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New Buddhist Sanskrit Texts
from Central Asia:
An Unknown fragment of the
Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra

by G. M. Bongard-Levin

The discovery of ancient Indian texts in Central Asia at the end of the 19th century opened a new stage in the study of Indian culture. There was found a large number of original Sanskrit literary and religious documents destroyed in India due to the climatic conditions but preserved in sand-covered ancient towns of Central Asia. Scholars have acquired many unique manuscripts, dating back to the 6–8th centuries A.D. The publication of these texts by P. Pelliot, K. Otani, L. Finot, S. Levi, E. Waldschmidt and others has allowed us to reconsider many traditional views concerning the domain of Indian culture and historical influence, as well as the history and development of Buddhism, its schools and main trends.

New problems were put before Buddhology: the problem of co-relation of Hīnayana and Mahāyāna, that of the reconstruction of the Buddha's original teaching, etc. Owing to the discovery of languages not known before—Śāka and Tocharian—as well as of the Central Asian variants of ancient Indian scripts, there appeared a new branch of Oriental studies: Central Asian philology and paleography.

Owing to the expeditions of Russian scholars to Central Asia, the Russian Academy of Sciences has acquired a remarkable collection of Indian and Śāka-Khotanese manuscripts, in many aspects surpassing by its fullness and scientific value the Central Asian collections of France, Germany, Japan and other countries.¹

Professor S. Oldenberg was among the first researchers to investigate the Central Asian texts. In fact, he was a founder of the Soviet school of Central Asian studies.² From the beginning of the

50's a gifted Leningrad orientalist, V. S. Vorobyev-Desyatovsky, devoted himself to studies of the Central Asian material; in spite of his short life he succeeded in publishing a number of unique documents in the Sanskrit and Śaka languages.

V. S. Vorobyev-Desyatovsky completed a full catalogue of all manuscripts and fragments of the Central Asian collection, which forms a solid base for further investigations of this valuable collection.⁴ The publication of Central Asian documents is an urgent task for Soviet scholars. Its realization will expose dozens of new documents on Indian culture and will help to solve important problems related to the history of spiritual culture in India and neighbouring countries during the ancient and early medieval periods.

Among the Buddhist Sanskrit texts of the Central Asian collection the fragments of the Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*—an important religious text of Northern Buddhism—are of the utmost interest. Only two fragments of this text were at the disposal of scholars until quite recently;⁵ that is why the study of the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* as well as of all connected problems of Mahāyāna religion and of the history of early Mahāyāna *sūtras* was carried out with the help of Tibetan and Chinese translations. The Sanskrit texts of the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, which were discovered in Turfan by a German expedition and later published by E. Waldschmidt, form a part of the Mūlasarvāstivāda canon and are not directly connected with Mahāyāna.⁶ The Southern (or Theravāda) tradition is represented by the *Mahāparinibbānasutta*—the sixteenth *sūtra* of the *Dīgha-Nikāya*.⁷

It was V. Vorobyev-Desyatovsky who, while studying the Central Asian Collection, brought attention to the existence of five fragments of the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* in his catalogue; later we discovered one more fragment.⁸ The investigation of these fragments is now complete: they have been transliterated, translated and annotated and many lacunas have been reconstructed. Judging by the fragments, the Mahāyāna version of the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* differs textually and conceptually from the Pali and Sanskrit (Mūlasarvāstivāda) ones. In Mahāyāna, a completely new interpretation was given to basic ideas of the early Buddhist religion. The *sūtra* deals with the interpretation of the ideas of *nirvāṇa*, salvation, Buddhahood, etc.

The Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* was very popular in Central Asia and China.⁹ Chinese sources preserve a story about the journey of

Dharmakṣema, a native of Magadha, in India, to Khotan in search of the Mahāyāna manuscripts of the *Nirvāṇasūtra*.¹⁰ Dharmakṣema discovered in Khotan copies of the *sūtra* and on his return to China, made a translation of the Sanskrit text into Chinese.¹¹ This tradition is in accordance with the find of the six fragments of the *sūtra* in Central Asia. Moreover, examination of these texts shows them to be different hand-written copies.

