

Writing in Ancient India: a love/hate relationship

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TIMELINE

- 🌿 2800–1900 BCE: Indus Valley writing (undeciphered)
- 🌿 535 BCE: Gandhara becomes part of the Achaemenid empire
- 🌿 326 BCE: Alexander’s Indian campaign
- 🌿 300 CE: composition of Pāṇini’s *Eight Chapters* (*Aṣṭādhyāyī*) in today’s Pakistan
- 🌿 260–230 BCE: inscriptions of Aśōka:
 - 🌿 today’s Afghanistan: Greek [Greek] and Aramaic [Aramaic]
 - 🌿 today’s Pakistan: Middle Indic (≈ “Gandhari”?) [Kharōṣṭhī]
 - 🌿 everywhere else: Middle Indic [Brāhmī]
- 🌿 125 BCE: composition of Patañjali’s *Great Commentary* (*Mahābhāṣya*)
- 🌿 70 BCE: earliest C¹⁴ date for a South Asian manuscript (*Gandhari Avadāna* in the ‘Split’ collection)
- 🌿 74 CE: C¹⁴ date for the Gandhari *Perfection of Wisdom* manuscript (from the ‘Split’ collection)
- 🌿 180 CE: Lōkakṣēma’s translation of a *Perfection of Wisdom* manuscript (道行般若經)

GRAPHOPHOBIA

Writing rots your brain

- (1) τοῦτο γὰρ τῶν μαθόντων λήθην μὲν ἐν ψυχαῖς παρέξει μνήμης ἀμελετησία, ἅτε διὰ πίστιν γραφῆς ἔξωθεν ὑπ’ ἀλλοτρίων τύπων, οὐκ ἔνδοθεν αὐτοὺς ὑφ’ αὐτῶν ἀναμνησκομένους: οὐκ οὖν μνήμης ἀλλὰ ὑπομνήσεως φάρμακον ἦρες. σοφίας δὲ τοῖς μαθηταῖς δόξαν, οὐκ ἀλήθειαν πορίζεις: πολυήκοοι γὰρ σοι γενόμενοι ἄνευ διδαχῆς πολυγνώμονες εἶναι δόξουσιν, ἀγνώμονες ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πλῆθος ὄντες, καὶ χαλεποὶ συνεῖναι, δοξόσοφοι γεγονότες ἀντὶ σοφῶν.
- (2) One striking point about the imparting of knowledge (particularly Vedic) in the ancient educational system of India was the great prejudice against learning from books... The prejudice against using books for learning was carried so far that among the six obstacles in the path of the acquirer of knowledge, reliance on books is mentioned as one. (Kane 1941: 347, 349)
- (3) *dyūtam pustakaśuśrūṣā nāṭakāsaktir ēva ca striyas tandrī ca nidrā ca vidyāvighnakarāṇi ṣaṭ*
The six obstacles to knowledge are: games, books, streaming, girls, laziness, and sleep.

Writing is for everyone

- (4) *vēdavikrayiṇaś caiva vēdānām caiva dūṣakāḥ vēdānām lēkhakās caiva tē vai nirayagāmināḥ* (*Mahābhārata* 13.24.70, crit. ed.)
Those who sell the Vedas, who criticize the Vedas,
and who write the Vedas will go to hell.

Writing is a pain

- (5) *saṅghaṃsa-apaḍilehā bhārō ahikaraṇam eva avidiṇṇam saṅkāmaṇa-palimanthō pamāya-parikammaṇā lihaṇā* (*Bṛhatkalpabhāṣya* v. 3825)
Abrasion, non-inspection, heaviness, locus, not allowed, obstacle to movement, mistakes, decoration, writing.
- (6) *jattiyamettā vārā u muñcaī bandhaī va jati vārā jati akkharāṇi lihati va tati lahugā jam ca āvajje*
(*Bṛhatkalpabhāṣya* v. 3831 = *Niśīthabhāṣya* v. 4008)
One is subject to a “light” penalty

for every time one opens a manuscript,
or closes it, or for every letter one writes,
or whatever other bad thing might happen. (Ollett 2024: 442)

