Writing and the Rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism[1]

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1. Introduction

Richard Gombrich, in a 1990 essay, argued that the emergence of writing in South Asia was one of several factors that made possible the rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism. In what follows, I will defend a much stronger claim: that the ritual conundrum of written texts was constitutive of Mahāyāna Buddhism. As part of this claim, I will also argue that a monolithic and intellectualist understanding of literacy — such as that put forward in Goody[2] or Ong[3] — cannot account for the widely varying technologies of writing that have emerged, especially within different religious traditions. The development of Mahāyāna technologies of writing, such as printing and prayer wheels, points directly to one particular way in which written sacred texts were experienced and ritualized in the early formation of the tradition.

In order to make this argument, we will look at early Mahāyāna textual sources about writing. This is territory which has been well trodden by Gregory Schopen[4] and more recently by Paul Harrison[5], and I will in part be building on their work. Later texts will be consulted to show that the unusual rituals and attitudes of the earlier tradition were not abandoned, but rather taken as a guide for subsequent textual composition. We will also look at ethnographic and historical evidence for mechanisms and processes of highly repetitive pro-

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[1] The first version of this paper was delivered at a conference in September 2004 in honour of Richard Gombrich's career.

[2] J. GOODY (ed.), *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, Cambridge 1968.

[3] W. ONG, *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture*, Cornell University Press, New York 1977; ID., *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, London 1982.

[4] G. SCHOPEN, 'Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism', reprinted in: G. SCHOPEN (ed.), *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India*, Honolulu 1997 [1991], 1–22; ID., 'A Note on the "Technology of Prayer" and a Reference to a Revolving Bookcase in an Eleventh-Century Indian Inscription', in: G. SCHOPEN (ed.), *Figments and Fragments of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India: More Collected Papers*, Honolulu 2005, 345–349.

[5] P. HARRISON, 'Mediums and Messages: Reflections on the Production of Mahāyāna Sū-tras', in: *The Eastern Buddhist* 35 (2003), 115–151.

duction, such as prayer wheels, printing, and rotating libraries, as well as sites where there was determined resistance to any shift from manuscript to print.

Let me be clear in my purposes here. I am not arguing that the emergence of writing among early Buddhists is the only factor that gave rise to the Mahāyāna. Other scholars have focussed on social register, specific styles of meditation, or regional differences, and I will not attempt to assess the relative importance of these many factors. As Gombrich himself noted, 'Social phenomena, including the composition of religious texts, are rarely amenable to a single explanation, and in fact are very often overdetermined'.[6] I do believe, however, that Mahāyāna Buddhism contains a unique way of being literate, and understanding this particular literacy is a prerequisite to understanding both the history and the present range of Mahāyāna Buddhism itself.

2. Setting out

Buddhists of whatever school will agree that the religion consists of the Three Jewels, Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. The Buddhas are extraordinary persons, the most recent being Siddhartha Gautama, who occur at rare intervals in the long span of time. Through many lifetimes of morality, study and cultivation they develop a transforming insight into how things actually are that culminates in a liberating experience, after which they teach, and through their teaching, create a social structure to preserve this teaching. What they understand — the principles they realize in the breakthrough to enlightenment — is called the Dharma. This insight takes expression as a body of teachings, called the *śāsana*; and the social institution — an order of monks, nuns, lay men and women — they found in order to transmit their teachings is called the Sangha.

Considered as a historical phenomenon, Buddhism, like Jainism or the Vedic traditions, was initially an orally transmitted tradition. We have both positive evidence for the social and ritual organization of its oral transmission and negative evidence, in the form of a deafening lack of references to the materials or acts of writing. What survives is a series of written canons, none of which are in the language that the Buddha and his disciples actually spoke. The most primitive sources are those in Pali, Gandhari and Sanskrit; subsequent translation projects created collections of canonical texts and commentaries in Chinese, Tibetan, Khotanese, Mongolian and other languages.

Of the primitive collections, only the Pali canon exists in its entirety. It is the product of the efforts of one particular early Buddhist order to translate their entire transmitted canon into a single language. Once codified it attracted

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6 R. GOMBRICH, 'How the Mahāyāna Began', in: T. SKORUPSKI (ed.), *The Buddhist Forum: Seminar Papers 1987–8*, London 1990, 21–30: 19 n. 23.

subsequent commentarial material for several further centuries. The Gandhari canon is almost entirely lost, though careful work over the past twenty years has demonstrated the importance of the surviving material.

The surviving Sanskrit material is more extensive and varied, containing some material as old as the oldest Pali, and rather more material which appears both chronologically and doctrinally newer. Several schools adopted Sanskrit as their canonical language. Though no single canon survives in the Sanskrit, texts from the Sanskrit Buddhist traditions were the main source for the Tibetan canon, compiled from the 8th to the 14th centuries, and the rules of Tibetan translation are such that we can often reconstruct texts and variants in the Sanskrit from the extant Tibetan texts.

The Chinese Buddhist corpus is by far the largest and most varied collection of canonical materials. The earliest translations date back to the 2nd century of the common era. Some texts were translated into Chinese several times over the centuries, and this can provide evidence for the historical development of the underlying original. Much of the Chinese canon was translated from Sanskrit, but Gandhari, Pali and other source languages have also been detected.

While the Pali and Gandhari materials are closely associated with specific Buddhist orders, the Sanskrit, Tibetan and Chinese texts come from a range of doctrinal positions and monastic orders. New texts claiming canonical status continued to be composed in Chinese well into the first millennium (the *Awakening of Faith* attributed to Aśvaghoṣa) and, in Sanskrit, right up to the fifteenth century (the Garland texts).

3. Oral transmission of the early canon

Several authors have studied the internal evidence of the transmitted canonical materials to make claims about the way in which the earliest Buddhist literature was passed on to subsequent generations. The Pali canon, although it is a translation from a prior language, is still the most fruitful body of material to study in this light. We find textual features, structural or stylistic, that are characteristic of oral transmission; explicit references to behaviours or social structures associated with recitation; and stories expressing the anxiety that the transmission of the textual tradition would be lost.

Orally transmitted canons often have structural features that help ensure a reliable transmission. In particular, repetition, metre and numbered lists are features of the Pali canon that acted as 'error-correcting' features during the process of its transmission.[7] For example, the *Anguttara Nikāya* is arranged as

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[7] GOMBRICH, 'How the Mahāyāna Began', 23.

lists of topics which increase in length: first the set of single topics; then the set of lists of two topics; then the set of lists of three, and so on.

