47th Annual Distinguished Faculty Lecture,
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ABSTRACT: As a living reality, religion is both thought *and* action. However, since their inception in the latter part of the nineteenth century, both religious studies and Buddhist studies have given much greater attention to what people are supposed to think, that is doctrine, than to what people do, that is practice. Further, the academic study of religion tends to not only privilege doctrine but also to treat action as derivative of thought, and, consequently, practice as derivative of doctrine. This essay addresses these issues in two parts: critical and constructive. The first part critiques prevalent understandings of the relation between doctrine and practice. The second part proposes an alternative way of thinking about that relation. That alternative is a dialectic between thought and action, between doctrine and practice. This dialectic relation is a non-dual one, that is a relation between "semi-autonomous" traditions. Each of the two has its own developmental trajectory, but is at the same time in creative interaction with the other. Understanding the relation between thought and action, or doctrine and practice as a dialectic between two semi-autonomous traditions, avoids the distorting presumption that practice derives from doctrine.

Preface

Like many Buddhist scholars, my interest in Buddhism began with practice. What is now sometimes called the "Zen boom" of the late 1950s to mid-1970s put Buddhism into public awareness in a more positive light than previously. Somewhat later, but equally important for those of us interested in Buddhism, was the emergence of the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan teachers in exile. Across these decades, young devotees such as myself were interested in how to change their lives, their minds, and their world through practice. Exploring many different kinds of Buddhist practices, I became interested in the role of ritual — not simply as one part of the Buddhist tradition but as central to Buddhist practice.[131] And from there to realizing that ritual is not a unique category of activity, but rather a way of doing things—what Catherine Bell has called "ritualizing."[132] Doctrine is also not some unique category of activity, but rather a way of thinking about things, though unfortunately, no one has come up with a neat equivalent term—"doctrinizing" having a really funny sound to it.[133]

Introduction

This essay is organized into two parts: critical and constructive. The first part critiques prevalent understandings of the relation

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[131] In other words, an entirely divergent view from the eliminationist reductionism of Buddhist modernism.

[132] Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 7.

[133] There is, of course, a verbal form of theology: "theologizing." For reasons I've addressed elsewhere, however, that term is inappropriate for Buddhist thought. Richard K. Payne, "Why 'Buddhist Theology' is Not a Good Idea" in *The Pure Land: Journal of the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies*, n.s., no. 27 (2012–2013): 37–71.

between doctrine and practice. The second part proposes an alternative way of thinking about that relation.

The Privileging of Doctrine

Since their inception in the latter part of the nineteenth century, both religious studies and Buddhist studies have given much greater attention to what people are supposed to think, that is doctrine, than to what people do, that is practice.[134] But as a living reality, what we talk about when we talk about religion is both what people think *and* what they do. For much of the academic study of religion, however, doctrine holds pride of place, while the realities of what people do are marginal.[135] And, even within the relatively neglected study of practice, ritual has until recently received particularly short shrift.

Consider, for example, the weight of scholarly publishing. The Lotus Sūtra (*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*) is one of the many Mahāyāna Buddhist texts originating in India. Its earliest sections are dated to the first or second centuries CE, but like most such texts it was expanded over the ensuing centuries. A translation into Chinese was completed in 286, but the most widely used Chinese version dates from 406. It is considered an essential source of key doctrines that influenced the development of East Asian Buddhism. One of these is a new interpretation of the idea that there are three different

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[134] According to Donald Lopez, "the significance of Buddhist texts does not lie simply in their doctrinal content, but in the uses to which they have been put" (Lopez, ed., *Buddhism in Practice*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 31.

[135] This privileging is rooted in nineteenth-century class distinctions that gave theoretical knowledge, such as theology and philosophy, a superior status to practical knowledge. The "white collar" theoretician, working with their mind in a clean office, is of higher status than the "blue collar" technician, working with their hands in the dirt and grease of the field or workshop.

"vehicles"—the vehicles of those who listened to the Buddha (*sravakayāna*), those who attain awakening independently (*pratyekabuddhayāna*), and those who awaken to both insight and compassion (*bodhisattvayāna*). This new teaching is that instead of three different vehicles leading to three different goals, all practice leads to full awakening; that is, there is only one vehicle (*ekayāna*). A quick search on Amazon turns up some two dozen different English language translations of the Lotus Sūtra that are readily available.

By contrast, consider the *Path of Purification* (*Vissudhimagga*) by Buddhaghosa (fifth century), arguably the single most important historical source on Theravāda Buddhist *practice*, such as is found today in Southeast Asia, and has become familiar in the West under the rubric of "insight" meditation (*vipassanā*). The *Path of Purification* comprises a complete path of practice structured by the three progressive categories of morality (*śīla*), contemplation (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*prajñā*). This essential text has only two full English translations, one published in parts between 1922 and 1931 and the second originally published in 1956.[136] Of course, the doctrine/practice distinction is not the only reason for this discrepancy[137] between the Lotus Sūtra and the *Path of Purification*, but similar contrasts could be explored regarding many Buddhist texts.[138]

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[136] A similarly casual search on JSTOR gives over 3,500 entries for the Lotus Sūtra, while a search for *Visuddhimagga* yields just over 800.

