushroom is itself intoxicating. Wasson saw this as a crucial and specific indicator of this mushroom. The *Ṛig Veda* contains one passage in which urine and *soma* are mentioned together and Wasson attempted to use it in support of his hypothesis:

> Acting in concert, those charged with the office, richly gifted, do full homage to *soma*. The swollen men piss the flowing (*soma*).[1]

While many of Wasson's arguments seemed persuasive, some scholars expressed reservations, especially in regard to urine drinking. In particular, though the phrase "the swollen men piss the flowing" probably does refer to *soma*, it is not mentioned explicitly. Furthermore, it merely refers to urination, not urine drinking. If we were to consider modern, literary accounts of beer drinking we would undoubtedly find many references to urination. We might even, in British literature, find many references to embarking on a drinking bout as "going on the piss". This connection between beer and urination is valid and incontrovertible yet who would be so foolish as to infer that this represents a tradition of urine quaffing among beer drinkers?

If, therefore, we could find references to actual urine-*drinking* in the context of *soma* use then Wasson's hypothesis would gain considerably in credibility. We know of the inebriating properties of fly-agaric urine because certain Siberian peoples use *A. muscaria* as an intoxicant. Many travelers in these parts have pointed out certain curious practices associated with its use. For instance:

> The Russians who trade with the Koryaks carry thither a kind of mushroom called, in the Russian tongue, Muchmor, which they exchange for squirrels, fox, ermine, sable and other furs. Those who are rich among them lay up large provisions of these mushrooms for the winter. When they make a feast, they pour water upon some of these mushrooms, and boil them. They then drink the liquor, which intoxicate them. The poorer sort, who cannot afford to lay in a store of these mushrooms, post themselves on these occasions round the huts of the rich, and watch the opportunity of the guests coming down to make water. Then they hold a wooden bowl to receive the urine which they drink off greedily, as having still some virtue of the mushroom in it, and by this way they also get drunk.
>
> *- Langsdorf, 1809*

The urine of one intoxicated person may be drunk by another and so on, the procedure being repeated up to five or six times. The reason for this lies in the chemistry of this mushroom. It contains both the primary active principle, muscimole (3-hydroxy-5-aminomethyl isoxazole) [2] as well the more toxic, less active ibotenic acid (α-amino-3-hydroxy-5-isoxazole acetic acid). [3] However, when meatabolized, the ibotenic acid molecule yields the more psychoactive and less toxic compound, muscimol. The metabolic process which carries out this de-carboxylation within the user's liver is very inefficient. So much so that approximately 85% of the ibotenic acid ingested passes

through the body unchanged and is excreted in the urine [4] thus enabling further users to become inebriated. This apparently unsavory yet economical practice is well documented among several Siberian tribes where *A. muscaria* is widely used in both shamanic and purely hedonistic contexts. [5] Of all known traditions of drug use this practice of recycling the urine is unique to *A. muscaria* consumption and should be considered a highly significant indicator of this mushroom.

Wasson did offer one indisputable example where urine is equated with *some*. It occurs in the great Indian epic, the *Mahābharata*. Although this epic was composed at a much later period than the Vedas, the passage indicated by Wasson shows quite clearly that urine (especially that of a god) could be a form of *soma* (here referred to by its common synonym, *amṛita*).:

> Kṛiṣṇa had offered the sage Uttanka a boon, and Uttanka said, "I wish to have water whenever I want it."
>
> "Whenever thou wilt require water, think of me!" replied Kṛiṣṇa. Having said so, he proceeded towards Dwaraka.
>
> Then one day Uttanka was thirsty, and he thought on Kṛiṣṇa, and thereupon he saw a naked, filthy *caṇḍāla* [an out-caste hunter], surrounded by a pack of dogs, terrifying, bearing a bow and arrows. And Uttanka saw copious streams of water flowing from his penis.
>
> The hunter smiled and said to Uttanka, "Come, Uttanka, and accept this water from me. I feel great pity for you, seeing you so overcome by thirst".
>
> The sage did not rejoice in that water, and he reviled Kṛiṣṇa with harsh words. The hunter kept repeating, "Drink!", but the sage was angry and did not drink.
>
> Then the hunter vanished with his dogs, and Uttanka's mind was troubled; he considered that he had been deceived by Kṛiṣṇa. Then Kṛiṣṇa came, bearing his disc and conch [symbols of Viṣṇu], and Uttanka said to him, It was not proper for you to give me such a thing, water in the form of the stream from an out-caste"
>
> Then Kṛiṣṇa spoke to Uttanka with honeyed words, to console him, saying, I gave it to you in such form as was proper, but you did not recognize it.
>
> For your sake I said to Indra, "Give the *amṛita* to Uttanka in the form of water."
>
> Indra said to me, "A mortal should not become immortal; give some other boon to him."
>
> He kept repeating this, but I insisted, "Give him the *amṛita*".
>
> Then he said to me, "If I must give it, I will become a *caṇḍāla* and give the *amṛita* to Uttanka. If he accepts the *amṛita* thus, I will go and give it to him today." As he continued to say, "I will not give it otherwise," I agreed to this, and he approached you and offered the *amṛita*.
>
> *- Mahābharata, Aśvamedha Parvan, 14.55, 12-35.1* [6]

Even though the connection to *soma* is less blatant than in the quotation from the *Ṛig Veda*, this episode has several important elements. The "*amṛita*" which flowed from the hunter's penis[7] is obviously intended to be understood as urine. Moreover, the hunter's real identity is Indra, the king of the gods who is so intimately involved with *soma* that he is known as *somapati* – "lord of *soma*". And why does Indra appear in the guise of a hunter? Perhaps because a hunter carries a bow and arrows, symbols of Rudra, the Vedic god who represented the *soma* plant (as distinct from *soma-pavamana*, the actual drink). Perhaps the most significant detail is that the hunter was a member of an out-caste tribe. Caste Hindus were forbidden to handle mushrooms but this restriction did not apply to the "untouchable" out-castes.

The correlation between *soma/amṛita* and urine in this passage is clear and obvious. Indra (the hunter) is reluctant to give the urine/water to Uttanka because it will make him immortal, thus underscoring the fact that this is no ordinary urine, it is *amṛita*. All that is needed in order to identify *soma* with this mushroom is to point out that, in all the world, only one plant is associated with a tradition of urine-drinking and that plant is the *Amanita muscaria* mushroom.

Since Wasson's groundbreaking work, much more evidence has come to light and further research by Clark Heinrich, Scott Hajicek-Dobberstein and others has been published. Hajicek-Dobberstein presents persuasive evidence that *A. muscaria* was in use among the *siddha*s (adepts) of Vajrayāna Buddhism in medieval India. [8] His paper brings to our attention the tale of Āryadeva and the urine-*amṛita* of his guru Nāgārjuna. We will examine that evidence more closely when we turn our attention to the Vajrayāna (or tantric) phase of Indian Buddhism. It is easy to see how Rudra, "the reddish one" with a thousand eyes could be equated with the *A. muscaria* mushroom. Not just a hunter, he also had his healing aspect. He carried a flask of his "special medicine" called *jalāṣah*, a word which has long been determined to mean urine. [9] Could this universal panacea be the urine of someone who has eaten *A. muscaria*?

## Psilocybe

Before we identify Rudra fully with *Amanita muscaria*, however, we must also account for the passage in the *White Yajur Veda* which tells us that Rudra – who is recognized by his blue-throat – reveals himself to cow-herds and to girls who fetch water. This, undoubtedly, sounds like a reference to the blue-staining stem of *Psilocybe cubensis*, a psychedelic species which grows on cow dung and which is averse to drought.

It is hardly likely that *Ps. cubensis* was the original *soma* of the Aryans as this people came from a colder latitude where the mushroom would not be found. It is far more likely that *soma* originally meant *A. muscaria* and that its definition was extended to include *Ps. cubensis* when this "new" mushroom was encountered. This tendency to consider *Ps. cubensis* as a type of *soma* would have increased as *A. muscaria* became harder to come by.

Ancient Iranian coin showing a fire altar. The traditional, mushroom-shaped supports remain unexplained.

## Syrian rue

In their book, *Haoma and Harmaline: The Botanical Identification of the Indo-Iranian Sacred Hallucinogen 'Soma' and its Legacy in Religion, Language and Middle Eastern Folklore*, David Flattery and Martin Schwartz suggest that the seeds of Syrian rue (*Peganum harmala*) were the original **sauma* – the hypothetical precursor to both the Vedic *soma* and the Iranian *haoma*. Syrian rue seeds are rich in β-carbolines such as peganine, harmine and harmaline, all of which take their names from this plant.

These β-carbolines are also found in the various psychoactive Amazonian concoctions known as *yage* or *ayahuasca*. These brews usually contain another drug, n,n,dimethyl-tryptamine (DMT) which is normally rendered inactive by the intestinal enzyme mono-amine-oxidase (MAO). An interesting property of β-carbolines is that they prevent MAO from performing its normal function and are therefore known as mono-amine-oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs). It is often assumed that the presence of these alkaloids in *ayahuasca* is purely to potentiate the DMT. However, they are psychoactive in their own right and some versions of *yage/ayahuasca* have no DMT, the principal ingredients being β-carbolines.

I can attest from personal experience that Syrian rue seeds are indeed psychoactive but somewhat sedative.

## Ephedra

Flattery and Schwartz also made a case for the ancient sacramental use of *Ephedra* species. The active principle in these plants is ephedrine, an amphetamine. It does not seem a likely candidate for *soma* merely because it is not very satisfactory as a drug. At low dosages it is a mild stimulant. As the dose is increased, the side-effects (e.g. shivering, hypertension, jaw-tension) increase dramatically.

Though active alone, it would certainly be potentiated by combining it with Syrian rue, perhaps to dangerous levels. It is just conceivable that, in combination with an MAOI such as Syrian rue, the stimulation might be amplified but without the unpleasant side-effects. I repeat that this is just possible. I do not intend to experiment with this combo (I also implore the reader to refrain likewise) as it is more probable that it would amplify the side-effects and, as these include hypertension, the results could be fatal.

## Lotus

Named in imitation of Wasson's *SOMA: Divine Mushroom of Immortality*, David L. Spess's *SOMA the Divine Hallucinogen* offers the hypothesis that *soma* was a species of lotus. Or, rather, that it may have been any of a number of lotus or water-lily species of the *Nympaea* and *Nelumbo* genera.

Spess bases his reasoning on the *Ṛig Veda* and on Vedic mythology, supplemented with appeals to European and oriental alchemy. Yet despite the intricacy of his arguments, Spess does not tell us what, if any, psychoactive substances are to be found in lotuses.

Richard Rudgley does, though. In an account of Meso-American drug traditions,[10] he mentions the presence of apomorphine-like compounds in the Egyptian blue lotus (*Nymphaea caerulens*) and noted that it is used in North Africa as "an effective substitute for opium". (Could this be the source of Homer's North African *lotophagoi*?) Jonathan Ott, however, dismisses all claims to psychoactivity in lotuses and water-lilies as unfounded and pharmacologically unsound.[11]

## Rhubarb

Rudgley cites the German pharmacologist Hummel who suggested that soma was rhubarb (*Rheum palmatum*) wine.[12] The problem with all alcoholic *soma*s is that *soma* was made and consumed during the *agni-hotra* ceremony which is not nearly enough time to ferment anything. Besides, rhubarb is laxative rather than psychedelic and, most important, it is not native to India.

## Argyreia

One of the more intriguing *soma*-substitutes discussed by the Brahmaṇas (the ancient Vedic commentaries) is *soma-latā* (or *soma-latikā*, both mean "*soma*-creeper", "*soma*-vine"). which, presumably, is the rationale behind the modern use of the pharmacologically-inactive climber *Asclepius acidum*.

*Soma-latā* was probably considered a suitable substitute for the original *soma* because it was similarly psychoactive. The psychoactive creeper known as Hawaian baby wood-rose (*Argyreia nervosa*) is actually native to eastern India – a better name might be "Bengali baby wood-rose". It contains ergine (also known as lysergic amide or LSA), a potent LSD-like alkaloid, which is readily soluble in cold water. Or milk. It was suggested as a candidate for *soma* by Cam Cloud.[13]

## Cannabis

It has been suggested that Indian hemp (*Cannabis indica*, better known in the U.S. as marijuana) was the Vedic *soma*. It is highly likely that the proto-Indo-Europeans had dealings with their neighbors in Central Asia, the Scythians (also known as Sogdians and as *saka* in Sanskrit) who were known by the ancients as cannabis-users. However, we known very little of how or when cannabis was introduced into India.

Chris Bennett draws attention to the mention of the plant called *uśana* in the Vedic commentary called the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* and proceeds to identify this plant with cannabis (Skt., *śaṇa*).[14] Not only is this *Brāhmaṇa* from the late Vedic period, when *soma*-substitutes were being sought but, the glossing of *uśana* as "hemp" is not supported by any dictionary. In defense of this translation, Bennett cites an "article in response to an earlier article" in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society for 1921. Unfortunately, the "article", by one B. L. Mukherjee, was merely a letter in response to another letter in response to an earlier article. In his letter, Mukherjee presents a list of bald (and often preposterous) assertions with no citations to substantiate his statements. We may therefore dismiss his opinion as "unscholarly" (the word is so much kinder than "crackpot").

One of the Sanskrit words for cannabis, *indraśana* ("Indra"s food"), is taken by Bennett to indicate that it was the *soma* enjoyed by Indra in the Vedas. However, *indraśana* does not occur in the Vedas and seems to be a medieval construction as there is no record of this term before the 12th century. Also, the word is ambiguous as it is also used for *Abrus precatorius*,[15] a plant without psychoactivity.

Bennett cites the work of the Russian archeologist Sarianidi in unearthing a "*soma* temple" in Central Asia. Earthenware pots with traces of cannabis seeds were found at this site. However, he may be making more of this than is justified. Sarianidi himself does not make the claim that it is a "*soma* temple", merely that it suggests the ritual use

of an intoxicant in a manner similar to the *soma* rite. Moreover, the Vedic fire-sacrifice, at which the *soma* was extracted and consumed, was always conducted *en plein air*. Temples did not arrive on the Indian scene until very much later.

## Is *soma* Indo-European?

In this regard, a very important observation was made by Iravatham Mahadevan. To wit, that the *soma* cult was confined to the Indo-Iranians – those Indo-European peoples who settled in Persia and northern India. It is not found in other branches of the Indo-European family. Granted, there was the classical belief that it was by drinking nectar and eating ambrosia that the gods of Olympus maintained their immortality. On the other hand, this was merely myth, not a traditional rite. No actual nectar was consumed. Travelers' tales of *soma* may have filtered through to the Greeks, giving rise to legends of nectar without any religious use of a sacrament.

But what about the mysteries? What about the *kykeon* of Eleusis? Is this not a traditional use of a psychoactive potion? Well, yes, it is but the Eleusinean mysteries were very much associated with the location of Eleusis and were not conducted throughout the Hellenic world. The *soma* and *haoma* cults were the prerogative of priests, whereas the mysteries were open to all. Furthermore, archeological evidence shows that the earliest temple structures at Eleusis are Mycenean, pre-dating the arrival of the Indo-European Greeks.[16]

There was no Slavic equivalent of *soma*. Neither Celt nor Teuton toasted the gods with *amṛita*. No Nordic bonfires tasted *haoma* offerings. Peter Lamborn Wilson devoted an entire book to his investigations into the possibility of an Irish *soma* [17] but, while the search turned up some interesting tidbits, it did not reveal an Irish tradition of a psychedelic sacrament. It seems that this practice was confined to the area around Bactria and northwestern India. In other words: the Indo-Iranians, BMAC and the Indus Valley.

This leaves us with a small number of alternatives. Either the Indo-Iranians, the Margians and the Harappans discovered their sacramental plants separately or they learned about them from one another. Correlations between the words *soma* and *haoma* [18] lead us to assume that both words derive from a common linguistic ancestor. Although the differences between the *soma* and *haoma* traditions pose their own problems, in this case their similarities allow us to treat them as one, simplifying the issue considerably.

It is difficult to imagine any interaction between the Indo-Iranians and the Indus Valley while the Harappan culture was at its height. At the period when the Indus Valley cities were flourishing, the proto-Indo-Europeans were still on the Steppes of central Asia. Two or three centuries separate the fall of Harappan culture from the arrival of the Aryans. But while the cities may have been abandoned, surely there was much of the indigenous culture (the festivals, the religion, the clothes, the recipes, the nursery rhymes, the drugs) which still survived in some form when the Aryan wagons rolled over the Khyber Pass.

If, as Parpola maintains, Rudra was a Harappan god before he was admitted to the Vedic pantheon, then that would lend credence to the notion that *soma* itself had its origins in the Indus Valley sacrament (IVS). It seems likely that the IVS was *Ps. cubensis*. It would have been abundant after the monsoon in their cattle-rich lowland pastures. On the other hand, the Aryans arrived after long travel through mountainous, forested regions. They had been through Bactria (Afghanistan), a region known to have an active tradition of *A. muscaria* use in modern times. If they brought this soma with them they would have seen the IVS as another version of their own sacrament. They may have gone so far as to adopt certain "more civilized" aspects of the indigenous culture, such as their *soma*-filters.

As the Harappan seals showing filters predate all other cultures in the region, it seems most logical to assume that it was the model for the ritual use of drugs found in the BMAC, Iran and Vedic India. On the other hand, there is no evidence of fire-altars in the Indus Valley. Perhaps the entire notion of a sacrifice with fire and drugs came together in the BMAC as a mixture of Harappan influence and indigenous practices. This may then have been adopted by the Indo-Iranians who subsequently carried it to Iran and north-western India.

It seems likely that the original *soma* which the Aryans revered was *A. muscaria* but that, after migration to a sub-tropical climate it became harder and harder to find (though it is still found at higher altitudes throughout the Himalayan range). Indeed, the commentaries on the Vedas dictate at length just which substitutes for soma are

permitted for ritual use. On entering the Indian sub-continent, however, the Aryans came within the range of *Ps. cubensis* and it is easy to imagine that these two psychoactive mushrooms would be held in comparison. Thus the Yajur Veda tells us that the rudras are red or purple (*A. muscaria*) but also that they are white with a blue "throat" (*Ps. cubensis*). Over time, the two mushroom gods are conflated into one and Rudra becomes Śiva.

It is possible that the Aryans used several different psychoactive plants and called them all *soma*. However, there is evidence of a cultural taboo against all mushrooms in Vedic culture. Sanskrit is not an entirely natural language; it was artificially created from five Aryan dialects as the common tongue of the Arya. It has a vast vocabulary but, surprisingly, has no word for "mushroom". Did those pandits who compiled the language simply forget to include a handful of mushroom-words? Surely not. These words must have been avoided deliberately. Evidence for the taboo is also found in the Laws of Manu which forbids even touching a mushroom. An ancient commentary on this passage states that those who eat mushrooms are equivalent to priest-killers. All of this leads one to believe that, not only were mushrooms held in awe but that they were associated with the priestly caste.

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Administration Panel

# Buddhism in historical perspective

## The axial age

The 6th century BCE was remarkable for the number of great thinkers who appeared simultaneously in various parts of the world. In Miletos, a Greek colony in Asia Minor (modern Turkey), Thales suggested that earthquakes and lightning were not the intervention of the gods but were natural phenomena, obeying natural laws. His treatise on the subject was the first to be written in prose. A fellow-citizen of Thales, the astronomer Anaximander, proposed that the Earth floats unsupported in boundless space. Both Thales and Anaximander speculated about the fundamental principle and origin of the universe. Thales thought it was water; Anaximander thought it was chaos. In another Greek colony, this time on the island of Sicily, Pythagoras made great discoveries in mathematics and acoustics and decided that the world was made of harmonious numbers.

Half a world away in China, Lao Tse wrote beautiful yet cryptic verses about a universal organizing principle called "the path" or "the way" (Chinese, *tao*), which manifests as the rhythmic interplay of positive (Chinese, *yang*) and negative (Ch., *yin*) forces. Although they were contemporaries, Lao Tse is unlikely to have met his compatriot Confucius, a professional philosopher who lectured mandarins on matters of duty and obligation. Nevertheless, apocryphal accounts of their "conversations" exist in Chinese.

## Early Buddhism

Meanwhile, in northern India, a certain Gautama Siddhartha suddenly came to understand why our lives seem unsatisfactory and what we can do about it. He compared his new perspective on life to that of a sleeper who awakens from a dream and thus declared himself to be *buddha* (Sanskrit, "awakened"). Buddhist scripture often refers to him by the Sanskrit title Śākyamuni, which is usually translated as "sage of the Śākya clan" though "sage" hardly captures the full meaning of *muni*. (The *muni*s who appear in the Vedas are semi-divine shamans.) The accounts found in Buddhist scriptures are the only source we have for the details of Gautama's life. Here is a brief synopsis:

> Mahāmayā, King Devadatta's favorite wife, gave birth to a son by cesarean section and died a week later. The king called his new son Siddhartha and consulted wise men about his future. They predicted that the child was destined for greatness – either he would become a world-ruling emperor (Sanskrit, *cakravartin*, "wheel-turner") or a great spiritual leader. Determined that his son should rule the world, the king made sure that the growing prince was confined to a palace, surrounded with luxurious distractions and protected from anything which could provoke serious thought.
>
> Despite all this, young Siddhartha desired something else. At first, he just wanted to see what was beyond the palace walls and he persuaded his charioteer to take him out for a drive. (Just why someone who never left his palace would have a charioteer is never satisfactorily explained.) But what he saw was an eye-opener. Not only did he see sickness, old age and death for the first time but he also saw a spiritual seeker, head shaved and dressed in a simple ocher robe, begging for his food. The experience affected him deeply and it was not long before he became a seeker himself, leaving the palace for a grass hut in the forest. Here he sat at the feet of a succession of spiritual teachers but, failing to find the peace he sought with any of them,

he struck out on his own. For three years he practiced harsh asceticism, mortifying his body, employing extreme breathing exercises and eating only a few hemp seeds each day.[1] He even acquired five disciples.

Eventually, with his body enfeebled and his thoughts clouded, he decided that self-mortification was not the way and he accepted an offering of food. Eating the food had a twofold effect, the first being that his five ascetic disciples left him in disgust. More importantly, it restored the clarity of Siddhartha's mind, and that's when he had his insight. Later, when he had found more disciples, he explained it in four steps, sometimes called the "four noble truths":

1. Life is commonly experienced as unsatisfactory (vide sickness, old age and death).
2. We are unsatisfied because, regardless of our situation, we desire things to be otherwise. Even pleasant experiences cause us to suffer if we try to hang on to them as they fade.
3. There is a state of bliss, free from suffering, called *nirvana*.
4. It is possible to achieve *nirvana* by abandoning our desires.

At this point, Gautama Siddhartha was about 30 years old. He lived for another 50 years, walking from city to city and offering his personal insights on a vast array of subjects from meditation, psychology and ethics to guidelines for democracy and labor relations. He established monasteries for his followers, the first Buddhist monks and nuns. At the age of 80, severely weakened by a long bout of dysentery, he entered "the great ultimate nirvana" from which there is no return.

## But Did It Really Happen?

Modern scholars have found fault with elements of this story. His father, for instance, cannot have been a king as, at that time, Magadha was a democratic state.[2] He may have been a man of importance, though, perhaps sitting as chairman of one of the local committees, or *sangha*. This word took on another meaning in Buddhism where it means the community of Buddhist practitioners. Also, it seems an odd coincidence that the founder of the Jain religion, Mahāvira, a contemporary of the Buddha, was also said to be the cloistered son of a king who left his luxurious palace to become an ascetic. It has also been pointed out that the legends of the Buddha's birth share elements of the myths of Indra's birth.[3]

It is customary to assume that the Buddha was a historical character (even iconoclasts like Trevor Ling do not question his historicity) but these parallels with non-Buddhist systems raise a suspicion that this may not be so. It is no longer believed that there was an ancient Greek poet called Homer who composed *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. The works of "Homer" are now understood to be the compiled and refined compositions of a large number of individual storytellers. Might not the teachings "the Buddha" also have been a centuries-old body of wisdom, analogously compiled, refined and imputed to a single, fictitious author? If this were indeed the case then we might view both Buddhism and Jainism as inheritors of a tradition which predated both. The purported founders of these two religious traditions, known as Buddha ("the awakened one") and Mahāvira ("the great man"), would then be viewed as simply being different versions of the same, fictitious, teacher. This view is confirmed to some extent by the considerable overlap in symbols common to both Buddhism and Jainism.

An aniconic depiction of the Buddha (as an empty throne with a pillar of flame surmounted by a *nandipada*) being worshiped by *nāga*s and humans, at Amarāvatī, India. Note also the pair of feet on the plinth. [From a 19th century drawing].

The earliest Buddhist art does not depict the Buddha as a person, but merely in symbolic form. In these so-called "aniconic" images, he may be shown as a parasol, an empty throne, pillar of fire or a pair of footprints. Could this be an acknowledgment that "the Buddha" was not a person in the normal meaning of the word? Some scholars have noticed that there seem to be Vedic precursors to some Buddhist symbols,[4] but it is possible they may be even older than that – by at least a thousand years.

## The *nandipada*

Early Buddhist symbols, wheel and nandipada, at Amarāvatī, India. [From a 19th century drawing].

In my brief account of the Buddha's life above, I used the date accepted by western scholarship – the end of the 6th century BCE. But this is not in accord with Buddhist tradition. Tibetan texts place him around 2,500 BCE. This may simply be equivalent to saying "a really, really long time ago" but, if taken seriously, would make the Buddha contemporaneous with the Indus Valley civilization. It may be no more than a curious coincidence but one of the earliest Buddhist symbols is that known as the *nandipada* (hoof-print) or *triśula* (trident). The name *nandipada* is simply due to a vague resemblance to a cattle hoof-print (and because we have to call it something), it has no known connection to cows. And, clearly, it is not a trident, either.

Nandipada on a Harappan seal. Note the wheel at bottom right. Indus Valley seal.

The *nandipada* symbol has long since fallen out of use so we cannot be sure of its significance, though some authors have seen it as a symbol the "three jewels" (Skt. *triratna*), the Buddha, his teaching (Skt. *dharma*) and the community of Buddhist practioners (Skt. *saṅgha*).[5] I find this explanation unsatisfying for much same reason that I cannot see the *nandipada* as a trident – the three points of the symbol are not equivalent. The outer two are foliate; the central one is just a point.

It is, however, possible to find these supposedly Buddhist symbols in Indus Valley artifacts, about two thousand years earlier than the Buddha's usual dates. For instance, the shape of the *nandipada* also resembles the headdress on the famous seated figure, claimed by some to be the Harappan precursor to Śiva, who is found on several Indus Valley seals.

An early version of Śiva?
[Indus Valley seal.]

## Cunda's offering

There is something of a mystery surrounding the Buddha's last meal. A few days before his death, the Buddha and a few novices who were traveling with him were offered a meal prepared by a blacksmith called Cunda. At this meal, Cunda presented the Buddha with a dish called something like "pig's delight" (Pali, *sukkara-maddava*). As this is the only occurrence of this term in all of Pali literature, no one is entirely sure what *sukkara-maddava* means. Suggestions have ranged from a pork delicacy to bamboo shoots but most scholars assume it to have been some sort of mushroom. Whatever it was, Gautama accepted it but told the novices not to eat any as was something that only Buddhas could handle. Just to be sure, after the meal the left-over *sukkara-maddava* was buried. Some have speculated that Cunda understood the mushroom in question to be *amṛita* ("[the elixir of] immortality") and was trying to prolong the Buddha's life.[6]

Early Buddhism (500 BCE to 100CE) was practiced only by monks and nuns; laymen merely provided their food, clothing, medicines and so on. Practice was based upon the discourses of the Gautama Siddhartha, better known as the Buddha ("awakened one"). These discourses are similar to Socratic dialog and are preserved in "Pali" the colloquial language of Magadha, the land of Gautama's birth.[7] Books at this time were written on palm leaves, strung together with thread, thus the name for these Buddhist discourses is *sutta* – Pali for "thread". Just as all fairy-tales start "Once upon a time…", all *sutta*s begin with, "This is what I once heard: The Buddha was at [place-name] in the company of [list of monks, nuns and laymen]" and then proceeds to describe how the Buddha was asked a question and the nature of his response. The actual content ranges from the nature of reality to workers' right to free health-care but the format remains rather austere and formulaic.

The role model of early Buddhism was the *arahant*, a saintly figure who has fully realized that the personal "self" is illusory, impermanent and in constant flux. As a result of this realization, all emotions and desires are brought under control.

## The Mahāyāna

Some time around the beginning of the Common Era a new movement arose which provided the Buddha's lay followers ways for them to practice while still engaged in worldly matters. Philosophically, the movement extended the doctrine of "no-self" to include all phenomena, not just the person. Because of this more open approach, the movement called itself the "Greater Vehicle" (*Mahāyāna*) and disparaged the older school by calling it the "Lesser Vehicle" (*Hinayāna*). The new ideal was the *bodhisattva*, one who dedicates his (or her) self to the aid of others. A *bodhisattva* typically vows to postpone enlightenment until everyone else has achieved theirs.

There were major differences in the scriptures, too. Mahāyāna scholars re-wrote them in Sanskrit, a less parochial, more cosmopolitan language, and called them *sūtra*s, from the Sanskrit for "thread". They also felt free to add new works to the canon: discourses they thought the Buddha should have had, perhaps. A whole new class of philosophical treatises – the *prajñaparamitā* literature – was added in this way.

Of course, no one actually came forward and announced that they had written a new scripture. All of the sūtras were ascribed to the historical Buddha or, at least, a Buddhist figure such as a heavenly *bodhisattva*. There must have been some folk who wondered, if these new scriptures were authentic *buddha-vacana* ("Buddha-speech"), as they claimed to be, where had they been hiding for the past five or six centuries?

Eventually, a legend grew up which accounted for that. According to this story, the Buddha gave these teachings only to a few of his more advanced students. The *prajñaparamitā* teachings were eventually committed to writing and were entrusted to the *nāga*s (snake spirits) who live under the ocean. The monk Nāgārjuna spent some time beneath the waves as a guest of a *nāga* king. While in the *nāga* palace the king presented Nāgārjuna with the Mahāyāna *sūtra*s which he brought back to dry land.[8]

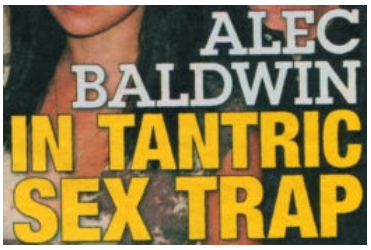
A fanciful tale, to be sure, but can it be entirely fiction? Does any of it, in some distorted manner, reflect reality, or even an aspect of the truth? At this distance in time it is difficult to know if there was a hidden meaning to this legend. There is, however, a folkloric tradition which associates *nāga*s with drugs. Also, in the *soma* ceremony, the large *soma*-bowl from which individual servings were taken, was called the "ocean" (Skt., *samudra*).

In contrast to the stiff formalism of the Pali *sutta*s, the *sūtra*s were written in a florid style full of hyperbole and exaggeration. They still began with "Thus did I hear at one time, when the Buddha was dwelling in…" but then they would go on to name a totally mythical location and to surround the Buddha with monks, nuns, laymen, *bodhisattva*s, *mahāsattva*s and *mahā-bodhisattva*s by the million, as well as non-Buddhist deities and visitors from other parts of the cosmos.

## The Vajrayāna

During the 7th century CE, Buddhism found itself in decline in many ways. It no longer enjoyed the widespread royal patronage of former times and many monasteries were abandoned. At the same time, a new kind of Buddhism was taking hold among the lower classes. Yet again, the new school had its own scriptures based on the *sutta*/*sūtra* model. Such a text was called a *tāntra* (Sanskrit for "weave"), a play on the meaning of *sūtra*, as if the "thread" had taken on an extra dimension. Yet again, the new scriptures used the familiar "Thus did I hear…" opening formula but this time to profoundly shocking effect. Vajrayāna *tāntra*s generally begin as follows, "Thus did I hear at one time, when the Buddha [so-and-so] was dwelling in the vagina of [so-and-so]…".

Also, the Vajrayāna offered a new form of role-model. Whereas the earliest Buddhism revered the *arahant*, and the Greater Vehicle emulated the *bodhisattva*, this new Buddhism had the "adept" (Skt., *siddha*) as its ideal. In contrast with the saintly figures of the *arahant* and the *bodhisattva*, the *siddha* could be outwardly worldly, appearing to the uninitiated as a craftsman, a gambler, a bum or even a pimp. The word "uninitiated" is crucial here. The inner teachings were secret and were imparted in a rite of initiation (Skt., *abhiṣeka*). This secrecy extends to its fundamental texts, the *tāntra*s, which are written in an impenetrably cryptic code in which words may have multiple layers of meaning. Frequently, the traditional commentaries on certain *tāntra*s vary so widely in their interpretation that they give the distinct impression that even the most august commentators are only guessing.



