

Article

Bodies of Knowledge: Bodily Perfection in Tantric Buddhist Practice [†]

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Abstract: This essay explores conflicting attitudes toward the body in Buddhist literature, with a focus on the tantric Buddhist traditions of yoga and meditation, which advanced the notion that the body was an innately pure site for realization while nonetheless still encumbered with earlier notions of the body as an impure obstacle to be overcome. Looking closely at a short meditation text attributed to the female Indian saints Mekhalā and Kanakhalā, the author argues that the body plays a central role in the creative re-envisioning of the self that characterizes tantric Buddhist practice.

Keywords: Buddhism; tantra; body; meditation; Heruka Body Mandala; Yoginītantras; non-duality; subtle body; yoga; Mekhalā; Kanakhalā



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1. Introduction

Buddhism has long harbored diverse and at times conflicting attitudes toward the body. These include negative views, in which the body is portrayed as an obstacle to awakening, an impure receptacle of filth that is a mistaken object of desire and attachment, leading only to suffering. On the other hand, the body has also been viewed as an indispensable aid to awakening, the innately pure basis for the awakening process. This latter view, I would argue, has its origins in early trends in Buddhist thought and practice, and came to fruition in esoteric Buddhist thought and practice. However, hostility toward the body and its associated misogyny never disappeared from Buddhist discourse, and remains an important but unfortunate aspect of contemporary esoteric Buddhist traditions. Herein, there will be an attempt to highlight the centrality of the body in tantric Buddhist literature on yoga and meditation practices, which weave earlier, dualistic views about the body into an increasingly complex tapestry of beliefs and practices concerning the body as the site of awakening. This will be done with a focus on “Oral Transmission on the Three Swirling Swastikas,” a little-known meditation manual¹ focusing on Perfection Stage practices attributed to the Indian Buddhist female saints, the Yoginīs Mekhalā and Kanakhalā.

2. Dualistic Underpinnings to Buddhist Meditation Practices

These conflicting attitudes have an ancient history in India. While early Vedic thought was based in part upon the identity of the body and the cosmos, as illustrated in well-known works such as the “Hymn on the Person,” *Puruṣa-sūkta*.² The body qua microcosm played an essential role in Vedic ritual, even if it was the object of the violent act of sacrificial dismemberment that was portrayed as a re-enactment of the cosmogony. However, by the mid-first millennium BCE, the cutting edge of Indian religious theory and practice was

¹ This text was summarized and partially translated by Shaw; see (Shaw 1994, pp. 114–17)). Building on her work, here I will translate and study the entire text.

² *R̥g Veda* 10.90, translated in (Doniger O’Flaherty 1981, pp. 29–32).

the ascetic “mainstream” Hindu and Jain traditions that sought to liberate the soul from the body, through painful practices such as fasting and immobility which denied basic biological drives.³ The *Mānavadharmaśāstra* nicely describes the attitudes of the ascetic as follows:

He should abandon this foul-smelling, tormented, impermanent dwelling place of living beings, filled with urine and excrement, pervaded by old age and sorrow, infested by illness, and polluted by passion, with bones for beams, sinews for cords, flesh and blood for plaster, and skin for the roof. When he abandons this body, as the tree abandons the bank of a river or a bird abandons a tree, he is freed from a painful shark.⁴

For many of the ascetic *śramaṇa* traditions that developed in India during the first millennium BCE, the body was an obstacle to be overcome on the path to gnosis or liberation, be it defined as the complete isolation of the soul from matter or the realization of the nature of ultimate reality.

The early Buddhist community stood out as something of an outlier among the *śramaṇa* traditions, as Bronkhorst (1986) has argued. Śākyamuni Buddha famously rejected the practice of asceticism, advocating instead the ideal of the “Middle Way,” which implied that physical health and well-being were essential requisites for the spiritual path.⁵ In early Buddhist works such as the *Mahāsaccaka Sūtra* we learn instead that “Buddhist meditation is a pleasant experience, accompanied by joy (*pīti*) and bliss (*sukha*), or bliss alone, in all but its highest stages, whereas non-Buddhist meditation is not described as pleasurable” (Bronkhorst 1986, p. 17).

Despite this rejection of severe asceticism, negative attitudes toward the body, along with its seemingly concomitant problem, misogyny, were quite prevalent in early Buddhism. One of the most common manifestations of these attitudes was a practice that the Buddha is alleged to have taught to combat attachment to the body and sexual desire. This is the “meditation on impurity,” *aśubha-bhāvanā*, which involves the visualization of the body in terms of its constituent anatomical and biological elements, for the purpose of replacing desire and attachment with disgust.⁶ This practice involves the analysis of the body into its constituent parts, with an emphasis on the more foul constituents, such as the innards, and a wide array of bodily substances, including feces, phlegm, pus, and nasal mucus.⁷ It presents a depressingly realistic picture of the body, designed to disenchant, in order to aid the meditator in overcoming attachment to his or her own, or another’s, body, most typically the female body. It was traditionally practiced in a charnel ground, where a heroic meditator could observe a corpse go through the gradual process of decay and dissolution. It is often described in Buddhist literature as a technique to overcome sexual desire; as Richard Roberts commented, “mythological and semiotic deconstruction of the body and its organs is the price paid for the tolerable cultural management of sexuality” (Roberts 2000, p. 59).

Mahāyāna Buddhists criticized early Buddhists for their dualist view of body and the world as something to be escaped, as well as their fixation on impurity, which works such as the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* declare are projections of a impure mind rather than an actual quality of world itself.⁸ Nonetheless, as Paul Williams has argued, the Mahāyāna ethic of self-sacrificial compassion implies a high degree of detachment from the body that strongly implies the “meditation on impurity” type of practice (Williams 1997, pp. 18–19). It is thus no surprise that Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, which contains some of the most moving

³ Regarding “mainstream” ascetic traditions at this time see (Bronkhorst 1986, especially pp. 51–59).

⁴ *Mānavadharmaśāstra* 6.76–78, translated in (Doniger and Smith 1991, pp. 124–25).

⁵ For a discussion of the early Buddhist rejection of severe asceticism see (Freiberger 2006, pp. 235–58.)

⁶ There are several canonical sources for this practice, including the Mahāsatipatṭhāna Sutta (Dīgha Nikāya 22) and the Kāyagatāsati Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya 119). For more information regarding this practice see (Wilson 1996, pp. 41–57).

⁷ See (Walshe 1995, p. 337) and (Gray 2007, pp. 58–63).

⁸ See (Thurman 1976, pp. 18–19).

arguments for compassion ever written, contains a detailed account of the foulness of the body in its “meditation” chapter.⁹

The idea that the body and the material is intrinsically impure persisted in Mahāyāna sources even as voices within this tradition challenged this dualistic construction. Contra the vision of material existence replete with foulness, Mahāyāna Buddhists created the vision of “Buddha Fields” (*buddhakṣetra*), commonly known via their Chinese moniker “Pure Lands” (淨土), created by buddhas out of their compassion for sentient beings, which were espoused by Mahāyāna works such as the *Sukhāvatīvyūha* sūtras.¹⁰ These realms are portrayed as paradise worlds, founded on pure crystalline ground and populated entirely by buddhas and bodhisattvas, and free of any harmful influences. One is born there asexually, magically appearing within a lotus blossom. Once there, there is no longer any need for sex or eating, or, presumably, excretory functions. It is a vision of a land that is “pure” insofar as it is free of the messy realities of embodied human experience.

