

Spells, Images, and Maṇḍalas: Tracing the Evolution of Esoteric Buddhist Rituals.
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Esoteric Buddhism evolved in India, Sri Lanka, and Tibet during the first millennium C.E., eventually giving rise to the Vajrayāna School in the seventh century. In China, its teachings had been labelled as “secret” or “esoteric” (*mijiao* 密教) by the tenth century, on the basis of scriptural classifications going back to the seventh and eighth. Koichi Shinohara’s *Spells, Images, and Maṇḍalas* persuasively argues that Esoteric Buddhism began to filter into China as early as the fourth or fifth centuries through the first translations of collected dhāraṇī spells and associated ritual instructions dating to that period.

The rituals of Esoteric Buddhism were initially simple recitations of dhāraṇī 陀羅尼 spells, accompanied by mudrās 印契 (hand gestures). Each spell or gesture derived its power from association with the Buddha, Bodhisattva, or deity responsible for its revelation. Later spell rituals were enriched by the introduction of image worship between the fifth and the ninth centuries. In the course of the same period two further important shifts occurred: firstly, techniques of interior visualization altered the role of physical images in the ritual; and secondly, since the recitation of a spell was restricted to initiates of the corresponding patron deity, initiation ceremonies came to assume a central place. Organized around maṇḍala 曼荼羅 representations of the pantheon, these initiations allowed practitioners to access successively different sets of spells and other ritual texts. *Spells, Images, and Maṇḍalas* documents these developments engendering ever more complex forms of representation and greater degrees of abstraction. In the process, the book offers a complete panorama of esoteric ritual compendia in medieval China, providing new text-critical readings in diachronic perspective.

The idea that the ritual owed its efficacy to protection by the Buddhas or deities who lent their authority to the dhāraṇī texts rendered the presence of these sponsoring deities essential. Their presence was made real or “actualized” through iconic representations or mental images. The gods were then collectively installed in the ritual space through the construction of a maṇḍala. The ritual’s fulfilment or “accomplishment” (*chengjiu* 成就) was expressed by the granting of the wish, i.e., the ritual’s objective. This successful outcome became sensible to the participants through an announcement by the presiding god made manifest. In the ritual protocol, visualization, i.e., the ritualized construction of mental images, occupied an increasingly important function. The actualization of the gods, initially understood as a transformation of their image placed in the ritual space, now resided essentially in the practitioner’s mind. Taking this logic a step further, the practitioner could visualize himself as the deity by identifying with the mental image projected.

Koichi Shinohara approaches these questions from a careful study of the ritual's structure and rationale as conveyed by the liturgical protocols in key dhāraṇī collections appearing in China. His analysis traces the changing role of image worship in the ritual. Gradually simple sets of instructions on the use of spells and mudrās transform into fully developed sūtras, typically providing a narrative framework that situates the text in the Buddha's teaching and presents scenarios for increasingly elaborate rituals involving images, visualization, and maṇḍalas, all tied together into a single scriptural package.

In Part I, three ritual scenarios take the reader through the process linking spell recitation to image worship and maṇḍala initiations: (1) spells are recited for every day objectives, associated with tutelary deities and covering the ten directions of space; (2) image worship, with ritually prescribed iconographies and involving offerings and spells, transforms into maṇḍala ceremonies organized around the image of a central deity; (3) the whole pantheon is invited to authenticate initiation ceremonies. In this most elaborate form, the deities, represented by seats, are grouped together in "halls" within the maṇḍala. A flower-tossing rite permits the candidate to identify his sponsoring deity and the level of mantra-transmission attained, according to the emplacement where the flower settles.

