

Buddhist Manuscript Cultures

Knowledge, ritual, and art

Edited by

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and Claudia Brown**

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6 From words to books

Indian Buddhist manuscripts in the first millennium CE

Jens-Uwe Hartmann

The earliest transmission

Dating and establishing chronologies for Buddhist manuscripts from ancient India pose problems in ways that differ from those associated with the ancient civilizations of the Mediterranean and the Near East. Two chronologies exist for the Buddha, one assigning his death to the first quarter of the fifth century BCE, the other about a hundred years later to the fourth (cf. Bechert 1991–97); more precise dates are not available. Except for the still undeciphered Indus Valley Script of the third and second millennia BCE, there is no evidence of writing in India prior to the third century BCE, and the oldest presently known manuscripts date from the first century CE, as we will see in the following section. This indicates an oral transmission of the Buddha's teachings for at least a hundred years and probably for a much longer period. The initial orality is also reflected in the semihistorical reports preserved in the various Buddhist traditions. In the Theravāda, the Buddhism of Sri Lanka and South East Asia, this development is described as collecting and structuring orally transmitted pieces: a few months after the death of the Buddha, his words, hitherto preserved in individual discourses, were recited by eminent monks and then collected in order to establish and confirm them as the “authentic” message of the Buddha (*buddhavacana*). They were arranged according to a structured scheme of classification, which was the system of the Tripiṭaka—the “Three Baskets,” and from then on faithfully transmitted within groups or schools of reciters. For several centuries, the transmission remained oral, until it was decided to adopt the medium of writing and to preserve and transmit the Tripiṭaka not only through learning it by heart, but also through writing it down. This is how the Theravāda presents the transmission of the word of the Buddha, and the reports of other Buddhist schools, although differing in many points, agree at least with regard to the structured collection of oral discourses.¹ For all we know, this picture is, at least in part, not likely to be true.

First of all, the diversity of the surviving versions of the scriptures does not support the idea of an early redaction of something like a canon, be it in the form of a Tripiṭaka or in some other arrangement. In fact, there are traces of at

least one different and probably older arrangement of texts preserved in the scriptures themselves. This arrangement knows of nine or twelve genres that are differentiated by formal criteria as, e.g., verse and prose, and by contents (Hinüber 1994). It rules out the idea of the Tripiṭaka as the first and only device for collecting single texts into a structured whole. Contrary to the oral transmission of the Vedic texts, which aimed at faithful preservation of the exact wording and for this purpose needed very precise structures, the Buddhists took considerably less interest in the wording and rather tried to preserve ideas and contents, admitting all sorts of redactional changes and developments both on the verbal and on the dogmatic level.

The adoption of writing

We do not really know when and why the Buddhists started to write down their sacred texts, or at least we do not know when and why they did it in India. We do, however, have a very interesting, although very brief, account of the date of and the reason for the beginning of writing among the Buddhists in Sri Lanka. As mentioned in the beginning, India appears to have been one of the last civilizations in the world to adopt the art of writing. The oldest documents are stone inscriptions from the third century BCE, and there is no evidence of an earlier use of writing.² This seems inconceivable in view of the huge amount of literature that was produced in India before that date, all the more so as part of this literature—for instance, the works on grammar—is already extremely sophisticated. It is exactly the sophisticated nature of some of this literature that is often used as a counterargument against the hypothesis of such a late invention of writing (cf. Falk 1993: 266f. and Salomon 1998a: 13). Be that as it may, even after its introduction, writing does not seem to have played a major role in cultural developments, and the Buddhists may have been counted among the first to write books and thereby put writing to use for purposes other than administration, imperial concerns, or inscriptions. The oldest Indian manuscripts are Buddhist, and the earliest among them date from the first or second centuries CE (cf. Allon et al. 2006).

Sri Lanka has been mentioned as the only source of any information on the beginning of writing among the followers of the Buddha. Sinhala Buddhists started at an early date to record historical and semihistorical information in so-called chronicles, the oldest of which—the *Dīpavamsa*—was composed not long after 350 CE.³ These chronicles mention that the monks (*bhikkhus*) wrote down the Tripiṭaka in Sri Lanka for the first time in the first century BCE, but the very short passage, consisting of only two verses, does not provide details of that Tripiṭaka or of the commentary (*aṭṭhakathā*). This famous and oft-quoted passage reads:

Before this time, wise bhikkhus had orally handed down the text of the three Piṭakas and also the Aṭṭhakathā. At this time, the bhikkhus who perceived the decay of created beings assembled and in order that the Religion

might endure for a long time, they recorded (the above-mentioned texts) in written books.

