

# Mahāyāna features in early Kharoṣṭhī manuscripts from Gandhāra

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## 1 General remarks

The term Mahāyāna is a rather late Buddhist term summarizing certain practices in distinction to other paths to salvation; namely, the methods of the *śrāvakas* and the *pratyekabuddhas*, considered to be insufficient from the Mahāyāna point of view. It is uncertain if the term ever existed for its own sake or if from its inception it was used to imply a valuation, i. e., being “greater” in respect to other methods polemically referred to as Hīnayāna (“inferior vehicle/path”).<sup>1</sup> The earliest texts documenting these two terms are the Chinese translations of Lokakṣema (fl. 179 CE), although these labels are not used abundantly and their distinction or hierarchical difference is present but not yet stressed.<sup>2</sup> The term Hīnayāna is generally not used in Buddhist texts outside (later) Mahāyāna scriptures. Rather, a common distinction was that between the *arhat*, the *pratyekabuddha*, and the *samyaksambuddha*. This sequence occurs in the Pali canon as well as in Sanskrit sources, however, usually preceded by other categories.<sup>3</sup> It was sometimes enlarged by the term *bodhisattva*, mainly or even exclusively in Prajñāpāramitā texts, resulting in the following sequence: *arhat*, *pratyekabuddha*, *bodhisattva*, *samyaksam-*

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Jan Nattier, *A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path According to The Inquiry of Ugra (Ugraparipṛcchā)* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2003), p. 174, n. 6, where she assumes that *mahāyāna* was some kind of epithet for the *bodhisattvayāna*, and that the term *hīnayāna* was created in analogy/opposition to the term *mahāyāna*.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Paul Harrison, “The Earliest Chinese Translations of Mahāyāna Buddhist Sūtras: Some Notes on the Works of Lokakṣema,” *Buddhist Studies Review* 10.2 (1993), pp. 135–177, see p. 176. The term *mahāyāna* was first transliterated as *moheyan* 摩訶衍, later translated as *da dao* 大道, “great way,” or *da sheng* 大乘, “great vehicle” (Egil Fronsdal, “The Dawn of the Bodhisattva Path: Studies in a religious ideal of ancient Indian Buddhists with particular emphasis on the earliest extant perfection of wisdom sūtra” [PhD, Stanford University, 1998], pp. 44–58.) After having been used rather rarely during the first centuries, it is included in Chinese text titles from the 4<sup>th</sup> century onwards, increasingly in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century (see Fronsdal, *ibid.*, pp. 61–65, 70).

<sup>3</sup> I. e., stream-winner, once-returner, non-returner, *arhat*, *pratyekabuddha*, and perfectly awakened one (*śrotāpanna*, *sakṛdāgāmin*, *anāgāmin*, *arhat*, *pratyekabuddha*, *samyaksambuddha*).

*buddha*.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, in these Prajñāpāramitā texts, but also rarely in Pali texts,<sup>5</sup> the *arhat* could be replaced by *śrāvaka*, leading to the sequence *śrāvaka*, *pratyekabuddha*, *samyaksambuddha*.<sup>6</sup> Again, we occasionally find this listing with the addition of *bodhisattva*: *śrāvaka*, *pratyekabuddha*, *bodhisattva*, *samyaksambuddha*. Finally, in later Mahāyāna texts, the last element could be dropped, resulting in *śrāvaka*, *pratyekabuddha*, *bodhisattva*. Alternatively, when referring to *yānas* (“vehicle” or “path”) it could be replaced by the term *mahāyāna*: *śrāvaka*-, *pratyekabuddha*-, *mahāyāna*.

These categories were based on the different conditions, capabilities, and ambitions of someone striving for awakening. The highest goal of the *śrāvaka*, who (theoretically) listened and relied only on what was commonly accepted as the Buddha’s teaching, was to become an *arhat*. The *pratyekabuddha* had a somewhat special status, since he attained awakening by himself without the help of a teacher. Both were bent on their own liberation. The last group aimed at the highest perfect awakening as a *samyaksambuddha*, which included not only arhatship but also omniscience (*sarvajñatā*) and the ability to teach the dharma<sup>7</sup> to others. Scholarship has often stated that the crucial difference between this and the former two categories is the premise of having great compassion for others and hence refraining from personal liberation until all beings are liberated.

## 2 Early days of Mahāyāna

The Mahāyāna, as it is known today, gradually emerged out of “original” Buddhism. From its advent, it was neither an autonomous system nor was it entirely separated from traditional forms of contemporary Buddhism (subsequently

<sup>4</sup> E. g., *Larger Prajñāpāramitā* from Gilgit, *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā*.

<sup>5</sup> The relevant Pali texts are treatises like the *Mahā-* or *Cullanidessa*, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, the *Milindapañha*, or the *Visuddhimagga*. Among the Prajñāpāramitā texts, the sequence occurs in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā*, the *Suvikrāntavikrāmapariprcchā* (sometimes adding *prthagjana* at the beginning) and the *Saptaśatikā* (+ *prthagjana*), as well as in the *Prasannapadā*.

<sup>6</sup> Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions on donative objects document the triad *śrāvaka* or *arhat*, *pratyekabuddha*, *samyaksambuddha* from the early first century (ca. 30 CE) onwards. From about the middle of the first century (first attestation 64–65 CE) the three terms are replaced by *sarvasattva*, the last occurrence of the triad (*arhat* etc.) is dated to 128–129 CE (these dates are based on the index of Britta Schneider in Harry Falk, *Hariśyena-lekhapañcāśikā: Fifty Selected Papers on Indian Epigraphy and Chronology*, selected and prepared for publication with indices by Britta Schneider, Caren Dreyer and Ingo Strauch (Bremen: Hempen Verlag, 2013), pp. 564 ff.

<sup>7</sup> I differentiate dharma (doctrine) and *dharma* (entity).

named Śrāvakayāna). Both shared a common heritage of Buddhist thought, even though some terms experienced a shift in their purport and connotation, as, for example, in the case of a *bodhisattva*, which accordingly received the designation *bodhisattva-mahāsattva* in Prajñāpāramitā and later Mahāyāna texts. The Mahāyāna, at least in its formative phases, was less a distinct doctrine than an additional system of practices and body of literature.

A central concern of studies that consider this additional system has been to define precisely the nature and essence of Mahāyāna, and several solutions have been offered to date. Indeed, this is not an easy matter to explicate, not only due to multiple congruencies between the Śrāvakayāna and Mahāyāna, but also because many aspects of the Mahāyāna are not necessarily represented in each and every text. On the one hand, various additions accrued over time, on the other hand, different historical developments appear to have been subsumed under one term and accordingly some scholars prefer to speak of many Mahāyānas, some even suggesting that there were as many Mahāyānas as there are Mahāyāna texts.

Predominantly, the origin of the Mahāyāna(s) is located around the turn of the Common Era, yet this assertion lacks any firm evidence. Until recently, the earliest available evidence for Mahāyāna texts comprised the Chinese translations of Lokakṣema, dated to the late second century CE. On their basis, it was often conjectured that the beginning of the movement should be sought a few centuries prior. Other Mahāyāna texts, extant in Sanskrit or Tibetan, are only preserved in later manuscripts and/or later text recensions, wherein it is often difficult to distinguish earlier textual strata from later interpolations. With the discovery of further manuscripts, dated to the first or second century CE (onwards) and thus representing the earliest surviving Buddhist manuscripts, this picture has now changed, since they pertain to a period very close to that assumed origin of Mahāyāna.

