Iconography and Text: The Visual Narrative of the Buddhist Book-Cult in the Manuscript of the Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita Sutra

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INTRODUCTION: A TALE OF TWO MANUSCRIPTS

This paper concerns two manuscripts of the Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita, the Perfection of Wisdom in eight thousand lines (henceforth, AsP), one made in eastern India and the other made in Nepal during the mid-twelfth century. They are prepared in completely different regional styles. Their iconographic programs, too, differ considerably. Nonetheless, the study of one could inform our understanding of the other, revealing the nexus of meanings in the manuscript illustrations during this period. The illustrations in the AsP manuscripts from South Asia are often considered as having no relation to the text that they accompany. This assumption led previous scholars to dismiss the role of images in understanding the text and vice versa.1 In this paper, I propose to reconsider this assumption and pursue to explain the relationship between the text and images in two AsP manuscripts from eastern India and Nepal with one tale, the story of a Bodhisattva whose selfless devotion to the Prajnaparamita epitomizes the essence of the book-cult.

THE NEPALESE ASP MANUSCRIPT IN THE ASIATIC SOCIETY OF KOLKATA

One of the Buddhist manuscripts in the acclaimed manuscript collection of the Asiatic Society, Kolkata, is an illustrated manuscript of the AsP prepared in Nepal Samvat 268 (1148 CE) during the reign of Anandadeva in Nepal (G. 4203).2 The donor of this manuscript was Tilaka who migrated from Kashmir (Kasmirnagar).3 It measures about 15" by 2". It is considerably more rectangular than eastern Indian ones that are long and narrow, usually measuring about 22" by 2". The manuscript has four illustrations, two on the first two folios, fol. 1 verso and fol. 2 recto, and two on the last two folios, fol. 298 verso and fol. 299 recto.4 The first two folios have suffered from physical damages caused by insects and others.


The difference in writing on the pieces of paper that reinforces the damaged parts suggests that the leaves were salvaged later, most likely in Nepal where this manuscript remained until the late nineteenth century. The paintings on the first two folios also suffered from damage, and lost much of the sumptuous pigments of vermilion orange, blue, yellow, purple, and different hues of green, which, otherwise, would have rendered the paintings stunningly beautiful.

Despite the damage, the iconography of the first two paintings is still discernable. The painting on the first folio represents the Buddha seated under a tree holding the gesture of preaching (dharmachakra-mudrā) with two attendants. The context of the book makes it possible to identify this scene of preaching as the opening scene of the AsP in which the Buddha begins to teach the Prajñāpāramitā sūtra on the Vulture peak at Rājagrha (Rajgir) (Pl. 30.1, top). The attendant on the left is attired in monk's robe. He might be Subhuti, one of the main interlocutors of the AsP. The figure on the right wears a tiara and might represent Indra (Sakra in the AsP) who is another main interlocutor of the AsP, but the damage is too severe to confirm this identification.

The painting on the facing page represents a four-armed female deity with two Bodhisattva figures on either side (Pl. 30.1, bottom).

She shows the preaching gesture in her main hands and holds a rosary and a book in her two raised hands. This undoubtedly represents Prajñāpāramitā, the personification of the Prajñāpāramitā text. These two paintings are meant to be viewed together, and the visual message of the two paintings in sum seems clear: the Buddha preaches the teaching of Prajñāpāramitā. The accompanying text to these two paintings is the eulogy to Prajñāpāramitā (Prajñāpāramitānīmamastu), but as opening images to the entire book, they illustrate the major event of the text rather effectively.

The paintings on the last two folios are fortunately in good condition (Pl. 30.2). Yet the iconography of these two paintings seems not as certain as that of the first set. The painting on folio 298 verso represents a Bodhisattva figure seated to the left showing the gesture of preaching with two figures seated in front of him holding attijali-mudrā. The facing folio shows two donor-like figures, male and female, both in attijali-mudrā with a roundel laid out in front of them and a rectangular object on a stand, topped by a stūpa-like structure. These two paintings may simply represent a generic scene of a Bodhisattva preaching the Prajñāpāramitā to the donors. But, a careful study of the narrative paintings of another AsP manuscript now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in light of the AsP text reveals that these two scenes represent the climactic moment of the Sādāpraurudita story in the AsP text.

