

Hisao Inagaki's *T'an-luan's Commentary on Vasubandhu's Discourse on the Pure Land: A Study and Translation* (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshōdō, 1998): A Review and Comment

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OVERVIEW

THIS TRANSLATION REPRESENTS a long-awaited development in the understanding of Pure Land Buddhist thought in the English-speaking world. A growing body of scholarship in the West has come to recognize what scholars in the East have long known: the intellectual and religious contributions of T'an-luan (476–542) have been of vital importance to the development of Pure Land thought in China and Japan, not to mention Chinese Taoist thought as well. In particular, T'an-luan's major text, the *Commentary on Vasubandhu's Discourse on the Pure Land* (Jpn. *Ōjō ronchū*; *Taishō*, vol. 40, No. 1819, pp. 826a–844b), sets out the philosophical underpinnings for such fundamental Pure Land notions as Amida Buddha, Pure Land and the path upon which ordinary beings might be able to realize birth in that land.

Until now, Western students of Pure Land Buddhism had been confronted with a dearth of English translations of T'an-luan's text. Those fortunate enough to obtain a copy have made considerable use of an earlier translation done by Roger Corless in his doctoral dissertation (1973). We have also gained guidance from a number of his subsequent articles and texts. In addition, portions of T'an-luan's text have been translated as part of the Shin Buddhist Translation Series of the Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha in Kyōto, a series that culminated in the publication of *The Collected Works of Shinran* (Kyōto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, 1997). Thus, by providing us with the first systematic and annotated translation of the entirety of T'an-luan's *Commentary*, Dr. Hisao Inagaki has provided all students of Buddhism with a gateway to this seminal Pure Land thinker. At the same time, this translation may well serve as a springboard for future advances in the understanding of Pure Land Buddhist thought in the English-speaking world.

For those unfamiliar with his many contributions, Dr. Inagaki is a prolific translator and writer, who has made significant contributions to the introduction of Buddhist thought in the West. His body of work includes, *A Tri-lingual Glossary of the Sukhāvativyūha Sutras* (1984), *A Dictionary of Japanese Buddhist Terms* (1984, 85, and 88), *Anantamukha-nirhāra-dhāraṇī Sutra and Jñānagarbha's Commentary* (1987), *A Glossary of Zen Terms* (1991 and 95), *The Three Pure Land Sutras: A Study and Translation* (1994, 95 and 2000), *Nāgārjuna's Discourse on the Ten Stages: Translation and Study of the Verses and the Chapter on Easy Practice* (1998). Some of his other translations are the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi Sutra*, Shan-tao's *Kuan-nien fa-man* and *Pan-chou tsan*, Kūkai's *Sokushinjōbutsugi*, and Kakuban's *Amida-hishaku*. He has also written many other texts and articles of note.

Inagaki now brings his considerable linguistic and philosophical skills to this challenging undertaking. He informs us, correctly, that the bulk of the scholarship related to T'an-luan has until now taken place in Japan, especially among those within the scholastic tradition of Shin Buddhism. Certainly, this is due to the fact that Shinran (1173–1262) paid close attention to T'an-luan as he developed a systematic approach to Pure Land Buddhism that we today call Jōdo Shinshū. In addition, Inagaki demonstrates his sensitivity to the fact that the act of translation is also to a large extent an act of interpretation. That is, the translator's choice of terms, expressions, sentence structure and logical flow involves more than an attempt to balance accuracy and readability. In fact the translator always engages in the act of translation/interpretation from a particular stance, whether this is admitted or not. From this perspective, Inagaki frankly acknowledges that his translation of T'an-luan's *Commentary* is based on his understanding of the text, which has been developed from the interpretive standpoint of his father, Inagaki Zuiken, as well as those of Katsura Riken, Ōe Junjō and Koreyama Ekaku. This represents a very honest and ultimately useful approach, since the doctrinal context of his translation is made clear from the outset. One wishes that other translators would be as forthright in their approach.

At the same time, as we will see below, the style of Inagaki's translation and his choice of expressions represent his own religious appreciation of the Pure Land teachings. The resolute use of the term "faith" and his willingness to adopt such devotional phrases as "glorious merit" and "precious adornments" seem to indicate that, for this translator, the deep religious underpinnings of T'an-luan's text cannot be ignored. In this way, the reader is presented with a classical philosophical text from sixth century C.E. China, which even today offers to the religious seeker a guide toward the realization of Amida Buddha's salvific reality.

