

## THE EASTERN BUDDHIST

In the preface to this book, the editors draw the attention of Buddhist studies majors in the United States to the significance of Buddhist textual studies. To my mind, this presents a curious contrast to the situation of Buddhist scholars in Japan, where people are often heard to complain that an abundance of text-critical philological studies on Buddhist literature may not always be conducive to the genuine understanding of the Buddhist teachings.

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*ONCE UPON A FUTURE TIME: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline.* By Jan Nattier. Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1991. ISBN 0-89581-926-0

In East Asian Buddhism the topic of the demise of the Buddha's Dharma looms large in terms of sectarian development, historiography, soteriological innovation, literary achievement, and more. The importance of this topic has naturally resulted in a number of studies. To date, however, virtually all of these studies have been colored by that same East Asian perspective—so asserts Jan Nattier in an important new work which, by examining the same sources from a primarily philological point of view, challenges much of the received wisdom on this topic.

Her book is divided fairly evenly into two sections, the first dealing with the many strands generally treated under the rubric "decline of the Dharma," and a second that takes a detailed look at the Kauśāmbī story, a narrative of the invasion of India by non-Buddhist forces and subsequent dissension within the Buddhist sangha that leads to the ultimate demise of the religion. After a brief introduction, Nattier outlines the "Frameworks of Buddhist Historical Thought" in order to demonstrate that, while containing neither a sense of centrally decisive historical events (as in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions) nor a teleological orientation, still, for Buddhists, the "question of history . . . has been of central, not peripheral, importance" (p. 9). As is the case throughout this book, Nattier's philological acumen is demonstrated as she ranges through Pali, Sanskrit, Tibetan, Uighur, and Mongolian texts to illustrate what she calls the "cosmological" and "Buddhological" frameworks of Buddhist history (see also her work on Maitreya, "The Meanings of the Maitreya Myth: A Typological Analysis" in Alan Sponberg and Helen Hard-

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acre, eds., *Maitreya, the Future Buddha*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). She concludes that for the Buddhist tradition “we are now in the lower reaches of a decline cycle, which must be complete before the upward cycle can begin. In the future we can look forward to the appearance of Maitreya. . . . In the meantime, however, what awaits us is an extended period of decline” (p. 26).

Having established this general framework, Nattier moves on in the next chapter to consider the many different timetables that have been offered to describe this decline. This is, of course, well-traveled ground, and few of the timetables presented here are new to the interested reader. What is new and impressive is the thoroughness with which each text is presented. Leading us through the bewildering variety of timetables, virtually every possible source is consulted, in each of the several languages in which it has been preserved, usually accompanied by text-critical comments which help date the tradition as well as sort out the many ways in which they have been understood. For example, she shows that Conze’s translation of the phrase *paścimāyāṃ pañcaśatyāṃ* in the *Diamond Sutra* as “the last five hundred years” derives from his reading of Lamotte’s description of the Chinese *Candragarbha-sūtra*, a text very influential in Chinese and Japanese *mo-fa* thought, yet likely composed much later than the *Diamond Sutra* and describing five five-hundred-year periods rather than the simple “latter five hundred years” found here. Similarly, Kern’s rendition of the same phrase in his translation of the *Lotus Sutra* as “the second half of the millennium” relies on the Vinaya tradition of the shortening of the period of the *saddharma* because of the Buddha’s decision to admit nuns to the renunciant order, in spite of the fact that this tradition refers only to the 500 years of the *saddharma*’s duration and nowhere discusses the period which will follow. Her book is filled with this sort of careful and detailed delimiting of what a text actually says, in all-too-often contrast to the way it has been read through the prism of later traditions. The conclusions Dr. Nattier draws from this analysis is that the tradition which predicts a five-hundred-year duration for the True Dharma is oldest, and when those five hundred years had actually elapsed, the need to refigure the chronology resulted in timetables of 1,000 years, and, similarly, after 1,000 years had actually elapsed—“around the late 5th or early 6th century . . . the loss of even a minimal consensus on the duration of the Dharma took place” (p. 63), leading to the surfeit of dating schemes found throughout the tradition. One other important finding is that the figure of 10,000 years, so dominant in East Asian chronologies, is not found in a single text of Indian provenance (pp. 61–62).

