

Orality and Writing in Early *Prajñāpāramitā*

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Abstract:

This article studies selected references to orality and writing in the *Prajñāpāramitā* text translated by Lokakṣema and extant as Taishō entry 224 under the title 道行般若經. The concern of the study is to explore what such references convey regarding emic expectations of how members of the audience will be engaging with this text.

Keywords:

Aṣṭasāhasrikā; Lokakṣema; early Mahāyāna; Orality; *Prajñāpāramitā*; T 224; Writing

Introduction

My exploration of selected passages from Lokakṣema's *Prajñāpāramitā* translation begins with the standard opening phrase (I), which is actually absent from the text under discussion. Then I take up several references in the text to orality (II), followed by others that mention writing (III). The fourth and final part of my study relates the evidence surveyed in this way to the question of the potential impact of reliance on writing for ensuring the transmission and spread of novel texts in the ancient Indian setting (IV).

I. The Opening of the *Sūtra*

The *Prajñāpāramitā* text translated by Lokakṣema and his team sets out by indicating that the Buddha was staying on Mount Vulture Peak at Rājagṛha, without employing the standard introduction of what follows as “Thus have I heard.”¹ This feature can be explored in the light of the other members of the textual family usually referred to by the title of the later Sanskrit version, the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*.² In the case of the relevant Kharoṣṭhī manuscript in Gāndhārī from the so-called Split Collection, part of this standard introductory phrase has fortunately been preserved, and the same phrase occurs in other versions extant in Chinese as well as in the Sanskrit and Tibetan versions.³ The absence of this standard introduction thereby emerges as a feature specific to Lokakṣema's translation among the members of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* textual family.

¹ Karashima 2011: 1,10 (= T 224 at T VIII 425c6): 佛在羅閱祇耆闍崛山中。

² As noted by Zacchetti 2015: 180, in the case of T 224 this title would be anachronistic, as the reference to eight thousand (lines) must have come into use considerably later than the time of translation of T 224.

³ Falk and Karashima 2012: 28 (1-01): *ś(r)judo* (followed by *ekasamae* etc.), T 220 at T VII 763b7 and T VII 865c7: 如是我聞, T 225 at T VIII 478b23: 聞如是, T 226 at T VIII 508b21: 聞如是, T 227 at T VIII 537a25: 如是我聞, T 228 at T VIII 587a9: 如是我聞, Mitra 1887/1888: 3,12: *evam mayā śrutam*, and D 12 *ka* 1b2 or P 734 *mi* 1b4: *'di skad bdag gis thos pa*. The presence of this formulaic beginning in all other extant versions makes it improbable that its absence in T 224 would be a case of abbreviation.

At the same time, however, references to orality abound in the remainder of the same text. The significance of such references in general requires some discussion, in particular in view of the suggestion by Osto (2015: 120) that at times such instances may reflect an agenda,⁴ namely:

an attempt to capture the “oral moment” of the traditional *sūtra* genre, and thereby efface or conceal its written nature. This move is a basic strategy of the Perfection of Wisdom *sūtras*, and it is achieved primarily through the use of dialogue. Through their seeming reproduction of historical, oral discourse, these texts demonstrate a basic anxiety about their own authority. Thus the position of the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* is both highly traditional and innovative. In their literary mode, they are traditional in that one of the means of establishing the authority of the *sūtras* is by simulating the “unadulterated orality” of dialogues faithfully memorized by the monastic tradition.

The question of memorization by the monastic tradition(s) is one to which I will return in more detail in the final part of my exploration. What concerns me at present is mainly the significance of references to orality in the specific case of the *Prajñāpāramitā* text translated by Lokakṣema and his team. Although this can of course no longer be assessed with certainty after some two millennia have passed by, it seems to me that if there had indeed been an authentication strategy to simulate an unadulterated orality, it would have been natural to employ the standard phrase “Thus have I heard” for this purpose.⁵ Alongside not having this

⁴ The reference is in particular to the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā* and based on comments on this text by Cole 2005: 173f to the effect that “the first line of the text announces in traditional form, ‘Thus I heard,’ ... Hence the narrative, while obviously a composition, is attempting to present its content as a historical, oral moment, unaffected by the medium that it inhabits. Slipping from awareness of a constructed narrative into the impression of unadulterated orality ... gives the illusion that spoken words were transmitted perfectly into narrative and then into written words, with no subsequent shift in form, content, or meaning ... The text, with its oral style promoting the illusion of the pure, singular moment of spoken discourse, cloaks its incipient greed”; see also Doherty 1983: 120 who, in relation to the same opening of the *Vajracchedikā*, comments that “[t]he Sutra opens deceptively with language called on to authenticate a particular historical occasion.” In a more general comment, Lopez 1995: 21 reasons that Mahāyāna *sūtras* “almost invariably begin with the stock phrase ‘thus did I hear,’ thereby maintaining the conceit of orality.” Given that the *Vajracchedikā* appears to be a condensation of larger *Prajñāpāramitā* texts and would thus have inherited the introductory format from its predecessors, whose earliest versions may well have evolved in an oral setting, I wonder if the above allegations of the presence of greed, deception, conceit, etc., are really helpful in order to *understand* the text.

⁵ A consideration to be kept in mind here would be the interesting comment by Nattier 2008: 23 that “features of Indian Buddhist scriptures that would have seemed foreign to Chinese audiences stem from their background as oral texts, including the opening phrase ‘Thus have I heard’ (which, rather than evoking the authority of a master-to-disciple lineage of transmission as in India, might well have sounded in Chinese rather like ‘The following is hearsay’).” This suggests that, at least at an early stage in the history of the reception of Buddhist texts in China, to which the present case certainly belongs, simulating orality would probably not have worked particularly well as an authentication strategy, at least as far as the general Chinese audience is concerned. Nevertheless, a range of *Āgama* texts listed by Vetter 2012: 7 as probably being indeed translations by Ān Shigāo (安世高) do employ the phrase 聞如是 to introduce the respective texts. The same holds for two translations that according to Harrison 1993: 150–156 can indeed be attributed to Lokakṣema, namely T 624 at T XV 348b27 and T 626 at T XV 389a10, which also begin with 聞如是. Given the proposed lack of effect of such indications in a setting that does not perceive orality as authoritative, this usage would then appear to be just a reflection of the Indic original, and the same may in turn also hold for the absence of this phrase in Lokakṣema’s *Prajñāpāramitā* translation, in the sense that it perhaps just reflects an idiosyncrasy of this particular Indic original. This seems to me a more probable explanation than the alternative possibility of intentional omission by Lokakṣema and his team, given that other parts of the same translation show a proclivity for closely reflecting the Indic original, to the extent of adopting transliterations of doctrinal terms rather than translations and at times even making the Chinese reflect the Indic syntax, two features that can make parts of T

phrase, Lokakṣema's translation of the *Prajñāpāramitā* explicitly recognizes the problem of misgivings about the authenticity of its teachings, showing that this was clearly a concern among the promoters of this text. Interestingly, the relevant passage relates the arising of such doubts to the occasion of *hearing* it being recited and taught.⁶ This suggests that, from an emic perspective, even actual oral performance may not have sufficed to establish the authority of the text in question. Besides, alongside repeated references to orality, the same text also exhibits a clear recognition and appreciation of the written medium. This makes it fairly safe to conclude that an agenda to “efface or conceal its written nature” in order to simulate an “unadulterated orality” does not seem to be relevant. The same would also hold for the still earlier member of the same *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* textual family witnessed by a Gāndhārī manuscript, which also repeatedly refers to putting the text into writing.⁷