- (7) *a a iti* (Eight Chapters [Aṣṭādhyāyī] 8.4.68)
- (8) *kimartham idam ucyatē. akārō 'yam akṣarasamāmnāyē vivṛta upadiṣtas tasya samvṛtatāpratyāpattiḥ kriyatē. kim punaḥ kāraṇam vivṛta upadiśyatē. ādēśārtham savarṇārtham akārō vivṛtaḥ smrtaḥ. ākārasya tathā hrasvas tadartham pāṇinēr a a. ādēśārtham tāvat. vṛkṣābhyām, dēvadattā3. āntaryatō vivṛtasya vivṛtau dīrghap-lutau yathā syātām. savarṇārtham ca. akāraḥ savarṇagrahaṇēna ākārām api yathā gṛhṇīyāt ākārasya tathā hrasvaḥ. tathā ca atikhaṭvaḥ, atimāla ity atra ākārasya hrasva ucyamānō vivṛtaḥ prāpnōti saḥ samvṛtaḥ syād ity evamarthā pratyāpattiḥ. [...]* (Great Commentary [Mahābhāṣya] on 8.4.68)
- (9) Why is this said? This sound *a* that was taught in the list of sounds has an open articulation, and its articulation is made closed by this rule. But why was it taught as open in the first place? **It was taught as open for the purposes of substitution rules and class membership.** In the case of substitution rules, a short *a* can be substituted with a long or prolated *a*, as in the case of *vṛkṣa-* + *bhyām* → *vṛkṣābhyām* [7.3.102] or *dēvadatta-* → *dēvadattā3* [8.2.83]. In the case of class membership, by understanding *a* and *ā* to belong to the same articulatory class, we make it such that *a* is the short version of *ā* and *vice versa*, so that we get a short *a* from *ā* in *atikhaṭvaḥ* ← *khaṭvā* and *atimālaḥ* ← *mālā* [both 1.2.48]. The *a* that would have been pronounced as open in these forms is pronounced as closed by this rule. [...] [AO]
- (10) *prāyēṇa saṅkṣēparucīn alpavidyāparigrahān samprāpya vaiyākaraṇān saṅgrahē 'stam upāgatē ~ 481*
ḥṛtē 'tha pātañjalīnā guruṇā tīrthadarśīnā sarvēṣāṃ nyāyabījānām mahābhāṣyē nibandhanē ~ 482
alabdhaḡādhe gāmbhūryād uttāna iva sauṣṭhavāt tasminn akṛtabuddhīnām naivāvāsthitanīscayaḥ ~ 483
vaijisaubhavaḡaryakṣaiḥ śuṣkatarkānusāribhiḥ ārsē vīplāvītē granthē saṅgrahapratikañcukē ~ 484
yaḥ pātañjaliśiṣyēbhyō bhraṣṭō vyākaraṇāḡamaḥ [or: patañjali, 'bhyaṣṭō, aṣṭa]
kālēna dākṣiṇātyēṣu granthamātrō vyavasthitaḥ ~ 485 [or: kālē sa, granthamātrē]
parvatād āgamaḡ labdhvā bhāṣyabījānusāribhiḥ sa nīto bahuśākhatvaḡ cāndrācāryādibhiḥ punaḥ ~ 486 [or: candrā-]
(Vākyapadīya of Bhartṛhari, 2.482–486)

[481–483] When the *Saṅgraha*, upon reaching grammarians who in general liked abridgements and possessed little knowledge, had ceased to be studied, subsequently definite knowledge [regarding the *Aṣṭādhyāyī*] was not, according to [scholars] who did not use their intellect, to be found in the *Mahābhāṣya*, [a work] which had been composed by the guru Patañjali, thoroughly versed in different systems of knowledge, [the *Mahābhāṣya*] which is the basis of all sources of interpretational principles, which is unfathomable on account of its depth [but all the same] appearing shallow on account of its excellence.

[484] When the work of the *ṛṣi* (Pāṇini), of which the defensive armour (*pratikañcuka*) [had been] the *Saṅgraha*, had been mutilated by Vaijī, Saubhava, and Haryakṣa, because [in trying to understand it] they had followed their bare reasoning [not taking Patañjali's views as authoritative], [485–486] the traditional knowledge of grammar — which, in the course of time, in the south, had fallen from the pupils of Patañjali, [and] existed [there] **only in the form of the book** (i.e., the *Mahābhāṣya*) — was made by Candrācārya and others, who followed the seed-like *Bhāṣya*, into a many-branched [tree] again, after they had obtained the [correct] traditional knowledge from the mountain-range [Himālaya?]. (trans. Bronkhorst 1993: 392–393)

Writing is foreign

- (11)  *lipi-* / *libi-* “script, writing” ← Bactrian λιβο, Persian *dipi*
 *pustaka-* / *postaga-* / *potthaga-* “manuscript, book” ← Persian/Bactrian *pōstag*
 *mudrā-* / *muddā-* “seal” ← Bactrian μολρογο, Persian *muhr*

