
Summary

S.1

The *Mahāmāyātantra*, named after its principal deity Mahāmāyā, is a tantra of the Yoginītantra class in which Mahāmāyā presides over a maṇḍala populated primarily by yoginīs and ḍākinīs. The practitioner engages the antinomian power of these beings through a threefold system of yoga involving the visualization of the maṇḍala deities, the recitation of their mantras, and the direct experience of absolute reality. As well as practices involving the manipulation of the body's subtle energies, the *Mahāmāyātantra* incorporates the transgressive practices that are the hallmark of the earlier tantric systems such as the *Guhyasamājatantra*, specifically the ingestion of sexual fluids and other polluting substances. The tantra promises the grace of Mahāmāyā in the form of mundane and transcendent spiritual attainments to those who approach it with diligence and devotion.

Introduction

I.1

The *Mahāmāyātantra*, named after its principal deity Mahāmāyā, belongs to the class of Yoginītantras. According to the post-tenth-century classification scheme of the Tibetan New Schools (*gsar ma*), the *Mahāmāyātantra* is categorized as a Mother tantra (*ma rgyud*) among Unexcelled Yoga tantras (*bla na med pa'i rnal 'byor gyi rgyud, yoganiruttaratantra*). It earns this classification due both to the importance placed on female divinities in the tantra's maṇḍala and to its inclusion of practices focused on the manipulation of the body's subtle energies. In this tantra, Mahāmāyā presides over a maṇḍala populated primarily by yoginīs and ḍākinīs, those semi-divine female figures known throughout South Asian tantric traditions for the power they derive from being propitiated with blood, flesh, and sex. The practitioner engages the antinomian power of these beings through a threefold system of yoga involving the visualization of the maṇḍala deities, the recitation of their mantras, and the direct experience of absolute reality. The *Mahāmāyātantra* also incorporates the transgressive practices that are the hallmark of earlier tantric systems such as the *Guhyasamājatantra*,¹ specifically the ingestion of sexual fluids and other polluting substances. The tantra promises the grace of Mahāmāyā in the form of mundane and transcendent spiritual attainments (*siddhi*) to those who approach it with diligence, courage, and devotion.

I.2

Though it is difficult to pinpoint precisely when the *Mahāmāyātantra* first began

to circulate within Buddhist tantric communities, the work rose to prominence toward the end of the first millennium CE as part of an efflorescence of new tantric material associated with yoginīs, ḍākinīs, and other female divinities. The designation “yoginītantra” was conferred on these texts precisely because of their incorporation of a more feminized vision of divinity and power. Yoginītantras vary in style and content, ranging from somewhat disordered and obscure works like the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra* to refined and doctrinally coherent texts such as the *Kālacakratantra*. With its distinct narrative style, focus on the mundane spiritual attainments, and near total absence of clearly articulated Buddhist doctrine, the *Mahāmāyātantra* demonstrates a thematic and rhetorical similarity to the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra*, one of the earliest yoginītantras.² Additionally, considering instances of intertextuality with the earlier *Guhyasamājatantra*,³ and a seeming lack of awareness of more doctrinally and structurally developed yoginītantras such as the *Hevajratantra* and *Kālacakratantra*, it is reasonable to assume that the *Mahāmāyātantra* was among the earlier of the yoginītantras, appearing in Buddhist tantric circles in the late ninth or early tenth centuries. It had certainly gained enough popularity by the eleventh century to draw the attention of the prominent monastic scholars of the period.

1.3

In India the *Mahāmāyātantra* probably circulated within both the major monastic institutions and the communities surrounding charismatic tantric masters. Foremost among the monastic scholars who commented on the text was [Ratnākaraśānti](#),⁴ whose *Guṇavatiṭīkā* (*A Commentary Endowed with Qualities*) grounds the often enigmatic verses of the *Mahāmāyātantra* in mainstream Buddhist philosophy, especially that of Yogācāra. [Kṛṣṇavajra](#)’s commentary,⁵ the *Mahāmāyātantrasya vṛtti smṛti* (*Recollection: A Commentary on the MahāmāyāTantra*), frequently cites the oral tradition, pointing to the body of unwritten instructions that present the practical techniques almost completely absent in the *Mahāmāyātantra* itself. Contributions to the *Mahāmāyātantra* corpus came from outside the walls of the monastery as well. [Kukkuripa](#) and Kṛṣṇācārya, both of whom would eventually be counted among the eighty-four *mahāsiddhas*, composed practice liturgies (*sādhana*) for the tantra, while the siddhas [Nāropa](#) and Kaṇha are said to have taught the tantra to Marpa, thus facilitating its transmission to Tibet.⁶

