

Guest Editor's Introduction

Dhāraṇī and Mantra in Ritual, Art, and Text

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The study of *dhāraṇī*, mantra, and other incantations in Buddhism has come into its own in the last decade or so. Buddhist spells, once strange, esoteric, and mostly invisible within scholarship, are now understood to be perfectly ordinary and ubiquitous across the full geographic spread of Buddhist traditions in Asia, from India to Korea to the Philippines. Nowhere is the deepening maturity of the field clearer than in the study of *dhāraṇī* and their places within the material practices of the religion. For many of us, it was Liu Shufen's 劉淑芬 groundbreaking series of studies of "*dhāraṇī* pillars" in China, which began to appear in the mid-90s and culminated in her 2008 volume, that set the tone, grounding the study of Buddhist incantations in material culture and social history (2008). Her work showed the central place of *dhāraṇī* within the practices, and practice communities, of lay Buddhists across China, and in doing so helped these fascinating short texts shed the conceptual "skins" in which they had been covered: that they were features only of cloistered, priestly, "esoteric" forms of the religion, but also the very idea that they were best understood as only texts at all—that is, only as words, whether as signs inscribed on a page or sounds spoken into the air of a ritual space. Her foundational work on the pillars (along with that of Kuo Liying 郭麗英 [2014], who has done the most important work on them more recently) helped to begin to make clear that the material imaginings of spells—their social lives as pillars or as amulets, and the details of the rituals in which they were spoken—were central and irreducible to spells within Buddhist practice. Though I do not think it was clear at the time, their work marked the beginning of a new direction in the study of Buddhism. Along with more traditional philological explorations—perhaps most influentially, Ronald Davidson's two-part "Study of *Dhāraṇī* Literature" (2009; 2014)—their works were early waves in an incoming tide of scholarship on incantatory materials from across Asia.¹

The years 2013 and 2014, in particular, were banner years for this study, as seen in two pieces published in *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, and a special issue of *The Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies*. Featured in these collections were studies of excavated materials relating to *dhāraṇī* and other forms of incantation in Indonesia,² the Philippines,³ Gandhāra,⁴ Nepal,⁵ and China,⁶ as well as studies of transmitted literature from India⁷ and China.⁸ The trans-cultural breadth of this work, taken as a whole, was startling. Its lessons for the field were well-characterized by a comment made by Volkhard Krech in his forward to the latter collection:

“The fascinating diversity and complexity of this religious discourse, when examined comprehensively, leave little doubt that nationalist, linguistic and sectarian frameworks will no longer serve.”⁹

Indeed, I would add that just as the cross-cultural study of spells makes clear the insufficiency of methodological nationalism and narrow sectarian or linguistic/cultural concerns, it also reveals another problem: method overly attached to traditional disciplinary boundaries. Taken in their full contexts of practice, *dhāraṇī* and mantra are immensely complex objects. In the forms in which they are found in archaeological contexts, they—more clearly than most features of the religion—cut across conceptual divisions and methods that separate word from image, from object, and from any particular social, ritual, or material context.

Take a quick example. A religious community pools its resources to pay for a pillar to be carved from stone and then inscribed with a spell and its framing tales, and adorned with images from the Buddhist cosmic *imaginaire*. Those texts having been taken from one edition among several available, chosen for reasons we would have to discover (a sense of authenticity? the ways they would indicate a certain level of discernment? the vagaries of textual transmission?). The texts, further, promising miraculous efficacies described in ways that draw on a range of elite discourses and local interpretations. And the spell itself in a form of language that, in its accounts and (local and trans-local) histories of use, highlights not only linguistic sense (or super-sense), but instead its nature as a dazzling sensory object, luminous and inconceivable, whose powers spread by touch, by wind, by shadows arcing outwards from the stone. And the finished object itself, the pillar, placed somewhere in particular, in a location chosen according to the desires of the community, perhaps in negotiation with their local temple: a hilltop, a crossroads, a town square, or, paired with another, at the entrance to a temple—each such place framing the pillar and the practices centering on it (or tangential to it) in its own way. Think, too, of those practices: from the pillar’s creation and initial set up to recurring formal rites involving it that may have happened, to however people treated it in their daily temple-going or workaday lives (including, of course, ignoring it entirely). The spell was constituted by the relations among all these elements (and more)—and note that, in this way of seeing it, one speaks of the incantation in particular: this spell carved on this stone by these people in this place and time. Clearly, neither art history nor philology nor intellectual or social history (etc.) alone is

sufficient to the task, when it is understood in this way. Each *dhāraṇī* calls, as much as one can muster it—and understanding that our sources are limited—for a focus on what we might call, borrowing from Isabelle Stengers' work (2005) in the philosophy of science, an ecology of practices. To the extent that *dhāraṇī* were bodily, imaginative, and social elements of human practices, nothing less will suffice (Copp 2019).

