Spells, Images, and Maṇḍalas:

Tracing the Evolution of Esoteric

Buddhist Rituals

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A Review of *Spells, Images, and Maṇḍalas: Tracing the Evolution of Esoteric Buddhist Rituals*

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While perhaps not immediately apparent, Koichi Shinohara's newest book is a novel attempt at the history of the *dhāraṇī*[2] in Indian and Chinese Esoteric Buddhism. Armed with a wealth of related texts, Shinohara weaves threads through their various commonalities, highlighting several of the trajectories over which the *dhāraṇī* genre of literature evolved. While an ambitious endeavor, Shinohara's study succeeds beyond its role as a new history of *dhāraṇī* literature; it ultimately succeeds in uncovering the various connections between *dhāraṇī*s, the worship of

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[2] *Dhāraṇī* are generally analogous with magical chants or spells, most frequently recited for this-worldly benefits. This genre of Buddhist literature dates as far back as the third century C.E.

images, the evolution of maṇḍalas, and formalized Esoteric ritual manu-
als.

The chapter divisions within the first part of *Spells, Images, and
Maṇḍalas* are largely based upon Shinohara's reconstructed history of the
evolution of Esoteric rituals. As the title suggests, he begins with
"spells"—that is to say, *dhāraṇī.* Rather than beginning with the first his-
torically known examples, however, Shinohara's first chapter focuses on
a particular *dhāraṇī* text. This text, the *Qifo Bapusa Suoshuo Datuoluoni
Zhenzhou Jing*, tentatively dates to between the fourth and fifth centuries
and is purportedly based on an Indian original. It appears twice in Chi-
nese translation, both in later *dhāraṇī* collectanea. Most important to
Shinohara's study, however, is the fact that practitioners believed these
dhāraṇī produced a simple vision of the corresponding deity when suc-
cessful. The worship of images, Shinohara argues, came later, and this
text is among the last predating this event. Shinohara then discusses a
group of Avalokiteśvara *dhāraṇī*s that were also appropriated into one of
these collectanea, especially one instance in which a painted image of
Avalokiteśvara is required, though the relationship between the vision of
the deity and the necessity of the image is ambiguous.

This ambiguity within Avalokiteśvara *dhāraṇī*s dovetails perfectly
into Shinohara's second chapter, which corresponds to "images" in his
title. It focuses on another transitional text, referred to as the *Shiyimian
Guanshiyin Shenzhou.* This slightly later *dhāraṇī* text centered on the Elev-
en-Faced Avalokiteśvara survives in four varying forms, the earliest of
which dates to around 570. Shinohara exposes their difference as a case
study to determine how one basic ritual can evolve throughout time. By
the mid-eighth century, this particular Avalokiteśvara ritual evolved
from a basic *dhāraṇī* ritual to include elements of image worship, a
maṇḍala initiation rite, as well as visualization-related practices (the last
two of which are detailed in chapters three and four). Shinohara conjec-
tures that an analytical view of these texts betrays a process of evolution
that applies beyond a single text. Rather, it demonstrates the evolution

towards Esoteric Buddhist ritual in general, from *dhāraṇī* recitation to image worship, leading eventually to the visualization practices that characterize standard Esoteric Buddhism.

Together, chapters three and four complete the title of the work with a transition to "maṇḍala." These chapters center on a *dhāraṇī* compendium compiled around 654 by Atikūṭa called the *Tuoluoni Jijing*, focusing specifically on the All-Gathering Maṇḍala described within and its accompanying ceremony. These two elements are the inner core of Shinohara's study. While the All-Gathering Maṇḍala is certainly not the first Esoteric Buddhist maṇḍala, it is the earliest-known attempt to synthesize and correlate the various deities of the Esoteric pantheon into a single comprehensive maṇḍala. Shinohara notes that this particular maṇḍala "also marked a fundamentally new departure: rituals closely linked with individual deities, once 'gathered' together, created a new awareness of a comprehensive and coherent Esoteric Buddhist tradition" (36). While Tejorāśi (Buddhoṣṇīṣa) is named the central deity of the All-Gathering Maṇḍala, the *Tuoluoni Jijing* allows for any Tathāgata or Prajñāpāramitā deity to replace him. However, despite being classified as the wrong type of deity, the Eleven-Faced Avalokiteśvara can also serve as the central deity. Dovetailing these chapters with his second, Shinohara convincingly demonstrates that Atikūṭa was particularly indebted to the earliest version of the *Shiyimian Guanshiyin Shenzhou*, from which the latter borrowed heavily. Shinohara leaves no doubt that the growth of the *Tuoluoni Jijing* depended chiefly on the types of Avalokiteśvara *dhāraṇī*s analyzed in chapter two.

