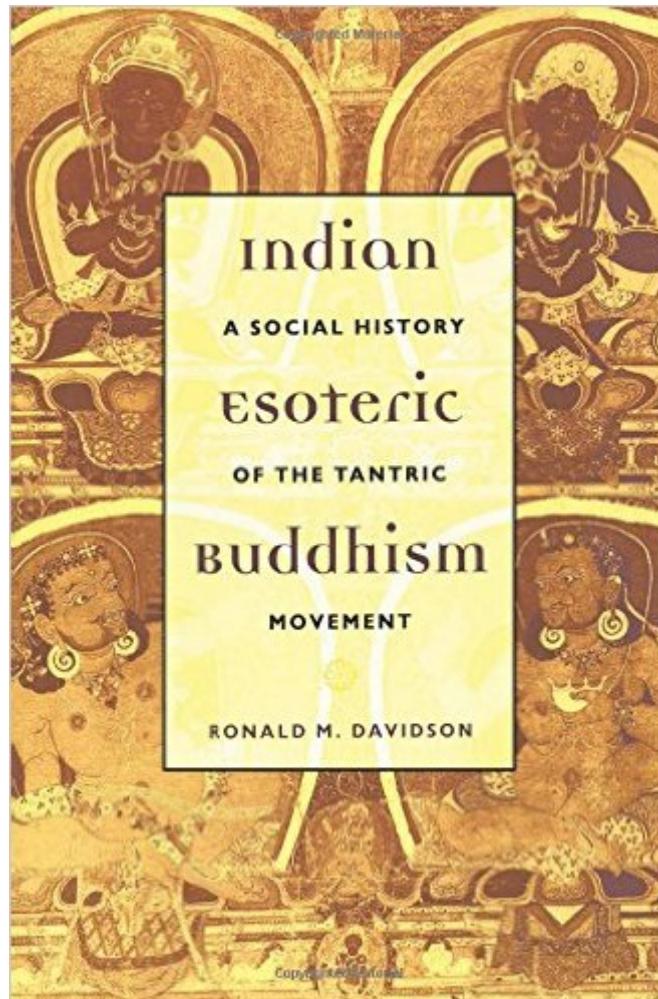


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Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History Of The Tantric Movement



Synopsis

Despite the rapid spread of Buddhism—especially the esoteric system of Tantra, one of its most popular yet most misunderstood forms—the historical origins of Buddhist thought and practice remain obscure. This groundbreaking work describes the genesis of the Tantric movement in early medieval India, where it developed as a response to, and in some ways an example of, the feudalization of Indian society. Drawing on primary documents—many translated for the first time—from Sanskrit, Prakrit, Tibetan, Bengali, and Chinese, Ronald Davidson shows how changes in medieval Indian society, including economic and patronage crises, a decline in women's participation, and the formation of large monastic orders, led to the rise of the esoteric tradition in India that became the model for Buddhist cultures in China, Tibet, and Japan.

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Customer Reviews

Ronald M. Davidson's book on "Indian Esoteric Buddhism" is not for those unfamiliar with the history of India or with the development of Buddhism, but it does not require advanced knowledge to follow his argument. (I would have found it unintelligible if it did.) It is also not for the devotional reader, or for anyone in search of details of religious practices, Yogic or otherwise. It is especially not for those in pursuit of salacious details of supposed Tantric practices. For those with a serious interest in the history of a great religious tradition, however, it is worth attention. Davidson outlines the complicated history of India during the centuries on either side of the first Muslim invasions, describing the internal and external warfare, the rise and fall of imperial states, the shifting of trade routes, and

