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Cave Six at Aurangabad: A Tantrayāṇa Monument?

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The idea of using East Asian Buddhist material to document the history of Indian Buddhism is not new to the scholarly world by any means, and such scholars as Prabodh Chandra Bagchi and Raghu Vira have done much to open the way. It is my intention to follow their lead in this study to demonstrate an iconographic methodology that collates historical data and images from East Asia with archaeological remains in India. My goal is to determine the nature of the practices of Indian Buddhism, the development of religious ideas, and the relationship of those ideas to the art of Buddhism.1

It is well known that many Indian Buddhist monks were active in China and even in Japan during the first millennium of the Christian era. Their work covered every aspect of Buddhism, but the best known were active either as proselytizers or as translators from Sanskrit to Chinese. Chinese histories and Buddhist biographers mentioned many of these individuals, and often it is possible to be relatively well informed about their lives and their Buddhist activities. Thus, if one of these teachers employed methods of Buddhist practice that are documented in East Asiatic sources, it follows that we would know something about the practice of Buddhism as understood by the Indian monk himself and, indirectly, about the practices being taught in India. Furthermore, by analyzing temples or iconographic programs of the East Asian version of a given sect, it should be possible to identify, at least tentatively, Indian prototypes or versions of the iconographic program in archaeological remains dating from a period just prior to the time of the activity of the Indian monk in China. Some monuments, the western caves, are particularly suited to this type of investigation because they survive relatively intact: gandhakūṭs, kosambakūṭs and vihāras, with all their major iconographic programs still in place, as if the monks had left only yesterday.

I have chosen Shingon Buddhism as a test case because of its obvious Indian origins. The words Shingon (Ch'en-yen in Chinese) literally mean “true word” and are the Japanese phonetic reading of the Chinese characters used to translate the Sanskrit mantra. The form and manner in which this teaching came to East Asia is documented in great detail, thanks to the establishment in Japan of a very conservative tradition by the Japanese monk Kūkai (posthumously entitled Kōbō Daishi), founder of the Shingon sect. He travelled to China in the year 804 of the Christian era, was initiated into the practices of Ch'en-yen by the Chinese monk Hui-kuo (also known as Hui Ko and Hui-lang) (d. 805), a disciple of the Samarkandi, Amoghavajra, who in turn had received his own training and abhishekas (initiations) from both Vajrabodhi, an Indian living in China, and from various sources in India during a five-year trip begun in 741/2. While Amoghavajra and Kūkai were Buddhist masters of great stature, both were committed to transmitting the Dharma and not to innovation. Likewise Hui-kuo, although credited with being the "inventor" of Tantrism by one author,2 hardly had sufficient stature to have been much of an innovator. Thus, we may assume that Kūkai, only one step removed from
the Indian traditions, transmitted to Japan Buddhist practices very close to the Indian version both in broad outline and in detail.3

While there is much scholarly debate about the origin of the form of Buddhism that is generally referred to in modern writing as Tantra or Tantrayāna, one thing is becoming certain: the origin of Buddhist Tantra in India and adjacent regions comes much earlier than the usual seventh- or eighth-century date accorded its development by most modern scholars, especially those working in East Asian Buddhism.4 However, for this study, we need only be concerned with the immediate transmission of the teachings to China and the sources in South Asia where the masters learned the doctrines they promulgated.

Subhākaraśīmha (A.D. 637–735) is credited with the introduction of Tantrayāna Buddhism to China. He arrived in China at the invitation of T'ang Hsuan-tsung (r. 713–755). He brought numerous texts with him, among them the Mahāvairocana-sūtra, which he translated into Chinese,5 and an iconographic copybook by his own hand of the deities for the maṇḍalas of the Sarvatathāgatagarbhasamādhi-sūtra. This latter survives in early Japanese copies and is known as the Gobushinkan (“Viewing-the-five-part-citta”).6 His biography states that he was a prince in a Central Indian family ruling in the country of Oḍra (Orissa).7 He ascended the throne at the age of thirteen but soon abdicated to pursue his desire to be a monk. After travel in South India, where he received Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-samādhi, as well as extensive overseas travel (apparently to the Indonesian area), he returned to Central India. Having developed both his meditational and artistic skills, he entered Nālandā to study with Dharmagupta. From him Subhākaraśīmha received the esoteric abhishekas. Following a period of pilgrimages to holy sites, he was instructed by Dharmagupta to go to China, which he did by the overland route via Kashmir and Udyana.8 There is some conflict in the narrative at this point, for although Dharmagupta instructed him to go to China, the Chinese emperor sent an escort as far as Kansu to welcome the renowned monk.9 When he arrived at the capital in 716 he was immediately given the title of “Teacher of the Country.” Such treatment indicates that he had been expected, very probably even invited, to come to China by the emperor directly and that great store was already placed in the abilities of this great master, whose fame had preceded him even from India.10

