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Note on a Chinese Text Demonstrating the Earliness of Tantra

by John C. Huntington

I. Introduction

Although divided by two closely related opinions, most scholars working on the history of Buddhism resolve the issue of the date of the beginning of Tantra by placing either its “origin” or its “emergence” in the seventh or eighth century. For one substantial group of scholars, the seventh century date has become tantamount to the absolute date for the “origin” of Tantra, and suggestions of earlier Tantra meet with categorical rejections by them. For a second large group, perhaps even a majority of Buddhologists, it is accepted that Tantra probably existed prior to the seventh century, but there is not enough evidence for it to be studied and it is accepted as one of those areas of human knowledge that is beyond our reach. For this second group, suggestions of pre-seventh century Tantra meet with skeptical interest but strong reservations as to the possibility of really knowing anything substantial about it. In effect, these scholars also seem to deny the existence of early Tantra on the grounds that any possible study of it is, by definition, epistemologically unacceptable. For a remaining few individuals, among whom I number myself, the idea of *either* a seventh century “origin” or “emergence” is simply erroneous. Tantra appears to these few individuals to have conspicuously traceable roots even in the pre-Śākyamuni period and, from both textual and iconographic studies, would seem to have been integrated into some aspects of Buddhism at a verly early date.

It is my purpose in this article to support the position of the few in an epistemologically acceptable manner by bringing to the attention of the scholarly community a Buddhist textual

passage that irrefutably places fully developed Mahāvairocana cycle Tantra and known Tantric meditational practices into a much earlier time-frame than the seventh century.

The passage in question is a *devayoga* maṇḍalic meditation contained in the version of the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa-sūtra* (SPS) that was translated into Chinese between the third and tenth years of the Hsüan-shih era under the Bei Liang (i.e., 414–421) and now listed as no. 663 of the *Taishō daizōkyō*. The passage contains evidence of an advanced understanding of the practices of the *pañcajinamaṇḍala* from the *Mahāvairocanasūtra* (MVS) cycle and acceptance of those practices as second nature. While it does not prove the existence of the practices in East Asia, it does conclusively demonstrate that such practices were known in the place of origin of the SPS version that served as the source for the Bei Liang translation, presumably India proper or the Indic northwest (specifically the Bactro-Gandhāran regions or Kashmir).

II. The Problem of the Seventh Century “Emergence”

The continuing attribution of the development of Tantra to the seventh or even eighth century seems to have originated in Toganoo Shōun’s argument based on “negative evidence”, that if Fa-hsien (fifth century), Hiu-shen (sixth century), and Hsüan-tsang (seventh century) did not mention the MVS, but I-tsing (second half of the seventh century) did, the text had to have been written in the mid-seventh century.¹ In his argument, Toganoo ignores the fact that an Indian *paṇḍita* by the name of Puṇyodaya (Puṇyopāya) arrived in China in 655 and tried to introduce Tantric texts but was prevented from doing so by none other than Hsüan-tsang,² who was primarily interested in the “Ideation Only”, Vijnānavādin School (Fa-hsiang or Dharmalakṣana School), and who, therefore, had not even been looking for Tantric texts in India.

That the various Chinese travelers did not come across Tantric texts is not surprising, since the texts were (and, in formal Buddhist practice, still are) part of a very conservative esoteric tradition open only to initiates to the system. Indeed, the traditional history of the Tantras states that they were transmitted

in secret from the time they were first revealed. Thus, it would seem that there would be little reason for the Chinese pilgrims, who were not specifically searching for initiation to the Tantras, to find them, and it was only after he had become well known to the Tantric masters at Nālandā that I-tsing was introduced to them.

