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Volume 10

1987

Number 2

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Indian Commentaries on the *Heart Sūtra*: The Politics of Interpretation

by *Malcolm David Eckel*

I.

Edward Conze opens one of his many articles on the Perfection of Wisdom Literature by saying that “the *Heart Sūtra* is easily the best known of all *Prajñāpāramitā* texts”.¹ There are few who would quarrel with Conze’s judgment. The text certainly functions for many people as a statement of the essence of the Mahāyāna, and if the *Heart Sūtra* itself were reduced to an essence, it would be the phrase “Form is Emptiness, and Emptiness is Form”. For someone who now looks back on the growth of the Mahāyāna tradition and tries to understand the central problems of the tradition in their original context, it seems only natural to ask how this most essential of phrases was understood by the Indian commentators whose works are preserved in the Tibetan canonical tradition. Certainly it clarifies the problem of understanding to know how the phrase was understood by those who stood in the most direct historical and linguistic proximity to the text.

But to approach the Indian commentators in the hope that they will somehow yield the “original” meaning of the text is to invite disappointment. Like us, the commentators were creatures of their own time. They had their own interests and preoccupations that forced them not to misinterpret the text but to use it for their own purposes. What we discover when we open the Indian commentaries on the *Heart Sūtra* is not the pristine meaning of the *sūtra* itself, stripped of all the imaginative accretions imposed by later centuries, but what a distinctive group of commentators thought it meant. And what they thought it meant was shaped as much by the preoccupations of their own

time as it was by the words of the *sūtra* itself.

By "preoccupation" I mean not only the obvious concepts and theories that occupied the minds of the intellectuals who commented on the Mahāyāna *sūtras* and whose commentaries gained enough notoriety or prestige to be preserved, but even the idea of commentary itself. As commentators and interpreters in our own right, we are so used to the assumption that texts are meant to be interpreted that we overlook how rare it is in many traditions to interpret a text and rarer still to have the interpretation preserved. The act of interpretation itself involves a distinctive and rather narrow conception of the function of a text. Judging by the record of Hsüan-tsang's visit to India, the *Heart Sūtra*, and in particular the *mantra* contained in the last few lines, had a much broader function than to serve simply as an object of interpretation. Hsüan-tsang tells a story of the philosopher Bhāvaviveka.² Bhāvaviveka was the kind of person who was well versed in the art of interpretation, but in Hsüan-tsang's story Bhāvaviveka did not interpret the *Heart Sūtra*. He used it as a chant to generate a vision of the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteśvara.

The chant did not work its effect without the addition of some related physical discipline. Bhāvaviveka reinforced the chant with a period of fasting. But in time the chant brought him the vision he wanted and an answer to one of his most vexing questions. Bhāvaviveka may, at some other time, have sat with a group of students and commented on the text of the *sūtra*. About that part of the story Hsüan-tsang has nothing to say. But Hsüan-tsang's story does make it clear that when we focus exclusively on "interpretation", as if that were the only way someone could stand in relation to a text, we may fatally distort its function. Interpretation may be only one of the many things that are done with a text. The fact that it is also what we are accustomed to doing with a text should not blind us to the other ways a text can function.

When a text like the *Heart Sūtra* can serve such a range of functions, from acting as a chant to summon a celestial *bodhisattva* to providing a focus of worship,³ we should view the existence of commentaries on the text with a certain sense of wonderment and even with suspicion. This is a use of the text that we can understand, but it should provoke a host of different questions.

Why, of all the possible uses to which the *Heart Sūtra* can be put, did the commentators choose this one? Why are the commentators apparently clustered within a narrow historical period? Was it only in this period that the text was available, or was it only in this period that the conditions were ripe for its interpretation? And why, in all that has been said and written about this text, has the Tibetan canonical tradition chosen to preserve these works, and preserve them in a context that makes of the commentaries themselves not just a source of new commentary, but also a focus of veneration? I will not answer all these questions here, but I would like to make some comment of my own not just on the interpretation found in the text of the Indian commentaries, but on the complex and overlapping functions performed by the text in the work of the commentators themselves. I will leave it to some other scholar in a later generation to ask why we choose to spend such effort writing commentaries on commentaries on a phrase from an Indian text.

