The “Dhyāna Collections” and Their Significance for Hindu Iconography

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The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to a rather neglected type of literature having few edited specimens.¹⁾ Texts of this genre are cataloged under titles such as “Dhyānamālā”, “Dhyānaślokāḥ” or “Dhyānaṣaṃgraha”.²⁾ As the titles indicate, these texts are collections of *dhyāna*-s. The word *dhyāna* connotes a description of the deity’s appearance, obviously intended as an aid for his/her visualization. The translation “meditation” for *dhyāna* with its complex and modern associations is better to avoid here as it is misleading.

A typical *dhyāna* collection systematically lists the characteristics of different deities, beginning with the deity considered most important and his/her forms or emanations and then going on to deities of lesser importance. In this way descriptions of the complete Hindu pantheon are provided. Local deities of the “Little Tradition” are also included and connected with deities of the “Great Tradition.” The choice and the sequence of the deities described allow speculations about the region and the religious milieu in which the texts originated. Usually the collections use descriptions found in Purāṇas, Tantric texts or earlier *dhyāna* collections and are arranged by anonymous compilers who do not indicate their sources. Sometimes there are references to certain Tantric traditions (*amṇāya*) to which a form of a deity belongs. The collections often contain verses written in *kāvya* metres. The tendency to use only one verse for one deity also favours the use of the longer metres. Several descriptions of one deity collected from different sources may be given sequentially. The style and poetic quality of the verses naturally differ according to the material drawn upon.

A typical *dhyāna* verse is the following :

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"One should always meditate on/visualize the great Lord (Śiva) who is as brilliant as a silver mountain, has the beautiful moon as a crest-jewel, whose limbs are shining like jeweled ornaments, hands hold an axe and antelope and (show the gestures of) boon and protection, who is calm, sits in lotus posture, is praised by groups of gods on all sides, wears a tiger skin, is the cause of the universe, worshipped by the universe, removes all fear, has five heads (and) three eyes."³⁾

The verse describes the deity's body colour, number of heads and eyes, attributes held in different hands, hand gestures, posture and garments, as well as his mood. The various heads of a deity signify different aspects and the diverse attributes held in various hands indicate different powers. A *dhyāna* verse may also describe the dwelling-place of the deity, such as a spot under a special tree or a heaven-like environment, and it also indicates whether the deity is single or accompanied by one or several consorts. Since each verse is usually a separate unit, it also contains a verb, at times expressing a devotional attitude, e.g., "I worship/bow to", or an instruction, e.g., "one should visualize/recall/reflect upon". The *dhyāna* collections provide us with valuable iconographic data and reflect the traditional scholars' need to arrange systematically the confusing number of descriptions of deities appearing in texts. However, for the practical use of the devotees, who worshipped a limited number of deities, there was perhaps no need for such systematic collections. There are also less complete collections of *dhyāna* verses, focussing only on a group of deities or a single deity whose forms are described.

Single *dhyānas* appear within different ritual contexts, most importantly within Tantric worship (*pūjā*) where the *dhyānas* are used as aids in creating mental images of the deities who are then worshipped mentally. This internal (mental) *pūjā* is often combined with an external *pūjā* which follows it and uses an outer idol or symbol of the deity. The visualization is often followed by the devotee showing hand gestures (*mudrā*) signifying the deity's attributes. In Tantrism the deity's appearance is closely related to his/her *mantra* form and different *mantras* correspond to different

dhyānas. The *mantras* are frequently named and classified according to the number of syllables they contain and a deity corresponding to a *mantra* may bear the same name, e.g., *ekākṣara-gaṇapati-mantra* (*mantra* of Gaṇeśa consisting of one syllable) and *Ekākṣaragaṇapati* (the Gaṇeśa who [se *mantra*] consists of one syllable). Sometimes there are parallels in the choice of the seed (*bija*) syllables forming part of a *mantra*, and the attributes in the deity's hands, like in the case of the *mantra* of Prāṇaśakti, the deification of life breath, whose principle (*mala*) *mantra* is: *āṃ hrīm krom*. Here we find the seed syllables of the noose (= *āṃ*), the energy (= *hrīm*) and goad (= *krom*). Corresponding to this, the noose and goad appear iconographically as two of the attributes held in the goddess' six hands.

Within Tantric rites, some deities can be visualized with different body colours in accordance with the desired result of the ritual. The colour red is often connected with rites of subjugation (*vaśīkaraṇa*) and the colour yellow with rites of immobilization (*stambhana*), etc.

