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“Proto–Tantric” Elements in The *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra**

Although a Māhāyāna sūtra, the *Gaṇḍavyūha* clearly contains a number of elements that seem to presage the “tantric” phase in Indian Buddhism. In particular, the sūtra contains four components worthy of note: elaborate scenes detailing what can best be understood as *maṇḍalas*, a soteriology based on absolute faith in the spiritual guides, a strong insinuation of organisational esotericism, and the hint of sexual yoga. After briefly summarising some recent scholarship on the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, the author addresses each of the four “proto-tantric” components in detail. Following this, the author concludes with the suggestion that despite the inherent difficulties in developing a relative chronology of Indian Buddhist literature, close readings such as provided in this article may be useful in generating data sets, which can then be used to relate Indian Buddhist texts to each other.

The *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra* is a Mahāyāna text composed sometime in the first several centuries CE, which relates the tale of a young layman’s quest for enlightenment in ancient India during the time of the Buddha. The narrative begins with an elaborate introduction glorifying the historical Buddha Śākyamuni as the resplendent “Vairocana.” After this, the story shifts to an encounter between the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī and Sudhana (“Good Wealth”),¹ the son of a merchant-banker from the city of Dhanyākara.² Mañjuśrī encour-

1. Tibetan: *nor bzangs*; Chinese: 善財童子.

2. Both E. Lamotte, “Sur la Formation du Mahāyāna,” in *Asiatica: Festschrift für Friedrich Weller* (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1954), 384–85 and N. Dutt, *Buddhist Sects in India* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1970), 277, n. 2 equate Dhanyākara with Dhānyakataka/Dharaṅkota, an ancient city on the banks of the Kṛṣṇā River in the southern region of Andhra. However, the early fifth-century Chinese translation of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* does not seem to be translating “Dhanyākara” as the name of Sudhana’s hometown. See J. Walser, *Nāgārjuna in Context: Mahāyāna Buddhism and Early Indian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 27.

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ages the young hero to seek out spiritual guides (“good friends”)³ in order to learn how to carry out the course of conduct of a bodhisattva and obtain omniscience. After travelling far and wide across India visiting fifty-two of these guides, Sudhana has his final visionary experience of and merges with the supreme bodhisattva Samantabhadra (“Universal Good”).⁴

The textual history of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* is complex,⁵ but a few words on the Chinese translations are necessary to provide some historical context for the sūtra. We find our earliest datable evidence of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* in the Chinese catalogues of the Buddhist canon composed in the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries CE.⁶ According to these catalogues, the monk Shengjian first translated the *Gaṇḍavyūha* into Chinese (T 294) sometime between 388 and 408 CE. Compared to the extant Sanskrit text, this is only a partial translation.⁷ The first complete Chinese translation of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* soon followed in 420. Entitled the “Chapter on the Entrance into the Dharma Realm” (T 278),⁸ it was translated by Buddhahadra and his team of translators as the final chapter of the immense *Avatamsaka-sūtra*.⁹ The Khotanese monk Śikṣānanda and his team translated the *Avatamsaka* once more into Chinese between 695 and 699 (T 279).¹⁰ The translation of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* within this work is substantially the same as the earlier one.¹¹ The fourth and final Chinese translation (T 293) of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* was completed in 798 by the Kashmiri monk, Prajñā. Called “The Vow Concerning the Course of Conduct of Samantabhadra and the Entry into the Range of the Inconceivable Liberation,”¹² it is based on an

3. Sanskrit: *kalyānamitra*; Tibetan: *dge ba'i bshes gnyen*; Chinese: 善知識。

4. Tibetan: *kun tu bzang po*; Chinese: 普賢。

5. For a detailed discussion, see chapter 1 of Douglas Osto, *Power, Wealth and Women in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra* (London: Routledge, 2008).

6. The following information on the Chinese sources and translations is from L. O. Gómez, “Selected Verses from the Gaṇḍavyūha: Text, Critical Apparatus and Translation,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1967), xxiii–xxix. The catalogues consulted by Gómez are themselves part of the Chinese Buddhist canon and are numbered according to the volume in the modern Japanese edition of the Chinese Canon, *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* (abbreviated henceforth as “T”). The volumes containing the catalogues are T 2145–49, 2151, 2153–54, and 2157.

7. In his dissertation, Gómez (p. xxiv) indicates four ways in which this text differs from the Sanskrit. First, it lacks the verses from the introductory section (the *Nidāna-parivarta*) and the first nine good friends found in the Sanskrit text. Second, instead of the twenty-seventh *kalyānamitra*, the householder Veṣṭhila, this translation has a bodhisattva named *Pu chiao kao kuei te wang*. Third, the following section describing Sudhana’s encounter with the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara lacks the twenty-two verses found in the Sanskrit text. Finally, this translation ends abruptly after the thirty-fourth good friend, the night goddess Pramuditāyanajagadvirocana.

8. The Chinese title *Ru fajie pin* 入法界品 corresponds to the Sanskrit **Dharmadhātu-praveśana-parivarta*.

9. This version contains the Veṣṭhila section but without its two final verses, and the Avalokiteśvara section still lacks its verses. Also missing are the final sixty-two verses of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* found in the section of Sudhana’s encounter with the bodhisattva Samantabhadra. These verses collectively known as the *Bhadracarī* are found in all extant Sanskrit manuscripts, at the end of the final Chinese translation (T 293) and as an independent text twice in the Chinese Buddhist canon (T 296 and 297). In Buddhahadra’s translation, instead of the *Bhadracarī*, the *Gaṇḍavyūha* ends with verses of praise to “all bodhisattvas in the universe” (see Gómez, xxvi).

