



H O M A V A R I A T I O N S

The Study of Ritual Change
across the *Longue Durée*

Edited by

RICHARD K. PAYNE

&

MICHAEL WITZEL

HOMA VARIATIONS

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Homa Variations

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*To my daughter, Alise Spinella, who accompanied me on our journey of
discovery to Japan*

— Richard K. Payne



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Preface



IN OCTOBER 2010 a conference entitled “Homa Variations: From Vedic to Hindu and Buddhist” was held at Harvard University. For three days, a dozen scholars presented their work as it relates to the *homa* ritual. Over the course of that time, about two dozen others were in attendance as well. One of the high points of the conference was the performance of a Newari *homa* by Naresh Bajracharya, one of the conference participants. Following the conference, additional papers were solicited to provide greater depth to this collection.

Acknowledgments



GENEROUS SUPPORT FOR the conference was provided by Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai (BDK), who have also provided support for the production of this collection, including copyediting by Marianne Dresser. Particular thanks go to Rev. Dr. Toshihide Numata, Chairman of Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai, for his continuing support of this and other projects of the Institute of Buddhist Studies, Rev. Brian Nagata of the Moraga office of BDK America, and to Rev. Naoyuki Ogi of the Tokyo office of BDK for their support and encouragement.

My thanks also go to Michael Witzel for organizing the activities. Michael first expressed interest in my work at the 2005 meeting of the International Association of the History of Religions in Tokyo. I knew his name from my own teacher, Frits Staal, who had spoken of him with high regard. Over the course of this project he has been supportive and has validated the importance of studying the *homa*. Thanks also go to Harvard University's Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, now renamed the Department of South Asian Studies, which provided both the venue for the conference meetings and more importantly the student assistants, who worked on the website that allowed for preconference communications with participants, prepared a bound copy of the abstracts for the participants' use, and provided the requisite logistic support during the conference itself. The Department also assisted with making arrangements for travel and lodging, and for refreshments during the course of the conference.

I am humbled by the interest the scholarly community has shown in this project. For myself, it fulfills one part of the research plan that I conceived while writing my dissertation. Inspired by Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*, I imagined a three-dimensional

approach to the study of the *homa*. The first was my own dissertation, published as *The Tantric Ritual of Japan*, that located the *homa* along the axis of the four Shingon training rituals. The second, still underway after all this time, is an examination of the variety of *homās* found in the Shingon ritual corpus. The third axis, as represented here, is the *homa* found across a variety of religio-cultural settings. Having long ago been faced by the fact that this third dimension would be far beyond my own limited abilities, I am grateful that others have assisted in its realization.

R.K.P.

Contributors



Naresh Man Bajracharya is the founding Chair of the Central Department of Buddhist Studies at Tribhuvan University and was the first Nepali appointed as Professor of Buddhist Studies. In addition to completing his PhD in Buddhist Studies at Delhi University in 1998, Bajracharya is also a tantric lineage holder and one of the leading priests in the Newar Buddhist sangha of Kathmandu. Author of many articles and books on Newar Buddhism, he was a Fulbright Scholar in Residence at Virginia Commonwealth University in 2009-10. Professor Bajracharya over the last decade has played a pioneering role in introducing the discipline of Buddhist Studies to Nepal and in revitalizing the spiritual traditions of Newar Buddhism across the Kathmandu Valley. He is currently engaged in organizing the construction of a Vajrayana Monastery in Lumbini. In late 2014, he was appointed Vice Chancellor of Lumbini Buddhist University in Lumbini.

Nawaraj Chaulagain is Assistant Professor in religious studies at Illinois Wesleyan University, Bloomington, Illinois, where he teaches courses such as Religions of the World, Hindu Religious Traditions, Asian Religious Practice, Islam from Mecca to Malcolm X, and Peace & War in the Modern World. His research interests include Hindu kingship rituals, yoga and meditation, and comparative religions and literature in South Asia. He is particularly interested in the questions of how religions and politics intersect and interact, and how they influence the ways people construct their religious worldviews.

David B. Gray is an Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Santa Clara University. His research explores the development of tantric Buddhist traditions in South Asia, and

their dissemination in Tibet and East Asia, with a focus on the Yoginītantras, a genre of Buddhist tantric literature that focused on female deities and yogic practices involving the subtle body. He is the author of both *The Cakrasamvara Tantra: A Study and Annotated Translation* (2007) and *The Cakrasamvara Tantra: Editions of the Sanskrit and Tibetan Texts* (2012).

Holly Grether currently serves as an Assistant Teaching Professor at Montana State University. Her teaching interests include Buddhism, gender and religion, and theories of sacrifice. She received a PhD in Religious Studies from University of California, Santa Barbara, with specializations in South Asia and History of Religions. Under the tutelage of David Gordon White, her dissertation traced historical origins of various elements of *homa* sacrifices in South and Central Asia. Other research interests include religions of the Silk Road, Hindu and Buddhist tantra, religion and law, and ritual studies.

Georgios T. Halkias obtained a DPhil in Oriental Studies at the University of Oxford and is currently an Assistant Professor at the Centre of Buddhist Studies, the University of Hong Kong. He specializes in Tibetan and trans-Himalayan Buddhism and history and has held research posts and fellowships in the United Kingdom (Warburg, SOAS, and Oxford), Germany (Ruhr University), and Japan (Otani-ha Foundation). His publications include *Luminous Bliss: A Religious History of Pure Land Literature in Tibet. With an Annotated Translation and Critical Analysis of the Orgyen-ling Golden Short Sukhāvativyūha-sūtra* (University of Hawai'i Press) and several articles on Tibetan and Central Asian Buddhism, Himalayan history, and interdisciplinary studies of religion.

Todd Lewis is the Murray Distinguished Professor of Arts and Humanities in the Religious Studies Department at the College of the Holy Cross. His primary research since 1979 has been on Newar Buddhism in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. He is the author of many articles on this tradition, co-author of *World Religions Today* (5th ed., 2014), and editor of the new course book *Buddhists: Understanding Buddhism Through the Lives of Practitioners* (2014). His most recent translation, *Sugata Saurabha: A Poem on the Life of the Buddha by Chittadhar Hridaya of Nepal*, received awards from the Khyentse Foundation and the Numata Foundation as the best book in Buddhist Studies published in 2011.

Timothy Lubin is Professor of Religion at Washington and Lee University. He has degrees from Columbia and Harvard, and earlier taught at Harvard and at the University of Virginia. He publishes on a wide range of topics in Sanskrit religious and legal literatures and epigraphy, teaching courses on Asian traditions, the comparative study of religion, and the Sanskrit language. His research deals with Indic legal traditions and Brahmanical Hindu ritual codes, the connections between them, and their reception in modern India. He co-edited *Hinduism and Law: An Introduction* (2010) and is at work on a study of Brahmanical authority in the history of South and Southeast Asia.

Charles D. Orzech is Reader in Religion, Conflict and Transition in the School of Critical Studies at the University of Glasgow and Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina Greensboro. He teaches a variety of courses, from introductory Buddhism and Chinese religion to seminars on theories of myth and on semiotics and religious images. He currently convenes the MLitt core course on Contemporary Perspectives on Religion and Theology at the University of Glasgow. His research has focused on the translation and transformation of late Mahāyāna Buddhism in eighth- through thirteenth-century China. He is the author of *Politics and Transcendent Wisdom: The Scripture for Humane Kings in the Creation of Chinese Buddhism* (1998) and more recently was the general editor of *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia* (2011). He is currently writing a monograph on vision and liturgy in Chinese Esoteric Buddhism.

Richard K. Payne is Yehan Numata Professor of Japanese Buddhist Studies at the Institute of Buddhist Studies, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, where his teaching focuses on methodology in the study of Buddhism, Buddhist psychology, and tantric Buddhism. As a member of the GTU's Core Doctoral Faculty, he directs dissertations in Buddhist studies and related topics. He edited *Tantric Buddhism in East Asia* (2005), and the Japan section of *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia* (2011). Currently he also is the Editor in Chief of the Buddhism section of the Oxford Bibliographies, and Co-Editor in Chief of the Oxford Encyclopedia of Buddhism. He initiated and is Chair of the Editorial Committee for the Pure Land Buddhist Studies series, University of Hawai'i Press, and is Chair of the Editorial Committee for *Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies*. His research on the *homa* continues, as does his work on a survey of tantric Buddhism.

Tadeusz Skorupski is Emeritus Reader in Buddhist Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Academic interests and research include Buddhist philosophy and doctrine, literature, iconography, rituals, and history. His publications include the comprehensive study of the *Sarvabuddhagatispariśodhana Tantra* (1983), a key *yoga tantra*. He was editor of *The Buddhist Forum*, and his recent publications include *The Six Perfections* (2002) and *Kriyāsaṃgraha: Compendium of Buddhist Rituals, an Abridged Version* (2002).

Tsunehiko Sugiki is Professor in the Department of Global and Regional Studies, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Kaichi International University (since April 2015). He holds a PhD in Religious Studies from the University of Tokyo (October 2000). He was formerly Specially Appointed Researcher in Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology in the University of Tokyo (January 2003–February 2007), Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, and so on in Waseda Institute for Advanced Study in Waseda University (March 2007–March 2011), and Lecturer and Professor in Nihonbashi Gakkan University (April 2011–March 2015). His specialization is Philology of Indian Buddhism (Buddhist Tantrism in particular) and Religious Studies.

