

Dharmadūta

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Bhikkhu Tampalawela Dhammaratana
Bhikkhu Pāsādika

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Studies on the Gilgit Texts: The *Sarvadharmagunavyūharājasūtra*

JENS-UWE HARTMANN, Berlin

Among the numerous Buddhist Sanskrit manuscripts found in Gilgit in 1931 and 1938 there is one which stands out with regard to the material the text is written on. While all the other manuscripts are written on birch bark, the material generally preferred in the northwest of the area where Sanskrit Buddhist texts are found, this is the only one written on palm leaf, the material used in India proper and in Nepal. Its script corresponds closely to the one styled Gilgit/Bamiyan Type I by Lore SANDER,¹ and so it appears that the material was first imported and then the text was written somewhere in the northwest. There are no traces of the manuscript being a palimpsest, at least as far as can be told from the photographs.

It belongs to the texts found during the excavation carried out by Madhu Sudan KAUL SHASTRI in August 1938, and it is first mentioned in his report as no. 4 in the description of manuscripts:²

“This is the Manuscript of a work called *Āryadharmā* which emphasizes the duty of worshipping the Buddhist congregation, *stupas*, scriptures and the merits accruing therefrom. It has no beginning or end and the top of each leaf is torn. Contains about 30 leaves of 5 lines with 20 letters per line. On the inside of the covers is painted the image of some Buddhist saint.”

A photograph (no. 1438) accompanied the publication, showing the wooden covers, three leaves and the rest of the bundle in side-view.

For three decades, only the covers received any attention. Together with a second pair of covers from the same find they were discussed by P. BANERJEE.³ Forty years after the find, in 1979, when Oskar VON HINÜBER pub-

¹ *Paläographisches zu den Sanskrithandschriften der Berliner Turfansammlung*, Wiesbaden, 1968 (Verzeichnis der Orientalischen Handschriften in Deutschland, Supplement 8), pp. 123 f.; for other terms referring to the same script see L. SANDER, “Einige neue Aspekte zur Entwicklung der Brāhmī in Gilgit und Bamiyan (ca. 2.-7. Jh. n. Chr.)”, *Sprachen des Buddhismus in Zentralasien*, ed. Klaus RÖHRBORN and Wolfgang VEENKER, Wiesbaden, 1983, p. 115, note 16; see also *idem*, “Remarks on the Formal Brāhmī of Gilgit, Bāmiyān, and Khotan”, *Antiquities of Northern Pakistan, Reports and Studies*, vol. 1, Mainz, 1989, pp. 107 ff.

² “Report on the Gilgit Excavation in 1938”, *The Quarterly of the Mythical Society* 30 (1939), p. 7.

³ “Painted Wooden Covers of Two Gilgit Manuscripts in the Sri Pratap Singh Museum, Srinagar (Jammu and Kashmir)”, *Oriental Art* 14 (1968), pp. 114-118, cf. Oskar VON HINÜBER, “Die Bedeutung des Handschriftenfundes bei Gilgit”, *XXI. Deutscher Orientalistentag*, ed. Fritz

lished his excellent survey of the Gilgit manuscripts,⁴ the text still went under the mysterious name of *Āryadharmā*. However, VON HINÜBER had seen the manuscript in the Sri Pratap Singh Museum in Srinagar and drew attention to the fact that it contained frequent mention of the Bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi and that four means of finding a spiritual friend (*kalyāṇamitra*) were also listed in it, and he presented the following description:⁵

“55 Bl., erh. Bl. No. 4, 5, 8, (9), (10), 11, 12, 14, 22, .4, 35, 38. Blattgröße: 20 cm zu 4,5 cm; 48 Bll. mit Schnürloch 7 cm vom linken Rand und 7 Bll. mit zweitem Schnürloch 15,5, cm vom linken Rand. 5 Zeilen pro Seite. Abbildung: No. 1438 im Grabungsbericht von Kaul Shastri. Material: Palmblatt.”

