CHAPTER 9

From Sri Lanka to East Asia: A Short History of a Buddhist Scripture¹

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Introduction

A study of the transmission history of Buddhism offers critical insight into our understanding of premodern, transnational, and multilingual commerce routes in South Asia and East Asia. Buddhists played important roles in many of the interactions between Sri Lanka and East Asia that took place on these commerce routes in the middle of the first millennium. We need only refer to some such examples from this period to confirm the extensive web of relationships that developed between Sri Lanka and its neighbors. The Chinese monk Faxian 信徒 from North India, arrived in China via Sri Lanka in 424.³ Buddhist nuns came from Sri Lanka to China in 429 and 433.⁴ In addition, two works originally written in (or, closely connected with) Sri Lanka were translated into Chinese during this time: The Samantapāsādikā (Ch. Shanjin lü piposhā 善見律毘婆沙) in 489, and the Vimuttimagga (Ch. Jietuodao lun 解脫道論).

¹ Earlier drafts of this paper were delivered at the conference Local History in the Context of World/Global History: Case Studies in Cultural History (Tokyo, December 2011), as well as at the conference Buddhism without Borders: An International Conference on Globalized Buddhism (Bhutan, May 2012). The latter presentation (but preliminary stage of this study) has also been published in the conference proceedings (Buddhism without Borders—Proceedings of the International Conference on Global Buddhism, 2012 The Centre for Bhutan Studies).


³ T2059, 50.340bc. See bibliography for an explanation of the citation style for Buddhist scriptures collected in the Taishō shinshū daizōkyō 大正新脩大蔵經.

⁴ Yabuuchi 2009, 136–137. As Higata Ryūshō has pointed out, the Sri Lankan king Mahānāma sent envoys to China twice, in 429 or 428 and in 435 (Higata 1943, 8–9). It is possible that Sri Lankan Buddhist nuns followed the envoys.
in 505. These examples from Buddhist sources suggest that a set of well-established trade routes between Sri Lanka and China were operating by the fifth century CE.

This paper focuses on the transmission of one particular Buddhist scripture that traveled these routes eastward and its influence on East Asian culture.⁵ This text, the Sarvatathāgatādhiṣṭhānahṛdayaguhyadhātukaraṇḍamu dra-nāma-dhāraṇī-mahāyānasūtra (hereafter, the Karaṇḍamudrā Sūtra), became extremely popular in East Asia as a relic to be placed in stūpas and Buddhist statues. The text itself encouraged readers to place a copy of it inside a stūpa or Buddhist image, stating that anyone who worships the said stūpa or statue would ‘become “irreversible” from awkening, be freed from rebirth in the hells,’ and gain the other benefits.⁶ At the end of the sūtra, a passage recorded the Buddha as reciting a formula composed of Sanskrit phonemes called a dhāraṇī (hereafter, Karaṇḍamudrā Dhāraṇī).⁷ While previous studies of the Karaṇḍamudrā Sūtra have been geographically limited to one particular country (Sri Lanka, China, or Japan) or by field (Buddhist studies, history of printing, or art history), this paper draws from the full range of South and East Asian sources to provide an overview of the transmission history of this text from South Asia to East Asia.

2 Transmission of the Karaṇḍamudrā Sūtra from Sri Lanka to China

In an account of Indian monastic life during the seventh century, the Chinese monk Yijing (義淨) describes two kinds of relics that Indian Buddhists placed in stūpas and Buddhist statues.⁸ The first kind are ‘physical relics of the Buddha’ (dashi shengu 大師身骨), and the second kind are copies of ‘the discourse of dependent origination in verse’ (yuangqi fasong 緣起法頌).⁹ On the issue of