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*Power, Wealth and Women in Indian Mahāyāna
Buddhism: The Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra*

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A Review of *Power, Wealth and Women in
Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism: The
Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra*

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Power, Wealth and Women in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra. By Douglas Osto. New York: Routledge, 2008, xvi + 177 pages, ISBN978-0-415-50008-1 (paperback), \$49.95.

Douglas Osto's study of the *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra* provides a welcome introduction to this unusually dramatic and visually ornate Mahāyāna Buddhist text. The *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra* tells the story of Sudhana, a merchant's son, who sets off in quest of enlightenment, serially visiting and revering fifty-two spiritual teachers or, as they are referred to in the text, "good friends" (*kalyāṇamitra*). The good friends represent many walks of life and include monks, grammarians, bankers, royal ladies, kings, and goddesses. Osto's systematic analysis makes use of narrative theory to reveal the underlying architecture of and make explicit the main concepts advanced in this bewilderingly complex piece of religious literature. Starting from the premise that texts must be read in

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relationship to social systems, Osto seeks to wed the text to its social context in a way that elucidates the themes of the text, the nature of its material origins, and its uses. To this end, Osto focuses his analysis on the three themes of power, wealth, and women.

Throughout his monograph, Osto is laudably transparent regarding his theoretical and methodological approach. Following a brief introduction to the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, scholarship on the text, and the nature of texts in general, Osto sets out to describe the particular vision of reality represented in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* in his second chapter. He is interested not only in the text's view of transcendence, but also in its arrangement of the same in relationship to self and society. He calls such an arrangement "worldview," defining it as: "a totalizing and generalized theory of existence that constructs meaning out of experience through establishing the relationships among reality, society and the individual" (14). Taking the topics of "reality," "society," and "individual" in turn, Osto marshals textual evidence to document a worldview structured along the two parallel but inconceivably interpenetrating axes of immanence and transcendence. In this *Gaṇḍavyūha* worldview, the Dharma realm is held to be imminent in phenomena, a hierarchically arranged spiritual elite infiltrates and mimics the structures of ordinary human society, and the elite individual simultaneously occupies a particular and local form body (*rūpakāya*), and a transmundane dharma body (*dharmakāya*).

Chapter Three, "Narrative," introduces the conceptual apparatus of narratologist Mieke Bal, which Osto thereafter makes use of in his textual analysis. Bal provides Osto a generic set of concepts for analyzing narrative. For instance, she posits, "A story is a fabula that is presented in a certain manner. A *fabula* is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors" (38). Other concepts from Bal's work include "the power," which is the actor that enables the hero to reach the goal of the fabula, and "focalization," the point of view through which the story is told. Although Osto's

employment of Bal's apparatus sometimes feels cumbersome, intrusive, and extraneous to his argument, it has the virtue of making explicit the nature of the text *qua* text. Oslo wishes to highlight the complexity of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* as a particular type of cultural object, a literary text, and introducing Bal's theoretical scaffolding advances this aim.

The next chapters on the topics of power, wealth, and women comprise the heart of Osto's exposition. In the first of these, Osto uses the criteria of weight (percentage of text devoted to topic), order of appearance, and descriptive content to evaluate the status of the various good friends Sudhana visits. In Osto's analysis, the relative status of the good friends provides a map of the spiritual hierarchy envisioned in the text. This spiritual hierarchy seems to coordinate with rather than subvert ordinary social hierarchies. For instance, Maitreya, one of the most spiritually elite "good friends," is metaphorically depicted as a crown prince. In the chapter on "wealth," Osto gives detailed evidence of the text's extensive use of the metaphor of material riches to show spiritual status, and draws attention to its teachings on how wealth is to be understood and enjoyed in compliance with the virtuous life. In the chapter on women, Osto gives examples of female "good friends," arguing that, unlike many other Mahāyāna and mainstream texts, the *Gaṇḍavyūha* keys female beauty to high spiritual status.

One of Osto's starting premises, following André Lefevere, is that the production of a text requires some form of patronage and that "for a text to survive its ideology cannot directly oppose the views of its patrons" (114). In his penultimate chapter, Osto provides a summary overview of external historical evidence on the social context of Mahāyāna literature in India during the first half of the first millennium, suggesting that politically elite men and women played an important role in its production. He is particularly interested in the inscriptional evidence for royal female patronage of Buddhism from Nāgārjunikoṇḍa. For Osto, that the *Gaṇḍavyūha*'s vision of spiritual society does not challenge but mimics mundane power structures, that it validates wealth

as a sign of virtue, and that it depicts elite, wealthy, and knowledgeable women in positive ways, all constitute good internal evidence regarding its social context. Arguing backwards from internal evidence, and forward from external evidence, Osto posits the existence of wealthy, politically elite, female patronage for the *Gaṇḍavyūha* in his conclusion.

Although Osto's thesis regarding the possible social context of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* is helpful and seems plausible, its force and interest is sometimes diminished by the manner in which it is presented. Osto's way of arguing his thesis often seems simultaneously underdeveloped and over-engineered. For instance, his chapter on "power" gives a full Buddhological discussion, with many textual examples, of the *Gaṇḍavyūha*'s idea of *adhiṣṭhāna* (base, authority, power), and makes ample use of Bel's sophisticated narratological apparatus. It does not contain, however, any developed discussion of what Osto himself intends by the term "power," in what way exactly his definition encompasses political or financial might, and how more general meanings of the term "power" relate to the spiritual power depicted in the text. This is strange, considering Osto's interest in connecting Mahāyāna texts to their political and social contexts, and his assertion that such texts contain embedded ideologies that reflect the values of their patrons. If we are to believe that this is so, and it does seem likely, he must provide some argument, beyond the presence of royal metaphors for Buddhahood, for why we should read political and economic meanings into the *Gaṇḍavyūha*'s notion of spiritual "power." This is just one example of a general pattern in Osto's work. I suspect that these types of issues could have been resolved had the manuscript been submitted to a more rigorous process of revision, as the bones of the Osto's scholarship are solid. Indeed, I look forward to reading future work by this interesting scholar.

There is much to appreciate in Osto's monograph. The first five chapters on "worldview," "narrative," "power," "wealth," and "women" provide extensive textual analysis, citing many particular passages from

the text. Regardless of how one comes down regarding the persuasive force of his argument, his detailed exposition of the text, which takes into account a number of redactions and translations, must be viewed as a valuable contribution to scholarship on the *Gaṇḍavyūha* and the Mahāyāna period of Indian Buddhism in general. For this reason, this book is a must-read for graduate students and specialists interested in debates regarding the origins and nature of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India. Also, Osto's writing style is clear, though sometimes repetitive, and he always makes his aims explicit. These qualities mean that excerpts from Osto's book would be suitable for advanced undergraduates studying the nature and function of religious literature in ancient India, Mahāyāna cosmology, soteriology, ontology, or gender in Buddhism.