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In Search of the Perfection of Wisdom.
A Short Note on the Third Narrative Depicted in the Tabo
Main Temple*

The Tabo Main Temple is one of the most remarkable Buddhist monuments preserving a large part of the original artistic program to be dated to the late 10th and mid 11th centuries.¹ Located in the Spiti valley, Himachal Pradesh, where the Indian and the Tibetan worlds merge into a complex web of closely related cultures separated along geographical barriers, it is a crucial monument to complement our understanding of the transfer of Buddhism and its art from India to Tibet. Although evidence is scarce, Tabo likely has been one of the places where Buddhist texts were translated from Indian languages, predominantly Sanskrit, into Tibetan. This appears to be supported by the fragmentary mid 11th century assembly depictions to the north of the entrance to the Assembly Hall, which contains at least one name of an Indian scholar.² Tabo's location at the modest altitude of 3280 meters and accessible from the Indian planes, West Tibet, the western Himalayas and via it also Kashmir certainly make it an ideal meeting point.

However the texts translated in the region and collected in the Tibetan Buddhist Canon – one may exemplarily recall the impressive amount of translations credited to the Great Translator Rin chen bzang po in the Tibetan canonical literature – only represent one aspect of the transmission. With practically no extra-canonical textual evidence of the time the other major aspect of the transmission is preserved through the art, which does add considerable text relevant information that is not preserved otherwise. Expressed in an extremely simplified manner, one could say that the art of Tabo monastery preserves a commentary on the interrelation of a selection of textual sources that were deemed to be suitable for the consumption and education

* I am grateful to Jinah Kim, whose hint from her own research made the identification of the Tabo narrative possible.

¹ The most comprehensive works on Tabo monastery and its artistic and textual treasures are Klimburg-Salter 1997; Petech and Luczanits 1999; Scherrer-Schaub and Steinkellner 1999; Thakur 2001; Tucci 1988.

² See the fragmentary captions to some of the depictions in the Assembly Hall in Luczanits 1999: 121-122, in particular no. 61, and the accompanying footnote (n. 72).

of a wider Buddhist public, and possibly also those ‘black-headed’ people that still needed to become white, as a poetic rendering in the Tabo renovation inscription refers to the conversion of non-Buddhists to Buddhism.

As is well known, the Tabo Main Temple even preserves texts themselves. Written on the walls and accompanying the art in a form that goes much beyond plain captioning, these wall texts are excerpts from the *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra* (Steinkellner 1995; Steinkellner 1996) and the *Daśacakra-kṣitigarbhasūtra* (Tauscher 1999) and represent the oldest Tibetan versions of the respective canonical texts.

The excerpts from the *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra* accompany the depiction of Sudhana’s miraculous journey from one spiritual friend to another that is depicted in the lower register of the southern half of the Assembly Hall. The story begins just as one enters the Assembly Hall and turns left to continue in the direction of circumambulation and ends at the opposite wall where the room opens up to the Ambulatory (Fig. 1, First Narrative). In the opposite half of the Assembly Hall the Life of the Buddha is depicted continuing in the direction of circumambulation (Fig. 1, Second Narrative). As becomes common in Tibet, its depiction is largely based on the Tibetan translation of the *Lalitavistara*, which represents the latest stage of this text, and is complemented by almost randomly placed preaching and *parinirvāṇa* scenes based on other textual sources. The painted panels prepared for the wall text to accompany this depiction have never been filled in.

The relationship of text and image in South Asian Art is far from being straightforward, neither in general³ nor in the specific case of the Tabo narratives. In Tabo, it

