Sman-gyi-bla Vaidur-ya
'od-kyi-rgyal-po
(Bhaisajya-guru-vaidurya-Prabharaja)
The Tibetan Medicine Buddha

THE COLOUR OF THE GEM vaiq.iirya plays a great role in Tibetan medicine. The Medicine Buddha is called be-du-rya hod-kyi rgyal-po, or 'King of the Vaiq.iirya Light'. In the Saddharmapuṭṭarika of about AD 200 he is only called 'King of Healing'. But in a Chinese medical text of AD 500 to 600, the Sūtra on the Merits of the Fundamental Vows of the Master of Healing in Hsuan Tsang's Tripitaka version, he is called the 'Vaiq.iirya Radiance Tathāgata'. The Chinese word is liu-li. In Tibetan vai-du-rya or be-du­rya and other variant forms remain untranslated loan words. According to Jäschke's Tibetan-English Dictionary, be-du-rya means 'azure stone, lapis lazuli'. It quotes Dzanglun (i.e., hdzasnl-blun), a collection of legends, in which are mentioned the Vaidūrya dKar.po 'White Vaidūrya' and Vaidūrya sNón.po 'Blue Vaidūrya', which are titles of works on astronomy–astrology and on medicine, respectively. The Tibetan–English Dictionary of Chandra Das says:5

3 Short title of phug-lugs rci-s-kyi legs-bsad mkhas-pa'i vaidur dkar-po'i do-šal dbyod-ltan sūni-nor.
4 Short title of gso-ba rig-pa'i bstan-bcos sman-bla'i dgoñis-rgyan rgyud-bzhis gsal-byil bai-dür sön-pohi mallika.
bai-du-rya – malachite or chrysolite. There are three descriptions
... the yellow lapis-lazuli called Mañjuri [sic], the green lapis-
lazuli called Sugata, the white lapis-lazuli called Sûnya [sic].

Mañjuri is probably an allusion to the Yellow Mañjuśrī, Sugata ‘having fared
well’ is easily associated with green, the colour of growth, and the colour
white with Sûnya ‘empty’. However, there is no such thing as a white, green
or yellow lapis lazuli. The colour blue is not mentioned by Chandra Das.
The works called ‘White Vaiḍūrya’ and ‘Blue Vaiḍūrya’ to which can be
added a book called ‘Yellow Vaiḍūrya’ on history do not seem to mean ‘lapis
lazuli’. Even the title ‘Blue Lapis Lazuli’ would not make sense because
of the tautology, as lapis lazuli can have no other colour. Jaques André
and Jean Filliozat compare the meanings of vaidūrya in nineteenth century
dictionaries and come to the conclusion that the early nineteenth century
ones favoured the meaning ‘lapis lazuli’,6 and that those near the end of the
nineteenth century preferred ‘cat’s eye’.7

Beryl, cat’s eye or lapis lazuli?

What, then, does vaidūrya mean? Etymologically it is related to Pāli veluriya
and Prākrit veḷuriya, verulia, velūrya and veļulia.8 Prākrit verulia became
Greek βερυλλίων whence came English ‘beryl’.9 While Greek βερυλλίων
and, from there, English beryl were derived from Prākrit verulia, the Per-
sian and Arabic words billaur, ballūr and bulūr meaning ‘crystal or beryl’
were also borrowed from India, but according to Alfred Master, they are
not derived from Sanskrit vaidūrya or Pāli veḷuriya.10 He does not sug-

