

Translating Translation: An Encounter with the Ninth-Century Tibetan Version of the *Kāraṇḍavyūha-sūtra*

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The *Kāraṇḍavyūha-sūtra* is the source for Avalokiteśvara's mantra: *Oṃ maṇi-padme hūṃ*, the most popular mantra in Tibet. This article examines why the sutra itself is little known, the history of its translation, the challenges that faces the translators, and evidence of corruption in the Sanskrit manuscript that was the basis for their translation. Finally there are thoughts on the meaning of Avalokiteśvara's name, the sutra's title, and the mantra itself.

The “84,000 project” plans to place online, over the next twenty-five years, English translations of the entire Kangyur (*bka' gyur*), the corpus of Tibetan translations of works attributed to the Buddha. In an estimated twenty-five years' time, work will start on translations of the Tengyur (*bstan gyur*), the Tibetan translations of Buddhist commentaries and practice texts, some miscellaneous works (such as Kālidāsa's *The Cloud Messenger*), and a few early Tibetan texts, one of which will be mentioned below.

I had a personal interest in translating the *Kāraṇḍavyūha-sūtra*, as it is the source of the mantra *Oṃ maṇipadme hūṃ*, the mantra of bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (Tib. *spyan ras gzigs*). At the age of sixteen, before my encounter with any Buddhist, I had copied out the Tibetan letters of the mantra, its phonetics and purported meaning from the only book on Tibet available in my corner of Wales at the time: *The Third Eye*, written by an Englishman who claimed to have been a Tibetan named Lobsang Rampa who swapped bodies with an Englishman (and conveniently brainwashed himself to forget Tibetan). He went on to write a series of books, including one telepathically dictated to him by his cat.



After such unpromising beginnings and various vicissitudes, I came to live at the Kagyu Samye Ling Centre in Scotland, where in 1978 I spent fifteen hours a day repeating *Om maṇipadme hūṃ* with the late Khenpo Lhamchok (*mkhan po lha mchog*) from East Tibet, who had turned his back on scholasticism and higher Tantric studies to dedicate himself exclusively to the practice of this mantra and turning his huge *Om maṇipadme hūṃ*-filled prayer wheel. We were in the midst of accumulating a hundred million repetitions of the mantra, which with large groups of laypeople in Tibet and India could be accomplished in a month, but took years in Scotland, even with numbers phoned in from all around Europe.

Khenpo Lhamchok taught that one repetition of the mantra prevented rebirth as an animal, two prevented rebirth as a *preta*, and three prevented rebirth in the hells. He even said (through his female interpreter) that even children and women could gain enlightenment by repeating it. If a prayer wheel containing the mantra is placed on the crown of a dying person's head he/she will certainly be reborn in Sukhāvati. Turn such a prayer wheel three times before setting off on a journey and your goals will be accomplished. I helped make a large wooden sign with the mantra on it set next to a pond so that it would reflect on the water, as the mere reflection would cause the fish in the pond to be reborn in Sukhāvati.

The Tibetan tradition teaches that the six syllables of the mantra include all six Buddha families and six wisdoms, cure all six *kleśas* (defilements), and prevent rebirth in the six realms that comprise the phenomenal world.

The most common representation of Avalokiteśvara in Tibet is white, sitting cross-legged and with four arms, two hands together in *añjali mudrā* (palms together), and holding a wish-fulfilling jewel. The other hands hold up a crystal *mālā* (rosary) and a white lotus. A particularly widespread practice of the four-armed Avalokiteśvara is a very brief *sādhana* (practice) by Tangthong Gyalpo (d. 1485), also famous for constructing iron suspension bridges and for being the founding father of Tibetan opera. In this meditation, Avalokiteśvara is visualised above the practitioner's head. The written mantra is arranged as a circle in Avalokiteśvara's heart. As it turns, it radiates light rays that purify all words and all beings, each one becoming an Avalokiteśvara. In conclusion, Avalokiteśvara dissolves into the practitioner and they become inseparable.

A Sūtra in the Shadows

Om maṇipadme hūṃ (pronounced 'Om mani pemé hung' in most parts of Tibet) is ubiquitous in Tibetan religious culture, filling prayer wheels, both hand-held

and gigantic, carved on walls and mountainsides. Tibet is said to be the special field of activity of Avalokiteśvara; such leading lamas as the Dalai Lamas and the Karmapas are regarded as his emanations. It is even said that Tibetan babies speak the mantra spontaneously. The *Kāraṇḍavyūha-sūtra* establishes the pre-eminence of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara even above all Buddhas. We would therefore expect the *sūtra* to be popular in Tibet. However, even the learned lamas I know are unfamiliar with the *sūtra*; some have not even heard of it. One general reason for this is the Tibetan emphasis on native commentarial literature rather than on the Kangyur itself; the latter is normally only read ritually in annual ceremonies. A further reason for the obscurity of the *sūtra* is that the Tibetan Avalokiteśvara meditation practices and explanations of *Oṃ maṇipadme hūṃ* are not to be found in the *sūtra*.

