

# Catuṣpīṭha

*Catuṣpīṭha* may be either an abbreviation of the scriptural title *Catuṣpīṭhatantra* or the name of the textual cycle and teachings directly or supposedly based on that scripture. The *Catuṣpīṭhatantra* is one of the earlier *yoginītantras*, the penultimate wave of scriptural revelation in Indian esoteric Buddhism. It was composed most likely in the late 9th century in northeast India (Szántó, vol. I, 2012, 35ff.). Like other examples of the genre, the text for the most part teaches a pantheon, the initiation rite meant to create a qualified worshipper of the pantheon, the worship proper of these deities, and related yogic-ritual practices employing visualization and mantras.

## Title and Structure

The title of the text is to be understood as The Scripture in Four Chapters, since it has nothing to do with *pīṭhas* in the sense of pilgrimage places. The chapters are given the names *Ātmapīṭha*, *Parapīṭha*, *Yogapīṭha*, and *Guhyapīṭha*; it is not at all clear how these chapter titles (meaning self, other, meditation, and secret, respectively) relate to their contents. The chapters are further divided into four subchapters each. Exegetical tradition maintains that the currently preserved text is the abbreviation of a 12,000-verse version, which itself was an abridgment of an 18,000-verse ur-revelation. The *Catuṣpīṭhatantra* as we have it today consists of what would amount to about 1,200 verses. Excepting a few prose passages, speaker markers, and mantras, the text is composed in more or less regular *anuṣṭubh* meter. The text is in the form of a dialogue between an unspecified Bhagavat (“Lord”), sometimes styled Jñānendra (“Sovereign of Gnosis”), and Vajrapāṇi, the standard petitioner of Vajrayāna scriptures (Szántó, vol. I, 2012, 25ff.).

## Sources

The *Catuṣpīṭhatantra* has not yet been published in its entirety (about half of the text accompanied by the *Catuṣpīṭhanibandha* of Bhavabhaṭṭa is edited in Szántó, vol. II, 2012, 5–224). It survives in at least

three almost complete palm-leaf manuscripts, several paper manuscripts, and at least six palm-leaf fragments. All these codices were copied in Nepal. There is also a canonical Tibetan translation from the 11th century, the joint effort of Gayādhara and Khug pa lhas btsas of the 'Gos clan (Szántó, vol. I, 2012, 73–89).

A significant amount of the text is also transmitted in the lemmata of the most extensive commentary, the *Catuṣpīṭhanibandha* of Bhavabhaṭṭa (northeast India, first half of the 10th cent.). The *Catuṣpīṭhanibandha* survives in several paper copies and three almost complete palm-leaf codices: two of these are of Nepalese origin, whereas what is the best manuscript was probably copied at Vikramaśīla Monastery in the second half of the 12th century. An enlarged Tibetan translation of this commentary was produced by the same translators as those of the *Catuṣpīṭhatantra* (Szántó, vol. I, 2012, 97–115).

There are two further commentaries extant in Sanskrit. Both are unfinished, as they comment on the first three chapters only. This does not mean that the authors knew a shorter recension, since both allude to passages in the *Guhyapīṭha*, chapter 4. The earlier, by one Kalyāṇavarman (Nepal?, 10th cent.), is simply called the *Pañjikā*. It is extant in a single Nepalese palm-leaf manuscript dated 1012 CE. This work was translated into Tibetan and completed with a commentary on the fourth chapter by Smṛtijñānakīrti (Szántó, vol. I, 2012, 115–119). The latter of the commentaries, the *Mitapadāpañjikā* by Durjayacandra (northeast India, late 10th cent.), survives in a single Nepalese palm-leaf manuscript and a paper apograph thereof. This copy is incomplete: there are two leaves missing from the beginning and an undeterminable number of folios from the end. The work has not been translated into Tibetan (Szántó, vol. I, 2012, 119–123).

