

Yoga of Hevajra

Practice of the Yuan Khans?

Zoltán Cser

PhD student at Mongolian Studies, Department of Mongol and Inner Asian Studies, ELTE University



Premise¹

In the article of **Shen Weirong** we read²:

„It has been widely accepted that Tibetan tantric Buddhism was very popular at the court of the great Mongol khans, yet little is known about the details of the Buddhist teaching that were taught and practiced enthusiastically in and outside the Mongol court of the Yuan dynasty. Due to the prevailing misconception that it was the tantric practice of Tibetan Buddhism, notoriously epitomized in the so-called Secret Teaching of Supreme Bliss (秘密大喜樂法 *mimi daxile fa*; esoteric samādhi of great joy), that caused the rapid downfall of the great Mongol-Yuan dynasty.”

„Twenty years ago, I. Christopher Beckwith drew attention to an until then unnoticed Yuan-period collection in Chinese on Tibetan tantric Buddhist teachings. This collection is called 大乘要道密集 *Dacheng yaodao miji*, or *Secret Collection of Works on the Quintessential Path of the Mahāyāna*. It includes at least 28 texts devoted³ to 道果 *daoguo*, or *lam 'bras* (the path and fruit) teaching, which are particularly favoured by the Sa skya pa sect, and to 大手印 *da shouyin*, or *Mahāmudrā*. According to the publisher's preface, this collection became a basic teachings text of the esoteric school in China, and from the Yuan through the Ming and Manchu Qing dynasties down to the present day it has been revered as a “sacred classic of the esoteric school.” This collection attributed to Phagpa lama (1235–1280).”

¹ The transliterations are according to the international standards.

² Shen Weirong: *Tibetan Tantric Buddhism at the Court of the Great Mongol Khans, Sa skya pandita and 'Phags pa's Works in Chinese during the Yuan Period*. (Quaestiones Mongolorum Disputatae No. 1) 2005, pp. 61-89.

³ Altogether 83 texts.

Let us see first of all the historical background, how the Khans were initiated into Hevajra tantra, one of the highest teaching in Buddhism.

Historical background

In the Tibetan text, *The Rosary of White Lotuses*⁴ written in the 1880s we find the detailed history of how Prince Godan (1248 in Lanzhou) and later Kubilai Khan (reign 1260–1294) was initiated into Hevajra tantra (1253 in Kharkhorum).

“According the Rosary of White Lotuses, Köten, wishing to test Sakya Pandita’s powers, had one of his resident magicians conjure up a image of a big city and then invited the Tibetan monk to step into it. Nonplussed, Sakya Pandita recited a prayer and threw some flowers at the mirage, whereupon it solidified into a real city. According to the Rosary, this “Phantom Town” became what is now the city of Lanzhou.

Duly impressed, Köten entered into a Preceptor-Protector relationship with Sakya Pandita and sought his counsel in matters both spiritual and temporal. The Tibetan guru’s standing was increased even more when Köten fell ill due to a plague of “earth demons” and Sakya Pandita succeeded in curing him by a technique known as the “Lion’s Roar.” Settling in at the new “Phantom Town” of Lanzhou, Sakya Pandita proceed to give teachings on various sutras and tantras and eventually initiated Köten and members of his court into the Hevajra Tantra, “opening anew for them the deepest path of Vajrayana.” Assisting the Pandita in his teachings was a sizable contingent of Uighur Buddhist monks from what is now Xinjiang province in the west of China.

Sakya Pandita (1182–1251) was never to return to Tibet. He died in Lanzhou in 1251. During his cremation images of Hevajra and Mañjusri appeared on the crown of his skull and Heruka on his forehead, as well as numerous other manifestations. Among his ashes were found numerous “relic pills,” small hard pellets of uncertain composition which are often found in the remains of highly advanced lamas (indeed, this phenomenon continues to occur to the present day).”

