

## Studies in Dhāraṇī Literature I: Revisiting the Meaning of the Term *Dhāraṇī*

Ronald M. Davidson

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**Abstract** The Mahāyāna Buddhist term *dhāraṇī* has been understood to be problematic since the mid-nineteenth century, when it was often translated as “magical phrase” or “magical formula” and was considered to be emblematic of tantric Buddhism. The situation improved in contributions by Bernhard, Lamotte and Braarvig, and the latter two suggested the translation be “memory,” but this remained difficult in many environments. This paper argues that *dhāraṇī* is a function term denoting “codes/coding,” so that the category *dhāraṇī* is polysemic and context-sensitive. After reviewing Western scholarship, the article discusses *dhāraṇī* semantic values and issues of synonymy, the early applications of mantras, the sonic/graphic background of coding in India extended into Buddhist applications, and the soteriological ideology of *dhāraṇīs* along with some of its many varieties.

**Keywords** *Dhāraṇī* · Mantra · Mahāyāna · Tantric Buddhism · Coding

### Abbreviations

- T *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*. Takakusu Junjirō and Watanabe Kai-kyoku, (Eds.), 1924–35. Tokyo: Daizōkyōkai.
- To sDe-dge canon numbers from Ui, Hakuju, et al. (Eds.) 1934. *A Complete Catalogue of the Tibetan Buddhist Canons (BKaḥ-ḥgyur and Bstan-ḥgyur)*. Sendai: Tōhoku Imperial University.

The Mahāyāna Buddhist term *dhāraṇī* has been understood to be problematic since the mid-nineteenth century, when it was often translated as something like “magical phrase” or “magical formula” and was considered to be

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R. M. Davidson (✉)  
College of Arts and Sciences, Department of Religious Studies, Fairfield University,  
344 Donnarumma Hall, Fairfield, CT 06824-5195, USA  
e-mail: RDavidson@mail.fairfield.edu

emblematic of tantric Buddhism. Even then, there was uneasiness voiced at such a specific definition and esoteric assignment, neither of which accorded well with the values associated with *dhāraṇīs* and their position in Mahāyānist literature, which consistently represents advanced bodhisattvas as having obtained *dhāraṇī* (*dhāraṇīpratilabdha*) or entering through the method of *dhāraṇīs* (*dhāraṇīmukhapraveśa*). Most particularly, the relationship of a soteriology of *dhāraṇī* to the practice of the recitation of mantras and the memorization of texts was not well mapped out. The situation improved with later scholarship—particularly notable in contributions by Bernhard, Lamotte and Braarvig—but the question of the semantic fields, origin, use and eventual disposition of *dhāraṇīs* continue to be difficult, partially because so many of the basic texts no longer exist in any Indic language.

In distinction to the position of previous scholarship, this paper will argue that *dhāraṇī* is a function term denoting “coding.” Consequently, the category *dhāraṇī* is polysemic and context-sensitive, capable of being applied within all the various activities so often included within the method of *dhāraṇī*: memory, recitation, protective mantras, inspiration, summary texts, and extended Mahāyānist works. This article will first summarize the received understanding of the discipline and its problems, then examine the semantics fields of *dhāraṇī* as well as its various categories and significations. In the following discussion, I must beg the reader’s indulgence in some measure. The complexity of *dhāraṇīs* in Mahāyānist circles requires that many of the questions of pragmatics associated with *dhāraṇīs*—especially their social, ritual and literary values—will have to be deferred to another time. Here, I wish to limit myself to a reflection on the most important doctrinal and theoretical models associated with *dhāraṇīs*.

### A Short Stroll down Memory Lane: *Dhāraṇī* in Western Scholarship

A summary of the Western notice of *dhāraṇīs* would seem in order, given that some scholars’ findings will be contested or refined in this study. Now it is curious that, for a variety of historical factors, the category of *dhāraṇīs* were to come rather late to the notice of Western scholars, even if the Buddhist use of “incantations” was cited early, as by John of Plano Carpini (1245–47).<sup>1</sup> He was one of the early Franciscans on missions from either European kings or from the Pope himself, but a later missionary, William of Rubruck in 1254, noted that the Uighurs chanted what was apparently a Buddhist phrase; this he transcribed as “*Om man baccam*,” and scholars have generally identified this as a form of the well-know OM MAṆI PADME HŪM.<sup>2</sup> William noted that Mongols have copied the Uighur script and that “They make great use of

<sup>1</sup> Dawson (1955, p. 12). The observations attributed to Marco Polo appear less cogent than those written by Plano decades before; Komroff (1930, pp. 63, 141, 190).

<sup>2</sup> Dawson (1955, p. 139). It is possible that an earlier notice was made by Simon of Saint-Quentin, but I do not have access to Vincent of Beauvais’ *Speculum Historiale*, which includes the only surviving fragments from the Latin text of Simon’s *Historia Tartarorum*; see Guzman (1971, 1974) on this material.

paper and characters for their sorcery, consequently their temples are full of short sentences hanging up,” which is one characteristic use of *dhāraṇīs*, but this is also done with other prayers as well.<sup>3</sup> Be that as it may, by the time the Jesuit missionary Ippolito Desideri completed his *Relazione de ‘viaggi all’Indie e al Thibet*, as some manuscripts are entitled, the meaning of OMMANĪ PADME HŪM had already become a topic of discussion and Desideri corrects some of the gross misunderstandings about this polysemic phrase.<sup>4</sup>

However, it was not until the British became interested in Nepal that the surviving remnants of Sanskritic Buddhist practice became investigated in any detail, and with it the categories of Sanskrit literature. Even then, the early imperial agents, such as Colonel William Kirkpatrick or Francis Buchanan Hamilton, perhaps unsurprisingly, did not mention *dhāraṇīs* specifically in their cursory discussions of religious practice.<sup>5</sup> It remained for one of the most remarkable men in the nineteenth century to be the first to describe them—Brian Houghton Hodgson. Hodgson relates that he was involved with a Bajrāchārya, evidently one Amṛtānanda, who in their discussions through 1826–28 provided him with extensive information about Buddhist literature of Amṛtānanda’s circle.<sup>6</sup> In 1828, Hodgson published his initial findings, and assiduously began to collect manuscripts in Sanskrit and other Indic languages, often at great personal expense; his collection formed the basis for much of nineteenth century Buddhist studies.<sup>7</sup> About *dhāraṇīs* in particular, Hodgson had a few scattered remarks. In his “Notices of the Languages, Literature, and Religion of Nepāl and Tibet,” he lists some important *dhāraṇīs*, and then provides a short definition: “Dhāranīs, though, derived from the Upadesa, are exoteric. They are short significant forms of prayer, similar to the Panchānga of the Brahmans. Whoever constantly repeats or wears [made up in little lockets] a dharīni (*sic*), possessed a charmed life.”<sup>8</sup> The Upadesa he references is an application of the old Buddhist literary category to esoteric literature, and he had already identified them as equivalent to tantra, except that the *dhāraṇīs* were not of restricted circulation.<sup>9</sup>

The same year, he published his “Sketch of Buddhism, derived from the Bauddha Scriptures of Nepāl,” in which he reproduces a lengthy list of titles of Buddhist literature and includes Amṛtānanda’s answer to twenty questions about Buddhist literature and practice. Question XIII asks the good Bajrāchārya about sacred writings, and Amṛtānanda responds that the Nepalese have

<sup>3</sup> Dawson (1955, p. 140); compare Komroff, ed. *Travels of Marco Polo*, p. 174.

<sup>4</sup> De Filippi (1937, pp. 294–296); see Jong (1974, p. 66). A useful biography of Desideri is Bargiacchi 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Kirkpatrick (1811) *passim*; Hamilton (1819, pp. 34–36).

<sup>6</sup> See Waterhouse (2004, pp. 41–43); Amṛtānanda was responsible for copying the ancient *Bud-dhacarita* ms., resulting in its partial destruction, and for filling in chapters to the text; see Johnston (1936, pp. x–xii).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Burnouf (1844, ii–v, 1–15, 574–588); Jong (1974, p. 72), gives little credit to Hodgson, except as a source of manuscripts; that was certainly not Burnouf’s testimony.

<sup>8</sup> Reprinted in Hodgson (1874, p. 18, n.†).

<sup>9</sup> Hodgson (1874, p. 15).

nine *Purānas*, called “the nine *Dharmas*.”... Besides these *Purānas*, we received *Tantras* and *Dhāranīs* from Śākya Sinha. ... The *Dhāranīs* were extracted from the *Tantras*, and are similar in nature to the *Guhya*, or mysterious rites, of the *Siva-Mārgīs*. A *Dhāranī* is never less than eight *slokas* or more than 500; in the beginning and middle of which are written the “*Vīja Mantra*,” and at the end, the “*Phūl Stotra*,” or the *Māhātmya*, *i.e.*, what desire may be accomplished or what business achieved by the perusal of that *Dhāranī*; such, for example, as obtaining children—advantage over an enemy—rain—or merely the approbation of Buddha. There are probably a thousand *Dhāranīs*.<sup>10</sup>

In the answer to his Question XX to Amṛtānanda, Hodgson reproduces what seems actually to be his own assessment as to the real purpose of the *Tantras* and *dhāraṇīs*, “The *Tantras* and *Dhāranīs*, which ought to be read for their own salvation, they [Nepalese *Buddhamārgīs*] read only for the increase of their stipend and from a greedy desire of money.”<sup>11</sup>

Burnouf worked assiduously with the manuscripts Hodgson had sent to Paris and was disturbed about the position of *dhāraṇīs* in Buddhist literature; he voiced his understanding in a manner that well sums up the problem as it still comes down to us:

I have said above that one encounters in the *Tantras*, the *Mantras* and *Dhāraṇīs*, or magical formulas, which constitute in the eyes of the devotees the most important parts of these books. I have not been able to discover the difference that distinguishes a *Mantra* from a *Dhāraṇī*, unless it is only that the *Mantra* always has appeared to me to be shorter than the *Dhāraṇī*, which is often quite developed.<sup>12</sup>

Unlike Hodgson, however, Burnouf also recognized that *dhāraṇīs* are encountered more widely than simply in the tantric corpus.

Already in comparing the simple *Sūtras* to the more developed *Sūtras*, I have said that the latter have submitted to the influence of ideas familiar to the *Tantras*, at least in that they have included *Dhāraṇīs*, or magical formulas, done to ensure the incalculable advantages to those who read the books wherein the *Dhāraṇīs* are found. This alliance of the *Dhāraṇīs* with the *Mahāyāna Sūtras* merits to be remarked further with more of a discussion. In the first place, *Dhāraṇīs* did not exist for the primitive *Sūtras*, where I have only recognized a single trace. That unique trace is to be found, as I have said above, in the legend of Śārdūkakarna, where Śākyamuni reveals to Ānanda the *Mantra* of six letters... In the second

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>12</sup> Burnouf (1844, p. 540), “J’ai dit plus haut qu’on rencontra dans les *Tantras* des *Mantras* et *Dhāraṇīs* ou formules magiques, lesquelles constituent aux yeux de dévots une des parties les plus importantes de ces livres. Je n’ai pu découvrir la différence qui distingue un *Mantra* d’une *Dhāraṇī*, si ce n’est que le *Mantra* m’a toujours paru être plus court que la *Dhāraṇī*, laquelle est quelquefois très-développée.

place, the presence of Dhāraṇīs in the Mahāyāna sūtras is able to be explained in two ways: Either the Dhāraṇīs are contemporaneous to the redaction of the text, or they have been introduced after they were completed. It is difficult to decide between these two hypotheses... I prefer nonetheless the former solution to the second, and I think that the Dhāraṇīs have not been added after the completion of the texts in which they occur.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, Burnouf wrestled with the same questions that others have often considered: the position of *dhāraṇīs* respective to the corpus of sūtras and tantras, but unlike Hodgson, and many since, he realized that such phrases—however they were understood and employed—belonged as much to Mahāyāna literature as to anything else. Shortly thereafter (1860), the German translation to Wassiljew's survey of Buddhism was published, and he also acknowledged that the *dhāraṇīs* were widely distributed in the sūtras, but that they foreshadowed the development of the tantras, which came after the earliest of *dhāraṇīs*.<sup>14</sup>

Waddell, in an important article that moved the discussion beyond the evidence provided by previous authors, insisted on a model of a superstitious populace needing protective spells. His paper provided a working definition,

The “*Dhāraṇī*” I would define as a “Buddhist spell of stereotyped formulas, an exoteric device of animistic origin, adapted by the Buddhists for the purpose primarily of protecting (*paritā*) superstitious humanity against specific fears and dangers in the external world by the outward means to which it had long accustomed”. It is the Buddhist analogue of the *Mantra* or secret sacrificial spell of Brahmanism, from which parent-religion it was directly derived eclectically, along with most of the other elements of Buddhism; and ‘*Mantra*’ is still occasionally used to designate the sets of cabalistic words within the larger *Dhāraṇī*.<sup>15</sup>

Suffice it to say that when Winternitz revised his *History of Indian Literature* for the English language publication in Calcutta in 1927, he summed up the understanding of his day.

<sup>13</sup> Burnouf (1844, pp. 541–542): Déjà en comparant les Sūtras simples au Sūtras développés, j'ai dit que ces derniers avaient subi l'influence des idées familières aux Tantras, du moins en ce qu'ils ont admis des Dhāraṇīs ou formules magiques, faites pour assurer des avantages incalculables à ceux qui lisent les livres où on les trouve. Cette alliance des Dhāraṇīs avec les Sūtras Mahāyānas mérite d'être remarquée sous plus d'un rapport. En premier lieu elle n'existe pas pour les Sūtras primatifs, où je n'en ai reconnu qu'une seule trace. Cette trace unique se trouve, ainsi que je l'ai dit plus haut, dans la légende de Ćārdūla karṇa, où Ćākyamuni révèle à Ānanda le Mantra de six lettres... En second lieu, la présence de Dhāraṇīs dans les Mahāyāna sūtras peut s'expliquer de deux manières: ou bien les Dhāraṇīs y sont contemporaines de la rédaction du texte, ou bien elle ont été introduites après coup. Il est bien difficile de décider entre ces deux hypothèses... Je préfère cependant la première solution à la seconde, et je pense que les Dhāraṇīs n'ont pas été ajoutées après coup dans les livres où elles ont pris place.

<sup>14</sup> Wassiljew (1860, pp. 193–197).

<sup>15</sup> Waddell (1912, p. 156).

The Dhāraṇīs or “Protective Spells” constitute a large and important part of Mahāyānist literature. The need for incantations, benedictions and magic spells, which was supplied in the very earliest times by the Vedic mantras, especially those of the Atharvaveda, played far too great a part in the mind of the Indian people, for Buddhism to have been able to dispense with them. We have already seen how the Buddhists of Ceylon used some of their most beautiful Suttas as Parittās or Pirits. In a similar manner the Mahāyāna Buddhists in India also transformed some of the Sūtras themselves into magic formulas. In addition to these, there were also endless invocations to the divine beings of the Buddhist and Hindu origin, so numerous in the Mahāyāna and—last, but not least—the mysterious words and syllables already so popular in the sacrificial mysticism of the Yajur veda. The protective and salutary magical power of a Dhāraṇī is primarily due to its containing some piece of wisdom *in nuce*, and not to any occult mystical significance of the words and syllables, though it is true that the Dhāraṇīs do also include “magic words” (mantrapadāni) of this kind.<sup>16</sup>

Winternitz was aware, in fact, of the complicated relationship between larger texts and *dhāraṇīs*, the former often containing the latter, but continued to try to demonstrate that the *dhāraṇīs* were primarily magical spells, albeit sometimes with kernels of wisdom literature found therein. For Winternitz, though, the magical spells of the *dhāraṇīs* led easily into the literature of the Mantrayāna, and he was adamant that there was not a “rigid boundry-line between the Mahāyāna and the Mantrayāna-Vajrayāna.”<sup>17</sup>

Winternitz was not alone in emphasizing the Mahāyānist associations of the *dhāraṇīs*. In 1931, Arthur Waley went even further by protesting the automatic association of what he called Dhāraṇī-Buddhism with the esoteric Buddhism known in East Asia.

Just as European writers have tended to connect the practice of Dhyāna solely with the establishment of a separate Dhyāna sect, so they have also tended to connect the use of *dhāraṇī* (magic word-formulae) only with the esoteric doctrines of the Vairocana sect, which did not become established in China until so late a date as the eighth century. In fact, however, scriptures centering round the use of spells figure very largely in the lists of works translated in Chinese even as early as the second century A.D.<sup>18</sup>

Like many writers before, Waley also connected *dhāraṇīs* with the appropriation of “pagan folk-lore” and missionary activity, as well as their meditative value as objects of contemplation.

Whether these writers acknowledge a necessary association with tantrism—and most do not—they emphasize the specific purposes, benefits, and incomprehensible nature of the “magical formulae,” as they were so often called. The

<sup>16</sup> Winternitz (1927, vol. 2, pp. 380–381).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 389.

<sup>18</sup> Waley (1931, p. xiii).

first major work to call into question the magical formula designation was that of Bernhard, based on work with manuscripts from Gilgit and Central Asia. Bernhard located a specific formula involving certain clearly non-Indoeuropean words: *ine | mīne | dapphe | dadapphe* |.<sup>19</sup> He was able to show that variations on this formula had a long history in Sarvāstivāda, Vaibhāṣika, Mūlasarvāstivāda, and Mahāyāna literature, including representative texts from the Abhidharma, Sūtra and the Vinaya, as well as commentaries on various works. Bernhard argued that the formula was derived from a Dravidian summary of the Four Noble Truths and reintegrated into Sanskritic ritual, whether part of a *vidyā* (spell), a mantra, or included in a *dhāraṇī*. Thus, while these related strings of phrases may render a Dravidian summary of the four truths, in different contexts they have been granted various genre designations, seemingly based on the community background of the classifier. And while Bernhard suggests that other *dhāraṇīs* may have been contracted forms (Stützen) of doctrinal phrases, he is not optimistic about extending this analysis to all the various mantras, vidyās and so forth that are encountered in Buddhist literature.<sup>20</sup>

While acknowledging the efforts of previous scholars, Étienne Lamotte sought to break from the necessary association of *dhāraṇī* with mantras in the first and fourth volume of his magnum opus, *Le Traité de la grand Vertu de Sagesse*. Because *dhāraṇī* is a term often invoked in the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature, Lamotte sought to discover the source of its terminology by building on the *Dazhi dulun* (大智度論) discussion apocryphally attributed to Nāgārjuna, but probably by either Kumārajīva or one of his immediate predecessors. In this commentary, the commentator is asked what is this *dhāraṇī* associated with the perfection of insight? The answer is that *dhāraṇī* means either to support (*dhāraṇā*) or to restrain (*vidhāraṇā*), the former in the case of wholesome qualities leading to awakening and the latter in the unwholesome qualities.<sup>21</sup> Later, in one of his lengthy notes for which he is justly famous, Lamotte puts forward his own position.

