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A Feast of the Nectar of the Supreme
Vehicle: An Explanation of the Ornament
of the Mahāyāna Sūtra, Maitreya's
Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra with a
Commentary by Jamgön Mipham

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ASAṄGA, MAITREYANĀTHA, and JAMGÖN MIPHAM. *A Feast of the Nectar of the Supreme Vehicle: An Explanation of the Ornament of the Mahāyāna Sūtra, Maitreya's Mahāyānasūtrāṃkāra with a Commentary by Jamgön Mipham*. Trans. Padmakara Translation Group. Boulder: Shambhala, 2018. XXV, 939 pp.¹ US \$69.95 (hc). ISBN: 978-1611804676

The *Mahāyānasūtrāṃkāra* (MSA) is one of the five texts said to have been transmitted by Maitreyanātha to Asaṅga. The other texts are the *Abhisamayāṃkāra*, *Madhyāntavibhāga*, *Dharmadharmatavibhanga*, and *Mahāyānottaratantra* (or *Ratnagoṭravibhāga*). The MSA is considered to be one of the foundational texts for the Yogācāra tradition, and has been the object of a great deal of study in Tibet. Translations of the work are attributed to three authors. According to tradition, Maitreyanātha transmitted the MSA along with the four other texts to Asaṅga (ca. 320 to ca. 390 CE), who is considered the main founder of the Yogācāra (or *Vijñaptimātratā*) school of Indian Buddhist thought. However, there remains debate regarding the ontic status of Maitreyanātha. For example, was the transmission from an otherwise unknown living teacher, or was the transmission the result of a visionary experience following Asaṅga's visit to the future buddha's abode in the Tuṣita heaven? Or perhaps the transmission developed from a pious attribution? In addition to the text translated here and the other four of the "five Maitreya texts," several important works

¹ The following appendices are included as follows, in addition to a glossary and index: Appendix 1-Mipham's structural outline, Appendix 2-a tabular presentation of the five bodhisattva paths and the 37 elements leading to enlightenment, and Appendix 3-a tabular presentation of the three worlds and six realms.

and commentaries are attributed to him. This translation of the MSA is accompanied by a translation of an extensive and detailed commentary by Jamgön Mipham (1846–1912), one of the most famous and prolific of modern Nyingma and Rimé authors.²

This is a technical text, with several layers contributing to an understanding of its meaning. The volume provides little in the way of an introductory explanation for readers only basically familiar with Buddhist thought. The translation depends more on the layers of explanation provided by Jamgön Mipham's commentary, which constitutes the bulk of the volume. In addition to students of the dharma who are already proficient in Buddhist thought, the translation would be of use to academics. Yogācāra is sometimes simply glossed as "Buddhist psychology," and therefore interpreted in terms of the concepts, categories, and concerns of Western psychology and psychotherapy. This kind of colonial appropriation of Buddhist thought is, however, fundamentally misleading. Rather than selectively decontextualizing key concepts, an understanding of how the system of Buddhist thought is organized can be acquired by reading the entirety of this work, as well as the other titles in the Maitreya-Asaṅga corpus. This translation of Mipham's commentary on the MSA can be seen as part of a broader undertaking of making translations of traditional works readily available, a project that provides a scholarly basis that enriches both a dharmic and a philological orientation.

² For further biographical information, see Douglas S. Duckworth's "Mipam" in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.703>>, idem., "Mipam Gyatso," *The Treasury of Lives* <<https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Mipam-Gyatso/4228>>. Additionally, see the Shambhala Publications webpage <<https://www.shambhala.com/jamgon-mipham-rinpoche/>> for biographical and bibliographical information, as well as a short video of Douglas Duckworth discussing his biography of Mipham. See also Douglas Duckworth, *Jamgön Mipam: His Life and Teachings* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2011).

The text is organized into five unequal parts, and it is the progress of topics through these five that constitutes the author's discursive intent. The first step is to convince readers of the text that the Mahāyāna teachings are valid, that they are *buddhadharma* (Part One: Chapters 1 and 2). Next, the intent is to convince readers of the superiority of the Mahāyāna, so as to instill enthusiasm for it (Part Two: Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6). The authors explain the meaning of the key concepts as part of the intellectual grounding of the Mahāyāna (Part Three: chapters 7, 8 and 9). Then the result of practice, the goal of perfected full awakening, is described (Part Four: Chapter 10). And finally, the path of practice is described in full (Part Five: Chapters 11 through 21). Keeping this overall framework in mind is essential when deeply enmeshed in some sections of the commentary.