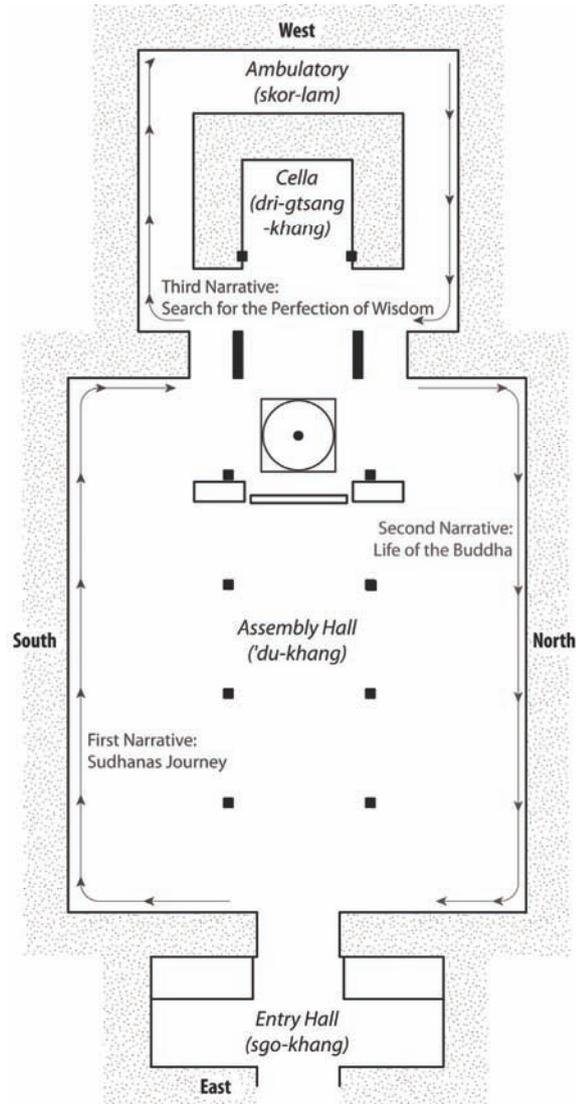


Fig. 1 The three pictorial narratives in the Tabo Main Temple and their relative location and orientation; drawing C. Luczanits.

³ An obvious case in point are the discrepancies between the textual descriptions and depictions of deities within the vast South Asian pantheon. It suffices to name the different versions of Durgā on early Indian Art. Dieter Schlingloff 1988, has introduced the study of South Asian narrative art on the basis of an art historical perspective that was further refined by Vidya Dehejia 1997. Based on a specific episode, the first scenes in the life of the Buddha, compared through time in text and image, a forthcoming article (Luczanits, in press) views the relationship of textual and visual narrative in a more general manner.

is clear that peculiar features of the depiction depend on causes that are to be found entirely outside the narrative itself. An obvious case in point is the way the protagonists are depicted in the two narratives in the Assembly Hall. In the Sudhana narrative, the hero wears the dress of a local youth and many of the spiritual friends he visits, in particular those that are householders, are dressed in that what is deemed local Western Himalayan fashion as well. Buddha's life, in contrast, takes place in India and the protagonists are accordingly dressed in lighter Indian garb. Further, the succession of the first scenes in the Buddha's life has been altered to enable a cross reference to the last scene in Sudhana's journey, both scenes being located in likening heavenly palaces. Even the iconography of the main figures appears to have been adjusted to provide a cross reference between these two scenes and the central four-fold Vairocana sculpture of the Vajradhātumaṇḍala located immediately to the side of these scenes.⁴

Walking beyond this area into the Ambulatory one reaches a third narrative, which – due to the absence of an accompanying wall text (again the prepared panels have been left empty) or any other identifying captions – has until recently withstood major identification efforts. More than ten years ago Renate Ponweiser started to work on this narrative for her MA thesis (Ponweiser 2004). Although she has read all Buddhist stories she got hold of since then, the source for the narrative escaped her, probably because it is found at the end of an otherwise purely doctrinal text. Finally, she had to finish her thesis with an unidentified narrative and a summary of her study has now been printed (Ponweiser 2007).

The third narrative is found in the lower register on the south and north walls of the Ambulatory. Stylistically, all three narratives are part of the renovation of the Tabo Main Temple in the mid 11th century. Compared to the other two roughly contemporary pictorial narratives the space allotted to this one is much smaller and the drawing is considerably less sophisticated, leaving more empty space between scenes and the different elements within a scene. As recognisable by the movement of the protagonist, this narrative also follows the direction of circumambulation, beginning in the south-eastern corner and ending in the south-western corner (Fig. 1, Third Narrative). What made identification particularly difficult is the fragmentary nature of the depictions, with some sections considerably damaged and others almost completely abraded, partly revealing the foundation period paint layer underneath. In addition the protagonist seems to disappear as the story unfolds and it is unclear from the pictorial narrative alone if it is one story that is depicted or if there are several.

Principally, the Ambulatory narrative is very similar to that of Sudhana, with its protagonist at the beginning wearing the same dress and apparently also journeying from one teacher, commonly a Buddha or Bodhisattva, to the next (Fig. 2). The scenes are set against cloud like mountains or within simplified architecture as it is also typical for the Sudhana narrative. However, the protagonist is now invariably crowned, as if Sudhana would have retained an exalted spiritual state after receiving

⁴ For a general description of the two narratives in the Assembly Hall and illustrations see Klimburg-Salter 1997: 120-135, in particular Diagram 10 and Figs. 126 and 127, and for the cross referencing including the main mandala image Vairocana see Luczanits 1997: 193 in the same volume. For a detailed description of the first scenes in the Buddha's life in Tibetan depictions, including those at Tabo, see Luczanits 2007.

the final blessing from Samantabhadra under the eyes of Vairocana in the last scene of the Assembly Hall narrative. In-between, the protagonist himself (Fig. 3) or other persons appear in the centre of the action.