II. Hearing the *Prajñāpāramitā*

A central interest evident in the *Prajñāpāramitā* text translated by Lokakṣema and his team, in line with other instances of this genre of texts, is to promote engagement in various ways with the text itself. In such contexts, hearing the respective teachings features prominently. This modality of textual reception appears to be perceived as standard and therefore relevant beyond the narrative time and location in which the text places itself. This is implicit in the indications that receiving the *Prajñāpāramitā* at the time of former Buddhas or else from the bodhisattva and future Buddha Maitreya (on being reborn in his presence in the Tuṣita Heaven) similarly take place by way of hearing.⁸

A repeatedly voiced concern in Lokakṣema's *Prajñāpāramitā* translation is that bodhisattvas should not react with fear on encountering the teachings of the *Prajñāpāramitā*.⁹ Such expressions of apprehension usually speak of “hearing” (聞) such teachings rather than of coming across them in the written medium. The topic of bodhisattvas being free from fear has a counterpart in the indication that the memorization and recitation of the very *Prajñāpāramitā* can counter the arising of fear when being in a frightful place in the wilds.¹⁰ This evidently applies to those bodhisattvas who no longer react with fear on hearing its teachings, which would in turn make it possible for them to memorize and recite the

224 challenging to read. For transliterations of what in Sanskrit are the terms *tathāgata* and *sarvajña* see below notes 6 and 34. An example illustrating the syntax problem would be Karashima 2011: 343,11 (= T 224 at T VIII 458b20): 色, 痛痒, 思想, 生死, 識空觀, where the position of 觀, as a rendering of *samanuṣāsyati*, follows the Indic syntax, whereas according to Chinese syntax 觀 should stand before the items to be contemplated (which in the present case are the five aggregates from the viewpoint of being empty); see also Karashima 2011: 343n5.

⁶ Karashima 2011: 168,8 (= T 224 at T VIII 441b13): 若諷誦說深般若波羅蜜時, 其心疑於法者, 亦不肯學, 念是言: 非但薩阿竭所說. 止他人言: 莫得學是! In this passage, 但薩阿竭 is Lokakṣema's rendering of what in Sanskrit is the term *tathāgata*, explained by Karashima 2010: 98 to reflect Gāndhārī *tasagada*; for variations of the relevant Gāndhārī term see <https://gandhari.org/dictionary/tasagada>, on the language of the original translated into Chinese as T 224 Karashima 2013, and on various Chinese renderings of this term in *Āgama literature* Anālayo 2017.

⁷ See below note 42.

⁸ Karashima 2011: 278,8 (= T 224 at T VIII 451b22): 或從彌勒菩薩聞是深經中慧 ... 若復有菩薩前世佛時, 聞深般若波羅蜜.

⁹ For example, Karashima 2011: 30,11 (= T 224 at T VIII 428b7): 有行菩薩聞是, 不恐, 不畏, 不難, 則為行般若波羅蜜.

¹⁰ Karashima 2011: 59,7 (= T 224 at T VIII 431a23): 善男子, 善女人學般若波羅蜜者, 持者, 誦者, 若於空閑處, 若於僻隈處, 亦不恐, 亦不怖, 亦不畏.

Prajñāpāramitā in the first place. Such memorization is a basic requirement in an entirely oral setting for enabling continued access to the text. The specific function assumed by the *Prajñāpāramitā* in this way touches moreover on a pervasive theme in much of Buddhist literature, namely the providing of protection, evident also in several texts from the *Āgama* and *Nikāya* textual corpus.¹¹

Another significant dimension of early and later Buddhist texts is the regular appearance of various celestials as active protagonists in different events and discussions. In the present case, an episode of this type reports how Śakra, the ruler in the Heaven of the Thirty-three, tests out the protective efficacy of keeping in mind the *Prajñāpāramitā*. According to the narrative setting, Śakra has been encouraged by other members of his celestial host to take up the *Prajñāpāramitā* that he has just heard the Buddha expound. The Buddha has joined their appeal by promising that, if Śakra were indeed to recall and recite the *Prajñāpāramitā*, his archenemies the *asuras* would abandon an attempt to invade the Heaven of the Thirty-three and withdraw rather than giving battle.¹² This proposal is well tailored to suit one of Śakra's most pressing concerns, in the way he features in Buddhist literature.¹³

Soon enough an occasion presents itself for Śakra to test out the power of bringing to mind the *Prajñāpāramitā*. Since he is at present among the audience of the Buddha's discourse spoken at Mount Vulture Peak and thus not in the Heaven of the Thirty-three, he of course does not have to face an attempt by the *asuras* to invade the heavenly realm over which he rules. But even such an august assembly listening to the Buddha expound the profundities of *Prajñāpāramitā* can be threatened by intruders, which in this case take the form of non-Buddhists (*anyatīrthya*) who are approaching in order to create some disturbance. Śakra recites the *Prajñāpāramitā* teaching he has just heard from the Buddha, as a result of which the potential intruders leave.¹⁴ A similar episode soon follows, which this time involves Māra trying to intrude. Śakra again recollects and recites the *Prajñāpāramitā* teachings, and Māra withdraws.¹⁵

This unsuccessful attempt to intrude is not the end of Māra's attempts to create difficulties for followers of the *Prajñāpāramitā*. In future times he will similarly be active when those on the bodhisattva path hear the *Prajñāpāramitā* but do not approve of it, to the extent that they leave it behind and instead follow the teachings of *śrāvakas* and Pratyekabuddhas.¹⁶ From the perspective of promoters of the *Prajñāpāramitā*, such dire results of Māra's mischief should quite definitely be avoided.

The above episodes involving Śakra and Māra exemplify a recurrent pattern in the *Prajñāpāramitā* translated by Lokakṣema and his team of presenting the setting and reception

^{11.} See, e.g., Skilling 1992 and Bongard-Levin, Boucher, Fukita, and Wille 1996.

^{12.} Karashima 2011: 77,5 (= T 224 at T VIII 433b15): 佛語釋提桓因: 當學, 拘翼! 般若波羅蜜. 當持經卷. 當諷誦. 何以故? 阿須倫心中作是生念: 欲與忉利天共鬪. 阿須倫即起兵上天. 是時, 拘翼! 當誦念般若波羅蜜. 阿須倫兵眾即還去.