Though much has been written about reading religious texts, and much of that scholarly work is important and useful, the story that one of my teachers, Bishop Taisen Miyata, told me epitomizes a fundamental dichotomy in attitudes toward religious texts.³ When sensei was the minister at the Sacramento Shingon Temple, a woman came to him and said that she wanted to read one of the Shingon texts that are recited in Japanese as part of the liturgy, conventionally known as the *Rishukyō* (T. 220.10, 240, 241, 242, 243, 244; Skt. *Adhyardhaśatikā Prajñāparamitā*), which is a tantric Perfection of Wisdom text. They met one afternoon at his temple office and he began to go through an English translation of the text, trying to unpack its complex tantric symbolism for her. But after half an hour or so, she became very frustrated and angry. She had expected to be able to simply read a religious text and understand it. And here she was being confronted by an English translation, which, through no fault of the translator's, was quite opaque.

³ For a discussion related to the problematic character of the category, see Richard K. Payne's "Buddhism" in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Religion*, Susan M. Felch, ed., 169–185 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

Her attitude evidences the continuing influence of the Protestant Reformation's effort to take control of the Bible out of the hands of priests, and to give God's message to ordinary people. This was the motivation for translations of the Bible into the vernaculars of English and German. The Protestant argument was that, being God's word, the Bible is intended for all Christians, to be read and studied by ordinary people, without the interference of experts or the mediation of priests who would tell them what it means. This attitude was formalized by the Fundamentalists at the end of the nineteenth century, who added the claim that the Bible is the infallible, revealed word of God.

This is an important part of the background to the commonly held view of religious texts as largely moralistic allegories, and the treatment of "the great religious classics" as all on a par with one another. It would seem to have also contributed to the academic treatment of religions with texts as somehow more valid or more important than oral traditions. Even a brief review of textbooks of "world religions" will reveal that those so identified are traditions that are represented by or presumed to be based on texts, while oral traditions are treated as simply local, tribal, or otherwise insignificant. The development of religious studies as an academic project in the nineteenth century is rooted in efforts to prepare missionaries for spreading the Gospel, and these roots are evident in the way that some religions are considered important for students to know thoroughly, in contrast to those which are passed by in brief, if not in silence, and in the ways that "important" religions are represented.

Almost anyone who has dipped into any of the Perfection of Wisdom texts knows how difficult they are to read. The apparent self-contradictions of assertions that one thing both is and isn't seem to make a mockery of any rational discourse, as does the absence of narratives that can be easily converted to allegorical morality tales. And while Buddhist literature is not lacking in stories—consider the Jatakas, and the Lotus

Sūtra as simply two prominent examples of narrative literature—much of Buddhist literature is dense and technical in nature, embedded in unfamiliar cultures of discourse, and therefore require commentarial materials in order to be understood. As evidenced by the work under review here, this was apparently as true for Tibetans studying texts originally written in Sanskritic languages, as it is for students of the dharma in the present-day. The cultural practices implicit in the text are explained in the “Translator’s Introduction.” There it is explained that:

It should be remembered that in Tibet, commentaries like Mipham’s were traditionally intended to serve as lecture notes, which the khenpos and instructors at the monastic colleges relied on for their detailed oral explanations, nourished by their extensive training and knowledge of the Indian commentarial tradition, including Sthiramati’s work [i.e., the *Sūtrālaṃkāravṛttibhāṣya*] (p. xxiii).

In other words, Mipham’s commentary was used as a textual basis for oral teachings. This helps us to understand the often dry and technical nature of the commentary—it is, in other words, a reference work used by scholars for the training of future scholars.

