

Skull Imagery and Skull Magic in the *Yoginī* Tantras

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I. RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND

THE BUDDHIST TANTRAS constitute a unique class of Buddhist literature. While developing from earlier trends in Buddhist thought and practice, they also constituted a serious challenge to Buddhist identity, largely due to the fact that many of them contain passages that appear to transgress the tenets of Buddhist morality.¹ Tantric literature also departed, gradually, from the rhetorical norms of Mahayana Buddhism. While early tantras maintained the rhetorical style of the Mahayana sutras, later tantras, and most notably the *Yoginī* tantras, radically departed from this style.² This essay will explore one small facet of the vast array of unusual elements that can be found in this literature, namely, the image of the skull, as well as the use of skulls in tantric ritual. Like other elements, this deployment of skulls in the tantras was disquieting to some, evoking as it does the uncanny atmosphere of the charnel ground. Through this exploration, I will argue that skulls are multifaceted symbols in tantric literature, simultaneously evoking both death and awakening. As a result, they were powerful symbols, fruitfully deployed in tantric literature in a number of interesting ways.

The genre of tantric Buddhist literature in which skulls and associated charnel imagery is most powerful is the *Yoginī* tantras. These texts were composed in India beginning in the late seventh century or early eighth century (with the composition of the *Sarvabuddhasamāyoga-ḍākiṅjālasamvara-tantra*)³ and continued to be composed up until the final decline of Buddhism in India from the thirteenth through sixteenth centuries.⁴

They are characterized by their focus on fierce deities, particularly the *yoginīs* and *ḍākiṅīs*, who appear to have originally been understood to be flesh-eating demonesses who haunted charnel grounds and wilderness

areas. As James Sanford wrote, “they were drafted into the Vajrayāna pantheon and transformed from horrifying old crones lurking in cemeteries into beautiful spiritual guides.”⁵ Despite this transformation, they retained elements of their dreadful origins and are typically depicted as garbed with ornaments derived from the charnel ground.⁶

As texts that focus on such an awesome class of goddesses, they are naturally replete with imagery deriving from the fearsome setting of the charnel ground (*śmaśāna*). Their deities are adorned with charnel ground regalia, most notably skulls and skull bowls (*kapāla*). The charnel grounds are also the ideal locale for the performance of many of the rites described in these texts, such as the notorious *Vetalā Sādhana*, in which the adept seeks to invoke a spirit to animate a corpse in order to compel it to bestow magical powers.

These texts, while at least nominally Buddhist, do not seem to derive from the normative Buddhist setting, that is, the Buddhist monastic context. According to traditional histories, they derived instead from the liminal social setting of the *siddhas*, the great tantric saints such as Lūipa/Matsyendranāth,⁷ who were seen as the originators of both the Buddhist and Śaiva tantric traditions.⁸ Indeed, charnel grounds were long the haunt of Śaiva renunciants. The primal charnel ground deity is clearly Śiva, whose paradoxical penchant for both asceticism and sexuality firmly earned him a liminal status in Hindu mythology.⁹ He is iconographically linked to the locale of the charnel ground via his penchant for ashes and bone ornaments, items that are found abundantly there, as well as the ghoulish company he was fond of keeping. His liminal status is recorded in several of the *purāṇas*, where we find passages such as the following, where his father-in-law Dakṣa, who disapproves of his dreadful appearance and ferocious companions, curses him:

You are excluded from the rituals and are surrounded by ghosts in the burning ground; yet you fail to honor me, while all of the gods give me great honor. Good men must scorn all heretics; therefore I curse you to be outside the sacrifice, outside caste; all the Rudras will be beyond the Vedas, avowing heretic doctrines, Kāpālikas and Kālamukhas.¹⁰

The form of Śiva that most clearly embodies the spirit of the charnel ground is Bhairava, the fierce and destructive form assumed by Śiva following his beheading of the deity Brahmā in a well-known episode of Hindu mythology. As a penance for this crime, Śiva qua Bhairava

wandered the world with the skull of Brahmā affixed to his hand, earning him the title *kapālin*.¹¹

Somadeva, in his eleventh-century work, the *Vetālapañca-viṃśatikā*, describes the charnel ground as being a virtual incarnation of Bhairava, as follows:

It was obscured by a dense and terrible pall of darkness, and its aspect was rendered awful by the ghastly flames from the burning of the funeral pyres, and it produced horror by the bones, skeletons and skulls of men that appeared in it. In it were present formidable Bhūtas and Vetālas, joyfully engaged in their horrible activity, and it was alive with the loud yells of jackals so that it seemed like a mysterious and tremendous form of Bhairava.¹²

Śiva's penance as the skull-bearing ascetic Bhairava was assumed as the "great observance" (*mahāvratā*) of the Kāpālikas, an infamous Śaiva sectarian group notorious for their extreme modes of practice involving violence and sexuality, as David Lorenzen has shown.¹³

However, the Śaivas were clearly not the only ones in early medieval India spending time in charnel grounds. The very horror of the *śmaśāna* was believed to make it an ideal site for heroic renunciants, who sought to completely cut through all attachments to the world. Included among them were Buddhists.