There are several points of interest in Subhākaraśīmha’s biography. He was an older teacher, renowned before setting out for China, which shows that his doctrines were established and popular in India before his departure. Furthermore, the Gobushinkan, even in copies, clearly reflects a Kashmiri idiom of drawing and contains several specialized mudrās known only from the Kashmiri school,11 thus verifying the route of Subhākaraśīmha through Kashmir, the existence of the esoteric tradition in Kashmiri Buddhism, and incidentally, his skills as an artist, an important ability for practitioners of the movement. The fact that Subhākaraśīmha carried with him the Mahāvairocana-sūtra and the drawings of the deities for the Tatvavastirāgama-sūtra demonstrates that the two texts were already seen as major components of the teachings. In addition, it may be argued, since none of the teachers who followed Subhākaraśīmha tried to add other sūtras as primary texts (although there are many secondary texts, especially those translated by Amoghadajrā), it would follow that these two were already seen as the two primary texts of the tradition.12

Vajrabodhi (d. 741) is the second individual who was influential in bringing the esoteric tradition to China. Although there is disagreement about his origins, in one version he was the son of a Malay Brahmin who was the teacher of the king of Kāśi, while in the other he was the third son of Isānavarman, a king in Central India. It is certain that he lived in South India for a time and that he was a child prodigy. Later he studied at Nālandā, and after that he travelled to West India, where he is known to have studied esoteric Buddhism. Following this period, he travelled to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. Subsequently he went to China, where he was very successful in making converts and initiating monks into the esoteric tradition.13

Although there is much to learn from the full biography of Vajrabodhi, it is sufficient to note that it was in Western India, the primary area of our concern, that he received the transmission of the esoteric teachings, thus demonstrably placing the teaching of that doctrine in that region.

The third important teacher was Amoghadajrā (705–774), apparently a native of Samarkand, who became Vajrabodhi’s disciple in China. It is known that Vajrabodhi used both of the two main maṇḍalas to test and train Amoghadajrā, thus reiterating their importance in the tradition. In Vajrabodhi’s biography, it is stated that at the time of his death in 714 he requested his disciple, Amoghadajrā, to travel to South Asia to receive further initiations. Towards the end of 714 Amoghadajrā sailed for South Asia, where he received instruc-
tion in the esoteric tradition. In Sri Lanka he received instruction in the Mahākaraṇagārabhadhātumāṇḍala, and sought out everything he could find related to the esoteric teachings of Buddhism. To this end he succeeded in collecting more than five hundred sūtras and commentaries, which he brought back to China in 746.14

Given the obvious relationship to India of the three principal teachers of esoteric Buddhism in China, it would seem obvious that some sort of material remains of the cult should survive in recognizable form there. Yet among India’s rich archaeological treasures, such specific identifications have not been made. One obvious reason is that, to the present day, most of the more obvious objects used in the practices have been made of ephemeral materials. The maṇḍalas are usually painted on cloth and, more recently, paper; sculpture, when used, is almost invariably wooden. Thus, there is little hope of discovering the full spectrum of the Indian visualization of this tradition. Yet it is my contention that with an adequate understanding of the practices of Tantrayāna Buddhism in their Shingon form and with a general understanding of the principles of iconography underlying the maṇḍalas, the teachings followed in Aurangabad, Cave Six may be identified.

In spite of the vast array of details in Shingon practice15 we need only be concerned with the most general principles and the physical arrangement of the maṇḍalas in the context of the temple. The Mahākaraṇagārabhadhātumāṇḍala is explained in the Mahāvairocana-sūtra and manifests the Karuṇā of the Buddha Vairocana. The Vajradhātumahāmāṇḍala is explained in the Sarvatathāgatavasāngrahamāṇḍala-sūtra (also known as the Vajrasekhara-sūtra) and manifests the Prajñā of the Buddha Vairocana. The union of the two maṇḍalas is the final Bodhi that the practitioner seeks. In practice the two maṇḍalas are hung on the east and west sides of the temple with a Sumeru-platform, or a Guhyā image in the center between them. The Guhyā or Sumeru-platform image always manifests the full enlightenment of the practitioner but may be demonstrated by any of several deities: Cintamani at the Kanshin-ji in Osaka; Vairocana on the Sumeru-platform at the To-ji in Kyoto; and Vajrasattva on the Sumeru-platform in the Kongobu-ji on Mount Koya.16 In practice this arrangement is fixed, so that the practitioner may realize the total integration of the two maṇḍalas by realizing in them both the nature of Karuṇā and the nature of Prajñā. At the Kongobu-ji, for example, this is demonstrated in the maṇḍalas of the two tō (pagoda i.e. stūpa) which are brought together as manifest in the image of Vajrasattva in the central Kondō (Kosambakūṭī).

