Jambudvīpe pracaramāṇah:
The Circulation of Mahāyāna Sūtras in India

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I

The fact—or better, perhaps, concept—of the circulation of Mahāyāna sūtras in India was expressed in some of the sūtras themselves by the verb pra-car, used with a locative, in many cases with “Jambudvīpa”. The usage is consistent in the Saṃghaṭadhamaparyāya, Saddharmapuṇḍarīka, Suvarṇabhāsottama, and Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā. The Tibetan translation is spyod or rab tu spyod.¹ The usage is not recorded in Edgerton’s Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary, and it seems appropriate to offer a brief note on the topic in this volume dedicated to the memory of Hirakawa Akira, who devoted his life to the study of Indian Buddhism and the rise of the Mahāyāna.

1. *Samghāṭa-nāma-dharmaparyāya*

The *Samghāṭa-sūtra* was translated into Khotanese by the first half of the fifth century. It was translated twice into Chinese: once in 538 and again by Dānapāla in 1001 (Taishō 423, 424). It was translated into Tibetan in the ninth century. Seven Sanskrit manuscripts, in varying degrees of completeness, were found at Gilgit; they have been dated by von Hinüber to the sixth to seventh centuries. Sogdian fragments are preserved in the Turfan and St. Petersburg collections.

Canevascini, who published the Khotanese fragments, Sanskrit text, and English translation has the following to say about the text:²

No special aspect of the Law is therein treated at length as the main concern of the authors seems to have been the glorification of the *sūtra* itself: the narratives, parables, and similes extensively used by the Bhagavat in his answers are essentially aimed at illustrating the intrinsic saving virtues of the Law, and particularly of this book on the Law, for him who believes in it.

The text is studded with prodigious events: beings appear, disappear and sometimes levitate, Bodhisattvas emanate animal forms from their bodies, incorporeal voices are heard in the ether and so on.

The setting of the *dharma-paryāya* is Mount Grāhrakūṭa near

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³ Canevascini, p. ix.
Rājaśrīha. Bodhisattva Mahāsattva Sarvāśūra asks the Blessed One:

asti bhagavāṃ saddharmo-paryāyo yaṃ śrutvā sarva-sattvānām paṃcānāntaryāṇi karmāṇi niravaśesena kṣayāṃ gacchatme, tathānye ca karmāvaranāḥ kṣīṇābhaviṣyanti, kṣipram cānuttarāṃ samyaksambodhīm abhisambuddhyamte?

Is there, Blessed One, a Saddharma-paryāya hearing which the five deeds of immediate effect of all beings will be eradicated without remainder, other karmic obstacles will be obliterated, and [those beings] will swiftly awaken to unsurpassed true and full awakening?

The Blessed One answers in the affirmative:

asti sarvāśūra saṃghāto nāma dharma-paryāya; etarhi jambudvīpe pracarisyati. yaḥ kaścit sarvaśūremāṃ saṃghātaṃ dharma-paryāyaṃ śroṣyati, tasya paṃcānāntaryāṇi karmāṇi parikṣayāṃ yāsyanti, avaivartikāḥ ca bhaviṣyanty ānuttarāyā samyaksam bodheḥ.

There is, Sarvāśūra, the Saṃghāta-nāma-dharmaparyāya, which is now to circulate in Jambudvīpa. The five ānantarya-karma of one who hears the Saṃghāta-dharmaparyāya will be fully eradicated, and [those who hear it] will become irreversible from unsurpassed true and full awakening.

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4 Canevascini, p. 6.
2. Suvarṇabhāsottama Śūtrendrarāja

Like the Samghāṭa-sūtra, the Suvarṇabhāsottama is textually well-represented. It exists in Sanskrit from Nepal. It was translated into Chinese several times: first by Dharmakṣema, who came to China in 414 CE. In 597 Baogui compiled a new version based on earlier translations, some now lost, but Yijing’s translation, published in 703, eclipsed the earlier translations and was itself rendered into Tibetan, Sogdian, Tangut, and Uighur. There are altogether three Tibetan translations and at least two Khotanese translations.  

