

YAROSLAV KOMAROVSKI. *Visions of Unity: the Golden Paṇḍita Shakya Chokden's new interpretation of Yogācāra and Madhyamaka*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011, pp. xii+451. ISBN 978-1-4384-3909-9 (Hardcover), \$ 90.00

The book is a fusion of a creative biography of the 15th-century controversial Tibetan thinker Shakya Chokden (*gser mdog paṇ chen shākya mchog ldan*, 1428–1507) with an extensive study of the nature and relationship between Yogācāra (Alīkākāravāda) and Madhyamaka (Niḥsvabhāvavāda) systems in medieval Tibetan philosophy. The book is fascinating and significant in different ways¹ and here I would like to dwell on several thoughts that appeared valuable, personally to me.

Beyond doubt, *a labelling* in philosophy is a handy and useful way to organize knowledge (as well as information) and a convenient way to define one's own place in the diversity of various approaches to the problem of reality and consciousness. Komarovski, taking as an example the philosophical position of Shakya Chokden, has certainly demonstrated that advertence should be had in a study of doxographical nets (or according to Komarovski '*doxographical pyramids*' (p. 89)) in Tibetan philosophy. '[T]hese doxographical pyramids [of different schools of Tibetan Buddhism—V.K.] look much the same as each other. They include similar systems with similar types of divisions filled with similar thinkers with similar labels attached to them, such as "Mādhyamikas" and "Cittamātra Followers". Nevertheless, *how* contents of the lower pyramidal layers are explained depends on who their observers standing on top are. In other words, although Tibetan doxographers believe that their views are rooted in systems of early Indian thinkers, within "reasonable limits"—as long as pyramids do not collapse—they allow themselves to explain the views of those early thinkers differently' (p. 89). Often these different explanations of early thinkers are presented as 'traditional' and 'the only correct'. According to Komarovski, 'a good example is Tsongkhapa and his students who bypassed the views of 'early Tibetans' (*bod snga rabs pa*) and claimed that their system was in agreement with the views of exalted Indian thinkers of the past. They were severely attacked by their Sakya critics for

¹ Apart from the main intrigue (the historical, doxographical and philosophical problems of interaction of Madhyamaka with Yogācāra) the book contains many lateral lines, which makes rich soil for further research. Komarovski reveals to us details of a different interpretation of difficult points in Mahāyāna epistemology and philosophy and a different approach to fundamental problems like a problem of interpretation of particulars (*rang tshan*) and universals (*spyi mtshan*), a superiority of tantra over sūtra, an interpretation of emptiness, etc.

