Tricycle Talks
"Demystifying Tantra"
Episode #143 with Richard Payne
February 25, 2026

Richard Payne: One of my teachers, Tarthang Tulku, recounted a story from his own early days as a training monk. One of his teachers was engaged in severance, body severance, of offering his body, visualizing cutting his own body up into pieces and offering those to ghosts and ghouls and demons and goblins, inviting them to come and eat his body, and he used to go out to the charnel ground at night and perform this practice. So according to the story that Tarthang Tulku told us, he and some of his friends went out at night, snuck up behind him, and when his teacher got to the point of offering his body to all of these demons whom he had invited, they jumped up behind him and shrieked. The point that he made is that if you are going to engage in this ritual, you have to mean it seriously. This is not a ritual to be undertaken just as something that I'm going to do because it's a cool practice. That is not going to be an effective practice. That is not the yoga. The yoga would be to actually offer one's own body to these demonic forces and, in doing so, recognize one one's own impermanence.

James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, and you just heard Richard Payne. Richard is a professor at the Institute of Buddhist Studies, as well as an ordained priest in the Shingon tradition of esoteric Japanese Buddhism. In his new book, *Tantra Across the Buddhist Cosmopolis*, he examines the evolution of tantric traditions from early medieval India to the present day. In my conversation with Richard, we talk about the challenges of trying to define tantra, some of the biggest misconceptions about tantric teachings and practices, how tantra challenges popular and scholarly notions about the nature of religion, and how he came to ordain as a Shingon priest. So here's my conversation with Richard Payne.

James Shaheen: OK, so I'm here with Richard Payne. Hi, Richard. It's great to be with you.

Richard Payne: Good morning, James. Thank you for having me on your program.

James Shaheen: Oh, it's a pleasure to have you. So Richard, we're here to talk about your new book, *Tantra Across the Buddhist Cosmopolis*. So to start, can you tell us a bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?

Richard Payne: Gosh, this goes back at least twenty years, and there were a couple of things that motivated me to pursue the work for that long a period of time. One was that, I mean, my main area of training has been religious studies, and the more that I studied Buddhism, the more that I did research in Buddhism, the more that I taught the tradition, it became increasingly clear that there are aspects that don't fit well into the structures of religious studies, that the way in which religious studies defines religion, the way it puts boundaries around the field of study, all of those contribute to a kind of distorting of the Buddhist tradition. I was reminded of this connection with something I was reading recently, someone recounting the Grimms' fairy tale of Cinderella—not the Disney version, but the Grimms' original version in which the ugly sisters attempt to fit their feet into the glass slippers by cutting off their toes and their heels, disfiguring themselves immensely in order to force themselves into the glass slippers. And that's pretty much the way I now think about how those categories, and not just religion and not just in the field of religious studies, but in the popular representations of Buddhism as well, where people talk about Buddhism as really philosophy or Buddhism as really psychology or Buddhism as really a lifestyle, a way of living. All of those provide constraints around what Buddhism can be and structure the way in which Buddhism is experienced, and all of those are distortions. What I wanted to do was then to address the ways in which tantric Buddhism can confront the limitations of religious studies as a field of inquiry and push the boundaries of religious studies.

The other thing that motivated me, the other kind of intellectual issue that I wanted to address, was the overarching unity, or coherence, of the tradition of tantric Buddhism. So I had studied Tibetan forms, I practiced in Japan, and the continuity of all of that was something that I wanted to explore and to delineate and to argue that there is a coherent tradition of tantric Buddhism, and that tradition has been called a movement rather than a religion. I mean, that was Ron Davidson's

term in his groundbreaking book, and what that says is that it does have unity, it does have a coherence not as a single lineage, not as a single institutional form, but in terms of common ideas, common texts, leading teachers and various institutions across the entirety of Buddhist history. So it was those two issues that I was interested in that largely motivated me to move through this book and to maintain the effort over more than two decades, actually.

James Shaheen: So tantra is often mischaracterized or misunderstood, especially in the popular imagination. People often simply think of sex in the West. They don't really necessarily know what tantra is. However, even among Western Buddhists, there are often misunderstandings. So I know you discuss the many challenges of trying to define tantra, so this may sound like a trick question, but how do you define tantra? Just a working definition that the listeners can kind of hold in mind, without being too definitive, of course.

