

Tripitaka Master Prajnā of the Tang Dynasty

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ABSTRACT

The translation of Buddhist texts has contributed greatly to the spread and development of Chinese Buddhism. There were many translators from Central Asia, India, and China who took part in the daunting task during the few hundred years of development of Buddhism in China. The four well-known translators include Kumarajiva, Xuanzhuang (玄奘), Yijing (義淨) and Amoghavajra (不空).

After Amoghavajra, the number of texts to translate began to decrease. Although there were translation centers and monks from in and outside China translating texts, however, the number of translations done was incomparable to the amount done before. Near the end of the Tang dynasty during Emperor Dezong's reign, Prajnā (9th century), an Indian monk who traveled to China and translated *The Mahāyāna Sutra on the Way to Six Pāramitās* (大乘理趣六波羅蜜多經). As a result, the Emperor Dezong recognized the importance of his translation work and had it placed in the Buddhist catalogues. Also, he decreed that Prajnā be taken to Xi Ming Temple (西明寺), in which Xuanzhuang had previously conducted his translations. He with a team of monks completed the translation of a small number of texts. As small as they may be, some of the texts such as *Avatamsaka Sutra in 40 fascicles* and the *Mahāyāna Sutra of Mind Ground* (本生心地觀經) are significant today.

This paper is a brief survey of the life and translations of Tripitaka Master Prajnā.

Keywords: Tripitaka Master Prajna, translator, Tang dynasty, Emperor Dezong

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Prajnā

The *Zhen Yuan Xin Ding Shi Jiao Mu Lu* (貞元新定釋教目錄) and *Song Biography of Eminent Monks* contain a biography of Prajnā (734-810?), particularly the *Zhen Yuan Xin Ding Shi Jiao Mu Lu* has a more complete article on him. According to the *Zhen Yuan Xin Ding Shi Jiao Mu Lu*, Prajnā also known as Bore Sanzang (般若三藏) and literally “wisdom” (智慧), is an Indian monk from ancient northwest India of Kapiśa or Kashmir (present day Bagram, Afghanistan, north of Kabul) who arrived in China in the 9th century. When he was seven years old, he renounced under Tiaofujun (調伏軍). As a novice, he memorized the four *Nikayas* and *Abhidharma*. Having been fully ordained, he could recite many texts such as *Abhidharma-kośa* and Sarvāstivādan texts. At fourteen, he went on a pilgrimage to the “two groves and eight pagodas” in search for what he did not know already. Later, Prajnā went to study in Nālanda University located in Central India. There he met and studied under Zhihu (智護), Jinyou (進友), and Zhiyou (智友). He learned the *Diamond Sutra*, treatises of Mind Only, *Discourse on the Stages of Yogic Practice* (Yogācārabhūmi śāstra), *Treatise on Discriminating the Middle and the Extremes* (中邊分別論), logic, grammar and composition, medicine, and so on. After eighteen years of study, he headed towards southern India in search of teaching and advice from those who still maintained the teaching of the dhārani. There he met an Abhiseka master, Dharmayasas (達磨耶舍), who having seen how industrious Prajnā was, transmitted the teachings of Yoga, teaching of entry into the mandala, the three mysteries, protection of the body (diamond armor), and five types of mudrās.¹

Spreading Buddhism into China

Prajnā who having learned that China was the home of Manjuśri, made a vow to spread Buddhism into China; thus the start of his journey in spreading Buddhism to the East. Due to tough winds, his boat sailed to Sri Lanka where it stopped to repair and refuel up in resources. It was in Sri Lanka where many Sanskrit texts and treatises were taken to China. Departing from Sri Lanka, his boat faced a sudden storm, in which Prajnā became the only survivor. Not only Prajnā survived but also the texts that he brought from Sri Lanka.² Zanning (贊寧), the compiler of the catalogue, is possibly indicating magical qualities of the sutra.

After half a month on sea, they finally reached Guangzhou (廣州) in 780. In 786,

¹ The three mysteries or secrets (三密) are the mysteries of the body, mind, and speech. T55, no.2156, p755c.

² 於白抄內大竹籊中得之。宛為鬼物扶持而到。乃歎曰。此大乘理趣等經。想支那人根熟矣。 On the fifth watch of the night, the wind ceased and he reached the shore. It was there he noticed within the large bamboo bucket, the sutras and treatises also survived that may have been supported by ghosts. T50, no.2061, p716b.

Prajnā arrived in Chang'an where he met his relative, Luohaoxin (羅好心) who was a military commander. He requested Prajnā to translate Buddhist texts, in which *The Mahāyāna Sutra on the Way to the Six Pāramitās* (DLP) was the first text Prajnā translated.

