

PRINCETON READINGS IN RELIGIONS

Donald S. Lopez, Jr., Editor

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Eschatology in the Wheel of Time Tantra

John Newman

The Wheel of Time Tantra (*Kālacakra-tantra*) was the last Buddhist revelation produced in India. Although it draws on all the preceding developments of Indian Buddhism, the Wheel of Time is in many respects unique. Among the Wheel of Time's special features are its adaptation of a Hindu myth as part of its strategy of self-legitimation, and its emphasis on the ancient theory of the identity of the macrocosm (the universe) and the microcosm (the individual human being). Both of these elements play a role in the eschatology—the account of the end of time—of the Wheel of Time.

The Wheel of Time Tantra originated in north India early in the eleventh century C.E., at a time when Buddhism was subject to two significant threats. On the one hand, Buddhism was gradually losing its ongoing competition with Hinduism for allegiance and support. On the other hand, the early eleventh century saw the first major incursion of Islam, a religious and political force that eventually hastened the demise of Buddhism in northern India. The eschatology of the Wheel of Time reflects these historical circumstances: it presents a prophetic vision in which Buddhism, allied with a subordinated Hinduism, triumphs over the “barbarian” religion of Islam in a final apocalyptic war.

To understand the eschatology of the Wheel of Time we must first examine the earlier Hindu myth of Kalki. According to the devotees of Viṣṇu, this god manifests on earth in the form of ten sequential incarnations, nine of which have already appeared. It is prophesied that the future tenth incarnation of Viṣṇu, Kalki, will appear at the end of the current age of decadence, when conditions have reached their very nadir. Humans will degenerate into a state of barbarism in which greed and malice will control every action; the basest forms of self-gratification will replace virtue and morality. Worst of all from the point of view of the followers of Viṣṇu, the caste system will be violated, and outcastes will subjugate and oppress the brahmans. At the end of the cosmic cycle, when evil has almost entirely eclipsed good, the brahman warrior Kalki will be born in the village of Sambhala. Leading an army of brahmans, Kalki will annihilate the out-

castes and barbarians, establishing a new golden age of righteousness, prosperity, and social order.

The Wheel of Time Tantra borrowed the Hindu myth of Kalki and adapted it to current religious and political conditions. The Buddhist refashioning of the prophetic myth says the Buddha taught the Wheel of Time Tantra to Sucandra, the bodhisattva emperor of the vast Central Asian empire of Sambhala. The eighth successor to the throne of Sambhala, Yaśas, unified all of the brahman families of Sambhala within a single Buddhist Adamantine Vehicle clan. For this he was given the title Kalkin, which in the Buddhist myth means “chieftain.” To this day the Kalkins of Sambhala reign in their Central Asian paradise on earth, preserving the Wheel of Time teachings from the forces of barbarism without. At the end of the current age of degeneration, when the barbarian Muslims have overrun the earth outside of Sambhala, the last Kalkin, Cakrin, will assemble a great army headed by the kings of Sambhala and the Hindu gods. Kalkin Cakrin and his army—elephants, chariots, cavalry, and infantry—will come out from Sambhala to eradicate the forces of Islam. After the great Armageddon, when the barbarian horde has been obliterated, Cakrin will return to Sambhala to initiate a new age of perfection. Buddhism will flourish, people will live long, happy lives, and righteousness will reign supreme.

So much for the exoteric presentation of the Buddhist myth. The Wheel of Time explains that the external war with the barbarians is illusory; the Buddha taught it merely as a skillful means to attract the allegiance of Hindu brahmins. In fact, the external war will simply be a magical display Kalkin Cakrin will conjure up to overwhelm the arrogance of the Muslims: through meditative concentration he will radiate countless magic horses that will captivate the minds of the barbarians, causing them to convert to Buddhism. Furthermore, the actual war will not take place in the macrocosm—the outside world—it will occur within the microcosm—the body of the practitioner of the Wheel of Time Tantra.

