

# Initiation Rituals in Shingon and Tibetan Buddhism

Jolanta GABLANKOWSKA-KUKUCZ

## Abstract

Initiation rituals which are present in Shingon Buddhism have a lot of similarities with abhiṣekas of Tibetan Buddhism. In esoteric practices of Shingon formal actions as fasting, keeping cleanliness of the body and surroundings, are very important which resemble the necessary behaviour in outer yogas – *kriyā* and *caryā* tantra. The initiation steps, especially the higher ones, resemble stages of yoga and anuttarayoga tantra abhiṣekas. Explanation of mandala symbolism in both Buddhist schools is also very much alike. Mandalas are symbols of a transcendent, universal Buddhahood – as a pure universe but also as mirrors of the mind and all activities of consciousness and phenomena. Mikkyō describes the “universal form” of all beings and things in terms of Four Mandalas, which are identical to those found in yoga tantra in Tibetan Buddhism, where Four Mandalas of Body, Mind, Speech and Action are present. Initiation rituals in Shingon are mostly kept secret. Tradition prescribes all details and steps as well as the number of candidates, which often is limited to one, two, four – up to ten. In abhiṣekas granted by Tibetan masters thousands of people often take part, but when ritual is full and all the explanations are given, secrecy is also kept.

**Keywords:** *Tibetan Buddhism, Shingon, Mikkyō, abhiṣeka, tantra.*

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# 1 Introduction

*Abhiṣeka* (Sanskrit), which is often translated into English as an initiation or empowerment, is an important ritual in the esoteric schools of Buddhism. It stands at the very beginning of a spiritual tantric path, regardless of which tantric class one chooses to follow. Thus, *abhiṣeka* is a method for starting an esoteric transmission, a traditional way to offer the blessings of lineage gurus to participants or an empowerment – an acquiescence to work with a particular meditation practice and an introduction into the mandala of a mediation deity.

There is a clear similarity between *abhiṣeka* and a coronation rite, both secular and those in accordance with Vedic scriptures.<sup>1</sup> During the monarch's accession ceremony,<sup>2</sup> water from "the four oceans" was poured out of golden jars onto the royal head. Other rituals were: *homa*, bathing the prince in soil (from different places of the kingdom), being shown auspicious items, crowning, and others. But not all every ritual had a coronation significance. As Davidson points out, even earlier Buddhist *abhiṣeka* was a meditative ritual with the visualisation of purificatory baptism (yoga Treatise from Qizil), when the meditator visualises seated and standing Buddhas, emitting light rays which enter his/her body. The rays then shine back and emerge into the surrounding world, removing suffering and bring purification.<sup>3</sup> The scripture entitled *Teachings the Secret Essence of Meditation*<sup>4</sup>, translated by Kumarajiva at the beginning of the 4th century CE, shows a visualisation of Buddha's pure body with thirty two major marks and eighty characteristics, pouring a five-colour nectar from a vase onto the head of a yogi. This nectar purifies all obstacles and leads to liberation.<sup>5</sup> There are also other texts (from the 4th–6th century), such as the *Kuan fo san mei hai ching* (*Scripture on Contemplating the Ocean of Buddhas*)<sup>6</sup> which emphasises the purificatory, cleansing aspect of *abhiṣeka* rituals.

<sup>1</sup>See for more: R. M. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement*, loc 4058 of 17603 (KE [=Kindle Edition]) and S. Geoffrey, *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra*, passim.

<sup>2</sup>Ibidem, loc 4029–4122 of 17603 (KE).

<sup>3</sup>R. M. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement*, loc 4111 of 17603 (KE).

<sup>4</sup>*Ch'an mi yao fa ching*, probably composed in China.

<sup>5</sup>Ibidem, loc 4111 of 17603 (KE).

<sup>6</sup>Ibidem, loc 4112 of 17603 (KE).