(Bechert 1992: 45)

This is said to have occurred during the reign of King Vattagāmaṇi Abhaya who ruled in the first century BCE. Various political and natural disasters occurred during his reign: a rebellion, a great famine, the second Tamil invasion of Sri Lanka and conflicts in the Sangha, the order of the Buddhist monks. According to the commentaries on the passage quoted above, there was a risk that parts of the scriptures were lost due to the death of the monks who had memorized them (cf. Hinüber 1990: 63f.). This is a very important point. Buddhism developed a wide range of ideas about its own irreversible decline and final disappearance, and one indication for this process of decline is the gradual loss of the scriptures (cf. Nattier 1992). As long as the scriptures are preserved, the inevitable decline is at least postponed. This appears to have been an important reason for writing down the texts, a reason also indicated by the specific wording of the passage (*ciraṭṭhiṭṭhaṃ dhammassa*), which is often employed in connection with concepts of decline. The wording of the passage appears to presuppose an already well-structured canon with commentary; although the actual canon is impossible to reconstruct, the writing down of the scriptures, such as during the reign of Vattagāmaṇi Abhaya, is generally taken as a historical fact (Bechert 1992: 52).

As mentioned before, this is the only information on a date of and a reason for writing down the sacred texts. More reasons are easily conceivable, but the Buddhists did not record them, or such records, if they ever existed, are not preserved.

The art of writing

During the first century CE, Buddhist books were written in two completely different scripts, Brāhmī and Kharoṣṭhī.⁴ The first one, Brāhmī, and specifically the Kuṣāṇa-Brāhmī named after the empire in which it was used, is the script from which subsequent indigenous Indian scripts developed. Along with Hinduism and Buddhism, writing was a major cultural invention exported from India to Central and Southeast Asia. Thus, the scripts used in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia were derived from South Indian alphabets. In Tibet, the script was modeled after a North Indian alphabet. Even in Central Asia, along the Silk Road, several ethnic groups, among them the Tocharians, the Khotanese, and to a certain extent even the Uighurs, also used a northern form of Brāhmī for writing their languages. Brāhmī is written, like Latin, from left to right. The other script is the so-called Kharoṣṭhī, written from right to left, used only in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent and in Central Asia, and only up to the fourth or fifth century, when it fell out of use and into oblivion.

As material for books, palm leaf was used from the very beginning in India and birch bark in the northwest of the subcontinent. Palm leaves necessitated

a certain format: the resulting pages were long and narrow and varied in length, but not in width. In contrast, birch bark allowed for various formats, because its width was not as limited as that of palm leaves, and several pieces could be pasted or stitched together. The scroll, which could reach several meters in length, was a format Buddhists in the northwest characteristically used during the first centuries CE. However, the preference for the scroll seemed to be linked to a particular language, namely Gāndhārī, and to a specific script, namely Kharoṣṭhī, both of which had been used for some time by the school of the Dharmaguptakas. Only a few examples of scrolls survived that were written exclusively in Brāhmī script for what were most likely ritual purposes. When Kharoṣṭhī fell out of use, the format of the scroll also disappeared from the record. For several centuries, the format prefigured by the palm leaf became the only model for a book, regardless of the material used for its production, such as palm leaf, birch bark, paper—as in Central Asia under Chinese influence—or even precious metal, such as gold. Such a book consisted of separate pages that were turned over on the upper edge in order to read the reverse side. A bundle of loose pages was usually held together by a string. For a long time, and in Sri Lanka up to the present, the pages had one or two string holes that allowed for tight fastening. In northwest India and Central Asia, the string hole was gradually reduced until it is only symbolically represented and eventually disappeared.

In the early centuries, Buddhist books were apparently not intended as art objects. There were no illustrations or illuminations, the ink was black, and there was no variation in color. No lines were drawn and there was no graphic delimitation of the space used for writing. Only one phenomenon had a certain function within the text and allowed for decorative variation: this was a circle that was also occasionally used to indicate the end of a text. Until the seventh century, this was the only means of decorating a manuscript, at least in northern India,⁵ as there were no surviving examples from the southern regions of the subcontinent. Prior to the seventh century, script was seemingly not employed for decorative purposes. From the first and second centuries until the seventh, early examples of book script developed rapidly, without, however, leading to a growing appreciation of calligraphy and the ornamental possibilities of writing. This seems to be confirmed by the relatively minor importance generally accorded to writing in Indian culture where the art of memorizing long texts and the admiration for the specialist who mastered such a feat existed alongside of the art of writing. Only in the seventh century CE, with the introduction of a script variously called Gilgit/Bamiyan type II or Proto-Śāradā, a sense for the aesthetic potential of script developed. This coincided with a change in the form of the pen and opened up new possibilities of differentiating between thick and thin strokes (cf. Sander 1968: 141ff. and plates 21–6).

