

***Making a Mantra: Tantric Ritual and Renunciation on the Jain Path of Liberation.* By Ellen Gough. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2021. 315 pages with bibliography, index, and 20 halftone illustrations. \$95 (hardcover), ISBN 9780226766904; \$30 (paperback), ISBN 9780226767062.**

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This book transforms at least four fields of study: the study of mantras, the study of the Jain tradition, the study of tantra, and the study of Indian religious traditions. This breadth of impact makes it a landmark publication that should be read by scholars in each of these fields. Rather than attempting a synoptic review, the comments here focus primarily on the first issue.

In modern scholarship the study of mantras has both been extensive and generated a variety of conflicting theories. Questions about the nature of mantras (what are they?), their origins (where do they come from?), and their cognitive or linguistic status (are they language?) have motivated many different scholars to examine this component of Indic religious culture.¹ Mantras are a key component of Vedic ritual

1. Foundational works in the scholarly study of mantras: Harvey P. Alper, ed., *Understanding Mantras* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), and its paper cover abridged version *Mantra* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); André Padoux, *Vac: The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); André Padoux, *Tantric Mantras: Studies on Mantrasastra* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011); Paul Copp, *The Body Incantatory: Spells and the Ritual Imagination in Medieval Chinese Buddhism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); and, if I may, Richard K. Payne, *Language in the Buddhist Tantra of Japan: Indic Roots of Mantra* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018). Far too many essays and book chapters have been devoted to the topic to list here; see Paul Copp, s.v.

culture and of the traditions of practice that derive—either directly or indirectly—from it. Single syllables and fragments of Vedic texts, a literature that dates from three or more millennia ago, have been used as mantras, and even today they retain the authority of their visionary origin.

The mantra mentioned in the title of Gough’s work, however, does not derive from Vedic sources. This effectively resolves an issue with which the scholarship on mantras has struggled: How do mantras come into being? As expansive as the scholarship on mantras has been, the scope of evidence examined has—until Gough’s work—not included the Jain tradition.

With the additional insights that Gough provides, we can now see that what makes a mantra is a conception of language that creates mantras, that is, the understanding that speech itself is efficacious. This differs from modern Western philosophy, in which the functions of language are usually categorized as communicating ideas, or as commanding action, or as making inquiries, or as expressing emotion. Conceptualizing the function of language in these ways depends upon an implicit metaphoric dichotomy between content and container—there are two separate things: there is some meaning and there is the linguistic expression that contains it.

The direct efficacy of speech, however, is a central theme in Indic philosophy of language. “Language” is already an abstraction, in contrast to speech, which is embodied activity. The idea that speech is efficacious in ways that differ from the communication of content in the container of language is shared across both Indic and tantric religious cultures. This includes wherever the latter have been spread—perhaps most widely by Buddhist practitioners.

Gough demonstrates how what originates as a brief text is converted by use into a mantra. The *ṛddhi-maṅgala* is a forty-four-line benediction that acquired “the authority to grant superhuman powers and liberation, initiate Jain ascetics, enliven temple images, and cure diseases” (p. 5). Coming from outside the existing boundaries of scholarship on mantras, Gough’s work indicates that it is not any defining characteristic, nor specific components, nor a Vedic source that make mantras.

“Mantras and Dhāraṇīs,” *Oxford Bibliographies (Buddhism)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780195393521-0102>.

Another perspective on these issues comes from work on tantric Buddhism in Indonesia. In an essay on mantras in Indonesian Buddhist texts, Arlo Griffiths has pointed out what may be called the “functional convergence” of mantras, *dhāraṇīs*, and *gāthās*. While these different categories may be distinguished on formal grounds, such as the presence of certain *bīja* syllables at the beginning and end, they are less distinguishable on purely functional grounds. These “different categories of Buddhist literature could be put to use in the same way.”² Thus, while scholars may seek to clearly delineate these categories, living adherents employ them in ways that are not so clearly distinguishable. The Jain *ṛddhi-maṅgala* is an instance of this—scholars may ask whether this is a literary text or a mantra, but for practitioners, for living adherents of the Jain tradition, this is a false dichotomy.

We can conclude, therefore, that the general answer to the question of what makes a mantra is: use in a religious culture that valorizes speech as efficacious.