These manuscripts are all written in the Kharoṣṭhī script and Gāndhārī Prakrit, and they were found in what is today Pakistan and Afghanistan, in an area conventionally termed “Greater Gandhāra.” Besides texts attributed to the Śrāvakayāna, some can be characterized as belonging to the Mahāyāna, notwithstanding that almost certainly no such designation nor self-awareness thereof was current at the time of the texts’ composition or copying. It is hence only in retrospect that we identify certain features, keyterms, or practices as such.

None of these Kharoṣṭhī manuscripts contain the term “Mahāyāna” or “Hīnayāna.”<sup>8</sup> In one manuscript (BC2) reference is made to four dharmas that

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<sup>8</sup> In two Kharoṣṭhī documents from Niya, the terms *mahāyanasamprastitaśa* (CKD 390) and *mahayana[sam]prasti[da]śa* (CKI 363, Endere inscription) are found, but these belong to a later time (ca. 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> century CE).

are taught, the dharmas of a *śrāvaka*, *pratyekabuddha*, *bodhisattva*, and *tathāgata*, as well as to three *yānas* that are revealed, the *śrāvaka*-, *pratyekabuddha*- and the *samyaksambuddha*-*yāna*. In another manuscript (BC11), the term *yāna* occurs but without any specification to one of the above mentioned groups; rather it seems to refer to a group in general as opposed to practicing in solitude.<sup>9</sup> In the Gāndhārī *Dharmapada*, *yāna* is mentioned in verse 99, but it is also used here rather generally to denote a vehicle upon which one proceeds on the path to liberation.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> BC11r32–33: *sakṣiteṇa sarvatradeṣeḥi sarvatradea ṇicakalo ṇa jado yaṇa upajea saṇaṇia upajea vivegagadasa upajea*, “In brief: nowhere, in no way, never, [and] not at all would a vehicle (*yāna*?) arise, would company (*saṃgaṇikā*) arise, would [this] arise for someone who has gone into solitude (*vivekagata*).” In another passage, the happiness resulting from being without company as well as the happiness resulting from detachment/seclusion are praised, 11r20: *vivegasuḥe asaṇaṇiasuh(\*e)*. Although the word *asaṃgaṇikā* does indeed suggest a physical separation from others, this does not necessarily imply spatial isolation. It could simply mean that the *bodhisattva* should be mentally unattached to the practices of others, as it is for example said in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* in respect to *viveka* (ed. Rājendralāla Mitra, *Aṣṭasāhasrikā: A Collection of Discourses on the Metaphysics of the Mahāyāna School of the Buddhists*, Now First Edited from Nepalese Sanskrit Mss. [Calcutta: G. H. Rouse, Baptist Mission Press, 1888], pp. 391–392; P. L. Vaidya, *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā with Haribhadra’s Commentary called Āloka*, Buddhist Sanskrit Texts, vol. 4 [Darbhanga: The Mithila Institute, 1960], p. 194; tr. Edward Conze, *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines & Its Verse Summary* [Bolinās: Four Seasons Foundation, 1973, reprinted 1975 with corrections]: “But that is not what I teach as the detachment of a bodhisattva, that he should live in a forest, remote, lonely and isolated, or in jungle, mountain clefts, burial grounds, on heaps of straw, etc. Subhuti: If that is not the detachment of the bodhisattva, what then is it? The Lord: A bodhisattva dwells detached when he becomes detached from the mental activities associated with the disciples and pratyekabuddhas” (... *sacet subhūte bodhisattvo mahāsattvo vivikto bhavati śrāvakaḥ pratisaṃyuktair manasikāraiḥ, vivikto bhavati pratyekabuddhaḥ pratisaṃyuktair manasikāraiḥ, evaṃ sa bodhisattvo mahāsattvo vivikto viharati*).

<sup>10</sup> 99. (MS 149) *yasa edadiṣa yaṇa gihi parvaḍasa va / sa vi ediṇa yaṇeṇa nivaṇaseva sadiā ~ SN I 33 yassa tādisaṃ yānaṃ itthiyā purisassa vā / sa ve etena yāneṇa nibbānass’ eva santike* (John Brough, *The Gāndhārī Dharmapada* [London: Oxford University Press, 1962], p. 133), cf. tr. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Oxford: The Pali Text Society/Wisdom Publications, 2000) of SN I 33, verse 150 and 152: “‘The straight path’ that path (*magga*) is called, and ‘fearless’ is its destination. The chariot (*ratha*) called ‘unrattling,’ fitted with wheels of wholesome states,” and “One who has such a vehicle, whether a woman or a man, has, by means of this vehicle, drawn close to *nibbāna*.”

### 3 Texts in the Kharoṣṭhī script with Mahāyāna elements

Currently, I know of thirteen manuscripts in the Kharoṣṭhī script that contain Mahāyāna elements:<sup>11</sup>

- (1) The Gāndhārī *Prajñāpāramitā*. The presumably earliest manuscript is a text that calls itself *prajñāpāramitā* (G *prañaparamida*) in a chapter colophon (Fragment 5 of the Split Collection).<sup>12</sup> It is dated to the first century CE by radiocarbon analysis of the birch bark (calibrated date/highest peak: 74 CE).
- (2) “The Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra.” The second manuscript is a long scroll and part of the Bajaur Collection. On palaeographic grounds it is dated to the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century. So far, it was not possible to identify a parallel and it is therefore highly likely that this text represents a hitherto unknown sūtra which was not further transmitted. Since there is no title of the text preserved in the manuscript itself, it was given different names up to now; currently it is simply denoted “Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For similar overviews cf. Mark Allon and Richard Salomon, “New Evidence for Mahāyāna in Early Gandhāra,” *The Eastern Buddhist* 41 (2010), pp. 1–22; Harry Falk and Ingo Strauch, “The Bajaur and Split Collections of Kharoṣṭhī Manuscripts within the Context of Buddhist Gāndhārī Literature,” *From Birch-Bark to Digital Data: Recent Advances in Buddhist Manuscript Research*, ed. by Paul Harrison and Jens-Uwe Hartmann (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2014), pp. 51–78, see 69–71; Paul Harrison, Timothy Lenz, Richard Salomon, “Fragments of a Gāndhārī manuscript of the *Pratyutpannabuddhasaṃmukhāvasthitasamādhisūtra*,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 41 (2018), pp. 117–143; and Ingo Strauch, “Early Mahāyāna in Gandhāra: New Evidence from the Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra,” *Setting Out on the Great Way: Essays on Early Mahāyāna Buddhism*, ed. by Paul Harrison (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2018). In these publications, two texts (namely BC4/11) were often not or only hesitantly included, even though they contain, in my opinion, unambiguous elements of later Mahāyāna literature. They are insofar different from the rest, as they are not literary sūtra texts but rather scholastic treatises.

<sup>12</sup> G *paḍhamage postage prañaparamidaae budhamitra /// idraśavasa sadhaviharisa imena ca kuśalamulena sarvasatvaṇa matrapitra...*, “In this first book of the *prajñāpāramitā* (of?) Buddhamitra (and NN?), the co-student of Indraśravas. By this wholesome root (may there be well-being?) for all beings (and?) for mother and father...” (after Harry Falk, “The ‘Split’ Collection of Kharoṣṭhī Texts,” *Annual Report of The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Sōka University* 14 [2011], pp. 13–23, see p. 23). For the edition see Harry Falk and KARASHIMA Seishi, “A First-Century *Prajñāpāramitā* Manuscript from Gandhāra – *parivarta* 1 (Texts from the Split Collection 1),” *Annual Report of The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Sōka University* 15 (2012), pp. 19–61; and *ibid.*, “A First-Century *Prajñāpāramitā* Manuscript from Gandhāra – *parivarta* 5 (Texts from the Split Collection 2),” *Annual Report of The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Sōka University* 16 (2013), pp. 97–169.

