

WHERE CHAN AND
TANTRA MEET:
TIBETAN SYNCRETISM IN
DUNHUANG

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Throughout most of the first millennium of the common era, the wealthy trading town of Dunhuang was a crucial point of commercial and cultural exchange on the Silk Route. At the Buddhist cave complex near the town, Buddhism was enriched by a cross-fertilization of religious traditions from India, China, Tibet, and various Central Asian centres. One particularly fruitful period for this cultural interaction was the ninth and tenth centuries.

Dunhuang was under Tibetan control between 786 and 848, and its loss in 848 was just one aspect of the wider disintegration of the ruling Tibetan dynasty. Already a few years earlier, Tibetan imperial patronage of Buddhism had become untenable and the monasteries of Central Tibet had been closed. According to traditional Tibetan historical sources, the collapse of royal patronage signalled the beginning of a 'dark period', a time when Buddhism went into severe decline. According to these accounts, it was only with the resurgence of a centralized political power in the late tenth century that Buddhism began to recover. Against this view, more recent scholarship has suggested that the dark period was in fact a crucial stage in the Tibetan assimilation of Buddhism.¹ With no controlling religious authority, Tibetans were able to develop their own Buddhist traditions, drawing upon those of their neighbours in China and India, as well as their own cultural concerns. Tibetans living in Dunhuang after it was regained by China loyalists were particularly well situated to absorb these various influences.

Thus any Tibetan Buddhist manuscripts from Dunhuang dating from the so-called 'dark period' might be expected to show signs of cross-cultural interaction or even deliberate conflation of religious practices from different sources. Reasoning from both factors just mentioned (Dunhuang's position on the Silk Route, and the disappearance of the central Tibetan religious orthodoxy) one might expect such interaction and syncretism to be commonplace. However, significant examples of this kind of activity remain few.

In the course of our researches into Tibetan tantra at Dunhuang, a group of five manuscripts has come to our attention.² Taken together, they reveal an unusually clear example of a Buddhist author active in tenth-century Dunhuang, combining techniques from two normally distinct traditions: the Chinese lineages of Chan (from the Sanskrit *dhyāna*, 'contemplation', and 'Zen' in Japanese), and the yogic meditation practices of Mahāyoga, derived from the Indic tantras.³ The manuscripts combine these techniques in complex and innovative ways, with technical terminology that reveals an extensive knowledge of both traditions. In fact, the degree of syncretism seen in these manuscripts is unique. A few other Dunhuang manuscripts assert the equivalence of Chan and Mahāyoga, but such claims have so far seemed largely rhetorical. The identification of this group of manuscripts reveals a remarkably sophisticated merging of traditions, a syncretism on a level

Pelliot tibétain
Touen-houang 322 A(1)

Pelliot tibétain
Touen-houang 626

Pelliot tibétain
Touen-houang 634

Pelliot tibétain Touen-houang 699

Pelliot tibétain
Touen-houang 808

one might expect in a vibrant and multicultural religious centre like Dunhuang.

The five manuscripts first caught our attention because of their distinctive handwriting. Closer examination confirmed that all five pieces were almost certainly penned by the same hand. (For the reader's benefit, the first folio of each manuscript is reproduced here – see Fig. 1.) In addition to their more obvious orthographic similarities, all five manuscripts open with a similar decorative marker; each line ends with a punctuation dot (*tsheg*) before the end-of-clause marker (*shad*). Any partial or blank lines, as at the end of a text, are filled with a series of double-*shad* markers; and all five manuscripts are decorated with red ink, the shade of which is identical in four.⁴

Having identified these five works as a cohesive group, we still needed to determine the nature of their relationship to each other. Just because they share a single scribe, they are not necessarily by the same author; it remained possible that the five manuscripts were simply the results of one scribe copying the works of various authors. In fact, three of the texts are almost certainly the work of a single author. As will become clear, the contents of PT626, PT634, and PT699 reveal a very close relationship. PT808 is probably also by the same author, while the authorship of PT322 remains uncertain.

Only one of these five manuscripts has received any attention in modern scholarship. In 1979, Okimoto Katsumi identified PT699 as a commentary to another short work found elsewhere in the Dunhuang collections and ascribed to the Chan patriarch Bodhidharma.⁵ Okimoto's brief study has recently been supplemented by Carmen Meinert.⁶ Meinert emphasizes the syncretic character of PT699, arguing that it is a Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*) commentary on a Chan text. The Great Perfection – a system of immediate access to enlightenment derived from the Mahāyoga tantras – was certainly known to the author of our manuscripts. However, we will argue that PT699 is better understood as a Mahāyoga commentary on a Chan text.

There is no doubt that the writer of our group of manuscripts was aware of the Great Perfection. PT322, an extended prayer to the wrathful and the peaceful buddhas of the Māyājāla *maṇḍala*, mentions the term 'great perfection' three times.⁷ Furthermore the

colophon to PT699 employs the term *Atiyoga*, another name for the Great Perfection. The passage in question describes three kinds of teachers: the teacher of Atiyoga, the teacher of the sutras, and the teacher of the tantras.

What is a master who teaches Atiyoga like? [Like] the great garuda who cuts through the sky yet is aware of all living beings, he clarifies the vehicles individually, yet cuts through space. *Clarifies* means he teaches the great meaning without mixing up [the vehicles]. Like the sky-soaring garuda, he draws forth the greatness of the meaning.

What is a master who teaches the sutras like? He teaches the divisions of the paths which one should traverse.

