THE AVATAMSKA–SÛTRA AS A “BODHI MANDALA TEXT”¹

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Ludwig Wittgenstein’s Philosophische Untersuchungen (1953) begin with a quotation from the first book of St. Augustine’s Confessiones. Wittgenstein’s quotation starts from the middle of the following paragraph (italicized), indicating St. Augustine’s troubles with language learning during his childhood:


Sic cum his, inter quos eram, voluntatum enuntiandarum signa communicavi et vitae humanae procellosam societatem altius ingressus sum pendens ex parentum auctoritate nutuque maiorum hominum.²

Haven’t I, from infancy following up here, come to boyhood? Or better, hasn’t it itself come unto me, succeeding infancy? And not has it broken off: where namely did it go away to? And yet, it was already not there any more. Indeed, not was I an infant any more, who wouldn’t speak, but already a boy, speaking, I was. And I remember this; and wherefrom I had learned speaking, I turned to later. Indeed, had not the elders taught me, offering me words according to a certain teaching or-

¹ For a short introduction to the same topic by the author, see Röllicke (1999). I am greatly indebted to Tony Howes, Heidelberg, for proof-reading and correcting the English draft version of this paper.

der, just like letters a little later, but I, through my own mind, which you gave me, my god, with sighs and varying voices and varying movements of the limbs I wanted to utter the senses of my heart, so that to volition way would be given, and neither was I strong enough for all that I wanted nor for all those for whom I wanted [it]. I grasped it through memory that they themselves stroke at some other kind of thing and that, according to its voice, they moved the body towards something: I saw and I kept with me this: that by them was voiced that thing itself, which they had sounded, since they had wanted to display it. But that they wanted this was disclosed out of the motion of the body, so to speak: out of natural words of all peoples, which come to be through countenance and winks of the eyes, through the acts of the other limbs, and through the sound of the voice, indicating the affection of the soul in demanding, possessing, rejecting, or fleeing from things. While in this way words were set to their places in varying sentences, and, gradually being heard of what things they were signs of, I steadily collected [them] together, and as my volitions had already been tamed to these signs, with my mouth through them I announced [my volitions].

So with those, among whom I stayed, signs of volitions to be announced I communicated, and into human life’s stormy society deeper ingress I had, depending on the authority of parents and the instruction of elderly people.

Wittgenstein comments on the italicized paragraph in the following way:


In these words we obtain, it seems to me, a particular picture of the essence of human language. Namely this: The words of language name objects—sentences are connections of such namings.—In this picture of language we find the roots of the idea: Each word has a meaning. This meaning is attached to the word. It is the object for which the word stands.

Wittgenstein has probably somewhat misread St. Augustine’s description of a child’s language learning. First of all, what Wittgenstein calls “objects” are, in fact, res, “things”, in the Latin text, which is certainly not the same as an “object”. It is by no means necessarily a “thing” that is in need of a noun in occidental language use. Second, St. Augustine does not say that “each word has a meaning”. He says