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The Dhāraṇī “Purifying All Karmic Obscurations”

Sarvakarmāvaraṇaviśodhanīnāmadhāraṇī

འཕགས་པ་ལས་ཀྱི་སྒྲིབ་པ་ཐམས་ཅད་རྣམ་པར་སྐྱོང་བ་ཞེས་བྱ་བའི་གཟུངས།

'phags pa las kyi sgrib pa thams cad rnam par sbyong ba zhes bya ba'i gzungs

The Noble Dhāraṇī “Purifying All Karmic Obscurations”

Āryasarvakarmāvaraṇaviśodhanīnāmadhāraṇī

· Toh 743 ·

Degé Kangyur, vol. 94 (rgyud, tsha), folios 236.a–236.b



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co.

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SUMMARY

s.1 *The Dhāraṇī “Purifying All Karmic Obscurations”* is a relatively brief text consisting of a short dhāraṇī and a passage about its applications and benefits. Most applications have to do with death and funerary rituals, as the text provides many methods to aid the departed toward a favorable rebirth.

ac.

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

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INTRODUCTION

i.

i.1 *The Dhāraṇī “Purifying All Karmic Obscurations”* is a short but important text providing many teachings to aid the dead toward a favorable rebirth. The text provides glimpses into the types of practices Buddhist communities in India and Tibet undertook for a situation that affects us all: the death of a loved one. The most important canonical text in this regard is *The Tantra Purifying All Evil Destinies* (Toh 483), and indeed, if the form of the dhāraṇī is anything to go by, our text does seem to have some kind of connection with that major scripture.

i.2 The evidence for the original Sanskrit is somewhat thin: a mere fragment of two and a half lines in an Indian *Compilation of Dhāraṇīs*.¹ However, even from this small fragment, which contains the full dhāraṇī and a passage from the applications, we can surmise that the version transmitted in India was somewhat different. We also know of an eponymous goddess who is clearly a personified dhāraṇī from the Indian tradition. The distinguished and influential scholar Abhayākaragupta in his *Niṣpannayogāvalī* describes her as an inhabitant of the Dharmadhātuvāgīśvara maṇḍala, green in color and holding a white lotus with a red tint marked by a vajra scepter with three prongs.²

i.3 The Tibetan translation is recorded in the imperial catalogs³ and there is at least one Dunhuang witness available to us.⁴ Unfortunately, the identity of the translators was not recorded, or if there was once a record, this has not survived. This witness from the famous Dunhuang collection is, despite its age, not a perfect copy. However, it provides some interesting variant readings, which we discuss in the notes to the translation. This text is included in both the Action Tantra section (Toh 743) and the Compendium of Dhāraṇīs section (Toh 1009) of the Degé Kangyur and other Tshalpa-lineage Kangyurs that include such a separate section. As far as we are aware, there is no extant Chinese translation.

i.4 This English translation was made principally on the basis of the Tibetan translations of the text found in the Tantra Collection (*rgyud 'bum*) and the Compendium of Dhāraṇīs (*gzungs 'dus*) of the Degé Kangyur in consultation with the Stok Palace Kangyur. We also compared these texts carefully against the Dunhuang witness, as will be evident from the notes that mark all major discrepancies. Additionally, we consulted the Sanskrit manuscript fragment, a transcript of which we include here in an appendix.

The Noble Dhāraṇī
Purifying All Karmic Obscurations

1.

The Translation

[F.236.a]

1.1 Obeisance to the Blessed Akṣobhya!

*namo ratnatrayāya | oṃ kaṅkani kaṅkani rocani rocani troṭani troṭani trāsani trāsani
pratihana pratihana sarvakarmaparamparāṇi me svāhā |*⁵

1.2 The application of this dhāraṇī is as follows:

If one recites it constantly,⁶ the entire succession of karma will be purified one by one.

If one recites it at the three junctures of the day,⁷ even the five sins of immediate retribution will be purified.

If one recites it once, bad omens, bad dreams, and inauspicious events will disappear.

If one holds it on one's body or writes it into a booklet and⁸ wears it tied around one's neck, one will never experience any of the untimely deaths.

If one is overcome with compassion and recites it into the ears of a moribund⁹ beast, bird, human, or nonhuman being, that being will not be reborn in the unfavorable destinies.