SUMMARY AND CONSIDERATION OF THE TEXT

The text consists of three essential parts. Part 1 offers a section on historical and doctrinal studies, which consists of a discussion of the historical development of Chinese Pure Land Buddhism and T'an-luan's place within it. Part 2 constitutes the annotated translation of T'an-luan's *Commentary*. The third portion consists of appendices and indices.

In Part 1 a brief description of Chinese Buddhism prior to the emergence of T'an-luan is followed by an interesting study of T'an-luan's life and work. Here Inagaki compares the differing accounts of T'an-luan's life according to texts written by Tao-ch'ò, Tao-hsuan, Chia-ts'ai, Wen-shen (and Shao-kang) and Fei-cho respectively. A review of these accounts, some of them rather hagiographic in nature, allows one to sketch out his life while tracing certain themes throughout them. We see, for instance, references to his early interest in the Taoist art of longevity, his Taoist writings, his early Buddhist studies and his later conversion to Pure Land Buddhism. Inagaki then goes on to place T'an-luan within the context of Pure Land thought. He begins by discussing forms of early Amida worship in India, describing Amida *jātaka* and *samādhi* among other things. Inagaki then goes on to describe what he calls Nāgārjuna's "Mādhyamika-Pure Land system," which merged an emphasis on the *pratyutpanna samādhi* practices with the path of easy practice for the attainment of the stage of non-retrogression (that is, contemplation, recitation of the name and taking refuge in Amida Buddha). He next discusses Vasubandhu's *Discourse on the Pure Land*, a systematic presentation of contemplative practices centered on Amida and his Pure Land (including the five mindful practices and the twenty-nine adornments of the Pure Land), which was to become the subject of T'an-luan's *Commentary*.

Following a summary of early Pure Land Buddhism in China, Inagaki takes up a consideration of T'an-luan's Pure Land thought. He begins by addressing, through a discussion of T'an-luan's view of reality, the traditionally held view that T'an-luan's thought represented a synthesis of the Mādhyamika thought of Nāgārjuna and the Yogācāra perspective of Vasubandhu. Inagaki's thesis at this point is that the Mahayanistic notion of the twofold truth of reality—ultimate reality (*paramārtha-satya*) and conventional reality (*saṃvṛti-satya*)—comes to serve as T'an-luan's explanation of the nature of "true merit" of the Pure Land. That is, ultimate reality is the "sphere of the Buddha's karmic activity," which represents "true merit" that conforms to Dharma-nature and "has the characteristic of purity." The realm of Samsara is the world of illusion, desire, and endless rounds of suffering. The reality of the Pure Land stands in contrast to that and is represented by the twenty-nine "glorious manifestations" of the

Land, the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas. This true merit is produced by Dharmākara Bodhisattva's Primal Vow and practices.

More specifically, says Inagaki, the twofold reality of the Pure Land means that all of the "glorious features" of the Land are at once phenomenal manifestations and noumenal ultimate reality. Such "extensive" and "condensed" presentations "enter into one another." This represents the view of Vasubandhu, who had also distinguished the three Buddha-bodies in his Yogācāra texts: body identical to ultimate reality (*Dharmakāya*), reward body (*Sambhogakāya*) and accommodative body (*Nirmāṇakāya*). According to Inagaki, T'an-luan re-phrased the two-fold reality theory and the three Buddha-body theory as the notion of the two kinds of Dharma-body (*Dharmakāya*): (1) *Dharmakāya* of Dharma-nature and (2) *Dharmakāya* as Expediency. T'an-luan states that the two are "different but inseparable; they are one but not the same." T'an-luan accepted the traditional view that Amida Buddha is a *Sambhogakāya* Buddha, since he arose out of the bodhisattva's vows and practices. At the same time, however, Inagaki states that T'an-luan viewed Amida Buddha in terms of this new, two-body theory. That is, "Amida as the *Dharmakāya* is the *Dharmakāya* of Dharma-nature, and his *Sambhogakāya* and *Nirmāṇakāya* bodies are included in the *Dharmakāya* of Expediency." In this way, Inagaki takes the position that T'an-luan developed a dynamic view of Amida Buddha, containing all three aspects of the Buddha-body and encompassing the working of wisdom, compassion, and *upāya*.