**THE EASTERN INDIAN AsP MANUSCRIPT IN THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON**

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston has six illustrated folios, one text folio, and two wooden covers of an AsP
thigh with a long sword (Pl. 30.4). In the painting of the BMFA manuscript, we see a man standing to the left holding a sword and cutting his own limb (Pl. 30.5). The visual motif of the cutting, one’s own flesh is similar in these two representations. The protagonists both hold a long sword and show determined expressions and conviction in the manner in which they are executing the cutting. However, the manuscript painting lacks the typical visual clues that help identify the Nagarjunakonda relief as the representation of the Śibi jātaka. For example, a scale in front of the king and a bird in one of the attendant’s arms in the Nagarjunakonda relief are missing in the painting. Instead, the painting shows a woman and a Brahman conversing with the man cutting his own flesh. The woman and this self-inducing man appear in subsequent panels, indicating a continuous story line. If it is not the Śibi jātaka, what do these narrative paintings in the manuscript represent?

The text of the AsP does not appear to be an immediate candidate for the answer for it is a metaphysical treatise that expounds the Mahāyāna doctrine of emptiness and does not seem to fit the bill for identifying a narrative. However, a close reading of the text in relation to the paintings proves otherwise. Following the text and understanding its content as the makers and users of the manuscript would have done reveals the answer to the above question.

The text accompanying the paintings on folios 205 and 206 is the last section of Chapter 32, the last chapter of the AsP, followed by the colophon. In this last chapter, the Buddha entrusts his teaching of the Prajñāpāramitā to Ananda and reiterates the importance of honouring the Prajñāpāramitā. The paintings do not depict this very event of the transmission of the dhīraṇā, but they depict the most dramatic narrative of the AsP about the selfless devotion of Sadāpuraṇita (ever-weeping) Bodhisattva to the Prajñāpāramitā and its teacher and his acquisition of the teaching of Prajñāpāramitā as told in Chapters 30 and 31, immediately preceding the illustrated pages. Conze condemns this story to be an avadāna (edifying tale) “tucked on at the end” that was subject to much more changes and alteration than any part of the AsP. The theme of cutting one’s own flesh may share its root with a number of jātaka stories in which self-infliction for the sake of saving other beings is the main theme as in the Śibi jātaka. The source of the story of Sadāpuraṇita may be a jātaka or an avadāna, but it does not diminish its importance

visual precedent of the self-sacrifice story: the Śibi jātaka

Unlike the rest of illustrations in this manuscript where the iconic representations of goddesses and esoteric deities dominate the scene, the six panels on folio 205 verso and folio 206 recto show characters in action, presenting a visual narrative (Pls. 30.3, 30.5-30.9). It has been assumed that the narrative sequence in these six panels represents an unidentified jātaka story as the museum record suggests. The first scene of the narrative on the left side panel of folio 205 verso (Pl. 30.3) does remind us of the famous jātaka tale of king Śibi, the Śibi jātaka, in which the king cut his own flesh to save a pigeon from a hawk, both of whom were Indra and Agni in disguise.

The relief panel now in the Nagarjunakonda ASI Site Museum represents the story of the Śibi jātaka rather vividly with the king seated to the left of the panel cutting his own
in the text of the AsP. The powerful visual representations of this story and their popularity in manuscript illustrations during the twelfth century suggest that it became one of the essential tools to illustrate and promote the book-cult of Prajñāpāramitā.

STORY OF SADĀPRUDITĀ: THE TEXT AND THE ICONOGRAPHY

Chapter 30 begins with the Buddha telling Subhuti about Sadāprudita as the example to follow in one’s search for Prajñāpāramitā. The Buddha narrates that Sadāprudita did not care for his body or his life in his search for Prajñāpāramitā and found himself in a secluded forest where he heard a voice telling him to go east. After focusing his entire thought and mind on how and where to hear Prajñāpāramitā without paying any attention to his physical needs, Sadāprudita was finally told to go to Gandhavatī. In this beautiful town built of the seven precious things, said the voice, he would find Dharmodgata Bodhisattva who would teach Prajñāpāramitā to him.

