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Reading the Vajrayāna in Context: A Reassessment of Bengal Blackie

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INTRODUCTION

Among Buddhist traditions, the Indian Vajrayāna often strikes Westerners (and many Asians as well!) as particularly colorful and provocative. Often enough, modern scholars have tended to emphasize, in their interpretations of the Vajrayāna, precisely what is the most colorful and unconventional.

There is something to be said for this approach, because it has the virtue of isolating what is perhaps the most distinctive about the Vajrayāna. But such a hermeneutic also has its problems, because it tends to stereotype the Vajrayāna in various ways, and to read its more distinctive elements in less than their full historical and religious context. This leads to an understanding of the Vajrayāna that is, while not entirely wrong, at least in need of certain corrections.

This emphasis on what is most colorful and distinctive in the Vajrayāna lies behind some prevailing trends in the way in which this tradition is understood in modern scholarship. Thus, for example, the Vajrayāna is sometimes seen as a radical departure from the basic teachings of earlier, conventional Buddhism, and as a tantric cult having more in common with “tantrism” than with classical Buddhism. As a tantric cult, while calling itself Buddhist, it is often seen to flagrantly violate many fundamental principles of earlier Buddhism, condoning the use of alcohol, violence, and sexuality in its rituals.

This way of understanding the Vajrayāna is present in early scholarly writing on the subject. More recently it forms the central hermeneutic in an article appearing in an earlier number of this journal, “Bengal Blackie and the Sacred Slut,” by Professor Lee Siegel.¹ The article seeks to interpret one of the Indian Vajrayāna *Caryāgīti* or songs of realization,² (*Caryāgīti* No. 10 by Kāṇha), attributed to Indian Buddhist *siddhas* or “perfected beings,” the enlightened ideal of the Vajrayāna.³ The *siddhas* of whom we have evidence lived mainly between the eighth and twelfth centuries A.D., during which the Vajrayāna was particularly prominent in India, and perhaps more toward the latter part of this

period.⁴ The *Caryāgīti* come down to us in a modest collection of some fifty songs, half attributed to three *siddhas* (Kāṇha = Kāhṇa = Kṛṣṇācārya, Bhusuku, and Saraha) and the other half attributed to seventeen other, different *siddhas* (among them Kukkuripa, Lūyipa, and Virūpa).⁵ Forty-six of the songs are extant in their original Old Bengali,⁶ with an accompanying commentary in Sanskrit by Munidatta written probably in the thirteenth century.⁷ All fifty songs along with the complete commentary survive in a flawed Tibetan translation by Grags.pa.rgyal.mtshan which is, nevertheless, along with Munidatta's commentary, indispensable to the effort of reconstructing their meaning.⁸

Siegel's article repeats many of the interpretations that have dominated Western writing on the Vajrayāna. It interprets the *Caryāgīti* as an expression of a "heterodox Buddhist cult,"⁹ a "tantric offshoot,"¹⁰ a sect within the larger Vajrayāna, setting itself apart from the latter¹¹ and seeing itself as superior¹² on account of its highly unconventional methods, involving "left-handed" or "sinister" rituals.¹³ In addition, the Vajrayāna of the *Caryāgīti* is interpreted as an out and out rejection of orthodox Buddhism, "a reaction to orthodox Buddhism"¹⁴ that is "scornful of orthodoxy."¹⁵ The Tantric practitioner of the *Caryāgīti* has, we are told, "given up his traditional understanding of Buddhism,"¹⁶ and for him "the more base or forbidden a thing is to the . . . Buddhist monks, the more splendid and desirable it is (to him)."¹⁷ His rejection of conventional Buddhism is epitomized in the "central activity" of *Caryāgīti* practice, sexual intercourse,¹⁸ where "lust is the same as disgust, libertinism as celibacy,"¹⁹ and "*nirvāṇa* . . . quite literally [is] conceived to be a perpetual . . . orgasm."²⁰

Is this interpretation accurate? Followers of the Indian scholar S. B. Das Gupta (see below) might say "yes." Those holding to a later Tibetan understanding might say "no." In my judgment, to answer the question with a simple "yes" or "no" is to belie the complexity of the issue. For the Indian Vajrayāna is not a simple phenomenon, but one that has several major, distinctive phases of development. What holds for one phase may well not hold for another.

My intention in this article is not to say "yes" or "no" to Siegel's interpretation, but rather to try to set his interpretation within the context where it may be valid and to suggest another, more classical context where I feel that it is not appropriate. In brief, Siegel's interpretation is interesting as an hypothesis for what may have been the earliest, pre-Buddhist context of the "Bengal Blackie" song. But when we look at the song within the context of the classical Indian Vajrayāna, then different hermeneutical principles need to be adduced. Siegel does not make this distinction and leaves the reader with an overly simplified understanding of what *Caryāgīti* No. 10 "means."

Let us begin by noting that the Indian Vajrayāna existed in India in one form or another probably for at least a thousand years, and passed through the following major phases:

- 1) *Origins*: This is the period during which the Vajrayāna was taking its initial shape in India, within a larger Tantric and Buddhist context. The length of time during which this process was occurring is entirely conjectural, but in light of later developments it is not unreasonable to assume that the process continued down into the sixth century at least, and perhaps even a little later, but there is no direct evidence of this period.
- 2) *Esoteric Period*: This period extends from the period of origins (during which the foundations of classical Indian Vajrayāna had taken some kind of initial, more or less self-consciously Buddhist shape) down to the mid-eighth century when the Vajrayāna began to gain widespread public attention. During this “esoteric period,” the Vajrayāna seems to have existed entirely outside of the established Buddhist monastic framework. The earliest tantric artifacts found at Nālandā date only from the late eighth or early ninth century²¹ and the first great Pāla Vajrayāna monasteries were built only about the same time. In addition, if the earliest *tantras* and tantric hagiographies are accurate, during the “esoteric period” the Vajrayāna seems to have been practiced largely in secret and to have met with considerable persecution. There appears to be virtually no direct historical evidence of this period either.
- 3) *Earlier Classical Period of General Acceptance*: This period begins with the mid-eighth century when the Vajrayāna found widespread acceptance in India. This acceptance is indicated by the Pāla dynasty’s active patronage of the Vajrayāna beginning about 750 and by its building of several major monastic complexes that were Vajrayānist in orientation (Odantapura and Vikramaśīla in the eighth century and Somapura in the ninth).²² Now the Vajrayāna was accepted as a legitimate Buddhist tradition by the Buddhist establishment, was practiced at the great Buddhist monasteries, and enjoyed the prestige of special royal favor. The public acceptance and stature of the Vajrayāna is perhaps also indicated by the fact that it is in the eighth century that we have the first evidence of Indian Vajrayānist missionaries in greater Asia (Śubhākara, Vajrabodhi, and Amoghavajra in China and Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra in Tibet).