Historically, the recitation of dhāraṇī and image worship came together from separate ritual origins, supplemented by instructions for offerings to the images. This is illustrated in the fourth- to fifth-century Instructions on Divine Spells by Seven Buddhas and Eight Bodhisattvas (*Qifo bapusa suoshuo datuoluoni shenzhou jing* 七佛八菩薩所說大陀羅尼神呪經, T. 1332), and its sixth-century continuation, Dhāraṇī Miscellany (*Tuoluoni zaji* 陀羅尼雜集, T. 1336). The association between dhāraṇī recitation and the seven Buddhas of the past is also borne out by the early fifth-century Great Vaipulya-dhāraṇī Sūtra (*Dafangdeng tuoluoni jing* 大方等陀羅尼經, T. 1339), offering salvation through visions, spells, and Bodhisattva-cult practices. While innumerable Bodhisattvas of the ten directions respond to the recitation of spells, the earliest collections suggest that many spells and associated rituals were especially affiliated with Avalokiteśvara, some grouped together in special Avalokiteśvara collections. It is in these that image worship through offerings of incense and flowers first makes its appearance.

Dhāraṇī recitation provided deliverance from both this and otherworldly predicaments: healing and redemption, sin absolution, avoidance of inferior rebirths, obtaining rebirth in various Buddha-lands. Ailments to be cured by Avalokiteśvara dhāraṇī rituals include eye pains, impaired limbs and sense organs, fever, madness from demonic possession, boils, fears and pains, stomach upsets, deadly poison, unconsciousness, tongue disease, leprosy, toxic energy, skin disease, and diarrhoea.

The ritual was performed on prescribed dates, after the preparation of a ritual area set up in front of a stupa or monastic retreat and marked out by lamps. The

recitation was preceded by rites of purification, including meditation, ablutions, a change of garments, and the observance of dietary rules.

Instructions were provided for the optional painting of an image on a piece of white cotton, according to rules for representing robes, lotus and water bottle attributes, and hair. In response to a fire offering (*homa* sacrifice), Avalokiteśvara would appear in the flames as depicted. Such manifestations notwithstanding, the author considers the practice of visualization techniques still to be absent from the ceremony at this stage in the ritual's historical development.

The Divine Spell of the Eleven-faced Avalokiteśvara, also partly preserved in the Tibetan Gilgit manuscripts, appeared in China in different versions between the sixth and eighth centuries, among them translations by Xuanzang 玄奘 (c. 600–664) and Amoghavajra 不空 (705–774). Rituals constructed around this figure constitute the beginning of maṇḍala initiations in China. Despite its including instructions on how to carve a wooden image of Avalokiteśvara and lay out the maṇḍala, this ritual is considered to be a fully developed exercise in visualization: the practitioner contemplates (*guannian* 觀念) a full moon emitting light in ten directions from his chest. Surrounded by this light, he recites a mantra; his body then merges with Avalokiteśvara. A physical image, meanwhile, is also placed in the centre of the maṇḍala, where it receives offerings and is brought out for the celebration of the *homa* rite.

Koichi Shinohara offers a circumstantial account of this major new development in the ritual's evolution based on the earliest Chinese version of Eleven-faced Avalokiteśvara spells titled *Shiyimian Guanshiyin shenzhou jing* 十一面觀世音神呪經 and translated c. 570 by Yaśogupta 耶舍崛多 (T. 1070). The opening section of the narrative is framed as a sermon by Śākyamuni. Then Avalokiteśvara speaks out, explaining the transmission, practice, and benefits of the spell: protection of life against diseases, accidents, harm from birds, animals, and magic, remembrance by the Buddha's of the ten directions, freedom from want, triumph over adversaries, avoidance of hell, and rebirth in a Pure Land. The text further contains instructions concerning the calendar (first to fifteenth day of the lunar month), preparation of the ritual space (*daochang* 道場, alternately designated "maṇḍala" or "altar"; *tan* 壇), ablutions, blessings of the bathwater, flowers, oil, sandalwood for the *homa* sacrifice, and offerings presented in the course of an image worship ritual. In the *abhiṣeka* 灌頂 (initiation) where water is poured over the head of the seated candidate, the corresponding maṇḍala has a water bowl in the middle in the place of the central image. The proceedings culminate in the animation of the image, expressing contrasting emotions and character traits on each of its eleven faces, shaking accompanied by thunder, and finally speaking to announce the fulfilment of wishes and congratulate the practitioner on his attainment. Sample wishes are helpfully provided: levitate and reach any destination without leaving one's seat, move freely

among holy beings, be a prince among the keepers of spells, be enabled to follow Avalokiteśvara in one's mortal body. If this ritual does not work to the candidate's satisfaction, an enhanced version using a relic image showered in flowers may be tried. In a closing rite, spells are pronounced for marking boundaries, blessing ashes and mustard seeds scattered in the four directions, and for accompanying a final circumambulation of the image.