The opinions of scholars concerning the date of the Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* differ greatly: some consider it to have been completed by 200–300 A.D., others suggest later dates—e.g., the beginning of the Gupta dynasty in India. Our fragments are written in upright Central Asian Brāhmī. It is possible to assume them to be part of a manuscript copied in Central Asia from some Indian version of the *sūtra*. Judging by the data of the Chinese texts, manuscripts of the Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* were widespread in Kashmir in the 5th century A.D. The existence of Indian versions (Indian original texts) is mentioned in the Chinese works dealing with the activities of Dharmakṣema.¹² For example, it is mentioned that Dharmakṣema originally brought an incomplete manuscript of Mahāyāna *Nirvāṇasūtra* from India to China. The Chinese sources also inform us that the beginning of the *sūtra* was written on birch-bark. In scholars' opinion it may be an indication of the Kashmiri origin of the *sūtra*'s basic version.¹³

The text of our fragment is not preserved in full;¹⁴ there is only its left side intact, dimensions 17/9 cm². The text is put down in Indian ink on light brown paper. The space between the lines is 1 cm, 27–28 *akṣaras* in each line. The verso text is better preserved than the recto, where the left sides of the first and seventh lines are wiped out. In the left part of the manuscript there is a circle and a hole for holding; it is registered as SI_{88a}^P in the N. Petrovsky collection. Judging by the paleography, the manuscript dates back to the 6–7th centuries A.D.¹⁵ The fragment being published here has a pagination, No. 15, which corresponds to the 13th page of the Tibetan translation xylograph (13a (1)–b (4))—'*Phags pa yongs su mya ngan las 'das pa chen po theg pa'i chen po'i mdo, Bka' 'gyur*, Vol. Jha; and 369A (15)–B (17) of the Chinese translation of Dharmakṣema (XII Volume of the Chinese Tripiṭaka).

Handwritten text in an ancient script, possibly Tamil or Grantha, on a fragment of parchment. The text is arranged in approximately seven horizontal lines. A circular hole is present in the center of the fragment, likely from a binding. The script is dark and somewhat faded, with some characters appearing to be in a different script or dialect than the main text.

Handwritten text in an ancient script, possibly Tamil or Grantha, on a fragment of parchment. The text is arranged in approximately seven horizontal lines. A circular hole is present in the center of the fragment, likely from a binding. The script is dark and somewhat faded, with some characters appearing to be in a different script or dialect than the main text.

A.

1. . . . yāpra [l]igrahūtapiṇḍapātāḥ ekānte sthan. punar aparaṃ tatheva ca triṃśadgamgā/. . .
2. byayam¹ dadāta. mahatā siṃhavikramaṇa gandhahastīva puṣpamālānyā-dāya . . .
3. kravākakā/daṃ/bakāraṇḍava. sārasakaukilabāhikakalaviṃkajīvajīva . . .
4. ya svai svai na [dit] vābhaidy² ekānte sthan. punar aparaṃ yā kāñcānaḥ pṛthiv . . .
5. ka sālāmūla³nimnam. pradeśam ālokyāpagataśarkkarasikatamākṣā . . .
6. tataśca kṣīrād [v]yaṣaṇīya makṣikā ekante tasthu punar aparaṃ tadaiva catudvīpaniv⁴ . . .
7. . . . [dahi]balena⁵: samidā⁶ upādāya. bhojanaṃ copanā[mya?] mahā-yānakā[śyapa?]⁷

B.