1.3 Moreover, if somebody has died some time ago and one recites it one hundred, one thousand, or one hundred thousand times, with friendly kindness and compassion, in the name of the dead person,¹⁰ that sentient being will be liberated at that very moment, even if they have already been born in the hells.

1.4 If one recites it over some earth, or sesame seeds, or mustard seeds, or water and scatters that over the corpse, or washes the corpse,¹¹ and then has it cremated,¹² or places it for keeping in a *caitya*,¹³ or if one writes the spell [F.236.b] and places it on their head, that person will certainly be liberated in

seven days, even if already born in an unfavorable destiny. That person will be reborn in a favorable destiny, among the gods, or wherever the aspirational prayer wished.

1.5 If one undergoes purification by ritually bathing throughout the waxing fortnight of the moon, changes clothes three times a day, fasts or eats white meals, and recites the spell one hundred thousand times in the name of a dead person,¹⁴ while circumambulating a *caitya* containing a relic, that person will be liberated from the lower realms. That person will then be reborn among the gods of the Pure Abodes and appear in front of the practitioner,¹⁵ perform worship, manifest his own appearance,¹⁶ congratulate the practitioner,¹⁷ circumambulate him three times, and then finally disappear.

1.6 If one writes down a dead person's name, recites the spell, and creates one hundred thousand *caityas*¹⁸ worshiped with parasols, banners, streamers,¹⁹ and so on, and casts them into the sea or a great river, then that person will be liberated from the hells, and so on.²⁰

1.7 Alternatively, having performed worship in the same way, if at the end one constructs a great *caitya* at a crossroads, worships it with parasols, banners, streamers, and so on, and then offers a meal and makes donations to the noble monastic community in worship²¹—as well as proclaims, “May this become a root of merit for so-and-so!²² Indeed, by this,²³ may he attain a favorable rebirth among the gods!”—that person will be reborn there, manifest his own appearance, offer one congratulations,²⁴ and then disappear.

1.8 ²⁵Whether one has committed the five sins of immediate retribution, or whether one is an apostate of the true Dharma, or whether one has disrespected the noble ones, if one sees this *dhāraṇī*, say, written on a wall at the time of death, all one's karmic obscurations will cease, how much more so if one chants and recites it! That very *tathāgata* shall come to one and say “Noble son! Come to me!”²⁶

1.9 *Here ends “The Noble Dhāraṇī ‘Purifying All Karmic Obscurations’.”*

ap.

Appendix

APPENDIX

ap1.1 This is a revised reading of the manuscript fragment Cambridge University Library Ms. Add. 1680.8.3 (+ denotes a lost *akṣara*):

*namo bhagavate 'kṣobhyāya tathāgatāyārhate samyaksambuddhāya | tadyathā oṃ
hūṃ kakani kakani | vākani vākani | rocani rocani | troṭani | troṭani |
saṃtrāsani | saṃtrāsani + + + 2 pratihana 2 sarvākarmaparamparāni me svāhā | ya
imāṃ dhāraṇīm antaśaḥ kuḍyalikhitām api paśyēt tasya pañcānantaryāni
parikṣayaṃ [explicit]*

ab.

ABBREVIATIONS

Z The Dunhuang witness of the text, Pelliot tibétain 49.3

n.

