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'Terms of art' in Indian Esoteric Buddhism

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Imprints of the “Great Seal”

On the expanding semantic range of the term of *mudrā* in eighth through eleventh century Indian Buddhist literature¹

David B. Gray

There is no doubt that the Sanskrit term *mudrā* is an important ‘term of art’ in the Tantric Buddhist traditions, given the fact that it has a special meaning in this particular field, distinct from its customary usage. Moreover, with respect to the concept of *mudrā*, our understanding is gappy. We have ample documentation with respect to the traditions transmitted to Tang China and preserved by the Japanese schools of esoteric Buddhism. We also have abundant information on the later Tibetan interpretations of this key term, and most particularly of *mahāmudrā/phyag rgya chen po*, which came to designate several major Tibetan practice traditions predominantly associated with the Kagyü lineages. But relatively little has been written on the deployments of the term *mudrā* in the Indian Tantric literature, despite the fact that this literature serves as the foundation on which the later Tibetan understandings are based.

¹ This paper was first presented in the panel “‘Terms of Art’ in Indian Esoteric Buddhism” at the XVth Conference of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, on 27 June 2008. I am grateful for the helpful feedback provided by the members in attendance. I would especially like to thank my friend Prof. Christian Wedemeyer, who conceived of and co-organized this panel; without his initiative the panel would not have been organized, nor would this paper have been written. I am also grateful for the detailed and helpful feedback on the paper provided by both him and Prof. Harunaga Isaacson.

For a useful summary of the significance of the term *mahāmudrā/phyag rgya chen po* in the Tibetan cultural context see Quintman 2003.

In this paper, I will explore the uses of the key term *mudrā* as it occurs in Indian Buddhist Tantras composed from the eighth through tenth centuries. I will begin by introducing the problems that the term *mudrā* presents to the student of the Tantras, and the misunderstanding they have occasioned. Following a survey of the term's significations, I will then turn to the main concern of this paper, which is the emergence of one of the primary meanings of this term in tantric Buddhist literature composed from the eighth century onward, which is quite distinct from its customary meaning, making it a true term of art. This is the use of *mudrā* to refer to female consorts of male deities or male practitioners. I will argue that this usage is an example of metonymy. In this case, *mudrā* qua hand gesture (as well as *vidyā* qua mantric utterance) designates a female deity, and later, by extension, a human female. That is, here a word designating an important ritual action serves as a metonym for the deity invoked and worshipped with this ritual action. This usage thus derives from the earlier meaning of the term as hand gestures, and particular the use of such gestures in rites for the summoning of female supernatural beings, most commonly *yakṣīs*, *yoginīs*, and *dākinīs* for sexual purposes. These ritual traditions, in turn, were almost certainly derived, in whole or in part, from rival Śaiva traditions. Evidence for this development is found in the strata of early eighth century Tantras known as the Mahāyoga Tantras, an early classification that includes both the Yoga and Unexcelled Yoga Tantra classes of latter Indo-Tibetan doxology.² This literature clearly points to the development at this time of the sexual "Secret" (*guhya*) and "Consort Gnosis" (*prajñājñāna*) consecrations (*abhiṣeka*) of the Unexcelled Yoga Tantras.

² Regarding the development of these classification schemes see Dalton 2005.

1. *Mudrā*: Delimiting its semantic range

It is important to note that in discussing the topic of ‘terms of art’ in the Tantric Buddhist context, we are invariably dealing with the subject of esoteric hermeneutics. As this subject has now been well studied, I will not waste time summarizing it.³ But it is important to note that many of the terms used in the Tantras have multiple significations, as sophisticated Indian and Tibetan scholars were well aware. This fact, or perhaps an imperfect appreciation of it, has periodically given rise misunderstandings in scholars who jump to conclusions in their readings of this literature.

The difficulty invoked by key ‘terms of art’ is highlighted by the following passage in *Anaṅgavajra*’s *Prajñopāyaviniścayasiddhi*, which had triggered considerable controversy:

Those who desire liberation should in every way serve Prajñāpāramitā. Abiding in ultimate reality, she is pure; conventionally, she [manifests] bearing a [female] body. She abides everywhere t on the form of an alluring woman (*lalanā*), and is commended by the Adamantine Lord as one who arises for the sake of others’ aims. Success will come easily for the adept who, through union with reality (*tattvayoga*), loves the consort (*mudrā*) who appears in clans such as those of the brahmin, etc., or is born as an outcast, or is an immoral wife of another, or one maimed or crippled, or likewise [one’s] mother or mother-in-law, one’s own daughter or sister.⁴

Benoytosh Bhattacharyya interpreted this passage literally, and took it as an occasion to engage in a diatribe concerning the alleged degeneracy of the Tantras, writing that “Vajrayānists went beyond due limits in their spite against the strict rules of morality, and

³ See, for example, the essays in Lopez 1988, and also Broido 1983 and Wedemeyer 2007.

⁴ *Prajñopāyaviniścayasiddhi* 5.22–25: *prajñāpāramitā sevyā sarvathā muktikāṅkṣibhiḥ | paramārthe sthitā śuddhā saṃvṛtyā tanudhāriṇī || lalanārūpam āsthāya sarvatraiva vyavasthitā | ato ’rthaṃ vajranāthena proktā bāhyārthasaṃbhavā || brāhmaṇādikulotpannāṃ mudrāṃ vai antyajodbhavām | duḥśīlāṃ parabhāryāṃ ca vikṛtāṃ vikalāṃ tathā || janayitrīm svasāraṃ ca svaputrīm bhāgineyikāṃ | kāmayaṃ tattvayogena laghu sidhyeta sādhaḥ ||* (Samdhong and Dwivedi 1987: 93). Many thanks to Harunaga Isaacson for his assistance in translating this passage.

they violated all of them and plunged headlong into the worst immortality and sin.” (1925: 32) Interestingly, while Bhattacharyya is almost certainly correct in interpreting *mudrā* as a human female consort, his outrage is apparently based on a mistaken assumption that transgression of social norms is being generally recommended here. As in the case of the *caryā* practices studied by Christian Wedemeyer, the practice described here was almost certainly recommended only for advanced practitioners under special conditions.⁵

P. C. Bagchi rightly took issue with this interpretation, but his own – which swings to the opposite extreme of symbolic interpretation – seems an equally limited if less scandalous interpretation. Bagchi insisted that the term *mudrā* refers to hand gestures, even though in this context Bhattacharyya’s assumption that it refers to a ‘woman’ actually seems more appropriate. Bagchi justifies his interpretation by claiming that the verse refers to an inner yogic process. He rightly points out that *lalanā*, translated above as “alluring women,” also refers to one of the three main channels of the subtle physiology (1939: 35 ff.).

Bagchi’s attempt to refute Bhattacharyya’s simplistic interpretation is admirable. However, where is little basis in the text to prefer one interpretation over another, so we are forced to concede that this passage exhibits an irresolvable polysemy, which, like a poem, makes it ultimately untranslatable. His interpretation of *mudrā* as a hand gesture would be correct in a large proportion of uses of the term in tantric Buddhist literature. However, in this case, the interpretation makes little sense, and he is probably wrong in asserting that *mudrā* does not refer to a woman here; it is probably its primary sense. As we will see, in Tantric literature the term *mudrā* possesses a broad range of potential significations, with a single use often implying more than one of these meanings.

⁵ The practice being described here appears to be one of the antinomian *caryāvratā/vratācaryā* observances described by Christian Wedemeyer in his paper in this volume. In fact, Wedemeyer has informed me that he believes (based upon its reference to the *tattva-yoga* as the method) that this passage describes the *tattva-caryā* practices designed to generate the gnosis of non-duality (*advayajñāna*) that he discusses in his paper.

Buddhists have long stressed the polysemous nature of language, and have argued against the essentialist notion that there is a direct correspondence between language and reality.⁶ Nāgārjuna, or an author writing under this name, argued this in his *Vaidalya-nāma-prakarāṇa*, as follows:

Furthermore, it is evident that scholars of the world apply a signifier to many significands; they apply to many things the word *go*, and likewise the word *hari*. The various things to which the word *go* is applied include the following: speech, a quarter of the compass, the earth, a light ray, a diamond, cattle, the eye, water, heaven. Scholars thus limit the word *go* to nine meanings. Likewise, scholars understand the word *hari* [to refer to] Viṣṇu, the lion, serpent, frog, the sun, moon, light, the monkey, tawny color, the parrot, Indra and *nāgas*.⁷

Our term *mudrā*, then, is not unusual in having multiple significations. To begin with, the multiple meanings of the term *mudrā* are now well known, even though the origins of the term remain obscure.⁸ The root meaning of the term, from which other meanings are arguably derived, is a ‘seal.’ By slight extension, it comes to refer to the imprint left by a seal, and hence ‘sign,’ given the fact that the seal’s imprint symbolizes something else, often an abstract entity, such a royal seal signifying a king’s authority. Jan Gonda, in his still illuminating article on the term *mudrā*, pointed out that the term *mudrā* has at least four meanings. The most common significations are 1) seal, stamp, or mark, and hence ‘symbol,’ 2) a symbolic hand gesture. In Tantric contexts, we also find the additional meanings of a 3) yogic position or posture, which is

⁶ See Matilal 1990: 37.

⁷ My translation from Nāgārjuna, *Vaidalyanāmaprakarāṇa* 106b–107a: / gzhan yang ’jig rten pa’i mkhas pa dag kyang rjod par byed pa dang brjod par bya ba du ma la sbyor ba mthong ba’i phyir ro // ’jig rten pa’i mkhas pa dag ni go sgra du ma la sbyor bar byed de / hari’i sgra yang de bzhin no // go sgra rnam pa du ma la ’jug pa ni ’di lta ste // ngag phyogs dang ni sa gzhi dang // ’od zer rdo rje phyugs dang mig / chu dang mtho ris don dgu la // mkhas pas go sgra nges gzung bya // ji ltar khyab ’jug seng ge glang po sbal // nyi zla ’od dang spre’u dang // ser skya ne tsho dbang po glu // mkhas pas harir shes par bya /; cf. Tola and Dragonetti 1995: 84.

⁸ See Saunders 1960: 6.

apparently derivative of the first meaning, as in the case of the *vajrolimudrā*,⁹ responsible for ‘sealing’ the flow of male semen, thus enabling the uptake of female sexual fluids. Also derived from the sense of ‘seal’ or ‘symbol,’ and (I will argue) strongly associated with the second sense of ‘hand gesture’ is the last sense, of *mudrā* as 4) the consort of a male adept, or the female counterpart of a male divinity. Gonda equates this usage to the term *śakti* as used in Hindu Tantras, and he interprets the last as ‘symbolic’ of or an impression or manifestation of the *mahāmudrā*.¹⁰

A person with even the slightest familiarity with tantric literature will know that the second signification, *mudrā* qua hand gesture, is by far the most common usage in tantric literature. This sense of *mudrā*, more properly termed “hand gesture” *hastamudrā* and also abbreviated as *hasta*, is an important ritual component derived from Indian dance, in which *hastamudrā* along with various other gestures and poses are used to convey a sentiment (*rasa*).¹¹ From the appearance of the first *bona fide* Tantras in the seventh century, up to the decline of Indian Buddhism in the thirteenth century, tantric literature is replete with accounts of ritual practices that require the deployment of specific hand gestures.

After this, we see the expansion of the semantic range of the term *mudrā* to designate a female consort during the eighth century, which I contend represents a key step in the development of tantric discourse and practice. Indeed, as the term increasingly came to designate a human female, we find the term “great consort” (*mahāmudrā*) used for goddesses, typically the consort of a tradition’s chief deity. This term, at the same time, continued to hold the abstract sense of *mudrā* qua symbol, in this case, a symbol of ultimate reality. The remainder of this essay will provide examples from the literature of all of these significations of the term *mudrā*, and it will attempt to chart, in particular, the eighth century development of the use of the term *mudrā* to designate a

⁹ This technique is discussed at length by David White (1996: esp. 199–202).

¹⁰ See Gonda 1972: 29.

¹¹ For a useful survey of Indian dance techniques see Schwartz 2004.

female consort.

2. Signs of awakening: Buddhaguhya on *mudrā*

Recent research points to a period of about one hundred and fifty years, from approximately 650–800 CE, as a crucial period in the development of tantric Buddhism. This appears to be the formative era in tantric Buddhist history, in which the Mantranaya or (later) Vajrayāna emerged as a self-consciously distinct Mahāyāna Buddhist movement.¹² The early eighth century saw the transmission to China of fully developed tantric scriptures and ritual traditions, such as the *Mahāvairocanābhisambodhi* and *Sarvathāgatātattvasaṃgraha* Tantras, followed closely by an even more substantial transmission to Tibet.¹³ While some authors have attempted to date the Tantras earlier,¹⁴ there is no convincing evi-

¹² See Davidson 2002b: 25. Among the evidence discussed by Davidson is Wu-xing’s report, dating to c. 680 CE, about the ‘new’ esoteric Buddhist movement. However, as Davidson notes in a more recent work, there clearly was considerable institutional stability underlying the shift from the ‘exoteric’ Mahāyāna to the ‘esoteric’ *mantranaya/vajrayāna* (2009: 117).

¹³ Regarding the transmission to China see Chou 1945. Regarding the late eighth and early ninth century transmission to Tibet see Snellgrove 1987: 381–463, and Kapstein 2000: 51–65.

¹⁴ Alex Wayman, for example, has suggested on the basis of rather flimsy evidence – tentatively, in his defense – that the *Guhyasamājatantra* was composed in the fourth century CE (1977: 99), and that the *Mahāvairocanābhisambodhitāntra* dates to the mid-sixth century (Wayman and Tajima 1992: 9–10). Matsunaga, in a far less speculative estimate, dates the *Guhyasamāja* to the eighth century (1978: XXV–XXVI), while Hodge dates the *Mahāvairocanābhisambodhi* to the mid-seventh century (2003: 14). Wayman cites Tāranātha’s report that the *Guhyasamāja* was hidden for three hundred years prior to its dissemination in support of his early estimate for the text’s composition (1977: 97). While Wayman finds this claim to be “not unreasonable,” it also seems highly unlikely to me that such texts and associated practice traditions could be kept secret for so long. It is precisely during the second half of the seventh century that Chinese pilgrims, such as Yi-jing, begin to report their observations of tantric practice in India. For an example of such an account see Gray 2007: 79.

dence that any were composed prior to the seventh century.¹⁵

In the flood of tantric literature composed from this point onward, the term *mudrā* immediately assumed the role of a key ‘term of art.’ As noted above, its primary signification in this was hand gestures, but various Tantras quickly proposed multiple significations of the term, developed systems of various classes of *mudrās* that also expanded the term’s semantic range.

While the term *mudrā* most commonly designates hand gestures in tantric literature, this significance by no means exhausts the term’s meaning. It is clear that by the eighth century at the latest *mudrā* were seen as an essential component of the special methodology advanced by the tantric traditions, and several systems developed during this period that present multiple types of *mudrā*. One of the most important authors writing on this subject during the eighth century was Buddhaguhya,¹⁶ who clearly had mastery of several systems, particularly those associated *Mahāvairocanābhisaṃbodhi*, *Sarvatathāgata-tattvasaṃgraha*, *Trailokya-vijaya*, and *Śrīparamādya* Tantras. Buddhaguhya argues that the term *mudrā*’s primary significance is ‘sign,’ or ‘symbol,’ an important secondary meaning deriving from the term’s primary sense of ‘seal.’ In particular, he sees *mudrā* as a cipher, a secret sign or set of signs, known only to the initiated, that link the practitioner to the deity, with different types or classes of *mudrā* referring to different approaches to the divinity.

This sense of *mudrā* is clearly advanced in the *Mahāvairocanābhisaṃbodhitāntra*, which relates the following at the opening of

¹⁵ Here I refer to the scriptures that either are or came to be designated as Tantras. I do not include the earlier proto-tantric texts, such as the *dhāraṇī* collections, that contain some of the features that would characterize tantric literature, but which appear to have been composed prior to the emergence of esoteric Buddhism as a distinct ‘vehicle.’ Regarding this proto-tantric literature see Chou 1945: 34–35, Matsunaga 1977, Abé 1999: 151–159.

¹⁶ Buddhaguhya was active during the mid to late eighth century, as documented by the invitation sent to him by King Trisong Detsen of Tibet (r. 755–796 CE). See Hodge 2003: 22–23. He responded to this not by travelling to Tibet, but sending the king a letter. Fortunately, this correspondence has survived. See Davidson 2002b: 154–159.

its chapter on *mudrā*:

If bodhisattvas adorn themselves with the *mudrās* that signify the realization of the sphere of reality, which serve as the ornaments of the Tathāgatas, when they wander in cyclic existence, the gods, serpent deities, *yakṣas*, *gandharvas*, *asuras*, *garuḍas*, *kinnaras*, *mahoragas*, humans and non-humans in all worlds will respect¹⁷ them and will become their audiences, because they are marked with the signs of the great awakening of all Tathāgatas.¹⁸

Here we see *mudrā* used in its sense of a sign of a deity or the abstract qualities attributed to it, such as the awakened qualities to which a practitioner aspires. This tradition bifurcated *mudrā* into two types, with and without perceptual forms (有形無形, *mtshan ma dang bcas/mtshan ma med pa*).¹⁹ Buddhaghūya defines the former, *mudrā* with perceptual forms, as the visualized forms or attributes of deities that are foci of meditation, while *mudrā* without perceptual forms are the hand signs that represent those symbolically.²⁰ In the Shingon tradition of esoteric Buddhism this symbolic sense was emphasized by the bifurcation of *mudrā* into two types, signs (契印) and hand gestures (*hastamudrā*, 手印),²¹ which corre-

¹⁷ Here I translate the Chinese 敬, “honor, revere, respect,” rather than the Tibetan *’byol bar ’gyur*, “give or make way, avoid, step aside,” as the latter lacks the positive meaning that I believe the text likely originally conveyed here.