After the turn of the millennium, this development culminated in the north with the emergence of scripts like the so-called Rañjana, which was so ornamental that it became rather difficult to read (cf. Sander 1968: plates 27–8). All of the observations apply only to the north of the subcontinent, where ink was used for writing. In the south, the script was not written with a pen, a feather or a brush,

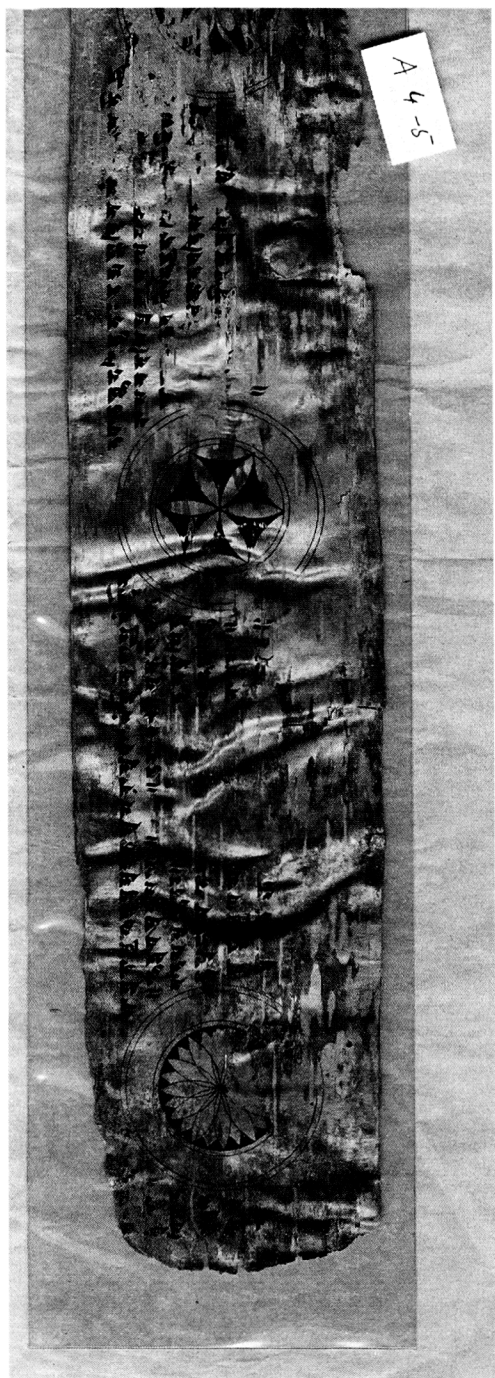


Figure 6.1 Left half of the final folio of the *Dīrghāgama* manuscript. (Photo courtesy of Jens-Uwe Hartmann.)

but engraved into a palm leaf with a metal stylus, leading to a rather different development that necessitated round shapes and did not differentiate between thin and thick strokes.

The art of book painting

Early manuscripts were not illuminated. This is perhaps surprising, since book painting was well known in the regions to the west of the Indian subcontinent. It has been pointed out that “[b]y the fourth century Christians in Asia Minor and Europe were illuminating their manuscripts, and by the sixth century Christians in Syria and Mesopotamia, as well as Iran, were supporting the many flourishing centers of illuminated book production. Further, Buddhists may have even earlier seen Greco-Roman illustrated books in Gandhāra and Bactria” (Pal et al. 1988: 11). In Gandhāra, a region in northern Pakistan, Buddhists drew extensively on Greco-Roman sculpture to create artistic expressions of their own gods, heroes, and saviors. If indeed they saw examples of illustrated books—and this is quite likely—they seemingly felt no need to imitate them. Manuscripts dating to the first centuries of CE do not readily strike us as beautiful. Beauty is, of course, nothing absolute, but a convention based at least in part on comparison. In that sense, a comparison of earlier manuscripts with later ones indicates that early producers spent less time thinking about the possibilities for decoration. The earliest examples of illuminated manuscripts in Indian scripts date to the end of the first millennium, and they do not come from India, but from Central Asia. The Petrovsky collection in St. Petersburg contains a paper leaf of a manuscript of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, the *Lotus Sūtra*, one of the most famous discourses of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and this folio bears a colored painting.⁶ The space for the illumination was left empty by the scribe, and the painting did not overlap with the writing. This suggests that the painting was contemporaneous with the script, and the script permits a dating. For paleographical reasons, Russian scholars tend to date the manuscript to the seventh century, but I question the likelihood of such an early date. While I am not a specialist of this variety of the Brāhmī script, which was developed in the southern part of Central Asia, in the region of Khotan, and we are still awaiting a paleographical handbook on this script, I am inclined to date this manuscript at least one or two centuries later.

