

# An Unusual Biography of the Buddha in Or.8210/S.3096: Śākyamuni and Yaśodharā Jointly Practicing the Way

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## Introduction

Among the Dūnhuáng manuscripts dating from the late 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, materials such as ‘Transformation texts’ (*biànwén* 變文), ‘Sūtra lecture texts’ (*jiǎngjīngwén* 講經文), ‘Seat-settling texts’ (*yāzuòwén* 押座文), ‘Dūnhuáng *avadāna*’ (*yīnyuán* 因緣),<sup>1</sup> etc. bear witness of the emergence of new genres, characterized by the use of a language featuring numerous colloquial expressions and vernacular syntactic constructions, and often committed to writing by using popular/demotic characters (*súzi* 俗字) or other forms of non-standard writing. Several of these genres have a prosimetric literary structure, alternating between passages in prose and rhyme, and some – such as the Transformation texts – were also directly related to images illustrating the narrative. The majority of these texts consists of Buddhist stories,<sup>2</sup> adapted for the purpose of narration and/or performance for a general audience; this type of performance was an integral part of religious life during the late medieval period, and some events were even state-sponsored and lasted for extended periods of time.<sup>3</sup>

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1 For a concise overview of Dūnhuáng popular genres, see for example Rong Xinjiang 2013: 398-411 and Schmid 2000.

2 As for the Transformation texts, there are also several with non-Buddhist contents. As such, we can assume that this literary form reflects a type of (performative) storytelling which eventually was adapted for Buddhist narratives. The origins of the genre are unclear, possibly, it was introduced from Central Asia or regions of Serindia.

3 The grandeur of Buddhist public performances is described in various contemporary sources, including historical texts and poems. Detailed descriptions are for example provided in P.3849 and S.4417, elaborating on the various parts and steps in the performance of lectures, such as introductory hymns, Seat-settling texts (moralizing texts recited while the audience

In this paper, I will focus on a text preserved in Or.8210/S.3096 of the British Library which includes a short and unusual biography of Śākyamuni, and in addition shows some remarkable features in its use of the language and variant characters. Only one leaf of the manuscript is preserved. The first part of the *recto* side consists of a Chán Buddhist inspired *gāthā*, followed by a prose narrative which continues on the *verso* side of the leaf.<sup>4</sup> The paper is of inferior quality, but the handwriting was obviously performed by an experienced scribe who seems to have swiftly and informally written down the story, not aligning the Chinese characters and using numerous semi-cursive and cursive forms. The hand is different from the one who had copied the *gāthā*, and most probably the scribe reused the leaflet when noting down the short narrative on the life story of the Buddha, covering the remainder of the *recto*, and then continuing on the *verso* side.

There are several extant narratives among the Dūnhuáng manuscripts dealing with episodes of the Buddha's life. Some of them are quite unique as compared to the “canonical”<sup>5</sup> versions (despite being based on them) that were circulating in China during the Late Medieval period, whereas some focus on

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was entering the lecture venue), the exegesis of a sūtra passage, eulogies to the Buddha, vows, as well as the transfer of merit (for a detailed description, see Schmid 2017: 192 f.).

- 4 The manuscript is briefly described in Mair 1981: 310. The dimensions are 30 x 39.99 cm. A digital version of the manuscript is provided by the International Dunhuang Project (<[http://idp.bl.uk/database/oo\\_scroll\\_h\\_a4d?uid=14407124109;recnum=8050;index=2](http://idp.bl.uk/database/oo_scroll_h_a4d?uid=14407124109;recnum=8050;index=2)>). The edition in this paper is based on this version.
- 5 Canonical materials on the Buddha's life circulating during that period include the *Xiūxíng běnqǐ jīng* 修行本起經 (Skt. *Cārya-nidāna*, “Sūtra of the Practice and Original Rise”, T. 3, no. 184; on this text, see Durt 2008/2010: 122); *Fó běnxíng jīng* 佛本行經 (“Sūtra on the Past Activities of the Buddha”, T. 3, no. 193); *Pǔyào jīng* 普曜經 (Skt. *Lalitavistara*, T. 3, no. 186); *Fāngguāng dàzhūānyán jīng* 方廣大莊嚴經 (Skt. *Lalitavistara*; T. 3, no. 187); *Fó suǒ xíng zàn* 佛所行讚 (Skt. *Buddhacarita*, T. 3, no. 192), and *Guòqù xiànzài yīnguǒ jīng* 過去現在因果經 (“Scripture on Past and Present Causes and Effects”, T. 3, no. 189). However, one text was of particular importance in the Dūnhuáng area, the *Fó běnxíng jí jīng* 佛本行集經 (T. 3, no. 190). The title is sometimes reconstructed as Skt. *\*Buddhacarita-saṃgrāha*, however, I render it as Skt. *\*Buddhacarita-saṃcaya-sūtra* (“Sūtra of the Collection of the Acts of the Buddha”), following Deeg 2022: 65. As pointed out by Siglinde Dietz, 集經 can refer to either Skt. *saṃgraha* or *saṃcaya* (cf. Hirakawa 1997: 1228). This text features by far the largest number of extant copies among the Buddha biographies (P.2221, P.3317, P.3157, P.2459v, S.293, S.5837, S.482v, S.1826, S.4873, S.920, S.4778, S.4194, P.3680, etc.), whereas only very few (or no) copies of the other major biographies mentioned above are extant among the Dūnhuáng manuscripts. The long text in 60 fascicles was probably translated by the Gandhāra monk Jñānagupta (闍那崛多). Despite the unique features of this biography and its great significance, there are very few Western studies on it (see for example Deeg 2022).

one<sup>6</sup> or several main events and others try to provide a more complete story line of the Buddha’s life.<sup>7</sup> For example, the so-called *bāxiàng* 八相<sup>8</sup> ‘eight images/episodes/scenes’, usually refer to the eight main events in Buddha’s life: (1) Descending from Tuṣita Heaven (降兜率); (2) entering into the womb of Māya (入胎); (3) birth (降生/出胎); (4) the great departure from the royal palace (出家, etc.); (5) subduing of Māra (降魔); (6) enlightenment/completing the Way (成道); (7) setting the Dharma wheel in motion/first sermon (轉法輪); (8) entering nirvāṇa (入滅).<sup>9</sup> These events were often depicted in scroll form, as well.

Our text was previously edited by several Chinese scholars, however, some passages and codicological features have not received sufficient attention yet, and some editions contain multiple inaccuracies and errors. Generally, in Chinese scholarship, *Dūnhuáng* semi-vernacular narrative literature is subsumed under the category of *biànwén* 變文 (‘Transformation texts’) since they share certain features, such as a prosimetric structure in many of these genres, the inclusion of elements of the contemporary spoken language (especially in the dialogic sections), the inclusion of extra-textual markers indicating that many of the narratives were performed for the general populace, as well as a close relation to imagery. The link to visual materials (which were exhibited during the performances, accompanying the recitation of the storyteller) is mandatory for Transformation texts in their strict definition,<sup>10</sup> but not for other semi-vernacular genres. The text discussed in this paper does not show any obvious link to visual materials and does not have a prosimetric structure; rather, it is a (partly) non-canonical and fragmentary account of the Buddha’s life,

6 For example, the lengthy account of the Buddha’s temptation by Māra in the *Pò Mó biàn* 破魔變 (‘Transformation [Text] of Destroying Māra’); for an edition and translation, see Lin & Anderl & Hung 2018.

7 E.g., the various versions and fragments are based on the canonical literature but use a more vernacular language and a prosimetric literary form. These texts were mainly used in public performances, narrating and illustrating the Buddha’s life. This can be also deduced from the frequent use of “performance markers” in the texts, indicating the specific mode or style of narration for the various sections (e.g., whether a passage had to be read unisono by the audience, or indicating a certain type of poetic style of recitation).

8 Besides the texts labeled *Bāxiàng biàn* or *Tàizi chéngdào biànwén* (see Table 1 below), other *Dūnhuáng* texts dealing with Buddha’s life include the *Tàizi chéngdào jīng* 太子成道經 (‘Sūtra of the Prince Completing the Way’; Ed.1957: 285–316; Ed.1994: 497–534; Ed.1997: 434–467) and the *Xīdá tàizi xiūdào yīnyuán* 悉達太子修道因緣 (‘The Avadāna of Prince Siddhā[rtha] Cultivating the Way’, Ed.1994: 535–552; Ed.1997: 468–480; this title is provided in the P.2999 version of the text), a relatively complete biography in prosimetric form.

