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Vajrayāna Ritual

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Vajrayāna Ritual

Nick Swann

Ritual, however conceptualized, plays a central role in Vajrayāna Buddhist practice. Dedicated practitioners – yogis and yoginis – are introduced to Vajrayāna practices through initiation rituals which purify them and empower them to cultivate the qualities of Vajrayāna deities and their associated *siddhis* (powers). This article offers a thumbnail sketch of such initiations and the practices which may result. The public Vajrayāna rituals of ‘monastic dance’ or *cham* (Tib. ‘*cham*’) and ‘long-life empowerment’ or *tshe wang* (Tib. *tshe dbangs*) are also outlined and discussed. Some cursory analysis is offered, framed by social anthropological thought, although this is more to anchor some of the discussion than to present a thesis regarding Vajrayāna and ritual. Vajrayāna is veiled in secrecy and as such the outsider can be lured into rather un-Buddhist speculation and projection about its practices. This entry does not purport to draw back the veil and reveal any secrets, but it does place at least some of Vajrayāna’s request for secrecy in context; hopefully the reader’s curiosity will be satisfied to that extent.

Keywords: Ritual, Vajrayāna Buddhism, Buddhist practice, Tibetan Buddhism, Tantric practice, Buddhist Tantra, Initiation, Yoga

Table of contents

1 Vajrayāna ritual

2 Vajrayāna orientation

3 Vajrayāna and ritual theory

3.1 Classic theories of ritual

4 Vajrayāna gurus

5 Psychic powers and risk management

6 Tantric texts

7 Tantric initiation

8 Practices

8.1 Deity yoga practice

8.2 Preliminary practices

8.3 Vajrayāna retreat

8.4 Ritual and sexual yoga

9 Public Tantric ritual

9.1 *Cham*

9.2 *Tshe wang*

10 Conclusion

11 Related links

1 Vajrayāna ritual

...one is not purified by another, nor by what is seen, heard, or perceived [by the senses], nor by the performance of ritual observances [...]

A person having undertaken a ritual act goes this way and that, fettered by his senses.
(*Suttanipāta* [Sn] 4.4 *Suddhaṭṭaka Sutta*; Ireland 1994)

The above quote seems clear regarding the Buddha's attitude towards ritual; it won't help a person to purify the mind or free anyone from samsara's fetters. However, ritual in this context specifically refers to Vedic ritual, such as Vedic sacrifice, rather than all 'rituals' per se. After all, every Buddhist tradition has activities that can be analysed as rituals, not least the ritual of taking refuge – the foundational practice of entering the Buddhist path.

The Vajrayāna is particularly rich in respect to ritual, with initiations, apotropaic rituals that petition deities for help, and daily practices for committed yogis and yoginis. *Yāna* denotes a path or vehicle of Buddhist practice; *vajra* (Tib. *dorje* [*rdo rje*]) is sometimes glossed as 'thunderbolt' or 'diamond'. The *vajra* originated as one of the weapons of the Indian deity Indra and symbolizes '...the impenetrable, immovable, immutable [...] state of enlightenment or Buddhahood' (Beer 2014: 233). The terms 'Tantra' and 'Vajrayāna' are used more or less interchangeably in this article, although they are not true synonyms. Vajrayāna refers specifically to the 'vajra vehicle' – the thunderbolt-fast way to *bodhi* or Buddhist awakening – whereas Tantra in general can refer to related but non-Buddhist systems such as Jain or Śaiva Tantra. In a literary context, Tantra can also refer to a specific Vajrayāna text or cycle of texts. Furthermore, the phrase 'Tibetan Buddhism' has come to imply Vajrayāna / Tantric thought and practice.

Vajrayāna is alive today in Japan as Shingon, and historically elements of Vajrayāna thought and practice once extended to southern Buddhist territories (for example, c. ninth- or tenth-century CE carvings of Vajrapani and other Tantric bodhisattvas at Budurwagala, Sri Lanka; Coningham et al. 2017), although it is of less significance there now. Indian Tantric traditions also spread to China from the eighth century, where they entered into dialogue with other emerging Chinese Buddhist traditions, eventually contributing to Korean and Japanese Buddhsisms. Vajrayāna has its greatest visibility as a living tradition in northern Buddhist areas, which include: Bhutan; Mongolia; the Buryat, Tuvan, and Kalmyk Republics; Ladakh, Lahaul, Spiti, Sikkim, and parts of Arunachal Pradesh in India; Nepal; and ethnically Tibetan regions and the Tibetan diaspora. It is also found across the world in Tibetan Buddhist Centres outside of these geographical heartlands.

This article presents an overview of Vajrayāna Buddhism, focusing on rituals which developed to bring practitioners – characterized as yogis (male) or yoginis (female) – to enlightenment, while potentially cultivating psychic powers on the way. The symbolism deployed in Tantric texts, teachings, and meditations is often violent or erotic, and

subversive of societal norms. The true meaning of this symbolism is only revealed to initiated yogis and yoginis who vow to keep it secret. As such, this entry does not purport to reveal any Tantric secrets or present rituals in a way that a reader could attempt themselves. Because Tantric practice matured in India in a Sanskritic environment, Sanskrit (Skt) is used here as the default language when discussing concepts common to a range of Buddhist traditions. Phonetic Tibetan (Tib.) equivalents are given where relevant, with Tibetan spellings using the Wylie system (Wylie 1959) given after the first instance of a word's use. There are also occasional uses of Pāli. Where used, English glosses for Buddhist technical terms are to be taken as adequate rather than definitive as they do not cover a full spectrum of meaning or capture every nuance of the original. The interested reader is encouraged to explore alternative glosses and translations for such terms. This entry draws on a combination of emic and etic literature, as well as the author's own ethnographic experience of the Sakya (Tib. *sa skya*) tradition of Tibetan Buddhism which includes extended fieldwork with monks in India and some twenty years of involvement with lay Buddhists in the UK.

