

*Siddham:  
The Script of the Buddha*



THE HINDU and the Buddhist tantric practices laid emphasis on sacred sound, symbol and worship. Letters themselves are objects of contemplation, as they are charged with energy that creates vibrations in the inner consciousness of the devotee. The most effective mantra-s are the *bijakshara-s* (seed syllables), combinations of letters containing sum total of divinity. Recitation of the mantra-s and *bijakshara-s* while visualizing those divine powers inherent in the letters is said to anchor mediator in the world of Supreme

This best representative of this is the script called Siddham. Its origin can be traced to the Gupta period when the Buddhist scriptures were taken to the East, China to start with and then to Japan and Korea. The scriptures in Sanskrit came to be written in a modified form of Devanagari, later came to be called Siddham, meaning 'accomplished' or 'perfect'. This became the vehicle for carrying the message of the Buddha.

In this confluence of two great cultures, the script itself acquired the dimension of aesthetic embellishment in the hands of the Chinese and then perfected by the Japanese. This also contributed to acceptance of the linguistic concepts of Sanskrit by the Chinese. This happened at a time when the Chinese were feeling the shortcoming of their logographic script, particularly, for expression of exotic ideas.

The presentation is a curtain raiser of this unique Indian contribution.



## *Siddham Script*

Siddham is a ritual script of esoteric Buddhism.

It is unique in that the letterforms themselves are given attributes of Buddhist divinity.

It is a derivative of Brahmi script, like the scripts of all the other Indian languages.



## *Siddham : the Origin*

This script came to be adapted

for writing Buddhist religious literature in Sanskrit  
during the Gupta period (320-647 AD).



## *Siddham : the Origin*

The Gupta period was the golden age of India for art, culture and literature.

It was the golden age for Indian Buddhism too.

Great monasteries flourished.

More and more Buddhist canons were committed to writing, mostly in the Siddham script.

In course of time literacy became a requirement for monks.



## *Siddham : the Name*

The copying of the canons started  
with the teacher writing SIDDHAM,  
to mean 'let the task be accomplished'.

The root of the word *sidh* means  
accomplished, successful, perfected  
with the connotation of being sacred.



## *Siddham : the Name*

*siddhirastu* (May this be accomplished or  
may this be perfected) or  
*namah sarvajnaya Siddham*  
(Homage to the All-knowing perfection)  
was written at the head of the copying book.

This might have led to the script being called Siddham



## *Writing materials*

Writing, in the initial stages, was done on birch bark ('*bhoj-patra*') using reed pens or on palm leaves using sharp nails.

Later it was brush or reed pen on paper in China and Japan, and chiselling on wooden blocks in Tibet.



## *Siddham travels abroad*

The large number of sutras in Sanskrit and their commentaries were introduced into China from the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

They were mainly in the Siddham script.

At this stage the script acquired another dimension characteristic of the Chinese - *Calligraphical*



## *Siddham travels abroad*

From China Siddham travelled eastward to Korea.

But it was at its next stop, Japan,  
that Siddham reached its zenith.



## *Indian and Chinese approaches*

The Chinese paid little emphasis on the correct pronunciation, while the Indians were obsessed with it.

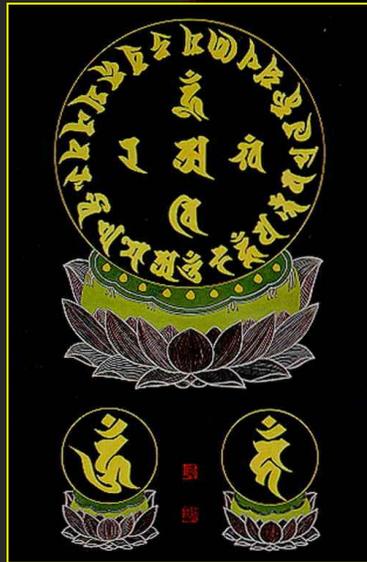
The Chinese were captivated by the written word.

In fact, for the Chinese, nothing had real value unless put in writing.



## *Chinese sensibility*

Again characteristic of the Chinese,  
and of the Japanese later,  
the form of the letters gave rise to  
a special branch of calligraphy,  
that was spiritual at the same time.



## *Mantras and Bijaksharas*

The Indian Buddhist monk,  
*Vajra-bodhi* and his disciple *Amogha-vajra*  
came to China in 720 AD and  
advocated the esoteric use of Siddham mantras  
and seed syllables (*Bijaksharas*).



## *Mantras and Bijaksharas*

By a Chinese imperial decree all monks were required to recite a popular Buddhist text, *Ushnisha-vijaya-dhaarini*, twenty-one times a day.

