ESOTERIC BUDDHISM IN CHINA

DEVELOPMENTS DURING THE 3RD–7TH CENTURIES:
NEW SCRIPTURES AND NEW PRACTICES
11. ON ESOTERIC BUDDHISM IN CHINA: 
A WORKING DEFINITION

Henrik H. Sørensen

Introduction

The aim of this essay is to formulate a working definition of the term “Esoteric Buddhism,” a phenomena variously described as Tantric Buddhism, Vajrayāna, Mantrayāna, and even “Occult Buddhism.” While the many practices and doctrines underlying the use of these different terms correspond to religious phenomena that have much in common, considerable confusion concerning their use still abounds. One reason for the current confusion has to do with our understanding of the origin of Esoteric Buddhism. While there has been no shortage of explanations for the development of Esoteric Buddhism, these inquiries often founder on a lack of uniform definitions and access to the primary sources across a wide range of Asian languages.¹

Specialists of Indian Buddhism have too often presented their opinions on Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantric Buddhist tradition without sufficient knowledge of the extensive Chinese translations or the numerous local compositions, which, in many cases, are much older textually than anything that has survived in Sanskrit or Pāli. As

¹ It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss the many attempts that have been made over the past few decades, and I will limit myself here to a few words on two of the most recent and best studies. David Snellgrove, in his now classical 1987 study, Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Indian Buddhists and Their Tibetan Successors, an account of the history of Tantric Buddhism and its transmission to Tibet, carefully avoided any attempt at establishing a historical framework for the rise and development of Esoteric Buddhism in India, and instead focused on how its doctrines developed. Davidson 2002a has done much to improve on Snellgrove’s historical (and sociocultural) lapse. However, Davidson also avoids any discussion on the origins of Esoteric Buddhism in India, and instead settles on the arbitrary date of the seventh century as the time, he believes, that Esoteric Buddhism arose. To this writer, it appears that perhaps Davidson has substituted “Esoteric Buddhism” with “Tantric Buddhism,” i.e., the developed form of Esoteric Buddhism based on the Buddhist tantras, and if that is the case, then he is of course perfectly correct in his assessment and I can offer no argument. A similar way of reading the development of Esoteric Buddhism in India can be found in Linrothe 1990, a groundbreaking work on Tantric Buddhist images and their iconography; see pp. 19–30.