[137] One might add sectarian considerations in that the Lotus Sūtra is considered a key text by some East Asian Buddhist sects.

[138] And in some cases, texts that are integrally both doctrine and practice are treated as doctrinal or "philosophical." This tendency among academics seems partly motivated by the higher social status, the greater intellectual cachet that still envelops

Formulaic representations of religions as sets of doctrines, such as those found in textbooks of "world religions" and in popular religious culture, simultaneously exemplify and reinforce this distorting emphasis on doctrine. In such settings, Buddhism is represented by the "major" doctrines that all Buddhists are said either to believe or to be taught.[139]

Both popular representations and academic understandings sometimes emphasize some imagined commonality of "all religions."[140] Once juxtaposed to one another in this larger category, however, both academic and popular discourse may then go on to emphasize contrasts between religious traditions, highlighting those doctrines that are identified as unique to one or the other—a kind of Aristotelian genus/species approach to definition. This emphasis on contrasting doctrines is also found in Buddhist sectarian polemics, where the teachings unique to a particular tradition within Buddhism are emphasized by its proponents and contrasted with the teachings of others.[141]

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philosophy and theology. This inclination is the result of class prejudice dating from the professionalization of academia that took place in the nineteenth century.

[139] Contemporary debates over the secularizing of Buddhism, for example, tend to focus more on doctrinal issues than on issues regarding practice. The interesting exception is debates over the role of ritual in Buddhist practice which results from the dichotomization of meditation and ritual. See Richard K. Payne, ed., *Secularizing Buddhism: New Perspectives on a Dynamic Tradition*, (Denver, CO: Shambhala Publications, 2021).

[140] Such commonality is not objective but rather follows from categorizing different traditions as religions, which selectively highlights those characteristics that seem to be shared.

[141] The academic focus on doctrine then, in turn, highlights sectarian polemics, a genre much given to making fine doctrinal distinctions. Thus, attention to doctrine is overdetermined—the central role of doctrine in religious studies selectively highlights doctrine and doctrinal aspects of texts from the Buddhist tradition. But such selection

Through repeated use, complex doctrinal claims can all too easily be reduced to formulaic keywords. For Buddhism, these include, for example, no-self, emptiness, karma, rebirth, buddhahood, awakening, samsara, nirvana, compassion, and so on, through the litany of topics familiar from textbooks, journalism, and popular culture.[142] These keywords are raised up as doctrinal emblems of the tradition, putatively representative of what Buddhists believe or are expected to believe.

There are two aspects of the greater attention paid to doctrine. First, doctrine and practice are thought to be two distinct and separate categories. And, second, not only is doctrine given priority, but practice is thought to derive from doctrine. Both of these aspects are historico-cultural artifacts and, therefore, problematic in their universal application.

The distinction between doctrine and practice is both congruent with and reinforced by dualistic preconceptions that pervade academic and popular religious cultures. These include the dualisms of mind and body, of spirit and matter, and of

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seems to often employ a decontextual and ahistorical conception of doctrine within which such comparisons can be made.

[142] Although each of these are used almost as slogans in popular and academic treatments of Buddhism, they are all complex and contested concepts within the tradition. Briefly (and very roughly), no-self and emptiness teach that both persons and objects have no permanent, unchanging essence. Karma labels the consequential nature of actions, while rebirth is the most significant consequence of a lifetime of actions leading to another lifetime. From different perspectives, buddhahood and awakening both describe the goal of practice. Samsara is the repetitive round of frustrations and suffering, while nirvana is the end of that repetition. Compassion is the guiding moral principle by which action turns toward the benefit of both self and others.

thought and action. In each case, the two are commonly conceived as separate from one another, ontologically distinct and independent.[143] Based on these dualisms, the idea that thought causes action has molded much of the study of practice, and being pervasive throughout the culture makes the privileging of doctrine seem obvious or natural.

The idea that practice derives from doctrine means that doctrine is fundamental and that practice is interpreted as having been created to express or to communicate that doctrine. However, the privileging of doctrine is frequently not expressed explicitly but is left implicit. The privileged status of doctrine is implicit in the greater attention paid to doctrine and by the way that practices are (supposedly) explained by reference to doctrines. According to this view, doctrinal interpretations of the meaning (or significance or rationale or function) of a practice are considered sufficiently explanatory. However, for the academic study of religion as a living reality, it is essential to distinguish explanation from interpretation, that is, to distinguish between an explanation of how something works and an interpretation of its meaning.

Here, I am using "explanation" in the strong sense of a causal explanation, an idea about how things work.[144]

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[143] Popular religious discourse does, of course, include what might be called a "soft idealism," which is reflected in claims about manifesting thoughts, thinking right thoughts, or affirming what one wants to happen, and so on.

[144] This distinction is intended to be more nuanced than the common distinction between the sciences and humanities that have followed from such concepts as the "is—ought" distinction as drawn by Hume, C.P. Snow's "two cultures," Wilhelm Dithey's distinction between understanding (*verstehung*) and knowledge (*wissenschaft*), and codified by Stephen Jay Gould as "non-overlapping magisteria" (NOMA). Despite being two human intellectual projects with different goals, interpretations, and explanations, they often seem to be confused in the discourse of religious studies.

