

A Study of Middle Age Sanskrit Poṣadha Palm-leaf Manual

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Abstract

The Poṣadha, or observing of eight Buddhist precepts by lay and monastic people in Buddhism starts in the lifetime of Buddha. With the growth of time, many Buddhist sects developed and they developed their Poṣadha methods (I.-Tsing, 1896). Among them is the tradition of the Sanskrit Mahayana monks. This article is about a palm-leaf manuscript [RAS Hudgson MS 70] from the Hudgson collection which is now in the South Asian society collection. This Poṣadha manual written by a novice has great significance as it takes us back to the time when the monks following Sanskrit tradition were still functioning. Interestingly this Poṣadha text is based largely on the Mahayana context and has very little Sravakayana influence. Directions for forming puṣpamaṇḍala has significant difference which hasn't been revealed before. This Vrata manual can be looked at as the initial ritualistic development of a now surviving Sanskrit Buddhism, this is Newar Buddhism.

Keyword: Poṣadha, Vrata, Brian Hudgson, Royal Asiatic collections, Puṣpamaṇḍala.

Introduction

Poṣadha is an important practice in Buddhism for monks, nuns, and lay practitioners. The manuscript under study is dated to the 13th -14th century and comes from the Hudgson collection. It is a manual for performing a *Poṣadha* ritual. (Gautam Vajracharya, Email communication, 3rd Dec. 2022)¹. The specialty of this manual is that it's a Sanskrit *Poṣadha* manual written by a residential novice monk of *Dharmadhātu Mahāvihāra*. Since the continuous tradition of Sanskrit monks has become extinct, we don't have a clear idea of how *Poṣadha* used to be performed (Dutt, 1962). Research on this manuscript may help us to fulfill the gap and get an understanding of the practice of *Poṣadha* in the Mahayana tradition of *Poṣadha* in the Mahayana tradition. The general objective of the article is to understand how *Poṣadha* was carried out during the 13th to 14th centuries without much esoteric aspect. Moreover, this article looks forward to

¹ For dating of the Manuscript opinion of Sanskritist and Art Historian Gautam Vajra Vajracharya and Vijay Raj Vajracharya of Central University of Tibetan Studies (CUTS) was taken. Prof. Vijay dates the manuscript to the 13th century whereas Gautam Vajra Paleographically assigns it to the 13th or 14th century.

exploring more of the palm-leaf manuscripts from the Hudgson collection. This type of research will help us to figure out the development of rituals before it gets more complicated as *AṣṭamīVrata* carried on in the modern era. Comparatively studying ancient scripts and researching is decreasing thus this article aims to boost the training of getting g back to the primary resource. This article primarily focuses on the steps of *Poṣadha*.

Research Methodology

This article is founded on descriptive and qualitative research on a palm-leaf *Poṣadha* ritual manual. This research work is written based on collective information from two sources: primary and secondary. The primary sources include the information gathered from Sanskrit as well as Tibetan Buddhist Texts. The author transcribed and translated the manuscript himself for this article. The researcher also collected information from personal contact via face-to-face communication and social media. Secondary sources comprise the translation of Sanskrit Buddhist and Tibetan texts into English by famous Buddhist scholars. Information from various books, journal articles, and articles was posted on different online sites.

Maṇḍala formation

The manuscript contains information and instructions on building four different maṇḍalas out of flowers. Using the flower-arranged *puṣpamaṇḍala* as a focal point reference, other activities such as taking refuge, confession, dedication, etc. take place. Thus these are important divisions for the *Poṣadha* manual. A total of four Mandala formation methods are instructed here. First, is the twenty-two-pointed *Akṣobhyamaṇḍala*. This is then followed by nine heaped maṇḍalas of three jewels; the Buddha, Dharma, and *Saṅgha*. Interestingly, unlike the fasting rituals performed today, there is no separate *Amoghapāśamaṇḍala*, as the ritual is dedicated to the lord of the *saṅghamaṇḍala*. Therefore, the *saṅghamaṇḍala* itself is being used as the main maṇḍala for the main purpose i.e. the special *Poṣadha* ritual.

