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The Benefit of Cooperation Recovering the *Śokavinodana* Ascribed to Aśvaghōṣa

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The Tibetan Buddhist canon consists of two parts, the Kanjur (“Translated Word [of the Buddha]”) and the Tanjur (“Translated Works”);¹ in the latter, Tibetan scholars collected all the translations of works composed by Indian masters, amounting to roughly four thousand titles. This collection contains several works attributed to Aśvaghōṣa, perhaps the greatest Indian Buddhist poet. First among them ranks the famous *Buddhacarita*, his *Life of the Buddha*, written in a form that would later come to be defined as a *mahākāvya*, a great epical poem. Here the authorship is undisputed, but in a number of other cases it is not certain whether a work ascribed to Aśvaghōṣa really stemmed from his pen, since he is sometimes confused with other poets like Āryaśūra and Mātṛceṭa. Moreover, in the Indian tradition famous names are rather freely ascribed to anonymous works in order either to “upgrade/upscale” these compositions or to place them in a certain literary or dogmatic tradition.²

The *Śokavinodana*, the “Consolation of Grief”, appears to be one of them. It is a small work consisting of forty stanzas in a Tibetan meter usually employed for translating Indian ślokas (*amuṣṭubh*), the most common meter in all genres of Sanskrit literature. The translation starts with the title in Sanskrit and Tibetan, followed by a line of homage to the Great Compassion personified as the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. It ends with a colophon which repeats the Tibetan title (*mya ngan bsal ba*), gives *ācārya* Aśvaghōṣa (*slob dpon rta dbyangs*) as the author and lists the Indian *upādhyāya* Ajitaśrībhadrā and the Tibetan Śākya-’od as translators and revisors.³ The two scholars are known from other translations, and if indeed they were contemporaries of the famous Tibetan translator Rin chen bzang po, they would have lived in the 11th century CE.⁴

Apart from its Tibetan translation – which made the previous existence of a Sanskrit original practically certain – nothing was known about the *Śokavinodana*, a situation not at all unusual, but always regrettable, especially when a work is connected with the name of a famous author. As far as we are aware, there are neither quotations nor references preserved in Indian Buddhist literature, and no translations in other classical languages of Buddhism were known to exist.⁵

Probably due to this situation, the poem does not seem to have attracted any attention among present-day scholars; at least no academic studies of the text have come to our knowledge. This

was the state of affairs until the end of January 2021, when all of a sudden a lucky coincidence occurred which completely changed the situation.

Presently, Kazunobu Matsuda and Jens-Uwe Hartmann are studying a Sanskrit manuscript of the *Tridaṇḍamālā*, a lengthy text remarkable for many reasons, not least for the fact that it is ascribed in its colophon to the aforementioned Aśvaghōṣa. It is preserved in a single Sanskrit manuscript once brought to Tibet and stored in the library of sPos-khang Monastery in southern Tibet, where it was photographed in the thirties of the last century by Giuseppe Tucci. Together with this work a second text was photographed, a *parikathā*, which is presently being studied by Péter-Dániel Szántó. Since no title is affixed to this text, Szántó provisionally names it **Saddharmaparikathā*; he considers it to be a preacher's manual on how to provide sermons for the laity (both brahmanical and Buddhist). Its eleventh chapter deals with the subject of *śokavinodana*, and in his search for possible parallels, Szántó had a look into the 14th chapter of the *Tridaṇḍamālā* and found two sets of twenty stanzas which treated exactly this topic. When he compared them with the Tibetan translation of the *Śokavinodana*, they turned out to represent its Sanskrit original.

This is the moment to explain more about the structure and function of the *Tridaṇḍamālā*. It consists of forty chapters and contains forty canonical sūtras that form the core of each chapter. These sūtras are quoted in full length. The remainder of the text appears to consist exclusively of verses. Each chapter begins with a triad of verses of homage to the Three Jewels, often followed by another set of verses, and it concludes with one or more sets of verses. These sets before and after the canonical text are related to the main dogmatic contents of the embedded sūtra, although this relation may be more or less explicit. Sometimes they may have been composed on the basis of the sūtra quotation, but often they are selected from fitting passages in other works. As the example of the *Śokavinodana* demonstrates, verses may be culled en bloc from other works, and there is a clear preference for sources connected with Aśvaghōṣa's name.