<sup>13</sup> The text is not yet published, translations and discussions are partly available in Ingo Strauch, “More Missing Pieces of Early Pure Land Buddhism: New Evidence for Akṣobhya and

- (3–4) BC4/11. Two other unparalleled texts are fragments 4 and 11 of the Bajaur Collection, dated to the same period. They also have no name, and for convenience I simply refer to them as “BC4/11.” Both scrolls are related to each other on the basis of similar terms and phrases, whereby BC4 seems to be the basic text and BC11 some sort of associated commentary. Both are presented in scholastic diction and possibly constitute a sermon or oral performance, which was subsequently written down.<sup>14</sup>
- (5) \**Sucinti-sūtra*. An unpublished fragmentary scroll from a private collection contains a text conventionally named *Sucinti-sūtra*.<sup>15</sup> Parallels were found in three Chinese translations (see section 4).
- (6) *Pratyutpannabuddhasaṃmukhāvasthitasamādhī*. Several small fragments containing passages known from the *Pratyutpannabuddhasaṃmukhāvasthitasamādhī*.<sup>16</sup>

All these manuscripts are dated to the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. Very recently, two more birch-bark scrolls with Mahāyāna content have been discovered, which probably belong to the same period of time, even though no more details are known at present.<sup>17</sup> These are:

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Abhirati in an Early Mahāyāna Sutra from Gandhāra,” *The Eastern Buddhist* 41 (2010), pp. 23–66; Andrea Schlosser and Ingo Strauch, “Abhidharmic Elements in Gandhāran Mahāyāna Buddhism: Groups of Four and the *abhedyaprasādas* in the Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra,” *Text, History, and Philosophy: Abhidharma Across Buddhist Scholastic Traditions*, ed. by Bart Dessein and Weijen Ten (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 47–107; *ibid.*, “The Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra: A Preliminary Analysis of Its Contents,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 39 (2016), pp. 309–335.

<sup>14</sup> First edited in Andrea Schlosser, “On the Bodhisattva Path in Gandhāra: Edition of Fragment 4 and 11 from the Bajaur Collection of Kharoṣṭhī Manuscripts” (Dissertation Berlin: Freie Universität, 2016). In the meantime, it became evident that another manuscript, namely BC6, also belongs to BC4/11. All three will be (re-)edited in a forthcoming volume of the Gandhāran Buddhist Text series (Schlosser [forthcoming]). In the following, only BC4/11 will be referred to, because certain terms, such as the *prajñāpāramitā*, are only mentioned in BC4 and BC11, not in BC6.

<sup>15</sup> I adopt the name \**Sucinti(n)* proposed in Paul Harrison, Timothy Lenz, Richard Salomon, “Fragments of a Gāndhārī manuscript of the *Pratyutpannabuddhasaṃmukhāvasthitasamādhisūtra*,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 41 (2018), pp. 117–143, rather than the previously used name \**Sucitti* (G *Suciti*).

<sup>16</sup> Identified by Paul Harrison, Timothy Lenz and Richard Salomon and published in the *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 41 (2018).

<sup>17</sup> Both are part of a private collection. They are first mentioned in Harrison, Lenz, Salomon, “Fragments of a Gāndhārī manuscript of the *Pratyutpannabuddhasaṃmukhāvasthitasamādhisūtra*,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 41 (2018), pp. 117–143.

- (7) *Samādhirāja-sūtra*.
- (8) An unidentified Mahāyāna *sūtra* with an “unusually extensive *paścime kāle* formula.”

Furthermore, there are several small palm leaf fragments from Bamiyan with text passages familiar from the

- (9) *Bhadrakalpika-sūtra*,<sup>18</sup>
  - (10) *Bodhisattvapiṭaka-sūtra*,<sup>19</sup>
  - (11) *Sarvapūnyasamuccayasamādhi-sūtra*,<sup>20</sup>
  - (12) *Vīradattapariṣcchā*,<sup>21</sup>
  - (13) as well as another yet unidentified text,<sup>22</sup>
- all dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Up to now, 58 fragments have been identified, containing portions of the list of one thousand buddhas of the *bhadrakalpa* and their characteristics as well as a section that describes the six perfections. “It may however be questioned whether the Bhadrakalpika is a ‘Mahāyāna’ *sūtra* in the full sense of the term. Although classified as such in the Chinese and Tibetan canons, it has little in terms of doctrinal content which is definitively and exclusively Mahayanistic” (Allon and Salomon, “New Evidence for Mahāyāna in Early Gandhāra,” p. 7). Edited by Stefan Baums, Andrew Glass, and MATSUDA Kazunobu, “Fragments of a Gāndhārī Version of the Bhadrakalpikasūtra,” *Buddhist Manuscripts*, vol. IV, Manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection, ed. by Jens Braarvig (Oslo: Hermes Publishing, 2016), pp. 183–266.

<sup>19</sup> MS 2179/17, 9<sup>th</sup> chapter on the *vīryapāramitā-sūtra*, no. 12 of the *Ratnakūṭa* collection (*Dabaoji jing* 大寶積經, tr. Xuanzang 玄奘 [602–664 CE]). A later Sanskrit manuscript of the same text, although lacking any correspondences in the text passages, is preserved among the Bamiyan fragments, ca. 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> century CE (cf. Jens Braarvig and Ulrich Pagel, “Fragments of the *Bodhisattvapiṭakasūtra*,” *Buddhist Manuscripts*, vol. III, Manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection, ed. by Jens Braarvig [Oslo: Hermes Publishing, 2006], pp. 11–88, see p. 30). For the edition of the Gāndhārī fragments see Stefan Baums, Jens Braarvig, Timothy J. Lenz, Fredrik Liland, MATSUDA Kazunobu, Richard Salomon, “The *Bodhisattvapiṭakasūtra* in Gāndhārī,” *Buddhist Manuscripts*, vol. IV, Manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection, ed. by Jens Braarvig (Oslo: Hermes Publishing, 2016), pp. 267–282.

<sup>20</sup> MS 2179/89. “This fragment comes from the portion of the text containing a dialogue between a sage named Uttara and a past Buddha called Vimalakīrtirāja” (Mark Allon and Richard Salomon, “New Evidence for Mahāyāna in Early Gandhāra,” *The Eastern Buddhist* 41 [2010], pp. 1–22, see p. 7). The identification was based on *ima sarvapūṇasamuca[y]* and is confirmed by the Chinese translation of Kumārajīva, *Jiyiqie fude sanmei jing* 集一切福德三昧經, T. 382, vol. 12, p. 996b27 and 996c3. There is no other Indic version of this text. Cf. also Paul Harrison, Timothy Lenz, QIAN Lin, Richard Salomon, “A Gāndhārī Fragment of the *Sarvapūnyasamuccayasamādhisūtra*,” *Buddhist Manuscripts*, vol. IV, Manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection, ed. by Jens Braarvig (Oslo: Hermes Publishing, 2016), pp. 311–319.

<sup>21</sup> Identified by Andrea Schlosser and Gudrun Melzer (forthcoming).

<sup>22</sup> Discovered by MATSUDA Kazunobu (cf. Harrison and Hartmann, eds., *From Birch-Bark to Digital Data: Recent Advances in Buddhist Manuscript Research*, p. xvi, n. 19).