Moreover there are references within the Pali Canon to social structures that ensured preservation of specific textual traditions through systematic recitation. Individual monks were described as *vinaya-dhara*, for example, meaning that they were skilled in transmitting (*dhara*, 'sustaining') the monastic code (*vinaya*). The monastic code itself contains rules clearly conceived because the transmission of the textual tradition was regarded as potentially tenuous. If a lay person notified a monk that he or she knew a text and was worried that it might be lost, monastic law permitted the monk to interrupt even the rainy season retreat in order to receive it.[8]

The Buddhist Councils, now remembered more as schismatic events, were actually called in response to threats to the textual tradition transmitted from the time of Gautama Buddha. According to the *Mahāvaṃsa* — a late source —, at the first council, held not long after the *parinirvāṇa* of Gautama Buddha, the monk Upali was recognized as the best authority for the *Vinaya* and so was asked to recite it; similarly, Ananda was asked to recite the *Sutta*. The received canon was heard and the community of monks was appropriately structured for its continued recitation. Once the textual tradition had been organized, the obligation of the Sangha as a whole to preserve the teachings was formalised as an internal distinction between those monks who were bound to the duty of preserving the texts (*ganthadhura*) and those who were bound to the duty of meditation leading to enlightenment (*vipassandhura*).[9]

From this, then, the picture emerges of a textual tradition and a religious order closely bound up with each other as inseparable aspects of the effort to carry on the work of the Buddha; the order is defined by the texts it recites, the texts contain rules for the order, and the texts are structured in order to be reliably transmitted within the order.

Now, Gombrich has argued that the Sangha was founded (among other reasons) in order to faithfully preserve the oral teachings, and the teachings themselves were internally ordered so that it was difficult to create apocryphal texts.

If we follow this line of reasoning, then the introduction of writing involves a loss of bibliographic control: it becomes possible to write out a new text and collate it in with other, canonical materials in a way that is not possible when the textual tradition is communally recited.

Under these circumstances, any text which is critical of the current teachings or introduces something which is palpably new has no chance of survival. It is possible that hundreds or even thousands of monks, nuns and Buddhist lay followers had visions or other inspirations

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[8] GOMBRICH, 'How the Mahāyāna Began', 25.

[9] R. GOMBRICH, *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*, London 1988, 152–3; GOMBRICH, 'How the Mahāyāna Began', 24–5.

which put new teachings into their minds, possible that they composed texts embodying those teachings — but we shall never know. For without writing those texts could not be preserved.[10]

For Gombrich, then, the introduction of writing creates the conditions whereby new texts could emerge from private experience into the ownership of the Sangha as a whole. Moreover, as he notes, a new text need not struggle to win legitimacy: it might happen almost by accident. 'A single manuscript in a monastic library, studied by no one, could be picked up and read, even translated, by a curious browser or visiting scholar.'[11]

4. The text remains with the physical remains

For Buddhists, the end of the life of a historical Buddha is also the cessation of all rebirth; this is the meaning of the term *parinirvāṇa*. While the ritual and philosophical responses to that absence are many and varied, what is relevant for us now is that even as Gautama Buddha came to the end of his life, he was alert to the problems posed by his imminent absence. His instructions are contained in the fifth chapter of the *Mahāparinibbānasutta,* a Pāli text with cognate versions preserved in Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan. In this text, two modes of continuity are identified. When the monk Ānanda expressed anxiety over his imminent departure, Gautama directed him and all Buddhists to the *Śāsana.* About his teachings, he said, 'Whosoever sees my teachings sees me'. It is in this context, then, that we need to understand the significance of faithfully transmitting the Buddha's teachings: it was understood as a ritual continuation of the presence of Gautama Buddha himself, a key link among the Three Jewels.

Not long after the discussion of his teachings, Ānanda asked Gautama Buddha what should be done with a Buddha's corpse. Gautama made it clear that the actual funeral rituals were not to be performed by Ānanda, but gave detailed instructions as to the type of ritual specialists who should perform his mortuary rituals, and recommended the worship of his funeral mound as a devotional practice for all Buddhists. Even during the time of Gautama Buddha, the remains of eminent monks were placed into hemispheric burial monuments called *stūpas*; and Gautama Buddha's description of how to worship a *stūpa* makes it clear that this was a familiar ritual. Scholars within certain Buddhist traditions did try to interpret this passage as debarring monks from worshipping *stūpas*; and this gave rise, in 20th century scholarship, to a widespread and erroneous correlation of the doctrinal body with the celibate Sangha and the physical body with the lay Sangha. This is not borne out either by

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[10] GOMBRICH, 'How the Mahāyāna Began', 27.
[11] GOMBRICH, 'How the Mahāyāna Began', 29.

the textual sources or indeed the wealth of subsequent evidence for ritual worship of *stūpas*, physical relics, images, and other material indices of teachers within the tradition.[12]

The effect of these two instructions given by Gautama Buddha just prior to his death was to establish two lineages of continuity realised through distinct ritual complexes. The body of the teachings was carried as an oral tradition that structured and was guaranteed by the monastic order to which it was entrusted. The remains of the material body, the *stūpa*, became the locus of devotional rituals performed by all Buddhists. The distinction between these two bodies, the physical (*rūpakāya*) and the doctrinal (Pali *dhammakāya*, Sanskrit *dharmakāya*), is known from Pali commentaries and modern studies[13] which emphasize a doctrinal and metaphysical understanding. Yet to an anthropologist, these are bodies created and sustained through ritual; *stūpas* require very specific rituals for their creation and consecration, and we have already had a taste of the ritual ordering of the Sangha for the purpose, among others, of ensuring the continued correct recitation of the *śāsana*.

So long as the teachings had no material presence, these two domains of ritual remained distinct. The spread of writing in South Asia brought them into collision. The origins of writing in South Asia date back at least as far as Aśoka (mid-3rd century BCE), who left his inscriptions in a wide range of scripts and languages.[14] The confusion experienced by Buddhists of the time is made very clear in the story of Sadāprarudita, to which we now turn.

5. Where is the Perfection of Wisdom?

The story of Sadāprarudita comes at the very end of an early Mahāyāna text, the *Aṣṭasahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines, hereafter AsP). Through the story of a pilgrim, it intends to show the importance of devotion to the text itself. This in itself is interesting, but far more interesting is the confusion experienced by key actors within the narrative over the location and aspect of the text.

In his doctoral thesis, Lancaster[15] used the sequence of Chinese translations from the Sanskrit to describe the evolution of the late Sanskrit text of the AsP

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[12] G. SCHOPEN, 'Monks and the Relic Cult in the Mahāparinibbānasutta: An Old Misunderstanding in Regard to Monastic Buddhism', in: K. SHINOHARA/G. SCHOPEN (eds.), *From Benares to Beijing: Essays in Honour of Jan Yün-Hua*, Oakville 1991, 187–202.

[13] F. REYNOLDS, 'The Several Bodies of Buddha: Reflections on a Neglected Aspect of Theravada Tradition', in: *History of Religions* 16 (4), 1977, 374–89.

[14] For a review of the recent literature see P. J. GRIFFITHS, *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion*, Oxford 1999, 34–40.

