

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joseph Walser. *Nāgārjuna in Context: Mahāyāna Buddhism and Early Indian Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. 369 pp. \$49.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-13164-3.

Reviewed by Richard Nance (Indiana University)

Published on H-Buddhism (January, 2006)

Joseph Walser's provocative new book, *Nāgārjuna in Context*, is aptly characterized as "pioneering." As a whole, the book is rich and rewarding. It is also, however, somewhat problematic, though this is perhaps to be expected of any work of such ambition. Despite the book's problems, which include an unusually high number of typographical errors and other such infelicities, Walser is to be congratulated for writing a text that will surely provoke productive debate.

Walser aims in this book to locate Nāgārjuna geographically and historically, and to offer a reading of Nāgārjuna's work that emphasizes the impact of institutional forces on his authorial output. His major claim is that Nāgārjuna should be seen as working to advance a specifically Mahāyāna agenda, in an institutional context not necessarily favorable to that aim. For this reason, the book begins not with an investigation of Nāgārjuna, but rather with an attempt to trace the geographical and historical boundaries of early Indian Mahāyāna.

On Walser's reading, the early "Mahāyāna movement" (a phrase intended by Walser in a sociologically technical sense) straddled the doctrinal and the social, comprising not only "attempts at doctrinal or literary innovation" (p. 5), but also those historical agents who propagated or were sympathetic to such innovation ("Mahāyānists"), whether inside or outside Buddhist monastic institutions. While acknowledging the diversity of doctrinal positions to which the label "Mahāyāna" has traditionally been applied, Walser suggests that much of this diversity "can be ascribed to the different strategies used by Mahāyānist groups to respond to the different political and legal structures in which they were enmeshed" (p. 9). This typifies Walser's idea that doctrinal content is ineluctably conditioned by social contexts, and that some of the specifics of doctrinal content can, accordingly, be explained by attending to the particularities of these contexts.

Walser sees Mahāyāna texts as offering not simply "ideas whose survival requires processes of production"

(p. 12). Rather, he argues that "the demands of production come to determine the final form of Mahāyāna texts" (p. 13). In order for a text to survive, it must first meet the demands of those who control available processes of production; texts that fail in this regard vanish from the historical record. Walser argues that Nāgārjuna recognized this, and that he worked to meet these demands by self-consciously employing various rhetorical and commentarial strategies. These strategies are discussed in later chapters of *Nāgārjuna in Context*. Before treating them, however, Walser considers the figure of Nāgārjuna himself.

In chapter 2, Walser sifts through a wide variety of textual, epigraphic, and art-historical evidence (as well as previous work by scholars such as Ian Mabbett) in an effort to contextualize the great philosopher and his literary output. He concludes, fairly convincingly, that Nāgārjuna was a late-second- or early-third-century Buddhist monk who lived, for at least a portion of his career, in a Pūrvaśailya, Aparāśailya, or Caityaka monastery in the area of Andhra. Given the fragmentary nature of the evidence we have, Walser has done a remarkable job here; it is hard to imagine a better case being made for Nāgārjuna's historical, institutional, and geographical location.

However, in his efforts to construct a plausible historical picture, Walser occasionally neglects some of the methodological problems introduced by his evidence. To be sure, he realizes that the hagiographies of Nāgārjuna are historically unreliable: "Almost all the elements contained therein are mythical at best and conflicting at worst.... Most of this material comes from accounts that were written with hagiographical interests ahead of historical documentation" (p. 60). Nevertheless, Walser forges ahead, proposing a "tool" that can, he promises, enable us to determine which details in the hagiographies are no more than "spurious" (p. 68)—and thereby enable us to distinguish historical facts from the accretions of legend.

He begins with the presumption that, “in general, hagiographers compose their stories with two purposes in mind: spiritual edification and institutional legitimation” (p. 67). If statements found in the hagiographies can be understood as falling into either (or both) of these categories, Walser argues, then we should question their historical accuracy. He acknowledges that such statements *may* be true: assuming them to have been included for the purpose of edification or legitimation “does not prove that there is no factual basis [for them]” (p. 68). But he insists that we should not presume their truth, for such statements are more plausibly read as “literary devices” that “tell us more about the needs of the compilers of the legend than about the subject of the legend itself” (p.68). By contrast:

“[I]f an item of the N?g?rjuna legend proves to be an early element in the tradition, and if it does not have an obvious role in edification or legitimation, then we have no choice but to assume that it was included into the hagiographies because it was ‘common knowledge’ to the compilers of these texts. This does not mean that the information is objectively true but, rather, that the compilers assumed that it was a fact that their readers probably already knew” (p. 68).