9 The list of the eight main events can differ according to specific texts, settings, or locations.

10 See for example Mair 1989 and, more recently, Karashima 2016.

sometimes referred to as *Dūnhuáng avadāna* (*Dūnhuáng yīnyuán* 敦煌因緣 or *Dūnhuáng yuánqǐ* 敦煌緣起). Curiously, these fragmentary versions of accounts of Buddha’s life (which usually do not have a title in the manuscripts) are referred to as *Tàizǐ chéngdào biànwén* 太子成道變文 (“Transformation Text of the Prince Completing the Way”) or *Bāxiàng biàn* in the current editions, although the contents, language, and genre features considerably divert from canonical sources, as well as from Transformation texts. As such, this designation is misleading.<sup>11</sup> The five to seven texts included under this heading in various editions are very short and fragmentary, and there is no indication of a title in the manuscripts. In addition, there are no clear genre features which would qualify them as Transformation texts or related genres.

In Zhōu & Zhāng & Huáng 1999, seven texts (most of them edited under the label *Tàizǐ chéngdào biànwén* in the other editions discussed above) have the title *bāxiàng biàn*, the text focused on in this paper being the last of them: 八相變擬 (七) (for an overview, see Table 1). As in the case of the header *Tàizǐ chéngdào biànwén*, this labeling is problematic and does not correctly reflect the features of this diverse group of texts.

Table 1: An overview of *bāxiàng biàn* Dūnhuáng manuscripts

| Text (with page numbers of the edition) | Manuscripts                             | Features    | Notes  |
|---|---|-------------|--|
| 八相變 (一) <sup>12</sup><br>(pp. 638–660)  | BD8437,<br>BD8671,<br>BD8348            | Prosimetric | A quite complete description of “Eight Scenes” (featuring many non-canonical elements and stories) |
| 八相變擬 (二) <sup>13</sup><br>(pp. 661–673) | Neiraku<br>Museum, (寧<br>樂美術館),<br>Nara | Prosimetric | Longer fragment, overlapping in contents with (一)  |

11 The five fragments are originally edited in Ed.1957: 317–328, and the editors indicate in the notes to these texts that a title is missing in the original manuscripts (“標題原缺”); curiously, the title 太子成道變文 has been also used in subsequent editions. Common to all the fragments is that they are structurally unsystematic, use highly informal character forms, frequently employ phonetic loan characters, and use non-canonical elements in the narration of the Buddha’s life.

12 Corresponding to Ed. 1957: 329–344: 八相變; Ed. 1994: 571–588: 八相變; Ed.1997: 507–522: 八相變 (一); for a study and annotated translation of this text, see Van Rentergem 2019.

13 Corresponding to Ed. 1957: not included; Ed. 1994: not included; Ed.1997: 523–530: 八相變 (二).

| Text (with page numbers of the edition) | Manuscripts       | Features        | Notes  |
|---|-------------------|-----------------|--|
| 八相變擬（三） <sup>14</sup><br>(pp. 674–679)  | P.2496,<br>BD8360 | Prosimetric     | Shorter fragment, starting from after the Four Encounters and Śākyamuni’s request to renounce home; overlapping in contents with (一) and (二)   |
| 八相變擬（四） <sup>15</sup><br>(pp. 680–683)  | S.4480            | Not prosimetric | Shorter fragment, including the Bodhisattva’s ascend to Tuṣita Heaven; the search for a suitable place for his last rebirth; the narrative mainly focuses on his birth in the Śākya clan and the events related to it; the fragmentary account ends with the remark that he became displeased with palace life and “desired to renounce home and cultivate the Way” (出家修道) |
| 八相變擬（五） <sup>16</sup><br>(pp. 684–686)  | S.4128            | Not prosimetric | The fragment starts with an account of Gautama’s birth and events related to it; the main part of the narrative focuses on predictions concerning the boy’s supernatural features/powers and his future career as a sage   |
| 八相變擬（六） <sup>17</sup><br>(pp. 687–688)  | S.4633            | Not prosimetric | The fragment starts with the parents’ wish to find a spouse for Gautama; however, Gautama expresses his desire to renounce home, and addresses his parents with a “sermon”. The story continues with an account of the parents’ reaction to this and Gautama’s determination to leave home   |

14 Corresponding to Ed. 1957: 317–319: 太子成道變文; Ed. 1994: 553–559: 太子成道變文（一）; Ed.1997: 484–484: 太子成道變文（一）.

15 Corresponding to Ed. 1957: 320–321: 太子成道變文; Ed. 1994: 557–560: 太子成道變文（二）; Ed.1997: 486–490: 太子成道變文（二）.

16 Corresponding to Ed. 1957: 322–324: 太子成道變文; Ed. 1994: 561–565: 太子成道變文（三）; Ed.1997: 491–495: 太子成道變文（三）.

17 Corresponding to Ed. 1957: 325–326: 太子成道變文; Ed. 1994: 567–568: 太子成道變文（四）; Ed.1997: 496–497: 太子成道變文（四）.

| Text (with page numbers of the edition) | Manuscripts | Features        | Notes   |
|---|-------------|-----------------|---|
| 八相變擬（七） <sup>18</sup>                   | S.3096      | Not prosimetric | This is the text dealt with in this paper. It is a short but relatively complete biography, however, in an extremely condensed form and many scenes only alluded to, with a focus on Śākyamuni's life in the palace and the encounter with and role of his wife |

Texts edited under the label of 八相變 “Transformation of the Eight Scenes [of Buddha’s life]” in Zhōu & Zhāng & Huáng 1999. The contents and structure of the first three are quite distinct from the remaining four. In the above edition, the text dealt with in this paper has the title “八相變擬（七）”. From （二） to （七）, the editors add 擬 (‘imitate; compare’) after 八相變, probably indicating that they regard （一） as “main version” and the remaining seven as variations and/or fragments. However, this does not correctly reflect the contents and the structure of this group of texts.

## Edition of the manuscript

The beginning of the narrative is missing. The information between /.../ indicates the column numbers of the text in the manuscript. Since the text contains numerous substitutions, most of them phonetic loan characters, (the assumed) “regularized” readings are inserted in brackets (...). 【...】 indicates amended characters. □ indicates a missing/unidentified character and a projected identification is marked by □ (...?). A doubtful identification is indicated by (?). A possibly missing section in the text is marked by [...]. Characters with a deletion marker on their right side are indicated by [[...]]. An empty space inserted between portions of characters is expressed by //.

The text has been previously edited in Ed.1957, Ed.1994, and Ed.1997; these editions will be critically discussed here. Since Zhōu & Zhāng & Huáng 1999 do not provide any relevant new information as compared to these three editions, it is not taken into consideration here.

<sup>18</sup> Corresponding to Ed. 1957: 327–328: 太子成道變文; Ed. 1994: 569–570: 太子成道變文（四）; Ed.1997: 498–500: 太子成道變文（四）.

[...]

/S.3096r-19/ [...] 却且住家**(1)**。到五歲已上，父王便取（娶）妻與太子，於大街中嚟**(2)**（結）玖（九）從（重）綵色樓子

/S.3096r-20/ 上坐；十六大國應有大富**(3)**長者之女，隊隊如**(4)**（而）過，太子並**(5)**總\*不看。**(6)**見前劫

/

S.3096r-21/ 婢**(7)**女破面與笑，色**(8)**（索）取（娶？）中脂**(9)**（指）上金[[？（=環？）？（=子？）]]\*\***(10)**脂（指）環，便打**(11)**喜鼓**(12)**，便與成親。三年

/S.3096r-22/ 之內，別床如（而）宿。太子坐禪**(13)**\*\*\*，夫人行道；夫人坐禪**(14)**，太子行道。到七年之時，

/S.3096r-23/ □□□□□□**(15)**便成出家。父王遣差五百个（個）力助（士？）**(16)**四門如（而）方（防）**(17)**。四門觀

/S.3096v-01/ 看，**(18)**先到東門見生老；恣（咨）**(19)**車匿：「因何如（而）老？」車匿答曰：「有生有老。」**(20)**

/S.3096v-02/ 太子不樂**(21)**，便別，却迴如（而）入。南門見病，西門見四（死）**(22)**，北門見削髮**(23)**（潔）衣**(24)**