Musashi Tachikawa is Professor Emeritus of the National Museum of Ethnology (1992–2004) and taught at Aichi Gakuin University (2004–2011). He earned his PhD in Sanskrit and Indian studies from Harvard (1975), and a DLitt from Nagoya (1985). He has authored many studies of *homa*, ritual, esoteric iconography, and Buddhist thought. These include *Pūjā and Saṃskāra* (with Shoun Hino and Lalita Deodhar, 2006), *Indian Fire Ritual* (with Shrikant Bahulkar and Mdhavai Kolhatkar, 2001), *Essays in Buddhist Theology* (2012), *Buddhist Fire Ritual in Japan* (with Madhavi Bhasker Kolhatkar, 2013), and several other works.

Vesna A. Wallace is a Professor of Religious Studies in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of California in Santa Barbara. Her two areas of specialization are Indian Buddhism, particularly Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions, and Mongolian Buddhism. She has authored and translated four books related to Indian Buddhism, three of which pertain to the *Kālacakra* tantric tradition in India and edited a book on Mongolian Buddhism. She has published numerous articles on Indian and Mongolian Buddhism.

Michael Witzel is the Wales Professor of Sanskrit, Harvard University. He studied at the University of Tübingen, Erlangen-Nürnberg (Germany), and Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, receiving his PhD in 1972 at Erlangen. He has taught at Tübingen (1972), Leiden (1978–1986), and Harvard since 1986. He was the director of the Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project and the Nepal Research Center at Kathmandu (1972–1978). He has held six visiting positions at Paris, Kyoto, and Tokyo. He is the editor of the Harvard Oriental Series (since 1993), HOS Opera Minora (since 1995), and the Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies (since 1995). He specializes in Vedic, Old Iranian, and Nepalese studies, Indian/Iranian prehistory and substrate studies, old and medieval Indian and Nepalese history and manuscriptology, as well as in ritual studies and comparative mythology. His most recent publications include: *Das Alte Indien* (2003, 2nd ed. 2010), *The Origins of the World's Mythologies* (2012), and two volumes of *Der Rig-Veda: I–II*, and *III–V* (2007, 2013).

HOMA VARIATIONS

Introduction

Richard K. Payne



THIS COLLECTION OF essays is intended to place the study of the *homa*—a votive ritual employing fire, which is found throughout the tantric world—within a framework that is both cross-cultural and historically longitudinal. This placement thus expands the study of ritual change across two axes—temporal and cultural. The temporal dimension that we seek to establish for the study of ritual change is the *longue durée*. For the most part, work on ritual change has had a relatively narrow temporal dimension, which severely limits the possibility of drawing conclusions regarding patterns or types of change that may be regular or consistent. Changes noted over narrow historical spans are subject to being produced by idiosyncrasies of their particular situation.¹ Second, the essays included make it possible to examine the effects of translocating rituals from one religious culture to another. Thus, the changes that this collection as a whole seeks to examine are ones that extend over time and across the boundaries between religious cultures. This collection addresses two audiences that appear to be largely disjunct from one another—scholars of ritual studies and scholars of Asian religions. For scholars of ritual studies we will first briefly introduce the *homa*, the ritual that provides the unifying theme for this collection. For scholars of Asian religions, we will then introduce the key theoretical issue of ritual change that informs the construction of this collection as a whole.

INTRODUCING THE *HOMA*

Since research on the *homa* is important for both ritual studies and the study of Asian religions, it is a nexus of interaction for these two fields of study. It is important for ritual studies because this one ritual, despite particular sectarian inflections, has a history of

more than two millennia, and the Indo-Iranian and Vedic rituals that form an important part of the source material for its development, extends that history to as much as four millennia. Over the course of its history, the *homa* has spread out from the Indian subcontinent into several different religious cultures, and in addition to South Asia, it is also found in Central Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia, as well as now in Europe and the Americas. It is, therefore, one of very few instances of a ritual that can be studied over the *longue durée*, having undergone repeated ritual change and cultural adaptation while at the same time retaining an extensive and detailed textual record, and a clearly identifiable continuity of ritual practice.²

The *homa* employs a fire into which offerings are made. Although sometimes spoken of—rather loosely—as a sacrificial ritual, since the offerings are destroyed in the fire, it is more appropriate to consider it a votive ritual. That is, the offerings are being conveyed to the deities in expectation of a *quid pro quo*. One of the unifying factors for *homās* in almost all traditions is that the fire is identified as Agni, the Vedic fire god. Agni is central to Vedic fire rituals and those that derive from them because by consuming the offerings, Agni makes them pure and only then conveys them to the gods. Additional sets of offerings to other deities may be added into a ritual performance of the *homa*, but Agni is almost invariably the first deity evoked.³

Other similarities uniting the *homa* as performed across the range of traditions in which it is practiced include the kinds of offerings made, the altars upon which the ritual is performed, and the implements employed in the performance of the ritual. The offerings frequently include both material and symbolic offerings, such as clarified butter or oil, grains and beans of various kinds, lights, incense, water for washing the deities' feet, music, and so on—the specific combination of offerings and the specific kinds of offerings varying according to ritual culture. Such variations at times further reflect material culture as well, such as in the kinds of substitutions made for the substances offered.⁴ There are also consistent similarities in the shapes of the altar hearths employed for the performance of *homās* having different purposes. While several traditions homologize the altar with a mandala, for the performance of a *homa* the altar is the hearth that contains the fire, and such hearths usually take one of a limited number of shapes. The shapes of hearths include circles, demilunes, stars, and so on, and specific shapes are employed for different ritual ends. Likewise, the implements employed in the performance of a *homa* are similar across various ritual cultures. A widely shared instance of the implements employed are the ladle and a spoon used to make offerings. Although the sizes and shapes of these implements also vary across ritual cultures, the use of those two paired implements is also consistent and is one of the ritual details significant for demonstrating continuity from Vedic through to tantric ritual practice.

By comparison, implements are also important for the study of the history of the Zoroastrian fire ritual, the *yasna*. Michael Stausberg has noted that there are limitations on what one can conclude regarding the antiquity of the *yasna* on the basis of

archaeological evidence, specifically mortars and pestles found in both performance of the *yasna* and in ancient sites such as Persepolis. Although the existence of mortars and pestles dating from the fifth century B.C.E. indicate the possibility that the *yasna* was performed that early, “the fact that similar or even identical implements have been used in a ritual context does not in itself constitute a valid proof for the hypothesis that it was ‘the Yasna’ that has been performed with the help of these vessels.”⁵ In the case of the spoon and ladle used in the *homa*, however, the implements are not isolated from other ritual elements. In other words, the implements form part of a network of interrelated ritual elements, including other ritual implements, the shapes of altars, and the kinds of offerings made.

Other specific ritual elements found in performances of the *homa* also point to the historical continuity with Vedic ritual culture. One telling instance is the ritual construction and destruction of the altar as found for example in the Japanese esoteric Buddhist tradition of Shingon. A defining characteristic of Vedic ritual culture is that ritual spaces are temporary constructions, usually interpreted as a consequence of the nomadic character of Vedic society. This is a clear difference from the fixed ritual sites of temples in Brahmanic and Hindu religious cultures. As temporary constructions, Vedic ritual action includes the construction and destruction of the ritual enclosures.⁶

Today in the Shingon tradition of Japanese esoteric Buddhism, the same actions—ritualized as symbolic ones—remain part of *homa* performance. As the final of the four rituals in the training sequence (*shidō kegyō* 四度加行) of a Shingon priest, the sequence of *homa* performances starts with the ritual construction of the altar and ends after several days of practice with its ritual destruction as well—it is dissolved into the five elements of the cosmos.⁷ Thus, although for probably centuries Shingon ritual practice has been done inside temple buildings at permanent altars, we find an almost vestigial remnant of the outdoor, temporary ritual enclosures of Vedic ritual practice. Other kinds of continuities and adaptations took place across the history of the *homa*. Adaptations are found in the religious cultures of China and Japan where interactions between the practices of the *homa* and other ritual practices were created. For example, Christine Mollier has discussed the development in China of a *homa* devoted to the seven stars of the Great Dipper.⁸ Similarly, in medieval Japan a Shintō version of the *homa* and other rituals based on tantric Buddhist prototypes were also developed.

As indicated by this brief description, the *homa* has been transmitted across the boundaries between several religious cultures, as well as having retained elements that point to a continuity of history extending over millennia. With roots in the rituals of Indo-Iranian and Vedic religious practices, and branches extending across the entire tantric world, it has been adapted to a variety of different purposes and cultural settings. In addition, it is a very well documented ritual, including canonic descriptions, manuals for performance, polemical discussions, and the like. This makes it one of the best possible rituals for studying ritual change over a long period of time and across religious cultures.⁹ Before moving on to the issues involved in the study of ritual change per se, it

will be useful to consider the category of ritual and how it has been distinguished from other related phenomena, such as ceremonial and festival. Examining how categories are formed reveals either explicit or implicit theoretical commitments.

