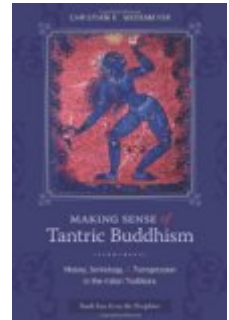


**Christian K. Wedemeyer.** *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism: History, Semiology, and Transgression in the Indian Traditions.* South Asia across the Disciplines Series. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. xx + 313 pp. \$26.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-16241-8.



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**Published on** H-Asia (March, 2015)

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There are often decades between the times when the scholarly community is graced with the appearance of new, qualified studies on Tantric/Esoteric Buddhism. Wedemeyer's new study gives us reason to rejoice. Here is a book that not only engages previous scholarship in a highly critical and refreshing manner but also adds significantly to our combined knowledge by bringing many new insights to the field, not the least his application of semiology as the primary theoretical approach.

After an introduction, Wedemeyer examines historiography in part 1, which comprises three chapters. He begins by taking his reader through the approaches to Tantric Buddhism that have characterized previous scholarship on the topic of the past century or so with a critical focus on its pursuit of origin(s). In the next chapter, the author significantly criticizes the historical discourses on the history of Tantric Buddhism. This entails a stringent and rigorous lesson in modern historiography. Then he tackles the widespread but erroneous views that Tantric Buddhism represents de-

cline, or the surfacing of a primordial undercurrent, its being "medieval," and finally he examines how historical facts have become historical narrative. The last chapter is devoted to an analysis of traditional, historical hermeneutics. It is in large part comparative, drawing as it does on material from a wide range of religious traditions in addition to Buddhism.

Then follows a second part on interpretation, which likewise includes three chapters. One may say that a better and more reasonable understanding of the concept of "transgression," and by wider definition "antinomianism," is the primary concern of the author in his attempt at unraveling the "secrets" of Tantric Buddhism. A short but densely packed chapter (chapter 5) on the practice of Indian Tantric Buddhism may be considered the scientific core of the book. Here Wedemeyer presents his own reading of Tantric Buddhism. First, he deals with the various questions related to the primary sources, in other words, the Tantras. Second, Wedemeyer sets out to interpret the terminology and regulations of the practi-

tioner and to examine how Tantric ritual/practice constitutes an inversion of both formal Mahāyāna and Brahmanism. Third, he discusses the parameters for the Tantric Buddhist rite, including its formal requirements and temporal delineation. In the third and final section of this chapter, he makes a comparison with Śaiva parallels to highlight the core of Tantric Buddhist practices, what he refers to affectively as *The Practice*.

The next chapter places transgression in context. Here the author first discusses the social location of Esoteric/Tantric Buddhism with the overriding purpose of defining who its adepts and practitioners were. In this process, he goes through the various standard models used to conceptualize the Tantric practitioner, including the issue of marginality, the repertoire of Buddhist professionals, and performance as show or rebellion. He ends this chapter with a section in which he muses over the issue as to whether the Tantric Buddhists actually performed all those acts of transgression they have been identified with. In the conclusion of the book, Wedemeyer recapitulates his findings and points to further scholarly forays into the proverbial jungle of Tantric Buddhism.

Generally stated the first part of the book deals with a dismantling of the various views and modes of conception on the constituents of Tantric Buddhism held by previous scholarship, while the entire second part of the book is devoted to a detailed discussion of the role of transgressive practices within Tantric Buddhism from the perspective of semiotic analysis. In a sense one may say that the author has singled the issue of transgression out from among the host of practices of which Tantric Buddhism consists, and made it the conceptual pivot around which his understanding of the tradition evolves. Given that antinomianism and transgression in Buddhist Tantrism vis-à-vis the standard codices for the deportment of bodhisattvas in Mahāyāna is one of the primary factors setting the two apart, it makes

a lot of sense to apply this important issue to elucidate the phenomena of Tantric Buddhism. Even so, one might equally well have taken a more phenomenological approach, such as those that relate to the special role of ritual in Esoteric and Tantric Buddhism, instructional pedagogics, guru-disciple relationship, special worldview of the Buddhist Tantras, etc., as a way of approaching and explaining the topic at hand. After all, transgressive practices are only part of the religious arsenal in the Tantric Buddhist tradition, something that Wedemeyer also points out.

