

Commentary: Overview

The writing of commentaries has been and continues to be one of the fundamental literary activities of Buddhists everywhere. For more than two thousand years, going back to the earliest days of the tradition, commentaries have been used to learn and teach the words of the Buddha, to transmit their form and content faithfully, and to systematize and develop Buddhist doctrine.

A commentary can be defined as a sustained textual mediation of the meaning and form of a culturally significant root text, or more simply the “continuous explication of text” (Guthmüller, 2013), to distinguish it from the more localized and occasional type of explication represented by glosses. At the same time, the very word “commentary” indicates, for the Western European tradition, a gradual evolution from glosses into the new literary genre of commentary: Latin *commentarium* originally meant “collection of notes (*commenta*)” (OED, 2012, s.v.); the same relationship holds between the Indian terms *vārttika* and *vr̥tti*). It took until the 5th century CE for such notes to develop into the first full-fledged commentary (Servius’s commentary on Virgil), and by the 12th century, Latin commentaries had become the “most important form of scholarly literature” in Europe (Guthmüller, 2013). What we have is thus a development from paratext to an independent work that stands in a truly intertextual relationship with its root text, with which it may engage selectively and in a topical order of its own choice. Early Buddhist commentaries not only performed the same task of continuous explication as the Latin *commenta* but also served as a tool for the rational organization of the teachings of the Buddha collected in the early Buddhist canons. From the very beginning, this organization entailed differences of opinion and organizational principles among various authorities. In the course of time, Buddhist commentators gradually assumed a voice of their own and developed original doctrinal and philosophical systems, while keeping to the literary form of commentary. This strategy allowed them to assert continuity with their tradition, while the different layers of root text and commentary facilitated the use of complex argument structures (Slaje, 2007, 73–74; Ganeri, 2011, 114–115); in the history of Buddhist

studies, however, it has led to a certain neglect of commentarial literature due to a mistaken assumption of lack of creativity (Kramer, 2013). In the Buddhist world as in the Latin world, the 5th century marks the consolidation of earlier exegetical material into comprehensive commentaries on which following generations of scholars built. In parallel with these “literary” commentaries, the production of “curricular” commentaries rooted in an instructional setting and based on either teachers’ or students’ notes continued to be a powerful force throughout the history of Buddhism (Ganeri, 2011, 113–114; Krasser, 2011). Some of these curricular commentaries were elaborated and crossed over into the literary tradition; others remained ephemeral, yet formed and continue to form the backbone of local Buddhist instruction (McDaniel, 2008, 191–204).

Principles and Classification

The main subgenres of Buddhist commentary are the following:

1. lexical and grammatical explanation of the language of their root texts;
2. scholastic, philosophical, and juridical elaboration of their root texts’ content; and
3. narrative explanation of root texts that could develop a life of its own (as with the explanatory background narratives that have been added separately to the Pali and Chinese versions of the *Dharmapada* verse collection).

While any given commentary can be categorized as primarily belonging to one of these subgenres, commentaries often combine characteristics of more than one subgenre. A basic categorization of the services provided by Buddhist commentaries would consist of linguistic and factual explanation, textual criticism (discussing variant readings), and higher criticism. That is, commentaries attempt to explain terms, provide information on allusions, and so on; or they offer textual information (this may overlap with the first category, e.g. if a term is replaced); or a commentary may reflect on the meaning and message of a text or elucidate its underlying, salvifically relevant meaning, which often involves the

collection, discussion, and refutation of different authoritative opinions.

The Buddhist traditions of India developed their own formulations of the principles and purposes of commentarial activity. The *Catuspratisarāṇasūtra* (Discourse on the Four Resorts), extant in several Sanskrit versions and in Chinese, lays down the following four “resorts” for the commentator: the teaching itself (*dharma*) should be followed, not the person of any particular teacher (*purusa*); the meaning (*artha*) of the teaching should be followed, not its specific formulation (*vyañjana*); teachings with clear meaning (*nītartha*) should be followed rather than those whose meaning needs establishing (*neyārtha*); and direct knowledge (*jñāna*) should be followed rather than discursive knowledge (*vijñāna*; Lamotte, 1949; Davidson, 1990).

This early canonical set of four “resorts” partly overlaps with four kinds of “discrimination” that the *Samdhinirmocanasaṃsūtra* (Discourse Resolving Difficulties; c. 3rd cent. CE) presents as characteristic of the communicative abilities of a bodhisattva (and thus to be imitated by the ideal commentator): discrimination (*pratisaṃvid*) concerning the words of the teaching (*dharma*), the meaning of the teaching (*artha*), linguistic shape (*nirukti*), such as dialectal differences, and lucidity (*pratibhāna*; Nance, 2012, 59–60). The first two of these abilities are prerequisites for understanding the word of the Buddha, the other two for communicating it to any given audience. A special case of the latter is the translation of Buddhist scriptures into non-Indian languages, and some commentaries were composed to serve precisely this purpose (e.g. the *Udānavargavivaraṇa*; Explanation of the Chapters of Inspired Utterances; see below).