Akṣobhyamaṇḍala

The first maṇḍala instructed in the manual is a Buddhist cosmological diagram. Before coming to the maṇḍala formation at the beginning are mantras for cleansing. Three ways of purifying via *ācamana*, *prākshalana*, and *snāna* are first instructed. After this blessing of three doors of body, speech, and mind for protection and blessing the land, seat, etc are performed. This is followed by *āryamāyājālamahātantroddhṛtmaṇḍalagāthā*. Then comes the formation of the actual *Akṣobhyamaṇḍala*.

The cosmological maṇḍala representation here is very interesting as this kind of formation varies from the one given in *Abhidharma* or other well-known resources. *Maṇḍala* formation here follows twenty-two heaps. This has a close relationship with the tradition that's followed until then within Kathmandu Valley. This also has close similarities

with *Acharya Jetāri's maṇḍala* formation of seventeen heaps². In this formation *Akṣobhya* is the center figure, hence he resides on top of Mt. Sumeru. After the formation of the *maṇḍala*, it is followed by the taking of refuge, praise, and extensive confession which will be later discussed.

Like the Tibetan Buddhist *maṇḍala* offering tradition here three heaps have been dedicated to Mount *Sumeru*. Meru has been classified into lower, center, and upper Meru. Regarding the continents, there are four main continents and there are subcontinents. This manual prescribes the subcontinent in intermediate directions. But it is unclear whether it is referring to two subcontinents like in *Abhidharma* or just one as the instruction only points out. Because two seed syllabus is prescribed for the subcontinent eg. *Om̐yāyāupadvīpāyanamaḥ* which suggest they are to the subcontinent. However, the verse on dedication or *niryātanā* denies this possibility whose discussion will be done in the *niryātanā* section.

Confession

At this point, extensive confession is made. A verse that is to be repeated three times for confessing is from *Vinaya Pitaka*. It is an extract from *bodhisattva-prātimokṣa-sūtra* (Dutt, 1998). These lines are borrowed by *Acharya Shantideva* in his *śikṣāsamuccaya* for the eighth chapter on confession (Bendall, 1978). After confession is made *niryātanā* and *visarjana* are performed. This allows the opening or formation of the Buddha *maṇḍala*.

Buddha Maṇḍala

As prescribed by the *Arya Gaṅkāraṇḍavyūhasūtra*, homage to Three Jewel is necessary for performing the *Poṣadha*³. Buddha *Maṇḍala* instructed here contains four transcendental Buddhas and four *Tārās*. Since the invocation of *Akṣobhya* who belongs to a set of five transcendental Buddhas has already been done in the previous *maṇḍala* of *Akṣobhya* with twenty-two heaps, in this section the center part of the *maṇḍala* is occupied by Shakyamuni Buddha. Causing Buddha *Vairocana* who usually takes a central place in absence of *Akṣobhya* to shift to the east. Only four *Tārās* are mentioned and nothing is mentioned about the fifth *Tārā* neither in the *maṇḍala* itself nor in the praises below. Praise carries along the line of refugees. One goes for refuge to Buddha, then dedication *aka niryātanā* is done followed by *visarjana*.

Dharma Maṇḍala

In chronological order, the Buddha *maṇḍala* is followed by the Dharma *maṇḍala*. There appear to be various ways of depicting the Dharma *maṇḍala*. Unlike in *Ācārya Kriyā Saṅgraha*, the dharma *maṇḍala* is prescribed as four levels of *tantra*. Here in this manuscript, nine diverse groups of *Mahāyāna Sūtra* have been determined (Locke,

²Jetsün Drakpa Gyaltzen (1147–1216) mentions four different lineages of *maṇḍala* offerings. Among them, *Acharya Jetari's* tradition appears to be closest to one mentioned in the manuscript. See. *Sakyabka' bum* pp. 503-538.

³First chapter of *sūtraśrīratnabhajanānuśamsāvadānam* states the importance of three jewels.

1980). Among the selection, *TathāgataGuhyaSūtra* today doesn't survive in Sanskrit fully. Moreover, this manuscript is the oldest resource studied so far that determines the list of nine sūtras of this text into Dharma maṇḍala.