And also: “According to the Rosary of White Lotuses, Khubilai’s wife Zangmo stepped into the breach and exclaimed that even gray-haired monks were no match for the young Phagspa. “Do not send him to Tibet,” she “but enter into a Preceptor-Protector bond with him, learn from him, ask him questions about the Dharma!” She pointed out that Sakya lamas were especially proficient in secret Tantra teachings and perhaps to set an example asked that she and her circle of twenty-four female attendants be initiated into the Hevajra Tantra. Phagspa complied, and to show her appreciation for the initiation Zangmo gave Phagspa her ear-ring containing a huge pearl. Later Phagspa reportedly sold the pearl and used the funds to put a gold roof on one of the temples at Sakya Monastery in Tibet.

Following his wife’s lead Khubilai then asked to be initiated into the Hevajra Tantra. Phagspa said this was not possible because Khubilai was a king and a king would not be able to observe the vows necessary to take the initiation. First, Phagspa explained, Khubilai would have to take a seat lower than the presiding lama’s seat; second, he would have to recognize the Triple Jewel as his sole refuge; third, he must follow whatever order his teacher gave him. Khubilai agreed all this was impossible for a king. Again his wife stepped forward. The King holds supreme authority in China and Mongolia, she pointed out, why not give Phagspa supreme authority in Tibet and affairs of the Dharma? Although it did not fully address all the issues raised, Khubilai and Phagspa agreed to this conciliatory compromise, and a

⁴ *Chen po Hor gyi yul du dam pa'i chos ji ltar dar ba'i tshul gsal bar brjod pa padma dkar po'i phren ba* - Rosary of White Lotuses, Being the Clear Account of How the Precious Teaching (of Buddha) Appeared and Spread in the Great Hor Country by Dam-chos rGya-mtsho Dharma-ta-la in 1880's. Published: Rosary of white lotuses: being the clear account of how the precious teaching of Buddha appeared and spread in the great Hor country by Damchö Gyatsho Dharmatāla ; translated and annotated by Piotr Klafkowski ; supervised by Nyalo Trulku Jampa Kelzang Rinpoche. Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 1987 (Asiatische Forschungen)

Hevajra initiation was given to the Mongolian ruler and twenty-four of his associates. In return he gave Phagspa an immense three-dimensional golden mandala encrusted with pearls “the size of sheep droppings” and granted the Sakya sect, with Phagspa at its head, both political and religious control over all of Tibet.”⁵

If we want to understand why the practice of Hevajra tantra was suitable to the two Khans (as we know in Khubilai’s court there were many protagonists of different religions, even before Phagspa there was a Chan abbot representing Buddhism) we should see first where we find Hevajra in the vast range of Buddhist practices and then understand the specific characteristic factors of that particular tantra.

Place of Hevajra tantra in Buddhism

According to the Tibetan Buddhism, the whole teaching of the Buddha can be divided into two categories: the Sutras and the Tantras. If we would like to summarize the difference between the two large systems, we can say, that the sutras are planting or practicing the causes for attaining Buddhahood (causal path) on the other hand, tantras are practicing the result, directly Buddhahood (resultant path). As Choegyal Namkhai Norbu states commenting the Garland of Views attributed to Padmasambhava⁶: “The Causal Vehicle or Sūtrayāna is so called because in it the nature of mind is like a 'seed' of enlightenment requiring the completion of the accumulation of merit and wisdom in order to ripen. Here the two truths, absolute and relative, are seen as two separate things, the former to be obtained and the latter to be overcome. The Fruitional Vehicle or Vajrayāna is so called because the nature of mind is deemed already endowed with all the qualities of the 'fruit' of enlightenment”.⁷

Hevajra belongs to the vehicle of the fruit. All the Buddhist paths including the Fruitional Vehicle can be understood through the teaching of the Base, Path and Fruit⁸. The Base contains where we are and what is our ultimate state, in sutra we can find it as the famous Two Truths⁹. The Two Truths defines the Path (between the relative and absolute), that is in the sutra the Two Accumulations (merits and wisdom) and through the path we can attain the Fruit, that is according to the sutra; the Two *Kāyas*. In the tantras the Base is our real nature, the is called in the tantras the Vajra (indestructible state of mind), the Path is the Two Stages (development and completion) through which we can transform our impure vision into pure vision (mandala and deity), what is the goal, realizing the natural mandala.

