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“Proto–Tantric” Elements in The Gandavyūha-sūtra*

Although a Māhāyana sūtra, the Gandavyūha clearly contains a number of elements that seem to presage the “tantric” phase in Indian Buddhism. In particular, the sūtra contains four components worthy of note: elaborate scenes detailing what can best be understood as mandalas, a soteriology based on absolute faith in the spiritual guides, a strong insinuation of organisational esotericism, and the hint of sexual yoga. After briefly summarising some recent scholarship on the Gandavyūha, the author addresses each of the four “proto-tantric” components in detail. Following this, the author concludes with the suggestion that despite the inherent difficulties in developing a relative chronology of Indian Buddhist literature, close readings such as provided in this article may be useful in generating data sets, which can then be used to relate Indian Buddhist texts to each other.

The Gandavyūha-sūtra is a Mahāyāna text composed sometime in the first several centuries CE, which relates the tale of a young layman’s quest for enlightenment in ancient India during the time of the Buddha. The narrative begins with an elaborate introduction glorifying the historical Buddha Śākyamuni as the resplendent “Vairocana.” After this, the story shifts to an encounter between the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī and Sudhana (“Good Wealth”), the son of a merchant-banker from the city of Dhanyakara. Mañjuśrī encour-

1. Tibetan: nor bzangs; Chinese: 善財童子.

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* Portions of this article appear in my book, Power, Wealth and Women in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Gandavyūha-sūtra (London: Routledge, 2008). I would like to thank Michael Radich and the anonymous reviewers of an earlier draft of this paper for their useful comments and criticisms.
ages the young hero to seek out spiritual guides (“good friends”) in order to learn how to carry out the course of conduct of a bodhisattva and obtain omniscience. After travelling far and wide across India visiting fifty-two of these guides, Sudhana has his final visionary experience of and merges with the supreme bodhisattva Samantabhadra (“Universal Good”).

The textual history of the Gandavyūha is complex, but a few words on the Chinese translations are necessary to provide some historical context for the sutra. We find our earliest datable evidence of the Gandavyūha in the Chinese catalogues of the Buddhist canon composed in the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries CE. According to these catalogues, the monk Shengjian first translated the Gandavyūha into Chinese (T 294) sometime between 388 and 408 CE. Compared to the extant Sanskrit text, this is only a partial translation. The first complete Chinese translation of the Gandavyūha soon followed in 420. Entitled the “Chapter on the Entrance into the Dharma Realm” (T 278), it was translated by Buddhabhadra and his team of translators as the final chapter of the immense Avatamsaka-sūtra. The Khotanese monk Śīksānanda and his team translated the Avatamsaka once more into Chinese between 695 and 699 (T 279). The translation of the Gandavyūha within this work is substantially the same as the earlier one. The fourth and final Chinese translation (T 293) of the Gandavyūha was completed in 798 by the Kashmiri monk, Prajñā. Called “The Vow Concerning the Course of Conduct of Samantabhadra and the Entry into the Range of the Inconceivable Liberation,” it is based on an

4. Tibetan: kun tu bzang po; Chinese: 善知識.
6. The following information on the Chinese sources and translations is from L. O. Gómez, “Selected Verses from the Gandavyūha: Text, Critical Apparatus and Translation,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1967), xxiii–xxix. The catalogues consulted by Gómez are themselves part of the Chinese Buddhist canon and are numbered according to the volume in the modern Japanese edition of the Chinese Canon, Taisho shinshu daizōkyo (abbreviated henceforth as “T”). The volumes containing the catalogues are T 2145–49, 2151, 2153–54, and 2157.
7. In his dissertation, Gómez (p. xxiv) indicates four ways in which this text differs from the Sanskrit. First, it lacks the verses from the introductory section (the Nidāna-parivarta) and the first nine good friends found in the Sanskrit text. Second, instead of the twenty-seventh kalyāṇamitra, the householder Vēṣṭhila, this translation has a bodhisattva named Pu chiao kao kuei ie wang. Third, the following section describing Sudhana’s encounter with the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara lacks the twenty-two verses found in the Sanskrit text. Finally, this translation ends abruptly after the thirty-fourth good friend, the night goddess Pramuditayanayanagadhirocanā.
8. The Chinese title Ru fajie pin 人法界品 corresponds to the Sanskrit *Dharmadhātu-praveśanaparivarta.
9. This version contains the Vēṣṭhila section but without its two final verses, and the Avalokiteśvara section still lacks its verses. Also missing are the final sixty-two verses of the Gandavyūha found in the section of Sudhana’s encounter with the bodhisattva Samantabhadra. These verses collectively known as the Bhadracarī are found in all extant Sanskrit manuscripts, at the end of the final Chinese translation (T 293) and as an independent text twice in the Chinese Buddhist canon (T 296 and 297). In Buddhabhadra’s translation, instead of the Bhadracarī, the Gandavyūha ends with verses of praise to “all bodhisattvas in the universe” (see Gómez, xxvi).
10. This translation is known as the “Huayan in 80 fascicles,” in order to distinguish it from the Buddhabhadra’s translation in sixty fascicles.
11. Three important exceptions are that the final two verses of the Vēṣṭhila section have been added, the name of Avalokiteśvara’s mountain has changed from *Prabha to Potalaka, and a short verse greeting has been added in the final section (T 279, 442b–c). See Gómez, xxvi–xxvii.
12. Ch. Ru bukeiyi jietuo jingjie Puxian xing yuan 入不思議解脫境界普賢行願 (Skt *Ačintyavimokṣa-gocara-praveśanā-samantabhadracarī-prajñā).
expanded and no longer extant Sanskrit version belonging to the king of Orissa, who sent his personal copy to China as a gift to the Emperor in 795. There are a number of passages in this translation not found in any extant Sanskrit source.

