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STUDIES IN INDIAN AND TIBETAN BUDDHISM

HISTORIES OF TIBET

Essays in Honor of Leonard W. J. van der Kuip

Edited by Kurtis R. Schaeffer, Jue Liang,
and William A. McGrath



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Some Interesting Passages from the *Noble Noose of Methods, the Lotus Garland Synopsis* and Its *Commentary*

Robert Mayer and Cathy Cantwell¹

THE *Noble Noose of Methods, the Lotus Garland Synopsis* (*'Phags pa thabs kyi zhags pa pad ma 'phreng gi don bsdus pa*, henceforth the *Noose of Methods*) is a Nyingma Mahāyoga tantra, cited by such scholars as Longchenpa. Versions are preserved in all known editions of the *Ancient Tantra Collection* (*Rnying ma'i rgyud 'bum*) and in those Kangyur editions that contain a special Ancient Tantra (*Rnying rgyud*) section. The *Noose of Methods* has additionally surfaced in some local Kangyur editions, such as Hemis, Batang, and Orgyen Ling.

The Tibetan title of its commentary is simply a *Commentary on the Noble Noose of Methods, the Lotus Garland Synopsis* (*'Phags pa thabs kyi zhags pa padma 'phreng gi don bsdus pa'i 'grel pa*, henceforth the *Noose of Methods Commentary*). A version of the *Noose of Methods Commentary* is shared by the Golden, Peking, and Nartang Tengyurs. Unfortunately, this, the sole traditionally transmitted version of the *Noose of Methods Commentary*, has lost around 30 percent of its text, among other misfortunes. No other transmitted versions of the *Noose of Methods Commentary* appear to have survived, not even in Nyingma compilations.

Fortunately, however, a probably late-tenth-century manuscript in eighty-five folios preserving a *Noose of Methods Commentary* with the *Noose of Methods* embedded as highlighted lemmata was among the Dunhuang treasures brought to London in the early twentieth century, now held at the British Library (IOL Tib J 321). Although the Dunhuang version of the *Noose of Methods Commentary* is often even more ^{corrupted through transmissional error} ~~transmissionally corrupted~~ than the Tengyur versions and incomplete, its lost portions are mainly different from

1. Much gratitude for sage advice from Peter Harvey, John Nemeč, Francesco Sferra, Jonathan Silk, Péter-Dániel Szántó, Dorji Wangchuk, and Ben Williams.

those of the Tengyurs, so most (probably not all) of *Noose of Methods Commentary* can be recovered, albeit ~~in transmissionally corrupted form.~~² with transmissional corruptions.

Published research on the *Noose of Methods* and the *Noose of Methods Commentary* remains limited. Responding to the unusual and very large discrepancies between the *Noose of Methods*'s surviving versions, we published a critical edition, not least to establish the boundaries of the original scripture, for confusions between which passages were commentarial and which were scriptural had produced conflicting conclusions over the centuries.³ Textual analysis also dashed our naive hopes that the possibly late-tenth-to-early-eleventh-century Dunhuang manuscript's lemmata of the *Noose of Methods* would prove significantly closer to a plausibly late-eighth-to-ninth-century archetype: alas, this Dunhuang witness of the *Noose of Methods* not only has serious lacunae but also has complex transmissional corruptions, sharing major indicative errors with the equally problematic mainstream Kangyur and Ancient Tantra Collection versions. Indeed, it is only the regionally peripheral (and sometimes very ancient) local Kangyurs, such as Hemis from West Tibet, Batang from East Tibet, and above all the unique hybrid Orgyen Ling manuscript from Tawang, along with some Ancient Tantra Collection editions from the Nepalese borderlands, that preserve better versions, closer to the archetype. In the same work, we also reunited the surviving fragments of the *Noose of Methods Commentary* to present a nearly complete (albeit hybrid) diplomatic edition. However, we produced no English translation (which will follow, for the 84000 nonprofit translation initiative).

Other academic interest has focused on one mention of Padmasambhava in a passage of the *Noose of Methods Commentary* and three in the marginalia to the Dunhuang text, but unfortunately mainly analyzed in isolation, divorced from their textual embeddedness in the *Noose of Methods* and its *Commentary*. Mayer has also posted on academia.edu the unpublished draft of an explor-

2. Cantwell and Mayer 2012, 30–31.

3. Cantwell and Mayer 2012. The versions of the *Noose of Methods* shared by all mainstream Kangyurs (Peking, Derge, etc.), and the Derge *Ancient Tantra Collection*, have major lacunae and also gain substantial (but differing in different editions) accretions from the commentary. Similar problems also afflict the forty-six-volume Bhutanese *Ancient Tantra Collection* recension (Tsamdrak, etc). For those unused to navigating critical editions, only Orgyen Ling is close to the original *Noose of Methods* (very much closer than the corrupted Dunhuang manuscript!); next closest are Batang and Hemis, while some Nepal borderlands Ancient Tantra Collections (such as Tingkyé) at least preserve the earlier chapter structure and avoid adding commentarial text. Sadly, in this unusual case, if one requires any degree of fidelity to the historically original texts, it is viable to rely on neither the usual popular editions, such as Derge, Peking, Tsamdrak, nor the Dunhuang manuscript.

atory public lecture mentioning the winged heruka of the *Noose of Methods*, one of the earliest known references to the classic Nyingma winged heruka.