The two earlier commentators, Bhavabhaṭṭa and Kalyāṇavarman, already allude to variant interpretations, thus there has already been some kind of exegesis of the text before them (Szántó, vol. I, 2012, 95–96). Both exegetes betray knowledge of a very influential satellite text of the cycle, the *Maṅḍalopāyikā*. The transmission history of this text is quite complex, and its authorship is problematic

(see Szántó, 2008b; vol. I, 2012, 123–147). Besides laying down the initiation ritual in great detail, one recension of the text introduced a new pantheon – most significantly a male deity, Yogāmbara, as the central figure – and eventually took over the role of primary scripture from the *Catuṣpīṭhatantra* itself. For Bhavabhṭṭa and Kalyāṇavarman, the pantheon is still exclusively female, but Durjayacandra already acknowledges Yogāmbara as the main deity of the cult.

The rest of *Catuṣpīṭha* literature consists of smaller commentaries, minor ritual manuals, and several scriptural texts, the longest of which, the \**Vyākhyātantra*, is extant only in Tibetan translation. Two texts delineating the daily ritual-meditative practice of the initiate deserve special mention. The *Yogāmbarasādhanopāyikā* of Amitavajra (north-east India, 11th cent.) seems to have been the standard manual, until it was overshadowed by a work based on it, the *Yogāmbarasādhanavidhi* of Jagadānandajīvabhadrā (Nepal, 14th cent.). Judging by the number of extant manuscripts and the current manner of worshipping Yogāmbara in the Kathmandu Valley, this was certainly the most popular ritual manual in recent times. (For an account

of these unpublished texts, see Szántó, vol. I, 2012, 89–95, 147–194.)

## The Pantheon

The original pantheon of the *Catuṣpīṭha* was exclusively female. The goddesses' iconographic features, seed syllables (*bījas*), mantras, corresponding hand gestures (*mudrās*), and worship are described in what may be called the flagship subchapter, 2.3 (that is, third subchapter of the *Parapīṭha*). The chief goddess, Jñānaḍākinī, occupies the central seat of the *maṇḍala*. She has three faces and six arms; she is clad in red garments and wears snake ornaments. Her faces are laughing, coquettish, and fierce. She holds a skull-staff, a battle-axe, a *vajra*-scepter, a bell, a skull-bowl, and a sword. She is surrounded by four goddesses in the cardinal directions, four in the intermediate directions, and four doorkeepers. The visualization starts with the central goddess. Each goddess is a transformation of her seed syllable (*bīja*), and they are later summoned by their specific mantras and corresponding gestures.

The main points can be tabulated as follows:

goddess	position	color	<i>bīja</i>	mantra
Jñānaḍākinī	middle	dark	<i>hūṃ</i>	<i>oṃ hūṃ svāhā</i>
Vajraḍākinī	east	white	<i>suṃ</i>	<i>oṃ a svāhā</i>
Ghoraḍākinī	north	yellow	<i>huṃ</i>	<i>oṃ ā svāhā</i>
Vettālī	west	red	<i>yuṃ</i>	<i>oṃ ā3 svāhā</i>
Caṇḍālī	south	black	<i>kṣuṃ</i>	<i>oṃ āṃ svāhā</i>
Siṃhī	northeast	yellow-white	<i>smryuṃ</i>	<i>oṃ ṛ svāhā</i>
Vyāghrī	southeast	black-white	<i>hmryuṃ</i>	<i>oṃ ṛ svāhā</i>
Jambukī	southwest	black-red	<i>ymryuṃ</i>	<i>oṃ ḷ svāhā</i>
Ulūkī	northwest	yellow-red	<i>kṣmryuṃ</i>	<i>oṃ ḷ svāhā</i>
Raudrī/Ḍākinī	east	white	–	<i>oṃ phuṃ svāhā</i>
Dīpinī	north	yellow	–	<i>oṃ pheṃ svāhā</i>
Cūṣiṇī	west	red	–	<i>oṃ phoṃ svāhā</i>
Kāambojī	south	black	–	<i>oṃ phriṃ svāhā</i>

Table 1: Where two colors are mentioned, it should be understood as half-half and not a mixture of the respective colors; *ā3* denotes the protracted (*pluta*) vowel.

