

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<https://thecjbs.org/>

Number 19, 2024

# The Language of the Sūtras: Essays in Honor of Luis Gómez

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NATALIE GUMMER, ed., *The Language of the Sūtras: Essays in Honor of Luis Gómez*. Berkeley: Mangalam Press, 2021. 408 pp. CAN \$47.78 (pb). ISBN 9781732220904.

This collection of invigorating essays, to have been co-edited by Natalie Gummer and Luis Gómez, derives from a conference on “The Language of the Sūtras” held in Berkeley shortly before Gómez’s death in 2017. The eight essays included both respond to Gómez’s own preoccupations and practices in the reading of Buddhist *sūtra* literature and push into critical territories of their own. As both a thoughtful memorial to one of the most innovative readers in recent Buddhist Studies and a sampling of fresh, stimulating critical approaches, *The Language of the Sūtras* deserves the attention of readers interested in Buddhist texts and the worlds of meaning, practice, and power that their reading helps create.

Indeed, what happens in the reading of *sūtras* is one of the unifying themes of the volume. In his foreword, Charles Hallisey reflects on the depth and diversity of Gómez’s reading practices, which he suggests were consistently enriched by a self-conscious emphasis on reading itself, and what texts—through reading—can be said to *do*. By resisting the reduction of the “literal” text to the ways it has been made to mean in dominant interpretive cultures, Gómez’s more receptive approach to the fine-grain features of the *sūtras* stands out against the doctrine-centric reading practices of many 20<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist scholars by questioning not *what* Buddhist texts mean but *how they might come to mean*; how they so persistently, across time and space, engage readers in generative, diverse acts of reading.

In her vivid, incisive introduction, Gummer articulates this point in terms of the *sūtras*’ agency; how these texts, far from being passive

vehicles of doctrine, have demanded the “active patience” of readers, engaging them in transformative “textual practices... not easily disentangled from material, visual, ritual, imaginative, and affective elements of experience” (7). As she elaborates, the language of the *sūtras* is active most importantly in the collaborative relationships it creates between text and reader. Hallisey and Gummer’s remarks suggest the overall critical flavour of the eight collected essays, each of which are *readings* in the Gómezian sense: ultimately, readings about reading. Sensitive to the “literal” features of the *sūtras* in question, each author lingers with the question of how their texts ask to be engaged.

In the first essay, Bruno Galasek-Hull gives a narratological analysis of the Pāli *Āṅgulimāla-sutta*, arguing that the enduring appeal of this text derives at least in part from its use—striking in premodern literature—of focalization: that is, its presentation of the narrative’s events through the prism of the protagonist’s inner monologue. This device minimizes the distance between narrator and audience, inviting the reader or hearer to participate sympathetically in the “mimetic illusion” of *Āṅgulimāla*’s conversion.

David Fiordalis’ essay investigates depictions of the Buddha’s smile across a wide range of *sūtras*, showing how the language of bodily gesture confronts the reader with a visceral yet ambiguous symbolism that projects sovereign power while withholding any exclusive, literal meaning. Fiordalis’ emphasis on visual and bodily description suggests intriguing questions about the enmeshment of the language of the *sūtras* with ritual embodiments and visual media.

Xi He’s essay turns to the *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra*, whose famed wealth of sensual description bears emotional dimensions He argues have been neglected. As she demonstrates, referring to Umberto Eco’s theory of the Model Reader, the sensual language of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* aims to implicate its audience in affective experiences that mirror those of its protagonist,

Sudhana, which she argues are crucial to the text's vision of spiritual transformation. He's lucid reflections on the value of pleasure in reading Buddhist texts—and traversing the Buddhist path—are particularly suggestive of further research.

While He celebrates the literary strategies of the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, Alan Cole's essay turns to the opening chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* to expose the caprice of what he argues is a single author angling to ensnare and overpower the reader in service of a somewhat antagonistic Mahāyāna movement. Readers of Cole's book *Text as Father* will be familiar with this view, which is perhaps most valuable here for offering a more suspicious, "devil's advocate" view of Buddhist language as an agent of ideological distortion.

Eviatar Shulman's essay considers the composition of *suttas* from a different angle, as a deeply communal process involving the progressive creation of the *suttas*' imaginal world and the Buddha's presence through repeated verbal formulae. Whereas such formulae are commonly seen as merely instrumental or authorizing, Shulman lingers with their more "literary" potentials, as agents of creation in both the Buddha's verbal personality and an endlessly permutable story-world.