The *Treatise* returns here to the [topic of] Dhāraṇī already studied above (in vol. 1). It is not a mantra, a magical formula, properly speaking, as it is generally translated; it is in the first place the memorization of the teachings of *all* the Buddhas. That is moreover how the Tibetans and the Chinese have understood the term; the former render it with *gzung* from the root ‘*dzin-pa* “to lay hold of, to seize”; the latter have transcribed it by the characters *tuólúóní* 陀羅尼 or *tuóliánní* 陀憐尼 or translated it by *zǒngchí* 總持 “entirely retain.”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Bernhard (1967, p. 149).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>21</sup> *Dazhi dulun* T.1509.25.95c3–96a1; Lamotte (1944–80, vol. 1, p.317).

<sup>22</sup> Lamotte (1944–80, vol. 4, p. 1854): *Le Traité* revient ici sur la Dhāraṇī déjà étudiée plus haut. Elle n’est pas à proprement parler un *mantra*, une formule magique, comme on traduit généralement; elle est au premier chef la mémorisation de enseignements de *tous* les Buddha. C’est bien ainsi que les Tibétains et les Chinois ont compris le terme: les premiers la rendent par *gzun* de la racine *ḥdzin pa* «to lay hold of, to seize»; les seconds la transcrivent par les caractères *t’o-lo-ni* 陀羅尼 ou *t’o-lien-ni* 陀憐尼 ou la traduisent par *tsong-tch’e* 總持 «totalement retenir».



Lamotte goes on to describe the differences between the *dhāraṇī* and another term with which it is often placed in compound, concentration (*samādhi*). In doing so, he adopts the *Mahāyānasūtrāḥkāra*'s tripartite division between weak, middling, and great *dhāraṇī*, and, at the end of this theoretical architecture, admits that *dhāraṇī* included mantra. However, Lamotte also argued that accomplished bodhisattvas were not supposed to use mantras, according to statements in the *Prajñāpāramitā* scriptures.<sup>23</sup> This use, he attributes to the apotropaic value of the Mahāyāna scriptures, but he believes this application of *dhāraṇī* but a secondary formulation and that the primary significance of the term is in the memorization of the scriptures.

In distinction to the Sūtras of the Tripiṭaka, which originally only had pedagogical value, the Mahāyānasūtras do not retain exclusively the teachings of the Buddhas, but also contain innumerable magical virtues, which assure their adherents immediate spiritual and material advantages. These are, properly speaking, the 'protections' (*paritrā*), the 'safeguards' (*rakṣā*), the *Dhāraṇī*. With an entirely natural extension of the meaning, the word *dhāraṇī*, initially conceived as the memorization of the teachings of the Buddhas by the bodhisattvas, here designates the sacred texts where they are consigned and which, in consideration of their marvelous effects, become an object of cultus (*pūjā*).<sup>24</sup>

Lamotte's point seems clear. His understanding of the category *dhāraṇī* was that it began as the capacity of bodhisattvas to memorize the sūtras of the Buddhas, which had magical qualities of practical benefits for those following them. They became the object of cultic practice only when the material benefits overcame the spiritual realities. In his estimation, the intrusion of the 'little tradition' employing mantras as vehicles for popular devotionism violated the spirit of the monastic prohibition against addiction to rites and practices (*śīlavrataparāmarśa*).

A somewhat similar approach has been taken by Jens Braarvig, whose article on *dhāraṇī* has been quite influential. Braarvig indicates that there were devotional trends along with the intellectual in the communities, but in the instance of *dhāraṇī* the primary description is concerned with the memorization of syllables. After reviewing some of the discussions found in sūtras, Braarvig sums up the problem with Lamotte's position.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Lamotte (1944–80, vol. 4, p. 1862).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 1863: A la différence des Sūtra du Tripiṭaka qui n'ont originellement qu'une valeur didactique, les Mahāyānasūtra ne renferment pas seulement les enseignements des Buddha, mais détiennent encore d'innombrable vertus magiques qui assurent à leurs adhérents des avantages spirituels et matériels immédiats. Ce sont à proprement parler des «Protections» (*paritrā*), des «Sauvegardes» (*rakṣā*), des *Dhāraṇī*. Par un glissement de sens tout naturel, le mot *dhāraṇī*, conçu initialement comme la mémorisation des enseignements des Buddha par les Bodhisattva, désigne ici les textes sacrés où ils sont consignés et qui, eu égard à leurs effets merveilleux, deviennent un objet de culte (*pūjā*).

<sup>25</sup> Braarvig (1985, p. 19).



All this should point to the translation [of *dhāraṇī* as] “memory.” But, as is well known, Mahāyāna literature contains volume after volume of seemingly meaningless strings of syllables, associated with *dhāraṇī*, to be recited for magical purposes. This has led buddhologists more often than not to translate *dhāraṇī* as “magical formula” or the like. This, though, does not fit well with the obvious connotation of memory.

Braarvig reviews some of these “seemingly meaningless strings of syllables,” and determines that the syllables must have been considered doctrinal summaries, which provided for bodhisattvas a variety of mnemonic devices to be employed for the purposes of memorization and eloquence (*pratibhāna*). As Lamotte had done before, Braarvig cites a well-known four-fold stratification of *dhāraṇī* in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* to validate this range of signification, a stratification that will be reconsidered below. Braarvig then argues that the *dhāraṇī* studied by Bernhard was a summary of the doctrine in a Dravidian language, and proposed that the systematic summary of doctrine we find in every tradition was represented in the Mahāyāna by the term *dhāraṇī*. He follows Lamotte in pointing out that the Chinese translation indicates a “summary” and “a support,” so putting these together would seem a simple process. He does admit, however, that not everything employed as a *dhāraṇī* can sustain this meaning, and invokes the tried-and-true model of religious degradation to explain the intrusion of mantras into rhetoric and inspiration.<sup>26</sup>

Most Buddhist mantras, however, especially in later times, were hardly employed as summaries of doctrine, but, rather, as aids to concentration and as magical means for protection, as, e.g., in the third and fourth *dhāraṇī* of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, whose words have no meaning. But *dhāraṇī* is also in the period in question closely connected with concentration, samādhi, as is also *smṛti*, remembrance, recollection, and *dhyāna*, meditation. *Dhāraṇī* and samādhi naturally belong together; to retain something in memory, concentration is needed, and remembrance may produce concentration. *Pratibhāna* [eloquence] also is associated with samādhi.

In the end, Braarvig assesses that *dhāraṇī* primarily denotes memory, or those mnemonics associated with memory, and is properly paired with eloquence (*pratibhāna*). The problem of mantras is not entirely solved by him, however, and he returns to it in the conclusion.<sup>27</sup>

It seems, then, that the frequently-encountered *dhāraṇī-pratīlabdha* should not, at least in the early Mahāyāna context, be translated as “having attained the magical formulas” or the like. It is also improbable that the bodhisattva at an advanced stage should obtain a set of meaningless syllables, when his attainments usually count qualities and powers. It yet remains a fact that the word *dhāraṇī* often appears in titles of texts containing such formulas, closely associated with them. The

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

connotation of memory, keeping in mind, was probably often forgotten in later phases of Buddhism.

In this explanation, Braarvig also follows Lamotte in determining that the application of *dhāraṇīs* as something very close to magical formulae was a violation of the spirit of Mahāyānist doctrine, for which the *dhāraṇīs* were formulated. With various modifications and perhaps some reticence, Braarvig's position has been accepted by most writers following him, so much so that Braarvig recently claimed that he had “demonstrated that its primary meaning in Mahāyāna sūtra is ‘memory’ or ‘retention’,” but again was at a loss to explain its other applications.<sup>28</sup> Yet even while they have argued with Braarvig, and extended the range of the discussion into later literature and even tantra in Tibet, both Gyatso and Pagel have struggled against the definition of *dhāraṇī* as illustrative of memory, and Gyatso's study in particular formulates a model of “iconic/indexical reminding” that is quite interesting and perceptive.<sup>29</sup>

### Some Antics Over Semantics

The valuable work done by so many scholars in Buddhist studies on this difficult problem has reflected on many of the most important definitions and citations in Buddhist literature. Nonetheless, I believe that the understanding of *dhāraṇī* in these representations is somewhat skewed in several important ways. First there is in recent writing especially an excessive emphasis on specifically the intellectual/mnemonic functions, despite the range of variation in the evidence presented. Even in the case of those, like Braarvig, who have considered evidence beyond intellectual functions, it has curiously not afforded a moment to reassess the fundamental model that has been proposed. Second, this process has been effected with little consideration to the question of semantics, and, particularly, synonymy and polysemy, even though much excellent work has been done on these issues outside of the understanding of *dhāraṇī*. Third, most of the previous perspectives speak of mantras in the context of Buddhist ritual or practice as somehow a later or degenerate usage, and do not consider contravening evidence.

Starting with our first objection, it appears that several previous scholars assess that *dhāraṇīs* began as an advanced intellectual exercise or wisdom statements, only to be either enclosed by spells (Winternitz), embedded in mnemonic aides (Lamotte) or represented as summaries of specific topics (Braarvig). While the term *dhāraṇī* is certainly used in all these applications, none of these positions individually or collectively can adequately explain *dhāraṇīs*' use in apotropaic, soteriological and devotional environments—as they acknowledge—yet these proved to be not only among their earliest but

<sup>28</sup> Braarvig and Pagel (2006, p. 24).

<sup>29</sup> Gyatso, “Letter Magic: A Peircean Perspective on the Semiotics of Rdo Grub-chen's Dhāraṇī Memory,” in Gyatso, ed., (1992, pp. 173–213), and Pagel (2007 a; b, pp. 22–24n25, 59–60n50, 83–89, 112–116).

also their most important applications, and the apologia that these uses are later is in fact not substantiated.

In reality, we seldom see *dhāraṇīs* that are actually effective mnemonic devices or that summarize abstract principles, in distinction to the hundreds employed in non-intellective purposes, including many of the earliest. The Dravidian summary of the four truths identified by Bernhard is a case in point: it is not a *dhāraṇī* until it is incomprehensible to readers of the Sanskrit text. Something of the same point has been made over and over again in the \**Mahāprabhāvadhāraṇī-sūtra*, which includes the presentation of 18 incomprehensible forms of the four truths said to come from languages in other continents, and Bhavya's seventh century discussion has Mahāyānists challenged that their phrases contain words in barbarian languages.<sup>30</sup> The only early *dhāraṇī* known to me that is close to a summary is the *Ṣaṇmukhadhāraṇī*, which has a commentary attributed to Vasubandhu. In the prose ritual portion before the *mantradhāraṇī*, the text outlines a series of aspirations the good Mahāyānist is to voice, which include many attributes of the Buddhist path. When we get to the *mantradhāraṇī*, however, it is in accord with others of its nature: OM KṢAME KṢAME KṢĀNATE KṢĀNATE DAME DAME DĀNATE DĀNATE etc., which cannot be construed as a logical mnemonic.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, the early *dhāraṇī* system did not include the phrase that was perhaps the most widely spread Indian Buddhist mnemonic phrase and summary of the doctrine of dependent origination, one that has been carved into statuary and even taken as a substitute for the relics of the Buddha himself. Sometimes called the *ye dharmā* formula in modern secondary literature, it was better known in medieval India as the *praṭītyasamutpāda-hṛdaya* or *-gāthā*, the aphorism of dependent origination: "All those elements that arise from a cause, including the cause of them, the Tathāgata has explained, as well as their cessation—thus has spoken the Great Ascetic."<sup>32</sup> So far as I have been able to determine, it was not employed as a *dhāraṇī* until very late in its use; when medieval texts frame it as a mantra, they attach an OM on the front and a SVĀHĀ at the end, in classic mantra style, for these syllables are markers of such performative, ritual speech acts.<sup>33</sup>

In reality, many of the instances cited to date refer to items that the *dhāraṇīs* are said to produce, but which could not have been the result of memorization, mnemonic techniques, or any other such items. How is it, for example, that *dhāraṇī* results in the realization of the entire Buddhist canon? While there are monks who, doubtless, have effected such feats of memory, it

<sup>30</sup> \**Mahāprabhāvadhāraṇī-sūtra* T. 1341.21.764c15–766c17. On Bhavya, see Kapstein (2001, p. 240).

<sup>31</sup> *Ṣaṇmukhadhāraṇī* To. 526, fol. 54a7-b1; T. 1360.21.878a18-22. A later, more extensive outline of the path is the *Nirvikalpapraśadhāraṇī*, Matsuda ed.

<sup>32</sup> For the history of this formula, see Boucher (1991); it is not clear that the phrase was actually termed a *gāthā* as opposed to a *hṛdaya*; it is known in this latter capacity in To. 521, and referred to as such in *Praṭītyasamutpādahṛdaya-vidhi-dhāraṇī*, To. 519–20, followed by commentarial literature, *Praṭītyasamutpādahṛdaya-kalpa*, To. 3138, fol. 318a1; more recently Sander (2002).

<sup>33</sup> *Praṭītyasamutpādahṛdaya-vidhi-dhāraṇī*, To. 519, fol. 40a2.

is doubtful that the actual *dhāraṇīs* in question were meant for them, since the *dhāraṇīs* invariably praise their easy quality, that the goal may be accomplished without the extensive work involved. In this regard, when one of the earliest *dhāraṇī* scriptures, the *Anantamukhanirhāra-dhāraṇī*, describes the purpose of its recitation, it is to recollect the Dharma without forgetting; this is done by reciting the lengthy *mantradhāraṇī* that yields nonconceptual recollection of the Buddha.<sup>34</sup> In this regard, I believe the inherent intellectual interest scholars have had in Buddhist doctrine has misled them into reading their own focus into that of *dhāraṇīs*' originators, and it is germane to note that Braarvig's 1985 discussion of *dhāraṇī* begins with observations on the intellectual milieu of Mahāyāna Buddhism.<sup>35</sup>

This brings us to the second area that might be considered, that of the semantic value of glosses in the sūtras. These have often been treated as if such glosses indicated actual identity, which would be synonymy. However, there is every reason to believe that the glosses of *dhāraṇī* provided in the sūtras merely indicate an overlap in function or denotative value. Let us consider a list from the *Ajātaśatrukaukṛtyavinodanā* that has recently perplexed Braarvig and Pagels.

What is *dhāraṇī*? *Dhāraṇī* is infallible recollection, unwavering comprehension, lucid intelligence, realized discriminative understanding, knowledge how to explain the path by pointing to the thusness in all factors of existence, safeguarding the fruit after one has attained it, knowledge how to enter into flawless conduct, knowledge of the different appellations of all factors of existence.<sup>36</sup>

In normative Indian writing, these would all be understood as something like approximate equivalents, sometimes identified as such under the designation *paryāya*. In Yogācāra writing, the term and the circumstances of equivalence received some attention. Sthiramati's explanation of *paryāya*, for example, indicates that there may be multiple designations for a specific reference, "‘equivalent’ means the elucidation of a single referent with multiple terms" (*paryāyo nāmaikasyārthasya bhinnasābdaiḥ pratyāyanam*).<sup>37</sup> In normal Sanskrit grammatical terms, this means that there is for one object (*abhidheya*) several denotations (*abhidhāna*). Now this is very close to the usage found in the *Mahābhāṣya* when Patañjali discusses topics like "It is only to be

<sup>34</sup> *Anantamukhanirhāra-dhāraṇī*, T. 1011.19.680b20–c2; for a translation from the later, more developed Tibetan of this section, see Inagaki (1999, pp. 50–70).

<sup>35</sup> Braarvig (1985, p. 17), "Mahāyāna Buddhism seems to have arisen in a milieu quite sophisticated intellectually"; similarly Braarvig (1997, p. 33), "Thus Bhavya tried to defend a part of the Mahāyāna texts which was only reluctantly accepted by the intellectual elite of his time, as is also the case today: Buddhism has been appreciated as a great intellectual tradition, but it has been difficult for many people to reconcile the belief in the efficacy of mantras and magical rituals with its great intellectual achievements." The supposition appears to be that intellectual elites had a value system different from that of the ordinary Buddhist, but this remains to be demonstrated for India and elsewhere outside of post-Enlightenment Europe.

<sup>36</sup> Braarvig and Pagel (2006, p. 25), translation theirs.

<sup>37</sup> *Madhyāntavibhāṅgāṭikā* p. 38.26.

employed to generate apprehension of equivalent expression” (*tato vaktavyam paryāvacanasyaiva grahaṇam bhavati*), indicating a continuity of hermeneutical technique from his time to Sthiramati’s.<sup>38</sup> Equivalence is furthermore the topic of much of the explanatory (*nirvacana*, Buddhists would say *nirukti*) literature from the time of Yāska forward, as Kahrs has argued.<sup>39</sup> However, in Buddhist usage most instances of “equivalents” or other explanatory glosses are actually overlapping in extension or intension and context-sensitive rather than precisely synonymous in the sense that we would understand. An example from the *Yogācārabhūmi* is instructive.

Again, the equivalents for ‘seed’ are element, lineage, nature, cause, wholeness, diffusion, substratum, appropriation, suffering, the basis for imputations of wholeness, the basis for egotism and these kinds of terms.