We are in a position to find out something definite about the Indian Vajrayāna as practiced during this period owing to the spectacular finds earlier in this century at Tun-huang in Chinese Turkistan. The Tun-huang collection of Tibetan documents, including Vajrayāna texts, dating from the eighth and ninth centuries, gives evidence of the kind of Vajrayāna that was extant at roughly this period in India.²³ From these documents, initial impressions suggest that the Vajrayāna had already by this time assumed its classical and self-consciously Buddhist form, with its basic Mahāyānist outlook, its liturgical structure and its symbology firmly in place. At the same time, in many respects, the Vajrayāna of this period represents an earlier stage of evolution when compared with later devel-

opments. The Tun-huang documents have the additional value of indicating the antiquity of many Tibetan Nyingma texts, which also apparently go back to this same time period and which may, in time, tell us more about the Indian Vajrayāna of this period.²⁴

- 4) *The Later Classical Period*: We have so far little reliable evidence for the Indian Vajrayāna as it existed between the time of Tun-huang and its reintroduction into Tibet roughly two centuries later. However, in the eleventh century, we see the Indian Vajrayāna again, this time as it is brought into Tibet for a second time, during the time of the second spreading of Buddhism (eleventh–thirteenth centuries). Now, retaining its strong monastic seat, the Indian Vajrayāna is in a more evolved, more systematized and perhaps more conventional form than previously. It is typified in the kind of Vajrayāna taught by the Tibetan Rin.chen.bzang.po, the Indian Atiśa, and the Tibetans Marpa (who studied in India with the *siddha* Nāropa) and ‘Brog.mi (who had studied with the *siddha* Śāntipa), each of whom made important contributions to the type of Vajrayāna that became dominant in Tibet among the Kadam, Sakya, Kagyu, and Gelug traditions. This “later classical period” comes to an end at the close of the twelfth century when Muslim raids on India culminated in Muhammad Ghuri’s devastation of the Buddhist monasteries in northeastern India.
- 5) *Post-Occupation Vajrayāna in India*: This period runs from the thirteenth century down at least to the end of the sixteenth century, when we have evidence through Lama Tāranātha (b. 1575) (who draws on information provided by his Indian guru Buddhaguptanātha) of a vital and widespread Indian Vajrayāna still retaining its earlier classical forms.²⁵

Returning to our subject, realization songs such as *Caryāgīti* No. 10 that Siegel seeks to interpret probably existed through most, if not all, of the above-mentioned periods of the Indian Vajrayāna. Our assessment of Siegel’s interpretations will depend on which of the periods of the Vajrayāna we are attempting to speak about.

In reference to the period of origins and the esoteric period, we have so far virtually no direct evidence. Nevertheless, reading back, one can hazard a guess that the kind of Vajrayāna Siegel speaks about may well have existed then, although such a judgment is largely conjectural. These periods of initial formation and very early development no doubt saw non-monastic yogins with perhaps some connection to Buddhism practicing alongside others with no such connection. Buddhist terminology as well as terminology aligned with other traditions may well have been in general and common use among such people. When it was a question of the epiphany of deities or of communication among highly realized yogins, concern for doctrinally correct Buddhist language, important in the later Vajrayāna, may well have remained in the background. It may also have been that the great masters of such circles of practice had pupils

who were understood to be neither strictly “Buddhist” nor “Hindu,” and were thus remembered as greatly realized ones in both traditions. Perhaps they themselves were more interested in the integrity of their individual lineages than with how they were set within the larger classical Buddhist (or Hindu) traditions. Perhaps in those very early days the identity of such people was blurred, and they were sometimes seen as in revolt against the classical traditions, including Buddhism.

However, as noted, such ideas are no more than conjectural. When we first have a glimpse of the Indian Vajrayāna, it is during the third period (from the Tun-huang evidence and the Tibetan Nyingma tradition) and the fourth period (from the rich evidence of the second spreading of Buddhism in Tibet). *Caryāgīti* No. 10, the specific song that Siegel wishes to interpret, certainly dates—along with the others of the *Caryāgīti* collection—at least from the fourth period, although it may also have existed much earlier as well. Scholars believe that this collection was composed down to the twelfth century, with the bulk of songs being composed perhaps in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and thus certainly very late in the history of the Indian Vajrayāna.²⁶

How applicable is Siegel’s interpretation for the Vajrayāna of these songs as they existed in this period? The only way I know to approach this question is to look at some of the Vajrayāna literature that characterizes this “later classical period” in India, from the eleventh century onwards, and to see whether what Siegel has to say about *Caryāgīti* No. 10 “works” in light of such evidence. In what follows, I would like to take my lead from Siegel’s article itself, by considering two questions: 1) what is the relation of the *Caryāgīti* to the larger Vajrayāna tradition in India and 2) what is the relation of the Vajrayāna as depicted in the *Caryāgīti* to the non-Vajrayāna Indian Buddhist traditions?

I. THE CARYĀGĪTI AND THE CLASSICAL INDIAN VAJRAYĀNA

It is well-known that a Western Protestant model of “sects” is not really applicable to the Indian Buddhist situation,²⁷ and this inapplicability holds even more for the Vajrayāna,²⁸ at least during the eighth through twelfth centuries in India (third period and fourth period). Rather than being defined by schools or sects, the Indian Vajrayāna of this time traces itself through lineages of initiation into the practice of a certain deity and its *tantra*, transmitted by a particular master. The situation is rendered complex by the fact that any given individual might hold or participate in any number of different lineages. Certainly, one can speak of trends and emphases within the Indian Vajrayāna but not of schools or sects in any real sense of the word. The later Tibetan typologization of the earlier Vajrayāna into “*tantras*”²⁹ and “*yānas*”³⁰—which in any case does not purport to identify schools, but rather trends—is no doubt somewhat artificial. Probably in their systematization the Tibetans left a lot of things out, and imposed patterns where such did not originally exist in any clear form.

