

# TANTRIC TREASURES

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*Three Collections of Mystical Verse*

*from Buddhist India*

INTRODUCED, TRANSLATED, AND ANNOTATED BY

Roger R. Jackson

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## Preface

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The purpose of this book is to provide an accurate and, I hope, accessible and poetically interesting translation of three classics of medieval Indian Buddhist mysticism, the Apabhraṃśa-language *Dohākoṣas* (“Treasures of Couplets”) of the great tantric masters Saraha, Kāṇha, and Tilopa. As the best mystical texts do, these collections combine first-person reports of the author’s experience, attempts to describe an indescribable ultimate, and advice on what to do—and what not to do—in order to experience that ultimate oneself. All three texts have been translated into Western languages before. Saraha’s *Treasury* has been translated at least four times, into French by Muhammad Shahidullah (1928), into English by David Snellgrove (1954), into English (though from the Tibetan rather than the Apabhraṃśa version) by Herbert Guenther (1993), and into English (again from Tibetan) by Kurtis Schaeffer (2000, unpublished). Kāṇha’s *Treasury* has been translated once, into French by Shahidullah (1928). Tilopa’s *Treasury* has been translated twice, by N. N. Bhattacharyya (1982) and (from the Tibetan) Fabio Torricelli (1997). These renditions have been made by scholars who are excellent philologists and/or philosophers and whose primary interest, therefore, was in precision rather than poetry. Yet the Treasures are deeply poetic texts, rooted in vernacular north Indian song styles of the late first millennium C.E., and replete with mystery, humor, paradox, and profundity, all conveyed with a refreshing, aphoristic directness. They have influenced poetry and song—not to mention spiritual life—in India, Nepal, and Tibet for a thousand years, and resonate as well with mystical verse from elsewhere, whether by Rumi, or Blake, or Kerouac and Ginsberg. They are great enough, and important enough, that, like the classics of both East and West, they can be mined repeatedly by translators, and their riches will never be exhausted.

I have been interested in Saraha, Kāṇha, and Tilopa for many years now, for they are important influences on Tibetan Buddhist traditions that long have preoccupied me, both personally and as a scholar. As part of my study of the ideas and practices surrounding the “great seal” (*mahāmudrā*) in India and Tibet, I have been reading the three Treasures in various languages, Asian and Western, for nearly a quarter century, trying with each reading (and in occasional writings) to draw closer and closer to the nub of what their charismatic, elusive

authors were trying to say—about the world, the mind, and how to live in an enlightened way. Without in the least intending to denigrate previous translations—from which, in fact, I have benefited immeasurably—I thought there was room still for a version of the three Treasuries that sought to bring to them a more contemporary poetic sensibility, without extracting them entirely from the cultural world from which they arose. I am not much of a poet (let alone a philologist or a philosopher), but I do love poetry enough that I could not resist attempting to carry across to readers of English something of my own sense of what these three figures may have conveyed to their original audiences, and convey today to their Asian descendants and to us. Experts in Indian, Buddhist, or tantric studies will find little new in my introduction or annotations, but I do hope that they, like the interested members of the educated public for whom this has been written, will find something of value in my renditions of the *dohās*, and in my attempts to locate them, difficult as it is to do so, in time, place, culture, and religion.