The primary source for Tibetan Avalokiteśvara practices and teachings is not this *sūtra*, but the eleventh-century *Maṇi Kabum* (*maṇi bka' 'bum*), “A Hundred-Thousand Teachings on the Maṇi Mantra,” a compilation of texts “discovered” by three tertöns (*gter ston*) or “treasure revealers” between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. It was claimed to have been composed and concealed by Tibet’s first Buddhist king, the seventh-century Songtsen Gampo (*strong btsan sgampo*), who reigned from 617 to 650, and whom the text portrays as an incarnation of Avalokiteśvara (Tib. *spyān ras gzigs*). It quotes from the *Kāraṇḍavyūha*, but clearly from the ninth-century translation. The *Kāraṇḍavyūha* is primarily known through the quotations chosen by this text, which extol the merit that comes from reciting the mantra. For example, a Buddha states that although he could count the number of raindrops that fall in a year, he cannot calculate the merit that comes from saying the mantra just once. It is assumed that this is Śākyamuni speaking, but most of these quotations are Śākyamuni repeating what he has heard from five of the past six Buddhas. There is no literary evidence, even in the Dunhuang cave libraries, for the popularity of *Oṃ maṇipadme hūṃ* or for the elevated importance of Avalokiteśvara before the eleventh century, when Avalokiteśvara practices were promulgated in a new wave of teachings from India. The Avalokiteśvara texts preserved in the Dunhuang caves use other mantras or *dhāraṇīs*. There is no copy of the *Kāraṇḍavyūha-sūtra* in the collection, even though it had been translated by that time, which indicates its lack of importance, at least in that area. There are, however, two ritual texts that do appear to show the influence of the *Kāraṇḍavyūha*’s six-syllable mantra: one has *Oṃ vajrayakṣamaṇipadme hūṃ* and the other has *Oṃ maṇipadme hūṃ mitra svāhā*.

The *Maṇi Kabum* created a specifically Tibetan version of the Avalokiteśvara myth, but here my focus is on the Tibetan translation of the *sūtra* in the early ninth century. It is a comparatively late translation within that translation project; this too indicates its relative lack of importance at that time, as well as the difficulties involved in translating it.

There are some added difficulties for a Tibetan reader of the *Kāraṇḍavyūha-sūtra*. For example, the author assumed the reader's familiarity with the *Mahābhārata*'s Pāṇḍavas, Kauravas and Khasas, and the story of Viṣṇu's dwarf incarnation as Vāmana, which includes Bali the king of the *asuras*, and his councilor Śukra (who is also the deity of the planet Mercury). The *sūtra* retells this Indian lore in an original manner, but its significance and clarity would be diminished for those unfamiliar with these narratives.

It Came from Inner Space

There is a Tibetan legend that the *sūtra* was one of four inside a precious casket (*kāraṇḍa* can mean casket in Sanskrit; see below) that descended from the sky onto the roof of the palace of the fifth-century ruler of the Yarlung area, King Lhathothori Nyentsen (*lha tho tho ri gnyan btsan*). This first appears in the *Pillar Testament*, where the King's name is given as Lhathothore Nyenshel (*lha tho tho re gnyan shel*). This text was said to have been discovered by Atiśa inside a pillar in 1049, but it exists in various versions dating from the eleventh and twelfth centuries. *The Pillar Testament* states that after the casket's descent from the sky it was revered and treasured, without the contents being understood. When Lhathothori's descendant, Songtsen Gampo, became the ruler of Tibet in the seventh century and became a convert to Buddhism, Thönmi Sambhota (Thon mi sam bhota) invented the Tibetan alphabet and translated the texts contained in the casket, including the *Kāraṇḍavyūha*. However, there is no historical evidence for the existence of Thönmi Sambhota, let alone of this translation.

A more mundane account by the thirteenth-century Nel-pa paṇḍita describes the texts being given to Lhathothori Nyentsen by a paṇḍita from India, who then continues on his way to China. This and other accounts state that one of the treasured writings was the six-syllable mantra, written in gold, but do not list the *Kāraṇḍavyūha-sūtra* as being present. The Tibetan word for Lhathothori's casket is *za ma thog*, so any *sūtra* it contained could be described as a *za ma thog gi mdo*, which could be one reason why the *Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra* became associated with that legend. The presence of the mantra alone would still suggest that the *sūtra*

dates to before the fifth century, but that assumes the historical reliability of these accounts written six hundred years later.

