Sman-gyi-bla Vaidur-ya
-chos-kyi-rgyal-po
(ghen-sajye-shru-vaidurya-Prabhara)
VAIDURYA

- Marianne Winder

The Tibetan Medicine Buddha

The colour of the gem vaidurya plays a great role in Tibetan medicine. The Medicine Buddha is called be-du-nya hod-kyi spong-po, or 'King of the Vaidurya Light'. In the Sādhakamrupaṇḍaraka of about AD 200 he is only called 'King of Healing'. But in a Chinese medical text of AD 540 to 606, the Sūtra on the Merits of the Fundamental Vows of the Master of Healing in Hisan Tsang's Tattaka version, he is called the 'Vaidurya Radiance Taṭṭāga'.¹ The Chinese word is lü-yi. In Tibetan vai-du-nya or be-du-nya and other various forms remain untranslated loan words. According to Jācchek's Tibetan-English Dictionary,² be-du-nya means 'azure stone, lapis lazuli'. It quotes Dzanglan (i.e., hduan-lus), a collection of legends, in which are mentioned the Vaidurya dKar-pa³ 'White Vaidurya' and Vaidurya skRon-pa⁴ 'Blue Vaidurya', which are titles of works on astronomy-astrology and on medicine, respectively. The Tibetan-English Dictionary of Chodra Das notes.⁵

³Short title of phy-dje-nya rdo-rje legs-bshad mkhas-pa's ston-ba dkar-pa's do-urgence dpags-pa.
⁴Short title of phy-dje-nya lhan-gru smon-ba's dpogs-pa's rgyad-bshad sems-bshad pa-mdzes-pa's skon-pa.
Beryl, cat’s eye or lapis lazuli?

What, then, does vaññārpa mean? Etymologically it is related to Pāli vaññārpa and Prākrit vaññārpa, vañña, vaññā and vaññā. Prākrit vañña became Greek βερυλλον whence came English beryl. While Greek βερυλλον and, from there, English beryl were derived from Prākrit vañña, the Persian and Arabic words bałlar and bałīr meaning ‘crystal or beryl’ were also borrowed from India, but according to Alfred Master, they are not derived from Sanskrit vaññārpa or Pāli vaññārpa. He does not sug-

4For example Horace Hayman Wilson, Dictionary, Sanskrit and English (Calcutta: Educational Press, 1819.
7J. Béhesi, ‘Mélanges etymologiques’, Mémoires de la Société Linguistique, xi (1900), 92, thinks that the Prakrit form vaññā is a corruption from Greek βερυλλον, diminutive of βερυλλος ‘beryl’ and that this word of Greek origin was imported into India either during the campaigns of Alexander the Great or later. This view does not hold water because the word vaññārpa is found in Sanskrit sources as early as the Atharvaveda Brahmana of 650 BC.
gest a Prakrit form from which they could be derived. 'Crystal' can be a
generalised term for 'beryl' because the beryl occurs in crystalline form.

The meaning of the Sanskrit word vaidurya is also 'beryl' according to
Mayerhöfer. To corroborate his opinion he quotes A. Master who gives
a chronology of the occurrence of vaidurya and its Prakrit and Pali forms
and asserts that the evidence for the meaning 'beryl' is conclusive for all
of them. But he mentions that Mallinatha of the fifteenth century
identifies vaidurya with lapis lazuli, and that Apte followed his example.
He also mentions that Sten Konow and A. C. Woolner translate Prakrit
vaidurya. varulie as 'cat's eye', and Dines Andersen does the same with Pali
vaidurya. The passage in which Mallinatha explains vaidurya as lapis lazuli
connects it at the same time with the meaning of 'cat's eye' as follows:

The women are afraid of the rays of the moon coming through the
window, which are reflected on the vaidurya walls and therefore
which Buddhavas explains as 'frighten like cat's eyes' and Master translates
as 'make terrible cat's eyes'. Thakura Phana translates vaidurya in this
context as 'chrysoberyl' or 'cat's eye' saying that Māgha's use clearly indi-
cates the chatoyancy of vaidurya. Perhaps the difference in the dates
is significant: Māgha wrote his work during the seventh century AD and