- (12) *jōtisa-nimitta-m-ādī chandaṃ gaṇiyam ca amha sāhitthā akkhara-m-ādī va ḍimbe gāhessaha ajayaṇā suṇaṇe* (Niśīthabhāṣya 5256)
 “Teach me astrology, prognostication, meter, calculation.”
 “Teach my kid letters.” It is a “laxity” if he agrees. [AO]

GRAPHOPHILIA

Writing is for everyone

- (13) *ado kośia so kulaputro* [va] (ku)[ladhida v]i bahudaro pu . . + (pra)[ñā]paramidaē [p](o)[sta]o pareṣu likhaṇa dasati (Falk and Karashima 2013: 106)

Even more merit than that, Kauśika, would that son or daughter of a good family would generate, who gives a manuscript of the *Perfection of Wisdom* to other people to copy it. [AO]

- (14) 佛言：「不如是善男子、善女人書般若波羅蜜者，持經卷與他人使書，若為讀，其福倍益多。」 (Karashima 2011: 113, 436c20)

The Buddha said: “It is not like that of the son or daughter of a good family who writes the *Perfection of Wisdom* and gives the manuscripts of this text to others for them to write and to recite. Their merit is many times greater. [AO; cp. Falk and Karashima 2013: 107]

- (15) *ataḥ khalu punaḥ sa kauśika kulaputrō kuladuhitā vā bahutaram puṇyam prasavēd ya imāṃ prajñāpāramitām antaśaḥ pustakagatām api kṛtvā abhiśraddhadhad abhiśraddhadhatē avakalpayann avakalpayatē adhimuñcann adhimuñcatē prasannacittaḥ prasannacittāya adhyāsayasampannō ’dhyāsayasampannāya bōdhāya cittamutpādyā samutpāditabōdhicittāya bōdhisattvāyādhyāsayēna dadyād antaśō likhanāyāpi vācanāyāpy akilāsitayā sampādayiṣyaty utyuktō ’muṃ grāhayiṣyati sandarśayiṣyati samādāpayiṣyati samuttējaiṣyati samprahaṣayiṣyati vācā nēṣyati vinēṣyati anunēṣyati, artham asyā asmai samprakāśayiṣyati, ēvaṃ cāsyā cittaṃ viśōdhayiṣyati, nirvicikitsaṃ kariṣyati, ēvaṃ cainaṃ vakṣyati, ēhi tvaṃ kulaputra asminn ēva bōdhisattvamārgē śikṣasva, atra hi tvaṃ śikṣamānaś caran vyāyacchamānaḥ kṣipram ēvānuttarām samyaksambōdhimabhisambhōtsyasē / abhisambudhya ca aparimitam sattvadhātum anuttarē upadhisaṅkṣayē ’bhivinēṣyasi, yaduta bhūtakōṭiprabhāvanatāyām iti* (Mitra 1888: 109)

- (16) *punavaro k(ośig) + + + + + [p](u)[t](ro) vi ku[t.]*
 (5-04:) + + + + + + + + + + + (po)[stao para](sa) [l](i)[khaṇa da]sati a[ya]me[va] teṇa bohudaro
 (5-05:) + + + + + [·]o [k]ośig ayaṃ ca so kulaputro va kuladhita vi ima prañaparamida svaya ca va
 (5-06:) + . . [praña]paramidaē atho parasa uvadiśēa ayameva teṇa bahudaro puño prasa
 (Falk and Karashima 2013: 108, 110)

Moreover, Kauśika, as for the son or daughter of a good family who gives a manuscript of the *Perfection of Wisdom* to other people to copy it, the following person generates even more merit than him: that son or daughter of a good family who recites it himself, and explains the meaning of the *Perfection of Wisdom* to others, this person generates even more merit than that one. [AO]

- (17) 「復次，拘翼！持般若波羅蜜經卷，授與他人使書，若令學、若自學，其福甚倍多。復次，拘翼！若有人自學般若波羅蜜解中慧，其福甚倍多。」 (Karashima 2011: 115, 437a1)

Moreover, Kauśika, if (the son or daughter of a good family) gives the manuscripts of this text to others for them to write it and makes them study it or studies it themselves, their merit is many times greater. Moreover, Kauśika, if there is a person who should study the *Perfection of Wisdom* themselves, and should be skilled in meaning, their merit is many times greater [AO; cf. Falk and Karashima 2013: 109, 111]

- (18) *punaraparam kauśika yaḥ kulaputrō vā kuladuhitā vā imāṃ prajñāpāramitām arthakuśalō vācayēt parēbhyaś ca likhitvā pūrvavad dadyāt sārtham savyañjanām upadiśēt paridīpayēd ayatnataḥ kauśika sa kulaputrō vā kuladuhitā vā bahutaram puṇyam prasavēt* (Mitra 1888: 112)