In the *yoginītantras*, especially in scriptures related to the cult of Śaṃvara or Saṃvara, the general trend was to appropriate full-fledged antinomianism and Kāpālika or charnel-ground imagery (see Sanderson, 2009, 145ff.). The *Catuṣpīṭha* imagery and the ritual procedures related to the deities are still at what may be termed a transitional phase (Szántó, vol. I, 2012, 55–57). The goddesses of the cardinal directions and the doorkeepers are visualized in the antinomian counterclockwise order, but those in the intermediate directions are not. Some of the goddesses do carry skull-bowls (h. *yogapātra*) and skull-staffs (*khaṭvāṅga*), but they are not wearing bone ornaments (their ornaments are snakes instead) and are not smeared with ash. Their hair is disheveled, but they are still fully clad. Instead of the dynamic dancing postures, they are visualized as seated. Only some of the goddesses are said to display ferocious laughter (*aṭṭahāsa*), and we find animal-headed goddesses only among the outer eight. Jñānaḍākinī herself does have a ferocious face, but it is not the one facing the worshipper. Since this original pantheon is female, there are no copulating deities. However, with the arrival of the new pantheon headed by Yogāmbara, the old chief goddess and the new god are portrayed in sexual embrace, as are some of the attendants.

The male deity Yogāmbara is in many ways similar to what with his superimposition became his consort: he is also dark, has three faces displaying the same emotions, and six arms, which also hold a *vajra*-scepter, a bell, and a skull-bowl, but a bow and an arrow in the remaining two, while one hand fondles the consort's breast. By being relegated to the role of female consort, Jñānaḍākinī sometimes adopts the name Yogāmbari.

The superimposition of a male deity onto a female pantheon is against the general trend of late tantric Buddhism (and also tantric Śaivism), where the tendency was rather for goddesses to become autonomous from their male partners, such as in the case of Vajrayoginī (see Sanderson, 2009, 173ff.).

## The Language of the *Catuṣpīṭhatantra*

Although the Sanskrit of most later Buddhist *tantras* tends to deviate greatly from classical usage, the language of the *Catuṣpīṭhatantra* goes even further. The text is written in an almost *sui generis* register of Sanskrit, one that unsystematically violates practically every grammatical rule. In declination there is complete promiscuity in gender, case,

and number. Conjugation does not fare any better: singular and plural, active and medial, and simplex and causative are frequently confused. Pronouns, enclitic particles, the word *et cetera* (*ādi*), and the *-tas* suffix are sometimes meaningless verse fillers. Words are sometimes truncated only to fit the meter (Szántó, vol. I, 2012, 60–67).

For example, *Catuṣpīṭhatantra* 1.1.1ab reads as follows:

*evaṃ bhāṣita sarvajña rīgīnāṃ jñānam īśvaram*

Aside from the doctrinal problem that this is not the standard etiological introduction (*nidāna*), every word except “thus” (*evaṃ*) and “gnosis” (*jñānam*) requires some explanation. The past participle with a zero-suffix *bhāṣita* acts as a finite verb, meaning “he spoke,” whereas the next word – “the omniscient one” (*sarvajña*), which looks like a vocative – is to be understood as the subject, with the zero-suffix standing for a nominative ending. The second verse quarter describes the subject: he is the gnosis (*jñānam*) of, or – as one commentator glosses it – that which is to be known for, *rīgīs* (sometimes spelled *rgī*), a word of unknown origin, usually understood by the exegetes as buddhas or elsewhere as goddesses. He is also the lord (*īśvaram*), but here, too, what is expected to be one case, the accusative, is to be taken as another, again the nominative. The example chosen here is a relatively straightforward one, and with such explanations, most of the teachings of the *Catuṣpīṭhatantra* can be more or less followed. However, some lines were so obscure that even scriptures that lift over entire passages from the *Catuṣpīṭhatantra* simply chose to ignore them, while retaining the immediately surrounding text (Szántó, vol. I, 2012, 48–54).