Richard Payne: OK, just to nuance that a little bit, I spent a large amount of time and writing in the book talking about the definitions, and over the length of time that I've devoted to this study one encounters any number—I've lost count—any number of different attempts to define tantra. And in preparing this, what I began to do was to fall back on my years of teaching Western logic. In that field, one of the important issues is definition and not then looking so much at what the contents of those definitions were but the different strategies that were employed for creating definitions. These definitional strategies, there are a limited number of them, and different Western scholars had employed them in various cases, attempting to come up with a definition. And my conclusion is that all of those definitional strategies are flawed.

So instead of talking about definition, what I prefer to talk about is delineation. The difference is that definition attempts metaphorically to draw a boundary around something, to fence it in, to say, "This is in, that's out"; "This is a chair; that's not a chair." Delineation in my mind, in my usage, is instead the attempt to sketch out the important characteristics, to draw in an outline form that allows the important characteristics to emerge, to be seen, to be visible. And with that approach, what I settled on is the idea that we can start, and I want to emphasize that we start

from the texts, start from the Buddhist canon. Both the Chinese and the Tibetan Buddhist canons include sections with numerous texts that are called tantras. So the heritage, the intellectual background of the tradition itself, the wisdom of those who have gone before us has been to designate certain texts as tantras. That provides a basis from which it allows us to explore and to expand. So it gives us a solid grounding in the bibliographic category of tantras. And then from there we can begin to look at what's included in those texts, and not limiting ourselves to those texts because it's a fuzzy category, to look beyond to other texts and the practices, the deities, the kinds of content that they have. And that becomes a source for us to consider what tantra is. It delineates for us what we're looking at.

James Shaheen: OK, toward an understanding of at least recognizing tantra when we see it, you characterize it in various ways. You argue that it is pervasive, invisible, and coherent. You mentioned coherence already. So before we dive into what this looks like for different tantric practices and traditions, can you tell us what you mean by these three terms? How is tantra then pervasive, invisible, and coherent?

Richard Payne: Thank you. These aspects of the tantric tradition have been individually addressed by different scholars in the past, and what I wanted to do was to draw them together to provide an understanding that we are looking at something that does have historical continuity beginning in early medieval India and extending right into the present.

Each of those three characteristics needs to be nuanced. It is pervasive in that tantric Buddhism has been found everywhere across the Buddhist world. There is no region, there is no part of the Buddhist world that has not had tantric Buddhism present to it. It has been often overlooked or covered over or ignored or written out of the history, and that's what I mean by being invisible. You know, a prime example of that is the understanding of Southeast Asia as Theravada, and this is part of a kind of simplistic and initial starting point with many introductions to Buddhism, the regional designation that Southeast Asia is Theravada, Tibet and Central Asia is tantric, and East Asian is Mahayana. And that's OK as a starting point, but it immediately breaks down when one

begins to consider the history. And those characterizations have tended to obscure the presence of tantric Buddhism in each of those regions. In many cases scholars who are trained in a particular tradition can't see the tantric character of what they're looking at within that tradition itself. They take something as just, well, naturally and unproblematically part of the tradition, and that's how they think about it. And it makes it more difficult then to see where those things are coming from.

In the introduction I talk about a friend of mine who was in charge of a small Zen retreat center. He'd been given the responsibility to take care of this place until the master that he knew was going to be retiring. And when I visited him, I saw a picture of a *lokapala* world guardian in the entryway, and to me that was a figure straight out of a tantric mandala. I knew this figure. I knew he's one of four, where he is located on the mandala, and so on. And I asked him, "You know, gee, here's this figure that to me is a tantric figure in a Zen retreat." And for him it was unproblematic. For him, it was just part of the Zen tradition, and each morning he offered incense and recited a chant to it. That was just part of his daily routine. He didn't think about its history and its background and how it winds up in the entryway to his Zen retreat center. There are other examples like that. If you don't have the background in tantric Buddhism, it's very hard to see it even when you run right into it.

James Shaheen: Would you mind also giving an example of, say, tantric iconography or texts that might appear unnoticed in, say, a Theravada tradition?