*bījaparyāyḥ punar dhātur gotraṃ prakṛtir hetuḥ satkāyaḥ prapañca ālaya upādānaṃ duḥkhaṃ satkāyadrṣṭyadhīṣṭhānam asmimānādhiṣṭhānaṃ cety evambhāgīyāḥ paryāyā veditavyāḥ ||*<sup>40</sup>

One need not have an excellent education in Buddhist doctrine to surmise that none of these can be precise or even fair equivalents in the manner that we employ such terms. Here seed (*bīja*) is explained as ‘lineage’ (*gotra*) but also identified with various forms of incorrect view and suffering, the consequence of ignorance and grasping. If we were unreflectively to equate all of these, based on the explicit statement that they are all *paryāya*, then we would be making the same rudimentary logical errors committed by those equating all the elements found in other ostensible lines of argument (all men are mortal; Socrates is mortal; therefore Socrates is all men). This cannot be the method to solve the problem of *dhāraṇīs*, and the current impasse is indicative of such errors in the imputation of synonymy without considering intension and extension.

The study of synonymy has gained much ground in semantic theory over the last sixty years, yet there remains some disagreement as to the best manner in which synonymy can be ascertained. Carnap famously argued for intensional isomorphism, to which Quine responded with his formulation of cognitive synonymy, while Mates despaired of offering an adequate definition.<sup>41</sup> By general agreement, however, tests of synonymy have been accepted, and that is stated by Mates, “Two expressions are synonymous in a language L if and only if they may be interchanged in each sentence in L without altering the truth value of that sentence.”<sup>42</sup> Others, like Malmkjær, have formulated the test in a manner of truth and falseness, “Two predicates

<sup>38</sup> *Mahābhāṣya* on I.1.68 (vol. 1, p. 177). On the question of the hermeneutics of meaning, see Khars 1998, 13–54.

<sup>39</sup> Kahrs (1998, pp. 152–168); Kahrs statement, p. 153, that “definitions of synonymy are hard to come by in works on theoretical linguistics and philosophy of language” is inexplicable.

<sup>40</sup> *Yogācārabhūmi*, Bhattacharya ed. pp. 26.18–19.

<sup>41</sup> Carnap (1956, pp. 56–59); van Orman Quine (1961, pp. 20–46); Mates (1952, pp. 118–119).

<sup>42</sup> Mates (1952, p. 119).

are said to be synonymous when it is logically impossible for a simple sentence, Rx, to be true while a simple sentence containing a predicate synonymous with R is false.”<sup>43</sup>

For our purposes, it can be said that none of the predicates offered to date for *dhāraṇīs* can satisfy these requirements, for we can easily find valid sentences that are true for *dhāraṇīs* in at least some Mahāyāna scriptures but would be false if we replaced that term with memory or discrimination or summary or magical phrase or any of the other specific terms suggested within the literature. Overwhelmingly, the contextual associations of mnemonic terms like *smṛti* or *dhāraṇa* are quite distinct from those of *dhāraṇī*. Thorough discussions of memory, per se, are generally found in the Abhidharma, with the *Abhidharmasamuccaya*'s definition being a standard reference: “What is recollection? It is the non-distraction of the mind towards an object that was recollected; it has the activity of non-inattention (*smṛtiḥ katamā | saṃsmṛte vastuni cetasaḥ asaṃpramoṣo 'vikṣepakarmikā*).<sup>44</sup> However, such definitions extend from *smṛti*'s place on the Buddhist path. As Cox has observed towards the Abhidharma contexts, “The mature description of the function of mindfulness in recollection cannot be understood except as an outcome of continual molding and adaptation of the primary sense of mindfulness as attentiveness operative in praxis.”<sup>45</sup>

Mahāyānist use generally follows in kind. *Smṛti*—in short hand for either *smṛtyupasthāna* (bases of recollection: *kāya*, *citta*, *vedanā*, *dharma*), for *smṛtyindriya* (faculty of memory), or for *samyaksmṛti* (correct recollection, number seven in the eight-fold path)—is frequently found in a copulative (*dvandva*) compound of “memory, intelligence, understanding...” (*smṛtimitigati*...sometimes with retention *dhṛti* following).<sup>46</sup> In these environments, one may lose memory/mindfulness (*muṣitasmṛti*), and this is sometimes listed as a defect of a disciple.<sup>47</sup> The primary exception to the meditative application is with the compound *jāṭismaraṇa*, recollection of previous lives, which in many texts is said to be a benefit from the recitation of *dhāraṇīs* or through other rituals rather than being either synonymous with the meaning of *dhāraṇī* or a specifically intellectual event.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Malmkjær (1995, p. 393).

<sup>44</sup> *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, p. 6; *Abhidharmasamuccayabhāṣya* p. 5; for a thorough discussion of memory in early Indian Buddhism, see the contributions of Jaini, Cox and Griffiths in Gyatso, ed. 1992.

<sup>45</sup> Cox (1992, p. 88).

<sup>46</sup> Some of the many examples: *Samādhirāja* XI.49 (Vaidya pp. 73–74), p. 79 prose, XXXI.25 (p. 193), XXXVII.48 (p. 270); *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* pp. 120, 183; *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* XIV.34 (Kern & Nanjio p. 308), XVI.23 (p. 334); *Ratnaketu-parivarta* p. 173.

<sup>47</sup> E.g., *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* p. 93.

<sup>48</sup> Schopen (1983, pp. 125–127), and note that the benefit is otherwise often obtained through ritual means. Gyatso (1992, p. 203, n. 31), identifies *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* sources emphasizing this relationship of *dhāraṇīs* to the recollection of previous acts, but this is done through letters, which will be discussed below.



In Buddhist usage, then, *smṛti* and other terms for memory generally have specific, meditative applications, as members of the noble path or as a practice associated with *śamatha*. This is quite different from the semantic fields of *dhāraṇī*, which may have ritual and teaching applications outside of those found with respect to *smṛti* and its cognates. When *dhāraṇī* as a category is associated with meditative practice, it is often paired with *samādhi*, as has been repeatedly noticed (*samādhidhāraṇīmukha*). The etymology of *dhāraṇī* is certainly from √dhr, which is employed with the verb *dhārayati*, to memorize, but the same root yields (among other terms) *dharma*, which is another term like *dhāraṇī* that is bewilderingly polysemic, as all students of Buddhism must learn to their grief. Non-Buddhist authorities considering the cognate word *dhāraṇā*, employed in the Yogic tradition, have wrestled with its polysemic associations as well, and I have not seen any provide a simple gloss of normative memory, although the *Mārkaṇḍeya-purāṇa* has identified *smṛti* as a gloss for its mindfulness functions as one of many equivalents.<sup>49</sup>

While both Lamotte and Braarvig have pointed to the Chinese translation of *dhāraṇī* as *zōngchí* (總持), they have not reported that *smṛti* and other memory/mindfulness terms are almost invariably translated by *nian* (念), a term sometimes employed for *vitarka* (conceptualization) as well. In the case of *zōngchí* 總持, the better interpretation is “generally hold/support” rather than “summarize” as suggested by Braarvig, and we do not normatively see standard words for summarize (like *lüè* 略) or essentials (*yào* 要) employed in the translation of *dhāraṇī*. Likewise, in Tibetan *dhāraṇī* and *smṛti* are well differentiated, *gzung(s)* for the former and *dran-pa* for the latter. If these terms were as close as they have been represented, then we would expect greater convergence of translation terminology at least some of the time.

This is not to say that the terms are utterly unrelated, and Braarvig has in some measure based his interpretation on the scripture most cited when *dhāraṇī* is identified with *smṛti*, the *Akṣayamatīnirdeśa*.<sup>50</sup> Beyond the data that he has collected, we find in Mahāyāna scriptures the intermittent association of the two. The *Samādhirāja*, for example, pairs the two as qualities for the learned,

He has extensive knowledge, and is sharp, with unlimited eloquence and pure sight.

<sup>49</sup> As Vyāsa glosses *Yogasūtra* III.1 as the binding of the mind, by its mere activity to the external object or in the various places: *deśeṣu bāhye vā viṣaye cittasya vṛttimātreṇa bandha itī dhāraṇā*, while Vācaspatimīśra modifies the gloss with *bandhaḥ sambandhaḥ* | emphasizing relationship or connection over the binding of the mind: *Pātañjalayogadarśanam* p. 277; *Mārkaṇḍeya-purāṇa* 36.35–61, 37.17–28, provides multiple meanings for *dhāraṇā* and is far too complex to discuss here, but the polysemy of *dhāraṇā* is detailed.

<sup>50</sup> Braarvig’s article was in great part stimulated by his excellent work on the scripture; Braarvig (1985, pp. 17–18), referencing *Akṣayamatīnirdeśa*, Braarvig ed., vol. 1, p.148, vol. 2, p. 556. Sthiramati, in his *Sūtrālaṃkāravṛttibhāṣya*, tsi, fol. 128a2, identifies this as an important source for understanding *dhāraṇīs*; for other śāstric references to this text, see *Akṣayamatīnirdeśa*, Braarvig ed., vol. 2, pp. lii–lvii.



That scholar will always have the power of memory and of *dhāraṇī*.  
*Jñānu vipulu tasya bhoti tīkṣṇaṃ tatha pratibhānam ananta cakṣu śud-*  
*dham | bhaviṣyati sada tasya paṇḍitasya smṛtibalam eva ca dhāraṇībala-*  
*ca || 18.6*

The *Vimalakīrti* lists them in a lengthy compound indicative of the depth of the bodhisattva's understanding,

The depth of all the oceans, Ānanda, indeed might be measured, but certainly the depth of the bodhisattvas' insight, knowledge, recollection, *dhāraṇī*, and eloquence is not able to be measured.

*śakyo hy ānanda sarvasāgarāṇāṃ gādhaḥ pramātum | na tv eva śakyo bo-*  
*dhisatvānāṃ prajñājñānasmrītidhāraṇīpratibhānasya gādhaḥ pramātum ||<sup>51</sup>*

But I would also argue that such specific lists call for us to differentiate between memory and *dhāraṇī*, since they are treated as members of a common set rather than as synonyms. In these and other instances, terms identified in relationship would best not be conflated with each other.

Before we attempt a solution to the problem, we might acknowledge that the ingredient most refractory to *dhāraṇī* definition has been the employment of *dhāraṇīs* as mantras. The difficulty in some measure arose because many scholars have taken a position that mantras or other spells are inherently degenerate whereas Mahāyāna is exalted—as in the statements by Lamotte and others above—so the two were understood to be incompatible. In this model, *dhāraṇīs* began as mnemonic aids, only to degenerate into mantra elements when the original purpose had been forgotten or set aside for unnamed reasons, and that is how Braarvig originally framed his discussion. So overall, the position that mantras are incompatible with Mahāyāna represents a revival of the well-worn Enlightenment criticism of religion, where the original simple message is lost because of an illiterate or nefarious priesthood turning salvation into spells, either for the purposes of securing patronage from superstitious clients or to deceive credulous believers.

However, the employment of *dhāraṇīs* as mantras cannot be so easily reduced to a collapse of authentic or original meaning, and in actuality the use of mantras is found throughout much of the canon and in post-canonical literature from a very early period, excepting most canonical Pali materials for a variety of reasons. The development of real spell traditions in the early Buddhist nikāyas is in part an extension of the well authenticated use of short texts as liturgical invocations of protection (*rakṣā*), as Skilling has shown.<sup>52</sup> However, mantras also evince the intrusion, not simply of local devotional cults, but of autochthonous systems of protection and spirit manipulation for various goals. This is visible in perhaps the earliest of the Buddhist use of

<sup>51</sup> *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* p. 103.

<sup>52</sup> Skilling (1992; 1994, pp. 625–738; 1977, pp. 63–88).

mantras already noticed by Burnouf, found in the *Mātaṅgī-sūtra* (now the beginning of the *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna*) where the Buddha gives Ānanda a “Sambuddha-mantra” to counteract the love-spell of a local witch (*vidyādhari*).<sup>53</sup> Another early Buddhist acknowledgement of magical systems speak of the power of the local spirits, and Lenz is editing a Gāndhārī *Avadāna* collection that includes a short story of a fight between tribal magic (*śabarīmāyā*) and high magic (*indramāyā*), one of many instances in which Buddhists recognized magical systems.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, the recently discovered Bajaur manuscript collection (1st–2nd century CE) includes a spell (*vidyā*) for the propitiation of a snake king named Manaspia (*nagaraya-manaspia vija*), and Strauch has shown its continuity with other protective texts in the canon.<sup>55</sup> As Cohen and others have observed, the association of Buddhism with *yakṣa* and *nāga* sites was not incidental, but it was part of a locally defined Buddhist praxis, allowed monks to place themselves in the local order, and the development of mantras within the early communities was of a similar value.<sup>56</sup>

The different Vinayas preserved in Chinese are arguably our best gauge on the support of and questions about mantras within the early traditions, and the many and often curious instances of monks and nuns employing mantras are indicative of the pervasion of mantra-related practices in several of the early schools. The Vinaya authorities concerned with decorum were clearly faced with a bewildering spectrum of spells, all of which were popular with various monks and nuns newly converted to the dispensation. Some of the Vinaya decisions had to do with the use of spells to commit crimes or infractions in a peculiar manner. So, many of the Vinayas report, the question about killing through magically emanating an animal or raising from the dead a Vetāla spirit—is it still an fault of defeat (yes)?<sup>57</sup> If two monks turn themselves into

<sup>53</sup> *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna* p. 5.

<sup>54</sup> Lenz (2008) Dr. Lenz informed me at that time that this material will be published shortly.

<sup>55</sup> Strauch (2008, pp. 40–47).

<sup>56</sup> Cohen (1998, pp. 399–400).

<sup>57</sup> *Sarvāstivāda-vinaya* T. 1435.23.8c15, killing with *vetālas* is still killing. *Mahāsāṃghika-vinaya*, T.1425.22.256a18-21: *vetāla*-mantra means that if a monk wishes to kill someone and performs the *vetāla*-mantra, when he has the attitude to harm then he commits a transgression of the vinaya; if he causes the generation of fear in the person, it is a *thūlaccaya*; if he succeeds in killing him, it is a *pārājika*, called \**vetālanamantramaraṇa*. Similarly, *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya-vibhaṅga* To. 3, vol. ca, fols. 142b3-143b5; T. 1442.23.662a10-b5. *Mahīśāsaka-vinaya*, T.1421.22.8c24-27: if a monk summons an evil colored specter and uses it to scare someone to death, then it is a fault of defeat (*pārājika*). *Mahīśāsaka-vinaya* T.1421.22.190a10-12: there was a bhikṣuṇī who practiced the path of magic (壘道, cf. Anshigao's trans. of *Mātaṅgī-sūtra*, T.551.14.89516 etc.) and wanted to kill a person, generating a serious fault (*thūlaccaya*: *sthūlātyāya*). She performed a mantra [*vidhi*] and to raise a dead person, wanting him to kill beings. *Sarvāstivāda-vinaya* T.1435.23.381b3-5: if a monk transforms his body into that of an animal by means of mantras, and then takes a human life, he is defeated if he intends to have done so.

animals, and have sex, or create magical animals for sexual purposes, is it still a fault of defeat (yes)?<sup>58</sup> If one causes delusion in another or is oneself deluded by means of mantras or medicine, and then has sex or kills someone, it is still defeat if the monk or nun had been aware of the circumstances.<sup>59</sup>

Many of the questions have to do with forbidding monks and nuns from making a living by employing spells for the laity, or teaching them to the laity; these are usually condemned as wrong livelihood or incorrect speech.<sup>60</sup> The exception to this is the employment of spells to protect from snakebite or wasps or other poisonous creatures, or from fire or flood, or to heal dental or stomach illnesses and so on. For example, in the *Dharmaguptaka-vinaya* we find the following account<sup>61</sup>

The lord was staying in Jetavana in Śrāvastī. Then the group of six bhikṣuṇīs studied mantras to earn a living. The mantras were *saṃdhimantras*, *kṣatriyamantras*, *vetālanmantras*, knowing the signs of death or the texts (論) on transforming wild animals, and prognostication by bird calls from flocks. All the bhikṣuṇīs heard of this, and among them was one with few needs and satisfied (*alpecchatāsaṃtuṣṭi*), practiced in the ascetic practices (*dhūtaguṇa*), who enjoyed studying the Vinaya, and knew modesty and decorum. She scolded the six bhikṣuṇīs, “What do you say about your actions, that you have studied these mantras, up to and including prognostication by bird calls?” She spoke to all the monks, who informed the Buddha.

The Lord for this reason called together the bhikṣu saṃgha, and scolded the six bhikṣuṇīs saying, “These are that which you should not do—this is

<sup>58</sup> *Sarvāstivāda-vinayamāṭṛkā*, T. 1441.23.611b19-22: Upāli asks the Buddha about transforming oneself by drugs or by mantras into a male or female and then having sex with animals, and the Buddha indicates it is still a *pārājika* offense. *Sarvāstivāda-vinaya* T.1435.23.379a6-12: if a monk or two monks say mantras and create animal forms and have sex with them, then—assuming they intended to do so—they are defeated. *Sarvāstivāda-vinayamāṭṛkā* T. 1441.23.569c2-11, 611b26-27: having sex with animals of various genders that are created by mantras or drugs is still a *pārājika* if intended.

<sup>59</sup> *Mūlasarvāstivādinaya-vibhaṅga* To. 3, vol. ca, fols. 35a6-b5; T. 1442.23.631a25-27.

<sup>60</sup> *Mahīśāsaka-vinaya*, T.1421.22.174a29-b2: monks wanted to practice various forms of prognostication; the Buddha did not allow it. *Mahīśāsaka-vinaya*, T.1421.22.174b2-4: monks wanted to learn mantras that confuse people; the Buddha did not allow it.