RITUAL, CEREMONIAL, FESTIVAL

As described in the essays that comprise this collection, the *homa* can be performed in a variety of different settings. In one case, for example, it is found as one element within a much larger complex of religious activities, such as the *Navarātra* described by Nawaraj Chaulagain in his chapter. In other cases, the *homa* is performed as a stand-alone ritual, such as in the Shugendō *saitō goma* discussed by Richard Payne. Such wide-ranging differences in the context of a *homa* performance may raise for some readers categorial concerns—what are we talking about when we say that the *homa* is a ritual, or that it is an element of a larger ceremonial sequence, or that it is performed as part of a festival? In contrast to some other approaches, we assert that it is not in fact possible to draw clear distinctions between these kinds of activities. While the categories are inherently fuzzy, the reflections of some earlier scholars helps us to discern a conceptual landscape within which to negotiate our path between *homa* as stand-alone ritual and as element in ceremonies or as part of a festival.¹⁰

Raymond Firth, for example, makes the distinction between ritual and ceremonial on the basis of conceptions of ritual efficacy. In his now classic studies of the Tikopia, Firth defines ritual as “a formal set of procedures of a symbolic kind, involving a code for social communication, and believed to possess a special efficacy in affecting technical and social conditions of the performers or other participants.”¹¹ Ceremonial is in his view a subset of ritual, but

the emphasis is more upon symbolic acknowledgement and demonstration of a social situation than upon the efficacy of the procedures in modifying that situation. Whereas other ritual procedures are believed to have a validity of their own, ceremonial procedures, while formal in character, are not believed in themselves to sustain the situation or effect a change in it.¹²

Elsewhere he notes that such a “compressed distinction is not wholly satisfactory . . . [as] in practice they may merge into or alternate with one another.”¹³ Our purpose here, however, is not to develop a definitive way of distinguishing between the ritual and ceremonial, but rather the opposite—to emphasize the complexity of the overlapping categories of ritual, ceremonial, and festival.¹⁴ Attempts to formulate classificatory systems, typologies, or taxonomies for such forms of human behavior as ritual, ceremonial, and festival are necessarily stipulative, rather than corresponding to either an objective distinction, or to a conceptual structure that can be reliably applied universally. The utility

of such category systems depends upon and is limited to the objects of study. William Sax expresses a similar concern with the category of ritual as such. He describes it as the problem of reifying ritual so that scholars and others “mistake an analytic category for a natural kind.”¹⁵

One of the characteristics that many scholars call attention to when identifying rituals is that rituals are performed repeatedly. In addition to being (at least potentially)¹⁶ repeatable, rituals are contained performances intended to effect some end.¹⁷ We take these three characteristics—repeatability, marked limits in space and time, and teleological intent—as a kind of minimalist set of indicators of how we are using the term “ritual” here.

Many scholars have offered more expansive definitions or characterizations. For example, a partial list of characteristics is given by Bruce Lincoln, drawing on Catherine Bell’s work. “Bell identifies formality, tradition, invariance, rule-governance, and sacral symbolism as some of the marks by which ritual is regularly distinguished, and to these we might add repetition, solemnity, and countless factors that vary with cultural context.”¹⁸ Similarly, although not offered explicitly as a definition, Sheldon Pollock lists “formalized, conventionalized, ceremonial, and symbolic behavior” as the characteristics of ritual.¹⁹ As Lincoln suggests in the quotation above, such a list is not closed, and while the individual items on such a list may constitute elements of a family resemblance, the more strands one attempts to bind together to form a polythetic definition, the more diffuse that definition becomes and the less heuristic value it has. It is for this reason that we prefer a more minimalist approach, which serves the same ends of inclusivity at least as well.

Further, there appears to be no general consensus about the various categories or terminology that may be used in describing other related categories of activity, such as festival, ceremonial, and so on—and perhaps that is just as well. However, what such lack indicates is twofold. First, the categories are reflections of social practices, and second are themselves the product of other social practices. As a consequence, they are formed by existing preconceptions as well as by the fluidities of the objects of study. As social constructs the categories not only do not have, but cannot have clear boundaries. As intellectually satisfying as definitional clarity may be, it is always at best a limited accomplishment, one constrained by some delimited field of inquiry for which such clarity is possible. Beyond that field the categories formed to describe it lose their sharp edges, with marginal cases and increasingly fuzzy boundaries²⁰ emerging. Thus, for example, we find some versions of the *homa* as examined in this collection to be part of the ceremonies marking a festival. While we can distinguish between them terminologically in this fashion, all three—ritual, ceremony, festival—are mutually implicative. Each category informs the significance of the others, and to these three several others might be added as well.²¹ Rather than claiming that any specific form or function identifies ritual as a discrete category, or taking refuge in stipulating it as a scholarly category, Catherine Bell’s emphasis on ritualizing points up the fuzzy boundaries and ambiguities of the

category. She argues that “ritualization is a way of acting that specifically establishes a privileged contrast, differentiating itself as more important or powerful. Such privileged distinctions may be drawn in a variety of culturally specific ways that render the ritualized acts dominant in status.”²² With this purposely minimalist indication of how we are using the term “ritual,” we can now consider the central theoretical issue for this collection, ritual change.

STUDYING THE DYNAMICS OF RITUAL CHANGE: THE *LONGUE DURÉE*

The theoretical movement away from functionalist explanations, which emphasized stability and the return to the norm, has opened consideration of change and disruption as the normal state of affairs. As Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern put it, “studies of ritual practices today take into account not only variation but also creativity and innovation. This is in line with a general shift towards the study of change as distinct from continuity.”²³ Many of the studies of ritual change that have appeared following this movement away from functionalist presumptions of stability and homeostasis have examined a particular ritual as it changes over a relatively short period of time. This has involved rethinking the status of ritual as historical, rather than as part of an eternal, unchanging religious reality. John D. Kelly and Martha Kaplan have suggested that “Nowhere more than in the study of ritual has the turn to history raised fundamental questions for anthropology.”²⁴ While ritual is frequently now discussed as process, practice, or performance, this needs to be qualified by a conception of any particular ritual as a historical entity.

The Historicity of Ritual

The study of ritual has changed dramatically over the period extending from the last quarter of the twentieth century to the present. The effects of those changes are still, however, being integrated into broader areas of study, such as religious studies. Reflective and critical studies have shown that in the nineteenth century ritual was one of the dichotomizing concepts around which the formation of conceptions of modernity, that is, the distinction between us and them, was crystallized. The tendency to define ritual as unchanging allowed it to be consigned if not to the dustbins of history, then to a childish stage of cognitive development. This evaluation reflects the self-image of Enlightenment modernism, boldly throwing off the shackles of tradition, freeing the individual from outdated and stultifying social impediments.

The Image of Ritual as Unchanging and Meaningless

A common conception of ritual in contemporary Western popular religious culture has been—and apparently continues to be despite changes in the academic community—that

ritual comprises a set of rigidly codified actions performed without reflection or intentional involvement. In this view ritual is performed simply out of rote memorization and continues to be performed despite being meaningless. No doubt the idea that rituals are unchanging—performed by rote—has several sources. One important source, however, is the common equation of tradition and authority. As Monica Wilson noted, “Ritual is commonly validated partly by its supposed antiquity . . . real or supposed.”²⁵ This strategy for claiming authority is no doubt one of the reasons that ritual has been seen as unchanging—in order to be meaningful, valid, or effective, ritual needed to be socially understood as partaking in a continuity of action going back beyond current memory. In such matters, however, current memory seems to be very short, such that “within a short space of time new forms are accepted as ‘traditional’ in ritual.”²⁶ In addition to this common strategy employed within religious traditions, however, theoretical and methodological commitments of academic studies of ritual also contributed to the image of ritual as unchanging.

For almost a century, for example, anthropology was defined as methodologically distinct from history, choosing to focus on the “anthropological present.” Although not necessarily intended to do so, such “snapshots” generally reinforced the image of the “primitive Other” as existing in a timeless, that is, unchanging social reality.²⁷ This imagery both reinforced and was reinforced by the theologically informed rhetoric of distinction made in the early development of religious studies between Christianity as vital and changing, in contrast with other religions portrayed as ossified, outdated, stultifying impediments to social and material progress, ready to be supplanted by the “Good News.”²⁸ More broadly, these images, presumptions, and rhetorics were part of the modernist justification for colonialism and imperialism. The twin benefits of the steam engine and the Gospel were to be brought to all the world’s people.

Christiane Brosius and Ute Hüsken have pointed out that this popular image of ritual as meaningless²⁹ is also of the rhetoric of “high modernity.” Citing the founding work of figures such as William Robertson Smith (1846–1894), James George Frazer (1854–1941), Arnold van Gennep (1873–1951), and Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), they point out that the term “ritual”

was imbued with stereotyping connotations referring to the odd, obsolete, primitive, timeless and thus unchanging, opposed to the notions of modern, civilised and progressive. Rituals were tied to religion, and according to a secular worldview, deemed an inappropriate form of action in a civilised, “enlightened” society.³⁰

This rhetoric of high modernity equating progress with secularization³¹ has itself come into question, for example, by Eric Wolfe³² and more recently by Robert Bellah.³³ Similarly, focus on the anthropological present has increasingly given way to a recognition that because of colonialism putatively “traditional” societies available for anthropological study were actually themselves undergoing significant changes created by the

stresses resulting from the very colonial status that made research possible.³⁴ Such reflections contributed to what Philippe Buc has described as the “crossbreeding of history and anthropology—an encounter that began before World War II and picked up speed in 1970s.”³⁵ Kelly and Kaplan note that in addition to the image of ritual as static,

the anthropological images of ritual have always existed in complex relations with a reservoir of images of ritual in Western culture more generally, relations of displacement, usurpation, inversion, subversion, incorporation, and transformation, of images authored by missionaries, travelers, conquerors, and others, such as juggernaut, suttee, yogic asceticism, vedic mystery, human sacrifice, cannibalism, head-hunting, firewalking, charlatan priests, and natives dancing in firelight.³⁶

Particularly in the last quarter of the twentieth century, the field of religious studies has been expanded by scholars whose background training lay in fields other than theology, and as a consequence such tropes as “the timeless East,” “eternal truths,” and “the Asian mind” have been questioned.³⁷

Despite these and other critiques, such preconceptions of ritual comprise a deeply embedded cultural residue, a residue formed out of the theological debates dating at least back to the period of the Protestant Reformation. As found in contemporary American popular religious culture, they evidence the triumph of broadly Protestant understandings of the nature of ritual. Commonly, usage of the very term “ritual” in that religious culture carries a dismissive tone or pejorative connotation.³⁸ Consonant with the challenges to the rhetoric of high modernity that presumed secularization as an inevitable historical process, increasingly frequent challenges to this stereotypical image of ritual as unchanging and meaningless are now also to be found in the academic study of religion, including religious studies *per se*, and also the social scientific studies of religion such as history, anthropology, and archeology.

