

UNIVERSITY SEMINARS

September 21, 2006

Seminar: Buddhist Studies Seminar #629

Meeting Date: September 21, 2006

Chair: Wendi Adamek

Speaker: Joseph Walser
Chair of the Department of Comparative Religion at Tufts University

Topic: "To Publish or Perish: Nāgārjuna, Mahāyāna, and Monastic Law"

Attendees: 20 people

Rapporteur: Christopher Kelley

Ironic empathy is perhaps the best way to describe Joseph Walser's (Chair of the Department of Comparative Religion at Tufts University) use of the dictum 'to publish or perish' as the main title of his lecture to the Buddhist Studies Seminar at Columbia University (Sept. 21, 2006).¹ An abbreviation of his newly published book *Nāgārjuna in Context: Mahāyāna Buddhism & Early Indian Culture* (CU Press, 2005), Walser's talk was aimed at elucidating the socio-political influences on the writings of the philosopher-saint Nāgārjuna.

Walser's erudite reexamination of works attributed to the acclaimed 2nd century Buddhist thinker, strives to answer such questions as: "just how is it that something that was written 1800 years ago in Brahmi script on palm-leaf parchment, sits today in Devanagari script in a library in New York City?"² According to Walser, the answer involves a deep appreciation for social *context*, and is not altogether different from why his own book now sits in the Labyrinth Bookstore on 112th Street.

Conceived and written while applying for tenure at Tufts, the impetus for Walser's book came out of feedback he received during that time. Thus the very act of writing about the social factors that facilitated the redaction of Nāgārjuna's ideas were, for Walser, instrumental in whether or not he himself would be published and in turn tenured (circumstance that may have also allowed Walser some degree of empathy with his subject).

Just as it would be a grievous error to reduce Walser's interest to career advancement, an examination of Nāgārjuna in context does not take away from the philosophical import of the Mahāyāna's most esteemed philosophical thinker. On the contrary, Walser's study enhances our understanding of Nāgārjuna, providing a refreshing and novel perspective.

In the following synopsis of Professor Walser's lecture, I will try to recapitulate his principal arguments, and illustrate some the supporting evidence he presented to the Buddhist Studies Seminar at Columbia University.

Professor Walser's lecture moved through three sets of concentric issues. Beginning with the more general, he pointed to a growing tendency among scholars of Buddhism to compartmentalize their respective projects into one of two dichotomous categories — namely — "doctrinal studies" and "social/cultural studies." Looking to the middle ground, Walser oriented his study in that nexus where the two meet. In his lecture he said that "there are ways of reading philosophical texts in such a way that nei-

¹ It is worth noting that phrase itself was, according to Walser, coined by a dean at Tufts University.

ther the philosophy, nor the social situation are eclipsed.” Walser maintains that the relationship between doctrine and culture is one of interdependence, and failure to recognize this will prevent an accurate evaluation of either one. For example, when thinking about the absence of any obvious thesis in Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikāmadhyamakakārikā* in light of the fact that Candrakīrti (a well known advocate of Prasaṅgika) was so much more transparent about his intentions, it is simply not enough to attribute Nāgārjuna’s reticence to a fear of reifying language. Walser’s approach is to focus not only on the *form* of Nāgārjuna’s writing, but also the social factors necessary for its *reproduction*.

Anyone can write anything they want, but not everything is reproduced. What Walser wants to know is, ‘what was it in Nāgārjuna’s writing that made it worthy of reproduction?’ For instance, Nāgārjuna could have written a treatise on the Buddha’s predilection for peanut butter and banana sandwiches. But while such a work would have undoubtedly raised a few eyebrows, its destiny was almost assuredly the trash bin. The question, according to Walser, is:

How does the form that a writing takes determine whether or not it is published or, conversely, how do institutional publishing standards determine the shape of the writings that get published?

In other words, whether one writes convincingly, or with virtuosity is only ‘half the battle’ of getting published — reproduced. The other half concerns the acceptability of that writing to the reproductive apparatus of the institutional majority.

Walser’s second concentric issue concerns a thesis he attributes to Gregory Schopen that states that the the Mahāyāna was a minority Buddhist movement, and that many of the early Mahāyānist monks resided in monasteries alongside non-Mahāyānist. The importance of this, in understanding Nāgārjuna, starts with acknowledging that the Mahāyāna was “not the publishing ‘fashion’ in any monastery until at least the fifth century.” Thus, one must consider what Mahāyāna thinkers, such as Nāgārjuna, had to do in order to get published.

