

# Tantric Prakaraṇas

*Prakaraṇas* are usually short or mid-length treatises on a particular aspect of doctrine and/or practice, either tacitly endorsing and promoting a viewpoint or phrased in an apologetic style; in other words, they are descriptive or argumentative, essay-style exegetical writings. While there is nothing specifically tantric about the term *prakaraṇa* itself, in the present article it refers to those related to esoteric literature. These treatises do not claim to be revelation: the author is known, or there is at least supposed to have been a human author, even if authorship is frequently debated. Examples of a treatise being attributed to an already well-known figure in order to increase its prestige abound. Some *prakaraṇas* proved to be very influential, as they are frequently quoted, endorsed, and debated.

The boundary lines between *prakaraṇas* and other genres such as commentaries or ritual manuals are not always so sharp, since works of the latter type often contain argumentative excursions, which can be seen as mini-treatises (one such example is a treatise embedded in the *Vimalaprabhā*, a commentary to the *Kālacakratāntra*; Gnoli, 1997). Moreover, some *prakaraṇas* were so prestigious and influential that later scriptural compilers took over from them entire paragraphs, thus “scripturalizing” passages that were presumably seen as important. In cultures in which tantric literature has been canonized (China, Tibet), there is no separate section dedicated to *prakaraṇas*; instead they are found dispersed among other genres of exegesis, sometimes affiliated to a particular cycle of scriptural revelation.

Topics can be varied. A popular theme is the surveying of Buddhist revelation, evaluating the virtues of one doctrine over another, and showing how the tantric revelation fits into the scheme. It did not escape the attention of authors that esoteric teachings were of a very different type when compared to mainstream Buddhism, and thus quite a lot of effort went into justifying not only their place but also their superiority. However, sometimes the theme of a treatise can be narrowly specialized, for example the precise number of initiations (*abhiṣeka*) and what they should consist of. For the historian these are very precious documents, since they are crucial

for reconstructing the intellectual landscape of medieval Indian Buddhism in general and esoteric Buddhism in particular.

An argumentative *prakaraṇa* is typically written in prose, but the *kārikā* style, fully versified form is not unknown; some are written in mixed prose and verse. Following the age-old model, after the topic has been pointed out, possible objections are listed and refuted employing reasoning (*yukti*) and the authority of revelation and previous masters (*āgama*), either by allusion or direct quotation. Descriptive *prakaraṇas* are usually in verse, the density of which suggests that this is mainly a mnemonic device. These do not typically follow the argumentative style, but almost always endorse a particular doctrinal perspective, at the expense of competing views.

Even if a particular *prakaraṇa* is not openly argumentative, the designation is similar to the titles of those that are. The headings of both kinds of treatises employ terms such as *tattva* (reality) or a synonym thereof; other words commonly employed include *nirukti* (elucidation), *pradīpa* (lamp), *nirākaraṇa* (refutation), or *siddhi* (proof or accomplishment). Furthermore, not infrequently a descriptive treatise was followed by an argumentative commentary either by the author himself or a disciple.

Although quite a few *prakaraṇas* have survived in the original Sanskrit, some of the most important and influential ones can now be accessed only in Tibetan translations, many of which are of poor quality. The individual texts discussed below are for the most part those whose original is extant, but exception is made in those cases where the work is too important to ignore. The survey is not comprehensive.

## Padmavajra's *Guhyasiddhi*

The *Guhyasiddhi* of Padmavajra (The Accomplishment of the Secret; *Gsang ba grub pa*; D 2217/P 5016) is very probably an 8th-century CE work. The Sanskrit original is available, but it is very poorly transmitted; the only edition thus far (Rinpoche & Dwivedi, 1987, 5–62) should be considered a very tentative

attempt. The work is arranged in nine chapters and it is almost entirely in verse. The *Guhyasiddhi* seeks to elucidate a number of points about what it sees as the fundamental tantric scripture, the *Guhyasamājantra*, which is unequivocally seen as the culmination of Buddhist revelation. The author advocates a complete, unapologetically antinomian spiritual programme for practitioners of varying abilities and accomplishments based on that scripture, beginning with the service of a *guru*, receiving initiation followed by diligent meditative practice, sexual yoga beginning with a real woman and culminating with a visualized internal consort, and various kinds of post-initiatory observance (*caryā*). One such passage (ch. 8, esp. v. 12) betrays intimate familiarity with rival Śaiva cults (Tanemura, 2008, 55–58; Sanderson, 2009, 144–145).