- (19) *ēvaṃ tvaṃ kulaputra pratipadyamānō na cirēṇa prajñāpāramitām śrōṣyasi pustakagatām vā dharmabhāṇakasya bhikṣōḥ kāyagatām* (Mitra 1888: 482)

You will before long be able to study the perfection of wisdom either from a book, or from the mouth of a monk who preaches dharma. (Conze 1973: 278)

Books as ritual objects

- (20) 其中有七寶之函，以紫磨黃金為素，書般若波羅蜜在其中，(Karashima 2011: 495 495, T224 473a16)
In it, there is a box made of the seven precious jewels. The *Prajñāpāramitā*, written on polished red-gold tablets (素 lit. ‘white silk cloth,’ used as writing material), is placed in it. (Karashima 2011: 495 fn. 534)
- (21) *tasya ca kūṭāgārasya madhye saptaratnamayaḥ paryāṅkaḥ prajñāptō ’bhūt caturṇām ratnānām pēḍā kṛtā ya-tra prajñāpāramitā prakṣiptā suvarṇapaṭṭeṣu likhitā vilīnēna vaudūryeṇa* (Mitra 1888: 506)
And in the middle of that pointed tower a couch made of the seven precious things was set up, and on it a box made of four large gems. Into that the perfection of wisdom was placed, written with melted vaidurya on golden tablets. (Conze 1973: 288)
- (22) 我語汝，阿難！是般若波羅蜜從中亡一字，汝捨汝縱不書，汝虛，以無有慈孝於佛所，汝以不復見我。(Karashima 2011: 535, 477c22; 縱 is his emendation for 擬)
I tell you, O Ānanda! If you forget even one character of the *Prajñāpāramitā*, cast it away, leave it aside unwritten, all these (misdeeds) mean that you do not have affection for the Buddha, that you will never see me again. (Karashima 2011: 535 n. 224)
- (23) 書具經正字頭角所，持時學時，當諦授與菩薩摩訶薩，與好長素卷，善書令經上下句相得，書時當得好筆書好素上，當自歸承事作禮供養，好香成搗雜香澤香繒綵華蓋旗幡，悉如天上所有香，著油麻中，所淨潔油麻好燈炷，自歸頭面著地，却然燈炷，加敬作禮承事。(Karashima 2011: 539, T224 478b2)
One (should) copy the entire (?) scripture, write the top and corners of the characters neatly. When bodhisattva-mahāsattva (wishes to) hold and study (this scripture), one should hand it over to him carefully and (also) give him a long fine silk scroll in order to copy (the scripture) well, so that (the writing of) the passages of both the former and latter parts of the scripture is consistent. When he copies it, he should use a good brush and write on white silk cloth (素). He should honour it, revere it, pay homage to it, offer beautiful flowers, fine incense, pounded incense, mixed incense, fragrant ointments, variegated silk fabric, a canopy of flowers, banners and streamers, sesame oil, which is purified by placing heavenly incense of all sorts in it, and fine lamp-wicks to it. He should make obeisance to it, put his head on the ground, step back, light lamp-wicks, respect, pay homage and serve it. (Karashima 2011: 539 fn. 257)
- (24) *tasmāt tarhy ānanda bōdhisattvair mahāsattvaiḥ sarvajñajñānaṁ pratilabdhuḥkāmair asyām prajñāpāramitāyāñ caritavyam iyaṁ prajñāpāramitā śrōtavyōdgrahūtavā dhārayitavyā vācayitavyā paryavāptavyā pravarttayitavyā dēśayitavyōpadēṣṭavyōddēṣṭavyā svādhātavyā likhitavā tathāgatādhiṣṭhānēna mahāpustakē pravyaktapravyaktair akṣaraiḥ sulikhitām kṛtvā satkartavyā gurukartavyā mānayitavyā pūjayitavārcayitavyā puṣpair dhūpair gandhair mālyair vilēpanaiś cūrṇaiś cīvarair vādyair vastraiś cattrair dhvajair ghaṇṭābhiḥ patākābhiḥ samantāc ca dīpamālābhir bahuvīdhābhiś ca pūjābhiḥ.* (Mitra 1888: 528)
Therefore then, Ananda, a Bodhisattva who wants to acquire the cognition of the all-knowing should course in this perfection of wisdom, hear it, take it up, study, spread, repeat, and write it. When, through the Tathagata’s sustaining power it has been well written, in very distinct letters, in a great book, one should honour, revere, adore and worship it, with flowers, incense, scents, wreaths, unguents, aromatic powders, strips of cloth, parasols, banners, bells, flags and with rows of lamps all round, and with manifold kinds of worship. (Conze 1973: 299)

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