1. . . . nyo¹ vā [ja]napadaḥpradeśam u[pā]jahru. te sarve niravaśeṣaṃ tatra tad ājagmuḥ sthā . . .
2. khaṃcaiti punar aparaṃ tena samayena²samkhyeyā gamgāvālikasamā mahā . . .
3. tān avivāritātapapṛthucchāya³ śilātālā prastravaṇākīrṇṇanirjharā . . .
4. hāprabhāvādevaṣṭrāḥ sumeruṇām⁴ saha pūjānimittam āga[cch] . . .
5. samkhyeya⁵ gamgāvālikasamāścatusāgaranivāsino mahānadī . . .
6. guṇābhirāmā pūjāpurassarāḥ divaprabhām ivādityaprabhābhiḥ sūrya-prabhā . . .
7. m abhinavadvīkarodaya ivāsokappa⁶llavarāgam kṛtvā bhagavantam abhivam[dya] . . .

NOTES TO THE TEXT

Recto

1. Ought to be *abhayam*.
2. *nadivābhaidya*, *abhadya*—without dividing, undivided, i.e., together; in Tibetan: “everyone crying loudly”; in Chinese: “carrying flowers and fruits”—evidently connected with *abhivādya*.
3. After *a* there is a little space but no *aksara* is preserved.
4. Possibly °*nivasinaḥ*.

5. Evidently, *vṛddhabalena*, cf. Tibetan text.

6. Ought to be *samidhām upādāya* (cf. Tibetan text), but *ā* instead of *ām* is possible, see F. Edgerton, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary*, I (Grammar), II (Dictionary) (New Haven, 1953), I, 9.20–22.

7. According to the Tibetan text, ought to be *Mahākaśyapa*. Evidently, the copyist first wrote *mahā* and then, by mistake, *na*, but in order to retain the sense, put down under the line 'yā—mahāyāna.

Verso

1. Possibly, *bhikṣunyo*.

2. Correctly (*a*)*samkheya*, thus *samayenā*.

3. Usually °*cchāyā*, here N.Pl., see also Edg. I, 9.86.

4. Better without *m*; usually °*uṇā*, but *ūnā* is also possible, see Edg. I, 12.32.

5. *asamkheya*.

6. Superfluous *p*.

TRANSLATION

A

1. . . (they), not having received the alms-food, stood aside. And then in the same manner (all the living beings) in their number equal to that of the grains of sand in 30 Gaṅgās . . .

2. took (a vow) of fearlessness. Like the great might of a lion, they, having taken flowers and garlands (which yielded a perfume), similar to the scent of the elephant's female at the time of coupling . . .

3. *cakravakas*, *kadambas*, *karandavas*, *sarasas*, *haukilas*, *bahikas*, *kalaviṃkas*, *jīva-jīvas*²⁶ . . .

4. each of them, exclaiming together in one voice,²⁷ stood aside. Then this golden land . . .

5. having noticed that the place at the foot of a *śāla* tree was devoid of the stones and sand . . .

6. and then, having cleared the milk from the flies, they stood aside. And then (those who live) on the four continents . . .

7. (with the help of the magic power), having brought fire-wood and food and offering (this). Mahākaśyapa . . .

B

1. . . . they (the nuns) came to this part of the land. And all of them, without exception, came there . . .
2. and then in that time (the great ones) . . . innumerable like the sand-grains of the Gaṅgā . . .
3. (trees), offering great shade, keeping out the heat, the foot of the rocks and the streams, (carrying the water) of the water-falls . . .
4. the divinities, possessing great power, came together at Sumeru, in order to make worship . . .
5. (the divinities), in number equal to the sand-grains of Gaṅgā, as well as those who live in the four oceans, and the great rivers . . .
6. brilliant in their merits, longing to make worship, they (darkened) the brilliance of the Sun (by their own light), just like the brilliance of the Sun (surpasses) the light of the day . . .
7. like the rising of the Sun, they expressed (their love), (gleaming) like the flowers of an *āsoka* tree, and, having offered veneration to the Buddha . . .

Compare the Chinese Translation

(The Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra, A Complete Translation from the Classical Chinese Language in 3 volumes, Annotated and with full Glossary, Index, and Concordance, by Kosho Yamamoto, Oyama, Ube City, 1973; vol. I, pp. 17–18).