[15] L. LANCASTER, *An Analysis of the Aṣṭasahasrikāprajñāpāramitāsūtra from the Chinese Translations*, PhD thesis, Religion, University of Wisconsin, 1977.

that had been translated by his teacher, Conze.[16] He concludes, against Conze, that the Sadāprarudita narrative is part of the earliest Sanskrit text as translated by Lokakṣema around 180 CE,[17] though the narrative is expanded and made less coherent through later redactions. Though the story I wish to consider is not assembled in all its pieces until the later translation of Kumārajīva, some 200 years later,[18] the climax of the story — in which the hero is confounded by the object of his pilgrimage — is present in the very earliest version.

The story of Sadāprarudita, 'Always Weeping', is the story of an aspiring Buddhist, a Bodhisattva, devoted to the Perfection of Wisdom. Summoned by a voice, he makes a pilgrimage to the much more advanced Bodhisattva Dharmodgata, and, as it turns out, to the Prajñāpāramitā itself which is enshrined in Dharmodgata's city. The story of this devout pilgrim is clearly an example for hearers or readers of the AsP, and it is typical of the self-referential nature of South Asian religious works that the AsP closes with the story of a pilgrimage to itself.[19]

The story begins with Sadāprarudita searching (*paryeṣamāṇaḥ*) for the Prajñāpāramitā. A voice manifests and speaks to him, saying, 'Go East, oh well-born son. You will then hear (*śroṣyasi*) the Perfection of Wisdom' (V 238.8). The voice promises him that he will be able to hear (*śroṣyasi*) the Perfection of Wisdom 'either as a book or as the body of a dharma-reciting monk' (*pustakagatāṃ vā dharmabhāṇakasya bhikṣoḥ kāyagataṃ* V 238.30).

After going east and passing through a few instructive adventures, Sadāprarudita learns that he must find a great Bodhisattva named Dharmodgata, from whom he will hear the Prajñāpāramitā. The vocabulary is unambiguous; various forms deriving from the root √*śru* occur, and he desribes Dharmodgata (whom he has not yet met) as the person who will cause him to hear the Prajñāpāramitā — '*yo māṃ Prajñāpāramitāṃ śrāvayiṣyati*' (242.15).

Yet when he finally encounters it, Sadāprarudita does not recognise the Prajñāpāramitā. In search of the Bodhisattva Dharmodgata, Sadāprarudita has come to the great city of Gandhavatī, and travels inwards to find a festival going on around a great peaked shrine (*kūṭāgāra*) in the very center.

Moreover, at that time the great Bodhisattva Dharmodgata caused a peaked shrine to be built from seven (kinds of) jewels, decorated with copper and sandalwood, draped with strings of pearls. At each of its four corners he had lamps fashioned from single rubies set. On each of

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[16] E. CONZE (trans.),*The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines and Its Verse Summary*, Bolinas, Cal. 1973.

[17] LANCASTER, *Analysis*, 13.

[18] In particular, the reference to seeing the Perfection of Wisdom in the form of a book or a dharma-reciting monk is first found in Kumārajīva's translation (LANCASTER, *Analysis*, 39, 234 n. 18, and 369).

[19] References for the Sanskrit text are to Vaidya's edition: P. VAIDYA (ed.), *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, Darbhanga 1960. Conze's translation is problematic and I have tended to provide my own translations.

the four sides were silver censers facing each of the four directions, in which pure *kṛṣṇāguru* (*Vepris bilocularis*) incense was burnt to worship the Prajñāpāramitā. In the middle of this shrine was set a seat[20] (*parańka*) made from seven jewels; and on the seat was a casket (*peḍā*) made from four jewels. The Prajñāpāramitā, written on leaves of gold coated with lapis lazuli, had been placed inside this. The peaked shrine was decorated with hanging banners and garlands of many colours. (V 249–50.4)

Now Sadāprarudita, the merchant's daughter and her five hundred attendants saw the peaked shrine laden with countless arrays of offerings. They saw hundreds of godlings, with Indra chief of the gods, scattering and showering and festooning the peaked shrine with sacred mandarava flowers, sandalwood, gold dust and silver dust. They heard divine hymns. (V 250.5–9)

Not understanding what he is seeing, Sadāprarudita addresses Indra[21] directly and asks what the point of all this festooning and scattering of divine flowers and singing of praises actually is. Indra's response is at once direct and evasive. He teases Sadāprarudita for his ignorance:

Don't you know? This, indeed, is the Prajñāpāramitā itself, mother and leader of the great Bodhisattvas! Great Bodhisattvas who practice it quickly attain all the perfections and qualities, all the dharma of the Buddhas, and omniscience. (V 250.13–6)

Sadāprarudita, however, remains confused, and asks, 'Where is it?' Clearly, he still does not understand what he is seeing.

Indra then makes it very clear:

This is it: written by the noble Bodhisattva Dharmodgata on leaves of gold, coated with lapis lazuli, placed in the centre of the shrine and sealed with seven seals. (V 250.18–9)

It is the holy object enshrined immediately in front of Sadāprarudita, on a raised dais, and the obvious centre of all the attention. Indra, however, goes on to make one last remark.

We cannot easily show it to you (*sā na sukarā asmabhis tava darśayitum*). (V 250.19–20)

There are a number of interesting points to observe here. First, Sadāprarudita, although he has vowed to find the Prajñāpāramitā, is quite unable to recognize it, even though it is the central object of worship in a huge public display, until it is pointed out for him. Second, at the point of arrival, when he reaches the destination of his pilgrimage, Dharmodgata has apparently just finished writing out a copy of the codex. Third, although Indra teases the patient pilgrim, even he, king of the gods, is somehow unable to actually show the Prajñāpāramitā to Sadāprarudita.

Why was Sadāprarudita unable to recognize the Prajñāpāramitā, and why is Indra unable to show it to him? The answer to the first question is, I think, clear; Sadāprarudita never expected to see the Prajñāpāramitā. Given his ear-

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[20] See the photograph of modern Newar codex-worship for a fine example of ritual continuity.

[21] He is acquainted with Indra from a previous encounter when the god tested the pilgrim's bodhisattva vow.

*The worship of the nine sacred texts, in manuscript form, that preceded a large recita-
tion of all nine texts by dozens of Vajrācāryas. 2003, Bu Bāhal, Laliptur, Nepal.*

lier visions, this is not surprising. Until this time, he has been expecting to
hear, not *see,* the Prajñāpāramitā. Even though it has been the object of his pil-
grimage, its presentation as an object of ritual worship is, for him, so unexpec-
ted as to prevent him recognising it when he arrives.