In Chapter 6 (Caturmahārāja-parivarta) of the Suvarṇabhāsottama, the Four Great Kings address the Buddha:  

\[ \text{ayam bhadanta bhagavan suvarṇabhāsottamaḥ śūtrendrarājo 'nāgate 'dhwani yatra grāmanagaranigamajanapadarāṣṭrā-jadhānīṣu pracarisyati | yasya yasya manuṣyarājñaś ca viśaye 'nuprāpto bhaviṣyati | yah kaścid bhadanta bhagavan manuṣya-} \]

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6 See Emmerick, pp. ix-xii.

rājā bhaved yenānena devendrasamayena rājaśāstreṇa rājatvaṁ kārāyet | asya suvarṇabhāsottamasya sūtrendrarājasya śrotā bhaven mānayitā vā bhavet pūjayitā vā bhavet tāś ca sūtrendradhārakā bhikṣubhiḥṣunyupāsakopāsikāḥ satkuryād gurukuryān mānayet pūjayet satatasamitaṁ suvarṇabhāsottamaṁ sūtrendrarājānaṁ śṛṇuyāt |

... [70.11] yatra grāmanagaranigamajananapadarāṣṭrarājadhānīṣu upasamkrāmayiṣyāmah | tatrāyaṁ suvarṇabhāsottamaḥ sūtrendrarājaḥ pracarisyati | teśāṁ ca manuṣyaraṇjāṁ asya suvarṇabhāsottamasya sūtrendrarājasaya śrotṛṇāṁ mānayitrṇāṁ pūjayitrṇāṁ ārakṣāṁ kariṣyāmaḥ paritrāṇaṁ parigrahāṁ paripālanaṁ daṇḍaparīhāraṁ śastraparīhāraṁ śāntiṁ svastayānaṁ kariṣyāmaḥ |

Sir, Blessed One: in future, wherever this Suvarṇabhāsottama Sūtrendrarāja circulates—in villages, cities, towns, regions, countries, and royal capitals—in the realm of whatever human king it is available, whatever, Sir, Blessed One, human king rules according to the Treatise on Royal Statecraft [entitled] Devendrasamaya, he will be one who listens to, venerates, and worships the Suvarṇabhāsottama Sūtrendrarāja. He will respect, honour, venerate, and worship the monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen who hold the Lord of Sūtras, and will constantly listen to the Suvarṇabhāsottama Sūtrendrarāja.

... Wherever, in the villages, cities, towns, regions, countries, and royal capitals that we visit, there the Suvarṇabhāsottama Sūtrendrarāja will circulate. And those human kings who listen to, honour, and worship the Suvarṇabhāsottama Sūtrendrarāja, we will extend protection to them ... and offer peace and security.

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3. Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-dharmaparīyaya

The Saddharmapuṇḍarīka is not only well-attested textually but well-known up to the present day. It was translated into Chinese by Dharmarakṣa in 286, by Kumārajīva in 405/6, and by Jñānagupta and Dharmagupta in 601/2. Kumārajīva’s translation has remained the perennial favourite. The sūtra was translated into Tibetan and many Central Asian languages, and is now available in modern translations into many of the world’s languages.

Pra-car is used three times in the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka, in all cases with the phrase “in this Jambudvīpa” (asmiṃ jambudvīpe):¹

[420.12] tasmāt tarhi nakṣatrājasaṁkusumitābhijñā anuparind-āmy ahaṃ imaṃ sarvasattvapriyadarśanasya bodhisattvasya mahāsattvasya pūrvayogaparivartaṃ yathā paścime kāle paścime samaye paścimāyāṃ pañcaśatyām vartamānāyām asmiṃ jambudvīpe pracaren nāntardhānām gacchen na ca māraḥ pāpyāṅ avatāraṃ labhena na māraḥ kāyikā devatā na nāgā na yakṣā na gandharvā na kumbhāṇḍā avatāraṃ labheyuh. tasmāt tarhi nakṣatrājasaṁkusumitābhijñā adhitiṣṭhāmimaṃ dharmaparīyayaṃ asmiṃ jambudvīpe.