¹⁸ MT, D 195a: *de bzhin gshegs pa’i rgyan du gyur pa chos kyi dbyings rtogs pa’i mtshan mar gyur pa’i phyag rgya rim par phye ba rgyas pa gang gis brgyan na byang chub sems dpa’ rnam ’khor ba na ’khor ba’i tshe / ’gro ba thams cad du de bzhin gshegs pa thams cad kyi byang chub chen po’i mtshan mas btab pas lha dang / klu dang / gnod sbyin dang / dri za dang / lha ma yin dang / nam mkha’ lding dang / mi’am ci dang / lto ’phye chen po dang / mi dang / mi ma yin pa rnam ’byol bar ’gyur zhing / de rnam kyang de dag gi ngag nyan par ’gyur pa yod kyis /*; T.18.848.24b1–6: 有同如來莊嚴具。同法界趣幟。菩薩由是嚴身故。處生死中巡歷諸趣。於一切如來大會。以此大菩提幢。而幟之。諸天龍夜叉乾達婆阿蘇囉揭嚕茶緊那囉摩羅伽人非人等。敬而遶之受教而行。 Cf. Hodge 2003: 232.

¹⁹ See MT, T. 848, 18.44a18, and D 190a.

²⁰ See his commentary translated in Hodge 2003: 208.

²¹ See the discussion and helpful chart in Togano 1932: 486. This chart is translated, and the discussion summarized in English, in Saunders 1960:

spend to the Mahāvairocanābhisambodhi tradition's *mudrās* with and without form, respectively.

Buddhaguhya's commentary occurs in the "Deity Concentration" (*lha'i ting nge 'dzin*, 本尊三昧) chapter of the Tantra.²² This chapter makes it clear that *mudrā*, along with mantra and form (that is, artistically created or visualized deity images) are primary modes of engagement with deities. *Mudrā* thus are an essential element of tantric deity yoga, designed to effect the achievement of union or identification with the deity. The significance of the topic is made clear by Buddhaguhya at the opening of his discussion of *mudrā* in his *Tantrārthāvatāra*, which begins with the following passage:

For the sake of those who desire to attain, without obstruction, the enduring happiness of accomplishing the aims of all beings continuously [like] a great lord (*maheśvara*) of all three worlds who exists amidst limitless good qualities, in order to benefit by all means the great host of beings, the Buddha and his scions formed the great intention to enable the achievement of this. Therefore, as a means of achieving this, they taught the four, *mahāmudrā* and so forth, which are a characteristic mark of the nature of the deity whom one has visualized.²³

Buddhaguhya here refers to the well-known system of four *mudrā* advanced by the *Sarvatathāgata-tattvasaṃgraha Sūtra* and related texts and traditions. These are the "great seal," *mahāmudrā*, a term that refers to visible signs, which "possess form," of a deity, much like the "signs" (契印) of the Mahāvairocanābhisambodhi

36–38.

²² That is, chapter seven in the Tibetan translation, and chapter twenty-eight in the Chinese. See MT D 170a, T.18.848.44a9.

²³ TA fols. 4a,b: *de sems can gyi tshogs chen po la rnam pa thams cad kyiis phan 'dogs par bsgrub par bya ba'i phyir yon tan rin po che mtha' yas pa'i tshogs la gnas pa 'jig rten gsum po thams cad kyi dbang phyug chen po rgyun mi 'chad par 'gro ba mtha' dag gi don mdzad pa'i bde ba ring por mi thogs par thob par 'dod pa de la de'i phyir sangs rgyas sras dang bcas pas de dag thob par byar rung ba nyid du dgongs pa chen po mdzad do // de rnams kyiis kyang de'i phyir sgrub pa'i thabs su rang gis brtags pa'i lha'i ngo bo nyid kyi bye brag tu gyur pa phyag rgya chen po la sogs pa bzhi 'dir bstan te /*. I am indebted to Harunaga Isaacson for his helpful advice on the translation of this passage.

system.²⁴ The other three correspond to the “formless” or symbolic representations. These include the “commitment seals” (*samayamudrā*) and “action seals” (*karmamudrā*), which designate different types hand gestures,²⁵ and the *dharmamudrā*, which are sonic representations of the deity, i.e., repetition of his or her mantra. For Buddhaguhya, these are complementary means for the achievement of deity yoga. His commentary continues, as follows:

Those who would make use of the *mahāmudrā*, etc. should be aware of the little bit that is stated in the text on the Vajradhātu *maṇḍala* in the Tathāgata clan. Why? It summarizes the procedure for the sake of those who would use them. In the general Tantra the terms *mahāmudrā*, *samayamudrā*, *dharmamudrā* and *karmamudrā* are stated. The *mudrā*, which indicate without distinction by means of a deity’s nature or form, mean a sign (*mtshan ma*, **cihna*); the meanings of *mudrā* and sign (*mtshan ma*), symbol (*rtags*), and metaphor (*nye ba’i mtshan nyid*, **upalakṣaṇa*) are not different. How so? An adept visualizes a deity without differentiating its nature or form, having apprehended the desire to retain it, and generating an mnemonic engagement (*dran pa*)²⁶ [with it]. Hence it is a metaphor for that. This meaning is clearly expressed in this very Tantra (the *Sarvatathāgata-tattvasaṃgraha*) and the *Trailokyavijaya*, which states: “Like a high edict with the king’s seal that should not be broken and is difficult to contradict, the

²⁴ These are equated by in Togano 1932: 486. See also Saunders 1960: 37. The “visible signs” include any possible visible symbol of a deity, including a deity image, symbolic attributes (sword, lotus, etc.), or seed syllables.

²⁵ According to Saunders, the *samayamudrā* designate the attributes of buddhas and bodhisattvas, while *karmamudrā* represent the activity or majesty of the buddhas (1960: 36–37).

²⁶ Here I follow Kapstein’s translation of *dran pa* in his essay “The Amnesic Monarch and the Five Mnemonic Men” (2000: 178–196). The term is more commonly translated as “memory,” but this translation seems awkward in meditative contexts such as this. As in the Dzogchen materials Kapstein has studied, here the term seems to involve an act of awareness involving the retention or recovery of, in this case, a divine appearance. See Kapstein 2000: 184–185, and 271 n. 28.

symbolic form²⁷ of a great spirit is known as *mudrā*.²⁸ And as the *Trailokyavijaya-kalpa* also states: “It is well known that this feature of all *mudrā* arises through the yoga of the mental image of the vajra of body, speech, and mind,”²⁹ and also “ultimate reality is *mudrā*.³⁰” The statement “mental image” (*gzugs brnyan*) here indicates the defining mark of the deity’s sign.³¹

²⁷ This translates Buddhaguhya’s text *mtshan ma’i gzugs*, which in turn is a translation of *cihnabimba*. The Tibetan translation of the root text reads *gzugs brnyan*, “reflection, mental image.”

²⁸ Buddhaguhya quotes this verse as follows: / *’da’ dka’ de bzhin mi shigs pa // rgyal po’i phyag rgya mchog gi riags // bdag nyid chen po mtshan ma’i gzugs // de bas phyag rgya zhes grags so* / (TA 4b). This is certainly a quotation of the following verse in the ST: *duratikramo yathā ’bhedyo rājamudrāgrasāsanah / mahātmacihṅnabimbās tu tathā mudreti kīrtitā* // (Horiuchi 1974: 2.372); Yamada reads *mahātmacihṅnaviśvas* (1981: 540). Many thanks to Harunaga Isaacson for bringing to my attention Horiuchi’s superior reading, which accords with the Tibetan translation. The canonical translation of this occurs as follows: / *ji ltar rgyal po’i phyag rgya mchog / khrims ni ’da’ ka mi phyed bzhin // bdag nyid chen po gzugs brnyan gyis // mtshan ma phyag rgya zhes par grags* / (ST fol. 136a).

²⁹ Buddhaguhya quotes the TV here as follows: / *sku gsung thugs kyi rdo rje yi // gzugs brnyan gyi sbyor ba yis // phyag rgya thams cad khyad par ’di // bskyed par rab tu bsgrags pa yin* / (TA 4b–5a); this occurs as follows in the canonical translation: / *rdo rje’i sku gsung thugs rnams kyi // gzugs brnyan sbyor ba ’di dag ni // phyag rgya kun gyi khyad par te // ’byung ba yang ni de yis bstan* / (TV 45b).

³⁰ Buddhaguhya here partially quotes the TV as follows: *don dam pa de kho na nyid phyag rgya yin no* (TA 5a). The canonical translation reads “ultimate reality is *mahāmudrā*.” (TV 45b: *don dam pa’i de kho na nyid kyang phyag rgya chen po zhes bya’o* /)

³¹ TA 4b–5a: / *phyag rgya chen po la sogs pa mnyes par bya ba de rnams kyang de bzhin gshegs pa’i rigs la rdo rje dbyings kyi dkyil ’khor du gtogs par gsungs pa nyi tshes skabs ’dir gleng bar rig par bya ste / gang gi phyir zhe na / de dag nyid mnyes par bya ba’i phyir cho ga bsduṣ pa yin te / de bas na phyag rgya chen po dang / dam tshig dang / chos dang / las kyi phyag rgya’i sgra rnams spyi’i rgyud nas bshad par bya’o // de la lha nyid kyis de’i bdag nyid dam / de’i cha shas kyis gang khyad par med pa bstan pa de dag ni phyag rgya zhes bya ste mtshan ma zhes bya ba’i don to // phyag rgya dang mtshan ma dang / rtags dang / nye ba’i mtshan nyid ces bya ba rnams ni don tha dad par ma yin te / ji lta zhe na / lha’i ngo bo nyid dam / de’i cha shas kyis bye brag med par brtags te sgrub pa pos lha gang rjes su dran par ’dod pa de la dmigs nas dran pa skye bar ’gyur te / de’i phyir ’di de’i nye ba’i mtshan nyid*

For Buddhaguhya, the term *mudrā* signified a sign or symbol for the deity, one which can manifest in various ways, such as sonic utterances, hand gestures, or physical or mental representations. These various forms of *mudrā* together served as important tools in the systems of the deity yoga that played a key role in the various tantric traditions. This understanding serves as the foundation, I think, for the various uses of the term *mudrā* found in the Tantras, commentaries, and ritual texts from the eighth century onward.

Of the four basic meanings of the term *mudrā* listed in section one above, the first, ‘seal, stamp, mark, or symbol,’ has been abundantly illustrated so far. Buddhaguhya invoked its basic meaning of ‘seal,’ and its symbolic use is also illustrated by the *Mahāvairocanābhisaṃbodhi* passage quoted above. The term *mudrā* there is used in the sense of a symbolic adornment, and this use of the term is not uncommon. A number of Tantras use *mudrā* in the sense of ‘insignia,’ a symbolic accoutrement worn by an initiated *yogī* or *yoginī*, such as the *pañcamudrā*³² and *ṣaṇmudrā*,³³ the lists of five or six insignia of a *yogī*. Chapter Twenty-seven of the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra*, for example, enjoins the following observance upon the initiated adept: “As for wearing the five insignia, they should be in place at all times, always displayed at night, and concealed during the day.”³⁴ It can also refer to other distinctive

do // de bas na don de rgyud 'di nyid dang / 'jig rten gsum las rnam par rgyal ba nyid las kyang gsal ba nyid du bstan te / ji skad du re zhid 'di nyid las // 'da' dka' de bzhin mi shigs pa // rgyal po'i phyag rgya mchog gi rtags // bdag nyid chen po mtshan ma'i gzugs // de bas phyag rgya zhes bsgrags so // zhes gsungs so // 'jig rten gsum las rnam par rgyal ba'i rtog pa las kyang / sku gsung thugs kyi rdo rje yi // gzugs brnyan gyi ni sbyor ba yis // phyag rgya thams cad khyad par 'di // bskyed par rab tu bsgrags pa yin // zhes bshad nas don dam pa de kho na nyid phyag rgya yin no zhes kyang bshad do // 'dir gzugs brnyan zhes smos pa ni lha'i mtshan ma'i mtshan nyid du bstan pa ste /.

³² In the Cakrasaṃvara tradition, they are the necklace, crest jewel, ear-ring, choker, and the sacred thread.

³³ The *ṣaṇmudrā* include the above, with the addition of ash (*bhasma*). This list is particularly associated with the Śaiva Kāpālikā *yogīs* (see Lorenzen 1989: 234, and also Sanderson 2005: 118–119 n. 74), but these insignia are also sometimes associated with Heruka. See Gray 2007: 45.

³⁴ My translation of CT 27.16, which occurs as follows in my edition (2012):

elements of one's appearance, such as hairstyle – e.g., the *yogī*'s crest of dreadlocks, *jaṭāmakuṭa* – as well as cosmetic decorations.³⁵

Another extension of *mudrā*'s basic sense of seal is the 'seals' employed in advanced yogic techniques. This is by far the least common use of the term, at least in the literature that I have studied. Like the Hindu tantric materials studied by David White, Buddhist sources also use the term *mudrā* to refer to what I call "yogic seals," blocks in the channels of the subtle body to manipulate the flow of the vital winds within them. *Mudrā* in this sense appears to involve both the laying down of seed syllables (*mantranyāsa*) to regulate the flow of semen or other substances within the channels of the subtle body.³⁶ This use of the term *mudrā* is a specialized application, involving only a slight modification, of the term's root meaning.

3. From hand seals to consorts: The eighth century growth in *mudrā*'s signification

The senses discussed above, however, represent only a small percentage of the instances of use of the term *mudrā* in tantric literature. As noted above, the vast majority of instances are *mudrā* qua hand gestures. However, as the eighth century progressed, the term was increasingly used to signify the goddesses invoked by employing hand gestures, as well as the human women who were seen as embodying or being possessed by goddesses, who served as consorts in tantric rituals and sexual practices. These significations, and their development during the eighth century, will be the focus of the remainder of this essay.

The use of gestures in ritual in South Asia almost certainly dates back to prehistoric times, and Buddhist Tantras exhibit what is cer-

pañcamudrāpratibaddham sarvakālavayavasthitam / rātrau tu prakṛtaṃ nityaṃ divā guptaṃ ca kārayet //; cf. Pandey 2002: 493. See also Gray 2007: 278.

³⁵ Ash, applied to the skin in the manner of Śaiva *yogīs*, is included in the *ṣaṇṇmudrā* list as noted above.

³⁶ See section five below for an example of this usage of the term.

tainly a far older practice, namely the use of *mudrā* in rites of invocation and summoning, particularly those that seek the “descent” (*āveśa*) or “interpenetration” (*samāveśa*) of the invoked deity into one of the participants of the ritual. These rites thus appear to be Buddhist examples of what might be termed “divine possession.”³⁷

Buddhism has been portrayed as a religion that disavows spirit possession, despite the fact that the practice of spirit possession has been attested in virtually all cultures where Buddhism has thrived, including India, Nepal, Tibet, China, Korea, Japan and Mongolia. Fred Smith, in a recent (2006) volume, has detailed the often ignored reality of discourse and practice focusing on possession in South Asia; such practices were clearly pervasive in the social context in which the Buddhist Tantras were composed, so the presence of discourse concerning this practice in the literature is not surprising. These practices were largely tolerated, if not practiced, by most Buddhist elites. In Sri Lanka, for example, belief that ability of demons and some classes of deities can possess human beings is widespread, and widely tolerated by Buddhist elites. However, religious figures who specialize in such spiritual lore are often looked upon with some aversion, as spirit possession is also closely associated with black magic. As Gananath Obeyesekere observed, the popularity of Buddhism in a given region in Sri Lanka is inversely correlated the popularity of belief in the ability of deities to possess humans, and the associated practices.³⁸ Belief in spirit possession was likewise widespread in China,³⁹ and have persisted to the present day, albeit in uncomfortable proximity to mainstream religions such as Daoism and Buddhism, which do not fully approve of these practices.⁴⁰ Likewise, belief in the ability of deities such the fox spirits (*inari*) was likewise widespread in premodern (and possibly contemporary) Japan, despite the fact that Buddhist authorities dis-

³⁷ See Smith 2006: ch. 1, for a detailed discussion of the history of the term *āveśa*, which Smith translates as “possession.” Smith also distinguishes deity and spirit possession; the examples I will bring up from the Buddhist Tantras largely appear to belong to the former category.

³⁸ See Obeyesekere 1984: 13.

³⁹ See Strickmann 2002: ch. 5.

⁴⁰ See Dean 1993: 64–83.

approved of the usually female shamanic practitioners who invoked them, and considered the practice “heretical.”⁴¹ In Tibet on the other hand, figures such as the Nechung oracle who are possessed by deities in elaborate ritual settings were accorded high status in mainstream traditions such as the Geluk school.⁴²

The apparent Buddhist disavowal of spirit possession is largely the result of self-conscious portrayal on the part of some Buddhists, who see states of possession as completely antithetical to the Buddhist ideal of self-control, as well as the mental clarity and mindfulness that are the goals of many Buddhist contemplative practices.⁴³ While this is an influential view in some Buddhist communities, there are clearly multiple views held by different Buddhist groups, which have to be evaluated individually.