Indra's inability to show him the Prajñāpāramitā is a more difficult pro-
blem. I think there is the hint of an answer in the recurrent sevenfold symmetry
of concentric layers around the manuscript; the city of Gandhavatī itself is said
to be encircled by seven walls with seven gates and so forth (V 249.16ff). This
sevenfold enclosure is the exterior manifestation of the seven seals which
prevent Indra from gaining access to the interior of the manuscript. While
there is no obvious sequence of seven stages within the Perfection of Wisdom
material, there is a clear parallel to the description of Sukhāvatī in the Pure
Land texts. Sukhāvatī is said to be surrounded by seven railings and seven
rows of palm trees.[22] The idea that the manuscript is itself a Buddha-field is not

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[22] L. O. GOMEZ, *Land of Bliss: The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light* (Studies in
the Buddhist Traditions), Honolulu 1996, 16. In terms of dating the correspondence is certainly
not improbable; the Chinese translator for both the Shorter Sukhāvatī Sūtra and the first recensi-
on of the AsP that contains the complete Sadāprarudita story is Kumārajīva.

elsewhere developed that I have seen, but if the parallel is not accidental, then the manuscript certainly exceeds the powers of any non-Buddhist deity.[23]

6. The shock of the written

What fascinates me about the story of Sadāprarudita is that the climax turns on his ignorance of books. Even when the voice in his visions clearly alerts him to the possibility encountering the text 'in the form of a book' (though this phrase is only in the latest versions) he is still utterly baffled by the enshrined codex as an object of worship (and this is in the earliest versions). It is not what he thought he was coming to hear. Given the constant reference to the act of writing all through the rest of the book, the story is not intended to introduce the possibility of a written sacred text in itself; rather, it is intended to offer a model of piety that can withstand the collision of the two separate ritually constituted continuities of the Buddha. Recall from above that, as a result of the need to preserve the teachings, the ritualized repetition of the teachings descending from Gautama Buddha was the right and duty of the Sangha, while the ritual worship of material markers was fixed to memorial shrines (*stūpas*). These two exclusive modes of ritually accessing the absent Buddha were collapsed into an inconceivable singularity when the sacred teaching was first written down.

Responses to this riddle varied among Buddhist communities. It is a feature of those innovating movements that came collectively to be called the Mahāyāna that, along with doctrinal features such as the generalisation of the Bodhisattva ideal (as is apparent in the *Sukhāvatī* texts) and the cosmological expansion visible in the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, they developed a specific doctrine of sacred literacy — the *Prajñāpāramitā* quickly acquired a divine aspect not dissimilar to Sophia of the Wisdom literature — and a set of rituals embedded in their sacred texts which gave them a wholly different character to any other textual tradition, Buddhist or otherwise.

In short, the Mahāyāna schools invest the materialized teaching, the book, with the sacrality of a relic — fragments of written text were treated as relics and enshrined in *stūpas* — but just as importantly the written text came to be constituted by continuous and pervasive re-inscription. This repetition becomes a ritual purpose in itself, distinct from (and sometimes even opposed to) any effort to communicate the meaning of the text.

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[23] The Pure Land literature is another important source for the early Mahāyāna. This is an intriguing example of intertextuality between the two genres, often thought to be distinct.

7. Text rituals

The Perfection of Wisdom literature — there is a whole genre within which the AsP is one of the two eldest texts — is the source of textual praxis for the subsequent tradition. Within the AsP, long lists of text rituals occur dozens of times, varying by context. A typical injunction suggests that, in spite of the efforts of Death to thwart the pious, one should acquire (*udgrhītavyā*) the Prajñāpāramita, recollect it (*dhārayitavyā*), cause it to be recited (*vācayitavyā*), understand it (*paryavāpnavyā*), promote its exposition (*pravartayitavyā*), display it (*upadeṣṭavyā*), teach it in detail (*uddeṣṭavyā*), recite it privately (*svādhyātavyā*), arrange for a manuscript copy to written out (*lekhayitavyā*), and write it out oneself (*likhitavyā*) (V 124).

Now, there are two features of this list worth considering in detail. First, it is reflexive. The Prajñāpāramitā, as a manuscript, is giving instructions for how the book itself should be used. Rather like the bottles that Alice encounters in Wonderland ('drink me!'), an early Mahāyāna adherent would have picked up this manuscript and found that it demanded that he or she carry out a series of acts, such as preaching the text and paying for more copies of the manuscript to be made. Second, the natural consequence of these prescriptions is the rapid multiplication of the manuscripts in question.

Where we have ethnographic data for the performance of these rituals, a third feature emerges which, for a reader accustomed to the Gutenberg model of literacy, is jarring. The repetition is not performed in order that the text be understood; indeed, as this new literacy took hold and developed, a wide range of mechanisms and ritual patterns emerged, none of which were concerned with conveying the meaning of the text.

While north of the Himalayas there was an exuberant development of new ways in which to achieve this repetition, in the Indic region a more conservative attitude prevailed. In the Kathmandu Valley it is still possible to see the last remaining Sanskrit Buddhist communities, the Newars, whose Buddhist priests (Vajrācāryas) perform manuscript rituals for the *Prajñāpāramitā* and other texts on a daily basis. These ritual recitations offer a minimal example of my third feature; for once the lead Vajrācārya has prepared himself and properly worshipped the manuscript, he then divides up the manuscript into as many parts as there are Vajrācāryas present. All then settle down — having prepared themselves properly — and begin to read their sections, out loud, all at the same time. The more priests there are, the quicker the reading is completed; and if someone arrives late, they are handed a spare bundle of pages by one of the other Vajrācāryas, complete their preliminary rituals, and settle in to reading. The result, from the perspective of a listener expecting to hear the text and understand it, is chaos.

This style of reading, where the point of the reading is to have read the text but not to convey textual meaning, is deeply disorienting to members of other South Asian religious traditions. When I described this ritual to Pt. Ganesh Thite, of Pune University, his sense of Vedic orthopraxy was deeply offended. In his view the 'correct' way to achieve an efficient recitation was for one fully qualified Brahmin to read out a Vedic text, and several others to listen to it. The idea that the manuscript could be dismantled and read out with no concern for the listener was, to him, appalling. The Theravāda ritual recitation of texts is similar to the Vedic. Such a reading is presently underway for the health of the king of Thailand. All 45 volumes of the Pali canon are being read out in a perfectly intelligible sequence, twenty-four hours a day for around 57 days. A newspaper article explaining the ritual notes: 'During the readings, the monks and the members of the public will read the Tripitaka aloud in unison. Most Thai Buddhists have no problem reading the Pali texts'.[24]

For the sponsors who pay for a Newar Buddhist recitation ritual, however, the more readers the better. David Gellner[25] interviewed the sponsors of such a ritual at Kwā Bāhal and found that they expected this ritual to alleviate illness, bring wealth and assist with smuggling, among other benefits. In 2003 I witnessed a ritual recitation staged in order to celebrate the end of a decades-long project to publish all the nine core Sanskrit texts of Newar Buddhism into printed Newari editions. Dozens of Vajrācāryas, selected for their prestige, were invited to Bu Bāhal to recite all the nine texts.

Not surprisingly, the relative worth accorded to the Newari printed books and the Sanskrit hand-written codices was expressed nicely in the organization of the ritual. The organizers had carefully laid out the printed volumes as a mandala,[26] thus arguing visually that the printed volumes were just as good as the codices; but the actual ritual worship and the subsequent recitation were performed using the Sanskrit manuscripts. The entire affair lasted all day and required some 400 person-hours of ritual effort.

