Encounters with the Unknown and Manifestations of Fear: Discerning the Purpose of the Great Darkness Text

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In the spring of 2013, the sixth of eight treasure rooms beneath Padmanabhaswamy Temple, Thiruvananthapuram, India was opened. Overshadowed by the discovery of further gold reserves — bringing the value of the temple’s holdings to some 22 bn. USD — was the presence of a library including superb editions of familiar texts, themselves priceless masterworks. One volume in particular was evidently unusual: it was penned on silk, a textual substrate known in East Asia but unheard of in the palmleaf-preferential South. Written in Siddham script, the c. 9th century text is primarily in Sanskrit, with extensive passages in what was initially thought to be phonetically transcribed glossolalia. The idiosyncrasies of the text caused it to be shelved until early 2016, when a team of European Research Council and University of Chicago scholars noticed interlinear notations in Chinese, early (Japanese) Katakana, and Tibetan, leading to the realization that these passages were in fact transliterations of sources written in different Asian languages. The collection and collation
of these sources appears to be focused on deities associated with the obscure and the unknown, represented metaphorically as forms of darkness. Taking a cue from this metaphor, and nodding to the application of the epithet “Darkness” or “Dark One” to deities described in the book, scholars have begun to refer to it as In Praise of Darkness, or the Great Darkness Text. (Project Announcement Part 1/2 Purāṇa Pāṇsura Pustakāni, Nov. 2016)

In the year that has passed since the publication of this announcement additional manuscripts discovered at Padmanabhashwamy Temple have been identified as tributary sources coalescing in the Great Darkness Text (GDT). Ongoing efforts by the European Research Council and the University of Chicago have been expanded to include specialists at the École Française d’Extrême Orient and the Institut Français de Pondichéry, with teams of specialists working simultaneously on different portions of the manuscript in an attempt to accelerate a complete survey of its contents. Though extensive swaths of the text remain unaddressed, sufficient details have been gleaned throughout the volume to allow for an informed material analysis of the manuscript, and for a cursory analysis of its central theme and purpose. The result of these analyses follow.¹

The Great Darkness Text: A Material Analysis

Material idiosyncrasy first drew attention to the Great Darkness Text, and a careful consideration of its form and attributes reveals much about its composition, context, and purpose. The

¹ I am indebted to the dedicated efforts of this diverse and talented multinational team of editors for the glimpse into this text that they make possible. In particular, I’d like to thank Dr. Lucille Womack for allowing me to access this work in progress. As I do not read many of the languages in which the GDT is recorded, I must acknowledge the relevant specialists, whose names are available on the project website. I have made an effort to work closely with these specialists to ensure the accuracy of my analysis. That said, any errors in transcription, translation, or interpretation are wholly my own.
text, which weighs 4.27 kg., comprises some 1,200 distinct writing areas. The silk substrate would have been extremely expensive, and technology for its production had to be imported and adapted, but the resulting volume was lighter and longer-lasting than palm leaf alternatives. The current binding is heavily damaged. Silk sheafs rest between two wooden covers: the obverse with remnants of an hexagonal geometric design, the reverse plain. Impressions spaced around the perimeter of the silk suggest that the volume was once much more substantially bound: on all sides, with closely spaced lashings. Wear on the vertices of the pages suggests an inner cover of leather or heavier cloth, meaning the volume was not only securely bound but sealed on all sides from dust and perhaps moisture. Durable and relatively lightweight, the GDT was designed to be portable.

Though the cover binding does not appear to be original, there are decorated sheafs of heavier-weave silk constituting front and end matter, or inner covers. The obverse includes a benediction addressed to Bhairava, the archetypical subject of the text. The preface includes a list of regions and rulers in pañcamī, or the ablative case, suggesting they are sources of the compiled material. Areas beyond South Asia are mentioned, which is highly unusual for Indian religious texts. Just inside the back cover appear archaic forms of the characters 接触未知 — Encounter with the Unknown (Chn. jiēchù wèizhī, Jpn. sesshoku michi), followed by a small note at the bottom of the inner cover in both characters and katakana to indicate this is the end of the volume, presumably for readers of these East Asian languages who were accustomed to texts flowing from right

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2 At times there are small frames of text on a single stretch of silk; at other times a block of text will extend beyond the dimensions of the covers, and be folded back on itself. This appears to reproduce South Asian and East Asian norms of textual reproduction on a uniform, cloth substrate.