The *Tridaṇḍamālā* holds quite a few surprises, ready among them ample quotations from the *Buddhacarita* and the *Saundarananda*, which presently amount to over 330 stanzas, more than 120 of them coming from the latter half of the *Buddhacarita* which thus far was thought to be lost in its Sanskrit original.⁶ The *Śokavinodana* presents another case of a citation of a work connected with Aśvaghōṣa, and this makes it very likely that the editor(s) of the *Tridaṇḍamālā* knew of the connection and that this connection instigated them to include exactly these verses. In turn, it is very likely that the many quotations from Aśvaghōṣa's works led to the ascription of the *Tridaṇḍamālā* to exactly this author at a later point.

At first sight, it is difficult to understand the exact function of such a text in Buddhist literature. Evidently, it is in part canonical, if this term is permissible here, since it contains sūtra texts extracted from a canon, in this case the version of the (Mūla-)Sarvāstivādins. This becomes sufficiently clear as soon as the sūtras are compared with surviving parallels, for instance texts recovered from the Buddhist cave monasteries along the ancient Silk Road in Central Asia. It is also poetical when one takes into account the numerous citations from Buddhist poetry. Finally, it is also ritualistic or practice-oriented, as soon as the focus is directed on the beginning and ending of each of the forty chapters. As mentioned above, all of them begin with verses of homage to the *triratna*, and they close with two or three verses that wish for the duration of the Buddha's teaching, or its protection, and exhort others to practice it. This formal setting already points in a certain direction, and there are a number of additional indications which confirm this impression;⁷ taken together, they strongly suggest that the *Tridaṇḍamālā* is something like a handbook for occasions when rituals become necessary within the community of monks and

possibly also of the laity. It seems very likely that each of the forty chapters served a specific ritual purpose.

The title of the work connects with the *Tridaṇḍaka*, a text which is, according to the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya*, to be recited during the rites for a deceased monk.⁸ Most likely, the text used on such an occasion was the *Anityatāsūtra*,⁹ and this very sūtra forms the middle section of chapter 11. There is another, rather clear-cut example: Chapter 25 contains the *Pravāraṇa-sūtra*, itself a sūtra concerned with a ritual, and in its third section the *Ekottarika-stotra* ascribed to Mātṛceṭa is quoted, but with a telling adaptation. The ten *anuṣṭubh* stanzas of this stotra list epithets of the Buddha relating to the numbers one through ten, in ascending order, all in datives depending on the word *namas*, “homage to”. In the *Tridaṇḍamālā* these epithets are consistently changed into genitives in agreement with the phrase *teṣām adya pravāraṇā*, “for them is now the Pravāraṇā (ceremony)”.¹⁰

We know very little about the everyday practices and rituals performed by members of the Buddhist saṅgha in ancient India. Such phenomena are extremely difficult to reconstruct from the surviving texts, which are mostly prescriptive, not descriptive. However, it appears that the *Tridaṇḍamālā* provides us with at least some hints. If it is a textbook designed to be used in rituals, and the forty chapters together with the circumstantial evidence would seem to suggest just that, then it was probably used in a wide variety of such rituals. It is a great pity that the text informs us of neither the specific purpose of a chapter nor when to recite it; these matters must have been everyday knowledge for the officiating monk(s) who employed it and therefore were not deemed necessary to be written down.

At present, it is impossible to reconstruct the exact purpose of chapter 14, which contains the stanzas of the *Śokavinodana*. However, the discovery of the Sanskrit original has enabled us to arrive at further insights. Hartmann’s immediate search of the Sanskrit literature recovered from Central Asia brought to light that one of the unidentified texts in a very interesting multiple-text paper manuscript was nothing else but the *Śokavinodana*. Regrettably, this manuscript is rather lacunose, and only two fragments of a single folio from the section which once covered the *Śokavinodana* have come down to us. They are sufficient enough, however, to prove that the manuscript originally must have contained the full text and not only a few verses as a quotation.

