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

Peter Alan Roberts

The Kāraṇḍavyūha-sūtra is the source for Avalokiteśvara’s mantra: Oṃ mani-pādi me hūm, 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”¹ 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 mani-pādi me hūm, 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

¹http://84000.co

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 \textit{Oṃ manipadme hūṃ} with the late Khenpo Lhamchok (\textit{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 \textit{Oṃ manipadme 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 \textit{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 Sukhāvatī. 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 Sukhāvatī.

The Tibetan tradition teaches that the six syllables of the mantra include all six Buddha families and six wisdoms, cure all six \textit{kleśa}s (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 \textit{añjali mudrā} (palms together), and holding a wish-fulfilling jewel. The other hands hold up a crystal \textit{mālā} (rosary) and a white lotus. A particularly widespread practice of the four-armed Avalokiteśvara is a very brief \textit{sādhana} (practice) by Tangthong Gyalpo\textsuperscript{2} (d. 1485), also famous for constructing iron suspension bridges\textsuperscript{3} and for being the founding father of Tibetan opera.\textsuperscript{4} In this meditation, Avalokiteśvara is visualised above the practitioner’s head. The written mantra is arranged as a circle in


\textsuperscript{3}Gerner, Manfred. \textit{Chaksampa Thangtong Gyalpo – Architect, Philosopher and Iron Chain Bridge Builder} (Thimphu: Center for Bhutan Studies, 2007).

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

Oṃ maṇi padme 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 (srong btsan sgam po), who reigned from 617 to 650, and whom the text portrays as an incarnation of Avalokiteśvara (Tib. spyan 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 Avalokiteś-
vara 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 vajrayakṣamanipadme hūṃ and the other has Oṃ mahāyanipadme hūṃ mitra svāhā.5

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.6

6Bka’ chems ka khol ma [The Pillar Testament]. (Gansu, China: Kan su’i mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1989), 95-6.
When Lhathothori’s descendant, Songtsen Gampo, became the ruler of Tibet in the seventh century and became a convert to Buddhism, Thönmí Sambhota (Thönmí 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 Thönmí Sambhota, let alone of this translation.

A more mundane account by the thirteenth-century Nel-pa paññita describes the texts being given to Lhathothori Nyentsen by a paññita 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.

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7Ibid., 107-8.
The śūtra evolved eventually into a longer form in verse, entitled Guṇakāraṇḍavyūha, one of the last Buddhist śūtras to be written in Sanskrit. The early Gilgit version has an even longer title: Avalokiteśvara-guṇa-kāraṇḍa-vyūha. 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 Vaishnavism 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: Varanasi 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, Śimhala, which is Śrilanka, 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). Simhala is often portrayed as the land of the rākṣasīs 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 Kāraṇḍavyūha-sūtra.

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

Śākyamuni describes to Bodhisattva Sarvanīvaraṇaviśkambhin 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 Vipaśyin describing how Śiva, Višṇu, 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 īśīga (phallus) that he prophesies will

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gain currency. It is an almost exact reproduction of a verse in the *Skandapurāṇa*, which Studholme describes as a major influence on the *sūtra*.11

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

Śākyamuni then describes Buddha Viśvabhū, in a previous Jetavana Monastery, describing to bodhisattva Gaganagañja 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 yakṣis and rākṣasīs; 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 Simhala 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 Gaganagañja 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 Simhala (had they relapsed?) by Avalokiteśvara in the form of a flying horse.

Śākyamuni then starts to describe to Bodhisattva Sarvanīvaranāvīskambhin 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 *Om 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”.

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11Studholme, 19.
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 sutra, 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 Śaḍaksarī 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 Sarvanivaraṇaviśkambhin that presently the only person who possesses the mahāvidyā is an incontinent dharmabhāṇcon (dharmabhāṇaka) in Varanasi. 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 Sarvanivaraṇaviśkambhin should regard him as being equal to all the Buddhas. Sarvanivaraṇaviśkambhin goes to Varanasi, 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 Viśṇu Purāṇa’s description of the origin of the Ganges.

