

Ritual Texts: South Asia

For most of its flourish in South Asia, Buddhism was not averse to rituals. In fact, in its highly successful esoteric manifestation, the prescriptive literature of which forms the focus of this entry, performance of rituals became the dominant feature of the religion. From relatively humble beginnings as short scriptures containing spells and their applications promising the fulfillment of a variety of worldly aims, ritual literature grew at a very fast pace, culminating in grand compendia of several hundreds of leaves with an ever-increasing palette of promised results, including liberation itself.

It is somewhat difficult to decide what can be regarded as ritual as generally understood, that is to say, external actions (*karma* or *kriyā*) involving objects, substances, perceivable incantation and movement, and what is strictly speaking a process of meditation (*dhyāna*), in other words, internal actions such as visualization (*bhāvanā*) or generating a certain mental attitude (*bhāva*). For in both exoteric and esoteric Buddhist ritual, external and internal actions almost invariably work in a mutually reinforcing tandem. Internal visualization can also act as a substitute for external objects or actions, for example in cases where an otherwise prescribed substance such as a precious gem is not available or when a certain action cannot be performed. Conversely, external objects or actions can act as a prop for developing the ritualist's meditative powers until they reach an ideal stage.

Scriptures and Manuals

Among surviving Indic (predominantly Sanskrit) manuscripts of esoteric Buddhist works, ritual texts are the most numerous. The existence of yet more can be ascertained through translations (primarily Chinese and Tibetan) and still more from quotations and references in extant works. Defining what exactly can be called a ritual text is again not an easy task, since very often scriptures contain little more than a frame to encase spells and ritual procedures – that is to say, in actual fact, they are ritual manuals of a scriptural status. This is especially the case for early

esoteric texts, often called ritual procedures (*kalpa*) and spells (*dhāraṇī*), in which excepting the frame story of revelation – usually a situation of crisis: earthquake, snakebite, assault of demons, and so on – there is little else but the spell itself, its ritual application, and praises of its benefits. (For an example of this literature, see Hidas, 2012; for further applications based on the same text in ritual manuals, see Hidas, 2010.) Furthermore, ritual manuals not infrequently acquired scriptural status by being incorporated in part or in whole into newly fashioned scriptures (Szántó, vol. I, 2012, 94–95, 172–177), or gained such prestige that they are referred to as if having scriptural authority. Commentarial works can also contain detailed descriptions of rituals, hence such passages can also be seen as mini-manuals embedded in exegesis.

However, for the most part, scriptures give only scattered instructions for or merely an outline of a ritual procedure, whereas the manuals, using the scriptural allusion or outline as a validation, spell out the procedure in greater detail. This is very similar to the case of kindred religious traditions, most importantly Śaivism, many rituals of which the Buddhists have adopted and adapted. Making allowance for the difference in terminology, the following quotation discussing descriptions of ritual practice in scriptures versus those in manuals can also be considered relevant in the case of Buddhism:

[...] common sense and the character of the Indian Śaiva literature must alert us to the naïvety of assuming that these works can reveal more than the general parameters within which some elements of local practice would have operated. They are texts of scripture (*āgamaḥ, tantraṃ, saṃhitā*) and as such were designed to be accepted as authorities by the widest possible constituency. To that end they tend to prescribe only the bare framework of practice, thereby allowing for the great variety on the level of detail and ancillary elaboration that can be observed in the practical manuals (Paddhatis) that guided the procedures followed by religious officiants in specific regions and lineages. (Sanderson, 2003–2004, 353)

Titles and Format

Ritual manuals come under a variety of names, and there does not seem to be any strict delimitation of genres. With small exceptions, all such manuals have an author. If the name of the author is missing, there is still a silent consensus that it is the work of a human being, as practical manuals are not supposed to be superhuman revelation.

