
Conjuring the Buddha: Ritual Manuals in Early Tantric Buddhism.

Jacob Paul Dalton. New York: Columbia University Press, 2023. Pp. 334.

Jacob P. Dalton's *Conjuring the Buddha* offers a meticulous study of Buddhist Tantric ritual manuals that were discovered in Cave 17 in Dunhuang, a significant transborder region and a centre for Buddhist training and translation during the Tibetan imperial period from the eighth and ninth centuries.¹ Dalton's study sheds light on the origin, development, innovation, and localization of Tantric Buddhist practices in Tibet in the ninth to tenth century CE, which is recognized as a formative period for Buddhism in Tibet. The ritual manuals in his study deal with some key Buddhist *tantric* (esoteric) elements: mantras, visualization, sexual yoga, and initiation rites. The latter two themes are important for contemporary Tibetan Buddhism as it grapples with the real-life power dynamics between teachers and students which sometimes causes social and sexual conflict. Besides providing well-researched historical content throughout, this book is also a treasure for those studying ancient² Tibetan manuscripts. The manuscripts themselves were recovered from the Dunhuang caves in the nineteenth century and later codified as IOL Tib (India Office Library Tibetan). There are two major contemporary sources for IOL Tib. Manuscripts: one is preserved in the British Library in London, England, while the other is in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, France. Dalton examines both manuscripts alongside other relevant

1. Sam Van Schaik, "Oral Teachings and Written Texts: Transmission and Transformation in Dunhuang," in *Contributions to the Cultural History of Early Tibet*, ed. Matthew Kapstein and Brandon Dotson (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 184.

2. Ancient here refers to the pre-xylographic printing era in Tibet (From 700 to 1300 century CE).

textual sources such as Kangyur³ (*bka' 'gyur*) in his research (Dalton, 10). Throughout his study, Dalton provides minute and detailed readings of the distinct structures or forms that these manuscripts take, such as the difference between *poti*, concertina, codex, and scrolls (14).

Comprising five chapters and spanning 334 pages, this book is a significant addition to the study of ritual manuals in Tantric Buddhism. Besides the introduction, chapter one, “Ritual Manuals and the Spread of the Local” (27), contains the book’s central argument. Here, Dalton writes, “in the topsy-turvy world of ritual manuals, where the unimportant is all the more significant, one may glimpse local innovations and individual interests, changes outside the canon and often beneath the gaze of large institutions” (27). Along this line, the author argues that a large part of the Tibetan ritual manuals was innovated by local masters in the ninth century CE for the necessity of preserving public life, a process which has continued to this day. Even early Buddhist ritual manuals such as the *dhāraṇī* sutra from India gained in popularity only in the second half of the fifth century CE, which indicates that the entry of Tantra into the Buddhist world is much later than traditionally believed (28). The subsequent four chapters are dedicated to four IOL Tib manuscripts: *Sarvadurgatīśodhana* (50), *sarvatathāgata-tattvasaṃgraha* (98), *Generation of Fortune Sādhana* (169), and *Samādhi Sādhana with Commentary* (208). Notably, the author has thoughtfully included translations of these texts at the end of each chapter, making it a valuable resource for scholars interested in studying the Dunhuang manuscripts in greater detail.

3. Kangyur is a collection of the Buddha’s words translated into Tibetan.

Chapter 4, *Secretary Secrets: Sexual Yoga in Early Mahāyoga* (135) studies the manuscript *Generation of Fortune Sādhana*, IOL Tib J 464 preserved at the British Library. Dalton begins the chapter by highlighting how sexual yoga has a long-shared history between the Vedic (*Upaniṣad*) Hindu and Tantric Buddhist traditions (135). According to the Buddhist tradition, sexual yoga is a ritualization of sexual activity that is intertwined with the practice of an initiation ritual, or *dbang gi cho ga* in Tibetan. The ritual is called *abhiṣeka* which in Sanskrit means moisturizing, but semantically means empowering.⁴ As the chapter title suggests, Dalton discusses the nuances of sexual yoga as it is incorporated within different levels of ritualised initiation. In Buddhism, normal sexual activities are viewed as a cause for suffering, but within a proper Tantric ritual, such sexual activity can be a method that frees oneself from suffering.

