

BOOK REVIEW

by Elson Snow

THE SUTRA OF CONTEMPLATION ON THE BUDDHA OF IMMEASURABLE LIFE AS EXPOUNDED BY ŚĀKYAMUNI BUDDHA, Translated and Annotated by the Ryūkoku University Translation Center, under the direction of Meiji Yamada; Ryūkoku University, Kyoto, 1984.

The Translation Center has again published a work that will become indispensable to the private and religious libraries of Buddhists living in Europe and the Americas. The introductory essay to this translated sūtra is interesting and especially important to Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists who have limited knowledge of the classical Japanese and Chinese languages. The brief and abbreviated historical explanations in the Introduction are merely meant to probe why the sūtra was originally composed and why the sūtra is so popular in the Buddhist-Chinese sphere of influence.

The translators and compilers of this volume have been clear on the scope of their work and have carefully annotated their text with glossary terms necessary to the understanding of the particular line of Pure Land Buddhism experienced by Shinran Shōnin. For this reason, it was necessary to make certain references to the kind of thinking represented in the non-meditative practices advocated by Shinran's teacher, Hōnen Shōnin, and formulated by Zendō (Shan-tao). More detail of the doctrine of the "three minds" and some remarks on comparative ideas would have been helpful, however, and would not have overloaded the Introduction with too much detail. Yet we should not expect more of this translation. It provides us with cross-references of various kinds and a rich Glossary.

The Devadatta story in the *Meditation Sūtra* is an attractive study of ethics, but we are reminded by Shinran that the drama of conspiracy and royal betrayal played out for us in the sūtra is really an expediency. If we are to know more of the Devadatta theme of Buddha and Queen Vaidehi, we can go outside this sūtra as well as read Shinran's interpretation in the volume of the *Kyōgyōshinshō*. The doctrinal interpretation of the sūtra is deeper than the obvious karmic plot and the religious significance points directly to practice and its source: the Vow Power of the Buddha.

The reader is benefited by the bi-lingual design of this book and its competency of organization is the same as seen in previous projects of the Translation Center. Misprints, however, are far too numerous and oversights in the editing process are barely tolerable. A cleaner typographical text is needed to match the fine scholarship of this volume.

It is an advantage to the student to have before him the Japanese form of the romanized Chinese text. Further, the short paragraph on *Romanization* could have been expanded to better explain how the Japanese are able to grammaticize Chinese original literature to come close to their own literary language, for the more linguistic knowledge we have about the work that goes on in translating a text, the better we are at capturing its religious nuances.

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SEVEN WORKS OF VASUBANDHU: THE BUDDHIST PSYCHOLOGICAL DOCTOR, by Stefan Anacker; Motilal Banarsidass, 1984, Delhi, India.

The religious person knows he is constantly contradicted in his persistent allegiance to a given spirituality, but there are ways to prepare oneself to illuminate a reality that is recognized as being incomprehensible. As a translator and commentator, Stefan Anacker prefers a psychological interpretation over a philosophical one. This certainly avoids the clumsiness of depicting the Yogācāra system as idealistic, or characterizing this tradition as "realistic pluralism."

Mystical and meditative traditions are not always embarrassed by religious silence, but there are voices unsatisfied at hiding behind a meditative mask of acceptance and submission to the organized world. The Mahāyāna tradition appears to recognize that demystifying religion is also a blind scheme that will eventually diminish spiritual life.

This is illustrated by intellectual history discernible by three distinct revolutions, commonly referred to as the "Three Swingings of the Wheel of Dharma": 1) the historical Śākyamuni Buddha's organizing of the sangha, his preparing its members for the ideal community, and his gaining the validity of Enlightenment; 2) the śūnyatā doctrine as elaborated by followers of Nāgārjuna to emphasize the ineffable (*anabhilāpya*) nature of things; and 3) the final preparation of a "therapeutic course of action (*ācāra*) rooted in meditation."

Today, the tendency is stronger to consider these three fundamental interpretations of dharmic law as sharing the same ground and differing only in their illustrative approach to reality. Stefan Anacker also blurs the distinction between Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu and compares these two thinkers as propagating two radically different methodologies rather than as originators of an entirely different philosophical system vying with each other:

Nāgārjuna wishes to demonstrate the inadequacy of all conventional statements . . . Vasubandhu is interested in showing a path conceived in conventional terms, which leads to the abandonment of all mental constructions.

Vasubandhu's method is not characterized by the dialectical emphasis of reality as seen from the two-fold perspective of Nāgārjuna, but is analyzed within the framework of a three-fold division. Both thinkers share rejection of duality and both expound the doctrine of śūnyatā, the religious philosophy of Emptiness.

Modern scholarship of Buddhism has sometimes taken the simplest method of treating problems by reducing religious practices to "therapy." This has been an easy and less exhausting task for popularizers

and scholars alike who first tried to reduce contemporary Zen to depth psychology and who later treated Tibetan Buddhism as some form of psychoanalysis, using it as a minute examination of the mind to discover personal causes and behavioral effects. The abhidharmic quality of Yogācāra lends itself to an overpowering interest in the contents of consciousness.