<sup>23</sup> The radiocarbon dating of one *Bhadrakalpika* fragment is within the range 210–417 CE (Mark Allon, Richard Salomon, Geraldine Jacobsen, and Ugo Zoppi, “Radiocarbon Dating

The earliest manuscripts come from the area of Bajaur and its neighbourhood,<sup>24</sup> the later ones from the Bamiyan region. In the following, I focus on the former.<sup>25</sup>

## 4 Mahāyāna elements

### 4.1 \**Sucinti-sūtra*

Based on the information published so far, the preserved text apparently contains no specific Mahāyāna terms but a few keywords, such as *lichavikumaro* and *suciti*, on whose basis certain Chinese parallels have been identified.<sup>26</sup> These, however, are labelled as Mahāyāna *sūtras*, and by content they are associated with the more famous *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra*.

### 4.2 *Pratyutpannabuddhasaṃmukhāvasthitasamādhi*

This fragment contains a merit passage corresponding to chapter IV of the earliest Chinese translation.<sup>27</sup> Most merit is obtained by mastering the *samādhi* (G *samaṣi ṇiphaditva* = Skt. *samādhim niṣpādyā*), which is more meritorious than teaching it to others (G *deśea sapagaśea*), and even more meritorious than giving a buddha field filled with all treasures as a gift. As far as certain terms are concerned, the text uses *kulaputra/kuladuhitr* instead of *bodhisattva*. References to writing are not included or at least not preserved in the fragment.

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of Kharoṣṭhī Fragments from the Schøyen and Senior Manuscript Collections,” *Buddhist Manuscripts*, vol. III, Manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection, ed. by Jens Braarvig (Oslo: Hermes Publishing, 2006), pp. 279–291, see p. 290). The *Sarvapūṇyasamuccayasamādhisūtra* is palaeographically dated to the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, according to Harrison, Lenz, Qian, Salomon, “A Gāndhārī Fragment of the *Sarvapūṇyasamuccayasamādhisūtra*,” p. 312.

<sup>24</sup> This is primarily said of the Split and the Bajaur Collection and is assumed for the other unpublished manuscripts in private collections as well.

<sup>25</sup> See also Ingo Strauch, “Early Mahāyāna in Gandhāra: New evidence from the Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra,” *Setting Out on the Great Way: Essays on Early Mahāyāna Buddhism*, ed. by Paul Harrison (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2018), who discusses the character of early Mahāyāna in Gandhāra, but based exclusively on the Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra. The present article tries to extend the discussion to all of the early Mahāyāna related manuscripts and identify common features.

<sup>26</sup> *Foshuo dafangdeng dingwang jing* 佛說大方等頂王經 (T. 477, vol. 14, tr. Dharmarakṣa, 308 CE), *Dacheng dingwang jing* 大乘頂王經 (T. 478, vol. 14, tr. Upaśūnya 502–557 CE [?]), and *Shansi tongzi jing* 善思童子經 (T. 479, vol. 14, tr. Jñānagupta, 591 CE), cf. Allon and Salomon, “New Evidence for Mahāyāna in Early Gandhāra,” p. 11.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Paul Harrison, *The Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sutra, Translated by Lokakṣema* (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1998), pp. 30–31.



### 4.3 *Prajñāpāramitā*

The Gāndhārī *Prajñāpāramitā* corresponds to large parts of chapter 1 and 5 of the Sanskrit *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*. The Gāndhārī text is closely related to the oldest Chinese version of the late second century CE (translated by Lokakṣema). The Sanskrit version (of the 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century) is considerably expanded.<sup>28</sup>

In short, on the recto side of the scroll (chapter 1) it is said that one should not perceive any *skandha* or any *dharma* that is called *bodhisattva* or even *prajñāpāramitā*, because the *prajñāpāramitā* has no own-being (*svabhāva*), just as the *skandhas* are devoid thereof. One should not engage in [the perception of any] form (*rūpa*) and the other *skandhas* (as well as their arising, destruction, etc.), because this would be to engage in a mental image (*nimittaṃ carati*). Instead one should practise the *samādhi* called *aparigrhīta* (non-apprehension).<sup>29</sup> If a *bodhisattva* realizes that in truth there is no *dharma*, and if he does not lose heart, then he should be considered as non-retrogressive, i. e., he can no longer turn away from awakening.<sup>30</sup>

The verso side of the scroll (chapter 5) largely contains a long passage on merit, specifically the merit of giving a written book of the *prajñāpāramitā* to others.<sup>31</sup> In sum, it is said that this merit is greater than the merit produced by establishing the beings in Jambudvīpa (or the *mahāsāhasralokadhātu* or the *trisāhasramahāsāhasralokadhātu*) in the *srotāpatti*phala; it is greater than the

<sup>28</sup> Cf. also the Bamiyan fragments of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* in late Kuṣāṇa Brāhmī, datable to about the second half of the third century CE (Lore Sander, “Fragments of an *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* Manuscript from the Kuṣāṇa Period,” *Buddhist Manuscripts*, vol. I, Manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection, ed. by Jens Braarvig [Oslo: Hermes Publishing, 2000], pp. 1–51; for the dating see p. 288 in her paleographical analysis in the same volume). According to Lore Sander, the recension is close to the one preserved in Nepalese manuscripts of the 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century. Altogether 46 fragments are preserved with passages from chapter 7–8, 10, 15, 17–18. It is possible that two folios among these fragments derive from another manuscript, since they are written with four lines instead of the five encountered elsewhere, and the format is different.

<sup>29</sup> G-PP 1–38: *aparigr[h].[d]. [ṇa](\*ma) [sa](\*ma)[si]*. A *bodhisattva* should not perceive anything through *nimittas*: G-PP 1–39 *na hi sa nimitado vihatavo ~ Aṣṭasāhasrikā* (ed. Rājendralāla Mitra, *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* [1888], p. 8; P. L. Vaidya, *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* [1960], p. 5) *na hi nimittato grahītavyā*.

<sup>30</sup> G-PP 1–30 and 31: *saye hi bosisatvasa ° prañāparamida uadiśamaṇae ° ṇa oli + + + + [sa](m)traso avajati ° thido bosisatvo ° niyudo ° avevaṭīae dhaṇḍue ° ~ Aṣṭasāhasrikā* (ed. Mitra [1888], pp. 7–8 / Vaidya [1960], p. 4) *saced bodhisattvasya [...] prajñāpāramitāyāṃ [...] upadiśyamānāyāṃ cittam nāvalīyate [...] na saṃtrāsam āpadyate [...] bodhisattvo [...] sthito 'vivartanīyāyāṃ bodhisattvabhūmau*. For the *prajñāpāramitā* being in essence the teaching that there is no *dharma* to be found, cf. G-PP 1–41 ~ *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, ed. Mitra (1888), p. 10 / Vaidya (1960), p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> G-PP 5–03: *(\*pra)[ṇa]paramidae [p](\*o)[sta]o pareṣu likhaṇa dasati ~ Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, ed. Mitra (1888), p. 112; Vaidya (1960), p. 55.

merit produced by causing the beings in Jambudvīpa (etc. up to the *gaṅgānadīvālikāsamalokadhātu*) to resolve to strive for perfect awakening (*cittotpāda*).

Moreover, it is proclaimed that the *prajñāpāramitā* is a fast track to awakening.<sup>32</sup>

In general, the *śrāvakas* are not diminished, which is evident in the statement that “those who want to be trained on the *śrāvakabhūmi* should listen to the *prajñāpāramitā*.” In regard to specifically Mahāyāna elements, the text uses the term *bodhisattva-mahāsattva* (the *mahāsattva* is not consistently added),<sup>33</sup> and alongside the *prajñāpāramitā* reference is made to the set of six *pāramitās* (G *ṣaḥ[i p.]* /// = Skt. *ṣadbhiḥ p.*).

