

THE LIMITS OF TRANSGRESSION: THE *SAMAYA* VOWS OF MAHĀYOGA

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Whether vows are honoured or flouted, they define a Buddhist community. Social groups are held together by shared value systems, and the Buddhist saṅgha is no exception. Of the three collections of early scripture, it was the Vinaya and its associated *prātimokṣa* vows that set out what it was to be a Buddhist monastic. Disagreements over the Vinaya, rather than over other doctrinal or philosophical matters, were the root causes of sectarian divisions between the early monastic orders.

When the Mahāyāna movements appeared, the followers of the Mahāyāna defined their distinct mode of being Buddhist using the language of vows. Most Mahāyāna monks lived in the same communities as the followers of mainstream Buddhism and adhered to the same *prātimokṣa* vows. They expressed and reified their difference through an additional set of vows, the bodhisattva vows. These new vows augmented and recontextualized the *prātimokṣa* vows, but did not meddle with them. The new context set out in the bodhisattva ideal, the salvation of all sentient beings, made it possible to reinterpret the prohibitions of the earlier monastic vows, so that even killing could be acceptable if the greater good of sentient beings was at stake. But the original *prātimokṣa* vows remained the basic definition of what it meant to be a Buddhist monk.

THE *SAMAYA* VOWS

The topic of this paper is the next major set of vows to appear after the bodhisattva vows: the *samaya* vows of Vajrayāna Buddhism. With the emergence of the tantras we see a new understanding of what it means to be a Buddhist, and at the same time, the formulation of new vows. In the seventh century, tantras like the *Sarvatathāgatattvasaṃgraha*

articulated a significantly new approach to Buddhist practice, history and cosmology. They also expounded a new kind of vow called *samaya*.

The use of the term *samaya* in the tantras is closely related to its root meaning in Sanskrit as a conjunction or meeting place.¹ In the tantras, the *samaya* is the place where wisdom (Tib. *ye shes*, Skt. *jñāna*) becomes embodied. This might be a physical representation of a deity, an empowerment, a visualization or a sacramental substance. Thus in empowerment and *sādhana* practice the wisdom being (Tib. *ye shes sems dpa'*, Skt. *jñānasattva*), becomes embodied in the *samaya* being (Tib. *dam tshig sems dpa'*, Skt. *samayāsattva*), the representation or visualized form of the deity. This is known as the *samayamudrā* (Tib. *dam tshig gi phyag rgya*). The five nectars of tantric ritual—the faeces, urine, semen, blood and human flesh—are known as the *samaya* substances (Tib. *dam tshig rdzas*) because they embody this ritualized inherence of the divine in the ordinary. Likewise, the sexual sacrament of the perfection stage practices is often referred to as the supreme *samaya* (Tib. *dam tshig mchog*).

In the course of empowerment or *sādhana*, the *samaya* vows are often invoked at the very culmination of the ritual, when *jñāna* and *samaya* come together. This conjunction is considered to be extraordinarily powerful.² Vilāsavajra, in his *Exposition of the Samaya* (*Dam tshig gsal bkra*) writes:

[The *samaya*] is by nature a pure conjunction;
Therefore it gives great power to the good and evil [deeds]
Of those who are [respectively] able or unable to maintain it.³

In order to live up to this conjunction, to become an embodiment of the deity's wisdom, one must abide by certain strict codes of behaviour. The results of failing to do so are often graphically described.⁴ The following warning from one of the Dunhuang manuscripts is typical:

¹ A definition of *samaya* in the early Tibetan commentarial tradition preserves the original Sanskrit etymology, rather unusually for Tibetan etymologies of Sanskrit words; see RONG ZOM's *Rgyud rgyal gsang ba snying po'i 'grel pa*: 404-405.

² On the ritual role of the *samaya* substances, see DALTON 2004: 18-19.

³ Q. 4744, f.579b.5: so mtshams dag gi rang bzhin pas// bsrung ba thub dang ma thub las// nyes legs stobs chen 'byed pa'o//.

⁴ See for example, IOL Tib J 346/2, IOL Tib J 419/3, IOL Tib J 473, and IOL Tib J 552.

If the *samaya* deteriorate, then while you live your complexion will deteriorate, your mind will become unclear, you will be subject to many illnesses and your wishes will go unfulfilled. Innumerable spirits and demons will wound you like an animal. When you die, your senses will become clouded, your tongue will stick [to your palate], you will smell unpleasant, and you will die vomiting blood. You will be escorted [from this life] by innumerable malicious demons.⁵

The benefits of keeping the vows are concomitantly great; the same text says:

If these three *samaya* do not deteriorate, then your body, speech and mind will be transformed into the *vajra* nature. While you live your hopes will be fulfilled, while at the time of death you will have a clear mind, untroubled by the sickness of the defilements. [Your body] will have a pleasant odour, you will not forget the instructions, and the deities will come as escorts.⁶

This presentation of the *samaya* has continued through to the present day. Contemporary Tibetan lamas often like to compare someone who holds the *samaya* vows with a snake inside a tube of bamboo. For the snake, there are only two ways out of the tube; similarly for the *samaya* holder, there are only two results: enlightenment or the deepest hell.

Considering the weightiness of the *samaya* vows, it is perhaps surprising that the discussions of these vows in the tantras themselves are neither systematic nor consistent; no two tantras present the same version of these vows. It was left to the commentarial tradition to turn these passages from the tantras into a coherent system of vows.⁷ Two

⁵ IOL Tib J 718 r.12: dam tshIg nyams pa na/ tshe 'dI la yang mdog nyams pa dang/ sems myi [r13] gsal ba dang/ /nad mang ba dang/ bsam pa myI 'grub pa dang/ rI dags sman ma dang 'dra ste// 'dre srI na yang bsam gyIs myI khyab pas [r14] glags gcod do/ /'chI ba'I dus su yang/ dbang po myi gsal ba dang/ /lce lta babs pa dang// drI ma myI zhibs pa dang/ khrag skyug nas snying gas te 'chI 'o/ /sun mar yang 'dre gnon [r15] bsam gyIs myI khyab par 'ong/.