The twin exegetical concerns with *dharma* and *artha* have an echo in the modern scholarly distinction between *Textpflege* and *Sinnpflege* (“curation of text” and “curation of meaning”; comp. Freiberger, 2000, 24, adopting terminology from Assmann & Assmann, 1987). The third term in the modern classification of commentarial purposes – *Zensur*, the distinction between authentic and unauthentic texts and the establishment of a canon – likewise constitutes a traditional Buddhist concern, as reflected for instance in the *Mahāpadeśasūtra* (Great Discourse on Criteria [for Authenticity]; Lamotte, 1947; Davidson, 1990).

The specific methods employed by commentaries to accomplish these aims are enumerated in Vasubandhu’s very influential reflection

on interpretation, the *Vyākhyāyukti* (Principles of Exegesis; c. 5th cent.), as (1) establishment of the purpose of the commentary (*prayojana*), (2) statement of the overall meaning (*piṇḍartha*), (3) explanation of the meanings of words (*padartha*), (4) demonstration of connections with other Buddhist texts and elements of Buddhist doctrine (*anusaṃdhī*), and (5) refutation of objections (*codyaparihāra*), building on a similar list in the *Vivaraṇasamgrahaṇī* chapter of the *Yogācārabhūmi* (Nance, 2012, 105–120, 167–212). This Buddhist list of five terms resembles (and possibly inspired) a more general conception of the services of a classical Indian literary or scholastic commentary that persisted into modern times. One may compare for instance the enumeration of five exegetical services in a verse quoted in the 19th-century compendium *Nyāyakośa* (Treasury of Nyāya Philosophy; Jhalakikar, 1893): *padaccheda* (word division), *padārthokti* (stating the meaning of words), *vigraha* (compound resolution), *vākyayojanā* (construal of sentences), *ākṣepasamādhāna* (answering of objections; Tubb & Boose, 2007, 3–5).

As Buddhist commentarial literature developed, a broad range of terminology came into use to distinguish (at least for us today not always clearly) between types and subtypes of commentaries. The earliest types of Buddhist commentary are called *vibhaṅga* and *nirdeśa*. The Sanskrit tradition of mainland India knows the terms *bhāṣya* (with which comp. Patañjali’s grammatical commentary *Mahābhāṣya* [Great Commentary]; c. 2nd cent. BCE), *vyākhyā*, *vṛtti*, *vivaraṇa*, *tīkā*, and more. The Pali tradition of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia developed a different set of terms: *atṭhakathā*, *tīkā*, *atthayojanā*, *gaṇṭhipadavivaraṇa*, and others. Looking beyond Buddhism, the various layers of Jaina commentarial literature present a similar mixture of pan-Indian and specific terminology: *bhāṣa*, *nijuttī*, and *cūṇī* for Prakrit commentaries and *vṛtti* and *tīkā* for Sanskrit commentaries (Balbir, 2009, 48–53; for the terminology of Sanskrit philosophical literature, see also Ganeri, 2011, 103). This general situation is mirrored in European humanist and Renaissance commentaries: “very many terms applied to [them], not always displaying any clear distinction . . . (*commentarius*, *interpretatio*, *enarratio*, *expositio*, *explicatio*, *adnotationes*, *glossae*, *scholia* etc.)” (Guthmüller, 2013).

Over time, particularly important canonical texts attracted whole clusters of commentaries. These may be considered “commentarial complexes,” because the multiple layers of commentaries and

subcommentaries cross-reference and shed light on each other. Moreover, such complexes are socially recognized, since several would typically be used together in teaching and scriptural study. Examples of such complexes that have received recent scholarly attention are the commentaries on the Pali *Brahmajālasuttanta* (Discourse on the Religious Net; Bodhi, 1978), the Pali *Dhammapada* (Word of the Doctrine; Carter & Palihawadana, 1987), the *Heart Sūtra* (Lopez, 1988), and the *Śālistambasūtra* (Discourse on the Rice Stalk; Schoening, 1995). A uniquely elaborate case of a commentarial complex is the Pali *atthakathā* and *tīkā* literature, a carefully planned enterprise commenting on the entirety of the Pali canon (Bond, 1982; Mori, 1984; see below).

