

THE BAJAUR MAHĀYĀNA SŪTRA.
A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF ITS CONTENTS

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Introduction

The *Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra* is the conventional name for fragment 2 of the Bajaur Collection of Kharoṣṭhī manuscripts.¹ The present article is based on the authors' ongoing edition of this text that is being prepared as a collaborative project between the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Munich, and the Chair of Buddhist Studies, University of Lausanne. The complete reconstructed text, its representation in the form of a Sanskrit word-by-word rendering (*chāyā*), and its preliminary translation will be made available in an online version at the beginning of 2017.² This procedure will enable the interested public to participate in the editorial progress before a final publication in print will appear within the next few years. At the same time, it will get scholars from different fields of Buddhist Studies involved in the study of this text. Exploring a text like this – without any direct parallels in other traditions of Buddhist literature and relating to a large number of texts in a multitude of languages and different genres, e.g. Mahāyāna, Āgama, and Abhidharma literature – can only be a collective endeavour. Both this

¹ For general surveys about the Bajaur Collection and its study see Strauch 2007/2008, Strauch 2008 and Falk & Strauch 2014. The following studies of single manuscripts are available: BajC 1 (*Dakṣiṇāvibhaṅga-/Gautamīsūtra*): Strauch 2014a; BajC 2 (Mahāyāna Sūtra): Strauch 2010, Schlosser & Strauch 2016, Strauch forthcoming-a+b; BajC 3 (*Manasvināgarājasūtra*): Strauch 2014b; BajC 4 and 11 (path of a bodhisattva): Schlosser 2016; BajC 5 and 9: Strauch 2012 (Arapacana verse collection, Nīti text); BajC 13 (*Prāti-mokṣa*): Strauch 2014c.

² The publication of the online version will be announced on the website of the Bavarian Academy project “Buddhist Manuscripts from Gandhāra:” <http://www.gandhara.indologie.lmu.de>.

summarizing article as well as the tentative reconstructed edition and translation will lay the proper ground work for this collaborative approach.³

The aim of this article is to present for the first time the main outline and characteristics of the text as a coherent narrative that reveals the principles of its compositional structure and the underlying doctrinal core. Thus rather than presenting an exhaustive study of the *Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra*, the article intends to set the frame for further studies that will help to better evaluate the importance of this text for our understanding of the genesis of early Mahāyāna and its doctrinal foundations.

Principles of text reconstruction

The *Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra* is preserved on a birch-bark scroll more than two meters in length and written in about 600 lines. The original scroll would have been approximately 18 to 19 cm in width. The beginning and end of the scroll are lost, as are parts of the right margin. The manuscript is preserved in a large number of fragments of different sizes that had to be reassembled in order to reconstruct the original shape of the text. Due to the fragmentary state of the manuscript, this reconstruction does not result in a complete text. Many gaps, from a few words up to several lines, have to be filled in by comparison with related texts and by exploring the internal logic of the text's structure.

The text itself is written continuously without any signs of subdivisions except for small dots or circles to mark the end of a sentence or a sub-clause or even a compound break. The only formal structure the text offers is an alternation of prose and verse sections. The verses fulfil two different functions: They often restate the contents of the preceding

³ In fact, the study of the text and the editorial process have already profited largely from the collective efforts of many colleagues, either in the form of workshops organized in Taiwan (2011), Munich (2013) and Lausanne (2014), or by their individual input. The authors take this opportunity to thank some of them: Mark Allon, Stefan Baums, Johannes Bronkhorst, Collett Cox, Thomas Crujisen, Harry Falk, Paul Harrison, Jens-Uwe Hartmann, Elsa Legittimo, Matsuda Kazunobu, Gudrun Melzer, Jan Nattier, Richard Salomon, Cristina Scherrer-Schaub, Jonathan Silk, Peter Skilling, and Vincent Tournier.

section(s), thus forming a proper conclusion of a chapter. On the other hand, they can also represent a mixture of items, some dealt with in the preceding text and others in the subsequent discourse. In these cases, they seem to form a transition between two different sections. The meter of the verses is a *triṣṭubh/jagatī* mix with the following subvarieties: *indra-vajrā*, *upendravajrā*, *indravaṃśā*, and *vaṃśastha*.

An additional feature of the text's structure is the change of the main protagonists of the discourse. While some chapters are composed as a dialogue between the Buddha and his disciple Śāriputra, others report a conversation between the Buddha and 84,000 devaputras with Śāriputra acting as an occasional interlocutor.

Based on these two formal characteristics, we subdivided the text into altogether seven sections.⁴ In short, these sections are:

1. Teaching of the Tathāgata
2. Instruction of the devaputras
3. Prediction to the devaputras
4. Qualities of the instructed devaputras
5. Rebirth of the devaputras
6. Awakening
7. Extinction without rebirth

Each of the seven sections can be further divided into several subsections based on their contents. These subsections will facilitate orientation and enable the reader to follow the discourse of the *sūtra* as a whole. The following table outlines this structure and indicates the amount of text (in lines) that is devoted to each of the sections and subsections ("pres." denotes the preserved lines, and "orig." the minimum number of lines that were once written on the manuscript based on gaps where the amount of missing text can be safely reconstructed, as for example in the case of numbered verses; Ś/D stand for Śāriputra or the devaputras and mark the point where the dialogue partners change).

⁴ According to our survey, section 1 is not concluded by verses, but the manuscript is fragmentary here, and it cannot be excluded that there originally was a short passage of around ten or twelve verses; especially because the verses of section 2 only take up the topics of the preceding section, and not of section 1.