ĀryaprajñāPāramitāSūtra is the center of the Dharma maṇḍala. It is surrounded by *Āryagaṇḍavyūhasūtra*, *ĀryaDaśabhūmiSūtra*, *ĀryaSamādhirājasūtra*, and *LaṅkāvatāraSūtra* in four directions. *SiddharmapuṇḍikaSūtra*, *ĀryaTathāgataGuhya Tantra*, *LalitavistaraSūtra*, and *Suvarṇaprabhasha-sūtra* surround *Āryaprajñāpāramitāsūtra* in intermediate directions. Much uncertainty about the roots of his list was a topic of academic discussion. Due to a lack of strong evidence, a contemporary renowned master advocated that this list came into existence as a returned gift from Hudgson in the Rana regime after locals begged to return their text (Bodhi Television, 2020). This manuscript takes the existence of the list from the 13th century to the 14th century.

Saṅghamaṇḍala

Saṅghamaṇḍala here is formed with *navautaputra* also known as nine close *bodhisattvas*. In this maṇḍala, *Avalokitesvara* is surrounded by eight *bodhisattvas* from eight different sides. *Mañjushri*, *Vajrapani*, *Maitreya*, *Kshitigarbha*, *Akashagarbha*, *Sarvanivaranavishkambhin*, *Samantabhadra*, and *Gaganagañja* reside on eight sides of the maṇḍala.

Aryavalokitesvara takes the center place in *Saṅgha Maṇḍala* which is also the main witness maṇḍala for observing *Poṣadha*. Thus, more elaborate rites and rituals are performed in the *Saṅghamaṇḍala* compared to the previous *Akṣobhyamaṇḍala*.

Refuge

Taking refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha are made with respective verses. Following the particular Maṇḍala is a refuge to particular Jewels. Verses of refugees are recited three times by the group observing the *Poṣadha* ritual. Then, *sādhuvāda* is given by *Opāyikaṃ*, or master guru. Vow to go for refuge until the achievement of *bodhi*, the realization is made. Verses of refuge are an extract from *bodhisattva-prātimokṣa-sūtra*.

Stotra

Two major chunks of *stotras* are found in the manuscript. The first one is to praise *Sadguru* during the *Akṣobhyamaṇḍala* ritual. The second *stotra* verse of *saptavidhānuttaras* even branches follows after taking refuge in the *Saṅgha* jewel. This *saptavidhānuttaraverse* is an extract from *Vajra Pañjaratantra* (Pearcey, 15th March 2022). After this verbal and mental act of veneration is performed, physical veneration is carried out by making an offering.

Offerings

Stotras are followed by a list of offerings. The list is then backed up by the instruction that says to offer physical objects and mentally created offerings. The list of offerings from the manual begins with *Naivedya*, *Udaka*, *Tāmbula*, *Gandha*, and *Dīpa* and

ends with *Dhūpa*. *Naivedya* here stands for an offering of eatables presented to a deity. *Udaka* is water. *Tāmbula* can mean areca nut or betel quid commonly known as *Pāna*. The Manual doesn't specify the type of *Gandha*, *Dīpa*, and *Dhūpa* used. As indicated earlier these are to be offered literally and mentally to *Guru maṇḍala* and so forth. It is at this point, through the line '*naivadyādiniryātanagurumaṇḍalādiṣu*' line that we come to know that *Akṣobhya*'s *maṇḍala* is the *guru maṇḍala*. Henceforth, below from here, instead of *Akṣobhya*'s *maṇḍala*, it will be referred to as *Gurumaṇḍala*.

Poṣadhavidhi

For taking up the eight precepts a verse is given. The verse has a close resemblance to the verse of *Poṣadha* in *Advayavajrasaṅgraha*. Words match with the first chapter *Kudrīśṭīnirghatan*. This then is followed by a big chunk of extract from *Guṅkāraṇḍavyūha* sutra from the chapter nine - *Baliṣambodhanabodhimārgāvatāraṇaprakaraṇam*. Here *Poṣadha* observers commit to upholding the path of enlightenment; *bodhimārga* just as philanthropist *Asūra* king *Bali* did after being shattered to *Pātāla* by the betrayal of *Vishnu* and later receiving updates from *Avalokiteśvara*.

