Jinah Kim


Although the title of the book raises the expectation of a comprehensive treatment of the cult of the book in the ancient Indian Buddhist world, the geographical and chronological frames are considerably smaller, as dictated by the constraints of the surviving material: The author examines in detail 28 illuminated manuscripts (out of a total of about 110 investigated manuscripts [p. 11, 55–59]) copied between the 11th and 13th centuries in eastern India (Bengal and Bihar) including some examples from Nepal (p. 1). This is done in three steps. After a general introduction (pp. 1–19) and a chapter on Buddhist books and their ritual use (pp. 23–70), the relation between text and image is investigated in the main part of the book (pp. 73–209). The last chapter is devoted to people who use(d) the manuscripts (pp. 213–285).

The aim of the book is mainly to go far beyond A. Foucher’s ground-breaking study of 1900 (p. 74), which contends that the miniatures are unconnected to the text and serve only as illustrations, and to demonstrate that text and images are indeed connected on a higher level (pp. 10, 73–209). The method to achieve this goal is clearly stated: “... my own narrative is a historical construct of the early twenty-first century. It is my contention that our present attempts to understand the past can in certain ways be helped more by historical imagination than by historical truism” (p. 11). This approach opens a really wide, if not unlimited, horizon of interpretation. Indeed, the following text does not (and probably does not want to) tell us much, if anything at all, about eastern Indian Buddhism of the 11th / 13th centuries or about the Buddhists living at that period. It rather offers a modernist perspective, unfettered by any method, on an unusually rewarding, but also very challenging, subject. In spite of this slightly surprising approach, the investigation is characterized seriously as an “art historical study of illustrated manuscripts” (p. 12).

The perhaps best example of the consequences of this slightly reckless interpretation of Buddhist texts, which are ultimately the only base to understand the images, can be seen in the way in which an interesting, but somewhat tricky verse is dealt with (p. 64 f.). The well-known Nālandā inscription of Vipulaśrimitra became almost famous through G. Schopen’s discussion of verse 6:

śrīmatkhasarppanamahāyatane prayatnāt
mañjūṣayā vihitāya janani jinānāṃ
yena bhramaty avirataṃ ...
“With the casket, executed by him with skill, at the great temple of the illustrious Khasarpāṇa (i.e. Avalokiteśvara), the mother of Jinas (i.e. Prajñāpāramitā) incessantly moves about ...”.

G. Schopen

This is, with all due caution and circumspection, interpreted by Schopen as follows “... the continuous revolving of a sacred text could only be some sort of ‘revolving bookcase.’” If this is meant by the verse—and it is indeed most tempting to accept this view—it is a highly important, if so far the only, piece of evidence for the (or an) Indian origin of the “praying” wheel.

This rendering is “advanced” further by the author by taking mañjūṣā as meaning that “a ... book with its encasing book covers might in itself be conceived as a case (mañjūṣa) ... If this text ‘incessantly moved about’ ... we may propose that a ritual turning of folios of a manuscript that accompanied a continuous recitation ... could have created such movements. Of course, this reading is even more fanciful than an imaginative construction of a revolving bookcase” (p. 64). Nobody would disagree with the last sentence, except that G. Schopen’s interpretation is neither “fanciful” nor “imaginative” but the result of careful considerations.

However, while a “revolving bookcase” might indeed be a possible interpretation, turning pages certainly is not covered, nor even remotely hinted at by any word in the verse. Moreover, if seen in the context of the inscription, this verse probably means something quite different. For, in verse 4 it is said that the Prajñāpāramitā of 8000 verses lived in the heart of Vipulaśrimitra’s predecessor, Aśokaśrimitra:

... yasya hṛdaye,
  sahasraṁ aṣṭābhīḥ prativasati saṃbuddhajananī

Verse 6 is similar in content and structure: “by means of a bookcase (mañjūṣa) provided by him (yena = Vipulaśrimitra) with great effort (prayatnāt) the Mother of the Jinas (Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā) wanders around incessantly in the monastery.” The “bookcase” provided by Vipulaśrimitra is most likely he himself after having learned this long text by heart with great effort, and he is, as a monk, moving around in the monastery carrying the text in his

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1 G. Schopen: A Note on the “Technology of Prayer” and a Reference to a “Revolving Bookcase” in an Eleventh-Century Indian Inscription, in: G. Schopen: Figments and Fragments of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India. More Collected Papers. Honolulu 2005, pp. 345–349, where it is also rightly stressed that “prayer wheel” is a very misleading misnomer for “recitation wheel.”