

Holy Smoke: Siddham Inscriptions on Incense Burners

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I have long been intrigued with the use of *siddham* script, *bonji*, in the esoteric Buddhism of the Far East and I was both pleased and puzzled when I received a letter from a curator at the Smithsonian Institute in the United States requesting identification of a *siddham* inscription on a Chinese incense burner (Fig. 1, opposite). The curator, Silvio Dedini, had acquired the incense burner in Hong Kong and had never seen a similar example in over twenty years of research on incense burners and clocks. And all the other burners he had studied over the years had been made from copper, pewter, or paktong—this specimen alone was made of brass.

The inscription on the lid of the burner (Fig. 2, p. 99) reads: *om va-jra dha-rma*, with the *rma* incorrectly formed (since the craftsmen who made such things were ignorant of the script, such corruptions are common). It may be translated as “Hail to the Adamantine Dharma”. I was initially puzzled by the incongruous lid handle until I was informed by Dr. Bedini that the original handle had been lost before he obtained the burner, and that he had replaced it with the “Chinese dog” handle seen in Fig. 1. The incense grid pattern (Fig. 3, p. 100) is an elaborate form of the *siddham* seed syllable *hriḥ*, the *bīja* of Amitābha Buddha, Avalokiteśvara, etc.

The significance of the inscription and the grid became clear when I discovered a text in the *Taishō Daizōkyō*¹ translated overleaf.

* Thanks are due to Kim Wagner for preparing the supplementary graphic work for this article. [Ed.]

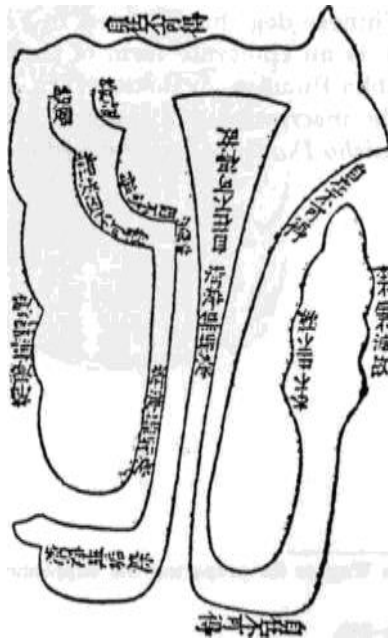
¹ T. 1042, Vol. 20, pp. 33a–34b.

*The True Method of Perfuming Sentient Beings of All Realms by the
Saving Grace of the (Incense) Seal of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva,
the All-Compassionate One and All-Wise
Translated by Amoghavajra*

The Supreme Holy One, Vairocana Buddha, thus revealed: great insight and perfect freedom can be attained by the utilization and knowledge of secret seals (*mudrā*). Those yogis who wish to practice [Tantra], be reborn in the Paradise of the West, and facilitate the salvation of sentient beings should follow an *ācārya* possessed of superior wisdom and talent, and receive initiation into the Lotus Flower Diamond Tantra.

The mystic rites must be conducted properly and for that an incense burner must be placed in the centre of the altar. The incense burner must have a special form, that is, one based on the (esoteric principles) of perfect freedom and total utilization. The incense grid is to be formed according to the secret teachings and will thus be all-enveloping.

[On the grid pattern] the four letters *ha*, *ra*, *i*, *aḥ*, are combined into one character *hriḥ*. The meaning of each letter is as follows: *ha*, the origin of all being is ungraspably empty; *ra*, undefiled purity; *ī*, ungraspable freedom; *aḥ*, innately unborn and undying. As the incense smoke wafts up through this pattern it flows back and forth thereby encompassing all aspects of existence. Schematically, this (flow of incense smoke) is:

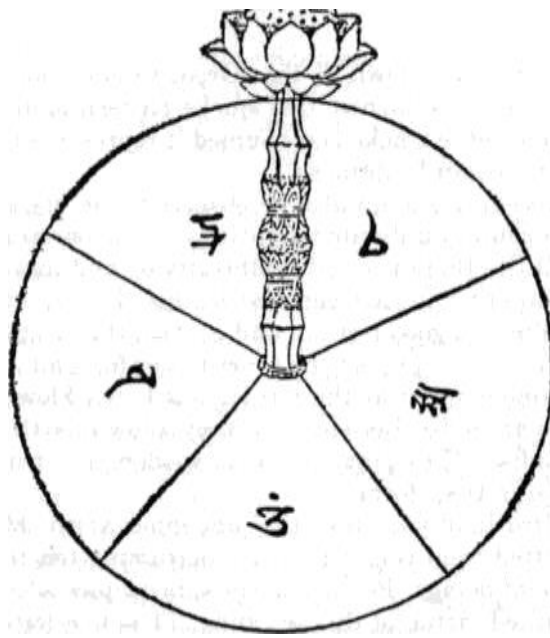


This miraculous pattern is known as the “Great Compassion Which Allays Suffering”. When incense is burned, this smoke pattern manifests the True Principle; when the incense smoke is consumed it represents the arising and passing of all things within Emptiness.

