Human Engagement on Manuscript Margins: Glimpses into the Social Life of a Collection of Buddhist Sūtras from Mustang

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"Pema khyapa, remember that your death is coming!"

Preamble

The message above is found, scribbled in questionable orthography, on the margin of a folio within a larger collection of Buddhist sūtras that was produced tentatively at the beginning of the fourteenth century and is presently preserved at Namgyal Monastery (*rnam rgyal dgon pa*) in Upper Mustang. It is unlikely that this note presents a profound teaching on the Buddhist notion of the impermanence of all phenomena, as one might perhaps expect in the context of Buddhist canonical literature. Rather, it should be interpreted as a teasing remark aimed at a fellow monk, tantric expert, or lay practitioner, who would perhaps have seen the message when it was his turn to recite the volume in question, and who would then perhaps have responded with an equally sarcastic remark at the expense of the initial writer.

This note also serves as an adequate opening line to this paper, since it illustrates some of its central concerns and intricacies. Through an investigation of such marginal notes as well as other traces of human handling of Buddhist manuscripts, the following analysis will tap into a rich and largely unexplored resource for our understanding of people's relationships to Buddhist scriptures and their use as social items. Some of these notes reflect a piety towards the Buddhist written word that is in line with established religious norms, while others are of a much more profane nature. Many are difficult to even decipher, and most come with considerable uncertainty with regard to their interpretation.

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Introduction

In the development of Tibetan and Buddhist Studies as an academic discipline, a focus on working with textual sources has always been a dominant concern, and research advancements were often driven by new manuscript findings. Besides the doctrinal and soteriological concerns of Buddhist texts, also the manuscripts carrying these contents, in their very material form, gained considerable interest, as exemplified by the vast amount of research conducted in relation to the Dunhuang manuscripts, or, to a lesser extent, the manuscript findings at Tabo Monastery. Already the early cataloguers of manuscript collections not only identified their textual contents but also registered the various notes and material traces added by their human handling.[1] In recent years, the study of the material aspects of such manuscripts was highlighted as being part of a larger trend in the humanities, namely an emphasis on the material dimensions of cultural production sometimes referred to as "material turn."[2] In Tibetan Studies, such efforts are reflected in several publications that address, amongst other things, aspects of the material production, materiality and function, or the documentation of material features of Tibetan manuscripts.[3] Despite their diverse subject matters, these studies share the common outlook of foregrounding the material medium of texts rather than the statements contained in them. In this perspective, books and manuscripts are not regarded primarily as sources for investigating the domain of intellectual history in the form of doctrinal and soteriological developments, but as sources for social history and the study of the conditions of their production and subsequent usage. These different disciplinary approaches, however, are not necessarily mutually exclusive. When texts and their material manifestations are regarded as cultural products in a general sense, as called for in a recent publication by Kurtis Schaeffer, these can act as "a nexus of intellectual, religious, social, artistic, and economic aspects of life,"[4] which involve issues of intellectual and social history alike.

The present investigation connects to these earlier studies in two principal ways. First, in exploring the various material traces of human

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1 Marcelle Lalou's three catalogue volumes of Tibetan Dunhuang manuscripts (Lalou 1939, 1950, and 1961) must be seen as exemplary and provide a meticulous record that includes descriptions of the material condition and marginal notes of the relevant material.

2 See, for example, Meier et al. 2015, which lays out central concepts for engaging with the materiality of textual sources.

3 Exemplary studies in this regard are Helman-Ważny 2014, van Schaik et al. 2014, van Schaik 2016, and Dotson and Helman-Ważny 2016; the same authors and several others produced a number of publications that reflect a larger interest in the material aspects of Tibetan manuscripts.

4 Schaeffer 2009, VIII.

handling of Buddhist scriptures, it explicitly focusses on tangible manuscript material rather than abstract texts, even though the examined marginal notes and other traces are often of textual nature. Secondly, these manuscripts are taken as informative sources for questions that pertain to fundamental social issues that may be formulated in rather general, but no less crucial terms: how were texts produced and used by humans? Such practises, conducted by individuals or groups, are not isolated phenomena but part of socially sanctioned and learned patterns of behaviour. In this sense, they also contain an ideological dimension, since any engagement with and usage of manuscripts can be regarded as a reflection of human attitudes towards texts in more general terms.[5]

The following analysis, which is certainly experimental in nature, therefore combines different methodological approaches: in its consideration of the physical appearance of manuscripts, it is akin to what has become known as "the archaeology of the book;"[6] its methodology of deciphering, interpreting, and contextualizing mostly textual sources has a strong philological component; its references of these traces to earlier usage, some of which pertain to ritual contexts, represents an attempt at historical anthropology; and its reflections on the general relationship between humans and manuscripts fall into the domain of intellectual history.

The manuscript collections at Namgyal Monastery

The material basis for exploring these issues is a collection of Buddhist canonical manuscripts from Namgyal Monastery in Upper Mustang. While these had been noted already during the early explorations of Michel Peissel,[7] they were only recently documented and studied systematically.[8] Among the numerous texts preserved at Namgyal Monastery, there are forty-three volumes with similar stylistic features, which are distinct and older than the rest of the collection. They contain intricate illuminations on the first and final folios of every volume as well as other features documenting the high quality

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5 For some useful theoretical reflections in this regard, see van Schaik 2016, 222–23, who attempts to link manuscripts as material objects with social patterns of behaviour through borrowings from "practice theory."

6 As outlined in Albert Gruijs's programmatic essay, a crucial aspect of this approach is that books are regarded as cultural phenomena and sources for cultural history in very general terms, which calls for a multi-disciplinary investigation (Gruijs 1972, in particular, pp. 89–90). For an application of this term to Tibetan books, see Helman-Ważny 2014, 1–11.

7 Cf. Peissel 1967, 152.

8 For a preliminary account of the collection, see Luczanits 2016. A detailed documentation and study of the codicological, art-historical, and textual features is provided in Luczanits and Viehbeck (forthcoming).

of their production. Although these volumes share a similar style, they form two distinct sets. One is a Sūtra collection (*mdo sde*) organised in thirty volumes, two of which are missing (vols. ma and ha).[9] Another Sūtra volume (nya) seems to have been added from a different collection. The remaining fourteen volumes constitute a Prajñāpāramitā set. They contain a single text, the *Śatasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitāsūtra* (ŚSPP), that is, the *Sūtra of the Perfection of Wisdom in One Hundred Thousand Lines*, commonly referred to by its short title "One Hundred Thousand" (*'bum*). Given the absence of any form of detailed paratextual information, the origin of these volumes is obscure. Codicological, orthographic, and palaeographic features as well as art-historical considerations point to between the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth century as a tentative period of production, with the Prajñāpāramitā volumes being dated earlier than the Sūtra volumes. Slight differences in codicological and stylistic details as well as historical evidence suggest that the two collections were produced in different settings and then brought together in Namgyal.

Despite these differences in the production and textual setup of these collections, there is reason to believe that they had similar functions in their actual usage. The mass production of Prajñāpāramitā sets as well as other volumes of important canonical literature has already been attested for the Dunhuang collections,[10] and early hagiographical reports also suggest that larger collections of canonical literature, including Sūtra collections and Prajñāpāramitā sets, were regarded as a stock equipment for Tibetan temples and monasteries.[11] There they functioned as symbolic objects representing the speech of the Buddha, while stūpas represented his mind and statues his body. This symbolic and representational significance is also evident in ritual contexts. Large volumes of canonical literature are carried in ritual circumambulation around a village to purify the community, its land, crops, and livestock as well as for protection from negative influences and the accumulation of merit. Ritual recitations of such volumes have

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[9] The structural setup of this Sūtra collection, its connection to other Himalayan text collections, and its principle relations to later structured Kanjurs are discussed in Viehbeck 2020.

[10] The production of thousands of copies of the *Aparimitāyurnāmamahāyānasūtra* as well as hundreds of copies of the ŚSPP and the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsūtra* was conceived at Dunhuang in the first half of the ninth century as a meritorious enterprise as well as a gesture towards the Tibetan emperor; see Dotson 2015, 5 and Iwao 2012.

[11] Biographies of the translator Rin chen bzang po (958–1055) document the existence of Sūtra collections (*mdo mangs*) and sets of the ŚSPP (*'bum*) at various places; see Steinkellner 1994, 130. The Tibetan text, however, is somewhat ambiguous, and it is not entirely clear whether Rin chen bzang po provided these text collections as equipment for the newly founded sites, or whether he had them recited there; see Tucci 1988, 115 and Ye shes dpal 1996, 24.

similar functions, and they are conducted in a seasonal rhythm or, also in private households, on specific occasions. While the general ritual significance of canonical texts is commonly known, their specific performance remains to be studied in detail.[12]

The Namgyal manuscripts have obviously also been exposed to such extensive usage, as testified by their timeworn appearance. But what exactly are the traces of human usage? And what can these tell us about how humans related to such manuscripts?

Methodological considerations

The idea for the present study developed during the documentation and digitisation of a substantial part of the Namgyal manuscripts. This bears with it a special way of relating to the volumes. While photographing text collections (and making use of the limited time available), researchers usually spend only a couple of seconds on every individual folio. While these glimpses are too brief to allow for a detailed engagement with the manuscripts' textual contents, naturally attention is drawn to anything that stands out from the standard layout: drawings, scribblings, doodles, notes, textual corrections, stains, torn pages, and attempts at patching them up. Thus, once attention shifts from the textual contents to the actual manuscript, numerous traces of its extensive history come into focus, which provide potential information on the ways in which people engaged with these volumes.

Subsequently, all marginalia and other signs of human usage were systematically recorded as part of the preparation of a comprehensive catalogue of the textual contents of both of the Sūtra collection and the Prajñāpāramitā set, when each folio could be investigated in greater detail. These efforts revealed several difficulties in working with this source material. The formal text of the volumes is written in clear "headed script" (*dbu can*). This pertains to the main textual contents as well as several short dedicatory notes found at the end of some volumes and further also most of the textual corrections, which, given their palaeographic specificities, were added at different points in time. In contrast, most other marginal notes use a variety of "headless scripts" (*dbu med*), including writings in "running script" (*'khyug yig*).

