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A Note on the Opening Formula of Buddhist *Sūtras*

by Jonathan A. Silk

Since at least the time of Buddhagosa, controversy has surrounded the interpretation of the stock opening of Buddhist *sūtras*—in Sanskrit *evam mayā śrutam ekasmin samaye bhagavān* (place name) *viharati sma*. The main problem centers around whether the *sūtra* was *heard* (*śrutam*) at one time, or whether the Blessed One *was dwelling* (*viharati sma*) at one time. The phrase *ekasmin samaye* (at one time), standing between the two verbal terms, could be understood to modify either.¹

The most often cited study of the problem is John Brough's paper, "'Thus Have I Heard . . .,'" written forty years ago.² In considering the evidence of the canonical Tibetan translations of Buddhist texts, Brough noted that the xylographed editions of the Kanjurs he consulted read the opening phrase as follows: 'di skad bdag gis thos pa dus gcig na/ bcom ldan 'das . . . , that is, they punctuate after the equivalent of Sanskrit *ekasmin samaye*. These Tibetan texts therefore understand the phrase to mean that the *sūtra* was *heard* at one time. In a note, Brough mentions that in Constantin Régamey's edition of the *Bhadramāyākāra-vyākaraṇa* the phrase is punctuated after *thos pa*, that is, after what in Sanskrit would be *śrutam*. According to Brough, however, there is no punctuation at all in the Narthang xylograph used by Régamey, either after *thos pa* or after *dus gcig na*. Brough suggested that the main mark of punctuation, the *shad* (= Sanskrit *daṇḍa*), after *dus gcig na* had merely been broken off the printing block in the Narthang edition. It is very possible that a portion of the full-length mark of punctuation, the *shad*, could have been broken on the wooden printing blocks and thus print

what appears to be the inter-syllabic mark, *tsheg*. (Mistaking the reading might be especially likely in the Narthang edition, notoriously difficult to read.) As far as Brough knew, and as far as I know, Kanjurs—xylographed or manuscript—always punctuate with a *shad* after *dus gcig na*, thus grouping “at one time” with “heard.”

The fact that Kanjur texts, even in all available Kanjur editions, contain a given punctuation does not, however, mean that this represents the totality of, as Brough puts it several times, “the Tibetan punctuation.” The first purpose of the present note is to draw attention to an interesting reading in a Tibetan manuscript, a reading which so far seems to have escaped notice, and to invite further study which will address the questions that the reading raises.

In 1937 Giuliana Stramigioli published an edition of the *Bhavasāṅkrāntisūtra* from a Tibetan manuscript.³ In her introduction she writes:

Ho adoperato per la mia traduzione un manoscritto del monastero di Toling, del sec. XIII o XIV, copia di uno più antico, probabilmente del X–XI secolo. Esso è uno dei pochi manoscritti conosciuti, il quale abbia conservato la grafia antica; troviamo perciò *myi* invece di *mi*, e il *da drag* finale, in seguito perduto; a volte però è adopterata anche la grafia moderna. *Altra caratteristica dell'antica grafia è il punto prima del danḍa (tib. śad).*⁴

Stramigioli's edition (printed in Tibetan type) seems to retain all of the archaic features she mentions in the passage just quoted. In many ways the orthography is similar to that familiar to us through the Tibetan materials from Tun-huang.⁵ Without access to a photograph of the manuscript, or to the manuscript itself, we cannot be certain, but the author seems to have faithfully transcribed the original. It is therefore with considerable interest that we notice the reading of the formulaic *sūtra* opening: *'di skad bdag gis thos pa/ dus gcig na bcom ldan 'das rgyal po'i khab na/ . . .* In a thirteenth or fourteenth century manuscript, possibly a copy of a tenth or eleventh century original, we have the very punctuation Brough asserted not to be found in Tibetan.

How are we to account for this singular reading? I cannot

find even one example of a reading parallel to this in all the Tun-huang materials available to me.⁶ Since, moreover, the catalogues of non-Tun-huang Tibetan manuscripts generally do not quote the manuscripts, or they quote only the colophons, it has not been possible for me to determine whether the reading occurs, for example, in old but non-Tun-huang materials. If the punctuation of the *Bhavasāṅkrānti* manuscript preserves an authentic tradition, the complete non-occurrence of this punctuation in the palpably early Tun-huang texts is very interesting. It is noteworthy that we do find some non-standard versions of the opening formula among these manuscripts. Stein 308 reads 'di skad bdag gis : thos pa' dus gcig gi tshé na' //, Stein 443 bdag gis thos pa + i' dus gcig na /, and Stein 463.II 'di skad pdak gyis thos pa'i dus kcig na /.⁷ Yet I cannot find even one instance of punctuation after *thos pa*.

