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Jacob P. Dalton, *Conjuring the Buddha: Ritual Manuals in Early Tantric Buddhism*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2023, 344 pp. ISBN: 978-0-231-20583-2, $35.00 (pbk).

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The introduction of tantric texts, which likely emerged in India in the seventh century, "changed the face of religious practice across Asia" (p. 1) according to Jacob P. Dalton. The primary focus was complex and elaborate rituals; these featured innovative myths, new gods, unfamiliar cosmologies, and elaborate practices involving secrecy, hierarchy, and transgression. Tantric texts come in sundry forms, with the ritual manual especially prevalent; *sādhanās* covering ritual transformations, *kalpas* covering ritual spaces, and *vidhis* covering initiations, for example. This book focuses on ritual manuals in Tibetan discovered in Cave 17 near Dunhuang, a city in northwestern Gansu Province, Western China. Despite mostly dating from the tenth century, these texts reflect ritual changes from late eighth century India.

The manuals are paradoxical in other ways; the imperial Pugyel court in Tibet banned the study of such texts, yet texts about *Mahāyoga* (Inner Tantra) practices were written in Tibet. Few texts have named authors, but there is an assumption that monastics wrote them; there are artistic representations that accompany the textual descriptions. Some texts are sutras (often *dhāraṇī* mantras) and commentaries, but a large group are ritual manuals, ranging from earlier plain instructions to later poetic elaborations. Dalton's avowed intent is to "tread a fine line, to follow each [ritual manual] through its … maze of ritual twists and turns while remaining open to the possibility of unexpected moments of poetry, when time slows, space opens, and a different type of experience is suggested" (p. 25).

Chapter One, "Ritual Manuals and the Spread of the Local," shows how extracanonical manuals spread in tandem with canonical texts, and interrogates the *dhāraṇī* sutras in terms of "ritualized recitation" (p. 35) and how they gave rise to standalone manuals. Most of the Dunhuang *dhāraṇī* texts are linked to sutras and are useful for development of tantra. Chapter Two, "From *Dhāraṇī* to Tantra: The *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana*," is concerned with this specific text, and the related amulets that exist. Dalton argues that the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana* is a highly malleable prototype, and that the Dunhuang texts show multiple reworkings of its contents. A *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana* manual is provided in translation at the end of the chapter.

Chapter Three, "Evoking Possession: The *Sarvatathāgata-tattvasaṃgraha*,"

discusses "postinitiatory practice[s] of the *sadhana*" (p. 99). Dalton notes that by the mid-seventh century tantric texts were multiplying at a great rate and a new system focused on the "practitioner's imagined union with a buddha" (p. 103) became prominent. The book discusses ritual practices in detail and gives an account of the five stages of awakening. The initiate self-consecrates and generates an experience of becoming a deity. Chapter Four, "Secretory Secrets: Sexual Yoga in Early *Mahāyoga*," opens with the power of meditation on the foul, moving to the role of sexual intercourse in enlightenment. In the mid-eighth century texts that advocated sex as a secret practice that could lead to awakening, while transgressing the boundaries of "ordinary limits" (p. 168).

Chapter Five, "Circles of Blazing Breaths: A Manual for Mantrarecitation," discusses a group of texts including Pelliot tibétain 634 and Pelliot tibétain 626. The questions investigated include whether the texts were written in Tibet or in Dunhuang, and the function of "methods for cycling the breath between sexual partners" (p. 202) as ways to manipulate the "subtle winds" of the body (p. 202). All chapters contain translations of distinct texts that illustrate or confirm the arguments made by the author throughout. The "Conclusions" summarises the findings of the research, arguing that early tantric Buddhist practices can be extracted from the Dunhuang texts, and that early manuals were presented as written by humans, while later manuals contained material that was attributed to the Buddha himself. As the texts changed, new practices were instigated; initiations, fire offerings, and meditations, to name a few. Paralleling this process was the development of poetic language to describe tantric practices, a trend that peaked in the mid-late eighth century.

Conjuring the Buddha: Ritual Manuals in Early Tantric Buddhism is a highly intelligent, well-read, admirably argued book that has the advantage of being focused on a narrow group of texts from a defined region and temporal period, which are of importance for the development of *tantra*, a movement that radically transformed Buddhism. The text is often complex and occasionally difficult to read, but the argument is ultimately clear and well-presented. It will be of interest to students and scholars of Buddhist Studies and esotericism.