

*THE VIMALAKĪRTI NIRDEŚA SŪTRA*. Translated and edited by Charles Luk. Shambala Books: Berkeley and London, 1972, 157 pp.

The *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*, "The Teaching of Vimalakīrti," is one of the most highly regarded of all Mahāyāna sūtras. Vimalakīrti, a householder and Buddhist layman living in Vaiśālī, is depicted as an eminent Bodhisattva. His dialogues with the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī and others give the sūtra a fine dramatic composition, through which the essence of the Mahāyāna thought is elaborately and profoundly expounded.

There are three Chinese translations and one in Tibetan. There is no Sanskrit original now extant. Among these versions, the Chinese translation by Kumārajīva has been the most popular and most widely studied in the East. This new translation by Charles Luk is based on the Kumārajīva version. A French translation by Étienne Lamotte appeared in 1962. It was based upon a study and collation of all the Tibetan and Chinese versions, and accompanied by very detailed footnotes. It may be considered the best translation so far into a modern European language. There is also a German translation by Yokota Takezo and Jakob Fischer, *Das Sūtra Vimalakīrti* (Tokyo, 1944), and an English one by Idumi Hokei, *Vimalakīrti's Discourse on Emancipation*, which appeared in the original series of the *Eastern Buddhist* (Vol. III, no. 1, 1924—Vol. IV, no. 3-4, 1928). Another English translation, by the late Richard Robinson of the University of Wisconsin, has had a limited circulation in mimeograph form, but has not yet been published. Since most of these are very difficult to come by, we must welcome the appearance of Mr. Luk's new English rendering.

Charles Luk (alias Lu K'uan Yü) was born in Canton in 1898. He studied under the guidance of Lamaistic masters and, later, under the Ch'an master Hsu Yun. He has produced many books and translations, mostly concerned with Ch'an and Ch'an thought. They were executed with the sole ambition "to present as many Chinese Buddhist texts as possible so that Buddhism can be preserved at least in the West, should it be fated to disappear in the East as it seems to be." The present work may be said to have emerged from this same background.

The translator explains the outlines of the sūtra in the Foreword, and has added a Glossary of important words at the end. He tells us that when he worked on this translation he used only the Kumārajīva version, and made use of annotations by Kumārajīva and Seng Chao, and a Ming commentary made in 1630 by

the Ch'an master Po Shan. Thus, he did not refer to any other Chinese or Tibetan translations, not to speak of the Western language translations mentioned above. Kumārajīva's version is highly celebrated for its graceful and yet simple wording (simple, that is, when compared to the original Sanskrit), harboring keen wit and profound meaning. Luk is successful in following after Kumārajīva and transmitting this characteristic of his version. Although there is no doubt the fine English owes to the translator's intelligence, he seems to be inspired by Kumārajīva to a great extent.

The principal aim of the book as stated in the dedicatory remarks, is "to present translations of Chinese Buddhist texts to keen students of the Dharma in the West." It is not an academic exercise but derives from the translator's deep feeling of compassion for all mankind. I think it can be said that the translator's aims have been mostly achieved in the approachability and readableness of the book.

However, seen from an academic viewpoint, the book is not free from a variety of shortcomings. Of course, in light of the intention expressed above, it would be wrong to expect a strictly scholarly treatment or procedure. Still, I do think it highly desirable that any translation should be supported by accurate scholarship. This is even more the case with a sacred and spiritual text such as this, that is rendered into a foreign language for the benefit of students of Buddhism. What they need above all is an accurate text, as accurate and precise as possible. An erroneous translation can only serve to distort the Buddha Dharma.