The following procedure should also be observed: the five letters *om*, *va*, *jra*, *dha*, *rma* each contain unlimited creativity. Each one transforms itself into the body of all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and manifests itself in the relative world in order to save sentient beings. These letters bestow on the practitioner unlimited good fortune and contain the complete wisdom of all the Buddhas. The letters protect the practitioner from all misfortune and confusion in the same manner as the miraculous Lotus Flower [of the True Law]. These letters are to be cherished, for they allow rebirth within a lotus in the highest paradise. They possess saving wisdom and beneficence. The Buddha can be seen in their forms.

Master this *mantra* [and you enter the] undefiled world. Miraculous fragrance will be emitted from this very body, perfuming ten thousand lands and countless sentient beings. Realize all these principles without delay and proclaim the unlimited virtue of this teaching. [The five letters] should be inscribed on the lid of the burner. The centre of the lid symbolizes the aspiration for perfect realization. The handle placed there should be yq/ra-shaped with an eight-petalled lotus flower on the top. The five letters of the *mantra* revolve around the centre, a symbol of the intention of the Buddhas to lead all to realization. Gaze on this form, compose the mind, and enlighten the innate Lotus nature. In such a manner, one is reborn in an undefiled paradise, yet still able to interact with the world [of *samsara*] and assist sentient beings in achieving a similar lotus-like [state], free of contamination or stain. This splendid result is due to the power of the original vows made by past Buddhas to save all beings.

The practitioner should concentrate his thoughts on these symbolic forms and grasp their meanings. The *hriḥ* pattern of the incense smoke symbolizes the aspiration for perfect enlightenment. That pattern is the sacred form [of an enlightened being], simultaneously revealing the original vow to [enlighten all], and the fruit of [obtaining Buddhahood in this very body]. Such is the symbolic principle of aspiration for perfect enlightenment. When incense is burned one venerates the sacred form and the smoke activates the *mantra*. Thus, there is total attainment. The lid should look like this:



Through this circular pattern one arrives at unsurpassed enlightenment. Those who are still troubled and confused and wish to continually utilize this *mantra* should rely on this miraculous pattern. Use sandalwood, lotus, or other fine incense in such a burner, and every day the Diamond Realm will shine brighter and brighter. All this is accomplished through the mantric principles described above. The incense burner pattern truly manifests [the Tantric teaching]. Perform various *mudrās* and recite the *mantra*, *oṃ vajra dharma hriḥ* [Hail to the Adamantine Dharma [Wisdom] of Thousand Armed Avalokiteśvara]!

If one utilizes this *mantra* all calamity and sickness will be avoided; one will be reborn in the highest paradise after death and be a facilitator of the liberation of all. Rely on this teaching, practise it, and perfect enlightenment will quickly be attained.

Compiled by the monk Mutō of Myōon Temple in the summer of 1735 based on a manuscript prepared by the priest Jōgon. Use this propitious text to kindle incense [properly] and let endlessly billow forth clouds of [holy] smoke in the shape of the letter hriḥ, the true image of reality.

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The text reveals how the incense burner was to be used and how powerful the seed-syllable *hriḥ* was thought to be—even a cloud of incense that drifted through its shape created “holy smoke” capable of enlightening sentient beings. It would be interesting to conduct an experiment with the same kind of incense kindled in this burner and in a “secular” model—would there be a difference in fragrance or in the atmosphere created?

Considering the great merit said to result from employing such an incense burner, it is surprising that this is the only one that seems to be extant. (Plain *hriḥ* grid incense burners are sometimes seen and may still be ordered from Buddhist supply stores in Japan.) It is clear from the text, said to have originally been translated from the Sanskrit in the eighth century, that such burners were produced in India, but inquiries to scholars of Indian art and religion have produced no evidence of their existence. The text itself was collated in Japan, and presumably Japanese Shingon priests must have used or at least seen such burners, so why have no examples turned up so far in temples, museums, antique shops, or in private collections? Other points for further research: Was the text translated into other Buddhist languages; and is there any record of such incense burners being used in Korea, Tibet, or Mongolia?



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4