/S.3096v-03/ 凡**(25)**僧，便是苦行頭子**(26)**。夜半子時，車匿、白馬、太子**(27)**\*\*\*\*三人\*\*\*\*\*，同口**(28)**如（而）去。

/S.3096v-04/ 太子乘馬如（而）上。妻是耶須陀羅，夫人並總不覺，着金邊（鞭）**(29)**



/S.3096v-05/ 至（指）**(30)**懷孕（？）**(31)**。四天王承**(32)**太子馬腳，【菩】薩口（踰？）**(32)**成（城）**(33)**如（而）去；至五更

/S.3096v-06/ 到雪山。先度**(34)**歸輪。太子後成佛道，一憚（彈）**(35)**脂（指）中，到**(36)**

/S.3096v-07/ 兜率天宮中。 // 說是到頭共成無上**(37)**

Table 2: Image references in the edition

| *   |   | **  | ***   | ****  | *****   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |  |  |  |

- (1) Incorrectly identified as *bù* 不 in Ed.1997 (498, no.2), and corrected to *jiā* 家. The form is clearly a variant of 家. Ed.1957 (327) has the following erroneous phrasing: 卻且住，不到五歲已上，[...].
- (2) Ed.1997 (498) has *jié* 絜 (‘regulate’; according to the *Yùpiān* 玉篇 also meaning *jiéshù* 結束 ‘to end’, a meaning which does not fit here) instead of *chī* 喫. Jiǎng Lǐhóng 蔣禮鴻 (according to Ed.1997: 498, n.3) corrects 喫 to 繫, a variant of *xì* 繫 ‘to connect’. Although this is semantically possible, I think that 喫 is used here as an unusual phonetic substitution of 結. 喫 is a rare character form, defined as demotic (*sú* 俗) dialect form of *chī* 喫 ‘to eat’. The reason why this form appears here is most probably because of its phonophoric 絜, the MC reading of which is /kjiat/, identical with the reading of 結. *Cóng* 從 ‘from’ (MC /trfɯwŋ/) is used as phonetic loan for the homophonous *chóng* 重 ‘layer’ (MC /trfɯwŋ/). As such, 喫玖從 is a phonetic rendering of the phrase 結九重, ‘composed of nine layers’ which fits perfectly into the context, indicating that the palace had nine stories.
- (3) *Fù* 富 is written with an unusual variant (see also below). According to Ed.1994 (596) there is a similar form in S.3050 within the same phrase 大  (富) 長者 ‘elders/leaders of great wealth’. Ed.1957 (327) has  and “corrects” to *zhòu* 宙 ‘eternity; eon’ which does not fit the context.
- (4) All instances of *rú* 如 ‘be like’ (MC /ŋy/) in the manuscript are used for *ér* 而 ‘and’ (MC /ŋi/), homophonous in Northwestern Medieval Chinese (NWMC), [i] and [y] being commonly confounded (Takata 1988: 118; for an overview of NWMC features, see Osterkamp and Anderl 2017).




- (5) Ed.1997 (498, n.7) claims that there are three vertical dots to the right of *bìng* 並, indicating the deletion of the character. However, a closer look at the passage in the manuscript reveals that the three dots are part of the character and that there is damage caused by a vertical line, affecting several characters of the column. As such, the right part of 並 got somewhat “separated” from the remaining part of the character and was thence interpreted as three independent dots by the editors (for an enlarged image, see \* below; the image to the right of it visualizes the yellowish vertical line which conceals/damages parts of the characters).
- (6) Theoretically, there are other ways to phrase this sentence, e.g.: 於大街中嚟（結）玖（九）從（重）綵色樓子，上坐十六大國應有大富長者之女。 However, this phrasing would imply that the daughters of the wealthy aristocrats would sit on top the nine-storied multi-coloured pavilion. This does not fit to the next sentence which states that these daughters paraded by the prince. Possibly, the subject is still the father mentioned in the previous phrase, implying that he and his son Gautama sat together on top of the pavilion or palace, in order to watch the procession, and choose one of the girls walking by as companion for the prince.
- (7) As observed by Liáng Litiān 梁栢天, the original character here could also be interpreted as *wǒ* 媠 ‘maid’ (see the discussion below), synonymous and structurally very similar to *bì* 婢.
- (8) *Sè* 色 ‘color’ (as in Ed.1957: 327) is a highly interesting replacement of *suǒ* ‘seek’ (Yáng Xióng 1990), having a similar phonetic profile: 色 MC /ʂək/ /ʂik/, 索 MC /sak/ /ʂəijk/. This type of replacement appears several times in 10th century Dūnhuáng texts, e.g., the *Yáqiā shū* 齟齬書: 已後與兒色(索)婦，大須穩審！ “Afterwards, when you are searching for a wife for your son, you should be very diligent!” (Ed.1957: 859). 索 is an ancient word for ‘to seek’ (in the Buddhist context, it was still used by the early translator Lokakṣema, and replaced by later translators with *qiú* 求 ‘to search for’; see Karashima 2013: 279), and seems to have survived as a regional expression. The phrase 索婦 ‘search for a wife’ is preserved in the modern Shānxī and Jīn dialects (on the historical development of 色/索, see Zeng & Anderl 2022: 4–5).

- (9) In the manuscript, 脂 (MC /tsyij/) ‘fat’ is used several times as a phonetic substitution for *zhǐ* 指 ‘finger’ (MC /tsyijX/; differing only in the tonal value), as correctly indicated in all editions.
- (10) The two question marks are placeholders for two “symbols” or characters which are inserted between 金 ‘golden’ and 指 ‘ring’ (see the image \*\* below the edition). To the right of them there are two deletion markers in the form of “卜” (on diacritic markers in Dūnhuáng manuscripts, see Galambos 2013). The direct insertion of symbols in narrative Dūnhuáng texts is highly unusual. What is their function and meaning (if any)? This will be discussed in detail in the analysis part of this paper. Ed.1957, Ed.1994, Ed.1997 unfortunately all ignore these symbols or special character forms!
- (11) Ed.1957 (327), Ed.1994 (596), Ed.1997 (499, n.10) have 𠂇, all correcting to *dǎ* 打. The left part is indeed ambiguous and could be both read as 木 or 扌, determinatives which are regularly mixed up or mutually exchanged in Dūnhuáng manuscripts.
- (12) Ed.1997 (499, n.10) reads 壹 and corrects to *gǔ* 鼓 ‘drum’; however, the character form is clearly a variant of 鼓 (see below).
- (13) Ed.1957 (327) has *chán zuò* 禪坐, ignoring the hook-formed reversal marker between the characters (see \*\*\*). Ed.1997 (499, n.11) notes the reversal marker and corrects to *zuò chán* 坐禪 ‘sit in meditation’.
- (14) For this highly unusual form of *chán* 禪 ‘meditation’, see the discussion below.
- (15) Here, there is a gap of approximately six characters; however, there is probably no break in the narrative. The scribe merely adjusted to the features and shape of the leaflet he reused (the upper part is a bit narrower). Ed.1994 (569) marks three characters as missing. However, I do not think this is necessary.
- (16) The text’s *lì zhù* 力助 ‘put in effort to help’ does not fit into the context. Ed.1957 (327) maintains 力助 and Ed.1997 (498) corrects to *lì shì* 力士 ‘strong men; guards’. Since the text displays many oral features based on the use of multiple phonetic loan characters, and the phonological profile of the two characters shows similarities (助 MC /dzrjoH/ vs. 士 MC /dzriX/), the scribe or writer

may have mixed up the two words when he “heard” them. In addition, the phrase *lì zhù* might have been frequently used at the time of the composition of the text, and the scribe unconsciously inserted it into the text (these mistakes based on automatically or unconsciously inserting frequently used phrases or words in the process of copying a text are commonly encountered in Dūnhuáng materials). Ed. 1994 (569) has 父王遣差五百個禮助四門，如方四門觀看。without annotations. Yuán Bīn (1983: 96) suggests that 力助 should be interpreted as *shǒulì* 手力, meaning ‘servant (> guard)’.

