REVIEW ARTICLE

The Discovery of "the Oldest Buddhist Manuscripts"

Еномото **Fumio**

Richard Salomon. Ancient Buddhist Scrolls from Gandhāra: The British Library Kharoṣṭhī Fragments, with Contributions by Raymond Allchin and Mark Barnard. Seattle: University of Washington Press; London: The British Library, 1999. pp. xx + 273, with 34 colour plates, 59 figures, 3 maps.

In 1996 the news of the discovery of "the oldest Buddhist manuscripts" (i. e., the oldest extant Buddhist manuscripts which can be dated) appeared in the international press. The book under review is the first comprehensive study of these manuscripts. It is written in a style easily accessible to the nonspecialist reader, without compromising scholarly standards. Since the full understanding of the significance of "the oldest Buddhist manuscripts" seems to require a general survey of the history of early Buddhist tradition and literature, the present review begins with my attempt at such a survey.

I

Oral Tradition of Buddhist Texts

Since before the time of the oldest Indic scripture, Rgveda, which is believed to have been compiled into the extant form about 1200 B.C., sacred texts have in principle been transmitted orally. They were recited from preceptors to their pupils by oral tradition instead of being written down. This tradition continues even today in India. In Vedic times, and perhaps throughout all Indian history, uttered speech, which was considered the true manifestation of language, was believed to have religious effect (e.g., mantra or Buddhist dhāraṇī). The Buddhist canon, which claims itself to

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be the repository of the sayings of the Buddha (ca. 5-4 century B.C.) and his disciples, have, in principle, also been transmitted by oral tradition. Vedic texts, whose forerunner is the Rgveda, are preserved in Old Indo-Aryan (or Sanskrit in a broad sense), while the Buddha is thought to have spoken in an eastern dialect of Middle Indo-Aryan, which developed from Old Indo-Aryan.

The sayings of the Buddha and his disciples were gradually compiled into the early Buddhist canon, which consisted of sūtra (discourse) collection and vinaya (code of monastic laws) collection. It was propagated throughout India and was rendered into other dialects of Middle Indo-Aryan. Gradually the Buddhist order divided into about eighteen sects (nikāya) in stages. Concurrently, the early Buddhist canon developed differently in each sect, and canonical languages unique to those sects were established. This is the reason why the extant early Buddhist canons transmitted by different sects are not identical in content, language or structure. Regarding structure, some sects classified the sūtra collection into four parts, others into five. While most of the sects called the four or five parts "Āgama," the Theravāda sect named their five-part sūtra collection the "Nikāya."

As for the canonical languages, that of the Theravāda sect is Pāli, which is thought to have been a western dialect of Middle Indo-Aryan while that of the Dharmaguptaka sect was Gāndhārī, a northwestern dialect of Middle Indo-Aryan. The Sarvāstivāda sect also used Gāndhārī at first, but gradually changed to Sanskrit. According to recent discoveries in Eastern Turkestan, the canonical texts of the Dharmaguptaka sect were also later transmitted in Sanskrit. It is known that the original languages of Buddhist texts translated at an early time into Chinese were most often Gāndhārī or similar languages. However, the later the texts were translated into Chinese, the greater the chance that the original texts were more Sanskritized. As for Buddhist texts in Sanskrit, they range from those in Sanskrit which incorporates many features of Middle Indo-Aryan (the so-called Buddhist hybrid Sanskrit) to those in pure Sanskrit.

The history of script is not as long as that of the oral tradition in India. Apart from the undeciphered script of the Indus Valley civilisation, it is held that the Aśoka inscriptions, that is, Aśoka's edicts inscribed on stones dating from the third century B. C. and remaining in various parts of India, are the oldest Indian script. One of the inscriptions enumerates the names of the Buddha's seven sermons, which are the oldest records known referring to the Buddha and his sermons. Unfortunately, the contents of the sermons are not cited. Thus Buddhist texts had a long history of oral transmission before they were put down in writing.

¹ See J.-I. Chung and K. Wille, "Einige Bhikşuvinayavibhanga-Fragmente der Dharmaguptakas in der Sammlung Pelliot," in H. Bechert et al., eds., *Untersuchungen zur buddhistischen Literatur* 2, Sanskrit-Wörterbuch der buddhistischen Texte aus den Turfan-Funden, Beiheft 8 (Göttingen, 1997), 47-94.

