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The Text on the “Dhāraṇī Stones from Abhayagiriya”: A Minor Contribution to the Study of Mahāyāna Literature in Ceylon¹

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.² 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*.³

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:⁴

- no. iv 1: . . . *Namas = trayadhvikānām sarva tathāgatānām oṃ bhuvibhuvana dhare dadha . . .*
2: *cala cala dhara dhara sarva tathāgata dhātu dhare padmam = bhavatu jaya dhare*

- 3: *vimale smara smara sarvva tathāgata dharmmacakrapra-*
varttana vajrabodhi
- 4: *maṇḍālaṅkāraṃkṛte sarvva tathāgatādhiṣṭhite bodhaya*
bodha-
- 5: *-ni bodhani budhya budhya sambodhani sambodhani cala*
cala cala-
- 6: *-ntu me sarvv = āvaraṇāni sarvva pāpa vigate hūṃ hūṃ*
hūṃ hūṃ huru
- 7: *huru sphuru sphuru sarvva stoka vigate sarvva tathāgata*
hr-
- no. v 1: *daya vajriṇi sambhara sambhara sarvva tathāgataguhyā-*
dhāraṇī mudre buddhe subuddhe sa-
- 2: *-rvva tathāgatādhiṣṭhitadhātu mudre svāhā // samayādhi-*
ṣṭhite svāhā // sarvva tathāgata
- 3: *hrdayadhātu mudre svāhā // supraṭiṣṭhita stūpe sarvva*
tathāgatādhiṣṭhite huru hu-
- 4: *-ru hūṃ hūṃ svāhā // om sarvva tathāgatoṣṇīṣa dhātu*
mudre sarvva tathāga-
- 5: *tadhātubhūṣitādhiṣṭhite svāhā // hūṃ hūṃ phaṭ phaṭ svāhā*
//

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 sarvva*); his no. ii = no. iv line 6 (beginning *me sarvv = . . .*) to no. v line 5 (ending *. . phaṭ svāhā*); his no. iii = no. iv line 7 (beginning *sarvva stoka* [rd. *śoka*] . .) 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 dharmā 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.”⁵ 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-Sarvatathāgatādhiṣṭhānahṛdayaguhyadhātukaraṇḍamudra-nāma-dhāraṇī-mahāyāna-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 Vidyākara-prabha and Devendrarakṣita of Rtsang, who appear to have lived in the second half of the 8th century A.D. or at the beginning of the 9th.⁶ This Tibetan translation is entitled *'Phags pa de bzhin gshegs pa thams cad kyi byin gyis rlabs 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 *Taiśhō*, two by Amoghavajra done in the 8th century (T. 1022a and 1022b), and one by Dānapāla in the 10th century.⁷ If one compares the text of the *dhāraṇī* found on the “Dhāraṇī Stones from Abhayagiriya” with that found in the *Sarvatathāgatādhiṣṭhānahṛdayaguhyadhātukaraṇḍamudra-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 *Sarvatathāgatādhiṣṭhānahṛdayaguhyadhātukaraṇḍamudra-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' attempts⁸ to show that the presence of *dhāraṇīs* cannot be taken as evidence of "Tantrism," this idea still persists. Here it should be noted that my summary is based on the Tibetan translation found in Peking Vol. 11, no. 508, 112-2-2 to 114-4-7.

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 Brahmin 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 Buddha 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 *Tathāgatas*, 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 obtained, 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 *pūjā* 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 kyī las kyī ’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 kyī 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 kyī byin gyis brlabs kyī 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 *Sarvatathāgatādhiṣṭhāna* appears to be quite distinct from “Tantra” as I would define it. It is in doctrine affiliated rather with texts like the *Saddharmapundarīka* 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 *Sarvatathāgatādhiṣṭhāna-sūtra* can be a little more precisely stated.

One of the central themes of the *Sarvatathāgatādhiṣṭhāna* 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 zhig chos kyi rnam grangs 'di bris te / mchod rten gyi nang du bzhag pa de de bzhin gshegs pa thams cad kyi rdo rje'i snying po'i ring bsrel 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 *Sarvatathāgatādhiṣṭhāna* as only one example of a clearly identifiable genre of “*dhāraṇī sūtras*,” 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 gzungs*, “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 *Sarvaprājñāntapāramitāsiddhicaitya-dhāraṇī: gzan yang*

rig pa chen mo'i sngags 'dis btab na mchod rten gcig btab na yang bye ba btab par 'gyur ro: “Moreover, if this *mantra* of the *mahāvīdyā* 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: *rig pa chen mo 'dis ma btab na bye ba btab kyang gcig dang 'dra bar 'gyur ro*, “But if this *mahāvīdyā* 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 *Sarvatathāgatādhiṣṭhāna*. 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 *Sarvatathāgatādhiṣṭhāna* 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.¹⁰ The same sort of evidence exists for other examples of this genre. The *Raśmivimalaviśuddhaprabhā-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,¹¹ 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.¹² Yet another example of this genre, the *Samantamukhapraveśaraśmivimaloṣṇīṣaprabhāsarvatathāgatahṛdayasamayavilokita-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*.¹³ 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 Nālandā in the cores of a large number of votive *stūpas*.¹⁴ That this text belongs to our genre is already clear from the passage that reads: *yah kaścīd bhikṣur vā bhikṣuṇī vā upāsako vā . . . imāṃ dhā-*