The author's highly critical stance to previous scholarship and popular notions of Tantric Buddhism is refreshing, and it is both engaging and delightful to see that he is not afraid to confront those scholars in the field with whom he disagrees. Even so, it must be noted that virtually everybody who has produced a study on Tantric Buddhism in the past century and more gets their due. Wedemeyer is especially contentious with regard to the now classical work by David Snellgrove (*Indo-Tibetan Buddhism* [1987]) and the more recent study by Ronald D. Davidson (*Indian Esoteric Buddhism* [2002]). It is of course a well-established scholarly strategy to take on those whose research is closest to one's own. Certainly many of Wedemeyer's criticisms are both relevant and insightful, including critiques of the supposedly tribal past of Tantric Buddhism, the reasons for its hedonistic and perverse transgressions, and its origin in Hinduism. However, the author's use of a quite different methodology, namely, the semiological analysis of signs and markers, inevitably makes his critiques appear more radical than they actually are. Nevertheless, in some cases, I feel that his criticism borders on the pedantic, especially with regard to his almost niggling refutations of many of Davidson's ideas, which in my view are nowhere near as unreflective as Wedemeyer makes them out to be.

Given the semiotic approach applied throughout the work, the author naturally devotes consid-

erable space to a rereading of Tantric Buddhist language, especially the question as to whether we should understand the tradition's antinomian discourse concretely or symbolically. Wedemeyer first exposes the literalist position, showing that it has been overstated and over-interpreted in most twentieth-century works on Tantric Buddhism. Next he discusses the symbolic position (including some nativist views) that claims references to transgressive practices were to be understood metaphorically. This endeavor takes Wedemeyer on a lengthy, semiotic venture focusing on the use and application of Tantric language. Finally he concludes that while the literal position certainly cannot be ignored, it should be understood within the special non-dualistic discourse of Tantric Buddhism. He refutes the idea that practitioners of Tantric Buddhism relished ingesting foul substances and indulged in other socially transgressive acts for hedonistic reasons. All the antinomian discourses employed in the tradition were carefully geared toward the attainment of a well-defined soteriological goal.

Wedemeyer's passionate insistence that the Tantric adept was not a tribal rustic, but a generally well-trained and educated person with or without a monastic background, is especially welcome. Moreover, his argument that within the Tantric Buddhist tradition there was not a fundamental demarcation between monk-practitioners and the lay-*siddhas* (adepts) even in terms of residence and ritual function can only be accepted. Indeed, the evident lack of distinction between them in terms of spiritual authority is incidentally also corroborated in the earliest, relevant sources in Chinese. Hence Wedemeyer's use of the term "religious professional" as a cover term for Tantric practitioners is correct.

Wedemeyer also demolishes a time-honored myth concerning the "tribal" or primitive roots of Tantric Buddhism. That was part of Victorian positivist scholarship's attempt to explain transgressive practices apparent in the tradition. Wede-

meyer's deconstruction of this fallacious but persistent view is founded on perceptive analysis and a solid knowledge of the sources. The vast majority of Tantric Buddhist practitioners were highly cultured as well as well versed in classical composition and a wide range of traditional Indian sciences. Wedemeyer shows convincingly that the antinomian discourse (whether symbolic, concrete, or a mix of the two) was a conscious construct on the part of the practitioners themselves, both as a way of setting themselves apart from the hierarchies of mainstream society and its culture and as a way of signaling their own status as non-dualists, as persons of transcendence. Certainly there is nothing remotely tribal, fringe-cultural, or primitive there. As the author eloquently demonstrates, the Tantric Buddhist inversion of mainstream cultural and religious norms reflects a conscious inversion aiming at the attainment of a non-dualistic state in the practitioner.