- (17) Ed.1994 (569) has *rú fāng* 如方 and does not regularize to *ér fāng* 而防. Yuán Bīn (1983: 97) regularizes 方 to 訪 ‘visit’ (四門如訪，四門觀看), while the other editions have 防 ‘guard; defend’ which is the better choice.
- (18) Ed.1997 (498) connects this phrase to the previous one: [...] 四門而防，四門觀看。 However, in this interpretation the last phrase is redundant “...to guard the four [palace] gates, to observe the four gates.” I think it is more likely that 四門觀看 already is part of the next episode: 四門觀看，先到東門，[...] “Inspecting the four gates, he first arrived at the eastern gate, [...]”
- (19) 恣 (MC /tsijH/) is a phonetic loan of 咨 (MC /tsij/), as indicated in all editions. The two words only differ in their tonal value (恣 has a falling tone, *qùshēng* 去聲, while 咨 has a level tone, *píngshēng* 平聲).
- (20) Ed.1957 (327) did not identify *yǒu lǎo* 有老 ‘there is old age/an old person’ and has □□ (Yáng Xióng 1990: 8 noted that error and corrected to 有生有老). Ed.1997 (498), not identifying 有老, amends *bù miǎn* 不免 ‘cannot be avoided’: 有生不免。 “If there is birth, [old age] is unavoidable.” However, this amendment is unnecessary: 有生有老。 “If there is birth, [then] there is old age.” is perfectly recognizable in the manuscript and befits the context.
- (21) Ed.1957 (327) erroneously identifies this as a variant of *mò* 寞 ‘quiet’, but corrects it to *lè* 樂 ‘pleased’; Ed.1994 (570, n.7) follows this interpretation.

- (22) All editions regularize *sì* 四 ‘four’ (MM: /sijH/) to *sǐ* 死 ‘die’ (MM /sijX/), homophonous and just differing in the tonal value. Note that even in Modern China, 四 is regarded as an unlucky number because of its sound proximity to the word for ‘to die’, and is as such often avoided.
- (23) Ed.1957 (327) has 喫口, the second character being very difficult to identify as *yī* 衣 ‘cloth’. Xiāo Xù (2014: 97) suggests that 潔 (潔) might be a mistake for *rǎn* 染 ‘to dye; polluted’, reading *rǎn yī* 染衣 (‘dye one’s cloth’), since the phrases 削髮染衣, 染衣剃髮, or 落髮染衣 are more commonly used (‘shaving the head and dyeing one’s cloth > become a monk’) in the Buddhist canon. There are no examples of 削髮潔衣 in CBETA. Although 潔衣 ‘clean clothes’ is semantically possible, Xiāo’s suggestion makes a lot of sense.
- (24) The form 凡 is difficult to identify and Ed.1994 (569) and Ed.1997 (498) render it as 凡: *fánsēng* 凡僧 ‘ordinary / worldly monk; practicing monk’. However, among the 120 凡 registered in DMCT, none resembles the form 凡. The character could possibly also be interpreted as 見 (‘to see’), and resembles the form of the other 見 in the text. The passage remains problematic.
- (25) 頭山 is regularized as 頭山 in Ed.1994 (596), following Ed.1957 (328, n.4); 頭山 looks similar (but not identical) to 山 (as in 雪山 later in the text); however, based on the context it probably should be read as *tóuzǐ* 頭子 ‘chief; head [of the ascetics]’, a rendering also adopted in Ed.1994 (499, n.17 suggests the alternative reading of 頭山 as *Jiùshān* 鷲山, ‘Vulture Peak’, Skt. *Ḡṛdhṛakūṭa-parvata*). Xiāo Xù (2014: 97) interprets 頭山 as *Tóu-shān* 頭山, an abbreviated version of *Xiàngtóu-shān* 象頭山 (Skt. *Gayāśīrṣa*), according to some sources the mountain where Śākyamuni engaged in ascetic practices for several years. In terms of context and the syntax of the passage, it is my opinion that the interpretation as 頭子 fits best.
- (26) In Ed.1957 (327) the two characters 太子 ‘prince’ are merged into 李. However, there is no such a variant form and the manuscript clearly shows two distinct characters (see \*\*\*\*; see also Yáng Xióng 1990: 8) and no ligature. By contrast, the subsequent two characters *sān rén* 三人 are indeed connected (see \*\*\*\*\*), a common feature in fully cursive writing.





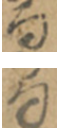



- (27) The form  is difficult to identify. Ed.1957 (327) ignores the character; Ed.1997 (499, n.19) assumes a 汝 (a variant of 汝) which does not make sense. Ed.1994 (569) also indicates an unreadable character after 同. Yáng Xióng (1990: 8) suggests that the phrase should be interpreted as *yītóng* 一同 ‘all together’. However, this a mere projection and is not supported by the features of this passage in the manuscript. The identification remains unclear.
- (28) *Biān* 邊 ‘side’ (MC /pen/) is used as substitution for the near-homophonous *biān* 鞭 ‘whip’ (MC /pjien/), as correctly indicated in all editions. Possibly, in NWMC, the phonological profile of these two words was even closer.
- (29) *Zhì* 至 ‘arrive’ (MC /tsyijH/) is used as a phonetic loan for *zhǐ* 指 ‘finger > point with the finger’ here, the reading only differing in the tone. Interestingly, the noun *zhǐ* 指 ‘finger’ (MC /tsyijX/) in the passage above is substituted by *zhǐ* 脂 ‘fat’ (MC /tsyij/). I suspect that the substitution 至 for ‘point with the finger’ indicates that as a verb it should be read with the falling tone (*qùshēng* 去聲), whereas the noun (‘finger’) is read with the flat tone (*píngshēng* 平聲).
- (30) Ed.1994 (569) has *huái jiǎo* 壞角 which does not make sense. For a discussion of the form , see below.
- (31) Ed.1994 (569) has *chéng* 乘; 承 (MC /dzying/) and *chéng* 乘 (MC /zying/) are structurally and also phonetically very similar; however, the form should be regularized to 承 based on the context, ‘hold/support [the hoofs of the horses]’; this was already noticed by Yáng Xióng (1990: 8). In other textual versions of this episode, we also find *pěng mǎtí* 捧馬蹄 ‘support the horse’s hooves’, *pěng* 捧 being synonymous to 承.
- (32)  after 薩 is difficult to identify. Ed.1957 (328, n.6) states that the form is ‘not clear’ (*wèixiáng* 未詳). Ed.1994 (569) does not regularize it and has a drawing of the variant in the edition. Ed.1997 (499, n.22) has a long explanation of the passage and edits this as 壘. However, these are most probably two characters, the second being 王 (→ 王 (成) 城 ‘city of the king; royal capital’). 薩 is interpreted as *púsà* 菩薩 ‘bodhisattva’, and the upper part of















寧 as a cursive form of *yú* 踰 ‘cross over; jump over’. As such, the edition renders the phrase as: 菩薩踰王成（城）如（而）去 “[...] the Bodhisattva crossed over the city wall and left.” This makes sense in the context of the passage. Possibly, the upper part could also be interpreted as a semi-cursive form of *dù* 度 ‘pass; cross’.







- (33) *chéng* 成 ‘complete’ (MC /dzyeng/) functions as a phonetic loan for the homophonous *chéng* 城 ‘city’; the two characters are commonly substituted for each other in Dūnhuáng non-canonical texts.
- (34) Ed.1994 (569, 570, no.14) interprets the variant as *shù* 庶 (for 庶) and corrects to *guǎng* 廣. However, the form is clearly a *dù* 度 (see below).
- (35) *Dàn* 憚 is a phonetic loan for *chǎn* 憚 (for a discussion, see below); *zhī* 脂 ‘fat’ is substituting *zhǐ* 指 ‘finger’.
- (36) Ed.1957 (327) marks 到 as not identifiable (□).
- (37) The last phrase follows a gap of approximately two characters and is in my opinion not part of the story itself, but rather the concluding words of the narrator emphasizing the great merit for the audience generated by listening to the description of Buddha’s life. Ed.1994 (569) ignores the gap and reads “...到兜率天宮中，說是到頭共成无上。” which does not make sense (for a discussion, see below). The editor also adds *xià quē* 下缺 “below [something is] missing”, assuming that a part of the narrative is missing. However, there is no indication for this.

