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The Text on the “Dhāraṇī Stones from Abhayagiriya”:
A Minor Contribution to the Study of Mahāyāna Literature in Ceylon

by Gregory Schopen

Thanks above all to the work of Professor Heinz Bechert we are beginning to have a much clearer picture of “Mahāyāna literature in Ceylon.” Professor Bechert has established what appears to be a workable periodization for Mahāyāna literature in Ceylon and added significantly to the list of Mahāyāna texts known to have circulated there. Still, our knowledge has perhaps not progressed so far that the addition of yet another title to the list might not be of some interest.

It appears that some time between 1940 and 1945 “eight granite tablets (placed on a rectangular platform) were found buried at a spot to the south east of the Northern Dagoba (ancient Abhayagiriya),” and that these tablets had “Tantric mystic formulas inscribed on them in North-Eastern Nagari of about the 9th century.” No one seems to have paid much attention to these “tablets” until 1967, when Dr. Nandasena Mudiyanse published a transcription of them in his interesting book, Mahayana Monuments in Ceylon.

Dr. Mudiyanse, who refers to these inscriptions as the “Dhāraṇī Stones from Abhayagiriya,” recognized that two of these “tablets” — nos. iv and v — were related, and formed “one complete dhāraṇī.” This “complete dhāraṇī” reads in his transcription:

no. iv 1: \[\text{Namas} = \text{trāyaṇḍhāvīkānāṁ sarvāḥ tathāgatānāṁ om bhuvibhuvana dhāre dadha} \ldots\]

2: \[\text{cala cala dhāra dhāra sarvāḥ tathāgata dhātu dhāre padmam} = \text{bhavatu jaya dhāre}\]
What Dr. Mudiyanse did not recognize, however, is that four of the remaining six “tablets" also contain pieces of this “complete dhāraṇī." His no. i = no. v line 2 (beginning with svāhā //samayādhiṣṭhite . . .) to line 4 (ending . . .om sarvā); his no. ii = no. iv line 6 (beginning me sarvā = . . .) to no. v line 5 (ending . . .phaṭ svāhā); his no. iii = no. iv line 7 (beginning sarvā stoka [rd. soka] . . .) to no. v line 5 (ending phaṭ svāhā); and his no. viii = no. v line 4 (beginning svāhā // om . . .) to line 5 (with the addition of the standard ye dharma hetu verse, etc.). That is to say that six of the eight tablets (nos. i, ii, iii, iv, v, and viii) all give pieces — several of them overlapping — of the same dhāraṇī.

Dr. Mudiyanse seems to imply that the dhāraṇīs on his tablets were “composed" by Ceylonese "Vajrayanists." He says of these dhāraṇīs: “The eight dhāraṇī inscriptions discovered near the Northern-dāgāba seem to have been composed by the Vajrayanists who, as attested by a study of the monuments of the 8–10th centuries, appear to have commanded a considerable following in Ceylon. These, it appears, were addressed to the stupa [i.e. the Northern-dāgāba], etc." In regard to at least six of the eight tablets, however, this is almost certainly not the case. Although I cannot identify the texts on tablets no. vi and vii, the text on tablets
no. i, ii, iii, iv, v and viii has almost certainly been taken from a Mahāyāna sūtra, entitled, according to the transliterated Sanskrit found at the beginning of its Tibetan translation, Ārya-Sarvatathā-gatāḥdiṣṭhānāḥdayaguhyaḥdātukarāṇḍamudra-nāma-dhāranī-mahāyā-ṇa-sūtra. The Sanskrit text of this sūtra appears not to have come down to us, although I have not been able to check all the various catalogs of Buddhist manuscripts to confirm this. It is, however, available in a Tibetan translation done, according to its colophon, by Vidyākaraprabha and Devendrarakṣita of Rṣiṅ, who appear to have lived in the second half of the 8th century A.D. or at the beginning of the 9th. This Tibetan translation is entitled 'Phugs pa de bzhin gshegs pa thams cad kyi byin gsnyigs vbras kyi snying po gsang ba ring bsrel gyi za ma tog ces bya ba'i gzungs theg pa chen po'i mdo; most of the known Kanjurs contain two copies of it. For example in the Peking Kanjur it is found at Vol. 6, no. 141, 151–3–2 to 153–5–6, and at Vol. 11, no. 508, 112–2–2 to 114–4–7. There also appear to be three Chinese translations of this text in the Taishō, two by Amoghavajra done in the 8th century (T. 1022a and 1022b), and one by Dānapāla in the 10th century. If one compares the text of the dhāraṇī found on the “Dhāraṇī Stones from Abhayagiriya” with that found in the Sarvatathāgatāḥdiṣṭhānāḥdayaguhyaḥdātukarāṇḍamudra-nāma-dhāraṇī-sūtra, there can be little doubt that — apart from minor variants and corruptions — the two are exactly the same, and that, therefore, the text on the Abhayagiriya stones was taken from this particular sūtra. This, in turn, would appear to be fairly clear evidence of the fact that the Sarvatathāgatāḥdiṣṭhānāḥdayaguhyaḥdātukarāṇḍamudra-nāma-dhāraṇī-sūtra circulated and was known in Ceylon in the 9th century A.D. This, in fact, would seem to be the chief significance of the identification.