### Indrabhūti's *Jñānasiddhi*

The *Jñānasiddhi* (Accomplishment of [Nondual] Gnosis; ed. Bhattacharyya, 1929, 31–100; Rinpoche & Dwivedi, 1987, 89–158; *Ye shes grub pa*; D 2219/P 3063) is confessedly a practical manual, but it is much more than that, as the author frequently digresses into supportive philosophical discussions, such as the Yogācāra controversy of *sākāra* and *nirākāra* (i.e. whether or not the perceiving mind “takes the form” of the perceived object). The work, which is structured in 20 chapters, is no doubt early, perhaps from the 9th century CE. Unfortunately, it is also rather badly transmitted (de Jong, 1998) in relatively late paper manuscripts. Just like Padmavajra, Indrabhūti promotes a unambiguously transgressive spiritual programme: the practitioner is free to do anything provided that he maintains meditative identity with the deity. The work is imbued with the spirit and diction of the *Sarvabuddhasamāyogaḍākinijālaśaṃvara*, a scripture the author also frequently quotes and refers to (Sanderson, 2009, 155–156, 163).

### Jñānapāda's *Ātmasāadhanāvātāra*

Perhaps one of the earliest argumentative *prakaraṇas* of late tantric Buddhism is to be found among the works of Jñānapāda or \*Buddhaśrījñāna (late 8th–early 9th cent. CE). His *Ātmasāadhanāvātāra* (An Introduction to Accomplishment in the Body; *Bdag sgrub pa la 'jug pa*; D 1860/P 2723) is extant in

Sanskrit (Kawasaki, 2004, 51) but remains inaccessible. More than half of the original can be recovered from two long excursuses in a still unstudied recension of a work called the *Sāramañjarī* (for the catalogue entry, see Sferra, 2008, 45). The work seeks to advocate, defend, and harmonize the fundamentally tantric practice of visualizing oneself as a deity with Yogācāra Buddhism.

### Works of the Ārya School

The so-called Ārya school is one of the two most influential traditions of *Guhyasamājantra* exegesis. While the fundamental text of this group, the *Pañcakrama* (The Five Stages; *Rim pa lnga pa*; D 1802/P 2667) deals almost exclusively with practice (a comprehensive study, edition, and French translation can be found in Tomabechi, 2006), the *Sūta* or *Sūtakamelāpaka* (The Integration of *Sūtras*, *Tantras*, and *Kalpas*; *Spyod pa bsdu pa'i sgron ma*; D 1803/P 2668), better known under the otherwise unattested title as the \**Caryāmelāpakapradīpa* of deutero-Āryadeva (most likely early 9th cent. CE) also deals with doctrinal matters, advocating a gradual path of tantric practice as the culmination of Mahāyāna in the form of a conversation between master and disciple (edited and translated into English in Wedemeyer, 2007). The *Cittaviśuddhiprakaraṇa* (A Treatise on the Purification of Mind; *Sems kyi sgrub pa rnam par sbyong ba zhes bya ba'i rab tu byed pa*; D 1804/P 2669) of presumably the same, tantric Āryadeva is a defense of antinomian practice and an attempt to show that in spite of all appearances, such a path is in perfect harmony with Mahāyāna philosophy (the latest edition and study, greatly in need of revision, is Varghese, 2008; for another translation, see Wedemeyer, 1999, 357–382). Attributed to the same author, the *Svādhiṣṭhānakramaprabheda* (An Elucidation of the Stages of Self-empowerment; *Bdag byin gyis brlab pa'i rim par rnam par dbye ba*; D 1805/P 2670) is another work on self-identification with the deity; it is deeply influenced by the *Sarvabuddhasamāyogaḍākinijālaśaṃvara*. It has been edited (Pandey, 1997, 169–194) and translated into English in C.K. Wedemeyer, 1999, 383–391.

