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The Range of the Bodhisattva: A Mahāyāna Sūtra

Reviewed by Stephen L. Jenkins

Humboldt State University
Stephen.jenkins@humboldt.edu

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cozort@dickinson.edu

A Review of *The Range of the Bodhisattva:* *A Mahāyāna Sūtra*

Stephen L. Jenkins¹

The Range of the Bodhisattva: A Mahāyāna Sūtra. Trans. Lozang Jamspal. New York: American Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2011, ISBN 978-1935011071 (cloth), \$42.00.

This *sūtra* is a superb example of Mahāyāna literature with a finely crafted, coherent, and self-conscious narrative structure, which includes the extraordinary characterization of its main protagonist as a non-Buddhist *nirgrantha*. It has been the center of a number of recent studies that focus on its instructions for the compassionate conduct of warfare, corporal punishment, and torture. However, this should not distract us from the general literary quality of the text and its bearing on a wider range of interests, such as the *ekayāna* doctrine, the perfections, pure lands, skillful means, the perception of heterodox traditions, and the cult of the book.

Since this is a review for the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, I will focus on the ethical content of the translation. A great deal is at stake in the interpretation of the Buddhist ethics of violence, both for historical interpretation and current Buddhist communities engulfed in conflict. In

¹ Humboldt State University. Stephen.jenkins@humboldt.edu.

the “Series Editor’s Preface,” Robert Thurman writes that the *sūtra* “provides an important corrective to the popular misconception that Buddhist principles of nonviolence are naïve and impractical” (ix).

The exaggeration of Buddhist pacifism has led to a wide variety of distortions. For scholars, the view that Buddhist thought was somehow incompatible with power politics or relatively unable to support state violence, particularly in comparison with the robust eroticization of violence in Śaivite contexts, has supported the impression that Buddhism failed to survive in India because of its pacifist ethics. [This is not an argument to be casually dismissed, but it is one that should be balanced by a consideration of the content of this *sūtra* and other sources that we too often ignore.] It was earlier argued by Hindu nationalists that the ethics of Buddhism and Jainism had weakened India to invaders and colonialists. Today, it is a popular idea among young Tibetan refugees that Buddhist pacifism is responsible for the loss of their homeland. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, whose pacifism has a great deal to do with Tolstoy and Gandhi, is misread as typically Buddhist, when in fact he is quite extraordinary.

The power of the Western assumption that Buddhism is unconditionally pacifist, a concept attractive to the colonized cultures on which it projected moral superiority, obstructs Buddhists who are trying to sort out their ethics in violent contemporary situations throughout the Buddhist world. I have been told many times, when seeking the help of superb native scholars in finding and translating Buddhist narratives on violence, that such passages cannot possibly exist. Scholarship in this area has often been met by hostility and incredulity. Many recent works on the Buddhist ethics of violence present themselves as exposés of the “dark side” of Buddhism, as if we should be surprised by the normal humanity of Buddhist peoples. Certainly Buddhists, like all peoples, often fail to live up to their highest ideals, but too often it is their failure to satisfy as a template for Western fantasies of pacifism that is the real source of disappointment, not their own sacred traditions, which are far

more nuanced and complex. Textual sources that support violence are often dismissed as apocryphal, allegorical, obscure, or limited to certain schools or tantric influences, echoed in Thurman's honest expression of reluctance in accepting that this sūtra goes as far as it does. This further supports the notion that Buddhist violence is inconsistent with its ideology. Violent Buddhists, even when their violence is a long-term function of monastic institutions, are too easily regarded as in bad faith with their tradition or the subjects of false consciousness.

This sūtra offers sophisticated practical thought on violence, arguing that compassionate internal governance and benevolent international relations enhance political security and prosperity. The goodwill, trust, and economic well being of international neighbors are vital political assets. Just as domestic poverty leads to violence and moral degeneration domestically, international insecurity and exploitation are seeds of violent conflict. Exploitive international relations create conditions of hostility that engender the arising of dangerous enemies and undermine support from potential allies. Exploitive internal governance undermines the economy and creates a culture of tax evasion, rather than generosity. Rapacious greed ultimately diminishes the treasury. Failure to exhaust all other possibilities, such as negotiation, intimidation and bribes, leads to unnecessary warfare, which is generally regarded in Indian political ethics as a dangerous mistake entailing great risk even for a superior military force.