The standard Śaiva genre denomination, *paddhati* (guide), is used extremely rarely. The most common such term is *vidhi* or *vidhāna* (procedure), which is usually preceded by the type of ritual it describes. Thus an *arcanavidhi* or *pūjāvidhi* would be a manual of worship, *maṇḍalavidhi* or *abhiṣekavidhi* an initiation manual, *varṣāpaṇavidhi* a manual for making rain, and so on. A synonymous term is *upāyikā* (method), sometimes spelled *upayikā* or even *upaikā*. Thus a *sādhanaopāyikā* (although in this case simply *sādhana* is more common) would be a manual for the visualization of a deity, a *maṇḍalopāyikā* an initiation manual, a *homopāyikā* a manual for oblation into fire. Slightly rarer terms include *krama* (procedural sequence), *prayoga* (procedure), and *upadeśa* (teaching). The type of ritual and the name of the genre are generally preceded by the name of the deity or the central deity of the pantheon involved or by the name of the tradition that the ritual is supposedly following. Thus, a *Tārāpūjāvidhi* would be a step-by-step instruction for the worship of the goddess Tārā and the *Guhyasamājamaṇḍalavidhi* an initiation manual based on the teachings of the *Guhyasamājatantra*. Works on a grander scale or deemed important by the author can also have a separate, “poetic” title. Thus the manual of Abhayākara Gupta for oblation into fire is called the *Jyotirmañjarī* (A Bouquet of Light), the same author’s grand compendium is titled *Vajrāvalī* (A String of Vajras), and Ānandagarbha’s initiation manual is styled the *Sarvavajrodayā* (The Rise of All Vajras).

Since ritual manuals are often not very long, manuscripts containing such texts are typically of a smaller format, which made them easily portable and prevented waste of precious writing space on palm leaf or birchbark. More recent paper manuscripts usually retain this format. Nowadays in Nepal, manuals are also published as stitched printed booklets, although the concertina format was quite popular in the region in the late medieval period. An 11th-century Kashmiri birchbark manuscript (as was probably common with manuscripts from that region) containing ritual material is also bound (Kawasaki, 2004). Some manuals come with

aiding illustrations; although this is more typical of recent manuscripts, some early samples are known to exist. Older ritual manuals retain the *scriptio continua*, but some more recent ones contain some formatting, such as highlighting the liturgical parts (the text to be recited such as mantras and hymns) or separating it by other visual means, thus making the manual more convenient to use. From a rather early date (c. 13th–14th cents.), there are some Nepalese bilingual manuals with the liturgical parts in Sanskrit and the instructions in Newar. This has become the standard among contemporary ritualists of Newar communities.

Initiation Manuals

The most operative of all esoteric Buddhist rituals is undoubtedly that of initiation (*abhiṣeka*), the primary aim of which is for the candidate (*śiṣya*) to obtain the right, but also the duty (the word *adhikāra* entails both), to propitiate a deity-mantra. To this effect, the candidate is led in front of a particular cult’s pantheon of deities represented by a diagram made of colored powders (*maṇḍala*), where he (very rarely: she) undergoes ritual transformation into a qualified worshipper. Several elements, including the terminology and choreography of the ritual, imitate the rite of Brahmanical royal consecration and resemble Śaiva *maṇḍala* initiation even more closely.

The following outline takes into account only the main rites, and it must be understood that there is great variety concerning which rites are performed, in what way, and in what order. Many of the rites for which the original terms are given below can form the subject of individual ritual manuals (except the *abhiṣekas*, which are always treated as a set).

Initiation proper is prefaced by a numerous sequence of preliminary rites. Prompted by an earnest request by a suitable candidate, a qualified officiant (*ācārya*), after having formally accepted the aspirant as a pupil (*śiṣyasaṃgraha*), first selects an appropriate site (*bhūmiparīkṣā*) and takes ritual control over it (*bhūmipariṅgraha*). He performs several rites to protect the site, including the installation of pegs around the territory in order to pin down possible obstacles (*vighnakīlana*). He then ritually makes fit (*adhivāsana*) the site (*vasundharā*); the utensils to be used, such as the flasks (*kalaśa*), the strings (*sūtra*) used to delineate the *maṇḍala*, and the colored powders (*rajas*); the initiand (*śiṣyādhivāsana*); and the deities that are to be invoked (*devatādhivāsana*).