2 Vajrayāna orientation

The opening quotation above is from a Theravādin Pāli source. While acknowledging that the Buddha was an extraordinary being with extraordinary powers, many Theravādins nevertheless see the Buddha as belonging to a specific historical period, passing into *Parinirvāna* and no longer impacting the world except for the teachings, the *Dhamma*, which he left behind. Vajrayāna practitioners see the Buddha somewhat differently. Based on Mahāyāna conceptions of the *trikāya* (the three bodies of a Buddha), all Buddhas – including the 'historical Buddha' – are seen as 'an example, an emanation or projection [...] of a universal principle or capability, Buddhahood or Buddha nature, Enlightenment, awakening – which is conceived of as present in all life and particularly in all beings which have consciousness' (Samuel and David 2016: 12). Vajrayāna practices aim to bring this 'principle or capability' to the yogini's foreground and help them to refine its focus until its qualities ripen within them. This is typically facilitated through a guru (*gūrū*) who initiates the yogini into the practices of an appropriate *yi dam* (Tib. *yi dam*). A *yi dam* is a protector deity with whom the yogini has a special affinity, and who is conceived as an emanation of one of the Five Tathāgatas, resident in the centre of their perfect cosmos, or mandala (*mandala*). These concepts are all expanded on below ([section 4](#)).

Theravāda Buddhist thought conceives samsara (the mundane world characterized by *dukkha* ('painfulness', 'unsatisfactoriness'), and a seemingly endless cycle of rebirth and re-death) and nirvana (the awakened state, permanently beyond rebirth) as being precise opposites (Gombrich 2009: 155). By contrast, in Vajrayāna thought they are considered to be identical – or non-dual – with each other (Harvey 2013: 126). Nirvana is present in samsara, but we fail to understand this due to the ways in which our past karma

conditions us to perceive our ‘reality’. Vajrayāna practice aims at purifying this past karma and cultivating the wisdom (Skt *prajñā*) to see the reality of this non-duality. These brief sentences barely scratch the surface of the vast topic of non-duality in Vajrayāna Buddhism, but they should be enough for the reader to make sense of this entry. For a more detailed introduction to the subject, chapter 5 of Williams (2012) is recommended.

3 Vajrayāna and ritual theory

It is not possible to discuss Vajrayāna ritual without a preliminary discussion of what ritual is. The study of ritual – and symbolism – has a long pedigree in social and cultural anthropology, and an exhaustive discussion of its history and development would leave us with few words for anything else. Consequently, the body of this entry includes a brief survey of ‘classic’ theories of ritual before introducing Vajrayāna ritual with examples briefly analysed by these theories. More recent models for understanding ritual and the analytical light that they can shed on Vajrayāna are also introduced, but any mention and use of theory in this article is for the purposes of framing and for food for thought rather than being the central focus.

3.1 Classic theories of ritual

From the early days of nineteenth-century anthropology, anthropologists have often tried to define ‘ritual’. These attempts have largely ended in failure, with definitions so broad as to be meaningless or so tightly focused that they exclude cultural practices that many would, in fact, point at and call ‘ritual’. This led to anthropologists in the latter decades of the twentieth century to reject attempts to define ritual altogether, with the understanding that we anthropologists apparently know a ritual when we see one (Kapferer 2007: 35), linked as they are by what Barry Stephenson (drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein) describes as ‘family resemblances’ (2015: 74; see further reading).

As well as attempting to define what anthropologists saw as universal cultural concepts, such as ‘ritual’ and ‘religion’, one strand of early anthropology also concerned itself with trying to find the origins of social phenomena. To this end, the origins of ritual were sought in regicide (Frazer 1890) or sacrifice (Hubert and Mauss 1898). Again, more recent anthropology has moved on from such exercises. Rather than looking for the origin of ritual, Émile Durkheim sought to identify its social function, and (characteristically for Durkheim) he found its function was related to maintaining social cohesion (Durkheim 1912). For example, in a Durkheimian analysis, weddings ensure public recognition of a union, offering social stability for any progeny and thereby stability for future iterations of a society. This analysis is also applicable to certain types of Tibetan Vajrayāna ritual, such as the *tshe wang* (*tshe dbangs*) ‘long life empowerment’ rituals often conferred after Lunar New Year (*lo sar*), in Tibetan communities, or the state-protector *cham* (‘cham’) dance rituals conducted at Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, India. Since Durkheim’s analysis is

concerned with understanding rituals in terms of their societal function, it is less applicable with regards to private Tantric initiations and resulting personal *sādhana* ritual practice. All of these examples are discussed below in more detail.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, there was a shift away from a focus on origins and/or functions of social phenomena to the analysis of their structure. This was inspired by Ferdinand de Saussure's structural approach to linguistics, which sought to analyse the patterns underlying different languages as well as the specific instances of particular languages (Saussure 1916). In anthropology, the key thinker in this respect was Arnold van Gennep. In his most famous work, *Les Rites de Passage* (1908; see van Gennep 1960), he offers a crosscultural structural analysis of hundreds of examples of rites of passage organized thematically into chapters covering pregnancy and childbirth, adolescence, marriage, and funerary rites, among others. In this analysis, van Gennep identifies groups of sub-rites connected to (i) separating initiands from mainstream society, (ii) the resulting period of separation, and (iii) the reintegration of initiands back into mainstream society with an altered status. Van Gennep labels the phases in his 'tripartite schema' as (i) pre-liminal, (ii) liminal, and (iii) post-liminal (van Gennep 1960: 10–11), taken from the Latin *limen* (meaning threshold, e.g. of a doorway) and indicating being between states.

The sub-rites identified by van Gennep appear to be related: rites of separation, liminality, and reintegration bear similarities across cultures and societies. For example, all cultures treat pregnant women differently to some extent from those who are not, indicating some form of separation from mainstream society; this separation may take ritual form where it extends to rites of seclusion, dietary restrictions, and separation from usual economic work during pregnancy (van Gennep 1960: 43). Furthermore, the liminal phase is commonly marked by a 'pivoting of the sacred' (1960: 12) resulting in an inversion of social norms: a couple might be from a humble social stratum but treated like royalty during their wedding; during Christmas Saturnalia rites, military officers serve food to the lower ranks. In terms of reintegration, initiates might be given a new (or additional) name or title, or be given the authority to wear clothing signifying their new status to society more broadly. The duration of these phases can also say something of the sociocultural purpose of the ritual. For example, a long betrothal period for a marriage, with a lot of rites to negotiate details such as bride price or dowry, might indicate that the institution of the family household is particularly stable in a society or culture, and it thus takes a lot of time to transition out of unmarried to married status.

Analogues of many of these features are found in various Vajrayāna rituals, and van Gennep's structure will help orientate the descriptions and discussion later in this article. First, there are two more anthropologists to discuss in relation to classic theories of ritual, both of whom build on van Gennep: Victor Turner and Maurice Bloch.