At the same time, the many individual lineages making up the classical

Vajrayāna during this period did not constitute many radically different orientations. They were unified by the fact that they all participated in a single liturgical structure, expressing a particular understanding of Buddhism. This fact has led David Snellgrove to remark aptly, “in any studies of the *tantras*, one must not permit oneself to be bewildered by the mere appearance of diversity . . . the fundamental pattern and mental process remained the same.”³¹

In spite of these facts, scholars have sometimes attempted to divide the Indian Vajrayāna into sects and schools. In reference to the *Caryāgīti*, Das Gupta in his *Obscure Religious Cults* (hereinafter *ORC*) contends that the *Caryāgīti* belong to a separate sect within the Vajrayāna, in revolt against the larger Vajrayāna, which he calls the “Sahajayāna,” with practitioners whom he calls “Sahajiyā Buddhists.”³² Siegel, as noted, follows the same usage.³³ Per Kvaerne indicates the fallacy of this usage in reference generally to the Vajrayāna and specifically to the *Caryāgīti*. He tells us that the term Sahajayāna has been used to identify a separate school or sect “apparently without textual justification.”³⁴ Various authors have “introduced the term Sahajayāna, as if there were a particular *yāna* within Tantric Buddhism characterized solely or at least chiefly by its dependence on the concept of *Sahaja*.”³⁵ Jean Naudou in his work *Les bouddhistes Kashmiriens du moyen âge* confirms and underscores the fallacy of such usage.³⁶

That the Vajrayāna of the *Caryāgīti* is not to be set apart from the rest of the Indian Vajrayāna is further indicated by looking at the authors of the *Caryāgīti*. Nearly all of these twenty *siddhas* are central figures within the classical Indian Vajrayāna. They appear not only as authors of these songs, but their “lives” are found in the standard works on the Indian *siddhas*,³⁷ their philosophical and commentarial works are preserved in the Tenjur,³⁸ and many of their lineages survived in Tibet.³⁹ One may doubt individual attributions, but the overall impression one gets is clear and consistent. The *Caryāgīti*’s authors were connected with the central Vajrayāna deities, performed their *abhisekas* (initiations), taught and commented on the basic *tantras*, and composed songs in a variety of genres, including that of the *Caryāgīti*. In light of these facts, again there seems no real justification for seeing *Caryāgīti* as anything other than an expression of the central, classical Vajrayāna.

This discussion leaves an important issue unaddressed. Das Gupta remarks on the apparent kinship between the *Caryāgīti* and the Buddhist tantric *dohās*, (written in Western Apabhraṃśa): They are both genres of tantric song, composed at roughly the same time, both in vernacular, attributed to some of the same *siddhas*, and emphasizing the notion of *sahaja* (co-emergence).⁴⁰ The *dohās*, and to a much lesser extent the *Caryāgīti*, have a strong theme of critique and protest against conventional Buddhism of all sorts, including that of the Vajrayāna. These facts led Das Gupta and others to see the *dohās* and the *Caryāgīti* as expressions of a single “yoga cult”⁴¹ filled with a “spirit of revolt against the orthodox school . . . [they] decry strongly the conventional prac-

tices of Buddhism and launch the bitterest attack on the commonly accepted practices and religious views of the orthodox systems.”⁴² Particularly in the *dohās* of Saraha⁴³ one finds what appears to be a trenchant criticism of classical Vajrayāna meditation and liturgy.⁴⁴ If the *Caryāgīti* and the *dohās* are not to be understood as a separate “tantric offshoot,” then how does one account for this spirit of protest?

The answer is complex, but has to do with the fact that the different types of primary (as opposed to commentarial) Indian Vajrayāna composition perform different functions within the overall economy of its literature. Thus within the Indian Vajrayāna, one finds three major, distinctive *genres* of primary composition: Tantric liturgical composition; various types of tantric hagiography, and the tantric songs. To a large extent, these three major types of composition correspond to the three types of surviving primary *texts*: the liturgical compositions survive mainly as the classical *tantras*,⁴⁵ the hagiographies as the Vajrayāna “lives” (Tib: *rnam.thar*),⁴⁶ and the songs in the collections of *Caryāgīti* and *dohās*.⁴⁷ But, on the other hand, one finds each of the three genres of Vajrayāna composition existing in some form in all the three types of extant primary literature. For example, the Tantric songs are found primarily in the collections referred to above, but one also finds the same types of songs in the (collective and individual) biographies of the *siddhas* and also within the liturgical framework of the *tantras*.⁴⁸ Relevant to the present discussion, one finds the songs in the biographies and the *tantras* not to be fundamentally different in author or content from the *dohās*: there is the emphasis on *sahaja*, (in the biographies) the same *siddhas* appear as authors who are the authors of the *dohās* and the *Caryāgīti*, and one often finds the same kind of “spirit of protest” that characterizes the *dohās* and the *Caryāgīti*. This suggests that the “spirit of protest” is not necessarily to be understood as an out and out rejection by a “tantric offshoot” of the rest of the Vajrayāna—or of conventional non-Vajrayāna Buddhism either. But, if this is so, then what can the meaning of this spirit of protest be?

One finds in the Indian Vajrayāna two central concerns operative on many different levels and in many contexts. First, is a type of *via negativa*, whereby one’s (subjectively referring) egocentricity and (objectively referring) preconceptions about things are progressively exposed and dissolved. This is carried out both through disciplines and meditation techniques common to all of Buddhism, and also through those specifically Vajrayānist. This concern corresponds to the central thrust of the Madhyamaka, to erode and dispel substantialistic ideas about oneself and the external world through discovery of their emptiness (*sūnyatā*).

