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Joel Tatelman. *The Heavenly Exploits: Buddhist Biographies from the Divyaavadaana.* New York: New York University Press, 2005. 444 pp. $22.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-8288-0.

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Buddhism Meets the World

"Where religion meets the world, these narratives present something for everyone," the dust jacket of this volume proclaims. And there is indeed something for everyone in the four *Divyaavadaana* narratives that Joel Tatelman has translated into English here; in this slim volume (the first in a multivolume edition), released by the Clay Sanskrit Library, Tatelman has produced a fine addition to an esteemed series that also offers such choice Sanskrit literary treats as Vaalmiiki's *Raamaayana*, as rendered into English by Robert P. Goldman, Sheldon I. Pollock, and other skilled translators. Drawing our attention to "the worldly face of religious literature," the dust jacket of Tatelman's entry recommends these tales as much for their entertainment value as for their historical or didactic value. To the extent that religious commitments are instantiated in humble everyday actions like cooking food, building houses, getting married, and paying off loans, Buddhism does indeed "meet the world" more frequently than some Buddhological tomes would lead one to suppose. And Joel Tatelman has a fine sense of how to present the actions of Buddhist actors, who practice the teachings while seeking adventure and making money, to English speakers who may have some vaporous assumptions about the purported nonmaterialism of the "spiritual" East.

Tatelman's translations narrate tales that accent the suspenseful adventures of non-monastic Buddhist merchants and ruling elites. Tatelman provides just enough context in his brief introduction to help the reader appreciate why these texts have many details on life-cycle rites, beliefs and practices geared toward controlling conception and fertility, commercial and business life, etc. We learn such useful things as methods for setting up a caravan (donkeys are deemed superior, and the wise merchant will find a spot in the middle rather than at the front or the back), and how to recognize a city inhabited by hungry ghosts. Beyond their value as tips that any traveler of any era might well keep in mind, such details tell us a great deal about the social life of South Asian Buddhists, especially those living and traveling in the frontier lands of the northwest, in the early centuries of the Common Era. We learn a great deal more about what the Sarvaastivaadins and Muulasarvaastivaadins aspired to and valued than we do from many standard works on early Buddhism in South Asia. And we learn what women, especially lay women, were doing and thinking, as well as what men thought women were doing and thinking. While Tatelman's slim volume does not, in this regard, provide much commentary on the gender-dynamics of these tales (less than one might expect in light of the insightful introduction he provided in his earlier annotated translation of *The Glorious Deeds of Puur.na*, a study of the *Puur.naavadaana*), it is clear that Tatelman values what such narratives can tell us about gender in South Asia.

These are tales that flow from a large wellspring of South Asian popular literature, much of it of the "penny dreadful" sort. ("Beware, young man! She appears to have sharp fangs behind those ruby red lips!") Though action-packed and seemingly lowbrow in intended audience, the narratives translated here are situated within a genre of Buddhist literature that accounts for present-day escapades by reference to the protagonist's morally determinative deeds of the past. The melodramatic narrative worlds of these tales are shaped by karma, by actions in the past, and follow fairly predictable patterns according to which an action of one kind yields an outcome in the form of particular lifescapes (hellish, heavenly, ghostly, human, animal, and the like) and *dramatis personae* encountered. Tatelman's introduction focuses on those features of the Avadaana genre that help us to understand the drive for wealth, adventure, and love that animate these tales. Like Tatelman's earlier annotated translation and study of the *Puur.naavadaana*, this volume's introduction gives useful information on what Buddhist texts were in wide circulation during the period

in which early Avadaanas were composed (at the beginning of the Common Era), and about how the translated work adds to our understanding of the genre.