The maṇḍalas themselves are highly complex arrangements, obviously not found in their entirety at Aurangabad. But the central deities of the maṇḍalas, which manifest in themselves the whole maṇḍala, appear to be present there. In Śubhakarṣita’s commentary on the Mahāvairocana-sūtra it is specifically stated that Mahāvairocana is the whole maṇḍala and that all the deities contained in it are none other than Mahāvairocana.17 Furthermore, especially in the Tattvasaṅgraha, the actual arrangement and final details of the maṇḍala are for the acārya to decide; thus it is highly likely that the manner in which the maṇḍalas are presented might vary greatly, so long as the main features were included. Given the labor-intensive nature of stone carving, it is very probable that only the main features would be present in that medium.

The two central figures of Vairocana are the key to the identification of the type of esoteric Buddhism taught by Śubhakarṣita. In the iconographic schema of Cave Six, (fig. 1) it will be seen that the two rear aisle shrines contain images of a Buddha in dhyānamudrā in the left shrine (a), and a Buddha displaying dharmacakramudrā in the right shrine (b). Since the Vairocana of the Garbhadhātumāṇḍala displays dhyānamudrā (fig. 2) and the Vairocana of the Vajradhātumāṇḍala displays a variant of dharmacakramudrā known as bodhyānigamudrā (fig. 3) it would seem that the two shrines reflect the same imagery as the two maṇḍalas. The small scale of the shrines (actually they are so small as to make entry quite difficult) would seem to indicate that they are intended for meditations to be performed from some position other than the interior of the chamber itself, thus suggesting a function parallel to the two maṇḍalas of the Shingon. The iconographic arrangement and the two images is so specific to Shingon that no other known form of Buddhism would have any use for this particular arrangement.18

Given this ‘key’ to the cave’s iconographic program, it is possible to test the rest of the images of the cave against the iconographic program of the sūtras involved. On the exterior of the back wall shrines, flanking their entrances, are the bodhisattvas Padmapāni and Vajrapāni (fig. 1, c-d and e-f). This corresponds exactly to the Mahāvairocana-sūtra (fig. 4) in that the two halls of the bodhisattvas Vajrapāni and Padmapāni flank the central eight-petalled lotus hall and manifest the Prajñā and Karuṇā of the Buddha Vairocana.19 In the Vajradhātumāṇḍala, the principal bodhisattvas, those of the eastern and western quadrants, are Vajrasattva and Vaj-
radharma, which, in the context of this manḍala are simply alternate names for Vajrapāṇi and Avalokiteśvara (i.e. Padmapāṇi; fig. 5). There are no conflicts with the textual manḍalas and, because it is only in the Mañjuśrī-
mūlakalpa and in the various texts of and commentaries on the Mahāvairocana-sūtra and Sarvatathāgatatattvasamgraha-sūtra that these two bodhisattvas attend Buddha, their presence therefore seems to corroborate the initial suggestion. The bodhisattvas of the antechamber (fig. 1, g and h) are again Padmapāṇi and Vajrapāṇi, easily recognized by their attributes.20 On the interior of the shrine the same two bodhisattvas (fig. 1, k and 1) attend a Buddha seated in pralambapādāsana who makes the fourth level of dharmacakrapravartananamudrā, symbolizing the fourth and most esoteric level of the teachings. The Buddha is one of the standard types occurring throughout the western caves21 and is attended by the same two bodhisattvas, also very common here. Thus, the group must be accepted as little more than a standard image. However, the figures flanking the attendant bodhisattvas in the antechamber (fig. 1, g and h) correspond to the attendants of the two bodhisattvas of the Mahākārṇaṇāgarbhādhūtmanḍala, i.e. the females Tārā and Māmaki and the krodhas Hayagriva and Krodha-candratilaka, who form the prajñā and kroḍha of Avalokiteśvara and Vajrapāṇi respectively.22 Thus it appears that the cave was intended to reflect the realizations of the practices of the Mahākārṇaṇāgarbhadhātumandala.