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11. Mayerhöfer, Kurzes frühstücks etymologisches Wörterbuch des Althindischen. A
12. Ibid., loc. cit., 205.
13. Konow, Sten, Commentary on Māgha’s Sāraṇīya-sūtra, iii. 65. (Bombay: Ni-
kaya Sagar Press, 1923).
15. Thakura Phana, Rabindra-Shongshod, edited by Sten Konow, with notes and translation by Char-
16. A. C. Woolner, Introduction to Prākrit, 3rd edition, (London: Medial Baynsharan,
1939), § 58, pp. 24, 228.
18. Quotes from George Buddhavas, 'Sam Lapa Lazuli in Indra', Studien zur Indo
er und Iranistik, v/vi (1930), 6.
19. Thakura Phana, Yogavasaksh driver, a Medieval Prākrit Text on. Gemmology, trans-
Kumāranāthasūtra, i. 24 (fifth century AD) suggests the crystals of beryl. Phana's book
was not accessible to me, and I am indebted to for this and other references to Dr Aton
Roga.
Mallinakha's commentary is of the fifteenth century. Louis Finot translates uṇīḍūra as 'cat's eye' because of the passage in Buddhahatth'a's Buthamānasā, 200, which says that the uṇīḍūra shows such a variety of brilliances that it gives the impression of flashing spurs. The passage in the Kepsinmanḍarī which Xonow interprets as 'cat's eye' is taken by Ānan to mean 'beryli'. Böhtlingk and Roth translate uṇīḍūra as 'beryli' without explaining why.

In the Pāli canon

Looking for velluriya in the Pāli Canon we find in Dipaṇḍaka, ii. 84:24

Just, O King, as if there were a velluriya gem, bright, of the purest water, with eight facets, excellently cut, clear, translucent...

Now, a lapis lazuli is opaque, and the whole purpose of this passage is to show that a coloured thread going through a translucent gem can be clearly seen, comparing it to a purified mind recognising the truth easily. Lapis lazuli is a rock and does not form crystals. The beryl is six-sided but the writer of this passage and similar ones may have regarded the two ends as two more sides. Otto Franke says to this passage that in other passages eight-sided columns are mentioned made of velluriya and that the listeners' ears may have got attuned to this so that the idea of eight facets are an assimilation to this habit of thinking. There is also the association of the Eightfold Path.

Vighnāpātika, ii. 12 has:26

You are not, O Bhikkhu, to use bowls made of gold, silver, set with jewels, or made of beryli, crystal, copper, glass, tin, lead, bronze.

22 Cf. note 16.

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Max Müller's note 1:

It is clear from verses 192-196 of the 13th chapter of the *Rāja-
ngīthā* written by Narahari in the 13th century (or according
to B. Laufer, the 15th) that at that time rājñīgī mea	sted 'cat's eye'. But it is uncertain that that was the only meaning ... at
the time when this passage was composed.

I shall come back to the *Rājaṅgīthā* later.

_Samkuttanīkāya_, i. 6.3 has:29

Even as a beautiful, illustrious berylstone of eight facets, well
polished, when laid on an orange coloured cloth shines and glows
and blazes ... 

Mrs. Rhys Davids' choice of stone seems right since the implication is that
the gem is transparent and has facets.

_Aṅguttaranaṇīkāya_, i. 70, 21 has:30

Within this cokkumāla [sphere] there are pearls, gems, cat's eyes
... all these are not worth one sixteenth part of the merit result-
ing from a fast with eight vows.

Here again is the pre-occupation with the figure eight. Nyānatiloka's German
translation has Türkisen for rājñīgī.39

_Aṅguttaranaṇīkāya_, ii. 19, 8 has.30

Lord, the mighty ocean has many and diverse treasures; there is
the pearl, the crystal, the lapis lazuli (rājñīgī), the shell, quartz,
coral, silver, gold, the ruby and cat's eye (maṇḍrungalla).

E. M. Hare's note to rājñīgī: 'the colour of bamboo, of the acacia flower
must be taken from a Pali commentary. Here I thought I would find out what
colour rājñīgī was: bamboo when young is usually dark green but turns into
yellow wood after one year, and the acacia flower is white or yellow. This
was inconclusive until I read the passage in the *Rājaṅgīthā*.31

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31 Die indischen Mineralien. Prakāra, Rājñīgīthā, Sambhavat und deutscher termine,
"bearbeitet von Richard Claus" (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1882), iii. 198.
The cat’s eye can be recognised from three types of sheen, that is, when it slightly shimmers like a bamboo leaf, shines strongly like a peacock’s neck or has the reddish-brown appearance of the eye of cats.

Apart from the fact that my favourite cat would object to the latter description, this seems to be a standard comparison unless it has been lifted out of the Pāli commentary used by Hare. The comparison with a bamboo is probably due to a conventional false etymology which associates vedurīya with Pāli vesu or vesu, both meaning ‘bamboo’. E. M. Hare, in spite of his note, ‘the colour of the saracca flower’, translates vedurīya as ‘lapis lazuli’. The reason for this is not far to seek. At the end of the enumeration in the Aṅguttarāniśākha a new gem has appeared, the maśāmpallā, which Hare translates as ‘cat’s eye’.

