

Notes on the term “*Dhāraṇī*” in medieval Chinese Buddhist thought¹

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Abstract

“*Dhāraṇī*”, with its many cognates in Chinese and other languages, is one of the most complex terms in Buddhism. Particular shadings of the tradition’s notions of memory, meaning, and meditation, as well as specific kinds of incantations and mnemonic devices, all fall within what can seem a rather bewildering semantic range. However, the logic of the term is consistent over a wide range of sources, though Western treatments have often been misleading. It is usually claimed that the basic practical significance of “*dhāraṇī*” is either memory or incantation. Yet Chinese sources make clear that each of these understandings overly privileges a narrow band of the term’s usage. Understanding that the basic practical sense of “*dhāraṇī*” was “grasp”, not memory or spells, illuminates connections within a range of sources, from doctrinal treatments to injunctions to “hold” *dhāraṇī*-incantations in mind and, indeed, on the body encountered in texts of various kinds.

“*Dhāraṇī*” (Ch. *tuoluoni* 陀羅尼, *zongchi* 總持, *chi* 持, *zhou* 咒, etc.), with its many cognates in Chinese and other languages, is surely among the most complex Buddhist terms of art. Particular shadings of Buddhist notions of memory, meaning and meditation, as well as specific kinds of incantations and mnemonic devices, all fall within what can seem a rather bewildering semantic range. Yet if we take exegetical writings composed or translated in the early centuries of Buddhism’s spread in China as examples, it is clear that the term’s range of meanings not only remained notably constant, its contours followed from a logic inherent in the word’s basic sense. Western treatments of the term, however, have often been misleading. Though it is usually claimed that the basic practical significance of “*Dhāraṇī*” is either memory or incantation, the earliest and most often-cited treatments of the word preserved in Chinese show that each of these understandings overly privileges a rather narrow band of the term’s usage. Instead, the many senses of “*Dhāraṇī*” in these works are well approximated by the English word “grasp”, which maps onto the primary usages of the term, not to mention its literal meaning, rather closely: basically, to hold (whether in one’s mind or nature or otherwise) and to understand (including in the

1 I am very grateful to Stephen F. Teiser, James A. Benn and Jacob Dalton for their critiques of earlier versions of this article. They are, of course, not to be held responsible for any infelicities of content or style that remain.

sense of “to have the knack for”).² Keeping the basic literal meaning of the term in mind – rather than privileging extended senses like memory or incantation (or spell) – allows the reader of Buddhist texts to appreciate the full complexity of the term and its associated doctrinal and practical traditions. Such a reading practice, furthermore, makes clear that medieval Chinese not only maintained traditional Buddhist conceptions, but that they also employed them subtly and profoundly in both doctrinal and historical writings until at least the tenth century.

As I will suggest at the end of this article, reading the term in this way also reveals deeper continuities *within* Chinese Buddhist traditions – and perhaps within those of Asia as a whole – than are otherwise clearly in view. Some of these continuities are visible in the ways in which the philosophical understandings I explore in this article were echoed in the wide range of practices of which *Dhāraṇīs* – including the runs of syllables known by this name – were parts. Understanding that the basic practical sense of *Dhāraṇī* was “grasp”, not memory or spells, helps to illuminate the connections that result from the doctrinal treatments discussed here and the many injunctions to “hold”³ *Dhāraṇī* incantations in mind and, indeed, on the body encountered in texts of various kinds.

The logic of “*Dhāraṇī*” as the emblem of a family of concepts and practices was maintained in Chinese Buddhism across a wide range of religious behaviour, from learned scholastic writing to popular methods of preparing the corpse for burial. I explore these latter activities, their discourses and realia, as well as the full depths of late medieval Chinese

- 2 This is not to say that memory – or mnemonics as a larger category – and various understandings of spells were not important themes in Buddhist writings on *Dhāraṇīs*, simply that they were but two elements in that discourse and that neither should be given an overly privileged place in our understandings of “*Dhāraṇī*” as the name for a family of concepts. Recent explorations of mnemonic conceptions of *Dhāraṇī* include Jens Braarvig, “*Dhāraṇī* and Pratibhāna: memory and eloquence of the Bodhisattvas”, *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 8, 1985, 117–30; Janet Gyatso, “Letter magic: a Peircean perspective on the semiotics of Rdon Grub-Chen’s *Dhāraṇī* memory”, in Janet Gyatso (ed.), *In the Mirror of Memory* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), 173–213; Matthew Kapstein, “Scholastic Buddhism and the Mantrayāna”, in Matthew Kapstein (ed.), *Reason’s Traces: Identity and Interpretation in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist Thought* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001); and Jan Nattier, *A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path According to the Inquiry of Ugra* (Ugraparipṛchhā) (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 291–2, n. 549 (though it will be clear to the reader of both that I do not always agree with it, Nattier’s brief but rich treatment of “*Dhāraṇī*” inspired this essay; the first sentence of this work echoes the first sentence of hers). For representative discussions of *Dhāraṇīs* as spells and incantations, see Richard D. McBride, “*Dhāraṇī*”, in Robert E. Buswell Jr. (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Buddhism* (New York: Macmillan, 2004), 217; Richard D. McBride, “*Dhāraṇī* and spells in medieval sinic Buddhism”, *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 28/1, 2005, 85–114; and Paul Copp, “Voice, dust, shadow, stone: the makings of spells in medieval Chinese Buddhism”, PhD Dissertation, Princeton University, 2005.
- 3 The word usually used here, *chi* 持, itself often simply means “*Dhāraṇī*” (including in these very contexts) as I will discuss below.

exegeses of “*Dhāraṇī*” and its Chinese cognates elsewhere.⁴ In this short article, in part to begin this work and in part simply to make a basic point about the meaning of “*Dhāraṇī*” as it was understood by exegetes in middle-period China, I focus on two of the earliest and most influential extended discussions of the term translated or composed in that period: those found in Chinese translations of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* (and, of course, in the *Yogacārabhūmi* from which it seems to have been drawn) as well as those in the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* (*Dazhidu lun* 大智度論).⁵

