



Douglas Osto. *Power, Wealth and Women in Indian Mahayana Buddhism: The Gandavyuha-sutra*. London: Routledge, 2008. 200 pp. \$150.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-48073-4.

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A “Systems Approach” to the Gaṇḍavyūha

With its extremely long collocations of adjectival and adverbial phrases, which often rest upon rather spare narrative scaffolding, the *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra* has an imposing, though not impenetrable, literary style. One might playfully dub it “The Scripture of the Marvelous Array of Multiple Prolix Passages.” Yet, the *Gaṇḍavyūha* rewards the reader’s persistence by revealing a vast cosmos and the wondrous, powerful vision of the quest for enlightenment undertaken by the young layman, Sudhana. In *Power, Wealth and Women in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism*, Douglas Osto has made Sudhana’s world more accessible to students and scholars of Buddhist literature.

Osto applies methods drawn from literary theory in order to portray the general worldview and narrative structure of the scripture, while exploring the themes of power, wealth, and women. He focuses on these themes because of their importance to the construction of the text’s worldview and ideology, and because of the relative lack of attention paid to them in previous scholarship. Osto makes the further claim that his analysis of the narrative structure and worldview of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* can help modern scholars to situate the scripture in its most immediate social and historical context.

According to Osto, his project rests on two assumptions. The first is that “literature exists within a social system,” and the second is that “production of texts as material objects requires patronage” (p. 1). (Osto’s view of textual ontology bears some similarities to what André Lefevre calls a “systems approach” to literature (p. 4), an approach that views literature as a system embedded within a culture and society.[1]) These assumptions bear upon his overall thesis, for Osto argues that “the *Gaṇḍavyūha* was composed by monks (possibly from Nāgārjunikoṇḍa during the rule of the Ikṣvākus) for patrons from an urban, wealthy elite in which women played an important role” (p. 12). He supports this the-

sis in part by arguing that the text contains “ideological overcoding” reflective of such “social embedded-ness” (p. 13). One implication of this argument is that a text that relies upon patronage as one of the means of its production is unlikely explicitly to contradict the worldview of its patrons. Osto thus argues that the *Gaṇḍavyūha* upholds “certain economic, social and political hierarchies” as “cosmic norms” (p. 13), which leads him to conclude that it may have been written for an audience consisting in part of wealthy, royal laywomen.

Apart from his broader argument and specific focus on the themes of power, wealth, and women, Osto’s work amounts to a fairly comprehensive and straightforward synopsis of the narrative and worldview of the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, no mean feat in this reviewer’s estimation. The chapter on worldview (chapter 2), which Osto defines as “a totalizing and generalized theory of existence that constructs meaning out of experience through establishing the relationships among reality, society and the individual” (p. 14), begins with a general overview of classical Indian Buddhist cosmology, followed by sections on reality, society, and the individual in the *Gaṇḍavyūha*. According to Osto, palatial structures and human bodies are commonly used in the scripture as metaphors for the cosmos, with reality divided into a mundane or immanent realm, the various *lokadhātus*, and a trans-mundane or spiritualized realm, the *dharmadhātu*. In the same way, society is distinguishable into mundane society and the spiritual society of good friends or *kalyāṇamitras*. The *sūtra*’s conception of the individual parallels society and reality in that the individual possesses both a physical or form body (*rūpakāya*) and a transcendent body (*dharmakāya*). That the immanent and the transcendent levels of reality completely pervade one another is one of the basic ontological positions of the scripture.

In the chapter on narrative (chapter 3), Osto draws

upon the work of literary theorist Mieke Bal.[2] Using her technical terminology, Osto explains that the fabula, the basic narrative structure, of the entire *Gaṇḍavyūha* may be expressed as, “Sudhana [subject] wants [verb] enlightenment [object].” Osto further argues that the Buddha Vairocana plays the role of “the power,” the “actor that enables the subject to achieve the aim of the fabula” (p. 39). In addition to the power, which is often abstract and remains in the background, the subject also has helpers, characters that play a more active role in the narrative. In the case of the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, all of the good friends to whom Sudhana goes for teachings may be considered helpers. Thus, the fabula of the scripture may be stated in more specific terms: “Sudhana, despite his ignorance, achieves enlightenment through the help of the good friends and the Buddha” (p. 39). This is, I think, a useful way of characterizing the basic narrative of the scripture, in which the layperson, Sudhana, visits a total of fifty-three good friends, receiving various teachings and gaining extraordinary powers en route to his achievement of awakening at the end of the scripture.

