

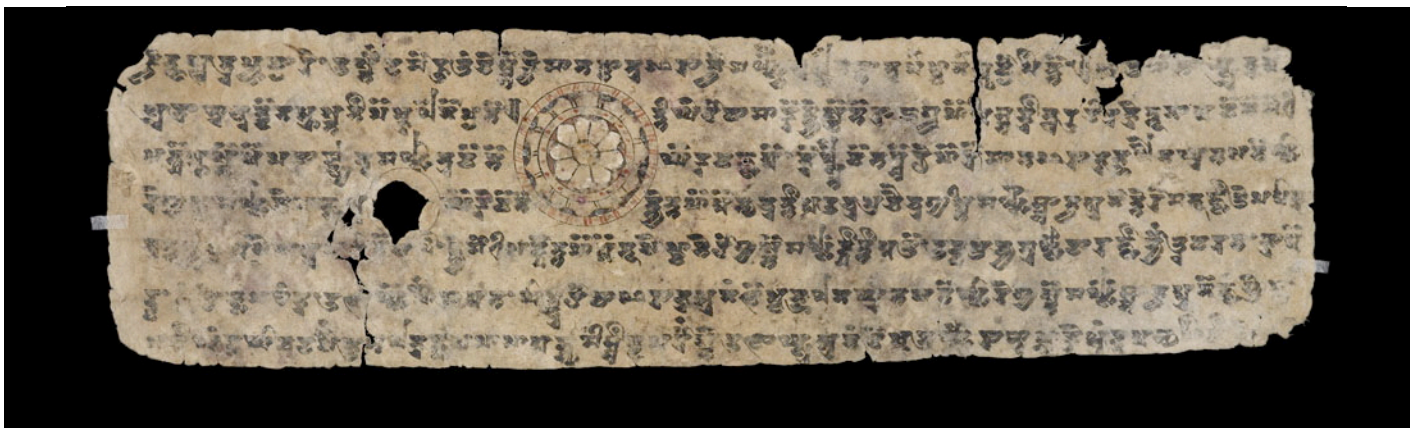
Suvarṇaprabhāsottamasūtra

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Introduction



Above: Pothi manuscript of *Suvar aprabhāsasūtra* in Khotanese Or.9609A/1.1
 [http://idp.bl.uk/database/oo_loader.a4d?pm=Or.9609A/1.1]

The *Suvar aprabhāsottamasūtra* is a popular Mahayana doctrine of Buddhism. The date of origination of the sutra is not clear, but the discovery of the many fragmented forms suggests its existence not later than early 5th century A.D.

The earliest Sanskrit translation of the supposedly original sutra composed in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit are known to be from Chinese Central Asia (Xinjiang) and Nepal. The *Suvar aprabhāsa* is considered in Nepal as one of the nine Dharmas. The 'nine dharmas' are not the canon of any sect, but a series of books which were compiled at different times. All these works are known as "Vaipulya Sutra". It is worthy to note that in Nepal these nine sutras are adored with profound religious fervent. There is a lack of unanimity regarding the title of the sutra. The Nepalese Manuscripts have adopted the title as Suvarṇaprabhāsottama. However, Professor Nobel has used the name as Suvarṇabhāsottama.

The importance of the *Suvar aprabhāsottamasūtra* to Mahayana Buddhism is revealed by the large number of translations and manuscripts which survived either wholly or in fragments. The Sutra was translated not only into Chinese and Tibetan but also into other languages as Uighur, Mongol, Sogdian, Khotanese, Tangut. The sutra played an important role in Japanese Culture in the 7th Century. It was the famous Chinese scholar pilgrim Yijing (A.D. 635-713) who was largely responsible for popularising the *Suvar aprabhāsa*. Based on his translation are versions in Tibetan, Uighur, Sogdiana and Tangut.

The sutra is of composite nature dealing with philosophies including the Confession of sins that forms the third chapter and over time it was continually expanded with the addition of Jataka of the hungry tigress story, an exposition of Sunyata (emptiness), the Pratityasamutpada (the chain of causality), Political ideas of Kingship, a Medical chapter and few esoteric discussions including

the 'dharanis'.

The text evolved for at least half a millennium from the first known Sanskrit version to the last Chinese translations. The Sanskrit version is known from two sources: the manuscript fragments found in Chinese Central Asia and the Nepalese manuscripts. The Sanskrit text of the sutra was first edited in 1898 in Calcutta, India by S.C. Das and S.C. Shastri. A Japanese edition was prepared by Nanjio and published by his disciple Izumi in 1931.

Professor Nobel analysed the structure of the Sanskrit text, comparing it with the oldest Chinese version, in order to determine which parts of the text belonged to the original sutra.