The second concern of the Indian Vajrayāna is equally important, and involves seeing “what remains” when emptiness is realized. What remains is *not* nothing (which would be a nihilism eschewed by all major trends of Buddhism), but rather a “world” that is pure and sacred. It is pure because it

appears as it is, empty of the egocentric distortions of conceptual thought (*vikalpa*). It is sacred because it manifests itself in its own characteristic way, which the Vajrayāna prefers to leave unnamed, but suggests through terms such as “co-emergence” (*sahaja*) and luminosity (*prabhāsvara*).

This two-fold concern is found as an underlying structure in all three types of primary Vajrayāna composition—the liturgies, the biographies, and the songs. In the liturgies, it is expressed in the common, fundamental structure of Vajrayānist ritual. One first meditates on *śūnyatā*, thereby emptying one’s mind of obstructing concepts. Secondly, one visualizes (*utpatrikrama*) within emptiness a presence which is ritually empowered as a sacred presence, and which is none other than the figuration of the sacredness of the world.⁴⁹ Finally, one concludes with an extended meditation on emptiness (*sampannakrama*), so that even that sacredness itself does not become the subject of obstructing concepts and preconceptions.

This same two-fold concern is expressed in the biographies, particularly in the ways in which the *siddhas* train their disciples. In the beginning of training, a pronounced *via negativa* is often followed, whereby the disciple is challenged to abandon his previous preconceptions about reality.⁵⁰ The second concern begins to manifest itself gradually as the disciple’s preconceptions give way, and he begins to notice a pure world in which he lives and of which he is, in some mysterious way, more and more an expression.

This two-fold concern is also expressed in the *tantric* songs, both those that we find in the *tantras* and biographies, and also those that we find in the *dohā* and *Caryāgiti* collections. Here, parallelling the division of labor performed by the three major types of primary Vajrayāna literature, the *dohās* tend to emphasize the first concern of *śūnyatā*. Thus, the *dohās* critique every form of egocentric preoccupation, particularly religious ones, more particularly Buddhist ones, and most particularly Vajrayānist ones. They express criticism as the gateway through which one must pass to the experience of sacredness. This corresponds to the initial meditation on *śūnyatā* in the tantric liturgies. And the *dohās* express the emptiness of all worldly and otherworldly preoccupations and phenomena as an end point, corresponding to the concluding meditation on emptiness at the end of the tantric liturgies. In the *tantras*, the songs and other material corresponding to the *dohās* are characteristically found precisely in the *sampannakrama* sections of the liturgy.⁵¹

When seen in context, the protest of the *dohās*, far from being evidence that the *dohās* represent a rejection of classical Vajrayāna, is rather an articulate and characteristic expression of a particular moment of classical Vajrayāna experience.

The *Caryāgiti*, on the other hand, tend to emphasize, in a yogic idiom that often makes them difficult to understand, the second of the two Vajrayāna concerns, that of sacredness. As suggested above, this is a sacredness that is not to be understood as separate from emptiness, but rather as the more ‘positive’ dimensions of the ultimate experience of *śūnyatā*.⁵²

II. THE CARYĀGĪTĪ, THE VAJRAYĀNA, AND BUDDHISM

It may be accepted that the *Caryāgītī* are a dimension of the classical Vajrayāna during the period under consideration, but how is one to view the place of the Vajrayāna itself, within the larger Indian Buddhist tradition during this same period? The understanding of the *Caryāgītī* and *dobās* as a “bitter . . . attack” on conventional Buddhism, the apparent continuities between Hindu and Buddhist Tantra, and the nature of the Vajrayāna itself have led several scholars to hold that the Vajrayāna and particularly the *Caryāgītī* are only nominally Buddhist. Thus Das Gupta tells us that the Vajrayāna of the *Caryāgītī* “notwithstanding the Buddhistic tone and color which it assumes, is essentially an esoteric yoga cult.”⁵³ Seigel, as noted, follows suit.

To begin with, it should be noted that the more we find out about the history and development of Buddhism both before and during the third period and the fourth periods in India, the less discontinuous from the larger Buddhist world the Vajrayāna appears. In fact, Vajrayāna ways of speaking and practicing run throughout Buddhist history, sometimes as an undercurrent, sometimes more overtly.⁵⁴ Part of the reason this fact has not been appreciated is that we have tended to read Buddhism itself in terms of its more philosophical expressions. The resulting one-sidedness has left aside counterbalancing trends of magic, liturgy, and “meditation on forms” that are important at every period of Buddhist history.

A look at the Vajrayāna system itself as evidenced in its classical Indian literature also confirms its continuity with earlier Buddhism in its concern to transcend ego and “see things as they are.” And, in continuity with the Mahāyāna ethical stance, quite as fully as in the conventional Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna practice is understood to be carried out under the aegis of the unbreakable *bodhi-sattva* commitment to the welfare and ultimate enlightenment of all sentient beings.⁵⁵

In addition, the Indian Vajrayānists as seen in their literature seem to have understood themselves as integrally Buddhist. Naudou pertinently observes that “far from opposing itself to the Mahāyāna as the latter opposes itself to the Hīnayāna, [the Vajrayāna] is not conscious of being different from [the Mahāyāna].”⁵⁶ And Kvaerne notes that “it is too often forgotten that [Buddhist]* Tantric ideas and practices never existed independently of the wider fold of Mahāyāna—a tantric master like Adayavajra, followed by the Tibetan tradition, divides Mahāyāna into *pāramitā-naya* and *mantra-naya* (*tantras*). The basic ideas of Mahāyāna are always subjacent in Tantric ritual.”⁵⁷

The preceding leaves several important questions undiscussed. If the Vajrayāna and its *Caryāgītī* during this period can be understood as integral expressions of classical Indian Buddhism, then what is one to make of the Vajrayāna’s and particularly *Caryāgītī*’s apparent continuities with the Hindu Tantra? Sec-

*my addition

ondly, what is the role of the unconventionality that is incontrovertibly part of the Vajrayāna? And, thirdly, how is one to interpret its sexual imagery? All three issues would seem to call into question the fundamentally Buddhist nature of the Vajrayāna and *Caryāgīti*.