A brief survey of the Chinese translations demonstrates a general trend towards an expansion of the *Gandavyūha* over time. Prajñā’s translation contains passages that are not found in the earlier Chinese translations. Some of these are found in the extant Sanskrit manuscript tradition and some are not found in any other version. This evidence suggests that the surviving Sanskrit recension may have been compiled sometime between the completion of Śikṣānanda’s translation (699 CE) and Prajñā’s translation (798 CE). As Gómez has demonstrated, however, except for a few passages (not relevant to the current discussion), the fifth-century translation by Buddhabhadra (T 278) contains substantially the same content as Śikṣānanda’s seventh-century translation (T 279), the surviving Sanskrit recension, and the Tibetan translation (ca ninth century). Therefore, in the following pages, I translate from the Sanskrit edition of the *Gandavyūha* edited by P. L. Vaidya and provide page references to the relevant sections in the Sanskrit edition of D. T. Suzuki and H. Idzumi, the Tibetan translation, Buddhabhadra’s Chinese translation (T 278), and Thomas Cleary’s translation of Śikṣānanda’s Chinese translation (T 279).

When we look to the content of the sūtra, we see that a number of elements in the *Gandavyūha* appear to represent a textual link between Mahāyāna Buddhism and Buddhist tantra. This idea is not a new one. Over twenty years ago, Dan Martin wrote, “Clearly the *Gandavyūha* and the rest of the *Avatamsaka* were not yet tantra, but they certainly could have provided inspiration.” Here, Martin is specifically looking at a connection between these texts and the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*. Moreover, in the same work, Martin notes that,

13. The colophon to the Chinese translation contains a letter from the king to the emperor (see T 293.848b–c; and Gómez 1967; xxvii).
17. P. L. Vaidya (ed.), *Gandavyūhasūtra* (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute, 1960). Henceforth, this edition will be abbreviated as “V.”
19. Citations from the Tibetan translation are from the Derge Kangjur version in the edition published as *The Tibetan Triptika: Taipei Edition, Volume VII. bKa’ ’gyur* (Taiwan: SMC Publishing Inc. 1991). References to the Derge are abbreviated with “D” followed by the Tibetan volume (“ga” or “a” of the Phal po che), folio number (Tibetan numbering system), r or v (for “recto” or “verso”), and the line number.
The Japanese scholars have already demonstrated the importance of the *Gandavyūha* as a source of inspiration for the most important tantras of the Shingon School, the *Vairocanābhisambodhi Sūtra* and the *Tattvasamgraha*.22

In the same year as Martin’s writing, Charles Orzech pointed out that the central figure of the *Mahāvairocanābhisambodhi Sūtra* (*Mahāvairocana Sūtra*), the Buddha Vairocana, also functions as the principal figure in two Mahāyāna sūtras — the *Gandavyūha* and the *Dasabhūmika*, both of which are contained in the *Avatamsaka*.23 In fact, Vairocana, the Buddha Śākyamuni in his glorified cosmic aspect, is the central figure of the entire *Avatamsaka*. More recently, Anthony Tribe has stated that the Caryā tantras, such as the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*, “took the luminous, translucent, magical world of the *Gandavyūha Sūtra* as the measure for how awakened cognition would perceive the world.”24 Tribe explains,

The world of the *Gandavyūha Sūtra* can be transformed at will by the mental acts of Buddhas and advanced bodhisattvas. It provides an eminently suitable perspective for the tantric practitioner, who from this point [of the Caryā tantras] onwards is increasingly concerned to transform, within the context of visualisation meditation, the appearance (and hence the reality) of him- or herself and the external world.25

Martin, Orzech and Tribe, while recognising the possible connection between the *Gandavyūha* and these tantric texts in general terms, do not provide much in the way of details. Finally, in a recent discussion, David McMahan addresses more specific possible connections between the *Gandavyūha* and Buddhist tantra.26 McMahan argues that the visual metaphor and imagery in the *Gandavyūha* and other Mahāyāna sources may have been used as prototypes for later tantric rituals. He writes,

From the similarity between tantric sādhana-s and such visionary episodes in the *Gandavyūha* and other Mahayana sūtras, I am led to believe that such episodes are not only a precedent to, but also a prototype of, tantric manḍala-s and visualisations, and that these practices are ritualisations of encounters such as those in the *Gandavyūha*.27

Following the lead of these scholars, I will in what follows, look more closely at four aspects of the *Gandavyūha* that appear to share an affinity to Buddhist tantras: two descriptive scenes highly suggestive of manḍalas, the sūtra’s claim that the authority of the spiritual guides (kalyāṇamitra) is absolute, an intimation of esotericism, and an allusion to sexual yoga.