That said, properly speaking there is no escape from the body in the Mahāyāna; as the Buddha taught in the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, the “foulness” of the world is only in the eye of the beholder, and this very world is a pure land for one’s whose mind is pure. As the Sixth Patriarch of Chan, Master Hui-neng, is reputed to have taught: “Awakening (*bodhi*) is only to be found in the mind, so what need is there to seek abstrusity outside? Those who listen to this teaching and put it into practice will find that [Amitābha’s] Western Paradise is only in the here and now.”¹¹ This, in turn, suggests Nāgārjuna’s famous assertion that cyclic existence is no different from the state of liberation from suffering, *nirvāṇa*.¹²

It should be noted that Indian Buddhists, and Indians in general, arguably did adhere to a body-mind duality. As Dan Arnold argued with respect one of Dharmakīrti’s philosophical works, it “is usefully considered, then, for the unique extent to which it makes clear (contra many contemporary appreciators of Buddhism) that (and how) Indian Buddhists were dualists (Arnold 2008, p. 1081). Yet Mahāyāna thought also contained a strong impulse toward non-duality, as evinced by works such as the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* and the thought of Nāgārjuna. Arguably, the impulse was particularly taken to heart by the more meditatively focused traditions, such as Chan/Zen.”¹³

3. Tantric Re-Envisioning of the Body

Tantric Buddhist traditions inherited both the early Buddhist concern with “purity” as well as the Mahāyāna ethic of compassionate self-sacrifice and its vision of a beatific awakened existence in the presence of a buddha, unencumbered by the messy reality of corporeal existence. The Unexcelled Yoga (*niruttarayoga*) tantric traditions, which were prominent in India from the ninth through thirteenth centuries, developed complex contemplative exercises designed to make awakening possible in a single lifetime. These were generally divided into two stages, the “Creation” or “Generation” stage (*utpattikrama*) and the “Perfection” or “Completion” stage (*sampannakrama*). The former is characterized by the practice of deity yoga, in one visualizes the dissolution of one’s conventional physical form to which one is deeply habituated into emptiness, and then reemerges as a buddha located in her or his buddha field, and surrounded by a retinue of other buddhas and bodhisattvas.¹⁴

The tantric visualization exercises in which one visualizes oneself as a buddha or bodhisattva in the mandala or court of a divine palace are strongly and genetically linked

⁹ See (Crosby and Skilton 1995, 90–95).

¹⁰ For a study and translation of one of these works see Halkias 2013.

¹¹ My translation from T.2008.48.352c.6–7: 菩提只向心覓/何勞向外求玄/聽說依此修行/西方只在目前/

¹² I refer to his famous assertion in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārika* 25.19, “Cyclic existence is not the slightest bit different from nirvana. Nirvana is not the slightest bit different from cyclic existence.” Translated in (Ngawang Samten and Garfield 2006, pp. 529–30).

¹³ David Loy argues this in his 2012 work (Loy 2012). For a contemporary work that focuses on non-duality as an important focus of Zen practice, see (Suzuki [1970] 2020).

¹⁴ For a still useful summary of tantric contemplative practices in the Unexcelled Yogatantra traditions see (Cozort 1986).

to the Mahāyāna exercises in which one visualizes oneself in the Pure Land of a buddha. The most obvious difference is that in the latter one visualizes oneself as a lesser entity in a buddha's court, while in the tantric practices one visualizes oneself as the central figure. But while tantric Creation Stage visions of the self as divine do indeed provide a thoroughly purified and ideal vision of the body, they are not intended to be dualistic. For tantric Buddhist authors advocated and aspired toward a nondual vision of reality; like Hui-neng and Nāgārjuna, and they thus rejected the idea that the goal to be achieved is other, intrinsically different from our ordinary, unawakened state. As tantric theorists have often explained, the purpose of this practice is to re-envision one's current condition, one's body and mind, as the goal of the practice, the awakened state.¹⁵ Tantric traditions accepted as a starting point the teaching expressed in works such as the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, namely, that our minds play a central role in the construction of our experience of reality, and thus advocate a transformation of one's self-identity, as well as the way that one perceives the world and the others who join us in inhabiting this world.

A nice account of this practice is found in *The Attainment of Divine Vision in the Mantra-Vajrayāna*, an eleventh century text by the Tibetan author, Rong-zom Chos-kyi bZang-po. He wrote:

Since all things are pure through their reality (*dharmatā*), their reality is not even slightly impure. Body speech and mind also have purity as their reality. Purity is awakening, and through purity body, speech and mind which are differentiated become inseparable and unelaborated (*niṣprapañca*), and thus should be understood to be the mandala of the adamant body, speech and mind, since it is completely pervasive.¹⁶

Purity is redefined as awakening, making "actual" physical purity or impurity irrelevant. Tormenting the body in painful ascetic practices is thus irrelevant; what matters is their transformation through contemplative practice, by conceiving oneself as an awakened being in the divine court or mandala that is the abode of buddhas.

On the surface, this practice might seem to be extremely fanciful, and perhaps even pathological. It is supposedly dangerous; tantric authors repeatedly warn about the dangers of practicing the advanced meditation techniques without proper preparation and guidance. However, it is certainly not intended to serve as a fanciful "escape" from reality; engaging in the practice in this way is almost certain to be disastrous. Interestingly, the same works that advocate meditation on oneself and the world as awakened do not advocate practices that undermine or deny the body. Instead, the body was rehabilitated in tantric practice as an essential requisite to awakening, a divine abode. This view comes to the fore in the so-called "body mandala" practices, in which one's body is viewed as the divine court of the deities on which one is meditating. This practice was understood to be a transitional practice, linking the Creation Stage practices, in which one visualizes oneself as a buddha and one's environment as a Pure Land, with the Perfection Stage practices that focus on one's inner world or subtle body.

The re-imagining of the body as *completely* pure is strikingly apparent in the practice of the "Heruka Body Mandala" associated with the Yoginītantras in the Cakrasaṃvara genre of literature. In this tradition, the deities of the mandala are mapped to one's body, with one's body thus visualized as their divine abode. The most important feature of this mandala is its three wheels, the "body," "speech," and "mind" wheels, that surround the central deities, Heruka and Vajravārāhī, and their attendants. In each of these wheels are eight deity couples, making up a total of twenty-four goddesses or "heroines" and twenty-four gods or "heroes". Each of the twenty-four deity couples is correlated to a pilgrimage site that is also correlated to a part of one's external body, such as the crown

¹⁵ See, for example, Tsongkhapa's explanation presented in his *Great Stages of Mantra* in (Hopkins 1977, p. 106).

¹⁶ Rong-zom Chos-kyi-bzang-po, p. 130: /chos thams cad chos nyid kyis dag pas/ma dag pa'i chos chung zad kyang med pa chos rnam kyis chos nyid yin pas/lus ngag yid gsum yang rnam par dag pa rang gi chos nyid yin te/rnam par dag pa ni sangs rgyas pa'o/des na rnam par dag pas phyed ba'i lus ngag yid ni dbyer med cing spros pa med pa dang/rdzogs par khyab pa'i phyir sku gsung thugs rdo rje'i dkyil 'khor nyid yin par rigs par bya'o /.

of the head, the left and right ears, and so forth.¹⁷ The female deities are associated with channels of the subtle body, which connects this practice to the Perfection Stage, while the male deities are associated with bodily organs and substances, particularly with the viscera and bodily substances. Insofar as the male deities are associated with the coarse and impure elements of the body, while the goddesses are connected with the subtle and hence more pure elements, this arguably inverts the Indian gender hierarchy.¹⁸ In fact, the male deities are associated precisely with the list of internal and foul body parts and bodily substances that Buddhists would contemplate in the ancient “meditation on impurity”.¹⁹ It thus represents a somewhat radical contemplative exercise, in which some of the most foul aspects of the body, including substances often considered impure such as blood, pus, urine and feces, are re-imagined as pure divinities. This, naturally, takes the idea of the innate purity of all things to its logical conclusion. The linking of the parts of the body with deities and the deities’ external pilgrimage sites also serves to undermine invokes the old Indic vision of the body as a microcosm, and thus undermines the idea the pluralistic vision of the body as the basis of individual selves.²⁰

