

“With the Help of *Sarasvatī*: The Challenges of Translating and Interpreting Tibetan Buddhist Ritual Texts”

Sarah F. Haynes, *Western Illinois University*

Tibetan Buddhist ritual is a topic that is just now receiving the attention it deserves.¹ Until recently scholars of Tibetan Buddhism have paid more attention to the philosophical traditions rather than the rich ritual practices. This paper takes a step in the direction towards remedying the gap in scholarship on Tibetan Buddhist ritual. The following is based on the experience of translating Tibetan Buddhist ritual texts. The intentions of this paper are to highlight the challenges of translating and interpreting esoteric ritual texts and to reflect upon the function of Tibetan Buddhist ritual texts, highlighted by my experiences working with a Tibetan Buddhist monk in India. Specifically, this paper argues for a performative approach in analyzing Tibetan Buddhist ritual material.

The foundation for this discussion is a collection of Tibetan Buddhist ritual texts written in honour of the goddess *Sarasvatī* (*dbyangs can ma*). Much is known about *Sarasvatī* in her Hindu context, but little has been revealed about her role in Tibetan Buddhism. This paper is based on my translation of nineteen ritual texts devoted to *Sarasvatī* in her Tibetan Buddhist ritual context. The texts fall within the category of esoteric tantric rituals, primarily *homa* and *sādhana*. What follows are reflections upon this process.

Setting the Foundation: *Sarasvatī* and her Ritual Texts

Sarasvatī is a goddess most commonly known in her Hindu forms. She is typically portrayed as a beautiful peaceful goddess associated with learning and music. Very little scholarship has examined the forms in which this goddess manifests in Tibetan Buddhism. *Sarasvatī*'s representations in

1. See the forthcoming book by Jose Cabezon *Tibetan Buddhist Ritual*.

Tibetan Buddhism mimic what is seen in Hinduism, but she develops many forms including a very wrathful tantric goddess (*dmag zor gyal mo*). The texts under consideration here are *homa* and *sādhana* devoted to several of *Sarasvatī*'s Tibetan Buddhist manifestations.

The first type of ritual manual under consideration is the *homa*. A *homa* is a fire ritual or oblation in the form of burnt offerings that finds its origins in the *Vedic* traditions of pre-Buddhist India. *Homa* are related to conventional objects and desires and are supplementary rituals that involve both mundane and supra-mundane deities (Snellgrove, 238–239). A *homa* can exist, as can a *sādhana*, independently or can be incorporated within larger rituals, such as a consecration. Another similarity between the performance of *homa* and *sādhana* are that both are only effective in so far as there is a self-identification between the practitioner and the deity.

A *sādhana* is a practice manual, literally a “means of achievement” that aims to guide the practitioner through meditative visualizations, the goal of which is the identification with the *yidam* (tutelary or meditational deity). A *yidam* is often talked about as a symbol or a manifestation of what the practitioner aims to embody. Just as a complete worldview is presented in the *tantras* a *yidam* represents the true nature of reality (Dreyfus, 19). Mills correctly identifies the meditational deity as much more than a symbol; it represents a potential and the practice of deity yoga, is a process of truth creation whereby the practitioner's sense of truth and relationship in the world is transformed (Mills, 120). Therefore, the rituals contained within a *sādhana*, as provided by the *tantra*, serve as the means for experiencing the non-duality of everything (Bentor, 3).

Each *sādhana* is divided into the following sections: homage, preliminaries (*sngon 'gro*), practice (*dnegos gzhi*) and conclusion (*rjes 'jug*). The method of division is based on the general structure of *sādhanas*. For example, a *sādhana* generally begins with a statement of homage whereby the deity of the text is revered. This is followed by a set of preliminary practices that usually includes going for refuge, the four immeasurables, generating a mind bent on enlightenment and a reiteration of the bodhisattva commitment, followed by the seven-limbed practice. These preliminary practices are always concluded by a mantra on emptiness.

The preliminaries lead into the main practice. The main practice includes the descriptions of the deity and the meditations and visualizations that are to be done in order to embody their qualities. These meditations

and visualizations vary significantly depending on the deity and the level of tantric practice. Generally, the practitioner visualizes himself/herself as the deity. However, the deity may only be generated in front. The practitioner recites the mantra of the deity, makes offerings, and expresses homage. The *sādhana* usually concludes with a reiteration of the importance and value of the deity. The qualities that will be embodied by the practitioner and the results of the practice are the typical topics with which these texts conclude.

Regarding the practices included in the *homa* and *sādhana* there are clearly several levels² and types of practice being demonstrated. The *Sarasvatī* ritual texts reflect more than low-level practices, showing the practitioner involved in meditations and visualizations that include deity yoga (*lha'i rnal 'byor*)³ and the manipulation of the subtle body. Deity yoga is the union of 'method' and 'wisdom' in tantric practice wherein both are cultivated simultaneously so that they become firmly and quickly established in the "continuum of one's consciousness" (Powers, 238). Deity yoga involves practices in which "the subtle consciousness that meditates on emptiness is manifested in a physical form embodying compassion. This unites wisdom and compassion within the continuum of a single consciousness, allowing one to amass the collections of merit and wisdom simultaneously" (Powers, 238). After completing the requisite preliminaries and engaging in deity yoga, the practitioner dissolves *Sarasvatī* into oneself whereupon one engages in visualizations that focus on the movement of energy⁴ through the nerve centres and channels (*cakras/khor lo* and *nāḍīs/rtsa*). This process of inner visualization is limited to higher-level tantric practice. For instance, the *kriyā-tantra* or action tantra is limited to external practices such as physical offerings to images of deities, ritual bathing and purification activities. The *caryā-tantra* or performance tantra emphasizes both external activities and internal meditations and yogic techniques, focusing on 'the generation of the deity in front'. On the other hand, *yoga-tantra* focuses on the generation of oneself as the deity and no longer as a

2. The four levels of tantric practice according to the *gsar ma pas*: *kriyā-tantra* (*bya rgyud*), *caryā-tantra* (*spyod rgyud*), *yoga-tantra* (*rnal 'byor rgyud*), and *anuttarayoga-tantra* (*bla na med rgyud*).

3. For further information about deity yoga see: the Dalai Lama and Jeffrey Hopkins translation of Tsong Khapa in *Deity Yoga*.

4. This energy is often called the *thig le* and is equated with the *bodhicitta* and in higher tantric practice it is equated with semen.

devotee to the *yidam*.⁵ “One visualizes oneself and the archetypal deity as separate beings, and then one causes the deity to enter oneself. In highest yoga tantra (*anuttara-yoga-tantra*) one develops a profound awareness of one’s body as being composed of subtle energies called winds. One then generates oneself as a fully enlightened buddha composed entirely of these subtle energies and possessing a buddha’s wisdom consciousness” (Powers, 244). Therefore, this breakdown of the classes of tantra (according to the *gsar ma pas*) shows that the *Sarasvatī sādhanas* reflect a variety of the practices, from the lowest to the highest-level tantras. This indicates that the goddess has the power, ability and qualities to be engaged as a wrathful deity and manifests some of the most complex meditative and yogic practices of Tibetan Buddhism.