"Tantric sex" headline.
National Inquirer, September 12th, 2011

The movement went by many names: Secret Mantra Vehicle (Skt., *guhya-mantra-yāna*), Easy Vehicle (Skt., *sahaja-yāna*) and Thunderbolt Vehicle (Skt., *vajra-yāna*). It is by this latter name that it is best known today. The early Vajrayāna drew heavily on Hindu tāntra to such an extent that several of its *siddha*s are also recognizable as teachers of certain Śaivite lineages. Both Vajrayāna Buddhists and Hindu Nāths revered a list of 84 *siddha*s.

Although the Vajrayāna movement may have borrowed myths, legends, rituals and deities from Hinduism, it kept strictly to Buddhist philosophy. It adopted such Hindu practices as the fire offering and assimilating several Hindu gods in the guise of Buddhist *bodhisattva*s. In particular, the god Śiva was the inspiration for many Buddhist deities, from the supremely compassionate Avalokiteśvara to the "wrathful" Mahākāla and Bhairava.

Vajrayāna Buddhism, like the tantric traditions in Hinduism and Jainism, is highly secretive. Despite the fact that several previously secret tantric texts have now been published in western languages, they remain cryptic and remarkably difficult to understand. This is not simply a problem with translation; their authors went to great lengths to ensure that only the initiated few would ever understand the message. For

instance, the *tāntra*s themselves are not only written in a secret jargon known as *saṅdhyābhāṣā*, (Skt., "twilight language") but even have sections of their text transposed. Similarly, while images of tantric deities are freely available to us today and books on tantric art may be found on the shelves of most libraries and bookstores, until recently the details of a deity's appearance were revealed only as part of a secret initiation.

At a typical Vajrayāna initiation, the practitioner is first given a spoonful of the "elixir of immortality" (Skt., *amṛita*) to drink, then the guru reveals the *maṇḍala* (divine palace) of a deity. The practitioner is then taught the visualization of that deity and its mantra. In fact, one medieval writer opined that the three essential elements of an initiation are the *amṛita*, the visualization and the *mantra*. The practitioner is then expected to practice the deity-meditation (Skt., sādhana) on a daily basis and is henceforth entitled to attend the twice-monthly tantric feast (Skt., *gaṇacakra*) dedicated to that deity. These *gaṇacakra*s were often said to be held in cemeteries and cremation grounds at night. The celebrants feasted on five meats: cow (or, as we shall see in another chapter, peacock), horse, dog, elephant and human (known as "the great meat"). To wash down the five meats they quaffed the fivefold *amṛita* (Skt., *pañcāmṛita*) – said to be a mixture of urine, feces, brains, blood and semen. We shall see that none of these supposed "meats" nor their corresponding amṛitas should be taken literally. Apart from the practical difficulty of finding fresh elephant meat every month, the lists of meats and elixirs tend to have a lot of variants. Peacock, for instance, occasionally substitutes for cow. In fact, this seemingly trivial matter has considerable bearing on the identification of amṛita, as we shall see.

Eventually, by 1300 CE, Islamic forces had taken a large part of India and Buddhism was no longer viable in the land of its origin but it had spread far and wide across Asia. Just across the Himalayas in Tibet, Buddhism had become the state religion and the country was ruled by series of religious leaders. Vajrayāna was especially popular there although it was banned for a while – a reaction against people who took the instructions literally! This edict underscores the message that, while there is much in the tantric tradition which is outrageous if taken literally, this apparently scandalous material merely serves to hide an inner core of covert meaning.

The notion of a secret god may strike some readers as odd but it should be borne in mind that these "deities" are intended for the purposes of meditation. Initiations invariably include instruction on the philosophical import of the deity and the conventional interpretations of the deity's various symbols and attributes. But, speaking as an initiate, I must say that the connections between symbol and meaning often seem incredibly far-fetched. One goddess carries a "bag of diseases" and a pair of dice while riding a three-legged mule with an eye in its rump. Then there's a snake-tailed protector-god with a thousand eyes, a face in its belly and ten heads, the topmost of which is a raven. Then again, several gods carry a club made from a mummified corpse. Was it really necessary to use such surreal and blood-thirsty imagery to express what are purely philosophical principles? As an example of this style of exegesis, there is a commentary on Vajra-Bhairava, [9] a Buddhist deity with the head of a water-buffalo, explains that his two horns symbolize "the two levels of truth". Curiously, no further mention is made of his head. Even if we admit a pair of horns as a valid visual metaphor for the difference between absolute and relative truth, why a water-buffalo? It is hardly the first thing which springs to mind.

Were it not for anomalies like this, it would be easy to imagine that all Buddhist meditation deities originated as a collection of visual mnemonics. Admittedly, many deities do seem to be created on this pattern but, plainly, many existed prior to being imported into Buddhism and were simply given new, "acceptable" explanations by monks and scholars. Indeed, as has been shown by Prof. Sanderson,[10] tantric Buddhism borrowed wholesale from the Śaiva schools of Hinduism, even to the extent of plagiarizing substantial passages from their scriptures.

So, while many Vajrayāna commentaries offer "respectable" Buddhist interpretations for the bizarre elements of its iconography, the symbols they attempt to explain are frequently not Buddhist at all. It is doubtful if any of the Vajrayāna deities had their origins in Buddhism. In fact, all other traditions of Buddhism deny that there are any "Buddhist gods". To understand the true meaning of these gods and their attributes we must look to their source – Hindu myth and ritual.

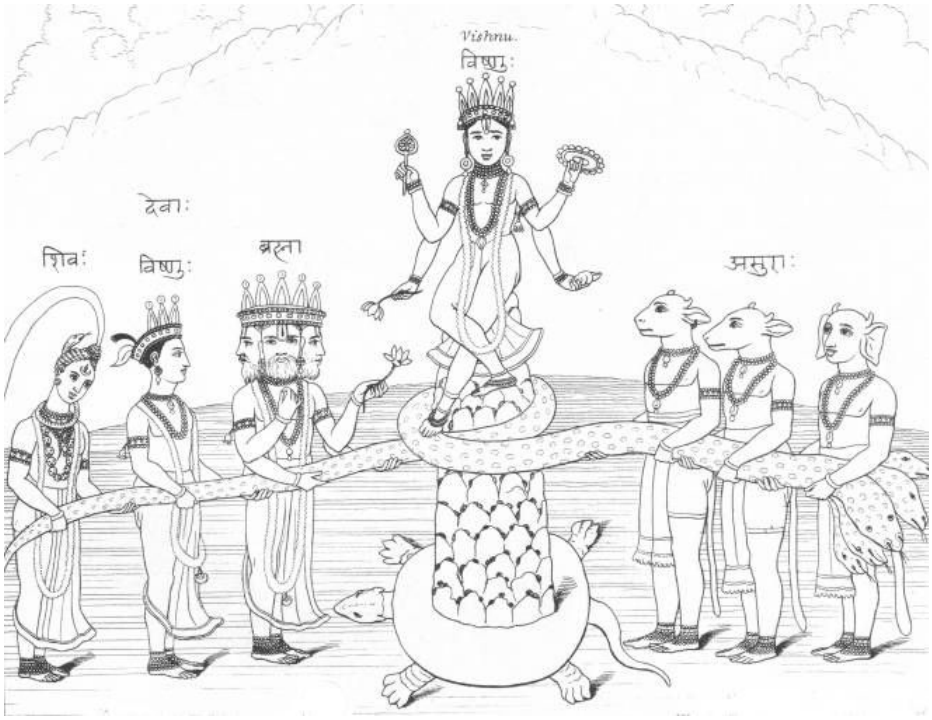
PREV NEXT

# *Amṛita*

## The Churning of the Ocean

Though the Vedas themselves are revered to this day, the great Vedic gods are no longer worshiped. Around 500 BCE, a new kind of literature began to appear, in which storytellers celebrated the deeds of a quite different set of gods and heroes. These texts are the vast epics, the Mahābharata and the Ramayana, and also collections of myths known as *puraṇa* (Sanskrit for "ancient [tales]"). Due to the proliferation of this particular religious format, this stage of Indian literature is known as the Puranic Era. Unlike the priestly Vedas, these works of were an expression of the non-Aryan majority and these "new" deities probably had a long, yet undocumented, history in the indigenous religious traditions.

One of the pivotal events in Hindu mythology is known as *The Churning of the Ocean* (Skt., *samudra-manthanam*). It is referred to time and again throughout Hindu literature and there are three sources which give the entire myth: the Viṣnu Purana, the Mahābharata and the Ramāyana. Though all were composed much later than the Vedas, each of these tells its own version of the origin of *soma*, the Vedic sacrament.




The gods (left) and *asura*s (right) churn the ocean. Viṣnu is depicted three times in this drawing: he is second on the left, between Brahma and Śiva, he sits atop Mt. Mandara and he is also the turtle-pivot at the mountain's base.

Whether the *amṛita* spoken of in this era was identical to the Vedic *soma-amṛita* remains a matter of conjecture. It is quite conceivable that the words *soma* and *amṛita* eventually became applied to all psychoactive potions, much as in modern usage "dope" may signify a wide variety of drugs, deriving its specific meaning from context.

The versions of the myth vary a little in their details but, briefly, the story is as follows:

In the most ancient times, the gods were engaged in constant warfare with their eternal adversaries: the *asura*s, the *daitya*s and the *danava*s, and on one occasion the gods had been soundly defeated by the *danava*s.[1] They were extremely dejected and appealed to the wise god Viṣnu for his advice. He counseled them to unite with their enemies and make peace by collaborating with the *danava*s on a joint project. The ocean, he pointed out, contained several fabulous treasures which would be revealed if it were churned, a feat which the gods, working alone, could never accomplish.

First they scattered various herbs in the ocean and then, taking Mt. Mandara as their churning-stick, they turned it upside-down and balanced it on the back of a giant turtle who was resting on the seabed (actually this was Viṣnu in one of his many disguises). As a churning-rope, they used the serpent-king Vāsuki,[2] winding him three and a half times around the mountain.[3] The gods and *danava*s took opposite ends of the great serpent and hauled him back and forth, causing the mountain to spin this way and that on its turtle-pivot. They kept up this to-and-fro motion for over a thousand years and, just as butter emerges from milk, many wonderful treasures floated to the surface of the ocean.

Though there were several other wonders, the greatest of all was *amṛita*. All three versions of the story tell of a noxious by-product, a virulent poison called *kalakhuta* ("mass of blackness"), *hālāhala* or simply *viśa* ("poison").[4] In some accounts, this is simply the final product to emerge from the ocean. Others say that Vasuki, unaccustomed to being used as the rope in a cosmic tug-of-war, vomited up the *kalakhuta*. This latter explanation presumes that *nāgā*-vomit, like snake venom, is virulently toxic.

Whatever the origin of the *kalakhuta*/*hālāhala*, Śiva saved the world from its perils by drinking it himself. Due to the extreme toxicity of the *kalakhuta*/*hālāhala* even Śiva dare not swallow it all the way. Instead, by yogic control and unwavering attention he holds the poison safely in his throat. The constant presence of this poison has caused his throat to change color and this, we are told, explains Śiva's blue throat.

The original agreement had been that the *asura*s, *daitya*s and *danava*s would share the *amṛita* with the gods but at the last moment the gods changed their minds. Viṣnu took the form of a beautiful woman known as "the enchantress" (Skt., *mohinī*) and distracted the *asura*s while the gods took all the *amṛita*.

One of the *asura*s, Rāhu by name, managed to get in line with the gods as the *amṛita* was being doled out and drank his share before being discovered. As soon as Rāhu was found out, Viṣnu hurled his magic discus (Skt., *cakra*) and decapitated him. But Rāhu had already drunk *amṛita*, the drink which confers immortality, so both his head and body continue to live. It is Rāhu's head which causes eclipses as he tries to eat the sun and moon. In astronomical terms, Rāhu represents the "ascending node" of the moon. That is, he is one of two points at which the orbit of the moon crosses the plane of the ecliptic, the other being the moon's "descending node". Known in Sanskrit as Ketu, this is said to be Rāhu's body.

From our vantage point in the 21st century, few of us believe in the churning of the ocean as an historical event nor in a physical Śiva with an actual throat. There must have been a time, however, when the story of how a god acquired a blue throat was a meaningful detail or it would not appear in so many variant versions of the myth. It must be admitted, however, that the *Bhagavan Purana* omits this episode. It briefly mentions that a poison was created but says that the *nāgā*s took it.

The Churning of the Ocean myth presents us with a tale resembling one of Kipling's *Just So Stories*. Such fables which offer fanciful accounts of, for instance, why the sea is salty, how the elephant got its long trunk or the robin its red breast, are known to folklorists as "pourquoi tales" (from French *pourquoi*, "why"). In its tone, the story of *How Śiva Got His Blue Throat* is a "pourquoi tale". It is as if Śiva's blue throat were a natural, but intriguing, phenomenon (like the briny sea, elephant's trunk or robin's breast) which required explanation. After all, the White Yajur Veda tells us that the god Rudra reveals himself to cowherds who recognize him by his blue throat.

In order to understand this myth we have to discard our customary understanding of a "god." Correctly interpreted, this story of Śiva's blue-stained throat reveals his secret identity. Our first clue lies in this term "blue throat" – in Sanskrit, *nīlakāṇtha*.

## Throat and stem

Rāhu the eclipse-demon, holding sun and moon - Balinese drawing

The Sanskrit word *kāṇṭha* means a narrow place or constriction. It does, certainly, mean "throat" or "neck," but it may also be used figuratively for a narrow part of any object – just as we refer to the "neck" of a bottle. In the context of a plant, the *kāṇṭha* would be its stem. A related word, *kāṇḍa*, does indeed mean "stem" or "branch" and puns are not exactly unknown in Sanskrit literature. Thus, while *nīlakāṇṭha* is invariably translated as "blue-throat," it could also be construed as "blue-stem" or "blue-stalk," a name befitting certain species of psychedelic mushroom. Specifically, this implies any species of mushroom which contains a appreciable quantity of the psychedelic alkaloid psilocin. Psilocin (4,hydroxy-n,n,dimethyl-tryptamine) is a somewhat fragile compound which easily degrades into a deep blue, inactive catabolite.

There are a few mushroom species native to India which are known to contain psilocin, the commonest being *Psilocybe cubensis*. There are others, including *Panaeolus cambogiensis*,[5] *Panaeolus campanulatus* (also known as *P. papilionaceus*), and *Copelandia cyanescens*[6] Unless extreme care is taken when picking these mushrooms, some of the delicate stem tissue stem is sure to become bruised. This damage initiates the enzymatic degradation of psilocin, causing the mushroom to turn dark blue at the place where it was touched. Typically, the mushroom is picked with thumb and fore-finger so that, after 20 minutes or so, a characteristic blue mark appears on the base of the stem. (And also on the tips of your thumb and fore-finger if you pick enough.)

I put it to you, dear reader, that at the most fundamental level, the real reason Śiva is called Blue-throat lies not in any mythological scenario but in a biochemical reaction. Simply put, the Hindu god Śiva is the apotheosis of a psilocin-rich psychedelic mushroom, probably *Ps. cubensis*. I admit that, on the face of it, this may seem an outrageous assertion, but consider Śiva's characteristics:

- By tradition, Śiva is associated with drugs in various ways: he is called "a medicine for kine and horses, a medicine for men, a [source of] ease for rams and ewes".[7] [8]
- He is "the first divine physician".[9]
- He is an avid consumer of psychoactive drugs. Various psychoactive drugs, including datura (*Datura metel*; Skt., *dhattura*), *gañja* (English, "marijuana", *Cannabis indica*) and *bhang*,[10] are considered sacred to Śiva.
- A legend describes Śiva consuming huge quantities of cannabis, datura and *Nux vomica* (the major plant source of strychnine, a powerful stimulant) before engaging in battle.[11]
- Offerings of datura flowers and *bhang* are made to Śiva.
- Śiva has a blue throat because he swallowed the poisonous by-product of *soma*, the drug of the gods.
- Śiva is often shown poised on one leg in the *tāṇḍava* dance.
- Śiva's companion is a bull, called Nandi ("joyous").
- Śiva carries the "cup of *soma*" (*i.e.* the crescent moon) on the crown of his head.
- A common alternative name for Śiva was Soma.[12]
- Some Śiva temples are mushroom-shaped and are even called "mushrooms" (Skt., *chattraka*).

Considered individually, these divine attributes may seem inexplicable, even bizarre, but once they all are seen to allude to the same referent they are readily understood. It is *Psilocybe cubensis* which is simultaneously the powerful **drug** and the perfect **doctor**. *Psilocybe* is the fungus-god who dances **on one leg** (the mushroom stem), **near cattle** (*Ps. cubensis* grows on cow dung), and has a **throat** (stem) that turns **blue** (when picked).

Though details vary, in every version of the myth, Śiva acquires his blue throat as a consequence of the production of soma-amṛita the sacred inebriant. In this context, the identification of a god with a psychedelic mushroom should not be out of the question.

Indeed, the parallels between Śiva and this blue-staining mushroom which grows on cow-dung may not only explain Śiva's blue throat but may go a very long way to elucidating many other characteristics of this god.

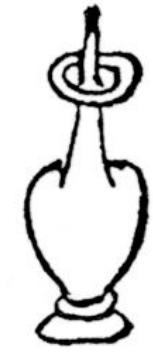
The popularity of the Śiva cults may be inferred by their influence on Buddhism. It its later phases, Buddhism not only borrowed many deities from Hinduism, but it imported Śiva several times over, though each time with a different name.

| Some Buddhist versions of Śiva: | |
|---|---|
| Avalokiteśvara | (see following discussion) |
| Bhairava | "Terrifier" |
| Iśa *or* Iśāna | "Lord" |
| Mahākala | "Great Black One"/"Great Time" |
| Maheśvara | "Great Ruler" |
| Nandi[ke]śvara | "Ruler of Nandi[ka]" |
| Nīladaṇḍa | "Blue Staff"/"Blue Stem" |
| "Nīlakāṇṭha" | "Blue Throat"/"Blue Stem" |
| Nīlāmbhara | "Blue-Robed" |
| Vajra-bhairava | "Vajra- (i.e. 'Buddhist') Terrifier" |

## Avalokiteśvara

Indian Buddhists referred to local deities by the term *lokeśvara*, – literally "place lord". The Sanskrit word *loka* ("place") shares a common origin with Latin *locus* and English *location*. One particular *lokeśvara*, presumably Śiva, became regarded by Buddhists as the *bodhisattva* Nīlakāṇṭha-Lokeśvara. Hindu texts often refer to Śiva, in his mild form, as *lokanatha* "lord of the world" or simply as *iśvara*, "lord." Familiarity with these two terms may have caused Buddhists to misinterpret the name of the *bodhisattva* Avalokita-śvara (*i.e.* "contemplation of sound") as Avalokiteśvara ("lord who looks down upon the world").

Eleven-headed Avalokiteshvara
From a Tibetan xylograph



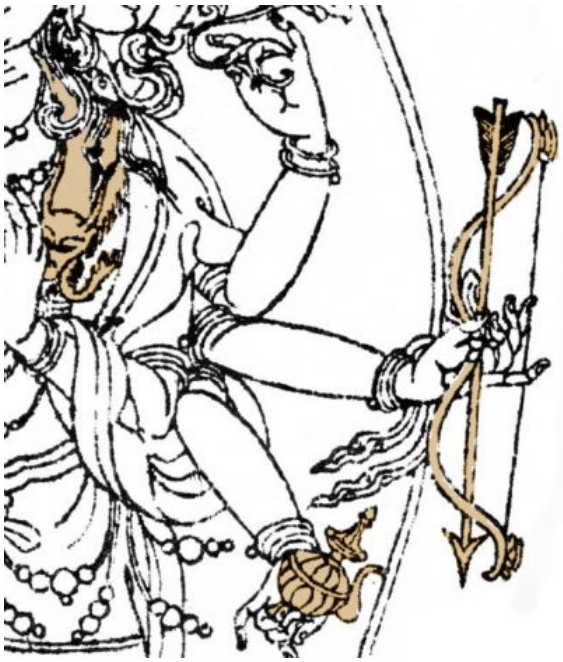
A 9th century scroll depicts Avalokiteśvara symbolically as a flask of *amṛita*

Eventually, Avalokiteśvara became so popular that every *lokeśvara* (even Nīlakāṇṭha) came to be regarded as one of his many aspects.[13] Avalokiteśvara is perhaps the best known of all Mahayāna *bodhisattva*s and his cult is to be found throughout the northern Buddhist lands. In Tibet he is known as Chenrezi (Tib., *sPyan.Ras.gZig*) and is patron deity of the Land of Snows. On migrating to China he became the female deity Kuan Yin and continued to thought of as female when imported into Korea, Vietnam and Japan. All these, whether Chenrezig, Kuan Yin or Kannon, carry a flask of *amṛita*.

These very Buddhist deities betray their Hindu origin in several iconographic details. For instance, the Tibetan Chenrezi is described as having a blue throat. According to the Buddhist commentary, this resulted from his swallowing poison, just like Śiva. In the Buddhist version though, he swallows the standard Buddhist trio of "poisons" – attachment, aversion and apathy. Are we to understand, then, that abstract nouns may cause one's throat to turn blue?[14] Encountered *in vacuo*, devoid of mythical context, this "explanation" of Avalokiteśvara's blue throat would be more baffling than the blue throat itself. As if simply possessing a blue throat were not enough, there is Buddhist deity who is explicitly named Blue-throat (Skt., *nīlakāṇṭha*)[15], said to be versions of Avalokiteśvara.

Nīlakāṇṭha-Avalokiteśvara takes his name ("Blue-throat") from Śiva.

To make any sense of any of this one must be familiar with the Hindu legend of how Śiva acquired his blue throat and also recognize Avalokiteśvara as Rudra/Śiva in Buddhist guise. Apart from his blue throat, Avalokiteśvara has several other attributes which he has inherited from his Hindu antecedents. One of his most popular aspects is Eleven-headed Avalokiteśvara (Skt., *ekadaśa-mukha-avalokiteśvara*). The number eleven has no especial meaning within Buddhism but, for whatever reason, it was closely associated with the Vedic god Rudra. One third of the thirty-three gods on Mt. Meru were, for instance, "the eleven Rudras". Vedic myth tells us that the god Prajapati (later called Brahma) took the form of an antelope in order to commit incest with his daughter. The other gods, aghast, created an archer to slay Prajapati before he could accomplish this deed. The archer, Rudra, slew the antelope and took his skin as a shawl.



A closer look at Eleven-headed Avalokiteśvara reveals Rudra's antelope pelt, bow, arrow and medicine flask.

Rudra was also said to be the world's first physician and carried a flask of medicine. The most significant attributes of Rudra, therefore, are his bow and arrow, his flask of medicine and his antelope-skin shawl. All of these, as well as the blue throat, are present in the iconography of Avalokiteśvara.

Avalokiteśvara has been a very popular deity in Mahāyāna and, over the centuries, he

Padmapāṇi Avalokiteśvara extends his right hand, which drips *amṛita*

has been imagined in many different ways. The simplest of these has a two-armed, one-faced Avalokiteśvara making the blessing gesture (Skt., *varada-mudra*) with his right hand and holding a lotus in his left. The lotus, incidentally, is sometimes said to be red, sometimes blue. What is not shown in images of Padmapāṇi ("lotus-holding") Avalokiteśvara is that his right hand drips *amṛita*.[16]

Prof. Chandra describes eighty-nine major versions of Avalokiteśvara and a few dozen variants who go by slightly different names. Of these, twenty-two are versions of "Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara" (Skt., *sahasrabhuja-avalokiteśvara*).

One has only to glance at an image of any thousand-armed deity to notice the resemblance to the underside of a mushroom cap. It would, of course, be absurd to build a hypothesis based on this resemblance alone. However, we have already seen that the blue-throated god Śiva is a deified form of the *Psilocybe cubensis* mushroom. In light of which, the comments of Prof. Chandra are very relevant:

A Nepalese drawing of Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara with a *nāgā* at his feet.

> The Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara is a metamorphosis of Maheśvara [i.e. Śiva]. His hymn is **Nīlakāṇṭha**ka... The trident and skull-mace are also characteristic of Maheśvara... *[emphasis added]*Chandra, L., 2000
>
> Sahasrabāhu ("thousand-armed") occurs in *Ṛig Veda* 8.45.265 and is a name of Śiva in the *Mahābhārata*.
>
> *- Dictionary of Buddhist Iconography, vol. 10* [17]

The above drawing of Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara shows a *nāgā* at his feet. The *nāgā* holds a flask of elixir in his two main hands, with a book, *vajra*, skull-cup of *amṛita* and a lotus in his other hands. Note that the book (Skt., *chatra*) is probably a play on the word for "mushroom" (Skt., *chattra*).

The number 1,000 also occurs in the mythology of Indra, the *soma*-lord, king of the Vedic gods: the *vajra*, Indra's thunderbolt-weapon, is said to have a thousand prongs:

> When the artful Tvaṣṭṛi had turned [upon his lathe] the well-made, golden thunderbolt with its thousand spikes, Indra took it to do heroic deeds.
>
> *- Ṛig Veda, 1.85.9* [18]

**PREV** **NEXT**

Administration Panel

# Initiations

> The eight mantra goddesses initiate,
> And one should taste the nectar.
>
> - *Indrabodhi* [1]

## Anointing the successor

Kings and dynasties of kings are to be found throughout the history of the world yet the actual mechanics of how one becomes a king are far from universal. In the system called primogeniture, the eldest son of a king ascends to the throne upon his father's death. This works well unless the son in question turns out to be an impatient cutthroat with patricidal tendencies. Perhaps this is why, in a ritual at least as old as the Vedic period (c. 1500 BCE), an Indian king would formally appoint a trustworthy successor in a ceremony called *abhiṣeka* (Sanskrit, "be-sprinkling; anointing").

A goddess anoints with *amṛita*. Note the large peacock feather in the *amṛita*-vase.
[From a Tibetan block-print.]

Though the tantric religious movement began much later in India's history (c. 600 CE), this royal ceremony provided the basic format of Vajrayāna (tantric) Buddhist initiations. These initiations are both secret and an essential prerequisite for tantric practice. The ritual confers both the ability and permission to perform the tantric practices associated with the specific deity of the initiation. For this reason, when Vajrayāna Buddhism was adopted in Tibet, *abhiṣeka* was translated as *dBang* (pronounced "wong"), meaning "empowerment". Tradition has it that even if one could discover the secrets for oneself, without an initiation, the practices would bring no benefit.[2] In a Vajrayāna *abhiṣeka* a guru reveals the details of a deity's appearance and

mantra. The initiate's mind then "merges with the mind of the guru" as they visualize and recite together. Without this encounter with the guru's mind, it is said, meditation on the deity and reciting the deity's mantra is futile. As we shall see, the actual reason for this may lie in the entheogenic potion which was drunk during the ceremony.

Readers who are familiar with the coronation rituals of European royalty may be surprised to learn that in ancient India the royal anointing ceremony required the would-be king to drink a psychoactive liquid, a detail which has been carried over into (and is central to) the tantric initiation. The potion used in the earliest form of the Hindu ceremony of anointing kings was called *soma* though in Vajrayāna initiations the drink is *amṛita*. This is a characteristic difference between Hindu and Buddhist traditions: in Hinduism, the terms *soma* and *amṛita* are used interchangeably but in Vajrayāna Buddhism the drug is known only as *amṛita*. It is almost as if the name *soma* were deliberately avoided.

The earliest description of the royal *abhiṣeka* is to be found in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, a manual for Vedic priests. In this work, the ritual called the "great *abhiṣeka* of kings" is compared to the "great *abhiṣeka* of Indra", the mythic occasion when the gods took Indra as their king. Indra was so fond of *soma*. He was called *soma*-lord (Skt., *somapati*) and is associated with *soma* in many myths.

Both *soma* and wine (in the form of the goddess Surā) were products of the Churning of the Ocean but during the "great *abhiṣeka* of kings," it is wine which is used,even though it referred to as "*soma*".[3] Hymns to Indra are chanted over a bowl of *surā* then the royal chaplain places the bowl in the hands of the would-be king. Although *surā* was merely alcohol, he behaves as though it is the psychedelic *soma*, presenting it to the king with the words:

> With thy sweetest, most intoxicating
> Stream be thou purified, O *soma*,
> Pressed for Indra to drink…
>
> - *Kauśītaki Brāhmaṇa* [4]

The king-to-be then drinks the *surā* and, keeping up the pretense, replies with verses about drinking *soma*, "the juice which Indra drank mightily." At this point, the Brāhmaṇa (i.e. Vedic commentary) remarks that the *surā* is no longer just *surā* but has been either magically transformed into *soma* by the power of the ritual, or (the text offers two explanations) the *surā* now "contains" *soma*.[5] From this passage we see that the author of the Brāhmaṇa clearly distinguished *soma* from *surā*, suggesting that the identity of the *soma* plant was known, if only to the caste of priests. It is also apparent that, if even kings' favorites had to play make-believe, genuine *soma* was almost impossible to obtain.[6]

## Initiations

> Sattvavajra asked, 'O Lord of Mysteries! Please explain the levels of initiations, which mature the suitable individual.
> The Lord of Mysteries replied, 'O great being, listen! If one is sincerely interested in the existential approach to the hidden energies of Being, one ought to be initiated in order to mature oneself.
>
> *Tantra of the Hidden Lamp of Pure Awareness. Ch. 21* [7]

In Hinduism, ever since the earliest, Vedic period, *soma* has also been known as *amṛita*. Also, at a much later date, the use of a potion called *amṛita* was an essential component of Vajrayāna Buddhist initiations. Indeed, many Tibetan lamas insist that without the ingestion of some kind of substance, an initiation is invalid, the three essential components of an initiation being:

> 1. the substance to be eaten or (more usually) drunk
> 2. the transmission of the visualization of a deity, and
> 3. the transmission of that deity's mantra.[8]

One of the first Tibetan lamas to settle in the United States was the late Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, a fluent English-speaker and charismatic teacher who attracted many western students. Despite the fact that the tradition of *abhiṣeka* is millennia old, Trungpa was well aware of its regal origins. He was also quite clear on the role played

by *amṛita*:

> In the tradition of *anuttara-tāntra*, the student receives a four-fold *abhiṣeka*. The entire ceremony is called an *abhiṣeka*, and each of the four parts is also called an *abhiṣeka*, because they are each a particular empowerment. The four *abhiṣeka*s are all connected with experiencing the phenomenal world as a sacred *maṇḍala*…
>
> …after taking the *samaya* oath, the student receives the first *abhiṣeka*, the *abhiṣeka* of the vase… Symbolically, the *abhiṣeka* of the vase is the coronation of the student as prince or princess, a would-be king of the *maṇḍala*. It signifies the student's graduation from the ordinary world to the world of continuity, the tantric world…
>
> *Amṛita*… is used in conferring the second *abhiṣeka*, the secret *abhiṣeka*. This transmission dissolves the student's mind into the mind of the teacher of the lineage. In general, *amṛita* is the principle of intoxicating extreme beliefs,[9] belief in ego, and dissolving the boundary between confusion and sanity so that co-emergence can be realized…
>
> By drinking *amṛita*, a mixture of liquor and other substances… the mind of the student merges with the mind of the teacher and the mind of the *yi-dam* [*i.e.* meditation deity], so that the boundary line between confusion and wakefulness begins to dissolve. In the third *abhiṣeka*… the *abhiṣeka* of knowledge and wisdom, the student begins to experience joy, *mahāsukha* [literally, "great bliss"] – uniting with the world. This is sometimes called the union of bliss and emptiness, which signifies greater openness and greater vision taking place.
>
> The fourth *abhiṣeka*… is known as the *abhiṣeka* of suchness [*i.e.* reality]. The student experiences that he does not have to dwell on the past, present or future. He could just wake himself up on the spot. The student's mind is opened to the ultimate notion of sacred outlook, in which there is nobody to flash sacred outlook. There is just a sense of the doer and the doing dissolving into one…
>
> *- Sacred Outlook: The Vajrayoginī Shrine and Practice.* [10]

These passages underscore the fact that, despite the innocuous composition of the modern formulation, the primary function of *amṛita* is as an inebriant. The very word "intoxicating" is used, albeit in an unusual context – that of subduing "extreme beliefs" and "belief in ego." Moreover, the allusions to ego-loss and "dissolving the boundary between confusion and sanity" are strikingly reminiscent of concepts commonly encountered in accounts of psychedelic experiences.[11] Even more so is the following passage, from a Dzogchen [12] text:

> When one bestows the deity initiation on the body and the goddess initiation using ritual substances, then subtle, ordinary accomplishments manifest. By transforming the inner world of one's experience, one's own body-image is imprinted with the form of the deity.
>
> Through the initiation into the state of pure presence which is outside of time, one's own body is experienced as insubstantial and never having come into existence… By seeing the nature of one's own mind, the state of contemplation shines forth… All latching on to 'me' and 'mine' has been exhausted; in this state without grasping there is nothing tainted or anything to correct.
>
> *- Tantra of the Hidden Lamp of Pure Awareness. Ch. 2* [13]

The implications of such descriptions as these are twofold: firstly, that the true *amṛita* was potent enough to induce a profound psychedelic state and, secondly, that Buddhist initiates knew this and employed it for precisely that purpose. As the student is told during one *abhiṣeka*:

> By the power of this nectar [*i.e. amṛita*], a burning-like blissful feeling and warmth is generated within you; thus the Initiation of Wisdom is attained by you.
>
> *- Initiation Ritual of the Fierce Guru* [14]

Note that the *amṛita* is said to produce "a burning-like feeling and warmth". These are

actual, physical symptoms. Symbolic substitutes and visualizations do not have physical side-effects. There is no question that the *amṛita* spoken of here is a physical substance and psychoactive, at that.