In the Creation Stage, the focus is on transforming one’s self identity and developing the divine pride that one is in fact an awakened being. The visualization practice, mirroring our apprehension of ordinary reality, focuses on the external appearances. Following the venerable Indian intellectual and spiritual tendency, going back to the Upanishads, to turn inward, the Perfection Stage focuses on the internal reality of the subtle body and levels of mind. Perfection Stage contemplative practices involve, as David Germano argued, “internal meditations on a subtle or imaginal body-image through visualizing its triune elements known as ‘the channels, winds, and nuclei’ (*rtsa rlung thig le*). This is in contrast to focusing on external visualizations of deities in front of one’s self, or as one self, or even internal visualizations of constellations of such deities as a ‘body mandala’”. Noting that these practices tend to focus more on “felt tactile sensations” and less on external visual imagery, Germano argues that these practices mark “a movement towards embodiment and processes internal to our body, with sexuality involving intensely tactile felt presences in contrast to vision, the coolest and most metaphorical of our senses”.²¹

The “subtle body” (*sūkṣmadeha, sūkṣmakāya*) is very nicely described by James Mallinson and Mark Singleton as “a network of psychophysical centres (*cakras, granthis, ādhāras*, etc.) linked by conduits (*nāḍīs*) for the movement of various endogenous airs and vital forces (*vāyus, bindu, Kuṇḍalinī*, etc.) These nexuses, conduits and substances have varying levels of empirical existence: some are visualized in meditation and others are manipulated by means of physical techniques”.²² It represents an alternate vision of the body that is connected to, but not directly identifiable with, out “coarse” physical bodies.

Ascetic practices, far from being advocated, were roundly criticized in many of the tantras. If anything, the tantras appear to veer in the opposite direction, toward hedonism. Antinomian practices involving sexuality as well as the consumption of “impure” substances, including meat and alcohol, are prominent in many of the tantras. In stark contrast to early Buddhist literature, the tantras are replete with erotic imagery, and initiated practitioners are called upon to attend *gaṇacakra* “feasts” that featured sacramental consumption of meat and alcohol, indulgence in music and dance, and, apparently, sexual practices as well. One of the purposes of this observance was strengthening one’s body, rather

¹⁷ For a discussion of the Yoginītantra pilgrimage sites and their relation to contemplative practices see (Huber 1999).

¹⁸ This is due to the common association in India of the female gender with the “impure” and “inauspicious” (*aśubha*); see See (Marglin 1985, pp. 65–83). Similar inversions of the gender hierarchy are found in Hindu Shakta tantric texts, with which the Buddhist Yoginītantras are closely related. Regarding this see (Biernacki 2007, pp. 35–37).

¹⁹ For an extended discussion of this practice see (Gray 2007, pp. 54–65).

²⁰ For more information on this see (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, pp. 198–202).

²¹ See (Germano 1994, p. 221.)

²² See (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, p. 171).

than weakening it via ascetic practices. Regarding this the Tibetan exegete Tsongkhapa wrote that:

One must increase bliss in order to produce the union of bliss and emptiness. To augment the ‘jasmine-like’ [semen] on which one depends since it is the support of bliss, it is necessary to expand the sense powers together with their supports by enjoying special desired objects. As it says in the *Dvikalpa*, “Since camphor is the cause, eat meat and especially drink wine”.²³

Tantric meditation implies a radically different worldview than the dualistic mind versus body, or rather, spirit versus body, view that animated the ascetic traditions. It is a view that is arguably more in accordance with the Middle Way, provided that one does not fall into the opposite extreme of hedonism.

However, in the tantric sphere this duality is lost in the vast complexity of the tantric worldview. To generalize, the tradition posits three levels of what we might term the body mind complex, the “coarse” level of our physical body and ordinary mental activity, a subtle level in which body and mind seem to merge, since the subtle body is both the conduit for subtle mental activity and is also defined as “mind-made” (*manomaya*). Finally, the “very subtle” drop is both the basic for body and mind, and is also the locus of awakening itself, the hidden knower of the gnosis of the nature of reality that is the ultimate goal for this tradition. This goal is achieved by releasing the “very subtle” drop from the structure that imprisons it, a knot of channels located in the vicinity of one’s heart.²⁴

Perfection Stage practice is largely focused on the manipulation of the “subtle body,” which consists of a network of channels that house the “winds” of *prāṇa* or life-force, and the “drops” of mental awareness that serve as the basis for our mental activity. These forces underlie a great deal of our unconscious physical and mental activities; among the goals of Perfection Stage practice is the mastery of these normally autonomous processes. Perfection Stage practices included visualization and other contemplative exercises, although they tended to be internally focused and hence somewhat more abstract than the Creation Stage deity yoga practice. They also entail physical practices, related to the Haṭhayoga practices that likewise ultimately derived from tantric practice traditions.²⁵ In tantric Buddhist contexts, these can involve sexual practices, since controlled sexual orgasm is one of the ways to open the central channel. This allows the unification of vital winds from the left and right channels into the central channel, which brings about the gnosis of non-duality (*advayaajñāna*), the ultimate goal of these traditions of practice. As Miranda Shaw has argued, sexual practices enable couples to transcend “the subject-object dualism of ordinary experience The merging of identities becomes the epitome of the nonduality wherein “subject” and “object” dissolve and fuse”.²⁶ Although some tantric texts appear to objectify women and hence describe them instrumentally,²⁷ autobiographical sources support the idea that tantric sexual relationships can be mutually empowering for both partners.²⁸

²³ Tsongkhapa, *The Detailed Exegesis of the Concise Samvara Tantra, called The Illumination of the Hidden Meaning*, bde mchog bsdu pa'i rgyud kyi rgya cher bshad pa sba pa'i don kun gsal ba, fol. 94b: /de yang bde chen dang stong pa sbyor ba la bde ba 'phel dgos la/ de yang bde ba'i rten kunda lta bu rgyas pa la rag las shing/de rgyas pa la 'dod yon khyad par can rnam bsten pas dbang po rten bcas rgyas dgos pa yin te/ brtag gnyis las/ de la ga pur rgyu yi phyir/ /sha ni bza' ba nyid du bya/ /khyad par du yang chang nyid do/ /zhes gsungs pa lta ro/; see also (Gray 2017, pp. 251–52). Tsong Khapa here quotes three pādas from the *Hevajra Tantra* 2.11.15: karpūraṃ pīyate tatra madanaṃ caiva viśeṣataḥ/balasya bhakṣaṇaṃ tatra kuryāt karpūrahetunā //; /de la ga pur btung bar bya/ /de la ga pur rgyu yi phyir/ /sha ni bza' ba nyid du 'gyur/ /khyad par du yang chang nyid do/ (Snellgrove 1959, vol. 2, pp. 98–99). This is one of the verses that Snellgrove does not translate. Note that Tsong Khapa's quote differs from the Sanskrit, which could be better translated as “Camphor is drunk, and since camphor is the cause, one should [drink] alcohol especially and also consume meat.” Here I follow the Tibetan in understanding *bala* “strength, vigor” as referring to meat.