The most dramatic event of the story comes when Sadāprudita, out of his devotion, decided to sell himself to get gifts for Dharmodgata. However, Māra, the evil one, obstructed Sadāprudita’s plan by disposing everyone in town that no one could hear Sadāprudita’s cry for selling himself. Indra who, as in the Śībi jātaka, decided to test Sadāprudita disguised himself as a young Brahman and asked him to sell his heart, blood and marrow of the bones. Sadāprudita happily agreed to this young man’s request, and “took a sharp sword, pierced his right arm, and made the blood flow. He pierced his right thigh, cut the flesh from it, and strode up to the foot of a wall in order to break the bone.” Witnessing this gruesome event of Sadāprudita’s self-mutilation from her window upstairs, a daughter of a merchant (śresṭhāprākāriṇī) ran down to ask the reason for his action. Sadāprudita explained that he wanted to sell his body to worship Prajñāpāramitā (prajñāpāramitāḥ pūjāvāśyām) and honour Bodhisattva Dharmodgata. This gruesome event that emphasizes the devotion to Prajñāpāramitā is what we see on the left panel of folio 205 verso (Pl. 30.3).

The man standing to the left who is cutting his left arm to bleed is Sadāprudita. The man who stands to the right appears to be Indra in the guise of a young Brahman, indicated by a strand of long hair on the back of his head. Between them is a green female who seems to have just walked into the encounter of the two men. Her face is turned to the Brahman with a worrisome expression; her left hand touches her chin and the right hand extended towards Sadāprudita as if asking for explanation. The Brahman seems to be explaining the action of Sadāprudita as his hand gesture of explanation suggests. The gist of the event is conveyed visually with minor differences from the text. The effect of self-mutilation is shown powerfully with the bleeding arm and with the red colour of the background. What sets this story and its representation apart from other stories of self-sacrifice, such as the Śībi jātaka, is that his heart, blood, and bone marrow are asked for, the most essential elements of one’s life, rather than just one part of the body. The choice of the red colour for the background seems deliberate, setting the tone of the narrative. The powerful colour of blood that flows from Sadāprudita’s arm, which is the corporeal sign of ultimate devotion, dominates the entire sequence of the narrative.

Having heard the noble cause of Sadāprudita, the merchant’s daughter asked to join him in finding Bodhisattva Dharmodgata. She suggested that they should go to her parents together to ask for money to help them on the way. The next two panels on folio 205 represent this event. The central panel (Pl. 30.5) has the merchant’s daughter leading the way followed by a small female figure, possibly an attendant. Sadāprudita follows them. Instead of the sword in the previous panel, he holds a narrow rectangular object in dark blue colour with red pigments on top, possibly representing the book of Prajñāpāramitā. In the first panel, a rectangular object in dark blue colour on a white cross-legged stand installed on a dark blue round disc is noticeable above the merchant’s daughter. This rectangular object must be the book that Sadāprudita holds in the second panel, and the dark round disc must be a mandala marking the sacred ground for the book. It is not clear what the word “Prajñāpāramitā” refers to in the text. But, the illustrations show that “Prajñāpāramitā” in the text is understood as “the book of Prajñāpāramitā,” which is to be worshiped and to be preached, hence the importance of Dharmodgata as the dharmabhūtaka, or the dharma preacher in Sadāprudita’s mission is also explained.

The right side panel shows the daughter pleading to her father to give her a part of his wealth for Sadāprudita’s noble cause (Pl. 30.6). The text narrates that Sadāprudita stood “at the threshold of the door to their house” while the daughter talked to her parents. In the painting, he stands behind the kneeling daughter, carefully holding the book of
A structure located between the Bodhisattva Vasudhara and the parents might represent their worship for the perfection of wisdom. And in the middle of this great group is a small statue of the seven precious things man up, and on it a box made of the yellow bone of the body. These were placed into golden boxes and taken down in the storm.

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follow the text very closely so that they are more than enough to deliver the gist of the story of Sadāprudita, the selfless devotion to the Prajñāpāramitā and the ultimate reward of having a chance to hear the Prajñāpāramitā and worship the book in person. In addition, the accompanying text of these six paintings reiterates the importance of honouring the book of Prajñāpāramitā. Thus, we may conclude that the six panels closely illustrate the content of the AsP text.