Judging by historical accounts such as this, *amṛita* must once have been a truly potent psychedelic. By contrast, the *amṛita* used in modern initiations is an infusion of herbs and grain which, despite being the object of copious blessings and mantras, has no perceptible psychoactivity.

Even so, there are those who contend that this liquid is still considered capable of producing the necessary mind-meld, as long as the student has sufficient faith. Such feats of the imagination may have become necessary as reliable supplies of *amṛita* would no longer have been available. This may well have occurred shortly after 1300 CE, when the great Buddhist institutions in India fell to Muslim invaders.

Of the four *abhiṣeka*s, only the first, or "vase *abhiṣeka*" is based on the Vedic *abhiṣeka* ceremony, the three *abhiṣeka*s which follow seem to be tantric additions. Unlike the Vedic ritual, however, the student is given only water to drink in the "vase *abhiṣeka*",[15] the *amṛita* being administered at the start of the second, or "secret *abhiṣeka*". As stated in a Tibetan commentary:

> Lexicographers say it is called "secret" because it is the initiation obtained from tasting the secret substance.
>
> *- mK'as Grub.rJe (1385 – 1438)* [16]

Hindu scholar Agehananda Bharati called attention to how the traditional phases of a tantric ritual may be intended to synchronize with the effects of a drug. In his example, the ritual was the Hindu rite of *maithuna* (*i.e.* tantric sex) and the drug was *bhang* (a cannabis drink) but the same principles may well apply here.

If we accept Trungpa's description, drinking *amṛita* (at least in its original formulation) produces psychedelic effects which first begin to manifest by the end of the second *abhiṣeka*.[17] As the effects of the *amṛita* continue to intensify, the student is introduced to philosophical concepts of increasing subtlety in two further *abhiṣeka*s. When the effects are at their peak, the student (now an initiate) experiences the *mahāsukha* ("great bliss") of non-duality and finally, with the fourth *abhiṣeka*, breaks through into the state of "suchness".

Thus we see that in order to practice Vajrayāna (tantric) Buddhism the student must "meet the guru's mind" in an *abhiṣeka* ceremony. Furthermore, drinking a liquid called *amṛita* is an indispensable part of that ceremony.

In subsequent chapters I will provide evidence for the historical use of psychoactive plants as a spiritual path within tantric Buddhism. Here, I will go further and state that, in its original form, the *abhiṣeka* initiation ritual – the gateway to tantric practice – was a drug-induced trip, guided by the initiating guru.

At the peak of the *amṛita* effects, while the student is in a blissful state of non-dual consciousness, a deity and a mantra are revealed. The student is invited to visualize the deity as each detail is described and its symbolism explained. If we imagine for a moment that *amṛita* was some kind of psychedelic, similar to LSD or *Psilocybe* mushrooms, then the student may have found this feat of visualization to be astonishingly easy. Often, on such psychedelic drugs, one need only think of something to bring it to the mind's eye – fully formed, minutely detailed, in 3D and Technicolor. We may imagine that, as the students listened, the guru's words magically transformed into images, occupying the front and center of their imaginations.

Furthermore, given the student's *amṛita*-enhanced frame of mind, the symbolism may have seemed especially profound. All in all, this must have made for a powerfully impressive ceremony, one which forged a powerful bond between the symbols revealed, the syllables intoned, and the bliss of non-duality. At the conclusion of the initiation the initiates take certain vows, most commonly to recite the mantra a certain number of times each day. Henceforth, the initiates devote some time every day to the *sādhana* (spiritual practice) of mantra-recitation while visualizing the deity. Such practices could be seen as attempts to re-create the drug-state without recourse to the drug, inducing the state of non-dual bliss by a form of hypnotic suggestion.

Then, once a month, initiates might also come together for a secret, tantric feast called a *gaṇacakra* in which they would renew their acquaintance with the effects of *amṛita* and to perform their yogic practices together. It should also be said that this was, at least in theory, a feast of the senses. Richly pleasing sense-objects – perfumes, silken robes,

music, morsels of delicious food – would be enjoyed while in the state of non-dual consciousness. The *tantrika*s would appreciate these sensual pleasures while simultaneously recognizing their nature as "void".

These *gaṇacakra*s were often the setting for those sexual practices which have become synonymous with *tāntra* in the West. These sexual techniques, which remained secret for centuries, are now available to anyone with a library card. The *tāntra*s have many more secrets to tell, however, such as the ritual use of drugs and, the supreme secret, enlightenment.

We have seen that between 2,000 and 1,500 BCE, a group of Aryan poet-priests composed the Ṛig Veda, singing the praises of a drug they called both *soma* and *amṛita*. Some time later, a commentary on this Veda declares, "the *soma* seller is evil,"[18] and compares the merits of several *soma* substitutes. Obviously, even in the Vedic period itself, supplies of the genuine drug had become problematic. Yet, approximately two thousand years later, a sect of Buddhism was performing recognizable versions of Vedic rituals with a potion called *amṛita*. What was it? Could the *amṛita* of Buddhist *tāntra* possibly be same as the ancient *amṛita* of the Vedas?

## The Eight Siddhis

> King Bhojadeva of Malava in the west became invisible together with 1,000 courtiers. In the South, at Kongkuna, King Haribhadra together with innumerable servants perfected the *siddhi* of making pills[19] and, as a result, for between 100 and 200 years more than 100,000 beings attained *siddhi*.
>
> *- Golden Rosary of Tārā* [20]

The literal translation of the Sanskrit word *siddhi* is "an accomplishment" but the closest modern term would be "super-power". Buddhist accounts of *siddhi*s always make a clear distinction between the "mundane" *siddhi*s (i.e. super-powers) and the "supreme" *siddhi*, which is complete enlightenment. The mundane *siddhi*s are also contrasted with riddhis – supernatural abilities such as clairvoyance, telepathy, bi-location, etc. which are said to result from long-term meditation practice.

Traditionally, there are said to be eight *siddhi*s but those eight vary widely between lists. The concept of the eight *siddhi*s is an ancient Indian folk tradition with many variants and it is possible to find Hindu, Buddhist and Jain versions.

Here is a list from a Buddhist source:

| The eight *siddhi*s: | |
|---|---|
| *khaḍga-siddhi* | Sword [of flight] super-power |
| *añjana-siddhi* | Eye medicine super-power |
| *pādalepa-siddhi* | Running super-power |
| *antardhāna-siddhi* | Invisibility |
| *rasāyana-siddhi* | Elixir [of immortality] super-power |
| *khecara-siddhi* | Flying super-power |
| *bhūcara-siddhi* | Pill-making super-power |
| *pātāla-siddhi* | Power over denizens of the underworld |

Some commentaries explain the *siddhi* of the sword as being invincibility in battle while others state that it is a magic sword which confers the power of flight. The latter is also implied by the iconography of the *siddha*s, as the *siddha* known as Khaḍgapa ("the swordsman") is normally shown in flight, holding a sword. One strange aspect of the sword-*siddhi* is that the sword in question often originates as a tongue of a zombie (Skt., *vetala*) which, when bitten off (!), miraculously transforms into a magical sword. Let us say that I am not entirely convinced of the reality of *vetala*s and strongly suspect that the adept was not required to French-kiss a corpse. On the other hand, there is certainly something behind this bizarre scenario. We will revisit the topic of "revived corpses" in a later chapter when we consider the process of drying and reconstituting the fly agaric mushroom.

The *añjana-siddhi* is a collyrium or eye-ointment which, when applied to the eyes, allows one to see supernatural beings. Naturally, we ask ourselves what psychoactive

drugs would (a) be capable of absorption through the eyes and (b) produce an effect which could be described as "seeing supernatural beings". The compounds which come most readily to mind are the class of alkaloids called tropanes. These substances (*e.g.* atropine, hyoscyamine, scopolamine) are found in *Datura* species, henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*), deadly nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*) and other members of the Solanacea. The tropanes may be absorbed through the skin and especially through mucous membranes, as found around the eyes. They are suspected of being the basis of the "flying ointments" used by European witches.

The elixir of youth is, of course, *amṛita*. The others are self-explanatory though a little more might, perhaps, be said about the pill-making *siddhi*. Buddhist scholar David Templeman, speaking of the pill-making *siddhi*, states that the pills "can be compounded out of various substances such as metals, herbs, **saint's urine**, etc." [Emphasis added.] *Bhūcara* means "to shape into a ball,"[21] and the *bhūcara-siddhi* is the ability to make "thumb-sized" pills of the nine kinds of flesh (human, elephant, horse, cow, dog, ass, camel, buffalo and wolf) Five of these (human, elephant, horse, cow and dog) are the "five meats" consumed along with the five *amṛita*s in the *gaṇacakra* ceremony. and pills of the five *amṛita*s (feces, urine, blood, pus and semen).


The German book-title reads "New improved healing with Filth-Medicine, namely feces and urine…".
[From the title page of a 17th century German medical text]

If this *siddhi* reflects an actual tradition of practice then I would venture to suggest that the stated ingredients of these pills are not to be understood at face value and that they probably represent different drug plants. A parallel may be found in the medieval European medical tradition called, in German, *Dreckapotheke* (literally "shit medicine"). In this system, vile and disgusting names were given to medicinal plants in order to conceal their identities. Unfortunately, knowledge of the true meanings became lost and doctors began to take the recipes literally.

Nevertheless, references to *cow*-dung probably should be taken literally. Thus, when King Puṣpabhūti visited the holy-man Bhairavācārya, he found him:

> …seated on a tiger-skin, which was stretched on ground smeared with green (*i.e.* fresh) cow dung, and whose outline was marked with a boundary ridge of ashes.
>
> - *The Harṣa-carita* [22]

Also, some instructions for conducting an initiation ceremony require cow dung…

> The maṇḍala ground should be anointed with unfallen cow dung, with charnel ground ash, together with the five ambrosias.
>
> - *The Cakrasamvara Tantra* [23]

Note that the "maṇḍala ground should be anointed with… the five ambrosias (Skt., *pañcāmṛita*)". This mention of the ambrosial sacrament together with cow dung is hardly coincidental. It surely indicates that *Psilocybe cubensis* mushroom, which grows from cow dung, was a vital component of the *pañcāmṛita* concoction. It is also significant that in both cases cited above that ashes are also employed. One of the eponyms of the god Śiva, who we have identified as an apotheosis of *Psilocybe cubensis*, is Bhasmabhuta ("Made of Ashes") and one author interprets the Śivaite use of ashes as a symbolic reference to mushroom spores.[24]

A Buddhist legend which describes Śiva's conversion to Buddhism and predicts that he will eventually become a Buddha in a world called Bhasmacchatrā.[25] Bhasmacchatrā may be translated as either "Ash Parasol" or "Ash Mushroom".

PREV NEXT

Administration Panel

# *Siddhas*

Vajrayāna adepts: Khaḍgapa flying, Nāgārjuna teaching, Karṇaripa dancing.
In the foreground is a jar of amṛita surrounded by wish-granting gems. A Mongolian wood-block print.

## The Eighty-four *Siddhas*

The role-models of Buddhist tāntra are a group of eighty-four practitioners who lived in the centuries prior to 1200 C.E. They are known as *mahāsiddhas* or "great adepts" and their exploits are recorded as short, often cryptic, biographies. A celebrated collection of these tales called *The Lives of the Eighty-four Siddhas* (Skt., *caturaśīti-siddha-pravṛitti*), was compiled by Abhayadatta, an Indian Vajrayāna scholar.[1] The word *siddha* is, of course, derived from *siddhi*, "super-power". While *The Lives of the Eighty-four Siddhas* does mention some of the mundane *siddhis*, the focus of the book is on the ultimate *siddhi*: enlightenment.

There is one biography, however, which speaks of four of the mundane *siddhis* almost as if they were physical substances. This tale describes the fate of a family of water-buffalo herders[2] who crossed paths with the *siddha* Carbaripa. Carbaripa sprinkled consecrated water on each of them, transforming them all, mother, father and child, into stone Buddha statues.

> The herdsman's young son gained the eight great *siddhis*: from his testicles came *khecari-siddhi*;[3] from his *vajra* (penis) came the nectar that transmutes base metal to gold; from his lower gate (anus) came the ambrosia of deathlessness; and from his eyes came the power of flight and so on.
>
> He became famous throughout the land, and the king of Campā and many buffalo folk came to pay respect.
>
> *- Lives of the Eighty-four Siddhas*[4]

This story is also found in the histories of Buddhist lineages compiled by Tārānātha.[5]

Here we have four *siddhis*, one of which (the nectar that transmutes base metal to gold) is not in the traditional list. The reason for the discrepancies is that this is not the usual Buddhist list of *siddhis* but one borrowed from the Nath lineage of Hindu tāntra. There is no doubt, though, that these "*siddhis*" coming, as they do, from various parts of the body are more akin to substances than super-powers. Perhaps they were substances which conferred certain "powers" – on a temporary basis, that is.

Some psychedelic mushrooms grow from dung and, thus, they may be the "ambrosia of deathlessness" which came from the "boy's" anus. Similarly, considering the existing traditions of fly-agaric which involve urine-drinking, we must suspect that these two mushrooms are implied here.[6] This account is an extremely brief tale so the fact that it includes a reference to "buffalo folk" must be regarded as significant. [7]

Many of the life-stories in *The Lives of the Eighty-four Siddhas* contain references to a physical substance called *amṛita* but only in two instances is it the main subject of the tale. The first of these chronologically is the tale of Vyali, eighty-fourth of the eighty-four *siddha*s.

## Vyali

Vyali the immortal, holding a bowl of amrita, with his immortal wife and immortal horse. He and his wife hold pages of a text (Skt., chatra), a possible pun on chattra ("mushroom"). On the far left is a bowl of amṛita pills.

His name is Sanskrit for "untrustworthy" or "the cheat", a name which is reminiscent of the "untrustworthy", "cheating" *soma*-dealers mentioned in the Brahmanas.[8] Alone among the eighty-four *siddha*s, Vyali did not seek enlightenment but simply wished to live forever – a desire which he fulfilled by means of *amṛita*. In fact, it would seem that the whole point of this story is to decry the misuse of *amṛita* for non-spiritual purposes. Briefly, it is as follows: [9]

> Vyali is a Hindu of the priestly Brahmin caste in the town of Apatra [10] who practices alchemy, trying to make *amṛita*, the elixir of immortality. Although he tries compounds of many different drugs his experiments are unsuccessful. After twelve years, destitute by his purchases of mercury,[11] he throws his alchemy books into the Ganges and goes to Benares as a beggar. On arriving in that city, Vyali is approached by a prostitute who shows him a strange book she has found while bathing in the Ganges. Recognizing his old alchemy text, he tells her his story. Impressed, she offers him money to continue his quest. With her support he buys more mercury and tries for a further year but due to his ignorance of the red myrobalan fruit the "signs of transformation" do not appear.
>
> One day, the prostitute is bathing and a "flower which was self-formed" attaches itself to her finger. As she plucks it off, a portion of it falls into Vyali's alchemical mixture and they see the "signs of transformation." The prostitute (now his wife, it would seem) mixes some in with his food and for the first time he experiences the desired effect. They subsequently eat the substance and also feed it to their horse with the result that all three "live without dying".
>
> Though immortal, Vyali retains his selfish nature and jealously guards the secret of the elixir, even from the gods. To this end, he finds an inaccessible swamp where he lives on top of a high rock under a tree. Nevertheless, the *siddha* Nāgārjuna vowing to restore the lost secret of amṛita to the land of India, flies to Vyali's hideout by means of a pair of magic sandals. After obtaining the recipe for amṛita in exchange for one of the sandals, Nāgārjuna lectures Vyali on greed and advises him to find a *gūrū*.

First we are told that Vyali's efforts do not meet with success because he lacks knowledge of the "red emblic myrobalan" (*Emblica officinalis*). Then, in almost the next breath, the missing ingredient, supplied by the prostitute-wife, is said to be a "self-

formed flower." Logically, we must assume that this self-formed flower is identical to emblic myrobalan but myrobalan is not a flower, it is a dried fruit. The most likely answer to this conundrum is that myrobalan and the flower are both symbolic substitutes for the genuine article: the vital ingredient, too secret to mention explicitly.

The dried fruit of emblic myrobalan is not only an important Indian medicine, it is the basis of a commercial red dye and, incidentally, is a constituent of Tibetan *amṛita* pills. Its most common name in Tibetan is *sKyu.Ru.Ra* but it also has the synonyms "source of youth" and "sustainer of youthfulness",[12] both of which sound like poetic translations of *amṛita*, "immortality." This fruit is not known to be psychoactive but the kernels of beleric myrobalan (*Terminalia bellirica*), a related species, are eaten by the Lodha people of West Bengal "for hallucination."[13] My guess is that, rather than any psychic effects, it is the fruit's function as an intense red dye which is implied here. This mention of redness suggests the brilliant scarlet of the fly agaric mushroom. While certainly not "a flower," mushrooms are often thought to be "self-formed" and a fly agaric (*Amanita muscaria*) is as colorful as any bloom.

There could be a clue in the name of Vyali's hometown, Apatra. There is no record of an actual Indian city by this name but it sounds very similar to the Sanskrit words *apātra* ("worthless") and *apattra* ("leafless"), both of which might be applied to mushrooms, which were considered worthless in Hindu tradition. Then again, "Apatra" is only one (Sanskrit) letter short of *atapatra* (Skt., "mushroom"). Speaking of Sanskrit puns, in the woodblock illustration, both Vyali and his wife hold a book. The Sanskrit word for "book" is *chatra*), almost identical to *chattra*, the other Sanskrit word for "mushroom".

*The Lives of the Eighty-four Siddhas* also includes Nāgārjuna's own biography which tells how he imparted the formula for amṛita to his disciple King Śālabhanda and his subsequent death. We must conclude, then, that although it comes earlier in *The Lives of the Eighty-four Siddhas*, this episode must have occurred after his encounter with Vyali. Although Nāgārjuna appears as the *gūrū* of four other *siddha*s in their own stories he had no human *gūrū* himself. Could this be because *amṛita* is essential to the *siddha* lineage? According to Tibetan lamas, there can be no transmission of the lineage without an *abhiṣeka* (initiation) and there can be no *abhiṣeka* without *amṛita*. Also, we are told that the secret of *amṛita* had been lost to India until Nāgārjuna acquired the formula from Vyali. By this logic then, Nāgārjuna could not have been initiated by an Indian *gūrū* as he was the only person in India with real *amṛita*.

Tradition avoids this awkward point by asserting that Nāgārjuna received his initiation from the goddess Tārā, who appeared to him in a vision. The suspicion therefore arises that this revelatory vision may have been induced by a draft of *amṛita*.

## Āryadeva and Nāgārjuna

It must be said that this is *not* the same Nāgārjuna as the one who was given the Mahāyāna sūtras by the nāgas. Several centuries must have intervened between Nāgārjuna the philosopher and Nāgārjuna the *siddha*. Tibetans seldom make that distinction, however. Nāgārjuna, they say, had the secret of amṛita and is, therefore, immortal.

Of the four tales in which Nāgārjuna plays the role of *gūrū*, three are brief and lacking in detail but the fourth is the other story in which amṛita is central to the narrative. This is the tale of Āryadeva, one which is particularly interesting as it describes *siddha*s making amṛita by urinating into a bucket. Presumably, this is related to the secret of amṛita which Nāgārjuna learned from the worldly, unenlightened, non-Buddhist Vyali.

Researcher Scott Hajicek-Dobberstein [14] has uncovered an abundance of clues in the tale of Āryadeva which indicate that at least one version of amṛita was the fly-agaric mushroom. The story may be summarized as follows:

> The tale concerns a monk called Karṇaripa ("the one-eyed"). Miraculously-born on the pollen-bed of a lotus flower. He excels as a monk but, dissatisfied with his learning, he seeks "ultimate knowledge" from the great alchemist and famous *gūrū*, Nāgārjuna whom he eventually finds in a forest, collecting ingredients for an elixir of immortality. Nāgārjuna initiates Karṇaripa into the practice of the "secret assembly" (Skt., *guhyasāmaja*) and takes him as his pupil. From here on, Karṇaripa is known as Āryadeva ("Noble God").
> As he is still a monk, Āryadeva must beg for his food and return with it to the hermitage to eat. Nāgārjuna has occasion to scold Āryadeva for bringing back excessive amounts of sumptuous food donated by townswomen. He tells him

to collect only what may be held on the end of a pin. The townswomen find a way around this restriction by baking barley cakes studded with candy, which Āryadeva balances on the pin. Āryadeva offers this delicacy to his *gūrū* who eats it hungrily but, due to the ruse, tells Āryadeva that he must remain at the forest hut. Even so, a tree-nymph brings him food and reveals her entire body to him. Upon Nāgārjuna's return, Āryadeva offers him this food and describes the nymph. The *gūrū* finds her tree but she reveals only her head to him.
Nāgārjuna prepares the elixir of immortality and places a few drops on his tongue. He offers the bowl to Āryadeva who throws it at a tree which bursts into leaf. Nāgārjuna, offended at the waste, demands that Āryadeva replace the elixir. This he does by urinating into a bucket, stirring it with a twig and handing it to his *gūrū*. Nāgārjuna declares that he has made too much and throws half of it over another tree which bursts into bloom. This Nāgārjuna interprets as an indication of his pupil's attainment and Āryadeva floats up into the sky where he is seen by a female follower. She begs for, and is given, one of Āryadeva's eyes, resulting in his name, Karṇaripa ("one-eyed"). He continues to levitate to the height of seven palm trees when he performs an inverted prostration to his *gūrū* and disappears in a shower of flowers.

In many, quite disparate cultures, "one-eyed" is a common epithet of the *Amanita muscaria* mushroom. This is due to its appearance as the bright red cap begins to split the white universal veil, looking like a bright red eye peering up through the undergrowth through white eye-lids. In this biography, though, Karṇaripa gets his name (one assumes) because he donated his eye to an anonymous "follower" but this leaves us wondering what his original name was, before he was called Āryadeva. Obviously, we are not being told the whole story.

Buddhist theoretical texts (Skt., *abhidharma*) classify beings according to their mode of birth: egg-born, womb-born, etc. The final category is miraculously-born. As mushrooms have no perceptible seed, ancient cultures often attributed their sudden appearance to lightning-bolts or to the sound of thunder. Lotus flowers lift themselves above the muddy water before opening. When open, the circular flower on a long gracile stem could easily function as a symbolic substitute for a mushroom, especially as it is a plant which, like mushrooms, grows in wet, muddy places.

It is no great stretch of the imagination to see a barley cake, studded with candy and balanced on a pin as the *A. muscaria* mushroom. The shiny red cap of a fresh fly-agaric, adorned with its glistening white spots, would not look all that incongruous on a restaurant's dessert tray. The "pin" is, of course, the mushroom's stem. Instantly recognizing the psychoactive mushroom, the *gūrū* "eats it hungrily".

The relevance of the tree-nymph is that *A. muscaria* cannot grow except in a mycorrhizal relationship with the roots of a tree. Wasson cites several examples of female tree-spirits in legends about the *A. muscaria* mushroom. When we are told that the nymph reveals only her head, we must assume this means that Nāgārjuna found only an immature specimen, just thrusting up through the soil. The "elixir of immortality" is, of course, *amṛita* and "secret assembly" is the name of a very prominent Vajrayāna scripture (Skt., *tāntra*).[15] Nāgārjuna makes the elixir of immortality which Āryadeva inexplicably throws away. Could it be that Nāgārjuna made his "elixir of immortality" simply by eating *A. muscaria* mushrooms and urinating into a bucket? Was this the alchemical process for which he was renowned? Perhaps Āryadeva was initially repulsed by the notion even of "placing a few drops on his tongue." If so, he soon catches on as he replaces the elixir by urinating into a bucket himself. The potency and rejuvenating power of this *amṛita* is demonstrated as it causes two trees to burst into leaf and into bloom.

As we may see from the story of Āryadeva, the matter of *amṛita* and its identity is treated in a veiled and secretive manner. Fortunately, there are enough nudges and winks in this case that some clues may be teased out of the narrative. Only with our modern understanding of botany and pharmacology are we able to deduce that the *A. muscaria* mushroom was amṛita or, at least, that it was what Nāgārjuna identified as *amṛita*.

## One-eyed Adepts

Karṇaripa amid floating damaru drums and parasols.
He holds a skull-cup of amṛita in his left hand, another is behind him, upon an amṛita-jar.

But why is Nāgārjuna so eager to make and consume *amṛita*? Is it simply to add centuries to his life? This would certainly be an understandable motive but that would be to ignore the role played by the potion in other Buddhist contexts. In the texts of the early Vedic period, the *soma* potion is often referred to by a poetic synonym: amṛita or "deathlessness." The name *soma* rarely occurs in Buddhist texts but references to amṛita are frequently found in Vajrayāna Buddhism. This tradition once flourished in India but today survives only in the Himalayas, Mongolia and, to a lesser extent, Japan.

Some time before 700 C.E., strange new religious practices began to appear on the Indian scene. Early adherents met in cemetery grounds at night, amid the glowing embers of funeral pyres. Their gruesome rites were rumored to include cannibalism and orgiastic, even incestuous, sex. Indeed, many such transgressive acts are prescribed by their scriptures, known as tāntra.

By the 7th century CE, all the major religions, Buddhist, Hindu and Jain, had incorporated tāntras and their commentaries into their canon of holy books. One enduring legacy of the tantric movement is the concept of the spiritual preceptor (Skt., *gūrū*; literally, "heavyweight"). Usually, the teachings are passed from the *gūrū* to a student in a deity initiation which also authorizes the student to perform a meditative ritual called a *sādhana*. In this kind of meditation the deity is visualized and her/his mantra is recited. If, by repeated practice of the *sādhana*, the student attains the state of consciousness indicated by the teachings then he (or she) becomes a *gūrū* to the next generation of students. As to its origin, opinions differ as to whether the tantric movement was an indigenous Indian development or whether it was introduced by one of the successive waves of Central Asian invaders who occupied India immediately prior to this period.

The earliest stories of tantric Buddhists are about wild, iconoclastic, but nonetheless enlightened, gurus known as *siddha*s ("adepts"). However, it should be noted that several of the founding *siddha*s, including Nāgārjuna, are also revered in India as founders (Skt. *ādi-nath*, literally "original lord") of Hindu tantric lineages. Also, there is a good deal of confusion regarding people with names meaning "One-eye". One of these is a one-eyed Śaiva saint called Kannapa and another is the Buddhist *siddha* called Kāṇḥapa. All of these are said to have voluntarily relinquished an eye in exchange for wisdom and received a name meaning "One-eye" as a result. This is oddly reminiscent of a Norse myth concerning the god Odin who also gave up an eye in exchange for wisdom.

Hajicek-Dobberstein [16] sees this myth as evidence of the Nordic use of *Amanita muscaria*. On the other hand, it also lends itself to a spiritual interpretation. English mystic Douglas Harding saw Odin's act as exchanging "two eyes" for "one vision", i.e., transcending dualistic consciousness with unitary awareness.[17] I am sure that the same argument could be made for Kāṇḥapa and Karṇaripa, but one-eyed-ness does not seem a very Buddhist simile. "One-ness" (Skt., *ekatā*) is very much a Hindu concept. The Buddhist equivalent translates to something more like "none-ness" (Skt., *śunyatā*). Slippery Buddhist philosophers prefer to use terms like "non-duality" rather than "unity". But then, Kāṇḥapa and Karṇaripa may both, in fact, be the Śaiva saint, Kannapa. Or perhaps they are all fictitious and entirely symbolic. One possible indication that Kāṇḥapa and Karṇaripa are the same person is that they have consecutive biographies in *The Lives of the Eighty-four Siddhas*,[18] – immediately after Nāgārjuna.

Buddhist biographies of Kāṇḥapa put him in the lineage of Nāgārjuna but give his *gūrū* as Jalandharipa (a.k.a. Haḍipa).[19] and in another biography his *gūrū* is Gorakṣa,[20] ninth *siddha* and successor to the *siddha* Mīnapa. This lineage is most intriguing as Gorakṣa and Mīnapa are also known as Gorakhnath and Matsyendranātha (or Macchendranāth) – not Buddhists at all, but seminal figures in the history of Hindu tāntra.[21] If the variant accounts of Kāṇḥapa and Karṇaripa refer to the same person, then these versions of his biography imply that he was an initiate of both Hindu and Buddhist lineages – a pivotal figure in the transfer of the Śaiva secrets of *amṛita* into Buddhism.

There are many legends and folktales concerning Gorakhnath, some even claim him as co-creator of the world with Viṣnu. He was a celebrated medieval yogi and *ādi-gūrū* ("founding teacher") of the Nāthas, an important lineage of Hindu tantrism, which states that he was born from a dung-heap.[22] His name is most likely an abbreviation of Gorakhṣanatha ("cow-protecting lord") but has also been construed as Gor-nath ("filth lord"),[23] presumably a reference to the dung-heap. In some versions, ashes from Śiva's own ritual fire were thrown on a dung-heap which later produced a little boy. Could this be a veiled reference to a *Psilocybe cubensis* mushroom, which grows only upon cow manure? If so, we must presume the so-called "ashes" to be, in fact, mushroom spores.

A Hindu legend tells how Matsyendranātha ("Fish Lord") was swallowed by a giant fish and attained enlightenment by overhearing the Hindu god Śiva instructing his wife. *The Lives of the Eighty-four Siddhas* has exactly the same story;[24] the Buddhist biography Mīnapa ("Fish Man") is identical in every respect, even preserving the reference to Śiva.

Quite clearly, the *siddha* tradition of Vajrayāna Buddhism has much in common with the Śaiva (i.e. Śiva-ist) lineages of Hindu tāntra. The same blurring of religious boundaries is also evident in many Vajrayāna rituals. For instance, by the early 8th century CE, India's monastic "university" at Nālanda, a prestigious Buddhist institution, was teaching monks how to perform the Vedic *homa* ("fire-offering") ceremony. This non-Brahminic survival of the Vedic *soma* rite was absorbed into the Vajrayāna from a Hindu lineage of Śaiva *tāntra*. *Homa* was the ancient Hindu fire ritual celebrated in the *Ṛig Veda*. Vajrayāna Buddhism carried it as far as Japan where it is called *goma*.

> Flick a drop of water on to the fire and recite three times "Om Amirite Hum! Phat!"... Pick up three sticks, dipping them one by one, into the *soma* (honey and oil, mixed), and toss them into the fire. Recite each time "Om Agni Svaha!"
>
> *- From a goma in the Japanese Tendai tradition* [25]

As we may see from the above passage, by the time it reached Japan, a good deal of the fire had gone out of the fire ceremony: the word *amṛita* (*qua* "amirite") is used in connection with a drop of water and *soma* means a mixture of oil and honey. What happened to the drugs?

We may assume that as the wild, transgressive tantric rites of the original *siddha*s became assimilated into the staid, conservative cloisters of monastic Buddhism, the original amṛita was replaced by symbolic substitutes. Monks and nuns take a vow not to partake of "intoxicants that cloud the mind" and that these entheogenic sacraments could be seen as doing just that (though many would claim the opposite). At the very least, monastic discipline could become problematic with groups of tripping monks roaming the cloisters. Moreover, many consider the psychedelic experience to be inherently anti-authoritarian – not a trait which is conducive to the smooth running of monasteries. So, the monastic commentators explained away the raunchier aspects of the *tāntra*s as being merely "symbolic" and the monks began to substitute innocuous

liquids (*e.g.* oil-and-honey) for the elixir. Although these commentators did a great job of sanitizing the *tāntra*s, few could agree on what the symbolism meant.[26]

Yet even without real *amṛita*, the homa ceremony continues to play a central role within Vajrayāna Buddhism. To this day, it is the rite used to bestow the rank of *gūrū* (Tib., *bLa.Ma*) upon a practitioner: the new *gūrū* performs the *homa* ceremony while his/her erstwhile preceptor acts as their attendant. Having performed this Buddhist adaptation of a Śaivite copy of the Vedic *soma* ritual, they are then formally entitled to perform the functions of a *gūrū* and instruct students of their own.

