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*Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism: History, Semiology,
and Transgression in the Indian Traditions*

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A Review of *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism: History, Semiology, and Transgression in the Indian Traditions*

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Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism: History, Semiology, and Transgression in Indian Traditions
By Christian Wedemeyer. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013, xx + 313 pages, ISBN 978-0-231-16240-1 (hardback), \$50.00.

Over the last century, modern academics—both Eastern and Western—have spilt much ink in the discussion of the transgressive practices and doctrines of Indo-Tibetan Tantrism. In contrast to the stereotype of Buddhism as a religion advocating celibacy, vegetarianism, and sobriety, these transgressive Buddhist practices include nudity, using a skull for a begging bowl, sexual (sometimes incestuous) indulgences and the ingestion of forbidden meats, alcohol, and bodily fluids.

In his latest book, Tantric Buddhism scholar Christian K. Wedemeyer proposes a novel approach to understanding—or as he puts it, “making sense of”—these practices and other controversial aspects of Indo-Tibetan Tantra and its history. Prior to Wedemeyer’s study, scholars have generally aligned with one of two contradictory positions: that

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these transgressive practices should be taken literally or that they should be interpreted wholly metaphorically. Wedemeyer argues that both of these approaches are flawed because they fail to account for the semiosis² inherent in the description of these practices. According to Wedemeyer, these transgressive practices serve as a method to promote discourse that depends neither on a literal or figurative position. In other words, transgressive practices among Tantric Buddhists ultimately serve as a hidden discourse on the subject of ritual purity. This approach can be applied to historiography, ritual practice, and transgression.

The title, *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism: History, Semiotics, and Transgression in the Indian Traditions*, may mislead readers who expect an analytical examination of Buddhist Tantric practices and rituals gleaned or otherwise extrapolated from extant textual evidence. This is a minor element of the book. Wedemeyer is really more concerned with criticizing the ways that scholars past and present have tried to “make sense” of Tantric Buddhism.

Making Sense is divided into two parts. The first serves as a commentary on traditional and modern narratives relating globally to Tantric Buddhism; the second critically discusses individual elements of Tantric Buddhist practices. Each part is further subdivided into three chapters. The first three chapters summarize academic and methodological frameworks applied by past and present scholars in order to “make sense of” Tantric Buddhism themselves. These three chapters are so absolutely mired in verbose methodological lecture that they fail to ever truly capture Tantric Buddhism and nourish it effectively as its subject matter.³

² Semiology is an important linguistic tool that forms part of Wedemeyer’s methodology. At its core, semiosis involves language that contains a meaning or agenda shrouded behind the literal meaning of the words used. Examples are given below.

³ This issue is equally criticized in Henrik Sørensen’s 2015 review of *Making Sense*: “The highly theoretical aspect of the book diverts too much attention away from the primary subject under discussion, in other words, Tantric Buddhism per se” (3).

That having been said, chapter one does serve as an excellent summary of the origins of Tantric Buddhism as scholars have understood or otherwise framed it. Here, Wedemeyer describes four main scholarly models regarding the origins of Buddhist Tantra: (1) as an outlet for transgressive impulses, (2) as an part of primordial Indian religion, (3) among Indian tribal groups, and (4) as ultimately derived from Śaiva traditions. He then systematically breaks down each of these views, illuminating every flaw that he can find. However, Wedemeyer's otherwise instructive discussion ends abruptly, neglecting to offer any potential alternative—novel or otherwise—to these flawed models. Instead, what follows is a discourse on the methodology of defining any one religious aspect in terms of its origin. Rather than presenting an alternative model for the origins of Tantra, Wedemeyer concludes simply by noting the danger inherent in applying such a methodology to Buddhist Tantric studies (34-36).

Wedemeyer justifies this approach in his introduction to the book, stating that

. . . critical attention needs first to be paid to the interpretative models that have been advanced in previous scholarship, so that a new approach may proceed free of encumbering assumptions that have so strongly marked earlier accounts. This is necessary insofar as there has developed . . . a consistent, hegemonic, effectively autonomous, and self-sustaining network of scholarly discourses on Tantric Buddhism that authorizes and reinforces certain ways of speaking about and otherwise representing it. (4)

Wedemeyer alludes to but never actually suggests any such “new approach.” One would assume that Wedemeyer's semiological approach would reveal some alternative later in the book, but this analysis is applied only to a handful of fleeting aspects of Tantric Buddhism—never to its origins. The origins of Tantra continue to be mentioned, but never with any conclusive stance. He summarizes,

We took as the object of our rhetorical analysis the very discourses used to represent Tantric Buddhism in order to demonstrate that the models taken for granted in modern academic research are themselves not only contingent and historical, but reflect rather more of the constitutive imagination of the modern interpreter than of the object they purport to explain. In so doing, the aim was to identify and warn of ruts in the scholarly road, so we can be free to follow new approaches. (69)