In his book *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (1995), Turner focused on the liminal phase of rites of passage and the inversion of social norms often found therein. In examining the experiences of those undergoing rites of passage collectively, such as pilgrims, he identified how initiands held a common bond and shared a sense of group equality as they endured hardships of varying degrees. Turner labelled this as *communitas* (from the Latin referring to a community of equals, or the spirit of community). He extended the concept to include members of social ‘total institutions’ such as the military, prisons, boarding schools, and monasteries. These total institutions constitute societies within a society, and members share their own rules governing dress, daily routine, and interpersonal behaviour – typically this strictly limits personal agency and demands that members conform to the structural expectations of the institution itself.

Bloch built upon van Gennep’s schema and Turner’s focus on liminality/*communitas* in an effort to explain how rites of passage work within a culture, through the concept of ‘rebounding violence’ (Bloch 1992: 4). For example, in Orokaiva (Papua New Guinea) coming of age rituals, once the preliminary rites have removed the initiands (children) from mainstream society they are symbolically reduced to the status of pigs and are hunted by their initiators, eventually being herded onto the platform where pigs are slaughtered/sacrificed. Once they have been symbolically sacrificed, the children are blindfolded and taken to secluded huts where they are treated like the spirits of the dead and taught cult practices, such as how to play spirit flutes and perform spirit dances. After a prolonged period of liminality, in which they remain separate from the community and in between identities of child and adult, they eventually return to the village to participate as hunters in an actual pig hunt (the rebounding violence, as identified by Bloch) before re-entering mainstream society (Bloch 1992: 8–11). Although after this ritual their day to day lives might not be much different, they are nonetheless ‘perfumed’ by their encounter with the sacred, never quite returning to their pre-initiation version of normality. In due course, we will explore parallel features found in Vajrayāna ritual, but before doing so we need to consider the role of the Vajrayāna initiator and teacher: the guru.

4 Vajrayāna gurus

Buddhist Tantric practitioners distinguish themselves from (e.g.) Jain or Śaiva Tantric practitioners by taking refuge in the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha just as other Buddhists do. However, unlike other Buddhists, they also take refuge in their guru, who is seen as the living embodiment of the Three Jewels. This guru – or specifically a yogi’s ‘root guru’ (Tib. *rtsa’e bla ma*; the terms guru and lama will be used interchangeably from here on) – is a trusted spiritual teacher and guide with whom the yogi feels a profound connection. This lama should be identified after careful scrutiny (The Sakya Trichen 2020), sometimes taking many years, although in reality today the choice might be made much more quickly. The lama’s authenticity should be confirmed,

for example by ascertaining their lineage and the lamas that they themselves studied with, and the Vajrayāna retreats that they have undertaken. If there are doubts then scrutiny can include directly questioning, even challenging, the potential root lama; but if and when a yogi has chosen and been accepted by a lama, any such doubting has to stop and the yogi must put complete trust in their lama's instructions.

In a sense, Vajrayāna can be thought of as a diverse array of 'personality cults' existing under the umbrella practices of taking refuge and the bodhisattva vow. (Vajrayāna Buddhism is an expression of Mahāyāna Buddhism and practitioners must act for the benefit of all, not just themselves.) This analysis and the use of the word 'cult' is not meant to be pejorative, but simply to highlight the diversity and individuality found in the range of lamas living today, and the teaching and initiation lineages that they represent.

All of these lineages trace themselves back to one or other Tantric Mahāsiddha ('Great Accomplished One'). Conventionally there were eighty-four of these who lived across South Asia at various times around the turn of the first millennium, although only a handful of them retain strong contemporary influence. Note that the Nyingma (Tib. *rnying ma*) tradition has further lineages of Mahāsiddhas from India beyond these eighty-four. Each has their own distinct narrative, recorded in their hagiography, which includes a transformation following an epiphany induced by Tantric practice. This epiphany typically involves a direct, personal encounter with the Mahāsiddha's *yi dam*, or with that deity's consort or an associated *dākinī* (a class of female deities who are in a sense 'sacred muses'). Following this, the *siddhis* (Tib. *sgrub* 'accomplishments', in the sense of 'psychic powers') ripen within the Mahāsiddha who then performs mystical feats to help bring others to awakening. The hagiography of the Mahāsiddha Naropa provides a good example of this (Guenther and Nāḍapāda 1995).

At this time in India, Tantric students, if accepted, were initiated into the teachings and practices of their guru's Tantric deity, in the anticipation that if they were diligent then the *siddhis* would ripen in them too. Typically a Mahāsiddha would only take on one or two such students (Stearns 1997: 188). These *siddhis* fall into two categories: the ordinary or relative, and the supreme (Samuel 1993: 422–443). The supreme *siddhi* is *bodhi*, awakening itself, the ultimate goal of Vajrayāna practice. If the supreme *siddhi* ripens, then simultaneously all the ordinary ones ripen too. However, with dedicated ritual practice, the ordinary *siddhis* can also ripen separately in someone who has not yet experienced *bodhi*, helping the practitioner in practical ways and clearing the ground so that full awakening becomes easier to achieve. The ordinary *siddhis* fall into four general categories: pacifying (Tib. *zhi*), increasing (Tib. *rgyas*), attracting (Tib. *dbang*), and repelling (Tib. *drag*), with each category being associated with an ahistorical Tathāgatā (sometimes referred to as a 'Dhyāni Buddha') who lives in one or other cardinal direction of a mandala. A fifth Tathāgatā, associated with the supreme *siddhi*, is in the centre of the mandala.



Figure 1. ‘Sand mandala’ of the Tathāgatā Amitābha, constructed by Vajrayāna monks from Tashi Lhunpo monastery for the UK Association for Buddhist Studies conference at the University of St Andrews in 2023. The celestial palace sits on top of a viśvavajra, the prongs of which can be seen as the dome-like structures in the cardinal directions. Photograph courtesy of the author.

This mandala is a conceptualization of the Tantric cosmos; it represents the cosmic dimension of a Buddha’s awakening. As such, it is considered perfect and pure. It is typically configured as a celestial palace with the mandala’s specific deity positioned on a lotus seat on top of a jewelled throne in its centre. The palace itself rests on a giant double vajra (viśvavajra) and is surrounded by a vajra fence and a circle of flames. The different cardinal directions correspond to different colours according to the Tathāgatā who controls that space (see below). A yogi is expected to spend at least part of their time each day visualizing their environment as their main deity’s mandala, meditating on the luminous nature of reality that takes expression as deity and mandala.