virtually rewriting the Buddhist canon. Nevertheless, it is their views that in the centuries to come, they would be elevated to the level of orthodoxy, and the views of their critics, would be treated as heterodox by the advocates of the Geluk sect that secured the support of the Central Tibetan government in the seventeenth century' (p. 90). All these circumstances together with considerable textual research of various works of Tibetan scholars made by Komarovski, force us to revise the way we think about such well-known for Buddhologists labels as 'Madhyamaka', 'Yogācāra', 'Vijñānavāda', 'Cittamātra', 'rang stong', 'gzhen stong', etc. For example, relaying on the texts by Shakya Chokden, Komarovski demonstrates that there is a similarity between a strict epistemological approach to the reality of the Geluk school and of their opponents—Dolpopa's followers of other-emptiness. According to Komarovski, Shakya Chokden comes to the conclusion that the doctrine of self-emptiness and the (elaborately criticized by almost all schools of Tibetan Buddhism) doctrine of other-emptiness do not contradict each other, and may be treated as subdivisions of Yogācāra Madhyamaka. 'Emphasizing the self-emptiness/other-emptiness distinction, Shakya Chokden shifts the focus from the distinction between other types of Madhyamaka, such as Prāsaṅgika and Svātantrika, to the differences between Yogācāra and Niḥsvabhāvavāda. In his overall approach, differences between Prāsaṅgika and Svātantrika lose their relevance as he himself explicitly acknowledges' (p. 136). The detailed analysis of self-emptiness and other-emptiness presented by Komarovski in Chapter 3 of the book (pp. 122–36) in connection with the Alīkākaravāda and Niḥsvabhāvavāda distinction requires us to rethink some interpretations of Madhyamaka Philosophy presented in the works of modern scholars, based mainly on the Geluk interpretations of texts written by Indian authors. In the beginning of the book (p. 74) Komarovski highlights ('for the purposes of this study') two contradictory tendencies: the tendency of harmonizing Madhyamaka (Niḥsvabhāvavāda) and Yogācāra, bringing them close to each other (presented by 'Śāntarakṣita, Kamalaśīla on the Niḥsvabhāvavāda side and Ratnākaraśānti on the Yogācāra side') and the tendency to oppose these two teachings (presented by 'Bhāviveka and Candrakīrti on Niḥsvabhāvavāda side and Dharmapāla on Yogācāra side'). These tendencies are well-known for specialists of Indo-Tibetan epistemology (see, for example, Harris 1991; Dreyfus 1997) but Shakya Chokden, according to Komarovski, presents them in a different ('new') way: 'Shakya Chokden articulates nothing less than a grand unity of Mahāyāna systems, all of which—if we take Yogācāra as a single unit with Alīkākaravāda position as a final view—provide a valid and complete means of achieving boodhahood' (p. 269). And Komarovski demonstrates how this 'grand unity of Mahāyāna systems' is possible—he shows that according to Shakya Chokden, both the Alīkākaravāda and Niḥsvabhāvavāda systems

are compatible with each other. At the same time, according to Shakya Chokden, each of these systems is self-sufficient and within itself, may provide all the necessary means for the direct realisation of reality. There is no need try to complement one system with propositions of the other, but both these systems are two parts of Madhyamaka. Niḥsvabhāvavāda and Alīkākaravāda are different and at the same time compatible. They are different in how they posit emptiness: ‘Niḥsvabhāvavādins treat it as a total negation of the entities of all phenomena, including emptiness itself. Alīkākaravādins selectively negate some phenomena (the imaginary natures) on the basis of other phenomena (the dependent natures), and preserve the entity of the non-dual primordial mind, the thoroughly established nature, left in reminder of that negation’ (p. 172). They are compatible because ‘what the advocates of those systems actually experience in the meditative equipoise of Mahāyāna āryas is the same’ (p. 173). Since the full compatibility ‘of the direct meditative experience of reality in all forms of Madhyamaka is the very foundation of Shakya Chokden’s conciliatory and encompassing approach to Mahāyāna systems’ (p. 272), it is not out of place to put forward a hypothesis about two different descriptive languages (or two different strategies of description) depicting the same subject. Shakya Chokden himself gives such an occasion, describing ‘two types of emptiness that he calls “the pinnacle of all tenets, Madhyamaka, which is the meaning expressed [by Madhyamaka teachings]” (*grub mtha’ kun gyi rtse mor gyur ba’i brjod bya don gyi dbu ma*): the non-analytical Madhyamaka experienced through meditation (*rnam par ma brtags pa sgom pas nyams su myong bya’i dbu ma*) and the analytical Madhyamaka, accessed by severing superimpositions apprehending signs (*rnam par brtags pa mtshan ’dzin gyi sgro ’dogs gcod pa’i dbu ma*)’ (p. 173). Each of these systems is accompanied by multiple descriptors (Komarovski calls them ‘synonyms’) that demonstrate two different descriptive strategies towards the same subject. Then what is the nature of a subject that generates two different descriptive languages? As soon as it is a matter of the same subject, then this subject has to be existent to generate the constructive descriptive language of Alīkākaravāda and at the same time, it has to be non-existent to generate the deconstructive language of Niḥsvabhāvavāda. To be in the middle and not to take sides is, according to Shakya Chokden, the marks of the great Madhyamaka. It may be this balancing between two descriptive languages is not only harmonizing the attempt to find a juncture between these systems, it may be this balancing is in the very nature of the final goal of all Mahāyāna systems. Besides, as Komarovski notes, this grand unity ‘cannot be called “synthesis”’, because ‘he [Shakya Chokden—V.K.] doesn’t view them as incomplete in themselves’ (p. 272). At the same time it is possible to describe Niḥsvabhāvavāda and Alīkākaravāda as mutually complementary systems, if we take into consideration Shakya Chokden’s position that ‘the

