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# A Post-Reading Group Reflection on Jowita Kramer's Visit to McMaster University's Religious Studies Department

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On Friday, March 18, 2016, the Religious Studies Department at McMaster University hosted our second Yehan Numata Reading Group. Our guest scholar was Dr. Jowita Kramer from Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (Munich, Germany). Dr. Kramer's research focus is on the history and philosophy of Tibetan and Indian Buddhism, intertextuality in Buddhist commentarial literature, and considerations of authorship. She is particularly interested in the Yogācāra tradition.

The topic of our reading group was Dr. Kramer's paper "Innovation and the Role of Intertextuality in the *Pañcaskandhaka* and Related Yogācāra Works," which she presented at the Authors and Editors in the Literary Traditions of Asian Buddhism conference at the University of Oxford in 2013. This study developed out of Dr. Kramer's interest in particular Buddhist manuscripts including *Pañcaskandhaka*, *Triṃśikā* and their commentaries. She analyzed the following commentaries: *Pañcaskandhakavibhāṣā* and *Triṃśikāvijñaptibhāṣya* (both of which were authored by a sixth-century Buddhist scholar Sthiramati), *Pañcaskandha-*

*vivaraṇa* by Guṇaprabha (which is shorter and older than the two works by Sthiramati) and *Pañcaskandhabhāṣya* by an unknown author. These works are contained within the Tibetan canon only, and have not been well studied.

While summarizing her paper for the group, Dr. Kramer emphasized the importance of concentrating on these commentarial works themselves rather than focusing too much on determining authorship. One of her goals for this study was to demonstrate that commentators such as Sthiramati were quite independent and were authors in their own right. Although they depended on root texts to some extent, these commentators were innovative in many ways. Dr. Kramer also cautioned that when examining the relationship between commentaries and their root texts, scholars must be mindful of the fact that root texts depend on past knowledge and thus are also secondary texts. She sought to better understand the roles and purpose of Indian commentaries and authorial techniques employed in composing them. For example, to what extent did authors follow set rules in composing their commentaries? She reviewed the degrees of intertextuality and innovation in the aforementioned commentaries and their root texts.

After conducting an extensive sentence-by-sentence analysis, Dr. Kramer reached several important conclusions. The commentaries she studied were mainly produced in an educational context. She likened the root texts she examined to a Power Point presentation given by a Professor to her or his students. Students require detailed explanation in order to understand Power Point slides, just as they required clarification in the past in order to understand root texts. Therefore, these commentarial texts were likely composed when teachers explained root texts and enriched them with their own insights.

Dr. Kramer also concluded that most commentaries are likely a mixture of more philosophical/creative elements and those that are

non-productive. Whereas some commentarial passages are almost entirely copied, there are many that display varying degrees of innovation. Innovation with respect to doctrine should be differentiated from structural innovations. Changes range from simply using synonyms or making supplements within a sentence to rejecting older teachings or expressing new ideas. Citations for borrowed material were used in the case of early sutras; however no citations were provided when other sources were used. Dr. Kramer concluded that intertextualities and creativities in both root texts and commentaries were employed in the same ways.

After listening to Dr. Kramer's fascinating summary, audience members asked many questions and engaged in a fruitful discussion. Questions arose about the purpose of commentarial texts and comparisons between Guṇaprabha's work and that of Sthiramati. There were also inquiries about the ways in which commentators used and cited their sources and the degree of intertextuality in the root texts. Overall, this reading group was an engaging and informative experience. We are grateful to spend the afternoon learning from Dr. Kramer.

The Department of Religious Studies will host our final reading group for this academic year on Friday, April 8th 2016 with Levi McLaughlin from North Carolina State University. The topic of this reading group will be "A Brief History of Soka Gakkai: From Intellectual Collective to Mass Movement." All are welcome!