#### 4.4 BC4/11 illustrating the path of a *bodhisattva*

The content of BC4/11 principally conforms to the basic tenets of Śrāvakayāna Buddhism, but there are also clear indications of Mahāyāna elements. Again, we have the term *prajñāpāramitā*, the set of six *pāramitās*, and the common expression *gaṅgānadīvālikāsamalokadhātu*. More important, however, is the statement that from the first intention to strive for awakening (*prathamacittotpāda*) the author/speaker receives the *prajñāpāramitā* in just one lifetime, again indicative of a fast track to awakening.<sup>34</sup> Equally important is a passage, which reflects the resolution of the author to strive for awakening for the sake of others.<sup>35</sup> Passages like this are usually known as *praṇidhānas* in others texts, where they mark the beginning of a *bodhisattva* career. The main theme in the scrolls from Bajaur is however not a detailed description of the (stages of the) path of a *bodhisattva*, but

<sup>32</sup> G-PP 5–54 and 5–55: *kṣipadaro ~ Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, ed. Mitra (1888), p. 133; Vaidya (1960), p. 67, *kṣiprataram*.

<sup>33</sup> Likewise, the oldest extant manuscript of the *Vajracchedikā* (Schøyen collection, ca. 6<sup>th</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> century CE) adds the *mahāsattva* only three times; elsewhere it uses only the term *bodhisattva* (cf. Paul Harrison and WATANABE Shōgo, *Buddhist Manuscripts*, vol. III, Manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection, ed. by Jens Braarvig [Oslo: Hermes Publishing, 2006], pp. 90–132, see p. 100).

<sup>34</sup> BC4r15–16: *se mah (\*i) iṣemi jādī paḍhamacitupade ca vrude praṇaparamida ca paḍiladha*, “Thus, here in this lifetime by me the first resolve [to strive for perfect awakening] (*prathamacittotpāda*) is performed (?) and the perfection of insight is obtained.”

<sup>35</sup> BC4r20–22: “By this knowledge of [what is] painful and this knowledge of [what is] useless every suffering [that will be] taken up will be accepted [and] looked at with an even mind. Every happiness [that will be] given up will be accepted. In this way, having reached complete extinction, I will leave this world. Avoiding [what is] unwholesome, doing [what is] wholesome, honoring Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha in (\*every) respect, acting for the profit of [all] living beings, teaching this Dharma, which is the knowledge of [what is] useless and painful, and establishing [all] beings in awakening, [then] certainly before long every fortune will exist for me, and every misery will not exist; [there] will be welfare for myself, welfare for others, and welfare for every living being.”

a discussion of the happy states and conditions that one would experience while being on this path. The practice of the path is mainly concerned with being dispassionate towards the world of senses; and the inner and outer sense bases (*āyatana*) are given as the cause of all suffering.<sup>36</sup> It is only through non-designation (*aprajñapti*) and relinquishing any conception (*saṃjñā*) that one is able to experience a certain higher kind of happiness (called *avasargasukha* or *avijñaptisukha*, among others).

#### 4.5 BC2, the “Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra”

Due to its length of over 600 lines, I can only give a short summary of the Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra.<sup>37</sup> The body of the text is structured by prose and metrical passages, which subdivide it into seven sections.

(1) The first section is a dialogue between the Buddha<sup>38</sup> and Śāriputra. Due to its extensive use of categories, it seems heavily influenced by Abhidharma scholasticism.<sup>39</sup> Another distinctive feature is what has been called the rhetoric of absence or negation. It is repeatedly stated that one should not have any notion of a *dharma*, and one should not perceive (*na samanupaśyati*) anything like a self, a being, an entity etc. (*ātman*, *sattva*, *bhāva*, *jīva*, *pudgala*), any arising or destruction, any own-being (*svabhāva*) and so on.<sup>40</sup> More or less this is what we have already heard in the Gāndhārī *Prajñāpāramitā*, and in many regards the Bajaur

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<sup>36</sup> For example, BC11v24–26: “[...] the inner sense bases are painful, the outer sense bases are painful. From their accumulation happiness should develop, happiness should arise? This is not possible. The inner are [like] boils, the outer are [like] boils. From their (\*accumulation) happiness should develop? This is not possible.”

<sup>37</sup> For a comprehensive summary of the content of the whole text see Andrea Schlosser and Ingo Strauch, “Abhidharmic Elements in Gandhāran Mahāyāna Buddhism: Groups of Four and the *abhedyaprasādas* in the Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra,” *Text, History, and Philosophy: Abhidharma Across Buddhist Scholastic Traditions*, ed. by Bart Dessein and Weijen Ten (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 47–107.

<sup>38</sup> Only referred to as *tasagada* (Skt. *tathāgata*) or *bhagava* (Skt. *bhagavat*).

<sup>39</sup> For an example and discussion of this Abhidharma background, presumably of the Sarvāstivādins, see Schlosser/Strauch, “Abhidharmic Elements in Gandhāran Mahāyāna Buddhism.”

<sup>40</sup> Parallels for the phrase *na samanupaśyati* are found abundantly in *Prajñāpāramitā* texts such as the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, the *Larger Prajñāpāramitā* from Gilgit, the *Suvikrāntavikrāmipari-prcchā*, or the *Śatasāhasrikā* (in the *Saptaśatikā* it occurs only in two passages and in the *Vajracchedikā* there is just one similar instance). It is also sometimes found in other Mahāyāna texts such as the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*, the *Prasannapadā*, the *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka-sūtra*, the *Samādhirāja-sūtra* or the *Abhidharmasamuccayabhāṣya*. Parallels to the formulation *ātma-saṃjñā* etc. (without *bhāva*) are existent in *Prajñāpāramitā* literature like the *Vajracchedikā* or the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā*. Some texts combine these categories also with other terms, such as *dr̥ṣṭi*, *grāha*, or *dhātu*.

Mahāyāna Sūtra and the Prajñāpāramitā texts are closely related in terms of their doctrinal background and their literary style. It may be worthwhile mentioning that the prototype of a good practitioner is called *mama śrāvaka* or *āryaśrāvaka* but not *kulaputra/kuladuhitr*.<sup>41</sup>

(2) In the second section, a group of 84,000 *devaputras*, having formed the intention to strive for awakening (*cittotpāda*) asks the Buddha to be instructed in the *bodhisattvaśikṣā*, the training of a *bodhisattva*. Basically, this means to have no notion of any *dharma*, not even of awakening itself. When one is able to not perceive anything, and if one is not discouraged by that, then one can expect awakening and to not turn away again, that is, one becomes non-retrogressive. This is (indirectly) equated with the attainment of the *dharmakṣānti*,<sup>42</sup> a technical term for the calm acceptance of the fact that *dharmas* are not produced.<sup>43</sup> In texts like the Prajñāpāramitā, the effect of this realization is usually named *anutpattikadharmakṣānti* and is explained as being synonymous to the acceptance that *dharmas* are devoid of self (*nirātmaka*) or of own-being (*svabhāva*).<sup>44</sup> Sub-

<sup>41</sup> In the Gāndhārī *Prajñāpāramitā* as also in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* the term *kulaputra* is attested (e. g., G-PP 1–09, Harry Falk and KARASHIMA Seishi, “A First-Century Prajñāpāramitā Manuscript from Gandhāra – *parivarta* 5 [Texts from the Split Collection 2],” *Annual Report of The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Sōka University* 16 [2013], pp. 97–169, see p. 32).

<sup>42</sup> In the text it is mostly written *dharmehi kṣati* = Skt. *dharmeṣu kṣānti*, but also once as *dharmakṣati* = Skt. *dharmakṣānti*.