Dhyāna verses also appear frequently in a type of *stotra* called "protective armour" (*kavaca, varman*), "protection" (*rakṣā*) or "cage" (*pañjara*), whose aim is to protect the devotee's body by assigning the deity's names and powers to each body limb as a protection from evil powers. The pattern is very similar to that of the Tantric *nyāsa* rite where forms of the deity are assigned to the worshipper's body parts. The *dhyānas* contained in the initial parts of the *kavacas* are set off by the remarks *atha dhyānam* and *iti dhyānam* at the beginning and end. They form part of a preliminary recitation, where obviously under the influence of Tantrism the seer (*ṛṣi*), metre (*chandas*) and other peculiarities of the *kavaca* are recited by the worshipper. The *dhyānas* are differentiated from the main body of the text, usually employing simple *anuṣṭubh*, by more complex metres.

Outside of a purely Tantric context, but under influence of Tantrism, the *dhyāna* verses came to be used in the initial parts of the regular Hindu worship ritual. They are used to recall the characteristics of the deity who is worshipped with various offerings in the ritual that follows. In certain regions it is popular to employ five *dhyāna* verses for the deities Viṣṇu,

Śiva, Gaṇeśa, Sūrya, and the Goddess who are worshipped together. Currently, the performance of *dhyāna* has been reduced to the mere recitation of the verse(s) without visualization which would perhaps be beyond the mental capacity of the ordinary untrained worshipper.⁴⁾ During the recitation the worshipper holds flowers in cupped hands which are consecrated by the *dhyāna* verses (considered as powerful mantras) and then offered to the deities.

Later *dharmaśāstra* texts⁵⁾ prescribe the *dhyāna* of the deity on waking up in the morning. The practice must have been that a popular *dhyāna* verse or a so-called *prātaḥsmaraṇastotra*, a class of *stotra* for early morning practice, describing characteristic features of a deity were recited. Popular books provide a variety of *dhyāna* verses for morning recitation.

The question arises whether and how far the descriptions in the *dhyāna* verses correspond to representations of deities in art and whether the study of the *dhyāna* collections would help in the identification of art objects. To be able to answer this question one would have to compare the descriptions found in the *dhyāna* collections to the descriptions found in works on fine arts and to actual art representations. Such comparative studies are not available. Single case studies show that the descriptions given in the *dhyāna* collections are sometimes helpful in identifying art objects, but there are many cases where the *dhyāna* descriptions do not agree with what we actually find. This could indicate that the corresponding *dhyāna* has not been found or that the artist followed another tradition. In any case the *dhyānas* were written and collected for the use of the worshipper, but not for that of sculptors or painters. The texts on fine arts (*śilpāśāstra*) and the consecration (*pratiṣṭhā*) of buildings have their own sections describing the characteristics of the deities involved. Examples are the respective sections in Śrikumāra's *Śilparatna* and Vairocana's *Pratiṣṭhālakṣaṇa-sārasamuccaya*. The latter text has been provided with explanatory drawings in Nepal in the style of the Nepalese sketch books. But even the descriptions found in these texts often do not agree with the representations in art.⁶⁾

Our present knowledge of Indian iconographic traditions is based on the evaluation of very limited source material, leaving much scope for future research. A careful analysis of deity descriptions in the verses appearing in *dhyāna* collections or Tantric texts is an important step leading to a better knowledge of Indian iconography. This would also put us in a position to prepare a new version of G. LIEBERT's "Iconographic Dictionary of the Indian Religions" (Leiden 1976).

An analysis of the *dhyānas* found in Kṛṣṇānanda Āgamavāgiśa's Tantrasāra has been published by two scholars⁷⁾ and there is a brief and incomplete analysis of the *dhyānas* found in the Vidyārṇavatantra.⁸⁾ Among the texts still awaiting such iconographic analysis are the *dhyāna* collections and the *dhyānas* appearing in Tantric texts such as the Śāradātilaka (which should be analysed together with the prapañcasāra on which it is based) the mantra section of the Īśānaśivagurudevapaddhati, the Mantramahodadhi, and the Nārada-Purāṇa.

The following is a list of the minimum number of details that should be extracted from the *dhyāna* descriptions and presented systematically, possibly in the form of a table :

1. name of the form of the deity as found in the respective text(s) with reference to other names possibly appearing in other texts; 2. body colour; 3. posture; 4. seat (*āsana*, *piṭha*) or vehicle (*vāhana*); 5. number of heads and their colours; 6. number of arms; 7. attributes (*āyudha*) and hand gestures (*mudrā*); (Texts rarely specify which hand holds a specific attribute, but usually indicate whether it is held in the right or left hand. Such information should be carefully recorded. A method standardizing the synonyms found in different texts for the same attribute should be devised.) and 8. special remarks such as whether the deity is accompanied by (a) consort(s) or attendants and peculiarities like special ornaments, garments, and hair styles.