The Early Period

The earliest Buddhist commentaries were collections of occasional (and originally oral) glosses (see below on the *Suttaniddesa* [Explanation of the Discourses], commonly called *Niddesa*) and the early Chinese scripture commentaries. In some cases, such glosses also provided the raw material for the gradual expansion of the root texts themselves by means of synonym strings and insertion of literary clichés. A case in point is the observable evolution of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Understanding in Eight Thousand Lines) from its earliest accessible version in Gandhari language through the exemplar of Dharmarakṣa's Chinese translation into the transmitted Sanskrit text (Falk & Karashima, 2012; 2013), in the process of which the text grew through such, at times seemingly mechanical, explanatory expansions.

Another starting point for the Buddhist genre of commentary were the root texts – mythologically speaking, the word of the Buddha – themselves since “the sūtra discourses comment on the Buddha’s insights and the path” (Mayer, 2004, 166). As the tradition presents the myth of scripture production, in the course of his long teaching career, the Buddha formulated the same insights in different ways for different audiences, in effect providing different commentarial angles on the same topic. Occasionally, the Buddha delegated the explication of his teaching to one of his closest disciples, moving the textual product one step closer to being a commentary. The best-known example is the recitation of the *Samgītisūtra* (Discourse on the Recital) by Śāriputra when back pain prevented the Buddha from teach-

ing it himself (as described in the introduction of the discourse; D III 209 in the Pali version). Another example is the *Bhaddekarattasuttanta* (Discourse on an Excellent Single Night) – preserved in the Pali *Majjhimanikāya* (Middle-Length Collection, nos. 131–134) – the teaching of which the Buddha partially delegated to Ānanda and Mahākassapa. The text is divided into *uddesa* (exposition) and *vibhaṅga* (explication), using the technical terminology of early Buddhist exegesis (von Hinüber, 1996, 33). We may view these as (successful) attempts to canonize certain commentarial acts, attributed to the Buddha’s closest disciples but possibly executed by later individuals or groups who will remain forever unknown.

Three non-Buddhist traditions also appear to have influenced the development of Buddhist commentarial genres. The Pali *Khandhaka* (Chapters [on Discipline]), the explanation of ritual rules for Buddhist monks and nuns, may have been modeled on the explanation of Brahmanical ritual rules in the pre-Buddhist *brāhmaṇa* (“Brahmanical”) literature (von Hinüber, 1996, 17–18). The *jātaka* (stories of the previous births of the Buddha) genre – the embedding of canonical verses in a narrative framework explaining the verses – appears to be indebted to the *ākhyāna* (legend) type of literature, likewise going back to the early Vedic period (von Hinüber, 1996, 56–57). And finally, the Buddhist scholastic practice of an author writing prose commentaries on his own succinct technical treatises follows the procedure of Brahmanical *sūtra* literature in technical fields such as grammar (Schoening, 1995, 111–113; Ganeri, 2011, 112–116).

The earliest example of a *vibhaṅga* (explication) outside the collection of the Buddha’s discourses is the *Suttavibhaṅga* commentary on the *Prātimokṣasūtra* (Binding Discourse), the fundamental rules of conduct for Buddhist monks and nuns, which is preserved in Pali and Sanskrit versions and in Chinese, Tocharian, and Tibetan translations. The second early Buddhist commentary type, *nirdeśa* (explanation), is characterized by its concern with synonyms for central doctrinal terms, collecting them into mnemonic building blocks or mapping among them. The two main examples of this genre are the Pali *Suttaniddesa* (Explanation of the Discourses) attributed to Śāriputra (see below) and the Gandhari verse commentaries that refer to themselves as a *nirdeśa* of *sūtra* (see below).

After the Pali *Suttavibhaṅga* and *Suttaniddesa*, which preserve very early material, the oldest

preserved Buddhist commentaries are three Gandhari commentaries on early Buddhist verses and one on the *Samgītisūtra*. Moreover, in contrast to the Pali texts, which reach us after centuries of redaction and copying, the Gandhari commentaries were discovered in birchbark manuscripts from the 1st century CE and are thus very close to their autographs, and possibly even autographs themselves. These manuscripts owe their survival to the fact that they – together with dozens of other Buddhist texts on birchbark scrolls – were carefully deposited in clay pots and other vessels in the arid region that is now northern Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan (Baums, 2014a, 208–213). Their unique importance lies in providing firsthand unmediated evidence for the state and craft of Buddhist commentary writing in this very early period, while the loss of comparable early commentaries elsewhere testifies to the ephemeral nature of this type of text.