Table: Contents of the *Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra*.

		lines, pres. lines, orig.		
1	Teaching of the Tathāgata		128.5	147.5
1.1	The teaching on emptiness	Ś	36	43
1.2	The <i>āryaśrāvaka</i>		–	
1.2.1	His <i>brahmacarya</i>		18.5	
1.2.2	His four <i>asaṃhāryadharmā</i> , <i>abhedyaprasāda</i> and <i>acintya</i>		58.5	
1.3	Wondrous phenomena	D	15.5	22.5
2	Instruction of the devaputras		143.5	143.5
2.1	<i>Bodhicittotpāda</i>	D	4	
2.2	<i>Bodhisattvaśikṣā</i>		37.5	
2.3	<i>Dharmakṣānti</i> and non-retrogression		–	
2.3.1	Non-retrogression		4.5	
2.3.2	Merit of the <i>dharmakṣānti</i>		71	
2.4	The Tathāgata's smile		13	
2.5	Verses (12): Repetition and reason for the smile		13.5	
3	Prediction to the devaputras		90	90
3.1	Buddha name and time span	D	5.5	
3.2	<i>Buddhakṣetra</i>		17	
3.3	<i>Dharmadeśanā</i>		47.5	
3.4	Verses (20): Repetition		20	
4	Qualities of the instructed devaputras		52	52
4.1	Moral conduct: <i>pañcaśīla</i> and <i>daśakuśalakarmapatha</i>	Ś	21.5	
4.2	Mental conduct: non-practice of <i>smṛti</i>		20	
4.3	Verses (10): Repetition		10.5	
5	Rebirth of the devaputras		73	73
5.1	Among the gods	Ś	4.5	
5.2	Among the humans		9.5	
5.3	In Abhirati		20.5	
5.4	Verses (32): Praise of the Tathāgata (<i>stotra</i>)	D	38.5	

6	Awakening		90	109
6.1	Not understanding the features of a Tathāgata	D	19	24
6.2	Seeing a Tathāgata in a dream		30.5	
6.3	Waking up and seeing no Tathāgata, dharma, or saṃgha		6.5	
6.4	No perception, no thinking		12	
6.5	Verses (32): Liberation		22	36
7	Extinction without rebirth	D	16	16
			593	631

Summary of contents

In the following, each section and subsection is briefly summarized according to its main contents. The summary is accompanied by references to previous studies on certain aspects and passages of the text that can provide further details.

1. *Teaching of the Tathāgata*

The scroll is not completely preserved, the beginning of the text is missing. The whole section is composed as a dialogue between the Buddha (always referred to as the Tathāgata or addressed as “Blessed One”) and Śāriputra that deals with the contents and characteristics of the Tathāgata’s teaching and the characteristics of his disciple (*śrāvaka*). According to a later passage of the text, this dialogue takes place on the Vulture Peak at Rājagṛha.⁵

1.1. *The teaching on emptiness*

The preserved portion of the dialogue begins with Śāriputra asking the Tathāgata a question. Due to the fragmentary state of the manuscript it is difficult to determine the exact content of this question. The preserved passages, however, make it clear that Śāriputra had asked the Tathāgata

⁵ For Ḡḍhrakūṭa in Gandhāran texts see also Strauch forthcoming-a.

for the sake of beings that possess the qualities of Tathāgatas, i.e., for the sake of Awakened Ones, or rather for the sake of bodhisattvas who aspire to become Awakened Ones.

In the beginning of his response, the Buddha denies the validity of categories of speech and mental constructions for describing a Tathāgata's teaching and the character of dharmas. This initial discourse concludes with the statement that all notions (*saṃjñā*) of dharmas should be avoided. Based on this fundamental statement, the text lists a number of categories that are not perceived by Śāriputra. This list contains categories of personality (*ātman*, *bhāva*, *jīva*) and of mental and physical processes. Most of these categories can be found in various other early Mahāyāna texts, and they are usually associated with the concept of emptiness. The dharmas are, for example, described as being without origination (*utpāda*), without an inherent nature (*svabhāva*), without cessation (*nirodha*), without characteristic marks (*lakṣaṇa*), without defilement (*saṃkleśa*) or purification (*vyavadāna*). Passages like these are typical for early Mahāyāna, and *Prajñāpāramitā* literature in particular.⁶

1.2. *The āryaśrāvaka*

After this discourse about the qualities of dharmas and their emptiness, which lays the doctrinal ground for the entire *sūtra*, the text focusses on the character of the follower of this teaching. It is remarkable that here the traditional term *āryaśrāvaka*, or “noble disciple,” is used. The discourse, however, makes it sufficiently clear that this *āryaśrāvaka* follows the path of a bodhisattva. The traditional (Mainstream) concept of an *āryaśrāvaka* is reinterpreted according to the new doctrinal approach. This new concept is based on the teaching of non-apperception that had been elaborated by the Tathāgata in the preceding instruction. Consequently, the ‘new’ *āryaśrāvaka*'s practice resembles in many regards that of a Tathāgata.

⁶ For details cf. Strauch forthcoming-a.

1.2.1. His brahmacarya

The first portion of the *āryaśrāvaka* discourse is devoted to his “pure conduct” (*brahmacarya*). Again the emptiness of dharmas is the basis of the explanation of this conduct. The Blessed One declares that of all dharmas neither a beginning, middle nor end (*ādi, madhya, paryavasāna*) is conceived, and hence also neither decrease, persistence, nor extension (*hāni, sthiti, vaipulyatā*). Therefore “this [single] dharma” is by nature immovable and baseless (*acala, anālaya*). This kind of dharma is the essence (*sāra*) of this dharma and vinaya. It is the foundation (*pratiṣṭhā*), based on which the disciple of the Blessed One (*mama śrāvaka*) lives the pure conduct. Based on this conduct, the *āryaśrāvaka* does not perceive (*na samanupaśyati*) the Tathāgata as being related to any of the aggregates (*skandha*), their origination, persistence, or *decrease.⁷

1.2.2. His four asaṃhāryadharmas, abhedyaprasāda and acintya

The qualities of an *āryaśrāvaka* are then exemplified on the basis of a list that contains groups of terms consisting of four members.⁸ The list combines conventional (Mainstream) terms designating qualities of an advanced *śrāvaka* as well as terms that are typical for the qualities of a Tathāgata. This confirms the impression that the concept of the *āryaśrāvaka* as represented in the *Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra* incorporates a number of elements that were hitherto exclusively known for Tathāgatas. Among them, one group is discussed in more detail: the *asaṃhāryadharma*s. Through these qualities an awakened being becomes immune to all sorts of evil influences, such as adherents of another faith, Māra’s army, or painful feelings and wrong views.