VARIED VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE SADĀPRUDITA STORY

The Sadāprudita narrative seems to have gained popularity in Nepal. A number of illustrated folios and book covers of the AsP manuscripts executed in Nepalese style of twelfth and thirteenth century feature identifiable scenes of this story. Before moving on to the discussion of the illustrations in the Kolkata manuscript introduced in the beginning of this essay, a cursory investigation of the varied modes of the narrative representation employed to depict the Sadāprudita story in the Nepalese manuscripts seems to be in order, for it will help us analyze the significance of the illustrations in the Kolkata manuscript and connect dots between the two manuscripts.

One of the three illustrated folios from a Nepalese AsP manuscript now in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (M 86. 345. 11 a c) presents this story in a single panel (M 86. 345. 11 b). It shows a male figure reclining under a tree and cutting his right thigh (Pl. 30.10). His body is smeared in blood and he seems to have ripped open his chest, probably to get the heart. This man clearly represents Sadāprudita at the moment of self mutilation. The Brahman sits in front of Sadāprudita with his hands extended towards him waiting to take Sadāprudita’s bone marrow and blood. The merchant’s daughter stands behind the tree on the right side of the panel, with her head turned away from the gruesome scene.

This single panel depicting the bloody event of self mutilation stands for the entire story of Sadāprudita and its moral, the selfless devotion to one’s teacher of Prajñāpāramitā that ensures the acquisition of the Prajñāpāramitā. The painting is not randomly placed but it is chosen to be placed at the end of Chapter 31. It does not seem accidental that the text right next to the painting in the middle reads, “This (was) the thirty-first chapter of the AsP, titled Dharmodgata (prajñāpāramitā-sāraṇī-vyāhāra-arjuna-bhakti-sūtra-kriṣṇa-cakravarta-tattvamah).” The readers and the users of the book would have easily recognized that Sadāprudita’s self infliction depicted here represents his devotion to Dharmodgata whose preach and another incident of selfless act of devotion by Sadāprudita and his troupe make up most of Chapter 31.

Representing the story with a single panel was not the only mode of narrative representation employed in Nepalese manuscripts. One of the photos of illustrated folios taken by Sāṅkrityāyana during his trip to Tibet in late 1920s and early 1930s has a partial view of an illustrated folio that features the Sadāprudita narrative. Sāṅkrityāyana’s invaluable photos were published in 1986 from the K.P. Jayawal Research Institute in Patna under the editorship of P.N. Ojha and S.K. Pathak with the title, The Album of the Tibetan Art Collections. The third folio in plate 24 of this book shows two scenes from the Sadāprudita narrative. The central panel of the folio shows a man seated to the left. He seems to be piercing his upper left arm. A young man stands in front of him and a woman seems to run down from a house on top of which a couple observes the unfolding event. The woman must be the merchant’s daughter and the young man must be Indra in disguise as a young Brahman. The right panel shows four of them on a chariot, probably representing Sadāprudita and the daughter followed by her parents.

After a careful examination of the photos against Sāṅkrityāyana’s reports of his trips published in three installments in Journal of Bengal and Orissa Research Society in 1935, 1937 and 1938, I have concluded that this folio must belong to a manuscript that was in the Ngor Monastery when he visited there. Sāṅkrityāyana reports that a manuscript of the AsP (No. II, 56) was incomplete with folios from 3 to 207. This particular manuscript, he says, had beautiful paintings on the last leaf and on two wooden covers. The last leaf with paintings that Sāṅkrityāyana mentions must be folio 207 as he reports. Because the manuscript is incomplete and missing the first two folios, which otherwise would have contained illustrations, there was only one illustrated folio left when he examined this manuscript. The folio with the Sadāprudita narrative in the photo is numbered 207, and thus it must belong to the manuscript that was in the Ngor Monastery when Sāṅkrityāyana visited there. Although it is difficult to study the image from a reproduction of an old black and white photograph, the style of the paintings seems to be concurrent with the paintings in the Nepalese manuscripts. The representation of the characters and the chariot in the right side panel is similar to that of the Vessantara jātaka in one of the covers in the National Museum, New Delhi (Acc. No. 51.212).