Just as the king of the realm rules directly, a master who teaches the meaning of the tantras cuts directly to the blissful union of the words. He teaches to be appropriate that which is inappropriate for the inferior scholars who [teach as if] dripping [water] onto rocks. Thus faults themselves are good qualities. In crowded places he teaches the dharma. Using common speech full of meaning, he understands its inner resplendence. He teaches with a mind that is like a hidden tortoise. Understanding the hidden secret is the quality of such a master. Thus it is said.⁸

Thus, according to this passage, the Atiyoga teacher teaches from on high, simultaneously transcending and distinguishing all the differences at a glance. The teacher of the sutras involves himself in the details of the gradual path to enlightenment. And the tantric teacher is immersed in the mundane world while maintaining a secret majesty.

One cannot conclude on the basis of this passage that the author considers himself to be an Atiyoga teacher, and his commentary a Great Perfection text. In fact, the body of the commentary makes no reference to the Great Perfection (or Atiyoga), but does make a number of indirect and allusive references to the teachings of Mahāyoga. Thus there is a case for arguing that the author considered his commentary to be an example of the third teaching method, that of the tantric master. On the other hand, it is quite possible that the colophon is intended to show the author to be an embodiment of all three types of teacher, applying the method of each wherever appropriate.⁹ This would be in accordance with the syncretism of his text.

The extent of Mahāyoga influence in PT699 can only be fully appreciated through the lens of the author's other two major works, PT626 and PT634, which have previously gone unnoticed. Both are commentaries on the same concise Mahāyoga ritual text. The greater part of the root text is based on the practice of the three *samādhis*, a triad commonly associated with Mahāyoga practice. In elaborating upon the root text, both PT626 and PT634 employ key terms drawn from Chan meditation systems. This syncretism is mirrored in PT699, in which the author applies the same structural

Fig. 1 The first folio of five Tibetan manuscripts in the same hand.

The five manuscripts shown here display a distinctive handwriting and were almost certainly penned by the same hand. In addition to their more obvious orthographic similarities, all five manuscripts open with a similar decorative marker; each line ends with a punctuation dot (*tsheg*) before the end-of-clause marker (*shad*). Any partial or blank lines, as at the end of a text, are filled with a series of double-*shad* markers; and all five manuscripts are decorated with red ink, the shade of which is identical in four.

The Bibliothèque nationale de France. Pelliot Tibétain 322, 626, 634, 699, 808.

grid of the three *samādhis* to the Bodhidharma Chan text, placing the entire Chan text in a Mahāyoga framework. The details of this creative reading are explained in the following pages.

The three *samādhis*

The standard Mahāyoga Buddhist ritual is divided into two stages, the development stage (Skt. *utpannakrama*; Tib. *bskyed rim*) and the perfection stage (Skt. *sampannakrama*; Tib. *rdzogs rim*). In the first stage, the visualization of the *maṇḍala* is gradually developed, after which it is worshipped and blessings are received. In the second perfection stage, the visualization appears instantaneously and is typically used in a ritualized sexual practice.

Generally speaking, the three *samādhis* are associated with the development stage, being the three phases by which the visualization is generated. In the first, the thusness *samādhi* (*de bzhin nyid kyi ting nge dzin*), the practitioner meditates on emptiness. Then in the second, the all-illuminating *samādhi* (*kun tu snang gi ting nge 'dzin*), the emptiness is activated; energized by compassion, a brightly luminous opening is created for the manifestation to appear. Finally in the causal *samādhi* (*rgyu'i ting nge dzin*), a seed-syllable appears from which the entire visualization unfolds.

The three *samādhis* appear throughout the Dunhuang Mahāyoga literature, receiving detailed commentary in several manuscripts.¹⁰ PT626 and PT634 are particularly elaborate examples. Both are commentaries on the same root text, whose provenance has yet to be identified. Both are almost certainly by the same author, indicated by many identical phrases and terms.¹¹

In both commentaries, the practice begins with three syllables, *Oṃ Aṃ Hūṃ*, visualized at one's head, throat, and heart. Each syllable radiates a light that purifies, respectively, one's body, speech and mind. This purification process is likened to that of extracting silver from a stone through melting and hammering.

After this initial purification, one settles into the correct seated meditation pose, defined by five *mūdras* (*phyag rgya lnga*): (i) covering the left hand with the right and (ii) the right leg with the left, (iii) straightening the posture, (iv) resting the eyes on the tip of the nose, and (v) pressing the tongue against the roof of the mouth. So seated, one 'views the mind' (*sems la lta ba*) and meditates on just that. This practice is described by means of three pairs of metaphors: (i) poison and its cure, (ii) a watchman and a thief, (iii) a lamp and a lake.

Next comes the all-illuminating *samādhi*, which receives the least attention of the three. PT626 says almost nothing, but PT634 describes the *samādhi* with a particularly striking metaphor:

When there is an opening in the clouds in the sky, the moon and many stars are revealed. Similarly, within the thusness *samādhi* which is like the sky, a gap opens in the great omniscient wisdom, the clouds. Then the syllable of oneself, a white A endowed with the causal consciousness, abiding as the cause, arises brightly in the sky.¹²

The metaphor of the sky and the use of the syllable A to mark the transition from the all-illuminating *samādhi* to the causal *samādhi* is common in early descriptions of the all-illuminating *samādhi*.¹³ In the causal *samādhi*, the visualized *maṇḍala* palace is generated out of the syllables, with oneself sitting at the centre as the principal deity. Lights are projected and reabsorbed, blessing the practitioner's mind.