The following discourse apparently deconstructs these conventional concepts of qualities of a Tathāgata by introducing another group of fours: the “unbreakable confidences” (*abhedyaprasāda*). This group is clearly based on the traditional concept of the *avetyaprasādas*, one of

⁷ The fragmentary text seems to abbreviate this passage and to list only form (*rūpa*) and feeling (*vedanā*). Likewise, only origination (*utpāda*) and persistence (*sthiti*) are preserved.

⁸ A comprehensive study of this list and its relation to Abhidharma and early Mahāyāna texts is available in Schlosser & Strauch 2016, part 1.

the well-known qualities of a stream-enterer. According to the conventional interpretation, the four *avetyaprasādas* are based on an active conceptualization of the four categories that are included here: By forming the right understanding with regard to the three jewels (*buddha*, *dharmā*, *saṃgha*), and morality (*śīla*) as the fourth, the advanced disciple obtains the quality of “faithful trust” (*avetyaprasāda*) in each of them. The *Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra* redefines this concept according to the teaching of emptiness.⁹ In clear terms, the Tathāgata’s speech determines the practice of *abhedyaprasāda* as a practice of non-apperception, here again marked by the verbal phrase *na samanupaśyati*. All items of the four *abhedyaprasādas* are characterized in the same way: By not perceiving any specific qualities in those four, one acquires the four “unbreakable confidences.” Further on, the text continues to elaborate on the qualities of the *abhedyaprasādas* with the help of the simile of empty space (*ākāśa*). Like space, these four confidences are without form, invisible, unlimited and free from characteristic marks.

The subsection is concluded by a summarizing statement, which once more repeats the central message with regard to the four *abhedyaprasādas*: By not perceiving Buddha, dharma, saṃgha, and morality, the Buddha’s disciple (*mama śrāvaka*) will be endowed with the unbreakable confidences that make him unassailable.

1.3. *Wondrous phenomena*

The dharma teaching is concluded by a conventional description of wondrous phenomena that frequently accompany and conclude a Tathāgata’s teaching. The entire Vulture Peak (Gṛdhrakūṭa) is filled with golden radiance, excellent fragrances and flowers. Innumerable gods (*devas*, *brahmā*-gods, *śuddhāvāsaka* gods) appear in the atmosphere (*antarikṣa*), approach the Blessed One with folded hands, and praise his teaching. Thereupon the entire buddhafield is filled with a golden radiance and the *trisāhasra-mahāsāhasralokadhātu* trembles.

⁹ For a more detailed analysis of this passage and a discussion of the term in the context of Abhidharma and Mahāyāna literature, see Schlosser & Strauch 2016, part 2.

This passage leads to the next section where a group of 84,000 devaputras from among these celestial beings approaches the Buddha and asks for instruction.

2. Instruction of the devaputras

The appearance of the devaputras marks the beginning of the actual bodhisattva teaching and conveys the central message of the text that takes up many of the elements of section 1.

2.1. *Bodhicittotpāda*

The section is introduced by the aspiration for the highest perfect awakening of 84,000 devaputras, who express their wish to be trained in the bodhisattva training (*bodhisattvaśikṣā*) for the sake of and out of compassion for all sentient beings. The composition of the formula used here is rather conventional and can be compared with aspiration formulae (*prañidhāna*) in other Mahāyāna texts (cf. Strauch 2010: 45–51 and Strauch forthcoming-b).

2.2. *Bodhisattvaśikṣā*

The text continues to give the contents of the training of a bodhisattva. As already noticed in section 1, this training consists mainly of the practice of non-apperception. Different categories are enumerated whereas the main statement is the same: One should not have any notion towards anything. Among others, the constituents of personality (*ātman, sattva, bhāva, jīva, pudgala*), of materiality (the *mahābhūtas, loka/paraloka*, anything seen/heard/thought) and the five aggregates (*skandha*) are listed here. Accordingly, only those who are free of any kind of notion towards any kind of dharma, including a notion of awakening (*bodhi*), mind (*citta*) and being (*sattva*), can be expected to achieve awakening.

Passages like those of the Bajaur *sūtra* are also found in early *Prajñāpāramitā* texts and show once more the strong affiliation of our text with the contemporary *Prajñāpāramitā* literature. The practice of non-apperception as described here is probably rooted in meditational practices that are also expressed in Mainstream Buddhist texts. They have been taken up and

reinterpreted in terms of the doctrine of emptiness by early Mahāyāna and Madhyamaka Buddhism in particular (cf. Strauch forthcoming-a).

2.3. *Dharmakṣānti and non-retrogression*

The instructed devaputras are characterized as bodhisattvas who are firmly set on the bodhisattva path. They have attained endurance with regard to (non-arising) dharmas (*dharmakṣānti*) and are consequently labelled as non-retrogressive bodhisattvas.

2.3.1. Non-retrogression

The section starts with the affirmation that the devaputras, while following the practice of non-apperception, do not lose heart. The Buddha confirms that this affirmation defines their status as non-retrogressive (*avaivartya*) bodhisattvas.

