

Padmakara Translation Group, *A Feast of the Nectar of the Supreme Vehicle: An Explanation of the Ornament of the Mahāyāna Sūtras, Maitreya's Mahāyāsūtrālaṃkāra with a Commentary by Jamgön Mipham*. Boulder, Colorado: Shambala Press. 976 pages. ISBN 978-1611804676. US \$69.95.

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Jamgön Mipham (1846-1912) was a celebrated and prolific author of the Tibetan Nyingma tradition, and an early exponent of the Tibetan Rimé (Tib. *ris med*) or 'non-sectarian' movement that worked to bridge doctrinal differences between Tibetan schools in the late nineteenth century. The present volume is an almost one thousand-page tome containing an English translation of Mipham's commentary, produced in the final year of his life, on an important compendium of Indian Mahāyānist teachings: what our translators render as the '*Ornament of the Mahāyāna Sūtras*', or in Sanskrit the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*. Mipham's commentary is preceded by a translation of all, nearly eight-hundred verses, of the Indian root text, and is followed by a number of appendices that provide further details about texts and terminology on which Mipham's commentary relies.

The introduction to the volume details a traditional Tibetan account of the authorship of the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*, namely its attribution to Asaṅga, in the fourth century. He is traditionally held to have been the amanuensis of the *bodhisattva* Maitreya. The verses of the Sanskrit *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* (henceforth MSA) are divided into twenty-one chapters (their divisions differing slightly in Tibetan translation), and are concerned with the legitimacy and pre-eminence of the Mahāyāna over 'mainstream' Buddhist teaching. Its perspective is that of the Yogācāra tradition, committed to the principle that all phenomena are reducible to activities of the mind

(*cittamātra*). However, the sequentially first concern of the MSA is the defence of literature fundamental to the Mahāyāna tradition in general, and its authenticity as an authoritative ‘vehicle’ of teachings that should be attributed to the Buddha. Among many other topics, its verses go on to laud the value of a *bodhisattva* as something like a regent of the Buddha’s authority, the importance of cultivating the knowledge that all phenomena are fundamentally non-dual (*advaya*), and the consequence that all sentient beings must be of the same fundamental nature as a Buddha. Hence the MSA offers an apologetic for the Mahāyāna as a heterogeneous phenomenon, and here and there attempts to reconcile seemingly conflicting teachings found across the breadth of Mahāyānist *sūtra* compositions: for example, the notion that the Buddha taught only a ‘single vehicle’ (*ekayāna*), in contrast to the more conventional ‘three vehicle’ model (among which the Mahāyāna, leading to the status of a Buddha, is supreme). Other recurring themes are the assertion that followers of the Mahāyāna constitute the best children or ‘heirs’ of the Buddha, and that the exponent of the ‘great vehicle’ is one who pursues the ‘great purpose’ (*mahārtha*; Tib. *don chen*): the liberation of all sentient beings from recurring transmigration.

The MSA boasts rich imagery and plentiful similes, often in descriptions of the qualities of Buddhas or *bodhisattvas*, though these are frequently presented in particularly terse language that requires explanation. To understand both these and the terminological idiosyncrasies of the MSA, students of the text have usually turned to its prose commentary (*bhāṣya*), extant also in Sanskrit and attributed to Vasubandhu (traditionally held to have been Asaṅga’s brother, so associated also with the fourth century). Preserved only in Tibetan translation is a further Indian commentary that attends to both the verse MSA and to Vasubandhu’s prose: the *Sūtralaṃkāravṛttibhāṣya* (Tib. *mdo sde rgyan gyi ’grel bshad*), which is attributed to the Yogācāra master Sthiramati. The latter may have lived in the sixth century, but is sometimes considered to have been Vasubandhu’s student. It is Sthiramati’s commentary (known for its extraordinary length, and called in Mipham’s text the ‘*Great Commentary*’) that forms the basis for Mipham’s own comparatively concise exposition of the MSA. Hence while Mipham’s reading of the MSA is a product of a much later period, and of another context in which affirming the fundamental unity of Mahāyānist teaching was of particular concern, his work has one foot planted firmly in the Indian Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda tradition and its interpretation of the Mahāyāna in the middle of the first millennium.