This marks the end of the third *samādhi* and thus the development stage, though this is not made explicit here. The root text divides the remaining meditations into four further perfection stage *samādhis*. The first of these four is a meditation on the visualization of one's own body, speech and mind as those of the deity. The second *samādhi* involves the recitation of the deity's heart mantra. The third is a sexual practice involving the manipulation of psycho-physical energies.¹⁴ Finally in the fourth *samādhi* the visualization is dissolved, the 108-syllable mantra of the deity Vajrasattva is recited for purification, and one rests in the enlightened state. The description of the manipulation of psycho-physical energies is unusual for the Dunhuang collections and may indicate a relatively late date (given that the Dunhuang cave was sealed at the beginning of the eleventh century) for our group of manuscripts.

Chan elements in PT626 and PT634

Thus the texts of PT626 and PT634 present a detailed discussion of a Mahāyoga meditation practice in terms of the three *samādhis*. Despite being firmly situated in the context of Mahāyoga meditation, both texts incorporate substantial elements of Chan meditation practice. All of these elements are found in the first of the three *samādhis*, the thusness *samādhi*.

As we have seen, the first *samādhi* is typically a meditation on the emptiness of the mind and phenomena. The presentation of the first *samādhi* in PT626 and PT634 is unusual in that it draws as much on Chan terminology and practices as on Vajrayāna sources. Specifically, the two commentaries as well as the root text associate the first *samādhi* with the practice of 'viewing the mind' (*sems la lta*).¹⁵ This is an internally-directed analysis with the aim of establishing that there is no actual object of the referent 'mind'. Thus the mind is examined for features like shapes and colours. Such techniques are not unique to Chan Buddhism, but the association of the techniques with the phrase 'viewing the mind' (Ch. *kan xin* 看心) is distinctive of the Northern Chan schools.¹⁶ These techniques are frequently discussed in the Dunhuang Chan manuscripts, including the fragments attributed to the Chan master Heshang Moheyan 和尚摩訶衍.¹⁷

While a certain degree of conceptual examination is clearly required for the practice of viewing the mind, in PT626 and PT634 the goal is a lack of mental activity. This is implied by the statement that viewing the mind is the means (*thabs*) and the mind's non-abiding is wisdom (*shes rab*). The state resulting from viewing the mind is described as non-thought (*mi bsam*), non-conceptualization (*mi rtog*), and not engaging the mind (*yid la mi byed pa*), three

central terms in Tibetan Chan, particularly in the texts attributed to Moheyan.¹⁸

Other possible references to Chan teachings in PT626 and PT634, less clear though still suggestive, appear in the three pairs of metaphors discussed above. In one metaphor the practice of mindfulness is compared to a watchman spotting a thief. The metaphor of the thief appears in the teachings attributed to Moheyan, as a symbol for the distractions of the six senses. The metaphor also appears in the writings of Shenxiu 神秀 (606?–706), exponent of the Northern Chan doctrines and the teacher of Moheyan's teachers.¹⁹ Finally, the metaphor of a butter lamp, used in PT634 to illustrate the practice of insight meditation (*lhag mthong*),²⁰ also appears in the Shenxiu's writings on insight meditation, and is suggestive of the 'inner illumination' (Ch. *fan zhao* 返照) taught by Moheyan.²¹

Once the discussion of the thusness *samādhi* is concluded, there is no further drawing upon Chan practices and teaching techniques. As we have seen, there is a great deal of overlap between the Chan elements of PT626 and PT634 and the teachings of Shenxiu and Moheyan. While Shenxiu is representative of the Northern Chan, the position of Moheyan is usually taken to be a later development which combined the Northern Chan practices with elements from other strands of Chan.²² The Chan affiliations of the author of our own texts are further elucidated in his other work, PT699.

Chan elements in PT699

Like the two commentaries discussed in the previous section, PT699 is based on a short root text, but in this case the root text appears in several other places. It is quoted in the Chan chapter of the *Lamp for the Eyes in Contemplation* (*Bsam gtan mig sgron*) under the title *Brief Precepts* (*lung chung*). It also appears elsewhere in the Dunhuang manuscripts on its own (ITJ689),²³ in a Chan compilation (PT121) and in an incomplete and previously unnoticed manuscript, where it appears in the company of some notes on the Vajrayāna (ITJ1774).²⁴ We can conclude that the text enjoyed some popularity throughout Tibet in the ninth and tenth centuries.

The *Brief Precepts* is a series of instructions on the practice of contemplation. It begins with an evocation of the compassionate motivation to end the suffering of all sentient beings. Then the meditation proper is discussed, beginning with the practice of viewing the mind, and moving on quickly to the instruction not to think nor to conceptualize. The text then describes the resulting realization of emptiness and the equality of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, from which the mind is liberated of itself (*rang grol*) with no need to obstruct or suppress concepts. The meditator is instructed to remain in an unmoving *samādhi*, while the meditative experience becomes increasingly subtle, peaceful and clear. The *Brief Precepts* concludes with the following statement: 'This dharma was entrusted to the great Kāśyapa. Dharmātala meditated in this way.'²⁵ Thus the author of PT699 would have been aware that

the subject of his commentary was firmly based in the lineages of Chan.