Sanskrit manuscripts from Central Asia quite often add verse numbers, a very helpful device, and from the preserved numbers 19, 23 and 31 it becomes clear, first, that the two fragments contain textual remains of the verses 19d to 32a and, second, that the order corresponds exactly to the Sanskrit text included in the *Tridaṇḍamālā*. It becomes clear, moreover, that the complete folio represented by the two fragments must once have contained at least the verses 18 to 32, since a part of the folio covering the first line of the recto and the last of the verso side is broken off, and that the *Śokavinodana* comprised about three folios of the manuscript.

The manuscript from Central Asia belongs to the finds discovered by the third of the so-called Prussian Turfan German expeditions, which took place in the Tarim Basin between December 1905 and May 1907. Found in Kyzil, it forms part of the Turfan Collection housed in the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin. Only one nearly complete folio and a number of fragments survived, which were published by Dieter Schlingloff as numbers 23–48 in his book on Buddhist hymns from Central Asia.¹¹ Later, the manuscript was described in the first catalogue volume of the Turfan manuscripts under shelf number 191 as “Sammelhandschrift mit Buddhastotras, Versen erzählenden Inhalts, Versen über das Geben” (“composite manuscript with Buddhastotras,

narrative verses, donative verses”).¹² However, neither Schlingloff nor the publishers of the catalogue volume could identify any of the verses.

In 1970, Gustav Roth noted a parallel between verses in the *Bhikṣuṇī-vinaya* manuscript edited by him and fragment 191 g, and this parallel was further studied by Lobsang Dargyay in his edition of the *Saptakumārikā-avadāna*.¹³ Recently, Hartmann was able to identify five verses taken from Aśvaghōṣa’s *Buddhacarita* (Bc) in fragment h of 191;¹⁴ they correspond to Bc 18.62–66. Chapter 18 of the *Buddhacarita* is not preserved in Sanskrit, but once again the *Tridaṇḍamālā* proves an incredible mine of lost textual sources. The verses Bc 18.62–78 are quoted in its chapter 16,¹⁵ and, as in the case of the *Śokavinodana*, only this quotation of the Sanskrit original made their identification in the Central Asian manuscript fragment possible.

There is no reference to the *Buddhacarita* or to Aśvaghōṣa in the Turfan manuscript, and the five verses are counted as 1 to 5, which shows that they have been adapted to a new context. Interestingly, remains of the same verses are found in two more Central Asian manuscripts, one of them (SHT 141/2) belonging to the German Turfan Collection, while the other, a Tocharian bilingual (PK NS 14), is part of the Pelliot Collection in the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris.¹⁶ Both have been classified as so-called donation formulas, i.e., compilations, which probably were read aloud during a major donation to the Buddhist order and thus clearly served a ritual function. Since the five *Buddhacarita* verses are part of the Buddha’s speech to Anāthapiṇḍada, who intends to donate a place for a monastery, they fit such a context perfectly well, and it is more than likely that fragment SHT 191 h equally represents the remains of such a donation formula.

It is a pity that E.H. Johnston, the excellent editor of *Buddhacarita* and *Saundarananda* and the leading specialist on Aśvaghōṣa at his time, never had a chance to inspect the manuscript of the *Tridaṇḍamālā* more closely. In 1938, Rāhula Sāṅkrtyāyana published his third report on Sanskrit manuscripts in Tibet, in which he quoted the beginning and the end of the *Tridaṇḍamālā*, including its colophon.¹⁷ Already in 1939, only one year after the publication of Sāṅkrtyāyana’s report, Johnston published a short note, where he reached the conclusion that Aśvaghōṣa had to be ruled out as the author of the text.¹⁸ Although his assessment is still valid, it becomes more and more evident that Aśvaghōṣa is a central figure in the text. His alleged authorship is surely an invention or, perhaps better, an ascription most likely meant to express the extremely close connection between the *Tridaṇḍamālā* and works known under his name. This may even include the above-mentioned *Ekottarika-stotra* ascribed to Mātrceṭa, since from a certain time onwards these two authors were identified with each other.¹⁹

