

# Kālacakra 'fire-arrow' versus 'three arrows'

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## Introduction

For many years in my practice I visualized myself as Kālacakra holding three arrows in my first red right hand. Several years ago I noticed that the word “fire” in “fire-arrow” is not the word-number for “three” in the original texts. I did not then wish to question the currently received tradition; so other than asking Alex Berzin if he knew where or when this interpretation arose, I kept this to myself. Now, Khentrul Rinpoche is spending a lot of money on a statue of Kālacakra that he wants to be completely accurate in every detail, and I fully agree with the importance of getting everything about Kālacakra right. So it is no longer appropriate for me to remain silent on this point. This is not a new discovery, but rather is how this was understood and taught by Kālacakra teachers down through the centuries until comparatively recently. Since the “three arrows” interpretation is what is taught at present by the highest teachers and what is seen in most current depictions of Kālacakra, it is necessary to examine the sources in some detail, which I do in the following. I am not in contact with the appropriate persons who are in a position to do something about this, but I hope that those of you who are will pass this on to them.

## A brief study

The *Kālacakra-tantra*, chapter 4, verse 13, says that Kālacakra holds in his first red right hand a fire-arrow, *vahni-bāṇaḥ* (*me yi mda'* in the Tibetan translation in the Kangyur). The *Vimalaprabhā* commentary glosses this with another word for fire-arrow, *agni-bāṇaḥ* (*me'i mda'* in the Tibetan translation in the Tengyur). If “fire” was intended here as the word-number “three,” the *Vimalaprabhā* would have glossed it with the number, as it does for all such word-numbers. For example, verse 19 has *vahni-vaktra-*, “fire face(s),” which is glossed as *tri-mukhāḥ*, “three faces.” The word “fire,” *vahni*, is glossed as “three,” *tri*. Here in verse 13, however, the word “fire,” *vahni*, in “fire-arrow” is not glossed by the number “three,” *tri*, but rather by another word for “fire,” *agni*. Therefore, a “fire-arrow” is what is intended, not “three arrows.”

The only reason that word-numbers are used in the first place is to fit the meter, where every syllable is regulated. This obviously applies only to works written in verse, while in prose there is no need to use them. Thus they are used in the *Kālacakra-tantra*, which is written in verse, but not in the *Vimalaprabhā* commentary, which is written in prose. Even in the verses of the *Kālacakra-tantra* standard numbers are used whenever possible. In the example from verse 19, the word-number “fire” in “fire mouth(s)” is immediately preceded by the standard number “nine” in “nine eyes,” *nava-nayanāḥ*. Verse 10 has *tri-gīvaṃ*, “three necks,” not “fire necks.” Verse 26 has *tri-netrāḥ*, “three eyes,” not “fire eyes.” The use of standard numbers is the norm in the *Kālacakra-tantra*. The use of word-numbers is the exception, for when standard numbers cannot be made to fit the meter. When word-numbers are used, they are glossed with standard numbers in the *Vimalaprabhā* commentary.

This was apparently well understood by the early Tibetan Kālacakra teachers. Thus, in the annotated editions of the Tibetan translation of the *Kālacakra-tantra*, there are no annotations on the word *me yi mda'*, “fire-arrow,” in this verse (4.13) by Bu ston (vol. 1, folio side 140, line 6) or by Jo nang Phyogs las nram rgyal (vol. 17, p. 111, line 22). Likewise, in the annotated editions of the Tibetan translation of the *Vimalaprabhā* commentary, there are no annotations on the word *me'i mda'*, “fire-arrow,” in this verse (4.13) by Bu ston (vol. 2, folio side 495, line 7) or by Jo nang Phyogs las nram rgyal (vol. 20, p. 21, lines 6-7). If “fire” stood for “three” here, they should have noted this. They did not.