Walser thus draws an opposition between literary devices, on the one hand, and common knowledge, on the other. While he notes that this opposition does not necessarily correspond to the opposition between fiction and fact, he sometimes writes as though he has forgotten these distinctions: “[T]he associations of N?g?rjuna with both St?mbana [sic] T?rtha and Kashmir should be regarded as serving a legitimating function in their legends and *not as fact*” (p. 75; emphasis added). Walser’s tool may help us to isolate “common knowledge” regarding N?g?rjuna—but “common knowledge” can comprise “spurious details.” Hence, if one is after facts about N?g?-rjuna (as opposed to facts about what people presumed about N?g?rjuna), the tool is of little help; at the very least, it requires a good deal of sharpening if the conclusions drawn from its application are to bear much weight.

In chapter 3, “Mah?y?na and the Constraints of Monastic Law,” Walser explores the institutional circumstances in which the early Mah?y?na took shape, and the ways in which vinaya protocols may have impacted the rhetoric of Mah?y?nists like N?g?rjuna. Walser is to be applauded for attending to these issues and it is to be hoped that his treatment of them will serve to stimulate further work in this important and neglected area. In this chapter, much of the discussion regarding N?g?rjuna

focuses on passages found in the fourth chapter of the *Ratn?val?*. Some of these have already been discussed by Gregory Schopen,[1] and Walser’s conclusions regarding these passages do not differ substantially from Schopen’s own: both agree that the rhetoric of the *Ratn?val?* implies that the Mah?y?na was both minor and marginalized at the time the text was composed.

As an author, N?g?rjuna was undoubtedly concerned with the way that his texts would be treated by those charged with transmitting them. In chapter 4, Walser explores the material circumstances under which Buddhist texts were preserved in monastic communities. Who owned these texts, and how were they passed down over time? For the most part, Walser focuses on protocols delineated in the various vinayas regarding textual recitation, copying, and storage, and he constructs a remarkably detailed and intriguing account of the institutional forces that may have impacted textual practice in Indian monastic communities. Although the sources for his account are scattered and inconclusive (as Walser himself acknowledges), the sources clearly portray texts comprising *buddhavacana* as texts meriting preservation.

If N?g?rjuna shared this view, then it is reasonable to assume that he would have had an interest in portraying Mah?y?na texts as the word of the Buddha. On Walser’s reading, N?g?rjuna worked to accomplish this goal by employing a number of rhetorical strategies. These are explored in detail in chapter 5. According to Walser, N?g?rjuna, as an early Mah?y?nist, appropriated canonical passages in his texts via a process of allusion. Doing so enabled him to piggyback on the authority of such texts, while reinterpreting their content in accordance with what Walser reads as novel—and constitutively Mah?y?-nist—doctrinal developments.

One such development is, for Walser, to be found in the reformulation of the notion of emptiness (*??nyat?*). Unlike a notion of emptiness found in the Pali suttas, where the term *suññat?* generally denotes “a psychological state reached at the end of a series of meditations wherein defilements are extinguished” (p. 117), Mah?y?na texts typically present emptiness as a characteristic equally applicable to all dharmas—as the logical ground for, or ontological precondition of, any phenomenon whatsoever. Walser is surely right that Mah?y?na texts present emptiness in this way, but he does not pause to ask whether similar formulations may be found in non-Mah?y?na sources (such as, for example, *Sa?yutta Nik?ya* IV.85 and *Pa?isambhidh?magga* II.10). If this formulation of emptiness is indeed constitutively Mah?y?-nist, then it seems we must conclude that Mah?y?na doc-

trine is to be found in the Pali Nikāyas.

While Nāgārjuna would likely have approved of this idea, it is not clear that Walser's case is supported by it. Indeed, such passages challenge Walser's reading of what Nāgārjuna was attempting. For it is possible that Nāgārjuna assumed that his own view did not, in fact, constitute a radical *departure from* accepted Buddhist tradition, but rather constituted the most convincing *interpretation of* that tradition. That is, Nāgārjuna may not have self-consciously applied rhetorical strategies in order to cloak novel ideas under the guise of acceptable doctrine. On the contrary, he may have felt that his doctrinal commitments were precisely those voiced by the authoritative texts of the tradition. If so, he would plausibly have seen such commitments as demanding not dissimulation, but elucidation.