Richard Payne: Theravada tradition has its own historical background of meditation styles and practices that appear to have been influenced by teachings from Indian tantric teachings that came into Southeast Asia. The six-character or the six-syllable mantra that is so pervasive in Tibet and is often just associated with Tibet, *om mani padme hum*, that is found in texts that were very popular historically in Southeast Asia. For a variety of reasons, some of it sectarian history, some of it simple accident, some of it weather, the history of the textual basis has largely been lost in Southeast Asia. In looking at Southeast Asia, it's hard to say, "Oh, what we're looking at

in modern Theravada, particularly as filtered through insight meditation teachings, which were indeed even more modern, is in any way particularly tantric." And yet within the broader culture, within the broader background of those teachings over that tradition, there definitely are tantric influences. Those are most evident in terms of the architecture and the ruins that remain because those have had historical longevity much more than texts.

James Shaheen: OK, so you've explained that it's pervasive, it's been everywhere; that it's invisible, either suppressed, forgotten, or overlooked by people who are not familiar with those texts or iconography; and last coherent. Explain what you mean by that.

Richard Payne: There's this way in which the tradition holds together. I explored that with a kind of thought experiment in the introduction to the book. Imagining a 12th-century Tibetan tantric practitioner coming to a 20th-century Japanese tantric temple in California, it seemed pretty clear that for somebody from the 12th century looking at what was going on, the details of the ritual, the details of the practice, the details of the way the temple was organized and decorated might have been different, but certainly looking at what was going on, a fire ritual, recitation of mantra, all of that, and even the mantras and deities themselves would've been familiar. And so there's that kind of integrity to the tradition with its incredible variety, but still a way of hanging together as being recognizably part of the same movement.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I found that very interesting when you said, I believe you said somebody centuries ago might look at the *homa* or the Japanese *goma* fire ceremony, the tantric fire ceremony, and recognize what they were looking at. Whether they understood the language or not, they would get it. You say that tantric Buddhism has been rendered invisible, within academic circles due to popular conceptions that it was solely characterized by transgressive practices, particularly sexual ones. So what gets left out when we just think of tantra as transgressive?

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Richard Payne: To characterize tantra as transgression is to make it foreign and make it easy to reject. If we think about Buddhism as a whole, Buddhism in its origins, transgressed Brahmanic culture. Buddhism was transgressive. So the question is not is it transgressive or not, but what is it transgressing against? And for many encountering tantric Buddhism to begin with, their worldviews were structured into good and bad, that is, holy and evil, God and Satan, angels and demons, and when they looked at much of what was going on in Tibet, for example, what they saw viewing the world with that framework, with that kind of dualism, was something that was demonic.

This was also then fit in with notions out of the Indic yogic traditions where transgression against caste rules is itself a liberating act, the famous five Ms of eating meat, of drinking wine, of having sex, all of these were validated, were legitimated as freeing one from the boundaries, from the bonds of the culture.

So transgression as liberation was part of that broader rhetoric coming out of India, and that was used to interpret what was found in the tantric Buddhist tradition as well. But there's just so much more. If you go to a Japanese Buddhist temple today, you might encounter, for example, as I did, someone giving a fire ritual offering for truck drivers who were sponsoring this ritual who drive trucks in the logging district of areas of Japan. And it's a dangerous occupation. They're driving big rigs with heavy loads on narrow roads that wind through the hills, and there they were asking for protection in their occupation. This is not particularly transgressive at all. There's nothing particularly about valorizing sex and death in this, but rather protection, which has been part of the Buddhist tradition the earliest time.

James Shaheen: Richard, you also note that tantra has long been characterized as decadent. So what does decadence mean in this context, and why is this account inaccurate or incomplete?

Richard Payne: The rhetoric of decadence is rooted in Western religious history and the idea that a tradition starts out as the pure ethical teaching by a founder that is recorded in a particular

book and upheld by a particular institution. The way of thinking about the history of the institutions has been that it gradually decays over time, and this was utilized in the Protestant Reformation as a way of legitimating the changes that they wanted to make. I'm not saying that this is necessarily an inaccurate representation, but it becomes over time a presumption about the nature of religious history. So in the Protestant Reformation, the reformers characterized the church that they were moving away from as having gone from that original, pure state and over time becoming increasingly corrupt and decadent until reform was needed. And then that reform repurifies the tradition, and the historical process begins again.

And that rhetoric, that way of writing history, was very clearly projected onto Kamakura-era Japan. I mean, self-consciously. So the Kamakura-era reformers were often equated to figures from the Protestant Reformation. Honen and Shinran and Nichiren, these were held as being equivalent to Luther and so on in the European reformation. But what that does is it, again, models a particular way of writing history. It limits how history can be viewed and presumes that there is an unavoidable sequence that begins with an initial purity with the founder and then gradually decays over time and requires a reformation. Indeed, that's the basis by which the Buddha is often characterized as a reformer of Vedic culture.