1.4

The *Mahāmāyātantra* arrived in Tibet in the early eleventh century as part of the second wave of Buddhist teachings to reach the Land of Snows. It appears to have entered Tibet via two distinct lines of transmission, through [Marpa Chökyi Lodrö](#) and [Gö Lhetsé](#). The lineage of Gö Lhetsé, a prolific translator and important teacher of the *Guhyasamājatantra*,⁷ appears to have died out, though the translation of the *Mahāmāyātantra* and the majority of its associated texts

preserved in the Kangyur and Tengyur are his. The converse is true of Marpa; if he ever produced a translation of the *Mahāmāyātantra*, it has been lost, and yet it is his lineage, as passed through his disciple Ngoktön Chöku Dorjé (*rngog ston chos sku rdo rje*, 1036–1102), that continues to be transmitted to this day. The *Mahāmāyātantra* also received a great deal of attention from the Tibetan polymath Tāranātha (1575–1634), who composed two commentaries and a practice manual for it.⁸

The Text

1.5

The *Mahāmāyātantra* describes, in verses both terse and enigmatic, the practices and attainments associated with the deity *Mahāmāyā* and her retinue of *yoginīs*. Yoginīs, and their close counterparts the *ḍākinīs*, are renowned for their ability to grant mastery of temporal and transcendent *spiritual attainments* to devoted and courageous practitioners who are willing to brave an encounter with these often ferocious beings. In this tantra *Mahāmāyā* is invoked as the queen of *ḍākinīs*, the queen of the *yoginīs*, and the supreme secret of these secret goddesses, making her the paramount source of spiritual attainment. The tantra promises the accomplishment of such powers through the visualization of its deities and their *maṇḍalas*, the manipulation of the body's subtle energies and the cultivation of the power of transgression through the ingestion of impure substances. And yet these practices are only hinted at within the tantra itself; the specifics are reserved for initiates and are to be spoken only by a lineage holder. Thus, as is the case with most tantras, this text is meant to be practiced only after receiving initiation and instruction from a qualified master.

1.6

The *Mahāmāyātantra*'s three chapters and eighty-one verses depart from the traditional narrative structure of Buddhist scripture. Buddhist tantras typically follow the *sūtra* tradition by beginning with a formulaic introduction meant to establish the time, place, audience, and above all the authority of a given scripture. This formula, which begins “Thus I have heard...” (*evaṃ mayā śrutam*), is absent in the *Mahāmāyātantra*, which begins instead with a perfunctory “Now...” (*ataḥ*).⁹ This deviation is in part explained by the fact that this is not a discourse of the Buddha, but rather a dialogue between two deities associated with the tantra. However, the lack of a formal introduction leaves it unclear precisely who these deities are. The interlocutor appears to be none other than *Mahāmāyā* herself; verse 1.25 invokes her by name as the recipient of the tantra's instruction. The speaker, however, is never explicitly identified within the text. *Kṛṣṇavajra* ventures a guess, suggesting Vajradākinī as the source of the teaching.¹⁰ *Ratnākaraśānti* takes a different approach and, instead of concerning himself with identifying figures not explicitly named in the text, considers the *Mahāmāyātantra* to be derived from a

much larger mythical compendium of tantras (which he refrains from identifying).¹¹ It is in that collection, he declares, that one may find the traditional introduction that establishes the important details of the *Mahāmāyātāntṛa*’s setting.

1.7

From this abrupt beginning, the first chapter continues with several verses invoking Mahāmāyā’s qualities and describing the powers acquired through her successful propitiation. Tantras centered upon yoginīs and dākinīs, whether Buddhist or non-Buddhist, typically emphasize the attainment of mundane powers over the transcendent; in this the *Mahāmāyātāntṛa* is no different. The yogī who masters the practices of Mahāmāyā will, the text promises, be able to magically influence and attack others, acquire whatever he desires, fly through the sky, travel through other realms, become invisible, possess the bodies of others, and become immortal. Compared to this comprehensive and repetitive list of mundane attainments, the tantra makes only passing reference to the more altruistic and transcendent attainments. Only once does the text mention that its attainments can be used to benefit others (1.28), and only once does it explicitly announce that its practice can result in buddhahood (3.25).