The *Noose of Methods* and its *Commentary* are remarkable texts, and it is regrettable that their contents remain so little studied. Preliminary to our translation of the *Noose of Methods* for the 84000 project, we present here a few interesting passages, an offering to Leonard van der Kuijp, without whose generous support our work on Nyingma tantrism would never have flourished.

The first passage is an etymology of the words *tshogs kyi dkyil 'khor* in chapter 6 of the *Noose of Methods Commentary*, which seems to have been authored in the Tibetan language rather than translated from Sanskrit. We read the passage as follows:

The term “assembly” (*tshogs*): since everything is gathered together and assembled through the consecration of oneself, it is called “assembly.” The reason it is called “center” (*dkyil*): since everything is emanated from one’s own mind, and moreover, since all the primordial wisdom[s] are emanated from the pure *dharmatā*, and since, with pure awareness, dharmas and mind become the same, [everything is] said to be “centered” in the mind. The reason it is called “circle” (*'khor*): since primordial wisdom [is] within everything, without center or circumference, actively pervading and perfecting, it is called “circle.” In this way, it is called the “assembled center [and] circle” (*tshogs kyi dkyil 'khor*).⁴

The analysis of *dkyil 'khor* seems telling. It glosses the Tibetan term for *maṇḍala*, *dkyil 'khor*, according to its two halves, giving first an explanation of “center” (*dkyil*), followed by an elaboration on “circle” (*'khor*). Yet it is unlikely that the Sanskrit word *maṇḍala* could have been similarly separated into two parts with exactly these implications, and a Sanskrit etymology should enlarge on the syllables of the original word, but this is not the case here. Were the text written in Sanskrit, we would expect the more usual explanation: “it takes [*lā*], i.e., grasps the essence [*maṇḍa*], thus it is a *maṇḍala*” (*maṇḍam lāti gṛhṇātīti*

4. Cantwell and Mayer 2012, 253–54: *tshogs zhes bya ba ni bdag gyi byin rlabs las thams cad 'dus shing tshogs pa'i phyir tshogs shes bya/ dkyil zhes bya ba gang zhe na / thams cad bdag gi sems las sprul pa'i phyir / ye shes thams cad kyang chos nyid dag pa las sprul pas/ chos dang sems rig pas mnyam par gyur pa la dkyil te sems la bya 'o / 'khor gang zhe na / thams cad du dbung mtha' myed par ye shes kyi khyab cing rdzogs par spyod pa ni 'khor zhes bya / / de lta bu ni tshogs kyi dkyil 'khor zhes bya 'o /*

maṇḍalam).⁵ It seems, then, that this section of the *Noose of Methods Commentary* on chapter 6 was most likely composed in Tibetan rather than translated from Sanskrit. Might the whole commentary have been composed in Tibetan?

A second interesting but difficult passage occurs in the *Noose of Methods Commentary*'s discussion of the final chapter of the *Noose of Methods*, which shows Buddha Vairocana concluding his teachings by reemanating and reabsorbing his enlightened retinue, from whom he has never been separate. Vajrakumāra deities (another name for Vajrakīlaya deities), often associated with Padmasambhava but never appearing in the *Noose of Methods* until now, are described as rejoicing at this.

The *Noose of Methods Commentary* comments by describing the utterances of any person (*skyes bu gang gis*) who has achieved highest awareness as “tantra” (the word is given in Sanskrit) and by explaining that such a “protector great being turns the vajra wheel, in Akaniṣṭha, by extension of his tongue faculty.” Such a form of words is normally only applied to the transcendent Buddha teaching such tantras, but the term used here, “person” (*skyes bu* = Skt. *puruṣa*), more generally implies an embodied noble person, often human, although it can also indicate a buddha. The next sentence refers to the sublime result of relying on the teachings of the flawless tantra, but the echo of its wording “flawless” (*ma nor*) in the marginal note might suggest a link to Padmasambhava. Next, the lotus king of great *siddhi*, Padmasambhava, is praised. Is he being connected in some way with the utterance of the tantra? Lexically speaking, this seems possible but uncertain. It might also partly depend on what weight one gives to a prior and ambiguous marginal note mentioning “non-contrivance,” preserved only in the corrupted Dunhuang manuscript (without proof it was included in the original commentary), and on how one chooses to translate it. Where we remain undecided about meanings, we present alternative translations:

Since they are emanated from evenness,

{note beneath the line} [*the maṇḍalas described in the related root-*

5. Note that Tibetan commentarial traditions do sometimes break the Sanskrit word *maṇḍala* into two for the purpose of glossing its meaning, but the connotations would not correspond neatly to the Tibetan equivalent term. For instance, Mi pham glosses *maṇḍal* as “essence” or “vital juice,” and *la* as taking or holding, so that *maṇḍala* would mean “to grasp the essence of enlightened qualities.” He adds that if the word is taken as a whole, it can also mean completely circular or entirely surrounded, and hence is translated as *dkyil 'khor* (Mi pham rgya mtsho 1984–93, 136: *maṇḍal ni snying po'am/ bcud dang la ni len cing 'dzin pa ste snying poi yon tan 'dzin pa'i gzhir gyur pa'am/ rnam pa gcig tu sgra 'brel mar thad kar bsgyur na kun nas zlum zhing yongs su bskor ba'i don du 'jug pas dkyil 'khor zhes bya ste/*).

text verses above] are taught by Padmasambhava without contrivance, OR, Padmasambhava explains [the above maṇḍalas] as being uncontrived

the significance of their arising [is that when] such a pure awareness [is produced] by any noble person (*skyes bu*) whatsoever, whatever sound is articulated by his speech, all without exception is called “tantra.”