In addition to *A Feast of the Nectar of the Supreme Vehicle*, there are five noteworthy modern translations and studies of the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*. It is informative to consider these works chronologically, as that reflects the development of Buddhist studies in Europe and the United States, which has not only been increasing, but also shifting to serve a wider audience. These are as follows:

1. Sylvain Levi's translation and study, *Mahāyāna-Sūtrālaṅkāra: Exposé de la Doctrine du Grand Véhicule, Selon le Système Yogācāra* (2 vols. Paris: Libraire Honoré Champion, 1907 & 1911).
2. S. Bagchi, *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra of Asaṅga*. Buddhist Sanskrit Texts, no. 13. (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute of Post-Graduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit Learning, 1970).⁴
3. Robert Thurman, et al., trans., *The Universal Vehicle Discourse Literature (Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra) by Maitreyaṅgā/Āryāsaṅga, Together with its Commentary (Bhāṣya) by Vasubandhu* (New York: American Institute of Buddhist Studies, Columbia University, 2004).⁵
4. Gadjin Nagao's *Daijō shōgon gyōron: wayaku to chūkai*. Japanese translation and commentary in 4 vols., I: 295 pp., II: 327 pp., III: 375 pp., IV: 204 pp. (Kyoto: Nagao Bunko, 2007, 2007, 2009, 2011).
5. The Dharmachakra Translation Committee, *Ornament of the Great Vehicle Sūtras: Maitreya's Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra, with Commentaries by Khenpo Shenga and Ju Mipham* (Boston & London: Snow Lion, 2014).

⁴ Gadjin Nagao notes that this is the same as Sylvain Levi's translation of the MSA that is "republished. . . without much improvement." See Gadjin Nagao, "The Bodhisattva's Compassion Described in the *Mahāyāna-sūtrālaṅkāra*," in *Wisdom, Compassion and the Search for Understanding: The Buddhist Studies Legacy of Gadjin M. Nagao*, ed. Jonathan A. Silk, 1-38 (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), n. 1.

⁵ For those whose research involves coordinating between the Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese versions of the text, Thurman provides a table of equivalents on p. xxxv. These texts are divided somewhat differently, which as noted below can prove confusing without guidance of the kind this table provides.

In light of these several works, we can at this point step back a moment from the common distinction between academic literature and “devotional” literature, by asking in what sense do these works constitute a coherent set? That question usefully problematizes the comfortable distinction between academic studies that focus on the text defined as a philological object, and the text defined as a conveyor of dharma. Is the distinction based on the intention of the author or the intention of the reader? Or is it in fact a baseless distinction? Here we will examine the Padmakara translation in comparison with the other English renderings, rather than attempting to critique it as a translation *per se*. This accords with the presumption we make about the publication, which is that, rather than intended primarily as a philological object, the translation is instead primarily intended for dharma use. We note, however, that dharma use does not mean that it is not a scholarly project, just a different kind of scholarly project.

In other words, the pairing of dharmic and philological orientations is specifically intended to obviate the common disjunction made between academics and practitioners, which itself repeats the contentious distinction between insiders and outsiders. Academics, cast as outsiders, sometimes claim to a superior knowledge because they do not hold a partisan position in relation to the tradition, that is, they do not feel impelled to protect the tradition or to present it in an unqualifiedly positive fashion. Conversely, practitioners, cast as insiders, also sometimes claim superior knowledge because of their personal experiences with and commitment to the tradition, that is, they “know” the tradition in ways that outsiders can’t. These oppositional pairings—insider vs. outsider, practitioner vs. academic—have become fruitlessly politicized. To engage in Buddhist practice, one needs a conceptual grasp of what one is doing and why. To study the textual record of Buddhism, one needs to have a conceptual grasp of what Buddhists think and do. These two are inherently complementary. As such the practitioner stance does not excuse one from

attending to the scholarly values of accuracy, reason, and clarity, nor does the academic stance excuse one from attending to the lived significance of the historical record.

We can get a sense of the style of the three English translations by comparing selections from them. For example in Chapter 14, “Practicing the Dharma,” verse 13 contains an expression that sounds almost self-contradictory in a way that is reminiscent of the Perfection of Wisdom literature, and of the tantric notion that defilements themselves are the means of liberation. Conveniently, the Padmakara version initially gives the text of the MSA separately from the commentary, while the others embed the MSA itself into the commentary. The verse is rendered in the Padmakara as follows:

Because they properly approach
Attachment and the like as suchness,
They will be completely free from them:
Thus they are delivered from them by means of them (62).

