THE STUDY OF RITUAL IN TANTRIC BUDDHISM

Tantric Buddhism is largely informed by doctrines continuous with those of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and indeed there is no sharp line between the two, but the relation should be seen as extending over a large transitional zone. The more unique contribution of tantra is what has been called its “ritual technology.” Even here, most of the specific practices identified with tantric Buddhism are found in the Mahāyāna or even earlier. Some indeed, are effectively pan-Indian. Given the tendency to privilege doctrine in religious studies anyway, why should we care about ritual practices that are not so special after all? This workshop will explore the issues of how Buddhism is constructed as an object of study, the privileging of doctrine and “Buddhist philosophy,” the place of cult in Buddhist praxis, how ritual practices change over time, and methodological issues in the study of ritual and the formation of theoretical understandings of it.

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