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The Teaching of Vimalakīrti (Vimalakīrtinirdeśa):
A Review of Four English Translations

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Editor's note: It is highly unusual for a book review to appear several years—let alone several decades—after the volume in question was published. Yet because English translations of Buddhist texts are still in short supply, many older works continue to circulate, to be used in classrooms, and to be consulted by scholars (if only to save time in finding a quick reference) long after their initial publication. Hendrik Kern's translation of the Sanskrit *Lotus Sutra (Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra)*—a work that first appeared in 1884 and is still the only published English version of this important Sanskrit text—is perhaps the most extreme example, but it is far from the only such case. As long as such translations continue to be printed and reprinted, to appear in bookstores, and to be used in courses, they still function as “current publications” regardless of their original copyright date. Since one of the roles of this journal is to offer critical assessments of the accuracy and usability of Buddhist texts currently available in English translation, it seems reasonable to include in the discussion not only recent publications but also older works that are still widely used. Earlier reviews have been published, of course, in the case of most of these works; yet the field of Buddhist Studies has continued to move forward, and our understanding of these texts has grown more nuanced. It seems worthwhile, therefore, not only to evaluate the most recent translation of a given text—in this case, Burton Watson's *The Vimalakīrti Sutra*—but older versions that continue to influence a current generation of readers as well. The following review will examine four different translations of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*—two from Chinese, two from Tibetan—with an eye toward evaluating their accuracy, their readability, and their appropriateness for use by a variety of audiences. If this unusual approach proves to be useful, other such reviews may follow in future issues.

Étienne Lamotte, trans., *The Teaching of Vimalakīrti (Vimalakīrtinirdeśa)*. Originally published in French as *L'Enseignement de Vimalakīrti* (Louvain: Bibliothèque du Muséon, 1962); English translation by Sara Boin. London: The Pali Text Society, 1976. ISBN 0-7100-8540-0 (hardcover). cxvi + 335 pp. Introduction, extensive notes, appendices, index of Sanskrit names and terms.

Charles Luk (Lu K'uan Yü), trans., *The Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra*. Berkeley, CA: Shambhala, 1972; rpt. Boston: Shambhala, 1990. ISBN 0-87773-072-5 (paperback). xxii + 157 pp. Glossary of Sanskrit terms; no index.

Robert A. F. Thurman, trans., *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti: A Mahāyāna Scripture*. University Park, PA/London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976. ISBN 0-271-01209-9 (paperback). x + 166 pp. Introduction, notes, glossaries of Sanskrit names and terms, English numerical categories, and English Buddhist technical terms; no index.

Burton Watson, trans., *The Vimalakīrti Sutra*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. ISBN 0-231-10656-4 (hardcover). xi + 159 pp. (other Columbia publications listed on pp. 161-168). Glossary of proper names and English and Sanskrit technical terms; no index.

Like most Indian Mahāyāna scriptures, the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* ("Teaching of Vimalakīrti") has not survived—even in fragmentary form—in any Indic language.¹ Its title, however, is assured, based not only on the transliteration preserved in the Tibetan version (a source which is not always reliable, since many of these transliterations are reconstructions based on the Tibetan itself) but on a handful of citations preserved in Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā* and *Madhyamakavṛtti* (seventh century), Śāntideva's *Śikṣāsamuccaya* (seventh century), and Kamalaśīla's *Bhāvanākrama* (eighth century).² It is difficult to gauge the degree of influence exerted by this text in India, though it is worth noting that there is no evidence that a single Indian commentary on the text was ever composed.³ In East Asia, by contrast, the scripture appears to have been a source of fascination from the time of its first appearance.⁴ It is said to have been translated into Chinese no fewer than eight times, of which three versions

¹ Just as this review was going to press, I received word that a complete Sanskrit version of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* has been discovered in Tibet and that scholars from Taishō University in Japan will be responsible for its publication. I am grateful to Dr. Stefano Zacchetti (International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhism, Tokyo, Japan) for conveying this exciting news.