During the late seventh and eighth century, Buddhists began composing scriptures that advocated ritual practices aimed at summoning divine beings for various purposes, most notably attaining various magical powers (*siddhi*). These rites clearly involved the recitation of magical formulae, mantras or *vidyās*, as well as the employment of gestures, dance, and worship. This tendency is strongly seen in the texts included in the well-known collections of eighteen Tantras known variously as the Mahāyoga, Māyājāla, or Vajroṣṇīṣa (金剛頂) collection.⁴⁴ A number of texts contained in these collections, dating to the early eighth century, contain descriptions of these sorts of ritual practices. These include prominent “Yoga Tantras” such as the *Sarvatathāgatātattvasaṃgraha* and *Śrīparamādya*, a Mahāyoga or “Father Tantra,” the *Guhyasamāja*, and also the *Sarvabuddhasamāyogaḍākinījālasaṃvaratantra*, which is the earliest known Yoginītantra.⁴⁵ The *Samāyoga* is the

⁴¹ See Blacker 1976: 55, and Smyers 1999: 60–61.

⁴² See Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956.

⁴³ See Gombrich 1971: 228.

⁴⁴ Independent traditions of a collection of eighteen Tantras have been preserved in both Tibet and East Asia. See Dudjom Rinpoche 1991: 1.459, and Giebel 1995: 111–115. See also Davidson 2002b: 145–146, as well as Gray 2009.

⁴⁵ These text all date, in some form, no later than the early eighth century, as evidenced by Amogavajra’s detailed description of them in his *Index to*

ninth text in Amoghavajra’s *Index to the Assembly of the Eighteen Adamantine Pinnacle Yoga Sūtras*, and while his summary is brief, it does contain the fascinating observation that this text “explains the yogic methods of employing the nine sentiments (*navarasa*, 九味).”⁴⁶ Amoghavajra then lists the nine sentiments, and they are indeed the nine as developed in Indian discourse concerning the aesthetics of drama, dance and poetry.⁴⁷

The *Samāyoga*, as preserved in Tibetan translation,⁴⁸ does contain such a teaching. The ninth kalpa of this text contains the following passage:

With song, cymbals, and dance, with gestures and with the sentiments – namely eroticism, heroism, compassion, humor, ferocity, terror, disgust, wonder, and tranquillity – one’s aim will be achieved. By being endowed with the sentiments of eroticism, etc., dancing with the various gestures, and by uniting oneself with all, one will

the Assembly of the Eighteen Adamantine Pinnacle Yoga Sūtras, which he composed in China following his return in 746 CE from a trip to South Asia. Regarding this important text see Giebel 1995.

⁴⁶ My translation from Amoghavajra’s 金剛頂經瑜伽十八會指歸, T.869. 18.286c.12. For a complete translation and study of this text see Giebel 1995.

⁴⁷ See Giebel 1995: 179–180.

⁴⁸ I refer to the text as preserved in the Kanjur under the title *Sarvabuddhasamāyoga-ḍākinījālasaṃvara-nāma-uttaratantra*. To. 366, D vol. ka, 151b–193a. There has been some confusion regarding the status of this text among Japanese scholars, largely due to the fact that it is labeled a “appendix” or *uttaratantra* (see Giebel 1995: 180–181). However, this confusion is due to a failure to take into account both the commentarial literature as well as the tendency of esoteric Buddhist traditions to make unsubstantiated claims that their scriptures derive from mythical root Tantras, which are usually of the massive size of one hundred thousand or more stanzas. I suspect that the claim that this text is an *uttaratantra* derived from a larger and now lost was a later invention, made possibly by Tibetans themselves or, perhaps, their Indian informants. There is an additional translation of this text preserved in the *rNying ma rgyud ’bum* which is very similar to the To. 366 text. This text is titled simply *Sarvabuddhasamāyogatantrarāja*. In addition, Surativajra, in his commentary on the Tantra, states that the tradition’s *mūlatantra* has ten *kalpas*, which is indeed the number of *kalpas* contained in the canonical text. See his *Sarvabuddhasamāyogaḍākinījālasaṃvaraṭīkāsamayogalaṃkāra*, To. 1660, D vol. ra, fol. 389b.

achieve all states of possession (*āveśa*). Eroticism (*śṛṅgāra*) corresponds to Vajrasattva, heroism (*vīra*) to the Hero Tathāgata, compassion (*karuṇā*) to Vajradhara, humor (*hāsyā*) to the supreme Lokeśvara, ferocity (*raudra*) to Vajrasūrya, terror (*bhayānaka*) to Vajrarudra, disgust (*bībhatsa*) to Śākyamuni, wonder (*adbhuta*) to Ārali, and tranquillity (*śānta*) always corresponds to the Buddha, since it pacifies all suffering.⁴⁹

This is a fascinating text on several points. Its evocation of the nine sentiments is clearly associated with dance and the elements that would normally accompany it in the South Asian context, namely music and also symbolic gestures or *mudrā*. The association of the *mudrā* with Tantric deities points to the ritual nature of this dance practice, which apparently had the aim of invoking trance-like *āveśa* states. Here it refers to the employment of dance to invoke the deities, with the implication that different styles of dance, employing one of the nine sentiments, could invoke the deity correlated to that sentiment. The text is following what is evidently an ancient pattern in India. As Dale Saunders and others have pointed out, the use of gestures in dance probably derive from their use in ancient Indian religious ritual.⁵⁰ Their deployment in Tantric ritual seems to be a reappearance of what Renou termed “immemorial magical ritual language.”⁵¹ I believe that Saunders and Renou are correct in this assessment. Most likely, the deployment in tantric ritual of song, dance, and *mudrā* for the purpose of invoking deities follows a venerable pattern in the history of Indian religions.

⁴⁹ SD 178b: / *glu dang sil snyan gar byed pas // steg dang dpa' dang snying rje dang // rgod dang khro dang 'jigs pa dang // mi sdug ngo mtshar zhi ba yi // nyams kyi phyag rgya rang don sgrub // steg la sogs pa'i nyams dang ldan // sna tshogs phyag rgya'i gar byas pas // thams cad bdag nyid rgyar sbyor bas // dbab pa thams cad rab tu 'grub // rdo rje sems dpa' steg pa la // dpal la dpa' bo de bzhin gshegs // rdo rje 'dzin pa snying rje la // rgod pa 'jig rten dbang phyug mchog / rdo rje nyi ma khro ba la // rdo rje drag po 'jigs pa la // śākya thub pa mi sdug la // ngo mtshar la ni a ra li // rab tu zhi la sangs rgyas rtag / sdug bsngal thams cad zhi ba'i phyir /.*

⁵⁰ See Saunders 1960: 10–13. On the relationship between Indian dance and drama with Tantric traditions see Shekhar 1960: 27–30.

⁵¹ See Renou and Filliozat 1947: 570; quoted in Saunders 1960: 12–13.

That is not to say, however, that this particular instance is simply a re-emergence of a venerable pattern. The term *āveśa*, which was extremely rare in earlier Buddhist literature, became quite common in early tantric Buddhist literature.⁵² Alexis Sanderson has argued, convincingly in my opinion, that this represents a Buddhist appropriation of Śaiva technical terminology. While it is possible that Buddhists might have drawn such practices from a non-sectarian, perhaps ‘tribal’ religious substratum,⁵³ I find this unlikely in this case precisely because the cultivation of states of possession was so important in Śaiva traditions.⁵⁴ The elite Buddhist resistance to the concept and practice of possession would have also likely obstructed such absorption ‘from below.’ The growth in the popularity and prestige of the Śaiva traditions during this period⁵⁵ was almost certainly what motivated Buddhist attempts to appropriate and transform elements of the Śaiva discourse and practice during the eighth century.

The connection between gesture and other ritual arts and the invocation of a deity for the achievement of various ends is made

⁵² There are no known extant Sanskrit texts of the *Samāyoga*; my reading here is based upon the Tibetan translation. The term here is *dbab pa*, a derivative of the verb *'bebs pa*, which is the verb typically used to translate *āveśa*, as is attested by other works for which the Sanskrit survived (some of which will be examined below).

⁵³ I refer here both the Ruegg’s argument for a South Asian pan-religious substratum, advanced in his 1964 and 2001 articles, as well as his 2008 monograph, as well as Davidson’s (2002b: 224–235) argument that Buddhist tantric traditions drew considerably from ‘tribal’ religious practices. The latter may very well be true, and may apply in this case as well. That is, the continued practice of rites of possession among various South Asian communities likely supported the Buddhist appropriation of these practices. But I am convinced that Sanderson is correct here, as there is additional evidence in these texts suggesting the possibility of Śaiva influence on the development of the Buddhist *abhiṣeka* rites. In this case, however, we are clearly dealing with borrowing accompanied by significant transformation and adaption. For a discussion of some of this evidence see the introduction to my edition of the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra* (2012), as well as Sanderson 1994, 2001, and 2009.

⁵⁴ See Sanderson 2009: 124–140. See also Wallis 2008.

⁵⁵ This is argued at length in Sanderson 2009.

more clearly in the eighth *kalpa* of this text, which details a large number of *mudrā* and their uses. One of these is the *Vajrayakṣa mudrā*, which it describes as follows:

Expand the Vajra palms upward, summoning [with] the tips of the two forefingers, and baring the teeth of the two thumbs. [This] will invoke terrifying Vajrayakṣī, devour the devils and so forth. Thus they are charmed. All states of possession (*āveśa*, *dbab pa*) will be achieved. One thus achieves knowledge, and can draw forth treasures, and likewise steal all wealth. One can suppress the glory of an ascetic, and also steal his glory. Taking her as a slave, one can carnally enjoy the Yakṣī. Through this one will quickly establish oneself as a chieftain of the Yakṣas. [This] is the Śrī Vajrayakṣa gesture.⁵⁶

This passage makes an important connection, namely between rituals involving *mudrā* for the purpose of summoning a supernatural being, and sexual enjoyment. There was in fact an extensive body of *sādhana*s designed to invoke non-human females, such as serpent girls (*nāgī*), *yakṣīs*, as well as female ghosts (*bhūtī*) and carnivore spirits (*piśācī*), for the sake of sexual gratification. These often have very interesting features. As I have previously discussed elsewhere, two eighth century texts, the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* and *Subāhupariṣcchāntānta* contain descriptions of rites for the summoning of non-human females, in this case *yakṣīs*, for the sake of sexual enjoyment. She can appear in the form that one desires, and both texts list female relatives, such as one's mother, etc., as possible forms in which she might manifest.⁵⁷ Buddhaguhya, in his commentary on the latter text, reports that this permits enjoyment of ordinarily prohibited objects of desire, commenting that one can

⁵⁶ SD fol. 175a: / *rdo rje thal mo gyen du dbye // mdzub mo gnyis kyi rtze mo dgug / mthe bo gnyis kyi mche ba gtsigs // 'jigs pa'i rdo rje gnod sbyin ma // 'grub pa bdud la sogs pa za // de bzhin du ni rmongs par byed // dbab pa thams cad rab tu 'grub // de bzhin rnam par shes pa sgrub // gter rnam s'byin par byed pa dang // de bzhin nor kun 'phrog par byed // ngal bso po ni dpal mnan te // dpal mo dag kyang 'phrog nas ni // mngag gzhug mar ni byed pa dang // gnod sbyin ma dang dga' ba spyod // gnod sbyin dag gi sde dpon du // 'dis ni myur du 'grub par 'gyur // dpal rdo rje gnod sbyin gyi phyag rgya'o /*

⁵⁷ See Gray 2007: 86–88.

enjoy without incurring the fault of incest and so forth.⁵⁸

These are not isolated examples; the Tibetan canon preserves translations of a number of short *sādhanas* designed to invoke such female beings.⁵⁹ A typical example is the *Yakṣanaḍanāḍīsādhana*, which reads as follows:

*na mo bai śra warṇa su ta ya na ṭa ku be rā ya dī bya mā na tsi ra ta
ya ye ma mā la ku ṇa ra la sha ri ta ya / yakṣa sa bindi ta ya tvām bha
ga wān / a wa rta ye śya me / tadya thā / ma ṇi ma ṇi / kuṭṭa kuṭṭa / ku
ku ku ku / pa ra pa ra / pū ra pū ra / ku pa ra ku pa ra / na ḍa ku be rā
de bya bi mā na ku ṇa li ku bi ku bi svā hā /*

By means of the ritual procedure, draw on a plank of bodhi wood or any given wood, and visualize, the *yakṣī* with one face and two arms, green, ugly, with fangs bared and ornamented by all ornaments. Her left hand holds a skull bowl filled with blood, and her right forms the boon granting gesture (*varadamudrā*). She stands leaning against the trunk of a bodhi tree. Before this [image], repeat the spell one thousand and times by means for the previous ritual procedure. Then, on the evening of the full moon complete the recitation, and the *yakṣī* will stand before [one]. Offer her white offerings, and then she will say the following: “What should I do?” Say to her: “Make me a *vidyādhara*, and be my wife!” She will say “So be it!” and will disappear. After that, she will come at night, adorned with all ornaments. One will become a *vidyādhara* together with her, and one will also have the power of a *yakṣa*. One will frolic and play with that *yakṣī*. One will go wherever one desires, and will live for five thousand years. This *vidyā* accomplishes approximately one thousand ritual actions. One who desires to invoke a *yakṣa* should draw [her] in a male form and summon in the manner previously [described], and he will be invoked. Having accomplished that, the *yakṣī* will be like a servant. *oṃ na ḍe bi ṇa ḍe dha ṇi svā hā*. Repeating this propitiation one hundred thousand times; one should sit in an extremely dark and gloomy isolated house on a full moon day and repeat it. Thereby she will come at midnight or dawn. She will become one’s mother, sister, or wife, bestowing

⁵⁸ See Buddhaguhyā, *Āryasubāhupariṣcchānāmatantrapiṇḍārthavṛtti*, 52b.

⁵⁹ A number of these are contained in vol. tsi of the rgyud ’grel section of the sDe-dge canon; see To. 2049–2082.

whatever one desires. This completes the *Yakṣanaḍanaḍīsādhana*.⁶⁰

This text is quite typical of the genre. It begins with the *vidyā* that one must recite to summon the *yakṣī*, describes her appearance and the ritual procedure, and then describes what is achieved thereby, usually the *yakṣī* as a “wife” or sexual partner, as well as in this case *vidyādhara* status, the strength of a *yakṣa*, super mobility and longevity. As in the case of the *yakṣīsādhanas* contained in the Tantras, it includes the interesting feature that she can appear in the form of female relative, or even, in this case, a male form.⁶¹

⁶⁰ *Yakṣanaḍanaḍīsādhana*, fol. 152a–b: *na mo bai śra warṇa su ta ya na ta ku be rā ya dī bya mā na tsi ra ta ya ye ma mā la ku ṇa ra la sha ri ta ya / yakṣa sa bindī ta ya tvām bha ga wān / a wa rta ye śya me / tadya thā / ma ṇi ma ṇi / kuṭṭa kuṭṭa / ku ku ku ku / pa ra pa ra / pū ra pū ra / ku pa ra ku pa ra / na ḍa ku be rā de bya bi mā na ku ṇa li ku bi ku bi svā hā / byang chub kyi shing dam gang yang rung ba'i shing leb bam / gang gi cho gas gnod sbyin mo zhal gcig phyag gnyis ma mdog ljang gu mi sdug pa mche ba gtsigs pa rgyan thams cad kyis brgyan pa / phyag gyon gyis thod pa khrag gis bkang ba 'dzin ba / gyas mchog sbyin gyi phyag rgya byas pa // byang chub kyi shing gi sdong po la brten nas gnas pa bri la bsam / de'i mdun du sngar gyi cho gas rig pa stong phrag brgyad cung ma longs pa cig bzlas te / de nas nya'i nub mo stong phrag brgyad rdzogs par byas pas gnod sbyin mo mdun du gnas par 'gyur ro // de la dkar gyi mchod yon dbul lo // de nas mo 'di skad smra bar 'gyur te / bdag gis ci bgyi zhes zer te / de la bdag la rig pa 'dzin pa grub par gyis la / khyod kyang nga'i bud med gyis shig ces brjod do // mo na re de ltar bgyi'o zhes zer nas mi snang bar 'gyur ro // de'i rjes nas mtshan mo rgyan kun gyis brgyan nas 'ong bar 'gyur ro // de dang bcas pas bdag rig 'dzin du 'gyur zhing gnod sbyin gyi stobs dang ldan par yang 'gyur ro // gnod sbyin mo de dang rtse zhing / rol bas gnas par yang 'gyur ro // rang gang du 'gro bar 'dod pa der 'gro bar 'gyur ro // lo stong phrag lnga 'tsho bar 'gyur ro // las stong tsho tsam byed pa'i rig pa 'di'o // gnod sbyin sgrub par 'dod na skyes pa'i gzugs su bris la sngar bzhin du dgug pa la sogs pa byas la bsgrub par bya'o // des grub nas gnod sbyin khol po lta bur 'gyur ro // om na ḍe bi ṇa ḍe dha ṇi svā hā / zhes pa 'di la bsnyen pa 'bum phrag gcig bzlas la / de nas nya'i nyin par khang pa dben par mun pa shin tu gnag pa cig tu 'dug ste bzlas pa byas pas / nam phyed dam tho rangs kyi dus su 'ong bar 'gyur ro // ma 'am sring mo 'am chung mar gyur te / gang yid la 'dod pa thams cad ster bar 'gyur ro // gnod sbyin na ḍa pho mo'i sgrub thabs rdzogs so //*

⁶¹ Presuming that this text was composed for a male audience, this may represent a rare case in which homosexual desire is allude to in a Buddhist tantric text.