This suggestion is strongly reinforced by the presence of Cave Six-A immediately adjacent to Cave Six (fig. 6). Iconographically, this cave has long been considered a curiosity or some sort of demonstration of syncretism between Buddhism and Hinduism. Gaṇeśa is the principal deity of the cave. He is flanked by deities from the Śaivite pantheon. On the left wall there are images of six female figures accompanied by Śiva, while on the right wall there are two images of Buddhas. Interestingly this corresponds in detail to the outer enclosures, that of the protectors, of both manḍalas. In the outer enclosure of the Vajradhātumandala, the central deity of each side is a form of Gaṇeśa. In addition, on the north a second image of Gaṇeśa occurs adjacent to the central figure. This latter may be conceived as the central deity of a fivefold manḍala to Vināyaka/Gaṇeśa as the overcomer of obstacles (to attainment), a fairly common element in Tantric Buddhism.23 In the outer enclosure of the exterior vajras, protectors of the Mahākārṇaṇāgarbhadhātumandala, Sākyamuni’s quarter is included as a separate hall in the original form of the manḍala as described in the Mahā-
vairocana-sūtra.24 Śiva, Umā and the other six of the saṃpaṭamārjikās are also important in the same realm of the exterior vajras. Mahākāla and Gaṇeśa also are accorded important locations in this manḍala as well, having the two final positions on the north side of the hall of exterior vajras. According to probability either that Cave Six-A combines the two protective outer enclosures of the two manḍalas, or that it simply represents the realm of the exterior vajras of the Mahā-
karṇaṇāgarbhādhūtumandala. For the moment I am inclined to believe that it belongs only to the Mahā-
karṇaṇāgarbhādhūtumandala, for the protective role of the outer enclosure of the Vajradhātumandala is not so important, while in the Mahākārṇaṇāgarbhādhūtumandala it is. Thus, Cave Six-A adds further corroboration to the identification of Cave Six as the Karuṇā aspect of the manḍala of Aurangabad.

If Cave Six is the Mahākārunaṇāgarbhādhūtumandala, then another cave with similar characteristics but a sufficiently different iconographic program, identifiable based on the teachings of the Sarvatathāgatatattvasamgraha-sūtra should be present at the site. Cave Seven, clearly emphasizes female figures and hence corresponds to Prajñā as explained in the sūtra. It has the same two rear shrines (fig. 7, a and b), arranged slightly differently than those of Cave Six, with all three figures on the interior and both Buddhas in dharmacakrapravartananamudrā and in pralambapādāsana. But because this image type is so widespread in the western caves, they must be taken as generic images, not specifically different from those in Cave Six. Indeed, the dhūṃma-
mudrā of Cave Six is exceedingly rare in the western caves, which lends even greater importance to its significance. But in Cave Seven it is the role of the female, Prajñā, that characterizes the nature of the cave. In the Vajradhātumandala, sixteen of the thirty-two deities are female. Most significantly, the four bodhisattvas of the Vairocana circle are all female emanations of the pāramitā of the four Tathāgatas of the Vajra, Ratna, Padma and Karma families, and each manifest the respective Jñāna of the kula as offered by her lord to Vairocana.25 He, in turn offers to the Tathāgatas the four interior Pūjā bodhisattvas of Dance, Garland-Disadem, Song (Gita) and Pantomime. Two more steps bring the total number of female figures to sixteen, exactly equal to the number of bodhisattvas in the text.26

As one enters the cave, one stands between the left-side shrine of the saṃpaṭamārjikās who are flanked by two Buddhas, and the right-side shrine of Hārīti and Jam-
bhala (fig. 7, c and d). Both shrines may be understood as part of the outer enclosure of the manḍala, which protects the center to insure conditions conducive to advancement toward the ultimate attainment.27 Probably Hārti and Jambhala/Vaiśravana were still seen as the progenitors of Prajñā and were, in this context, revered as the fundamental source of birth leading to enlightenment.28 Their position in relation to the rest of the cave indicates however, that they serve a function preliminary to the whole.

On the veranda, one is immediately confronted by two huge images of the bodhisattvas Padmapāni and Vajrapāni (fig. 7, e and f). Padmapāni-Avalokiteśvara is represented as the “Lord-of-Salvation-from-Hindrances”29 and specifically represents the overcoming of obstacles on the way to enlightenment. The accompanying bodhisattva, while not carrying a vajra, exhibits a nilapadma in his right hand and is accompanied by the same two deities as the comparable figure in Cave Six. Thus, he may be called Vajrapāni-Mañjuśrī, the manifestation of acquired wisdom (Prajñā), (as opposed to the innate wisdom [Jñāna] of Vajrapāni). Thus as the overcomer of hindrances and as Prajñā, the two bodhisattvas are specifically preparatory to the shrine within. These two bodhisattvas occur in the enclosure of the bodhisattvas of the Vajradhatumāṇḍala, each repeated eight times to form the group of sixteen bodhisattvas. This is by no means a contrivance, for in Tantrayāna there are only three major bodhisattvas and all others are simply manifestations of them, i.e., Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī and Vajrapāni.

Passing into the interior of the cave, one is confronted by two panels of female figures (fig. 7, g and h), the one on the left depicting Tārā and the one on the right, Māmaki, each with attendants.30 These are the Prajñā of the Karuṇā and Prajñā aspects of Bodhi and are identical with Padmapāramitā and Vajradhatumāṇḍala. It may well be possible that Ratnapāramitā and Karmapāramitā are present as well, but this is impossible to determine, for the attributes of the secondary figures are not clearly distinguishable. One subsidiary figure however clearly demonstrates the presence of the Pāñcajñinamāṇḍila system of meditation; the small male figure second from the left in the left panel (fig. 8) has his hair arranged in the pāñcajñata (five knots) convention, indicating the manḍala of the mantras of the five Jina-buddhas. This is a very rare arrangement on surviving Indian images, although it is well known as the arrangement for Arapacana-Mañjuśrī (A RA PA CA NA being an esoteric mantra of the five Bud-

has with each syllable specifically manifest in one of the knots). This convention is strictly limited to esoteric Buddhism and provides another firm indication supporting our interpretation.