Interpretations may claim to tell us the significance, meanings, or purposes of things, but they do not tell us how things work. The conceptual distinction between interpretation and explanation may seem trivially obvious. Still, clarity about the difference is fundamental to understanding that practice is not always and necessarily derivative from doctrine, nor that doctrinal interpretations are explanatory. There may indeed be instances in which a change in doctrine motivates a change in practice, but that must be demonstrated on a case-by-case basis rather than presumed as a given or as the normal state of affairs for all religious traditions. It is equally the case that changes in practice have motivated changes in doctrine.

Sharply delineating explanation from interpretation as two intellectually distinct projects in this fashion makes it clear that an interpretation, no matter how doctrinally or philosophically sophisticated, is not an explanation. For studying ritual as integral to religion, interpretations do not explain how or why a ritual originated, how it developed over time, how it may be effective or affect its participants, why it is maintained and reproduced over time, or how it changed as it was transmitted across cultural, linguistic, or religious borders.

While these generalizations regarding the disjunction of doctrine and practice reflect the state of religious studies and Buddhist studies since their inception over a century and a half ago, they have, however, been changing in the last two to three decades. The study of "lived religion" is a recent and welcome corrective to the hegemony of doctrinal studies.[145] But here, we

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[145] See, for example, the volume *The Oxford Handbook of Lived Buddhism*, co-edited by Courtney Bruntz and Brooke Schedneck, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Available online and forthcoming in print).

are concerned with the cultural inertia of intellectual discourse that continues to carry dualistic presumptions regarding doctrine and practice forward in both popular and scholarly discourse.

To repeat, the thesis of this essay is also twofold. First, the critical claim is that practice is not solely derivative from doctrine—indeed, practice is more complex than that. Second, the constructive claim is that thinking of practice and doctrine as separate and related (non-dual) is more adequate to the study of religion.

With these general methodological claims set out, examining a specific instance enables evaluating the validity of the approach outlined above to the relation between ritual and doctrine. One of the most dramatic rituals in the corpus of Buddhist practice is the tantric fire ritual in the course of which a fire is built in a hearth on the altar of a temple, and offerings representing the practitioner's mistaken conceptions and misplaced affections are burned and transformed into wisdom.[146]

Homa

The *homa* ritual is found in almost all tantric traditions, not only Buddhist but also Hindu and Jain.[147] Adopted into tantric Buddhist practice in the early medieval period, it is today found extensively throughout Japan, Tibet, Nepal, Mongolia, Taiwan,

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[146] The ritual is known in Sanskrit as *homa*, in Tibetan as *sbyin sreg* (སྦྱིན་སྲེག), in Chinese as *humo*, and in Japanese as *goma* (護摩).

[147] With a finer grain of categorization, some tantric traditions within the Hindu strain of praxis do not employ *homa* rituals.

and in some Buddhist temples in Europe and the Americas as well.

The particular kind of *homa* that I have studied most extensively is from the Japanese Esoteric Buddhist tradition of Shingon. Focusing on this ritual moves our inquiry from intellectual abstractions about the relation between doctrine and practice to a single particular case. Three analytic strategies can be employed to determine whether the fire ritual derives from or is (adequately) explained by doctrine or not. The first is an examination of relevant texts, the second is an inquiry into the ritual's history, and the third is a close look at the essential contents of the ritual itself.

Textual Inquiry

One of the most important texts for the Shingon tradition is the "Great Sun Buddha Tantra" (Dainichi-kyō, 大日経, Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi tantra). One might expect that the Great Sun Buddha Tantra would provide doctrinal prescriptions regarding the homa, particularly in a chapter with the promising title of "The Mundane and Supramundane *Homa* Rituals."[148] What one finds there, however, is not doctrine. It begins with a genealogy of different fires, from the beginning of mundane fires as the grandson of the great Brahmā (Mahābrahmā) down through nine generations of fires, each having its own name. Then, another list of fires individually named and identified for use in the sequence of life cycle rituals of the Brahmanic

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[148] Rolf W. Giebel, tr., *The Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi Sūtra* (Berkeley: The Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2005), 42c– 44a, print 213–217, online pdf 191–195.

tradition is given.[149] Two additional fires are listed: the fire in the sea and the fire at the end of time. Vairocana, the "Great Sun Buddha" who teaches this tantra, then explains that none of these are the true practice of *homa*.

Vairocana details how, after awakening, he expounded twelve fires, each of which is now named and described. He insists, however, that these are external *homa*, and following some additional ritual details, the Buddha Vairocana explains internal *homa*, saying that:

> Next, internal *homa* extinguishes karma and [re]birth.
>
> Understanding one's own *mana*s (mind), one dissociates oneself from form, sound, and so on.
>
> The eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body, as well as verbal and mental action,
>
> All arise entirely from the mind and depend upon the mind-king.
>
> The eyes and so on, born of differentiation, as well as the objective realms of form and so on,

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149 These life stages are known as *saṃskaras* and identified here as conception, purificatory bathing of each of the parents, birth, name giving, first feeding, making a topknot of the child's hair, giving of precepts, presentation of a cow to the teacher, and marriage. These ten match but do not include all the items in the list of sixteen saṃskaras found elsewhere.

