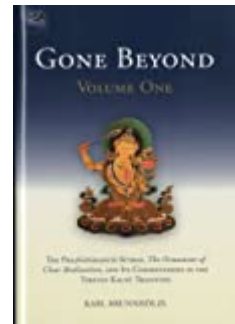
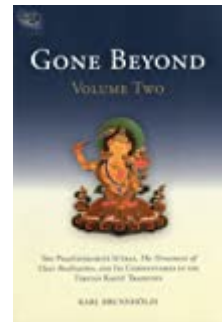




Karl Brunnhölzl. *Gone Beyond: The Prajnaparamita Sutras, the Ornament of Clear Realization, and Its Commentaries in the Tibetan Kagyu Tradition.* Volume 1. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2011. 876 pp. \$54.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55939-356-0.



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Unzipping the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras

Despite being one of the most commented upon texts in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* has been somewhat neglected by Western scholars, who have tended to show greater interest in more ontologically and epistemologically oriented texts. While this is perhaps not surprising, given the fundamentally secular nature of modern Western philosophy, the lack of attention is unjustified for at least two reasons. The first is the argument that the concept of *mārga* incorporates and pre-

supposes everything else in Buddhism (as presented in Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Robert M. Gimello's edited collection *Paths to Liberation: The Mārga and Its Transformations in Buddhist Thought* [1992]), the implication of which is that the soteriological dimensions of Buddhism are just as worthy of study as its philosophical aspects (if not more worthy). The second is the fact that the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* represents Mahāyāna Buddhism's most comprehensive and influential systematization of

the path, a point noted in 1929 by Theodor Stcherbatsky in his introduction to the first printed Sanskrit edition of the text when he described it as “the fundamental work for the study of the Buddhist doctrine of the Path.”[1]

Recently, this imbalance within Buddhist studies has begun to change. Several important commentaries on the *Abhisamayālaśāhikā* have been published, and scholars working in the field known to Tibetans as *phar phyin* (Skt. [*Prajāpāramitā*]) need no longer be referred to as pioneers, despite still being relatively few in number.[2] One such scholar is Karl Brunnhölzl, whose recently published encyclopedic resource book on the Kagyā *Abhisamayālaśāhikā* commentary tradition stands as a landmark contribution to *Prajāpāramitā* studies. In terms of the scope of its subject matter and the detail of its annotations, it is fair to say that *Gone Beyond* ranks alongside another monumental (but regrettably incomplete) study of *Prajāpāramitā*, namely, Étienne Lamotte’s translation of the *Mahāprajāpāramitāśāstra* (1949-80).

The dust jacket of *Gone Beyond* describes the *Abhisamayālaśāhikā* as “resembling a zip-file” of the *Prajāpāramitā śāstra*. Extending the digital analogy, we may say that through the inclusion of voluminous notes and extensive supplementary material Brunnhölzl has successfully “unzipped” the *Abhisamayālaśāhikā* to reveal the intricate detail of the work’s sophisticated schema of *Prajāpāramitā* exegesis to Western audiences. Thus, regardless of whether Western neglect of the text has been mainly due to the work’s sheer inaccessibility or whether it is a result of its perceived irrelevance, Brunnhölzl’s translation of the Fifth Shamarpa’s concise commentary on the *Abhisamayālaśāhikā* is a large step toward overcoming the first of these obstacles, while his extensive introduction makes a significant contribution to overcoming the second.

Although the centerpiece of the project is the translation of the Fifth Shamarpa’s commentary, it only occupies 270 of the two volumes’ combined total of 1,630 pages. The remaining pages are taken up with the translator’s extensive introduction (180 pages), ten appendices (680 pages), 2,613 endnotes (370 pages), index, glossaries, and bibliography. The inclusion of such an enormous amount of supplementary material to assist understanding the commentary gives us some idea of how inaccessible the *Abhisamayālaśāhikā* can be for those outside the Tibetan monastic system (as well as quite a few within, it may be said).

The introduction to the translation includes the following topics: a summary of the meaning of the *Prajāpāramitā śāstra* themselves, their contents, and their transmission to Tibet; the special interpretive schema of the *Abhisamayālaśāhikā* together with a brief survey of the work’s major Indian and Tibetan commentaries; the “view” of the text in terms of well-known traditional Tibetan doxographical categories; the reasons why it occupies such an important place in the traditional Tibetan monastic curriculum; a review of the rather limited attention it has so far received by Western scholarship; the practical relevance of the text; the *Abhisamayālaśāhikā* as a contemplative manual; the meaning of “other-emptiness” (Tib. *gzhan stong*) in the Eighth Karmapa’s and Fifth Shamarpa’s commentaries; and an overview of the entire three-volume study. Brunnhölzl’s introduction is at its most engaging when addressing the basic question of why we should be bothered wrestling with such a dry and technical text. Although the *Abhisamayālaśāhikā* declares in its opening verses that its basic purpose is to generate faith and inspire people to undertake the various practices of the bodhisattva path, Brunnhölzl observes that it tends to produce the opposite effect. He finds it very hard to believe that “the endless lists, subdivision, and technical details of things to be accomplished and to be relinquished ... could serve as ‘faith boosters’ to anyone.... On the contrary, almost everyone has had a hard time stifling the exact opposite feeling of tremendous resistance to all these lists and subdivisions and urge to run out of the class” (p. 103). To overcome this natural reaction to the *Abhisamayālaśāhikā*, Brunnhölzl devotes considerable space to arguing the case for why readers should persevere with such a difficult work.

