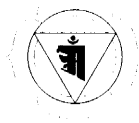


TANTRIC STUDIES

Volume 1

2008



Centre for Tantric Studies

A Definition of Mahāyoga

Sources from the Dunhuang manuscripts

Sam VAN SCHAİK

1. Introduction

The categories that we use to talk about groups of texts are always problematic. We tend to adopt a category from traditional sources, and make our own sense of it, using it for convenience because we need a way to refer to a group of thematically or historically associated texts. This is understandable and perhaps necessary as a working practice. But our use of these terms is called into question when such categories are themselves submitted to historical analysis. Sometimes such analysis reveals that the category came into being so late that its use is anachronistic, or that it has been used with such a variety of significations that our way of employing it is almost entirely arbitrary. Then it may seem as if we have no choice but to continue using the category in a way that is historically inaccurate or to abandon it entirely.

The category of *Mahāyoga* — “the great yoga” — has come to be problematic in just this way. *Mahāyoga* has not yet been treated to a full historical analysis as a doxographical category, yet it continues to appear in current scholarly discourse as if it were self-explanatory and unproblematic. *Mahāyoga* (Tib. *rnal ’byor chen po*) does have a particular meaning in the received Tibetan tradition, especially within the Nyingma school, where it signifies a group of eighteen tantras, a set of meditative and ritual practices, and a philosophical view associated with these.¹ Yet the interpretation of *Mahāyoga* has not been stable over the 1,200 years of the Tibetan tradition; nor is any uniformity in its use to be found in the Indic commentarial tradition.

Therefore I would argue that it is time that the category of *Mahāyoga* was treated to a thorough historical analysis, even though it is not my intention in this article to undertake such an awesome task in full. Here I will take just one phase in the development of *Mahāyoga* in the Indo-Tibetan tradition by looking at the meanings of *Mahāyoga* in the Tibetan Dunhuang manuscripts, mostly dating from the tenth century AD. I hope to show that the category of *Mahāyoga* is defined coherently enough in these manuscripts to justify our continuing to use it in this context at least, without anachronism. At the same time, understanding the way in which the Dunhuang texts define *Mahāyoga* may augment our reading of the tantras and *sādhana*s themselves.

My main intention is to introduce a group of texts from the Dunhuang manuscripts that can be brought into relationship with each other using the definitions of *Mahāyoga* found within the manuscripts themselves. I will show connections between these sources and how they imply an attempt to form a coherent concept of *Mahāyoga*, without glossing over the differences between them. Thus my aim here is mainly synchronic. I hope at least to show the state of the developing Tibetan tradition of *Mahāyoga* exegesis, as it stood in the tenth century.

¹ A classic Tibetan presentation of *Mahāyoga* in English translation can be found in Dudjom 1991 (Volume I, Part 4).

2. The Sources

A Summary of the View of Mahāyoga According to Scripture

The *Summary* is the most important text for this study. It is substantially the longest and most detailed definition of Mahāyoga provided in any of the Dunhuang manuscripts. It is found in a single manuscript, IOL Tib J 436, which is poorly written and physically damaged, and the text is probably missing its opening lines.² The *Summary* treats Mahāyoga under four headings: (i) view, (ii) *samaya*, (iii) union and liberation, and (iv) meditation.³

Doxographical texts

Two further manuscripts (IOL Tib J 644 and Pelliot tibétain 656) offer definitions of Mahāyoga in the context of doxographical treatments of Buddhist scripture that are antecedents to the nine-vehicle system of the Nyingma. Here we find brief but well-developed treatments of not only Mahāyoga, but Anuyoga and Atiyoga as well. Notably, none of the manuscripts refer to these higher yogas as “vehicles” (*theg pa*) per se. In both manuscripts the treatments of Mahāyoga are interestingly in close concordance with the definitions offered in the *Summary*. In particular, Pelliot tibétain 656, entitled *The Seven Great Scriptural Systems* (*Spyi'i lung chen po bdun*) presents an almost identical definition of Mahāyoga view, practices and vows, and may be from the same authorial source.

The works of Gnyan dPal dbyangs

Of primary importance here is *The Questions and Answers on Vajrasattva* (*Rdo rje sems dpa'i zhus lan*), a treatise by Gnyan dPal dbyangs comprising a wide-ranging collection of fifty-one questions and answers on meditative and ritual practice, encompassing both philosophical and practical issues. These questions and answers are intended as a clarification of Mahāyoga. In contrast to the doxographical texts, Mahāyoga is here called “the supreme system,” and no higher class of tantra is mentioned.⁴

The Questions and Answers on Vajrasattva appears in three Dunhuang manuscripts (IOL Tib J 470, Pelliot tibétain 819 and 837) as well as the Tibetan canonical collections, and will shortly appear in translation and critical edition elsewhere, so is not included here.⁵

² Though the text is apparently incomplete, the word that begins the treatise as we have it, “... meditation” (*bsgom pa*) suggests that all we are missing is a list of the topics covered in the treatise, i.e. view, *samaya*, union, liberation and meditation.