3 Though there are many names and metaphorical allusions to darkness and the unknown scattered through tributary sources and reproduced in the text itself, chief among these in prominence and prevalence in the compiled GDT is the Sanskrit derived भैरव (Bhairava), meaning “Cry of Fear.” More about Bhairava and his relationship with the volume and its project below.
to left. Between this title page and the body of text is a purple swath of silk, the only dyed fabric in the volume.

**Tributary Sources**

The GDT was a grand collaborative exercise, bringing material from dozens of sources together in a definitive volume rendered in a single script. The original sources from which the GDT pulled were originally written in several languages, most prominently Tibetan, Chinese, and Japanese. They are themselves compendia of other sources, as evinced by shifts in writing substrate, calligraphic style, and regional designation. All told, there are twenty-six distinct textual streams feeding into the GDT. The oldest of the contributing sources appears to be a 7th-century Chinese text, though a Sanskrit source references epigraphy and the existence of a tradition of practitioners linked to this manuscript dating to the 5th or 6th century. The latest source appears in a North Indian pre-Hindi Prakrit, and is coeval with the GDT, putting its composition at the middle of the 9th century.

The range and diversity of sources reproduced in the GDT reflect a network of specialists in different regions investigating disparate aspects of a close-knit nexus of topics. The compilation of this research into the GDT was never completed, a fact made clear by the discovery of source materials in the Padmanabhaswamy archive which both include and extend beyond what appears in the GDT. For example, the 17th section ends abruptly mid-description. A Chinese source for this material appears in the archive, and the point at which the GDT transposition ends is located roughly two-thirds of the way through that source. Compilation of the GDT was itself a sub-divided collaborative

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5 GDT sec. 17; Chn. source 14.2.B.
effort, with sections transposed and rendered by more than one scholar, evinced by variations in writing size and style, and repeated error distribution.

That each of these twenty-six sections was worked on by teams of scholars and scribes parallels the composition of the sections themselves. Each section is not the reproduction of a single work, but several works related by region and original language. Sections 21 and 22 are both in Chinese, with the former covering materials from what is now Bhutan, Sikkim, and other Himalayan regions, while the latter addresses Mongolia and North-Western China. There is occasional cross-commentary, such as Japanese material on China (sec. 24) and Chinese material on India (sec. 19), most likely collected by expatriates. More frequent, however, are stories recorded from incoming visitors. Tibetan accounts include many such stories from India and Nepal.

The early medieval teams of Keralan scholars editing the GDT encountered references to large-scale compilation projects similar to their own. Sections 3 and 5 describe efforts in Kathmandu to collect data from visiting scholars, ascetics, and storytellers. Focused on the Himalayan region, compilers drew from what we now distinguish as Vajrayāna, Śaiva, Śakta, (including Kaula variations on the two preceding), and Bön traditions. Material details indicated a remarkably variegated range of sources represented in the GDT, and subsequent investigation has provided an initial view of the text’s complex topography. It is, in essence, a series of nested but repeating structures: a fractal of sorts. Individual voices collected material, mostly from direct observation. Over time and across Asia, various regional authorities collected, and teams of scholars organized, these individual accounts. They collated related stories from other compiled sources or collected directly from outsiders. Eventually these initial compilers became aware of other, similar, regionally collabora-

6 The earliest entries in these sources coincide with the spread of written culture in Tibet (7th cent.), though the relation between that diffusion and these efforts remains obscure.
tive efforts. Some regional projects intersected, taking on transregional scope. These transregional projects themselves grew, and they were primarily those sources collected in the panregional project that was the GDT. Material evidence lets us know mostly about those who gathered and compiled these sources: language, script, organization, and substrate all show us these were geographically diverse textual scholars with extensive support of regional rulers. What we know about the voices who originally gathered and shared these data we can only gather obliquely through analysis of the GDT’s representational mode.

Though the authors of the GDT were educated, travelled, aligned with regional influence, and therefore elite, many of the voices they record are not. There are references to wandering monks and ascetics, and other various groups of people whose identities are caught up in the recognition, veneration, and even emulation of deities described in this text. There are references to local leaders, healers, and shamans, non-elite persons who had direct relationships with such deities. The presence of feminine personal pronouns and adjectives demonstrate the inclusion of female informants. Descriptions of the project teams reveal that, at least in China, there were some female specialists gathering and collating these data. This is further supported by the presence of hiragana, an alternate Japanese syllabary that was used almost exclusively by women. Such details led to the reconsideration of the presence of Prakrit and dialogues written with voices both in Prakrit and Sanskrit: originally presumed to be shuffled sources, they may instead be traditional representations of simultaneous male and female voices recorded in different vernacular registers. This project was considered important by many people, from many backgrounds, making the