In the supreme incomparable place of Akaniṣṭha, the protector great being, turning the vajra wheel, speaks by “extending his tongue faculty.”

By relying on that, because what will be realized is the accomplishment of the yoga of the protector’s secrets of body, speech, and mind, [such utterances of tantra] can only be flawless (*ma nor*), it is said.

I prostrate to he who has attained the supreme *siddhi* of great wonder,

{note beneath the line} *the master Śāntigarbha, after examination finding [these utterances of tantra] flawless (ma nor), praises Sambhava*

the lotus king (*padma rgyal po*), who overpowers the world;⁶ he who unravels from the expanse⁷ the Tathāgata’s great secret pith instructions (*upadeśa*).⁸

6. Btsan lha 1997, s.v. *ngam pa*. Alternatively, the Tengyurs’ reading of “who is not worldly” (*jig rten ma ’gyur*) might be more correct if Padmasambhava is intended as some kind of Buddhist equivalent to an avatāra (see below). The Dunhuang manuscript’s *ngam* may well be a scribal error, given the persistent similarity between the *tsheg* and the letter *nga* in these manuscripts.

7. We take *klung* here to indicate *klong*, for three reasons: IOL Tib J 321 repeatedly reads *klung* for *klong*; Peking, Golden, and Nartang Tengyurs descend from a separate stemmatic line, but read *klong*; ditto Nyangrel in his rendering of this praise (Cantwell and Mayer 2012, 93–94).

8. Transcription from IOL Tib J 321: \$ = mgo yig; *** = blank spaces left by copyist; : = *visarga*

/mnyam las ’phros te

{note beneath the line} *pad ma sam ba bhas rang gz[or?] byas pa ma yin bar ston*

[84r.1] \$ / *byung ba’i don / /skyes bu gang gis rig pa de / /ngag gis ci skad brjod pa’i sgra / /thams cad ma lus tan tra zhes /*

[2] *’og myin bla myed gnas mchog du / /mgon po bdag nyid chen po yis / /rdo rje ’khor lo bskor pa na / /ljags kyi dbang po*

[3] *bkram las gsungs / /de las brte *** n te mgon po ’i / /sku gsung thugs *** kyi gsang ba rnams / /rnal ’byor*

“Extending his tongue faculty” (*ljags kyi dbang po bkram*) is classic Buddhist terminology to signal the Buddha preaching, or about to preach, Dharma. A supernormally large tongue (*prabhūtajihvab*) is the twenty-seventh of the Buddha’s thirty-two bodily marks (*lakṣaṇas*) of a great being (*mahāpuruṣa*), which physically establish and demonstrate his authority. Hence many scriptures describe the Buddha’s preaching, or preparing to preach, in terms of covering his entire face, his entire assembly, as far as the Brahma worlds, or even the 1000³-fold (i.e., billionfold) great chiliocosm with his tongue—for such a tongue cannot lie.⁹ The exact form of Tibetan words found here occurs in numerous canonical sūtras and tantras, such as the *Perfection of Wisdom in 100,000 Lines* (*Mahāprajñāpāramitā*, Toh 8),¹⁰ the *Jewel Cloud* (*Ratnamegha*, Toh 231), the *Questions of Ratnajālin* (*Ratnajālīparipṛcchā*, Toh 163), the *Shorter Tantra for the Practice of the King of Vajra Wrath* (*Vajrakrodharājakaḷa palaghutantra*, Toh 632), and in the Ancient Tantras too, such as the *Blazing Lamp* (*Sgron ma ’bar ba’i rgyud*, *Mtshams brag*, vol. na, 467–91). The occurrence of this term is thus a powerful indicator that the preaching of Buddha’s word (*buddhavacana* = Tib. *bka’*) is being signaled here.

[4] *sgrub pas rtogs bya ’i phyir / **** / ma nor tsam du bshad pa yin // **** //*

[5] *\$/ / dngos grub mchog brnyes ya mtshan chen po ’i / ’jig rten ngam gyur pad ma rgyal po yis / /de bzhin gshegs pa ’i man ngag*

{note beneath the line} *slobs dpon shan ting gar bas brtags nas ma nor nas/ sam ba bha la stod pa ’ol*

~~*/de bzhin gshegs pa ’i man ngag*~~ [6] *gsang chen rnam/ *** /klung nas bkrol mdzad de la phyag ’shal lo // ****//*

[84v.1] *\$/ // **** // **** // ****//*

[3] *// **** // **** // ****// ** //*

[4] *\$/ ’phags pa thabs kyiis ***** zhags pa pad ma ’phreng las rtog pa’-i rgyal ***** po ’i don bsdus pa ’i ’grel pa/*

[5] *rdzogs s.ho // *** : *** //*

{note beneath the line} ***** **** kam cu pa bo’u ko gis bris// **** // **** //*

The Dunhuang text—like those *Noose of Methods* versions with which it shares indicative errors—omits any chapter ending; however, the three Tengyur editions, descended from a separate stemmatic line, do include a chapter ending, after the praise and before the text ending: *le’u ste/ bzhi bcu rtsa gnyis pa’ol/*.