³ The *Summary* is not the only text contained in the manuscript IOL Tib J 436, though it is the first text. It is followed by five others. The titles of the six texts in the manuscript are as follows.

- (i) *Ma ha yo ga'i lung du bsdu pa*
- (ii) *Man ngag be ru ka la bstod pa* (a stotra to Heruka)
- (iii) *Byang chub sems pa rdo rje la bstod pa* (a stotra to Vajrasattva)
- (iv) *Lha rnam la rdo rje gar gis mchod pa* (a treatise on the *vajra* dance performed as an offering)
- (v) *Dpal chen shri he ru ka la bstod pa* (another stotra to Heruka)
- (vi) *Dam tshig nyams la bskang ba'i 'thol bshags* (a confession prayer for infringements of the tantric *samaya*)

The nature of the texts, and the very rough and ready quality of the paper and handwriting comprising this manuscript suggest that it was the property of an individual who used it for teaching and ritual purposes. For a complete catalogue entry, see Dalton and van Schaik 2006. A translation and transcription of the *Summary* appears below in Section 5.

⁴ Note that Mahāyoga, Anuyoga and (implicitly) Atiyoga are also briefly discussed in Pelliot tibétain 841.

⁵ A full translation and critical edition of *The Questions and Answers on Vajrasattva* appears in Takahashi forthcoming.

Another treatise by Gnyan dPal dbyangs, the *Lamp for the Mind*, also treats Mahāyoga explicitly, and though it is preserved only in the Tibetan canon (and not in the Dunhuang manuscripts) I will refer to it here as well.

The works of Madhusādhu

Another important text, though less well-known than *The Questions and Answers on Vajrasattva*, is an unnamed commentary associated with a master known as Madhusādhu. This appears in a lengthy scroll (IOL Tib J 454), and in a condensed form in a shorter manuscript fragment, IOL Tib J 508. While only the latter presents itself as a Mahāyoga treatise, the strong thematic connections between these two texts justifies the inclusion of the longer manuscript in this group as well. I have presented a translation and edition of both texts elsewhere, and here I will draw on these texts where appropriate.⁶

The works of Padmasambhava

The only early text convincingly attributed to Padmasambhava is a commentary on the *Upāyapāśa* which survives in a Dunhuang manuscript copy (IOL Tib J 321) as well as in the Tibetan canon. The canonical version is unattributed but the Dunhuang manuscript contains a colophon which states that Padmasambhava was the author of the commentary. The term Mahāyoga occurs both in the main text and in the interlinear notes.⁷ The *Upāyapāśa* itself is known to the later Nyingma tradition as one of the eighteen Mahāyoga texts, and is also cited in the longer Madhusādhu treatise. In addition there is an important work on Mahāyoga that is attributed to Padmasambhava in the Tibetan canon, *The Garland of Views* (well-known through Samten Karmay's edition and translation). Though though this attribution is later and perhaps less certain, the text does contain much that is similar to the Dunhuang Mahāyoga texts, and even if not by Padmasambhava at least seems to belong to the early period.

The works of Gnubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes

While they are not represented among the Dunhuang manuscripts, we should not neglect the two major works of Gnubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes. His *Lamp for the Eyes of Contemplation* and *Armour Against Darkness*, dating from the late ninth to early tenth centuries, are classic works of Tibet's 'dark age' and contain much that is thematically linked to the Dunhuang manuscripts. Both works offer definitions of Mahāyoga, which we must consider as vital context for the definitions in the Dunhuang manuscripts.⁸

⁶ Another important and lengthy tantric treatise is found in the manuscript Pelliot tibétain 337. Although the term Mahāyoga does appear once in the treatise (panel 3, l.17), the doxographical system here is that of exoteric (*nang*) and esoteric (*phyi*) yoga. The treatise quotes from the *Sarvabuddhasamāyoga* and *Gubhasamāja* tantras, as well as the *Sarvatathāgata-tattvasaṃgraha* tantra (panel 4, ll.4–5). The treatise does not share many of the features that characterize the explicitly Mahāyoga literature, and may represent a slightly earlier stage of tantric exegesis.

⁷ The main text in chapter 38 (IOL Tib J 321: 78r.5–6) states that to understand the meaning of *mahāmudrā*, one should start with the four activities, and goes on to say that this is taught in many Mahāyoga tantras (*ma ha yo ga 'i tan tra du ma las bshad do*). The interlinear note to 1v.3 mentions "the tantra [class] of Mahāyoga" (*ma ha yo ga 'i rgyud*). My thanks to Robert Mayer and Cathy Cantwell for their help with locating these passages.