²⁴ See (Cozort 1986, pp. 94–97). Cozort summarizes the Perfection Stage as preserved in the Guhyasamāja and Kālacakra practice traditions, and as presented by the Geluk tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.

²⁵ For excellent studies of these practices in Hindu tantric contexts see (White 1996, 2003).

²⁶ See (Shaw 1994, pp. 186–87).

²⁷ See (Jackson 1992, pp. 92–93).

²⁸ See (Cabezón 2017, pp. 129–32) and (Jacoby 2014, ch. 5).

Although desire and sexuality were problematized in some early Buddhist sources, as a “poison” in the case of desire, their application to the spiritual path were often justified in tantric Buddhist literature via the trope of alchemical transformation. The *Cittaviśuddhiprakaraṇa*, a tantric work attributed to the great saint (*mahāsiddha*) Āryadeva, wrote the following:

Just as someone who has overcome poison can neutralize poison with poison, or as water is drawn out from the ear with water, or a thorn with a thorn, likewise the wise draw out passion with passion The enjoyment of desire by means of wisdom and means liberates the mind of one who is a suitable vessel and can even cause others to be liberated. If the unwise partake of desire, it becomes a fetter. The wise, however, relying upon desire, achieve liberation.²⁹

For one with proper understanding, what is “poison” for ordinary people can be safely handled and transformed into an occasion for liberation. What is needed to make this possible is knowledge, the secret techniques preserved by these traditions.

4. Perfecting Non-Duality

Perfection Stage practices are normally considered to be extremely esoteric. Traditionally, in Indian Buddhist contexts, they were not supposed to be written down, but were communicated from master to disciple orally. Over time, however, there developed several genres of “oral transmission” texts that purportedly record these oral teachings; many examples of this sort of work are preserved in the Tibetan canon.³⁰ These works are often extremely obscure, as they were apparently written in a manner that was meant to obfuscate rather than elucidate the secrets of the tradition.³¹ In other words, they were meant to augment, but not replace, the transmission of esoteric knowledge from a master to a disciple.

The earliest Yoginītantra, the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*, which likely dates to the ninth century,³² makes no overt references to Perfection Stage visualization or yoga practices involving the subtle body, although later commentators read these practices into the text, as secrets obliquely referenced by it.³³ Elements of Perfection Stage practice are found in some of the explanatory tantras (*vyākhyatantra*, *bshad rgyud*) in this tradition, such as the *Abhidhānottara*, *Vajradāka*, *Yoginīsaṃcāra* tantras, which likely date to the tenth through twelfth centuries.³⁴ However, references to these practices are quite cryptic in these texts; clearer expositions are found in practice texts attributed to three great saints (*mahāsiddha*) who composed pivotal practice texts for this traditions, namely Lūipa, Kāṇha and Ghaṇṭapā. Lūipa is the reputed author of the *Cakrasaṃvarābhisamaya*, an important *sādhana* text which contains oblique references to Perfection Stage practices, and likely dates to the tenth or eleventh century as well, as Atiśa wrote a commentary on it. Clearer presentations of Perfection Stage practices are found in Kāṇha’s *Olicatuṣṭaya*, which likewise appears to date

²⁹ Āryadeva, *Cittaviśuddhiprakaraṇa*, vv. 36cd–37; 41–42: (36cd) *viśākrānto yathā kaścid viśeṣaiva tu nirviṣaḥ* // (37) *karṇāj jalaṃ jalenaiva kaṇṭakeṇaiva kaṇṭakam/rāgeṇaiva tathā rāgam uddharanti manīṣiṇaḥ* / . . . (41) *tadvat pātrikṛtāṃ cittāṃ prajñopāyavidhānataḥ/bhuñjāno mucyate kāmo mocayaty aparāṇ api* // (42) *durvijñāiḥ sevitaḥ kāmāḥ kāmo bhavati bandhanam/sa eva sevito vijñāiḥ kāmo mokṣaprasādhakāḥ* // (Patel 1949, pp. 4–5); *ji ltar dug gis zin ‘ga’ zhiḡ // dug nyid kyis ni dug med byed // rna las chu la chu nyid dang // tsher ma zug la tsher ma nyid // de bzhin chags pa chags nyid kyis // mkhas pa rnam kyis ‘dzin par byed / . . . / de bzhin snod du byas pa’i sems // shes rab thabs kyi cho ga yis // ‘dod pas spyod bzhin grol bar ‘gyur // gzhan dag kyang ni grol bar byed // rnam shes ngan pas bsten byas na // ‘dod pa ‘ching ba nyid du ‘gyur // de nyid mkhas pas bsten byas nas // ‘dod pas thar par rab tu sgrub/* (Patel 1949, pp. 25–26).

³⁰ Excellent translations of texts of this genre in the Yoginītantra tradition are found in (Harding 2010).

³¹ For a helpful discussion of this genre of Tibetan literature see (Kapstein 1996).

³² Regarding the dating of this text, which might possibly date somewhere between the late eighth to mid-tenth century, see (Gray 2007, pp. 11–14); (Gray 2012, pp. 6–8); (Sanderson 2009, pp. 158–61).

³³ For a discussion of the reading in of Perfection Stage practices into the *Cakrasaṃvara* root text see (Gray 2005).

³⁴ While the dating of these texts are not clear, they naturally postdate the root text itself. The oldest among them appears to be the *Abhidhānottara* and *Yoginīsaṃcāra*, which likely date to the tenth or early eleventh centuries; they were translated into Tibetan by Atiśa Dīpaṃkāraśrījñāna in the mid-eleventh century.

to the tenth or eleventh century,³⁵ and also Ghaṇṭapā's **Cakrasaṃvarapañcakrama*, which may date to the twelfth century.³⁶

As Tsunehiko Sugiki argued in an important 2003 paper, the Perfection Stage developed in the Yoginītantra traditions with the internalization of the mandala, and its mapping to sites within the body. This move toward internalization is found in the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* itself, in chapter 50, which has a section that equates the sacred pilgrimage sites with the bodhisattva stages. The opening verse of this section reads as follows:

Next, above all, I will elucidate
The yoginīs' stages, seats, and so forth.
The parts of Śrī Heruka's body are
The nature of all, the moving and fixed.³⁷

Following the listing of the correspondences between sites and stages, the passage concludes:

This teaching of Śrī Heruka's
Concerned with the inner stages.³⁸

The idea here is that Śrī Heruka, the buddha with whom the meditator in this tradition will identify in deity yoga practices, pervades the entire universe, collapsing the distinction between self and other, the subjective and the objective. Moreover, the text hints, without providing details, that the contemplation is to be internalized, via what came to be known as the body mandala practices. This included mapping the twenty-four sacred sites to various internal bodily sites (*sthāna*) and the male deities to various bodily constituents (*dhātu*) as noted above. However, it also included the mapping of the female deities to subtle body channels (*nāḍī*) connected with the twenty-four internal sites. This internalized mapping can be found in chapters 12 and 14 of the *Abhidhānottara-tantra*, chapter 14 of the *Vajradāka-tantra*, and Lūpa's *Cakrasaṃvarābhisamaya* (Sugiki 2003, p. 164). Kāṇha's *Olicatuṣṭaya* likewise advocates a visualization entailing achieving a buddha's three levels of embodiment (*trikāya*) through the visualization of the entry and dissolution of seminal essence (*bodhicitta*) through the network of twenty-four internal sites, linked by subtle channels, that collectively constitute the mandala's three wheels (*trīcakra*), which are