[12] Kim and Niels Gutschow describe an annual circumambulation of ŚSPP (*'bum*) volumes for the village community of Rinam in Zanskar (Gutschow and Gutschow 2003, 135–36). A more detailed account of ritual circumambulation and recitation of a Kanjur (*bka' 'gyur*) as a community ritual in Nubri is given in Childs 2005, which also provides references to other accounts of similar ritual activities. Although dealing with South Asian Buddhist manuscripts, Jinah Kim's study on illustrated canonical manuscripts reveals many parallels in usage and hence is relevant also for the Tibetan context (Kim 2013).

Their occurrence is far less standardised than that of the headed writing and may exhibit rather idiosyncratic forms. The same is true for abbreviations (*skung yig*) and contractions (*bsdus yig*) of syllables, which are frequently employed in this context.[13] Obviously notes were produced by a number of people with varying degrees of literacy, and there are common misspellings that often provide an approximate phonetic rendering of the respective word. The reading of these notes is further complicated by the use of local and at times archaic terminology. Among the major challenges in their interpretation, however, is their brevity and lack of contextual information, and some of them are simply too timeworn or faded to be deciphered at all.[14] In those cases where these notes have remained legible, their contents differ greatly and reflect a considerable spectrum of human engagement: they range from sober textual criticism of the main text to clumsy attempts of beginners' hands at penning single characters; from explanatory glosses dedicated to unwrapping the contents of the main text to seemingly mindless reproduction of its individual words; from edifying and moralising religious poetry to slandering side blows.

Clearly only a very limited number of these marginalia fall into the conceptual domain of what is indicated by the Tibetan term "*mchan*" or "*mchan bu*" ("annotation"), a term used to refer to scholarly notes that in some way enable or improve the reading of the main text.[15] In contrast, the benefits of the other notes, jottings, and scribbles are diverse and found in perhaps unexpected ways: in using the empty space of manuscript margins to express devotion, to crack jokes, or simply to counter boredom. This variety and wealth may be regarded as an important feature of such marginalia, since in this way they offer a window into the actual usage of Buddhist manuscripts not gained from reading the normative prescriptions evoked in other textual sources.

In view of the diverse and often ambiguous nature of this material, a reconstruction of any kind of concise social history of these

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[13] Central features of abbreviations and contractions in the context of canonical literature are discussed in Eimer 1992, 53ff, and, more generally, in Bacot 1912.

[14] As a general convention, the notes below are reproduced as found in the manuscript. Resolutions of word contractions and suggestions for orthographic corrections are added in parentheses. The latter must be treated with caution, since it cannot be expected that the standards of later literary Tibetan should be readily applied to these early local sources. Uncertain readings of characters are underlined, and illegible or missing characters are indicated by the character "x."

[15] The scope and variety of *mchan bu* is described in Solmsdorf 2018. One should note, however, that this discussion does not address notes that lack a function with regard to the main text. Hence, I think it is appropriate to translate *mchan bu* as "annotation," while the domain of marginalia is conceptually much larger.

manuscripts will not be attempted.[16] The aim of this paper is more modest and explicitly impressionistic. In considering the material traces of human usage, it addresses human-manuscript relations in general terms and as illustrated by examples from the Namgyal manuscripts. While both the Sūtra collection and the Prajñāpāramitā set were analysed in this light, thus amounting to a rough total of 15.000 manuscript folios (each with recto and verso) of source material, the examples discussed below are drawn mostly from the Sūtra collection, simply for the pragmatic reason that these folios provided more interesting cases for our interest. The resulting picture is therefore intrinsically connected to the history of this very collection, although it may be assumed that its trajectory is not unlike that of other, similar text collections.

A sliding scale of human-manuscript relations

In reviewing the visible traces of human handling of manuscripts and in attempting a more systematised presentation of the relations they reflect, I suggest to organise these along a sliding scale of three principle modes of engagement: 1) production and maintenance; 2) various forms of usage; and 3) misuse, neglect, and abandonment.

The first of these is the mode of the creation, refinement, and sustained care of manuscripts. On the one hand, this refers to the moment when manuscripts are produced as objects of material craftsmanship, but also of textual scholarship. However, textual refinement, in particular, is not necessarily a singular event but can be performed continuously, and the same holds true for repair and maintenance activities. Such efforts are commonly instigated through contexts in which the manuscripts are actually used, mostly in rituals and for recitation. The use of the manuscripts in various forms can be regarded as the second major mode of interaction. Only few traces testify to the use of these canonical texts in the study and teaching of Buddhist contents, and the main context for their practical engagement appears to have been in ritual recitation. Their usage then also provides opportunities for employing manuscripts for other purposes, such as when they are used as writing paper, which reflects a variety of relations to Buddhist texts that will be discussed under a separate heading below. In the long term, sustained use also contributes to the eventual deterioration of the manuscripts and might lead to repair measures or further neglect and perhaps abandonment, or the

[16] Noteworthy research in this regard was conducted by Brandon Dotson, who used marginalia to explore the social conditions of the reproduction of sūtras at Dunhuang (Dotson 2015) and its orthographic conventions (Dotson 2016).

recycling and reuse of their paper for new manuscripts, and thus pertain to the third mode.

Obviously, there is significant overlap between any of these three modes of engagement, and their distinction serves mostly as a heuristic tool for providing a basic orientation. Underlying is of course a temporal process in which the manuscripts are seen to deteriorate with usage and over time, but all three modes can also be activated and employed at the same time. For example, a ritual recitation could be used for revising textual contents or repairing material damages, but it could also provide the setting for misusing manuscript leaves for scribblings to counter the possible boredom of recitation, and such ritual usage of manuscripts naturally also leads to their eventual deterioration.

Creating, refining, and maintaining manuscripts

The volumes of both the Sūtra collection and the Prajñāpāramitā set are products of exceptional craftsmanship. This is testified by high-quality paper, fine calligraphy, illuminations that adorn the first and final folio of each volume, and the carved wooden plates (*glegs shing*) that enclose them.

Fig. 1: The first and the final folio of Namgyal mdo, vol. na, exemplifying the high standards of craftsmanship. The notes below the illuminations were subsequently added and identify their contents.

These features reflect the manuscripts' status as important symbolic objects as well as the artistic and financial efforts invested in their

production. However, only very little information is provided on the latter, and neither of the two collections comes with a longer preface or colophon that would detail its origins. Only a few of the individual volumes contain brief dedicatory notes at their end. These are written in clear *dbu can* script, like the main text but in smaller size, and their contents and palaeographic features suggest that these belong to the original context of production. These notes may mention the place where a volume was produced and the agents involved, most importantly the sponsors, and, albeit only in one case, the scribe. In general, historical information is rare.[17] The main purpose and explicit focus of these notes seems to be the dedication of virtue. In fact, one of their most consistent elements is the dedication of such virtue accumulated through the production of canonical volumes towards progress on the Buddhist path, which documents the central rationale for the production of texts amongst Buddhist communities.

Efforts in producing high-quality volumes also extended to textual matters. Notably, many of the volumes of the Sūtra collection contain a final note that confirms the textual quality of the volume. Some of these are written in black ink and simply attest to the textual integrity of a volume—in the form "it is correct" (*dag go*)[18]—, while others are in red ink and point to additional steps of revision with the phrase "re-edited and correct" (*dang zhus te dag go*).[19]

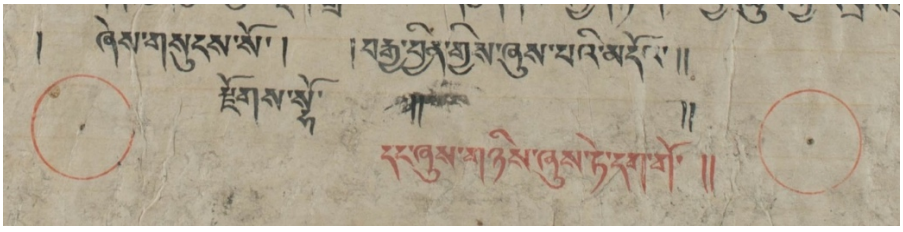

Fig. 2: Indication of additional revision at the end of the main text. This volume (mdo, vol. da) was even revised twice.

[17] The historical details on the production of these volumes that can be drawn from these dedicatory notes are discussed in Luczanits and Viehbeck (forthcoming, Concluding remarks) and will hence not be repeated here. Most importantly, these notes suggest that the two text collections were produced at different places and then brought together in Namgyal.

[18] See Namgyal mdo, vol. nga, fol. 335a or vol. ca., fol. 299a.

[19] See, e.g., Namgyal mdo, vol. cha, fol. 336a or vol. da, fol. 299a. On the editorial process of sūtras from Dunhuang and the meaning of the term *dang zhus*, see Dotson 2015, 18–19. Usually, this refers to an additional editorial step, which is distinguished from the first or "actual edit" (*ngos zhus*). See also a colophon from Tholing manuscripts referred to by De Rossi Filibeck 2007, 59, in which several additional steps of revision ("*ngos zhus* / *dang zhus* / *gnyis zhus* // *gsum zhus te dag go* //") are indicated. Notably, red ink was also used by the editors in Dunhuang; see Dotson 2016, 136.

In terms of their size and palaeographic style, these notes are similar to the main text and seem to have been part of the volumes' initial production. While such is not found in the volumes of the Prajñāpāramitā set, both collections document numerous instances of textual correction, and a significant part of marginal and interlinear writing concerns textual matters. These measures take different forms according to the issues at stake. Longer passages of text to be erased are marked in colour or crossed out. The deletion of individual syllables or single characters is commonly indicated by three dots above the respective sign. Textual additions are achieved by filling in the respective passage on the folio margin and marking its exact location with dots or a cross mark. When longer passages are emended, the text is erased by scratching off the first layer of paper and fitting in the corrected passage into the gained space. All of these actions are apparently understood as standard measures without need for further explanations.[20] In fact, explanatory notes with regard to textual corrections are rare and applied only to seemingly special or noteworthy cases. In one instance, for example, only a single character was deleted; but since it was the negative particle (*ma*), hence changing the meaning of the entire sentence, a pithy memo was left to emphasise that the original writing contained an "incorrect word."[21] In another case, the text of an entire page was crossed out, which also is commented on in a brief explanation: "This side of the folio is redundant."[22] Yet another note points to two blank lines and provides a suggestion of how these should be filled: "In this context, an omission or addition occurred. Hence, one should get the original from Yara and record these two lines!"[23]

The ultimate rationale for the textual refinement of canonical volumes, like for their production, is the accumulation of merit. The following note, which is unusual in its detailed information, explicates the dedication of such corrections for future benefit: "On the twenty-ninth day of the third Tibetan month, Nam mkha' corrected a vowel

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[20] These means of textual correction are well-known and hence will not be discussed in more detail here. Visual examples for such cases are provided in Luczanits and Viehbeck (forthcoming, Chapter one).

