

A Survey of the Explanatory Tantras and Commentaries of the Guhyasamāja Tantra

Introduction

This paper takes the form of a survey of the Explanatory tantras and some of the commentaries to the Guhyasamāja Root tantra. It provides a summary of their contents, discusses the relationship between them and reassesses their dating in light of the recent reassessment of the date of the Guhyasamāja Root Tantra itself by Wedemeyer (Wedemeyer 2007).

(Note: this author provided a revised assessment of this date in the paper: “The Guhyasamāja Piṇḍikṛta-sādhana and its context”, 2010)

Background to the Guhyasamāja Root Tantra and related texts

Guhyasamāja Root Tantra

The Guhyasamāja Root Tantra and its commentaries are thought to have arisen during the second half of the first millennium CE. There is a specific discussion on the dating later in this paper. The Guhyasamāja Root tantra itself is the subject of a critical edition and translation by Fremantle (Fremantle 1971). The Sanskrit text is given in Bagchi (Bagchi 1965), Fremantle and Matsunaga (Matsunaga 1978). Fremantle and Matsunaga worked independently on their critical editions. The Tibetan text is given in the Derge (Barber 1990, sec.T442) and Peking editions of the Tibetan Tripitaka (Suzuki 1956, sec.P81). The Chinese text is given in Taisho 885 (Takakusu & Watanabe 1924).

In the Tibetan traditional narrative, the Guhyasamāja Root Tantra is held to be a "Subsequent Tantra" (uttaratantra) to the Sarvatathāgata-tattvasaṃgraha-sūtra and is said to be "the root of all tantras" (Sonam Dragpa (Bsod-nams-grags-pa) et al. 1996, pp.56-57). Matsunaga makes the same point, expanding it to say that the Sarvatathāgata-tattvasaṃgraha-sūtra forms the basis of all the subsequent Higher Yoga Tantra (Anuttara-yoga tantras) (Matsunaga 1977, p.111).

Guhyasamāja Subsequent Tantra

The Guhyasamāja Root Tantra itself has a "Subsequent Tantra", sometimes referred to as an "appendix tantra", a "completion tantra" a "continuation tantra" or an "uttaratantra". This is regarded as a separate work in the Derge Edition, T443, but is included as the eighteenth and

final chapter of the Root Tantra in the Peking and Taisho editions. This chapter was not addressed by Fremantle but the Sanskrit text may be found in Matsunaga's edition.

The Canonical Explanatory tantras

In the Tibetan traditional narrative, there are said to be five Explanatory Tantras according to Tsongkhapa (Wayman 1977, p.84) and six according to Panchen Sonam Dragpa (Sonam Dragpa (Bsod-nams-grags-pa) et al. 1996, p.57). This "confusion" is quickly resolved when it is seen that Tsongkhapa includes the Guhyasamāja Subsequent Tantra in his list, which Sonam Dragpa does not, the lists being otherwise the same. The Explanatory Tantras are generally referred to as "vyākhyātantra" and sometimes as "ākhyānatantra" by modern scholars. These texts are regarded as having the same canonical authority as the Root and Subsequent Tantra's and where translated into Tibetan, these works are found in the "rgyud" section of the Derge Kangyur. Of these five texts, four were translated into Tibetan. The fifth text is only known from references to its name and from quotations included in other works. None of the Sanskrit originals have so far been found and none of the Explanatory Tantras were translated into Chinese.

The texts available in Tibetan versions are, in the Derge edition:

- T444 sandhivvyākaraṇa-nāma-tantra
dgongs pa lun bstan pa
Revelation of the Intention Tantra
- T445 śrīvajramālābhīdhanamahāyogatantra-
sarvatantraḥṛdayaḥasyavibhaṅga-nāma
rnal 'byor chen po'i rgyud dpal rdo rje phreng ba mngon par brjod pa rgyud thams
cad kyi snying po gsang la rnam par phye ba
The Vajra Garland
- T446 caturdevīparipṛcchā
lha mo bzhis yongs su zhus pa
Questions of the Four Goddesses Tantra
- T447 vajrajñāna-samuccaya-nāma-tantra
ye shes rdo rje kun las btus pa
Compendium of Vajra Wisdom Tantra

The text that is lost and only known from quotations is called "devendrapariṣcchā" – "The Questions of Indra". In particular it is quoted by Candrakīrti in the Pradīpodyottana, as explained by Wayman (Wayman 1977, p.85).