³⁵ David Snellgrove hypothesized that Kāṇha, to whom is attributed a commentary on the *Hevajra Tantra*, lived during the early ninth century, and that the *Hevajra Tantra* was composed by the late eighth century (Snellgrove 1959, vol. 1, pp. 13–14, esp. n. 4). However, there does not appear to be any convincing evidence that the *Hevajra Tantra* was composed this early; Ronald Davidson argues, correctly I believe, that the *Hevajra* dates no earlier than the late ninth century (Davidson 2002, pp. 77–78, n. 69). This implies that Kāṇha was likely active circa the late ninth to early tenth century, and his disciples thus likely thrived during the tenth century. However, since it is not certain whether the Kāṇha who authored the commentary on the *Hevajra Tantra* is the same figure as the guru of Mekhalā and Kanakhalā, this dating should be taken as provisional at best. His "The Four Stages" (*Olicatuṣṭaya/rim pa bzhi pa*) was translated by the Kashmiri scholar Sumatikīrti who was active circa the eleventh century. Lūpa is the author of the *Cakrasaṃvarābhisamaya*, an important *sādhana* text. It contains oblique references to Perfection Stage practices, and likely dates to the tenth or eleventh century as well, as Atiśa wrote a commentary on it. Clearer presentations of Perfection Stage practice are found in Kāṇha's *Olicatuṣṭaya* and Ghaṇṭapā's **Cakrasaṃvarapañcakrama*. The Kāṇha who composed the *Olicatuṣṭaya* may be the ninth century contemporary of King Devapāla (c. 810–850 CE) or, most likely, a later figure.

³⁶ Little is known of Ghaṇṭapā, and the Tibetan translation of his **Śricakrasaṃvarapañcakrama*, which refers to the famous *Pañcakrama* text on Perfection Stage practice attributed to Nāgārjuna in the Guhyasamāja tradition, lacks a colophon. However, a longer text attributed to him, his *Śricakrasaṃvaramaṇḍalavidhitattvavātāra*, was translated into Tibetan by the Indian scholar Kumāravajra with his Tibetan disciple Nyima rDo-rje. Kumāravajra seems to have been active during the twelfth to thirteenth century, and mentored two Tibetans, Nyima rDo-rje and Tho-gar-dge mdze. See the entry on Kumāravajra at <http://purl.bdrc.io/resource/P8208>.

³⁷ My translation of *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* 50.19; cf. (Gray 2007, p. 374) and (Sugiki 2003, p. 160). The text occurs as follows: *athāparaṃ pravakṣāmi bhūmipīṭhādī yoginīśrīherukasyāṅgāṅgaṃ sarvāṅgasthiracalātmakam* // (Gray 2012, p. 231); */de nas gzhan yang bshad par bya/ /rnal 'byor ma yi sa dang gnas/ /he ru ka dpal sku'i yan lag /thams cad brtan g.yo'i bdag nyid can/* (Gray 2012, p. 564). Note that the Sanskrit compound *aṅgāṅga* is challenging to translate, since *aṅga* can mean "body" as well as "limb" or "part." The Tibetan reads it as *sku'i yan lag*, which could be translate as "limbs" or "parts" of the body. I went with the latter, since the text clearly is referring to the 24 body parts correlated with the 24 mandala deities and sacred sites. I also follow the Tibetan in disregarding the *aṅga* in the compound *sarvāṅgasthiracalātmakam*, for metrical reasons. If one translated it, one might do so as "The nature of all parts, the moving and fixed."

³⁸ My translation of *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* 50. 22cd; cf. (Gray 2007, p. 375) and (Sugiki 2003, p. 160). The text occurs as follows: *śrīherukamatis cāyaṃ eṣa adhyātmabhūmayah* // (Gray 2012, p. 231); */śrī he ru ka'i gzhuṅ du spyod/ /di ni nang gi bdag can sa/* (Gray 2012, p. 231). Note that the Tibetan *spyod* seems to read the extant Sanskrit *cāyaṃ* as *cāraṃ*, a reading not attested in any of the extant Sanskrit sources.

correlated to the three secrets—body speech and mind, the three realms of existence (*triloka*) as well as the triple body (*trikāya*) of the buddhas (Sugiki 2003, pp. 165–68).

The three levels of embodiment achieved by buddhas is an important Mahāyāna technical concept that plays a very important role in the Yoginītantric traditions. The idea is central in the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*, a text that is almost bereft of technical Buddhist terminology, no doubt due to the fact that significant portions of it were derived from Śaiva sources, as Alexis Sanderson first demonstrated.³⁹ The triple body doctrine holds that a buddha realizes three levels of embodiment, the “emanation body” (*nirmāṇakāya*), the individual body, one among many, to which we are habitually inclined to identify. This identification reinforces the self-other dichotomy. However, the aspiring buddha, in realizing emptiness, learns that all beings are deeply interdependent, so much so that the apparent pluralistic sense of reality as well as the self-other dichotomy are seen to be illusory. Simultaneously upholding both sense of embodiment, self as one and self as all, the now awakened buddha achieves great bliss, as well as the ability to manifest in whatever form accords with the scope of reality (*gocara*) of the being with whom she or he seeks to communicate; this ability is the “communal enjoyment” level of embodiment (*saṃbhogakāya*).⁴⁰

Yogic visualization practices that call for visualizing the mandala, conceived as a symbol of the three-fold levels of reality and embodiment, within one’s physical body reconceived as a pure abode of the deities, thus attempt to collapse the distinction between self and other, external and internal, by portraying the body as a multi-layered complex entity that is deeply and profoundly interconnected with the universe. Realizing and mastering this is tantamount to achieving Buddhahood for this tradition.

As most of these texts present the details of these practices in a cryptic manner, undoubtedly, to thwart those seeking practice details without the guidance of a qualified guru, we must turn to the meditation manual (*sādhana*) genre for better explanations of Perfection Stage practice. A particularly interesting and relatively clear example of this genre is a short work preserved in the Tibetan canon called the “Oral Transmission on the Three Swirling Swastikas.”⁴¹ It presents an interesting account of a contemplative practice involving meditation on the subtle body that problematizes, in a playful way, our very conception of the body, and hence will be an appropriate focus for this investigation into Indian tantric conceptualizations of the body.

It is a work attributed to two of the “great saints” (*mahāsiddha*) of the Indian Buddhist tradition, the yoginīs Mekhalā and Kanakhalā, who were known as the “severed-head” sisters. Unfortunately, little is known about this pair. It is extremely challenging to date the *mahāsiddhas* of Indian tantric Buddhism, and the challenge presented by dating relatively obscure figures, such as Mekhalā and Kanakhalā, is even greater than that presented by the better-known saints. The only historical evidence we have concerning the lives and possible dates of Mekhalā and Kanakhalā are brief descriptions of them included in works dedicated to the eighty-four great saints of tantric Buddhism, such as Abhayadatta’s *Caturaśītisiddhapravṛtti*.⁴² This work informs us that they were born in Devikoṭa, in what is now northeast India,⁴³ and that they were disciples of a very well-known saint, Kāṇha,

³⁹ Sanderson made this argument, convincingly I believe, in a series of articles; see (Sanderson 1994, 2001).

⁴⁰ See (Makransky 1997) for an excellent presentation of the Mahāyāna Buddhist *trikāya* theory.

⁴¹ This work is preserved in the Tibetan canon, with Sanskrit title **Nandyāvartatrayamukhāgama* which can be reconstructed from the Tibetan transcription, *nandya barta tray a mu kha ā ga ma* and the literal translation *g.yung drung ‘khyil pa gsum gyi gdams kyi nyams len*. The Sanskrit *nandyāvarta* is difficult to translate into English, so I follow the Tibetan translation, “swirling swastika.” What it designates is a diagram, sometimes included among the “eight auspicious emblems” (*aṣṭamaṅgala*), consisting of a swastika, the four limbs of which form a labyrinth. For a visual example see (Bruhn and Titze 1998, p. 5). Shaw translates the term as “whirling cross” (1994, p. 114), which is not incorrect, but is perhaps less true to the South Asian context insofar as it evokes Christian symbolism.

