

On the traditions of the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi-sūtra* and its *maṇḍala* in Tibet

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In the Tantric Buddhism of Tibet, the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi-sūtra* is regarded as the basic tantra of the Caryā Tantras in the standard fourfold classification of Buddhist tantras. But because the current of Tantric Buddhism based on the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi-sūtra* fell into decline quite early in India, not very much material has been preserved. This current of Tantric Buddhism was, however, introduced to Tibet during the Tufan period, and exemplars of the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi-maṇḍala*, although few in number, were previously known to exist. These included a copy in the Ngor Collection, brought out of Tibet by bSod nams rgya mtsho, a former abbot of Ngor Monastery, and a version preserved at Tateyama Museum in Toyama prefecture, Japan.

But when I was searching for material to assist in the reproduction of the Tibetan *Vajradhātu-maṇḍala* and *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi-maṇḍala* at the Toga Meditation Museum in Toyama prefecture in 1994–96, the number of related texts, line drawings and photographs that I managed to obtain exceeded my expectations. An analysis of these various sources revealed considerable differences among the different Tibetan versions of the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi-maṇḍala* regarding the arrangement and iconography of the deities.

A thangka put on the market by a London art dealer in 1993 is the oldest extant example of the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi-maṇḍala* among these, dating from the thirteenth century, but the central deity faces east and the arrangement of the deities is also the reverse of the norm. In addition, the four Buddhas of the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi-sūtra* are depicted in the archways above the four gates. The Samantabhadra Chapel (Kun bzang lha khang) and Amoghapāśa Chapel (Don zhags lha khang) in the *stūpa* at dPal 'khor chos sde (early 15th cent.), meanwhile, preserve murals depicting various deities from the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi-maṇḍala*.

Today, the traditions of the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi-sūtra* and its *maṇḍala* have more or less disappeared in Central Tibet, but it has come to light that these traditions have managed to survive in Amdo in northern Tibet. The Kālacakra College (Dus 'khor grva tshang) at Bla brang Monastery (Bla brang bkra shis 'khyil) in Gansu province, China, runs a course on the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi-sūtra*, and during my visit in 1996 I was able to take photographs of its *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi-maṇḍala*. This *maṇḍala* is similar to the Tateyama Museum version, and my conjecture that the latter derived from Amdo was thus confirmed.

In addition, I acquired copies of numerous wood-block ritual manuals preserved at Bla brang Monastery. These included some which have already been reprinted in India,

such as those on the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi-maṇḍala* by the first and third Panchen Lamas, but there are also a number of texts that were not even known to exist, such as a lengthy manual of 62 folios by bTsun gzugs shes rab rgya mtsho. The dates of this author are not known, but I was told that he had been a scholar-monk attached to the Kālacakra College at Bla brang Monastery.

At Rva rgya Monastery in mGo log county, Qinghai province, I was also able to obtain photographs of a line drawing of a *samaya-maṇḍala* of the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi-maṇḍala* used when creating a *maṇḍala* in powdered colours, as well as copies of xylographs and manuscripts of ritual manuals preserved at this monastery. These too include some, such as the above-mentioned manuals by the Panchen Lamas, about which we already knew, but again there are a number of texts that had not been known to exist, such as an anonymous commentary on procedures for measuring out the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi-maṇḍala*.

In this paper, basing myself on the above materials, I propose to shed light on the traditions of the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi-sūtra* and its *maṇḍala* in Tibet, which have hitherto been veiled in mystery, and I also hope to survey their iconographical characteristics through a comparison with Japanese exemplars.