Significant Commentaries of the two Guhyasamāja Traditions

Two traditions, also called schools or "lineages", can be found in the commentaries of the Guhyasamāja tantra, both of which survive in present day Tibetan Buddhist practice.

The two traditions are named from abbreviations of the names of their founders: the "Jñānapāda tradition", named after Buddhaśrījñāna and the "Ārya tradition" also known as the "Noble tradition" or the "Saint tradition", named after Ārya Nāgārjuna. Whether this "Nāgārjuna" should be regarded as the same person who wrote the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (Fundamental Treatise on the Middle Way) will be discussed later.

The two traditions are differentiated in two main ways. The form of the maṇḍala used in their practices is different, with nineteen deities for the Jñānapāda and thirty-two for the Ārya tradition, as described by Meiszahl (Meiszahl 1976, p.221) and Wayman (Wayman 1977, pp.122-124). The method for interpreting the arcane vocabulary used in the tantra is different, with the Jñānapāda tradition placing a greater emphasis on the literary quality of their commentaries and reserving the explanation to oral teachings (Wayman 1977, p.95), whilst the Ārya tradition rely on the Explanatory Tantras to explain such matters. The Jñānapāda tradition does not quote from these texts, a point which will be examined further below.

Commentaries of the Jñānapāda Tradition

These begin with the works of Buddhaśrījñāna himself, after whom the tradition is named. We know from the Blue Annals that Buddhaśrījñāna studied under Haribhadra for a time (Roerich 1976, p.367) and from Ruegg that Haribhadra was alive at the same time as the Pāla king Dharmapāla, who reigned 770-810CE (Ruegg 1981, p.101). We also know from the Blue Annals that Buddhaguhya was a disciple of Buddhaśrījñāna (Roerich 1976, p.352) and from Snellgrove that Buddhaguhya was invited to Tibet by the Tibetan king Khri Srong-lde-brtsan who reigned 754-797CE (Snellgrove 1987, pp.446, 383). This would allow the earlier part of the period 770-800CE to be identified as the likely time when Buddhaśrījñāna was obtaining his experience in the Guhyasamāja tradition.

In the Blue Annals, Buddhaśrījñāna has a variety of human and divine teachers. Only one of these teachers, Lalitavajra, is credited with authorship of any extant work related to

Guhyasamāja, although Tucci has doubts about whether this text was actually composed by Buddhaśrījñāna's teacher or a later person of the same name (Tucci 1956, p.252). This work is:

Lalitavajra

T1910 guhyasamājatantra-nidāna-gurūpadeśa-bhāṣya

gsang ba 'dus pa'i rgyud kyi gleng gzhi bla ma'i man ngag gis bshad pa

Explanation of the Guru's Oral Instructions on the Introduction to the Secret
Assembly Tantra

Buddhaśrījñāna is credited as the author of a number of works on Guhyasamāja:

Buddhaśrījñāna

T1855 samantabhadra-nāma-sādhana

kun tu bzang po zhes bya ba'i sgrub pa'i thabs

T1853 mukhāgama

rim pa gnyis pa'i de kho na nyid bsgom pa zhes bya ba'i zhal gyi lung

T1859 muktītilaka

grol ba'i thig le

Two other works from around the same time are mentioned in the Blue Annals as being "old translations" made prior to the reign of Ral-pa-can from 815CE (Roerich & 'Gos Lo-tsa-ba G'zön-nu-dpal 1976, p.103; Matsunaga 1977, p.114):