Nevertheless, the coronation element still plays an important role, because during this ritual a bodhisattva/yogi becomes Buddha's successor. Other aspects of the rituals include: the chanting of mantras, fire ceremonies (*homa*) and others (whose role is to overcome possible obstacles in performing a ritual), throwing a flower in the mandala, obtaining the mantra and image of the meditation deity. This coronation element has become more and more elaborated by the 8th century as one may observe, for example, in the *Vajrapāṇyabhiṣekamahātantra*:

Now a possessor of the vajra, this Dharma of vajra has been explained for you, and the vajra arisen from meditation has been actually placed in your hand by all the Buddhas. So, from today, all the magical ability of Vajrapani in the world is just yours [...] In the way a Cakravartin is coronated that he might achieve dominion, in the same sense it is said, that you have been consecrated Adamantine Intellect (*rdo rje blo ldang*), so as to be King of the Dharma.<sup>7</sup>

The *Mahāvairocanābhiṣambodhitāntra* (or *Mahāvairocanasūtra*) also emphasises the imperial role of an *abhiṣeka*.<sup>8</sup> Different coronation ritual items are used during the initiation, and various actions take place such as: consecration with water, with a crown, vajra scepter and a bell. Some of them are more protective than royal. Certainly, there are special ones directly related to religious ceremony like: receiving indestructible discipline, receiving the mantra and mudra, the elimination of defilements by blessing the body, speech and mind in order to become a teacher as well as receiving a special dharma name. Additionally, Śubhakarasiṃha manifests similarities between *abhiṣeka* and enthronement in medieval India:

When worldly people in India perform the rite of *abhiṣeka*, they collect water from the four great oceans of the world and from all rivers and lakes in their kingdom. [...] Then they seat their crown prince on a lion's throne, which is placed before the map of their kingdom. [...] All the ministers and subjects who serve the kingdom surround the crown prince, aligning themselves in circles according to their power. The prince's teacher in the discipline of

<sup>7</sup>Ibidem, loc 4164 of 17603 (KE), text translated from the Tibetan version.

<sup>8</sup>*Mahāvairocanābhiṣambodhitāntra*, sDe-dge ed/494 fols 239b2–241a6.



the Veda seats himself behind the prince on an elephant-shaped throne. Holding the jeweled water in an elephant tusk, he pours it on the summit of the prince's head. Praising great ancient monarchs who saved the world through their peaceful rule, the teacher proclaims, "This prince who follows the tradition of the cakravartin of the past will attain longevity and prosperity of his family and his entourage".<sup>9</sup>

And then he describes *abhiṣeka* in Tantric Buddhism:

Our *abhiṣeka* for the prince of Dharma must be understood differently. In this *abhiṣeka*, the prince of the Dharma sits on the miraculous lion throne adorned with the lotus blossoms of the subtle Dharma, the throne being placed before the great map [mandala] of the secretly glorified universe, the Dharmakāya's domain. The water of wisdom and compassion, impregnated with goodness is poured on the Dharma prince's mind. Then all bodhisattvas and guardians of Buddhism express their joy [...]. Thereupon the master [...] announces, "from now on, this prince of the Dharma will attain birth in the family of the Tathāgatas and succeed to the throne of the Buddhas".<sup>10</sup>

All of these elements mentioned above can be found in Tibetan and Shingon initiations. There is much more evidence concerning Tibetan *abhiṣekas*, because they are often given to the public and for fifty years they have also been widespread in Western countries. There is also extensive literature on this topic since it has been the focus of various research projects. Shingon rituals, however, have been guarded in secrecy. Its teachings have only been passed down orally, until 1920 when Shingon arrived in countries outside of Japan.

## 2 Tibetan Buddhism

Tibetan *abhiṣekas*<sup>11</sup> (according to the new transmission schools) are of four types, according to the Four Tantra classes. About those classes, in the *Tan-*

<sup>9</sup>*Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, see R. Abe, *The Weaving of Mantra*, p. 135–136.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>11</sup>For more on the subject see J. Grell, *Przekazywanie niewyraźnego. Przykład tybetańskich inicjacji (Passing Down the Inexpressible. Example of Tibetan Empowerments)*, p. 112–124.



*tra of Indestructible Tent* (Sanskrit. *Vajrapañjaratantra*, Tib. *rdo rje gur*)<sup>12</sup> we find such a statement: “Action tantra is for those of lesser [faculties]; Yoga without action, for those with greater faculties; yoga tantra for superior sentient beings, and highest yoga tantra, for those even greater”.