In the meditative and non-meditative context, Buddhism also encourages a transcendental distinction between “this world” and the “other world.” Overattentive Western interpreters of Buddhism misconstrued this phenomenological aspect of the dharma, reducing it to either a psychological doctrine or a philosophical system. Anacker also sees a personalized transformation of the individual by following tenets originating in Vasubandhu’s writings; hence, the subtitle of his work is “The Buddhist Psychological Doctor.”

Anacker’s excellent volume contains a little over 100 pages of *Glossary and Index of Key Terms*. His introduction to each text is clear and the notes at the end of each chapter are helpful. There is a *devanagari* text for each of the four Sanskrit works translated. The book is also introduced with an excellent chapter entitled, “Vasubandhu, His Life and Times.”

The following four works are easily grouped together, not simply because they survive in Sanskrit but because they offer a natural, unified approach to the Yogācāra perspective. This study of Vasubandhu and his works looks upon the literature as so many therapeutic layers, suggesting that one text will erase the effects of an earlier age. The study also favors this kind of “psychology” over the dual formation of Jung and Freud, for the unconscious cannot reveal what must be rectified and will judge illusive intentions rather than actually change the behavior of the practitioner.

FOUR EXTANT TEXTS IN SANSKRIT

I The Twenty Verses and Their Commentary (*Vimśatikā-kārikā*)

A theory of knowledge and criticism of the realist’s argument for a correspondence theory are presented here. According to Thomas Kochumuttom, the critique is not against realism but against that theory of knowledge. Vasubandhu is really supporting a theory of the “self-transformation of consciousness which carries within it the seeds of subjectivity and objectivity.”

II The Thirty Verses (*Triṃśikā-kārikā*)

This is a brief summary of Asanga’s doctrine and it presents a view of life. In Anacker’s perspective, it teaches that in the non-meditative state everything is merely a construction and all of consciousness is undergoing a revolution as a psychological process which is the very heart of a therapeutic theory.

III The Teachings of the Three Own-Beings (*Tri-Svabhāva-nirdeśa*)

This is a view of reality with reference to subject-object duality. Leo Pruden, Ph.D., has written in a note of a yet unpublished translation that “the theory of the three natures (*svabhāva*) or characteristics (*lakṣaṇa*) is one of the most important parts of the philosophical system of Asanga and Vasubandhu.” The three are 1) *kalpita*: that which has no reality, is the imagined, and is the manifestation of the other-dependent and the state of existence wherein the individual is seen as subjective or objective; 2) *paratantra*: where the dependent manifest forms of subjectivity and objectivity are constructs and not real; and 3) *pariniṣpanna*: seen as the total absence of dependent causes and this “fulfilled” or

“perfect” mode has no subject-object distinction or application.

IV Commentary on the Separation of the Middle From Extremes (*Madhyānta-vibhāga-bhāṣya*)

These verses are ascribed to Maitreyanatha and are thought to have been given to Vasubandhu by Asanga. The commentary represents a central position between the extremity of *sarvastivāda* realism and the radical relativism of *Madhyamika*. It clearly avoids the traditional opinions concerning what is false and true and states how things are to be *seen as they really exist*. This text not only describes the phenomenal and absolute aspects of reality but its aims are to void uncertainty, fear, indolence and doubt, thereby serving Anacker’s program for the “meditational therapy” of Vasubandhu.

THREE TEXTS WITH NO FULL SANSKRIT ORIGINALS

V A Method for Argumentation (*Vāda-vidhi*)

This version is an account of Vasubandhu’s logic that has been previously collected and arranged, representing the fullest restoration we have of the lost text in Sanskrit. Two other works of logic are attributed to Vasubandhu but are lost.

The intent of this work is to achieve “correct knowledge.” It was not motivated by the formality found in previous logical systems to sustain a naive realism. Instead, it became a reform of inference and syllogism necessary to carry out epistemological investigations. Buddhist logic is a logic of particulars in contrast to the speculative interest of universals, and Vasubandhu’s “art of disputation” aimed to see through all spurious reasoning.

VI A Discussion of the Five Aggregates (*Pañcaskandhaka-prakaraṇa*)

The rendering of this “Discussion” is based on a Tibetan translation. It is an analysis of the entire “bundle” of the psycho-physical phenomena, or five *skandhas*. It is in this way that individuals are experienced.

The *skandhas* collection are momentary elements. Instead of categorizing the individual as possessing fixed tendencies, the scheme of the five aggregates describes the process of materialities, feelings, dispositions and consciousness. The principle of cessation is the sensible way to study the arising and passing away of positive, negative and neutral behavior rather than categorizing an individual for his undesirable traits for the purpose of modifying personal and social behavior.

VII A Discussion for the Demonstration of Action (*Karma-siddhi-prakaraṇa*)

This treatise of moral retribution is translated mostly from the Tibetan. As karma is action and filled with ethical importance, the “time-interval” is of particular concern to the Buddhist theory of momentariness. A series of moments gives way to previous ones, a specific problem for Buddhists. The solution to the mystery of continuity, applicable to all events, is of primary importance in morality that is governed by the psychic process. As practical experience, Buddhists emphasize the three-fold division of action (karma) into bodily, verbal and mental acts.