As the Buddha was about to enter *nirvāṇa*, each took up innumerable, boundless, beautiful flowers of lotus and came to where the Buddha was, touched his feet with the head, carried their steps back, and sat on one side.

Also, there were lion kings, that were as many as the sands of twenty Gangeses. King Lion's Roar headed the number. To all beings they gave fearlessness. Carrying various flowers and fruits they came to where the Buddha was, touched his feet with the head and carried their steps back, and sat on one side.

Also, there were kings of flying birds as many as the sands of twenty Gangeses. They were lapwings, wild geese, mandarin ducks, peacocks, and all such birds, and *gandharvas*, *karandas*, *minas*, parrots, *kokilas*, wagtails, *kalavinkas*, *jivamjivakas*, and all such birds, carrying flowers and fruits, came to where the Buddha was, touched his feet with the head, carried their steps back, and sat on one side.

Also, there were buffaloes, cows, and sheep, that were as

many as the sands of twenty Gangeses, which all came to the Buddha and gave out wonderfully fragrant milk. All this milk filled the ditches and pits of Kuśinagara castle. The colour, fragrance and taste were all perfect. This done, they carried their steps back and sat on one side.

Also, there were present *ṛṣis* of the four lands, who were as many as the sands of twenty Gangeses, Kṣāntirṣi headed the number. Carrying flowers, incenses, and fruits, they came to where the Buddha was, touched his feet with the head, walked around him three times, and said to him: "O World-honoured One! Please have pity and accept the last of our offerings!" The Tathāgata, aware of the occasion, was silent and did not accept. At this, their wish was not answered, all the *ṛṣis* were sad. They carried their steps back and sat on one side.

There were present all the kings of the bees of Jambudvīpa. Wonderful Sound, the king of bees, headed the number. They carried in many flowers, came to where the Buddha was, touched his feet with the head, walked around him once, carried their steps back, and sat on one side.

At the time, the *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣunīs* of Jambudvīpa were all gathered, excepting the two venerable ones, Mahākaśyapa and Ānanda. Also, there are spaces in between the worlds, which were as many as the sands of innumerable *asamkhyas* of Gangeses and all the mountains of Jambudvīpa, of which King Mount Sumeru headed the number. Grand were the adornments of the mountains. Old and luxuriant were the bushes and forests, and the branches and leaves were full grown, so that they hid the sun. Various were the wonderful flowers which bloomed all around and they were beautiful. The grand springs and streams were pure, fragrant, and transparent. *Devas*, *nāgas*, *gāndharvas*, *asuras*, *garudas*, *kimnāras*, *maharagas*, *ṛṣis*, charmers, actors, dancers, and musicians filled the place. All these heavenly ones of the mountains and others came to where the Buddha was, touched his feet with the head, carried their steps back, and sat on one side.

Also, there were gods of the four great seas and of the rivers, who were as many as the sands of *asamkhyas* of Gangeses and who all had great virtues and heavenly feet. Their offerings were twice as many as those that had preceded them. The lights that had emanated from the bodies of the gods and those of the mask dances so hindered the lights of the sun and moon that they were hidden and could not be seen any more. The *champaka* flowers were strewn over the waters of the river Hiranyavati. They came to where the Buddha was, touched his feet with the head, carried their steps back, and sat on one side.

NOTES

See M. I. Vorobyeva-Desyatovskaya, E. N. Tyomkin, "The Manuscripts of the Central Asian Fund," in *The Oriental funds of the largest libraries of the Soviet Union* (Moscow, 1963), pp. 50–51 (in Russian); G. M. Bongard-Levin, E. N. Tyomkin, "New Buddhist Texts from Central Asia" (Moscow, 1967).

