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*Buddhist Magic: Divination, Healing, and Enchantment Through the Ages*, by Sam van Schaik, is a groundbreaking work, being the first monograph entirely focused on the topic of magic in Buddhism. More specifically, and most usefully, it provides an annotated translation of a Tibetan Buddhist grimoire (spell book) that is adeptly contextualized within the broader intellectual history of Buddhism. The spell book in question is part of the Stein Collection of Dunhuang texts, which van Schaik has spent years researching and cataloguing. Van Schaik explains that he decided to use this text as a basis for writing a history of Buddhist magic, and as the basis for a kind of “untold history” of Buddhism more generally, in the sense that the spell book is exemplary of how Buddhism was practiced “on the ground” (p. 5). The study of magic, van Schaik points out, has unfortunately been long neglected in Buddhist studies due to a variety of historical and cultural prejudices. It is a relief to see it now receive this level of sustained scholarly respect and attention, and, overall, this book provides a solid introduction to the topic. While grimoire studies in European and Christian contexts are better established and more advanced, van Schaik’s book is reminiscent of, and finally provides a good Buddhist parallel to, similar studies of Western grimoires.

Unfortunately however, van Schaik’s work in *Buddhist Magic* falls short in several critical ways, mainly in how he chooses to theoretically approach the subject. The way he defines and explains “magic,” and describes how magical practices have traditionally been used by Buddhists across Asia, ends up inadvertently reinforcing many of the historical scholarly prejudices against magic that he ostensibly is trying to correct. Most of these problems are concentrated in the introduction and first chapter where he tries to define the topic of study. “Magic” is a much-contested term within scholarship generally and van Schaik provides a brief, but useful, introduction to Western intellectual attempts to understand magic, from James Frazer to Émile Durkheim. He ultimately concludes that previous “grand theories” of magic imposed by Western scholars are insuf-
cient for understanding magic, especially within a Buddhist context. He notes that there is no Tibetan or Sanskrit equivalent for the term magic, although there are a number of words such as ‘phrul and las sbyor that at least vaguely communicate the same concept. However, van Schaik is eager to preserve the cross-cultural category of magic and rightly notes the many undeniable structural similarities between Buddhist magic and, in some cases virtually identical, practices in Chinese, Greek, Egyptian, Sumerian, European, and other cultural spheres. As van Schaik correctly points out, magic users across Eurasia, perhaps drawing on the same folkloric stock, used similar ritual techniques for similar ends, and thus the umbrella term “magic” can and should be deployed to discuss them.

Eschewing grand theory, van Schaik ultimately argues for a Wittgensteinian “family resemblance” approach to defining and understanding what magic is in Buddhist cultures. So far, so good. However, van Schaik’s insistence that there is no Buddhist theory of magic is not strictly accurate. While it is true to a degree that there are no specific definitions of magic in Buddhist sources, there have been a number of attempts within Buddhist scriptural and commentarial texts to philosophically understand the significance of magic or magic-like abilities. Many Mahayana sutras, for instance, use magic in a rhetorical or metaphorical sense to help describe the key philosophical concept of Emptiness, and vice versa.[2] Stephan Beyer and Peter Schweiger have discussed in depth how the practice of magic in Tibetan Buddhism specifically is intimately connected with mādhyamaka and yogācāra philosophical understandings of reality.[3] Of course, it could easily be argued that these understandings are merely a post hoc hermeneutic or academic overlay of preexisting folkloric rituals. However, the way van Schaik sidesteps the issue of the implicit Buddhist philosophy of magic throughout the book, as if such a thing does not exist, is frustrating.