9. Skilling 2013, 21–47.

10. Derge Kangyur, ’*bum*, ka, vol. 14, 5b: *de nas bcom ldan ’das kyiis zhal gyi sgo nas/ ljags kyi dbang po bkram ste/ stong gsum gyi stong chen po’i ’jig rten gyi khams ’di thams cad ljags kyi dbang pos khyab par mdzad nas/*. See also the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra* (*Da zhidu lun* 大智度論): “Now, wishing to preach with his mouth the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā*, which is profound (*gambhīra*), difficult to fathom (*durvigāhya*), difficult to understand (*duravabodha*), and difficult to believe (*durgrāhya*), he puts out his broad tongue as his witness (*sākṣin*), for the words pronounced by such a tongue are necessarily true” (Lamotte 1944, 457).

The first interlinear note is ambiguous. If applying to Padmasambhava's action rather than to the maṇḍalas, it would attribute to his teaching the related Buddhist terminology "uncontrived" (*rang bzor byas pa ma yin pa*),¹¹ meaning not fancifully contrived by ego or intellect. This term can apply more generally to egoless activities, but here in the context of "emanating maṇḍalas out of evenness," "turning of the vajra wheel," and "utterances of tantra," it would more likely indicate a scripturally authoritative voice (*pramāṇapurūṣa* = Tib. *tshad ma'i skyes bu*);¹² thus we find both major types of scriptural authority, *pramāṇapurūṣa* as well as *mahāpurūṣa*.¹³ The term "uncontrived" is typically applied to buddhas and to compilers (*saṃgītikāra*), senior sangha members like Ānanda, who recited accurately (or organized the collective recitation of) the utterances of the Buddha at the great historic Buddhist councils (*saṅgīti*) with the words "Thus have I heard on one occasion," thereby compiling the scriptural canons.¹⁴ In much tantric Buddhism, an equivalent function (and the term *rang bzor byas pa ma yin pa*) is typically attributed to the celestial bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi (often also identified as Vajrasattva or Vajradhara), who without contrivance compiles and transmits to humankind those secret tantric scriptures he previously heard from the Buddha but which the Buddha had temporarily secreted in various heavens.

The mention of the "supreme incomparable place of Akaniṣṭha" as the location where the "protector great being turns the vajra wheel" is likewise interesting. Akaniṣṭha (Pāli: Akaniṭṭha) has had a variety of interpretations in the many schools of Buddhism. Mahāyāna cosmologies often associate Akaniṣṭha with the highest level of the fourth *dhyāna*, an exalted meditative state achieved by superior beings cognizant of emptiness, immediately prior to full buddhahood. However, in the Ancient School's Mahāyoga class of scriptures to which the *Noose of Methods* belongs (and in many Great Perfection tantras too), Akaniṣṭha predominantly features as the inconceivable nondual expanse of total realization, where the vajra wheel of tantric scriptures is turned.¹⁵

11. *Rang bzor byas pa* = Sanskrit *kāvyaṃ*.

12. van der Kuijp 1999; Silk 2002, 116–20; and Skilling 2013.

13. Skilling 2013.

14. See, inter alia, passages from Jñānagarbha's *Anantamukhanirhārādharmaṅgīkā* cited in Silk 2002, 116: "What is to be established refers to . . . the compiler (**saṃgītikāra*) making himself an authority (**pramāṇīkṛta?*), so that his words may produce in others certainty with respect to this discourse on the Teaching, because when certainty is produced, people will obtain what they seek by firm practice, but when it is not they will not obtain it."

15. This is frequently described in their *nidānas*: see, for example, *Guhyagarbhatantra* (*Mtshams brag*, vol. 20 [*wa*], 153); *Phur bu myang 'das* (*Mtshams brag*, vol. 36 [*chi*], 229);

Subsequent Ancient School exegetes continue to embrace this theme: Dudjom Rinpoche's *History of Nyingma*, for example, devotes a chapter to the "Turning of the Secret Mantra Wheel," which describes Great Akaniṣṭha as the realm of nondual realized mind, the buddhafield in which Samantabhadra manifests nondually as Vajradhara or Vajrasattva so he can turn the wheel of the nondual tantras.¹⁶

Perhaps it is no coincidence that another Dunhuang text, IOL Tib J 644, specifies Padmasambhava as the exemplar of the Mahāmudrā highest level of Mahāyoga awareness holder (*vidyādhara*), called a "Second Buddha" and equal to Vajrapāṇi, while IOL Tib J 464/1 explains that such a realized awareness holder is indistinguishable from Vajrasattva?¹⁷ Might Padmasambhava then somehow be equated with the Vajrasattva interlocutor to whom Vairocana utters the *Noose of Methods*? For, prima facie, such appellations seem not inconsistent with the idea of a humanly embodied siddha, Padmasambhava, abiding as a realized Vajrasattva in the realm of Akaniṣṭha, where tantras resound.