The exegetes were not blind to this highly idiosyncratic Sanskrit (Szántó, vol. I, 2012, 61–64). The author of the aforementioned *Maṇḍalopāyikā*, who nevertheless emulates this ungrammatical style, calls it barbaric language/usage (*mlecchabhāṣā*). He also alludes to the fact that this usage is meant to safeguard the esoteric teachings. The commentator Bhavabhaṭṭa advises the reader to pay attention to the meaning, since meter, gender, case endings, number, and the such are “beyond worldly usage” (*atilaukika*) in this scripture (Szántó, vol. I, 2012, 62). He also warns the reader not to criticize grammatical or ungrammatical expressions, since they are both constructs. It is not unlikely that the *Catuṣpīṭha* exegetes considered the barbaric language of the *Catuṣpīṭhatantra* something intentional, meant either to keep the uninitiated ignorant or to teach

on a metalevel the ultimately constructed and conventional nature of all things.

The *Catuṣpīṭhatantra* is perhaps the second earliest *yoginītantra* to employ Apabhramsha verses (the first – as far as we know – is the so-called proto-*yoginītantra*, the *Sarvabuddhasamāyogaḍākinījālaśaṅvara*). Some of these became very influential in later liturgy especially in the rite of collective worship (*ganacakra*). There are several features in these verses pointing to a strong affinity with eastern types of Apabhramsha.

## Synopsis of Contents

The idiosyncratic usage of Sanskrit affected the transmission of the text and exegetical consensus greatly. It is therefore difficult to outline a precise synopsis of contents, since, depending on chosen readings and interpretation, the same passage could be describing different topics. Moreover, since the *Catuṣpīṭhatantra* is not organized well, the borders of subunits may vary according to each commentator. The contents of the subchapters are broadly as follows:

Subchapter 1.1 first describes the setting for the revelation of the scripture. The petitioner is Vajrapāṇi, who is found heading an unusual list of bodhisattvas: Dhutaḡaṇa, Bībhasa, Lambaka, Trikaṅṭha, Meru, Meruśikhara, Padma, and Padmodara. Although the first questions refer to breath retention, in what follows, a unique system of reckoning time is revealed. The basis is a duodecimal group of so-called sovereigns of abodes (*bhuvaneśvaras*), a list unique to this scripture (and to those, such as the *Vajraḍākatantra*, that have borrowed from it): Rohitā, Mohitā, Bhadra, Vṛṣabha, Kūrma, Makara, Raṅḍā, Mikira, Bhidrika, Vyākuli, Svapna, and Kāma. On the basis of this system (studied by Sugiki, 2005a), the text teaches natal prognostication, practical astrology (e.g. when to undertake moneylending), auspicious times for beginning rituals, and so on. The subchapter also describes a computation of the northern and southern progression of the sun as well as another type of divination, this time based on a diagram. (The first eight verses are edited, translated, and discussed by Szántó, vol. II, 2012, 5–13; vol. I, 2012, 199–207.)

Subchapter 1.2 teaches the bodily signs of death, how to counteract them and thus cheat death (*mṛtyuvañcana*), matters related to curing snake-bite, and rainmaking. (See a full edition, translation,

and discussion by Szántó, vol. II, 2012, 14–54; vol. I, 2012, 208–242.)

Subchapter 1.3 teaches meditation on emptiness (*śūnyatā*) accompanied by a method to divine success in particular rituals depending on the color that emerges when the practitioner contemplates emptiness. (For an edition with all three commentaries, see Szántó, 2008a. For a reedition of the text of the *Catuṣpīṭhatantra* and the *Catuṣpīṭhanibandha*, translation, and discussion, see Szántó, vol. II, 2012, 55–65; vol. I, 2012, 243–251.)