1.8

Following this exhaustive account of the attainments, the first chapter closes with a description of a short sequence of visualization. The reader may be puzzled at this point to find that Mahāmāyā, who had, up to this point, been invoked using explicitly feminine epithets, is suddenly referred to using undeniably masculine terms. Though some suggest this is the tantra of a male deity with a feminine name,¹² Mahāmāyā is a female deity, as the verses of invocation make clear—she is the great Queen Mahāmāyā, the mother of the guhyakas, and the queen of yoginīs. She is consistently addressed using a specifically feminine epithet, vidyā, that simultaneously invokes her status as the embodiment of knowledge and as the female deity presiding over a maṇḍala. And yet here, and in the third chapter where her iconography is fully described, she becomes the male Heruka, the Virile One(vīra) embracing the consort Buddhaḍākinī.

1.9

This gender ambiguity is clarified when we consider that the tantra describes Mahāmāyā as a feminized form of absolute reality. She is said to pervade everything in the three worlds, to be the source of all the gods, and to create, sustain, and destroy the universe. Most importantly, she is exactly what her name suggests, the “great illusion” that constitutes apparent reality. When she takes embodiment, she can do so in any form necessary, which in the context of this tantra is Heruka, the male deity most frequently found at the center of tantric maṇḍalas. Ratnākaraśānti makes explicit the ontological primacy of the feminine

Mahāmāyā; in his commentary he equates her with Vajradhara, the embodiment of absolute reality, who is typically male, and identifies her as “she who has the form of Heruka.”¹³

I.10

The second chapter is the tantra’s shortest and most challenging. Its verses only hint at the techniques and visualizations to which they refer. The communities in which the *Mahāmāyātantra* circulated would have guarded their teachings and techniques closely, making complete explanations accessible only to an intimate circle of initiates. The tantra’s verses—especially those that appear to refer to specific techniques—are not meant to be edifying, only allusive. It is the role of the tantric master to unpack each verse and convey its practical content to those prepared to receive it. Thus in this chapter we are offered only the barest of introductions to what was likely a complex sequence of techniques.

I.11

The fifth verse of the second chapter introduces the primary structure of the tantra’s practices, one the later Tibetan commentators would identify as a framework for the [development stage](#) and [completion stage](#) practices unique to the *Mahāmāyātantra*.¹⁴ Verse 2.5 states:

The threefold practice is said to be essentially mantra, appearance, and reality. Through three aspects of wisdom he will not be stained by the faults of existence.

[Kṛṣṇavajra](#) provides the necessary elaboration:

Mantra refers to those mantras such as *om̐* and so forth that are fixed in the six places, the eyes and the rest. *Appearance* refers to the [deity’s] manner of appearance as explained below—his color, form, posture and faces. *Reality* refers to the fundamental nature which is completely free from all conceptual fabrication.¹⁵

The visualizations, recitations, and sequences of practice that follow in the text are to be understood and employed in terms of this threefold structure.

I.12

The remainder of the chapter presents a series of practical techniques for attaining mastery over the phenomenal world and generating bodily energies and fluids for use in ritual practice. Each verse from 2.7 to 2.14 alludes to a specific visualization centered on a single mantric syllable and its associated deity, the practice of which leads to the stated outcome. Yet it is impossible to determine, based on the verses alone, what practices are being described. It is left to the commentators and the oral tradition to fill in the detail. Consider verse 2.7:

Meditate upon the first syllable which is the color of Indra.

Merged fully with one's own awareness it is summoned in an instant.