Here I present a standard method often used to explain the differences in classes:

- Action Tantra - is similar to the bliss of partners looking at each other
- Conduct in terms of smiling at each other
- Yoga in terms of hugging each other
- Anuttarayoga in terms of being in union

One must remember that this is only a kind of imagery and does not constitute actual descriptions of actual practices. This division into four types is based on four types of desire, as enlisted by Vasubhandu in his *Treasure of Phenomenology* (*Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*)<sup>13</sup>: “Sexual satisfaction is gained through intercourse, holding hands, laughter and gazing [at one’s partner]”.

The division of the tantra into four sets<sup>14</sup> can be also viewed through the connection between the practitioner and the deity. Action tantra is based on meditation, where the deity is seen as an external object. In conduct tantra there are phases of practice with an inner deity and in yoga tantra the deity is the true nature of the practitioner. In the highest yoga tantra one sees oneself as a deity from the very beginning.

The structure of the *abhiṣeka* ritual is quite complicated, especially in the higher tantras. In action (*kriyā*) tantra there are three supramundane families (and three mundane): Tathagata, Padma and Vajra. The main stress in yogic practices is on the purity of the outer conduct, so elements of practice such as ablution and cleanliness are of major importance.

*Abhiṣeka* or initiation into *kriyā* tantric practice is twofold and consists of the water and crown initiation. These two rituals serve to ripen the disciple’s mind. The first is to establish the potential to realise dharmakaya, the reality dimension of awakening, while the second – the crown or diadem ceremony – serves to establish the potential for form kaya: sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya. The water initiation is given five times – with a dedication for

<sup>12</sup>See Jamgon Kongtrul, *The Treasury of Knowledge, System of Buddhist Tantra*, p. 97.

<sup>13</sup>Ibidem.

<sup>14</sup>It can be also divided into three groups – action tantra, tantra of both (conduct tantra), and yoga tantra. This is an older division by Buddhagyua or Lilavajra, and into five by Shantipa



all beings, to the deities, to śravakas and pratyekabuddhas, to bodhisattvas and buddhas. The placing of the crown (by use of mudra) represents a conferral of the initiation. Then comes an important stage - the authorisation to draw and teach about the mandala – if a student is striving for the title of vajra master.

The last step of each *abhiṣeka* ritual is the taking of tantric vows, both general ones common for all classes of tantra and a special variety, assigned to each class. All these vows are enlisted in Jamgon Kongtrul's *Buddhist Ethics*, which is a part of his *The Treasury of Knowledge*. Kongtrul states there: "Vows and pledges assumed during the initiation must be safeguarded like one's life, Four pledges constitute the foundation common to all tantras: To maintain correct view, refuge and awakening mind, and to receive the mandala's initiation".<sup>15</sup> In the *Guide to Mantra (Mantrāvatāra)* we can find a similar statement: "Know that for tantra vow *to receive* means *not to reject*".

Then come individual pledges for each tantra class. Let us mention some examples of vows in the action tantra: to have faith in the Three Jewels, not to be angry with one's deity if the rites are not effective, offer food, drink without any partiality to an unexpected guest, be benevolent towards all creatures and so on.

*Caryā* tantra is a further category of the tantra in which the purity of a place, body and action is important, but with greater emphasis on meditation. Now meditation is of equal importance to purity. *Abhiṣeka* for *caryā* tantra has a more complicated structure – it still includes two initiations of the former tantra, but a further two are added: vajra, bell and name initiation.

To this category, according to Tibetan classification, belongs *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*<sup>16</sup>, which is of primary importance for Shingon Buddhism (*Mahāvairocana-sambodhitānta*). According to this tantra, Tibetan master Tenga Rinpoche describes *abhiṣeka* as follows:

**Fourfold initiation of the vase**<sup>17</sup> for purification of the stains that cause the lower forms of births, the second to cleanse the seeds of cyclic existence, the third to plant the seeds of two accumulations, the fourth as a seed for becoming a buddha's regent

<sup>15</sup>Jamgon Kongtrul, *Buddhist Ethics*, p. 229.

<sup>16</sup>Another *caryā* tantra (from the Vajra Family) is *Vajrapānyabhiṣekatantra*. No tantras from the Padma Family in the *caryā* tantra class have been translated into Tibetan. See for more in: Mkhas Grub Rje's *Introduction to the Buddhist Tantric System*, translated by F. Lessing, A. Wayman, Delhi 1978.