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7 Sections 17; 21.
The GDT and its tributaries present a staggering amount of material and textual information. It’s likely the project was commissioned somewhere in Kerala, where it was eventually found. The how of the compilation of this text is evident, if unprecedented: Kerala had both the wealth and interconnectivity to conceive of and accomplish such a task. Ideas and information had long moved through this region from all over Asia and the Mediterranean, along with the spices that made the region wealthy and the silk that served as the foundation for the text. That the text, rich in what we would now call Śaiva material, was found in a temple patronized by Vaiṣṇava rulers indicates effort wasn’t merely sectarian. The why of this project and its importance to its patrons is less clear. The balance of this essay is an attempt to shed light on this question through an analysis of the text’s central topic: a class of wrathful deities encountered across Asia, and the selected prime example who is, in Sanskrit, called Bhairava.

Wrathful Deities, Bhairava, Essence, and Effect

The text deals with a class of deities, ferocious in appearance and wild in behavior, who appear at thresholds between the familiar and the unknown: the margins of wilderness, doorways into sacred spaces, and cemeteries or creation grounds. Though a family resemblance in depictions of liminal creatures across South and East Asia has long been noted, this text is the first evidence that there was ongoing transcultural communication regarding encounters with such beings. The Great Darkness Text — the applied name paralleling recently noted internal self-reference as the Treatise on That Which

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9 Over the past three millennia Buddhists, Jains, Śaivas, Vaiṣṇavas, Śaktas, and others have vied for philosophical and political influence in South Asia. The tension was, and continues to be, particularly pointed between Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva traditions.
Was Previously Obscure — appears to be a collaborative attempt to classify these creatures, determine their origins, and discern their purpose. Initial analysis seems to allude to a pan-Asian community of specialists who travelled these marginal spaces between cultures and used this text to encounter and engage such deities. (Project Announcement Part 2/2 Purāṇa Pāṇsura Pustakāni, Dec. 2016)

The following are a few of the names used for a pan-Asian class of deity recorded in the Great Darkness Text:
— Wisdom King (明王 — Chn. Míngwáng, Jpn. Myōō; विघराण — Skt. Vidyārāja);
— Blood Drinker (胜乐金刚 — Chn. Shèng lè jīngāng; ्ष्‌ — Tib. Khrag’thung);
— Great Darkness (大黑天 — Chn. Dàhēitiān, Jpn. Daikokuten; 大黒天 — Tib. Nagpo Chenpo);
— Cry of Fear (भैरव — Skt. Bhairava).
(Project Announcement Addendum Purāṇa Pāṇsura Pustakāni, Dec. 2016)

The research team working on the GDT has concluded that wrathful deities are the organizing theme for the corpus.10 Focusing on Bhairava — who while not an absolute archetype is certainly a privileged ectype in the text — illuminates the purpose of the GDT project. Reading Bhairava through the lens of 9th-century Kaśmīri Śaiva theology paired with theory from Ernst Cassirer and Michel Foucault makes sense of otherwise inconclusive material and textual analyses. It becomes clear that the compilers of the GDT were not supernatural big game hunt-

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10 Robert Linrothe, in his Ruthless Compassion, sketches out the difference between Wrathful Deities and Wrathful Protectors. Though protection falls within the purview of many of these deities, they are not merely protectors, or repurposed demons, domesticated and chained for public benefit. Instead, they are fully developed deities in their own rite, with roles and identities far surpassing that of doorman. See Robert N. Linrothe, Ruthless Compassion: Wrathful Deities in Early Indo-Tibetan Esoteric Buddhist Art (Boston: Shambhala, 1999).
ers nor collectors of tales of the macabre and gruesome. Rather, they were explorers: intrepid pursuers of fringe experiences and the physical impressions of encounter with the unknown. It is these encounters they collected and organized in order to map the edges of knowledge, experience, an all encompassing inside, and the beginning of the Other.

There is a tendency, especially in the ex-Manichean Abrahamic-influenced Euro-American arena, to organize with binary classification: good/bad; safe/dangerous; insider/outsider; civilized/crude; sacred/profane. To a mind primed for such binary designations, the deities addressed in the GDT would lie with the latter member of these sets. They have fangs and wild eyes; their hair is unkempt and they are often naked; their jewelry is made of snakes and scorpions; they are known to relish impure substances and death; they are associated with dogs and the border beyond which lies wilderness. Though the phenomena reported in the GDT come with different labels, Bhairava is the most frequently used and overtly preferred name. His example most closely aligns with these creatures’ common core.