The translator is weak in Sanskrit, as evidenced by misspellings: *gandbāra* (p. 4, 7) instead of *gandbarva*, *bodbipākṣita* (p. 86) instead of *bodbipākṣika* (or could this be careless proofreading; these words are correctly spelled on other pages). The Sanskrit term for 道場 is *bodbimāṇḍa*, not *bodbimāṇḍala* (p. 39 ff, p. 87); this is an error often made by other scholars as well. The personal names rendered in Sanskrit as Ratnarāṣi (for 宝積, p. 5) and Merukalpa (for 須弥灯王, p. 64) should be Ratnakūṭa or Ratnākara, and Merupradiparāja, respectively. Instead of conjecturing Sanskrit equivalents, however, these terms should perhaps have been rendered into English, inasmuch as they are mostly names and words with meanings significant enough to translate, and Kumārajīva too has translated them, not transliterated. In view of the overall character of the book, the author should perhaps have avoided meaningless Sanskrit words as far as possible. The name *Āmrādārikā* (p. 139) is unknown to me; it is usually *Āmrapālī* or *-pālīkā*.

There are numerous mistakes in translating the Chinese text. For example, 炎 is not "flame" (p. 18), but "mirage." The words 自捨如来, wrongly rendered:

"Since I left the Buddha . . ." (p. 32) simply mean: "Except the Tathagata . . ." as Robinson renders it. In the sentence 本自不然, 今則無滅 the character 然 is equal to 燃 (to burn): this can be verified not only from the Tibetan text but also from Hsüan-tsang: 熾然. It is translated (p. 23): "... since fundamentally they are not self-existent they cannot now be the subject of annihilation." But the sentence means, metaphorically, that all beings are neither burning nor extinguishing. Robinson is right to translate it: "As they themselves have never burned, they are not extinguished now."

The translator seems to understand the Buddhist terms 有為 and 無為 according to their intrinsic Chinese sense or with a Taoist flavor. He gives their Chinese pronunciations: *yu-wei* and *wu-wei*, and translates them "active" and "inactive" respectively (pp. 30, 63, 94; on pp. 32, 35, 94 he puts them as "the worldly" and "the transcendental," or "mundane" and "supramundane"). The character 為, however, means not only "to act" but also "to make." Being derived from the root *kr-*, the Sanskrit original *samskrta* for 有為 can also imply "act, deed" (*karman*). With prefix, however, *samskrta* usually means "put together," "constructed," etc., and as a Buddhist term it means "produced by cause and effect." Often the two terms are translated as "conditional" and "unconditioned," that is, the relative versus the absolute. Putting aside whether it was the author's intention to introduce the Taoist idea by his translation of these terms, I think the reader should be made aware of their original Indian, Buddhistic significance.

There is a general lack of common knowledge about things Indian and Buddhist. For example, the listing (p. 4, n. 2) of the so-called "eight classes of divine beings" is wrong (see the Glossary, p. 143, where it is correct). The name 帝釈 is given as "Śakras and Indras" (p. 17) as if it were two distinct divinities.

The term *bodbimanda* 道場 is described as "a holy site" (p. 39; see also p. 140 f.) and is said to include various sacred pilgrimage places in China, such as O Mei and Wu T'ai Shan. But *bodbimanda*, originally and primarily, refers to the spot under the Bodhi-tree in Bodhgayā where Śākyamuni Buddha first obtained his enlightenment; the spot is also called the *vajrāsana* 金剛宝座. The translator mentions nothing about this. On p. 39, line 1, Vimalakīrti declares to Bodhisattva "Glorious Light" that he comes from "the (not *a* as in Luk's translation) *bodbi-manda*." This means that he, equating himself with Śākyamuni, comes from the *vajrāsana*, that is, he is already enlightened. It does not mean he is coming from any holy place such as O Mei in China, as might be inferred from the translator's footnote.

The sentence 正定衆生來生其國, translated on p. 9 (last 2 lines) as “living beings who have realized samādhi will be reborn there,” is completely misunderstood, the character 定 being taken as meaning “samādhi.” Here 正定 is equal to 正定聚 (Skt. *samyakva-niyata*); a fact confirmed by the Tibetan as well as by Seng Chao’s commentary where it is clearly mentioned (Taisho, vol. 38, p. 336a 11). Since the words 正定聚 mean “those destined for right attainment” (usually contrasted with 邪定聚, “those destined for falsehood,” and 不定聚, “those destined for neither”), the sentence means: “those living beings destined for right attainment will be reborn in that land.”