PT699 explains the practice of meditation with the instruction to arrange the body in meditation posture, to turn away from the objects of the six senses, view the mind, and remain in non-thought and non-conceptualization. The process of viewing the mind is described as an intellectual enquiry, similar to the method of PT626 and PT634, but with considerably greater detail. This is the longest section of commentary. The same injunction to turn away from six senses and to view the mind is found in the teachings of Moheyan.²⁶

Turning to the practice of non-thought and non-conceptualization, the author of PT699 employs the Chan teaching of the 'three phrases', attributed in the *Lidai fabao ji* 歷代法寶記 to Wuxiang 無相. Wuxiang (684–762) was an exponent of the Baotang school of Chan based in Chengdu in southwestern China. This school seems to have exerted a direct influence on Tibetan Chan, which has been described as a dovetailing of late Northern and Baotang Chan.²⁷ In our commentary, PT699, the three phrases (*man ngag gsum*) are mentioned by name: non-mind (*mi sems*), non-mindfulness (*mi dran*) and illusoriness (*sgyu ma*). The original Chinese phrases of Wuxiang (*wu nian, wu yi, wu wang* 無念無義無忘) differ in that the last means something more like 'non-forgetting'.²⁸ This difference is clarified somewhat in other Tibetan Chan texts, where the third phrase is rendered as 'the illusory mind not emerging' (*sgyu ma'i sems mi 'byung ba*).²⁹

PT699 also ties the direct experience of the mind as nonexistent to the practice of the 'single-method *samādhi*' (*ting nge 'dzin tshul cig*).³⁰ This may be a reference to the similar term (*yi xing san mei* 一行三昧) which appears in the *Platform Sutra*. There, it appears in passages criticizing the Northern Chan, indicating that the single-method *samādhi* was associated with that school.³¹

PT699 does not employ the richness of metaphors found in PT626 and PT634, but we do see again the metaphor of the sense objects as thieves and the awareness of them as a watchman. Here the *Brief Precepts* refers to 'being aware of the arisings' (*byung tshor*).³² The commentary compares the arisings (*byung*) to thieves, and awareness (*tshor*) to a watchman. This rather compacted discussion is clarified by a passage attributed to Moheyan in which he explains that, just as when one is aware of a thief, the thief cannot enter one's home, so when one is aware of the arising thoughts and concepts, one is liberated from them.³³ The wording of this passage is very similar to our commentary. Of particular note is PT699's use of the word *tshor* in the sense of 'aware'. The term has a specific meaning in Chinese treatises and translations of Chinese sutras from this period; rather than standing for the Sanskrit *vedanā* ('feeling' or 'sensation') as it does in translations of Sanskrit texts, it stands for the Chinese *jue* 覺 meaning 'to understand, to be aware, to wake up'.³⁴

This wakeful awareness is described in PT699 as 'the antidote to the *śrāvakas*' pacification'.³⁵ The pacification practice of the

śrāvakas, meditators seeking a personal peace without the bodhisattva's wider motivation, is used in many Chan texts as a symbol of one extreme in meditation practice. Unsurprisingly then, it appears more than once in the writings attributed to Moheyan.³⁶

The author's position within Chan

As we have seen in the above discussion, there are many points of similarity between the Chan doctrines presented in our three works – PT626, PT634 and PT699 – and in other Dunhuang Chan manuscripts. The great compilation of Tibetan Chan material PT116 is a rich source for similar terminology. Interestingly, most of the points of similarity in PT116 occur in a discrete section of the manuscript that is framed as a treatise written as an aid to *Mahāyogins*, a term usually used to refer to tantric practitioners. This is not the only instance of the use of the term *Mahāyoga* in manuscripts otherwise entirely Chan in character, a phenomenon we will return to in the conclusion.³⁷

Another Chan compilation, PT121, exhibits even stronger links to our group of documents. PT121 contains five works, of which the third is a copy of the *Brief Precepts*. The fourth is a discussion of the three phrases of Wuxiang, and the fifth is an analysis of the meaning of the three jewels (*dkon mchog gsum*). The third and fourth texts are clearly linked thematically to PT699. The fifth is similar to another of our group of manuscripts, PT808, which is also a discussion of the three jewels. The two discussions of this topic differ in certain details, but use much of the same terminology. Thus we can infer that the compiler of the PT121 collection moved in the same Chan circles as the author of our group of documents.³⁸

The many links with the teachings of Heshang Moheyan, in the Tibetan Dunhuang documents ascribed to him and in the Chinese record of the Samye debate, make it quite clear that the author of our texts was following a tradition similar to that of Moheyan, if not the actual lineage of this famous teacher.³⁹ In short, the Chan background of our author is what one would expect of a Tibetan Chan teacher: late Northern Chan with elements of Baotang.

A Mahāyoga interpretation of a Chan text: PT699

Thus in writing his commentary to the Chan text known as the *Brief Precepts*, the author of PT699 was clearly drawing on a specific tradition of Chan teachings, and it is quite possible to read the text as a straightforward Chan commentary. Yet when read alongside PT626 and PT634, certain references to Mahāyoga practice become apparent, suggesting that the author also had in mind the three *samādhi* structure when composing this commentary. That is to say, his commentary interprets a Chan text in terms of Mahāyoga ritual techniques.

