

# EMBODYING THE WORDS OF THE BUDDHA

ELENA PAKHOUTOVA AND AGNIESZKA HELMAN-WAZNY



Fig. 1 *Leaves from a The Perfection of Wisdom (Prajnaparamita) Sutra* manuscript; Nalanda Monastery, Bihar, India; 1073, 1151; ink and opaque watercolor on palm leaf; each approx. 2 7/8 × 22 3/8 in. (7.3 × 56.8 cm); Asia Society, New York; Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Acquisitions Fund; 1987.1; image courtesy Asia Society

## ILLUMINATED PAGES OF THE *PRAJNAPARAMITA* SUTRA MANUSCRIPT

Nalanda, India  
1073, 1151

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## SUMMARY

Curator of Himalayan art Elena Pakhoutova and scholar of material culture of books Agnieszka Helman-Wazny follow the journey of an illuminated Buddhist manuscript, written on palm leaves in an eleventh-century Indian monastery and carried across the Himalayas by a Kashmiri master. The Sanskrit-language text is the early Mahayana Perfection of Wisdom Sutra, while the images depict Buddhist deities and events from the Buddha's life. Many such manuscripts survive in Tibet, where generations of scholars have treasured them.

These illuminated pages contain text written in ink on palm leaves and images rendered in mineral pigments. The text of the Sanskrit manuscript presents the teachings of *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Verses (Ashtasahasrikaprajnaparamita) Sutra*, known as *Prajnaparamita*, which is thought to have been developed over two centuries, from the first century bce to the first century CE.

The Buddha's teachings were first communicated as oral recitations, and only later were written down and envisioned in images. "Thus have I heard, at one time" is the phrase that begins the texts known as sutras. These words launch the story describing an occasion when the Buddha gave the teaching that is the subject of this manuscript. This sutra's narrative is structured as a dialogue between the Buddha and one of his disciples, the elder (arhat) Subhuti.

As one of the earliest and important sutras, *Prajnaparamita* reflects the developments in Buddhist thought and practice of that time. It conveys the core principles of the Greater Vehicle, or Mahayana movement, communicating the Buddhist philosophical notion of no-self as the means to understand the emptiness of all things and perfect the wisdom that comprehends reality. As physical objects, *Prajnaparamita* manuscripts represent the words of the Buddha and the teachings themselves (fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Cambridge University, "India Unboxed: The Perfection of Wisdom," *YouTube*, June 12, 2017, 3:50, [https://youtube.com/watch?v=4Fw\\_p31bH7Y](https://youtube.com/watch?v=4Fw_p31bH7Y).

## ILLUMINATIONS

The painted images in *Prajnaparamita* manuscripts created in India do not illustrate the text but represent contemporaneous Buddhist teachings and reflect the preferences of the patrons who commissioned them. The illuminations form a consistent group depicting the Eight Great Events of the Buddha's Life and images of bodhisattvas and deities. Manuscripts usually feature twelve figural images, as in this example, or eighteen.<sup>1</sup> Typically, a page, or folio, is decorated with three panels (fig. 1), with the central panel displaying a bodhisattva or a deity and the two side panels showing scenes of the Buddha's life. The illuminated folios are commonly placed in the beginning, middle, and end of the manuscript, but the arrangement can vary. In this manuscript the eight episodes of the Buddha's life begin in the left panel of the first folio, followed by the right panel, and they recur in the same order on the other three leaves, depicting the Buddha's birth at Lumbini; his enlightenment at Vajrasana in

Bodhgaya; the first teaching at Sarnath; the multiplication miracle at Shravasti; the descent from the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods at Samkashya; the taming of a mad elephant at Rajgir; accepting a monkey's gift of honey at Vaishali; and his passing away (parinirvana) at Kushinagara.



Fig. 3 Current locations of the places mentioned in the Buddha Shakyamuni's life.