The association of Buddhists with charnel grounds is evidently quite ancient. Archaeological excavations have shown that Buddhist monasteries were often built on or near charnel complexes, as Gregory Schopen has shown.¹⁴ Buddhists, in taking the reliquary mound (*stūpa*) as one of their central cult centers, implicitly rejected brahmanic notions of the impurity deriving from death. The Buddhist association with sites connected with death was not without social implications, for in choosing such sites, they deliberately placed themselves in a liminal position within larger Indian society, a position that implied a rejection of brahmanic notions of purity and pollution.

Most importantly, the charnel ground was the site for a certain sort of meditation, the "mediation on impurity" (*aśubhabhāvanā*). Meditating in charnel grounds for the purpose of contemplating death and impermanence is an ancient Buddhist practice, which is justified by the legend that one of the four sights that inspired Siddhārtha Gautama to undertake the spiritual journey that would culminate with his achievement of awakening was the sight of a corpse.¹⁵

Both the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna-sutta*¹⁶ and the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*¹⁷ describe the nine charnel ground contemplations or “meditation on impurity,” which involve the contemplation of corpses in their various stages of disintegration. The practice of this meditation has persisted through time, as evidenced by the continuing interest in this subject in scholastic literature, where we find varying analyses of corpses into nine or ten types.¹⁸ We also find treatments of this theme in Mahayana literature,¹⁹ and also contemporary Web sites detailing the stages of the disintegration of corpses, produced for the sake of meditators who lack access to charnel grounds.²⁰ Such meditations were believed to serve as antidotes for attachment to the body or sensual pleasures.²¹

Elsewhere in the *Majjhima-nikāya* the Buddha recommends charnel grounds as meditation sites²² and describes his austerities as a bodhisattva thus: “I would make my bed in a charnel ground with bones of the dead for a pillow.”²³ Dwelling in charnel grounds had become an acceptable vocation for Buddhist renunciants by at least the beginning of the Common Era, by which time they were designated as *śmāśānika* (Pāli *sosānika*). The *Vimuttimaggā*, a text composed by Upatissa in Pāli in the first or second century CE, describes the benefits of this practice as including an understanding of death and impermanence, overcoming of fear, and gaining the reverence of supernatural beings.²⁴

II. SKULL IMAGERY IN THE YOGINĪ TANTRAS

The tantric texts that call upon practitioners to perform rituals, such as mandala construction in charnel grounds, or to use the substances derived from charnel grounds in rituals, followed a venerable precedent. A number of the early tantras, later classified as *kriyā* tantras in the Indo-Tibetan classification scheme,²⁵ describe practices necessarily set in charnel grounds.²⁶ These likely derive from what I have termed “the cult of the charnel ground.”²⁷ Texts resulting from this social milieu are characterized by their focus on the charnel ground (*śmāśāna*) as the ideal site for practice and call for the practitioner to dress him- or herself in garb derived from this locale, most notably skulls and bone ornaments, and to live upon the foodstuffs available there. However, the charnel ground culture comes to its fruition in Buddhist literature in the *Yoginī* tantras. Perhaps not coincidentally, this is also the genre of Buddhist literature that received the greatest degree of influence from Śaiva traditions.²⁸

In addition to textual dependence on Śaiva materials, the Buddhist Yoginī tantras also drew upon Śaiva iconography.²⁹ Among a number of iconographic elements borrowed from Śaiva sources is the decorative use of skulls. In India, the skull is clearly a symbol of death and the fear of death and is thus considered inauspicious and impure. In both Śaiva and Buddhist tantric contexts, it is deployed as a sign that the deity bearing this symbol has mastered death and has transcended the mundane world in which fear of death is nearly universal.

The deity Heruka, who is prominent in a number of texts in this genre, is a clear example of a Buddhist deity modeled upon a Śaiva precursor, particularly the fierce deities Bhairava or Rudra.³⁰ He is described as follows in the *Sarvabuddhasamāyoga-ḍākiṇījālasamvara-tantra*:

Greatly Glorious Vajraheruka is very terrifying, blazing with ash; his visage blazes blue for beings, and his mandala of light blazes red. He is as fierce as the end time of great destruction. Greatly blazing, his voice blazes, like a charnel ground fire. He has a crown of skulls, fierce like the end time of great destruction. Possessing the methods such as anger, he is as terrifying as a charnel ground, with various faces, and eyebrows arched in anger. With his blazing gaze and dance, he completely reduces the three worlds to ash, along with Mahādeva, Viṣṇu (Upendra), the Sun, the Moon, Yama, and Brahmā.³¹

It is important to note that that there is a long tradition in tantric Buddhism of associating death with awakening. For early Buddhists, final emancipation, *parinirvāṇa*, is not attained until death. In traditions of tantric yoga, it was widely believed that in death one gained a vision of the clear light, identified with the *dharmakāya* or gnosis of awakening, meaning that death provided an opportunity for awakening that is difficult to achieve in normal states of consciousness.³² Hence such dreadful images evoking death are also seen as symbols of awakening.