II.

The Tibetan canon preserves the text of seven Indian commentaries on the *Heart Sūtra*, attributed to the authors Vimālamitra, Jñānamitra, Vajrapāṇi, Praśāstrasena, Kamalaśīla, Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna (more commonly known as Atiśa), and Śrī Mahājāna.⁴ As far as one can determine from Tibetan historical sources, the seven commentaries come from the period between the middle of the eighth century and the middle of the eleventh century, a period that encompasses both of the “diffusions” of the Dharma into Tibet. Many of the commentators were teachers of Tibetan students or played some other significant role in the dissemination of Buddhist ideas in Tibet. Vimālamitra, for example, is treated as one of the chief teachers of the *rdzogs chen* tradition of the *rNying-ma* school.⁵ He is linked to the controversy over gradual and sudden enlightenment associated with the so-called council of bSam-yas, an event in which Kamalaśīla is reported to have defeated a Chinese monk in debate and established the dominance of his own gradualist interpretation of the Buddhist path in Tibet.⁶ The controversy is described in Kamalaśīla’s now well-known work on the stages of meditation

(*Bhāvanākrama*) and is reflected in two other works by Vimalamitra on the same subject: "The meaning of the sudden practice of non-conceptuality" (*Cig car 'jug pa rnam par mi rlog pa'i bsgom don*) and "The meaning of the gradual practice" (*Rim gyis 'jug pa'i sgom don*).⁷ Both Vimalamitra and Kamalaśīla flourished at the end of the eighth century.

At the other end of this brief historical spectrum is Atīśa. Atīśa served as abbot of the monastic college at Vikramaśīla under the reign of two Pāla kings who bridged the late decades of the tenth century and the early decades of the eleventh.⁸ In his later years, after he had achieved considerable prominence as a scholar and monastic leader, Atīśa was invited to Tibet to take part in the re-establishment of monastic scholarship associated with the "second diffusion of the Dharma". In collaboration with Rin-chen-bzang-po he translated a number of works of Indian origin. After he had become established in Central Tibet, he wrote an independent work, "The Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment" (*Bodhipathapradīpa*), that later served as the source for the analysis of the path now dominant in the *dGe-lugs-pa* school of Tibetan monasticism.⁹

If the lives of these three scholars are any measure, the commentaries on the *Heart Sūtra* preserved in the Tibetan Canon are the product of a historical milieu in which a commentator was not simply an isolated scholar, but the bearer of a distinctive lineage of practice, a monastic official, and, as a result, also a political figure. This combination of interests is reflected in the use they made of their commentaries on the *Heart Sūtra*. Along with the normal discussion of ontology and metaphysics is a discussion of practice and discipline, matters that would have been of as much concern in the formation of a monastic curriculum as in the adjudication of philosophical disputes. It is often said that the categories of Buddhist philosophy are inseparable from questions of practice, but the connection is seldom as clear as it is in the commentaries produced by these seven commentators on the phrases of the *Heart Sūtra*.

On the level of ontology or metaphysics the comments on the phrase "Form is Emptiness, and Emptiness is Form" reflect the dispute between Madhyamaka and Yogācāra philosophers about the nature of Emptiness. From the time of Bhāvaviveka in the sixth century there had been a running controversy be-

tween the philosophers of these two schools about the proper way to relate the ontology of one school to the ontology of the other.¹⁰ Mādhyamika spoke of two truths (or realities), the ultimate and the conventional, and explained that the two truths could be used to strike a balance between extremes. A person could follow a middle path by affirming the reality of things conventionally but denying their reality ultimately. Yogācāra philosophers also sought a position of balance, but expressed it in a concept of three “natures”.¹¹ Things were understood as having three natures or “characteristics”, their imagined nature, their dependent nature, and their absolute nature. To avoid the extremes of complete affirmation or denial, the texts of the Yogācāra tradition explained that imagined nature did not exist, absolute nature did exist, and dependent nature (which was the combination of the two) existed insofar as it was absolute and did not exist insofar as it was imagined.