### Śāntarakṣita's *Tattvasiddhi*

The most widely known *prakaraṇa* is perhaps the *Tattvasiddhi* (A Proof of Reality; *De kho na nyid grub*

pa; D 3708/P 4531) attributed to Śāntarakṣita. Both the Tibetan tradition and some modern scholars (e.g. Mishra, 1985–1986, 123–124) maintain that this author is the same as the first abbot of Bsam yas and the author of the *Tattvasaṃgraha*, a philosophical work. However, it is much more likely that the author is a deuterio-Śāntarakṣita, perhaps from the 9th century CE and not the 8th. The only complete edition of the Sanskrit text thus far is a draft by K.N. Mishra, which remains unpublished but available since 1986. A complete edition by T. Tomabechi incorporating the readings of a palm-leaf manuscript found in China is forthcoming (announced in Steinkellner, 2008, 291). Partial editions have been published in Moriguchi Kōshun, 1993 (with a Japanese translation and an examination of texts quoted by the work) and E. Steinkellner, 2001 (the passage is translated into English in Steinkellner, 2008). All the manuscripts used in these editions are rather poor paper witnesses. The overall goal of the *Tattvasiddhi* is to justify antinomian and anti-ascetic tantric practice, promoting the idea that great bliss (*mahāsukha*), which is supposedly enjoyed by liberated beings, can only be produced by sensual bliss (*sukha*). To this end, the author employs a variety of techniques, chief among which is a type of inference developed by the logician Dharmakīrti (Steinkellner, 1999, 355–360). Although the work lacks the sophistication and elegance of logico-philosophical authors, it proved important and influential, as parts of it were incorporated into at least one scripture fashioned in the late 10th or early 11th century (Szántó, 2013b, 349). At present, there is no complete translation of the text; a comprehensive summary can be found in E. Steinkellner, 2008, 293–294.

### Anaṅgavajra's *Prajñopāyavinīscayasiddhi*

The chief idea of Anaṅgavajra's work (Establishing the Ascertainment of Wisdom and Means; *Thabs dang shes rab rnam par gtan la dbab pa'i sgrub pa*; D 2218/P 3062; ed. Bhattacharyya, 1929, 3–27; Rinpoche & Dwivedi, 1987, 63–87) is the importance and indispensability of a master and the initiations and instructions provided by him in order to obtain success on the tantric path. Large blocks of this text have been transformed into scripture, namely, the *Samputodbhavantra* (Szántó, 2013b, 353, 354, 356). The dating of the author is uncertain, but he must,

on account of the mentioned adaptation, precede the end of the 10th century.

### \*Tripiṭakamalla's \*Nayatrāyapradīpa

The \**Nayatrāyapradīpa* (A Lamp [to Elucidate the Respective Superiority of] the Three Ways; *Tshul gsum gyi sgron ma*; D 3707/P 4530) is a lengthy and sophisticated work now available only in Tibetan. The author's name has been transmitted and tentatively reconstructed in a variety of ways (\*Tripiṭakamala, \*Tripiṭakamāla, \*Tripiṭakakamala) of which \*Tripiṭakamalla ("Champion of the Three Canons") is the most plausible. A critical edition of the Tibetan is lacking but a substantial portion has been studied and translated in I. Onians, 2002, 92–139. The author presents the three ways – the way of hearers (Śrāvakayāna), the great way (Mahāyāna), and the *vajra* way (Vajrayāna) – in an inclusivistic model. His teaching on the superiority of Vajrayāna or tantric teachings over mainstream Mahāyāna is encapsulated in the following celebrated verse, which is often quoted and thus available in the original:

*ekārthatve 'pyasaṃmohād bahūpāyād aduṣkarāt |  
tikṣṇendriyādhikārāccamantraśāstraṃviśiṣyate ||*  
(the last quarter is also seen as *mantranītiḥ  
praśasyate*, or *mantranītir viśiṣyate*)

Even if the aim is the same, the mantra teaching is distinguished [from that of the Perfections] by its lack of confusion, many methods, easiness and appropriateness for those of sharp faculties. (trans. Onians, 2002, 88)

The author argues that the tantric path does not have a different goal than that of the Mahāyāna, but it is supreme to it in these four ways. The text then proceeds to elaborate on these four kinds of superiority in great detail. The author must be quite early: his paradigmatic tantric scripture is the *Guhyasamājatantra* and he does not seem to quote any text later than the 9th century CE.