NOTES

- n.1 Published from Cambridge University Library Ms. Add. 1680.8.3 and marked at the time as “unidentified” in Hidas 2021, p. 42.
- n.2 Lee 2004, p. 79: *Sarvakarmāvaraṇaviśodhanī haritā trīśūka-vajrāṅkasitaraktakamaladharī*; Toh 3141, folios 127.b–128.a: *las dang sgrib pa thams cad rnam par sel ba ljang gu ste rdo rje rtse gsum pas mtshan pa'i padma dkar dmar 'dzin pa'o* | | . The Tibetan translation *las dang* is surprising, as we would expect *las kyi*.
- n.3 Denkarma, folio 303.a; no. 415 in Herrmann-Pfandt, pp. 237–38; and no. 382 in Kawagoe 2005, p. 21.
- n.4 Pelliot tibétain 49.3; Pelliot tibétain 49 itself is a kind of proto-*Compilation of Dhāraṇīs*. The identity of the text was first determined by Lalou 1939, pp. 16–17.
- n.5 The translation of this dhāraṇī is: “Obeisance to the Three Jewels! *Om, kaṅkani kaṅkani* radiant, radiant, destroyer, destroyer, trembler, trembler, remove, remove my entire succession of karma, *svāhā!*” The reading in the Dunhuang manuscript (henceforth marked as Z) is corrupt at the end: *na mo rad na tra ya ya | om ka ka ni | ka ka ni | ro tsa ni | ro tsa ni | tro tha ni | tro tha ni | tra sa ni | tra sa ni | pra ti hA ni | pra ti hA ni | sa rwa pA ra mA | pA ra mA | pA ri ni mA swA hA*. Also, note that the Sanskrit differs slightly.
- n.6 Z is marred by a serious eyeskip here: the text jumps two sentences, reading, “If one recites it constantly [...] bad omens,” etc., with the bracketed ellipsis marking the omitted text.
- n.7 Normally “the three times” (*dus gsum*) refers to “the past, the present, and the future,” but in the present context, it must mean “at the three junctures” (i.e., dawn, noon, and dusk). Cf. Candrakīrti’s *Pradīpoddyotana* (Chakravarti

1984, p. 189 and p. 215 respectively): *triṣkālaṃ sandhyātraye* and *triṣkālaṃ trisandhyam*.

- n.8 Z reads “or” (*sam*) instead of “and” (*nas*). The canonical reading is not impossible if we understand the booklet to be very small.
- n.9 Z reads “at the time of death” (*chi ba'i tshe*) instead of “of a moribund” (*chi ba'i*).
- n.10 That is to say, the *dhāraṇī* is customized by replacing the *me* (“my”) with the name of the beneficiary in the genitive.
- n.11 If the empowered substance was water.
- n.12 The Stok Palace manuscript reads “worshipped” (*mchod*) instead of “cremated” (*bsreg*), which is also the reading of Z.
- n.13 A funerary *caitya* (*mchod rten*); Z has a fascinating variant, “tomb” (*mchad pa*). It is not impossible that the text was customized to fit local practices around Dunhuang.
- n.14 See [n.10](#).
- n.15 Z reads “shadow” (*bsgrib pa*) for “practitioner” (*sgrub pa po*); if the reading is not a corruption, it must mean the shadow cast by the aforementioned *caitya*. In that case, understand the following elements to refer to the *caitya*, not the ritualist.
- n.16 The string “manifest his own appearance” is not found in Z. It is possible that it is a contamination from a similarly phrased passage below, in the penultimate paragraph.
- n.17 Lit. “will say, ‘Well done!’ ” (*legs so*), which usually corresponds to *sādhu* in Sanskrit. Z repeats the words (*legs so legs so*).
- n.18 These are clearly small votive *caityas*.
- n.19 The difference between the two, at least according to Bhavabhaṭṭa, a commentator of the *Catusepīthatantra*, is that banners (*dhvaja*) have an emblem or design (*cihna*) on them. Ad 2.3.11: *patāketi cihnarahitā matsyapakṣyādicihnāṅko dhvajah* (Szántó 2012, vol. 1, p. 288 and vol. 2, pp. 91–92); the Tibetan is slightly different, but the import is the same, see Toh 1607, folio 180.b: *ba dan zhes bya ba ni nya dang ngang pa la sogs pa'i ri mo med pa'o | | rgyal mtshan zhes bya ba ni ri mo dang bcas pa'o*.

- n.20 Z does not transmit “etc.”
- n.21 Up to here, Z reads merely, “Or, having fashioned a *caitya*, having worshiped it...”; it is quite likely that some text was lost here. Having said that, it is odd that the canonical reading has “having performed worship in the same way” and then repeats the articles of worship. Therefore, it appears that we have some contamination.
- n.22 Instead of “so-and-so” (*che ge mo zhig*), Z transmits “this person” (*myi 'di*).
- n.23 Instead of “indeed, by this [merit]” (*'di kho nas*), Z transmits “from this transmigration” (*'di 'i 'khor nas*), which may well be the original reading.
- n.24 See [n.17](#).
- n.25 This last paragraph is not transmitted in Z. Some parts of it are, however, attested in the Sanskrit fragment. The sentence with “written on a wall” is attested in the fragment as *antaśaḥ kuḍyalikhitām api*. It is also noteworthy that *antaśaḥ* here means “ultimately” and not “at the time of death” as the Tibetan would suggest.
- n.26 This passage proves that the initial obeisance to Akṣobhya (also see the expanded obeisance in the Sanskrit fragment) is part of the text and not the translators’ obeisance, despite the fact that it is also not transmitted in Z. No other tathāgata was mentioned before. The invitation refers to Akṣobhya’s pure land, Abhirati. Alternatively, emend *de nyid* to *nyid* and understand it as a reference to a generic tathāgata with an emphasis (i.e., “the tathāgata himself”).