Another aspect of Toganoo's reasoning reflects a commonly held opinion with which I am in complete disagreement. He holds that, in general, very shortly after any given text was created, it was written down and translated into Chinese. According to him,³ the one version of the *Amoghapāśa-sūtra* (*APS*) which mentions the *MVS* several times and must therefore be later than the *MSV*, was in Louyang no later than 693. Moreover, he holds the *APS* to be the model for the *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha-sūtra* (*STTSS*). However, possibly unknown to Toganoo, the great Indian teacher of Vairocana cycle Tantras, Śubhākarasimha brought the illustrations for the *STTSS* (known to the academic world as the *Gobushinkan* from the Onjō-ji copy of 855) with him to China in 716. This would have compressed the creation of the three *sūtras* into less than a fifty year span.⁴ Yet, by any measure we can discover, whether in Japan, Nepal, or Tibet, the esoteric teaching tradition was extremely conservative in the development of ritual and introduction of "new" teachings. How then could the whole system have developed anew and spread to historically-documented locations from Kashmir (where Śubhākarasimha studied the *STTSS*), to Sri Lanka (where Amoghavajra was initiated into the *MSV*), and from Nālandā (where Śubhākarasimha and I-tsing studied esoteric Buddhism) to the Konkan (where the *MSV/STTSS* was practiced)—virtually all of the Indic subcontinent—in less than fifty years?

It is my opinion that this rapid development did not occur and that, in fact, there had been a very long period of development. My research into art and iconography suggests that Tantric systems developed very slowly, taking centuries rather than decades. For example, relative to *Mahāvairocana* practices, I have shown that specific iconographic characteristics demonstrate that the sixth century Aurangabad Caves numbers 6, 6A, and 7, very probably constitute a dual *maṇḍala*, virtually identical in concept to the dual *maṇḍala* of Shingon Buddhism.⁵ This fact

alone places the development of the text two centuries earlier than Toganoo's theory and raises serious doubts about the whole idea of the East Asian development of the union of the two *maṇḍalas*. Moreover, if, as I believe, Chen Yen/Shingon esotericism was transmitted intact to China based on sixth century Indian practices, the whole problem of development in the *Mahāvairocana* cycles is pushed back into a much earlier time frame, the fifth or even the fourth century at the latest, with much "proto" *Vairocana* cycle development having had to take place even earlier.

III. The "Maṇḍala" of the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa-sūtra*

Simply stated, there is unequivocal textual evidence that the basic *maṇḍala* of the *MVS* was known in the early fifth century. Even the most conservative inferences to be drawn from the evidence that will follow demand that the *MVS* itself be assigned an early fourth century date. And, I insist, based on internal evidence of the *maṇḍalas* in the texts, that there is at least a strong possibility that it might be earlier, even much earlier.⁶ The version of the *Suvarṇaprabhāsottamarāja-sūtra* (*SPS*) that was first translated into Chinese between the third and tenth years of Hsüan Shih (414–421) under the Northern Liang by Dharmakṣema⁷ contains an unmistakable meditation in (I emphasize *in*, not *on*) a *maṇḍala*. While most of the *sūtra* is a lengthy polemic on the benefits that will accrue to an earthly king who supports Buddhism and the teachings of the *sūtra* by virtue of the protection of the four heavenly kings (*lokapāla*), the *sūtra's* primary buddhological content is the universality of Śākyamuni, in which his life is said to be eternal.⁸ In the introduction to Chapter 2, while the Bodhisattva Mahāsattva Śraddhāketu is meditating on the length of life of the Buddha Śākyamuni, his house becomes vast, extensive, made of lapis lazuli, adorned with treasures, and there appear four divine seats and on those seats appear, in the east Akṣobhya, in the south Ratnaketu, in the west Amitāyus and in the north (?)—suśabda [Divyadundubiśvara]. Then the Buddhas of the four directions impart their esoteric knowledge (about the length of Śākyamuni's life) to him through meditational means.⁹

To anyone knowledgeable about the *maṇḍalas* of the *MVS* and the *STSS*, this arrangement and apparent sequence of the meditation is immediately familiar. The house was transformed into the palace of the “eight-petalled lotus hall,” the Buddhas are essentially the *tathāgatas* of the *maṇḍala* of Mahāvairocana and, true to still current meditational practices, the practitioner, in this case the Bodhisattva Śraddhāketu, is to envision himself in the center of the *maṇḍala*—identical to Vairocana—where he receives the “offering” of the *jñāna* of the Buddhas.¹⁰ The whole passage in question reads as follows:

At one time, in Rājagṛha, there was a Mahāsattva Bodhisattva named Śraddhāketu who had done many good deeds. He wondered why Śākyamuni Buddha’s life span was so short that he only lived for eighty years. The Mahāsattva remembered that Śākyamuni Buddha had said that there were two virtues that give long life spans. The first virtue was not to kill anything and the second one was to give food to others. [Yet, during his former lives], Śākyamuni Buddha had obtained many virtues. He did not kill anything and also gained the ten virtues. He gave unlimited public food and even satisfied beings with his own flesh and blood. [Therefore, how could it be that his life span was so limited?] The Mahāsattva prayed. At that instant, the floor of the room he was in suddenly became filled with gems and, as in *buddhakṣetras*, the room became filled with clouds of fragrance. From the four walls, there appeared the four Buddhas—Akṣobhya on the east, Ratnaketu on the south, Amitāyus on the west and (?)—suśabda (Ch. Wei-miao-sheng, “Torrent of Excellent Sound”) on the north. [The four Buddhas] radiated great light over Rājagṛha, the three thousand great chiliocosms, and all *buddhakṣetras* in all directions. At that time, because of the [four] Buddhas’ divine power, the people in the three thousand great chiliocosms gained heavenly happiness; and, even those possessing not a single virtue, attained all virtues. All the benefits of the world were distributed. The Mahāsattva, seeing the four Buddhas, piously made *añjalimudrā* and prayed to them. He asked the four Buddhas, why, if Śākyamuni Buddha possessed innumerable virtues, did he live only eighty years? They said, “You should not concern [literally “stick”] yourself with this question. Have you not seen that no one can tell the life span of a Buddha except for the Buddhas themselves?”¹¹

It will be noted that the names for the Buddhas of the *maṇḍala*

of the *SPS* are slightly different from those of either the *MVS* or its companion, the *STTSS*, but they are close enough that there can be no error in recognizing the intention of representing the *maṇḍala* of Mahāvairocana in the *SPS*.¹²

The *SPS* has:

Direction:	Chinese:	Sanskrit:
Center	(practitioner [Śraddhāketu] identical to Vairocana)	
East	A-ch'u ^A	Akṣobhya
South	Pao-hsiang ^B	Ratnaketu
West	Wu-liang-shou ^C	Amitāyus
North	Wei-miao-sheng ^D	(?)-suśabda

The *MVS* has:

Center	Pi-lu-chê-na ^E	Vairocana
East	Pao-ch'uang ^F	Ratnadhvaja
South	K'ai-fu-hua-wang ^G	Samkusumitarāja
West	Wu-liang-kuang ^H	Amitābha
North	T'ien-ku-lei-yin ^I	Divyadundubhimeghanirghoṣa

The *STTSS* has:

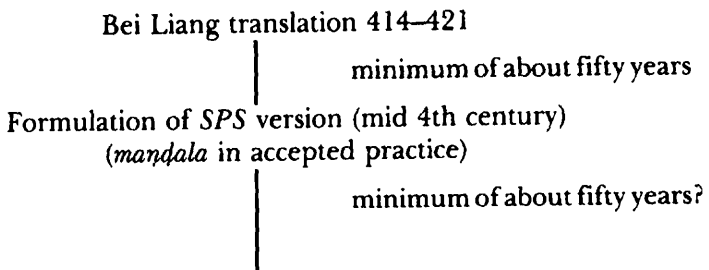
Center	Pi-lu-chê	Vairocana
East	A-ch'u	Akṣobhya
South	Pao-shêng ^J	Ratnasambhava
West	Shih-tzu-tsai-wang ^K	Lokeśvararāja
North	Pu-k'ung-cheng-chiu ^L	Amoghasiddhi