We need to consider a basic and perhaps rather obvious premise at the outset: questions about the nature of *Dhāraṇīs*, whether they concern the category as a whole or the particular sense of any one example of the term “*Dhāraṇī*” or its cognates, must be sensitive to the specific rhetorical and practical contexts in which these terms appear. Elements of those contexts can include the genre of text of which the terms are a part, the explicit and implicit arguments they participate in, as well as the doctrinal and practical frameworks that condition them. One of the concerns of this article is to show the extent to which scholarly conceptions of *Dhāraṇīs*, particularly *Dhāraṇīs* in Chinese Buddhism, have suffered from over-generalization.⁶ One result of this over-generalization is that the deep complexities of the term have been glossed over, as have the traditions of doctrinal thought and

4 See chapters 3 and 4 of Copp, “Voice, dust, shadow, and stone”, the latter of which deals with a set of Tang glosses on a single *Dhāraṇī*, as well as my forthcoming monograph on Buddhist spells in medieval Chinese Buddhism. But see also McBride, “*Dhāraṇī* and spells”, for an important recent work on medieval Chinese understandings of *Dhāraṇīs* that covers some of the same ground covered here, though at times with quite different results.

5 Chinese versions of both texts date to the first half of the fifth century. For an extended study of the latter work, see Chou Po-kan, “The problem of the authorship of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa*: a re-examination”, *Taida lishi xuebao* 臺大歷史學報 34, 2004, 281–327. The place of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* in medieval Chinese Buddhism has not yet inspired the same level of interest among scholars. The text exists as one section of the *Yogacārabhūmi*, though it circulated independently of that larger work and was so translated twice in the fifth century, once (*Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經 (100 vols., ed. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎, Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡邊海旭 et al., Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924–32) [hereafter T] no. 1581) by Dharmakṣema (Tanwuchen 曇無讖; fl. 412–433), and once (T no. 1582) by Guṇabhadra (Qiunabatuoluo 求那跋陀羅; 394–468). The fourfold rubric for classifying *Dhāraṇīs* contained within this text was extremely influential in East Asia. See McBride, “*Dhāraṇī* and spells”, 96–7, for a concise discussion of Dharmakṣema’s fame as a spell caster, his translation of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, as well as the development of that text’s fourfold *Dhāraṇī* rubric by Jingying Huiyuan 淨影慧遠 (523–592). For a much longer study of Dharmakṣema, including information about the dating of his translations, see Chen Jinhua “The Indian Buddhist missionary Dharmakṣema (385–433): a new dating of his arrival in Guzang and of his translations”, *T’oung Pao* XC, 2004, 215–63, especially p. 258. See note 14 below for a reference to a discussion of the rubric by Ryūichi Abé that draws on medieval Japanese understandings of this system.

6 I explore this issue in greater detail in Copp, “Voice, dust, shadow, stone”, 111–68.

spell craft of which it was emblematic.⁷ We must be clear about what is at issue within the various discussions of the nature of *Dhāraṇī*s, as well as the ways that the modern scholarly habit of privileging certain canonical accounts of them have conditioned our view of what *Dhāraṇī*s are or can be. The close readings in this article, which focus on the most privileged of those canonical statements, are intended to help break the hold of certain long-lived stereotypical pictures of *Dhāraṇī*s in order to inspire refreshed scholarly approaches to them. To the extent that medieval Chinese translations of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* and the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* faithfully present traditional Indian views on “*Dhāraṇī*”, the arguments of this essay apply to Buddhist scholastic understandings more generally. As will be clear almost immediately in what follows, I engage the work of scholars who draw on Sanskrit versions of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* and I assume a rather high degree of continuity between Sanskrit and Chinese versions (with appropriate caveats). That said, as the title suggests, my goal here is more modestly to address certain medieval Chinese Buddhist writings – all of course products of the hyper-literate elite of the tradition – and the ways they have been analysed in modern scholarship. A clear understanding of the ways the arguments of this essay apply and fail to apply to other Buddhist traditions must await the analyses of other scholars.

“*Dhāraṇī*” in Chinese versions of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*

Most Western accounts of the place of “*Dhāraṇī*” in Buddhist doctrine stress that the term is closely associated with memory, and that it is derived from the Sanskrit root \sqrt{dhr} , meaning “to hold, keep, possess, bear”.⁸ The close association with memory has sometimes been thought to follow naturally from the putative original nature of *Dhāraṇī*s as mnemonic devices.⁹ Jens Braarvig, in what has become a standard article on the subject, notes the “obvious connotations of memory” that attach to the term.¹⁰ Another scholar, going somewhat further, asserts that the Chinese translation of *Dhāraṇī* as “comprehensive retention” (*zongchi*; “encompassing grasp” as I render it here) “[alludes] to the memory function”;¹¹ another, making it clearer still, claims that “the literal significance of the term ‘*Dhāraṇī*’ is ‘memory’”.¹² Braarvig’s main concern in his article is to explore the concept’s connections with “eloquence” (Skt. *pratibhāna*), and the way the two form the basis of the bodhisattva’s abilities as a preacher of

7 For Chinese Buddhist traditions of spell craft, see Michel Strickmann, *Chinese Magical Medicine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 89–122; John Kieschnick, *The Eminent Monk: Buddhist Ideals in Medieval Chinese Hagiography* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 67–111; McBride, “*Dhāraṇī* and spells”; and Copp, “Voice, dust, shadow, stone”.