b.

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GLOSSARY

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

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

g.1 Abhayākaragupta

—
—

abhayākaragupta

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

g.2 Akṣobhya

mi 'khrugs pa

མི་འཁྲུག་པ།

akṣobhya

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

Lit. “Not Disturbed” or “Immovable One.” The buddha in the eastern realm of Abhirati. A well-known buddha in Mahāyāna, regarded in the higher tantras as the head of one of the five buddha families, the vajra family in the east.

g.3 aspirational prayer

smon lam

སྨོན་ལམ།

praṇidhāna

A declaration of one’s aspirations and vows, and/or an invocation and request of the buddhas, bodhisattvas, etc.

g.4 banner

rgyal mtshan

རྒྱལ་མཚན།

dhvaja

A banner with a crest.

g.5 caitya

mchod rten

མཚོད་རྟེན།

caitya

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

The Tibetan translates both *stūpa* and *caitya* with the same word, *mchod rten*, meaning “basis” or “recipient” of “offerings” or “veneration.” Pali: *cetiya*.

A caitya, although often synonymous with *stūpa*, can also refer to any site, sanctuary or shrine that is made for veneration, and may or may not contain relics.

A *stūpa*, literally “heap” or “mound,” is a mounded or circular structure usually containing relics of the Buddha or the masters of the past. It is considered to be a sacred object representing the awakened mind of a

buddha, but the symbolism of the stūpa is complex, and its design varies throughout the Buddhist world. Stūpas continue to be erected today as objects of veneration and merit making.

g.6 dhāraṇī

gzungs

གཟུངས།

dhāraṇī

See “spell.”

g.7 five sins of immediate retribution

mtshams med pa lnga

མཚམས་མེད་པ་ལྔ།

pañcānantarya

These are killing one’s mother, father, or an arhat; drawing blood from a thus-gone one; or causing a schism in the saṅgha.

g.8 karmic obscurations

las kyi sgrib pa

ལས་ཀྱི་སློབ་པ།

karmāvaraṇa

The persistent physical, mental, or emotional obstacles to spiritual progress.

g.9 parasol

gdugs

གདུགས།

chattra

First of the eighty designs on the palms and soles of the Tathāgata. In general Indian iconography it is a symbol of protection and royalty. In Buddhism it symbolizes protection from the blazing heat of afflictions, desire, illness, and harmful forces, just as a physical parasol protects one from the blazing sun or the elements. It is also included in the eight auspicious emblems.

g.10 Pure Abodes

gnas gtsang ma

གནས་གཙང་མ།

śuddhāvāsika

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

The five Pure Abodes are the highest heavens of the Form Realm (*rūpadhātu*). They are called “pure abodes” because ordinary beings (*prthagjana*; *so so’i skye bo*) cannot be born there; only those who have achieved the fruit of a non-returner (*anāgāmin*; *phyir mi ’ong*) can be born there. A summary presentation of them is found in the third chapter of Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa*, although they are repeatedly mentioned as a set in numerous sūtras, tantras, and vinaya texts.

The five Pure Abodes are the last five of the seventeen levels of the Form Realm. Specifically, they are the last five of the eight levels of the upper Form Realm—which corresponds to the fourth meditative concentration (*dhyāna*; *bsam gtan*)—all of which are described as “immovable” (*akopya*; *mi g.yo ba*) since they are never destroyed during the cycles of the destruction and reformation of a world system. In particular, the five are Abṛha (*mi che ba*), the inferior heaven; Atapa (*mi gdung ba*), the heaven of no torment; Sudṛśa (*gya nom snang*), the heaven of sublime appearances; Sudarśana (*shin tu mthong*), the heaven of the most beautiful to behold; and Akaniṣṭha (*’og min*), the highest heaven.