While the Rājanighanta compares the sheen of the cat’s eye to that of the bamboo leaf,32 Hare’s note to the passage in the Aṅguttarāniśākha compares the colour of the vedurīya, translated by him as ‘lapis lazuli’, to a bamboo.33 The Rājanighanta is a compilation of various works. Verse 194 combines the comparison to a peacock’s neck with a comparison to the eye of a cat, and therefore in that passage clearly means the ‘cat’s eye’ gem. In verse 216 in chapter 13, the lapis lazuli is described and also compared to a peacock’s neck as follows:34

That lapis lazuli must be regarded as genuine and auspicious which is without white flecks, is blackish or dark blue, smooth, heavy, pure, shining and like a peacock’s neck.

This description of lapis lazuli corresponds to the mineralogical facts. The white flecks are caused by calcite. Here five Sanskrit words are translated by ‘lapis lazuli’, but not vedurīya.

The comparison of vedurīya to a peacock’s neck in Hare’s note35 can be substantiated with a passage in Jātaka no. 32, the Naccottisakha:36 ‘peacock, your neck in hue like lapis lazuli ... ’ This translates vedurīya as avāpunābhā. Pāli nibba means ‘lustre’, and avāpa, Sanskrit vāpa, does not have to mean ‘colour’ but just ‘beauty, appearance’. So the passage could equally mean,

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32 Girde, Die indischen Kanonbien.
33 Hare (tr.), Mahāvagga, 117.
34 Ibid., 33.216.
35 Hare (tr.), Mahāvagga, 137.
36 Translated under the editorship of E. B. Cowell by Robert Chalmers, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1895), i. 84.
'peacock, your neck has more lustre than the appearance of beryl'. The *Rājānghaṇḍa* may have borrowed the simile from the *Jātaka*.

Now, while Chalmers translated *veḷuriya* in *Jātaka* no. 32 as 'lapis lazuli', H. T. Francis and R. A. Neil, the translators of volume three, still under Cowell's editorship, translated in *Jātaka* no. 419 *veḷuriya* as 'emeralds'?

*Adham veḷuvakāyuṇa matusveḷuriya*

Here is a golden necklace and emeralds and pearls.

In volume four of the same edition, translated by W. H. D. Rouse, in *Jātaka* no. 463, the word *veḷuriya* is translated as 'coral':

*Tamra paṇa samudde vagina veḷuriya*

Now, this ocean was full of coral the colour of bamboo.

Rouse's note says: 'the scholiast explains that the sea was red, like the reeds called 'scorpion-reed' or 'crab-reed', which are red in colour'. He adds that the baul was coral, which is also the word used at the end of the story (pāda). In fact, on the next page the sequence of precious substances found in the ocean, itself a fanciful notion, is: diamonds, gold, silver, emeralds, *vamārāpāveḷuriya*; at the end of the passage it is: 'gold, silver, jewels, corals (this time pāla), and diamonds.' Thus 'emeralds and *veḷuriya* the colour of bamboo' was replaced by 'jewels and corals'.

The *Dhammapada* is believed to be an early text. It is mentioned in the *Mūlindaśastakam* which belongs to the beginnings of the Christian era. The commentary to it is called *Dhammapadhuddhakathā* and is attributed in its colophon to Buddha-dhagöna who lived in about AD 400 even if Buddha-dhagöna was not himself the author. In the part commenting on *Sakkāsattago*, viii. 3, the line *ime suṇca māvāpya sābe veḷuriyagāṇa* is translated by Eugene Watson Burlingame as, 'Take these golden bracelets; all set with beryl'.

The *Mūlindaśastakam*, i. 267 has an enumeration of precious substances in which *maṇḍalīvenāśa* is juxtaposed. I. B. Horner translates the two words as 'cat's eyes, lapis lazuli'. Here is the same situation as is

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37 Subāṅgūjātaka, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1887), 262.
38 Suppīrakājikā, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1901), 89.
39 Ibid., 90.
40 Buddhist Legends Told from the Original Pali Text of the Dhammapada Commentary, (Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1921), 729.
the Aṅguttaranikāya. Again, seṭariṣya is translated as ‘lapis lazuli’ because maṣāṅgala is ‘cat’s eye’ or ‘beryl’.

The Dictionary of the Pāli Text Society renders maṣāṅgala as ‘a precious stone, cat’s eye’ and compares Sanskrit maṣadrā ‘emerald’ and Sanskrit gālane ‘crystal’.43 Childers’ Pāli Dictionary quotes the Abhidhānavagodānīka as saying that the maṣāṅgala is a stone produced in the hill of Māara (otherwise unknown).44 Note 10 by E. M. Lare to the Aṅguttaranikāya passage explains maṣāṅgala which he has translated as cat’s eye, as a ‘variegated crystal’.