The real war is the struggle between the forces of enlightenment and ignorance that characterizes the path of the yogin, the tantric practitioner. When the yogin achieves adamantine gnosis, the transformative wisdom that is the goal of the Wheel of Time path, he or she overcomes the inner barbarism that creates the evils of existence. In this esoteric, allegorical interpretation of the myth, the war between Kalkin and Islam symbolizes the radical illumination of the yogin in which correct understanding of reality dispels the darkness of ignorance.

Like many other prophetic, eschatological traditions, the Wheel of Time Tantra responded to contemporary religious, social, and political tensions by projecting them and their resolution onto an idealized future. The Buddhist author of the Wheel of Time was greatly troubled by the decline of Buddhism vis-à-vis Hinduism, and by the ominous appearance of marauding Muslim armies on the western borders of India. Earlier Buddhist eschatology (the prophecy of the future buddha Maitreya) provided no clear solution to these problems, so the Wheel of Time presented its own creative response. By adapting a Hindu myth to counter the threat of Islam, the Buddhists hoped to draw Hindus into the Buddhist camp

to face a new common enemy. Whereas the Hindu myth of Kalki was devised to assert the caste privileges of the brahmins, the Buddhist myth attempted to unite all Indians against a foreign invader. Although this strategy met with no great success in India, the myth of the Kalkins of Sambhala lives on among the Tibetan and Mongol followers of the Wheel of Time.

The exoteric myth of a Buddhist holy war against Islam may be powerful propaganda, but it creates tension within the Buddhist tradition itself. Buddhism is perhaps best known for its adherence to the principle of nonviolence, and Kalkin Cakrin's annihilation of the Muslim barbarians appears directly to contradict this. The conflict is resolved in two ways. The violent war, which the Wheel of Time Tantra first describes in glorious terms, is later explained to be mere illusion, a mere magical show the Kalkin emanates to convert, not destroy, the Muslims. Furthermore, the entire myth of the external war is interpreted as allegory: the Wheel of Time yogin understands the esoteric interpretation, that the myth of the apocalyptic war in reality symbolizes the victory of gnosis over spiritual nescience.

The Wheel of Time Tantra shares a sophisticated theory of scriptural interpretation with Buddhism as a whole. Buddhists produced erstwhile utterances of the Buddha throughout the entire history of Indian Buddhism, but for the most part they debated the interpretation of scripture rather than its authenticity. The Wheel of Time Tantra pushed the limits of this openness through the wholesale borrowing of Hindu myth and imagery. Although this overt syncretism met with some resistance, in the end its power as myth and mysticism gave rise to a rich tradition that continues to this day.

The *Śrī Kālacakra-tantra* ("Splendid Wheel of Time Tantra") is the main textual source for the Wheel of Time system. Although Western scholars believe this tantra was composed long after the lifetime of the historical Buddha, the Wheel of Time tradition considers it a discourse the Buddha delivered to King Sucandra of Sambhala. The following translation consists of two excerpts, one from the first chapter (verses I.154–65) and one from the second (verses II.48–50). In the first excerpt the Buddha prophesies the exoteric eschatology, the external war in the macrocosm, and in the second he provides an esoteric interpretation that treats the war as an allegory for the inner yogic path. A brief overview of these passages will help the reader to follow the translation.

Śrī Kālacakra I.154 foretells the succession of teachers of the "barbarian" religion, that is, Islam, and demonizes the Judeo-Christian-Islamic prophetic lineage. Elsewhere in the Wheel of Time texts Muḥammad is singled out as the most important of the barbarian teachers, and al-Raḥmān (a name of Allah) is noted as their demonic deity. Verse I.155 describes the alleged culinary habits of the barbarians in terms certain to disgust Indians observing brahmanical dietary restrictions. Verse I.156 glorifies the power and omniscience of the Buddha, implicitly supporting the authority of the present prophecy. Note that the Wheel of Time claims the enlightened mind of the Buddha to be the source of the Vedas, the foundational texts of Hinduism. Verses I.157–60 prophesy the lineage of the Buddhist kings of Sambhala, beginning with King Sucandra. The eighth king,

Yaśas, an emanation of the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, will become known as Kalkin for unifying the castes of Sambhala into a single clan. The twenty-fifth and last Kalkin, Cakrin, will be the agent of the Buddhist Armageddon. Verses I.161–63 depict the great war at the end of the eon, in which the Hindu gods will help the Buddhist army of Cakrin to defeat the army of Islam. Verses I.164–65 describe the dawning of the new age, in which Cakrin's sons Brahmā and Sureśa will reign over the northern and southern halves of the world.