It was printed on prayer sheets and engraved on pillars in the Siddham script throughout the empire.



## *Contribution of Sanskrit*

Sanskrit, through this interaction, contributed to the Chinese language also, by addition of thirty phonetic radicals, division of sounds on the basis of origin of sound, as labials, linguals, gutturals, dentals etc and incorporation of seven thousand Sanskrit terms in the Chinese vocabulary.



## *Significance of letters*

The Hindu tantric practices were devoted to sound, symbol and worship.

The esoteric significance of the Sanskrit alphabet was incorporated into the tantric Buddhism, but with some changes.



## *Significance of letters*

One such is that  
the letter 'a' displaced 'OM'  
as the supreme seed syllable.



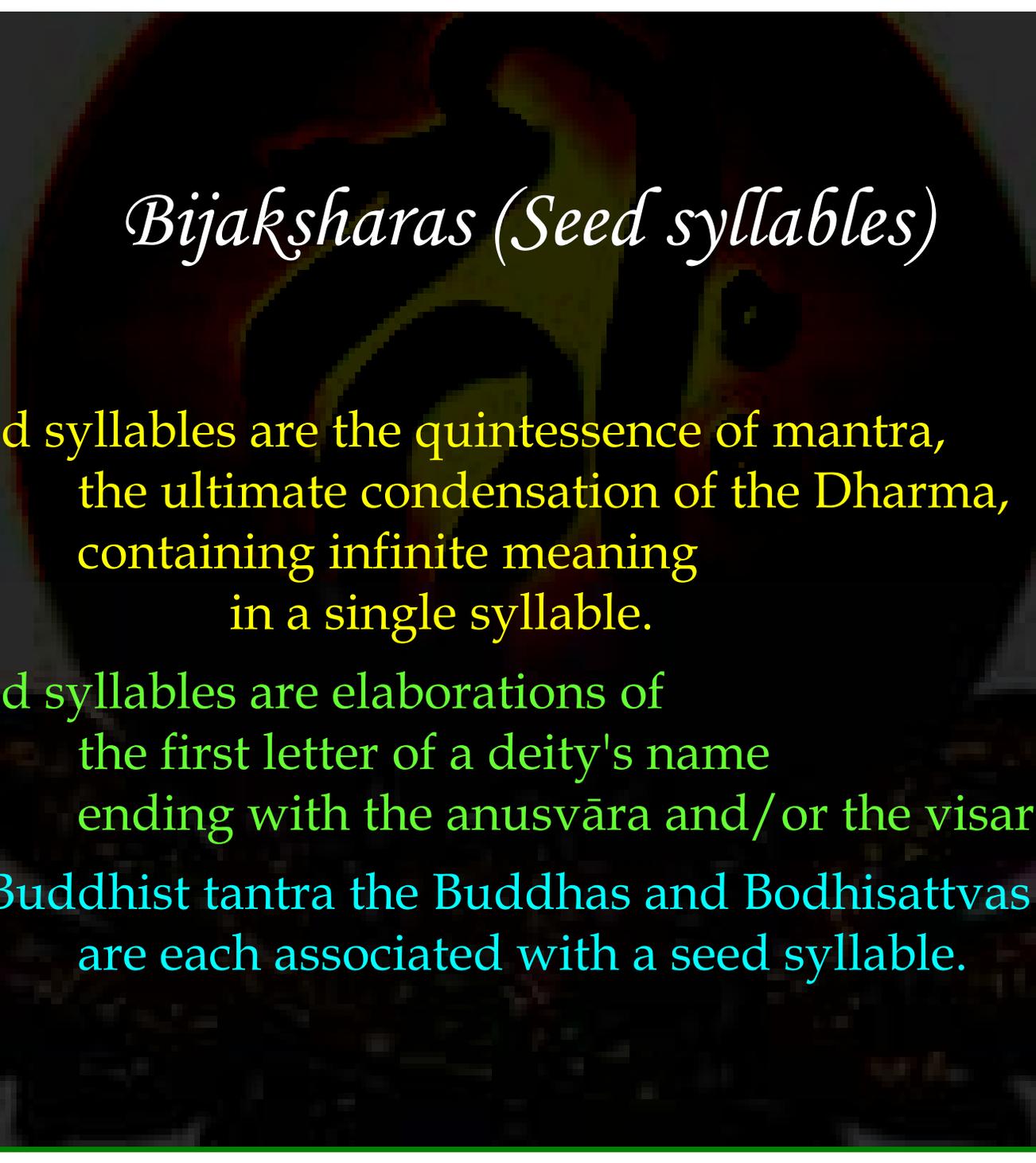
“What is the mantra dharma?  
It is the teaching of the letter A”  
– *Maha-vairochana-sutra*



## *Bijaksharas & Mandalas*

The incredibly complex Indian tantric traditions were simplified.