In his preface, Thurman claims "in the case that a king was able to expel an invading neighbor's army from his kingdom, he was explicitly prohibited from pursuing that army into the territory of the neighbor in a counter-invasion. The king was enjoined to stop his army at his own frontier and, instead of invading the enemy to punish him for the original invasion, to impose a peace treaty . . ." (x). But these ideas are not noted in the book being reviewed or by other scholarly studies, and there appear to be no such explicit statements in the sūtra.

The scripture is largely silent about wars of aggression, but it is quite clear that a king has the right to suppress attempts by kings within his area of conquest to resist his authority and he may confiscate their properties. Any king that resists the sovereignty of a true Buddhist *dharmarāja* is morally wrong and merits forceful domination. Xue Yu's work shows the longer version of the *sūtra* to be even harsher in regard to controlling vassals. When warfare is conducted, casualties should be avoided, particularly enemy casualties; destruction of infrastructure and the natural environment should be minimized; and prisoners should be treated with humanity. Before dismissing such concerns as politically naïve, we might consider, with some shock and awe, how ignoring each of these has been an enormously costly mistake for the victor in recent wars.

Along with protecting his people and attempting to capture his enemies alive, the third chief concern of a Buddhist king going to war should be to win. Rather than arguing that political pragmatism must yield to ascetic ideals of compassionate pacifism, the scripture maintains that a measured and principled use of violence, governed by compassionate intentions, enhances security and serves the purposes of acquiring and retaining power, while maintaining moral integrity. Just as in personal ethics, where Buddhist texts argue that compassion is self-interested, the *sūtra* claims that compassionate state policy is ultimately self-beneficial and rejects the idea that absolutizing national or personal interest is actually in the national or personal interest.

Michael Zimmermann's rich and ground breaking study of the *sūtra* published by Sokka Gakkai in 2000, which was unaware of Jamspal's 1991 Columbia dissertation, was unfortunately missed in turn twelve years later as a resource for the introduction to Jamspal's publication as a book. I learned of these studies only after doing my own translation work with Dr. Sangye Tendar Naga at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in 2005. Zimmermann's research has the crucial superiority of access to the Chinese version and is an excellent study highly recom-

mended for reading with the text. My own work related the text to broader research showing that compassionate killing is a normative Mahāyāna idea and concrete comparative attention to the *dharmasāstra* literature. Xue Yu's recent article draws on the longer Chinese version of the text, about 100 folios rather than sixty, which seems to have expanded almost in the mode of a commentary. The longer version apparently contains *tathāgatagarbha* thought, while the shorter is in the Madhyamaka mode. An analysis of the relationship between the two versions would be extremely valuable.

Jamspal's translation is generally quite consistent with other studies. However, the importance of the Chinese can be seen where Zimmermann correctly translated a term for capturing the enemy alive, missed by both myself and Jamspal. It could also be argued that Jamspal sometimes softens the translations, for instance, in the treatment of punitive violence. The limits on compassionate punitive violence, intended to reform the victim, exclude anything that permanently damages the victim, such as maiming, amputation of limbs, scourging of sense organs, and death. This is much more constrained than what has been historically practiced in Buddhist polities, which generally practiced all these including the death penalty, but still leaves great latitude for inflicting intense punishment. The text describes actions a king should take if verbal chastisement is ineffectual. These include binding, imprisonment, fining, and exile. They also include terms for severe physical punishment. Jamspal translates the list, *brteg pa dang | bsdigs ba dang | gnod par bgyi ba dang | sbyo ba dang | brgyad bkag pa*, as "he should try warning, scolding, rebuking, or beating" (53). He appears to leave "*gnod par bgyi ba*," untranslated, which would normally be rendered as "harming" and considerably softens the preceding direction to "act harshly" with "should try." Zimmermann chose: "behaves harshly by [inflicting] harsh forms [of punishments such as] . . . beating, threatening, harming (!) [sic], scolding, reproaching" (194). This could already be fairly read as torture. Both appear to take *bsdigs ba* as "warning" or "threatening," but in addition to "frightening [often with a weapon, Sanskrit *tarj*]," it also has

meanings such as “sting” [*sdig-pa* being the word for scorpion] or “whip,” [Sanskrit *taḍ*] and “torment” which seem appropriate here between two similar terms. It might be rendered: “[He should harshly take severe action such as] beating, tormenting, harming, scolding and reproaching.” In reference to the longer version, Xue Yu simply generalizes with the word “torture.”