Niḥsvabhāvavāda approach is more faithful to *how* reality is realized within the meditative equipoise, while the Alīkākaravāda approach is more faithful to *what* experiences that reality and what that reality actually is, i.e. the primordial mind' (p. 274). Komarovski in his book brilliantly presents all the details of 'a tightrope walking art' of Shakya Chokden, and although the 18th-century Geluk scholar Thuken Losang Chokyi Nyima in his book *The Crystal Mirror of Philosophical Systems* reports to us: '[W]hen he [Shakya Chokden—V.K.] was about to pass away, he recognized the baseness of his view, which destroys the cause of the dharmakāya of the Tathāgata' (Thuken Losang Chokyi Nyima 2009), but it seems to me that Shakya Chokden's position of 'not taking sides' entirely represents the ideal position for modern specialists in Buddhist studies.

References

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DANUTA STASIK. *The Infinite Story. The Past and Present of the Rāmāyaṇas in Hindi*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2009, pp. 319. ISBN 978-81-7304-815-9 (Hardbound)

The book under review is the result of yet another research effort on the various literary manifestations of the Rāmkaṭhā, carried out by a representative of Western academia; it provides a solid contribution to the rich tradition of the *Rāmāyaṇa*-scholarship. The legendary story of Rāma, or, in a modernised version, Rām, cannot be underestimated: it has been phenomenally popular all over India and has many times played a crucial role in the history and religious life of South Asia and beyond, particularly in the socio-cultural development of the Indian nation. There is a unique quality to the Rāmkaṭhā, which has been preserved throughout the centuries: being open to changes, it, at the same time, seems to have always been very protective about the central 'identity-element'—which is, no doubt, the figure of Rām/a himself, who

is universally seen as a defender of *dharma* and a righteous ruler. The discussed book of Danuta Stasik investigates this important feature of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, focusing on the literary tradition in Hindi (from the 15th to the 20st century)—the area of the author's immediate expertise.

The book appears to be a modified and edited version of Danuta Stasik's earlier monograph, published in the Polish language: *Opowieść o prawym królu. Tradycja Ramajany w literaturze hindi* [The Story of the Righteous King. The Rāmāyaṇa Tradition in Hindi Literature] (Warszawa, 2000), which she considers 'the fullest exposition ... [of her] enquiries into the Rāmāyaṇa' (p. xi). This English version is presented by the author as 'both a sum of [her] previous research and its sequel', as *The Infinite Story* owes a great deal to it, 'particularly with regards to its basic approach and chief conclusions' (ibid.). Having chosen to investigate 'many *Rāmāyaṇas*' and, especially, the image of Rām/a in the literary tradition of northern India, Danuta Stasik entered a very important and rewarding field in the Indic studies—for, I would like to stress it, here lies the key to the understanding of many crucial cultural stereotypes of the Indian civilization.

The title of the English version of the monograph—*The Infinite Story: The Past and Present of the Rāmāyaṇas in Hindi*—speaks for itself: the very fact that, in modernity, the story of Rām/a has gone beyond the frameworks of literature and fine arts and is often represented in the mass-media—in the form of TV-series, cartoons, comic-books etc.—thus, being in and outside the traditional area of its inception and development shows that its significance has not diminished; moreover, it is open to new interpretations and is capable of producing new versions.

