

Transmission of Mahāyāna Buddhism from Gandhāra and Bactria to China*

Seishi Karashima

Translated by Safarali Shomakhmadov

THE International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology (IRIAB) was founded at Soka University in 1997. I am the sole founder of the institute. Its main goal is to promote peace and prosperity on earth through a critical study of Buddhist texts and the Buddhist ‘history of ideas’ based on philological research methods that are informed with an understanding of Buddhism as a spiritual and cultural heritage of all humankind. The focus of the institute’s activities currently is developing a research library specializing in Buddhist studies and relevant disciplines of humanities as well as publishing monographs that present the latest research by IRIAB fellows and the world’s leading authorities in Buddhist studies.

The research series *Bibliotheca Philologica et Philosophica Buddhica* is commentary on important Buddhist texts. The *Annual Report of The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University* has already been published in 20 volumes since 1998. It presents research by specialists in Buddhist studies and most of the articles are in English, making the latest findings in the discipline available to a wide readership.

IRIAB fellows have preserved and popularized Buddhist manuscripts in collaboration with leading authorities in Buddhist studies, particularly Buddhist manuscriptology. As a result of their efforts, we have published rare manuscripts kept in the British Library (London), the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences (St Petersburg) and the National Archives of India (New Delhi).

The IRIAB also organizes public lectures by renowned scholars in Buddhist studies and promotes joint research projects with visiting overseas fellows. IRIAB fellows, in cooperation with overseas fellows of Buddhist studies, are currently striving to develop the institute as a research centre for studies on Buddhist philology.

The following is a list of IRIAB publications (as of November 2017),

most of which are available in PDF format and the large majority of which are in English.¹

- (1) *Annual Report of The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University* vols I–XX (1998–2017).
- (2) *Bibliotheca Philologica et Philosophica Buddhica* (BPPB) vols I–XIII (1998–2012).
- (3) *Buddhist Manuscripts from Central Asia: The British Library Sanskrit Fragments*, edited by Seishi Karashima, Klaus Wille, vol. I (2006), vol. II. 1, 2 (2009), vol. III. 1, 2 (2015, with Jundo Nagashima).
- (4) *Buddhist Manuscripts from Central Asia: The St. Petersburg Sanskrit Fragments*, edited by Seishi Karashima and Margarita I. Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya, vol. I (2015).
- (5) *Gilgit Manuscripts in the National Archives of India, Facsimile Edition*
 - I. Vinaya Texts, edited by Shayne Clarke (2014).
 - II. Mahāyāna Texts
 - II.1. *Prajñāpāramitā* Texts (1), edited by Seishi Karashima, Youngjin Lee, Jundo Nagashima, Fumio Shoji, Kenta Suzuki, Ye Shaoyong and Stefano Zacchetti (2016).
 - II.4. Further *Mahāyānasūtras*, edited by Adelheid Mette, Noriyuki Kudo, Ruriko Sakuma, Chanwit Tudkeao and Jiro Hirabayashi (2017).
 - III. *Avadānas* and Miscellaneous Texts, edited by Noriyuki Kudo (2017).
- (6) *Sanskrit, Gāndhārī and Bactrian Manuscripts in the Hirayama Collection*, edited by Tatsushi Tamai (2016).

Buddhism is [one of] the oldest world religions and became rooted in society more than 2000 years ago. That is why Buddhist studies is popular across a range of disciplines in humanities such as philology, philosophy, linguistics and history of arts and archaeology. Combining these cross-disciplinary perspectives helps us understand the nuances of Buddhism more accurately.

I once translated fragments of Chinese Buddhist precepts at the request of the late Dr Kyuzo Kato (1922–2016), renowned archaeologist and researcher of Buddhist artefacts from Bactria and Tokharistan in Uzbekistan. The precepts have instructions on where and how to build a Buddhist stupa as well as various religious buildings and houses inside

a Buddhist monastery, with facilities such as toilets to be used on a daily basis. It is a good example of how one discipline of Buddhist studies (study of canonical texts) contributed to the development of another, that is, Buddhist archaeology.

For facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration in Buddhist studies, in 2005 and 2007 we organized an international symposium entitled ‘The Encounter of Buddhist Art Historians and Archaeologists with Buddhist Philologists’. The late Dr Kato also took part in the symposium and spoke on the findings of his excavations in Old Termez. In addition, we invite three or four overseas experts in Buddhist studies every year. In total, 80 renowned Buddhist studies scholars have, to date, visited our institute and given lectures.