Around the turn of the millennium, the first dated examples of book illuminations appeared in India. They were produced in the cultural sphere of the Pala-Sena dynasty (770–1205) that ruled mainly in Bihar and Bengal, and showed similar patterns of dividing a palm leaf into regular spaces. While the illustrations in the Central Asian manuscripts usually adopted the shape of a circle—probably based on the previously existing circle design—the Pala-Sena manuscripts preferred square illustrations. This format conveys a geometrical impression that is repeated in the rectangular letters of the script. Script and decoration together created a rather beautiful impression, and it is only then that Buddhist manuscripts became objects of aesthetic sentiment and art, so that the production of a masterpiece

required both a gifted scribe trained in calligraphy and a gifted painter (Pal et al. 1988: 79, 85).

Books as Ritual Objects

In March 2001, the Taliban decided to destroy the two gigantic Buddha statues carved into the rock of the Bamiyan valley in Afghanistan despite protests around the world and especially from Asian countries with large Buddhist populations. At present, UNESCO plans to rebuild them and a team of German specialists has begun the removal of the debris in order to identify larger pieces that may be used for the reconstruction of the two statues. Initial plans to employ heavy equipment like bulldozers were abandoned in order to select pieces from the debris by hand. In July 2006, the local workers found an unusual artifact in the niche of the smaller of the two Buddhas (Figure 6.2). The remains suggest that it may have been a simple kind of reliquary or a similar object, such as an amulet. Its original relation to the destroyed Buddha statue and its original storage location could not be reconstructed from the fragments of a small birch bark manuscript that had been wrapped in cloth and placed inside a cylindrical metal object.

The few fragments shown on the photograph offer a first hint at the text that the manuscript contains (Figure 6.3). The words *(ni)rodha* and *utpāda*, “destruction” and “origination” are visible and they are repeated in the other fragment next to it. These two words point to a well-known group of discourses by the Buddha, and a closer examination of some of the fragments confirms the identification. The main topic of these texts is *pratītyasamutpāda*, “dependent origination,” an explanation of how the human state of ignorance and suffering comes about and how one can transcend it.⁷ This explanation is given in a short and condensed formula that contains one of the most foundational teachings of the Buddha

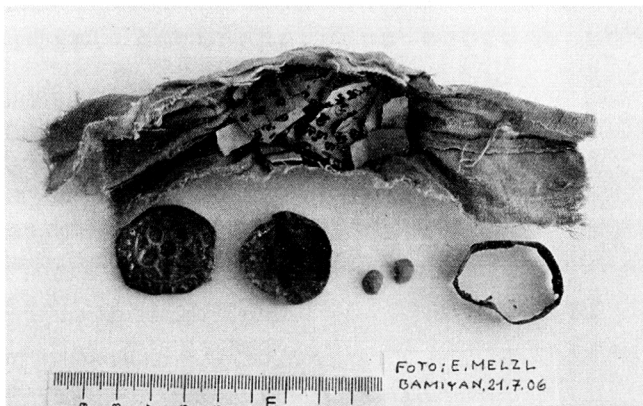


Figure 6.2 Remains of an amulet (?) from Bamiyan.