Lokesh Chandra, in his introduction to his edition of the *sūtra*, records a tradition that Upagupta taught the text to King Aśoka in the second century BCE, though this is analogous to saying Shakespeare read *Oliver Twist*. He also states that it was translated by Dharmarakṣa of Dunhuang into Chinese in 270 CE, and again by Guṇabhadra between 435 and 443 CE. However, as Studholme points out, those were translations of the *Ratnakaraṇḍavyūhasūtra*, a very different text. The only known translation into Chinese is that by T'ien Hsi-tsai in 983, which is also late in terms of the importance of Avalokiteśvara in Chinese Buddhism, and is indicative of the *sūtra*'s marginal importance even for that tradition.

The manuscript fragments discovered in the Gilgit *stūpa* are not later than the seventh century, and are less Sanskritized than the surviving Sanskrit versions of the *sūtra*, the earliest of which dates to the beginning of the second millennium. Adhelheid Mette, who has published these fragments, suggests that it was composed in the fourth or fifth centuries. The Tibetan version tends to correspond with the earliest of the Cambridge manuscripts rather than the readily accessible Vaidya edition of the twentieth century.

The *sūtra* evolved eventually into a longer form in verse, entitled *Guṇakāraṇḍavyūha*, one of the last Buddhist *sūtras* to be written in Sanskrit. The early Gilgit version has an even longer title: *Avalokiteśvara-guṇa-kāraṇḍavyūha*. Tuladhar Douglas has established that the *Guṇakāraṇḍavyūha* was written in fifteenth-century Nepal. It incorporates passages from texts such as the *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra*, and is “bookended” by yet another layer of narrative added to what was already a complex story-within-story structure.

The *Kāraṇḍavyūha-sūtra* was evidently composed at a time when and in an area of India where the *purāṇas* of Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism were well established, for the *sūtra* both reacted against and absorbed those traditions.

As to geographical reference points that the reader is assumed to be familiar with: Varāṇasi plays an important role and its sewer is mentioned on two occasions, so that it must have made a vivid impression on the author. Magadha would have been known well known from accounts of the Buddha's life. Candradvīpa, is not mentioned in any other sutra, though it appears later in tantras. This is a location in the Ganges delta or south Bengal. Finally, Siṃhala, which is Śrīlaṅka, is clearly a distant land portrayed as an island inhabited by *rākṣasīs* (demonesses who could take on the form of beautiful ladies but then eat their lovers). Siṃhala

is often portrayed as the land of the *rākṃhals* in Buddhist literature, such as the *Lain Buddhist lit*, and also in general Indian literature, such as the *Rāmāyaṇa*, though the males of this species are all curiously absent in the *Kārae all cursūtra*.

What Avalokiteśvara Did Next; A summary of the *sūtra*'s contents.

Śākyamuni describes to Bodhisattva Sarvanīvaraṇaviṣkambhin that Avalokiteśvara has just visited the Avīci hell, freeing the beings there, followed by a visit to the “city of the *pretas*”. *Pretas* (the departed) are a category of ghosts who are forever tormented by hunger and thirst.)

He then describes Buddha Vipāśyin describing how Śiva, Viṣṇu, Agni, Sarasvatī, the deities of the sun, moon and so on, were all manifested from different parts of Avalokiteśvara's body; this mirrors the Brahmanical account of the creation of the universe from Brahmā. Avalokiteśvara then warns the newly created Śiva how beings in the future will think that he is the creator instead, and he even recites one of the Śaivite verses about Śiva's *liṅga* (phallus) that he prophesies will gain currency. It is an almost exact reproduction of a verse in the *Skandapurāṇa*, which Studholme describes as a major influence on the *sūtra*.

Śākyamuni then describes Buddha Śikhin describing Avalokiteśvara's qualities to bodhisattva Ratnapāṇi, and Avalokiteśvara comes from Sukhāvātī to see Śikhin with an offering of lotuses from Amitābha.

Śākyamuni then describes Buddha Viśvabhū, in a previous Jetavana Monastery, describing to bodhisattva Gaganagaṇja how Avalokiteśvara visited the land of gold inhabited by upside-down beings, the land of silver inhabited by four-legged beings, and the iron land of the *asuras*, where Bali describes to Avalokiteśvara, in yet another narrative within a narrative, how Viṣṇu's deception resulted in his banishment to the underworld. Viśvabhū then describes Avalokiteśvara visiting the land of darkness inhabited by *yakṃbis* and *rākandās*; then manifesting as a Brahmin in the highest paradise, the Śuddhāvāsa realm, where he fills a poor deity's empty palace with wealth; then going to Siṃhala as a handsome man who marries all the *rākṣasīs* and converts them from cannibalism; then becoming a bee that buzzes homage to the three jewels over a sewer in Varanasi, thus liberating all the insects within it; and then going to Magadha, where he invisibly causes a rain of food and drink to fall on people in the wilderness who have been resorting to eating each others' flesh for the previous twenty years.