² See Lamotte, *The Teaching of Vimalakīrti*, p. xxv.

³ None, at any rate, is preserved in the voluminous Tibetan canon, and all of the commentaries on the text contained in the Chinese Buddhist canon are Chinese or Japanese compositions.

⁴ See Richard Mather, "Vimalakīrti and Gentry Buddhism," *History of Religions*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1968), pp. 60-73, and Paul Demiéville, "Vimalakīrti en Chine" (Appendix II of the French version of Lamotte's translation [Lamotte 1962, pp. 438-455]; unfortunately this valuable contribution was not included in the English edition).

are still extant: those produced by Zhi Qian 支謙 (T474, 223-228 CE), Kumārajīva (T475, 406 CE) and Xuanzang 玄奘 (T476, 650 CE).⁵ Numerous commentaries to the text were also composed in both China and Japan.⁶ In Tibet, on the other hand, this scripture garnered far less attention. Though an early translation by an unknown translator, preserved only in manuscript fragments found at Dunhuang, was completed in the late eighth or early ninth century CE, and another (which became the sole version incorporated into the Tibetan canon) was produced by Dharmatāśīla (Tib. Chos-nyid tshul-khrims) around the same time,⁷ the text never seems to have received commentarial attention, and indeed it seems fair to say that it was largely ignored. It is thus not surprising that two of the published English translations—those of Luk and Watson—are renditions of Kumārajīva's Chinese translation, which was by far the most influential version in East Asia. What requires comment, by contrast, is why there should exist two modern translations (those of Lamotte and Thurman) of the Tibetan version of a text that does not seem to have been used by the Tibetans themselves. This question—which has to do not with the quality of the English translations but with their status as scholarly artifacts—will be considered toward the end of this review.

Sources and Intentions

Every translator of a Buddhist text must confront, at the outset, two fundamental issues: from which version of the text will she translate (for in most cases, even when the text has been preserved only in a single language, these are multiple),⁸ and for what audience is the translation intended? Not all such decisions, however, are made consciously, much less clearly conveyed to the reader. Some translators are explicit about the first, others about the second, and still others leave the reader to guess at both. A not uncommon pattern is

⁵ For further details and a discussion of the non-extant versions see Lamotte, *Vimalakīrti*, pp. xxvi-xxxvii.

⁶ See Taishō nos. 1775-1780, 1791, 2768-2778, 2186 (all based on the version translated by Kumārajīva) and 1782 (based on the version translated by Xuanzang).

⁷ Peking/Ōtani 843, Derge/Tōhoku 176, Stog Palace 171.

⁸ While it is generally the case that only one translation of each text is preserved in the Tibetan canon, for example—though there are interesting and important exceptions—the translator must still decide whether to use a single manuscript or xylograph edition or to expend the considerable effort required to construct an adequate critical edition. For an insightful discussion of this issue see Paul Harrison, "Meritorious Activity or a Waste of Time? Some Remarks on the Editing of Texts in the Tibetan Kanjur," in *Tibetan Studies, Proceedings of the 5th Seminar of the International Association of Tibetan Studies, Narita 1989* (Narita: Naritasan, 1992), pp. 77-93.

for translators located within the academy to be quite articulate about the version(s) from which they are translating, but completely mute—perhaps not ever having consciously entertained the question—about who, if anyone, their audience might be. For translators outside the academy, by contrast—especially those whose primary identity as writers is that of practicing Buddhists—the opposite is frequently the case, and we may find a clear statement that the intended audience for the translation consists of Buddhist believers, but no indication as to which version of the text (much less which specific edition) served as its base.

The translations to be discussed here span this range of possibilities and can easily be arranged along a continuum from the scholarly to the popular. In his highly technical study Lamotte offers precise documentation (though only at the end of his long introduction, on p. cxvi) of the textual basis of his translation, stating that he is working from the Tibetan version of the text (using the Ōtani edition alone) with significant variants found in Xuanzang’s Chinese version printed in smaller type. Lamotte also provides specific references to the earlier translations of Zhi Qian and Kumārajīva, which he occasionally cites in his notes. Nowhere, however, does he raise the issue of the audience for whom his efforts are intended, though the fact that his translation fairly bristles with parenthetical Sanskrit terms suggests that he envisioned a scholarly readership with high tolerance for Indological detail.