8 See Braarvig, “*Dhāraṇī* and *Pratibhāna*”, 19.

9 Nattier, *A Few Good Men*, 291–2, n. 549.

10 Braarvig, “*Dhāraṇī* and *Pratibhāna*”, 19.

11 Strickmann, *Chinese Magical Medicine*, 103.

12 Kapstein, “Scholastic Buddhism and the Mantrayāna”, 237.

the Dharma. The bodhisattva remembers the teachings (or, as I will argue, has a command or grasp of them) and is eloquent in their exposition, matching his words to the capacities of his audience. Braarvig quotes from the *Lalitavistara*:

Attaining *dhāraṇī* is an entrance into the light of Dharma, as it functions so as to retain all that the buddhas spoke; attaining *pratibhāna* is an entrance into the light of Dharma, as it functions so as to please all living beings with good sayings.¹³

But as Braarvig and others also make clear, ‘‘*Dhāraṇī*’’ in this sense does not mean simple rote memorization of the teachings. The *Bodhisattvabhūmi* and other texts famously divide *Dhāraṇīs* into four kinds.¹⁴ The first kind is called in Sanskrit *dharmadhāraṇī*, or ‘‘grasp of the teachings’’. The second is called *arthadhāraṇī*, or ‘‘grasp of the meaning’’. Respectively, these two terms indicate the capacity to grasp and keep in mind the letter and the meaning of the teachings.¹⁵ The third form is called *mantradhāraṇī*, or ‘‘grasp of spells’’. The precise meaning of this *Dhāraṇī* is the least agreed upon; as I will argue below, its basic sense in the text is a grasp of (a ‘‘knack for’’ or ability in) spell arts. The final sort of *Dhāraṇī* is called *ksāntidhāraṇī*, or the ‘‘grasp by which one attains the forbearance of a bodhisattva’’.¹⁶

Taking the first two kinds of *Dhāraṇī* as a pair, it is important to note here (and I will explore this in some detail below) that these sorts of *Dhāraṇīs* – particularly the second – are not simply memory.¹⁷ Grasping the

13 Braarvig, ‘‘*Dhāraṇī* and *Pratibhāna*’’, 18.

14 *Pusa dīchi lun* 菩薩地持論 (T no. 1581, 30: 934a). There are several treatments of these passages in the scholarly literature. Among them, Ryūichi Abé’s succinct discussion in his *The Weaving of Mantra: Kūkai and the Construction of Esoteric Buddhist Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) is especially clear (p. 166). His treatment, however, does not sufficiently distinguish among ideas of *Dhāraṇīs* as spells – such as those found in the *Lotus Sūtra* – as mnemonic devices, and as forms of spiritual capacity. Similarly, McBride conflates the two in his own study of elite conceptions of *Dhāraṇī* (‘‘*Dhāraṇī* and spells’’, 113).

15 Cf. McBride, who claims ‘‘these two types of *Dhāraṇī* may best be thought of as codes’’ (‘‘*Dhāraṇī* and Spells’’, 97).

16 Translating here the longer name of this *Dhāraṇī*, ‘‘*de pusa ren tuoluoni*’’ 得菩薩忍陀羅尼, on which see below.

17 Of course ‘‘*Dhāraṇī*’’ was often used to indicate the great mnemonic abilities of the bodhisattva, even in Tang China; again, I do not at all deny this. For an example of such a usage of the term we may take the following mention found in a collection of miracle tales from the mid-eighth century. This text, the *Accounts of the Spiritual Resonance of the Great and Vast Flower Garland Sūtra of the Buddha* (*Da fanguang fo huayan jing ganying zhuan* 大方廣佛華嚴經感應傳), describes the inconceivable size of the *Flower Garland Sūtra*. ‘‘The *Flower Garland Sūtra* has untellable multitudes of verses, as many as the lands and seas or the infinitesimal dust motes [of all worlds]. How could they be contained on *patta* leaves? They are what the *Dhāraṇī*-power of the great bodhisattvas records and holds (*tuoluoni li zhisuo jichi* 陀羅尼力之所記持) ... A great ocean of ink and a collection of brushes the size of Mt. Sumeru would not serve to complete even one small part of one chapter’’ (T no. 2074, 51: 177c). The capacity for remembering described here is clearly not meant to parallel anything achievable by humans. This is, no doubt, the point. Indeed, it

meaning of the teachings, after all, is not precisely the same as remembering their full extent; in fact it would seem to obviate the need for actual memorization of the letter of the teachings. It is possible, indeed, that these four are to be taken as stages of accomplishment, moving in the direction of a progressively more refined “grasp” of the Dharma – beginning with remembering the letter of the teachings and finally, in the fourth “stage” of *Dhāraṇī*, attaining the forbearance of a bodhisattva, one of the highest forms of spiritual insight spoken of in the tradition. This notion of the scheme might not seem at first to square with the third sort of *Dhāraṇī*, *mantradhāraṇī*, which is often taken simply to be a name for *Dhāraṇīs* as spells (mantras), but which instead indicates a “grasp” of them, whether in the mind, the understanding, or in some form of practical mastery. Braarvig also notes that a close reading of these texts makes it appear unlikely that the term “*mantradhāraṇī*”, or “spell *Dhāraṇī*” if we translate from the Chinese, should simply be taken to indicate “magical formula”.¹⁸ Instead, taking the term as one constructed according to the pattern of the previous two, it is clear that the meaning must be along the lines of “grasping” the phrases of the magical formula (Skt.: *mantrapada*, Ch.: *zhoushu* 咒術). In addition, the fact that words clearly related to “*Dhāraṇī*” were commonly used to describe the “wielding” of spells – think of “*vidyādhara*” (“spell grasper/wielder”) and its Chinese translation *chiming zhe* 持明者 – is also relevant here.¹⁹ The *Bodhisattvabhūmi*’s explication confirms this understanding. “What is spell-*Dhāraṇī*? When the bodhisattva attains this samādhi power, he rids beings of afflictions by means of the phrases of spells”.²⁰ Here again, “*Dhāraṇī*” refers to a state of spiritual attainment, or a mental state – a samādhi, not a specific kind of spell. This understanding of the term is further supported in an exegesis of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* found among the manuscripts of the Dunhuang “library cave”. The *Record of the Meaning of the Bodhisattvabhūmi* (*Dichi yiji* 地持義記) explains the term “spell-*Dhāraṇī*” as follows: the text “says ‘spell’ (*zhoushu* 咒術), [because] one [must] cultivate wisdom to use them. [Because] one has attained dhyāna-concentration (*chanding* 禪定) and cultivated wisdom and sovereignty (*hui zizai* 慧自在), one is able to employ spells. Because one is not deluded with regards to spells, it is thus named ‘spell-*Dhāraṇī*’.”²¹

seems fair to say that the image of this astounding ability, possessed by the god-transcending great bodhisattvas, is employed here simply to praise the *Flower Garland Sūtra*, specifically its inconceivable vastness. This passage may offer a good example of the way that *Dhāraṇī*, as capacity for remembering, was understood in the Tang. See also Braarvig, “*Dhāraṇī* and Pratibhāna”, 19.