Figure 2. Detail of the northern quarter of the mandala of the Tathāgatā Amitābha pictured above. The protective vajra fence can be seen just inside the outer rainbow boundary. Photograph courtesy of the author.

Each of these Tathāgatās – Akṣobhya, Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, Amitābha, and Amoghasiddhi – has a group of deities associated with them who may individually be identified with the cultivation of specific related *siddhis*. For example, the Ratnasambhava ('Jewel-Born') is associated with the north and with *siddhis* which 'increase' (lifespan, intelligence, wealth), and among his family are the prosperity deities Kubera and Vasundhārā. Colour symbolism often plays a helpful role in identifying a deity's *siddhis* and the 'family' to which they belong; in the system centred on Akṣobhya (blue) for the uncommon *siddhi*, this runs white (Vairocana) for pacifying, yellow (Ratnasambhava) for increasing, red (Amitābha) for attracting, and green (Amoghasiddhi) for repelling. As with everything Tantric, some caution is needed in this method of identification: for example, Mañjuśrī is associated with increasing wisdom and is usually depicted as yellow, but actually belongs to Amitābha's family. Some images of him will give a red tinge to his outline to indicate this. Snellgrove (1987: 189–213) and Landaw and Weber (2006: ch. 3 and 121–123) offer analytical and confessional perspectives on Tathāgatas and mandalas; we will return to these subjects in later sections.

Other ordinary *siddhis* include curing illnesses, removing obstacles to practice, pacifying vexatious rivals, and mystical powers such as clairvoyance, mindreading, flight, and the ability to appear in several places at once. In the wrong hands and used for selfish ends, these powers could be dangerous, but the bodhisattva vow prevents Vajrayāna Buddhists from such abuses (while at the same time stipulating that if one has *siddhis* then one is obliged to use them to help others; Federation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition 2000: 30).

There are, inevitably, oversimplifications in the paragraphs above, and the reader might be left with the impression that Vajrayāna ritual is all about gaining the ordinary *siddhis*, or that some Tathāgatās are peripheral while only one is central. It should be emphasized that while the ordinary *siddhis* are considered helpful on the Vajrayāna path, they are always in support of achieving the actual goal of *bodhi*, awakening, and not an end in themselves. Also, all Five Tathāgatās represent full awakening, with qualities and powers that go beyond the classes of ordinary *siddhis*.

5 Psychic powers and risk management

Note that psychic powers are not a Tantric Buddhist innovation; they are found in earlier textual sources too, namely Mahāyāna Buddhist sūtras and the Pāli canon. In Pāli sources, the Buddha tends to downplay psychic powers and disparagingly identifies mundane powers with those achievable by some ‘ascetics or Brahmins’. For example, in the Sampasādāniya Sutta the Buddha says:

Here some ascetic or Brahmin enjoys various supernormal powers: being one he becomes many – being many he becomes one; he appears and disappears; he passes through fences, walls and mountains unhindered as if through air; [...] he flies cross-legged through the sky like a bird with wings. (*Digha Nikāya* [DN] III 112; Walshe 1995: 423–424)

In the text the Buddha continues, saying that these are trivial in comparison with the ability to live in equanimity (Pāli *upekkha*); in others he says the power to instruct people is more important (*Ānguttara Nikāya* [AN] I 170ff.; Bodhi 2012: 263–265). In the Kevaddha Sutta, the Buddha goes so far as to say ‘...seeing the danger of such [supernatural powers], I dislike, reject and despise them’ (DN I 213; Walshe 1995: 176).

Accordingly, there are several potential ‘dangers’ associated with these psychic powers. In general, trying to achieve them could become an end in itself, and a distraction from the Buddhist path. More specifically, particular *siddhis* such as those for attraction, or for increasing wealth, are clearly open to abuse in the wrong hands, or could eventually lead to a practitioner’s corruption. For these reasons there are several controls in place to prevent Vajrayāna practices from falling into the wrong hands, and to keep the yogis and yoginis who use them from becoming led astray by greed or selfishness. Principal among

these controls are the prerequisites in place before a ritual can be studied and practiced – it is not possible to simply pick up a Vajrayāna ritual text and have a go for oneself. From an emic perspective this is because, despite the wealth of Buddhist texts now available to the scholar and/or practitioner, Buddhism remains an oral religious tradition. Buddhist texts have an oral quality to them, and in Tibetan monastic education a text needs to be heard aloud before any meaningful study of it can be undertaken. Furthermore, the text needs to be heard being read aloud by someone who themselves heard it read aloud etc. going back to the original teacher in an unbroken oral transmission. In Tibetan this is known as *lung*. A more etic reason for needing an oral transmission of a Vajrayāna teaching is that ritual texts are written in a twilight language, with concatenated layers of symbolism in places, as well as inverted meanings and deliberate mistakes. These are only explained orally, typically as part of the extended instructions (*tri she*; Tib. *khrid bshad*) on how to do practices (Samuel 1993: 245). While this might frustrate academic scholars of Tantra, it should be kept in mind that the purpose of Tibetan Buddhism – or any religion or cultural phenomenon, for that matter – is not simply to be the object of Western scrutiny, and we should be willing to limit our prurience ‘out of respect for our continuing ignorance of most things Tantric’ (Gyatso 2005: 275).

Yogis and yoginis are also kept on the straight and narrow Vajrayāna path through the vows that they take. Adhering to the bodhisattva vow prevents them from practicing for personal, selfish ends. They also take Tantric vows (Skt *samaya*, ‘binding pledge’), the most important of which are: maintain respect and trust in one’s guru; not contradicting the Buddha’s teaching; respecting one’s fellow practitioners (one’s vajra brothers and sisters); and not abandoning love and compassion (see Swann 2021: 280–283).

