

The *Sgra-sbyor-bam-po-gñis-pa* on the *Maṇḍala*: “Seeing the Essence”

In an interesting article in the previous volume of *SCEAR*,¹ investigating aspects of the Japanese *shingon* fourfold *maṇḍala*, Fabio Rambelli refers to an etymology of the Sanskrit term, *maṇḍala*.² This etymology, characterized by the author as “esoteric”—or perhaps rather “esotericizing”—involves the analysis of the term into the constituents *maṇḍa* and *la*. In this context the term is glossed as Skt. *sāra*, “essence”, and *la* is identified as a suffix meaning “completion” or “possession”. Here I would like briefly to draw attention to a similar etymology which is formulated in an early ninth-century Tibetan source. Without going into details about the esoteric or more general Buddhological aspects, I will here have a brief look at this *locus* and some of the grammatical data involved.

We find this etymology in the *Sgra-sbyor-bam-po-gñis-pa*,³ the commentary on a selection of terms from the Sanskrit-Tibetan lexicon of Buddhist terms *Mahāvvyutpatti*.⁴ Both manuals were written *c.q.* compiled by a group of Indian and Tibetan scholars⁵ in the late eighth or early ninth century CE,⁶

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¹ “Re-inscribing *Maṇḍala*: Semiotic Operations on a Word and its Object”, *Studies in Central & East Asian Religions*, Vol. 4 (1991), pp. 1–24.

² *loc. cit.*, p. 11.

³ Peking *Bstan-'gyur mdo'-grel*, *ÑO* 1r1–38r3, ed. Suzuki (1955–61), title no. 5833; Co-ne *Bstan-'gyur mdo'-grel*, *CO* 131v1–160r7. Critical edition: Ishikawa (1990); an annotated translation of this text is currently being prepared by Dr. C. A. Scherrer-Schaub (Lausanne) and the present author.

⁴ Peking *Bstan-'gyur mdo'-grel*, *GO* 204v7–310r8, ed. Suzuki (1955–61), title no. 5832; Co-ne *Bstan-'gyur mdo'-grel*, *CO* 1r1–131r7. Most commonly used edition: Sasaki (1916–25), critical edition: Ishihama and Fukuda (1989).

⁵ The main contributors are listed in the introductory section of the *Sgra-sbyor-bam-po-gñis-pa*, Peking *Bstan-'gyur*, *ÑO* 2r1–v1, ed. Ishikawa (1990: 1–2); cf. Simonsson (1957: 241–4), Snellgrove (1987: 441–2), Erb (1990: lxv–lxvi).

⁶ On the dating, cf. Simonsson (1957: 212–13, 239–41, 263–4), Uray (1989), Erb (1990: lxv–lxvi).

as part of the process of standardizing and codifying the Tibetan terminology used to translate the numerous Sanskrit terms and phrases that form the backbone of discourse in Buddhist literature.

The commentary on the term *maṇḍala* reads:⁷

*maṇḍala*⁸ *zhes-bya-ba* / *maṇḍa*⁹ *ni-sāra*¹⁰ *ste-sñiñ-po* 'am *dbyiñs-sam-dkyil-la-bya* / *la ni-ādāna*¹¹ *ste-len*¹² *pa-* 'am- 'dzin-*pa-lta-bu-la* 'an¹³-*bya* / *kho*¹⁴-*ra-khor-yug*¹⁵-*zlum-po* 'i¹⁶-*miñ*¹⁷-*yañ-maṇḍa-la*¹⁸ *zhes*¹⁹-*bya-bas na-dkyil-'khor-du sñan-chad*²⁰-*grags-pa-bzhin-so-na-gzhag* /

[The term] “*maṇḍala*” [can be analysed as consisting of] *maṇḍa* [which can be glossed as] *sāra*, meaning “heart” or “basic material” or “middle” and to [which can be glossed as] *ādāna*, in turn meaning “to seize” or “to hold” or the like. Given the fact that [the term] “*maṇḍala*” is a term for a circle (*zlum-po*) [that functions] as the circumference (*kho-ra-khor-yug*) [of a specific space], [the designation] *dkyil-'khor* that was [already] current (*grags-pa*) previously (*sñan-chad*) is to be kept unchanged (*so-na-gzhag*).