22. Martin, 190. Unfortunately, Martin does not provide a reference to the Japanese scholarship on this relationship.
Mandalas
The *Gandavyūha* contains numerous passages that depict visually elaborate scenes detailing what can best be understood as *mandalas* (sacred diagrams; literally “circles”). Although there is no mention of using these descriptions as objects of visualisation meditation, their detailed systematic arrangement (as McMahan has suggested) may have inspired the *mandalas* used in Buddhist tantric practice. While McMahan looked specifically at three scenes in the *Gandavyūha* — Vairocana’s initial transformation of his peaked dwelling and Jeta Grove, Sudhana’s entrance into Maitreya’s peaked dwelling, and Sudhana’s final encounter with Samantabhadra — I will use two other examples overlooked by McMahan that add substantial evidence to his general thesis. The first is the gathering of the bodhisattvas occurring after Vairocana’s transformation, and another is from Sudhana’s encounters with the Night Goddesses (V 171–284).

In the opening scene of the *Gandavyūha*, the Buddha Vairocana enters a trance state (*samādhi*) called the “Lion’s Yawn” (*simhavijrmbhita*) that transforms his peaked dwelling (*kutagara*) and the surrounding Jeta Grove into an infinitely vast space adorned with countless jewels. Although this is an oft-quoted passage from the text,28 what most commentators fail to discuss is the gathering of bodhisattvas around Vairocana after this miraculous transformation takes place. Having seen the Buddha’s miracle, bodhisattvas from distant buddha lands approach, pay their respects, and set up various types of jewelled *kutagara*. The narration of this event is deliberate and highly structured.29 First, a bodhisattva from the east named *Vairocanapranidhanabhiraspabhā* from the buddha land of the Tathāgata30 named Vairocanasrītejorāja, gains permission from that Buddha to leave, approaches with a large retinue of bodhisattvas, pays his respects, and sets up jewelled *kutāgāras*. The narration of this event is deliberate and highly structured.29 Then, a bodhisattva named *Duryodhanavīryavegarāja* comes from the south with his retinue of bodhisattvas, pays his respects, and sets up jewelled dwellings to the south (V 6.16–28). This pattern continues with bodhisattvas arriving in the following order: west, north, northeast, southeast, southwest, northwest, from below and then above (V 7.13–12.5). The specific pattern and order of arrangement thematise space by representing this gathering as a type of array (*vyūha*) in the form of a three-dimensional *mandala* constructed with Vairocana at the centre.

The next example occurs when Sudhana meets with eight Night Goddesses (*rātrī-devatā*), who are located at the site of the Buddha’s enlightenment

29. For the following section in the other Sanskrit edition, see SI 2–23. For the corresponding section in Tibetan translation, see the D ga280v–ga287r. For Buddhabhadra translation, see T 278.676a6–680c12. For an English translation of Sikṣānanda’s Chinese translation (T 279), see Cleary, 1139–45.
30. “Tathāgata” means literally “(He who has) Gone Thus.” It is a common epithet for buddhas.
When we examine the locations of the night goddesses, an intriguing pattern emerges. Sudhana sees the first night goddess, Vāsantī, “... above the great city of Kalipavastu on a platform in the sky within a peaked dwelling of multi-coloured matchless jewels, seated on a lion-throne of great gems within a lotus (smelling) of all the finest fragrances ...”32 At the conclusion of this visit, the goddess sends Sudhana to see Samantagambhīraśrīvimalaprabhā at the Buddha’s site of enlightenment (V 180.28–30). This goddess tells our hero to see Pramuditayanajagadvirocanā right next to her on the right at Vairocana’s site of enlightenment.33 Pramuditayanajagadvirocanā is said to sit “upon a lion-throne in a flower within the Lord’s assembly-\textit{mandala}.”34 She instructs Sudhana to go to the next goddess who sits right next to her in “the assembly-\textit{mandala} of the Tathāgata.”35 Similar statements are made for the next two goddesses,36 who are said to be “at the base of the feet of the Lord Vairocana,”37 and “near the Lord” (bhagavato sakāsām) (V 264.26).