⁸ Despite the existence of a critical edition of the Tibetan text and more than one translation in progress, no translation or edition of the *Lamp for the Eyes of Contemplation* has yet been published. There are however two studies of the text's general framework: van Schaik and Dalton 2003 and Meinert 2003. Regarding the

Tantric notes

There are notes on tantric theory and practice scattered throughout the Dunhuang manuscripts. Two such collections of notes, brief treatises and practice texts are relevant to our investigation here. The first, which I will refer to as *Tantric Notes I*, is a large concertina now split into three parts. The first folios are Pelliot tibétain 36, followed by a substantial segment in IOL Tib J 419, followed by Pelliot tibétain 42 (when the manuscript is turned over to read the verso, this order is reversed, of course). All in all, the complete manuscript contains about twenty texts of various kinds.⁹ Among these texts is a series of questions and answers (IOL Tib J 419.6, Pelliot tibétain 42.I). These are similar in subject matter and tone to *The Questions and Answers on Vajrasattva*. There is also a long treatise dealing with various matters relating to tantric meditation practices (Pelliot tibétain 42.II–VI). There is a descriptive treatment of the rituals of union and liberation (Pelliot tibétain 42.VIII–IX and IOL Tib J 419.7), and a more detailed ritual manual for the liberation practice (IOL Tib J 419/12).

The second of these manuscripts, which I will refer to as *Tantric Notes II*, is a compact concertina, in a fluent but hastily written handwriting with several mistakes and corrections. Like the manuscript above, it is now split between the Stein and Pelliot collections, the beginning and end appearing in IOL Tib J 583 and the middle in Pelliot tibétain 288.¹⁰ The manuscript contains a series of *sādhana*s, prayers and notes. Among these is a treatise on “the six boiled-down essentials” (IOL Tib J 583/4), which are: (i) view, (ii) *samaya*, (iii) recitation practice, (iv) purification through burning, (v) aspirational prayer, (vi) *sādhana*.¹¹

Manuals for tantric practice

There are a great number of meditation and ritual manuals found in the Dunhuang collection, including *sādhana*s (*sgrub thabs*), *vidhi* (*cho ga*) and other descriptions of ritual techniques. I will draw on some examples of these in the Dunhuang manuscripts where they seem particularly apposite to the way Mahāyoga is being defined in the *Summary*.

Armour Against Darkness, Jacob Dalton's Ph.D. dissertation on the *Sutra Gathering All Intentions* (Dalton 2002, as yet unpublished) draws extensively on this work.

⁹ Macdonald and Imaeda (1978–9) divided one long text on aspects of tantric practice into five parts (their parts II to VI). Due to the widespread use of their division of the manuscript, I will use it (represented by Roman numerals) when discussing texts in Pelliot tibétain 42. When discussing text in IOL Tib J 419, I will use the divisions found in Dalton and van Schaik 2006.

¹⁰ The structure of this manuscript is as follows:

- (i) Fragmentary notes
- (ii) *Sādhana* for Avalokiteśvara
- (iii) Prayers to the five buddhas
- (iv) The six boiled-down essentials (*bskol mo rnam drug*)
- (v) Prayer to Vajrasattva
- (vi) Notes on the view of Mahāyoga
- (vii) Invitation prayer to the bodhisattvas of the *vajra*, *ratna* and *dharmā* families
- (viii) Invitation prayer to Vajrasattva
- (ix) Treatise given “by the yogin to his students”

As with IOL Tib J 436, the miscellaneous nature of this material, and the poor quality of the handwriting and spelling suggest that this was a personal collection of materials for teaching and ritual purposes. For a complete catalogue entry, see Dalton and van Schaik 2006.

¹¹ Due to a lacuna in the manuscript, (i) is incomplete while (ii), (iii) and (iv) are missing. Fortunately, another explanation of these “six boiled-down essentials” has survived in Pelliot tibétain 280/2, which is also fragmentary but contains full treatments of (ii), (iii) and (iv).

An exception among the *sādhana*s is the long ritual manual in Pelliot tibétain 245, which appears to follow the ritual sequence of the *Guhyagarbha*. It contains a ritual for the “Mahāyoga maṇḍala of the gathering” (*rnal ’byor chen po’i tshogs kyi dkyil ’khor*), and refers elsewhere to “the eternal Mahāyoga” (*rnal ’byor g.yung drung chen po*).

Tibetan Chan texts

It has been known for some time that several of the Tibetan Chan texts in the Dunhuang manuscript collections refer to the practices of Chan as “the great yoga” (*rnal ’byor chen po*), the same Tibetan term that translates the Sanskrit *mahāyoga*.¹² However, there is no indication in any of these manuscripts that “great yoga” refers to the tantric class of the same name. Thus it may be used simply to refer to an exceptional yoga.