Finally, we might note that later Mahāyāna texts, well aware of the ritual status of earlier Mahāyāna books, argued for their greater worth in terms of ritual superiority. The *Guṇakāraṇḍavyūha*, a 15th century Newar metrical Sanskrit text, contains a level shift in the ritual use of texts. In the final chapter, after listing the various activities which are appropriate to the text, the point is

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[24] P. JAICHALARD/M. SUKYINGCHAROENWONG, 'Tripitaka Marathon to Honour the King', in: *The Nation*, 16 October, accessed online (17 October 2007) at *http://www.nationmultimedia.com/2007/10/16/headlines/headlines_30052584.php*.

[25] D. N. GELLNER, 'The Perfection of Wisdom: A Text and Its Uses in Kwa Bahah, Lalitpur: From Soteriology to Worldly Benefits', in: D. GELLNER (ed.), *The Anthropology of Buddhism and Hinduism: Weberian Themes*, New Delhi 2001, 186.

[26] W. TULADHAR-DOUGLAS, *Remaking Buddhism for Medieval Nepal*, London 2006, 95, 144.

made that copying out a single manuscript of this book is the equivalent of copying manuscripts of every single Mahāyāna sūtra.[27]

8. Meaningful recitation

Is this, therefore, a meaningless reading? Here I think we must distinguish carefully between intelligibility and meaning. While the recitation imperative derives, at least in part, from the oral tradition that preceded literacy — a recitation whose intention was precisely to preserve an intelligible transmission of the teachings — there is another ritualized use of language in Indic religions, the mantra, which influenced the development of Mahāyāna recitation. Mantras are unintelligible sequences of sounds, though they are not meaningless. Their meaning is exactly their recitation, through which a deity is said to be realized. In the case of the Perfection of Wisdom, the text itself becomes a deity, also called Prajñāpāramitā.

The specific ritual relationship, whereby the recitation of a text actualizes the deity that is the text, is expressed very clearly at least twice within the classical Indic tradition before the rise of Vajryāna tantras. Within the commentarial and philosophical corpus there is a short commentary by Diṅṅāga (480–540 CE) on the Prajñāpāramitā called the Collected Essence of the Perfection of Wisdom (*Prajñāpāramitāpiṇḍārthasaṃgrahaḥ*). The first verse reads:

> The *Perfection of Wisdom* is nondual awareness; she is a Tathāgata.
> The word refers both to *book* and *path*; it is to be attained through application to its meaning.
> *prajñāpāramitā jñanam advayaṃ sā tathāgataḥ*
> *sādhyā tādarthyayogeṇa tācchabdaṃ granthamārgayoḥ*

The point here is that the book (*grantha* means the physical manuscript, not the abstract text), the deity, and the process of meditative progression are not different, and it is precisely that nondifference that is the key to using the book, realizing the deity and progressing along the path. Diṅṅāga is very carefully indicating that the 'meaning' of the term Prajñāpāramitā, and by extension, the words within, is not verbal meaning. It is realized through the application of a person to the deity, to the book, to its rituals, and to the Buddhist path unfolded thereby.

This same argument is made in visual form in the iconography of Prajñāpāramitā as a statue or painting that became widespread after about the 8th century in the Kathmandu Valley, Bengal, Indonesia and elsewhere. The deity is depicted as a four-handed female bodhisattva, holding a book in the upper left

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[27] W. TULADHAR-DOUGLAS, *History and Cult of the Guṇakāraṇḍavyūha*, MPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 1997.

hand and a rosary in the upper right hand. The lower two hands are joined at the sternum in a gesture called 'turning the wheel of Dharma' — that is, expounding the Buddhist teachings. Now, the book that she is holding is also the Prajñāpāramitā; and the rosary indicates that she is reciting the book. Thus the iconography makes the same argument as Diṅṅāga did: the deity is the book, and she is the recitation of the book as well, and this taken together is how the meaning of the book is taught.[28]

It should not be surprising, then, to learn that Newars ritually quicken their sacred texts. Not every book gets this treatment; but there are forms of writing (precise calculations of the astrological date and ritual language) found in the colophons of the manuscripts of sacred texts that show that the books have been invested with presence in the same manner as statues of deities and the cloth paintings used for ritual and mediation. For this reason, the book must be worshipped before it is recited; for this reason, such a ritually quickened manuscript cannot simply be thrown away. Ritual handbooks list the ritual used to consecrate a newly copied book (the *sāphū coya vidhi*).

9. Historical depth in Nepal

The textual claims are ancient; the ethnographic data is modern. We do have evidence, beyond the text's own urgings, for the antiquity of these rituals. The foundation myth for Bu Bāhal notes that a Bengali widow brought a small reliquary and manuscript of the Prajñāpāramitā written in in 188 CE (VS 245) — a very early date but not impossibly so — when Bu Bāhal was refounded around NS 40 (= 920 CE).[29]

Manuscripts dating to about that time still exist and are the basis for recitation cults today in several other Newar monasteries. The manuscript at Thaṃ Bāhī, also said to be of Bengali origin, was first written out in 1223 CE; that of Kwā Bāhal in 1225 CE, and that of Michu Bāha is said to date to 1010 CE. Given the antiquity of *Prajñāpāramita* and *Pañcarakṣā* manuscripts generally, these are reasonable dates; what is interesting is that these particular manuscripts have survived constant handling for so many centuries. The manuscripts are inscribed to show their periodic renovations, a process by which the entire manuscript is re-inked, character by character. This ritual may require that the consecrated manuscript be deconsecrated and reconsecrated afterwards. Gellner[30] describes this process and relates the frequency of renovation

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[28] See P. PAL, *Art of Nepal*, Los Angeles 1985, 198, P4, cover (b) for an example from the 12th century.

[29] J. LOCKE SJ, *Buddhist Monasteries of Nepal Sahayogi Prakashan*, Kathmandu 1985, 156.

[30] GELLNER, 'Perfection of Wisdom', 189–90.

to the intensity of usage. While he suspects that the present social organization of the recitation cult is recent, it is clear that the ritual was already thriving during the Pāla period. From the 9th century we have a short ritual manual translated into Tibetan by Dānaśīla on how correctly to recite a book (the *Pustakapāthopāya*) that gives a brief Vajrayāna ritual.

10. Ritual and mechanical innovation

Compared to their northern and eastern neighbours, Newar Buddhists have been conservative in their ritual textual practices. This is useful for comparative purposes, and when we consider the technology that the Newars actually had to hand — such as stamps and dies for metal coins and sculpture — it makes their resistance to Tibetan innovations all the more striking.

There were important Tibetan monasteries within the Newar culture area from at least the 8th century. The constant flow of people and materials across the Himalayan spine included texts, teachers, medicines, fabric and other commodities, and Newar Buddhism must be considered one of the three founts that watered the Tibetan traditions as they developed.

