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**Ludovic Viévard.** *Vacuité (śūnyatā) et compassion (karuṇā) dans le bouddhisme madhyamaka.* Paris: Collège de France, 2002. 340 pp. ISBN 978-2-86803-070-2.

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In *Vacuité et compassion*, Ludovic Viévard develops a lengthy argument for seeing the two poles—emptiness and compassion—that supposedly define Mahaayaana Buddhism, as basically of a piece. In a manner reminiscent of middle and late Mahaayaana polemics, Viévard begins with the standard position that the Mahaayaana view of reality emphasizes the emptiness of all dharmas, whereas the earlier forms of Buddhism simply present the emptiness of persons. Then in the following one hundred pages, Viévard moves through a dense and at times interesting review of various statements by Mahaayaana authors regarding emptiness, the dialectic that is relied on to reveal it, and the overall place of emptiness in the soteriology of the Mahaayaana that leads to full buddhahood. Much of this will not be news to those who have been reading in the field for the past thirty years. The second part of the book then takes up the question of compassion and likewise presents a range of statements from various authors and texts showing how essential compassion is to the Mahaayaana conception of the path. The final chunk of the book then works to show that fundamentally these two concepts are not only intimately related, but can be shown to be ontologically—if the Madhyamakās allowed for such—joined at the hip, and, more exactly, ought to be viewed as complementary elements in a coherent vision of non-duality, the topic that marks the final full chapter.

As someone who thinks that it is good, fundamentally, to have an academic field fleshed out with authors of different persuasions and interests, I nonetheless found it hard to find a precise place for this book in the field or to develop a review that would showcase its merits. Without intending to dismiss the contributions of the book—there certainly is a lot of useful information collected here—I feel obliged to raise a number of questions

regarding the methodology and the framing of the discussion, comments that will lead on to the more general question of Buddhist Studies' relation to the liberal arts, a topic that I think unavoidable for debating the merits of the approach that this book takes.

For most Western-trained buddhologists, one of the first sticking points in this book will be, “Are you sure that there was ever something so substantial as the Mahaayaana, or the school of Madhyamaka, which will allow blanket generalizations about the role of emptiness and compassion in either?” Viévard, though mentioning in more than one section that he allows for a plurality of positions on either topic, still focuses fundamentally on erecting a house of sameness in which quotes drawn from a wide variety of texts and times can be relied upon to point to one basic vision of the real and the true, and which supposedly can be taken as markers of orthodoxy for the Madhyamaka and, more loosely, for the Mahaayaana in general. Thus, the reader who pays attention to footnotes will note that she or he is being bounced around from expected sources associated with Naagaarjuna to rather unexpected ones like the *Mahaapraj-ñāpāramitāśāstra*, which was probably composed in China by Kumaarajīva, to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and then on to significantly later works by Chandrakīrti or Shantideva. No effort is made to convince the reader that this rather wide swath of authors and texts, belonging to different times and genre, are actually speaking in one voice about one vision of truth—a vision of truth that is verifiable enough that it is not to be thought of as a function of language, ideology, history and practice.

In short, in Viévard's treatment of these topics, truth is altogether singular (“the correct idea of empti-

ness” [p. 8]) and looms like a great elephant behind all the partial, discordant, multi-colored, contradictory statements that supposedly refer to just that singular zone of truth. This position is nuanced, in some sense at least, by explaining that different accounts of emptiness may vary according to the level of the yogin who is giving the account (pp. 10, 91). Of course not everyone will see this as a solution to the intractable problems of intersubjectivity, i.e., “Do I really have any way to know what you are thinking,” and vice-versa. Probably even fewer readers will start to feel like closure is about to be achieved by adding a dose of compassion to the mix. “But more than this, as before, compassion is very important even necessary for perfecting one’s understanding of emptiness” (p. 16).

Instances of this kind of enthusiasm for repeating select spokespersons’ regulations for entering truth are, in fact, legion in this book. In some cases, the need for a specific spokesperson falls away, leaving bald statements such as, “The conjunction of emptiness and compassion is then a condition for Mahaayaana in that it is the only way to enlightenment. The presence of both does not imply that their opposition should be solved, but only that each of them counterbalances the other, always taking it closer to its perfection” (p. 15). Readers familiar with a variety of Mahaayaana texts may find this an odd blanket statement, and, perhaps more troubling, many readers might feel like they not sure why they are being told such things.

This leads to another layer of methodological worries. Is it really good practice to pull quotes from texts without identifying the overall structure, intent, function, and narrative of the “mother” work which supplies the passage? Is Madhyamaka language really to be held so apart from literary criticism that the basic rules of close-reading need not impinge on the process of mining these works for the jewels that fit the crown? In this vein, some readers might wonder if we can always take these Indian authors at their word. Why, after all, need we assume that Buddhist authors engage in their literary adventures with singular, univocal interests and ambitions? Has it ever been proven that there is only one language-game, or actually, no language-game, at work in these texts? Clearly, the Mahaayaana sutras, for their part, work on a variety of levels that bounce from nervous self-aggrandizement to nasty polemics and then on to silky seductions. So can we so swiftly assume that the ‘*saastra*’ writers were altogether single-minded in handling language for the sole purpose of articulating truth, whatever that might turn out to be?