The place of origin of the *Bhavasāṅkrānti* manuscript is the monastery of Toling [(m)tho l(d)ing], located in western Tibet. It was founded in the tenth century by Ye shes 'od, patron of the famous translator Rin chen bzang po, and it was at this monastery that Atiśa composed his *Bodhipathapradīpa*. The *Bhavasāṅkrānti* itself was translated by Jinamitra, Dānaśīla and Ye shes sde. Of these three it seems that at least Jinamitra was connected with the monastery of Toling during his lifetime. Could it be that the manuscript or its ancestor(s) represents an early copy of the translators' original, unaffected by any attempts at revision or standardization? Or is it possible that the manuscript's punctuation represents an old West Tibetan tradition? It would not be impossible that such a tradition was not preserved even in the ancient Tun-huang texts since they, after all, were recovered from the eastern-most reaches of the Tibetan culture area.

To confirm the information provided above, it will be necessary in the first place to locate the *Bhavasāṅkrānti* manuscript itself, and verify its readings. Likewise, attempts must be made to locate other instances of such punctuation in Tibetan manuscripts.

It is not, of course, only to the manuscripts that we must turn in considering the traditional understanding of the phrase, for commentators have often taken up the question. Already in 1933 Alexander von Staël-Holstein had noticed some of their

observations.⁸ He reported Kamalaśīla's awareness, expressed in his commentary to the *Vajracchedikā* (Tōh. 3817; P 5217), that the phrase could be interpreted in at least two ways,⁹ and he referred to the remarks of the **Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa*.¹⁰ While some of Staël-Holstein's other comments need to be somewhat corrected,¹¹ to him goes the great credit of raising the issue of the commentators' understandings of the phrase. Later, Brough discussed the views of Buddhaghosa and Haribhadra, and N.H. Samtani introduced the views of Vīryaśrīdatta's *Artha-viniścaya-sūtra* commentary.¹²

I recently came across another passage which may also be of interest to us in our consideration of the problem of the opening formula. In a commentary to the *Triskandhaka* attributed by tradition to Nāgārjuna, the *Bodhyāpattideśanāvr̥tti* (Tōhoku 4005; Peking 5506), we find the following (Derge Tanjur, mdo 'grel, ji, 178b7–179a1):

'o na 'di na bdag gis thos pa la sogs pa dang po dang tha ma med pas
bka' ma yin no zhe na / de ni ma yin te / 'phags pa dkon mchog brtsegs
pa chos kyi rnam grangs stong phrag brgya par gleng gzhi la sogs par
'di dag thams cad gsungs pa'i phyir ro // 'di ni de'i nang nas dum bur
bton pas de med pa la 'gal ba ci yang med do //

Now, here someone might say that since the [traditional] beginning and ending [of a *sūtra*, namely] “by me was heard” and so on, are absent, this is not [the Buddha's] word. But this is not so, because all of these are spoken in the introduction to the *Āryaratnakūṭadharmaṇyaśāstasāhasrika* and so on. Since this [*sūtra*, the *Triskandhaka*,] has been extracted from within that [collection], there is absolutely no contradiction in it lacking that [formula].

Even setting aside for the moment the question of the authorship of the commentary, this passage should, in itself, be important for any future study of the *Triskandhaka*. There is a quite clear awareness here that the *sūtra* was not originally an independent work, taught in and of itself by the Buddha. Rather, the ritual formulae which make up the *Triskandhaka* were lifted out of the *Ratnakūṭa*.¹³ The passage could be relevant to our discussion of the stock opening formula of Buddhist *sūtras*, however, since it quotes that formula as “‘by me was heard,’ and so

on." The fact that the phrase "at one time" is not explicitly included *might* indicate that somehow the two parts of the phrase were conceived of as independent. Note that the term 'di skad, the Tibetan equivalent of Sanskrit *evam*, is also omitted here, as it is in many of the Tun-huang manuscripts. This may have been felt by some to be unimportant or a non-essential part of the formula, despite the fact that some commentaries discuss it at length. There are probably many other passages in Indian commentaries which contain other comments relevant to the present issue. These passages remain to be noticed.

NOTES

1. It could also, of course, be taken with both. The mezozeugma is not rare in Sanskrit.

2. John Brough, "Thus have I Heard . . .," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 13/1 (1949): 416–26. See also the paper by N.H. Samtani, "The Opening of the Buddhist Sūtras," *Bhārati: Bulletin of the College of Indology* 8/2 (1964–65): 47–63. A recent paper by Okamoto Yoshiyuki in *Tōyōgaku Kenkyū* 12 (1986): 21–28, which apparently treats this opening formula, was not accessible to me.

3. Giuliana Stramigioli, "Bhavaśāṅkrānti," *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 16/ 3–4 (1937): 294–306. This article also contains two Italian translations, one from the Tibetan, the other from the Chinese text of the *sūtra*.