In the interior of the shrine is the usual Buddha in dharmacakramudrā, seated in pralambapādaśana on the sīṅhāsana (fig. 7, j). In this case he is not attended by the two bodhisattvas, however, but by two groups of three Buddhas (fig. 7, k and l). This is a specific reference to the esoteric tradition, wherein the actual enlightenment of the Buddha came prior to his meditation under the Aśvatha tree at a time when he was bathing in the Nairāraṇjana River. At that time he decided to hold his breath until he had attained enlightenment, at which point the six Buddhas of the past, the Buddhas of the ten directions and the Buddhas of all directions came to him and transmitted their Jñāna to him. Thus armed, he went off to meditate and to the defeat of Māra. The implication of the presence of the six Buddhas is that the fourth level of the teachings is imbued with the Jñāna of all Buddhas as well as that of the historical Buddha and is thereby the Universal Dharmadhātu-jñāna.

On the right wall of the shrine is a small relief panel of a male and female bodhisattva pair (fig. 7, n). There has been much discussion (although, so far as I am aware, unpublished) about the possible iconography of this group. The fact that the Prajñā holds a nilapadma, associated only with the attainment of knowledge in an esoteric sense, indicates that this pair is associated with the Prajñā aspect of enlightenment. Therefore, the bodhisattva can only be some hypostasis of Vajrapāni-Mañjuśrī. The relatively small size and unembellished nature of the group imply that the image is necessary for iconographic “completeness” but is not actually a major part of the ritual configuration of the cave. This would account for the comparatively understated, and therefore iconographically difficult-to-read, representation.

On the left wall is the famous dancing figure with musicians (fig. 7, m). This has two possible, but closely interconnected interpretations in the context of esoteric Buddhism. After the Buddhas of the four directions offered the pāramitā deities to Vairocana he returned the honor by offering Lāsikā (dance)31 to Akshobhya, Vajramālā ([Flower] garland [-diadem]) to Ratnasambhava, Vajragītā (song-recitation) to Amitābha, and Vajraṇītyā (pantomime) to Amoghasiddhi.32 The group could be interpreted narrowly as dance or, as all four since the dancer and the musicians are adorned
with garlands, since music usually includes singing, and since the dancer is making pantomime gestures. I personally prefer the latter interpretation. This, then, is the offering of Vairocana to the practitioner who has accomplished the four Jhānas of the Jina and is in the process of the final realizations. According to Bharatanātyam vocabulary, the gesture has specific sexual implications, appropriate to the union meditations of Yoganaddha practices. While these practices are very underplayed in the modern Japanese version, to the point that many students of the esoteric tradition deny that they ever had any role in Japanese or Chinese versions of esoteric Buddhism, this group in the context of this cave would seem to demonstrate that, in India, both the Mahāvairocana and Sarvatathāgatagarbhasamgrahāsūtras were taught with Yoganaddha meditations.

It may be objected that there is no emphasis on the Pañcakīrma of the Mahāvairocana and Tatvāmsāgrahāsūtras, but this is not the case. In a series of five shrines over the doors to the main shrines of both caves are groups of five Buddhas with attendants (fig. 7, i). While it may also be objected that the mudrā of the Buddhas does not conform to the usual conventions, i.e., the images above the door display dharmacakra, dhyanā, dharmacakra, dhyanā, and dharmacakra mudrās in order, it must be remembered that there is no other group of five Buddhas. It is therefore possible that these images simply date from a time prior to the iconographic rigidity of more familiar conventions or that they are part of a tradition that did not demand, or perhaps even use the now better known mudrā. Their presence in this location serves to consecrate the abhishekas performed in the chambers below.

Abhisheka ceremonies are remarkably uniform throughout the Vajrayāna world. In its simplest form, the practitioner is brought before the image or shrine containing the image that is the object of the initiation, the rituals and instructions are given, the head sprinkling is carried out and the initiate then circumambulates either the shrine, the image, or the ritual platform. In the case where a Guhyā image is used, the shrine enclosing it may be opened either for the whole ceremony or at some point in the ceremony; but once opened, it is eternally “open” to the practitioner, i.e., available for his meditations. Caves Six and Seven at Aurangabad are ideally suited to serve as the place of initiation in the abhisheka ceremonies. In both the porches and the antechambers of the shrines, the subsidiary figures would attend directly upon their lord, the monk realizing himself as Vairocana. This is most apparent to the visitor to the site where, when he stands directly in front of the images, he finds that the subsidiary figures gaze directly at him and the vidyādharas seem about to fly past the main icon to converge directly at a point over his head, ready to place their garlands upon him. Likewise the central shrine configuration of the caves is ideally suited to the circumambulation that takes place during the ceremonies. Thus the caves are architecturally appropriate to the very rituals that must have been performed in conjunction with the form of Buddhism under discussion.