Besides the pioneering scholars just mentioned, I have learned a great deal over the years about these poets, their songs, and their context from conversations with (and the work of) my great friends from graduate school, John and Beth Newman, José Cabezón, and John Makransky, and a number of scholars I have had the fortune to know since, most notably Luis Gómez, Janet Gyatso, Donald Lopez, Matthew Kapstein, Ronald Davidson, Dan Martin, and Kurtis Schaeffer. Looming behind them all as a constant, open-minded presence is my mentor, Geshe Lhundub Sopa, professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin. In developing an approach to translating Asian poetry, I have read, enjoyed, and been influenced by the efforts of a great many predecessors, including A. K. Ramanujan, Edward Dimock and Denise Levertov, Dilip Chitre, Robert Bly, Linda Hess and Shukdev Singh, Andrew Schelling, Stephan Beyer, Glenn Mullin, Rick Fields, Gary Snyder, Kenneth Rexroth, Burton Watson, Sam Hamill, W. S. Merwin, and the radical *adiguru* of them all, Ezra Pound, from whom I have stolen the initial “Bah!” of my translation of Saraha’s first verse. Of continuing inspiration over the years in matters poetic have been my word-bedazzled friends Dan Bromberg, Frank Levering, Erin McMahon, Sue Solomon, and Wendy King, and, though they now, and all too soon, are past where words can reach, Harvey Sacks and Marion Percy. As I brought the manuscript toward completion, I received great encouragement from my colleagues in the Religion department at Carleton College, and valuable advice and assistance from Cynthia Read, Theo Calderara, Heather Hartman, and Jessica Ryan of Oxford University Press. I am also grateful to Oxford’s anonymous readers, whose comments, criticisms, and suggestions I have found both perceptive and useful.

As always, my greatest supports—and support, as any writer knows, may include not just encouraging one’s efforts but dragging one off on occasion for a game of catch or to smell the new blossomed lilies—have been my son, Ian Jackson, and my wife, Pam Percy, to whom this is lovingly dedicated.

## Kāṇha's *Treasury of Couplets*

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❁ I

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loaha gavva samuvvhai haum paramatthe pavīṇa  
koḍiha majjheṇ ekku jai hoi nirañjaṇa-līṇa

Worldlings display  
their arrogance:  
“I’ve entered the ultimate!”

But if one  
in ten million  
is tied to the unadorned . . .

*the unadorned:* Alternatively, “the naked,” or “unclothed” (Skt. *niraijāna*, Tib. *ma gos pa*). In either case, it means reality as it is, uncomplicated by any conceptual elaboration or dualistic speculation. As Shahidullah notes (89), the term refers to God in many modern Indian languages.

❁ 2

---

āgama-vea-purāṇeṇ paṇḍiā māṇa vahanti  
pakka siriphale alia jima vāheria bhamanti

Scholars put pride  
in their scriptures,  
Vedas, and Purāṇas;  
they circle outside  
like bees  
round a ripened fruit.

3

vohicia raabhūsia akkohehiṇ siṭṭhao  
pokkharavia sahāva suha ṇia-dehahi diṭṭhao

The awakening mind,  
caked with dust, is covered  
by the unmoving;  
natural bliss is seen,  
like a lotus,  
in your inmost body.

**awakening mind:** The bodhicitta (Apa. *vohicia*) is, in a Mahāyāna context, the aspiration to attain enlightenment, or awakening, for the sake of all beings. This meaning is preserved in tantric traditions, where it also may refer, in the context of subtle body practices, to the blissful white drop that resides at the crown cakra or, more broadly, to the innate. The implication seems to be that the bodhicitta is not evident to us but resides within the unchanging nature of reality. Alternatively, the reference to the unmoving may imply that the bodhicitta (which in a tantric context must be stabilized) itself is unmoving. **inmost body:** Probably a reference to the subtle body. An equally plausible translation is: “your own body.”

4

gaaṇa ṇīra amiāha pāṇka mūla-vaṇṇa bhāviai  
avadhūi-kia mūlaṇāla haṇkāro vi jāai

Space is the water,  
infinite light the mud—  
it’s without a root;  
the central channel’s the basic stalk,  
the syllable Haṇ  
the blossom.

**Haṇ:** The syllable generally associated in Buddhist tantra with the white drop at the crown cakra, the nature of which is great bliss. The verse as a whole is a description of the subtle body using the imagery of the lotus. In addition to the subtle body as a whole, though, the lotus also may be used to symbolize the cakras within the subtle body, or—as in K3—the supreme purity residing within those cakras, that is, one’s innate blissful, empty gnosis.

5

lalaṇā rasaṇā ravi sasi tuḍia veṇṇa vi pāse  
patto-cauṭṭha caumūṇāla ṭhia mahāsuha vāse

The left and right channels,  
the sun and moon,  
are stopped on either side;  
the four leaves,  
and the four roots:  
great bliss resides within!