These statements indicate a circular, symmetric pattern around a central point resembling a \textit{mandala}. The goddesses themselves indicate this with references to the “assembly-\textit{mandala}” (\textit{parṣan-\textit{mandala}}) of the Lord (bhagavān) or Tathāgata. Sudhana’s encounter with the first goddess in the sky above Kapilavastu is his entry point into this three-dimensional \textit{mandala} around the bodhimandā. The seven goddesses following are positioned next to each other, each to the other’s right, so that the hero performs a circumambulation (\textit{pradakṣīna}) around the site of the Buddha’s enlightenment. The numeral eight suggests that each goddess faces a primary or secondary direction (north, northeast, east, southeast, south, etc.) around the bodhimandā. Statements that the goddesses are “at the base of the feet of the Lord Vairocana” and “near the Lord” demonstrate the Buddhist belief that the Buddha is in some sense always present at the site of his enlightenment.

Here we see a striking parallel between the manner in which the night goddesses surround the Buddha and the way that yoginīs and goddesses encircle buddhas on tantric \textit{mandalas}.38 An example of the connection between the \textit{Ganḍavyūha} and this type of \textit{mandalic} arrangement is graphically illustrated at the Buddhist monastery complex of Tabo in western Tibet. Along the walls of the main assembly hall at Tabo is a continuous painted frieze depicting

\begin{footnotesize}
31. For the corresponding sections, see SI 223–364; D a79v–a201r; T 278.720a2–751a1; and Cleary, 1284–1382.
32. ... \textit{kapiḷavastuno mahānagarasyordhvam gaganatale vicitrāṅgupamamanīkātāgāre sarvavaragandhapadnagarbhamaḥrathasinhāsane nisāṇnām} (V 171.13–14).
33. ... iyam ihave mamānantaram vairocanabodhimande pradakṣiṇena pramuditayanajagadvirocanā nāma rātridevātā pratīvāsati (V 185.14–15).
34. ... bhagavatāh parṣamandale puspagarbhāsinīhāsanānisāṇām ... (V 180.26–27).
35. tathāgataparṣamandalasamānantaram (V 202.20).
37. ... bhagavato vairocanasya pādamūle ... (V 239.30).
38. There are numerous examples of similar formations in tantric literature. Hevajra and Nairātmyā surrounded by eight yoginīs is one example from the \textit{Hevajra Tantra}. For text and translation of this important tantra, see David Snellgrove, \textit{Hevajra Tantra}, 2 volumes (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1959). Another example is Heruka and Vajravarahi guarded by eight fierce goddesses in the \textit{Cokrasamvara Tantra}. See David Gray, \textit{Cokrasamvara Tantra: A Study and Annotated Translation} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
\end{footnotesize}
scenes from the *Gandavyūha* of Sudhana’s visits to the various spiritual guides. Next to these painted units are inscriptive panels containing redacted versions of these visits from a Tibetan translation of the *Gandavyūha*.39 Also preserved at Tabo is a complete stucco set of the main divinities of the Vajradhātu mandala.40 This *mandala* contains Vairocana Buddha in the centre surrounded by four directional Buddhas, each flanked by four attendant bodhisattvas, followed by eight goddesses and four guardian deities.41 Thus, at Tabo we find a graphic depiction of the *Gandavyūha*’s narrative located in the same space as a three-dimensional *mandala* of the Buddha Vairocana surrounded by eight goddesses, in a manner strikingly similar to the description of Vairocana’s *bodhimaṇḍa* within the *Gandavyūha*-sūtra.

**Authority**

Another “proto-tantric” aspect we find in the *Gandavyūha* is a soteriology based on absolute faith in the spiritual guides, or “Good Friends” (*kalyāṇamitra*). This devotional attitude intimates the guru adoration found in tantric sources. Early on in the *Gandavyūha*, Mañjuśrī declares to Sudhana that worshipping the good friends is the natural course (*nisyanda*) of action for developing omniscience:

> Indeed, Son of Good Family, for the perfection of omniscience this is the beginning and natural course — namely the visiting, serving and worshipping of the good friends. Therefore, Son of Good Family, you should tirelessly venerate the good friends.

We find further evidence of the centrality of the good friends later in the text. Just prior to Sudhana’s encounter with Maitreya, the boy and girl, Śrīsambhava and Śrīmatī, make the most emphatic statements in the *Gandavyūha* concerning devotion to the *kalyāṇamitrās* as a means to attain enlightenment. After telling Sudhana that he should go to the bodhisattva Maitreya who is a “good friend that will water all your roots of merit and cause them to grow,”43 Śrīsambhava and Śrīmatī enter into a protracted discourse on the *kalyāṇamitrās*. First, the two state that one should never tire of seeking good friends, nor resist their advice, nor doubt their instructions (V 363.19–25). Next, the pair provides an extensive list of reasons why. Some of these are: “the bodhisattvas’ hearing about the course of conduct of all bodhisattvas depends

