

# An Overview of Ghaṇṭāpa's *Śrīcakrasaṃvarasādhana* and Its Characteristics

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**1. Introduction** This paper will examine the structure of the *Śrīcakrasaṃvarasādhana* (*dpal 'khor lo sdom pa'i sgrub thabs*) (*CS*) written by the Indian mahāsiddha Ghaṇṭāpa. It will look at the characteristics and significance of the text and compare it with the other major sādhana lineages, especially that of Lūipa. The *Śrīcakrasaṃvarasādhana* is one of Ghaṇṭāpa's three major writings and is aimed at practitioners of the generation stage (*uttapatikrama*, *bskyed rim*).<sup>1)</sup> The date the text was written is unknown. In addition to the *CS*, Ghaṇṭāpa composed one other text on the body maṇḍala entitled the *Upadeśakāya maṇḍalābhisamaya* (*dpal 'khor lo sdom pa'i lus dkyil gyi mngon rtogs*) (*KM*), which is an abbreviated outline of the visualizations in the *CS*. Although there are no detailed commentaries by Ghaṇṭāpa himself, later masters such as Buton (bu ston) and Tsongkhapa composed commentaries and sādhanas based on Ghaṇṭāpa's text.<sup>2)</sup> Compared to the other lineages of Lūipa and Kṛṣṇācārya, Ghaṇṭāpa's *CS* emphasizes the body maṇḍala visualization. Because of this, Ghaṇṭāpa's method is considered significant, and it is still practiced today in the Tibetan tradition. Despite its importance, there has been no major study or translation of the text to date. This research is the first full study of Ghaṇṭāpa's sādhana.

**2. Overview of the *Śrīcakrasaṃvarasādhana*** The *CS* can be divided into seven major sections. The text begins with an explanation of the procedures that the practitioner should carry out before beginning the actual meditation session, such as taking refuge, checking their motivation, purifying their body, speech, and mind, and collecting *siddhis* (D 222b5–223a1, P 258a5–258b1). This is followed by a detailed explanation of the body maṇḍala visualization, including donning the armour and initiation (D 223a1–224a4, P 258b1–259b7). After the visualization of the maṇḍala is complete, the text instructs the yogī or yoginī how to recite relevant mantras (D 224a4–6, P 259b7–260a2). This is followed by a brief explanation of how a practitioner of Cakrasaṃvara should conduct

themselves, such as observing *brahmacārya* conduct (chastity) and keeping his or her commitments. This section also touches on the yoga of eating and drinking (D 224a6, P 260a2–3). Next, the practitioner is instructed to make tormas (*bali, gtor ma*) offerings to local spirits (D 224a7–224b1, P 260a3–5). This is followed by an explanation of drop yoga (*bindu yoga*) (D 224b1, P 260a5–6). The *sādhana* concludes with some practical advice about engaging in the practice, the benefits of carrying out such a practice, and a note about the translators of the text from Sanskrit to Tibetan (D 224b1–5, P 260a6–260b3).

The body maṇḍala visualization takes up a large portion of the *CS* text and is the most crucial part of the *sādhana*. It begins with the practitioner visualizing their gross body as the habitat maṇḍala: their legs, genitals, navel, and heart as the wind, fire, water, and earth elements, their spine as Mount Sumeru, and their entire body as the four doors of the celestial mansion. At this point, Ghaṇṭāpa explains the appearance of Heruka and Vajravārāhī (D 223a1–5, P 258b7). Next, the practitioner, who has already generated themselves as Heruka, visualizes his or her subtle elements (*dhātu, kham*s) as the inhabitants of the maṇḍala. First, the practitioner visualizes a letter HŪM at the centre of their central channel (*avadhūti*), at the heart (D 223a5, P 258b7). Around this are the four essence yoginīs and their respective seed syllables,<sup>3</sup> representing the wheel of great bliss (*mahāsūkha*cakra, *bde chen 'khor lo*). Around this are the eight gate and corner goddesses and their seed syllables,<sup>4</sup> representing the commitment wheel (*samayacakra, dam tshigs 'khor lo*) (D 223a6–7, P 258b7–8). Next, the three wheels are visualized: the mind wheel (*cittacakra, thugs kyi 'khor lo*), the speech wheel (*vākcakra, gsung gyi 'khor lo*), and the body wheel (*kāyacakra, sku yi 'khor lo*). In this visualization, the practitioner places seed syllables and male and female deity couples (the twenty-four heroes and heroines) on the various subtle elements of the body, each corresponding with one of the twenty-four holy places in modern-day India, Nepal, and Tibet. For example:

Above your head are Khaṇḍakapāla and Pracandā. On the crown of your head are Mahākaṅkāla and Caṇḍākṣī. At the right ear are Kaṅkāla and Prabhāvatī. At the back of the neck are Vikaṭadamaṣṭrī and Mahānāsā. [Together, this constitutes] Pīṭha. (D 223a7–223b1, P 259a2–3)

Each deity arises from a seed syllable that begins with the first letter of the name of its corresponding holy place. Ghaṇṭāpa says that the male deities should have the same

appearance as Heruka, and the female deities the same appearance as Vajravārāhī.