[21] Namgyal mdo, vol. tsa, fol. 248a5: *tshig log*.

[22] Namgyal mdo, vol. nya_b (= Ng45), fol. 118b, left margin: *shog logs 'di lhago [lhag go]*. This example is drawn from a secondary volume nya that was added to the original collection. In terms of style as well as signs of usage it is very similar to the other volumes.

[23] Namgyal mdo, vol. ja, fol. 251b.7: *'di'i 'tsham du chad lhag byung ba yin pas g.ya' ra nas ma phyi len nas phreng gnyis po 'di 'bris dgos* /. This is the only case in which a place named G.ya' ra is mentioned in the manuscripts, but we can assume that it refers to the village that is located in the valley of the Puyung Khola above Dhi. While it remains to be explored whether a similar text collection exists there, it shows that such was produced there in the past.

and fixed a mistake (*chad lhag*) of the main text. Due to this virtuous action, may there be liberation from the intermediate state (*bar do*)."[24]

The stylistic variety of both notes and actual textual corrections testify to the fact that these were executed by multiple hands and at different times. Textual care was obviously an issue not only of the initial production of suitable volumes but also of sustained engagement. While there is no registry that details such interventions, incidental traces do suggest that the use of canonical volumes in ritual recitation also provided an opportunity for their correction and maintenance. In a longer marginal note, an individual by the name of Klu sgrub rgya mtsho elaborates on his engagement with the collection as follows:[25]

> The original of this precious Sūtra collection was incomplete at the beginning and end. Hence, when [I], the one who bears the name Nāga,[26] requested a complete recitation (*gtsang 'don*) of the volumes of the Sūtra collection, based upon my inquiry three pages were retrieved from two old monks and inserted at the beginning at page number four, etc. I furthermore donated volume labels (*gdong dar*) to those without volumes labels, and book strings to those without book strings. May the two obscurations of myself and all sentient beings who have been our mothers be purified, and based on this virtue may the two accumulations be quickly completed!

An investigation of the respective pages of this volume confirms the contents of this note. Three folios at the beginning of the volume (f. 2,

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[24] Namgyal mdo, vol. tsha, fol. 233b, bottom margin: *hor zla bsum [gsum] pa'i tshes nyir gu'i [nyer dgu'i] snyin [nyin] kyed byas nas namkhas [nam mkhas] tsa'i [rtsa'i] chad lhag bsos pa'i dge' bas bar rdo' [do] las sgrol bar byin gyis blobs [rlobs] //*. I tend to read the phrase "*kyed byas nas*" as an indication that the mark for the vowel *o* has been corrected, which is also what we see in the manuscript. In the word *bcom* of the main text, the vowel *o* above the letter *ca* has been eliminated by scraping off a layer of paper. Then four syllables (*bcom ldan 'das ga*) were marked to be deleted by dots above them and a coloured strike through. It could also be possible that the reading of *tsa*, which I corrected to *rtsa* ("main text"), refers to the letter *ca*. In this case, the note would emphasise that the issue is with this character specifically, but the general content remains similar.

[25] Namgyal mdo, vol. tsa, fol. 323b, bottom margin: *mdo sde rin po che rtsa ba 'di yi mgo 'jug gnyis nas ma tsang 'dug pas nA gas ming can gyi mdo de [sde]'i glegs baM rnaMs gtsang mdon ['don] zhu skabs rtsad chod byas pas grwa rgan gnyis nas shog bu gsum thon byung ba der dbu yi grangs yig bzhi pa sogs la bcug yod gzhan yang gdong dar med pa rnaMs la gdong dar dang spo [po] thag med pa rnaMs la spo [po] thag phul ba sogs kyi dge rtsas bdag sogs ma gyur 'gro ba'i sems can rnaMs sgrib gnyis dag nas tshogs gnyis myur du rdzogs par gyur gcig [cig]*.

[26] This of course refers to his Tibetan name Klu sgrub rgya mtsho. The use of playful epithets, including allusions to Sanskrit and exaggerating adjectival descriptions, are common features in this context.

4, and 5) as well as its final sheet (f. 324) were indeed replaced by newer pages.

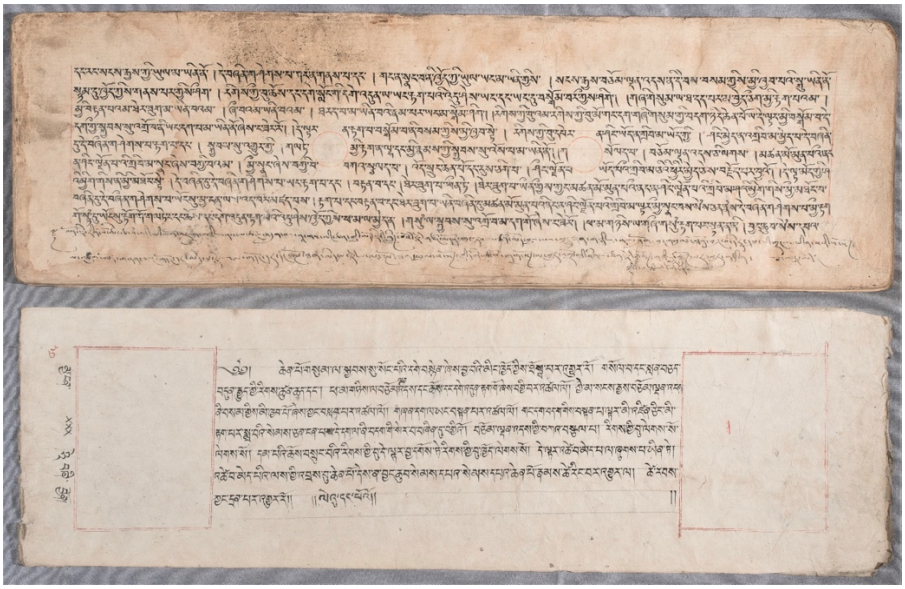
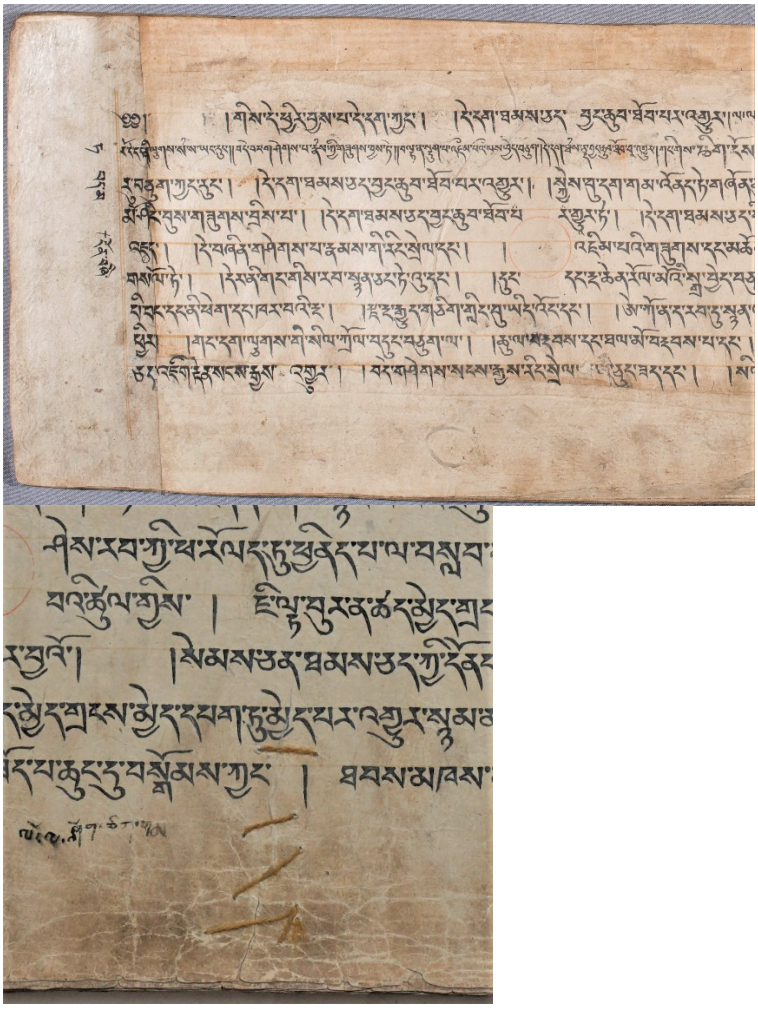


Fig. 3: Replacement of missing pages at the end of mdo, vol. tsa, including the corresponding note on the previous folio.

The replacement of missing folios is among the most common means of manuscript maintenance and is observed for the majority of the volumes of the Sūtra collection and the Prajñāpāramitā set. Usually, however, it is performed without any further written explanation. Other such interventions concern the reparation of damaged manuscript folios. For example, tears are often patched up with needle and thread, and gaps are filled up with pieces of paper.



Figs. 4ab: Patching and rewriting of a torn folio margin of mdo, vol. ta, fol. 174a (a); stitching of a timeworn middle part of a folio of 'bum, vol. ka, fol. 48a (b).

Maintenance activities might also pertain to the outer cover of the volumes, as indicated by the note above. Apart from this one instance, the offering of new volume labels is also documented on small paper slips that were added to three volumes of the Sūtra collection (vols. nga, da, and ya), obviously in an effort to document and honour this intervention. Like the previous note, these also highlight the merit gained by such actions:[27]

[27] Namgyal mdo, vol. nga, added slip of paper: *kun mkhyen e+waM [e wam] sa chen po'i slob ma'i tha shal pa sprang btsun nA ga sid+d+ha sa mu drA [dra] pas mdo sde rin po che gtsang 'don zhu skabs ras khra gdong dar 'di phul bas dngos po sman [dman] rung*

> [I], the humble monk Nāgasiddhasamudra, an unworthy disciple of the Omniscient One from E waM [chos ldan], the Great One of the Sa [skya] tradition,[28] requested a complete recitation of the precious Sūtra collection. At that occasion (*skabs*), I donated volume labels of coloured fabric. Even though these were of inferior quality, my motivation was utterly pure. Based on this cause, may the two accumulations be completed by that virtue and the two obscurations be purified. May this turn into the cause for myself and all sentient beings who have been our mothers to swiftly attain complete awakening!

