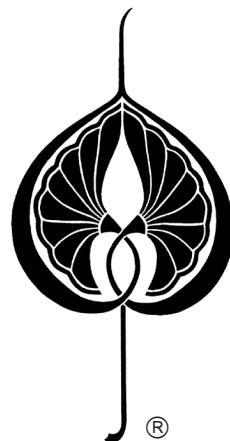


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A Brief Exploration of Late Indian Buddhist Exegeses of the “Mantrayāna” and “Mantranaya”

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This is a brief philological analysis that seeks to shed some light on the terms “Mantrayāna” and “Mantranaya,” based on selected exegetical works related to several Buddhist *tantras* of the Unexcelled Yoga class. It also takes into account certain Buddhist tantric interpretations of the word “mantra” in later scholastic sources that may help us to understand not only the ways in which different Buddhist tantric traditions in India construed the term “mantra,” and thereby the concepts of Mantrayāna and Mantranaya, but also the later Mantrayāna’s self-representation. As attested in many tantric sources, the terms Mantrayāna, Mantranaya, Mantranīta, and Mantramārga are employed interchangeably. The word “mantra” that delineates their meanings is a semantic signifier both of a particular method of actualizing awakening and of ultimate reality itself. Thus, it is both signifier and signified. Defined as a “protection of the mind” in most Buddhist tantric sources, it became a designation for the different tantric strategies for achieving a nonconceptual state of mind as well as for the representation and communication of the nonconceptual, inconceivable, and nondual reality.

In the view of the later Indian commentators on Buddhist *tantras*, Mantrayāna is held as a special type of Mahāyāna. In the *Guṇavati*, a commentary on the *Mahāmāyā-tantra*, Ratnākāraśānti (ca. 970–1045) resorts to the exposition in the *Śrīvajraśikhara-tantra* to define Mantrayāna as a profound (*gambhīra*) Mahāyāna, which differs from the System of Perfections (*pāramitā-naya*) in its method and in the length of time it takes the adept to attain awakening (*bodhi*). The method (*upāya*), or the path (*mārga*), of bodhisattvas, which must be cultivated for three immeasurable eons, is contrasted here to that of Mantrayāna, which Ratnākāraśānti characterizes as a highly eminent

(*atimahat*) path to awakening (*bodhimārga*),¹ which, having an abridged form (*saṃkṣepa-rūpa*) and the aspects of the mandala disk with its retinue and so on, facilitates a faster (*kṣipratara*) and easier (*sukhatara*) accomplishment of awakening.²

The *Guhyasamājapradīpodyotanavyākhyā* provides us with a similar and clearly stated definition of the term “Mantranaya” (“Mantra System”) in this way: “That which is secretly spoken (*mantryate*) or communicated by spiritual mentors is mantra. A sevenfold system (*naya*) is that which leads to (*nayati*), or makes one obtain (*prāpayati*), the practice whose content is that [mantra].” That which constitutes the sevenfold Mantra System is explained thus: “The Mantra System is said to be a sevenfold exposition (*ākhyāna*): the mandala, community, fire-pit, oblation, *melāpaka*, process (*krama*), and reality (*tattva*).”³ Thus, the Mantra System is here also understood as a component of the Mantra-Mahāyāna that provides Mahāyāna with a new multiplex of ritual and meditational practices as a faster path to liberation.

This commentary on the *Guhyasamāja-tantra* further informs us of a *modus operandi* that Indian Buddhist exegetes employed in their theories of mantra (*mantra-vāda*). It is said to comprise the four types of discussion of mantra, namely, the designation (*saṃjñā*) of a mantra, the meaning (*artha*) of a mantra, the recitation (*vidarbhaṇa*) of a mantra, and the *vajra* speech that is free from sounds.⁴ This fourfold sequence reflects the structure of many Unexcelled Yoga *tantras*, which contain four main divisions of exposition: (1) the introduction of the subject matter and the speaker of the *tantra*, both of which are identified as mantra; (2) the provisional and definitive meanings of the *tantra*, which, as Buddha’s speech, is identified as mantra; (3) the description of mantras and mantra recitation in the stages of initiation and completion; and (4) the final accomplishment of the *tantra*, buddhahood characterized by *vajra* speech, the primordially non-arisen *A*.

The Kālacakra master Vibhūticandra (twelfth to thirteenth centuries)⁵ holds a view similar to that of Ratnākāraśānti. In his *Amṛtakaṇikodyotanibandha*, a commentary on Raviśrījñāna’s *Amṛtakaṇikākhyā-ṭippanī*, he asserts that bodhisattvas who follow the practices of mantra and bliss (*mantra-sukha-caryā*) have a swift accomplishment (*kṣipra-siddhi*) due to recitation of mantras and so on.⁶ This mantra practice (*mantra-caryā*) is defined in the aforementioned *Guhyasamājapradīpodyotanākhyā* as a *tathāgatas’* practice (*tathāgata-caryā*), as a practice of the precious persons (*ratna-pudgala*) whose

reality (*tattva*) spiritual mentors (*guru*) explain as mantra, and who having accomplished the stage of completion have mantra practice as their conduct (*caraṇa*) with a non-concentrated *samādhi* (*asamāhita-yoga*). However, this mantra practice is not separate from the bodhisattva practice, which *mantrins*, according to their abilities, undertake by any means that can accomplish the aim of sentient beings, whether or not those means are contrary to worldly conventions.⁷ Thus, for the above-cited authors, although the Mantrayāna may seem to diverge from the earlier Mahāyāna in terms of its practices, which at times go against conventions, it should not be examined in isolation from Mahāyāna. It is its larger Mahāyāna context that gives it the unmissed Buddhist identity.

