*A Brief Introduction to the Mūlasarvāstivāda Dīrghāgama
Manuscript from Gilgit*

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[The Mūlasarvāstivāda Dīrghāgama manuscript was probably found somewhere around the Pakistan and Afghanistan border area. However, it was only identified by scholars in a London rare book shop. The content of this manuscript consists of canonical discourses of the Buddha making the text very important for the Buddhist faith and yet, the manuscript was copied with many errors and a general lack of care. Why was such an important text collection copied without the expected care?]

Buddhism as it is practiced today is often distinguished into either Mahāyāna (the Great Vehicle) or Theravāda (the School of the Elders) traditions. While many often view these two as rival schools where Mahāyāna is the liberal offshoot from the more conservative Theravāda, this way of understanding Buddhism is not correct. The Mahāyāna is not a school of Buddhism at all, but rather, its origins were as a sort of social movement within the traditional Mainstream (i.e., early) Buddhist schools, of which there were many. It is also commonly believed that the Theravāda tradition is the only remaining Mainstream Buddhist school that is still extant. This too, is not exactly correct. While their *sūtras* (discourses of the Buddha) are unique, Mahāyāna monks and nuns today in East Asia and the Himalayan region still follow the *vinayas* (monastic rules) of either the Dharmaguptaka or Mūlasarvāstivāda traditions respectively, which were, like the Theravāda tradition, Mainstream Buddhist schools. Although the *vinayas* of the Theravāda Dharmaguptaka, and Mūlasarvāstivāda traditions are all extant, much the *sūtras* of the Mūlasarvāstivāda had been missing for centuries. The Dharmaguptaka *sūtras* are preserved in Chinese translation and those of the Theravāda are still extant in their original Pali, giving them an undue air of authority in the eyes of many. How did a trip to an antique bookshop in London change all this?

Fig. 1: *Dīrghāgama* manuscript, folio 269r, Govinda-sūtra. Courtesy Jens-Uwe Hartmann.

In March of 1998, Kazunobu Matsuda, a specialist in Buddhist manuscripts, visited the Sam Fogg rare bookseller in London, an establishment specializing in rare art and manuscripts, on the lookout for manuscripts from Afghanistan. He was the first scholar recorded to lay eyes on three large birch bark folio bundles that were part of a single Sanskrit manuscript. Matsuda identified this manuscript as the *Dīrghāgama*, or the ‘Collection of Long Discourses’ of the Mūlasarvāstivāda Buddhist tradition. Matsuda’s identification was very exciting, as this collection, which contains the canonical discourses supposedly spoken by the Buddha throughout his long teaching career, was considered to have been lost and had mainly survived only as brief quotations in other Buddhist texts until then. The Theravāda and Dharmaguptaka equivalents to the *Dīrghāgama*, the *Dīghanikāya* in the language of Pali and the *Cháng āhán jīng*¹ translated into Chinese, have been preserved into the present. Now, with all three versions of the Collections of Long Discourses available once again, scholars are finally able to analyze some of the key doctrinal differences between the three traditions of Buddhism that remain to this day.

The manuscript is made from birch bark and is quite long spanning over 450 individual folios. Much of the manuscript, which is composed in Sanskrit, is fragmentary. The birch bark folios that are intact measure around 50 cm x 10 cm and generally contain eight lines written in black ink on each side of a folio with space for a string hole slightly left of the center. However, it is often the case that an actual hole is not present in the space provided and it is therefore unlikely that the manuscript was bound together. Manuscripts from this area are often bound together by a string pierced through the string hole found close to the center of each folio. This creates what is referred to as a folio bundle in a *pothi* format. The fact that this manuscript exists as a bundle but was not actually bound suggests that it may not have been used for active study. The manuscript is presently distributed into four private collections. While no colophon was recovered, paleographic analysis suggests it may be from the 7th or

¹ Please note that Chinese characters are not supported in this publication due to the technical limitations of the publisher.

8th century CE. This supposition has been confirmed by the most recent radiocarbon dating in 2019, which shows that the copying of the manuscript took place somewhere between 676–776 CE. As the manuscript only became known to scholars after it appeared on the market, its find-spot is unknown, but it is very likely to be from the Gilgit area in Pakistan, perhaps from the vicinity of the Kargah Buddha site close to where the famous Gilgit manuscripts were found in the 1930s. Even so, because we do not have any reliable information on the find spot besides secondhand information, we cannot say anything certain. However, philological analysis makes the general Gilgit area a likely find location. The *Dīrghāgama* manuscript-consists of 47 individual *sūtras* and among those, 37 are still extant within the manuscript with the second half being mostly intact. The 10 missing *sūtras* consist of heavily damaged or entirely lost folios fragments that make the reconstruction of those texts exceedingly difficult currently. Unfortunately, portions of sections of the extant folios are also damaged. However, digital restorations of the manuscript images have proven successful. In many instances some or nearly all of certain damaged folios have been restored (Figs. 1-2). Such restorations have proven immensely helpful in the editing of the *sūtras* that make up the manuscript.

Fig. 2: Detail of a damaged section of *Dīrghāgama* manuscript, folio 298r7.

Fig. 3: Detail of *Dīrghāgama* manuscript, folio 298r7, after digital restoration.

Due in part to its long length, providing a perfect specimen for detailed philological and paleographical analysis, scholars have been able to discern that the manuscript was the work of a scriptorium and appears to have been copied by five to seven scribes. There are numerous errors in copying and content—such as haplography, dittography, spelling mistakes, and a haphazard usage of negations—seen throughout the manuscript. This may indicate either careless copying by the scribes throughout its production or that this manuscript is a product of a long copying tradition where multiple errors were introduced over many years of copying. Whatever the case may be, it seems possible that the scribal copyists either were not familiar with the content and/or language of the *sūtras* in the collection or did not take the time to check their work thoroughly. It has been hypothesized that this manuscript was made either for the meritorious act of *sūtra* copying (a religious activity in the history of Buddhism) or for the sake of maintaining a monastic library. Whatever the intended purpose may have been, the manuscript was likely not meant to be used for study as the frequent errors would often make it difficult to understand for those without a good background knowledge of this genre of *sūtra* literature. Interestingly, there is evidence that the birch bark folios of the manuscript had been carefully repaired before the *sūtras* were copied on the manuscript folios. This may suggest that the manuscript folios could have been considered to be of some importance as a material object while the content of the manuscript might have been a secondary concern.

Regardless of the purpose of its composition, the finding of *Āgama* manuscript has been a boon for scholars of historic Buddhist textuality. It will take some time before the entirety of the manuscript is edited, but the work has begun, and several new and sometimes surprising discoveries have already been made from our study of the manuscript. Thanks to the ongoing careful philological work by scholars editing the *sūtras* of the manuscript, we now have a better understanding of the development and transmission of Buddhist *sūtras*, and the doctrinal differences shared between three important Buddhist traditions. With further comparative study of the three Collections of Long Discourses, it is expected that the depth of this understanding will only deepen.

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Description

- Four private collections: two in Japan, one in Norway, and one in the United States.
- Material: Birch bark, more than 450 folios typically consisting of 8 lines per folio.
- Dimensions: Approximately 50 cm x 10 cm.
- Script: Gilgit/Bamiyan Type II, also known as Proto-Śāradā.
- Provenance: Currently unknown. Radiocarbon dating suggests composition between 676–776 CE. It is probably from Greater Gandhāra, which encompassed areas of modern Pakistan and Afghanistan, most likely from the Gilgit area of Pakistan.