Viśvamisra

T1844 dpal gsang ba 'dus pa'i rgyud kyi man ngag gi rgya mtsho thigs pa

Drop from the Ocean of Oral Instructions on the Glorious Secret Assembly Tantra

Vajrahāsa

T1909 tantrarāja-śrī-guhyasamāja-ṭīkā

rgyud kyi rgyal po dpal gsang ba 'dus pa'i rnam par bshad pa

Commentary on the Glorious Secret Assembly, the King of Tantra

According to Hodge, Vajrahāsa was a contemporary of rMa rin-chen-mchog and they are both listed as translators of the first seventeen chapters of the Guhyasamāja Root Tantra in the rNying-ma'i rGyud-'bum (Hodge 2003, p.12). Whilst preparing this paper, this could not be

verified upon examination, but it was found that they are both listed as the translators of the *He-ru-ka Zhes Bya-ba'i sGrub-pa'i Thabs*, T1675 in the Derge edition. In contrast, the translation of the first seventeen chapters of the Root Tantra in the *gTing-skyes* edition of the *rNying-ma'i rGyud-'bum* is attributed to Vimalaprabhā and Ka-wa dPal-brtsegs (Germano et al. 2009). This will be discussed further below. However, *rMa rin-chen-mchog* was one of the original group of Tibetans ordained at the founding of *bSam-yas* monastery by *Khri Srong-lde-brtsan* in about 779CE (Snellgrove 1987, pp.389, 450) and he was later killed shortly after *Glang-dar-ma* became king in 836CE (Shakabpa 1967, p.51). Allowing for a few years of training to become proficient in translation, these relationships and dates would make it likely that *Vajrahāsa* wrote his commentary no more than ten to twenty years after the period 770-800CE when *Buddhaśrījñāna* was active, say about 785-810CE.

Viśvamitra's work was translated into Tibetan by *Vairocana* and *Jñānagarbha* according to its coda. Whereas a variety of persons called *Jñānagarbha* existed between 700-900CE (Ruegg 1981, p.69n224), *Vairocana* was also one of the original group of monks ordained at *bSam-yas* and was later exiled by *Khri Srong-lde-brtsan* following accusations of sexual misconduct by the Queen *Tshe-sPong bZa'*. This would place the translation between, say, 785 and 797CE, using the same approach as above. The actual work itself might be a little earlier.

The work by *Vajrahāsa* is a commentary on the Root Tantra and Hodge says that it only addresses the seventeen chapters of that, excluding the eighteenth chapter, the Subsequent Tantra (Hodge 2003, p.12), whilst *Viśvamitra's* work is a commentary solely on the Subsequent Tantra (Matsunaga 1977, p.114).

Commentaries of the Ārya Tradition

These begin with the works of *Ārya Nāgārjuna* after whom the *Ārya Tradition* is named. Other major commentaries in this tradition are attributed to *Āryadeva* and *Candrakīrti*.

The traditional Tibetan view of these works is that they are attributed to the same people as the founder and followers of the *Mādhyamika* school. This "attribution" is not straightforward and although sometimes stated to be because these persons lived miraculously long lives, it is more often stated that the later texts were composed at the earlier period and hidden, later to be discovered, or were revealed in visions by the earlier masters. Both these explanations are related in *Tāranātha's History of Buddhism* (*Tāranātha* 1608, lines.52a3-5, 101b4-6) and are related by *Wedemeyer* (Wedemeyer 2007, pp.20, 23).