18 Braarvig, “*Dhāraṇī* and Pratibhāna”, 18.

19 See below for more on these connections in the Chinese context.

20 *Pusa dichì lun* 菩薩地持論 (*T* no. 1581, 30: 934a). Braarvig (“*Dhāraṇī* and Pratibhāna”, 20), who translates from a Sanskrit version of the text, has a somewhat different rendering.

21 *Dichì yilun* 地持義記, p. 2141; *T* no. 2803, 85: 951c. Also relevant here, though far from simply so, is the passage in the *Bhadrakalpika-sūtra* that draws connections between *Dhāraṇī* as a quality of bodhisattvas and the Arapacana syllabary, a run of syllables that seems to have been incantatory in its origins, and whose resemblance

We should note that the fact that incantations are the proper focus of the bodhisattva’s samādhi in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* is clearly not arbitrary, given that (as we will see) the last sort of *Dhāraṇī* is also often said to involve them. This last form, the “*Dhāraṇī* in which one attains the forbearance of a bodhisattva” (*de pusa ren tuoluoni* 得菩薩忍陀羅尼), “consists”, as Braarvig explains, “in pondering a mantra until one understands its meaning, namely that it is without meaning, and accordingly understands all dharmas as being beyond expression”. Attaining this understanding, the bodhisattva is able to abide without fear amid the “un arisen”, or empty-of-essence, phenomenal world. This is, of course, among the loftiest states of spiritual attainment described in Buddhism.²² There is a specific mantra associated with this practice, what the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* calls, in the Chinese translation, the “spell to attain the forbearance of a bodhisattva” (*de pusa ren zhoushu* 得菩薩忍呪術).²³ The spell, strikingly, goes by the same title as the *Dhāraṇī* it leads to, and we should note in passing the fact that here “*Dhāraṇī*” (*tuoluoni*) and “spell” (*zhoushu*) are, if not interchangeable in meaning, clearly related. This is interesting, given the fact that modern scholars sometimes imply that later East Asian confluences of the two are based on misunderstandings of the term.²⁴ The spell goes:

*īṭi miṭi kiṭi bhi kṣānti svāhā*²⁵

It is, in miniature, a typical *Dhāraṇī* incantation in that it is partly made up of syllables that would have made sense to Buddhists of the period, at least in terms of their practical and doctrinal associations (“*kṣānti*”, which we have already seen as “forbearance”, and *svāhā*, a term that, though it lacks clear discursive meaning, was a very commonly occurring ending of spells and would have been “understood” in terms of its function and place in ritual speech), and partly of those that would not (*īṭi miṭi kiṭi*). But here the latter group’s lack of discursive sense has utility: it is a synecdoche for the

and possible historical connections have often been noted. As Peter Skilling has noted, the text states that the bodhisattva “obtains the *dhāraṇī* which gives access to the sixteen gates of letters (*akṣaramukha*). What are the sixteen letters obtained? *A ra pa ca na da sa ka tha pa ba kṣa cha pa ṭha ḍha*” (Skilling, “An Arapacana syllabary in the *Bhadrakalpika-Sūtra*”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116/3, 1996, 523). On the probable incantatory origins of the Arapacana syllabary, see Richard Salomon, “New evidence for the Gāndhārī origin of the Arapacana syllabary”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 110/2, 1990, 255–73. On the connections between the Arapacana syllabary and *Dhāraṇīs*, see, e.g., Nattier, *A Few Good Men*, 292 n. 549.

22 Braarvig, “*Dhāraṇī* and Pratibhāna”, 20. We should keep in mind, as Kapstein notes, that in its Sanskrit original, this is a difficult passage, and that “not all aspects of its interpretation are entirely secure” (Kapstein, “Scholastic Buddhism and the Mantrayāna”, 238). The Chinese version, for good or ill, is perhaps somewhat clearer.

23 *T* no. 1581, 30: 934a. Xuanzang’s translation of the *Yogacarabhūmi*, in a parallel passage, has *zhou zhangju* 咒章句 (*T* no. 1579, 30: 543a).

24 See, for example, Nattier, *A Few Good Men*, 292 n. 549.

25 Braarvig, “*Dhāraṇī* and Pratibhāna”, 20.

rest of phenomenal reality. The practitioner contemplating its lack of sense is awakened to the fact that this brief string of syllables is not unique in its meaninglessness, for indeed this is the nature of all things. The spell is thus said to be “excellent at liberating” (*shanjie* 善解).²⁶ Contemplating it, one “realizes that the meaning of all words and speech, as well as the inherent nature of all dharmas, is unattainable” (*bukede* 不可得).²⁷ There is a fascinating paradox here: a proper grasp (*Dhāraṇī*) of reality shows it to be ungraspable. This is surely part of the point of the progression of *Dhāraṇī* implied in this scheme. It is one familiar to readers of Buddhist texts: the true grasp is of that which cannot be grasped; the true meaning is that there is no meaning.²⁸

“*Dhāraṇī*” in the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*

In keeping with what I understand to be the main theme of the treatments found in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, I will now seek to explore more deeply the nature of *Dhāraṇī* as spiritual capacity, as well as its close connections with *samādhi* and *kṣānti*. In order to do so – and to root this discussion more securely within the medieval Chinese doctrinal sphere – I turn to the influential normative discussions contained in the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, the *Dazhidu lun* 大智度論, translated, compiled, or perhaps composed, by the famous Kuchaeen translator and exegete