These two chapters also explore a range of wider topics that require mentioning. In chapter three, Shinohara also analyzes the variety of Esoteric Buddhist practices during the mid-seventh century using the *Tuoluoni Jijing* entry on the deity Vajragarbha as a case study. He also includes a general typology of maṇḍalas, based on the data appearing in the *Tuoluoni Jijing.* Chapter four juxtaposes the All-Gathering Maṇḍala ceremony against the Indian Puṣyasnāna ceremony (as well as general

maṇḍapa and *śāntī* rituals), demonstrating that the All-Gathering Maṇḍala ceremony corresponds greatly to these non-Buddhist rituals.

Part two of Shinohara's opus transitions into the early eighth century, with the discussion of more ritually organized *dhāraṇī* sūtras. Chapter five details the evolution of three different *dhāraṇī* texts up to their translations by the monk Bodhiruci (fl. 693-727). Shinohara first traces the evolution of Bodhiruci's *Guangda Baolouge Shanzhu Mimi Tuoluoni Jing* (T. 1006) by comparing it to its forerunner, the *Mouli Mantuoluo Zhoujing* (T. 1007). In comparing these texts, he exposes a complicated reconfiguration of the *Mouli Mantuoluo Zhoujing* into a more coherently organized scripture. Shinohara continues by unearthing the relationship of Bodhiruci's *Ruyilun Tuoluoni Jing* (T. 1080) to three earlier translations by Yijing (635-713), Śikṣānanda (652-710), and Ratnacintana (d. 721).[3] Here, Shinohara shows that Bodhiruci's translation introduces several major changes, such as reciting divine names and *dhāraṇī*s being substituted for visualization practices, and an elaborate maṇḍala, added together with an extensive ceremony. He explains how a simpler *dhāraṇī* recitation was reconstructed into an elaborate and formal visualization ritual. Finally, Shinohara takes up Bodhiruci's *Yizi Foding Lunwang Jing* (T. 951) and his *Wu Foding Sanmei Tuoluoni Jing* (T. 952), the former of which contains instruction on initiation into a maṇḍala. This particular maṇḍala closely parallels the All-Gathering Maṇḍala of the *Tuoluoni Jijing*, though—like the *Ruyilun Tuoluoni Jing*—the latter version contains a visualization ritual. Furthermore, Shinohara notes that an additional Bodhiruci translation, the *Qianshou Qianyan Guanshiyin Pusa Lao Tuoluoni Shenjing* (T. 1058) even references Atikūṭa's All-Gathering Maṇḍala ceremony, bringing this chapter full circle.

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[3] Respectively, the *Foshuo Guanzizai Pusa Ruyi Xin Tuoluoni Zhoujing* (T. 1081), the *Guanshiyin Pusa Mimizang Ruyilun Tuoluoni Shenzhou Jing* (T. 1082), and the *Guanshiyin Pusa Ruyimoni Tuoluoni Jing* (T. 1083).

In his analysis of the Amoghapāśa-Avalokiteśvara *dhāraṇī* sūtras,[4] Shinohara continues to analyze the reformulating of simple *dhāraṇī* around the worship of images. Two early versions of the text parallel the transition between pure recitation and image-centered practice, as seen in Shinohara's above analysis of four *Shiyimian Guanshiyin Shenzhou* variants. However, the chronologically subsequent Amoghapāśa *dhāraṇī* sūtras include sections on creating images and maṇḍalas. By the time of Bodhiruci's translation, however, this text has expanded to thirty fascicles, including a host of mantras, maṇḍala initiation ceremonies, and practices for visualizing seed syllables—each of which become important in the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* and its commentary. After examining several visualization passages, he concludes that the All-Gathering Maṇḍala seems to have originated within the Avalokiteśvara cult, and that its structure seems to have been adapted for use in later Esoteric rituals.

In part three, Shinohara progresses steadily towards the mature visualization rituals appearing in Esoteric Buddhism exemplified by the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* and the *Sarva-tathāgata-tattva-saṅgraha*. Chapter seven focuses not on the well-known *Mahāvairocana*, but instead on sections of Yixing's (683-727) valuable commentary to this text (T. 1796)—especially within relation to its maṇḍala initiation rites. Shinohara notes the numerous parallels between the All-Gathering Maṇḍala ceremony and the maṇḍala ceremony appearing in the *Guhya-tantra*—a text cited by Yixing in his commentary, but only extant in a later version attributed to Amoghavajra (T. 897). While the details of the extant *Guhya-tantra* remain different, there is a clear relationship between this text and the All-Gathering Maṇḍala. Shinohara also notes Yixing's frequent citations of the *Susiddhikara-sūtra* as a source for his commentary. However, the majority of this chapter is devoted to examining the reshaping of the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* maṇḍala ceremonies in Yixing's commentary to ac-