There may have been some precedent for this. Some brief notes on the Vajrayāna are appended to the version of the *Brief Precepts* found in ITJ1774 (Fig. 2). The notes mention three well-known Mahāyoga teachers by name: Ācārya Buddhagupta,

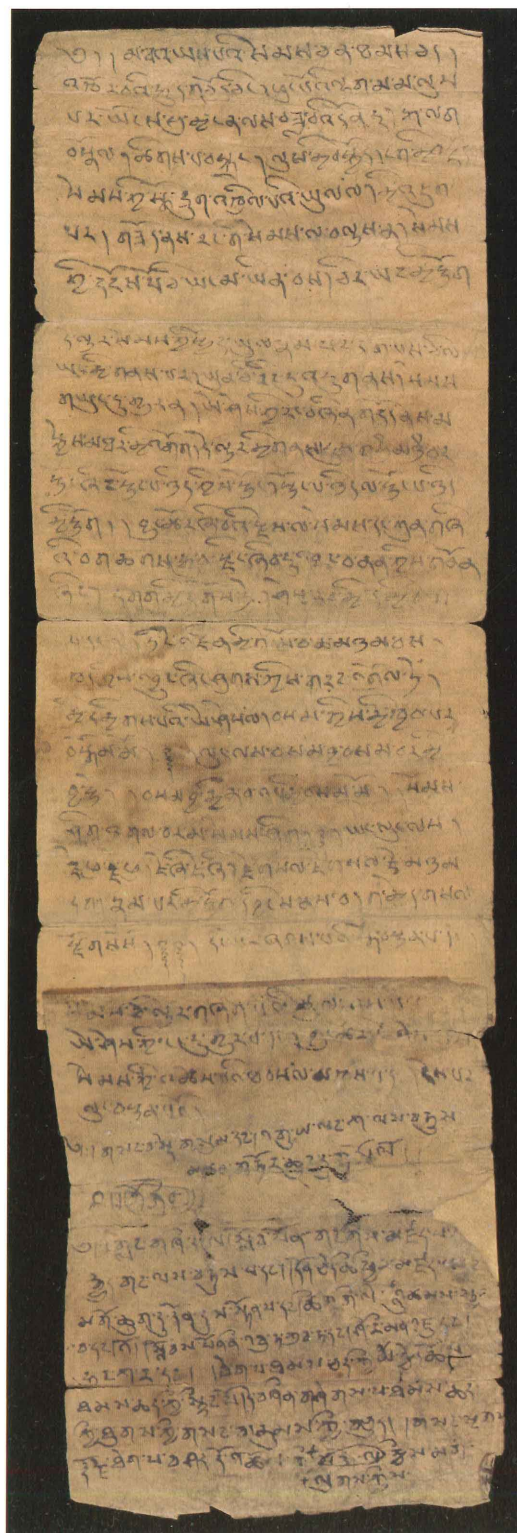


Fig. 2 The *Brief Precepts*.

The *Brief Precepts* is a Chan or Zen text. Some of the versions found at Dunhuang, such as the one in Tibetan shown here, mention Mahāyoga teachers which suggests that the text may have enjoyed popularity among tantric practitioners in this area.

The British Library, IOL Tib J 1774

Śrīmañju (= Mañjuśrīmitra) and Hūṃkara.⁴⁰ This suggests that the *Brief Precepts* may have enjoyed a wider popularity among the Mahāyoga practitioners around Dunhuang.

In the first part of PT699 the author discusses the nature of ignorance. Among several definitions, ignorance is said to be 'not seeing the face of the deity and the master.'⁴¹ The reference to seeing the face of the deity carries a strong implication of the presence of Vajrayāna practice. This is no more than a hint by our author, but it sets the scene for the meditation instructions which follow.

At the beginning of the section on meditation, in describing the posture to be assumed for viewing the mind, the author uses the system of the five *mūdras*.⁴² We have already observed these same five instructions in PT626 and PT634, where the author discusses the posture to be assumed for the practice of the thusness *samādhi*.⁴³ Similar posture instructions are found in many Tibetan Chan texts, but not this set of five.⁴⁴ On the other hand, the same five appear in other Dunhuang Mahāyoga texts, as the posture to be assumed for performing the three *samādhis*.⁴⁵ Thus these five *mūdras* seem to be derived from Mahāyoga practices of this period.

Having assumed the physical posture for Mahāyoga practice, PT699 instructs the meditator in the Chan method of 'viewing the mind'. As we have seen in PT626 and PT634, this method is also applied by our author in the context of the thusness *samādhi*. The 'three phrases' of Wuxiang which appear in this section of PT699 have an analogous triad in PT634, where the three pairs of metaphors are arranged into: (i) the entrance, which is means and wisdom; (ii) the remedy, which is mindfulness and alertness; (iii) the method for settling the mind, which is calm abiding and insight.⁴⁶ The position of this triad in PT634 mirrors the position of the three phrases in PT699: both come immediately after the emptiness of mind has been established. It seems then that the three phrases of Wuxiang are employed as a suggestive allusion to the three pairs of metaphors.

Having discussed the three phrases of Wuxiang, PT699 goes on to compare meditation to the reflections of the sun and moon. Similarly PT634, after discussing the analogous triad, calls attention to the reflective quality of meditation, like reflections of the moon and the stars in water.⁴⁷ In PT634 this image bridges the thusness *samādhi* to the all-illuminating *samādhi*, symbolizing the transition from the empty aspect of the mind to the luminous aspect of compassion.