The *Suvar aprabhāsottamasūtra* preserved in a great deal of manuscript materials in various languages of Central Asia. The British Library contains eight fragments of a very old manuscript of the Sutra from Fārhād Beg Yailiki. A damaged small fragmentary 'accordion' type block print text of the sutra was unearthed by the first German Expedition in Central Asia by Grunwedel (1902-3). Immediately after the discovery, it was studied and published by Heinrich Stonner in 1904. Subsequently many other German scholars studied the sutra. In his Catalogue Ernest Waldschmidt edited the text with great care. Akira Yuyama recently (2004) surveyed all the Central Asian manuscripts.

There are two major collections of the Uighur version of this sutra - the Altun Yaruq (now preserved in the Institute Vostokovedeniya, St Petersburg) and Turfansammlung. The first Uighur version of this text was translated into Chinese at the end of the 10th century.

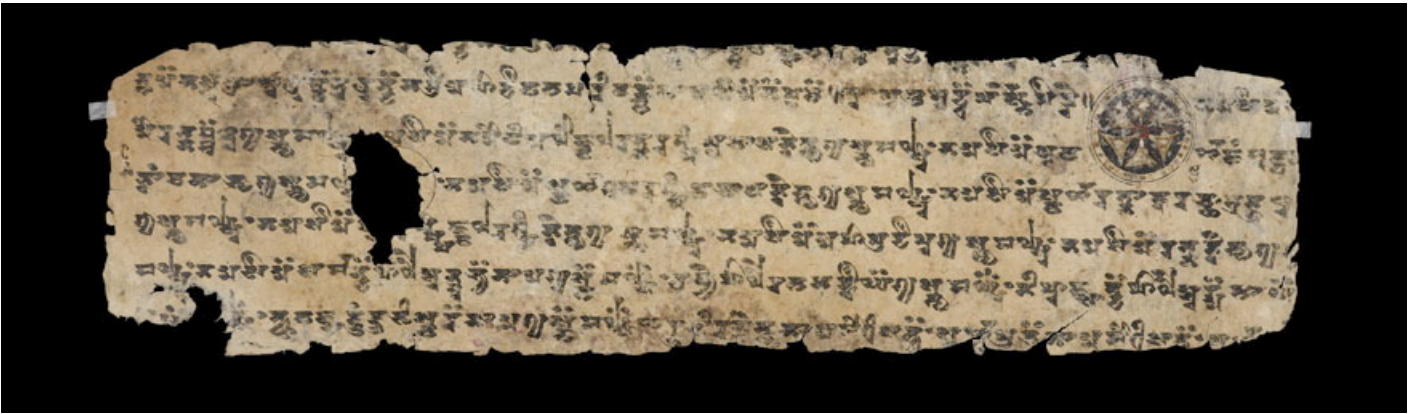
The Chinese Tripitaka contains three complete translations of the *Suvar aprabhāsottamasūtra* (Taisho Issaikyo, vol 16, nos. 663-665). The first translation was made by Dharmakṣema (Fafeng). The second edition is a composite text (he bu jin guang ming jing- a collection of the *Suvar aprabhāsottamasūtra*) compiled and edited by Baogui in 597. And the third edition is the one done by the famous pilgrim scholar Yijing. The original text has undergone many modifications and its bulk has swelled with the passing of time.

The sutra was held in high esteem in Japan and as a result of royal patronage the sutra there were four renderings of the sutra into Japanese by Jinamitra, Silendrabodhi and others.

The Tibetan translations of the Sanskrit texts were edited by Professor Nobel. The first Tibetan translation was made by Sud-gu-soka and jnanakumara during the first half of the 8th century. And the second translation was made by Jinamitra, Silendrabodhi and Yesesde at the beginning of the 9th century. The canonical editions of the 'Kanjur' used by Nobel reflect two versions: one represented by the red Kanjur (block print) housed at the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris and the hand written Kanjur of the Preußische Staatsbibliothek, Berlin and a later one revised represented again by red Kanjur preserved at the University of Cambridge. In addition to the Tibetan translations from the original Sanskrit there are translations from Chinese versions as well.