Parallel with the etymology described by Rambelli, we find here the analysis into *maṇḍa* and *la*. Also corresponding is the glossing of the constituent *maṇḍa* as **sāra*, “essence”.²¹ In the light of the gloss **ādāna* given for the constituent *la*, it would seem that the author(s) of this passage did not regard this second constituent as (part of) a suffix. I would suggest that this gloss refers to an entry from a *dhātupāṭha*, i.e. a catalogue of verbal roots belonging to an indigenous system of Sanskrit grammar.²²

⁷ Based on ed. Ishikawa (1990: no. 298). Variant readings in the Dunhuang MS, Pelliot tibétain 845 f. 23r2–3 (hereafter: Pt.) are given in the notes. Variants merely consisting of the inverse i-graph are not included in the notes.

⁸ Pt.: *man-dha-la*.

⁹ Pt.: *man-da*.

¹⁰ Pt.: *sa-ra*.

¹¹ Pt.: *a-da-na*.

¹² Pt.: *lend*.

¹³ Pt.: *yañ*.

¹⁴ Pt.: *khor*.

¹⁵ Pt. inserts *tu-* after *yug*.

¹⁶ Pt.: *pa*’i.

¹⁷ Pt.: *myiñ*.

¹⁸ Pt.: *mal-da-la*.

¹⁹ Pt.: *ces*.

²⁰ Pt.: *cad*.

²¹ The gloss *maṇḍa* = *sāra* is very common in *Mahāyāna* Buddhist literature, cf., e.g., *Bodhi-caryāvatāra-pañikā*, ed. Vaidya, p. 29, in connection with the term *bodhimaṇḍa*: *maṇḍaśabdo* ‘*yañ sāravacanam ghrāmaṇḍa iti yathā*’ /

²² On the *dhātupāṭha*-s, cf., e.g., Palsule (1961), Cardona (1976:161–4).

The root *lā* is introduced with the semantic gloss *ādāne*, “[occurring] in the meaning ‘to take’ (*ādāna*)”, in both the Pāṇinian and Cāndra catalogues.²³ It is difficult to say whether we have here a quotation of the whole *dhātupāṭha* entry or a reference to the meaning entry *ādāne* only. I have described this phrase elsewhere, and the other place in this text where it occurs (cf. *infra*), in terms of a quotation from a *dhātupāṭha*.²⁴

We could take the passage as we have it now in the xylographic versions of the canon, viz. *la-ni-ā-dā-na* as corrupt for *lā ādāna* and emend accordingly. An argument against this emendation is the attestation of *ni-* at this place in the oldest, probably ninth-century, manuscript of this text. But even if we read *la ni- ādāna* (or **ādāne*) the passage clearly refers to the semantic tag supplied to the root *lā* in the *dhātupāṭha*. Possibly the authors of the *Sgra-sbyor-bam-po-gñis-pa* regarded the form *maṇḍala* as a *tatpuruṣa* compound, that is, a certain type of nominal compound, here with a verbal-derivative nominal as the second member of the compound. Although I have so far not been able to determine the precise derivation according to Sanskrit *vyākaraṇa*, there are strong indications that the analysis given here is not in accordance with Pāṇinian grammar. The term *maṇḍala* occurs in two Pāṇinian *gaṇas*²⁵ (i.e. sets of linguistic elements, usually nominal stems or verbal roots, that undergo specific grammatical operations). Both *gaṇas* are lists of uncompounded nominals, so it is unlikely that “*maṇḍala*” was looked upon as a compound. Moreover, the *Kṣīratarāṅgirī*²⁶ mentions the term as an evidently primary derivation from the root *maḍI*, unfortunately without giving more details on the derivational procedure.²⁷ At another place in the *Sgra-sbyor-bam-po-gñis-pa*, the *lā ādāne* entry is referred to, viz. in the commentary on the term *dauṣṭhulya*. Two modes of analysis of the term are presented there, both featuring the reference to *ādāne* (the second implicitly).²⁸

A second detail in the *Sgra-sbyor-bam-po-gñis-pa*’s comment on *maṇḍala* that I would like to touch on briefly, is the interpretation of the phrase *so-na-*

²³ *lā ādāne* (Pāṇinian *dhātupāṭha* 2.49), *rā lā ādāne* (Cāndra *dhātupāṭha* 2.19). The latter introduces two roots, viz. *rā* and *lā*. The *Kātantra dhātupāṭha* introduces the roots with another gloss, namely *dāna*, “to give” (2.22 *rā. lā, dāne*).

²⁴ Verhagen (1993: 41, no. 24, 42, no. 28).