Tāranātha proposes either that these texts were like the later gter-ma of the rNying-ma tradition and were revealed to the appropriate later lineage holders when the time was appropriate, or that the earlier teachers appeared in a vidyādhara-form and gave teachings to the later lineage holders via visions. In neither case does he propose the explanation of modern scholars that the actual authors of these texts named themselves after the earlier Mādhyamika masters, as has been proposed by Ruegg, Lindtner and others. This might suggest that the first person in the lineage given after each of the earlier teachers would represent the first person to produce each specific text attributed to that earlier teacher. Tāranātha relates that Mātāṅgipa received these teachings from Āryadeva and Nāgārjuna, whilst Rakṣitapāda received them from Candrakīrti and Rāhulaśrībhadra from Nāgabodhi. The lineage through Mātāṅgipa is also given in the Lineage Homage section of the present-day Long Guhyasamāja Sādhana of Ganden Jangtse, whilst the lineage after Candrakīrti passes to Śiṣyavajra and then to Kañhapa (Ganden Jangtse, lines.70a.6-70b.6).

Major commentaries of the Ārya tradition include:

Nāgārjuna

T1784 śrī-guhyasamajā-tantrasya tantra-tīka

dpal gsang ba 'dus pa'i rgyud kyi rgyud 'grel

Commentary on the Glorious Secret Assembly Tantra

This work also includes:

aṣṭādaśa-pāṭala-vistara-vyākhyā

le'u bco brgyad pa'i rgya cher 'grel pa

Extensive Commentary on the Eighteenth Chapter (of the Glorious Secret Assembly Tantra)

This is a separate work in the Peking edition.

T1796 piṇḍīkṛta-sādhana

sgrub pa'i thabs mdor byas pa

Condensed Sādhana (of the Glorious Secret Assembly)

Sanskrit text by de la Vallée Poussin (de la Vallée Poussin 1896)

T1797 śrī-guhyasamāja-mahāyogatantra-utpadakrama-sādhana-sūtra-melāpaka

rnal 'byor chen po'i rgyud dpal gsang ba 'dus pa'i bskyed pa'i rim pa bsgom pa'i thabs mdo dang bsres pa

Generation Stage Meditation of the Great Yoga Tantra of the Glorious Secret Assembly Tantra, combined with Sūtra

T1798 śrī-guhyasamāja-maṇḍala-vidhi

dpal gsang ba 'dus pa'i dkyil 'khor gyi cho ga

Maṇḍala Ritual of the Glorious Secret Assembly

T1802 pañcakrama

rim pa lnga pa

Five Stages

Sanskrit text by de la Vallée Poussin (de la Vallée Poussin 1896)

Āryadeva

T1803 caryāmelāpaka-pradīpa

spyod pa bsdus pa'i sgron ma

Lamp that combines the Practices

Sanskrit text by Wedemeyer (Wedemeyer 2007)

Candrakīrti

T1785 Guhyasamāja-tantra-pradīpodyotana-tīkā-saṭkoṭī-vyākhyā

sgron ma gsal bar byed pa zhes bya ba'i rgya cher bshad pa

The Commentary "The Illuminating Lamp" of the Secret Assembly Tantra with extensive explanation of the six Positions

Sanskrit text by Cakravarti (Cakravarti 1984)

Dating these texts and authors is more difficult than for the Jñānapāda authors as they are, for the most part, clearly identified individuals, rather than figures with the same names as the earlier Mādhyamika masters.

There seems to be little in the works of Nāgārjuna as above which allow them to be dated – they only refer to the Root and Subsequent Tantras and the Explanatory Tantras but not other works, according to Wayman and Wedemeyer. However, both Tāranātha, as above, and the Ganden Jangtse lineage homage relate that Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva gave Guhyasamāja teachings to Mātāṅgipa and the Ganden Jangtse lineage homage and the Song of Tilopa, from The Rain of Wisdom (Nalanda Translation Committee 1980), both relate that Mātāṅgipa passed the lineage on to Tilopa. Tilopa has the dates 988-1069CE in the traditional Kagyu chronology (Gyaltzen 1990, p.270), so Mātāṅgipa would most likely have "received" the teachings in visions of Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva around 950-1050CE. Wedemeyer relates that Tucci dates the Rakṣitapāda mentioned above to between 950-1075CE, being a contemporary of Rin-chen

bZang-po (Wedemeyer 2007, p.25n53) and so his "receiving" the teachings from Candrakīrti would also be within this range. Wedemeyer himself derives a range of dates for the work of Āryadeva using a literary approach, which gives 850-1000CE (Wedemeyer 2007, p.14). However, Wedemeyer uses a date of 1040CE for the death of Nāropa, the student of Tilopa, as proposed by Wylie (Wylie 1982, p.691), rather than the date from the traditional chronology, which would move back the dates of Tilopa and hence Mātāṅgipa, giving a range of about 925-1025CE for the teachings from Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva and 950-1075CE for those from Candrakīrti.

