

The Background of the Maṇḍala of the Nine Syllables in the *Gorin kuji myō himitsu shaku*

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1. Introduction

Kakuban 覚鑊 (1095–1144) is an influential scholar-monk of Shingon 真言 Buddhist tradition in late Heian period. It is well-known that he developed throughout his writings the systematic interpretations concerning Pure Land Buddhism from the perspective of Esoteric Buddhism, which has been explained as the attempt to mix these two teachings.

In multiple previous studies, it is pointed out that, in his *Gorin kuji myō himitsu shaku* 五輪九字明秘密釈 (*Secret Interpretation of Mantras of Five Wheels and Nine Syllables*, hereafter, *Gorin kuji*), Kakuban advanced the most sophisticated discussions on the main components of Pure Land Buddhism: Amida Buddha, Land of Utmost Bliss, and the practice of *nenbutsu* 念仏.¹⁾ Buddhist scholars such as Kushida Ryōkō 櫛田良洪 explain that those discussions were the indispensable foundation for the development of the doctrinal discourse “Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism” (Jp. *mikkyō jōdo kyō* 密教浄土教) in medieval Japan.²⁾

The lineage and historical background of the above-mentioned Kakuban's discussions on Pure Land Buddhism is the main subject of this paper. Needless to say, his discussions include various doctrinal and practical elements and perspectives. Among them, I focus on the issue of the maṇḍala of the nine syllables (*kuji mandara* 九字曼荼羅) described in the second chapter of the *Gorin kuji*, “the gate of correctly entering the secret mantra” (*shōnyū himitsu shingon mon* 正入秘密真言門), and reveal its background.

The maṇḍala of the nine syllables is the Esoteric mandalic discourse of Amida's mantra of the nine syllables, *om a mṛ ta te se ha ra hūṃ*. With respect to its lineage and historical background, various previous studies have suggested the influence from the following two sources: Esoteric Buddhist scriptures translated in China and manuscripts written by Esoteric Buddhist monks in Heian Japan. In this paper, I will discuss the significance of the

second source through examining descriptions in the *Gorin kuji* and its related texts.

As I will mention later, Akatsuka Yūdō 赤塚祐道, a scholar of Japanese Esoteric Buddhism, examines the influence upon the maṇḍala of the nine syllables from the Esoteric Buddhist manuscripts written in Heian period. According to him, Kakuban followed the knowledge of the Esoteric Buddhist ritual of Amida Buddha and described the maṇḍala. It is also pointed out that Kakuban employed within his discussion the structure of the visualization of the wheel of syllables (*jirin kan* 字輪觀) used in the ritual.³⁾

I will follow Akatsuka's discussions and demonstrate from the new perspective the proximity between the maṇḍala of the nine syllables and the visualization of the wheel of similar nine syllables which forms the Esoteric Amida ritual. The point of discussion is another Esoteric Buddhist concept, the five viscera maṇḍala (*gozō mandara* 五藏曼荼羅).

The five viscera maṇḍala is considered to be the Esoteric Buddhist view on a human body developed in East Asian region. This maṇḍala is said to indicate the horizontal correspondence between the whole universe (macro-cosmos) and a human body (micro-cosmos).⁴⁾ The texts such as the *Gozō mandara* 五藏曼荼羅 (*Five Viscera Maṇḍala*), *Gozō mandara waeshaku* 五藏曼荼羅和会釈 (*Reconciled Interpretation of Five Viscera Maṇḍala*), and *Gorin kuji* describe it.

In this paper, I will examine the *Gorin kuji* and the *Gozō mandara* and point out the following facts: First, according to the second chapter of the *Gorin kuji*, the five viscera maṇḍala is regarded as the foundation of the maṇḍala of the nine syllables. Second, the *Gozō mandara* inherited in Kōzanji 高山寺 temple refers to the visualization of the wheel of nine syllables instead of the maṇḍala of the nine syllables. The text calls the visualization the “seed maṇḍala of the [Buddha of] limitless life” (*muryōju shuji mandara* 無量寿種子曼荼羅).

We are able to assume the contextual proximity and replaceability between the maṇḍala of the nine syllables and the visualization of the wheel of syllables through these facts. It is highly possible that the conclusion of this paper supports the validity of Akatsuka's hypothesis.

2. Doctrinal Position of the Maṇḍala of the Nine Syllables in the *Gorin kuji*

In the second chapter of the *Gorin kuji*, Kakuban introduces the systematic interpretations of two mantras: the five wheels (*gorin* 五輪) and nine syllables. The former represents the

whole body of Mahāvairocana Buddha and the latter symbolizes Amida and his salvific function.

Kakuban further organizes the comprehensive discourses of these mantras in the same chapter: the five viscera maṇḍala based on the five wheels and the maṇḍala of the nine syllables. In the first half of the chapter, he investigates the structure and practical significances of the former maṇḍala, while developing the exegesis of the latter in the second half of the chapter.