There does not seem to be any necessity for maṣāṅgala to be regarded as ‘cat’s eye’. Recapitulating, one can say that the translators of Pāli usually rendered seṭariṣya as ‘cat’s eye’ or ‘beryl’, except when mentioned together with maṣāṅgala which for unknown reasons came to be translated as ‘cat’s eye’, and then seṭariṣya was translated as ‘lapis lazuli’.

Something very special

For Sanskrit, Monier Williams’ dictionary says:45

Vaiśākāy— a cat’s eye gem; at the end of a compound anything excellent of its kind.

This may well be the clue to the change in interpretation in Chinese and Tibetan: because lapis lazuli seems to be something very precious to the Chinese and the Tibetans they want to give this meaning to vaiśākāy which is to express something very special though different from ‘diamond’ which in Sanskrit is vajra. Berthold Laufer maintains that not only bi-li was the Chinese word for vaiśākāy, but that the whole word was pi-lu-li which occurs on a Han bas-relief and is a phonetic transcription of the Sanskrit word.46 This is borne out by Stanislaus Julien’s list of loan words from the Sanskrit where, indeed, the syllable no.1374, ni, is shown to correspond regularly to Sanskrit ni, and li to Sanskrit rya.47

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42 (Chippstead: Pāli Text Society, 1925), ii. 249.
44 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1899), 1021.
45 Publication 154, Anthropological series, volume 1, (Chicago: Chicago Field Museum of Natural History, 1912), 111.
It seems not unlikely that in some Sanskrit dialect the word was "varāṇga" from which the Prakrit form "varula" was derived. The "cat's eye" is called in Chinese "mao tsing 'cat’s essence'." Laufer does not favour the "lapis lazuli" translation though that is advocated by the books of Eitel and F. Porter Smith, which he quotes.

Chrysoberyl and aquamarine

Isidorus of Seville (560-636) mentions that beryl comes from India and is pale green, but that in chrysoberyl, i.e., cat's eye, a gold-coloured lustre can be observed. Laufer decides it should be "chrysoberyl" because this stone has an opalescent sheen. He also remarks: "How could the Tibetan authors distinguish blue, green, white and yellow varāṇga if the word should denote the "cat's eye"?" Thus, the cat's eye can be of only one colour and always has a sheen. While the beryl can be of many colours and without a sheen though it may have a sheen as Laufer's "chrysoberyl." There are yellow, green and white beryls, and the blue beryl is the aquamarine. It must be due to this that the Tibetan doctor Yetshi Donden and his translator Kelsang Jampa were using the phrase "King of Aquamarine Light" for the meditative Buddha.

Also, they were, no doubt, aware that "vaikūrya" must have meant "aquamarine" in early Tibetan writings as is testified by the three lines from the bka’-chas po-lung. From sections of the reports of Padmasambhava's words, chapter 22, item d) which is believed to have been composed during the lifetime of Padmasambhava and edited later.

"dba’-chags rgyal-po gyu bya khyu-byung-is
sko-mdog ba-dan mThin kha’i-mdog chags-pa
hams-car zil-gyi-mon-pa bya’r rgyal-po

'the king of the birds, the turquoise bird, the cuckoo, which unparalled all because it was born with the colour of the blue vaikūrya'. Here the colour of the blue vaikūrya is at the same time the colour of the turquoise bird. This could well apply to the colour of the aquamarine which is a transparent bluish green while the turquoise itself is opaque bluish green but it could never apply to the dark blue opaque lapis lazuli.

45 F. Porter Smith, Contributions towards the Materia Medica of China (London: Trübner, 1871).
46 Useppologiie, sv. 7. 5-7: Berghs in India pignatar, genus quae longas tenues habens, viriditatem simili amethysto, sed cum pallore ... Chrysoberylus dictus ab aurem pallido eius viriditas si in aurem colorum repellit. Et hunc 'India matiss.'
47 Laufer, op. cit. in note 45, 111.
48 The Ambrosius Heart Sutra, with annotations by Yetshi Donden, translated by Kelsang Kelsang, (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1977), 15 and passim.
49 Ms. Helen Prentiss, Quellen zur Geschichte der Indischen Baukunst, in Proceedings of the Academy of Science and Literature, 1910, pp. 344 and 250, quoting "Ma’er" from the "Five sections of the reports of Padmasambhava’s words", chapter 22, item d) and po-ba’i tshur-rig.
Chinese interpretations