The Nature of Tantric Textual Analysis

The following issues will be addressed in relationship to the process of textual analysis and interpretation of esoteric ritual texts:

1. The position of the translator,
2. The traditional methods of interpretation,
3. The performative approach to textual interpretation, and
4. The question of making esoteric teachings public.

As a relative outsider to Tibetan Buddhism, that is, as a non-ethnic Tibetan, a comparatively inexperienced practitioner, and a scholar of Buddhism for many years, how should one purport to render an accurate translation of esoteric ritual texts? The argument is often made that one cannot truthfully portray a religious tradition without having experiential knowledge. Another common argument is that esoteric texts, like *homa* and *sādhana*, should not be made public. How does one justify the decision to translate these esoteric ritual texts?

A modern translator is faced with many difficulties, but a translator of esoteric ritual texts is faced with even more obstacles. Therefore, the translator of Tibetan Buddhist (tantric) texts often experiences problems

5. Further divisions exist in these four categories of practice, i.e., yoga with signs and yoga without signs.

not faced by translators of other languages and religious texts.⁶ Pathak notes the multidimensionality of Tibetan Buddhist literature in his analysis of the problems experienced by a translator of Tibetan Buddhist literature (Pathak, 45–50). Pathak discusses several of the key issues in translating Tibetan Buddhist texts, that is, issues of providing a free translation or a verbatim translation or of translating Buddhist technical terms where no English equivalent exists or of capturing the tone and “serenity” of the Tibetan text (Pathak, 45–47). These issues of methodology need to be dealt with by a translator during the actual process of translation. What is of even greater importance for the translation of tantric texts is the prospective formulae proposed by Pathak for translation he has developed.

The methodological steps addressed in Pathak’s formulae have been undertaken during both the process of translation and textual interpretation of the *Sarasvatī* ritual texts. In summary, Pathak suggests the following:

- 1) the compilation of a bibliography of text translated into western languages that are applicable to the texts being translated/examined, 2) established usage of a Tibetan-English concordance and a Tibetan-Sanskrit dictionary, 3) associating oneself with a learned Tibetan scholar/practitioner, 4) the addition of notes in the translation to clarify any possible confusion regarding the methodology and word choice, 5) acknowledgment of the traditional Tibetan methods of interpretation, 6) an overall lucidity of the language while engaged in translation, 7) the inclusion of appendices that outlines difficulties experienced by the translator (Pathak, 48–49).

One of the most important points made by Pathak is the second issue I mentioned above—i.e., the traditional Tibetan methods of interpretation. The hermeneutical methods (*bshad thabs*) undertaken by indigenous Tibetan Buddhist scholars are essential in providing an accurate translation and rendition of the texts. One of the weaknesses of western scholarship regarding Tibetan Buddhist literature is the inability of scholars to take into consideration *sandhāya bhāṣā* (coded-language)—the interplay of *neyārtha/drang ba’i don* (implicit meaning) and *nītartha/nges pa’i don* (explicit meaning). In order to translate and represent accurately the contents of esoteric-tantric materials, one needs to recognize the polysemic nature of these texts. Thus, in direct relation to the polysemy of tantric texts, Thurman

6 For a comprehensive examination of these issues see *Buddhist Translations: Problems and Perspectives*. Lama Doboom Tulku, ed., New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1995.

argues that their esoteric nature cannot be ignored.⁷ “To put it very bluntly, if you can say that the aim in the exoteric Centrist and Idealist schools is *clarity*, then the aim in the esoteric tantric traditions is, ‘clearly’, *obscurity*” (Thurman 1988, 121). The act of simply acknowledging the esoteric nature of tantric texts is not sufficient. In the process of interpretation one must find and utilize an appropriate method that recognizes and accounts for the *obscurity*. Thurman notes, “This metaphysical background [the world-view presented in the *anuttara-yoga-tantras*] is too often taken for granted because one wants to talk about the hermeneutical issues, the elegant technicalities of textual interpretations. But understanding the Buddhist world view is essential to the discussion” (Thurman 1988, 124). Furthermore, this world-view, the context presented in tantric texts, is essentially an universe of possibilities, that is one of multiple interpretations and perspectives. This world-view presented in tantric texts is contingent upon the level of practice to which the text belongs and also the degree of spiritual and meditative achievement of the practitioner. One tantric practitioner may interpret the same text in an entirely different manner than another practitioner.

The third issue that deserves attention is the performative approach—i.e., the interpretative techniques of indigenous Tibetan Buddhist scholar-practitioners, in addressing the nature of the texts, and the esoteric nature of the tantric based ritual texts directly relate to the primary hermeneutical technique utilized here in the interpretation of the *Sarasvatī* ritual manuals. As Thurman notes, “. . . it is clear that the hermeneutical enterprise in this tradition is an essential part of praxis on whatever level, an essential vehicle on the way to enlightenment” (Thurman 1978, 23). If from the perspective of the Tibetans, hermeneutics is a necessary part of one’s practice towards enlightenment, then the modern translator must not ignore what has been said by Tibetan Buddhist scholars and practitioners. If one is to acknowledge the nature of these texts while translating them, then it should be done wholly. That is, simply accounting for the ideas of coded-language and the explicit and implicit meanings is not sufficient. One needs to acknowledge and integrate into one’s methodological technique the performative nature of these ritual texts. This perspective is evident and ultimately valid when one takes into consideration that when the Tibetans translated these tantric texts from Sanskrit they approached their own translations from an experiential

7. See Thurman “Buddhist Hermeneutics” and “Vajra Hermeneutics”.

perspective. In relation to the translation of the word *bodhisattva* Guenther notes:

When the Indian Buddhist key-terms were rendered into Tibetan the Tibetans recognized the dynamic character of experience and dealt with these terms hermeneutically. The emphasis, on their part, therefore, has always been on 'understanding' which is a participating in ever new and fresh ways to fathom 'what it means to be', rather than a standing aloof in splendid subjectivity and merely perceiving dead 'objects' which do not mean anything" (Guenther 1978, 40).

Guenther's discussion of the translation of *bodhisattva* is applicable to the translation of the entirety of tantric texts. The Tibetan translators were seeking an understanding of what they were translating because they realized the dynamic nature of these texts and their inherent performativity.⁸ These ritual texts are not simply meant to be read or memorized by the practitioner but, are to be enacted either mentally or physically.