Asian narrative and artistic territory is populated by myriad supernatural creatures, some similar to those familiar to Euro-American traditions, some less so. A vetāla, to take an example from the South Asian context that produced the GDT, is a reanimated corpse (like a zombie) who can feed on a person’s life force (like a vampire) and can be controlled by a master (like a golem). Yakṣas are localized supernatural characters, often associated with the forces of nature in both their positive and negative aspects; rakṣasas are demons that trouble or plague people; bhūtas are ghosts or unclassified entities; pretas are creatures of disquiet, twisted by desire and dissatisfaction. This range and diversity of seemingly sinister characters appear all over Asia, often in overlapping categories, and often with a degree of internal diversity: not all members of a certain population are good, nor all bad.

Bhairava, the primary ectype of the deities addressed in the GDT, bears traces of this ambivalence. Though his behavior is at times transgressive, and he and his related ritual and devotional
corpus warrant fear and caution, he is not perceived as an outstanding threat, nor in opposition to mainstream or orthodox religious practice and its maintenance. Indeed, along with being the chief of the yakṣas, bhuts, pretas, vetālas, and other assorted troublesome or terrifying creatures, he is associated with Bir Bābās or local heroes.¹¹ They, like Bhairava, protect territory and, while unpredictable, are benevolent if remembered and attended.

In particular, Bhairava is famous for defending the sacred Hindu city of Vārāṇasī, or Kāśī, in northern India. There, he protects the city so effectively that even Yama, god of death, cannot enter, and anyone who sets foot within its boundary has all faults expunged, no matter who they are or what they have done. Despite this extremely purificatory effect, Bhairava remains associated with darkness, anger, death, and esoteric religious practice. This apparent ambivalence, his association with the protection and maintenance of borders, his association with death and transgressive ritual action, his wrathful appearance, and his staunch emplacement within Hindu sacred geography are useful points to keep in mind when considering the following summaries of regional accounts found in the GDT.

In GDT accounts drawn from East, Central, and South Asia, a wide range of wrathful deities are described, compared to other known types and instances of supernatural being, and organized accordingly. Throughout, there are a few common features—including fangs, bristling hair, tridents, and a third eye, to name a few—which appear to be of the greatest interest to the compilers. As will become increasingly evident in the following summary excerpts, these features support the theory that the GDT is in essence an effort to catalog and map creatures who appear at the peripheries: points between the known and the unknown. Japanese, Chinese, Tibetan, and Sanskrit are the four primary source languages in the compilation. Not all of

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these Sanskrit sources originated in India. Some clearly refer to Nepal, while other segments appear to be from South-East Asia, Afghanistan, or Pakistan. Though distinct in their vernacular cultures, these regions were all within the region that historically treated Sanskrit as lingua franca, and their scholarly, export-quality work would have been recorded in this transferable language. Material from what is now Korea and parts of the Tibetan plateau were recorded in Chinese. Japanese material was first noticed due to the use of hiragana script, and some of the presumed Chinese materials have proven to be classical Japanese. The following region-specific summaries are drawn from the as-yet-incomplete findings of the research teams cataloging and translating the GDT and tributary sources.

In Japanese contributions, the greatest attention is given to the Myōō (明王), literally Wisdom Kings, who are ferocious in appearance and protective in nature. They have wild hair and fangs, and they trample demons. Later iconography includes tridents and bulls. These associations might have come from Śaiva influence via Vajrayāna Buddhism, which is generally held to have entered Japan in the 9th century. It is interesting to note that the stories of what come to be labeled Myōō predate this introduction, suggesting, as is true in many cases, longer histories of communication and exposure than we can easily account for, as well as the presence of similar characters or categories in Japan that allowed for the ingress and syncretic reconception of Buddhist Bhairava-type characters.

The sections in Japanese also address a precursor to Bishamonten (毘沙門天), a guardian deity associated with tridents and vanquishing demons. He lives on the northern side of a northern mountain, at the edge of known and accessible Japanese topography. He dwells not at the periphery of a community but at the periphery of a naturally formed territory. There, he is the king of creatures analogous to the yakṣas that Bhairava rules in India. It is interesting to note that Śiva, of whom Bhairava is believed to be a form, resides on Mount Meru, high in the
Himalayas, at the northernmost geographical limit of South Asian awareness.