According to Brosius and Hüsken, this stereotypic image of ritual as outmoded religiosity and inadequate science began to change in the late 1970s. The concept of ritual was applied to secular and political dimensions of society, and from there began to be applied more widely.³⁹ Running throughout these new valorizations of ritual as a social process, “ritualizing” as Catherine Bell⁴⁰ called it, much of the emphasis has been on ritual as historically located, although perhaps not explicitly theorized as such. In other words, ritual is treated as something that occurs at a particular time and place for a particular reason.

In Buddhist studies, despite the long-standing imagery of the tradition as the archetypal expression of enlightened spontaneity, even Chan and Zen have recently come under examination as ritual traditions.⁴¹ For many Western converts to Buddhism, the representation of the tradition as rational, humanistic, in accord with science, and opposed to ritualism has become a modern dogma.⁴² That representation, however, has been overdetermined by apparent congruence of the “rhetoric of immediacy” of the

Chan and Zen tradition⁴³ and the neo-Romantic religious conceptions of immediate perception and spontaneous realization. Concomitant with this has been attention to embodiment as an important theme.⁴⁴ Hopefully this latter will facilitate an intellectual awareness that Buddhist meditation, despite claims of exceptionalism, is located on a spectrum of yogic practices, themselves highly ritualized, and deriving from Indic sources—and not a unique marker of Buddhist identity.

The issues related to such a revisioning of yogic practice require an awareness of ritual as a historical entity, which is what is meant here by its “historicality.”⁴⁵ Although the claim that ritual is historical may on the face of it seem unproblematic, many studies of ritual have tended to examine ritual as a particular instance, sometimes in the idiom of the “ethnographic present,” and at other times from a short-term perspective, that is *histoire événementielle*. Such short-term perspectives, however, tend to obscure the historicality of any particular ritual as a social phenomenon. Many social phenomena have been studied historically, such as, to take some arbitrary examples, the book, democracy, fashion, and domesticated plants. There is, therefore, no inherent reason that rituals should not also be considered as historical entities.

The historicality of ritual is demonstrated in this collection. Examining a variety of different instances of the *homa* over a period of more than two and a half millennia shows a variety of changes in the ritual’s performance. As suggested earlier, in the course of that history, the *homa* has been adapted into several different religious cultures, being transformed in identifiable ways. The *homa* retains an identity that makes it recognizably the “same” ritual, despite having been transmitted across both temporal expanses and cultural boundaries.

Ritual Change/Ritual Invariance

Despite the resistance of popular religious culture, the preconceptions embedded in ordinary language about ritual, and the theological foundations of religious studies, that rituals change is no longer a radical observation. Bruce Lincoln has suggested that a shift in intellectual climate—from one regarding ritual as static to one that regards ritual as a historical entity subject to change like any other historical entity—took place around 1980.⁴⁶ Similarly, Michael Stausberg asserts that “the discovery that rituals are mechanism[s] of world making in their own right and hence merit an independent inquiry was one of the starting points for the recent take-off of ‘ritual studies’ since the 1970s.”⁴⁷ Since that time, a substantial body of scholarship has been created examining not only ritual *per se* but also ritual change.

On the other hand, the idea that ritual is invariant, that is, stable or unchanging—sometimes to the degree of being synonymous with pathology—also remains strong. Some scholars working in the area of cognitive theories of ritual continue to theorize while holding an *a priori* conception that ritual is invariant, and that ritual practitioners hold concomitant attitudes. For example, Robert N. McCauley

summarizes work by Pascal Boyer and Pierre Liénard suggesting that cultural construction of certain

evolved dispositions of the human mind is responsible for everything about religious rituals from the fact that they must be carried out just right each and every time, to the fact that at each step they require concentration on particular components of the action at hand, to their focus on a comparatively small set of recurrent themes. Those themes have to do with such things as managing problems of contamination, hence the focus on cleaning and washing, and creating and maintaining order and boundaries.⁴⁸

Boyer and Liénard in turn point to Roy Rappaport as the source of this list of characteristics.⁴⁹ According to Boyer and Liénard, Rappaport had “enjoined” anthropologists to explain “the ‘obvious’ (i.e., obvious to all anthropologists) aspects of ritual—those frequent features that a decent model should explain.”⁵⁰ They summarize these aspects under six rubrics. First, “no obvious empirical goals: ‘meaningless’ acts” within which they distinguish between the meaninglessness of specific acts within the ritual and the purpose for which a ritual is performed. Second, compulsion, which they describe in terms of a feeling that one “must perform a specific ritual, that it would be dangerous, unsafe, or improper not to do it.” Third, literalism and rigidity, which indicates that despite variation between ritual performances, “people strive to achieve a performance that matches their representation of past performances, and that they attach great emotional weight to any deviation from that remembered pattern.” Fourth, “repetition, reiteration, redundancy,” that is, doing the same action several times, the exact number of repetitions and the exactness of the repetition being important. Fifth, “order and boundaries,” which both distinguishes ritual from “the relatively unpredictable patterns of nonritual environments,” and distinguishes the ritual space from “the other, unmarked space.” And, sixth, a set of “specific concerns” in exemplification of which they identify as common themes: “pollution and cleansing, protection against invisible dangers, and the creation of a special space and time.”⁵¹

Liénard and Boyer develop this characterization of ritual in order to identify the cognitive processes formative of ritual practices. They point to Freud’s “tantalizing observation that obsessive neurosis should be seen as a private cult and religion as a collective form of neurotic obsession.”⁵² While Freud’s conception of “ritual as pathology” has been thoroughly critiqued to the point that it is no longer a viable explanation,⁵³ Liénard and Boyer do explore the similarities between such behaviors as children’s rituals, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and life-stage-relevant intrusive thoughts that, although “clearly different” manifest “a common set of cognitive processes.”⁵⁴ That there are consistent similarities between rituals and that such similarities may result from cognitive processes shared by ritual practitioners and others does not, however, establish

that rituals are invariant. It may simply indicate that the ideology of rituals frequently includes claims to invariance. Such ideological claims, however, are not descriptive.

One explanation of ritual change is that actors always intend invariance, but must adapt to particular situations. They intend to adhere to an invariant model, and when changes are made, the intent is always to revert to that model—the changes being understood to be temporary and undesirable. This may certainly be the case with some rituals, but it is hardly universal. Several instances of intentional and systematic changes to rituals and ritual systems are known. The example of changes to Christian ritual in the course of the Reformation is quite clear and quite dramatic. That period is very well-studied and such studies reveal that wide-ranging sectarian differences in the performance of the “same” rituals developed in the course of a century or so. In some instances, very radical transformations of ritual practices took place in even shorter periods of time.⁵⁵ Perhaps the most radical instance of ritual change is ritual failure, events that a theory of ritual based on a strong understanding of invariance would find difficult to incorporate.

Ritual Failure

As suggested, there is increasing acceptance of the idea that rituals do in fact change, and study of the ways in which ritual changes take place. Ritual change, however, also implies continuity. Distinct from ritual change with its implication of continuity is the idea of ritual failure. As a concept, ritual failure has entered the scholarly lexicon relatively recently and has been employed in two distinct ways. In one usage, the phrase is used to identify those ritual performances that fail to meet their intended goals. An example of this usage is Michael D. K. Ing’s discussion of a famous instance of ritual failure that befell no lesser of a ritual expert than Confucius himself.⁵⁶ According to the “Tangong Shang” chapter of the *Liji*, Confucius attempts to perform the rites for a joint burial of his parents, including the construction of burial mounds (rather than grave burials). Shortly after completing the rites, heavy rains fell and the burial mounds collapsed. Ing suggests that the treatment of this event in the *Liji* reveals two conflicting interpretations of the events—was the failure preventable, and due to Confucius himself having somehow not performed the rites properly, or was the failure unpreventable, the result of circumstances outside Confucius’s control? Ing’s own suggestion is that the two interpretations cannot be resolved. He says that the passage “can be read as asserting a kind of descriptive ambiguity such that it reveals the uncertain and even risky nature of ritual performance. Both kinds of failures exist, yet the actors in the passage, the authors of the passage, and readers of the text often cannot distinguish the agencies involved in the failure.”⁵⁷

Robert N. McCauley and E. Thomas Lawson suggest that individual ritual failures can accumulate to the point of crisis, that is to a ritual system as such “crashing.” They go on to suggest that it “is easy enough to see how the crash of such a ritual system may well lead to the group’s extinction” as a religious organization.⁵⁸ Whether this actually then

follows or not is dependent upon a variety of other factors related to such issues as frequency of performance (scaled low to high), sensory pageantry (scaled low to high), and ritual form (bivalent as either special agent or special patient/instrument).⁵⁹ This suggests one of the ways that ritual failure in the first usage, the failure of a ritual to accomplish its goals, leads to ritual failure in the second usage, the cessation of ritual practices.