other political, military, and economic factors bringing about material, organizational, and ideological changes. The exposition here is probably as clear and concise as the material allows -- but I found myself wishing that Davidson had done a separate book on the subject, with adequate maps and chronologies, and summarized its conclusions here. If possible I would give it four and a half stars on this count -- I suspect that many readers will just give up before finding out what all of this has to do with esoteric Buddhism. (A lot, if you accept Davidson's argument, but for a while it has to be taken on faith, so to speak.) The declining status of women, particularly their place in public religion, is given considerable attention. Not out of a desire to be trendy or politically correct -- it turns out to be an important, and measurable, indication of social and political changes. Archeological and iconographic evidence is used when available; fieldwork in India and Pakistan has suffered from delayed publication. Studies of popular religion in modern India are also used, including Davidson's own investigations. Some patterns of religious devotion seem to persist, regardless of the official religion prevailing at this or another time. Davidson applies this picture to the emergence of new and radical strains in Indian Buddhism and Hinduism during this long and turbulent period. He argues, convincingly, that disruption of the great monastic institutions around which Indian Buddhism had been built allowed for personal forms of religiosity to emerge. Some of these, which we know as "Tantra," had a great future within Mahayana Buddhism, but mainly outside of India, in the Tibetan and Chinese cultural zones (the latter including Korea and Japan). Other responses probably vanished without a trace, or survive as apparent aberrations in better-attested schools of thought. Davidson emphasizes that similar trends appeared in Hinduism during the same period, and argues that the esoteric traditions influenced each other in complex and subtle ways, some of which he explores. The old problem of whether Hindu or Buddhist Tantra is the "original" form fades, if both are seen as responses to the same stresses and changes. Davidson argues that organized Indian Buddhism suffered in the long term by abandoning its own traditions of philosophy, and adapting its arguments to the prevailing concerns of the time. Although this produced some interesting philosophy, the shift from salvation to epistemology was bound to weaken the appeal of Buddhism as a religion in a time of upheaval. This loss of emotional impact also helps to explain the infiltration of new and radical forms of meditation and ritual into the monastic movement itself. Davidson also looks at the literary forms of Buddhist Tantras, and their use of paradoxes, and what can only be called scandalous whimsy, as preaching devices; aspects which are often explained away, or decried, but make good sense in the setting he proposes. His comments on specific texts are excellent, and one wishes there were more of them, instead of just what is sufficient to carry the argument. I found the book fascinating, although not easy going at times. The

emergence of new religious forms is often explained as a result of processes internal to the religion in question, and often blamed on the representatives of the old ways. Davidson's argument that external factors can play an equally important role suggests taking a new look at popular mystical movements in other religions. For western Christianity, a comparable work, although from a very different starting point, is Norman Cohn's "Pursuit of the Millennium," which argued for the close relationship between social and economic issues and religious movements in the later Middle Ages. Some of the "libertine" movements he describes have a certain resemblance to various manifestations of the Tantric movements in both Hinduism and Buddhism. Also consider, for example, the relation of the rise of Hasidism in the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe to the catastrophic decline of the Polish state, rather than the supposed failures of the established Jewish leadership. (Reposted from my "anonymous" review of June 19, 2003.)

While this book may not be so useful to tantric practitioners, for the rest of us it makes this very difficult material much more accessible. Davidson covers a daunting amount of material and does so in an interesting fashion. When I first read it, I couldn't put it down. Since then, I have assigned the book twice to my undergraduate classes. In year-end evaluations, the majority of my students considered it to be invaluable to understanding the rest of the tantric material I assigned. There are a few chapters that offer more detail than is of interest to the non-specialist (such as his chapter on Early Medieval India). But anyone who has tried to piece together portions of Indian dynastic history from original sources will appreciate the fact that he makes a daunting task look relatively easy!

This book is a major contribution to understanding the historical context and evolution of the siddhi tradition within Buddhism. Its research, speculations, and conclusions may not please everyone, but it's of tremendous value in understanding the origin of practices, divinities, and personages. The book is scholarly, loaded with footnotes, and appendices reflecting the author's research. It is very well written. While the book is not designed as an encomium to Buddhist mythology, it serves well those who wish to understand Buddhism's historical context.

"Indian Esoteric Buddhism" is a remarkable and ambitious work. As Davidson goes through an account of the political and economic pressures besieging the Indian monastic establishment, he advances the thesis--with partial success, I think--that Vajrayana arose from the threat to institutional monastic Buddhism caused by the feudalization of Indian politics and the erosion of the traditional monastic patronage system. One response to this was a new esoteric system employing

the "imperial metaphor," a kind of updating of Buddhist ritual and meditation to reflect the new political reality and make Buddhism relevant to the newly emergent and very belligerent feudal overlords. So far so good. But as Davidson proceeds to the discussion of the siddha movement, the flaws in his thesis start to show much more starkly. Much of Davidson's argument relies on bald assertions that this or that passage from an old text is meant literally, even when the commentarial tradition disagrees. He tries to undermine the authority of the commentators by stating that they were merely domesticating siddha material so they could be absorbed into the Buddhist institutional establishment without posing a challenge to its norms. In service of this argument, he cites an introductory passage from the Buddhakapalatantra, and then reviews three commentators, who he maintains diverge in their interpretation--thus proving that the tantra was not actually using coded language, the interpretation of which would be passed down in the lineage of transmission. But he fails to show that the commentators' respective exegeses actually contradict each other. In fact, some of their alleged divergences are merely variations in terminology used to designate synonymous ideas. There is nothing here to suggest that the early lineage of this tantra would not have included an explanation of the deeper meaning of some of its more outrageous narratives (which Davidson seems to think represent mere farce); on the contrary, the narratives seem to indicate that some such deeper level of meaning is intended, even if they also evince a sense of humor and playfulness. Incredibly, Davidson cites the famous antinomian Virupa as one of the institutionally-aligned commentators involved in sanitizing the extreme content of the tantras, right before launching into a section where he holds Virupa up as an example of an antinomian siddha whose songs and hagiography have undergone the same sanitizing process by other commentators! Something fishy is going on here. He cites a "drinking song" of Virupa's and Munidatta's exegesis of the song as a coded teaching on esoteric anatomy. Davidson seems to think this is ridiculous, that the song is only "a humorous acknowledgement that the famous saint preferred to spend time in a bar rather than religious environments." But there are clues within the song that something deeper is going on: he speaks of no "old age or death" (suggesting alchemy, connected to esoteric anatomy), a cryptic reference to entering the tavern by the "tenth door" (what taverns have ten doors, and why not just say "the door"?), and the number 64. I cannot escape the suspicion that Davidson's contention that the song was meant only literally is almost certainly false. More problems: In a section on Naropa, Davidson attempts to show that siddhas cultivated their public image carefully when in reality they diverged from their ascetic reputation. To do this he translates an account of meeting the mahasiddha Naropa by the Tibetan translator Nagtso, who describes Naropa as "corpulent." Based on that, Davidson asserts that Naropa was so fat that he