At the end of his chapter, Walser cites two passages in which he sees Nāgārjuna to be smuggling new interpretive wine in old doctrinal bottles. These passages are crucially important for Walser's argument; unfortunately, however, his reading of them is somewhat strained. The first example is drawn from Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamādhyamakārikā* (MMK). Following Kalupahana, Walser reads the fifteenth chapter of this work as offering an interpretation of the doctrinal content sketched out in the *Kaccānagotta sūta*. He cites Buddhaghosa's commentary on a short section of that sūta, in hopes of providing "a contrasting interpretation" (p. 184). But it is difficult to see how Buddhaghosa's interpretation of the *Kaccānagotta sūta* passage differs substantially from Nāgārjuna's own. The relevant portion of the *Kaccānagotta sūta* has the Buddha emphasizing that it is an error to fall into the extreme of existence or nonexistence, and that his own teaching of dharma traces a middle path between these two extremes. Following this, the Buddha outlines the twelve-limbed presentation of dependent arising, illustrating thereby the middle path to which he has just referred. Buddhaghosa, commenting on this verse, labels the two extremes respectively as *sasatam* and *ucchedo*—terms that Walser translates as "eternalism" and "disruption"—and notes that each constitutes a negative extreme (hence one rightly to be avoided). But this is precisely the point that Nāgārjuna himself is plausibly read as striving to make in chapter 15 of the MMK—and verse 15.7 does little more than underline the fact that this point was anticipated by the Blessed One.

So where, precisely, is the new interpretive wine? Walser seems to think that it is to be found in "the Mahāyāna teaching of emptiness" that constitutes "the logical ground on which the more common interpretation

must rely" (p. 185). But the term *nyatā* itself appears nowhere in MMK 15; when it later surfaces, it is explicitly stated (as at MMK 24.18) to be equivalent to dependent arising—thereby placing Nāgārjuna perfectly in line with the doctrinal contours sketched out in the *Kaccānagotta sūta*. If Nāgārjuna was indeed attempting to smuggle new wine in old bottles, he may have done his job too well—the new wine is arguably indistinguishable from the old.

The second example adduced by Walser comes from the first chapter of the *Ratnāvalī*. Here again, Walser argues that we are faced with several verses (1.78-93; the Sanskrit here is lost) that, when taken together, reveal an agenda: Nāgārjuna is aiming to cloak the "Mahāyāna doctrine of emptiness" under the guise of already accepted *buddhavacana*. In these verses, Nāgārjuna offers a lengthy analysis of the person (*skyes bu*) and the elements (*kham*s) that might be thought to make up the person. The analysis is undertaken in order to demonstrate that ideas such as "person" and "element" are conventional (*kun rdzob*). Nāgārjuna then goes on to note that this mode of analysis is applicable to a number of other concepts (enumerated in 1.91-93); he concludes by quoting a short passage of *buddhavacana* in which such concepts are stated to be "ceased in consciousness" (*rnam shes su / 'gag par 'gyur zhes thub pas gsungs*). Walser notes that the *Kevaddha sūta* of the *Dharmapitak* may have provided Nāgārjuna with the source for the latter quotation, and observes that "it is significant that here, at the first place in the *Ratnāvalī* where Nāgārjuna refers to the Mahāyāna doctrine of emptiness, he illustrates it with an allusion to a scripture that would have been known by any Buddhist" (p. 187).

But one may reasonably wonder whether Nāgārjuna in fact refers to "the Mahāyāna doctrine of emptiness" in this section of the text. The terms *Mahāyāna* (*theg pa chen po*) and *nyatā* (*stong pa nyid*) do not appear; furthermore, Nāgārjuna goes on to note explicitly (in verses 1.94 and following) that his discussion pertains "to that consciousness which is signless, boundless, supreme over all" (*rnam shes bstan med mtha' yas pa / kun tu bdag po de la ni*). This description looks suspiciously similar to one offered in the *Kevaddha sūta* itself (*viññāna? anidasana? ananta? sabbato pa(b)ha?*, although the Tibetan *kun tu bdag po* points perhaps to an underlying *sarvata? prabhu rather than *sarvata? prabh?). Walser may be right to assume that Nāgārjuna uses the rhetorical strategy of appropriating "terms and concepts that are already well-established for describing high states of meditative absorption" and then applying those terms "to reality regardless of one's mental state" (p. 187). Indeed, Nāgārjuna

rjuna may well have believed that the terms and concepts he employed can and should be generalized in this way. But the passage cited by Walser doesn't quite show that N?g?rjuna believed this, nor does it show that N?g?rjuna assumed that such a generalization would be held by his audience to be problematic. If anything, the passage simply shows N?g?rjuna to have worked to advance his arguments by appropriating passages from accepted Buddhist doctrinal texts.