The verse commentaries contain selections of verses from the *Dharmapada* or *Udāna* (Inspired Utterances), the *Arthavarga* (Chapters on Meaning), the *Pārāyaṇa* (Going to the Far Shore), and other canonical sources. Each section is introduced by the first quarter of the verse in question, followed by the formula *sutro tatra nideśo* (Skt. *sūtram tatra nirdeśah*; “[thus] the canonical text; the explanation on it [is as follows]”), indicating a relationship with the exegetical tradition represented by the Pali *Suttaniddesa*, which is also borne out by some shared material.

The main service provided by the verse commentaries is, however, a procedure of “categorial reduction” (Baums, 2014b), whereby the parts of each verse are systematically equated with the members of sets of doctrinal categories, such as the three sources (*nidāna*) lust (*rāga*), hate (*dveṣa*), and delusion (*moha*) or the three categories (*skandha*) virtue (*śīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and understanding (*prajñā*). A very similar procedure (employing a distinct but overlapping set of categories) is taught in the *Nayasamuṭṭhāna* (Operation of Guidelines) chapter of the Pali exegetical manual *Peṭakopadesa* (Instruction for the Piṭaka Master; Ñānamoli, 1964; Baums, 2014b, 35) and exemplified in the *Hārasampāta* (Combined Exegesis) chapter of the same work. This text thus seems to occupy a very important place in the history of Buddhist commentary. Linguistic features of the Pali *Peṭakopadesa* (including the peculiar form of its title) suggest that it was translated into Pali from a northwestern language such as Gandhari, a conjecture that is strengthened by the identification of AnShigao’s 2nd-

century Chinese translation *Yinchirujing* (陰持入經; Commentary on the Discourse on Aggregates, Elements, and Spheres; T. 603) as a version of the *Suttatthasamuccaya* (Summary of the Meaning of the Discourses) chapter of the *Peṭakopadesa* (Zacchetti, 2002a; see below). When one further takes into consideration the untraced quotations from an Indian exegetical manual called *Pile* (毘勒; Piṭaka [Master]) in the 5th-century *Da zhidu lun* (大智度論; Great Treatise on the Perfection of Understanding; T. 1509; Zacchetti, 2002b; see below), the following scenario seems likely: the method of categorial reduction and related exegetical procedures flourished in northwestern India, where we see them employed in the Gandhari commentary manuscripts and where they were probably set out in a number of manuals. The early Chinese translators took an interest in these methods, translating and quoting from some of the Piṭaka manuals, whereas the Theravāda tradition collected and translated them in the Pali *Peṭakopadesa*, reworked their content in the *Nettipakkaraṇa* (Guidebook; Ñānamoli, 1962), and employed some of their methods in the *atṭhakathās*. This method of categorical reduction (or mapping) may have a historical echo in the short-lived early Chinese exegetical method of *geyi* (see below).

The Gandhari *Samgītisūtra* commentary employs the same method of categorial reduction as the Gandhari verse commentaries, with many of the same target doctrinal categories. It adds a second level of reduction by mapping each set of ten complete commentary sections to the Four Truths (*satya*) or the Three Courses (*yartman*) in special summary sections. Another prominent service, introducing most commentary sections of the *Samgītisūtra* commentary, is the etymological explanation of the root text’s doctrinal terms. The order of root terms in the Gandhari commentary corresponds almost perfectly to that of the Chinese translation of the *Samgītisūtra* in the *Chang ahan jing* (長阿含經; Discourses of the Long Collection; T. 1), suggesting an affiliation with the Dharmaguptaka school (Salomon, 1999, 171–173).

A prominent feature of both the Gandhari verse commentaries and the Gandhari *Samgītisūtra* commentary is their systematic collection and presentation of alternative interpretations for the same part of the root text, sometimes simply introduced by the expression “alternatively,” in other cases attributed to “some” or “others.” No preference is usually expressed for any of these alternatives, other than possibly by the order in which they are presented.

This stands in contrast to another group of Gandhari scholastic treatises, such as a commentary on or discussion of the *Dhātuvibhangasūtra* (Discourse on the Explication of the Elements) and especially an independent treatise on existence in the three times (British Library Fragment 28; Cox, 2014, 43–46). Both of these point the way to the later flourishing in Gandhara and Kashmir of polemical commentaries and other scholastic works in Sanskrit (see below).

We know very little about early Buddhist commentarial traditions in the regional languages other than those preserved in Gandhari and Pali. A body of commentaries in Old Sinhalese language was reworked into the Pali *atthakathās* and subsequently lost, and the Pali commentaries refer to lost commentaries of the South Indian Andhaka school (von Hinüber, 1996, 101–102, 104–105).