(The Buddha to Bodhisattva Nakṣatrājasaṁkusumitābhijñā)

Therefore, Nakṣatrājasaṁkusumitābhijñā, I entrust this Pūrvayoga-parivarta to the Bodhisattva Mahāsattva Sarvasattvapriyadarśana in order that in the last age, in the final

¹ References are to H. Kern and Bunyiu Nanjio, Saddharmapuṇḍarīka, St. Petersburg: Imprimerie de l’Académie Impériale des Sciences, 1912 (Bibliotheca Buddhica X).
period, when the final five hundred years are passing, it will circulate in Jambudvīpa, and it will not be lost; Māra the Wicked One will have no opportunity [to do harm], and deities of Māra’s realm, nāgas, yakṣas, gandharvas, kumbhāṇḍas will have no opportunity [to do harm]. Therefore, Nakṣatrārājasamkumunitābhijña, I empower this dharmaparyāya in this Jambudvīpa.

[477.7] ayaṁ ca bhagavan saddharmapuṇḍarīko dharmaparyāyo 'smiṁ jambudvīpe pracaramāṇo yeṣāṁ bodhisattvānāṁ mahāsattvānāṁ hastagato bhaviṣyati tair bhagavan dharmabhāṇakair evaṁ veditavyam | samantabhadrasya bodhisattvasya mahāsattvasyānubhāvena yad asmākam ayaṁ dharmaparyāyo hastagataḥ samantabhadrasya bodhisattvasya mahāsattvasya tejasā |

(Samantabhadra Bodhisattva to the Buddha) Blessed One, when this Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-dharmaparyāya circulates in Jambudvīpa, the Bodhisattva Mahāsattvas into whose hands it falls, those dharma-bhāṇakas should know this: It is by power of the Bodhisattva Mahāsattva Samantabhadra that this dharmaparyāya has come into our hands, by the might of the Bodhisattva Mahāsattva Samantabhadra.

[479.7] tasmāt tarhi bhagavann aham api tāvad imaṁ dharmaparyāyam adhiśṭhāsyāmi yathā bhagavan mamādiśṭhānenaṁayaṁ dharmaparyāyo 'smiṁ jambudvīpe pracariṣyati ti.

(Samantabhadra Bodhisattva to the Blessed One) Therefore, Blessed One, I empower this Dharmaparyāya in such manner that by my empowerment this Dharmaparyāya will circulate in
Jambudvīpa.

4. Āṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā

In Chapter 10 of the Āṣṭasāhasrikā, the verb is used in a passage that is often cited with regard to the geographical origin and spread of the Prajñāpāramitā:

ime khalu punah śāriputraśat pāramitāpratisamyuktā sūtrāntas tathāgatasya atyayena dakṣīṇa-paṭhe pracarisyanti. dakṣīṇa-paṭhaḥ punar eva vartanyāṁ pracarisyanti, vartanyāḥ punar uttarapathe pracarisyanti. navamaṇḍaprapāpte dharmavinvaye. saddharmasya antardhānakālasamayesa manavāḥrtaṁ śāriputra tathāgatena kulaputrāḥ kuladuhitaraś ca. tasmā kāle ya imāṁ prajñāpāramitāṁ udgrahisyanti dhāraisyanti vācāisyanty paryavāpsisyanti pravartayisyanti desāisyanty upadekṣyanty uddekṣyanti svādhyāisyanti antaśo likhitvā pustakagatām api kṛtvā dhāraisyanti, jñātāṁ te śāriputra tathāgatena, adhiṣṭhitāṁ te śāriputra tathāgatena, drṣṭāṁ te śāriputra tathāgatena, vyavalojitāṁ te śāriputra tathāgatena buddhacakṣusā.