These paintings are on the verso of folio 207, and if the facing folio (fol. 208) survived, it would have had the rest of the story as seen in the Boston example. The narrative sequence in this manuscript must begin with an event prior to the self-mutilation for, this scene is placed in the central panel unlike the Boston example that begins with the scene of self mutilation on the left panel.

Another Nepalese example representing this story now in the Metropolitan Museum of Arts, New York, captures it in yet another narrative frames (Acc. No. 1984. 429. 1 a-b). In this example, the story is depicted inside of the book covers that most likely belong to an AsP manuscript. They must have originated from Nepal judging from the style. The narrative is shown in multiple frames, following the sequence and details of the events as described in the text (Pls. 30.11, 30.12).

It begins with Sadāprudita paying homage to the Prajñāpāramitā, represented as a four-armed female deity in the first panel (Pl. 30.11, left). This scene gives an answer to why the subsequent events take place in the following panels. It is like a preamble to the narrative that might be read, “in search of the Prajñāpāramitā, Sadāprudita did the following”, just...
like the Buddha opens the story in the text by addressing Subhuti, “Furthermore, Subhuti, one should search for perfect wisdom as the Bodhisattva Sadāpratītā has done, who at present leads the holy life in the presence of the Tathāgata Bhīṣma-gaṇitaṁrūṣhavasaṁa.”

The event unfolds as Sadāpratītā wanders about in the forest not caring for his body and welfare. In the painting, this situation is cleverly represented with a monkey offering food and Sadāpratītā showing no interest to the food offered (Pl. 30.11, middle). In fact, each scene shows the genius of the painter who seems to have been very inventive and pragmatic in rendering the story visually apprehensible.

The voice from the sky (antartikṣāntiṁrūṣhā) in the text is represented with a celestial being appearing in the air amidst red flame or light. Māra who obstructed the people from listening to Sadāpratītā’s cry appears in the sky with an angry look on him with his attendant as if acknowledging that his attempt to prevent Sadāpratītā from making the great merit of self-sacrifice had failed (Pl. 30.11, right). Sadāpratītā is depicted as cutting his right calf to bleed with a small dagger, and when he appears next time on a chariot in the middle of the other cover, he is shown wearing an ornament around his calf that looks similar to his armlet, as if wearing a hand-aid to cover his scar from the previous event (Pl. 30.11, right, Pl. 30.12, middle). This is unique to his painting for in other manuscript paintings he is not depicted with any sign of trauma after the initial mutilation scene. According to the text, Indra reveals his true identity and offers to grant a boon, but Sadāpratītā rejects this offer and restores his mutilated body himself “through the Buddha’s might and through the perfect purity of the Bodhisattva’s resolution.”

It seems that the painter decided to show the sign of Sadāpratītā’s sacrifice and the magical restoration. This little detail helps us identify Sadāpratītā from others, and we could discern that Sadāpratītā and the merchant’s daughter are shown twice in this panel, walking towards the next scene.

The last panel of the narrative sequence shows Sadāpratītā and the merchant’s daughter seated in front of the preaching Buddha who is seated on a pedestal with an elaborate canopy hovering over him (Pl. 30.12, right). Although the preacher is represented as a Buddha figure not a Bodhisattva, this must depict the culminating event of the Sadāpratītā narrative in which the group arrived in Gandahavati and listened to Bodhisattva Dharmodgata’s teaching on Prajñāprāmitā. There are unmistakable visual clues for this story, including Sadāpratītā and the merchant’s daughter present in the front row among the audience. The yellow rectangular object topped by jewels, which is installed on a stand in the middle of the scene, must represent the book of Prajñāprāmitā. The air-bubble in the upper right hand corner must contain unhappy Māra and his attendant just like they appear in the sky in the facing panel although the damage makes it hard to confirm the identification.

Such an elaborate and inventive representation of the story suggests that it was open to interpretation unlike the conventionalized set of visual narratives such as the eight scenes of the Buddha’s life. More examples representing this story are sure to be found. For now, the varied examples of representing the Sadāpratītā story in the AsP manuscripts seem enough to suggest that the visual representations of this narrative were yet to be conventionalized even in the thirteenth century.