Yaśomitra explains their names, stating: (1) because those who abide there can only remain for a fixed amount of time, before they are plucked out (\sqrt{brh} , *br̥ṇhanti*) of that heaven, or because it is not as extensive (*abr̥ṇhita*) as the others in the pure realms, that heaven is called the inferior heaven (*abr̥ha*; *mi che ba*); (2) since the afflictions can no longer torment (\sqrt{tap} , *tapanti*) those who reside there because of their having attained a particular samādhi, or because their state of mind is virtuous, they no longer torment (\sqrt{tap} , *tāpayanti*) others, this heaven, consequently, is called the heaven of no torment (*atapa*; *mi gdung ba*); (3) since those who reside there have exceptional (*suṣṭhu*) vision because what they see ($\sqrt{drś}$, *darśana*) is utterly pure, that heaven is called the heaven of sublime appearances (*sudṛśa*; *gya nom snang*); (4) because those who reside there are beautiful gods, that heaven is called the heaven of the most beautiful to behold (*sudarśana*; *shin tu mthong*); and (5) since it is not lower (*na kaniṣṭhā*) than any other heaven because there is no other place superior to it, this heaven is called the highest heaven (*akaniṣṭha*; *’og min*) since it is the uppermost.

g.11 relic

sku gdung

སྐུ་གཏུང་།

dhātu

The physical remains or personal objects of a previous tathāgata, arhat, or other realized person that are venerated for their perpetual spiritual potency. They are often enshrined in stūpas and other public monuments so the Buddhist community at large can benefit from their blessings and power.

g.12 root of merit

dge ba'i rtsa ba

དགེ་བའི་རྩ་བ།

kuśalamūla

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

According to most lists (specifically those of the Pāli and some Abhidharma traditions), the (three) roots of virtue or the roots of the good or wholesome states (of mind) are what makes a mental state good or bad; they are identified as the opposites of the three mental “poisons” of greed, hatred, and delusion. Actions based on the roots of virtue will eventually lead to future happiness. The *Dharmasaṃgraha*, however, lists the three roots of virtue as (1) the mind of enlightenment, (2) purity of thought, and (3) freedom from egotism (Skt. *trīṇi kuśalamūlāni | bodhicittotpādaḥ, āśayaviśuddhiḥ, ahaṃkāramamakāraparityāgaśceti |*).

g.13 spell

gzungs

གཟུངས།

dhāraṇī

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

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

g.14 streamer

ba dan

བ་དན།

patākā

A banner without a crest.

g.15 tathāgata

de bzhin gshegs pa

དེ་བཞིན་གཤེགས་པ།

tathāgata

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

A frequently used synonym for *buddha*. According to different explanations, it can be read as *tathā-gata*, literally meaning “one who has thus gone,” or as *tathā-āgata*, “one who has thus come.” *Gata*, though literally meaning “gone,” is a past passive participle used to describe a state or condition of existence. *Tatha*(*tā*), often rendered as “suchness” or “thusness,” is the quality or condition of things as they really are, which cannot be conveyed in conceptual, dualistic terms. Therefore, this epithet is interpreted in different ways, but in general it implies one who has departed in the wake of the buddhas of the past, or one who has manifested the supreme awakening dependent on the reality that does not abide in the two extremes of existence and quiescence. It is also often used as a specific epithet of the Buddha Śākyamuni.

g.16 The Tantra Purifying All Evil Destinies

ngan song thams cad yongs su sbyong ba'i rgyud

ངན་སོང་ཐམས་ཅད་ཡོངས་སུ་སློང་བའི་རྒྱུད།

sarvadurgatipariśodhanatantra

g.17 Three Jewels

dkon mchog gsum

དཀོན་མཆོག་གསུམ།

ratnatraya

The Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha—the three objects of Buddhist refuge.

g.18 three junctures of the day

dus gsum

དུས་གསུམ།

triṣkāla

Morning, noon, and evening.

g.19 untimely death

dus ma yin par 'chi ba

དུས་མ་ཡིན་པར་འཆི་བ།

akālamaraṇa