While hand gestures are not mentioned in this text, they are in the text that follows it, the *Yakṣinīpārthivīlakṣmīsādhana*. It includes the following description of a *mudrā* used in the invocation of *yakṣī*: “Now the *yakṣīs* will be achieved. The left hand is placed horizontally back-downward before the navel. Raise the middle and ring fingers, and stretch the index and little fingers back. Place the right hand over it, face down, and keep it there. This is the *yakṣīmudrā*.”⁶² The reader is then informed that slight modifications of this gesture result in *mudrās* for other supernatural entities.

By this point one might wonder why this essay has digressed into what appears to be an issue only tangentially related to the history of the use of the term *mudrā* in tantric Buddhist literature. However, I suspect that practices such as these, involving the invocation of female deities and spirits, had a profound impact on the eighth century transformation of the concept of *mudrā*. During this period key ritual elements – *vidyā* and *mudrā* – employed in the invocation of female deities, often for the sake of both sex and magical power,⁶³ both became terms used for the female tantric partners in sexual rituals. While the exact process by which the early Buddhist sexual rites developed is unclear, there appears to be considerable continuity between the rites for the summoning magical females and the sexual rituals that developed in the context of the Mahāyoga and Yoginītantra consecration rites. These rites, like the summoning rituals, purportedly bestowed upon successful practitioners not only pleasure but also magical powers (*siddhi*), transmitted via the “empowering substance” of sexual fluids, the transmission and consumption of which was a major focus of first Śaiva, and later Buddhist, rites of consecration.⁶⁴

⁶² *Yakṣinīpārthivīlakṣmīsādhana*, 153a: / de rang la gnod spyin mo rnams bsgrub par bya'o // lte ba'i thad kar lag pa gyon pa gan rkyal du byas nas / gung mo dang srin lag gyen du bslangs la mthe'u chung dang mdzub mo phyir brkyangs la / de'i steng du lag pa gyas pa kha sbub la 'dug pa ni gnod spyin mo'i phyag rgya'o /.

⁶³ The attainment of both the sexual services of the *yakṣī* and various magical powers are repeatedly promised in these texts.

⁶⁴ For additional information on such practices see White 2003, and also Gray 2007: 103–131.

As Sanderson argues, ritual practices involving possession appear to lack antecedents in earlier Buddhist traditions.⁶⁵ However, entering into states of possession have been central to Śaiva initiatory rites that appear to predate the development of the tantric Buddhist *abhiṣeka*.⁶⁶ Entry into a state of possession also appears to be required in the Śaiva Siddhānta *nirvāṇadīkṣā*,⁶⁷ a rite described in scriptures such as the *Kiraṇatantra* that appear to predate these eighth century Buddhist scriptures.⁶⁸ The *Picumata*, a Vidyāpīṭha Śaiva scripture, contains a passage clearly connecting *mudrā* with the invocation of deities for the sake of the cultivation of states of possession:

O fair-faced one, the Mahāmudrā of Bhairava draws every *mudrā* nigh. When it is employed correctly with full subjective immersion [the deity of the] Mantra immediately becomes manifest. [The *Mudrā*] brings about possession in the Sādhaka without [need of] Mantra-repetition or visualization.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ See Sanderson 2009: 133. Sanderson's argument appears to be correct; Strickmann, in his "genology of spirit possession" (2002: 204), identifies the *Amoghapāśasūtra* (不空罽索陀羅尼自在王咒經, T. 1097), translated c. the late seventh or early eighth century, as the earliest Buddhist scripture translated into Chinese to advocate rites involving possession. This is yet another piece of evidence reinforcing the idea that this was a crucial era in the development of Tantric Buddhism.

⁶⁶ Sanderson argues that these practices originated with the Kāpālikas, and were advanced by the Śākta Śaivas (2009: 133 n. 311).

⁶⁷ Regarding this rite see Davis 1991: 92–100, and also Flood 2006: 134–138.

⁶⁸ Goodall estimates that the *Kiraṇatantra* was composed circa the fifth to eighth century (1996: xxxiii), so it *likely*, albeit not definitively, predates the Buddhist texts studied here, which cannot be reasonably dated prior to the late-seventh century, with the exception of the *Mahāvairocanaḥisambodhi*. Yet this text, unlike the others, does not contain textual passages describing initiatory rites involving possession and/or sexuality.

⁶⁹ Translated and edited (as follows) in Sanderson 2009: 133–134 n. 311. *Picumata* 87.126c–128b: *bhairavasya mahāmudrā mudrāsānidhyakārikā // 127 prayuktā tu yadā mudrā lakṣaṇena varānane / bhāvātmakavidhānena sadyo mantrō vijṛmbhati // 128 karoti sādhakāveśaṃ japadhyānavivarjitā /*

As in the case of the Buddhist examples that will follow, the terms *mudrā* and *mahāmudrā* are ambiguous, interpretable in the ordinary sense of ‘hand-gesture’ or the specialized sense of a consort, human or divine.

This pattern is likewise illustrated by a *maṇḍalavidhi* contained in the *Śrīparamādya-mantrakalpakaṇḍa*, another of the influential eighth century ‘Mahāyoga’ Tantras. The passage reads as follows:

He who undertakes the worship of the *maṇḍala* attains all powers. He should worship with dance, displaying the gestures (*phyag rgya dag*). He should always worship the *maṇḍala* by means of the five sense pleasures. Then his own *mudrā*⁷⁰ will be presented by the secret goddesses. *Hrīḥ hūṃ śrī bhyo*. As for the complete production of the *maṇḍala*, it is square with four gates, and has four lines and four great pillars. It is adorned with four corners. In the center of that one should thus draw the four *maṇḍalas*. Place at the gate the four-faced Nanda bearing a sword in his hand, endowed with the Essence [mantra], the proud power producer. Now, in the primal *maṇḍala* one should thus be immersed.⁷¹ One should be possessed⁷² by the sisters (*sring mo, bhagini*) in due order. Engaged, worship in accordance with the procedure with incense and so forth. One accomplished in secret bliss will perform the summoning. *Oṃ kā li ma ni ra de pro ta la me bhū rāksha si pa rastā ma ya he ba ho ba, ba ra he bi dye tī ma ya svā hā, sid dhi ke sid dhi stā ma a he*. With the gestures, *hrīḥ hūṃ śrī bhyo*. Then all are possessed. Being possessed, [they] should enter.⁷³

⁷⁰ I leave the term untranslated here because I do not know whether it means a ‘consort,’ which seems most likely here, or perhaps the disclosure of a secret hand gesture.

⁷¹ This is a tentative translation of *kun nas ’jug par bya*, possibly a translation of a form of the verb *sampraviś*, “to enter into together or completely, have intercourse with,” *samāviś* “penetrate, possess, enter thoroughly,” or perhaps *āviś*, “enter, take possession.”

⁷² The text here reads *’jug par bya*, “should insert, enter,” perhaps translating *praviśeta* or *praveśayet*.

⁷³ PA 185a–b: / *dkyil ’khor mchod pa byed pa de // dngos grub thams cad thob pa ni // phyag rgya dag kyang bstan byas nas // de yis gar gyi mchod pa bya // ’dod pa’i yon tan lnga po yis // rtag tu dkyil ’khor mchod par bya // de nas gsang ba’i lha mo rnam kyis rang gi phyag rgya phul lo // hrīḥ hūṃ śrī bhyo // dkyil ’khor thams cad bya ba ni // gru bzhi pa la sgo bzhi pa // thig*

This passage evokes the language of summoning and possession. There is a faint erotic tone to this passage, evoked by the use of the term “sister” in conjunction with *mudrā*, but this allusion is weak, and does not necessarily imply sexual practices. In this case, it seems more likely that the term is used in the sense of a divine female with which the adept is “united” via possession.

The term *mudrā* thus came to refer to the female entities with whom the adept united in such rituals, whether human or non-human. The term “sisters” (*bhagini*, *sring mo*), which would be understood as a synonym of the terms *yoginī* and *ḍākinī*,⁷⁴ here likely refers to a clanswoman, a woman initiated into the clan. The idea of “presentation of the *mudrā*” may be a reference to a process of initiation, in which the initiate is inducted into the clan via union with a “sister.” This is thus likely a precursor to the third consort gnosis consecration (*prajñājñānābhīṣeka*) of the later Niruttarayogatantras. Again, this idea is expressed clearly in the *Tattvasaṃgraha*, as follows:

One should make a *maṇḍala* that is like the wheel of truth (*dharma-cakra*), surrounded by *mudrā* wives; the Buddha should be inserted there. As soon as he enters one should speak the secret to the Buddha: “All-bestowing Lord, give me your wife!” Speaking thus, one obtains the secret accomplishment, unequalled splendors of the buddhas in all of the methods of the clan consort.⁷⁵

bzhi pa dang yang dag ldan // ka ba chen po bzhi dang bcas // gru chad bzhi yis rnam par mdzes // de yi dbus su de bzhin du // dkyil 'khor bzhi po bri bar bya // sgo ru mngon phyogs bzhi po ni // snying po dang bcas gzhas par bya // dga' bo lag na mtshon cha thogs // dngos grub bya ba bsnyems dang bcas // de nas dang po dkyil 'khor du // de bzhin kun nas 'jug par bya // sring mo rang gi phyag rgya yis // go rims bzhin du 'jug par bya'o // zhugs nas bdug pa la sogs kyis // cho ga bzhin du mchod byas nas // gsang ba de nyid rab grub pas // dgug pa yang dag bya ba yin // om kā li ma ni ra de pro ta la me bhū rāksha si pa rastā ma ya he ba ho ba / ba ra he bi dye tī ma ya svā hā / sid dhi ke sid dhi stā ma a he / phyag rgya 'di rnams kyis so // hrīḥ hūm śrī bhyo / de nas thams cad dbab par 'gyur ro // babs nas gzhus par bya'o /.

⁷⁴ CT ch. 24 indicates that *bhagini* is a code word for *ḍākinī*. See Gray 2007: 259, and Pandey 2002: 128.

⁷⁵ Yamada 1981: 483: *dharmacakrasamākāraṃ kuryād vā guhyamaṇḍalam / mudrābhāryāparivṛtaṃ tatra buddhan niveśayet // praviṣṭvaiva hi tad*

Another passage in the *Tattvasaṃgraha* sheds further light on the initiatory nature of these practices. The passage opens with the step in the initiation sequence when the adept’s blindfold is removed, and he is introduced to the *maṇḍala* and the tradition’s secrets. It occurs as follows:

Then, one should release the blindfold, duly display the *maṇḍala*, and declare the secret of the commitment consorts (*samayamudrā*):

“These commitment consorts are good, and will serve you in everything.⁷⁶ The mother, sister, wife, and daughter [are] the servants.”⁷⁷ Then the essence mantra is: *oṃ sarvavajragāmini sarvabhakṣe sādhyā guhyavajriṇi hūṃ phaṭ*. By repeating this once, all women are subjugated and can be enjoyed, and there is no immorality (*adharma*) [in so doing].⁷⁸

guhyam brūyād buddhasya tatṣanāt / bhāryā hy etās tava vibho dadasva mama sarvada // evaṃ brūvaṃs tu sarveṣu kulamudrānayeṣu ca / guhyasiddhiṃ avāpnoti buddhānām asamatviṣām //; ST 118a,b: *chos kyi 'khor lo 'dra bar ni // gsang ba'i dkyil 'khor bri bya zhing // phyag rgya bud med rnams kyi bskor // des ni sangs rgyas gzhag par bya // gsang ba der ni zhugs nas kyang // sangs rgyas la ni nyid du smra // 'di khyab pa yi btsun mo ste // kun gtong bas ni bdag sogs zhes // rigs rnams kun gyi phyag rgya ni // tshul rnams la yang de skad brjod // sangs rgyas rnams ni mnyam med pa'i // gsang ba'i dngos grub thob par 'gyur /*. Many thanks to Christian Wedemeyer for his assistance with the translation of this passage.

⁷⁶ This translates *sarvakarmakarāḥ śubhāḥ*. Note that *karmakara* normally means a servant or a laborer. The Tibetan reads *rtag tu* in place of the Sanskrit *śubhāḥ*, suggesting a reading of *sadā*.

⁷⁷ I translate here the term *anugā* as “servant;” it can also mean companion, but I think servant is more appropriate, given, the preceding use of the term *karmakara*, as well as what follows. It can also mean “acting in conformity with,” which apparently the reason that the Tibetan translates it as *'dra ba'o*.

⁷⁸ Yamada 1981: 288–289: *tato mukhabandham muktva maṇḍalam yathāvad darśayitvā samayamudrārahasyaṃ brūyāt / etāḥ samayamudrās te sarvakarmakarāḥ śubhāḥ / mātaraś ca bhṅinyaś ca bhāryā duhitaro 'nugā iti // tatrāsya hrdayaṃ bhavati / oṃ sarvavajragāmini sarvabhakṣe sādhyā guhyavajriṇi hūṃ phaṭ // anayā sakṛjjaptayā sarvastriyo vaśīkrtyopabhoktavayāḥ adharma na bhavati /*; ST 77a: */ de nas gdong g.yogs bkrol nas dkyil 'khor rim bzhin bstan te / dam tshig gi phyag rgya gsang ba smros shig / dam tshig phyag rgya 'di khyod kyi // rtag tu las kun byed pa ste // ma dang srīng mo rnams dang ni // chung ma bu mo 'dra ba'o // de la de'i snying po ni 'di*

I am struck by the continuity between this ritual sequence and the rites for summoning non-human females for sex and consecration. Clearly, the Buddhist system of consecrations developed from older, and almost certainly Śaiva,⁷⁹ practices involving the invocation of deities for the purpose of consecration at the time of initiation. It is interesting as well that the motif of incest pervades both practices. The discourse about incest in the *yakṣīsādhanas* is, apparently, literally intended, at least if we believe Buddhaghosya. Yet in the context of initiation it seems to be intended symbolically, in reference to the new ‘family’ into which the adept is initiated, as I have discussed elsewhere.⁸⁰ Yet even here, the implication of coercion and transgression is maintained, as indicated by the above passage assertion that “all women can be controlled and enjoyed,” and there assurance that there is no immorality in doing this. In another closely related text, the *Śrīparamādyā-nāma-mahāyānakalparāja*, the practitioner is again assured of this, as follows: “The Master of *Mudrā* practices the dharma, is pure and wears clean clothes. In eating everything and doing everything he is beyond reproach. He is attended by the consorts who are jackal-shaped messengers (*śivadūtīmudrā*, *zhi ba’i pho nya’i phyag rgya*) and he repeats the essence [mantra].”⁸¹ Like the Śaiva texts discussed by Christian Wedemeyer and Alexis Sanderson, but unlike the later Mahāyoga and Yoginī Tantras, this text seems to focus on a dualist, outwardly oriented conduct rather than inwardly focused cultivation of non-dualistic gnosis.⁸² Of particular interest here is the identification

*dag yin no // oṃ sarba ga ma ni sarba bāktre sā dha ya gu hya badzri ṅi hūṃ
phat / ’di lan cig bzlas pas bud med thams cad dbang du byas te spyad na
chos ma yin par mi ’gyur ro /.*

⁷⁹ That is, if Alexis Sanderson is correct, as I believe he is.

⁸⁰ See Gray 2007: 115. This topic is discussed at length in my forthcoming article “The Tantric Family Romance: Sex and the Construction of Social Identity in Tantric Buddhist Ritual.”

⁸¹ My translation from the *Śrīparamādyā-nāma-mahāyānakalparāja*, fol. 171a: */ de nas phyag rgya’i slob dpon chos spyod pa gtsang ba gos gtsang ma bgos pa // thams cad za’am thams cad spyad pa la yang smed pa med de / zhi ba’i pho nya’i phyag rgyas zhugs la snying po bzlas par bya’o /.*

⁸² I refer to the passage from the *Niśvāsattvasaṃhitā* discussed by Wedemeyer in his article in this volume. See also Sanderson 2006: 164–165.

of the “consorts,” *mudrā*, here goddesses or initiated *yoginīs*, as *śivadūtī*, a term that could be translated as “jackal[-faced] messenger” or “messenger of Śiva,” the name given to a *śakti* created by the goddess in the *Devī Māhātmya*.⁸³ This appears to be another example of Śaiva terminology turning up incongruously in Buddhist scripture.⁸⁴

Interestingly, the following quotation from the *Śrīparamādya-nāma-mahāyānakalparāja* occurs at the beginning of a passage describing a initiation ritual that takes place in the “consort *maṇḍala* known as the commitment of all powers” (*dn̄gos grub thams cad kyi dam tshig zhes bya ba’i phyag rgya’i dkyil ’khor*, **sarvasiddhisamaya-nāma-mudrāmaṇḍala*). The rite is described as follows:

Then the great [syllable] *bhyo* is heard within the *maṇḍala*. Then, aside from the master, how should all of the other enter? This excepts [those who have] the commitment of the evil ones (*gdug pa’i dam tshig*). The disciple holds a flower in his hands and is blindfolded. He is admitted with the hand gesture of Mahākāla, and the great oath (*mahāsamaya*) [syllable] *bhyo* should be applied to his ear. Then, being terrified, he should cast the flower. He will attain as his chosen deity that on which it falls. If it does not fall [on a deity] he should enter to cast again. Then he will attain the ability to terrify as well as each and every yoga. Then he should be released from the blindfold and the *maṇḍala* shown [to him]. Worshipping with the gestures of the evil ones, etc., the essence mantras and their respective signs should be given [to him].