^{13.} On the role of Śakra in Buddhist literature see, e.g., Anālayo 2019: 87f.

^{14.} Karashima 2011: 81,4 (= T 224 at T VIII 433c25): 釋提桓因從佛所聞般若波羅蜜即受誦. 彼異道人即遙遠遠繞佛一匝, 便從彼間道徑去. As already noted by Drewes 2015: 125 in relation to the corresponding Sanskrit version, the narrative context and the specific terminology employed here convey that Śakra relies on what he has memorized.

^{15.} Karashima 2011: 84,4 (= T 224 at T VIII 434a14): 釋提桓因心中誦念般若波羅蜜, 且欲究竟, 弊魔便復道, 還去.

^{16.} Karashima 2011: 237,5 (= T 224 at T VIII 447b3): 當來行菩薩道者, 得聞深般若波羅蜜, 不可意, 便棄捨去, 反明聲聞, 辟支佛法 ... 是菩薩, 摩訶薩當覺知魔為.

of its teachings in an entirely oral manner, without explicitly granting room to the alternative of employing written means for the same purpose. Since the text under examination here already testifies to a sophisticated level of growth in *Prajñāpāramitā* thought, making it fairly obvious that a considerable evolution must have taken place previously,¹⁷ it seems quite possible, although of course not certain, that such references may reflect a time when the text existed in a predominantly or even entirely oral setting. The same no longer holds for the stage in evolution of the present *Prajñāpāramitā* text reflected by Lokakṣema's translation, as another equally recurrent pattern in the same text involves references to writing.

III. Writing the *Prajñāpāramitā*

Māra's obstructive activities are indeed not confined to occasions of hearing the *Prajñāpāramitā*, as he may also interfere when writing is involved.¹⁸ One passage presents two alternative scenarios for such potential interference, which are either when one wishes to write the *Prajñāpāramitā* or else when one wishes to teach it (literally, to speak it, 說).¹⁹ This neatly reflects the two main avenues for ensuring the transmission of *Prajñāpāramitā* teachings, once the use of writing has come to join an oral tradition. In addition to passing on such teachings verbally, which then need to be remembered by the audience, it is also possible to write them down.

Writing comes up repeatedly in relation to the meritorious potential of the *Prajñāpāramitā*. Śakra evinces a sustained interest in the acquisition of such merit, motivating him to inquire about the benefits a man or woman of good family (*kulaputra/kuladuhitr*) can expect from memorizing and reciting the *Prajñāpāramitā*. The Buddha's reply goes beyond the scope of the original question, as he also brings in the alternative options of writing down the *Prajñāpāramitā* and of engaging in various forms of worship directed toward it.²⁰ The expanded scope of this reply could reflect a gradually increasing importance accorded to writing that may have motivated the explicit inclusion of its benefits in the Buddha's articulation of the range of options for deriving merit from the *Prajñāpāramitā*. A similar pattern can be seen in relation to a different inquiry by Subhūti, where again only the Buddha's reply mentions writing.²¹

Yet another case of this type involves two separate occasions on which the Buddha, in the course of entrusting the *Prajñāpāramitā* to Ānanda, warns that care should be taken that nothing be lost. The first instance indicates that Ānanda should not forget even a single sentence; the second injunction adds to the need not to forget even a single word the possibilities that the *Prajñāpāramitā* may be abandoned by him, neglected by him, and not be written down.²² The sense of the last of these references is to some extent open to conjecture.

¹⁷. See the observations in Harrison 1993: 139f.

¹⁸. Karashima 2011: 233,1 (= T 224 at T VIII 446c24) lists various obstructions created by Māra on the occasion when bodhisattvas, great beings, are engaged in writing down this teaching, 菩薩, 摩訶薩書是經時.

¹⁹. Karashima 2011: 242,12+16 (= T 224 at T VIII 448a16+21): 若欲書般若波羅蜜, 若欲說時.

²⁰. Karashima 2011: 89,1 (= T 224 at T VIII 434b24): 學般若波羅蜜者, 持者, 誦者 and Karashima 2011: 89,4 (= T 224 at T VIII 434b27): 書般若波羅蜜者, 持經卷, 自歸, 作禮, 承事, 供養名華, 搗香, 澤香, 雜香, 繪綵, 華蓋, 旗幡.

²¹. Karashima 2011: 244,11 (= T 224 at T VIII 448b20): 不欲令有學_[s] 誦_[s] 受般若波羅蜜者?, and Karashima 2011: 245,2 (= T 224 at T VIII 448b24): 便不復學_[s] 誦_[s] 書是經, thus here 書 has replaced 受, whereas in the previous example in note 20 it replaced 學.

²². Karashima 2011: 443,4 (= T 224 at T VIII 468c25): 慎莫亡失一句 and Karashima 2011: 535,7 (= T 224 at T VIII 477c22): 是般若波羅蜜從中亡一字, 汝捨, 汝擬不書; see Karashima 2011: 536n226 on emending 擬 to

Perhaps it could be taken to convey that, whatever Ānanda were to forget, abandon, and neglect, that much would not stand a chance of being written down in later times. Alternatively, however, the text could be read more literally to convey that Ānanda himself may fail to write it down. This appears to be the more apposite interpretation, given that just before the conclusion of the whole text the Buddha gives rather detailed instruction to Ānanda on how a copying of the *Prajñāpāramitā* should be carried out.²³ At any rate, it seems fair to assume that the present formulation may result from a reference to writing being added to an injunction that at an earlier stage was only concerned with Ānanda's memorization abilities.²⁴

In sum, the above cases may reflect an actual development in the ancient Indian setting during which writing has come to acquire increasing importance alongside ways of orally engaging with the *Prajñāpāramitā*.²⁵ The impression that orality may have been fairly central at an early stage in the development and spread of the *Prajñāpāramitā* text in question also emerges from an observation by Falk and Karashima (2013: 99) regarding a tendency for an increase in detailed information on the identity of the speaker, which becomes evident when comparing the same passage in the Gāndhārī manuscript, Lokakṣema's translation, and the Sanskrit version. Taking up just one of their examples for the sake of illustration, the relevant Gāndhārī passage has just *aha* (= Sanskrit *āha*), the translation by Lokakṣema and his team identifies the Buddha as the speaker, 佛言, and the Sanskrit version adds to that an identification of the one to whom the Buddha addressed his words, which is Śakra, the ruler of the *devas* [of the Thirty-three]: *evam ukte bhagavān śakraṃ devānām indram etad avocat*.²⁶ Falk and Karashima (2013: 99f) offer the following reasoning on this type of

縱, and on the significance of the latter in Lokakṣema's usage Karashima 2010: 671. A reference to writing also occurs in the first entrustment but as part of a different phrase; see Karashima 2011: 442,4 (= T 224 at T VIII 468c17).

²³ Karashima 2011: 539,11 (= T 224 at T VIII 478b3).