Now if we would like to understand the levels of tantras than according to Nāgārjuna, they can be divided into four categories, starting from *kriya tantra*, *charyā tantra*, *yogatantra* and finally *anuttarayogatantras*. The primary difference between the classes of tantras is based on the relationship between the practitioner (in the practice it is called *Samayasattva*; the Pledge being) and the main Deity (Jñānasattva, Wisdom being). For example in the *Kriya tantras* the practitioner is like a servant, the main Deity that is visualized in front is like a lord. But in the *anuttaratantras* the *Samayasattva* is inseparable from the Jñānasattva. Hevajra belongs to anuttaratantra class, so the highest level.

Within anuttaratantras we can find so called Father tantras, Mother tantras and Non-dual tantras. The division is according to the focus of practice; whether it is the development stage, or accomplished stage

⁵ From Don Corner: Don Croner's World Wide Wanders Part 2, Mongolia, Tibetan Buddhism; Sakya <http://www.doncroner.com/2005/02/mongolia-tibetan-buddhism-sakya.html> (22.03.2015.)

⁶ 'jig ten las 'das pa'i lam la yang rnam pa gnyis te/ mtshan nyid kyi theg pa dang rdo rje'i theg pa'o/ (The path that transcends world (*sasara*) is subdivided in two categories: the Philosophical Characteristics Vehicle and the Vajra Vehicle). From Man ngag Ita ba'i phreng ba, by Padmasambhava (VIII c.) A: in SNGA 'GYUR BKA' MAT SCHOS SDE, vol. 'a, published by Si khron bod kyi rig gnas zhib 'jug khang; B: in GDAMS NGAG MDZOD, vol. ka, published at Paro in Bhutan 1979

⁷ Choegyal Namkhai Norbu: The Precious Vase (*Santi maha sangha 'i rmang gzhi 'i khrid rin chen bum bzang zhes bya ba*) Shang Shung Edizioni, 58031 Arcidosso GR, Italy 1999, p. 31

⁸ Tib.: *gzhi lam 'bras bu*.

⁹ Skr: *saṃvṛti-satya* and *paramārtha-satya*.

or in Kalacakra tantra non-dual of the two stages. Hevajra belongs to the Mother tantras, it means that the main focus is not on the visualization, on the outer mandala (development stage), but on the inner bliss, inner heat or inner mandala (accomplished stage). This category contains vast range of elaborate practices of physical yogas and sexual practices with the aim to develop heat and bliss.

Why anuttara tantras are „suitable” for an Emperor

If we understand the above mentioned characteristics of the actual tantra the reasons can be summarized according to the following points:

- the path of result, the state of enlightenment – not to renounce like in the sutra system
- importance of Bodhicitta, to care all beings
- relation between the Deity and the practitioner
- the way of development stage (Supreme Royal mandala and Supreme Royal action)
- integrating daily activities into the practice
- developing Siddhis during completion stage
- example of the history of Guhyasamāja tantra
- the only problem: the initiation and the Samayas

The above points are clearly show why anuttara tantras can be practiced by an emperor. First of all the sutra system is based on renunciation (monks and nuns), but in tantras all the activities of worldly life could be part of the practice. Although the tantras are not belonging to sutra approach, but Bodhicitta, the altruistic intention to save and protect all beings is integrated part of it, that is also very important aspect for a ruler, taking care of all population, protecting the country and so on. In anuttaratantras the Deity, here Hevajra and the practitioner (the emperor) are inseparable, so the practitioner is also the lord of the mandala like a king. This clearly can be seen in the names of the two main development state practices (Supreme Royal mandala and Supreme Royal action). During accomplished state there is description of different superhuman capacities that can be accomplished through the yogas. In one of the popular stories that explains the connection between the anuttaratantras and royalship we can find that the Buddha was asked by the king Indrabodhi to give such a teaching and path that he can apply without changing his position as a king. This time the Buddha gave the Guhyasamāja tantra and initiation which is esteemed as the most ancient tantra of all anuttaratantras.

The only problematic thing is the hierarchical relationship between the Vajramaster who is conferring the initiation and the receiver, the disciple, but as we know Phagpa lama and Kubilai could find solution.

Short description of the Hevajra path according to Sakya Lamdre tradition

Traditionally to impart the teaching of Hevajra connected to the Lamdre takes six weeks. Although there were no strict time-frames, it is generally estimated that the average duration of Lamdre teachings was about three years. The whole Lamdre teaching is divided into two sections — first the preliminary (*sutric*) section and then the tantric section.