Kakuban also refers to the continuity between these maṇḍalas within the discussions. In the second half of the chapter, he states as follows.

Concerning the origin of this maṇḍala of the nine syllables, it emanates from the gate of the syllable *ha* in the gate of the five wheels. The gate of the syllable *ha* is the forty-eight resolutions which the Bodhisattva Dharmākara (*hōzō bosatsu* 法藏菩薩) made in the causal state (*in'i* 因位). In other words, the wind of this teaching arises from the gate of the syllable *ha*. When the syllable *ha* is fully developed, it is called *hrīḥ*. From the syllable *hrīḥ*, the mandara of the nine syllables emanates.⁵⁾ (*KZ*, 2: 1140)

In the *Gorin kuji*, the syllables *ha* and *hrīḥ* are respectively classified into the five wheels of the womb realm (*taizō kai* 胎藏界) and the diamond realm (*kongō kai* 金剛界). According to it, the syllable *ha* corresponds to the kidneys and the wind element (*fūdai* 風大), while *hrīḥ* corresponds to the lungs and Amida Buddha. Kakuban follows these discourses and asserts that Amida, his forty-eight resolutions, and the mandara of the nine syllables rise from them.

In the first half of the chapter, Kakuban also describes the relationship between Amida and the five viscera mandara as follows.

The syllable *vaṃ* corresponds to the lotus section (*renge bu* 蓮華部) and Amida Buddha and controls both the lungs and the consciousness of nose... It corresponds to the west direction and the metal element (*kingyō* 金行), which control fall season. Its color is white. The wind of the breath exists spontaneously in the lungs and nose. It corresponds to the wind element.⁶⁾ (*KZ*, 2: 1140)

According to Kakuban, Amida Buddha corresponds to the lungs, nose, and wind of the breath. Thus, he also corresponds to the wind element.

3. Multiple Discourses on the Nine Syllables in Medieval Shingon Buddhism

3.1. The Structure and Background of the Maṇḍala of the Nine Syllables

In the second half of the second chapter of the *Gorin kuji*, Kakuban describes the structure of the maṇḍala of the nine syllables as follows.

On the central dais, a practitioner opens the eight petals of a lotus flower, and visualizes the nine syllables *hrīḥ* on them. On the central dais, the bodhisattva Kannon 觀音 dwells, and eight Buddhas in meditation dwells on the eight petals. Next, on the eight petals of a lotus flower, the eight syllables *a mṛ ta te se ha ra hūm* appear in this order. They are the bodies of the seeds (*shuji shin* 種子身) of eight deities such as Kannon, Jishi 慈氏 (*miroku* 弥勒), Kokū 虛空 [zō 藏], Fugen 普賢, Kongōshu 金剛手, Monju 文殊, Jokaishō 除蓋障, and Jizō 地藏. The twelve deities who serve Buddhas are lined up around them.⁷⁾ (KZ, 2: 1161–1162)

The maṇḍala consists of four sections: the central dais, eight petals of two lotus flowers (inner and outer), and outside area. First, the nine syllables *hrīḥ*, the Bodhisattva Kannon, and eight Buddhas are located on the central dais and eight petals of an inner lotus flower. Second, the eight syllables, *a mṛ ta te se ha ra hūm* and the eight bodhisattvas are located on eight petals of an outer lotus flower. They correspond with each other as follows.

Table 1. The correspondence between syllables and bodhisattvas in the *Gorin kuji*

<i>a</i>	<i>mṛ</i>	<i>ta</i>	<i>te</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>ha</i>	<i>ra</i>	<i>hūm</i>
Kannon	Jishi (Miroku)	Kokūzō	Fugen	Kongōshu	Monju	Jokaishō	Jizō

Third, the twelve bodhisattvas who serve Buddhas are located around the lotus flowers.

Concerning the lineage and historical background of this maṇḍala, scholars first assumed the influence from the scriptures such as *Wuliangshou rulai guanhang gongyang yigui* 無量寿如来觀行供養儀軌 (*Manual of Visualization and Offering of Amida Buddha*) and *Bada pusa mantuluo jing* 八大菩薩曼荼羅經 (*Sutra of the Maṇḍala of Eight Great Bodhisattvas*) translated by Amoghavajra (705–774).⁸⁾

They, however, does not have the reference to the nine syllables. Akatsuka investigates the Esoteric Buddhist manuscripts written in medieval Japan such as the *Shōgo shū* 勝語集 (*Collection of Superior Words*) and points out that some of them refer to the correspondence between the nine syllables and eight bodhisattvas within the context of the ritual of Amida Buddha and the visualization of the wheel of syllables used in it.⁹⁾