a. Hindu and Buddhist Tantra

Basing themselves on undeniable similarities between the Hindu and Buddhist *tantras*, scholars have often tended to treat the two as subsets of the same religious orientation.⁵⁸ Das Gupta in discussing the *Caryāgīti* takes this approach,⁵⁹ even quite incorrectly using the term “Sahajiyā,” a Vaishnavite appellation, to apply to the Vajrayāna of the *Caryāgīti*.⁶⁰ Siegel takes the same approach, attempting to clarify the *Caryāgīti* by using specifically Hindu Tantric terminology;⁶¹ by attributing to the *Caryāgīti* Hindu Tantric emphases and concerns;⁶² by seeing behind the *Caryāgīti* a Hindu Tantric cosmological framework;⁶³ and by finding in the *Caryāgīti* the same central ritual activity as in the Hindu Tantra.⁶⁴

As noted above, such a mixing of terminology *may* have characterized the first period and perhaps also to a lesser extent the second period of the Indian Vajrayāna, but by the time of the literature surviving from the classical third period and fourth period, such a mixing occurs only rarely.

At least by the time of the literature of the third period and fourth period, the Hindu and Buddhist Tantra would appear to be interested in different things. The former appears to aim at perception and worship of the primal reality of the cosmos revealed as the Goddess, Devī, or as Śiva and Śakti, who have historical and cosmological, as well as yogic dimensions. The Buddhist Tantra, by contrast, aims at a perception of the ultimate nature of immediate experience, a perception that is primarily understood to be inseparable from egolessness, emptiness, and liberation.

During the third period and fourth period, not only the specific intention of the Buddhist Tantra and its integrally Buddhist context, but also its various components would appear to be markedly different from those of the Hindu Tantra. In the Buddhist Tantra, feminine energy is understood as equanimous, spacious, and intelligent, while masculine energy is the more active and externally transforming. In Hindu Tantra, as is well known, the roles are reversed and, even in reversed form, quite dissimilar. In Buddhist Tantra of these periods literal sexual activity seems to have played sometimes a major, sometimes a minor, and sometimes (in the monastic context) a non-existent role, whereas in Hindu Tantra, it is considered a central part of the classical *sādhana*. In the Buddhist Tantra of these periods, caste purity and pollution are not fundamental issues, in contrast to Hindu Tantra. In Hindu Tantra, the aim to achieve the primal cosmic unity through *yoga* contrasts sharply with the Buddhist disavowal of such a concern for *illo tempore* in the Vajrayāna. The yogic

processes of Buddhist and Hindu Tantra also appear quite different in intention.⁶⁵ Lastly, even the term *sahaja* appears to intend two very different things in the two traditions. In the Hindu Tantra, it indicates a “natural” way, accommodating the base human tendencies of this Kali Yuga. In the Buddhist Tantra, *sahaja* is bound up with an opposite, optimistic evaluation of the human potentiality, stressing the possibility of enlightenment in one life. Here *sahaja* indicates the perception of the inseparability of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* (thus “co-emergence”) and the proximity of enlightenment with ordinary experience. Finally, it should be mentioned that the Buddhist Tantrics themselves, in so far as they are reflected in hagiographies from these periods, were at great pains to register moral and metaphysical objection to the Hindu Tantra and the literature indicates a continual tension and contention between the two traditions.⁶⁶

b. Unconventionality in the Vajrayāna

A look at the three major genres of Indian Vajrayāna composition might seem to confirm the existence of a gap separating the Vajrayāna from the rest of Indian Buddhism during the third period and the fourth period, and this is particularly suggested by descriptions of often rather extreme unconventionality among the *siddhas*. The *siddhas* were usually non-monastic, often following the lifestyles of hermit or wandering *yogi*, though also appearing as layman or monk. As depicted in the Indian hagiographies, their relationship to the fixed codes of their general Indian and specifically Buddhist environment was ambiguous. They adopted a particular lifestyle and followed its conventions, but they are frequently shown acting in a manner contradictory to conventional codes—sometimes in the most outrageous fashion. They are shown as awe-inspiring men and women who had attained the two *siddhis*—enlightenment itself and miraculous powers. They are characterized by unpredictability and, in seeming flagrant contradiction to Buddhist ethics, they are often depicted (even while monks) as drinking liquor and cohabiting with low caste women. It is a legitimate question to ask what this has to do with Buddhism.

A close look at the hagiographies of the period suggest that rather than calling the *siddhas* unconventional and seeing them as unvaryingly so, it might be more accurate to call them non-conventional—i.e., neither conventional nor unconventional. This is so, because in the literature, they are often depicted as extremely conventional and, for those *siddhas* who were monks and laymen, one has the impression that most of the time, most of them were quite faithful to the conventions of their contexts.

What makes the difference between the *siddhas*' conventionality and their unconventionality? In the literature, the *siddhas* are shown as following forms of convention for the same reason that they break them—to teach others. Tāranātha tells us that a certain Indian *siddha* purposely hid his true level of realization because he saw that revealing it would not help those around him.⁶⁷

On the other hand, when the excessively scrupulous Brāhmin Bhadrāpa meets his teacher, the latter as conditions of giving teaching requires Bhadrāpa to come to the cremation grounds at midnight, bringing liquor and pork, and eventually has Bhadrāpa cleaning latrines, all disastrously polluting actions for a man of his caste.

The telling point in these biographies is one that characterizes Indian Buddhism as a whole: enlightenment itself is disjunct from any established code of ethics or behavior, although it will (particularly in the Mahāyāna, by virtue of the *bodhisattva's* commitment) express itself in an active and energetic way in relation to any code, sometimes by upholding it, sometimes by contradicting it. Enlightenment itself reveals things as they are, and any given behavioral norm has no assigned value in and of itself, but only within its existing context and in relation to its helpfulness to enlightenment. If the *siddhas* are depicted as unconventional, it is not through any inherent rejection of the relative value of caste or of conventional Buddhist norms, but rather because they are understood to be acting under the Mahāyāna injunction to help others, even if this involves breaking (even) Buddhist conventions to do it.⁶⁸ Interestingly enough, the *siddha* biographies reveal the *siddhas* continually critical of their more conventional Mahāyāna brethren because they find the latter too tame, and unwilling to extend themselves far enough in fulfillment of their *bodhisattva* vows.

c. Sexual Imagery in the Vajrayāna

As in earlier Buddhism, so in the Vajrayāna of the eighth to twelfth centuries in India, enlightenment is often expressed as bipolar in nature: one can speak of a subject not bound up in ego, and of a world seen as it is. In the classical Vajrayāna, this bipolarity is referred to as the inseparability of wisdom (*jñāna*—the wisdom of the individual) and great bliss (*mahāsukha*—the experienced quality of the world). But how might one indicate these two which are in fact not two but one? In the Vajrayāna this mystery is often depicted in the tantric iconography of a transcendental couple in embrace.