<sup>43</sup> Cf., e. g., *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā* (Nalinaksha Dutt, ed., *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* [Calcutta, 1934], p. 223; KIMURA Takayasu, ed., *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā I-2* [Tōkyō: Sankibo Busshorin, 2009], p. 99; tr. Edward Conze, *The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom with the Divisions of the Abhisamayālaṅkāra* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975], p. 174): “Patient acceptance of nonproduction is the patient acceptance of the fact that all dharmas are not produced, stopped, or put together” (*yā sarvadharmāṇām anutpādāya anirodhāya anabhisamṣkāraya kṣāntir iyaṃ bodhisattvasya mahāsattvasya anutpādakṣāntiḥ*). For the connection to becoming irreversible, cf., e. g., *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* (ed. Mitra [1888], p. 331; Vaidya (1960), p. 165; tr. Conze 1973): “One says therefore that a Bodhisattva is irreversible if he patiently accepts the cognition of non-production” (*tata ucyate anutpādajñānakṣāntiko bodhisattvo mahāsattvo ‘vinivartanīya iti*).

<sup>44</sup> *Vajracchedikā* from Gilgit, fol. 11a (Schøyen Collection): *nirātmakeṣu dharmeṣu kṣāntiṃ* (“acceptance with regard to the fact that *dharmas* are devoid of self”). Later manuscripts add *anutpattikeṣu: nirātmakeṣu anutpattikeṣu dharmeṣu kṣāntiṃ* (“... and devoid of arising”, cf. Paul Harrison, “Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā: A New English Translation of the Sanskrit Text Based on Two Manuscripts from Greater Gandhāra,” *Buddhist Manuscripts*, vol. III, Manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection, ed. by Jens Braarvig [Oslo: Hermes Publishing, 2006], pp. 134–159, see p. 157, n. 117). In the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā*, Nepalese manuscript, 11<sup>th</sup> century, ed. KIMURA Takayasu, *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā VI–VIII* (Tōkyō: Sankibo Busshorin, 2006), p. 21, the *anutpattikeṣu dharmeṣu kṣānti* is explained as *dharmāṇām dharmasvabhāvam anutpattikair dharmaiḥ kṣānti* (in contrast to another *kṣānti*).

sequently, a long passage of BC2 praises the merit of being pervaded by this *dharmakṣānti*. It is said that in this way a *bodhisattva-mahāsattva* produces significantly more merit than by giving gifts or worshipping *tathāgatas* or *pratyekabuddhas* and/or building *stūpas* for them.

(3) Thereupon the Blessed One predicts that these *devaputras* will attain the highest perfect awakening, saying that they will all become *tathāgatas* bearing the name Vipulaprabhāsa.<sup>45</sup> In the following, the appearance and constitution of their future buddha field is described and compared to the one of Akṣobhya (i.e., Abhirati<sup>46</sup>). In the verses concluding this prose section the mental constitution of the *devaputras/bodhisattvas* is described. Among other characteristics, they will abide in the notion of non-origination (G *aṇupadadriḥie ḥhida* = Skt. *anutpādadṛṣṭyām sthitāḥ*) or the concentration which is without mental perception (G *aṇovalabhae ḥhida samaṣie* = Skt. *anupalambhāyām sthitāḥ samādhyām*).

(4) The fourth section is about the moral qualities of the instructed *devaputras*. Essentially, this means to refrain from the ten unwholesome actions (*akuśalakarmapatha*).

(5) After that, the text stipulates the three possible rebirths of the *devaputras*: among gods, among affluent humans, or in Abhirati. Being reborn in Abhirati, they will not be reborn again.

(6) In section six, the process of awakening is compared to a person being in a dream and finally waking up. While dreaming, he would see a *tathāgata* expounding the dharma of a *śrāvaka*, *pratyekabuddha*, *bodhisattva* or *tathāgata*, as well as establishing persons on the path of a *śrāvaka*, *pratyekabuddha*, or *samyaksambuddha*. What is important here is that the text accepts all three *yānas*, although it concludes that all is like a dream and ultimately they do not really exist.

(7) The closing section is fragmentary, but the text apparently culminates in realizing emptiness by overcoming any mental construction (G *avisakharo* = Skt. *abhisamskāra*). Thus, there would no longer be any rebirth. In this passage, also the term *paramārthaśūnyatā* (G *paramarthaśuṇada*) arises,

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<sup>45</sup> G *viholappravhaṣa*. In the verses concluding this section, the name is given as Mahāpradīpa (G *mahapradīva*) and Mahāprabha (G *mahappravha*). In the smaller *Sukhāvatīvyūha*, Mahāprabha is the name of a Buddha in the West. Mass predictions like the one in the Bajaur text are also common to other texts, as, for example, the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, or the *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka-sūtra*, cf. Ingo Strauch, “More Missing Pieces of Early Pure Land Buddhism: New Evidence for Akṣobhya and Abhirati in an Early Mahāyāna Sutra from Gandhāra,” *The Eastern Buddhist* 41 (2010), p. 49.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Strauch, “More Missing Pieces of Early Pure Land Buddhism.”

which, in the *Samādhirāja-sūtra*, is a synonym for the dharma or for the *samādhi* taught in the text itself, which is characterized as being non-conceptual.<sup>47</sup>

## 5 Conclusions

What can we conclude from all these texts (i. e., the Gāndhārī *Prajñāpāramitā*, BC4/11 and the Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra)? What can they tell us about the Buddhism practised at the time and place of their composition? It goes without saying that we have to be cautious when drawing any conclusions: these manuscripts represent only a few texts that were found by chance, and more discoveries in the future could change the picture again. Nevertheless, for the time being this is what we have (for a summary see table 1).

Unsurprisingly, all three texts use traditional terminology, and many of the stock phrases also occur in the Pali canon or Sanskrit Śrāvakayāna texts, indicating that the author was an educated monk.

Specific terms and lists, even though negated, suggest furthermore a scholastic background as well as a focus on meditational matters, as opposed to rituals like worshipping *stūpas*, for example.<sup>48</sup>

It is also striking that the *arhat* ideal is held in high esteem, and that all three soteriological paths are accepted. In general, early Mahāyāna texts lack any opposition to *śrāvakas*, even though they promote the *bodhisattva* path.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> For *paramārthaśūnyatā* = dharma cf. P. L. Vaidya, ed., *Samādhirājasūtram*, Buddhist Sanskrit Texts, vol. 2 (Darbhanga: The Mithila Institute, 1961), 29.29 (30.34 in the translation of Peter Alan Roberts (2018), v 1.1 2018, translated from the Tibetan, available in the internet at: 84000.co): “They teach the stainless, precious Dharma, the ultimate truth of emptiness.” For *paramārthaśūnyatā* = *samādhi* cf. ed. Vaidya (1961), 29.116 (30.127 in the translation of Roberts [2018]): “Whoever has this practice of peace, this supreme *samādhi*, the ultimate truth of emptiness, propagates it and creates copies of it, he is a *dharmabhāṇaka* with wisdom.” For non- conceptualism see, for example, chapter 12 in Vaidya’s edition (chapter 13 in the translation of Roberts [2018]).

<sup>48</sup> This points to a general rejection of materialistic cult in favour of a more de-materialized mental meditation process of realizing the essential emptiness of all *dharma*s. A similar focus on meditation and renouncing the world is evident, for example, in early Mahāyāna texts like the *Ugraparipṛcchā*, the *Samādhirājasūtra*, the *Rāṣṭrapālāparipṛcchā*, or the *Ratnarāśisūtra*.