Only three years later, during a visit to the Sri Pratap Singh Museum and the Central Asian Museum in Srinagar in 1982, Chandrabhal TRIPATHI (or, Chandrabhāl TRIPĀTHĪ, as he sometimes preferred to write his name), a well-known Indologist from Berlin with a long-standing interest in the Gilgit manuscripts, finally succeeded in identifying the text. A careful examination of the manuscript revealed that the text was not as incomplete as KAUL SHASTRI's report had suggested; on the last page it preserved traces of a colophon which TRIPATHI could restore to *sarvadharmaguṇavyūharāja-nāma-mahāyānasūtram sa[m](āptam)*. In an unpublished report on his visit to Srinagar he writes:⁶

“Zwei Sanghātasūtra-Handschriften und die Palmblatthandschrift sind nunmehr im Central Asian Museum, University of Kashmir. Die Palmblatthandschrift enthält einen neuen Text: sarva-dharma-guṇa-vyūha-rāja-sūtra; vorhanden sind die Foll. *2, *3, 4, 5, [6], *7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, [16], 1[7], *18, [19], *20, *21, 22, 2[3], *24, 25, *26, *27, [28], 2[9], 30, *31, 32, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, [40], [4]1, [43], (4)[4], [45], *46, (4)[7], [48], 49; und ein Endblatt. Weitere vier Blätter waren bisher nicht einzuordnen, bei einer Textbearbeitung wäre ihre Einordnung wohl möglich.”⁷

However, his untimely death on March 4, 1996, not so long after his retirement in 1989, prevented him from publishing this important discovery.⁸

STEPPAT, Wiesbaden, 1983 (*Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, Supplement, 5), p. 49.

⁴ “Die Erforschung der Gilgit-Handschriften (Funde buddhistischer Sanskrit-Handschriften, I)”, *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen* 1979, No. 12, pp. 327–360, with addenda in the *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 130 (1980), pp. *25* f., and 131 (1981), pp. *9*–*11*.

⁵ Pp. 330 and 351.

⁶ There exist two such unpublished reports to the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Council), which supported his research in Srinagar in 1982 and 1987. In the second report on his next visit to the Central Asian Museum and the Sri Pratap Singh Museum in 1987, the palm leaf manuscript is not mentioned again.

⁷ According to this list, altogether 50 leaves appear to be preserved; KAUL SHASTRI speaks of “about 30”, BANERJEE of 54, and VON HINÜBER of 55 folios.

⁸ An obituary by Klaus BRUHN will appear in the *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 147.1, and a bibliography in the next issue of the *Berliner Indologische Studien* (1997).

In autumn 1996, TRIPATHI's unpublished work on the text came into my hands through the good offices of Dr. Reinhold GRÜNENDAHL and Dr. Klaus WILLE in Göttingen. It consisted of various sets of photographs and photocopies of the manuscript and of transliterations of a number of folios, mostly handwritten, but some of them typed. Only then did I become aware of the fact that TRIPATHI had already identified the text. TRIPATHI's discovery immediately led to the realization that both a Chinese and a Tibetan translation of the text are available. Among his materials there is no indication whatsoever that TRIPATHI himself knew of the existence of these translations, but at present it is difficult to see how he could have correctly restored the Sanskrit title without drawing on one or the other of them, especially since the first two words, *sarvadharmā*, are so faint on the photograph as to be practically illegible, and the same holds true for the other occurrences of the title on folios 8r5 and 10v5-11r1, also noticed by TRIPATHI. On the other hand, it is quite likely that these faint akṣaras are much more legible on the originals that TRIPATHI studied during his visit to the Central Asian Museum than on the available photographs.

Although each of the available folios is preserved in one piece, none of them is fully readable. The top and bottom lines have often been at least partly rubbed off, and so have the akṣaras at the left and right edges, the left edge generally being in worse condition. In many cases parts of the top and bottom lines have broken off. For a full understanding and restoration of the Sanskrit text the translations, especially the Tibetan one, are therefore indispensable.

The Chinese translation, Taishō no. 1374, was made by the famous Yijing at the beginning of the eighth century.⁹ Approximately one hundred years later, around the beginning of the ninth century, the text was translated into Tibetan by Prajñāvarman, Surendrabodhi, Ye śes sde and others.¹⁰ So far, no translations in other languages or further Sanskrit manuscripts have come to light. Despite its temporary circulation documented by the Gilgit manuscript and the Chinese and Tibetan versions, the text appears never to have belong-

⁹ The translation work was finished on August 8 in the year 705, according to Taishō 2154, vol. 55, p. 567b 18-19 (I owe this reference to my friend Friedrich GROHMANN in Taipei).