Kenneth Eastman argued that “the great yoga” in Chan texts does indeed refer to the tantric class of Mahāyoga, but that it was used in these texts by “members of a Ch’an lineage who were attempting to disguise their teachings with the name of Mahāyoga.”¹³ This explanation seems unlikely, since there is no sign of any attempt to disguise the nature of these texts, which name many Chinese Chan masters, frequently use the Tibetan equivalent for the term “Chan” (*bsam gtan*) and which are even in places referred to as Chan texts (*bsam gtan gi yi ge*).¹⁴ In general, it seems that “the great yoga” appears in these texts merely as a synonym for Chan practice.

On the other hand, there is evidence of integration between Chan and Mahāyoga lineages, and even syncretism between Chan and Mahāyoga meditation practices at Dunhuang. A group of manuscripts written in the same hand suggest that the Chan techniques of examining the mind (*sems la lta*) were taught in the context of the “suchness concentration” in Mahāyoga *sādhana*s.¹⁵ In addition to this, one of our Mahāyoga manuscripts defines the view in the following striking way: “according to the scriptures of Chan, Sūtra and Mantra, the view is non-fixation (*dmyigs su myed pa*).”¹⁶

Thus the question of the significance of the term “great yoga” in the Tibetan Chan manuscripts remains open. In the notes toward a definition of Mahāyoga below I will return to certain parallels with Tibetan Chan; but as none of these texts contain any explicit references to tantric meditation practices, we do not need to consider them among our primary sources for a definition of Mahāyoga.

Dating

An important point here is the dating of the manuscripts that we are using as sources for the definition of Mahāyoga. It was once thought that the Tibetan manuscripts in the Dunhuang collections must date to the period of Tibetan occupation; that is, between the conquest of Dunhuang in 786 and the fall of Tibetan power there in 848. It is now recognized that many of the Tibetan manuscripts can be dated to later than this. Indeed

¹² For example, IOL Tib J 705, 709/9, 710/1; Pelliot tibétain 116, 818.

¹³ Eastman 1983: 58.

¹⁴ See for example 709/9, also discussed in the section on the *samaya* vows, below.

¹⁵ For a detailed examination of the manuscripts in question, see van Schaik and Dalton 2004. See also Meinert 2006 for a detailed analysis of one of these manuscripts, and an argument for links with Atiyoga rather than Mahāyoga.

¹⁶ IOL Tib J 508/4 r19.3–5: *lta ba ni bsam gtan dang / mdo sde dang sngags gyi gzhang zhes dmyigs su myed de*.

some of the Tibetan manuscripts were written only a few years before the closing of the cave at the beginning of the eleventh century.¹⁷

Many of the later manuscripts contain tantric material. Indeed, few if any manuscripts containing tantric texts have been dated to the earlier, imperial period. Some of the manuscripts that we will look at below have been firmly dated to the tenth century, and without contrary evidence, we may take it as a working hypothesis that all of these manuscripts postdate the Tibetan rule of Dunhuang, and indeed may well be as late as the end of the tenth century.

A separate issue, however, is the date of the textual content of the manuscripts. There is little to indicate that any major translation of Indian tantric sources occurred between the fall of the Tibetan empire in the mid-ninth century and the activity of the “new” translators from the late tenth century onward. The Dunhuang materials contain little or no sign of developments in the manipulation of internal energies (and the corresponding set of four empowerments) that characterize the Indic movements of the mid-ninth century onward, such as the eighteenth chapter of the *Guhyasamāja* and the works of the Ārya school. Thus the Tibetan tantric manuscripts from Dunhuang, while generally written in the tenth century, seem to represent lineages that came to Tibet between the mid-eighth and mid-ninth centuries. The primary reason for this is probably simply that after the fall of the Tibetan imperial dynasty there was not the necessary will or resources to carry out the project of sending Tibetan translators to India to find new lineages and translate new texts. It was just this combination of will and resources in the kings of Western Tibet and other local princes that restarted the Tibetan translation project in the late tenth century — too late to leave a trace in the Dunhuang manuscripts.¹⁸

As for the interest in Mahāyoga at Dunhuang itself, we can only speculate on who was practising Mahāyoga. However, there are some indications that that was a relatively wealthy audience for these texts. We have, for example, the beautifully produced manuscripts of the *Guhyasamāja* and the commentary on the *Upāyapāśa* attributed to Padmasambhava. There is also a ritual item featuring Vajrasattva as the chief of the five buddha families, expensively decorated with the rare pigments of lapis lazuli and vermilion¹⁹ (see Figure 1).