⁶ IOL Tib J 718 r.11: 'dI gsum ma nyams na ni lus ngag yid gsum/ rdo rje rang bzhIn du gyur te/ /tshe 'dI la yang/ bsam ba 'grub pa dang/ 'chI ba'I dus byung na yang/ sems [r12] gsal ba dang/ nyon mongs pa pa'i nad kyI pa myI brlungs pa drI ma zhIm ba dang/ man ngag myI brjed cing/ /sun mar yang lha rnam pa byon no/.

⁷ It is not possible here to review the vast topic of how the transgressive statements found in the tantras were interpreted in Indic tantric exegesis. Recent discussions of

systems became popular in Tibet, one transmitted within the Rnying ma, and the other in the ‘new’ (Tib. *gsar ma*) schools, especially the Sa skya and Dge lugs. The Rnying ma system comprises twenty-eight vows, divided into three root vows and twenty-five branch vows. The *gsar ma* system comprises fourteen root downfalls and eight branch downfalls. Let us look in more detail at the twenty-eight vows of the Rnying ma *samaya*.⁸

The three root vows are:

- (i) The vow of the body: to venerate the guru
- (ii) The vow of speech: to continually practice the *mantras* and *mudrās* of the deity
- (iii) The vow of mind: to keep the restricted teachings of the tantras secret

The twenty-five branch vows are arranged in five groups of five:

- (i) The five to be accepted, which are the five nectars: faeces, urine, semen, blood and human flesh
- (ii) The five not to be rejected, which are the five defilements of desire, hatred, ignorance, pride and jealousy
- (iii) The five to be practised, which are the five rituals of liberation and union (Tib. *sbyor bsgrol*)
- (iv) The five to be known, which are the pure natures of the components, elements, sense objects, sacraments and propensities
- (v) The five to be accomplished, which are the buddha’s body, speech, mind, qualities and activities

This is a rather long list, but one thing that is immediately striking about it is that some of the vows commit the practitioner to perform apparently transgressive or immoral actions. While the root vows (of venerating the guru, practising the *mantras* and *mudrās* and keeping the teachings secret) are relatively innocuous from this point of view,

this material can be found in ONIANS 2001, DAVIDSON 2002 (especially chapter 6) and WEDEMEYER 2007. See also the bibliography of the latter for earlier discussions.

⁸ The fourteen vows of the *gsar ma* system are well enough known that no repetition is needed here. The Indic antecedents of this vow system have been discussed in DAVIDSON 2002: 22-327. This system clearly gained currency in India by the tenth century, as evidenced by the number of treatises devoted to it in the *Bstan ’gyur* (Q. 3303-3314).

the branch vows involve commitments to eating the five forbidden substances, accepting the five defiling emotions, and practising ritual slaying and sexual union.

Transgression is one of the main themes of the higher tantras. Rules of purity and moral conduct are deliberately subverted in order to blur the distinction between pure and impure. The *samaya* vow systems drawn from these tantras integrate the transgressive rhetoric of tantric ritual with proscriptions limiting the behaviour of mantrins. The *samaya* vows protect the soteriological purpose of transgression, while at the same time telling tantric practitioners that they can't actually just do whatever they feel like. Here, transgression and restriction are brought into the same sphere, where they coexist, and not without some tension.

This dual function of the tantric vows was recognised by the Tibetan scholastic tradition. According to the nineteenth century scholar 'Jams mgon Kong sprul, some scholars divided the tantric vows into *saṃvara* (Tib. *sdom pa*)—injunctions to engage in certain kinds of behaviour—and *samaya* (Tib. *dam tshig*)—prohibitions restraining certain kinds of behaviour.⁹ However, Kong sprul notes that some scholars used these terms the other way round, and yet others considered them synonymous.

VOWS IN MAHĀYOGA

A good proportion of the Dunhuang Tibetan manuscripts are concerned with the ritual and theory of Mahāyoga. In my recent work on the meanings of the term 'Mahāyoga' in the tenth century I have shown that some Dunhuang texts define themselves in terms of the doxographical category of Mahāyoga and many others may be classified as Māhayoga in that they inhabit the same ritual universe (VAN SCHAİK 2008).¹⁰

⁹ *Shes bya kun khyab*: aḥ 79a: 'dir nyams su blang bya bsgrub pa'i tshul khriṃs la sdom pa/ /sbyang bya bzlog pa'i tshul khriṃs la dam tshig/ (See also the English translation in KONGTRUL 2003: 249).

¹⁰ IOL Tib J 436/1 is a brief treatise on the definition of Mahāyoga, and the two doxographical texts IOL Tib J 644 and PT 656 offer definitions of Mahāyoga. As I show in my article (VAN SCHAİK 2008) there is a substantial consistency between these three texts, as well as others found in the Dunhuang manuscripts. Elsewhere I have also traced the development of the early Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*) movement within the sphere of Mahāyoga (VAN SCHAİK 2004).

It is likely that these manuscripts originally came from a community of tantric practitioners active in the Dunhuang area in the tenth century. The discussions of the *samaya* vows contained in the manuscripts should give us an idea of the relevance of the *samaya* vows to Mahāyoga practitioners, ‘on the ground’. The Mahāyoga texts from Dunhuang are particularly interesting because they were composed during the so-called Tibetan Dark Age when many of what were later to become Rnying ma doctrines were being formulated.

Of the many Dunhuang texts which discuss the *samaya*, eleven actually spell out the exact nature of the Mahāyoga *samaya* vows (a brief summary of these texts appears below in Appendix 1). Perhaps the most striking thing about these manuscripts, none of which has ever been discussed before, is their variety. They show that before the arrival of the authoritative figures of the new schools, beginning with the Sa skya pa master Grags pa rgyal mtshan in the twelfth century, there was no concerted attempt to impose a single interpretation upon the tantric vows. Thus multiple vow systems, each derived from different tantras and indeed different stages in the development of tantric Buddhism all exist together in the Dunhuang manuscripts.