Once we start asking about shifts in genre that mark the move from Mahaayaana sutras to the ‘*saastra*’ literature of medieval Indian Buddhism—the genre that is the most basic realm of reference for ViÅ©vard’s book—this reviewer was a little shocked to find little sensitivity to the past ten years of debate on the nature of the Mahaayaana. Gregory Schopen’s work is nowhere mentioned and the recently emerging debate about the Mahaayaana being an anxious fringe group without much patronage or institutional viability is not broached. Similarly, the questions that Richard Gombrich raised thirteen years ago regarding the likely connection between the origin of the Mahaayaana and the emergence of literature, are not countenanced. While we are on the topic, a range of scholars, such as Paul Harrison and Jan Nattier, have been asking for several years if the concept of Mahaayaana as a unitary movement is not altogether problematic. None of these debates found a place in ViÅ©vard’s account. Instead the book coasts along on the air cushion of Buddhist theology in which Madhyamaka discussions of *praj-naa*, *nirvaa.na*, buddhahood, and final reality circle around one another in perfect auto-confirmation, never having to touch the reality of history, or that huge gaping chasm between language and the Real, problems that I will address below.

Perhaps the more interesting questions that this work raises have to do with the singularity of emptiness. As I mentioned at the outset, ViÅ©vard is aware that there is a problem here and spends some time addressing it (pp. 26-49). Though I was happy to see acknowledgment of these problems, I was not at all convinced that his arguments proved the singularity of emptiness or proved that the Madhyamaka positions were none other than a restoration of the Buddha’s position (pp. 45, 47). A book dedicated to this sort of topic probably should have stepped into a much wider investigation of what is at stake in setting up emptiness as a singular real. To keep the discussion brief, let me outline four major questions that might have figured in such a discussion.

First, since emptiness is specifically identified in Sanskrit as the emptiness or lack of something, there is the unavoidable question of what remains. That is, even if we agree that the Madhyamaka discussion of removing the illusion of inherent existence is cogent and self-same in identifying and removing just that imputation of inherent existence, can we really assume the remaining presence of the object, now just shimmering in a kind of nominal presence, is cognized in a singular and universal manner? One would immediately want to ask, how could we ever know that one person’s experience of a

cart—without the overlay of inherent existence—matches another person’s? Once we pose this question, we can either go toward an omniscient observer such as the Buddha, the Madhyamaka tack and Viāvard’s, or toward a more existential one that remains both unsure about the singularity of experiencing what remains, yet altogether interested in the variety of experience that probably lurks there. That is, the world without the overlay of inherent existence might have a lot of flavors and it is only the Buddhists who are insisting that there is really only one form of subjectivity and objectivity in the universe, and it is a subjectivity/objectivity that is self-same with the buddhas. A more incisive discussion would have pointed out, and problematized, the way that the Madhyamakas insist on such an antiseptic and singular form of closure. Just this kind of problem is what remains unaddressed in Viāvard’s discussions, which edge toward preaching the Madhyamaka as something of value in and of itself.

Second, can we really be so sure that recognition of emptiness, even in the singular way that it is imagined by Buddhist authors, will result, again in singular fashion, in the steady sterilization of the cognizing subject who is expected to find nirvana in this manner? Or is making that supposition a key theological element that holds the discussion together and which would therefore warrant treatment in a book such as this one? Here the question is precisely about situating the role of Buddhist soteriology that figures so prominently in Viāvard’s discussion. What this boils down to is the question, how do Madhyamaka writers imagine, and justify, the position that one can wiggle free of the thick and searingly particular historical matrix that undergirds the knowing subject?

Putting this in a manner more reminiscent of Michel de Certeau’s *L’écriture de l’histoire*, “how is it explained that thinking can proceed scot-free of everything else that is part of consciousness, with its endless layers of accumulated mentality and memory?” Getting a bead on how these questions play out in various Madhyamaka discussions would have been good ground for presenting the architecture of the school and assessing whether or not this is, in fact, a philosophic tradition in the strict sense of the word. Similarly, raising these issues is not simply interesting in itself, they call into question Viāvard’s steady refrain that the Madhyamakas are completely free of ontology. Arguably, the system only works with some pretty serious ontological curbs in place, which, even if certifiably free of inherent existence (the Buddha, Buddhism, the law, etc., being empty), still belong to a very fixed and free-standing arrangement

that, to most thinkers, would qualify as an ontology.

Third, in my reading of Viāvard, I sensed that language and reality were getting a bit too friendly and that this, too, was turning into an unthought aspect of the system. For instance, what is one to make of the sentence that comes in the context of identifying emptiness as singular, even when it is spoken of in different ways, “Comment, d’ailleurs, cerner au mieux cette vacuité? En l’interprétant comme un instrument dialectique. Cela permet de rendre compte de son intégration au processus soteriologique, de son rôle à l’intérieur d’une dialectique dont la difficulté est de jouer la discursivité contre elle-même” (p. 22). It is that supposition that emptiness is a “dialectical instrument” which might even be playing a “role inside the dialectic,” not to mention in the process of salvation, which interests me in particular. How exactly is this going to work? How are we to imagine emptiness as the phenomenological aspect of reality coming back into the floating world of language to play a role? Of course, it is not hard to argue for the emptiness of words, sentences and such, but it does seem a whole lot harder to see how emptiness is part of the linguistic process, or how emptiness might even be the “le moteur de la dialectique” (p. 22).