As a result, in tantric Buddhist literature and art, imagery evoking death, and skull imagery in particular, is quite pervasive, precisely because it also evokes the awakening toward which the tradition aspires. Such imagery is particularly associated with the authority figures of the tradition, the deities, *siddhas*, and gurus or lamas, as these are seen as the awakened figures capable of bestowing the tradition's teachings. In the *Cakrasamvara-tantra*,³³ for example, the tradition's chief deity, Heruka, is described as follows:

Place in the center of the lotus the hero who is the terror of Mahābhairava, who is bright and brilliant, and who makes the tremendous noise of very loud laughter. Wearing a skull rosary, divine are his three eyes and four faces. Covered with an elephant hide, his excellent eyebrows are split by a *vajra*. His hand wields a *khatvanga* staff, [and he is] ornamented with a half a hundred garland.³⁴

This is immediately followed with the following description of his consort, the goddess Vajravārāhī:

The goddess who stands before him is the truly awesome Vajravārāhī, facing the deity Śrī Heruka, with three eyes and of fierce form. Her skull bowl is filled [with entrails], blood trickles from her mouth. She threatens all of the quarters together with the gods, titans, and humans.³⁵

The master (*ācārya*), like the deities, also must assume a charnel-ground-derived garb when performing major rituals. He is described as follows:

He has the proper knowledge and understands the tantra and Śrī Heruka's mantra. He is not angry, is pure and competent, and he understands yoga and is perfected in knowledge. His hair is marked with skulls, his limbs are smeared with ash. His body is decorated with ornaments, and [he] has a bone garland. His hair is formed into one plait, and he wears a bone garland.³⁶

The *Hevajra-tantra* gives additional information concerning the master's garb, adding details concerning the construction of a skull-tiara that "marks" the master's hair, as well as ash and the sacred thread, as follows:

Now he, whose nature is *hūṃ*, should arrange his piled-up hair as a crest and for the performance of yoga he should wear the skull tiara, representing the five buddhas. Making pieces of skull five inches long, he should secure them to the crest. He should wear the two-stranded cord of hair, which symbolizes Wisdom and Means, the ashes and the sacred thread of hair.³⁷

This imagery firmly places these texts within the context of charnel-ground culture.

Apparently the use of skulls in tantric Buddhist iconography and ritual sparked criticism. Although we do not know the source of this criticism, the author or authors of the *Cakrasamvara-tantra* presumed that it would be leveled against the text and thus included a preemptive response. It occurs as follows:

By whom is the skull of the relics of the reality body disparaged, arising as it does from the tripartite cause of conch, mother-of-pearl, and pearl? The hero who has a skull garland and who is adorned with a half moon is regarded as one who is born as the heroes' hero.³⁸

While it is certainly possible that criticism might have come from within the Buddhist community, made by Buddhists uncomfortable with charnel ground imagery and practices, it seems far more likely that this text was directed toward Hindu critics, most likely brahmins, who would view these bone implements as polluting.³⁹ That this is the case is suggested by the late ninth-century commentator Bhavabhaṭṭa,⁴⁰ who explained that “just as conch and so forth is purifying for Vedic brahmins, likewise the skull is as well.”⁴¹ In other words, the text compares the “impure” skull with the “pure” objects of similar appearance, such as the conch, used in Vedic ritual.

Interestingly, this passage also refers to a myth in a Vedic canonical text, the *Atharva Veda*, related in its effort to legitimate the use of skulls in tantric ritual. This is the myth that holds that pearl and mother of pearl derives from the bones of the slain *asura* Vṛta.⁴² It is particularly interesting that the author of this tantra was familiar with the *Atharva Veda*, given the long association of the study of this text with Śaiva groups such as the Pāśūpatas.⁴³

While it seems likely that this text was composed in expectation of criticism from Hindu circles, the author or authors of this text (or, perhaps, a later Buddhist reviser) also attempted to legitimate the use of skulls in a Buddhist fashion. They did this with a reference to a key Buddhist philosophical concept, through the modification of the term skull (*kapālaṃ*) with the unusual qualifier “of the relics of the reality body” (*dharmakāyaśarīrāṇām*). At first glance this seems somewhat strange. Technically speaking, bone relics should be classified as belonging to a buddha's “form body” (*rūpakāya*), not the intangible “reality body,” *dharmakāya*.⁴⁴ A closely related term, *dharmasārīra*, typically refers to “textual relics,” often mantra or *dhāriṇī* inscriptions.⁴⁵

The text here associates a skull with the *dharmakāya*, the “reality body” of a buddha, representing either the collection of a buddha’s teachings or the gnosis of a buddha (*buddhajñāna*), the realized wisdom whereby a buddha is awakened. This association is rooted in several trends in Mahayana Buddhism. One factor was the development of Buddhist hierarchical systems of classifying Buddhist teachings in terms of the three bodies of a buddha.⁴⁶ Another factor was the rise of the “relic cult,” centering upon *stūpas*, in Buddhist communities.⁴⁷ Since *stūpas* are basically reliquary mounds, believed to enshrine the physical relics of a buddha, the rising popularity of this cult would naturally elevate the significance of these relics.⁴⁸ The famous talking *stūpa* episode in the *Lotus Sūtra*, for example, highlights not only the belief that *stūpas* somehow embody the Buddha and preserve his presence,⁴⁹ but even that a *stūpa* itself could manifest the voice of a buddha (*buddhavacana*), thus embodying his or her “reality body” in the same manner as a textual relic.⁵⁰