Then Avalokiteśvara arrives at Viśvabhū's Jetavana Monastery and bodhisattva Gaganagaṇja meets him. As each Buddha's name is only given when they are first

introduced into the narrative and they are thereafter referred to only as Bhagavan, as is Śākyamuni too, it is easy to lose track of which Buddha is relating the narrative we are reading.

Śākyamuni then recounts his previous life as a merchant and being rescued from the cannibalistic *rākṣasīs* of Siṃhala (had they relapsed?) by Avalokiteśvara in the form of a flying horse.

Śākyamuni then starts to describe to Bodhisattva Sarvanīvaraṇaviṣkambhin the landscape and inhabitants in each of Avalokiteśvara's pores. However, there will prove to be only ten of them. But the description abruptly stops and is later recommenced, interrupted by the insertion of a narrative that concerns the climax of the *sūtra*: obtaining the *Oṃ maṇipadme hūṃ mahāvidyā*. While *vidyā* is basically a Sanskrit word for “knowledge”, and in later tantras meant a consort, in this context it is virtually a synonym of mantra and means “spell” and “incantation”, so *mahāvidyā* is “great incantation”.

Śākyamuni says that he visited trillions of Buddhas in search of the six-syllable mantra, or as the *sūtra* refers to it, the *mahāvidyā*. Eventually he met Buddha Padmottama, who had also searched through trillions of Buddha realms until he came to Amitābha, who instructed Avalokiteśvara to give the *mahāvidyā* to Padmottama. Avalokiteśvara in doing so creates a *maṇḍala* from precious powders. These diagrams that represent the palaces of a deity and its environs became a well-known feature of Buddhist tantra. They represent the palace seen from above, without its roof, and the doors and walls laid out flat. In this *sūtra*, the *maṇḍala* is simple compared to those of the tantras. The four maharajas that guard the four directions stand guard in the doorways. Inside, Amitābha is in the center of the palace with a bodhisattva Maṇidhara on his right, and a four-armed goddess named Śaḍakṣarī Mahāvidyā (*yi ge drug pa'i rig sngags chen mo*; “the six syllable great *vidyā*”) on his left. The only other figure is a vidyādhara making offerings beneath the goddess. The vidyādharas were beings with magical powers and spells. Therefore the names of all three deities in addition to Amitābha relate to the *mahāvidyā*. However, we see here the personification of the *mahāvidyā* as a four-armed goddess. because not only is *mahāvidyā* a feminine noun, but the *sūtra* also frequently refers to it as “the Queen of *mahāvidyās*” (*mahāvidyārājñī*; *rig sngags chen mo'i rgyal mo*). She is described as white, with four arms, her extra arms holding a lotus and a rosary of jewels. This is evidently the origin of the later four-armed version of Avalokiteśvara.

Śākyamuni then tells Sarvanīvaraṇaviṣkambhin that presently the only person

who possesses the *mahāvidyā* is an incontinent *dharmabhāṇcon* (*dharmabhāṇaka*) in Varāṇasi. A *dharmabhāṇaka* had an important role in the purely oral transmission of Buddhism in its first centuries. They preserved lengthy teachings in their memory and recited them. In this case he has the *mahāvidyā* secretly memorized. He has lost his vows, but still wears his robes, soiled with feces and urine, and he has a wife and children, but nevertheless Sarvanīvaraṇaviṣkambhin should regard him as being equal to all the Buddhas. Sarvanīvaraṇaviṣkambhin goes to Varāṇasi, obtains it, and returns to the Buddha Śākyamuni. Śākyamuni abruptly continues with the description of Avalokiteśvara's pores, concluding with an ocean that comes from his big toe, reminiscent of the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*'s description of the origin of the Ganges.

Avalokiteśvara then arrives from Sukhāvati with an offering of lotuses to Śākyamuni from Amitābha. Śiva and his consort Umādevī arrive to receive from the Buddha prophecies of their Buddhahood. However, the Buddha sends them to Avalokiteśvara to receive them, another demonstration of Avalokiteśvara's superiority to all Buddhas.

Śākyamuni describes witnessing a *samādhi* competition between Avalokiteśvara and Bodhisattva Samantabhadra during the time of Buddha Krakucchanda (which Avalokiteśvara of course wins), even though earlier Śākyamuni had described Avalokiteśvara as imperceivable and stated that Samantabhadra had spent twelve years in search of one of Avalokiteśvara's pores and failed to see them.