Generally, he is in agreement with Jeffrey Hopkins and Georges Dreyfus, who hold that the function of the text in Tibetan scholasticism is not to provide any practical advice on how to traverse the path to enlightenment.[3] Rather, its function is to bring together the various descriptions of the stages of practice into a single coherent Mahāyāna worldview within which meaningful practice can be undertaken. One of the problems for Western audiences of the *Abhisamayālaśāhikā*, however, is that it is more difficult to construct such a worldview, based, as it is, on a highly speculative cosmology. Brunnhölzl adopts a constructivist approach to the problem. The primary goal of the text, he says, “is to assist in the task of deconstructing our ordinary course and subtle conceptual overlays with their myriad ways of ‘black-and-white’ thinking, thus giving way to increas-

ingly more direct insights into what our mind is in its own true nature without any overlays” (p. 106).

At odds, then, with the typical Tibetan approach, but possibly in line with the *AbhisamayĀlaā'kāra's* YogĀcĀra origins, BrunnhĀñlzl argues that the text can indeed be used as a contemplative manual, or as he calls it, a deconstruction manual. The function of the lists, he argues, is to point to emptiness. The conceptual fixating mind self-dissolves, defeated with its own weapons, just as two sticks rubbed together produce a fire that in turn consumes the two sticks, thereby giving the practitioner “glimpses of a radical but healthy shock of groundlessness” (p. 123). Still, one wonders whether the same shock of groundlessness would be more easily gained through a direct reading of the sĀ«tras themselves without the *AbhisamayĀlaā'kāra's* elaborate framework, since it is not unreasonable to believe that such was the original intention of the sĀ«tras.

One of the reasons for the complexity of the *AbhisamayĀlaā'kāras* system, BrunnhĀñlzl says, is that its purpose is to unknot our highly knotted and multilayered understanding of the world together with its multiplicity of reference points. This may well be true, but there is also another, simpler, reason. The text is clearly complicated because it attempts to superimpose a coherent soteriological schema on a sĀ«tra that was never executed in accordance with any systematic plan—“a vast storehouse or jumble of ideas and fragments,” as Edward Conze once put it.[4] Although BrunnhĀñlzl acknowledges the somewhat artificial nature of the *AbhisamayĀlaā'kāra*, admitting that it obviously attempts to “forge a coherent overall structure where it is hard to find one,” he does not, I feel, go far enough in attributing its complexity to this contrived interpretation (p. 701n175).

Another interesting and original contribution made by BrunnhĀñlzl in his introduction is his discussion of the *AbhisamayĀlaā'kāra's* philosophical point of view. Although most Indian and Tibetan commentators consider the it to be a Madhyamaka text, the problem is defining Madhyamaka. The Eighth Karmapa says that Haribhadra, the work's most authoritative Indian exegete, follows Asā'ga's system and is therefore a False Aspectarian MĀdhyamika, which he equates with Shentong MĀdhyamika. BrunnhĀñlzl goes on to explain how Rangtong/Shentong is not a dichotomy, and that there are a range of positions other than those of Tsongkhapa and Dolpopa. He rejects the view espoused by some contemporary scholars that the Eighth Karmapa was a genuine proponent of Shentong (rather, his position

was more a kind of “Shentong Lite”). Such a view, BrunnhĀñlzl maintains, appears to be based on an oversimplification of Eighth Karmapa's position as presented in Gelugpa *yigcha*.

Turning to the translation itself, navigating one's way through the *AbhisamayĀlaā'kāras* 70 topics and approximately 1,200 individual listed items is never easy, even for monks who have already memorized its 273 verses. Readers will benefit from BrunnhĀñlzl's use of numbered subheadings. While there is also value in his use of parenthetical numbers to help the reader identify the subsections that follow at certain points in the text, these would have been even more helpful if BrunnhĀñlzl had mentioned the page that the reader should jump ahead to if he or she wants to go straight to a particular subsection—a kind of hyperlink, if you will. Generally speaking, BrunnhĀñlzl's terminology will be mostly recognizable to scholars familiar with MahĀyĀna and Abhidharma literature in English translation. There are, however, a few standard terms that BrunnhĀñlzl has chosen to render into English in a new way, justifying his choice with extensive explanations in the endnotes. Among the new alternatives that deserve wider uptake are “the four realities” (*catursatya*), “path of familiarization” (*bhĀvanĀmĀrga*), and “disposition” (*gotra*).

