



Ulrich Timme Kragh. *Early Buddhist theories of action and result: a study of Karmaphalasambandha Candrakirti's Prasannapada, verses 17.1-20*. Wien: Arbeitskreis für tibetische und buddhistische Studien, Universität Wien, 2006. 422 pp. ISBN 978-3-902501-03-5.

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The Efficacy of Action: Buddhist Theories, Buddhist Critiques

Ulrich Timme Kragh's *Early Buddhist Theories of Action and Result* is a fine example of the continuing philological scholarship on the Buddhist philosophical tradition and two of its most famous exponents, Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti. Though readers of this review will likely know them best as proponents of the Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophical tradition known as Madhyamaka, Kragh's study is not primarily about the arguments commonly associated with Madhyamaka. Instead, he focuses on Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti primarily as sources for understanding pre-Yogācāra Buddhist theories of the mechanism by which actions bear subsequent fruit either in this life or in future lives.

The textual focus of Kragh's book is chapter seventeen of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, verses 1-20, along with Candrakīrti's commentary thereon, the *Prasannapada*. Kragh limits his study to these twenty verses, because in them Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti summarize the doctrinal categories related to the Buddhist conception of action, and critique two of the prevailing early theories explaining the connection between an action and its subsequent effect (*karmaphalasambandha*).

The book is divided into three main chapters, with a succinct (not quite twenty-page) general introduction that surveys prevalent scholarly views on the history of karma theory in Indian religions, situates the textual focus of the study, and describes its goals and methods. Chapter 1 introduces the manuscripts of the *Prasannapada* used as a basis for the study, discusses the possible

historical relationship among the manuscripts, and describes the critical apparatus employed in their study.

Chapter 2 contains the centerpiece of the book: the excellent critical editions Kragh produces of the Sanskrit and Tibetan texts of the works here considered. The Sanskrit edition is particularly painstakingly accomplished, as he also identifies words, phrases, and sentences that Candrakīrti may have lifted from earlier commentaries on Nāgārjuna's work, supplying the actual passages in Tibetan or Chinese on the opposing page. Kragh's editions are good examples of how to edit a text critically while paying heed to the scholarly desire for a diplomatic edition. I found the editions readable, and once I became familiar with his critical apparatus, I had no problem seeing the editorial changes and variant readings. His separation of substantive variants from accidentals is useful, even though, as Kragh notes, the distinction between the two is hazy in an inflected language such as Sanskrit.

Chapter 3 contains an English translation of the Sanskrit of Nāgārjuna's verses and Candrakīrti's commentary, with extensive supplemental discussion and footnotes. Kragh sees his own interpretive remarks as organized around three aims: to support his reading of the Sanskrit text, to compare Candrakīrti's commentary with the other extant commentaries on the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, and to critically assess the sources for the early Buddhist theories of action and its result.[1] These goals he accomplishes. The translation does indeed clearly reflect Kragh's interpretation of the text—even if the choice to parenthetically provide the Sanskrit

for each word or phrase sacrifices some readability for transparency. On the other hand, Kragh helpfully supplies English translations for all the French and German citations, and Kragh's own commentary is quite illuminating.

Kragh's work builds upon a long tradition of philological scholarship. The Sanskrit text of the *Prasannapad?* was first edited in its entirety by Louis de La Vallée Poussin at the beginning of the 20th century, based on a single Sanskrit manuscript belonging to the Cambridge University Library, as well as on the Tibetan translation.[2] Relying on another Sanskrit manuscript found in Nepal by Giuseppe Tucci, J. W. de Jong published a new edition of the *M? lamadhyamakak? rik?* in 1977, and two articles in 1978 containing text-critical notes regarding La Vallée Poussin's edition of the *Prasannapad?* .[3] More recently, Anne MacDonald has thoroughly reviewed the fifteen known Sanskrit manuscripts of the *Prasannapad?* .[4] She has determined that five of the manuscripts are significant while ten are merely apographs. On the basis of a study of chapter one of the *Prasannapad?*, she produced a *stemma codicum* or family tree of the significant manuscripts, determining that they all seem to possess a common ancestor or textual tradition. Kragh's critical Sanskrit edition of chapter seventeen is based on the five significant manuscripts identified by MacDonald, and generally confirms MacDonald's conclusions about their relationship.

The thematic significance of chapter seventeen of the *M? lamadhyamakak? rik?* (and the corresponding treatment thereof in the *Prasannapad?*) was recognized early on by Étienne Lamotte, who appended an unannotated French translation of it to his study and translation of Vasubandhu's *Karmasiddhiprakara? a*, another important source for the study of Buddhist theory of action.[5] N? g? rjuna's chapter discusses two theories of the connection between an action and its subsequent result. The problem that these theories attempt to solve concerns causal continuity over time: what is the mechanism whereby an action bears fruit at some point in the future, either in this life or in subsequent lifetimes?