2.3.2. Merit of the dharmakṣānti

The state of accepting this teaching and its practical consequences is associated with one of the major qualities of a bodhisattva: endurance with regard to dharmas (*dharmeṣu kṣānti, dharmakṣānti*).¹⁰ For the author(s) of the Bajaur *sūtra*, this capacity is clearly the foremost characteristic of a bodhisattva. A long passage praises the merits that accrue from *dharmakṣānti* that is compared here to other merit-producing activities such as giving gifts (to the three jewels) or worshipping Tathāgatas and Pratyekabuddhas. It goes without saying that obtaining the capacity to endure the true character of dharmas supersedes all these activities many times over. In order to illustrate and emphasize the superiority of *dharmakṣānti* the

¹⁰ Only once written together as *dharmakṣānti*, mostly *dharmeṣu kṣānti* (G *dharmehi kṣānti*). This endurance is in other Mahāyāna texts further specified as being the endurance with regard to the fact that dharmas are devoid of arising (*anutpattika*, e.g., in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* or *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*) or that dharmas are devoid of a self (*nirātmaka*, e.g., in the *Vajracchedikā*). In the manuscript from Bajaur none of these adjectives is added, but the overall context makes it clear that the same endurance is meant (cf. Strauch 2010: 29–43).

text uses a number of conventional similes, such as that of a sky compared to the part of the sky occupied by a bird, that of the ocean compared to a puddle, or that of a heap of mustard seeds compared to a single seed.

This passage resembles one of the most characteristic parts of many Mahāyāna *sūtras* that often praise the text itself (or any practice related to its preservation or transmission, be it oral or written).¹¹ Here, it is remarkably not the text nor any text-related practice that is in the center of this passage, but the capacity of *dharmakṣānti* itself (cf. Strauch 2010: 29–44).

2.4. *The Tathāgata's smile*

The long passage praising the merits of *dharmakṣānti* is followed by the Tathāgata's smile, which emits multicolored rays of light that pervade the entire buddhafiield. Usually, such a smile occurs as a Buddha's reaction to somebody's aspiration. It can therefore be suggested that it directly refers to the preceding aspiration of the devaputras and their successful instruction. At the same time, such a smile usually introduces a prediction (*vyākaraṇa*) that confirms the preceding aspiration. Thus the concluding passage of section 2 is simultaneously announcing the following section 3 that contains the confirming prediction.

Due to the light emitted by the Buddha, a great number of beings approach and venerate him. These beings range from gods, *nāgas*, and *yakṣas* to monks and kings (here Bimbisāra is explicitly named) and their entourage to merchants (*śreṣṭhīn*) and householders¹² (*grhapatī*). The light then returns to the Buddha, circles him thrice and disappears in front of him. This event prompts Śāriputra's question about the cause of his smile.

¹¹ Cf. Schopen 2005: 125f.: "Passages of this type are – perhaps more than anything else we have seen so far – characteristic of early Mahāyāna *sūtra* literature. They are quite literally found everywhere, and their sheer commonality, together with their seemingly inflated rhetoric, may, ironically, have numbed us to their significance. More than anything else, they express in a language that is perhaps foreign to us, but perfectly suited to their intended audience, the value that is placed on specific things."

¹² Householder or even house-lord is the literal translation, but here probably "financiers" might be suitable as well (see the discussion of *grhapatī* in Nattier 2003: 22–24).

The structure of this whole subsection is highly conventional and agrees with the usual narrative device introducing a prediction given by a Tathāgata.¹³

2.5. *Verses (12): Repetition and reason for the smile*

In the Bajaur *sūtra* the direct link between this narrative and the following prediction is interrupted by a verse portion that takes up this question but also repeats the preceding text passages by referring to the infinite merit accrued by someone on the bodhisattva path. Although the fragmentary state of the manuscript does not presently allow for the complete reconstruction of these verses, it is clear that they do not contain the prediction itself, but rather refer in a kind of summarizing manner to subsections 2.3.2–2.4.

3. Prediction to the devaputras

3.1. *Buddha name and time span*

In response to the verses, the assembly of gods and monks scatter variously colored flowers to honor the Blessed One. Taking up Śāriputra's question about the smile, the Buddha then makes a prediction of future buddhahood to the 84,000 devaputras. After innumerable *kalpas* they will become Tathāgatas, Arhats, Perfectly Awakened Ones, all bearing the name Vipulaprabhāsa.¹⁴

3.2. *Buddhakṣetra*

The future buddhafield that these devaputras will attain is explicitly compared with the buddhafield Abhirati of the Buddha Akṣobhya. The description given here is largely parallel to the descriptions of Abhirati found in the *Akṣobhyavyūha* and in the *Karuṇāpūṇḍarikasūtra* (based on the *Akṣobhyavyūha*), including the remarkable fact that it is inhabited also

¹³ For more details about the genesis of this narrative element and its development in Śrāvakayāna and early Mahāyāna literature, see Strauch forthcoming-b.

¹⁴ In the verses concluding this section the name is Mahāprabha.

by women.¹⁵ Contrary to the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, where Gaṅgadevā¹⁶ turns into a man before entering Abhirati, the Bajaur *sūtra* clearly preserves the original characteristics of this buddhafield as mentioned in the principal text of this tradition, the *Akṣobhyavyūha*.

3.3. *Dharmadeśanā*

The description of the characteristics of the future buddhafield is completed by an exposition of the dharma that will be taught there. Again a distinct feature of Abhirati as described in the *Akṣobhyavyūha* recurs: the spiritual goal to become an Arhat is highly esteemed and introduces this passage. According to the *Akṣobhyavyūha*, it is characteristic for the Arhat career in Abhirati that even indolent people who become stream-enterers will attain arhatship after hearing the Buddha's teaching just four times. In a Śrāvakayāna context, an indolent person becoming a stream-enterer might have to be reborn as many as seven times before attaining arhatship. In its prediction, the Bajaur text is explicitly referring to this new and superior feature in comparison to the conditions that characterize the buddhafield of Śākyamuni.

