Kālacakra ‘fire-arrow’ versus ‘three arrows’

By David Reigle

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-bāṇāḥ (me yi mda’ in the Tibetan translation in the Kangyur). The Vimalaprabhā commentary glosses this with another word for fire-arrow, agni-bāṇāḥ (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-grīvam, “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 rnam 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 rnam 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 Detri 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 rnam 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-bāna, me'i 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, Ksitigarbha, 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 mandala, 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 -bāṇaḥ, “arrow.” The commentary specifies that Indra holds an agni-bāṇaḥ, “fire-arrow,” and Rudra holds a bāṇaḥ, “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.

References:


Detri Rinpoche, Third (1779-1862). sDe khri 'jam dbyangs thub bstan nyi ma'i gsung 'bum, 6 volumes. TBRC W22204.


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 vahnu 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.