With the composition of the *Yoginī* tantras, it is not only *stūpas* that can talk and thus manifest the Buddha’s wisdom. Talking skulls, too, are found in the increasingly bizarre terrain of tantric literature. The *Buddhakaṣāla Yoginītantrarāja*, a ninth-century text, begins with a *nidāna* opening passage that narrates the origin of the scripture. It relates the death of Śākyamuni Buddha immediately following his sexual union with the *yoginī* Citrasenā. Although physically dead, his presence lives on via his skull, which gives a discourse, and also disgorges this text itself, the “Buddha skull king of *yoginī* tantras.”⁵¹

This text, then, clearly indicates what is meant in the tantric context by a skull that is a “relic of the reality body,” a skull that can manifest a buddha’s gnosis. It is an image that unites the ideas of death and awakening. The skull, then, is a symbol that is particularly meaningful in the tantric context, in which death truly is seen as an occasion for the realization of the *dharmakāya*, and hence awakening.

III. SKULL MAGIC

Passages such as the above clearly highlight the significance of skulls in tantric Buddhist literature and help us to understand their centrality in later tantric Buddhist iconography. They are also very important in tantric Buddhist ritual. Skulls, or more properly, skull bowls, are ubiquitous elements in the tantric Buddhist ritual practices associated with the *Yoginī* tantras. In the Newar and Tibetan Buddhist contexts, these

bowls are formed from the upper hemisphere of a human skull, the inside of which is often covered with a decorative layer of metal that makes it water-impermeable. These skull bowls are used in a wide variety of rituals such as *abhiṣeka* initiation rites, usually in conjunction with a *vajra*. When so deployed, the skull bowl replaces the lotus, symbolizing wisdom (*prajñā*), while the *vajra* symbolizes expedience (*upāya*).

However, in the remainder of this article I will focus on several ritual practices in which the skull plays a central role, the focus of the ritual, rather than a necessary but peripheral ritual implement. In these cases, the skull retains its dual association with awakening and death, and thus can serve as an agent for either one of these potentialities.

The example that sparked my interest in this topic is the infamous Tachikawa Skull Ritual studied by Jim Sanford. The surviving texts that describe this ritual portray it as a secret method for producing for oneself a talking skull, one that will tell one the secrets of the world.⁵² While I have not found a ritual for the production of a talking skull in any of the Indian materials I have studied, in my study of the *Cakrasamvara-tantra* I have come across several ritual practices employing skulls that contain elements of the Tachikawa ritual, including the anointing of skulls with body fluids and the association of these rituals with *ḍākiṇīs* and jackals.

In tantric literature, the skull is often used in rituals employing sympathetic magic techniques. Chapter twelve of the *Cakrasamvara-tantra* describes a ritual for giving one's enemy a hemorrhage or a headache. This ritual involves the creation of a simulacrum of one's enemy's skull, which one enchants with mantra and then ritually acts upon. It occurs as follows:

With this mantra, the quintessence⁵³ of Śrī Heruka's essence, make a substitute skull devoid of flesh, and rub it with the tip of one's forefinger. His blood will be drawn out. By rubbing it with the left it will return again. If, enchanting with mantra, the skull is struck with one's fist, the head of him whose name one utters will ache. Calling the mantra to mind, fill the skull with milk and he will be relieved.⁵⁴

As is typical of the tantras, the text gives a rather bare-boned description of the ritual, leaving out many elements essential for its practice. For example, one element that is left out is the fact that, when performing the ritual for causing hemorrhage, one visualizes oneself as the fierce deity Vajrarudra and then invokes the fierce goddess Khaṇḍarohā. The

visualization one then performs is described as follows by the ninth-century commentator Jayabhadra:

As for “with the tip of the forefinger,” etc., this refers to drawing out blood. The procedure for this is as follows: taking a human skull, the mantrin who has performed the prior service instantly utters the syllable *hūṃ* while in union with Vajrarudra. Khaṇḍarohā, with a sword in hand, issues from the deity’s right nostril. Visualize that she pierces in five places the head of him who is named and that the skull fills with streams of his blood.⁵⁵

As is typically the case with these rituals, the text also provides the ritual antidote. In this case, anointing the skull with milk, a pacifying element in Indian magic, relieves the injury caused by the rite.⁵⁶

The *Cakrasamvara-tantra* also describes another ritual that is the closest analogue I have found in Indian literature to the Tachikawa Skull Ritual. Like the latter ritual, it involves anointing a skull with sexual fluids and is associated with *ḍākiṇīs* and jackals. However, unlike that rite, it is a violent ritual, used for the elimination of one’s enemies. Chapter 46 of the *Cakrasamvara-tantra* opens with the following passage:

Next, there is the accomplishment of all ritual actions through the five *ha* syllables, by means of which there is rapid engagement in power through the cognized only. One should rub one’s hands on which are the five syllables, *haṃ hau ho hai haḥ*. Drawing blood from his mouth with a [word of] command, one’s foe dies instantly. Should one anoint the skull that is the receptacle of one’s own blood with the blood of one’s ring finger, as soon as it dries the victim perishes. Should one, angered and with reddened eyes, repeat [the syllables] excitedly, the king will quickly be killed, along with his army and his mount. Make an offering of the *ḍākiṇī* sacrifice (*bali*), with cat, mongoose, dog, crow, crane, and jackal; there is no doubt that in this tantra this quickly yields power.⁵⁷

This passage appears to describe two rituals, the first being a ritual for killing an enemy by drawing a *yantra* in the shape of a five-petalled lotus on one’s palm, in the center of which is written both the victim’s name and a ritual command, and on the petals of which are written the five mantra syllables.