In conclusion, it must be stated that, regardless of the persuasiveness of the foregoing arguments, the postulation of the presence of the form of Tantrayāna known as Shingon existing at Aurangabad is only a working hypothesis based on comparative analysis. No inscription verifies the name of any deity. In spite of the relatively great and highly specific correspondence of the iconographic program to Shingon, it is possible that some related and now lost sect was responsible for the caves. Moreover, no one, no matter how clever, can know what was in either the immediate oral tradition, or in the minds of the monks as they performed their rituals at the site. I intend only to suggest that there seems to be a strong possibility that a form of Buddhism either identical to or very closely related to Shingon Buddhism was being practiced in the second quarter of the sixth century at Aurangabad. On the basis of this hypothesis, and on the basis of evidence within the caves it may be argued that many of the caves of Ellora,Ajanta and Kanheri also seem to have had similar religious connotations, but that shall have to await a fuller exposition of this study.

The implications of the hypothesis for the study of the history of Buddhism are that Tantrism may now begin to be studied more actively in its home setting. Once the correlations of the East and Inner Asian connections have been made, it will be possible to study the interrelationships between such major Buddhist centers as Kashmir, Bihar, Orissa and the western Ghats, which in turn will lead to a fuller understanding of Buddhism in general.
Fig. 1. Iconographic schema of Aurangabad, Cave 6 (does not indicate “residence” cells or veranda).
Fig. 2. Garbhadhātu Vairocana from the Shosonzuzō.
Fig. 3. Vajradhātu Vairocana from the Shosonzūō.
Fig. 4. Plan of the “quarters” of the Garbhadrūgumāṇḍala.
VAJRADHĀTUMĀNDALA
(Interior Portion Only)

Fig. 5. Plan of the central portion of the Vajradhātumāndala.

A Mahāvairocana
   a Vajrapāramitā
   b Ratnapāramitā
   c Dharmapāramitā
   d Karmapāramitā

B Akshobhya
   1 Vajrasattva
   2 Vajrarāja
   3 Vajrasādhu
   4 Vajrarāga

C Ratnasambhava
   1 Vajraratna
   2 Vajrāteja
   3 Vajraḥāsa
   4 Vajraketu

D Amitāyus
   1 Vajradharma
   2 Vajrātikṣha
   3 Vajraheṭu
   4 Vajrabhāsha

E Amoghasiddhi
   1 Vajrakarma
   2 Vajraraksha
   3 Vajrasamdhī
   4 Vajrayaksha

5 Vajralāśi
6 Vajramālā
7 Vajragītā
8 Vajranḍītyā
Fig. 6. Iconographic schema of Aurangabad, Cave 6A.
Fig. 8. Detail of dwarf ascetic with pāñcajata.
I am grateful for aid, encouragement and information generously provided by others in connection with this essay: my teacher, J. LeRoy Davidson, to whom this article is dedicated, first introduced me to the western caves and many of the fascinating problems connected with them. The National Endowment for the Humanities gave support for a year’s study in Asia on these problems. Walter M. Spink has shared much of the fruit of his tireless, yet largely unpublished labors on the precise chronology of several of the western cave sites. Robert A.F. Thurman has shared his vast knowledge of Tantra and Buddhist history.


3While the broad outline of events is widely accepted there are many points of debate over details of the lives of individuals. See Minoru Kiyota, Shingon Buddhism: Theory and Practice, Los Angeles and Tokyo, 1978, pp. 17-22; Chou Yi-liang, “Tantrism in China,” Harvard Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 8, (1945), pp. 241-332, passim; Jan Yin-hua, A Chronicle of Buddhism in China, 581-960 A.D., Santiniketan, 1966, pp. 54-71. (It must be noted that Chinese historical sources are more concerned with a teacher’s magical feats and imperial patronage than his actual teachings.)