Śrī Kālacakra II.48–50 correlate the elements of the Wheel of Time eschatology with its yogic path of spiritual transformation. Kalkin Cakrin symbolizes the gnosis of adamantine mind produced at the culmination of the path; the four divisions of the Buddhist army represent the four attitudes basic to the Buddhist path; and so on. Each of these has its opposite symbolized by members of the Muslim force: Kṛmāti, leader of the barbarians, represents nonvirtuous karma; the barbarian army signifies the evil attitudes of Death; and so on. Verse II.50 correlates the new age of perfection with the state of enlightenment produced by the path. Cakrin's sons Brahmā and Sureśa, emanations of the bodhisattvas Mañjuśrī and Lokanātha (Avalokiteśvara), symbolize menstrual blood and semen. In the tantric yoga of the Wheel of Time these basic components of the human body are transmuted to produce a new adamantine body.

The translation is based on my unpublished edition of these excerpts, which draws on the following editions of the Sanskrit, several manuscripts, and the Tibetan translations. Several glosses included in my translation of Śrī Kālacakra II.48–50 are taken from the *Vimalaprabhā* commentary.

Raghu Vira and Lokesh Chandra, *Kālacakra-tantra and Other Texts*, Part 1. Śata-piṭaka Series vol. 69 (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture, 1966); Biswānath Banerjee, *A Critical Edition of Śrī Kālacakratāntra-rāja (Collated with the Tibetan Version)*. Bibliotheca Indica Series no. 311 (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1985). Jagannatha Upadhyaya, *Vimalaprabhāṭikā of Kalki Śrī Puṇḍarīka on Śrī Laghukālacakratāntrarāja by Śrī Mañjuśrīyaśa* vol. 1. Bibliotheca Indo-Tibetica Series no. 11. (Sarnath: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 1986).

Further Reading

See Geshe Lhundub Sopa, et al., *The Wheel of Time: The Kalachakra in Context* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1991); John R. Newman, "The Outer Wheel of Time: Vajrayāna Buddhist Cosmology in the Kālacakra Tantra" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1987); Edwin Bernbaum, *The Way to Shambhala* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1980); Glenn H. Mullin, *The Practice of Kalachakra* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1991); Tenzin Gyatso the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, *The Kalachakra Tantra: Rite of Initiation for the State of Generation*, translated by Jeffrey Hopkins (London: Wisdom Publications, 1985).

Wheel of Time Tantra

(I.154) Adam, Noah, and Abraham—there will also be five others of darkness in the family of demonic snakes: Moses, Jesus, the White-Clad One, Muḥammad, and Mathanī, who is the eighth—he will be blind. The seventh, Muḥammad, will clearly be born in the city of Baghdad in the land of Mecca, where the mighty, merciless idol of the barbarians, the demonic incarnation, lives in the world.

(I.155) The barbarians kill camels, horses, and cattle, and briefly cook the flesh with blood. They cook beef and the fluid of the womb with butter and spice, and rice mixed with vegetables, all at once on the fire. Where men eat that with forest fruit, King Sucandra, where they drink bird eggs, that is the place of the demons.

(I.156) The gnosis body of the conqueror Buddha manifests on earth in these moving forms: drop, power, magic eye ointment, divine eagle, river of the gods, sage Nārada, wishing cow, fort, lightning, good science, unchanging supreme digit, divine language, and the incorporeal. It proclaims what was, what is, and what will be, and all the texts on the Vedas, philosophy, and so forth.