The skull ritual can apparently accomplish this same aim, but can also be performed so as to kill on a far grander scale, namely, for the

elimination of an enemy king along with his army. The ritual description is very bare-boned. It clearly involves a skull, but one which is “the receptacle of one’s own blood.” It is then anointed with the “blood of one’s ring finger.” This seems clear, but the commentator Bhavabhaṭṭa, who lived circa 900 CE, glosses the term “ring finger” (*anāmikā*) as a “childless woman” (*anapatyā*) whose “blood” is uterine blood or menstrual discharge.⁵⁸ This detail, along with the injunction that one should perform a sacrifice to the *ḍākiṇī* involving the meat of a number of animals, including jackal, invokes the charnel-ground culture that appears to be the ultimate origin or inspiration of not only the *Cakrasamvara-tantra*, but also the East Asian tradition that gave rise to the Tachikawa Skull Ritual.

Tantric literature focuses on human skulls, which is natural, given the fact that in early medieval India, these would be readily available in the charnel grounds that were positioned on the outskirts of cities and major towns. However, the tantras also contain rituals employing animal skulls. In these cases, they are used in order to invoke qualities associated with these animals.

For example, chapter 12 of the *Cakrasamvara-tantra* describes the following ritual for driving one’s enemy or enemies insane: “Binding the conjoined skull seals, repeat [the quintessence mantra] without breathing. He whose name the fierce one [utters] will instantly become mad. As many as one thousand people will be maddened. One can mentally release them.”⁵⁹ The late ninth-century commentator Kambala comments upon it as follows:

Place the magical diagram (*yantra*) augmented with the name of whom-ever [is the victim] within the conjoined skull seals, i.e., conjoined skull [hemispheres] of a rabid dog, together with the five intoxicants. Repeat [the mantra] seven times without breathing, then bind and seal them. Should one conceal it together with his name in a charnel ground, he will become mad.⁶⁰

Clearly, the ritual calls for the use of rabid dog skulls in order to inflict a similar sort of madness upon the victim of the rite. The aura of madness that this ritual evokes is further heightened in the following description written by the fifteenth-century Tibetan commentator Tsong Khapa:

Draw a wheel augmented with the victim’s name. Prepare the seeds, roots, stalk, leaves, and branches of the *datura* plant,⁶¹ and put it in the

closed mouth of a rabid dog's skull. Bind its fissures with mud [made of] charnel ground ash, and repeat the augmented quintessence mantra seven times without breathing. If you put it in a charnel ground, he whose name one [utters] will become mad. As many as one thousand people will be maddened. If one bathes [the skull] with milk reciting with a peaceful mind, they will be released.⁶²

The addition of the potent and poisonous intoxicant *datura* was clearly intended to heighten the efficacy of the rite. Tsong Khapa's description also firmly places this ritual within the scope of charnel-ground culture.

In conclusion, it is clear that the skull is a powerful symbol in tantric literature and ritual. It is a symbol with twofold significance, just like the rituals in which skulls can be employed. Just as "achievement" (*siddhi*) is understood in tantric literature to be twofold, manifesting the ultimate achievement of buddhahood or the worldly achievement of mundane ends,⁶³ the skull can be a cipher for awakening itself, representing the Buddha's gnosis, and can be employed in ritual to invoke awakening, the achievement of enlightening knowledge. But they are also employed in rituals to achieve worldly ends, such as the torment or destruction of one's enemies. These worldly applications are largely violent, but this seems understandable, given the fact that the skull is commonly understood as a symbol of death. It thus plays a prominent role in the violent *abhicāra* Buddhist rituals that are intended to harm or destroy enemies.

NOTES

1. Tantric literature, and particularly the *Yoginī* tantras, contains numerous descriptions of violent rituals which, if practiced literally, would involve a transgression of the first precept prohibiting killing. Many tantras also contain descriptions of sexual practices that would likewise entail a violation of the *prātimokṣa* vow of celibacy for the monastic *saṅgha*.

2. Early tantras, such as the *Mahāvairocanābhisambodhi* and the *Tattvasaṃgraha*, largely preserve the style of the Mahayana sutras, and many of them maintain the title of “sutra,” at least in their early versions. The opening *nidāna* verse, typically beginning “Thus have I heard . . .” is a particularly useful marker of this transformation. Many early tantras follow the venerable Buddhist pattern of locating the scripture in the teaching activity of a buddha. Later, tantras such as the *Guhyasamāja* and *Hevajra* transform this through the eroticization of the opening *nidāna* verse. A number of tantras, such as the *Cakrasamvara*, drop the *nidāna* verse entirely, representing a total break with earlier Buddhist scriptural patterns. For further discussion of this topic see my “Disclosing the Empty Secret: Textuality and Embodiment in the *Cakrasamvara Tantra*,” *Numen* 52, no. 4 (2005): 417–444.