10. This translation is known as the “*Huayan* in 80 fascicles,” in order to distinguish it from the Buddhahadra’s translation in sixty fascicles.

11. Three important exceptions are that the final two verses of the Veṣṭhila section have been added, the name of Avalokiteśvara’s mountain has changed from *Prabha to Potalaka, and a short verse greeting has been added in the final section (T 279, 442b–c). See Gómez, xxvi–xxvii.

12. Ch. *Ru bukesiyi jietuo jingjie Puxian xing yuan* 入不思議解脫境界普賢行願 (Skt **Acintyavimokṣa-gocarapraveśana-samantabhadracarī-prañidhāna*).

expanded and no longer extant Sanskrit version belonging to the king of Orissa, who sent his personal copy to China as a gift to the Emperor in 795.¹³ There are a number of passages in this translation not found in any extant Sanskrit source.

A brief survey of the Chinese translations demonstrates a general trend towards an expansion of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* over time. Prajñā’s translation contains passages that are not found in the earlier Chinese translations. Some of these are found in the extant Sanskrit manuscript tradition and some are not found in any other version. This evidence suggests that the surviving Sanskrit recension may have been compiled sometime between the completion of Śikṣānanda’s translation (699 CE) and Prajñā’s translation (798 CE).¹⁴ As Gómez has demonstrated,¹⁵ however, except for a few passages (not relevant to the current discussion), the fifth-century translation by Buddhahadra (T 278) contains substantially the same content as Śikṣānanda’s seventh-century translation (T 279), the surviving Sanskrit recension, and the Tibetan translation (ca ninth century).¹⁶ Therefore, in the following pages, I translate from the Sanskrit edition of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* edited by P. L. Vaidya¹⁷ and provide page references to the relevant sections in the Sanskrit edition of D. T. Suzuki and H. Idzumi,¹⁸ the Tibetan translation,¹⁹ Buddhahadra’s Chinese translation (T 278), and Thomas Cleary’s translation²⁰ of Śikṣānanda’s Chinese translation (T 279).

When we look to the content of the sūtra, we see that a number of elements in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* appear to represent a textual link between Mahāyāna Buddhism and Buddhist tantra. This idea is not a new one. Over twenty years ago, Dan Martin wrote, “Clearly the *Gaṇḍavyūha* and the rest of the *Avatamsaka* were *not yet* tantra, but they certainly could have provided inspiration.”²¹ Here, Martin is specifically looking at a connection between these texts and the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*. Moreover, in the same work, Martin notes that,

13. The colophon to the Chinese translation contains a letter from the king to the emperor (see T 293.848b–c; and Gómez 1967, xxvii).

14. The earliest datable, complete Sanskrit manuscript of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* is a twelfth-century Nepalese manuscript brought from Nepal by the British civil servant, B. H. Hodgson, and presented to the Royal Asiatic Society, London, in 1835. For details, see E. B. Cowell and J. Eggeing, “Catalogue of Buddhist Sanskrit Manuscripts in the possession of the Royal Asiatic Society (Hodgson Collection),” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 8, no. 1 (1875): 3–4, 51.

15. Gómez, xxiii–xxix.

16. For the date of the Tibetan translation, see E. Steinkellner, *Sudhana’s Miraculous Journey in the Temple of Ta Pho: the inscriptional text of the Tibetan Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra edited with introductory remarks* (Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1995), 19.

17. P. L. Vaidya (ed.), *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra* (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute, 1960). Henceforth, this edition will be abbreviated as “V.”

18. See D. T. Suzuki and Hokei Idzumi (eds), *The Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra*, New Revised Edition (Tokyo: The Society for the Publication of Sacred Books of the World, 1949). Henceforth, this edition will be abbreviated as “SI.”

19. Citations from the Tibetan translation are from the Derge Kanjur version in the edition published as *The Tibetan Tripitaka: Taipei Edition, Volume VIII. bKa’ Gyur* (Taiwan: SMC Publishing Inc. 1991). References to the Derge are abbreviated with “D” followed by the Tibetan volume (“ga” or “a” of the Phal po che), folio number (Tibetan numbering system), r or v (for “recto” or “verso”), and the line number.

20. Thomas Cleary, trans., *The Flower Ornament Scripture: A Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra* (Boston: Shambhala, 1993).

21. Dan Martin, “Illusion Web — Locating the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* in Buddhist Intellectual History,” in *Silver on Lapis: Tibetan Literary Culture and History*, ed. Christopher I. Beckwith (Bloomington: The Tibetan Society, 1987), 191. The emphasis is his.

The Japanese scholars have already demonstrated the importance of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* as a source of inspiration for the most important tantras of the Shingon School, the *Vairocanābhisambodhi Sūtra* and the *Tattvasaṃgraha*.²²

In the same year as Martin's writing, Charles Orzech pointed out that the central figure of the *Mahāvairocanābhisambodhi Sūtra* (*Mahāvairocana Sūtra*), the Buddha Vairocana, also functions as the principal figure in two Mahāyāna sūtras — the *Gaṇḍavyūha* and the *Daśabhūmika*, both of which are contained in the *Avatamsaka*.²³ In fact, Vairocana, the Buddha Śākyamuni in his glorified cosmic aspect, is the central figure of the entire *Avatamsaka*. More recently, Anthony Tribe has stated that the Caryā tantras, such as the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*, “took the luminous, translucent, magical world of the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra* as the measure for how awakened cognition would perceive the world.”²⁴ Tribe explains,

