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The Dhāraṇī “Surūpa”

Surūpānāmadhāraṇī

· Toh 1078 ·

Degé Kangyur, vol. 101 (gzungs 'dus, waṃ), folios 240.a–240.b



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s.

SUMMARY

- s.1 This text consists of a short dhāraṇī followed by its application, a food offering made to the pretas (hungry spirits). The text says that by the power of the spell, the offering will be made manifold and there will be many future benefits for the person performing the rite.

ac.

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ac.1 This text was translated and introduced by the Buddhapīṭha Translation Group (Gergely Hidas and Péter-Dániel Szántó).

ac.2 The translation was completed under the patronage and supervision of 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha. Andreas Doctor edited the translation and the introduction, and Dawn Collins copyedited the text. Martina Cotter was in charge of the digital publication process.

i.

INTRODUCTION

i.1

The Dhāraṇī “Surūpa” is a short yet important and popular text. It reveals a dhāraṇī that is to be used while making a food offering to pretas. The ritual is outlined in simple terms. This is followed by a description of the benefits of the spell and the ritual. In addition to many pretas being fed, the performer of the ritual will have a favorable rebirth in Sukhāvatī that culminates in their awakening. As is well known, the realm of the pretas is one of the five or six (and one of the three unfavorable) destinies for rebirth in saṃsāra.¹ Its inhabitants are constantly tortured by hunger and thirst as karmic retribution for being miserly. The depiction of this realm is a popular topic in Buddhist literature and art.² Pretas usually cannot eat proper meals because the food that they see turns into disgusting substances as soon as they reach it, or because they have needle-thin throats. The implication here seems to be that the power of the dhāraṇī removes these difficulties for them.

i.2

We have been unable to find a self-standing transmission of the original Sanskrit text. However, it is preserved in its entirety in no fewer than three Sanskrit manuals for beginner practitioners (Skt. *ādikarmika*, Tib. *las dang po pa*): the *Ādikarmāvatāra* by Mañjukīrti,³ the *Ādikarmapradīpa* by Anupamavajra,⁴ and the *Ādikarmavidhi* by Tatakaragupta.⁵ These texts have not been translated into Tibetan, but the Tibetan canon does preserve a work that is closely related to (and very likely even based on) the aforementioned triad: *The Gradual Path to Awakening* (*byang chub kyi gzhung lam*, **Bodhipaddhati*, Toh 3766), which is attributed to the famous and influential master Abhayākaragupta. This work also incorporates the entire text. Prominent Tibetan masters maintained this tradition. See, for example, the work of Butön (bu ston rin chen grub, 1290–1364), *The Easy Path Leading to Omniscience* (*rnam mkhyen du bgrod pa'i bde lam*). These manuals describe the ritual as a *bali* offering to be performed by bodhisattvas on the early stages of the path.

- i.3 The Tibetan translation is not recorded in the imperial catalogs, and we could not identify any Dunhuang fragments. Because the canonical transmission lacks a translators' colophon, the identity of the translators is unknown. This text is included in both the Action Tantra section (Toh 540) and the Compendium of Dhāraṇīs section (Toh 1078) of the Degé Kangyur, as well as in other Tshalpa-lineage Kangyurs that include such a separate section. Several Tibetan witnesses leave the Sanskrit *surūpa/surūpā* ("beautiful" / "having a beautiful form") element untranslated in the heading but translate it to *gzugs legs* in the colophon. The Sanskrit transmission seems to have "Surūpā" (with a long ending) as a description or name of the dhāraṇī. However, it is also noteworthy that the Indo-Tibetan transmission of the dhāraṇī contains an obeisance to the tathāgata Surūpa, who is otherwise unknown. It is not impossible, therefore, that **Surūpadhāraṇī* (if this was indeed the form, with a short ending in *surūpa*) could also be understood as *The Dhāraṇī of Surūpa*.
- i.4 The Chinese translation, *The Beautiful, A Dhāraṇī-Sūtra Spoken by the Buddha* (佛說妙色陀羅尼經, Taishō 1386) dates from a rather late period, between 989–99 CE, and is the work of Faxian, who worked under the aegis of the Northern Song dynasty's famous Translation Bureau.⁶ Unlike the Sanskrit and Tibetan translations, which are practically identical, two significant differences can be found in the Chinese: (1) there is an introductory section in which the Buddha teaches the spell to Ānanda and a closing section in which Ānanda is delighted to have received the teaching, and (2) the text of the dhāraṇī itself is quite different.
- i.5 This English translation is principally based on the Tibetan translations of the text found in the Tantra Collection (*rgyud 'bum*) and the Compendium of Dhāraṇīs (*gzungs 'dus*) in the Degé Kangyur, in consultation with the Stok Palace Kangyur. We consulted all Sanskrit manuscripts available for the three *ādikarmika* texts previously mentioned and created a constituted text which we include here in an appendix.