⁴² See (Robinson 1979, pp. 211–12).

⁴³ This town, which was an important tantric Buddhist and Hindu pilgrimage site, has been variously identified with modern sites in Assam or West Bengal, India, or in Bangladesh. See (Gray 2007, p. 332, n. 19).

which means that they likely lived circa the tenth century.⁴⁴ They earned their nickname, “the severed-head sisters,” when they supposedly chopped off their heads and offered them to Kāṇha when he demanded his fee for instructing them; he generously restored their heads following this sanguine offering. They advocated meditation on the “severed-head” Chinnamuṇḍā (Tib. *dbu bcad*) form of the female buddha Vajravārāhī, a deity who is closely related to the Hindu tantric goddess Chinnamastā.⁴⁵

Vajravārāhī, also known as Vajrayoginī, is the central goddess in the Yoginītantra traditions deriving from the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*, and she became one of the most popular and influential female deities in Newar and Tibetan Buddhist tantric traditions.⁴⁶ While Vajravārāhī features prominently in the *Cakrasaṃvara* related tantras, to my knowledge, there is no mention of her “severed headed” form in any of these works of which I am aware.⁴⁷ There are a number of meditation manuals focused on this form, which also goes by the alternate name “Triple Bodied Vajrayoginī” (*trikāyavajrayoginī*), featuring “severed headed” Vajravārāhī flanked by two attendant yoginīs, with the trio assimilated both to the buddhas’ three bodies as well as the three main channels of the subtle body.

Mekhalā and Kanakhalā’s short text describes a meditation involving the three main channels of the subtle body, the *avadhūtī* or central channel, and the *Rasanā* and *Lalanā* channels that intertwine it on the right and left respectively. These play a major role in tantric Buddhist soteriology. According to the “Unexcelled Yogatantra” system of praxis, suffering is largely the result of dualistic thinking, which in turn arises from the bifurcation of the life force within the left and right channels. Unifying this energy in the central channel collapses dualistic thinking and leads to the gnosis of nonduality, *advaya-jñāna*, which is equated to awakening in this tradition.⁴⁸ This requires opening the central channel, which is normally sealed, by various techniques, including dreaming, real or visualized sexual union, or dying.

The “Oral Transmission on the Three Swirling Swastikas” presents a somewhat unusual approach to this problem; it calls for imagining the mixing of the life force and the opening of the central channel via the visualization of the violent rupture of the channels. In it the practitioner is to visualize her or himself as “Severed-headed” Chinnamuṇḍā Vajravārāhī. Hence, the channels are truncated, and are visualized as being topped by three swirling swastika emblems⁴⁹ at the point at which they are severed at the neck. The goal of this practice is, as the work states, the realization of emptiness, which means the attainment of the nondual gnosis, via the realization of the self-aware very subtle drop that is released and then realized in this practice.

The text is a short and somewhat cryptic practice text. Rather than a full-blown *sādhana* meditation manual, it provides more of a skeletal outline to what are highly esoteric practices, with the expectation, no doubt, that the details are to be filled in by one’s guru. It bears a number of similarities with other texts from this genre that were composed in more or less the same time and place, that is, northern India circa the tenth to eleventh

⁴⁴ As noted above, as the Kāṇha qua *Cakrasaṃvara* master was likely their guru, and appears to have been active circa the tenth to eleventh centuries, they can be provisionally dated to this same period.

⁴⁵ Chinnamuṇḍā and Chinnamastā are the subjects of (Bernard 1994); see also (English 2002, pp. 94–102).

⁴⁶ Elizabeth English provides an excellent introduction to practice traditions focusing on Vajrayoginī/Vajravārāhī; for an overview of her practice in Tibet and Nepal see (English 2002, pp. xxii–xxviii). See as well Diemberger 2007 for a study of the impact of the Vajravārāhī-related traditions on Tibet.

⁴⁷ Three tantras focusing on Vajravārāhī are preserved in Tibetan translation, the **Khyāvajravārāhī-abhidhāna-tantrottara-vārāhyabhibodhi* (To. 377), **Dākinīsarvacittādvayācintyājñāna-vajravārāhyabhibhava-tantrarāja*. (To. 378) and **Dākinīsarvacittādvayācintyājñāna-vajravārāhyabhibhava-tantrottaratāntra* (To. 379). A cursory examination of these works did not turn up any references to the goddess’ severed-headed form.

⁴⁸ Christian Wedemeyer, for example, defined “the attainment of the aim of Buddhist Tantric *yogins*” as “a non-dual gnosis that sees through (and acts without regard for) the delusive sense that the constructed categories of conceptual thought are real and objective.” (Wedemeyer 2013, p. 361). As for unification of the winds in the central channel leading to the gnosis of nonduality, this is Mekhalā and Kanakhalā’s text presents, in my understanding, at least. Similar ideas are found in other Perfection Stage systems, namely that the unification of vital winds in central channel at the heart center leads to the dawning of the very subtle mind of clear light; see (Cozort 1986, pp. 96–97).

⁴⁹ It should be noted that the swastika or *svastika* is an ancient auspicious symbol that has been employed for thousands of years by Buddhists, Hindus and Jains in India.

centuries. These include, for example, the short oral instruction texts communicated by the Indian yoginī Niguma to her Tibetan disciple Khyungpo Naljor (Khyung-po rNal-'byor), which formed the basis of the Shangpa Kagyu (*shangs pa bka' brgyud*) tradition he founded upon his return to Tibet.⁵⁰ For example, her “Vajra Lines of the Six Dharmas,” her tradition of six Perfection Stage Yogic practices, contains the following short passage outlining in a very cursory fashion the practice of “inner heat” (*caṇḍālī, gtum mo*) yoga:

Gather the quintessence, the hollow interior purifier in three vital points, and to quicken the heat, the six dharmas, such as inner heat in sequence: rabbit descending, holding, reversing, spreading, and blending with vital energy currents. Adorn oneself with nondissipating great timeless awareness.⁵¹

While this text very quickly runs through stages of a complicated yogic practice, it is of interest in its claim that wisdom is the end result of this practice. The idea that realizing the illusory nature of reality is the key to awakening is found in many of her works, such as her *Glorious Immortal Great Timeless Awareness*, which claims:

Look at the great nondissipating empty-bliss of clarity without concepts. One's body as empty appearance of the deity's form is actually one's mind. Mind is the empty appearance of the deity's form. Mind and the deity's form are inseparable.⁵²

Here she describes the nonconceptual awareness or gnosis that is the ideal result of these contemplative practices. Clearly, they are nondual insofar as they undermine conceptual dichotomies such as self and other as well as body and mind.

