

Was there really a Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra in Prakrit?

Introduction

Scholars since the 19th Century have quoted and re-quoted each other repeatedly to the effect that there was a Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra in Prakrit. Conze thought so too and summarized the evidence in “The Prajñāpāramitā Literature” (Conze 1978).

This paper reviews the evidence and follows these references back through various commentaries in Japanese, Chinese and Tibetan, to the original statements made by Paramārtha (499-569CE), Avalokitavrata (c7-8thCCE) and Candrakīrti (c600-650CE).

Thanks are due to Burkhard Quessel of the British Library for providing a copy of “grub mtha’ nām bshad chen mo” by ‘jam dbyangs bzhad pa and to Professor Jens Braavig and Dr. Harry Falk for discussing their recent work on Prajñāpāramitā texts in Kharoṣṭhī.

All un-attributed translations are by the author.

Overview

This paper reviews the evidence and follows these references back through various commentaries in Japanese, Chinese and Tibetan, to the original statements made by Paramārtha (499-569CE), Avalokitavrata (c7-8thCCE) and Candrakīrti (c600-650CE).

In fact, the trail thins out the further back we look, and eventually it disappears altogether. There actually doesn't appear to be any textual evidence for a Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra in Prakrit after all.

However, there is some support to be found for the idea that Prajñāpāramitā ideas do have an early origin. The fact that three completely different ancient commentators thought so, for whom it would have been unlikely, or impossible to communicate or be aware of each other's work, together with a review of recent of archaeological evidence from Harry Falk and a recent assessment of one of the earliest texts translated into Chinese, by Harrison, provide evidence that Prajñāpāramitā ideas do come from an early period, certainly no later than the first century CE.

So, although we do have no evidence of a Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra in Prakrit after all, there is some support for Conze's proposal that the earliest parts of the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras might be as early as 100BCE.

Origin of Prajñāpāramitā

Conze spent a great deal of effort in classifying and analyzing the Prajñāpāramitā literature which he documented in "The Prajñāpāramitā Literature" (Conze 1978). He proposed a sequence for the development of the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras and a dating as well (Conze 1952). He said that parts of the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā represent the earliest development of Prajñāpāramitā, a view which has been strengthened by other authors since that time and further underpinned by recent archaeological evidence which will be outlined later. As to a possible source of these ideas, he explains:

Several authors have claimed that it probably developed among the Mahāsāṅghikas in Southern India, in the Andhra country, on the Kistnā river. Near Amarāvati and Dhānyakaṭaka, the Mahāsāṅghikas had two famous monasteries, which gave their names to the sects of the Pūrvaśailas and of the Aparāśailas. These sects are significant because 1) they had a Prajñāpāramitā in Prakrit, they 2) spoke of the dharmadhātu in the same way as the Prajñāpāramitā, and 3) their Buddhology prepared the way for that of the Prajñāpāramitā (Conze 1978, p.1).

He offers three references in support of the first two points. The third point is Conze's opinion based on his extensive readings:

- a) Paramārtha, given by Przyluski in *Le Concile de Rajagrha* (Przyluski 1926, p.364),
- b) ‘jam dbyangs bzhad pa (Jam-yang-shay-ba), given by Lamotte in *Asiatica – Festschrift Friedrich Weller* (Lamotte 1954, p.387n52),
- c) Candrakīrti, also given by Lamotte in *Asiatica FFW* (Lamotte 1954, p.387n53).

Conze has taken each of these supporting references from the work of other authors, which on inspection merit further investigation, since the idea that Prajñāpāramitā concepts arise out of the Mahāsāṅghikas has been widely repeated:

- a) In *Le Concile de Rajagrha*, Przyluski immediately cites the Bukkyō daijii (Przyluski 1926, p.364) and Rahder (Rahder 1926, p.xxviii) as the sources of this. Rahder just cites the same section of the Bukkyō daijii.

The Bukkyō daijii quotes from 又眞諦の部執異論疏 (Commentary by Paramārtha on the Samayabhedoparacanacakra). It says:

又眞諦の部執異論疏に依れば大衆部には華嚴涅槃勝鬘維摩金光明般等の諸大乘經を攝すと云ひ
(Ryukoku Daigaku 1914, p.2619.b.20).

Moreover, according to Paramārtha’s Samayabheda commentary, it is said that, with regard to the Mahāsāṅghikas, they had various Mahāyāna sūtras (such as) the Avataṃsaka(-sūtra), the Nirvāna(-sūtra), the Śrīmālā(-sūtra i.e. Śrīmālādevī-siṃha-nāda-sūtra), the Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa(-sūtra), the Suvarna-prabhāsa(-uttama-sūtra) and the Prajñāpāramitā(-sūtra).