In order to understand this situation, we need to look at how the Mahāyoga *samaya* vows developed. Transgressive *samaya* vows actually appeared before the Mahāyoga tantras, in tantras of the Yoga class, the *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha* and the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana*. The transgressive vows of these tantras are basically reversals of the standard vows of a layperson. They are injunctions to (i) kill, (ii) steal, (iii) lie and (iv) fornicate.¹¹ Obviously these vows are part of the rhetoric of transgression which appears in the Yoga tantras and in a greatly magnified form in the Mahāyoga tantras. They are clearly not vow systems designed to control people’s behaviour; yet it should be noted that restrictive vows are also found in both of these texts.

These four vows seem to have become very well established by the time of the *Guhyasamājatantra*, one of the earliest of the Mahāyoga tantras, and perhaps the most influential treatise on transgressive practices. In the *Guhyasamāja*, killing, stealing, lying and fornicating are simply referred to as the four *vajra* vows. The *samaya* vows are expounded in the *Guhyasamāja*’s chapter seventeen in a rather chaotic jumble of vows exhorting the yogin to engage in the ritual

¹¹ These are discussed in SNELGROVE 1987: I.175-6, 268.

consumption of the five nectars and in ritualized sexual practices. There is little in the way of restriction, except for the injunction to venerate the master and the injunction to secrecy. These two behavioural restrictions are the solid weight which anchors all the transgression which surrounds them in the *Guhyasamāja*.¹²

In later Mahāyoga tantras, the vows became both more restrictive and more organized. The *Guhyagarbhatantra*'s nineteenth chapter organizes the *samaya* vows into five root and ten branch vows. The five root vows are:

- (i) Not to abandon the unsurpassed [vehicle]
- (ii) To venerate the guru
- (iii) Not to interrupt the [practice of] *mantra* and *mudrā*
- (iv) To have loving-kindness for those who enter the genuine path
- (v) Not to divulge the secret truths to others

Additionally, the ten branch vows comprise the five things not to renounce, which are the five defiling emotions, and the five things not to reject, which are the five nectars. Here the five root vows are all restrictive, and the transgressions have been organized into the two sets of five branch vows.¹³ The sexual transgression which is the mainstay of the *Guhyasamāja* vows is entirely absent from the *Guhyagarbha* vows.

These *Guhyagarbha* vows are similar to the *samaya* vow system that was adopted by the Rnying ma school, which we looked at earlier. But they are not the same: there are only fifteen of these *Guhyagarbha* vows, while the Rnying ma system has twenty-eight. For something closer to the Rnying ma system we must look beyond the tantras themselves to a treatise attributed to the eighth-century Indic tantric exegete Vilāsavajra.

Vilāsavajra wrote commentaries on several tantras, including the *Guhyagarbha*, but when he came to compose a treatise on the *samaya* vows, he did not choose to follow the *Guhyagarbha* system. In his *Exposition of the Samaya (Dam tshig gsal bkra)* he whittled down the root vows from five to four, and extended the branch vows from ten to

¹² Note however that the explanatory tantra to the *Guhyasamāja*, the *Sandhyā-vyākaraṇa*, explains these transgressive actions as metaphors for normative Buddhist activities (see WEDERMEYER 2002: 184-187).

¹³ Killing, stealing, lying and fornication are mentioned in chapter 19 of the *Guhyagarbha*, but they are not integrated into the vow system of the tantra.

twenty-five. The only later development in the Rnying ma system was that these four root vows were further whittled down to three. Vilāsavajra's fourth root vow, the vow of *bodhicitta*, dropped away, leaving the three root vows which now neatly represented the classic triad of body, speech and mind. This final stage can already be seen in the Dunhuang manuscripts.

THE *SAMAYA* VOWS IN THE DUNHUANG MANUSCRIPTS

So far we have seen how the Mahāyoga *samaya* vows had been systematised by the ninth century. Yet the variety of presentations of the *samaya* vows in the Dunhuang manuscripts shows that over a century later several different ways of formulating the *samaya* vows all existed concurrently. The variety of formulations can be seen in Appendix 1, where all of the manuscripts containing formulations of the Mahāyoga *samaya* vows are listed.¹⁴ Here we will look only at the four main systems found in the manuscripts:

¹⁴ Although in this article I have chosen to focus on the Mahāyoga *samaya* vows, the Dunhuang manuscripts do also provide us with treatments of the vows of other tantra groups, especially Kriyā and Yoga, and of the newer classes of yoga which had begun to be placed above Mahāyoga, that is, Anuyoga and Atiyoga. As a single example, PT 656 represents an important tenth century classification of the tantric vow systems; I will briefly summarize its treatment of each class of vows here:

Kriyā: five vows—(i) not to abandon the three jewels, (ii) to regard and respect the *vajra* master as if he were a buddha, (iii) not to have negative thoughts about, and to remain harmonious with, one's *vajra* brothers and sisters, (iv) to perform the cleansings three times a day, (v) not to eat or drink meat, garlic, onions, and alcohol.

Yoga: seven vows—(i) to regard and respect the *vajra* master as if he were a buddha, (ii) not to generate negative thoughts about, and to remain harmonious with, one's *vajra* brothers and sisters, (iii) not to forsake the mind of enlightenment, (iv) not saying a word [about the secret teachings] until one has been granted initiation as a *vajra* master, (v) not to consort with beings of lower vehicles, nor (vi) [drink] the water of their valley, and (vii) to always hold one's bell and vajra.

Mahāyoga: the twenty-eight vows, grouped into three kinds—the vows of view, practice, and accomplishment.

Anuyoga: four vows—(i) reality, (ii) compassion, (iii) equality, and (iv) union with the sense-objects.