Kanakalā and Mekhalā's text is fortunately somewhat clearer than many of Niguma's practice texts. As we will see, they focus on the attainment of nondual gnosis by means of contemplative yogic practices that focus on the body. The text begins as follows:

Homage to the Yoginī Mother. Having obtained the instructions of the guru, we, Kanakalā and Mekhalā, will explain the instructions on the three swastikas in order that one might understand the meaning of emptiness. One's body is vacuous, with three channels that run from the crown to the navel. They are yellow, white and red, the size of needles.⁵³ Visualize that the right channel is naturally cleared out, that the left channel has a moon drop, and that the central channel is vacuous. Focus one's attention on them, as empty within and without. If one's consciousness is excited, focus one's attention on the two drops of the right and left [channels].⁵⁴

The opening of the text indicates that it will focus on the three swastikas, which here are elements of the subtle body as envisioned in this practice tradition. The purpose of this practice is to realize emptiness, that is, the nature of ultimate reality as conceived by Mahāyāna Buddhists. It then turns to the visualization practice, focusing on the central channel and the left and right subsidiary channels that conceived as running along the body's vertical axis. As is common in Indian Buddhist texts focusing on the subtle body, the body is to be first visualized as empty,⁵⁵ pervaded by the luminous elements of the subtle body. The text continues:

Then one should visualize a fire-colored swastika [emerge] from [the syllable] *hūṃ* atop the headless central channel. At the four corners of the swastika are [the syllables] *om*, *āḥ*, *hūṃ*, and *phaṭ*. Atop the right Rasa[nā channel] is a lunar swastika from [the syllable] *a*. It arrests the wind of the seminal essence fluid. Atop the left La[la]nā [channel] is a red swastika from [the syllable] *om*. By visualizing it one obstructs the wind of fire. Then, from

⁵⁰ Niguma is reputed in multiple sources to be the sister of the Mahāsiddha Nāropa (956–1040 CE), so she likely was active circa the late tenth to mid-eleventh centuries. See (Harding 2010, pp. 3–6). Khyungpo Naljor's birth is traditionally dated to 990 CE, suggesting the possibility that they might have met sometime during the eleventh century. However, dating him is problematic, in part due to the claim that his life span was 150 years. Regarding this see (Kapstein 2005).

⁵¹ Translated in (Harding 2010, p. 140).

⁵² Translated in (Harding 2010, p. 164).

⁵³ Here I follow the reading preserved in the Lhasa Kanjur, *khab rtse tshad*, rather than the sDe-dge Kanjur's defective *khab rtse chad*. I am grateful to one of my peer reviewers for suggesting the likelihood of this reading.

⁵⁴ My translation from the **Nandyāvartatrayamukhāgama*, fol. 34a7–34b2. See the Tibetan text in the Appendix A below.

⁵⁵ For example, the “hollow interior” as succinctly described by Niguma above.

the wheel of wind, wind arises and weaves about the throat. In the center, a twelve-span channel emerges due to the movement of the Sugata wind. The wind of water of the right and the wind of fire of the left emerge from the sun and moon channels and are inhaled into the mouths of the two goddesses, and formed by them into breath, piercing the apertures of the two channels. The two [winds] come forth and strike the swastikas, encircling the central mind, circling to the left and right. Then one should visualize the breath of the two winds dissolving into the two swastikas, and then dissolving into the central swastika. One's body, blazing with the fire of gnosis, dissolves gradually into the sphere of reality from the neck down to the soles of one's feet.⁵⁶

The text continues with a more detailed description of the three channels and the swirling swastika emblems that top them where they are severed at the neck. Each is accompanied by a seed syllable. One then ejects one's vital energy from the severed channels, and transfers it to the accompanying goddess pair, who are unnamed in this text, but are usually identified as Vajravārṇinī and Vajravairocanī.⁵⁷ who transform and return it, facilitating its integration in the central channel, which in this text is identified with the central deity, severed-headed Vajravārāhī, with whom the meditator identifies. This ignites the inner heat fire that blazes in this channel, filling one with the fire of gnosis, which triggers a visualization of the dissolution of one's body. The text continues as follows:

One should concentrate on the drop of equality, which is not established through analysis, and is insubstantial, devoid of all observed qualities. If one does not contemplate in this fashion, whatever one does one will wander cyclic existence without understanding the innate (*sahaja*, *lhan skyes*).⁵⁸

Having dissolved oneself into emptiness, one then contemplates ultimate reality. The focus of one's attention is then the "drop of equality" (*mnyam nyid thig le*). Given the way this meditation proceeds, this appears to be a variant of the meditation on the "subtle drop" found in other Perfection Stage contemplative traditions. Meditating on it, ordinarily at the base of the central channel, concentrates the vital winds at this point,⁵⁹ as we shall see in the text that follows:

Subsequently apprehending that drop, one should generate oneself as the Severed-Headed Mother. Then one should visualize the syllable *hrim* in the navel. The wind, rising in the junction of the three [channels], moves. *Hrim* dissolves into the three drops; *i* into the drop of wind, *ha* into the drop of seminal essence, and *raṃ* into the drop of blood.⁶⁰ In brief, they are blue, white, and red. Not rising, they are urged upward by wind, flowing in the channels of the Severed-Headed One. One should visualize that they gush out [to a distance of] four spans. The [flow of] the left [channel] circles to the left, and the [flow of] the right [channel] to the right. The central drop blazes and dissolves. The right and left drops are exhaled by the two goddesses, and they dissolve into the central [channel]. One should visualize that one inhales it down, and it dissolves into the *hūṃ* in one's heart. This is the clear and stainless nondual drop, self-aware, free of all happiness and suffering. It is the self-aware emptiness that appears as cyclic existence. Behold, meditating on yoga, one will attain the nondual gnosis. This completes the oral instructions on the three swastika spoken by the Mothers Kanakhalā and Mekhalā.⁶¹

The text proceeds with the impelling of the vital winds and drops up the channels, and their controlled release where the channels are severed at the neck. The red and white drops are expelled and consumed by the two goddesses, Vajravairocanī and Vajravārṇinī,

⁵⁶ My translation from the *Nandyāvartatrayamukhāgama, fol. 34b2–6.

⁵⁷ See (Bernard 1994, pp. 85–86) and (Shaw 1994, p. 115).

⁵⁸ My translation from the *Nandyāvartatrayamukhāgama, fol. 34b6; cf. (Shaw 1994, p. 116).

⁵⁹ See (Cozort 1986, p. 71). Miranda Shaw translates *mnyam nyid thig le* as "point of equanimity" (1994, p. 116), which is not a bad translation and correctly implies it is the focus for the meditation. However, I think that this misses the fact that this is a step in the Perfection Stage contemplative process.

⁶⁰ Here the text analyzes the seed-syllable *hrim* into its component parts, the letter *ha*, the syllable *raṃ*, and the vowel *i*.

⁶¹ My translation from the *Nandyāvartatrayamukhāgama, fols. 34b6–35a3; cf. (Shaw 1994, pp. 116–17).

who then exhale them, whence they are absorbed by one's central channel and dissolve into one's heart center. This leads to the manifestation of the "non-dual drop" (*gnyis med thig le*, **advayabindhu*), which leads to the gnosis of reality, the nondual gnosis. The "nondual drop" is almost certainly a variant name for the better known "non-abiding drop" (*mi gnas pa'i thig le*), also known as the "indestructible drop". This drop abides in the heart, and when the course and subtle winds dissolve into it, the very subtle mind, the mind of clear light which apprehends ultimate reality, arises. This seems to be what the text here is describing, using slightly different terminology than is found in other practice traditions.⁶²

One of the most interesting features of the "severed-headed" or "triple-bodied" Vajravārāhī contemplative tradition is the multiple levels at which it challenges dualistic constructions of self and identity, lending credence to the text's claim that its ultimate goal is the achievement of nondual gnosis. One of its critical features is the text's deployment of three figures, Vajravārāhī as well as Vajravairocanī and Vajravārṇinī. While we would expect the meditator to largely identify with the central figure, Vajravārāhī, it is important to note that the dedicated and experienced practitioner would take the time to identify with all three goddesses. Rather than visualizing oneself as one among many, one visualizes oneself as one as simultaneously many, which makes sense given the trio's identification with a buddha's three levels of embodiment. The text seriously challenges monadic constructions of self, following venerable Buddhist tradition.⁶³ Moreover, as the three goddesses are also equated with the three main channels of the subtle body, the tradition also playfully deconstructs the inner/outer dichotomy, since one in effect visualizes elements of the subtle body as outer manifestations in the manner of deity yoga visualization. The tradition thus seems to have been aiming to seriously disrupt dualistic thinking.