4. *Ibid.*, 296, emphasis added.

5. The manuscript, or at least the transcription provided by the author, does not, however, present any instance of the so-called reverse *gi-gu*, common in Tun-huang manuscripts. The transcription does record, however, the use of the *tsheg* before the *shad* after every letter, not just after *nga*. The double *shad* is often used in non-sentence final position.

6. I have checked through the recent detailed catalogue of the Stein collection published by the Tōyō Bunko: Yamaguchi Zuihō et al., *Sutain Shūshū Chibettogo Bunken Kaidai Mokuroku*, 10 volumes (Tokyo: Tōyō Bunko, 1977–86). The serial numbers of this catalogue are the same as those established by Louis de la Vallée Poussin. See his *Catalogue of the Tibetan Manuscripts from Tun-Huang in the India Office Library* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962). The Yamaguchi catalogue quotes the beginning of each manuscript, but not always as far as the formula. Often of course the manuscripts are fragmentary and do not, as it were, begin at the beginning. The Paris collection was not accessible to me, with the exception of those texts published by Arian MacDonald (Spanien) and Yoshiro Imaeda in *Choix de Documents Tibétains Conservés à la Bibliothèque Nationale*, 2 vols (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1978–79). The opening formula seems to occur in only one manuscript reprinted

there, and then in the form *bdag gis thos pa dus gcig na* / (Pelliot tibétain 504).

7. The “:” seems to represent a similar mark in the manuscripts. I transcribe the ‘*a-chung*’ with a “flag” on the right shoulder by “+,” and the reversed *gi-gu* by “i. The omission of ‘*di skad*’ in the formula seems, by the way, to be fairly common. See below.

8. Alexander von Staël-Holstein, *A Commentary to the Kācāpaparivarta* (Peking: The National Library of Peking and the National Tsinghua University, 1933): iv, and note 8.

9. Staël-Holstein quotes Kamalaśīla as follows: *dus gcig na ces bya ba ni dus gcig gi tshe ste / dus thams cad du chos dkon mchog 'di lta bu dag thos dka' bar bstan pa yin no / yang na bdag nyid mang du thos par ston to // dus gcig na 'di thos kyi gzhan na ni gzhan dag kyang thos so zhes ston to // yang na dus gcig na bcom ldan 'das bzhugs so zhes 'og ma dang sbyar te /*. Luis O. Gómez suggests reading *thos par ston te / for thos par ston to //*, and reading with Peking *dus gcig na 'di thos kyi gzhan dag kyang thos so zhes ston to //*. He then tentatively translates this passage as follows: “‘At one time’ means ‘then, at that time [in particular],’ which means that it is difficult to hear precious teachings (*dharma*s) like these all the time. Also [the phrase can be construed in two ways]: It may mean that ‘only I [Ānanda] heard [the Dharma] in full,’ and ‘I heard it at one time,’ though others also may have heard it. Or, connecting [the phrase] with the following [clause, it could be read as], ‘at one time the Blessed One was staying.’” If we follow Staël-Holstein’s reading and not that of Peking, the next to last sentence would mean “others also may have heard it on other occasions.”

10. See Étienne Lamotte, *Le Traité de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse de Nāgārjuna*, Tome I (Louvain: Université de Louvain, Institut Orientaliste, 1981; originally 1944): 87.

11. His remarks (note 8) on *Prthivibhandhu’s commentary to the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* (P 5518) seem to show that he was not aware that this text, translated from Chinese (T. 1723), was in fact authored by K’uei-chi. See Akira Yuyama, *A Bibliography of the Sanskrit Texts of the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1970): 63. Staël-Holstein in the same note mentions the views of K’uei-chi as expressed in T. 1700 (XXXIII) 126a, a *Vajracchedikā* commentary.

12. See Samtani’s “The Opening of the Buddhist Sūtras,” p. 57ff, and his subsequently published edition: *The Arthaviniścaya-Sūtra & Its Commentary* (*Nibhandana*), Tibetan Sanskrit Works Series 13 (Patna: K.P. Jayaswal Research Institute, 1971): 68 (introduction) and 74ff (text).

13. Compare the wording of the “colophon” of the Sanskrit text of the *Triskandhaka* which reads: *evam pañcatrīṃśat-lathāgata-nāmāni pāpa-śodhanāyop-ālī-ṣṭhā-sūtre bhagavatārya-sārīputram uddiśya bodhisattvānām sarvāpatti-viśodhanāyoktāni*. Edited by Kimura Takayasu in “Bonbun Sanbonkyō ni tsuite,” *Taishō Daigaku Sōgō Bukkyō Kenkyūjō Nenpō* 2 (1980): 179.