Then the commitment is taught. All sentient beings being sealed, the commitment is that one should eat despised [substances]. Mantras

⁸³ This occurs at *Devī Māhātmya* 8.22–27, translated in Coburn 1991: 64–65; the goddess is closely associated with jackals, which is why White translates the term as “Jackal-Shaped Female Messenger” (2003: 319 n. 17). The *Devī Māhātmya*, on the other hand, explains the name as follows: “Since Śiva himself was sent by her as a messenger, she has become known throughout the world as Śivadūtī” (“She who has Śiva as a messenger” 8.27, translated in Coburn 1991: 65). Perhaps due the ambiguity of the word *śiva* in this compound, the Tibetan translators transliterated it (as *zhi ba’i pho nya*) rather than translating it.

⁸⁴ See, for example, the instance analyzed in depth in Hatley 2007: 177–183.

should not be taught. [This] commitment will grant the achievement of yoga. The fierce commitment⁸⁵ is marked by the lance and seal of the mothers. If transgressed, your essence is permanently destroyed.⁸⁶ Now, undertaking this, he who eats human flesh will attain yoga before long. He who does not eat will have no success (*siddhi*). If one does not transgress the sacrament, one will not be killed by any host (*tshogs*, **gaṇa*), and one will learn the gnosis of the consort (*phyag rgya'i ye shes*). These aims will be fulfilled by worshipping with the dance of *mudrā*,⁸⁷ offering sacrifice (*bali*, *gtor ma*), and satiating oneself with food and drink and pleasure. This is the *mudrā-maṇḍala* called “the commitment of all powers.”⁸⁸

⁸⁵ This text *drag po'i dam tshig* might be read as “sacrament of Rudra.”

⁸⁶ The term *snying* here is ambiguous. It might refer to the essence mantra bestowed at initiation, or perhaps the heart or essence of the guilty practitioner. The passage is threatening dire consequences if this *samaya* is broken. The use of the second person pronoun *khyod kyi*, intensifies the threat by directly addressing the reader.

⁸⁷ I presume that *phyag rgya'i gar* refers to a dance employing gestures.

⁸⁸ D 171a–b, H 132a–133a, S 32a–b: / *de nas dkyil 'khor gyi dbus nas bhyo chen po thos par 'gyur ro // de nas slob dpon ma gtogs pa gzhan thams cad ji* (HS: *ci*) *ltar 'ongs pa zhugs par 'gyur zhing 'thob* (D: *thob*) *par 'gyur te / gdug pa'i dam tshig ni ma gtogs so // de nas slob ma lag na me tog thogs pas ras kyis mig bkab la nag po chen po'i phyag rgyas bcug ste / rna bar* (S: *rnam par*) *dam tshig chen po bhyo zhes bya ba dang sbyar bar bya'o* (HS: *bar bya'o*; D: *ro*) // *de nas skrag nas me tog dor* (S: *'dor*) *ro // de nas gang du lung ba de lhag pa'i lhar bsgrub par bya'o // gal te lung bar ma gyur na yang dor* (S: *'dor*) *du gzbug go / de nas ni 'jigs par byed par* (*par deest* in D) *nus shing rnal 'byor yang so sor 'thob* (D: *thob*) *par 'gyur ro // de nas gdong gyogs bkrol la dkyil 'khor bstan par bya'o // gdug* (D: *bdug*) *pa la sogs pa'i phyag rgyas mchod nas snying po dang / rang rang gi mtshan ma sbyin par bya'o // de nas dam tshig bstan par bya ste // sems can thams cad rgyas gdab* (D: *bdab*) *cing // dam tshig sdang rnam bza' bar bya // sngags rnam bstan par mi bya ste // dam tshig rnal 'byor grub ster bya'o // drag po'i dam tshig mdung rse dang // ma mo rnam kyis rgyas 'debs pas* (S: *par*) // *gal te 'das na khyod kyi snying // rtag tu 'jig par byed par 'gyur // de nas brtsams te gang sha chen po za ba ni de ring po mi thogs par rnal 'byor 'grub par 'gyur ro // gang za bar mi 'gyur ba de'i dngos grub med do // gal te dam tshig las 'das par ma gyur na tshogs thams cad kyis kyang mi gsod par 'gyur ro // phyag rgya'i ye shes bslab par bya ste / phyag rgya'i gar dang mchod pa byas nas gtor ma sbyin zhing bza' ba dang / btung ba dang / longspyod la sogs pa'i tshim par byas nas phyr 'byung* (S: *byung*) *bar bya'o // dngos grub thams cad kyi dam*

This passage appears to describe a consecratory rite empowering one to participate in *gaṇacakra* type ceremonies, involving the consumption of “despised [substances],” with human flesh (*sha chen po*, *mahāmāṃsa*) specifically mentioned, which implies a charnel ground locale for the practice.⁸⁹ The presence of deities that were strongly associated with Śaiva traditions, originally at least, is also notable.⁹⁰

An important event in the history of tantric Buddhism, well-documented in the early eighth century Buddhist Tantras, was the development of rites of consecration in partial dependence upon Śaiva ritual precedents, involving sexual activity as well as other forms of sensual stimulation, such as dance, music, the consumption of meat and intoxicants, and, originally at least, entry into altered states of consciousness for the purpose of “bringing down” the deities into the participants. A further passage from the *Tattvasaṃgraha* illustrates this nicely:

One should exhibit the adamantine erotic dance, and fasten the adamantine garland. One should compose the adamantine song, and worship with adamantine dance. The consecration through sexual pleasure is supreme. Aside from the bliss of dance and song there is no other. Thus the secret worship is unexcelled.⁹¹

tshig ces bya ba'i phyag rgya'i dkyil 'khor ro l.

⁸⁹ Many of the early eighth century Tantras show incipient signs of the early development of the charnel ground practices that are prominent features of the Mahāyoga and Yoginī Tantras composed from the late eighth century onward. The reader will likely note that this text exhibits many of the qualities of the *caryāvrata* discussed by Wedemeyer in his paper in this volume, above.

⁹⁰ These include Mahākāla, the “mothers” (*ma mo*, *mātrkā*), and possibly Rudra. During this period many Śaiva deities were adopted by Buddhist groups and transformed into Tantric Buddhist deities.

⁹¹ Yamada 1981: 492: *vajralāsyām samādhāya vajramālām tu bandha[ye]t | vajragītām tato badhvā pūjayed vajranṛtyayā || kā[maratyābhiṣekā] gryā nṛtyagītasukhāt sukhaṃ | nānyad asti hi teneyam guhyapūjā niruttarā ||*; ST 120b: *rdo rje 'jo ma byas nas kyang | rdo rje phreng ba 'chিং byed cing || de nas rdo rje glu blangs la || rdo rje gar gyis mchod byas la || 'dod pa'i dga' bas dbang bskur mchog | glu dang gar gyi bde ba las || bde ba gzhan gyis myong min te || de phyir gsang mchog [sic] 'di bla med l.*

This “consecration through sexual pleasure” (*kāmaratyābhiṣeka*) may be an early description for the rites that came to be known as the “secret” and “consort gnosis” consecrations. This consecration was seen as essential for the cultivation of magical power, the *śiddhis*, much like the *yakṣīsādhanas*. The *Tattvasaṃgraha* reports that “The Lord Vajraratna said: ‘Having become a holder of the *karmamudrā*, and endowed with all ornaments, embracing a woman magical power (*vibhūti*) is delivered in worship, and one will succeed’.”⁹²

The term *mudrā* qua consort can clearly imply either an empowered human female or a goddess, more or less corresponding to the Śaiva term *śakti*, as Gonda observed. The *Hevajratāntra*, which was composed circa the late ninth or early tenth century,⁹³ contains a passage that illustrates this with a play of words on the term *mudrā*:

One who knows yoga should always worship his mother and sister. One who is devoted to reality should worship Naṭī, Rajakī, Vajrā, Caṇḍālī, and Brāhmaṇī through the method of wisdom and expedience. They should be served energetically, without disclosure. If not hidden, suffering will be produced [for one] by snakes, thieves, fire, and evil spirits will arise.⁹⁴ These consorts of the five clans are related for the sake of liberation. They are called “seals” (*mudrā*) because they they are marked (*mudryate*) by a vajra.⁹⁵

⁹² Yamada 1981: 491: *karmamudrādharo bhūtvā sarvābharaṇabhūṣitaḥ / striyaṃ pariṣvajya pūjāyāṃ vibhūtiṃ niryātya śidhyatīty āha bhagavān vajraratnaḥ //*; ST 120b: *las kyi phyag rgya bcings 'gyur la // rgyan rnams kun gyis brgyan nas kyang // bud med 'khyud pa'i longs spyod ni // mchod phyir phul na 'grub par 'gyur // zhes bcom ldan 'das rdo rje rin chen gyis gsungs so /*.

⁹³ Davidson argues, correctly I believe, that the *Hevajra* dates no earlier than the late ninth century. See Davidson 2002a: 65, 77–78 n. 69.

⁹⁴ The Sanskrit here is vague, reading *bhūcara*. Kāṇha glosses this as *piśācādayaḥ*, “goblins and so forth.” See Snellgrove 1959: 2.117.

⁹⁵ My translation of HT 1.5.2–4, which occurs as follows in Snellgrove’s edition (1959: 2.16): *jananīm bhaganīm caiva pūjayed yogavit sadā / naṭīm ca rajakīm vajrām caṇḍālīm brāhmaṇīm tathā // prajñopāyavidhānena pūjayet tattvavatsalaḥ // sevītavayāḥ prayatnena yathā bhedo na jāyate / agupte kriyate duḥkham vyāḍacaurāgnibhūcaraiḥ // mudrāḥ pañcakulānīti*

This passage seems to blur the boundary between humans and deities, as might be expected in a tradition advocating either possession by deities, or meditative identification with them. The use of kinship terms implies human females, yet from there the text segues to the goddesses with whom they may be identified. On the other hand, the following passage from the *Śrīparamādyamantrakalpakhanda* refers to goddesses as *mudrā*, as follows:

The holder of all vajras, the great reality of the five secrets, gives rise to the goddesses who are consorts (*mudrā*, *phyag rgya*). They are always impassioned and possess great power. They are the supreme deity, the victorious lord, and the four sublime consorts. Their bodies empower beings.⁹⁶

This text elsewhere frequently uses the term *mudrā* for goddesses.⁹⁷ But this power of creating empowered and empowering *mudrā* is not limited to Mahāsukha Vajrasattva, but also the human master who embodies his power, and can thus, through sexual union, empower women. The passage reads as follows:

The vajra is held by him, and the bell of reality should be rung. Being empowered in the great seal of the convention, should the essence be recited, the vajra and so forth are attained. He will succeed [as] a master of admantine yoga (*vajrayogeśvara*), like a second Vajrasattva, and he will be empowered by Vajrin (i.e., Vajradhara). Women, having become possessed through the descent of the Teacher’s vajra, make a hand gesture with the vajra and become *yoginīs*.⁹⁸

kathyate mokṣahetunā / vajreṇa mudryate ’nena mudrā tenābhidhīyate //; cf. Snellgrove 1959: 1.60–61.

⁹⁶ PA 224a: / *rdo rje thams cad ’dzin pa ni // gsang ba lnga yi de nyid che // phyag rgya’i lha mo byung bar gyur // rtag tu chags dang dngos grub che // rnam rgyal dbang phyug lhag pa’i lha // phyag rgya dam pa bzhi pa ste // sems dpa’ byin gyis brlabs pa’i sku /*.

⁹⁷ For example, PA 212a lists four male deities, Vajrasattva, Vajraratna, Vajradharma, and Vajrakarma, followed by their “consorts” (*mudrā*, *phag rgya*), Sattvavajrī, Ratnavajrī, Padmavajrī, and Viśvavajrī.

⁹⁸ PA 235b–236a: / *de nyid kyis ni rdo rje bzung // chos kyi dril bu dkrol bar bya // dam tshig gi ni phyag rgya cher // byin gyis brlabs nas snying po bzla // rdo rje la sogs thob par gzung // rdo rje sems dpa’ gnyis pa ’dra // rdo rje rnal ’byor dbang phyug grub // rdo rje can gyis byin rlabs ’gyur // bud med rnam kyang ’bebs gyur nas // ston pa’i rdo rje phab pa yis // rdo rje*

It is with such empowered women that initiated adepts would conduct the ‘practices’ conducted at special occasions and occasions, such as the *gaṇacakra* rite.⁹⁹ Not surprisingly, the term *mudrā* is also used to describe the female participants in these practices. A fascinating description of the worship of the consort in the context of the *gaṇacakra* rite is contained in the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra*. It reads as follows:

Furthermore, it is not the case that all are adept in all yogas, capable of feasting to the extent of their ability on fish, flesh, and so forth. One should partake of the five foods, and so forth, with relish, even when they are not present. At night one should always undertake extensive feasting. Then the messenger should be bestowed. Placing one’s head in her lap, she is worshipped in the fashion of the nondual hero. Whether or not she is one’s mother, sister, daughter, kinswoman, or wife, should one do thus in accordance with the rite, one will be free of all bonds.

Then the mantras are accomplished, until the end of the world. Assuming the master’s form, I, the adept, take the worship. Have no doubt that the heroes’ place is indeed the consort (*mudrā*). The well-equipped adept should sing, dance, and so forth. So long as all embodied ones are not intent upon knowledge of yoga, they roam through cyclic existence, hastening toward dissatisfaction and grief. The adept should thus worship the consort with all things. The contemptuous ones who desire that which is unworthy of the worshipped will burn.¹⁰⁰

dang bcas phyag mtshan ’dzin // rnal ’byor ma rnam rab tu ’gyur /. Many thanks to Christian Wedemeyer for his assistance with the translation of this passage.

⁹⁹ Regarding such practices see Christian Wedemeyer’s paper in this volume. See also Davidson 2002b: 318–22.

¹⁰⁰ My translation from my edition (2012) of CT 33.1–8:
ataḥ paraṃ nāsti sarvaṃ sarvayogeṣu sādhaḥkaḥ /
bhakṣabhojyaṃ matsamāmsādibhiḥ kartavyo yathāśaktiḥ // 1
avidyamāne ’pi kartavyaṃ pañcakhādyaḍi yatnataḥ /
rātrau tu sadā kuryāt bhakṣabhojanaṃ vistaram // 2
dūtīm ca tato dadyāt svotsaṅge śiraḥ kṛtvā /
vīrādvayapūjitaḥ // 3
mātā yadi vā bhaginī putrī bāndhavī bhāryā vai /
evaṃ vidhividhānena kuryād bandanamuktikam // 4

Some commentators on this text made it clear that it is not a mundane social gathering that is being described here. The text in this passage, “the well-equipped adept should sing, dance, and so forth,” triggered the following fascinating commentary by Bhavyakīrti, who was active during the early tenth century.¹⁰¹ It reads as follows:

Regarding the **well-equipped adept**,¹⁰² the exalted Koṅkaṇapāda asserted that “one should know forms of song and music which are [performed] in a special manner”¹⁰³ I, Bhavyakīrti, hold that gazing is false, raising the arms is false, as are facial expressions¹⁰⁴ and the sexual arts of the god of love. Comparing oneself to a bee and a woman’s face to a lotus is false. Whispering in the ear about beauty and not having a man is false. These are all completely false. As it is said, “I state that if one is moved by utterances of all sorts, then, alas, one is defeated by the god of love’s fool. If one does not understand this, what can be done?” If one investigates the aims of singing, dancing, and so forth, it is not the case that they all the same.¹⁰⁵

*tataḥ sidhyante mantrā yāvadhūtasamplavaḥ /
 ācāryamūrtim āsthāya pūjāṃ gṛhṇāmi sādhakāḥ // 5
 vīrāṇāṃ āsanāṃ caiva mudrāṃ eva na saṃśayaḥ /
 gūtanṛtyādi kartavyaṃ sādhakāḥ susamāhitaḥ // 6
 tāvad bhramanti saṃsāre duḥkhaśokapariplutāḥ /
 na bhavanti ca yogajñānaratā yāvat sarve ’pi dehinaḥ // 7
 pūjayet tato mūdrāṃ sarvabhāvena sādhakāḥ /
 pūjītāpūjyam icchanti nīrdahanty apamānitāḥ // 8;
 cf. Pandey 2002: 524–25.*

¹⁰¹ See Gray 2007: 22.

¹⁰² I use a bold font here and below to indicate the text being commented upon in commentarial literature.

¹⁰³ Bhavyakīrti quotes Jayabhadra’s commentary, which here reads as follows: *susamāhita ity aprākṛtarūpeṇa gītavādyādīnāṃ prayogo vijñeyaḥ* (Sugiki 2001: 133).