Pl. 30.12. Sadāpratītā narrative on the book cover

Sadāpratītā NARRATIVE AND THE BOOK-CULT

The scene of Sadāpratītā cutting himself is so visually provocative and powerful that it could easily be the ‘icon’ of the story. It could also be the visual title of the story that reads “Sadāpratītā’s selfless devotion to the teacher of the Prajñāprāmitā.”

Given its visual power, it may be an obvious choice to pick the scene of self-mutilation to represent the entire story if a “monoscopic” representation is desired for the iconographic program of the manuscript. In some examples, as we have seen, it was indeed the case.

But, in others, the emphasis was given not to the most dramatic event but to the most climactic event that reveals the result of all the dramatic actions taken along the path. As narrated previously, the story culminates to the events in Gandahavati where the Bodhisattva Dharmodgata teaches Prajñāprāmitā and Sadāpratītā worships the Prajñāprāmitā in person. The Boston example shows the scene of Dharmodgata preaching the Prajñāprāmitā in the centre of the last folio, a prominent location in the iconographic program. In addition, the last scene of the narrative in the Boston manuscript is the worship of the book by Sadāpratītā. I believe that the two paintings placed at the end of the Kolkata manuscript represent these two scenes.

The preaching Bodhisattva seated on an elaborate pedestal on folio 298 verso of the Kolkata manuscript (Pl. 30.13) must be the Bodhisattva Dharmodgata from whose finger tips seems to come out the yellow rectangular object on a pedestal in front of him, the book of Prajñāprāmitā. The visual liaison between the fingers and the book gives an impression that Dharmodgata conjected the book and its stand from his own hands. It physically relates the action of teaching, suggested by his hand gesture, to the content of teaching, implied by the book. The two figures seated in front of Dharmodgata are not necessarily identifiable individually, but they are clearly in the audience of Dharmodgata’s teaching.

The facing panel has the same yellow rectangular object placed on a stand, representing the book (Pl. 30.14). The book is prominently located as in the previous panel, but bigger in size. A stūpa-like structure hovers over the book. This stūpa-like high tower structure must represent the kañcagōta that Dharmodgata built for the Prajñāprāmitā.

The last panel of the Boston manuscript also shows the kañcagōta in the form of a small yellow object over the book (Pl. 30.10), but due to the damage and its minute scale, it is hard
to identify what this kāṭāγāra looks like. On the other hand, the Kolkata manuscript shows a much bigger and more detailed depiction of the structure (Pl. 30.14). It has a few receding tiers on the bottom and a small dome topped with vertically stacked umbrellas. The damage on the top part of the painting is unfortunate, but even without the uppermost part, the structure looks just like a stupa depicted in other Nepalese manuscript paintings of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, like the “Svaṇaṁbhucharita” in the AsP manuscript in the Asiatic Society, Kolkata, A. 15 dated to N.S. 191 (Pl. 30.15). The stupa-like shape of the kāṭāga in the painting on folio 299 recto highlights the importance of the book as a sacred object and makes it an unmissable focal point of veneration. The sheer size of the book also makes a clear statement about its status as the sacred object to be worshipped by the devotees who looks upward at the book with due respect (Pl. 30.14).

If the panel depicting the preaching Bodhisattva represents the Bodhisattva Dharmodgata teaching the Prajñāpāramitā, the male and female devotee figures seated in front of a small mandala worshipping the book in the facing panel must represent Sadāprārūdita and the merchant’s daughter, especially in comparison with the last two panels in the Boston example that feature preaching Dharmodgata in one and the worship of the book in the other. They may, of course, be a generic lay devotee couple. With the donor colophon on this very folio, this would be a perfect place to portray the donors. In addition, the donor figures that appear in the lower registers of the stelae from eastern India and Nepal of this time often feature a couple if not an entire family. Their visual affinity to the contemporary sculptural representations of the donor figures may encourage anyone who has no prior knowledge of the text and its story to identify them as the donor couple. Moreover, in later Nepalese manuscripts, the last panel is often given to the depiction of donor and his family. Although it is tempting to fix their identity as one or the other and make an argument for one, it seems more productive to open our interpretation to why they might be both.