PREV NEXT

# *bDud.rTsi* – a Tibetan tale of *soma*

A Tibetan Buddhist text re-tells the *Churning of the Ocean* legend with several novel elements, some of which provide clues to the identity of *amṛita*. The text in question is the *Immaculate Crystal Garland* (Tib., *Dri Med Zhal Phreng*) a Tibetan work which, presumably, is itself a translation of a Sanskrit original. Despite the relative obscurity of this work, it was one of the first Tibetan texts ever translated into English. [1] Here is the tale it tells:

> Once upon a time, evil demons, had unleashed the lethal *hālāhala* poison, with disastrous effect on all sentient beings, including mankind. Very concerned about this state of affairs, the Buddhas convened a true summit meeting – they met on top of the cosmic axis, Mount Meru. It was agreed by all the assembled Buddhas that the only solution was to provide the world with an antidote and the antidote par excellence was *amṛita*, elixir of immortality. Unfortunately, it lay concealed in the depths of the ocean. In order to procure the elixir they decided to churn the ocean, using Mount Meru as a churning stick, and so cause the water of life to rise to the surface of the waters. This they did, and gave the *amṛita* to the gentle *bodhisattva* Vajrapāṇi to keep it safe until the next Buddha-summit, when they would deliver it to all living beings.
>
> However, the evil Rāhu, an *asura*,[2] happened to hear of this precious discovery, and carefully watched Vajrapāṇi's movements, waiting for a chance to snatch the elixir. An opportunity soon arose and as soon as Vajrapāṇi's back was turned, Rāhu drank the entire world's supply of the elixir of immortality. Then, as if the theft was not crime enough, to add insult to injury, he replaced the stolen *amṛita* with his own urine. Rāhu then hurried away as fast as possible, and had already traveled a considerable distance before Vajrapāṇi came home.
>
> The only beings who witnessed the flight of Rāhu were the sun and moon but Rāhu threatened them with vengeance, if ever they should to betray him to Vajrapāṇi.
>
> As soon as Vajrapāṇi discovered the theft, he set out in pursuit of the culprit but his searches proved fruitless. Eventually, he thought of asking the sun but the sun was evasive, saying that he had paid no particular attention as to who it was. The moon, on the other hand, replied honestly but begged Vajrapāṇi not to tell Rāhu. Armed with this this information, Vajrapāṇi rapidly found Rāhu and dealt him such a blow with his thunderbolt [*i.e. vajra*] that his upper body was lacerated all over and his lower half was completely obliterated. But despite his dreadful wounds, Rāhu could not die – the *amṛita* he had drunk protected him from death. This powerful elixir, however, dripped from his wounds and fell all over the world, causing numerous medicinal herbs to spring up wherever it touched the soil.
>
> When the Buddhas re-convened their summit meeting, it was not to distribute the *amṛita*, as they had planned. Instead, they had to decide upon how to dispose of Rāhu's urine. To pour it out would have been most dangerous to living beings, as it contained a large quantity of the *hālāhala* poison. So they decided that Vajrapāṇi should drink it, in just punishment for his carelessness in letting the *amṛita* be stolen.
>
> As he drank Rāhu's urine, Vajrapāṇi's fair, golden complexion was transformed by the effects of the poison to dark blue, his jeweled ornaments – necklaces, bangles, ankle-bracelets and so on – all turned into snakes and he was surrounded in an aura of blazing fire. This transfiguration caused Vajrapāṇi to

detest all evil demons, especially Rāhu.

Rāhu himself did not escape without punishment. The Buddhas re-assembled his shattered body but replaced his missing legs with the tail of a nāga,[3] formed nine different heads from his broken one and placed a raven's head on top. The large wound in his abdomen was made into an enormous mouth, and the lesser wounds into thousand of eyes.

After his transformation, Rāhu, who had always been wicked, became more evil than ever. His rage was directed especially towards the sun and the moon, who had betrayed him. He is constantly trying to devour them, particularly the moon, who displayed the most hostile disposition towards him. He overshadows them whilst trying to devour them, and thus causes eclipses; but owing to Vajrapāṇi's unceasing vigilance, he never succeeds in destroying them.

Undoubtedly, the striking parallels between "The legend about Chakdor" and the Hindu legend of the origin of *soma* show that the Buddhist *amṛita* and the Hindu *soma* were at one time understood to be identical. Moreover, the principal property of *amṛita* is, to this day, perceived by Buddhists as being a species of inebriation, however symbolically this inebriation may be interpreted. Why else would barley beer (Tib., *ch'ang*) be used by yogins as a symbolic substitute for *amṛita*?[4] Conversely, why else would Tibetans employ the term *bDud.rTsi* as a poetic synonym for beer?

This legend is noteworthy for several reasons. Firstly, Buddhist deities are mostly viewed as philosophical abstractions and, unlike the gods of Hinduism, do not normally appear as characters in cosmic dramas. This story of Vajrapāṇi and Rāhu is a rare example of a tale in which Buddhas and *bodhisattva*s behave as mythological entities. This is all the more reason to see this as a Buddhist redaction of a Hindu myth, specifically "the churning of the ocean." The parallels to this myth are obvious, especially as some of the Hindu versions include an episode where Rāhu steals the *soma*, which then has to be rescued.

Vajrapāṇi ("thunderbolt in hand") is, in part, a thinly disguised form of the Vedic god Indra, who was also known as "Vajrapāṇi". Both gods use their thunderbolt to destroy a serpent-creature which, in Indra's case, is the drought-demon Vṛitra. There are several accounts of the battle between Indra and Vṛitra but *soma* is involved with all of them. In one Indra quaffs copious draughts of *soma* before the battle. In another, Vṛitra has drunk all the *soma*, and in a third, Vṛitra is made of *soma*.

The disposal of Rāhu's urine is clearly analogous to the passage in the Hindu myth in which Śiva drinks the *hālāhala* poison, resulting in his blue throat. In the Buddhist version, Rāhu's urine is contaminated with *hālāhala* and drinking it turns Vajrapāṇi's golden complexion dark blue. Curiously, it is Buddhism, the religion of forgiveness, mercy and self-sacrifice, in which Vajrapāṇi, forced to drink poisonous urine as punishment, develops a hatred of demons whereas in the Hindu version, Śiva selflessly drinks the *hālāhala* poison for the sake of all beings.

In addition to this unorthodox retelling of Hindu myths, the tale of Vajrapāṇi and Rāhu is partly an astrological allegory.[5] According to folklore, Rāhu is the demon who causes eclipses and this story neatly rationalizes his motivation. It explains why Rāhu hates the sun and moon so much that he continually tries to swallow them and why he can never permanently contain them – they just escape through the huge mouth in his abdomen. In the same fairy-tale manner, the story explains how medicinal plants came about: they all sprang up together when the earth was showered with Rāhu's blood. The *amṛita* contained in this blood gave these plants their healing properties but it was, after all, demon's blood so beware, they may also be toxic.

On yet another level, the legend may be seen as a philosophical parable. The *hālāhala* poison represents our habitual tendency to become enmeshed in neurotic, often destructive, thought patterns. Contrasted with this poison is *amṛita*, its antidote, representing the teachings of the Buddha. The familiar Buddhist icon known as *The Wheel of Life* has, at its center, a rooster, a snake and a pig. These symbolize attraction, aversion and apathy, the three habitual tendencies of the mind, known to Buddhists as "the three poisons". To one side of the wheel a Buddha is pointing away from these poisonous mental afflictions to a state of blissful peace beyond the icon's border. It would not, therefore, be out of place to see this legend of poison and its antidote as a mythologized account of *saṃsara* ("existence as suffering") and nirvana ("existence as peace"). We might also note that, one of the characteristic aspects of Buddhist meditation is its emphasis upon awareness, and the *amṛita* was lost due to Vajrapāṇi's

lapse in attention.

Calling upon all these various influences, Vedic, folkloric, astrological and philosophical, we can account for most features of the legend of Vajrapāṇi and Rāhu, but not all. The most fascinating aspects are those which remain, unexplained by any prevailing paradigm. In particular, there are several unresolved questions surrounding the matter of Rāhu's urine. Why does Rāhu replace the *amṛita* with his urine? We are not told. And why does Rāhu's urine contain the *hālāhala* poison? This also, we are not told.

If this were our only encounter with a potion called *amṛita* then we might never be able to answer these questions. However, we know that, in Hinduism, *amṛita* ("deathlessness") has been a common synonym for *soma* since the Vedas and, in Buddhism, it is the name of a supposedly psychoactive elixir used in initiations and tantric feasts. Once again, our modern acquaintance with *Amanita muscaria* allows us to perceive a connection between *amṛita* and urine. Without sufficient familiarity with its pharmacology and traditional modes of use, this connection is not at all obvious. It could easily have been overlooked by even the most learned Buddhist scholars of earlier centuries, perhaps even those who translated this text into Tibetan.

We find in The Legend About Chakdor distant echoes of the Hindu myth of the titanic struggle between the sky-god Indra and the monstrous snake-demon Vṛitra whom he decapitated with his thunderbolt (Skt., *vajra*). Indra, the sky-god, is also said to have conquered the *asuras*.[6] It has been noted that there is an almost worldwide association of thunder and lightning with mushrooms.[7] This would be especially the case in India where mushrooms spring up only after the annual monsoon and its inevitable thunderstorms. Thus it is only to be expected that if a mushroom cult was part of the Vedic religion then, of all gods, it would be Indra, the thunderbolt-wielder and bringer of monsoons who would be most associated with it.

How are we to account for the equivalence of Śiva and Vajrapāṇi in these two legends? Why is Śiva the protagonist of the Hindu version and not Indra, the god who is invariably associated with *soma* in the Vedas? Śiva, a god who was to assume a supreme position in later Hinduism, was unknown to the authors of the Vedas. It is generally accepted that he evolved from Rudra, a fierce and terrifying god. Even to pronounce his name was to incur his wrath. Thus it was deliberately mispronounced as "Rudriya" and eventually he came to be known by one of his apotropaic epithets: Śiva, meaning "the auspicious one".

The Buddha with his yakṣa bodyguard, Vajrapāṇi. [Gandhara]

In later (Puranic) Hinduism, Indra, the god of thunderbolts and *soma*, has dwindled in importance, becoming merely an aspect of Śiva. This equivalence presumably accounts for the association of Śiva with snakes (*cf*. Vṛitra) and with *soma*. Similarly, these same attributes were transferred to the Buddhist Vajrapāṇi whose name ("thunderbolt-wielder") was originally a by-name of Indra.

Early Buddhist writers, such as Buddhaghoṣa, acknowledge that Vajrapāṇi was, in fact, Indra[8] but denigrate the king of the gods by referring to him as a *yakṣa* (approximately equivalent to our "gnome" or "goblin"). In Buddhist texts, this seems to be a common tactic for disparaging the Hindu gods but, in this case, Vajrapāṇi is seen as a friend of Buddhism, if a trifle over-bearing:

> Vajrapāṇi is a complex personality in the Buddhist pantheon. In the Pali texts he is a yakṣa who frightens people who refuse to answer a reasonable question put to them by the Buddha.
>
> - *Dictionary of Buddhist Iconography*[9]

The *yakṣas* are classed along with the *asuras* in Hindu legends as malign spirits and, like the *asuras*, are thought to represent a vestige of the pre-Aryan, Dravidian, religion. Incidentally, *nāgas* are often considered to be another of the classes of *asura*. Both the *nāgas* and the *asuras* were believed to inhabit a subterranean realm call Pātāla[10] which, for some reason, has connections with *amṛita*.

The reason for the connection between *asuras* and *soma-amṛita* is not immediately obvious but they are frequently associated in folklore and legend. The Vedas speak of buying *soma* from the indigenous population. It is not unreasonable to suppose that the *asuras* were a mythic representation of the gods of those indigenes.

This passage from the Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali:

> Perfections proceed from birth or from drugs or from spells or from self-castigation or from concentration.
>
> - *The Yoga System of Patāñjali* [11]

This statement is fascinating in itself but, in the context of the *asura-amṛita* connection, the commentary[12] to it is even more so:

> He describes the perfection which proceeds from drugs. A human being, when for some cause or other he reaches the mansions of the demons (*asura*), and when he makes use of elixirs of life brought to him by the lovely damsels of the demons, attains to agelessness and to deathlessness and to other perfections. Or (this perfection may be had) by the use of an elixir-of-life in this very world. So for instance the sage Mandavya, who dwelt on the Vindhyas and who made use of potions…
>
> - *Ibid.* [13]

This ancient connection between *amṛita* and the world of the *asura*s was so widely understood that even in 17th-century Tibet it could be taken for granted:

> Also, there was a farmer who took Tārā as his meditation deity. When he dug in the earth and cried "Phu! Phu!" [i.e. "Hiss! Hiss!"] the gate of Pātāla itself opened. Entering the place of the Nāgas, he drank the amrita he found there. Thus, he became like a rainbow body.
>
> - *The Golden Rosary of Tārā.* [14]

Despite his Sanskrit name, Tārānātha was a Tibetan monk (1575 – 1634). Such was his great scholarship that he became known as "the omniscient" (Tib., *Kun.mKhyen*). The Indian Buddhist yogin Buddhagupta took Tārānātha as a disciple during his five-year stay in Tibet and taught him much concerning the history of Buddhism in India, especially that of Tārā practice and of the *siddha*s. Remarkably for the age in which he lived, Buddhagupta had traveled to such distant lands as Madagascar, Zanzibar and Sumatra.

Given Vajrapāṇi's supposed *yakṣa* origins, the assumed correlation of *yakṣa*s to *amṛita* is pertinent:

> Again, there was a *sādhaka* who practised the *sādhana*[15] of Tārā. He sat beside the roots of a *bimba* tree[16] and repeated *mantra*s. On one occasion, in the early morning, he saw a narrow lane in front of him which had not been there previously. He entered this and followed along the way. By nightfall, he found himself in the midst of a delightful forest and here he saw a golden house. When he entered it, he encountered the Yakshinī Kālī, who was the servant of the Yaksha Natakubera. She was adorned with every kind of ornament and her body was of an indefinite colour.
>
> She addressed him, "O *sādhaka*, since you have come here, you must eat of the elixir," and she placed in his hands a vessel filled with nectar. He remained for one month, drinking the elixir, and thereafter his body became free of death and rebirth.
>
> - *Ibid.* [17]

The word *yakshinī* (or as I would write it, *yakṣinī*) is the feminine form of *yakṣa*. As with Vajrapāṇi, the designation of *yakṣa* is used for Hindu deities. I think we may safely assume that the yakṣinī in question is the Hindu goddess Kālī in Buddhist guise. The god Natakubera is the dwarfish wealth deity better known as Kubera (Sanskrit: "deformed"). In this case, the designation "*yakṣa*" is not misplaced. Natakubera (Skt., "the bent and misshapen one") is considered the lord of the *yakṣa*s (Skt., *yakṣarāja*). Kubera is not the only wealth deity who seems to have a connection with *amṛita*; we will encounter others.

Although Buddhist authors often disparaged Hindu gods by calling them *yakṣa*, *yakṣa*s were not, themselves, held in disdain. In fact, they were incorporated into the Buddhist pantheon, especially that of the Vajrayāna. One particularly intriguing Vajrayāna deity is a Buddha known as "King Nāga-Lord" (Skt., *nāgeśvara-rājā*). Many tantric deities have

The blue-bodied, white-faced Buddha called Nāgeśvara-rājā ("King Nāga-Lord")
[Mongolian miniature, author's collection.]

bodies in startlingly unnatural colors – green, red, yellow, etc. Unlike these, King Nāga-Lord's body is of two colors: his head is white but he is blue from the neck down.

There are other two-colored Vajrayāna deities such as those who occupy the corners of *maṇḍala*s, but they are divided vertically. For example, for a *maṇḍala* with a green northern quarter and a blue eastern quarter, the deity in its north-east corner would typically have her right side green and her left side blue. King Nāga-Lord is unusual in having head and body of different colors. It is not, however, unique. There is another well-known deity with a head of one color and body of another and that is the lion-headed *ḍākinī*, Siṃhamukhā. Yet again, this is a white head on a blue body

Siṃhamukhā - white head, blue body.

Of course, this particular color-scheme is suggestive of the *Psilocybe cubensis* mushroom with its whitish cap and a stem which turns blue. The iconography of King Nāga-Lord contains other hints that he may be a psychoactive plant: he has a back-rest of "all kinds of flowers", a "hood of seven snakes"[18] and he is accompanied by a retinue of four bodhisattvas, all holding plants. In a well-known compendium of Tibetan icons, this group of deities is placed immediately after the "medicine Buddha" (Skt., *Bhaiṣajyaguru*) and his retinue of six deities. In addition to holding various plants, King Nāga-Lord and his followers are surrounded by leaves and large flowers. I think we may safely assume that the seven snakes are poisonous and that the plants are medicinal.

## Buddhism acquires Hindu gods and Hindu drugs

Many of the distinctive traits of Vajrayāna Buddhism, including the Vedic *homa* and *bali* rituals,[19][20] have been traced to Hindu origins, specifically to Śivaite ascetics called *kāpālika*.[21] Several prominent Vajrayāna deities are thinly disguised versions of Śiva and his consort, Kalī. There also is evidence that large passages of Vajrayāna texts were copied wholesale from Śaivite texts.[22] The traffic was not entirely one-way, though. Statues of Lakuliśa, a pioneer *kāpālika* of the *pāśupata* sect, show him as "turning the wheel of dharma" (a characteristically Buddhist gesture) and is even shown with an *uṣṇīṣa*, Buddha's crown-bump.[23] Despite borrowing rituals, symbols and even gods, Buddhism retained its own philosophical doctrines and meditative techniques.[24]

*Kāpālika* ascetics imitated the appearance of Rudra (*i.e.* the Vedic version of Śiva) by living in cemeteries, clothed only with ashes taken from funeral pyres. As a religious observance they carried a *khaṭvāṅga* (skull-topped staff) and used a "skull-cup" (Skt., *kapāla*) as a begging bowl. The rationale provided by the *kāpālika* for this observance was that they were imitating their god: Rudra/Śiva. According to legend, the god Brahma (famous for having four heads) grew a fifth head and when this head told Śiva, "I know [the manner of] your birth", Śiva cut it off. If my hypothesis that Śiva originated as the apotheosis of the *Psilocybe cubensis* mushroom is correct, then the manner of his birth was that, like all such mushrooms, he sprouted from cow dung. Thus, this decapitation may be explained as Śiva's impulsive response to an implied insult.[25] Whatever the reason for this behavior, the myth states that Śiva had to make amends by carrying Brahma's head (either in his hand or on a staff, accounts vary).

Given that Rudra was in all likelihood a mushroom god,[26] it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that the skull-cup, staff and ashes represent the cap, stem and spores of a mushroom. But which mushroom? Heinrich, drawing evidence from Hindu legends, argues persuasively that Rudra was a homologue of the fly agaric, *Amanita muscaria*. In Sanskrit, Rudra means both "red, ruddy" and "howling, weeping" and either interpretation could be applied to this mushroom. The first is obvious: the most prominent feature of the mushroom is its brilliant red color. When eaten, however, it may have a pronounced effect on the body's cholinergic system, causing copious flows of mucus, saliva and tears. It is conceivable that the Vedic sages knew the fly agaric mushroom as the "red/weeper." Also, the spores of all Amanitas are white. This is congruent with the notion that the *kāpālika*'s (white) ashes represents the mushroom's spores. A commentary to a Buddhist *tāntra* describes how Mahādeva (*i.e.* "The Great

God", a common by-name of Rudra/Śiva) was converted to Buddhism and became the Buddha "Silent Lord of Ashes" (Skt., *Bhasmeśvaranirghoṣa*), in the world-system called "Ash Parasol" (Skt., *Bhasmacchatrā*).[27] It is worthy of note that the Sanskrit word *chattra* (as in *Bhasma**cchatrā***) means both "parasol" and "mushroom". Some temples to Śiva (called *chattra-ka*) are mushroom-shaped. Like *chattra*, *chattra-ka* also has the dual meaning of "parasol" and "mushroom".[28] The philosophy of the *kāpālika* ascetics was known as "the doctrine of *soma*" (Skt., *somasiddhanta*). Although the *kāpālika*s left no record of their beliefs, this name implies that their teachings centered around the use of the psychoactive Vedic sacrament, *soma*. This may not be exactly accurate, however, as the god Śiva was frequently called Soma or Someśvara ("*soma*-lord")[29] so the term *somasiddhanta* could conceivably mean "the doctrine of Śiva". Even if this is the case and the main focus of *somasiddhanta* was Śiva and not *soma*, the *kāpālika*s, like their god, were notorious for their use of intoxicants.[30]

As with many of the ancient Vedic gods, Rudra is no longer worshiped as such, his mythos having completely merged with that of Śiva. The orthodox explanation is that Rudra had a change of name, now going by "Śiva" but it is quite conceivable that Śiva was originally a separate, indigenous mushroom god. Certain clay seals from the pre-Aryan civilization of the Indus Valley bear the image of a man with bovine horns (or a ritual headdress), seated in what appears to be a yogic posture and surrounded by animals. Some scholars have interpreted this as an ancient form of Śiva. If so, it is possible that his cult had existed for millennia before the arrival of the Aryans with their Vedic culture, gods and drugs.

Śiva's eponym *nīlakaṇṭha* ("blue-throat") and his association with the bull Nandi ("joy-bringer") would seem to connect Śiva with *Psilocybe cubensis*, a blue-staining mushroom which grows on cow-dung, yet as Rudra he is also the "red-coloured, who has a thousand eyes," a clear reference to the red *Amanita muscaria* with its many eye-like, white spots.

> …haunts cemeteries and places of cremation, wearing serpents round his head and skulls for a necklace, attended by troops of imps and trampling on rebellious demons. He sometimes indulges in revelry, and, heated with drink, dances furiously with his wife Devī the dance called *tāṇḍava*, while troops of drunken imps caper around them.[31]

Presumably, Rudra (fly-agaric god of the invading Aryans) was eventually assimilated with Śiva (blue-necked cattle god who dances on one leg) because they were both sacred, psychoactive, mushrooms. The eventual prominence of Śiva may be explained by the fact that *Psilocybe cubensis* is far more abundant in India than *Amanita muscaria*.

The Pāśupata sect, which gave rise to the *kāpālika* ascetics[32] was active from the 2nd century C.E. and contributed much to Vajrayāna Buddhism. It was the Pāśupata who introduced the *homa* ceremony to Buddhism, a ritual still used in the Vajrayāna tradition.

## Rāhu and Viṣnu

The iconic description of Rāhu reads like a list of obscure Vedic allusions and oblique *soma* references. His bow and arrow are an echo of those carried in the Vedic period by Rudra and, later, by Śiva. Rāhu is often said to arise from a "sea of blood and fat", that is, a red sea dotted with white gobbets of human fat. The thousand eyes recall the thousand eyes of both Indra and Rudra. The "eyes" and the sea of blood and fat are, of course, allusions to the white "eyes" on the blood-red cap of a fly-agaric (*Amanita muscaria*) mushroom. He is engulfed in flames – again this is reminiscent of the fiery red of the fly-agaric cap.

Once again we find Rudra's bow and arrow but, instead of an antelope skin, Rāhu wears a human skin. The flayed human skin which Rāhu wears as a shawl is likely to represent the "universal veil", a white "skin" which envelopes the young fly-agaric and is characteristic of the *Amanita* genus of mushrooms.

The eyes which cover Rāhu's body naturally bring to mind the "thousand eyes" with which both Rudra and Indra were afflicted. And as with Rudra and Indra we may see these "eyes" as the white spots on the cap of the fly agaric mushroom.

Possibly the most intriguing detail of Rāhu's iconography is that his tenth and topmost

head is that of a raven. The best known tradition of fly-agaric use is among the tribes of eastern Siberia. In the myths and legends of these people, Raven is a god (part creator, part trickster) who brought the mushroom to mankind. There is also a lesser-known tradition of *A. muscaria* use in Afghanistan where the mushroom is called "raven's bread".[33] There is clearly a correlation between the fly-agaric mushroom and ravens but the reason is not immediately apparent. It would be a neat solution if ravens simply liked to eat this mushroom but, while they are reported to eat various species of fungus I have been unable to find a single account of them eating *A. muscaria*.

## Viṣnu in Tibet

Perhaps the most profound difference between the Hindu and Buddhist versions of the Churning of the Ocean is the complete absence of Viṣnu from the Buddhist story. This god played a crucial role in all the Hindu versions but Vajrayāna Buddhism seems to have inherited only the Śaiva (*i.e.* Śiva-ist) traditions of Hindu tāntra and hardly anything from the Vaiṣnava (*i.e.* Viṣnu-ist) tradition.

The Tibetan version of "Great Viṣnu" is identical to Rāhu in appearance.

Viṣnu is not entirely absent from the Vajrayāna pantheon, however. Now that he has been subjugated by Vajrapaṇi, Rāhu is considered to be a "protector" deity. A deity called "Great Viṣnu" occurs in the retinue of Rāhu, the former demon.[34]

PREV NEXT

# Peacocks

The goddess Tārā as Mahāmayūrī ("the great peahen").

## The five meats

At a typical Vajrayāna initiation, the practitioner is given an "elixir of immortality" (Skt: *amṛita*) to drink, the guru recites meditation instructions – the details for visualizing a deity and a mantra. In fact, one medieval writer opined that the three essential elements of an initiation are these three: the *amṛita*, the visualization and the mantra. The practitioner is therefore expected to practice the deity-meditation every day and is

entitled to attend the monthly or fortnightly tantric feast (Skt., *gaṇacakra*; Tib., *Tshogs 'Khor*) dedicated to that deity.

The flask which is used to distribute the *amṛita* at such initiations and *gaṇacakra*s invariably has a spray of peacock feathers adorning the neck. This is not merely decoration, this spray is used to sprinkle *amṛita* upon the assembled celebrants. It is said that a small bundle of twigs may be substituted if peacock feathers are not available. But, clearly, the fact that this work-around is allowed implies that peacock feathers should be used if possible. Why is this? What on earth could connect *amṛita* and peacock feathers? The answer, once again, is to be found in a psychedelic mushroom.

The female bodhisattva Mahāmayūrī between flasks of amṛita. Note the similarity in shape between the body of the peacock and the amṛita flasks.

## The tantric feast

The *gaṇacakra*s were often said to be held in cemeteries and cremation grounds at night. The celebrants feasted on five meats: cow, horse, dog, elephant and, what is euphemistically called "the great meat" (Skt: *mahāmamsa*), human flesh. To wash down the five meats they quaffed "the fivefold elixir" (Skt: *pañcāmṛita*) – a concoction of (human) urine, pus, brains, blood and semen. We shall see that none of these supposed "meats" or their corresponding *amṛita*s should be taken literally. It should be noted that the list of five meats is usually the five given here. Occasionally, though, "cow" is replaced by "peacock".[1]

Now, this is rather curious. Could it be that a cow and a peacock are in some way equivalent? If the *gaṇacakra* rituals (like most tantric rites) use secret, cryptic, terminology then could "cow" and "peacock" be two different code words for the very same item? We shall see that both terms in fact refer to the psychedelic mushroom *Psilocybe cubensis*. The reason that this mushroom species would be called "cow" is quite simple: it grows on cow dung, but where do peacocks fit into this puzzle?

We saw earlier, in the discussion of the name Nīlakaṇṭha, that it can just as easily mean "blue stem" as "blue throat" and that *Psilocybe cubensis*, a psychedelic mushroom, is characterized by a blue coloration. It so happens that in Sanskrit literature, the peacock is frequently called "blue throat" (Skt., *nīlakaṇṭha*), for obvious reasons. Thus, the logical chain which equates beef with mushroom and mushroom with peacock-flesh takes some working through but is not really complicated or far-fetched. Indeed, it is possible that corroboration for this hypothesis may be found in the iconography of the Vajrayāna protector deity Yamāntaka.

The wrathful deity Yamāntaka is usually said to ride a water-buffalo – a suitably wrathful mount. But just occasionally, his mount is described as a peacock. Using the above logic, may we then conclude that *Ps. cubensis* also grows on buffalo dung? Well, no, we cannot because it doesn't. However, there is a related mushroom which does.

*Panaeolus camboginiensis* is a mushroom which is reported to grow **only** on the dung of the water-buffalo.[2] Though small, it contains very high concentrations of psilocin and psilocybin. Paul Stamets cites concentrations as high as 0.55% psilocybin and 0.6% psilocin.[3] Due to the high levels of psilocin it exhibits a strong bluing reaction when bruised. It would therefore deserve to be called "blue throat", just like *Ps. cubensis* and would thus be eligible to share its association with the blue-throated peacock. Thus, we may perceive a chain of associations by which both the water-buffalo and the peacock become identified with the mushroom. Perhaps this might go some way towards explaining why a medieval Hindu monastic order devoted to the god Śiva called itself the "intoxicated peacocks" (Skt., *matta-mayūri*).[4] Note that *matta* has a range of meanings covering any temporary mental derangement, including the sexual frenzy of a bull elephant in heat. It does not necessarily imply intoxication with alcohol.

## About those buffaloes…

The fact that this extremely potent psychedelic mushroom (*P. camboginiensis*) has a very specific substrate requirement (water-buffalo dung) may underlie the water-buffalo symbolism which is encountered within the Vajrayāna pantheon. This mushroom's growing medium could, for instance, explain why Vajra-bhairava (an important meditation-deity) has a water-buffalo's head and why Yamāntaka rides upon a water-buffalo. Bhairava ("the terrifier") is one of the names of Śiva and *vajra* ("thunderbolt") was often used to identify a deity as Buddhist. We may therefore

paraphrase the name, Vajra-bhairava (literally "Thunderbolt-terrifier"), as "the Buddhist version of Śiva the terrifier". It is not difficult to imagine why an especially powerful species of mushroom might be called "the terrifier" – high dosage trips are not all rainbows and butterflies.

There is, incidentally, a Chinese version of Rāhu who rides a water-buffalo. His mantra is:

> *om rāho na[mah] asura-rājāya soma-śatānāya śantikari svāhā*
>
> Om. Oh Rāhu, king of the anti-gods, *soma*-thief, bringer of peace, hail.

The only feature that this Rāhu has in common with his other versions is that he holds the sun and moon. In his other two hands he holds a sword and a corpse. We will investigate corpses as mushroom symbols in a later chapter.

## Peacocks and poisons

In India, there is a widespread folk belief that the peacock lives on a diet of poisonous snakes. Similarly, in Tibet, it is said that the peacock eats the deadly berries of black aconite. Its motivation for this is entirely altruistic, and is done purely to save other animals from being poisoned. On the basis of this folk-belief, Mahayana Buddhism took the peacock as a symbol of the bodhisattva ideal.[5] For all its value as a metaphor, this Tibetan belief is quite impossible in reality. Peacocks live in sub-tropical India but not in the high, frigid plateau of Tibet; conversely, aconite grows in temperate climes but not in steamy India.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, to learn that peacock-flesh is itself considered to be poisonous. After all those poisonous snakes and berries, surely the peacock's flesh would be saturated with toxins. But that is not, in fact, the stated reason. Rather, it is said to be because the peacock was present at "the churning of the ocean" and when the *kalakhuta/hālāhala* poison emerged from the waves it was the peacock who bravely drank it and saved the world from certain death. But as a result, his throat turned blue, which is why poets call the peacock "blue throat" (Skt., *nīlakaṇṭha*).

At this point, dear reader, you may be forgiven for being a trifle confused. When we looked at a few variants of the *Churning of the Ocean* myth there was no mention of a peacock. Furthermore, it was always Śiva who drank the *kalakhuta* poison. It was he whose throat turned blue and thus received the name Nīlakaṇṭha – not a single peacock was mentioned. There is, however, a radically different variant of the legend in which Śiva is replaced by a peacock. This is undoubtedly because the peacock, for obvious reasons, is traditionally called "blue throat", just like Śiva. But even in the more orthodox versions of the myth, the color of Śiva's throat is often compared to that of the peacock.

## The War-god and the Great Peahen

Peafowl are occasionally credited with the ability to transmute toxins into the elixir of immortality. This also is said of the Hindu war-god Skanda, a son of Śiva who rides a peacock and "changes poison into ambrosia".[6] The Buddhist ideal of transcendent wisdom is personified by a *bodhisattva* called Mañjuśrī. Most often he is seen riding a lion but there are Chinese variants which show a peacock as his mount. This has caused confusion between images of Skanda and Mañjuśrī.[7] In addition to riding the (blue) peacock, Skanda also carries a flag emblazoned with the image of a (red) rooster. This combination of blue and red suggests the two kinds of psychoactive mushroom we have been considering: the blue-staining psilocybian species and the brilliant red fly-agaric. It may also explain why he is also "the form of Rudra called Blue-and-Red (Nīlalohitā)". [8]

This god is known by several names, including Kārttikeya, Kumara, Subramanya and Murugan. But he has many other names including Śarabhū ("born in a thicket"), Guha ("secret one"), Rudrasūnu ("child of Rudra") and Siddhasena ("captain of the adepts"), all of which are fitting names for an entheogenic mushroom.