¹⁰⁴ This is a tentative translation of an obscure line, *sna gong dag ni rnam pa kha ’bras shing*. The text *rnam pa kha ’bras* could be read as “facial expression,” while *sna gong*, “above the nose,” may be an obscure reference to a particular facial expression.

¹⁰⁵ Bhavyakīrti, *Śrīcakrasaṃvarapañjikā-Śūramanojñā-nāma*, 33ab: */ sgrub po shin tu mnyam gzhas pas // zhes bya ba ni tha mal ba’i gzugs su ma yin pa’i tshul gyis glu dang rol mo la sogs pa’i sbyor ba bya bar shes*

Bhavyakīrti articulates what was almost certainly a major concern of tantric Buddhist gurus in his day, just as it continues to be now. The ‘practices’ described in these texts should not be assumed to be religiously sanctioned versions of mundane hedonism, but are rather performed, as Jayabhadra claimed, “in a special manner” (*aprākṛtarūpeṇa*), with extraordinary aims, as Bhavyakīrti added. Moreover, the participants are not ordinary individuals, but initiated adepts. This is also the case with respect to the *mudrā*. Commenting on the text in *Cakrasaṃvaratantra*, “The master, well equiposed, should worship the consort (*mudrā*),”¹⁰⁶ the early- to mid-ninth century commentator Jayabhadra¹⁰⁷ described the consort as follows: “One’s **consort** is an outer woman, well educated in mantra and Tantra, who is has the commitments, i.e., is committed has the commitments regarding what is to be protected and eaten.”¹⁰⁸

As the term *mudrā* was increasingly used for ‘outer’ female practitioners, the term *mahāmudrā*, “great consort,” was in turn often used as a proper term of respect for the consort of a central deity. An example of this usage are found in the *Śrīparamādyamantrakalpakaḥḍa*, where Mānavajriṇī, the consort of Mahāsukha Vajrasattva is described as the consort of Maheśvara. The passage occurs as follows:

par bya'o zhes koṅka na'i zhal snga nas bzhed do // skal ldan grags pa ni // mig mi btsuns zhes bya ba de brdzun yin // lag pa 'degs pa gang yin de yang brdzun // sna gong dag ni rnam pa kha 'bras shing // 'dod lha'i 'dod spyod de yang brdzun yin la // bud med gdong gi padma la rtog cing // sbrang bu lta bur bdag gir byed de'ang brdzun // sdug dang skye bo med par rang dga' ba'i // rna bar gshub pa gang yin de yang brdzun // 'di dag thams cad rnam pa kun du brdzun // bdag ni 'gro na rnam kun sgra sgrogs pa // kyi hud 'dod pa'i lha yi rmongs pas bcom // shes ma gyur na ci zhis bya ba smros // zhes glu dang gar la sogs pa'i yul rnam nyid brtags na mnyam par bya ba la sogs pa yod pa ma yin no zhes 'dod /.

¹⁰⁶ My translation from my edition (2012) of CT 3.7ab: *tato hi pūjayen mudrām ācāryaḥ susamāhitaḥ*; cf. Pandey 2002: 39.

¹⁰⁷ For an estimate of the time period when he was active see Gray 2007: 11–12, 21.

¹⁰⁸ Sugiki 2001: 114: *svamudrām iti bāhyāṅganāṃ mantratantrasuśikṣitāṃ rakṣaṇīyabhakṣaṇīyasamayasaṃvitāṃ samayinīm ity arthaḥ //*.

In what way is the Lord the master of Mānavajriṇī? Since she, who is the supreme consort (*phyag rgya mchog*) of Maheśvara who has the supreme of great powers (*mahāsiddhi*), praises the Adamantine Lord, he is Mānavajriṇī’s master. This Lord is the very person [known as] Śrī Paramādyā. The wealth of all powers will be attained for whom-ever declares him to be Vajrasattva.¹⁰⁹

Here we see the sort of slippage that seems to characterize the Buddhist Tantras that exhibit Śaiva influence. In this literature we sometimes see the names of Śaiva deities, followed by attempts to assure the readers, in the text itself or in the commentators, that the Śaiva deity is actually a buddha. This is certainly the case with respect to the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra*, a Buddhist Yoginītantra composed circa the late eighth or early ninth century.¹¹⁰ It exhibits undeniable Śaiva influence, contains numerous examples of slippage.¹¹¹ It also employs the term *mahāmudrā* for the central deity’s consort. The passage in question, in the thirty-third chapter, reads “The primordially established great consort (*ādisiddhā mahāmudrā*) should be worshipped with great zeal, [as is done by] men in the Yoga Tantras.”¹¹² As an aside, I should mention that the eleventh century commentator Vīravajra glosses *yogatanreṣu* as “*Guhyasamāja* and so forth,” showing that the later Tibetan classifications are truly late.¹¹³ The modification of *mahāmudrā*

¹⁰⁹ PA 262b–263a: / de la rdo rje bsnnyems pa’i bdag po bcom ldan ’das ji ltar yin zhes na / kun mchog dngos grub chen po yi // dbang phyug chen po’i phyag rgya’i mchog / rdo rje dbang phyug cher bstod pas // rdo rje bsnnyems pa’i bdag po’i bdag / ces bya ba ni bcom ldan ’das mchog dang po’i skyes bu’o // mchog dang po yi de nyid ’di // rdo rje sems dpa’ gang gang brjod // dngos grub kun gyi ’byor pa rnam // de la thams cad ’grub par ’gyur /.

¹¹⁰ Regarding the dating of this text see Gray 2007: 11–14.

¹¹¹ Many examples are related in the introduction to Gray 2012. For further discussions of the dependence of this text on Śaiva Tantras see Sanderson 2009: 156–220, and Hatley 2007: 175–189.

¹¹² My translation from my edition (2012) of CT 33.9a–c: *ādisiddhā mahāmudrā yogatanreṣu mānavas tathā / pūjanīyā suyāt nataḥ*; cf. Pandey 2002: 526.

¹¹³ Kambala was almost certainly active during the tenth century, for his *Sādhanaidhi* commentary quotes the *Hevjratantra*, which was composed no earlier than the late ninth century. Moreover, the traditions that hold that

with *ādhisiddhā* clearly points to the symbolic value of this term. Bhavabhaṭṭa, who was active circa 1000 CE, glosses *mahāmudrā* as “goddess,”¹¹⁴ in this case the goddess Vajravārāhī, the consort of the Tantra’s chief deity Heruka, in whose form the male adept is to visualize himself. The text uses *mahāmudrā* as a simple extension of *mudrā* qua consort. That is, just as the adept needs female consort – much of the scripture is dedicated to instructions regarding how to find, communicate with, and win over the *yoginīs* or *ḍākinīs* who are suitable candidates for this role, the consort of the chief deity, whom the adept emulates, is the “great consort.”

However, the term is used differently by a commentator who was active around the same time as Bhavabhaṭṭa, Kambala.¹¹⁵ His commentary occurs as follows, on the text “union with Śrī Heruka” (*śrītherukasam̐yogam*) in the Tantra’s first verse: “Regarding **union with Śrī Heruka**, ‘Heruka’ is oneself, and the consort (*mudrā*) is Vajravārāhī. Their ‘union’ is the defining characteristic of *mahāmudrā*.”¹¹⁶ Here we see *mudrā* used for the female consort identi-

Kambala was either the guru or grand guru of Tilopa suggest that he was active no later than the tenth century. See Gray 2007: 23. The quotation reads as follows: “The *Dvikalparājā* states: ‘The great seal, situated in the navel with the form of the tip of a blazing lamp, is the first letter (*a*), conceived by the wise to be wisdom.’” SN *Herukāvidhāna* fol. 1b.6: *dvikalparājñō / mahāmudrā sthitā nabhau jvaladdīpaśikhākārā / ādisvarasvabhāvā sā dhīti budhaili prakalpītā //*; SN D fol. 2a: *yang brtag pa’i rgyal po gnyis pa las / lte bar phyag rgya chen po gnas // ’bar ba mar me’i rtse lta bu // dbyangs yig dang po’i rang bzhin te // blo zhes sangs rgyas rnam kyis brtag / ces gsungs so /*. This corresponds to HT 2.4.40c–41b, but it differs considerably from the text edited in Snellgrove (1959: 2.66). It may represent an old variant of this text.

¹¹⁴ Bhavabhaṭṭa glosses this text as follows: *ādisiddhā prakṛtisiddhā mahāmudrā devatā* (Pandey 2002: 526).

¹¹⁵ See Gray 2007: 23.

¹¹⁶ */ dpal he ru ka yang dag sbyor // zhes bya ba ni / dpal he ru ka ni bdag nyid do // rdo rje phag mo ni phyag rgya ste / de dag gi yang dag par sbyor ba ni phyag rgya chen po’i mtshan nyid do /* (SN D fol. 2b); [*śrītheruka*]*saṃyogam iti / śrītherukam ātmā mudrā vajravārāhī / tayoh̐ saṃyogaḥ mahāmudrālakṣaṇam /* (SN *Herukāvidhāna* fol. 2a.2–3). The first syllables of this passage – almost assuredly *śrītheruka* as attested by the root text, the Tibetan translation and the commentary itself – is lost due to damage to the

fied with Vajravārāhī, while *mahāmudrā* seems to be used in the sense of spiritual accomplishment and/or realization of ultimate reality achieved through such union.

We find a similar use of terminology in the Guhyasamāja tradition. This text opens with the infamous narrative context (*nidāna*) verse, “Thus have I heard at one time the Lord was residing in the vulvae of the adamantine ladies, the essence of the body, speech and mind of all tathāgatas.”¹¹⁷ Needless to say, the exact nature of the Buddha’s abode here inspired interesting commentary. Probably the earliest datable commentary on the *Guhyasamāja* was that composed by Vilāsavajra, who was active circa the late eighth century according to Davidson.¹¹⁸ He had the following to say about this matter: “The **lady** indicates the consort (*mudrā*). **The Lord was residing** in the place of her reality source (*dharmodaya*).¹¹⁹ What a great wonder!”¹²⁰ Later commentators interpreted the term *mudrā* here in different ways. Candrakīrti, in his *Pradīpodyotana* commentary, seems to understand it in terms of a human female. He cites an explanatory Tantra (*vyākhyātantra*) that explains: “The **lady** is the well-sanctified consort. [Her] well-sanctified lotus is the **vulva**. **Was residing** means Vajradhṛk positioned there in the form of a drop.”¹²¹ On the other hand, the commentator *Rab-tu-dga’-ba’i*

manuscript.

¹¹⁷ Matsunaga 1978: 4: *evaṃ mayā śrutam ekasmin samaye bhagavān sarvatathāgatakāyavākcittahṛdayavajrayoṣidbhageṣu vijahāra.*

¹¹⁸ See Davidson 1981: 6–7.

¹¹⁹ The term *bhaga*, “vulva,” and the euphemism *dharmodaya*, “reality source,” are often used interchangeably in this literature. Here Vilāsavajra glosses *bhaga* with *dharmodaya*, while Bhavabhaṭṭa, in his CT commentary, glosses *dharmodaya* with *bhaga*. See Gray 2007: 181 n. 1, and Pandey 2002: 48.

¹²⁰ *Śrīparamādya-nāma-mahāyānakalparāja*, fol. 92a: / *btsun mo zhes pa ni phyag rgya’i don to // bcom ldan ’das chos kyi ’byung gnas de’i gnas na bzhugs so zhes bya ba de ni ngo mtshar che’o* /.

¹²¹ Candrakīrti, *Pradīpodyotana-nāma-ṭīkā*:
yoṣit susaṃskṛtā mudrā bhagaṃ padmaṃ susaṃskṛtam /
vijahāra sthītas tatra bindurūpeṇa vajradhṛk // (Cakravartī 1984: 14); D fol. 10a: / *btsun mo legs sbyangs phyag rgya ste // legs sbyangs padma bha ga yin // bzhugs la rdo rje ’dzin pa der // thig le gzugs kyis gnas pa’o* /. Many

'byung-gnas go-cha,¹²² in commenting on the title *Guhyasamāja*, wrote: "The **Secret** is thus the assembly of all gods in the vulva of Prajñāpāramitā. Moreover, the secret is the goddess, and the **community** [the deity] assembly together with of Bodhicittavajra."¹²³

The creative identification of human and divine consorts, which can in turn symbolize ultimate reality, is at work in the identification of the 'lady' with both Prajñāpāramitā, the mother of the buddhas who symbolizes their gnosis as well as the human consort who, presumably, is understood to embody the goddess and the gnosis of ultimate reality that she symbolizes. The consort is thus a symbol of the goddess who symbolizes in turn the gnosis of ultimate reality, *buddhajñāna*. The eleventh century commentator Vīravajra glossed "direct vision of *mahāmudrā*" as "emptiness of the sphere of reality (*dharmadhātu*)."¹²⁴ As David Snellgrove noted, *mahāmudrā* can refer both to the consort and to the "absolute truth as realized through her" (1987: 265). This idea is quite old; the *Trailokyavijaya*, as noted above, equated ultimate reality with *mahāmudrā*.¹²⁵ The *Śrīparamādyā-mantrakalpakhaṇḍa* likewise contains what appears to be an example of this usage:

Now I will explain the sublime *mahāmaṇḍala*, the supreme Mahā-sukhavajra famed as the sublime convention (*mahāsamaya*). In the center [of the consecrated ground] in accordance with the procedure, [the master], having been equiposed in the Great Seal (*mahāmudrā*), should create the *maṇḍala* there.¹²⁶

thanks to Christian Wedemeyer for bringing the Sanskrit text of this work to my attention.

¹²² This author was certainly Indian; possible reconstructions of his name might include *Pramuditākaravarman.

¹²³ Rab-tu-dga'-ba'i 'byung-gnas go-cha, *Śrīguhyasamājantrarājaṭikā-candrāprabhā-nāma*, fol. 120b: 'di ltar gsang ba ste / shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i bha gar lha thams cad tshogs pa'o // yang na gsang ba ni lha mo ste / de rnam byang chub kyi sems rdo rje dang lhan cig tshogs pa ni 'dus pa'o /.

¹²⁴ See PD 355a; the larger passage in which this gloss is embedded is translated in Gray 2007: 28.

¹²⁵ See note 30 above.

¹²⁶ PA 175b: / de nas yang dag bshad bya ba // dkylil 'khor chen po dam pa

Here *mahāmudrā* appears to be used in precisely its sense of ultimate reality, which is contemplated prior to the creation of the *maṇḍala*. This idea is further developed in the *Hevajratantra*, where we find *mahāmudrā* as a clear label of ultimate reality. The passage in question, from *kalpa* one, chapter eight, reads as follows, in Snellgrove’s translation:

The whole of existence arises in me, in me arises the threefold world, by me pervaded is this all, of naught else does this world consist. Whatever yogin, thinking thus, should perform the practice in complete control, he will succeed, there is no doubt, even though he is a man of little merit. Eating, drinking, performing ablutions, awake, asleep, it is thus that he should think, and so seeking after the Great Symbol [*mahāmudrā*], he will gain thereby the eternal state (Snellgrove 1959: 1.77).

It is important to note that this passage occurs immediately after a description of the four joys system of sexual yoga. It thus seems to be describing a realization of ultimate reality, signified by *mahāmudrā*, which can be attained via the practice of union with a consort. This notion is confirmed by one of the *Hevajra* explanatory Tantras (*vyākhyātantra*), the *Vajrapañjara*, which explains that: “The method of the perfection of wisdom is a term for ‘yoginī,’ who is served for the sake of union with the great consort (*mahāmudrā*).”¹²⁷ Likewise, the *Samvarodaya*, a text usually identified as a Cakrasaṃvara *vyākhyātantra*, states that “The complete awakening in great bliss is thus the supreme Mahāmudrā.”¹²⁸ Mahāmudrā is thus a goal to be achieved via practice with a physical consort, a *karmamudrā*.

Eventually the older system of four *mudrās* was redefined in terms of different types of consorts. Thus, the *mudrā* who is, as

ste // bde ba chen po rdo rje mchog / dam tshig dam pa'i ming can yin // dkyil 'khor gnas ni 'dus byas nas // de dbus cho ga bzhin du ni // phyag rgya chen po mnyam gzhag nas // der ni dkyil 'khor bsgrub par bya /. Many thanks to Christian Wedemeyer for his assistance with the translation of this passage.

¹²⁷ *Vajrapañjaratantra*, 54b: / *shes rab pha rol phyin pa'i thabs // rnal 'byor ma zhes mngon par brjod // phyag rgya chen po'i sbyor ba las // gang phyir de nyid bsten pa yi /*.

¹²⁸ Tsuda 1974: 79: *mahāsukhābhisambodhir mahāmudrā parā tathā*.

Jayabhadra put it, an “outer women” becomes the *karmamudrā*, the “actual consort.” But the consort who is mentally visualized is the *jñānamudrā*, the “gnostic consort,” or even, when we move to an even higher level of abstraction, the *samayamudrā*, the “symbolic consort.” Here the *mudrā* qua consort transforms to a *mudrā* qua insignia, a *khaṭvāṅga* staff in the case of Vajravārāhī. And *mahāmudrā* ultimately becomes the *mudrā* qua consort qua symbol; it is the realization of ultimate reality or *buddhajñāna*, as symbolized by the goddess Prajñāpāramitā, who in turn is reflected in the various other goddesses, and, ultimately, in the woman who serves as a consort. Perhaps it is most accurate to say that the term *mahāmudrā*, as a term of art in the Yoginītantras, is ultimately untranslatable, as it expresses in a compound of two words with four syllables a wide range of meanings; to attempt to reduce the term to any one of these, while not technically incorrect, nonetheless results in a distortion and a loss.