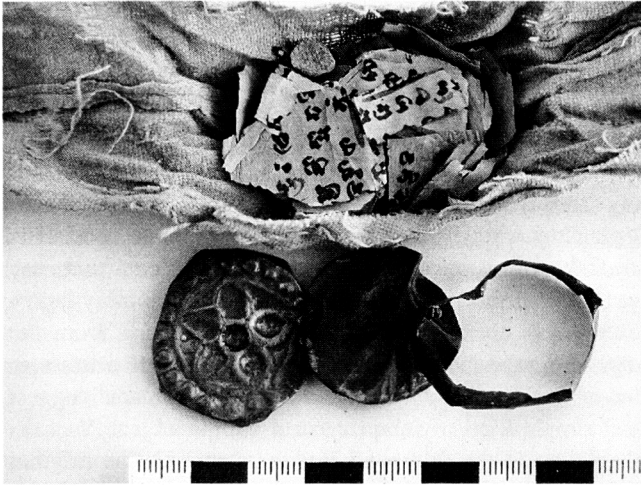


Figure 6.3 The text fragments.

that is also closely connected to his awakening experience (cf. Bongard-Levin et al. 1996: 34–6). The content of the passage made it a good choice for using the manuscript fragment in a context in which a book became a visible representation of the Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha, and even represented the Buddha himself.⁸ As such, the manuscript fragment symbolized meaning beyond its material form and, through its materiality, manifested a presence that was believed to be highly beneficial for the worshippers and extended its protection to the place that contained it.⁹

We do not know when written texts were first used in rituals, but it was an established practice by the middle of the first millennium. The best-known and most widespread example is probably the Tibetan formula, *ye dharmā*, which is also the shortest of its genre. This single stanza is linked closely to the other texts mentioned above; if the *sūtras* about the *pratītyasamutpāda* doctrine can be considered a condensed form of the Buddha's most profound teachings, then the *ye dharmā* formula can be understood to represent a condensed version of the *sūtras*.¹⁰

Books used for such ritual and cosmological purposes no longer function only as a means for communicating their verbal contents. The text they contain represents an ultimate presence of the Buddha and his supernatural powers. It is no longer read; on the contrary, it is hidden, placed within a container, such as an amulet, reliquary, *stūpa*, Buddha image, or perhaps an altar. Since it symbolizes another reality, even a fragment of it can represent this function; this is illustrated in the *Nagaropama-sūtra*, one of the texts on the *pratītyasamutpāda* formula, which stands for the whole of the Buddha's teachings, and by the *ye dharmā* verse, which again may represent the *Nagaropama-sūtra*.¹¹ In other words, it is not the quantity

and, more irritatingly for modern scholars, it is not the philological completeness of the text that brings about the desired effects of protection. Texts may be incomplete and still represent the whole of the Dharma.

An important ritual function of books that is separate from communicating the immediate content of a manuscript concerns the religious merit or *punya* generated by copying or reciting them. We do not know when and where this practice was first employed, but it is evident that only books that contain the word of the Buddha, or texts, which are generally subsumed under such categories as “canon,” were used in this manner. This ritual notion may be linked to ideas similar to those discussed above concerning the information on the earliest written form of the Tipiṭaka in Sri Lanka. Copying prevents loss; loss potentially means the decline of the *buddhadharma* and, consequently, the disappearance of the means for salvation. Therefore, copying is seen as beneficial, and combined with the idea that the written word of the Buddha may also represent his presence and his power, copying is a beneficial act of merit in itself. In East Asia, these ideas led to the development and application of printing within Buddhist circles. Among the oldest examples of printed texts were *dhāraṇīs*, protective spells, from Japan which date to about 770 CE and which had been printed already a million times by then (Grönbold 2005: 165–7). The oldest printed book in the world is a copy of the Chinese translation of the *Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, which dates to 868 CE and was found in Dunhuang.¹²

Copying the word of the Buddha brings merit to the scribe and to the donor who sponsors the act of copying, regardless of the philological quality of the product. One of the best preserved of the manuscripts found in Pakistan and Afghanistan within the last decade or so is a case in point. It contains the *Dīrghāgama* (Figure 6.1), the “Collection of the Long (Discourses of the Buddha),” one of the major sections of the canonical scriptures of the school of the (Mūla-) Sarvāstivādins (cf. Hartmann 2004). It is a rare find, since the text has not been preserved elsewhere, but it presents challenges for scholars working on its edition. Long *sūtras* that elsewhere comprise ten to twenty leaves are represented by two or three, leaves only; entire sections are misplaced or missing; and frequently, the wording is so corrupt as to be incomprehensible. The appearance of the manuscript, however, is quite beautiful; it is well written, by at least four scribes, as we now know,¹³ who shared the work on alternating pages, which may account for some of the lost text. The manuscript is also exceptional on account of its radiocarbon dating that dates it between 764 and 1000 CE, a date which agrees well with the paleographical analysis (cf. Allon et al. 2006: 279f.). At that time, the act of copying a manuscript had apparently become a meritorious deed in itself that was not necessarily motivated by the intention of preserving the word of the Buddha. Rather, the principal aim had been to duplicate a religious object for the purpose of making merit.