39. For a detailed description, see E. Steinkellner. For a more recent study, see Laxman S. Thakur, *Visualizing a Buddhist Sutra: Text and Figure in Himalayan Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
40. A description of the *mandala* can be found in the *Tattvasamgraha Tantra*. See D. A. Todaro, “An Annotated Translation of the *Tattvasamgraha*” (PhD, Colombia University, 1985).
42. *esa hi kulaputra ādiḥ esa nisyandah sarvaṣaṣṭāparinispattaye yad uṣa kalyāṇāmitrānām sevanam bhajanam paruyāsakanam, tasmat tarhi kulaputra aparikhiṇena te bhavitavyam kalyāṇāmitraparyupāsanatāyai* (V 46.12–15). Cf. ŚI 56.24–57.3; D ga322v.5–323r.1; T 278.689c9–16; Cleary, 1178.
43. *sa te... kalyāṇamitro > bhisyandaiasyati sarvakaśalamūlāṇī vivardhayaiṣyati* (V 361.16–17).
on the good friends,”44 “the practices of the teachings of all bodhisattvas depend on the good friends,”45 “the lights of knowledge of all bodhisattvas are produced by the good friends,”46 “the enlightenment of all buddhas is obtained through propitiating the good friends,”47 “bodhisattvas supported by the good friends do not fall into evil destinies,”48 and “bodhisattvas embraced by good friends do not turn away from the Mahāyāna.”49

This list reinforces Mañjuśrī’s statements and clarifies the Gandavyuha’s position on the kalyāṇamitra(s). Here we learn that practising the course of conduct of the bodhisattvas (bodhisattvacaryā) depends on the good friends. The statements about “practices” (pratipatti) and “lights of knowledge” (jñānaloka) emphasise the need for bodhisattvas to rely upon the kalyāṇamitra(s). Any doubt that the Gandavyuha presents a devotional path to enlightenment is immediately dispelled by the declaration that “the enlightenment of all buddhas is obtained through propitiating the good friends.”

Because the spiritual guides are the primary source of enlightenment, their authority is absolute and their instructions are not to be questioned. The Gandavyuha possesses two striking examples of this. When Sudhana visits with the Brahman Jayosmayatana (V 90–95), the Brahman tells our hero to throw himself into a raging fire. Sudhana has his doubts, but then tens of thousands of gods appear and declare the good qualities of the Brahman. After hearing this barrage of support, Sudhana is overjoyed, realises that Jayosmayatana is a “true good friend” (bhūta-kalyāṇamitra), bows at his feet and says, “Noble One, I confess my sin — I rejected the authority (ājñā) of the good friend.”50 Immediately after this statement, Jayosmayatana recites the following verse:

A bodhisattva who successfully makes his mind one with his gurus, follows instructions and does not doubt;
From this all his aims are also successful, and he skilfully awakens to the knowledge of the buddhas under the tree of enlightenment.51

This verse highlights the moral of this episode: a bodhisattva “should not doubt” (na kāṅkṣaye) the instructions of his teachers. In other words, the spiritual authority of the good friends is absolute and should be obeyed without hesitation.52

44. kalyāṇāmitrādhīnāḥ... bodhisattvānām sarvabodhisattvacaryāśrīravah (V 363.26).
45. kalyāṇāmitra pratipattidhīh sarvabodhisattvasikṣāpratipattayah (V 363.30).
46. kalyāṇāmitrasmajjantāḥ sarvabodhisattvajñānālokāḥ (V 364.4).
47. kalyāṇāmitrādhana pratipattidhī sarvabuddhabodhīh (V 364.10–11).
48. kalyāṇāmitrādhdhanāmitrādīnāḥ... bodhisattvā na patantā durattasī (V 364.16).
49. kalyāṇāmitra prayājghītā bodhisattvā na nivartante mahāyānā (V 364.17).
50. atyayam atyayato desayam ārya yo hāṃ kalyāṇāmitrajñānam pratīvāhayāmī (V 94.17–18).
51. pradaksinam ya bodhisattva ānuśasti kurvati / na kāṅkṣaye guruhya ekadhā shhatita mānasam // tato / tato / pradaksinam ca buddhajñānām bodhimūlī buddhaye // (V 94.19–22). Cf. SI 122.11–14; D ga387r.4–5; T 278.702a10–13; Cleary, 1222.
52. Sudhana, reassured by the divinities, then climbs the mountain path and jumps into the fire. While falling, he attains a trance (saṃādhi) of the bodhisattvas called “Well Established” (su-pratīṣṭhitā), and upon touching the fire, attains another saṃādhi called “The Supernatural Knowledge of Bliss within Cessation” (prāśama-sukhābhijñā) (V 94.23–25). Thus, the advice to not doubt the good friends is reinforced in the narrative by these beneficial results.