As a translator I acknowledge my perspective leans more towards that of an outsider, or an etic point of view. Therefore, in line with the formulae of Pathak, I consulted a learned Tibetan (Buddhist) scholar and practitioner after my initial translation of the *Sarasvatī* ritual texts. The accuracy of my translations has been further assured by consulting someone who is an insider to the tradition. While one hundred percent accuracy cannot be guaranteed from all perspectives, the commentaries provided by the Tibetan Buddhist scholar-practitioner provided insight into the text which otherwise would not have been possible from my own perspective. In regards to making esoteric texts public, scholars and translators of tantric texts are often criticized. However, the issue of public accessibility to tantric texts is not as much a taboo as in the past. In the last fifty years, a considerable number of tantric texts, from the lowest levels to the highest levels of tantric practice have been translated by both western scholars and Buddhist practitioners. For instance, the current Dalai Lama has himself endorsed the translation

8. Kawamura notes that not all Tibetan Buddhist texts can be interpreted based on traditional Indian methods of interpretation (Kawamura, 367). In particular, tantric texts of a higher level require different hermeneutical strategies due to the multiplicity of meanings inherent in the words of the text.

of tantric practice texts.⁹ Therefore, the decision to translate the tantric texts no longer needs justification. Moreover, it seems reasonable to make these teachings public to a certain extent in order to correct the public opinions regarding tantra, because tantra has become sensationalized and distorted by western media sources and public figures. Furthermore, a translation of a tantric text does not fully reveal the meaning behind the practices. As noted earlier, these texts have multiple meanings and the average person most likely would not recognize the implicit meaning of the text.

The Nature and Function of Tibetan Buddhist Ritual Texts and Performance

As a combination of different meditational rituals, prayers, visualizations, and hand gestures, *sādhana*s represent the characteristics of an enlightened being (Powers, 240). Furthermore, from a ritual studies and performance theory perspective, it is important to note that the aim of the ritual manuals is to direct the practitioner to begin to manifest the characteristics of enlightenment and the enlightened deity through repeated practice. “Tantric adepts develop the ability to reconstitute ‘reality,’ which is completely malleable for those who train in yogas involving blissful consciousnesses realizing emptiness” (Powers, 242). Therefore, it is clear that *sādhana*s are indispensable to tantra, thus Tibetan Buddhist practice.

Similarly, the ritual of fire offering (*homa*) has found an important niche in Tibetan Buddhist practice. The *homa* has been studied comprehensively in relation to its Vedic origins.¹⁰ This includes detailed studies of the ritual in East Asian Buddhism.¹¹ Therefore, this section will briefly outline the development of *homa* and its integration into Tibetan Buddhism. Even though the Tibetans need not to justify their inclusion of this ritual of pre-Vedic origin, it is beneficial to provide an overview of its historical

9. The current Dalai Lama has endorsed or written the introductions to several translations of tantric texts. For example, in the introduction to *A Manual of Ritual Fire Offerings*, the Dalai Lama writes: “Traditionally Tantra is supposed to be kept secret. However, this unique path is often subject to severe misunderstandings, which are more harmful than the partial lifting of secrecy.”

10. For in-depth discussions on the Vedic origins of *homa* see: Payne 1991, 40–50, Staal, Tachikawa, and Knipe.

11. See: Strickmann 1983, Payne 1991, and Saso.

development and integration into the set of Tibetan Buddhist practice. “While Hinduism may dress later practices in the terms of vedic rituals, thereby rendering them canonical and orthodox, Tibetan Buddhism stands in no need of vedic authority” (Bentor 2000, 595–596). The Tibetans felt it was not necessary to label this ritual as heterodox as they did not have to answer to Hindu ideas of authenticity.

Historically, in India the ritual of fire offering possibly originated with the arrival of the Indo-Europeans or Aryans (Payne 1991, 36). Thus, the origins of *homa* pre-date the Vedic period in India. *Agni* was and is the deity central to the fire offering ritual,¹² and it is so even in the *homās* of Tibetan Buddhism. This points to the continuing importance of *Agni*, even in Buddhist practice, regardless of his origins. It appears that fire offering rituals were highly popular in ancient India, to the point where the Buddhists could not disregard them and ultimately, could not disregard the god that is central to the success of the ritual (Bentor 2000, 594). Thus, the Buddhists of ancient India incorporated this ritual into their religious practices, and this in turn eventually led the Tibetans to merge the fire offering ritual into their own practices. Bentor notes:

... over the course of time, and despite the positions taken in early Buddhist scriptures such as the *Dīghanikāya*, the fire rituals of vedic origins were nevertheless eventually appropriated by Buddhism as one of many different means that might be employed on the path to *nirvāṇa*—a phenomenon not unique to fire rituals. In an attempt to underline superiority of a certain practice, it was contrasted with another popular ritual, which in some way resembled it. Thanks to this resemblance the contrasted practices eventually merged together. This is common within the Buddhist religion, and even more so in Tibetan Buddhism, with its strong tendencies toward synthesis (Bentor 2000, 594–595).

Tibetan Buddhists have continued the practice of fire offering rituals in their modern liturgical ceremonies with only slight modifications to how the *homa* appeared in the Vedic period; thus they retained the essential characteristics over several many centuries (Skorupski, 403). Strickmann suggests that because of its popularity in Buddhism the ritual of fire offering was seen as an important factor in the development of tantric practices.

12. For further information regarding the significance of *Agni* see: Ellison Banks Findly's Ph.D. Diss. *Aspects of Agni: Functions of the Rg Vedic Fire*.

Comme le rituel védique avant lui, le bouddhisme tantrique est pénétré du culte du feu, qui est au coeur d'une multitude de mythes et de légendes. En raison de la place centrale qu'occupe généralement le feu dans la culture et le rite, et de son rôle de signifiant universel, le *homa* a peut-être servi de catalyseur à l'assimilation tantrique. Pour les bouddhistes en particulier, le *homa* était le rite païen par excellence (Strickmann 1996, 339).

Strickmann posits that because of the extent to which *homās* have penetrated Buddhist tantric practices and because of the universal nature of fire rituals in general, it served as a catalyst for tantric assimilation and continues to be one of the most important ritual practices. Strickmann is correct in stating the importance of the fire ritual in tantric Buddhism, i.e., Tibetan Buddhist practices; however, it seems difficult to pinpoint the *homa* as a catalyst for tantric assimilation in Buddhism. What can be said is that the “continuous employment of internalized fire rituals in Tibet appears to be part of a general process of interiorization that took place in both Hinduism and Buddhism, especially in their systems of Yoga and Tantra” (Bentor 2000, 596).