3. This dating is made on the basis of Amoghavajra’s detailed summary of this text in his *Index of the Vajrasekhara Sūtra Yoga in Eighteen Sections* (金剛頂經瑜伽十八會指歸, T. 869), a work he composed following his return to China from South Asia in 746 CE. For an annotated English translation of this important text see Rolf W. Giebel, “The Chin-kang-ting ching yü-ch’ieh shih-pa-hui chih-kuei: An Annotated Translation,” *Journal of Naritasan Institute for Buddhist Studies* 18 (1995): 107–201.

4. Although the great Northern Indian Buddhist centers such as Nālandā and Vikramasīla were destroyed by the early thirteenth century, Buddhism, at least in its tantric form, seems to have been preserved for several centuries by itinerant *yogī* groups. Buddhism seems to have existed in some form in Northern India by the late sixteenth century, apparently as preserved by Buddhist Nāth *yogīs* such as Buddhaguptanātha, who traveled to Tibet in the late sixteenth century and served as a guru for the Tibetan polymath Tāranātha. See David Templeman, “Taranatha the Historian,” *Tibet Journal* 6, no. 2 (1981): 41–46.

5. James H. Sanford, “The Abominable Tachikawa Skull Ritual,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 46, no. 1 (1991): 15–16.

6. For more information concerning the *yoginīs* and *ḍākiṇīs* see my *The Cakrasamvara Tantra: A Study and Annotated Translation* (New York: American Institute of Buddhist Studies/Columbia University Press, 2007), 77–103. See also David Gordon White, *Kiss of the Yoginī: “Tantric Sex” in South Asian Contexts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

7. Regarding Lūpa/Matsyendranāth and the overlapping lists of Buddhist and Śaiva *siddhas*, see David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 78–110.
8. I argue this in my article “Eating the Heart of the Brahmin: Representations of Alterity and the Formation of Identity in Tantric Buddhist Discourse,” *History of Religions* 45, no. 1 (2005): 45–69.
9. This mythology has been admirably studied by Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty in her *Śiva: The Erotic Ascetic* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973).
10. Translated in Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* (1976; repr., Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988), 278, from the *Skanda-purāṇa* 1.1.1.20–40, and *Śiva-purāṇa* 2.2.26.14–27, 2.2.27.42–54.
11. For a summary of this story see David N. Lorenzen, *The Kāpālikas and the Kālāmukhas: Two Lost Śaivite Sects*, 2nd rev. ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991) and Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*, 272–320.
12. This passage is from the frame story that begins the *Vetālapañcaviṃśatikā* in Somadeva’s retelling, which is in turn embedded within his much larger *Kathāsaritsāgara*. It describes the charnel ground entered at night by King Trivikramasena. Trans. in N. M. Penzer, ed., *The Ocean of Story, Being C. H. Tawney’s Translation of Somadeva’s Kathāsaritsāgara* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1968), 6:167.
13. See Lorenzen, *Kāpālikas and the Kālāmukhas*, and see also Sunthar Visuvalingam, “The Transgressive Sexuality of the Dīkṣita: Sacrifice, Criminality and *Bhakti* in the Hindu Tradition,” in *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees: Essays on the Guardians of Popular Hinduism*, ed. Alf Hiltebeitel (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 427–462.
14. See Gregory Schopen, “Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism,” *History of Religions* 31, no. 1 (1991): 13, 14. See also Robert DeCaroli, *Haunting the Buddha: Indian Popular Religions and the Formation of Buddhism* (London: Oxford University Press, 2004), 55–62.
15. The classic rendition of these events occurs in the *Buddhacarita*, canto 3, in E. H. Johnston, ed. and trans., *Aśvaghōṣa’s Buddhacarita or Acts of the Buddha* (1936; repr., Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984).
16. *Dīgha-nikāya* 22, trans. in Maurice Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1987), 338–339.
17. *Majjhima-nikāya* 10, trans. in Ñāṇamoli and others, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 148, 149.
18. A list of ten types of corpses occurs in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* sections 263 and 264; see C. A. F. Rhys Davids, *A Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics of the Fourth Century B.C.* (1923; repr., Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Co., 1975), 69–70.

The standard list of nine occurs in the Sanskrit *Mahāvvyūtpatti* as follows: (1) a discolored corpse (*vinīlaka*); (2) a festering corpse (*vidhūtika*); (3) a worm-eaten corpse (*vipaḍumaka*); (4) a bloated corpse (*vyādhmātaka*); (5) a bloody corpse (*vilohitaka*); (6) a devoured corpse (*vikhāditaka*); (7) a dismembered, scattered corpse (*vikṣiptaka*); (8) a burned corpse (*vidagdhaka*); and (9) bones (*asthi*). See Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature* (1932; repr., Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1970), 94. This practice is described in more detail in chapter 6 of Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*; see Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, trans., *Visuddhimagga: The Path of Purification* (Seattle: BPS Pariyatti Editions, 1999), 173–190.