All these finds raise a certain expectation that the study of the *Tridaṇḍamālā* will have still more surprises in store. Most notable at the moment are verses that are also contained in the Chinese translation of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-upadeśa* and, according to Matsuda’s hope, may eventually connect with Aśvaghōṣa’s mysterious *Sūtrālaṅkāra*.²⁰

This leads to the last important find regarding the *Śokavinodana*, which in a way rounds off the present picture. After recovering the Sanskrit original on the basis of a Tibetan translation, only the Chinese canon did not seem to be contributing to the textual history of this small work. However, Matsuda quickly showed that this impression was unfounded; on the basis of the Sanskrit he identified the *Jie yu jing* (T 804), a late translation by Fatian in the 10th century, not only as containing the *Śokavinodana*, adequately translated by the Chinese title, but as a text closely corresponding to the 14th Tridaṇḍa of the *Tridaṇḍamālā*. There are many philological problems involved, too numerous and too intricate to address here, but there is no doubt that

the *Jie yu jing* is an attempt to render a version of the 14th Tridaṇḍa into Chinese. Nearly all the verses of the *Śokavinodana* are attested in one way or another, even if the translation is sometimes difficult to reconcile with the Sanskrit original.

Finally, as an illustration of this trilingual situation and a sample of the style of the Sanskrit poem, we present the verses 1–3, 15–16, 23, 33, 37 and 40:²¹

kaścit priyaviyogārtaḥ pradīptaḥ śokavahninā |
 dhṛtim ālambya yatnena svacittaṃ paribhāṣate || <1>
 gang zhig dga' bral nyam thag ste || rab tu mya ngan me 'bar ba ||
 bsgrims nas shin tu spro bsrings shing || rang gi sems nyid brjod par bya || <1>
 愛別離最苦 憂火鎮燒然 若欲自安心 端居作觀想 <1>

A certain man, tormented by separation from a beloved person, inflamed by the fire of grief, with great effort regained his composure and exhorted his mind [thus]:

prāpta<ḥ> karmapathārūḍho vināhūtena yo janah |
 gato vināparādhena tatra kiṃ parikruśyase || <2>
 las kyi lam zhugs thob pa yi || sbron pa med par skye bo gang ||
 nyes pa ma byas song gyur pa || de la ci zhig yongs su gdung || <2>
 譬如群鳥獸 暫聚各分飛 生死人亦然 云何懷憂苦 <2>²²

Ascending the path of action, a man arrives without summons, and he departs without transgression. Why do you lament this?

yadi tasyaiva maraṇaṃ bhaven nānyasya kasyacit |
 uccair ākranditum yuktam mahān paribhavo hy ayam || <3>
 ci ste de nyid 'chi bar 'gyur || gzhan ni su yang min na go |
 'di ni byur chen non pa zhes || cho nge chen pos gdab par rigs || <3>
 只自一有死 眾人皆長生 別離痛不任 親姻須啼泣 <3>

If only he were to die and no one else, (then) it would be proper to lament, for this would indeed be a great disgrace.

prṥhivī dahyate yatra meruś cāpi viśīryate |
 śuśyate sāgarajalam śarīre tatra kā kathā || <15>
 gang du sa rnam bsreg 'gyur te || lhun po'ang thal bar 'jig pa dang ||
 rgya mtsho'i chu yang skam 'gyur na || lus can de dag lta ci smos || <15>
 大地妙高山 及以四大海 劫壞亦歸空 何況衆生趣 <15>

The earth burns, Mount Meru crumbles, the water of the ocean desiccates; what to speak of a (human) body?

vajrasāraśarīrāṇāṃ buddhānāṃ yady anityatā |
 kadalīgarbhatulyeṣu kā cintānyeṣu dehiṣu || <16>
 ci ste sangs rgyas rnam kyi sku || rdo rje'i sku yang mi rtag na ||
 chu shing snying po med 'dra ba'i || lus can gzhan rnam smos ci dgos || <16>
 金剛堅固身 尚自示寂滅 凡識如芭蕉 云何欲久住 <16>²³