Atiyoga: one single vow—the indiscriminate (*phyal ba*). The text explains that *phyal ba* means that one naturally remains in the sphere of the infinite supreme bliss. While vow means something not to be transgressed, to be *phyal ba* is to be beyond the concepts of maintaining or not maintaining a vow. For a translation, transcription and reproduction of this manuscript, see DALTON 2005. Note that *phyal ba* also occurs in a separate doxographical context where it refers to ordinary worldlings, uninformed by

The four vajra vows

These vows, which, as I mentioned earlier, derive from pre-Mahāyoga tantras like the *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha*, appear infrequently in the manuscripts. In PT 337 they are called “the vows of the four buddha families.”¹⁵ However, this treatise does not mention Mahāyoga and seems to be in an earlier tradition of classifying the tantras only into ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ yoga.¹⁶ In the Great Perfection text IOL Tib J 647 each of these four vows is reinterpreted to accord with the text’s rhetoric of transcending ritual activity.¹⁷ In fact there is no evidence from the manuscripts that these four vows were considered to belong to Mahāyoga at all. It seems that when Mahāyoga began to develop into a discrete category of yoga (a process which we can observe in the Dunhuang manuscripts), the four *vajra* vows were not incorporated into Mahāyoga vow systems.

The five defiling emotions

The vows to engage in the five defiling emotions of desire, hatred, ignorance, pride and jealousy feature as one of the sets of branch vows in the *Guhyagarbha*, in Vilāsavajra’s *Exposition of the Samaya*, and in the Rnying ma twenty-eight vow system. They also seem to have circulated as an independent set of vows, appearing in several manuscripts (in IOL Tib J 321 and 583; PT 42, 288 and 337) as the central *samaya* vows. These vows are thoroughly transgressive, yet these texts usually try to put them into a normative context. For example, in one manuscript the practice of the five defiling emotions is framed in a way that makes them acceptable within the Mahāyāna Buddhist context:

Desire is defined as developing the great desire for the ultimate liberation of all beings. Hatred is defined as hatred which tames those

philosophical views, as in PADMASAMBHAVA’S *Rosary of Views* (*Man ngag lta ba’i phreng ba*). See KARMAY 1988: 152-153. Another example of a reinterpretation of *samaya* vows according to the Atiyoga approach is found in IOL Tib J 647: 3v-4v (for a translation and transcription see KARMAY 1988: 54-55, 58).

¹⁵ PT 337: panel 4, ll.16-21. On the four deity *maṇḍala* system of the *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha*, see SNELLGROVE 1987: 196-197.

¹⁶ On this stage of tantric doxography, see DALTON 2005: 121-124.

¹⁷ See KARMAY 1988: 54-55, 58.

beings who harbour ill will towards the Mahāyāna, and thinking of them with love. Ignorance is defined as not differentiating phenomena, because they are pure by nature; this is designated as the valid cognition of phenomena. You should develop pride in yourself as the greatest, because you show that language obscures the equality of all things. Jealousy [is acceptable] because ordinary sentient beings are not [suitable] receptacles for this Mahāyana Vajrayāna.¹⁸

In later centuries it became standard practice for Rnying ma authors to present the *samaya* vows in this way. Such presentations appear in the works of authors like Rong zom pa (b.eleventh c.) and Klong chen pa (1308–1364). Given the well-known criticisms levelled in the eleventh and twelfth centuries of previous Tibetan misunderstandings regarding the transgressive language of the tantras, it is interesting to see a metaphorical reading of these transgressive vows in a tenth century text. Furthermore, the presence of this reading in tenth century Tibetan tantric exegesis supports a characterization of Rong zom's statements in this area as a continuation of earlier traditions, rather than a reaction to polemical statements from the emerging 'new' traditions.¹⁹

The three root vows

In another well-represented system of Mahāyoga vows, the three root vows of body, speech and mind are discussed alone, with no reference to any branch vows. The most extensive example of this genre, IOL Tib J 718, is translated and transcribed in Appendix 2. A shorter text on the three *samaya* vows appears in two manuscripts, Or.8210/

¹⁸ PT 288, v4.3: de la 'dod chags ni/ 'gro ba thams shad bla na myed pa'i/ +bsgral ba'i 'dod chen po bskyed par [v5] bya 'o/ /zhe sdang ni/ theg pa chen po'i cha la/ ngan sems skye ba 'dul zhing byams pa'i/ bsam bas zhe sdang bya'o/ /gti mug ni/ chos thams cad rang bzhin gis/ rnam par dag pas/ rnam [v6] par myi byed do/ chos gyi tshad mar {'dog} pa 'o/ /nga rgyal ni/ thams cad mnyam ba nyid du gyur pa la/ mying sna tsogs gyis dgrib pa/ de dag thams cad bstan pa ni [v7] 'phyir/ bdag kun gyi gtso bo yin bar nga rgyal bskyed do/ phrag dog ni thed[sic] pa chen po rdo tje theg pa 'di sems can phal gyis shes pa'i snod pa ma yin.

¹⁹ On the polemics of the 11th and 12th centuries, see KARMAY 1980 and WANGCHUK 2002. The relevant commentaries are RONG ZOM's *Rgyud rgyal gsang ba snying po'i 'grel pa* and KLONG CHEN PA's *Phyogs bcu'i mun sel*. For a translation of the discussion of the five defiling emotions in the latter, see DORJE 1987: 1204-1210.

S.9223 and PT 269.²⁰ Finally, the Mahāyoga ritual in PT 840 concludes with a discussion of the *samaya* according to the three vows. All of these texts share similar phraseology, and may derive from a single tradition.

This system represents the most condensed *samaya* vow tradition. Where we had five root vows in the *Guhyagarbhatantra*, and four in the Vilāsavajra's *Exposition of the Samaya*, we now have three. Furthermore, in contrast with both of these previous sources, the branch vows are entirely absent. The existence of other vows is simultaneously acknowledged and dismissed in IOL Tib J 718: "If you strive at these *samaya*, there is no need to augment them with any others."²¹

The twenty-eight vows

Perhaps most importantly, the twenty-eight vow system that is still used by the Rnying ma school today is also seen in the Dunhuang manuscripts. The twenty-eight vow system is mentioned in two treatises, both of which specifically link these vows with the Mahāyoga tradition. The two manuscripts are PT 656 and IOL Tib J 436. The system is treated in more detail in the latter (f.34v–35r) though the scribe has missed out the five branch vows to be accepted, probably in error. As far as I know, these manuscripts are the earliest dateable appearance of this classic Rnying ma vow system.²²

It seems that as Mahāyoga came into focus as a doxographical category, it was increasingly associated with the twenty-eight vow system. In both of these manuscripts, the entire twenty-eight vows are subsumed into another triad: (i) the *samaya* of the view, (ii) the *samaya* of practice and (iii) the *samaya* of accomplishment, which

²⁰ I would like to thank Kazushi Iwao for pointing out these two manuscripts to me.