The Dhāraṇī “Surūpa”

1.

The Translation

[F.240.a]⁷

1.1 Obeisance to all buddhas and bodhisattvas. [F.240.b]

*namaḥ surūpāya tathāgatāyārhatē samyaksaṃbuddhāya | tadyathā | oṃ suru suru
prasuru prasuru tara tara bhara bhara saṃbhara saṃbhara smara smara saṃtarpaya
saṃtarpaya sarvapretānāṃ svāhā* |⁸

1.2 One should recite this spell seven times over a meal of rice together with water. Then, after having snapped the fingers of the left hand three times, one should offer it in a secluded place to all pretas and say the following: “Off with you, you who seek weak points and are looking for an opportunity!⁹ I hereby donate food to pretas residing in every world system!” One should perform this on an empty stomach. In this way, the pretas will each be given a bushel of rice.

1.3 If one performs it in this way, in each and every rebirth one will never be feeble or poor. Rather, one will possess great might, beauty, a countenance lovely to behold, much wealth, and great enjoyments. One will have a long lifespan, freedom from illness, and will swiftly attain unsurpassed, perfect awakening. When one has died, one will be reborn in the realm of Sukhāvātī.

1.4 *Here ends “The Dhāraṇī ‘Surūpa’.”*

ap.

Appendix

APPENDIX

ap1.1 Constituted text of the Sanskrit based on how it is transmitted in the *ādikarmika* manuals:

*namaḥ surūpāya tathāgatāyārhatē samyaksaṃbuddhāya | tadyathā | om suru suru
prasuru prasuru tara tara bhara bhara saṃbhara saṃbhara smara smara saṃtarpaya
saṃtarpaya sarvapretānāṃ svāhā | anayā dhāraṇyodakasahitaṃ bhaktaṃ sapta
vārāṇ pariṇipya vāmahastenācchaṭātrayaṃ dattvā sarvapretebhyo vivikte pradeśe
dātavyam | evaṃ ca bhāṣitavyam | apasarantv avatāraprekṣiṇo dadāmy ahaṃ
sarvalokadhātuvāsināṃ pretānāṃ āhāraṃ iti | abhuktenaiva kartavyam | evaṃ
sarvapretānāṃ taṇḍuladronabhaktaṃ pratyekaṃ dattaṃ bhavati | evaṃ kurvan na
durbalo bhavati na daridro bhavaty api tu jātau jātau mahābalaḥ prāsādiko darśanīya
ādhyo mahābhogo bhavati dīrghāyur arogī kṣipraṃ cānuttarāṃ samyaksaṃbodhim
abhisambhotsyate | cyutaś ca sukhāvatyāṃ lokadhātāv upapadyate || iti surūpā
nāma dhāraṇī ||*

n.

NOTES

- n.1 See Sadakata 1997, pp. 41–70.
- n.2 The pretas are enjoying renewed scholarly attention; McNicholl 2019 and Rotman 2021 are two recent major works on the subject.
- n.3 Unpublished manuscript, currently being studied by Szántó for a forthcoming publication, *Buddhism for Beginners II: The Mañjukīrti Corpus*. The current location of the manuscript is not known with certainty. It was first seen and identified by Rāhula Sāṅkṛityāyana at Ngor Monastery; see Sāṅkṛityāyana 1935, p. 32. We are reading the text from the photographs kept at the Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, Göttingen, shelf number Xc 14/50; for the catalog entry, see Bandurski 1994, pp. 86–87. Little is known of the author; the manuscript is undated but was most likely copied in Magadha during the eleventh or twelfth century.
- n.4 There are two editions of this text: La Vallée Poussin 1898, based on Royal Asiatic Society, London, MS. Hodgson 69 and Takahashi 1993, based on the previous edition, and Tōkyō University Library MS. new 57, old 349. Takahashi 1992 is a Japanese translation of the entire text. According to the colophon, the author Anupamavajra was active at Vikramaśīla Monastery.
- n.5 Unpublished, incomplete manuscript, currently at National Archives Kathmandu, showcase 3/7, read from the microfilm images of the Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project, reel no. A 1165/7. Little is known of the author; the manuscript is undated but was probably copied in Bengal during the thirteenth century.
- n.6 On the life and career of this Kashmiri scholar, see Orzech 2011, pp. 448–49.