The central panels, from the first to the fourth leaves, portray the goddess Prajnaparamita, bodhisattvas Manjushri, and Avalokiteshvara, and the goddess Tara. The images display the established iconography also found in contemporaneous and later representations of the Eight Great Events in sculpture (fig. 4) and other forms of painting in India (fig. 5), Tibet (fig. 6), and beyond (fig. 7).<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 4 Major Events of the Buddha's Life; Northeastern India; 12th century; "Andagu" stone with pigments; 1/2 × 4 1/2 × 1 1/2 in; Rubin Museum of Art; C2005.4.2 (HAR 65388)



Fig. 6 Life Story of Buddha Shakyamuni; Tibet; 19th century; pigments on cloth; 32 1/8 × 22 3/8 in. (estimated); Rubin Museum of Art; gift of Shelley and Donald Rubin; C2006.66.164 (HAR 157)

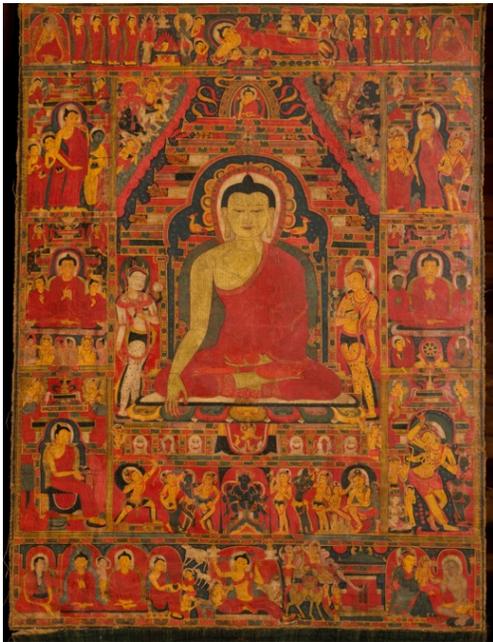


Fig. 5 The Eight Great Events of the Buddha's Life; Tibet; ca. 13th century; pigments on cloth; 41 3/4 × 30 3/4 in (106 × 78 cm); Private collection, Switzerland



Fig. 7 Victory over Mara; Mongolia?; 19th century; pigments on cloth; 30 7/8 × 25 1/2 (78.42 × 64.77 cm); Rubin Museum of Art; C2006.66.305 (HAR 699)

## OBJECTS OF DEVOTION AND ACCUMULATION OF MERIT

Wealthy patrons commissioned scribes and artists to create elaborately decorated manuscripts considered physical containers of wisdom and the words of the Buddha. Such valuable commissions were devotional objects intended to generate merit—an investment of positive karma to ensure good present and future lives. It is believed that the text of this sutra, read aloud on special occasions, purifies the space wherever it is heard, generates positive karmic links with the teachings in the minds of all gathered, and brings well-being and prosperity to the whole region.<sup>3</sup>

## FORMAT AND MATERIALS

Indian Buddhist books such as this, known as *pustaka* in Sanskrit, were the most treasured items that traversed the Himalayan regions, and were held as valued assets in Tibetan monasteries. The term used for describing books of loose leaves in rectangular landscape format is *pothi*, which means “book” in Indian languages. These Indian manuscripts made from palm leaves became a model for the paper manuscripts known as Tibetan long books, *pecha*, as palm leaves were not available in Tibet.

The loose leaves of Indian palm-leaf books are gathered by a cord pulled through holes drilled into the leaves and two wooden covers. The holes in such books also served to attach bookmarks. This *Prajnaparamita* manuscript from the Asia Society, New York, has two holes symmetrically located within painted vertical bands. Early Tibetan books often include drawn circles to faithfully represent this practical feature of palm-leaf manuscripts (fig. 8).