²¹ IOL Tib J 718. See Appendix 2.

²² We can find these twenty-eight vows in some tantras from the *Rnying ma rgyud 'bum* collection, including the *Dri ma med pa'i bshags pa'i rgyud* (M. vol. Wa, pp. 2.1-123.5), on which see, too, M. KAPSTEIN's contribution to the present volume. The twenty-eight vows are mentioned in the confession prayer in Chapter 6, which is entitled *Dam tshig nyi shu rtsa brgyad pa'i bshags pa*. However, the dating and geographical origin of most of the tantras in this collection is often impossible to determine; many certainly originate from post-tenth century Tibet.

comprises the second root vow (to continue the *mantras* and *mudrās*) and the five branch vows to be accomplished.

What are the relevant *samaya*? One should assemble the *samaya* in order to embrace that which is concordant, in order to restrain that which is discordant, and in order to obtain and accomplish. There are twenty-eight *samaya* in the transmitted precepts (*lung*). According to the esoteric instructions (*man ngag*) they are grouped into three. This one should know.

“What are they?” They are (i) the *samaya* of view, (ii) the *samaya* of practice and (iii) the *samaya* of accomplishment. Now to distinguish these. The *samaya* of mind (not disseminating the secret instruction to others) and the five aspects to be known are the *samaya* of the view. The *samaya* of the body (not developing animosity or scorn towards the *vajra* master and brothers and sisters), the five *samaya* to be practised and the five *samaya* not to be renounced are the *samaya* of practice. The *samaya* of speech (not ceasing [the performance of] *mantras* and *mudrās*) and the five *samaya* to be accomplished are the *samaya* of accomplishment. The result of these three is the nature of accomplishment.²³

One can see why the twenty-eight vow system became popular. It boiled down the restrictions on tantric practitioners into three basic vows: venerating the guru, practising the deity’s *mantras* and *mūdras*, and keeping the secret teachings secret. At the same time, it kept the transgressive vows associated with the defiling emotions and the rituals of Mahāyoga in the twenty-five branch vows. But while the twenty-eight vows came to dominance in Rnying ma lineages in later centuries, in the Dunhuang manuscripts they are merely one of many systems of *samaya* vows.

²³ IOL Tib J 436, 1v, l.1: .../de la c[i]’[i] phy[i]r [l.2] dam tsig ce na/ /’dra bar dka’ ba’i phyIr dang/ my[i]’dra bar sdom ba’i phyIr dang/ /thob par cing [l.3] grub pa’I phyir dam tsig tseg bya/ ’o/ /de la dam tsig nyI shu rtsa brgyad ni/ /lung yin la man ngag gis ni gsum du ’dus pa [l.4] shes ga par bya ste/ /dpe yang gang zhe na/ /lta ba’i dam tsig dang/ spyod pa’i dam tshig dang/ bsgrub pa’i dam tsig go/ /de la dbye na [l.5] thugs kyi dam tsig gsang ba’i man ngag/ /gzhan la myi spel ba dang/ /shes par bya ba’I dam tsig lnga ni/ lta pa’i dam tsig go [l.6] sku’i dam tsig nI rdo rje slob dpon dang/ mched lcam dral la ngan sems dang/ dpya sems myi bskyed pa dang/ /spyang par bya [l.7] dang myi spang ba lnga ba lnga ste/ spyad pa’i dam tsig go/ /gsung gi dam tsig sngags phyag rgya rgyun myi gcang pa dang [2r, l.1] dam tsig lnga nI bsgrubs pa’i dam dam tsig go/ /’di gsum ya char ma gyur pa’i ’bras bu nI grub pa’I rang bzhin no/ /

STANDARDIZATION OF THE *SAMAYA* VOWS

The existence of so many different variations of the *samaya* vows in the Dunhuang manuscripts should be understood against the background of Indic tantra and the political situation in tenth century Tibet. An almost inconceivable variety of tantric texts emerged in India between the sixth and twelfth centuries. R.M. Davidson has argued that the plethora of tantric texts is directly related to the chaotic political scene of medieval India. There is little doubt that the lack of any central controlling system allowed variation to thrive.²⁴

Most tantric cycles developed in specific communities of *tāntrikas*, who would have been bound by the *samaya* vows expounded in their particular texts. Initially, perhaps, practitioners would be bound by the vows of the tantra into which they had been initiated. As these cycles became more widely disseminated, it is likely that Indic teachers transmitted their own versions of the vows as part of their oral instruction lineage. Some of these systems came to be written down, in treatises like Vilāsavajra's, or indeed in our Dunhuang manuscripts. Thus the *samaya* vows would continue to vary between one oral lineage and another. This theory is given some support by one of the Dunhuang manuscripts (PT 337), a commentary on an unidentified tantra. After discussing the *samaya* vows, the commentary says: "The *samaya* are the transmitted precepts (*lung*) of the *vajra* master, passed down from one person to another".²⁵

When these tantric cycles appeared in Tibet in the late ninth and tenth centuries, the political situation was equally fluid. With the end of the authority of the imperial kings, there was no religious imperative to regulate the transmission of Indic lineages, or to limit the flourishing of a multitude of coexisting systems of practice. This is the situation that characterises the 'age of fragmentation' (*sil bu'i dus*) of the mid-ninth to late tenth centuries in Tibet

By the twelfth century certain Tibetans saw the need for a single authoritative system of tantric vows. One reason for this development may be that the forefathers of the new schools (especially the Sa skya) felt impelled to present a unified version of authentic Indic Buddhism, against the cacophony of voices from the existing tantric lineages of

²⁴ DAVIDSON 2002: 114-116.