The third main scenario discussed in this part consists of initiations into esoteric practices before a maṇḍala. The ceremony for the All-Gathering Maṇḍala is described in the Collected Dhāraṇī Sūtras (*Tuoluoni jijing* 陀羅尼集經, T. 901), translated in 654 by the Indian monk Atikūṭa 阿地瞿多 with the help of the Chinese recorder (*bishou* 筆受) Xuankai 玄楷. According to the preface, this type of ritual had been hitherto unknown in China. Atikūṭa was commissioned to translate the text after having performed the ceremony in 651 at the Huiji monastery 慧日寺 in Chang'an with impressive results. A description of that event is included in fascicle 12. In truth, the Collected Dhāraṇī Sūtras also include fragments from several previously translated texts. In this particular formation, the collection can be said to have come together in China. The resulting textual borrowings and overlaps are meticulously identified in the present work.

Within the narrative framework of the collection, the Eleven-faced Avalokiteśvara introduces the All-Gathering Maṇḍala to the assembled audience attending a sūtra sermon by the Buddha, and then goes on to provide detailed instructions for a ceremony lasting seven days and nights. Much of the ritual's duration is devoted to selecting and securing the site, i.e., the ritual space, constructing the maṇḍala, and preparing the ritual paraphernalia. This space is delineated with poles, ropes, and banners; the outline of the maṇḍala is then marked and decorated with five-coloured powders, with grouped halls and individual emplacements arranged around the seat of the presiding deity (*zuozhu* 座主) in the centre. On the seventh day, the ritual paraphernalia are put in place: gold and silver bowls, jewelled fruit trees, lamps, incense, and food offerings. The initiation rite takes place in the seventh night, following a simple schematic outline: after the deities have been invited to their seats, the blind-folded candidate tosses a flower on the maṇḍala, establishing his affiliation with the deity on whose seat it falls. He is admitted to corresponding mudrā, dhāraṇī, and maṇḍala practices and endowed with "treasures" to wear on a protective spell cord 咒索 (*pratisara*). In the concluding fire ritual, the deities are invited one by one to descend into the fire and dismissed. The ritual space is then dismantled and the maṇḍala effaced.

If the ritual of the All-gathering Maṇḍala in the Collected Dhāraṇī Sūtra seems to have originated in practices of Avalokiteśvara worship, it became in time a more general initiation ceremony, extended notably to Vajra deities. The typology of

maṇḍala ceremonies is largely determined by the fact that dhāraṇī rites evolve into rituals with accompanying mudrās, images, and maṇḍalas dedicated to the worship of a specific deity. The ceremonies were consequently considered as “belonging” to, i.e. being presided by and falling under the protection of that deity who also guaranteed their efficacy. The example of the maṇḍala ceremony of the bodhisattva Vajraṅgarbha 金剛藏, many of whose mudrās and spells served for healing “demon-induced illness” (*guibing* 鬼病), is developed in detail (pp. 37–44).

Part II illustrates this typological distinction. Affiliation with either Avalokiteśvara or the Vajra deities is the main distinguishing feature among the rituals collected in three sūtras (T. 1006, 1080, and 951) that were translated between 706 and 710 C.E. by the southern Indian monk Bodhiruci 菩提流志 (d. 727). They can be divided into two groups according to whether Avalokiteśvara presents the dhāraṇī to the Buddha or the Buddha teaches it to the Vajra deities. These texts also document the gradual transformation of the dhāraṇī sūtra genre through the introduction and development of visualization practices. For example, in Bodhiruci’s version of the Cintāmaṇicakra Dhāraṇī Sūtra (*Ruyilun tuoluoni jing* 如意輪陀羅尼經, T. 1080), previously translated by Yijing 義淨 (638–713) and others, the practice of simply reciting dhāraṇī spells is quintessentially transformed into an act of recitation before a central deity who has first been visualized by the practitioner.