Subchapter 1.4 first teaches the first part (followed up in 2.3) on how to meditate on the chief goddess, Jñānaḍākinī. The remaining part teaches a rite to paralyze and a method to stop excessive rain. (See a full edition, translation, and discussion by Szántó, vol. II, 2012, 66–83; vol. I, 2012, 252–270.)

Subchapter 2.1 for the most part deals with oblation into fire (*homa*). The rite can be undertaken for a variety of worldly aims: killing enemies, invigoration, subjugation, placating, obtaining a son, increasing fertility in cattle, averting danger from a city or a country, paralyzing, attracting, and restoring an ousted king. The size of the pit, the firewood, substances cast into the fire, measurements, and so forth are customized according to the aim. A short passage at the end describes the ideal initiate (*śiṣya*). (This last passage is edited, translated, and discussed by Szántó, vol. II, 2012, 84–85; vol. I, 2012, 274–277. A synopsis of the rest is given by Szántó, vol. I, 2012, 271–274.)

Subchapter 2.2 teaches oblation into water (*jalahoma*), a rare but not unparalleled ritual. The aims are similar to those of usual *homas*, the only major difference being that substances are not cast into fire but in a large receptacle of water. (See a detailed synopsis and discussion by Szántó, vol. I, 2012, 278–282.)

Subchapter 2.3 is by far the longest one. It describes in considerable detail the pantheon of the cult and related matters such as mantras and hand gestures used both to invoke the goddesses and to worship them. The food offering called *bali* is also described in detail. The subchapter contains praises in both Sanskrit and Apabhramsha. In the latter half, elements of transgressive worship are given: here the deities are offered liquor, the so-called nectars (*amṛta*, i.e. bodily substances such as semen, urine, and feces), and the so-called hooks (*aṅkuśas*), known in other systems as lamps (*pradīpa*, i.e. five kinds of flesh – that of elephants, cows, dogs, horses, and humans). The subchapter finishes with a dedication

of merits and the ritual dismissal of the deities. (The subchapter is edited, translated, and discussed by Szántó, vol. II, 2012, 86–161; vol. I, 2012, 283–356.)

Subchapter 2.4 deals with a variety of topics, including descriptions of the nectars and hooks, ways of purifying and empowering them, miscellaneous details concerning the *bali* offering, rituals of propitiating the doorkeeper goddesses, an Apabhramsha verse to be recited in order to gain entry to secret collective worship, and the secret signs and code words used in the same context (see Sugiki, 2005b). The most striking statement in this subchapter concerns the goddesses: should they fail to comply with the initiate's wishes, they can be killed. (See synopsis, including an edition and discussion of the Apabhramsha verse by Szántó, vol. I, 2012, 357–366.)

Subchapter 3.1 teaches the symbolism of the main ritual implements: the scepter (*vajra*), the bell (*ghaṇṭā*), and the string of beans for recitation (h. *akṣasūtra*). The last passage is a somewhat obscure presentation on the amount of knowledge (*jñāna*) that inhabitants of different levels of the universe possess. (A synopsis is given by Szántó, vol. I, 2012, 367–373.)

Subchapter 3.2 teaches a variety of minor rites, mostly the drawing of amulet-like diagrams but also rites to attract a king, a woman, or material wealth. (A synopsis is given by Szántó, vol. I, 2012, 374–379.)

Subchapter 3.3 reveals a variety of methods to induce possession (*āveśā*) and rites to drive off one's enemy, to attract a woman, to paralyze, to chastise what the text calls "wicked wives" by blocking their vulva, to produce an ointment for clairvoyance of female spirits, and to cause strife between two targets. (A full edition, translation, and discussion are given by Szántó, vol. II, 2012, 162–188; vol. I, 2012, 380–410.)

Subchapter 3.4 discusses the symbolism of the *maṇḍala*, a variety of yogic sexual practices undertaken with a consort, and further individual propitiations of goddesses. (See a synopsis by Szántó, vol. I, 2012, 411–416.)