Now, the Tibetan canon was printed for the first time in the 12th century, using wood block technology learned from the Chinese (who printed theirs in the 10th); and while this version of the printed canon was lost, several subsequent complete editions were carved for printing. These printed editions run to hundreds of volumes and are an important part of any monastery's furnishings. Yet it was only in the early 20th century that the first Newar book on Buddhism, a translation of the *Lalitavistāra*, was printed.

The contrast between the two traditions is most starkly shown by the placement of prayer wheels around the Buddhist shrines of the Kathmandu Valley. The hundreds of diaspora Tibetan monasteries that litter every hilltop in the Valley are lined with prayer wheels; Newar monasteries have none, save where Tibetans have noticed their existence. Thus the most ancient shrines of Avalokiteśvara at Bungamati and Jana Bāhal do have prayer wheels, for they are featured in medieval Tibetan pilgrimage guides; but Itum Bāhal, just as ancient but unknown to the Tibetans, has none.

For those unfamiliar with a prayer wheel some explanation may be in order. They come in all shapes and sizes but the basic format is a cylindrical drum, stuffed with printed Buddhist texts, mounted on a shaft that serves as both axle and mount. The outside of the drum is covered with rings of writing, mantras, that rotate past as the drum is spun. Most commonly seen are the handheld prayer wheels, where the shaft extends downwards to become a handle and the drum has a weighted tassle attached. By a regular swirling motion of the right hand, the drum is set to spinning clockwise. Each revolution counts as a recita-

tion not just of the mantras inscribed on the surface of the drum, but also of all the texts within. Larger prayer wheels are set into the walls and corridors of Tibetan monasteries, some the size of five gallon paint tins, and some the size of giant tree trunks. The smaller prayer wheels are set into motion with a brush of the hand as one walks past, and an internal ratchet makes a cheerful clacking clatter as one sets eight or twelve of them into motion passing along a wall. The larger size have a bell that tolls once for each revolution, and small children often expend tremendous effort hauling these round just to hear the bell.

Prayer wheels have been around for at least a thousand years. They derive from a similar sort of innovation that led the Indo-Newar Buddhists to divide up a manuscript into bits: the point is to achieve as many recitations as efficiently as possible. While there are Tibetan texts that discuss the construction and use of prayer wheels, there are no such Sanskrit texts, nor do the Tibetan texts offer any clues as to their origins. Yet among Tibetans the ritual impetus drives a continuous process of invention.

I have seen a tiny prayer wheel driven by rising hot air placed neatly on the radiator of a monk in England, apparently a modern adaptation of the larger models that used to sit in monastery kitchen chimneys. Refugee communities in Karnataka paint mantras on the vanes of windmills and ceiling fans. In California, one of Tarthang Tulku's first students told me the story of his encountering a phonograph for the first time: it was swiftly appropriated for prayer-wheel duty. Since then his organization has experimented with new technology and applied it to the recitation problem. Early laser printers were used at their finest resolution to jam far smaller copies of the mantras onto paper than a human hand could ever write; the paper was trimmed and glued into long strips that were then wound, again using modern machinery, into highly compressed spools that were inserted into traditional prayer wheels. The effect, as I was told, was to increase the number of texts released per revolution of the prayer wheel by at least an order of magnitude. Similar claims are made on the website:

Since 1991, mantras and texts for prayer wheels have been typeset in a computerized Tibetan font designed for the Yeshe De text preservation projects. This allowed much more text to be printed in a very small area. Lines can be scaled down and the text compressed into compact units of meaning. A custom-designed typesetting program stacks the lines closely while retaining legibility. Even so, the final copy is checked line by line with a magnifying glass for type defects and gaps.

This technological innovation and careful review has made it possible to create uniquely powerful prayer wheels containing extensive collections of important Sūtras, mantras, and dhāranīs. The Dharma Wheel Cutting Karma prayer wheel, for example, compresses the text of the Eight Thousand Line Prajñāpāramitā, an entire Tibetan volume, into a single line that spans eighty-one press sheets. About 52 lines of this length (325') set one above another and printed on 3 1/2"-high paper can fit into the drum of a handheld wheel.[31]

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[31] Text from *http://www.nyingma.org/PrayerWheels/typing2.htm*.

Another prominent Tibetan teacher working in the west, Lama Zopa Rimpoche, describes the beneficial effects of a prayer wheel filled with microfilm.[32] Tarthang Tulku's organization went on to design and install hundreds of solar-powered prayer wheels that spin silently, with no human hand to push them, on the Tibetan plateau.

So far as I know, there is no warrant in the Sanskrit sources for regarding a rotation of a book as equivalent to reciting or writing it out. Other forms of abbreviation exist, however. In the recitation of very large numbers of mantras, each recitation may count for ten or a hundred; the use of circular rosaries for keeping track of recitation may have pointed the way to rotation. Physical abbreviations include the fan-like stylised books used in some Zen monasteries, which are riffled to yield a rather musical sound; this is held to be the equivalent of one recitation of the text. The theory behind prayer wheels applies also to prayer flags, which are said to release an instance of the texts printed onto them with each flap in the wind; but the link between human intentional action and the merit derived from the prayer wheel is usually clearer.

There is, however, a related device, the rotating sutra case or library (Chinese *lun ts'ang*, Japanese *rinzō*), which is almost certainly genetically related to the prayer wheel.[33] Just as the prayer wheel is almost exclusively a Tibetan item, so the rotating sutra case exists only in China, Korea and Japan, although there is some confusion between the two. These rotating libraries are always large. Guo,[34] translating a Sung dynasty handbook of 1103, gives the standard height as 6.4 metres, but some were much larger. The example at Wu t'ai shan is some 20 metres in height. The library as a whole is mounted on a bearing; it is octagonal in shape, and the library has handles on the outside allowing it to be rotated. These exist in several Japanese monasteries, including Asakusa in Tokyo and the important Shingon site of Koyasan. These rotating libraries are used in the same way as very large prayer wheels: by moving the library

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[32] LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE, 'The Benefits of Prayer Wheels', available online at *http:// www.medicinebuddha.org/prayer_wheels.htm*. Last accessed 16 October 2007.

[33] SCHOPEN, 'Note', 345, in which he tries to locate the origins of revolving book cases in India, is clearly unaware of GUO, who gives much earlier dates for the first revolving bookcases in China; Q. GUO, 'The Architecture of Joinery: The Form and Construction of Rotating Sutra-Case Cabinets', in: *Architectural History* 42 (1999), 96–109. In his defense, he apparently wrote the article in the 1980s and did not update it before publication. If Schopen's interpretation of the difficult Vipulaśrīmitra inscription is correct, then this may well be evidence for the spread of prayer wheels or revolving bookcases from Central or East Asia to eleventh century Indic Buddhist sites. Where he argues that it must be a bookcase rather than a prayer wheel, his argument is again flawed. It is possible to write an epitome of the AsP in a small enough form to fit within a prayer wheel and such epitomes are widespread in Newar Sanskrit Buddhist manuscripts, especially the 'portmanteau' manuscripts that contained mantra-like ritual epitomes of several major texts that allowed for their speedy recitation.