Avalokiteśvara then departs in what reads like a natural conclusion to the *sūtra*, but it is followed by what is evidently another addition. Śākyamuni prophecies to Ānanda that there will be monks in the future with bad conduct and that they should be expelled. However, the description is peculiarly similar to that of the *dharmabhāimil* who was the only human to possess the *oṃ maṇipadme hūṃ mahāvidyā!* The Buddha also describes with apparent relish all the sufferings in hells that will come to those who appropriate or use monastic property; this reads like a list of complaints about the activities of lay people when this part of the *sūtra* was composed.

An impossible task fulfilled

The Tibetan translator of the *Kāraṇḍavyūha* was Yeshe Dé (*Ye-shes sDe*), the principal Tibetan in the translation program of the late eighth and early ninth centuries, which was begun by King Trisong Detsen (*Khri srong lde btsan*, reigned 742-798).

Yeshe De's name is on no less than 347 texts in the Kangyur and the Tengyur (*bstan 'gyur*), three of which are his own original works in Tibetan.

He worked on this *sūtra* with two Indian paṇḍitas. One of these was Jinamitra, who is listed as the translator of 234 texts. He had come to Tibet in the reign of Trisong Detsen.

The other Indian was Dānaśīla, also known as Mālava, who came to Tibet much later, in the reign of Ralpachen (*ral pa can*, r. 815-838). Dānaśīla has his name on 167 texts. He is also listed as the author of seven of these, five of which he translated himself, one of which curiously is a text of divination based on the croaks of crows. Of the remaining two texts he authored, Jinamitra translated one, while Rinchen Zangpo (*rin chen bzang po*, 958–1055), the prolific translator of a later generation, translated the other. Dānaśīla was from Kashmir. The earliest manuscripts of the *sūtra* were discovered in a *stūpa* in Gilgit, which is Kashmir's immediate neighbor to the north. Studholme believes that this fact, together with the strong Śaivite influence on the *sūtra*, suggests that it originated in Kashmir. Although there is no concrete evidence for this, its translation only after the arrival of Dānaśīla in Tibet at least does not contradict that hypothesis.

Jinamitra and Dānaśīla, together with a few other Indian scholars, compiled the great Tibetan-Sanskrit concordance entitled *Mahāvvyutpatti*, which was the fruit of decades of work on translation.

The *Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra* is listed in the catalogue of the collection in the Tang-tong Denkar Palace (*pho brang thang stong ldan dkar*), which was compiled in 824, and therefore we can date the translation to some time between 815, the beginning of Ralpachen's reign, and 824.

The translation work took place in a building dedicated to the translation project, which was situated within the circular compound of Samye (*bsam yas*) Monastery, Tibet's first monastery. Yeshe Dé appears to have died during Ralpachen's reign and his remains are said to be interred within a *stūpa* on the hill neighbouring the monastery.

The translators had to resort to the transcription of Sanskrit in the lists of flora and fauna that appear in the text, there being no obvious Tibetan equivalents, although even *tarakṣa* was simply transcribed, in spite of there being wolves in Tibet. Apart from the challenging vocabulary there were difficulties that arose from the *sūtra* itself and from errors in the manuscript that the Tibetan translation was made from.

The *sūtra*'s narratives are not always clear, and seem compressed from their original sources. Some of the first person narratives within the *Kāraṇḍavyūha-sūtra* retain egregious signs of their original third person form. For example, in the Buddha's account of his previous life as a merchant on the island of the *rākṣasīs*, as he sets out from his house one night the account is suddenly in the third person, and after his walking all around an iron building (*samantena parikramati*), and climbing a tree, it reverts back to first person (*anuvicaran tvarita āgacchāmi*). These grammatical anomalies tend to be cleaned up in the Tibetan translation, though not in Bali's long story of his unfortunate encounter with Viṣṇu, which is mostly in the third person.

I shall give here a few interesting instances of when the translators were at the mercy of a corrupt text.

In one of Avalokiteśvara's pores there are mountains, each made of a precious substance, and the Tibetan lists diamond, silver, gold, crystal, red lotuses and sapphire. The mountain of red lotuses is obviously anomalous, if charming. The Sanskrit in all present editions has *padmarāga*, ruby, which is usually simply transliterated into Tibetan. It seems that here and in three other places in the text, *padmarāga* was incorrectly copied, or misread, as *padmarakta*, though it would have been a highly suspect strange word.

A more serious corruption is where *adrṣṭa-maṇḍala* (an unseen *maṇḍala*) lost a syllable to become *aṣṭa-maṇḍala* (eight *maṇḍalas*), and this was compounded by the omission of the negative, so that *adrṣṭamaṇḍalasya na dātavyāṃ* seems to have become *aṣṭamaṇḍalasya dātavyāṃ*. In the Sanskrit, Avalokiteśvara is stating that there must be a visible *maṇḍala*, for otherwise the recipient will not see and learn the portrayed *mudras*, or hand gestures, of the deities. The Tibetan instead has Avalokiteśvara announcing that he is going to make eight *maṇḍalas* to transmit the *mahāvidyā*, even though he then describes just the one.