Regardless of their derivation, *sādhana*s and *homās* share many characteristics that shape the essential understanding of how Tibetan Buddhist rituals function. Rituals encompass a scope of activity that reaches from “ritualization among animals through ordinary interaction ritual to highly differentiated religious liturgy. It includes all types of ritual: celebrations, political ceremonies, funerals, weddings, initiations, and so on” (Grimes 1990, 9). There is absolutely no doubt that the practices involved in *sādhana*s and *homās* are rituals. However, in order to provide an understanding of the nature and function of these rituals, they first need to be categorized and properly defined. Having recognized that ritual studies encompasses a wide range of activities, events and motivations Grimes has developed six modes of ritual sensibility:

... ritual pervades more of our life than just an isolated realm designated ‘religious’ ... as a beginning, I propose to distinguish six modes of ritual sensibility: ritualization, decorum, ceremony, liturgy, magic, and celebration. I regard these, not so much as types of ritual, as sensibilities, or embodied attitudes, that may arise in the course of a ritual. If one of them dominates, then, of course, I would speak of a ‘ritual of decorum’, for example (Grimes 1982, 35).

Among such “modes of sensibility”, the mode dominating the practices in the *sādhana* and *homa* is *liturgy*, not excluding the possibility for other modes to interject and overlap. About *liturgy*, Grimes states:

I call ‘liturgical’ any ritual action with an ultimate frame of reference and the doing of which is felt to be of cosmic necessity . . . Liturgical power is not mere force, but is a mode of tapping the way (*tao*) things flow, connecting with the order and reason (*logos*) things manifest. Liturgy is a way of coming to rest in the heart of cosmic change and order . . . Liturgy is a symbolic action in which a deep receptivity, sometimes in the form of meditative rites or contemplative exercises is cultivated (Grimes 1982, 43).

Having identified these rituals (texts) as liturgical in nature,¹³ that is, as composed of actions that are done with the ultimate frame of reference in mind, i.e., enlightenment or buddhahood, the practitioner is “coming to rest” in the idea of change, that is embodying the characteristics of one’s meditational deity (*iṣṭa-devatā/yidam*). We can now see that the first similarity is the liturgical aspect. Thus, a ritual approach and a performative hermeneutic is the best method for interpreting these rituals and texts.

According to Grimes, “Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation, especially the interpretation of ancient or foreign documents. A broader view of hermeneutics does not restrict itself to ancient texts, but includes consideration of contemporary actions as well” (Grimes 1982, intro). Furthermore, a performatively grounded hermeneutic also exposes the ritual avoidance that is still deep in the heart of post-Protestant theology” (Grimes 1986, 6). This ritual avoidance has characterized the position of most academics in the history of Buddhist Studies. A performatively grounded hermeneutic will be the approach utilized in the case study that follows.

A second similarity between *sādhana* and *homa* is the ultimate frame of reference to which Grimes referred to as “cosmic change” or in this case, transformation. The transformative power of both *sādhana* and *homa* is contingent upon the practitioner’s performance and continual practice of the rituals. The practitioner’s intent, experiencing buddhahood, is the *raison d’être* of these rituals. While one may engage in these rituals for purification or blessing, the ultimate frame of reference remains the goal of embodying

13. For a discussion of liturgy and performance see Rappaport p. 118. “Without performance, there is no ritual, no liturgical order.”

the qualities of enlightened beings. This entails an inner transformation that is characterized by an experience of the non-duality of all things. “In the *sādhana* it [transformation]¹⁴ serves to bring the meditators to the exalted dimension where they realize or emulate the realization of the non-duality of ordinary conventional level of appearances and actual truth” (Bentor 1996, 3). From a Mahāyāna perspective this experience of non-duality results in the practitioner remaining in samsara out of great compassion and wisdom in the form of one’s meditational deity to help all sentient beings (Bentor 1996, 4).

Similarly, the inner transformation that occurs during the ritual practice of *homa* results in a new outlook on reality. “The transformative power of the fire is especially significant in tantric ritual, where the attainment of an inner transformation is the prime objective” (Bentor 2000, 596). The practitioner engages in external rituals of purification, but the interiorization of fire through meditative practices and visualizations aims at the unification of the ritual practitioner with the enlightened deity.

Other similarities exist, but suffice it to say at this juncture that owing to the similarities between these two types of rituals stated above, we can now proceed to an analysis of them from the perspectives of ritual studies and performance theory.

The transformative qualities inherent in these texts serve as the link between *homa* and *sādhana* and among theories proposed by ritual studies scholars and performance theorist because, in general, ritual performance is about transformation. There is a strong need to locate Tibetan Buddhist ritual texts in performance theory because these texts are inherently performative. Simply stated, “Ritual is performance . . .” (Schechner 1986, 361). A handful of scholars have begun to examine Tibetan Buddhist ritual and ritual texts from a ritual studies and performance theory perspective. However, further work is required in order to come to an understanding of Tibetan Buddhist ritual and ritual texts in light of their ritual and performance aspects.

In relation to the Zen kōan tradition, Stephenson has recognized two trends through which scholars have tended to approach this Zen practice, trends that are also applicable in this study. Stephenson writes:

14. Brackets mine.

The reception and interpretation of the Zen kōan tradition has been dominated by certain theoretical and methodological trends. These trends may be conveniently divided into two camps, one populated by experientialists, the other by textualists. Experientialists approach kōans from the perspectives of psychology, mysticism, and religious experience. Textualists employ philological, historical—critical, and hermeneutical methods and theories in dealing with kōan collections. Between the two groups there are methodological and interpretative tensions, often centered on the question of language . . . (Stephenson, 475).

In order to avoid the pitfalls of these two positions, Stephenson proposes a third standpoint based on ritual studies and performance theory. The suggestions Stephenson make are quite valid and useful tools for an analysis of Tibetan Buddhist ritual texts. The theories offered by ritual and performance theory are interdisciplinary, but have a shared interest in understanding the “. . . connections between everyday behaviour, dramatic performance, and ritual action . . .” (Stephenson, 476).

Approaching *homa* and *sādhana* in terms of performance and ritual action aims at avoiding an overly philological methodology that provides only one ‘piece of the puzzle’. Furthermore, a performative hermeneutic prevents one from falling deep into the experientialists perspective. Sharf (1995) argues against the extreme position of those who interpret Buddhist ritual from the experiential perspective. However, Gyatso (1999) in response to Sharf’s argument correctly notes that the Tibetan Buddhist meditative experience differs from other Buddhist traditions. Gyatso notes: “Nor can we in any event draw a strict line between meditation and ritual performance—especially in the case of tantric Buddhism with its elaborately structured visualizations, which, as will be shown, are sometimes supposed precisely to elicit kinds of experiences” (Gyatso 1999, 117). Therefore, as will be shown, Sharf’s argument needs to be contextualized in the realm of a specific type of Buddhism, specifically Zen Buddhism. Gyatso offers a position that acknowledges the need to avoid psychologizing Buddhist ritual to an extent, but one needs to realize that Tibetan Buddhism emphasizes the cultivation of meditative experiences.