If impermanence applies to (even) the Buddhas, whose bodies are firm like diamonds, what to think of creatures who are (hollow) like the inside of a plantain tree?

ya eva te prayatnena lāliṭaḥ putrasamjñayā |
 sa eva janmāntaritaḥ tāḍitaḥ śatrusamjñayā || <23>
 gang nyid khyod kyis rab bsgrims te || brtse ba'i bu yi 'du shes pa ||
 de nyid tshe rabs gzhan dus na || rdeg par byed cing dgrar 'du shes || <23>
 至後世中 隨其報應 各各不同 或為僕從 <23>

Whom you have zealously spoilt thinking he is your son, once he has entered another life you will smite him thinking he is your enemy.

ruditaṃ yac ca saṃsāre bandhūnām viprayogataḥ |
 teṣān netrāśrubindūnām samudro 'pi na bhājanam || <33>
 mdza' bshes rab tu bral ba yis || 'khor ba'i nang du gang ngus pa ||
 mig gi mchi ma'i thigs pa yi || snod du rgya mtsho'ang rung ma yin || <33>
 生死別離 愛戀泣淚 亦如海水 又彼有情 <33>

The amount of tear drops they have shed in transmigration due to separation from kith and kin is more than even the ocean could hold.

nṛṣu dāridryadoṣeṇa yānubhūtā viḍambanā |
 tāṃ vaktum asamartho 'smi jihvā lajjāyatīva me || <37>
 mi la dbul ba'i nyes pa yis || mtho btsams pa ni gang myong de ||
 brjod pa bdag la mthu med pa || rang gi lce la ngo tsha bzhin || <37>
 設生人中 貧窮飢困 種種苦惱 說不能盡 <37>

As for the disgrace that they had to endure in the world of men because of wretched poverty, I cannot even describe it, for it's as if my tongue is ashamed.

karmāviddham jagad idaṃ yasmād bhramati cakravat |
 tasmāt saṃgaṃ parityajya mokṣe buddhir niveśyatām || <40>
 las kyis shugs kyis 'gro ba 'di || gang phyr 'khor lo bzhin du 'khor ||
 de bas chags pa yongs spangs shing || thar pa la ni blo zhen bya || <40>
 是故汝等 學斷輪迴 速求解脫 <40>

Swung by *karma* is this world; round and round it goes like a wheel. Give up attachment and set (your) mind on liberation!"

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Notes

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² Ascriptions to Aśvaghōṣa are not limited to this period and dogmatic environment. In the 'Tantric Age', several short, but extremely popular and influential normative texts were ascribed to him, most notably the so-called *Gurupañcāśikā*; see Lévi 1929: 255–285.

³ Derge no. 4177 (= 4505), vol. *nge (spring yig)*, 34b2–3, and Peking no. 5418 (= 5677), vol. *gi (mdo 'grel)*, 111a8–111b1 *rgya gar gyi mkhan po a dzi ta shrī bha dra dang | zhu chen gyi lo tsā ba dge slong shākya 'od kyis bsgyur cing zhus te gtan la phab pa'o* ||. For the reliability of such colophons *cf.*, Almogi 2020: 29ff.

⁴ For a detailed discussion of the work and the date of these two translators, and especially Śākya-'od, see Chen 2018: 122–129. It is interesting to note that they are credited with the translation of two more works ascribed to Aśvaghōṣa (the *Aṣṭākṣaṇakathā* and the *Daśākuśalakarmapathanirdeśa*) and one to Mātṛceṭa (the *Kaliyugaparikathā*), *cf.*, Chen 2018: 123.

⁵ After writing the first draft of this article, it emerged that *subhāṣita* anthologies quote many *Śokavinodana* verses. We plan to include a complete list in our forthcoming edition and also thank Harunaga Isaacson for tracing several parallel verses.