More broadly, the fourth chapter provides greater clarity regarding the textual meaning and foundation of sexual yoga as well as its ultimate purpose. Finally, this chapter discusses the theme of the great perfection (Tib. *rdzogs chen*) (156), a view and practice that presents all of the qualities of the Buddhas as intrinsically inherent to the minds of all sentient beings. Nevertheless, the chapter would benefit by clarifying the term “great perfection,” and whether it is the practice of the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism or the resultant state culminating from the sexual union practice described in the *Mahāyoga* more broadly. Relevant to the focus of this chapter is the application of Tantric rituals in contemporary Buddhism. Unfortunately, there are examples of some religious teachers (e.g., Guru’s and Lama’s) who deploy the sexual yoga/union practice to take advantage of their students. This contemporary reality shows

4. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama and Jeffrey Hopkins, *The Kalachakra Tantra: Rite of Initiation* (London: Wisdom Publications, 1985), 66.

how this practice can have both positive and negative impacts for individual's and the Buddhist community at large. This book also cast doubts on the history of Buddhism in Tibet. For example, a persistent historical claim is that India was the source of Tibetan Buddhism, while other scholars – such as Matthew Kapstein – argue that China had been the primary source of Buddhism in Tibet.⁵ In the same vein, Carmen Meinert's study of the Dunhuang manuscript indicates the Chinese Chan's influence in Tibetan *rdzogs chen*.⁶ On the contrary, Dalton's research shows that the Tibetan Dunhuang manuscripts he deals with originated in central Tibet and were brought to Dunhuang (9). He adds that the translation projects undertaken in the Dunhuang cave-monasteries involved at least three languages: Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese. However, the translation project was later interrupted and discontinued for unclear reasons. These claims are a unique contribution of Dalton's study, because it shows that instead of a Chinese Buddhism influence in Tibet in the ninth century, Tibetan Buddhism, including its texts, might have had a greater impact on Chinese Buddhism.

Due to the complex orthographic writing of the Tibetan language, the author faced serious challenges identifying various Tibetan handwriting styles and abbreviations; a challenge that Dalton executed well when differentiating and decoding them. Despite the strengths of Dalton's text, a few areas of his analysis could be further unpacked. For example, situating the current tantric ritual manuals within the old tantric tradition (Tib. *sngags rnying ma ba*) or in the new tantric tradition (*sngags gsar ma ba*) in Tibetan Buddhism and

5. Matthew Kapstein, *Buddhism between Tibet and China* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2009), 3.

6. Carmen Meinert, "The Conjunction of Chinese Chan and Tibetan Rdzogs Chen Thought: Reflections on the Tibetan Dunhuang Manuscripts IOL Tib J 689-1 and Pt 699," in *Contributions to the Cultural History of Early Tibet*, ed. Matthew Kapstein and Brandon Dotson (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 239.

examining them from their perspectives might be a better approach to this topic. Indeed, within the new tantric tradition, one can find an extensive discussion of the four types of initiation: 1) the vase initiation (Tib. *bum dbang*), 2) the secret initiation (*gsang dbang*), 3) the wisdom initiation (*sher dbang*), and 4) the word initiation (*tshig dbang*).⁷ Understanding these initiations in the Tantric Buddhist tradition could complement Dalton's analysis of the initiation. Lastly, inclusion of English transliteration (Wylie Tibetan) of the Tibetan texts in hands alongside their English translations will help Tibetan hermeneutics to recognise the different orthographic styles used in the manuscripts. Overall, and being myself a member of Tantric Tibetan Buddhism as well as a scholar in the field, who has lived with, studied, and practiced these ritual manuals for more than three decades, I can confidently say that *Conjuring the Buddha* is a well-researched and essential work, showcasing Jacob Dalton's expertise in Tantric Buddhism and the Dunhuang manuscripts. This book will undoubtedly prove invaluable to scholars and students in the field, offering a profound exploration of Buddhist tantric rituals and Dunhuang manuscripts.

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7. Daniel Cozort, *Highest Yoga Tantra: An Introduction to the Esoteric Buddhism of Tibet* (New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1986), 34.