## A short discussion of character forms found in S.3096





Table 3: Character variants in S.3096

| Variant form  | Manuscript reference           | Standard form | Modern Mandarin | Comments  |
|---|--------------------------------|---------------|-----------------|---|
|    | S.3096r-19-04<br>S.3096r-23-04 | 家             | <i>jiā</i>      | Semi-cursive; Ed.1994 (498, no.2) identifies the character as <i>bù</i> 不 and corrects it to 家. However, this is unlikely and it is quite clearly an abbreviated and informally written form of 家. Compare similar forms in DMCT:<br><br><small>S-3096r-19-04 BD16444-094-17 S-2512v-0010-29 BD16444-093-21</small> |
|   | S.3096r-19-07                  | 歲             | <i>suì</i>      | Abbreviated lower part  |
|  | S.3096r-19-11                  | 王             | <i>wáng</i>     | Semi-cursive  |
|  | S.3096r-19-15<br>S.3096r-21-05 | 與             | <i>yǔ</i>       | Abbreviated / cursive   |
|  | S.3096r-19-22                  | 嚙             | <i>chī</i>      | Rare variant of 嚙; used phonetically  |
|  | S.3096r-19-24                  | 從             | <i>cóng</i>     | Semi-cursive; compare 從 (Φ096; Huáng Zhēng 2005: 67)  |
|  | S.3096r-19-25                  | 縵             | <i>cǎi</i>      | Abbreviated left part (determinative)   |












| Variant form   | Manuscript reference           | Standard form | Modern Mandarin      | Comments  |
|--|--------------------------------|---------------|----------------------|---|
|   | S.3096r-20-06                  | 國             | <i>guó</i>           | Semi-cursive central part; compare  (S.5659)  (P.2187)  |
|   | S.3096r-20-07                  | 應             | <i>yīng</i>          | Semi-cursive / heavily abbreviated  |
|   | S.3096r-20-10                  | 富             | <i>fù</i>            | Abbreviated middle part; compare  (Beijing 成 96; Huáng 2005: 119; appears also in P.5032); Ed.1994 (498) reads <i>zhòu</i> 畝 and corrects to 富; the character form is certainly a variant of 富 |
|   | S.3096r-20-11                  | 長             | <i>cháng / zhǎng</i> | Semi-cursive  |
|    | S.3096r-20-12                  | 者             | <i>zhě</i>           | Fully cursive   |
|   | S.3096r-20-15                  | 隊             | <i>duì</i>           | Semi-cursive / abbreviated phonophoric  |
|   | S.3096r-20-22                  | 總             | <i>zǒng</i>          | Semi-cursive / abbreviated form of 惣, a commonly used variant of 總; compare  (P.2299),  (P.3913-089-01)   |
| <br> | S.3096r-20-24<br>S.3096v-01-01 | 看             | <i>kàn</i>           | This is a common way of writing 看 'see' in Dūnhuáng manuscripts   |










| Variant form  | Manuscript reference                            | Standard form | Modern Mandarin | Comments   |
|---|---|---------------|-----------------|--|
|    | S.3096r-21-01                                   | 嫖?/婢?         | wō/bì           | The character is edited as 婢 in the Chinese editions; however, the original character looks very similar to 嫖; both characters refer to ‘maid; female servant’, and are also structurally very similar; however, there is no compound 嫖女; as such, the regularization 婢女 makes sense |
|    | S.3096r-21-03                                   | 破             | pò              | Modified determinative   |
|    | S.3096r-21-06                                   | 笑             | xiào            | In the vernacular manuscripts of Dūnhuáng, the adding of a 口 ‘mouth’ to 笑 ‘to laugh’ is common practice. Since 口 is thus functioning as determinative, the “original” determinative 笑 is structurally reduced <sup>19</sup>  |
| <br><br> | S.3096r-21-10<br>S.3096r-21-15<br>S.3096v-06-16 | 脂             | zhǐ             | Zhǐ 脂 ‘fat’ consistently replaces zhǐ 指 ‘finger’ in the text   |





19 On the various forms of xiào 笑 in Dūnhuáng manuscripts, see Zhāng Yǒngquán 1996: 475–477.











| Variant form   | Manuscript reference           | Standard form | Modern Mandarin | Comments   |
|--|--------------------------------|---------------|-----------------|--|
|   | S.3096r-21-20                  | 鼓             | <i>gǔ</i>       | A heavily altered form of ‘drum’; compare 鼓 (Φ096; Huáng Zhēng 2005: 134)  |
| <br> | S.3096r-21-26<br>S.3096r-22-25 | 年             | <i>nián</i>     | This is a remarkable ‘big-belly’ cursive form of 年, rarely encountered in Dūnhuáng manuscripts. However, similar forms are frequently seen in later texts of cursive script in China and Japan, e.g. 𠄎 and 𠄏 (Moji Portal)   |
|   | S.3096r-22-04                  | 床             | <i>chuáng</i>   | A demotic character form (identical with the modern abbreviated form) of 牀 ‘bed’. According to the 7th c. <i>Zhèngmíng yàolù</i> 正名要錄 (S.388), a “slightly erroneous” ( <i>shāo è</i> 稍訛) form. <sup>20</sup> 床 is the dominant form in non-canonical Dūnhuáng texts |








<sup>20</sup> On the various forms of 牀 in Dūnhuáng manuscripts, see Zhāng Yǒngquán 1996: 390.





| Variant form  | Manuscript reference | Standard form | Modern Mandarin | Comments   |
|---|----------------------|---------------|-----------------|--|
|    | S.3096r-22-05        | 如             | <i>rú</i>       | Cursive; note that all <i>rú</i> 如 in the manuscript are used for <i>ér</i> 而, the two characters being homophonous in NWMC  |
|    | S.3096r-23-16        |               |                 |  |
|    | S.3096v-01-14        |               |                 |  |
|    | S.3096v-02-09        |               |                 |  |
|    | S.3096v-03-22        |               |                 |  |
|    | S.3096v-04-05        |               |                 |  |
|    | S.3096v-05-16        |               |                 |  |
|    | S.3096r-22-06        | 宿             | <i>sù</i>       | Semi-cursive   |
|   | S.3096r-22-09        | 禪             | <i>chán</i>     | The second form is highly unusual, with a heavily abbreviated right part. The character rather resembles <i>xiù</i> 袖 ‘sleeve’ or a variant of 福 found in S.2113  ; however, based on the context, it should be 禪. The use of this form (22-18) is surprising since it appears in the same line as the first form (22-09), and the writing style of the copyist / scribe is usually very coherent |
|  | S.3096r-22-18        |               |                 |  |








| Variant form  | Manuscript reference | Standard form | Modern Mandarin | Comments   |
|---|----------------------|---------------|-----------------|--|
|    | S.3096r-22-14        | 道             | <i>dào</i>      | Cursive form, used three times and illustrating the coherent style of the scribe   |
|    | S.3096r-22-22        |               |                 |  |
|    | S.3096v-06-13        |               |                 |  |
|    | S.3096r-22-27        | 時             | <i>shí</i>      | Cursive and very rounded form (compare the forms for 年)  |
|    | S.3096r-23-05        | 父             | <i>fù</i>       | This form is damaged and difficult to identify (only based on the context)   |
|    | S.3096r-23-07        | 遣             | <i>qiān</i>     | Radically altered form   |
|   | S.3096r-23-11        | 個/个           | <i>gè</i>       | This is an abbreviation (corresponding to the modern form), current in non-canonical medieval manuscripts  |
|  | S.3096r-23-13        | 助             | <i>zhù</i>      | Compare 助 (Φ096; Huáng Zhēng 2005: 565)  |
|  | S.3096r-23-20        | 觀             | <i>guān</i>     | The determinative seems to be altered to a 山 above; however, the 見 to the right is clearly visible while the left (phonetic) part is abbreviated |




| Variant form  | Manuscript reference   | Standard form | Modern Mandarin | Comments   |
|---|--|---------------|-----------------|--|
|    | <p>S.3096v-01-08</p> <p>S.3096v-01-15</p> <p>S.3096v-01-23</p> | 老             | <i>lǎo</i>      | This is a rather unusual variant which is consistently used by the scribe  |
|    | S.3096v-01-09  | 恣             | <i>zì</i>       | An unusual vertically “expanded” form, with a pronounced “gap” between the upper (phonophoric) and lower part (determinative)  |
|   | <p>S.3096v-01-11</p> <p>S.3096v-01-17</p> <p>S.3096v-03-14</p> | 匿             | <i>nì</i>       | This semi-cursive form is used three times and gives witness to the consistent writing style of the scribe   |
|  | S.3096v-01-12  | 因             | <i>yīn</i>      | This variant has an interesting inner 入 shaped part (this feature is very rare in Dūnhuáng writing); this element is probably a semi-cursive form of 大 (compare 𠂇 in Moji Portal); the 口 element is converted into a 冂 |

