

The sources for utkrānti in Tantric Buddhism

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ABSTRACT

The Buddhist yogic practice of directed egress of consciousness from the body (i.e. ‘conscious dying’) has long been known only under its Tibetan name, [gong du] ’pho ba. In relatively recent times several studies have appeared which not only identified the original Sanskrit name, utkrānti, but have also shown that this practice is well-attested in Brahmanical and Śaiva sources. After some general considerations I shall start the present paper with a review of non-Buddhist sources (chiefly based on Prof. Alexis Sanderson’s research). It will be shown that the practice of ‘yogic suicide’ is attested much earlier in these traditions, and that a later adoption by Buddhists is a very plausible scenario.

I shall then turn to identifying the available Tantric Buddhist sources that teach the practice of utkrānti, with special reference to texts surviving in the original Sanskrit. I will argue that the earliest scriptural source is the Catuspīṭhatantra. However, I will also show that this is probably not the earliest text to teach that practice in the Tantric Buddhist tradition, as the relevant passages in the Catuspīṭha bear a very strong resemblance to the *Mukhāgama of Buddhajñānapāda. I will argue that introducing the practice of utkrānti in a text that is doxographically speaking ambivalent — since a mukhāgama counts as revelation but not scripture — reflects the uneasiness with which earlier Tantric Buddhists adopted outsiders’ practices. This concern probably evaporated by the time the Catuspīṭha was revealed.

A handout will contain the relevant passage from the Catuspīṭha with parallels from the *Mukhāgama. Reading through this passage I will discuss the various ways in which exegetes (Bhavabhaṭṭa and Smṛtijñānakīrti) tried to interpret the opaquely described practice (arguing that this variety reflects a nascent tradition) and refer to texts that further adopted this teaching, most notably the Vajradākatantra and the Sampuṭodbhava (as already pointed out by Kawasaki) but also the Samvarodaya and its commentaries, the initiation manual of Padmaśrīmitra, and the commentaries to the Sampuṭodbhava (including a hitherto unstudied Sanskrit commentary). It will also be shown that the Catuspīṭha — somewhat strangely from the viewpoint of later traditions — teaches utkrānti without presupposing elements of the so-called subtle body (i.e. tubes and wheels, nāḍī and cakra).

One particular problem to be discussed is whether we can adopt the translation ‘yogic suicide’ for the Buddhist practice of utkrānti. It will become clear from the text that presumably on ethical grounds Buddhists were very keen not to interpret the practice as suicide, but simply a yogic way of ending one’s life when the time of death seems inevitable and the practice of ‘cheating death’ (i.e. ritually prolonging one’s lifespan) is for some reason impracticable.

ABOUT THE LECTURER

Péter-Dániel SZÁNTÓ is Junior Research Fellow at Merton College, Oxford (2010-present), and is reading for a D.Phil. in Oriental Studies (Sanskrit). After finishing the diplomas in Tibetan Studies (1999-2004) and Indology (2000-2006) at Eötvös Lóránd University, Budapest, he started his doctoral research at Oxford under the supervision of Prof. Alexis Sanderson in 2006. He has published several important articles in Tantric Buddhism, including “Antiquarian Enquiries into the Initiation Manuals of the Catuspīṭha” (Newsletters of the NGMCP, No.6) and “A Critical Edition of Catuspīṭhatantra I.3. with Three Sanskrit Commentaries” (Tantric Studies vol. 1). He also has experience in teaching at Eötvös Lóránd University, University of Oxford, etc.