Only after Renate Ponweiser's article has gone to press fortunate circumstances allowed me to identify the narrative. While I was teaching at UC-Berkeley 2004-2005 I met Jinah Kim, who worked on Indian and Nepalese Buddhist manuscript illuminations for her PhD. One of her discoveries she told me off during another visit in spring 2006 was that an early Nepalese book cover depicts scenes of a story taken from the last chapters of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, namely the story of Sadāprarudita in search of the Perfection of Wisdom. She has in the meantime published her discovery (Kim 2008). Only when I narrated Jinah's discoveries to Eva Allinger it occurred to me to see if the Tabo mural depicts this story, and indeed it does.



Fig. 2 The Bodhisattva Sadāprarudita encouraged by a 'Tathāgata frame'; Tabo Ambulatory, S-wall; photo: Jaroslav Poncar 1984 423 (WHAU).

The story begins with chapter 30, where a Bodhisattva called Sadāprarudita sets out to search the Perfection of Wisdom "in such a way that he did not care for his body, had no regard for his life, and gain, honour and fame did not interest him." (Conze 1958: 481). He is sent towards the East to the Bodhisattva Dharmodgata in the city Gandhavatī. Becoming doubtful on the way and stopping in sorrow he is encouraged by what Conze translates as a 'Tathāgata frame' (Fig. 2; Conze 1958: 481) and later the Buddhas of the Ten Directions bless him. Having no gift for Bodhisattva Dharmodgata, Sadāprarudita attempts to sell himself, which is first prevented by Māra and then tested by Śakra (Fig. 3) who asks for "a man's heart, his blood and the marrow of his bones." (Conze 1958: 497). Sadāprarudita begins to cut his thigh and is interrupted by a merchant's daughter, who offers to give whatever he requires. The merchant's daughter, her 500 maidens and her parents decide to join the Bodhisattva in his search and they all proceed on chariots. They finally reach Gan-

dhavatī where they meet the Bodhisattva Dharmodgata (Fig. 4), who has encased the Perfection of Wisdom “written with melted *vaidūrya* on golden tablets” within a pointed tower (Fig. 5; Conze 1958: 506). Receiving the teachings of Dharmodgata (Chapter 31) the Bodhisattva Sadāprarudita finally attains a stage where he is only reborn in the presence of Buddhas (Chapter 32; Conze 1958: 527).



Fig. 3 Sadāprarudita with Indra and the Four Great Kings; Tabo Ambulatory, S-wall; photo: Jaroslav Poncar 1984 605 (WHAU).



Fig. 4 The Bodhisattva Sadāprarudita offers himself to the Bodhisattva Dharmodgata; Tabo Ambulatory, N-wall; photo: Jaroslav Poncar 1984 606 (WHAU).



Fig. 5 Sadāprarudita venerating the tower of the Perfection of Wisdom; Tabo Ambulatory, N-wall; photo: Jaroslav Poncar 2001 0268 (WHAV).

It is beyond the scope of this note to describe the extensive narrative in detail and relate the depiction to its textual source, the latter being already available online. All photographs available to me from the Tabo depictions, mostly done by Jaroslav Poncar in 1984 and 1991, are accompanied by quotations from Edward Conze's translation of the text (<http://www.univie.ac.at/itba/> under: Sites > Tabo > Ambulatory). Instead, I would like to reflect on the purpose of this narrative in this particular place and how it relates to both, the other depictions in the Tabo Main Temple and the usage and general function of 'texts' represented with and in the murals.

In a certain way, the story of Sadāprarudita can be taken as reinforcing the original quest of Sudhana on a higher level. The real goal of the quest is now not another teacher such as the Bodhisattva Dharmodgata, but the text of the Perfection of Wisdom itself, the "mother and guide of the Bodhisattva" (Conze 1958: 507), as Sadāprarudita refers to it. Since this still happens on a Bodhisattva level, it is only consequent to continue to depict the protagonists, the Bodhisattva, the merchant's daughter and her parents etc. in local dress and thus visually relate it to the Sudhana story. However, there is no other visual cross reference that connects any of the Assembly Hall narratives with that of the Ambulatory. Instead the narrative in the Ambulatory appears to be closed within itself with the beginning preaching scenes likely referring to the delivery of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*.