At the other extreme is Charles Luk, who provides no information whatsoever on the text from which his translation is drawn, stating only that “Our translation is based on explanations and annotations by the enlightened Indian translator Kumārajīva and his equally enlightened Chinese pupil and assistant, Seng Chao . . . and on the commentary in 1630 by Ch’an master Po Shan of the Ming dynasty” (xiii). The reader is given no hint as to where published versions of any of these documents might be found,⁹ nor is it even made clear that he is working not simply from “explanations” by Kumārajīva, but from a Chinese sūtra translation produced by him at the beginning of the 5th century CE. Scholarly documentation, quite clearly, is not important to this translator.

The nature of his intended audience, by contrast, is stated explicitly at the end of the preface, where Luk writes:

Now that some Western Buddhists have made very good progress in their meditation . . . they should guard against falling into the stages of the śrāvaka and Pratyeka-buddha by starting their immediate training in Bodhisattva development into Buddhahood as taught in this important sūtra. (xxi)

⁹ One of his sources is certainly the earliest extant Chinese commentary on the text, *Notes on the Vimalakīrti-sūtra* (T1775), which includes comments by Sengzhao 僧肇 and Daosheng 道生 as well as by Kumārajīva himself.

Luk goes on to point to the “sacred duty of planting the Mahāyāna banner in the Occident in the present Dharma ending age” (xxii). Clearly this version—reissued in 1990 by Shambhala Press with a foreword by the longtime teacher at the Zen Center of Los Angeles, Taizan Maezumi Roshi—is intended not for historians or philologists, nor for the general reader with an interest in Buddhism, but for practitioners who have embarked on the Mahāyāna path.

The translations of Watson and Thurman fall between these two extremes. Of the four translators it is Watson who is most straightforward about the audience he is addressing: “Like my earlier translation of the Lotus Sutra,” he writes, “the present volume is intended primarily for readers who have no special background in Buddhist studies” (x). Watson also states clearly that he is working from Kumārajīva’s version of the text (ix), but offers no further specifics, referring the reader to the translations of Thurman and Lamotte for details. Finally, he notes that he has also consulted three Japanese translations of Kumārajīva’s version (x) and one Japanese translation of the Tibetan (xi).

For his part, Thurman states frankly that his translation is based on the Tibetan version “as I am most at home in that language” (ix), but he does not go on to provide any textual details. And what he does say is sometimes less than illuminating. His comment that the text “was translated into Tibetan twice, the definitive version completed in the ninth century by the well-known translator Chos Ņid Tshul Khriṃs” (ix) leaves the reader to wonder what the status of the “non-definitive” version might be. It is only by consulting Lamotte’s introduction (xxxviii–xliii) that it becomes clear that Thurman is referring to an earlier translation, preserved in manuscript fragments found at Dunhuang, which differs in numerous respects from the version that was later incorporated into the Tibetan canon. Clearly Thurman does not wish to engage the full range of textual issues dealt with by Lamotte, but a brief clarification of the identity of this mysterious “other version” would have alleviated much potential confusion.

Although Thurman is not explicit about his anticipated audience, this can be inferred from his statement of intent: “My main goal in this translation is to present the authentic *teaching* of Vimalakīrti, and so my main focus is philosophical rather than philological” (x; emphasis in the original). By introducing the notion of authenticity Thurman reveals that he is writing from a standpoint of advocacy, thus allowing us to place his work near the end of the spectrum occupied by Luk’s earlier version.

The translator’s conception of his audience, as we shall see, has a direct bearing on the style of the resulting translation. It may also have an impact—though not always in ways that could have been predicted—on the accuracy of the translation. A concern with philological precision can coexist with either an emic or an etic stance on the translator’s part; a lack of such concern, unfortunately, can coexist with either as well. Where the author’s

own stance vis-à-vis the Buddhist tradition appears to have taken his translation in an unexpected direction, we will note this fact in passing.