As with many novel concepts, ritual failure used in this second way has led to considerations indicating that it requires additional nuance. Having moved from the image of rituals as “timeless and unchanging,” to the ideas that rituals change, the reality of the cessation of ritual practices per se, has in turn generated a conception of ritual transformation as a range of changes and cessations, “rather than as a binary indicator of failure or success.”⁶⁰ Timothy Insoll goes on to conclude that “ritual failure has to be conceived of almost on a sliding scale of effect, from personal failure, the ritual did not bring the desired results, through kin group, community, society, and so on. The key point being that ritual failure must be considered complex and multi-scalar.”⁶¹

Studies of ritual change,⁶² and perhaps even more so ritual failure,⁶³ provide a substantive basis not only for refuting the idea that ritual is static and invariant but also the idea that ritual is empty of cognitive significance. As Vasiliki G. Koutrafouris and Jeff Sanders note in their archeological study of ritual failure, “Rituals form fundamentally resilient systems: therefore ritual represents a particularly emotive and powerful phenomenon.”⁶⁴ Similarly, Insoll emphasizes that “considering ritual failure poses a challenge to ahistorical and static constructs of ritual practices and religious beliefs, and instead permits ritual agency and a more dynamic perspective to be adopted.”⁶⁵

Theoretical Consequences of Changing Rituals: Varieties of Ritual Change

Functionalism, or more fully structural functionalism, has been a dominant metatheoretical orientation in the social sciences for over a century. Its main explanatory device was to interpret social actions, including rituals, in terms of their contribution to maintaining social cohesion and social stability. Although functionalism increasingly faded in sociology and anthropology from the mid-twentieth century, it seems to have continued to play an implicit function in ritual studies up to around the end of the century. In part this seems to have been due to what Bruce Lincoln has called the “common understandings of ritual that stress tradition, fidelity, and timeless repetition.”⁶⁶ As already noted, Lincoln suggests that beginning in the 1980s, researchers have increasingly “turned their attention to the question of change and discontinuity in ritual.”⁶⁷ Despite this metatheoretical shift, religious rhetorics have long employed a self-representation of providing access to a timeless and unchanging transcendent reality, and in doing so often presented an image of the rituals that enabled such access to the timeless as themselves stable and unchanging. In this case we see the claim that rituals are invariant to be part of an ideological system. This has been perhaps one of the mitigating factors contributing, along with the popular conceptions identified by Lincoln, to the lag time between

the decline of functionalism and the rise of studies of ritual change. Conversely, this image of unchanging stability has also informed an “anti-ritual prejudice” that explains ritual as a kind of mindless repetition of meaningless actions.⁶⁸ Although no longer an unqualified authority, Freud’s continuing influence on popular religious culture also contributes to the understanding that ritual is an inefficacious repetition of symbolic actions as part of an obsessive dysfunction. As we saw above, his ideas are specifically identified as part of the background informing some studies of ritual in cognitive science of religion.

Studies of ritual change have begun to identify some of the ways in which such change takes place. It seems premature to attempt a taxonomy of change, but three patterns of change are by mixing of disparate ritual elements, by invention of new rituals, and by the routinization of visionary experience.

Ritual Change by Mixing

One kind of change that has been studied results from the mixing together of ritual elements from differing ritual traditions. Monica Wilson examined the changes in wedding rituals in southern Africa, where over a period of a century and a half traditional practices of the Nguni people were confronted by Christian missionaries backed by colonial powers. Seeking to discern “any general principles of change in ritual,” she concludes her study by suggesting three processes of ritual change.⁶⁹ In the first, rites “were taken over complete, almost without modification.”⁷⁰ The second process involves a selective adoption of ritual elements—“some of the conventions of western marriage were taken over piecemeal, and details copied.”⁷¹ And in the third process, while elements were borrowed, they were also transformed. These three are descriptive categories, and Wilson finally concludes by highlighting the determinative role of the ways in which social relations are conceived and the important role of the imagination. “A poet’s associations always lie within the frame of his experience as a member of a particular society within a given culture, but inside that frame his imagination roves; the symbols used in rituals are poetic and dramatic forms accepted by a community, through time.”⁷²

Susan Sered has also examined ritual change resulting from the mixing of different ritual elements from different ritual traditions and has offered a taxonomy based upon the agent responsible: individuals, professionals, or institutions.⁷³ She comments that the tendency to view ritual as unchanging is not supported by the childbirth rituals that she studied. “The ritual fluidity, multiplicity, and creativity observed in these studies suggests that conventional scholarly understandings of ritual are far too static, too likely to emphasize repetition rather than change, and too quick to assume that everyone in a particular culture group engages in more or less the same ritual acts.”⁷⁴

While her categorization based on agency is made problematic by the absence of any criteria for what constitutes a ritual,⁷⁵ of more interest to our present goal of establishing the longitudinal study of ritual is differentiation of “distinct arenas of ritual

configuration”: reservoirs, menus, and packages. “Reservoirs” designates a societal ritual system, “menus” designates “the clusters of rituals associated with particular streams, modalities, traditions, subgroups, and so on,” while “packages” designates the ritual complex employed by an individual.⁷⁶ This terminology points to different scopes of study when considering longitudinal change.

In their study of ritual changes in Papua New Guinea, Stewart and Strathern describe similar dynamics. They examine the restorative ritual known as *rindi kiniya*, which was employed to “repair all kinds of problems, from those within the human body to those in the whole cosmos.”⁷⁷ Significant social and political changes to Duna society began with colonial influences starting in the 1930s, and then incorporation into the nation-state of Papua New Guinea in 1975. Christian missionaries of many different kinds, supported by colonial and governmental powers, brought about a sharp disruption to Duna religious practices. Stewart and Strathern point out, however, that this is not simply a matter of displacing one religion with another. “The Christian God has been slotted in as the ultimate power in the world, to whom prayers have to be directed for world making and remaking, yet certain of the traditional notions are very much blended and intertwined with Christian ones.”⁷⁸

Ritual Change by Invention

Given the emphasis on ritual invariance and continuity from some founding event in the past, this category has received very little attention. Indeed, as Catherine Bell noted, “the tendency to think of ritual as essentially unchanging has gone hand in hand with the equally common assumption that effective rituals cannot be invented.”⁷⁹ The type of ritual change intended under the rubric of invention may perhaps be best exemplified by the Last Supper because of its very familiarity. While the Last Supper is frequently thought of as the origin story (etiological myth) for the Eucharist, it may also be read as recording the invention of a ritual. In conversation with Catherine Albanese several years ago she described an experimental performance of what I now think of as a womanist Eucharist. As I recall her description now, this was performed by a Catholic priest for a select group of women and was only performed once—and only intended to be performed once. While many attempts to define ritual point to repetition, Albanese’s reflections suggest that rituals can be rituals without in fact being repeated, simply on the basis of having been scripted and formalized. In addition to repetition as a defining characteristic of ritual being made problematic by ritual invention, so also is the criterion of public or communal action. Although under the enduring influence of Freud private ritual is still not uncommonly considered pathological, private invented ritual has also been noted as potentially beneficial.⁸⁰ Bell gives several additional examples of ritual invention.⁸¹

One of the things that makes examination of this category difficult is the fuzziness of the category of ritual, as indicated by Bell’s notion of ritualization. If we consider

again the instance of the Last Supper, we see a meal being ritualized, in this case by divine injunction. The meal remains the foundational metaphor, but as the consequence of a long history of ritualization has almost disappeared under the weight of ritualized symbolism. Part of this process has been to reify the ritual as a distinctly different form of activity from daily life, and thereby to demarcate it as something without a history as such, though with a founding moment.

As opposing extremes on a continuum of ritual change, the idea of ritual invention complements the idea of ritual failure. As the most radical kind of ritual change, invention highlights the importance of social construction in our understanding of rituals.⁸² Several of the studies that have followed on the now classic *The Invention of Tradition* emphasize the limits of invention.⁸³

The invention of ritual is not an unconstrained process and as such points up the importance of the difference between arbitrary behaviors and social conventions. The former carries a connotation of being totally unmotivated by any precedent and capable of being created entirely anew. The use of this understanding of arbitrary in some intellectual circles today would seem to originate in Saussure's usages regarding the relation between a signifier and a signified. For example, it is arbitrary which side of the square cap a graduate's tassel is worn on. It could just as well be the right as the left. But local custom determines appropriate practice. In some cases, undergraduates will wear it on the right side, while graduates wear it on the left, while in other cases, the tassel is switched from one side to the other upon receipt of the diploma. Thus, rather than being entirely unmotivated by any history, such practices—despite the possibility of being changed without loss of the link in meaning between signifier and signified—do have a social history and are motivated by that history, that is, by social convention.

