Esoteric Buddhist Practices
The practice of abhiṣeka in esoteric Buddhism stands as the gateway ceremony into the esoteric system and represents a ritual of passage that was required for a candidate to be considered a member of the esoteric community, authorized to perform the rituals and to say the mantras associated with the plethora of esoteric practices. In many ways it was unlike the Mahāyānist vows of the bodhisattva, which could have been declared through the process of visualization, with or without the presence of a consecrated bodhisattva giving the vows, and the acceptance of bodhisattva vows was generally done without the use of mantras or dhārāṇīs. Conversely, the esoteric rite theoretically required the presence of a master who had himself been consecrated, and the abhiṣeka additionally employed a variety of distinctive ceremonial activities—mandalas, mudrās, mantras, homas, etc. Because it was seen normatively as a transfer of authority between human generations, it had greater similarities to the two levels of ordination (pravrajyā and upasampadā) for the monk than to the practices of the Mahāyāna per se, and sometimes invoked the familial metaphors of consanguinity (father-son, brothers). Since individuals did not always have living masters, the abhiṣeka ceremony also developed a narrative of transmission, wherein the first human master may have received the initial consecration from a buddha or bodhisattva in a vision, in a miraculous manifestation, or in a dream.

The Buddhist abhiṣeka rite took its direct inspiration from classical and medieval coronation rites, although it also appropriated some of the dynamics of abhiṣeka as a purification visualization in Mahāyānist rituals as well. The non-Buddhist rituals on which it was based employ the abhiṣeka rite for several different purposes, although the different applications of abhiṣeka are in need of further exploration. Nonetheless, within discrete Indian ritual programs, abhiṣeka had at least six different uses: (1) as a rite of coronation, (2) as a ritual of renewal, (3) as a metaphor signifying recognition, (4) as a ritual of purification, (5) as a ritual of consecration, and (6) as a rite of bathing images as honor given the divinity (Davidson, forthcoming[a]).