So that's a way of thinking about history and thinking about religious traditions that is imposed on Buddhism. And then because there are matches, there are certain ways in which this is not totally inaccurate, that then gets concretized as the history. It feels natural because that's the way we've been taught to think about religious history. And so when Buddhism is presented in that way, it seems to make sense, but what it doesn't do is accurately represent figures who don't fit into that history well.

James Shaheen: It reminds me of how the British looked at Tibetan Buddhism and thought, "Oh, it's kind of Catholic." You know, that was their frame of reference, and in some odd way, it's somewhat accurate, it sounds true, but I can see how easy it is to fall into that trap.

James Shaheen: You note that tantra has no single easily identifiable origin, but you say that tantra was certainly influenced by Vedic ritual culture. So can you talk a bit about Vedic ritual and how it influenced the development of Buddhist tantric traditions?

Richard Payne: Well, for myself, my main area of study has been the *homa*, the fire ritual, in Japanese *goma*. That ritual has a structure, and the structure is drawn upon the model of feasting an honored guest. So in this way of organizing ritual activity, a guest is invited, preparations are made before this, and then the guest is invited and welcomed. They're offered lights and incense and music and food and drink. And then at the end of that, they're thanked, they're sent on their way, and one tidies up afterwards. So this is basically inviting a guest to a dinner, having them enjoy themselves, and then wishing them well and sending them on their way. That structure, that model, goes back to Vedic rituals. Again, this is not all Vedic rituals, and this is not all tantric rituals, but it is a common theme that runs from the Vedic into tantric Buddhism. So one can look and see the model of feasting an honored guest as structuring ritual performances. That is, for me, one of the clearest indications of this continuity.

There are scholars who have argued for Iranian influences into early medieval India and also the idea that there are other indigenous traditions that contributed to the development of Tantric Buddhism in India. So it's a very, very complicated history. Still a lot is unknown despite the scholarship, the great scholarship that's been done over the last fifty years exploring the origins of tantra and trying to understand how it developed.

James Shaheen: So in discussing the development of tantric yogas, you use the framework of interiority or interiorization. So what do you mean when you talk about the interiorization of ritual, and how did interiorization develop over time?

Richard Payne: This was a very transformative part of later medieval Indian religious culture. And so it's not only within tantric Buddhism, but it's the interpretation of the external performance in terms of the physical body, an embodied form. One of the things, for a long time

when I encountered the idea of interiorization, given our basis, it seems natural to assume that it's a psychological process, that one is visualizing the performance of the ritual and that that's what interiorization means. Visualizing the performance of the ritual is certainly part of that, but there's also a much richer yogic embodied understanding of what interiorization means. And so things like breathing are interpreted as heating into the interior fire and breathing out, or digestion, of putting food offerings into the interior digestive fire.

So interiorization has multiple dimensions and is not a uniquely mental interiority but understanding the practice as being fully embodied throughout one's physical existence. And this does connect with broader yogic traditions in India and then also with practices in East Asia as well. There are Daoist forms that borrowed from tantric Buddhism, and tantric Buddhism borrowed elements from Daoism as well. And part of that was the development of practices that focused on the interior gestation of the Tathagata within, *tathagatagarbha*. And so that is another practice that was found in Chinese traditions. You may be familiar with the *Golden Flower* text, and that is about a visualization practice of interiorizing the transformation of one's tathagatagarbha filtered through some ideas from Chinese Daoism. So interiorization is a complex category. It's not simply, "Oh, I'm using my mind versus my body."

James Shaheen: I think it would help our listeners, not all of them will know what tathagatagarbha is, so might you just briefly say what that is?

Richard Payne: Right, so *tathagatagarbha* is the Indian Buddhist concept that one contains within oneself either the presence of the awakened future being or the potential for future awakening. The Tathagata is an epithet for the Buddha, a title attributed to the Buddha, given to the Buddha, meaning "one who has gone thus," and there's a lot of commentary on what that means. And *garbha* can either be womb or embryo. So it's either the potential for some future development or the existence of something that can be developed, and throughout the tradition, different interpretations of, is the tathagatagarbha something that already exists within you that has to be propagated? Is it your internal buddha-nature that already is there but you need to do

work to manifest it? Or is it simply a potential that exists, a space within oneself, metaphorically speaking, where one's awakened nature can be made evident?