| Variant form  | Manuscript reference | Standard form | Modern Mandarin | Comments  |
|---|----------------------|---------------|-----------------|---|
|   |                      |               |                 | element (compare the transformation of the inner part of 同 below)   |
|    | S.3096v-02-04        | 樂             | <i>lè</i>       | A very reduced semi-cursive form, rarely encountered in Dūnhuáng texts  |
|    | S.3096v-02-06        | 別             | <i>bié</i>      | Difficult to identify due to damage   |
|    | S.3096v-02-23        | 髮             | <i>fà</i>       | An extremely reduced form for 'hair'; compare similar Dūnhuáng manuscript forms registered in DMCT:<br> |
|  | S.3096v-02-24        | 潔             | <i>jié</i>      | This is a variant of 潔  |
|  | S.3096v-03-01        | 僧             | <i>sēng</i>     | Slightly altered form, drifting into cursive on the right lower part  |
|  | S.3096v-03-04        | 是             | <i>shì</i>      | Semi-cursive  |
|  | S.3096v-03-05        | 苦             | <i>kǔ</i>       |   |
|  | S.3096v-03-07        | 頭             | <i>tóu</i>      | This is a semi-cursive reduced form; compare the fully cursive 頭  |
|  | S.3096v-07-09        |               |                 |   |

| Variant form  | Manuscript reference           | Standard form | Modern Mandarin | Comments   |
|---|--------------------------------|---------------|-----------------|--|
|    | S.3096v-03-08<br>S.3096v-03-11 | 子             | <i>zǐ</i>       | The upper form is very unusual (resembling a 凵) and possibly corrupt (or another character)  |
|    | S.3096v-03-21                  | 同             | <i>tóng</i>     | Semi-cursive transformation of the inner part, similar to 入 (see also the entry on 囧)  |
|    | S.3096v-04-03<br>S.3096v-05-07 | 乘             | <i>chéng</i>    | A highly abbreviated, nearly fully cursive form (similar to forms of the homophonous <i>chéng</i> 承); that it indeed is a variant of 乘 is confirmed by a similar variant in S.6557 (see Huáng Zhēng 2005: 51)            |
|  | S.3096v-04-12                  | 羅             | <i>luó</i>      | A remarkable variant and an even more drastic abbreviation of the phonophoric as for example found in S.2113:  ; compare also S.3540. |
|  | S.3096v-04-16                  | 惣(總)          | <i>zǒng</i>     | A quite different semi-cursive form as for example found in P.2324:   |

| Variant form  | Manuscript reference | Standard form | Modern Mandarin                 | Comments  |
|---|----------------------|---------------|---------------------------------|---|
|  | S.3096v-04-18        | 覺             | <i>jué</i>                      | This character is substantially transformed, both the upper and lower parts (this form is very rare in Dūnhuáng material).  |
|  | S.3096v-05-02        | 懷             | <i>huái</i>                     | Semi-cursive form, the right lower part drifting into cursive   |
|  | S.3096v-05-03        | 角?胤?<br>孕?    | <i>jiǎo /<br/>yìn /<br/>yùn</i> | This form is extremely difficult to identify and it has been interpreted as 角 (Ed.1957: 317, 318, n.5; for an explanation, see Ed.1997: 499, no.20); however, I think this is mistaken; based on the context, it should be either <i>yìn</i> 胤 as in 懷胤 ‘pregnant’ or <i>yùn</i> 孕 ‘pregnant’. Although there might be some resemblances with 胤, the right part 丩 is replaced by 弓, the most likely explanation of the form is (a slightly damaged) 孕; compare Huáng Zhēng 2005: 529  (P.2299) |

| Variant form  | Manuscript reference | Standard form  | Modern Mandarin   | Comments   |
|---|----------------------|--|-------------------|--|
|    | S.3096v-05-13        |  |                   | This problematic form is discussed in the edition; it probably consists of two characters, the one below being 王   |
|    | S.3096v-06-05        | Ed.1994 (569, 570, n.14) interpreted this form as 庚 (a variant of 庶); however, it is quite clearly a variant of 度; compare forms in DMCT: <br><small>S2165-008-23 P3913-014-11 S-5809r-0017-01 P3664-487-16 S-4626r-0020-16</small> |                   |  |
|    | S.3096v-06-06        | 歸  | <i>guī</i>        | A form with the complex left part abbreviated to a 止, a common practice in Dūnhuáng writing  |
|   | S.3096v-06-12        | 佛/仏  | <i>fō</i>         | A commonly used abbreviated form for ‘buddha’  |
|  | S.3096v-06-15        | 禪/禪  | <i>chān / dàn</i> | Editors have identified this character as 禪; however, I think it should be a 禪. Anyway, the phrase 一禪/禪脂中 is a phonetic rendering of 一彈指中 ‘a snap with the fingers > within a short period of time; immediately’ |
|  | S.3096v-07-02        | 率  | <i>shuāi</i>      | Semi-cursive form  |

| Variant form   | Manuscript reference           | Standard form | Modern Mandarin | Comments   |
|--|--------------------------------|---------------|-----------------|--|
|   | S.3096v-07-05                  | 說             | <i>shuō</i>     | Abbreviated right part   |
| <br> | S.3096v-06-18<br>S.3096v-07-08 | 到             | <i>dào</i>      | A highly reduced form, difficult to identify due to paper damage |

Some of the character forms are vertically stretched, a feature one often encounters in semi-cursive or cursive script. Most of the forms are not fully cursive but the cursive features pertain to only one part of the character (usually the “last” or “inner” part to be written). With one exception (三人), the strokes of the characters do not merge with each other (a feature of some types of fully cursive script). The handwriting has particular individual features and the shapes of the characters are very consistent. Evidently, the text was written / copied by a very experienced hand. Although this is only a conjecture, it is possible this text was not produced in the process of copying another text, but it might have been quickly noted down by a performer or storyteller. The consistent use of cursive and semi-cursive character forms also indicates that the scribe was probably not a professional copyist but rather a member of the clergy or lay Buddhist community. The insertion of the two symbols is quite unique and will be discussed in more detail below.

### Annotated translation

[...] <sup>21</sup> [*Life in the palace / Meeting his wife*] [He] then resided at home (i.e., the palace) for a period, <sup>22</sup> and after the fifth year, the king-father thereupon searched for a wife to bestow upon the crown prince. [The father and Gautama]

21 The first part of the text is obviously missing, and the “biography” starts with Gautama’s life in his father’s palace, concretely, when the king is searching for a wife for his son.

22 *Qiě* 且 is probably used as temporal adverb here ‘temporarily; for a period of time’; *qiě* can also indicate immediate action before a verb, however, this meaning does not fit the context. Or, possibly, *quèqiě* 却且 is a compound here.

sat on top of their nine-stored and multi-colored palace,<sup>23</sup> and the daughters of all<sup>24</sup> the wealthy leaders<sup>25</sup> of the sixteen great states [of India] were passing by in groups; [however], the prince did not look at them at all. But when he saw his wife<sup>26</sup> of former eons,<sup>27</sup> he smiled<sup>28</sup> and he took her as [his] spouse; he placed a golden ring on her middle finger; the drums of joy were beaten,<sup>29</sup> and they became a couple.

For a period of three years, they would sleep in separate beds, and when the prince sat in meditation, his wife practiced the Way, and while the wife was sitting in meditation, the prince practiced the Way. After a period of seven years, he then managed to renounce home. His father ordered 500 guards to safeguard the four [palace] gates.

[*The Four Encounters*] Inspecting the four gates, he first arrived at the eastern gate and saw birth<sup>30</sup> and old age. He then inquired with Chandaka:<sup>31</sup> “For what reason is there old age?” Chandaka answered: “If one has been born, [then it is unavoidable that] there is old age.” The prince was displeased by that, and so he departed and returned to the palace. At the southern gate,

23 *Lóu* 樓 (here suffixed with *zi* 子) refers to multi-floored structures, such as a palace, castle or tower. Early examples of the compound *lóuzi* date from the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century and early Táng.

24 *Yīngyǒu* 應有 (lit. ‘should have’) or *yīngshì* 應是 (lit. ‘should be’) are used as pronominal quantifiers, in the meaning of ‘all’ (glossed as *yīqiè* 一切 in Wú Xiǎorú 1980: 135).