This quotation suggests that the Mahāsāṅghikas had a range of well-known Mahāyāna sūtras available to them, including a Prajñāpāramitā sūtra. Although Paramārtha’s Samayabheda commentary is lost to us (Silk 2009), portions of it were included in the 三論玄義檢幽集 (Collection of deep examination of the Profound Meaning of the Three Treatises, Taisho 2300) of 中觀澄禪 (Chūkan Chōzen, 1227-1307, Japanese but writing in Chinese), so it is possible to

examine this more closely. The text from which the Bukkyō daijii took the extract and paraphrased it is as follows:

即於此第二百年大衆部流出三部眞諦疏曰。

第二百年。

大衆部併度行央掘多羅國此國在王舍城北此部引花嚴涅槃勝鬘維摩金光明般若等諸大乘經於此部中有信此經者有不信此經者若不信者謗言無般若等諸大乘經言此等經皆是人作。

非是佛說悉簡置一處還依三藏根本而執用之。

小乘弟子唯信有三藏由不親聞佛說大乘故爾。

(Takakusu & Watanabe 1924, 70.0459b09)

Then, in the 200th year (after the Buddha), from among the Mahāsāṃghikas came forth three divisions, it is said in Paramārtha's commentary:

In the 200th year: The whole of the Mahāsāṃghika travelled to the Aṅguttarāpa country which is to the north of Rājagṛha and this group withdrew there. Among this group, there was belief in the Avataṃsaka(-sūtra), Nirvāṇa(-sūtra), Śrīmālā(-sūtra), Vimalakīrtinirdeśa(-sūtra), Suvarṇa-prabhāsottama(-sūtra), Prajñāpāramitā(-sūtra) and various other Mahāyāna sūtras; there were also those with no belief in these sūtras.

As for those with no belief, they spoke slander against the Prajñāpāramitā and the various other Mahāyāna sūtras, saying that such sūtras as all those above were the works of Man. Denying it to be the case that the Buddha spoke all the texts, nonetheless they still hold to and use the original tripiṭaka.

The Hīnayāna followers only believed what there is in the tripiṭaka, because of not hearing Mahāyāna Buddha-teachings in person.

Demiéville provides a corresponding French translation (Demiéville 1932, p.43). Placed in a fuller context, the Bukkyō daijii extract seems to present certain difficulties. Firstly, in the Samayabhedoparacanacakra of Vasumitra, on which Paramārtha is commenting, neither the Chinese (Taisho 2033, translated by Paramārtha himself) nor Tibetan (Tohoku 4138) versions make any mention of these sūtras nor to those who did and didn't believe in them. Also, Paramārtha dates this to 200 years after the Parinirvāṇa of the Buddha, saying that these sūtras all exist and are “Mahāyāna sūtras”. He also describes those who believe in these sūtras as “Mahāyāna” and those who don't as “Hīnayāna”. These terms do not appear in the Samayabheda either. Also none of these terms appear in the other translation of the Samayabheda into Chinese – Taisho 2031 by Xuánzàng. This give the overall impression that this passage concerning Mahāyāna sūtras and their believers was added to the scope of the existing text by Paramārtha in his commentary. Vasumitra was a Sarvāstivādin scholar who lived four hundred years after the Parinirvāṇa of the Buddha (Lamotte 1988, p.275) – surely he would have been aware of the items that Paramārtha included in his Commentary if they had been extant at the time.

- b) In Asiatica – Festschrift Friedrich Weller, Lamotte refers to Le Boudhisme by Vasilief, saying:

Les Pūrva et Aparāśaila . . . possédaient, au dire du *Grub-mtha'* tibétain, des Prajñāpāramitā en Prakrit . . . (Lamotte 1954, p.387)

The Pūrva and Aparāśaila (sects) . . . had, as is said in the Tibetan *Grub-mtha'*, Prajñāpāramitā(-sūtras) in Prakrit . . .