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Sudhana doubts his spiritual guide a second time when he meets the King Anala. Our hero finds the King seated on a wondrous jewelled throne surrounded by ten thousand executioners (kāraṇā-puruṣa) resembling the guardians of hell (naraka-pāla), armed with various weapons, carrying out horrific punishments upon criminals. The bodies are heaped upon each other, a torrent of blood flows from them, and the screams of those who are mutilated and killed are as terrifying as the cries of the tortured in the great Naraka hell (V 121.6–26). After witnessing this horrific slaughter, Sudhana thinks:

... this King Anala is deprived of the good Dharma, a doer of tremendously wicked deeds, a desirer of sin, one practised at the injury of other beings’ lives, entirely devoted to wounding other beings, indifferent to other beings, and is striving for descent into the evil destinies. How then am I to hear the course of conduct of a bodhisattva from him?54

While our hero is engaged in this thought, divinities appear on a platform in the sky above him and say, “Son of Good Family, do you not remember the instruction of the good friend, the Sage Jayosmayatana?”55 When Sudhana says that he remembers, the divinities tell him:

Son of Good Family, you must not give rise to doubt concerning the instructions of the good friends. The good friends rightly guide (beings); they do not lead them astray. For, Son of Good Family, the knowledge of the conduct of bodhisattvas’ skilful means is inconceivable.56

On this occasion, the divinities invoke the Mahāyāna notion of expedient means (upāya-kausālya). Because the methods of bodhisattvas are inconceivable, Sudhana should not question the good friends. Unquestioned obedience to the kalyāṇamitrās is required because one only attains omniscience through serving and worshipping these spiritual guides.57

The Gandavyūha’s emphasis on the absolute authority of the good friends goes beyond the reverence found for one’s spiritual guide in mainstream

53. This encounter may be found in Buddhhabhadra’s translation at T 278.708a27–709a4.
54. ayam ca analo rāja kuśaladharmanarājaratino mahāsāvādayakarmakāri pradeśādhamasamkāpah parasaśattvājīvitopadrahāya pratipannah parasāttvātīnäntapatarih paralokkakirapekso durgatiprapātābhimbhah śat kuto śvād bodhisattvacaryāsavo bharīyaśaiti? (V 121.27–32). Cf. Sl 157.20–26; D a24v.6–25r.2; Cleary, 1244.
55. upari gaganatale devata ity evam ārocaya asuh — na smarasi kulaputra jayosmaya asya tāhā ratseh k l anamir anusasa m iti? (V 122.1–2). Notice that the divinities refer to Jayosmayatana as a “sage” (ṛṣi) and not a “brahman” (brahmaṇa) as he is in his own section (V 90–95). There seems to be some confusion with regard to title between the Brahman Jayosmayatana and the kalyāṇamitra directly before him, the Sage Bhismottaranirghosa. But it is clear from the context of this section that the gods are referring to Jayosmayatana.
56. mā tvam kulaµputrā, kalyāṇamitrānusāsanīm viückitsām utpādaya. savyak samena kalyāṇamitrāṇi praṇayantī na viśameta. acintyam hi kulaµputra bodhisattvānām upāyakausālayacaryāṇāma (V 122.3–5). Cf. Sl 158.4–7; D a25r.3–5; Cleary, 1244.
57. As it turns out, Anala was only creating the illusion that criminals were being executed in order to scare his citizens into behaving properly; actually, no one was harmed (see V 123).
Buddhism and many Mahāyāna sources. Snellgrove summarises well the general Mahāyāna position when he writes:

Here the advantages of having “good friends” (kalyāṇamitra) as opposed to evil ones (pāpamitra) is certainly urged, and to have a good friend as one’s teacher is highly recommended and it is proper that one should trust him, but for all his virtues he is but a means toward final enlightenment.

This view Snellgrove contrasts with the tantric notion when he states, “...one injunction which can never be transgressed as it is the basis of all tantric practice, namely that of the absolute necessity of total devotion to one’s chosen teacher or master (Sanskrit: guru; Tibetan: lama).” I would argue that the anecdotes in the Gaṇḍavyūha of Sudhana’s doubting the Brahman and the King provide us with textual evidence of a Mahāyāna view of spiritual guides that prefigures the emphasis placed on the absolute obedience to one’s guru as found in tantric sources. By providing occasions for Sudhana to question the spiritual authority of the good friends, the narrator of the story dramatically illustrates to his target audience the importance of this type of complete submission to spiritual authority.

Esotericism and Sexual Yoga

The third and fourth “proto-tantric” aspects of the Gaṇḍavyūha I would like to mention are the suggestions of both esotericism and sexual yoga that occur during Sudhana’s meeting with the courtesan Vasumitrā. When Sudhana arrives in Ratnavyūha in the country of Durga, he encounters two types of people. The first, who do not know Vasumitrā’s virtues (guna) or the scope (gocara) of her knowledge, think the following when they meet Sudhana:

One whose senses are calm and restrained in this way, who is thoughtful in this way, who is composed in this way, whose mind is not frustrated in this way, whose gaze is kept down in this way, whose thoughts are not overcome by sensations in this way, who is grasping at the causeless, whose eye has rejected all forms in this way, whose mind is not agitated, whose behaviour is profound, who is handsome, whose manner

58. The concept of kalyāṇamitra (Pāli: kalyāṇamittata) within the Buddhist tradition is widespread. In the article “Kalyāṇamitta and Kalyāṇamittata” (Journal of the Pali Text Society 21 [1987]: 50–72), Steve Collins discusses the various meanings of these terms found in Pāli literature. For kalyāṇamitta, Collins distinguishes three overlapping levels of meaning in the Pāli sources: (1) a general sense “in which trustworthiness, reciprocity and perhaps a consequent mutual regard are extolled,” (2) a “Buddhised” level where such sentiments are set within the framework of Buddhist morality, and (3) a specifically Buddhist sense when it is applied “to someone who helps another on the Buddhist Path.”