The text goes on to describe the actual contents of the dharma teaching in the new buddhafield. In general, this teaching seems to be identical with that expounded in the preceding sections 1 and 2. It consists mainly in the practice of non-apperception in respect to dharmas.

As a result, almost all of the instructed bodhisattvas would be endowed with the thirty-two characteristic marks of a great man (*mahāpuruṣa-lakṣaṇa*). And having listened to the dharma that other Buddhas proclaim in other buddhafields, they in turn would also teach the dharma themselves.

The text continues to describe the actual constitution of the bodhisattvas who will teach the dharma. There would be no one who would criticise them. Free from defilements etc. they would teach the dharma – a dharma which would not follow someone's own line of inquiry, and

¹⁵ For more details about the parallels of this passage with the *Akṣobhyavyūha* and related literature, see Strauch 2010: 51–59.

¹⁶ Both spellings occur, Gaṅgadevā and Gaṅgadevī. More frequently it is Gaṅgadevā, Gaṅgadevī is only used in the chapter titles.

which would not be based on false views. Again the text refers here to the preceding instruction on non-apperception that pervades the entire text as a golden thread. As in the introduction (section 1), this passage lists terms designating a personality (*ātman*, *sattva*, *bhāva*, *jīva*, *pudgala*), and, in an abbreviated form, the five aggregates (*skandha*).

3.4. Verses (20): Repetition

The prediction is concluded by twenty verses that briefly summarize the contents of the preceding text. In particular, the mental constitution and moral conduct of the devaputras is described. They would have cut off all their defilements, all be named Mahāprabha, and for innumerable aeons they would course towards awakening for the sake of the welfare of all beings. On account of their teaching, all beings would turn towards awakening.

4. Qualities of the instructed devaputras

Śāriputra enters the scene and acts again as the main interlocutor. The first section of the dialogue between him and the Tathāgata describes the qualities of the devaputras that are now on the bodhisattva path. It concerns two items: their moral conduct and their mental conduct.

4.1. Moral conduct: *pañcāśīla* and *daśakuśalakarmapatha*

The subsection on moral conduct lists the elements of the ten wholesome deeds (*daśakuśalakarmapatha*). This list is opened by an extensive treatment of the five precepts (*pañcaśīla*) and concluded by an abbreviated reference to the remaining items of this traditional list. Thus the two lists are merged into a list of actually eleven precepts, although neither the numbers nor the technical terms are mentioned in this passage of the manuscript. However, in a previous section (3.2), the people of the future buddhaheld are characterized as having assumed the ten virtues (G *daśakuśalasamādīna* = BHS *daśakuśalasamādinna*).

The *pañcaśīla* section presents each item in a more or less identical manner. Though there are variations in the individual phrasing, it is possible to generate a syntactic structure that governs this passage:

Thus indeed, Śāriputra, these devaputras, neither on account of themselves, nor on account of others, nor for the sake of some little gain in this world, [insert: one of the *pañcaśīlas*, such as “kill living creatures,” past tense]. Now they do not perceive [insert: something related to the aforementioned *śīla*, e.g. “any living creature”]. Then how is it the case they will [repeat: *śīla*]? Thus indeed, Śāriputra, even before these devaputras were restrained from [repeat: *śīla*]. Then what can be said about now?

From the doctrinal point of view, it is important that again this specific moral conduct is based on the practice of non-apperception.

References to the *daśakuśalakarmapathas* are found in many Mahāyāna texts, although the actual contents of the list seem to vary. The treatment of the *pañcaśīlas* as a complete set is a peculiar feature that puts the Bajaur *sūtra* close to other early Mahāyāna texts. Thus the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* (chapter 17) also contains the complete set of the *pañcaśīlas* and adds all the remaining items of the *kuśalakarmapathas*, making eleven items altogether, despite being called *daśakuśalakarmapatha*.¹⁷

4.2. Mental conduct: Non-practice of *smṛti*

The second subsection concerns the mental conduct of the devaputra-bodhisattvas. Again this quality is explained by the absence of any notion, in this case with regard to mindfulness (*smṛti*), body (*kāya*), speech (*vācas*) or mind (*manas*) and consequently also to the four applications of mindfulness (*smṛtyupasthāna*), namely with regard to body (*kāya*), feelings (*vedanā*), mind (*citta*) and dharmas.

¹⁷ Ed. Mitra 1888: 324/Vaidya 1960: 161. A different (the ‘standard’) sequence, without the inclusion of intoxication, is given in chapter 25 (ed. Mitra 1888: 427/Vaidya 1960: 211). The *Bodhisattvabhūmi* lists all items of the Bajaur manuscript, calling them the *bodhisattvasya viśuddhā rthacaryā* (ed. Dutt 1966: 154). Likewise, the *Ugraparipṛcchā* (all versions) gives the same list of eleven precepts, with an interesting difference regarding the sequence of items 4 and 5. Here, as well as in the earliest Chinese translations of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* by Lokakṣema, the sequence of items is exactly the same as in the Bajaur manuscript. Later on, items 4 and 5 changed places, obviously to group the reference to speech with the other following items of the *kuśalakarmapathas* that relate to speech. For more details on the varying lists of the *daśakuśalakarmapathas* and their relation to the *pañcaśīlas*, see Nattier 2002.