Obstacles to wisdom unborn, the Wind-
parched Fire is able to extinguish.

It burns away false differentiation and
accomplishes the pure *bodhi*-mind.

This is called internal *homa*, and it has been
taught for bodhisattvas.[150]

As presented here, internal *homa* is concerned with purifying the karmic afflictions created by one's own mistaken conceptions and misplaced affections. While for us today, a great deal of this chapter is obscure, this distinction between the many kinds of external *homa* and the internal *homa* allows us to conclude two things.[151]

First, the tantra is compiled during the period in Indic religious history (c. 6 to 8 centuries CE) that saw many external ritual practices being reinterpreted and reformulated as embodied yogic practices, which are performed within the body.[152] Interiority, in this case, is not mental, as we might easily assume in today's psychologized milieu. In other words, this interiorization is not a matter of performing the ritual in one's imagination as the mental manipulation of symbolic imagery. Rather, interiorization was being effected by an interior

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[150] 44a; Giebel, print: 217, online pdf: 194; cf. Hodge, 389–390.

[151] It seems reasonable to assume that understanding the chapter depended upon familiarity with the many different strains of ritual practices active at the time the tantra was compiled.

[152] Jacob Dalton, "The Development of Perfection: The Interiorization of Buddhist Ritual in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32 (2004), 1–30; Yael Bentor, "Interiorized Fire Rituals in India and in Tibet," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 120.4 (2000), 594–613.

physiological process. This is similar to a kind of compassion meditation that readers may be familiar with—one breathes in the suffering of living beings, transforms that suffering within one's own body, and breathes out compassion, peace, and ease for all living beings.[153]

The second conclusion we can draw from the Great Sun Buddha Tantra is that the tantra's authors and editors were referring to a rich and complex ritual culture involving the use of fire that was already in place. This insight means that whether the doctrinal interpretations given to these practices in the tantra itself were widely shared or unique to this text, they are interpretations of existing ritual practices. While we might understand the tantra as legitimating this ritual for tantric Buddhist practitioners, it is legitimating an existing practice, one most probably already being practiced anyway. The tantra, in other words, constitutes a codification of existing practice, which was being transmitted experientially and orally—prior to this codification, initiates were probably being shown and told what to do, not reading a *sūtra*, tantra, or ritual manual, and following its instructions.[154]

The Great Sun Buddha Tantra is relatively early, as are the other tantras that played significant roles in the development of East Asian tantric Buddhism. Readers familiar with Tibetan Buddhist textual categories will know that the later

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[153] Tib. *tonglen*.

[154] To the extent that doctrinal learning takes place in the performance of ritual, it is an implicit form of learning and not didactic. This is "knowledge–how," see Carlotta Pavese, "Knowledge How," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), retrieved from: https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/knowledge-how/.

tantras, when the tradition became better established, do give greater attention to doctrinal discourses. In later tantras, the "authoritative teachings seem to be most focused on those aspects of tantric discourses that are systematically pointing out the non-dual, blissful, and empty nature of ultimate reality present in all sentient beings and attainable within a single lifetime."[155] As rich as the later tantras are with doctrinal exposition—and as fascinating as doctrine is for twenty-first-century intellectuals—any discussion of the *homa* found there will also be an interpretation of an existing and well-established practice.

Historical Inquiry

The second analytic strategy is historical. If we look at history instead of texts, the relation between ritual and doctrine is also clearly not one in which doctrine determines ritual.

A primary source for the tantric Buddhist practice of the *homa* is Vedic ritual practice, which predates the time of the historical Buddha, Śākyamuni, by more than a millennium. Components from it were adapted into Buddhist practice in the early medieval period, and then, from India, it spread throughout the tantric Buddhist world.

Central to most Vedic rituals are offerings to the ancestors, and these rituals are modelled on the guest-host practices of the Vedic peoples. Feasting an honored guest already involved a set of ritualized activities, just as our own holiday meals do today. Adopting the practices of feasting as a

[155] Vesna A. Wallace, "The Tantric Buddha: Primordial Buddhas as Philosophical Authors," in *Routledge Handbook of Indian Buddhist Philosophy*, William Edelglass, Pierre-Julien Harter, and Sara McClintock, eds., 46–63 (London: Routledge, 2022), 46.

model organizing the actions of a ritual is more adequately explanatory of the *homa* ritual than are any doctrinal interpretations attributed to an already existing ritual.

In both Vedic and tantric ritual, the fire into which offerings are made is personified as Agni. Agni is not only the ritual fire but also cooking fires, wildfires, the digestive fire, the fire of sexual desire, the cremation fire, and, as we have already seen, the fire of wisdom that destroys karma. Fire is not the symbol of Agni; Agni is the fire.