<sup>61</sup> *Dharmaguptaka-vinaya*, T. 1428.22.774c21-775a14 (almost exactly the same at 1428.22.754a17-b10, under *pāyantika* #117 and restated 745b11 in *pāyantika* #118). Confer *Dharmaguptaka-vinaya* T. 1428.22.960c11-15: Then the six bhikṣus recited *tīrthika* mantras employed in amulets concerned with good and bad fortune and placed in homes, *saṃdhimantras*, and *kṣatriya* mantras, and *\*śabara* mantras, and mantras for comprehending the birth, death and fortune of men, mantras for turning back any sounds. The monks told the Buddha and he replied “It is not allowed.” They taught the mantras. Buddha said, “It is not allowed.” They used them to obtain livelihood. The Buddha said, “It is not allowed.” Similar correct livelihood questions *Dharmaguptaka-vinaya* T. 1428.22.963b10-28, *Mahāsāṃghika-vinaya* T.1425.22.287a20-22, 531a3-b4.

not proper deportment, not the *śramaṇadharmā*, not *brahmacaryā*, not following that which is to be done. They are not to be accomplished! What do you say, bhikṣuṇīs, that you studied these techniques, on up to prognostication by bird calls?” Through many innumerable means he scolded them and then said to all the bhikṣus, “The nuns’ many serious transgressions (*āpatti*) against the Vinaya are in the first place defiled, so that they themselves have to come together to reaffirm the bhikṣuṇī-vinaya and the ten systems of concord<sup>62</sup> so that the Saddharma may endure for a long time. Now anyone who wishes to preach the Vinaya, should speak in this way, ‘If one is a bhikṣuṇī, then studying *laukika-saṃdhi-mantras* for the purpose of livelihood commits a *pāyantika*.’ Here, bhikṣuṇī is defined as above and *saṃdhi-mantras* is defined as above. This [hypothetical] bhikṣuṇī practicing the *saṃdhi-mantras* on up to prognostication by bird calls, you will teach as a *pāyantika* if she understands what they are doing; if she does not understand, then it is a *duṣkṛta*. This is also a *duṣkṛta* for bhikṣus, śikṣamānās, śramaṇeras and śramaṇerikās, and thus these are all faults. That which is not a fault (*anāpatti*) is if one studies such mantras for the [treatment] of disease of the stomach, or to cure indigestion, or lack of digestion. If one studies books or recitation, if one studies worldly śāstras, all for the purpose of defeating the *tīrthikas*, or if one studies mantras against poisoning for one’s own protection and not for the purpose of livelihood, then there is no fault.

爾時婆伽婆。在舍衛國祇樹給孤獨園。時六群比丘尼。學習呪術以自活命。呪術者。或支節呪剎利呪。或起尸鬼呪。或學知死相知轉禽獸論。卜知眾鳥音聲。諸比丘尼聞。中有少欲知足行頭陀樂學戒知慚愧者。嫌責六群比丘尼言。汝等云何。乃學習如是諸呪術。乃至知眾鳥音聲。即白諸比丘。諸比丘往白世尊。世尊以此因緣集比丘僧。呵責六群比丘尼言。汝所為非。非威儀非沙門法非淨行非隨順行。所不應為。云何比丘尼。學如是諸技術。乃至知眾鳥音聲。以無數方便呵責已告諸比丘。此比丘尼多種有漏處最初犯戒。自今已去與比丘尼結戒。集十句義乃至正法久住。欲說戒者當如是說。若比丘尼。學世俗技術以自活命波逸提。比丘尼義如上。技術者如上說。彼比丘尼。習諸技術乃至知眾鳥音聲。說而了了者波逸提。不了了突吉羅。比丘突吉羅。式叉摩那沙彌沙彌尼突吉羅。是謂為犯。不犯者。若學呪腹中虫病。若治宿食不消。若學書學誦。若學世論。為伏外道故。若學呪毒。為自護不以為活命無犯。

Here, the exact nature of *saṃdhi-mantras* or *ksatriya-mantras* is obscure, but possibly these had to do with forming alliances or contracts (*saṃdhi*) and engaging in belligerence, since they refer to worldly purposes. Similar in tension is the case of monks who were employing spells for soteriological purposes in the *Mahīśāsaka-vinaya*.

<sup>62</sup> *Dharmaguptaka-vinaya*, T.1428.22.570c3-7 lists the ten systems of concord.

When all the monks recited spells, they didn't eat salt and didn't sleep in a bed, but called out "Namo bhagavan!" Then they had some doubts, "Are we taking an incorrect heterodox view, accepting something outside the teacher's Dharma?" Therefore they went to ask the Buddha, who replied, "[When performing] the Dharma of mantras, do not follow its point of view [but keep a Buddhist perspective instead]."<sup>63</sup>

有諸比丘誦呪時。不噉鹽不眠床上。稱言南無婆伽婆。生疑我將無隨異見受餘師法耶。以是白佛。佛言。神呪法爾。但莫隨其見。

These monks stand in contrast to the frequent instances in the Vinayas where the purposes of the mantras are focused on tangible benefits, whether these are within the intent of the normative Buddhist tradition or not. The mantra elements in the Vinayas may be relatively late in some Vinayas, for they are generally found in the later *pāyantika* rules or in appendices to the Vinayas. However, their presence in most of the received Vinayas indicates that mantra recitation was a factor in the praxis of some monks within most of the early schools.

In view of the scattered presence of mantras at many levels of Buddhist documents, attempts like Lamotte's to dissociate either Mahāyāna ritual or *dhāraṇīs* from mantras are not on solid ground.<sup>64</sup> His position has in fact led him into error, for he maintains that the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* says a bodhisattva should not use mantras; the actual text, though, says that a non-regressing *avinivartanīya*-bodhisattva should not, under any circumstances, employ mantras, drugs or spells that subjugate and control women (*sa yānīmāni strīṇāṃ vaśīkaraṇāni mantrajāpyauśadhividyābhaiṣajyādīni tāni sarvāni sarveṇa sarvaṃ na prayojayati*).<sup>65</sup> Immediately thereafter, however, the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* affirms that the *avinivartanīya*-bodhisattva is skilled in mantras and spells (*mantreṣu kovidāḥ vidyāsu kovidāḥ*), which are but two items in a long list of skills to be cultivated.<sup>66</sup> Conversely, we see that mantras on their own or in conjunction with *dhāraṇīs* are found or referenced throughout the Mahāyānist scriptures and related texts, right from their earliest period, and Harrison has called attention to spells contained in the *Druma-kinnara-rāja-paripṛcchā*.<sup>67</sup> In this process, mantras seemed to have become associated with *dhāraṇīs* first as an important subset and then through synecdoche each came to stand for each other in

<sup>63</sup> *Mahīśāsaka-vinaya*, T.1421.22.174c2-5; we note that the Chinese seems to indicate a Prakritic oblique case rather than the Sanskrit dative *bhagavate*. A somewhat related story about the six *bhikṣuṇīs* is found in *Dharmaguptaka-vinaya*, T. 1428.22.743b23-c29, where they are only allowed to recite "Namo Buddhāya" instead of evil mantras.

<sup>64</sup> Lamotte (1944–80, vol. 4, p.1862); he also misunderstands the potential Vinaya problems by maintaining that the use of mantras violates the prohibition against attachment to ceremonies (*śīlavrataparāmarśa*), but the actual Vinaya problems, as are illustrated above, have much more to do with right livelihood (*samyag-ājīva*).

<sup>65</sup> *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, p. 166.

<sup>66</sup> *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, p. 167.

<sup>67</sup> *Druma-kinnara-rāja-paripṛcchā-sūtra*, pp. 295, 299; cf. \**Mahāyānāvātāra-śāstra*, T.1634.32.46b2-3.

many environments. We occasionally see that a *mantradhāraṇī* was an appositional compound indicating a *dhāraṇī* that was a *mantra* (*mantra eva dhāraṇī*), demonstrating the grammatical understanding of identity of reference (*samānādhikaraṇa*). This is most tellingly seen in various texts when the term “mantra words” (*mantrapadāni*) is used interchangeably with “*dhāraṇī* words” (*dhāraṇīpadāni*), and such interchangeability is a hallmark of semantic identity, as we have seen.<sup>68</sup>

In short, the proposal that the true meanings of *dhāraṇī* initially constituted mnemonic or summation functions that were lost or degraded remains problematic. It does not take into account the reality that *dhāraṇī* scriptures with similar *dhāraṇī* parameters, ideas, functions and proposals as identified by Lamotte and Braarvig continue to be composed by Mahāyānists even during the systematic employment of mantras as *dhāraṇīs* and still after the advent of tantric Buddhism. The functions of *dhāraṇīs* cited in early Mahāyāna Sūtras are found through the lengthy works of the fourth and sixth centuries—like the *\*Daśacakrakṣītigarbha-sūtra* (T.410-11), the *\*Mahādharmadīpadhāraṇī-sūtra* (T.134) and the *\*Mahāprabhāvadhāraṇī-sūtra* (T. 1341)—through the seventh century *Anantamukhapariśodhananirdēśaparivarta* (T. 310(2) and To. 46) and on into the eighth century, with the *Dhāraṇī Scripture for Protecting the Head of State* (守護國界主陀羅尼經 T. 997). The continuity between these works and the earlier Mahāyānist *dhāraṇī* scriptures is remarkable, and suggests a very stable institutional structure, one that would strongly militate against the institutional amnesia that would entail forgetting that *dhāraṇīs* originally meant memory.

### The Parameters of the Problem and a Potential Proposal: Coding as the Meaning of *Dhāraṇī*

If we sum up the parameters required to satisfy the primary functional and ideological requirements of the class of items included in the category *dhāraṇī*, we find that they are minimally five, although others may be parsed out. *Dhāraṇīs* must be capable of being understood as vehicles (means and end) for the storage of previously experienced information, in a manner that could be interpreted as memory, whether this refers to memory of experiences in this life, in previous lives, or the “recollection” of items that had never in fact been memorized, such as mindfulness of the canon. *Dhāraṇīs* must be capable of functioning as the vehicle for the sonic power of mantras, whether these are for worldly purposes, as in the case of protection or other goals, or for

<sup>68</sup> This use is seen in *Bodhisattvabhūmi* p. 273.11 and 274.3; *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* pp. 396.3, 397.2-3, 397.6, 397.9, 398.3, 399.2, 399.7, 399.9, 400.1, 401.1, 402.5, 477.1, 477.4; see also *Ratnaketu-parivarta* pp. 114–117, 130–1, 135, 145, 148, 168 (*dhāraṇīmudrāpada* may be replaced with *hṛdayamudrāpada*); *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka* vol. 2, pp. 39.1-3, 43.11, 46.16 and see the *Sarvajñatākāra-dhāraṇī* in appendix to volume two, where an alternative version of chapter two is presented. These applications appear to contradict Braarvig (1985, pp. 19–20) and Skilling (1992, p. 150, n. 3). Mantrapada is otherwise discussed Pagel (2007b, pp. 57–61).

soteriological purposes.<sup>69</sup> *Dhāraṇīs* must be capable of storing and communicating scriptures, whether individual texts, or sections of the canon, or the entire canon itself, and whether this storage is understood as ontological compression or encryption or some other method. *Dhāraṇīs* must be able to speak to the deep structure of reality, so that they are events that have strong ontological claims, so much so that the universe is capable of being seen as a string of *dhāraṇīs*. These also have a soteriological component in the gnoseology of absolute reality. Finally, *dhāraṇīs* must be ritually efficacious, for they play an important role in the rituals associated with the teaching of the Mahāyāna, the offerings to the Buddha, and other normative ritual enterprises of many Mahāyānist gatherings. This means that any value for *dhāraṇī* must be polysemic, for all of these functions must fall into the class of conditions exercised by *dhāraṇīs*, which can in turn have not a single purpose, but must be capable of exercising its functions in an environment-sensitive manner.

I believe that the best equivalent for the term *dhāraṇī* is the English language pair “code/coding,” indicating both encryption signs and the system of coding/decoding such information. Terminology associated with coding is typically polysemic, and is applied in multiple fields: information studies, genetics, mathematics, linguistics, etc. Semiotics has, in particular, investigated both simple and complex processes of coding. Eco argued that a code includes four items: a set of signals, a set of source parameters to be coded, a set of behavioral responses and a “rule [that] establishes that a given array of syntactic signals refers back to a given state” so that a source of information may communicate to a destination in a systematic manner.<sup>70</sup> Eco discusses the relative primitive situation (his *system-code*) wherein a water level may set off one of four signals that communicate water levels and guide either the holding or the release of water at a watergate. In this model, Eco envisions a one-to-one signal to response code, so that one state of the water elicits a single response for the watergate. Even in such a simple situation, there a number of connotations for every denotation, and such codes convey several levels of cultural content in the processes: drought, flood, pragmatic responses, engineering sophistication, official support of the populace, and so on.<sup>71</sup> He indicates that codes’ open system of signification entails an “infinite semantic recursivity,” meaning that each layer of signification can itself implicate further levels of meaning, so that even simple codes imply complex series of branching connotative structures.<sup>72</sup>

Genetic systems represent some of the more complex coding functions available in nature, for the genetic code found in the DNA in the 46 chromosomes of the human body contain approximately three million nucleotide base pairs, each being a combination of the deoxyribose sugar, a phosphate

<sup>69</sup> *Ratnaketuparivarta*, p. 139: mahābalavegavatī sarvaśatrunivāraṇī bāteyan dhāraṇī sarvabhayavyādhiduḥsvapnadurnimittamokṣaṇī yāvād anāvāraṇajñānamahāpuṇyajñāna-samuccayānuttarajñānaniṣyandeyam dhāraṇī bhāṣitā ||

<sup>70</sup> Eco (1976, p. 37); compare Eco (1984, pp. 164–188).

<sup>71</sup> Eco (1976, pp. 48–150).

<sup>72</sup> Eco (1976, pp. 121–125; 1984 pp. 185–188);



group and one of four nucleobases (adenine, thymine, guanine and cytosine).<sup>73</sup> There are actually two code systems engaged by the double-helix molecule of DNA: DNA replication (creating exact replicas of itself) in mitosis and DNA translation involved in protein manufacture. In the former process, the double helix's weak hydrogen bond that holds each of the nucleotide base pairs together is split by the action of the enzyme helicase, and each of the resulting strands is replicated through complex processes, made more difficult because each strand is the mirror image of the other in inverse form (anti-parallel). Once the DNA has been replicated, cell mitosis may happen. In the case of DNA translation, the overwhelming majority of the nucleotides, about 98.5% in fact, are curiously non-coding sections of DNA, meaning that they do not engage in protein manufacture, although they are suspected of determining other functions. In the case of coding sections, the DNA is temporarily divided by a RNA polymerase, which spins off a messenger copy of the DNA, but in RNA form (single-stranded, with ribose instead of deoxyribose and uracil replacing thymine); this messenger-RNA transfers the 64, three-nucleotide codons that carry the genetic code to a complex enzyme called a ribosome, which employs other forms of RNA to create a peptide protein chain from 20 amino acids, as indicated by the genetic code. Thus, the genetic code is infinitely more complex (even in this grossly oversimplified retelling by a Buddhologist) than the kinds of codes in Eco's watergate model. Genetic codes are, moreover, natural adaptive responses to the need for complex information transfer outside of human language. In the genetic instance, the code is not just in the elements, but even more present in their arrangement, similar to the basis for the codes in cybernetic machine-language, composed of 0/1 alternatives in a bewildering array.

How does this satisfy the problem of *dhāraṇīs*? If *dhāraṇīs* were understood by Buddhists as the *process* of coding as well as the codes themselves, then *dhāraṇīs* would be expected to be context and function sensitive. They would be expected to compress information, expand information, be overcoded or undercoded, be supplanted or corrupted (as DNA can be corrupted). Most important for our purposes, the term coding is applicable to all the parameters listed above. Memories are encoded and decoded in the act of recall.<sup>74</sup> Mnemonics involve codes to stimulate memory functions, and connectionist models of memory emphasize the relationship of primitive memory nodes in association with other nodes to establish memory networks, a model similar to *dhāraṇī* functions, as we will see. Moreover, codes can represent larger files by decompression or translation, as in the case of our few genetic codes informing great varieties of polypeptides or as in the compression and decompression programs that take vast quantities of information, code it as a zip-file in a manner incomprehensible to anyone but a machine, and decompress it to render it readable for ordinary mortals.

<sup>73</sup> Garrett and Grisham (2007, pp. 88–1018), is a standard introduction to this material. Eco (1984, pp. 182–183) discusses some of this material as it pertains to protein synthesis.

<sup>74</sup> Melton and Martin (1972) explores this theme in detail.

In reality, *dhāraṇīs* as codes/coding can carry ( $\sqrt{dhr}$ ) all of these signs (*nimitta*, *cihna*) and more, and in some manner the rhetoric of ‘infinite possibilities’ associated with both semiotics and genetics is replicated at the level of Buddhist *dhāraṇī* statements.<sup>75</sup> More importantly, the background culture of India has provided Buddhists a ready series of assumptions that different incomprehensible phonemes *must* be codes, so that the religious texts are set up with the horizon of expectations that sounds, letters, syllables and other sonic or graphic systems may be interpreted according to Mahāyānist principles. *Dhāraṇīs* were emblematic of Mahāyānist systems specifically because they were *thick* in an anthropological sense—they operated simultaneously on several cognitive and affective levels. Such presumptions allowed Indian Buddhists the assurance that complex documents can be encoded into and decoded from linguistic nodes that somehow contain the full ontology of the texts in forms that may be easily manipulated but are not logically expressive of their texts. In this model, *dhāraṇīs* are not the simple utilitarian skills of intellectuals in need of a system of textual mnemonics. Instead, *dhāraṇīs* are the presumed containers of complex—potentially infinite—meaning systems, both logical and supra-logical. They may be decoded by meditative realization of the extraordinary meaning encrypted into these non-linear forms.