In the process of my own philological studies on Buddhist texts in Sanskrit, Pāli, Gāndhārī, Chinese and Tibetan languages, I always try to understand, study, use and collate findings from other disciplines studying Buddhism, in order to grasp all the nuances of the multifaceted teachings that Śākyamuni Buddha left to the world more than 2500 years ago.

My recent article discusses that members of the Mahāsāṃghikas composed new texts and called them *vedulla* / *vaitulya*, meaning that they were “irregular” as Buddhist scriptures but “incomparable, peerless” nevertheless.² Later, they came to have the more positive nomenclature of *vaipulya*, meaning “abundance, fullness”. Much later still, they came to be called *mahāyāna-sūtras* as well. Those who composed, recited, read, copied or proclaimed these “new scriptures”, did not call themselves “Mahāyāna Buddhists” to begin with, as they were, after all, members of the Mahāsāṃghikas. Thus, Mahāyāna Buddhism occurred / arose from the Mahāsāṃghikas, but on the other hand, the Sarvāstivādins did not initially accept Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Moreover, relying on my own and my colleagues’ recent research, I trace the “shift of languages” and the “way of transmission” of the so-called “Mahāyāna scriptures” as follows:

- (1) Oral transmission in Prakrit (i.e. colloquial languages, including Gāndhārī): first century BCE
- (2) Oral transmission in Prakrit / writing of Prakrit texts in Kharoṣṭhī: first to third centuries CE
- (3) Broken Sanskrit mixed with Prakrit: second to third centuries CE
- (4) (Buddhist) Sanskrit; writing in Brāhmī script: third / fourth century CE onwards

I also compared word for word texts of Gāndhārī *Prajñāpāramitā* manuscripts dating back to the first century CE that were recently discovered in Pakistan, with transliterated texts of the same found in the oldest Chinese translation made by Lokakṣema, who was born in Tocharistan, i.e. Bactria.³ This comparison clearly demonstrates that the original texts of Lokakṣema's Chinese translation of *Prajñāpāramitā* were compiled in the Gāndhārī language. For example, 怛薩阿竭 (EH. tat sat ʔa gjiat) = **tasa-agada* <BHS. *tathāgata*; 優婆塞 (EH. ʔju ba sək) = Gā. **uvasak(a)* <BHS. *upāsaka*; 優婆夷 (EH. ʔju ba ʒjiəi) = Gā. *uvasia* <BHS. *upāsikā*; 般若波羅蜜 (EH. pan nja: pa la mjīət) = Gā. *prañaparamida* <BHS. *prajñāpāramitā*; and 彌勒 (EH. mjiei[mjiei:] lək) = Bactrian *Metraga*; ≠ BHS. *Maitreya*, Pā. *Metteya*.

Furthermore, at the end of this *Prajñāpāramitā* scripture, we find the story of Sadāprarudita who journeyed eastwards to a very prosperous country called Gandhavaṭī and listened to the teaching on the *Prajñāpāramitā*. Gandhavaṭī seems to be the toponym of Gandhāra. This story also tells us that this scripture was written in Gandhāra.

Furthermore, based on philological research, I also compared the earliest Chinese translations with old Sanskrit fragments excavated in Central Asia and suggested that other early Mahāyāna scriptures such as *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* (Lotus Sutra) and *Amitābha-vyūha* (= *Sukhāvati-vyūha*) were also compiled in the Gandhāra region in the Gāndhārī language.⁴

As a lot of Gāndhārī inscriptions were found in Termez and most of them belong to the Mahāsāmghikas, it is apparent that the Mahāsāmghikas were in a majority in ancient times. Therefore, there is a high probability that Mahāyāna Buddhism flourished in Termez, too, and Bactrian / Tocharian Buddhist monks such as Lokakṣema studied there and travelled around China with the newly composed Mahāyāna scriptures in Gāndhārī language.

The tradition of the first Buddhist transmission in China is recorded in the Xiong zhuan 西戎傳 (Chronicle on the Western Regions) of *Weilue* 魏略 (A Brief History of Wei), which was written by Yu Huan 魚豢 in the mid-third century and cited in a commentary by Pei Songzhi's 裴松之 *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 (Records on Three States, 429 CE). It reads as follows:

昔漢哀帝元壽元年博士弟子景盧受大月氏王使伊存口授浮屠經

In the past, in the first year of the Yuanshou era [2 BCE], during the Han period of Emperor Ai, Jin Lu 景盧, student of the Imperial

Academy, received the Buddha's oral teachings from Yicun 伊存, envoy of the King of Greater Yuezhi [Tocharians].