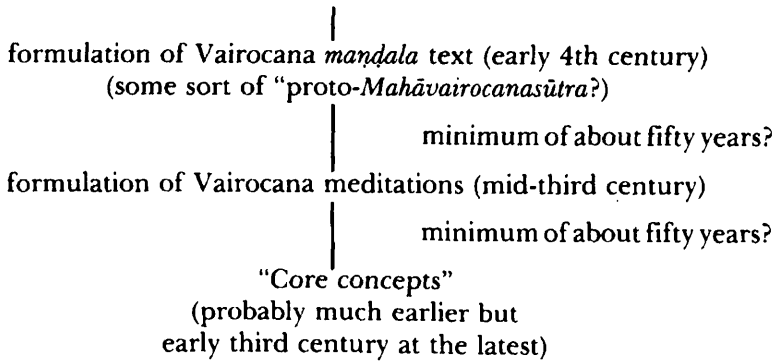
At first reading, these names may not seem to be very closely related. However, both Divyadundubhimeghanirghoṣa, "Voice of the Divine Kettle Drum Cloud", and Wei-miao-sheng, "Torrent of Excellent Sound", convey essentially the same meaning, and both refer to the teaching nature of Amoghasiddhi. K'ai-fu-hua-wang or Samkusumitarāja, "Ruler of the Blossoming Flower", is an explanation for the nature of Ratnasambhava, "Gem (or Treasure) Born", who demonstrates the ability of the individual to practice as a monk, which is symbolized by the metaphor of rebirth on a newly opening lotus blossom. And, in the *Sukhāvatīvyūha-sūtras*, Lokeśvararāja is the name of the Buddha before whom Dharmākara, the youth who was to become Amitāyus/Amitābha, took the vows which were to lead to the prediction of his Buddhahood, and is thus a direct reference

to Amitābha/Amitāyus. Given this information, it is easy to recognize that the alternate names are simply epithets of the familiar Buddhas of the *maṇḍala* and that actually there are no real discrepancies.

The description of Śraddhāketu's room, the position of the four Buddhas, and their imparting knowledge to Śraddhāketu in unison parallels the imparting of the *jñāna* of the four Buddhas to the initiate in the Shingon ritual. In the Shingon ritual, the initiate, dressed as Vairocana and seated before a *maṇḍala*, has the water (symbolizing their respective *jñāna*) from the four subsidiary vases of the *maṇḍala* poured into the central vase which is, in turn, emptied over the initiate's head, thus imparting the knowledge from the four Buddhas directly into him. Indeed, the meditation in the *SPS* is so close to being identical to the practice of the *Mahāvairocana* that the *SPS* could not have been written without knowledge of it. Regrettably, the details of the *maṇḍala* are not spelled out, so it is not possible to determine just how close to the detailed Shingon version of the *maṇḍala* the *SPS maṇḍala* really is. However, that is the nature of references to *maṇḍalas* in Buddhist literature, where they are frequently referred to by just naming the progenitor (*Ārya*) or, at the most, a few of the central deities.

What we are left with is the problem of the earliness of the Vairocana cycle. Since the *maṇḍala* of Vairocana is mentioned in the Bei Liang version of the *SPS*, it must be assumed that knowledge of the *maṇḍala* pre-existed the formulation of that version of the *SPS* and that by the time of the formulation of the *SPS* the meditational practice had already become so well accepted that its inclusion was meaningful to at least the community of monks in which the *SPS* was formulated. Thus, assuming that the *SPS* had at least a modest history during which it gained importance and acceptance before being taken off to China to be translated (see my comments above), we can chart the history of the concept of the *SPS maṇḍala* as follows:





While this proposed date will be an anathema to some, for others it simply falls into a pattern of accumulating evidence for an increasingly earlier date for Tantra.¹³ One real problem for the study of the earliness of the literature of Tantra is that the versions of the texts that we have are not early but are rather late. But, as anyone who has worked on the *MVS* knows, it is obviously a great compilation of concepts and ideas, some of them presumably belonging to remote antiquity. I do not propose to suggest here that the *MVS*, intact, as we know it from eighth century translations into Chinese, existed in the third or fourth century. On the contrary, while I do think that the origin of the *MSV* is much earlier than the seventh century date proposed by Toganoo (discussed above), I argue that the circa fifth or sixth century text presently known is an outgrowth of compilations and “accretions” that spanned centuries. Initially there were sets of not necessarily related practices which, in turn, had been developed from diverse “core concepts” of vastly greater antiquity.