The ritualised context of recitation therefore provides a setting and opportunity not only to engage with the text of the sūtras, but, perhaps even more so, to engage with their material manifestation, the maintenance and protection of which is equally important in terms of its meritorious potential.

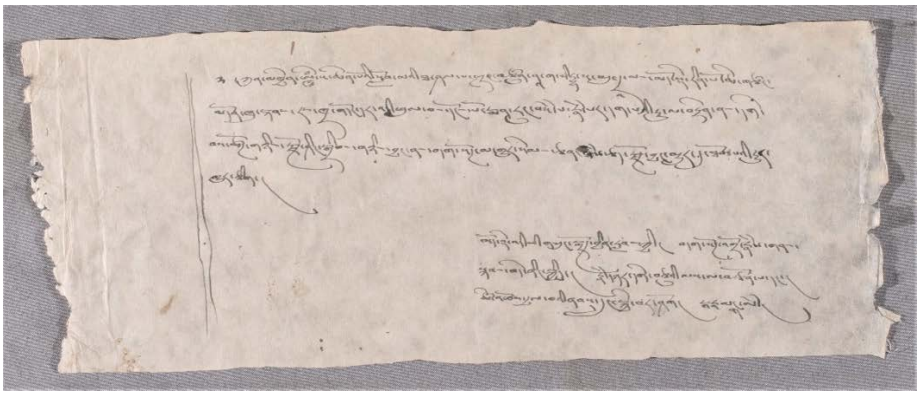


Fig. 5: Small paper slip added to mdo, vol. nga, reporting maintenance activities.

Practises of using manuscripts: teaching, study, and recitation

While texts are readily associated with the acquisition and transfer of new knowledge, it is commonly known that the study and teaching of Buddhist contents were not the primary purposes of the larger, representational volumes of Tibetan canonical literature. This is true

bsaM pa rnaM par dag pa'i rgyu la brten nas dge bas tshogs gnyis rdzogs shing sgribs gnyis byang nas bdag sogs ma gyur sems can thaMs cad rdzogs byang myur du thob pa'i rgyur gyur cig /.

[28] This refers to Ngor chen Kun dga' bzang po (1382–1456), who with the foundation of Ngor e waM chos ldan Monastery laid the basis for the Ngor sub-school of the Sa skya tradition. Ngor chen was very active in Mustang and his tradition remains influential until the present day. For details on his activities in Mustang, see Heimbel 2017.

also for the Namgyal manuscripts. Among all volumes, there is only one instance, at the beginning folios of the first volume of the Prajñāpāramitā set, which documents a more detailed and systematic engagement with the textual contents. These few folios are annotated with interlinear glosses (*mchan bu*) explicating the meaning of individual phrases, as applied when texts are used in a teaching setting.

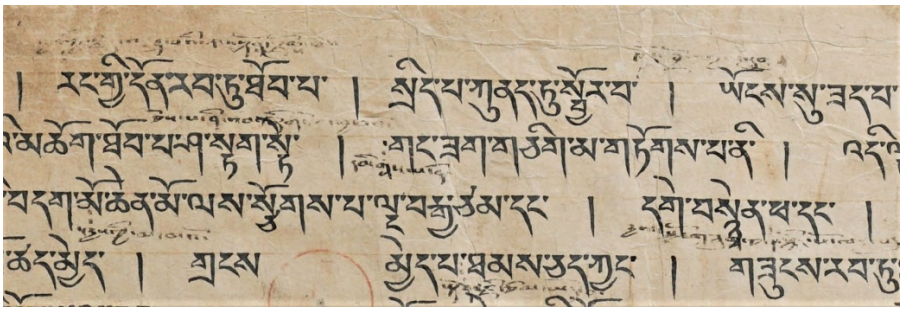


Fig. 6: Traces of interlinear glosses in 'bum, vol. ka, fol. 2a.

No comparable interpretative notes on textual contents are found in the other volumes. However, most of these other volumes do contain small written identifications or explanations below the respective images adorning their beginning and end. Like other notes, these also must have been added at later times, and by people with varying degrees of knowledge, since they also feature several faulty identifications.[29] All of these interpretative attempts, be they faulty or not, reflect efforts to understand the contents of the manuscripts people were dealing with.

The fact that people actually related to the contents of individual volumes is also observed in several marginal notes. An individual by the name of Vija (*bI dza*; see also below), for example, penned the following statement in verse on the volume containing the *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra*: "This is the excellent sūtra of Gaṇḍavyūha, which provides a clear exposition of the *ālaya* [consciousness], the basis of everything."[30] Yet another, anonymous writer emphasised to his fellow religious experts the doctrinal contents of another volume, in particular the doctrine of karmic retribution: "This here is the Sūtra collection *Lokaprajñapti*. As karmic retribution is [explained] in here,

[29] For a detailed discussion of these identificatory notes below the manuscript illuminations, see Luczanits and Viehbeck (forthcoming, Chapter two).

[30] Namgyal mdo, vol. na, fol. 25b, bottom margin: *kun gyi gzhir gyur kun gzhi yi// rnaMr [rnam par] bzhag pa gsal ston pa'i// stug po bkod pa'i mdo mchog yin// bar skabs tshigs bcad bI dzas bris//*.

please look at this, venerable monks."[31] Notes of such nature are rare, and none of them provide further information on their production. It seems likely that these also were composed in contexts where individuals were handling the volumes during ritual recitation. While this does not allow for a detailed reading or study of texts, the above examples, although few in number, demonstrate that textual contents were not utterly irrelevant either.

The usage of both text collections in recitation is clearly evident, since all of their folios exhibit the typical traces of human contact concentrating on the margins at the centre of the manuscript, the part that is touched when pages are turned. The ritual recitation of canonical texts in public contexts, often according to a seasonal rhythm, and for individual reasons in private settings is common usage, and thus it is safe to assume that the volumes of both collections were used for such purposes as well. While this is usually not separately documented, a number of notes on the manuscripts do testify to such individual performances of recitation. With regard to the Sūtra collection, for example, there are several instances that record a "complete recitation" (*gtsang 'don*) of the collection.[32] Almost all of these are connected to a single person, a certain Klu sgrub rgya mtsho, encountered already in the notes above. His efforts reflect a personal engagement that provides crucial details on the practise of recitation:[33]

> [I], an irreligious (*chos med*) beggar (*sprang po*) called Klu sgrub rgya mtsho, used my own tongue to properly conduct a complete recitation of the twenty-eight volumes of the Sūtra collection. May the roots of this virtue bring about the pacification of unfavourable conditions and obstacles for all sentient beings, beginning with my father and mother, in this life, as well as their birth in Sukhāvatī in their next life. Having commenced on the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month of the Iron-Mouse year, in the meantime I was influenced by laziness and distraction, and hence finished up (*'jug dril ba*) on the auspicious eighth day of the second month of the Iron-Bull year.

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[31] Namgyal mdo, vol. wa, fol. 39a, bottom margin: *'dir ni mdo sde 'jig rten stan gzhag [= 'jig rten bzhag pa] yin las rgyus [rgyu] 'bras 'di na yod pas rab chung [byung] rtsun [btsun] pa rnams 'di la gzigs zhu*.

[32] Cf. Namgyal mdo, vol. nga, added paper slip; vol. tha, fol. 100b, bottom margin; vol. da, added paper slip; vol. tsa, fol. 323b, bottom margin; vol. tsha, 293b, bottom margin; vol. a, fol. 287b, bottom margin.

[33] Namgyal mdo, vol. a, fol. 287b, bottom margin: *chos med kyi sprang po klu sgrubs [sgrub] rgya mtsho zhes bya bas mdo sde glegs baM nyi shu rtsa brgyad rang gi lce thog nas gtsang mdon ['don] tshad mar byas pas dge ba'i rtsa bas pha mas gtso byas sems can thaMds [thams cad] kyi tshe 'dir 'gal rkyen bar chad zhi nas phyi ma bde ba can du skye bar 'gyur cig / lcags byi zla 9 bas [ba'i] tshe 25 la dbu brtsaMs zhing bar skabs le lo dang rnaM g.yeng gi dbang du gsong [song] shis [gshis] lcags glang zla ba 2 tshe bgyad [brgyad] bzang por 'jug dril bas bskal ba mchog tu bzang bkris [bkra shis] dpal 'bar 'dzaM gling gyan [rgyan] du byon /*.

> Due to that, may the most fortunate of times, the blazing glory of goodness, appear as an ornament to the world!

While public recitations of larger canonical collections are usually completed within a few days, this instance shows that in private settings individuals could engage with a text collection for an extended time. With admitted interruptions, Klu sgrub rgya mtsho spend more than four months on his recitation of the collection. A similar period of three months and ten days is indicated on three other occasions, when a recitation was conducted by someone named Dkon tshul.[34] Given the limited amount of information, it is difficult to determine the exact reasons and conditions under which such longer, individual engagements with the collections were conducted. However, all cases explicitly mentioned the accumulation of merit and its dedication for present and future benefit as the desired outcome of the recitation, as further explicated in the following verse:[35]

> By the power of the proper resounding of these excellent sūtras,
> May all difficulties of the sponsors vanish,
> And all sentient beings, limitless like the sky,
> Ultimately attain the state of a Conqueror.

It is important to note that—as expressed here and in Klu sgrub rgya mtsho's note—the general accumulation of merit, fortune, and goodness is not only a personal issue. It also includes other people directly involved in the respective actions, such as the sponsors and monastic or lay officiants, as well as kinship and companions, with relatives and parents being often explicitly mentioned, the larger village community, and, ultimately, all sentient beings. In other words: the merit accumulated through recitation concerns communal welfare.