Dating the Root and Subsequent Tantras

The earliest datable mention of the Guhyasamāja tantra occurs in the works of Amoghavajra who visited Śri Lanka and South India by ship from China between 744 and 746CE. During his travels, he received extensive teachings on the Tattvasaṃgraha sutra and produced an outline of it in eighteen sections (Takakusu & Watanabe 1924, sec.T869). Section fifteen describes a "Guhyasamāja-yoga", with some similar features to the extant Tantra, but with many notable items not mentioned. Most of what is described corresponds to the present chapter five (Matsunaga 1977, p.112).

In the discussions of the work of Vajrahāsa and Viśvamitra above, we see that the seventeen chapters of the Root Tantra were extant by about 785-810CE and the Subsequent Tantra by 800CE. These considerations lead Matsunaga to propose that the Root Tantra was being "developed" during the first half of the 8th century CE, from 700CE, and "completed" during the second half, by 800CE.

It is interesting to note that there appears to be a North/South divide between the early lineage of the Jñānapāda and Ārya traditions. Buddhaśrījñāna and his followers are all based in North India, whereas Mātāṅgipa is situated in the South India, according to the Song of Tilopa (Nalanda Translation Committee 1980, p.126), Rakṣitapāda receives his teachings from Candrakīrti in Koṅkana and it is in the south where Amoghavajra gives the first account of Guhyasamāja.

Dating the Explanatory Tantras

Matsunaga addresses the difficulties of dating the Explanatory Tantras in "A doubt to Authority of the Guhyasamāja-Ākhyāna-tantras" (Matsunaga 1964). There are no surviving Sanskrit

versions of them and they were not translated into Chinese. Nor were any of them quoted by the "Old Translation" texts on Guhyasamāja of the Jñānapāda tradition.

Matsunaga points out anomalies in the structure of the vajramāla and vajrajñāna-samuccaya vyākhyātantras which suggest that they were not finalized before some of the works of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti were produced. This is unusual as Canonical Explanatory Tantras are taken to have the same "authority" as Root and Subsequent Tantras as Buddhavacana.

Matsunaga suggests that part of the vajramāla vyākhyātantra was composed after a version of the Pañcakrama of Nāgārjuna was produced and that there were some additions to the Pañcakrama after that. He also shows that the vajrajñāna-samuccaya vyākhyātantra was produced in two stages, the second part being produced after the Pradīpoddyotana of Candrakīrti was produced.

As a result of his analysis, Matsunaga proposes that the Explanatory Tantras date from around the same time as the "revelations" of the works of Nāgārjuna, Āryadeva and Candrakīrti, starting somewhat earlier, but only being completed around the same times.

Origin of the Explanatory Tantras – a hypothesis also linking the origins of the Jñānapāda and Ārya traditions

Matsunaga proposes that the Explanatory Tantras were deliberately composed by the scholars of the Ārya tradition to legitimize their own radical compositions, whose features were not actually supported by the Root and Subsequent Tantras, unlike the works of the Jñānapāda tradition (Matsunaga 1977, p.835).

Matsunaga's proposal seems to be based on the idea that there were actual individuals carrying the names of Nāgārjuna, Āryadeva and Candrakīrti and that they and their followers needed to establish the legitimacy of their new teachings.