¹⁰ Peking Tripiṭaka, Otani Reprint, no. 782, vol. 30, pp. 84-90 = *mdo chu*, 205 a5-219 b8; Derge Tripiṭaka, Taipei Edition, no. 114, vol. 11, pp. 137-141 = *mdo sde ja*, 181 a1-195 b4, and no. 524 (527), vol. 18, pp. 16-20 = *rgyud 'bum na*, 54b4-68 a7; Phug brag Kanjur no. 268, *mdo sde sa*, 325 b5-350 a6; sTog Palace Kanjur no. 486, *rgyud tha*, 61 a6-81 a1. The translation is listed in the Lhankarma catalogue among the Mahāyānasūtras with less than 10 *bam po*, cf. Marcelle LALOU, "Les textes bouddhiques au temps du Roi Khri-sroṅ-lde-bcan", *Journal Asiatique* 241 (1953), pp. 313-353, no. 102. For the inclusion in the Tantra section as a *dhāranī* (*gzunś*) by Bu ston cf. Helmut EIMER, *Der Tantra-Katalog des Bu ston im Vergleich mit der Abteilung Tantra des tibetischen Kanjur*, Bonn, 1990 (Indica et Tibetica, 17), p. 89. — So far, no fragments of the text have been identified among the Tibetan Dunhuang manuscripts in the various collections.

ed to the store of mahāyānasūtras utilized for quoting purposes in the exegetical literature; at least, no citations have yet become known.

This is perhaps no great surprise, since the text is of a very composite nature. In fact, it would be difficult to state its doctrinal position clearly, to trace a definite line of argumentation or to reduce it to a core of coherent propositions. On the contrary it is exactly inclusiveness and diversity which appear to be characteristic of this text. It contains *dhāraṇīs* and the description of a ritual; it lists a few terminological groups such as various sets of four *māra-karma* or the four dharmas with which a bodhisattva should be endowed on his search for a spiritual guide (*kalyāṇamitra*), already referred to by Oskar VON HINÜBER. The bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara and Vajrapāṇi play a dominant part as the interlocutors of the Buddha, while a bodhisattva Vyūharāja, somehow — but by no means clearly discernibly — connected with the title of the text, appears just once in a short passage. First and foremost, however, the text is concerned with its own preservation in times of decline, with the worldly, or kammatic, and spiritual, or nibbanic, benefits to be derived from its propagation, and with the merits to be gained from worshipping the text and its preachers (*dharmabhāṇaka*). A short description of its contents may serve to illustrate these points.¹¹

The Buddha stays at the Veṇuvana in Rājagrha together with five hundred monks and 1200 bodhisattvas beginning with Maitreya. Humans and non-humans alike honour the Buddha. He enters a certain meditation, and the earth shakes, accompanied by various supernatural signs. The four great kings, the bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi with a large retinue and the bodhisattva Vyūharāja arrive and worship the Buddha. Vajrapāṇi requests a teaching of the *Sarvadharmaguṇavyūharājasūtra*. Avalokiteśvara declares that those who hear this *dharmaparyāya* will not descend into hell, but eventually reach Sukhāvatī, and whoever preaches it will equal the tathāgata. Rather abruptly, Vajrapāṇi inquires about the meaning of the name Avalokiteśvara. After explaining it, the Buddha teaches a *dhāraṇī* called Jayamatī, and Vajrapāṇi promises to protect all those who worship and propagate this *dharmaparyāya*. For the sake of those who hear it, Vajrapāṇi proclaims another *dhāraṇī* and teaches a ritual centering on statues of Śākyamuni (in the middle), the four-armed Avalokiteśvara (on the right) and Vajradhara (on the left).

Avalokiteśvara declares that this *dharmaparyāya* is not for beings with little merit and lists various groups of hindrances (*māra-karma*). The Buddha speaks about the profits and the merits to be gained from this sūtra; all the earlier merit of a person does not amount to a hundred-thousandth of writing only one letter of it. Again Avalokiteśvara lists its advantages, among others: agreeable atmosphere in the family, victory in every fight, but also Akṣo-

¹¹ It is based exclusively on the Tibetan translation. A study of the Sanskrit text will have to wait until the manuscript is edited.

bhya (!) appearing at the hour of death and calling the person to Sukhāvātī. Questioned by Vajrapāṇi, the Buddha foretells that the *dharmaparyāya* will remain intact in the realm of the nāgas and in the Trayastrimśa heaven, but not in Jambudvīpa, and he entrusts it to Vajrapāṇi, who promises to protect those honouring text and preacher.