60. David Snellgrove, Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Indian Buddhists & Their Tibetan Successors, 2 volumes (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), 177.

61. David Snellgrove, Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, 176.

62. For Buddhabhadra’s translation of this section, see T 278.716c9–717b27.
is like the ocean, whose mind is imperturbable and not downcast — what would this one do with the lady Vasumitrā? For such people do not delight in passion, nor are their minds perverted (viparyastā). The conception of foul things does not course within such people. Such people are not slaves to desire. Such people are not in the power of women. Such people do not course in the range (gocara) of the Evil One (māra). Such people do not inhabit the domain (viṣṇaya) of the Evil One. Such people do not sink into the mud of desire. Such people are not bound by the snares of the Evil One. They are not doers of what should not be done.\textsuperscript{63}

But those who know of the excellence (viṣeṣa) of her virtues and the scope of her knowledge say to the young hero:

Very Good, Son of Good Family! You, who think that the lady Vasumitrā should be questioned, have made good gains! Surely you desire buddhahood! Surely you desire to make yourself into a resource for all beings! Surely you desire to extricate the spear of passion for all beings! Surely you desire to produce beneficial cognition!\textsuperscript{64}

These two groups may be divided into those who are spiritually “in the know” and those who are not. The less spiritually developed fail to realise the advanced attainments of Vasumitrā, and adhere to a traditional and widespread (exoteric) view of Buddhist morality. The second group’s attitude expresses the superior opinion that due to her spiritual attainments, the courtesan’s occupation does not exclude her from being a spiritual guide to Sudhana. This distinction between an outside group maintaining a conventional view of Buddhist morality, and an inside group with a more profound religious insight is a defining feature of esoteric Buddhism. Although the Gandavyūha does not make reference to distinctively tantric practices such as secret initiations or “consecrations” (abhiseka), and the undertaking of special vows (samvara/samaya/vrata), these types of practices are predicated upon the type of “insider/outside” distinction, or organisational esotericism,\textsuperscript{65} that the Gandavyūha depicts in Sudhana’s encounter with Vasumitrā. The connection between the Gandavyūha and tantric practice is further strengthened by Vasumitrā’s use of sexual contact as a means of teaching Dharma.

When our hero approaches Vasumitrā’s house, he sees that it and the surroundings are made of jewels, gold, diamonds, etc. \ldots (V 154.22–155.3).

\textsuperscript{63} kim asya evam śāntadāṇḍendriyaśya evam samprajāṇasya evam abhrāntasya evam avikṣiptamānasasya evam yugamātrapreksinah evam vedanābhīr aparyādattatticittasya evam animittagsṛhamah sarvarūpagasēṣu utkṣiptacaksuṣah evam avyagramānasasya gambhiraceṣṭāyābhirūpasya sāgarakalpasya aksobhyānavalīnicittasya vasumitrāyā bhāgavatyā kāryaṁ? na hitārā rāgaraṅga bhavanti, na viparyastaśicitthā. nedsrānām aṣubhasamjñā samudācarati. nedsrāh kāmadūsā bhavanti. nedsrāh strīvasaṅga bhavanti. nedsrā mārgogacare caranti. nedsrā mārgavasayam nīsevante. nedsrāh kāmane samādant. nedsrā mārgopāśār badhyante: nākāryakārīna bhavanti (V 154.10–17). Cf. SI 202.1–9; D a62v.1–5; T 278.09.716c17–24; Cleary, 1270–71.

\textsuperscript{64} sadhū sadhū kāluputra, sulabhās te lābhāḥ, yas tvam vasumitrām bhāgavatīn pariprasātvāṃ manyaye. niyamaṇa tvam buddhatvam prārthitaye. niyamaṇa tvam sarvasattvapraṇirśāram ātmānām kartukāmah. niyamaṇa tvam sarvasattvānām rāgasālamuddhakūkāmah. niyamaṇa tvam subhasamjñānām vikaritukāmah (V 154.18–20). Cf. SI 202.10–14; D a62v.6–7; T 278.09.716c26–28; Cleary, 1271.

The courtesan is described as extremely beautiful, and is said to be skilled in languages, the arts and sciences, and the means (upāya) of bodhisattvas. Vasumitrā tells Sudhana that she has attained a liberation known as “Ultimate Dispassion” (vīrāga kotigata) (V 155.20). Through it she is able to assume the female form of any being to teach them the Dharma and lead the lustful to a state of dispassion (V 155.20–24). Those that come to her attain this state through various means: seeing her, talking to her, holding her hand, dwelling with her, embracing (ālingana) her, and kissing (paricumbana) her (V 155.26–156.6).