In chapter 1, "Magic Across Cultures," van Schaik develops his family resemblance definition of magic by succinctly discussing a variety of magic ritual texts from cultures across Eurasia. He begins with an examination of the rituals found in the Atharvaveda, the earliest textual source for Indian magic and arguably one of the most influential cultural sources for what eventually developed into the Tibetan magic exemplified in the Dunhuang grimoire. Van Schaik then expands his discussion outward from India, progressing from Chinese “spellbinding” rituals to Mesopotamian magic tablets, the Greek Magical Papyri, Jewish magical recipes from Egypt, and finally to later European grimoires. In this survey of world magical texts, van Schaik of course skips over quite a bit of available material (most notably, Islamic sources are barely mentioned, despite a rich magical tradition), but overall, this section provides a very good overview of the subject, especially for readers new to the topic of magic. Also, his main point here is well made, namely that the various texts and types of rituals he summarizes can easily, even naturally, fall into the cross-cultural category of magic. Here he highlights some of the more obvious family resemblances between these different magical sources, noting that they usually, if not always, include summoning or exorcising various types of spirits or demons, use of sacred or specially powerful words or phrases, specialized gestures or movements, and the creation of empowered material objects or substances.

Again, all these points are well made, but the interlocking, threefold definition of magic, specifically Buddhist magic, that van Schaik sets forth at the end of chapter 1 has several significant flaws. In particular, in the first part of his definition, van Schaik argues that Buddhist magic is “this worldly” (p. 40), or what over fifty years ago Melford Spiro called “Apotropaic Buddhism” in contradistinction to “Nibbanic” or soteriological
Buddhism.[4] This is a well-worn theoretical model in Buddhist studies that is recycled in *Buddhist Magic*—the notion that magical practices are radically distinct from, and a sort of accretion upon, the “true” goal of Buddhism, that is, liberation from samsara and the achievement of nirvana. Buddhist attitudes toward magic are, however, much more complicated than this, and the ability to practice magic to help beings more effectively is often treated as a critical, even indispensable, component of the bodhisattva’s soteriological path. To take one of numerous examples, in verse 35 of Atiśa’s famous *Lamp for the Path of Enlightenment*, the great master declares that one cannot ultimately work for the good of beings without developing supernormal (magic) abilities. Luis Gomez has written an excellent article on this topic in which he explains how, from the Mahayana perspective at least, salvational gnosis and magical power are inextricably linked.[5] This is made explicit in many later Tibetan grimoires as well as tantric commentaries where the ability to effectively practice ritual magic is treated as a key aspect of spiritual realization. Van Schaik’s failure to address this aspect of magic in Buddhist thought is the main, and unfortunately critical, flaw of the book.

Chapters 2 through 4 are dedicated to a highly informative and useful textual history of Buddhist magic beginning with early Indian and Gandharan sources and culminating with the Dunhuang grimoire. Chapter 2, “Magic, Medicine, and the Spread of Buddhism,” correctly argues that a variety of textual and archeological evidence indicates that magic was practiced by Buddhists, both monastic and lay, from the very beginning of the tradition and that magical texts and rituals were a key component of Buddhism’s spread throughout Asia. Here van Schaik seems to argue, as others have, that magic is inextricably embedded within the Buddhist worldview. He skillfully discusses several early Buddhist archeological sites at which magical texts have been discovered, including in India, along the Silk Road in China, and in the Gandharan region, where the earliest dated Buddhist texts currently available include magic spells.

Chapter 3, “Sources of Magic in Buddhist Scripture,” deals with the development of magic ritual in somewhat later textual contexts, specifically in Mahayana scriptures. Here van Schaik specifically examines the immensely popular and prevalent, though generally badly understudied, dhāraṇī (spell) literature that pervades the Mahayana tradition. From here he shifts to a discussion of magic in the Buddhist tantras, especially the kriyā tantras, which in many cases are simply collections of magical ritual instructions, which is to say grimoires, after which later texts like the Dunhuang spell book seem to be modeled. Van Schaik also discusses in detail another such later Tibetan spell book, namely the “Ba ri be'u 'bum” collated by Ba ri Lotsāwa in the eleventh century. He concludes the chapter by considering the presence of violent magical ritual, or “black magic,” often intended to kill sometimes whole masses of enemies, in Buddhist spell books like the *Ba ri be'u 'bum* and tantric scriptures like the *Vajrabhairava Tantra*.[6] If anything, van Schaik here seriously understates the prevalence of such practices in tantric sources. He could also have discussed the army repelling magic in the *Hevajra Tantra*, the legendary violent magical exploits of the great tantric sorcerer Rwa Lotsāwa, or Nyingma Mahayoga scriptures, which are often positively brimming with black magic. But here and throughout the book van Schaik displays an obvious discomfort with the presence of “aggressive” magic in Buddhist sources, as well as certain magical rituals that contain human remains as ingredients, and takes an apologetic tone when discussing them. This kind of squeamishness, for lack of a better term, unconsciously replicates the biases of past generations of Buddhist scholars or, perhaps more accurately, is a symptom of it. This is ultimately an artifact of Western observers thinking they know more about what should constitute normative Buddhism than their sources do.
and is something the field generally needs to get over.