In Chapter Four, Nattier takes up what will be, for many, the most challenging topic in the book, i.e., the “East Asian Tripartite System” of the True

Dharma (*cheng-fa*), Semblance Dharma (*hsiang-fa*), and Final Dharma (*mo-fa*). After noting that none of the profusion of texts dealt with in the preceding chapter (which give actual timetables) refers to the concept of *mo-fa*, she contends that not only did the term *saddharma* not originally include any sense of decline, but the term *saddharma-pratirūpaka* (*hsiang-fa*, usually rendered as Counterfeit Dharma) most often (and originally) referred not to a second period nor to a period viewed as the false representation of the True Dharma. Rather she finds that, in India, *saddharma-pratirūpaka* was most likely of Mahāyāna origin (pp. 69–70), relatively late in appearance (ca. 1st century BCE), short-lived, i.e., popular from the 1st to 6th centuries but “disappearing almost entirely from the Buddhist conceptual repertoire by the latter part of the first millennium CE” (p. 72), and originally referred not to a second period in the history of the Dharma but, as with *pāścimāyām pañcaśatyām*, simply to the period after the historical Buddha’s death, “namely, the period of time during which the True Dharma will survive” and that it is not “contrasted with a separate period of *saddharma*; rather, it is an indication of its very presence” (p. 78). She also argues that the use of *saddharma-pratirūpaka* to refer to a distinctly separate period of the Dharma following the *saddharma* is limited to a small number of Mahāyāna sutras, and, of these, even fewer attribute such a periodization to the Dharma of the historical Buddha (e.g., neither the Pure Land texts nor the *Lotus Sutra* contain such a scheme). And even here we still do not find a negative valuation of *saddharma-pratirūpaka*: “Rather, it refers to the real and ongoing presence of the *saddharma*, whether it is used to refer to part or all of the period when this will be the case” (p. 86). Where, then, does the consistent translation/evaluation of *saddharma-pratirūpaka* as “counterfeit” come from? From “the sole occurrence of this term in the Theravāda tradition” (p. 87, referring to the well-known passage in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya*, ii, 224). Thus, excepting this passage, she concludes that “semblance of the True Dharma” or “reflection of the True Dharma” is the preferred translation of *saddharma-pratirūpaka* and *hsiang-fa*, as they “convey both the literal meaning of the term and the sense that the *saddharma-pratirūpaka* is indeed in conformity with the genuine teachings of the Buddha” (p. 89). Although her evidence clearly supports this conclusion, I wonder if she doesn’t underestimate the weight of the “counterfeit” tradition found in the Pali *Nikāya*, Chinese *Āgama* (T 99, 2.226b–c and T 100, 2.419b–c), the Sarvāstivāda Vinaya literature (the *Vinaya in Ten Parts*, T 1435, 23.385c, translated in 404 by Kumārajīva and others), the commentaries on these texts, and a similar notion of a “counterfeit perfection of wisdom” in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* and the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā*. Given awareness of the Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda use of the term, the dominant usage of this term in the Mahāyāna to indicate a time

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when the Dharma *would* be accessible, the Mahāyāna authors' presumed awareness of their own authoring activity and an accompanying defensive posture of the "cult of the book" (seen also in their use of the "latter five hundred years" and "time of destruction of the true dharma" as justifying their new dispensation, pp. 108-109), might there not be a refigured understanding of *saddharma-pratirūpaka* so as to counter the claims that they, in fact, were the counterfeiters? If not, why would they bring such a loaded term into their works at all? Of course, even were this so, it still does not bring *saddharma-pratirūpaka* back into line with a three-part periodization, nor, at least in the Mahāyāna case, does it align it with the time of the destruction of the *saddharma* (*saddharma-vipralopa*), often used in the same texts but in a totally different context.

Finally she turns to the concept of *mo-fa* itself. After demonstrating that there is no foundation for the common assumption that *mo-fa* is a translation of *saddharma-vipralopa* ("destruction of the True Dharma") as found, for example, in the *Lotus Sutra*, she goes on to say that it is not a translation of any Indic term at all, but rather a Chinese variant of *mo-shih*, for which the original Sanskrit is *paścimakāla*, the "latter age." The earliest and most common Chinese translation of *paścimakāla* is not *mo-fa* but *mo-shih*, and, like the other terms discussed above, simply refers to the period after the death of the Buddha, nowhere implies a final period following two other periods (i.e., it is comparative rather than superlative), and is largely used in the Mahāyāna context of validating the efficacy of a particular scripture in such a time rather than bemoaning the impossibility of attainment (pp. 108-109). She concludes that "*mo-fa* is thus a Chinese apocryphal word: a term created in China, with no identifiable Indian antecedent" (p. 103). These are strong words and will no doubt cause discomfort to many.