Yet this does not exhaust the semantic range of this term; as Roger Jackson points out, *mahāmudrā* also came to have a third, intermediary level of meaning. Not only does it designate the consort (real or imagined) with whom one practices and the realization that one is aiming to attain, but it also comes to designate “one of a sequence of *mudrās* corresponding to various Buddhist concepts, experiences, and path-stages” (2005: 5596). We find this idea elaborated particularly in the latter commentarial tradition. For example, the “bodhisattva commentator” Vajrapāṇi, in his late tenth or early eleventh century¹²⁹ commentary on the *Cakrasaṃvara*, the *Laghutantraṭīkā*, was not deterred by the fact that among the various *mudrās*, only *mahāmudrā* is mentioned by name. He proceeded to outline a complex system of practice in which *mahāmudrā* designated not only the goal, but also a stage of practice on the path to it, as follows:

Now, since Prajñāpāramitā is endowed with the perfection of all forms, the Lord stated in this Tantra that she is the “achievement of

¹²⁹ Claudio Cicuzza dates this commentary to the early phase of Kālacakra exegesis, and argues that it was most likely composed between 967 and 1026 CE, when most of the other early Kālacakra texts were composed. See Cicuzza 2001: 25–26.

pleasure,” because it is a Wisdom Tantra. The *yogī* “should meditate upon” this “achievement of pleasure.” Here “pleasure” refers to Vajrasattva of great passion, great aim, the supreme imperishable,¹³⁰ and “achievement” is the great consort (*mahāmudrā*) Prajñāpāramitā, endowed with all perfect forms. Moreover, his passion is non-conceptual great compassion, and the achievement is the conceptual great emptiness, as they are [conceived in] the self-awareness of the *yogīs*. In the achievement of the actual and gnostic consorts, there is the supreme achievement. “For the sake of Buddhahood, one should meditate on her, namely, the great consort (*mahāmudrā*), who is the achievement of pleasure [in which] all is known, all forms are known, the path is known, the forms of the path are known, and who bestows the Buddha qualities such as the ten powers and the four fearlessnesses, and so forth.”¹³¹

¹³⁰ Here and below I translate the Sanskrit *paramākṣaraḥ* following the Tibetan *mchog tu mi 'gyur ba*. This might also be translated as “the supreme syllable,” and in some contexts this compound refers to the syllable *om*.

¹³¹ Cicuzza 2001: 123–124: *tad eva prajñāpāramitā sarvākāraavaropetā sā cāsmiṃ tantrē kāmasiddhir ity uktā bhagavatā prajñātantratvād iti | tāṃ kāmasiddhiṃ bhāvayed yogī | iha kāmo mahārāgo vajrasattvo mahārthaḥ paramākṣaraḥ | siddhir mahāmudrā prajñāpāramitā sarvākāraavaropetā iti | athavā kāmo nirālambā mahākaruṇā siddhir sālambā mahāsūnyateti yogināṃ svasaṃvedyatvād iti | karmamudrājñānamudrāsiddhyor uttarā siddhiḥ | tāṃ mahāmudrāṃ kāmasiddhiṃ sarvajñatāṃ sarvākārajñatāṃ mārgajñatāṃ mārgākārajñatāṃ daśabalacaturvaiśāradyādibuddhaguṇadāyakiṃ bhāvayed buddhatvāya |*; LT 124a,b: */ de nyid shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa rnam pa thams cad kyi mchog dang ldan pa'o // de yang rgyud 'dir bcom ldan 'das kyi 'dod pa'i dngos grub tu gsungs te shes rab kyi rgyud 'di nyid las so // 'dod pa'i dngos grub de rnal 'byor pas bsgom par bya'o // 'dir 'dod pa ni 'dod chags chen po rdo rje sems dpa' don chen po mchog tu mi 'gyur ba'o // dngos grub ni phyag rgya chen po shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa rnam pa thams cad kyi mchog dang ldan pa'o // de ltar na 'dod pa ni dmigs pa med pa'i snying rje chen po'o // dngos grub ni dmigs pa dang bcas pa'i chen po stong pa nyid de rnal 'byor pa rnam kyi sa rang rig pa nyid kyi phyir ro // las kyi phyag rgya dang ye shes kyi phyag rgya'i dngos grub dag las gong ma'i yang gong ma'i dngos grub bo // phyag rgya chen po 'dod pa'i dngos grub de ni thams cad mkhyen pa nyid dang rnam pa thams cad mkhyen pa nyid dang lam mkhyen pa nyid dang lam gyi rnam pa thams cad mkhyen pa nyid dang stobs bcu dang mi 'jigs pa bzhi la sogs pa sangs rgyas kyi yon tan mtha' dag ster bar byed pa mo ste | sangs rgyas nyid kyi phyir bsgom par bya'o |*

Here we see again the equation of *mahāmudrā* with the goal of practice, personified by the goddess Prajñāpāramitā. He then goes into greater depth describing this meditation practice, which he divides into two stages, “prior image meditation” (*pūrvabimbabhāvanā*) and “subsequent image mediation,” which appear to be visualization practices associated with perfecting stage meditation. He describes them as follows:

Now, this meditation has two aspects, prior image meditation and subsequent image mediation. Prior image meditation is meditation on the signs of smoke, etc.,¹³² the ultimate image. When the image is seen, one places the penis in the vulva, then there is the meditation on the subsequent image, the supreme imperishable, for the sake of increasing of bliss. Moreover, in order to produce great bliss, one should then abandon the actual or gnostic consort, and meditate on the great consort. Regarding the prohibition on meditation with a physical or visualized consort, the Lord stated [the following] in the *Paramādibuddha [Tantra]* in Twelve Thousand [Stanzas]: “Having abandoned the actual consort, and set aside the gnostic consort, meditate upon the great consort through the yoga of the supreme imperishable.” With respect to the first action, the prior meditation, [it also states]: “Unceasing supreme bliss is obtained in the vulva (*yoni*) as long as the *yogī* does not emit seminal essence. One should always visualize oneself as the Buddha image, endowed with a blissful form, as long as one keeps one’s semen stabilized.” This adamant expression should be understood in the context of consecration.¹³³

¹³² I presume that *dhūmādinimitta* refers to the eight signs seen during the dying process, and visualized in some traditions of perfecting stage meditation.

¹³³ Cicuzza 2001: 124: *asyaiva bhāvanā dvidhā / pūrvabimbabhāvanā paścādbimbabhāvanā / pūrvabimbabhāvanā dhūmādinimittabhāvanā bim-baparyantam / dr̥ṣṭe bimbe bhage liṅgam pratiṣṭhāpayitvā paścādbhāvanā paramākṣarasukhavṛddhyartham / punaḥ karmamudrām jñānamudrām parityajya mahāmudrām bhāvayen mahāsukhavṛddhaye / iha karmamudrā-jñānamudrābhāvanāpratiṣedho dvādaśasāhasrike paramādibuddhe bhagavatoktaḥ / tathā bhagavān āha – karmamūdraṃ parityajya jñāmudrām vi-kalpitām / paramākṣarayogena mahāmudrām vibhāvayet // iti tathādikar-maṇi pūrvabimbabhāvanā / yāvan na kurute yogī bodhicittavisarjanam / yo-nau prāpnoty avicchinnam tāvad ānandam uttamam // tenaiva sukharūpeṇa saṃyutaṃ buddhabimbakam / bhāvayen nityam ātmānam yāvaca chukram*

Clearly, by the time this text was composed, if not earlier, a highly sophisticated path of practice had been developed that was articulated in terms of the *mudrā*, with the *mahāmudrā* representing the ultimate stage of this path. These systems almost certainly influenced the later Tibetan systems of Mahāmudrā practice.

While this system became the predominant one by Vajrapāṇi’s time, there were other, earlier classifications of *mudrā* that are of considerable interest. The *Tattvasaṃgraha* contains numerous passages¹³⁴ that deploy the terminology of the classical four *mudrās* in terms that evoke sexual practices. A striking example reads as follows:

sthīrībhavet // iti / idam api vajrapadaṃ sekārthenāvagantavyam /; LT 124b–125a: / 'di nyid bsgom pa rnam pa gnyis te / sngon du gzugs brnyan sgom pa dang / phyi nas gzugs brnyan bsgom pa'o // sngon du gzugs brnyan bsgom pa ni du pa la sogs pa'i mtshan ma gzugs brnyan gyi mthar thug par bsgom pa'o // phyi nas bsgom pa ni gzugs brnyan mthong ba nas bha gar līngā rab tu bkod de mchog tu mi 'gyur ba'i bde ba 'phel ba'i don du bsgom pa'o // slar yang bde ba chen po 'phel ba'i phyir las kyi phyag rgya dang ye shes kyi phyag rgya yongs su spangs te phyag rgya chen po bsgom par bya'o // 'dir las kyi phyag rgya dang ye shes kyi phyag rgya bsgom pa dgag pa ni bcom ldan 'das kyis mchog gi dang bo'i sangs rgyas stong phrag bcu gnyis par gsungs so // de ltar yang bcom ldan 'das kyis gsungs pa / las kyi phyag rgya yongs dor zhing // ye shes phyag rgya rnam spangs te // mchog tu mi 'gyur rnal 'byor gyis // phyag rgya chen po rnam bsgom bya // zhes pa de bzhin du sngon du las dang po pa'i bsgom pa ni / ji srid byang chub sems 'dor ba // de srid rnal 'byor pas mi bya // rgyun mi 'chad par skye gnas la // mchog tu dga' ba thob par 'gyur // bde ba'i rang bzhin de nyid kyis // ji srid khu ba brtan pa'i phyir // rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas gzugs brnyan gyi // bdag nyid rtog tu bsgom par bya // zhes pa ste rdo rje'i tshig 'di yang dbang bskur ba'i don gyis rtogs par bya'o /.

¹³⁴ See as well the passage above that uses the term *samayamudrā* in reference to what appears to be female consorts in the sexual practices connected with the initiatory process. This is clearly a departure from the ‘exoteric’ meaning of *samayamudrā* qua hand gesture, but it also cannot be assumed that this refers to the *samayamudrā* of later sexual yoga systems, in which the term designates a visualized consort, a chaste alternative to sexual practices with an “actual consort” (For examples of such usage see Gray 2007: 171–172 n. 2, and 377 n. 8). I believe that that *Tattvasaṃgraha* was composed around the time that the sexual practices were beginning to gain currency in Buddhist circles; it thus represents an early stage of the development of this practice tradition.

Should one equipoise the two organs and search for treasure, one will obtain the treasure through interpenetration (*samāveśa*),¹³⁵ meditating upon the great seal (*mahāmudrā*). Should one bind the highest pledge making love with a woman, one will point out the treasure there where the seal is fixed. Should one equipoise the two organs and search for treasure, one will produce the treasure that is gnosis, meditating upon the gnostic seal (*jñānamudrā*). Binding the actual seal (*karmamudrā*) with the concentration of the two organs, one will point out the treasure there where that seal will manifest.¹³⁶

While the exact meanings of *mahāmudrā*, *jñānamudrā*, and *karmamudrā* here are not completely clear, there does appear to be continuity with the later traditions. The association of the *karmamudrā* with the “two organs” seems to imply sexual union with an actual consort for the sake of the attainment of magical power, in this case the power of treasure finding. However, the other two serve as objects of the verb “meditating,” suggesting the possibility that, as in the case of the later traditions, the *jñānamudrā* may be a visualized consort, and *mahāmudrā* the goal or ultimate stage of practice.

¹³⁵ Regarding the translation of *samāveśa* – a key tantric technical term in its own right – as “interpenetration,” see Smith 2006: 371–372.

¹³⁶ My translation of the Sanskrit edited in Yamada 1981: 398: *dvayendriyasamāpattiyā nidhānaṃ parimārgayet / bhāvayaṃs tu mahāmudrāṃ samāveśān nidhiṃ labhet // badhvā tu samayāgrīn vai rāmayāṃs tu striyan tathā / yatra mudrā dṛḍhībhūyān nidhin tatra vinirdiśet // dvayendriyasamāpattiyā nidhānaṃ parimārgayet / bhāvayaṃ jñānamudrāṃ tu nidhijñānaṃ pravartate // badhvā tu karmamudrāṃ vai dvayendriyasamādhitaḥ / sphuṭet yatra tu sā mudrā nidhin tatra vinirdiśet iti //*; ST 98b: / *dbang po gnyis ni mnyam sbyar la // gter rnams kun du tshol byed cing // phyag rgya chen po bsgoms na ni // babs par gyur na gter rnyed do // dam tshig mchog ni bcings nas kyang // bud med dang ni rtse byed cing // gang du phyag rgya dam gyur pa // de na gter ni yod par bshad // dbang po gnyis ni mnyam sbyar na // gter rnams kun du tshol byed cing // ye shes phyag rgya bsgoms nas ni // gter gyi ye shes 'jug par 'gyur // dbang po gnyis kyi ting gyis // las kyi phyag rgya bcings nas ni // gang du phyag rgya gnyis gyur pa // de na gter ni yod par bshad /*; cf. Snellgrove 1987: 268–269. Note that like Snellgrove I translate *sphuṭet* as “will manifest,” rather than following the Tibetan, which reads “divided,” *gnyis gyur pa*.

On the other hand, another Tantra presents a system of *mudrā* that appears to be completely independent of the earlier schema advanced in Yogatantras such as the *Tattvasaṃgraha*, or the later tradition advocated by the ninth, tenth, and eleventh century commentators of major systems such as the *Cakrasaṃvara*, *Hevajra*, and *Laghukālacakra* Tantras. This text is the *Vajrāmṛtatantra*, a text which, as the title “Vajra Ambrosia” suggests, is powerfully erotic.¹³⁷ While its exact dates are unknown, it closely follows the Mahāsukha Vajrasattva tradition first advanced by the Śrīparamādyā Tantras.¹³⁸ Based on its content, I estimate that it was likely composed around the same time as the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra*, circa the late eighth or early ninth century. Like that text, the absence of the technical terminology of the advanced perfecting stage yoga systems suggests it was composed before these systems were developed, beginning in the early ninth century. It is presided over by Mahāsukha Vajrasattva and his consort, who here is Māmakī rather than Mānavajriṇī.¹³⁹ Its exhausts a great deal space discussing the more erotic rites which occur in the *gaṇacakra* such as the *yonipūjā*¹⁴⁰ and the production of the five ambrosias (*pañcāmṛta*).¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ The text’s title, “Adamantine Ambrosia,” or “ambrosia of the *vajra*” (*vajrāmṛta*), is a term used within the text for the sacrament of mixed sexual fluids. See note 139 below.

¹³⁸ For more information on a major Vajrasattva practice tradition rooted in the Śrīparamādyā scriptures see Astley 2006.

¹³⁹ These two goddesses, however, are apparently closely related if not identical, in that they are names used for the chief consort of Vajrasattva in different Vajrasattva traditions. Tsong Khapa commented, in his *Illumination of the Hidden Meaning* commentary on the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra* that “Māmakī is an appellation for Mānavajriṇī.” See Tsong Khapa, *bde mchog bsdus pa’i rgyud kyi rgya cher bshad pa sbas pa’i don kun gsal ba*, fol. 69a: / *māmakī zhes pa rdo rje bsnnyems ma la bod pa’o* /.

¹⁴⁰ The VA describes the production of the *vajrāmṛta* as follows: “Produce passion for the secret *maṇḍala*, and twirling your tongue, take up with your mouth the great bliss, the adamantine ambrosia. Then one will quickly succeed.” (VA 17b: / *gsang ba’i dkyil ’khor la ’dod byas // lce ni dril bar byas nas su // kha yis padmar blang bar bya // rdo rje dbud rtsi bde ba che // de nas myur bar dngos grub bo* /)

¹⁴¹ The VA characterizes the *pañcāmṛta* as follows: “Prepare everyday the five adamantine ambrosias, with the human flesh (*mahāmāṃsa*), human

The text, as was increasingly common in tantric Buddhism from the eighth century onward, unites eroticism with meditative disciplines. The following passage is characteristic:

The Blessed Adamantine Lord Vajrāmṛta Mahāsukha said: “Listen, Māmakī, regarding the origination of *mudrā* and *mantra*, I say that there are three types of *mudrā*, arising from Body, Speech and Mind. The Body is the supreme consort (*phyag rgya mchog*), and speech the *mudrā* which is the activity of mantra. The symbolic *mudrā* of mind is the concentration that exists figuratively and nondualistically. The *mudrā* of union should be known from the *Vajrāmṛta Mahātantra*. The symbolic *mudrā* is not drawn, but is the *mudrā* of manifest form. The deity is the divine woman. Worship the lotus of her vulva with all of one’s faculties, blissfully. Uniting the vajra and lotus, all ritual activities will succeed.”¹⁴²

This typology of three *mudrās* correlating to the three secrets of body, speech and mind is quite interesting, as is the correlation of the body to the “highest” one, the *phyag rgya mchog*, which could possibly, but not necessarily, be a translation of *mahāmudrā*. If so, it would be a perfect encapsulation of creation stage (*utpattikrama*) practices, connecting the body with the older sense of *mahāmudrā* qua divine image. At the same time, it points toward the developing perfecting stage methodology that focuses on the body and tactile experience rather than the mind and mental states.¹⁴³ The other two correspond respectively to the *dharmamudrā* and the *samaya-*

blood (*mahārudhira*), and likewise with feces, urine and semen.” (VA 18a: / sha chen dang ni khrag chen gyis // de bzhin bshag gcī khu ba dag / de dag rdo rje bdud rtsi lnga // nyin dang nyid du bsgrub par bya /)

¹⁴² VA 19b: / rdo rje bdud rtsi bde chen po // bcom ldan rdo rje can 'di gsungs // phyag rgya sngags dag 'byung ba ni // bshad de nyon cig mā ma kī // phyag rgya rnam pa gsum gsungs te // sku dang gsung dang thugs las 'byung // sku ni phyag rgya mchog 'gyur te // gsung ni phyag rgya sngags kyi las // thugs kyi mtshan ma'i phyag rgya ni // bsam gtan rim mo gnyis med gnas // rdo rje bdud rtsi rgyud chen las // sbyor ba'i phyag rgya shes bya ste // mtshan ma'i phyag rgya mi brī'o // phyag rgya mngon gzugs yin te // lha ni lha mo bud med do // dbang po thams cad bde ba ru // bha ga'i padmar mchod par bya // rdo rje padma mnyam sbyor zhing // las thams cad ni 'grub par bya /.