Chapter 4, “Magic Users and Materia Magica,” narrows further in on the Dunhuang grimoire and essentially functions as an introduction to this text’s translation in chapter 5. Van Schaik here pays special attention to more ethnographic-oriented discussions of magic specialists in Buddhist cultures as a way of understanding the type of person who likely used the Dunhuang grimoire. Overall, this is an important and highly informative section, but the detour into examining south-east Asian weiksa (wizards), while fascinating in and of itself, is a bit odd in this chapter, which otherwise is focused almost exclusively on a Central Asian, Tibetan context. The weiksa discussion seems like something that would have been more appropriate in the general introduction to the book and is unfortunately a bit of a distraction where it is placed. Chapter 4 also highlights and discusses some of the pharmacological ingredients, as well as certain other materials that are referenced in Buddhist grimoires, such as effigies and divination mirrors. This section is a useful guide for scholars studying Buddhist magical ritual texts, which often make very obscure references to certain ingredients or materials. Van Schaik here also discusses the demonology of Buddhist magic, since many spells are dedicated to exorcising or controlling as familiar spirits various types of nonhuman beings. This section is somewhat less useful though, again mainly due to theoretical framing. While van Schaik correctly argues that the words “demon” and “spirit” are inadequate for defining these types of beings, his decision to use “monster” to classify them is even worse (p. 105). “Monster” has even more negative conceptual baggage than “demon,” not only implying indelible moral corruption, but also a kind of unnaturalness that is completely inappropriate in the Buddhist context. It especially makes little sense to label entities like lha and dri za, which are often conceptualized as benevolent, heavenly beings, as monsters. The term daemon, I and others have argued, is a much more useful and accurate cross-cultural category for these kinds of beings.[7]

Chapter 5, “A Tibetan Book of Spells,” is a succinctly annotated translation of the Dunhuang grimoire. This is arguably the best chapter in the book and should be a standard for how future translations of Buddhist magic texts are done. Van Schaik identifies nine distinct sections in the spell book, grouping spells together based on similarity of method and function, or on what deity they invoke. The nine sections cover different types of magic such as healing, weather control, clairvoyance, and controlling or easing pregnancy. What is especially useful about van Schaik’s introductions to each section of the text is that he highlights similar spells in earlier Buddhist texts that may have functioned as the sources for the Dunhuang grimoire.

Despite some significant framing problems, van Schaik’s book is a good introduction to the topic of Buddhist magic and should be on the reading list of any serious student of the Buddhist tradition. He breaks new ground in the field and hopefully will inspire more research and published translations of Buddhist magical texts.

Notes

[2]. A good example of a Buddhist scripture that does this is the Bhadramāyākāravyākaraṇa Sūtra (The Prophecy for the Magician Bhadra Sutra), translated from the Chinese version in A Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras: Selections from the Mahāratnakūṭa, ed. Garma C. C. Chang (University Park: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1983).


[6] I am using “black” here not as a moral pejorative but in an emic technical sense. In tantric Buddhist hermeneutics, magical rituals for different purposes are given specific “color codes,” and aggressive magic is coded black.


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