4The whole attribution of the development of Tantra to the seventh or eighth century seems to originate in Togano Shōun’s fallacious reasoning based on the argument that if Fa-hsien (fifth century), Hui-shen (sixth century), and Hsuan-tsang (first half of the seventh century) did not mention the Mahāvairocana-sūtra but I-ching (second half of the seventh century) does, the text had to have been written in the mid-seventh century (Himitsu Bukkyō-shi (History of Esoteric Buddhism), Kyoto, 1933, p. 17). In his argument, Togano ignores the fact that Punyodaya arrived in China in 655 and tried to introduce Tantric texts but was prevented from doing so by none other than Hsuan-tsang, who was only interested in the Idealistic school and therefore had not even been looking for Tantric texts in India. That the various Chinese travellers did not come across them is not surprising since the texts were (and still are) part of a very conservative esoteric tradition open only to initiates of the system, and indeed the traditional history of the Tantras states that they were transmitted in secret from the time they were first revealed. Thus, it would seem that there would be little reason for the Chinese pilgrims who were not specifically searching for initiation to the Tantras to find them and it was only after they became popularly known in India that I-ching came across them in a possibly incidental manner while searching for texts.

Togano’s reasoning also reflects the common opinion held by many scholars that any given text was created, written and translated into Chinese in a very short period of time. The Amoghapāśa-sūtra, which mentions the Mahāvairocana-sūtra several times and must therefore be later, was in Loyang no later than 693 and is generally held to be the model for the Sarvatathāgatatattvasamgraha-sūtra which Subhakarashimha brings the illustrations for (the Gobushinkan) to China in 716. This would force the creation of three sūtras into a span of fifty years or less. Yet the teachings of these sūtras had spread from Kashmir to Sri Lanka and from Nālandā to the Konkan—virtually all of the Indian subcontinent. Fifty years seems a very unrealistically short time for any doctrine to have spread so widely, even among specialists.

Indeed, recent scholarship has placed a related text, the Guhyasamājatantra as no later than the fourth century (Alex Wayman, Yoga of the Guhyasamajatantra Delhi, 1977, p. 99, and my forthcoming article, “An Iconographic Study of Swayambhunath,” soon to be published in papers from the Wisconsin Conference on South Asian Studies). Both studies conclude independently that the Guhyasamājatantra must be no later than fourth century in its completed form. Since the Guhyasamajatantra is an outgrowth of the pāñcakṣaṇa system that previously developed in the Mahāvairocana-sūtra and related texts, then the dates for these texts in India will have to be third century at the absolute latest possible date and the strong reservation must be made that they may well be earlier, even much earlier.


4The earliest surviving copy is at the Onjō-ji and

His biography (Taishō, 50.714 bl-716 a17) is more concerned with how much he impressed the emperor with his ability to make rain than Buddhist matters; however, it provides a useful historical basis. Cf. Chou, “Tantrism”, pp. 251–72.


Compare figurative style in the Gobushinkan to Kashmiri painting, for example in my “Gu-ge Bris: A Stylistic Amalgam,” in P. Pal, editor, Aspects of Indian Art, Leiden, 1972, pl. LVII left and right.

There is much discussion on this point but apparently no Buddhologist or historian of Buddhism is aware of the authorship of the Gobushinkan, a fact well known to art historians.


Chou, “Tantrism”, pp. 286–88. This brief sketch of material pertinent to our topic does not do justice to one of the most important figures in the history of East Asian Buddhism. For a fuller description of his contribution see Chou, “Tantrism”, pp. 284–307.

The literature on Shingon theory and practice is truly vast; ranging from Kūkai’s collected works and the canonical literature to recent studies, the bibliography alone is over 50,000 entries. For a basic introduction in western languages one may consult the following: Ryūjin Tajima, Les deux grands Mandalas et la doctrine de l’Exoterisme Shingon, Paris, 1959; Kiyota’s Shingon Buddhism, cited in note 3; and especially Hakeda’s Kūkai: Major Works, cited in note 5.

The main images in the Kongō-ji, attributed to Kūkai himself, are known only from photographs, for they were destroyed by fire early this century.

Tajima, Les deux grands Mandalas, p. 67 (Taishō, XXXIX. 787 c22); cf. also Hakeda, Kūkai., p. 91; and Huntington, Shosonzūzō, pp. 133–34. Implicit in the two single figure illustrations in the Shosonzūzō are the respective maṇḍalas in their entirety. Neither maṇḍala is specifically referred to again but the entire rest of the sketchbook assumes a total familiarity with them.

That Shingon versions are bejewelled and crowned does not negate their identification with the Aurangabad images. The Japanese versions simply show the true esoteric nature of Vairocana as the Dharmakāya. While either Subhākarasimha or Hui Kuo are generally credited with “inventing” this identification (cf. Hakeda, Kūkai, p. 81 et sq.), I am very doubtful of this. Since a cult of the Universal as Vairocana was very widespread with the teachings of the Avatamsaka-sūtra (which is of great importance in the writings of Kūkai) and the images of the Universal Buddha are found throughout Asia with the cult of the Bṛhad Buddha (e.g. Yun Kang, Bamiyan, Lung Men, Todai-ji, Lalitāditya’s caitya, etc.) a much earlier date (c. 4th–5th century at the very latest) is suggested. Further, the fact that Vairocana as Dharmakāya continued on in Kashmiri Buddhism and into early Tibetan Buddhism which derived from Indian sources also argues strongly for an Indian origin to the concept.