None of the characters in the Japanese contributions to the GDT is otherwise unknown. In fact, many of them appear in Heian Period folktales. What is interesting is the fact that these contributors were not interested in stories of other sorts of phantoms or demonic looking characters, such as Tengu or even predecessors of Yamabushi. Instead, they looked for these strange and frightening creatures, who were associated with protection, and who lived at the farthest fringes of the known world.

The Chinese sources cover similar data: fanged creatures with three eyes and wild hair, often writhing and roiling, crushing or otherwise dominating demons. In these portions, there seems to be greater attention paid to arranging these creatures and instances of their encounter into networks. This directly reflects visualization practices common to Buddhist lineages found in Tibet, China, and Japan. As the Myōō protect the cardinal directions in temples and on maps, Bhairava-type deities protect the margins of imagined territories entered by the meditator in order to organize and better engage myriad personified phenomena. In the case of Chinese sources, maṇḍalas are mapped onto physical territory. Concentric circles mark degrees of unfamiliarity, with the known in the center. This fits nicely with the theory of meditative maṇḍala visualization practice presented by David Gordon White in “At the Maṇḍala’s Dark Fringe: Possession and Protection in Tantric Bhairava Cults.” There, he argues that the initial models for these visualized cognitive landscapes were kingdoms: seats of power with concentric regions of diminishing influence, security, and awareness.12

Chinese sources also traced the appearance of a slightly different creature: tomb guardians (鎮墓獸 — Chn. zhènmùshòu),

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of which ceramic examples exist dating to as early as the 4th century BC. These creatures are also described as fanged, wreathed in horripilation, and protective in behavior. They guarded the doors to tombs, boundaries between life and the obscure territories of death. The GDT notes that earlier descriptions, drawn from stories handed down across a few generations and reproduced alongside contemporary accounts, depict creatures that were canine in appearance. Later descriptions refer to an increasing incidence of anthropomorphic forms, sometimes called regional guardians (鎮墓俑 — Chn. zhènmùyǒng, लोकपाल — Skt. lokapāla), and a division of labor into protection in natural (zhènmùshòu) and human (zhènmùyǒng) realms. Origins in dog-like form reinforce associations with peripheries and protection, and as White shows in Myths of the Dog Man, with peoples beyond the pale. As certain aspects of the encounter with death were domesticated through elaborate integration into social ritual and performance, they were managed by less marginal figures. The physical territories of tombs were guarded against thieves by zhènmùyǒng. Nevertheless, ineffable aspects of death, and the recognition of an inhabited unknown somewhere out there, were clearly still recognized through the enduring presence of zhènmùshòu.

Eventually, the zhènmùshòu came to share many features with wrathful protectors from Tibetan traditions, including the trampling of demons. They even take on one of Bhairava’s most atypical attributes in South Asian contexts: a mustache. There

13 In this way they are like Bhairava in his role as master of death in Vārāṇasī.
15 As noted earlier, Bhairava in South Asia is explicitly associated with dogs. The pairing of anthropomorphic and canine forms suggests that the peripheral and central natures of Bhairava in South Asia can be informed by this division of labor in the Chinese context. Bhairava never loses his canines — dental or zoological — but he comes to play new roles as aspects of encounter with the unknown are integrated into mainstream society. Conversely, it seems that individuals aware of experiences such as this primarily documented in the GDT began to recognize and express points of encounter in their everyday, relatively domestic lives.
is, however, a noteworthy point of uniqueness in these descriptions. Some of these guardians were said to have a feature lacking in South Asian or even closely related Chinese and Japanese language contributions: small wings, or the presence of plumage, near knee and shoulder joints.\(^\text{16}\)

Tibetan accounts present many cases similar to those in Chinese materials. Protective deities are associated with skulls, fangs, a third eye, and the crushing of demons. Yamāntaka, also called Vajrabhairava, is described as having the head of a buffalo. His descriptions echo those of early zhènmūshòu (tomb guardians), an association reinforced by the fact that Yamāntaka means “Conqueror of Death.” Bhairava, in his all encompassing role in Vārāṇasi, also takes over the duties of Yama, and defeats death in his own way. With these examples, the investigation of points of encounter with the unknown clearly encompasses both geographic (territorial) and mortal (metaphysical) limens.