6 Tantric texts

Tibetans organize Tantric texts under two systems: the Nyingma scheme of ‘Nine Vehicles’, and the ‘Four Classes’ scheme adopted by later traditions such as the Gelug (Samuel 2012: 77). Each specific Tantra is focused on a specific deity or pair of deities. Often the retinue of these deities plays a part too. The highest class of Tantra requires serious commitment to a daily ritual practice regime and is principally aimed at ripening the supreme *siddhi*. Other classes of Tantra, such as *Kriyā* Tantras, can be lighter in terms of commitment; an initiate might commit to saying the deity’s mantra a specified number of times each day, or simply re-commit to keeping their bodhisattva vows, rather than daily deity yoga practice (see [section 8](#), below). *Kriyā* Tantra deities focus on ripening the ordinary *siddhis*, such as the *Kriyā* Tantras of the above-mentioned Kubera or Vasudhārā, of healing deities such as Parṇaśabarī, or of wisdom deities such as Mañjuśrī. Nevertheless, committed practice of a *Kriyā* Tantra can still lead to full *bodhi*, an example being Atiśa, the eleventh-century Bengali monk who lived and taught in Tibet and whose

Tantric practice focused on the *Kriyā* Tantra long-life goddess White Tārā (Samuel 2012: 177).

7 Tantric initiation

The *lung* and *tri she* of a Tantra can in theory be given by anyone who has received the oral transmission and instructions themselves, but most Vajrayāna rituals also require an empowerment (Tib. *wang* [*dbangs*]; Skt *abhiṣeka*) to ripen one's capacity to conduct a practice, and permission (Tib. *je nang* [*rjas gnang*]) to do said practice. These can only be conferred by a qualified guru. 'Qualified' here refers to a guru who can trace a direct unbroken line, guru to guru, between themselves and their lineage's founder. They should also be knowledgeable, show some of the results of Tantric practice, be motivated by compassion, and focused on benefitting their followers rather than themselves (Kalu Rinpoche 1995: 27). The *je nang* is often requested and then granted as part of a broader *wang* initiation ritual, and it is to such a ritual that we now turn.

Of the sample of different Vajrayāna rituals considered in this article, *wang* is the foundational ritual that introduces a practitioner to the world of a Tantric deity and initiates them into that deity's practices. The core structure for a *wang* is modelled on Vedic royal enthronements (for a classic overview of this, see Heesterman 1985: ch. 8), establishing the imagery that the initiand is being empowered to take up the royal seat of a Buddha. However, this can be abbreviated or expanded depending on the Tantra in question and the anticipated level of commitment to its practice; a *wang* can take under an hour or run to multiple days. Although the fine details vary immensely, the overall structure of different *wangs* are similar and comparable. An outline sketch of this structure for a *Kriyā* Tantra is offered below, based on the author's unpublished notes alongside scholarly accounts from Geoffrey Samuel (1993) and Stephan Beyer (1978).

The space in which the initiation will take place is prepared by being cleaned and an altar arranged with an image (preferably of the deity in question) and offerings laid out. The guru's seat will be slightly higher than those of the initiands – not out of a personal sense of self-importance on the part of the guru, but because what they speak is going to be *buddhavācana* (the 'speech of the Buddha') and those words/sounds should be treated with respect. There will also be a small table in front of the guru with any paraphernalia that they may require for the ritual, typically a vajra-handled bell, a vajra, and a vase (Tib. *phumpa* [*bum pa*]; Skt *kumbh*), plus anything specific to the deity's initiation. The bell and vajra commonly form a pairing, with the bell symbolizing the perfection of wisdom and the vajra symbolizing 'method' – 'method' here referring to the remaining five perfections of generosity, morality, forbearance, vigour, and meditation. The guru will typically arrive before the initiands and begin the preparations to take on the role of the deity in the

initiation. He or she will be accompanied by one or more attendants who help with the *wang* and at times act as a proxy for the initiands.

As the initiands arrive they are greeted at the door by an attendant with a *phumpa* (vase) of saffron-infused water, which has had purificatory mantras recited over it. The attendant pours a little water into their cupped palms (as a rule the left palm for higher Tantras, right for lower, but there are exceptions) which initiands then use to rinse their mouths, spitting out the excess. This is to purify any negative karma they may have generated through their past speech. On entering the initiation space, the initiands will purify their bodies by doing three prostrations towards the guru before taking their seats. While the guru finishes their preparations, the initiands will recite the purificatory deity Vajrasattva's 100-syllable mantra (either collectively and led by a fellow initiand, or privately) to purify their minds.

Next, the initiands make a formal request for the guru to teach. This typically begins with offering a mandala to the guru. This is a specific kind of offering, in which a sequence of objects symbolizing (a) a perfect cosmos and (b) the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha are offered to the guru by one of the initiands, often the main sponsor of the *wang*. The initiands then recite a standard formula for requesting a teaching, repeating it three times. The guru then gives a teaching about the deity and practice the initiands are about to undertake. This can be as short as a couple of sentences about the origin of the practice, or a much longer exposition on the Buddhist principles that the practice encapsulates.

The guru then purifies the initiation space into emptiness with a mantra such as the Purity Essence Mantra – *Om svābhāva suddha sarva dharma svābhāva suddho' ham* (*Om* all is intrinsically pure, I am intrinsically pure) – and instructs the initiands to visualize themselves (i.e. the guru) as identical with the actual deity that they are being initiated into, with a detailed description of the deity's appearance. At this point the initiands make a request to have the actual initiation given to them, and relevant vows might also be given. They take refuge and cultivate *bodhicitta*. Taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma (the Buddha's teachings), and the Sangha (in the sense of the *āryasangha*, the community of those who have achieved some level of *bodhi*, awakening), is the defining act of becoming a Buddhist. It is done through repeating a formula such as 'I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma, I take refuge in the Sangha' in the understanding that these 'Three Jewels' offer shelter from the vicissitudes of samsara. Vajrayāna Buddhists also take refuge in the guru as the embodiment of the Three Jewels. The formula is typically repeated three times, but more repetitions can be made. Cultivating *bodhicitta* involves the intention to work towards achieving *bodhi* for the benefit of all beings not just oneself. This is in line with the Mahāyāna bodhisattva vow, and again is done through repeating a formula. Initiands are then instructed on how to visualize themselves as the deity, often beginning with a 'seed syllable' visualized at their hearts. In this way, they are initiated

into how to meditate on the body of the deity. They might be instructed to visualize that they are being anointed and purified by one or all of the Tathāgatās. The initiands are next taught the deity's mantra(s), which are visualized as emerging from the guru's mouth, entering their own mouths, and circling the seed syllable at their hearts. In this way they are initiated into the speech of the deity. Then they may be taught meditations specific to the deity, initiating them into the deity's mind.