The issue of the extent of Tantric Buddhism's indebtedness to the larger Hindu tradition and that of Śaiva worship in particular runs through the book. Wedemeyer, however, through a mixture of semiotic analysis and formal comparative methodology, breaks this down into more manageable and also more logical components. He shows that while there were considerable interchanges and transfers between the Śaiva tradition and Tantric Buddhism, the idea that the latter was a sort of Buddhist version of the former is misleading. There are many examples of Tantric Buddhism influencing Hindu Tantra. This observation may appear self-evident to some, perhaps even trivial, but it is in fact a very significant point, the implications of which should radically alter the way in which the roots of Tantric Buddhism have hitherto been conceived. Saivism and Tantric Buddhism as religious phenomena arose through mutual interchanges *simultaneously*.

Wedemeyer's rather thorough dismantling of previously held notions of the intents and meanings of Tantric Buddhism—especially those of

modern scholarship—successfully exposes many of the fallacious concepts and readings that have marred our understanding of Tantric and Esoteric Buddhism up to now. What is even better, he also succeeds in resurrecting it—or rather—bringing it back into “eye level” where it belongs. Therefore, his work does not constitute a complete “undressing” or demystification of the Tantric Buddhist tradition, or in any way renders it simplistic or banal, but it serves the noble purpose of making proper sense of it, sense in the way that it can no longer be seen as representing something primitive, mystic, incomprehensible, and/or inexplicable whether seen in a religious or cultural perspective. Thereby Wedemeyer places the tradition squarely within the medieval Indian context. Tantric Buddhism should no longer be seen as an alien tradition that developed on the fringes of traditional society and religion; in Wedemeyer’s presentation it can be said to have finally regained its proper place in the “cultural *maṇḍala*,” if not as a representative of the mainstream, then at least centrally in the late first millennium world of Indian Buddhism.

On the negative side, there are a few major issues, and a number of minor ones, in Wedemeyer’s otherwise excellent study. While being firmly grounded in formal philology and methodology, it does have a strong postmodernist slant that is evident throughout his discourse. Although one can only sympathize with his rational application of Roland Barthes’s and Pierre Bordieu’s ideas to the topic, his use of Edward Said’s anti-Orientalist discourse as part of his attempt at dismantling earlier Western accounts/comprehensions of Tantric Buddhism as a subaltern form of Buddhism is in my view both overstated and unnecessary. The politically tinged and one-sided anti-Orientalist discourse is really outmoded, and has by now been replaced by post-post-Orientalism, an approach that endeavors to put things in balance rather than exchange one extreme reading with another. One does not correct earlier mistakes by applying new, opposite, or distorted ones as it

happens when one places the marginal in the center and relegates the center to the margins. The perceptive one gets rid of both extremes to arrive at the middle.

The highly theoretical aspect of the book diverts too much attention away from the primary subject under discussion, in other words, Tantric Buddhism per se. This means that at times the author goes a bit overboard in his penchant for showing his approach to be a conceptually more rational tool for dealing with the topic in question. Such tedious lecturing almost suggests that his readers are intellectually deficient, or otherwise entirely unread in postmodern discourse analysis and semiology. However, given that Wedemeyer’s analytical tools, including the meta-language he frequently uses, do require a high degree of introduction and contextualization, one will have to bear with his sometimes pedantic theoretical digressions as well as explicative charts accompanying them.

Here and there the author goes off on a tangent while refuting certain ideas with which he disagrees. One example being his overlong tirade against the concept of “medieval” in regard to classical India, which he sees as a deliberate strategy at denigration by scholars who use this term in their discourses on Indian Buddhism. A period designated “medieval” may simply mean that it is a period in-between, nothing more. It does not automatically follow that the user seeks to relegate a period to a low point in human intellectual and cultural development.