The juxtaposition of these two views of reality yielded many contrasts, but the most important had to do with the existence of absolute nature itself. Did absolute nature exist or not? A Mādhyamika would be content to say that it existed conventionally, but not ultimately; but if the Yogācāra vision of reality was interpreted as meaning that absolute nature existed ultimately, the two schools were at loggerheads. It is this second interpretation of the Yogācāra position that generated Bhāvaviveka's attack on the Yogācāra in the sixth century, and it is this second interpretation that is reflected in the commentaries of the eighth century, particularly in the commentary on the relationship between Emptiness and Form.

The commentator Jñānamitra explains the phrase in a way that is consistent with the position of the Madhyamaka:

Now, in order to define Emptiness he says: “Form is Emptiness, and Emptiness is Form”. If one does not understand that what is called “Form” is Emptiness, one is deluded and perceives and conceptualizes Form, or designates [it] with words. To say that [Form] is Emptiness means that the nature of Form is Emptiness. It has no identity in the past, the present, or the future, and cannot be grasped. . . . There is no place for any extreme or any entity. This is why [Form] is called “Emptiness”.

“Emptiness is Form” means that Emptiness also cannot be grasped and is designated conventionally as “Form”.¹²

What makes this explanation consistent with the explanation we might expect from a Mādhyamika such as Bhāvaviveka is that Jñānamitra makes no attempt to speak of Emptiness as something that exists or remains after concepts have been removed. He explains only that Emptiness is subject to the same analysis as Form, and the application of analysis to the concept of Emptiness then closes the circle: Form is Emptiness, but Emptiness too is empty and is no different from Form.

For an explanation of the passage that makes use of Yogācāra categories we look to the commentary of Śrī Mahājāna:

“Form is Emptiness, and Emptiness is Form” is a brief statement of the objectification [involved] when one thinks about Reality (*tattva*). “Emptiness is not different from Form, and Form is not different Emptiness” is a more extended statement. First of all, when one considers Form, one admits that it is Emptiness. . . . “Emptiness is not different from Form” means that dependent nature, which is the imagination of what is unreal, is empty of imagined duality. To be empty of duality in a sense that leaves its existence intact (*paryudāsa-pratiṣedha*) is the nature of Form.¹³

Here Mahājāna uses the standard terminology of the three natures to equate Emptiness with absolute nature that is left behind when the dualities of imagined nature are removed. The point is clinched, for those who know the technical terminology of this controversy, by a term that I have translated as “leaving its existence intact”. The term is *paryudāsa-pratiṣedha*, sometimes translated as “nominally bound negation”.¹⁴ By this Śrī Mahājāna means that the negation involved in the claim that Form is empty means only that Form is empty of the dualistic concepts wrongly imposed on it, not that it does not exist at all. This is a basic feature in the Yogācāra understanding of Emptiness. It also is a feature about which Bhāvaviveka, as a Mādhyamika, had many critical things to say.