A final phase in the development of the ritual is introduced in Part III. This stage is exemplified by the sūtras associated with the deity Amoghapāśa 不空羂索. These texts were introduced into China with the short Sūtra of the Amoghapāśa Spell originally translated in 587 by Jñānagupta 闍那崛多 (522–600), an Afghan missionary monk resident in China, and translated a second time in 659 by Xuanzang. This sūtra features for the first time instructions for the visualization of syllables. In certain versions, five syllables are correlated with the five elements as well as the parts of the body, five cosmic wheels etc.—remarkably combining entities of Indian and Chinese correlative cosmologies. In others the syllables represent individual deities. In the same Amoghapāśa Spell instructions that introduce the visualization of syllables the name Vairocana 毘盧遮那 also begins to appear. Syllable visualizations subsequently occupied a central position in the Mahāvairocana Sūtra and associated texts. The highest form of dhāraṇī recitation practices examined in this final group of texts was termed “pure” Esoteric teaching in Yixing’s 一行 (683–727) commentary on the Mahāvairocana Sūtra. Amoghavajra’s ritual manuals identify it as a form of Vajraśekhara visualization ritual, designated a yoga practice. The emphasis on the “pure” nature of this form of esoteric teaching became especially influential in Japanese scholarship and practice.

Yixing collaborated during 724–725 as recorder with the Indian monk Śubhakarasiṃha (637–735) in the translation of the Mahāvairocana Sūtra into Chinese. His

commentary includes detailed ritual instructions on the maṇḍala ceremony. The two translators were both familiar with yogic visualization practices and interpreted the Indian sūtra in that light. Beside the term “contemplation,” Yixing employs the expression “transporting the mind” (*yunxin* 運心) for the act of constructing a mental picture, thereby linking maṇḍala visualization again with contemplative yogic practices. Yixing explains that an initiate (*ācārya*) must have thoroughly mastered yoga and be an adept at *yunxin*, which he defines as the capacity to visualize the *samaya* of the maṇḍala deities, i.e., their respective shape, colour, syllable, character, mudra, and other iconographic attributes, while presenting the ritual offerings and uttering the deities’ mantra.

A detailed summary of the day-by-day protocol for the All-Gathering Maṇḍala Ceremony from the Collected Dhāraṇī Sūtras is found in the appendix. The mental images evoked throughout the books are illustrated with schematic depictions from Japanese compilations of Esoteric Buddhist iconographies, complete with corresponding textual citations. Koichi Shinohara’s conclusion also links these iconographies with early temple images in Japan, notably in the Tōdaiji 東大寺 in Nara, an apt demonstration of the far-reaching influence of esoteric ritual. The significance of Shinohara’s contribution indeed extends beyond Esoteric Buddhism in China. The conceptual framework of this teaching emerged from Indian Buddhist and Hindu practices, as well as the post-Vedic culture of *santi*-propitiation and apotropaic ritual. Although the deities and spells were distinctly Buddhist, the influence of esoteric ritual in China reached beyond the Chinese Buddhist community, completely transforming Daoist ritual as well. And while images became the focus of the accomplishment miracle, the rise of ever more sophisticated visualization techniques fundamentally affected the status of icons in all spheres of Chinese religion, raising questions about visual representation, the power of images, the nature of their efficacy, and the psycho-religious dimension of mental projections.

Spells, Images, and Maṇḍalas is a timely contribution to the flourishing field of dhāraṇī research in North America. Columbia University Press and its *Sheng Yen Series in Chinese Buddhist Studies* are to be commended for publishing in 2014 beside *Spells, Images, and Maṇḍalas* a second impressive study in the same area, *The Body Incantatory: Spells and the Ritual Imagination in Medieval Chinese Buddhism* by Paul Copp.

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