Writing of Buddhist Texts

Buddhist chronicles in Pāli tell us that the hitherto recited Buddhist texts were written down in Sri Lanka in the early first century B.C. when a severe famine occurred. As the population diminished, the Buddhist order feared that Buddhism would perish, for once monks who memorized and recited those texts were dead, the texts themselves would disappear. Thus the Buddhist order wrote down the texts in order to preserve them for posterity. Another legend says that King Kaniska (the late first or early to middle second century A.D.) ordered Buddhist texts to be inscribed on copper plates and kept in a stūpa in Kashmir of northern India. Yet the written or inscribed Buddhist texts themselves are not extant. Incidentally, Chinese Buddhist texts were also inscribed on stones, which are much more durable than paper (the usual writing material), as a precaution against the disappearance of the Buddhist doctrine. Such a precaution was believed necessary both because Buddhism was persecuted several times in China, and also because the mo-fa **\frac{1}{2}\$ theory, which held that the Buddhist teachings would soon disappear, became widely accepted.

"The oldest Buddhist manuscripts" are made of birch bark. Birch bark was used as writing material in Gandhāra and its surroundings as well as Central Asia, while palm (tāla) leaves were generally used in other regions of India. Of the regions above, Central Asia was the first to begin using paper which had been invented for writing material in China. It was only much later that the use of paper spread throughout India.

The manuscripts are written in Gāndhārī language with Kharoṣṭhī script, one of two scripts used in classical India. This script was written right to left and was used in Gandhāra, its surrounding areas and Central Asia only for several centuries before and after the first century A.D. The other script, Brāhmī and its derivatives, was written left to right. It was more widespread and used over a longer period in India. The present Indian scripts are all derived from Brāhmī. The manuscripts also include a fragment of a Brāhmī manuscript, which is presumed to be part of the oldest extant Brāhmī manuscript. However, it is not a Buddhist but a medical text.

Buddhist texts, especially sūtras and vinayas, were usually transmitted by oral tradition in India (as well as Sri Lanka) even after texts were beginning to be written down. This can be inferred from the fact that, during the late fourth to early fifth centuries, most Chinese Āgamas were translated from texts memorized by Indian monks. Furthermore, during the same period, Fa-xian 法题, who left China in order to search for the Indic originals of vinaya texts, had great trouble finding such manuscripts in India and Sri Lanka. Therefore when Buddhism was destroyed in India proper, and managed to survive only in its surrounding areas such as Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka, the above-mentioned fear came true: most of the early Buddhist texts

² E.g., Dīpavaṃsa 20.20f.

³ The Da-Tang xi-yu-ji 大唐西域記, Taishō No. 2087, Vol. 51, 887a.

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in Indic, which were transmitted by oral tradition, were lost when Buddhist monks reciting those texts disappeared. Because these texts were written in different languages and differed in content depending upon the sect, their disapperance represented an immense loss for the scholarly study of Buddhism. Incidentally, Mahāyāna sūtras, which are thought to have been gradually formed from about the first century B.C., are presumed in many cases to have been written down from the beginning because the texts themselves instruct the readers to copy them. In fact, abundant copies of some Mahāyāna sūtras are preserved in manuscript form in Nepal. However, the Indic texts of other Mahāyāna sūtras are not extant at all.

Among the early schools of Buddhism, only the canon of the Theravāda sect, which survives in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, has been preserved in its entirety. These texts, preserved in Pāli, are the primary material for understanding the thought of the Buddha and early Buddhism. Yet it is suspected that some of the Buddha's sermons found in Pāli Buddhist texts may include doctrinal statements unique to the Theravāda sect. Therefore when we wish to discover the original thought of the Buddha, it is indispensable to compare the Pāli texts with early Buddhist texts of other sects. Unfortunately, there used to be little material, other than the Chinese translations of early Buddhist texts, available to us.

However, since the end of the last century, fragments of early Buddhist texts in Indic belonging to sects that perished in India have been discovered in succession in Buddhist ruins in Central Asia and regions surrounding India. Most of the fragments, written in Sanskrit, can be ascribed to the Sarvāstivāda sect. They often date to periods much later than the translations of early Buddhist texts into Chinese. Indeed only a few of those fragments seem to date back to several centuries A. D., but their exact date is difficult to discern.