Table 2. The correspondence between syllables and bodhisattvas in the *Shōgo shū*

<i>om</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>mṛ</i>	<i>ta</i>	<i>te</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>ha</i>	<i>ra</i>	<i>hūm</i>
	Kannon	Jishi	Kongōshu	Kokūzō	Kongōzō	Monju	Jokaishō	Jizō

Akatsuka follows these facts and assumes that the maṇḍala of the nine syllables in the *Gorin kuji* is also deeply influenced by the medieval Esoteric Buddhist manuscripts and discourses.¹⁰⁾

3.2. The Seed Maṇḍala of the Buddha of Limitless Life in the *Gozō mandara*

It is noteworthy that the *Gozō mandara* transmitted in Kōzanji temple also refers to the correspondence between the nine syllables and bodhisattvas. This is the manuscript during the middle of Kamakura period. According to Sueki Fumihiko 末木文美士, the *Gozō mandara* follows the composition of the *Gorin kuji* and successively explains the five viscera maṇḍala and the significance of the nine syllables of Amida.¹¹⁾ The *Gozō mandara* of Kōzanji temple is obviously based on the *Gorin kuji*.¹²⁾ In the second half of the text, the significance of the nine syllables is described as follows.

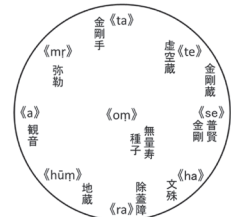
The syllable *om* has the meaning of the three bodies of Buddhas which include the dharma body (*hosshin* 法身) and transformation body (*keshin* 化身). It satisfies the purpose of this mandara and represents the non-duality between Buddha bodies. The syllable *a* is Kannon. The syllable *mṛ* is Jishi. The syllable *ta* is Kongōshu. The syllable *te* is Kokūzō. The syllable *se* is Kongōzō 金剛藏. The syllable *ha* is Myōkissō 妙吉祥. The syllable *ra* is Jokaishō. The syllable *hūm* is Jizō. They are called the “seed maṇḍala of the [Buddha of] limitless life.” The status of the nine seats were explained as above. (Sueki 2013, 6a)

The correspondence between the nine syllables and bodhisattvas is summarized as follows.

Table 3. The correspondence between syllables and bodhisattvas in the *Gozō mandara*

<i>om</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>mṛ</i>	<i>ta</i>	<i>te</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>ha</i>	<i>ra</i>	<i>hūm</i>
Three bodies	Kannon	Jishi	Kokūzō	Fugen	Kongōshu	Monju	Jokaishō	Jizō

In the *Gozō mandara*, this correspondence is called the “seed maṇḍala of the [Buddha of] limitless life.” According to Sueki, this text also includes the diagram which describes the visualization of the wheel of nine syllables and bodhisattvas.¹³⁾



4. Conclusion

In this paper, I discussed the contextual proximity and replaceability between the mandala of nine syllables and the visualization of the wheel of syllables. In the second chapter, I examined the doctrinal position of the maṇḍala of the nine syllables in the *Gorin kuji* and revealed the close connection between it and the five viscera maṇḍala. In the third chapter, I also investigated the multiple discourses concerning the nine syllables in the *Gorin kuji* and *Gozō mandara* and pointed out the replaceability between the maṇḍala of the nine syllables and the visualization of the wheel of nine syllables within the relationship with the five viscera maṇḍala.

These research results eloquently explain the lineage and historical background of the maṇḍala of the nine syllables described in the *Gorin kuji*. As Akatsuka points out, Kakuban definitely constructed the maṇḍala based not only on the Esoteric Buddhist scriptures translated in China but also on the manuscripts written by Esoteric Buddhist monks in Heian Japan.

Notes

- 1) See for example Nasu 1970 and Matsuzaki 2002.
- 2) See for example Kushida 1964.
- 3) See Akatsuka 1995; 2004.
- 4) See for example Kameyama 2011.
- 5) Concerning the English translation, see also van der Veere 2000, 193.
- 6) Concerning the English translation, see also van der Veere 2000, 165–166.
- 7) Concerning the English translation, see also van der Veere 2000, 192.
- 8) See for example Yoritomi 1992.
- 9) See Akatsuka 1995, 36.
- 10) See Akatsuka 2004, 5.
- 11) See Sueki 2013, 3–4.
- 12) See Sueki 2013, 5.
- 13) See Sueki 2013, 6.

Abbreviations

KZ *Kōgyō daishi zenshū* 興教大師全集. Ed. Tatsue Nakano 中野達慧 and Kōjun Tomita 富田敦純. 2 vols. Tokyo: Sesōken, 1935.

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Key words Kakuban, *Gorin kuji myō himitsu shaku*, *Gozō mandara*, maṇḍala of the nine syllables

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