Again, he does not further elaborate upon such “new approaches.” Wedemeyer’s unwillingness to suggest an alternative model is unsettling. Are scholars to simply avoid all discussion of the origins of Buddhist Tantra until newer information presents itself? Are they simply to align with the least-flawed approach?⁴

The second chapter begins with a lengthy introduction⁵ to historiography in general before returning to the subject of Buddhist Tantra. Wedemeyer uses this chapter to detail lengthy summaries of three main scholarly approaches to the narrative structure of Tantra: (1) as the decline of Buddhism, (2) as the primordial beginning of Indian religion, and (3) as the midpoint of a larger historical movement.⁶ As he did in his first

⁴ Wedemeyer seems to present significantly weaker criticisms of the Tantra-from-Śaivism model—easily the one that I personally find the most promising and intriguing.

⁵ Pp. 37-42. Wedemeyer admits in his preface that “elements of chapter 2” have first appeared in his 2001 article, “Tropes, Typologies, and Turnarounds: A Brief Genealogy of the Historiography of Tantric Buddhism.” However, such “elements” (in actuality, the majority of pp. 38-49) are similar to *Tropes* pp. 225-233 and *Vajrayāna* pp. 11-24.

⁶ Wedemeyer’s critique of the term “medieval” is derived from the penultimate paragraph (375-376) of his 2006 review of Ronald Davidson’s *Indian Esoteric Buddhism* (2002), a sizable part of which appears slightly revised on page 63. In *Making Sense*, this section reads as an expanded critique of the term “medieval” as well as a means to expand his critique of *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*—then eleven years old. Sørensen labeled this section a “tangent” and an “overlong tirade” (3) for which a simple answer exists: “A period designated ‘medieval’ may simply mean that it is a period in-between, nothing more” (3).

chapter, Wedemeyer finds flaws in each of these approaches, portraying them as “methodological blinders or . . . ‘ruts’ in the avenues of scholarly research” (41) to be avoided. While Wedemeyer is quick to provide evidence against the validity of each of these approaches, he again shirks the responsibility of providing even the most preliminary substitute for them. The first third of the book has thus been spent on little more than discrediting most of the major historiographical approaches to Tantric Buddhism advanced by scholars since the inception of Tantric studies.

Wedemeyer’s third chapter focuses on how Tantric Buddhist sources depict their own history. After introducing the chapter, Wedemeyer produces a nearly eight-page summary (71-79) of “the cosmological, ‘buddhalogical,’ and historiographical realignments effected by the early Mahāyāna movements” (71). He uses this as a springboard from which to extrapolate five models by which esoteric Buddhist groups could justify the authenticity of their scriptures, asserting that their scriptures: (1) were taught by Śākyamuni during his lifetime, (2) were taught by Śākyamuni in another world, (3) represented a more honorable and ancient Buddhist system of teaching, (4) were recovered for future revelation after having been hidden, or (5) represent teachings newly presented from direct encounters with other buddhas. Wedemeyer then applies these models to esoteric Buddhist scriptures and describes Śaiva parallels. While these five models are certainly useful to analyze the legitimation techniques utilized by Tantric scriptures, Wedemeyer’s detailed discussion of Mahāyāna Buddhism yet again clearly displaces Tantra as the central subject of discussion. One cannot help but wonder why Wedemeyer did not instead analyze the legitimation techniques appearing in extant Tantric scriptures—upon which considerably less has been written in English—and then work backwards, tracing them to corresponding Mahāyāna precedents as necessary.

The second half of *Making Sense* is Wedemeyer’s own contribution to the field of Tantric Buddhist studies. He begins, in chapter four, with a discussion of several substances described as ingestible for practitioners

of Buddhist Tantra. These are the so-called “five meats” (beef, dog, elephant, horse, and human flesh) and the “five ambrosias” (feces, urine, blood, semen, and marrow). Some scholars have assumed that these substances are meant literally for consumption and others contend that this speech is purely figurative. Wedemeyer rejects both of these conclusions.

Instead, he argues that applying the system of connotative semiotics to Tantric scriptures enables scholars to “address the fundamental question of their meaning(s) and, on this basis, reconstruct the social contexts that created and sustained them” (107). Examining previous scholarship regarding the figurative or literal interpretation of the ingestion of these foul substances, Wedemeyer contends that there is a missing level of meaning. For example, he notes that the *Guhyasamājatantra* calls for the smearing of feces, urine, and water to purify a ritual site, which certainly sounds foul, but cow dung, urine, and water are all frequently used outside of Tantra in India to purify ritual sites (111). He further notes that hyperbolic transgression within Buddhist literature can be traced at least as far back as the *Dhammapada*, which openly discusses the (obviously nonliteral) killing of one’s parents, the king, and two Brahmins (112).