It could, of course, be argued that the dhāraṇī may have circulated independently, but that is difficult to maintain since we know from Amoghavajra's Chinese translation that already by the mid-8th Century the dhāraṇī was an integral part of the sūtra. Moreover, if we allow for a gap of even fifty to a hundred years between the date of the composition of the sūtra and Amoghavajra's translation, that would mean that the dhāraṇī was a part of the sūtra already by the 7th century, or at least two hundred years before the Abhayagiriya tablets were written. Finally, it is fairly clear from Mudiyanse's remarks that these inscriptions were somehow associated with a stūpa, the Northern dāgāba, at Abhayagiriya, and it is
only if we assume a knowledge of the *sūtra* as a whole — not just of
the *dhāraṇī* — that we are able to account for this association (cf.
below).

A summary of the contents of this *sūtra* might be of some
interest since, in spite of Waley's and Williams' attempts* to show
that the presence of *dhāraṇīs* cannot be taken as evidence of “Tan-
trism,” this idea still persists. Here it should be noted that my
summary is based on the Tibetan translation found in Peking Vol.

The text opens with the Buddha dwelling in Magadhā, in the
*Vimal-ārāma*. A Brahmin named *Vimalaprabha* comes to him
and invites him to come to his house for the next day's meal. The
Buddha consents by remaining silent and the Brahmin returns
home to begin the preparations. At the appointed hour the Brahma­
min returns to accompany the Buddha to his house and they set
off with the usual flashing of lights and general hubbub which
seems always to mark a Buddha's movements. On their way they
come upon “a large old *stūpa* that was dilapidated and overgrown
with weeds, was covered with grass and branches and rubble and
looked, in fact, like a heap of rubbish. But when the Buddha
approached it, that old *stūpa* . . . began to glow brightly all around
and multi-colored rays of glowing light shot forth. And from that
heap of rubbish and rubble a voice of approbation came forth: 'It
is good. It is good, O Śākyamuni, etc.' ” (112-4-5 to 7). The Bud­
atha prostrates himself before the *stūpa*, circumambulates it, and
presents it with his own garment. He weeps, then smiles, and
Vajrapāṇi asks the reason for this. The Buddha says that there is a
particular text (*chos kyi rnam grangs*), which he names, and that
wherever this text is, there also are hundreds of millions of *Tathā-
gatas*, unspeakably many relics of *Tathāgatas*, the 84,000 pieces of
*Dharma*, etc. (112–5–7ff.) — the Buddha, of course, is speaking
about the *Sarvatathāgatādhiṣṭhāna-sūtra*. Having only heard the
name of the text, some in the assembly “obtained the fruit of the
Stream-winner, some Arhatship, etc.” Vajrapāṇi then says that if
“through only hearing the name of this text” such things are ob­
tained, what great merit would be obtained by “one who respects
and honors and makes much of it” (113–2–1ff.). The Buddha
then gives a series of statements indicating that acts undertaken in
regard to this text, having it copied, performing *pujā* to it with
flowers and incense, etc., result in merit equal to that of ninety-
nine hundreds of millions of Tathāgatas, or to that resulting from doing pūjā to such a number of Buddhas.

The nāgas, devas, etc. then say that this broken down stūpa, “since it shows great marvels of marvels, must have great power indeed.” This is followed by an interesting interchange between Vajrapāṇi and the Buddha. The former asks how this stūpa that has become a heap of rubble can be renewed. The latter responds by saying that “this is not a heap of rubble. This, in fact, is a great stūpa of the precious things made from the seven precious substances.” He goes on to explain that the visible decline of the stūpas takes place “through the maturation of the results of the acts of beings becoming apparent” (sems can rnam kyi las kyi 'bras bu rnam par smin pa ston pas nub par 'gyur gyi, 113–3–7) and that the decline in merit of beings will increase “in the last time, in the last period,” and that this is the reason why he wept.