That this development took place is demonstrable even from the *MSV maṇḍala* of the *Mahāvairocana* itself. It is generally accepted that there is a sequence of development to the Tantric literature consisting of the *MVS*, followed by the *Amoghapāśasūtra* (which mentions the *MVS* several times), followed by the *Tattvasaṃgrahasūtra*.¹⁴ However, in the *MVS maṇḍala*, the Bodhisattva Amoghapāśa figures prominently in the quarter of Avalokiteśvara.¹⁵ Presumably, he was added after the formulation of his *Amoghapāśasūtra* and therefore long after the formulation of the “core” or “basic” *MVS*. While the *MVS* must await a detailed analysis before its layers may be understood, I think that it is appropriate to insist that it is unrealistic to see it as a monolithic entity with a discrete point of origin. Simply put, it

makes much more sense to understand a long period of development and to expect a layering of accretions to the text. Such a view of the literature would solve many problems.

If such a view is accepted, then it is possible to account for the mid-second century image of a Buddha attended—it has been argued—by Padmapāṇi and Vajrapāṇi, an identifying characteristic of the *MVS*, found at Ahicchatrā.¹⁶ Dated in the year 32 of the Kuṣāṇa era (about 152 C.E.), it would be iconographically problematic in the extreme if the whole concept of the particular esoteric trinity is denied until the seventh century. However, by accepting the idea of “proto”-Mahāvairocana cycle practices in Buddhism, the figure falls into a pattern of the early development and existence in the Mathurā region of several recognizable cults of Buddhism. Moreover, if it is accepted for what I think it is, a trinity of a Buddha (presumably Śākyamuni/Vairocana) with Padmapāṇi and Vajrapāṇi Bodhisattvas as attendants, it is archaeological evidence that at least the “core concept” of Mahāvairocana cycle practices in Buddhism had even earlier origins than the second century date of the stone image. While it is not widely known by art historians, there is an early literary tradition in Buddhism that refers to the making of images in a variety of materials, except, however, monolithic stone.¹⁷ Accordingly, although the date of the image of ca. 152 C.E. is tentative pending the final resolution of the date of the Kuṣāṇa era, its existence in stone suggests a relatively long tradition of making such images in other materials before it was appropriate to translate it into monolithic stone.

How old was this tradition? I am convinced that the artistic record will demonstrate a pervasive presence of Tantric, or perhaps “proto Tantric” methodologies having “emerged” in the second century B.C.E. At that point, it is not too much of an act of faith to suggest that the *Atharvavedic* prototypes of Tantra did indeed have real significance in early Buddhism and in the formulation of early Buddhist Tantra.

IV. Conclusions

It is surprising that this passage on the four *tathāgatas* of the *maṇḍala* has gone unnoticed until now. What it does for

“Tantric studies” is to provide a textual basis for insisting that the origin of Tantra was much earlier than the usually cited seventh century “emergence.” Obviously, since this text was translated between 414 and 421 and contained this information at that time, the “origin of the Mahāvairocana *maṇḍala per se* had to be earlier than that. Since the *SPS* cannot be later than fourth century, yet it obviously implies that the *maṇḍala* of Mahāvairocana is already in well established practice, it must be that the *MSV* or at least the “core” ideas for it were in existence no later than the early fourth century and probably earlier.