He then (113-116) describes in detail the system of connotative semiotics, an approach that advocates neither a purely literal nor a purely figurative view. Wedemeyer contends that applying this methodology to Buddhist Tantras demonstrates that the Tantric ingestion of foul substances is really a concealed dialogue on purity and transgression—and most importantly serves as a means of transcending their inherent dualism (121-122). Wedemeyer also suggests that it is “close to irrelevant” whether or not these texts referred to real or symbolic substances for ingestion (125). He adduces other examples to support the usefulness of connotative semiosis as a system by which scholars can interpret the truths behind the “five meats” and “five ambrosias.”

Chapter five takes as its focus the Tantric Buddhist *caryāvrata* (alternately *vratacaryā*, among other synonyms). Wedemeyer argues that *caryā* (“practice”) is a “term of art,”⁷ and that previous scholarship has frequently misconstrued its meaning within Tantric Buddhism. The *caryāvrata* is a time-delimited practice that involved living in liminal or funereal spaces (forests, mountain peaks, cemeteries, etc.), possessing horrific items of dress (loose hair, ornaments of bone, a skull staff, etc.), and employing transgressive behaviors (sex, wandering, commensality, song, dance, consumption of the meats and ambrosias, etc.). Wedemeyer compares these elements to other *vrata* within Indian culture, asserting that the *caryāvrata* is another deliberate semiosis. By overturning mainstream Buddhist practices, he argues, it fosters a hidden dialogue on the nonduality of purity and pollution within Tantric Buddhist rituals. Wedemeyer also analyzes at length the Śaiva parallels to the Tantric Buddhist *caryāvrata*. In doing so, he examines the Śaiva relationship to Tantric Buddhism, concluding that the nonduality inherent within the semiosis of the Buddhist *caryāvrata* was subsequently borrowed by the Śaivas, rather than appropriated into Tantric Buddhism from Śaiva antinomian rituals.

These two chapters jointly illustrate what is arguably Wedemeyer’s best work within *Making Sense*. Sørensen rightly noted that chapter five “may be considered the scientific core of the book” (1) as it is clearly the book’s strongest argument. As we have seen, he utilizes connotative semiotics to reveal hidden dialogues on ritual purity inherent within Tantric Buddhist antinomianism and demonstrates an emphasis on nonduality within this clandestine discourse. While this is certainly a solid contribution to the field—especially when juxtaposed against the content of Wedemeyer’s first three chapters—it is not truly novel. In his preface to *Making Sense*, Wedemeyer does state that “the central argument of chapter 4 first saw publication as” (xvii) a 2007 journal article

⁷ Here, Wedemeyer uses the definition from *Random House Webster’s Dictionary of the Law*: “a word or phrase having a special meaning in a particular field, different from or more precise than its customary meaning” (134, n.2).

(“Beef”) as well as that “the central argument in chapter 5 was first articulated” (xvii) in a 2012 journal article (“Locating”). In fact, the contents of chapters four and five are nearly identical to their earlier published counterparts. Some degree of editing is present, but it is only used to sharpen, tone, and repackage the original articles for clarity and cohesion within their new monograph format.

Upon the initial publication of his 2012 article on the *caryāvrata* (“Locating”), Wedemeyer thrice lamented its limitations, even at a length of seventy pages.⁸ Ironically, had this article actually been extended to a book-length study of the Tantric Buddhist *caryāvrata*, it would undoubtedly help “make sense of Tantric Buddhism” in a hitherto unprecedented and truly groundbreaking way.

While *Making Sense* does indeed aid in demystifying Tantric Buddhist concepts such as the “five meats” and the *caryāvrata*, this reader can only recommend its sixth chapter to those already familiar with Wedemeyer’s previous work. This final thirty-page chapter contains *Making Sense*’s only new contribution to the field of Tantric studies. This chapter asks what we really know of Tantric Buddhism in terms of how it was practiced, and focuses on the dichotomy between transgressive *śiḍha* communities and institutional Buddhist communities. While admitting that the literatures of these groups portray different concerns, Wedemeyer believes that the two communities were somewhat integrated because no evidence corroborates this separation outside Tantric literature. He argues that Buddhist antinomian traditions originated from Buddhist monastic professionals rather than outcast or tribal communi-

⁸ “Though a comprehensive treatment is beyond the scope of the present paper (and would likely require a book-length study, given the quantity and diversity of the relevant sources), I nonetheless hope here to demonstrate the essential parameters of the concept in the Tantric traditions,” (“Locating” 353) “The analysis here has, unfortunately, only scratched the surface of a widely ramified and critically important aspect of Indian esoteric religion in the late first millennium,” (“Locating” 397) and “Limitations of space and cogency have made it impossible in the foregoing to explore in detail the postscriptural understanding of the *caryāvrata* . . .” (“Locating” 399 n137).