The earlier note of Klu sgrub rgya mtsho reveals also another interesting historical detail. The Sūtra collection as it is preserved at Namgyal presently lacks two of altogether thirty volumes (vols. ma and ha). Apparently, these were already missing when Klu sgrub rgya mtsho was handling the collection—whenever that was—, since he also referred to only twenty-eight volumes. In yet another note, he explains that he engaged with the manuscripts at the age of twenty-

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[34] Cf. Namgyal mdo, vol. tsha, fol. 301a, bottom margin; vol. za, fol. 327a6; and vol. 'a, fol. 21a, bottom margin. In the notes, his name is given as *dkon mtshul*. In the last instance (vol. 'a), he mentions that he was joined by two spiritual friends (*dge bshes*). His name is also mentioned on vol. tha, fol. 369b.

[35] Namgyal mdo, vol. a, fol. 287b8: *mdo mchog 'di rnaMs tshul bzhin sgrags pa'i mthus// sbyin bdag rnaMs kyi bar chad kun zhi zhing// mkha' dang mnyaM pa'i seMn [sems can] thaMd [thams cad] kyis// mthar thug rgyal ba'i go 'phangs thob par shog//*.

six. However, the many traces he left on the folios do not provide sufficient information to date him in absolute terms.[36]

Another individual who regularly occurs among the many marginal notes and who was already mentioned above is a certain Rnam rgyal or Vijaya. While he also engaged in the recitation of the collection, he figures more prominently as a poet who filled the blank space of the manuscript margins with his compositions.

The use of manuscript margins as writing material

In Himalayan communities, the knowledge and custom of producing paper was rather widespread.[37] However, since paper making required considerable means in terms of raw material, labour, knowledge, and finances, paper remained a scarce commodity and its usage was limited mostly to religious and administrative purposes. At the same time, larger manuscript collections were available in many monasteries and local temples, and these were handled by different people, who could use these opportunities to engage with the manuscripts and their paper in various ways.

The case of Rnam rgyal is certainly special. His name appears no less than nineteen times in different variants on the leaves of the Sūtra collection. In all but one of these cases, he used the manuscript margins to note down one of his poems. These are spread over the entire collection and range from short four-line verses to longer and more complex compositions.[38] The following acrostic (*ka rtsom*), the only one in the collection, gives an impression of his poetic skill:[39]

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[36] Cf. Namgyal mdo, vol. a, 34b, bottom margin: *snubs [nub?] kyi ri skyes chos med sprang po nga / mdo 'di klog mdon ['don] byed pas bskal ba bzang / klu sgrubs [sgrub] rgya mtshos rang lo nyer drug gi / lcags glang zla 2 tshes 6 bris*. In another note his age is given as twenty-five, see Namgyal mdo, vol. ya, fol. 125a, bottom margin.

[37] A detailed history of Himalayan paper production remains to be written; for a first orientation, see Helman-Ważny 2016.

[38] Poetic compositions under his name are found here: Namgyal mdo, vol. ca, fol. 72b, bottom margin; vol. cha, fol. 91b, bottom margin; vol. nya, fol. 34b, bottom margin; vol. na, fol. 25b, bottom margin; vol. pa, fol. 162a, bottom margin; vol. wa, fol. 111a, bottom margin; vol. wa, fol. 271a, bottom margin; vol. zha, fol. 109b, bottom margin; vol. zha, fol. 126b, bottom margin; vol. zha, fol. 143b1–2; vol. zha, fol. 241a2; vol. zha, fol. 370a, bottom margin; vol. 'a, fol. 252b, bottom margin; vol. ya, fol. 219a, bottom margin; vol. ya, 267a, right margin; vol. ya, fol. 360a5–6; vol. ra, fol. 183b, bottom margin; vol. sa; fol. 15b, bottom margin. Considering their stylistic similarities, several other anonymous poems might also have been authored by him. Apart from his poetic compositions, his name appears only once, in a short note, see mdo, vol. za, fol. 140a, upper margin.

[39] Namgyal mdo, vol. cha, fol. 91b, bottom margin: *ka skal bar ldan pa'i bI dza ya// kha kha bton mdo sde dag la byas// ga gong nas gong du 'gro 'dod pas// nga ngoMs pa med pa'i thos pa brtsal// ca cal po 'khor ba'i chos la byas// cha chos mthun gyi spyod pa srang la gzhal// ja ji 4n [bzhin] gyi gnas lugs rtogs 'dod pas// nya nyaMs myong gi gdam ngag mkhas la nyan// ta btan [brtan] gyi sgo gtan 'dzud 'dod pas// tha mtha' med srid pa'i sprul*

Ka: Vijaya, endowed with good fortune,
Kha: Conducted a recitation of the Sūtra collections.
Ga: Those who wish to proceed further and further
Nga: Should exert themselves to study, without contentment.
Ca: Idle talk (*cal po*) is regarded as a samsaric phenomenon,
Cha: Acts according to the Dharma are counted as precious.
Ja: Those who want to realise the nature of reality (*gnas lugs*) as it is
Nya: Should listen to those who know how to advise on personal experience.
Ta: Those who wish to enter a reliable doorway
Tha: Should contemplate the limitless manifestations of worldly existence.
Da: Those who wish to use these freedoms and endowments[40] meaningfully
Na: Should strive exceedingly and accomplish the highest Dharma.
Pa: Even though there are many volumes of scripture,
Pha: [These] are not seen here and there.
Ba: This treasury, the wish-fulfilling gem of oral teachings,
Ma: Should be requested, with diligence, again and again,[41]
Tsa: From the lama, the faultless teacher.
Tsha: [His] oral advice radiates in all directions.
Dza: Endowed with the four oral lineages, it is like a beautiful woman,
Wa: Which manifests clearly (*wa le*) and without delay (*khyug ge*).
Zha: By that, calm abiding (*zhi gnas*) and higher insight (*lhag mthong*) arise in union;
Za: This is the most excellent of the vehicle of the profound sūtras.

The contents of these poems are clearly not incidental but make explicit connections to the manuscript collection: they praise their general qualities and refer to their textual contents; they provide advice on how to relate to these writings and what benefit is gained from their veneration; and they demonstrate not only interest and poetic skill but also familiarity with the elements of Buddhist doctrine

bsaMs [ba bsams]// da dal 'byor 'di don yod byed 'dod pas// na nan btan [tan] bskyed na dam chos bsgrubs// pa spo [po] ti glegs baM mang mod kyang // pha pha+rol [pha rol] tshu rol mthong ba med// ba bang mdzod gsung ngag yid 4n [bzhin] nor// ma ma nor ston pa'i bla ma la// tsa brtso+rus [brtson 'grus] skyed nas yang yang zhus// tsha tshad du 'khyol ba'i zhal gdaMs snang // dza mdzes ma snyan brgyud 4 ldan des// wa wa le khyug ge byonsu [byon nas su]// zha zhi lhag zung 'brel skyesu [skyes su] gnang // za zab mo sdoe [mdo sde] theg pa'i mchog//.

[40] This refers to the eight freedoms (*dal ba*) and ten endowments (*'byor ba*), which provide a human life with favourable conditions for spiritual development.

[41] At this point, the order of the lines in the English translation differs from the arrangement in Tibetan in order to enable syntactical fluency.

and a calling to convey this to others. Obviously, these poems are meant to be read by others who engage with the manuscripts, and they were written with the intention of guiding their interactions.

Despite the prominent presence of the author of these poems, little is known about this person and even his name is difficult to determine. Instead of his Tibetan name, he uses Sanskrit renderings in longer (*rad+Ne bI dza ya*) or shorter (*bI dza* or *rad+Ne*) forms. However, these are often problematic, which is also mentioned in an anonymous note below one of his poems: "Ha, there are many mistakes in the name that you applied to yourself!"[42] Apparently, also others reflected upon the Tibetan rendering of his name, since below yet another one of his poems his Tibetan name is suggested scribbled in vanishing letters:[43]

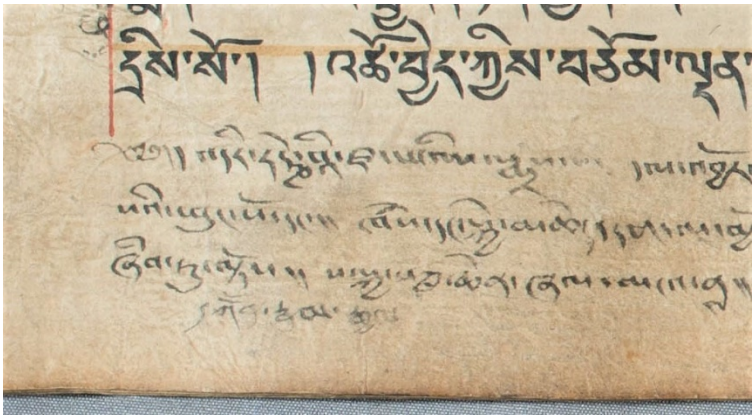

Fig. 7: An idiosyncratic rendering of Ratnavijaya's name (rad+Ne bI dza ya) in the first line of the notes and a suggestion for its Tibetan equivalent (dkon mchog rnam rgyal) at the bottom (mdo, vol. ra, fol. 183b).

The fact that his true name is indeed Dkon mchog rnam rgyal is also confirmed in one of his compositions that features this appellation, albeit slightly hidden in the midst of ornate poetry:[44]

> These are the words of the Conqueror, victorious in the present and the future.

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[42] Namgyal mdo, vol. nya, fol. 34b, bottom margin: *khyed kyis tab [btab] pa'i tshan [mtshan] la nor so mang ha*. That this note refers to the writing of his name is not only indicated by its content but also made explicit by dots linking the note to the name.

[43] Cf. Namgyal mdo, vol. ra, fol. 183b, bottom margin. The Tibetan contraction (*dkoog rnam rgyal*) can be unpacked to *dkon mchog rnam rgyal*.

[44] Namgyal mdo, vol. ya, fol. 219a, bottom margin: *'di phyi rgyal ba rgyal ba'i gsung/ lo res 4n [bzhin] du ma chag [chags] par/ gsung sgrogs byed pa'i rgyal ma rgyal// ma g.yengs klog pa'i mchod gnas rgyal/ khyad par dkoog [dkon mchog] rnaM rgyal rgyal/ nyoongs [nyon mongs] g.yul las gnyen po rgyal/ yon gyi bdag mo ngo 'tshar [mtshar] che/ dge tshogs byang chub chenor [chen por] bsngo//*. His name is spelled out in the fifth line.