Translation

In 788, Prajnā translated the DLP with Jingjing (景淨), a Persian of Daqin Temple (大秦寺) into seven scrolls.³ They presented it to the Tang Emperor Dezong (742-805), who was knowledgeable in Buddhism. Having noticed the discrepancies and incoherency of the text due to the fact that Prajnā did not understand the local language and Jingjing did not understand Sanskrit or Buddhism, the emperor asked Prajnā to retranslate the text.⁴ With Luohaoxin's recommendation, an official imperial edict was issued and Prajnā was granted to retranslate the text at the translation center in Xi Ming Temple (西明寺). As Xi Ming Temple was a well-known translation center at that time where Xuanzhuang (玄奘) had once been, many monks also helped with the translation of DLP.⁵

In 789, Prajnā translated *Da Hua Yan Zhang Zhe Wen Fo Na Luo Yan Li Jing* (大華嚴長者問佛那羅延力經).⁶ In 790, Prajnā was given the title "Tripitaka Master" and the royal purple kasaya, given only by the emperor to certain highly esteemed monks. Not long, Zhiruo (智柔) invited Prajnā to translate the *Heart Sutra*. He retranslated the *Heart Sutra* with Liyan (利言).⁷ In the same year, he returned to Kashmir in search for more texts as Amoghavajra (不空 705-744) had done before him.⁸ His last two translation works were the *Mahayana Sutra of Mind Ground Contemplation* (大乘本生心地觀經) and the *Shou Hu Guo Jie Zhu Tuo Luo Ni Jing* (守護國界主陀羅尼經).⁹ In 792, Prajnā

³ Jingjing is a follower of Jingjiao (景教), also known as Brilliant Teaching or Nestorianism. See Max Deeg, "The "Brilliant Teaching": The Rise and Fall of "Nestorianism" (Jingjiao) in Tang China" *Japanese Religions* (31) 2. http://www.japanese-religions.jp/publications/assets/JR31_2_a_Deeg.pdf The collaborative translation of a religious text between two religions is also significant that it indicates harmony among the religions of the Tang dynasty.

⁴ According to *Zhen Yuan Xin Ding Shi Jiao Mu Lu*, the emperor requested to retranslate in order to differentiate texts that are Buddhists and non-Buddhists. This was because Jingjing was not a Buddhist, but a Nestorian who was fluent in Chinese; thus during the translation, he would have used non-Buddhist ideas to interpret the text. See Stanley Weinstein, *Buddhism under the Tang*, transl. Ven. Yifa, p163 and *Zhen Yuan Xin Ding Shi Jiao Mu Lu*, T55, no. 2157, p755c.

⁵ Ten monks were named in the DLP who had helped out with the translation and compiling of DLP. See *Ibid.*

⁶ Only one fascicle long, Prajnā and Liyan (利言) translated the text describing the power of the Buddha as merit attained from the offering of food. See T14, no.547. On Narayana see *Fo Guang Dictionary*, p3029 and 3542.

⁷ T8, no.254 and Stanley Weinstein, *Buddhism under T'ang*, p163.

⁸ For more info on the text, see *Shou Hu Guo Jie Zhu Tuo Luo Ni Jing* (守護國界主陀羅尼經), (Tokyo: Oookura Shuppan Kabushiki Kaisha (大藏出版株式會社), 2000), p16.

⁹ These two sutras were among the few that remained popular.

returned to Chang'an. In 794, he traveled around Mount Wutai. In 796, Prajnā was requested by the Emperor Dezong to translate the *Avatamsaka Sutra* in Chongfu Temple (崇福寺) of Chang'an.

According to the *Song Biography of Eminent Monks* (宋高僧傳), only three texts, the DLP, *Da Hua Yan Zhang Zhe Wen Fo Na Luo Yan Li Jing* (大華嚴長者問佛那羅延力經), and the *Heart Sutra* (般若波羅蜜多心經), and a total of twelve fascicles were translated.¹⁰ However, the *Zhen Yuan Xin Ding Shi Jiao Mu Lu* compiled by Yuanzhao (圓照) included six texts in seventy fascicles.¹¹ These texts included *Shou Hu Guo Jie Zhu Tuo Luo Ni Jing* (守護國界主陀羅尼經) translated in Ci En Temple (慈恩寺), *Mahāyāna Sutra of Mind Ground Contemplation* (大乘本生心地觀經) in eight fascicles translated in Li Chuan Temple (醴泉寺), DLP in ten fascicles, *Da Hua Yan Zhang Zhe Wen Fo Na Luo Yan Li Jing* (大華嚴長者問佛那羅延力經) in one fascicle, *Heart Sutra* (般若波羅蜜多心經) and forty fascicles of *Avatamsaka Sutra*.¹² There are a few other texts mentioned in the *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* (大正新修大藏經) that were not mentioned, but were works of Prajnā such as *Zhu Fo Jing Jie She Zhen Shi Jing* (諸佛境界攝真實經) and *Fo Shuo Zao Ta Yan Ming Gong De Jing* (佛說造塔延命功德經).¹³ His most popular translated texts include the *Shou Hu Guo Jie Zhu Tuo Luo Ni Jing* among the practitioners of the tantric tradition, *Mahāyāna Sutra of Mind Contemplation*, and the *Avatamsaka Sutra* in forty fascicles.¹⁴

