

BOOK REVIEWS

EXISTENCE AND ENLIGHTENMENT IN THE LANKĀVA-TĀRA-SŪTRA: A Study in the Ontology and Epistemology of the Yogācāra School of Mahāyāna Buddhism. By Florin Giripescu Sutton. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991. xix + 371 pp., with a bibliography and index. ISBN 0-7914-0172-3.

The *Lankāvatāra-sūtra*, a Mahāyāna text important for the study of Yogācāra and Ch'an and Zen Buddhism, has been accessible to Western readers since D. T. Suzuki published his *Studies in the Lankavatara Sutra* (1930) and his translation of the Sanskrit text (1932). However, comparatively little has been published, at least in Western languages,¹ since that time, probably due to the fact that it is a tremendously difficult text to tackle. First of all, as Sutton points out, there are three extant Chinese translations (a fourth is lost), which are quite different from one another, and, of course, even the latest Chinese translation of the *Lankāvatāra* is earlier than the Nepalese manuscripts from which the Sanskrit text has been established. Furthermore, as everyone who has worked with the text has complained, the *Lankāvatāra-sūtra* is disorganized in structure; particularly problematic are the relationships between the verse and prose portions of the main body of the *sūtra*, and between the main body and the tenth chapter (*Sagāthakam*), which consists only of verses. Finally, the *sūtra* contains many important philosophical concepts, but in a very unsystematic form. To deal with these satisfactorily, one would have to establish the history of each concept both up to and after its treatment in the text. Sutton's project then, to produce what is probably the first book-length study of the *Lankāvatāra-sūtra* in a Western language since Suzuki's *Studies*, is very ambitious, and it is not surprising that the results are not completely successful. Before I express my reservations, I shall attempt to summarize his work.

In his study, Sutton examines a number of topics found in the *sūtra*, and he organizes his book by dividing these topics into two sections. The first section concerns ontology and consists of chapters on *tathāgatagarbha*, the nature of the five *skandhas*, and *dharmadhātu*, which are characterized, respectively, as the Essence of Being, the Temporal Manifestation of Being, and the Spatial or Cosmic Dimension of Being. In the first chapter, Sutton discusses three aspects of the theory of *tathāgatagarbha*, namely: as "Essence-of-Buddhahood," which he relates to Hindu concepts of *ātman*, but which he main-

¹ For an extensive bibliography of mostly Japanese works, as well as of texts, translations, and commentaries, see Takasaki Jikidō, *Ryōgakyō* (Tokyo: Daitō Shuppan, 1980), pp. 410–419.

tains is an *upāya* for teaching those who are not ready to understand *dharmanairātmya*; as “Embryo,” i.e., the potential for Buddhahood in all beings; and as “Womb,” which the *Lankāvatāra-sūtra* identifies with *ālayavijñāna* (the *sūtra*’s original contribution to *tathāgatagarbha* theory, as Sutton, following Takasaki, points out). In the second chapter, the author compares the view of the five *skandhas* in the *Lankāvatāra-sūtra* with those found in the Pāli canon, in *abhidharma* texts (particularly *Abhidharmakośa*), and in Mādhyamika literature, and he concludes that the *abhidharma* philosophers, along with Yogācāra thinkers such as Vasubandhu and Asaṅga, misunderstand the Buddha when they identify the *skandhas* with *anātman*, while the *Lankāvatāra-sūtra*, like the Mādhyamikas, correctly understands the Buddha’s Middle Way.