I think we are starting to see such a focus. Where once the study of *dhāraṇī* and mantra was the nearly unique province of the more adventurous philologists, the study of spells in Buddhism is now embraced by scholars working across the disciplines. The articles in this special issue exemplify this trend. Alongside studies featuring the discipline of philology in its classical form (de Bernon, Hidas), focusing on the production of scholarly editions and translations, we find it in its mode of the “archaeology” of word and book, which takes the *particular* materiality, visuality, and physical context, or paratext, of any given “witness” to a text as central to its nature and meaning (Galambos, explicitly, but also, I think, Gough). Related to this foregrounding of material context is the foregrounding of practice, in particular of formal religious ritual. Four studies are centered in ritual practice (Gough, de Bernon, Kim, and, at least implicitly, Galambos). Finally, we find studies rooted in art historical method that are also steeped in textual and ritual analysis (scholars of visual culture having always been stronger than textualists in this way) (Gough, Kim).

Our first article, by Ellen Gough, “Is the Jain Mantra for an Enlightened Soul *Arhaṃ* or *Arbraṃ?*,” is a study of the visual, sonic, and ritual character of a set of mantras within Jain practice, spanning from the medieval to the modern period. It might seem odd to lead off a special issue in a journal devoted to the study of Buddhist thought and culture with a study of Jainism, but Gough's article, aside from its excellence on its own terms, helps us to understand the wider landscape within which Buddhist spells were imagined and put into practice. It makes clear, if evidence were still needed, that a blinkered Buddhism-only approach to the study of Buddhism—whether in India, China, or elsewhere—can never be fully up to the task. Gough's study is explicit, I think, on this point. It is a fascinating close-grained work centering on seemingly peculiar, and small, sonic/visual variations on a “single” mantra, which takes it within a broad religious landscape cutting across traditions. Unraveling her mystery—centering in part on the placement of the single syllable *ra* in inscriptions of the mantra—Gough finds a wealth of insight

into “the ontologies and soteriologies of different Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu communities.”

Youn-mi Kim’s article, “A Ritual Embodied in Architectural Space: The *Uṣṇīṣavijayā Dhāraṇī* and Yingxian Timber Pagoda from the Liao Empire,” is the first of a series of three on the *Uṣṇīṣavijayā*, a spell whose importance within scholarly understandings of the trans-Asian Buddhist tradition seems to grow every year. It was, for example, the incantation whose scripture inspired the creation of the *dhāraṇī* pillars discussed earlier. Kim’s paper studies pagodas built within the Khitan Liao empire (916–1125), which, at its greatest extent, encompassed what are today parts of China, Mongolia, Russia, and North Korea. It explores a very different materialization of the spell than those that had previously been seen in Buddhist religious practice. Pillars centered written forms of the incantation, treating them as the generator of blessings. The pagodas were different. Kim’s work, through close readings of the visual representations featured in the pagodas, shows that their designers sought to enact the *Uṣṇīṣavijaya dhāraṇī* and its efficacies through materialization of ritual processes understood to be inherent to the spell. Drawing on Alfred Gell’s concept of “material agency,” she shows, for example, how the groups of statues featured on each floor of the Yingxian Timber Pagoda 應縣木塔 were intended to manifest the power of the spell in a way that constituted an innovation from the older imaginings of the direct material efficacy of the pillars (which people in Liao lands continued to build). This, to my mind, is a significant contribution to our understanding of the material culture of *dhāraṇī*.

Olivier de Bernon’s study, “*Uṇhissavijaya* in Cambodia: Rituals and Narrative,” continues this issue’s series on the *Uṣṇīṣavijayā*, deepening our understanding of the text’s vast geographical reach with an account of a version of the text in the ritual life of Cambodia. Especially when read alongside the other papers in this issue, the nature of the text and its practices described in the paper offer a fascinating case of the transformations that *dhāraṇī* underwent in local traditions across Asia—whether as *zhou* 咒 (and its cognates) in East Asia, or here as *gāthā*, and other textual and ritual forms, in Cambodia.¹⁰ We see, I think, a double case of such transformation here: not only the formal text of the *Uṇhissavijayagāthā*, which is recognizably both the “canonical” *Uṣṇīṣavijayā* and something different, but also a local rite, which de Bernon describes in vivid detail, that the *Uṇhissavijayagāthā* in part inspired:

the *pūṇy jīva-dān*, the “Ceremony of the Gift of Life.” De Bernon rounds off the article with a translation and edition of one manuscript version of the text.