The identity of Agni and the votive fire points to the fact that for some ritual cultures, ritual is not the symbolic manipulation of symbolic objects for symbolic ends. Symbolic interpretations of ritual give primacy to something other than ritual, such as mythology or psychology. Like doctrinal ones, these abstract away from actual ritual performance and its experience as part of lived religion.

In the early medieval period, the *homa* and Agni, along with various other practices and deities, were reformulated into what we today identify as tantric culture. Vedic ritual continued in some parts of India alongside Brahmanic and tantric practices.[156] Doctrinal developments did not instigate this historical trajectory. Instead, when such practices were integrated, for example, into a Buddhist context, they were then given Buddhist doctrinal interpretations, such as emptiness or the others mentioned previously. Attribution of doctrinal significance followed the adoption of ritual practices.

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[156] Frits Staal, *Agni: The Vedic Ritual of the Fire Altar* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1983).

Thus, as examined here, neither the textual nor the historical record indicates that the practice of *homa* derived from doctrine. In addition to these two analytic strategies, a third is to examine the contents of the ritual itself.

Ritual Inquiry

The third analytic strategy is to look closely at the content of the ritual itself.

Even a relatively short ritual, such as the *homa*, comprises many different components. The most uniquely tantric—rather than Vedic—ritual act in the *homa* is ritual identification. "Ritual identification" is at the center of the fire ritual. Given its centrality—both in the structure of the ritual and in how it is understood to be effective—this would seem to be the most likely element to have derived from doctrine. When we look at the ritual closely, however, we find that it is something to be done, not something to be thought—a ritual action to be performed, not an idea to the thought, nor a doctrine to be believed.

Ritual identification involves evoking a buddha, bodhisattva, or protector deity into the altar enclosure, first by ritually cleansing the altar, then inviting the deity, and finally enclosing the altar space with protections.[157] Then, the practitioner visualizes their own body, speech, and mind to be identical to the body, speech, and mind of the deity. The identification of the practitioner's body with that of the deity is done by the bodily act of forming *mudrā* (hand gestures). The

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[157] These ritual actions comprise both hand gestures (*mudrā*) and mantra taken together.

spoken act of reciting mantra (verbal expressions) is the identity of speech. And the mental act of visualizing *maṇḍala* (diagrammatic portrayals of the specific buddha being evoked along with his distinct retinue of bodhisattvas and protectors) constitutes the identity of mind.

The identity of practitioner and deity in the tantric rituals of the Shingon tradition is a non-dual relation—the practitioner does not stop being the practitioner, but rather is simultaneously aware of being awakened, reframing their experience as that of a buddha. This is not, in other words, a delusion in which one thinks that one is the creator of the universe.[158] Ritual identification correlates first with the doctrine that one is always and already awakened and second with the claim that tantric practice is the sudden path to awakening, being so powerful that it effects awakening in this very lifetime.[159]

And in a very significant sense, the practice of the *homa* serves to embody this teaching of identity in the practitioner, not by means of didactic instruction, but experientially. The practitioner is not being told what to believe or what to think but rather engages in ritual actions that frame their experience of being in the world as awakened.

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[158] Such inflation forms one of the amusing episodes in the classic Chinese Buddhist picaresque tale of Monkey, in which a monkey gains extraordinary powers through Daoist practice and thinks he is greater than the Buddha. He learns, much to his chagrin, that he is not. He becomes the disciple of the Monk Xuanzang and assists him in his travels (and adventures) on the Silk Road.

[159] The term "correlation" indicates the nondual and dialectic relation between doctrine and practice, that is, praxis, in the present. Such doctrinal claims are not explanatory but rather interpretive.

In performing the ritual, one simply performs the ritual act of identification—there is no accompanying doctrinal instruction in the ritual itself. As in many societies, learning occurs not only by the intellectual transmission of facts, concepts, and reasoning but also—or even perhaps primarily—through enacted bodily activity. This style of training can be found in Vedic and Buddhist traditions long before the development of tantra and in a wide variety of traditions elsewhere in the world as well.[160]

Practicing mindfulness of the body is an embodied practice. This is evident in texts of the Pāli canon,[161] where, for example, it is explained that "mindfulness of the body, when developed and cultivated, is of great fruit and great benefit."[162] This is not an abstract doctrinal claim, but rather part of foundational instructions on attending to the breath. Similarly, embodied practice is also found in the Zen tradition, for example, in Sōtō Zen, where Dōgen teaches that just sitting (*shikantaza*) is being a buddha.[163]

Despite the centrality of the ritual act of identification in the fire ritual, it was added to a pre-existing ritual practice,

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[160] For example, neo-Confucian training is largely embodied.

[161] Pāli is the language created to record an early set of texts attributed to Śākyamuni Buddha. The canon is associated with the Theravāda school.

[162] "*Kāyagatāsati Sutta*: Mindfulness of the Body," in *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation fo the* Majjhima Nikāya, tr. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, 949–958, #119 (Boston: Wisdom, 1995).

[163] Wendi L. Adamek, *The Teachings of Master Wuzhu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 6.

perhaps as part of making the fire ritual more tantric.[164] Rituals that involve making offerings into fire have a long prehistory before being adapted into tantric Buddhist practice with the addition of ritual identification at its center.

