



Paving the Great Way: Vasubandhu's Unifying Buddhist Philosophy

Jonathan C Gold

Columbia University Press, 61 West 62 Street, New York, NY 10023, USA. Website: <https://cup.columbia.edu>. 2014. 336 pp. \$65. HB. ISBN 9780231168267.

This book states: 'This book is a study of the philosophical work of Vasubandhu, a fourth/fifth-century Indian monk who was perhaps the greatest Buddhist philosopher after the Buddha. Vasubandhu's works are well known in Indian, Tibetan, and East Asian Buddhist traditions. From his time to this day, and without a break, his writings have been widely cited and commented upon, his arguments used and debated, and his accomplishments praised. He is a familiar figure in contemporary Buddhist studies as well... Everyone knows Vasubandhu. What is remarkable, then, is that we do not, by now, know Vasubandhu very well' (1).

And after reading this book, we neither know Vasubandhu nor his works, forget about knowing either 'very well'. And the frivolity that is this book begins with the contradiction that Vasubandhu is admittedly stated as 'perhaps the greatest Buddhist philosopher after Buddha' and then in the same page, Jonathan C Gold goes on to term Nagarjuna, Asanga, Dignaga and Dharmakirti to be of 'comparable stature' to Vasubandhu.

Gold insults the Buddha, we are unsure which Buddha, as being a mere philosopher in the first paragraph of the book to ultimately compare the Buddha and Vasubandhu to Nietzsche and Freud (221). Is it not ironical that first this Princeton savant of Buddhism praises Vasubandhu as the greatest Buddhist philosopher above all others and then says that four other Buddhist thinkers are as good as Vasubandhu? Then to prove his non-existent domain-expertise in continental philosophy, Gold says in his first endnote that Vasubandhu was a 'fox' of Isaiah Berlin (249).

Within the context of the *Jatakas* and other Buddhist corpora, to even think of comparing Vasubandhu to a metaphorical fox shows, to put it mildly, a reprehensible lack of Eastern epistemology.

Vasubandhu anticipated Vachaspati Mishra, who is acknowledged to be a '*sarva-tantra-svatantra*; free from being influenced by different disciplines that one deals with'. That is, Mishra was a scholar with a mastery of every knowledge-domain he studied without becoming biased towards any one of those archaeologies of knowledge. These shows of faux scholarship, like comparing Vasubandhu to Berlin's 'fox', mar(k)s the book under review.

To illustrate this point further, one needs to closely read Gold's chapter 'Agency and the Ethics of Massively Cumulative Causality' (176–213). Like his first endnote, where Gold writes, 'I do not really believe', and yet he believes enough to write on what he disbelieves; this chapter is another effort at self-aggrandisement and contradictions, written in the first person and reminiscent of his fetish for heavy-sounding chapter titles that signify nothing.

The arrogant title of the first chapter should warn any scholar to stay away from this book: 'Summarizing Vasubandhu: Should a Buddhist Philosopher have a Philosophy?' (1–21). Gold is certainly none to summarise Vasubandhu's works and someone who does not understand what philosophy means, leave alone Buddhist philosophy, is not worth our time. Of course, Buddhism has a philosophy that is distinct from other philosophies. Sunyata or emptiness is an argument or standpoint, *vada*, which needs *pramana*, valid proof. Vasubandhu certainly had a particular world view that accommodated his own spiritual journey from being a Sautrantika to being a Yogachara Buddhist. These two *vidas*, found their greatest advocate in Vasubandhu, who provided their suitable *pramanas*.

Like all Eastern philosophies, Vasubandhu's works arose out of his experiences as a Buddhist monk. Thus, they need to be assessed by someone who is within this experiential Buddhist tradition. As will be shown shortly, Gold, being just a dry structuralist ivory-tower scholar, does not understand Vasubandhu at all. This, in spite of his linguistic and other academic credentials. Contrast this book under review with Malcolm Smith's translation in *Buddhahood in this Life: The Great Commentary by Vimalamitra* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2016). Smith, though not teaching at Princeton, or, mayhap, because he is not teaching or learning there, has something original and constructive to

say in his translation. For the problematics and politics of Ivy League education and by extrapolation, professorial appointments, see Evan Gerstmann, 'The Irony of the Elite College Admissions Bribery Scandal', *Forbes*, 13 March 2019 <<https://tinyurl.com/y6d8zeom>> accessed 05 June 2019.

Now we turn to the narcissistic, hotchpotch, and hilarious chapter, 'Agency and the Ethics of Massively Cumulative Causality', to illustrate why Gold should not be read by anyone serious about Buddhism and Vasubandhu. The chapter begins thus: 'We are trapped, and destined to suffer, by the fact of our birth. Our suffering has, in fact, beginningless causes, and is properly conditioned to continue endlessly. What's more, the Buddhist denial of the personal self—ordinarily the seat of freedom—seems to deny as well the possibility of meaningful human agency. Vasubandhu, as we have seen, is repeatedly found denying agency—even agency in a single momentary event. Yet salvation is possible. It is proposed not through a new kind of agent, but through the very causal, karmic effects that have kept us imprisoned for so long. This chapter seeks to explain how this can work' (176).