26 The connection between *Dhāraṇī* and *kṣānti* is found in *Dhāraṇī* sūtras as well, though this relationship is not often explicitly accounted for in those texts. For a convenient example, we may take the “Great Vaipulya *Dhāraṇī* Sūtra” (to use Paul Swanson’s translation of the title), the *Da fangdeng tuoluoni jing* 大方等陀羅尼經, translated by Fazhong 法眾 very early in the fifth century. At the beginning of the narrative, as a result of hearing the names of nineteen *Dhāraṇīs*, the bodhisattvas in the audience abide in the “patience [of tolerating the knowledge] that dharmas do not arise 無生法忍 (*anutpattika-dharma-kṣānti*)”. The lesser beings in attendance achieve accordingly lesser spiritual states upon hearing the names (Swanson, “Dandala, *Dhāraṇī*, and Denarii: a T’ien-t’ai perspective on *The Great Vaipulya Dhāraṇī Sūtra*”, *Buddhist Literature* 2, 2000, 206–7). Though the bodhisattvas here are not said to engage in the sort of practice described in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, the two texts create the same parallel relationships between *Dhāraṇī* and *kṣānti* – though the sūtra is closer in spirit to the later understandings of *Dhāraṇī* as powerful utterances, in that simply hearing the words seems to induce the state described.

27 *T* no. 1581, 30: 934a.

28 Zhi Qian’s 支謙 early-third-century translation of the *Anantamukha-dhāraṇī-sūtra* – though a *sūtra* and thus strictly beyond the purview of this article – offers another important (and earlier) version of this practice that sheds light helpfully here. Based on the text, dharani syllable practice was originally (or in this very early text at least) a meditative and ethical practice of meditation upon the meanings of the syllables, engaged in apparently in secluded locales such as mountains and marshlands. The syllables were to be written, thought on, spoken, and “enacted” (*xing* 行). In the text’s account it seems to be *this* practice, not some puissance inherent in the syllables themselves (as in later *Dhāraṇī* texts), that effected the wondrous results advertised for it in the scripture. See *T* no. 19, 1011: 680 ff.

Kumarajiva (344–413) in the early years of the fifth century.²⁹ The prominence of the *Treatise*, along with the two texts just discussed, in modern understandings of the term “*Dhāraṇī*” and its referents is in large part due to the work of the Belgian scholar Étienne Lamotte. His translation of the *Treatise* – which he called *Le traité de la grande vertu de sagesse* – and accompanying discussion of the nature of *Dhāraṇī*, the first part of which was published in 1946, have become the most often-cited work in discussions of the term within the context of Chinese Buddhism.³⁰

We must, however, be careful to keep in mind the context of Lamotte’s original discussion and not generalize too much from his account. His characterization of *Dhāraṇīs* – which is, for the most part, that of Kumarajiva’s *Traité* he translated and commented on – has often been taken to be universally normative for the term and allowed to float free of its conditioning context, rather than seen as inextricably tied to specific lines of the *Scripture of the Great Perfection of Wisdom* upon which it is, by extension, commentary.³¹ These scriptural lines shaped Kumarajiva’s explication of them – his statements about the nature of *Dhāraṇīs* took the form they did because of the assertions on which they were comments. It is crucial to keep this fact in mind.³² Neither these assertions nor their later explications within the text are framed as portable or universally applicable definitions of every form of *Dhāraṇī*, but instead as accounts specific to the case at hand – an idea further supported by the fact that elsewhere in the text different explanations of “*Dhāraṇī*” are given. Indeed, more generally, the tendency to take certain uses of “*Dhāraṇī*” (as well as other important Buddhist terms) as existing independently of particular roles in specific discourses can give a mistaken impression of unity to the complex and varied world of medieval Buddhist writing.

The first significant treatment of “*Dhāraṇī*” within the text deals explicitly with *Dhāraṇī* as a spiritual attainment, or faculty, in line with my discussion above, and it is to that account that I now turn. The line that the *Treatise* comments on here states that “[bodhisattvas] attain *Dhāraṇī*, as

29 Or, as Chou Po-kan has recently argued, by Sengrui, his editor and student (Chou, “The problem of the authorship of the Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa”).

30 The canonical status of his work has more recently been affirmed in Michel Strickmann’s own deeply learned study, *Mantras et mandarins: le bouddhisme tantrique en Chine* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1996), which relies heavily, and rather uncritically, on a partial reading of Lamotte’s discussion of the nature of dhāraṇī.

31 Kumarajiva’s and Sengrui’s own scholastic traditions (on which see Chou, “The problem of the authorship of the Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa”) would also have shaped the text’s account.

32 The elevation of the text’s pronouncements to universal status is an extension of the exalted status the *Treatise* has been accorded in both traditional and modern scholarship. Though the work is in any honest estimation very important indeed, its rather strict purview – both in terms of its subject and its historical moment – is essential to its nature. Thus, it seems to me unhelpful to claim, as one scholar does in a work on Chinese understandings of the concept of *Dhāraṇī* found in doctrinal texts, including the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* and the *Treatise*, that the *Treatise* is “perhaps the single most important document for understanding Buddhism in medieval China” (McBride, “*Dhāraṇī* and spells”, 93). Taking the text to be more than it is obscures, rather than clarifies, its importance as a source.

well as all the samādhis; moving in emptiness, formless and unconditioned, they achieve forbearance”.³³ The commentary, as so often in the *Treatise*, is in the form of a dialogue. A question is posed: “How is it that these three things, in this order, are used to praise the bodhisattva-mahāsattva?” The inquiry, we see, is concerned primarily with the nature of the bodhisattva-mahāsattva, not with the individual natures of each of these three of his qualities as such. In fact, as will become clear below, “*Dhāraṇī*” (and then “samādhi” and “forbearance” in turn) seem mainly to stand in for the wisdom and power of the bodhisattva of a certain level of attainment, not as things detachable from him. They are primarily qualities of the bodhisattva rather than independent free-floating entities like mnemonic codes or spells.