Subchapter 4.1 deals mostly with matters related to initiation (*abhiṣeka*): characteristics of the ideal officiant (*ācārya*), the manner in which the initiate should behave toward him, the rite of initiation proper, and rules of postinitiatory observance. (See full edition, translation, and discussion by Szántó, vol. II, 2012, 189–214; vol. I, 2012, 417–449.)

Subchapter 4.2 is perhaps the most obscure one. The outset is quite antiritualistic in its tone, and there are several philosophical discussions on the

topics of bondage, impermanence, and the nature of consciousness. In spite of all this, the text continues with yet further meditational methods, including the visualization of Vajrasattva and the interiorized oblation into fire (*guhyaḥoma*). (See synopsis by Szántó, vol. I, 2012, 450–453.)

Subchapter 4.3 starts with a speculation on the presence of elements (earth, water, etc.) in the body and continues with a visualization meant to make consciousness firmly concentrated and the practice of conscious egress from the body at the time of death (*utkrānti*). In this practice, the initiate is supposed to block with mantras the apertures of his body and direct his consciousness toward the top of his head, whence it should exit. Although liberation is not promised explicitly, the text says that even great sinners become purified by this method. However, it warns, the initiate must wait until the time death has become inevitable (i.e. when he has perceived the signs of death described above and has no wish to prolong his worldly existence). The last procedure (or procedures?) described is too obscure to be identified with certainty: it may be a continuation to *utkrānti* or a separate method meant to read other people's thoughts. (The passage on *utkrānti* is edited, translated, and discussed by Szántó, vol. II, 2012, 215–224; vol. I, 2012, 455–468. An overview of the rest is given by Szántó, vol. I, 2012, 454–455, 469–470.)

Subchapter 4.4 first teaches a meditation method meant to secure perfect enlightenment. A few verses teach signs of accomplishment, mostly visions that the meditator experiences. Two further, similar methods are taught, along with practical advice for the meditator, such as finding a suitably isolated place, and a recipe to alleviate his hunger and thirst. The closing passages describe the joy of the retinue on hearing the *Catuṣpīṭhatantra* and the benefits accrued from merely listening to it or copying it. (See synopsis by Szántó, vol. I, 2012, 471–474.)

## Presumed Environment, Innovation, and Influence

Judging from the divinatory passages and targets of rituals, the intended clientele of the specialist initiates was the urban or semi-urban Buddhist laity. Furthermore, the passages describing the *ācārya*'s fee and a passage praising the value of the *ācārya* in the *Maṇḍalopāyikā* seem to suggest that the *ācāryas* themselves were not monks but married householders.

The *Catuṣpīṭhatantra*, although several of its texts were translated into Classical Tibetan, seems to have enjoyed only a marginal role in Tibet. Quotations and references in Indic texts are also rather scarce when compared to other *yoginītantras*, such as the *Hevajratantra*. However, the cycle was greatly successful in the Kathmandu Valley, where Yogāmbara and Jñānaḍākinī are worshipped to this day.

The *Catuṣpīṭhatantra* was nevertheless very influential on the subcontinent (here discounting Nepal), in an indirect way. Several important scriptures related to the cult of Śaṃvara or Saṃvara borrow passages from it. Almost two hundred verses are incorporated into the *Samputodbhavantra* and several dozens of verses into the *Vajraḍākatantra*, the *Ḍākārnavatantra*, and the *Samvarodayatantra*, and there are echoes even in the *Yoginīsaṃcāratantra* and the *Abhidhānottarantra*. The aforementioned Apabhramsha verses were incorporated into the periodically observed collective worship (*gaṇacakra*). The *Catuṣpīṭhatantra* was very likely the first esoteric Buddhist scripture to teach *utkrānti*, although it was not the earliest text to do so (the earliest being the *Dvikramatattvabhavānā Mukhāgama* of Buddhaśrījñāna/Jñānapāda). The waning popularity of the text was perhaps due to its highly obscure language.

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