2. See T. I. Stcherbatsky, "S. F. Oldenburg as an Indologist," in *To the 50th Anniversary of Scientific and Public Activity of S. F. Oldenburg (1882–1932)* (Leningrad, 1934), pp. 15–23 (in Russian); S. Oldenburg, "A Preliminary Note to a Buddhist Manuscript, Written in Kharosthi" (S. Petersburg, 1897) (in Russian); S. Oldenburg, "A Kashgari Manuscript of N. Petrovsky," *ZVOIRAO*, vol. 7 (1892), pp. 81–82 (in Russian); S. Oldenburg, "Two Kashgari Buddhist Texts," *ZVOIRAO*, vol. 8 (1893–1894), pp. 152–153 (in Russian); S. Oldenburg, "Notes on the Kashgari Buddhist Texts," *ZVOIRAO*, vol. 8, pp. 349–351 (in Russian); S. Oldenburg, "Fragments of Kashgari and Sanskrit Manuscripts from the Collection of N. Petrovsky," *ZVOIRAO*, vol. 11 (1897–1898), pp. 207–264 (in Russian); *Ibid.*, vol. 15 (1902–1903), pp. 0113–0112 (in Russian).

3. Details in: G. M. Bongard-Levin, E. N. Tyomkin, "Works by V. S. Vorobyev-Desyatovsky and investigation of the Buddhist texts from N. Petrovsky collection," *Problems of the History of Languages and Culture of the Peoples of India (A collection of articles in memoriam of V. S. Vorobyev-Desyatovsky (M., 1974))*, pp. 12–19 (in Russian). See also the bibliography of works by V. S. Vorobyev-Desyatovsky printed here.

4. Recently some of the texts were investigated and published (See G. M. Bongard-Levin, E. N. Tyomkin, "New Buddhist Texts from Central Asia"; G. M. Bongard-Levin, "Buddhist Studies in the USSR and New Archaeological Excavations in Soviet Central Asia," in *East Asian Cultural Studies*, vol. XII (1973), N° 1–4, pp. 11–28; G. M. Bongard-Levin, E. N. Tyomkin, "Fragment of an Unknown Manuscript of the Saddharmapūṇḍarīka from N. F. Petrovsky collection," in *Indo-Iranian Journal*, vol. VIII, 1965, N° 4, pp. 268–274; G. M. Bongard-Levin, "Two New Fragments of the Saddharmapūṇḍarīka (a preliminary note)," in *Indian culture and Buddhism (M., 1972)*, pp. 187–191 (in Russian); G. M. Bongard-Levin, M. I. Vorobyeva-Desyatovskaya, E. N. Tyomkin, "New Sanskrit Texts from Central Asia," in program of the Conference on the Languages of India, Pakistan, Nepal and Ceylon (M., 1965) (in Russian); G. M. Bongard-Levin, M. I. Vorobyeva-Desyatovskaya, E. N. Tyomkin, "On Investigation of Indian texts from Central Asia," in *Materials on the History and Philology of Central Asia* (Ulan-Ude, 1968), N° 3, pp. 105–117 (in Russian); G. M. Bongard-Levin, M. I. Vorobyeva-Desyatovskaya, E. N. Tyomkin, "A Fragment of the Sanskrit Sumukhādhārāni," in *Indo-Iranian Journal*, vol. X (1967), N° 2–3, pp. 150–159; G. M. Bongard-Levin, E. N. Tyomkin, "Fragment of the Saka version of the Dharmasārīra-sūtra from the N. F. Petrovsky collection," in *Indo-Iranian Journal*, vol. XI (1969), N° 4, pp. 269–280; See also: Akira Yuyama, "Supplementary Remarks on Fragment of an Unknown Manuscript of the Saddharmapūṇḍarīka from N. F. Petrovsky Collection by G. M. Bongard-Levin and E. N. Tyomkin," *Indo-Iranian Journal*, vol. IX, N° 2 (1966), pp. 85–112; "A Bibliography of the Sanskrit texts of the Saddharmapūṇḍarīka (Canberra, 1970), pp. 21, 22, 102; H. Bechert, "Über die 'Marburger Fragmente des Saddharmapūṇḍarīka'" in *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen. Philologisch-Historische Klasse*, 1972, N° 1, S.3–81.