Furthermore, we have evidence that relatively highly placed Chinese officials from the regime that replaced the Tibetan occupation were deeply involved with Tibetan Mahāyoga. In one of the copies of *The Questions and Answers on Vajrasattva* (IOL Tib J 470) the name of the scribe is Phu shi meng hwe'i 'gyog. The first part of this clearly Chinese name is an official rank, *fu shi* 副使, the name for the third highest ranking official in a district called a *zhen* 鎮, comprising 50 households. This same scribe probably also wrote out the longer Madhusādhu treatise mentioned above.²⁰ This certainly suggests that the presence of Mahāyoga at Dunhuang was at least in part sustained by patronage from wealthy Chinese officials.

¹⁷ See Takeuchi forthcoming. Important tantric manuscripts dated to the late tenth century include Pelliot tibétain 44, Pelliot tibétain 849 and Or.8210/S.95.

¹⁸ One of the best discussions of this movement is in Davidson 2005, chapters 4 and 5.

¹⁹ This item is IOL Tib J 1364. Analysis of this item with Raman Spectroscopy has shown that it contains the precious pigments lapis lazuli and vermilion, rare among portable painting from Dunhuang. See Chudo 2005: 61. The author states that “the evidence of very precious lapis lazuli on the icon may serve to illustrate the iconographic importance of Vajrasattva in the 8–10th century with the spread of esoteric Buddhism in Dunhuang.” For my reasons for associating this image specifically with Mahāyoga, see Section 3(i) of this article.

²⁰ This rank, as it appears in another Tibetan Dunhuang document (Pelliot tibétain 1124), is discussed in Sakajiri 1995: 70. For further discussion of this scribe, see van Schaik forthcoming(a), where I argue that the same scribe is responsible for IOL Tib J 454.



Figure 1: Vajrasattva with Five-Buddha Crown. IOL Tib J 1364.

(Reproduced by kind permission of © The British Library)

3. The View

(i) THE SINGLE MODE (*tshul gcig*)

The *view* (*lta ba*) is a catch-all term for philosophical or doctrinal content.²¹ Among the Dunhuang texts we find two ways of defining the Mahāyoga view. The first is found in the *Summary* and the doxographical texts, and clearly works to set Mahāyoga apart from other tantric classes, especially the other ‘inner yogas’ of Anu and Ati. The second way of defining Mahāyoga is more inclusive, emphasizing a nonconceptual formulation of the view, the spontaneous presence of enlightenment, and the identity of the buddhas and one’s own mind. I will discuss these two kinds of definition separately and then look at their relationship to each other.

The *Summary* defines the view of Mahāyoga with the words “seeing the five families in a single mode” (*rigs lnga tshul gcig du lta*). This is repeated, more or less exactly, in the definitions of the view in the two doxographical texts. *The Seven Great Scriptural Systems* says:

In Mahāyoga secret mantra the view is that the five families are seen in a single mode. Moreover, the five great elements are the female deity, and the objects formed from them are the male deity. Because they abide pervasively in everything, everything is seen as *nirvāṇa* without self or other.²²

While in the other doxographical text, we have:

In the deity system of Mahāyoga the five families are seen in a single mode.²³

²¹ While *lta ba* is used in Tibetan translation for Skt. *darśana* or *dr̥ṣṭi*, in the Tibetan exegetical tradition it generally has the specific signification of the philosophical or gnoseological insight that characterizes a particular system of thought and practice. Thus in the Dunhuang doxographies and later Rnying ma exegesis there is a different ‘view’ associated with each of the Buddhist vehicles.

²² Pelliot tibétain 656 l.24: gsang sngags ma ha yo ga lta ba ni / rigs lnga tshul gcig du lta / de yang ’byung ba chen po lnga ni yum / de las gzug [25] su gyur pa ni yab / thams cad la khyab par gnas pas / bdag dang gzhan myed ngan las ’das pa lta ba’o /

²³ IOL Tib J 644 1v.5: ma ha yo ga’i lha rgyud ni / rigs lnga tshul gcig par lta /

This was clearly a popular formulation of the difference between Mahāyoga and other, earlier tantric systems.²⁴ So what might it mean? The “five families” are the five buddha families, a *maṇḍala* formulation that is implicit in the *Sarvatathāgatattvasamgraha* and appears in fully developed form in tantras such as the *Guhyasamāja* and *Guhyagarbha*. Indeed, in the opening passages of the early-period Tibetan translation of the *Guhyasamāja* all forms of buddhas and bodhisattvas are absorbed into the body of Mahāvairocana. Then at the beginning of the next section of the tantra we have the following statement:

Then the *tathāgata* Akṣobhya, the *tathāgata* Vairocana, the *tathāgata* Ratnaketu, the *tathāgata* Amitābha and the *tathāgata* Amoghavajra resided together in the heart of the *tathāgata* Bodhicittavajra.²⁵

The remainder of the first chapter consists of the transcendent buddha re-emerging as the five buddha-families and their consorts. Both of the passages quoted above can be found in the somewhat fragmentary first pages of the Dunhuang manuscript of the *Guhyasamāja*. This manuscript contains interlinear notation throughout; the note to the second of the two quotations reads: “then the buddhas of the five families resided in the body of Vajrasattva”.²⁶ This identification of the supreme buddha who embodies all five families as Vajrasattva is significant, for we see it again and again in the Dunhuang manuscripts, in an apparent smoothing-over of the different names for the transcendent deity found in the *Guhyasamāja* and elsewhere. For example, our manuscript of notes of Mahāyoga, IOL Tib J 583, also contains the following prayer to Vajrasattva:

The five families are a single mode, inseparable by nature,
But due to the need for training, the five families teach individually;
The omniscient Bodies are without limits;
To the inseparable wisdom Body I pay homage.