[34] GUO, 'Architecture of Joinery', 97.

through one complete revolution, the user gains the merit of having completed a recitation of every single book in the library. Unlike a prayer wheel, the volumes within the library remain accessible for scholarly use.

11. Printing as monumental recitation

Given what has gone before, it should come as no surprise that the world's first printed texts were Buddhist *dhāraṇīs*, short magical texts intended for recitation. The earliest dated printed text is either a *dhāraṇī* of a six-armed Bodhisattva, dating from 757 CE,[35] or the famous Dunhuang *Vajracchedikā Prajñaparamita* of 868 CE. Both of these were woodblock prints, and there is some evidence for wood blocks being used for motifs and designs even earlier.

We can, I think, learn somewhat more from a set of single page charms from Japan, the *Hyakumantō Darani* printed on the orders of Empress Shōtoku (718–770). Metal plates were cast and used to print one million sheets containing as many repetitions of four prayers. Each sheet was then rolled up and inserted into a small wooden stūpa carved on a lathe. The scale of this project and the nature of the end product make it clear that printing was not seen as a means to achieving wider readership. Education was not the point: repetition, simple repetition, was the point. Certainly in its historical context Shōtoku's project was also a clear message to the Nara-period Buddhist sangha that relations between the throne and the sangha had recovered from a recent crisis; but within the value system endorsed by Nara Mahāyāna Buddhism, the purpose of the ritual was the printing itself.

Similarly impressive is the Thunder Peak Pagoda, constructed in 975 CE by a prince of the Wu-Yue Kingdom, now in the Zhejiang Province of China. This structure was built from bricks each one of which was hollow and had a printed scroll inserted within it. By deliberate analogy to the tradition of the multiplication of the corporeal relics of śākyamuni, the dedication to the text claims that 84,000 impressions were made for insertion into bricks.[36] This astonishing construction was only discovered when the structure collaped in 1924.

Large state-sponsored printing projects are a hallmark of this period in East Asia. The Chinese canon was first carved onto blocks in the late 10th century under imperial sponsorship, requiring well over 100,000 wood blocks. A full set of blocks was completed in the early 11th century to protect Korea against the Mongols, and, indeed, state bureaus which had as their sole responsibility

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[35] Noted in P. PAL/J. MEECH-PEKARIK, *Buddhist Book Illuminations*, Hong Kong 1988, 237, 263 without further reference; most discussions of the Dunhuang *Vajracchedikā* take that to be the earliest dated printed item.

[36] S. EDGREN, *Chinese Rare Books in American Collections*, New York 1984, 50–1; cited at PAL/MEECH-PEKARIK, *Buddhist Book Illuminations*, 236.

the production of Buddhist texts and translations existed in Korea, Japan, and China.[37]

These earliest examples of printing are the most effective historical examples with which to confront Western presuppositions about the evolution of literacy. Here we have no courageous individuals resisting an oppressive regime through the liberating and democratic effects of printing in the vernacular; indeed, in every respect we find the opposite. The *Hyakumantō Darani* was a hugely expensive project, only really feasible for the state; it served to protect the state through the power of traditional religion, and, being a *dhāraṇī*, was by definition unintelligible. The Thunder Peak Pagoda printing project was not merely unintelligible, but when finished, invisible: 84,000 bricks, invisibly quickened by the texts buried within. Both were also exquisite expressions of piety on a scale comparable to the building of medieval Western cathedrals.

Where the state sponsors the publication of the Buddhist canon, we are on more familiar ground; clearly, the content of the canon and its preservation as an abstract text are at stake. However, the importance of repetition as in these quantitatively enormous print runs of *dhāraṇī*s is never far from the surface. The difference between printing and prayer wheels would appear to be that printing produces a physical artefact, a printed text, which is evidence of a successful instance of the repetitive ritual. Even this is unnecessary, however. Ekvall records an instance of Tibetan monks carefully pressing woodblocks into the running surface of a stream.[38]

12. Developments since 1990

The final development in prayer wheels is, of course, computer recitation. I know of at least one program designed to recite the Heart Perfection of Wisdom (the *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdayasūtram*) automatically; it was developed in a Japanese Zen monastery, using HyperCard on a Macintosh.[39] Like a prayer wheel, this program recited the text silently, displaying each phrase on the screen; but it adds the sound of the bell which is struck periodically through the recitation of the text. It doubles as a device for teaching students to memorise the text, and as a device for automatically reciting the text. It is not particularly efficient, however, as it follows the ordinary human pace of recitation.

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[37] PAL/MEECH-PEKARIK, *Buddhist Book Illuminations*, 237, 263; T. SEN, 'The Revival and Failure of Buddhist Translations During the Song Dynasty', in: *T'oung Pao* 88 (2002), 27–80; here 30.

[38] R. EKVALL, *Religious Observances in Tibet: Patterns and Function*, Chicago 1963; cited in: GOODY (ed.), *Literacy*, 16.

[39] I saw this programme in use during a collaboration between Zen and Vajrayāna practitioners in Kathmandu in 1995.

In a similar vein we might note a newspaper clipping taken from the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, March 1995.

The reporters had gathered to watch Robopriest, a fully ordained robot cleric who has been saying prayers in the cemetery since 1992. Isao (his inventor) continued: 'He is well versed in the liturgy of ten Japanese Buddhist sects and, when he chants the sutras, his lips and facial muscles move in time to the pre-recorded blessings. He also bows his head and closes his eyes, in the manner prescribed in ancient scriptures.'[40]

I suspect the ordination of a non-human is somewhat problematic even in this day and age; but I have not been able to find out anything further about this machine. What is here transcribed as 'ordained' may well be something more like the sacralisation rituals performed for important manuscripts in Nepal.[41]

The World Wide Web offers a virtual landscape into which objects which function like prayer wheels or printing presses may be introduced. The simplest form is an animated icon of a prayer wheel turning while the page is being viewed. I began to study this problem before Tim Bray's hypertext protocol was unleashed on the world, and anticipated seeing an early digital prayer wheel as soon as the animated GIF standard was released. The first one I saw was at http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/2227, now extinct; it was apparently written by a programmer associated with Lama Zopa's Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition. Such animated prayer wheels are now fairly common 'floating images' on the web, though most of them appear to be copies of the same two or three original files. By 1996 the online Mahāyāna community had become aware of the possibilities, and in that year Deb Platt published a web page whose first (visible) words are 'This is where prayer wheels enter the cyber-age'. The page goes on to note that the computer hard disk or a CD-ROM spins at very high speed, far faster than any prayer wheel could hope to spin. If the hard disk has Buddhist *sūtras* stored on it, it theoretically functions as a prayer wheel. She goes on to note that

If the mantra is inscribed once and placed into a prayer wheel, each rotation of the prayer wheel accumulates the same merit as saying the mantra once. Similarly, a prayer wheel containing 100 million instances of the mantra yields the same purification power per rotation as saying the mantra 100 million times.