The important passage 法隨於如, 無所隨故 appears on pp. 21–2, and is translated: “(the absolute Dharma) is in line with the absolute for it is independent.” This rendering is possible and not wrong linguistically. But the translator seems unaware of the sentence’s paradoxical construction, a technique which is often used to reveal the situation of *śūnyatā* (emptiness). Here I think Robinson’s “Dharma accords with suchness, because it has nothing to accord with,” a much better rendering. Luk’s translation could lead to an understanding such as: “Dharma is independent, therefore it is absolute,” which is misleading. The sentence is really paradoxical and shows that the negation (of “to accord with”) is equal to its affirmation, “to accord with suchness.” Affirmative is negative, and negative is affirmative, is the point in this passage. Accordingly, Luk’s rendering may be perhaps revised: “. . . the Dharma is in line with the absolute, because it is not in line with anything whatsoever.”

Page 68 depicts a scene in which the first of the Buddha’s disciples, Mahākāśyapa, who has reached the stage of arhatship, the Hīnayāna’s highest goal, is lamenting the fact that his attainment of arhatship has cut him off from the root of compassionate love for living beings, and that accordingly he is not entitled for the Mahāyāna’s supreme *bodhi*. The text reads 我等何為永絕其根, 於此大乘已如敗種. Robinson rightly translates: “Why have we forever cut off its roots, so that in this Great Vehicle we are like ruined seed?” Luk misunderstood the whole idea, saying: “What should we do to uproot for ever the rotten *śrāvaka* root as compared with this Mahayana, so that. . . ?” The difference between these is self-evident. Robinson correctly has: “its (i.e., Mahāyānic *bodhi*) roots,” while Luk wrongly makes it “rotten *śrāvaka* root,” confusing seed 種 with root 根. Luk’s “as compared with . . .” does not make sense either. Note in this connection p. 85, where Mahākāśyapa makes a similar lamentation, the “defective organs” 根敗 on line 15 corresponding to the “ruined seeds” here.

On p. 88 (line 2) we read: “He is reborn to show himself to all.” In the Chinese

示彼故有生 the character 故 stands for 故意 (willingly, at will). It does not mean "to," "for the sake of." On the basis of the Tibetan we can surmise a Sanskrit form: "*samcintya-(bhava-)upapatti*," which corresponds to Kumārajīva's 故有生 and Hsüan-tsang's 故意受生. The translation should read something like: "He manifests himself (is reborn) at will." This passage is very important in revealing the Mahāyāna bodhisattva ideal. A bodhisattva does not abide in *nirvāṇa* but comes repeatedly down to the world of *samsāra*; this rebirth in *samsāra* is not due to his *karma* and *kleśa* (defilements) but solely due to his own volition, own decision. Without "at will," the meaning of the passage is reduced almost to nothing. Here, Robinson and Idumi have also failed to grasp the exact meaning. Lamotte's "ils manifestent volontairement (*samcintya*) des naissances (*jāti*)," is correct, although *jāti* would be better replaced by *upapatti*.

Misunderstandings and mistranslations are found almost throughout the book. Those pointed out above are merely representative. If the translator had only consulted some of his predecessors' translations, Lamotte's in particular, or if he had referred to Hsüan-tsang's version, most of these faults could have been avoided. I admire the translator's zeal and deep devotion, and I am second to none in respect for the great effort he has made in presenting Chinese Buddhist texts to the West. But translation works must be established on a firm base. And, in that sense, to point out faults may be our duty. In sum, the reader will easily obtain in this readable and handsome book the general outline and the general atmosphere of the sutra's *śūnyatā* teaching. But, unfortunately, so far as details and exactness are concerned, it must be accepted with reservation.

NAGAO GADJIN