The commentator replies:

Because [the Buddha] wants to put forth the real merits of the bodhisattvas, he must praise what must be praised [so that] others will trust in what must be trusted. Since beings cannot [on their own] trust in the exceedingly profound and pure Dharma, [the Buddha] praises bodhisattvas. Furthermore, although he has spoken the names of the bodhisattva-mahāsattvas, he has not yet spoken of that by means of which they are bodhisattva-mahāsattvas. It is because of their attainment of the merits of *Dhāraṇī*, samādhi, and forbearance that they are named bodhisattva-mahāsattvas.

The question then turns to the nature of each of these three attainments, starting with *Dhāraṇī*. The commentator continues:

Dhāraṇī, in the language of the Qin [that is, the version of Chinese used by the court of the Latter Qin Dynasty], is “able to grasp” (*nengchi* 能持), or alternatively, “able to block” (*nengzhe* 能遮).³⁴ As for being able to grasp, once one has collected all manner of good dharmas, one is able to keep hold of them so that they do not scatter or become lost. It is like an intact vessel: when it is filled with water, the water does not leak out and disperse. As for being able to block, the evil roots that [are wont to be] born in the mind are blocked and not borne. If there is the desire to commit evil deeds, one will take hold and not allow oneself to commit them. This is called “*Dhāraṇī*”. This *Dhāraṇī* either corresponds to the mind or does not correspond to the mind; is either defiled or undefiled. It is formless, invisible, and unhindered; it is contained within one element, within one sense field, within one aggregate ... This is the meaning of “*Dhāraṇī*”. Moreover,

33 *Dazhidu lun*, T no. 1509, 25: 95c. Cf. Étienne Lamotte, *Le Traité de la grande vertu du sage*, vol. I (Louvain, 1946), 317. The translation that follows is my own. I have consulted Lamotte, however. I translate *ren* 忍 here because the Chinese text translates the Sanskrit. The other two terms are transliterated in the original.

34 This is one of the most often-cited definitions of *Dhāraṇī*, within both traditional sources and modern scholarship. For an example of the former, see the *Guanzizai pusa ruyilun zhou kefa* 觀自在菩薩如意輪咒課法, T no. 1952, 46: 983a.

one who becomes a *Dhāraṇī* bodhisattva, due to the power of his memory, is able to keep [in mind] every teaching he hears. What is more, like a chronic fever, this *Dhāraṇī*-dharma will ever accompany the bodhisattva; like a ghost that haunts him, this *Dhāraṇī*-dharma will never part from the bodhisattva; like good and bad habits, this *Dhāraṇī*-dharma will ever follow the bodhisattva. In addition, this *Dhāraṇī* will keep hold of the bodhisattva and not allow him to fall into the two earth pits. This is like the benevolent father who loved his son – when his son was about to fall into a pit he grabbed him and kept him from falling in. Furthermore, when the bodhisattva attains *Dhāraṇī* power, the demon king, his demon horde, and other demons will not be able to move him, harm him, or overcome him. In this way he is like Mount Sumeru, which is not moved when an ordinary worldly blows on it.

The interlocutor then enquires into how many kinds of *Dhāraṇīs* there are. “Many”, replies the commentator, who goes on to elucidate three of them. All three are basically different forms of “grasp”, whether of what one has heard, of the nature of phenomena, or of one’s composure and understanding amid the essenceless flux of phenomenal reality. The text states:

One kind is called the *Dhāraṇī* of retaining what is heard (*wenchi tuoluoni* 聞持陀羅尼). When one attains this *Dhāraṇī*, all speech and every teaching that the ears hear will not be forgotten. This is called the *Dhāraṇī* of retaining what is heard.³⁵ Next there is the *Dhāraṇī* of discriminating awareness (*fenbie zhi tuoluoni* 分別知陀羅尼). He who attains this *Dhāraṇī* is able to distinguish the largeness or smallness, the beauty or ugliness, of all beings and all dharmas. It is as the verse has it:

Elephants, horses, and metals;
Wood, stone, and clothing;
Men, women, and water –

All are different.
All things [of a kind] bear one name
[Although] some are noble and some base.
Attaining this encompassing grasp [Dhāraṇī],³⁶
He can make distinctions.

There is also the *Dhāraṇī* of entering sounds (*ru yinsheng tuoluoni* 入音聲陀羅尼). The bodhisattva who attains this *Dhāraṇī* will feel neither joy nor antipathy upon hearing the sounds of speech. Even if all

35 The Song, Yuan, and Ming versions of the text do not have this sentence, which has 陀鄰尼 for “*Dhāraṇī*”.

36 *Zongchi* 總持, the standard Chinese translation of “*Dhāraṇī*”.

beings were to speak foully and curse him for kalpas numerous as the sands of the Ganges, his heart would not be angered.

“But bodhisattvas are not yet wholly free of the defilements”, the interlocutor objects. “How is it that they can forbear through such abuse for kalpas as numerous as the sands of the Ganges?” The commentator responds:

As was said earlier, it is only because they have attained this *Dhāraṇī* power (*li 力*) that they are able to do so.³⁷ Moreover, although the bodhisattvas have not yet exhausted the defilements, they have great wisdom, sharp faculties, and can think. They rid themselves of angry thoughts by thinking this thought: “If my ear-root [or “auditory faculty”] had not encountered these sounds, to whom would these foul sounds attach?”³⁸ In addition, once the insults are heard, they go away immediately. Without distinctions, who would be angry? The minds of ordinary worldlings attach to me and mine; they distinguish between right and wrong, which then gives rise to hostility and anger. If one can understand that speech arises and disappears of itself and that in it before and after are not connected, then one can be without hostility or anger and understand as well that dharmas have no inner master. Who insults? Who is hostile?