Apart from those of the Sarvāstivāda sect, fragments which can be ascribed to the Dharmaguptaka sect have also been discovered. To begin with, a fragment of the so-called "Gāndhārī Dharmapada" (according to Richard Salomon, it should be called the "Khotan Dharmapada") in the Gāndhārī language was discovered in Central Asia. It dates to the second century A. D. This verse text corresponds to the Dhammapada of the Theravāda sect, arguably the most famous text in Buddhism. Other fragments which can be ascribed to the Dharmaguptaka sect have been discovered in Buddhist ruins in Central Asia, but all of them are written on paper in Sanskrit. This suggests that these texts are of a much later date.

Thus it is especially welcome that some very old Buddhist manuscripts, which Salmon concludes as belonging to the Dharmaguptaka sect, have recently been discovered. Since these texts are dated by Salomon to the early first century A.D., they have been called the "oldest Buddhist manuscripts." Their discovery is comparable in importance to that of the Dead Sea scrolls.

As mentioned above, it is necessary to compare early Buddhist texts of as many sects as possible when we try to understand the original thought of the Buddha. It is

generally assumed that the older the date of a manuscript is, the more original the content of the manuscript, since it is less developed or marred by corruptions caused by transcribal errors. Thus these manuscripts of the British Library, which are the oldest datable Buddhist manuscripts extant, are very important material in the search for the truly oldest Buddhist text which renders most faithfully the Buddha's sayings.

II

The book under review, dealing with the manuscripts, consists of eight chapters, whose subjects and their main contents are as follows.

The preface describes how and when the British Library's Oriental and India Office Collections acquired the manuscripts and informs us that the book is the first volume of a series published under the auspices of the British Library/University of Washington Early Buddhist Manuscripts Project.

Chapter 1 deals with Gandhāra and Gandhāran Buddhism which form the background of the manuscripts. Its geographic situation has given Gandhāra an important historical role, for it was here that the Indian world encountered and interacted with the Iranian cultural sphere. Regarding Buddhism in Gandhara, despite the general assumption that Buddhism was first introduced to Gandhara around the middle of the third century B.C. under the sponsorship of King Aśoka, only one original Gandhāran Buddhist text was previously extant, i.e., the "Gāndhārī Dharmapada (Khotan Dharmapada)." However, recent discoveries have begun to show that Buddhist texts were rendered into, or even originally composed in, the Gandhari language. The manuscript fragments taken up in this book give us a direct look at a random sampling of a text collection, probably belonging to the Dharmaguptaka sect of the first half of the first century A.D. in Gandhara. They suggest that the Dharmaguptaka sect achieved early success under their Indo-Scythian supporters in Gandhāra, but that the sect subsequently declined with the rise of the Kuṣāṇa Empire (ca. mid-first to third century A.D.), which gave its patronage to the Sarvāstivāda sect. It is important to note that the fragments have no significant reference to or indication of concepts and ideas of Mahāyāna Buddhism. This runs counter to the general belief that Gandhara played a decisive role in the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Chapter 2 describes the contents of the manuscripts. The British Library collection as received by the Library consists of twenty-nine fragmentary scrolls of birch bark manuscripts as well as five clay pots and twenty-six potsherds bearing dedicatory inscriptions in Kharoṣṭhī. The author's investigation has, however, indicated that there may have been originally between twenty-one and thirty-two scrolls, and that there may have been between twenty-three and thirty-four individual texts altogether. The provenance of the collection is presumed to have been somewhere in eastern Afghanistan, possibly the Haḍḍa area. The manuscripts were written using

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reed pens and black ink. With the exception of a Sanskrit medical text written in Brāhmī script of about the Kuṣāṇa period, the texts are written in Gāndhārī. The number of scribal hands is around twenty-one. Although no texts preserve their titles, the texts or their genre types identified so far are as follows:

- A version of the Sangīti-sūtra with an unidentified commentary, and sūtras partly corresponding to the Anguttara-Nikāya of the Pāli canon.
- (2) A commentary on a collection of verses, which partly corresponds to the Suttanipāta, Udāna, Dhammapada, Itivuttaka and Theragāthā of the Pāli canon.
- (3) An abhidharma treatise or commentary discussing topics such as the doctrine that "everything exists", a thesis unique to the Sarvāstivāda sect.
- (4) Verse texts including a version of the Anavatapta-gāthā, a text corresponding to the Pāli Khaggaviṣāṇa-sutta and a slightly different version of the Bhikhuvarga of the Khotan Dharmapada (the so-called Gāndhārī Dharmapada).
- (5) Avadāna texts. Unlike ordinary avadāna texts, most do not contain stories describing the results of actions done in previous lives.
- (6) A stotra, or hymn of praise, to the Buddha in verse.

Chapter 3 discusses Kharoṣṭhī manuscripts discovered earlier. Among those discovered previously in Chinese Central Asia, the Khotan *Dharmapada* was published, but a Hīnayāna version of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* in St. Petersburg and an unidentified text in Sanskrit written on palm leaf kept in Paris remain unpublished. As for those from Afghanistan, a large number of birch bark manuscripts found at and around Haḍḍa have never been properly published. There is also a private collection of palm leaves consisting of seventy fragments, representing parts of twenty-three original manuscripts. The author classifies these previous discoveries into two main types: scrolls containing continuous texts for use in Buddhist monasteries, and small pieces of inscribed bark used, apparently, as charms or amulets.

Chapter 4 deals with the origin and character of the British Library collection. The author proposes the hypothesis that the collection consists of worn and discarded manuscripts ritually interred in a pot. To support his hypothesis, the author gives the following evidence. Physically, it appears that the manuscripts were probably damaged before being deposited in the pot. The textual evidence is the word *likhidago*, "[it is] written", which appears several times in the manuscripts. The author proposes that the scribe who had been assigned to make new copies of the texts contained in the scrolls would have marked them, after he had finished recopying them, as "written," that is, "copied," to indicate that they could be discarded. The hypothesis is also supported by data from other discoveries. The author thinks that written texts were perceived to have some sanctity or spiritual power comparable to that of the relics of deceased holy persons; or rather they were considered as a sort of relic themselves. Here the issue is raised whether and how the hypothetical practice of the

ritual interment of "dead" books is historically related to the Mahāyāna "cult of the book."

Chapter 5 describes the format, material and construction of the manuscript scrolls. The scrolls were rolled up from the bottom with the recto on the inside. The major scrolls were originally about 14 to 25 cm wide and 230 to 250 cm long, making them probably shorter than the Khotan *Dharmapada* scroll. They were constructed of bark strips which were joined together. The author finds it reasonable to assume that Gandhāran scrolls (including those in the British Library) arose as an imitation, or rather an adaptation, of Greek papyrus scrolls that must have been familiar to the inhabitants of Gandhāra. The shift from the scroll to the standard Indian *poṭhī* format, which is apparent among the birch bark manuscripts, coincides with the adoption of the Sanskrit language and the Brāhmī script. It represents the process whereby the distinctive features of Gandhāran linguistic and literary tradition were gradually replaced by mainstream traditions of classical India. It is evident that the scribe avoided refilling his pen with ink before finishing a word, which is sometimes useful for deciphering the location of word boundaries.

Chapter 6 describes the palaeographic and linguistic features of the manuscripts. The palaeographic evidence indicates that the manuscripts were probably written between the earlier part of the first century A.D. and the age of Kanişka (the late first or early to middle second century). It is remarkable that some of the manuscripts have vowel signs which are not usually seen in Kharosthi, such as the vowel r and long vowel \bar{a} . Phonological features of the texts generally coincide with those of inscriptions dating from the first century A.D. Yet, the avadana texts, which were apparently composed locally, display a much simpler and more colloquial style of Gändhäri than the other texts, which were evidently rendered into Gändhäri from one or more different languages. The author suggests that the general weakening of the aspirate/unaspirate contrast among voiced consonants in Gandhari was essentially an internal development within Gandhari rather than the influence of other languages, especially the Iranian languages. He also remarks that the reason why the Gändhäri language was, unlike Päli or Sanskrit, never subjected to any single authoritative orthographic and grammatical standard was essentially a historical accident caused by its premature death: the language fell out of use in India in or not later than the third century A.D.