Dedication

Pūnyapariṇāmanāka dedication refers to the transformation of merit. This manual borrows a verse from the 'king of aspiration' for transformation or dedication of merit. This aspiration prayer itself is an extract from the *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra*. It extracts verse fifty-five. Translation of this verse comes as

“Just as the hero *Mañjuśrī* knows,
In that way so does *Samantabhadra*.
In practice in the same way as they do,
I am dedicating all this merit (Robert, 2022).”

The verse seems to be widely recited within Tibetan Buddhist schools as many *sadhanās*, prayer books have this verse printed under the section dedication and aspiration.

Niryātanā

Before the last section of *maṇḍalavisarjan*, *niryātanā* is performed. Though the *Guru Maṇḍala* section doesn't specify what is being *niryātanā* meaning dedicated, the rest of the part indicates that it is the dedication of *puṣpamaṇḍala*. Thus, it seems that the *maṇḍala* heap that was formed by offering flowers at the direction and the intermediate directions earlier is the *maṇḍala* that's being dedicated here. *Buddha guṇa*, *Dharma guṇa*, and the *Saṅghaguṇa*.e. qualities of three jewels are mentioned for the dedication of the Flower *maṇḍala*. *niryātanā* for *buddha*, *dharma*, and *Saṅghamaṇḍala* borrows the verses from *bodhisattva-prātimokṣa-sūtra*. For *Gurumaṇḍala*, the following verse is used for *niryātanā*. The verse portrays a unique Buddhist cosmology with *Mt. Meru*, its feature, and surrounding continents, and features. Through this verse, it is clear that the cosmic *maṇḍala* indicated in this manual has four continents and four sub-continents making a total of eight

*dvīpa*or continents. Previously, there was confusion about the total number of subcontinents because two seed syllabus were prescribed for the subcontinent which suggests the possibility of having two subcontinents in each direction.

*caturatnamayameruaṣṭadvīpaprasobhitamī.
saptaratnasamākīrnantudadāmianutTārādāyineī*

Visarjana

After the step of *maṇḍalaniryātānā* is Maṇḍala dissolution (*Skt. Visarjana*). For this, the mantra *Om Vajra Muḥ* is prescribed. Though the dissolving is suggested four times for Guru Maṇḍala, Buddha maṇḍala, Dharma maṇḍala, and Saṅghamaṇḍala— there is no instruction and how this is physically performed.

Dhāraṇī

The last instruction given in the manual text is to recite the *dhāraṇī* twenty-one times during *AmoghapāśaPoṣadha*. Dharani is:

*namoratnatrayāya
namaḥāryaavalokiteśvarāyabodhisatvāyamahāsatvāyamahākārūṇikāya
ītadyathāī amoghaśīlamahāśuddhasatvabhara2saṃbhara2padmavibhūṣitabhūjadhara2sama
ntāvalokiteśvarāyaomāḥhūṃ phaṣṣvāhā*

This instruction along with the *dhāraṇī* preceding is given foremost after the dissolution of *Saṅghamaṇḍala*. This indicates that on distant occasions *Poṣadha* can be executed as well as it can be executed in enumeration with *AmoghapāśaPoṣadha*. With this ends the *Poṣadhavidhāna* manual.

Colophon

Beginning of colophon starts with the name Śrī Dharmadhātu Mahāvihāra. Colophon further reveals that the scribe of this manuscript— Abhayākara -- is a novice monk. He is a residential monk of Dharmadhātu Mahāvihāra. As the manuscript has no further clear clue about where the monastery of origin is, we can assume as follows. Since the manuscript uses Vartula script with Bangali influence śrī Dharmadhātu Mahāvihāra mentioned in the manuscript might not necessarily be based in Nepal maṇḍala rather more to the south or even more to Vikramaśīla university⁴.

In the medieval period, many monasteries were named Dharmadhātuvihara within Nepal. For an instant, Thāmbahī, Pharping Vajrayogini, and a monastery nearby Newroad

⁴ Vijay Raj Vajracharya, CUTS declared the script of this manuscript as Vartula script which is also known as the ancient Bhujimol script. Since the script has the influence of Bengali style, Vajracharya suggests it as a Vartula script rather than stating ancient Bhujimol. Vajracharya and his team have been working on manuscripts of this style currently.

are until today addressed as Dharmadhātuvihāra or Mahāvihāra. Thus the exact place of origin is unknown which makes this *Poṣadha* manuscript more venerable and wide scope.