Tatelman has a fine appreciation for lively storytelling, and his work corrects the tendency to neglect this important means of conveying the teachings–a tendency that has long characterized the field of Buddhist studies, despite the fact that monastic libraries across the Buddhist world are chock-full of these kinds of tales. Tatelman's volume is also invaluable as a source of information about devotional rituals that some older Buddhological tomes assume all monks would rightfully eschew. For example, one story narrates 'Saakyamuni's visit to a frontier town where Buddhist monks and missionaries have encountered doubt and conflict. He transports himself to the frontier using his psychic powers, seated in his perfumed chamber, accompanied by a devout goddess who shades him with a *baakula* branch. After performing amazing deeds and winning the attention and faith of the townspeople, he miraculously emits hair and nail relics from his living body, to be enshrined in a reliquary at the request of a group of women who converted to Buddhism at the sight of his glorious body. We are told that for one who has acquired merit over many lifetimes, seeing a Buddha has a greater effect on the mind than twelve years of meditation (*na tathaa dvaada'savar.saabhyasta.h. 'samatha's cittasya kalyataa.m janayati ... yathopacitaku'sala muulahetukasya sattvasya tat prathamato Buddhadar'sanam.*) (pp.184-185). The valet goddess who had accompanied him from the Buddhist heartland to the frontier town then plants her branch onto the central shaft of the stuupa built over the living relics and takes up residence there. "'Lord, I shall remain worshipping here at this Stupa,' and there she stationed herself. Some people call the shrine 'Matrons' Stupa'; others, 'Baakula-Shaft,' and to this day it is venerated by those monks who are given to the veneration of shrines" (p. 187).

The book contains two suspenseful tales of adventurous young men going to sea to find their fortunes ("The Story of Shrona Koti-karna"' and "The Story of Purna"). These adventure-seekers get more adventures than they dare to dream, of course, often of the ghoulish, vampirical, ghostly, or otherwise potentially fatal sort. Moral virtue is instantiated in physical beauty, heroic strength, quick-witted MacGyver-like responses to heroic ordeals, and in the acquisition of wealth (although of course the best form of wealth is wealth-in-circulation, not wealth that is horded). The third story in the volume, that of Prince Sudhana, demonstrates that generosity to fellow beings and indefatigable courage in defense of one's beloved (even if she is a nonhuman *kinnari* nymph, considered dispensable by many at court) are virtues that give rise to awakening as a Buddha in a later life. The story of Prince Sudhana is a *jaataka* (also known as a "*bodhisattva avadaana*"), narrating events from a Buddha's former life. The prince must overcome the wicked machinations of a jealous royal minister and pass through a hero's trials to be with his beloved nymph. Because it is a past-life story, Tatelman points out, the redactors do not let monastic priorities like celibacy prevent them from producing an engaging romantic narrative. Even the awakened Buddhas, the narrative suggests, have been buffeted by the psychic and material effects of erotic love, and in pursuing such love affairs in a heroic way, they successfully laid the foundation for full awakening.

"The Story of Makandika the Wanderer" relates several *jaataka*s set in lands outside the Maagadhan heartland. It includes that of the trader Sinhala, who astutely avoids being consumed by a band of female ghouls when shipwrecked off the coast of Sri Lanka. It also includes the *jaataka- of a wanderer who helps to settle (or further unsettle–it is hard to say) the complicated domestic situation of King Udaayana of the Vatsas. King Udaayana had made quite a few matrimonial alliances with other rulers. The intrigues between co-wives in his court, as depicted in this narrative, would put the scriptwriters of the* Sopranos_ to shame. Jealousy toward 'Syaamavatii, a devoted lay follower of the Buddha, leads one co-wife to plot the death by arson of 'Syaamavatii and her five-hundred companions. Being devout and accomplished, they seize the opportunity to seek voluntary death and go on to exalted post-mortem destinies, and so the story ends on a triumphant note.

Tatelman's translation makes for a particularly good study aid in that it is faithful to the Sanskrit (which is printed on facing pages) without much loss of elegance. The syntax of the English approximates that of the Sanskrit, which makes for easy Sanskrit training. Given the paucity of adequate Sanskrit textbooks (not to mention texts useful for the student of Buddhist hybrid Sanskrit), this volume thus stands out as an excellent teaching tool.

I do have a few quibbles. The text could have used more vigorous editing. For example, on page 165 we find the following sentence that appears to be a hybrid of interrogative and imperative: "Think what is to be done?" Tatelman's failure to propose a translation or provide substantive commentary on the compound *caitya-'salaakaa-graha.ne*, used as an epithet for

the monk Purna–the translation "[first in] getting meal tickets" leaves *caitya* untranslated–frustrates this reader. But no doubt the editorial policies for producing these tiny books limit what translators can do to satisfy the curiosity of readers.

Paired with a contribution to critical theory in Buddhist studies (such as those to be found in the works of Bernard Faure, Rita Gross, Janet Gyatso, Alan Cole, or Reiko Ohnuma), this lovely edition would give an upper-level undergraduate or beginning graduate student a fairly rich palette of colors to work with in depicting the narrative worlds that the Divyaavadaana and similar texts establish, as well as the ideological commitments that structure those worlds.

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