Here is the same verse from Thurman, et al. (Ch. XIII, since this version follows the chapter organization of the Sanskrit and French) as follows:

Thus, one properly engages with the passions and so forth,
and thereby becomes liberated from them; such is their
transcendence (170).

And the Dharmachakra version:

Because attachment and the like
Are themselves engaged correctly,
A complete liberation from them occurs—

And through that one definitively emerges from them (438).

Comparing the different translations of the same verse is one method of deepening our understanding of the meaning, a kind of triangulation back toward some shared conceptual significance. The accompanying commentaries in juxtaposition to one another also provides a deepening of our understanding.

Thurman, et al., gives the Vasubandhu commentary, which for this verse reads:

It is in properly engaging with passions and so on that one is liberated from them. Thus once their (reality) has been fully realized (as both frustrating and empty), they are transcended. This is the intended implication here (170).

The Dharmachakra version includes the commentary by Khenpo Shengpa (1871–1927) in the form of an annotation commentary (*T. mchan 'grel*) in which the words of the verse being commented on are replicated in the text of the commentary, indicated in this version by bold:

Because the intrinsic nature of **attachment and the like are themselves engaged correctly, a complete liberation from them occurs** (that is, from attachment and so forth), **and through** becoming familiar with **that**, meaning the intrinsic nature of attachment and so forth, **on definitively emerges from them** (439).

The Dharmachakra version then goes on to give the full section from Mipham's commentary, while the Padmakara version interweaves the verses with the commentary. While Mipham's commentary comprises

several paragraphs, for our purposes here we will only look at the opening section. Each commentary adds to our understanding, and in the case of the two versions of the Mipham commentary, a complementary reading of one in relation to the other helps us untangle the apparent conundrum that defilements are overcome by defilements. The Mipham commentary for this verse is rendered in the Dharmachakra as follows:

It may then be thought that if the afflictions themselves bring deliverance from affliction, then why aren't all sentient beings, who are already experiencing the afflictions, not also already liberated? . . . The bodhisattvas . . . understand that the real condition of afflictions such as desire is nothing other than the nature of the basic field of phenomena, and so they experience the afflictions accordingly. That is why they are freed from ordinary, afflictive attachment and the like, and it is indeed the case that deliverance from affliction is nothing other than the afflictions themselves (441).

Compare this then with the following Padmakara rendering:

Why, then, if certain deliverance from defilements is achieved by means of the defilements themselves, have all sentient beings who indulge in defilements not achieved certain deliverance? . . . Bodhisattvas . . . have realized the thatness of attachment and so forth, which is the nature of the expanse of reality, and they approach them properly, so they will be completely freed from ordinary, independently existing defilements. This is why they achieve certain deliverance from defilements by means of the defilements (482).

Each of the three English translations has its own contribution to make towards understanding this important work. Philologically oriented scholars may use a translation such as the Padmakara to think back toward the text in the source language that is of interest to them, whether Sanskrit, Chinese, or Tibetan. Those interested in the dharmic significance will find their understanding of the teachings of Maitreyañātha, Asaṅga, and Mipham enriched by taking into consideration the different ways that translators have rendered this work into English. Most contemporary adherents of Buddhism, whether lay or professional, will probably be familiar with some version of the teaching that anything that exists only exists as the result of causes and conditions. Whatever we encounter is constructed and our experiences in the social or interpersonal realms are conventional. Consequently, from the perspective of either dharmically or philologically motivated scholarship, there can be no single definitive translation of key Buddhist texts. For instance, the connotations of words in English drift and change over time and the context. It is, therefore, a benefit to us that scholars have produced alternative translations of this key work.

At the same time, works such as the MSA are technically dense and they were written as mnemonic tools and not as expositions. The only way to engage meaningfully with these tools, therefore, is with the aid of commentaries. However, the commentaries are themselves constructed in a particular context. Vasubandhu's commentary has the benefit of being close, both temporally and intellectually to the work by his half-brother Asaṅga. Shengpa and Mipham, on the other hand, have the benefit of the interpretive perspectives accumulated over the intervening centuries. To move beyond the misleadingly facile equations of Buddhist thought with Western philosophy, psychology, or theology, requires the collective effort of translators such as the Padmakara Group, and readers willing to commit themselves to a deep engagement with these valuable texts.

Notes on the Contributor

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