A certain Buddhist goddess called Mahāmayūrī ("the great peahen") is said have this name because "she swallows poison and transforms it into *amṛita*", just like Skanda.[9] Once an important deity in her own right, Mahāmayūrī is now mostly remembered as

one of the Twenty-one Tārās. Another of this group, Jangulī Tārā, rides a peacock and is said to prevent (or cure) snake-bite. As with many forms of Tārā she carries a lotus blossom in each hand.

## Amitābha and Amitāyus

Amitābha, upon a throne supported by peacocks, has an amṛita-flask in his begging-bowl.

The Buddha who rules the "Lotus family" of deities is called Amitābha. This name is usually taken to be Sanskrit for "immeasurable radiance" but it is quite possible that the name is not Sanskrit at all, but a later, vernacular, tongue called Prakrit. In that language, *amita* equates to the Sanskrit *amṛita*. Therefore, if Amitābha were a Prakrit name, it would translate as "radiance of *amṛita*". Whether or not this is the case, Amitābha has several overt (though generally unacknowledged) connections with *amṛita*. Take, for instance, the "ten-*amṛita* mantra of Amitābha":

> *oṃ* ***amṛite amṛit****-odbhave* ***amṛita****-sambhave* ***amṛita****-garbhe* ***amṛita****-siddhe* ***amṛita****-teje* ***amṛita****-vikrānte* ***amṛita****-vikrānta-gāmini* ***amṛita****-gagana-kīrtikare* ***amṛita****-dundubhi-svare sarvārtha-sādhani sarva-karma-kleśa-kṣay-aṅkare svāhā*
> [Emphasis added]

Surely, any deity who has the word *amṛita* repeated ten times in his mantra must have something to do with the sacramental elixir. And, incidentally, his throne is supported by peacocks.

The most devoted worshipers of Amitābha are those of the "Pure Land" sects of Mahāyāna Buddhism. These sects share the belief that by devotion to Amitābha and by reciting his name one may be reborn in his paradise. This is so unlike the mainstream of Buddhist thought that some authors have suggested that it may even be a distant echo of the Christian heaven, acquired through contact with Nestorian Christians in central Asia. Non-Buddhist influences are certainly evident in these traditions. The paradise of Amitābha is called "The Abode of Pleasure" (Skt., *sukhavati*), a name it shares with one of the heavens of Zoroastrianism, indicating an Iranian influence.[10]

Amitābha has an aspect in which he embodies the concept of longevity. In this aspect, he is known as Amitāyus, Sanskrit for "immeasurable life". This is not very different, semantically, from "no death", the literal meaning of *amṛita*. Earlier, we briefly considered the deity Yamāntaka. He, too, has a name which could be seen as a paraphrase of *amṛita*. Yama is the King of Hell and embodiment of "death" in both Buddhism and Hinduism; *antaka* means "ender". Thus, Yamāntaka may be parsed as "He Who Ends Death", which may not be exactly synonymous with "no-death" but it is certainly in the same spirit.

In Chinese and Japanese Buddhism, Amitāyus is simply an aspect of Amitābha but Tibet distinguishes between them, holding Amitāyus to be a separate entity. Even so, both deities have very similar attributes, both make the "meditation" hand-gesture and both have the peacock throne. However, Amitābha is dressed as a monk and holds a begging-bowl filled with *amṛita*,[11] whereas Amitāyus wears jewelry [12] and holds a flask of *amṛita*.

Growing out of Amitāyus' *amṛita*-flask is the wish-granting tree which emerged along with *amṛita* at the churning of the ocean. That a tree should be associated with *amṛita* suggests a connection with the psychoactive fly-agaric (*Amanita muscaria*) a mycorrhizal mushroom. That is to say, the fly-agaric mushroom requires the roots of a host tree in order to grow. It may be no coincidence that both Amitābha and Amitāyus are bright red, the color of fly-agaric.

## The *siddha* Śavarīpāda

The name of this *siddha* implies that he was a member of the Śavari (or Śabari), a non-Aryan, indigenous tribe.[13] Legend has it that he was a hunter who lived in the hills of Vikrama.

> Śavarīpa was cruel and he slew untold numbers of antelope. In order to save the remaining antelopes, Avalokiteśvara disguised himself as a hunter and appeared before him. Seeing him, the cruel and boastful Śavarīpa asked, "How many antelopes can you slay with one shot?" He replied, "Five hundred, usually."
>
> Śavarīpa did not believe him. "Prove it," he said. Avalokiteśvara magically created a large number of antelopes and made them all graze in the glade. When he was about to shoot Śavarīpa said sarcastically, "Just a hundred will do."
>
> With just one arrow, Avalokiteśvara killed every one of the antelopes…
>
> *- Paraphrased from Lokesh Chandra*[14]

This is a rare case of a Buddhist deity actually making use of their hand-held attributes (Skt., *mudra*). In this case, Avalokiteśvara uses Rudra's bow and arrow and kills antelopes – Rudra's original target.

Needless to say, Avalokiteśvara converted Śavarīpa who became a vegetarian and, eventually, became enlightened. For reasons never explained (though attentive readers may be able to connect the dots) he is known as "The Wearer of the Peacock Feather". Were all those "antelope" really mushrooms?

## The wish-granting cow

Mention of Amitāyus' wish-granting tree raises the subject of the other products of the churned ocean. In our consideration of the Churning of the Ocean so far, we have concentrated mainly on *amṛita* but most redactions of this myth name a total of fourteen "treasures" which emerged from the ocean. The greatest of

these was *amṛita*, but another one was Parijata, the wish-granting tree, and yet another was Kamadhenu, the wish-granting cow.

As cows go, Kamadhenu (a.k.a. Surabhi) is more than a little strange. For a start, she has a woman's face but has cow's horns and is frequently depicted with human breasts in addition to her cow's udder. This udder, by the way, is unique in the annals of dairy herds. Instead of milk, this one gives *amṛita*. This may be deliberate obfuscation of the true nature of *amṛita* or it may be an attempt at euphemism. We are now aware that *amṛita* does not come from a cow's udder; it grows from the cow's excrement.

One might object that Kamadhenu is simply an expression of (a) the celebrated Hindu reverence for cows and (b) of religious reverence for *amṛita*, a purely mythological sacrament. There is one further detail, however, which makes sense only in terms of the equation *Ps. cubensis* mushroom = *amṛita* = peacock, as described in this chapter. That detail is that Kamadhenu has a peacock's tail.

In the tantric feats of the ancient *siddhas*, "peacock" and "beef" were identical in flavor. They both tasted of mushrooms.

Kamadhenu, the wish-granting cow.

PREV NEXT

# Parasol deities – female

## Lady “Crown-bump White Parasol”

When we consider the symbolism of parasols and umbrellas as a motifs in Buddhist art we must distinguish between two quite distinct functions. The most commonly encountered parasol is that over the head of a Buddha or Bodhisattva in statues, murals and illuminated manuscripts. This kind of parasol is not unique to Buddhist art; it is the parasol which always accompanies an Indian king, as much a symbol of status and royalty as it is a sunshade. But the kind of umbrella which concerns us here is of a different kind: it is the kind which is held by a deity and which serves as their defining attribute. One such deity is Uṣṇīṣasitātapatrā.

Uṣṇīṣasitātapatrā - from a Tibetan print.

Sita means “white, bright, or pale” while *atapatra* is normally translated as “parasol” or “umbrella” and an *uṣṇīṣa* is the bump on top of a Buddha’s head. At first glance, then, although a parasol may signify royal status, her name does not appear to make much sense – especially the “crown-bump” part. Nevertheless, that is how her name is usually translated: “Crown-bump White Parasol [Lady]”. However, another meaning begins to emerge when we recall that Sanskrit is surprisingly deficient in fungus words. The language had no direct way of saying “mushroom.” Instead, one said either *chattra* or *atapatra*, the primary meaning of both words being “parasol” or “umbrella”. There is, admittedly, an awkward literary circumlocution: *śilīndhraka* (literally “a wormy thing”) but, generally, if one wished to refer to mushrooms the choice was between *chattra* (“parasol”, “umbrella”) or *atapatra* (“royal parasol”).

An old saying maintains that “the Greeks had a word for it,” meaning that, however abstruse and recondite a concept, it could be expressed succinctly in Greek. Even more so than Greek, Sanskrit is supremely expressive and has a huge, comprehensive vocabulary. This being the case, its paucity of mushroom terms is especially curious. Could it result from a cultural taboo?

## When *all* mushroooms were illegal

The ancient Laws of Manu state that merely touching a mushroom is tantamount to injuring a Brahmin priest. An ancient commentary on this text tells us that:

> Those who eat mushrooms… are fully equal in guilt to the slayers of Brahmens (*sic*), and the most despicable of all deadly sinners."
>
> *- The Works of Sir William Jones, Vol. V, pp 160-161*[1]

Surely this is insanely harsh if all we are talking about is an occasional mushroom omelet.

In both the the Laws of Manu and its commentary, those who transgress in regard to mushrooms are compared to those who injure Brahmin priests. Perhaps, then, this overly-severe edict and the linguistic lacuna indicates a taboo which had its origin in a monopoly of mushrooms by the priestly caste. In passing, it is perhaps significant that only the lowest castes in Hindu society were allowed to eat mushrooms. Could this be why the lowest castes feature so prominently in tantric literature? Could they have been the mushroom dealers?

But why should the Brahmins wish to sequester all mushrooms to themselves? My guess is that they considered only certain species special but that a blanket, all-mushroom taboo arose from a "better safe than sorry" attitude. So which were the mushrooms the Brahmins would have considered special, sacred even? One clue may come from the śilīndhraka mentioned above. Monier-Williams' Sanskrit-English Dictionary explains that it is "a mushroom (especially one growing on cow-dung)." Now, I'm not sure how many other species of mushroom grow on cow dung in India but *Psilocybe cubensis* certainly fits that description and it contains the classically psychedelic compounds psilocin and psilocybin.

A Buddhst stupa, sprouting parasols.
(From an ancient stone carving)

## The gift of the *nāga*-king

There is a legend that the king of the *nāga*s (serpent spirits) presented the Buddha with a jewel-encrusted umbrella…

> It is gold with a sapphire handle and its edges are studded with jewels, including diamonds which shine like the sun. The jewels give off a nectar which can quench the thirst of all sentient beings…[2]

This "nectar" is neither bee-fodder nor a thick, pulpy fruit juice. It is, of course, *amṛita*. And despite the claims about the "thirst of all sentient beings", we should not think that it functions merely to quench thirst. "Thirst" (Skt., *tṛiṣṇa*), is Buddhist technical jargon; it is shorthand for that craving for circumstances to be otherwise than they are which lies at the root of all suffering. To truly satisfy this "thirst" is to achieve nirvana.

Unique in the history of umbrellas, this one is adorned with jewels that emit a psychoactive liquid. This is bizarre behavior for an umbrella, so why has nobody commented on this incongruous oddity? The answer lies largely in the fact that, until the Wassons' discoveries in Oaxaca in the late 1950s, the existence of blue-staining psychedelic mushrooms remained utterly unsuspected.

Although several species of psilocybian mushrooms have been found in India, the interest shown by scholars of religion has been negligible as yet. It now is apparent that this passage should be understood thus:

| | |
|---|---|
| parasol | A mushroom |
| golden | with a gold-colored cap, |
| sapphire handle | a blue-staining stem, |
| jewels on rim | and remnants of a cortinate veil attached to outer edge of cap |
| amṛita-radiating | is a source of amṛita, the psychedelic |

| | |
|---|---|
| | sacrament. |

This narrows the field tremendously as, within the geographical area of India where the tantric cults flourished, there are few species of psychoactive mushrooms which stain blue,, notably *Psilocybe cubensis* and *Panaeolus camoboginiensis*, both of which grow on bovine dung. It is remarkable that, while much of this evidence has been available for so many years, until we became familiar with the properties of the Psilocybe genus, it simply made no sense.

The connection to Psilocybe mushrooms becomes even stronger as we consider that many Psilocybe species have some kind of "crown bump" in the center of the cap. Mycologists call this an umbo, from the Latin word for the raised boss in the center of a shield. In the context of mushrooms, mention of a crown bump certainly suggests the umbo on mushroom cap which would imply the Psilocybe genus. [We will consider the significance of the "crown-bump" in another chapter.]

There are, incidentally, other parasol goddesses, such as Aparajitasitātapatrā ("Indomitable white parasol") and a few parasol gods such as a version of Gaṇapati (the Buddhist form of Gaṇeśa, the elephant-headed god of the Hindus) who often holds an umbrella.

Further corroboration that these parasol and crown-bump deities are really about psychedelic plants (if not mushrooms, *per se*) is provided by the extensive allusions to *amṛita* in their liturgies.[3] The ritual invocation of Uṣṇīṣavijayā is of particular interest:

> *oṃ amṛte amṛtōtbhawe amita-vikrānteamita-gate amṛta-gamini amṛta-āyur-date gaggana-krītti-kare sarva-kleśa-kṣayam-karite svāhā*
>
> *Oṃ* ***amṛita***[-goddess], source of ***amṛita***, infinitely strong, infinitely gone, going in ***amṛita***, giver of immortal life, you who make the sky your hide-mat, destroyer of all defilements, *svaha*![4] [Emphasis added]

"Source of *amṛita*, infinitely strong…" Well, that doesn't leave much doubt as to what this is about, but the reference to the "hide-mat" has been incomprehensible until now.[5] However, given the repeated mentions of *amṛita* (which, after all, is an ancient synonym for *soma*) one can only assume that the hide-mat in question is that used in the Vedic fire-sacrifice. In this age-old ritual, two round stones were placed on a cowhide mat and the *soma* was ground between these stones with a little milk or water. Presumably, the leather mat prevented waste: if any of the *soma*-milk paste was spilled, it fell safely onto the mat and could be gathered up again.

So, while the *atapatrā* in Uṣṇīṣasitātapatrā does mean "parasol," it can also mean "mushroom". It is not even a symbol or code for "mushroom"; it is simply one of two, normal, everyday words which any Sanskrit-speaker would have used when talking about mushrooms.

## Stems and umbos

The Sanskrit word for the handle of an umbrella is *daṇḍa*, literally a club or staff. Thus, if an entire mushroom is called a "parasol", it seems reasonable to call its stem a *daṇḍa*. If this were the case we might expect to find a Vajrayāna Buddhist deity, based on "blue-throated" Śiva, called Nīladaṇḍa. In fact, there is such a deity and his name is normally translated as "Blue Staff". He is quite an important deity – he is one of the "Ten Wrathful Deities" and appears in at least fourteen different forms.[6] Despite his prominence, the significance of his name, the purpose of his staff, why it is blue and why he carries it is not explained in any commentary known to me.

There is every indication that Uṣṇīṣasitātapatrā represents a psychedelic mushroom species which is characterized by an *umbo*, or "crown bump." Is it possible that *uṣṇīṣa* may be a covert name for all psychedelic mushrooms? For all *amṛita*-sources? Support for this hypothesis may be found in a verse of praise to Amara-vajra-devī ("Deathless thunderbolt goddess"):

> Born of Heruka's clan, great thunderbolt *uṣṇīṣa*-lady with a face of nectar…[7]

Note that this goddess is addressed as an *uṣṇīṣa* even though she is neither included in lists of *uṣṇīṣa*-deities nor does she have "*uṣṇīṣa*" in her name. (The *uṣṇīṣa*-deities are discussed in detail in another chapter.) Her name is not devoid of interest, though. *A-mara* means "no-death" and has a precise parallel in *a-mṛita* (also meaning "no-death"). The *vajra* portion of her name evokes Indra, the thunderbolt-wielding, *soma*-loving, king of the Vedic gods and also the world-wide belief that thunder causes mushrooms. Just to underline the matter, she is also addressed as "**Thunderbolt** *Uṣṇīṣa*-Lady". Her mantra is:

> *oṃ* ***amṛita****sana-javani mahā-****amṛita****-samukhe jiwaṃ praveśaya praveśaya*…[8]
>
> *Oṃ*, fast-acting *amṛita*, great *amṛita*-faced [lady], lead, lead into life…

Quite clearly this "*uṣṇīṣa*-lady" is being identified with the *amṛita* itself. She is also said to be "fast-acting", suggesting that there are several varieties of *amṛita*, some faster-acting than others. When considering psychedelic drugs, rapidity of onset is often an indication of potency. Thus, a "fast-acting *amṛita*" is likely to be an especially potent one.

I sincerely doubt that this identification of an *uṣṇīṣa*-deity with a form of *amṛita* is a singular case. Surely, all the *uṣṇīṣa*-deities are varieties of *amṛita*. They are, in all probability, various species of psychedelic mushroom. Furthermore, when Uṣṇīṣasitātapatrā appears in symbolic form in her *maṇḍala*, she is not only shown as a parasol (*i.e.* a mushroom) but her eight attendant deities are shown as vases of *amṛita*.

The goddess Sitātapatroṣṇīṣā is shown as a "parasol", surrounded by eight vases of amṛita

Uṣṇīṣasitātapatrā is said to have 1,000,000,000,000 eyes and mention of a many-eyed mushroom brings to mind the fly-agaric (*Amanita muscaria*) with its red cap dotted with hundreds of white "eyes".[9] But she surely cannot represent the fly-agaric as we are expressly told that she is "white" (or at least "pale"). Could this mean that we are being told that she is a psychoactive mushroom but one which is *sita* ("white, pale") and not "the red one"?

## The "banner of victory"

There is a tradition in which Uṣṇīṣa-sitātapatrā carries both a parasol and a banner. The *dhvaja*, or "banner of victory", was held aloft by an Indian army upon the defeat of an enemy. Modern western readers might imagine a banner or flag as an oblong or triangular cloth attached by one side (the "hoist") to a flagpole and with the opposite end (the "fly") fluttering in the wind. Such flags did exist in ancient India (they were called *patākā*) but the *dhvaja* was quite different. It was essentially a cylinder of cloth

with the pole in the center, rather like a parasol with an extended skirt attached. Once we realize that the "banner" in question is a cylinder of fabric with the flagpole at the center, the allusion to a mushroom becomes apparent.

The goddess Sitātapatroṣṇīṣā holding both a parasol and a banner of victory
(Tibetan wood-block print)

## Goddess of the peacock parasol

Given the use of Sanskrit umbrella and parasol words as synonyms of "mushroom" and our interpretation of the peacock as a specific symbol for *Ps. cubensis*, our suspicions should be raised whenever parasols and peacocks come together.

The Buddhist goddess Rematī with her peacock parasol.
[From a Mongolian drawing.]

One such conjunction of these symbols is found in the Buddhist goddess Rematī who always has a peacock-feather parasol above her head. (No one holds it. It just floats there.) This, then, would seem to be a strong indication that the deity was involved with a cult of the mushroom. If this is the case, it will be worth our while to consider the meanings of her other attributes. For example, Rematī also has a tiny corpse on her tongue and her right hand wields a corpse-club. We shall delve into the secret meanings of skulls and corpses in a later chapter. And we are not yet finished with Uṣṇīṣasitātapatrā…

PREV NEXT

Administration Panel

# Parasol deities – male

There is no parasol in this image of the male deity Sitātapatra ("White Parasol") but he does hold a book (Skt.: chatra). This is undoubtedly a pun on chattra the Sanskrit word for both "parasol" and "mushroom".

## Sir "White Parasol Crown-bump"

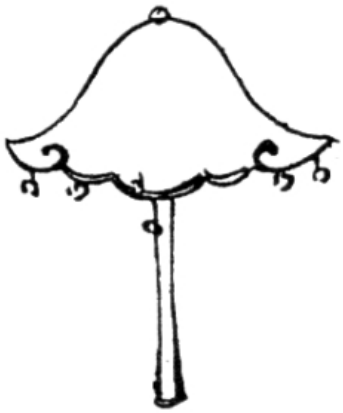
Sitātapatroṣṇīṣa ("White Parasol Crown-bump") is the name of a male Vajrayāna deity which seems to have been formed merely by re-ordering the elements of Uṣṇīṣa-sita-atapatrā. Though I have failed to find any direct connection between the two, it is not inconceivable that Sitātapatroṣṇīṣa had his origin in a Chinese form of Uṣṇīṣasitātapatrā as, in China, she was thought of as male.[1]

A Japanese representation of Sitātapatroṣṇīṣa
(Medieval drawing)

On the other hand, there is a male deity called simply Sitātapatra ("White Parasol"), without the "crown-bump", who is known from Nepalese sources. Despite his name, this "White Parasol" carries no parasol (Skt., *atapatra*) but, in his upper left hand, he holds a book (Skt., *chatra*). This is undoubtedly a pun on *chattra* (with two t's), another word for "parasol". Also, with his thousand arms he does resemble a mushroom cap. Another curious feature is that, like Avalokiteśvara, he carries Rudra's bow, arrow and medicine flask.

Detail of Sitātapatroṣṇīṣa drawing showing the "parasol"

Some Japanese representations of "White Parasol Crown-bump" are particularly striking, as he appears to be holding, not a parasol, but a distinctly mushroom-shaped object with (need I point out?) a crown-bump. I understand that it sounds more than a little far-fetched to postulate the existence of a cult of psychedelic mushroom users in China and Japan. A cult, moreover, which preserved iconographic symbols which are fully understood only by Sanskrit speakers. But just suppose such a cult did exist, then it is to be expected that its followers would use whatever psychedelic mushrooms were local to their area. The original, Indian, species would be unavailable in these more northern climes so they would be forced to rely on other, temperate, species. It is hardly likely that they would import *Psilocybe cubensis* from India. Observe, therefore the enlarged detail from the illustration. It is a very close match for *Psilocybe liniformans*, an Asian species, found in both China and Japan.[2]



Symbolic form of Sitātapatroṣṇīṣa as a "parasol". [From the Chōjō Mandara scroll]

Admittedly, it is difficult to identify a species with any precision from one instance of a simple line drawing. However, there is a 9th century Japanese scroll (the "Chōjō Mandara" scroll) which lists hundreds of deities with their mantras and their symbolic representations. The symbol of Sitātapatroṣṇīṣa is, as one might expect, a "parasol" and the relevant portion of the scroll is illustrated here. Notice the distinctive features of this "parasol": it has tiny blip on the top, its edges are wavy and curled and there are small ornaments dangling from the rim.

Here is a comparison with a textbook description of the potently psychedelic species *Ps. argentipes*.[3]

Comparing the symbolic representation of Sitātapatroṣṇīṣa in the "Chōjō Mandara" scroll with the description of *Psilocybe argentipes* in Stamets, P. 1996

| | |
|---|---|
| The "parasol" | Psilocybe argentipes |
| has tiny blip on top, | The cap [has]... a sharp umbo. |
| its edge is curled and wavy | Margin incurved, irregular, often wavy and |
| with small dangling ornaments. | adorned with fragments of the partial veil. |

The parallels are obvious. Every feature of the drawing may be matched to the text-book description even to the amusingly apt choice of the word "adorned". If a scientist in late 20th century United States sees the veil remnants as ornaments, it is little wonder that the same idea occurred in 9th Japan. So if the male bodhisattva Sitātapatroṣṇīṣa ("White Parasol Crown-Bump") is a psychedelic mushroom in disguise, what does that imply for his close relative, the female bodhisattva Uṣṇīṣasitātapatrā ("Crown-Bump White Parasol [Lady]"). Surely this confirms our suspicions that she is a mushroom, too.

That Uṣṇīṣasitātapatrā is said to have 1,000,000,000,000 eyes and mention of mushrooms brings to mind the fly-agaric (*Amanita muscaria*) with its red cap dotted with hundreds of white "eyes".[4] But she surely cannot represent the fly-agaric as her name expressly states that she is *sita* (Sanskrit for "white" or "pale"). Are we being told that she is a psychoactive mushroom but one which is *sita* ("white, pale") and not "the red one"?

## Hindu umbrellas

While not entirely relevant to the subject of Buddhist sacraments, the story of Kṛiṣṇa (often written Krishna) is very pertinent to the topic of psychedelic mushrooms in Indian religions. By now the reader must be aware that *Psilocybe cubensis* is a blue-staining, psychedelic mushroom which grows on cow dung. Kṛiṣṇa is a cowherd, living in a village of cowherds and cowgirls. He also happens to be dark blue, like the mushroom's stem and Śiva's throat. I believe that elements of Kṛiṣṇa's myth show that he, like Śiva, is an apotheosis of *Ps. Cubensis*. It would seem that in different parts of India the same psychedelic mushroom became regarded as two different gods.

Here is a revealing tale about Kṛiṣṇa's childhood:

> On one occasion Krishna wished to annoy Indra. Seeing the *gopas* [cowherds] preparing to worship the giver of rain, he dissuaded them from it, and urged them rather to worship the mountain that supplied their cattle with food, and their cattle that yielded them milk. Acting upon this advice, they presented to the mountain Govardhana curds, milk, and flesh. This was merely a device by which Krishna diverted the worship of Indra to himself; for upon the summit of the mountain Krishna appeared, saying, 'I am the mountain' and partook of much food presented by the *gopas*; whilst in his own form as Krishna he ascended the hill along with the cowherds, and worshiped his other self.
>
> Having promised them many blessings, the mountain-person of Krishna vanished. Indra, greatly incensed at the disregard shown him by Nanda and others, sent floods to destroy them and their cattle; but Krishna, raising the mountain Govardhana aloft on one hand, held it as an umbrella and thus sheltered his friends from the storm for seven days and nights. Indra then visited Krishna and praised him for what he had done; and his wife Indrani entreated Krishna to be a friend of their son Arjuna. [5]

There are several elements of this tale which are worthy of note. Firstly, the mountain is called Govardhana, "cattle galore", which sounds just the sort of place we would expect to find *Ps. cubensis*. Giri Govardhana is, incidentally, a real place. It is a place of pilgrimage and considered very holyholy. As mountains go(,) it is hardly impressive, but in myth it's the symbolism that counts. A low, roughly conical hill, Giri Govardhana is approximately the shape of a mushroom cap. So, not only does Kṛiṣṇa function as a *chattra* ("umbrella") by shielding the villagers from the storm, he even adopts the appearance of a *chattra* ("mushroom"). Moreover, with his dark-blue body forming the stem and the golden hill Govardhana as the cap this is clearly not just any mushroom – he is the blue-stemmed, cattle-dung-loving *Ps. cubensis*.

Kṛiṣṇa acting as an "umbrella" with Indra on an elephant in the clouds.
Note the peacock on Giri Govardhana.

Notice that the offerings which Kṛiṣṇa diverts to himself were originally intended for Indra, the *soma*-lord. This legend appears to document the shift from one mushroom-god to another as Indra's sacrament, *Amanita muscaria*, was eclipsed by Kṛiṣṇa's *Psilocybe cubensis*.

The Bhāgavata Purāna tells us the gods' own thoughts in this conflict. Here, Indra gives vent to his displeasure:

> Just see how intoxicated the forest-dwelling cowherds are because of the wealth [of the forest]. They have taken refuge with Krisna, a mortal, and now they neglect the gods. Abandoning meditative knowledge, they desire to cross over the ocean of material existence through ritualistic so-called sacrifices which are like unstable boats.
>
> *- Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāna, X, 25.3-414*

It is significant that the *purāna* chooses to characterize the worship of Kṛiṣṇa as "intoxication". Surely this is the author of this passage giving his audience the literary equivalent of a wink.

Indra complains of "ritualistic so-called sacrifices". Presumably, these "so-called sacrifices" were an indigenous mode of worship, and not the "correct", Vedic, sacrifices dear to Indra. Also, the Kṛiṣṇa-oriented worship did not require "meditative knowledge" in order to "cross over the ocean of material existence". In this, Indra sounds uncannily similar to those modern critics who see psychedelic spirituality as invalid simply because it is too easy. The mushroom path does not require "meditative knowledge". While Kṛiṣṇa's path led one to the profoundest realizations, it entailed neither elaborate ritual nor years of grueling austerities. All that was necessary was to eat the little gods growing out of the cow dung.

Here is Kṛiṣṇa's response to Indra's bluster:

> Indra unleashes rain full of hail and mighty winds out of season in order to destroy us because we neglected his offering. Consequently, I will employ suitable countermeasures through my mystic power. I will destroy the ignorance and pride born of opulence of those who, out of stupidity, think of themselves as lords of the world. The bewilderment caused by thinking of oneself as lord is inappropriate for the demigods, who are endowed with a godly nature. If I break the pride of the impure for their peace of mind it is an appropriate thing to do.

It is evident that by the time this *purāna* was written, Indra, the erstwhile king of the gods, could be spoken of as an ignorant, proud "demigod" who is also "impure". The *purāna* certainly considers him to be far inferior to the likes of Kṛiṣṇa who administers a timely check to Indra's overweening pride by deflecting the fury of the tempest. He does this by becoming the (dark blue) shaft of an umbrella:

> I will lift up this spacious mountain from its stony base, and hold it up, as a large umbrella, over the cow-pens.
>
> - *Viṣṇu Purāna, V,xi.17*

Then, just in case we had missed the whole "umbrella" thing, the *purāna* gives us a hefty nudge in the ribs…

> Saying this, [Kṛiṣṇa] lifted up the mountain of Govardhana with one hand and held it effortlessly, as a child holds a mushroom.
>
> - *Viṣṇu Purāna, V,xi.17*

But could this not be any mushroom? Does it really have to be a psychedelic species? We saw in an earlier chapter that there is a clear connection between the peacock and *Psilocybe cubensis*. The fact that Kṛiṣṇa wears a peacock feather in his hair could be dismissed as coincidence but it should be noted that depictions of the incident at Giri Govardhana often show a peacock on the hill, as if to emphasize its psilocybian significance.

We cannot leave the topic of Kṛiṣṇa without mentioning his great renown as a lover. Whenever he appeared, the cow-girls (Skt., *gopī*) would abandon their husbands and spend the night in the fields with Kṛiṣṇa. An odd feature of this love-making was that each *gopī* believed that Kṛiṣṇa had made love to her alone. This is easily explained if we assume that Kṛiṣṇa was the *Ps. cubensis* mushroom and that "making love to Kṛiṣṇa" is code for the psychedelic experience. As it is a totally internal, private experience (which may provides access to divine realms), each *gopī* had Kṛiṣṇa to herself.

There is a curious element of this myth, however, which I do not profess to understand. Why is it that Kṛiṣṇa's devotees are exclusively female? Was Kṛiṣṇa's mushroom cult originally confined to women? Is there an ancient, matriarchal component to Indian drug sacraments? This is a theme which has echoes in the tantric cults of the goddess and in the Buddhist *ḍākinī* traditions.

PREV NEXT

Administration Panel

# Wheels and bumps on the head

> But the one wheel that is hidden, only the inspired know that.
> – *Ṛig Veda, 10.85.161* [1]

The classical form of the dharmacakra, with nandipāda and garlands.

Tempting as it may be to perceive the decorations around the rim as mushrooms, studies of the evolution of this form shows that they are stylized parasols.

(From a 1st century carving.)[2]

## Wheels and arrows

We have already considered the Buddhist goddess Uṣṇīṣasitātapatrā in the context of parasols (and, hence, mushrooms). We will now examine her connection with wheels and a mysterious group of deities who seem to allude to the bump on the Buddha's head. Uṣṇīṣasitātapatrā occurs in several forms: with two arms, four arms, eight arms and, especially popular, with one thousand arms and a billion eyes. One invocation of her thousand-armed form describes her as holding a wheel in each of her 500 left hands and an arrow in each of her 500 right hands. Any deity with a billion eyes and a thousand arrows brings to mind the thousand-eyed archer, Rudra, but this

Drawings of Buddhist wheels taken from ancient carvings[3]

pairing of arrow and wheel is rather odd. As Uṣṇīṣasitātapatrā is widely regarded as a protectress, one might be excused for expecting 500 bows to be provided for all those arrows. Unless there was an ancient tradition of using wheels for target practice, it is difficult to see a connection between these two attributes of which the goddess holds an abundant supply. So, what relevance may a wheel have here?

The customary assumption on seeing a wheel in Buddhist art is that it is the *dharmacakra*, the Buddhist emblem par excellence. Whenever world religions are represented with symbols, the wheel is used to represent Buddhism. But why a wheel? The traditional reasons for this go back to legends of Siddhartha's birth when wise men predicted that he world become either a great emperor (Skt., *cakravartin*; literally: "wheel-turner") or a spiritual teacher. Siddhartha's father did all he could to prevent him developing any spiritual interests. Nevertheless, he eventually left home and wandered in the forest, studying with various teachers. Eventually he found enlightenment by his own efforts and began to teach others. Now known as the Buddha ("the awakened one") he began to teach. In doing so, he is said to have "turned the wheel of the law".