⁶ For an overview *cf.*, Matsuda 2019a and Hartmann no date. Chapter 15 of the *Buddhacarita*, consisting of altogether 58 verses, is even quoted in full; for an edition see Matsuda 2020a.

⁷ For a description of them *cf.*, Hartmann no date.

⁸ Schopen 1992: 32–34, note 62=Schopen 1997: 231–233; see also the additional footnote in Schopen 2010: 118, note 35=Schopen 2014: 69–70.

⁹ Hartmann n.d.

¹⁰ The *Ekottarikastotra* is preserved in a Sanskrit manuscript from Tibet, *cf.*, Matsuda 2019b, 23. For a comparative study of the stotra, its Tibetan translation, and the adaptation in the *Tridaṇḍamālā*, *cf.*, Terzová 2019.

¹¹ Schlingloff 1955: 34–40 and 104–109.

¹² Waldschmidt 1965: 107.

¹³ Roth 1970: 115, notes 6 and 7; Dargyay 1978: 29–33; *cf.*, Wille no date (SHT XIII, Ergänzungen und Korrekturen zu Teil 1 bis 12).

¹⁴ See Wille no date (SHT XIII, Ergänzungen und Korrekturen zu Teil 1 bis 12).

¹⁵ See Hartmann no date for a survey of citations from *Buddhacarita* and *Saundarananda*, most of them identified by Matsuda.

¹⁶ See Hartmann no date, note 21.

¹⁷ Sāṅkṛtyāyana 1938: 157–160.

¹⁸ Johnston 1939.

¹⁹ *cf.*, Hartmann 1987: 21 and Almogi 2020: 158ff.

²⁰ *cf.*, Matsuda 2020b.

²¹ All the peculiarities of the Sanskrit manuscript like gemination etc. are eliminated in order to present a readable text; variae lectiones of the Tibetan editions are not listed; the deviations of the Chinese translation are left uncommented.

Sanskrit ms. 27v5–28r1 (verses 1–3); 28r4–5 (15–16); 29r5–v1 (23); 29v3–4 (33), 29v5 (37); 30r1 (40).

Tibetan Derge no. 4177 vol. *nge (spring yig)*, 33a2–3 (verses 1–3); 33b3–4 (15–16); 33b7 (23); 34a5 (33), 34a7 (37); 34b1–2 (40).

Tibetan Peking no. 5418 vol. *gi (mdo 'grel)*, 109v6–8 (verses 1–3); 110r7–8 (15–16); 110v4–5 (23); 111r3 (33), 111r5–6 (37); 111r7–8 (40).

Chinese T 804, 749b13–18 (verses 1–3); 749c12–13 and c10–11 (15–16); 750a14–15 (23); 750a22–23 (33), 750a26 (37); 750b1 (40).

²² Interestingly, the Chinese translation of another Tridaṇḍa preserves a very similar verse. As mentioned above, the 11th Tridaṇḍa of the *Tridaṇḍamālā* centres on the *Anityatāsūtra*. Yijing translated a slightly different version of this section into Chinese, the *Wuchang jing* 無常經 with the alternative title *San qi jing* 三啓經, the former being a possible rendering of *anityatā* and the latter of *tridaṇḍa(ka)* (Taishō 801, *cf.*, Taishō 2912; in Taishō 2912 both titles are combined into *Wuchang san qi jing* 無常三啓經. *cf.*, Loukota (n.d.) Hartmann (n.d.) for more information on those two texts and a Chinese Dunhuang fragment of Taishō 2912), and this text contains the following stanza: 譬如群宿鳥 夜聚旦隨飛 死去別親知 乖離亦如是 (Taishō Vol. 17, 746a25–26). It exists only in Chinese, but not in the Sanskrit text.

²³ This is verse 14 in the Chinese translation.

DHARMAYĀTRĀ

**A Felicitation Volume in Honour of
Venerable Tampalawela Dhammaratana**

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DHARMAYĀTRĀ

**Papers on Ancient South Asian Philosophies,
Asian Culture and Their Transmission**

Presented to

**Venerable Tampalawela Dhammaratana
on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday**

Mahinda Deegalle
EDITOR

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