The final verse finds a close parallel in the *Zangs gling ma* (twelfth century) of Nyangrel (Myang ral): "I prostrate to and praise the Buddha Body, who has attained the supreme siddhi, of great wonder, the body of incomparable realization, the Lotus King, you who unravel from the expanse the Tathāgata's great secret pith instructions!"¹⁸ This final verse of the *Noose of Methods Commentary* was very likely present in its archetype, since it has persisted in all of the extant witnesses of the *Noose of Methods Commentary* across both lines of transmission. In the Dunhuang manuscript, but not in the three Tengyur versions, this praise is set on a new line, perhaps intended to draw attention to

Phur pa bcu gnyis (*Mtshams brag*, 19 [dza], 786); *Dbang rgyas rta mchog rol pa* (*Mtshams brag*, vol. 30 [a], 520); *Buddhasamāyoga* (*Mtshams brag*, vol. 18 [tsha], 4); *Sgyu 'phrul bzhi bcu pa* (*Mtshams brag*, vol. 20 [wa], 219); *Gsang snying bla ma chen po* (*Mtshams brag*, vol. 20 [wa], 338); *Rdo sems rol chen* (*Mtshams brag*, vol. 21 [zha], 350); and scores of others.

16. Dudjom 1991, 447–50.

17. Dalton 2020, 34–35. In his 2003 publication on IOL Tib J 644, Dalton failed to notice that it mentioned Padmasambhava's name. Mayer 2007 compounded the error by accepting Dalton's report without reexamining the Dunhuang manuscript—unwarranted laziness since IOL Tib J 644 is only three folios!

18. Cantwell and Mayer 2012, 93–94: *dngos grub mchog brnyes ya mtshan chen po'i sku/ rtoḡ ba bla med padma rgyal po'i sku/ de bzin gshegs pa'i man ngag gsang chen rnam/ klong nas grol mdzad khyed la phag 'tshal bstod/*. See chapter 4 of the *Zangs gling ma*, when King Indrabodhi and his retinue experience a breakthrough realization and Indrabodhi praises the Guru's miraculous appearance. (Doney 2014, especially 116–117).

it¹⁹ or otherwise merely to fill empty page space, as is the wont of this scribe.²⁰ Note that a few of the praise's words also occur in the famous *Seven Line Prayer* to Padmasambhava, popularized by Nyangrel's thirteenth-century Dharma heir, Guru Chöwang (Gu ru chos dbang). The sublinear note, in which "flawless" (*ma nor*) seems to echo the *ma nor* just above, specifically attributes this praise to Śāntigarbha, possibly suggesting it might have existed independently, to be reused in the *Noose of Methods Commentary*, although the mention of Śāntigarbha could also have other reasons.

What are we to make of such text, which is ambiguous and might simply be referring to Vairocana uttering the tantra to his interlocutor Vajrasattva in chapter 1, but which is also juxtaposed with references to Padmasambhava's supreme siddhi, great wonder, and his unraveling the Tathāgata's pith instructions from the expanse? To current Tibetological knowledge, any utterance of tantric scripture by a human siddha seems unusual and extraordinary. Thus there have been fully understandable attempts, some more plausible than others, to interpret this passage in accord with conventional expectations (which we will consider below).

But a further interpretive strategy is also available, never so far attempted. We can try locating the *Noose of Methods* and the *Noose of Methods Commentary* within *all* of their proper historical contexts—not only Tibet before the Later Dissemination period (Phyi dar) and not only Indian tantrism in general, but also, more specifically, the contemporaneous tantric culture of Padmasambhava's homeland, Uḍḍiyāna, the modern-day Swat Valley, from where he and many of his tantric traditions are said to have originated. The former two are already much discussed. Here we focus on the third, hitherto never considered at all.

For current Tibetology, our text has two unfamiliar aspects: (1) the apparent attribution of scriptural revelation to an embodied human siddha, and (2) the attendant characterizations of that siddha as a divine being, realized from the very start. How do these look if set against the contemporaneous tantric cultures of Uḍḍiyāna?

(1) It is generally recognized by scholars of the field (Sanderson, Nemeč, Williams, et al.) that the nondual Śaiva traditions of Kashmir of that period introduced important innovations. While the revelations of previous Śaiva traditions were typically attributed to fabled interactions at mythical locations of intangible beings, such as divine *ṛsis* and *devas*, a defining feature of

19. IOL Tib J 321, 84 recto.

20. See, for example, similar spaces on the proximate folios: IOL Tib J 321, 83 recto and 84 verso.

these traditions was their ostensible projection of scriptural revelation out of the distant domains of myth into the plain view of recordable history and tangible geography. Correspondingly, the intense sanctity required for the act of scriptural revelation had to be transposed from distant heavens onto humanly embodied siddhas of the here and now whose inseparability from the supreme reality rendered them at one with the divine sources of scripture.