**Crown/diadem initiation** to establish a potential for realization of form kayas Bell initiation – which plants seeds of sixty qualities of Buddha speech

**Vajra initiation** sowing seeds of twofold omniscience (which is knowledge about two truths: provisional and absolute)

**Name initiation** for a name known in three realms (which means a capacity for spreading the doctrine in whole world)<sup>18</sup>

In the end there are authorisation rites, which enable an adept to conduct enlightened endeavours for the benefit of beings.

*Abhiṣeka* of yoga tantra had all five *abhiṣekas* of each family: water/vase initiation, diadem/crown initiation, vajra initiation, bell initiation, word initiation, and initiation of Master of the Vajra – with *samaya* vows. Although the five initiations have the same names as in the lower tantras, their meaning is different.<sup>19</sup> In the Highest Yoga Tantra there are four initiations: “The first, initiation of the vase, and the second, the secret initiation, the third – pristine awareness [through] wisdom, and the fourth itself, the same as that” (*Guhyasamājatantra*). Each of the four parts is connected with a special *mandala*.<sup>20</sup> Sometimes there is a fifth initiation for particular students - of vajra

<sup>18</sup>Tenga Rinpoche *Sutry i Tantry. Drogi buddyzmu*, p. 53.

<sup>19</sup>See for example: Jamgon Kongtrul, *Systems of Buddhist Tantras*, p. 117–147.

<sup>20</sup>*Abhiṣeka* structure is as follows:

1. Initiation of Vase-Body, using a sand (or painted) mandala, consist of five parts:
  - (a) Water (Akṣobhya), cleansing away the stains of ignorance
  - (b) Diadem initiation (Ratnasambhava), planting the seed for the Buddha’s future action
  - (c) Dorje initiation (Amitābha) – potential for the realisation of pristine awareness
  - (d) Bell initiation (Amoghasiddhi) – to realise the indivisibility of emptiness and compassion, realising the speech of the Buddha
  - (e) name initiation (Vairocana) – planting the seed to receive the name of the Buddha
2. A secret one (*guhya*) – With body (relative) – mandala, nectar flows from a master body, removing the stains of the speech and channels of the body, in order to obtain the speech of the Buddha
3. A pristine awareness – (through) wisdom initiation – with a real or visualised consort, a *bhaga* mandala is used with the goal of attaining awakening through actualisation of the indestructible nature of the Buddha’s mind
4. The fourth initiation – a word initiation– based on a mandala of ultimate *bodhicitta*, introduction in the nature of sameness, the unborn essence of emptiness or the ultimate truth





master. Conferred through words alone, a student receives a prophecy about his/her realisation and is placed symbolically into the dharma lineage.

An inevitable part of all high initiations are the tantric vows and pledges, which are numerous. They belong to one of two categories: prohibition and precepts; concerning downfalls, contemplation, conduct and so on. There are pledges for beginners, adepts and those of highly stable realisation, pledges of an indestructible awakened body, speech and mind.

Many of the rituals listed above can be found in Shingon initiation (*kanjō*). Furthermore, the four mandala representation occurs in each tantra class, although some differences in names and symbolism can be found.

### 3 Shingon *abhiṣeka* – *kanjō*

The literal meaning of *kanjō* is “to sprinkle the water on the crown of the head”. In general, the format of most of the rituals includes an important part: water from five vessels, symbolising the five wisdoms, is sprinkled on the disciple’s head.

Shingon initiations are based mainly on *Dainichikyō* (*Mahāvairocanasūtra*), also *Vajrasekharasūtra* (*Kongōchōkyō*), which belong to the so-called “pure” category of teachings.

During the ritual, the master and disciple play roles similar to Mahāvairocana and Vajrasattva in the *Mahāvairocanasūtra*. The ritual begins with a visualisation of themselves as deities after which the master draws a mandala<sup>21</sup>, where a disciple is prepared to enter. Then the ablution of the disciple’s hands is performed, and he/she is presented with perfumed incense

<sup>21</sup>The mandalas form the base for the altar platform during initiations. They are placed one on the top of the other, depending on the text and the main deity of the ritual.