In a section entitled T'an-luan's theory of salvation, Inagaki proposes that for T'an-luan the Name of Amida Buddha, particularly recitation of the Name with correct faith, was soteriologically central. Referring once again to the concept of "true merit," Inagaki maintains that, for T'an-luan, "All the glorious manifestations of the Pure Land, etc. include Amida's Name." He then reminds us that the Five Mindful Practices, which Vasubandhu set out as essentially contemplative practices for the bodhisattva, become for T'an-luan a path of practice and faith for ordinary people. Further, the Five Mindful Practices become fulfilled when one practices in accord with the Dharma, which is "in agreement with the significance of the Name." The issue here then becomes one of the correctness of one's faith, which must be sincere, single-hearted and constant. What is required, Inagaki points out, is a "singleness of mind" or complete faith in the salvation brought about by Amida Buddha. It is through the Vow-Power, or Other Power, that one is able to attain enlightenment "quickly" and thus one "should accept it in faith, and should not entertain restricted views."

In the next section on T'an-luan's successors, Inagaki clarifies the extent to which Tao-ch'ō and, later, Shinran were influenced by T'an-luan's thought. In particular, he maintains that Shinran's understanding of the two aspects of merit-transference, his system of thought based on the

Vows, and his conceptions of true practice, faith, enlightenment, true Buddha and Land, and the transformed Buddha and Land all owe much to the religious thought of T'an-luan.

The reader will find that Part 1 offers a useful introduction to the historical and doctrinal background of T'an-luan's *Commentary* and thus provides an appropriate context from which to engage the text. The detailed, albeit summarized, presentation of Chinese Pure Land Buddhist thought is helpful. Moreover, Inagaki's efforts to develop certain major themes, such as the nature of Amida Buddha and the Pure Land, Vow-Power, contemplative and recitative practices, the "true merit" embodied in the Name, and the primacy of faith, will provide guidance to one who seeks to delve into the depths of this challenging work. Finally, in the course of setting out his own exegesis, Inagaki also introduces us to the ideas of a number of Japanese thinkers, including Ryōchū, Jinrei, Koreyama Ekaku, Fujita Kōtatsu, Yamaguchi Susumu, and others.

Part 2 consists of the translation of T'an-luan's *Commentary*. Fascicle One begins with T'an-luan's introduction of the paths of easy practice and difficult practice leading to the stage of non-retrogression. After considering Vasubandhu's *Discourse* and setting out some preliminary definitions, he then presents an elucidation of the verse portion of that text. He details the Five Mindful Practices, which comprise worship, praise, aspiration, contemplation and merit-transference. T'an-luan then begins to discuss the twenty-nine objects of contemplation of the Pure Land, Amida Buddha and the bodhisattvas of that land. The first fascicle ends with a supplementary discussion—eight questions and answers pertaining to issues of salvation, karma and practice.

Fascicle Two contains T'an-luan's exposition on the prose portion of Vasubandhu's text. He revisits the Five Mindful Practices and the Twenty-Nine Objects of Contemplation. In this section, he presents them as the "glorious merits" of that Land, which are accomplished through the Buddha's Vows and practices. Such merits manifest the perfection of self-benefit and benefiting of others. All of these "glorious adornments" enter into the one Dharma principle of "purity." The extensive and condensed presentations enter into each other, and thus all Buddhas and bodhisattvas have two Dharma bodies. T'an-luan goes on to discuss the significance of this structure of purity from a soteriological perspective (converting beings by skilful means) and schematically (the accomplishment of the five gates of approach to Enlightenment). In the end, he explains that bodhisattvas attain highest Enlightenment quickly due to the working of the Eighteenth, Eleventh, and Twenty-Second Vows of Amida Buddha. Setting out the significance of benefiting others and benefit for others, he concludes by extolling Other Power, and urges all beings to have faith in it.

The present translation comes equipped with a number of aids to the reader. Each page is divided into two sections. The upper portion contains

the *Taishō* version of the original text, while Inagaki's translation can be found in the lower portion. Corresponding sections in each are numerically keyed for easy reference. In addition, Inagaki has provided a number of features to this translation that will be quite helpful, especially to the reader who plans to study the text with some reference to the Japanese scholastic tradition. For instance, chapter and section headings are provided in English with subheadings in Chinese. Although these headings do not appear in the Chinese original, they correspond to a traditional interpretive organization of the text. Substantial annotation is also appended to the text in the form of endnotes. Certain key terms are highlighted and accompanied by the original Chinese character with its corresponding Sino-Japanese romanization. Finally, the appendices, following the translation, are also quite informative and useful. They include historical maps of China from the Later Han to the Southern and Northern Dynasties. The collection of sources for T'an-luan's biographies in the original Chinese is unique and should provide a wealth of material for historians. Equally useful are the indices that are appended to the end of the book.