Similarly, few Sanskrit commentaries on the early Buddhist canon have come down to us in the form of manuscript fragments, and our knowledge of commentarial activity in this area remains incomplete. The remnants of a Buddhist monastic library discovered at Bamiyan include fragments of a *Dharmapada* commentary (now preserved in the Schøyen Collection), and a number of Sanskrit fragments from the northern Silk Road (including SHT, fragment 922; Sander, 1981, 66) contain commentarial material on the *Udānavarga* (Chapters of Inspired Utterances). It is possible that these commentaries – like the earlier Gandhari commentaries on the same root texts – served pedagogical purposes in the training of Buddhist novices who had memorized the verses that now functioned as vehicles for doctrinal explication. A later Sanskrit commentary on the *Udānavarga* is Prajñavarman's 8th-century *Udānavargavivaraṇa*, produced to support the translation of the *Udānavarga* root text into Tibetan and now itself only preserved in Tibetan translation (Balk, 1988).

Consolidation and Handbooks

As commentaries and subcommentaries proliferated in Indian Buddhism, the need arose for synthetic treatments of Buddhist doctrine. The first large-scale attempt at such systematization were the Abhidharma (scholastic) treatises of the early Buddhist schools, which use many of the same techniques as the earlier commentaries (von Hinüber, 1996, 68) and in many respects can be regarded as a special kind of commentary on the entire body of the Buddha's teaching rather than on individual

texts, an understanding reflected by the title of the Theravāda Abhidharma work *Vibhaṅga*. We have the complete canonical Abhidharma collections of the Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda schools and individual works by other schools such as the Dharmaguptaka. Formally, the Sarvāstivāda canonical Abhidharma work *Samgītiparyāya* is a commentary on the *Samgītisūtra* (Willemen, Dessein & Cox, 1998, 67–68), and the Theravāda *Kathāvatthu* appears to have in turn presupposed its own explanatory commentary, now lost (von Hinüber, 1996, 72).

The Sarvāstivāda canonical Abhidharma treatises in turn attracted a very lively commentarial activity, the several layers and summaries of which provided the formal framework for the development of Sarvāstivāda thought. Fragments of the *Prakaranabhāṣya* (Commentary on [the Treatise on] Topics), an early commentary on the *Prakarāṇapāda* (Treatise on Topics), were found on the northern Silk Road (Sander, 1981, 65–66). In Kashmir, a tradition of writing scholastic compendia called *vibhāṣā*, all formally commentaries on the *Jñānaprasthāna* (System of Knowledge), flourished and reached its last and most comprehensive expression in the *Mahāvibhāṣā* (Great Commentary), allegedly compiled and redacted at a Buddhist council convened by the emperor Kaniṣka in the 2nd century CE; the *Mahāvibhāṣā* became the foundational text of the Vaibhāṣika school of Sarvāstivāda scholasticism (Willemen, Dessein & Cox, 1998, 116–121). At the same time in Gandhara, the development of Sarvāstivāda thought found expression in a series of systematic compendia including Dharmāśreṣṭhin's (or Dharmottara's) **Abhidharmahṛdayaśāstra* (Treatise on the Heart of Scholasticism; T. 1550), Upaśānta's **Abhidharmahṛdayaśāstra* (Treatise on the Heart of Scholasticism; T. 1551), and Dharmatrāta's **Miśrakābhidharmahṛdayaśāstra* (Mixed Treatise on the Heart of Scholasticism; T. 1281; all three only preserved in Chinese translation). The literary form of the last of these – a verse root text arranged by topic and combined with an autocommentary – was adopted by Vasubandhu (5th cent. CE) in his *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, which presents orthodox Vaibhāṣika doctrine in the root text and subjects it to Sautrāntika criticism in the commentary. The *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* became the most successful handbook of Indian Abhidharma and served in translation as the fundamental scholastic compendium throughout Tibet and East Asia, down to today, and was also translated into Tocharian and Uighur (Sander, 1981, 66). The main subcommentaries on the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*

are Yaśomitra's *Sphuṭārthābhidharmakośavyākhyā* (Commentary on the Treasury of Scholasticism Having Clear Meaning; Wogihara, 1932–1936) and Sthiramati's *Tattvārthābhidharmakośatikā* (Commentary on the Treasury of Scholasticism Having True Meaning; a Sanskrit manuscript of this text has recently been rediscovered in Tibet). Śamathadeva's *Abhidharmakośopāyikā* (Companion to the Treasury of Scholasticism; D 4094/P 5595; Honjō, 1984; for a complete annotated translation, see Honjō, 2014) collects the numerous canonical citations and allusions of the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* as an aid to the reader; Dignāga's *Marmapradīpābhidharmakośavṛtti* (Commentary on the Treasury of Scholasticism Illuminating the Core; only preserved in Tibetan translation; D 4095/P 5596) is a summary of the *Abhidharmakosa*, and the manual *Abhidharmadīpa* (Illuminator of Scholasticism) with the autocommentary *Vibhāṣāprabhāvṛtti* (Commentary Illuminating the [Great] Commentary; Jaini, 1977) appears to have been written in response to the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*.