Practices such as ritual identification that come from a cultural and intellectual context other than one's own are easily misinterpreted. This issue indicates the necessity of an additional nuance for our earlier methodological discussion.

How Not to Misinterpret Other People's Rituals

The comparative dimension of religious studies requires sensitivity not only to the cultural context of other people's beliefs and practices but also to one's own. In other words, it is very much like translating a text written in a foreign language into one's native tongue.

The issues involved in translation have been the subject of some discussion by philosophers. In order to avoid mistakes based on presuming that one's own cultural context and values are unproblematically universal, some philosophers have

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[164] While ritual identification is central to many tantric rituals, it is not particularly theorized in the ritual literature as such with which I'm familiar. My own attempts to understand how ritual identification is thought to be effective have moved toward an interpretation that makes it consistent with familiar Mahāyāna doctrines. That strategy is evident, for example, in the first chapter of the Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi tantra. Among those, one understanding of identity is that both the buddha and the practitioner are empty; that is, neither has any permanent, eternal, absolute, or unchanging essence. Both arise due to causes and conditions, and when those causes and conditions change, both practitioner and buddha change. The two are identical in just that fashion—since there is no essence, a practitioner is equally a buddha and a buddha is equally a practitioner—the third term of the relation being emptiness. While understanding the ritual act of identification in this way makes sense to me, that is, it is a satisfying interpretation, it is being applied to an already existing practice. It does not indicate that the practice is derived from the doctrine of emptiness.

proposed what is known as the "principle of charity."[165] The principle of charity may be characterized as requiring translators to make three assumptions about other people outside their own culture.[166] And it may be summarized in three phrases: that other people they do mean what they say, that it makes sense to them, and that what they say is not simply a result of duplicity, obscurantism, insanity, or irrationality.

This is, of course, not to claim that one never encounters duplicity, obscurantism, insanity, or irrationality. However, one must first understand what is being said before moving on to any conclusion regarding the intention or mental status of the other. The principle of charity has also been employed in anthropology, where the issues of understanding other people's cultures means "translating" into the framework of one's own. Here, we suggest that it can be adapted as a principle guiding interpretation of other people's religions as well. Quite simply, interpretations that seem obvious in one's own cultural, social, or intellectual context do not necessarily apply outside that context. The principle of charity provides a better guide to

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[165] The principle of charity was named as such by Neil L. Wilson in his "Substances Without Substrata," *The Review of Metaphysics* 12.4 (June 1959), 521–539. Willard van Orman Quine (*Word and Object*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), and Donald Davidson ("On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974) have further refined the idea.

[166] "The 'principle of charity' has been defined as the hermeneutic principle that 'If a participant's argument is reformulated by an opponent, it should be expressed in the strongest possible version that is consistent with the original intention of the arguer. If there is any question about that intention or about implicit parts of the argument, the arguer should be given the benefit of any doubt in the reformulation.' Jonathan Davis, "A Code of Conduct for Effective Rational Discussion," http://www.ukpoliticsmisc.org.uk/usenet_evidence/argument.html (accessed May 3, 2005). The principle originates with Quine's discussion of the problems of translation" (Richard K. Payne, "Ritual Syntax and Cognitive Theory," *Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies*, 3rd series, no. 6 (2004), 195–227: 223 n. 5.

understanding other people's religious practices, such as ritual identification.

Working through these three different analytic strategies, we find that the textual record, the historical record, and the ritual performance itself, all reveal the *homa* ritual as a pre-existing practice to which Buddhist components and interpretations were added. Discerning these processes of adaptation and interpretation requires both awareness of one's own religious culture to prevent presuming inappropriate meanings and applying the principle of charity. But if ritual and other practices do not derive from doctrine, then what is a better way of thinking about the relation between the two?

If Not Derivative, Then What?

So, if practice does not derive from doctrine and is not explained by doctrine, and doctrinal interpretations are made of existing practices, then what is a better way of thinking about the relation between doctrine and practice? After all, it seems obvious that there is some kind of relation.

Despite hoping for a more elegant alternative, the unfortunately clunky phrase I've come up with is "semi-autonomous traditions." This phrase simply identifies a way of thinking about the relation between two ongoing systems of practice, whether religious practices or those of art and architecture, poetry, historiography, and literature, or recording and explicating doctrine. As found in any particular tradition, doctrinal reflection, including recording such reflections in texts, is a practice with its own history and trajectory.

"Semi-autonomous traditions" is a descriptive label, not a theory. What it describes, however, is a way of understanding the history of religious traditions by framing it as a complex of overlapping systems—ritual, textualization, doctrine, art, architecture, music, etc. That frame acknowledges the reality that each system has its own ongoing process of development, while at the same time acknowledging that they interact with one another. As a descriptive term, it can be of heuristic utility because it helps to avoid the distortions created either by treating any one of the traditions as dominant or determinative of the others or by treating each in isolation from the others. In the specific instance here, doctrine and practice each have their own developmental processes and have interacted with one another. But neither is primary, dominant, nor determinative of the other.