In the last chapter of the first section, Sutton discusses the relationship between *dharmadhātu* and a group of important concepts, including *dharmatā*, *tathatā*, and *sūnyatā*. He identifies one aspect of *dharmadhātu* as the “Cosmic Law,” which governs “the fundamental structure of the universe,” and stresses that the *sūtra*’s interpretation shows that it does not completely deny the reality of the external world. Finally, he relates the three aspects of being that he has discussed so far to the classical Yogācāra *trisvabhāva* theory found in the *Madhyāntavibhāga* and concludes that *tathāgatagarbha* corresponds to the “always non-existing” (*asac ca nityam*) nature of being, the five *skandhas* to the “though existing, yet not from the absolute point of view” (*sac cāpy atattvatah*) nature, and *dharmadhātu* to the “from the absolute point of view, existing and yet non-existing” (*sadasattattvatah [sic] ca*) nature.² I find it rather surprising that Sutton singles out *tathāgatagarbha* as *parikalpitasvabhāva*, even if it, as “specifically stated in the *Sūtra*, is only a provisional concept and a teaching device, to be abandoned once the true meaning of Anātman has been obtained” (p. 130). Sutton throughout is concerned to show that the *Lankāvatāra-sūtra* is not guilty of positing an *ātman* in the form of *tathāgatagarbha*, but I would suspect that the characterization of *tathāgatagarbha* as “always non-existing,” which is the Yogācāra equiva-

² Sutton’s reference here is confusing and misleading. In his text, he reproduces in full verse 3.3 of the *Madhyāntavibhāga*, but he does not translate it. Instead, he quotes a (rather awkward, I think) translation by Yamada Isshi of the corresponding portion of the *Bhāṣya*, but in his footnote (p. 340, n. 28) he refers to “the quote from the *Madhyāntavibhāga-bhāṣya*, 3, k.3 (R. C. Pandeya’s ed., p. 38) and its translation.” In fact, the passage quoted is from the *kārikās*, while the translation is from the *Bhāṣya*, and the page number in Pandeya’s edition is not 38, but 84. The *Bhāṣya*, incidentally, uses the familiar terms *parikalpita-*, *paratantra-*, and *pariniṣpannasvabhāva* to describe the three natures.

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lent of "absolutely false," is, although possible, not typical. Sutton's argument would be more convincing if he provided an explicit reference concerning this point.

The second section of Sutton's book concerns Yogācāra epistemology. The first chapter of this section is devoted mainly to Buddhist dialectics, especially in the form of the tetralemma (*catuskoti*), and Sutton illustrates the way in which the *sūtra* encourages the elimination of dualistic thinking about topics such as existence, Buddhahood, and nirvana. In the second chapter, Sutton takes up the doctrine of mind-only (*cittamātra*) and identifies three meanings of *citta*: the "empirical mind," consisting of the *caittadharmas*; the "transformed Mind," i.e., the purified *ālayavijñāna*; and the "universal Mind, that is, the mind projected upon the world at large (*tribhava, traidhātuka*), when perceived to be the substitution for the triple world" (p. 171). At the conclusion of this chapter, Sutton states, "The main thesis of this book is that the 'Mind-only,' or 'Nothing but the Mind' formula, should be regarded as a disparaging comment applicable to all absolutistic claims of explaining the ultimate Reality through conceptual language and not as a definitive affirmation of a one-sided and dogmatic monistic idealism à la Bishop Berkeley, as Suzuki and others erroneously believed" (pp. 203–204). His point throughout the chapter, if I understand him correctly, is that the famous statement from the *Daśabhūmika-sūtra*, "This whole world consisting of the three spheres is nothing but mind,"³ and similar formulations throughout, at least, the earlier Yogācāra literature are epistemological rather than ontological: although they deny that the external world can be accurately cognized, they do not take a position regarding its existence or non-existence. Thus, Sutton follows what Lambert Schmithausen has described as "the mainly American fashion of altogether denying idealism (in the sense that objects, including material objects, are considered to be mere mental representations and—explicitly or implicitly—denied to exist outside mind)."⁴

The third chapter is about the nature and attainment of *āryajñāna*, which Sutton translates as "transcendental wisdom" or "gnosis," and which he equates with "No-mind" (*acintya*), a state of "pure awareness." In the fourth chapter, Sutton, generally following Suzuki, briefly describes the Yogācāra system of eight *vijñānas*. He discusses the difference between *vijñāna* and *jñāna* ("empirical cognition" and "trans-empirical cognition") and between *khyātivijñāna* and *vastuprativikalpavijñāna* ("perceptual knowledge" and

³ Schmithausen's translation of *cittamātram idaṃ yad idaṃ traidhātukaṃ* (Kondō's edition, p. 98) as quoted on page 189.