It is commonly understood that the starting point of this grand literary and cultural tradition is the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki (broadly dated between 5th century BC and 3rd century AD; p. 3). The story quickly became a part of the classical literature and folklore in the North of India and in other regions of the subcontinent, especially in the East and South (where it underwent considerable changes), and spread in numerous versions in different languages.

The *Rāmāyaṇa*-tradition in Hindi and related languages (Avadhi, Braj, Maithili etc.) is remarkably rich: although major Hindi texts—like *Rāmcaritmānas* by Tulsīdās—have been in the centre of academic research both in India and in the West for many decades now, there is still a lot to be investigated regarding representations of the Rām/a-cult in literature and art. Therefore, the present research under review delivers a very important contribution to the history of literary and religious traditions of northern India. The novelty of Danuta Stasik's approach stems from the fact that she looks at a number of Rām/a-related texts—starting from even pre-Tulsīdās opuses (15–16th centuries) and ending with the innovative versions of the late 20th century—

as parts of one closely-knit and non-interrupted literary tradition, which can be traced back to the ancient epic-poem itself.

Before approaching the main subject of her research, in the Introduction to her book Danuta Stasik provides a background for her study, discussing a number of issues, which cannot be ignored in the *Rāmāyaṇa*-scholarship: the origins of the epic poem, the formation of the Rām/a-cult and the negotiations between and within the Kṛṣṇa- and Rām/a-oriented *bhakti*, the balance between the divine and the royal in Rām/a, and, of course the ‘multiple streams’ of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition in literature. She presents a very impressive panoramic review of literary texts—some of them mirror the core story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in its full form, some of them only develop certain themes and situations from the Vālmīki—and, later on, Tulsīdās-versions—the *nāṭakas* by Bhāsa and Bhavabhūti, philosophically-oriented ‘pauranic’ versions like the *Ādhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, Buddhist and Jaina adaptations, famous South- and East-Indian interpretations, are mentioned, among other texts. As it is aptly expressed in the Introduction, though *Rāmāyaṇa* is ‘constantly remodelling itself (or constantly being remodelled)’, however ‘it retains a certain basis on which authors build their retellings’ (p. 37).

Danuta Stasik chose to divide the main body of her text into two parts. The first one—‘The Story and Its Authors’—is dedicated to the literary history of the Rām/a-related texts in the northern India and provides us with a thoughtful insight into the evolution of the Rāmkaṭhā and its philosophical interpretations, starting from a few medieval pre-Tulsīdās texts (Chapter 1). It is very clear, however, that this is only Tulsīdās’s *Rāmcaritmānas* that gives a new start to the Rāmkaṭhā-tradition in India—the authority of this poem clearly overshadowed, at least in the Hindi-area, its great epic predecessor. The shift towards a new language of expression, the strong *bhakti* ideology, the beauty of the verse—these are only a few principal factors of its unbeaten success. It is worth mentioning that, apart from a very detailed and informed analysis of the *Rāmcaritmānas*, the author finds it necessary to dwell on other Rām-related texts of Tulsīdās, which are rarely mentioned outside special scholarly works (*Rāmlalānahachu*, *Jānakīmaṅgal* and some others—see Chapter 2).

The author continues her historical analysis of the *Rāmāyaṇas* in Hindi with an excursion into the Hindi literature of the following centuries: in Chapter 3, we get an opportunity to learn about the so-called ‘esoteric’ *Rāmāyaṇas*, which emphasise the mystical interpretation of the story (e.g. *Dhyānamanjari* by Agradās), and various examples of *riti*-style texts, with *Rāmcaṅdrika*, a master work by Keśavdās among them; the latter demonstrates the poet’s skills in descriptions of ‘the happy life and court pleasures’ of Rāma and Sīta (p. 134).