The preliminary section focuses on the so called “*Three Visions*”:

- impure vision: introduces the karmic vision or samsāra, the six realms or states of suffering
- vision of experience: introduces the experiences of a practitioner (“one pointedness” and “clear discrimination”)
- pure vision: introduces the experience of an accomplished being, a Buddha¹⁰

The tantric section called “*Triple Tantra*”, because is based on three tantric texts:

- root tantra: *Hevajratantrarājanāma*

¹⁰ Lama Choedak Yuthok: *Lamdre Dawn of Enlightenment*. Gorum Publications, Canberra 1997, p. 52

- two explanatory tantras: *Dākinīvajrapañjaratantra*, *Saṃpuṭatantra*¹¹

Initiation, generation stage, completion stage

The path of tantra can be divided into three steps (initiation and the two stages):

- Initiation: in the Lamdre tradition the complete initiation takes six weeks and the aim is to introduce to the student the Body, Speech, Mind and primordial Wisdom of the enlightened state which is in the form of the Deity Hevajra.
- Generation stage: this state (outer mandala practice) is basically comprises visualization and mantra recitation and daily activity yogas (such like yoga of eating, sleeping, waking and so on), the aim is to attain one-pointedness through clarity.
- Completion stage: inner mandala practice (usually in retreat) which is basically generation of inner heat (tib: *gtum mo*). The aim is to control the vital energies and integrating the generated visualized mandala into the inner so called Vajrabody, which is energy system of the physical body. Then the bliss is the state which is the starting point of the higher level of meditations like Mahāmudrā. Through that on this level Buddhahood or enlightenment can be achieved.

In the system of anuttaratantras (sometimes even in the kriya tantras) there are always physical yoga systems connected to the completion stage, these are exercises in sequenced order called in the Tibetan texts as '*phrul 'khor* or '*thrul 'khor*¹² or '*phrin las*¹³, in some cases '*lus sbyong*¹⁴ or '*rsta rlung*¹⁵ or even '*rnal sbyor*¹⁶ which is actually the Tibetan translation of the word *yoga*¹⁷.

Texts about the Yoga of Hevajra

Among the many texts can be found about the physical yoga of Hevajra just the main examples:

- '*phrin las sum cu rtsa gnyis kyi 'khrul 'khor* (Thirty-two activities of yantra) by Dragpa Gyaltsen¹⁸

- '*lam 'bras kyi 'phrin las sum bcu so gnyis* (Thirty-two activities of the Lamdre) by Phagmo Drupa¹⁹

- '*rnal sbyor gyi phrin las sum cu rtsa gnyis* (Thirty-two activities of Yoga) by Norchen Kunga Sangpo in collecting the works of Dragpa Gyaltsen

¹¹ Panchen Ngawang Choedak: *The Triple Tantra, translated and annotated by Lama Choedak Yuthok*. Gorum Publications, Canberra 1997, p. 54

¹² Actually this is the Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit term "yantra", sometimes translated as; "machine", "diagram", "construction".

¹³ Usually translated as "enlightened activity" or "Buddha's actions (karma)".

¹⁴ Usually translated as "body exercises".

¹⁵ Usually translated as „channels-winds (prāṇas)“ practices.

¹⁶ '*Rnal* means "natural state", '*byor* means "possessing", so the translation of yoga in Tibetan: „possessing the natural state“.

¹⁷ Meaning of „yoga“ in the different Buddhists sources could be also an interesting research topic. Just briefly to mention there is a Yoga sutta in the Pāli canon, where yoga means under control of the sense faculties, or bounded by negative emotions. In Yogācāra yoga means basically meditation practices. Yogācārins are those beings, who are focusing mainly on meditation. In the tantras and especially in the higher tantras yoga can mean union, but in mahāmudrā (yoga: contemplation) and in the dzogchen teaching (yoga: possessing the natural state) we can find also different meaning.