### ***Dhāraṇīs* as the Sonic/Graphic Coding of Buddhist Sounds**

It would appear that the source of *dhāraṇīs* peculiar doctrinal formulation was an amalgam of Vedic sonic theology, grammatical encoding strategies and Buddhist metaphysics coming together in the new environment of writing. The Vedic component stems from clear statements that the syllable *oṃ* is the essence of all the Vedas, being the reverberation (*praṇava*) from which the scriptures arise. As the *Jaiminīya-upaniṣad-brāhmaṇa* describes it, Prajāpati pressed speech, and eventually secured the three-fold knowledge of the Vedas.

He pressed the threefold knowledge. Of it being pressed the sap streamed forth. That became these sacred utterances: *bhūs*, *bhuvas*, *sva*.  
He pressed these sacred utterances. Of them being pressed, the sap streamed forth. That became that syllable, *oṃ*.<sup>76</sup>

Because *oṃ* is the juice (*rasa*) of the Vedas, these scriptures also flow forth through it as well. As the *Chāndogya-upaniṣad* I.1.9 affirms, “The threefold knowledge operates by means of it [*oṃ*].” Here, the encoding metaphor evokes the squeezing of juice from the soma plant during the Vedic sacrifices;

<sup>75</sup> *Sāgaranāgarājaripṛcchā* fol. 139b6-7: chos kyi brda'i rjes su 'jug pa'i yi ge gang yin pa de dag thams cad mi zad pa'i za ma tog gi gzungs kyi rjes su 'jug pa'i tshul gyis byang chub sem dpas yi ge de dang de rnam kyi tshul gyi dgongs pa rab tu shes te |

<sup>76</sup> *Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa* I.23.2-7; Oertel p. 101, translation Oertel's. This discussion of the importance of *oṃ* was inspired by Padoux (1990, pp. 14–22).

the Vedas are squeezed into the ॐ juice, so that by means of the ॐ juice, the Vedas operate, much as by means of the soma juice the *śrauta* sacrifice is successful. Consequently, ॐ is the three fold knowledge itself, possesses a thousand syllables (*sahasrākṣaraṃ*) and flows out in all the worlds (*sarvān imān lokān abhivikṣarati*).<sup>77</sup>

The Vedic system, though, makes (for Buddhists) untenable ontological claims about the relationship between the syllable ॐ and the specific texts of the Vedas, for the former was an actual and irreducible essence of the latter, although we will see that Buddhists surreptitiously appropriate some values of this system as well. Of equal importance are the theories of representation implicit in the encoding systems of the early grammarians, who were concerned with the unfolding of understanding through the grammatical employment of meta-linguistic syllables (*pratyāhāra*).<sup>78</sup> As is well known, the grammarians had developed specific coded expressions that might indicated either sounds—as the *Śiva-sūtras* do—or grammatical operations, and sometimes both, as in the definition of a word (*suptiñantaṃ padam*) where the *sup*-endings represent all nouns and the *tiñ*-endings all verbs.<sup>79</sup> The relationship may therefore be a one-to-one, one-to-many, or either, depending on context. There may be hierarchies of reference, as in the case of *lakāra*, which may mean simply the letter *la* or the ten verbal tenses and moods encoded with the letter *la*, such as *lṛi*, *loṭ*, and so on. Such coded syllables appeared nonsensical, with peculiar sounds—*knu*, *ṇit*, *haś*, etc. —none of which referenced items in the world but instead constituted technical vocabulary to explain Sanskrit grammar. The challenge for grammarians was to justify their necessity, since Sanskrit at one time was a natural language, and critics protested that the Vedas are learned from the teacher and natural expressions from the world. Patañjali famously acknowledged this in his *Mahābhāṣya*, but he pointed out that one benefit to learning grammar is economy of effort, “since Brāhmaṇs must surely understand words and without grammar there is no other easy means by which word forms may be known.”<sup>80</sup> The potential for error is infinite, whereas the number of rules necessary for correct speech is finite.<sup>81</sup> Grammatical study thus yields understanding out of proportion to its investment, so that each coded grammatical term refers to an extensive array of applications.

It would be perspicacious at this juncture to observe that in Indology there is a predisposition to arrest investigation of a topic if any early Brāhmaṇical component is located in the analysis of later religious systems. This is usually

<sup>77</sup> *Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa* I.19.10, I.10.1.

<sup>78</sup> *Akṣayamatiniṛdeśa* Braarvig vol. 2, p. 32, acknowledges this relationship, which is not specifically mnemonic, but representative of efficiency in encryption.

<sup>79</sup> A useful introduction to the *Śiva-sūtras* is Faddegon 1929; Cardona 1976, 1997 and 1999 are thorough and indispensable.

<sup>80</sup> *Mahābhāṣya* 1.20-21: *laghvarthaṃ cādyeyaṃ vyākaraṇam | brāhmaṇeṇāvaśyaṃ śabdā jñeyā iti | na cāntareṇa vyākaraṇam laghunopāyena śabdāḥ śakyā jñātum |*

<sup>81</sup> *Mahābhāṣya* pp. 5–6, 8–9, 10, etc., mostly in the context of the protection of dharma from incorrect usages.

done with the unspoken affirmation that grounding a facet of the later development in a Brāhmaṇical source is sufficient to explain all attributes, based on an artificially reified representation. In this instance, it should be clear that one cannot derive *dhāraṇīs* from the Vedic and grammarians' systems alone, for all we would be left with are the relationships of OM to the Vedas and the grammatical sūtras to language, not to mention that both the sacrificial and educative functions associated with these systems were almost exclusively in the hands of one group, the Brāhmaṇs. *Dhāraṇīs* represent Buddhist innovation by associating several factors—some appropriated from other sources, some original—in a new institutional setting that formed a new sociology of knowledge represented by the Mahāyānist Dharmabhāṅakas, who will be explored in another paper.

Now an adequate description of the development of *dhāraṇīs* would require more than an article (or even one book), so I can but point to some of the more salient attributes. In this, I will argue that “*dhāraṇī*” is most often employed in Buddhist texts as an essentialist category, indicating that complex elements or information may be encoded, encrypted or compressed into *dhāraṇīs* and subsequently decoded, decrypted or decompressed from them. Some of this use stems from the exaltation of the syllabary/alphabet as the basis for all the scriptures (understanding that in various ways) and sometimes reflects the encounter of Buddhists with non-Sanskritic language domains. *Dhāraṇīs* do take a page from the Vedic paradigm, but these elements are highly modified in light of Mahāyānist doctrines and atomized in the manner of the Abhidharma analysis of elements, so that they become emblematic of Buddhist metaphysical values with Brāhmaṇical overtones rather than the reverse. In this process, *dhāraṇīs* were employed for a spectrum of purposes, but *dhāraṇī* texts broadly reflect elements from either the intellectual or the propitiatory (or devotional) streams of Mahayanist life, and often combine the two.

As found in Mahāyānist texts, the classic definition of *dhāraṇī* per se is that it is a syllable/letter or word that represents the potential for unlimited, inexhaustible meaning in a concentrated form. The well-known statement in the *Pañcaviṃśatī Prajñāpāramitā* represents one standard articulation of this definition.

The *dhāraṇī*-entrances are constituted by the similarity of the method of syllables, the entrance into syllables, and the ingress by means of syllables. Which are these three? The syllable *A* is an entrance, because all dharmas are unarisen (*anutpannatva*) from the beginning [the author goes through all the syllables of the *a-ra-pa-ca-na* syllabary, attributing a quality to each syllable]. There is no employment of syllables beyond this. Why? Since there is no designation for anyone by which they would be indicated, expressed, taught, defined or seen. Thus indeed, Subhūti, all dharmas are to be understood as just like space.

This, Subhūti, is the ingress through [the entrance of] the *dhāraṇī*, the ingress through teaching the syllables *A* and so forth. Whatever, Subhūti,

bodhisattva mahāsattva will know the approach by skill in the syllables A and so forth, he will not be impeded with respect to any sound. Instead, he will contemplate all of them through the reality of sameness and will consequently attain skill in the knowledge of sounds (*rutajñānakauśalya*). And, whatever bodhisattva mahāsattva will hear this syllable seal of A, etc., and, having heard it, will subsequently grasp it, bear it in mind, recite it and teach it to others, he accordingly delights them with his disposition and may expect twenty benefits.<sup>82</sup>

*yaduta dhāraṇīmukhāni | yadutākṣaranayasamatākṣaramukham akṣara-praveśaḥ | katamo 'kṣaranayasamatā akṣaramukham akṣarapraveśaḥ | akāro mukhaḥ sarvadharmāṇām ādyanutpannavāt |... nāsti ata uttari akṣaravyavahārah | tat kasya hetoḥ | tathā hi na kasyacin nāmāsti yena samvyavahriyeta yena vābhilapyeta yena nirdiśyeta yena lakṣyeta yena paśyeta | tad yathāpi nāma subhūte ākāśam evam eva sarvadharmā anugantavyāḥ | ayaṃ subhūte dhāraṇī[mukha]praveśo 'kārdyākṣaranirdeśapraveśaḥ | yaḥ kaścit subhūte bodhisattvo mahāsattvaḥ idam akārdyākṣarakauśalyapraveśam jñāsyati na sa kvacit rute pratihanyate | sarvaṃ taṃ dharmatayā samādhayiṣyati rutajñānakauśalyaṅ ca pratilapsyate | yo hi kaścit subhūte bodhisattvo mahāsattva imām akārdyākṣaramudrāṃ śroṣyati śrutvā codgrahīṣyati dhārayiṣyati vācayiṣyati pareśaṃ deśayiṣyati ramayati tathā santatyā tasya viṃśatir anuśamsāḥ pratikāṃkṣitavyāḥ |*

A similar emphasis on skill in syllables/letters, sounds or words as the *dhāraṇī* entrance is repeated in other Mahāyānist scriptures—the *Pitaputrasamāgama*, the *Dhāraṇīśvararāja*, the *Ratnacūḍaparivarta*, to mention a few—and should be considered the most fundamental form of the *dhāraṇī* question.<sup>83</sup> If we follow our text here on the nature of *dhāraṇīs*, it is clear that here the forty-two syllables/letters of the Gāndhārī *a-ra-pa-ca-na* syllabary constitute the *dhāraṇī* entrance.

This Gāndhārī syllabary has been interpreted by Brough as if it were a mnemonic code to reveal some specific text or organization of terms, but the lack of uniformity in the lists of terms associated with these syllables belies this argument, and the lists available to date—such as those in the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature, in the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, and in the old *Lalitavistara*—do

<sup>82</sup> This is from the recast *Pañcaviṃśatī Prajñāpāramitā*, Dutt pp. 212.8-10, 213.7-15; slightly corrected and interpreted with To. 3970 vol. ga, fols. 235a3-4, 236a2-5. The same passage in the unrecast *Pañcaviṃśatī* is found in the early Chinese translations: the incomplete translation by Dharmarakṣa, T. 222.8.195c18; and complete translations by Mokṣala T. 221.8.26b17; by Kumārajīva T. 223.8.256a6; and by Xuanzang T. 220.7.81c8. On the relationship between these recensions, see Lethcoe (1976) and Kimura, ed., *Pañcaviṃśatī*, vol. 2-3, pp. 188–201.

<sup>83</sup> *Pitaputrasamāgama* T.310(16)373c-374a, To. 60, fol. 51b4-52b2; *Dhāraṇīśvararāja* (*Mahākāruṇa-sūtra*) T. 398.441c24-442a24 (see *Akṣayamatīnirdeśa* Braarvig, vol. 2, p. xxvi for this scripture; see also Pagel 2007a); for the *Ratnacūḍaparivarta* section on *dhāraṇī*, see *Akṣayamatīnirdeśa* Braarvig, vol. 2, pp. xcii–xciii; *Bhadrakalpika* To. 94, fol. 11a2-b7 (see Skilling 1996, although the folia he identifies do not match my edition). Pagel's systematic survey of related systems (2007b, pp. 18–61) demonstrates their importance.

not agree in their explanations of the syllables.<sup>84</sup> Other *dhāraṇī* syllable systems, such as the eight syllables specified in the *Anantamukhanirhāra-dhāraṇī* (*pa-la-ba-ja-ka-dha-śa-kṣa*), one of the earliest, are also attached to adventitious meanings without an integrated system, and the meanings appear to have changed with time. None of the lists of equivalents for these two syllable systems represent a standard grouping of either dharmas or general properties (*svasāmānyalakṣaṇa*), let alone other Buddhist factors in the path or models of truth.<sup>85</sup> Later, the sixth century *\*Mahādharmadīpadhāraṇī-sūtra* will provide three syllables, *a-ka-na* (阿迦那), with multiple interpretations as well.<sup>86</sup>

Again, we see that explanations to date excessively intellectualize what appears to be a more fundamental and somewhat haphazard process in the aggregation of factors compounded into the category *dhāraṇī*. As the *Lalitavistara*, the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, and the Gandhāra carvings published by Salomon affirm, the *a-ra-pa-ca-na* was considered a beginning place for students to learn; in such carvings, the bodhisattva is shown with other students learning their *a-ra-pa-ca-na*.<sup>87</sup> In our highly literate societies, we appear to have lost the sense of wonder at the power of encoding sounds into syllables, so that—once the letters have been learned—the door to the entire Buddhist canon is unlocked. Yet in societies in which literacy is decidedly a minority behavior (~10–12% literacy in the 1881 Indian census) the capacity to understand letters and attach them to sounds is a miraculous event, so that it becomes an “entrance” (*mukha*) yielding the potential for all learning, eventually leading to omniscience.<sup>88</sup> Thus one of the reasons for the consistent relationship of *dhāraṇīs* with memory and inspiration is that the capacity to understand the break-down of words into sounds, and to read from their alphabetic representations, facilitates the learning and teaching processes immeasurably, as anyone who has tried to memorize a recited list knows.

Moreover, memory is itself a process of encryption and for many learners relies on physical representations to “see” the sounds of the text and associated forms. Thus, the difficulty with the analyses to date—letters as mnemonic devices yielding specific content as the product of letters as heads of words—is that it assigns supreme importance to the words said to be

<sup>84</sup> *Pañcaviṃśatī*, Dutt pp. 212–213; *Gaṇḍavyūha*, Suzuki and Idzumi, ed., pp. 448–450; Brough (1977 pp. 86–94). Brough’s statement that “in the *Hua-yen (Avataṃsaka)* versions, as the Sanskrit text of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* shows, there is no attempt to illustrate the head-syllable in the esoteric explanation” (p. 86) is beside the point, for the lack of an universal practice simply validates a skepticism toward the idea of their use as a mnemonic device in the manner described.

<sup>85</sup> On this point see Inagaki (1987, p. 60); for the later list and explanation, Inagaki (1987, pp. 199–201, 217–225; 1999, pp. 113–115, 131–139). Pagel (2007b, p. 19) recognizes the problem but understands the solution differently.

<sup>86</sup> *\*Mahādharmadīpadhāraṇī-sūtra*, T. 1340.21.695a-c10, 698b3, 717c3-718b15, 729b22-730a27, 734c23-735b22, 738a29-c13. We may suspect that this begins with the listing of *a-ka* as the two syllables of the *dhāraṇīmukha* in 666c10. The letters *a-ka-na* are also found in a mantra in the *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka-sūtra*, Yamada, vol. 2, p. 44.4 and see p. 44n8.

<sup>87</sup> Salomon (1990, 1993).

<sup>88</sup> Plowden (1883, pp. 229–230).



evoked from the letters, the “un arisen” (*anutpannatva*) for *A*, etc., as we saw in the *Pañcaviṃśatī* above. In distinction, I believe that the real message of *dhāraṇīs* is precisely the reverse: the syllables and their graphic signs are the essential elements. This is why the values assigned to the letters can be changed as needed, because the important elements have been retained. The process is similar to pedagogical procedures elsewhere, for when school children learn in English that “a is for apple” the purpose is not to learn ‘apple’ but to associate ‘a’ with one of its potential applications; any other word beginning with ‘a’ will do as well, just so long as the head letter is conserved. Consequently, it is the sonic and graphic encodings of the alphabet that are the vital content to *dhāraṇī* theory, not the adventitious meanings attached to specific letters, for these provide but a framework of associations to demonstrate the potential forms of signification that may be decoded from the sounds or letters and to allow easy memorization of the syllables and their order.<sup>89</sup>

Eventually *dhāraṇī* will be virtually identified with memory in a few scriptures, like the *Akṣayamatīnirdeśa*, but this is a consequence of the supposition that letters or sounds are thick with meaning, whether understood, potential or transworldly. As the problem is laid out in the \**Āryadeśanāvīkhyāpana-śāstra* attributed to Asaṅga,

Now the *dhāraṇī* entrance is said to be every bodhisattva’s infinite *dhāraṇī* entrance. It is extensively explained as in the sūtras. If one wishes to summarize the characteristics of *dhāraṇī*, it is accomplishment of the penetration of syllables (\**akṣarapratiśedha*) with reference to the body of words, sentences and sounds (*nāmapadavyaṅjanakāya*) according to his intellectual supremacy (*matyaisvārya*). He obtains the powers of recollection and *dhāraṇī* in accordance with the category under discussion. With this power of recollection, within a single letter he can illuminate, distinguish, and fully reveal every kind of object, whether indicative of defilement or purity (*saṃkleśavyavadānārtha*). Therefore it is termed *dhāraṇī* entrance.<sup>90</sup>

陀羅尼門者。謂諸菩薩無量陀羅尼門。廣說如經。若欲略說陀羅尼相者。謂諸菩薩成就字類通達於名句文身如意自在。得如是種類念持之力。由念力故隨一字中而能顯示。分別開演一切種染淨之義。是故說名陀羅尼門。

Memory is an essential part of the *dhāraṇī* encoding process, but it is only one facet. Similarly, the emphasis on specific syllables and their letter signs allows the reader to stop in a place in the text, facilitating certain kinds of inspiration (*pratibhāna*), so that *dhāraṇī* is closely tied with reflection on the text as well.

<sup>89</sup> See McClelland (2000) on ‘connectionist’ models of memory. Pagel (2007b, p. 24) is not convincing as an interpretation of meaning changes.

<sup>90</sup> \**Āryadeśanāvīkhyāpana-śāstra* T. 1602.31.492c4-8.