⁴ Schmithausen, *Ālayavijñāna* (Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 1987), pp. 298–299.

“object-discriminating knowledge”), and he very briefly explains the *parāvṛtti* (“inner revolution”) of the *ālayavijñāna* as understood by the *Lankāvatāra-sūtra*. In his last chapter, on causation, Sutton seems primarily concerned with showing that the Yogācāra understanding of causality, at least as found in the *sūtra*, is essentially similar to that of Nāgārjuna⁵ and that it does not reflect the “absolutely idealistic monism” described by Suzuki.

As this summary suggests, Sutton frequently uses the *Lankāvatāra-sūtra* as the basis for his explication of various points of Yogācāra philosophy. In doing so he follows the lead of Suzuki, who in the second half of *Studies* introduced what he considered to be the most important Yogācāra doctrines to a Western audience that was largely unfamiliar with the texts and thought of the school. However, more than sixty years have passed since the publication of *Studies*. Sutton’s remarkable statement that he knows of “only three book-size studies of this school, and a handful of scholarly articles” (p. xv) to the contrary, a considerable amount of information about Yogācāra is available today; therefore, one can expect more sophisticated studies than in Suzuki’s time. It seems to me that a mainstream Yogācāra *śāstra*, such as the *Triṃśikā* with its *Bhāṣya*, would be a more logical basis than *Lankāvatāra-sūtra* for “a study in the Ontology and Epistemology of the Yogācāra School of Mahāyāna Buddhism” (the subtitle of Sutton’s book). As Takasaki has pointed out, “the *Lankāvatāra* was in no way the first organiser of these [i.e., the major Yogācāra] doctrines, nor was it composed by the orthodox Vijñānavādin or Yogācāra teachers.”⁶ This is not to say that Sutton, who refers to Takasaki’s article, is unaware of the doctrinal differences between the *Lankāvatāra-sūtra* and other Yogācāra texts, but he frequently seems to be unsure of whether to focus on the peculiarities of the *sūtra*, of which detailed studies would be very valuable, or to try to derive systematic Yogācāra doctrine from this strikingly

⁵ Apropos the relationship between Mādhyamika and Yogācāra interpretations of causation, the *Abhidharmasamuccayabhāṣya* quotes a *catuṣkoti* in its explanation of the profundity of *prāpti*: “Indeed it is also [said]: Because it has its own seed, [a *dharma* is not [produced] by another;/ Because of its dependence on those [conditions, it is] not [produced] by itself./ Because of the motionlessness [of itself and another, it is] not produced by the two./ And because of the efficacy of those [seeds and conditions, it is] not [produced] without cause” (*svabijātvaṅ na parataḥ na svayaṃ tad apekṣanāt/ niśceṣtatvaṅ na ca dvābhyāṃ tacchakter nāpy ahetutaḥ—ASBh:34*). I have been unable to find the source of this passage, and I wonder whether the author of *ASBh* didn’t compose it himself.

⁶ Takasaki, “Sources of the *Lankāvatāra* and its Position in Mahāyāna Buddhism,” in *Indological and Buddhist Studies: Volume in Honour of Professor J. W. de Jong on his Sixtieth Birthday*, edited by L. A. Hercus et al. (Canberra: Faculty of Asian Studies, 1982), pp. 545–568:560.

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unsystematic text.

A large proportion of Sutton's work consists of translations of the many passages upon which he comments,⁷ and I have two criticisms related to the translations. It is true that Suzuki's translation is outdated, and Sutton's translation, on at least one occasion (p. 120), restores an important sentence that Suzuki seems to have omitted accidentally.⁸ However, Sutton's is a philosophical study, and it is rather distracting to wade through line after line of translation from *sūtra*, which tends to be wordy and repetitive, in order to extract an important idea. The book would be more readable if it contained fewer translations of passages and more succinct paraphrases or summaries. Of course, a new English translation of the entire *sūtra* with textual notes would be a major and welcome contribution upon which future studies could be based.