In the case of ritual invention, it is methodologically important to clarify that there is effectively no instance that is fully arbitrary. Returning to our example, we note that in contrast to understanding the Last Supper as an instance of invention, and in line with the general argument of his book, Bernhard Lang argues that "Jesus does not seem to have 'invented' the ritual handling and consumption of a token piece of bread and the drinking of wine; arguably, what he did was transform a well-known and often practiced form of sacrifice celebrated at the Jerusalem Temple in his period."⁸⁴ There will always be a social or historical context that provides conventional elements or interpretations. The distinction between "designed" (Lang's term) and invented evidences the importance for anyone describing a ritual case as one of invention clearly to delineate between the new invention as ritual and the social and cultural conventions and symbols that inform the newly invented ritual. Equally important will be the clear explication of the criteria by which invention is determined. For one study, a theological or doctrinal distinction may be taken as a marker of invention, while in other contexts of inquiry structural or symbolic innovations may be used to delineate invention.⁸⁵

Ritual Change by Routinization of Visionary Experiences

One of the suggestions regarding the origin of some kinds of rituals, such as *sādhana*s practiced individually, is that someone who has a visionary experience attempts to transmit a method for attaining the same experience to another person. This routinization of visionary experiences allows for the creation of new rituals, though no doubt drawing extensively on ritual elements available in the religious milieu. Geoffrey Samuel has noted that by now it is something of a cliché to suggest “that much of the writing of the Mahāyāna *sūtras* reflects visionary and meditative practices.”⁸⁶ There is good reason that it has become a cliché, since the claim regarding the routinization of visionary experiences is found as early as the *Yogācārabhūmi*, a Buddhist text that dates from the early or middle of the second century.⁸⁷ In his study of this work Paul Demiéville describes visionary experiences of various monks, including the visionary ordination of a Kashmiri teacher named Dharmadatta (or Dharma). Entering samādhi Dharmadatta was able to travel to Tuṣita heaven, where he was ordained by Maitreya, the future Buddha. Dharmadatta then transmitted this ordination to a Chinese disciple.⁸⁸

Extending the idea of the importance of visionary experiences by comparing several Buddhist texts with the *Bhagavadgītā*, Stephan Beyer proposed a “wave of visionary theism sweeping over the whole of northern India, influencing Hindu contemplatives as well as the [Buddhist] yoga masters of Kashmir.”⁸⁹ The structure that Beyer proposes is that following on visionary experiences, systems of practice—“visualization and magical creation”⁹⁰—were instituted so as to enable practitioners to purposely re-experience the visionary realities, such as Tuṣita. Both the visionary experiences and the ritualized practices (*sādhana*, etc.) intended to enable others to access those same visionary experiences are, however, known to us from texts, such as the descriptions in the *Bhagavadgītā* that Beyer highlights. Among such texts, Beyer includes the Pure Land *sūtras*, the visionary characteristics of which have been discussed by Jan Nattier⁹¹ and Paul Harrison. Harrison has suggested a slightly different interpretation, one that points to the use of visual imagery not descriptively as referencing an originary visionary experience, but rather as a form of transformative exercise. Specifically Harrison discusses the jeweled trees of Sukhāvatī, which are described as being comprised of various precious substances, in all of the possible combinations of substances and tree parts (roots, trunk, branches, leaves, and so on).⁹² The importance of texts and the necessity of complementing texts with observation will be the focus of the next section.

These three types of change—mixing, invention, routinization—are examples of the kinds of consistent patterns that might become the basis of more wide-ranging studies of ritual change. As mentioned above, our concern here is with change over long periods of time, the *longue durée*. Studies seeking to examine longitudinal changes, that is, identifying and explaining changes to rituals that take place over extended time periods, require a combination of methods.

HOW TO CROSS THE *LONGUE DURÉE*: TEXTS + ETHNOGRAPHY

For the historical study of ritual, that is over the *longue durée*, it is necessary to have recourse to texts. Philippe Buc has claimed, however, that dependence solely upon texts is methodologically problematic “because we do not have access to ritual practices, but only to texts depicting them (a given that renders impossible from the very start the use of certain kinds of anthropological models).”⁹³ This is, however, one of the things that makes the *homa* especially valuable for the longitudinal study of ritual change.⁹⁴ First, there is an extensive ritual literature specifically on the *homa*—including not only descriptions but also prescriptions, that is, ritual manuals. This literature continues for well-over a millennium and a half, is found throughout the tantric world, and in several of the languages of that world. And, second, this literary record is complemented by several living religious traditions in which the *homa* continues to be performed. These traditions are found in quite different religious cultures and are available for observation as a publicly performed ritual. It seems entirely plausible that were a ninth-century Śaivite tantrika to somehow observe a *homa* performed in the Shingon temple in Sacramento, California, on a New Year’s morning in the twenty-first century he would recognize it as a variant of the ritual with which he was already intimately familiar.

Catherine Bell has noted that the need for context in understanding texts, including ritual ones, is now commonly accepted—“a text should not be approached in isolation or abstraction from the historical milieu in which it was written.”⁹⁵ She goes on, however, to raise additional important questions about the relation between textualization and ritualization, which are left unanswered even by a focus on a text’s context. These constitute

a more underlying set of questions. What is the significance or functional effect of writing ritual down, both vis-à-vis ritual and as a written text? How does writing a text or depicting ritual in a text act upon the social relations involved in textual and ritual activities? Ultimately, how are the media of communication creating a situation rather than simply reflecting it; how are they restructuring social interactions rather than merely expressing them?⁹⁶

Understanding the textual record of the *homa* over several centuries is a necessary step toward answering Bell’s questions—whether these questions are directed toward the contemporary academic describing a ritual observed, or toward someone working in a traditional milieu in which a ritual manual or canonic source prescribing a ritual performance was created.

While many different kinds of textual records may be of use, probably the most extensive body of textual material directly related to ritualized practices is to be found in ritual manuals and prescriptive scriptural texts along with their commentaries. The detailed information regarding ritual performance found in such texts is examined in several of the essays in this collection.

Ritual manuals and prescriptive scriptures are, of course, not without difficulties as resources for the study of ritual. Regarding the materials related to the shift from Vedic to Brahmanic ritual, Timothy Lubin notes that the prescriptive texts “are anonymous works of uncertain provenance and date, probably composite in origin, and inadequately edited in their standard published forms.”⁹⁷ Another issue, noted by Geoffrey Samuel in his discussion of the textual sources dating from the origin of tantra, is that “the relationship between text and practice in the material is often oblique.”⁹⁸

Both ritual manuals and prescriptive scriptures share the problem that their authors assume a great deal of knowledge that the contemporary reader may not have as part of their own cultural experience or religious training. At a very basic level, for example, it is not uncommon for ritual manuals to simply identify ritual elements, such as mantra and *mudrā*, by a name, rather than describing in full or (literally) spelling out. The author of the ritual manual assumes that the practitioner is already trained and knows how to perform the necessary *mudrā*, or knows how to recite the mantra as required at some particular point in the ritual. In some cases, a mantra may not even be identified as a mantra, but simply by its name, such as “astra.”⁹⁹

Prescriptive scriptural sources may be even more obscure, taking for granted either what was common knowledge at the time, but which is no longer commonly known, or in other cases polemic debates unknown to the reader in the present. The Vairocanābhisambodhi sūtra, for example, has a chapter discussing different kinds of *homa* fires.¹⁰⁰ Why? What is this about? Presumably it has to do with other votive practices employing fires that were contemporaneous to the cult of the text itself. But what practices?, whose practices?¹⁰¹

Similarly obscure is the description of an “internal *homa*” that closes this chapter of the Vairocanābhisambodhi sūtra:

Next, internal homa extinguishes karma and [re]birth.

Understanding one’s own manas (mind), one dissociates oneself from form,
sound, and so on.

The eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body, as well as verbal and mental action,
All arises entirely from the mind and depend upon the mind-king.

The eyes and so on, born of differentiation, as well as the objective realms of form
and so on,

Obstacles to wisdom unborn, the Wind-parched Fire is able to extinguish.

It burns away false differentiation and accomplishes the pure bodhi-mind.

This is called internal homa, and it has been taught for bodhisattvas.¹⁰²

Is this a prescription for visualizing oneself performing a *homa* ritual? What is the “wind-parched fire?” Is it pointing to contemplation of the mind itself as an alternative to ritual performance?¹⁰³ An additional difficulty is that in such instances any commentaries may be of limited utility or reliability. The author of the commentary may be

separated from the author/s of the scripture by both time and culture. Continuing with our example, there are two major commentaries on the Vairocanābhisambodhi sutra, one by the eighth-century Indian monk Buddhaguhya (commentary dates from 760), and the other by the Chinese monk Yi Xing (683–727). A commentator such as Buddhaguhya working a century or more after the compilation of the tantra in India may still be familiar with the tradition of practice constellated in the Vairocanābhisambodhi, but has perhaps already lost touch with the polemic context (or, alternatively may know it so well as to assume it does not require explanation). Similarly, although Yi Xing's commentary is no doubt rooted in his work with Śubhakarasiṃha in translating the text into Chinese and is historically closer to the probable origin of the sutra in the mid-seventh century, his own religious culture is distinct from that of the text's author(s).