James Shaheen: Well, I don't want to tip into this trope of self-transformation that you try to steer away from, or individual transformation. But is that tantric practice then intended to make that manifest, or to allow one to realize that within?

Richard Payne: Yes, we talked previously about the Vedic model of ritual of feasting an honored guest. One of the ways in which that model is transformed into a tantric version is by adding the ritual action of identification between the body, speech, and mind of the practitioner and the body, speech, and mind of the deity who is being evoked in the ritual. So the deity is made present in the enclosed ritual space, and then after initial offerings, there is a visualization of union, that the practitioner's own body, that is the often opposition that they're seated in, in performing the ritual, their speech, the mantra and *dharani* that they're reciting and the visualization of the mandala and the ritual enclosure in which the deity is present, those aspects of body, speech, and mind are then identified with the Buddha or the bodhisattva or protector deity's own body, speech, and mind. And in the homa ritual, a further nuance of this is that the mouth of the hearth on the altar where the fire is built, the mouth is identified with the practitioner's mouth and with the deity's mouth. The fire is the transformative wisdom that the practitioner has and that the deity has, and the offerings that are made are one's own obscurations. So one is offering one's own obscurations into the transformative fire that is present on the altar that is also into the mouth of the deity. And the wisdom of the deity is the same as the wisdom of the practitioner. And that wisdom fire transforms those offerings from *klesha* to wisdom, from obscurations into understanding. So that identification is what transforms the vertical model of feasting an honored guest into tantric ritual.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I don't want to take us too far away from the questions I've got here, but it's easy to confuse that for individual transformation. It's our model in contemporary Western

spirituality in the spiritual marketplace. You know, there are ads for this sort of thing. Why is this not individual transformation, and how might we understand it otherwise?

Richard Payne: As you say, it's very easy for us to see this as a form of individualized transformation, a practice designed to make me better. And certainly the standard representation of Buddhism is of an individual in seated silent meditation. And that's not just typical, that's normative for the way that Buddhism is represented. If you did a Google search for images of Buddhism, you'd get a lot of them of somebody in an idealized setting, next to a lake or on a mountain, in the sunset on the beach, silently meditating by themself. And again, this is rooted in the Protestant tradition of Western culture. And this is not a criticism; it's just a characterization. And it certainly matches elements of the Buddhist tradition as well. And that's what it means for that representation to be overdetermined, that there are expectations in our society, in our culture, about what religion, or in this case, what Buddhism is, and indeed there are aspects of Buddhism that match that, and so that merging, that matching together overdetermines that representation of Buddhism.

But as I mentioned, there's a lot more than individual transformation. That tantric practitioner who was offering a fire ceremony to benefit and protect truck drivers, that was not a practice of individual transformation; that was a practice of protection, of extending assistance to them. There are strongly devotional aspects within Buddhism that get obscured and ignored by an emphasis on individual transformation. There are all of the social ramifications of what it means to be a member of a sangha and to have the support of a sangha that's an interpersonal, not an individual, aspect of the Buddhist tradition.

And again, that's something that is shared with Christianity in the United States as well, that there is the support of the community for the person, but that dynamic often gets obscured or ignored or written out of the representation when solely individual, isolated, seated, silent meditation is taken as what Buddhism really is.

James Shaheen: Right, that's interesting. I thought you would get to sangha because all of what we are doing, regardless of what you're practicing, is within the context of sangha and embedded in sangha. You mentioned the goma ritual, or homa, but you mentioned that it's a central practice in Shingon, and you actually trained as a Shingon priest, is that right? And how did you come to ordain in that tradition?

Richard Payne: Well, first of all, quite willingly. This goes back to trying to figure out what to do for my dissertation, for my research project. I had a long familiarity with Japanese Buddhism. I grew up in contact with the Japanese Buddhist community in San Jose, and at the same time then, the Zen boom came along in the sixties, and then there was the Tibetan expatriate event, you know, people coming to the United States and to the West from the Tibetan diaspora.

So I went from that background in Japan to exploring Tibetan Buddhism. I worked with the Nyingma Institute with Tarthang Tulku Rinpoche in Berkeley. But when it came to doing my dissertation, a little bit of planning led me to conclude that, well, I'm very comfortable with the Japanese culture. I'm now married, I have a child, and the idea of going to some remote gompa in Nepal that's a two-day trek away from medical care was not immediately appealing. Japan, as a modern country, would support having a family there more easily. And I also knew that there was a tantric tradition within Japan, and so that seemed to me to be a way to bring into unity, into a coherent study my background studies in Japanese Buddhism and those in Tibetan Buddhism.