In the book's one sustained consideration of *sūtra*-adjacent texts, Shenghai Li looks to *śāstras* and commentaries to investigate the reading practices of historical scholastic communities. Specifically following Candrakīrti's commentary on the *Samādhirāja-sūtra*, Li demonstrates Candrakīrti's interest in the *sūtra*'s poetic features, interpreting them via Madhyamaka theories of language. Remarkably, the power of this language for Candrakīrti evidences not authorial intent, *per* a modern view, but precisely the absence of discursive thought.

With Richard Nance's essay we return to the *Āṅgulimāla-sutta* for a sustained reflection on the difficulties and potential ambivalences of

interpreting the language of the *sūtras*. Proceeding from an episode in the text where the Buddha seems to change his mind, or doubt his wording, Nance demonstrates the extreme range—historical and potential—of the interpretive act, which he insists we confront in every encounter with *buddhavacana*.

Gummer's own essay concludes the volume with a compelling exploration of the temporal imagination as exercised in the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Suvarṇa(pra)bhāsottama-sūtra*. Proceeding from the *sūtras*' understanding of their own language as transformative of worlds and persons, Gummer demonstrates how their temporal frameworks—so different from our own historiographical imaginations—might shift their audiences' experiences and expectations of time itself, with potential consequences even for the ways we perform historiography and other forms of narration in the present.

Each of these essays warrants more detailed discussion than my space here allows. Suffice it to say that a shared strength of their authors—consistent with Hallisey's remarks on Gómez himself—is their ability to think and theorize from within the “imaginal worlds” of each of their source texts, yet often in ways exceed their particular historical frames and come to bear on our thinking in the present. Gummer's essay is exemplary in this regard. Taken altogether, they represent a broader statement, staking out an expansive yet coherent, compelling perspective on the agency of Buddhist language, not merely as communicative or prescriptive, but as constitutive of rich, potentially transformative acts of reading with affective, cognitive, practical, and ideological dimensions, in both their traditional contexts and beyond.

As such, *The Language of the Sūtras* contributes momentum and depth to a burgeoning wave of scholarship on the literary dimensions of Buddhist texts. Along with the work of Gómez and previous publications of the included authors, a string of book-length works and shorter

publications anticipate the notion that Buddhist texts seek to engage their audiences in acts of reading generative of more than mere doctrine.<sup>1</sup> Yet while many of these focus on historically and regionally specific reading cultures, *The Language of the Sūtras* takes a more comprehensive and theoretical view, exceeding local frames and suggesting the open, multivalent possibilities of what *reading* can achieve across the Buddhist milieu. Indeed, much of the pleasure in crossing the expanse of *The Language of the Sūtras* is in being reminded of the richness and variety of what can happen—what *has* happened, throughout Buddhist history—between text and reader.

As suggested by its title, *The Language of the Sūtras* does limit its focus largely to the *sūtras* themselves, and while many of the works it discusses have had illustrious careers beyond South Asia, its authors stay close to the “original” Indic contexts and languages. Moreover, apart from Li’s piece, the essays here do not explore the reading and writing cultures historically enmeshed with the *sūtras* (i.e. hermeneutical traditions, parasūtraic narratives, and so on). These parameters lead one to wonder what more might be said about the language of the *sūtras* if questions of their translation, ritualizations, apocrypha, and so on were more present. For instance, how might an acknowledgement of the *sūtras*’ linguistic agency affect scholarly approaches to these works’ translations, or to *sūtras* composed beyond South Asia? Is agency translatable? Finally, with essays such as Cole’s and Shulman’s approaching the thorny issue of the *sūtras*’ authorship head-on (and distinctly), and Li’s demonstration of quite different, traditional conceptions of authorship, *The Language of the Sūtras* opens onto the complex question of the

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Andy Rotman, *Thus Have I Seen: Visualizing Faith in Early Indian Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Charlotte Eubanks, *Miracles of Book and Body: Buddhist Textual Culture and Medieval Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Kristin Scheible, *Reading the Mahāvamsa: The Literary Aims of a Theravāda Buddhist History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

relationship—necessary?—between authorial intention and textual agency.

I take these potential lines of questioning as evidence not of any weakness of *The Language of the Sūtras* but as some of the many ways it encourages new, equally thoughtful work in the study of Buddhist literature—in other words, as a remarkable asset for continuing scholarship. What strikes me as most exciting about the book's provocations is how consistently they emerge *less* from any literary theory applied from without than from the authors' intimacy with the *sūtras* themselves; in other words, how they suggest themes and questions perhaps proper to a still-emerging Buddhist literary studies.

#### Notes on the Contributor(s)

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