THE LIMITS OF TRANSGRESSION:
THE SAMAYA VOWS OF MAHĀYOGA

Sam van Schaik

Whether vows are honoured or flouted, they define a Buddhist community. Social groups are held together by shared value systems, and the Buddhist saṅgha is no exception. Of the three collections of early scripture, it was the Vinaya and its associated prātimokṣa vows that set out what it was to be a Buddhist monastic. Disagreements over the Vinaya, rather than over other doctrinal or philosophical matters, were the root causes of sectarian divisions between the early monastic orders.

When the Mahāyāna movements appeared, the followers of the Mahāyāna defined their distinct mode of being Buddhist using the language of vows. Most Mahāyāna monks lived in the same communities as the followers of mainstream Buddhism and adhered to the same prātimokṣa vows. They expressed and reified their difference through an additional set of vows, the bodhisattva vows. These new vows augmented and recontextualized the prātimokṣa vows, but did not meddle with them. The new context set out in the bodhisattva ideal, the salvation of all sentient beings, made it possible to reinterpret the prohibitions of the earlier monastic vows, so that even killing could be acceptable if the greater good of sentient beings was at stake. But the original prātimokṣa vows remained the basic definition of what it meant to be a Buddhist monk.

THE SAMAYA VOWS

The topic of this paper is the next major set of vows to appear after the bodhisattva vows: the samaya vows of Vajrayāna Buddhism. With the emergence of the tantras we see a new understanding of what it means to be a Buddhist, and at the same time, the formulation of new vows. In the seventh century, tantras like the Sarvatathāgatatattvavasamgraha
articulated a significantly new approach to Buddhist practice, history and cosmology. They also expounded a new kind of vow called *samaya*.

The use of the term *samaya* in the tantras is closely related to its root meaning in Sanskrit as a conjunction or meeting place.\(^1\) In the tantras, the *samaya* is the place where wisdom (Tib. *ye shes*, Skt. *jñāna*) becomes embodied. This might be a physical representation of a deity, an empowerment, a visualization or a sacramental substance. Thus in empowerment and *sādhana* practice the wisdom being (Tib. *ye shes sms dpa’*, Skt. *jñānasattva*), becomes embodied in the *samaya* being (Tib. *dam tshig sms dpa’*, Skt. *samayasattva*), the representation or visualized form of the deity. This is known as the *samayamudrā* (Tib. *dam tshig gi phyag rgya*). The five nectars of tantric ritual—the faeces, urine, semen, blood and human flesh—are known as the *samaya* substances (Tib. *dam tshig rdzas*) because they embody this ritualized inherence of the divine in the ordinary. Likewise, the sexual sacrament of the perfection stage practices is often referred to as the supreme *samaya* (Tib. *dam tshig mchog*).

In the course of empowerment or *sādhana*, the *samaya* vows are often invoked at the very culmination of the ritual, when *jñāna* and *samaya* come together. This conjunction is considered to be extraordinarily powerful.\(^2\) Vilāsavajra, in his *Exposition of the Samaya* (Dam tshig gsal bkra) writes:

> [The *samaya*] is by nature a pure conjunction;
> Therefore it gives great power to the good and evil [deeds]
> Of those who are [respectively] able or unable to maintain it.\(^3\)

In order to live up to this conjunction, to become an embodiment of the deity’s wisdom, one must abide by certain strict codes of behaviour. The results of failing to do so are often graphically described.\(^4\) The following warning from one of the Dunhuang manuscripts is typical:

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\(^1\) A definition of *samaya* in the early Tibetan commentarial tradition preserves the original Sanskrit etymology, rather unusually for Tibetan etymologies of Sanskrit words; see RONG ZOM’s *Rgyud rgyal gsang ba snying po’i ’grel pa*: 404-405.

\(^2\) On the ritual role of the *samaya* substances, see DALTON 2004: 18-19.

\(^3\) Q. 4744, f.579b.5: so mtshams dag gi rang bzhin pas// bsrung ba thub dang ma thub las// nyes legs stobs chen ’byed pa’o//.

\(^4\) See for example, IOL Tib J 346/2, IOL Tib J 419/3, IOL Tib J 473, and IOL Tib J 552.