If available the following information is also very useful: the deity's *mantra*; the *yantra* and surrounding deities assigned to its parts; and the ritual application of the *mantra*.

Summary and Conclusions

1. "Dhyāna collections" contain metrical descriptions of the appearances of deities as aids to their visualization. They are usually the works of anonymous compilers who drew on material from earlier collections, Purāṇas or Tantric texts, usually without mentioning their sources ; therefore, identification of the material is difficult.

2. The collections are of a later date, reflecting the need to arrange systematically the confusing number of descriptions of deities found in literature, although the individual *dhyāna* descriptions are much older.

3. The single *dhyāna* verses and most likely the collections were intended for the practical use of the worshipper to help him/her create a mental image of the deity. They were not written for the use of sculptors and painters, although they may sometimes be useful in identifying art objects.

4. Single *dhyāna* verses appear within different contexts of ritual worship, usually under Tantric influence. In Tantrism the *dhyāna* is closely related to the deity's *mantra*.

5. Along with the *dhyānas* in Purāṇas and Tantric texts, the *dhyāna* collections are important transmitters of the iconographic traditions in India. Their systematic analysis will greatly enlarge our knowledge of Hindu iconography.

1) I know of only one edition entitled "Mūrtidhyānam" by S. SWAMINATHA SASTRI, Thanjavur 1985. Other *dhyāna* collections circulate in hand-written transcripts, e.g. Devatādhyānāślokaḥ (transcript no. 105, kept in the library of the Institut français d'indologie, Pondicherry and copied from a palm leaf manuscript) and Dhyānaratnāvali (transcript no 232, kept in the same library). These three collections clearly reflect their South Indian origin. An example of a Nepalese collection is the "Dhyānasamgraha" (manuscript 3431-1 preserved in the Asha Archives, Kathmandu). Other Nepalese *dhyāna* collections have been listed in M.L.B. BLOM : Depicted Deities, painters' Model Books in Nepal. Groningen 1989, p. 84.

2) Cf. also the entries in the New Catalogus Catalogorum (vol. 9. Ed. K. KUN JUNNI RAJA. Madras 1977) s.v. (Devatā) dhyānasamgraha, Dhyānamālā, Dhyā-

naratnāvali, Dhyānaślokaḥ and Dhyānasamuccaya.

- 3) Cf. Śiva-purāṇa (ed. Bombay 1925), Vidyēśvara-Saṃhitā, chpt. 20, v.52 :
*dhyāyen nityaṃ mahēsaṃ rajatagirinibhaṃ cārucandrāvataṃsaṃ
ratnākālpōjjvalāṅgaṃ paraśumrgavarābhitiḥastam prasannam/
padmāsinaṃ samantāt stutam amaragaṇair vyāghrakṛttiṃ vasānam/
viśvādyam viśvavandyaṃ nikhilabhayaḥaram pañcavaktraṃ trinetram//*
- 4) Cf. the criticism of this practice by S.C.V. BHATTACHARYA in A. AVALON:
Principles of Tantra. part 2. Madras 5 1978, p. 490 : "...Dhyāna is performed by
really meditating on the form of the Devatā, no matter whether the Dhyāna-
Mantra is recited or not; for the Śāstrik meaning of the expression 'Dhyāyet'
is 'should meditate' and not 'should recite the Dhyānamantra'."
- 5) E.g. Tryambakayajvan's Strīdharmapaddhati (ed. I. J. LESLIE : in The Perfect
Wife. Oxford 1989) 2v. 7 : *prabudhya ca devatādhyānaṃ kartavyam*,
- 6) This problem has been discussed at a recent conference held at Heidelberg;
cf. Shastric Traditions in Indian Arts. Ed. A. L. DALLAPICCOLA. 2 vols. Stuttgart
1989.
- 7) D. C. SIRCAR : Tantrasāradhṛtā Dhyānamālā. Journal of Ancient Indian Hi-
story 6. 1972-73. 186-278, and P. PAL : Hindu Religion and Iconology according
to the Tantrasāra. Los Angeles 1981.
- 8) S. S. ŚĀSTRĪ : Iconography of Śrī Vidyārṇava Tantra. Bangalore 1944. For
an analysis of the section dealing with Gaṇeśa, cf. G. BÜHNEMANN : Forms
of Gaṇeśa. Wichtrach 1989.

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