In Le Boudhisme, Vasilief in turn says:

Sie zeigen, dass ihre Lehre in dieselbe Reihe mit dem Buche der Mahāsāṃghika gehört, welches das grosse Statut (mahāvastu, མགོ་ཆེན་) gennant wird, wo bereits von den zehn Bhūmi und den Ideen der Pāramitā's gesprochen wird; dazu fügen sie noch, dass zwei Sekten dieser Schule: die Pūrvaçaila und die Aparāçaila die sūtra's der Pradschnāpāramitā und andre aus der Lehre des Mahājāna, in Prakrit-Sprache abgefasst, besassen. (Vasilief 1860, p.264)

They show that their teaching belongs to the same series as the book of the Mahāsāṃghikas that is called “the big statute” (Mahāvastu, gzhin chen po) where the ten Bhumis and the ideas of Pāramitās are already being spoken; to that they add that two sects of this school: the Pūrvaśaila and the Aparāśaila possessed Prajñāpāramitā and other sūtras of the teachings of the Mahāyāna written in the Prakrit language, it is said.

In the paragraph immediately before this, Vasilief refers to Blatt 81
ཀླུབ་མཐུ་
 (grub mtha’ sh. 81):

Die Mahājānisten rechtfertigen sich gegen diese Anklagen durch die Ungewöhnlichkeit (ཐུན་མིན་) ihrer Lehre, welche in Folge davon durch die gewöhnlichen Sammler der Sutra’s nicht zugänglich gemacht werden konnte, sondern der Beteiligung von Bodhisattva’s, wie Samantabhadra u.s.w. bedurft habe. (Vasilief 1860, p.264)

The Mahāyānists defend themselves against these charges by way of the unusual nature (thun min [i.e. thun mong ma yin pa]) of their teachings, which, in consequence thereof, could not be made available to an ordinary gatherer of sūtras, but it required the involvement of Bodhisattva’s such as Samantabhadra etc.

It is not possible to determine which edition of “grub mtha’” Vasilief was using, but elsewhere in the book he makes reference to ‘jam dbyangs bzhad pa (Jam-yang Shay-ba), whose “Great Exposition of Tenets” is known as “grub mtha’ chen mo” (‘Jam dbyangs bzhad pa’i rdo rje 1997). This has been translated by Hopkins in “Maps of the Profound”. Using Hopkins’s edition (Hopkins 2003, p.716), the relevant section in English can be found (Hopkins uses “collector” rather than “gatherer”) and the corresponding section in Tibetan has been located (‘Jam dbyangs bzhad pa’i rdo rje 1997, pha pt.2 111a). The section on the Pūrvaśailas and the Aparāśailas follows this (ibid., pha pt.2 113.a). Hopkins only provides references to a Taipei reprint of this work in book format not available to this author. The references in this paper have been substantially reworked to the Tibetan foliation from the bla brang

bkra shis 'khyil blockprint. Hopkins only uses the Root Text of 'jam dbyangs bzhad pa, interspersed that with the Word Commentary of ngag dbang dpal ldan (Nga-wang Bel-den). As a result, when Hopkins writes:

. . . in the scriptures of the Pūrvashailas and Aparashailas seven scriptural collections are mentioned, consisting of the Bodhisattva scriptural collection, the scriptural collection of the Knowledge Bearers, the scriptural collection of discipline, the scriptural collection of discourses, the scriptural collection of manifest knowledge, the extensive scriptural collection, and the scriptural collection of birth stories.

Hopkins does not give 'jam dbyangs bzhad pa's source as it is not identified in the texts he has selected. 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa does provide the source as a quotation in his own Word Commentary. It is from Candrakīrti's Triśaraṇasaptati (gsum la skyabs su 'gro ba bdum cu pa Tohoku 3971). Candrakīrti says:

/ nyan thos rnam kyī dbang mdzad nas /
/ sde snod gsum du 'dod pa yin /
/ byang chub sems dpa'i gnas skabs kyī /
/ nges pa der ni yod ma yin /

/ 'phags pa nub kyī rir bshad dang /
/ shar gyi ri pa'i nyan thos kyis /
/ byang chub sems dpa'i dbang byas pa /
/ sde snod bdun du bshad pa yin /

/ byang chub sems dpa'i sde snod dang /
/ de bzhin rig 'dzin zhes bya dang /
/ mdo sde chos mngon 'dul ba dang /
/ rgyas dang de bzhin skyes pa'i rabs /

/ de ltar sde snod bdun po ni / . . .

Candrakīrti: (Rin-chen 1985, T.3971 dbu-ma gi 253a), quoted by

‘Jam dbyangs bzhad pa: (‘Jam dbyangs bzhad pa’i rdo rje 1997,
pha pt.2 111a.3)

As justified by [lit. after making force for] the Śrāvakas,
three baskets are considered;
There, the existence of a Bodhisattva is not established.