Reluctance to use such words is natural considering longstanding guiding assumptions about Buddhist ethics. As indicated by Zimmermann’s exclamation point above, the sūtra sharply challenges our expectations by advocating compassionately inflicting pain and harm, short of permanent damage, to cure a criminal of bad behavior. This is explained with the analogies of a parent punishing a child or a doctor taking severe action to cure someone; both inflict pain with compassionate intentions. This may seem to be an especially liberal Mahāyāna perspective, but if we consider the *Milindapañha*, which explicitly advocates torture, scourging, amputation and the death penalty as punishments, the Mahāyānist approach here is actually much less harsh. The guidelines of the sūtra are also considerably more moderate than the past practices of Buddhist nations, including Tibet.

The title of the text is a source of considerable confusion. Although it is broadly cited in classical *śāstras* as *Satyaka-parivarta*, it is catalogued under the name *Bodhisattva gocara-upāya-viṣaya vikurvaṇa-nirdeśa Sūtra*. Jampal repeats an error found in the Tibetan catalogues by misspelling the title with *vikurvāṇa*. The Tibetan phonetic spelling in the colophons is consistently *vikurvaṇa*. He translates the full Sanskrit title as *Noble Revelation of Transformational Activities by Skillful Means in the Range of the Bodhisattva* (xix). I suggest “The Noble Teaching through Manifestations on the Subject of Skillful Means in the Bodhisattva’s Field of Activity.” The text repeatedly identifies and validates its main teacher, Satyavādin, a *nirgrantha*, as a miraculous transformation or manifestation of the Buddha’s skillful means. As in other sūtra titles ending with *nirdeśa*, the title identifies who teaches it. Jampal commendably chose a book

title, *The Range of the Bodhisattva*, honoring the original text, rather than choosing a title that privileges the importance of the translation and analysis as in other recent sūtra studies.

The editing unfortunately includes many basic errors, including ones that should have been caught by software, such as the failure to capitalize the first word of a sentence and the simple agreement of verb and noun (xix). On page 35, about six lines of print are blank and some of the text is missing. The introductory materials and appendices make no effort to engage or utilize recent sūtra studies and translations, even those directly related to this sūtra. The notes and appendices are rich with valuable references to primary texts that will be beneficial to others who work on this sūtra, but there is also much that may mislead some readers. For instance, it includes an extended discussion of Śāntideva's two types of *bodhicitta* that suggests such ideas are assumed or present in the text. Elsewhere it is assumed that the distinction between the selflessness of persons and the selflessness of *dharmas* is understood in the text, when that distinction does not occur there. At times it seems to be written more as a traditional commentary, as when block quotations of Candrakīrti suffice to explain key terms or categories without any other introduction or explanation. Appendix IV, "Nirgranthas in the time of the Buddha," usefully notes that there is a *nirgrantha* by the same name in the *nikāyas*, but treats this figure as another historical character rather than looking to the *nikāyas* for characters later redeployed in Mahāyāna sūtras. When Saccaka, a *nighaṅṭhaputta* in the *Cūlasaccakasuttaṃ*, hesitates to accept the Buddha's key point that kings have the right and are worthy to execute criminals, Vajrapāṇi, Śākayamuni's armed bodyguard, threatens to smash his head. Vajrapāṇi is generally identified with Indra and his behavior models that of an ideal king. In the later Mahāyāna text, we find him again involved in related issues of appropriate violence. Recognizing these characters is often a key to understanding their function in the text.

The loose association of common Buddhist ideas found in both the Aśokan edicts and the sūtra, for instance, that a king should visit ascetics, that animals should be treated with mercy, etc., is used as a basis for suggesting a date for the text. Although the Aśoka of the *avadānas* and other Buddhist narratives played a large role in the Buddhist imagination, there is very little evidence that the Aśoka of the edicts had any such role. In a number of cases, the Aśoka of the edicts and the Aśoka of legend are not differentiated. Jamspal suggests that, when stating that universal kings have no need for scriptures, the compiler of the sūtra was thinking of Aśoka's own independence from *śāstras*, since he is thought by scholars of epigraphy to have personally composed the edicts (xxxix).

In declaring that both the sūtra and Aśoka had the "great ecumenical goal of unifying all religious sects," it should be remembered that Aśoka is actually remembered in Buddhist narrative traditions as a perpetrator of the mass murder of thousands of *nirgranthas*, well after his conversion to Buddhism, and the historical Aśoka has the interest of a successful conqueror in pacifying his realm and suppressing all forms of internal discord. The section of the sūtra on *ekayāna* is replete with expressions of superiority and domination. The text's claim that all heterodox sects appear merely through the skillful means of the Buddha is remarkable, but is clearly an attempt to absorb them into a Buddhist master narrative and would hardly be attractive as an ecumenical ideal.