Kumāracandra, in his *Ratnāvalīpañjikā* commentary on the *Kṛṣṇayamāri-tantra*,⁸ glosses “Vajrayāna” as “Mantra-Mahāyāna.”⁹ In explaining the process of initiation into the Kṛṣṇayamāri Mandala, he cites the following words by which the *vajra* master selects his main disciple at the time of initiation: “Come, boy! I shall accurately teach you Mahāyāna that has a method (*vidhi*), which is the system of mantra practice (*mantra-caryā-naya*), [for] you are a suitable vessel for the sublime system (*mahā-naya*).”¹⁰ Thus, in this tantric tradition also, the term Mantra-Mahāyāna designates a type of Mahāyāna, which is qualified as “a sublime system” on the basis of its having mantra practice as its method.

In his *Amṛtakaṇikākhyā-ṭippaṇī*, a commentary on the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti*, Raviśrījñāna (ca. twelfth century)¹¹ defines sublime mantra (*mahā-mantra*) as gnosis of sublime bliss (*mahāsukhājñāna*), and the Mahāyāna System (*mahāyāna-naya*) as a means by which that sublime mantra is obtained (*nīyate*) or achieved (*prāpyate*).¹² Likewise, explaining the meaning of Mañjuśrī’s epithet as one who has the “sublime system” (*mahānaya*), Raviśrījñāna interprets the phrase as “the one for whom the appearances of the signs of smoke and the like are without appearances and without an object.”¹³ In his commentary on the *Amṛtakaṇikākhyā-ṭippaṇī*, Vibhūticandra confirms that the term *naya* (“system”) should be understood as a path of seeing the signs (smoke and so on).¹⁴ For these two masters of the Kālacakra tradition, what characterizes the Mantra-Mahānaya is the practice of the six-phased yoga (*ṣaḍaṅgayoga*) that brings about the appearance of the ten signs, beginning with smoke and ending with *bindu*, to the *yogī*’s mental perception. These are said to be appearances of the *yogī*’s

own mind, and hence neither the object of his meditation nor external appearances.

Raviśrījñāna also employs the term Mahāmantra-naya, which he describes as three imperishable (*akṣara*) and self-aware (*svasaṃvedya*) families (*kula*), which are of the nature of joy (*ānanda*), supreme joy (*paramānanda*), and special joy (*viramānanda*) of the body, speech, and mind, whose imperishability is due to *prāṇāyāma*. Here, the Mantranaya is a specific yogic method of manipulating vital energies, which induces the experiences of certain types of bliss that facilitate the actualization of the Buddha's body, speech, and mind. But this Mahāmantra-naya is also a sublime mantra family (*kula*) that consists of the *tathāgatas*, such as Vajrasattva and others. A reason for it to be considered a family is its nonduality, and it is sublime (*mahā*) due to being a self-aware (*svasaṃvedya*) awakening mind (*bodhicitta*), which, as a pervader (*vyāpaka*), is the same essence (*samarasa*) of all phenomena. The word "mantra" in this context is defined in a similar way as in other tantric exegetical treatises: "Bliss (*sukha*) is called mantra due to being a protection of the mind (*manastrāṇa-bhūta*)."¹⁵ In Raviśrījñāna's view, when it is said that the Buddha arose from this system of sublime mantra, it means that he arose from sublime bliss (*mahāsukha*) and is therefore of the nature of sublime bliss. Vibhūticandra further explains Raviśrījñāna's above-mentioned exposition, stating that bliss is a protection of the mind because it is a gate (*dvārā*) to the practice (*caryā*) of imperishable bliss (*akṣarasukha*), for it is by means of bliss that the *yogī* attains awakening in accordance with yogic practices. He also emphasizes that bliss is mantra, as it is free from conceptualization (*nirvikalpa*).¹⁶

Raviśrījñāna distinguishes the Mantra System (*mantranīti*) from the System of Perfections (*pāramitānaya*) in the following manner. "In the Mantra System, the nonduality of emptiness and compassion, of wisdom and method, is of the nature of sublime bliss (*mahāsukha*) that is arisen from *samādhi*. However, in the System of Perfections (*pāramitānaya*), the mind (*citta*) that consists of Svābhāvīkākāya, which is of the nature of the identitylessness of all phenomena (*sarvadharmānairātmya-svarūpa*), is free from mental wavering such as I and mine, the object and subject of apprehension, and so on." In the Vehicle of Perfections (*pāramitāyāna*) that consists of the Mantra-Mahāyāna (*mantramahāyānātmaka*), the gnosis of reality (*tattva-jñāna*) is of the nature of non-origination (*anutpāda-rūpa*), which has the gnosis of

nonduality as its result.¹⁷ Thus, following the *Vimalaprabhā*'s expositions on the Vajrayāna, Raviśrījñāna wants us to understand the Mantra-Mahāyāna as an integration of the Mantranaya and the Pāramitānaya in terms of the indivisibility of the bliss and emptiness, generated by means of this integration. Just as these two, bliss and emptiness, should not be understood as entirely identical, although pervading each other, so also the Mantranaya and the Pāramitānaya, although being mutually interactive, bear their own distinct features.

Elaborating on the aforementioned exposition of the Mantranaya and Pāramitānaya by Raviśrījñāna, Vibhūticandra seems to go further, affirming that the reality of non-origination (*anutpāda-tattva*) is found in both vehicles, in the Pāramitāyāna and in the Mantrayāna, due to their non-differentiation. For him, these two vehicles, or systems, are not merely ancillary to each other. To illustrate his point, he compares the following statement from the *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā* and the *Kālacakra-tantra*, which we also encounter in Nāropā's *Sekoddeśaṭīkā*:¹⁸ "It is said in the *Prajñāpāramitā*, 'He who [courses] in the perfection of wisdom attains *samādhi* on space,' and so on. Here also [in the *Kālacakra-tantra*, chap. 5, v. 115, it is said]: 'with minds absorbed in space,' and so on."¹⁹ Vibhūticandra also justifies his view of the nondifferentiation of the Pāramitāyāna and the Mantrayāna in terms of their non-origination by pointing out that if a cause, or the Pāramitāyāna, is without origination, then its result, or Mantrayāna, must also be without origination, because a cause is of the same kind as its result, as, for instance, a rice sprout does not come from a *kodrava* seed.²⁰ Raviśrījñāna specifies the result of the System of Perfections (*pāramitānaya*) as a Jina, the teacher (*śāstr*), and he characterizes the Mantra System (Mantranaya) as a reality of the stationary and movable worlds (*sthiracalajagat-tattva*). This means that the Buddha, or the mind that has realized the emptiness of all phenomena as taught in the System of Perfections, and its object, or the entire world consisting of the gnosis of bliss as taught in the Mantra System, become unified. This seems to be a different way in which Raviśrījñāna seeks to point out the integrative nature of the Mantra-Mahāyāna than the one previously mentioned. According to him, both systems have the Vajra Lady of Bliss (*sukha-vajra-praṇayinī*), who is the self-aware, Madhamayaka's thought (*madhayamaka-dhī*), which is ultimately neither expounded (*kathyate*) nor invented (*kriyate*) by a spiritual mentor, and which is a self-arisen (*svayambhū*) and inconceivable (*acintya*) gnosis.²¹