²⁵ *Maṇḍala* is element no. 171 in the *ardharcārī-gaṇa* (cf. Pāṇ. 2.4.31, attributing masculine and neuter genders to these nominals) and no. 109 in the *gaurādi-gaṇa* (Pāṇ. 4.1.41, these nominals taking the feminine suffix, *ṆīP*).

²⁶ Commentary by Kṣīrasvāmin (twelfth century) on the Pāṇinian *dhātupāṭha*, cf. Cardona (1976: 288–9), edition: Leibich (1930).

²⁷ *Kṣīratarāṅginī* ad I.291: *maḍI ca / cakārād vibhājane pṛthaksūtrād arthāntare 'pi / maṇḍate / maṇḍo rasāgram, maṇḍakaḥ, maṇḍalam, maṇḍūram, lohamalam, manṇapaḥ, Ṇer itnuC (Un. 3.29): maṇḍayitnuḥ ...* (ed. Liebich 1930: 26).

²⁸ Ishikawa (1990: no. 274) *dauṣṭhulya: du[r?] ni-smad-pa-'am-ñan-pa | ṣṭhā gatinivṛttau zhes-byas-ste-gnas-pa-la-bya | la ni-ādāna ste-len-pa-'am-'dzin-pa'o | gcig-tu-na-duṣṭhu ni-ñes-pa-'am-skyon-gyi-miñ-la ni-goñ-du-bśad-pa-dañ-dra [sic]-ste | spyir-na-ltuñ-ba-dañ-sgrib-pa'i miñ-ste-gnas-ñan-len-du-btags |* ; cf. Verhagen (1993: 41, nos. 23, 24).

Gzhag. I have interpreted it here as “is to be kept unchanged”, in other words the already current Tibetan term *dkyil-'khor* is to be “adopted unchanged” as the standard translation for the Sanskrit *maṇḍala*. It is not evident whether this Tibetan term was “previously current” as a translation for the Sanskrit term or as an indigenous concept.

Parenthetically I would like to mention that the phrase *so-na-gzhag* might theoretically also be interpreted as “is to be left untranslated”, “is to be adopted as a loanword”. This phrase²⁹ is attested in that very meaning elsewhere in the *Sgra-sbyor-bam-po-gñis-pa*, in its commentary on the term *brāhmaṇa* “Brahmin”.³⁰ There the authors unmistakably opt for a loanword, namely *bram-ze*. Setting aside the morphophonemic changes that the word has evidently undergone, this *bram-ze* is indeed a Sanskrit loanword of common usage in Tibetan. The expression *sor-bzhag*, comparable to *so-na-gzhag/bzhag*, is also used in another early grammatical treatise, when referring to the loanword *padma*, “lotus”.³¹

However, this interpretation of *so-na-gzhag* in the present context seems less plausible. It is true that the word *maṇḍala* is attested as a loanword in Tibetan, usually spelled *ma-ṅda-la* or *maṅdal*. Compare for instance the dictionaries of Jäschke, s.v. *maṅdal*, and Das, s.v. *ma-ṅda-la*. The loanword is met with particularly in the context of Tibetan tantric literature. Note for instance expressions such as *maṅdal gyi cho ga*, “ritual [precepts] regarding the *maṇḍala*”; and *maṅdal-gyi-khrid-yig*, “guide for the *maṇḍala*”, which are quite frequent, e.g., in titles (especially in the abbreviated and marginal titles)³² of exegetical and ritualistic treatises of the Vajrayana. However, the use of the loanword *maṅdal[a]* is much more marginal than that of the two other loanwords indicated above, *bram-ze* and *padma*; the designation *dkyil-'khor* is by far the most common Tibetan equivalent of the Indie term *maṇḍala*.

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²⁹ With morphological variation in the verb, *bzhag/gzhag*.

³⁰ Ishikawa (1990: no. 292): ... *shon-chad-grags-pa btsan-par-byas-te-bram-ze-so-na-bzhag* |, cf. Simonsson (1957: 275–6).

³¹ In the *Sgra'i rnam-par-dbye-ba-bstan-pa*, on the mantra *Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*, cf. Vcrhagon (1990: 134–5, and note 12); on *sor-bzhag*, cf. Chos-grags (n.d.: 744).

³² Cf., e.g., the abbreviated titles *maṅdal-khrid-yig* in Tōkhoku (1953), nos. 11503 and 12030, *maṅdal-dmigs-rim*, *ibid.*, no. 11366, *maṅdal-bśad-pa*, *ibid.*, no. 11234, and the *maṅdal-dpe-cha* studied in Schubert (1954).

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