From the Catalogue of "Buddhist Sūtras: A Universal Spiritual Heritage—Manuscripts and Iconography of the Lotus Sūtra" Exhibition

Buddhist *Sūtras*—An Extraordinary Spiritual Heritage

Dominique Trotignon

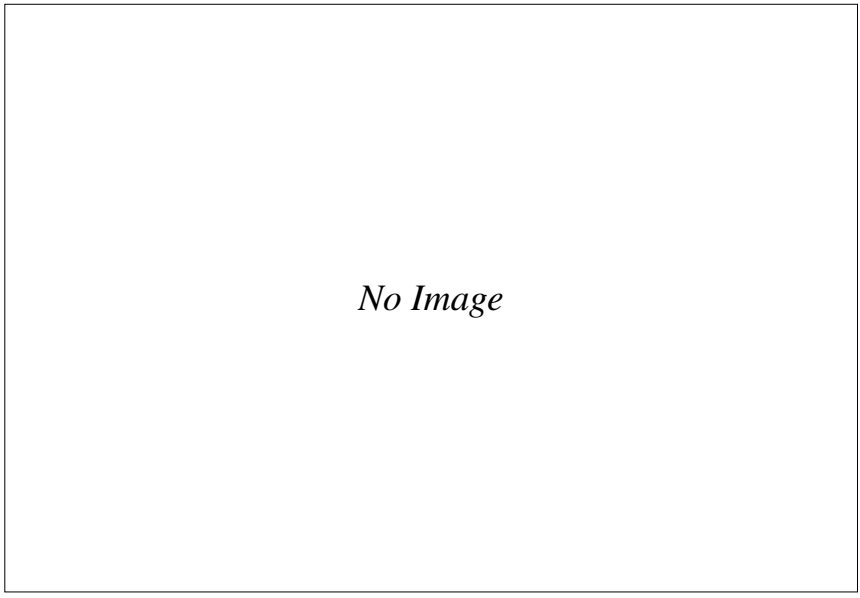
TODAY, here in the prestigious UNESCO building in Paris, the Institute of Oriental Philosophy and the Soka Cultural Association of France offer us a rare exhibition, which merits thorough exploration. The quality of the exhibits, the fact that, so far, they have been too rarely brought together in public, and the fact that they are here for the first time in France, are not the only sources of interest.

We should also welcome the willingness to exhibit these works in all their diversity and, most of all, in their astonishing fertility. Buddhist *sūtras* represent a remarkable example of the special role that certain religious teachings can play in the development of human culture. The *sūtra* is primarily a 'literary genre' typical of Indian spiritual traditions, but thanks to the specific way that it is used in Buddhism, it has been able to spread throughout almost all of the vast Asian continent, nurturing different cultures and acquiring a very special status.

This exhibition does not only show us material objects—some quite remarkable manuscripts and printed books—but also the incredible artisanal, artistic, intellectual and spiritual powers of invention of which Buddhist *sūtras* have been the catalyst. For the importance of Buddhist *sūtras* in world history goes well beyond the simple dissemination of the spiritual teachings they contain.

The abundance and variety of manuscripts from all the geographical areas where Buddhism took root reveal that they are also the inspiration for a wide range of translations, for the invention of alphabets, for the development of lexicons and for reflection on the role of language. Likewise the *sūtras* have also contributed to the development of printing processes and nourished the artistic imagination of the people they reached. This is illustrated magnificently by the fresco paintings of the Mogao Caves, listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1987.

What this exhibition asks us to do is to 'see' the *sūtras* as containers; not just as content, not just as narratives and teachings which become



Old Uighur manuscript of the *Avalokiteśvara-sūtra* (Chapter 25, the *Lotus Sūtra*). 9th century. Paper scroll, black and red ink. Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, Russian Academy of Sciences, Saint Petersburg

sources of iconography. And we would especially like to mention here some aspects of the *sūtra* that are hard to see or that risk being invisible to the uninformed eye.

Whatever the form adopted for memorisation—poetic stanzas or prose narrative, the Buddhist teaching is initially 'the word of the Buddha' (*buddhavacana*), or that which has been 'well said' (*sutta*, *sūkta*) by the master, and must convey the very essence of his teaching. But this essence does not necessarily or solely lie in the information contained in his words, quite the contrary perhaps... The circumstances when it was taught and the audience who heard it represent crucial data when the *sūtra* is considered as a particular 'literary genre' of its own.

Essential Narrative Dimension of *Sūtras*

Indeed, the fact that the *sūtras* are usually narratives is, in itself, significant. The scenario of a meeting with an audience and the dialogue that ensues is not anecdotal—even though the form can seem stereotyped and sometimes oversimplified. It also aims to illustrate one of the fundamental points of the Buddha's teaching: the conditional nature of all phenomena. Far from proposing a theory which would be valid for all

times and in all places, the Buddha always addresses one or more listeners in specific circumstances and his word is efficacious at the moment he utters it, for that particular audience, in that situation.