He then delineates the diagram of the deities (*maṇḍalasūtraṇa*) and fills up the delineated spaces with colored powders (*rajaḥpātana*). When the *maṇḍala* is finished, the candidate again asks to be admitted. He is then blindfolded and made to enter in front of the *maṇḍala* (*śiṣyapraveśa*). There he is put into a state of possession (*āveśa*) and made to cast a flower or a tooth stick on the diagram or a simulacrum thereof, whereby his affinity with a particular set of deities is established. The blindfold is then removed, and he is led around the *maṇḍala* to be introduced to the deities. It is here that initiation proper begins.

After being sworn to secrecy, the candidate is first given a garland (*mālābhīṣeka*), is sprinkled with consecrated water (*udakābhīṣeka*), and then is given a tiara (*mukutābhīṣeka*) and his most important ritual implements, the *vajra*-scepter (*vajrābhīṣeka*) and the bell (*ghaṇṭābhīṣeka*). To signal his new identity, he is given a new name (*nāmābhīṣeka*), which is determined by his affinity with a set of deities. Should he wish to become an officiant himself, the candidate undergoes a supplementary initiation, that of the officiant (*ācāryābhīṣeka*).

Later manuals sometimes treat the above set as a single initiation, collectively calling it that of the flask(s) (*kalaśābhīṣeka*). From around the 9th century onward, this set came to be augmented with the “secret initiation” (*guhyābhīṣeka*), which was at first devoid of antinomian elements but quickly came to denote a rite in which the officiant copulates with a consort and the initiand consumes the sexual fluids. Very soon after, yet another initiation – the “knowledge-of-wisdom initiation” (*prajñāñānābhīṣeka*) – was added. This is a mirror of the previous rite; here the initiand copulates with another or the same consort and again consumes the sexual fluids. Later still, the so-called fourth initiation (*catuṛthābhīṣeka*) came to close the set, which in most cases meant a kind of oral explanation of what the initiand’s previous sexual experiences refer to in terms of his future practice. (For a discussion of some of the controversies concerning the latter initiations, see Isaacson, 2010.)

At the very end of initiation, there are several further, closing rites. The officiant predicts the enlightenment of the initiate (*vyākaraṇa*), formally allows the pupil to practice (*anujñā*), and provides him with encouragement (*āśvāsadāna*). He also informs the new initiate of his ritual duties and observances. Then the deities that were invoked into the diagram are respectfully dismissed (*visarjana*), the *maṇḍala* is destroyed, and the powders are cast into flowing

water (*maṇḍalopasaṃhāra*). The initiation rite, which can last for several days, is then brought to a conclusion with the officiant’s performing a fire oblation (*homa*) and a communal feast (*gaṇacakra*).

Several very important and influential initiation manuals survive in the original Sanskrit, although judging by the number of such works extant in Tibetan translation, this is a small proportion of what must have existed. Perhaps the earliest (9th cent. [?]), but certainly the most archaic among them, is the *Sarvavajrodayā* of Ānandagarbha. It describes initiation related to the *maṇḍala* of what may be termed the first truly esoteric Buddhist scripture, the *Sarvatathāgatattvasaṃgraha*, which very explicitly states that swift enlightenment is impossible without initiation. (For an edition of the manual, see Mikkyō Seiten Kenkyūkai, 1986; 1987; Takahashi, 1990.)