[Ratnākaraśānti](#) comments:

This is explained as follows: once the vulva of Buddhaḍākinī and so forth is rendered red like saffron, imagine the syllable *om* red like saffron in the vessel of the [Virile One](#) and fix the Virile One in the subtle sphere. Once the Virile One has been made red by the light of the syllable *om*, two rays of red light emerge from the Virile One. Imagine a noose on the tip of the first and a hook on the second. Binding the neck of the object to be accomplished with the noose and piercing its heart with the hook, imagine that it is quickly summoned.¹⁶

It thus becomes apparent that the words of the tantra itself provide merely an outline, a shorthand version for tantric practitioners already well versed in its practices. Likewise, each of the subsequent verses of this chapter points to complex meditation techniques, a type of knowledge that is, as verse 2.17 indicates, “secret, obscure, and unwritten.”

I.13

The third and final chapter brings the tantra to a close with a description of the rites for preparing and consuming impure substances, followed by a complete presentation of the iconography of [Mahāmāyā](#) and her retinue. The cultivation of the power of transgression through deliberate consumption of impure, polluting substances is an important aspect of Buddhist tantra. Notions of purity and pollution have been formative elements of South Asian identity since Vedic times. Such an identity is destabilized through contact with and ingestion of impure substances and bodily fluids. Indian Buddhist tantras, especially those of the later Yoga tantra class such as the *Guhyasamājatantra*,¹⁷ positioned the consumption of sexual fluids at the climax of the ritual process so as to harness the force of the transgressive act into a powerful soteriological moment. The same holds true for the ingestion of illicit meats: their ritual consumption negated a social identity formed through the observation of dietary and behavioral proscriptions. Through the eating of taboo substances, practitioners' bonds with mundane society are fully severed and their acceptance into the community of spiritual adepts is confirmed.

I.14

Yoginītantras, including the *Mahāmāyātāntra*, carried on the transgressive practices that developed in tantras such as the *Guhyasamājatantra* and the *Guhyagarbhatantra*. In the *Mahāmāyātāntra*, the consumption of sexual fluids is presented at the end of the second chapter and the ingestion of illicit meats in the early verses of the third. The final two verses of the second chapter describe, in a typically occluded fashion, the ingestion of sexual fluids that marks the culmination of the meditation sequence. The verses instruct the yogī to keep his mind free of concepts and take the “wish-granting jewel” between his thumb and ring finger and

place it in his mouth. [Kṛṣṇavajra](#) explains that this refers to the ingestion of “relativebodhicitta” (*kun rdzob kyi byang chub sems*, i.e. [semen](#)) after its prolonged retention in the tip of the penis.¹⁸ In the parlance of the later tradition, this marks the [completion stage](#) section of the practice. In the words of the tantra itself, the ingestion of sexual fluids triggers “everlasting [spiritual attainment](#).”

I.15

Moving into the third chapter, the tantra introduces a sequence of verses outlining the rites associated with the ingestion of [sacramental substances](#). The yogī is instructed to gather the five illicit meats (elephant, horse, cow, dog, and human), roll them individually into pellets, and store them for seven days. Next they are mixed together and stored in the cavity of a rotting jackal for an additional seven days. Finally they are taken out and consumed, resulting in an experience of “the great fruitions” (*mahāphalāni*, 3.6), which [Ratnākaraśānti](#) identifies as “the state of wisdom.”¹⁹ Though the five illicit meats are common enough in tantric literature, the especially polluting addition of a jackal corpse appears to be a unique contribution of the *Mahāmāyātānta*. We can understand this distinctly unpalatable process as intended to collapse the binaries of pure and impure, precipitating a more complete rejection of dualistic concepts and, as verse 3.1 states, leading to “omniscience.”

I.16

The final section of the tantra concerns the method of practice, the [sādhana](#), for the deity, including the details of the visualization of [Mahāmāyā](#) and her maṇḍala. The stages by which a tantra is to be practiced are frequently concealed within the text—the order will be scrambled and the details elided.²⁰ The act of organizing these elements is left to tantric teachers and lineage masters, who composed independent ancillary texts to codify the proper sequence of practice. These texts incorporated practices drawn from the oral tradition and embedded the basic outline provided by the tantra within an established sādhana framework that normally included common Buddhist elements such as refuge in the Three Jewels, the generation of the aspiration for awakening, the offering of confession, and so forth. Thus while the core material for a sādhana is found within the tantra itself, each sādhana is unique, reflecting styles and interpretations that are as diverse as their authors. Sādhana composed on the *Mahāmāyātānta* by the Indian authors Ratnākaraśānti, [Kukkuripa](#), Ratnavajra, and Kumé Dorjé (*sku med rdo rje*), as well as a number composed by Tibetan authors, have been preserved in Sanskrit and Tibetan.