25 *Zhāngzhě* can translate Skt. *grhapati* and *śreṣṭhin* and perhaps does not refer here to ‘elders’, but rather to the heads of rich households, or more concretely to the leaders of rich merchant households (see the corresponding DDB entry for further references).

26 *Bīnǚ* 婢女 lit. ‘maid’, but here certainly meaning ‘wife’.

27 *Qiánjié* 前劫 ‘former *kalpas*; previous eons’; indicating that in all his innumerable former life cycles, Śākyamuni was married to an incarnation of his wife.

28 *Pò miàn yǔ xiào* 破面與笑, lit. ‘break the face and laugh at [her]’; ‘breaking the face’ refers to widening one’s mouth into a smile.

29 *Dǎ xǐgǔ* 打喜鼓 / *dǎ huānxǐ gǔ* 打歡喜鼓 ‘beat the drums of joy’, is a rare expression and only appears a few times in CBETA, usually in the context of announcing the birth of Gautama in the palace (e.g., *Fó běnxíng jíjīng* 佛本行集經, T03n0190\_p0689b03), e.g. 忽聞歡喜鼓聲。時王驚問。大臣答言。大王夫人生一太子。 “Suddenly hearing the drums of joy, the king was surprised and asked [about it]. The senior officials answered: ‘The wife of the great king has given birth to a prince!’”

30 In the vernacularized versions of the Buddha’s biography found at Dūnhuáng, this can either refer to the sight of a pregnant woman, or to the encounter with a man who reports on the hardships of having a pregnant woman at home. Possibly, the compound is also influenced by literature translated from Sanskrit in which “birth and old age” (*jātijarā*) often appear as *compositum* (e.g., *Udānavarga* 15.5 and 15.6).

31 *Chēnni* 車匿 (Skt. Chandaka), the servant and horse groom of Gautama. After assisting him with the escape over the palace walls, he and the horse *Kaṇṭhaka* would return. Eventually, he would become a disciple of the Buddha.

he saw sickness (i.e., a sick person), at the western gate, he saw death (i.e., a corpse), and at the northern gate he saw a monk who had shaved his head and wore clean clothes.<sup>32</sup> This was none other than the leader [of the ascetics]. [?]<sup>33</sup>

[*The Great Departure*] In the middle of the night, Chandaka, the white horse [Kañṭhaka], and the prince departed together [from the palace].<sup>34</sup> The prince mounted the horse. The wife was Yaśodharā<sup>35</sup> and she was not aware of [his leaving] at all.<sup>36</sup> [Gautama] took his [horse] whip, pointed at her, and she became pregnant. The four heavenly kings lifted the hooves of the horse and leaped over the kingly palace walls, and [he] departed. During the fifth watch,<sup>37</sup> [he] arrived at the Snow Mountains.

[*Enlightenment / Teaching*] First he engaged in teaching, and then he completed the Way of the Buddha (i.e., reached enlightenment). With a snap of the fingers (i.e., an extremely short period of time), he arrived at the palaces of Tuṣita Heaven.<sup>38</sup>

*Expounding this, [we] will in the end<sup>39</sup> together complete the supreme.*<sup>40</sup>

32 *Jiényī* 潔依; this compound typically appears in the phrase *zhuó xīnjié yī* 著新潔衣 ‘wear fresh clothes’ (or similar phrases) in CBETA. In the context of Buddha’s biography, it often relates to the episode when Śākyamuni concludes his period of extreme ascetic practices, bathes in the Naranda river, and puts on fresh clothes. Here, probably, the author actually refers to *jìngyī* 淨衣 ‘pure garment’ (or alternatively *rǎnyī* 染衣, robes dyed in dark color), referring to the garment worn during begging, or – more generally – to the monks’ robe (Foguang: 4698).

33 This passage is problematic (see the discussion in the edition). Most likely this is an allusion to the years of ascetic practice after Śākyamuni left the palace. The “leader of the ascetics” probably refers to the first of the six ascetics Śākyamuni practiced with, Purāṇa Kāśyapa.

34 Remarkably, the horse is treated as human being here (quantified by the classifier for persons, *rén* 人).

35 In the text, the name of Gautama’s wife is rendered as Yéxūtuólúo 耶須陀(陀)羅, which is a highly unusual phonetic transcription; Yéshūtuólúo 耶輸陀羅 is more common for Yaśodharā. 耶須陀羅 appears only once in CBETA, in the Táng Dynasty *Dàshèng sīlùn xuányì* 大乘四論玄義 (CBETA, X46n0784), written by a certain Jūn Zhèng 均正.

36 *Jué* 覺 ‘wake up’ is here interpreted as *fājué* 發覺 here, ‘become aware of; discover’ (suggestion by Liáng Litiān).

37 The period between 3 and 5 AM.

38 *Dòushuài tiān* 兜率天, rendering Skt. Tuṣita (Heaven).

39 *Dàotóu* 到頭, a Táng period colloquialism, glossed as *zhōngguī* 終歸, *jiūjìng* 究竟 (lit. ‘arrive + Suffix’ > ‘finally; in the end’); see Jiāng and Cáo 1997: 88. Possibly it also could be interpreted as a verb here, in the meaning ‘to end’: “Having finished expounding this, we will together achieve liberation.”

40 *Wúshàng* 無上 lit. ‘not have – above > supreme; unexcelled; unsurpassed’; in this context referring to ‘liberation; salvation’ (syn. to *jiětuō* 解脫).

## Analysis

The great number of phonetic substitutions, some of them typical for North-western Medieval Chinese (e.g., the systematic replacement of 而 by 如) is a strong indication that the story might have originally been orally transmitted (e.g., in the context of a performance / public narration) and that it was written down or copied in a local context. Possibly, it was swiftly noted down by a scribe, providing a concise outline of some important events in the Buddha's life. The writing style and the character forms indicate that the text was not copied by a professional scribe but rather by a member of the Buddhist clergy or laity. I would rather assume the last, since the features and the content of the text are highly unusual, and was maybe composed by somebody who was not so familiar with the life stories of the Buddha. Or, alternatively, the storyline of Buddha's life was heavily adapted to a local audience.

The timeline of the recorded events is not consistent and includes elements not found elsewhere. The concise nature of the narrative might also indicate that the scribe / storyteller noted down some episodes in an extremely condensed form, possibly to be elaborated on and expanded at the time of the performance or narration.

The short narrative begins with Gautama's dwelling in his father's palace and obviously important events prior to that, such as those related to his conception and birth, are missing. However, the text commences right after the Chán poem in S.3096; as such, there is no text portion missing due to damage to the manuscript and thus the scribe rather ignored the episodes from the early life of the Buddha. Possibly, he had noted down this part on another manuscript leaf. Obviously, the copyist "reused" S.3096 to note down his highly condensed version of the sage's life.

## The joint practice of Gautama and Yaśodharā

After mentioning that the prince was dwelling "at home" (i.e., in the palace), the focus immediately shifts to one of the main concerns in this narrative,<sup>41</sup> Gautama's encounter with his (past and future) wife, their marriage and spiritual (rather than sexual) life together. This part is the most interesting and, as far as I know, quite unique. While Gautama seems to be unmoved by the sight of all the daughters of the state's aristocrats and high officials, he imme-

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41 Another fragment focusing on Gautama's meeting his wife, although with quite different content, is S.4633 (ed. in Ed.1997: 496–497).

diately recognizes Yaśodharā as his spouse during all of his former lives and he “breaks his face”, i.e., smiles at her, confirming that he will choose her as a wife, and subsequently gives a golden ring to her.



Here, the manuscript shows a unique feature: between the words ‘golden’ (*jīn* 金) and ‘ring’ (*zhīhuán* 指環) two symbols are inserted (see the image to the left). Although the scribe (or a later reader) cancelled them out by adding a deletion marker 卍 to the right of each symbol, this feature is highly interesting: did the scribe add the image of a ring<sup>42</sup> in order to “illustrate” this passage? What does the second symbol mean? Could it possibly be a symbol indicating that they got married (“knitted together”); or does it indicate that the ring is put on the finger of Yaśodharā?<sup>43</sup> Or are these symbols just arbitrarily or even playfully inserted?