Findings

Through the study of the *Poṣadha* manual from the 13th and 14th centuries, the pre-formation of *Poṣadha* and how it used to be carried out in the past is known. The article attempted to explore the unstudied manuscript of the Hudgson collection and as a result, an outline of the manual has been brought forth. For taking a step back in history, this article tries to locate different sections in their root text such as the words of Buddha and the work of various masters.

Apart from *Kriyasaṅgraha's guru maṇḍala* rituals through this manuscript, we have a unique yet equally old form of *guru maṇḍala*. Interestingly Shakyamuni Buddha is presented as chief among other transcendental Buddhas and Tārās. This shows the fact that Shakyamuni Buddha had higher status than the transcendent Buddha back then which seems to be vice versa in recent times. Among numerous sūtras taught by Shakyamuni Buddha, a finite number of texts have been chosen to represent the Dharma maṇḍala. Despite the selection criteria for these nine sūtras being unknown, easy guesses can be made that they were selected based on their importance. Those nine texts such as *gaṇḍavyūhasūtra*, *Daśabhūmisūtra*, *Samādhirājasūtra*, etc. must have been important in the 13th century for a monastic and lay Saṅgha back then. In the Saṅghamaṇḍala, there is the concept of nine close bodhisattvas. A similar idea of nine instead of eight great bodhisattvas continuing from middle age is found in *Svayambhūpurāna*. There Lokaśvara is the chief and different places known as the Vitarāga were formed where the other eight bodhisattvas reside.

The later part of the manuscript also indicates that there may be a connection between sila or vows with Amoghaśīla which is referred to in Amōghapāśadharaṇīof Avalokitesvara, further studies and research is required to trace the connection. Therefore, digging into more palm-leaf manuscripts used in ancient scripts is necessary to find more of Buddhism's past rituals and traditions.

Conclusion

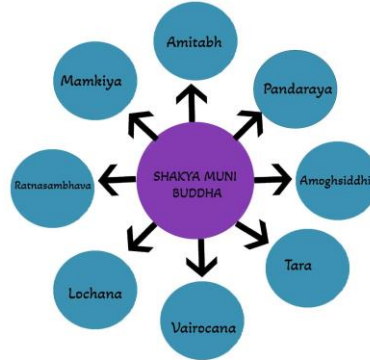
This article is the sole article based on the complete *Poṣadha* Sanskrit manual from middle-age. Since not much of Sanskrit writings survive fully today in their original form, Tibetan language resources were accessed. Here we get the complete stages of the rituals performed back then, which start with *acamana* and end with *dhāraṇī* recitation. Among the four flower heap *maṇḍalas*, *guru maṇḍala* and Buddha *maṇḍala* appear distinct from the now-known tradition. Physical as well as mental offerings are carried out during *Poṣadha*. Six items starting from Naivedya to Dhupa are offered physically. Whereas refuge or *vandanā*, confession aka *Pāpadesanā*, and dedication i.e. *Pūṇānupariṇāmanā* are offered mentally along with Stotra. Before the Visarjana, commitment to keep eight precepts and *niryātanā* of the *maṇḍala* is performed which concludes the ritual. Based on this ancient text many competitive studies of modern rituals should be done shortly. The development process of simple steps of *vrata* growing up to its complex should be studied well.

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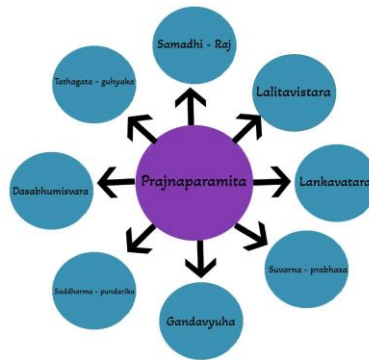
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Appendix

1Nine-heaped Buddha Maṇḍala Placement:



2Nine-heaped Dharma Maṇḍala Placement:



3Nine-heaped Saṅgha Maṇḍala Placement