We may begin, however, simply by examining a few representative passages to assess the accuracy of their treatment by these four scholars. Because Luk and Watson are working from Kumārajīva's Chinese text, while Lamotte and Thurman are drawing mainly upon the Tibetan, we will discuss these two groups of translations separately.

Translations based on Kumārajīva's Chinese Version

A section found in the opening chapter of the *Vimalakīrti* offers a good starting point from which to examine the English versions produced by these two translators. Following the standard opening statement "Thus have I heard" and a description of the location where the scripture was preached, the text identifies the members of the audience and then goes on to describe one contingent of those in attendance—a group of thirty-two thousand bodhisattvas—in greater detail. Three segments of this detailed description are given below, each first in the Chinese text of Kumārajīva (with volume and page references to the Taishō edition), then in the renderings offered by Watson and Luk, respectively.

(1) 念定總持辯才不斷 (14.537a13)

Watson: "Their mindfulness, meditation, retention of the teachings, and eloquence never faltered" (17)

Luk: "They had achieved right concentration and mental stability, thereby acquiring the uninterrupted power of speech." (1)

Watson has done a good job of handling most of the Buddhist technical terms here, rendering *nian* 念 (presumably from Skt. **smṛti*) as "mindfulness," *ding* 定 (**samādhi*) as "meditation," and *biancai* 辯才 (*pratibhāna*) as "eloquence." One key technical term, however, which is regularly applied to bodhisattvas and generally paired with eloquence in Mahāyāna scriptures, has been obscured. The compound *zongchi* 總持 does not simply mean "retaining [the teachings]" but is an early translation of *dhāraṇī*, a technical term for a particular type of mnemonic device employed by bodhisattvas.¹⁰ While Watson may have been

¹⁰ Kumārajīva usually transliterates this term as *duoluoni* 多羅尼, but here he has followed the wording found in Zhi Qian's earlier translation (14.519a15-16). The word *dhāraṇī* itself is often treated as synonymous with *mantra* in the sense of "spell, magic charm" (and indeed both words are sometimes translated into Chinese as *zhou*

aware of the significance of this term, its presence in the text is not made transparent to the reader. The net effect is to elide a reference to a powerful, indeed quite magical, technique and to offer a bland (and acceptably modern) reference to “retention” in its place.

Luk’s translation, on the other hand, is problematic in other ways. His “right concentration” apparently stands for *nian* 念 (or *nian ding* 念定?), while “mental stability” is either a rendition of *ding* 定 or of *zongchi* 總持. If the former is the case, the expression *zongchi* 總持 has simply been left out; if the latter, the translation misses the mark altogether. Moreover, by adding the word “thereby” Luk introduces an element of causality which is not present in Kumārajīva’s text. Based on this very brief sample, one would have to describe Luk’s rendition not as a translation, but as an exegetical paraphrase.

(2) 布施持戒忍辱精進禪定智慧及方便力無不具足 (537a13-15)

Watson: “. . . and of almsgiving, keeping the precepts, forbearance, assiduousness, meditation, wisdom, and the power to employ expedient means, there was not one they were deficient in.” (17)

Luk: “They had achieved all the (six) *pāramitās*: charity (*dāna*), discipline (*śīla*), patience (*kṣānti*), devotion (*vīrya*), serenity (*dhyāna*) and wisdom (*prajñā*), as well as the expedient method (*upāya*) of teaching.” (1-2)