19. For example, Śāntarakṣita, in his *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, quotes the *Ratnameghasūtra* concerning the *śmāśānika*, or meditator who dwells in a charnel ground. See the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* 135.1, translated in Cecil Bendall and W. H. D. Rouse, *Śikṣā Samuccaya* (1922; repr., Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1981), 132.

20. See, for example, <http://www.wakeupsmart.com/Asubha.html>. Many thanks to Dr. Anil Sakya for bringing this Web site to my attention.

21. This practice also had misogynist implications, as Liz Wilson has argued. See her *Charming Cadavers: Horrific Figurations of the Feminine in Indian Buddhist Hagiographic Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

22. See the *Mahāssapura-sutta*, *Majjhima-nikāya* 39, trans. in Ñāṇamoli and others, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 366.

23. *Mahāsīhanāda-sutta*, *Majjhima-nikāya* 12, trans. in Ñāṇamoli and others, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 175.

24. This text was originally composed in Pāli and was translated into Tibetan; this translation was edited and translated into English by P. V. Bapat in his *Vimuktimārga Dhutaḡaṇa-nirdeśa: A Tibetan Text Critically Edited and Translated into English* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1964). The passage concerning the advantages of charnel ground meditation occurs on pp. 54–55 of that text. See also Reginald Ray, *Buddhist Saints in India* (London: Oxford University Press, 1994), 298–302.

25. For a classic discussion of these categories, see David Snellgrove, “Categories of Buddhist Tantras,” in *Orientalia Iosephi Tucci Memoriae Dicata*, ed. G. Gnoli and L. Lanciotti, *Serie Orientale Roma* 56, no. 3, 1353–1384. For a more recent critical and historical analysis of the development of these classificatory schemes see Jacob Dalton, “A Crisis of Doxography: How Tibetans Organized Tantra During the 8th–12th Centuries,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 28, no. 1 (2005): 115–181. Many thanks to Dr. Charles Orzech for bringing the latter work to my attention.

26. Chapter 7 of the *Subāhupariprccha-tantra*, a text composed during the seventh century, describes a *vetālasādhana*, a rite for reanimating a corpse in order

to achieve magical powers, as well as several other chanel ground oriented practices. See Ronald Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 203–204. Chapter 26 of the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, a text dated to the eighth century, also describes a *vetālasādhana*. See Glenn Wallis, *Mediating the Power of the Buddhas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 176.

27. See Gray, “Eating the Heart of the Brahmin,” 53.

28. Alexis Sanderson has pointed out several instances of intertextual overlap between the Buddhist *Laghsumvara-tantra*, also known as the *Cakrasamvara-tantra*, and several early Śaiva tantras that appear to have been associated with the Kāpālikas. See his essay “History through Textual Criticism in the Study of Śaivism, the Pañcarātra and the Buddhist Yogīntantras,” in *Les Source et le temps*, ed. François Grimal (Pondicherry: École française d’Extrême Orient, 2001), 1–47.

29. This thus continued a trend that began centuries earlier, as Phyllis Granoff has argued. See her “Maheśvara/Mahākāla: A Unique Buddhist Image from Kaśmīr,” *Artibus Asiae* 41 (1979): 64–82.

30. Indeed, the advocates of the *Cakrasamvara* and related tantras developed myths that account for this iconographic similarity, claiming the Heruka is a manifestation in Śaiva guise of the Buddha Mahāvajradhara, who assumed this form to tame the deity Bhairava. A translation of Indrabhūti’s version of this myth can be found in my book *The Cakrasamvara Tantra*, 46–51. See also Ronald Davidson’s “Reflections on the Maheśvara Subjugation Myth: Indic Materials, Sa-skyapa Apologetics, and the Birth of Heruka,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 14, no. 2 (1991): 197–235. For a more general study of Buddhist myths of the subjugation of Śaiva deities, see Iyanaga Nobumi, “Récits de la soumission de Maheśvara par Trailokyavijaya—d’après les sources chinoises et japonaises,” in *Tantric and Taoist Studies in Honour of R.A. Stein*, ed. Michel Strickmann, *Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques* vol. 12 (Brussels: Institut belge des hautes études chinoises, 1985), 633–745.

31. My translation from the text at To. 366, D rgyud ‘bum vol. ka, fol. 157b.

32. Regarding this see Glenn H. Mullin, *Tsongkhapa’s Six Yogas of Naropa* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1996), 78–81.

33. The *Cakrasamvara-tantra* (CT) likely dates to the late eighth century or early ninth century. Regarding its dating, see Gray, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra*, 11–14.

34. CT 2.14a–16b. For an annotated translation see Gray, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra*, 167–168.

35. CT 2.16c–18b. For an annotated translation see Gray, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra*, 168–169.