For the first emphatically antinomian Buddhist scripture, the *Guhyasamājatantra*, at least two 9th-century manuals survive: the *Viṃśatavidhi* of Nāgabuddhi (edition Tanaka, 2010, 629–716) and the *Maṇḍalavidhi* of Dīpaṃkarabhadra (edition Bahulkar, 2010). A very influential manual for the same cult, Vāgīśvarakīrti’s *Samkṣiptābhīṣekavidhi*, dates from the early 11th century. Besides a succinct description of the initiation rite, this text also contains an important polemic passage (edited – and discussed in Japanese – by Sakurai, 1998, 407–426; the polemic section is reedited, translated, and discussed by Onians, 2002, 279–289). Yet another manual of this cult with significant influences from other traditions is Padmaśrīmitra’s still unedited *Maṇḍalopāyikā* (late 11th or 12th cent.).

The cult of Saṃvara or Śaṃvara has at least one initiation manual extant in the original Sanskrit; this is Bhūvācārya’s still unpublished *Samvarodayā nāma maṇḍalopāyikā* (before 1054 CE). A similar manual related to the cult of the deity Yamāri is the 10th-century *Yamāriṃmaṇḍalavidhi* of Śrīdhara (Kuranishi, 2008, 195–238). The cycle centered on the *Catuspīthatantra* also has an extant initiation manual, which has undergone several recensions and even succeeded in reforming the pantheon of the cult. This text is simply called the *Maṇḍalopāyikā* and is attributed either to (an) Āryadeva or one Caryāvratipāda (Szántó, 2008; vol. I, 2012, 123–152, which also contains a synopsis of one recension). In spite of its overwhelming importance, the cult of Hevajra can boast only one, incomplete manual in the original – the anonymous *Sekapṛakriyā* (edition and translation Finot, 1934, 19–48; a draft annotated reedition by A.G.J.S. Sanderson and H. Isaacson is in

circulation). Further unpublished initiation manuals include the works of one Subhūtipālita for the cult of Bhūtaḍāmara (which are in a fragmentary state) and a manual called **Gurūpadeśa* for the cult of Mahāmāyā by *Vinayadatta.

What one might term a subgenre of initiation, or rather conversion, manuals are those for instructing beginners (*ādikarmika*). These manuals usually start with making a candidate take refuge (i.e. the standard Buddhist conversion rite) and instructing him in the duties of a lay follower, the worship of less esoteric deities such as Jambhala, and less elaborate rites such as fashioning simple reliquaries (*caitya*) or clay molds (*sañcaka*), offering a simulacrum in the shape of the universe to the master (*gurumaṇḍalaka*), and other kinds of worship.

One such work, the *Ādikarmapradīpa* of Anupamavajra (late 11th cent.) has been published twice (first by La Vallée Poussin, 1898, 162–232, which includes a discussion; reedition by Takahashi, 1993). The *Ādikarmāvatāra* of Mañjukīrti and the *Ādikarmavidhi* of Tataragupta remain unedited. (A study of this material in a dissertation by I. Sinclair is forthcoming.)

Manuals of Post-initiatory Practice

By far the most numerous among extant manuals are called *sādhana* (method of accomplishment), a term that covers a multiplicity of meditative rituals (*bhāvanā* or yoga) centered on a deity (*devatā*) or a main deity and his or her attendants. The practitioner (*sādhaka*, *yogin*, or *mantrin*) is supposed to perform such rites on a daily basis after initiation.

In more archaic *sādhanas*, the deities are visualized in front of the practitioner, and they are treated as high-ranking guests. Most typically they are summoned and worshipped with the appropriate offerings, mantras, and hand gestures (*mudrā*); praises (*stotra* or *stuti*) are recited to them, whereafter they are petitioned for a variety of goals. In later *sādhanas*, the practitioner seeks to gain identity with the deity and is even instructed to maintain this identity outside of meditation sessions.

A variety of preliminaries usher in the main part, which is usually the visualization of the deity. These preliminaries are suffused with standard Mahāyāna concepts, and they usually culminate in the contemplation of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). From emptiness the main seed-syllable (mantra or *bīja*) of the deity arises, which then instantly transforms into the deity itself. The descriptions of the forms of the

deities can be very detailed and hence of value to art historians for the identification and understanding of iconic objects. The visualization is supposed to be complete and vivid. When the effort of visualization has tired the practitioner, he is instructed to repeatedly recite (*japa*) the longer mantra of the deity. Thus, the goddess Tārā would appear as a transformation of the seed-syllable *trāṃ*, but her mantra for recitation is *oṃ tāre tuttāre ture svāhā*. The recitation of mantras is of paramount importance, since it is often stated that the mantra and the deity are one and the same. One of the relevant rituals in this respect is that of “preliminary service” (*pūrvasevā*), the repetition of a mantra a given number of times (e.g. 100,000) in order to gain mastery over it.