The contemporary manuscript illustrations like the Boston example and the text of the manuscript suggest that anyone in the know would have recognized the two paintings as a set depicting the climactic event of the Sadāprārūdita narrative. The makers of this manuscript must

have chosen these two scenes to represent this narrative. The chance of the manuscript being displayed open for public viewing throughout its career before coming to the Asiatic Society, Kolkata, is extremely slim. The manuscript must have remained in limited circulation. The two paintings are not only intended to represent the Sadāprārūdita narrative but most likely to have been read as such among the people who used the manuscript. At the same time, Sadāprārūdita and the merchant’s daughter in this painting are indeed devotees, not just ordinary ones, but the most devoted worshippers of the Prajñāpāramitā and its teacher.

Sadāprārūdita’s quest for the teacher of the Prajñāpāramitā is sometimes likened with Sudhana’s search for the teaching in the Avataṃsaka sūtra. One of the major differences between the two characters is that Sadāprārūdita has a female companion, the merchant’s daughter. Although the merchant’s daughter’s relationship to Sadāprārūdita is not conjugal, the unnamed “merchant’s daughter” could easily be likened with the wives and female members of the family who are represented but often remain unnamed in inscriptions. The pattern of donating images seems to have increasingly involved women of the household, for donor figures are often depicted as couples as long as they are not monastic celibates.

In this historical and cultural context, Sadāprārūdita and the merchant’s daughter seem to present the ultimate role model for lay donors of the book of Prajñāpāramitā. They are to honour and worship the book of Prajñāpāramitā as Sadāprārūdita and the merchant’s daughter did.

The two simple scenes chosen in the Kolkata manuscript emphasize the importance of the book, especially considering how prominently the book of Prajñāpāramitā is depicted in relation to the archetype donors of Sadāprārūdita and the merchant’s daughter. In this manifestation of the story, the focus is completely shifted to the book. The importance of the worship of the book, which was obviously practised with the manuscript in which these paintings appear, might have encouraged the choice of these two simple scenes from the narrative. But, even in its most elaborate narrative representations as seen in the Boston example, the focus of the story is the book of the Prajñāpāramitā as it appears in every panel held dearly by Sadāprārūdita, if not actually in worship. Then, the visual narrative of Sadāprārūdita seems to have been employed to illustrate the book-cult explained in the text of the AsP. In the Kolkata manuscript, the focus of the visual narrative is shifted from the dramatic events to the most culminating event of teaching and the worship of the book, and so the book’s importance as a cultic object is even more highlighted and the gist of the book-cult gets epitomized in two simple scenes.
CONCLUSION
The story of Sadapradita as told in the AsP is not necessarily about the worship of the book. Like the story of Sadhana’s pilgrimage in the Anurâdhapura Sâstra, it is about searching for the teaching of dharma, especially of the Prâjñâpâramitâ. Like the Śīle jātaka, it emphasizes selfless giving, so the story is in fact about selfless devotion to the Prâjñâpâramitâ and its teacher. Various visual representations of this story in the eastern Indian and Nepalese manuscripts of the AsP confirm that the theme of quest for the perfect wisdom and of selfless devotion to the teaching is closely followed in pictorial rendering of the story. Yet, the way it is rendered in the Kolkata manuscript and the Boston manuscript clearly indicates that “Prâjñâpâramitâ” in the text was understood as the book of Prâjñâpâramitâ, and this book was one of the most important elements of the story. After all, these paintings appear in the book of Prâjñâpâramitâ, and it is not a surprise that the books of the AsP promulgate their self-importance and prove that they are worthy of veneration.

The date of the Boston manuscript is tentative for it is given in a Pāli king’s regnal year, but Gopâla’s 4th year may be around 51147 with our current knowledge of the Pāli chronology. The date of Kolkata manuscript is 31148 (N.S. 268). These two manuscripts are more or less contemporaneous to each other. Interestingly, they are among the earliest dated illustrated manuscripts that feature the Sadapradita narrative. Thus, the Sadapradita narrative as rendered in these two manuscripts not only illustrates the book-cult as explained in the text but also helps us understand the book-cult as practised in the twelfth century. Hopefully, this study will help identify more twelfth century manuscripts with the Sadapradita narrative that could shed some light on our understanding of the Buddhist book-cult of the twelfth century.