To give some examples: Within the Krama tradition, and close to Padma-sambhava's time, a named individual, Jñānanetra (a.k.a. Śrīnātha, ca. 850–900), while staying in Uḍḍiyāna, became the first in human form to reveal the *Kramasadbhāva* and *Kālikulapañcaśataka* scriptures.²¹ Another Krama scripture, the *Yonigabvaratantra*, was likewise revealed at Uḍḍiyāna's Karavīra cremation ground by Jñānanetra.²² Similar narratives apply to Matsyendranātha (perhaps eighth century?), Niṣkriyānanda (dates uncertain), and Vasugupta (ca. 825–75), who discovered teachings engraved on a rock.²³ Such revelations, ostensibly situated within recordable history and the geographical landscape, rather than veiled behind myth, became a hallmark of the nondual Śaiva traditions of Kashmir, central to their theology of the historically existent but supremely exalted human-embodied siddha as source of revelation. Extant Indic traditions apparently record at least one approximate Buddhist equivalent: the *Vajramahābhairavatantra* was first revealed at Uḍḍiyāna to the eighth-century Indian siddha Lalitavajra.²⁴

(2) If the Śaiva term *siddha* might seem familiar to Vajrayāna scholars, then appearances are deceptive, because *siddha* had differing implications in different genres of medieval Sanskrit literature. In earlier literature, such as epics, and in the Purāṇas and Kāvya, siddhas were mythic semidivine beings who lived in the sky (*antarikṣa*), comparable to *gandharvas*, *yakṣas*, and the like.

In later centuries, for most Buddhists, siddhas were ordinary human beings who achieved realization through the practice of Vajrayāna. An elite few among them, like Tilopa, might receive Vajrayāna transmissions direct from Vajradhara, the Buddha's *dharmakāya*, but were nevertheless terrestrial human beings: crucially, even if Buddhist siddhas might become privileged recipients of tantric scriptures, they were not the divine originators of them.

21. Williams 2017, 147; and Sanderson 2007, 264 (for the Sanskrit colophons, see note 97).

22. Sanderson 2007, 264; for the Sanskrit colophon, see note 96.

23. See Williams 2017, 134–43, 143–46, 182–90.

24. The Sanskrit colophon specifies where it was revealed (*Śrī-odḍiyānayoginīpūthāt . . .*), while numerous Tibetan sources specify to whom. See Wenta 2020, 15–22; also Siklos 1996, 113–14.

But in Kashmir's nondual Śaiva traditions, the term *siddha* was more complex. Some siddhas were accomplished humans approximately resembling the Buddhist definition, but many others were very much more: divine or semi-divine nonhumans, realized from the very start, who adopted the guise of human siddhas to descend from their lofty abodes to specific geographical locations in the Kashmir region for the express purpose of disseminating nondual tantric scriptures.

The term that came to be applied to such primordially realized siddhas descended from on high in human guise to disseminate tantric scriptures was *avatāraka*, which Sanderson translates as “promulgator” and Williams as “agents of revelation.” Another term used was *avatīrṇa*, implying Śiva descended to earth. As Sanderson puts it, “the term *avatārakah* is used to denote a divine or semi-divine promulgator of scripture.”²⁵ Some *avatāraka* siddhas could be hugely significant as sources of the entire tantric dispensation. Jayaratha, for example, described the *avatāraka* siddha Matsyendranātha as the sole source of revelation of the entire Kaula tradition,²⁶ while Abhinavagupta describes the three *avatāraka* siddhas Tryambaka, Āmardaka, and Śrīnātha, respectively, as founders of the nondual, dual, and nondual-cum-dual teachings of Śiva.²⁷ Were such *avatārakas* in any sense historical figures? Certainly traditional historians, such as Kalhaṇa (twelfth century), envisaged them as such, and most Western scholars too believe that in most or at least many cases, beneath the dense mythology real humans had indeed existed.²⁸

25. Sanderson 2007, 264.

26. Williams 2017, 135–36; Sanderson 2007, 264n95.

27. Williams 2017, 166. *Tantrāloka* 36.12–14: *teṣāṃ krameṇa tanmadhye bhraṣṭaṃ kālāntarād yadā | tadā śrīkaṇṭhanāthājñāvasāt siddhā avātaran || tryambakāmardakābhikhyāśrīnāthā advaye dvaye | dvayādvaye ca nipuṇāḥ krameṇa śivasāsane || ādyasya cānvayo jajñe dvitīyo dubhitrakramāt | sa cārdbhatryambakābhikhyāḥ saṃtānaḥ supratīṣṭhitāḥ || ataś cārdbhacatasro 'tra maṭhikāḥ saṃtatikramāt | śīyapraśīsyair vistīrṇāḥ śataśākhaṃ vyavasthitaiḥ.*

28. Sanderson 2007, 427: “Kalhaṇa speaks of the reign of Avantivarman (c. 855/56–883) as one that was marked by the descent of Siddhas among men for the benefit of the world. That this development had a major impact on Kashmirian society is evident in the fact that Kalhaṇa records it. For he is generally silent about the recent history of religion in the valley beyond noting the religious affiliations of certain kings and the temples and other religious foundations that they established. Such figures as Bhaṭṭa Rāmakaṇṭha, Abhinavagupta, and Kṣemarāja, who loom so large in the learned literature of the Śaivas of Kashmir and beyond, receive not even a passing mention.” Of all *avatārakas*, Matsyendranātha seems the most densely mythologized and hence historically least probable; yet even regarding him, see Dyczkowski 2009, vol. 2, 273–74: “Matsyendranātha, who may well have been a historical figure, represents a major watershed in the development of Kaulism.”