The *sādhanas* of deities are transmitted individually, in collections of *sādhanas* centering on a single deity and its ectypes (for examples of such collections, see English, 2002; Isaacson, 2009), or in heterogeneous collections (manuscripts of several such collections were further compiled by Bhattacharya [1925–1928] under the title *Sādhanamālā*). This type of literature has been much better studied than the initiation manuals, although several fundamental texts have been edited only very recently (e.g. Sakurai, 1998; Isaacson, 2002; Luo & Tomabechi, 2009). Monographs on the topic include S. Beyer’s (1978), which, although primarily dealing with Tibetan texts, is illuminating for Indic material as well; another in-depth study is by E. English (2002), on the goddess Vajrayoginī.

There is great variety in the length of *sādhanas*: some can contain only a few lines, but some cover dozens of leaves. More elaborate *sādhanas* can be called *abhisamaya* (practice), although this is not always the case. Besides the standard step-by-step instructions, authors of *sādhanas* sometimes cite varying viewpoints concerning the minutiae of ritual either approving them as suitable variations or refuting them.

Initiation entails at least two ritual actors, the officiant and the initiand, but very often more, such as the officiant’s helpers, the consort or consorts, and sometimes the family and retinue of the initiand, who are allowed to view the *maṇḍala*. However, the practice described in *sādhanas* is a basically private affair (excepting cases in which the officiant is to have an assistant called the *uttarasādhaka*). Initiates of some of the later tantric revelations (from the 9th cent. onward) are also enjoined to periodically observe group worship. This rite, usually called *gaṇacakra*, is a reenactment of the *maṇḍala*, with the overseer (typically the *ācārya*) and his consort

acting as the main deity pair. The community is to feast on nonvegetarian offerings and liquor. At least two complete manuals survive in Sanskrit (for a brief notice of the first, see Isaacson, 2009, 128; for the second, see Szántó, forthcoming), but the only monograph on the subject to this date (Shizuka, 2007; for an overview of this study in English, see Shizuka, 2008) does not take them into account.

Manuals of Occasional Rites

The rites thus far described concern initiates only, for whom they are obligatory. However, an initiate can also undertake per demand rituals for clients, who in most cases would be lay followers. Naturally, the initiate may perform these same rituals for himself if need be, in which case he is his own client, as it were.

One of the most common ways of fulfilling a variety of aims was oblation into fire (*homa*). By customizing various elements of the ritual, such as the size and shape of the firepit, the size of the firewood, and the articles offered into the flames, a specialist could seek to placate or avert (*śāntika*) malign events or influences, promote invigoration (*pauṣṭika*) of health and wealth, or aggressively attack and even kill (*abhicāra*) enemies. These three headings are later on complemented by others such as attracting (*ākarṣaṇa*) and gaining control over others (*vaśya*), commonly for sexual purposes, creating dissent (*vidveṣaṇa*), driving away (*uccāṭana*), paralyzing (*stambhana*) an enemy's body or speech, and others. (For an edition of a very influential *homa* manual, the already mentioned *Jyotirmañjarī*, see Okuyama, 1983; 1986.) Similar results can be obtained with other rituals (typically styled *prayogas*), such as the use of amulets. Such *prayogas* are also often employed toward gaining mastery over magical accomplishments (*siddhi*), sometimes styled "minor" (*kṣudrasiddhi*), such as obtaining command over a resuscitated corpse (*vetālasiddhi*), gaining magical slippers (the relative of seven-league boots [*pādūkāsiddhi*]), and the ability to fly with a magical sword (*khaḍgasiddhi*).