Raviśrījñāna further alludes to the integrative character of the Mantra-Mahāyāna by distinguishing Mahāyāna from Vajrayāna in terms of their respective domains of inquiry and realizations. He does so by asserting the following: “Mahāyāna pertains to conventional (*saṃvṛti*) reality, while Vajrayāna refers to the ultimate reality (*paramārtha*).”²² Vibhūticandra further explains this statement, commenting that Vajrayāna practice (*caryā*) utilizes the ultimate reality, which is luminosity (*prabhāsvara*), and the Mahāyāna practice utilizes conventional reality, which is generosity (*dāna*) and so on. He asserts these two types of practices as compatible.²³ That is, the synthesis of the two as the Mantra-Mahāyāna unites the domains of conventional and ultimate realities in its theory and practice. The Mantra-Mahāyāna is presented here as a synthesis of both the path and the goal, of both the cause and the result, and of both the emptiness of all phenomena and sublime bliss. These two masters’ presentation of the Mantra-Mahāyāna synthesis seems to go even further in terms of asserting the utter indispensability of the integration of the Mantra System and the System of Perfection for soteriological purposes. Considering the fact that Raviśrījñāna and Vibhūticandra were masters of the *Kālacakra-tantra* tradition, which explicitly expresses this synthesis as its strategy,²⁴ it is not surprising that their interpretations of the Mantra-Mahāyāna is in alignment with that of the *Kālacakra* tantric system, where the word “vehicle” (*yāna*), as appearing in the compound Vajra Vehicle (*vajrayāna*), is explained as a unification of the cause, or the *Pāramitānaya*, and its result, or the *Mantranaya*.²⁵

In the *Sekoddeśaṭīkā*, Nāropā’s exposition on the meaning of the word “mantra,” which is also based on the *Kālacakra* tantric view, points not to the emptiness aspect of the awakened mind, but to the supreme, imperishable gnosis (*paramākṣara-jñāna*) of mantra due to being a protection of the mind. In support of this interpretation, he cites the following lines from the root *tantra* of the *Laghukālacakra-tantra*, which reads:

Since the meaning of [the word] mantra is a protection of the elements of the body, speech, and mind, therefore the imperishable gnosis of emptiness is [implied] by the word *mantra*.

A mantra that consists of merit and knowledge is of the nature of emptiness and compassion.²⁶

The view of mantra as bliss or as the gnosis of sublime bliss is by no means unique to the *Kālacakra-tantra* tradition. *Ratnākāraśānti*, in

his *Hevajrapañjikāmuktāvalī*, a commentary on the *Hevajra-tantra*, gives a somewhat different interpretation of the word “mantra,” stating: “It is mantra due to protecting the world (*jagat-trāṇa*) and due to reflecting on the meaning of reality (*tattvārtha-manana*).” But, when defining “mantra” as “*bodhicitta* that is arisen from *samādhi*,”²⁷ he demonstrates his agreement with other exegetes who describe mantra as a mind of awakening (*bodhicitta*), which consists of sublime bliss.²⁸ Likewise, in the *Yogaratnamālā*, a commentary on the *Hevajra-tantra* attributed to Kaṇha, mantra is defined as the ultimate (*pāramārthika*) *bodhicitta*, and as reality (*tattva*), which is the gnosis of the unexcelled sublime bliss (*anuttaramahāsukha-jñāna*), free of conceptual elaborations (*niśprapañca*).²⁹

In accordance with the explicit dichotomization of mundane and supramundane rites found in the later Buddhist *tantras* and their commentaries,³⁰ Raviśrījñāna, in his *Amṛtakaṇikākhyā-ṭippanī*, classifies mantras into two main categories: mundane (*laukika*) and supramundane (*lokottara*). Mundane mantras are characterized by letters (*varṇa*), or by the synopsis of a series of letters into a single syllable (*pratyāhāra*), which bring about pacification, prosperity, and other mundane results achieved in mundane rituals.³¹ In contrast to mundane mantras, a supramundane mantra consists of *nāda* (an unproduced sound) representing compassion, and of *bindu*, signifying emptiness due to the yoga of the supreme, imperishable (*paramākṣara*). This supramundane mantra is unified and has a luminous nature (*prabhāsvarātma*). It is the goal that is to be accomplished (*sādhyatva*), and it is the meaning (*artha*) of all mantras and of the *mahāmudrā*, the highest achievement. Its progenitor (*janaka*) is the Lord (*bhagavān*) himself. Due to being of the nature of ultimate reality (*paramārtha*), that Lord is without syllables (*anaṅgāra*).³² It is safe to assume that the obvious parallel between Raviśrījñāna’s presentation of the supramundane mantra as unified compassion and emptiness and his previously given explanation of the Mantra-Mahāyāna is not fortuitous. This parallel is based on the view of the supramundane mantra as the ultimate source of the Mantra-Mahāyāna.