<sup>49</sup> Examples are: *Ugraparipṛcchā* (cf. Jan Nattier, *A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path According to The Inquiry of Ugra [Ugraparipṛcchā]* [Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2003], pp. 172–173), *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* (T. 224, cf. Egil Fronsdal, “The Dawn of the Bodhisattva Path: Studies in a religious ideal of ancient Indian Buddhists with particular emphasis on the earliest extant perfection of wisdom sutra” [PhD, Stanford University, 1998], pp. 51–52).

Gāndhārī <i>Prajñāpāramitā</i> (Split C 5)	Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra (BC 2)	BC 4/11
traditional terminology (scholasticism)		
[ <i>ārya</i> ]śrāvaka; <i>bodhisattva</i> ( <i>mahāsattva</i> ); <i>kula</i> putra / <i>kuladuhitr</i>	<i>ārya</i> śrāvaka; <i>bodhisattva mahāsattva</i>	<i>bodhisattva</i>
no perception ( <i>na samanupaś, aparigraha, anupalabha</i> )	no perception, no notion ( <i>na samanupaś, saṃjñā</i> )	no cognition, no designation ( <i>avijñapti, aprajñapti</i> )
merit passage (giving a book of the <i>prajñāpāramitā</i> )	merit passage (being pervaded by <i>dharmakṣānti</i> )	
<i>bodhicittotpāda</i> [[ <i>Aṣṭa</i> : <i>dharmakṣānti</i> , = <i>avaivartika</i> = <i>vyākaraṇa</i> ]]	<i>bodhicittotpāda</i> , <i>dharmakṣānti</i> = <i>avaivartika</i> = <i>vyākaraṇa</i>	<i>prathamacittotpāda</i> , – – » self-prophecy «
[[ <i>Aṣṭa</i> : parallel <i>buddhakṣetra</i> of <i>Akṣobhya</i> ]]	parallel <i>buddhakṣetra</i> of <i>Akṣobhya</i> , similar to future <i>buddhakṣetra</i>	
<i>prajñāpāramitā</i> ; six <i>pāramitās</i>		<i>prajñāpāramitā</i> ; six <i>pāramitās</i>
reference to writing		

Table 1. Comparison of key elements contained in the manuscripts under consideration.

The practice of a *bodhisattva* is essentially to have no perception, no notion, and no designation of anything that relates to the sense-experienced world. Although the Pali canon contains similar formulations regarding the non-notion of elements, in these early Mahāyāna texts and especially in *Prajñāpāramitā* texts, the focus lies on the non-notion of *ātma/sattva/(bhāva)/jīva/pudgala* as well as the non-notion of *bodhi*, *bodhisattva* or the *prajñāpāramitā*. BC4/11 do not use the same “no notion”-phrases, but similarly do state that one should not be attached to sense-experience, and the bliss gained through non-cognition/non-manifestation (*avijñapti*) or non-designation (*aprajñapti*) is praised as the highest bliss.

Another issue that is typical for Mahāyāna literature, most of all *Prajñāpāramitā* texts, are passages that concern merit.<sup>50</sup> Most commonly the highest amount of merit is produced by transmitting and copying a text, whereas in the Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra the most precious thing is to be pervaded by *dharmakṣānti*. This predominant role of the *dharmakṣānti* is not found in other *Prajñāpāramitā* texts. There is only one exceptional passage in the *Vajracchedikā* (§ 28) where the obtainment of the *dharmakṣānti* yields the most merit. In parallel

<sup>50</sup> Merit passages are, for example, prominent in *Prajñāpāramitā* texts (*Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, *Larger Prajñāpāramitā* from Gilgit, *Vajracchedikā*), the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, the *Samghāṭasūtra*, or the *Jñānālokāṃkāra*.

passages (§§ 8, 11, 24, 32) this is replaced by remembering only one verse (*catuspādikā gāthā*) and teaching it to others. Otherwise the *dharmakṣānti* is very common, and it is one of four key stages of a *bodhisattva* path, as represented in the earliest Chinese translations identified by Paul Harrison:<sup>51</sup> First is the resolution to strive for awakening for the sake of others (*bodhicittotpāda*); second, as a result of having heard the dharma, is the patient acceptance that dharmas are not produced (*anutpattikadharmakṣānti*); third, one becomes non-retrogressive (*avaivartika*) because of this *dharmakṣānti*; and fourth is the prediction to attain buddhahood (*vyākaraṇa*). All these elements are present in the Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra,<sup>52</sup> and also in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, even though this very passage is not preserved in the Gāndhārī fragments known so far. BC4 only refers to the *prathamacittotpāda* and contains some kind of self-prophecy (the *prañidhāna*-like passage).

Often included in the prediction is the description of a *buddhakṣetra*. As is the case in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, for the Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra the highest and final rebirth is in Akṣobhya's buddha field, Abhirati (the passage is not preserved in the Gāndhārī *Prajñāpāramitā*).<sup>53</sup> In its very detailed description, it is closely related to, but textually independent from the *Akṣobhyavyūha*, the locus classicus for a description of this buddha field.<sup>54</sup>

What is missing in the Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra but extant in the other three manuscripts is:

- any reference to the six *pāramitās* (all the other manuscripts refer to the set of six with a focus on the *prajñāpāramitā*, promoted as a fast track to awakening),
- any reference to writing (only mentioned in the Gāndhārī *Prajñāpāramitā*).

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<sup>51</sup> Paul Harrison, "The Earliest Chinese Translations of Mahāyāna Buddhist Sūtras: Some Notes on the Works of Lokakṣema," *Buddhist Studies Review* 10:2 (1993), pp. 135–177, see p. 171.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Ingo Strauch, "Early Mahāyāna in Gandhāra: New Evidence from the Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra," *Setting Out on the Great Way: Essays on Early Mahāyāna Buddhism*, ed. by Paul Harrison (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2018).

<sup>53</sup> In the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* (ed. Mitra [1888], p. 219; Vaidya [1960], p. 181), Gaṅgadevā is predicted to be reborn as a man in Abhirati and live the *brahmacarya* there. After that he will pass from buddha field to buddha field, always seeing a *tathāgata* until he will finally reach full awakening himself. In a later passage (ed. Mitra [1888], p. 450; Vaidya [1960], p. 222, and ed. Mitra [1888], p. 452; Vaidya [1960], p. 224) the *brahmacarya* in this buddha field is connected with abiding in or listening to the *prajñāpāramitā*.

<sup>54</sup> See Ingo Strauch, "More Missing Pieces of Early Pure Land Buddhism," pp. 53–58. Most parallels are given to the *Akṣobhyavyūha*, many to the *Karuṇāpūṇḍarīka-sūtra*, none to the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* (ed. Vaidya [1960], pp. 175–182, 220–225, 226–234) or the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* (chapter 11), only some to the (larger and smaller) *Sukhāvatīvyūha*. Though many parallels are given to the *Akṣobhyavyūha*, the features are enumerated in a different sequence, and a slightly different terminology is used.



Missing in all Gāndhārī manuscripts but known from other/later Mahāyāna texts and sometimes considered central to Mahāyāna are the following elements. There is

no downgrading of the *śrāvaka*- or *pratyekabuddha*-yāna,  
no special focus on forest monks,  
no mention of *dharmabhāṇakas*,  
no *upāyakaśālya*,  
no *bhūmi* system,  
no celestial *bodhisattvas*,  
no *kāya* differentiation,  
no *dharmadhātu* or *tathāgatagarbha* concept.