**the four leaves and the four roots:** The four leaves and roots may refer to the four major lotuses, that is, cakras, in the central channel of the subtle body; they may also refer to the four ecstasies that are experienced within the central channel, as well as to any number of fourfold schemes that parallel those four, from the four initiations of the Yoginī tantras, to four emptinesses, four luminosities, four moments, four Buddha bodies, etc. See note to S11.

evaṃkāra via laia kusumiaaravindae  
mahuara-rūeṃ suraa-vīra jīmghai maarandae

Sprung from  
the Evaṃkāra seed,  
the lotus is in bloom;  
  
the rapturous hero  
sips its pollen  
like a bee.

**Evaṃkāra:** *Evaṃ* (“thus”) is the first word of any Indic language Buddhist sūtra or tantra, part of the standard phrase “Thus I have heard at one time” (*evaṃ mayā śrutam ekāsmiṃ samaye*), and in tantric circles came to be regarded as a mantra that symbolized the source or basic substance (“seed”) of all things. It sometimes was divided into its component syllables, *e* and *vaṃ*, which were taken to represent, among other things, the wisdom realizing emptiness and the experience of great bliss; the conjoining of the two indicates the qualities of the innate gnosis that is the inmost nature of the mind; as the *Hevajra Tantra* says (HT 2:3, 4), “It is there that the ecstasies arise.” See also ST 3:17, where *evaṃ* is said to be the locus of the experience of Buddhahood. *Evaṃkāra* means “that which effects *evaṃ*,” or simply “the syllable *evaṃ*.”

pañca mahābhūā via lai sāmaggie jaia  
pūhavi ava tea gaṃdhavaha gaṇa sañjaia

Based on that seed,  
all the five  
great elements rise:  
  
solid and liquid,  
brilliance and breeze—  
all arise from space.

**space:** As I have shown (note to S12), space is a common symbol for emptiness; to the degree that emptiness is the “source,” or condition for the possibility, of all forms, so, too, space is the source of all the other elements.

gaṇa-samīraṇa-suhavāse pañcehiṃ paripuṇṇae  
saala surāsura ehu uatti vaḍhie ehu so suṇṇae

The place of space,  
and wind, and bliss,  
is filled with the five;  
  
all the gods and titans  
proceed from that—  
and that, fool, is empty.

**the five:** the five great elements: earth, water, fire, wind, and space. The image here is of the basic reality, the innate gnosis (“space, wind, and bliss,” or emptiness, vital energy, and bliss) generating the five basic elements, which, in turn, become the source of all beings—but one must recall that the source itself is empty.



khiti jala jalaṇa pavaṇa gaṇa vi māṇaha  
maṇḍala-cakka visaavuddhi lai parimāṇaha

Earth, water,  
fire, wind, space:  
think on them!

The maṇḍala circle:  
knowing how things are,  
understand it.

**maṇḍala circle:** See K18. The maṇḍala circle itself is regarded as a purified transformation of the five great elements.

ñittaraṅga sama sahaja-rūa saala-kalusa-virahie  
pāpa-puṇṇarahie kuccha ṇāhi kāṇhu phuḍa kahie

Waveless and ever the same,  
the form of the innate  
is without defilement;

in it, there is  
no vice or virtue at all,  
Kāṇha plainly declares.

**waveless:** See S72, where at least a provisional distinction is suggested between water and waves. See also S81, where the “utmost power” is described as waveless, and HT 1:10, 32, where utmost rapture (*paramarati*) is described as “waveless.” **virtue:** *Puṇṇa* (Skt. *puṇya*) often is translated as “merit,” but in Buddhist discourse it is one of the most common terms for that which is ethically positive, hence a good candidate for a Buddhist equivalent of the Western philosophical concept of “virtue” or “goodness”—with the understanding that virtue is not an abstraction or Platonic idea but a term applied to particular actions that entail positive results.

vahiṇṇikkaliā kaliā suṇṇāsuṇṇa paiṭṭha  
suṇṇāsuṇṇa veṇṇi majjheṇ re vaḍha kimpi ṇa diṭṭha

Go outside, look around,  
enter the empty  
and the nonempty.