Tibetan language accounts also detail many localized, Bön protectors of territory. As their appearance and attributes merge with more widespread Buddhist characters, they are eventually described very much like Bishomonten: a reformed, martial Bhairava. In the case of Nam Tö Sé (བཟློ་སྲས་), the parallel goes so far as to paint them both rulers of yaksas and kings of a northernmost mountain. It is clear that these homogenized characters weren’t introduced with the spread of Buddhism, but rather reflect the encounter of Buddhism with local creatures that were assimilated and, to an extent, repurposed. This further suggests that encounters with Bhairava-type deities were experiences that occurred independent of connective influence: Buddhism did not enter a territory and populate it with Bhairavas: rather, mul-

\(^{16}\) I have recently been informed by a colleague that Southeast Asian representations of Garuda, a supernatural and anthropomorphized bird who performs many protective duties similar to those of Bhairava, is at times represented with vestigial wings. There are even examples of hybrid Bhairava/Rakṣasa/Garuda guardian forms which have a mustache, three eyes, fangs, and wings. Sadly, consideration of such examples and possibilities falls beyond the scope of this essay, and will have to wait for a later project.
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Multiple disparate encounters with such creatures were organized in relation to the pan-Asian concept of Bhairava-type deities.

It is clear from these summaries that the deities addressed in the GDT share a range of attributes: they are ferocious or terrifying in appearance; they are associated with death and dogs; they appear at thresholds and boundaries, be they cosmological, metaphysical, social, or geographical. The compilers of the GDT were evidently interested in developing a detailed taxonomy of this sort of being. Associated with the unknown, it is not difficult to cultivate a sense that they all reflect the ineffable gestalt experience of encountering the unknown. Just how this might work, and how we can discuss such phenomena and experiences of encounter in developed and precise ways, are made possible through a consideration of the nature of Bhairava in conjunction with some 20th-century theory of myth and knowledge.

The Keystone Case of Bhairava

Though there are many etymologies — of varying provenance and plausibility — presented for the name Bhairava, it is difficult to divorce the meaning entirely from the components भी bhi and रव rava meaning, respectively, “fear” and “to cry out.” In his commentary on the ninth century Svacchandatantra, Kṣemarāja’s first exposition is of Bhairava’s name. Two of Kṣemarāja’s four glosses of Bhairava’s name get to the core of his identity, and more specifically to the identity so laboriously pursued in the GDT. The first reads:

अक्रंक्ष: भीरव: ततो जात: तदाक्रं न्दत: म्फ़ुरतिः

Bhayam bhīḥ saṃsāratrāsāḥ tayā janito ravaḥ ākrandaḥ bhīravaḥ tato jātaḥ tadākrandatāṃ sphuritaḥ
Fear, that is to say terror, specifically the terror of transmigratory existence, engenders a scream; a wailing is thus born; therefore a cry is manifest.\(^{17}\)

This explanation, written in the cascading multiple-gloss style that prevents any ambiguity, explains Bhairava to be composed of fear (\textit{bhaya}) and cry (\textit{rava}). Kṣemarāja further designates that it’s a wailing cry, one that is issued when terror is experienced. That terror is the fear that arises when one encounters entropic, transmigratory existence. It is true that in the Svachchandatantra Bhairava can be understood to be the supporter of all things, and knowing and understanding him can indeed generate courage. To say this is in any way evident in the name itself is a stretch, at best.

After saying that Bhairava means the cry due to the fear of experiencing transmigratory existence, Kṣemarāja explains that this experience is not necessarily negative. He writes:

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\text{अस्यैव भीरवस्य संसारभयविमर्शनस्यायं शक्तिपातवशेनोथापकः}
\]
\[
\text{asyaiva bhīravasya saṃsārabhayavimarśanasyāyaṃ śakti-}
\]
\[
pātavaśenotthāpakaḥ
\]

Of this indeed, of the cry of fear, of awareness of fear in the world, is this: the awakening that is due to the instillation of power (śaktipāta).\(^{18}\)

Generally speaking, \textit{śaktipāta} is an initiatory empowerment in which spiritual energy is transmitted from the \textit{gūru} to a disciple. Kṣemarāja here identifies the inherently terrifying experience of encountering and considering transmigratory existence as a moment of natural initiatory empowerment: one is awakened due to a \textit{śaktipāta} that occurs as one becomes aware of and

\(^{17}\) Paṇḍit Madhusudan Kaul Shāstrī, ed., \textit{The Svachchanda-Tantra with commentary by Kshemarāja} (Bombay: Nīrṇaya-Sagar Press, 1921). Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

\(^{18}\) Ibid.
Encounters with the Unknown considers the terror inherent in overwhelming, impermanent, illusory transmigration. Experiencing this awareness, fear, and empowerment, a cry naturally erupts. Though the exact order is debatable, the association is unmistakable. This is the essence of Bhairava: he is directly linked to encounters with the unknown, resulting fear, ensuing empowerment, and ultimate expression. As such, he is most representative of the core identities of the characters presented and organized in the GDT. Though varying in style and representation defined by cultural context, all of these wrathful deities share this same relationship with the unknown, fear, and its resolution. Kṣemarāja recognizes this in his philosophical commentary for a medieval tantric text. Though the name isn’t necessarily essential, here the essence has a name, and it is Bhairava.