²⁴ This would concord with a similar pattern, in this case emerging on comparing versions of the same entrustment in different texts, identified by Apple 2014: 43, where "differences within entrustment episodes between the chronological 'snapshots' of the Chinese and Tibetan versions demonstrate a transition from predominantly oral transmissions to entrusted transmissions of written texts."

²⁵ The impact of orality appears to be relevant also to translation into Chinese for cases like T 224. Zacchetti 1998: 492f explains that recitation completely permeates the task of translation, in line with the importance of orality in the Indian tradition and also reflecting a role of the act of translation as a liturgical reenactment of the Buddha's teaching: "l'atto del tradurre è visto come riattualizzazione liturgica del tempo e della situazione archetipica in cui si verificò la predicazione del Buddha ... la recitazione ... permea totalmente l'opera di traduzione ... nella tradizione indiana in genere, è proprio la parola parlata ad avere valore sacrale ... e, d'altra parte, la recitazione (non la lettura in silenzio) dei *sūtra* è tutt'ora uno dei momenti liturgici più importanti di tutte le comunità buddhiste."

²⁶ Falk and Karashima 2013: 110 (5-08), Karashima 2011: 116,1 (= T 224 at T VIII 437a7), and Mitra 1887/1888: 57,16. Placing these three versions alongside each other is not meant to convey the idea of a single line of textual evolution, instead of which each of these three is best considered a distinct version in its own right. An increase in explicit indications regarding speakers can also be seen in different Pāli discourses in the *Sagātha-vagga*, which have at times shorter and at times longer prose passages introducing the respective verses, but at other times also just the verses themselves, so that it is only the quotative *iti* that indicates a change of speaker, whose identity has to be inferred; for the first example of this type in the collection see SN 1.14 to 1.19 at SN I 6–8. The pattern in such instances appears to be that the explicit indication (given in the present case in SN 1.13 at SN I 6,15) that the first speaker is a *deva* and the reply to that is given by the Buddha holds for the remainder of the discourses as well. An oral performance of one of these discourses could have relied on modulation of voice or perhaps changes in posture (such as expressing more or less respect when reciting the respective parts) in order to convey the needed information to the listening audience. In the case of the Chinese parallels to this particular set of discourses, explicit indications in prose ensure that the identity of

occurrence:

Maybe this points at an initial oral presentation of the text, as given in Gāndhārī, which the reciter knew by heart including the persons speaking, indicating different speakers by a different modulation of the voice. For readers deprived of this help, the change must be expressed verbally.

The above exploration of the probable significance of orality is not meant to imply, however, that writing was necessarily held in lesser esteem.²⁷ In fact, Lokakṣema's translation explicitly indicates that modes of engaging with the *Prajñāpāramitā* by either oral means or else by writing it, etc., are equally based on the might or power (*anubhāva*) of Buddhas.²⁸ Another passage even takes up just the case of a practitioner of *Prajñāpāramitā* engaged in writing it, which leads to being watched over and protected by all Buddhas.²⁹ Such references would hardly have come into existence if writing had been held in low esteem.

When considered alongside ample references to orality, it seems as if writing may simply have been seen as a valid alternative or addition to the already existing repertoire, rather than being by nature of lesser value.³⁰ Perhaps at this stage writing functioned more as a

each speaker is easily recognized; see SĀ 1007 at T II 263b27 and SĀ² 233 at T II 458c16 (parallels to SN 1.14), SĀ 1335 at T II 368b22 and SĀ² 355 at T II 490b3 (parallels to SN 1.15), SĀ 598 at T II 160a26 and SĀ² 175 at T II 437c18 (parallels to SN 1.16), SĀ 600 at T II 160b27 and SĀ² 174 at T II 437b29 (parallels to SN 1.17) SĀ 578 at T II 154a6 and SĀ² 163 at T II 435b8 (parallels to SN 1.18), and SĀ 584 at T II 155b5 and SĀ² 168 at T II 436b2 (parallels to SN 1.19). Regarding the last case, it is worthy of note that an Uighur manuscript has preserved the final verses of SĀ 583 and the initial verses of SĀ 584 without providing a prose introduction to the latter; see Kudara and Zieme 1983: 296–301.

²⁷ Vetter 1994: 1267 reads the following reference in the 道行般若經, Karashima 2011: 65,2 (= T 224 at T VIII 431c22): 復次, 拘翼! 般若波羅蜜書已, 雖不能學, 不能誦者, 當持其經卷, 若人, 若鬼神不能中害 to imply that the written form of the *Prajñāpāramitā* “was not in high esteem.” The preceding part of the passage in question describes how engaging with the *Prajñāpāramitā* in various ways can provide protection against different challenges. The present reference then gives the assurance that this protective power can also be accessed by just holding a written copy in one's hand. It thereby opens the door to the benefits one may gain from the text beyond the circle of those who have already been able to study, recite, and memorize it. Rather than expressing a lack of esteem, the passage could alternatively even be interpreted as expressing a high evaluation of the written text, by showing that it enables access to the same magical potency that otherwise requires oral modes of engaging with it. In the end, however, I think the main point made here is not about granting esteem to either orality over writing or else writing over orality, but much rather to throw into relief the power of *Prajñāpāramitā* evident with both writing and orality; on this passage see also Drewes 2007: 122n26 and Apple 2014: 29 (notably, in a later publication Vetter 2003: 57 presents a summary of the passage quoted above that seems to concord better with its actual wording: “Wer einen Prajñāpāramitā-Text abgeschrieben hat, aber noch nicht studieren oder rezitieren konnte, soll ihn mit sich tragen; auch das schützt gegen Menschen und Dämonen”). Based on the above unconvincing assessment, Vetter 1994: 1268 then considers a subsequent description of worshipping the *Prajñāpāramitā* “to be for persons not able to deal with it otherwise.” The relevant text, beginning Karashima 2011: 66,9 (= T 224 at T VIII 432a5), does not seem to have any explicit indication in this respect, and it is also not directly related to the above quote where the power of the written copy is indeed relevant for those not able to study, recite, and memorize it. Instead, as far as I can see, this second passage seems to depict the benefits of worshipping the *Prajñāpāramitā* as available to anyone and thus would include those who are able “to deal with it otherwise.” This in a way exemplifies a general need not to posit devotional acts of worship as something only relevant to those unable to avail themselves of other ways of engaging with the teachings. Even an erudite scholar monk may still be quite keen on performing acts of worship, as can be seen from the travel records of Chinese pilgrims like Fāxiān (法顯) and Xuánzàng (玄奘) visiting India.

