



Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism: History, Semiology, and Transgression in the Indian Traditions (South Asia Across the Disciplines)

By Christian K. Wedemeyer

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Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism fundamentally rethinks the nature of the transgressive theories and practices of the Buddhist Tantric traditions, challenging the notion that the Tantras were "marginal" or primitive and situating them instead both ideologically and institutionally within larger trends in mainstream Buddhist and Indian culture.

Critically surveying prior scholarship, Wedemeyer exposes the fallacies of attributing Tantric transgression to either the passions of lusty monks, primitive tribal rites, or slavish imitation of Saiva traditions. Through comparative analysis of modern historical narratives that depict Tantrism as a degenerate form of Buddhism, a primal religious undercurrent, or medieval ritualism he likewise demonstrates these to be stock patterns in the European historical imagination.

Through close analysis of primary sources, Wedemeyer reveals the lived world of Tantric Buddhism as largely continuous with the Indian religious mainstream and deploys contemporary methods of semiotic and structural analysis to make sense of its seemingly repellent and immoral injunctions. Innovative, semiological readings of the influential *Guhyasamaja Tantra* underscore the text's overriding concern with purity, pollution, and transcendent insight issues shared by all Indic religions and a large-scale, quantitative study of Tantric literature shows its radical antinomianism to be a highly managed ritual observance restricted to a sacerdotal elite. These insights into Tantric scripture and ritual clarify the continuities between South Asian Tantrism and broader currents in Indian religion, illustrating how thoroughly these "radical" communities were integrated into the intellectual, institutional, and social structures of South Asian Buddhism.

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Editorial Review

Review

Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism is a major contribution to our understanding of Indian esoteric (or Tantric) Buddhism. Christian K. Wedemeyer writes with verve, humor, and most crucially, remarkable clarity, managing to explain difficult texts and ideas with great lucidity.

(Roger R. Jackson, Carleton College)

An important new work in Buddhology

(*Choice*)

Highly Recommended.

(David Templeman *South Asia*)

Wedemeyer not only provides an advanced introduction, but also makes the reader question the assumptions (and almost everyone has assumptions about Tantra!) they bring to and expect of the study of Tantric Buddhism.

(Justin Thomas McDaniel *Religious Studies Review*)

A clear work that engages a fresh methodology in order to articulate a new theory of Buddhist antinomianism, offering thereby a novel way to 'make sense' of tantric Buddhism.

(*Journal of Religion*)

[An] important and useful contribution to the study of Tantric Buddhism in India.

(Sumit Guha *H-Asia*)

Review

A milestone in the field, this masterful semiological analysis puts it all together: who was practicing Tantric Buddhism, what they were doing, and why; how it all relates to the larger history of South Asian religion; and, most of all, how to understand Tantra's challenging transgressive language. Christian K. Wedemeyer's methodological precision sheds light on traditional and modern historiography alike and makes a critical intervention in the scholarship that will have a major impact for generations to come.

(Janet Gyatso, Harvard University)

About the Author

Christian K. Wedemeyer is associate professor of the history of religions at the University of Chicago Divinity School and in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations. He is the translator and editor of *Aryadeva's Lamp That Integrates the Practices: The Gradual Path of Vajrayana Buddhism According to the Esoteric Community Noble Tradition*, and his research concerns the history and literature of Buddhism in Southern Asia and Tibet.

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