This paper proposes an alternative, which has not been found elsewhere:

Firstly, if we consider the alternative idea that there were not actual persons carrying the names of Nāgārjuna, Āryadeva and Candrakīrti, but that other individuals, such as Mātāṅgipa, claimed to have received teachings from these great masters of the past in visions, as recorded by Tārānātha, then it is possible to suppose that the same or other similar persons might quite likely claim to have received these Explanatory Tantras in visions as well. This would not impute any

deliberate acts of legitimation to them and would accord with the tradition surrounding the works received from the "named" teachers of the past.

Secondly, taking the spatial dimension into account as well as the temporal as Matsunaga did, we can see the origin and practical development to the Guhyasamāja teachings being situated in the South of India. This accounts for the earliest mention by Amoghavajra and the later revelations of the Ārya school. In fact, we also find that Buddhaśrījñāna spends nine years in the South of India in Kaṃ Ko-na and studies under the ācārya bSrung-ba'i Zhabs who claims to be disciple of the ācārya Nāgārjuna (Roerich 1976, p.368).

"Kaṃ Ko-na" sounds quite like Koṅkana and bSrung-ba'i Zhabs can be "back-translated" into Sanskrit using the standards of the Mahāvvyutpatti as bSrung-ba = rakṣa or rakṣitaḥ and Zhabs = pāda, hence Rakṣitapāda. Tāranātha uses bSrung-ba'i Zhabs for this name also. This can hardly be a co-incidence and provides a concrete link between the Jñānapāda and Ārya traditions, both now being shown to arise in South India. Demonstration of such a link has not been found in the literature up to now – the two traditions have somehow been supposed to have arisen independently, in some way not explained. This would require the dates of the works of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti to be put back to around 800CE and calls into doubt the dating of Rakṣitapāda quoted by Wedemeyer. He does mention some doubt about this in a footnote (Wedemeyer 2007, p.25n53).

After the nine years, Buddhaśrījñāna returns to North India and then teaches Guhyasamāja to a variety of followers, setting the Jñānapāda tradition in motion.

However, there is no reason to suppose that development of the tradition stopped then and the Ārya school, based on the Explanatory tantras and works of Nāgārjuna, Āryadeva and Candrakīrti, develops, finally being translated into Tibetan by Rin-chen bZang-po et. al. from the mid-tenth century.

Contents of the Explanatory Tantras

(from Wayman, Wedemeyer and Sonam Dragpa)

T445 vajramālā: The Vajra Garland

T446 caturdevīparipṛcchā: Questions of the Four Goddesses

Tantra

These two texts explain elements of the yoga technique of the Guhyasamāja. The Vajra Garland teaches the generation stage with six yogas, four yogas and three samādhis and explains the completion stage by means of five stages. The Questions of the Four Goddesses explains the drops of the Subtle Body, the yoga of Vital Air, the dhāraṇī maṇḍala and the meaning of the five colours.

**T444 sandhivṃyākaraṇa-nāma-tantra: Revelation of the Intention
Tantra**

**T447 vajrajñāna-samuccaya: Compendium of Vajra Wisdom
Tantra**

The Revelation of the Intention is a commentary on the first twelve chapters of the Root Tantra, setting out the "proper interpretation" of the text according to the Ārya tradition. It is thought to be the earliest of the four Explanatory Tantras. The Compendium of Vajra Wisdom sets out the method used by the Ārya tradition to interpret texts, describing the six positions and four procedures to be used in analysis.

Concluding remarks

From reviewing the Guhyasamāja tantras and commentaries and considering the supposed authors, approaches to the creation of the works and their chronologies, a proposal on the linkage between the Jñānapāda and Ārya traditions has been made and on how the two traditions developed separately after that, allowing the Explanatory Tantras and texts of the Ārya tradition masters to arise. This proposal provides an earlier commencement date for the Ārya tradition and allows more time for the evolution of the complex relationships between the Explanatory Tantras and the works of Nāgārjuna, Āryadeva and Candrakīrti, which with the previously proposed dating would all have had to have happened in the last half of the tenth century CE.

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