²⁵ PT 337: panel 4, l.22: *slobd dpon gyI lung gclg du brgyud cIng bshad pa yIn*. Note that the system of twenty-eight vows is also described as 'the transmitted precepts' (*lung*) in the passage from IOL Tib J 436 cited earlier.

Tibet.²⁶ Thus we see the fourteen root and eight branch downfalls set out as the only correct *samaya* system by the Sa skya patriarch Grags pa rgyal mtshan (1147–1216) at the beginning of the thirteenth century.²⁷ The Sa skya forefathers were also keen to rescue tantric practice from the bad reputation it had gained for itself in some quarters. Thus the vow system Grags pa rgyal mtshan chose tends to emphasize the restrictive and normative vows, with less emphasis on transgressive practices. In Grags pa rgyal mtshan's treatment, such transgressive elements that do appear in this vow system are glossed over.

Ultimately, the most significant factor in the standardization of the *samaya* vow systems in Tibet must have been the growth of monastic communities. It became common practice in these communities for monks to receive tantric initiations, and the relationship between the tantric *samaya* vows and the monastic Vinaya quickly became a subject of discussion and debate. Treatises on the correct way to integrate the *samaya* vows with the monastic vows were circulating in Tibet by the twelfth century.²⁸

The classic treatment of this question was written by Sa skya Paṇḍita (1182–1251) in the thirteenth century. His *Differentiating the Three Vows* (*Sdom gsum rab dbye*) was the first major work in what became a Tibetan genre dedicated to assimilating the *prātimokṣa*, bodhisattva and *samaya* vows, which became collectively known as the three vows (*sdom gsum*).²⁹ In this way the *samaya* vow system was integrated with the monastic vows of Tibet's great monastic communities.³⁰ As I suggested earlier, Buddhist communities are defined by their vow systems. Once the *samaya* vows became

²⁶ On the activities of the early Sa skya patriarchs in the reinvigoration of Tibetan Buddhism during this period, see DAVIDSON 2005, especially chapters 8 and 9.

²⁷ In his *Clarifying and Dispelling Error* (*Rtsa ba'i ltung ba bcu bzhi pa'i 'grel pa gsal byed 'khrul spong*). See bibliography for details.

²⁸ SOBISCH 2002: 177.

²⁹ The *sdom gsum* genre is a vast topic, which has been treated in great detail in SOBISCH 2002. The *Sdom gsum rab dbye* has been translated and discussed in RHOTON 2002. Note that despite its significant influence on discussions of various doctrinal matters, especially for the Sa skya school, the *Sdom gsum rab dbye* could not really serve as a model for later *sdom gsum* literature, as it deals with the vow systems only in passing, being more concerned with discussions of contested topics related to them.

³⁰ An impression of how this worked in practice can be gained from LOPEZ 1995, which includes a translation of a ritual for restoring infractions of the *prātimokṣa*, bodhisattva and *samaya* vows, written by TSONG KHA PA in the fifteenth century.

integrated into large monastic communities, multiplicity was no longer an option.

The value of our Dunhuang documents is that they tell us that it was not always thus. In pre-twelfth century Tibet, and probably in the context of Indic Vajrayāna Buddhism as well, a multiplicity of *samaya* vows was quite acceptable. This attitude is well expressed in a passage from the *Guhyagarbhatantra* itself:

This *samaya* is a great wonder!
There are as many *samaya* as there are concepts to be subdued
Among the sentient beings of the three levels of existence
In the ten directions of the six world systems.³¹

APPENDIX I

MAHĀYOGA *SAMAYA* VOWS IN THE DUNHUANG MANUSCRIPTS

IOL Tib J 321

Padmasambhava's commentary on the *Upāyapāśatantra*.³² Chapter 2 discusses the *samaya*, as three kinds of purity: (i) the *samaya* of the five buddhas (i.e. the five defiling emotions), (ii) the five sacred foods, and (iii) the *samaya* of the lack of virtue or sin in phenomena, and of food being pure and unimpaired.

IOL Tib J 348/2

The three aspects of *samaya*: secrecy regarding (i) the *yi dam* deity, (ii) the *vajra* master, (iii) the heart mantra of the *yi dam*.

The four conditions: (i) not having bad thoughts about the *vajra* master and siblings, (ii) not looking at tantras which the *vajra* master has not given the empowerment for, (iii) not contesting the *vajra* master (iv) not coveting the wealth and jewels of *vajra* siblings.

IOL Tib J 436/1

The twenty-eight vows, classified into three groups: (i) the *samaya* of the view, which comprises the third root vow (secrecy) and the five

³¹ M. vol. Wa, p. 212.2-3: /dam tshig 'di ni rmad po che//jig rten drug gi phyogs bcu na//srid gsum 'gro ba ji snyed pa//rtogs 'dul dam tshig de snyed spro/.

³² The canonical version of this commentary is found in the Peking *Bstan 'gyur* at Q. 4717. The tantra itself is in the *Bka' 'gyur* at Q. 458. The Sanskrit name of the tantra is attested in another manuscript, IOL Tib J 454.

branch vows to be known; (ii) the *samaya* of practice, which comprises the first root vow (to venerate the guru) and the five branch vows to be practiced, the five to be accepted, and the five not to be renounced; (iii) and the *samaya* of accomplishment, which comprises the second root vow (continue the *mantras* and *mudrās*) and the five branch vows to be accomplished.

IOL Tib J 583/9 & PT 288

The seven injunctions: (i) to cut through ordinary phenomena; (ii) to examine the three realms; (iii) to attain the five principal buddhas; (iv) to maintain the five *samaya* (i.e., the five defiling emotions); (v) to accept the five nectars; (vi) to practice the ten nonvirtues; (vii) to uphold the eight laws.

IOL Tib J 647

3v–4v: The four *vajra* vows and the five defiling emotions interpreted in the context of Atiyoga.