Supramundane mantra, which is characterized as luminosity, or clear light (*prabhāsvara*), is said to be the source of all utterances. In that respect, it is nondual with mundane mantras.³³ If it is not mantra itself that impedes a *samādhi* on reality, but its verbal and mental recitation, then Mantra-Mahāyāna is conceived as a path characterized by

nonduality in terms of the indivisibility of the mantras uttered by *yogīs* from their source, supramundane mantra. Nāropā, in his *Sekoddeśatikā*, alludes to supramundane mantra when speaking of *anāhata* as mantra consisting of the utterances of all sentient beings, as *saṃbhogakāya*, a speech *vajra* characterized by delight, as it delights all sentient beings with the utterances of all sentient beings.³⁴

In Raviśrījñāna's view, due to being innate gnosis (*sahajajñānatva*), the Buddha himself is a source (*yoni*) of all mantras. It is in light of this perspective that Raviśrījñāna wants us to understand the following instruction cited from the first chapter of the *Pañcakrama* attributed to the *tāntrika* Nāgārjuna, in which the process (*krama*) of *vajra* recitation is described in accordance with the *Yoga-tantras*: “The *yogī* should abandon an external recitation [of mantras], which is an impediment to meditation. Why would the Lord Vajrī, who [himself] is the meaning of mantras and who is of the nature of *vajra*, recite [mantras]?”³⁵

Kṛṣṇācārya (Kāñha), in his *Vasantatilakā*, a work based on the *Cakrasaṃvara-tantra*, also expresses his perspective on the inappropriateness of mantra recitation at the advanced stage of yogic tantric practice. Centuries later, Vanaratna (fourteenth to fifteenth centuries), in his commentary on the *Vasantatilakā*, the *Rahasyadīpikākhyā*, poses the question: “Why should the king of *yogīs* who has ascended the stage of completion practice mandala, *homa*, meditation, and recitation [of mantras]?” In his response to this question, he states that all external practices, which constitute the stage of generation (*utpattikrama*), are artificial (*kṛtrima*) because they are conceptualized (*kalpita*), accomplished through external means, and characterized by dissolution, just like a crafted object such as a pot is subject to destruction.³⁶ His explanation for why mundane mantras can be efficacious in mundane rites despite their artificiality is based on his view of the importance of the realization of emptiness. His assertion is that mantras that arise from the letter A facilitate the mundane rites of pacification and the like in accordance with their nature; otherwise, they do not have the completely known reality (*parijñāta-tattva*). To explain what Kṛṣṇācārya means by this somewhat cryptic statement, Vanaratna cites the following verses:

The nature of the letters of mantra is a single, supreme, and imperishable [syllable A]. Only due to a complete knowledge of that [syllable A] can mantras accomplish the rites.

Hence, we do not desire mantras that are of the nature of letters,

since they are not potent causes of curving even a blade of grass.³⁷

In Kṛṣṇācārya and Vanaratna's views, the syllable A, which is the leader (*nāyaka*) of all syllables and the chief of mantras, is non-arisen by nature and is a pointer to the primordially non-arisen reality (*ādyanutpanna-tattva*), the nature of all non-arisen phenomena. From that syllable A, all fields of knowledge (*vidyāsthāna*) are extracted (*uddhṛta*), namely, the five fields of knowledge that belong to the Buddhist *Nikāyas* and the fourteen fields of knowledge belonging to the *Nikāyas* of non-Buddhist traditions, such as the Vedas and their Aṅgas, Mīmāṃsā, Nyāya, Purāṇas, and Dharmasāstras. Without that lord of mantras none of these could be uttered. The syllables of mantras, *tantras*, and exoteric *śāstras* obtain their instrumentality (*kāraṇatva*) only due to that letter A. In the *Yoginī* and other *tantras*, this should be understood as a nonconceptual extraction (*uddhāra*) of mantra.³⁸ All sentient beings are dependent on this mantra (the syllable A) by their nature. The flow of the speech of all sentient beings, be it manifest or unmanifest, is of the very nature of mantra (the syllable A), because speech arises from it and because it is present in every act of speech. Only the mantras that are employed in one's rite with this view (*drṣṭi*) become productive (*saphala*).³⁹ Here again, we see the emphasis on the importance of the integrated approach of the Mantra-Mahāyāna. Ritual practices and mantra recitations devoid of the view of emptiness, stipulated by the system of perfections, are declared barren.

A discussion of mantras' ultimately non-arisen nature can be seen already in one of the earliest Buddhist *tantras*, the *Vairocanābhisambodhi-tantra*, which employs the Madhyamaka's analytical method to demonstrate the emptiness of mantras. It is stated there that the characteristic (*lakṣaṇa*) of mantras is neither created, made effective, nor approved by any buddha. The reality (*dharmatā*) of phenomena, which remains during the arising of the *tathāgatas* and during the non-arising of the *tathāgatas*, is the mantra-reality (*mantra-dharmatā*) of mantras. The power of a mantra does not issue from the mantra, it does not enter sentient beings, it does not arise from substances, nor is it perceived by its doer. It is successful because of the inconceivable (*acintya*) dependent origination (*pratīyasamutpāda*). The *tantra* advises the *yogī* to always follow the eternal (*satata*) Mantra System (Mantranaya), while understanding that all phenomena are inconceivable by nature.⁴⁰

Furthermore, Ratnākāraśānti also seems to hold the view that recitation of mantras without the knowledge of their meaning is ineffective.

In commenting on the following verse of the *Mahāmāyā-tantra*, which reads: “A yoga consisting of mantras, body, and dharma is said to be threefold. Due to the threefold knowledge, one is not smeared by the faults of cyclic existence,” he explains that the threefold yoga, or *samādhi*, which has reality (*tattva*) as its object, consists of the mantra, the deity’s form that arises from mantras, and dharma, by means of which the *yogī* becomes similar (*sadṛśa*) to Vajrasattva Śrīheruka. Here, he describes mantra as an utterance (*vacana*) that illuminates reality (*tattvodyotaka*), and dharma as knowledge (*jñāna*) of the meaning of mantras (*mantrārtha*). In his view, the *yogī*’s purification from sins (*pāpa*), the faults of cyclic existence (*bhava-doṣa*), is unattainable by the recitation of mantras alone because all three ingredients of this yoga are necessary for purification.⁴¹ Thus, according to Ratnākāraśānti, although recitation of mantras is an indispensable part of the path of purification, it alone is soteriologically ineffective without the knowledge of the mantras’ higher, connotative meanings.