(I.157) O glorious King Sucandra, Kalāpa, capital of the renowned land Sambhala, surrounded by mountains, measures five hundred leagues. Soon you will establish your son Sureśa as supreme king there, then you will return to your divine abode. There will be seven kings in the splendid Śākya line, and the eighth will be Śrī Yaśas.

(I.158) He will be Śrī Mañjuśrī, saluted by the best gods, Kalkin through the adamantine lineage. He will give the adamantine initiation, and make all the brahman sages into a single clan. Elevated on the true vehicle, terrorizing the demons, Śrī Yaśas, with a short spear in his hand, will teach the Wheel of Time on earth for the liberation of sentient beings.

(I.159) At the end of the age, among those Kalkins, at the end of twenty-five reigns, the wrathful Kalkin Cakrin, lord of the gods, honored by the best gods, will appear in the lineage of Kalkins. His peaceful form will delight the righteous; he will annihilate the race of barbarians. Cakrin, mounted on a mountain horse, a short spear in his hand, radiant as the sun, will strike all the foes.

(I.160) When eight Kalkins have reigned, the barbarian religion will certainly appear in the land of Mecca. Then, at the time of the wrathful Kalkin Cakrin and the vicious barbarian lord, a fierce battle will occur on earth.

(I.161) At the end of the age Cakrin, the universal emperor, will come out from Kalāpa, the city the gods built on Mount Kailāsa. He will attack the barbarians in battle with his four-division army. The Hindu gods Śiva, Skanda, Ganeśa, and Viṣṇu will assist Kalkin, as will the mountain horses, elephant masters, kings in gold chariots, and armed warriors.

(I.162) There will be ninety million dappled mountain horses swift as the wind, four hundred thousand elephants drunk with wine, five hundred thou-

sand chariots, six great armies, and ninety-six crowned kings. Kalkin, with Śiva and Viṣṇu, will annihilate the barbarians with this army.

(I.163) Ferocious warriors will strike the barbarian horde. Elephant lords will strike elephants; mountain horses will strike the horses of Sindh; kings will strike kings in equal and unequal combat. Hanūmān, son of Mahācandra, will strike Aśvatthāman with sharp weapons. Rudra will strike the protector of the barbarian lord, the master of all the demons. The wrathful Kalkin will strike Kṛṇmati.

(I.164) Kalkin, with Viṣṇu and Śiva, will destroy the barbarians in battle with his army. Then Cakrin will return to his home in Kalāpa, the city the gods built on Mount Kailāsa. At that time everyone on earth will be fulfilled with religion, pleasure, and prosperity. Grain will grow in the wild, and trees will bow with everlasting fruit—these things will occur.

(I.165) Fifty years after eliminating the barbarian horde, Kalkin will achieve spiritual fulfillment in Kalāpa, the palace the gods built on the back of lofty Kailāsa. The sons of the guru of gods and men, Brahmā and Sureśa, will promote the dharma. Brahmā will be king in the north; Sureśa on the earth to the south.

(II.48) Cakrin is adamant mind in one's body; Kalkin is true gnosis. The Hindu gods are the cessation of the twelve factors of worldly existence. The elephants, horses, chariots, and foot soldiers are the noble boundless attitudes: love, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. Rudra is the gnosis of the individual realizer; Hanūmān is the gnosis of the disciple. The wicked barbarian lord is living beings' sin. Kṛṇmati is the miserable path of nonvirtue.

(II.49) Aśvatthāman is ignorance. The demon army is the fourfold host of Death: malice, ill will, jealousy, and attachment and aversion. Their defeat in battle is destruction of the terror of existence. Splendid victory is the path of liberation. The gift of dharma on Mount Kailāsa is elimination of the fear of existence. The earth filled with wealth is the purified collection of the body's elements.

(II.50) Cakrin's sons—Brahmā and Sureśa, to the north and south, Mañjuśrī and Lokanātha, conquerors of the three existences—are the splendid menses and semen that give bliss. The lineages of brahmins and so forth in back of the earth are the numerous pure buddhas. Thus, the war with the barbarian lord definitely occurs within a living being's body; but the illusory, external war with the barbarians in the land of Mecca is certainly not a war.

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