Reportedly, Kukai (774-835), the founder of Shingon sect in Japan, studied Sanskrit under him for a few years at Xi Ming Temple during Kukai's pilgrimage to China in

¹⁰ T50, no.2061, p716b.

¹¹ X77, no. 1522, p191c.

¹² "Biography of Prajnā, Li Chuan Temple of Tang (唐醴泉寺般若傳)", T50, no.2061, p0722a.

¹³ Both of these texts are placed in the esoteric section of catalogues. *Zhu Fo Jing Jie She Zhen Shi Jing* (諸佛境界攝真實經) also known as *She Zhen Shi Jing* (攝真實經) and *Zhen Shi Jing* (真實經) is one of the main yoga texts into yogic practice. See T18, no.868. According to the *Shōwa Era's Comprehensive Catalogue of Dharma Treasure* (Shōwa Hōbō Sōmoku-roku 昭和法寶目錄), there is a Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan version of the text. The *Fo Shuo Zao Ta Yan Ming Gong De Jing* (佛說造塔延命功德經) was translated with Muniśrī (牟尼室利) who read out the Sanskrit, Yuanzhao (圓照) wrote down the notes, and Jianxu (鑑虛) edited. See T19, no.1026 and *Shōwa*, p250.

¹⁴ *Shou Hu Guo Jie Zhu Tuo Luo Fan Jing* was popular among the practitioners of esoteric Buddhism. The ten fascicles text was translated by Prajnā with a northern Indian monk, Muniśrī (牟尼室利) also known as Jimo (寂默) in Chinese. See "Biography of Jimo (寂默) Ci En Temple of Tang (唐京兆慈恩寺寂默傳)" *Song Biography of Eminent Monks* (宋高僧傳), T50, no.2061, p720. For more info on the text, see *Shou Hu Guo Jie Zhu Tuo Luo Ni Jing* (守護國界主陀羅尼經), (Tokyo: Ookura Shuppan Kabushiki Kaisha (大藏出版株式會社), 2000), pp19-24.

Regarding the *Mahayana Sutra of Mind Ground Contemplation*, there were a number of commentaries and references to the text, displaying its significance in the Buddhist circle. See *Shōwa*, p11. Yongming Yanshou (永明延壽) quoted a lot from the text including DLP. See T48, no.2016, p552a.

804.¹⁵ According to *Goshōrai Mokuroku* (御請來目錄), Kukai also brought back a number of translated texts including the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, *DLP*, *Zao Ta Yan Ming Gong De Jing*, and *Shou Hu Guo Jie Zhu Tuo Luo Ni Jing* to Japan.¹⁶ These texts were the foundations for starting Shingon sect and spread of understanding of esoteric Buddhism in Japan.

In 810, Prajnā passed away in Luoyang and was buried in Longmen Grottoes on the Eastern Heights (龍門西岡).

Translated Texts

The first text that Prajnā translated is the DLP, also known as the *Six Paramitas Sutra* (六波羅蜜多經 and 六度經). The Sanskrit name is *Mahāyāna nāya sat Paramita Sutra*. The DLP has been translated into Chinese from Sanskrit and no other versions are known. The first translated version with Jingjing was not received well as it was not translated coherently. The second translation was a collaborative translation effort with Prajnā leading through the process in Xi Ming Temple. Emperor Dezong wrote the introduction to the text, which has survived today.¹⁷ There are some discrepancies between what is written in the canon and compiled in the *Mochizuki*. According to the DKSC, in 788 the emperor Dezong requested a commentary be written on the DLP, in which Liangxiu wrote the commentary and Prajnā wrote the introduction to the commentary.¹⁸ In 789, Chaowu (超悟) of Qian Fu Temple, Shaoliang (少良), and Qiyun (齊運) later revised the commentary into ten fascicles.¹⁹ However the *Mochikuchi Bukkyō daijiten* stated that Chaowu wrote only four fascicles and Liangxiu was not mentioned as one of the few who wrote the commentary.²⁰ Zhitong (智通) with the help of Daoan (道岸) also wrote a ten fascicle commentary to the text, a one fascicle Su Li Jue (疏例訣) and a one fascicle catalogue (大乘理趣六波羅蜜多經疏義目).²¹ Thus, a total of three commentaries, a Su Li Jue and a catalogue were written and compiled. However, all of them including the Sanskrit extant version were lost.²²