raṇīm likhitvā 'bhyāntaram prakṣīpya caityaṃ kariṣyati / tenaikena caityena kṛtena lakṣaṃ tathāgatacaityānām 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 *Bodhigarbhālamkāra-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 *Bodhimaṇḍalalakṣālamkāra-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.

2. See especially H. Bechert, “Mahāyāna Literature in Sri Lanka: The Early Phase,” *Prajñāpāramitā and Related Systems: Studies in Honor of Edward Conze*, ed. L. Lancaster & L.O. Gómez (Berkeley:1977) 361–68.

3. Nandasena Mudiyanse, *Mahayana Monuments in Ceylon* (Colombo:1967) 99–105. For the discovery Mudiyanse cites the *Archaeological Survey of Ceylon, Annual Report 1940–45*, p. 41, which is not available to me (p.99). The existence of these “tablets” has occasionally been cited elsewhere in the literature as an indication of the presence of “Tantric teachings” in Ceylon: P.E.E. Fernando, “Tantric Influence on the Sculptures at Gal Vihara, Polonnaruwa,” *University of Ceylon Review*, 18 (1960), 65; R.A.L.H. Gunawardana, “Buddhist Nikāyas in Mediaeval Ceylon,” *The Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies*, 9 (1966), 65; etc.

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.

6. F. A. Bischoff, *Der Kanjur und seine Kolophone*, Bd. I (Bloomington:1968) 94; 239–40; J.W. de Jong, "Notes à propos des colophons du Kanjur," J.W. de Jong, *Buddhist Studies*, ed. G. Schopen (Berkeley:1979) 168 (no. 100) 172 (no. 138).
7. P. Demiéville, H. Durt, and A. Seidel, *Répertoire du canon bouddhique sino-japonais, édition de Taishō, Fascicule annexe du Hōbōgirin*, deuxième édition révisée et augmentée (Tokyo:1978) 92; L.R. Lancaster & Sung-bae Park, *The Korean Buddhist Canon: A Descriptive Catalogue* (Berkeley:1979) 381 (K1113), 427(K1287).
8. A. Waley, *A Catalogue of Paintings Recovered from Tun-Huang by Sir Aurel Stein* (London:1931) xiii-xiv; J. Williams, "The Iconography of Khotanese Painting," *East and West* 23 (1973)115.
9. cf. G. Schopen, "The Phrase 'sa pṛthivīpradeśaś caityabhūto bhavet' in the Vajracchedikā: Notes on the Cult of the Book in Mahāyāna," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 17 (1975) 147-81.
10. L. Giles, "Chinese Printing in the Tenth Century," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (1925) 513–15; T.E. Carter, *The Invention of Printing in China and its Spread Westward*, second edition, revised by L. Carrington Goodrich (New York:1955) 73–74; S. Edgren, "The Printed Dhāraṇī-Sūtra of A.D.956," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, Stockholm, 44 (1972) 141–46.
11. L. Carrington Goodrich, "Printing — A New Discovery," *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 7 (1967) 39–41; "Printing: Preliminary Report on a New Discovery," *Technology and Culture* 8 (1967) 376–78.
12. Carter, *The Invention of Printing in China*, 46–53; B. Hickman, "A Note on the Hyakumantō Dhāraṇī," *Monumenta Nipponica* 30 (1975) 87–93.
13. Éd. Chavannes et S. Lévi, "Note préliminaire sur l'inscription de Kiu-Yong Koan," *Journal asiatique* (1894) 354–73; Éd. Chavannes, "Le sūtra de la paroi occidentale de l'inscription de Kiu-Yong Koan," *Mélanges Charles de Harlez* (Leyde:1896) 60-81; J. Murata, ed. *Chū-yung-kuan. The Buddhist Arch of the Fourteenth Century A.D. at the Pass of the Great Wall Northwest of Peking*, Vol. I,II (Kyoto:1955-57) [in Japanese with English summaries].
14. A. Ghosh, "A Buddhist Tract in a Stone Inscription in the Cuttack Museum," *Epigraphia Indica* 26 (1941) 171-74.
15. 'The *Bodhimaṅḍalalakṣāṅkāra-dhāraṇī* — 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 t'o lo ni ching* (Taishō 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 Ś. Bira, *O'Zolotoj knige"* S. *Damdina* (Ulan-Bator:1964), *T'oung Pao* 54 (1968) 174–75, 178–89.