This tradition has been questioned mainly because the annals of the Han Dynasty do not have any official reports on the envoys of the Greater Yuezhi to China. However, in the 1990s, 16 bamboo slips were discovered in Xuanquan of Dunhuang and these artefacts dating from 52 to 18 BCE contain records of Greater Yuezhi envoys to the Han Dynasty.

The tradition in question must reflect the fact that Buddhism was brought from Tocharistan to China.

In addition, it should be noted that the early monks who translated Mahāyāna scriptures were either born in Tocharistan or descendants of Tocharian families. Monks such as Lokakṣema, who translated Gāndhārī *Prajñāpāramitā*, *Amitābha-vyūha* and other scriptures into Chinese (between 178 and 189 CE), came from Tocharistan. Zhi Qian 支謙, a monk who was Lokakṣema's disciple, translated a multitude of Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna scriptures (between 220 and 257 CE), and sometimes simply revised Lokakṣema's translations. He was born in China but his grandfather came from Tocharistan. The original language of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra* translated by Zhi Qian was also apparently Gāndhārī. In addition, Dharmarakṣa, who is said to have been the translator of 159 (or 154) Buddhist scriptures (between 266 and 308 CE) and also to have translated the Gāndhārī Lotus Sutra, was born in a Tocharian family which had lived for generations in Dunhuang.

As already mentioned, the earliest translations of Mahāyāna scriptures were made by Bactrians / Tocharians or their descendants from Gāndhārī. As Lokakṣema was a contemporary of the Kushan emperors Kanishka (r. 127–51 CE) and Huvishka (r.c. 152–87), and Zhi Qian was a contemporary of Vasudeva I (r.c. 190–230), Kanishka II (r.c. 231–45), Vaskuṣāṇa and Vasiṣka (r.c. 251–57), Buddhism flourished under these emperors. It is likely that the Kushan emperors sent their envoys along with Buddhist monks to take the Buddhist teachings to China or to share the values and an understanding of Buddhism as a diplomatic strategy. This is evidenced by the following fact: the Chinese letter *si* 寺 was originally used to refer to a government building for receiving foreign guests and delegates, which thus also accommodated Buddhist monks from the Western countries. For this reason, *si* 寺 began to denote a Buddhist temple.

However, there are still many unanswered questions related to when, where and how the Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures were composed, and when, where and how Buddhism was transmitted into China. I hope to

find the answers to some of them by studying Buddhist scriptures and secular documents in different languages such as Sanskrit, Gāndhārī and Chinese and collating my research with the findings of various related disciplines including the history of Asia, art history and archeology.

Prof. Kato invited me several times to his excavation and research in Termez. Today, I finally arrived in the land of Termez and made a decision to study the above-mentioned issues based on the recent studies of art historians and archaeologists in Uzbekistan.

Editor's Notes

* This article is based on a keynote address that the late Prof. Seishi Karashima delivered in Russian to the 'International Conference on Buddhist Culture' held at Termez State University, the Republic of Uzbekistan on November 24, 2017. Just after he accepted our request to modify the address into an article for this feature, he passed away suddenly on July 23, 2019. Later, with kind permission from Mrs Karashima, we decided to publish the keynote address as was, with the translation support of Dr Safarali Shomakhmadov. This is an expression of our sincere condolences on his demise and our determination to inherit his will towards the study of Buddhism.

¹ <http://iriab.soka.ac.jp/publication/> (Accessed July 15, 2020)

² Seishi Karashima, 'Who Composed the Mahayana Scriptures? — The Mahāsāṃghikas and Vaitulya Scriptures', *Annual Report of The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University* vol. XVIII (2015), 113–62.

³ Seishi Karashima, 'Was the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Compiled in Gandhāra in Gāndhārī?', *Annual Report of The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University* vol. XVI (2013), 171–88.

⁴ Seishi Karashima, *The Textual Study of the Chinese Versions of the Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra in the Light of the Sanskrit and Tibetan Versions* (Tokyo: The Sankibo Press, 1992); Seishi Karashima, 'On Amitābha, Amitāyu(s), Sukhāvati and the Amitābhavyūha', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* vol. 23 (2009): 121–30.

About the Author and Translator

Seishi Karashima was director of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University. He specialized in Buddhist philology and earned a PhD in literature from Beijing University. With his vast knowledge of languages including Sanskrit, Pali, Tibetan, Middle Indo-Aryan and ancient Chinese, Prof. Karashima was a leading authority in detailed analysis of Chinese Buddhist translations.

Safarali Shomakhmadov is senior researcher at the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, the Russian Academy of Sciences. He is a specialist in Buddhist manuscripts excavated in Central Asia. He has long interacted with the late Prof. Karashima and presented a lecture at the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology, Soka University in 2018.