A few lines further on, PT699 states that 'any further changes are equal in the mere A.'⁴⁸ The significance of this syllable A is not explained, but is easy to identify when cross-referenced with PT626 and PT634, in which a white syllable A signifies the pure consciousness, and represents the transition from the general luminosity of the all-illuminating *samādhi* to the detailed visualizations of the causal *samādhi*.⁴⁹ We have seen that the white A (or in some cases *Om*) is commonly used in Dunhuang Mahāyoga texts as the initial visualization in the causal *samādhi*.⁵⁰

The author of PT699 does not suggest that the meditator go

on to perform the tantric visualizations. This would be rather a stretch when the root text, the *Brief Precepts*, remains firmly on the theme of non-conceptual meditation right to its end. However, the commentary does build one further bridge across to the world of Mahāyoga (before the final explicit syncretism of the colophon discussed in the introduction). After a statement that equality (*cha snyom*) requires a full abandonment of self, the author asks, 'where is this shown?'⁵¹ In Tibetan treatises this rhetorical question is usually followed by a citation intended to validate the position of the author as not mere personal opinion. Here, the citation is not from a Chan text, but from the Mahāyoga treatise *Questions and Answers on Vajrasattva* (*rdo rje sems pa' zhus lan*) which was known in Dunhuang.⁵² This suggests that PT699 was aimed at an audience both interested in Mahāyoga meditation and familiar with the main texts of the Tibetan Mahāyoga traditions.

Thus the author of PT699 seems to have directed his commentary on the Chan *Brief Precepts* toward the same audience as his Mahāyoga commentaries, an audience well-versed in tantric development stage practices. His allusions to elements of these practices, and the way in which his Chan and Mahāyoga commentaries mirror each other's structure brings the Chan text into the realm of Mahāyoga.

Syncretism in Dunhuang and the 'dark period'

In a groundbreaking article on Mahāyoga texts from Dunhuang, Kenneth Eastman noted the existence of a Tibetan Chan manuscript from Dunhuang (PT116) that is presented as a teaching on Mahāyoga. 'But', he wrote, 'there is nothing in it that suggests any direct borrowing from Mahāyoga other than its title. There is, in other words, not even a trace of any attempt at synthesizing the two traditions, but it is rather simply a Ch'an treatise masquerading as a treatise on Mahāyoga.'⁵³

As noted above, there are a number of Chan manuscripts which use the term Mahāyoga in this way, without incorporating any actual Mahāyoga terms or practices. Given the existence of the syncretism in the texts discussed above, the judgement that such treatises are merely masquerading as Mahāyoga is thrown into question. It is more likely that a number of Chan texts were in fact well studied within Mahāyoga circles. Even when such works made no explicit attempt to incorporate Mahāyoga elements, they would have been understood within the context of Mahāyoga practice, a point of view which was only occasionally made explicit in works like the ones presented here.

The kind of syncretism seen in the group of manuscripts discussed in this study contrasts dramatically with the conservatism of the later tradition. After the 'dark period', all visible influences of Chan were eliminated from Tibetan Buddhism, and Mahāyoga and Chan were carefully distinguished from each other.⁵⁴ This trend can already be observed in the tenth-century *Lamp for the Eyes in Contemplation* by the great central Tibetan scholar Gnubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes. This influential work represented a crucial step

in the codification of Chan, Mahāyoga and the Great Perfection as distinct vehicles to enlightenment.⁵⁵ In comparison, our group of manuscripts exhibits a remarkable freedom, blurring the lines between meditation systems which were elsewhere kept quite distinct. The system of practice set out in these manuscripts did not survive into the later Tibetan tradition. Indeed, this creative integration of meditation practices derived from both Indic and Chinese traditions could only have been possible during the earliest

years of Tibetan Buddhism, when doctrinal categories were still forming, and in this sense it represents an important stage in the Tibetan assimilation of Buddhism.

Sam van Schaik and Jacob Dalton both work on the International Dunhuang Project at the British Library on an AHRB-funded collaborative project with SOAS to catalogue and digitize the Tibetan tantric manuscripts from Dunhuang.