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[4] These include the *Bukong Juansuo Zhoujing* (T. 1093), the *Bukong Juansuo Shenzhou Xinjing* (T. 1094), the *Bukong Juansuo Tuoluoni Zizaiwang Zhoujing* (T. 1097), the Foshuo Bukong Juansuo Tuoluoni Yigui Jing (T. 1098), and Bodhiruci's *Bukong Juansuo Shenbian Zhenyan Jing* (T. 1092).

count for various elaborate visualization practices and the transformation of the interpretation of specific rituals throughout texts. Particularly important in terms of the latter is the changing interpretation of the initiatory rite in which a candidate throws a flower onto a maṇḍala.

The final chapter of *Spells, Images, and Maṇḍalas* takes up still later ritual developments appearing in ritual manuals (*yigui*) said to have been translated by Amoghavajra (705-774), many of which relate to the *Sarva-tathāgata-tattva-saṅgraha* system, rather than that of the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*. Shinohara takes as his focus two specific ritual manuals relating to Cintāmaṇicakra-Avalokiteśvara,[5] and demonstrates how rituals of *dhāraṇī* recitation continued to evolve through the eighth century. In comparing these manuals with an earlier variant, Shinohara again exposes a clear transition towards visualization ritual. Next, Shinohara analyzes a number of mantras and visualization practices across ritual manuals, culminating in his assertion that the first of Amoghavajra's two manuals under discussion served as a prototype for other authors to create ritual manuals to individual deities. The second manual is closely related to the *Sarva-tathāgata-tattva-saṅgraha* system, betrayed by the mantras it employs. In examining these manuals, Shinohara extracts the stages by which these manuals developed, while highlighting the importance that the outline of the All-Gathering Maṇḍala played throughout Esoteric Buddhist writing.

Altogether, Shinohara's reconstruction of the history of Esoteric ritual is awe-inspiring. Situating Atikūṭa's *Tuoluoni Jijing* and its All-Gathering Maṇḍala within the ritual context of early Esoteric Buddhism easily serves as the book's most visible contribution to the scholarly understanding of magic and ritual with Buddhism. Paths can now be forged from *dhāraṇī*s to image worship to maṇḍalas and finally to visualization rituals. Yet throughout his work, Shinohara consistently draws great interest to the otherwise virtually ignored All-Gathering Maṇḍala. Further,

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[5] These texts are *the Guanzizai Pusa Ruyilun Niansong Yigui* (T. 1085) and the *Guanzizai Pusa Ruyilun Yuga* (T. 1086).

the book only hints at the All-Gathering Maṇḍala's potential in re-contextualizing the entire Esoteric maṇḍala tradition, from smaller maṇḍalas centered on minor deities to monstrous arrangements such as the Garbhodbhava-maṇḍala.

Reconstructing the evolution of early Esoteric Buddhism is far from the book's only achievement. It also re-forges the scholarly understanding of Esoteric deities and their relationships. For example, Shinohara illuminates—very subtly—the essential role played by the cult of Avalokiteśvara within Esoteric circles before the compilation of the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra.* Shinohara also goes out of his way to discuss the emerging pantheon of "Vajra deities," their assimilation into Esoteric literature, their changing relationships with the so-called "Avalokiteśvara deities," and their eventual prominence within later genres of Esoteric literature.

While certainly an excellent foray into the world of Esoteric lore, Shinohara's opus is limited in that it spends little time relating its discussion to the larger Buddhist context. Shinohara's chapter on Yixing's commentary to the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* directly connects the text to the All-Gathering Maṇḍala ceremony, but only traces the trajectories by which certain elements evolve. More work remains to be done regarding Atikūṭa's All-Gathering Maṇḍala and how it relates to well-known Esoteric elements such as the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*'s Garbhodbhava-maṇḍala, or the various maṇḍalas of the *Sarva-tathāgata-tattva-saṅgraha.* Shinohara has discovered a direct connection between Atikūṭa and these more developed works, but stopped short of determining exactly how dependent they are on the All-Gathering Maṇḍala and its ceremony.

At its core, *Spells, Images, and Maṇḍalas* is a meritorious undertaking that fills a number of academic voids in the history of early Buddhism. Shinohara's work is nothing short of commendable, and blazes a much-needed trail for the scholarly analysis of chronologically later Buddhist esoterica—especially the still-unexplored foundations of classic

Esoteric works such as the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*, the *Sarva-tathāgata-tattva-saṅgraha*, and their various maṇḍalas.

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