śāriputra āha iyam api bhagavan prajñāpāramitā

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evam gambhīrā paścime kāle paścime samaye vaistārikā bhaviṣyat
uttarasyāṃ diśi uttare digbhāge? bhagavan āha ye tatra
śāriputra uttarasyāṃ diśy uttare digbhāge imāṃ gambhīrāṃ
prajñāpāramitāṃ śrutvā atra prajñāpāramitāyāṃ yogam
āpatsyante te vaistārikāṃ kariṣyanti.

Moreover, Śāriputra, these sūtrantas associated with the six
perfections will, after the passing away of the Tathāgata, circulate
in the South. From the South they will circulate in the East, and
from the East they will circulate to the North—from the time
when the Dharma-Vinaya is like freshly made cream right into the
period when the good law disappears.¹⁰ Those sons of the family or
daughters of the family who at that time take up, hold, recite,
master, propagate, teach, instruct in, explain, or chant this
Prajñāpāramitā, who at the least write it down in the form of a
book and preserve it, they, Śāriputra, are borne in mind by the
Tathāgata, they are known by the Tathāgata, they are seen by the
Tathāgata, they are watched over by the Tathāgata with the vi-
sion of an Awakened One.

Śāriputra asked: “Blessed One, in the last age, in the final pe-
riod, will this Prajñāpāramitā, which is so profound, be wide-

¹⁰ Cf. Edward Conze (tr.), The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines
and its Verse Summary, Bolinas: Four Seasons Foundation, 1973, p. 159:
“Moreover, these Sutras associated with the six perfections will, after the pass-
ing away of the Tathagata, appear in the South. From the South they will
spread to the East, and from there to the North—from the time when the
Dharma-Vinaya is like freshly made cream right into the period when the good
law disappears.” I am not convinced that Conze’s interpretation of navamanda-
aprāpte ... antardhānakālasamaye is correct, but follow it for now for want of
a better solution.
spread in the Northern direction, in the Northern region? The Blessed One replied, “Those, Śāriputra, in the Northern direction, in the Northern region who listen to the Prajñāpāramitā and devote themselves to it there will spread it widely.

In Chapter 28, we find Prajñāpāramitā circulating amongst humans and in the Tuṣita Heavens:

\[ ye \text{ hi kecid ānanda bodhisattvā mahāsattvāḥ prajñāpāramitāyām cariṣyanti, niśṭhā tatra gantavyā-} \text{manuṣyebhya evaite} \text{ cyutā bhavisyanti te ihopapannās tuṣitebhyā eva vā devanikāyebhyās cyutā bhavisyanti manuṣyeṣu evopapannāh.} \text{ tat kasya hetoḥ. tathā hi manusyeṣu tuṣiteṣu ca devesu} \text{ iyam prajñāpāramitā vistareṇa pracariṣyati ti.} \]

One can conclude with certainty, Ānanda, that the Bodhisattva-Mahāsattvas who course in the Prajñāpāramitā have been reborn here from [previous lives as] humans, or that or they have been reborn as humans from [previous lives in] the Tuṣita Heavens. Why? Because it is among humans and the Tuṣita gods that this Prajñāpāramitā will widely circulate.