NOTES

- 1 On Tibet's 'dark period', see Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, 451–70; Karmay, *The Great Perfection*, 8–10; Sørensen, *Tibetan Historiography*, 423–39; Yamaguchi, "The Fiction of King Dar-ma's Persecution of Buddhism"; Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism*.
- 2 The five manuscripts in question are all in the Pelliot collection at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris. They are all prefixed PT (Pelliot tibétain) and are numbered 322, 626, 634, 699 and 808.
- 3 The term *Mahāyoga* (*rnal 'byor chen po*) appears in the Dunhuang manuscripts as a common name for tantric practice, particularly denoting the practices derived from a genre of tantras which appeared from the mid-seventh century onwards, including the *Guhyaagarbha tantra*, the *Sarvabuddhasamāyoga tantra* and the *Guhyasamāja tantra*. Other terms used to define tantric practice in the Dunhuang manuscripts include *Vajrayāna* (*rdo rje'i theg pa*) and 'secret mantra' (*gsang sngags*).
- 4 The single-folio PT808 uses a slightly lighter shade of red ink. PT808 is also the only one of the manuscripts to contain no Mahāyoga material, so that it stands on the edge of our core group. The Dunhuang collections contain several other manuscripts which may share the same hand, ITJ597, PT958, PT149 and PT592. These are not included in the present study because they do not directly relate to Chan or Mahāyoga. Generally speaking, these other manuscripts share an interest in Buddhist historical narrative. Thus ITJ597 is a history of Khotan couched as a prophecy (*Li yul gi dgra bcom bas lung bstan pa*), and PT149 ties the activities of Tibetan king Khri srong lde brtsan to the narrative events of the *Gaṇḍhavyūha Sūtra*. As well as differing thematically from our core group of manuscripts, none of these others contains all of the orthographic features described above.
- 5 Okimoto, "Tonkō shutsudō". On p. 423 n. 8, Okimoto identifies two further copies of the root text, in ITJ689 and PT121/3. Since then another copy has been identified in the manuscript ITJ1774.
- 6 Meinert, "Chinese Chan and Tibetan Rdzogs chen".
- 7 PT322, f. B(1)r.1; f. B(1)r.3–4; f. B(1)v.7.
- 8 The colophon is difficult to follow due to its arrangement on the page. We believe the following is the correct reading of the lines, PT699, 5r. *a ti yo ga 'chad pi slob dpon ci lta bu zhe na/ khyung chen nam par gcod kyang skye 'gro la lus shes/ theg pa so sor gsal yang spyi rgya rlabs kyis gcod/ gsal la ma 'dres che pi don ston pa/ 'khas lding khyung ltar don gi che ba 'byin/ mdo sde 'chad pi slob pon ci lta bu zhe na/ 'grod par bya ba'i lam gi bye brag la/ ngang pi rgyal po myi 'gyog gcas su gcod/ de bzhin slob dpon rgyud kyi don 'chad pa/ tshig gi bde sbyor myi 'khyog gcas su gcod/ smad pi rna bu brag la 'dzag pa'i/ myi 'tsham 'tsham bar 'chad pas/ skyon nyid yon btan yin/ mang po 'dus pi nang na/ chos 'chad pa/ skad byings don dang ldan bas/ khong bkrar go/ ru sbal skungs pa lta bu'i blos 'chad pa/ gab pa'i sbas pa de shes slob dpon yon yin/zhes byung ngo.*
- 9 When the commentary was composed (probably in the tenth century), the line dividing Atiyoga from Mahāyoga was still indistinct. The Dunhuang materials represent an early stage in the development of Atiyoga, when it was still in the process of separating from the wider tantric matrix from which it arose. The colophon to PT699 implies that, for the author at least, Atiyoga was less a strictly defined textual category than a teaching method, a hermeneutical approach that could be applied to a variety of texts. For more on the early development of the Great Perfection/Atiyoga in the Dunhuang manuscripts, see Van Schaik, "The Early Days of the Great Perfection" and Dalton, "The Development of Perfection".
- 10 See, for example, ITJ716/1 and ITJ437.
- 11 That said, PT626 is generally briefer in its comments. The work actually has two parts. The first part delineates a hermeneutical system that differs somewhat from the principal system used in the second part. Thus the first system divides the text into seven general topics, while the second uses only four topics.
- 12 PT634, f. 2r.3. *nam kha la sprin gis go phye nas gza' skar mang po go phye ba dang 'dra' bar de bzhin nyid ki ting nge 'dzin nam ka dang 'dra ba' la kun mkhyen gi ye shes chen pos sprin gis go phye nas bdag gi yi ge a dkar po shes pa rgyu can rgyur gnas pa nam ka la sal gis byung ngo.*
- 13 See, for example, ITJ437, f. 7r.1–6.
- 14 For more on the early development of the perfection stage sexual practices in the Dunhuang manuscripts, see Dalton, "The Development of Perfection".
- 15 PT626 f. 2v.6, PT634 f. 1v.1 (*mchan 'grel*).
- 16 ITJ468, f. 2r.4–5, STMG, ff. 146.6–147.2, PT823, recto f. 1.4 (translated in Gomez, "Direct and Gradual Approaches", 109, 119, 126). In PT626 and PT634, viewing the mind is linked to its non-abiding (*mi gnas*). This link is a common theme in Northern Chan texts (see Faure, *Will to Orthodoxy*, 61–3). See also PT116, panel 184.
- 17 Moheyan was based at Dunhuang in the 780s and 790s, with a short interlude teaching at the royal court in Central Tibet at the invitation of the king. He was perhaps the most influential figure within Tibetan Chan, and plays a central role in the accounts of the imperial 'great debate' between Chinese and Indian exponents of Buddhism held at Samye temple in the eighth century.
- 18 PT117, f. 6v.3–4; STMG, f. 165.4–5; Gomez, "Direct and Gradual Approaches", 152 n. 43. In Moheyan's works, non-thought (Ch. *bu si* 不思) and the others are distinguished from the obstruction or cessation of thoughts; rather, when the thoughts are left alone, they are pacified of themselves (*rang zhi*).
- 19 Gomez, "Direct and Gradual Approaches", 153; Gomez, "Purifying Gold", 89–90.
- 20 PT634, f. 1r.3 (*mchan 'grel*).
- 21 Gomez, "Purifying Gold", 92, 102.
- 22 Broughton, "Early Ch'an Schools", 8–9.
- 23 Here the Tibetan Dunhuang manuscripts held in the Stein collection at the British Library are prefixed ITJ (short for IOL Tib J, or "India Office Library Tibetan J").
- 24 A critical edition based on all but ITJ1774 is provided in Okimoto, "Tonkō shutsudō".