### \*Dharmendra's \*Tattvasārasaṃgraha and \*Udbhaṭa's \*Mantranayāloka

The otherwise unknown authors \*Dharmendra and \*Udbhaṭa were master and disciple as is clear from the latter's testimony. \*Dharmendra's \**Tattvasārasaṃgraha* (A Compendium on the Essence of Reality;

*De kho na nyid kyi snying po bsdu pa*; D 3711/P 4534) is a long work on Mahāyāna soteriology. In the last section the author states that he chose not to engage with the Vajrayāna because although the tantric revelation is legitimate, in this degenerate age there are no suitable candidates for its practice. \*Udbhaṭa's work, the \**Mantranayāloka* (A Look at the Way of Mantras; *Gsang sngags kyi tshul gyi snang ba*; D 3710/P 4533) is an apology for this statement, which proved very controversial with contemporaries, although this author is not quite as dismissive as his master. Judging from the textual pool cited in the two works (e.g. the *Guhyendutilaka*, the *Paramādyā*, already the \**Nayatrāyapradīpa*, as well as some now completely lost works), both must date from circa the 9th century CE.

### **Aśvagoṣa/Vāpilladatta's *Gurupañcāśikā***

The *Gurupañcāśikā* (Fifty [Stanzas] on the *Guru*; *Bla ma lnga bcu pa*; D 3721/P 4544) is a short but very influential work already cited in the 10th century, in actual fact for the most part an anthology of scriptural verses, describing the qualities of a tantric master and how disciples should interact with him. At present we are aware of only two Sanskrit manuscripts, both fragments (Lévi, 1929, also contains a French translation; Szántó, 2013a; Pandey, 1997, 33–40 misleadingly prints the entire Sanskrit text, but the latter part is a back translation from Tibetan marked only by square brackets). There is also a rather inferior Chinese translation (事師法五十頌; T. 1687). The manuscript studied by S. Lévi also transmits two further small works, lists of the so-called fundamental (*mūlāpatti*) and gross trespasses (*sthūlāpatti*), essentially major and minor commandments for a tantric initiate. There are several other such works deserving closer attention (a preliminary overview is presented in Davidson, 2002, 322–327). In spite of their brevity, these texts allow valuable insights into the inner workings of a tantric community.

### **The works of Advayavajra and his followers**

Nearly all the works of the early 11th-century author known as Advayavajra or Maitreyanātha (or even Avadhūtipāda and Maitrīpāda) may be considered

as *prakaraṇas*. This famous master is among the first tantric authors to have come to the attention of modern scholarship, when a collection of nearly two dozen of his short treatises was published by H.P. Shastri (1927). A new edition of this corpus – with the exception of the *Tattvaratnāvalī*, for which see Ui Hakuju, 1952 – using new manuscript material accompanied by Japanese translations has been published by the Mikkyō-seiten Kenkyūkai (Esoteric Scriptures Study Group; 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991). A comprehensive account of Advayavajra's thought is still lacking; the latest word on the subject is H. Isaacson and F. Sferra, 2014. At least two topics from his works merit and received special attention. The first concerns initiation: the author seems to have held a minority view concerning the correct sequence of blisses (*ānanda*) that are experienced during sexual initiation; this was one of the greatest debates among tantric authors of the period. His teachings on this theme were defended by one of his disciples, Rāmapāla, in his *Sekanirdeśapañjikā* (A Commentary to the Instruction Concerning Initiation; *Dbang bskur ba nges par bstan pa'i dka'grel*; D 2253/P 4098). This latter work is comprehensively studied, edited, and translated in H. Isaacson and F. Sferra, 2014. The second topic associated with Advayavajra is the so-called non-tantric practice of the "great seal" (*mahāmudrā*; Isaacson & Sferra, 2014, 411–420).