Hey, fool! Can’t you see  
between those two,  
empty and nonempty?

**between those two:** This phrase evokes the ontological “middle way,” so often propounded by Buddhists (e.g., in the Madhyamaka philosophy of Nāgārjuna), between eternalism and nihilism, or the assertion that phenomena exist absolutely and immutably and the assertion that they do not exist at all.

☉ 12

sahaja ekkū para atthi tahi phuḍa kāṇhu parijāṇai  
satthāgama vahu paḍhai suṇai vaḍha kimpī ṇa jāṇai

The innate above all  
is one—Kāṇha understands it  
clearly and well;  
fools recite  
so many treatises and scriptures,  
and know nothing at all.

☉ 13

aha ṇa gamai ūha ṇa jāi  
veṇi-rahia tasu niccala ṭhai  
bhaṇai kāṇha maṇa kahavi ṇa phuṭṭhai  
ṇi/c/cala pavaṇa ghariṇi ghare vaṭṭai

It doesn't move up,  
it doesn't go down;  
doing neither, it stops there,  
motionless.  
Kāṇha says: thought  
can't possibly escape  
when motionless breath,  
the mistress, remains at home.

*the mistress:* Literally, the “female householder.” Thought, implicitly, is the male householder, who cannot leave the house (i.e., the central channel of the subtle body) as long as his female counterpart, the breath, remains inside it.

☉ 14

varagiri-kandara guhira jagu tahi saala vi tuṭṭai  
vimala salila sosa jāi jai kālāgni paiṭṭhai

The precious mountain cave  
is deep—the whole world  
is sundered there;  
stainless waters  
dry up, until  
the fire of time ignites.

*mountain cave:* A symbol of the central channel of the subtle body, which itself is likened to a great mountain, such as Meru, seen in many Indian mythologies as the center of the world. *stainless water:* Perhaps a reference to the stilling of the innate blissful, empty gnosis, or awakening mind, which is stainless by nature. *fire of time:* The *kālāgni* is an apocalyptic event on a macrocosmic scale, but here, given the yogic nature of Kāṇha's references, most likely connotes an individual's enlightenment, the final event in his or her career as a sentient being.

☉ 15

ehu so ūddhameru dharaṇidhara sama visama uttāra ṇa pāvai  
bhāṇai kāṇha dullakkha duravahāha ko maṇe paribhāvai

Lofty Meru, support of the world,  
is uncertain terrain—  
you won't reach the top;  
Kanha says: it's barely visible,  
hard to approach—  
who can encompass it with mind?

**Meru:** As noted, the mythic mountain at the center of the world, here a symbol for the subtle body, “barely visible, hard to approach” except for those with proper initiation and yogic prowess. Its top, where resides the innate, blissful, inmost mind, is difficult to scale, for the yogic practices that give one access to it are the most arduous a human being can undertake.

☉ 16

jo saṃveai maṇa raṇa aharaha sahaja pharanta  
so paru jāṇai dhamma-gai aṇṇa ki muṇai kahanta

If daily you discern  
the thought jewel,  
the innate shining forth,  
you know how things really go—  
others talk of it,  
but what do they know?

**thought jewel:** A synonym for the awakening mind, or bodhicitta, which in the tantric context is identified with the blissful drop residing at the crown cakra. See K3.

☉ 17

pahaṇi vahante ṇia-maṇa vandhaṇa kiau jeṇa  
tihuaṇa saala vipphāriā puṇu saṃhāria teṇa

As you travel the path,  
if you manage to bind  
your inmost thought,  
you'll emit  
the whole triple world,  
then draw it back again.