NOTES

1. Toganoo Shōun, *Himitsu bukkyō-shi* [History of Esoteric Buddhism] (Kyoto: 1933), 17. There is ample reason to believe that I-tsing would have been introduced to the esoteric Tantric tradition whereas others who had gone before him might not have had the opportunity. He stayed at Nālandā for ten years, certainly long enough to win the confidence of a Tantric master. For an English version of this widely accepted theory, see M. Kiyota, *Shingon Buddhism: Theory and Practice*, (Los Angeles and Tokyo: 1978) 19–20.

2. See K. Ch'en, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey* (Princeton: 1964) 332.

3. *Ibid.* pp. 19–20.

4. A full analysis of the texts will demonstrate that there are actually many problems with this, especially since the *Amoghapāśa-dhāranīsūtra* (T. 1096, translated by Li Wu-ch'an in C.E. 700) has a full *maṇḍala* cycle of its own, one which is clearly an outgrowth of the system of secondary *maṇḍalas* of individual deities that grew up around the deities in the various quarters of the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*.

5. See my “Cave Six at Aurangabad; A Tantrayāna Monument?” in *Kalādarśana: American Studies in the Art of India*, J.G. Williams (ed.) (New Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta: 1981) 47–55.

6. I hope to produce a comparative study of certain Buddhist and other “proto-Buddhist” *maṇḍalas* demonstrating my arguments on this point in the relatively near future.

7. T. 663; K 1465.

8. T. 663, Chapt. 2.

9. T. 663, p. 326, A.

10. Ryūjun Tajima. *Deux grands maṇḍalas et la doctrine de l'esoterisme Shingon*, (Tokyo: 1959) 170–172.

11. See footnote 8. I wish to express by gratitude to my student Yin-fen Hung for her preliminary draft of the translation; however, the final translation and any faults it may contain are my responsibility.

12. It is not relevant to the thesis of this article whether any of the later versions of the SPS have similar names or not. Neither J. Nobel, *Suvarṇabhāṣotamasūtra, Das Goldglanz-Sūtra, ein Sanskrittext des Mahāyāna-Buddhismus* (Leipzig: 1937); *Suvarṇabhāṣottamasūtra, Das Goldglanz-Sūtra, ein Sanskrittext des Mahāyāna-Buddhismus, Die tibitischen Übersetzungen mit einem Wörterbuch*, 2 vols. (Leiden and Stuttgart: 1944 and Leiden: 1950); and *Suvarṇabhāṣottamasūtra, Das Goldglanz-Sūtra, ein Sanskrittext des Mahāyāna-Buddhismus, I-tsing's chinesische Version und ihre Übersetzung*, 2 vols. (Leiden: 1959) nor R.E. Emmerick (*The Sūtra of Golden Light* (London: 1970)) have dealt with the earliest extant Chinese version in any detail. However, it is only the Bei Liang version that presents the necessary documentation of the early *maṇḍala*. Accordingly, in this article, no notice is taken of alternate readings and expanded sections that exist in the later versions.

13. See, for example, A. Wayman's arguments for the date of the *Guhyasamājantra* in his *Yoga of the Guhyasamājantra: The Arcane Lore of Forty Verses* (Delhi: 1977) 97–99.

14. Kiyota, *op. cit.*, 23–24.

15. Ryūjun Tajima, *op. cit.*, 87–89.

16. For the trinity from Ahichatṛā, see S.L. Huntington with J.C. Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India: Buddhist, Hindu and Jain* (Tokyo: 1985) 153–155.

17. I have dealt at length with these traditions concerning early images elsewhere. See "Origin of the Buddha Image, Early Image Traditions and the Concept of *Buddhadarśanapūṇyā*", in *Studies in Buddhist Art of South Asia*, A.K. Narain (ed.) (New Delhi: 1985) 24–58. For a specific list of materials see, L. Hurvitz, trans., *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma* (The Lotus Sūtra) (New York: 1976) 39.

List of Significant Characters

- A. 阿閼
- B. 寶相
- C. 無量
- D. 微妙聲
- E. 毘盧遮那
- F. 寶幢
- G. 閼敷華王
- H. 無量光
- I. 天鼓雷音
- J. 寶生
- K. 世自在王無量
- L. 不空成就