## *Dhāraṇīs* as the Coding of the Buddhist Values

In the development of *dhāraṇī* elements, three distinctly Buddhist doctrinal systems come into play. First is the ubiquitous Buddhist metaphysical predisposition to atomize and proliferate phenomena, most concretely in the instance of *dharmas*—our *dhāraṇī* cognates—in the Abhidharma system. In the case of *dhāraṇīs*, that means that the elements of the syllabary may be replaced easily by other syllables, by sounds, by words, by strings of syllables, or by entire texts, for encryption may be infinite. Such an interpenetration is possible, because of the Mahāyānist emphasis on interdependence, a doctrine common to all its schools. This means that every element of reality is interdependent with all other elements of reality, and each is dependent on the other in some measure. Second, the content of this interdependence is expressed as the dharmas leading to awakening, in their formal organization in the Buddhist texts. Finally, this freedom is found in the relationship of scripture to reality, for Mahāyānists maintain that reality itself is encoded with truth and therefore can be the source of scripture. *Dhāraṇīs* operated as the essential intermediary coded nodes processing information between dharmas, sounds, Buddhist elements and Buddhist scriptures.

Buddhist literature closely supports the model that the *dhāraṇīs* constitute a specific moment in the teaching of the metaphysical interpenetration of all elements, for encoded in each *dhāraṇī* are other elements of reality and their relationship is interdependent. The Vedic system contributed the affirmation that such encoding would necessarily be sonic in nature and could have both transcendental and temporal benefits. *Dhāraṇīs* atomize this idea by affirming that one letter is in all letters and all letters are in one letter, as some Mahāyānist literature declares.<sup>91</sup> Whereas the Vedic system relentlessly emphasizes OM at the head of all the mantras, and the grammarians were necessarily tied to their specific grammatical terminology, the Buddhists might freely juggle any number of elements. The *Śatasāhasrikā*, for example, discusses the *dhāraṇī* method of all the letters (*\*sarvākṣradhāraṇīmukha*),

Again, you should study well that all the languages enter into a single syllable, or two syllables... up to incalculable syllables as dominion of implication (*\*ākṣepaiśvārya*). Again, you should study well that in one syllable there is subsumed every syllable and in every syllable there is one syllable. This is the dominion of implication.<sup>92</sup>

又應善學一切語言。皆入一字。或入二字。。至無數引發自在。又應善學於一字中攝一切字。一切字中攝於一字。引發自在。

The idea is that no syllable exists in its own being, but all syllables implicate each other and, in turn, all languages. The bodhisattva is specifically to train in

<sup>91</sup> E.g., *Pañcaviṃśatī-Prajñāpāramitā* T. 220.7.378b12-22, 727c20-728a1, T.221.8.128b20-27.

<sup>92</sup> *Śatasāhasrikā-Prajñāpāramitā*, T. 220.6.969b19-25,

the practice of perceiving one syllable in all the syllables and vice versa, as the *Pañcaviṃśatī* enjoins,

You should understand, Subhūti, that the bodhisattva mahāsattva is skilled in contemplating forty-two syllables in one syllable and is skilled in contemplating one syllable in forty-two syllables. Having cultivated the skillfulness in the consummation of syllables, he becomes one skilled in the consummation of syllables.<sup>93</sup>

*sa khalu punaḥ subhūte bodhisattvo mahāsattvo dvācatvāriṃśadakṣarāṇy ekasminn akṣare kuśalo bhāvayati | ekākṣaram dvācatvāriṃśadakṣareṣu kuśalo bhāvayati | akṣarābhīnirhāraakuśalaṃ bhāvayitvākṣarābhīnirhāraakuśalo bhavati |*

The doctrinal structure thereby affirms the mutual interpenetration of syllables, and this is the *dhāraṇīmukha* of those elements.

*Dhāraṇī* doctrines also built on the widely held Mahāyānist claim that to hear even one verse or one syllable of a scripture is to obtain the benefits of the scripture, although we find seeds of this in the earlier canon.<sup>94</sup> In this regard, the grammarians contributed the expectation that any and every apparently nonsense syllable could be an encoded key to an extraordinary wealth of speech acts, whether those protecting monks from venomous snakes or those assisting the generation of highest awakening. Moreover, like grammar, the *dhāraṇīs* were said to yield great benefit for less effort than if one were to memorize either the Buddhist scriptures as a whole or attempt to assuage one-by-one the infinite number of errors possible in the world. In both the grammatical and the Buddhist application, the emphasis was on the ease of the method (*laghūpāya*).

All such functions are basic or essential to the process of learning, so that the learning of the canon inheres in the letters of the *dhāraṇīs*, both in an intellectual and in a metaphysical sense. Consequently, in many applications (not just those emphasizing letters), *dhāraṇī* is extended to indicate the “fundamentals,” “essentials,” or “basics” of the Buddhist program, whether memorization, lists of doctrines or ritual programs. These are encoded in specific sonic forms, so that skill in all the sounds (*sarvarutakuśalya*) is emblematic of the basic system of *dhāraṇīs*. Once reflection on the sounds of the *dhāraṇī* has been mastered, the unlimited expanse of the Buddha’s teaching may be accomplished, and so *dhāraṇīs* are often said to lead to a series of soteriological events because they encompass all the Buddha-dharmas. After providing the *mantradhāraṇī* entrance of omniscience towards all forms, the *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka-sūtra* lists the succeeding stages of the bodhisattva’s career,

<sup>93</sup> *Pañcaviṃśatī*, Kimura ed., vols. 6–8, p. 68.

<sup>94</sup> *Vajracchedikā-Prajñāpāramitā*, Conze § 32a; *Samghāṭadharmaparyāya* <94>; *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* pp. 224.8, 225.4-10;

O son of good family, the bodhisattva mahāsattva who cultivates this ingress into the *dhāraṇī* entrance of omniscience towards all forms obtains 8,400,000 *dhāraṇī* entrances, 72,000 *dhāraṇī* entrances and 60,000 samādhi entrances. The bodhisattva mahāsattva who has obtained this *dhāraṇī* attains great loving kindness and great compassion. For the attainment of just that concentration, the bodhisattva mahāsattva awakens to the 37 branches of awakening and attains omniscient gnosis.<sup>95</sup>

*imam kulaputra sarvajñatākāradhāraṇīmukhapraveśam bodhisattvo mahāsattvo bhāvayamānaś caturaśītidhāraṇīmukhasatasahasrāṇi pratilabhate, dvāsaptatiś ca dhāraṇīmukhasahasrāṇi pratilabhate, ṣaṣṭim ca samādhimukhasahasrāṇi pratilabhate | imāṃ ca dhāraṇīm pratilabdho bodhisattvo mahāsattvo mahāmaitrīm pratilabhate mahākaruṇām pratilabhate | kevalam asya samādheḥ pratilābhāya bodhisattvo mahāsattvaḥ saptatrimśadbodhipakṣān dharmān avabudhyate sarvajñajñānaṃ ca pratilabhate |*

The encoded content of the *dhāraṇīs*, irrespective of their appearance as syllables, is the buddhadharmas leading to awakening and ultimately the scriptures themselves. At this point, the *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka* even makes the extraordinary claim that all the buddhadharmas are the very “own being” of its *dhāraṇī*, and that Buddhas obtain awakening based on their understanding of these letters.

In it [the *sarvajñatākāradhāraṇī*] is encapsulated all the buddhadharmas. The Lord Buddhas, having awakened to this *dhāraṇī* in its *svabhāva*, teach all beings the Dharma but do not pass into nirvāṇa too quickly.

*iha ca sakalabuddhadharmāṇām parigrahaḥ | imāṃ ca dhāraṇīm svabhāvena buddhvā buddhā bhagavantaḥ sattvānām dharmam deśayanti na cātīkṣipraṃ parinirvāyanti |*

Accordingly, the factors of awakening lead to the entire potential canon of the Buddha’s word, since the buddhadharmas operate as nodes of realization that ultimately yield the entire expression of the Buddha’s word. The \**Mahādharmaḍipadhāraṇīsūtra* explains that the fundamental soteriological process produces the literary events as the accomplishment of the *dhāraṇīmukha* by invoking ecological images through punning on the cognate word earth (*dhāraṇī*), which acts as the support (*saṃdhāra*) or container (*bhājana*) for beings.

Thus this great earth establishes and generates every kind of gem and is just able to act as their container. Again, it is able to generate every kind of medicinal herb, plants and trees, groves of trees, flowers and fruit, and can support them all. Again it generates every hill and great mountain, all lakes and rivers as far as the great ocean, and can support them all.

<sup>95</sup> *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka* vol. 2, pp. 27.16-28.5; *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka* vol. 2, p. 30.9 declares that all the *bodhisattvapiṭaka* is taught in this *dhāraṇī*: *atra sākalyena bodhisattvapiṭakam upadiṣṭam*.

Again, it is able to have the four kinds of birth (viviparous, oviparous, etc.), biped and quadruped creatures, humans, deer, birds and wild beasts; it supports and is the container for all of these. This *dhāraṇī* is like that, all you Mānavas. And as for the term “entrance” (*mukha*), it is exactly the Tathāgata. This entrance into the Tathāgata’s treasure generates all the inconceivable treasure of the gem of the Dharma. Thus, O Mānava, this *dhāraṇī*, the entrance into the True Dharma, generates all the sūtras, all statements (*vākya*), all distinctions of meaning, all the perfections, and thus it is termed an entrance. O Mānava, again, this *dhāraṇī* is entirely able to support every kind of teaching, that is the reason it is called earth (*dharaṇī*).<sup>96</sup>

如此大地建立出生一切眾寶即能任持。又能出生一切藥草卉木樹林花果種類。悉皆任持。又出一切小山大山諸池河水乃至大海悉能任持。又亦能有四生之類二足四足人鹿鳥獸亦皆任持。此陀羅尼亦復如是。諸摩那婆。所言門者。即是如來。如來藏門出生一切諸法寶藏不可思議。如是摩那婆。此陀羅尼妙法門中出生一切諸修多羅。一切章句。一切分別義。一切諸波羅蜜。故名為門。摩那婆。又陀羅尼者。悉能任持一切法故。亦名為地。

Since all the teachings extend from the penetration into the syllable *A*—the encrypted source for all syllables—all the teachings (the 37 branches of awakening, the 12 members of dependant origination, etc.) are conversely found therein, and the penetration into *dhāraṇī* means the penetration into sound and vocal ability as well.<sup>97</sup> The *\*Mahādharmadīpadhāraṇīsūtra* later likens this to the action of the great Nāgarāja Anavatapta:

All the means of verbal action and the sonic forms of language—though such techniques as the arrangement of letters, exalted, extensive or summary expressions, etc. —each of these arises from within the texts of the treasury of letters (*\*māṭṛkakośa*), which are at the head [of the letters’ arrangement]. It is this *\*māṭṛkakośa* that is aggregated. All Mānavas! For example, the Nāgarāja Anavatapta, in the instant of the snap of your fingers, is able to generate a cloud entirely covering 7000 yojanas, one that sends down rain everywhere in Jambudvīpa. And the lake wherein the Nāgarāja resides (Anavatapta by Kailāśa), sends out the four kinds of streams into the four directions entering the four oceans.<sup>98</sup>

諸是口業方便語言音聲。及以文字麤妙寬略說等。一切皆從摩得勒伽藏字本中生。字本為首。即是摩得勒伽藏之所攝也。諸摩那婆。譬如阿那婆達多龍王能於一彈指間興雲普覆七千由旬降微細雨遍閻浮提。又如彼龍所住大池出四種河。周流四方。入於四海。

<sup>96</sup> *\*Mahādharmadīpadhāraṇīsūtra*, T. 1340.21.662a21-b2; *Ratnaketuparivarta*, p. 173.7, also employs *dharaṇi* (earth) in its discussion.

<sup>97</sup> Among the many sources affirming this, the *\*Mahāyānāvātāra* attributed to *\*Dṛḍhamati*, T. 1634.32.39a26-27.

<sup>98</sup> *\*Mahādharmadīpadhāraṇīsūtra*, T.1340.21.663b14-20.

The *Sāgaranāgarājaparipṛcchā* reinforces this with the idea that knowledge of the *dhāraṇī* produces realization of all the etymologies (*nirukti*) of all the syllables.

O Nāgarāja, this entrance into the sign of the syllables means that when a bodhisattva has obtained the *dhāraṇī* in the Inexhaustible *Dhāraṇī* Container, he will conceptualize the intention of the etymologies of all syllables.

*lku'i bdag po 'di ni yi ge'i brda la 'jug pa zhes bya ba mi zad pa'i za ma tog gi gzungs la byang chub sems dpas gzungs thob nas yi ge thams cad kyi nges pa'i tshig gi dgongs pa rtoḡ par 'gyur ba'o |*

Likewise, because the syllables enter into a text and the text into the syllables, any text may be so invoked as representing all of the canon, and be considered a *dhāraṇī* as a result. We see the extension of this idea to early texts, such as everyone's favorite hagiography of the Buddha, the *Lalitavistara*, which proclaims itself to be the “*dhāraṇī* treasury, as it is the encryption of all lore” (*dhāraṇīnidhānaṃ sarvaśrutādhāraṇatayā*).<sup>99</sup> Likewise, the *Aṣṭādaśasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā* claims it has the same ability,

Moreover, Ānanda, this deep *Perfection of Insight* is the ingress to all the syllables. Consequently, this deep *Perfection of Insight* is the entrance into all *dhāraṇīs*, the *dhāraṇī* entrance in which a bodhisattva mahāsattva is to train. Bearing in mind this *dhāraṇī*, the bodhisattvas mahāsattvas come face-to-face with the excellent knowledge of all forms of eloquence.<sup>100</sup>

*iyam punar ānanda gaṃbhīrā prajñāpāramitā sarvākṣarāṇāṃ praveśaḥ |  
iyam ānanda gaṃbhīrā prajñāpāramitā sarvadhāraṇīnāṃ mukhaṃ yatra  
dhāraṇīmukhe bodhisattvena mahāsattvena śikṣitavyaṃ | imān dhāraṇīn  
dhārayatāṃ bodhisattvānāṃ mahāsattvānāṃ sarvapratiḥhānapratisaṃvidā  
āmukhībhavanti |*

Over time, several Mahāyāna scriptures will make this claim, that they represent the *dhāraṇī* entrance into the scriptures, that encoded in each of them are all the other scriptures. In part they were motivated by the attractiveness of such an ideology: instead of the study of the syllables opening the door (*dhāraṇīmukha*) to the mastery of the scriptures, the mastery of the encrypted messages within the syllables of the specific scripture becomes the mystical vehicle for the mastery of the scriptures as a whole. This allowed the proponents of a scripture to claim that the study of their scripture or system yielded the knowledge of the canon. Certainly, this was taken to an eventual extreme, and the *Sarvavaidalyasaṃgraha* had to protest that “claiming to enter the word of the Tathāgata through the designation of a single letter is rejection of

<sup>99</sup> *Lalitavistara*, p. 317.8

<sup>100</sup> *Aṣṭādaśasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā*, p. 84.

the Dharma” (*yi ge'i ming gis de bzhin gshegs pa'i bka' la 'jug go zhes zer na chos spong ba yin no*).<sup>101</sup> Yet this is exactly what the *dhāraṇī* system did, by featuring the letter *A* as the alpha and omega of the Buddhist canon, so that all the Buddha's word was encrypted in *A*.<sup>102</sup>

Finally, the easy movement from dharmas to Dharma, from all sounds to all texts is facilitated by the Mahāyānist assumption that the scriptures are encoded in reality itself. The *Sāgaranāgarājariprcchā* insists that every word and every letter is the word of the Buddha, because each of them communicates the Buddhist values associated with the nature of reality and therefore they all represent the *Inexhaustible Container Dhāraṇī* (*\*akṣayakaraṇḍaka-dhāraṇī*); it even goes on to claim that all dharmas have the qualities of the Buddhist teaching, including their character as *dhāraṇīs*.<sup>103</sup>

Because all dharmas are space, the similarity of all dharmas to space is demonstrated. Because all dharmas are accomplished by effort, the freedom of all dharmas is demonstrated. Because all dharmas are not to be appropriated, the masterless character (*\*asvāmikātā*) of all dharmas is demonstrated. Because all dharmas are recollection, the unforgettableness of all dharmas is demonstrated. Because all dharmas are *dhāraṇīs*, the inexhaustibility of all dharmas is demonstrated.

*chos thams cad nam mkha' yin pas na chos thams cad kyi nam mkha' lta bu nyid ston to | chos tams cad nan gyis byas bas na chos thams cad kyi sgrol ba nyid tu ston to | chos thams cad blang du med bas na chos thams cad kyi bdag po med pa nyid ston to | chos thams cad dran pa nyin pas na chos thams cad kyi brjed ba med pa ston to | chos thams cad gzungs yin pa na chos thams cad kyi mi zad pa nyid ston to |*

In an even more extreme statement, the *Tathāgatotpattisambhava* articulates the image of a sūtra text on which all elements of reality are recorded, and then the text hidden in a particle of dust, to be found later by a person with penetrating insight; the sūtra indicates that this is the nature of the Buddha's wisdom, that it penetrates all elements of reality.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>101</sup> *Sarvavaidalyasaṃgraha-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra* To. 227, fol. 186b4-5; T. 274.9.378b1 interprets the statement as referring to a single verse rather than a single letter.

<sup>102</sup> Once Braarvig moves away from his emphasis on memory, he recognizes this fundamental function of *dhāraṇī*; see *Akṣyamatinirdeśa* Braarvig, vol. 2, pp. xci–xcii.

<sup>103</sup> *Sāgaranāgarājariprcchā* To. 153, fol. 136b4-137b7; To 598.15.137b18-c17. The quotation is from To. 153, fol. 140a6-b1. As Pagel (2007b, pp. 32–33) shows, the Tibetan text provides a series of letters with corresponding meanings, but Dharmarakṣa's translation (T.598.15.137c10-13) does not reflect this, and the textual distance between the Tibetan and the Chinese is perplexing. This section occurs immediately after an affirmation that *no* word or letter is the word of the Buddha, a relatively standard Mahāyānist method of scriptural argumentation. On the via-negativa expression of relationship of words and *dhāraṇīs*, see; *\*Devarājaravara-prajñāpāramitā* T.231.8.719a15-29.