The theory of the "mind-series" (*citta-sant? na*), laid out in verses 7-11, likens action and its effect to a seed and its subsequent fruit. This analogy is proposed to explain the causal continuity between the action and its subsequent effect. The intention behind the action is like a seed in the mind-series of the individual, and its subsequent effect is like the fruit. The analogy would seem to suggest that action remains connected to its result through a

series of "natural" stages of development that exists in the mind-series of the individual. However, in verse 12 of the *M? lamadhyamakak? rik?*, the theory is said to have various and grievous faults, upon which Candrak? rti elaborates, following previous commentators. The commentators' critique of the theory seems to take aim at the basic early Buddhist supposition that the mind-series can only have a single layer. In other words, a mental event, at any given moment, must be unitary and singular in nature. No distinction is allowed between conscious and subconscious levels of mind, for instance. Given this presupposition, Candrak? rti can claim that the theory of the mind-series goes too far in the pursuit of continuity, and has the unwanted consequence that the mind-series could not change. For, on this premise, there could not be a mixture of seeds from good, bad, and neutral actions coexisting in the mind-series at any time.

The second theory, laid out in verses 13-20, uses a different kind of analogy to explain the causal connection of an action with its effect. It likens the connection between action and its effect, a connection that is called the "non-perishing" (*avipra? ? ? a*) phenomenon, to a promissory note, and action (*karma*) to a debt. The *avipra? ? ? a* is a non-perishing phenomenon that is created by an action and "deposited" either in the aggregates or in the mind of the individual until the time is right for the effect to become manifest. According to this theory, the locus (*? ? raya*) for the non-perishing phenomenon remains undetermined. Candrak? rti claims that it exists as a "latent tendency dissociated from the mind" (*cittaviprayuktasa? sk? ra*).

Kragh shows that this theory regarding the mind-series is associated with the Sautr? ntikas, as reflected in several sources—for instance, in the commentary on the *Karmasiddhiprakara? a* by Sumati? ? la (pp. 270-271). The theory of *avipra? ? ? a* is traced to the Sa? mat? yas by Sumati? ? la and others, although a similar theory, called *upacaya* ("accumulation"), is also associated with the Mah? s? ? .

..ghikas (pp. 293-294). Kragh discusses the relevant sources, but also does well, I think, to warn the reader that such doxographical characterizations are found mostly in later commentaries and may be part of a retrospective attempt to classify theories by *nik? ya* designation (p. 27).

An interpretive question arises in the course of his analysis. Is the theory of *avipra? ? ? a* refuted or accepted by the author of the *M? lamadhyamakak? rik?*? Kragh raises this question (pp. 268, 305-306), and points out

that the verses are not entirely clear on this point. The *avipra? ? ? a* theory is described as a mental construction (*kalpan?*), but this does not necessarily imply that action and its effects are thoroughly rejected. Candrak? rti and other commentators attribute both the refutation of the mind-series theory and the *avipra? ? ? a* theory laid out in verses 13-20 to “others,” who are neither the proponents of *sant? na* theory nor the M? dhyamika himself. However, as Kragh points out, the remainder of the chapter, which the commentators represent as spoken by the M? dhyamika, does not refute the *avipra? ? ? a* theory explicitly.

Although it lies outside the main focus of Kragh’s book, the M? dhyamika response to the theories of *karmaphalasambandha* that follows in the remainder of chapter seventeen is interesting. The remaining portion of the chapter argues that action, agent and result are empty of inherent existence (*ni? svabh? va*), and concludes with another simile. It is as if the Teacher uses his superhuman powers (*? ddi*) to conjure a person, and this conjured person conjures another thing. The agent is likened to the conjured person and his action to the second conjured thing. Defilements, actions, bodies, agents, and effects are thus said to be like a city of celestial musicians, a mirage and a dream. This is not necessarily a firm denial of the efficacy of action on the conventional level of reality.

Squarely within the focus of Kragh’s book, however, are the theories of action and its subsequent effect, which attempt to account for where karmic potentials are stored until coming to fruition and when and how they come into effect in future lives. Readers will come to their own conclusions regarding the adequacy of these theories for explaining the causal continuity of actions over

time. Kragh’s book makes a valuable contribution to their study. As I read through the translation and commentary, I was also reminded of the complex relationship that exists between Madhyamaka dialectical method and the constructive Buddhist ontologies against which that is framed. What, precisely, about these theories does the M? dhyamika wish to criticize, and does anything remain intact after the critique? Kragh’s book will be useful for those wishing to consider such questions further.

Notes

[1]. The doctoral dissertation on which the book is based also includes critical editions and unannotated translation of the remaining thirteen verses of chapter seventeen (with Candrak? rti’s commentary thereon). The dissertation was submitted to the University of Copenhagen in 2003 and is available from the Danish Royal Library (www.kb.dk).

[2]. Louis de La Vallée Poussin, ed., *M? lamadhya-makak? rik? s (M? dhyamikas? tras) de N? g? rjuna avec la Prasannapad? commentaire de Candrak? rti*, Bibliotheca Buddhica 4 (reprint, Osnabruck: Biblio Verlag, 1970).

[3]. J. W. de Jong, ed. *N? g? rjuna: M? lamadhya-makak? rik?* (Madras: Adyar Library, 1977); “Text-critical Notes on the Prasannapad?,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* Vol. 20 (1978): 25-59, 217-52.

[4]. Anne Macdonald, *The Prasannapad? Chapter One: Editions and Translations* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Vienna, 2003).

[5]. Étienne Lamotte, “Le Traité de l’Acte de Vasubandhu: Karmasiddhiprakara? a,” *Mélanges chinois et bouddhique*, vol 4 (Bruxelles: L’Institut Belge des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1935-1936), 152-288.

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