Analysis and Beyond

The Svacchandatantra describes Bhairava as the cry of fear that arises due to the awareness of transmigratory existence, a great, overwhelming unknown. The Bhairava-type deities catalogued in the GDT instead appear in a somewhat lesser moment of encounter with the unknown. Resulting not in a shriek of terror but rather a sensory experience, an encounter with the unknown is experienced as a palpable encounter with a creature. Though there is regional and even individual diversity amongst these creatures, they are nevertheless clearly of a type in terms of both appearance and function. The compilers of the GDT were directly aware of such phenomena, but similar experiences are postulated by Ernst Cassirer in his 1925 Language and Myth. Cassirer builds upon Usener’s theory of momentary deities to offer his own theory of the interconnected origins of religion and language. These beings, as Cassirer summarizes,

> do not personify any force of nature, nor do they represent some special aspect of human life; no recurrent trait or value is retired in them and transformed into a mythico-religious image; it is something purely instantaneous, a fleeting,
emerging and vanishing mental content, whose objectification and outward discharge produces the image of the “momentary deity.”

Bhairava doesn’t fit this description at only one point: mythic-religious images were and are made of him. The difference is that the momentary deities theorized by Usener and developed by Cassirer were unique not only to a certain place, but a single time. They were one-off experiences. Contrastingly, the basis for the eventual compilation of the Gōḍī lies in a recognition of the fact that these encounters demonstrated great similarity across time and space. People were seeing culturally specific versions of the same sort of creature. The cosmology of the Svacchandatantra suggests that we can read these as miniature versions of the initial experience with existence: instead of a fear of everything, humans encountered the unknown, and were afraid. Instead of instantaneous śaktipāt, they saw a creature: a form of Bhairava who both marks and helps reconcile this encounter with the unknown.

Michel Foucault’s notion of irruption facilitates thinking beyond individual arisings to widespread presence. In Archaeology of Knowledge, Foucault calls for discourse to be ever ready for irruption: that point when a shift in circumstance makes something formerly so minor as to be practically invisible into something so pervasive and referenced its ubiquity seems eternal and natural. Bhairava’s presence across Asia is such an irruption: a demonic looking deity who marks and protects boundaries, his examples tease the categories of the known and the unfathomed. Now widely recognized and accepted, even normalized, it could be said that his grand conceptual irruption is the coalescence of many minor irruptions, when some hitherto unknown or unexperienced or unexpressed thing was met in a moment

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of overwhelming bewilderment, which gave rise to the presence and perception of Bhairava.

Foucault says that “to disconnect the unquestioned continuities by which we organize, in advance, the discourse that we are to analyze,” we must embrace the practicality of irruption, the point before which any influence or origin is obscure, making this arrival as though *ex nihilo*. Foucault refers to this irruption in chronological terms. We can always look for, and find, precedent for any major phenomenon we wish. We do not know where Bhairava first appeared, when he was first represented, whether he moved into or out of containing traditions. We do, however, have a metaphysical model for the irruption of individual Bhairavas or Bhairava-type deities. Though perhaps they lay dormant or imperceivable in the fabric of existence, their perception irrupts into the consciousness of the person encountering the unknown. It is possible that the initial moment of fear and its processing modeled in the *Svacchandatantra* is ahistorical and therefore fits well with Foucault’s idea that there is apparent chronological irruption. Nevertheless, it is the individual instances of metaphysical irruption of Bhairava that the GDT was attempting to document and analyze.

The GDT’s sponsors, compilers, and contributors were mapping points at which there had been overwhelming experiences of unknowing at and the appearance of Bhairava or a Bhairava-type deity. There are several possible reasons for this: they could be interested in knowing where their boundaries lay; why such experiences led to such encounters; or the nature of the relationship between, say, Gundari Myōō (軍荼利明王) in Japan and Ananda Bhairava (आनन्दभैरव) in India. They could even have been interested in cultivating nuanced appreciation for such deities. After all, it is said in the Tibetan Buddhist *Bardo Thodol* that if one reacts to a wrathful deity with disgust or fear, it does not end well. While it is likely that the identification and analy-