<sup>104</sup> Gómez (1995) translates two versions of the text.

In sum, the movement from interpenetration of all elements to all elements coding the Buddhist teachings is an easy reformulation for the Mahāyāna scriptures. Moreover, it is a necessary formulation for them to make, since the Abhidharma tradition had already established that all compounded dharmas are impermanent, all defiled dharmas are suffering, all dharmas are non-self and only nirvāṇa is peace—the well-known Sarvāstivāda statement. The Mahāyānist challenge was to demonstrate that the Mahāyānist ontology was encoded into reality in the same way, that there was a direct line from reality to the scriptures, and the formulation of the *dhāraṇīs* as the coding system facilitated this conjunction of elements.

### From Tangible Benefits to Ultimate Liberation—*Dhāraṇīs* as Soteriological Forces

While the coding of the canon in a few phrases might have seemed like a stroke of contemplative genius, it simultaneously resulted in a doctrinal crisis, because it was not clear how extending these *dhāraṇīs* beyond the pedagogical or apotropaic purposes to implicate the soteriological process was precisely to be carried out. That is, if the *dhāraṇīs*' distinctive characteristic was the encryption of the Buddha's word, then they might be understood to produce the realization of the path through the internalization of the Buddha's gnosis, as we have seen. This leap of logic, while so smoothly made, had extraordinary consequences for the Mahāyānists, who seem to have only partially addressed these concerns in a rigorous manner, and generally long after they were fait accompli. Ultimately, it was justified through appeals to questions of karma and path gnoseology, based on other well-established principles.

The precedent for remarkable results from the recitation of a few phrases came in the form of the narrative of Cūḍāpanthaka, one of the Arhats of the early tradition who began as such a dunce that he could not remember a single verse taught to him by the Buddha. Instead, in the *Divyāvadāna* version, he was asked simply to memorize two phrases, even though these proved difficult to recollect, "I remove dust, I remove defilement" (*rajo harāmi malaṃ harāmi*).<sup>105</sup> But one night, towards dawn, he suddenly wondered, "Did the Lord mean for internal dust or external dust?" Then, suddenly, three verses occurred to him which he had not learned before (*aśrutapūrvās tisro gāthā āmukhīpravṛttājātāḥ*). These in turn led to his attainment of Arhatship and subsequent comprehension of the entire Buddhadharmā, so much so that he became the instructor of 12,000 nuns, who were recognized as mistresses of the Tripiṭaka. At the conclusion of the narrative, Cūḍāpanthaka became recognized by the Buddha as the best of those skilled in the evolution of mind (*cetovivartakuśala*).<sup>106</sup>

<sup>105</sup> *Divyāvadāna*, Vaidya pp. 430–434; this story is widespread in the canon; for further references, see Davidson (2002, p. 360n13).

<sup>106</sup> I connect this word with the vivartakalpa, evolving period of the universe, rather than with "turning back," another meaning for vivarta.



To circumvent questions on how the village idiot recited a few words to become an exalted Arhat, the earlier tradition employed two structures to bracket the Cūḍāpanthaka phenomenon. First, the narrative has him ask questions about the meaning of the phrase he is to recite before he achieves awakening, so that in most versions of the Cūḍāpanthaka hagiography, he passes from recitation to analysis to insight and then final realization, allowing for his reflective functions to precipitate Arhatship. Second, the episode concludes with several stories of past lives to justify the extraordinary karmic circumstances that would lead to such an understanding. Thus, both the karmic and gnoseological areas required attention for the unaware recitation of poorly understood phrases to conclude in awakening.

In distinction, the Mahāyānist *dhāraṇī* ideology was constructed around a representation that scriptural or doctrinal essence had become encoded into a concentrated form, which allowed for the remarkable transformation required by the benefits accorded the *dhāraṇīs*. Because *dhāraṇīs* are consistently represented as conferring mastery of the scriptures, they are inherently powerful, and have many natural consequences, extending from their encoding the power of the scriptures, many of which had already been understood to protect monks from danger through their recitation.<sup>107</sup> An even earlier analog is found in the *Chāndogya* mythology—the gods clothed themselves in the Vedic scriptures to escape death, but to no avail; om̐ being the juice of the Vedas and immortal, the gods entered the immortal syllable and gained immortality.<sup>108</sup> Similarly, the Buddhist *dhāraṇīs* are endowed with the power of the scriptures—occasionally conceived of as *dhāraṇī* juice—and as a concentrated form of Mahāyānist scripture the *dhāraṇīs* were said to be able to eliminate even sin accumulated by one who has committed the five heinous crimes of immediate karmic retribution (*ānantaryakarma*).<sup>109</sup>

Skilling has pointed to what he calls the “escape clause,” that some Mahāyānist scriptures allowed that the protection afforded by mantras or *dhāraṇīs* does not apply to events precipitated by karmic retribution, but this position was not universally accepted and overwhelmingly *dhāraṇīs* declare their ability to circumvent the worst of offenses.<sup>110</sup> Even in the case of some inherited karma, the *Ratnaketu-parivarta* claims that its *dhāraṇī* can effect sexual transformation for those burdened with the female state.<sup>111</sup> Consequently, when Bhavya discusses the escape clause, he simply indicates the exclusion of those with physical or mental handicaps that would keep them from the monastic enclave in the first place: born blind, one-eyed, lame, and so on. In distinction, he points to those with egregious sin who achieved

<sup>107</sup> Explored in detail in Skilling (1992).

<sup>108</sup> *Chāndogya-upaniṣad* 1.4.3-5; similarly *Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa* pp. 96–97, 180.

<sup>109</sup> *Dhāraṇī-rasa* is mentioned in the *Suvarṇprabhāsa* p. 115.7. For the alleviation of the five heinous sins, see *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka*, vol. 2, pp. 29, 39; *Ratnaketu-parivarta* pp. 38, 127, 151.

<sup>110</sup> Skilling (1992); the *Agrapradīpadhāraṇī* is especially adamant about the escape clause; To. 528, fols. 69b2, 70b3, 71a2, etc.

<sup>111</sup> *Ratnaketu-parivarta* pp. 37–38, 42–44, 48.

Arhatship—Aṅgulimāla, Ajātaśatru, etc. —and indicates that the skillful means of the Mahāyāna is as able to destroy the roots of retribution that would normally accrue.<sup>112</sup>

Because karmic doctrines play such a central role in normative Mahāyānist soteriology, eventually the apotropaic functions precipitated the allowance of the soteriological use of *dhāraṇīs*. In this regard, I believe the logic was simple: if mantras and apotropaic scriptural elements can guard against the consequences of previous karma, then the soteriological application of such elements may occur when they are turned to attack the cause of karma—the *kleśas* or other defilements.<sup>113</sup> Here we may infer that the soteriological function of *dhāraṇī* works to assist awakening by assaulting the root of the karmic problem, the three poisons that constitute the ultimate causes rendering the individual susceptible to snakes, illness, outcaste spells and the rest in the first place. The *dhāraṇīs* clearly serve simultaneously to promote the roots of goodness (*kuśalamūla*), which are the reverse of the defilements and, in some measure, their antidotes. Thus, the *dhāraṇī* system of protection from karmic consequences appears to have evolved into protection from karmic causes, which means that they were predisposing the reciter to liberation.

The movement from karmic consequence to causes further entailed the second issue: gnoseology. In normative Buddhist soteriology, the *kleśas* were the targets of the analytical functions of *prajñā*, which worked in association with the trainings in virtue and meditation to eventually eliminate the seeds for all further *kleśas*. While the recitation of *dhāraṇīs* could easily be integrated into the *śamatha* meditative systems through their employment in recollecting the Buddha or Dharma—as we see in the *Anantamukhanirhāradhāraṇī* discussions—it was less clear how *dhāraṇīs* might work with the other training, that in insight. This conflict in values was eventually resolved by appeal to Mahāyānist metaphysics, and this appeal was especially well articulated in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, which describes an advanced bodhisattva meditating on mantras in a section widely recognized for its importance, but perhaps not as well interpreted.

He is supremely mindful of those *mantra* phrases spoken by the Tathāgata, to wit: *ITI MIṬI KIṬI BHIKṢĀMṬI PADĀNI SVĀHĀ*. He considers, ponders and investigates the reference value of the mantra phrases, and becomes correctly accomplished by practicing the purport of the mantra phrases relying on himself and not listening to another.

Accordingly, he concludes, “There is no denotative value determinate in these mantra phrases, for they are referentially indeterminate (*nirartha*)! Thus, their semantic force is exactly their referential indeterminacy! Beyond that, there is no other semantic value to be discovered.” And by

<sup>112</sup> *Tarkajvālā*, pp. 185b2–186b4.

<sup>113</sup> *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka*, vol. 2, p. 40.18: sarvajñānākāradhāraṇīmukhapraveśaḥ karmapakṣakṣayaḥ saṃvartate kuśalābhivṛddhaye, and p. 41: sarvakarmāvaraṇāni kṣayaṃ gamiṣyati; *Suvarṇaprabhāsa* p. 107; *Ratnaketu-parivarta*, pp. 63, 136, 139, 151–156; *Anantamukhanirhāradhāraṇī*, Inagaki (1987, p. 231): de yi las kyi sgrub pa myur du ‘byang and Inagaki (1999, p. 146).

this referential indeterminacy the significance of these mantra phrases becomes well penetrated.

The bodhisattva, having correctly penetrated the reference value of these mantra phrases, by following that semantic value he correctly penetrates the non-referential value of all dharmas as well, by himself and without relying on another. Moreover, the following significance is penetrated: the denotative force of inherent being (*svabhāvārtha*) of all dharmas is not determinate through all expressions (*sarvābhilāpaiḥ*), and that is exactly the inexpressibility of their inherent being (*nirabhilāpya-svabhāvātā*)—that is the semantic force of their inherent being. Thus, having correctly penetrated the semantic force of the inherent being of all dharmas, he does not search for some other reference, as from the penetration of that sublime significance, he attains joy and ecstasy. Consequently, the bodhisattva's supreme forbearance is expressed by the bodhisattva who, having obtained the *dhāraṇī* phrases, intones them.<sup>114</sup>

*yānīmāni tathāgatabhāṣitāni bodhisattvakṣāntilābhāya mantrapadāni tadyathā iṭi miṭi kiṭi bhikṣānti padāni svāhā | ity eteṣāṃ mantrapadānām arthaṃ cintayati tulayaty upaparīkṣate | sa teṣāṃ mantrapadānām evaṃ samyakpratipanna evaṃ arthaṃ svayam evāśrutvā kutaścit pratividhyati | tad yathā nāsty eṣāṃ mantrapadānām kācid arthapariniṣpattiḥ nirarthā evaite | ayam eva caiṣāṃ artho yaduta nirarthatā | tasmāc ca param punar aparam arthaṃ na samanveṣate | iyatā tena teṣāṃ mantrapadānām arthaḥ supratividdho bhavati | sa teṣāṃ mantrapadānām arthaṃ samyak pratividhya tenaivārthānusāreṇa sarvadharmāṇām atyartham samyak pratividhyati svayam evāśrutvā parataḥ | evaṃ ca punar arthaṃ pratividhyati | sarvābhilāpaiḥ sarvadharmāṇām svabhāvārthāpariniṣpattiḥ | yā punar eṣāṃ nirabhilāpyasvabhāvātā ayam evaiṣāṃ svabhāvārthaḥ | sa evaṃ sarvadharmāṇām svabhāvārthaṃ samyakpratividhya tasmāt param arthaṃ na samanveṣate | udāraṇ ca tasyārthasya prativedhāt prītiprāmodyam pratilabhate | tena bodhisattvena pratilabdhā tāni dhāraṇīpadāny adhiṣṭhāya bodhisattvakṣāntir vaktavyā |*

This section has been somewhat misinterpreted, with the bodhisattva's realization of referential indeterminacy (*nirartha*) taken as indicating that mantras are without meaning. Certainly, the term *artha* is one of those polysemic words, which may indicate meaning, sense, reference, goal, purpose and so forth. However, here the value of *nirartha* is understood by the commentator as indicating the connection of the act of reference and the object of reference (*\*abhidheyābhidhānasambandha*); thus the description *nirartha* indicates that absolute understanding is non-referential, since mantras do not have

<sup>114</sup> *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, Wogihara 273.9-274.4; To. 4037, fol. 144a6-b7; T. 1579.30.543a5-22; T. 1581.30.934a15-28; T. 1582.30.996c8-17; *Bodhisattvabhūmivyākhyā* To. 4047, fol. 237a.

denotative force.<sup>115</sup> The *Bodhisattvabhūmi*'s use of *artha* here is strongly in alignment with the position of the relationship of word and object found discussed extensively in the most neglected of works attributed to Asaṅga, the \**Āryadeśanāvikhyaṇa-sāstra*, and is carried on by others extending the Yogācāra theories of language, which were grounded in the Vaibhāṣika Abhidharma but went beyond it.<sup>116</sup> When we look at the sūtra correlates, moreover, we see that the idea is to not grasp onto an objective reference, and the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* is even more definitive about the soteriological force of spells,

Now here, O Kauśika, the bodhisattva mahāsattva who trains in the spell (*vidyā*) awakens to highest complete awakening and obtains omniscience. And therefore he, having awakened to highest complete awakening will look out onto the minds of beings. How so? Here, O Kauśika, there is nothing whatsoever present for a bodhisattva mahāsattva training in a spell, so that there would be not anything obtained, or cognized, or brought into presence. Therefore, O Kauśika, we call this omniscience.<sup>117</sup>

*atra hi kauśika vidyāyām śikṣamāṇo bodhisattvo mahāsattvo 'nuttarām samyaksambodhim abhisambhotsyate sarvajñajñānaṃ ca pratilapsyate | tena so 'nuttarām samyaksambodhim abhisambudhya sarvasattvānām cittāni vyavalokayiṣyati | tat kasya hetoḥ? atra hi kauśika vidyāyām śikṣamāṇasya bodhisattvasya mahāsattvasya na tat kiṃcid asti, yan na prāptam vā na jñātam vā na sākṣātkṛtam vā syāt | tasmāt sarvajñajñānam ity ucyate |*

Precisely the same point is made *in extensio* in the *Anantamukhanīrharadhāraṇī*, one of the earliest of our *dhāraṇī* scriptures, first reportedly translated by Zhiqian 223–253 CE (T. 1011).<sup>118</sup> Following the declaration of the longest of the *dhāraṇīs* in the scripture—one that exhibits many of the characteristics found in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* example above—the scripture maintains that a bodhisattva holding onto that *dhāraṇī* will therefore not grasp after any of a lengthy series of objects, beginning with all the compounded and un-compounded dharmas (*samskṛtāsamskṛtadharmā*) and concluding with elements of virtue.<sup>119</sup> The Mahāyānist emphasis on non-referentiality

<sup>115</sup> *Bodhisattvabhūmivyākhyā* To. 4047, fol. 237a2: don yong su grub pa'i ci yang med de zhes bya ba ni brjod bya dang brjod byed kyi 'brel bas yang dag par bsdus pa'o |

<sup>116</sup> \**Āryadeśanāvikhyaṇa-sāstra* T. 1602.31.502b29-c2 articulates five meanings for 'artha' (see also 557c19-29) and 535c17-536a24 presents the Yogācāra understanding of *nāma-pada-vyañjanakāya*, which we have seen employed in describing *dhāraṇīs* above. For a reasonable discussion of some of these issues through the later representative Paramārtha, Paul 1979, who compares his position to the well-known essay "On Sense and Reference" in Frege 1966, pp. 56–78.

<sup>117</sup> *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* Vaidya 28.2-6; a much more extensive discussion of syllable and meaning with much the same import is given in the *Bodhisattvapaṭaka* To. 56, vol. ga, fols. 170b7-172a2. See also the *Kuśalamūlasaṃparigraha* materials translated Pagel (2007b, pp. 62–65).

<sup>118</sup> This attribution is accepted in Nattier (2008, p. 122).

<sup>119</sup> Inagaki (1987, pp. 153–154; 1999, pp. 69–70).

eventually precipitated a counter-position, and the curmudgeonly *Sarvavaidalyasaṃgraha* reproaches those who claim that having no reference is sufficient for awakening.<sup>120</sup> In discussing the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*'s *dhāraṇī* doctrines, then, we may keep in mind that the text is simply articulating many of the values already found in Mahāyānist sūtras of the day, especially the close relationship depicted between the attainment of *dhāraṇī* through contemplating mantras and the attainment of patience towards the unarisen nature of all dharmas.<sup>121</sup>

Thus, what is arguably the central Mahāyānist theoretical problematik—grasping after essences within objects/referents in the world—came with the corollary problem of its antidote, since antidotes are necessary for the proper pursuit of meditation. The prior inclusion of inexplicable syllables in mantras within earlier Buddhist traditions was eventually extended to the soteriology of the bodhisattva path, since the contemplation of these syllables entailed the dissociation from assuming the essential nature of objects of cognition, for we do not generally find *mantradhāraṇī* attributed own being (*svabhāva*) outside of encoding all the elements conducive to awakening.<sup>122</sup> Mahāyānists therefore readily found in *mantradhāraṇīs* the lack of reference that fit easily into their philosophical and doctrinal architecture, irrespective of whether the doctrine was the interdependence of all elements of reality (*sūnyavāda*) or the absence of a real external world (*vijñānavāda*). Consequently, we see a universal acceptance of *dhāraṇīs* in Mahāyānist circles, for the non-referential coded syllables could be overcoded with the appropriate system without protest (as we saw in the Vinaya discussion above), even though later intellectuals like Bhavya and Dharmakīrti would develop justifications for the soteriological value of mantras and *dhāraṇīs* in their own ways.<sup>123</sup>

Eventually the discussion turns to the problem of the path—if spells are particularly efficient means, then the path may be shortened—but this is denied by certain Mahayanist commentators like Jñānagarbha in his commentary on the *Anantamukhanirhāra-dhāraṇī*; Jñānagarbha says that the path still takes at least three incalculable aeons, in the manner of good Mahayanist doctrine.<sup>124</sup> Even then, we have some indications that the soteriological benefit of the *dhāraṇī* entrance was expected to be accomplished in seven years.<sup>125</sup> This figure is provided in a few scriptures both as a desirable goal and, in the *Buddhākṣepana-sūtra*, as a measure of failure for ten bodhisattvas

<sup>120</sup> *Sarvavaidalyasaṃgraha* To.227, fol. 183a7.