IOL Tib J 718/1

Extensive discussion of the three roots of *samaya*: (i) not ceasing [the performance of] *yi dam*, *mantra* and *mudrā*, (ii) not disseminating these instructions to others, (iii) not developing bad thoughts or desire and aversion to the *vajra* master and the *vajra* brothers and sisters.

Or.8210/S.9223

Verso: A treatment of the three root *samaya* vows. The same text appears in PT 269 and a lengthier treatment of the same vows appears in IOL Tib J 718.

PT 42

Verso 27.1–28.1: The five vows (i.e. the five defiling emotions).

PT 269

Recto: A treatment of the three root *samaya* vows. The same text appears in Or.8210/S.9223, and a lengthier treatment of the same vows appears in IOL Tib J 718.

PT 280/2

Defines *samaya* as the three root vows of body, speech and mind. The *samaya* of practice, ‘and so on’. Seems to be indicating the group of twenty-eight *samaya* vows.

PT 337

3.20: Four kinds of licentiousness:

Perform anything: perform the four *samaya* vows, such as not killing.³³

Do anything: do any worldly activity like dancing and singing.

Eat anything: such as the five nectars.

Drink anything: such as beer.

4.16-21: *Samaya* of the four buddha families: not to kill (*vajra* family), fornicate (jewel family), lie (lotus family), or steal (action family).

PT 656

A brief enumeration of the *samaya* vows of each kind of tantra. Mahāyoga vows are twenty-eight vows grouped into three (see IOL Tib J 436/1 above).

PT 840

A brief treatment of the *samaya* of body, speech and mind. The same text appears in Or.8210/S.9993 and a lengthier treatment of the same vows appears in IOL Tib J 718.

APPENDIX 2

A TREATISE ON THE THREE ROOT *SAMAYA* VOWS (IOL TIB J 718/1)

IOL Tib J 718/1 is the most extensive commentary on the Mahāyoga *samaya* vows found among the Dunhuang manuscripts. The text is closely linked to two other manuscripts, PT 269 and Or.8210/S.9223 (see Appendix 1 above). The manuscript containing this text is in

³³ Note that PT 337 seems to be unique among the Dunhuang discussions of the *samaya* vows in that the four *vajra* vows proscribe, rather than encourage killing, lying, stealing and fornicating. In the absence of other versions of this treatise, it is not clear whether PT 337 represents a specific tradition of the *samaya* vows, or a scribal anomaly.

concertina form. In it, the text is followed by another, a description of a *yogiṇī maṇḍala*.

IOL Tib J 718/1: *Translation*

This is a teaching on how sentient beings attain the result of ordinary body, speech and mind as the buddhas' body, speech and mind. According to one source, the *samaya* is like the ground, because it supports the ocean. So it is said.³⁴ It is also like three roots. The meaning of these three is:

- [i] Not ceasing [the performance of] *yi dam*, *mantra* and *mudrā*.
- [ii] Not disseminating these instructions to others.
- [iii] Not developing bad thoughts or desire and aversion to the *vajra* master or the *vajra* brothers and sisters.

Let us say more on the meaning of not ceasing [the performance of] *yi dam*, *mantra* and *mudrā*. The *yi dam* means settling without forgetting. Performing *mantras* is explained as counting many *mantras*. In ultimate truth [the *mantras*] are the great blessings of the buddhas' body, speech and mind. They should be recited from the heart without declining into being mere words. Not ceasing refers to the superior continuity, the middling continuity and the inferior continuity. The superior continuity is abiding like the course of a river at all times and in all behaviors. The middling continuity is to meditate six times in one day, making offerings, performing activities, and saying prayers. The inferior continuity is [to meditate] twice, once in the morning and once in the evening, and not to transgress this for months and years. If you keep this [vow], you will be transformed into the *vajra*-like body. If you transgress it, you will be born in the great Avīci hell.

As for the meaning of not disseminating the secret instructions to others: whom are the secrets to be kept from, and how is one supposed to act according to the instructions? There are three kinds of secrecy: the outer secrecy, the intermediate secrecy and the secrecy of the gates. The outer secrecy is keeping [the instructions] secret from outsiders, those with divergent views, heretics and criminals. The

³⁴ This may be a reference to VILĀSAVAJRA's *Dam tshig gsal bkra* (Q. 4744: 579b.4).

intermediate secrecy means keeping them secret by not distributing them even to other yogins with different masters, incompatible *maṇḍalas*, incompatible ritual items, or incompatible instructions, and to those with contentious natures. The secrecy of the gates comprises the secret *yidam* deity, the secret heart *mantra*, the secret instructions of the master, and the secret symbols. These secret signs should not be spoken, even as mere words. It is said in the scriptures that the power that comes from the secret *mantras* is such that those who cannot rely on the *samaya* of secret awareness will die suddenly. So act in accordance with this.

Do not develop bad thoughts, desire and aversion, or derisory feelings towards the *vajra* master and brothers and sisters. What is a *vajra* master? His compassion toward you is greater than that of your own parents, greater even than that of the *sugatas*. It is also said in the scriptures that the qualities of the *vajra* master are greater than those of the *tathāgata* buddhas of the three [times]. Seeing your brothers and sisters as gods and goddesses, do not develop bad thoughts, desire or aversion toward them. Do not even utter slanderous words.

If these three *samaya* do not deteriorate, then your body, speech and mind will be transformed into the *vajra* nature. While you live your hopes will be fulfilled, and at the time of death you will have a clear mind, untroubled by the sickness of the defilements. [Your body] will have a pleasant odour, you will not forget the instructions, and the deities will come as escorts.

If the *samaya* deteriorate, then while you live your complexion will deteriorate, your mind will become unclear, you will be subject to many illnesses and your wishes will go unfulfilled. Innumerable spirits and demons will wound you like an animal. When you die, your senses will become clouded, your tongue will stick [to your palate], you will smell unpleasant, and you will die vomiting blood. You will be escorted [from this life] by innumerable malicious demons.