Each hall contains a group of twenty-one major aspects (both male and female) and a number of minor aspects. Again, as with the whole maṇḍala, the contents of the hall may be represented by the main deity.

It is interesting to note, however, that a clear distinction is made between the spread open-prong vajra of Vajrapāni in the antechamber and the closed or returning-prong vajra of the two Vajrapānis attending the back wall shrines. I do not know why this distinction has been made but it is very unlikely that it is unintentional, i.e. artistic whim. For example, the Gobushinkan depicts several distinctly different types of vajras as characteristic emblems of different aspects of the deity.

There is evidence that this is actually a dual image of Maitreya-Vairocana, while both the vajrapārānya and the standing or walking images are Sūkhyamuni-Vairocana; but this will have to await a much fuller exposition of my research in this area.

Unfortunately, there are no inscriptions at the caves to inform us of the actual names used for these deities. However, rather than call them the “Western-puṇḍarika-bearing-Prajñā-aspect of Lokesvararāja” and “Eastern-nilapadma-bearing-Prajñā-aspect-of-Aksobhya,” I shall arbitrarily call them by their well known common names of Tārā and Māmaki. But it must be noted that Puṇḍura and Māmaki or Dharmapāramitā and Vajrapāramitā might be more appropriate.


Tajima, Les deux grands Mandalas, pp. 58–64.

Contrast this to the Guhyasamājatantra meditation of the four Jinas emerging from Vairocana by emanating their Prajñā first. Cf. my article noted above, note 4 regarding this meditation.

In popular literature on both Shingon and Tendai Buddhism, the femininity of these sixteen deities is
severely underplayed or even partially ignored, and indeed, some of the deities are represented as male. However, the texts are absolutely clear as to who is female and in recent discussions with priests of the Shingon sect, it has been made clear that the femininity of Prajñā is a very well-known aspect of its nature. The actual meditations however, are one of the best kept guhyā aspects of Japanese Buddhism. Cf. Tajima, Les deux grands Mandalas, pp. 170–72.

22 In the Tendai version of the VajRHātuMAṇḍara, originating from the same sources as the Shingon version, Brahmā, Śakra, Candra and Vaiśravana all appear dressed as females, which may reflect this same iconography.

23 See my Swayambhūnath article (above note 4).

24 I use this designation in deliberate preference to “Lord of Travellers” as he is usually called in art-historical literature. Each of the perils has a specific metaphor, which is well known and very basic in Buddhist circles. The salvations from external perils must be understood as popular level salvations while the freedom from internal fears is the technical soteriological level. They are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Salvation from external peril</th>
<th>Freedom from internal fear</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Robbers</td>
<td>Wrong views</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lions</td>
<td>Pride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prison</td>
<td>Covetousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elephants</td>
<td>Ignorance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drowning</td>
<td>Desire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire</td>
<td>Anger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snakes</td>
<td>Jealousy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demons (disease)</td>
<td>Doubt</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These, of course, are none other than the fetters that, once cast off, allow one to reach enlightenment. Thus, this bodhisattva is none other than Amoghapāsa, whose sūtra, although not practiced in Shingon as a major text, is the intermediate stage between the Mahāvairocana- and the Tattvasamgraha-sūtras.

30 See note 22.

31 Interpreted as “Joy” in the Sino-Japanese rendition of the name.

32 Tajima, Les deux grands Mandalas, pp. 184–86.

33 It must be pointed out that the Jina may display either conventionalized, non-specific mudrā (such as seen here, i.e. any and all Buddhas may display either of these mudrā) or by the more commonly known specific mudrā usually associated with them. However the iconographic rigidity usually associated with the Jina as understood in modern scholarship does not hold true even for relatively late image conventions, e.g. in Japan the Jina as represented in the crowns of other images are almost always shown only in dhyānamudrā. It must be furthermore pointed out that the “specific mudrā” convention does not survive in known images from prior to the seventh or eighth century except in Nepal. Yet, there are a number of circumstances, such as in these two caves, where the Pañcajina are clearly present. See also the discussion of the mudrā in Susan L. Huntington, “The Buddhist Stūpa of Gyaraspur,” forthcoming in Chhat 11.


35 My iconographic studies of the western caves have completely convinced me of the validity of Walter Spink’s chronology of them. In fact, if anything, I feel an even shorter period of excavation for any given cave is far more appropriate as the societal context would have demanded great expediency to meet certain astrologically determined deadlines. Cf. his Ajanta to Ellora, Bombay and Ann Arbor, n.d. pp. 5–6 and passim. I would again like to express my gratitude to Professor Spink for the effort he has spent on my behalf and for his sharing much unpublished material with me.