More confusing yet is where *ayaṃ* ("this (masculine)") was corrupted to *ahaṃ* ("I") in the middle of the Buddha's description of how Avalokiteśvara is unperceivable, with *ayaṃ māyāvī asādhyah sūkṣma evaṃ anudṛśyate* becoming *ahaṃ māyāvī asādhyah sūkṣma evaṃ anudṛśyate*, so that briefly the Buddha is describing himself!

The most interesting mistranslation is perfectly understandable, and has been the topic of papers by Régamey and Lienhard. It is in the context of the story of the flying horse that rescues merchants from Siṃhala. the land of the *rākṣasīs*, where shipwrecked merchants had unsuspectingly set up home with them, not

suspecting that they would eventually be their wives' meals. Naomi Appleton has studied various retellings of this story, which first appears in the *Jātakas*, where the Buddha is the flying horse and the 250 merchants who realize the deception and leave on his back eventually become 250 pupils of the Buddha (another 250 merchants who remained with their wives were eaten up). The *Kāraṇḍavyūha-sūtra*'s particular version is in accord with its promotion of the supremacy of Avalokiteśvara above all Buddhas. Here the previous life of the Buddha is not as the rescuing horse but as the head merchant who is in need of rescue, having been duped by his *rākṣasī* wife, and Avalokiteśvara has appeared as the flying horse that saves him. In this case, however, all the other merchants make the mistake of looking back as their wives call out to them, so that they fall off the horse and are immediately devoured.

The interesting part, in terms of the difficulties of translation, is in the description of how the head merchant discovers that his wife and the other women are *rākrifīs*. In Tibetan it is his own wife who informs on herself and the other women while she is asleep. The merchant is astonished to see her laughing in her sleep, as he has never seen such a thing before, and asks her why she's laughing. She then tells him that all the women are *rākṣasīs* and are going to eat the merchants, and if he does not believe her to take a road south (though the Tibetan always translates *dakṣiṇa* in the *sūtra* literally, as "on the right") to see where a previous group of merchants are locked up and being eaten. He does so (this being the point in the narrative where he climbs the tree in the third person and sees the unfortunate prisoners over the wall), and when he returns to his house, she asks him if he now believes her. When he says he does, she tells him where to find the flying horse and how to escape on it. He then climbs into bed and his wife suspiciously asks why he is cold. He says he went outside to defecate and urinate, and for the rest of the stay until his escape he has to keep his plan secret from her.

There is something a little odd about this story, and it hinges on one word: *ratikara*. An *apsaras* (celestial nymph) listed amongst the audience for the Buddha's teaching at the beginning of the *sūtra*, is named *Ratīkarā*, obviously a feminine noun, which could be rendered as "giver of (erotic) pleasure." In the merchant's story, however, it is a masculine noun, and this form appears not to occur anywhere in Sanskrit literature other than in this *sūtra*. The Sanskrit does not mention any sleeping going on while the laughing occurs, but the Tibetan addition of sleeping was presumably the only way to make sense of the passage where the paramour of the "giver of pleasure" is betraying herself.

In the *Guṇakāraṇḍavyūha*, which is the later, extended Nepalese version, *raticara* has been replaced by *dvīpa*. Now it makes sense, unusual though that sense may be. The merchant's astonishment is at seeing a lamp laugh, and it is the talking lamp that exposes the true nature of his wife and tells him how to escape. This makes narrative sense, in terms of the merchant's astonishment and particularly as the *rake cus* are all talked about in the third person. The *Kāraṇḍavyūha-sūtra* gives no explanation for the sudden appearance of this strange lamp, which is characteristic of its crude narrative style, but the *Guṇakāraṇḍavyūha* identifies the lamp as also being an emanation of Avalokiteśvara. It could, however, be argued that this clearer version is also a way of rationalizing the *sūtra*'s confusing narrative.

The mysterious name

The *sūtra* describes Avalokiteśvara as having qualities that no Buddha, let alone any other bodhisattva, possesses. His "name", his *mahāvidyā*, is a secret sought by Buddhas in many realms and eons without success. Yet paradoxically Avalokiteśvara still has the status of being Amitābha's emissary to the Buddha, bringing with him the gift of a lotus flower, as is standard for the role of a bodhisattva in earlier *sūtras*. Perhaps the earliest example of bodhisattvas as emissaries from the Buddhas in other realms is found in the *Lalitavistara*, though this predates the appearance of the *Sukhāvativyūha-sūtra*, so that Avalokiteśvara as a messenger from Amitāyus (the commoner early name for Amitābha) is strikingly absent.