The discussion of the “*Dhāraṇī* of entering sounds” is quite extensive – it dwarfs those of the previous two kinds of *Dhāraṇī*. The author describes the *Dhāraṇī* in terms of a dispassionate abiding in the awareness of no-self and in the clear understanding of the ceaseless arising and passing away of the world of contingent, essenceless phenomena – in short, it is *Dhāraṇī* as forbearance, in which we see once again the close connection between these two ideas. “*Dhāraṇī*”, here, simply refers to the attainment of a higher level of the practical wisdom, or spiritual ability, common to a great range of Buddhist teachings and not something at all unique to *Dhāraṇī per se*. For the bodhisattva who has attained this *Dhāraṇī* – and here the meaning of the term, clearly, is “this *grasp* of the nature of things” – just as there is no reason for rancour over being verbally abused, there is no cause for pleasure at being praised. As the text states:

Moreover, the bodhisattva has insight into the fact that all dharmas are like a dream or an echo. Who praises? Who is happy? I who have not yet attained liberation from the three worlds, who have not yet extinguished the defilements, who have not yet attained the Buddha Way – tell me, how could I then be joyful at the praise I am given? ...

37 The distinction here seems to be between bodhisattvas and bodhisattva-mahāsattvas. The latter are characterized by *Dhāraṇī*, samādhi, and kṣānti. The former have not yet attained these powers.

38 I follow Lamotte’s lead on where to end the quotation (Lamotte, *Le Traité de la grande vertu du sage*, vol. I, 319).

These marks characterize what are named “the *Dhāraṇī* of entering sounds”. Additionally, there are those named “*Dhāraṇī* of Extinction”,³⁹ “*Dhāraṇī* of Limitless Revolutions”,⁴⁰ “*Dhāraṇī* of Contemplation According to Stages”, “*Dhāraṇī* of Mighty Virtue-Power”, “*Dhāraṇī* of the Flower Garland”, “*Dhāraṇī* of Sound and Silence”, “*Dhāraṇī* of the Empty Storehouse”, “*Dhāraṇī* of the Oceanic Storehouse”, “*Dhāraṇī* of Distinguishing All Dharma Stages”, “*Dhāraṇī* of Understanding the Meaning of All Teachings”. This is but a sampling of the five-hundred *Dhāraṇī* gates; were one to discourse on them extensively there would be no end to it. It is on this basis that we say the bodhisattvas all attain *Dhāraṇīs*.⁴¹

The next line of *sūtra* text that the *Treatise* comments on also deals with *Dhāraṇīs*, this time with what is named the “Unimpeded *Dhāraṇī*” (*wu'ai tuoluoni* 無礙陀羅尼), which the bodhisattva is also said to achieve. Here the voice of the interlocutor is given a mildly exasperated tone. “It was said before that the bodhisattva achieves *Dhāraṇīs* – how is it that the text now emphasizes that he achieves the *Unimpeded Dhāraṇī*?” “Because the Unimpeded *Dhāraṇī* is the greatest”, comes the reply. The commentator stresses at this point that not all *Dhāraṇīs* are equal, that there are lesser and greater varieties, and that there is a king among them, the Unimpeded *Dhāraṇī*. “Moreover, though I said before that all bodhisattvas attain *Dhāraṇī*, we do not know which grade of *Dhāraṇī* [they achieve]. There are the petty *Dhāraṇīs* attained by wheel-turning kings, sage kings, and transcendents (*xian* 仙), such as the “*Dhāraṇī* Grasped through Hearing” (*wenchi tuoluoni* 聞持陀羅尼), the “*Dhāraṇī* of Distinguishing among Sentient Beings” (*fenbie zhongsheng tuoluoni* 分別眾生陀羅尼), and the “*Dhāraṇī* of Saving, Protecting, and Not Renouncing Those Who Have Taken Refuge (*guiming jiu hu bushe tuoluoni* 歸命救護不捨陀羅尼)”. These sorts of petty *Dhāraṇīs* are attainable by normal humans, as the author states:

Those of the outer paths, hearers, pratyekabuddhas, or those newly embarked on the bodhisattva path, however, can never attain the Unimpeded *Dhāraṇī*. Only bodhisattvas of unlimited merit, wisdom, and strength can attain this *Dhāraṇī*. It is for this reason that it is given special mention. Moreover, this kind of bodhisattva, whose self-benefit is complete, seeks only to aid others by preaching the dharma and converting them unceasingly. They take the Unimpeded *Dhāraṇī* as their root. Because of this, these bodhisattvas constantly practise the Unimpeded *Dhāraṇī*.⁴²

39 Lamotte (*Le Traité de la grande vertu du sage*, vol. I, 321), no doubt wisely, does not translate the names of these *Dhāraṇīs*. My translations are highly provisional.

40 Lamotte (*Le Traité de la grande vertu du sage*, vol. I, 321) omits the character “revolutions” (*xuan* 旋).

41 *Dazhidu lun* 大智度論, T no. 1509, 25: 95c–96c.

42 *Dazhidu lun*, T no. 1509, 25: 97c.

These examples from three of the major sources on our subject demonstrate the basic contours of early doctrinal discussions of the “grasp” of *Dhāraṇī* as a capacity, or at times an activity, of the bodhisattva. As should be clear now, this material does not support the idea common to Western scholarship that the term refers primarily to memory or to incantations. These are but two parts of the semantic range of the term and should not be privileged in our understanding of its use in Buddhist writings.