According to the introductions of the Theravāda Abhidharma commentaries *Atthasalīni* (Rich in Meaning), *Sammohavinodanī* (Dispeller of Delusion), and *Pañcappakaranaṭṭhakathā* (Commentary on Five Works), the famous commentator Buddhaghosa initiated their production in the 4th or 5th century CE, which means that he did not write them himself (von Hinüber, 1996, 149–153). A certain Ānanda of Kalasapura and his pupil Dhammapāla produced sets of subcommentaries on the Abhidharma commentaries in the 5th and 6th centuries CE (or later; von Hinüber, 1996, 166–170). Theravāda Abhidharma commentaries continued to be written into the modern period (von Hinüber, 1996, 149n513).

With the rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism sometime around the turn of the new millennium, and the corresponding production of Mahāyāna *sūtras*, came a new production of commentaries as well. A retrospective overview of Indian Mahāyāna commentaries can be gleaned from the Tibetan translation catalogues and extant translation corpus (Schoening, 1996). The *Lhan kar ma* catalog (early 9th cent. CE) lists 51 titles in its section on commentaries on Mahāyāna *sūtras*, and another 8 titles in its section on *sūtra* commentaries translated from Chinese. Approximately 30 of these commentaries are lost and only known from the catalogue. Taking these together with the 90 translations of Mahāyāna *sūtra* commentaries that are preserved in the Tanjur (Translation of Teachings), a total of approx-

imately 120 Indian Mahāyāna *sūtra* commentaries are known to have been translated into Tibetan. There are 34 Mahāyāna *sūtras* in the Kanjur (Translation of the Word [of the Buddha]) that have corresponding commentaries in the Tanjur, including eight *sūtras* from the *Prajñāpāramitā* section and 25 other Mahāyāna *sūtras*. At least 20 commentaries in the Tanjur are subcommentaries on the *Abhisamayālankāra Prajñāpāramitopadeśaśāstra* (Instructional Treatise on the Perfection of Understanding [Called] Ornament of Intuition; Schoening, 1996, 115–116), a systematizing verse summary of, probably, the *Pañcavīṁśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Understanding in 25,000 Lines; Conze, 1978, provides a comprehensive overview of the Prajñāpāramitā commentarial literature in India and Tibet). Examples of other Mahāyāna *sūtra* commentaries influential either in East Asia or in Tibet are Vasubandhu's **Daśabūmikasūtropadeśa* (Instruction on [the Discourse on] the Ten Planes; T. 1522), or **Daśabūmikabhāṣya* (Commentary on [the Discourse on] the Ten Planes), Sthiramati's *Aksayamatinirdeśatikā* (Commentary on the Explanation of Aksayamati; Braarvig, 1993), and Vīryaśridatta's *Arthavīṁścayasūtranibandhana* (Treatise on the Discourse Discussing the Meaning; Samtani, 1971). It is nonetheless curious that relatively speaking, Mahāyāna *sūtras* were apparently infrequently commented on in India; in East Asia, however, we witness a positive efflorescence of *sūtra* commentaries, with especially importance given to doctrinally or ritually significant texts such as the *Saddharma-puṇḍarikasūtra* (Lotus Discourse), *Sukhāvatīyūha* (Larger Pure Land Discourse), *Mahāvairocanasūtra* (Great Discourse on Vairocana), and the like.

Eventually, these growing bodies of Buddhist commentaries and subcommentaries demanded a further synthesis in the form of comprehensive, systematic handbooks. The classical age for such handbooks were the 4th and 5th centuries CE, prominent examples being Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* (Path of Purity) for the Theravāda tradition, the *Abhisamayālankāra* (Ornament of Intuition) for the Prajñāpāramitā literature, and Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (Commentary on the Treasury of Scholasticism) for Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma. Such handbooks could be designed to help in the production of a set of commentaries (as with the *Visuddhimagga* and the Pali *atṭhakathās*), or they could themselves give rise to a second wave of commentaries (as with the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* or *Abhisamayālankāra* and their subcommentaries).