Avalokiteśvara first appears prominently as one of two bodhisattva attendants to Amitāyus in the *Sukhāvativyūha-sūtra*. Avalokiteśvara was translated into Tibetan as *spyān ras gzigs*, "seeing eyes". The Chinese *Kuan-yin* is derived from a variant in Sanskrit: *Avalokitasvara*, where *svara* means "sound", which was therefore glossed as "one who perceives the sounds [of the prayers of the faithful]," amongst other interpretations. In the Chinese tradition Avalokiteśvara eventually became worshipped in female form, because of the identification of Princess Miao-chan as his emanation.

But even for a bodhisattva this is a curious name: *avalokita* is a past passive participle, meaning "seen"; but in that case what could "Lord of the Seen" mean? It has been glossed as "one who is looking upon all beings with compassion", but another approach is to consider what it would have meant to Buddhists in the beginning of the first millennium, particularly within the Mahāsaṅghika tradition, which was particularly fertile ground for the appearance of what became

known as Mahāyāna sūtras. Two of the principal Mahāsaṅghika sūtras, within its Lokottaravādin tradition, were the *Avalokita Sūtras*. They are contained within the Mahāvastu and were not translated into Tibetan. They are sometimes referred to as proto-Mahāyāna sūtras. In the *Avalokita Sūtras*, *avalokita* does not refer to a being, but means that which has been seen by those who have crossed over *saṃsāra*, and is therefore a synonym for enlightenment. Therefore for a Lokottaravādin, whatever the actual etymological origin of the name may be, it would inescapably have had the resonance of meaning “Lord of Enlightenment”.

The rise of a bodhisattva to a paradoxical supremacy over the Buddhas resulted from the need for a divine figure who could be prayed to and who would respond by interceding in the difficulties of one’s life. The Buddha of early Buddhism has entered the quietude of nirvana, leaving us to do for ourselves the salvific work that he has explained. Brahmanical deities could not fulfill the role of a saviour, one who could bring liberation through his blessing, and the only kind of Buddhist figure who could be promoted to such a role was the bodhisattva.

But why did Avalokiteśvara rise to such prominence above all other bodhisattvas? Following the *Sukhāvatīvyūha-sūtra*, where Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta appear as the two bodhisattvas on either side of Amitāyus, sūtras, such as the *prajñāpāramitā sūtras* have Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta amongst the Buddha’s audience as a pair. They are both given individual prominence in the additional chapters of the *Lotus Sūtra*, but in the *Kāraṇḍavyūha* Mahāsthāmaprāpta is alone in the audience, presumably listening along with the others to a description of the supremacy of Avalokiteśvara’s qualities and awaiting the rare opportunity to see him. In the Tibetan tradition Mahāsthāmaprāpta even became conflated with and eclipsed by Vajrapāṇi.

One crucial reason for Avalokiteśvara’s initial rise in prominence could simply be his unusual name: in the Buddhist response to and assimilation of Śiva, this bodhisattva’s name mirrored Śiva’s common epithet of Īśvara (Lord). Lokeśvara (Lord of the World) became another name commonly used for Avalokiteśvara. Moreover, Studholme has pointed out that the six-syllable mantra of Avalokiteśvara was a response to Śiva’s five-syllable mantra in the *Skanda Purāṇa*. The reaction to the cult of Śiva by appropriating his qualities into a bodhisattva is evident in Avalokiteśvara’s displacement of Śiva’s role as a creator in the sūtra, and is explicit in such texts as the *sādhana* of “Avalokiteśvara with a blue throat”, the blue throat being a characteristic of Śiva; he acquired it when he drank the powerful poison that formed at the creation of the world.

Towards the end of the first millennium, there was an even more explicit Buddhist mirroring of Śiva with the appearance of Cakrasaṃvara, the deity who took possession of Śiva's body, retinue and sacred sites.

The mysterious title

A *karaṇḍa* (without the long *a*) is usually a basket made of reeds, river reeds being the most suitable material for making baskets. A *karaṇḍa* is frequently shown in the background of portraits of Indian *siddhas* as a basket containing their collections of scriptures. *Siddhas* are also portrayed as making a hand gesture representing the basket: a *karaṇḍa-mudrā*. There is even a layperson's hairstyle named *karaṇḍa-makuṭa*: the hair is arranged on top of the head in the shape of a tall rounded basket. Another word for basket is *piṭaka*, the most common metaphor for the Buddha's teachings: they are described as "the three baskets" or *tripiṭaka*, which contain the *vinaya*, the *sūtras* and the *abhidharma* or its predecessor the *mātrkā*.