36. CT 2.4a–6b. For an annotated translation see Gray, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra*, 164–165.
37. *Hevajra-tantra* 1.6.15–16, translated in David Snellgrove, *The Hevajra Tantra: A Critical Study* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 1:64–65. The *Hevajra-tantra* has been dated by Snellgrove to the early ninth century (*ibid.*, 1:11–19).
38. CT 31.3c–5a. For an annotated translation see Gray, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra*, 297.
39. That this is the case is suggested by the contemporary Newari context, in which Hindus and Buddhists continue to live in close proximity. David Gellner has reported that brahmins will never enter Newari Buddhist compounds such as Kwā Bāhāḥ by the front door, because, as a brahmin stated, “when you go in the main door you have to go underneath a *caitya*, and *caityas* contain impure (*aśuddha*) things such as bones.” Gellner concludes that “what is holy relic (bones in a *caitya*) to the Buddhist is impure to the Brahman.” See his *Monk, Householder, and Tantric Priest: Newar Buddhism and Its Hierarchy of Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 97.
40. Regarding the dating of Bhavabhaṭṭa and other commentators on the CT, see Gray, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra*, 21–24.
41. My translation of the text *yathā śaṅkhādayo vaidikānām pavitrās tathā kapālam api*, ed. in J. S. Pandey, *Śriherukābhīdhānam Cakrasamvaratantram with the Vivṛti Commentary of Bhavabhaṭṭa* (Sarnath: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 2002), 2:515.
42. See the *Atharva Veda* 4.10, translated in W. D. Whitney, *Atharva-Veda-Saṃhitā, Part I* (Indian repr. ed.; Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1962), 161–162.
43. Regarding this association, see Peter Bisschop and Arlo Griffiths, “The Pāśupata Observance (Atharvavedaparīśiṣṭa 40),” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 46, no. 4 (2003): 315–348.
44. For an excellent study of the Buddhist triple-body theory see John Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied: Sources of Controversy in India and Tibet* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).
45. See John S. Strong, *Relics of the Buddha* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 9–10, as well as Glenn Wallis, “The Buddha’s Remains: Mantra in the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 24 (2001): 89–125. See also my essay “Disclosing the Empty Secret.”
46. This became an important tool for tantric Buddhist thinkers in the construction of taxonomies that privilege their own tradition’s texts, which were invariably classified as *dharmakāya* teachings. For an example of this see Ryūichi Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

47. Regarding this term see Gregory Schopen's essay "Monks and the Relic Cult in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*: An Old Misunderstanding in Regard to Monastic Buddhism," in his *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 99–113.
48. This is generally the case, but not exclusively so. Buddhists often enshrined textual *dharmasārīra* in *stūpas*, often in conjunction with physical relics. See Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*, 10.
49. Regarding this see Schopen's article "Burial *Ad Sanctos* and the Physical Presence of the Buddha in Early Indian Buddhism," in *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*, 114–147.
50. For a translation of this episode see Leon Hurvitz, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 183–194.
51. For a translation of this opening passage and a discussion of the history and significance of this text see Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, 247–251.
52. See Sanford, "The Abominable Tachikawa Skull Ritual," 1–20.
53. That is, the hero's seven-syllable *upahṛdaya* mantra, which is *oṃ hrīḥ ha ha hūṃ hūṃ phaḥ*.
54. CT 12.2.4. For an annotated translation see Gray, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra*, 210–211.
55. This is translation of my reading of the text in his *Cakrasamvarapañjikā*, from IASWR ms. #MBB-I-122, fol. 22b.3–5: *tarjanyagreṇetyādinā rudhirākaraṣaṇam āha / tatrāyaṃ kramah / naraśira[h]kapālam ādāya kṛtapurvasevāmantrī jhaṭiti vajrarudrayogāt hūṃkārocāraṇa / devasya dakṣiṇanāsāpuṭ[ā]ntarāt / khaṇḍarohā śāstrahastā niścārya tayāḥ yasya nāmnā pañcasthāne śirovedhaṃ kārayitvā tadrudhiradhārabhiḥ kapālaparipūrṇa bhāvayet/*.
56. Just as blood is typically associated with the fierce *abhicāra* rites, milk is associated with the pacifying *śāntika* rites. Moreover, these substances were seen as symbolically oppositional. Regarding this see David Gordon White, *Kiss of the Yoginī*, 68–73.
57. CT 46.1–5. For an annotated translation see Gray, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra*, 358–359.
58. His comment here reads *anāmikā anapatyā tasyā rudhiraṃ rajaḥ*. Ed. in Pandey, *Śrīherukābhīdhānam*, 569–570.
59. CT 12.2.7. For an annotated translation see Gray, *The Cakrasamvara Tantra*, 212.
60. My translation from Kambala's *Sādhananidāna-śrīcakrasamvara-nāma-pañjikā*, To.1401, D rgyud 'grel vol. ba, fol. 29b.

61. Tsong Khapa gives both the Tibetan translation, *smyo byed*, and also attempts to transliterate its Sanskrit name, *dhattūra*, which he represents as *dadura*. This refers to the plant *Datura alba*, which is both a powerful hallucinogen and poison.

62. My trans. from Tsong Khapa's *bde mchog bsdus pa'i rgyud kyi rgya cher bshad pa sbas pa'i don kun gsal ba*, bKra-shis Lhun-po edition (repr., Delhi: Ngawang Gelek Demo, 1980), vol. nya, fols. 103b–140a.

63. Regarding the two senses of the term *siddhi* in tantric Buddhism, see Charles D. Orzech, *Politics and Transcendent Wisdom* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 50–52.