Chapter 7 discusses the date of the manuscripts. The avadāna texts refer to two historical rulers who can be dated to the early first century A.D. The pots and potsherds associated with the manuscripts can also be dated in or around the first to second century A.D. In conclusion, "a date between about A.D. 10 and 30" is "the most likely one for the composition of the scrolls" (p. 154).

Chapter 8 provides a preliminary evaluation of the corpus of the texts. In this corpus, vinaya texts are strikingly absent, sūtra texts are relatively sparsely represented, while commentaries on verse collections and the avadānas are best represented

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overall. The author thinks that the manuscripts do not represent the surviving portion of a comprehensive written canon of the sort with which we are all familiar in the Pāli canon, although it remains to be seen whether it is significant in indicating that such texts were more frequently rendered into written form than the sūtra and vinaya texts. Regarding the sectarian affiliation of the manuscripts, the following evidence indicates that the texts belong to the Dharmaguptaka sect. First, an early photograph shows the manuscripts inside pot D (one of five pots in the collection), which bears a dedication to the Dharmaguptakas, and second, the Sangīti-sūtra in the manuscripts is virtually identical with the corresponding version in the Chinese Dīrghāgama, which has been attributed to the Dharmaguptakas. The new materials including the British Library collection indicate that the Jalahaad Plain around Hadda, that is, the ancient Nagarāhāra, was quite possibly the principal center of the Dharmaguptaka sect in the early centuries of the Christian era. In conclusion, "[the British Library scrolls] represent a random but reasonably representative fraction of what was probably a much larger set of texts preserved in the library of a monastery of the Dharmaguptaka sect in Nagarāhāra" (p. 181).

The Appendix describes the inscribed pots and potsherds in the British Library collection. With the exception of potsherd 9 bearing an inscription written in Brāhmī script, which could date from as late as the fourth or fifth century A.D., the pottery can be dated to the intermediate early and middle Kuṣāna periods. Some pots, including pot D which contained the scrolls, bear inscriptions without, however, giving the donor's name. This omission is surprising since it fails to indicate who the owner of the karmic merit generated by the gift is. The author explains this fact on the grounds that these pots represented casual or minor gifts for which it was not felt absolutely necessary to record the donative formula, including even the donor's name, in full. He further suggests that the pots were originally containers for drinking water for the residents of the monasteries, but that in some cases they were subsequently used as funerary vessels, either in the conventional sense of burial vessels of the bodily remains of deceased monks, or in the wider sense of vessels containing the "bodily" remains of "dead" books.

This book is full of stimulating and significant information, not only about the British Library collection but also the Kharoṣṭhī documents in general, historical data regarding Gandhāra, the actual usage of early Buddhist literature and so forth. Such information provides the author with firm evidence for treating the topics discussed above carefully, and leads to convincing conclusions on many points. Nevertheless there are some points at which I would like to provide my own views.

Apart from their importance mentioned by the author, these new scrolls provide the key to solving other problems raised in Indological or Buddhist studies. Here is one example. On page 38, the author remarks that the hero of the well-known Vessantara-jātaka of the Pāli canon is called sudaṣā, that is, sudaṣṇa in the

Gāndhārī manuscripts. This sudaṣṇa reminds us of a problematic transcription of the hero's name, su-tuo-sha-na 蘇陀沙拏 cited in the Yi-qie-jing yin-yi 一切經音義 compiled by Xuan-ying 玄應. It has been stated that su-tuo-sha-na corresponds to swðšn in Sogdian and hence Xuan-ying is likely to have known this Sogdian word. However, it is well-known that most of the early Buddhist texts in Chinese translation were from Gāndhārī originals, while we know of no Chinese Buddhist text translated from Sogdian. The word sudaṣṇa found in the Gāndhārī manuscripts would indicate that su-tuo-sha-na is more likely to be a transcription of this Gāndhārī form than of the Sogdian word.