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21 Ibid.
22 Robert N. Linrothe and Jeff Watt, *Demonic Divine: Himalayan Art and Beyond* (New York: Rubin Museum of Art; Chicago: Serindia Publications,
sis of the personification of the frontier experience—the sense of exploration and discovery—could well have driven most of these efforts, there is another possible impetus: the benefits of knowing and understanding Bhairava. Certainly, it would behoove a population to know who dwelt at and protected its peripheries, and to know that these creatures are at once ferocious and not predatory. It would also behoove a people to find a way to engage the Other, and the unknown, and to reconcile this rupture of experience and understanding that gave rise to the perception of Bhairava in the first place. In both India and Japan, we have examples of Bhairava-type deities becoming mainstream and finding place within society. At first, they are recognized and marked at the doorways to sacred spaces: temples, and in some cases tombs. Then, we have instances of Bhairavas who have become mainstream deities themselves, even surrounded by other Bhairavas filling the type of role they once filled. In Vārāṇasī, Kāl Bhairava is central to the city, while its periphery is guarded by eight other Bhairavas. Kāl Bhairava, though he rules over death, is not ferocious, but he is not to be trifled with. He remains calm, but his power can expedite untold cycles of rebirth. Among the Myōō, Fudō (不動) sits calm, with smaller and fewer fangs, unmoving and contemplative. He is surrounded by four other Myōō, who still guard the periphery. In this way, the unknown is incrementally incorporated into the familiar and the mainstream while at the same time a connection providing access to the unknown is made regular and reliable.

The GDT doesn’t just map similar cases across space, but also a range of cases within particular spaces. In these models, such as the cases of Kāl Bhairava and Fudō Myōō, terrifying creatures are incrementally integrated into society. Their role and appearance become more familiar. This pattern seems to be reflected in some of the source material. As one Tibetan portion (sec. 9) recounts, a traveler entered a dark, narrow mountain pass, and heard a strange sound. As he tried to gain his bearings and identify the sound, he saw a creature with wild eyes, and flam-
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ing flowing hair, bared fangs and lolling tongue, holding out a skull in the traveler’s direction. Initially frozen with dread, the traveler was able to continue to observe this Bhairava, noticing that the terrifying figure was also holding flowers, and though hideous made no move to attack. The skull was in fact a begging bowl, which he held out for alms. Placing some dried meat in the bowl, the traveler went on his way. His fear resolved, the mark of that point of transition imprinted emotionally and cognitively in his mind, he entered new and unknown territory.

It is evident that Bhairava-type deities can both mark and resolve encounters with the unknown, or Other, on both communal (i.e., Kāl Bhairava and Fudō Myōō) and personal (the account of the traveler) levels. It follows that explorers, alchemists, and ritual experts would be interested in further investigating these phenomena and newly exposed frontiers. Expanding this understanding, it becomes clear why the GDT wanted to pull material from so many diverse sources, regulate it, and re-present it; why it is written phonetically, and made to be portable. Often, phonetic transcription was based in a theory of the power of speech: Sanskrit mantras had power when recited by Chinese Buddhists not because of their meaning, but because of their sound, making phonetic reproduction paramount. In this case, phonetic transcription wasn’t to aid ritual accuracy, but to facilitate conversation. By being able to express to others the findings and further goals of such a project, specialists versed in Sanskrit could travel across Asia, expanding both the spread of information and the project itself. As is evident in the repeated focus on outside territory, participants in these projects knew that whatever the benefit of studying Bhairava-type deities in their own context could provide would be exponentially increased by the inclusion of material from other regions and contexts. Beyond increasing understanding of the process of expanding knowledge by analyzing points of intersection with the unknown, collecting these materials provided connections between networks of periphery: mutual recognition of Bhairava was a way to bridge otherwise restrictive chasms between cultures and peoples across Asia. This could facilitate
trade, dialogue, and even physical movement among and across disparate cultural contexts.

While the potential of the GDT was never fully realized, these efforts were not made in vain. Beyond linking contributors through a hub in Kerala, the text cemented a scholarly awareness of the experience of Otherness. The GDT remains relevant to this day. It provides a window back in time to a different cartography of wilderness and civilization, of insider and outsider. Bhairavas, many in place since the time of the GDT, become markers for encounters with the unknown, and as such can guide contemporary religious and social research. Bhairavas helped mediate fear and expand understanding. Is it so ridiculous to suggest that better understanding their nuanced forms and roles might help Euro-American minds reconcile the overwhelming, initially uncomfortable encounter with the diversity and dynamism of Asian religious contexts?
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