
Restoration of a Treasure from the Collège de France Libraries

The Aṣṭasāhasrikā-Prajñāpāramitā or Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines, India, 11th century

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EDITOR'S NOTE

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- 1 The library of the Collège de France's Institute of Indian Studies, a research library mainly dedicated to the most recent publications in this field, also preserves works of art and numerous manuscripts acquired through donations and legacies.**





- 2 The oldest manuscript dates back to the eleventh century. It contains the text of *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*, one of the main texts of Greater Vehicle Buddhism. It was gifted to the French Republic by the Nepalese Prime Minister in 1898, at the end of Sylvain Lévi's mission in Nepal [Sylvain Lévi was professor of Sanskrit Language and Literature at the Collège de France from 1894 until 1935]. *The Perfection of Wisdom* develops teachings that were unknown to Early Buddhism, also called Lesser Vehicle: the perfection of wisdom as a path towards salvation; in other words a gnosis based on the doctrine of vacuity, in which nothing can be asserted about beings, objects and ideas because their true reality, if it exists, lies beyond our understanding.
- 3 Like many treatises of the Greater Vehicle, this text in itself gave rise to a form of worship, for making or funding copies of it was an eminently pious and meritorious act. The Institute of Indian Studies' copy is among the most ancient known ones. Its presentation is typical of ancient Indian and South-East Asian books: it is written on palm leaves bound by thongs threaded through each page, and protected by wooden boards which are often sculpted or painted. The wooden covers of the Institute of Indian Studies' copy show the five Jina (the cult's most important Buddhas) and four salutary Tr goddesses, as well as certain scenes from Buddha's past lives.
- 4 The manuscript is one of the rare remaining testimonies of painting from eastern India (Bihar and Bengal) from the pāla era (eighth to twelfth centuries), which strongly influenced Nepalese and Himalayan art. Its history underlines one of the pathways of this influence, as it was probably produced in Patna or Bengal for a Nepalese devotee, or brought to Nepal by a monk or a traveller.
- 5 Its rareness is what makes this document so exceptional. The most ancient palm-leaf manuscripts have mostly disappeared in India, where they have been destroyed by insects, rodents, and the humidity of the monsoon periods. This one, preserved by the altitude and relatively dry climate of the Kathmandu Valley, was however in a poor condition: palm-leaves were stuck together, there were galleries of xylophagous insects

and mud deposits, and the wooden covers were encrusted. Moreover, the dry air of our French libraries meant that the pages, which were dehydrated, could no longer be handled without crumbling. With the support of the Collège de France's Documentary Networks and Partnerships Division, the library of the Institute of Indian Studies commissioned an expert's assessment of the deterioration (report by M. Thierry Aubry of the BnF) and then contacted several restorers.

- 6 After examining the different proposed protocols, the manuscript was entrusted to the workshop of Marie Messenger, a graphic art restorer, in partnership with the wood painting specialist Émilie Masse. One by one, each of the 203 palm-leaves, softened and flattened through humidification, was cleaned and consolidated with Japanese paper impregnated with cellulose ether and set with wheat starch paste. The leaves were unstuck, and the ripped fragments adhering to the next palm-leaf were removed and set back in their original place.
- 7 After several preliminary tests with different solvents, human saliva rinsed with water was chosen to clean the wood covers, as it combines efficient action by the enzymes with a virtually neutral pH. Areas of the pictorial layer that had lifted were fixed with sturgeon glue. This delicate, long and costly process restored the radiance of the paintings, so that many formerly invisible details reappeared, for instance: the diversity of designs of the textiles, the finesse of the characters' contours, and the details in the architecture and landscape. Several strata of the pictorial layer can now also be distinguished, which will ultimately allow us to carry out a more precise study of the technique used to produce them.
- 8 A chemically neutral conditioning was designed specially, so that the manuscript could be handled safely using a system which separates the wooden covers from the palm-leaves. Once the building renovation currently underway at the Institute of Civilizations has been completed, the manuscript will be preserved in rigorously controlled hygrometric conditions.
- 9 The Institute of Indian Studies hopes soon to be able to restore another one of its treasures, namely a manuscript of the *Śiva-dharma*, a collection of texts partly unpublished and fundamental to the study of Śivaism, which unfortunately researchers cannot at present consult due to its poor state of conservation.

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