Although the aggregate of wisdom is like space,
Body, Speech and Mind are the great embodiment.
Please come from the place
Where all emanations originate, O Vajrasattva.²⁷

Here, by implication Vajrasattva is the embodiment of the five buddhas. *The Questions and Answers on Vajrasattva* seems to presuppose the eminence of this deity in its very title, and this is made explicit in the first two questions and answers in the text. The answer to the second question states:

²⁴ Note however that the “single mode” is not discussed by Gnubs Sangs rgyas ye shes in his treatment of Mahāyoga in the *Lamp for the Eyes of Contemplation*. It is also absent from Gnyan dPal dbyang’s works on Mahāyoga. Possibly it derives from a distinct lineage of Mahāyoga exegesis.

²⁵ Tn.409: 55.6: / de nas de bzhin gshegs pa rdo rje mi bskyod pa dang / de bzhin gshegs [7] pa rin chen dpal dang / de bzhin gshegs pa tshe dpag tu med pa dang / de bzhin gshegs pa rdo rje gdon mi za bar grub pa dang / de bzhin gshegs pa rnam par snang mdzad rnam [56.1] de bzhin gshegs pa byang chub kyi sems rdo rje’i thugs la bzhugs so /

Most of this passage, with no significant variation, is found in IOL Tib J 481: 1v.5 and IOL Tib J 438: 1r.1

²⁶ IOL Tib J 481 1v.5 (*mchan ’grel*): de nas rigs lnga’i sangs rgyas rdo rje sems pa’i skur bzhugs so //

²⁷ IOL Tib J 583 v9.3: // rigs lnga tshul [4] gcig rang bzhin dbyer myed yang // [5] btul pa’i dbang gyis rigs lnga so sor [v10.1] bstan // thams cad mkhyen pa’i sku [2] ni mtha’ dag myed // dbyer myed ye shes [3] sku la phyag ’tshal lo // ye shes phung po mkha [4] ’dra yang sku sku gsung thugs ni bdag [5] nyId che // <spu> sprul pa kun gyis [v11.1] ’byung gnas nas rdo rje sem pa gshegs [2] su gsol //

He is identical to the matchless realization of nonproduction of all conquerors of the
 three times;
 He is the nature of them all, the mind of the ocean of sugātas.
 Because he is the genuine basis for all the marks
 Of Body, Speech and Mind, he is taught as the supreme one.²⁸

We also find ample evidence for the primary role of Vajrasattva in the Dunhuang *sādhana* material. Indeed, it is a striking fact that the majority of the *sādhana*s which might be categorized as Mahāyoga based on the criteria of the *Summary* (discussed in the next section) involve self-visualization as Vajrasattva.²⁹ In one of these *sādhana*s, Vajrasattva is visualised as appearing from a *vajra* in which the five spokes represent the buddhas of the five families, and he wears a crown with the buddhas of the five families.³⁰ Furthermore, in the *sādhana*s which focus on the practice of “union” (on which, see below), the male practitioner is visualized as Vajrasattva, often with the deities of the five families visualized internally at different points of his body. These are clear instances from the ritual texts of the meaning of the “single mode”. To give one final, visual, example, we also have a painting of Vajrasattva on a ritual item which I mentioned in the previous section (see Figure 1). On this item, Vajrasattva is clearly wearing the crown of the five buddha families, a visual implication of his role as the embodiment of all five families.³¹

The assignment of this role to Vajrasattva can be seen in the later Tibetan tradition as well, and not only within the Nyingma school. The Sakya patriarch Bsod nams rtshe mo (1142–1182) is credited with the statement that Vajrasattva should be considered the principal deity because of his ability to cause any of the buddha families to manifest.³² This is essentially the same point made in the *Summary*, though Vajrasattva is not mentioned explicitly there. In the later tradition, the role of Vajrasattva seems to have been somewhat weakened as the deity became primarily associated with the purification practice of the tantric preliminaries (*sngon 'gro*).³³

The five families that are contained within the “single mode” are of course the standard five buddhas and their consorts. In the *Summary* and other sources, the female deities are said to represent the “five great elements” (*'byung ba chen po*), while the male deities

²⁸ From the critical edition in Takahashi forthcoming: [Q2] / rdo rje sems dpa' ni dus gsum gyi de bzhin gshegs pa thams cad kyi thugs rdo rje/ lags la/ sku gsung thugs kyi bdag po lags so zhes bya ba'i don ci lta bu lags// dus gsum rgyal bas skye med rtogs par mnyam / / kun gyi rang bzhin bde bshegs rgya mtsho'i thugs // sku gsung thugs kyi mtshan ma ci snyed pa'i// dngos gzhi nyid du gyur pas bdag por bshad/

²⁹ Such *sādhana*s include IOL Tib J 331/2, 464/1, 552, 553, 554, 716/1, 754/8; Pelliot tibétain 245.