Philosophical Commentaries

In the case of the Indian Buddhist philosophical schools, commentaries likewise served as the primary literary form for the back and forth of discussion and the exposition of arguments. The primary root-text reference for the unfolding of Madhyamaka philosophical discussion was Nāgārjuna's (*Prajñānāma*) *Mūlamadhyamakārikā* (Root Verses on the Middle Way [Called Understanding]). The *Akutobhayā* (Fearless), attributed to Nāgārjuna himself and translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva in 409 CE (T. 1564) and into Tibetan by Jñānagarbha and Klu'i rgyal mtshan, and Buddhapālita's *Mūlamadhyamakavṛtti* (Root Commentary on the Middle Way) are two important early commentaries on the *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*. Bhāviveka (c. 500–570 CE) used his commentary *Prajñāpradīpa* (Illuminator of Understanding) on the *Mūlamadhyamakārikā* for a critique of Buddhapālita, and in his *Madhyamakahṛdayakārikā* (Verses on the Heart of the Middle Way) with the autocommentary *Tarkavālā* (Flame of Reasoning), he defended the Madhyamaka standpoint against an array of Buddhist and non-Buddhist opponents. Candrakīrti (c. 600–650 CE) composed the *Prasannapadā* (Clear-Worded), another preeminent commentary on the *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*, and further engaged with Nāgārjuna's thought in the *Śūnyatāśaptativṛtti* (Commentary on the 70 [Verses] on Emptiness) and the *Yuktisaṣṭikāvṛtti* (Commentary on the 60 Principles), in addition to writing a commentary on Āryadeva's *Catuḥśata* (Four Hundred [Verses]). The later Madhyamaka philosopher Kamalaśīla (c. 740–795 CE) – famous in the history of Tibetan Buddhism as a proponent of gradual enlightenment in the debate of Bsam yas (c. 792–794 CE), which led to royal support of the Indian form of Buddhism over the Chinese – composed influential commentaries on his teacher Śāntarakṣita's works *Madhyamakālambikā* (Ornament of the Middle Way; a synthesis of Yogācāra and Madhyamaka thought) and *Tattvasaṃgraha* (Summary of Truth; a comprehensive doxography of Buddhist and non-Buddhist schools of thought). (For a detailed survey of Indian Madhyamaka literature, see Seyfort Ruegg, 1981.)

The points of departure for Yogācāra commentarial activity were Mahāyāna *sūtras* as well as foundational philosophical treatises. Vasubandhu, for instance, on the one hand composed the *Daśabhūmikabhāṣya* on the *Daśabhūmikasūtra* (see above) and on the other the *Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣya* (Commentary

on the Distinction of the Middle and the Extremes) on the *Madhyāntavibhāga* (Distinction of the Middle and the Extremes) attributed to Maitreyanātha. He also wrote a commentary on his older brother Asaṅga's compendium *Mahāyānasamgraha* (Summary of Mahāyāna) and followed the expository strategy of root text with autocommentary in his *Vimśatikā* (Twenty [Verses]). Similarly, the famous commentator Sthiramati (c. 510–570 CE) is alleged to have written a *Mahāyāna sūtra* commentary in the *Akṣayamatinirdeśātikā* (see above) and commentaries and subcommentaries on his recent predecessors' work in the *Abhidharmasamuccayabhbāṣya* (Commentary on the Summary of Scholasticism; engaging with Asaṅga) and *Trīṇśikāvijñaptibhbāṣya* (Commentary on the 30 [Verses] on Consciousness) and *Madhyāntavibhāgatikā* (Commentary on the Distinction of the Middle and the Extremes; both responding to Vasubandhu). Here as so often in the history of Indian literature, it is possible that some commentaries by other authors have been retrospectively associated with Sthiramati's name.

In the logico-epistemological school of Buddhism, Dharmakīrti (7th cent. CE) employed the root-text/autocommentary strategy in his *Pramāṇavārttikasvavṛtti* (Autocommentary on the Commentary on the Means of Knowledge), the first part of his *Pramāṇavārttika* (Commentary on the Means of Knowledge) on Dignāga's *Pramāṇasamuccaya* (Compendium of the Means of Knowledge). The combined work attracted subcommentaries by Karṇakagomin (*Pramāṇavārttikasvavṛttitikā* [Commentary on the Autocommentary on the Commentary on the Means of Knowledge]) and Prajñākaragupta (*Pramāṇavārttikabhbāṣya* [Commentary on the Commentary on the Means of Knowledge] or *Vārttikālambikā* [Ornament of the Commentary]).

Commentaries and Translation

On the borders of the Indian cultural sphere, Buddhists using non-Indian languages translated Indian commentarial works: the Chinese *Samgītiparyāya* (Stache-Rosen, 1968), the Tocharian *Vinayavibhanga* (Explication of the Discipline; Pinault, 2008, 61–88), and the numerous Tibetan Mahāyāna *sūtra* commentaries discussed above may serve as examples. But part and parcel of the general translation activity of Buddhist literature from Indian to non-Indian languages was the production of new commentarial material in the recipient languages. In its simplest

form, these were glosses supplied by a translator or member of a translation team to elucidate difficult terms or justify translation choices; at the other end, these were accomplished literary compositions in their own right that would come to shape the new Buddhist idioms of the recipient languages.