Another problem with Sutton's translations is his uncritical approach to his text. If one intends to study the *Lankāvatāra-sūtra*, one must first decide which version to use and to what extent to refer to other versions. For example, Suzuki translates from the Sanskrit, but he tells us that he follows the T'ang dynasty Chinese translation by Śikṣānanda, sometimes referred to as the seven-*chūan* version (T. 672) when he has difficulties,⁹ while Takasaki Jikido partially translates from and explains the Sung translation by Gunabhadra, known as the four-*chūan* version (T. 670).¹⁰

Sutton, who apparently does not know Chinese (p. 11), has decided to follow Suzuki in using the Sanskrit. He claims that in Nanjio's text "all possible variants and corrections were carefully incorporated either into the text itself, or into the numerous footnotes" (p. 23), and he seems to feel that this absolves him of the responsibility of consulting other versions himself. His

⁷ In an appendix, Sutton thoughtfully provides the Sanskrit text for all passages that he translates, for which he is to be commended. It would be much more convenient if the text were placed either directly before or directly following the translation, but this is probably too much to ask of an editor who has to deal with the realities of book production and marketing for a predominantly non-Sanskrit-reading audience.

⁸ "Now, on account of this, Mahāmati, I teach the one-pointed concentration" (*atha etasmān mahāmate ekayānaṃ deśayāmi*—Nanjio:140). I assume that Suzuki's omission is unintentional since he usually informs us when he emends the text and because all of the Chinese versions contain this sentence. The passage from which the sentence is dropped can be found on p. 122 of Suzuki's translation. Incidentally, Sutton does not remark on Suzuki's omission, which he should have.

⁹ Suzuki, *The Lankavatara Sutra: A Mahayana Text* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1932), pp. xviii-xlix. Yasui Kōsai has translated the Sanskrit text into Japanese (*Bonbun Wayaku Nyūryōgakyō*, Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1976).

¹⁰ Takasaki, *Ryōgakyō* (Tokyo: Daitō Shuppan, 1980).

faith in the infallibility of Nanjio's text is, however, unjustified, and his exclusive reliance on the Sanskrit text results at least once in a translation that disagrees significantly with, and is obviously worse than, Suzuki's. In a discussion of dependent origination, the Sanskrit text reads as follows: *sad asato hi bhagavaṃs ũrthakarā apy utpattim varṇayanti bhūtvā ca vināśaṃ pratyayair bhāvānāṃ* (II:103). Sutton translates this as it stands: "On account of (the duality of) Being and non-Being, O Blessed One, the philosophers also explain the rising of (all) things through causal factors, and having come [into existence through causation], they also disappear (by causation)" (p. 269). Thus, according to Sutton's translation, this whole sentence describes a non-Buddhist theory of causation.

The Chinese translations, on the other hand, read very differently: [Sung] 世尊道亦說有無有生。世尊亦說無有生已滅 (T. 670:493a); [Wei] 世尊。外道亦說從於有無而生諸法。世尊說言。諸法本無依因緣生生已還滅 (T. 671:524a); [T'ang] 世尊。外道亦說以作者故從無生有。世尊亦說以因緣故一切諸法本無而生生已歸滅 (T. 672:602c-603a). Suzuki suggests that there is an omission in the Sanskrit and translates "according to the Chinese translations": "Blessed One, the philosophers explain birth from being and non-being, while according to the Blessed One, all things coming into existence from nothingness pass away by causation" (Suzuki 1932:90). According to Suzuki, then, the sentence juxtaposes non-Buddhist and Buddhist theories.