In addition to its contribution to the scholarly discourses on mantras, Gough’s work also contributes an understanding of the Jain tradition that is more adequately grounded in lived religion. In other words, by smoothly integrating history, textual study, and her own fieldwork, the volume is truly interdisciplinary in the best sense. This interdisciplinary complexity is what makes for the very best of religious studies scholarship.³

In Western religious studies scholarship, the Jain movement has long been treated as a minor thread in the tapestry of religious culture in India. Representations of the tradition in the religious studies literature and textbooks have often characterized it, and perhaps implicitly dismissed it, by some of the more extreme ascetic practices found in the tradition—practices characteristic of itinerant male yogis. What

2. Arlo Griffiths, “Written Traces of the Buddhist Past: Mantras and Dhāraṇīs in Indonesian inscriptions,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 77, no. 1 (2014): 140.

3. In this regard, an important example of the rewards of interdisciplinary complexity is H. Byron Earhart’s *A Religious Study of the Mount Haguro Sect of Shugendō: An Example of Japanese Mountain Religion* (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1970). A similarly rewarding complexity emerges across the three volumes of Holmes H. Welch, Jr.’s *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism: 1900–1950*, *The Buddhist Revival in China*, and *Buddhism Under Mao* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967, 1968, and 1972 respectively).

has been obscured by this focus on elite male practitioners is the religious life of families, what Paula Arai refers to in the Buddhist context as “domestic dharma.”⁴

The emphasis on ascetic practices, including the more *outré* ones, has also obscured the tantric dimension of the Jain tradition. In this dimension also, Gough’s work breaks new ground in the study of Jain practice. Contemporary representations of Indic religions have employed modernizing conceptions of religion (especially two in particular: that religion is essentially a matter of individual transformative experience, and that religion is necessarily detached from worldly goals). These tendencies have meant a sanitization of traditions, including a shift of focus from tantric practices of power to practices oriented toward emotional expressions of devotion, that is, *bhakti*.

Much of religious studies discourse continues to be rooted in the idea of “world religions,” which is usually the big five: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. The claim is that these are the traditions that have universalized beyond the constraining supports of their native societies, achieving a “universal” status. This assumes a neoliberal individualism, since by extension people choose their affiliation rather than being born with it (natal religion). While these two characteristics—transcending a society of origin and being available for individuals to choose freely—suggest objective criteria, and yet which religions actually make it onto the list is still selective, i.e., judgments are made by individual scholars, and these selections then become sedimented in the discourse of the field.⁵ Hierarchies of categories reflect different answers to questions such as: Is Christianity a single entity, or are Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox traditions each a world religion? Is the Orthodox tradition, which is segmented into autonomous ethno-nationalist institutions, actually a world religion?

Despite attempting to create nuance, organizing schema such as “world religions” and “world’s religions” and “religions of the world” are, therefore, problematic. This is more than just who “has a seat at

4. See Paula Arai, “Domestic Dharma in Japan,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Richard K. Payne and Georgios T. Halkias (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming; online: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.965>, 2021).

5. The relative uniformity of religious studies textbooks evidences the pressures of the sociology of knowledge in this regard.

the table” (itself problematic since to get a seat at the table, one has to behave themselves according to the standards of polite society—that is, act like a religion). It is also that such categories impose preconceived characteristics rather than reflecting empirically grounded generalizations. In doing so such schema distort the field of religious studies and corrupt public discourse about religion by naturalizing a conception of religion grounded in one particular tradition.

The study of heretofore marginal traditions, such as the Jain, has the potential payoff for religious studies not only of “filling in the gaps” in our knowledge, but hopefully also challenging the preconceptions that have structured the field of study. Michael Slouber, himself a renowned scholar of Jain studies, expresses his own evaluation of this work, saying that

Currently, Ellen Gough is the leading scholar of Jaina tantra and has been engaging with a much wider range of primary sources than her predecessors. Her recently published book *Making a Mantra . . .* is the most substantial contribution to the study of Jaina tantra since the publication of Jhavery’s *Comparative and Critical Study of Mantrasastra* in 1944.⁶

The normal tone for scholarly work is one of restraint, so just to be clear: Ellen Gough’s work is a brilliant accomplishment and makes important contributions to our understanding of the religious history of the Jain tradition, Indian religious history more generally, and the use of mantra.

6. Michael Slouber, “The Goddesses of Jaina Tantra,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Tantric Studies*, ed. Richard K. Payne and Glen A. Hayes (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