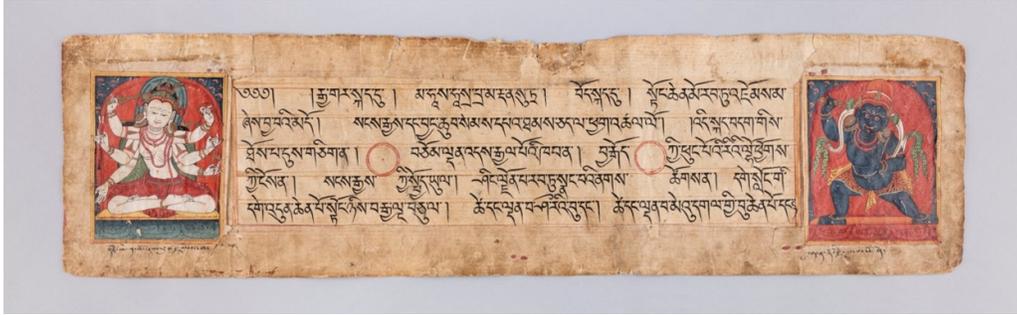


Fig. 8 Frontispiece from the *Great Destroyer of the Thousand Foes (Mahasahasrapramardani) Sutra Manuscript*, Tibet; ca. 13th–14th century; ink and pigments on paper; 7 1/4 × 27 in.; Rubin Museum of Art; C2004.33.1

## THE PROCESS

To create support for writing, palm leaves were cut from a tree and their twigs sliced off. The leaves came from two types of palm trees, the talipot and the palmyra,<sup>4</sup> which differed in size and quality. The talipot type was employed until the fifteenth century in northern and western India and until the eighteenth century in Bihar and Sri Lanka. The palmyra type was used in eastern India from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. The leaves (fig. 9) were boiled in water or milk to make them soft and durable, dried, and then trimmed to two lengths, long or short.



Fig. 9. Prepared palm leaves before they become supports for writing; photograph by Agnieszka Helman-Ważny, 2020

The leaves were flattened and polished with sand until smooth,<sup>5</sup> then cut to the desired size. The string holes were drilled, and the space for text and miniatures laid out. Scribes usually worked independently from painters, first marking the lines for text and choosing a script. In the talipot manuscripts from northern India, Central Asia, and Nepal, they wrote characters in ink with a reed pen, as in this manuscript, a good example of that type, written in Ranjana script.<sup>6</sup>

Composed of soot mixed with oil or animal glue, the inks in palm-leaf books resembled inks for writing on paper.<sup>7</sup> Before the nineteenth century most painting pigments came from natural minerals; synthetic pigments followed later.<sup>8</sup>

Palm leaves were readily available in tropical climates, and although they are more durable and resistant to insects than paper, the oldest examples do not survive. A few rare, dated examples are in the collections of the National Archives and the Kaiser Library in Kathmandu, Nepal, the University of Cambridge, and the British Museum, London.<sup>9</sup> During the early second millennium Tibetan monks studying in India produced palm-leaf manuscripts made from regional materials and written in Tibetan language.<sup>10</sup> Although palm leaves were not available for making books in Tibet, many Indic palm-leaf manuscripts have been preserved in Tibet's dry climate.<sup>11</sup>

## **MATERIALS AND PATRONAGE**

The materials used in a book's production were determined by regional availability and the patron's preferences, reflecting their aesthetic choices as well as the book's status and function. Materials were carefully selected for their qualities and suitability for specific types of writing and decorations.

In most instances the last part of the text, called the colophon, recorded patrons, scribes, and the location where the manuscript was created.

