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III. BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTICES

The Prajñāpāramitā Literature, by Edward Conze. Tokyo: The Reiyukai, 1978. 138 pp.

This review was written before Professor Conze's passing on September 24, 1979. For a brief obituary, please turn to page 116.

Edward Conze's *Prajñāpāramitā Literature* has until now been a much sought after work, having been out of print for a number of years. It was originally published in 1960 by Mouton & Co., and Buddhist scholars are fortunate once again to have this valuable reference work available to them. Hopefully it will help to rekindle scholarly interest in this crucial aspect of Buddhist studies. To quote Conze: "The most outstanding feature of contemporary *Prajñāpāramitā* studies is the disproportion between the few persons willing to work in this field and the colossal number of documents extant in Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan." (*The Large Sūtra on Perfect Wisdom*, p. x)

Like most of Conze's sixty-one other books and articles connected with the subjects and philosophy of the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras*, this one is written in a style that is both succinct and easy to read. This work, however, is written for an audience which is presumed to have already a rather specialized and sophisticated knowledge of Buddhist studies.

This second edition is essentially the same as the first with the noteworthy addition of a complete bibliography of Conze's works on this subject by the book's editor, A. Yuyama. It contains Conze's reconstruction of the history of the development of the various recensions of the *sūtras* in India, and the interpretations of these in China, Nepal, Siam, Cambodia, Tibet, Japan and Europe. Also included is an annotated bibliography of these recensions with a list of the commentaries on them in India and Tibet, and a list of the Chinese commentators on the *sūtras*. Conze gives greatest emphasis to the commentary by Maitreya called the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*, and the sub-commentaries on it in India and Tibet. His list of the Tibetan subcommentaries is useful, but it cannot be regarded as complete, since it includes just forty titles. A more complete listing of these Tibetan works can be found in Lokesh Chandra's *Materials for a History of Tibetan Literature*, Pt. 2 (New Delhi, 1963) which contains more than two hundred titles.

Professor Conze's main purpose in this work is to provide a historical sketch of the development of the *P.P.* literature as well as a (partially) annotated bibliography of the root scriptures and their commentaries, which have formed the bases for the classical study of Mahāyāna Buddhism, particularly in India and Tibet. His effort has greatly facilitated further critical scholarship on the various controversial

opinions held among major Indian commentators about the actual meaning and method of the *P.P.* scriptures. As it is in the light of this lively commentarial tradition that Professor Conze's own interpretations will have to be finally analysed, it might be the place here to simply mention two of his opinions, which would be the subjects of an interesting debate with the followers of the commentarial tradition begun by Maitreya's *Abhisamayālamkāra* and followed by Haribhadra and the Tibetan scholars Tsong-kha-pa and Sera rJe-btsun-pa. Two of Professor Conze's debatable interpretations are briefly mentioned below. They are: 1. his opinions regarding the repetitive style of the scriptures; 2. his interpretation of the meaning of the *P.P.*'s final ontological viewpoint.

1. Prof. Conze's opinion that the larger *P.P.* scriptures are composed of "masses and masses of monotonous repetitions which interrupt and obscure the trend of the arguments" (p. 10) would be a point of contention for these classical scholars. Haribhadra's tradition, for example, tends to see these apparent repetitions as discrete sets of meditative-antidotal procedures which thoroughly eliminate the obstacles to Buddhahood. For example, folios 153a4 through 170a4 of the of the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā* (*sde-dge* edition) are (according to Maitreya's *Abhisamayālamkāra* and Haribhadra's *Sputārthā*) devoted to a description of the Path of Cultivation (skt. *bhāvanāmārga*, tib. *sgom lam*). A full translation of this section of the *P.P.* would require about thirty-five English pages, but Professor Conze's translation reduces it to a half page. He rationalizes his condensation by claiming that all the contents of these pages are just "masses and masses of monotonous repetitions which interrupt and obscure . . .". Haribhadra, on the other hand, sees these contents of the *P.P.* as systematically designed meditative antidotal procedures for eliminating the so-called 'spontaneous obstacles' (tib. *spang-bya-lhan-skyes*) to enlightenment. In his *Short Commentary* (skt. *Sputārthā*, tib. 'Grel-pa-don-gsal or 'grel chuñ), Haribhadra comments on the contents of these seventeen folios of the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā* with the following: "(These scriptural words instruct by way of the means of) meditating just the actual antidote of (the spontaneous obstacles) to be abandoned." Tib. (*mdo tshig gi chos can*) *span by'a (lhan skyes kyi) dnos poi gñen po ñi du rnam par sgom par byed (tshul gyis' doms pai yin pa: phyir)*. (Quoted from Sera rJe-btsun-pa's *Rol mtsho . . . skaps dang poi spyi don*. p. 113b7-134a1, Sera New Edition. The parentheses enclose Sera rJe-btsun-pa's interpretive comments.) The lengthy and seemingly repetitious instructions in these pages are understood to be an antidotal formula which redefines the Path of Cultivation according to the *P.P.*' new Mādhyamika ontology. According to Haribhadra's tradition, the seemingly repetitious antidotal procedures of this entire section of th

scripture are to be understood and actualized in order for the results of the Path of Cultivation (i.e. enlightenment) to be achieved. Therefore, Professor Conze's opinion that the *P.P.* is largely composed of 'interrupting and obscuring monotonous repetitions' would be heartily rejected by Haribhadra as a misunderstanding of the purpose of the *P.P.*'s thorough and detailed antidotal procedures.