> May Rgyal ma,[45] who organises a recitation of these words
> Every year, without interruption, prevail!
> May the officiating lamas (*mchod gnas*), who read out without distraction, prevail!
> In particular, may Dkon mchog rnam rgyal prevail!
> May the antidote against the army of afflictions prevail!
> The female sponsor is truly wonderful!
> I dedicate the accumulation of virtue towards great awakening.

As a side remark, this poem also testifies that women engaged with the manuscript collections. In particular, their role as sponsors (*yon bdag mo*/*sbyin bdag mo*) for the production or the recitation of Buddhist texts seems to be the only context in which female agency is explicitly acknowledged. This is also documented in other instances of the Sūtra collection,[46] and it was also previously noted as a larger phenomenon in Tibetan book production.[47]

Historical details about Dkon mchog rnam rgyal—or Ratnavijaya in Sanskrit—are lacking. In the poem above, he considers himself among the officiating lamas (*mchod gnas*) who carry out the recitation. On another occasion he refers to himself as "a young monk" (*btsun chung*),[48] and his compositions evidently have an overtly religious tone. At times, they also convey a moralizing attitude, perhaps directed at fellow reciters with less devotion to morally sanctioned behaviour. The dangers of consuming alcohol are particularly addressed:[49]

> While you see the faults of drinking,
> Why do you drink, you sinner?
> Due to alcohol, one will proceed to the three lower existences.
> To be specific, one will end up in the hell realm.
> This again is only a reason for crying and weeping.
> There is no other enemy like intoxication.
> It is said that those who drink alcohol

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[45] I tend to read this as a personal name, but it could also be an ornate epithet, or, if it should be corrected to *rgyal mo*, refer to a queen.

[46] See, e.g., Namgyal mdo, vol. da, fol. 92a, right margin (*yon dag [bdag] mo*); vol. tsa, fol. 81a, bottom margin (*yon dag [bdag] pho mo*); vol. zha, fol. 77b, bottom margin (*yon dag [bdag] mo*); vol. ya, fol. 267a, right margin (*sbyin pa'i bdag mo*).

[47] See Diemberger 2016.

[48] See Namgyal mdo, vol. zha, fol. 143b1–2.

[49] Namgyal mdo, vol. wa, 271a, bottom to right margin: *chang gi nyes pa mthong bzhin du// blo ngan khyod ni 'thung ngaM ci// chang gis ngan song 3 [gsum] du 'gro// khyad par myal ba'i gling du 'gro// de yang ngu 'bod kho na'i rgyu// myos 'gyur lta bu'i dgra gzhan med// chang 'thung ba'i mi dag ni // nam yang bde ba mi thob gsungs// sprang po bI dza'i bris//*. Similar contents are also discussed in another poem, see Namgyal mdo, vol. za, fol. 14b, bottom margin.

Will never obtain happiness.

This is a drastic warning, and it is easy to imagine that Himalayan communities perceived alcohol as problematic. That intoxication may have been an issue even during the handling of Buddhist texts is suggested by another marginal memo. In one instance, apparently meaningless letters are scribbled on the margin of one of the folios of the Prajñāpāramitā set, perhaps written to test a new pen. A note below the scribbling, carved by what appears to be the same hand and squeezed in between an empty space of the main text, shows a revealing attempt at explaining these letters: "Based on this scribble, I was writing being drunk on alcohol."[50]

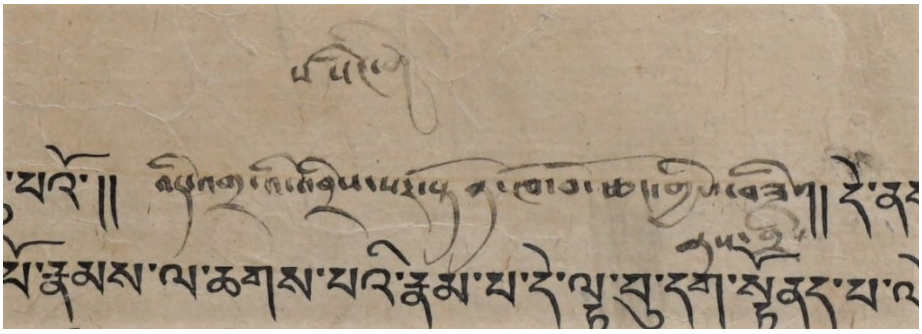

Fig. 8: Drunken scribble on the margin of the Prajñāpāramitā set ('bum, vol. ta, fol. 305a)?

Was the author of the note really under the influence of alcohol, or—perhaps more likely—was this intended as a joke? Notes such as this one come with considerable difficulties in interpretation and leave one guessing about the exact conditions that lead to its production.

The same is true for several other notes that on the one hand carry a critical message and call for proper behaviour in engaging with the manuscript collections but on the other appear exaggerated in their tone and hence are more likely intended as teasers rather than serious advice. Some of these notes explicitly address those individuals handling the manuscripts during recitation, which further strengthens the assumption that ritual recitation provided an opportunity for the use of manuscript margins as sources for writing. One of the recurring issues here is the proper performance of the actual recitation, including the development of an appropriate mental attitude: "Officiating lamas

[50] Namgyal 'bum, vol. ta, fol. 305a, upper margin: *'di 'gra ['dra] 'i 'bris par sten kho bo chang gyis [gis] bzi nas bri*. Note that *kho bo* could also indicate a third person pronoun, that is, "he" instead of "I." That the writer is indeed referring to himself, in a very much self-ironic gesture, is supported by the observation that the handwriting of the two notes appears to be identical.

reading out the Sūtra collection, you must distinguish provisional and ultimate meaning. Do not engage in idle chitchat! Do not deceive male and female patrons!"[51] In this context, too, the idea of karmic retribution is stressed: "Officiating lamas, reading out the Sūtra collection, do not disregard karma, the law of cause and effect!"[52] Just as the veneration and correct recitation of volumes of canonical Buddhist texts obtains tremendous merit, inadequate handling of the volumes can have corresponding negative effects. Warnings against such negative karmic consequences are frequent, however usually not as graphic as the following: "Officiating lamas, if you do not recite clearly, your tongues will be ploughed like a field!"[53] At least some of these notes also transport a good sense of humour next to their cautionary contents. This can be inferred from their general stylistic features, but it is sometimes also made explicit by the onomatopoetic addition of the sound of laughter. The following example illustrates both aspects well: "Renunciate monks, it will be beneficial if you refrain from all these many causes and consequences of your actions—Ha, ha, brother (*a po*), take good care!"[54] Also the note quoted at the very beginning of this article, which is in fact found twice on the margins of the Prajñāpāramitā set,[55] falls into this category. All of these notes testify that manuscript margins were also used as a means for different forms of communication, not all of which were concerned with lofty religious ideals.

Another type of manuscript usage is reflected in the numerous stock phrases, reproductions of words from the main text, writing exercises, and even meaningless scribbles that occupy a significant portion of the margins. The interpretation of these is somewhat ambiguous too. All of the examples discussed so far, despite their different natures, aimed at communicating a certain message to a particular audience—be it the correction of a textual mistake, the report of manuscript maintenance, the exploration of its textual contents, the display of poetry, or the use of manuscript space for the

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[51] Namgyal mdo, vol. tsa, fol. 81a, bottom margin: *'do [mdo] sde rlog [klog] pa'i bla mchod tsho brang [drang] don dang nye [nges] don gnyis shan phyed dgos pa lagso [lags so]/ kha lta gog po ma 'dzod [mdzod] cig/ yon dag [bdag] pho mo ma slu cig*.

[52] Namgyal mdo, vol. tsa, fol. 33b, left margin: *'do [mdo] sde rlog [klog] pa'i bla mchod tsho las rgyu 'bras khyad du ma gsod 'dzod [mdzod]*.

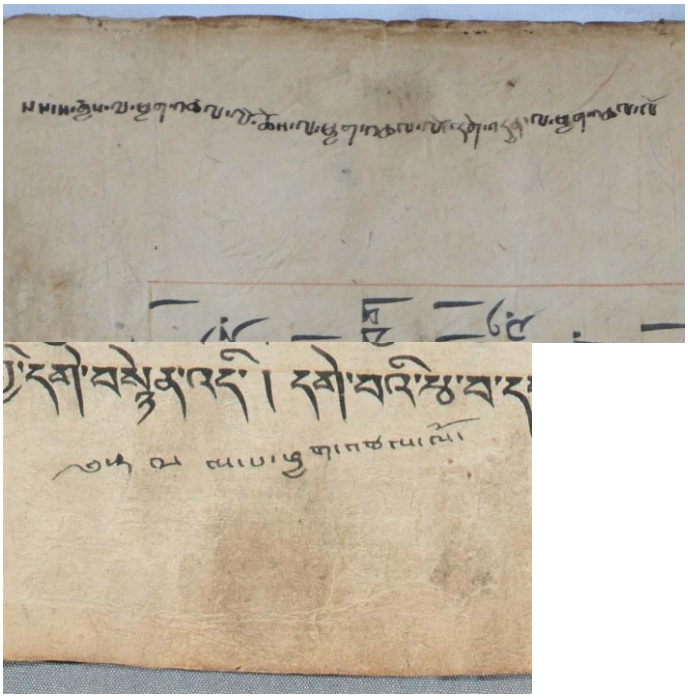
[53] Namgyal mdo, vol. tsa, fol. 112a9: *bla ma mchod tsho blog [klog] dag par ma ton na lce la zhing rmo bar rda [bda'] 'o//*.

[54] Namgyal mdo, vol. la, fol. 322a, bottom margin: *rab dbyung [byung] btsun pa tsho las rgyu 'bras mang po da [de] yo de ~~dum~~ la 'dzems na phan par rda' [gda'] sde// a po legs por gnyer 'dzod he he//*. It seems like the syllable *dum* has been replaced by *la*, written on top of the former.

[55] Cf. Namgyal 'bum, vol. ca, fol. 103a, bottom margin: *dpad [pad] ma kyab [skyab] pa khyod 'chi ba yong dran pa sten*. Further in the same volume, fol. 155a, bottom margin: *pad ma skyab pa khyod mchi ['chi] ba yong dran pa sten*.

exchange of notes. This communicational element, however, seems to be lacking or at least incidental in the following examples.