Also on the level of the general progress from a protective room, the Entry Hall, via a dynamic ritual centre, the Assembly Hall, to a realm of fully developed Bodhisattvas and Buddhas, the Ambulatory and Cella,⁵ the Search for the Perfection of Wisdom does not really link up, but there are other more worldly representations in the back section of the temple as well, in particular the Renovation Inscription.⁶ As with the topics in the Assembly Hall, those in the Ambulatory also reflect a vertical hierarchy with the lowermost section reserved to the narrative. Above the story are the 16 Bodhisattvas and the 16 Mahābodhisattvas of the Fortunate Aeon (*bhadra-kalpa*), which is further enforced by the depiction of the 1000 Buddhas in the uppermost row and on the inside wall of the Ambulatory. Probably the only convincing connection of the narrative to this program is that Sadāprarudita reaches a kind of permanent state of Bodhisattvahood, and thus joins those depicted immediately above him.

Even if it is not visible in the story as such, its main focus is the text hidden in the tower built by Bodhisattva Dharmodgata in the city of Gandhavatī. The story is centred on finding and venerating this invisible text, which is intimately connected with achieving the full understanding of the text's content. This is in line with the text itself, where its study and its veneration are encouraged side by side as suitable and successful methods (Conze 1958: 527-529). But the text is encased in a pointed tower, which itself becomes focus of veneration, and it is through this tower that the text is depicted in the pictorial narrative of Tabo (Fig. 5). It is further interesting to note, that the goddess Prajñāpāramitā has not yet been depicted in the Tabo Main Temple, but appears to become particularly prominent in the 12th century.⁷

Both evidence on site⁸ and the historical literature⁹ prove that it was customary at that time to furnish a newly established temple with a copy of the *Prajñāpāramitā*-literature and to have this literature copied over and over again. The temple, thus, became the tower in which these texts could be venerated. More strikingly, there are also indications that special tower-like buildings were in fact erected to house this corpus. In Alchi, Lower Ladakh, it appears that such a tower, erected immediately to the left side of the Main Temple's veranda, still exists, as its decoration indicates that it was used to store books of the Buddha's teaching.¹⁰ The fact that towers, such as the one of Gondhla in Lahaul, were also used to store a Buddhist library in the uppermost chamber, can be taken as a continuation of this tradition, even if this has not been their exclusive function.¹¹

⁵ A detailed layout of this thematic progress and its background has been worked out already and will be published in due course.

⁶ On the Renovation Inscription see Steinkellner and Luczanits 1997.

⁷ Luczanits 2004: 214-216.

⁸ Among the Tabo manuscript fragments the various versions of the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts make up 75% of the ca. 35 500 folio 'library' (Steinkellner 2001: 317-321).

⁹ For example in the biography of Rin chen bzang po: Snellgrove and Skorupski 1980: 94 (107-108).

¹⁰ A survey of the development of the Alchi temple complex, including a detailed description of this tower, done in co-operation with Holger Neuwirth is currently prepared for publication.

¹¹ On Gondhla including its tower see Klimburg-Salter 1994: 57-59, figs. 39-42. The library has consequently been documented and studied by Helmut Tauscher (e.g. Tauscher 2007) who told me that there are curiously no *Prajñāpāramitā* texts among the books that were still housed there until recently.

The depiction of the search for the Perfection of Wisdom in Tabo and its location within the temple has, thus, to be interpreted in ways that go much beyond the iconographic program of the temple alone. Representing the search and achievement of the ultimate teaching of the Buddha, which is physically present in the temple as well, its location in the realm of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas appears highly appropriate. In addition, the fact that Sadāprarudita and his company are depicted as locals receives an additional meaning since the depiction can be taken as reflecting and reinforcing an actual religious practice at the time and place of its depiction.

This may seem far-fetched on the basis of a single depiction in an exceptionally early monument, but the identification of this narrative cycle actually clarifies the identification of many other depictions. It can, thus, easily be shown that this topic is in fact depicted quite frequently and also in relation to the relevant text itself. The “preaching Bodhisattva attended by lay people in western Tibetan dress” in a *Śatasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* manuscript miniature published in Klimburg-Salter 1997: fig. 229 actually depicts the Bodhisattva Dharmodgata attended by Sadāprarudita, the merchant’s daughter and three of her maidens. The *Prajñāpāramitā* text is represented by the book on a stand between the two Bodhisattvas. Furthermore, a number of other Tabo manuscript illuminations can be identified as part of this story, be it the sorrowing Sadāprarudita illustrated at the end of chapter thirty of an *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (Fig. 6), or the scattering of *mandāra* flowers by the gods (Fig. 7) on another manuscript page that also preserves a fragmentary second scene with the crowd approaching Bodhisattva Dharmodgata. Further, a manuscript fragment from Tholing clearly illustrates the tower housing the *Prajñāpāramitā* text (*Precious Deposits* 2000, vol. 2, 53) and another manuscript illumination from Tabo, located at the beginning of chapter six of an *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, represents the *Prajñāpāramitā* text topped by a flaming jewel, obviously standing for the Buddha’s teaching (Fig. 8). Although the texts cannot be dated with any certainty, we can infer from the evidence that in the Western Himalayas we do have manuscript illuminations directly related to the text itself by the late 11th century at the latest.