The sexual imagery so prevalent in this period of the Vajrayāna not only indicates something about the goal, but also something important about the path, expressed in the saying quoted in the *Hevajra Tantra*: “By passion the world is bound, by passion released.”⁶⁹ It is important not to understand this dictum in a purely naive and literal fashion, as if the Vajrayāna were saying that by indiscriminantly indulging in sexual passion and breaking social or religious conventions, liberation might somehow be attained. There are in fact stories in Tibetan tradition about individuals who came to grief because they took this saying too literally. But then what is the meaning of this oft-repeated Vajrayāna dictum?

“By passion the world is bound, by passion released,” is to say that the relative world itself provides the means by which liberation may be attained. This is, of course, a basic idea in all Buddhist schools. This characteristically Vajrayāna formulation means to point to the inherent purity of the ordinary world.

Even passion, that most fundamental of *samsāric* defilements can, because of its inherent purity, become a means to liberation. This notion parallels in earlier Buddhism, to take just two examples, the notion of *anāsrava dharmas* in the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma and of *paratantra svabhāva* in the Yogācāra.⁷⁰

In the Vajrayāna of this period, this inherent purity of the various aspects of the phenomenal world—passion and the other defilements—was an emphasized subject of practice.⁷¹

It would appear that the dictum in the classical Vajrayāna, “by passion the world is bound, by passion freed” intends passion in its various senses,⁷² but more broadly and more accurately it intends every aspect of conditioned experience. In the early days of the Vajrayāna in India (first period and second period) and also during the third period and fourth period, sexual activity seems to have been one context of practice, but never the only one and often not the main one.⁷³ At other times in India and in Tibet, the references to explicit sexual rites were often understood in a purely symbolic manner. We should also keep in mind that within the Vajrayāna context, even the later commentators didn’t think that the main point was whether references to sexual activity were literal or purely symbolic, but rather that the real point lay elsewhere.⁷⁴ As the *Hevajra Tantra* says, in reference to *sahaja*, it is not quite passion nor yet the absence of passion that is the key issue: “Neither passion nor the absence of passion is found there, nor yet a middle state. Because of its freedom from all three, *sahaja* is called perfect enlightenment.”⁷⁵

CONCLUSION

It would thus appear that when we take Kāṇha’s *Caryāgīti* #10, itself an expression of the classical, and most likely later classical period of the Indian Vajrayāna (11th–13th c. CE), and look at it in the context of other evidence from the same period, we would see a context of interpretation for Kāṇha’s song different from the one suggested by Lee Siegel on two major points. First, the *Caryāgīti* in this context is not an expression of an aberrant, renegade Vajrayāna tradition, but rather an integral expression of the classical Vajrayāna itself. This is appreciated when we properly understand the structure of the Indian Vajrayāna, as well as the particular idiom of the *Caryāgīti* and the way its “spirit of protest” is an expression of a central moment within the classical Vajrayāna.

Secondly, the *Caryāgīti*’s Vajrayāna does not see itself as rejecting earlier Buddhism and replacing it with a different type of religiosity. Instead, the Vajrayāna clearly sees itself as the legitimate inheritor of classical Indian Buddhism and as a development within the latter. This is appreciated when we note the fully Buddhist ambience of the Vajrayāna, its self-understanding as a Mahāyānist tradition, its important role within the Buddhist monastic system, its fundamental discontinuities with Hindu Tantra, and the way in which its unconventionality and sexual imagery represent Vajrayāna ways of stating and realizing traditional Buddhist concerns.

As noted above, this is not to deny the possibility of other earlier, less Bud-

dhicized contexts in which songs such as Kāṇha's may have been differently understood, particularly during the first period and second period of the Indian Vajrayāna. It is as an hypothesis for such an earlier period's hermeneutics that the general tenor of Siegel's interpretations are interesting. But for the classical periods of the Vajrayāna, and particularly for the fourth period, the eleventh and twelfth centuries C.E. from which the *Caryāgīti* #10 and its commentary comes, such a reading would seem clearly inappropriate.

NOTES

1. Lee Siegel, "Bengal Blackie and the Sacred Slut: A Sahajayāna Buddhist Song," *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, Volume 1, 1981, pp. 51–58.
2. Translation used by Per Kvaerne, *An Anthology of Buddhist Tantric Songs* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1977), p. v. Italicized items, such as *Caryāgīti*, are Sanskrit unless otherwise noted.
3. For a brief but helpful summary of the *siddha* ideal, see Guiseppe Tucci, *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, Rome: Libreria dello Stato, 1949, Vol. I, pp. 226–230.
4. Kvaerne, *Buddhist Tantric Songs*, p. 7, quoting Snellgrove's view.
5. For a list of the *siddhas* to whom the songs are attributed, see Kvaerne, *ibid.*, p. 4.
6. First edited by Haraprasad Sastri, *Hājār Bacharer Purāna Bāṅgālā Bhāṣāy Bauddha Gān o Dohā* (Bangiya Sahitya Parisat, Calcutta, 1916).
7. For information on the text and its commentary, see Kvaerne, *Buddhist Tantric Songs*, pp. 1–8 and 17–29.
8. Kvaerne, *ibid.*, p. 21. The *Caryāgīti* have been the subject of a number of studies since Sastri's edition and publication of the text. Particularly significant and influential have been the works of Shahidullah (Mohammed Shahidullah, *Les Chants Mystiques de Kāṇha et de Saraha*, Paris, 1928) and Das Gupta (Shashibhusan Das Gupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, Calcutta, 1946). Most recently, the *Caryāgīti* and their commentary in both original languages and in Tibetan translation have been subjected to close and brilliant scrutiny by Per Kvaerne in his *Buddhist Tantric Songs*. For a summary and critical evaluation of the various works dealing with the *Caryāgīti*, see Kvaerne, *ibid.*, pp. 9–16.
9. Siegel, "Bengal Blackie," p. 51.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
21. Sukumar Dutt, *Buddhist Monks and Monasteries in India*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1962), p. 349.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 349, ff.
23. For an idea of what these documents can reveal about the Indian Vajrayāna, see Ken Eastman, "Mahāyoga Texts at Tun-huang," *Bukkyōbunka kenkyūsho kiyo*, 22 (1984).
24. See also Ken Eastman, "A Ninth Century Vajrayāna Handbook from Tun-huang," a paper presented to the Conference on Buddhism and Christianity, University of Hawaii at Manoa, January, 1984.
25. Tāranātha, *bkaḥ. babs.bdan.ldan*, *History of the Seven Special Transmissions*, Tibetan Nyingma Monastery, P.O. Tezu, Dist. Lohit, Arunchal Pradesh, 1974.
26. Kvaerne, *op.cit.*; p. 3.
27. David Snellgrove, *Buddhist Himalaya* (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1957), pp. 46–48, summa-