Since Tantric Buddhism as a historical phenomenon should not be dated much earlier than the appearance of the first Buddhist *Tantras* during the seventh century, I am of course not too happy with the use of “Tantric Buddhism” as a common denominator whenever Esoteric Buddhism is referred to (unless of course, it only means *Tantric Buddhism*). I should think that “Esoteric Buddhism” is a better and more appropriate overall term, since it allows for more flexibility

ty and accommodation of the entire tradition of magical practices, including what we may call magic-Mahāyāna and the more unsystematic forms of Esoteric Buddhism that appeared under the Gupta dynasty and led up to the formation of full-blown Tantric Buddhism. The author does indeed use “esoteric Buddhism” in a number of instances but without a proper explanation, something that carries problems of its own as well, especially so since there are a number of Buddhist formations that may well be termed “esoteric” but that are otherwise entirely unrelated to Tantric or Esoteric Buddhism. The problem of terminology in Wedemeyer’s book is further complicated by his use of “Vajrayāna,” supposedly a substitute for Tantric Buddhism (?). In fact, the author’s inconsistent and slightly chaotic use of names or terms meant to signify the same thing subverts the clarity of his discourse. His definitions work best when he distinguishes broadly between “non-dual Tantric Buddhism” and dualistic ditto.

The most serious weakness in Wedemeyer’s study comes from his evident lack of access to primary sources in Chinese. Of course one should not automatically expect that an Indologist would also master classical Chinese, or for that matter be interested in Chinese Buddhism. However, in this particular case, it would have improved the quality of his arguments considerably had he chosen to consult the rich and abundant Indian Buddhist material extant in Chinese translation, especially that of the pre-Tang period, much of which is in fact unique and of the utmost significance for understanding the rise of Esoteric Buddhism, that is, those forms of Buddhist practice that presaged the rise of the full-blown Tantric Buddhist tradition. This material would have provided him with numerous cases useful for his attempt at placing Tantric Buddhism (read: Esoteric Buddhism) within a more coherent historical and therefore also more precise religious and semiotic context. Perhaps it would even have caused him to rethink (and rework) the established temporal framework which requires the absurd notion that Tantric

Buddhism suddenly appeared out of nowhere in India during the seventh century. A critical look at the immediate prehistory of Tantric Buddhism would have been an extra asset to what is otherwise an impressive study.

It should also be said that for a significant and important study such as this, Wedemeyer’s book is slightly lopsided in organization. Most of it is devoted to correcting—or setting right—the fallacies of previous scholarship, a quest he certainly accomplishes with *bravura*, while those parts in which he introduces new material and insights are relatively short and concise. Moreover, one-third of the book consists of notes, a bibliography, and an index. Personally I would have preferred to read more about concrete examples of transgressive practices and ritual in the history of Tantric Buddhism, especially its social structures, than being lectured at length about the formal aspects of historiography and semiotics.

These points of criticism apart, *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism* is easily the most important and useful contribution to the study of Tantric Buddhism in India since Davidson’s *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, a work with which it consistently engages, sometimes overly critically, but in a constructive and useful manner. It is a hard task within the limited space of a review such as this to do Wedemeyer’s book full justice, as it is so rich and dense in its application of theory, analysis, discussions, and information. Nevertheless, I hope to have at least touched on its major points. Needless to say, this book is a weighty contribution to our ongoing engagement with Tantric Buddhism, and one that in so many ways assists us in getting closer to a balanced understanding of this interesting and fascinating religious phenomenon. And finally, this is not a book for the classroom, but one that only the most dedicated scholar-nerd of Tantric Buddhism can truly appreciate and enjoy.

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**Citation:** Henrik Sorensen. Review of Wedemeyer, Christian K. *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism: History, Semiology, and Transgression in the Indian Traditions*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. March, 2015.

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