¹⁴³ See Germano 1994: 220–21.

mudrā of the later systems. This scripture, however, did not seem to have left a strong impact, on the Tibetan traditions at least.¹⁴⁴ It thus remains nothing more than an interesting footnote in the larger history of the concept of *mudrā* in South Asian Buddhist tradition.

4. *Mudrā* and polysemy

I would like to end where we began, with the term *mudrā* and the controversy concerning its interpretation in the passage from Anaṅgavajra’s text cited in section one above. The argument that I advanced above, namely that *mudrā* has four basic meanings, is itself a simplification, and one of limited value. The first meaning, ‘seal,’ and, by extension ‘symbol,’ itself contains a vast range of potential significations. Moreover, as examples above have undoubtedly shown, it is not always easy to identify the meaning implied by a given use of the term. In fact, I believe that it is undoubtedly the case that the authors of these texts were typically aware of the polysemy of the technical terminology they employed, and often used it playfully, deploying double entendre.¹⁴⁵ As a result, it is often impossible, and arguably undesirable, to reduce terms such as *mudrā* to a single meaning. For example, chapter thirty-six of the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra* opens with the following verse: “And then there is the great worship of the consort that is famed as the laying down of mantra. Have no doubt that this consort worship rapidly achieves power.”¹⁴⁶ While on the surface this seems to imply worship of a consort, the reference to *mantranyāsa* implies that it could also involve manipulation of subtle physiology. Indeed, worship with an “outer consort” could very well also entail the manipulation of the subtle physiology via subtle yogic ‘seals.’ In passages

¹⁴⁴ Only three commentaries on this text were translated into Tibetan (To. 1649–51). I am not aware of this text or associated practice traditions playing a significant role in any of the major Tibetan Buddhist orders.

¹⁴⁵ The very title of the Tantra discussed above, the *vajrāmṛta*, may very well be an example of double entendre.

¹⁴⁶ My translation from my edition (2012) of CT 36.1: *atha mudrāmahāpūjā mantranyāsaprakīrtitā | āśusiddhikarā hy ete mudrāpūjā na saṃśayaḥ ||*; cf. Pandey 2002: 533. See also Gray 2007: 265.

such as Anaṅgavajra's *Prajñopayaviniścayasiddhi*, key terms such as *mudrā* often cannot be safely interpreted in a singular fashion. The mistake made by both Bhattacharyya and Bagchi was simply insisting on a singular meaning. In the case of this passage in the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra*, the commentator Vīravajra explains that it refers to *both*, that is, union with a female consort, a *mudrā*, in which the *yogī* lays down *mudrā* qua yogic seals to reverse the flow of semen, as follows:

Having thus explained the destruction of the Lord of Death, now I will explain the secret fire sacrifice via the path of passion. **And then** there is stated the **great worship of the consort**, and so forth. The hero and *yoginī*, having practiced the four [creation stages of] service and worship (*sevāsādhana*), make oblations of seminal essence with the ladle of the secret vajra into the fire pit of the lady's vulva: this is what is called the **great worship of the consort**. If the seminal essence "goes" to the bliss of cessation, then in the state of concentration one lays down mantra, i.e., one reverses [its flow]. These [practices of the] **worship of the consort** rapidly achieve the twelve ritual actions.¹⁴⁷

Other texts play with the ambiguity of the term *mudrā* in other ways, using it as a double sign pointing toward both hand gestures and female consorts. For example, the ninth *kalpa* of the *Sarvabuddhasamāyoga* describes a *mudrā*, the name of which might tentatively be rendered as the "*śrī samaya* of the universal golden age" (*kun tu sna tshogs skal pa bzang po dpal dam tshig ces bya ba'i phyag rgya*), which is abstractly described as follows:

Neither passionate nor dispassionate, nor observed in the middle, this application of the magic of all women is the supreme vehicle of non-duality. If one is sealed with this *mudrā*, one can come, go and fly as desired. The glorious self of all magic attains Vajrasattva. It

¹⁴⁷ PD 427a: / de ltar 'chi bdag 'joms pa bshad nas da ni chags pa'i lam gyis gsang ba'i sbyin sreg bshad pa ni / de nas / phyag rgya'i mchod pa chen po dang // zhes bya ba la sogs pa smos te / dpa' bo dang rnal 'byor ma bsnyen sgrub bzhis sbyangs nas btsun mo yum gyi bha ga'i thab khung du gsang ba'i rdo rje'i dgang gzar gyis byang chub sems kyi da gang blugs byed pa ni phyag rgya'i mchod chen zhes bya'o // byang chub sems dga' bral du song na bde ba'i ting nge 'dzin nyams nas sngags dgod pa bzlog pa ste / nang gi sbyin sreg gi phyag rgya'i mchod pa 'di dag ni las bcu gnyis myur du grub par byed pa yin no /.

is the knowledge of the *mudrā* of the goddess of all magic. Neither existent nor non-existent, unperceived in the middle, union with Prajñāpāramitā achieves the awakening of the Buddhas. Everything has the characteristic of space, and space moreover has no characteristics. Everything, the three worlds without exception, is illusory, everywhere seen and felt like an illusion. Not being conceivable in this way is the mode of all beings. The *yogī*, with this *mudrā*, comes, goes and flies as he pleases. Women, etc., are the supreme treasure, ranging everywhere made of space. Through uniting oneself to the insubstantial, one is equalized with space, and will always attain the union of the *ḍākinīs*’ magic. Just as the red lotus is not defiled by the fault of passion, thus one possessed of *yoga* will not be defiled by the fault of abiding (*gnas kyi nyes pa*).¹⁴⁸

Since this passage is embedded in series of descriptions of different hand gestures, a reader would reasonably expect that this passage too uses the term *mudrā* in this sense. Yet this passage is clearly ambiguous, and could also be read as referring to female consorts, given the erotic language.

It is clear that the rich complexity of tantric literature is, in part, made possible through polysemous terms such as *mudrā*. Already, by the early eighth century, the term was used with a wide range of meanings, designating a seal and symbol, hand gestures, and human or divine consorts. The later Buddhist tantric traditions inherited and expanded upon these meanings, adding at least one more, the ‘seals’ of subtle yogic practices. But the authors of tantric literature, who were so fond of pushing and transgressing bound-

¹⁴⁸ SD 175b–176a: / *bud med kun gyi sgyu sbyor 'di // gnyis su med pa'i theg pa'i mchog / phyag rgya 'di yis btab na ni // 'dod pa bzhin du 'gro 'ong lding // dpal ldan sgyu ma kun gyi bdag / rdo rje sems dpa' rab tu 'grub // sgyu ma thams cad kyi lha mo'i phyag rgya shes pa'o // yod pa ma yin med pa'ang min // dbu mar yang ni dmigs su med // shes rab pha rol phyin sbyor ba // sangs rgyas byang chub rab 'grub pa'o // thams cad nam mkha'i mtshan nyid de // nam mkha' la yang mtshan nyid med // khams gum dag ni ma lus pa // thams cad sgyu ma lta bu ste // ji ltar sgyu ma thams cad du // mthong ba dang ni reg par 'gyur // dmigs su yod pa'ang ma yin te // de bzhin 'gro ba kun gyi tshul // phyag rgya 'di yis rnal 'byor pa // 'dod pa bzhin du 'gro 'ong lding // bud med la sogs rin chen mchog / mkha' las dngos rnam thams cad spyod // dngos po med par bdag sbyor bas // nam mkha' kun dang mnyam sbyor ba // mkha' 'gro sgyu ma bde ba'i mchog /.*

aries, likewise challenged and extended dramatically the semantic range of key terms such as *mudrā*. This point is made quite clearly in the *Mahāmudrātilaka*, a Hevajra *vyākhyātantra* that dates no earlier than the tenth century. Its ninth chapter presents the following extended discourse on the many meanings of the term *mudrā*:

Now I will explain the signification of *mudrā*. The earring (*kuṇḍala*), the choker (*kaṇṭhikā*), the wheel (*cakra*), necklace (*rucakā*), ash (*bhasma*) and sacred cord (*brahmāsūtra*) are the six insignia (*mudrā*), which are the Six Perfections of generosity, discipline, tolerance, effort, meditation, and wisdom. Generosity is the reality consort (*dharmamudrā*), discipline the actual consort (*karmamudrā*), tolerance the symbolic consort (*samayamudrā*), effort the concentration [consort] (*samādhi[-mudrā]*), meditation the gnostic consort (*jñānamudrā*), and wisdom the *mahāmudrā*. This should be known as the ultimate [meaning].

One should purify the six sense media. They are well known to be the six consorts (*mudrā*), which should be known as the six clans respectively. The six consorts are in essence goddesses, [their seed syllables being] *yam*, *raṃ*, *laṃ*, *vaṃ*, *aṃ* and *haṃ*. Worship her through the process of the goddesses, her worship being the process of experiential uniformity (*samarasa*), [effected] by means of the processes of control, enjoyment and dissolution. [The six goddesses] are Caṇḍālinī, Rajakī, Ḍombī, Nartī, Kapālinī and Brahmaṇī. Caṇḍālinī is of the Lotus clan, Rajakī is of the Jewel clan, Ḍombī is of the Vajra clan, Nartī is of the Sword (*raḷ gri*) clan, Kapālinī is of the Wheel clan; these are the five consorts, and Brahmaṇī is the gnosis consort (*jñānamudrā*), and she is of the Vajrasattva clan. Brahmaṇī is one's mother, Kapālinī is one's sister, Nartī is one's daughter, Ḍombī is one's wife, Rajakī is one's daughter-in-law, and Caṇḍālinī is one's mother-in-law. They should be worshipped without discursive thought, through the procedure of wisdom and expedience. Through non-discursive thought success is attained in an instant. "Mother" is shown to be mind, and "sister" speech. "Daughter" is body, and "wife" the life force. "Daughter-in-law" is exertion, and "mother-in-law" equality. The channel of power is the "mother," and it is the precious receptacle of the Buddhas. The "sister" is the channel of semen that is in the supreme place. The "daughter" is the channel of blood, which is below the channel of semen. The "wife" is the channel of urine that exists between those two. The "daughter-in-law" is the channel of saliva that exists in the throat, while the "mother-in-law" is the channel of nasal mucous that exists

in the forehead. Mother is known to be earth, sister as water, daughter as fire, wife as wind, daughter-in-law as space, and mother-in-law as non-space. Mother is sweet, sister is sour, daughter is bitter, wife is salty, daughter-in-law is spicy, and mother-in-law is astringent. One should worship them with effort, and one will rapidly attain success. I have explained the clans of the *mudrās* that are difficult to find in the *Yogatantras*.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ *Mahāmudrātilakantra*, 72b–73a: | de nas gshan yang bshad bya ba // phyag rgya'i brda ni rab yin te // rna cha gdu bu 'khor lo dang // mgul do de bzhin thal ba dang // tshangs pa'i skud pa phyag rgya drug / pha rol phyin drug dran pa'o // sbyin pa tshul khrims bzod brtson 'grus // bsam gtan shes rab drug yin no // sbyin pa chos zhes bstan pa ste // tshul khrims las zhes dran pa'o // bzod pa dam tshig ces su dran // brtson 'grus ting 'dzin shes par bya // bsam gtan ye shes zhes byar dran // shes rab ces bya phyag rgya che // don dam par ni shes par bya // skyes mched drug ni dag par bya // phyag rgya drug tu rab tu grags // rigs drug rim par shes par bya // lha mo'i bdag nyid phyag rgya / yaṃ raṃ laṃ vaṃ aṃ haṃ ste // lha mo yi ni rim pas so // de ru mchod pa rab tu bya // mchod pa ro mnyam rim pa'o // thim dang longs spyod dbang gis ni // gnas kun gyi ni de bzhin no // gtum mo btso blag ḍombi dang // gar mkhan thod pa bram ze mo // gtum padma'i rigs yin te // btso blag rin chen rigs su dran // ḍombi rdo rje'i rigs zhes bya // gar mkhan ral gri'i rigs su dran // thod pa can ni 'khor lo'i rigs // de lnga dag pa phyag rgya'o // ye shes phyag rgya bram ze mo // rdo rje sems dpa'i rigs su dran // bran ze mo ni ma yin te // thod pa ma ni sring mor dran // gar mkhan bu mor shes par bya // ḍombi chung mar rab tu grags // btso blag mkhan ni mna' ma yin // gtum mo sgyug mor dran pa'o // shes rab thabs kyi cho ga yis / rtog pa med pas mchod par bya // rnam rtog med pas dngos grub 'grub // ji ltar bsnyen pa skad cig gis // ma ni sems zhes bstan pa ste // gsung ni 'di ru sring mor dran // bu mo skur rnam par grags // chung ma srog ces bya bar dran // mna' ma rtsol bar dran pa ste // sgyug mo mnyam par dran pa'o // ma ni mthu yi rtsa yin te // sangs rgyas rin po che yi snod // sring mo khu ba'i rtsa yin te // mchog ma'i gnas na yod pa'o // bu mo khrag gi rtsa yin te // khu ba'i rtsa yi 'og na yod // chung ma dri chu'i rtsa yin te // gnyis gyi bar na yod pa'o // mna' ma mchi ma'i rtsa yin te // mgrin pa'i gnas na yod pa'o // sgyug mo snabs kyi rtsa yin te // dpral ba'i gnas na yod pa'o // ma ni sa ru shes par bya // sring mo chu ru dran pa'o // bu mo me ni yin par dran // chung ma rlung du rab tu grags // mna' ma de ni nam mkha' ste // sgyug mo nam mkha' ma yin no // ma ni mngar ba yin pa 'gyur // sring mo de ni skyur bar dran // bu mo kha bar shes bya ste // chung ma lan tshvar 'di ru dran // tsha ba de ni mna' ma ste // sgyug mo bska bar dran pa'o // de rnams 'bad pas mchod par bya // myur du dngos grub thob par 'gyur // rnal 'byor las rnyed dka' ba // phyag rgya'i rigs su bdag gis bshad // dpal phyag rgya chen po'i thig le las phyag rgya'i brda dang mchod pa'i cho ga zhes bya ba'i le'u ste dgu pa'o |.

There seems to be no more suitable way to conclude this paper than by ending with a caveat. Given the semantic richness of the Tantras, we would be wise to resist monosemous readings of the tantric texts. This is wise not only due to the polysemy of the terms themselves, but is also advisable given the fact that the interpretation of many of them has changed over time. The task at hand is more modest, yet more profound, and is, first, to chart the range of possible meanings of these terms, and then to explore the politics of their interpretation.

Bibliography and abbreviations

Abbreviations

CT	<i>Cakrasaṃvaratantra</i>
D	Derge (sDe dge) print edition of the Tibetan canon
H	Lha sa print edition of the Tibetan canon
HT	<i>Hevajratantra</i>
K	Kaneko's (1982) catalogue of the rNying-ma rGyud-'bum, mTshem-brag edition
LT	<i>Laghutantraṭīkā</i> (Vajrapāṇi)
MT	<i>Mahāvairocanābhisaṃbodhitantra</i>
PA	<i>Śrīparamādya-mantrakalpakhaṇḍa</i>
PD	<i>Padārthaprakāśikā-nāma-śrīsaṃvaramūlatantraṭīkā</i> (Vīra-vajra)
S	Stog Palace Manuscript of the Tibetan Kanjur
SD	<i>Sarvabuddhasamāyogaḍākinījālasaṃvara-nāma-uttaratantra</i>
SN	<i>Śrīherukābhidhāna-sādhananidhi-pañjikā</i> (Kambala)
ST	<i>Sarvathāgatattvasaṃgraha-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra</i>
T	Taishō Chinese Tripiṭaka
TA	<i>Tantrārthavatāra</i> (Buddhaguhya)
To	Tōhoku catalogue of Derge canon
TV	<i>Trailokyavijaya-mahākālparāja</i>
VA	<i>Vajrāmṛtatantra</i>

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