The name of the Buddhist wheel (*dharmacakra*) derives from *dharma* ("law") + *cakra* ("wheel"). This *dharma* is not a law in the usual legalistic sense but a universal principle as in the **law** of gravity. So Siddhartha ended up as a "wheel-turner" after all. Presumably, this is the source of those wheels in the aniconic images but why teaching a philosophical principle should be referred to as "turning a wheel" is never satisfactorily explained. And here's another odd thing… the Buddhist scriptures use *cakravartin* as though it were a word in common usage, well-known to all. Yet it is a purely Buddhist term. Granted, there is a passage where it turns up in a Hindu scripture and is explained as "a king born with the signs of wheels on his hands". But the very fact that it had to be explained indicates that it was a term unfamiliar to Hindus. Basically, it is Buddhist jargon; only Buddhists associate wheels with monarchy.

Drawings of Buddhist wheels taken from ancient carvings[4]

## Wheels as mushrooms

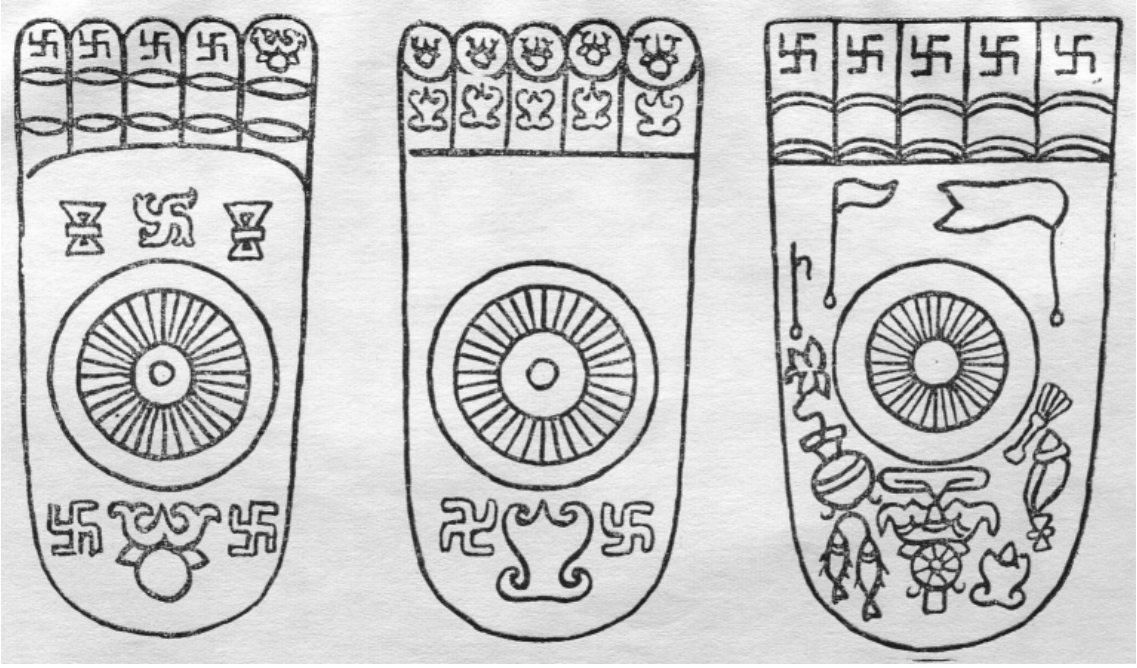
Carl Ruck, a scholar of ancient Greek, derives the word *woinos* (Greek for "wine") from a proto-Indo-European word meaning "spoked wheel".[5] Originally, he says, it was a metaphor for a (presumably psychoactive) mushroom but was subsequently applied to the later intoxicant, wine. Admittedly, Ruck's is a minority opinion but, when it comes to the origin of the word "wine", even the acknowledged authorities in the field can only hazard guesses.[6]

Not a wheel, a mushroom "spore-print".

A standard work on IE etymology[7] has no root-words meaning "fungus", "mushroom" or "toadstool." This may not, in itself, be significant but let us suppose for a moment that Ruck's conjecture is correct and, rather than use a simple, direct word for "mushroom", the proto-Indo-Europeans employed a term meaning "spoked wheel." Surely this would imply that the taboo on mushroom words is not just a peculiarity of Sanskrit but dates to the origins of the Indo-European people.

## Viṣnu

The Sanskrit *cakra* not only means "wheel" but also "discus". It is one of the two weapons of Viṣnu,[8] the other being a mace (Skt., *gada*). It is not difficult to see how these two symbols may be combined to create the simulacrum of a mushroom – the discus being the cap and the mace, the stem. Even without the mace, typical depictions of Viṣnu show the cakra hovering above his raised index finger in such a way as to suggest a mushroom.



Ancient carvings of Buddha's "footprints". They show many symbols but most prominent is the wheel. Viṣnu is also represented as a pair of footprints.

Note also the parasol marked with a wheel and nadipada at the base of the rightmost "footprint".[9]

Viṣnu is often shown with four arms, his other pair of hands holding a conch shell and a lotus. We have already seen that the lotus flower with its smooth, leafless stem may represent a mushroom but what, then, are we to make of the conch?

In Sanskrit literature (and, subsequently, in Tibetan literature, too), the conch is the stereotypical metaphor for whiteness. Also, like many of the deities which we have examined, Viṣnu is blue. Taken together, then, Viṣnu's attributes imply a mushroom – a white one with a blue "body". It is not difficult, therefore, to see this god as a deified form of *Psilocybe cubensis*. But, as so often happens with mushroom traditions, there is a conflation or confusion of psychoactive mushrooms. Viṣnu's cakra has a name, "Beautiful" (Skt., *sudarśana*), it is described as "flaming" and "like the sun". This sounds very much like descriptions of *Amanita muscaria*.

Viṣnu's cakra,sudarśana

In what I am sure is no coincidence, the Buddhist deity Blue-throat (Skt., *nīlakāṇṭha lokeśvara*) also has four arms and carries a discus, a club, a conch and a lotus.[10] There has always been a rivalry between the followers of Śiva and those of Viṣnu so it is curious to discover this Buddhist bodhisattva with Śiva's name and Viṣnu's attributes. No doubt the Buddhists who adopted this deity happily conflated the two gods because they realized that they both represented the original "blue-throat", the *Psilocybe cubensis* mushroom.

To get back to Uṣṇīṣasitātapatrā's wheels and arrows, let's just consider those two symbols. Imagine for a moment that one of these arrows were fired at the center of one of the wheels. The result would be something which, in shape, resembles a mushroom. Not only is it a disc with a rod extending perpendicularly from its center but the spokes of the wheel actually resemble a mushroom's gills (lamellae).

## "Nothing to do with the crown"

> In Vajrayāna there is a class of deities going under the generic name of Uṣṇīṣas. The word Uṣṇīṣa means 'the crown [of the head]' but the deities have nothing to do with the crown. They are nevertheless popular in Tāntric works and their statues are found in China. Hence it is necessary to make a passing reference to these Uṣṇīṣa gods briefly…
>
> – *The Indian Buddhist Iconography*[11]

From the earliest period of Buddhism, there have been pious myths regarding the

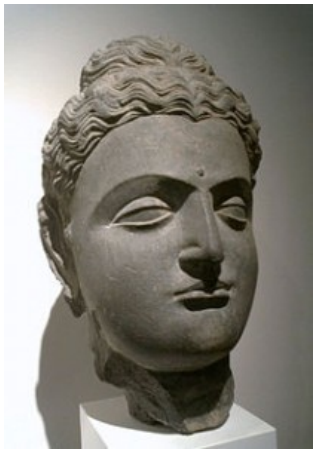
Buddha. All Buddhas, for instance, are said to be six feet tall, have golden skin and, curiously, have eight more teeth than lesser mortals. They have marks in the shape of wheels on the palms of their hands and soles of their feet and a clockwise-turning curl of three hairs between the eyes. The mark which we are going to examine here, however, is the *uṣṇīṣa* (pronounced oosh-NEE-sha) – a small bulge on the top of a Buddha's skull. Anyone who has taken time to examine a statue or painting of a Buddha will have noticed a strange bump on the crown of his head. Historically, it has its origin in the art of the Buddhist kingdom of Gandhara.

The kingdom of Gandhara (now the province of Kandahar, Afghanistan) originated as a remnant of Alexander the Great's Asian conquests. Its people spoke Greek, wore Greek dress and, for a while, worshiped Greek gods. King Menander I (*regnat* 160-135 BCE), converted to Buddhism and his subjects soon followed suit. There is an account of the king's first encounter with Buddhist philosophy in a Pali text known as "The Questions of King Milinda" (Pali, *milinda-panha*) which records his conversation with a Buddhist monk called Nagasena.


The head of a Buddha from a Tibetan painting, showing the uṣṇīṣa (crown bump).

The Gandharans took to Buddhism enthusiastically but, being culturally Greek, they were accustomed to temples with statues. So they made the first ever statues of the Buddha, often very beautiful. They also minted some charming coins which show a standing Buddha (with his Greek name, ΒΟΔΔΟ "Boddo") on one side and the Greek hero Herakles (a.k.a. Hercules) on the other.

So, if the first Buddha statues did not appear until the 2nd century BCE, what was Buddhist art like prior to that time? The earliest examples of Buddhist art do not show the Buddha at all. There are stone carvings found on the monumental architecture at at such pilgrimage sites as the great stupa at Sañchi. Sometimes there was just an empty seat beneath the *bodhi*-tree, sometimes there was a wheel on a pillar, sometimes a pair of footprints.


The head of a Gandharan Buddha, showing the topknot which prefigured the uṣṇīṣa.[12]

This is not, as we find in some Islamic traditions, due to a restriction on depicting the human form for, in every case, humans (and even gods) are portrayed in attitudes of reverence toward the focal object. Art historians have traditionally seen this as a reluctance to depict the Buddha, but one scholar[13] has offered an eminently sensible alternative explanation: that the scenes in question are intended to depict a set of pilgrimage sites, each with its own symbolic monument.

Whatever the reason for the lack of earlier images, the earliest Buddha-statues we know of were made in Gandhara. In these images, the Buddha's head was not shaven but his hair was tied up in a topknot. All later Buddha statues derive, ultimately, from these Gandharan originals though, over time, the Greek-style topknot was misinterpreted as a cranial protrusion. Thus was born the *uṣṇīṣa* or "crown bump" (from the Sanskrit word for "turban" or "sun-shade"). Thus, the presence of an *uṣṇīṣa* on Buddha-statues may be accounted for in terms of art history. What cannot be so easily explained is the existence of divine versions of the *uṣṇīṣa*. That is, deities who represent the *uṣṇīṣa* or include a reference to the *uṣṇīṣa* in their name.

I find it remarkable that there is even one deity who represents the Buddha's crown-bump but there are, in fact, several lists and groupings of *uṣṇīṣa* deities. The most popular grouping seems to have been a set of eight called the Aṣtoṣṇīṣas ("eight crown-bumps"), though the members of this group vary considerably from one list to another. Possibly the most authoritative list occurs in a description of a *maṇḍala* in the Niṣpannayogāvalī[14] (a medieval Indian collection of *maṇḍala*s) but there are others.

## "I have a little list"

During the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368 CE), the emperors of China were Vajrayāna Buddhists and so their former palace-complex in Beijing, known as the Forbidden City, includes a Tibetan-style temple called Pao Hsiang Lou. This temple houses a truly remarkable collection of 787 statues in seven chapels, including two entirely different sets of Eight Uṣṇīṣas.

For some reason, this class of deities was once extremely popular. Even the now obscure deity Vikiraṇoṣṇīṣa (otherwise known as Uṣṇīṣa-vikiraṇa) was once the focus of a thriving cult in medieval Japan and was worshiped in seven different versions.[15] But if

it were not for paintings and references to him in old texts, he would now be quite forgotten. Vimaloṣṇīṣa ("The Immaculate Uṣṇīṣa"), with four heads and eight arms, is the central deity in a six-deity *maṇḍala* in a Tibetan collection.[16] As with Vikiraṇoṣṇīṣa, this *uṣṇīṣa*-deity has no current following.

Other groups of *uṣṇīṣa*-deities include the Three Uṣṇīṣas and the Five Uṣṇīṣas (which, together, make another variant of the Eight Uṣṇīṣas which is known in Japan), the Nine Uṣṇīṣas and the Ten Uṣṇīṣas. As we saw above, Benoytosh Bhattacharyya, in his compendium of Indian Buddhist deities admitted that he could not understand the significance of the Uṣṇīṣas but included them because "they are… popular in Tāntric works and their statues are found in China."[17] Another source, on the other hand, is not so circumspect and professes to fully understand their significance. Without citing any authority for its opinion, it confidently states that the Uṣṇīṣas…

> …are the personified virtues and actions of Śākyamuni: for example, Buddhoṣṇīṣa represents the preaching of the doctrine, Mahoṣṇīṣa represents the great wheel used as a weapon when preaching to people to release them from ignorance; Sitātapatroṣṇīṣa is a shelter for all living beings; Abhyudgatoṣṇīṣa has the power to produce the virtues of a Buddha; and Tathāgata-vikraṇ-oṣṇīṣa the power to break down evil deeds; and so on.
>
> – *The Buddhist Encyclopedia* [18]

To illustrate the great number and variety of *uṣṇīṣa*-deities, here are some groupings of "Eight Uṣṇīṣas" from Tibet, China and Japan:

Variant I:
The "Eight Uṣṇīṣas" as listed in the Tibetan translation of the Niṣpannayogāvalī

| East | Mahoṣṇīṣa | Great crown-bump |
|---|---|---|
| South-east | Udgatoṣṇīṣa | Emerging crown-bump |
| South | Sitātapatroṣṇīṣa | White-parasol crown-bump |
| South-west | Mahodgatoṣṇīṣa | Great-emerging crown-bump |
| West | Tejorāśi-uṣṇīṣa | Splendor-mass crown-bump |
| North-west | Ojas-Uṣṇīṣa | Strength crown-bump |
| North | Vijayoṣṇīṣa | Conquest crown-bump |
| North-east | Vikiraṇoṣṇīṣa | Scattered crown-bump |

Variant II:
The "Eight Uṣṇīṣas" as in the Pao Hsiang Lou statues

| East | Vajroṣṇīṣa | Thunderbolt crown-bump |
|---|---|---|
| South-east | Tejoṣṇīṣa | Blazing crown-bump |
| South | Ratnoṣṇīṣa | Gem crown-bump |
| South-west | Dhvajoṣṇīṣa | Banner crown-bump |
| West | Padmoṣṇīṣa | Lotus crown-bump |
| North-west | Tikṣṇoṣṇīṣa | Pungent crown-bump |
| North | Viśvoṣṇīṣa | Universal crown-bump |
| North-east | Chattroṣṇīṣa | Umbrella crown-bump |

Variant III:
A Japanese list of the "Eight Uṣṇīṣas"

| Mahoṣṇīṣa | Great crown-bump | white |
|---|---|---|
| Abhyudgatoṣṇīṣa | Sprouting crown-bump | yellow |
| Ananta-svara-ghoṣoṣṇīṣa | Endless-cry-hearing crown-bump | red |
| Sitātapatroṣṇīṣa | White-parasol crown-bump | golden |
| Jayoṣṇīṣa | Victory crown-bump | saffron |
| Vijayoṣṇīṣa | Conquest crown-bump | light yellow |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Tejorāśi-*uṣṇīṣa* | Splendor-mass crown-bump | white |
| Vikiraṇoṣṇīṣa | Scattered crown-bump | "not very deep" white |

This latter list, taken from a Japanese text, is significant not simply because of its somewhat different list and omission of compass-directions. Rather, it is most unusual in the curious colors attributed to the deities. Tantric deities often have colored skin but the colors are usually very bold and distinct – white, dark blue, yellow, red and green being the most common. By contrast, many of the colors in this list are limited to four yellows, two whites and a red. What is more, many are only subtly different. The list discriminates between yellow, light-yellow, golden and saffron; a distinction is also made between white and "not very deep white". These do not seem to be the usual vivid, symbolic colors we encounter in tantric contexts. Rather, they are the sort of color-terms employed by a natural history field-guide in its descriptions of… oh, flowers, say. Or mushrooms.

The dozen or so deities included in these three lists by no means exhaust the various deities with *uṣṇīṣa* somewhere in their name. Some prominent *uṣṇīṣa*-deities omitted from these lists include Uṣṇīṣa-cakravartin ("Crown-bump Wheel-turner"), Uṣṇīṣa-Buddha, Uṣṇīṣajvāla ("Uṣṇīṣa-blaze") and the goddess Uṣṇīṣavijayā. This latter goddess has at least six different forms and has a male equivalent called Uṣṇīṣavijaya.[19] I list all these names and their variants not for the sake of tedious repetition (there are many more) but merely to demonstrate that the *uṣṇīṣa* deities are so numerous and so wide-spread that we must conclude that they represent a historical cult of some importance.

## The Twenty-one Tārās

The goddess Tārā ("savioress") is extremely well-known in Tibet and Nepal. So much so, in fact, that a leading authority on Buddhist deities lists 50 variants of her.[20] Almost every Tibetan Buddhist family begins the day with the recitation of the *Praises to the Twenty-one Tārās*. This hymn has one verse for each of twenty-one different aspects of the goddess, some wrathful, some beneficent. If they didn't all have "Tārā" as part of their names one might easily assume that these were twenty-one entirely different goddesses. In fact, that seems to have been the case. The Twenty-one Tārās were "revealed" to the Kashmiri pandit Sūryagupta in the 9th century and include several goddesses who had previously been the focus of their own independent cults. Fourth of the twenty-one is Uṣṇīṣa-sitātapatrā-Tārā ("Crown-bump white-parasol Tārā"). From her name one might expect her to carry a parasol but Tibetan texts have her wielding a club. Lokesh Chandra shows a Mongolian variant which "replaces the club with a parasol"[21] though, to this author's eyes, the alleged "club" appears to be a victory-banner.[22] Without the -Tārā suffix, Uṣṇīṣa-sitātapatrā has enjoyed a successful solo career and is big in Tibet, where she is known as *gDug.dKar.Mo* ("White Umbrella"). The fact that Sūryagupta included Uṣṇīṣasitātapatrā in his list of twenty-one "Tārās" attests to her importance (and of *uṣṇīṣa* deities generally) to Vajrayāna Buddhists in 9th century India.

## Why *uṣṇīṣa*-deities?

What was the basis of this "crown-bump" cult and can we make anything of this strange collection of names? Prof. Lokesh Chandra, no doubt struck by the oddness of the names, suggests that *uṣṇīṣa* might signify "summit" or "supreme excellence" rather than "crown-bump."[23] In defense of this hypothesis he offers the fact that, in many *maṇḍala*s, Uṣṇīṣa-cakravartin ("Crown-bump Wheel-turner") occupies the zenith. But, surely, even if we accept this interpretation it leaves us with such puzzling names as "Supremely Excellent White Parasol" and "Supremely Excellent Umbrella", the significance of which is not immediately evident. Where do umbrellas and parasols fit in this explanation?

As to the names of the *uṣṇīṣa*-deities, four are easily explained. The Thunderbolt-, Gem-, Lotus-, and Universal-Uṣṇīṣas take their names from the symbols assigned to the four "Buddha families" which correspond to the four directions: vajra (East), ratna (South), padma (West) and karma (North), respectively. The symbol of the karma-family is the *viśva-vajra*,[24] hence Viśvoṣṇīṣa (= *viśva* + *uṣṇīṣa*). These four names are fully in accord with the conventions of Vajrayāna symbolism; it is the remaining names which seem odd. Yet, despite their apparent disparity, I believe that they may all be understood.

## Victory and conquest

The names Uṣniṣa-vijayā, Vijay-oṣniṣa and Jay-oṣniṣa are derived from *jaya* ("victory") and *vijaya* ("conquest"), both of which are traditional synonyms for *amṛita*. According to legend, the gods had to defeat the demons in battle in order to gain access to the sacred drug. Tradition has it that these names have been used to mean "*amṛita*" ever since. This legend could be read as a mythologized account of the conflict between the invading Aryans and the indigenous people of India. If this is the case, then the elixir which the Aryan "gods" won from the indigenous *asura*s may have been *Psilocybe cubensis*, a replacement for their vanishingly scarce sacrament, *Amanita muscaria*. To this day, *vijaya* is the name of a psychoactive sacrament in Hindu tantra but, in modern versions of the rites, it is taken to mean cannabis.[25] It is clear, therefore, that a Buddhist goddess named Uṣniṣa-vijayā ("Crown-bump Conquest [Lady]") would carry implications of psychoactivity and could well refer to a psychoactive plant. This suspicion is heightened when we learn that she is referred to as "The Spiritual Food of All the Buddhas".[26] I believe that this designation is intended quite literally. She is a spiritual food, or at least, something which may be eaten for spiritual purposes.

As we have seen in a previous chapter, the *dhvaja* in Dhvajoṣṇīṣa ("Banner Uṣṇīṣa") is actually a "banner of victory", held aloft by an Indian army upon the defeat of an enemy, which connects it to the *jaya* ("victory") and *vijaya* ("conquest") deities. There is good reason to link it to the parasol deities, too. We have seen that the parasol and umbrella names (i.e. Chattroṣṇīṣa, Sitātapatroṣṇīṣa, Aparajita-sitātapatrā, Uṣṇīṣa-sitātapatrā and Sitātapatroṣṇīṣa) may well be references to psychedelic mushrooms. "Banner" names should also be classed with these. The ancient Indian war-banner was essentially a cylinder of cloth with the pole in the center, rather like a parasol with an extended skirt attached. Thus, the *dhvaja* or "banner of victory" provides a connection between the umbrella symbols (Skt., *chattra*, *atapatra*) and the allusions to *soma*/*amṛita* as "victory" and "conquest" (Skt., *jaya*, *vijaya*).

It is perhaps noteworthy that Indian temples of Viṣnu are customarily "protected" by two statues of deities known as Jaya and Vijaya.[27] In addition, Jayā (Skt., "victorious lady") and Vijayā (Skt., "conquering lady") are the names of two attendant goddesses found in the retinue of Śiva's wife Parvatī (Hindu) and in that of the goddess Chinnamasta (both Hindu and Buddhist).

## Rāhu and the sea-monster

The *soma*-thief, Rāhu carries a banner of victory in one of his right hands. Usually this banner is said to be made from the hide of a sea-monster (Skt., *makara*). A similar sea-monster banner (Skt., *makara-dhvaja*) is carried by Kāma, god of love. I have never seen any reason given for this choice of flag material but, as so often in Sanskrit, it could simply be a play on words. The Sanskrit word *makāra* (with a long ā) means "the letter *m*" and is often shorthand for "a word beginning with *m*". For instance, in Hindu tāntra, ritual sex (Skt., *maithuna*) involves the *pañca-makāra* ("five m's") – four supposed aphrodisiacs and the sex act itself, all of which begin with *m*. Sanskrit literature abounds with puns and, as word-play goes, the substitution of *makara* for *makāra* is quite trivial. The question is, what does the *m* stand for? Well, as Rāhu had replaced the *amṛita* with his urine, the most obvious *makāra* ("*m*-word") in this case is *mutra*, "urine". If, as I suggest, the banner of victory is equivalent to a parasol as a mushroom symbol, then Rāhu's *makara* banner may be deciphered as "the urine-mushroom" or fly-agaric.

It may be no coincidence that the traditional *amṛita*-vessel (Tib.: *Bum.Pa*), used in initiations and tantric feats, has a spout which emerges from the mouth of a *makara*.

## Does *uṣniṣa* mean "psychedelic"?

Now that we have explored the alternative significance of crown-bumps, umbrellas and wheels, it does not require a great stretch of the imagination to see the various Uṣniṣa deities as mushrooms – either different mushroom species or different qualities of a single species. Mushrooms are found randomly distributed, so we have a "scattered Uṣniṣa". They grow in damp places and at during the rainy season, hence the *uṣniṣa*-deity called Unnata, "moisture". Also, as we have seen, "wheel" may have been used to mean "mushroom", thus explaining the "wheel-turning" *uṣniṣa*-deitiess. It is quite possible that, once *uṣniṣa* became established as a code word for *Psilocybe* mushrooms, its usage was extended to include other psychoactive fungi such as *Amanita muscaria*. This would account for several of the names.

Several accounts of *A. muscaria* experiences may be found on the drug-information website www.erowid.org. Many writers of these accounts have seen fit to include comments on the taste of this mushroom and their opinions range from "delicious" to "disgusting". It is not clear from these accounts whether the differing views regarding the palatability of fly-agaric reflects personal variations of taste, different methods of preparation or variations in the mushroom itself. Thus, "pungent Uṣniṣa" could refer generally to the distinctive taste of *A. muscaria* or, more specifically, to an especially spicy variety.

Anyone who has seen its brilliant red color shining through the undergrowth like a fiery jewel will recognize the aptness of "blazing Uṣniṣa" and "mass-of-splendor Uṣniṣa". Also, as *A. muscaria* is often said to induce feats of great strength,[28] this may be the basis of the name Ojas-uṣniṣa, "Strength Uṣniṣa".

## "Elevated" or "up-chucked"?

Prof. Chandra, with some reason, translates Udgatoṣṇīṣa as "Elevated Uṣniṣa". I have chosen to translate *udgata* as "emerging" though I was tempted to translate it as "throw-up". I admit that the latter is a little unorthodox but I believe it is justified. The Sanskrit *ud-gata* is literally "up-gone" and the name could be intended to carry an ambiguous allusion to vomit. Indeed, Monier-Williams in his *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* gives "vomited" as one of the meanings of *udgata* and the related word *udgati* does, in fact, mean "vomiting".[29] In similar vein, Abhyudgatoṣṇīṣa could be interpreted as "Anointed-with-vomit Uṣṇīṣa".

While mild nausea is an occasional side-effect of *Psilocybe* (especially at the onset of effects), vomiting is a frequent consequence of *A. muscaria* ingestion. Incidentally, this side-effect of *A. muscaria* intoxication may account for this statement from a Vedic commentary:

> Three things are performed at the [*soma*] sacrifice: eating, swallowing and vomiting.
>
> – *Aitareya Brahmana* [30]

But vomit is merely one meaning of *udgati*; when speaking of a young stag's antler's, it means "sprouting" – a word which is also perfectly apt for mushrooms. Sanskrit writers loved to pack many meanings into a word so the alternative interpretations are by no means mutually exclusive.

It is apparent that the names Udgatoṣṇīṣa and Abhyudgatoṣṇīṣa are closely related so my translations: "Emerging Uṣniṣa" and "Sprouting Uṣniṣa" were intended to reflect this connection.

## The Great Uṣṇīṣa

There is yet another Japanese list of Uṣṇīṣas (this time it is "The Nine Uṣṇīṣas") which includes a deity called Ekākṣara Uṣṇīṣa ("One-syllable Crown-bump") who carries a wheel surrounded by blades and another called Unnata Uṣṇīṣa ("Moisture Crown-bump") who holds an eight-spoked wheel. The term *ekākṣara* ("one syllable") usually means the mantric syllable *oṃ*. However, *akṣara* also means "axle" and, given the context of wheels, a single wheel on an axle could be construed as a homologue of a mushroom.

The Eight Uṣṇīṣas are frequently depicted as sitting between the spokes of an eight-spoked "wheel of the law" (Skt., *dharmacakra*). This symbol of the Buddha's teaching is usually shown with eight spokes (like the one held by Unnata), and sometimes with sixteen spokes. The earliest written accounts, however, describe it as having one thousand spokes.[31] Perhaps this "thousand" simply means "more than anyone cares to count" – like the many gills of a mushroom.

Mahoṣṇīṣa, is sometimes listed as Mahoṣṇīṣa-cakravartin ("Great Uṣṇīṣa, the Wheel-turner") and, as if the name Ananta-svara-ghoṣoṣṇīṣa were not unwieldy enough, he is also known as Ananta-svara-ghoṣa-cakravarty-**uṣṇīṣa** ("Endless-cries-hearing Wheel-turning Uṣṇīṣa"). Not only does this bodhisattva hold a wheel but he sits at the center of a wheel with eight other *uṣṇīṣa*-deities between the spokes. There is another version in which a Buddha hovers above his head, surrounded by an aura of wheels. Yet, this deity

is not called Mahā-cakra ("Great wheel") but Mahā-*uṣṇīṣa*. A deity called Mahācakra does exist, though. He is a form of Vajrasattva ("thunderbolt hero") and has quite an interesting mantra:

> *oṃ nīlāmbaradhara vajrapāṇi-hṛidaya mahākrodha-sattva hūṃ phat*
> *oṃ*, blue-clad essence of Vajrapāṇi, great wrathful being, *hūṃ phat*

The "blue-clad" one here is undoubtedly a blue-staining *Psilocybe* mushroom. The mention of Vajrapāṇi brings to mind not only the Buddhist bodhisattva of that name but also the original Vajrapāṇi: Indra, king of the Hindu gods, also known as Soma-pati ("the *soma*-lord").

The Buddhist Encyclopedia, you will recall, offers the explanation that Mahoṣṇīṣa "represents the great wheel used as a weapon when preaching to people to release them from ignorance". This use of a wheel is not only unfamiliar to me but I find a literal interpretation impossible to imagine. Just how does the "great wheel" function as a weapon? Was a giant wheel used to flatten the ignorant? And just how would this wheel-weapon "release them from ignorance"? One possible answer is that the *uṣṇīṣa*-deities were actually psychoactive mushrooms. It is easy to see how such a species may have acquired a reputation for "converting" people – with a sufficiently high dose, a shift in philosophical perspective is guaranteed. Is it possible that these mushrooms may have been administered surreptitiously in order to "release" someone mired in "ignorance"? Was there a tantric practice of dosing the up-tight with 'shrooms? This, surely, would be a "wheel" which was "used as a weapon".

## Uṣṇīṣasitātapatrā

There are two known traditions of Uṣṇīṣasitātapatrā in which she has eight arms. In both of these, one of her eight hands holds a wheel. In her thousand-armed forms her arms are arranged in a circle like the thousand spokes of the Buddhist *dharmacakra* – or the gills of a typical mushroom.
She has 1,000 heads and 1,000,000,000,000 eyes – 1,000 in the palms of her hands and (unlike Avalokiteśvara, but rather like Indra, Rudra and Rahu) the remaining 999,999,999,000 are distributed all over her body. According to Wasson, extra eyes may represent the white dots (remnants of the universal veil) on the bright red cap of *Amanita muscaria*.[32]
Aside from these opaque hints and allusions to a psychoactive mushroom, there are several good reasons for associating this deity with *amṛita* and *soma*. For instance, *amṛita* is referred to in some of her liturgical praises and the *dharani* of Uṣṇīṣasitātapatrā is one of the very few explicit references to *soma* in Buddhism.

Unlike mantras, *dhāraṇī*s are composed largely of actual Sanskrit words. For instance, many *dhāraṇī*s begin with the expression *tad-yathā*, Sanskrit for "as follows". Unfortunately, while individual words may be recognizable, translations of entire *dhāraṇī*s are seldom meaningful. The *dhāraṇī* of Uṣṇīṣasitātapatrā has been translated into English as:

> As follows: *oṃ*, fire, fire, sky-equal, sky-equal.
> O powerful one! O powerful one!
> O Soma-lady! O Soma-lady!
> consecrated with inspiring power of all Buddhas,
> crown-bump of all Tathāgathas [*i.e.* Buddhas].
> White umbrella lady, *hum phat* for me *hum ni svaha*![33]

If my suspicions are justified, the *dhāraṇī* may also be rendered:

> As follows: *oṃ*, fire, fire, sky-equal, sky-equal.
> O powerful one! O powerful one!
> O Soma! O Soma!
> Consecrated with inspiring power of all Buddhas,
> Psychoactive mushroom of all enlightened ones,
> White mushroom lady,
> *hum phat* for me *hum ni svaha*!

The fact that *soma* is even mentioned here is astonishing. While Buddhism borrowed

many *soma* traditions from Hinduism, it hardly ever mentions *soma* by that name. In almost every instance the word is replaced by its synonym, *amṛita*.

For a Hindu, the terms *soma* and *amṛita* are used interchangeably yet Vajrayāna Buddhism refers to its sacramental elixir exclusively as *amṛita*. Buddhist references to *soma* are very rare. This may be because early Buddhism condemned Brahmanic rituals and, presumably, the use of "*soma*" which these rites entailed. Thus, when Buddhists (that is, Vajrayāna or tantric Buddhists) eventually appropriated the *soma* fire ritual, they referred to the sacrament as *amṛita*, as though this was a distinctly separate substance. Indeed, by the time Buddhism reached Tibet *soma* and *amṛita* were assumed to be two very different substances with very different origin myths.

PREV NEXT

Administration Panel

## The origin of Tārā

One of the most popular of all the deities of Tibet is the female bodhisattva called Tārā. Her name is assumed to be the feminine form of the Sanskrit word Tāra, the literal meaning of which is "the star". Buddhist lexicographers tend to disagree with that etymology and construe her name as deriving from the Sanskrit root √*tṛi* meaning "to carry across". Hence we are told that her name implies "she who ferries one across the raging sea of *samsara*", or to put it more simply, "savioress". However, the practice of etymology in India and Tibet was to creatively reveal hidden meanings by word-play rather than to discover accurate word-histories.