The final two chapters of the book should be taken as a unit; both stake out new and valuable territory. In chapter 6, Walser provides an overview of abhidharmic doctrine and the doctrinal differences between early Buddhist sects. Here, he focuses especially on texts in Chinese translation, many of which have been largely neglected by Western scholars. He also examines sources—chief among them the *Samayabhedopacara?acakra*, attributed to Vasumitra—that allow him to reconstruct (provisionally) some of the doctrines of Mah?s??.

..ghika abhidharma. These investigations are valuable and on the whole fairly clear, even if Walser's exposition occasionally is weighed down by the mass of details that he is attempting to present.

At certain points, however, Walser veers into obscurity and risks misrepresenting the tradition. One such occasion occurs when he attempts to clarify the relation between *sa?s?ra* and *nirv??a* by invoking the principle of bivalence. Unpacking a passage from the *Ud?na* that defines *nirv??a* and *sa?s?ra* via mutually exclusive predicates—*nirv??a* is unconditioned, while *sa?s?ra* is conditioned—Walser notes that “[t]he principle of bivalence (a.k.a. *tertium non datur*) states that between A and non-A there can be no third term—and yet Buddhism does introduce a third term—namely, the karma, a category under which falls [sic] all the practices used to convey one from *sa?s?ra* to *nirv??a*” (p. 194). This implies that Buddhist thinkers either ignore or repudiate the insight expressed in the principle of bivalence—but they do not. The principle of bivalence states simply that any meaningful proposition must be either true or false; this is an idea to which no Buddhist, to my knowledge, has ever taken exception. In any case, it is difficult to see what the principle of bivalence has to do with the notion that karma is held by Buddhists to bridge the divide separating *sa?s?ra* and *nirv??a*.

Walser's goal in chapter 6 is to lay the groundwork

for chapter 7, in which N?g?rjuna's relation to abhidharmic literature is explored. This chapter, like the one that precedes it, is somewhat sprawling, though this is perhaps in keeping with the complexity of the source material with which Walser is dealing and the difficulty of the task he is attempting. I am, unfortunately, unable to pronounce on the accuracy of Walser's conclusions regarding his Chinese sources (as I do not read Chinese), but in at least one respect, the chapter is an unqualified success: it shows, conclusively, that the common notion that N?g?rjuna stakes out a position “in opposition to abhidharma” is overly simplistic, and needs to be carefully and continually rethought in light of materials available in Chinese translation.

Walser's reading of N?g?rjuna's work is one to which objections will surely be raised. His attempt to identify particular doctrines as constitutively “Mah?y?nist” may be challenged, and some of his other hypotheses are likely to provoke heated debate—e.g., the notion that the early Mah?y?na was an embattled movement whose exponents were self-consciously collusive in their attempts to secure status for their favored texts and doctrines. Whether or not one agrees with the book's conclusions, however, Walser is to be commended for writing a work that dares to stake out new territory and to challenge received assumptions regarding N?g?rjuna and the early Mah?y?na. With *N?g?rjuna in Context*, we have the first large-scale, synthetic attempt at situating N?g?rjuna within the complex web of forces—social, institutional, doctrinal, and rhetorical—that impacted him and his work as an author. Though the book presents the fruit of years of painstaking research, it also makes clear that a great deal of work remains to be done. We are in Walser's debt for revealing just how much we have left to learn.

Note

[1]. See Gregory Schopen, “The Mah?y?na and the Middle Period in Indian Buddhism: Through a Chinese Looking-Glass,” in *Eastern Buddhist*, n.s. 32, no.2 (2000): 1-25.

Copyright (c) 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Richard Nance. Review of Walser, Joseph, *Nāgārjuna in Context: Mahāyāna Buddhism and Early Indian Culture*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. January, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11329>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.