Owing to the fact that in Buddhist *tantras*, mantra and *prāṇa* are seen as inextricably connected, the previously mentioned commentators tend to define *prāṇa* as mantra. For instance, Vanaratna refers to the wind of *prāṇa* as mantra on the basis that *prāṇa* that rises from the region of the navel is a cause of all mantras. Its circulation he calls “recitation” (*jāpa*). Those within the three realms who resort to *prāṇāyāma* are referred to as the ones who recite the king of mantras.⁴² Thus, *prāṇāyāma* becomes a higher practice of mantric recitation, which is soteriologically more effective than a verbal or mental recitation of mantras.

Commenting on the practice of the retention (*dhāraṇā*) phase of the six-phased yoga of the *Guhyasamāja-tantra* (chap. 18, v. 148), Nāropā points to the *prāṇa* that is retained in the center of the heart *cakra* as one’s own mantra (*svamantra*) due to being a protection of the mind.⁴³ Similarly, in the *Vimalaprabhā*, in Vajrapāṇi’s exposition of the *Kālacakra-tantra*’s six-phased yoga, and in Raviśrījñāna’s commentary on the *Ṣaḍaṅgayoga* of Anuparamarakṣita, mantra recitation (*mantra-jāpa*) is explained as the control of vital energies (*prāṇa-saṃyama*).⁴⁴ In the same text, Raviśrījñāna also gives other meanings to the word “mantra,” such as an uttering of syllables and as the retention (*dhāraṇā*) phase of the six-phased yoga, or the retention of *prāṇa*, to which he also refers as a “vajra recitation” and as a “recitation of the neuter” (*napuṃsaka-jāpa*), meaning a reflection on the *prāṇa* present

in the *avadhūti* channel. In that regard, he cautions that prior to engaging into this higher form of mantra recitation, one must know the *prāṇāyāma*.⁴⁵

According to the *Vimalaprabhā*, it is due to the control of vital energies that deities grant boons and not due to unrestrained *prāṇa* and verbal speech. This, we are told, is the definitive meaning of the phrase “mantra recitation” (*jāpa*). But when it is said that mantra recitation with a rosary and the like is to be performed for the sake of ordinary *siddhis*, we should understand this in terms of a provisional meaning.⁴⁶

In view of the preceding interpretations of mundane and supramundane mantras and their validity, one could say that the term “Mantrayāna” is understood as referring to a path (*mārga*) that explains and utilizes mantras in two ways. The first is as an external method characterized by the verbal and mental recitation of mantric expressions, which can be described as a specific type of performative utterance whose validity depends on the prescribed procedures and circumstances. Although this type of utterance is a linguistic act characterized by intentionality and conceptualization, it ignores conventional linguistic forms. As such it produces a new kind of experience. However, any fascination with mantric utterances is to be resisted as a distraction from the ultimate, supramundane mantra. The fact that our commentators felt an obligation to discourage a preoccupation with mantric utterances without the proper epistemic framework suggests that they were responding to a widespread tendency they witnessed.

The second manner in which mantras are utilized is constituted by internal yogic practices that give rise to the sound of innate bliss. Devoid of conceptualization, these practices lead the *yogī* to the realization of the ultimate mantra. Similarly to mundane mantras, the validity of the supramundane mantra is contingent on technicity, in this case, on the *prāṇāyāma* and other five phases of the six-phased yoga. Being the *yogī*'s innate identity, or the gnosis of imperishable bliss, it is nonlinguistic by nature, devoid of intentionality, and non-relational. Nevertheless, one can say that the self-awareness of the ultimate mantra is the result of prescribed performative procedures, the *prāṇāyāma* and so on. Likewise, although non-relational, the ultimate mantra expresses itself in dialogical relationship, as attested by Buddhist *tantras*, which disclose their interlocutor, teacher, and audience. Although devoid of intentionality, it seeks a profound responsive understanding and reverential reception upon being heard.

Articulating criteria of the depth of responsive understanding became a prominent task of exegetes of mantra. As we have seen, in their endeavor to achieve this, our commentators framed the ultimately inconceivable, supramundane mantra of voiceless words into the microworld of their ready-made exegetical structures and formulations, characteristic of Indic śāstric systems. They are interpreters of what was heard and what was implied in a given context that limited the possibilities of the infinitude of embedded perspectives and meanings of the ultimate mantra. In light of this, one could say that their interpretations of the Mantra-Mahāyāna, as one of the innumerable expressions of supramundane mantra, are usually subject to the same contextual limitations.

Similarly to the relationship between the system of perfections and the system of mantras, the relationship between mundane and supramundane mantras is by no means that of a static opposition between two different kinds; theirs is a dynamic relationship of two interactive aspects of the same phenomenon. In that relationship, mundane mantras are the pervaded and the ultimate mantra is their pervader, or the ultimate mantra is enacted in its diverse provisional forms through mundane mantras and through all other utterances by means of which the different fields of knowledge have been transmitted and the nature of human experiences shaped. Hence, even the words of our exegetes are pervaded by the supramundane mantra. Thus, supramundane mantra is subject to both repetition and re-signification. In that respect, Mantrayāna with all of its various tantric traditions can be said to be only one of its multifarious re-significations. As such, it itself is subject to re-signification in the ongoing interplay of the conceptions, perceptions, and linguistic forms on the part of its exponents. In that respect, any attempt to draw a conclusive interpretation of the Mantrayāna appears misguided.