In Shingon we have four types of mandalas: *mahā mandala* (*dai mandara*), which is an anthropomorphic representation of the deities. Next is the *dharma mandala* (*hō mandara*), where the deities are depicted in the form of their seed syllables, then the *samaya mandala* (*samaya mandara*), which represents the vows of the deities in the form of their attributes/mudras, and the *karma mandala* (*katsuma mandara*), representing the activities of the deities in their three dimensional forms. In Tibetan Buddhism we have four mandalas which have a slightly different symbolism. The four mandalas have four seals, four types beginning with the Body (*mahā*), Mind, Speech (*samaya*), and Marvellous Action (*karma*). We talk about four mandalas, but each mandala has signs of these four types and each of the four types can be found in one of them. For more, see: Taikō Yamasaki, *Shingon. Japanese Esoteric Buddhism*.





which is used to purify the entire body. The faculty of speech is cleaned with cloves and a silken mask is put over his eyes to protect him from outside influences. Then, holding a flower in his/her hand, the disciple has to formulate in his/her conscious the certainty that his/her mind is Buddha's mind, and that all Buddhas from the past have passed the same way. Then follows the part where the disciple throws a flower into the mandala, which in turn presents him with a prophecy concerning which deity is appropriate for meditation practice, and what kind of achievement he/she will realise and what action will be performed.

An important stage is, of course, the esoteric precepts of *samaya* (*samaya*), which are bestowed a day before the actual initiation. Ryūichi Abé explains that the vows are: “a prerequisite for ordination, which are based on the four essential precepts: to uphold the authentic teaching of the Buddhas; to be steadfast in guarding one's own enlightened mind; to be unreserved in sharing with students the knowledge of Buddhism; and not to abandon one's effort to save sentient beings”.<sup>22</sup>

All initiation steps, which represent the five realms referring to the depth of consciousness to which there are associated, are listed as follows:

1. looking at a mandala from a distance (a pre-ritual, an initial contact with esoteric teachings)
2. a bond-establishing ritual (*kechi-en*), where the initiate is led to the mandala and an anise spring is cast upon him/her, to establish a bond with the deity
3. the disciple is given the mantra and mudra of his personal deity, and becomes a disciple of the shingon master. This is also known as the “permission initiation” (*koka kanjō*) or Dharma learning initiation (for the laity)
4. the transmission of Dharma – which is only for priests or people completely devoted to Mikkyō, having undergone former training. To take esoteric precepts is necessary, if a disciple wants to get a title of “ajari”<sup>23</sup> – the presented symbols of pagoda and vajra symbolise universal enlightenment and the continuity of a dharma lineage
5. the advanced initiation, which is reserved only for those admitted to Dharma lineage. This is mind to mind transmission, without rituals or

<sup>22</sup>Ryūichi Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra*, p. 134.

<sup>23</sup>*Ajari* means “master”. Here the title is only a basis for further training.



devices. This is an intuitive transmission of the teachings, and is given to very limited number of disciples

6. initiation to scholarly practice which takes place only at Kōyasan. The initiated should win a debate and undergo training in practices and rituals. There is a limited number of participants – one, five or ten.<sup>24</sup>

During the ritual, one must follow very strict rules outlining in precise detail, for example, a student's each and every step – in which direction, which leg, and so on.

Here a student must use of all bodily senses – taste, sight, hearing, smell. The cleansing aims to purify symbolically body, speech and mind. He/she steps over an incense burner, eyes covered with a silken mask cutting him/her off from the outside world. Forming a mudra, he/she recites mantras to transcend his/her body-mind into a symbol of enlightenment, transcending time and space.<sup>25</sup>

Although some of rituals have a strong affinity with the ritual of the enthronement the emperor in Japan<sup>26</sup> (for example a use of a gem, sword and mirror), one can see more similarities with Tibetan *abhiṣeka*, showing clearly their common, Indian source.

<sup>24</sup>See for example – Taikō Yamasaki, *Shingon. Japanese Esoteric Buddhism*.

<sup>25</sup>Ibidem, p. 180.

<sup>26</sup>One of the earliest manuals on the coronation *abhiṣeka* shows it in an even more evident fashion. Of course, there are still some vestiges of Chinese coronation, (points 4, 5, 10 in ritual), but here he became rather a *cakravartin* than a Son of Heaven. In the manual from 1272, entitled *Sokuiin (Mudrā of Coronation)* there is a depiction of ritual procedures. They are enlisted by Ryūichi Abé in his *The Weaving of Mantra* (page 361).



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### Abbreviations:

13. KE – Kindle Edition