Concerning the notion of the book as a ritual object, I add some remarks on the “cult of the book” which has become increasingly important in discussions on the emergence of the Mahāyāna (Schopen 1975; Vetter 1994: 1266–72; Nattier 2003: 184–6: for a critique of Schopen’s ideas, see Drewes 2007).¹⁴

Mahāyāna *sūtras* frequently hold out the prospect of enormous merit (*puṇya*) to those who venerate, recite, expound, or read and copy them. They also declare the location of such acts or of the book itself to be eminently sacred, as if the Buddha himself was present. It is striking that these texts make mention only of themselves, as though no other texts existed that espoused similarly meritorious rewards. This communicative strategy makes use of the commonly accepted idea that texts offer protection and benefits, such as *puṇya*, to people and places. It also conveys the notion that certain texts are more apt to do so than others. What scholars often identify as a “cult” of the book may perhaps be equally well understood as a way of promoting a particular text in a highly competitive environment (cf. Harrison 2006: 148, n. 57). One is reminded here that Mahāyāna *sūtras* are normative texts that may or may not describe a reality. To assess this question, we require confirmation from other sources, which appears to be absent (cf. Schopen 1975: 171f.). This is frequently the case in ancient India, where usually very meager direct evidence on the life ways of people is outweighed by a gigantic amount of normative literature. For this reason, it may be difficult to demonstrate the existence of a Buddhist cult of the book in India during the first millennium, but the phenomenon is well documented in later periods¹⁵ and in other areas of the Buddhist world.

Notes

- 1 For the version of the school of the Mūlasarvāstivādins cf. Obermiller 1932: 73ff.
- 2 Cf. Falk 1993: 337 after most comprehensively presenting all the available evidence: “Es gibt keinerlei Hinweis auf die Existenz der beiden Schriften Brāhmī und Kharoṣṭhī vor Aśoka” (“There is not the slightest indication of the two scripts Brāhmī and Kharoṣṭhī existing before Aśoka”), but cf. Salomon 1998: 12 and 14 on the problem of inscribed potsherds from Sri Lanka “which are said to be securely assigned by radio-carbon dating to the pre-Mauryan period” (12).
- 3 Cf. Hinüber 1996: 89 for the date.
- 4 For an overview of these two scripts, see Salomon 1996.
- 5 For this and similar ornamental signs, cf. also Scherrer-Schaub et al. 2002: 191–194.
- 6 *Buddhistische Manuskripte der Großen Seidenstraße*. Das Lotossutra und seine Welt, Soka Gakkai Internationale Deutschland e.V. 2000, 9, no. SI P/5.
- 7 The fragments were identified by Kazunobu Matsuda, Kyoto, as belonging to the *Pratītyasamutpāda-ādi-vibhaṅga-nirdeśa-sūtra* corresponding to *Nidāna-samyukta* no. 16, cf. Tripāthī 1962: 157–164. For a closely related text, the *Nagaropamasūtra*, cf. Bongard-Levin et al. 1996.
- 8 For the possibility of substituting relics with specific written texts cf. Falk 1997: 92 and Strauch 2000: 217f.
- 9 For protective texts cf. Skilling 1992.
- 10 For this formula and its various versions cf. Boucher 1991, Huber 1992, Falk 1997, Skilling 1999, Strauch 2000 and Skilling 2002; presently Stefan Baums (Seattle) is working on a set of plaques from Merv; for the use of the *Nagaropamasūtra* and the *ye dharmā* formula in cultic inscriptions cf. also Salomon 1998: 122f.
- 11 Cf. the idea often expressed in *Mahāyānasūtras* that even one stanza recited, taught or otherwise transmitted will confer the same merit as the whole text, see Schopen 1975: 148 and *passim*.

- 12 Cf. <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/themes/landmarks/diamondsutra.html> (accessed 29 February 2008).
- 13 This is convincingly demonstrated by Gudrun Melzer in her doctoral dissertation on a part of the Śīlaskandha section of the *Dīrghāgama* manuscript, cf. Melzer 2006: 68–77.
- 14 In addition, for a critique of Schopen's ideas, see now Drewes 2007.
- 15 For an example from present-day Tantric Buddhism in Nepal, see Gellner (1996).