The world of the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra* can be transformed at will by the mental acts of Buddhas and advanced bodhisattvas. It provides an eminently suitable perspective for the tantric practitioner, who from this point [of the Caryā tantras] onwards is increasingly concerned to transform, within the context of visualisation meditation, the appearance (and hence the reality) of him- or herself and the external world.²⁵

Martin, Orzech and Tribe, while recognising the possible connection between the *Gaṇḍavyūha* and these tantric texts in general terms, do not provide much in the way of details. Finally, in a recent discussion, David McMahan addresses more specific possible connections between the *Gaṇḍavyūha* and Buddhist tantra.²⁶ McMahan argues that the visual metaphor and imagery in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* and other Mahāyāna sources may have been used as prototypes for later tantric rituals. He writes,

From the similarity between tantric *sādhana*-s and such visionary episodes in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* and other Mahayana sutras, I am led to believe that such episodes are not only a precedent to, but also a prototype of, tantric *maṇḍala*-s and visualisations, and that these practices are ritualisations of encounters such as those in the *Gaṇḍavyūha*.²⁷

Following the lead of these scholars, I will in what follows, look more closely at four aspects of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* that appear to share an affinity to Buddhist tantras: two descriptive scenes highly suggestive of *maṇḍalas*, the sūtra's claim that the authority of the spiritual guides (*kalyāṇamitra*) is absolute, an intimation of esotericism, and an allusion to sexual yoga.

22. Martin, 190. Unfortunately, Martin does not provide a reference to the Japanese scholarship on this relationship.

23. Charles Orzech, “Mahāvairocana,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987).

24. P. Williams and A. Tribe, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2000), 225.

25. Williams and Tribe, 208.

26. David McMahan, “Transpositions of Metaphor and Imagery in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* and Tantric Buddhist Practice,” *Pacific World Journal*, Third Series, no. 6 (Fall, 2004): 181–94.

27. McMahan, “Transpositions of Metaphor and Imagery in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* and Tantric Buddhist Practice,” 191.

Maṇḍalas

The *Gaṇḍavyūha* contains numerous passages that depict visually elaborate scenes detailing what can best be understood as *maṇḍalas* (sacred diagrams; literally “circles”). Although there is no mention of using these descriptions as objects of visualisation meditation, their detailed systematic arrangement (as McMahan has suggested) may have inspired the *maṇḍalas* used in Buddhist tantric practice. While McMahan looked specifically at three scenes in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* — Vairocana’s initial transformation of his peaked dwelling and Jeta Grove, Sudhana’s entrance into Maitreya’s peaked dwelling, and Sudhana’s final encounter with Samantabhadra — I will use two other examples overlooked by McMahan that add substantial evidence to his general thesis. The first is the gathering of the bodhisattvas occurring after Vairocana’s transformation, and another is from Sudhana’s encounters with the Night Goddesses (V 171–284).

In the opening scene of the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, the Buddha Vairocana enters a trance state (*samādhi*) called the “Lion’s Yawn” (*simhavijṛmbhita*) that transforms his peaked dwelling (*kūṭāgārā*) and the surrounding Jeta Grove into an infinitely vast space adorned with countless jewels. Although this is an oft-quoted passage from the text,²⁸ what most commentators fail to discuss is the gathering of bodhisattvas around Vairocana after this miraculous transformation takes place. Having seen the Buddha’s miracle, bodhisattvas from distant buddha lands approach, pay their respects, and set up various types of jewelled *kūṭāgāras*. The narration of this event is deliberate and highly structured.²⁹ First, a bodhisattva from the east named Vairocanapraṇidhānābhiraśmiprabha from the buddha land of the Tathāgata³⁰ named Vairocanaśrītejorāja, gains permission from that Buddha to leave, approaches with a large retinue of bodhisattvas, pays his respects, and sets up *kūṭāgāras* to the east (V 6.16–28). Then, a bodhisattva named Duryodhanavīryavegarāja comes from the south with his retinue of bodhisattvas, pays his respects, and sets up peaked dwellings to the south (V 6.29–7.12). This pattern continues with bodhisattvas arriving in the following order: west, north, northeast, southeast, southwest, northwest, from below and then above (V 7.13–12.5). The specific pattern and order of arrangement thematise space by representing this gathering as a type of array (*vyūha*) in the form of a three-dimensional *maṇḍala* constructed with Vairocana at the centre.

The next example occurs when Sudhana meets with eight Night Goddesses (*rātri-devatā*), who are located at the site of the Buddha’s enlightenment

28. For examples, see D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, 3rd Series (London: Luzac and Company, 1953), 76 ff; M. A. Ehman, “The Gaṇḍavyūha: Search for Enlightenment” (PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1977), 43 ff; A. K. Warder, *Indian Buddhism*, Revised Edition (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980), 424 ff; and David McMahan, “Orality, Writing, and Authority in South Asian Buddhism: Visionary Literature and the Struggle for Legitimacy in the Māhāyāna,” *History of Religions* 37, no. 3 (1998): 249–74.

29. For the following section in the other Sanskrit edition, see SI 2–23. For the corresponding section in Tibetan translation, see the D ga280v–ga287r. For Buddhābhadrā translation, see T 278.676a6–680c12. For an English translation of Śikṣānanda’s Chinese translation (T 279), see Cleary, 1139–45.

30. “Tathāgata” means literally “(He who has) Gone Thus.” It is a common epithet for buddhas.