For [lit. with] those who expound of the noble Aparasāilas and
the Śrāvakas of Pūrvasāila,
seven baskets are said to exist,
justifying [lit. making the force of] a Bodhisattva:

The Bodhisattva basket and
also what is called “the Knowledge Holder” (basket) [i.e.
vidyādharaṇīka] and
the sūtra (basket), the abhidharma (basket), the Vinaya (basket) and
the extensive basket [i.e. vaipulyaṇīka] and also the (basket of)
“birth-stories”

so there are seven baskets . . .

‘Jam dbyangs bzhad pa goes on to say:

cing spyang ras gzigs brtul zhugs kyis sher mdo don dam pa’i chos
mngon par
bshad cing mdo’i sde snod yang yin pa’i phyir te /
(‘Jam dbyangs bzhad pa’i rdo rje 1997, pha pt.2 113.a.5)

Avalokiteśvara explains that the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra (is) true
abhidharma, since it is also (in) the basket of sūtras.

Avalokiteśvara’s commentary to Bhāviveka’s Prajñāpradīpa, called
Prajñāpradīpaṭīkā (shes rab sgron ma rgya cher ‘grel pa Tohoku 3859) also
says:

‘di ltar dge ‘dun phal chen sde nyid kyi sde snod kyi gzhi chen po zhes
 bya ba’i
 khongs su theg pa chen po ‘di yang gtogs te /
 de nas sa bcu pa’i mdo dang pha rol tu phyin pa’i mtshan nyid dag
 ‘byung ba’i phyir dang /
 dge ‘dun phal chen sde nyid kyi shar gyi ri bo’i sde dang
 nub kyi ri bo’i sde dag las kyang ‘phral skad du /
 shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa la sogs pa theg pa chen po’i mdo dag
 ‘byung ba’i phyir ro / (Rin-chen 1985, T.3859 dbu-ma za 270a.6)

So, Mahāyāna is also included among the Vinaya basket of (those of) the saṃgha of the Mahāsāṅghikas called the Lokottaravādins, because within that are the sūtra of the Ten Grounds and the defining characteristics of the (Six) Perfections, and because there are the Prajñāpāramitā and other Mahāyāna sūtras from the sects of the Pūrvaśailas and the Aparāśailas of the saṃgha of the Mahāsāṅghikas, even in everyday language [i.e. a Prakrit].

The references in Avalokitavrata’s Commentary to a Vinaya of the Lokottaravādins and to Prajñāpāramitā and other sūtras in Prakrit do not occur in Bhāviveka’s Prajñāpradīpa, nor in his Madhyamakahrdayavṛtti-Tarkajvālā (Tohoku 3856, also known as “The Blaze of Reasoning”) which Avalokitavrata also quotes in his commentary.

- c) In Asiatica – Festschrift Friedrich Weller, Lamotte refers to the Mūlamadhyamakakārikās de Nāgārjuna by de la Vallée Poussin, saying of the supposed Prajñāpāramitā in Prakrit:

Dans des stances en quasi-sanskrit, dont le texte nous a été conservé par Candrakīrti, les Pūrvaśaila professaient sur le Dharmadhātu, ou l’Absolu, des vues identiques à celles du Mahāyāna. (Lamotte 1954, p.387)

In stanzas of quasi-sanskrit, whose text was preserved for us by Candrakīrti, the Pūrvashailas professed views identical to those of the Mahāyāna over the Dharmadhātu, or “the absolute”

De la Vallée Poussin (de la Vallée Poussin et al. 1903, p.548) cites two verses from the Sanskrit version of Prasannapadā. However, better editions of these same verses have been produced since that time and these are presented by Harrison:āgamasūtreṣu /

ṇa viṇaṣṭa (or viṇatṭha?) ṇa uppaṇṇa (?) dharmmadhāusamaṃ jagamaṃ /
sattadhāuṃ ca daṃśesi eṣā loānuvattaṇā //
tīsu adhvāsu sattāṇaṃ pakatī nopalambhatī /
sattadhāuṃ ca daṃśesi eṣā loānuvattanetyādi //
(Harrison 1982, p.225)

Harrison translates this as:

Not destroyed, not produced, the world is the same as the *dharmadhātu*,
Yet he taught the *sattvadhātu*; this is in conformity to the world.
He does not apprehend the nature of beings in the three times,
Yet he taught the *sattvadhātu*; this is in conformity to the world.
(Harrison 1982, p.225)

So we can see that this does not really support the claim that there was a Prajñāpāramitā sūtra in Prakrit, but it does support Lamotte’s contention that Mahāyāna-like ideas did exist in Prakrit texts of the Mahāsāṅghikas. Candrakīrti also quotes these two verses in the Madhyamakāvatārabhāṣya where he attributes them to the Pūrvashailas. (de la Vallée Poussin et al. 1903, p.458n2). It is clear that the “quasi-sanskrit” referred to by Lamotte is a form of what Edgerton calls “Buddhist hybrid Sanskrit”, albeit of a very “Prakrit” type. Harrison has identified the source of these verses, which will be discussed later.