In Chapter 32, the last chapter, the word occurs in a passage of immense significance, the final statement of the entire text, which identi-

\[ 11 \text{ That Haribhadra, who worked at Trikūṭakavihāra ca. CE 800, glosses uttare dig-bhāge with cīna-deś’ ādau perhaps reflects the transregionalism of the age: see U. Wogihara, Abhisamayālaṃkārālokā Prajñāpāramitāvyākhyā, Tokyo: The Toyo Bunko, [1932] 1973, p. 488.18.} \]

\[ 12 \text{ Vaidya (ed.) p. 227.2. Cf. Conze (tr.) p. 266.} \]
fies Prajināpamitā with the Tathāgata:\textsuperscript{13}

tasmāt tarhi ānanda yathaiva tvayā mamaitarhi tiṣṭhato dhriyamānasya yāpayato ’smin samucchraye prema ca prasādaś ca gauravam ca kṛtam, tathaiva tvayā ānanda mamātyayād asyām prajnāpamitāyām kartavyam. dvir api trir api te ānanda parindāmi anuparindāmi enām prajnāpamitām, yatheyam nāntardhiyet, yathā nāsyām tvam anyāḥ puruṣāḥ syāḥ. yāvad ānanda iyaṃ prajnāpamitā loke pracarisyati, tāvat tathāgatas tiṣṭhati ti veditavyam. tāvat tathāgato dharmam desayati ti veditavyam. avirahitās te ānanda sattvā buddhadarśanaṇa dharmāśravaṇena saṃghopasthānena ca veditavyam. tathāgatāntikāvacaras te ānanda sattvā veditavyāḥ, ya enām prajnāpamitāṃ śroṣanty udgraḥisyanti dhārayisyanti vācayisyanti paryavāpsyanti pravartayisyanti desayisyanty upadekṣyanty uddekṣyanti svādhyāisyanti likhiṣyanti sakhariṣyanti guruṇariṣyanti mānayisyanti pūjayisyanty arcayisyanty aparāyi-ṣyanti puspadhūpagandhamālyavilepanacūrṇacīvāraacakcha-tradhvaṣajhaṇṭāpatakhābhīḥ, samantāc ca dīpamālābhiḥ, bahu-vidhābhiś ca pujābhir iti.

Therefore, Ānanda, just as at present you have acted with love, faith, and respect towards my body while I have lived, stayed, and continued, just so, Ānanda, after my passing you should act towards this Prajināpamitā. A second time, a third time, Ānanda, I entrust and I bequeath to you this Prajināpamitā, that it will not be lost ... This should be known: As long, Ānanda, as this

\textsuperscript{13} Vaidya (ed.) 260.25. Cf. Conze (tr.) p. 300. Here Conze renders the phrase “be observed in the world”.

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Prajñāpāramitā circulates in the world, so long the Tathāgata remains, so long the Tathāgata teaches the Dharma: this should be known. It is to be known that those beings, Ānanda, will not be deprived of the sight of the Buddha, the hearing of the Dharma, the serving of the Saṃgha. Those beings, Ānanda, are to be known as in close range of the Tathāgata, who listen to, take up, hold, recite, master, teach, instruct in, explain, chant, write down, honour, revere, and worship this Prajñāpāramitā, with flowers, incense, perfumes, garlands, ointments, aromatic powders, robes, sunshades, banners, bells, streamers, and from all sides with lamps and garlands, and many types of offerings.

II

These passages point to a self-consciousness and a concern for circulation amongst the individual textual communities of the sūtras, and the sharing of a common vocabulary by the different communities. 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.

The frequent use of the term dharma-bhānaka in important Mahāyāna sūtras suggests that these “reciters of the Dharma” played a central role in their dissemination. Dharmabhānakas are to be protected, cherished, and worshipped — indeed, the dharma-bhānaka was to be seen as the Buddha himself. The Saddharmapuṇḍarīka devotes an entire chapter to them (Sanskrit Chapter 18, Dharmabhānakānuśamsā -parivarta). The same text repeatedly lauds the merits of writing the dharmaparyāya down or having others write it down. The merit of the worship of the dharmaparyāya as a book (pustakagataṃ vā satkuryād
gurukuryāt, etc.) and of carrying the manuscript of the dharmaparyāya on one’s shoulder (ya imaṁ dharmaparyāyaṁ pustakagataṁ kṛtvā aṁsena parivahati) is also applauded. The manuscript of the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka functions as a relic.