4.3. Verses (10): Repetition

The following ten verses repeat, in abbreviated form and in reverse order, what was mentioned before in subsections 4.1 and 4.2, i.e., the absence of any notion of *dharmā*, *citta*, *vedanā*, *kāya*, as well as some of the *pañcaśīla*/*daśakuśalākarmapatha*.

5. Rebirth of the devaputras

Section 5 describes the different destinies where the devaputra-bodhisattvas can be reborn. It begins with the general statement that in every rebirth there will be a path to awakening (*bodhimārga*).

5.1. Among the gods

As gods they will be endowed with ten attributes (*sthāna*), namely: divine lifespan, divine beauty, *divine bliss, *divine fame, *divine sovereignty, divine forms, sounds, fragrances, tastes, and tactile objects (*āyus*, *varṇa*, **sukha*, **yaśas*, **ādhipatya*, *rūpa*, *śabda*, *gandha*, *rasa*, *spraṣṭavya*).¹⁸

5.2. Among the humans

As humans they will be reborn among affluent *kṣatriyas*, *brāhmaṇas*, or *gṛhapatis*, who are rich, virtuous, and handsome. Among other characterizations, they do not ‘look up to,’ i.e., they do not admire or feel inferior to adherents of another faith, such as the *nirgranthas*,¹⁹ and they will have no teacher other than a Tathāgata.

¹⁸ The line is incomplete, hence only seven of the ten attributes are preserved.

¹⁹ G *ṇo ya añati*[*thi*]*acaragaṇiāḥaparivayeṇa muholoyida bhavati = S no ca anyatīrthikacarakanirgranthaparivrājakānāṃ *mukholokitā* (BHS *mukhullocakā*/P *mukhullocakā*) *bhavanti*. Cf. *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* (ed. Mitra 1888: 322/ed. Vaidya 1960: 161 *punar aparāṇ subhūte avinivartanīyo bodhisattvo mahāsattvo nānyeṣāṃ śramaṇānāṃ brāhmaṇānāṃ vā mukham ullokayati*). A similar passage is to be found in the *Pañca-viṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (ed. Kimura 1990, IV: 143 *śramaṇabrāhmaṇānāṃ mukham ullokayati*).

5.3. *In Abhirati*

If they have been set out on the path for long (*cirayānasamprasthita*), their wholesome roots are well matured, and they have made the necessary preparations, they will be reborn in the *lokadhātu* Abhirati. In all following rebirths they will enjoy the presence of a Tathāgata, and in Abhirati they will live as monks, who have left their home and live the pure conduct. By supernatural power they can travel to other buddhafiels and hear the dharma there. If there is no Tathāgata in a buddhafiels, they will teach themselves. They will possess the *tathāgatabalas* (five of ten are mentioned), such as knowing the actions of all beings in the past, present, future, or their former abodes. Similar statements can be found, for example, in the 19th chapter of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, where the rebirth of Gaṅgadevā is described. As in the Bajaur text, Gaṅgadevā is predicted to encounter in each of her rebirths a Tathāgata, being able to travel to other world-systems in order to be in the presence of one.²⁰

Sections 4 and 5 are addressed to Śāriputra. According to their style and contents they are closely related to the preceding prediction. As the prediction itself (section 3), they are composed in the future tense and describe the further career of the devaputra-bodhisattvas. It is therefore possible to conceive of the entire passage from section 3 to section 5 as a kind of extended prediction. This evaluation is supported by the following verses that refer to the contents of all three sections.

5.4. *Verses (32): Praise of the Tathāgata (stotra)*

The 84,000 devaputras kneel before the Blessed One and praise him with 32 verses.²¹ In these stanzas, various epithets of the Buddha are listed. Some of the verses conclude with the expression: “We too will be like that ...” (*G tasa bhaviṣama = S tathā bhaviṣyāmaḥ*). Throughout the verses, emphasis is laid on the calmed body, the liberated mind, the absence of

²⁰ For more details cf. Strauch forthcoming-b; see also Nattier 2000: 84 and 89–91 for this sort of ‘intergalactic travels.’

²¹ This introductory phrase and the first few stanzas have been included in the discussion of *stotras* in Mahāyāna *dharmaparyāyas* in Skilling 2015.

obstacles, and the obtainment of final extinction (*nirvṛtti*) by leaving behind all kind of rebirths.

6. Awakening

The following section seems to take up the preceding praise of the Tathāgata. Being instructed and predicted and firmly set on the path towards buddhahood, the devaputras are now concerned with the consequences of their new insight for the understanding of their future awakening and their Tathāgata qualities following this awakening. The ensuing dialogue begins with the devaputras' question about the character of this awakening. In accordance with the general doctrinal character, they state that they do not perceive a dharma that can be related to awakening.

6.1. *Not understanding the features of a Tathāgata*

This statement leads to a discourse on the features of a Tathāgata, i.e., someone who both experienced awakening and teaches. Since there is nobody and nothing awakened and nobody and nothing to be awakened, the question occurs: What then is a Tathāgata? What can the devaputras or anybody else say about his nature?

In the following discourse the text takes up some of the unique qualities of a Tathāgata (*āveṇikadharmā*) as defined in Mainstream Buddhism and repeatedly referred to in Mahāyāna sources.²² According to our text, assertions with regard to these Buddha qualities are in fact made without a real understanding (*aprajānant*).