²⁸ Karashima 2011: 224,3 (= T 224 at T VIII 446a16): 若有念, 說, 誦者, 若有學, 受, 書者, 皆是諸佛威神之所致。

²⁹ Karashima 2011: 440,2 (= T 224 at T VIII 468b28): 有行是般若波羅蜜, 若書者, 諸佛悉視護之。

³⁰ Commenting on the Buddha's entrustment to Ānanda in the Sanskrit version of the *Aṣṭāsahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, Schopen 2010: 43 notes that “there is no indication here that copying or worshipping the book

supplement than as a replacement, in that a combination of the two would have appeared to offer the best way to promote the *Prajñāpāramitā*.³¹

In the ancient Indian setting, the production of a written copy—as an alternative for those unable to invest the time needed to memorize the text—still required dedicating a substantial amount of time, in addition to the need to procure the required writing material.³² Lokakṣema's *Prajñāpāramitā* translation exhibits clear awareness of the fact that writing the text is a demanding task, evident in the indication that someone aspiring to be quick at it should complete a copy within a year.³³ In other words, although memorization of a text is indeed a demanding task, writing it down is also not without its challenges.

Moreover, and perhaps also more importantly, recurrent references to various ways of worship show that the use of writing opened up a new avenue for worship that had in this form not been available in an oral setting. This helps dispel the impression that writing was held in low esteem. An example of this takes the form of listing ways of engaging with the *Prajñāpāramitā* that proceed from writing the text to studying it, memorizing it, reciting it, cultivating it, and engaging in various modalities of worship, followed by indicating that in this way one worships omniscience.³⁴ The highlight placed on worship in this way, by bringing in the highly valued attainment of omniscience, neatly reflects that writing would not only have provided support for oral modalities of engaging with the *Prajñāpāramitā*—in the sense of offering a backup for memorization and thereby ensuring the continuity of oral performances of the text—but also afforded a stable physical object toward which worship could be directed. From the emic perspective this must have appeared as a rather important benefit of writing.

The new avenue for worship available through a written copy of the text can perhaps best be exemplified with an episode found in the final chapters of Lokakṣema's *Prajñāpāramitā* translation. These chapters depart from the doctrinally-oriented dialogue mode adopted in the preceding chapters by instead presenting a sustained narrative, which depicts the bodhisattva Sadāprarudita's quest for the *Prajñāpāramitā*. This narrative in a way makes the teachings presented in the preceding parts of the text come alive by embodying them in a tale designed to touch the heart and provide inspiration.

According to the relevant episode, Sadāprarudita's teacher had a construction made to house a container studded with gems that held incense together with a copy of the *Prajñāpāramitā* written in golden letters. The teacher then engaged in daily acts of worship toward the written copy with the help of flowers, incense, lamps, banners, and music.³⁵ The

is of any lesser value than hearing, mastering, or repeating it.”

³¹ In a comment on Mahāyāna *sūtras* in general, Skilling 2004: 84 reasons: “How did the texts circulate? Orally, or as books? The answer is, most probably, both, and in fact the two need not be separated. Manuscripts were not sent by post or as attachments: the journey of a text was a process involving recitation, explanation, and adoration.”

³² The need to ensure donations of writing material emerges quite palpably from the survey of relevant textual references offered by Skilling 2014.

³³ Karashima 2011: 221,5 (= T 224 at T VIII 446a5): 欲疾書是經者, 至一歲乃至竟。

³⁴ Karashima 2011: 68,2 (= T 224 at T VIII 432a20): 善男子, 善女人書般若波羅蜜, 學, 持, 誦, 行, 自歸作禮, 承事, 供養好華, 搗香, 澤香, 雜香, 繪綵, 華蓋, 旗幡, 薩芸若則為供養. Karashima 2010: 395 lists 薩芸若 as a transliteration of *sarvajña*.

³⁵ Karashima 2011: 495,3 (= T 224 at T VIII 473a22): 是菩薩用般若波羅蜜故作是臺. 其中有七寶之函. 以紫磨黃金為素, 書般若波羅蜜在其中. 匣中有若干百種雜名香. 曇無竭菩薩日日供養. 持雜華, 名香, 然燈, 懸幢幡, 華蓋, 雜寶, 若干百種音樂, 持用供養般若波羅蜜. Note that this description does not come in direct

description given in this way, however fictional it may be, conveniently illustrates an evident advantage of having a written copy of the text, as in an entirely oral setting it would be challenging to find a comparably efficient modality for performing worship.³⁶ The attraction of such devotional activities can be seen in the report by the Chinese pilgrim Fāxiān (法顯) that already in early fifth century India Mahāyāna practitioners were engaged in worshipping the *Prajñāpāramitā*.³⁷

IV. Writing and the Spread of Novel Texts

Writing the *Prajñāpāramitā* also features prominently in a section of the text whose main concern appears to be self-promotion.³⁸ This takes the form of depicting at times stunning scenarios of merit generation, all of which are invariably bested by the merit to be gained through engaging with the very text itself.³⁹ For example, worship of the Buddha's relics cannot match the act of having written a copy of the *Prajñāpāramitā* and then giving that to

association with any teaching activity by this teacher, the bodhisattva Dharmodgata, instead of which it just portrays his personal practice of worship, followed by describing that other bodhisattvas (餘菩薩) and *devas* also perform such regular worship, upon hearing which Sadāprarudita and his five hundred followers then also engage in such worship. It is only afterwards that Sadāprarudita and his followers in turn proceed (便行至) toward the place where the teacher is preaching and, thrilled at seeing him, perform acts of worship toward him, following which he then delivers teachings to them; for the beginnings of these teachings see Karashima 2011: 499,4 (= T 224 at T VIII 473b16). The description given in the passage quoted above is thus clearly concerned with a publicly accessible place for worshipping a written copy of the *Prajñāpāramitā* and thus differs from the corresponding part in the Sanskrit version, on which Drewes 2007: 126n30 comments that, “[i]f this passage reveals anything about the way Mahāyānists venerated books, it seems more likely to be that veneration of copies of sūtras owned by *dharmabhāṅakas* sometimes formed part of preaching rituals.” In the text translated by Lokakṣema and his team, however, the event of preaching is a distinct episode, and the preceding veneration of the copy of the *Prajñāpāramitā* does not seem to form part of a preaching ritual. The 道行般若經 also puts into perspective the reflection by Drewes 2007: 137 that “it is in fact not clear that sūtra worship was especially important for the Mahāyāna at all. Although Mahāyāna sūtras commonly advocate the veneration of written sūtras, they typically depict it as less significant than other sūtra-oriented practices.” Lokakṣema's *Prajñāpāramitā* translation rather conveys the impression that, from an emic perspective, worship of the text did carry considerable importance and was considered no less significant than other ways of engaging with the text.