So the Shingon tradition was the one that I was able to establish contact with a temple in Sacramento. The priest there was very helpful. And so I was introduced to people in Japan on Mount Koya, where I was allowed to study. The constraints, however, were that this is an esoteric tradition, it is an initiatory tradition, so they wouldn't allow me to study the fire ritual without going through the whole training, a four-part training that advances through various dimensions of practice and culminating in the goma, or homa, ritual.

And also for me, it seemed to make a lot more sense. Academically, my background included a lot of social science orientation, and so a kind of anthropological undertaking of going and actually learning to perform the ritual seemed to make the most sense. I think that that's an important part of how one can engage in an academic study because it allows you to understand what's going on in a different way from what one just sees in the text.

So I went through the training and received the ordination. My teacher in Japan knew that I was an academic and I was oriented toward that scholarly track, that I was not particularly interested in coming back to the United States and serving in a temple or setting up my own storefront. So I had the support from him to pursue this, and I studied privately in a temple. There have been other Americans who have gone, other Westerners who have gone, and studied in the regular training program. But he enabled me to study in his temple as his own private student. So that culminated in the homa, and that had largely been the center of my research ever since.

James Shaheen: You know, in Kyoto, I did go to a temple that had a vajra and a bell, and I realized, "Oh boy, here it is." It was a Shingon temple. But one of the associated practices with Shingon is the Shikoku pilgrimage, which you describe as a tantric institution. Can you tell us a bit about the pilgrimage and the rituals associated with it?

Richard Payne: Yes, one of the kind of folk culture aspects of the Shingon priestly training is that upon completing the training, one is expected to go on the Shikoku pilgrimage. So this is a pilgrimage route that encircles the island of Shikoku, one of the four main Japanese islands. The route starts on Mount Koya, which is the main training center for what is today probably the most dominant lineage of Shingon. The route starts at a temple that includes a mausoleum containing Kukai. Local legend is that he's alive in deep meditation, awaiting the return of, or not the return, the coming of Maitreya Buddha, who will return to this earth, who will come to this earth at that site. So Kukai, the founder of the Shingon tradition in the 9th century, established

his training center on Mount Koya, and he is said to be still there in meditation awaiting Maitreya.

That's where one starts the route, and it goes to the island of Shikoku and circles it clockwise through eighty-eight different temples. Each of those temples has two shrines: the main shrines for whatever the chief deity of that temple is, and also an ancillary shrine next to it for Kukai. And so when one shows up at one of the eighty-eight temples, there's first the recitation of the mantra for that main deity, but one also goes to the ancillary shrine and recites mantras for Kukai. So he's present at each of the eighty-eight temples, and the route itself supposedly was established by him. That's not historically grounded; that's legend. But many of the sites on it are associated with his biography: his birthplace; a place where he sat gazing out at the eastern direction and recited a particular dharani that allowed the power of a budha to enter into his body; the site where he made a vow that if he was going to be successful, he needed to know, so he was willing to jump off this cliff, believing that if he was going to be successful, he would be lifted up and protected from crashing to his death; temples that he helped emperors establish in various parts of the island.

So in terms of the history, the lineages, the practices, the figure of Kukai, the devotion that leads people around the island and back to Koyasan at the end, those are all part of a compound of characteristics which, taken together, make it tantric in character. Each of the temples, many of them are not Shingon temples as such, and this is part of the interesting history. They were not established as Shingon temples, and they are not necessarily Shingon temples today. So there are Pure Land, Zen, there's something called the Ji sect, which is one of the old Pure Land sects. This is one of the few temples that remains active in present-day Japan. So there's that variety. And much of the history of Japanese Buddhism is recorded in that landscape, and pilgrims travel through that landscape and engage the figure of Kukai as a fellow pilgrim.

James Shaheen: Another ritual you discuss is the practice of severance, or *chöd*, which you describe as a tantric inflection of charnel ground meditations. So can you tell us about severance in the practice of cutting through delusions?