Concluding thoughts

“Grasping”, “keeping” and “holding” (Ch. *chi* 持) are crucial ideas in Buddhist practice and thought – not here in the negative sense of “attachment” or “clinging” (usually denoted in Chinese by words such as *zhi* 執, *zhao* 著 and *ai* 愛) but in the sense of the possession, memorization, recitation, or wielding of texts, whether they be incantations or scriptures.⁴³ The Chinese translation of *Dhāraṇī* as “encompassing grasp” (*zongchi* 總持) marks it as part of this larger family of usages. The ideas and practices indicated by these technical uses of the component term *chi* are present at many conceptual depths in the tradition. They are perhaps most commonly found, in Chinese Buddhism, in those behaviours indicated by the notoriously slippery word *shouchi* 受持. As one scholar has pointed out, this word’s range of meanings includes: to receive and keep a text in one’s possession, to receive and memorize a text or teaching, and/or to devote oneself to a text or teaching.⁴⁴ This semantic range is of course partly co-extensive with that of *Dhāraṇī* – not surprisingly, as I say, given that *Dhāraṇī* was translated as *zongchi* 總持, “encompassing grasp”. *Chi* does much the same conceptual work in both words; its presence connects them in a family of notions, a fact that should help us gain a firmer grasp (as it were) of what medieval usages of the term *shouchi* really indicate. Future studies of that term might explore the extent to which the “receiving and keeping” or “upholding” (two of its common translations) of a text implies something more like its *absorption* within the person of the Buddhist in a way that echoes the “grasp” of spiritual ideals displayed in the *Dhāraṇī* of the bodhisattva. For, as I showed above, the deeper ranges covered by this set of concepts are typically the province of *Dhāraṇī*, or *zongchi*, which is after all the “encompassing grasp”. At this level of usage – again, taking *chi* in both cases to be fundamentally the same concept – one holds things in mind, or as part of oneself – whether texts, concepts, or the knack for spells – and one keeps hold of oneself (however paradoxical this turns out to be on the philosophical level), steadily, both in the face of temptation and

43 On *chi* as a term indicating the “wielding” of texts, see Robert Gimello, “Icon and incantation: the Goddess Zhunti and the role of images in the occult Buddhism of China”, in Phyllis Granoff and Koichi Shinohara (eds), *Images in Asian Religions: Texts and Contexts* (Vancouver: UBC Press), 2004, 225–56.

44 For a succinct discussion of this term, see Stephen F. Teiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese Buddhism* (Kuroda Institute Studies in East Asian Buddhism, 9. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 140–41, including note 6.

within the empty non-arising of phenomena, which, as well, one may be said to grasp. One can also take full hold of harmful karmic or psychological attributes in order to remove them. A tenth-century ritual manuscript found at Dunhuang states that one should take an “encompassing grasp (*zongchi*) of polluted blockages and get rid of them. [Thus] will one’s merit be perfected and completed”.⁴⁵ Connections such as the close relationship between *zongchi* and *shouchi* are not simply incidental, they are suggestive of deep metaphorical continuities in the Chinese Buddhist practical imagination.

There is one final permutation in this complex of concepts: *Dhāraṇīs* – and here the doctrinal sense of the term starts to blend with that of “spell” – also held things within them; just as in English a “hold” is also a thing that holds. This understanding of the word seems to have become more prominent in later centuries. The biography of the Indian monk Śubhakarāsīmha (Shanwuwei 善無畏, 637–735) in the *Song Biographies of Eminent Monks* (*Seng gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳) gives a good example of the way that *Dhāraṇīs* were seen in certain Tang traditions (or Tang permutations of contemporary Indic traditions) to encompass all Buddhist teachings and practices within them. “As for the meaning of the ‘Three Treasuries’ (*sanzang* 三藏) [a term indicating both the full range of the written tradition and the monk who has mastered it]: within, they are the precepts (*jie* 戒), concentration (*ding* 定), and wisdom (*hui* 慧) [that is, the ‘Three Trainings’, a metonym for all Buddhist practices and for the structure of the Buddhist path itself]; without, they are scriptures (*jing* 經), monastic codes (*lü* 律), and treatises (*lun* 論) [that is, all Buddhist teachings] – *Dhāraṇīs* utterly encompass them all.”⁴⁶

A last example of the term in a brief text of Tang vintage might help to clarify these matters further, at least as they were understood in Tang Buddhist circles. Huizhong 慧忠 (fl. eighth c.), in his preface to Xuanzang’s 玄奘 (602–644) *Heart Sūtra*,⁴⁷ uses the term *zongchi* in a way that both clarifies issues discussed earlier and further demonstrates that these understandings were not limited to either Indic or early Chinese Buddhist communities, despite what some contemporary scholars seem to imply.⁴⁸ Introducing the text, Huizhong claims “this scripture is like the great earth – is there a creature not born from the earth? All buddhas simply point to the one mind – is there a dharma whose existence is not due to the mind? Indeed, comprehending the mind-ground is called ‘encompassing grasp’ (*zongchi*). The realization that dharmas are unarisen is named ‘wondrous awakening’.”⁴⁹ These statements accord well with certain of the positions expressed in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, and the biography of Śubhakarāsīmha. We can note, in addition, the way that the *Heart Sūtra*, a brief text of only 313 characters, is said to

45 p. 2807, collected in *Quan Tangwen Xinbian* 全唐文新編 (Changchun, China: Jilin wenshi, 2000), 17: 11571.

46 *Song Gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳, T no. 2061, 50: 714c.

47 *Boreboluomiduo xinjing* 般若波羅蜜多心經, T no. 251, 8: 848.

48 See, for example, Nattier, *A Few Good Men*, 292 n. 549.

49 T no. 251, 8: 848c.

be like the “the great earth”, which gives rise to all creatures, a simile that brings out the pith-like, or profoundly synecdochic, character of *Dhāraṇī*, a sense of the term closely related to its basic meaning of “grasp”.

What, then, did “*Dhāraṇī*” mean in these medieval Chinese sources? The texts on which I have drawn in this article, all either translated and important in medieval China or composed there, show the answer to have been present from the beginning. The Sanskrit’s basic meaning of “grasp” or “hold” – understood however in its full and rather dazzling range, from the suggestively profound to the practically simple: grasping the ungraspable nature of reality or holding a spell on one’s person – remained the governing sense of the various cognates of the term in Chinese, both in doctrinal and in practical contexts.