After a period of such meditation, the initiands are required to make a commitment to the deity. This is made in silence, and the guru states the different commitment options available, depending on the level of the Tantra. This might involve daily performance of the deity's *sādhana* (see [section 8.1](#) below), reciting the deity's mantra a particular number of times per day, or a 'minimum' commitment of maintaining one's existing bodhisattva vows with no specific daily practice focused on that initiation's deity. The ritual ends with prayers to dedicate the karmic fruits, or merit (Skt *pūnya*; Tib. *sonam* [*bsod nams*]), arising from the event towards achieving awakening for the benefit of all beings. Finally, there are prayers for the long life of the guru and the long life of other key gurus of their lineage. The initiates then approach the guru to offer a *khatag* (Tib. *kha btags*, a typically white scarf offered in lieu of flowers in Himalayan cultures) and a donation, and to receive a personal blessing, possibly by being touched with an object used in the initiation.

A cursory van Gennepian analysis (see [section 3.1](#)) identifies purificatory rites and, through the initiands' request to receive the teaching, separatory rites that draw initiands away from the mundane world; past negative karma is expunged and positive karma generated through offerings and the aspiration to receive the initiation. The Purity Essence Mantra indicates the transition to the liminal phase, in which initiands are given the authority to become the deity and are taught specific practices; the reintegration rites begin with the commitments relating to the way in which initiands will carry their relationship with the deity's practice into their daily lives. The reintegration rites are quite perfunctory and do not feature rituals to bring the initiands 'back down to earth', for example by dismissing the visualizations and having initiands 'reappear' in their regular human form. This implies that the liminal phase never quite dispells, and that initiands should view themselves as permanently in the world of Tantra from that point onwards. There is certainly *communitas* between initiands, although this is understandably more developed at longer and larger initiations such as the twelve-day Kālacakra initiations, which have a 'festival' feel. However, Bloch's concept of rebounding violence is more or less inverted. Violent imagery is certainly a feature of Tantra but this is focused towards obstacles (Tib. *barche* [*bar chad*]) to an individual's practice rather than to the individual or to other beings themselves. Rather, initiands are exposed to the positive qualities of a deity and are then empowered to perceive those qualities within themselves and to ripen them further.

8 Practices

8.1 Deity yoga practice

The structure of the initiation ritual forms the template for what is known as deity yoga practice. In deity yoga, the yogi or yogini performs a systematic meditation on themselves as the deity, with periods of meditation focused on the deity's body, speech, and mind. Deity yoga is typically practiced using a *sādhana* text that guides the practitioner through the practices and ensures that the commitments that they have made are maintained. Before beginning the *sādhana* proper, a yogini will offer prayers to their guru and the lineage gurus. A *sādhana* itself will begin with taking refuge and refreshing the commitment to the bodhisattva vows, before purificatory practices and/or the restating of Tantric vows. The environment is purified with the Purity Essence Mantra or similar and the yogini is then guided through the process of visualizing themselves as the deity. There may be further purifications and visualized anointments before conducting meditations specific to the deity as instructed during the *tri shed*, reciting the deity's mantra, and any concluding practices and prayers to dedicate the karmic fruits. *Sādhana* practice can last anything from a few minutes to several hours. The same van Gennepian analysis can be applied to deity yoga practice as to initiation, again with the yogi remaining in the visualized form of the deity into their daily life.

8.2 Preliminary practices

Certain preliminary practices, known as *ngon dro* (Tib. *sngon 'gro*), need to be completed to create the best circumstance for *siddhis* to ripen (Kalu Rinpoche 1995: 119ff.). These involve substantial repetitions – typically 100,000 – of specific physical, vocal, and mental actions in order to purify one's body, speech, and mind. In practical terms, it is acknowledged that one's mind is likely to wander for ten percent of the time, so an extra 10,000 repetitions are added, plus another 1,000 to account for the time one's mind is wandering while performing the additional 10,000 repetitions. These can include: repeated bodily prostrations; mandala offerings (in the sense of offering one's whole universe conceived as perfect rather than a mandala in the sense of a specific deity's cosmos); reciting the 100-syllable mantra of the purificatory deity Vajrasattva; and performing guru yoga. Guru yoga involves visualizing that one's lama is identical with one's *yi dam* (protector deity), offering a prayer to all the lamas of the lineage, requesting blessings from the lama for a successful Tantric career, and then merging into oneness with the lama in the empty, luminous nature of reality. As with all Vajrayāna rituals, guru yoga begins with taking refuge and cultivating *bodhicitta*, and ends with dedicating any karmic benefits from the practice to help all beings attain *bodhi*.

Some traditions, such as Gelug, require one to complete all the preliminary practices before receiving higher Tantric initiations and teachings, a process that can take several months even if conducted in a dedicated retreat context (Samuel 2012: 81). However,

rushing through the preliminaries is not really the point of the practices, and even when technically completed there are many who continue with them to some level each day (Jetsün Khandro 2013). In the Sakya tradition, preliminary practices can be conducted alongside higher Tantric practice. The preliminary practice itself is also considered to be a possible route to *bodhi* without the need for further initiations and practices (Blo-gros-mtha'-yas and Hanson 2000: 24).

8.3 Vajrayāna retreat

While practicing deity yoga is considered beneficial and establishes a connection with a deity, undergoing focused and undistracted practice in retreat is the most likely environment in which a yogi ripens the *siddhis*. A retreat is carried out under the guidance of an experienced lama, and often in the company of other retreatants (Samuel 2012: 67). Typically a commitment is made to perform *sādhana* practice several times a day and recite a certain number of the deity's mantra – perhaps hundreds of thousands of repetitions taking several months or years. That said, some can be completed in a day, such as Uṣṇīśavijāya's short retreat in which 1,000 repetitions of her extremely long mantra are recited (Lama Zopa Rinpoche 2007: 36). Having completed this particular retreat, the yogi's past negative karma is purified and they will never again be reborn in a lower Buddhist realm (i.e. as an animal, a *preta* [hungry ghost], or in a hell realm). Other *Kriyā* Tantra retreats can be as short as a week or so, but the higher Tantra retreats such as those of Vajrayogini or Hevajra run to three months and eight months respectively, and many undertake longer retreats lasting over three years (Samuel 2012: 67), or even for the remainder of one's life. These retreat practices are alive and well today. Cave complexes such as Samye Chimpū in Central Tibet are still active with retreatants, and all major traditions of Tibetan Buddhism have founded retreat centres in India. There are also long term retreat centres in the wider world, such as the Kagyu Retreat Centre on Holy Isle in Scotland.