³⁶ Schopen 1975: 179 perceives an “observable shift ... from an orientation emphasizing the oral tradition to one primarily emphasizing a written tradition. In the former case the development and maintenance of new cultic centers would depend on the periodic visits of wandering *bhāṅakas* or reciters. This was, at best, an unstable mechanism. If centers were to be established which would have a more permanent character and which would, by that fact, make possible the development of a cult in a more truly sociological sense of the term, it was necessary to have a more permanent, more specific object to serve as the focal point of the cult. The shift to a primarily written tradition is perhaps to be accounted for by this need. Once the book was in written form, it could be deposited permanently at the places where the *bhāṅakas* were in the habit of teaching and reciting and thus, even in the absence of the *bhāṅakas*, it would provide a permanently located source of power.” Although the main argument by Schopen 1975 regarding an institutionalized cult of the book has been successfully criticized by Drewes 2007, the basic pattern described in the above quote still seems helpful for appreciating the substantial difference in matters of worship between an entirely oral setting and a form of orality that operates in combination with the employment of written texts.

³⁷ T 2085 at T LI 859b25: 阿毘曇師者供養阿毘曇, 律師者供養律, 年年一供養, 各自有日, 摩訶衍人則供養般若波羅蜜, 文殊師利, 觀世音等. As the quote shows, the report of worship of the *Prajñāpāramitā* here is preceded by references to worship of Abhidharma and *Vinaya*, but then is followed by mentioning Mañjuśrī and Avalokiteśvara et al.; Zhao 2023: 4 argues in support of the reference itself concerning the *Prajñāpāramitā* as a text.

³⁸ Hartmann 2019: 21 draws attention to a recurrent pattern that takes the form of “the self-promotion of exclusively one text, but never of a movement ... The situation is somehow reminiscent of present-day advertisement competitions between different products: each is always the best.”

³⁹ On this type of presentation, see in more detail Harrison 2022 and Anālayo 2024.

someone else.⁴⁰ A merit-making scenario mentioned with marked frequency involves such writing the *Prajñāpāramitā* and giving it to another, who then also writes it and passes it on to others.⁴¹ There can be hardly any doubt that the highlight provided by this type of description reflects an important concern among the promoters of the *Prajñāpāramitā* translated by Lokakṣema and his team. Fortunately, the Gāndhārī manuscript has preserved portions of this part of the text with similarly repeated references to writing as a means of transmitting the text to others.⁴² This thereby confirms the emphasis placed on this type of activity during the period in the evolution of *Prajñāpāramitā* thought and practice reflected by these two texts.

Now this Gāndhārī manuscript and Lokakṣema's translation appear to be our earliest witnesses to texts of the wider *Prajñāpāramitā* literature,⁴³ making the indications provided in this way relevant to ascertaining the dynamics at work during this stage in the evolution and diffusion of *Prajñāpāramitā* thought. This can be explored further based on the following proposal by Gombrich (1988/1990: 21):

[T]he rise of the Mahāyāna is due to the use of writing. To put it more accurately: the early Mahāyāna texts owe their survival to the fact that they were written down; any earlier texts which deviated from or criticized the canonical norms ... could not survive because they were not included among the texts which the Saṅgha preserved orally.

This would provide a meaningful background to the evident concern in the early *Prajñāpāramitā* texts studied here with writing as a means of promoting themselves. However, the above suggestion has met with some criticism.⁴⁴ Ruegg (2004: 20n25) comments on the above quote that “[h]ere the separate matters of the rise and the survival of the Mahāyāna have been telescoped together. There are of course indications that some

⁴⁰ Karashima 2011: 100,8 (= T 224 at T VIII 435c2): 般若波羅蜜書已, 舉施與。

⁴¹ Karashima 2011: 113,1 (= T 224 at T VIII 436c8): 善男子, 善女人書般若波羅蜜者, 持經卷與他人, 使書, 若為讀之; repeated in Karashima 2011: 113,7, 114,5, and 115,3 (= T 224 at T VIII 436c15+20+28) and in an expanded form, where the same basic pattern leads on to further forms of engagement with the text, in Karashima 2011: 118,3+10, 119,6, 121,1+9, 122,6, and 124,5 (= T 224 at T VIII 437a24, b1+11+18+25, and c3+9); the final four instances just refer to the *kulaputra/kuladuhitr* taking (in the hand) the *Prajñāpāramitā*, 持, and then giving it to someone else who then writes it, etc., rather than explicitly indicating that the *kulaputra/kuladuhitr* had in the first place themselves written it, 書, as is the case for the preceding references. Regarding the significance of 持 see Apple 2014: 32n19.

⁴² Falk and Karashima 2013: 106 (5-03): (*pra*)[*ñā*]paramidaē [*p*](*o*)[*sta*]o paṛṣu likhaṇa, p. 108 (5-04): (*po*)[*stao para*](*sa*)[*l*](*i*)[*khaṇa*], p. 120 (5-24): *yo prañaparamidaē postao parasa likhaṇa*, p. 122 (5-29): *yo prañaparamidaē postao para[sa likha..]*, p. 124 (5-33): *yo prañaparamidaē postao parasa likhita [daea]*, p. 146 (5-38): *ima prañaparamida likhita dajati*, p. 148 (5-39): *imayeva prañaparamida likhita uvaṇamea*, p. 152 (5-43): *ima prañaparamida likhita dajati* and (5-44) [*pa*]ramida likhita uvaṇameati, p. 156 (5-49): *imayeva prañaparamida likhita daeati*, and p. 160 (5-52): *ima prañaparamida likh[ita] uvaṇa(m)e*.

⁴³ According to T 2145 at T LV 47c8, the translation was completed in the year 179 of the Common Era; see also Harrison 1993: 142. Falk 2011: 20 reports that the C14 dating of this Gāndhārī manuscript gave “two-sigma ranges from AD 25–43 (probability 14.3%) and AD 47–147 (probability 81.1%),” adding that “[o]n palaeographic ground[s] a date in the first century AD would not surprise.”

⁴⁴ For a reply to a critical observation in Nattier 2003: 185 see Pagel 2006: 79. Walser 2005: 137f sees a potential problem in relation to the *Vinaya* rule regarding not teaching recitation word by word, given that the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya* extends this regulation to doing the same in the written medium; see T 1428 at T XXII 639a18 and for a survey of the parallel versions of this rule Anālayo 2011: 862n39. Yet, even with this additional stipulation the rule would apply only to the rather specific case of a fully ordained monastic dictating word by word to a scribe who has not received full ordination. It seems improbable to me that such a specific scenario could have had a substantial impact on the writing down of texts in general.

Mahāyāna Sūtras were not set down in a single written redaction, and hence that they may have sometimes been transmitted orally.” A more detailed criticism has been formulated by Drewes (2010: 60) in the following manner:⁴⁵

Mahāyāna sūtras advocate mnemonic/oral/aural practices more frequently than they do written ones, make reference to people who have memorized or are in the process of memorizing them, and consistently attach higher prestige to mnemonic/oral practices than to ones involving written texts. Study of differences in various versions of sūtras translated into Chinese has directly shown that these texts were often transmitted orally (e.g., Nattier 2003). It is thus highly unlikely that writing was necessary for the preservation of Mahāyāna sūtras during the movement’s formative centuries. There is no evidence that Mahāyāna sūtras were initially composed in written form ... Overall, there is no evidence that Mahāyāna textual practices were ever distinct from those of non-Mahāyānists.