NOTES

1. Cf. Benoytosh Bhattacharya, ed., *Sādhanamālā*, vol. 1 (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1968), 225, where Vajrayāna is defined as a path of the unexcelled and perfect awakening (*anuttarasamyakṣambodhi-mārga*). In Samdhong Rinpoche and Vajravallabh Dwivedi, eds., *Kṛṣṇayamāritantram with Ratnāvalī Pañjikā of Kumāracandra*, Rare Buddhist Texts Series, vol. 9 (Sarnath, Varanasi: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 1992), 235, Vajrayāna is glossed in a similar way as the unexcelled path of awakening (*anuttaram bodhimārgam*).

2. Samdhong Rinpoche and Vajravallabh Dwivedi, eds., *Mahāmāyātantram with Guṇavatī by Ratnākāraśānti*, Rare Buddhist Texts Series, vol. 10 (Sarnath, Varanasi, Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 1992), 2–3. The *Mahāmāyā-tantra* belongs to the class of *Yoginī-tantras*.

3. The *Guhyasamājapradīpodyotanavyākhyā*, cited in Vajravallabh Dwivedi and Thinlay Ram Shashni, eds., *Bauddhatantrakośa*, part 1, Rare Buddhist Text Series, vol. 5 (Sarnath, Varanasi: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 1990), 90: *mantryate gurubhir upāṃsu kathyate yaḥ sa mantraḥ; tadviśayacaryāṃ tām nayati prāpyatīti nayāḥ saptavidhaḥ*.

*maṇḍalaṃ gaṇakuṇḍaṃ ca balir melāpakakramaḥ |
tattvaṃ saptavidhākhyānaṃ sa mantranaya ucyate ||*

4. The *Guhyasamājapradīpodyotanākhyā*, cited in Dwivedi and Shashni, eds., *Bauddhatantrakośa*, p. 90.

5. For information on the life of Vibhūticandra, see Cyrus Stearns, “The Life and Tibetan Legacy of the Indian Mahāpaṇḍita Vibhūticandra,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 19, no. 1 (1996): 127–171.

6. See *Amṛtakaṇīkodyotanibandha* in Banarsi Lal, ed., *Āryamañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti with Amṛtakaṇīkā-ṭippaṇī* by Bhikṣu Raviśrījñāna and *Amṛtakaṇīkodyotanibandha of Vibhūticandra*, Bibliotheca Indo-Tibetica, vol. 30 (Sarnath, Varanasi: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 1994), 209.

7. The *Guhyasamājapradīpodyotanākhyā*, cited in Dwivedi and Shashni, eds., *Bauddhatantrakośa*, 41.

8. The *Kṛṣṇayamāri-tantra* is classified as a method (*upāya*), or father, *tantra* of the Unexcelled Yoga *tantra* category, belonging to the Yamantaka cycle.

9. Samdhong Rinpoche and Dwivedi, eds., *Kṛṣṇayamāritantram*, 123.

10. *Ibid.*, 94:

*ehi vatsa mahāyānaṃ mantracaryānayaṃ vidhim |
deśayīṣyāmi te samyaḥ bhājanas tvaṃ mahānaye ||*

The Tibetan translation reads somewhat differently:

Come, boy! I shall authentically teach you
the method of mantra practices in the Mahāyāna
[for] you are suitable vessel for the Mahāyāna.

*bu tshur theg pa chen po la |
gsang sngas thsul gyi cho ga ni |
khyod la yang dag bstan par bya |
khyod nitheg chen snod yin no ||*

11. Raviśrījñāna is known as a great *ācārya* in the Kālacakra tantric tradition of Vikramaśīla. In his benedictory verses of the *Amṛtakaṇīkāṭippaṇī*, he affiliates

himself to the lineage of the *siddha* Śabarapāda, also known as Śabarīpa (ca. seventh century), to whose lineage also belonged Luipā, Dārikapā, Sahajayoginī Cintā, and Ḍombī Herukapāda. According to Śubhākāragupta, Raviśrījñāna was his contemporary and the contemporary of Śākyaśrībhadrā (1127–1224) and Dharmākāraśānti, all of whom were followers of Abhayākāra Gupta (1084–1103). According to Vibhūticandra (Lal, ed., *Āryamañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti with Amṛtakaṇikā-ṭippaṇī* by Bhikṣu Raviśrījñāna and *Amṛtakaṇikodyotanibandha of Vibhūticandra*, 113), Raviśrījñāna was a disciple of Dharmākāraśānti. In addition to his commentary on the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti*, Raviśrījñāna also wrote two commentaries on the six-phased yoga as taught in the *Kālacakra-tantra*: the *Ṣaḍaṅgayogaṭikā* and the *Guṇapūrñināma-ṣaḍaṅgayogaṭippaṇī*.

12. *Amṛtakaṇikākyā-ṭippaṇī* (Lal, ed., *Āryamañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti with Amṛtakaṇikā-ṭippaṇī* by Bhikṣu Raviśrījñāna and *Amṛtakaṇikodyotanibandha of Vibhūticandra*, 27).

13. *Amṛtakaṇikākyā-ṭippaṇī* (ibid., 39): *mahānayo nirālambanirābhāsadhūmātip ratibhāso asya sa tathā*.

14. *Amṛtakaṇikodyotanibandha* (ibid., 147): *nayo 'dhyakṣadhūmamādimārgaḥ*. In Jagannāth Upadhyāya, ed., *Khasamatantraṭikā*, Saṃkāya Pātrika Series, vol. 1 (Varanasi: Saṃpūrñāndanda Sanskrit University, 1983), 235, the term *naya* is interpreted in this way: A system (*naya*) is that by means of which something is explained (*vyākhyāte*) or ascertained (*nīyate*). A system is that by which the Lord explains a *sūtrānta* with its provisional meanings (*neyārtha*).

15. *Amṛtakaṇikākyā-ṭippaṇī* (Lal, ed., *Āryamañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti with Amṛtakaṇikā-ṭippaṇī* by Bhikṣu Raviśrījñāna and *Amṛtakaṇikodyotanibandha of Vibhūticandra*, 14): *manstrāṇabhūtātāt mantram sukham udāhṛtam iti*.