Therefore, Stephenson’s outline of the two trends, while based on Sharf’s article, needs to be examined in light of Gyatso’s inclusion of the importance of meditative experience in Tibetan Buddhist tantric ritual practice. What results is the following case study that approaches these tantric rituals and ritual texts from a performative perspective that takes into consideration the

meditative experiences that are cultivated and embodied by the practitioner of Tibetan (tantric) Buddhism.

The Performative Reading of Ritual Texts: A Case Study¹⁵

The following case study is based upon a four-month research trip to India. While in India I consulted a Tibetan Buddhist scholar-practitioner at the *Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies* regarding the translations of the *Sarasvatī homa* and *sādhana*. What followed was an unsolicited experience, that is, what was intended to be a simple consultation and reading of Tibetan texts turned into ritual performances.

In the beginning my early morning meetings with my Tibetan teacher were very traditional. That is, I sat while he read the texts and told me how he would translate the texts and what he believed to be their implicit meaning. We engaged in a very traditional Tibetan method of textual instruction (*gzhung khrid/dpe khrid*);¹⁶ the teacher provided me, the student, with an oral commentary on the texts. Eventually a certain level of trust was earned and after my level of knowledge was gauged I realized my teacher was beginning to “perform” the texts while we sat and read. For instance, when coming to a part in the text that involved *mantra* recitation my teacher would change his tone and accompany his chanting with the proper *mudrās*. His performances triggered a number of questions that I will now address.

I began to question the placement of authority in relation to both the ritual text and the teacher. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition authority is invariably associated with enlightened beings. A direct association with the Buddha is considered the highest marker of authority or authenticity, that is *buddhavacana* (words spoken by the Buddha).¹⁷ Transmission (*lung*) in

15. A version of this section was presented at the American Academy of Religion Conference in November 2006 as “Character Transformation: Authority and Improvisation in Tibetan Buddhist Ritual Texts.”

16. For a discussion on the nature of Tibetan textual instruction see Dreyfus, page 151.

17. On the origins and authenticity of the *Vajrayāna*: They derive from the Buddha’s dharmakāya, the unoriginated “body of reality depicted as Samantabhadra in Nyingma traditions and Vajradhāra in the New Translation schools. Yet, for human beings in general, the dharmakāya is inaccessible; therefore, out of compassion, the primordial dharmakāya Buddha takes shape in saṃbhogakāya and nirmāṇakāya forms . . . the Vajrayāna was taught by the Buddha to human beings. In this rendering, the Buddha gives the tantric teachings for the first time to King Indraabhūti, ruler of the land of Uddiyana. In the story, recounted here with

the Tibetan tradition dictates that the teaching becomes authoritative when it has been passed down from one authorized teacher to another, hopefully within a lineage that is unbroken and can be traced back to the original author (of the text) (Dreyfus, 155–156). An authentic lineage of teachers are said to have maintained the sayings of the Buddhas as related in tantric texts on which these ritual manuals were based and later commented upon by verifiable Indian masters (Bentor 1996, 63). So, where is the authority of the ritual text in this equation? While reading through the ritual texts my teacher would at times feel the need to “correct” the text and at other times was adamant not to go beyond the written word. I began to wonder where he felt the authority of the text superseded his own authority. On the one hand, as a highly ranked teacher he must have some authority, however, the authority of the teacher is not absolute (Dreyfus, 157).

The effectiveness of Tibetan Buddhist ritual is dependent upon correct performance by a qualified teacher or practitioner. I realized the authority of the text took priority over my teacher when it came to the correct recitation of *mantras* and other parts of the text that required a literal rendering and an accurate performance in order to attain the transformative results. The Buddha is believed to have established the proper method in the tantras that were later taught and commented upon by learned Indian and Tibetan teachers. Straying from the correct manner of performance may possibly nullify the whole ritual, resulting in an unsuccessful performance (Bentor 1996, 213). Furthermore, the beginning of Tibetan Buddhist ritual manuals often provide methods to prevent such ineffectiveness, that is, they usually include a *mantra* that aims at correcting any faults in the performance of the ritual (Bentor 1996, 213–214).

Tibetan Buddhist texts are often riddled with grammatical mistakes, spelling errors and other faults made while the texts were being translated and copied into different editions. When happening upon these mistakes during our meetings my teacher was very much unwilling to correct these obvious errors when they would drastically alter the implicit meaning (*neyārtha/drang ba'i don*) of the text. However, at other times he was more willing to accept the totally unrelated and meaningless context rather than

commentary, the Buddha first appears in his *nirmāṇakāya* form and then, when he wishes to reveal the tantric teachings, manifests himself as the *sambhogakāya* Buddha at the center of a vast *maṇḍala* (Tārānatha quoted in Ray, 117–118).

mess with the literal word on the page. For instance, my teacher would not be willing to correct a mistake relating to the fundamentals of the text, such as an offering given during the recitation of a *mantra*. In this context his authority was secondary to that of the text or the words written by or linked to an enlightened being.

The authority of my teacher was primary in the context of exactly what we were engaged in, textual instruction. The authority of this highly ranked teacher was secured in the oral commentaries he provided in relation to the rituals. While he was unwilling to change words or even letters in the ritual manuals, even though the simple correction of an obvious spelling mistake would make more sense, he would use his training to authorize the commentaries he provided. His reluctance to fuss with the words in the ritual and acceptance of the meaninglessness can be directly related to the understanding that the proper performance of the rituals supersedes the meaning of the ritual actions (Bentor 1996, 63). Therefore, by changing even the slightest and minor of words could result in the nullification of the ritual performance. However, I suggest that the meaning of the rituals from a literal perspective may not be important, as seen by his reaction, but the implicit meaning, that is the meaning that ultimately transforms one's self and world-view is central to the entire ritual process. Therefore, correct recitation and the implicit meaning of the texts are most important. Thus to mess with the text means one is ultimately messing with one's world-view.¹⁸

A discussion of the "meaning" of ritual inevitably leads into a consideration of Staal's groundbreaking article "The Meaninglessness of Ritual". Staal's work focuses on Vedic ritual and because of the Vedic origin of *homa* and the similarities between Tibetan Buddhist tantric practice with those rituals he writes about, an examination of Tibetan Buddhist ritual in light of his work is not out of place. Staal argues that rituals are meaningless from a semantic point of view and are performed for their own sake. Staal writes:

18. This points to the contingent nature of both these rituals and to performance in general. Tibetan Buddhist rituals and performance are dependent upon the coming together of a multitude of actions (*mudrās*), words (*mantras*) and direction. Moreover, these rituals are inherently composite in nature and their efficacy is based on their proper performance. Performance is intrinsically a contingent process (Schieffelin, 197). This inherent contingency is accounted for in Tibetan Buddhist rituals as the authors of these ritual texts included a fail-safe for human error.