Someone may wonder why I have quoted two of the lesser known commentators on this passage to illustrate the interpretive approaches of the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra traditions, especially when we have commentaries from such respected representatives of the Madhyamaka as Kamalaśīla and Atīṣa. The answer to this question reveals something important about

the commentators themselves. We know from their other writings that Kamalaśīla and Atīśa were aware of the philosophical problems reflected in the dispute between Yogācāra and Madhyamaka. Kamalaśīla himself made important contributions to the understanding of this dispute, if not to its solution. We find, however, that Kamalaśīla and Atīśa used their commentaries on the *Heart Sūtra* not to promote the cause of Madhyamaka ontology, but to clarify their thinking on a question that was essentially epistemological. They took the text as an occasion to explain how a person could gain a correct understanding of the insight expressed in the phrase “Form is Emptiness, and Emptiness is Form”, and relate that understanding to other stages on the path to enlightenment. Being epistemological, the question was also political in the broad sense of the term. It had to do not just with the ontology of Emptiness, but with *how* a person should study the text and *who* had the authority to establish its interpretation.

Bhāvaviveka dealt with this question in his own way at the end of his argument against the Yogācāra, an argument that is found in his commentary on the *Madhyamakakārikās* and in his compendium of Indian philosophy, the *Tarkajvālā*. He starts the argument with a Yogācāra objection:

It is said in scripture that the ultimate cannot be investigated and is not accessible to logical reasoning (*tarka-gocara*). For this reason, the ultimate cannot be expressed by inference (*anumāna*).

He then gives his own reply:

This is wrong. Inference that follows scripture (*āgama*) negates all concepts and brings about non-conceptual insight. The ultimate, then, is not an object (*viśaya*) of inference. But [inference] has priority, because there is no other way of investigating what is true and false.¹⁵

In Bhāvaviveka's system this argument served as a justification for the rationality of the process leading to the ultimate understanding of Emptiness. In the hands of Bhāvaviveka's intellectual heirs, notably the eighth-century Mādhyamika Jñānagarbha, it led to the definition of ultimate truth as the truth that is consistent with reason.¹⁶

Kamalaśīla echoes Bhāvaviveka's concern for reason in his commentary on the *Heart Sūtra*. The commentary is not long, but it gives a clear impression of the problem that brought Kamalaśīla to the text. Kamalaśīla says:

By the power of the Buddha, Śāriputra asks Avalokiteśvara how to train. The intent of the question is [to ask] what is achieved by training. What is achieved is certainty. This [certainty] is [gained] through the means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*). . . . The point of [Avalokiteśvara's] reply is: O Śāriputra, the three-fold assembly of *bodhisattvas* should train with the knowledge that comes from inference whose object is ultimate truth. One does not [train] with perception, because [ultimate truth] is not the object of visual perception, because there is no means of knowledge for which it is an object, and because there is no ability [to produce effective action]. [Furthermore,] one already has trained in yogic perception, and there is no need for [further] training.

One should train [instead] with knowledge that comes from inference about the ultimate. It is through the knowledge that comes from inference that one develops certainty about the Perfection of Wisdom, which is like an illusion and is [identical to] Emptiness.¹⁷

Kamalaśīla then goes on to describe what he has in mind when he speaks of the inference whose object is ultimate truth:

First, [an effect] does not arise ultimately from any connection with a cause. When analyzed, it is impossible [for an effect to arise from a cause], because it cannot arise from itself, from something else, from both, or from neither. It also is impossible for an effect to arise that either exists or does not exist.¹⁸

This is Kamalaśīla's only attempt to explain the meaning of Emptiness in this brief commentary. Someone who comes to the text in search of a new interpretation of the phrase "Form is Emptiness" is bound to be disappointed. But the passage does tell a great deal about the context in which Kamalaśīla thought the interpretation of the *Sūtra* should be made. It was a context dominated by the rules of rational analysis.

Atīśa's commentary also focuses on an epistemological problem, but not specifically on the role of reason. He uses his considerable professorial ingenuity to explain how the *Heart*

Sūtra reflects, in its cryptic phrases, a complex system of discipline that governs the progress of a *bodhisattva* toward Buddhahood. He places the phrase “Form is Emptiness” in the middle of the Path of Vision (*darśana-mārga*), the third of the five paths used in the *Abhisamayālamkāra* and later works to outline the path as a whole. His ingenuity is perhaps most apparent in his explanation of the word “therefore” in the fifth section of the text. Atīśa takes the word in its temporal sense, meaning “after that” or “subsequently”, and understands it as a reference to the whole Path of Practice (*bhāvanā-mārga*)—a reference, in other words, to the last nine of the ten *bodhisattva* stages (*bhūmi*).