It is worth noting that a goddess called Tārā is also known in Hinduism and even in Jainism, thus suggesting quite an ancient (perhaps even pre-Āryān) origin. In Tibet, most Buddhist families begin the day with a recitation of a hymn called the *The Praise of Tārā in Twenty-one Verses*. Despite it being an integral part of Tibetan Buddhist practice, the hymn clearly originated as a Hindu text.[1] The hymn is replete with references which are unintelligible from a purely Buddhist viewpoint. These include allusions to Mt. Mandara (the churning-stick in the Hindu myth of the Churning of the Ocean), Kailaśa (Śiva's mountain paradise), the myth of Śiva's incineration of Kama (the Hindu god of love) with a glance, and explicit mentions of the gods Śiva, Brahma and Indra. A prime example is to be found in verse 12. A Hindu myth describes the River Ganges as flowing from Śiva's hair. Accordingly, when verse 12 speaks of the "crescent moon" in Amitābha's "matted locks" Prof. Wayman interprets this is as a clear reference to Śiva and, thus, sees the original participants in the verse as, not Tārā and Amitābha, but the River Ganges and Śiva.[2]

"The Praise of Tārā" is extracted from the Tārā Tāntra, and is essentially a hymn praising the various qualities of a single goddess. However, legend has it that during the 9th century a leper called Suryagupta had a vision of Tārā who cured him of his leprosy. He also composed a liturgy describing twenty-one different goddesses, all seen as aspects of Tārā.

## Tārā and Ishtar

The provenance of Tārā and whether she was originally Buddhist or Hindu is the subject of some debate. My own guess is that she is older than either religion and was adopted (and adapted) by both. I deem it quite possible that her origins are to be found in the Sumerian goddess Ishtar. In her role as "the star", in Hindu mythology and astrology she is the personification of the planet Venus, just as Ishtar was in Sumer. Also, both goddesses are associated with the acacia tree. So, if Tārā is an Indian importation of a Sumerian goddess, how would this have come about?

Many archeologists believe that the great Indus Valley cities such as Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa were modeled on Sumerian originals. They have many similarities in construction but are laid out in a much more systematic fashion, suggesting that the cities' builders were attempting to improve on the Sumerian originals.[3] Also, some linguists have speculatively linked the Sumerian language with the non-Āryān, Dravidian, languages of India in a language-group called Elamo-Dravidian.

Even absent any ethnic or linguistic connections, it is known that there were trade connections as Harappan beads have been found in Mesopotamia. Merchants traveling between Mesopotamia and India may well have relied upon Ishtar/Tārā (*i.e.* "the stars") for navigation and perhaps called upon her to save them from storms at sea, just as Buddhist travelers such as Tārānatha did in much later times. This could then also provide a basis for the secondary meaning of "the one who ferries us across" and would account for the popularity of Tārā among mariners and seafarers.

# Āryā Tārā and the Tārā of the acacia grove

As with many popular deities, Tārā appears in various forms, each of which is distinguished from the others by some detail of iconography. For instance, the well-known and popular form called Āryā Tārā [4] may be recognized by the following characteristics: She is green in color, she sits with the left leg drawn up as in a meditation posture but with the right leg extended, the right foot often supported by a lotus. She wears the silk robes and jewelled ornaments of a peaceful bodhisattva, has one face with two eyes and is smiling. Her right hand makes the *varada-mudra* ("boon-granting gesture") while her left holds the stem of an *utpala* (night-blooming lotus, *Nymphaea stellata*.) the bloom of which is level with her left ear.

There are other forms of the deity who closely resemble Āryā Tārā but who, in addition to the above attributes, carry a second *utpala* lotus in the right hand. One of these is Khadiravanī Tārā or "Tārā of the acacia grove" and her distinguishing feature is that she is invariably accompanied by her attendant goddesses, Aśokakāntā-Maricī and Ekajatā.

This name, Khadiravanī, is rather mysterious, though. In India, the acacia tree is sacred to Tārā, in Mesopotamia, Ishtar was worshiped in acacia groves. When I asked a learned Tibetan lama why the *khadira* tree is associated with Tārā, he told me that it is because these trees grow in her paradise. As I remain unconvinced of the physical existence of Tārā's paradise, I was less than satisfied by this response. For one thing, there are many popular bodhisattvas but only Tārā has a special tree. Why so?

Mallar Ghosh has suggested that Khadiravana was the name of an actual location in Bengal though she admits that this is speculative as no such place-name is to be found, either in modern times or in the historical record.[5]A more plausible suggestion from Dr. Ghosh is that the name is corruption of *khadiravarna* ("acacia-colored")[6] which would thus derive the color of Green Tārā from her association with the acacia tree. Some credence must be given to such alternative translations of the name, as "acacia grove" is, correctly, *khadira-vaṇa* with a palatal *ṇ*. If interpreted literally, the name Khadira-vanī implies *khadira-vana*, "acacia-sound" but that makes least sense of all. What is beyond dispute, however, is that the first element in her name is *khadira*. So, I ask once more, why the *khadira* and not some other tree?

Perhaps we may find a clue in the frequent occurrence of *amṛita* and other magical potions in the legends associated with Tārā. As for instance in these passages:

> The Achāryā [*i.e.* Jowo Atisha] entered the village, and since he prayed to Tārā, a great rainfall of *amṛita* descended from the sky, which cured the dying of their affliction.
>
> *- Tārānatha , The Golden Rosary of Tārā* [7]

and

> Again, there was once a bhikshu [monk] who, for three years, made circumambulations of a temple of Tārā…
>
> An elixir fell from the sky like a stream of milk.[8] Once he drank of this, his body became free of old age. He lived for some three hundred years, and it is said that during this entire period he appeared to remain at the age of sixty.
>
> *- ibid.*[9]

Note that (a) the nectar was said to be "like a stream of milk", that is, similar to the Vedic descriptions of *soma*, (b) the word for "elixir" in this Tibetan text is *bCu* ("sap" or "juice") which brings to mind the meaning of *soma* ("juice"), and (c) its effect was to halt the aging process and delay death, effects commonly attributed to *amṛita* ("deathless").

In modern Indian usage, *khadir*a is the common name of *Acacia catechu* but we cannot assume that the ancients identified plant species in exactly the same way as we do. Monier-Williams, for instance, states that the name *khadira* has also been used to mean *A. nilotica* and *Mimosa pudica*, both of which are related to *A. catechu*. Also, Trout's Notes on Acacias[10] remarks upon the considerable confusion over the species of this family, even among modern taxonomists. For example, *A. catechu* is sometimes called *A. nilotica* and *A. nilotica* has been known as *Mimosa nilotica*

*A. nilotica* and *M. pudica* are sources of the psychedelic compound n,n,dimethyl-tryptamine (DMT), which is also found in a closely-related species known as white

khadira (*A. arabica*).[11] I have found no myths or legends which might suggest that *khadira* was ever considered psychoactive but various names given to it (e.g. *soma*-essence, *soma*-tree, *soma*-bark) indicate that its entheogenic use was known at one time. What is more, the latter term "*soma*-bark" (Skt., *soma-valka*) connotes very precise knowledge of which part of the plant was used as, or in, *soma*.

## Indo-huasca

Although pure DMT is active when smoked or insufflated, it normally has no effect when eaten. This is because an enzyme called mono-amine oxidase (MAO), found in the intestine, renders it inactive. Several plants, however, contain alkaloids which inhibit the action of MAOs. Harmine, harmaline and tetra-hydroharmine are such MAO-inhibitors (MAOI), and belong to a chemical grouping called the β-carbolines. MAOIs are found in many plants (e.g. passion-fruit) and also in tobacco-smoke but they seldom occur in any significant amounts. The Amazonian ayahuasca vine, *Banisteriopsis caapi*, is a celebrated exception but the most concentrated source yet discovered are the seeds of Syrian rue (*Peganum harmala*) a plant found throughout the arid regions of the Middle East and India. Thus, if we accept that the names *soma*-bark, etc. do indeed relate to the entheogenic use of *A. arabica* then this would thus imply the use of a binary entheogen similar to the Peruvian *yage*.[12]

Among the many compound words which contain "*soma*" is *soma-vallari* or "*soma*-creeper". The word *vallari* is cognate with *vallabha*, "beloved", presumably because a vine or creeper embraces its support. What is notable about *soma-vallari* is that it is the common, or garden, rue (*Ruta graveolens*) which is a bushy shrub and not a creeper at all. The two rues, common rue and Syrian rue, look very similar but are not, in fact, related. Also, while Syrian rue is psychoactive and potentiates DMT, common rue is not and does not. In ancient Greece and Rome, common rue was believed to be the domesticated variety of Syrian rue. Pliny mentions that the plant some call *ruta* is called *peganum* by others, and vice versa. It is quite possible, therefore, that the confusion over these two species was not confined to ancient Europe. The superficial similarities between the species may have led Indian writers to use the term *soma*-vallari for both *Ruta graveolens* and *Peganum harmala*. One especially interesting synonym for *khadira* is *soma-sara* ("*soma*-essence" or "*soma*-power") which implies that if this ingredient were omitted the *soma* concoction would lose its entheogenic effect. This is precisely what we would expect to find in such a DMT + MAO-inhibitor combination. Moreover, many of the Vedic hymns to *soma* refer to mixing liquids, for instance:

> The floods of the high one, the truly awesome one, flow together. The juices of him so full of juice mingle together as you, the tawny one, purify yourself with prayer. O drop of Soma, flow for Indra.
>
> *- The Rig Veda, 9.113.514* [13]

There is an Indian legend in which Soma (i.e. the moon) elopes with Tārā (the planet Venus) whereupon Tārā becomes pregnant, gives birth to Budha and initiates the "Tārāka War" which divides the planetary gods. This Budha is the planet Mercury and is by no means to be confused with Buddha ("the awakened one"). Their names are cognate, however, *budha* meaning "wise" or "clever".

Could this legend be a poetic allusion to the entheogenic use of a concoction which contained *khadira* (represented by Tārā) and some MAO-inhibiting plant (here represented by the god Soma)? A further indication that the this legend might involve the *soma*-drug rather than merely Soma, the moon-god, may also be provided by the Sanskrit name for the planet Venus. Just as Soma is the name of the moon-god while *candra* is the moon itself, Tārā is the name of the planetary goddess, the planet Venus itself being called *sukra*.

This word *sukra* (literally meaning "clear" or "pure") is also one of the Vedic synonyms for *soma*. Thus, while the moon is the heavenly body which is most frequently associated with *soma*, the planet Venus is also related. It may be worth noting in this regard that of all the "planets", only the moon, Venus and Mercury exhibit periodic phases. The phases of the moon are obvious but a keen eye may sometimes detect the phases of Venus. Perhaps an exceptional person with especially acute vision would be able to detect the phases of Mercury but I should imagine it almost impossible without a telescope. If the phases of Venus were observed by ancient Indian sages then they may have attributed them to the same cause as the phases of the moon (i.e. the depletion of the *soma* contained therein).

Flattery and Schwartz have suggested that *soma* was a decoction of *P. harmala* (a potent

MAO-inhibitor) though it is unlikely that this plant alone could elicit the ecstatic effects described in the Ṛig Veda. However, a certain Dr. Watt is quoted by Hillebrandt in his classic work, "Vedic Mythology", as having this to say about *soma* and the Iranian *haoma* (which he calls "Homa"):

> ...the Homa may after all prove to be the Soma of the ancients. If this be accepted, the dry and bitter twigs having, as at the present day with the Homa, been simply used to flavour some other beverages, much in the same way as Acacia bark is used throughout India...

In the very next paragraph Hillebrandt continues:

> Long before this time Lagarde, in his Gesammelte Abhandlungen, pp. 172-176, made a distinction between the Soma of the Indians and that of the Iranians; he saw in the oldest Soma plant a kind of rue, in fact that which is called sahasrapajas in the RV. It corresponds, he said, to peganon of the Greeks, called moly in Cappadocia...

If the poet-sages of the Vedic period had used a *soma* which was a decoction of *P. harmala* (Hillebrandt's "peganon of the Greeks") and if they then flavored it with acacia bark they would have discovered a very potent combination indeed. And why else would *khadira* be called *soma*-bark?

This combination of two plants, one containing DMT and the other being an MAO-inhibitor is well-known to occur in Peru and other parts of South America as *yage* or *ayahuasca*. It is, however, not unknown in Asia. It has been brought to my attention that, in Iran, initiates of a certain Muslim order use a concoction of *Arundo donax* roots (containing DMT) and *P. harmala* (MAO-inhibiting beta-carbolines)[14] The stems of *A. donax* ("Giant Reed") are also widely used in the middle-east in the manufacture of the end-blown flute known as the *nay*. The Naqshbandi Sufi tradition has many songs and poems which refer to this flute and its ability to transport the listener to other realms. These songs are loaded with double meanings which reflect the reed's double use as flute and as a sacrament. The use of this entheogen is secret, however, and is restricted to the higher echelons of the sect.

Although apprehensive about indulging in speculation so far from my chosen field, I am reminded that the Sumerian hero Gilgamesh was offered the plant of immortality, "the secret of the Gods". It was a spiny plant which pierced his palm with its thorn (an acacia, perhaps?) and yet it is also said to be a water plant (a reed?). Are there any spiny plants which grow under water? I know of none. It is known that our version of the Epic of Gilgamesh is a fairly late, abbreviated redaction with many lacunae. Could it be that these two plants, acacia and arundo have been conflated? And what of the snake who steals the sacred plant from Gilgamesh? Is this yet another snake/entheogen complex?

## Aśokakāntā- Maricī

As stated above, Khadiravani Tārā ("Tārā of the acacia grove") is accompanied by the female bodhisattvas Aśokakāntā-Maricī and Ekajatā. The name Aśokakāntā means "branch of the Asoka tree". Having discovered that Tārā's tree, the *khadira*, contains DMT, we are prompted to ask if this tree might not also have entheogenic properties. Monier-Williams gives the following under the entry for *aśoka*:

> *a-śoka*... not causing sorrow;... not feeling sorrow;... the tree Jonesia Asoka Roxb. (a tree of moderate size belonging to the leguminous class with magnificent flowers)...
>
> *- Monier-Williams, A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*

An alternative interpretation of *a-śoka* is "causing not-sorrow" or "causing an absence of sorrow". This might be an appropriate meaning for a drug plant but is there any evidence that it has any psychoactivity? The Tārā Tāntra, contains a rite of love magic which includes this curious passage:

> ... grind up datura, nimb and *aśoka* flowers, make the powder into an ointment with honey... etc.
>
> *- quoted in "In Praise of Tārā", by M. Wilson., p.387, n.80.*

In his notes to this passage Wilson includes a quotation from an unspecified *sadhana*:

> Make five thousand burnt offerings with narcotic *candali* seeds And likewise narcotic fruits and the flowers of the *aśoka*…
>
> - ibid., *p.387.*

The "datura" (Skt., *dhattura*) referred to above is *Datura metel*, a solanaceous plant which is well-known throughout Asia for its psychoactive and poisonous properties. Although "nimb" (*Azadirachta indica*, a.k.a. *nīm* or *neem*) is well-known in India as a medicinal plant, Wilson notes that "every part of it is used for magical purposes." This is from a work by Tārānatha:

> When he was seated in a certain spot where young cattle herds often played, he found several swords they had made out of an *aśoka* tree and which they had left behind. He took one of them in his hands and put it down in front of himself. When he went into meditation, fire blazed forth from the sword of its own accord, and when he clasped it in his hands he soared into the skies and gained inner spiritual vision.
>
> - *The Seven Instruction Lineages.*[15]

Asoka is also an ingredient in a preparation claimed to "induce visions and illuminate hidden contents of the psyche".[16] Thus, although we have no direct evidence regarding its properties, we find that, at least within the tradition of tantric Buddhism, the *aśoka* tree is considered to be one of various "narcotic" and magical plants. That much of this evidence is found in the context of Tārā practice lends further weight to the notion that the use of psychoactive plants either was a part of her cult or, at least, that the cult preserved and transmitted the information that these plants held a spiritual "power" without necessarily understanding how this power was made manifest.

On the other hand, regardless of any pharmacological properties of its own, *aśoka* may be used symbolically, a stand-in for another plant. Asoka is one of those trees which blooms before it leafs out. In Spring, before a single leaf appears, *aśoka* trees are a mass of red blossoms – not unlike a gigantic fly agaric mushroom.

Returning to Monier-Williams' dictionary definition of *aśoka* for a moment, if we read on a little further in the same entry we find:

> *Aśokari*, m. 'enemy of the Aśoka tree,' the plant Nauclea Kadamba Roxb.
>
> - *Monier-Williams, A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*

This particular species of *Nauclea* has not, as yet, been analyzed for its alkaloid content but various other species of this genus are used medicinally in various parts of Asia many of which are known to contain MAO-inhibiting beta-carbolines. We have seen that the *aśoka* tree (*Jonesia aśoka*) was traditionally associated with "narcotic" [17] and magical plants and, as it is a member of the Leguminosae (the same family as Acacia) it is not unreasonable to suspect that it might contain DMT. If so, in order for it to become orally active, it would need to be combined with something that would inhibit the body's monoamine-oxidase. If we find that *N. kadamba* does indeed contain beta-carbolines, like others of its genus, then it may be just such an MAO-inhibitor. But why would that make it the "enemy of the Asoka tree" rather than its friend?

The reason is most likely because *aśoka* is a commonly-prescribed ayurvedic medicine. As *kadamba* is used as an ayurvedic remedy perhaps the name *aśokari* was given to it simply as a reminder that it is contra-indicated if the patient is taking *aśoka*. The effects of the combination might not be what the doctor ordered.

Aśokakāntā-Maricī is a yellow, two-armed form of Maricī ("light-ray") a goddess associated with the dawn.[18] She is depicted as riding in a chariot drawn by seven pigs. This image seems to be a deliberate allusion to the sun-god's seven-horse chariot. This complementary pairing of horse (active/male) with pig (passive/female) is also found in the pairing of the Buddhist deities Hayagriva (male) and Vajravārāhī (female). These two *yidam*s (meditation deities) are often represented in sexual union. Hayagriva ("horse-neck") is characterized by a small horse-head emerging from the crown of his head and Vajravārāhī ("thunderbolt-sow") has a sow's head emerging from hers.

Like the sun-god Surya, her charioteer is also legless, either being a female deity or our

old friend Rāhu. The Sadhanamala, a tantric Buddhist text, says this of Aśokakāntā-Maricī:

> I bow to Maricī who rides the sow of golden color, whose complexion is like the color of molten gold. She stands in sportive attitude on the moon over the lotus, and holds with her left hand the bough of the *aśoka* tree, and displays the Varada pose in the right. She bears the image of the Dhyani [sic] buddha (Vairocana) on the crown, is decorated with bright jewels, wears white garments and grants assurance of safety (to the world).
>
> - *Indian Buddhist Iconography* [19]

Despite this description, she often appears without her sow and frequently with a vajra in her right hand. Pigs (both boars and sows) are of course famously fond of mushrooms and will uproot underground fungi such as truffles. I have yet to discover any conclusive evidence that Maricī has entheogenic implications but his conjunction of pigs and a medicinal plant certainly raises suspicions, especially when Rāhu is involved.

## Ekajatā

According to the Tibetan Vajrayāna tradition, Ekajatā (also known as Ekajatī) is the protectress of mantras. Her own mantra is "...said to be so powerful that the moment it is uttered a man becomes free from danger, he is always followed by good fortune and his enemies are destroyed." [20] She appears in several forms with 2, 4, 8 or 24-arms and varying sets of attributes. While the four-armed aspects occur most often in Indian sources, there is also a two-armed, one-eyed, one-toothed (and often one-breasted) Ekajatā which is more common in Tibet. She is frequently depicted a wrathful, pot-bellied form which corresponds closely to the standard descriptions of *yakṣa*s.

The name "Ekajatā" means "one tuft" and is usually interpreted as referring to her hairstyle but if we examine her iconographic representations we find nothing unusual about her hair, it being either (a) piled tidily in a neat coif, (b) in the matted locks of the *jatamukuta* ("dreadlock") style or (c) flying upwards in the stylized manner common to wrathful deities.

Both Khadiravanī Tārā and Aśokakāntā-Maricī clearly have botanical references in their names. This naturally causes us to wonder whether the third member of the trio, Ekajatā might not also represent a (possibly psychotropic) plant. "One tuft" could refer to a reed, perhaps *Arundo donax* which has one giant stem surmounted by a single flowering plume.

## Jangulī Tārā

In addition to Khadiravanī Tārā there is yet another green form of Tārā who carries two lotuses. This is Jangulī Tārā and her distinctive feature is that she (like Skanda) rides a peacock. Tārā who is said to protect her devotees from all dangers, assumes the form of Jangulī Tārā ("Venom Tārā") to give protection from snake-bite. The relevance of the peacock here being that, in Indian folklore, peacocks are said to eat snakes.
Jangulī is included in the *Sādhanamala* as a separate goddess with her own practices but she was eventually absorbed by the Tārā cult as being one more aspect of the great, protective goddess. The *Sādhanamala* has this *sādhana* for Jangulī:

> Jangulī is white in colour and holds in her left hand buds of poisonous flowers.
>
> - *Sādhanamālā*[21]

PREV NEXT

# Ḍākinīs

> Plants, O ye mothers, I hail ye as goddesses.
>
> *- Yajur Veda* [1]

## Vajrayoginī/Vajravārāhī

Vajrayoginī/Vajravārāhī

When Jetsun Milarepa initiated Gambopa with urine-flavored tea, he was introducing him to the *maṇḍala* of Vajravārāhī. She is the main *ḍākinī* of the Kagyud, Mila's lineage. [2] One of the four great branches of Tibetan Buddhism, it carries the teachings of Indian *siddha*s such as Saraha, Tilopa and Marpa's guru, Nāropa. Ḍākinī is a word with meanings which range from "demonic witch" to "enlightened consort". It is also used as an honorific term for a guru's wife. *Ḍākinī*s such as Vajravārāhī are female deities who represent the wisdom aspect of enlightenment. They are visualized, and identified with, in meditation.

As a red goddess, decorated with white ornaments, who also stands on one leg, she should immediately arouse our interest as possibly symbolizing the *Amanita muscaria* mushroom. When we are told that her skull-cup is "brimming with *amṛita*" this only heightens our suspicions. A closer look at her iconography and rituals reveals abundant

references to *amṛita* and, covertly, to mushrooms.

Vajrayoginī ("Thunderbolt Yoga-lady") is, in many ways, the archetypal *ḍākinī*. She is almost completely interchangeable with Vajravārāhī ("Thunderbolt Sow"), being identical in every regard except for a single iconographic detail: Vajravārāhī has a small excrescence in the shape of a sow's head above her right ear. The prefix Vajra- serves to distinguish Vajravārāhī from the Hindu goddess Vārāhī ("Sow"), consort of Vārāha, the "boar incarnation" of Viṣṇu. Thus, Vajra-vārāhī is "the Sow goddess of the Vajrayāna" or "Buddhist Vārāhī."

In the "Wheel of Life" (Skt., *bhavacakra*), a diagram said to have its origin in Buddhism's earliest period, the pig symbolizes ignorance. This is because pigs eat whatever is in front of them without discrimination. The Vajrayāna makes the same observation about porcine table manners but, in a characteristic inversion of symbolic values, asserts that the sow's head symbolizes a meditative state known as "one taste" (Skt., *ekarasa*). On a more mundane level, we should not overlook the fact that pigs are notoriously fond of mushrooms nor that the *vajra*, Indra's thunderbolt weapon, features in several legends of the origin of *soma*.

In addition to their iconographic similarities, Vajrayoginī and Vajravārāhī are interchangeable in that they are both considered to be the consort of the *heruka* Cakrasaṃvara. Despite their wrathful appearance, *heruka*s represent the compassion aspect of enlightenment. Transcendent wisdom, its complementary aspect, is represented by their female consorts, in this case Vajrayoginī.

Cakra-saṃvara means "wheel-*saṃvara*". Vedic texts mention Samvara as the name of a drought-demon (drought is inimical to moisture-loving mushrooms) while a much later tradition has Samvara as a synonym of Śiva. In Buddhism, Samvara (or Sambara) is a variant form of the meditation-deity Hevajra. But, when used as a common noun, *saṃvara* is also a synonym for *samaya*, a word with two meanings: "vow" and "sacrament". Jayabhadra, in his commentary on the *Laghu-śaṃvarai* states that the initiate is:

> ...committed to the *saṃvara*, both those to be observed and those to be consumed. [3]

In other words, *saṃvara* means both the *amṛita* consumed at the outset of the initiation and the vows made at its conclusion. Thus, the name Cakrasaṃvara may be translated as "wheel-sacrament". In an earlier chapter we examined the wheel as a mushroom symbol and therefore the interpretation of Cakrasaṃvara as "mushroom-sacrament" remains a distinct possibility.

The Cakrasaṃvara *tāntra* describes the sexual union of Vajrayoginī and Cakrasaṃvara though, as with all *tāntra*s, this is intended to be understood on many levels. The interpretations range from subtle yogas of bodily energies to teachings on the inseparability of voidness and bliss. Heruka and Vajrayoginī are considered to be fully equivalent to other such pairs such as Hevajra and Nairatmya in the Hevajra *tāntra*. These deity pairs were (and still are) visualized in the meditation practices of tantric Buddhists but in the Kagyud tradition it is most often Vajrayoginī (or her close relation Vajravārāhī) alone who is the main object of meditation.

Although many variants of Vajrayoginī are known, almost all forms show her as a naked sixteen-year-old girl, bright red, and adorned with white beads made of human bone. She carries a skull cup full of blood in her left hand, a curious staff (Skt., *khaṭvāṅga*) in the crook of her left arm and a "cutter" (Skt., *kartṛi*), a kind of curved knife, in her right hand.

In all her variants except one, the ḍākinī Vajrayoginī carries a skull-cup (of blood or *amṛita*) and in many forms she drinks from it. The exception is her headless form in which she has cut off her own head with her *kartri*, and holds her own head in her left hand where normally she would hold the skull-cup. Three streams of blood arc upwards from her neck, the central one falling into the mouth of her own, severed head and the left and right streams fall into the open mouths of her two attendant *ḍākinī*s.

Generally, we are told that the "blood" which Vajrayoginī drinks is the "blood of the enemies" but the invocation of the headless form shows that it is her own essence which is being consumed. Her descriptions may be read on at least two levels, literal and metaphorical. I believe that both were intended. The literal one is as a young female yogi, drinking a reddish liquid from a human skull-cup by the light of the funeral pyres of a cremation ground. To take that as the only interpretation leaves several elements

unexplained, however.

## How big is a skull?

Buddhist images display a distinct double standard when it comes to skulls. The skull-cups which hold *amṛita* or other liquids are always life-size. That is, their size is comparable to the head of the deity holding it. Then there are the other, ornamental, skulls and heads which are much smaller. The skulls adorning Vajrayoginī's tiara, the "human heads" which hang as a garland around her neck and those impaled upon her *khaṭvāṅga* staff cannot possibly be of normal size. The notion of someone wearing five human skulls as crown ornaments and fifty heads as a necklace is as implausible as it is grotesque. But nowhere in the descriptions of the many deities who wear such heads and skulls is it stated that they are anything less than normal size.

One might logically infer, then, that as these deities are supernatural beings they must be of superhuman size and the skulls just look small by comparison. However, Buddhist artists use iconographic texts which preserve the canonical dimensions of the deities. These diagrams use a system of iconometric grids to give the size and proportions of all beings who may be painted: Buddhas, bodhisattvas, gods and even goblins. According to these canonical proportions, *ḍākinī*s come in one standard height: 108 "finger widths" (Tib., *Sor.Tshigs*) or somewhere around 6ft 6in. This is, admittedly, an imposing height for a sixteen-year-old girl but that is still nowhere near large enough for her to wear five human skulls on her headband.

The grids are extremely useful for determining the intended size of her skull ornaments. Measurements with the grids show that these "skulls" are between three and four inches across. This is far too small for even a child's head but it is just about right for the dried "head" (i.e. cap) of an *Amanita muscaria* mushroom.

As ever with the Vajrayāna we may expect many levels of interpretation of these symbols, literal meanings being overlaid with many layers of metaphor. If we relax our mental focus a little and ignore the finer details, we see that we are being told that the *ḍākinī* is red with white spots and stands on one leg, not unlike the *Amanita muscaria* mushroom. She holds a liquid (*amṛita*) in a cup made from a life-sized human skull. Actual human skull-cups such as this are still a part of tantric sacramental observance and are used to hold *amṛita*.

I find it difficult to believe that even the most enterprising young *yoginī* could find fresh, liquid, human blood in a cremation ground. The liquid contained in her skull-cup is sometimes said to be *amṛita*, sometimes blood. Both, of course, refer to a reddish decoction of fly agaric, not actual human blood.

Finding fifty "fresh human heads, dripping blood" for her garland presents another problem. Even if she could accumulate this quantity of heads, the garland and tiara would be quite unwearable due to their great size. But, as we have seen, the many heads and skulls adorning her body are only the size of the caps of *A. muscaria* mushrooms. Could this be because they actually **are** the caps of *A. muscaria* mushrooms? The possibility of such a symbolic substitution should not be lightly dismissed, after all, the Ojibway (a Native American people) refer to the bulbous base of an *Amanita* as a "skull". [4]

## Her symbols

Without her symbolic attributes (Skt., *mudra*), Vajrayoginī would be indistinguishable from any other naked teenage girl. But apart from their use in iconographic identification, they provide a remarkable insight into the hidden meanings implicit in this deity. Here are some of her most significant symbols:

The dharmodaya as represented two-dimensionally.

### The dharmodaya

Vajrayoginī, her entourage and the whole landscape in which they stand arise out of something called a *dharmodaya* ("the origin of things"). When depicted in solid form it is shown as a tetrahedron standing on one point so that the uppermost face is horizontal. On the other hand, when it is drawn in two dimensions it is identical to the six-pointed "star of David". These are merely artistic conventions, however; the written texts sometimes get a little more specific about the details. For instance, a sādhana of "Two-faced Vajravārāhī in the Chel tradition" describes the *dharmodaya* as "white on the outside, red on the inside, with a narrow root and a large hood, domed on top like the back of a tortoise."[5] Rather like a red and white mushroom.

## The corpse

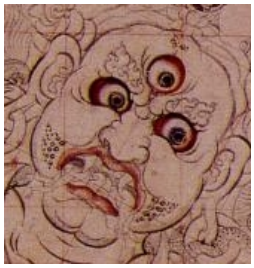
Many liturgies describe Vajrayoginī as standing one-legged (i.e. mushroom-like) "as if dancing" on a corpse. We now turn our attention to the many connections between *amṛita*, corpses and mushrooms.

Vajravārāhī crushes a corpse between sun and moon disks.

In *The Mahāvīra Vessel and the Plant Pūtika*,[6] Stella Kramrisch describes how later versions of the *soma* sacrifice combined it with the *pravargya* sacrifice which requires a specially-made pot. As part of the fire-ritual, a pot is made from clay into which were mixed a few other ingredients, most important of which being a plant called *pūtika* ("the stinker"). This plant was the first of the substitutes for *soma* described in the Brahmanas.

In the northeastern Indian state of Bihar live the Santal tribe, an ancient indigenous people whose language is neither Indo-European nor Dravidian but belongs to the third family of Indian languages: Munda. The Santals eat a reddish-brown mushroom they call *pūtka* which, if left to decay, develops a powerful stench like that of a human corpse. To avoid this unpleasantness, leftover *pūtka* is therefore buried – like a corpse. This sounds like a pretty good candidate for the *pūtika* of the Brahmanas, stinky and with a very similar name.

However, *pūtka* is in no way psychoactive and the Santal do not hold these mushrooms in any particular reverence though they believe them to be generated by lightning strikes, just as the Vedas say *soma* was.[7] Also, the Santal word *pūtka* is a curiosity in that it defies the rules of Santal grammar. Santal nouns fall into two groups: "things with a soul" and "things without a soul" and of the entire plant kingdom, *pūtka* is the only one to be accorded a soul. As a mushroom, the Santal see it simply as a seasonal ingredient in their curries [8] though they claim to be familiar with a species of entheogenic fungus. They say it grows on cow dung.[9]



A detail from a drawing of Rematī showing the corpse on her tongue

In a Vajrayāna ritual, five corpses, one human and four animal, are buried. Then, when they have decomposed, a pot is made from clay which they have become.[10] Once again, the literal interpretation leads us to an unlikely conclusion, as many years would need to pass before animal tissue is incorporated into clay. I suggest that this process would be a lot more feasible if these "corpses" were insubstantial, rapidly decomposing mushrooms. And this pot which is made from the "clay" presents an precise parallel to the the ritual incorporation of the *pūtika* into the clay of a pot during the Vedic *soma*-ceremony.