This was true from his very first sermon, given near Benares. The fact that its main theme is *duḥkha* (dissatisfaction)—especially about austerities—has a special significance when we remember that he was addressing his five former ascetic companions, whom he invites to abandon such practices. And if this speech is often called the "The Setting in Motion of the Wheel of the Dharma", this is not so much because it was his first public sermon but rather because members of his audience, one after the other, experience thanks to him, 'the opening of the eye of Dharma', that is to say the vision of Reality as it is. Thus it is the efficacious strength and instant revelatory character of the 'word of the Buddha' that are highlighted.

So the narrative dimension of the *sūtra* is not a literary device aimed at making Buddhist teachings more enjoyable or easier to discover, but rather an essential component of the teaching itself. The listener is invited to identify with the characters, to really put themselves in their place in order to, if possible, have the same experience as them.

It will fall upon the *bhāṇaka*—the 'reciters' who devote themselves to the task of memorising these circumstantial teachings, to not only retain his words but also to indicate which audiences should hear them and in what circumstances they should be transmitted by them. It is also the role of the master-instructor to choose the 'well said words' according to the disciple's spiritual level, the words he must learn by heart to be able to recite them as his practice unfolds, so that the disciple in turn can live the inner transformation that the narrative proclaims.

This 'operative' dimension of the *sūtras* is all too rarely mentioned. It may however explain why, over the centuries—and contrary to what has often been said—some of these teachings experienced a development that has, in fact, nothing to do with them being 'literary'. Mahāyāna, the branch of Buddhism which—at the dawn of the Christian era—advocates the adoption of a 'Great Vehicle' to progress on the Buddhist path, is characterised by its particular use of 'books'. While it is true that the spread of its teachings benefited enormously from writing that was becoming commonplace amongst Buddhists, we forget that these texts, sometimes gigantic in scale, are primarily *sūtras*—that is to say they are narratives; narratives whose extraordinary narrative development, whose 'greatness' or immensity...—must itself have a role, because just like their founder, Buddhists are always and above all aiming for effectiveness!

The *Lotus Sūtra*—which justifiably occupies a central place at the heart of this exhibition—is a good example. Throughout the course of its twenty-eight chapters, it keeps telling the listener that a hitherto unheard of teaching will be revealed; then we have descriptions of extraordinary meetings of Bodhisattvas, plus parables and stories of miracles, however a really new teaching does not seem to be disclosed. Is it therefore perhaps the case that the *act of hearing* and the 'extraordinary' features of the narrative are, in themselves, this new experience to which listeners were invited? In the very utterance of a teaching that has truly never been heard of before, are we not accessing another dimension of reality?

Oral and Written Traditions in the Propagation of Buddhism

Even though a written form was finally adopted to conserve and spread the *sūtras*, they are, above all, words to be proclaimed and heard, words which should cause the listener to experience a conversion of the spirit and potentially to reach enlightenment itself. The primacy of the oral remains essential in the transmission of Buddhist teachings themselves. The last revision of the Pāli Canon (carried out in 1956 in Rangoon, Burma) provides compelling evidence of this, for let us not forget that it was the written version that was corrected according to the oral tradition, not vice-versa…

Reciting and listening to a *sūtra* is, in itself, a practice. It might therefore seem contradictory that Buddhists finally decided to give tangible form to these narratives-teachings... To we who so easily give primacy to the written word—"spoken words fly away, written words remain"—, it seems to go without saying that writing down oral teachings will facilitate their preservation and dissemination—and it was indeed this concern for conservation that drove the Sinhalese to become the first to take this course of action at the dawn of the Christian era.

But it nevertheless remains true that even at the end of the first millennium C.E., not all Buddhist communities had yet engaged in written conservation—the Chinese pilgrims who made the perilous journey to India in order to bring back 'books' so dear to their own culture, provide us with their testimony of complaining about this.

So the reifying of these teachings as objects must also be responding to other objectives, objectives that we can seek in the so frequent closeness in Buddhism of 'making audible' and 'making visible'—just as the sight of the Buddha himself was enough to affect his listeners, in the same exceptional way as the words that he delivered to them.

In this way the special power attributed to the 'word of the Buddha' came almost naturally to be attributed to their physical representation. Did the Buddha himself not say, 'Who sees me, sees the Dharma'?! The corpus of these writings is also considered, in the ancient Buddhist tradition of India, as the 'Body of reality' (*dharmakāya*) of the Buddha and, as such, provides, after emerging firstly as the audible word, a form that can also be touched and seen.

In this way the *sūtras*, in 'book' form, make the transformative power of the 'word of the Buddha' not only visible but also 'operative'. They are 'relics', just like the physical remains of his body after cremation: manuscripts and printed books come to take the place of the bodily relics of the Buddha within the stupas and statues—the reliquaries—of the Master. And, for every Buddhist, it goes without saying that a book containing the teachings of the Master cannot be discarded like common rubbish, but, like a cremation, can only be destroyed by fire!