Richard Payne: Yes. This is one of the continuities from the various earliest parts of Buddhism were charnel ground practices. The rules of the order, the vinaya, include instructions for monks on how to take cloth from corpses and make their robes out of that. And some of the earliest meditation practices are on decaying corpses, detailed instructions on how to go to a charnel ground, how to be safe when you do this, how to form the visual image and come back to your meditation hole and engage in visualization of the process of a corpse's decay. Buddhaghosa lays out nine or ten stages of decay, and that very structure of the stages of decay is replicated across much of Asian Buddhism. So there's that shared continuity. And one of the themes that I hope emerges for readers of this book is that there is both uniqueness and commonality. So across the Buddhist tradition, there is use of charnel ground practices in one form or another; valorization of that was an experience of impermanence; in Japan, the aestheticization of it. The literature of cherry blossoms falling in the springtime is part of that valorization of the ephemerality of physical existence of our own being in the world.

In Tibet, then, that takes on a particular form. It's employed for specific purposes and in a specific context, and it's rooted in the Perfection of Wisdom literature. The awareness of impermanence and the transitory nature of one's existence and the cutting off, the severance, of attachments to objects in the world, to our favorite emotions, to our physical body, that severance as a practice to become aware of impermanence. There are further forms that focus on body severance, and this is perhaps because of the tendency to be fascinated with this transgressive character of Buddhism. It has often been highlighted as what severance is. The severance tradition is much more inclusive and expansive than only body severance. But certainly that's the one that's most famous, best known.

One of my teachers, Tarthang Tulku, recounted a story from his own early days as a training monk. One of his teachers was engaged in severance of body, severance of offering his body, visualizing cutting his own body up into pieces and offering those to ghosts and ghouls and demons and goblins, inviting them to come and eat his body, and he used to go out to the charnel ground at night and perform this practice. So according to the story that Tarthang Tulku told us, he and some of his friends went out at night, snuck up behind him, and when his teacher got to the point of offering his body to all of these demons whom he had invited, they jumped up behind him and shrieked. This was both a nicely humorous story that humanized the significance of what it meant to be a young monk trainee in Tibet at the time, that he was a trainee and the relationship to his teacher, but the point that he made is that if you are going to engage in this ritual, you have to mean it seriously. This is not a ritual to be undertaken just as something that I'm going to do because it's a cool practice, but, of course, I don't really believe that my body is going to be consumed by demons. That is not going to be an effective practice. That is not the yoga. The yoga would be to actually offer one's own body to these demonic forces and, in doing so, recognize one one's own impermanence.

James Shaheen: OK, Richard, so far we've focused on the development of tantric traditions in specific geographical locations, but you also discuss the networks that have formed through Buddhist travels. So how did tantric practices shift and evolve as Buddhists traveled across Asia?

Richard Payne: Yes. So nodes and strands form networks. Most of the book is structured in regional categories, so South Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia. And the first thing is that by going with a regional category avoided the imposition of modern national categories. In most cases it is problematic to talk about something like—although I have used the terms, sorry—Japanese Buddhism or Chinese Buddhism. That implies a unity and an identity that is itself limiting what we can understand. Regions at least avoid those modern nation state categories, because those modern nation state categories have been used for polemic purposes for the promotion of a particular form of Buddhism as superior, as identical with this kind of

indigenous authenticity of a particular ethnic identity. So regions help to avoid those modern nation state categories by talking about, for example, East Asia or Southeast Asia.

But regions are themselves conventional, they're useful. And in structuring the book, it's not an attempt to talk about the regions in their entirety but rather to use the regional category as a way of talking about specific aspects of the tantric tradition. That, however, I felt needed itself to be kind of subverted, that those regional categories are not anything more than useful ones and are not to be taken too literally. And so the converse of that is networks, the connections between locations, that is, nodes, in different places, and the networks of Buddhist history wander all across the globe.

Going back to those simple introductory models of Buddhist history, one of them has the big arrows on the map: one big arrow going from India to East Asia, one big arrow going from India to Southeast Asia, one big arrow going from India to Central Asia. That implies both a unilinear flow, that this is just one line going from India to China, for example. It also, however, implies that it was the only direction that things went.

When we shift perspective and begin to think about networks, it's not single lines, and it's not one direction. It's multiple connections between multiple locations. It flows between all of those in both directions. There was a prince from Southeast Asia, from insular Southeast Asia, who established a temple in Nalanda. Atisha is famously associated with Tibet, that he brought the tantric teachings to Tibet, but he spent as much time in Southeast Asia and in Java as he did in Tibet, and the teachings that he learned there are what he took to Tibet. So these lines of connection are complex and multiple and go in both directions. It's not simply that Indian Buddhism went over the Silk Road and came to China and was transformed in the process. Individuals traveled from places in India across those routes to places in China where they taught or translated and oftentimes, in many cases, made the trip back if they could.