16. *Amṛtakaṇikodyotanibandha* (ibid., 210): *mantrasukhaṃ nirvikalpaṃ*.

17. *Amṛtakaṇikākyā-ṭippaṇī* (ibid., 88, 16).

18. See Mario E. Carelli, ed., *Sekoddeśaṭikā of Naḍapāda (Nāropā): Being a Commentary of the Sekoddeśa Section of the Kālacakra Tantra* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1941), section on Vajrapāṇi's description of the *Kālacakra-tantra*'s six-phased yoga.

19. Cf. the exposition of a twofold yoga practice (*yogābhyāsa*) in the Mantrayāna and Pāramitāyāna contained in the *Vimalaprabhā* commentary on the *Kālacakra-tantra*: J. Upadhyaya, ed., *Vimalaprabhāṭikā of Kalkin Śrīpūṇḍarīka on Śrīlāghukālacakratāntrārāja* by Śrīmañjuśrīyaśas, vol. 1, Bibliotheca Indo-Tibetica Series, no. 11 (Sarnath, Varanasi: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 1994).

20. *Amṛtakaṇikodyotanibandha* (Lal, ed., *Āryamañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti with Amṛtakaṇikā-ṭippaṇī* by Bhikṣu Raviśrījñāna and *Amṛtakaṇikodyotanibandha of Vibhūticandra*, 132): *tathā hi prajñāpāramitāyām uktam. ākāśe sa yogam āpsyate*

yaḥ prajñāpāramitāyām ityadi. atrāpi ākāśāsaktacittaiḥ ityādi.

21. *Amṛtakaṇikākhyā-ṭippanī* (ibid., 17–18).

22. *Amṛtakaṇikākhyā-ṭippanī* (ibid., 106): *saṃvṛtir mahāyānaṃ paramārthe vajrayānam.*

23. *Amṛtakāṇikodyotanibandha* (ibid., 208).

24. For an example, see the *Vimalaprabhā* commentary on the *Kālacakra-tantra*: Upadhyaya, ed., *Vimalaprabhāṭikā of Kalkin Śrīpuṇḍarīka on Śrīlaghukālacakratantrarāja by Śrīmañjuśrīyaśas*: “Here in Vajrayāna, having resorted to the mundane and ultimate realities...” (*iha vajrayāne laukikalokottarasatyam āśritya*).

25. The *Vimalaprabhā* commentary on the *Kālacakra-tantra*: V. Dwivedi and S. S. Bahulkar, eds., *Vimalaprabhāṭikā of Kalkin Śrīpuṇḍarīka on Śrīlaghukālacakratantrarāja by Śrīmañjuśrīyaśas*, vol. 2, Rare Buddhist Text Series, vol. 12 (Sarnath, Varanasi: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 1986), chap. 2, v. 13, p. 163.

26. Carelli, ed., *Sekoddeśaṭikā of Naḍapāda (Nāropā)*, 69. In Francesdo Sferra and Stefania Merzagora’s edition (Francesdo Sferra and Stefania Merzagora, trans., *Sekoddeśaṭikā by Nāropā* [Paramārthasaṃgraha], Serie Orientale Roma, vol. 99 [Rome: Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente, 2006]), the citations is on p. 193.

*kāyavākcittadhātūnāṃ prāṇabhūto yatas tatas |
mantrārtho mantrasābdena śūnyatājñānam akṣaram ||*

27. Ram Shankar Tripathi and Thakur Sain Negi, eds., *Hevajratantram with Muktāvalī Pañjikā of Mahāpaṇḍitācārya Ratnākārasānti*, Bibliotheca Indo-Tibetica Series, vol. 48 (Sarnath, Varanasi: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 2001), 29.

28. Cf. the *Amṛtakaṇikodyotanibandha* (Lal, ed., *Āryamañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti with Amṛtakaṇikā-ṭippanī* by Bhikṣu Raviśrījñāna and *Amṛtakaṇikodyotanibandha of Vibhūticandra*, 143).

29. D. L. Snellgrove, *The Hevajratantra: A Critical Study*, vol. 2, London Oriental Series, vol. 6 (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 109, 111.

30. One does not find this type of dichotomization in the earlier *Kriyā-* and *Caryā-tantras* as well as in the *Yoginī-tantras*, such as the *Cakrasaṃvara-tantra*, and the like.

31. We find a similar category of mantras in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, where the class of *dhāraṇīs* called the “*mantra-dhāraṇī*” is described as mantra words (*mantra-pada*) that facilitate a pacification of sentient beings.

32. *Amṛtakaṇikāṭippanī* (Lal, ed., *Āryamañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti with Amṛtakaṇikā-*

ṭippaṇī by Bhikṣu Raviśrījñāna and *Amṛtakaṇīkodyotanibandha* of Vibhūticandra, 88), and the *Amṛtakaṇīkodyotanibandha* (ibid., 194). In the *Amṛtakaṇīkodyotanibandha* (ibid., 208), Vibhūticandra asserts emptiness as the reality (*dharmatā*) of all mantras.

33. Cf. the *Vimalaprabhā* commentary on the *Kālacakra-tantra* (Dwivedi and Bahulkar, eds., *Vimalaprabhāṭikā of Kalkin Śrīpuṇḍarīka on Śrīlaghukālacakratantrarāja* by Śrīmañjuśrīyaśas, 17); the *Amṛtakaṇīkākhyā-ṭippaṇī* (Lal, ed., *Āryamañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti with Amṛtakaṇīkā-ṭippaṇī* by Bhikṣu Raviśrījñāna and *Amṛtakaṇīkodyotanibandha* of Vibhūticandra, 4); and the *Paramārthasaṃgrahanāmasekoddeśaṭīkā* (Sferra and Merzagora, trans., *Sekoddeśaṭīkā* by Nāropā, 62), which give the same reading: “*guhyaṃ śrāvakaṃ pratyekayānāyoraṃ uttaraṃ vajrayānaṃ*” (“Secret is Vajrayāna, which is superior to the vehicles of śrāvakas and *pratyekabuddhas*”), or it is a unification (*ekalolībhāva*) of the body, speech, mind, and gnosis.