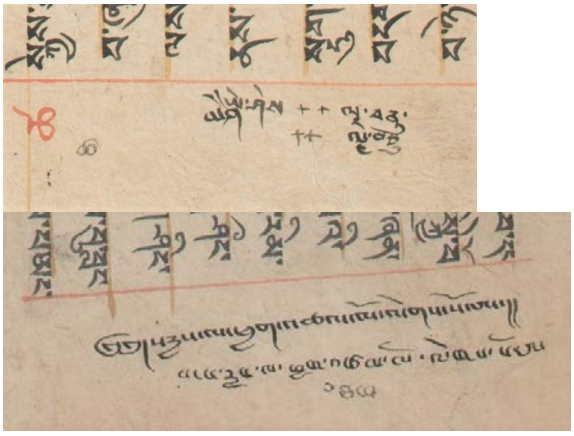
This claim may appear, at first sight, somewhat contradictory to the textual contents of what can be meaningfully identified as "stock phrases." Many of the manuscript folios show traces of praises to the common pantheon of Buddhist veneration: the Buddha (*sangs rgyas*), the Dharma (*chos*), and the Sangha (*dge 'dun*), the Three Jewels together (*dkon mchog gsum*), the Conquerors of the three times (*dus gsum rgyal ba*), all Tathāgathas (*de bzhin gshegs pa*), Bodhisattvas (*byang chub sems dpa'*), and all glorious, highest lamas (*bla ma dam pa rnams*), etc. While these certainly reflect a culturally deeply ingrained devotion towards Buddhism, it is questionable whether this really is the driving force behind their production. Given their mostly clumsy handwriting and generally careless application, it seems likely that many reflect first attempts at writing by a beginner's hand, considering that these phrases were part of the basic and well-known vocabulary. It is also possible that some of such notes were carried out not as writing exercises, but even more casually as random scribbles to pass the time, perhaps during long sessions of recitation.[56]



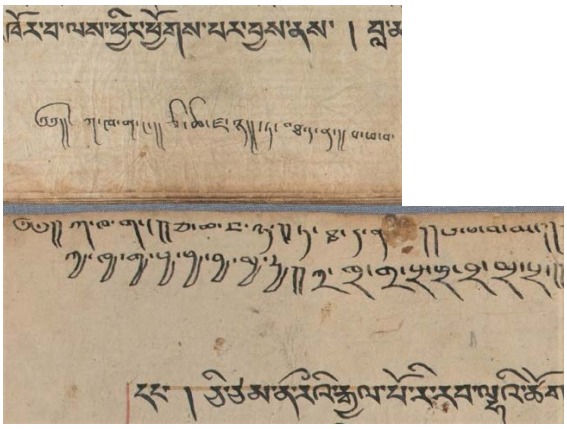
Figs. 9ab: Scribbled praises on the margins of 'bum, vol. ka, fol. 46b (a) and mdo, vol. ya, fol. 154a (b).

[56] Curious in this regard are the numerous instances of praises to Dpal sras 'bum found on folios of the Prajñāpāramitā set.

A similar case of such usage is the copying of text, which is observed on many leaves of both collections. This may involve copying individual words and phrases from the main text—in some instances even replication of page numbers, as shown in the examples below—but also the reproduction and repetition of earlier notes. These cases may also be realistically interpreted as writing exercises or mere acts of boredom. The same holds true for the numerous instances that feature the jotting down of characters of the Tibetan alphabet, a well-known phenomenon in Tibetan manuscripts. These often consist of linear lists of a smaller or larger amount of basic characters of the Tibetan alphabet, at times also letter combinations. Since some of these writings were carried out by very clumsy hands, it seems reasonable to assume that children or illiterates were involved in their production.

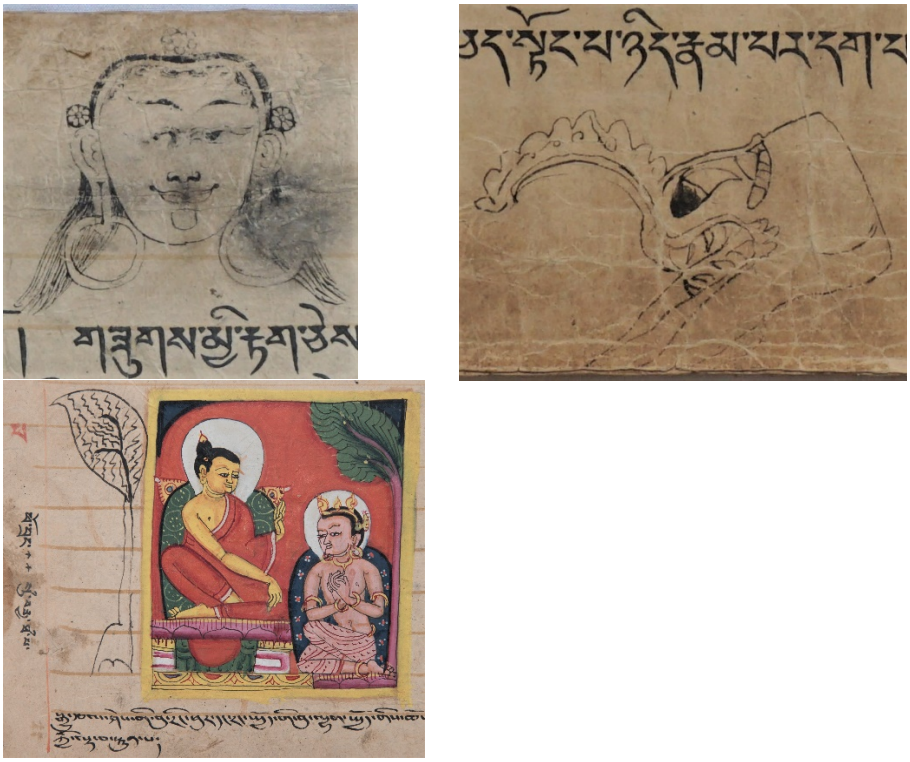


Figs. 10ab: Replication of page numbers on the margins of mdo, vol. tsha, fol. 250a (a); repetition of a praise to the Buddha on mdo, vol. wa, fol. 244b (b).



Figs. 11ab: Jottings of characters of the Tibetan alphabet on mdo, vol. ca, fol. 137b (a) and mdo, vol. pa, fol. 259b (b).

A broader range of engagement can also be observed with regard to the drawings found on a few of the manuscripts folios. Some of these include depictions of figures from the Buddhist pantheon that are artistically ambitioned and appear to be inspired by the original illuminations of the manuscripts or other standard depictions of Buddhist art. Others are merely quick scribblings, at times stylistically akin to comics and with a great visual variety. Further, as in the textual notes, there are also cases of apparently thoughtless reproduction from the original illuminations. The following pictorial examples give an impression of the spectrum.



Figs. 12abc: Skilled drawing on 'bum, vol. ka, fol. 133b (a); comic-style sketching on 'bum, vol. ta, fol. 23a (b); copy of a tree from official illuminations on mdo, vol. pha, fol. 300a (c).

Despite their differences in style and ambition, all of them are later additions and not part of the original design of the manuscripts. Like the various types of textual notes, they also make use of the blank space of manuscripts margins for their respective purposes.

These visual and textual examples demonstrate that the manuscript collections were handled by a large variety of people with different concerns and motivations, which included concerned scholar-monks, ambitious poets, bored reciters, and careless children alike. Beside

those rare instances in which traces allow for a connection between the notes and their authors, such as the cases of Klu sgrub rgya mtsho, Dkon mchog rnam rgyal, and a few others, most of the agents will remain anonymous. Their interactions with the manuscripts, however, are manifested on the material itself, and in the long run their engagement ensured not only textual refinement and maintenance but also contributed to their deterioration.

Misuse, neglect, and abandonment of manuscripts

Given their relative old age, the manuscripts of the Sūtra collection and the Prajñāpāramitā set are in a considerably good condition. This conservation was certainly achieved through the favourable climatic conditions in Upper Mustang but also through the social care that was extended towards Buddhist manuscript collections.

At the same time, social usage, mostly in the context of ritual recitations, provided the circumstances for alterations of the manuscripts and for using their paper for purposes different from their original intention. A clear line between use and misuse, however, is difficult to draw. While even concerned monks such as Klu sgrub rgya mtsho and poets like Dkon mchog rnam rgyal in fact performed alterations to the manuscripts, the general tone of their notes suggests that in their self-perception, and quite likely in the perception of others as well, their writing intended to ensure the proper treatment of the manuscripts and hence added to their renown and long-term preservation. A child's alphabetical scribble, in contrast, was perhaps carried out with no special intention at all, but it was certainly perceived by the adult others as damaging the manuscripts. This is also illustrated by several attempts at the erasure of inappropriate scribbling on the margins.

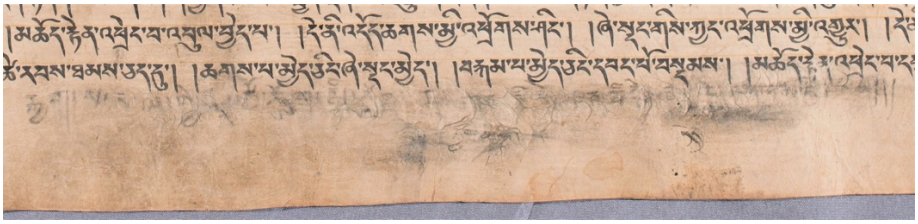


Fig. 13: Removal of inappropriate jottings (mdo, vol. ta, fol. 45a).

Despite the enormous importance attributed to Buddhist canonical manuscripts, the timeworn traces of human interaction testify that access to the manuscripts was not strictly limited to a considerate religious elite but also included a broader range of social agents. Communal ritual recitations of canonical manuscript collections often

included a large gathering of diverse people,[57] and it is conceivable that such events provided the opportunity for a less well-protected engagement with the manuscripts. Oral accounts of Himalayan communities also report cases in which Buddhists manuscripts were handed over to children as a means for the study and practise of reading and recitation, but were then handled with limited care.[58] Further, also unfavourable storage conditions and a lack of attention can generally lead to water damage and subsequent moulding, thus adding to the long-term deterioration of manuscripts.