It is in the extensive appended material that one of the greatest strengths of the whole translation project becomes apparent. BrunnhĀñlzl's approach of taking a relatively concise text and making it the centerpiece, while supplementing it with selected translations from a much more detailed work—in this case, the Eighth Karmapa's commentary—is, I think, very effective. In this respect, it is worth comparing *Gone Beyond* with another recent worthy contribution to PrajĀ±ĀpĀramitĀ studies, namely, Gareth Sparham's translation of Tsong-kha-pa's *Golden Garland (gSer phreng)* (2008-10), an extremely difficult text that is similar to the Eighth Karmapa's commentary in terms of its length and the detail of its excursions. In Gelugpa monasteries, the *Golden Garland* is usually only studied after first studying one of the easier works, such as rGyal-tshab's *Ornament of the Essence (sNying po'i rgyan)*. Sparham's English translation, accurate and scholarly though it is, borders on the inaccessible without any oral commentary and/or other supplementary material that so far is only available in Tibetan.

Other useful material in the appendices includes a number of charts that help one understand the many matrices found throughout the PrajĀ±ĀpĀramitĀ, a new translation of the *AbhisamayĀlaā'kāra* itself, and trans-

lations of two other works typically studied as preliminaries to the study of the detailed commentaries on the *AbhisamayĀlaā'kāra* and their even more detailed sub-commentaries. While these preliminary works have been translated before, Brunnhölzl's translations have the advantage of being more extensively annotated, not to mention being free of monist terminology favored by Eugene Obermiller and the St. Petersburg school.

As already mentioned, the endnotes are extremely detailed, with many extending to two or more pages of fine print, and reading more like mini academic papers than notes. Notable examples include Brunnhölzl's lengthy and detailed discussions of the authorship of the *Bā'hattāka* (Tib. *yum gsum gnod 'joms*), the meaning of "bodhisattva," and the three turnings of the wheel of dharma. One problem I occasionally found with some of the longer notes, particularly those containing extensive summary and paraphrase, was that Brunnhölzl's views and those of the works he summarizes are not always clearly distinguished.

When translating passages from canonical works, Brunnhölzl usually provides references to the Peking and Dege editions of the Kangyur and Tengyur, as well as chapter and verse numbers for passages quoted from well-known *Āstras*. References to page numbers in published Sanskrit editions are generally not given, which in the context of Haribhadra's *AbhisamayĀlaā'kāraĀlokā*, Brunnhölzl justifies on the grounds that "the Tengyur is more widely accessible and read than Wogihara's Sanskrit edition" (p. 687n46). Be that as it may, given that a number of published Sanskrit works are listed in the bibliography, and were, one assumes, consulted by Brunnhölzl, one wonders why the relevant page numbers could not have also been mentioned in the endnotes (though, admittedly, chapter and verse numbers are, in most cases, sufficient).

The two glossaries (EnglishĀSanskritĀTibetan; TibetanĀSanskritĀEnglish) in the second volume are considerably briefer than I had expected. I did not, for example, find Tibetan or Sanskrit equivalents for the following

English terms on a randomly chosen page: "afflictive omnipresent cause," "direct wrong engagement," and "juxtaposed wrong engagement." While there is obviously a limit to what can be included in a glossary, this was one area in which I thought Brunnhölzl could have been more expansive, given large number of technical terms for which there are often no commonly agreed on English equivalents. It should also be mentioned that while the two volumes are available separately, it is recommended that they be purchased together, as only volume 2 contains the index, glossary, and bibliography.

A few minor quibbles aside, one could hardly ask for a clearer presentation of such a complex topic. Brunnhölzl is to be congratulated on producing a must-have resource book for serious students of Mahāyāna.

Notes

[1]. Theodor Stcherbatsky, introduction to *Abhisamayālaā'kāra-prajñāpāramitā-upadeśa-sāstra: The Work of Bodhisattva Maitreya*, ed. by Eugene Obermiller and Theodor Stcherbatsky (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1929), p. iii.

[2]. Notably, see Haribhadra, *AbhisamayĀlaā'kāra with Vā'tti and Ālokā AbhisamayĀlaā'kāraĀlokā*, trans. Gareth Sparham, 4 vols. (Fremont: Jain Publishing, 2006â12); and Tsongkhapa, *Golden Garland of Eloquence: Legs-bshad gser-phreng*, trans. Gareth Sparham, 4 vols. (Fremont: Jain Publishing, 2008â10).

[3]. Jeffrey Hopkins, "A Tibetan Perspective on the Nature of Spiritual Experience," in *Paths to Liberation: The MĀrga and its Transformations in Buddhist Thought*, ed. Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Robert Gimello (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1992), 228â229; and Georges Dreyfus, "Tibetan Scholastic Education and the Role of Soteriology," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 20, no. 1 (1997): 31-62.

[4]. Edward Conze, "Maitreya's AbhisamayĀlaā'kāra," *East and West* 5 (1954): 192-197, quotation on 193.

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