The last of my four questions wonders about the value of treating this material in something like a philosophical manner without acknowledging, formally and fully, the conservative religious framing that supports it. Or more exactly, are we really being asked to pursue this question of emptiness and compassion in the context of the liberal arts tradition, which the introduction, with its nods to Schopenhauer, St. Augustine, and St. Paul suggests, along with the later section on Aristotle’s notion of the dialectic? Or have we stepped beyond the pale of what normally constitutes a discussion in the liberal arts, or more exactly, the History of Religions? That is, many readers who are not fundamentally Buddhist, or rather Mahayanic, in orientation might feel that the book does little to set all this in context. Other traditions are mentioned, but seem to quickly pale next to the Madhyamaka which is presented as a glowingly wonderful place to finally come to rest. The problem again is one of genre. If this book is written for readers who, as products of post-Enlightenment Occidental education, are interested in Buddhism within the context of other interesting human projects that might include Christianity, capitalism, and scholasticism itself, how are they going to fare in reading this book? The imprimatur of the Collège de France ought to secure this expectation of a liberal arts/History of Religions orientation. So what then to say regarding

how the book walks the unavoidable line of representing the internal vicissitudes of the Madhyamaka tradition while also standing outside it to think about its history and thought vis-à-vis other frames of reference? Here I think the book does not win high marks. At each critical point of questioning how the system works, the reader is returned to closure and the appearance of confidence with QED quotes from the masters within the system.

Related to the question of context, in the post-feminist, post-Derrida, post-Certeau era of the twenty-first century, Viã©vard might have done well to at least address what is sure to be one response to this book. "How should we assess the contribution of this resolutely male truth-mongering from medieval India that, not surprisingly, draws its strength from an ultimate patriarch, born not of woman but of another perfect patriarch, who promises, with his voice, to be able to return everyone to his own effulgent being, which now is to be understood as the being of reality?" While I am not interested, for the moment, in pushing that particular response, I think this study could have found a way to address these bigger questions that require leaving the lexicon of Madhyamaka to ask directly, "What is going on here, and why should we care?" Or, "Why are these authors so taken with this play of language and its promise of peace and closure, and what might this tell us about being human?"

I, for one, was hoping both for such questions and attempts at answers from the obviously smart and linguistically gifted author Viã©vard. A more humanizing treatment of the Madhyamakas would have set up the discussion to give the reader a chance to ponder the entire project as yet another example of how humans, the world over, engage in complex and often astounding linguistic and philosophic feats in order to build an image of the world with meaning, hierarchy, and destiny in such a manner that it will conform to their deepest desires. Thus, I would argue that there is wonderful ground to more fully engage the likes of Schopenhauer here and to begin to frame this discussion of Madhyamaka writing as another example of how humans render the world as will and representation. In short, I was often dismayed that the basic liberal arts/anthropological injunction to treat the Madhyamaka meaning system as yet another imaginative was not followed.

Let me close out my reflections by offering one way to frame the discussion of emptiness and compassion

in a manner which, despite my best efforts, is going to sound more Heideggerian than I mean it to. Arguably, the fundamental play in Madhyamaka, and in Buddhism in general, is the emergence of a discourse between beings which promises to take them to their ultimate destination by giving a final account of being and a paragon (the Buddha) who managed the feat. Without reifying the knowing beings, their discourse, or the being that is to be explained, one can fairly easily see that the Madhyamakas are basically involved in the project of exciting beings with the promise of a way to completion and total legitimacy as they imagine retracing the path of the Buddha to end up at one with him, and the reality that undergirds him and everything else. Thus there are four elements linked in a comforting and ultimately domesticizing schema of closure: the believer; the final mode of reality; the Buddha as master signifier who knows that final mode of being and actually is that final mode of being; and lastly, his rhetoric which is the means to effect the unification and the collapse of all difference into himself, with no remainder and no dissent.

Obviously this is a deeply religious paradigm which assumes, and appeals to, a human longing for containment, inclusion, justification, etc., items which seem quite at odds with the picture that Viã©vard sketches of the Madhyamakas' steadfast rejection of ontologies. What really left me feeling uneasy in this book was that, though it supposedly set out to put Madhyamaka statements on emptiness in the context of other important discussions, such as compassion, it still lacks regard for these more fundamental religious elements that anchor the Madhyamaka program and which rightfully locate it within other metaphysical attempts to solve the problem of being human. Asking these straightforward questions regarding the structure and history of the Madhyamaka package certainly only begins to scratch the surface, but similar lines of reflection might have had a lot to offer the reader, especially those readers who are not so satisfied with theological justifications of theology.

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