(*bodhimaṇḍa*).³¹ When we examine the locations of the night goddesses, an intriguing pattern emerges. Sudhana sees the first night goddess, Vāsantī, “. . . above the great city of Kalipavastu on a platform in the sky within a peaked dwelling of multi-coloured matchless jewels, seated on a lion-throne of great gems within a lotus (smelling) of all the finest fragrances . . .”³² At the conclusion of this visit, the goddess sends Sudhana to see Samantagambhīraśrīvimalaprabhā at the Buddha’s site of enlightenment (V 180.28–30). This goddess tells our hero to see Pramuditāyananajagadvirocanā right next to her on the right at Vairocana’s site of enlightenment.³³ Pramuditāyananajagadvirocanā is said to sit “upon a lion-throne in a flower within the Lord’s assembly-*maṇḍala*.”³⁴ She instructs Sudhana to go to the next goddess who sits right next to her in “the assembly-*maṇḍala* of the Tathāgata.”³⁵ Similar statements are made for the next two goddesses,³⁶ who are said to be “at the base of the feet of the Lord Vairocana,”³⁷ and “near the Lord” (*bhagavato sakāsam*) (V 264.26).

These statements indicate a circular, symmetric pattern around a central point resembling a *maṇḍala*. The goddesses themselves indicate this with references to the “assembly-*maṇḍala*” (*parśan-maṇḍala*) of the Lord (*bhagavān*) or Tathāgata. Sudhana’s encounter with the first goddess in the sky above Kapilavastu is his entry point into this three-dimensional *maṇḍala* around the *bodhimaṇḍa*. The seven goddesses following are positioned next to each other, each to the other’s right, so that the hero performs a circumambulation (*pradakṣiṇa*) around the site of the Buddha’s enlightenment. The numeral eight suggests that each goddess faces a primary or secondary direction (north, northeast, east, southeast, south, etc.) around the *bodhimaṇḍa*. Statements that the goddesses are “at the base of the feet of the Lord Vairocana” and “near the Lord” demonstrate the Buddhist belief that the Buddha is in some sense always present at the site of his enlightenment.

Here we see a striking parallel between the manner in which the night goddesses surround the Buddha and the way that yoginīs and goddesses encircle buddhas on tantric *maṇḍalas*.³⁸ An example of the connection between the *Gaṇḍavyūha* and this type of maṇḍalic arrangement is graphically illustrated at the Buddhist monastery complex of Tabo in western Tibet. Along the walls of the main assembly hall at Tabo is a continuous painted frieze depicting

31. For the corresponding sections, see SI 223–364; D a79v–a201r; T 278.720a2–751a1; and Cleary, 1284–1382.

32. . . . *kapilavastuno mahānagarasyordhvam gaganatale vicitrānupamamanīkūtāgare sarvavaragandhapadmaḡarbhamaḡaratnasimḡāsane niṣaṇṇam* (V 171.13–14).

33. . . . *iyam iḡaiyam mamānantaraḡ vairocanabodhimande pradakṣiṇena pramuditāyananajagadvirocanā nāma rātridevatā prativasati* (V 185.14–15).

34. . . . *bhagavataḡ parśanmaṇḡale puspagarbhasimḡāsanaṇiṣaṇṇam* . . . (V 180.26–27).

35. *tathāgataparśanmaṇḡalasamanantaram* (V 202.20).

36. See V 219.19–20 and 230.29.

37. . . . *bhagavato vairocanasya pādāmūle* . . . (V 239.30).

38. There are numerous examples of similar formations in tantric literature. Hevajra and Nairātmyā surrounded by eight yoginīs is one example from the *Hevajra Tantra*. For text and translation of this important tantra, see David Snellgrove, *Hevajra Tantra*, 2 volumes (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1959). Another example is Heruka and Vajravārāhī guarded by eight fierce goddesses in the *Cakrasamvara Tantra*. See David Gray, *Cakrasamvara Tantra: A Study and Annotated Translation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

scenes from the *Gaṇḍavyūha* of Sudhana’s visits to the various spiritual guides. Next to these painted units are inscriptional panels containing redacted versions of these visits from a Tibetan translation of the *Gaṇḍavyūha*.³⁹ Also preserved at Tabo is a complete stucco set of the main divinities of the Vajradhātu *maṇḍala*.⁴⁰ This *maṇḍala* contains Vairocana Buddha in the centre surrounded by four directional Buddhas, each flanked by four attendant bodhisattvas, followed by eight goddesses and four guardian deities.⁴¹ Thus, at Tabo we find a graphic depiction of the *Gaṇḍavyūha*’s narrative located in the same space as a three-dimensional *maṇḍala* of the Buddha Vairocana surrounded by eight goddesses, in a manner strikingly similar to the description of Vairocana’s *bodhimaṇḍa* within the *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra*.

Authority

Another “proto-tantric” aspect we find in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* is a soteriology based on absolute faith in the spiritual guides, or “Good Friends” (*kalyāṇamitra*). This devotional attitude intimates the guru adoration found in tantric sources. Early on in the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, Mañjuśrī declares to Sudhana that worshipping the good friends is the natural course (*niṣyanda*) of action for developing omniscience:

Indeed, Son of Good Family, for the perfection of omniscience this is the beginning and natural course — namely the visiting, serving and worshipping of the good friends. Therefore, Son of Good Family, you should tirelessly venerate the good friends.⁴²

We find further evidence of the centrality of the good friends later in the text. Just prior to Sudhana’s encounter with Maitreya, the boy and girl, Śrīsaṃbhava and Śrīmatī, make the most emphatic statements in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* concerning devotion to the *kalyāṇamitras* as a means to attain enlightenment. After telling Sudhana that he should go to the bodhisattva Maitreya who is a “good friend that will water all your roots of merit and cause them to grow,”⁴³ Śrīsaṃbhava and Śrīmatī enter into a protracted discourse on the *kalyāṇamitras*. First, the two state that one should never tire of seeking good friends, nor resist their advice, nor doubt their instructions (V 363.19–25). Next, the pair provides an extensive list of reasons why. Some of these are: “the bodhisattvas’ hearing about the course of conduct of all bodhisattvas depends

39. For a detailed description, see E. Steinkellner. For a more recent study, see Laxman S. Thakur, *Visualizing a Buddhist Sutra: Text and Figure in Himalayan Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

40. A description of the *maṇḍala* can be found in the *Tattvasaṃgraha Tantra*. See D. A. Todaro, “An Annotated Translation of the *Tattvasaṃgraha*” (PhD, Columbia University, 1985).