James Shaheen: You know, it's funny because it's easy to think of the more unilinear way because when we see maps, historical maps, or when we see maps of the spread of Buddhism, we have arrows going in one direction. But when you describe regions and the difficulty that a definition like region brings to the table, you may as well be talking about tantra again. It's like we've come full circle. The difficulty in defining tantra brings you to a different heuristic or methodology, a way of being able to, say, one recognizes tantra when one sees it. Just tell us what you mean by context, use, and designation as a way of recognizing tantra when one sees it.

Richard Payne: OK, so context implies the plural character. When one goes into a temple in Japan, there are many aspects of what one is seeing, and that is the context that can lead one to see that this is a tantric temple. For example, the altar in a Japanese tantric temple is a mandala. It's flat on the floor, it's square, it's enclosed by a five-colored rope and often has a stupa in the center of it, and that altar shape is an identifying factor within the context. It's one of the contextual matters that informs the decision or the recognition that this is a tantric temple. The presence of the two mandalas would be another indication. So it's not that these are exclusive items that individually say, "Oh, this is tantra," but taken together in that context, one can say, "OK, we're now looking at a tantric temple."

So context, use. The same deity, for example, in one usage is clearly tantric and in another not. I mentioned the background of that Lokapala, of that guardian deity in the entryway to that Zen retreat. In use that is a Zen figure because it's not being treated there as a tantric figure. It's part of the Zen tradition, so it's not a fixed set of characteristics. This deity is used here in the Zen temple as part of the Zen tradition, Zen practice, what that priest did on a daily basis. In a different context, the use of that figure as, for example, perhaps a central deity for the performance of rituals, the deity that would receive the offerings in that context, in that use, that deity is now tantric. So it's not that the deity is inherently somehow in and of itself tantric but that it depends upon how it's being used.

Designation is also an important factor. As I said, there are texts that are labeled tantras, that is, they are designated Tantras. There are traditions that self-identify as tantra. So when that is the case, we have a clear indication. How much more clear could it be that this thing is tantric, that it is either called tantric or claims the label of being tantric? So context, use, and designation are different approaches and play together in understanding what it means for something to be tantric.

James Shaheen: So, in other words, you're looking at it both from the outside and also from the perspective of those actually practicing it, is that correct?

Richard Payne: Yes, there are a variety of perspectives, and no one of them is adequate. That's what is so flawed about so many of those definitional strategies. They pick one thing or another, or even a set of things. But most of those things, the typical characterization, body speech, and mind, of mantra, mandala, and asana, that those three are somehow tantric in character. Any one of those can be traced to a pre-, in some cases a pre-Buddhist history. Mantra recitation goes back 2,000 years before Shakyamuni, so these are not uniquely tantric except in context, use, and designation. When mantras are recited in a tantric context, they are tantric. When they're used for tantric ends in relationship to tantric goals, then they're tantric. If they're designated as tantric, then those mantras are tantric. There's nothing inherently in the mantra that makes it tantric. It is only because it's in use, context, and designation that it is in that instance tantric in nature.

James Shaheen: You know, I hope our listeners come away with a better understanding of what tantra is. It's not an easy topic, but you certainly bring a lot of clarity to it, Richard.

Richard Payne: Thank you.

James Shaheen: And I'm sure we'll have to meet again to discuss this further, because we only touched on part of what you write about in the book. Anything before we close?

Richard Payne: I just wanted to thank you for engaging in this and for allowing me to talk about something that has been part of my life for more than two decades. It's very satisfying to see it come to fruition and now be headed out into the world for other people to see and engage in, and thank you for helping that to happen.

James Shaheen: Well, congratulations on the work. So, Richard Payne, it's been a pleasure. Thanks so much for joining us. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *Tantra Across the Buddhist Cosmopolis*, available now.

Richard Payne: Thank you.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Richard Payne. Tricycle is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to making Buddhist teachings and practices broadly available. We are pleased to offer our podcasts freely. If you would like to support the podcast, please consider subscribing to Tricycle or making a donation at tricycle.org/donate. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with the show, you can follow *Tricycle Talks* wherever you listen to podcasts. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by Sarah Fleming and the Podglomerate. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!