34. Sferra and Merzagora, trans., *Sekoddeśaṭīkā* by Nāropā, 70.

35. Lal, ed., *Āryamañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti with Amṛtakaṇīkā-ṭippaṇī* by Bhikṣu Raviśrījñāna and *Amṛtakaṇīkodyotanibandha* of Vibhūticandra, 88, 200, and 28.

bāhyajāpaṃ tyajed yogī bhāvanāyāntarāyikam |
mantrārtho bhagavān vajrī vajrātmā tu kathaṃ japet ||

See also Rām Śaṅkar Tripathi’s Sanskrit edition of the *Pañcakrama* (*Piṇḍīkrama and Pañcakrama of Ācārya Nāgārjuna*, Bibliotheca Indo-Tibetica Series, vol. 25 [Sarnath, Varanasi: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 2001]), p. 39, v. 6.

This view of a mantra recitation as an artificial, conceptual, and external practice, which the *yogī* must abandon on the stage of completion (*niṣpanna-krama*), characterized by a nonconceptual method leading to the realization of nondual reality (*advaya-tattva*), is common to all traditions of the Unexcelled Yoga *tantras*. One finds clearly stated instructions for the *yogī* to abandon the practices of mantra recitation and mandala visualization in a variety of sources such as those of the *Kālacakra-tantra*, *Guhyasamāja-tantra*, and the *Cakrasaṃvara-tantra*.

36. Samdhong Rinpoche and Vajravallabh Dwivedi, eds., *Vasantatilakā of Cāryavartī Śrīkṛṣṇācārya with Commentary Rahasyadīpikā* by Vanaratna, Rare Buddhist Text Series, vol. 7 (Sarnath, Varanasi: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 1990), 7–8.

37. Ibid., 72:

svabhāvo mantravargasya paramākṣara ekakaḥ |
tatparijñānamātreṇa mantrāḥ syuḥ karmakāriṇaḥ ||
ata eva hi necchāmi mantrān varṇasvarūpiṇaḥ |
na hi śaktās tṛṇasyāpi kubjikaraṇahetavaḥ ||

So far, I have been unable to identify a source of these two verses cited by Vanaratna.

38. Cf. Tripathi and Negi, eds., *Hevajratnam with Muktāvalī Pañjikā of Mahāpaṇḍitācārya Ratnākāraśānti*, 24, where the *mantra-tattva* is explained this way: “*mantra* itself is reality, the letter *a*, etc. (*mantra eva tattvam akārādi*).”

39. Samdhong Rinpoche and Dwivedi, eds., *Vasantatilakā of Cāryavartī Śrīkṛṣṇācārya with Commentary Rahasyadīpikā by Vanaratna*, 71–76, 86. Cf. the *Amṛtakṇikodyotanibandha* (Lal, ed., *Āryamañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti with Amṛtakaṇikā-ṭippaṇī by Bhikṣu Raviśrījñāna and Amṛtakaṇikodyotanibandha of Vibhūticandra*, 208), where it reads: “Emptiness is the reality of all *mantras* (*sarvamantrāṇaṃ dharmatā śūnyatā*).” Another way in which Vanaratna and Kṛṣṇācārya speak of the emptiness of mantras is by identifying *dharmakāya*, the emptiness of the buddhas, as *mantra* because it is a protection of the mind, and by ascertaining the sound of sublime bliss (*mahāsukha-dhvani*), or *nāda*, as *mantra* on the grounds that it too is a protection of the mind and a secret speech (*gupta-bhāṣaṇa*).

40. The *Vairocanaḥhisambodhi-tantra* cited in Banarsi Lal, ed., *Luptabuddhavadanasamgrahaḥ*, part 2, Rare Buddhist Text Series, vol. 25 (Sarnath, Varanasi: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 2001), 68.

41. Samdhong Rinpoche and Dwivedi, eds., *Mahāmāyātantram with Guṇavatī by Ratnākāraśānti*, p. 27, v. 5:

mantasaṃsthānadharmātmā yogas trividh ucyate |
trividhena tu jñānena bhavadoṣair na lipyate ||

42. Samdhong Rinpoche and Dwivedi, eds., *Vasantatilakā of Cāryavartī Śrīkṛṣṇācārya with Commentary Rahasyadīpikā by Vanaratna*, 68.

43. Sferra and Merzagora, trans., *Sekoddeśaṭikā by Nāropā*, 115.

44. The *Vimalaprabhā* commentary on the *Kālacakra-tantra*: Upadhyaya, ed., *Vimalaprabhāṭikā of Kalkin Śrīpuṇḍarīka on Śrīlaghukālacakratantrarāja by Śrīmañjuśrīyaśas*, chap. 4, v. 113, p. 208; Sferra and Merzagora, trans., *Sekoddeśaṭikā by Nāropā*, 130: *mantrajāpo nāma prāṇasaṃyamah*; and Francesco Sferra, ed. and trans., *The Śaḍaṅgayoga by Anupamarakṣita with Raviśrījñāna’s Guṇabhāraṇīnāma-śaḍaṅgayogaṭippaṇī*, Serie Orientale Roma, vol. 85 (Rome: Istituto Italiano per L’Africa e L’Oriente, 2000), 97.

45. See Raviśrījñāna’s *Guṇabhāraṇīnāmaśaḍaṅgayogaṭippaṇī*, a commentary on Anupamarakṣita’s *Śaḍaṅgayoga* (Sferra, ed. and trans., *The Śaḍaṅgayoga by Anupamarakṣita with Raviśrījñāna’s Guṇabhāraṇīnāma-śaḍaṅgayogaṭippaṇī*, 121–122).

46. Dwivedi and Bahulkar, eds., *Vimalaprabhāṭikā of Kalkin Śrīpuṇḍarīka on Śrīlaghukālacakratantrarāja by Śrīmañjuśrīyaśas*, chap. 2, v. 207.