The longest and most detailed chapters of Mipham's commentary generally accompany the lengthier sections of the MSA: those concerned with the status and various bodies proper to a Buddha (chapter 10) and with correct interpretation of impermanence and emptiness (chapter 19). Three chapters of Mipham's commentary are particularly long relative to the number of verses of the MSA that they elucidate: those concerned with the defence of the Mahāyāna (chapter 1), with 'thatness' (*tathatā*: Tib. *de bzhin nyid*) or reality (chapter 7) and with the cultivation of non-dual awareness (chapter 12). One of Mipham's interests is to articulate the compatibility of the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra (or Cittamātra) systems of philosophy, and he argues that any disagreement between the two hinges on whether or not the mind exists on the level of ultimate truth. As the MSA teaches about the fundamentally non-dual nature of consciousness, Mipham finds Asaṅga and the Madhyamaka to be in agreement (the verses of the MSA, unlike Vasubandhu's commentary, make no mention of other challenging points of Yogācāra doctrine, such as the status of the substratum consciousness, *ālayavijñāna*). Here Mipham makes clear his position in relation to other Tibetan scholastic disagreements: he refutes the interpretation of Yogācāra that considers the mind to be not empty (or rather 'empty of other': *gzhan stong*), but acknowledges that self-illuminating gnosis, devoid of any dualistic sense of subject or object, is fundamental to both Madhyamaka and Mantrayāna (i.e. tantric) perspectives on Buddhist practice and purpose. Elsewhere (chapter 12), Mipham follows the MSA – against many voices in the Madhyamaka tradition – by adhering to the position that there exist discrete modes of liberation for *arhats*, solitary realizers (*pratyekabuddhas*) and Buddhas, and that the doctrine of a single vehicle was taught only for the benefit of certain sentient beings.

In so far as the translators have sought to accurately convey the content of the Tibetan form of the MSA for a Western audience, they have certainly succeeded. The translation of its verses is accurate and eloquent, though by their nature many of these verses will mean little to a reader who does not resort to some commentary or other. Mipham's explanation of them is lucid and resourceful, and draws upon a wealth of wider Buddhist canonical literature. In supplementary footnotes our translators provide further references to both Vasubandhu's and Sthiramati's commentaries on the root verses, in each instance relying on our Tibetan translations of these works while remaining conscious of their Indian origins and earlier linguistic context. Other footnotes justify translations of particularly unclear lines or phrases, and defend (infrequent) minor amendments to Mipham's text. The volume includes a very clear glossary, which supplies both

the Tibetan terms underlying the English translation and the Indic terminology that these Tibetan terms usually render. Other appendices present elements on the path of the *bodhisattva* and an outline of Indian Buddhist cosmography.

If anything is lacking from this very rich volume, it is perhaps some greater discussion of the place of Mipham's commentary on the MSA in his wider oeuvre. Mipham was notable in the Nyingma tradition for the attention that he devoted to Indian commentarial literature – masterpieces attributed to founding figures of both the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra systems, as well as a great many other works besides – which he explained with great pedagogical acumen. The MSA is a pertinent choice for an ecumenical commentary not only because of its supposed authorship by Maitreya (than whom there could be no greater authority besides a living Buddha), but because it constitutes one of our earliest systematic defences of the Mahāyāna as a mature and knowingly diverse treasury of teachings. The translation of Mipham's commentary is aimed at an audience acquainted with Buddhism seen through its Tibetan forms, and one that is interested in the manner in which Tibetan scholarship has sought to unpack and harmonise different strands of Indian Mahāyānist thought. Indeed, the MSA is an early instance of Indian Buddhist authors attempting to do a very similar thing: in its original context, to defend the value of the Mahāyāna from its detractors, while explaining how a Yogācāra interpretation of its diverse teachings is best suited to formalize all that has been received from the Buddha.