I.17

Within the *Mahāmāyātānta*, although verse 3.7 announces the commencement of the sādhana, the majority of practices have already been introduced in the preceding two chapters. But it is only here, at the end of the tantra, that we are

finally given the complete iconographic description required for the self-visualization of the deity that precedes all other practices.²¹ The visualization begins by imagining a red lotus flower with four petals, in the middle of which sits a single subtle sphere. From this sphere, four additional subtle spheres emerge and come to rest on each of the four petals. These four spheres then transform into four yoginīs, each distinct in color and wielding the specific implements described in the tantra. They sing a song of invocation in the language of the yoginīs ²² to the central subtle sphere, summoning Mahāmāyā and consort from their essential state, first in the form of mantra syllables, then in full iconographic detail. Mahāmāyā takes the dark blue form of Heruka embracing the red Buddhāḍākinī. (S)he has four faces—blue in the east, yellow in the south, red in the west, and blue-green in the north. (S)he has four hands, each holding a different implement: a skull cup, a khaṭvāṅga, a bow, and an arrow.

I.18

Once this five-deity maṇḍala has been fully imagined, the practitioner is prepared to apply any of the diverse practices that have been described throughout the work: the visualization of mantra syllables and additional maṇḍala deities, the manipulation of subtle energies, or the consumption of sexual fluids and illicit meats. Through identification with Mahāmāyā and engagement in these potent practices, the diligent practitioner will be rewarded with mundane powers, reach “highest attainment of suchness” (3.25), and, as we are told in the tantra’s final verse, be forever protected by Mahāmāyā, “the queen of the yoginīs.”

About the Translation

I.19

This translation is based upon a comparative edition, made by the translators, of the Tibetan recensions of the *Mahāmāyātāntṛa* drawn from the Degé (*sde dge*), Lhasa, Narthang (*snar thang*), Peking, and Stok Palace (*stog pho brang*) editions of the Tibetan Kangyur. Though the tantra itself no longer exists in Sanskrit, Ratnākaraśānti’s important commentary, the *Guṇavatīṭikā*, is preserved in two Sanskrit manuscripts held in Nepal’s Royal Archive, which have been edited by the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies. Because the *Guṇavatīṭikā* attests to the majority of the Sanskrit terms, it allows access to much of the *Mahāmāyātāntṛa* in its original language. We have therefore given careful consideration to both the Sanskrit edition of this commentary and the manuscripts upon which it is based. Where the Sanskrit term is available, we have privileged the semantic range of the Sanskrit over that of the Tibetan, allowing us to recapture something of the flavor of the original Sanskrit. The commentaries of Ratnākaraśānti and Kṛṣṇavajra were consulted throughout the translation process and greatly influenced our reading of the root text.

The *Mahāmāyātāntṛa* is a challenging text. It is thematically inconsistent and disjunctive in places, and at times the referent of a given verse is unclear. Though this is certainly due in part to attempts by its authors to conceal the meaning or proper sequence of the tantra, it is clear that a grammatically flawed work is hiding behind the Tibetan translation. This is common among Buddhist tantras, as their authors did not always possess a solid command of the Sanskrit language. Where possible we have clarified the text to make it more readable, but there remain passages that are enigmatic and difficult to follow.

Note

In the translation, the numbers within square brackets preceded by F. indicate the folio numbers of the Degé edition of the Tibetan; the numbers without letters indicate the page numbers of the *dpe bsdur ma* (comparative) edition of the Tibetan (see bibliography).

THE TRANSLATION

The King of Tantras, the Glorious Mahāmāyā

CHAPTER 1

The First Instruction

1.1

Homage to the Glorious Vajraḍākinī!

I pay homage to the protector of beings, Glorious Vajraḍākinī,
Universal sovereign of the ḍākinīs, the very essence of the five wisdoms and three
bodies.

1.2

I pay homage to all the vajraḍākinīs
Who cut the bonds of conceptual thought and descend to act in the world.

1.3

Now, following that, I will explain the tantra called *The Supreme Secret of the
Secret Goddesses, the Vajraḍākinīs*. [F.167.b]

1.4

She pervades the entire Egg of Brahmā, the animate and inanimate.
She is the source of all goddesses and rules over Brahmā and the rest.