Dharma-bhāṇaka does not seem to have been a vocation as such, and the sūtras use other terms, for example “the bhikṣu who holds this sūtra”. A revealing passage at the beginning of the Anumodanāpuṇyānirdesa-parivarta (Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sanskrit, Chapter 17) points to attempts to propagate the dharmaparyāya throughout society, by male and female monastics, by lay men and women, and even young men and women, down to the family level:

yah kaścid ajita kulaputro vā kuladuhitā vā tathāgatasya parinirvṛtasya imaṁ dharmaparyāyaṁ deśyamānāṁ prakāśyamānaṁ śṛṇuyād bhikṣur vā bhikṣuṇī vā upāsako vā upāsikā vā vijñapuruṣo vā kumārako vā kumārikā vā śrutvā cābhyaṁumodet | sa ca tato dharmāśravanāt utthāyya prakrāmet | sa ca vihāragato vā grāhagato vā aranyagato vā vīthāgato vā grāmagato vā janapadagato vā | tām hetuṁs tāni kāraṇāni ca dharmam yathāsruṭam yathodgrhyitam yathābalam aparasya sattvasyā’ acakṣet māt vā pitur vā jñāter vā sāmmodikasya vā samstutasya vā anyasya vā kasyacit so ’pi yadi śrutvā ’numodet | anumodya ca punar anyasmai acakṣen so ’pi taṁ śrutvā

14 Haruaki Kotsuki (ed.), Saddharmapuṇḍarīka: Sanskrit Lotus Sutra Manuscript from University of Tokyo General Library (No. 414), Romanized Text, Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 2003 (Lotus Sutra Manuscript Series 5), p. 165.3 and 165.19, respectively.
15 Saddharmapuṇḍarīka (Kern & Nanjio) p. 421.5, evaṁrūpaṁ sūtrāntadhārakam bhikṣum.
16 Saddharmapuṇḍarīka (Kotsuki) p. 169.9.
anumoded anumodya ca so 'pi aparasmai ācakṣet so 'pi taṁ śrutvā
'numodet ity anena paryāyeṇa yāvat pañcāsat paramparāyāḥ atha
khalu ajita yo 'sau pañcattamaḥ puruṣo bhavet
paramparaśravaṇānumodakah tasyāpi tāvad aham ajita
kulaputrasya vā kuladuhitur vā anumodanāsahagatam
puñyābhisamśkāram abhinirdeśāmi ...

(The Blessed One to Bodhisattva Maitreya) Ajita, a son of the
family or daughter of the family—whether a monk, a nun, a lay-
man, a laywoman, an intelligent person, a young man, or a young
woman—who, after the Tathāgata has passed away, hears this
dharmaparyāya being taught and proclaimed, and having listened
to it rejoices, and then leaves that dharma-lecture and returns to
the monastic residence, to the home, to the forest, to the roadway,
to the town, or to the countryside, and announces the causes and
reasons, the Dharma as they have heard it, as they have remem-
bered it, according to their ability, to another being—mother or
father, relative or one who rejoices or praises, or to any one else
and that person rejoices upon hearing it, and, after rejoicing,
proclaims it to another; and that person too rejoices upon hearing it,
and having heard it, rejoices, and in this fashion up to a succession
(parampara) of fifty ...

This passage is given as an ideal situation, and is followed by an
extravagant simile to explain the vast merit to be gained in this manner.
But it also suggests that a thorough-going ideology of propagation
stimulated the circulation of Mahāyāna sūtras in India and abroad.
The comparative reading of similar passages in the Saddharma-puṇḍarīka and other Mahāyāna sūtras should help us to
understand further the ideologies of propagation, oral and written,
and thereby contribute to our understanding of the remarkable spread of Mahāyāna ideas, practices, texts, and artefacts.

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