Therefore the veneration which surrounds the Buddhist *sūtras* as objects has little similarity with the respect we might show for sacred objects in the 'religions of the Book': a Buddhist book is more than just an object that preserves the Buddhist teachings, it is, itself, a manifest form of the Buddha and his word.

In the same way that, graphically, images of Buddhas were multiplied countless times, the reproduction of any other object of worship, including texts, does not just aim to ensure the spread of the content of the teachings. For the disciple, the act of copying objects is itself a 'beneficent' (*puṇya*)—or as we also say 'meritorious'—practice, both personally and for the whole of humanity.

Numerous Mahāyāna *sūtras* also praise those who create multiple copies of the book itself or even just excerpts or just the title... The same is true of any other text considered to be the 'word of the Buddha'—such as mantras painted or engraved on stones, or the 'wind horses'—also called 'prayer flags'—that travellers in the Himalayas can discover in large numbers on the monuments or mountain passes... they are all countless material forms of the 'word of the Buddha'.

While monotheistic beliefs have been called 'religions of the Book', we might call Buddhism the 'religion of libraries'! How many monasteries have vast shelves piled with manuscripts and books, even though none of them will ever be read... Taking part in or benefiting from reproducing the 'word of the Buddha' could also end up becoming an end in itself: copying a manuscript, printing a book or, more simply, financing it… are all examples of taking an active role in propagating this material presence. This without doubt explains why Buddhists have also taken

such an active role, from the outset, in developing reproduction processes such as woodcutting and printing...

Plunging into a Different Reality

And then finally, the eminently narrative character of the *sūtras* and many other Buddhist teachings (for example of course, the *Jātaka* tales, which relate the different previous lives of the Buddha) naturally find another additional way to 'reify themselves' in graphic representations of the characters and events shown in their stories.

It also goes without saying that the spiritual message alone of these texts would justify interest in such representations, but the anecdotal or simply illustrative aspect does not seem to exhaust their provocative power. The abundance of Buddhist iconography, particularly noticeable in sanctuary caves, plunges those who enter them into a dimension that breaks with ordinary reality in every respect.

Here it is not so much a case of just giving an illustrated devotional framework for a spiritual experience, rather it is about plunging the practitioner into a 'different' reality, which, like the hearing of the teachings represented therein, is designed to cause such a spiritual experience, in the same way that an initiation can.

So Buddhist shrines can literally make you dizzy! And here again it is a case of 'making *visible*' the Buddha and his word, in all their possible forms of reification, right up to an immeasurable infinity. The representation of 'a thousand Buddhas' is one especially significant example of this.

Well beyond the mere mention of a 'miracle' that the historical Buddha performed in the city of Śrāvastī (leaving speechless several of his detractors whom he had just been debating with), the multiplicity of his 'forms' also illustrates a central point of Buddhist teaching that is highly valued in Mahāyāna: a Buddha, like any other phenomenon (but even more so) because he is 'empty' of any substance, can make himself visible in a truly incalculable number of possible forms!

We cannot therefore go too far in warning Western visitors that they will be faced with a multitude of seemingly always similar if not identical representations, whose almost incessant repetition may seem incomprehensible: attached as they are to preferring a single intellectual approach of focusing on the content of the Buddha's teachings, many of them risk missing out on the material and truly experiential dimension of Buddhist 'objects', even if they are simply books.

The abundance and variety here is not driven by the uninspired

ritualism of a devotee counting his productivity in the hope of further profit, like a grocer who multiplies his stock (a reputation often ascribed to the 'accumulation of meritorious actions'). This is a real and essential spiritual function.

By letting themselves see, hear, touch, and simply be 'in the presence' of the Buddha and his word, his disciples behave in such a way that the everyday environment itself is radically transformed and can thus provide the chance to directly experience an 'other' reality, hitherto unheard of, unseen, unknown. Beyond their undeniable historical, cultural, artistic and even artisanal interest, the Buddhist *sūtras* displayed here may be able to teach the public that a simple book, for some, can be much more than a physical object, and that its presence alone, in itself, is worth as much as its intellectually comprehensible content.

Author Biography

Dominique Trotignon is a Director and Teacher at the Institut d'Études Bouddhiques (Institute of Buddhist Studies), Honorary President of the 'Vivekārāma' Buddhist Theravāda Association and conducts works of synthesis and reflection on the ancient Buddhism of India and the Theravāda of South East Asia, as well as on the establishment of Buddhism in France. He is the co-author of *La mort est-elle une fin?* (Is death an end?) (Salvator, 2009) and has also contributed to the writing of several anthologies, including those of the collection *Ce qu'en disent les religions* (What religions say) on the theme of Les femmes et les religions (Women and Religions) and La Création du Monde (The Creation of the World) (Atelier, 2002 and 2004).