Once again Watson has done quite well in rendering this passage into English. Though “assiduousness” is an unusual translation of *jingjin* 精進 (Skt. *vīrya*), which is usually given as “energy” or “exertion,” it is quite an acceptable one, and all of the others are well established equivalents. Luk, on the other hand, has once again introduced into his translation a number of terms that are not contained in the Chinese text. The word *pāramitā* does not occur in Kumārajīva’s translation, for example, despite the fact that the first six items here are generally 咒), but in India *dhāraṇī* referred specifically to powerful formulae that allow the bodhisattva to retain what he has learned (or according to some texts, to retain the virtuous qualities he has developed) from one lifetime to the next. Given this distinctive usage, it is perhaps not surprising that unlike *mantra*, which is a pan-Indian religious expression, *dhāraṇī* is used exclusively by Buddhists, and only by Mahāyāna Buddhists at that. Kumārajīva’s own translation of the *Da zhidu lun* 大智度論 (T1509), for example, contains a long discussion of this topic in which the author takes it for granted that *dhāraṇīs* are used only in Mahāyāna circles and proceeds to discuss why they should be unknown to the *śrāvakas* (25.269b ff.).

associated with that list, nor is there any reference in the Chinese to “teaching.”¹¹ Thus while Luk’s version might convey to the reader a good sense of how the sūtra would be understood by contemporary Chinese Buddhists, it does not represent a faithful rendering of the content of Kumārajīva’s text.

(3) 逮無所得不起法忍 (537a15)

Watson: “They had learned to accept the fact that there is nothing to be grasped at, no view of phenomena to be entertained” (17)

Luk: “However, to them these realizations did not mean any gain whatsoever for themselves, so that they were in line with the patient endurance of the uncreate (anutpattika-dharma-ksānti).” (2)

Here, however, both translators seem to have run into difficulty. The first part of this description (*dai wusuo de* 逮無所得, lit. “they had reached [a state of] non-attainment”) corresponds fairly well to Watson’s rendition, but Luk’s rendering is less a translation than an interpretation. There is nothing in the Chinese text that refers to “realizations,” for example, nor does it speak of any gain “for themselves.” The words “they were in line with” are also Luk’s own addition, for the text states simply that the bodhisattvas had “reached” (carrying over the word *dai* 逮 from the first phrase) the state of “enduring (*ren* 忍) the non-arising [of] dharmas (*buqi fa* 不起法).” The Sanskrit equivalent supplied by Luk is indeed the expression that usually corresponds to this Chinese phrase, but the term “uncreate” has (for this reader, at least) overtones of “the unconditioned” (*wuwei* 無為 or *asamskṛta*) that are not relevant here. What the bodhisattva is able to endure, according to this expression, is not something “uncreated” (and thus beyond all that is subject to change) but simply “un arisen,” i.e., something that has never come into being (not at least in the way in which we usually imagine “being”) at all.

Watson, too, had difficulty with this expression (perhaps even more so), for he translates it simply as “no view of phenomena to be entertained.” This is, however, entirely too vague for what was a well-known technical expression

¹¹ It is important to note that *upāya* (or *upāya-kausalya*) is not always used in reference to “adapting the teachings to suit the needs of one’s listeners,” though its use in this sense in the *Lotus Sūtra* has given this definition a very high profile. In a number of earlier Mahāyāna texts—e.g., the *Ugraparipṛccha-sūtra* and the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*—the term refers instead to certain countering measures used by a bodhisattva in order to avoid falling into Arhatship or a heavenly rebirth. Accordingly, it is better to simply translate the term as “skill-in-means” or “tactical skill” and let the reader determine, according to context, whether it has anything to do with teaching in a given instance.

in the Buddhism of Kumārajīva's time.¹² To translate this pivotal term as Watson does may well represent the way this phrase would look to a modern reader without any specialized knowledge of Buddhism, but it certainly cannot represent Kumārajīva's understanding of the term. Once again the stumbling block is a Buddhist technical term that has gone out of currency in contemporary East Asian Buddhism.