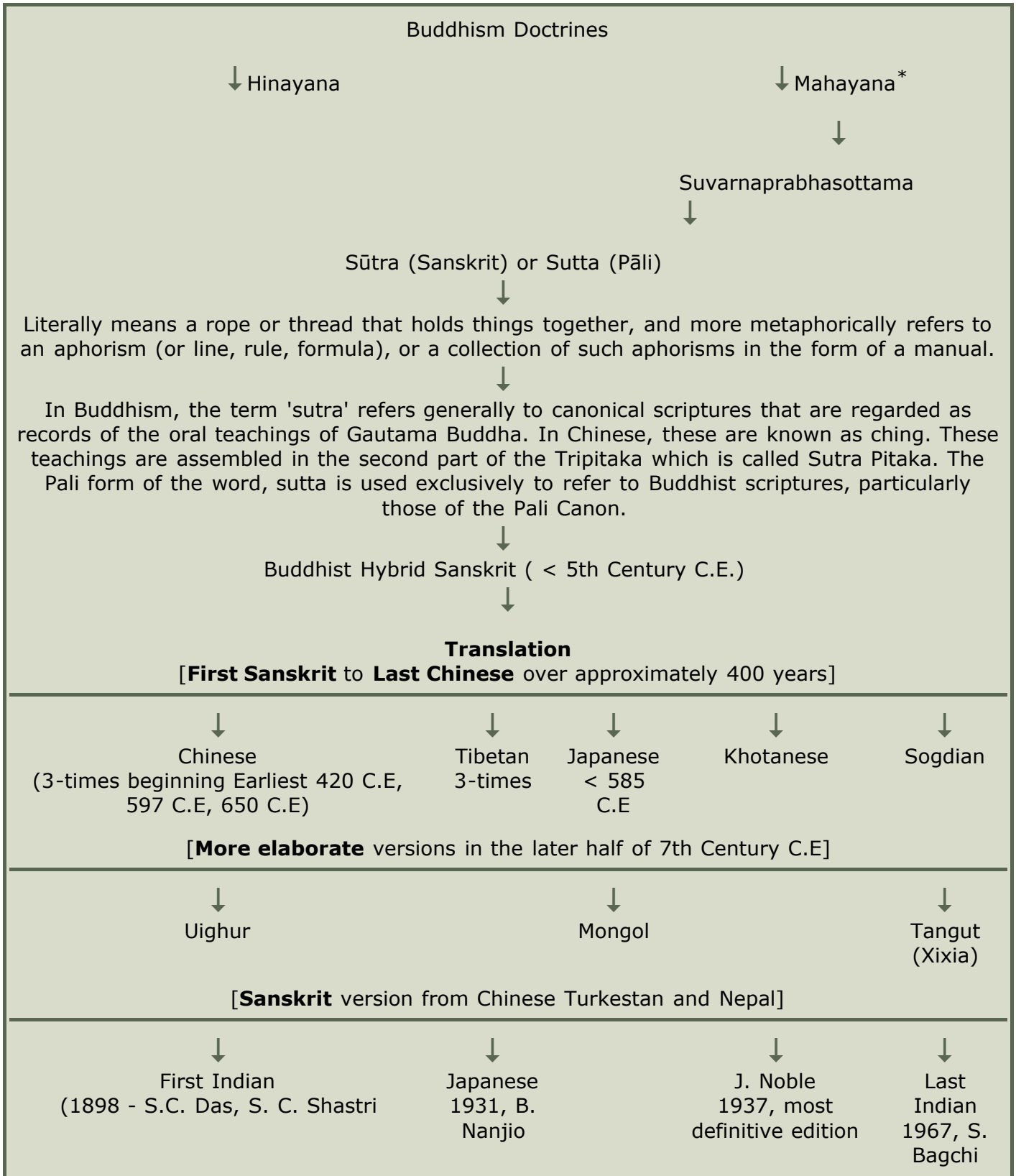
The Library of International Academy of Indian Culture has a Xylograph of the sutra in Mongolian. The National Museum of India holds one hand written manuscript of the sutra.

The *Suvar aprabhāsa* bears marked affinity to other Mahayana sutras with apparent deviations from original teachings and philosophy of the Buddha. Besides there is concurrence of thought in the *Suvar aprabhāsottamasūtra* and the Prajnaparamita regarding the doctrine of the void (Sunyata).



Above: *Pothi manuscript of Suvar aprabhāsasūtra in Khotanese Or.9609C/1.2*
[http://idp.bl.uk/database/oo_loader.a4d?pm=Or.9609C/1.2]

Timeline & Evolution



The basic tenet of the Mahayana Doctrine

- Sunyata (Emptiness)
 - Pratiyasamutpada (The chain of causalities)
 - The life of Tathagata
 - The confession of sins
 - The praise of Bulihas
 - Advice for Kings and Rulers
 - A Medical Chapter
 - The Jataka of the hungry tigress, etc.
-

Bibliographies

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Links

Translations of the *Suvar aprabhāsottamasūtra*
[<http://www.fpmt.org/teachers/zopa/advice/goldenlight.asp>]

Introduction to the *Suvar aprabhāsottamasūtra*
[<http://www.fpmt.org/teachers/zopa/advice/goldenlight.asp>]

An article on Blake and the *Suvar aprabhāsottamasūtra*
[<http://www.fpmt.org/teachers/zopa/advice/goldenlight.asp>]