41. See David Snellgrove and Hugh Richardson, *A Cultural History of Tibet* (Boston: Shambala, 1995), 113–14.

42. *esa hi kulaputra ādiḥ eṣa niṣyandah sarvajñatāpariṇiṣpattaye yad uta kalyāṇamitrānām sevanaṃ bhajanaṃ paryupāsanaṃ. tasmāt tarhi kulaputra aparikhinnena te bhavitavyaṃ kalyāṇamitraparyupāsanaṭāyai* (V 46.12–15). Cf. SI 56.24–57.3; D ga322v.5–323r.1; T 278.689c9–16; Cleary, 1178.

43. *sa te . . . kalyāṇamitro > bhiṣyandayisyati sarvakuśalamūlāni vivardhayisyati* (V 361.16–17).

on the good friends,”⁴⁴ “the practices of the teachings of all bodhisattvas depend on the good friends,”⁴⁵ “the lights of knowledge of all bodhisattvas are produced by the good friends,”⁴⁶ “the enlightenment of all buddhas is obtained through propitiating the good friends,”⁴⁷ “bodhisattvas supported by the good friends do not fall into evil destinies,”⁴⁸ and “bodhisattvas embraced by good friends do not turn away from the Mahāyāna.”⁴⁹

This list reinforces Mañjuśrī’s statements and clarifies the *Gaṇḍavyūha*’s position on the *kalyāṇamitras*. Here we learn that practising the course of conduct of the bodhisattvas (*bodhisattvacaryā*) depends on the good friends. The statements about “practices” (*pratipatti*) and “lights of knowledge” (*jñānāloka*) emphasise the need for bodhisattvas to rely upon the *kalyāṇamitras*. Any doubt that the *Gaṇḍavyūha* presents a devotional path to enlightenment is immediately dispelled by the declaration that “*the enlightenment of all buddhas is obtained through propitiating the good friends.*”

Because the spiritual guides are the primary source of enlightenment, their authority is absolute and their instructions are not to be questioned. The *Gaṇḍavyūha* possesses two striking examples of this. When Sudhana visits with the Brahman Jayoṣmāyatana (V 90–95), the Brahman tells our hero to throw himself into a raging fire. Sudhana has his doubts, but then tens of thousands of gods appear and declare the good qualities of the Brahman. After hearing this barrage of support, Sudhana is overjoyed, realises that Jayoṣmāyatana is a “true good friend” (*bhūta-kalyāṇamitra*), bows at his feet and says, “Noble One, I confess my sin — I rejected the authority (*ājñā*) of the good friend.”⁵⁰ Immediately after this statement, Jayoṣmāyatana recites the following verse:

A bodhisattva who successfully makes his mind one with his gurus, follows instructions and does not doubt;

From this all his aims are also successful, and he skilfully awakens to the knowledge of the buddhas under the tree of enlightenment.⁵¹

This verse highlights the moral of this episode: a bodhisattva “should not doubt” (*na kāṅkṣaye*) the instructions of his teachers. In other words, the spiritual authority of the good friends is absolute and should be obeyed without hesitation.⁵²

44. *kalyāṇamitrādhīnāḥ* . . . *bodhisattvānām sarvabodhisattvacaryāśrāvah* (V 363.26).

45. *kalyāṇamitrāpratibaddhāḥ sarvabodhisattvaśiḥṣāpratipattayah* (V 363.30).

46. *kalyāṇamitrasamjanitāḥ sarvabodhisattvajñānālokaḥ* (V 364.4).

47. *kalyāṇamitrārādhanapratibaddhā sarvabuddhabodhiḥ* (V 364.10–11).

48. *kalyāṇamitrasamdhāritāḥ* . . . *bodhisattvā na patanti durgatisu* (V 364.16).

49. *kalyāṇamitrāparigṛhītā bodhisattvā na nivartante mahāyānāt* (V 364.17).

50. *atyayam atyayato deśayāmy ārya yo > haṃ kalyāṇamitrājñāṃ prativāhayāmi* (V 94.17–18).

51. *pradakṣiṇam ya bodhisattva ānuśāsti kurvati / na kāṅkṣaye gurubhya ekadhā sthapitva mānasam // tato > sya sarva artha bhonti te > pi ca pradakṣiṇāḥ / pradakṣiṇam ca buddhajñānu bodhimūli budhiyate //* (V 94.19–22). Cf. SI 122.11–14; D ga387r.4–5; T 278.702a10–13; Cleary, 1222.

52. Sudhana, reassured by the divinities, then climbs the mountain path and jumps into the fire. While falling, he attains a trance (*samādhi*) of the bodhisattvas called “Well Established” (*su-pratishṭhita*), and upon touching the fire, attains another *samādhi* called “The Supernatural Knowledge of Bliss within Cessation” (*prāsama-sukhābhijñā*) (V 94.23–25). Thus, the advice to not doubt the good friends is reinforced in the narrative by these beneficial results.