One very important but rather understudied civic rite is weather control, typically rainmaking (*varṣāpaṇa*), which was understandably in high demand in agrarian societies. Several such – as yet unedited – texts survive (see Szántó, vol. I, 2012, 235–241). A better-studied group of texts are those on consecration (*pratiṣṭhā*). In the earlier period, such rituals were designed to make sacred images (stat-

ues, scroll paintings) fit for worship, but as Buddhist ritualists increasingly moved into the civic sphere, they also composed rituals to consecrate monastic and civic structures – such as groves and water tanks – as well as rituals for their renovation (*jīrṇoddhāra*) when such an occasion arose (Bentor, 1996; Tanemura, 2004).

A large textual body of protective rites suggests that officiants were also seen as specialists of crisis and averting crisis. Many of these are general rituals for protection (*rakṣā*), but some are very specialized. Two such categories deserve special mention: the treatment of poisons (*viśākarṣaṇa*), typically that of snakes, and combatting omens of death, also called "cheating death" (*mṛtyuvañcana*). (For an edition, translation, and discussion of one such text from the latter category, see Schneider, 2010.)

The wholesale adoption of life-cycle rituals was a relatively late development in esoteric Buddhism, and it most likely occurred among the Newars of Nepal in the 12th century. (A contemporary manual reflecting still existing practice is Kaji & Bajracharya, 2010. There are also several – as yet unedited – works surviving in palm-leaf manuscripts on the topic.) The earliest such ritual with apparently pan-Indic currency was the funerary rite for a departed officiant (for an introductory study to one such manual, see Tanemura, 2007; edition with notes in Japanese in Tanemura, 2013).

Compendia

With so many disparate rituals on offer, it was a natural development to create longer, systematized, and convenient compendia. One such early type of compendium discusses "ten fundamentals" (*daśatattva*) in which an officiant should be proficient, although the actual contents fluctuated somewhat. (The trope of classifying the principal rituals to be performed by an officiant into ten "fundamentals" is studied, with an edition of one surviving Sanskrit source, in Klein-Schwind, 2012.)

The first truly mature compilation is the *Vajrāvalī* of Abhayākaragupta (for a full edition and introductory study, see Mori, 2009), an influential though not always very original scholar of the Pāla Empire active in the late 11th and early 12th centuries. The author organized his grand compendium under 50 headings, most of which deal with consecration and initiation. This work was followed very closely by the *Kriyāsamuccaya* of the Nepalese Jagaddarpaṇa (also known as Darpaṇācārya; before 1305 CE), a work

that is still influential among the Newars. Among his 64 headings, the ones that do not correspond to the *Vajrāvalī* can be suspected to describe rites of local importance. A somewhat earlier, also Nepalese work is the *Kriyāsaṃgrahaḥpañjikā* of Kuladatta (for an analysis and abridgment, see Skorupski, 1998; 2002; partial edition, translation, and discussion Tanemura, 2004).

Scholarly Study of Buddhist Rituals

Until recently, scholarly studies of Buddhism, including its esoteric aspect, tended to focus on philosophical and mystical matters to the detriment of ritual texts, which are arguably among the best witnesses for exploring realia in the South Asian Buddhist world. Of course, whether such manuals were “models of” or “models for” – in other words, whether they described current practice thereby codifying it in writing or prescribed the ideal model for the performance of a ritual – is a matter of debate. Nevertheless, their very survival means that at least at some point, somebody considered a particular manual important enough to be copied.

The only region to have preserved Buddhist ritual in which at least the liturgical language is Sanskrit is Nepal, which is practically synonymous with the Buddhist Newar communities of the Kathmandu Valley. The most valuable anthropological works in this respect are the ones that also take into account textual evidence (a paradigmatic example is Gellner, 1992). However, numerous aspects of contemporary Nepalese Buddhism and the body of ritual texts surviving since the medieval period are still unexplored.

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