The above criticism seems to assume that the proposal by Gombrich (1988/1990) requires that the texts were composed in writing. This does not appear to be the case, as the proposed impact of writing on the rise of Mahāyāna seems to intend the word “rise” rather in the sense of “growth” or “spread.” In fact, the phrase “[t]o put it more accurately” shows that the point at stake is the survival of Mahāyāna, and the ensuing paragraph is about preservation and transmission of texts rather than their composition. As noted by Vetter (1994: 1243n4) in a comment on the same proposal, it “only presents the hypothesis that the early Mahāyāna texts owe their *survival* to the fact that they were written down.”⁴⁶ In the same vein, Harrison (2003: 133) already pointed out that the proposed thesis “bears rather on the logistics of preservation. It does not explain how the Mahāyāna began, but how its texts survived.”

This much would not require positing a complete abandonment of orality, composition undertaken only in written form, or textual practices only employed among Mahāyānists. Instead, the suggestion would mainly be that reliance on writing, once this gradually came into use in the ancient Indian setting alongside oral practices, would have facilitated the transmission and spread of teachings deviating substantially from the established curriculum. This potential would have been favorable for the diffusion of novel texts. In addition, even for purposes of memorization or recitation, access to a written version can make a substantial difference, as it allows for a text to be memorized or recited even without being in the presence of someone who has already memorized it.

The reference by Drewes (2010: 60) to a consistency in attaching “higher prestige to mnemonic/oral practices than to ones involving written texts” does not find corroboration in Lokakṣema’s translation of the *Prajñāpāramitā*. This in a way exemplifies the importance of an observation offered by Silk (2002: 369), in that “we must stop referring, at the very least provisionally, to ‘the Mahāyāna’ in the singular,” and instead approach any particular text from the viewpoint of its potentially representing “a different community, a different Mahāyāna.” In other words, differences between, for example, the *Ugraparipṛcchā* and early *Prajñāpāramitā* texts do not seem to be just minor variations in what can in principle be

⁴⁵ See also Drewes 2015: 132f.

⁴⁶ Vetter 1994: 1243n4 continues by stating that “[i]f we take seriously what the earliest version of the *Aṣṭasahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* says about its oral transmission ... the hypothesis cannot apply to this *sūtra*’s early days.” This assessment comes with a cross-reference to an appendix to his article of which the most directly relevant part, as far as I am able to see, appears to be the position taken by Vetter 1994: 1267f regarding a supposed lack of esteem of writing, for a critical reply to which see above note 27.

viewed as members of an otherwise internally consistent entity. Instead, the respective textual traditions much rather appear to reflect quite distinct, individual articulations of a pan-Buddhist concern with the path of a bodhisattva.⁴⁷ This holds not only in general but also in relation to the topic under discussion here, as can be seen from the following finding by Nattier (2003: 185):

[T]he early *Ugra*—or rather, our oldest (2nd century CE) extant example—appears to have set forth instructions for the practice of the bodhisattva path ... without offering its audience any special merits for preserving the text itself. In later editions, by contrast, we encounter precisely the same *sūtra*-centered rhetoric that is well known from other book-cult texts.

The shift observable in this way from the earliest to later versions of the *Ugraparipṛcchā* differs from the *Prajñāpāramitā* text studied here, where the two earliest extant versions clearly exhibit a keen interest in self-promotion and are at pains to encourage writing as a means of passing on the text to others. Notably, the *Ugraparipṛcchā* also differs in other respects. It does not have challenging teachings on emptiness of the type found in the present *Prajñāpāramitā* text and in other members of this genre.⁴⁸ Presumably for this reason, it does not explicitly envisage that its teachings may trigger reactions of fear among its audience,⁴⁹ differing in this respect from Lokakṣema's *Prajñāpāramitā* translation.⁵⁰ The *Ugraparipṛcchā* also does not have anything comparable to the depiction in Lokakṣema's *Prajñāpāramitā* translation of how someone in the audience, on hearing the text being recited and taught, reacts with doubt and openly states that this is not an authentic record of the teachings of the Buddha, even to the extent of issuing warnings to others.⁵¹

^{47.} A concern that is also quite relevant among Theravāda traditions; see Anālayo 2014b: 22.

^{48.} The rather distinct nature of these texts can be exemplified with the observation by Nattier 2003: 179 that “the *Ugra* lacks anything that could be construed as a ‘philosophy of emptiness’”; in fact, in clear contrast to *Prajñāpāramitā* texts, “in the *Ugra* such antiessentialist and antireifying arguments are conspicuous by their absence” (p. 180).

^{49.} To be precise, the Tibetan version of the *Ugraparipṛcchā* does have a reference to the need of not being afraid of emptiness, but this occurs in the context of a long list of qualities of a bodhisattva who has gone forth and comes together with references to the signless and the wishless; see D 63 *nga* 279a3 or P 760.19 *zhi* 323b3: *stong pa nyid kyis mi skrag pa*, translated in Nattier 2003: 294. T 310 at T XI 478a9 has a comparable reference: 解空不驚; T 322 at T XII 20b15 reads: 若以空為不想之行喜; and T 323 does not seem to have a counterpart to this passage. The point here is thus not a reaction to the teachings promoted in the text, unlike the case of early *Prajñāpāramitā*.

^{50.} For one out of several references in T 224 to the possible occurrence of such a reaction, in this case worded in terms of commending their absence, see above note 9.

^{51.} See above note 6. Nattier 2003: 14 reasons that some “oral texts may originally have made no claim to the status of ‘scripture’ (or in the present case, of ‘*sūtra*’) at all. For the *Ugra*, it is true, we have no direct evidence of such a process.” Such a scenario would hold for some early Abhidharma texts, which from an initial stage as mere commentaries seem to have been gradually promoted in status; see Anālayo 2014a: 86–89 and 148–156. However, the basic cast of the *Ugraparipṛcchā* takes the form of teachings given by the Buddha in reply to inquiries by Ugra, and for that to be in existence without an implicit claim to *sūtra* status would require eliminating the Buddha from its cast. This seems a rather improbable scenario, given that the oral circulation of records of teachings attributed to the Buddha in *Āgama* and *Nikāya* text must have provided an obvious template for framing the present series of replies to Ugra's queries. With this type of precedent in place, it would be difficult to understand why the teachings to Ugra should have been presented in a form that lacks the attraction of being attributed to the Buddha. At any rate, a claim to *sūtra* status is clearly in place at the earliest stage of development of the *Ugraparipṛcchā* to which we still have access. Given that the same text reports no objections to this claim, it seems fair to assume that it may have been more fortunate in this respect compared to early *Prajñāpāramitā*.

