

Buddhist Stages of Liberation and Their Uses in Early Gandhāran Scholastic Literature

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The early Buddhist scholastic literature preserved in Gāndhārī manuscripts dating from the first century BCE to the second century CE makes use of three major systems of dividing the path to liberation into discrete stages. The first of these systems is employed by the British Library Saṃgītisūtra Commentary and consists of Seven Planes (*sata bhumie*) corresponding to those known from the Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā (*śukravivaśaṇabhumi*, *gotrahubhumi*, *aṭhamaabhumi*, *daśaṇabhumi*, *taṇubhumi*, *bhavaṇabhumi* = *viḍaraḷaḷa* and *kiḍaviḍa*); the highest four of these Planes are explicitly equated with the Four Fruits of early Buddhism (*soḍavatiḍa*, *sayiḍaḷamiḍa*, *aṇaḷamiḍa* and *arahapa*). Among recent manuscript finds, the Seven Planes are further reflected in the Gāndhārī Bhadrakalpikasūtra and in a Sanskrit avadāna collection from Bamiyan. The second systematisation of stages of liberation occurs in the British Library set of Gāndhārī Verse Commentaries and consists of four Planes called *daśaṇabhumi*, *bhavaṇabhumi*, *aṇatariabhumi* and *kriḍaviḍa* (Plane of Seeing, Plane of Development, Plane of Immediacy and State of an Adept). This system is not known from other Buddhist texts, but appears to be related to, and possibly a precursor of, the classical Sarvāstivāda scheme of four paths (*darsānamārga*, *bhāvanāmārga*, *ānantaryamārga* and *vimuktimārga*). The third system of stages, which I discovered in the Verse Commentaries and subsequently also found in the Saṃgītisūtra Commentary, has no known parallels in other Buddhist texts and appears to be peculiar to the Buddhism of early Gandhāra. The texts refer to this set of categories as the Five Makers of a Teacher (*paṃca śastuḷaraga*) and enumerate them as (*saceṣu*) *uṭhaviḍa*, *pradiṭhaviḍa*, *ṇaṇiḍa*, *vriṣaviḍa* and *vimutiḍa* (Having Set out [in the Truths], Being Established [in the Truths], Being a Knower, Being a Master and State of Liberation). The present paper will propose a historical contextualization of these three early Gandhāran systems of stages of liberation and work out their role in the development from the Four Fruits to the mature Mahāyāna systems of Planes. It will further discuss the exegetical purpose that these systems serve as they are being mapped to basic Buddhist categories in the Saṃgītisūtra on the one hand, and to parts of early Buddhist verses in the Verse Commentaries on the other. On this background, the paper will conclude with a general consideration of the interaction of Abhidharma and Mahāyāna thought in early Gandhāra.

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