<sup>121</sup> *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka*, vol. 2, p. 26.13-14: samādhidhāraṇīkṣāntipratilabdha; *Ratnaketuravivarta* pp. 136, 163.

<sup>122</sup> *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka*, vol. 2, p. 28, already discussed above.

<sup>123</sup> Braarvig (1997), Kapstein (2001 pp. 233–255), Eltschinger (2001, 2008).

<sup>124</sup> Inagaki (1987, p. 94) discusses this point.

<sup>125</sup> *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka* vol. 2, p. 9.6-7: *saptānām varṣāṇām atyayena imām sarvajñatākāradhāraṇīmukhapraveśadhāraṇīm pratilabhate bodhisattva mahāsattvaḥ* l. Similarly *Suvārṇa-prabhāsa*, p. 118.1.

who attempted success in the *dhāraṇī* entrance, failed to accomplish it, and gave up the Buddhist path.<sup>126</sup> In that narrative, the heretofore promising bodhisattvas became discouraged, gave up their monastic robes, returned home, became hangers-on in the court of Ajātaśatru and complained about the Buddhist dharma. Their mythic lack of success—reflecting no doubt a real problem for some Buddhist meditators—was explained as a consequence of decisions they had made many lives before, and eventually all was put aright.

### So Many *Dhāraṇī* Functions, So Little Time

Over time, a number of factors contributed to the proliferation of *dhāraṇī* entrances—the tension between syllables/letters/words and meaning, the multiple fields of significance to the category (sounds, memory, summation, decryption, to name a few)—so that there can be little wonder that Buddhist classifications of *dhāraṇīs* contained multiple facets in classic statements of polysemy and thick description. We have seen at the beginning of this essay that the several functions of *dhāraṇīs* in the *Ajātaśatrukaukṛtyavinodanā* indicated that the monothetic definition of *dhāraṇī* as memory was problematic, since many of the elements attributed there could not be adequately described as exclusively recollective or mnemonic. Consequently, the test of “code/coding” will be whether that terminology can account for the range of functions found in Buddhist literature.

As with the *Ajātaśatrukaukṛtyavinodanā*, many Mahāyāna sūtras detail varieties of *dhāraṇī* by dividing *dhāraṇīs* into discrete categories. The *Samādhirājasūtra* defines four kinds of *dhāraṇī*: the four knowledges with respect to the infinite linguistic expressions of all compounded elements, of all sounds, of defilements and the qualities of purification.<sup>127</sup> For its part, the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* identifies three obscure *dhāraṇīs* attained by preachers (Dharmabhāṅakas)—that which revolves (or imparts) the *dhāraṇī*, that which imparts ten trillion (*dhāraṇīs*), and that which imparts skill in all sounds (*sarvarutakauśalya*).<sup>128</sup> The *Anantamukhanirhāradhāraṇī* describes four *dhāraṇī* entrances: the accomplishment of the infinite entrances (*\*anantamukhanirhāradhāraṇīmukhapraveśa*), skill in the faculties of beings (*\*sattvendriyakauśalya*-), un-compounded skill in karma and fruition (*\*karmavipākāsaṃskṛta-kauśalya*-),

<sup>126</sup> *Buddhākṣepana-sūtra* To. 276 fol. a2-4; T. 811.17.770b21-c2; T. 831.17.876a15-21.

<sup>127</sup> *Samādhirājasūtra*, Vaidya 148.11-15. Narendrayāśas elaborates by detailing three more groups of four—the four *dharmadhāraṇīs*, the four *lakṣaṇadhāraṇīs*, and the four *dhāraṇīmukhas*, making sixteen *dhāraṇīs* total; T. 639.15.580c23-581a17; this strategy is not followed by the Tibetan in To. 127, fol. 82b3-7. For a discussion of the four recensions of the *Samādhirāja*, see Skilton 1999; for other *Samādhirāja* materials, Skilton (2002), Gómez and Silk (1989, pp. 1–88).

<sup>128</sup> *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* p. 475.7-9: *dhāraṇyāvartīdhāraṇī*, *koṭīśatasahasrāvartī dhāraṇī*, and *sarvarutakauśalyāvartī dhāraṇī*; Dharmarakṣa’s translation (T. 263.9.133a.20-21) is little help; Kumārajīva translates the curious *-āvartī* literally as 旋, meaning to turn (T. 262.9.61b7-8), as do the Tibetan translators, using *‘khyil ba* (To. 113, fol. 176b3-4).



and the expression of the deep Dharma (\**gambhīradharmavacana*-).<sup>129</sup> Other scriptures multiply *dhāraṇīs* by enumerating multiple members of the same or similar category, as in the cases of the *Daśabhūmika* or the *Dhāraṇīśvararāja*, with respectively ten and eight forms.<sup>130</sup> This trajectory was to attain its high point with the more than a hundred *dhāraṇīs* (hyperbolically identified as the 100,000 immeasurable *dhāraṇīmukhas*) named in the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra* translations of the fifth-eighth centuries.<sup>131</sup>

Yogācāra and Vijñānavāda authors appear particularly predisposed to discuss *dhāraṇīs*. The *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*, for example, mentions *dhāraṇīs* that result from action in a previous life (*pūrvakarmavipākena*), from learning in this life (*dr̥ṣṭadharmabāhuśrutyena*), and with the support of contemplation (*samādhisamñīśrayena*); the latter is superior to the other two and again broken down into three forms (weak, middling and strong), depending on which stage of the bodhisattva path it is found.<sup>132</sup> The *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, leading up to the section just translated, famously defines *dhāraṇīs* as relating to Dharma (*dharmā-*), to semantic value (*artha-*), to mantra phrases (*mantra-*), and to the attainment of the bodhisattva's supreme forbearance (*bodhisattvakaṣṭāntilābhāya dhāraṇī*).<sup>133</sup> The first is the exact understanding of words, phrases and letters in texts by having listened to them just once and without recitation practice; the second is the comprehension of their significance in the mind without having to remind oneself of their content; the third is the intoning of *mantra* phrases to obtain unending successes in the curing of beings' diseases and the fourth is the attainment of forbearance described above. The commentary to the *Ṣaṣṭhāyikā-dhāraṇī* attributed to Vasubandhu specifies six functions or goals (*artha*) of *dhāraṇīs*: the completion of insight, the purity of the power of compassion, purification of one's own stream of being, comprehension of impediments caused by others, summation of the factors of awakening, and the reality and correct knowledge which are these factors' fruit (*shes rab yongs su rdzogs pa dang | snying rje'i stobs rnam par dag pa dang | rang gi rgyud rnam par dag pa dang | gzhan gyis bsgrubs pa'i gags*

<sup>129</sup> These approximate Sanskrit renderings are based on the Tibetan, edited in Inagaki (1987, p. 135): sgo mi zad pas sgrub pa'i gzungs kyi sgor 'jug pa dang | sems can rnam kyī dbang bo la mkhas pa'i gzungs kyi sgor 'jug pa dang | las dang rnam par smin pa la mkhas pa 'dus ma byas kyi gzungs kyi sgor 'jug pa dang | chos zab mo la bzod pa'i gsungs kyi sgor 'jug pa. The various Chinese translations disagree in both meaning and order on some of these, and their disagreement is related to the problem of the philological history of the text. Even then, most agree with most factors in the Tibetan: T.1011.19.680b28-c1; T.1012.19.682c17-19; T.1013.19.685c6-9; T.1014.19.688c8-12; T.1015.19.692c5-8; T.1016.19.695c5-7; T.1017.19.699a17-20; T.1018.19.703a18-21; T.1009.19.676b9-12.

<sup>130</sup> *Daśabhūmika* p. 162.16–163.3; *Daśabhūmikavyākhyāna* To. 3993, fol. 243a4-b7, T. 1522.26.192b4-23; *Dhāraṇīśvararāja* T. 397(2).13.22c8-24c4, T. 398.13.441a3-12, To. 147 (designated the *Tathāgatamahākaraṇīnīrdeśa*), fols. 218b–230a. This material is discussed by Pagel 2007a.

<sup>131</sup> *Buddhāvataṃsaka* T. 278.9.702c-703b; T. 279.10.348c-349b; further expanded T. 293.10.701c-702c.

<sup>132</sup> *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* XVIII.71–73.

<sup>133</sup> *Bodhisattvabhūmi* Wogihara 272–274.



*yongs su shes pa dang | byang chub kyi tshogs kun du sdud pa dang de'i 'bras bu yang dag pa'i ye shes dang de bzhin nyid do |*).<sup>134</sup>

The various types and categories of *dhāraṇī* developed in greater or lesser measure because the variety of discussions expressed under the rubric of *dhāraṇī* was so diverse. Even then, they do tend to express certain areas of emphasis, as I have argued above with five areas that must be covered: memory/mindfulness, mantras, canonical encryption, signs of ultimate reality, and ritual. Reviewing the *dhāraṇī* texts, it appears to me that these necessities are worked out through specific attributes. For example, in several of the texts designated as *dhāraṇīs*, the mindfulness/summation of the Dharma is seen in an emphasis on the affirmation of basic Buddhist doctrines—the four noble truths, the thirty-seven limbs of awakening, and so forth—to a degree unusual in other genres of Mahāyānist texts.<sup>135</sup> The lengthy *\*Mahāprabhāvadhāraṇīsūtra* is perhaps the most elaborate example of that trend, and while it covers very many topics in its 20 fascicles, it consistently returns to the topic of the four truths, sometimes encoded in languages supposedly spoken by the denizens of other realms.<sup>136</sup>

The mantric aspect is frequently associated with the emphasis on the relationship between *dhāraṇīs* and concentration, so that the compound “*dhāraṇī* and concentration entrances” (*dhāraṇīsamādhimukha*) is a standard accomplishment of advanced bodhisattvas, as has been noticed many times before.<sup>137</sup> Moreover, when *dhāraṇīs* occur in one or another of the great soteriological scriptures or other texts—like the *Daśabhūmika* or the *Samādhirāja*—they often foreground the question of the special knowledges (*dharma-*, *artha-*, *nirukti-*, and *pratibhāna-pratiṣamvid*), all of which are related to skills necessary to the ritualized act of preaching. Additionally, when *dhāraṇīs* are given in other Mahāyānist texts, then the mantras often highlight their employment in propitiatory purposes, to invoke a Buddha, a bodhisattva or goddess for various purposes. This appears to be an extension of the practice and images invoked during the “recollection of the Buddha” (*buddhānusmṛti*) and often serves an apotropaic or soteriological function,

<sup>134</sup> *Ṣaṣṭhādhāraṇīvyākhyāna* To. 2694, fol. 1b2-3, T. 1361.21.878b6-8. Immediately following the *Vyākhyāna*, T. 1361 includes a useful subcommentary attributed to Zhiwei (智威), entitled 六門陀羅尼經論廣釋, which was written in 653, shortly after Xuanzang translated the *Ṣaṣṭhādhāraṇī* in 645, so there can be some confidence that the text reflects received understanding; the section on the six goals is T.1361.21.879a14-b24.

<sup>135</sup> E.g., *Karuṇāpūṇḍarīka*, vol. 2, pp. 21–25, each of the *dhāraṇīs* is said to generate the condition of faith in various fundamental Buddhist conceptual lists; such lists are reviewed in *\*Mahādharmadīpadhāraṇī-sūtra*, T. 1340.21.666a29, 678a7-680b2; the *dhāraṇī* section to the *Akṣayamatī* comes immediately after the discussion of the thirty-seven limbs of awakening; *Akṣayamatīnirdeśa* Braarvig, vol. 2, pp. 510–557. *Puṣpakūta-dhāraṇī* To. 516, fol. 33a7.

<sup>136</sup> *\*Mahāprabhāvadhāraṇīsātra* T. 1341.21.764c-767c, 775b-c, 777c, and these are sometimes said to represent the speech of other realms or other species, like *yakṣas*; the *Karuṇāpūṇḍarīka* vol. 2, p. 39.1 (and see Yamada’s discussion in the appendix to vol. 2) indicates that its *dhāraṇī* employs words of Dravidian origin, *drāmiḍamantrapada*.

<sup>137</sup> *Daśabhūmika*, p. 156.2; *Ratnaketurparivarta*, Kurumiya p. 32.11; *Samādhirāja*, pp. 113.23, 120.31, 218.14; *Suvarṇaprabhāsa*, p. 30.5; for attainment of patience associated with *dhāraṇī*, *Rāṣṭrapālapariprcchā*, p. 11.3–17.

although other goals are also enumerated: the facilitation of learning, the pacification of disease, the elimination of malicious spirits, the cultivation of merit, to name but a few.<sup>138</sup>

If my argument is correct, all of these functions can be understood as codes/encoding/decoding, and I believe that they can. All the items on the list represent elements that may be brought under the rubric of coding: memory/mindfulness, the attributes of reality, summations of complex issues, inspiration, hermeneutics, syllabic representations of the canon, letters, signs, understanding, analysis and so forth. All of these (and more) can be handled by the ideology of a system that transforms information—whether by compression, encryption, decompression, translation, replication, manipulation or other information system manipulation known to coding—so that mantras, phrases, syllables, graphic representations, non-verbal signs, and other signs of awakening can carry the Buddhist message. These can all be *dhāraṇīs*.

### Conclusion: A *Dhāraṇī* for all Seasons

The sheer volume and proliferation of *dhāraṇī* scriptures and *dhāraṇī*-related rites ensure that any single statement concerning the nature of *dhāraṇīs* requires qualification almost before it is written, and that eventually the statement will be contradicted in some measure in some scripture, for Mahāyānist sūtras sometimes contradict each other and, occasionally, themselves. Nonetheless, *dhāraṇīs* are revealed in Mahāyānist sūtras as the coded systems of the Buddhas' speech, for the protection of beings, for the liberation of bodhisattvas, for the eloquence of the preachers, for the intuitive realization of the scriptures, for the mnemonics of the four truths, and for a hundred other purposes. Consequently, we may recognize the following meanings of *dhāraṇī*, even while admitting that other fields of signification may be uncovered:

*Dhāraṇīs* are syllables/letters that are codings of specific elements of Buddhist doctrine as examples of their range of potential applications in order to demonstrate the syllables/letters' efficient utility in learning and internalization of material.

*Dhāraṇīs* are syllables/letters that are codings of all other syllables, designations, statements and forms of language by both implication and mutual interpenetration.

*Dhāraṇīs* are syllables/letters that are codings of Buddhist scriptures, stimulating realization or recollection of their meanings. Their special connection is with eloquence and inspiration for the preachers of the Mahāyāna, the Dharmabhāṅakas.

<sup>138</sup> The *buddhānusmṛti* theme is expressly associated with the *dhāraṇī* in the *Buddhākṣepanasūtra*, To. 276, fol. 48a5; T. 811.17.772a18-21, T. 831.17.877b22-27; the thirty-two *mahāpuruṣalakṣaṇas* are reviewed in detail in *\*Mahādharmaḍipadhāraṇī-sūtra* T. 1340.21.671b29-677b15.

*Dhāraṇīs* are formalized, ritualized syllables (mantras) that are codings of specific powers for the purposes of protection from dangers, illnesses, and terrifying experiences in the world.

*Dhāraṇīs* are mantras as codings for the destruction of the consequences of karma, up to and including the five heinous crimes of parricide, etc.

*Dhāraṇīs* are mantras as codings for the destruction of the psychologically unwholesome states: desire, anger and ignorance and for the augmentation of the their antitheses, the three roots of wholesomeness.

*Dhāraṇīs* are mantras as codings for the essential elements of the Buddhist path, especially the four Noble Truths and the 37 Branches of Awakening. All the *dhāraṇīs* reflective of the Buddhist path are codings especially connected to the entrance of contemplation (*samādhimukha*) and the power of mindfulness (*smṛtibala*).

*Dhāraṇīs* are mantras as codings for the entire Buddhist path, acting as a easy, skillful means for the attainment of liberation, because they do not reference dharmas in the world but are non-referential in nature. Their particular connection is to the attainment of the special patience towards the unarisen nature of dharmas.

*Dhāraṇīs* are phrases/statements/texts that operate in the same manner as *dhāraṇīs* as syllables/letters or as mantras, from coding elements of doctrine to the entire canon to acting as a vehicle for final liberation. This function yields *dhāraṇīs* as a genre, which often includes prayers, aspirations, ritual programs and concluding summaries of benefits. It is indicative, though, that texts in the genre can have their *mantradhāraṇīs* abstracted elsewhere with no sense that there is a loss of the meaning, just what we might expect for coded information.

Essential to the model is a curious essenceless essentialism: *dhāraṇīs*, being non-referential and without essence contain the essential code of the Mahāyānist teachings and scriptures. The decompression of that code, its systematic decryption, is the new problematik, one to be solved through the recitation of the *dhāraṇīs* in appropriate venues, combined with rituals, meditation and the bodhisattva's aspiration. The expectation became that all apparently nonsense syllables were part of the Buddha's encryption process that assigned meaning without reference, so that the doctrinal systems of non-referential gnosis (*anālambanajñāna*) could attach infinite value to sonic and graphic signs that could continue to be reinterpreted at will. In this light, the rhetorical position of modern semiotics about the infinitely recursive connotation and denotation of signs in fact appears to have found harmonic resonance in this theoretical aspect of Buddhist soteriology.

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