To sum all of this up, work hard! If you strive at these *samaya*, there is no need to augment them with any others.

IOL Tib J 718/1: *Transcription*

Parts of the Tibetan text are written in red, rather than black, ink; they are indicated here by italics. The opening curl is represented by (\$), decorative *shad* by (!), and the reversed *gi gu* with a capital *i* (I).

[r1]

*\$/ /sems can lus ngag yId gsum sku gsung thugs
kyI 'bras bu thob par bzhed pa nI/ /dam tshIg sa gzhI
lta bu las/ /brten te rgya mtsho snyed cig gsungs na/
yang/ /rtsa ba lta bu gsum ste/ /yI dam sngags tang*

[r2]

*phyag rgya rgyun myI gcad/ gsang ba'I man ngag gzhan la
myI spel// ! //rdo rje slob dpon dang mched tang lcam
dral la dang na sems dang zhe sdang myI skyed/ /'dI gsum
gyI don yang// ! //yI dam sngags tang phyag rgya rgyun myI gcad
zhes bgyI ba'I don yang/ /yI dam ~~ni~~ yang nam du yang/*

[r3]

*myI brjed pas bzhas pa'I// ! //sngags kyIs bya ba yang/
sngags kyI rnam grangs mang po zhis tu gsungs na yang//
don dam par sgu gsung thugs kyI che ba'I byin kyI rlabs//
tshIg tsam du yang zur myI gcad cing/ brnag ... bzla ba ... bgyi*

[r4]

*'o/ /rgyun myI gcad ces bya ba'I don yang/ /rgyun gyI
rab tang rgyun kyI 'bring dang/ rgyun kyI mtha' ma'o/ /rgyun kyI
rab nI/ dus tang rnam pa tham cad du rtsang po'i gzhang
lta bur gnas pa'o/ ! /rgyun kyI 'bring nI zhag gcig la*

[r5]

*dus drug du bsgom pa dang/ /mchod pa dbus ba dang/ /'phrin
las bcol ba dang/ smon lam gdab pa'o// ! //rgyun kyI mtha'
ma nI/ nang chub dus gnyIs tang/ /lo dang zla ba la myI 'da'
ba'o// ! //dI lta bsrungs na sku rdo rje lta bur 'gyur ro*

[r6]

*'di las 'das 'das na/mnar myed pa'I
dmyal ba chen por skye'o/ /gsang ba'I man ngag
gzhan la myI spel lo zhes bya ba'I don ni/ /gsang ba nI su la
gsang/ /man ngag gIs bgyI bgya'I don cI lta ba lags//*

[r7]

*gsang ba la yang rnam pa gsum ste/ /spyI gsang dang
bar gsang dang/ /sgo gsang ste gsum mo/ /*

[r8 blank]

[r9]

*spyI gsang nI myI nang dang/ lta ba myI gcig pa dang mu
stegs pa dang/ /rkun gnas dang/ dam tshIg nyams las
gsang ngo/ /bar gsang nI rnal 'byor pa yin
na yang/ slob dpon myI gcig pa dang/*

[r10]

dkyIl 'khor ma 'dres pa dang/ dam rdzas ma 'dres
 pa dang/ /man ngag ma 'dres pa dang/ thugs tshod
 mnga' yang spyang myI 'bris pas na gsang ngo/ /
 sgo gsang nI/ yI dam gyI lha gsang/ sngags kyi

[r11]

snyIng po/ /gsang/ slob dpon gyI man ngag gsang/ /
 rtags pa gsang/ /*mtshan ma gsang/ 'dI dag nI*
tshIg tsam du yang myI smra/ /lung las kyang/ gsang sngags
 las byung mnga' 'I don/ /gsang ba rIlg pa dam tshigs las

[r12]

myI brtan thub pas lhan cIlg 'chI/ zhes byung ba
 bzhIn du bgyI 'o/ /rdo rje slob dmon dang mched tang
 lcam dral la/ dngan sems dang zhe sdang/ dpya sems
 myI bskyed/ /rdo rje slob dpon gang zhI na/ lus kyI

[r13]

pha ma bas kyang drin che/ /dus gsum gyI bde bar gshegs
 pa bas kyang/ /bdag gI thad kar drin che/ lung las
 kyang/.../du/...

[v1-2 blank]

[v3]

gsum bder gshegs sangs rgyas pas/ /rdo rje
 slob dpon yon +tan che zhes 'byung ste/ /mched dang
 lcam dral nI/ /lha dang lha mo lta bur blta ste//
 de ngan sems dang zhes sdang lta zhIlg ga la bskyed de

[v4]

tshIlg tsam gyIs kyang myI smod do/ /dam tshIlg
 'dI gsum ma nyams na ni lus ngag yid gsum/
 rdo rje rang bzhIn du gyur te/ /tshe 'dI la yang/ bsam
 ba 'grub pa dang/ 'chI ba'I dus byung na yang/ sems

[v5]

gsal ba dang/ nyon mongs pa pa'i nad kyI pa myI brlungs
 pa drI ma zhIm ba dang/ man ngag myI brjed cing/ /sun mar yang lha
 rnams pa byon no/ /dam tshIlg nyams pa na/
 tshe 'dI la yang mdog nyams pa dang/ sems myi

[v6]

gsal ba dang/ /nad mang ba dang/ bsam pa
 myI 'grub pa dang/ rI dags sman ma dang 'dra ste//
 'dre srI na yang bsam gyIs myI khyab pas

[v7]

glags gcod do/ /'chI ba'I dus su yang/
 dbang po myi gsal ba dang/ /lce stibs pa dang//
 drI ma myI zhibs pa dang/ khrag skyug nas snying
 gas te 'chI 'o/ /sun mar yang 'dre gnon
 [v8]
 bsam gyIs myI khyab par 'ong/ /'dI
 gsum nyams na dmyal ba chen por 'gyur ro//
 de bas na cI dang yang sdom te 'bod cig//
 'dI ltar 'bad na dam tshI g zhan ma dag
 [v9]
 gIs bsnan myI gdos so// !!! //

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