Making generalizations about Tantra is risky and there are exceptions and outliers to this brief sketch. For example, recitation of Avalokiteśvara's mantra – *om mani padme hūm* – does not require prior permission or initiation in order to bring benefits, and there are deities whose powers can ripen within one without the need to undertake a retreat. The above is an attempt at a fair depiction of Tantra, one which avoids oversimplification and prepares the reader to be accepting of nuances in Tantra not covered here but which they would likely encounter in a conversation with a Tantric practitioner.

8.4 Ritual and sexual yoga

The higher Tantras deploy overt sexual imagery. Sexual union is used as a metaphor for non-duality, as well as for the joining together of wisdom (female) with method (male). Method here refers to the Mahāyāna Perfections (Skt *pāramitās*) of generosity, morality,

forbearance, vigour, and meditational absorption, with wisdom being the remaining Perfection in the list. Sexual bliss is used as an analogue for the bliss of nirvana (*nirvāṇa*), with the qualification that nirvana's bliss is superior since it is free of attachment, dualistic fixation, and does not fade. This imagery becomes embodied in deities in higher Tantras, who are usually naked except for bone jewellery, and depicted in sexual union with a consort (Landaw and Weber 2006: plates 19, 22, 23). The nature of such imagery also challenges dualistic boundaries, as the transgressive is presented as the aspirational. A yogi's daily practice may include meditations relating to sexual imagery, invoking the metaphors above. Some may practice physical sexual yoga with a *sangyum* (Tib. *gsang yum*, Tantric partner), accompanied by meditations and visualizations (Davidson 2005: 37); for others, it is a purely meditational practice.

The notion of using physical sexual intercourse as a route to mystical attainments will no doubt set off alarm bells with several readers, particularly as Vajrayāna Buddhism has subordination to one's guru's wishes as a central tenet. It has resulted in several scandals as well as tragic cases of abuse in recent years (see, for example, Finnigan and Hogendoorn 2019). However, as Samuel notes,

there were and are occasional elements of abuse, both in pre-modern Tibet and today. Equally, though, it seems likely that most *sangyum* relationships were either contexts of genuine spiritual practice, ordinary marital relationships, or a mixture of both. (Samuel 2012: 69)

The transgressive side of Tantra does not stop at sexual imagery. Higher Tantric rituals include references to consuming the 'five meats' (cow, horse, elephant, dog, and human flesh) and the 'five nectars' (urine, faeces, brain matter, menstrual blood, and semen). These are explicitly identified as being repugnant, and while the current reader likely agrees on a material level, they also represented a profound challenge to Brahmanical symbolic purity in the Indian society in which Tantra originally formulated (Wedemeyer 2014: 117). However, we do not need to take this practice literally. As previously stated, Tantras are written in a coded language (Strong 2002: 195) which can only be understood through direct oral instructions. According to Wedemeyer, some scholars dispute this and consider that the language is literal, while others hold that the literal and symbolic are interwoven (Wedemeyer 2014: 107ff.). Regardless, some passages in Tantric literature such as *sādhanas* are deliberately misleading and only the initiated, solemnly bound to respectful secrecy, know which.

9 Public Tantric ritual

So far, the focus of this entry has been on Vajrayāna rituals conducted away from the public sphere and directly aimed at bringing committed practitioners closer to *bodhi*. However, there are classes of Vajrayāna ritual which are far more public and aimed at

bringing about general benefits to attendees such as increasing their store of *punya* (merit) or warding off threats. Two of these are outlined below: *cham* ritual monastic dance and *tshe wang* ‘long life’ empowerment.

9.1 *Cham*

Cham is a ritual masked dance performed in certain monastery courtyards on particular festival days across the Northern Buddhist world. There are common themes but no standardized ‘script’, and performances vary in complexity from monastery to monastery. *Cham*’s Tibetan origin story points toward the Tantric ‘vajra dance’ performed by Padmasambhava when taming the local non-Buddhist deities who were obstructing the construction of Tibet’s first monastery at Samye (Tib. *bsam yas*) (Schrempf 1994: 95), but other obstacle-defeating episodes from Tibetan history are also found in *cham*’s repertoire, such as the ‘Black Hat’ dance reenacting the assassination of the purportedly anti-Buddhist king Langdarma by a monk named Palkyi Dorje (Samuel and David 2016: 8). It is clear that *cham*’s outward purpose is the removal of obstacles to Buddhist flourishing, but contemporary *cham* has additional functions in some monasteries, including attracting tourist revenue in the case of Hemis Gompa in Ladakh, India or, in the case of the touring Tashi Lhunpo monks, of raising awareness of Tibetan culture while also generating income. Of course, these material dimension of contemporary *cham* are not necessarily incompatible with the above-mentioned Buddhist flourishing.

Although a specific public courtyard performance of *cham* might only last a few hours, the ritual preparations take weeks, with performers practicing deity yoga for the deity they will be representing as well as rehearsing the foot work and hand gestures that summon the deity’s qualities within them (Mroczynski 2008: 18). The focal point of *cham*-as-ritual is the *linga* (Tib. *ling ga*): an effigy made of dough which represents the obstacles to be destroyed, or on a more metaphysical level, the ego (Samuel and David 2016: 11–12). This is typically brought into the courtyard space by two or four dancers dressed as *durdag* (abbreviated Tib. *dur khrod bdag po*), male and female skeleton Lords of the Cemetery. Outside of this role, the *durdag* dancers are the first to enter the public *cham* space. They provide a form of ‘crowd control’, establishing the perimeter of the dance space and encouraging spectators to move back. Various monastic dancers then enter the courtyard dressed as deities, with the colours of their masks and costumes triangulating them within the mandalic five *Tathāgatā* system. A number of Black Hat dancers (i.e. not representing deities) can perform too, sometimes attacking the *linga* before another character delivers the final blow (Samuel and David 2016: 12). Mona Schrempf’s (1994) classic article on the subject provides an overview of a specific *cham* based on Nebesky-Wojkowitz’s translation of a Vajrakīla *cham* manual, but it should be noted that over time *cham* provides scope for innovation. This does not mean that an individual dancer can improvise, but that an authoritative *lama* can occasionally introduce a new character, such as the nineteenth-

century Mongolian ‘Lama of the Gobi’ Danzan Rabjaa developing a new costume and character for the female spirit of the land, Ama (Mroczynski 2008: 25). Given the strong Nyingma roots of *cham*, and the Nyingma acknowledgement that authority can arise from meditational inspiration, such innovation might be anticipated.