- n.7 In the Toh 540 version of the text there is a slight discrepancy in the folio numbering between the 1737 *par phud* printings and the late (post *par phud*) printings of the Degé Kangyur. Although the discrepancy is irrelevant here, further details concerning this may be found in the Toh 540 (<https://read.84000.co/translation/toh540.html#UT22084-088-035-109>) version of this text.
- n.8 “*om suru suru prasuru prasuru*, cross, cross, bear, bear, collect, collect, remember, remember, gratify, gratify, for all pretas, *svāhā!*”
- n.9 *avatāraprekṣin*. This description usually applies to *bhūtas* or other demons who are constantly on the lookout for weak points, usually caused by a breach of morality, in order to enter and possess a being. It is conceivable that one of the two Tibetan elements was originally a gloss of the other.

b.

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GLOSSARY

· Types of attestation for names and terms of the corresponding · source language

AS	<i>Attested in source text</i> This term is attested in a manuscript used as a source for this translation.
AO	<i>Attested in other text</i> This term is attested in other manuscripts with a parallel or similar context.
AD	<i>Attested in dictionary</i> This term is attested in dictionaries matching Tibetan to the corresponding language.
AA	<i>Approximate attestation</i> The attestation of this name is approximate. It is based on other names where the relationship between the Tibetan and source language is attested in dictionaries or other manuscripts.
RP	<i>Reconstruction from Tibetan phonetic rendering</i> This term is a reconstruction based on the Tibetan phonetic rendering of the term.
RS	<i>Reconstruction from Tibetan semantic rendering</i> This term is a reconstruction based on the semantics of the Tibetan translation.
SU	<i>Source unspecified</i> This term has been supplied from an unspecified source, which most often is a widely trusted dictionary.

g.1 Abhayākaragupta

—
—

abhayākaragupta

An influential scholar active at Vikramaśīla Monastery in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries.

g.2 Anupamavajra

—

—

anupamavajra

Name of a scholar of uncertain dates, active at Vikramaśīla Monastery.

g.3 bali

—

—

bali

A food offering made to a deity or spirits; such an offering may be varied and elaborate, or may be simple uncooked food.

g.4 beginner practitioner

las dang po pa

ལས་དང་པོ་པ།

ādikarmika

g.5 bhūta

'byung po

འབྱུང་པོ།

bhūta

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

This term in its broadest sense can refer to any being, whether human, animal, or nonhuman. However, it is often used to refer to a specific class of nonhuman beings, especially when bhūtas are mentioned alongside rākṣasas, piśācas, or pretas. In common with these other kinds of nonhumans, bhūtas are usually depicted with unattractive and misshapen bodies. Like several other classes of nonhuman beings, bhūtas take spontaneous birth. As their leader is traditionally regarded to be Rudra-Śiva (also known by the name Bhūta), with whom they haunt dangerous and wild places, bhūtas are especially prominent in Śaivism, where large sections of certain tantras concentrate on them.

g.6 bushel

bre bo che

བྲེ་བོ་ཅེ།

drona

A measure of volume.

g.7 dhāraṇī

gzungs

གཟུངས།

dhāraṇī

See “spell.”

g.8 Mañjukīrti

—

—

mañjukīrti

Name of a scholar of uncertain dates, active in Magadha.

g.9 preta

yi dags

ཡི་དགས།

preta

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

One of the five or six classes of sentient beings, into which beings are born as the karmic fruition of past miserliness. As the term in Sanskrit means “the departed,” they are analogous to the ancestral spirits of Vedic tradition, the *pitṛs*, who starve without the offerings of descendants. It is also commonly translated as “hungry ghost” or “starving spirit,” as in the Chinese 餓鬼 *e gui*.

The pretas live in the realm of Yama, the Lord of Death, where they are particularly known to suffer from great hunger and thirst and the inability to acquire sustenance.

g.10 snapped the fingers

se gol

སེ་གོ།

acchaṭā

A courteous way of attracting someone’s attention.

g.11 spell

gzungs

གཟུངས།

dhāraṇī

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

The term *dhāraṇī* has the sense of something that “holds” or “retains,” and so it can refer to the special capacity of practitioners to memorize and recall detailed teachings. It can also refer to a verbal expression of the teachings—an incantation, spell, or mnemonic formula that distills and “holds” essential points of the Dharma and is used by practitioners to attain mundane and supramundane goals. The same term is also used to denote texts that contain such formulas.

g.12 Sukhāvatī

bde ba can

བདེ་བ་ཅན།

sukhāvatī

The buddha realm in which the Buddha Amitābha resides.

g.13 Surūpa

gzugs legs

གཟུགས་ལེགས།

surūpa

Name of a buddha.

g.14 Tatakaragupta

—

—

tatakaragupta

Name of a scholar of uncertain dates, active in Bengal.

g.15 Vikramaśīla

—

—

vikramaśīla

A renowned monastic complex in India.

