Prefatory Note

By examining the continuities of esoteric Buddhist ritual culture across the broad sweep of Buddhist movement from India to Japan, I intend in this essay to work against the grain of the organizational structure of this collection. The dominant mapping for both religious studies and Buddhist studies remains primarily geo-cultural, an organizational principle that is, understandably, reinforced by the demands of language specialization, and it provides the organizing rubric for this volume—China, Korea, Japan. Like all such organizing systems, however, the benefits of grouping some things together comes at the cost of keeping other things apart.

Perhaps at least partly in response to the tendencies toward essentializing religion into geo-culturally defined “traditions,” recent scholarship has tended to focus close attention on specific contextualizing factors, including geographic, cultural, social, historical, literary, economic, and artistic. Within the geo-cultural framework, the intent for this collection has been to emphasize context and define locale. Once close attention to context comes to be taken for granted, however, it is in danger of losing its function as a critical corrective and results in the collection of a great deal of isolated information—all trees, no forest. Dialectically, at this point, this approach is in need of its own critical corrective. Attention to the historical continuity of ritual praxis across

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1. In the background of these geo-cultural categories is a kind of nativism, which tends to impose an assumption that there is a normative form of Buddhism to be found within these geo-cultural areas. Even further in the background, one may frequently discover a style of the comparative study of religion based on sweeping generalizations built on unfounded presumptions regarding religious universals—common narrative structures regarding founders and their teachings, and the progressive institutionalization and decay of the purity of those teachings into empty ritualism.

2. The term “praxis” is used here to refer to the ways in which religious ideology and practices mutually interact. This dialectic relation between religious ideas—itself
the boundaries of religious cultures—informed by close attention to context—may provide one such corrective.

**Issues in Theory and Method**

There has been a great deal of scholarly discussion, and consequently scholarly disagreement, over the question of how to understand tantric, esoteric, or Vajrayāna Buddhism. Different approaches to the question are possible, of course, and need not be seen as mutually exclusive, as each yields different results. For example, doctrinal and ideological studies, textual studies, and institutional and sectarian histories are all well-established approaches and valuable sources of knowledge. An approach that remains underutilized, however, is ritual studies.3

What has been called the ritual “technology” of tantric Buddhism (Sharf 2002a, 269) is an area of inquiry requiring not just additional attention but also the development of new theoretical and methodological tools to facilitate that study. A key aspect of this is, I believe, an emphasis on historical continuity that counters the rhetoric of rupture created by the implicitly nativist emphasis on the putatively unique character of a Chinese, Korean, or Japanese form of Buddhism.

From this perspective it is possible to see that the ritual technology of Buddhist tantra originated in India, drawing on Vedic ritual culture as perhaps its major influence, was adapted into Buddhism (Gonda 1965, 452–55), and was carried by Buddhists to East Asia. However, tantric Buddhist ritual was just one part of a much larger ritual corpus that was transmitted to East Asia, and it is this larger ritual culture of East Asian Buddhism that acts as the institutional and conceptual context within which tantric ritual exists.4 For example, the Shingon

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3 Historically, the Romanticism that informed the study of East Asian Buddhism had the effect not only of raising a particular form of meditation to paradigmatic status as the Buddhist practice (on par with prayer for Christianity) and promoting the idea that spontaneity exemplified the goal of Buddhist practice, but it also actively obstructed the study of Buddhist ritual, creating categories and representations that marginalized ritual practice as irrelevant to the goal of awakening (that is, the Romantic goal of spontaneity) and a sign of decadence. See Payne 2005b.

4 Systems theory, with its ideas regarding nested systems and semipermeable boundaries between systems, offers a theoretical framework for the analysis of these