However, *kaṛanda* is also used for something more solid than reeds. In the *Kāraṇḍavyūha-sūtra* the word *karaṇḍa* is only used for the container in which beings in hell are crammed together and boiled like beans, which bursts open and frees the beings when Avalokiteśvara arrives there. The Tibetan translates both *karaṇḍa* and *kāraṇḍa* as *za ma tog*, which in present times is generally used for a solid box for carrying food in, and we have seen that King Lhathothori was described as receiving the divine gift of texts in a *rin chen za ma tog*, which would therefore be a precious box or casket.

In the title of the *sūtra*, however, *Kāraṇḍa* has a long *a*, and that word is most commonly used for a duck that lives amongst river reeds, though the *sūtra*'s title is unlikely to mean "A Display of Ducks". In terms of Sanskrit grammar, it appears to be a *vṛddhi* form that would indicate origin. The reeds themselves are never called *karaṇḍa*. Perhaps, if the long *a* has any grammatical significance, it means that this display of Avalokiteśvara's qualities has come from the casket that contains this description.

The word *vyūha* in the title follows the example of such *sūtras* as *Sukhāvatī-vyūha* and *Gandavyūha*. *Vyūha* can mean array, display, presentation and description, and is used in the *sūtra* itself to mean a chapter. Studholme points out that in the Vaishnavite tradition it is used to mean Viṣṇu's emanations. The later Nepalese version's longer title *Avalokiteśvara-guṇa-kāraṇḍa-vyūha* is more meaningful and could be translated as *The display from the basket of the quali-*

ties of Avalokiteśvara, or *The display of the baskets (or caskets) of the qualities of Avalokiteśvara*, as when Tuladhar-Douglas takes *kāraṇḍa* to be a plural and mean “reliquaries”.

The mysterious mantra

The climax of the *sūtra* is the revelation of the Queen of *mahāvidyās*: *Om maṇi-padme hūṃ*. The narrative of the *sūtra* is clumsy, for the Buddha states that no one anywhere, not even any Buddha, knows it, but abruptly this description changes to the merits of those rare people who do know it.

As described above, Sarvanīvaraṇaviṣkambhin obtains the *mahāvidyā* from the only person in the world who possesses it. (Though one assumes from the preceding narrative that Śākyamuni has it, he does not act as if he does.) This individual, a lapsed monk with a family, who was nevertheless respected for his esoteric knowledge, was presumably a type of person who existed at the time of the *sūtra*’s composition. A similar description occurs at the end of the *sūtra*, as a prophecy, condemning such lapsed monks with families living in temples.

The mantra itself has been subject to various interpretations and Lopez has given a delightful history of them.

The earliest interpretations in the west, as in the venerable Lobsang Rampā’s strange book, was that *maṇi* and *padme* did not form a compound and *padme* was the masculine locative, with the result that it meant “Jewel in the Lotus”. But as has been pointed out by Martin and others, masculine nouns have female vocative endings in mantras. Maṇipadma is here, as frequently described in the *sūtra*, Avalokiteśvara’s name: “Jewel-Lotus.”

Verhagen has even supplied us with a translation of one of the few indigenous Tibetan texts in the *bstan-gyur*, a grammar text entitled *sgra’i rnam par dbye ba bstan pa*, “A teaching on the cases”, which uses this very mantra as an example for the vocative ending in *-e*. Nevertheless, this still puzzles commentators. How can a male noun end up with a feminine ending? One obvious answer to this conundrum is that this is hybrid Sanskrit, in other words a Sanskritized middle-Indic. In Māgadhi Prakrit the masculine nominative and vocative singular ending was *-e*. There are still a few traces of this *-e* ending found in Pali, which otherwise has the northwestern Middle-Indic ending *-o*. However this argument is countered by the *-e* ending being rare in Buddhist hybrid Sanskrit texts. However Signe Cohen has pointed out the unreliability of the printed editions of these texts, for their editors frequently “corrected” the *-e* ending to *-o*, and that the *-e* ending, which

has been considered as confined to the north-east, was also widespread in the north-west. She also points out that when we look at Tocharian loan-words from Sanskrit, indicating what kind of Buddhist Sanskrit the inhabitants of Turkestan were familiar with, “masculine personal names and other masculine *-a* stems signifying a person invariably end in *-e* in Tocharian B: *upadhyāye*, *brāhmaṇe*, and *bodhisatve* for *upadhyāya*, *brāhmaṇa*, and *bodhisatva*.”

My translation, with its various demerits, of this unusual, obscure, but significant *sūtra*, will appear on the 84000 website, so that anyone interested can read for themselves the unexpected source of *om maṇi padme hūṃ*. Whether that will inspire people to recite it more or less often remains to be seen.

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