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Review

Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism: History, Semiology, and Transgression in the Indian Traditions, by Christian K. Wedemeyer. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. xx + 313 pp. £34.50. ISBN 0-231-16240-1 (hardback). £18.00. ISBN 0-231-16241-8 (paperback).

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In *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism: History, Semiology, and Transgression in the Indian Traditions* Christian K. Wedemeyer sets out to dismantle some of our longest-held and most deeply ingrained ideas about late Buddhist Tantra, after which he offers a handful of important new assertions about the nature of Tantric thought and practice. While Wedemeyer has not attempted to address every significant aspect of late Buddhist Tantra in this unassuming book, the handful of topics he does discuss are of central and defining importance to our understanding of the whole, making this the most important book on Buddhist Tantra published in the last ten years.

It must be borne in mind that Wedemeyer's subject in this book is 'Tantric Buddhism', by which he means late esoteric Buddhism, expressed in the Mahāyoga and Yoginī Tantras, which is defined by its nondualist attitude with respect to notions of the relationship between the divine and the human, and of ritual purity and pollution. Wedemeyer has not sought to address the tamer, 'institutional' forms of Tantra that are less clearly distinguished from traditional Mahāyāna practice (pp. 9–10).

The first part of the book, Historiography, contains three chapters, the first two of which examine the stories scholars have told and retold about Tantric Buddhism from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, often without much critical reflection. The first chapter discusses three commonly-repeated assertions about the origins of Tantric Buddhism: that it developed as a result of a decline in Buddhist morality, that it was a revival of the oldest substrate of Indian religion, or that it represents religious elements coopted from Śaivism. All three views, aside from being completely dubious, have enabled scholars to skirt the issue of what is transgressive or antinomian in Buddhist Tantra, because according to these narratives

those aspects are not really of Buddhism, but came from somewhere else. Clearly scholars should do more to resist our natural drive to seek out the 'origins' of things.

The second chapter takes up the often-made claims that Tantric Buddhism represents the end of Indian Buddhism, the primordial religion of India, or a 'medieval' period in a longer historical trajectory. These assertions are based on certain recurrent conceptual tropes (organic development; a series of hierarchical binaries pervasive in patriarchal, literate, urban societies; and the idea of a cultural nadir, respectively) that are, in truth, products of the cultures of the historians, rather than really having anything to do with the history of Tantric Buddhism itself. Drawing from arguments advanced by Hayden White, Wedemeyer shows that any attempt to narrativize a grand history that includes Tantric Buddhism is inherently problematic, as 'historical narratives [are] fundamentally fictive and based on pre-critical choices' (p. 41). Scholars should do more to resist our natural drive to repeat the narratives already familiar to us, too.

Chapter Three turns to narratives composed by Tantric Buddhists themselves (in India, Tibet, China and Japan), focusing mainly on explanations of where Buddhist scriptures came from. Wedemeyer shows that traditionally there were many ways of explaining the origins of Buddhist scriptures—well beyond the 'bare historical' model scholars often assume Buddhists of long ago would have assumed: that these texts were spoken by Buddha Śakyamuni in embodied human form, then passed down through his community of followers. Wedemeyer uses this to exemplify the fact that traditional Buddhist historiographical discourses are no less complex than those developed more recently in the West. All, however, operate on the same basic principles, as each historiography—Asian or Western, traditional or modern—is driven by a stock of structuring metaphors.

The second part of the book, Interpretation, sets out to explain some key aspects of Tantric Buddhism, taking the issue of its seeming antinomianism head-on. In Chapter Four, Wedemeyer attempts to develop a new way of thinking about the statements prescribing transgressive action in the late tantras. While most past scholarly discussion of Buddhist Tantra has insisted on taking these prescriptions as having been meant literally or only figuratively, Wedemeyer suggests an alternative way of reading them based on 'connotative semiotics', as formulated by Roland Barthes. In order to understand, for example, the meaning of a tantra's directive that the practitoner should eat beef, we must keep in mind that in the cultural context in which this text was written, beef signified pollution, and the act of consuming that beef would thereby signify having achieved nondual gnosis, a transcendence of notions of purity and impurity. Thus in the act of eating the impure beef, 'the practitioners of these traditions signify ritually that their attainment of the enlightened state...is, in fact, a fait accompli' (p. 122). Left unspecified is the question of *to whom* this is signified—to the practitioner? to a broader

public? or both? Perhaps a future study delving further into this will lead to a richer understanding of 'enlightenment' in this social context.

Chapter Five looks at the practice of the Practice (*caryā*, in this context basically synonomous with *vrata*, *vratacaryā*, *caryāvrata*, *vidyāvrata*, etc.), in which a *yogi*, after having achieved a certain degree of success in his practice, will for some time live a wandering lifestyle, during which he dresses in a garb fashioned from human bones, has sex with a consort, and performs other norm-overturning behaviours. The Practice is described rather laconically in the late tantras that treat it (including the *Guhyasamāja*, *Buddhakapāla*, *Hevajra*, *Laghusaṃvara* and others), but by collating what is said about the practice in a dozen of these texts, Wedemeyer is able to show that there are patterns in how it is described. The latter half of the chapter uses the case of the Practice to explore the relationships between Buddhist and non-Buddhist (especially Śaivite) communities in the second half of the first millennium, arguing that the Tantric Age was an environment of intense mutual influence, with a shared 'zeitgeist of antinomian practice' (p. 137).

In the final chapter, Wedemeyer argues that rather than having come into the Buddhist world from beyond its margins, the nondualist Tantric systems of Indian Buddhism 'transcend the [dualist] Tantric systems from within' (p. 187). The authors of Tantric Buddhism were clearly educated within institutionalized Buddhism, as it is the categories of institutionalized Buddhism that they prescribe overturning—and thus ultimately help reinforce. The practitioners of Tantric Buddhism do not seem to have been genuine outcastes, but rather elites temporarily affecting marginality for the duration of the Practice.

In toto, *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism* must be seen as arguing that Tantric Buddhism was indeed about transgression, but despite what many of us have been trained to think, never about 'transgression *as such*' (p. 131). The nature and the meaning of that seeming antinomianism is only properly understood when the context in which it was enacted is sufficiently reconstructed, which, as Wedemeyer makes abundantly clear, past scholars have often neglected to do.

Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism will be best enjoyed by readers already familiar with the existing academic discourse on Tantra, mainly scholars and graduate students in South Asian religions. It may take some time for our field to fully assimilate all of Wedemeyer's arguments, but someday we will look back on the way we used to think about Tantra and agree that it indeed did not make much sense.