Similarly, if “three arrows” rather than “fire-arrow” was meant, writers of Kālacakra sādhanas over the centuries should have given this. They did not. Bu ston gives *me'i mda'*, “fire arrow,” in both his full Kālacakra sādhana (vol. 5, folio side 134, line 3) and in his short Kālacakra sādhana (vol. 5, folio side 159, line 4). The Seventh Dalai Lama gives *me'i mda'*, “fire-arrow,” in his full Kālacakra sādhana (vol. 8, folio side 331, line 2). The Sixth Panchen Lama Palden Yeshe gives *me mda'*, “fire-arrow,” in his full Kālacakra sādhana (vol. 5, folio side 207, line 5). The Third Detsi Rinpoche gives *me mda'*, “fire-arrow,” in his Kālacakra mind maṇḍala sādhana (vol. 3, folio side 176, line 4). These Kālacakra teachers are in the Kālacakra lineage that now teaches “three arrows.”

The sādhanas of the Jo nang Kālacakra lineage give only *mda'*, “arrow.” This may be seen in Dol po pa's full Kālacakra sādhana (vol. 10, p. 32, line 8), in Phyogs las nram rgyal's full Kālacakra sādhana (vol. 23, p. 218, line 21), in Tāranātha's full Kālacakra sādhana (vol. 4, p. 45, line 3), and in his nine-deity Kālacakra sādhana (vol. 5, p. 7, line 10). The early full Kālacakra sādhana by the Indian Kālacakra teacher Sādhuputra also has only *bāṇa-*, “arrow” (p. 142 or p. 13, verse 6), since this portion of his sādhana is written in verse, while an annotation to one of the Sanskrit manuscripts has *agni-bāṇa*, “fire-arrow.” The recent full Kālacakra sādhana

by Mi pham, written in 1906-1907, gives *me'i mda'*, "fire-arrow" (vol. 1, folio side 44, line 4). No Kālacakra sādhana known to me gives "three arrows."

The "fire-arrow," *vahni-bāṇa*, *me mda'*, is spoken of in the *Kālacakra-tantra*, chapter 1, verse 128, in the section on war machines. Rocks and fire-arrows are thrown into enemy forts by such machines. This is a weapon held not only by Kālacakra, in his first red right hand, but also in the first right hand of the red deities Ratnasambhava, Pāṇḍarā, Jambhaka, Kṣitigarbha, and Rasavajrā, as the *Kālacakra-tantra* and *Vimalaprabhā* commentary thereon tell us (chapter 4, verse 22). There, the verse says only *bāṇaḥ*, "arrow," to fit the meter, while the commentary says *agni-bāṇaḥ*, "fire-arrow." Then in the body maṇḍala, more deities hold a fire-arrow, as the *Kālacakra-tantra* and *Vimalaprabhā* commentary thereon tell us (chapter 4, verse 34). There, the verse has both *agni-bāṇaḥ*, "fire-arrow," and then just *-bāṇa*, "arrow." The commentary specifies that Indra holds an *agni-bāṇaḥ*, "fire-arrow," and Rudra holds a *baṇaḥ*, "arrow." In no case does the *Kālacakra-tantra* or *Vimalaprabhā* commentary ever say "three arrows."

The Kālacakra primary source texts, especially verse 4.13 and its commentary, show that "fire-arrow" is what was intended, not "three arrows." The Kālacakra teachers from then until comparatively recently apparently knew this, as shown by their annotated editions of the Tibetan translations of the *Kālacakra-tantra* and *Vimalaprabhā* commentary, and by their Kālacakra sādhanas. We can see how the error of "three arrows" arose. The word "fire" in "fire-arrow" was taken as the word-number "three," as it can be in verses when the normal word for "three" will not fit the meter. Then it was applied even when "fire-arrow" occurred in prose passages, where it is not the word-number "three." I have not yet been able to determine when "fire-arrow" came to be taken as "three arrows," but it must have been a relatively recent error. I do not think that anything about Kālacakra is insignificant, and I would be happy to see this error rectified.

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Further on word-numbers, a well-known example of their usage in the Kālacakra texts is the following: The word-number 403 occurs in *Kālacakra-tantra*, chapter 1, verse 27, where it must fit the meter, as *vahnau khe 'bdhau* (Tibetan *me mkha' rgya mtsho*), "fire [3] space [0] ocean [4]." It is glossed there in the *Vimalaprabhā* as *try-adhika-catuhṣata*, "four hundred and three." The number is given straightforwardly and unambiguously.