Assessment of Conze's evidence

Returning finally to Conze's contention that the Mahāsāṅghika sects of the Pūrvaśailas and the Aparāśailas spoke of the dharmadhātu in the same way as the Prajñāpāramitā and had a Prajñāpāramitā in Prakrit, we find that his reasons seem to support the first point, but that the second point is not strongly supported by them. The best that might be said is that there were texts containing similar ideas to some of those in the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras and that these were written in what is now called Buddhist hybrid Sanskrit, as coined by Edgerton for this type of language.

However, even this position bears further consideration. The authors upon whose works these conclusions rest are all of a relatively late date compared with the period they are describing. In the Samayabheda of Vasumitra, these sects are described as existing two hundred years after the Parinirvāṇa of the Buddha (Lamotte 1988, p.282), yet Paramārtha (499-569CE), Avalokitavrata (c7-8thCCE) and Candrakīrti (c600-650CE) all lived at least 500 years later still. Each of these works is a commentary to an earlier work, yet we do not find the relevant information in those works, only in the later commentaries. However, there must be some foundation to these ideas, since Paramārtha would have had no contact with either Avalokitavrata nor Candrakīrti and Avalokitavrata was a supporter of Bhāviveka and a critic of Candrakīrti. Nonetheless, they all agree on the main points.

More recent developments

Two more recent developments throw further light on the development of the Prajñāpāramitā: Paul Harrison's work on the Chinese translations of Mahāyāna sūtras by Lokāṣema during the latter half the second century CE and Harry Falk's transcription, analysis and carbon-14 dating of a birch-bark manuscript from Gandhāra of a section of the Aṣṭasāhasrikā (8000 line) Prajñāpāramitā sūtra in Kharoṣṭhī.

Harrison looked at a particular work translated by Lokāṣema, the Lokārṇuvartana sūtra, which he has determined has many similar verses to the Māhavastu of the Lokottaravādin subsect of the Mahāsāṅghikas. Because of this and because the subject matter of the first half the sūtra itself is the transcendent nature of the Buddha, Harrison concludes that the Lokārṇuvartana sūtra is a work of the Lokottaravādins

(Harrison 1982, pp.212–213). The second part of the sūtra is concerned with the teaching of the Buddha. These verses are not found in the Mahāvastu and Harrison does not address them, by and large. However, he does show that the two verses quoted above by Candrakīrti in Buddhist hybrid Sanskrit are in fact from this text, being verses 94 and 63. He compares these verses with those of the only other translation of this sūtra, into Tibetan by Jinamitra, Dānaśīla and Yeshe sde in the 9th CCE and the Tibetan version of the Madhyamakāvātāra of Candrakīrti where these verses are again repeated, although having been translated into Tibetan by Tilakakalasa, Pha tshab nyi ma grags and Kanakavarma. There is a close correspondence. Of course, in the Tibetan translation, the archaic nature of the Sanskrit is lost.

Falk has been working on a variety of Kharoṣṭhī fragments in recent years. At the 2008 conference of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, Falk described a birch-bark manuscript found in Gandhāra and now in a private collection. It consists of parts of the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā sūtra in Kharoṣṭhī. In a recent email exchange with this author, Falk has said that the manuscript has been carbon-14 dated “in the seventies (of) 1st century AD, with a rather narrow margin up and down”. A paper on the text and dating is expected in 2010. Although to be confirmed, the writing style of the manuscript is said to be similar to that of one of the scribes of the British Library Kharoṣṭhī fragments. One of the other Gandhari Kharoṣṭhī fragments is part of the Mahāvastu which as was said above is associated with the Lokottaravādins whilst, albeit later, when Xuánzàng visited India in the 7thCCE, he found considerable numbers of Lokottaravādin monasteries at Bāmyān, in Gandhāra (Lamotte 1988, p.541). So the Lokottaravādins show a continued presence in this area for many centuries.

These two more recent developments provide a firmer foundation for the ideas related by Conze that the Prajñāpāramitā, or at least its core doctrines, developed amongst the Mahāsāṅghikas. We also see that the dating of the manuscript of the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā sūtra to the first century CE supports Conze’s proposal that the earliest parts of the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras might be as early as 100BCE.

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