Vajrapāṇi then says “If, O Blessed One, someone made a copy of this text and put it into a stūpa, what root of merit would be produced?” The Buddha answers by saying that “if someone made a copy of it and put it into a stūpa, that stūpa would become a stūpa of the relics of the “essence” of vajra of all Tathāgatas (. . . de de bzhin gshegs pa thams cad kyi rdo rje'i snying po'i ring bsrel gyi mchod rten du 'gyur ro), it would become a stūpa of ninety nine millions of Tathāgatas, etc. (113–4–5ff.), and that if someone did pūjā to that stūpa he would become “irreversible” from awakening, be freed from rebirths in the hells, be protected from malignant nāgas, frost, hail, poison, animals, and disease and sickness. The same benefits would result if the text were put into an image. At the end of this discussion Vajrapāṇi says: “O Blessed One, how could this text come to have such superior qualities? And the Blessed One said: ‘It is the Dhāraṇī of the Seal of the Casket of the Relics and the Concealed Essence of the Empowerment of All Tathāgatas (de bzhin gshegs pa thams cad kyi byin gyis brlabs kyi snying po gsang ba ring bsrel gyi za ma tog gi phyag rgya'i gzungs yin te /). This is the power, Vajrapāṇi, which therefore empowers such superior qualities (114–2–6).” Vajrapāṇi then asks for the text of that dhāraṇī, and the Buddha responds by reciting exactly the same text as is found on six of the eight “Dhāraṇī Stones from Abhayagiriya.” After the dhāraṇī is recited all the Tathāgatas in the ten directions give their approval, the old stūpa is visibly transformed, and the text ends in typical sūtra fashion.
There is therefore nothing at all “Tantric” about our text if by “Tantric” we mean that phase of Buddhist doctrinal development which is characterized by an emphasis on the central function of the guru as religious preceptor; by sets — usually graded — of specific initiations; by esotericism of doctrine, language and organization; and by a strong emphasis on the realization of the goal through highly structured ritual and meditative techniques. If “Tantric” is to be used to refer to something other than this, then the term must be clearly defined and its boundaries must be clearly drawn. Otherwise the term is meaningless and quite certainly misleading.

As a matter of fact, the doctrinal affiliation of the Sarvatathā-gatādhiśṭhāna appears to be quite distinct from “Tantra” as I would define it. It is in doctrine affiliated rather with texts like the Sad-dharma-puṇḍarīka and the Suvarṇaprabhāsottama, texts in which “the text or book as a source of sacred power” is a fundamental preoccupation. This preoccupation, though little studied, is a clear characteristic of much of early and middle Mahāyāna sūtra literature.9 Still, within this larger category the affiliation of the Sarvatathāgatādhiśṭhāna-sūtra can be a little more precisely stated.

One of the central themes of the Sarvatathāgatādhiśṭhāna is expressed in the passage which says “If, O Vajrapāṇi, someone made a copy of this text and put it into a stūpa that stūpa would become a stūpa of the relics of the essence of vajra of all Tathāgatas . . . It would become a stūpa of ninety-nine millions of Tathāgatas as numerous as the seeds of the sesame (lag na rdo rje gang zhis chos kyi rnam grangs ’di bris te/ mchod rten gyi dang du bzag pa de de bzhin gshegs pa thams cad kyi rdo rje’i snying po’i ring bsrrel gyi mchod rten du ’gyur ro . . . de bzhin gshegs pa til gyi gang bu snyed dgu bcu rtsa dgu’i mchod rten du ’gyur ro, Pek. Vol. 11, no. 508, 113–4–5f.). This passage, and a number of other characteristics, marks the Sarvatathāgatādhiśṭhāna as only one example of a clearly identifiable genre of “dhdrani sutras,” the central theme of which is succinctly expressed in the title of another, very short example of the same genre. The title in question is Mchod rten gcig btab na bye ba btab par ’gyur pa’i grungs, “The Dhāraṇī by which, If One Establishes a Single Stūpa, He Establishes Ten Million” (Pek. Vol. 6, no. 140, 152–2–2 to 3–2; Vol. 11, no. 546, 168–4–8 to 5–8). Almost exactly the same phrase is found — here not as a title, but in the body of the text — in the Sarvāprajñāntapāramitāsiddhīcaitya-dhāraṇī: gzan yang
Moreover, if this mantra of the mahāvīrya were to be recited, and if he were to establish a single stūpa, then [in effect] ten million stūpas would be established”; but then the text immediately adds an interesting twist: “If this mahāvīrya is not recited, although he establishes ten million [stūpas], it would be as if he established only one” (Pek. Vol. 11, no. 509, 115–3–7).

