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Social Subjects and Esoteric Buddhist Ritual: Reflections on Dr. Charles D. Orzech's Talk at the University of British Columbia's Department of Asian Studies

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On February 9, 2017, Dr. Charles Orzech of the University of Glasgow visited University of British Columbia's Asian Centre and gave a lecture titled "Liturgy, Icon, and Text in the Development of Esoteric Buddhism." Dr. Orzech is Reader in Religion, Conflict and Transition in the School of Critical Studies at the University of Glasgow and Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina Greensboro. His research has focused on the translation and transformation of late Mahāyāna Buddhism in eighth-through thirteenth-century China.

Dr. Orzech's talk addressed two parts of an ongoing project on liturgy in medieval Chinese Esoteric Buddhism, which he framed with two questions: *Did Esoteric Buddhism in China evolve following a linear trajectory?* And: *What do Esoteric Buddhist rituals do?*

Dr. Orzech's answer to the first question challenges the notion that Esoteric, or Tantric, Buddhism evolved in a linear process. Many

scholars (including Jianfu Lu 呂建福, Peng Jinzhang 彭金章, Henrik Sørensen, and Michel Strickmann) interpret the emergence of Esoteric Buddhism in China as a gradual interiorization of ritual practices. This process is often traced to the use of mantra in the late Vedic period, to *paritta* rituals in Early Buddhism, to the development of *dhāraṇī* scriptures, to the incorporation of image worship, to the interiorization of image worship in Śaiva-inflected tantric visualizations. Dr. Orzech pointed out that this way of thinking about Esoteric Buddhism reflects the 19th century notion that Esoteric Buddhism is a degeneration of “authentic” Buddhism into magic and superstition.

Dr. Orzech outlined a number of examples that have been offered in support of the evolutionary theory of Esoteric Buddhism. He problematized each example by showing that visualization practices, *dhāraṇīs*, and practices that involve the use of images all appear in a plethora of contexts, and sometimes all within a very short time period. For example, visualization practices, such as imagining oneself as the Buddha, appear quite early in a number of forms. Dr. Orzech also pointed out that *dhāraṇīs* were not created for tantra, citing multiple examples from the *Taishō Revised Tripiṭaka* (Jpn. *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經) where *dhāraṇīs* are found to have multiple meanings and uses, such as memory aides, apotropaic spells, or abbreviations of entire teachings.

Setting aside these evolutionary schemas, Dr. Orzech argued instead that the rapid appearance of certain ritual features in the 8th century, such as lunar discs and seed syllables (Skt. *bīja*), may be considered the distinguishing feature of Esoteric Buddhist texts and practices, as well as evidence of borrowing among tantric traditions. To illustrate his point, Dr. Orzech referred to 8th century manuals attributed to the translator Amoghavajra (Chn. *Bùkōng* 不空) that contain rituals formulated in terms of a host receiving the gods and buddhas as honored guests. The appearance of these texts, which became a standard ritual

pattern for many tantric rites, suggests borrowing from other tantric contexts in an environment where the use of *dhāraṇī*, visualization, and *mudrā* were already present. In these rites, the practitioner is also instructed to visualize lunar discs and seed syllables inside one's own body or inside the body of the deity. Following Gavin Flood,¹ Dr. Orzech described these practices as "entextualization"—the imprinting of text on, or in the body—and goes further to suggest that this ritual process actually shapes the subjectivity of the participant.

Turning to his second question—*What do Esoteric Buddhist rituals do?*—Dr. Orzech asserted that such rituals may have accomplished the social formation of "subjects" through liturgy and discourse. In communal Esoteric Buddhist rituals, practitioners imagine themselves among an assembly of buddhas and bodhisattvas. The subjectivity of the practitioners is then shaped through visualization, *mantra*, and *mudrā* through the performative, material, and social dimensions of the ritual.

To illustrate this point, Dr. Orzech referred to *Taishō* 865, the consecration (Skt. *abhiṣeka*; Chn. *guàn dǐng* 灌頂) of Sarvāthasiddha, translated by Amoghavajra. The liturgical pattern described therein includes confession, praise of the buddhas, the taking of bodhisattva vows, and merit transfer. Although written to be performed in congregation, the entire ritual can also be visualized in the imagined presence of all the buddhas and bodhisattvas. In either case, Dr. Orzech affirmed that this rite was not intended to be a solitary practice performed in isolation, but a communal, social, ritual that accomplished the social construction of typical, rather than individual, subjects—bodhisattvas. Participants collectively purify themselves, take the bodhisattva vows, and become di-

¹ Gavin D. Flood, *The Tantric Body: The Secret Tradition of Hindu Religion* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

vine subjects themselves through visualization and entextualization, in a process strikingly similar to the consecration of an image of worship.

Throughout his talk Dr. Orzech returned several times to a ritual that appears in *Taishō* 1320 (Chn. *yúqié jí yāo yīn kǒu shīshí yí* 瑜伽集要焰口施食儀; *Rites for Distributing Food to the Burning Mouths from the Essentials of the Yoga-tantra*), wherein the practitioner imagines oneself as Āvalokiteśvara. This ritual appeared in Dr. Orzech's first published article.² For myself and the other graduate students attending the talk, it was encouraging to see how Dr. Orzech has spent years working with this particular text and allowed his ideas to grow in new directions and into different projects throughout his career. We look forward to his upcoming book and to his rethinking of Esoteric Buddhist ritual, and the subjectivity they informed.

Many thanks to Dr. Orzech for sharing his work, and to the talk's sponsors and attendees.

² Charles D. Orzech, "Seeing Chen-Yen Buddhism: Traditional Scholarship and the Vajrayāna in China," *History of Religions* 29, no. 2 (1989): 87–114.

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