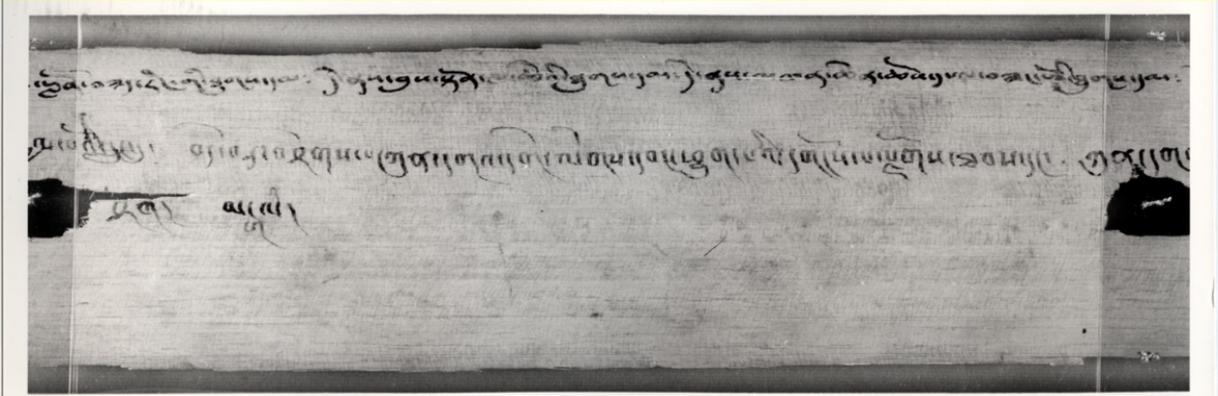


Fig. 10 Leaves from a *The Perfection of Wisdom (Prajnaparamita) Sutra* manuscript, detail of the Tibetan inscription, leaf 5 verso, Asia Society Archive; image courtesy Asia Society

## PATRONAGE AND HISTORY OF OWNERSHIP

In addition to illuminations, this manuscript contains an interesting record of its ownership. The manuscript's Sanskrit and Tibetan colophons (fig. 10) state that it was produced at Nalanda Monastery in 1073 CE and restored and rededicated in 1151 CE.<sup>12</sup> This monastery in eastern India was well known to Tibetans as the major center of Buddhist learning. The book's two Tibetan colophons translate the Sanskrit and indicate that it was once owned by the renowned Kashmiri scholar Shakyashribhadra (1127 or 1145–1225), educated at Nalanda. Invited to Tibet to teach, he traveled extensively in Tibetan regions from 1204 to 1214. Thereafter, the manuscript belonged to Buton Rinchen Drub (1290–1364), the famous Tibetan scholar and editor of the first Tibetan canon and the founder of Zhalu Monastery. The last Tibetan inscription documents dedicatory use of this book for the benefit of Kunga Gelek Wangchuk.<sup>13</sup> These inscriptions reveal networks and connections from the manuscript's creators and patrons to famous Indian and Tibetan teachers, who treasured the book and passed it down in their turn.

Other preserved manuscript colophons reveal that an especially high number of Nepalese and Tibetan patrons commissioned such books in India in the first half of the eleventh century, the period when Tibetans were actively acquiring Buddhist culture from India.<sup>14</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah P. Losty, *The Art of the Book in India* (London: British Library, 1982), 20.

<sup>2</sup> For example, a large stone stele at Jagdispur, India, (Janice Leoshko, “Scenes of the Buddha’s Life in Pāla-Period Art,” *Silk Road Art and Archaeology* 3 (94 1993): 251–76, 262), one in the British Museum collection, OA 1942.4-15.3), a small stone stele in the Potala Palace collection (Ulric von Schroeder, “Nepal: Licchavi Period; Wood Carvings of the Jokhang of Lhasa,” in *Buddhist Sculptures in Tibet*, vol. 1 (Hong Kong: Visual Dharma Publications, 2001), 407–31, fig. V-3, 129 A, B, C, D.), in the Rubin Museum C2005.4.2 and elsewhere, and early Tibetan thangkas depicting the Eight Great Events of the Buddha’s Life. See Claudine Bautze-Picron, “Śākyamuni in Eastern India and Tibet in the 11th to the 13th Centuries,” *Silk Road Art and Archaeology: Journal of the Institute of Silk Road Studies* 4 (1995-96): 355–408.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Padmakara Translation Group, trans. 2018. “*The Transcendent Perfection of Wisdom in Ten Thousand Lines (Daśasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā)*” 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha. 33.70. (Toh 11. Degé Kangyur, vol. 31 [shes phyin, ga], fols. 1b–91a, and vol. 32 [shes phyin, nga], fols. 92.b–397.a.). <http://read.84000.co/translation/UT22084-031-002.html>.

<sup>4</sup> *Corypha umbraculifera* or *C. taliera* and *Borassus flabellifer*. Masatoshi Konishi, *Hāth-Kāghaz: History of Handmade Paper in South Asia* (Shimla and New Delhi: Indian Institute of Advanced Study and Arya Books International, 2013), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Om Prakash Agrawal, *Conservation of Manuscripts and Paintings of South-East Asia*, Butterworth-Heinemann Series in Conservation and Museology (London: Butterworth-Heinemann in association with the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, 1984), 24–62.