I could cite more examples of Atīśa’s attempt to squeeze oceans of meaning from the simplest phrases. But perhaps it is best to return instead to one of the questions with which I began this essay. Why would Kamalaśīla and Atīśa write such commentaries at all? I think it is not too far-fetched to think that behind Kamalaśīla’s defence of reason, and Atīśa’s imaginative attempt to see in the *Heart Sūtra* the system of a graded path of study, there lies a problem of authority, a problem that was sharpened by the conciseness and simplicity of the text itself. The *sūtra* is attractive precisely because it reduces the complexity of the path to a few simple concepts. It is the kind of text that is particularly susceptible to a form of interpretation that emphasizes the suddenness and simplicity of enlightenment. To seminary deans and monastic officials like Kamalaśīla and Atīśa this simplicity presented a challenge. They seem to have felt a need to pull in the reins and insist that the study of Emptiness can only be contextualized or institutionalized in a system of rational and orderly study.

What was the source of the challenge? The presence of Vimalamitra in the list of commentators on the *sūtra* gives us one possible answer. Vimalamitra was a Tantric master who defended a form of practice known as “the sudden practice of non-conceptuality”. When Atīśa’s commentary is compared to Vimalamitra’s, it is clear that Atīśa had Vimalamitra very much in mind. Atīśa does not spend much time actually refuting Vimalamitra. What he does instead is place Vimalamitra’s comments in the context of his own conception of the path, as if to say that Vimalamitra’s remarks about the *Heart Sūtra* are acceptable as far as they go, but have to be placed in the right system of



study before they can properly be understood. Kamalaśīla also was an enthusiastic defender of the gradual and systematic pursuit of enlightenment. We might very well imagine that Kamalaśīla and Atīśa wrote their commentaries on the *Heart Sūtra* in response to a challenge that stemmed from Tantric exegesis, like the exegesis found in Vimalamitra. But this should not be understood as meaning that Kamalaśīla and Atīśa harbored any deep antipathy to the Tantric tradition as such. They both were practitioners of Tantra and recognized the validity of the Tantric tradition in its own sphere. What they resisted was an interpretation of the *Heart Sūtra* that either slighted the claims of reason or collapsed the system of categories that made of the vast corpus of Perfection of Wisdom Literature a graded path to enlightenment.

Regardless of the immediate cause that provoked Kamalaśīla and Atīśa to compose their commentaries, it is clear that we have in the corpus of Indian commentaries on the *Heart Sūtra* more than just an analysis of the ontological problems that in other contexts so occupied the minds of Mahāyāna philosophers. The commentaries also give us a glimpse of the politics of interpretation that concerned this small group of philosophers in their other roles as teachers, monastic officials, and defenders of a tradition of authoritative interpretation.

NOTES

1. E. Conze, "Prašāstrasena's Ārya-Prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya-tīkā," in *Buddhist Studies in Honour of I.B. Horner*, ed. L. Cousins et al. (Dordrecht: 1974) 51–61.

2. S. Beal, trans., *Si-yu-ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World* (1884; reprint ed. Delhi: 1969) vol. 2, 223–225.

3. As G. Schopen has shown in "The Phrase 'sa prthivīpradeśaś caityabhūto bhavet' in the *Vajracchedikā*: Notes on the Cult of the Book in Mahāyāna," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 17 (1975) 147–181.

4. The seven commentaries make up Otani nos. 5217–5223 of *The Peking Tibetan Tripitaka (PTT)*. References to the commentaries in this article are based on the reprint edition of the Peking Tibetan Tripitaka (Tokyo and Kyoto: 1957), volume 94, folios 285–350.