Much more can and will be said about avatāraka siddhas. Here, we merely wish to signal in outline their remarkable parallels with representations of Padmasambhava in Tibetan sources, such as the *Bka' thang* literature. Padmasambhava's unique and unusual representation is too well known to require elaboration here: emanated by Buddha Amitābha, Padmasambhava is a divine being, enlightened from the start.²⁹ Manifesting miraculously in Uḍḍiyāna, Padmasambhava descends onto a specific geographic location in Kashmir. Known as the “Buddha of Vajrayāna,” Padmasambhava is the founder of tantric Buddhism, the first to reveal the Vajrayāna teachings in their entirety, which the historical Buddha Śākyamuni had not been able to do.³⁰ The Padmasambhava of the *Bka' thang* literature is thus very close to the avatāraka of Kashmir and Uḍḍiyāna yet altogether different from the better-known, more human Buddhist siddha models, such as Abhayadatta's *Caturaśītisiddhapravṛtti*, which describes Tilopa, Virūpa, Saraha, and so on. Why then measure the Padmasambhava of the *Noose of Methods* and the *Noose of Methods Commentary* exclusively by the latter and not also by the former, which is surely also appropriate? If we do look at the *Noose of Methods* and the *Noose of Methods Commentary* in the light of the contemporaneous tantric culture of Uḍḍiyāna, a reasonable thing to do, it appears quite possible that Padmasambhava might be envisaged as some kind of Buddhist avatāraka. If so, he might indeed be intended as an actual utterer of the *Noose of Methods* scripture itself, one who “unravels from the expanse the Tathāgata's great secret pith instructions.” Moreover, the other Dunhuang references to Padmasambhava could support this interpretation in their various ways: Padmasambhava as a figure in ritual narratives (PT 307, PT 44), the redactor of *Phur pa* tantras (PT 44), equal to Vajrapāṇi and called a “Second Buddha” (IOL Tib J 644), and so forth.³¹

Knowledge of Kashmiri tantric influences has been slow to penetrate Tibetology, yet without such contextual understanding one cannot do justice to the *Noose of Methods Commentary* passage. Without this necessary contextual understanding, the traditional Tibetan idea of Padmasambhava revealing tantric scripture, and which we think might be prefigured in the *Noose of Methods* and the *Noose of Methods Commentary*, appears so far-fetched that an entirely understandable initial response is to seek ways to explain it away.

Thus Dalton suggests the final verse of praise attributed to Śāntigarbha

29. Even in the rarer “womb-birth” narratives, Padmasambhava is a divine being, enlightened from the start.

30. For a fine traditional explanation of Padmasambhava, see Palden Sherab 1992.

31. Cantwell and Mayer 2016; Mayer 2020; and Dalton 2020.

(see above) is really a colophon,³² somehow implying Padmasambhava as the human author of the *Noose of Methods Commentary*. Yet it contains no recognizably colophonetic material, certainly none spelling out Padmasambhava as the author of the *Noose of Methods Commentary*, and in all surviving witnesses Tibetan scholars have situated it within the main body of the final chapter, not the colophon. The editors of the Peking, Golden, and Nartang Tengyurs place the passage unambiguously within the main body of the final chapter, preceding all end matter, before the chapter-ending chapter title and number, before the text-ending text title, and before the text-terminating phrase “The End” (*rdzogs so*). The Dunhuang text—like those *Noose of Methods* versions with which it shares indicative errors—omits any chapter ending at all but nevertheless places the praise within the main body of the commentary, before the end matters of text title, text termination, and scribal colophon.

Second, Dalton seeks to reframe the entirety of the *Noose of Methods* and the *Noose of Methods Commentary* by construing a quite separate marginal note found only in the Dunhuang version as depicting the Buddha himself as *saṃgītikāra* of the tantra and Padmasambhava as the human author of the commentary.³³ Yet the Buddha acting as a *saṃgītikāra* is widely thought to be unprecedented in Buddhist literature, whether Śrāvakayāna, Mahāyāna, or Vajrayāna: as the compiler of words they had previously heard from the Buddha, a *saṃgītikāra* must be someone other than the Buddha by definition, so it makes little sense to call the Buddha himself a *saṃgītikāra*.³⁴ Logically this could only happen if the Buddha were repeating teachings he had “heard” from another buddha, which is not described here. The marginal note Dalton invokes is attached to the title of the Dunhuang document, at its very start. It appears as follows:

{title} *'phags pa thabs kyi zhags pa zhes bya ba pad ma 'phreng gi don
bsdus pa'i 'grel pa'*
{note beneath the line} *do rje sems dpa'-i dngos grub thob par bya ba*

32. Dalton 2020, 48.

33. Dalton 2020, 48: “A note explains that the tantra’s reciter (Skt. *saṃgītikāra*; Tib. *sdud pa po*) was the buddha (typically held to be Vajrapāṇi in most tantric works), while the commentary’s author was Padmasambhava.”

34. The closest one gets to the buddha as a *saṃgītikāra* is in those Rdzogs chen tantras with an ‘uncommon’ *nidāna* that emphasizes the non-duality of teacher, teaching, place, audience, and time; yet even in them, one could not single out the buddha as a separate *saṃgītikāra*, as would be required here. Moreover, this is a Mahāyoga tantra, not a Rdzogs chen tantra. Thanks to Peter Harvey, Jonathan Silk, and Dorji Wangchuk, for their advice on this issue.