In order to write the commentary, one needed to understand the meaning implied in the sutra; thus talks were given on the sutra at the Qian Fu Temple by Chaowu and at

¹⁵ Ronald S. Green, *Kukai, Founder of Japanese Shingon Buddhism: Portraits of His Life*, (University of Wisconsin, 2003), PhD, p120.

¹⁶ T55, no.2161, p1062c.

¹⁷ T8, no.261, p865a. The introduction written by the emperor was also placed in the *All Tang Texts* (全唐文) 55, pp6~8.

¹⁸ Liangxiu had helped with the translation of the DLP as ordered by the emperor. He was later requested by the emperor to edit the new DLP commentary. Monks were also invited to give a talk about the text. T55, no.2156, p762c. For the biography of Liangxiu, see X77, no. 1522, p86b.

¹⁹ Ibid, p763b.

²⁰ *Mochikuchi Bukkyō daijiten* (The Great Dictionary of Buddhism 望月佛教大辭典), Ed. Mochizuki Shinkō. 望月. 信亨, et al, (Taipei: Horizon Publishing Co., 1979), p3288.

²¹ T55, no.2156, pp764 and 769.

²² *Mochizuki*, p3288.

the Li Chuan Temple. A hall in the Li Chuan Temple was used as the national institute for Principle and Way of Mahāyāna Sutra (大乘理趣經院) or Six Pāramitās Sutra (六波羅蜜多經院).²³ There were seven learned monks (義行僧) who often gave Dharma talks and recited the sutra including Tanyan (談筵) and Chaowu.²⁴ Thus, increasing the popularity of the text. If talks were given on the text, then it will help in the spread and popularity of the text.

Other texts worth mentioning is that there were two texts compiled by Yuanzhao regarding the DLP – *Tripitaka Master Prajnā's Record of Translated texts from the past to now* (般若三藏續古今翻譯經圖記) in two fascicles and *The Meaning of the Sounds in DLP* (大乘理趣六波羅蜜多經音義) in two fascicles. The *Zhen Yuan Xin Ding Shi Jiao Mu Lu* refers to the *Tripitaka Master Prajnā's Record of Translated texts from the past to now* for the biography of Prajnā. However, the record is not mentioned except in the *Song Biography of Eminent Monks* and the *Zhen Yuan Xin Ding Shi Jiao Mu Lu* catalogues do not mention it at all.²⁵ *The Meaning of the Sounds in DLP* is also not found.

The *Mind Ground Sutra* is also mentioned a number of times in the *Zong Jing Lu* (宗鏡錄卷第十一) by Yong Ming Yan Shou (永明延壽).²⁶

Avatamsaka Sūtra in sixty fascicles has been translated by Buddhahadra (359~429), and Siksanda (652~710) in eighty fascicles. In 796, Prajnā began translating a forty fascicles hand-written text given by King of Orissa to the Tang Emperor Dezong. The forty fascicles is the chapter on “Entering the Dharma Realm (Gandavyuha or 入不思議解脫境界普賢行願品)” of the eighty fascicles Avatamsaka Sutra; it is also known as “Vows of Samanthabhadra Bodhisattva (普賢菩薩行願品).” The forty fascicles also circulated as an independent text as the “Vows of Samanthabhadra (普賢菩薩行願品)” like the “Universal Gate Chapter (普門品)” in the Lotus Sutra. In 798, Prajnā completed the translation of Avatamsaka Sutra in forty fascicles with a team of eight that included Yuanzhao, Zhitong, Chengguan (澄觀), and many others.²⁷

²³ T55, no.2156, pp763-764c.

²⁴ Tanyan (談筵) is also known as Liangxiu, see T50, no.2061, p737c. T55, no.2156, p763b.

²⁵ T50, no.2061.