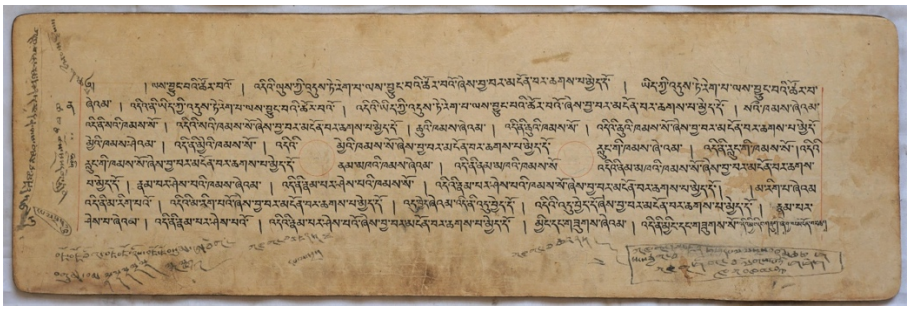


Fig. 14: Signs of long-term usage: stains of liquid spills and human touch; jotting and scribbling ('bum, vol. na, fol. 271a).

As noted above, minor damages are rectified through appropriate repair measures: the replacement of lacking pages, the stitching together of tears, and the patching up of holes are common procedures. When a specific body of canonical manuscripts is regarded as overtly timeworn and charitable sponsors allow for the production of a new set, the older one often remains with the other texts of the temple or monastery but is no longer used in recitation or ritual. Cases of the outright disposal of manuscripts are rare but do occur. Especially in the case of smaller institutions, entire temples or monasteries are occasionally abandoned and their respective possessions, including their manuscripts, are left to decay. Individual pages of manuscripts are also used in the repair of others,[59] but if a particular manuscript or a larger collection is indeed seen as unfit for further use, it may be discarded in appropriate ways. Such older manuscripts are sometimes placed in stūpas, where they retain their

[57] As described by Childs 2005, public recitations were headed and directed by religious specialists, but their performance allowed a significant part of the lay population of a village to directly engage with canonical manuscripts.

[58] Such stories are fairly common, and while I have heard of them in different settings and locations, I never actually witnessed a case where canonical manuscripts were given to children.

[59] See Iwao 2017 for some details on the reuse of sheets in the context of canonical manuscripts from Dunhuang.

function as an object of blessing and veneration,[60] but there are also reports that texts are ritually disposed by burning or throwing them into a river. However, these are rather extreme measures, and fortunately the Namgyal manuscripts were not exposed to such actions.

Concluding suggestions: Buddhist canonical manuscripts as communal objects

As explicated in the present investigation, the Namgyal manuscripts reflect a wide spectrum of human engagement that ranges from their laborious production and careful refinement and maintenance to their crucial role in communal or individual recitation rituals and their usage as a material basis for scribbling and sketching. One guiding principle in these interactions is the idea of karmic retribution. As explicitly stated in various notes, all aspects related to the production and proper usage of canonical volumes yield considerable meritorious potential, but there are also warnings about the dangers and karmic consequences of improper usage. Especially in light of the latter, it may be asked how the very same manuscripts regarded as highest objects of Buddhist veneration and sources for the ultimate wellbeing of the community can be employed as paper for exchanging sarcastic notes and sketches?

There are certainly various ways to account for this. As part of their long history, both the Sūtra collection and the Prajñāpāramitā set have moved to different locations,[61] and it is to be assumed that engagement with the manuscripts differed depending on the place and the people handling them. It may further be assumed that the manuscripts' main practical purpose, namely their usage in recitation, provided a setting in which interactions with them were less well-protected and depended largely on the particular conditions in which the respective rituals were conducted.

Yet another, more general, and probably more significant answer arrives if this consideration includes not only those phenomena that are readily associated with the mishandling of manuscripts, such as

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[60] One example of such a case are the manuscripts fragments that came to light recently during the deconstruction of stūpas at Matho, Ladakh. For a survey of the manuscripts and their historical background, see Tauscher 2019. Aurel Stein had also suggested that the textual collections of the Dunhuang manuscripts could be regarded as "sacred waste," but this idea was more recently disputed, see, e.g., Rong 1999. The ritual burying of Gandhāran manuscripts is described by Salomon 2009. For a more general overview of the "death" and disposal of religious texts, see Myrvold 2010.

[61] Indications regarding their mobile history are discussed in Luczanits & Viehbeck (forthcoming, Concluding remarks).

children's scribblings, but also the other notes of more considerate content. How, for example, is it justified that Nam mkha' (see above), after deleting a mere four syllables of the original text, reports about this engagement in a note that extends to over half of the bottom margin of the respective folio? Why is it possible that Dkon mchog rnam rgyal, no doubt an ambitious poet, adorns the Sūtra collection with eighteen poems in his name, and quite likely several more? How can Klu sgrub rgya mtsho, who has done much for the reparation and maintenance of the Sūtra collection, document his interventions not only on separate paper slips, added to the collection for future reference, but also and in the same way on the margins of the manuscript folios that he intends to preserve?

These activities make more sense when such volumes of canonical literature are viewed as what might be meaningfully called "communal objects,"[62] pertaining to their production as well as their usage. As indicated, historical details on the conditions of production are scarce. However, according to the fragmentary historical information available from both the dedicatory notes found on some of the volumes and a few of the later marginal notes,[63] certain features pertaining to their communal character become obvious. The production of these volumes involved, and could in fact only be achieved by, the joint efforts of a number of individuals: different sponsors who provided the means for their production,[64] scribes and other craftsmen who had the skills to execute the production, a monastic body that ensured the proper consecration of the volumes, and many others. While the volumes were thus produced by certain people in a certain context, they emerged as a communal enterprise. This character is captured well in the following marginal note:[65]

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[62] It is striking that this conception as communal objects also has been argued for in the context of Buddhist manuscripts from Cambodia that contain chants for end-of-life rituals and hence show many similarities with regard to practical performance and they ways manuscripts connect different people or groups within Buddhist societies; see Walker 2018, 48–99.

[63] Since these are discussed in Luczanits and Viehbeck (forthcoming: Concluding remarks), they will not be repeated here.

[64] Information on sponsors is scarce for the present volumes, but it seems likely that individual volumes were in fact sponsored by different people. Such is obvious, for example, for a similar Sūtra collection from Lang Monastery (*glang gdon pa*) in Bicher, Upper Dolpo, in the case of which the existing poetic prefaces provide more information on their production. For observations with regard to some of these prefaces, see Heller 2007 and Heller 2009. A more detailed study of these prefaces is envisioned by the current author.

[65] Namgyal mdo, vol. tsa, fol. 121a: *dam chos ngo mtshar can/ yon dag [bdag] ngo mtshar can/ 'chod nas [mchod gnas] ngo mtshar can/ 'gris 'khan [bris mkhan] ngo mtshar can/ shu gu ngo mtshar can/ gnas khang ngo mtshar can/ gnas pa'i mi rnams la snying rje che ba/ jams [byams] pa'i gnyen dang 'grogs//*.

Wonderful highest Dharma!
Wonderful sponsors!
Wonderful officiating lamas (*mchod gnas*)!
Wonderful scribes!
Wonderful paper!
Wonderful dwelling!
May the people who live there be associated
With kind and loving companions!

It might be also reasonable to assume that this communal vision of the volumes facilitated their movement to different locations, depending on local conditions and communal needs. This vision is definitely intrinsically connected to their ritual usage, which analogous to their production enabled the convention of various agents. Both of these aspects, namely a vision regarding such canonical volumes as communal objects as well as the factual use supporting this vision in a long-term perspective and providing the context for actual communal interaction with them, are central features in the explanation of the forms of human engagement reflected on the manuscript margins. They encouraged caretakers like Klu sgrub rgya mtsho to repair damages and fix other problems of the collection and to document this on the margins for his contemporaries and future generations. They inspired Dkon mchog rnam rgyal to share his poetic vision of the volumes and to admonish other users about their proper treatment. They allowed others to exchange sarcastic notes, and they also permitted the manuscripts to fall into the hands of children who scribbled their first letters. In other words: they provide access to the manuscripts as communal objects.

The communal character of these and similar Tibetan canonical volumes is perhaps underlined when compared with manuscript traditions from other cultural contexts. A sizable amount of research has been performed with regard to the marginalia on European medieval manuscripts.[66] While these also reflect a considerable range of human engagement—offensive remarks, including one of the first recorded usages of the F word in the English language that is found in a marginal note of a fifteenth-century manuscript,[67] depictions of weird creatures, and sexual obscenities are amongst the most well-

[66] Particularly well-known is Erik Kwakkel's academic work and his popular blog about various aspects and interesting marginalia of medieval manuscripts: https://erikkwakkel.tumblr.com/; accessed on July 16, 2020.

[67] The marginal note was added apparently in 1528; see Wilson 1993 for an early account. More recently, this has been popularised and discussed on different social media channels. I thank Helmut Tauscher for pointing this detail out to me.

known and recently well-marketed features[68]—they also point to a fundamental difference. Those marginalia studied in the European context typically reflect either the activities of the producers, that is, the scribes or illuminators of the original manuscripts, or, to a lesser extent, of the people who were able to receive their textual contents, that is, the readers who at times also were the private owners of the manuscripts. In both cases, the agents are limited to a rather narrow, highly specialised, and certainly elitist social group. The margins of Tibetan canonical manuscripts, in contrast, exhibit the engagement of a much more diverse body of agents in the context of a range of practises in which reading plays only a secondary role as well as in the long-term development of the manuscripts in different local and temporal settings. Despite these discrepancies and with all caveats regarding the respective cultural specificities, the diverse research that has been produced on marginalia in other cultural contexts may act a fruitful perspective to advance our understanding of Tibetan manuscripts, an avenue, however, that is too vast to be taken within the limits of the present preliminary orientation.

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Namgyal manuscripts: all images of both the Sūtra collection and the Prajñāpāramitā set are currently prepared to be made accessible in the "Archives" of *Resources of Kanjur & Tanjur Studies* (rKTs):

[68] For the monetisation of medieval marginalia on social media, see the online article by Kate Wiles in *History Today*: https://www.historytoday.com/monetising-past-medieval-marginalia-and-social-media; accessed on July 16, 2020.

https://www.istb.univie.ac.at/kanjur/rktsneu/sub/archives.php (accessed September 28, 2020). A handlist of the textual contents of the manuscripts is already available under "Resources": https://www.istb.univie.ac.at/kanjur/rktsneu/handlist/index.php?coll=Ng (accessed September 28, 2020).

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