*dang/*³⁵ *bsam ba la bgegs myi 'jug cing bsam ba mthar phyin par bya*
ba'i don/ 'bu tas bsdus sam ba bhas byas

{title} *The Noble Noose of Methods the Lotus Garland Synopsis: Its Commentary*

{note beneath the line} *The meaning is that Vajrasattva's siddhis should be accomplished, no obstacles to [one's] aspirations will arise, and [one's] wishes should be perfected. Synopsized by the Buddha, produced by Sambhava.*

If Dalton's interpretation of 'bu tas bsdus to indicate the Buddha as a "compiler" (*sdud pa po* = Skt. *saṃgītikāra*) is unlikely, we suggest that it is referring to the Buddha as synopsisizer. Buddhist tantrism often claims the scriptures taught to humans are shortened summaries of vaster versions preserved in the heavens and pure lands. And indeed, all extant witnesses of the *Noose of Methods* that represent its earliest recension specify that our forty-two-chapters version is merely synopsized (*bsdus pa'i*) from a vast sixteen-thousand-chapters version (*le'u khri drug stong ba las*).³⁶ Likewise, the *Noose of Methods Commentary's* analysis of the title explains that *bsdus pa'i* means it is summarized from "the twelve collections of the scriptures and the eighteen tantras and so on."³⁷ Thus 'bu tas bsdus means the Buddha synopsized these conveniently short instructions, while *sam ba bha byas* might possibly mean that Padma-sambhava subsequently manifested the synopsis into our world by "unraveling from the expanse the Tathāgata's great secret pith instructions," as the verse of praise describes him. Interestingly, John Nemeč sees this scenario as "a perfect analog" of what he describes in his work on the nondual Śaivism of Kashmir.³⁸ Moreover, if this is indeed a tantra synopsis first revealed to the human

35. The positioning of this reference to Vajrasattva, its grammar, and perhaps also its meaning might make it a bit unlikely to be referring to the homage instead of to the title, as some have suggested.

36. Cantwell and Mayer 2012, 228: "From out of the *Noble Noose of Methods* in 16,000 Chapters, the Synopsized Tantra King of Ritual Manuals (*kalparāja*) known as the *Lotus Garland*, is here completed" (*'phags pa thabs kyi zhags pa le'u khri drug stong ba las/ pad ma 'phreng zhes bya ba rtog pa'i rgyal po bsdus pa'i rgyud/ rdzogs s.bo/*). With these words, the Batang, Hemis, Orgyen Ling, Tingkyé, Rigdzin, and Kathmandu editions all specify the root text is only a tiny synopsis of a huge sixteen-thousand-chapter version. For evidence that the above represent the earliest recensions, see Cantwell and Mayer 2012, 43–67.

37. Cantwell and Mayer 2012, 231: *don bsdus pa ni gsung rab bcu gnyis dang tan tra sde bco bryad la stsogs pa la bsdus pa 'o.*

38. Personal communication, October 9, 2021. See Nemeč 2020.

world by Padmasambhava, it might not be coincidental that in every one of its numerous extant witnessess, be they in Kangyurs, in Tengyurs (as lemmata), in Ancient Tantra Collections, or from Dunhuang, it is the title of the *Noose of Methods* tantra itself that includes both of the elements *padma* and *don bsdus pa*: these elements are definitely not, as Dalton suggests, linked to the title of the commentary alone.³⁹

Finally, it must be emphasized that research into the *Noose of Methods* and the *Noose of Methods Commentary*, the mutual relationships between the non-dual Śaivism of Kashmir, Padmasambhava, and the wider Nyingma traditions of Tibet have barely begun. Much of what is suggested above is inevitably tentative and exploratory. Much still needs to be examined: for example, the relative chronologies of Padmasambhava, the early Padmasambhava school, and Kashmir's avatāras; the relation (if any) between several other distinctive structural, organizational, and doctrinal features possibly shared by Kashmiri Śaivism and Nyingma Buddhism;⁴⁰ and, of course, full translations of the *Noose of Methods* and the *Noose of Methods Commentary*, and the still unresolved questions of their authorship. Intriguingly, might Padmasambhava be somehow equated with the Vajrasattva, to whom Vairocana utters the *Noose of Methods*? We look forward to forthcoming developments in the field.

39. Dalton 2020, 47.

40. Structurally speaking, for example, the Kaubjikā and Traipura Śaiva-Śākta traditions had three orders of lineage holders: “stream of divine masters” (*divyaugha*), “stream of siddhas” (*siddhaugha*), and “stream of human masters” (*mānavaugha*; Ben Williams, personal communication, September 25, 2021). How might that compare (if at all) with the three orders of Nyingma lineage holders, “mind direct transmission of the buddhas” (*rgyal ba dgongs brgyud*), “sign transmission of the awareness-holders” (*rig ’dzin [=vidyādhara] brda brgyud*), and “oral transmission from humans” (*gang zag snyan brgyud*)? Organizationally, Somānanda's *Śivadṛṣṭi* and descriptions of Matsyendranātha detail lineages that were patrilineal, hereditary, and ostensibly descended from a divine first ancestor (Williams 2017, 173–75): how might that compare (if at all) with the Nyingma “bones lineage” (*gdung rgyud*)? Doctrinally, how might *Pratyabhijñā* compare (if at all) with the Great Perfection (Rdzogs chen)?

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