



The world's  
Oldest  
Printed  
Book

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Essays on Buddhist History & Culture

## The World's Oldest Printed Book

When, in about 1455, Gutenberg printed his Bible it was hailed as a major technological and cultural achievement and for centuries after was considered to be one of the pivotal moments in human history. Before the invention of printing all documents had to be written by hand; a long and laborious process. But worse still, as scribes wrote out each word, their eyes aching from the strain, they often made mistakes – spelling errors, missing words, sometimes even missing whole lines – which were all included in the next copy, or inaccurately ‘corrected’ by the next copyist, and thus infecting books with hundreds of errors and making some parts of the text obscure. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Gutenberg lost his pioneer status because of a most unusual way, under most curious circumstances and by a most unexpected individual.

By about the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE Indian Buddhist monks from what is now Kashmir and northern Afghanistan started finding their way further north and finally encountering China. It was they who introduced Buddhism to China and soon more monks were going there as missionaries while Chinese monks were taking the same routes to India as pilgrims. One of the stops on this long dangerous journey was a small town in the desert named Dunhuang, a short distance beyond which was a long cliff that stretched for

several kilometres. As pilgrims moved back and forth past Dunhuang they cut caves into the cliff until there was several hundreds of them, some serving as monk's cells, others as shrines with painted walls and images in them. By about the 13<sup>th</sup> century traffic past Dunhuang slowed and finally stopped and the place went into a long period of decline.



The Dunhuang Caves

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the region where Dunhuang is situated was one of the most remote and little-known places in the world and started to attract the attention of the British and the Russians who were interested in mapping it, finding a possible 'back door' to China and getting there before the other did. Word had already reached those in British India more interested in cultural matters that whole cities and other monuments were buried in the desert sands of this region. One of these was Aurel Stein who

has already explored parts of central Asia. A Hungarian by birth and British by nationality, Stein was a scholar of Sanskrit who had a deep interest in India's past. One of his early achievements was his discovery of and the translation of the *Rajatanataragani*, the chronical of the kings of Kashmir. In 1906, financed by the British Indian government, he set off for central Asia again tasked with finding antiquities.



Stein's photo of some of the scrolls

While camping at Dunhuang he heard rumours that a lone monk who lived in the caves had some year earlier found a stash of ancient manuscripts in a sealed up cave. To cut a long story short, using a combination of pleading,



flattery and downright chicanery Stein convinced the monk to show him the manuscripts and the cave where he had found them. Apparently, the books had been sealed up in the cave centuries before and been perfectly preserved in its dark dry atmosphere. To Stein's astonishment he found that there were some 50,000 manuscripts, in Chinese, Tibetan, Sogdian (an extinct central Asian language) and even a few in Hebrew, plus bronze images and beautifully painted and embroidery religious banners. He immediately recognized the enormous historical value of these documents and again by slightly underhand means convinced the monk to let him examine them and take his pick of them.

When Stein arrived back in India and word of his discovery spread, it caused a sensation, and the most important of the finds turned out to be a copy of a Buddhist *sutra* in the form of a paper scroll, not hand written but printed. The frontispiece of this scroll is a picture of the Buddha on the Gijjhakuti, the Vultures Peak in Rajagaha, delivering a sermon while surrounded by disciples and devas. And at the very end of the *sutra* is a dedication which reads; "Devotedly made for widespread free distribution by Wang Jie on behalf of his parents, on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the 4<sup>th</sup> month of the Xiantong reign." This date is equivalent to 868 CE making the scroll by far the oldest printed document in the world – nearly 600 years earlier than Gutenberg's Bible.

Not only was printing a Chinese innovation, it was almost certainly one prompted by Buddhism. From an early period in India it came to be

considered meritorious to make images of the Buddha, and of course if making one image was meritorious then making two was twice as meritorious, three more so, etc.



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Pious Chinese Buddhists carved multiple images on stone, painted them on walls or drew them on paper. Eventually, some unknown person hit on the idea of carving the outline of the Buddha on a wooden block, rubbing ink on it and then stamping it on paper, thus allowing for producing many images simply and quickly. It was just a short step from this to carving words of a wooden block and doing the same, and thus printing was born. Exactly

when printing was invented is not known but it could have been several centuries before the now famous sutra was printed.

Another point of interest is the sutra's colophon which shows that the Buddhist practice of printing sutras, sermons or expositions of the Dhamma for free is as old as bookmaking.

In the last few decades Chinese authorities have started a campaign to have the famous sutra returned to China and given the fact that it is in a sense stolen property, this sounds like a reasonable demand. However, during the 10 years of the so-called Cultural Revolution, one of the goals of the Communist Party of China was to destroy what they called the four olds (*si jiu*); old customs, old culture, old habits and old ideas. During this terrible period, vast amounts of Chinese artistic treasures were wantonly smashed, burned or consigned to the rubbish heap in a campaign to totally wipe out China's past. According to UNESCO it was the most culturally destructive event in human history. It is almost certain that the Dunhuang manuscripts, including the famous sutra, would have been destroyed had Aurel Stein not acquired them. So, for all the criticism directed towards Stein he saved these precious manuscripts. Today the *sutra* is on display in the British Museum and all the others are accessible online.