Again the merit derived from honouring the text is described, this time by the Buddha. All the listening bodhisattvas, indras etc. promise henceforth to honour text and preacher. Then Avalokiteśvara asks the Buddha about the merit and the rebirth of those writing the text or causing others to write it etc. The Buddha answers that they will be reborn in Sukhāvātī, and then both the Buddha and Avalokiteśvara describe the amount of merit. In a short story about an earlier rebirth, the Buddha provides an additional authentication of the text by explaining how he himself obtained the *dharmaparyāya* from a previous tathāgata.

Finally, both Avalokiteśvara and the Buddha confirm the rareness of beings with constant trust in the *dharmaparyāya*, and the Buddha illustrates the case of those who at first are moved but afterwards lose their trust with three interesting examples. In the first, a pregnant woman experiences hellish pains during her delivery and decides henceforth to practice *brahmacarya*, but afterwards forgets about it. In the second, the behaviour of a drunken man is described, for instance his fearless and provoking visit to a cemetery thinking that neither god nor demon will be able to harm him; upon becoming sober again, he is remorseful and determines to give up alcohol, but then fails to do so. In the third, beings are reborn in the human realm after a long time in hell. Tortured in the womb, they realize their suffering in the *samsāra* and decide to follow the Buddha when they have emerged from the womb. Once they are born, however, they again become heedless and will be subject to the sufferings of hell. At the end of the text, Ānanda asks about its name, and the Buddha lists five different titles.¹² The usual concluding sentence follows: the Bodhisattvas, Mahāśrāvakas and all the other listeners rejoice in the words of the Buddha.

It is evident from this summary that the importance of the text does not derive from hitherto unknown ideas or concepts expressed in it or from a novel presentation of Buddhist doctrine. Rather, it is based on the text's considerable contribution to the phenomenon termed by Gregory SCHOPEN in his regrettably still unpublished dissertation as "the Buddhism of Gilgit". In this sense, however, the text has much to offer as a piece of evidence in its

¹² Sems can thams cad kyi skyabs byed pa (= Satvatrāṇakarīn), Byaṅ chub sems dpas źus pa (= Bodhisatvapariṣcchā), bKod pa'i rgyal po'i mam par 'phrul ba'i rgyal po (= *Vyūharājavikurvaṇarāja), De b'zin gsegs pa mñon par rdzogs par byaṅ chub (= Tathāgatābhisambodhi), and Chos thams cad kyi yon tan bkod pa'i rgyal po (= Sarvadharmaguṇavyūharāja); these titles are partly preserved in the Sanskrit manuscript, and TRIPATHI tried to restore them, but definitely without falling back on the Tibetan translation.

combination of various religious concepts flourishing in Gilgit, in its combination of sūtra and 'tantra' elements which led to its inclusion in both sections of at least one edition of the Tibetan Kanjur, and, above all, in its contribution to the "cult of the book".¹³ The concept of the (or a) *dharmaparyāya* used here is probably one of the most intriguing questions posed by the text. Obviously, an edition of the Sanskrit manuscript will be the primary task in preparing the way for a serious study of the sūtra which aims, first, at establishing its relationship with similar literature from Gilgit¹⁴, and then at placing it in the wider context of "the Buddhism of Gilgit". It is to be hoped that work on such an edition will start in the near future.

¹³ For this cult of the book in Mahāyāna texts cf. Gregory SCHOPEN, "The Phrase 'sa prthivīpradeśaś caityabhūto bhavet' in the Vajracchedikā: Notes on the Cult of the Book in Mahāyāna", *Indo-Iranian Journal* 17 (1975), pp. 147-181, and, especially for Gilgit, Oskar VON HINÜBER, "Die Bedeutung des Handschriftenfundes bei Gilgit" (as note 2 above), pp. 54f.

¹⁴ There are other texts containing a ritual prescription, as, e. g., the *Hayagrīvavidyā* with Lokeśvara (= the Buddha) in the middle, Avalokiteśvara on the left, Vajradhara on the right, and above Hayagrīva, and quite a few sūtras comprise one or more dhāraṇīs — evidently a very important element of Buddhism in Gilgit —, e. g., the *Kārandavyūha*, the *Ratnaketuparivarta*, the *Sarvatathāgatādhiṣṭhānasattvāvalokanabuddhakṣetrasandarśanavyūha*, etc.; for the cult of the book especially the *Samghātasūtra* is to be compared.