We may now turn to a few lines from another section of the sūtra, drawing from Chapter 4 (in Kumārajīva's version) in which Śākyamuni Buddha asks a number of bodhisattvas to visit Vimalakīrti. Each bodhisattva in turn refuses to go, citing a disconcerting encounter in the past in which he was bested by Vimalakīrti. One of these men, called "Good Virtue" (*Shande* 善德) in Kumārajīva's version, relates his experience of having been the target of a discourse by Vimalakīrti on the nature of a true "dharma-gift." Vimalakīrti's comments, as recalled by Good Virtue, include the following:

(4) 於身命財起三堅法 (14.543c19)

Watson: "With regard to body, life, and wealth, one follows the doctrine that these three are indestructible. . . ." (61)

Luk: ". . . the relinquishment of body, life and wealth [springs] from the three indestructibles. . . ." (46)

This is admittedly a difficult passage, and it may well be these lines and those discussed below that Watson had in mind when he remarked that the *Vimalakīrti* is beautifully concise "except for a rather murky passage at the end of chapter 4" (ix). Yet there is a well-established Buddhist motif here which, if correctly understood, can clarify matters considerably. A number of early Mahāyāna sūtras refer to "extracting the substance (*sāra*) from the insubstantial (*asāra*)," exhorting the bodhisattva to do so with respect to three things: his body (*kāya*), life (*jīva*), and material wealth (*bhoga*).¹³ What is meant by this, in brief, is that although these three items are transitory and unreliable, the bodhisattva can

¹² Kumārajīva usually translates this Sanskrit expression as *wusheng fa ren* 無生法忍, but here he has followed the wording found in Zhi Qian's earlier translation (14.519a17).

¹³ See for example the *Ugrapariprocchā-sūtra* §6B, translated in Jan Nattier, *A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path according to The Inquiry of Ugra* (University of Hawaii Press, forthcoming 2002), and the *Ratnarāsi-sūtra*, §V, 17, translated in Jonathan Silk, *The Origins and Early History of the Mahāratnakūṭa Tradition of Mahāyāna Buddhism with a Study of the Ratnarāsisūtra and Related Materials* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1994), p. 471.

make use of them to extract something truly enduring: the merit which will help him to attain buddhahood in the future. The three items from which this merit can be extracted are precisely those mentioned at the beginning of the passage given above, and what is more, the term *jian* 堅 “solid, firm, durable” is one of the regular equivalents of Sanskrit *sāra* “essence, substance” in this context.¹⁴ Re-reading this passage in light of this awareness, it becomes clear that it can easily be translated as “with respect to one’s body, life, and wealth, one brings forth the three [kinds of] substantial qualities” (reading the term *fa* 法 “dharma” not in the technical sense of “doctrine” but in its equally common sense of “quality, phenomenon, thing”). Without recognizing this traditional motif the passage remains quite inscrutable, forcing Watson to attempt to salvage the situation by suggesting that the three “indestructible things” are “Not the ordinary body but the true or eternal body, etc.” (p. 61, n. 5).

Luk’s translation once again contains interpolated material, but he has also misconstrued the grammar of the passage. Attempting to bring it into line with standard Chinese Buddhist teachings he adds the word “relinquishing” (which has no equivalent in Kumārajīva’s text). He then goes on to describe this postulated relinquishing as coming forth from “the three indestructibles,” which he defines in a note as “infinite body, endless life, and boundless spiritual possessions” (p. 46, n. 3; this may be the source of Watson’s interpretation). But the grammar makes it clear that these three “substantial qualities”—not “indestructibles,” which is an over-translation of *jian* 堅—are what is being brought forth, not the source from which something else arises. Luk’s rendition is therefore problematic in several ways.

(5) 以出家法起於深心。以如說行起於多聞(543c22-23)

Watson: “By following the rules for those who have left the household life one cultivates a deeply searching mind; by carrying out religious practices in the prescribed way one acquires much learning. . . .” (61)

Luk: “. . . retiring from the world [springs] from the profound mind; knowledge gained [springs] from hearing (about the Dharma). . . .” (46)

Challenges to the translator continue to abound in this passage, and once again Watson does much better than Luk, due primarily to his far better grasp of classical Chinese grammar. Luk understands “retiring from the world” (he

¹⁴ See for example the version of the *Ugrapariprocchā-sūtra* preserved in the Ratnakūta section of the Chinese canon (T310[19], 11.473b26-28) and the *Ratnarāsi-sūtra* found in the same section (T310[44], 11.645b21).