rizes this point nicely. See A. Bareau, *Les Sectes Bouddiques du Petit Vēhicule* (Saigon: École Française d'extrême-orient, 1955), pp. 7–9, for fuller statement.

28. David Snellgrove, *Hevajra Tantra*, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1959) makes this point clear in his introductory section, pp. 1–46.

29. For an example of such a typologization, see F. Lessing and A. Wayman, *Fundamentals of the Buddhist Tantra* (The Hague: Mouton, 1968), pp. 141, ff. where *mkhas.grub.rje* expresses this typology in classical form.

30. For a modern composition of the Nyingma classification of the nine *yānas*, see Tārthang Tulku, *Crystal Mirror V* (Berkeley: Dharma Press, 1977), pp. 165, ff.

31. Snellgrove, *Buddhist Himalaya*, pp. 79–80. See also D. Snellgrove and H. Richardson, *Cultural History of Tibet* (New York: Praeger, 1968), p. 139.

32. Das Gupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, p. xxiii–xxviii.

33. E.g., Siegel, "Bengal Blackie," p. 50.

34. Kvaerne, *Buddhist-Tantric Songs*, p. 61.

35. Ibid.

36. Jean Naudou, *Les Bouddhistes Kāśmīriens au Moyen Age*, Paris: Annales du Musée Guimet, Bibliothèque d'Études vol. LXVIII, 1968, pp. 109–112. Translated, very unevenly, into English by Brereton and Picon as *Buddhists of Kāśmīr*, Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1980; same discussion falls on pages 129, ff. One reason for this error may be a misunderstanding of the use of the term "yāna" in the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna context. In earlier Buddhism, "yāna" generally means a path that is distinctive and different from other paths, to be followed to the exclusion of other paths, as in *śrāvakayāna* and *pratyekabuddhayāna*, "way of the hearers" and "way of the solitary buddhas" respectively. In the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna, while the earlier usage is sometimes retained, *yāna* can also be used in a non-exclusive way. Thus *bodhisattvayāna* is another, equivalent name for the Mahāyāna, emphasizing the *bodhisattva* ideal. In the Vajrayāna, the term *yāna* is often likewise used sometimes to indicate an emphasis—on a particular lineage or text, or an aspect of the Vajrayāna itself. *Kalacakrayāna* (way of the *Kalacakra Tantra*) would be an example of the former, while *guhyayāna* (secret way), *mantrayāna* (way of *mantras*), *upayayāna* (way of skillful means) and *sahajayāna* (way of co-emergence) would be examples of the latter. As Kvaerne observes, "the term *yāna* (at least in the sense of separate schools) is somewhat out of place when referring to the various aspects of tantricism; the distinction between *Sahajayāna*, *Kalacakrayāna* and Vajrayāna is quite artificial" (*Buddhist Tantric Songs*, p. 275, n. 1). In another work, Das Gupta appears to express doubts about the correctness of his erstwhile attempts to classify the Indian Vajrayāna into different sects. He mentions the terms Vajrayāna, Kalacakrayāna, and Sahajayāna and then says "we do not know on the authority of what texts this division of schools has been made . . . characteristics of the schools have never been sufficiently explained . . . (in particular) the name of Kalacakrayāna . . . appears to be perplexing." S. B. Das Gupta, *Introduction to Tantric Buddhism* (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1958).

37. E.g., Abhayadattaśrī's *Caturaśītisiddhāpravṛtti*, translated by James B. Robinson, *Buddha's Lions* (Berkeley: Dharma Publishing, 1979).

38. Ibid., pp. 289–307, where each of the works in the tantric section of the Tenjur attributed to one of the eighty-four siddhas is listed.

39. Evidence from Tibetan tradition further indicates something of the central role of the *dohās* in the Indian Vajrayāna. The great monastic teacher Atīśa (982–1054) had studied the *dohās* as part of his training and *siddhas* as diverse as Dam.pa.sangs.rgyas (11th c.), Vajrapāṇi (11th c.) and Maitripa (11th c.) were renowned for their teaching of the *dohās*. Lineages of *dohā* study entered Tibet through Marpa the translator (1012–1097) who studied with Maitripa, and through Vajrapāṇi. See H. V. Guenther, *The Royal Song of Saraha* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969), pp. 15–16. Later a Tibetan commentator looking back on the *dohā* tradition remarked that he found the basic teaching of the *dohās* to embody "the essence of Buddhism" (Ibid.).

40. Das Gupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, p. 4.

41. Ibid., p. xxxiii.

42. Ibid., p. 68, "The poets of the Sahajiyā school laid their whole emphasis on their protest against the formalities of life and religion and this made them distinct in their religious attitude from the Vajrayāna or the general school of Tantric Buddhism." Ibid., p. 51.

43. See David Snellgrove's rendition of one of Saraha's *dohās*, in Edward Conze, *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1954), pp. 224–239.