### **The Works of Vāgīśvarakīrti**

A close contemporary of Advayavajra was Vāgīśvarakīrti, who was best known for his argumentative works and passages concerning initiation, more specifically the fourth initiation (*caturthābhīṣeka*), of which he was an advocate. To this day, the most comprehensive study of Vāgīśvarakīrti's works is a monograph in Japanese (Sakurai, 1996), which includes an edition of his initiation manual containing a defense of sexual initiation for qualified monks (on which see Onians, 2002, 279–289). His *Tattvaratnāvalokavivarāṇa* (An Elucidation of "A consideration of Precious Reality"; *De kho na nyid rin po che snang ba'i mam par bshad pa*; D 1890/P 2754, 4793; Sanskrit and Tibetan edition in Pandey, 1997, 83–142) is for the most part an elaborate defense of the fourth initiation (Isaacson, 2010, 269–271), dispelling a variety of contradicting doctrines, whereas his \**Saptāṅga* (On the Seven Ancillaries; *Yan lag bdun pa*; D 1888/P 2752) deals

chiefly with the same issue even more extensively (Sakurai, 1996, 212–220), analyzing no less than 17 views concerning the topic.

### Jñānakīrti's *Tattvāvatāra*

Already cited by early 11th-century authors, the *Tattvāvatāra* of Jñānakīrti (An Introduction to Reality; *De kho na nyid la 'jug pa*; D 3709/P 4532) is a lengthy and comprehensive overview beginning by defining types of Buddhist practitioners according to ability, with the paths suitable for them, and culminating in a discussion of the highest spiritual attainment. The work is cited by later Tibetan authorities as one advocating the achievement of the “great seal” based on exclusively exoteric, *sūtra*-based practices. While many of the quotations from the text can be found in the original elsewhere, the work itself is lost in Sanskrit, and the Tibetan translation has still not received the attention it deserves.

### Jñānaśrī's

#### \**Vajrayānāntadvayanirākaṛaṇa*

The authorship of the *\*Vajrayānāntadvayanirākaṛaṇa* (Dispelling the Two Extreme Views Concerning the Tantric Way; *Rdo rje theg pa'i mtha' gnyis sel ba*; D 3714/P 4537) has not been established with certainty. The work was probably written in the 11th century. It is a learned and sophisticated text that first seeks to prove that the tantric revelation is indeed the Buddha's teaching, and then proceeds to describe its superiority to exoteric Buddhism with great emphasis on the idea of “skill in means” (*upāyakaśālyā*). The discussion of the tantric path's superiority closely mirrors the discussion of the superiority of the Mahāyāna in the classic *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*. The critical edition of the Tibetan translation has not yet been published (the Sanskrit original has been lost), but two in-depth studies greatly facilitate access to this text (Kyuma, 2009; Tanemura, 2009).

### Ratnavajra's

#### *Caturthasadbhāvopadeśa*

Ratnavajra was a Kashmiri author also known as Sūkṣmāvartabhaṭṭa; his activity can be placed with certainty in the first half of the 11th century. The text

entitled *Caturthasadbhāvopadeśa* (A Teaching Concerning the True Nature of the Fourth [Initiation]; *Bzhi pa'i don mnam par nges pa'i man ngag*; D 2475) is extant in Sanskrit, but it is at present inaccessible (Kawasaki, 2004, 51). This fully versified, short and dense work seeks to refute the opinion of certain “Eastern scholars” (almost certainly Vāgīśvarakīrti and perhaps Ratnākaraśānti) that the fourth initiation (*caturthābhīṣeka*) is a separate rite. Ratnavajra points out that previously the “fourth” was unknown in Kashmir, but it is now practiced in spite of its spurious nature.