Here it should be noted that ‘to get published’ means that your treatise is either written down and reproduced on parchment, or memorized and reproduced in an oral form. According to the Vinayas, if a monk were caught writing down or reciting a “heretical” text, a number of penalties are imposed on that individual by the administering monastic institution. In other words, there were a number of legal mechanisms for ensuring the transmission of non-heretical ideas — *buddhavacana* (word of the buddha) — and suppressing “heretical” ones. In this sense ‘buddhavacana’ refers not to a set list of books, but rather to a any text that conforms to the officially sanctioned canon set by the

monastery. So where Mahāyānists were a minority in monasteries — which was the predominate trend during the period in question — the monastic rules governing the transmission of ideas heavily favored those books used by the majority, and put any text that threatened this precedent in jeopardy. What this means in terms of Nāgārjuna, Walser said, is ‘that we should think of him less as a philosopher attempting to establish the Mādhyamika, and more as a Mahāyānist attempting to bypass potential opposition to the Mahāyāna in his monastery, and to establish Mahāyāna texts as the kind of texts that his monastery was already committed to preserving.’

In contradistinction to the popular view that Nāgārjuna argued against all positions, Walser maintains that if Schopen’s thesis holds water, then there was “far more at stake for Nāgārjuna in making friends within his own monastery than in conquering enemies in other monasteries.” Therefore, one should look at Nāgārjuna’s arguments in terms of *alliances* — not just who Nāgārjuna attacks.

Walser began the final third of his lecture with a reexamination of several sections of Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikāmādhyamakakārikā*. Looking first at his attack on the Sarvāstivādins in the first chapter, Nāgārjuna refers to four conditions: *hetu*, *ālambana*, *anantara*, and *ādhipatyeya*. According to Walser, this list occurs nowhere in the sūtra literature, and nowhere in the Theravādin abhidharma literature. It does, however, appear in two Sārvāstivādin abhidharma texts — the *Vijñānakāya* and the *Prakaraṇapāda*. Additionally the term *svahāva*, common in abhidharma literature, is used in the same technical way as Nāgārjuna only in the aforementioned Sārvāstivādin texts. Walser’s conclusion: ‘we can tentatively assume that Nāgārjuna was not writing in a Sārvāstivādin monastery,’ because Nāgārjuna was keenly aware of his audience. Moreover, he makes use of very specific literary, linguistic, philosophical strategies for establishing alliances with them.

For instance, the inclusion of a quotation that tells of the Buddha teaching dependent-origination as “non-arising and non-ceasing” in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikāmādhyamakakārikā* essentially communicates the position that dependent-origination is unconditioned. This is at odds with many Buddhist schools (i.e. Vasubandhu), but not with the Mahāsāṅghikas. In fact, there are several other examples where the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* meshes quite well with Mahāsāṅghika doctrine. Something Walser believes Nāgārjuna capitalized on because he may have been living in a Mahāsāṅghika monastery while writing the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikāmādhyamakakārikā*.

Walser also speculated on other potential allegiances that Nāgārjuna may have had with the Saṃmitīyas and/or the Pudgalavādins. Nāgārjuna structured his arguments in such a way that, according to Walser, made the positions of these other schools

tenable — if and only if — they acknowledged the Mahāyāna thesis of emptiness. Walser quoted a passage that I'll repeat here for good measure. It is from chapter twenty-four of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikāmadhyamakakārikā*:

All things make sense [*yujyate*] for him for whom the absence of being makes sense. Nothing makes sense for him for whom the absence of being does not make sense.

Walser calls this position one of *rehabilitation*, in that Nāgārjuna is neither adopting, nor opposing.

Another example was concerned with Nāgārjuna's use the phrase "neither identical nor different." The Pudgalavādins', and their sub-sects', major claim was that the pudgala was neither identical nor different from the aggregates. "By extending the type of rhetoric that the Pudgalavādins were already using," Walser said, "we can read Nāgārjuna as attempting to show that the Pudgalavādins would be safe from the Sarvāstivādins *if and only if* they adopted the Mahāyāna view of śūnyatā." Walser followed up with several other interesting examples to illustrate this point.

In summing things up, Walser examined three sets of issues: (1) the tendency among some scholars to segregate cultural studies from doctrinal; (2) Gregory Schopen's thesis that the Mahāyāna was a minority Buddhist movement and that some early Mahāyānists were living in monasteries with non-Mahāyānists; (3) the implications of this thesis and how one might read Nāgārjuna in a novel way that takes all of this into consideration. In short, understanding the works of Nāgārjuna in context may provide new insight and deeper appreciation for one of Buddhism's greatest thinkers.