The translation itself should be quite accessible even to the reader with a modest background in T'an-luan's Pure Land thought. That is to say, Dr. Inagaki's T'an-luan is quite readable. As with most of his other translations, the choice of words and the crafting of phrases do not appear to have been done with the purpose of confusing the reader. Instead, one has the sense that his translation, together with its many reading aids, is intended to give the reader every opportunity to take part in a meaningful, "interpretative" exploration of an extremely dense, dark and daunting forest of ideas. This clumsy attempt at a metaphor is intended to point out another engaging feature of T'an-luan's text and this translation: its many similes and metaphors. Perhaps aware that he was asking the reader to comprehend an extremely difficult (and ultimately incomprehensible) text, T'an-luan laced his work with an assortment of illustrative examples. From the hair of the tortoise (indicating the non-existence of birth and death that is conceived as real by sentient beings) to the man riding the donkey that could fly (illustrating one who entrusts in Other Power), the similes and metaphors of T'an-luan's *Commentary* give it a life that would be beyond the reach of a mere philosophical tract. Inagaki apparently recognizes this unique and vital feature of the text, and so has devoted considerable effort to make these similes and metaphors hit the mark in English as well. Particularly handy is an index explaining T'an-luan's many similes and metaphors, which Inagaki includes at the end of his text.

One's reservations about the translation are relatively trifling. Chief among them is the clear Shin Buddhist perspective that Inagaki brings to his reading of T'an-luan. However, as mentioned above, every translation expresses a particular view or interpretive stance, and Inagaki is quite "up front" about the perspective that he has brought to his task. Another

concern for some might be that, at times, the translator's choice of expression becomes somewhat idiosyncratic, causing the words to lose their transparency. For instance, the translation of the term *shōgon kudoku* (literally, adornment-virtue) as "glorious merit" is a bit flowery for my taste. The words "lordship" for *shu* (literally, head) and "kinsmen" for *kenzoku* (kin or family) both seem a bit dated. However, in light of the breadth and depth exhibited in Inagaki's considerable achievement, these are not important criticisms. Moreover, in another sense, one could argue that the use of these sorts of terms does not deter the reader from grasping the meaning of T'an-luan's text at all. In fact, the terms employed by Dr. Inagaki seem often to have been selected exactly because they give expression to his own religious appreciation of T'an-luan's Pure Land Buddhist message.

For example, let us compare the differences between translations of the same passage found at the end of T'an-luan's *Commentary*. The first can be found as a passage cited in Shinran's *True Teaching, Practice and Realization*, which was translated by the Shin Buddhism Translation Series (of which Dr. Inagaki is a leading committee member).

Again, a person of inferior powers astride a donkey cannot rise up off the ground, but when following an outing of a cakravartin king, is able to ride in the air and wander freely throughout the four continents with no obstruction—such is termed "Other Power." How foolish are scholars of these latter times! Hear the teaching that you should ride upon Other Power and awaken shinjin. Do not confine yourself to your own powers (*The Collected Works of Shinran*, p. 60).

This rendition is, of course, entirely accurate and reads beautifully. Still, there is a distance here between the reader and T'an-luan, who seems somehow remote and preachy. We get the feeling that we are being given instructions by a Dharma Master who is telling us that we must entrust in Other Power and realize *shinjin*. Perhaps this translation conveys the words of T'an-luan truthfully and literally. Still, I cannot help but wonder whether it conveys the penultimate point that he was trying to reach in his text.

Compare the previous passage now to the one translated by Dr. Inagaki. The literal meaning is the same, or at least very similar. However, in this rendition we get the sense, not that Master T'an-luan is delivering instruction to us, but that he is offering to us his own religious understanding and experience—his "faith" if you will—and is encouraging us to realize the same.

Though a man of little virtue who rides a donkey cannot fly, if he were to follow the procession of a Cakravartin, he could fly in the

air and travel in the four continents without hindrance. This is called "other-power." How fortunate we are to have met with the Other-Power! Students of the future, having heard that the Other-Power is to be trusted in, should accept it in faith, and should not entertain restricted views (Inagaki, p. 291).

CONCLUSION

Although T'an-luan has been exhaustively studied in the East, systematic treatments of his thought are only just beginning in the West. Dr. Inagaki's study and translation of *T'an-luan's Commentary on Vasubandhu's Discourse on the Pure Land* is sure to play an important role in the development of this research in English for many years to come. But even more than that, it will help to ensure that the religious commitment of this individual who in sixth century China wrote exhaustively of his faith in Amida Buddha's salvation will reach the hearts and minds of all "students of the future." Translation truly becomes a work of art in the hands of a master. We express our heart-felt appreciation to Dr. Inagaki and eagerly await his next contribution.