Japanese scholars have also noted that the *mo-fa* in Kumārajīva's translation of the *Lotus Sutra* has nothing to do with the three-period scheme or *saddharma-vipralopa* of the Sanskrit text, claiming instead that it is a translation of *paścimakāla*, meaning simply "after the Buddha" or "the later time" (e.g., Yamada Ryūjō, "Mappō shisō ni tsuite," p. 362; "Rengemenkyō ni tsuite," p. 122 n. 1); still, *saddharma-vipralopa* does, in fact, appear often in conjunction with *paścimakāla* in the *Lotus*, the Perfection of Wisdom literature, and other Mahāyāna texts. This indicates that in India the "latter time" was thought, at least rhetorically, to be one of the destruction or end of the True Dharma and thus the idea does not originate with the Chinese (although *mo-fa* doesn't mean the end of the True Dharma but rather the last period of the Dharma). Is it then reasonable to call *mo-fa* an "apocryphal word"? If *mo-fa* is a variant of *mo-shih*, itself a translation of *paścimakāla*, as Nattier claims, no (at least not in the *Lotus Sutra*), though it may not be as literal a transla-

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tion as *mo-shih*. Further, inasmuch as its presence is not an indicator of an apocryphal text (the original purpose of delimiting “apocryphal words,” cf. R. Buswell, ed., *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990, p. 24), no again (although Nattier notes that a substantial number of the first occurrences are in suspicious or dubious texts—p. 100, n., 105). What *would* perhaps be apocryphal would be a usage of *mo-fa* as part of a three-part periodization of True Dharma, Counterfeit/Semblance Dharma, and Final Dharma (as in the *Ta-sheng t'ung-hsing ching*, for example). It is unfortunate that “apocryphal” has gained currency as a description of everything non-Indic in the Chinese canon, and I would urge that we do not extend such a problematic and loaded term to our philological work as well. Nonetheless, even if there is a clear sense in Indian texts of a later time that will be characterized by the destruction of the True Dharma this does not imply the periodization of the “tripartite scheme” (as also noted by Yamada, p. 361).

As a final blow to the oft-accepted notion regarding the Indian provenance of the *mo-fa* doctrine, she considers the influential “attempts by modern scholars (in particular, by modern Japanese scholars, in whose own religious traditions this system continues to hold a central place) to find evidence for its origins in India” (p. 111), i.e., the thesis that it was “the suffering experience by the Buddhist community under Mihirakula’s rule that stimulated a sense of the Dharma’s decline and led to the formulation of the concept of the ‘three periods’ (including the notion of a period of *mo-fa*) by Indian Buddhist thinkers” (p. 114) and conveyed to China through the mid-to-late 6th-century translations of Narendrayaśas. Given the earlier conclusions regarding the apocryphal nature of *mo-fa*, she concludes that “there is absolutely no evidence that he, or the scriptures he translated, played a key role in the formulation of the East Asian three-period system.” Although it is true that Narendrayaśas’ translations do not themselves contain a three-period system, they are to this day among the most oft-cited texts in both China and Japan in connection with the decline and were translated in exactly the same period that the three-period system came into vogue. Yamada Ryūjō, the originator of this theory, does not argue for either an Indian three-period system nor an Indian antecedent for the term *mo-fa* other than *paścimakāla*. What he does propose is that the Chinese development of *mo-fa* thought and the popularity of the three periods was greatly stimulated by the translations of Narendrayaśas (“Mappō shisō ni tsuite,” p. 362), which brought together all of the various elements of the demise tradition as well as a text specifically describing the atrocities of Mihirakula (“Mappō shisō ni tsuite,” pp. 369–70). Nattier believes that the reverse is the case, i.e., “it was the growing popularity of the concept of *mo-fa* . . . that contributed to the high level of Chinese interest in

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the scriptures he subsequently translated, with their more general discussions of decline'' (p. 116).