Despite these kinds of difficulties, the textual record provides us with the most important source we have for studying the dynamics of ritual change, including adaptations across religious cultures, over a wide historical horizon.¹⁰⁴ The methodologies of textual studies are well established and can be brought to bear for the study of ritual over the *longue durée*. What is necessary, however, is that the kinds of questions asked of the texts shift from the still common focus on doctrinal matters to matters of ritual and practice. Changing the questions being asked will also entail a change in the kinds of textual materials examined, as well as a change in the background knowledge for research of this kind. Answering questions about ritual and practice will require a shift in the knowledge base a researcher brings to the study from the not uncommon emphasis on familiarity with doctrine to pragmatic considerations of ritual as an embodied performance taking place in a specific social setting at a particular time, that is, ethnography.

One of the characteristics of ritual frequently commented on is specifically the fact that a ritual performance involves a wide range of sensory modalities and is therefore more than “a text.” Discussing the role of ritual in moral formation, David Solomon et al. emphasize that “rituals as repeated, stylized bodily movements and/or statements bring together symbols, emotions, and moral commitments.”¹⁰⁵ Discussing the ritual cycle of the Maring living in the Central Highlands of New Guinea, Rappaport similarly emphasizes that to participate in a ritual is not an action symbolic of something else, such as a commitment to ally with a group in its next war, “participation *indicates* membership. It does not simply symbolize it.”¹⁰⁶

The study of the *homa* could also be furthered through additional methodologies, such as archaeology, art history, and epigraphy. Although not included here, we can hope that this collection will stimulate scholars in those areas to attend to the *homa* specifically and ritual more generally. Each of these can contribute to the historical understanding of tantric ritual. Archaeology and epigraphy have been recognized as important sources by many scholars in the years since 1991, when Gregory Schopen published “Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism.”¹⁰⁷ In an important contribution to the historical study

of Buddhist tantra, Ronald Davidson has put these sources to good use in his *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*.¹⁰⁸ Unfortunately, some scholars have unnecessarily bifurcated the study of Buddhism between a putatively “real” Buddhism reflected in archaeology and epigraphy in opposition to a supposedly artificial or contrived representation created from texts. However, particularly in tropical areas not conducive to the preservation of written texts because of mold and insects, the archaeological record can be the crucial piece in establishing alternatives to the “authorized” histories constructed for sectarian and political ends. Andrea Acri’s studies, together with those of Jeffrey Sundberg,¹⁰⁹ P. D. Sharrock, and Arlo Griffiths,¹¹⁰ draw heavily on archaeological information and have demonstrated its importance in uncovering the otherwise obscured history of tantric Buddhism in Southeast Asia. Art history also provides an additional resource for understanding the history of Buddhism in ways outside the textual, ritual, archaeological, or epigraphic.

ORGANIZATION AND CONTENTS OF THIS COLLECTION

The essays of this collection are purposely not arranged according to any of the three systematics that are effectively normative for the study of religious traditions, whether in Asia or not. These three—chronological, geo-political, and sectarian—have become effectively naturalized as the proper categories for the study of religions. However, change is not chronologically uniform and developmental, religions engaged with power structures that were different from those familiar to us today (nation-states), and participants in traditions sometimes actively sought out other traditions for purposes of adaptation, appropriation, or rebuttal. For these reasons, the reader will not find the essays arranged in a chronological sequence, such as classic, medieval, and modern. Chronological divisions are usually more representative of political and military events, and constitute a presumptive framework into which the history of religious cultures is forced. More important, when considering the processes of ritual change, there is no reason to assume that there is a single, progressive history that can be used to structure a developmental sequence. Too often chronological periodization of this kind implicitly carries with it the sense of progressive development, that is, that later is somehow better. Nor are the essays grouped by geo-political categories—India, Nepal, Tibet, China, Japan. Such categories themselves often reflect contemporary power structures—both political and academic—rather than the connections between religious practices that concern us here. Geographical groupings frequently serve to minimize continuity across geo-political boundaries, emphasizing instead new developments supposedly more authentically responsive to the host culture. Lastly, the commonly deployed divisions of sectarian affiliation,¹¹¹ such as Hindu and Buddhist, no matter how carefully nuanced within such divisions (whether Vedic, Brahmanic,

Hindu, or Theravāda, Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna, for example), facilitate the kind of divisive specialization common to contemporary academia.¹¹² Use of sectarian affiliation has frequently resulted in a kind of hermetic treatment, one in which changes in a tradition are understood solely in terms of its own preceding history, ignoring outside influences as part of the context of change.¹¹³ Such specialization promotes hermetic understandings of traditions, for example, only looking to earlier Buddhist sources for later Buddhist developments or representing Hinduism by the Bhagavadgītā. In the study of ritual per se and practice more generally, the kind of clear divisions commonly institutionalized in academia all too often inhibit the recognition of patterns that transcend those divisions.

One of the ways in which this collection seeks to stimulate the study of ritual change across the *longue durée* is to creatively juxtapose essays and the ritual traditions that they focus on in such a fashion as to make it possible to consider continuities within and between them—continuities that would otherwise be obscured by the more familiar rubrics. Thus, rather than employing any of the three familiar rubrics, the essays are arranged here in a fashion reminiscent of the steppingstones in some gardens in Japan. Instead of a regular, smooth progress that would allow viewers of the garden to move through the garden without conscious attention to where they are stepping or where they are standing, the unevenly placed stepping stones of Japanese gardens demand that the visitor attend to each footstep, to look where they are going, to see where they are in the garden and thus to see the garden rather than simply walking through it. The intentionally unfamiliar juxtapositions of the following essays will, hopefully, promote inquiry that does not assume a unilinear progressive development, nor an essential coherence based on contemporary nation-states, nor reinforce the tendency toward self-referential conceptions of religious traditions.

The studies that follow were not crafted to accord with any preconceived categorization, but rather to elicit the best contemporary scholarship on a single ritual—the *homa*. Consequently, the essays cannot be neatly systematized, as each reflects the variety of theoretical concerns and methodological approaches of the author of each contribution. The groupings—Symbolic and Comparative Studies, Textual Studies, and Descriptive Studies—reflect key meta-methodological commonalities between the essays, rather than an imposed systematization.

Symbolic and Comparative Studies

The first set of essays approach the study of the *homa* by means of the symbolism of the ritual. Methodologically, these essays also share a comparative approach to the study of ritual. A concern with symbolism and the use of comparison are also found in other essays within the collection, suggesting the enduring importance of these approaches, but here they form the primary impetus of the three studies.

Grether

Holly Grether's essay opens our collection with a broad perspective, ranging across the ritual traditions of the entire Indo-Iranian religious complex, while also drawing on Central and East Asia materials as well. Citing Michel Strickmann's rhetorical question regarding the lack of inquiry regarding the *homa* in East Asia, Grether briefly surveys the range across which the *homa* is found. The direction that she wants to move the inquiry, however, is toward a more thorough investigation of the Zoroastrian connection with early medieval developments in India—as against a one-dimensional narrative that only runs from the Vedas to tantra.

Her study draws on material from the Zoroastrian ritual tradition, particularly the *yasna*, and thus provides an important new perspective on Hindu and Buddhist versions of the *homa*. In terms of the role of textual sources for the study of ritual dynamics, Grether's essay points up the important potential of the Avesta as an additional resource for studies of ritual across the *longue durée*. Grether takes the symbolism of fire and water as a basis for examining these ritual practices in a comparative mode. In her analysis, fire and water form a semiotic pair, found so widely throughout these ritual traditions that the pairing of one with the other constitutes a "ritual rule."¹⁴

Central to the general theme of ritual change across the *longue durée*, she concludes (citing Michael Witzel's essay "Meaningful Ritual") that "while the basic structures of the agnihotra are shared, tantric traditions add several ritual frames. Tantric ritual structure, thus, cannot be a mere survival of old Vedic forms, but rather represents a special development. . . . While tantric rites contain more ritual sequences, the basic structure remains the same."¹⁵ This points to a consistent pattern of what might be called semantic change. Semantic change, such as the deities to whom offerings are made, is much easier to effect and takes place more quickly than does syntactic change, the organizational structure and underlying ritual metaphor that shapes a ritual performance. The rituals that Grether examines are symmetrical in their structure, another characteristic found throughout tantric ritual.

Grether also highlights the Avestan symbolism in which the fire itself is considered an instantiation of the deity evoked, in this case Ahura Mazda. This ritual identification of the fire and the deity is also found throughout the range of *homa* rituals, and when identification of the practitioner with the fire and deity is added, the distinctively tantric aspect of ritual practice is manifest.

Some of the themes found in Grether's study introduce topics also addressed by other essays in this collection. Interiorization of ritual actions is one of the themes that runs throughout this collection. Interiorization refers to the process by which a ritual that is performed manually as a set of physical actions comes to be internalized as a mentally performed ritual. Similarly, the role of sexual symbolism is also introduced—in this essay in terms of fire as masculine and water as feminine. Grether also discusses the pivotal role of initiation in establishing equivalencies between the *homa* and other rituals.

Skorupski

Tadeusz Skorupski's contribution to this collection gives us the symbolic associations and religious valences of fire in India from the earliest recorded period through the development of the tantric traditions. These are the meanings that inform the ritual practices of the Vedic, Brahmanic, and tantric fire offerings. Skorupski's review reveals the multivalency of fire, which can represent seemingly everything—from birth and death, to digestion and sex, to breath and speech, and that ultimately it is the gate to immortality. In this milieu it is hardly surprising that Buddhist practitioners should have developed a version of the *homa* for their own use, a theme also discussed by Halkias in this volume.