As hinted in the title, the text shares with a number of other sūtras the idea that this world is actually the *buddhaḥsetra* of Śākyamuni and as such it is the continuing sphere of influence for his skillful means. Since this world is actually a buddha-field, there can be no opposing dharma within it except that which is empowered by the Buddha, just as the kingdom of a universal monarch cannot contain an opposing army. It is, in fact, impossible that there are any competing heterodox movements. Their appearance is merely through the skillful means of the Buddha. They are generously said to be wise, accomplished in meditation, and beneficial to the maturation of beings, but also to be as out-

shone as fireflies by the sun. Whatever they offer is merely through the power of the Buddha, and, in the gradual unfolding of various *upāya* that characterizes the *ekayāna*, the heterodox are even lower than those committed to the lesser vehicle. However it also teaches that, as with the main protagonist of this *sūtra*, even the teachings of the heterodox may be *buddhavacana*. A comparison to heterodox teachers voicing *buddhavacana* found in other *sūtras*, such as the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, might be valuable. Satyavādin's characterization resonates with the iconoclastic spirit of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, whose main teacher is a wealthy merchant who frequents gambling houses and brothels. Here also, *bodhisattvas* may appear to be ignorant and worldly, thrive in the bustling crowd, display wealth, and sport amongst women. Satyavādin is said to have taken the form of virtually every kind of living thing from monk to *mahorāga* in order to mature sentient beings.

The text has a high literary quality; it is remarkably coherent with a well-crafted narrative frame that is consistent throughout the text. It lacks the jumbled feel of mass interpolations typical of many *sūtras*, and there is more to its composition than a fleshed out *matṛka* or another reconfiguration of standard tropes and motifs. Its conceptual coherence is more striking with every reading. No wonder that it is so broadly cited and recommended by the likes of the great Tsong Khapa. Its sense of humor, daring, and use of characters seem similar to the *Vimalakīrti*, but it does not have the same exuberant fascination with the visionary and miraculous. After Satyavādin has just taught the famously vicious King Caṇḍapradīyā not to employ capital punishment, he narrowly escapes death himself for criticizing the king for being too wrathful. After he appeases the king by admitting that he himself is too outspoken with unwise (!) people, they decide to go for an audience with the Buddha. Caṇḍapradīyā promptly declares that all those who do not show up will be executed. Surely this is meant to be funny.

The *sūtra* is also highly self-conscious, both in its internal narrative construction and the consideration of its own narrative as a text. It

tells its own story of remaining hidden in a box enshrined in a *stūpa*, calling itself the “Secret of the Tathāgata,” and reminding us of archaeological finds of texts in containers and all the legends of hidden texts from the *Prajñāpāramitā* to the *gTer-ma* tradition. It also describes itself as being relatively ignored, reminiscent of the Lotus’s strident sense of being unappreciated, and shows great concern, through an extended discussion, that the audience be prepared to receive it favorably. Since it is not understandable by those devoted to an inferior vehicle or to those who are morally inferior, the text represents a severe danger to those who might suffer a terrible *karmic* fate by disrespecting it. It is buried like a dangerous book of magic that can destroy those unprepared to open it.

The sūtra’s particular take on the *ekayāna* doctrine is that all the teachings offered by the Buddha are phases in training, just as a master craftsman gradually teaches his discipline through a graded series of techniques. So there is also the sense that the teachings of the text should be offered when the time is ripe for them. Jampal notes that the sūtra makes no mention of text worship, but it does offer vast merit for reading, contemplating, and writing it in the form of a book, etc. (xlvi). It also describes the dangers of telling the text to those who might disrespect it and thus suffer harmful consequences. Clearly, combined with its reflective self-awareness as a physical object with its own narrative, it has at least nascent aspects of the cult of the book.

A first translation is an especially valuable and challenging contribution, and it is more important to get such work out than to attempt a definitive treatment that leaves no room for improvement and further study. Regardless of the fact that the editorial quality and critical analysis are not to normal academic standards, all future work on this important text will be indebted to Lozang Jampal’s translation, which belongs in every Buddhist Studies library. The edition generously offers a topical outline of the text, extensive notes, an index, and a thirty-two-page glossary separately indexing Tibetan, Sanskrit and English terms. After its long wait for an audience ready to hear its extraordinary

teachings, Lozang Jamspal has opened up the “Secret of the Tathāgata” in these latter days of the dharma.

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