Gold is incorrect in saying that Vasubandhu repeatedly denies agency and we are confused about which Buddhism is Gold speaking of when he says that Buddhism denies 'the personal self'? Dependent origination is not a denial of the personal self. Further, it is well understood within Buddhist Studies that the Buddha(s) spoke the same truth in different ways for different audiences. The *Lotus Sutra* and the *Lankavatara Sutra* are two distinct sutras meant for two distinct groups of subjects with agency. For without agency, these sutras, including Vasubandhu's religious practices qua texts, which arose out of Vasubandhu's agency, would be useless and impossible respectively. When these and other sutras, after being heard, are acted upon, only then do we have a Vasubandhu arising, the *pratityasamutpada* of Vasubandhu.

Thus, Gold is way off the mark when he accuses Vasubandhu of denying agency to the Buddhist subject. Gold's hubris as a non-Buddhist white man aspiring to teach Buddhism to the world is given away by his declaration that: 'For Buddhists, the kind of agency that is available to us sits very close to moral nihilism' (176). So Gold is not a Buddhist by his own

admission, and one wants to know who is this 'us' here? And exactly what 'kind of agency' is available to these elite us? Last this reviewer checked; even the Christian Martin Heidegger is not sure much agency is available to the being in the here and the now. It is now clear that Gold is seeking academic scores by making generalisations that mean nothing in particular. He is another Orientalist desperate for academic validation from his quid quo pro white peers. Gold writes of salvation. This is an idea not to be found in Eastern religions. Gold mixes categories that have no similarities except the fact that one suspects that Gold knows more about the topos of salvation than he knows of Buddhist nirvana.

Gold belittles the insights of the Tibetan sage Milarepa (180). He begins to talk on and on about his daughter Etta, whom he jokingly says in this supposedly serious treatise, Milarepa never met. This shows that Gold has no clue about the yogic siddhis, which Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains know all seers of the stature of Milarepa to have. Milarepa's and the Buddhist tradition's emphasis on renunciation is also mocked by Gold: 'I am supposed to realize that my attachment to my daughter is deluding me and preventing me from renouncing my home and family and pursuing *nirvāna*. But from a conventional perspective, the actual perspective from which I view my own life, to see my daughter (or my son, or my wife, or my work, etc.) as a fetter would be to deny what I experience to be the meaning of my life. This is a stark example, and that makes for some of the humor in Milarepa's poem. Surely there must be some positive karmic benefit from caring for a daughter' (180).

Instead of talking of Vasubandhu's ideas of karmic bonds or Milarepa's insights into karma, we now get to hear of what Gold thinks has karmic benefits! Because there is 'some positive karmic benefit from caring for' Etta, who likes playing basketball (205), Gold will harangue us about how great a parent he is, and how lucky all of them are to be born in the United States: 'As a parent I can take some of the credit, for having provided food and insisting on sleep. I also bought the basketball. I might like to take credit also for my daughter's genetic heritage ... having-been-born-in-the-right-place-at-the-right-time' (206).

But while Buddhists and Vasubandhu would

credit karma as part of Etta's actions, Gold concludes that in the final analysis, all these are possible due to America's scientific progress. What this reviewer finds in this book is the same old refrain of American exceptionalism. Only here, American exceptionalism is contrasted in a positive light to Gold's American non-experiential understanding of Vasubandhu's philosophy.

The depth of this book can be summarised by quoting Gold himself: 'All that we need is to know the rock we kick with our foot is empty space' (221). All that we need to know of this book is that it is bereft of coherence and meaning.

Subhasis Chattopadhyay



Illuminations

Walter Benjamin

Bodley Head, Penguin Random House, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London, SW1V 2SA. UK. Website: <https://www.penguin.co.uk/>. 2015. 272 pp. £16.99. PB. ISBN 9781847923868.

The mysterious Monsieur Chouchani, as it were, fashioned the thinking of Emmanuel Levinas among others. The less mysterious, but for Hannah Arendt's intervention, Walter Benjamin now exerts an influence over us that is more pervasive but this reviewer finds that our understanding of Benjamin has been narrow in scope. We tend to slot him as an atheist whose Marxism is akin to Max Horkheimer's and Theodor Adorno's rabid anti-populist rants. The book under review, which is part of the 'Bloomsbury Revelations' series, includes Benjamin's essay 'The Storyteller'. Unless Benjamin is quoted at some length, his difference from other atheistic existentialists will not be clear:

The earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times. ... The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and

cannot counsel others. To write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life. In the midst of life's fullness, and through the representation of this fullness, the novel gives evidence of the profound perplexity of the living. Even the first great book of the genre, *Don Quixote*, teaches how the spiritual greatness, the boldness, the helpfulness of one of the noblest of men, Don Quixote, are completely devoid of counsel and do not contain the slightest scintilla of wisdom. If now and then, in the course of the centuries, efforts have been made ... to implant instruction in the novel, these attempts have always amounted to a modification of the novel form (87).

Benjamin's implicit yearning for 'spiritual greatness' and 'wisdom' is precisely what according to Benjamin is missing from *Don Quixote*. Like Simone Weil and the popular Jacques Derrida of aporias and of eternal *différences*, Benjamin yearns for the spiritual within 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (211–44). It is a different matter that this seminal and oft-quoted essay has influenced thinkers ranging from Marshall McLuhan to Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard's contempt of popular culture as simulacra is informed by Benjamin's rejection of the popular; of the cultural perversity of the masses:

The growing proletarianization of modern man and the increasing formation of masses are two aspects of the same process. Fascism attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have a right to change property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property. The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its Führer cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values (234).

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