Tantric Buddhist practice, including the fire ritual, has historical roots from before the time of Śākyamuni Buddha. Developing in the medieval period, it spread across the Buddhist cosmopolis and continues into the present. That history can be seen as running alongside the practices of Buddhist doctrinal reflection and entextualization. But the two do interact — there are historical moments when a doctrinal change effects a change in practice and, conversely, moments when a change in practice effects a change of doctrine. In this non-dual relation of separate and related, neither is the only cause determining the other, and indeed, other semi-autonomous traditions are also part of the ongoing processes of historical change.

From Practice to Doctrine: A Change in Practice Motivating a Change in Doctrine

One example of a change in practice that led to a change in doctrine follows the death of the Buddha Śākyamuni. Initially, memorial mounds, known as *stūpas*, were constructed as reliquaries containing the bodily relics of the Buddha. They were, therefore, the continuing embodied presence of the Buddha and drew both laity and monastics as sites of devotion and worship. Later, copies of texts containing the Buddha's teachings, referred to as the dharma,[167] were placed inside *stūpas*. These, in turn, came to be thought of as another kind of body of the Buddha, the body of his teachings. Such *stūpas* then also served as sites of veneration by laity and monastics. Over time, these practices were theorized into the doctrine of the three bodies of the buddha—the transcendent body of the teachings (*dharmakāya*), the glorious body manifest as a result of awakening (*sambhogakāya*), and the human body of a living buddha (*nirmāṇakāya*).[168] The three-body doctrine arose in response to developing practices related to the remains of Śākyamuni's human body. This is, in other words, an instance in which practice motivated doctrine.

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[167] "Dharma" is a densely polysemous term. In much of common Buddhist discourse in English, it is treated simply as the insider term for the teachings of the Buddha Śākyamuni—rather like the use of the term "Gospel" in Christian English language discourse. Although admittedly not a Sanskritist, my understanding of the core or root meaning of the term is that which is actually the case. In this sense then, the teachings of the Buddha are dharma, because they are based on or point to what is actually the case. Similarly, in Buddhist psychology, the ultimate experiential constituents are called dharmas because they are what are actually the case as well. A not uncommon stylistic distinction is made between the teachings of the buddhas as "Dharma," and the psycho-ontological constituents as "dharmas"—but treating the two as distinct in this fashion unfortunately blurs the underlying unity of meaning.

[168] See John Powers, "The Body of the Buddha," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Richard K. Payne and Georgios Halkias, eds., (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, online 2021) https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.745, print 2024.

From Doctrine to Practice:
Multiple Semi-Autonomous Traditions in Interaction

The following example first demonstrates doctrine motivating practice but also adds the idea that several semi-autonomous traditions can interact with one another. Art, architecture, calligraphy, metallurgy, weaving, medicine, astronomy, astrology, and so on all interacted with ritual, but also all had their own history and trajectories of development. The high value that we place on interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary work in the field of religious studies evidences our awareness of the importance of such interactions.

The specific example is one in which there appears to be a convergence of three different semi-autonomous traditions — the calligraphic *maṇḍala* created by the Japanese monk Nichiren (1222–1282). Active during the medieval period in Japan, Nichiren established a new sect, which gives central place to the Lotus Sūtra. The sect's practice includes reciting a phrase praising the title of the Lotus Sūtra (known as the *daimoku*), and in some strains of Nichiren Buddhism, this recitation practice is particularly prominent. Despite distinctions based on doctrine, the phrase, *namu myōhō renge kyō*, is indistinguishable from a mantra, and the practice of reciting it is indistinguishable from mantra recitation. The recitation of mantras and other powerful verbal expressions is known not only from the broader tantric tradition but also from the Buddhist tradition as a whole and even more extensively throughout the Indic context. The phrase *namu myōhō renge kyō* can be rendered as meaning "praise to the true dharma lotus *sūtra*," and is central to the graphic form created by Nichiren for practice. Members of the lineage widely employ reproductions of the scroll. Three semi-autonomous traditions

flow together in Nichiren's written scroll — doctrinal, calligraphic, and mandalic.

The explicitly doctrinal dimension is from Indic theories regarding the power of sound, specifically, the power of various forms of extraordinary language, such as mantra. The idea that sound is powerful extends to written forms, such as a mantra written in the Siddham script[169] that is still in use in East Asian Buddhism today.[170] The sound of the mantra, the written phrase, and the deity are considered to constitute an identity—reciting or writing the mantra makes the buddha, bodhisattva, protector, or in this case, the power of the *sūtra* present. As central objects of cultic practice, deities—whether anthropomorphic or texts or mantras—are referred to in Japanese as "chief deity" (*honzon*, 本尊). According to specialist in Japanese Buddhism Jacqueline Stone, "Honzon were regarded not as merely symbolic but as actually embodying the powers and virtues of the Buddhist holy beings that they depicted."[171]

The second dimension is the style of calligraphy found in the practice of Chinese talismanic writing. Originating in Daoist talismanic writing, this style was adopted by Buddhist practitioners as well.[172] The characters used to write protective

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[169] Siddham is a medieval Sanskrit script different from the more commonly encountered Devanāgarī script.