In this case, the Sanskrit text does not make sense. Sutton is forced to supply many words in his attempt to translate it, an attempt that results in a sentence with peculiar English syntax. Suzuki is undoubtedly correct in his surmise that a portion of the Sanskrit is missing and that the Chinese translations provide a better reading. His translation makes sense, but he does not indicate which Chinese version he used.¹¹ Takasaki, translating from the Sung version but referring to the Sanskrit and to the Tibetan translation, also maintains that there is a *lacuna* in the Sanskrit. He furthermore identifies the missing portion as corresponding to the portion in the Sung version that reads, "The Blessed One also says that things come into existence from nothingness" (世尊亦說。無有生), and he shows that the phrase *pratyayair bhāvānāṃ* is not reflected in the Sung translation. Finally, he quotes from the Tibetan, which

¹¹ Although, as I have mentioned, he states that he relies on the T'ang translation when he has trouble with the Sanskrit, Suzuki appears to have translated this passage on the basis of the Wei translation. The T'ang translation contains the phrase 以作者故, which is not found in the other versions or in Suzuki's translation. 作者 is a translation of the Sanskrit *kartr* (creator), and I think that this phrase was inserted by Śikṣānanda in order to explain the non-Buddhist theory: they believe in "production from being" because they accept a creator (e.g., Īśvara) that exists permanently.

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probably provides the most accurate version of the Buddha's understanding of dependent origination as expounded in the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra*: "The Blessed One says, moreover, that all existing things are produced from nothingness due to the various conditions, and having been produced, are once more destroyed."¹² In Takasaki's translation and annotations we can see most clearly the intended distinction between the Buddha's system of causality and those of the heretical schools, while the meaning of the passage is completely lost in Sutton's translation.

I have gone on at such length to show once again the danger of relying exclusively on Sanskrit texts. Even though, as he says early in the book, he does not intend to supersede Suzuki's translation, Sutton has provided translations of large portions of the text. Since his purpose is to investigate the Yogācāra ideas "as presented in one of the earliest and most influential texts, the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra*" (p. 1), his translations should reflect some attempt to establish an accurate text, particularly in cases such as this. Even if he is unable to read Chinese or to consult Takasaki's excellent work, he should at least acknowledge and take into account Suzuki's textual footnotes.

I have already mentioned Sutton's statement regarding the supposed dearth of materials on the Yogācāra school. At the very least, he should have specified "in languages other than Japanese." Even if one doesn't read Japanese, one can get some idea of the wealth of scholarly studies on Yogācāra topics by looking at Nakamura Hajime's *Indian Buddhism* (through the 1970s)¹³ and at the list of works cited in Schmithausen's *Ālayavijñāna*; together, these invaluable sources of bibliographical information contain hundreds of works. One might argue that much of the Japanese scholarship on Yogācāra consists of very detailed studies of specific points of doctrine based on small passages of text. However, as Schmithausen has shown so convincingly, there is no single, unified Yogācāra philosophy, and it is only with the help of this kind of detailed study that we can identify those ideas that are common to a group of texts and those that are unique to a particular text.¹⁴ As for the secondary literature specifically concerning the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra*, I have cited above the bibliography in Takasaki's *Ryōgakyō*.

Finally, however, Sutton is to be commended for trying to make sense of this very difficult *sūtra*. In each of his chapters, he attempts to explain the

¹² *bcom ldan 'das kyis kyañ dños po rnam ma mchis pa las rkyen rnam 'byuñ ba dan/ byuñ nas kyañ 'jig par gsuns te* (Peking *Bka' 'gyur*, volume *ñu:ff.* 106a8-106b1; Takasaki 1980:343)

¹³ Nakamura 1987:253-284.

¹⁴ Sutton does not include *Ālayavijñāna* in his bibliography so I assume that it was not yet available when he wrote his book.

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meaning of an important concept, not merely what the text says about it. His insistence throughout the book that the purpose of the *Lankāvatāra-sūtra* is practical rather than speculative is undoubtedly well founded, as is his suggestion that the Yogācāra and Mādhyamika schools agree on more fundamental points than has usually been recognized. I hope that his work provokes a renewed interest among Western scholars in this important text.

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