³⁰ This is in IOL Tib J 552 4r.6–5r.4.

³¹ This item is IOL Tib J 1364.

³² For a discussion of Vajrasattva's role as principal deity, and this statement in particular, see Snellgrove 1987: 220–223.

³³ Note that the purification practice from the tantric preliminaries employs the imagery of the descent (*'babs*) of the flow of *bodhicitta*, and in some cases, for example the preliminaries of the *Klong chen snying thig* Vajrasattva is visualized in union with a consort, making explicit the connection with the practice of union (many translations are available; probably the most easily acquired is the commentary by Dpal sprul o rgyan 'jigs med chos kyi dbang po: Patrul Rinpoche 1998). Note also the so-called “hundred syllable mantra” of Vajrasattva, which is always associated with the purification practice, appears on the verso of the final folio of the Great Perfection text IOL Tib J 647, with the instruction that it is to be recited before the precepts (*lung*) of the main text can be received (see van Schaik 2004b: 175–176). The hundred-syllable mantra also appears on the final folio of IOL Tib J 581, which may possibly be included among our Mahāyoga material, as it contains imagery from the *sādhana*s of union, especially in the final line: “[the goddesses] play by offering the secret nonduality” (3v.2: *gnyis myed gsang ba'i mchod pas rol*).

represent the forms made up from those elements. This statement is characteristic of the *Guhyagarbha*.³⁴

Before we move on I would like to note, without drawing any conclusions, that the “single mode” (*tshul gcig*) is also a common term in Tibetan Chan literature. In the Tibetan Chan manuscripts (also from the Dunhuang collections), the “single mode” (*yi xing* 一行 in Chinese) signifies the method of simultaneous (*cig car*) realization through non-conceptualization (*mi rtogs*) or non-fixation (*mi dmigs*). The idea that there could be a single mode for realization was contentious within Chan, and was one of the distinguishing features of the split between the so-called northern and southern schools.³⁵ We see both positions represented in the Tibetan Dunhuang manuscripts.³⁶

(ii) NON-FIXATION, SAMENESS AND THE BUDDHA AS ONE’S OWN MIND

The second common way of formulating the Mahāyoga view can be seen in the following quotation from *Tantric Notes II*:

The view of Mahāyoga: Phenomena are neither existents nor non-existents. Having renounced purity and impurity, “not renouncing” and “not obtaining” are one in space. Whoever understands the true state of Vajrasattva becomes him. Since one’s own mind is the path to liberation, nothing will come of seeking it anywhere else.³⁷

This passage (apart from the last sentence, which I will come back to shortly) is a version of the view strongly based in the *prajñāpāramitā* texts, though without recourse to the specific arguments of the Madhyamaka literature. Turning to a canonical source from the same period, we see a very similar definition of the view of Mahāyoga given by Gnyan dPal dbyangs in his *Lamp for the Mind*:

The meaning of the view of Mahāyoga is this:
If it is sought in existence that is a superimposition;
If it is sought in nonexistence that is a depreciation;
If it is sought in both existence and nonexistence,
It would become indeterminate.
Since it is not connected with any other [state]
It will never be found.
All debate regarding the extremes is thus
Free from these three and free from all biased extremes,
Which are the manifestations of one’s own deluded intellect.
Consequently, this is the ultimate view.³⁸

³⁴ See for example the description of the generation of the maṇḍala in chapter 6 of this tantra.

³⁵ See the discussion of *ting nge ’dzin tshul gcig* in van Schaik and Dalton 2004: 67. See also the translation of the *Text on the Single Mode of Non-fixation* (*Dmyigs su myed pa tshul gcig pa’i gzhung*) in Faber 1985. On the controversy related to this term in Chinese Chan see Faure 1997: 67–69.

³⁶ For example, IOL Tib J 710/1 contains a detailed critique of the idea that a single mode is suitable for all, and IOL Tib J 709/4 argues for a multiplicity of methods contained in the so-called single mode. Other treatises, especially those from named Chinese masters, often lean more toward the single mode approach; see for example the treatise of Gal na yas in IOL Tib J 709/8.