5. As has been pointed out by D.S. Ruegg in *The Literature of the Madhyamaka School of Philosophy in India* (Wiesbaden: 1981) 107.

6. L.O. Gomez, "Indian Materials on the Doctrine of Sudden Enlighten-

ment," in W. Lai and L.R. Lancaster, eds., *Early Ch'an in China and Tibet* (Berkeley 1983) 393–434.

7. The first *Bhāvanākrama* is edited by G. Tucci in *Minor Buddhist Texts* II (*Serie Orientale Roma* 9) (1958) 185–229, the third *Bhāvanākrama* in *Minor Buddhist Texts* III (*Serie Orientale Roma* 43) (1971). Vimalamitra's works are found in *The Peking Tibetan Tripitaka*, Otani nos. 5306 and 5334.

8. H. Eimer, *Berichte über das Leben des Atiśa (Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna)*, (Wiesbaden: 1977), and *Rnam Thar Rgyas Pa: Materialien zu einer Biographie des Atiśa (Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna)* 2 vols. (Wiesbaden: 1979).

9. H. Eimer, *Bodhipathapradīpa: Ein Lehrgedicht des Atiśa (Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna) in der tibetischen Überlieferung* (Wiesbaden: 1978).

10. An early version of the controversy is found in M.D. Eckel, "Bhāvaviveka's Critique of Yogācāra Philosophy in Chapter XXV of the Prajñāpradīpa," in C. Lindtner, ed., *Miscellanea Buddhica* (Copenhagen: 1985) 25–75. For a later version of the same controversy see M.D. Eckel, *Jñānagarbha's Commentary on the Distinction Between the Two Truths* (Albany: 1986).

11. This brief summary of the positions of both schools is based on Bhāvaviveka's outline of the argument. Bhāvaviveka based his own presentation of the Yogācāra position on such early Yogācāra texts as the *Madhyāntavibhāga*, but he recast the position in a way that highlighted the differences between the two schools.

12. *PTT*, vol. 94, 305a/6–305b/2.

13. *PTT*, vol. 94, 344b/8–345a/4.

14. B.K. Matilal, *Epistemology, Logic, and Grammar in Indian Philosophical Analysis* (The Hague: 1971) 162–165. The distinction between *pariyudāsa pratishedha* and its opposite (*prasajya pratishedha*) is discussed in a number of works on Mahāyāna philosophy. See, for example, my "Bhāvaviveka's Critique," 71 and *Jñānagarbha's Commentary*, 126. The most complete explanation of the concept is still Y. Kajiyama's *An Introduction to Buddhist Philosophy: An Annotated Translation of the Text of the Tarkabhāṣā of Mokṣākaragupta* (Kyoto: 1966) 38–39. On the idea that the negation "leaving existence intact" see G.M. Nagao, "'What Remains' in Śūnyatā: A Yogācāra Interpretation of Emptiness", in M. Kiyota, ed., *Mahāyāna Buddhist Meditation: Theory and Practice* (Honolulu: 1978) 66–82.

15. The translation is adapted from my "Bhāvaviveka's Critique," pp. 73–74. The argument is repeated at the end of Bhāvaviveka's response to the Yogācāra in the fifth chapter of the *Tarkajvālā*. An edition and translation of the chapter by Lindtner and myself is in preparation.

16. Eckel, *Jñānagarbha's Commentary*, 71.

17. *PTT*, vol. 94, 331b/8–332b/3.

18. The first argument against the ultimate arising of things is found in the first chapter of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās* and throughout the subsequent Madhyamaka tradition. The second argument is mentioned by Atiśa in the *Bodhipathapradīpa* as one of the four great proofs of Emptiness. See Eimer, *Bodhipathapradīpa*, 128–9. English translation in R. Sherburne, trans., *A Lamp for the Path and Commentary by Atiśa* (London: 1983), 136.