2. While recognizing that the primary purpose of the *P.P.* is to teach the absolute truth of emptiness, Professor Conze's opinion regarding the nature of emptiness seems to differ from the opinions of Maitreya, Haribhadra, Tsong-kha-pa, etc. We can find an illustration of Conze's opinion in his translation of the title of Maitreya's commentary on the *P.P.*, the *Abhisamayālamkāra*, a work which he considers to be a valid interpreter of the structure and method of the *P.P.* He translates this title: "*Treatise on Re-Union with the Absolute*". (Serie Orientale Roma, Vol. VI, Roma, 1954). He justifies this translation by recourse to the following etymological analysis: "Etymologically derived from *abhi* + *sam* + the root ("to go") *i-re*), *abhisamaya* can be translated as "coming together", or "reunion", or "communion". The true reality outside me comes together with the true reality inside me—that is the idea" (p. 104). Perhaps Prof. Conze's etymology is strongly influenced by his apparent opinion that this school of Mahāyāna Buddhism claims that the absolute truth and the final soteriological goal are one and the same. He does say that the *P.P.* asserts as much when he says: "Here it is taught that . . . there is no such multiplicity, because all is one" (p. 7), and when he says that the final truth of the *P.P.* "is based on the equivalence of the self and the absolute" (p. 6). The term "emptiness" for Prof. Conze, therefore, seems to signify an absolute truth in which phenomenal reality is negated by a oneness of individual selves and the undifferentiated whole, as is implied by his translation of *abhisamaya* as "*Re-Union with the Absolute*". With this opinion in mind, it is easier for us to understand his translation of such phrases as "a Bodhisattva, a great being, who courses in the perfection of wisdom, should not apprehend all dharmas . . . should not apprehend a Bodhisattva" (*Large Sūtra*, p. 94). Based on this translation, which interprets *yan dag par rjes su mi mthon* (skt. *asamanu-pashyati*) as not apprehending a Bodhisattva or dharma at all, Prof. Conze explains that the purpose of the *P.P.* is to present the practitioner with contradictory facts which are meant to enhance a Bodhisattva's progress toward the final goal. He says: "All the many thousand lines of this Sutra can be summed up in two sentences: 1. . . 2. There is no such thing as a Bodhisattva or all knowledge, or a "being" or the perfection of wisdom, or attainment. The solution of this dilemma lies in nothing else than the fearless acceptance of both contradictory facts" (*Large Sūtra*, p. 5). Prof. Conze's view of the *P.P.*'s ontology and methodology will be

briefly contrasted below with the interpretations of Haribhadra, Tsong-kha-pa and Sera rJe-btsun-pa.

The Tibetan translation of *Abhisamaya* is *Mngon-par-rtogs-pa*, which is defined as “complete understanding” of all the elements of Mahāyāna Buddhist practice and goals. In the Tibetan commentaries of the aforementioned authors, there is no mention of a “re-unification with the absolute”, presumably because the progress toward Buddhahood is regarded by them as linear rather than circular. Moreover, the Buddha himself is not understood as identical with the absolute truth. The absolute truth, i.e., emptiness, is considered to imply that all existents are “empty of true existence” (skt. *satyasiddhi*, tib. *bden-par-grub-pa*); that is, empty of the ability to exist independently, irrespective of being an object of consciousness. Buddhahood, the state of compassionate omniscience, is also empty of “true existence”; but it is not emptiness (i.e., the absolute truth) itself. This interpretation leads the aforementioned commentators to interpret the above passage from the *P.P.* in the following way: “a great-minded Bodhisattva, who courses in the perfection of wisdom, should not apprehend as ‘truly existing’ all dharmas . . . should not apprehend as ‘truly existing’ a Bodhisattva.” Based on this ontological interpretation, the term *yañ dag par rjes su mi mthong ba* (skt. *asamanupashyati*) takes on a special meaning. Here, *yañ dag par* (skt. *samanu*) is taken as an adverb meaning “perfectly”, “absolutely”, “truly”; hence the translation, “not apprehended as ‘truly existent’”, or not “truly apprehended”.

Therefore, in contrast to Prof. Conze’s interpretation and translation, these commentators do not see the *P.P.* as presenting a dilemma solved by “nothing else than the fearless acceptance of both contradictory facts”; nor do they see the *A.A.* as a “*Treatise on Re-Union with the Absolute*”.

As it is not the place here to go into any of these complex issues in the detail they deserve, they are only mentioned as a prelude to future critical scholarship on the various interpretive exegeses of the *P.P.* by Indian and Tibetan scholars. This type of critical scholarship on the commentaries of the *P.P.* has been greatly enhanced by Prof. Conze’s *The Prajñāpāramitā Literature*, which (along with his sixty-one other important books and articles) has provided us with a firm foundation for such future endeavors. Western Buddhologists and/or Buddhists will forever be in his debt.

Edward W. Bastian