Avalokiteśvara then arrives from Sukhāvatī 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 supe-
riority to all Buddhas.

Śākyamuni describes witnessing a samādhi competition between Avalokiteś-
vara and Bodhisattva Samantabhadra during the time of Buddha Krakucchanda
(which Avalokiteśvara of course wins), even though earlier Śākyamuni had de-
scribed 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 sū-
tra, but it is followed by what is evidently another addition. Śākyamuni prophes-
sies 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 hūm
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 prin-
cipal Tibetan in the translation program of the late eighth and early ninth cen-
turies, which was begun by King Trisong Detsen (Khri srong lde btsan, reigned
742-798).

Yeshe Dé’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.12 Of the remaining two texts he authored, Jinamitra translated
one, while Rinchen Zangpo (rin chen bzang po, 958–1055), the prolific translator

12Dānaśīla, “Kākacaritra, bya rog gi skad brtag par bya ba” in Bstan ’gyur (dpe bsdur ma) (Beijing:
of a later generation, translated the other. Dānasīla 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 Dānasīla in Tibet at least does not contradict that hypothesis.

Jinamitra and Dānasīla, together with a few other Indian scholars, compiled the great Tibetan-Sanskrit concordance entitled Mahāvyutpatti, 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 rākṣasis, 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 adṛṣṭa-manḍala (an unseen manḍala) lost a syllable to become aṣṭa-manḍala (eight manḍalas), and this was compounded by the omission of the negative, so that adṛṣṭa-manḍalasya na dātavyām seems to have become aṣṭa-manḍalasya dātavyām. In the Sanskrit, Avalokiteśvara is stating that there must be a visible manḍala, 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 manḍalas 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 asādhyaḥ sūkṣma evam anudṛṣṭyate becoming ahaṃ māyāvī asādhyaḥ sūkṣma evam anudṛṣṭyate, 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 Ġaṇḍarāśa, 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 Jātaka, 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).

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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 *rākṣasi* 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 *rākritis*. 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 Ęying 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 *Ratikarā*, 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, *ratikara* 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 Sukhāvatīvyūha-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 Sukhāvatīvyūha-sūtra. Avalokiteśvara was translated into Tibetan as spyan ras gzigs, “seeing eyes”. The Chinese Kuan-yin is derived from a variant in Sanskrit: Avalokitasvara, where svara means “sound”,16 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.17

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 sutras, within its Lokottaravādin tradition, were the Avalokita Sūtras. They are contained within

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17 Ibid., 293-350.
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 Kāranḍavyūha 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 ofĪśvara (Lord). Lokēśvara (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”.

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18 Studholme, 65.
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 karanḍa (without the long a) is usually a basket made of reeds, river reeds being the most suitable material for making baskets. A karanḍa 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 karanḍa-mudrā. There is even a layperson’s hairstyle named karanḍa-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, karanda 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, Kāranda 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 karanda. 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 Sukhāvatīvyūha 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.20 The later Nepalese version’s longer title Avalokiteśvara-guna-kārāṇḍa-vyūha is more meaningful and could be translated as The display from the basket of the qualities of Avalokiteśvara, or The display of the baskets (or caskets) of the qualities of Avalokiteśvara, as when Tuladhar-Douglas takes kārāṇḍa to be a plural and mean “reliquaries”.21

The mysterious mantra

The climax of the sūtra is the revelation of the Queen of mahāvidyās: Oṃ maṇi-padmē 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, Sarvanīvaraṇaṅkambhin 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.22

The earliest interpretations in the west, as in the venerable Lobsang Rampa’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 dbyes ba bstan pa, “A teaching on the cases”, which uses this very mantra as an exam-

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20Studholme, 9.
21Tuladhar-Douglas, 2.
ple 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 Māgadhī 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 oṃ maṇipadme hūṃ. Whether that will inspire people to recite it more or less often remains to be seen.

References


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