Such differences make it perhaps understandable if early generations of promoters of the *Ugraparipṛcchā* may not have felt a pressing need to ensure the spread of its teachings through promises of staggering merit-accrual. This could simply be because they may not have encountered as much resistance as proponents of *Prajñāpāramitā*. In other words, the struggle for survival would naturally have made itself felt more acutely, and thereby called for more explicit measures at protection, among promoters of a text that encountered more opposition among its potential audiences, due to diverging more substantially from the type of teachings known and in circulation in that specific geographical and temporal setting. It could then have been the degree of innovation that determined to what extent measures ensuring the survival of the text would have been considered important from the outset of its circulation. With the coming into vogue of such measures and their success, even texts lacking such self-promotion strategies may eventually have incorporated these in order to be able to compete successfully for audiences and followers.

Whatever may be the final word on the rationale behind such differences, their very existence shows that each of these textual traditions requires being treated on its own terms rather than being considered straightforwardly as representative of the general but somewhat elusive category of Mahāyāna *sūtras*. Following the pertinent advice offered by Silk (2002: 369), a full appreciation of the resultant complexity would make it preferable to refrain from the understandable temptation to identify supposedly consistent patterns applicable to all members of this category. This holds for the present research as well, in that the indications derived from the early *Prajñāpāramitā* texts studied here are not invariably transferable to assessments of the general category of “the Mahāyāna” or even “the early Mahāyāna,” instead of which they just represent the specific case of early *Prajñāpāramitā* literature.⁵² Attempts to proceed beyond this circumscribed sphere of relevance would require undertaking similar studies with other texts on their own terms.

Another instance of criticism that requires discussion has been articulated by Osto (2019: 132n54) in the form of two objections. According to the first of these two, the proposal by Gombrich (1988/1990) supposedly rests

on his *a priori* assumption that there could not possibly be another institutional basis outside the traditional *saṅgha* to support an alternative oral tradition. Gombrich assumes that the ancient *saṅgha* was a monolithic institution that did not tolerate the existence of fringe elements within its ranks. I disagree that it takes a large organized body of people to orally transmit a sacred text. A small fanatical group, I imagine, could be quite successful at it.

Now, Gombrich (1988/1990) provides a survey of textual evidence for oral modes of transmission in the ancient Indian setting, including those of the Brahminical and Jain traditions. Although the assumption of alternative avenues for transmission outside of these established lineages of recitation offers an interesting perspective, for it to be taken seriously as an alternative explanation would require pointing to some supportive evidence, comparable to the body of evidence that testifies to traditional lineages of oral transmission. The same holds for the idea of a small fanatical group. If small fanatical groups had such an impact as to assure the spread of novel teachings on a major scale, we would expect to find

⁵² This ties in with the observation by Hartmann 2019: 21 that “the interest or the needs of those people who used texts we consider as Mahāyāna changed over time and place, and they changed considerably.”

this corroborated by some evidence. The onus of proof here lies with the proponent of such a scenario.

The second objection by Osto (2019: 132n54) is that “the assertion that the Mahāyāna *sūtras* would not have survived without being written down is a *post hoc, propter hoc* fallacy: Mahāyāna *sūtras* were written down; they survived; therefore they survived because they were written down.” This objection does not take into account that Gombrich (1988/1990: 29) supports his thesis by noting that “early Mahāyāna texts themselves offer what might be seen as corroborative evidence,” such as by eulogizing the meritorious potential of written versions of themselves. The present research corroborates this pattern, showing that the proposed role of writing, rather than being a product of fallacious reasoning, can be confirmed by actual textual evidence, at least for the text under discussion here. The same corroboration to some extent also put into perspective the first objection. If there had indeed been the alternative option of small fanatical groups ensuring transmission, it would be difficult to understand not only why the *Prajñāpāramitā* text under discussion here does not mention such an option even in passing, but also why this same text exhibits such a sustained concern with promoting the writing of copies of itself to be passed on to others. Such a concern only really makes sense, it seems to me, if it indeed reflects what at that time was considered crucial for facilitating the transmission of this *Prajñāpāramitā* text and its teachings.⁵³

Other scholars have in fact taken positions that are more in line with the thesis originally presented by Gombrich (1988/1990). Williams (1989/2009: 24) clarifies that continuity of orality is not an argument against this hypothesis, as “for Gombrich the important point is that Mahāyāna would not have survived without occurring within an enduring respected Buddhist organization which was prepared to preserve it.” Norman (1997: 93) in turn broadens the applicability of the same reasoning to include also the writing down of Pāli texts, reasoning that, “to a very large extent, the advent of writing meant that an already existent canon was fixed when it was written down, but writing allowed new canons to come into effect because the authors did not have to point to a long *bhāṇaka* tradition of the texts, which alone, before the use of writing, could prove that they were *Buddhavacana*.” McMahan (2002: 96f) sums up the main point that “[w]riting was a medium that was uniquely appropriate to the Mahāyāna and its creative reinterpretations of doctrine in that it freed access to texts from being dependent on the collective activities of chanting and recitation, and thus from the need for the institutional sanction of the monastic saṅgha.”

These assessments would receive support from the evidence provided by the Gāndhārī manuscript and Lokakṣema’s *Prajñāpāramitā* translation, which clearly evince a conscious attempt to bolster the employment of writing through staggering scenarios of merit acquisition in order to ensure the text’s preservation and spread. This much would be a natural result of a setting where, in the words of Skilling (2013: 106), “unlike the Āgamas and Vinayas, which were transmitted by established Vinaya lineages, the fledgling Vaidalya *sūtras* had no guaranteed support system.”

⁵³ This could be related to a reference offered by Skilling 2009: 61 to a passage in the *Mahāvastu*, according to which “*bodhisattvas* have a very special relationship to writing: *bodhisattvas* are generally the initiators of sciences and skills, including writing systems”; see Senart 1882: 135,4. The relationship depicted in this way would be in line with the impression that reliance on writing may have played an important role among early generations of *bodhisattvas* in India.

Conclusion

A survey of selected references in the *Prajñāpāramitā* text translated by Lokakṣema and his team points to an interrelationship between oral ways of engaging with the text and a presumably gradually growing relevance acquired by writing. Besides acting in support of oral performance by facilitating textual storage, the written medium appears to have opened up new avenues for devotional engagement with *Prajñāpāramitā* as a sacred text through acts of worship directed at a written copy. The apparent shift toward an increased reliance on writing alongside the continuity of orality may have fostered the maintenance and spread of this *Prajñāpāramitā* text independent of already established lineages of orally transmitted textual collections.

Acknowledgement

I am indebted to Mark Allon, Bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā, Richard Gombrich, Jens-Uwe Hartmann, and Tse-fu Kuan for commenting on a draft version of this article, which have led to substantial improvements of my presentation (this holds especially for the comments offered by Jens-Uwe Hartmann).

Abbreviations

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|-----------------|--|
| CBETA | Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association |
| D | Derge |
| P | Peking |
| SĀ | <i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 99) |
| SĀ ² | <i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 100) |
| SN | <i>Samyutta-nikāya</i> |
| T | Taishō (CBETA) |

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