Reading skillful translations of incantatory texts is, indeed, one of the pleasures offered in this special issue. We find another in the next article, “*Uṣṇīṣavijayā-dhāraṇī*: The Complete Sanskrit Text Based on Nepalese Manuscripts,” by Gergely Hidas. As its title suggests, it is an example of philology in its classical form, offering “the first critical edition and translation of the *Uṣṇīṣavijayā-dhāraṇī* as it survives in Sanskrit manuscripts.” The edition and translation, along with the descriptions of the ten manuscripts they are based on, shed light on a vector of the life of the *Uṣṇīṣavijayā* in South Asia that has heretofore been hard to see. In this regard, it is bracing to read Hidas’s translation of the spell itself—especially coming after de Bernon’s rendering of the Cambodian ritual text of “the Gift of Life.” We see in these two texts two differing polyglot styles of devotional speech, where regular language is juxtaposed with sacred language that neither scholar (for different reasons) translates, but which lead to substantially the same effect. De Bernon’s text combines Khmer, the plain language of the participants, with Pāli, a sacred language of the Buddhist scriptures; in Hidas’s text, comprehensible Sanskrit is interspersed with the kind of untranslatable incantatory sound common in *dhāraṇī*. In both renderings, these mixtures create a sense of intense devotion attempting to reach beyond what is expressible in regular language.¹¹ They leave me hoping that more scholars will attempt such translations. They will have good models here.

Our special issue ends with Imre Galambos’s case study of the place of incantations within both the practice of ritual and the creation of books: “Untying the Bonds of Hatred: Manuscripts of a *Dhāraṇī* from Dunhuang.” The papers in this special issue, taken as a whole, describe a striking range of contexts and practices that incantations both shaped were in turn shaped by. Galambos’s study does this by looking to the material contexts of their copying for ritual use. He shows that close attention to the codicology of manuscripts from Dunhuang containing copies of the *Dhāraṇī Scripture Spoken by the Buddha on Dissolving [Ties with] Grudge-Holders of a Hundred Lifetimes* reveals at least three different insights about the nature of their production and use. Some were objects produced collectively, and for collective benefit, directly involving, at least in some cases, the donors who had commissioned them. The variation in the quality of the handwriting on a few of the manuscripts

points to the likelihood that some donors took up the brush themselves. Other manuscripts appear to have been produced in sets, in a kind of modest production run; a possibility that opens important lines of inquiry into how *dhāraṇī* were received in Buddhist communities in the Dunhuang region. Finally, Galambos's comments on the contrasting natures of single-text manuscripts and multiple-text manuscripts, and how they frame their incantatory text as different kinds of things, constitutes an important insight into *dhāraṇī* practice in China in the ninth and tenth centuries. The single-text manuscripts appear to frame their texts as devotional, merit-generating objects, while the text when it appears simply as one among several likely had more ancillary ritual uses.

That different incantations are different is easy to see; more difficult to see, and perhaps more important: the same incantation is rarely the same, when its variations in context and use are taken seriously. The studies in this special issue help us to see this, and they signal the continued deepening of a field of inquiry that has truly come into its own.

December 31, 2020

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Notes

- * I am grateful to my co-editor, Youn-mi Kim, for her help in thinking through this introduction.
- 1 Other works of scholarship in this vein that might be mentioned here include (but are in no way limited to) Abé (2000), Barrett (2001), Chen (2002), McBride (2005), Shinohara (2014b), Copp (2014), Overbey (2019). As the material culture of *dhāraṇī* began to draw scholarly attention, art historians began to explore paintings and ritual spaces related to *dhāraṇī* as well. For example, see Shimono (2004), Wang (2011), Kim (2013), Wang (2018), and Lee (2021).
 - 2 Cruijsen, et al., (2012 [2013]) and Griffiths (2014).
 - 3 Orlina 2012 (2013).
 - 4 Strauch (2014).
 - 5 Bühnemann (2014).
 - 6 Hidas (2014).
 - 7 Davidson (2014).
 - 8 Shinohara (2014a).
 - 9 Krech (2014, 1).
 - 10 On these issues, see also Walker (2018, 249–316).
 - 11 I discuss these issues at more length in Copp (2012); and see also Ryan Richard Overbey's recent exploration (Overbey 2019).

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