ties, as previously examined.⁹ He notes correctly that in order for anti-nomianism to “make sense,” the one to invert cultural norms must be well established on the socially acceptable side of this duality. He finishes the chapter, returning to the question of whether or not Tantric Buddhist practitioners actually performed some of the disgusting actions highlighted in *Making Sense*. It is important, of course, that such rites were possible to perform, but whether anyone actually did is unknown. While this contribution is not quite as groundbreaking as the original articles that became chapters four and five of *Making Sense*, I cannot possibly overemphasize how welcome an addition it was to this book.

Wedemeyer concludes his study stressing that the rhetorical patterns inherent in Tantric Buddhist scriptures and rituals possess a semiological structure that explains their transgressive nature. As he has demonstrated, such practices seem now to “make sense” as part of a hidden discourse. He compares the evolution of Tantric scriptures from the Mahāyāna texts, just as Mahāyāna scriptures evolved from early Buddhist texts: each movement seemed to adopt the previous doctrines and transcend rather than subvert them. Utilizing the words of Peter Skilling, Wedemeyer reminds us that Tantric Buddhism (I) was not meant to solve the needs of the laity, (II) was rigorous rather than lax in morals; (III) depends heavily on the literature of earlier movements, (IV) was not an independent institutionalized entity or denomination, and (V) is a great fountain of diversity, of which we should never lose sight. Finally, Wedemeyer offers a quick disclaimer, claiming that his conclusions are meant as a methodological corrective, rather than as a means to correctly interpret every instance of Tantric transgression. The book also includes two appendices: Wedemeyer’s translations of the story of Indrabhūti and chapter nine of the *Buddhakapāla Tantra*. Following the appendices, the last third or so of *Making Sense*’s page count is devoted to Wedemeyer’s extensive endnotes, bibliography, and index.

⁹ This conclusion certainly assists in validating Wedemeyer’s critique of the model by which Tantra originated via tribal communities (24-30).

As previously discussed, *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism* is largely a repackaging of Wedemeyer's earlier work, juxtaposed against a half-summary, half-polemic against the methodology most commonly applied to Tantric Buddhist studies. While connotative semiosis certainly serves as a useful bridge that connects the six chapters of the work—and in so doing helps “make sense” of Tantric Buddhism—this system is only vigorously utilized and applied within the fourth and fifth chapters, both of which Wedemeyer has again previously contributed to academia. Semiotics is never applied to the origins of Tantra, nor any of the various frameworks criticized by Wedemeyer in the first half of *Making Sense*.

In closing his own review of *Making Sense*, Sørensen states, “And finally, this is not a book for the classroom, but one that only the most dedicated scholar-nerd of Tantric Buddhism can truly appreciate and enjoy” (4). On the contrary, I believe the value of this book lies in its introduction to the various strategies used by scholars to approach Tantra (Chapters 1-3). While Wedemeyer's methodological tangents border on unwieldy, his discussion of these strategies can be quite useful for the beginner. I can also absolutely see its appeal—as well as recommend it highly—for those who are otherwise unfamiliar with Wedemeyer's earlier work (Chapters 4-5). However, I feel that “the most dedicated scholar-nerd of Tantric Buddhism” is particularly unlikely to fall into either category.

Setting aside my own impressions for a moment, *Making Sense* has been favorably reviewed in other journals¹⁰ and was awarded the American Academy of Religion award for Excellence in the Study of Religion: Historical Studies in 2013. That having been said, I personally cannot understand how the tone taken in the early part of *Making Sense*, scorning and belittling the methodologies of an academic field (for roughly one-third of the book)—while neglecting to provide even the slightest alternative—can possibly be perceived as “excellence.”

¹⁰ Sørensen's is the only review of which I am aware that highlights any aspect of *Making Sense* in a negative light.

Each of Wedemeyer's previous works on Tantric Buddhism—including the journal articles repurposed within *Making Sense*—certainly bears its own well-earned mark of excellence and undeniably provides a solid contribution towards the field and its betterment. In my opinion, *Making Sense* is the first of Wedemeyer's many works to fall short of that mark. This is without a doubt because *Making Sense* relies on far too much of its author's earlier work¹¹ to possess any unique substance of its own—let alone substance enough to serve as a solid foundation for a monograph-sized study.

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¹¹ Due to time constraints, I have not been able to fully examine all of Wedemeyer's earlier works for content reproduced in *Making Sense* without attribution. *Making Sense* may indeed contain more reproduced content of which I am unaware.

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