**you'll emit the whole triple world:** A reference to the extraordinary creative powers of thought once it has been brought under control. In fact, whether or not one controls one's inmost thought, that is, the innate gnosis, it is there that the world rises and falls. Tantra, however, gives one the tools to control that process: in generation-stage yogas, one visualizes emitting and reabsorbing the world in divinized form; in the completion-stage yogas that are Kāṇha's primary referent, one actually learns to transform cosmic processes, at least as they relate to oneself—though the lore of the Indian great adepts (mahāsiddhas), among whom Kāṇha is counted, suggests that the powers one gains through tantra may be exercised on a “public” scale in addition to the private one.

kāhiṃ tathāgata labhae devī koha-gaṇahi  
maṇḍala-cakka-vimukka acchaṃ sahaja-khaṇehi

How is the Thus-Gone gained?  
In the company  
of wrathful goddesses;  
free from the maṇḍala circle,  
I live in  
the innate moment.

**Thus-Gone:** One of the commonest epithets of a Buddha, *tathāgata*. It sometimes glossed as the One Thus Come (*tathā āgata*), sometimes as One Thus Gone (*tathā gata*), and sometimes as One Gone to and/or returned from Thusness (*tatha[ī] gata*); for the latter interpretation, see HT 1:5, 8. **wrathful goddesses:** The various female deities that are particularly featured in the Yoginī tantras practiced by Kāṇha; see, for example, HT 1: 8, 10–20, ST 13:22–27. Such spiritually efficacious beings as yoginīs and dākinīs may be understood as symbolic, as visualized, as manifest in concrete females—or all of these. **free from the maṇḍala circle:** Perhaps an indication that Kāṇha has moved beyond the visualization-centered practices of the generation stage to the transformative subtle body practices of the completion stage. The compound is ambiguous, though; it also may be read as indicating that Kāṇha is free in or through the maṇḍala circle. This would tally better with apparent meaning of K9. **the innate moment:** As for Saraha, the moment at which one attains innate ecstasy, the highest of the four successive ecstatic experiences induced in the central channel of the subtle body.

sahaje ṇiccala jeṇa kia samaraseṇ ṇīamaṇa-rā  
siddho so puṇa takkhaṇe ṇau jarāmarāṇaha bhāa

When you're motionless in the innate,  
to your inmost royal mind  
things taste the same;  
there's perfection in that moment,  
and no more fear  
of aging or death.

ṇiccala ṇivviappa ṇivviāra  
uaa-atthamaṇa-rahia susāra  
aiso so ṇivvāṇa bhaṇijjai  
jahiṃ maṇa māṇasa kimpī ṇa kijjai

Motionless, nonconceptual,  
changeless,  
beyond rising or setting,  
good to the core—  
that's how we speak of nirvāṇa,  
where thought  
has nothing to do  
with thinking.

evaṃkāra je vujjha te vujjha saala asesa  
dhamma-karaṇḍaho sohu re ṇia-pahudhara-vesa

Awaken to Evaṃkāra,  
and you awaken  
to everything there is;  
that alone contains what is—  
hey, it's the dwelling of  
your inmost potentate.

*what is:* My translation here for the untranslatable *dhamma* (Skt. *dharma*). On this term, see, for example, the note to S3.

jai pavaṇa-gamaṇa-duāre diḍha tālā vi dijjai  
jai tasu ghorāṇḍāreṇ maṇa divaho kījīai  
jiṇa-raaṇa uareṇ jai so varu amvaru chuppai  
bhaṇai kāṇha bhava muṇjante nivvāṇo vi sijjhai

If the door  
where the breath goes out  
is fastened tight,  
if thought is made a lamp  
in the awful darkness there,  
if the precious gem of the Victor  
touches the top of the sky,  
then, says Kāṇha,  
delighting in existence,  
you'll still perfect nirvāṇa.

*gem:* Again, the “thought jewel,” or blissful awakening mind, which is located at the top of the subtle body, and includes the realization of emptiness, often symbolized by the sky. *the Victor:* The *jina*, another common epithet for a Buddha, seen as one who has gained victory over the forces of the Evil One, Māra, a symbol for saṃsāra itself.