The performers are totally immersed in the proper execution of their complex tasks. Isolated in their sacred enclosure, they concentrate on correctness of act, recitation and chant. Their primary concern, if not obsession, is with rules. There are no symbolic meanings going through their minds when they are engaged in performing a ritual (Staal 1979, 3).

While I agree with Staal's argument that an accurate performance of the ritual is ideally essential, I think he incorrectly assumes an absence of symbolic meaning. For the Tibetan Buddhist practitioner the enactment of the rituals in *homa* and *sādhana* are littered with symbolic meanings. For instance, the Tibetan Buddhist tantric practitioner engages in mantra recitation and while doing so often visualizes the seed syllables (*bīja/sa bon*) in a variety of symbolic ways. In relation to the recitation of mantras, Staal sees them as meaningless because of the non-semantic features they display. “. . . the presence of non-semantic features in mantras does not necessarily mean that they are by that very fact not semantic, meaningless” (Thompson, 584). I agree with Thompson's stance on Staal's theory on the meaninglessness of mantras. While I believe a syntactic analysis can be fruitful, invariably it is representative of only one point of view. The point of view that results from an analysis of syntax is ingrained in philology.

Ultimately, what can be concluded from this discussion is that a systematic analysis based on syntax and the structure of the ritual is valuable to an extent. For instance, in relation to Tibetan Buddhist ritual it is relevant in that the performance of the texts includes a strict order of performance and a variety of prerequisites need to be completed beforehand. However, I believe this type of analysis is limited and in the fact that it does not account for the “messiness” of ritual performance. I suggest that the “messiness” of ritual and fallibility of the practitioner were recognized by the authors of these ritual texts, as suggested by the inclusion of the fail-safe. Therefore, because of the inherent experiential characteristics of ritual, a syntactic analysis or an analysis steeped in philological methodologies is not able to account for the disorder that occurs during ritual performance.

This raises two important issues regarding ritual performance and ritual texts: ritual stability and ritual modification. Schechner notes that rituals are always changing, including changes that are not limited to the texts, but include the style of performance, method of transmission, intricacies of gestures, etc., (Schechner 1986, 360). Slight changes at specific points in the performance of *homa* and *sādhana* can greatly affect the outcome

of the ritual. On the one hand, Schechner notes that ritual modification is not a problem. On the other, he states that rituals seek stability (Schechner, 362). In relation to tantric ritual practice, ritual modification is significantly problematic. Modification to tantric ritual not only counters *buddhavaṇana* but also results in messing with the practitioner's world-view and transformation. However, the stability that rituals seek out is the same stability that the practitioner seeks in one's quest for transformation. In both instances, the outcome of the ritual and its success is contingent upon stability, in mind and in practice.

A literal rendering and ultimately the desired outcome of these rituals are dependent upon proper memorization of certain parts of the "script" or manual. This becomes evident when one picks up a text and discovers that Tibetan Buddhist ritual manuals are often "incomplete". The authors of the texts presuppose a certain level of knowledge of the performer of the rituals. The texts follow a certain formulaic style and often when one comes to a certain step in the ritual one finds that the author will have included only the first few syllables or words of the *mantras*. My teacher, based on his monastic training, would then be able to fill in the gaps. It is here that I realized the importance of memorization in relation to Tibetan Buddhist ritual performance. It is well known that Tibetan Buddhism, and Buddhism in general, emphasizes the memorization of the important texts of their respective traditions. Therefore, Tibetan Buddhist teachers are able to recite from memory the key components of rituals. Through memorization one attempts to ingrain the text in one's mind to the point where exact recitation is enduring and accessible during the performance of rituals (Dreyfus, 93). However, these texts must also enlighten one's interaction with the world and simply being able to access pieces of information is not sufficient (Dreyfus, 92). Essentially the practitioners have memorized a script just as actors or musicians memorize a score. After much practice the script or score becomes ingrained in one's memory whereby the information becomes the means by which they manifest their potential and transform their world-view.

The incorporation of ritual devices and images is a significant factor in the outcome of tantric ritual practice. "Images are the central device of *sādhana* practice, the most common kind of tantric meditation . . . in the course of such a process special images are sometimes manipulated expressly to evoke meditative experiences" (Gyatso 1999, 123). Ritual

devices and images in tantric practice can be both physical and mental and can include *mudrās*, *mantras*, *thangkas*, and other ritual participants, particularly in rituals of sexual union. Here the issue of stability resurfaces; as the concrete nature of these devices and images indicate their purpose in ritual performance, they are utilized in order to make stable meditative experiences (Gyatso 1999, 124). In other words, the tantric practitioner aims at embodying the *yidam's* qualities, thus making permanent and stable the transformation that they have undergone. On the one hand these devices and images are very cerebral, i.e., mentally created as supports for ritual practice. On the other hand, these images are embodied in the actualized performance. Therefore, these devices and images have both physical and mental components where neither are considered more superior.¹⁹

When my teacher first started performing *mudrās* while reciting the *mantras*, I assumed he was using the *mudrās* as a mnemonic device. Maybe he was trying to fill in the blanks of the incomplete *mantras* by performing the corresponding *mudrās* thereby bringing the words to the surface that signified a connection between the physical act of hand gestures and the remembrance of mantras, a mind-body relationship.²⁰ My second thought was that he was “required” to fully engage in the ritual; and that a half-hearted reading of a ritual text was considered a negative act. The performance of *sādhana's*, whether incorporated into larger public ritual or during private meditation, requires a number of outward actions and inward meditations or visualizations. Perhaps there needs to be an attempt on the part of the practitioner in whatever context to be fully engaged, that is, to perform all the requisite acts of the ritual or be susceptible to *karmic* consequence. What becomes important then is the intention behind the action. Therefore, if my teacher performed the ritual halfheartedly while reading the text with me, that is, if he was unable to complete all required acts, at least he did what he could (i.e., *mantras* and *mudrās*, perhaps visualizations) with the right intention. From my perspective the performance would not be considered

19. Due to the nature of certain tantric ritual practices there has been a change over the centuries to use mental creations in lieu of the actual devices, i.e., the use of the *mudrā* (young girl) in ritual sexual union.

20. A useful analogy may be the need to act out a hand gesture in a nursery rhyme in order to remember the corresponding words, i.e., Three Little Pigs.

inauthentic regardless of his level of engagement and his positive intention would suffice as a balance to any negative *karma* accrued.