<sup>6</sup> In South India and Southeast Asia letters were usually incised on the surface of the palm leaf with special tools and then filled in with a black, sooty pigment. See Jeremiah P. Losty, *The Art of the Book in India* (London: British Library, 1982), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Om Prakash Agrawal, *Conservation of Manuscripts and Paintings of South-East Asia*, Butterworth-Heinemann Series in Conservation and Museology (London: Butterworth-Heinemann in association with the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, 1984), 31–36.

<sup>8</sup> Pratapaditya Pal and Julia Meech-Pekarik, *Buddhist Book Illuminations* (Hong Kong: Ravi Kumar, 1988).

<sup>9</sup> One of the oldest manuscripts, the *Skandapurāṇa* (National Archives, NAK 2/229 / NGMPP B 11/4), is dated Mānadeva Saṃvat 234, or 810–811 CE. The *Suśrutasaṃhitā* manuscript containing an Āyurvedic text (the Kaiser Library, KL 699 / NGMPP C 80/7), is dated Mānadeva Saṃvat 301, or 878 CE; Kengo Harimoto, “The Dating of the Cambridge Bodhisattvabhūmi Manuscript Add. 1702,” in *Indic Manuscript Cultures through the Ages: Material, Textual, and Historical Investigations*, ed. Vincenzo Vergiani, Daniele Cuneo, and Camillo A. Formigatti, *Studies in Manuscript Cultures* 14 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 363–64; Bidur Bhattarai, *Dividing Texts: Conventions of Visual Text-Organization in Nepalese and North Indian Manuscripts* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 18.

<sup>10</sup> Yonezawa Yoshiyasu, “The Sanskrit Manuscript of the Vinayasūtravṛtti in DBu Med Script,” *成田山仏教研究所紀要 Narita Sanbukyo Kenkyujo Kiyō* [Journal of Naritasan Institute for Buddhist Studies] 43 (2020): 65–84.

<sup>11</sup> Ernst Steinkellner, *A Tale of Leaves: On Sanskrit Manuscripts in Tibet, Their Past and Their Future*, 2003 Gonda Lecture (Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Susan L. Huntington and John C. Huntington, *Leaves from the Bodhi Tree: The Art of Pala India (8th–12th Centuries) and Its International Legacy* (Dayton, OH, and Seattle: Dayton Art Institute in association with the University of Washington Press, 1990), 186–89.

<sup>13</sup> My reading of what is visible in the currently framed folio—Ze Ring (bzad ring), Buton (bus ston kha che—an alternative spelling, his primary name with the nickname “Big mouth”), and Chopel Zangpo (chos dpal bzang po)—confirms an anonymous translation in Denise Patry Leidy, Sherman E. Lee, and D. John, *Treasures of Asian Art: The Asia Society’s Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection* (New York: Asia Society Galleries; Abbeville Press, 1994), 66; Susan L. Huntington and John C. Huntington, *Leaves from the Bodhi Tree: The Art of Pala India (8th–12th Centuries) and Its International Legacy* (Dayton, OH, and Seattle: Dayton Art Institute in association with the University of Washington Press, 1990), 87.

<sup>14</sup> Jinah Kim, *Receptacle of the Sacred: Illustrated Manuscripts and the Buddhist Book Cult in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 226–27.

## **FURTHER READING**

Allinger, Eva. 2001. “Narrative Paintings in 12th–13th Century Manuscripts: An Examination of Photographs Taken by Rahula Sankrtyayana at the Ngor Monastery, Tibet.” *Journal of Bengal Art* 6, 101–15.

Helman-Ważny, Agnieszka. 2014. *The Archaeology of Tibetan Books*. Leiden: Brill's Tibetan Studies Library, 36. Leiden: Brill.

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<http://rubinmuseum.org/projecthimalayanart/essays/illuminated-pages-of-the-prajnaparamita-sutra-manuscript>.

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