44. E.g., ibid., pp. 226–227.

45. The best example in English is the *Hevajra Tantra*, trans. by David Snellgrove, (above n. 22).
46. J. B. Robinson, *Buddha's Lions*.
47. Kvaerne, *Buddhist Tantric Songs*, and Shahidullah, *Les Chants Mystiques*.
48. Throughout *Buddha's Lions*, and *Hevajra Tantra*, Vol. I.
49. E.g., *Hevajra Tantra*, I, pp. 73, ff. This is, of course a sacredness that is never to be understood except as inseparable from emptiness.
50. A constant theme throughout *Buddha's Lions*, and also Tāranātha's *bkab.babs.bdon.ldan* (Lives of the Siddhas).
51. *Hevajra Tantra*, I. vi. 24: "Free from learning and ceremony and any cause of shame, the yogin wanders filled with great compassion. . . . He has passed beyond oblations, renunciation, and austerities and is freed from *mantra* and meditation, released from all obligations. . . ."
52. These distinctions are only relative ones, we emphasize again, and both the *dohās* and *Caryāgiti* contain both types of material.
53. Das Gupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, p. xxxiii.
54. David Snellgrove, *Buddhist Himalaya*, pp. 1–90 presents many examples in support of this point.
55. Kvaerne, *Buddhist Tantric Songs*, p. 30. Thus it is somewhat misleading to say, "the Tantric adept transcended the categories: pure and impure, good and evil . . ." and " 'There is no difference' Kāṇha declared, 'between virtue and vice,' " (Siegel, "Bengal Blackie," p. 54) without presenting the other side of the picture. For the Vajrayāna, the ultimate insight which reveals the conditioned nature of good and evil itself invariably gives birth to, and is inseparably bound up with, compassion for others, and the unbreakable bodhisattva vow of commitment to the welfare of others, a commitment that is understood to hold for all subsequent lifetimes!
56. Naudou, *Buddhists of Kāśmīr*, pp. 135–6.
57. Kvaerne, *Buddhist Tantric Songs*, p. 30.
58. Mircea Eliade appears to take this approach in his *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (Princeton: Bollingen Foundation, 1958), pp. 200, ff.
59. Das Gupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, p. xxxiv and p. 20 where he says "the fundamentals of the Hindu and Buddhist Tantras are the same."
60. See Kvaerne, *Buddhist Tantric Songs*, p. 61.
61. Such as *śakti*, *suṣumnā*, and *kundalinī*.
62. Such as the overriding Hindu Tantric concerns for transcending caste purity and pollution: "the Sahajiyā adept could demonstrate in (the arms of his low caste partner) his transcendence of caste distinctions and social taboos" (Siegel, "Bengal Blackie," pp. 52–53).
63. We read that the yogin "intimates" (sic!) a "mythological event" (ibid., p. 52); "on the mythological plane the god has reincorporated the goddess, reestablished the primordial unity out of which all things are evolved" (ibid., p. 57).
64. "Sexual intercourse was the central activity of the Sahajiyā *sādhana*." (ibid., p. 54).
65. Kvaerne: "Yogic terms and concepts play an important part in Tantric Buddhism; but at the same time, these concepts are used within a specifically *Buddhist* context . . . while other yogic schools emphasize the importance of *preserving* the 'nectar' of the highest *cakra* in order to attain immortality . . . *tantric* Buddhism emphasizes the function of [the highest] *mahāsukhacakra* as a symbol of Absolute truth and hence as the complementary opposite of relative truth, the two modes of truth functioning within the framework of a *dialectical process which aims at uniting both planes of being*." *Buddhist Tantric Songs*, p. 31.
66. See, e.g., Robinson, *Buddha's Lions*, pp. 26–32.
67. Tāranātha, *History of the Seven Special Transmissions*, p. 434.
68. This becomes particularly evident in classical descriptions of the higher *bhūmis*. See J. Rahder, *Daśabhūmika Sūtra*, Śāta-Piṭaka Series, No. 74 (Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture, n.d.), pp. 185 ff.
69. *Hevajra Tantra*, I., II.ii.51., this saying quoted by Siegel, "Bengal Blackie," p. 54, but without footnote.
70. On the *anāśrava dharmas* in the Sarvāstivādin *abhidharma*, see Louis de la Vallée Poussin, *Abhidharmakośa de Vasubandhu, Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques*, Volume XVI, Bruxelles: Institut Belge des hautes études chinoises, 1971 edition, pp. 6–11, and throughout *Kośa*. For an interesting viewpoint on the Yogācāra theory of *trisvabhāva* and particularly *paratantra svabhāva*, see Gadgin M. Nagao, " 'What Remains' in Śūnyatā: A Yogācāra Interpretation of Emptiness," in Minoru Kiyota (ed.), *Mahāyāna Buddhist Meditation: Theory and Practice* (Honolulu: University

of Hawaii Press, 1978), pp. 66–82. Both theories state in characteristic ways that conditioned experience need not be only defiled, and that the possible purity of conditioned experience has important implications for the path (*mārga*).

71. Modern Tibetan oral commentary explains this emphasis as follows: Conditioned experience is to be regarded as pure and sacred, not to be subjected to egocentric possession and manipulation. One is enjoined to develop “sacred outlook” (Tib. *dag.snangs*): whatever pleasing or unpleasing thing arises, one is to regard it as sacred and just what it is. This is understood to short circuit habitual attempts to convert experience into ego’s own currency—to possess, drive away, or ignore what arises in fulfillment of the root defilements: passion (*rāga*), aggression (*dveṣa*), or ignorance (*moha*). The unceasing arising of experience thus is understood to provide unending opportunities to transcend ego: a fact that has led to the application to the Vajrayāna, of the term *upāya-yāna*, “a way rich in soteriological methods.” (Ven. Trungpa, Rinpoche, *Journey Without Goal*, Boulder: Shambhala Publication, 1983.)

72. Which, of course, is much broader than sexual passion per se, and includes the passion behind turning on a light or turning the page of a book.

73. Snellgrove, *Hevajra Tantra*, Vol. I., pp. 33–34.

74. Ibid., Vol. I, pp. 8–10.

75. Ibid., Vol. I, p. 82.