- 25 PT699, f. 5r.1, 'od srungs che la chos gtad pa/ dar ma ta la 'di ltar sgom/. The author of the commentary shows that he understands the context of these lines by referring to Dharmatāla (a variant on the name Bodhidharma) as the twenty-eighth in the lineage of Indian masters.
- 26 PT823, recto panels 1.4–2.2 (translated in Gomez, "Direct and Gradual Approaches", 126). The description of this practice is based on the influential apocryphal *Śūraṅgama Sutra* (see Faure, *Will to Orthodoxy*, 65).
- 27 In "Early Ch'an Schools", 7–9, Broughton argues that Wuxiang's direct disciple Wuzhu was the Chinese teacher who instructed Sba gsal snang. As told in the *S/Dbā bzhed*, he was one of the first people sent by the Tibetan king Mes 'ag tshoms (704–55) to bring Buddhist teachings to Tibet. See Diemberger and Wangdu, *Dbā bzhed*, 46–52. The Chinese *locus classicus* for the three phrases is the influential *Lidai fabao ji*.
- 28 On the three phrases, see Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra*, 44.
- 29 PT121, panel 411; PT116, panels 165–66.
- 30 PT699, f. 3v.6, ting nge 'dzin tsha cig du bdag gis bsgoms. Here we are reading tshul for tsha.
- 31 Faure, *Will to Orthodoxy*, 67–69.
- 32 PT699, f. 4r.5 (*mchan 'grel*).
- 33 PC4646, f. 147r-v (translated in Gomez, "Direct and Gradual Approaches", 153 n. 43).
- 34 Gomez, "Direct and Gradual Approaches", 153; Faber, "A Tibetan Dunhuang Treatise", 67, n. 41. The word *tshor* also appears in this context in PT116, panels 155–56.
- 35 PT699, f. 4r.1, nyan thos zhi ba'i gnyen po.
- 36 ITJ709, f. 4r.3–6, STMG, ff. 165.5–66.1 (translated in Gomez, "Direct and Gradual Approaches", 111, 120).
- 37 PT116, panels 119–70; discussed in Eastman, "Mahāyoga Texts at Tun-huang", 58. Other Chan texts using the terms Mahāyoga (*rnal 'byor chen po*) and Mahāyogin (*rnal 'byor chen po pa*) are ITJ710/1, ITJ709/9, ITJ704/1, and (if it can be called a Chan work) ITJ705/PT818. Another version of the last text is discussed in Otokawa, "New Fragments of the *Rnal 'byor chen por bsgom pa'i don* from Tabo".
- 38 There is yet another discussion of the three jewels, different again, though clearly from the same tradition, found in PT812 verso.
- 39 With regard to lineage, it is worth mentioning the short list that appears in PT699 of people who "left no physical elements" at their death. Only two of the six figures in this list may be easily identified, Lang Dkon mchog 'byung gnas and Gnubs Nam mkha'i snying po. Both are considered by the later Tibetan tradition to have been Mahāyoga practitioners taught by the eighth-century figure Padmasambhava. Another Dunhuang document, PT996, discusses a Central Asian Chan lineage which includes a Tshig tsa Nam mkha'i snying po, active during the eighth century. In *The Great Perfection*, 98, Karmay argues that these two figures with the name Nam mkha'i snying po should not be identified; however, PT699 strengthens the case for making such an identification. PT996 associates Nam mkha'i snying po with a Spug ye shes dbyangs, author of a treatise on Chan called *The Meaning of Meditating on Mahāyoga* (PT818). Thus Nam mkha'i snying po may well have played a part in both Mahāyoga and Chan lineages. PT996 has been discussed and reproduced in Lalou, "Document tibétain sur l'expansion du dhyāna chinois".
- 40 ITJ1774, f. 5r.4–5, slob pon nI 'bu ta kub ta dang/ shI rI man 'ju dang/ hung ka ra dang/. In the later Tibetan tradition, all three figures are strongly associated with Mahāyoga. The identity of Buddhagupta is discussed in Karmay, *The Great Perfection*, 61–63.
- 41 PT699, f. 2R.2, lha dang slob dpon ni zhal ma mthong.
- 42 PT699, f. 2R.2–3.
- 43 PT634, f. 1R.2; PT626, f. 2V.4. The five *mūdras* are also referred to as "the five entry gates" (*'jugs pa'i sgo lnga*).
- 44 ITJ468, f. 1R.1–2 (translated in Gomez, "Direct and Gradual Approaches", 108). This passage is very similar to the instruction in the root text, the *Brief Precepts*.
- 45 Or.8210/S.95, V.5, ll.4–8. See also ITJ437, f. 1V.9, where the thusness *samādhi* is referred to as 'meditating on the nose' (*sna la bsgom*).
- 46 PT634, f. 2R.1.
- 47 PT699, f. 3V.4–6; PT634, f. 2R.1.
- 48 PT699, f. 4V.1 (*mchan 'grel*), gyur ba yang a tsam du cha mnyam.
- 49 PT626, f. 5R.1; PT634, f. 2R.3 (*mchan 'grel*).
- 50 ITJ331/2, f. 2R.5; ITJ437, f. 7R.6; ITJ464, f. 2R.4; Or.8210/S.95 V.3, ll.4–6
- 51 PT699, f. 4v.2 (*mchan 'grel*, *de ltar ci bngon zhe na*).
- 52 The canonical edition of this work can be found at P.5082. In addition, two full copies are found in ITJ470 and PT837 and a partial copy in PT819. Dpal dbyangs considered his *Zhus lan* a Mahāyoga work, as is clear in the opening lines where he explains that he composed the work, 'for the sake of those wishing to understand with awareness the way of the supreme Mahāyoga' (*rnal 'byor chen po mchog gi lugs/ rig pas shes par 'dod pa'i phyir*). The lines cited in PT699 can be found in the answer to the twenty-eighth question.
- 53 Eastman, "Mahāyoga Texts at Tun-huang", 58.
- 54 A singular exception to this is the 'hidden treasure' (*gter ma*) text, the *Bka' thang sde lnga*. See Karmay, *The Great Perfection*, 90–99.
- 55 On Gnubs chen's role in the codification of the Great Perfection, see Van Schaik, "The Early Days of the Great Perfection".