This points to the contradiction that exists between the ideal ritual practice and the actual ritual practice. The idea of ritual perfection is important for the outcome of the *sādhana*s and *homas* as attested to in the translations when fail-safes are added to amend errors and faults of the performance. Ideally, the practitioner is able to complete the visualizations in conjunction with the rest of the ritual as instructed in the text. However, to visualize vast fields of colourful Buddhas and bodhisattvas during a fast-paced ritual performance requires a high level of meditative ability. Therefore, while the ideal is that the practitioner would be able to complete the requisite ritual details, in actuality very few practitioners are able to fully engage in the ritual. Beyer writes:

The ability to achieve single-minded concentration on a vividly appearing picture is the result of long and really rather frustrating practice. We must remember—and this point should be emphasized—that the visualization is performed during a ritual; that is, the practitioner is reciting a text (which is either placed on a small table in front of him or which he has memorized) and the visualization takes place in time with the rhythmically chanted textual description of the evocation . . . The reading of the ritual text in the assembly hall often goes at breakneck speed, and the vast majority of monks are unable to visualize that quickly, if indeed they are able to visualize at all (Beyer, 71).

This reiterates the point that only those with a high level of meditative ability can keep pace with the ritual performance. “It would seem that contemporary scholars are not the only ones predisposed to ignore the disjunction between the textual ideal on the one hand, and the lived contingencies of religious practice on the other” (Sharf, 245). Does this lack of ritual perfection amount to fakery on the part of the practitioners? Religious fakery or lying about one’s practice, achievements, etc., need not be the downfall of these rituals, as the built-in fail-safes account for imperfections in the performance. In his discussion of Zen *kōan* practice Stephenson points to the inherent deception of ritual performance. “If fakery, cheating, and lying are potentially inherent in performance, and there seems little doubt this is the case, so too is the overcoming of the inauthentic” (Stephenson, 489). Even though the performance of *sādhana*s and *homas* likely possesses this inherent fakery they are not rendered

inauthentic. A lack of authenticity is rendered null and void by the intention of the practitioners and again the built-in guarantee of success.

From a performative point of view these ritual manuals are very much scripts. They loosely follow the same formula, with only the subject matter and characters changed. Having realized my teacher believed he lacked the authority to move beyond the words and framework of the rituals I began to question who, if anyone, had the authority to improvise within Tibetan Buddhist ritual. Just as the director or scriptwriter of a play often dictates who can or when improvisation occurs, who improvises within the context of Tibetan Buddhist ritual is selective. The “director” or “scriptwriter” who determines this in Tibetan Buddhist ritual would be an enlightened being. Let us say the Buddha is the scriptwriter who allows improvisation; who he selects would be, most likely, an enlightened being who can in a sense prove his/her worth or can trace one’s lineage back to someone like the scriptwriter himself, i.e., the Buddha. So, if the director/scriptwriter feels the actor is of any merit he/she may play with the words on the page. This decision or fitting criteria is based on experiential knowledge linked to the Buddha’s experiences of enlightenment and his teachings. Therefore, high-ranking teachers and highly realized beings would have the authority to make changes to the script. While significant changes to the structure of the ritual would not be done, highly advanced lamas and scholastically trained monks, such as abbots, are believed to possess the necessary level of ability to make changes (Bentor 1996, 60–61). Bentor notes however, that these changes tend to be relatively minor, not affecting the framework of the major ritual. In other words, the ability to improvise is selective, not everyone has the right to nor the authority to make changes to the ritual performance. And when changes occur they do not affect the foundation of the ritual.

Watching my teacher perform the texts also began to trigger analogies between Buddhist teacher-scholar-practitioner and actor and ritual text and script and the problem that exist with the relationship between Tibetan Buddhist rituals and the idea of performance. These rituals are definitely performances, whether embodied by a teacher in a private setting or enacted in the context of a public liturgy. However, performances are said to “create and make present realities vivid enough to beguile, amuse or terrify” (Schieffelin, 194). The argument can be made that the private performance of a *sādhana* neither amuses nor terrifies, that is there is no entertainment.

The “impulse to entertain”²¹ is not readily apparent in the performance of these Tibetan Buddhist rituals. However, I contend that because of the variety of settings in which these rituals are performed, especially when performed in a liturgical setting, perhaps with an audience of villagers, lay practitioners, etc. the need to engage the audience would most likely be of concern. The patron of the rituals, i.e., the villagers/audience would need to be satisfied with the performance. This leads me to the following question: does performance require an audience? I do not believe so in the Western sense. When a *sādhana* is performed in a private setting, that is, without a live audience, I argue that the assembly of visualized deities can be considered an audience and that the practitioner him/herself can be amused or terrified by the realities they are making present.

An inherent problem within these ritual texts is the idea of “selective improvisation” and creativity. One can argue Tibetan Buddhist ritual texts are by nature rigid and any attempts at flexibility or creativity will hinder the ritual process. In other words, only a select number of performers have the requisite abilities to improvise and be creative during Tibetan Buddhist ritual. Moreover, performativity itself implies some creativity, particularly the imaginative creation of a human world or social reality (Schieffelin, 198 & 205). However, *sādhana*s are essentially the construction of a new social reality or world-view. Therefore, I suggest that a creative process is in fact occurring; a creativity that does not hinder the outcome of the ritual. According to Schechner, performance is the catalyst for a transformation from one state, identity situation to another (Schechner 1977, 71). This is exactly what these rituals aim to do; their aim is to transform the world-view of the practitioner to the point where he or she ultimately manifests the characteristics of the meditational deity in a sense realizing the potential inherent within themselves.

The permanency of these rituals appears to contradict the nature of performativity. That is, there are intended long-lasting effects of *sādhana* and *homa*. The rituals aim at existing in more than the present. Here I believe a distinction should be made between placement of effect/result in relation to time. For instance, the performance is more of a fleeting experience for the audience, but the effects on the practitioner or actor is intended to be long lasting. In early stages of *sādhana* practice the effects

21. Schechner 1977, 87.

may indeed be transitory for the practitioner. However, as one continues to engage in these rituals and meditative practice the effects, that is, a transformation of self and world-view, will, hopefully, be firmly established within the practitioner. Therefore, one needs to take into consideration the abilities of the practitioner/performer in relation to meditative technique and spiritual attainment when examining the nature of Tibetan Buddhist ritual. Permanency contradicts the very nature of Buddhism, however, a transformation of self and world-view is a state of spiritual achievement that is indeed permanent.