A defining feature of tantric Buddhist “higher” consecrations is the sexual copulation of the male practitioner with a female consort. Originally (as in Hindu tantra), ritualised sex appears to have occurred in order to generate sexual fluids that were then sacramentally ingested; only later did these practices take on a more yogic significance. Needless to say, ritual sex was only considered a part of the path for the spiritually advanced and initiated. In the Gaṇḍavyūha’s account of Vasumitrā, we find a courtesan who is a spiritual guide that leads beings to dispassion through embraces and kisses. Also, access to such teachings is only available for those advanced enough to recognise Vasumitrā’s spiritual attainments. Thus, we find combined in this episode of the Gaṇḍavyūha two elements that appear to foreshadow both the esotericism and sexual practices often associated with Buddhist tantra.

Conclusion: Toward a Typology of Indian Mahāyāna and Tantric Texts

In the preceding pages, I hope that I have sufficiently demonstrated that there are certain aspects of the Gaṇḍavyūha that, although not tantric, resemble Buddhist tantra. I have referred to these aspects as “proto-tantric” in deference to the received scholarly tradition that places Mahāyāna sūtra literature temporally prior to Buddhist tantric texts. Unlike the Tibetan tradition that views all sūtras and tantras as “the words of the Buddha” (buddhavacana), contemporary scholars tend to stratify Mahāyāna Buddhist texts according to a relative chronology that is based largely on two factors: the dates of Chinese translations and doctrinal developments. Unfortunately, the dates of Chinese translations only indicate when a particular translator or team happened to translate a certain text. They tell us nothing of the actual historical origins of texts in relation to each other. Moreover, since doctrinal developments, innovations, transformations, modifications, etc., occur in relation to any number of social, political, geographic, and historical factors, we cannot

66. The antiquity of this literary reference to teaching through embraces and kisses is confirmed by Buddhah Bradley’s fifth-century translation. See 阿梨富我者. 得攝一切眾生三昧. 若有眾生. 阿梨富我者. 得諸功德密藏三昧. (T 278.717b6–7). Here 阿梨富 is a transliteration of the Sanskrit ālingana (“embracing”), and 阿梨富 seems to be a transliteration of the Sanskrit paricumbana (“kissing”). Although the meaning of 阿梨富 is hardly clear, Fazang in his commentary on the Avatamsaka glosses the term (in a slightly varied form, 阿梨富) with 啞口 (T 1733.471.a23–24), which, based on a number of passages in Buddhist texts dealing with monastic regulations, appears to indicate a type of sexual infraction involving kissing. I would like to thank Michael Radich for this reference to Fazang and related passages.

assume that religious doctrines develop over time in anything like a smooth linear fashion.

So where does this scepticism of relative chronology leave us? Are my references to “proto-tantric” elements in the Gandavyūha misguided? Would terms that do not imply temporal priority such as “pseudo-tantric” or “quasi-tantric” be more appropriate? The various Chinese translations of the Gandavyūha indicate that like many other sūtras, it was not a static text, but that it continued to change over time, however, we do know that at least one version of the Gandavyūha existed by the early fifth century (Buddhabhadra’s translation), which contains elements that seem to prefigure the Buddhist tantras. Thus, as McMahan rightly points out, we cannot assume that the proto-tantric elements in the Gandavyūha are necessarily later additions by Buddhist redactors influenced by tantric ideas. In fact, as I have indicated in my notes, all the “proto-tantric” passages in the Gandavyūha discussed here may be found in Buddhabhadra’s fifth-century Chinese translation (T 278).

Previous scholars have already suggested that the Gandavyūha appears to bear some relation to the Mahāvairocana sūtra, the Tattvasamgraha, and the Guhyagarbha Tantra based on some general observations. My hope is that the close readings I have provided here from the Gandavyūha may be employed usefully as specific data needed for clustering it with other texts in a type of matrix suggested by Jonathan Silk. Silk writes:

If we imagine Buddhism as a multi-dimensional space, and we do not prejudge the locations of different kinds of Buddhism — with for example Theravāda Buddhism in one corner and Zen far away in another — but instead start our thinking on the level of individual texts, I think we would quickly realize that various texts would be located at various points in this multi-dimensional matrix, some texts being located more closely to each other than a third type. Of course, there can be no such thing as an absolute location, but only a location to other objects in the space (just as is the case in the three dimensions of our physical universe).

This method suggests that through close readings of Buddhist texts that pay attention to details, such as the names of buddhas and bodhisattvas in lists, various spatial formations, literary motifs, vocabulary, and stock formulas, we may begin to cluster into groups the hundreds of mainstream and Mahāyāna sūtras and tantras preserved in Sanskrit and other Indic languages, as well as Chinese and Tibetan translations. Given the truly vast amount of unstudied literature, there is great utility in using such an approach to acquire some rough sketches of this unknown landscape. With this intention in mind, I offer here a few contour lines from the Gandavyūha for a future map of this largely uncharted terrain.