had to be carried by four men in a palanquin and assisted in getting to the throne that had been arranged for him, on the occasion of a visit by a petty king or vassal. This implies that, far from a humble cremation-ground ascetic, Naropa was a rich, politically involved VIP who was dependent on his servants just to get around--a picture that fits Davidson's thesis quite nicely. But when I checked the Tibetan in the footnotes, I saw that Nagtso does not describe Naropa as fat or corpulent. What he says is that Naropa was "sku bong che wa"--his body was large in size. This COULD mean fat, maybe, but the Tibetan term "bong che" actually just means big or bulky in all dimensions, including height. Arnold Schwarzenegger, for example, is "bong chen po." Give what Nagtso Lotsawa actually wrote, we can conclude that Naropa must have been impressively tall with a big frame, but not that he was fat or incapable of moving around on his own. The obvious explanation of the fact that four men were carrying him to the throne that had been set up for him is that it was because he was being afforded a special honor by the aforementioned petty king (rgyal phran), in accordance with Indian norms of respecting venerable personages. Considering that Davidson has spent extensive time in South Asia, it's amazing that he made the culturally myopic mistake of thinking that Naropa's treatment by a visiting king was utilitarian rather than ceremonial in nature. Even this mistake would seem trivial, however, if it weren't so typical of the way Davidson makes unwarranted leaps of logic and misleading translations to support his argument. In the end, I don't know what to make of Davidson's thesis that Vajrayana Buddhism arose and developed as a response to institutional pressures created by feudalization of Indian politics and the erosion of the monastic patronage system. There is probably some truth in this thesis, but the totality of his argument is rendered shaky by the weakness of its individual steps and examples. It seems like a very partial account of Vajrayana's origins, like the proverbial blind man touching the different parts of the elephant. A particularly conspicuous omission--startling, really, to any student of this path--is a treatment of the yogic and meditative practices of the Vajrayana: what sorts of internal states were they supposed to cause, how are they supposed to transform the practitioner, how successful were Indian practitioners in achieving those states through these practices? These are questions that seem to be at the heart of what the Vajrayana is all about, but Davidson is more concerned with the ornaments that Vajrayana dresses up in. I'll end by quoting a telling passage: "The evident spectrum of behavior stemmed from the fact that siddhas came from a variety of backgrounds and did not have a pan-Indic institutional structure to provide the relatively uniform socialization that the Buddhist monasteries afforded the esoteric monks. Yet some had come from an elite background and were well educated at the highest level, but left the monastery or the capital city to engage in a new career of primitive association, free of the strictures incumbent on the resolutely status

conscious. Others were from the lowest order and came to the life in a desperate move to make sense of the world that continued to unravel as the gods seemingly supported the capricious conduct of men with swords, power, and wealth."So, people became siddhas to start a "new career" to escape the suffocating social expectations (a perennial Indian concern: "log kya kahenge?"), or else as a "desperate move." Nowhere does Davidson entertain the possibility that the overriding concern of the siddhas might have been awakening and liberation. This is in spite of the fact that the literature again and again articulates the ultimate goal of buddhahood, connects tantric spiritual cultivation to the path language of the Mahayana, and expresses its metaphysics in terms of established Buddhist Mahayana ideas of emptiness and dependent arising, gnosis, nonduality, and luminosity. Perhaps the greatest fault of Davidson's work is that it attempts an answer to the "esoteric conundrum" without reference to the expressed soteriological aims of Vajrayana practice or the inner phenomenological states it is supposed to engender.

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