Sudhana doubts his spiritual guide a second time when he meets the King Anala.⁵³ Our hero finds the King seated on a wondrous jewelled throne surrounded by ten thousand executioners (*kāraṇā-puruṣa*) resembling the guardians of hell (*naraka-pāla*), armed with various weapons, carrying out horrific punishments upon criminals. The bodies are heaped upon each other, a torrent of blood flows from them, and the screams of those who are mutilated and killed are as terrifying as the cries of the tortured in the great Naraka hell (V 121.6–26). After witnessing this horrific slaughter, Sudhana thinks:

... this King Anala is deprived of the good Dharma, a doer of tremendously wicked deeds, a desirer of sin, one practised at the injury of other beings' lives, entirely devoted to wounding other beings, indifferent to other beings, and is striving for descent into the evil destinies. How then am I to hear the course of conduct of a bodhisattva from him?⁵⁴

While our hero is engaged in this thought, divinities appear on a platform in the sky above him and say, “Son of Good Family, do you not remember the instruction of the good friend, the Sage Jayoṣmāyatana?”⁵⁵ When Sudhana says that he remembers, the divinities tell him:

Son of Good Family, you must not give rise to doubt concerning the instructions of the good friends. The good friends rightly guide (beings); they do not lead them astray. For, Son of Good Family, the knowledge of the conduct of bodhisattvas' skilful means is inconceivable.⁵⁶

On this occasion, the divinities invoke the Mahāyāna notion of expedient means (*upāya-kauśalya*). Because the methods of bodhisattvas are inconceivable, Sudhana should not question the good friends. Unquestioned obedience to the *kalyāṇamītras* is required because one only attains omniscience through serving and worshipping these spiritual guides.⁵⁷

The *Gaṇḍavyūha*'s emphasis on the absolute authority of the good friends goes beyond the reverence found for one's spiritual guide in mainstream

53. This encounter may be found in Buddhahadra's translation at T 278.708a27–709a4.

54. *ayaṃ ca analo rājā kuśaladharmaparihīṇo mahāsāvadyakarmakāri praduṣṭamanahsaṃkalpaḥ parasattvajīvitoparodhāya pratipannah parasattvotpīḍanataparāḥ paralokanirapekṣo durgatiprapātābhimukhaḥ. tat kuto > smād bodhisattvacaryāśravo bhaviṣyatīti?* (V 121.27–32). Cf. SI 157.20–26; D a24v.6–25r.2; Cleary, 1244.

55. *upari gaganatale devatā ity evam ārocayām āsuh — na smarasi kulaputra jayoṣmāyanasya rṣeḥkalyāṇamītrānuśāsanīm iti?* (V 122.1–2). Notice that the divinities refer to Jayoṣmāyatana as a “sage” (*rṣi*) and not a “brahman” (*brāhmaṇa*) as he is in his own section (V 90–95). There seems to be some confusion with regard to title between the Brahman Jayoṣmāyatana and the *kalyāṇamītra* directly before him, the Sage Bhiṣmottaranirghoṣa. But it is clear from the context of this section that the gods are referring to Jayoṣmāyatana.

56. *mā tvam kulaputra, kalyāṇamītrānuśāsanīsu vicikitsām utpādaya. samyak samena kalyāṇamītrāni pranayanti na viśamena. acintyam hi kulaputra bodhisattvānām upāyakauśalyacaryājñānam* (V 122.3–5). Cf. SI 158.4–7; D a25r.3–5; Cleary, 1244.

57. As it turns out, Anala was only creating the illusion that criminals were being executed in order to scare his citizens into behaving properly; actually, no one was harmed (see V 123).

Buddhism⁵⁸ and many Mahāyāna sources.⁵⁹ Snellgrove summarises well the general Mahāyāna position when he writes:

Here the advantages of having “good friends” (*kalyāṇamitra*) as opposed to evil ones (*pāpamitra*) is certainly urged, and to have a good friend as one’s teacher is highly recommended and it is proper that one should trust him, but for all his virtues he is but a means toward final enlightenment.⁶⁰

This view Snellgrove contrasts with the tantric notion when he states, “. . . one injunction which can never be transgressed as it is the basis of all tantric practice, namely that of the absolute necessity of total devotion to one’s chosen teacher or master (Sanskrit: guru; Tibetan: lama).”⁶¹ I would argue that the anecdotes in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* of Sudhana’s doubting the Brahman and the King provide us with textual evidence of a Mahāyāna view of spiritual guides that prefigures the emphasis placed on the absolute obedience to one’s guru as found in tantric sources. By providing occasions for Sudhana to question the spiritual authority of the good friends, the narrator of the story dramatically illustrates to his target audience the importance of this type of complete submission to spiritual authority.

Esotericism and Sexual Yoga

The third and fourth “proto-tantric” aspects of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* I would like to mention are the suggestions of both esotericism and sexual yoga that occur during Sudhana’s meeting with the courtesan Vasumitrā.⁶² When Sudhana arrives in Ratnavyūha in the country of Durga, he encounters two types of people. The first, who do not know Vasumitrā’s virtues (*guṇa*) or the scope (*gocara*) of her knowledge, think the following when they meet Sudhana:

One whose senses are calm and restrained in this way, who is thoughtful in this way, who is composed in this way, whose mind is not frustrated in this way, whose gaze is kept down in this way, whose thoughts are not overcome by sensations in this way, who is grasping at the causeless, whose eye has rejected all forms in this way, whose mind is not agitated, whose behaviour is profound, who is handsome, whose manner

58. The concept of *kalyāṇamitra* (Pāli: *kalyāṇamitta*) within the Buddhist tradition is widespread. In the article “*Kalyāṇamitta* and *Kalyāṇamittatā*” (*Journal of the Pali Text Society* 21 [1987]: 50–72), Steve Collins discusses the various meanings of these terms found in Pāli literature. For *kalyāṇamitta*, Collins distinguishes three overlapping levels of meaning in the Pāli sources: (1) a general sense “in which trustworthiness, reciprocity and perhaps a consequent mutual regard are extolled,” (2) a “Buddhicised” level where such sentiments are set within the framework of Buddhist morality, and (3) a specifically Buddhist sense when it is applied “to someone who helps another on the Buddhist Path.”