The main highlighted text of the 19th century appears to be *Ānand Raghunandan* by *maharaja* Viswanāth Siṃh (1871)—a play, which may be counted as the first of

its kind in modern Hindi (Chapter 4). Chapter 5 of the first part speaks about entirely different texts, which, however, undoubtedly belong to the discussed tradition. One of them, *Saket*, a modernistic interpretation of an episode from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, was created and published in the first decades of the 20th century by Maithīlīśaran Gupta. This poem, composed in the period of national awakening, marks a very clear departure from the purely religious interpretation of the Rāmkaṭhā (which was predominant in medieval India) towards a socio-cultural and even a political one: Rām is portrayed as a righteous ruler and as a true leader of people, who ‘could bring well-being and peace’ (p. 187), the creator and the guardian of ‘heaven on earth’ (p. 184). Although the divine side of his personality is not denied, the emphasis is made on his human qualities.

The image of Rām as of a *dharma*-motivated ruler, compassionate, modest and an open-hearted human being is presented in a very clear-cut form in an important modern novel *Apne-apne Rām*, written by Bhagvān Siṃh (Chapter 6). It appeared ‘in the beginning of 1992, i.e. during the ever-increasing intense agitation of Hindu fundamentalists [and] was published before the ... demolition of Babri Maṣjid in Ayodhya on 6th December 1992’ (p. 216). According to Danuta Stasik’s observation, Siṃh (who was inclined towards Marxist ideology) radically demythologizes the traditional story and brings it down to rational, realistic dimensions (pp. 221–22).

The second part of the book, ‘The Protagonist of the Story’, follows the chronological order suggested in the first part. We are once again invited to make the journey from medieval *Rāmcaritmānas* to modern *Apne apne Rām*, but this time the author concentrates only on the evolution of the hero. She suggests three major stages in the development of Rām/a, which are best understood from the analysis of three texts—those of Tulsīdās, Maithīlīśaran Gupta and Siṃh (Chapters 7, 8, 9, respectively).

With the help of numerous examples and extensive excerpts from these texts, Danuta Stasik convincingly demonstrates her point: for Tulsīdās, King Rām/a was, first of all, a deity, an object of a *bhakti*-cult and emotional adoration; in Gupta’s poem he was portrayed as a divine and righteous king, with his qualities of a ruler emphasised; in Siṃh’s novel he becomes just a human being with exceptional qualities, capable of rearranging and reforming the social patterns of Indian society. For each of the contributors to the Rāmkaṭhā in Hindi, even if their beliefs are contradictory, Rām/a serves as ‘the embodiment of the eternal human longing for righteousness’ and personifies the ideal ruler (p. 265). These three images—the author argues—are ‘blendings in different proportions, of the two constituent elements of Rām’s nature—humanity and divinity, while their proportion depends on the outlook and intentions of the individual author as well as the spirit and/or ideologies of his time’ (p. 269).

To sum it up, the monograph under review presents a very thorough and competent research of the *Rāmāyaṇa*-tradition in Hindi, based on a historical approach. The author's excellent expertise allows us to use this book as a very reliable source of information about numerous Rāmkaṭhā-versions: the general data about the texts, the portraits of characters and step-by-step (or, rather, as it is in many cases, *pad* by *pad* or canto by canto) descriptions of plots. Especially important from this point of view is the supplemental material at the end of the book, where readers will find the summary of the story and the full list characters of *Rāmcaritmānas* (Appendices 1 and 2).

Danuta Stasik constructs a masterly model of the *Rāmāyaṇa*-evolution in Hindi, which stretches along six centuries, and supplements it with a very convincing interpretation of the development of the image of Rām/a himself. Her analysis is rich in detail and precision.

The valuable research, presented in *The Infinite Story*, will be appreciated by all scholars of Indian mythology and epic traditions, specialists in Indian religions and professional researchers of Hindi literature. The book provides a good read and must be praised for its transparent logic, clarity of style and eloquence, therefore it may be recommended as a reference book for students of Indology.

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