While many items on this list could simply be explained chronologically, meaning they were developed after the texts were written down, one in particular remains intriguing; that is, the absence of the *prajñāpāramitā* in the Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra. The question is: Did different groups favor different terms, even though they fundamentally refer to the same *samādhi*, in which one does not perceive or apprehend any *dharmas* (*anupalambha/aparigrhīta-samādhi*) due to the realization and acceptance that they are non-originated and essentially empty (*anutpāda/anutpattika/nirātma*)?<sup>55</sup> Was this initially called *dharmakṣānti*, and is the *prajñāpāramitā* just another term that became popular under the influence of the six *pāramitās*? Is this *samādhi* and *dharmakṣānti* the general basis of all Mahāyāna sūtras, to which other additional elements like prophecies, buddha fields, dialogues, or narratives could be added and freely chosen by a dharma preacher (*dharmabhāṇaka*) according to his own inspiration (*pratibhāna*)?

I think at least the vision of a parallel buddha field can be considered as an additional element that was integrated. I also think that the term *prajñāpāramitā* was such an additional element under the influence of the six *pāramitās*.<sup>56</sup> For a visualization of the possible influence and integration of these two concepts in the mentioned manuscripts see fig. 1.

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<sup>55</sup> Cf. *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, ed. Mitra (1888), p. 490; ed. Vaidya (1960), p. 242. Here, as a result of hearing the *prajñāpāramitā*, the *bodhisattva* Sadāprarudita “produced a perception which did not lean on any dharma” (*sarvadharmeṣv anīśritasaṃjñā*). He “came face to face with doors to concentration” (*samādhimukhāni*) with names like “non-apprehension of the own-being of all dharmas” (*sarvadharmasvabhāvānupalabdhir nāma samādhiḥ*) or “non-apprehension of all dharmas” (*sarvadharmānupalabdhir nāma samādhi*), even though these are only two of altogether sixty-two *samādhis*.

<sup>56</sup> Just as one example, in the Sarvāstivāda *Samyuktāgama* (sūtra no. 1177, T. 2, vol. 1, pp. 316c23–317b16), only the *dharmakṣānti* is mentioned but not the *prajñāpāramitā* (cf. FUJITA Yoshimichi, “The Bodhisattva Thought of the Sarvāstivādins and Mahāyāna Buddhism,” *Acta Asiatica: Bulletin of the Institute of Eastern Culture* 96:1 (2009), pp. 99–120, see pp. 104–106). The focus is on meditation.

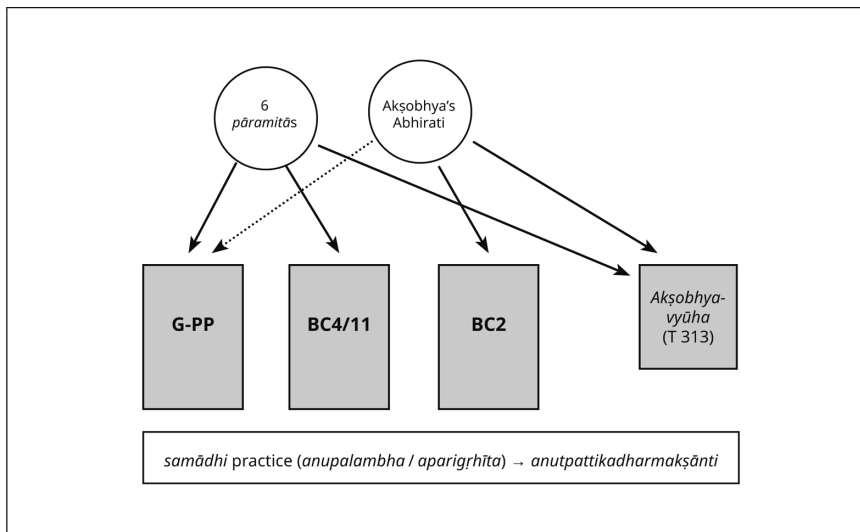


Fig. 1. Illustration of common features and influences discernible in the manuscripts under consideration.

The concept of Akṣobhya's buddha field Abhirati influenced the Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra as well as, of course, the *Akṣobhyavyūha* (to give one prominent example) and the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, although the relevant passage is unfortunately not preserved in the Gāndhārī *Prajñāpāramitā* (hence the dotted line in fig. 1). However, it did not influence BC4/11. This could simply be due to it being a different kind of text genre. Equally, the concept of the six *prajñāpāramitās* naturally influenced the Gāndhārī *Prajñāpāramitā* as well as BC4/11 and the *Akṣobhyavyūha*,<sup>57</sup> but not the Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra. This observation is in accord with the distinction between a philosophical (*prajñāpāramitā*) and a more devotional or religious (*buddhakṣetra*) strand of early Mahāyāna, as proposed by Paul Williams.<sup>58</sup> It appears that the common basis for all these Kharoṣṭhī Mahāyāna manuscripts from the Bajaur area is the practice of non-grasping at any *dharma*, expressed as *anupalambha*, *aparigṛhīta*, or the like. This method can also be circumscribed by a non-perception or non-notion of any *dharma*. When

<sup>57</sup> In *T. 310* (trans. Bodhiruci, 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> century CE) one has to practice the six *pāramitās* to be reborn in Abhirati. But already in *T. 313* (trans. Lokakṣema, 179 CE, 751c21; 751c24–25 = 102a20; 751c28; 758b26–27) the six *pāramitās* are referred to (I owe this information to Jonathan A. Silk).

<sup>58</sup> Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (London [et al.]: Routledge, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition 2009), pp. 47 ff.

the practitioner is able to calmly realize that all dharmas are non-originated, he will be destined for awakening and become irreversible.

The concept of *anupattikadharmakṣānti*, if not the term, is present in all Mahāyāna texts I have read so far. Thus, it might very well be the common core of the Mahāyāna movement. The Prajñāpāramitā texts, often held to be the earliest of the Mahāyāna corpus, replaced this term by the term *prajñāpāramitā* as the highest form of understanding or insight. Others emphasized the consequent prediction, which at some point naturally followed as soon as one had realized that all dharmas are in fact non-existent and thus obtained the *dharmakṣānti*. Thus, to slightly modify the “key stages” of a *bodhisattva* path given by Paul Harrison in respect to the earliest Chinese translations of Mahāyāna texts (*bodhicittotpāda*, *anupattikadharmakṣānti*, *avaivartika*, *vyākaraṇa*), I would like to suggest that there is just one common basis for all, namely the non-grasping of any *dharma* based on the realization that they are without own-being. Or in other words, the basis is that there is no basis.

\* I thank Jonathan A. Silk, Ingo Strauch and Jens-Uwe Hartmann for reading and commenting upon an earlier draft of this article. Special thanks to Henry Albery for correcting the English.

## Abbreviations

BC	Bajaur Collection, fragment no.
CKD	Corpus of Kharoṣṭhī Documents, item no., available at <a href="http://gandhari.org">gandhari.org</a>
CKI	Corpus of Kharoṣṭhī Inscriptions, item no., available at <a href="http://gandhari.org">gandhari.org</a>
fol.	folio
G	Gāndhārī
G-PP	Gāndhārī <i>Prajñāpāramitā</i> (ed. Harry Falk and KARASHIMA Seishi, “A First-Century Prajñāpāramitā Manuscript from Gandhāra – <i>parivarta</i> 1 [Texts from the Split Collection 1],” and “ <i>parivarta</i> 5 [Texts from the Split Collection 2],” <i>Annual Report of The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhism at Sōka University</i> 15 (2012), pp. 19–61; and 16 [2013], pp. 97–169)
MS	Martin Schøyen Collection, fragment no.
Skt.	Sanskrit
SN	<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i> , ed. Pali Text Society
T.	<i>Taishō shinshū daizōkyō</i> , no.