The final act in *cham* is the destruction of the *linga*, often but not always by a dancer in a stag costume (Samuel and David 2016: 11). In terms of van Gennep’s ritual analysis, a *cham* performance has a constellation of separation phases as each monastic performer-practitioner begins their preparations and deity yoga practices in the run up to the main performance day. For the public, the *durdags*’ appearance marks the start of the performance and sets the demarcation line between two worlds; one more samsaric and one more nirvanic. The liminal phase ensues, with *cham* establishing a Tantric cosmology and populating it with deities, humans, and animal figures which enact a conflict between pro- and anti-Buddhist forces, in which the former finally triumph and a purer post-liminal world emerges. Geoffrey Samuel and Ann R. David compare public *cham* performances to a military flypast: they are an exercise in demonstrating the power of Vajrayāna and the range of deities that monastic specialists can invoke and mobilize for the benefit of others (Samuel and David 2016: 9–10). *Cham* also fits well with Catherine Bell’s (2009) model of ritual in which the (religious) ideal cosmos is invoked within the ‘real’ cosmos and made identical with it. This is firmly coherent with the principal feature of Tantra.

9.2 *Tshe wang*

A *tshe wang* is a Vajrayāna empowerment ritual typically given to a large public group in order to extend the lifespans of participants. These rituals are commonly offered at the beginning of the Tibetan lunar year (February or March in the Gregorian calendar). According to Tibetan astrology, or *tsi* (*rtsis*), when a new year starts there is a wholesale shift in astrological influences, good or bad, including those which may impact one’s mental and physical ‘vitality’ – *la* (*bla*) and *sog* (*srog*) respectively. If *la* and *sog* are both negatively impacted by the new year’s influences, then it is believed that one is at risk of a foreshortened life. Attending a *tshe wang* is a way of mitigating that risk. White Tārā (in her various forms such as *Sapta Locanā* and *Cintamāṇicakra*) is probably the most well-known long life deity, but this author has encountered *tshe wang* in India and Nepal focused on Tangtong Gyalpo (the Tibetan *nyonpa* [*smyon pa*], crazy yogi) and on Hayagrīva.

As Vajrayāna rituals go, a public (*mi mang*, many people) *tshe wang* seems relatively chaotic to the observer. Although the lama will carry out the ritual in the prescribed manner, any given initiate’s attention may not always be focused on the proceedings, and conversations and even picnicking may break out during the teachings that precede a *tshe wang*, and while the lama does their preparations. The lunar new year is a festive time in the Tibetan calendar, so such relaxed, celebratory behaviour is understandable within this

context. Initiands might make prostrations when first arriving; however, where the rituals are conducted by high profile lamas, such a large amount of distracting movement can be seen as a security risk and prostrations might be discouraged. The requests for teaching are made in the same call and response manner found in smaller scale *wang*, along with offerings made on behalf of the crowd.

The lama gives a teaching and then leads the initiands through a brief version of the initiation ritual with its phases to purify the body, speech, and mind as outlined above. At a late phase in the ritual, the lama may wave a *tshe dar* (Tib. *tshe mdar*) – an arrow decorated with *khatag* (offering scarf; see [section 7](#)) in the five different colours of the Tathāgatās – over the crowd, removing obstacles to a long life. When the main ritual is completed and the initiands have made their commitments, the initiands form a line to each (eventually) offer a *khatag* and a donation before having a moment's direct contact with the lama, often while the lama touches their head with an object used in the ritual such as the lid of a vase containing symbolic *amṛt* (Tib. *dud tsi* [*bdud tsi*], nectar of immortality). The initiands will typically be given a little *amṛt* poured into their palm to drink, and possibly a small ball of barley dough (*tshe pag*) to eat or share with family later. They are also commonly given a blessed piece of cord with a knot in the middle known as a *sung du* (*srung mdud*, protection knot).

Although not impossible, it seems highly unlikely that an initiand at a *mi mang tshe wang* would be able to establish a daily deity yoga practice based on their initiation experience. However, the purpose of attending such an event is far more about receiving 'blessings' in the form of *chin lab* (Tib. *spyin rlabs*; Skt *adhiṣṭana*, connection [to a deity]) than it is about cultivating a focused meditation practice. This *chin lab* is particularly evident through the encounter with the lama-as-deity at the end of the *tshe wang*, and the blessed items received and consumed. A *tshe wang* is also a community event and an opportunity for local religious specialists to assert their validity.

10 Conclusion

All traditions of Buddhist thought include the idea that what we perceive mundanely is not how things 'really' are, but is a world seen through the prism of our karmically-influenced predispositions. Vajrayāna is no different, but it asserts that the skilled practitioner can quickly see through the mundane world and bring themselves to *bodhi*, awakening, through systematic meditation and visualizations introduced and maintained through ritual. This ultimate Tantric goal may not be clear through public Tantric rituals, with their focus on the general good of the population or nurturing the *siddhi* of a long life in individuals, or perhaps on the role and prestige of the institutions offering such rituals. However, there are private yogis and yoginis with a dedicated practice who are sincerely focused on this

ultimate goal, and committed to using any incidental *siddhis* that may ripen in them for the benefit of all beings.

11 Related links

- A short contemporary Tibetan film on the risks of relying on Tantric ritual, by Avikrita Rinpoche, an emerging (male) lama of the Sakya tradition: see <https://www.avikrita.org>.
- A comprehensive and systematic overview of Tibetan Buddhism, including the role of Tantra, by a long-established scholar-practitioner: <https://studybuddhism.com/en/dr-alexander-berzin>.
- Audio teachings on *ngon dro* (preliminaries), how to approach a retreat, and many other topics by (female) lama Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche: <https://www.khandrorinpoche.org>.
- Holy Isle Retreat Centre: <https://www.holyisle.org/the-project/buddhism>.

Attributions

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