All Buddhist deities are identified by the set of symbolic attributes they bear. The goddess Rematī (also known as Śri Devī) has a stranger set than most, not the least of which is the corpse which rests upon her tongue. Naturally, as we have seen with heads strung into garlands and the skulls which adorn crowns, this "corpse" is far smaller than life-size.

The Buddhist protectress Rematī is much more familiar to us in her original guise as the Hindu goddess Kālī. This popular goddess, now considered the consort of the god Śiva, began her existence as one of the seven named tongues of flame that consume *soma* in the Vedic fire ritual. To this day, Kālī is represented with an abnormally long tongue, thrust out over her chin. According to tradition it protrudes in this way so that

she may constantly taste *amṛita*. Kālī also has a garland of "human heads" and a skirt of "humans arms." It is curious that there are no torsos or legs. Is it possible that the heads should be seen as "mushroom caps" and the arms as "mushroom stems"?

Kali's tongue tastes amṛita.
Detail from a 19th century drawing.

The description of Rematī, a Buddhist form of Kālī, is even more explicit in its allusion to the *homa* fire sacrifice (that is, the version of the Vedic *soma* rite):

> Her mouth is described as an open hearth for destructive burnt offerings (Tib., *Drag Po'i Hom Khing*), which conflagrates the enemies or *rudra*s who pervert or destroy the teachings. Tongues of fire blaze within her mouth… Her red tongue twists like lightning as she experiences the divine taste of nectar, symbolized by the human corpse.[11]

A corpse-club.
Detail from the mandala of Yamāntaka.

The important Vajrayāna deity Yamāntaka uses a corpse as club. The name Yamāntaka (*i.e. yama+antaka*, "death ender") parallels the meaning of *amṛita*: "deathlessness". This corpse-club (Tibetan: *Zhing dByug*) is represented as a corpse impaled on a stake. If, as with Rematī, the corpse represents the taste of *amṛita*, then this corpse-on-a-stick appears to be some kind of *amṛita*-on-a-stick. A psychoactive mushroom would certainly fit this description as the body (cap) of the mushroom is "impaled" by the stem.

Similar "weapons" are wielded by Preṣakā ("maid-servant"), a goddess in the retinue of Vetālī ("Revived Corpse Lady", "Zombie Woman"). In Indian folklore, cemeteries may be haunted by spirits called *vetalas* [12] who enter corpses of the recently deceased and re-animate them. They are loosely equivalent to the western notion of a "zombie". Preṣakā "brandishes two corpses, a mummified body in the shape of a club and a vermilion-colored corpse".[13] Here we see the mushroom in three stages: the "vermilion-colored corpse" is a fresh, bright-red *A. muscaria* mushroom, the "mummified corpse" is the same mushroom when dried and the "revived-corpse" is the "mummified corpse" after it has been reconstituted (*i.e.* "revived") by soaking in water.

This drying process is not simply for storage, though as mushrooms are seasonal, this is an important consideration. Any *A. muscaria* mushrooms intended for consumption should be thoroughly dried in order to convert as much ibotenic acid to muscimol as possible. Having been "revived," the mushrooms would then be ground between a pair of "*soma*-stones" to produce a more potent and less toxic potion than would be possible with fresh mushrooms. This raises the intriguing possibility that in "treading on a corpse," Vajrayoginī may actually be pressing out the *soma*-elixir.

## The skull-cup

Vajrayoginī carries a cup, made from the top of a human skull, which is variously described as containing either *amṛita* or blood. This "blood" is sometimes further defined as "blood of the enemies" or "blood of the unrighteous". Given the Indian passion for wordplay, this is readily explained by seeing both "enemy" and "unrighteous" as puns. One Sanskrit word for "enemy" is *amitra* (*a-mitra*, literally, "not-friend"), phonetically very close to *amṛita*.[14] Similarly, when we encounter references to "evil-doers" we should recall that in Sanskrit word is *a**n**ṛita* (literally, "evil", "unrighteousness"). Again, this is very close to the sound of *amṛita*. Many deities are said to hold skull-cups and if we compare their variant forms, we frequently find that in some versions the deity's skull-cup holds "blood" while at other times it holds *amṛita*. This is a good indication that the term "blood" is not to be taken literally and that it is synonymous with *amṛita*.

We may now see why Rematī's flaming mouth "conflagrates the enemies" while her tongue "experiences the divine taste of nectar." If her mouth is a "hearth for burnt offerings," then her tongue must taste the nectar (*amṛita*) which is sacrificed to the flames. The tantric practitioner who visualizes Rematī in this way denigrates "the enemies or *rudra*s who pervert or destroy the teachings" as both "enemy" (Skt., *amitra*) and "unrighteous" (Skt., *anṛita*) while simultaneously celebrating the *soma* sacrament by imagining the goddess in terms of the fire ritual and by making puns on the word *amṛita*. This passage exemplifies the typical tantric style of juxtaposing opposites and transcending moral judgments.

Having explained the "enemies" and the "unrighteous" we are left with

A human skull amṛita-cup. The interior is painted red, with the heart-maṇḍala of Cakrasaṃvara and Vajravārāhī drawn in ink.

the question of the *rudra*s. The phrase "enemies or *rudra*s" implies that they were considered synonymous. But if "enemy" is really just a pun on *amṛita* that means that these *rudra*s are *amṛita*, too. So who were they?

As we have seen in an earlier chapter, a god called Rudra is mentioned in the hymns of the Ṛig Veda yet no clear image of a deity emerges. Indeed, his name is to be found as a synonym of various gods. Sometimes the epithet *rudra* (Skt.: "red", "ruddy") implies Agni the fire god, sometimes the god Soma, and sometimes it is a synonym of Indra, the storm god who is closely connected with *soma*/*amṛita*. The *Ṛig Veda* speaks of the hordes of *rudra*s who accompany Indra, the bringer of storms and the Yajur Veda describes the "red" and "blue-necked" *rudra*s frequently seen in damp places.

By critical analysis of various Hindu legends, Clark Heinrich makes a convincing case that the god Rudra was the Fly agaric mushroom in disguise.[15] In the Indian subcontinent, dry for most of the year, mushrooms appear in sudden flushes during and after the monsoon rains. This would certainly explain why Indra, the monsoon-bringer whose thunderbolt causes the *soma*-plant to spring forth, should be accompanied by hordes of *rudra*s, the fungal source of his favorite potion. After all, the White Yajur Veda tells us how the "dwarfish", "misshapen" *rudra*s are seen "by the thousand".

Also, around the 5th century, certain ascetic followers of Śiva known as *kāpālika*s began imitating Rudra in behavior and appearance. As a religious observance they lived in cemeteries, clothed only in the ash of funeral pyres, wore their hair long and matted, carried a *khaṭvāṅga* (skull-topped staff, see below) and used a skull-cup (Skt.: *kapāla*) as a begging bowl. In this latter observance, they imitated Rudra's legendary penance for cutting off the head of the god Brahma.

An unititiated member of the Buddhist establishment, hearing of "enemies or *rudra*s who pervert or destroy the teachings" might understand it to refer to such "heretics" as these Hindu *kāpālika*s. However, many of the distinctive traits of Vajrayāna Buddhism, including the Vedic *homa* and *bali* rituals, have been traced to Hindu origins.[16] Specifically, they are believed to derive from this very sect: the *kāpālika*.[17]

Thus, when chanting about "enemies" or "*rudra*s" the multi-layered meanings of *tāntra* allow practitioner of Vajrayāna to present an air of orthodoxy while simultaneously sending a nod and a wink to those initiates who know that both "enemy" and "*rudra*" are code-words for the *soma*/*amṛita* drug: a mushroom. Doubtless, these are the *rudra*s whom Rematī eats for breakfast.

The role of the *kapāla* (Skt. "skull-cup") is so important to the Vajrayāna that there is a prominent *heruka* (wrathful, male meditation-deity) called Buddha-kapāla. He is the central character in a *tāntra* (*Buddhakapāla-yoginī-tāntra-rāja*) in which he sexually embraces his "intoxicated, nude and fearless" wisdom-consort Citrasenā ("bright-spear lady"). Note that "Buddha skull-cup" and "bright-spear lady" may be seen as complementary names. If appropriately arranged, the skull-cup and spear may be seen as the cap and stem of a mushroom.

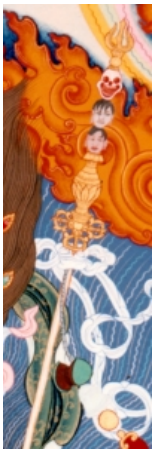
This *tāntra* has an opening chapter that is full of truly startling non-sequiturs. It begins in the usual way of *tāntra*s, with the Buddha having sex with a lady-friend (in this instance, Citrasenā) but this time the Buddha dies during the act. Vajrapaṇi, a member of the audience of attendant bodhisattvas, speaks up and, rather than comment on the scandalous death of the enlightened one, he beseeches Citrasenā to find some way of enlightening the truly stupid. Citrasenā, though, is still horny and ogles the dead Buddha lustfully. This causes the Buddha's head to pop open, releasing a mantra about *amṛita* which makes distant *nāga*s sweat.[18]

In all fairness, it should be noted that Buddhist *tāntra*s usually have their verses shuffled in order to confuse the uninitiated. Even so, the surreal, impossible imagery should be enough to demonstrate that this text is symbolic and not to intended be taken literally. But we do have the mention of *amṛita* (even if only in a mantra) in the same breath as our old friends the *nāga*s and an actual, physical, symptom – sweating. Excessive perspiration is characteristic of drugs which affect the neurotransmitter acetylcholine. It so happens that muscimol, the active principle of the fly-agaric mushroom, is such a drug. Profuse sweating is a side-effect of fly-agaric intoxication.

## The khaṭvāṅga (staff)

Most *ḍākinī*s are said to carry a staff called a *khaṭvāṅga*, usually in the crook of the left arm. The name translates as "bed-leg" though one authority declares the original

*khaṭvāṅga* to have been a club made of a human skull with a human rib for a handle. This attribute is borrowed from the *khaṭvāṅga* held by Śiva, though in his case it is simply a staff topped with a skull. The Buddhist *khaṭvāṅga* is a staff topped with a stack of cryptic symbols.


The khaṭvāṅga

Various Vajrayāna commentaries explain the role of the *khaṭvāṅga* as the male "secret consort" of the *ḍākinī*. In other words, though apparently alone, she is considered to be in sexual union with the staff. Symbolically this is said to represent the union of primordial wisdom (the *ḍākinī*) with skillful means (her *khaṭvāṅga*). There are many such commentaries on the symbolism of the *khaṭvāṅga* and its various parts but nowhere in the literature are we told what, literally speaking, a *khaṭvāṅga* is and what practical purpose (if any) it serves.

An eight-sided white staff, often said to be made of bone, the *khaṭvāṅga* is topped with a series of symbols. From the top, they are a black, five-pronged *vajra*, three heads, a vase and a *viśvavajra* ("double thunderbolt"). When depicted in detail it is also decorated with a scarf, a *damaru* and a bell.

When ḍākinī is translated into English as "witch" one is forcefully reminded that the sky-walking abilities of her European sisters have often been attributed to a salve containing henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*), applied to the genital mucosa with a (broom-)stick. Prior to its known use in Europe, the psychoactive properties of henbane and its close relative datura (*Datura* spp.) had been employed for centuries in the east. Afghanistan in particular was known for its henbane cults and still has traditions of many drug plants.

In the eastern part of Afghanistan is the Swat Valley, said by some to be the site of fabled Oḍḍiyāna, "home of the flying *ḍākinīs*."[19] Oḍḍiyāna is said to be the actual origin of the *tāntra*s. To state this in more orthodox terms, the Buddha assumed the form of Vajrapaṇi in order to teach the *tāntra*s to a very select few of his followers. These secret teachings were then preserved in the land of Oḍḍiyāna, the location of which is disputed. Some place it in Bengal, some in southern India but the majority opinion is that it was the Swat Valley in eastern Afghanistan – which is not far from the site of the Bactria-Margiana Archeological Complex. Megasthenes and other ancient writers speak of a "Land of Women" in India and Indian literature contains references to "women's kingdoms" (Skt., *stīrya rājyas*).

Could the ḍākinī's "sexual" embrace of the *khaṭvāṅga* really have been a transdermal means of drug application? In other words, did she fly on her *khaṭvāṅga* as witches "flew" on broomsticks? It may worthy of note that the Victorian explorer and translator, Sir Richard Burton, remarked that Afghanistan was home to an exclusively female cult which indulged in ritual masturbation with sticks. It is entirely possible that this is a sex-obsessed westerner's distorted view of a women-only henbane cult.

The Afghanistan region was subject to a period of invasion and unrest in the 7th and 8th centuries CE which (in a manner analogous to the 20th century Chinese invasion of Tibet) may have resulted in the dissemination of what had been a purely local cult. As this is precisely the period of the first tantric *siddha*s in India, it tends to validate the many Vajrayāna texts which indicate Oḍḍiyāna as the origin of the *tāntra*s.

## The Vajra

The *vajra* is, of course, Indra's thunderbolt and is intimately involved with legends of *soma*. Often, the *vajra* on the top of a *khaṭvāṅga* is replaced by a three flaming points, highly reminiscent of Śiva's trident.

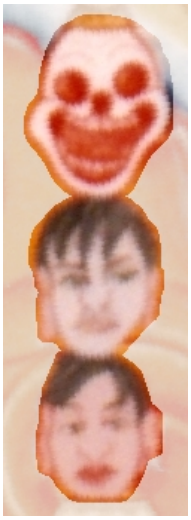

The vajra.

## Heads

The three "heads" are the same size as the fifty which Vajrayoginī wears in her garland and the five on her tiara. The size, that is, of mushroom caps. Stacked as if impaled upon the staff, they are: a freshly decapitated head, a decomposing head and a skull. Or, at least, that is how they are depicted in paintings and sculpture. The written sources refer to them differently, however. These three heads are referred to as "a fresh head", "a drying head" and "a dried head". It is almost as if these tiny "heads" are, in fact, mushroom caps drying on a stick. Could this, in fact, be the original function of an actual (as opposed to symbolic) *khaṭvāṅga*?

In order to dry the mushrooms thoroughly (an essential process with *A. muscaria*), the caps and stems would need to be separated. (This also affords an opportunity to inspect the mushroom for larval infestation.) They would then be strung on thread and hung up to dry. The caps and stems would dry at different rates and so would be strung on

separate threads. I believe that, on one level, the *khaṭvāṅga* and skull-cup, which are so often seen together, represent the separated stem and cap of the mushroom. This conjecture is borne out by the "inner offering" of the *gaṇacakra* ritual where "*amṛita*" is made yogically by visualizing the *khaṭvāṅga* inserted vertically into a skull-cup (making a distinct mushroom shape).


Heads: "fresh", "drying" & "dried".

## Vase

I can hardly begin to express the incongruity of the next symbol. Has there ever been a real, physical staff which had a vase as one of its parts? Despite the utter incongruity of this vase, no one, as far as I know, has ever remarked how strange it seems.
While the vase is said to symbolize "emptiness" it is, in fact, full. Does it come as any surprise, then, to learn that it is said to be full of *amṛita*? [20]

## Viśvavajra

Below the vase is the *viśvavajra* ("universal-thunderbolt") shown as two crossed *vajras*. If the *vajra* does, indeed, symbolize a psychoactive mushroom, this suggests the possibility that two kinds of mushrooms were used in combination. The two could have been *Amanita muscaria* and *A. pantherina* or even *A. muscaria* and *Psilocybe cubensis*. Although this sounds like an alarming combination, anecdotal reports claim this pairing to have spectacularly ecstatic effects.[21]

## Ḍamaru, sun and moon

> You can obtain Buddhahood: by taking a medicine pill which will make you immortal like the sun and moon...
>
> - *The Life of Gampopa* [22]

Dangling from the *khaṭvāṅga* are a *ḍamaru* (an hourglass-shaped "pellet drum"), a small bell and symbolic representations of the sun and moon.

The *ḍamaru* is another borrowing from Hinduism: it is the drum played by Śiva as he dances on one leg and which many be seen dangling from his trident in images of the god. Throughout India, this a pair of symbols, the trident and *ḍamaru*, are recognized as an aniconic representation of Śiva. In its shape, the *ḍamaru* resembles a young *Amanita muscaria* in its "dumb-bell" stage, before the universal veil has been ruptured.

The other ornament on the *khaṭvāṅga*, the bell, is a more recognizable mushroom shape, its clapper being the stem. The impression of a stem is heightened as the clapper is extended by symbols of the sun and moon. The sun and moon were paradigms of immortality and are on some level, therefore, to be considered synonymous with *amṛita* ("deathlessness").

The power of flight is a typical ḍākinī characteristic, hence the Tibetan translation of ḍākinī as *mK'a.sGro.Ma* ("sky-going-lady"). It is also possible to interpret this "flight" as a state of enhanced consciousness. After all, in the late 1960s, "flying" was one of the most common terms used by hippies for an LSD experience, second only to "tripping". [23]

## The kartri (curved knife)


The kartri

In her right hand, Vajrayoginī/Vajravārāhī holds a blade called a *kartri*. This strange implement is sometimes called a flaying knife and sometimes a chopper. Its handle attaches at the center of the inner curve of a crescent-shaped blade which, optionally, has a hook on one end. This hooked end would be ideal for uprooting *A. muscaria* without damage and the curved blade is similarly suited to chopping *A. muscaria*, whether fresh or dried.[24] Certain deities, including Vajrayoginī/Vajravārāhī, may hold it inverted with the curved blade uppermost and the handle pointing down. This closely resembles the outline of a mushroom, especially when the blade lacks the "end hook."

In the later versions of the *soma* ceremony, the *pravargya* pot was sometimes made by a priest but often by a potter, known ritually as the *kartṛ*, or "maker". Curiously, this word is almost identical in sound to *kartri*, "cutter".

## Apron

Vajrayoginī/Vajravārāhī, like most *ḍākinīs*, wears five sets of ornaments made from human bone: a necklace, two earrings, four bracelets and anklets, an apron and a tiara of skulls.

Detail of Vajrayoginī showing some of her ornaments and garlands

The "apron" is a network composed of beads and and other small pieces of bone. If the garland of heads represents a collection of mushroom caps strung together for drying, then the "bones" of the apron are their stems.

Such an "apron", when hung up, would make a most efficient drying arrangement. When dried, the stems of *Amanita muscaria* are very hard and could certainly stand up to being worn as an actual apron. The bone-white beads of the "five ornaments" make a sharp contrast to Vajravārāhī's blood-red skin. This white-on-red color scheme is distinctly reminiscent of *A. muscaria*, a deep red mushroom that is "ornamented" with dots of white.

A pile of bones? No, A. muscaria stems.

Vajrayoginī originated as the consort of Cakrasamvara yet soon developed her own cult as the *yoginī-tāntra*s came to overshadow the earlier *yoga-tāntra*s, probably in the 7th century C.E. Her cult includes several examples of *homa* (the Vedic fire ritual) and *bali* (a food offering) which make explicit references to *amṛita*. Visualizing oneself as Vajrayoginī is central to several traditions of Tibetan yoga. I do not dispute the efficacy of these yogas but I am skeptical that their success depends on the precise details of the visualized image. On the other hand, the various symbolic details of Vajravārāhī/Vajrayoginī seem to make sense when considered in the context of the *Amanita muscaria* mushroom and the adoption of Śaiva Hindu elements by Vajrayāna Buddhists. Both these themes are hinted at in a legend recounted in a Chinese commentary on a major Buddhist *tāntra* wherein the Buddha Vairocana converts Hindu *ḍākinī*s to Buddhism by eating them![25]

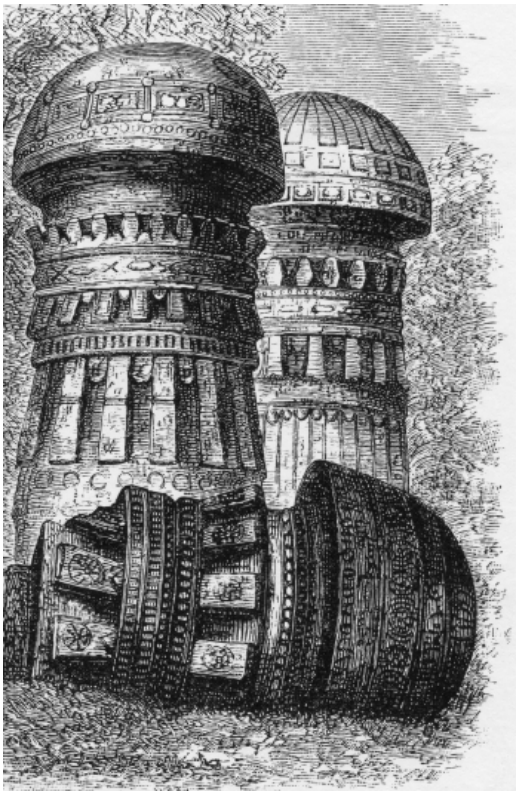
PREV NEXT

# Conclusions and speculations

## What are we to make of all this?

It has been known for some time that certain drugs were used in Indian religions. The *purāṇa*s mention Siva's use of cannabis, datura and *Nux vomica* [1] and various *tāntra*s mention cannabis, camphor and betel. These last three are considered aphrodisiac are used in connection with "tantric sex" (Skt., *maithuna*).[2] All of these, however, were exoteric, spoken of openly, not neemayading to be cloaked in secrecy.[3] But there were other drugs besides these – drugs which were more potent and more potentially devastating to the psyche. These were not used as aphrodisiacs, nor were they used in a recreational setting. They were primarily religious sacraments and were valued for the access which they provided to rarefied mental states.

The earliest account of these other, secret, drugs occurs in the Vedas – ancient collections of sacred chants compiled around 2,500 BCE by the "Aryans", Indo-European invaders of north-west India. These verses speak in veiled terms of the mysterious *soma*, the plant-derived elixir of immortality and drink of the gods. The awe-filled tone of the hymns to *soma* make it quite clear that, whatever this elixir was, it was central to their notions of spirituality and the divine.



The mysterious "mushroom pillars of Dimapur" in Assam, India. [From a 19th century drawing]

The actual religion and mythology of the Aryans seems to have been very similar to that of ancient Greece and Rome. Indeed, some of their deities are almost identical. However, the worship of these gods, Indra, Varuna *et. al.*, as described in the Vedas has not survived; the gods and goddesses which are now worshiped in India bear no resemblance to those Aryan deities.

Certain elements of the Vedic religion, though, continued after its gods were forgotten. One of these is the fire-sacrifice (Skt., *agni-hotra*), the ritual at which the Vedic priests would consume *soma*. This rite is still occasionally practiced to this day by members of the Brahmin caste, linear descendants of the ancient Vedic priesthood.

Some time in the early middle-ages (perhaps around the 5th or 6th centuries CE), the *agni-hotra* began to be practiced by members of other castes, sometimes even by members of the "untouchable" out-castes. These ritual celebrants were adherents of the new, "tantric" movement who had co-opted the fire-sacrifice for their own uses. Like the brahmins, they passed on permission to practice their rituals in a formal initiation ceremony. But, unlike the brahminical, father-to-son initiation, these initiations were performed by a tantric guru and were open to all, albeit under conditions of great secrecy.

The tantric movement must have been very popular in medieval India as both Hinduism and Buddhism adopted its techniques and developed their own versions of tantric practice. Tantric Buddhism, for instance, is known as Vajrayāna.

# Vajrayāna

I have deliberately refrained from attempting to identify "the original *soma*". Not only have thousands of pages already been devoted to this somewhat contentious issue, this is not the focus of my book. My interest lies in early Vajrayāna Buddhism and, in particular, the use it made of a psychoactive sacrament known as *amṛita*. The data presented in this book makes it quite clear that this was, at least in most instances, a mushroom which contained the alkaloids psilocybin and psilocin. Most likely, the original, Indian, species was *Psilocybe cubensis* although, as I have pointed out, it is likely that other, similar, species were also used.[4]

No doubt some readers are asking, "Why?" or even, "What on earth would induce a sensible, sane, meditative Buddhist to derange their minds and suffer a series of surreal hallucinations?". To deal with the easy part first, these mushrooms do not induce hallucinations. Admittedly, such drugs were once called hallucinogens (*i.e.* hallucination-inducers) but this out-moded term is very inaccurate – they do not make you see things which are not there. You may see vivid images with eyes closed but this can hardly be called hallucinating. You may briefly, for instance, mistake a real object for something else – as in the famous Buddhist example of mistaking a coiled rope for a snake. But this sort of misapprehension happens to the soberest among us and, again, it is not what most people consider hallucinating.[5]

But this still has not answered the question, "Why?". One suggestion might be that these plants allow access to parts of the mind which are not normally available to our conscious minds – the so-called "subconscious". While this is undoubtedly true and may be very valuable in a psych-therapeutic setting, this is still not the true spiritual use of these plants. Could it be, then, that the "closed-eye visuals" provide some sort of spiritual message or visions of gods and goddesses? Well, this is very real possibility but from a Buddhist point of view such messages or visions would be beside the point. This not to deny that the inner revelations which manifest while under the influence of psychedelics may be powerfully transformative. One may even experience the presence of transcendent entities, whether benignly divine or terrifyingly demonic. These inhabitants of our subconscious mind are reminiscent of what the analytical psychologist Carl Jung termed "archetypes".

> Had Jung lived just a little longer – he died in 1961 – he might have added psychedelics to his list of pathways to one's deeper, more enlightened psyche.
>
> *- Heidegger and a Hippo.*[6]

The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* also speaks of encounters with such entities but urges us to recognize them as aspects of our own mind – an attitude with which, I am sure, Jung would agree. However, while confronting these archetypal entities might be useful to one's spiritual journey, from a Buddhist standpoint they still belong to the realm of "relative truth" – the world of words and concepts, a world which requires dualistic notions of "this" and "that". The psychedelic experience has more than this to offer.

From a yogic perspective, a truly valuable property of such psychedelic plants is that they provide an easy way to experience (if the term "experience" is even valid here) the state of non-duality, the state of "bliss-void" in which one may, for instance, see a flower (and see it in profound and vivid detail) without there being any concept of "flower" or "seeing" or even "seer". This is a very difficult state to describe because the act of description necessarily requires the use of words and concepts, the very words and concepts which are transcended in this state. This problem is not a new one. It did not arise with the modern use of psychedelics, nor is it peculiar to the psychedelic state. It is inherent it the task of using words to describe the ineffable. Such descriptions can only be (to use a Buddhist metaphor) "fingers pointing at the moon".

This state which I have attempted to describe is the fundamental condition of *śunyatā* spoken of in the Buddhist scriptures. The Sanskrit word *śunyatā* is often translated as "nothingness" or "voidness", both of which are misleading from a philosophical point of view and are way off from the experiential stand-point. The English word "nothingness" provides a useful starting-point, though, as in may be creatively deconstructed as "no-thing-ness", in other words, a state in which there are no "things". There is "stuff", certainly – the stuff of reality itself – but the mind does not divide it up, categorizing and labeling the "stuff" as "things".

Even so, this may not be the ultimate value of the psychedelic state. The recognition of *śunyatā* corresponds to what, in Mahāyāna Buddhism, is known as "the second turning of the wheel of Dharma". But there was a "third turning". Mahāyāna Buddhism claims

that, in order to prevent people from falling into the error of nihilism (*i.e.* interpreting *śunyatā* as mere nothingness, rather than "no-thing-ness"), he taught the doctrine of Buddha-nature. This "third turning of the wheel of Dharma" describes how the fundamental, substrate of all consciousness is the enlightened mind.

How does this relate to the use of psychedelics? Well, it is possible, while immersed in the state of "no-thing-ness" to recognize that fundamental, substrate of awareness. If we do, we can see that it is none other than the basis of our ordinary mind. In fact, in some traditions (e.g. in Zen and in the tantric Mahāmudra philosophy) it is even called "ordinary mind". It should not, however, be confused with the everyday mind, filled with internal chatter. Rather, it is both the basis of that superficial mentality while, at the same time, encompasses it. This is why many profound Buddhist thinkers say that we are already enlightened. We just need to realize the fact.

Is the recognition of our innate Buddha-nature an inevitable consequence of taking psychedelics? Most certainly not. Many people take psychedelics without even waking up to the state of "no-thing-ness", but psychedelics definitely make these states available to us.

> Psychedelics remain an uncertain method of attaining a powerful experience of recognition of the ground of being. But like psychopathic states and near-death experience, they seem to be able to induce a fore-taste of the nature of mind.
>
> - *Maya Yoga* [7]

So, if achieving these states is not guaranteed, how can we maximize the possibility of a truly mystical experience? What may be needed is an enlightened teacher, one who is not only fully conversant with Buddhist philosophy and meditation techniques but also familiar with psychedelics. Someone who could use the psychedelic experience as an opportunity to point out the fundamental nature of mind itself. Vajrayāna initiations usually include something called "pointing-out instructions" with which the initiating guru "points out" the nature of mind. These days, with only colored water as *amṛita* and the instructions given in Tibetan, few initiates derive any benefit from the ritual. It is my hope that the psychedelic experience could be used as a true initiation in the original sense, with the psychedelic drug functioning as *amṛita*. Perhaps this book may encourage such new, enlightened teachers to appear and make themselves available to a new generation of initiates.

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# Indo-European languages

## Europe (18th century CE)

Most people who learn to speak more than one European language will be struck by the frequent similarities between words. Take, for example, the English words *father*, *brother*, *two* and *three*; these clearly resemble the Latin *pater*, *frater*, *duus* and *tres*, the Greek *pater*, *phrater*, *duo* and *treis*, and the German *Vater*, *Broder*, *zwei*, and *drei*. The first person to point out such similarities was Joseph Scaliger (1540-1609) who, using words for "god," identified the language groups we now call Romance, Greek, Germanic and Slavic. He failed, however, to realize that this is due to their descent from a single ancient tongue. That honor goes to James Parsons (1705-1770), an English physician, antiquarian and fellow of the Royal Society who, in 1767, published *The Remains of Japhet, being historical enquiries into the affinity and origins of the European languages*. [1]

According to biblical tradition Shem, Ham and Japheth, the three sons of Noah, engendered the races of mankind. While the Book of Genesis clearly identifies Shem as forefather of the Semites (Hebrews and Arabs) and Ham as progenitor of the Hamites (Egyptians and Cushites), nothing is explicitly said about the descendants of Noah's third son. In the 18th century the word of the Bible was still accepted without question and European Christians, being neither Semite nor Hamite, were forced to conclude that they had descended from Japheth. As a result, many 18th century scholars referred to the Europeans and their languages as "Japhetic".

Japheth, son of Noah, supposed ancestor of all Europeans

In *The Remains of Japhet*, Parsons compared eleven number words (1…10, 100) in a wide variety of European languages in addition to Persian, Bengali, Turkish, Hebrew, Malay and Chinese. From this comparison he correctly concluded that the languages of Europe are related to each other and, furthermore, to Persian and Bengali. Conversely, they are entirely unlike Turkish, Hebrew, Malay or Chinese. The family of European, Persian and Indic languages, first identified by James Parsons, is now known as the Indo-European language group. The language group called "European" refers to almost all of Europe's languages. It includes all Celtic, Germanic, Greek, Romance and Slavic languages but excludes Basque (Europe's neolithic, pre-Indo-European language), Sami (Laplander) and medieval arrivals such as Finnish, Hungarian, and Turkish.

A portrait of Sir William Jones by Joshua Reynolds

Parsons also inferred that the family resemblances implied the existence of a common ancestral tongue from which the languages of Europe, Iran and India have all descended. In this, he again anticipated the theories of modern linguists who call this mother tongue proto-Indo-European. Unfortunately for Parsons, he called it Gaelic. His valid insights and potential contribution to the study of linguistics went largely unread as they were embedded in a tedious attempt to prove (using long-winded arguments based on the Bible and Irish legend) that the ancestral tongue of all Europeans, Persians and Indians, as spoken by Japheth, third son of Noah, was the Irish dialect of Gaelic. But let us not criticize Parsons too harshly for this. He was by no means the first to propose that all languages radiated out from a still-spoken tongue; he was preceded by Goropius Becanus (1519-1573) of Antwerp who traced the descent of all human language from Dutch. Thus, while several of his hypotheses have since been confirmed (e.g. that Irish and Welsh were "originally the same") the discoveries of James Parsons went unnoticed for centuries.[2]

Instead, the credit for recognizing the commonality of European and Indian languages and suggesting descent from a common prehistoric origin usually goes to the remarkable Welsh polymath Sir William Jones (1746-1794), Chief Justice of India,

friend of Ben Franklin and son of the mathematician who invented the symbol π. During his 1786 address to the Asiatick Society of Bengal (which he had founded two years earlier) Jones suggested that Sanskrit and Persian are related to Latin, Greek and, somewhat more distantly, to "Celtick" and "Gothick." He concluded that these languages must all derive from a common ancestor, now lost. Jones later published these opinions in *The Sanscrit Language* (1786). This speech is generally taken to be the beginning of Indo-European studies.

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Administration Panel

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