²⁶ T48no. 2016

²⁷ See “Biography of Lianhua of Tang (唐蓮華傳)”, T50, no.2061, p721b

Placement in the Catalogues

Of all the texts that Prajnā had translated, most of them are placed in the esoteric section (密教部). With a few exceptions, the DLP text is placed in the esoteric section of some of the catalogues such as *Lu Wai Jing Deng Mu Lu* (錄外經等目錄), *Goshōrai mokuroku* (御請來目錄), and *Zhu A She Li Zhen Yan Mi Jiao Bu Lei Zong Lu* (諸阿闍梨真言密教部類總錄).²⁸ For most catalogues such as *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* placed the text at the end of the Prajnā section. This text being placed among esoteric texts may indicate that it has some esoteric elements within. It may possibly be due to the fact there is a chapter on dhāraṇi.²⁹ The chapter discusses how the merits from the practice of the dhāraṇi can protect the nation and avoid calamities. It is also a skillful means for saving living beings. Other than that, there seems to be no other esoteric elements inside the sutra. Besides the fact that in the biography of Prajnā, Zanning mentioned that there may be some magical elements in the sutra to allow it to be protective. Later Japanese scholars categorized DLP as a Prajnā text hints at how esoteric texts are later defined. Many Mahāyāna texts had dhāraṇis within the text such as the *Śūramgama Sutra*, *Lotus Sutra*, and so on. It is possible during the Tang dynasty with the popularity of esoteric Buddhism, texts that included such elements as dhāraṇis or indication of immediate attainment and so on were placed as esoteric. Most texts of the time were a mix of esoteric and exoteric Buddhism such as the *Surangama Sutra* emphasis on immediate relief through dhāraṇis and focus on the teachings that lead to the possible relief.

Significance in Tang - Song China

A number of texts and works by other monks of the Tang and Song dynasty have mentioned or quoted from the sutra such as in the *Fo Shuo Si Shi Er Zhang Jing Su Chao* (佛說四十二章經疏鈔卷第二), there is a quote from chapter six of DLP on precepts pāramitā.³⁰ The number of references to the text possibly indicates its popularity among the Buddhist circle. According to Stanley Weinstein, Emperor Dezong was a great supporter of Prajnā and translation of Buddhist texts.³¹ Thus, a translation center was established with the help of the emperor. Besides supporting the translation center and Prajnā's translations, the emperor ordered two Buddhist canon catalogues compiled, in which a detailed introduction of the origins the text were given.³² Emperor Dezong took

²⁸ For *Goshōrai Mokuroku* (御請來目錄), see T55, no.2161, p1062c. For *Lu Wai Jing Deng Mu Lu* (錄外經等目錄), see T55, no.2175, p1112c. *Zhu A She Li Zhen Yan Mi Jiao Bu Lei Zhong Lu* (諸阿闍梨真言密教部類總錄) was compiled by Tendai master Annen (安然) (841-889). See T55, no.2176.

²⁹ See chapter two of DLP. T8, no.261, p870.

³⁰ *Fo Shuo Si Shi Er Zhang Jing Su Zao* (佛說四十二章經疏鈔卷第二), X 37, no.671. *Fo Shuo Fan Wang Jing Pu Sa Xin Di Ping He Zhu* (佛說梵網經菩薩心地品合註卷第三) also quotes from the same section of DLP. See, X38, no.694, p649c.

³¹ Stanley Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, trans. by Ven. Yifa, p162.

³² The two catalogues were the three fascicles *Xu Kai Yuan Shih Jiao Mu Lu* (續開元釋教目錄) completed in 794 as an addition to the *Kai Yuan Shih Jiao Mu Lu* (開元釋教目錄) compiled by Zhishen (智昇) and

great notice in Prajnā and DLP that may be due to the content of the text that indicate the ability to protect the nation and ways to practice the six paramitas that can bring about protection and stability in the nation. There were a number of texts during the time that promoted or indicated the ability to protect and stabilize the nation. It is possible that during Emperor Dezong's time of constant internal fighting that led him to flee the capital numerous time, the emperor and nation felt the need for stability.³³ These texts helped in a way promote Buddhism to the emperor.

Having seen the text was quoted and used by many, it was still not as popular as other Mahāyāna texts such as the *Lotus Sutra*, *Avatamsaka Sutra*, and so on. It was possible that the text did not appeal to the people as it did not meet the needs and conditions of the time. Actually, all of Prajnā's translations did not gain much popularity. Texts such as the *Mind Ground Sutra* appealed to the ideal of protecting the nation. It was during the Tang dynasty when Buddhism had reached a peak and began to decline. Venerable Master Taixu wrote a commentary to the *Mind Ground Sutra* that has not been done in years.

the thirty fascicles *Zhen Yuan Xin Ding Shi Jiao Mu Lu* (貞元新定釋教目錄) completed in 800. See Ibid, p164.

³³ Stanley Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, pp149~165.

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