6For example Horace Hayman Wilson, Dictionary, Sanskrit and English (Calcutta:
Education Press, 1819).
7L’Inde vue de Rome. Textes latins de l’Antiquité relatifs à l’Inde (Paris: Belles Lettres,
8Richard Pischel, Comparative grammar of the Prākrit languages, translated from the
gives various Prākrit forms.
9J. Halévi, ‘Mélanges etymologiques’, Mémoires de la Société Linguistique, xi (1900), 82,
thinks that the Prākrit form velūrya is a corruption from Greek βερυλλίων, diminutive of
βερυλλός ‘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 vaidūrya is found in Sanskrit sources of as early as the Adhvīta Brāhmaṇa of 650
BC.
10Alfred Master, ‘Indo-Aryan and Dravidian, Section II’, Bulletin of the School of Ori-
gest a Prākrit 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 vaiḍūrya is also ‘beryl’ according to Mayrhofer. To corroborate his opinion he quotes A. Master who gives a chronology of the occurrence of vaiḍūrya and its Prākrit and Pāli forms and asserts that the evidence for the meaning ‘beryl’ is conclusive for all of them. But he mentions that Mallinātha of the fifteenth century identifies vaiḍūrya with lapis lazuli, and that Apte followed his example. He also mentions that Sten Konow and A. C. Woolner translate Prākrit veluria, verulia as ‘cat’s eye’, and Dines Andersen does the same with Pāli veluriya. The passage in which Mallinātha explains vaiḍūrya 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 vaiḍūrya walls and therefore bidāleksaṇabhīṣanābhyah

which Buddruss explains as ‘frighten like cat’s eyes’ and Master translates as ‘make terrible cat’s eyes’. Thakkura Pheru translates vaiḍūrya in this context as ‘chrysoberyl’ or ‘cat’s eye’ saying that Māgha’s use clearly indicates the chatoyancy of vaiḍūrya. Perhaps the difference in the dates is significant: Māgha wrote his work during the seventh century AD and

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12 Master, loc. cit., 305.
13 Ibid., 304.
14 Kolāchala Mallinātha, Commentary on Māgha’s Śiśupālavadha, iii. 45. (Bombay: Narayana Sagar Press, 1923).
20 Thakkura Pheru, Rayanaparikkhā, a Medieval Prakrit Text on Gemmology, translated by S. R. Saarna, (Aligarh: 1984), 67-68, verse 94. Pheru’s reference to Kālidāsa’s Kumārasambhava, i. 24 (fifth century AD) suggests the crystals of beryl. Pheru’s book was not accessible to me, and I am indebted for this and other references to Dr Arion Roju.
Mallinātha’s commentary is of the fifteenth century. Louis Finot translates vaidūrya as ‘cat’s eye’ because of the passage in Buddhabhaṭṭa’s Ratnaparikṣā, 200, which says that the vaidūrya shows such a variety of brilliances that it gives the impression of flashing sparks.21 The passage in the Karpīramanijāri which Konow interprets as ‘cat’s eye’ is taken by Lanman to mean ‘beryl’.22 Böhtlingk and Roth translate vaidūrya as ‘beryl’ without explaining why.23

In the Pāli canon

Looking for veluriya in the Pāli Canon we find in Dīghanikāya, ii. 84:24

Just, O King, as if there were a veluriya 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 veluriya 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.25 There is also the association of the Eightfold Path.

Vinayapiṭaka, ii. 12 has:26

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

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22 Cf. note 16.


Max Müller’s note 1:

It is clear from verses 192–196 of the 13th chapter of the Rājaniḥaṅṭu written by Narahari in the 13th century (or according to B. Laufer, the 15th) that at that time vaidūrya meant ‘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 Rājaniḥaṅṭu later.

Samyuttanikāya, i. 643 has:

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.

Arīguttaranikāya, iii. 70, 24 has:

Within this cakkavāla [sphere] there are pearls, gems, cat’s eyes ... all these are not worth one sixteenth part of the merit resulting from a fast with eight vows.

Here again is the pre-occupation with the figure eight. Nyānatiloka’s German translation has Türkisen for veluriya.