The Chinese pi-lu-li usually appears just as lu-li because the Chinese are as fond of abbreviating as are the Tibetans. Édouard Chavannes is cautious in the 1912 volume of his Ciné cent contes et apologues: "des parures de unifūrga (šebu-lu), d'or et d'argent." But by 1921 he has made up his mind: "des parures de beryl, d'or et d'argent."54 Demiéville in 1924 thinks it designated a purely mythical substance.55

E. Burnouf in his translation of an incomplete version of the Saddharma-pundarika from the Sanskrit enumerates the seven precious substances su-currya, ruppa, unifūrga, saphaka, laktamsukti, anaprapaksha, musunipula [sic], interpreting them as: gold, silver, lapiz lazuli; crystal, red pearls (connecting mukta with mukta); emerald, cat's eye.56 W. E. Soothill in his translation of the Saddharma-pundarika from the Chinese, has gold, silver, lapis lazuli, moonstones, agates, coral, amber.57 In his note, Burnouf informs us that he is following the Abhidhammapadīpika in using 'lapis lazuli', and that, according to A. Remusat, musunipula means to the Chinese a blue and white stone, perhaps 'ammonite'.58

Babylonian appreciation of lapis lazuli

A recent author dealing with Chinese scriptural accounts on the Medicine Buddha, in translating texts from the Chinese Tripitaka, consistently translates lu-li with 'lapis lazuli'. Max Brünbaum is his The Healing Buddha,59 giving the reason for his choice, saying the Gandhāra is near the only source of lapiz lazuli in the ancient world (i.e., Afghanistan) and that these images are noted for their emphasis on the depiction of light and flames emanating from the form of the Buddha. As lapiz lazuli is opaque dark blue it is not the best colour to depict light or flames, although dark blue pervaded with golden rays often appears on thakas as the back curtain or back plate.

53 Édouard Chavannes, Ciné cent contes et apologues extrait du Tripitaka chinois et traduits en français 4 vol., (Paris: E. Leroux, 1918-38), iii, 393, no. 506.
54 Édouard Chavannes, Contes et Épisodes du Rouddhâna, (Paris: Bessard, 1921), 141.
55 Paul Demiéville, review of Hong Thang Lapidarium Siscam, Bulletin d'école française d'Extrême Orient, xxiv (1924), esp. pp. 276-283. John Irving is in his article 'The Lu Lhakor at Benares (Varanasi)', Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft, cxviii (1983), 328, i.e., 20, subscribe to this opinion.
58 Burnouf, Bonne Loi, 319-320.
of a deity. The gold flecks in lapis lazuli which are caused by pyrite were the reason why it was highly prized by the ancient Babylonians who compared them to the stars in the night sky.60 The etymology of lapis lazuli directs us also to Persia. The word occurs first in the fourteenth century as a compound of Latin lapis ‘stone’ and Mediaeval Latin lazurum from Arabic lazaward from Persian lákwárward ‘lapis lazuli’. From this was derived the Sanskrit word rajasvarta for ‘lapis lazuli’. About this, the Laghvumnapuriká, verses 19–20, says: ‘it is without white spots and the colour of a seacock’s neck’61. According to the Ragjogahánjú, xii, 215, rajasvarta used against bile diseases is soft and cool, while vaisárya, according to Rágjogahánjú, xii. 193, is warm. The English word azure goes back to the same Arabic word lazaward through Old French and Old Spanish, omitting the initial l which was mistakenly regarded as an Arabic article.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, it seems that vaisárya, refúriga and élu-li mean ‘beryl’, and that Páli refúrya is interpreted as ‘lapis lazuli’ when juxtaposed with Páli masáragalla, while Chinese élu-li and Tibetan bṣé-du-rva are often translated as ‘lapis lazuli’ because lapis lazuli was an extremely rare and special stone which could only be obtained from Afghanistan before the rocks near Lake Bukal were discovered, and because it resembled the night sky with its stars, the most exalted symbol of the divine.

If ‘beryl’ translates vaisárya, and the Medicine Buddha is traditionally surrounded by a blue radiance, it would have to be called ‘blue beryl radiance’. According to Dongzhog’s New Light English–Tibetan Dictionary the Tibetan word for ‘aquamarine’ is yuṣkha, a lasso word from a Sanskrit word for ‘blue lotus’.62 But as a blue beryl is an aquamarine, ‘aquamarine radiance’ still seems to be the best translation for Tibetan bṣé-du-rva.hed. Why yuṣkha is the Tibetan word for ‘aquamarine’ is another question. Is the colour of the blue lotus aquamarine?