6.2. *Seeing a Tathāgata in a dream*

As with other canonical categories, the validity of this positive definition is not straightforwardly denied, but re-interpreted along the lines of the doctrine of non-apperception. This time the text uses the metaphor of a dream. The text invokes the image of a Tathāgata and his teaching. In a

²² For an extensive discussion of the *āveṇikadharmas*, see Lamotte 1970: 1625–1627 and Dessein 2010.

dream-like state a person would experience a Tathāgata defining himself in terms of a certain *āveṇikadharmā*. The text goes on to specify the different dharmas expounded by the Tathāgata. Here it enumerates four different categories: dharmas relating to a disciple (*śrāvakadharmā*), dharmas relating to a Pratyekabuddha (*pratyekabuddhadharmā*), dharmas relating to a bodhisattva (*bodhisattvadharmā*), and dharmas relating to a Tathāgata (*tathāgatadharmā*). These four categories are related to three different spiritual paths on which the Buddha instructs and establishes his followers: the path of disciples (*śrāvakayāna*), the path of Pratyekabuddhas (*pratyekabuddhayāna*), and the path of Perfectly Awakened Ones (*samyaksambuddhayāna*).

It is remarkable that the Bajaur *sūtra* does not refer in this context to a specific *bodhisattvayāna*. Although it recognizes the existence of distinct qualities of bodhisattvas (*bodhisattvadharmā*), it clearly identifies their spiritual path with that of a Buddha (*samyaksambuddhayāna*). This agrees with the description of the *āryaśrāvaka* (section 1) where the practice of the ‘new’ disciple was explicitly based on the model of a Tathāgata. At the same time, the text does not express any superiority of one of the three paths mentioned here. Instead, the text elaborates only on one of them in some detail: the *śrāvakayāna*. It does so by referring to the well-known concept of the career of an Arhat that is defined by his gradual loss of the ten fetters (*saṃyojana*), which bind him to his material existence. In full accordance with the canonical model the text lists the different kinds of stream-enterers (*srotāpanna*), *once-returners (*sakṛd-āgāmin*)²³ and non-returners (*anāgamin*) before defining the Arhats in a conventional way by using attributes like “whose taints are destroyed” (*kṣiṇāsrava*), “who have done their duty” (*kṛtakṛtya*), “who have laid down the burden” (*apahr̥tabhāra*), or “who have completely destroyed the fetters to existence” (*parikṣiṇabhavasamyojana*).

It is typical for the *Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra* that this Mainstream concept is dealt with in great detail, with its wording nearly identical with its canonical counterparts.

²³ The passage concerning the once-returner is not preserved on the extant manuscript.

6.3. *Waking up and seeing no Tathāgata, dharma, or saṃgha*

The detailed description of a Tathāgata's action in the world and the contents of his instruction is finally relativized by the metaphor of the person who has awakened and is no longer in the state of dream where he experienced all this. In line with the general attitude of the text, the person now asks who has given the teaching and who has established the beings on the respective paths. In answering this question, all notions concerning the Tathāgata, his instruction and assembly are qualified as mere dream-visions.

6.4. *No perception, no thinking*

The devaputras reconfirm that they do not perceive *the Tathāgata, *his instruction, or his assemblies (*pariṣad*).²⁴ Simultaneously, they confirm that they themselves will not develop the idea that they would become Tathāgatas with a following, and that they have given up all notions of the teacher (*śāstr*) and his community (*tathāgataśrāvakaśaṃgha*).

6.5. *Verses (32): Liberation*

After this statement, (at least) thirty-two verses are given. The main topic of this group of verses seems to be the consequences of notions of wrong views on the perspective of rebirth (*punarbhava*). For someone having a notion, there would be passion, hatred, and delusion. But having appeased these and all wrong views, there would be no attachment anymore, and thus no further rebirth. There would be extinction (*nirvāṇa*).

7. Extinction without rebirth

The concluding verses of section 6 seem to connect the preceding discourse with the last section in the preserved text of the *Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra*. Due to its rather bad state of preservation it is at present difficult to exactly define its contents. The overall tone of this passage is related

²⁴ The passage is fragmentary and contains only the reference to the four assemblies.

to the previously mentioned topics of rebirth and extinction. Thus the text says that one should get rid of the ‘fire’ (caused by sense experience leading to desire) and bring oneself to extinction.

Another fragment preserves a passage discussing the emptiness according to the ultimate truth (*paramārthaśūnyatā*), which is not easy (to describe or understand), because there is no speech, language, words, and so on. When there is no mental construction (*abhisamkāra*), it is called empty (*śūnya*). The text on this fragment ends with “Why should there be another birth (*jāti*)?”

The next and last fragment continues the discussion, saying that there is no mental construction, and hence no growth or decline, no origination or non-origination, no defilement, and no purification. For someone who is without conception, mental agitation, conceptual proliferation, cognition or clinging (*manyānā*, *spandana*, *prapañcana*, *viññapti*, *allīyana*), there is no more cause for rebirth (*pratisandhi*).

According to its terminology and content the final section seems to take up issues that have been raised in the very beginning of the preserved text by referring to categories of speech and mental constructions and their relation to emptiness. Although we cannot be sure that this section really marks the end of the original text, this frame-like structure gives some reason to assume that section 7 concluded the entire *sūtra*.

Conclusion

The *Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra* is centered around the prediction to a group of 84,000 devaputras who, after having heard an instruction of the Tathāgata (section 1), aspire to attain the highest perfect awakening and ask for instruction in the bodhisattva training (section 2.1–2.2). Both the initial instruction as well as the instruction of the bodhisattva training are characterized by the doctrine of non-apperception that is closely related to, if not identical with the doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Having successfully obtained this instruction, the devaputras acquire the status of non-retrogressive bodhisattvas who are characterized by the quality of the “endurance with regard to (non-arising) dharmas” (section 2.3–2.4). Following this, the Buddha predicts the future buddhahood to these 84,000 devaputras. They are all said to be reborn as Buddhas with the

name Vipulaprabhāsa/Mahāprabha in a buddhafield that resembles the buddhafield Abhirati of the Buddha Akṣobhya. Their future teaching is again based on the principle of non-apperception (section 3).