1.5

She is their great secret, the great Queen Mahāmāyā.
She is the great illusion, intensely fierce, who destroys all that exists.23 [507]

1.6

She pervades all of this: the animate and inanimate, the three worlds.
Time after time she gathers in and again emanates the triple world.

1.7

This mother of the guhyakas is celebrated as the essence of illusion.
She is the knowledge that perfects the three worlds and fulfills all desires.

1.8

Through the mere thought of the queen of the accomplished, knowledge itself,
The devas, dānavas, gandharvas, yakṣas, āsuras, and humans,

1.9

The vidyādharas, the kinnaras, and mahodaras,
The rākṣasas and piśācas—all are mastered for practitioners.
All creatures are subdued: those born in the water and on land.

1.10

Phenomena are naturally luminous; they are primordially pure and without stain.
The methods of those possessing the self-arisen five wisdoms are to be praised;24

1.11

CHAPTER 2

The Second Instruction

2.1

Now, following that, I will explain the sublime secret syllable that bestows the result of the spiritual attainment for the practice of the great queens of yoga.

2.2

Merely visualizing her, the yoginī grants the best of things.
Apply the first syllable and sustain the upward breath.38

2.3

Taking that which comes at the end of the eight together with $\bar{u}$ and the bindu,
The yogī moves the downward breath, abandoning the real and unreal. [510]

2.4

The observances are not explained: the activities of the garland mantra,
Of retention, and of fire offerings are all omitted.39

2.5

The threefold practice is said to be essentially mantra, appearance, and reality.
Through three aspects of wisdom he will not be stained by the faults of existence.

2.6

The yogī who constantly meditates on this without interruption
Is equal to Vajrasattva and gains accomplishment in a single month. [F.169.a]

2.7

Meditate upon the first syllable which is the color of Indra.
Merged fully with one's own awareness it is summoned in an instant.

2.8

The one possessing the second syllable is imagined and cultivated.
One gains power over everything within the whole of the three worlds.

2.9

Brahmā, and lord Viṣṇu, so too Indra and the Lord of Desire;
Invoked with the wisdom syllable, they are summoned along with their wives.40

2.10

Endowed with the syllable $\bar{a}$, settled in awakened body, speech, and mind,41
Perform the threefold union—this is the supreme extraction of the pill.

2.11

Possessing the syllable *khe* is the four-faced one with a red body.42
Skull cup in hand he is passion itself—this is the supreme extraction of semen.

2.12

CHAPTER 3

The Third Instruction

3.1

Now comes a thorough explanation of the supreme accomplishment of the samaya:
The ingestion of the other gathered substances that bestow the result of
omniscience.

3.2

By their mere consumption the mothers of the spirits are accomplished:46
Elephant and horse, and so too cow and dog.

3.3

Mixed with the great one and also the five wisdom nectars,
From the fourteenth to the eighth they are combined and mingled together.47

3.4

Left inside a jackal for seven days, remove them. [512]
Roll the five into pellets the size of mustard seeds.

3.5

Indeed this tantra teaches that from the eighth to the fourteenth
Cultivate them individually for seven days, mix them, and place them in a jackal.48

3.6

Take them out—from the five make pellets the size of the fruit of spiritual attainment.
Because the great fruition is perfectly realized, it is taught in this tantra but fully
concealed
The buddhas have concealed the great fruition in every instance.

3.7

Next follows the method of practice: visualize a mind lotus
Glowing red in color and endowed with the four goddesses.
It is adorned with the figure of the Buddha.

3.8

In the east he shines like a blue lotus, to the south he is yellow,
To the west whitish red, and in the north he glows emerald.49
Shrouded in a garland of flames, he is beautiful with three eyes, four faces, and four
arms.

3.9

Imagine that the goddess in the east has three eyes and holds a khaṭvāṅga and bell
in her left hands and a vajra and skull cup in her right hands. The goddess in the
south wields a trident, a jewel, a banner, and a jackal. The goddess in the west holds
a bow, an arrow, a multi-colored lotus, and a skull cup. [F.170.a] The goddess in the
north wields a sword, a noose, a hand drum, and a skull cup.