The basic idea that is being expressed here is repeated, rephrased and developed in a number of texts similar to the Sarvatathāgatadhipatīya. Not only does the recurrence of this idea establish the thematic unity of this group of texts and mark them as members of a specific genre; we can also note that archaeological and epigraphical evidence clearly establishes that this group of texts had a very widespread distribution throughout the Buddhist world and a marked impact on actual Buddhist practice.

We have seen, for example, that the text of the dhāraṇī of the Sarvatathāgata-dharmadhiṣṭhāna was engraved on some stones somehow connected with a stūpa in 9th-century Ceylon. We also know that the same text was inserted into the hollow bricks of an old stūpa in Hangchow in the 10th century, and that yet another printing of our text appears to have been put inside a large number of miniature stūpas made, again in the 10th century, and discovered in Chekiang.

The same sort of evidence exists for other examples of this genre. The Raśmivimalavīśuddhāprabhā-dhāraṇī (Pek. Vol. 7, no. 218), another text of this group, was deposited in a stūpa as early as 751 A.D. in southeast Korea, and the Empress Shōtoku in about 770 A.D. had a “million” copies of the same text printed and put into a “million” miniature stūpas which she then had distributed all over Japan. Yet another example of this genre, the Samantamukhapraveśarasāśmivimalavīśaprabhāsa-sarvatathāgata-dhāraṇī (Pek. Vol. 7, no. 206), is found in the famous polyglot inscription of Chū-yung-kuan, which is inscribed on what seems to have been the base of a stūpa. Even in India itself we find epigraphical evidence of our genre. Here we might cite the text found in “The Cuttack Museum Stone Inscription” and on at least some of the hundreds of terracotta tablets found at Nalanda in the cores of a large number of votive stūpas. That this text belongs to our genre is already clear from the passage that reads: yah kaścid bhikṣur vā bhikṣunī vā upāsako vā . . . imāṃ dhā-
ranāṃ likhitvā 'bhyamṭaram prakṣipyā caityaṃ kurisyati / tenaikena caityena kṛtena lacṣaṃ tathāgatācaityānāṃ kṛtaṃ bhavati. It is put beyond any real doubt when we note that the Cuttack Museum inscription and the Nālandā tablets contain — as I will show in some detail in the near future — slightly different versions of a text preserved in the Kanjur under the title Bodhigarbha-lakṣa-dhāraṇī (Pek. Vol. 6, no. 139, 150–1–1 to 151–2–2). This text is, in fact, an extract taken from a larger work with a very similar title, the Bodhimaṇḍalalakṣa-lakṣa-dhāraṇī (Tohoku no. 508), which has all the characteristics that define our group.15

If, then, the identification of the text on the “Dhāraṇī Stones from Abhayagiriya” is to be able to help us understand something about the kind of Mahāyāna that was current in 9th Century Ceylon, at least two things must be done. First, that text must be placed alongside other texts of a similar kind or genre. Secondly, we must make some attempt to understand the place of this genre in Buddhist literature and doctrine as a whole. For the moment, however, I can offer these notes only as a first tentative step towards doing both.

NOTES

1. The researching and writing of this paper were made possible by a grant from the Translations Program of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Here too I would like to thank Dr. Akira Yuyama and the Staff of the Reiyukai Library for having so kindly sent me Tibetan materials when I was living in Wyoming, and Professor Luis O. Gómez for having read this paper and having shared with me a number of valuable observations.


4. Mudiyanse, pp. 102–03; note that for some reason Dr. Mudiyanse prints a number of obvious compounds as if they were two or more separate words.

5. Mudiyanse, p. 100.


15. The *Bodhimayâdalalakâlàkârā-dhâra-,* — if that is the correct title — appears to be preserved only in the Derge and Lhasa Kanjurs, and the version we now have was translated not from Sanskrit, but from Chinese by an 18th Century Mongolian named Mgon po skyabs. The original from which the Tibetan translation was made is entitled *P'u t'i ch'ang chung yen 'to lo ni ching* (Taishô 1008) and is attributed to Amoghavajra. For some bibliographic remarks on the Tibetan translation and its translator see J.W. de Jong’s review of Š. Bira, *O"Zolodaj knige* S. Damdina (Ulan-Bator:1964), *Toung Pao* 54 (1968) 174-75, 178-89.