Recently, I got aware of a similar character on the verso side of S.1477, appearing in the following context: 女卍一步 (部) “The woman (wife) and

42 An empty circle ○ (e.g., S.545) could theoretically also constitute a variant form of *xīng* 星 ‘star’, a character attributed to Empress Wǔ Zétiān 武則天 (on this form, see Yú Shūjiàn 2012: 361–362). However, this does not make much sense in the context of our story. In Japan, ○ could also occasionally substitute the character for ‘wheel’, *lún* 輪 (Jap. *rin*), such as in the expression 如意○觀音 (= 如意輪觀音), Skt. \*Cakravarti-cintāmaṇi-Avalokitēśvara-bodhisattva. Hashimoto (1919: 22) has further evidence of an early usage of ○ for 輪, providing an example from the Heian period, on the verso side of a manuscript featuring a calendar (dating from 1171–1173). The manuscript stored at the Kongōji 金剛寺 in Ōsaka writes 月輪 as 月○ in its colophon: 此月○中異說西寺成尊筆 (note: 西寺 is an abbreviated way of writing Daigoji 醍醐寺). I am very much indebted to Sven Osterkamp for this information and the references!

43 I am thankful to the colleagues who offered a variety of interpretations of these symbols, such as Henry Albery and Siglinde Dietz who pointed out the similarities with the *nandipada* (‘a bull’s hoof’) symbol found on Kuṣāṇa coins and other objects. Sven Osterkamp agreed with my suggestion that the first symbol might actually be the drawing of a ring, “illustrating” the passage; the second symbol is more difficult to interpret, but we both thought about something being tied together (concretely, here symbolizing marriage). By contrast, Imre Galambos rightfully pointed out that this type of “illustrations” inserted right into the text would be highly unusual in Dūnhuáng material. Samira Müller suggested that this might be a stylized depiction of a *mudrā* used to express the “start of the turning of the wheel of Buddhism” (see also the note above on ○). It might indicate that the married couple devoted themselves to reverence and meditation after they got married and as such initiated the spiritual career of Śākyamuni. Huáng Zhēng 黃征 (communication through Wendy Sau Ling Yu 余秀玲) suggested that these marks might indicate an interval, meaning that the contents before and after the marks are independent sections of the text. Possibly, in this concrete instance, marking that the marriage to Yaśodharā constitutes a turning point in his life (and coincides with the beginning of his religious practice, an event which is usually associated with his leaving the palace).

child (or just ‘wife’ if we interpret 子 as suffix) [donated] one chapter [of the sūtra]”. Based on this context, 𠄎 should be interpreted as a variant of 子 (many thanks to Yú Jiāháng 于佳航 for this suggestion!). When comparing it to 子 𠄎 in S.3096v-03-11, it appears to be an “abbreviation” of this semi-cursive form, with the upper part deleted or faded.

My tentative interpretation is as follows: In the phrase ...上金??脂(指)環 “placed a golden ring on her finger”, 指環 ‘ring’ was originally (playfully?) written as 〇𠄎 by the scribe, representing 環子 (‘ring + suffix 子’), maybe following a particular scribal convention or automatically imitating the original when copying the text. However, this was immediately corrected by deleting 〇𠄎 with deletion markers, and replacing them with the more “regular” 脂(指)環 ‘ring’.

Whereas canonical accounts of Buddha’s life usually focus on Gautama’s life in the palace as a period of indulging in worldly pleasures and the sexual engagement with his countless concubines, in our story he does not even have intercourse with his own wife! Indeed, it is emphasized that they did not even share the same bed, and that they lived like ascetics next to each other.<sup>44</sup> We might wonder then how their son Rahula was conceived? Here, the biography follows a story line which we also find in other accounts of Buddha’s life preserved among the Dūnhuáng manuscripts, namely, that he was conceived without sexual intercourse, but rather with the help of the supernatural abilities of Śākyamuni (which are projected already into his period of palace life here!). Concretely, when leaving the palace, he points his *horsewhip* at the sleeping Yaśodharā who consequently becomes pregnant.

Another unique element emphasizing their religious lifestyle while dwelling in the palace is the reference to *joint meditation practice* of Gautama and his wife. I did not find any parallel to this passage so far, neither in canonical texts nor Dūnhuáng vernacular accounts of the Buddha’s life. Indeed, the two *complement* each other in their practice, and it is stated: “[...] when the prince sat in meditation, his wife practiced the Way, and while the wife was sitting in meditation, the prince practiced the Way.” This assigns Yaśodharā a unique significance concerning the soteriological path of her husband.

44 This reminds us to a certain degree of other Buddhist narratives which focus on the purity of conduct even between couples, such as certain versions of the Pāli *Sāma jātaka* in which the parents dwell in separate huts in order to stay focused on their religious practices. In our story, curiously, this is emphasized while Śākyamuni still lives in the palace, and has not even renounced home yet.

The only part which somehow resembles more canonical versions concerns the Four Encounters, despite containing some textually problematic passages. Furthermore, the encounter with somebody giving birth is included.

The last part of the text discusses the remainder of Buddha's life in a time lapse, each phrase indicating an event which is typically described at length in traditional sources: After arriving at the Himālaya (lit. 'domain of the snow') mountains he engaged in teaching and 'completed the Way of the Buddha'. *Chéng Fó dào* 成佛道 usually refers to the attainment of enlightenment (Skt. *bodhi*), and should as such be placed *before* his teaching career is mentioned. The last phrase is the most puzzling, stating that he "with a snap of the fingers arrived at Tuṣita Heaven". This heaven is indeed the place whence he came from to be reborn for the last time but it is certainly not the destination of Śākyamuni after his enlightenment!<sup>45</sup>

The text ends with a note which indicates the performative nature of the text, a feature which has not been identified in any previous edition (all editions ignore the gap before the last phrase, and try to combine it somehow with the previous one). The audience is told that the very act of expounding the life story of the Buddha, and the process of listening to it, will lead everybody to "supreme" enlightenment.<sup>46</sup> As such, engaging with the life of the Buddha is identified as a soteriological device which will directly lead to the achievement of the highest goals in Buddhism, constituting a "shortcut" to enlightenment. With the use of the adverb *gòng* 共 'together', the communal experience of this process is emphasized.

## Final thoughts

This is a highly unusual account of Buddha's life story; possibly, it is a vernacularized adaptation circulating among a local audience. The visual features of the manuscript text suggest that it may have been copied or noted down

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45 Maybe the author / storyteller somehow mixed this up with the story of Śākyamuni ascending to heaven in order to teach his mother? However, this is unlikely, since according to this (late) narrative his mother dwelled in Trāyastriṃśa ("Heaven of the Thirty-three", *sānshísān tiān* 三十三天), another heaven in the World of Desire (*yùjiè* 欲界). In addition, this story usually does not appear in Dūnhuáng material concerning the life of the Buddha. As for the development of the narrative of Buddha ascending Trāyastriṃśa to teach his mother, see Anālayo 2012. Possibly, here the narratives concerning Śākyamuni and Maitreya were mixed up (since Tuṣita Heaven is the dwelling place for Maitreya, waiting there to eventually descend and become a Buddha).

46 Direct addresses of the audience are frequently encountered in vernacular stories extant among the Dūnhuáng manuscripts. This is also reminiscent of final sentences in various Mahāyāna sūtras, indicating the transfer of merit (Skt. *puṇyaparīṇāma*).

informally and hurriedly, using numerous variant and (semi-)cursive character forms, as well as phonetic loan characters, indicating that the story might have been transmitted orally. The content of the text shows several features which cannot be found in canonical accounts of Buddha's life. Most interestingly, seemingly the author could not reconcile such worldly activities as sex with the ideal of renunciation as embodied by Gautama Siddhārtha. But this challenges the real-world intelligibility of the narrative, i.e., what renunciation of the world entails, and elevates Siddhārtha to a somewhat more transcendent figure, a trait also reflected in his (eternal?) return to Tuṣita Heaven, perhaps. One wonders why the most important turning point in Buddha's life, the secret departure from the palace which marks the renunciation of a life of pleasure and the beginning of his career as world-renouncer is transferred to within the palace walls. Paradoxically, *his life as ascetic and practitioner commences in the moment when he meets his wife*. Possibly, this twist of the story was meant to inspire those who did not leave home but still wanted to pursue a pure lifestyle and follow the Buddhist path, especially in light of the soteriological note at the end. Ultimately, the narrative may have been aimed at an audience of devoted (female?) lay followers.

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