Arīguttaranikāya, ii. 19, 8 has:

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

E. M. Hare’s note to veluriya: ‘the colour of bamboo, of the acacia flower’ must be taken from a Pāli commentary. Here I thought I would find out what colour veluriya 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 Rājaniḥaṅṭu:

\[\text{\textbf{References}}\]


30 Atthanipata, Mahāvagga, translated by E. M. Hare, (London: Luzac, 1935), 137.

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 veḷuṇiya with Pāli velu or venu, both meaning ‘bamboo’. E. M. Hare, in spite of his note, ‘the colour of the acacia flower’, translates veḷuṇiya as ‘lapis lazuli’. The reason for this is not far to seek. At the end of the enumeration in the Aṇīguttaranikāya a new gem has appeared, the masāragalla, which Hare translates as ‘cat’s eye’.

While the Rājanighaṇṭu compares the sheen of the cat’s eye to that of the bamboo leaf, Hare’s note to the passage in the Aṇīguttaranikāya compares the colour of the veḷuṇiya, translated by him as ‘lapis lazuli’, to a bamboo. The Rājanighaṇṭu 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:

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 vaiḍūrya.

The comparison of veḷuṇiya to a peacock’s neck in Hare’s note can be substantiated with a passage in Jātaka no. 32, the Naccajātaka: ‘peacock, your neck in hue like lapis lazuli ...’ This translates veḷuṇiyavaṇṇuṇpanibhā. Pāli nibhā means ‘lustre’, and vaṇṇa, Sanskrit varṇa, does not have to mean ‘colour’ but just ‘beauty, appearance’. So the passage could equally mean,

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32 Garbe, Die indischen Mineralien.
33 Hare (tr.), Mahāvagga, 137.
34 Ibid., 13,216.
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 Rājanighaṇṭu 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':

\[\text{idam suvaṇṇakāyūraṁ muttāveḷuriyā}\]

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':

\[\text{tasmiṁ pana samudde vaṁsaraṅgaveluriyāṁ}\]

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

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 haul was coral, which is also the word used at the end of the story (pavālo). In fact, on the next page the sequence of precious substances found in the ocean, itself a fanciful notion, is: diamonds, gold, silver, emeralds, vaṁsaraṅgaveluriyāṁ; at the end of the passage it is: 'gold, silver, jewels, corals (this time pavāla), 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 Milindapañha which belongs to the beginnings of the Christian era. The commentary to it is called Dhammapadāṭṭhakathā and is attributed in its colophon to Buddhaghosa which fixes its date to about AD 400 even if Buddhaghosa was not himself the author. In the part commenting on Sahassavaggo, viii. 3, the line ime suvaṇṇakāyūra sabbe veḷuriyāmayā is translated by Eugene Watson Burlingame as, 'Take these golden bracelets, all set with beryls'.

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

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37 Sulāsajātaka, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1897), 262.
38 Suppārakajātaka, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1901), 89.
39 Ibid., 90.
40 Buddhist Legends Told from the Original Pāli Text of the Dhammapada Commentary, (Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1921), 229.
the Aṅguttaranikāya. Again, veḷuṇiya is translated as 'lapis lazuli' because masāragalla is 'cat's eye' or 'beryl'.

The Dictionary of the Pali Text Society renders masāragalla as a precious stone, cat's eye and compares Sanskrit masāra 'emerald' and Sanskrit galva 'crystal'. Childers' Pāli Dictionary quotes the Abhidhānappadīpika as saying that the masāragalla is a stone produced in the hill of Masara (otherwise unknown). Note 10 by E. M. Hare to the Aṅguttaranikāya passage explains masāragalla which he has translated as cat's eye, as a 'variegated crystal.'

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

**Something very special**

For Sanskrit, Monier Williams' dictionary says:

**Vaiḍūrya** – 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 vaiḍūrya which is to express something very special though different from 'diamond' which in Sanskrit is vajra. Berthold Laufer maintains that not only liu-li was the Chinese word for vaiḍūrya, but that the whole word was pi-liu-li which occurs on a Han bas-relief and is a phonetic transcription of the Sanskrit word. This is borne out by Stanislas Julien's list of loan words from the Sanskrit where, indeed, the syllable no.1374, pi, is shown to correspond regularly to Sanskrit vai, and liu corresponds to Sanskrit rū, and li to Sanskrit rya.
It seems not unlikely that in some Sanskrit dialect the word was *vairūrya* from which the Prākrit form *verulīa* 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 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 *vairūrya* 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 Yeshi Donden and his translator Kelsang Jhampa were using the phrase 'King of Aquamarine Light' for the Medicine Buddha.