One of the themes that emerges through these details is the basis for the internalization of ritual, which is often taken to be the hallmark of the shift from Brahmanic to tantric ritual. The internalization examined by Skorupski does not take the form of a meditative visualization of the formerly external ritual process itself. In other words, these are not simply a visualized repetition of the external ritual actions. Instead, the ritual is homologized in various ways with psycho-physiological processes. This is also found in Sugiki's essay, where he employs the term "psycho-somatic" to refer to the internalized version of the *homa* that employs the esoteric physiology of winds, channels, and drops. The process of internalization employs a variety of metaphoric associations—offerings are breath, for example—rather than literally mentally visualizing the physical ritual activities. The internalization of ritual appears as the product of several different strains of creative re-envisioning of the ritual process. The example of the Kauṣītakī Upaniṣad's concern with the unending character of the breath as oblation suggests the hope that by knowing that the true nature of the breath is oblation one attains the ritual status necessary for rebirth in the realm of the gods.

Tachikawa

Musashi Tachikawa expands the scope of our study to Japan. He takes a classic Eliadean distinction between sacred and profane as an oppositional pairing and then matches that pair with other similar oppositional pairs, such as individual and social, pure and impure, and the presumably disjunct goals of release from rebirth, or liberation from bondage to *saṃsāra* (*mokṣa*), and power and pleasure in this world (*bhoga*). He diagrams the flow of ritual action between the two realms of sacred and profane, and in doing so creates the image of a wave-like pattern of interaction between the two. Tachikawa adds complexity to this basic image by suggesting that movement between some of the various oppositions can take place within the realm created by the relation between the terms of another opposition. He suggests, for example, that movement from the state of impurity to that of purity can take place within the realm of the sacred, as for instance in the transformation of a deceased person from corpse to spirit (impure to pure) within the sacred confines of a funeral ceremony.

In the case of Japanese rituals, Tachikawa suggests that the Mahāyāna equation of *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* has created overlapping categories in the ritual system. He then looks more closely at the actions involved in a Japanese *homa* (J. *goma* 護摩), noting that there is a fundamental division between preparatory rites and offerings as such. An overall concern of the essay is to demonstrate the way in which individual, subjective experiences are synthesized into collective ones. This is an important theme for considering the role and efficacy of many public and political rituals, such as those examined by Chaulagain in the next section.

Textual Studies

The second set of essays have texts per se as their central focus. As discussed earlier, the use of textual sources in many cases requires that scholars ask new questions of already familiar texts. In the previous section, Grether introduces the Avesta into our consideration of the sources relevant to the historical study of the *homa*, and in this section textual sources from the Vedic, Puranic, and Buddhist traditions are added.

Lubin

Timothy Lubin's study, "The Vedic *Homa* and the Standardization of Hindu *Pūjā*" looks at the period of transition from the Vedic to Brahmanic eras, when the classic fire offerings required the establishment of three fires. These three fires are found in all of the solemn rites: the householder (*gārhapatya*) fire, located on the western side of the ritual enclosure, the southern (*dakṣiṇāgni*) fire, which functions to ward off evil influences, and the offering (*āhavaniya*) fire, on the eastern side of the ritual enclosure. The presence of these three serve to distinguish the solemn (*śrauta*) rites from the simpler, or one might say streamlined, rituals that only require one fire. Lubin renders these latter, that is the *grhya* rites as the "homely" rites. Also known as the domestic rites, these take place in the home rather than in a separate ritual enclosure and employ only the "household fire." This is not the cooking fire in the kitchen, but rather a special ritual fire, maintained in a household chapel. Also important in contrasting the solemn rites from the homely rites is the reduction of the number of ritual officiants needed. The solemn rites can be seen as forming a range of increasing complexity, from the simple, one-day-long offering of *soma*,¹¹⁶ the *agniṣṭoma*, up to the twelve-day-long ritual called "the piling up of Agni" (*agnicayana*)—each requiring a corresponding increase in the number of officiants. In contrast, only one officiant is needed for the domestic rites, with the householder himself serving as the ritual sponsor (*yajamāna*).

The transition from solemn to domestic rites is important in the historical transformation of Brahmanic ritual, and as Lubin explains, required a new rationale to legitimize these simpler ritual forms. This ritual record evidences a changing socioeconomic

situation, which Lubin sees as involving a shift from a model of authority based on leadership within a nomadic band to one based on leadership in an established household.

Sugiki

Tsuneiko Sugiki gives us a detailed study of sexual symbolism in early Buddhist tantras, that is, from about the ninth to thirteenth centuries. The internalization of ritual action is of particular importance in this discussion, and as indicated earlier there are differing conceptions of what internalization means. Sugiki specifically notes the threefold typology offered by Abhayākara Gupta—mental, internal, and supreme.¹¹⁷ Although elsewhere in this volume authors discuss the different kinds of *homa* ritual, such as, the fourfold categorization of pacification, prosperity, bewitchment, and subjugation, Sugiki notes that the internal forms do not follow this kind of categorization—thus indicating that while the external fire ritual can be categorized according to external goals, internalized fire rituals seek other kinds of accomplishments, such as the power of gnosis to “burn up” delusions.

Through careful textual analysis, he has arranged these texts in a progressive sequence. Understood in this fashion, Sugiki’s ordering demonstrates the progress from sexual yoga as practiced physically to its symbolic internalization as what he calls a “psychosomatic” process, that is, subtle body yoga.

Subtle body yoga requires learning control over the symbolic physiology of subtle winds (*prāṇa*), that circulate through the three channels (*nadis*), which themselves pass through lotus-shaped centers (*cakras*). This subtle, or esoteric physiology serves to distinguish different sorts of internalization. Psychosomatic internalization differs both from a visualized performance of the *homa* per se and from a symbolic equation of meditation as a fire that purifies one’s emotional and cognitive obscurations (*kleśa*). While the latter understanding of the goal of practice is at play in the works Sugiki examines, the purification is understood in a more literal sense as the fire reaching up into the head and activating the “great bliss” *cakra* (*mahāsukhacakra*).

Gray

David Gray continues the examination of textual sources for understanding the *homa* by turning to an important *homa* ritual manual (*vidhi*) attributed to one of the Buddhist *mahāsiddhas*, Kāṇha (also known as Kṛṣṇācārya). This manual is itself part of the Cakarasamvara tantra cycle of textual materials. Internalization of the *homa* forms an important part of the ritual practice described by Kāṇha, as also found in the contributions by Skorupski and Sugiki in this volume.

Also introduced here is a detail that itself provides a key to tracing the dynamics of change for the *homa*. That is the issue of the categories of rites. In this case, we learn that there are three categories, while as reflected in other essays in this volume there are also sets of four and five categories. While across the tantric tradition these often overlap,

there may be other, more divergent systems of organizing tantric rituals yet to be identified. Finally, we note that Kāṇha also makes one of the assertions found repeatedly throughout the tantric traditions, that is, that without *homa* there can be no success.

Halkias

Georgios Halkias examines another *homa* ritual manual (*vidhi*), this one related to an otherwise little known buddha, Aparimitāyus. Like the more familiar and similarly named Amitāyus, one of the buddhas important to the Pure Land tradition, Aparimitāyus can provide the benefit of longevity. Although little known today, Aparimitāyus was a very popular buddha at various times in Buddhist history because of the desire for longevity, and he is found in both Tibetan and Chinese traditions.¹¹⁸

As with Skorupski, Halkias gives us some insight into the way in which Brahmanic *homas* were rejected by early Buddhism, but then adapted back into the tradition later. This was not the rejection of ritual per se, as some modernizing interpreters would have it. Instead, it is a rejection of the performance of ritual as a means by which monks would earn their livelihood, that is, a means other than mendicancy, and one associated with the taking of animal life. The logics of the symbolism of external and internal again play a role in this process, with the interpretation of the internal dimension as a kind of meditation. This association between external ritual performance and internal meditations provided a rationale making the performance of ritual acceptable within a Buddhist context.

While many of the same terms for various kinds of rituals recur throughout the literature, the number of kinds of rituals varies between different textual traditions. Here, for example, in contrast to the three kinds of *homas* as found in Gray's study of Kāṇha's ritual manual, we now find a set of four different kinds of *homas* identified in relation to Aparimitāyus. Authorship of this manual is attributed to the Queen of Siddhas, an epithet given to several different legendary figures.

Wallace

Vesna Wallace's study looks at the *homa* in relation to the Kalācakra cycle, a tantra widely accepted as the culmination of tantric Buddhist development in India, and held to be the most important tantra by the Gelug tradition, that headed by the Dalai Lama. This is a close study of the ritual requirements and practices for the *homa* in the Kalācakra tradition, providing the kind of detail—such as implements, offerings, color symbolism, and the five functions that the rite can fulfill—that is essential for comparisons that lead to knowledge of the dynamics of ritual change and adaptation.

Important to the study of the Kalācakra tradition is the commentary by Vimalaprabhā. Wallace indicates that Vimalaprabhā makes the same distinction between internal and external noted by Halkias. Internal and external are distinguished by the goals that the two kinds of *homas* can attain—internal *homas* facilitate attainment of the “supreme indestructible gnosis” (*paramākṣara-jñāna-siddhi*), while external *homas* are of use in more mundane attainments, such as purification and merit-making. It is worth noting