Fig. 6 Sadāprarudita in sorrow; illumination on a folio of an *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* manuscript, Tabo Monastery; photo: Deborah E. Klimburg-Salter 1994 98,15 (WHAV).



Fig. 7 Śakra, Sādapararudita and a bowl of *mandārava* flowers; illumination on a folio of an *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* manuscript, Tabo Monastery; photo: Deborah E. Klimburg-Salter 1994 99,18 (WHAU).



Fig. 8 The text topped by a flaming jewel; illumination on a folio of an *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* manuscript, beginning of chapter six, Tabo Monastery; photo: Eva Allinger 1994 529,2 (WHAU).

A later western Himalayan depiction from the Ford collection and today in the Walters Museum of Art, Baltimore (Pal 2001: 137ab), shows the relevant narrative at the final page of the text (137b). The teaching Bodhisattva Dharmodgata is depicted on the left, and Sadāprarudita approaches on the chariot from the right, while the veneration of the text is placed in-between. The captions underneath the hero and the merchant's daughter show that the donor identifies himself with the hero of the story.

It is thus clear that the events narrated in the story have been understood in the western Himalayas as exemplary for the religious usage of the text itself, especially by the lay community. The text may be studied by the monks, but first of all it is an object of veneration, even if the actual content of the book is not seen at all. If we take the iconographic program of the Tabo Main Temple as a representation directed rather towards the laity than the monks, a hypothesis that would need a very thorough trans-disciplinary study to be proven, then we may take the story as exemplary for the attitude expected from the laity towards the text, namely that of veneration.

Is it then likely that the wall text accompanying the depiction of Sudhana, an abbreviated version of the *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra*, serves to authenticate the depicted story through the presence of the text as Ernst Steinkellner 1999 proposed? In my assessment, the attitude towards the text as evidenced through the story of Sadāprarudita, depicted in the Tabo Main Temple and on comparative manuscript illuminations, and the actual practice in the region allow for qualifying the function of this wall text more precisely. The canonical text added to the depiction may actually be understood as marking the narrative depiction as an object worthy of veneration, just as icons are. Given that the veneration of the text may be extended to the tower that houses the text within it, or the book itself without opening it, one may even interpret that also the empty panels meant to house the text of the other narratives are equally powerful indicators of something worthy of worship. In fact, in the Tabo depiction the text of the story of Sadāprarudita's search is just as inaccessible as the *Prajñāpāramitā* text in the story itself, where it can not even be seen by the fairly accomplished Bodhisattva Sadāprarudita, but it does have its place.

Finally, it needs to be mentioned that the story of Sadāprarudita has been quite prominent in Central Tibet as well, not only at a fairly early stage as represented by a book cover from private collection published in *Sacred Visions* (Kossak and Singer 1998: no. 8), but also later in more complex depictions that are increasingly difficult to recognise. The following may serve as examples:

- A private collection illuminated *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* manuscript, Pal 2003 no. 126, with Dharmodgata on the left directed towards the approaching chariot on the right on the final page.
- A fascinatingly complex Karmapa school *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* manuscript with the scenes inscribed (but the captions poorly transcribed and interpreted) from the 'Collection RRE' in Pal 2003: no. 104.¹²

¹² A single book cover published in *Indian, Himalayan and Southeast Asian Art*, Christies Amsterdam, Wednesday 21 November 2001, no. 81, depicts the story as well.

These depictions are commonly found on the last page of the manuscript, the first page being illustrated with a Buddha and the goddess Prajñāpāramitā.

The most fascinating depiction, though, is probably that on the left side wall of the White Temple in Tholing, that also remained unidentified until now.¹³ Here the story is arranged around a huge representation of the city of Gandhavaṭī with the teaching Bodhisattva Dharmodgata and the *Prajñāpāramitā* tower inside it. It thus is to be expected, that the search for the Perfection of Wisdom has been depicted quite frequently in the Himalayas and numerous other examples will come to light in future.

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¹³ Hein and Boelmann 1994: 106-108, identify this depiction as representing Śambhala, after they have been informed by monks that it represents a Kālacakra mandala.

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