³⁷ IOL Tib J 508/8 v5.2–v6.1: / rnal ’byor chen po ’i lta ba la // dngos po dngos po myed pa’i chos // dag cing ma dag rnam spang nas ma spangs ma blangs dbyl’ngs su gcig // rdo rje sems dpa’i ngang nyid la gang shig shes pa der ’gro ’o // bdag sems thar pa’i lam las ni gzhan las btsal bar myi ’byung ’o /

³⁸ *Thugs kyi sgron ma*, 377r: rnal ’byor chen po lta ba’i don // yod las btsal na sgros btags te // med las btsal na skur btab ’gyur // yod med gnyis las btsal byas na // de ni lung du ma bstan ’gyur // de la gzhan yang ’brel med pas // nam yang rnyed par mi ’gyur te // mtha’ la rtsod kun de lta bas // gsum bral phyogs gcig mtha’ bral ba // rang blo ’khrul pa snang ba yin //

This kind of *prajñāpāramitā*-based discourse is seen in much of tantric literature. In many sources it is expressed as “non-fixation” (*myi dmyigs*), a term that occurs across the spectrum of sutra and tantra, and therefore attractive to exegetes seeking to associate the tantras with the philosophical position of the sutras.³⁹ A striking instance of this appears in one passage from the Mahāyoga Notes: “According to the scriptures of Chan, Sūtra and Mantra, the view is non-fixation.”⁴⁰ Is there any basis for this highly syncretic statement? The longer Madhusādhū treatise does offer a definition of non-fixation (*myi dmyigs*):

Non-fixation means that the dharmakāya, or the space of reality, pervades all phenomena, and in wherever is pervaded by that space is nondual with the wisdom of awareness. [Thus] not to fixate on substances and characteristics is to be pervaded by the dharmakāya.⁴¹

Indeed, along with its occurrence in the tantras and sūtras, *non-fixation* is also found throughout the Tibetan Chan texts. The statement that the view of non-fixation is found throughout “the scriptures of Chan, Sūtra and Mantra” may just reflect an awareness that this term was used in a variety of traditions, but we should also keep in mind the syncretic tendencies of Tibetan Chan.⁴²

Another important way of expressing the view of Mahāyoga in the Dunhuang manuscripts is in terms of “oneness” (*gcig tu*) or “sameness” (*mnyam nyid*). For an example let us look again at *Tantric Notes II*:

What does it mean to “cut through phenomena”? Whatever exists, it is all based on the five great [elements]. Even the great [elements] themselves do not exist. Thus, everything — proof and refutation, self and other, virtue and sin, purity and dirt and so on — is shown to be nothing whatsoever. Everything is non-dual. This is known as *sameness*.⁴³

The concept of sameness is described as one of the ways of formulating the Mahāyoga view by Gnubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes in his *Lamp for the Eyes of Contemplation*:

According to some spiritual guides (the masters Padmasambhava and Madhusādhū) the view of Mahāyoga is sameness. They (the arguments, scriptural sources and esoteric instructions on sameness) say that there is sameness in ultimate, in conventional, in the nonduality of the truths, that the five great elements are the same as the five *tathāgatas*, and that the eight consciousnesses are the same as the five wisdoms. I will

³⁹ It is particularly common in the *Prajñāpāramitā* sūtras. In the tantras, see for example *Guhyagarbha* chapter 5 (Tb.417:168.2): ‘jigs pas dmigs med shes par gyis/. While the *Mahāvīryūtpatti* (4461) gives the Sanskrit equivalents *anupalabdhi* and *anupalabdhibetuh*, in the current context the original Sanskrit term may be **nirālambana* or **anālambana*.

⁴⁰ IOL Tib J 508/4 r19.3–5: lta ba ni bsam gtan dang/ mdo sde dang sngags gyi gzhang zhes dmyigs su myed de.

⁴¹ IOL Tib J 454 l.195: myi dmyigs [196] zhes pa ni / chos kyi sku ste / chos kyi dbyings kyim chos can thams cad la khyab pa dang / dbyings kyis gar khyab par rig [197] pa’i ye shes kyis gnyis myed pa / dngos pa dang mtshan mar myi dmyigs pa chos kyi skus kyab khyab bo /

⁴² On syncretism at Dunhuang see van Schaik and Dalton 2004 and Meinert 2007.

⁴³ IOL Tib J 508/9 v12.3–5: / de la chos gyi la gcad pa gang zhes na / ci snyed du srid pa de dag thams shad / ched po lnga las brten zhang/ (Pelliot tibétain 288 v1.1–5) ched po nyid kyang myed te / de bzhin du thams shad / sun phyung dang / bdag dang gzhen zhes ’am / dge sdi dang / gtsang smyes zhes bya ba la bstogs ste / gang yang myed par mngon te /

[v2.1] thams shad gnyis su myed na / mnyam pa nyid [2] ces bya ’o /