Where, then, does Professor Nattier suggest the three-period system came from? She concludes:

The notions of *saddharma* and *saddharma-pratirūpaka* were well established in Indian Mahayana literature by the middle of the 2nd century CE at latest. Meanwhile the term *paścimakāla* ('latter age' [Chin. *mo-shih*]) had also entered Indian Buddhist literature, likewise in a Mahayana context [of scriptural validation]. . . . By the latter half of the 3rd century CE Buddhist scriptures containing all of these terms were being translated into Chinese by Dharmarakṣa, who appears to have introduced the two vital terms *hsiang-fa* (as a translation of *saddharma-pratirūpaka*) and *mo-shih* (as a translation of *paścimakāla*). . . . Around the same time the notion of two periods in the history of the Buddhist religion (found in such Indian texts as the *Lotus Sūtra*) was becoming well established in Chinese Buddhist circles. . . . Chinese Buddhists began to interpret the term *mo-shih* . . . as 'final age,' as the name of a third such period . . . certain Buddhist translators . . . began to use the term *mo-fa* as an occasional substitute for *mo-shih*, thus bringing the latter into greater symmetry with its 'predecessors,' the periods of *cheng-fa* and *hsiang-fa*, respectively. Having thus entered the scriptural corpus, the term *mo-fa* took on a life of its own, and Chinese commentators undertook with enthusiasm the task of describing the nature and duration of this anticipated third period. That they chose for its duration the quintessential Chinese figure of 10,000 years (with its underlying implication of 'an eternity') demonstrates that they were free from any constraints encountered in Indian documents . . . [and] expressed the hope that Śākyamuni's teachings would last forever, albeit in a reduced and less accessible form. (pp. 117-18)

Nattier looks in Chapter Five at the various causes given to the decline. Here, too, a number of commonly accepted notions fall to her scrupulous attention to the text over the tradition, as she notes that in virtually all cases the cause must be sought within the Buddhist community itself, thus questioning the usual internal/external scheme. Even in the case of the Vinaya tradition that attributes the demise of the Dharma to the presence of renunciant women, Professor Nattier reminds us that this means that it is ultimately the Buddha who must shoulder the blame, as it was his decision to admit women. Similarly, the notion that the invasion of India by foreign kings (the Kauśāmbī story) is an external cause of decline must be rejected, as these

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narratives put the end of the Buddhist sangha well after the foreign forces are repelled, a result of quarreling within a sangha enjoying the "munificence of a well-intentioned Buddhist king" who has called the entire sangha together for an imperial feast! As she presents these various traditions of decline, a great number of texts are consulted and subjected to philological and text-critical examination, yielding a myriad of hitherto overlooked insights and clarifications. She sums up Part One by considering the differences between the "fierce conservatism, devoted to the preservation for as long as possible of the Buddha's teachings in their original form," the viewpoint which stems from the belief that "the dharma is still fully accessible (albeit increasingly difficult to encounter and to practice) throughout the period of its survival on earth" which "we actually find in much of South, Southeast, and Inner Asia," and the "sharp contrast" of *mo-fa* traditions, found, as she reminds us, "only in East Asia," which "are confronted with the task of finding a way to continue to function, as Buddhists, within the prolonged but far from auspicious age of the 'Final Dharma'" leading to the kind of "dispensationalism" known so well in the Pure Land and Nichiren traditions (pp. 136-38). I am not convinced that there is a great difference in the period of *mo-fa* as a prolonged "evil period" and the long slow decline of South, Southeast, and Central Asia. The difference seems to be more in the Mahāyāna use of *upāya* as a legitimation device or "dispensationalism" vs. prophetic conservatism. The advent of tantra as the appropriate means in the *kali yuga* in India and Tibet, for example, hardly seems conservative. Highlighting this aspect also serves to draw attention to the polemic nature of the decline traditions, each seeking to claim their own scriptures and practices as the True Dharma. Similarly, the three-period scheme seems structurally similar to Buddhaghosa's 5,000-year periodization (pp. 56-58) and best understood not in terms of "apocryphal words" but the Chinese ordering of the teachings (*p'an-chiao*). What one *does* find developing uniquely in East Asia, however, is an existential interpretation of the decline that makes the degeneration more a matter of humanity's inborn lack of capacity for practice and realization than external or situational obstacles (a tradition that continues in Tanabe Hajime's notion of human "constitutive evil").

In Chapters 7 and 8 we are led through thirteen different versions of the "Kauśāmbī prophecy," one of the more frequently encountered traditions of the decline prophecy, from the *Mahāvibhāṣā* through Chinese, Tibetan, and Khotanese versions (she has dealt with the Mongolian *Candragarbha-sūtra* in her Harvard Ph.D. thesis). This story, reflecting the historical invasions of non-Buddhist kings and their actual hostilities towards the Buddhist community, is often cited as an example of an "external" cause of the decline of the Dharma. Even here, though, Nattier reminds us that, though the prophecy