### \*Jñānākara's *\*Mantrāvatāra* and *\*Mantrāvatāravṛtti*

\*Jñānākara is very likely another 11th-century author. His 60-verse *\*Mantrāvatāra* (An Introduction to the [Way of] Mantras; *Gsang sngags la 'jug pa*; D 3718/P 4541) and an autocommentary (*Gsang sngags la 'jug pa'i 'grel pa*; D 3719/P 4542) seek to briefly introduce the tantric path under 15 headings, such as the appropriate practitioner, the types and nature of his accomplishment, the proper and improper way of practice, and so forth. The originals of both works have been lost. The *\*Mantrāvatāra* is not argumentative as such, but its introduction states quite clearly that it is intended to refute “perverted views.” The commentary makes it clear that in the author's mind this meant a literal interpretation of the *tantras* promoted by what he views as false teachers. Some verses of the root text (as quoted by the Tibetan scholar Bu ston Rin chen grub) have been translated in J. Hopkins, 2008, 227–230.

### Jinasujayaśrīgupta's *Abhiṣekanirukti*

The *Abhiṣekanirukti* (An Explanation of [the Third and Fourth] Initiations; *Dbang bskur ba'i nges pa bstan pa*; D 2476/P 3301; *Dbang gi don nges par brjod pa*; D 2477/P 3302; ed. by Isaacson used with attribution in Onians, 2002, 349–368; trans. Onians, 2002, 322–348; new draft in Isaacson, 2008) is a complex and in some ways unusual treatise on viewpoints concerning the function of “knowledge of wisdom initiation” (*prajñājñānābhīṣeka*), in which the initiand has to copulate with a consort. Jinasujayaśrīgupta lists three views of the *yogatantras* (by which here the *Guhyasamājatantra* is meant) and three views of the *yoginītantras*

(represented by the *Hevajratāntra*), but unconventionally he does not commit himself to any of them; instead he exhorts the reader to select the appropriate one. The two Tibetan translations differ in attribution: the first is assigned to Ratnākaraśānti and the second to Jinasujayaśrīgupta, but it can be shown that the true author is the latter, probably a disciple of the former, and that the attribution was altered deliberately in order to increase the work's prestige (Isaacson, 2010, 267).

## Śrīlakṣmī's

### *Advayasiddhisāadhanopāyikā*

Although Śrīlakṣmī or Lakṣmīkarā is presented by the tradition as having lived at least three centuries earlier, it is unlikely that she dates from before the late 10th century. Her *Advayasiddhir nāma sāadhanopāyikā* (A Practical Manual Called The Attainment of Nonduality; *Gnyis su med par grub pa'i sgrub thabs*; D 2220/P 3064) is a short, 36-verse work, a gnostic practical manual, for the most part a compilation of well-known aphorisms (for the best edition, see Rinpoche & Dwivedi, 1987, 159–164). The practitioner is exhorted to give up external methods and focus on worshipping the *guru*, sexual yoga with a consort, and the cultivation of nonduality. Perhaps the only truly distinctive feature of the work is that it is signed by a female author.

## The anonymous *Subhāṣitasamgraha*

The *Subhāṣitasamgraha* (A Collection of Aphoristic Statements) was one of the earliest tantric Buddhist works published in Europe, with profuse apologies for and a condemnation of its contents (Bendall, 1903; 1904a; 1904b). The text is available only in Sanskrit and it is poorly transmitted. As the title shows, the author did not mean to be original and his work is for the most part indeed a collection of quotations. However, the manner in which these are strung together is significant, as is the fact that many of these passages are not available in the original elsewhere. By making reference to authorities both scriptural and exegetical, the compiler wished to present a comprehensive map of tantric practice underpinned by Madhyamaka philosophy. The work is greatly inspired by Jñānakīrti's *Tattvāvātāra*.

## The anonymous *Yukti pradīpa*

A completely unknown *prakaraṇa* by an anonymous author entitled *Yukti pradīpa* or *Yuktidīpa* (A Lamp of Reasoning) was discovered by R. Sāṅkṛityāyana (1937, 27–28) on his second journey to Tibet. The current state of the manuscript is unconfirmed, and it is accessible only through very low quality, sometimes barely legible photographs in the Tucci collection (Sferra, 2008, 42). There is no edition of the text and it is doubtful whether one could be produced at this stage. From what is legible, it would seem that the author's main opponents were subitists who claimed that liberation is possible merely by having received a *guru*'s teaching, without the need for gradual and constant meditative and ritual practice. Judging by the quotations, the author was a follower of the so-called Jñānapāda school.

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