The emphasis was now on the seed syllables, especially on the conjunction of *mandala-s* (magic charts).



## *Bijaḥṣharas (Seed syllables)*

Seed syllables are the quintessence of mantra,  
the ultimate condensation of the Dharma,  
containing infinite meaning  
in a single syllable.

Seed syllables are elaborations of  
the first letter of a deity's name  
ending with the anusvāra and/or the visarga.

In Buddhist tantra the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas  
are each associated with a seed syllable.

## *Bijaḥṣharas (Seed syllables)*



āḥ

is the seed syllable of Amoghasiddhi.  
It is the combination om āḥ hūm

dhīḥ

is the seed syllable of perfect wisdom.  
It is associated with Mañjuḥṣa & Mañjuśrī  
and Prajñāpāramita.



## *Bijaṣharas (Seed syllables)*



hūṃ

is frequently the last syllable of a mantra.  
It is particularly associated with  
Akṣobhya, Vajrapāṇi, and with Vajrasattva.

Om̐

begins many mantras.



## *Seed Words*

These are words which do not quite fit the definition of being a seed syllable, but which function in more or less the same way.



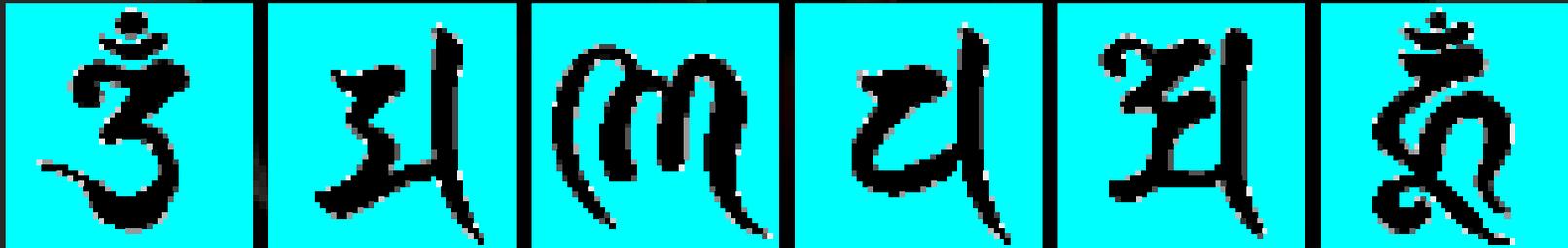
**Svāhā**

**comes from Vedic ritual and is used on the end of Buddhist mantras**

*Mani mantra*

**"om mani padme hum"**

The six-syllable mantra of the Great Bright Light



*Shittan (Siddham) form, as used in Japan*

*Heart sutra*  
*Prajñāpāramita Hridaya Sūtra*

हृदाया

hṛ da ya

Perhaps composed in China  
around the 7th century,  
it incorporates verses  
from the Chinese version of  
the Large Prajñāpāramita texts.

In Siddham

ग॒तं ग॒तं प॒रा ग॒तं प॒रा सं ग॒तं व॒ (ॐ ह्रूं ह्रूं) ॥

In Tibetan (Uchen)

ག་ཏེ་ག་ཏེ་ལྷུ་ར་ག་ཏེ་ལྷུ་ར་སྐྱོ་ག་ཏེ་བོ་ལྷོ་ལྷོ་ལྷོ།

*gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā*

"gone, gone, gone beyond, gone altogether beyond,  
oh what an awakening, All hail!"

# *Dainichi Nyorai (Garbha-dhaatu)*

In the tantric Buddhism of the East, thirteen Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are often grouped together, and are venerated on special days following a believer's death. Here is a symbolic representation.



# *Dainichi Nyorai (Garbha-dhaatu)*



*AMH*, is the seed syllable  
of Dainichi in the womb realm.

Here is the Dainichi mantra meaning  
*Om all Pervading One; Imperishable One*  
worshipped in the form of a stupa;  
It is read from the bottom

*Om a v ira ham kham (Sanskrit)*  
(ॐ अ वी र हं खं)

*Om a bi ra un ken (Japanese)*





*Buddhism quickly adapted itself  
to the cultures where it happened to spread,  
modifying its teaching  
to incorporate local customs,  
thus revitalizing old ways  
as it created new paths.*

*Buddhist religious calligraphy is  
a manifestation of this vitality.*