To set your very own prayer wheel in motion, all you have to do is download this mantra to your computer's hard disk. Once downloaded, your hard disk drive will spin the mantra for you. Nowadays hard disk drives spin their disks somewhere between 3600 and 7200 revolu-

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[40] This was picked up by *Private Eye* (May 1995) and I contacted the *Globe and Mail* who confirmed the original story but were unable to supply a copy of the original clipping. A related article was published in 1999: Japan Echo, 'ROBO-MONK: Sutra-Chanting Doll Becomes Temple Mascot', 28 May; available online at *http://web-japan.org/trends00/honbun/ tj990527.html*. Last accessed 17 October 2007.

[41] Perhaps the most vexing problem associated with this is the question of agency. So far as I understand the problem, the production of merit requires intention.

tions per minute, with a typical rate of 5400 rpm. Given those rotation speeds, you'll soon be purifying loads of negative karma.

If you occassionally post articles to netnews, you can exponentially increase the good karma that is generated by including the mantra in your .sig file. Shortly after posting an article, every news server in the world will be spinning your mantra round and round. If we assume that the news servers are Unix machines that operate continuously, a single news posting with this .sig will probably spin over *5 trillion times* before the article expires. Sentient beings everywhere will be thanking you. However avoid *spamming* the net, as the negative karma produced by the spam tends to cancel out the good karma that might otherwise have been generated.[42]

Technology moves on; 'netnews' and the '.sig' are now forgotten terms from an era before browsers were the dominant window onto the internet. The more recent Digital Prayer Wheel[43] includes various applets and animated prayer wheels and, naturally, gives instructions on how to add a prayer wheel to one's own web page.

13. Writing and the spread of the Mahāyāna

I set us two tasks at the beginning of this essay. The first was to show that there are many literacies, not just one. The second was to show that Mahāyāna Buddhism came into being together with its own way of being literate, and that way of being literate was a significant feature in its self-understanding and spread across Asia.

There are many ways of being literate. This is a liberating idea, which I hope will make possible a more sensitive analysis of the historical development of literacy across various societies. The advent of writing shapes and is shaped by the cultural moments in which it occurs. Because writing is a structuring, stabilising technology which profoundly affects the way in which culture is transmitted, it should not be surprising that these literacies are themselves tenacious social patterns that persevere and change in revolutionary ways. In my own researches I have seen Mahāyāna literacy make its first tentative forays into the realm of the digital and algorithmic; whether this will lead to (or has already led to?) a qualitative shift on the order of the invention of writing remains to be seen.

We have seen how Mahāyāna literacy is fundamentally different from Vedic literacy — as expressed by Pandit Thite's physical unease at the Newar way of reciting. It is also different from the style of literacy that shaped the

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[42] D. PLATT, 'Click Here for Good Karma', 1996, webpage: *http://www.serve.com/cmtan/ buddhism/Lighter/GoodKarma/index.html*; most recently accessed 17 October 2007; links indicated in italics.

[43] Dharma Haven 2005: 'The Prayer Wheel: Spiritual Technology from Tibet', web page *http://www.dharma-haven.org/tibetan/prayer-wheel.htm*; most recently accessed 17 October 2007.

Western academy and its tools for understanding Mahāyāna Buddhism. The particular Mahāyāna technology of writing evolved not just in order to be understood but also to be printed, chanted, rotated, repeated. A Mahāyāna book is not just for being understood; it is a ritual object that has readability as only one of its properties, no more important than worship-ability, enshrine-ability, or recitability. From this it is not far to the many book-centred Buddhisms — such as the Japanese Nichiren schools that urge devotion to the *Lotus Sutra* itself as a saviour.

This difference of literacies, rather like Thite's nausea, explains why the book-centred Buddhisms are so perplexing to students (and professors) of Buddhism for whom the only literacy is the literacy of meaningful statements. The Western academy, shaped by the Protestant Reformation, was constituted by a very different literacy. Gregory Schopen, who carefully documented the cult of the book in early Mahāyāna, wrote an influential article[44] in which he complained that the history of Buddhism was written on the basis of textual sources, and did not give equal weight to archaeological or art-historical sources. The article referred to 'Protestant presuppositions' — but Schopen did not go far enough. In the way that all humans do, the writers of Buddhist texts use language to communicate arguments, stories and emotions; but for them, the books that may contain those statements are much more than just packaged communication.

Writing and the rise of the Mahāyāna. I return, finally, to Gombrich's claim. He argued that the advent of writing, and the concomitant loss of the social institutions that guaranteed the recited transmission, allowed for new texts to creep in. This may well be true, though it is at best a necessary and not a sufficient condition. Schopen, Harrison, and Nattier have all given accounts of Mahāyāna history that recognize the importance of writing. The emphasis Mahāyānists placed on writing is linked to relics, trade patterns, apocalyptic movements. Barrett,[45] in a recent study in environmental history, discusses some of these theories and then connects Mahāyāna literacy and the emergence of printing to global shifts in climate. As with so many other studies, this too founders under the weight of an assumption: their literacy is the same as Western academic literacy and must be concerned primarily with conveying meaning.[46]

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[44] SCHOPEN, 'Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism'.

[45] T. H. BARRETT, 'Climate Change and Religious Response: The Case of Early Medieval China', in: *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* Series 3 17(2) (2007), 139–56; 151–4.

[46] Further literature: Y. AN (trans.), *The Buddha's Last Days: Buddhaghosa's Commentary on the Mahāparinibbana Sutta*, Oxford 2003; E. FRAUWALLNER, 'Prajñāpāramitāpiṇḍārtha-saṃgrahaḥ', in: *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Süd- und Ostasiens* 3 (1959), 140–4; L. GOOD-RICH, 'The Revolving Book-Case in China', in: *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 7(2) (1942), 130–61; B. HICKMAN, 'A Note on the Hyakumanto Dharani', in: *Monumenta Nipponica* 30

Such an oversight requires real determination. Mahāyāna books are in no wise coy about revealing their motives. Where Walter Benjamin observed the devaluation of popular reproductions of artwork by contrast to some idealized and inaccessible Original, Mahāyāna books refuse to hypostatize some *ur-text* lingering above and behind each ink-spattered volume. Each book *is* the deity; each book *requires* that you reproduce it as a condition of reading.

The first Mahāyāna genre to emerge, the Perfection of Wisdom texts, embodied a profound response to the emergence of writing. The collision of intangible, recited scripture and tangible, worshipped relic had not been anticipated and it presented a ritual and doctrinal conundrum. In these texts, the consubstantiation of the physical object and the sacred scripture generated an utterly new kind of object, the written relic that demanded its own replication. This was a literacy, and it was this literacy and not any other that drove forward a chain of mechanical innovations that gave to us reading and writing humans the invention of printing.

(1975), 87–93; M. WALSHE (trans.), *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1987.

Mohr Siebeck 2009

Teil III: Textualisierung im Hinduismus und im Buddhismus

Statt eines Epilogs