Given the notoriously obscure nature of "oral transmission" genre in tantric Buddhist traditions, Kanakhalā and Mekhalā's "Oral Transmission on the Three Swirling Swastikas" provides a relatively clear look into Perfection Stage practice. As we would expect, it implies a mastery of Creation Stage visualization practices, as well as the ability to dissolve one's identity, whether ordinary or divine, into emptiness. It builds on the foundation of a Creation Stage visualization of oneself as Severed-headed Vajravārāhī flanked by the attendant yoginīs Vajravairocanī and Vajravārṇinī. It does not provide the iconographic details for this visualization; the text assumes that the reader has already been instructed in this practice. On this basis, it focuses on Perfection Stage practices involving the manipulation of the elements of the subtle body, with the aim of releasing the very subtle "nondual drop," embedded in the heart, so as to create an occasion for awakening.

In this tradition, body and mind, course and subtle, inner and outer, self and other are all dualities that are ultimately dissolved, making room for the apprehension of emptiness that transcends such distinctions. Tantric Buddhists, naturally, were not free of dualistic thinking, since their goal, nondual gnosis, implies that there must be dualistic thought patterns to be transcended. These traditions rather identify such patterns of conceptual thinking as the central existential problems which they claim to be able to resolve via their contemplative practices.

These traditions attempt, I think, to take the middle path between the extremes of ascetical rejection of the body and bodily experience, and materialist embrace of the body as it appears to us. Esoteric Buddhism did reject asceticism in theory, and largely but not entirely followed through with this rejection in practice. Bodily experiences, including sensual enjoyments, were to be cultivated rather than rejected, albeit in an intentional rather than indulgent fashion. However, it is not the case that esoteric Buddhists simply accepted the body as it appears to us.

Consistent with their nondual philosophy, they embraced the notion that there is no essential difference between the deluded and awakened state, and the latter can thus

⁶² For more on this process as described in the Guhyasamāja and Kālacakra traditions, see (Cozort 1986, pp. 96–97).

⁶³ We might note that Śākyamuni Buddha's answer to the Hindu notion of an eternal self, *atmān*, was the concept of the self as deriving from the "five heaps" or aggregates, which collectively give rise to our sense of a singular self.

be realized in and through one's body and mind. The body is both the starting and end point, and, most notably, the *instrument* of the practice, that which acts and is acted upon. It provides an example of "the use of the body as instrument for the altered states of consciousness and modes of self-transcendence" (Roberts 2000, p. 57). This realization entailed a re-envisioning of the body and mind, and this is one of the major goals of perfection stage practice, namely, realizing the gnosis of a buddha within our bodies. This requires a creative re-engagement with the body, seeing it ultimately as the empty abode of radiant self-awareness.

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Appendix A. Tibetan Translation of the "Oral Transmission on the Three Swirling Swastikas"

Nandyāvartatrayamukhāgama/g.yung drung 'khyil pa gsum gyi gdams kyi nyams len

To. 2415, D rgyud 'grel vol. zi, 34a7–35a3:

[34a7] rgya gar skad du/nandya barta tray a mu kha ā ga ma nā ma/bod skad du/g.yung drung 'khyil pa gsum gyi gdams kyi nyams len zhes bya ba/yum rnal [34b1] 'byor ma la phyag 'tshal lo//bla ma'i zhal gdams thob byas nas//g.yung drung gsum gyi gdams pa ni//stong nyid don ni rtogs pa'i phyir//kaṃ ka me kha la bshad bya//rang gi lus ni khong stong la//spyi bor brtsams nas lte ba'i bar//rtsa gsum ser dang dkar dmar ro//de [34b2] nams nang ni khong stong ste//g.yas kyi rtsa la khab rtse tshad⁶⁴//rang bzhin bsal ba bsam par bya//g.yon par zla ba'i thig le ste//dbus kyi rtsa ni khong stong ngo//de la sems gtad phyi nang stong//shes pa rgod na g.yas g.yon gyi//thig le gnyis pa sems gtad la//de [34b3] nas dbu bcad dhū tī'i steng//hrīḥ las g.yung drung 'khyil pa ni//me yi mdog can rnam bsam bya//g.yung drung 'khyil pa'i zur bzhi la//om dang āḥ dang hūṃ dang phaṭ//g.yas phyogs ra sa'i steng du ni//a las zla ba'i g.yung drung 'khyil//byang chub sems kyi chu [34b4] rlung bkag//g.yon pa la nā'i steng du ni//om las g.yung drung 'khyil ba dmar//bsams pas me yi rlung 'gags so//de nas rlung gi 'khor lo nas//rlung ni langs te mgrin par sles//dbus su bde gshegs rlung rgyu bas//sor ni bcu gnyis rtsa 'thon nas//[34b5] g.yas g.yon chu rlung me rlung ni//nyi zla'i rtsa nas 'byung byas nas//lha mo gnyis dag zhal du rngub//slar yang gnyis kyis phu byas pas//rtsa dag gnyis kyi rtsa bug brtol//rnam par rgyu ste g.yung drung 'phog/dbus kyi sems bskor byas nas su//gnyis ni g.yas skor g.yon [34b6] skor ro//slar yang rlung gis phu byas nas//g.yung drung gnyis la thim byas nas//dbus kyi 'khyil pa thim par bsam//ye shes me sbar rang lus ni//mgrin pa'i gnas nas rkang mthil bar//rim gyis zhu ste chos dbyings su//mnyam nyid thig ler sems gtad do//brtags pas [34b7] ma grub dngos med yin//dmigs pa'i mtshan nyid thams cad bral//de ltar ma bsgoms ci byas kyang//lhan skyes ma rtogs 'khor bar 'khyams//thig le de las blangs byas nas//bdag nyid dbu bcad yum du bskyed//de nas lte bar hrīm yig bsam//sum mdor rlung ldang gyin [35a1] la rgyu//hri ni thig le gsum du zhu//i ni rlung gi thig le ste//ha ste byang chub thig le'o//rakta'i thig le raṃ yig ste//mdor na rim par sngo dkar dmar//ma shar rlung gis gyen la 'ded//dbu bcad rtsa sbubs rgyu na ni//steng du sor bzhi 'thon par bsam//[35a2] g.yon pa g.yon skor g.yas pa g.yas//dbus kyi thig le 'bar zhing thim//lha mo gnyis kyis phus btab pas//g.yas g.yon thig le dbus la thim//de nyid mar la rngub byas pas//snying ga'i hūṃ la thim par bsam//de ni gsal la dri ma med//gnyis med thig le rang [35a3] rig ste//bde dang sdug bsngal thams cad bral//'khor ba snang ba rang rig stong//kye ho

⁶⁴ The sDe-dge Kanjur here reads *chad*, but the Lhasa Kanjur, which follows the same pagination as the Derge edition here, preserves what is certainly the correct reading, *tshad*, corresponding presumably to the Sanskrit *mātra*.

rnal 'byor bsgoms nas ni//gnyis med ye shes thob par 'gyur//g.yung drung 'khyil pa
gsum gyi zhal gdams yum kañka la me ka las gsungs pa rdzogs so/.

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