¹⁸ Grags pa rgyal mtshan (1147–1216) in the Sakya lamdre collection in the section of lam 'bras slob bshad (v. 1-26) 10. text, pp. 303–307

¹⁹ phag-mo dru-pa (1110–1170) in the collected texts of Phagmo Drupa, pp. 647–653

Surprisingly there is a recently discovered bilingual, Tibetan - Chinese text from the collection of Qing court that contains the same yogic exercises mentioned by the above texts, and this is one of the rare manuscripts that were published in English with explanations and notes, with the title; *Samadhi of Completion*²⁰.

Samādhi of completion: Secret Tibetan yoga illuminations from the Qing court²¹

According to the illustrated text, the structure of the practice is the following:

- preliminary practices (11): 3 to expel the impure air (tib: *rlung ro*), 4 developing inner heat and 4 radiating lights from the different points of the body (Body-mandala practice)
- main practices (96): 32 yogic postures in normal order, 32 in reversed order, 32 in random order

At the end on the 108th image we can see Dragpa Gyaltsen and then there is 9 more images describing the completion meditational practices of Chakrasamwara, Yāmāntaka, Guhyasamāja and Amitāyus tantric cycles.

The whole practice is like a rosary beads practiced sequentially one movement after the other.

According to the Buddhist tantric system (anuttara tantras, such like Hevajra, Chakrasamwara, Yāmāntaka, Guhyasamāja and so on) if someone, a practitioner was successful completing the above yogic practices, generating inner heat, bliss, then it was possible for him to do consort practices to enchant and integrate the bliss into meditation (but prior to these practices sexual yogas were not allowed).



Example

From the original text (*kyai rdo rje'i rnal 'byor las rtsa rlung*; p. 4.):

kyai rdo rje'i rnal 'byor las rtsa rlung

'dzin pa'i mngon du rlung ro bud

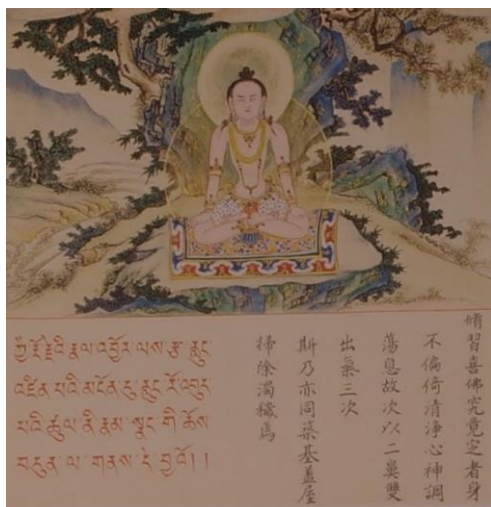
pa'i tshul ni rnam snang gi chos

bdun la gnas de bya'o

²⁰ In TBRC the original text is under the title: *kyai rdo rje'i rnal 'byor las rtsa rlung*

²¹ 究竟定 — 清宮藏密瑜伽修行寶典 - jiu jing ding — qing gong zang mi yu jia xiu xing bao dian (Samādhi of completion : Secret Tibetan yoga illuminations from the Qing court), Published by the forbidden city publishing house, Beijing 2009

From the Hevajra Yoga, to establish the *rtsa rlung* (channels and winds (*prāṇa*)) expel the dead (impure) wind (*prana*) in the “Seven point position of Vairocana”.



page 4. from the original text

Conclusion

In the Yuan period all the tantric practices were based on texts which were translated from Tibetan and they belonged to the highest yogatantras, the anuttaratantra class.²²

All the anuttaratantras have it's particular physical yoga systems connected to the inner mandala practices, these completion phase practices were kept in secret, due to the fact, that they were mostly practiced in retreats (Kālacakra, Guhyasamāja, Six Dharma of Nāropa, Yoga of Niguma and so on).

If the Yuan elite were really practicing Hevajra, then they were doing physical yogas with different breathing methods and the connected visualizations.

The Chinese terms in anuttaratantra texts are mostly referring to yogic techniques not orgies as Toh Hoong Teik and also Shen Weirong states.²³ According to them the term *yanshe* 'er or *yanjie* 'er means not degenerate sexual practice, but rather it is a transliteration of the Sanskrit *yantra* or tib. *'phrul 'khor* – or physical yogic exercises.