5. See R. Höernle, "Manuscript Remains of Buddhist Literature," vol. I (Oxford, 1916), pp. 93–97, p. XXI; Taishō (Taishō, Shinshū Daizōkyō), t. XII, p. 604. According to D. S. Ruegg, one of the fragments of the Mahāyāna sūtra is given in *Ratnagotravibhāga-Mahāyānottaratantrāśāstra*. See D. S. Ruegg, *Le traité du Tathāgatagarbha du Bu Ston Rin Chen Grub* (Paris, 1973), p. 24; Nakamura Hajime, "A Critical Survey of Mahāyāna and Esoteric Buddhism Chiefly Based upon Japanese Studies," *Asiatica*, vol. VII (Tokyo, 1964), pp. 49–53. H. Nakamura refers to a work by K. Vatanabe, where a fragment of the sūtra from Central Asia is mentioned (Ko-getsu—in Japanese) (Tokyo, 1933), p. 570.

6. See E. W. Waldschmidt, "Das Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra," *Abhandlungen der Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, Bd. I–III, 1950–1951.

7. *Digha-Nikāya*, vol. II (Pāli Text Society). Ed. T. W. Rhys Davids, J. E. Carpenter (London, 1947).

8. A short characterization of these fragments has been given. See G. M. Bongard-Levin, E. N. Tyomkin, "New Buddhist Texts from Central Asia," *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, vol. XI (1969), N° 1–4; G. M. Bongard-Levin, "Buddhist studies . . ."; G. M. Bongard-Levin, E. N. Tyomkin, "Works of Vorobyev-Desatovsky . . ." (in Russian).

9. Details in: A. Bareau, *Recherches sur la biographie du Buddha dans les Sūtra-piṭaka et les Vinaya-piṭaka anciens. II. Les derniers mois, le parinirvāṇa et les funérailles*, t. I (Paris, 1970).

10. The difference between Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna versions was pointed out by many scholars on the basis of the Chinese translations (see, for instance, L. Renou, J. Filliozat, *L'Inde classique* (Paris, 1953), p. 435).

11. Cf. F. W. Thomas, "Brāhmī Script in Central-Asian Sanskrit Manuscripts," *Asiatica*, (Leipzig, 1954); L. Sander, *Palaographisches zu den Sanskrithandschriften der Berliner Turfansammlung* (Wiesbaden, 1968).

12. P. Ch. Bagchi, *India and Central Asia* (Calcutta, 1955); E. Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, vol. I (Leiden, 1959); A. Gabain, "Der Buddhismus in Zentralasien," *Handbuch der Orientalistik*, Bd. 8 (*Religionsgeschichte in der Zeit der Weltreligionen*) (Leiden-Köln, 1961); *Ch'an and Zen Teaching*, Ed., trans. and expl. by Lu K'uan Yü (London, 1962).

13. P. Ch. Bagchi, *India and Central Asia*, p. 109–110.

14. G. M. Bongard-Levin, "Sanskrit Manuscripts from Central Asia (A fragment of the Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra)," *Journal of Ancient History* (*Vestnik Drevnei Istorii*) (1975), N 4, pp. 75–79 (in Russian); two other fragments were also published: G. M. Bongard-Levin, "New Indian Texts from Central Asia (An unknown fragment of Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra)," *Peoples of Asia and Africa* (1975), N 6, pp. 145–151 (in Russian); by the same author, "A New Fragment of Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra," *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungariae*, t. XXV, fasc. 1–4 (1977), pp. 243–248.

Abbreviations

ZVOIRAO—"Zapiski Vostochnogo Otdeleniya Imperatorskogo Russkogo Archeologicheskogo Obschestva" (Transactions of the Oriental Section of the Imperial Archeological Society).