59. The *Mahāyāna-sūtrālaṅkāra*, the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi*, and the *Aṣṭa-sāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* each mention the “blessing of having taken hold of a good friend” (as quoted in Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature* [London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1932], 63). Finding a good friend is a necessary first step on the bodhisattva’s path, and that friend remains a valuable aid at all times (Dayal, 63). Sāntideva states that the entire acceptance of the Buddha’s teaching is implied in the injunctions not to leave the good friend and to study the scriptures. See Cecil Bendall and W. H. D. Rouse, trans., *Śikṣā Samuccaya: A Compendium of Buddhist Doctrine*, Second Edition (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1971 [1922]), 43.

60. David Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Indian Buddhists & Their Tibetan Successors*, 2 volumes (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), 177.

61. David Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, 176.

62. For Buddhahadra’s translation of this section, see T 278.716c9–717b27.

is like the ocean, whose mind is imperturbable and not downcast — what would this one do with the lady Vasumitrā? For such people do not delight in passion, nor are their minds perverted (*viparyasta*). The conception of foul things does not course within such people. Such people are not slaves to desire. Such people are not in the power of women. Such people do not course in the range (*gocara*) of the Evil One (*māra*). Such people do not inhabit the domain (*viśaya*) of the Evil One. Such people do not sink into the mud of desire. Such people are not bound by the snares of the Evil One. They are not doers of what should not be done.⁶³

But those who know of the excellence (*viśeṣa*) of her virtues and the scope of her knowledge say to the young hero:

Very Good, Son of Good Family! You, who think that the lady Vasumitrā should be questioned, have made good gains! Surely you desire buddhahood! Surely you desire to make yourself into a resource for all beings! Surely you desire to extricate the spear of passion for all beings! Surely you desire to produce beneficial cognition!⁶⁴

These two groups may be divided into those who are spiritually “in the know” and those who are not. The less spiritually developed fail to realise the advanced attainments of Vasumitrā, and adhere to a traditional and widespread (exoteric) view of Buddhist morality. The second group’s attitude expresses the superior opinion that due to her spiritual attainments, the courtesan’s occupation does not exclude her from being a spiritual guide to Sudhana. This distinction between an outside group maintaining a conventional view of Buddhist morality, and an inside group with a more profound religious insight is a defining feature of esoteric Buddhism. Although the *Gaṇḍavyūha* does not make reference to distinctively tantric practices such as secret initiations or “consecrations” (*abhīṣeka*), and the undertaking of special vows (*saṃvara/samaya/vrata*), these types of practices are predicated upon the type of “insider/outsider” distinction, or organisational esotericism,⁶⁵ that the *Gaṇḍavyūha* depicts in Sudhana’s encounter with Vasumitrā. The connection between the *Gaṇḍavyūha* and tantric practice is further strengthened by Vasumitrā’s use of sexual contact as a means of teaching Dharma.

When our hero approaches Vasumitrā’s house, he sees that it and the surroundings are made of jewels, gold, diamonds, etc . . . (V 154.22–155.3).

63. *kim asya evaṃ śāntadāntendriyasya evaṃ samprajānasya evaṃ abhrāntasya evaṃ avikṣiptamānasasya evaṃ yugamātraprekṣiṇaḥ evaṃ vedanābhir aparyādattacittasya evaṃ animittagrāhiṇaḥ sarvarūpagateṣu utkṣiptacakṣuṣaḥ evaṃ avyagramānasasya gambhīraceṣṭasyābhirūpasya sāgarakalpasya akṣobhyānavalinūcittasya vasumitrāyā bhāgavatāyā kāryam? na hīdṛśā rāgaratā bhavanti, na viparyastacittāḥ. nedrśānām aśubhasamjñā samudācarati. nedrśāḥ kāmādāsā bhavanti. nedrśāḥ strivaśagā bhavanti. nedrśā māragocare caranti. nedrśā māraviśayam niṣevante. nedrśāḥ kāmapañke samsīdanti. nedrśā mārapāśair badhyante. nākāryakāriṇo bhavanti* (V 154.10–17). Cf. SI 202.1–9; D a62v.1–5; T 278.09.716c17–24; Cleary, 1270–71.

64. *sādhu sādhu kulaputra, sulabdhās te lābhāḥ, yas tvam vasumitrām bhāgavatīm pariprastavyām manyase. niyamena tvam buddhatvam prārthayase. niyamena tvam sarvasatvapraṭiśaranam ātmānam kartukāmaḥ. niyamena tvam sarvasatvānām rāgasālyamuddhartukāmaḥ. niyamena tvam śubhasamjñām vikaritukāmaḥ* (V 154.18–20). Cf. SI 202.10–14; D a62v.6–7; T 278.09.716c26–28; Cleary, 1271.

65. For this idea, see Gregory Schopen, “The Text on the Dhāraṇī Stones from Abhayagiriya’: A Minor Contribution to the Study of Mahāyāna Literature in Ceylon,” in *Fragments and Fragments of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India: More Collected Papers* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 310.