Bibliography

Primary resources

- *Chen po Hor gyi yul du dam pa'i chos ji ltar dar ba'i tshul gsal bar brjod pa padma dkar po'i phren ba* - Rosary of White Lotus, Being the Clear Account of How the Precious Teaching (of Buddha) Appeared and Spread in the Great Hor Country by Dam-chos rGya-mtsho Dharmata-la in 1880's. Published: Rosary of white lotuses: being the clear account of how the precious teaching of Buddha appeared and spread in the great Hor country by Damchø Gyatsho Dharmatāla ; translated and annotated by Piotr Klafkowski ; supervised by Nyalo Trulku Jampa Kelzang Rinpoche. Wiesbaden : Harrassowitz, 1987. (Asiatische Forschungen)

²² Many of these texts were translated from Tibetan even in the Tangut period in Xixia 西夏 empire – (1032 – 1227).

²³ Toh Hoong Teik: *Tibetan Buddhism in Ming China*, PhD dissertation, Harvard University 2004, p. 147

- *jiu jing ding — qing gong zang mi yu jia xiu xing bao dian* 究竟定 — 清宮藏密瑜伽修行寶典 - (*Samādhi of completion : Secret Tibetan yoga illuminations from the Qing court*). Published by the forbidden city publishing house, Beijing 2009
- *lam 'bras kyi 'phrin las sum bcu so gnyis* (Thirty-two activities of the Lamdre) by Phagmo Drupa in the collected texts of Phagmo Drupa, pp. 647-653
- *man ngag Ita ba'i phreng ba*, by Padmasambhava (VIII c.) A: in SNGA 'GYUR BKA' MAT SCHOS SDE, vol. 'a, published by Si khron bod kyi rig gnas zhib 'jug khang; B: in GDAMS NGAG MDZOD, vol. ka, published at Paro in Bhutan 1979
- *rnal sbyor gyi phrin las sum cu rtsa gnyis* (Thirty-two activities of Yoga) by Norchen Kunga Sangpo in collecting the works of Dragpa Gyaltsen in the Sakya lamdre collection in the section of lam 'bras slob bshad (v. 1-26)
- *phrin las sum cu rtsa gnyis kyi 'khrul 'khor* (Thirty-two activities of yantra) by Dragpa Gyaltsen in the Sakya lamdre collection in the section of lam 'bras slob bshad (v. 1-26) 10. text, pp. 303-307.

English resources

- Choedak, Panchen Ngawang: *The Triple Tantra, translated and annotated by Lama Choedak Yuthok*. Gorum Publications, Canberra, Australia 1997, p. 54
- Don Croner's World Wide Wanders Part 2, Mongolia, Tibetan Buddhism; Sakya <http://www.doncroner.com/2005/02/mongolia-tibetan-buddhism-sakya.html> (22.03.2015.)
- Lama Choedak Yuthok: *Lamdre Dawn of Enlightenment*. Gorum Publications, Canberra, Australia 1997, p. 52
- Namkhai Norbu, Choegyal: *The Precious Vase (Santi maha sangha 'i rmang gzhi 'i khrid rin chen bum bzang zhes bya ba)*. Shang Shung Edizioni, 58031 Arcidosso GR, Italy 1999, p. 31
- Shen Weirong: *Tibetan Tantric Buddhism at the Court of the Great Mongol Khans, Sa skya pandita and 'Phags pa's Works in Chinese during the Yuan Period*. QUAESTIONES MONGOLORUM DISPUTATAE No.1 (Tokyo: Association for International Studies of Mongolian Culture) 2005, pp. 61-89
- Toh Hoong Teik: *Tibetan Buddhism in Ming China*. PhD dissertation, Harvard University 2004, p. 147

Illustrations

Hevajra and the five main tantra Deity Yidams from Ulaanbaatar (19th Century):

http://gepeskonyv.btk.elte.hu/adatok/Okor-kelet/Okori.es.keleti.muveszet/index.asp_id=595.html

Illustrations from Tibetan Buddhist Research Centre from the book of Channel Wind practice of Hevajra Yoga (*kyai rdo rje'i rnal 'byor las rtsa rlung*):

http://www.tbrc.org/#library_work_ViewInWindow-W1KG14474%7CI1KG14756%7C1%7C1%7C1%7C124