In this way, in the *CS*, both the habitat and inhabitant maṇḍalas are visualized within the practitioner's body. There is no explicit mention of the outer maṇḍala in the *CS*.<sup>5)</sup> This method of visualizing the entire maṇḍala in the body, including the habitat maṇḍala, is unique to Ghaṇṭāpa and shows his emphasis of the body maṇḍala.

**3. Comparison with Other Lineages** When compared with the earlier *Cakrasaṃvarābhisamaya* (*CA*) sādhana of Lūipa, many of the main elements of the *Śrīcakrasaṃvarasādhana* are the same, and the visualizations themselves are very similar. The same can be said of Kṛṣṇācārya's sādhana. However, the emphasis of the sādhana of each lineage is different. While Lūipa's sādhana includes both the outer maṇḍala and the body maṇḍala, the text mainly deals with the visualizations of the outer maṇḍala (*CA* [3]–[8]). On the other hand, Ghaṇṭāpa's text concerns itself solely with the visualization of the body maṇḍala, clearly showing Ghaṇṭāpa's emphasis on the inner body maṇḍala. In addition to this, in Lūipa's *CA*, the outer maṇḍala has thirty-seven deities, and the inner body maṇḍala (*CA* [9]) has twenty-four. In Ghaṇṭāpa's system, however, the outer maṇḍala has one single deity, and the inner body maṇḍala has thirty-seven deities. Furthermore, in Lūipa's sādhana, only the heroines are visualized at each of the twenty-four holy places (*CS* [9]c). There is also no visualization of the coarse body itself as the habitat maṇḍala.

**4. Conclusion** In short, the *Śrīcakrasaṃvarasādhana* begins with the preliminary practices of taking refuge and generating a pure motivation, followed by purification of the body, speech, and mind of the practitioner. After this, the body maṇḍala is visualized, with the practitioner's body viewed as the celestial palace itself. This is followed by the visualization of the great bliss and the commitment wheels and placing the thirty-seven deities of the three wheels on the various channels and elements. Finally, mantras are recited, and ritual cakes are offered. The *CS* is an extraordinarily concise and cryptic text. Many of the deities of the maṇḍala are abbreviated or left out entirely, and detailed explanations are scarce. Without extensive knowledge of the Cakrasaṃvara system, it would be nearly impossible to practice this meditation based on this text alone.

Compared with the other major lineages of Cakrasaṃvara, Ghaṇṭāpa's sādhana places great importance on meditation on the body maṇḍala. Ghaṇṭāpa's system of visualizing the body of the practitioner itself as the habitat maṇḍala is unique, and not seen in other

lineages of Cakrasaṃvara. Although the body maṇḍala practice itself is not unique to Ghaṇṭāpa's *Śrīcakrasaṃvarasādhana*, the emphasis it places on it is what sets CS apart from the other lineages and is what makes it a critical practice in the Cakrasaṃvara tradition, that is still practiced to this day.

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## Notes

- 1) The other two writings are the *Śrīcakrasaṃvaraṣekaparakriyopadeśa* (D 1431) which deals with the initiation, and the *Śrīcakrasaṃvarapañcakrama* (D 1433), which deals with the completion stage.
- 2) Tsongkhapa's sādhana entitled the *Clear Illumination of Intent* (*dgongs pa rab gsal*) closely follows the CS and offers insight into the more difficult passages.
- 3) The four essence yoginīs are: Ḍākinī, Lāmā, Khaṇḍarohā, and Rūpiṇī.
- 4) The eight goddesses are: Kākāsyā, Ulūkāsyā, Śvānāsyā, Śūkarāsyā, Yamadātī, Yamadūtī, Yamadaṇṣṭrī, and Yamamathanī.
- 5) In Ghaṇṭāpa's *Cakrasaṃvarakāyamaṇḍalābhisamaya* the outer maṇḍala is visualized before the body maṇḍala and consists of a single deity: Heruka Yab-Yum.

## Abbreviations and Primary Sources

- CS     *Śrīcakrasaṃvarasādhana* by Ghaṇṭāpa. D 1432, P 2149, N rGyud 'drel vol. na 240a–242b, C rGyud vol. wa 223b–225b.
- CA     *Cakrasaṃvarābhisamaya* by Lūipa. D 1427. Sanskrit edited in Sakurai 1998.
- KM     *Upadeśakāyamaṇḍalābhisamaya* by Ghaṇṭāpa. D 1434, P 2151.  
bCom ldan 'das 'khor lo bde mchog gi lus kyi dkyil 'khor gyi sgrub pa 'i thabs dgongs pa rab gsal shes bya ba (*The Clear Illumination of Intent*) by Tsongkhapa. D 5326, P 6164.

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**Key words**    Ghaṇṭāpa, *Śrīcakrasaṃvarasādhana*, Body Maṇḍala, Heruka, Cakrasaṃvara

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