Also, they were, no doubt, aware that *vaidurya* must have meant 'aquamarine' in early Tibetan writings as is testified by the three lines from the *bKa'-thans sde 'Ina* (Five 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.

'dab-chags rgbal-po guya khu-byug-ni
sku-mdog bai-dur mthin kha'i-mdog chags-pas
hams-cad zil-gyis-non-pa bya'i rgbal-po

'the king of the birds, the turquoise bird, the cuckoo, which surpassed all because it was born with the colour of the blue *vaidurya*'. Here the colour of the blue vaidurya 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.
Chinese interpretations

The Chinese *pi-liu-li* usually appears just as *liu-li* because the Chinese are as fond of abbreviating as are the Tibetans. Édouard Chavannes is cautious in the 1912 volume of his *Cinq cents contes et apologues*: ‘des parures de *vaïdûrya* (lieu-li), d’or et d’argent’. But by 1921 he has made up his mind: ‘des parures de béryl, d’or et d’argent’. Demiéville in 1924 thinks it designated a purely mythical substance.

E. Burnouf in his translation of an incomplete version of the *Saddharma-pundarika* from the Sanskrit enumerates the seven precious substances *svarna, rûpya, vaïdûrya, sphaïka, lohitamukti, açmagarbha, musâragalva* [sic], interpreting them as ‘gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, red pearls (connecting *mukti* with *mukta*), emerald, cat’s eye’. W. E. Soothill in his translation of the *Saddharmapundarika* from the Chinese, has gold, silver, lapis lazuli, moonstones, agates, coral, amber. In his note, Burnouf informs us that he is following the *Abhidhânappadipika* in using ‘lapis lazuli’, and that, according to A. Rémusat, *musâragalva* means to the Chinese a blue and white stone, perhaps ‘ammonite’.

Babylonian appreciation of lapis lazuli

A recent author dealing with Chinese scriptural accounts on the Medicine Buddha, in translating texts from the Chinese *Tripiṭaka*, consistently translates *liu-li* with ‘lapis lazuli’. Raoul Birnbaum in his *The Healing Buddha* gives the reason for his choice, saying the Gandhāra is near the only source of lapis 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 lapis 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 thankas as the back curtain or back plate.

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59 London: Rider, 1979, 60.
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 lazulum from Arabic lāzaward from Persian lāzhward ‘lapis lazuli’. From this was derived the Sanskrit word rājavarta for ‘lapis lazuli’. About this, the Laghurātanapariśā, verses 19–20, says: ‘it is without white spots and the colour of a peacock’s neck’.\(^{61}\) According to the Rājanighaṇṭu, xiii. 215, rājavarta used against bile diseases is soft and cool, while vaidūrya, according to Rājanighaṇṭu, xiii. 193, is warm. The English word azure goes back to the same Arabic word lāzaward 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 vaidūrya, veḷuriya and liu-li mean ‘beryl’, and that Pāli veḷuriya is interpreted as ‘lapis lazuli’ when juxtaposed with Pāli masāragalla, while Chinese liu-li and Tibetan be-du-rya 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 Baikal were discovered, and because it resembled the night sky with its stars, the most exalted symbol of the divine.

If ‘beryl’ translates vaidūrya, and the Medicine Buddha is traditionally surrounded by a blue radiance, it would have to be called ‘blue beryl radiance.’ According to Dongthog’s *New Light English–Tibetan Dictionary* the Tibetan word for ‘aquamarine’ is puṣkara, a loan 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 be.du.rya.hod. Why puṣkara is the Tibetan word for ‘aquamarine’ is another question. Is the colour of the blue lotus aquamarine?

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