Osto argues that the various good friends may be arranged hierarchically according to their status, which is measurable on the basis of three main criteria: their position in the narrative, the relative “weight” (that is, percentage of the total text) of the section in which they appear, and content, such as the description of their traits. Osto uses the first two criteria as guidelines that may be either confirmed or denied by the other content. For example, Osto writes, “Ratnacūḍa is the sixteenth good friend and Sudhana’s visit with him constitutes only 0.69 percent of the total text; while Maitreya is the 52nd *kalyāṇamitra* and 11.9 percent of the total text is devoted to this section. Thus by these criteria, we may assume that Maitreya has greater status than Ratnacūḍa” (p. 41). Employing these criteria, Osto argues that the good friends are arranged hierarchically based on the metaphor of kingship: “Vairocana represents the King of the Dharma realm, Mañjusrī and Samantabhadra are his chief ministers, and Maitreya is the crown prince. The other good friends may then be seen as royal officials within Vairocana’s domain” (p. 48).

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 explore the themes of power, wealth, and women, respectively. They also function to continue his synopsis of the scripture by enabling him to bring together various disparate sections of the narrative. By power, Osto means both “spiritual power,” that is, the ability to manipulate reality through extraordinary powers, and temporal power or authority. Indeed, many of the good friends are wealthy and powerful members of the royal, urban elite. And many of them

are women. Osto argues that this as an indication that the scripture was composed on behalf of such wealthy and powerful individuals, who served as patrons to the monks who likely composed the scripture. Wealth and status, he argues, are seen in the scripture as evidence of one’s spiritual development. There is a happy circularity involved in having wealth and giving it away. By giving away one’s wealth, one gains merit, which brings greater wealth.

In addition to their wealth and status, many of the female good friends whom Sudhana encounters over the course of his spiritual quest possess indescribable beauty as a result of their spiritual development. Despite the text’s various androcentric features, which Osto discusses, women in the scripture are not generally seen as temptresses or afflicted by the passions; instead, their beauty inspires dispassion in those who see them. According to Osto, the positive attitude towards female beauty shows the predominance in the scripture of what Susanne Mrozik calls “physiomoral” discourse over “ascetic” discourse.[3] Osto suggests further that this positive portrayal of women throughout the *Gaṇḍavyūha* may indicate that wealthy women were among those who patronized the author(s) of the scripture. In the chapter on historical context (chapter 7), Osto draws upon studies of the inscriptions at Nāgārjunikoṇḍa that seem to provide evidence of royal women of the Ikṣvāku dynasty patronizing Buddhism in the Middle Period (circa third century CE). As he admits, however, the evidence here is merely suggestive. Yet, Osto also suggests that the predominance of wealthy and powerful men and women in scripture indicates that wealthy merchants and royal men and women may have been the intended target audience for the scripture (p. 120ff).

Critical readers might raise doubts about some of the structural methods of literary analysis that Osto employs throughout his analysis, such as the value of using “weight” as an interpretive criterion of significance, while others may question the means by which he reaches some of his conclusions about the social and historical context of the scripture. The structural approach seems worthwhile insofar as it helps him to clarify the scripture’s narrative framework and its overarching themes, both of which are obscured by the prolixity of its descriptive and argumentative passages. However, with its visionary motifs, the *Gaṇḍavyūha* seems a difficult test case for the “systems approach” to Indian Buddhist literature. If Luis Gómez is correct in stating that what goes for the *Avatamsaka* also applies to the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, then one may also put forward his conclusion that “it does not even pretend to depict historical

events.”[4] As Gómez and Osto both point out, the world of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* is one of immanence as well as transcendence; yet, a work of literature may only indirectly or unexpectedly reflect the social and historical context of its composition.

Although there may be scope for the type of world-view analysis that Osto has given us, even if one could establish that the *Gaṇḍavyūha* reflects a particular social and political reality, it seems to me a leap to conclude that criteria internal to the text provide us with evidence about the actual or intended audience of the scripture. The *Gaṇḍavyūha* is such a difficult text to read that it is hard for me to believe that anyone but trained scholars would have wanted to do so. For as much as I know, however, perhaps there were such people among the wealthy lay community. Be that as it may, Osto ought to be commended for attempting to draw some conclusions about context and audience with which other scholars may then grapple. His work will also undoubtedly serve as an excellent introduction to the *Gaṇḍavyūha* and

a welcome resource that both surveys and complements the literature already available for the study of this fascinating scripture. Although the book’s list price mitigates its usefulness as a textbook for undergraduate or graduate courses, it is a book well worth having on hand in the library.

Notes

[1]. André Lefevre, “Mother Courage’s Cucumbers: Text, System and Refraction in a Theory of Literature,” *Modern Language Studies* 12, no. 4 (1982): 3-20.

[2]. Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

[3]. Suzanne Mroziak, *Virtuous Bodies: The Physical Dimensions of Morality in Buddhist Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[4]. Luis O. Gómez, “The Avataṃsaka-Sūtra,” in *Buddhist Spirituality*, ed. Takeuchi Yoshinori (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993), 160-170.

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