There is little doubt that the genre of commentary went hand in hand with translation, as for instance in China when a foreign master elucidated a text in the course of expounding it for translation, this sometimes being a public event. This procedure on the one hand provides a good example of how commentarial glosses may have entered a text and on the other hand emphasizes the inevitable role of translation itself as commentary, since any rendering of words from one language into another involves decisions about meaning.

The earliest Chinese translation procedure as attested in colophons involved a master (usually Indian or Central Asian) providing both *koushou* (口授; oral translation) and *koujie* (口解; oral explanation; Zürcher, 1959, 31). Three products of this procedure from the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE are still extant: An Shigao's (安世高; fl. c. 150–170 CE) *Ahan koujie shi'er yinyuan jing* (阿含口解十二因緣經; Discourse on the Oral Explanation of the 12 Causal Links in the Canon; T. 1508) contains a separate collection of glosses (Zürcher, 1959, 31, 330n69) that constitutes a "record of oral explanations delivered by An Shigao to his students" (Zacchetti, 2004; Nattier, 2008, 63–64). The *Yinchiru jing zhu* (T. 1694) associated with Kang Senghui 康僧會 (fl. c. 220–240/260 or 250–280 CE) is based on a root text by An Shigao (T. 603; see above; Zürcher, 1959, 54; Nattier, 2008, 152). Similarly, the *Anban shouyi jing zhu* (安般守意經注; Commentary on the Discourse on Mindfulness in Breathing; T. 602) associated with Kang Senghui is based on a root text (the **Ānāpānasmytisūtra* [Discourse on Mindfulness in Breathing]) in An Shigao style recently rediscovered in an ancient Chinese manuscript brought to Japan and preserved in the Kongōji temple in Osaka (Nattier, 2008, 60–61; Zacchetti, 2007) and contains a mix of text and explanation (Zürcher, 1959, 31, 53, 54, 330n68). With these three texts, one may compare the glosses inserted in chapter 1 of the *Da mingdu jing* (大明度經; Great Discourse on the Perfection of Understanding; T. 225) associated with Kang Senghui and Zhi Qian (支謙; fl. c. 220–250 CE), the root text of which consists of a mixture of scriptural quotations from meditation and Mahāyāna texts (Zürcher, 1959, 54, 338n162). A special exegetical procedure (reminiscent of the categorial

mapping of the early Indian commentaries) is *geyi* (格義), the explanation of numerical lists in Indian Buddhist texts through comparable texts in the Chinese classics (Mair, 2010). This procedure was introduced in the late 3rd century by the Chinese teacher Zhu Faya (竺法雅) for those unfamiliar with the Indian literary list style, but it stayed ephemeral and was already denounced by Zhu Faya's disciple Dao'an (道安; 312–385 CE).

The next stage of development, in which the exegetical material has assumed the character of an independent commentarial text, is illustrated by Dao'an's *Renben yusheng jing zhu* (人本欲生經註; Commentary on the Great Discourse on Conditioned Arising; T. 1693), a commentary on An Shigao's **Mahānidānasūtra* (Great Discourse on Causes; T. 14) translation (Zürcher, 1959, 186, 388n33), and by the anonymous *Shi'er men chan jing* 十二門禪經 (Discourse on the 12 Gates of Meditation) from the Kongōji manuscript, a commentary on An Shigao's *Shi'er men jing* (十二門經; Discourse on the 12 Gates; Zacchetti, 2003; Nattier, 2008, 65). (On Dao'an's commentarial style and exegetical theory, see Zürcher, 1959, 187, 191–192; and on the style of these *zhu* [註] commentaries in general, see Kanno, 2002; Mayer, 2004, 167–168).

A third style of early Chinese commentary, based on Indian precedents, is the addition of illustrative stories to early canonical verse texts, which we see in Zhi Qian's *Arthapada* (Word of Meaning; i.e. *Arthavarga*) translation *Yizu jing* (義足經; Discourse on the Word of Meaning; T. 198; Bapat, 1951; Nattier, 2008, 134) and in the *Dharmapada* version *Faju piyu jing* (法句譬喻經; Discourse on the Word of the Doctrine and Similes; T. 211) attributed to Faju (法炬) and Fali (法立; fl. 290–306 CE), which is based on a root text (T. 210; trans. 224 CE) by Weiqinan (維祇難) revised by Zhi Qian (fl. 222–252 CE; Zürcher, 1959, 47–4855).

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