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may reflect the suffering incurred during the actual invasions, in fact the murder of the last arhat and the last tripitaka master takes place well after the foreign kings have been defeated—the tragedy occurs at the hands of quarrelling factions among the sangha itself, on the occasion of a great *pañcavarṣa* feast! She draws the conclusion that the Kauśāmbī story originated in “north-west India sometime between the beginning of the 2nd century CE and the middle of the 3rd” (p. 226), during the period of Kushan rule, a prosperous time for the Buddhist community. Thus the cause for the prophesied demise is not the persecution of the evil kings but rather the very prosperity of the religion and serves analogously to early Hebrew prophetic literature to tender “not consolation but criticism of its own religious community, and not encouragement but exhortation . . . a response to the complacency and even decadence that can come from overwhelming success” (pp. 284–285). Like Nattier, I too would locate the motivation for that tradition within a prophetic mode of the Buddhist church, adding only that such a posture most often has to do with apologetic rivalry concerning the question of just whose Dharma is the True Dharma, i.e., a concern for orthodoxy. In this context both the conservative response of the Nikāya schools and the dispensationalism of the Mahāyāna become readily understandable as different approaches to the question of canonicity in a supposedly non-dogmatic or even anti-dogmatic religion.

As in Part I, the clear passage that Nattier steers through the bewildering variety of texts, languages, Central Asian locations, and the like is admirable—I found her construction of the stemma enjoyable and stimulating reading. To construct her stemma she used the methodology of Paul Maas, and I share her concerns regarding how well his methods work when dealing with late printed texts rather than manuscripts, working on a pericope embedded within a text rather than the entire text itself (shouldn't we separate the *sitz im leben* of the “evil kings” tradition from the Kauśāmbī story?), the impact of oral traditions upon the written text, and the like. Nonetheless, the lack of source-critical studies of Buddhist texts has always been an embarrassment in our field, and, regardless of future methodological refinements, it is to be hoped that Nattier's work will spur more of the same.

Professor Nattier's careful accounting of the complex varieties of texts has set a new pace, and perhaps now we will no longer have to spend so much time looking for the “smoking gun” that has dogged our work, i.e., the first usage of *mo-fa* and the tripartite scheme. Wherever and by whomever these were first used, they are clearly not as universal as was hitherto thought, and I now think that in the future we will push the dates and importance of this formalization even later. Spurred by Professor Nattier's work, for example, I recently looked for *mo-fa* and the three-period scheme in the extant texts of

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the Teaching of the Three Stages (*San-chieh-chiao*), widely assumed to be based precisely on these notions and evidence of their widespread acceptance in the latter half of the 6th century. To my chagrin, however, I discovered that *mo-fa* is used rarely (only seven occurrences within over 400 pages of edited *San-chieh-chiao* texts), and never in conjunction with a three-period scheme. Even the Teaching of the Three Stages has nothing to do with the tripartite system!

Ironically, my only caveat about the book stems from its greatest strength, i.e., the lack of concern with the East Asian perspective (a “Gandhāro-centric approach,” the author tells me). Given her agenda of correcting the distortions of that perspective and the consequent attention she gives it, it is hard to keep in mind that the book is not about East Asia. This leads her, I think, to overstate those distortions—for example, most studies that I am aware of begin with the observation that the three periods are primarily a late 6th-century Chinese development (it is more likely Lamotte’s claim of the Indian provenance of the three periods that fueled this idea), and then find Indian precedents in the many scriptures that discuss the decline of the Dharma. It is true, however, that many Japanese authors do not distinguish clearly between the “idea of *mo-fa*” (*mappō shisō*) and the specific term, *mo-fa*. Although her careful study of the philological details has forever changed that and forces a more prudent discussion, that many Japanese studies focus on *saddharma-vipralopa* as the meaning of *mo-fa*, is, I believe, true to the Chinese reception of the traditions of demise (and also gives it an Indian origin). This is a small concern, however. *Once Upon a Future Time* is a major contribution to the field in which the author has demonstrated the persistence of a theme of decline in the Buddhist tradition, decline conceived not as a general cosmological cycle but the eventual demise and disappearance of the “teachings of a specific historical figure” (Śākyamuni). She has also clearly established that it is the teaching of decline rather than the East Asian tripartite system that pervades the Buddhist tradition. Having so carefully delimited the usage of *mo-fa* in this work, perhaps in the future we can hope for a similarly exacting account of *fa-mieh* (*saddharma-vipralopa*) and its related terms, for, as she has shown, it is here that we begin to discover the force that has made the teaching of decline so strong throughout the years. Professor Nattier is to be congratulated for providing a solid basis for this research in such a stimulating and readable account.

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