Whereas the initial instruction (section 1) is composed as a dialogue between the Buddha and Śāriputra, the following sections 2 and 3 mainly consist of a conversation between the Buddha and the devaputras, sometimes interrupted by a question from Śāriputra.

The narrative between the Buddha and Śāriputra is fully taken up from section 4 onwards. Here the Buddha describes the moral and mental qualities of the predicted devaputra-bodhisattvas in this life (section 4) and their perspectives for a future rebirth in another life (section 5). Among the various rebirths that are mentioned, rebirth in the buddhafield Abhirati of the Buddha Akṣobhya is especially highlighted.

The devaputras, having followed this conversation between the Buddha and Śāriputra, praise the Buddha and reconfirm their aspiration to become Tathāgatas (section 5.4). Taking up their conversation with the Buddha, the devaputras inquire about the right understanding of the entities “awakening” and “Tathāgata,” i.e., of those items that are at the core of their aspiration. Again both terms are explained on the basis of the idea of non-apperception, this time with the help of the dream metaphor (section 6). The last portion of the preserved text concerns extinction (*nirvāṇa*) and the closely related question of how a further rebirth can be avoided (section 7).

If we look at this summary as a whole, the narrative structure can be described in terms of a bodhisattva career: Initiated by a discourse of the Tathāgata, the potential bodhisattvas aspire for future buddhahood and receive their own instruction. This is followed by their prediction. The subsequent sections describe the state of the bodhisattvas in this and in future existences. With a discussion of awakening and the qualities of a Tathāgata the final stages of a bodhisattva career are dealt with, which are only to be followed by their extinction.

According to its style and diction, this text is closely associated with *Prajñāpāramitā* texts (most of all the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* and *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā*), although the term *prajñāpāramitā* itself does not occur. It appears that the author was not influenced by this key term, or that he deliberately chose not to mention it. The underlying doctrinal message,

however, is identical with that of the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature and the related early Madhyamaka philosophy that aims to “destroy the wholly formal, logical, or conceptual notions concerning the process involved in perception” (Inada 1970: 76). This principle of non-apperception is factually present in all parts of the text and underlines the coherent character of the *sūtra* as a literary composition.

By describing the main stages in a bodhisattva career, i.e., the thought of awakening (*bodhicittotpāda*), the endurance with regard to (non-arising) dharmas (*dharmakṣānti*), the attainment of the stage of non-retrogression (*avaivartya*), and the prediction (*vyākaraṇa*), the *Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra* agrees with other early Mahāyāna *sūtras*, in particular those translated in the early 2nd century CE by Lokakṣema (cf. Harrison 1993). Like many of these early *sūtras*, the Bajaur text is still largely concerned with elements that are usually attributed to Mainstream traditions. Despite its clear Mahāyāna character and its concentration on the path to buddhahood, the world of the *Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra* is still defined by the values and concepts of the *śrāvaka* path which continue to be recognized and esteemed.

In various contexts it uses these well-known and established Mainstream concepts to introduce its new doctrinal approach. Thus we repeatedly observe the re-definition of conventional terms and concepts like *āryaśrāvaka*, *brahmacarya* and *abhedyaprasāda* in section 1 and *pañcaśīla* in section 4. In other passages Mainstream concepts are directly taken over but described as dream-visions (section 6).

The Bajaur *sūtra* even avoids distinguishing a specific bodhisattva path. Instead, it lists among the teachings of a Tathāgata the traditional three paths of a disciple (*śrāvaka*), a solitary Buddha (*pratyekabuddha*) and a Perfectly Awakened One (*samyaksaṃbuddha*). The Bajaur *sūtra* does not express a clear hierarchy among these paths. But it is obvious that the bodhisattva instruction of the devaputras has this last category in view. The devaputras aim at awakening and they explicitly express the desire to become Buddhas like the Tathāgata by whom they are instructed (section 5.4). According to the terminology of the text, they are now bodhisattvas on the Buddha path with the aim to become Buddhas themselves.

The strong affiliation of the *sūtra*'s discourse with accepted Mainstream concepts is perhaps telling for the environment in which this text

was composed and used. The single fact that the manuscript is part of a manuscript collection that contains a significant number of canonical and paracanonical Mainstream texts suggests that the *Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra* was used in a monastery that was inhabited by both Śrāvakayāna and Bodhisattvayāna/Buddhayāna monks. In such an environment it seems only natural to link the new concepts of emptiness and the bodhisattva path to the widely accepted and intensively discussed categories of the Śrāvakayāna, including its advanced scholastic tradition of Abhidharma. By doing so, the adherents of the Mahāyāna movement did not so much stress the difference of their teaching from that of their Śrāvakayāna brethren. Instead, they placed their teaching within the current discourses and thus demonstrated its continuity and conformity with the tradition.

It is possible that with regard to these features the *Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra* opens a window on a rather early phase in the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism. But we also have to keep in mind that accessing this manuscript also means getting into contact with a local or regional variant of Mahāyāna thought that might have been different from other contemporary expressions of Mahāyāna.²⁵

Abbreviations

BajC	Bajaur Collection, fragment no.
BHS	Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit
G	Gāndhārī
P	Pali
S	Sanskrit

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ABSTRACT

Birch-bark manuscripts from Gandhāra are the oldest material remains of Buddhist texts known so far. In recent years, a growing number of these texts can be ascribed to the Mahāyāna movement. The largest of these Mahāyāna texts is part of the so-called Bajaur Collection. According to its linguistic and paleographic features the text can be dated to the 1st or 2nd century CE. It is written in the *sūtra* style and centers around the prediction given to 84,000 devaputras that they will become Buddhas with their own buddhafiield. The text has no direct parallel in Indic, Chinese or Tibetan languages. The present article gives for the first time an overview of the content and compositional structure of the text based on the ongoing edition carried out by the authors.