This leads to a discussion of character creation. I began looking at the performer of the *sādhana* as an actor. In a sense he or she is more accurately a performer. Zarrilli in his discussion of *noh* drama makes reference to the internal psychophysical process that occurs for the *noh* actors (Zarrilli, 142). Zarrilli notes that this internal psychophysical process is the actor's inner preparations for the performance. For the Tibetan Buddhist practitioner the internal psychophysical process is in fact the performance. It is this process that allows for the transformation of self and world-view. Zarrilli continues his discussion noting that the "actor becomes one with the character". The performer of Tibetan Buddhist ritual differs from the *noh* actor only in the sense that when he or she aims to become one with the character it is with the hope that there will eventually be a permanency to this transformation. "Going into character" at first has a temporary status as it does for the *noh* actor, however, the intention on the part of the Tibetan Buddhist practitioner is to make this character his or her permanent self.

Ultimately these rituals *are* performances. Tibetan Buddhist ritual manuals serve as scripts that provide the lines to repeat and actions to perform. The Tibetan teacher/lama/monk depending on authority and status can theoretically be both scriptwriter/editor and actor. Whether he has the authority to improvise or whether there is a live audience present are not necessarily important. What is important is that there is within the *sādhana* and *homa* a ritual process of transformation occurring. With the proper training these texts serve as the tools that guide the performer into a new permanent reality where the *yidam* is no longer a symbol or potential but is what the performer has manifested.

Yet Another Function: Ritual Texts as Narratives

Finally, can ritual texts serve other purposes? Having examined the provenance of these *sādhana* and *homa*, translating and analyzing them has lead me to question whether these texts can function in other ways. I would like to suggest that *sādhana* and *homa* can function as two types of narratives: historical records and narrative stories.

First, trying to avoid a reductionist philological approach to these ritual texts I believe that in conjunction with the historical materials, i.e., colophon information and the authors and translators backgrounds, these ritual texts can serve as historical narratives. I suggest that together these sources can function as narratives on the development of ritual practices, therefore they function as textual records. What can be concluded from a study that puts ritual texts in juxtaposition with historical sources is that their importance goes beyond the instructions they provide and they can be considered sources for historical studies of the development of the ritual practices of Tibetan Buddhism.

Narrative theory consists of an intricate look at the function of the story, its characters and narrator. As a genre of literature, “. . . narrative is a form of communication which presents a sequence of events caused and experienced by characters” (Jahn, 2). The study of narrative involves the examination of the narrative situation, that is, the type of narrator of the story and the interaction with the characters who experience the reality of the story. Narrative can be represented in many forms, including texts, films, performances, pictures, scripts, etc. (Jahn, 19). Narrative theory usually distinguishes between the story and the discourse. The story is *what* is narrated, whereas, the discourse is *how* it is narrated (Jahn, 19).²² Therefore, to view *sādhana* and *homa* as narratives is not off base. As stated above, these ritual texts serve as scripts. These scripts are composed of the discourse of an authorial narrator. The story related by the narrator is one of the process of transformation of the character into the narrator.

Second, approaching ritual texts from a holistic point of view allows them to function as stories that inform the reader about the growth and role of the deity. In light of this and more importantly, as narratives these texts

22. Jahn further elucidates this distinction by saying that narrative is anything that tells or presents a story. A story is a sequence of events involving characters, p. 19.

provide information about the potential of the practitioner. Particularly, one can view these texts as stories being narrated by enlightened beings. The world-view that is attested to in the ritual texts is from the perspective of enlightened beings, specifically, the being that the practitioner is trying to embody. Therefore, ritual texts, as instruction manuals, present a narrative situation where the guidelines for transformation are from the perspective of a narrator with authority, the *yidam*, in this case, *Sarasvatī*. The authorial narrator²³ addresses the practitioner or the character in order to establish the correct practices that need to be done in order to embody the qualities of an enlightened being. Furthermore, this world-view is presented as a non-fictional reality, that is, the practitioner is to believe that the ultimate reality between these two types of rituals (*paramārtha-satya/don dam bden pa*) of an enlightened state of mind is achievable. In other words, the “fictitious” (*bhrānti/khrul pa*) or conventional world (*saṃvṛti-satya/kun rdzob kyi bden pa*) or state of mind in which the practitioner lives possesses the possibility for change. This change is made possible through the instructions provided in the ritual texts.

Examining ritual texts as narratives sheds light on the relationship between the deity and the practitioner. It becomes clear that the foundation of this relationship is based on trust and respect. That is, the practitioner in engaging in the practices of the text ultimately acknowledges that one reveres the deity as an authority figure. The deity possesses the qualities that the practitioner aims to have and in attempting to embody them the practitioner ultimately submits to the wisdom and experiences of the deity. This is a relationship where the practitioner trusts that the instruction manual, i.e., ritual text, as narrated by the enlightened being, will guide one to where one will eventually possess the qualities of that same narrator.

To bring this examination of ritual texts as narratives full circle it would be necessary to investigate how the practitioner views the text. That is, do *sādhana* and *homa* serve as more than models for their practice and means of achievement for enlightenment? Fieldwork is required to answer this question. However, I suggest that even if these texts are not viewed as anything other than instruction manuals, the foundation is present for them to serve as meaningful stories about the potentiality that exists. Because of their esoteric nature they would not be the fables or tales of Biblical

23. See Jahn p. 8.

narrative. Yet, their esoteric nature does not exclude them from existing as stories that function in a moral manner. Schechner notes, “performing a ritual, or a ritualized theatre piece or exercise, is both narrative (cognitive) and affective” (Schechner 1993, 240). Ultimately, there is a cognitive aspect to ritual and ritualized behaviour.

The purpose of entering into the above discussion was to show that ritual texts can serve as significant resources for determining historical developments in relation to Tibetan Buddhist ritual practice. Furthermore, an investigation into their narrative function revealed a relationship between the deity and the practitioner that is based on a multi-dimensional and gradually transforming reality. At the least this examination indicates that Tibetan Buddhist ritual texts are open to interpretations from different perspectives and that further research into how they operate is essential. The main reason that this is possible is that ritual can be so broadly defined and is very porous in nature (Schechner 1993, 228). Because of the dynamic nature of ritual and ritualized behaviour the ritual texts of Tibetan Buddhism are thus susceptible to polysemy. Thus, “. . . rituals are not safe deposits vaults of accepted ideas but in many cases dynamic performative systems generating new materials and recombining traditional actions in new ways” (Schechner 1993, 228).

The Future of Tibetan Buddhist Ritual Studies

As a whole, the contents of this paper demonstrate the need for scholars of Tibetan Buddhism to first acknowledge the importance of ritual for more than their philosophical teachings. This illustrates how essential it has become for scholars to take another road in the study of ritual. One goal of this paper was to put forward ideas that stimulate discussion on the role of ritual in Tibetan Buddhism. Further research is required in this field and it is my hope that this paper will act as a stepping stone in the right direction. This next step should consist of a combination of two methods that acknowledges the inherent philosophical basis of ritual performance, that is the motivation that drives the experience, where the introduction of a performance based hermeneutic provides another alternative for scholars to study ritual texts such as *homa* and *sādhana*.

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