[170] Aaron Proffitt, "Shingon," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Richard K. Payne and Georgios T. Halkias, eds. (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, online: https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.767), print 2024.

[171] Jacqueline Stone, "Nichiren," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Richard K. Payne and Georgios T. Halkias, eds. (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, online: https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.767), print 2024.

amulets were brushed with specific and consistent distortions. East Asian scholar James Robson has described this distorted style of Daoist talismanic writing as "an esoteric or illegible form of writing."[173]

The third dimension is art historical, specifically *maṇḍalas* used as organizing principles. Written in Chinese characters, the phrase praising the Lotus Sūtra is "surrounded by the names of various buddhas, bodhisattvas, and deities." [174] In this way, the "calligraphic *maṇḍala* . . . represents in Chinese and a few Sanskrit characters the ever-present assembly where the primordial Śākyamuni Buddha preaches the Lotus Sūtra."[175] In the kinds of *maṇḍala* most often portrayed in Western religious studies literature, the figures are pictorial representations of a central buddha and his retinue. In some East Asian *maṇḍalas*, the attendant deities that appear surrounding the *maṇḍala*'s central deity are represented by mantric syllables, while here, it is their names that function mantrically.

This calligraphic *maṇḍala* from medieval Japan for a particular Buddhist practice can be interpreted as an instance created in the space where three different semi-autonomous

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[172] Christine Mollier, *Buddhism and Taoism Face to Face: Scripture, Ritual and Iconographic Exchange in Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009).

[173] James Robson, "Signs of Power: Talismanic Writing in Chinese Buddhism," *History of Religions*, 48.2 (2008), 130–169: 131.

[174] Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *The Lotus Sūtra: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016) 189.

[175] Jacqueline I. Stone, *Right Thoughts at the Last Moment: Buddhism and Deathbed Practices in Early Medieval Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016), 356.

traditions overlap.[176] The structure of a central deity with surrounding retinue found in *maṇḍala*s dating from early medieval India constitutes one of the semi-autonomous traditions contributing to the formation of the mandalic *honzon* created by Nichiren. The power of extraordinary language and the talismanic style of calligraphy from Daoist practice also contributed to forming this central object of cultic practice. Shifting perspectives, as employed in practice, this calligraphic *maṇḍala* with a mantra as its central figure is neither representational nor referential. As an object used in practice, its meaning is not located in something other than itself. It is the presence of the powers and assembly of the Lotus Sūtra, just as other *maṇḍalas* are the presence of a buddha and the retinue who accompany that buddha.

Conclusion

Neither doctrine nor ritual exists entirely independently from one another. Instead, the two affect one another, bound together in a non-dual dialectic. Conversely, neither is fully autonomous, that is, closed off from one another. Yet, each continues to develop along their own trajectories while interacting with one another.[177] Such trajectories are not necessarily smooth and uniform but rather a series of steps, gaps, leaps, digressions, and punctuations that mark changes of various kinds, changes that can result either from internal events or external ones.

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[176] What follows does not draw on any established art historical study that I have been able to locate, but rather my own thesis based on thinking about how the *maṇḍala* discussed here can be interpreted as a product of three different semi-autonomous traditions converging.

[177] This use of "development" is specifically *not* intended to suggest any teleological, goal-oriented trajectory, leading to a better final state.

The concept of "semi-autonomous traditions" is suggested as a useful way to think about the relation between ritual and doctrine.[178] In addition to interacting dialectically, this separate but related character is a non-dual relation – each exists in a necessary relation with the other. The idea of semi-autonomous traditions is not a causal explanation—but a conceptual framework that can assist scholarship while at the same time avoiding distortion and misconceptions. So, while we have focused here on ritual, the same applies to other kinds of practices as well. Thus, the category of "religion" itself identifies a semi-autonomous tradition—though one operating in religious studies discourse at a higher level of abstraction that includes the semi-autonomous traditions of both doctrine and practice.[179]

The weight of scholarship in both Buddhist studies and religious studies tips the scales dramatically away from the side of practice and toward the side of doctrine. This is not only a consequence of the intellectual obsession with ideas but also because of the belief that thought causes action, the workings of the sociology of knowledge, and the economics of academia.[180] These influences all put a thumb on the scale—or perhaps, given how many factors are involved, it is more of a full fist.

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[178] In systems theory, this understanding of the interaction between two traditions would be described as two semi-permeable systems.

[179] From a perspective different from that of religious studies, the three traditions may be viewed as overlapping with one another. Instead of a hierarchy of abstraction, the three would look like a Venn diagram.

[180] See Scott Mitchell, "Drawing Blood: At the Intersection of Knowledge Economies and Buddhist Economies," in *Buddhism Under Capitalism*, Richard K. Payne and Fabio Rambelli, eds. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022),169–183.

The presumption that thought causes action is not simply true as given. It is, instead, one way in which we conceive of ourselves. For religious studies, the analogous claim that doctrine determines practice is also not simply true as given. Instead, it is one way of thinking about a complex, dialectical interplay between two semi-autonomous traditions that are nondually related.

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