On page 11, the author tells us that one major class of texts of the new fragments which seems to imply structures and genres different from those of more familiar Buddhist corpora in Pāli or other languages are the commentaries on the sets of verses. However, commentaries of this kind are also found in texts such as the Jñānaprasthāna, the Zun po-xu-mi pu-sa suo-ji-lun 尊婆須蜜菩薩所集論, the Yogā-cārabhūmi and the Gāthāsaṃgrahaśāstrārtha ascribed to Vasubandhu,6 which are all related to the Sarvāstivādins.7

On page 150, regarding the evaluation of the figures who give us the crucial proofs for the date of the manuscripts, the author states, "But there is no way to know for sure whether the texts referring to these rulers were composed during their lifetimes, or whether the references to them were posthumous. I consider the former alternative to be a priori more likely, since such stories seem to be designed primarily to celebrate their patronage and presumably also thereby to stimulate and perpetuate it..." However, the latter alternative may in fact be the case, for example, because no scholar could state that the extant Indic texts of the Aśokāvadāna referring to the historical ruler Aśoka were composed during his lifetime, namely in the third century B.C. The contexts where the references appear in the new texts do not seem to be clear enough to decide on either alternative.

On page 169, the author says, "The Dharmaguptakas are notably absent from the epigraphic records of other parts of north India as well as of the Deccan and the

⁴ Taishō No. 2128, Vol. 54, 528a.

⁵ Y. Yoshida, "Buddhist Literature in Sogdian [in Japanese]," Nairiku Ajia Gengo no Kenkyū 内陸アジア言語の研究 [Studies on the Inner Asian Languages] VII (Kobe, 1991), 101.

⁶ See F. Enomoto, "Notes on a Collection of Canonical Verses in the Zun po-xu-mi pu-sa suo-ji-lun 尊婆須蜜菩薩所集論, with Special Reference to the Original Meaning of tathāgata [in Japanese]," in E. Mayeda, ed., Watanabe Fumimaro Hakase Tsuitō Kinen Ronshū: Genshibukkyō to Daijōbukkyō 波邊文磨博士追悼記念論集:原始仏教と大乗仏教 [Studies in Original Buddhism and Mahāyāna Buddhism in Commemoration of Late Professor Dr. Fumimaro Watanabe] Vol. 1 (Kyoto, 1993), 255-69.

⁷ Regarding the view that the term "Sarvāstivādin" is identical with "Mūlasarvāstivādin", see F. Enomoto, "'Mūlasarvāstivāda' and 'Sarvāstivāda' [in Japanese]," *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku Kenkyū* 印度學仏教學研究, 47-1 (Tokyo, 1998), pp. (111)-(119).

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south." However, a recently published report of the Saheth (formerly Jetavana) ruins notes the existence of seal impressions referring to the Dharmaguptakas.8

This book is very carefully printed. Only a few misprints have come to my attention: p. 60, note 3: read 1841 for 1941 (this mistake was found by the author himself and relayed to me after the publication of this volume); p. 269, right column, line 2: read 157 for 156.

The preface states that critical editions of particular texts within the corpus as well as detailed studies on them will be published in subsequent volumes in this series. I am sure that these volumes will contribute greatly to various fields of study such as Buddhism, history, and linguistics. On the other hand, it should be noted that ancient Buddhist manuscripts or fragments have been discovered one after another, and that new discoveries are appearing continually. In particular, the Buddhist manuscripts found in the Schøyen Collection is of great interest. It contains fragments written in Kuṣāṇa Brāhmī script or Kharoṣṭhī, some of which appear to be as old as those in the British Library manuscripts. Perhaps we shall soon be able to see older manuscripts datable than those treated in this book.

⁸ Y. Aboshi and K. Sonoda, eds., Gionshōja Sahēto Iseki Hakkutsu Chōsa Hōkokusho, Honbunhen II 祇園精舎サヘート遺跡発掘調査報告書 (本文篇 ID [Excavations at Jetavana (Saheth), Text II] (Osaka: Kansai University, 1997), 1170-72.

⁹ See J.-U. Hartmann and P. Harrison, "A Sanskrit Fragment of the Ajātaśatru-kaukṛtya-vinodanā-sūtra," in P. Harrison and G. Schopen, eds., Sūryacandrāya: Essays in Honour of Akira Yuyama on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday, Indica et Tibetica 35 (Swisstal-Odendorf, Germany, 1998), 68f.