The courtesan is described as extremely beautiful, and is said to be skilled in languages, the arts and sciences, and the means (*upāya*) of bodhisattvas. Vasumitrā tells Sudhana that she has attained a liberation known as “Ultimate Dispassion” (*virāga koṭigata*) (V 155.20). Through it she is able to assume the female form of any being to teach them the Dharma and lead the lustful to a state of dispassion (V 155.20–24). Those that come to her attain this state through various means: seeing her, talking to her, holding her hand, dwelling with her, embracing (*āliṅgana*) her, and kissing (*paricumbana*) her (V 155.26–156.6).⁶⁶

A defining feature of tantric Buddhist “higher” consecrations is the sexual copulation of the male practitioner with a female consort. Originally (as in Hindu tantra), ritualised sex appears to have occurred in order to generate sexual fluids that were then sacramentally ingested; only later did these practices take on a more yogic significance.⁶⁷ Needless to say, ritual sex was only considered a part of the path for the spiritually advanced and initiated. In the *Gaṇḍavyūha*’s account of Vasumitrā, we find a courtesan who is a spiritual guide that leads beings to dispassion through embraces and kisses. Also, access to such teachings is only available for those advanced enough to recognise Vasumitrā’s spiritual attainments. Thus, we find combined in this episode of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* two elements that appear to foreshadow both the esotericism and sexual practices often associated with Buddhist tantra.

Conclusion: Toward a Typology of Indian Mahāyāna and Tantric Texts

In the preceding pages, I hope that I have sufficiently demonstrated that there are certain aspects of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* that, although not tantric, resemble Buddhist tantra. I have referred to these aspects as “proto-tantric” in deference to the received scholarly tradition that places Mahāyāna sūtra literature temporally prior to Buddhist tantric texts. Unlike the Tibetan tradition that views all sūtras and tantras as “the words of the Buddha” (*buddhavacana*), contemporary scholars tend to stratify Mahāyāna Buddhist texts according to a relative chronology that is based largely on two factors: the dates of Chinese translations and doctrinal developments. Unfortunately, the dates of Chinese translations only indicate when a particular translator or team happened to translate a certain text. They tell us nothing of the actual historical origins of texts in relation to each other. Moreover, since doctrinal developments, innovations, transformations, modifications, etc., occur in relation to any number of social, political, geographic, and historical factors, we cannot

66. The antiquity of this literary reference to teaching through embraces and kisses is confirmed by Buddhahadra’s fifth-century translation. See 阿梨宜我者。得攝一切眾生三昧。若有眾生。阿眾鞞我者。得諸功德密藏三昧。(T 278.717b6–7). Here 阿梨宜 is a transliteration of the Sanskrit *āliṅgana* (“embracing”), and 阿眾鞞 seems to be a transliteration of the Sanskrit *paricumbana* (“kissing”). Although the meaning of 阿眾鞞 is hardly clear, Fazang in his commentary on the *Avatamsaka* glosses the term (in a slightly varied form, 阿眾毘) with 鳴口 (T 1733.471.a23–24), which, based on a number of passages in Buddhist texts dealing with monastic regulations, appears to indicate a type of sexual infraction involving kissing. I would like to thank Michael Radich for this reference to Fazang and related passages.

67. Ronald M. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 197–98.

assume that religious doctrines develop over time in anything like a smooth linear fashion.

So where does this scepticism of relative chronology leave us? Are my references to “proto-tantric” elements in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* misguided? Would terms that do not imply temporal priority such as “pseudo-tantric” or “quasi-tantric” be more appropriate? The various Chinese translations of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* indicate that like many other sūtras, it was not a static text, but that it continued to change over time, however, we do know that at least one version of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* existed by the early fifth century (Buddhabhadra’s translation), which contains elements that seem to prefigure the Buddhist tantras. Thus, as McMahan rightly points out,⁶⁸ we cannot assume that the proto-tantric elements in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* are necessarily later additions by Buddhist redactors influenced by tantric ideas. In fact, as I have indicated in my notes, all the “proto-tantric” passages in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* discussed here may be found in Buddhabhadra’s fifth-century Chinese translation (T 278).

Previous scholars have already suggested that the *Gaṇḍavyūha* appears to bear some relation to the *Mahāvairocana sūtra*, the *Tattvasaṃgraha*, and the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* based on some general observations. My hope is that the close readings I have provided here from the *Gaṇḍavyūha* may be employed usefully as specific data needed for clustering it with other texts in a type of matrix suggested by Jonathan Silk. Silk writes:

If we imagine Buddhism as a multi-dimensional space, and we do not prejudge the locations of different kinds of Buddhism — with for example Theravāda Buddhism in one corner and Zen far away in another — but instead start our thinking on the level of individual texts, I think we would quickly realize that various texts would be located at various points in this multi-dimensional matrix, some texts being located more closely to each other than a third type. Of course, there can be no such thing as an absolute location, but only a location to other objects in the space (just as is the case in the three dimensions of our physical universe).⁶⁹

This method suggests that through close readings of Buddhist texts that pay attention to details, such as the names of buddhas and bodhisattvas in lists, various spatial formations, literary motifs, vocabulary, and stock formulas, we may begin to cluster into groups the hundreds of mainstream and Mahāyāna sūtras and tantras preserved in Sanskrit and other Indic languages, as well as Chinese and Tibetan translations. Given the truly vast amount of unstudied literature, there is great utility in using such an approach to acquire some rough sketches of this unknown landscape. With this intention in mind, I offer here a few contour lines from the *Gaṇḍavyūha* for a future map of this largely uncharted terrain.

68. McMahan, “Transpositions of Metaphor and Imagery in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* and Tantric Buddhist Practice,” 191.

69. Jonathan Silk, “What, If Anything, Is Mahāyāna Buddhism? Problems of Definitions and Classifications,” *Numen* 49, no. 4 (2002): 392–93.