NOTES AND REFERENCES
1. J.P. Loisy, "An Early Indian Manuscript of the Kârûṇâyikâsûtra," in Debala Mitra and Gouriswar Bhattacharya (eds.), Studies in Art and Archaeology of Bharâg and Bengal (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1989), 8. Loisy argues that it is natural to find that the images do not go with the accompanying text in the manuscript of the Karunayikasutra now in the British Library because the images in the manuscripts of the AsP, the most popular text, often have nothing to do with the text.
3. This information is given in the colophon on the verso of folio 299v. Ibid.
4. Shastry wrongly reports that the first two leaves contain four illustrations.
5. This painting of the Bodhisattva in preaching gesture on folio 298 verso was previously published in Pratapaditya Pal’s The Arts of Nepal (fig. 26) and the Buddhist Book illuminations (fig. 39) with wrong provenance as belonging to a manuscript in the Cambridge University Library. Pal, The Arts of Nepal Vol. 2, paintings (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974), fig. 26; P. Pal and M. Meech-Pekarik, Buddhist Book illuminations (New York: Ravi Kumar Publishers, 1988), fig. 39.
6. This record was provided to me on August 3, 2005 when I did research at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
10. The story recait here is based on Coone’s translation. Coone, Perfection of Wisdom, 277-290.
both in the past when Dharmañcata preached the Prajñāpāramitā and in the present when the Buddha preaches the Prajñāpāramitā in the AsP.


29. I use the term "generic" because the colophon does not specify if the donor was married.


31. Many Pañcarakṣaśa manuscripts of the seventeenth and eighteenth century show the donor families in the last illustrated panels. For example, the British Library has a number of Pañcarakṣaśa manuscripts most of which contain the depictions of the donor families at the end of the manuscript, see Or.13894, Or.13852 and Or.13946, Or.13946 has a full page depiction of the donor family.


33. However, this situation changes considerably later in Nepal, for all the family members are often named and listed in the donative inscriptions of manuscripts and sculptures made after the fifteenth century.

34. As discussed in Bautze-Picron’s essay, the rectangular slabs and the lower registers of the steles from eastern India show donor figures often as couples.

35. The doctrinal significance of the Siddhāratha-merchant’s daughter couple is also an important topic to discuss in relation to the rampant esoteric images in the manuscript paintings of the twelfth century eastern India, but it is out of scope of the present article.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Two Unpublished Mārīchī Sculptures in the Khulna Museum, Bangladesh, and Related Images from Mainamati

Gerd J.R. Mevissen

Mārīchī, the Buddhist goddess of Light and Victory, is well known to scholars of Indian iconography.1 Quite a large number of Mārīchī images originated from Eastern India. In her comprehensive study on this goddess Claudine Bautze-Picron (2001) listed thirty-four stone sculptures from Bihar,2 fourteen from Bengal (West Bengal and Bangladesh),3 and altogether thirty-one from Orissa,4 Uttar Pradesh5 and other regions.

The present article aims at bringing to attention the existence of two large stone sculptures of Mārīchī that remained unnoticed so far. They are presently kept in the Archaeological Museum at Khulna in the south-west of Bangladesh and may be dated to the eleventh/twelfth century, the high-time of Mārīchī image carving in the Bengal region.6

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The first image (Pl. 31.1) bears the museum’s acc. no. 48; it is carved out of black stone and measures 121 cm in height and 62.5 cm in width. Quite unspecifically, its provenance is given as Barisal, without indicating whether by this is meant the City, the District or the Division of the same name in the south of Bangladesh. The sculpture is remarkably well preserved and complete, no damage can be observed.

The three-headed and eight-armed goddess stands in pratyāśito position, i.e., with her right leg bent and the left one stretched, on a viśvaśūpa pedestal. Her central head as well as the one on the proper right are human, with wide-open eyes, a third eye on the forehead, and a forceful (though not fierce) facial expression. As usual in Mārīchī images, her left head is that of a sow. Her ears are adorned with round kusālas, her heads with a tall mukuta ornamented with triangular elements. She wears a multiple beaded necklace, triangular-shaped kāyikas on her upper arms, broad wristlets and chains on her ankles. The