does not translate the word *fā* 法 “dharma”) as arising from a “profound mind,” but this is grammatically impossible; one must read *chujia fā* 出家法 “the qualities of the renunciant” (or of renunciation) as the basis upon which the profound mind is brought forth, and not the reverse. Here and throughout this section Luk seems to be unaware that the particle *yu* 於 is commonly used in early Buddhist translations to mark a direct object, an awareness which would have made the translation of these lines into English vastly simpler.¹⁵

Watson’s translation is not without its problems, but these are minor by comparison to those found in Luk’s version. Once again he has overlooked the possibility of translating *fā* 法 in the non-technical sense simply as “qualities” (the meaning it seems to have throughout this passage), and his “deeply searching mind” is a curious choice (there is no word for “searching” in the Chinese). But the significance of the character *shen* 深 “profound” in this context is admittedly less than transparent, and as we shall see it may be the result of an error in Kumārajīva’s text.¹⁶

(6) 以無諍法起空閑處。趣向佛慧起於冥坐 (543c23-24)

Watson: “by observing ways that are free from contention one creates peaceful and uncrowded surroundings; by directing one’s efforts toward Buddha wisdom one learns quiet meditation. . . .” (61)

Luk: “absence of disputation [springs] from a leisurely life; the quest of Buddha wisdom from meditation. . .” (46)

This is perhaps the most difficult passage yet, and once again Luk has inverted the grammatical order of the text, stating that a “leisurely life” leads to the absence of disputation, and meditation to “Buddha wisdom,” rather than vice versa, while Watson has interpreted the sentence structure correctly. It must be admitted, however, that what is found in Kumārajīva’s text is precisely the opposite of what one would expect. Is it not the case, for example, that meditation leads to the wisdom of the Buddha rather than the reverse?

But it is precisely this sort of material that tests the mettle of the translator. Several decades ago, at a certain divinity school in New England, students

¹⁵ On this feature of early Buddhist Chinese see Erik Zürcher’s invaluable article “Late Han Vernacular Elements in the Earliest Buddhist Translations,” *Journal of the Chinese Language Teachers Association*, vol. 12, no. 3 (1979), pp. 177-203 (p. 190 and p. 199, n. 42), where Zürcher suggests that this usage was probably derived from the vernacular language.

¹⁶ See below, p. 251.

taking the required French and German exams were routinely given writings on biblical scholarship that were at best grossly outdated and at worst self-evidently false. The reasoning behind this approach, it was said, was that if the student was able to translate correctly what the French or German text *actually* said, rather than what she thought it *should* say, this would constitute definitive proof that she could indeed read the language in question. When faced with an unexpected passage in a Chinese Buddhist text the same principle obtains: it is the translator who conveys in English what the text actually says, rather than what standard Buddhist categories might lead one to expect, who has successfully acquitted his task.

But there are difficulties of other types in this passage as well. What, for example, is the place of “peaceful and uncrowded surroundings” (in Watson’s version) or a “leisurely life” (in Luk’s reading) in a Buddhist text such as this? Both translations evoke the imagery of a life of luxury and ease, not the rigors of traditional Buddhist practice. Has the text again been modernized to appeal to contemporary readers? Indeed it has, but not—in this case—by Watson or Luk. Here the changes were made not in the twentieth century, but more than a millennium and a half before.

Even without an Indic-language text of the *Vimalakīrti* at our disposal,¹⁷ it is possible to determine, in many cases, what the underlying Indian terminology would have been by comparing Kumārajīva’s text with other versions (above all the Tibetan) and by noting parallel passages found in other Chinese sūtras for which Indian versions are extant. And in the present case there is no question that Kumārajīva’s *kongxianchu* 空閑處 (“empty leisure place”) stands for an underlying Sanskrit (or Prakrit) **aranyavāsa* “wilderness-dwelling,” an expression used in Indian Buddhist texts to refer to solitary dwelling in a wild and uncultivated place. This is hardly an image of comfort or ease; indeed such places are routinely described in Indian texts as infested with robbers and carnivorous beasts, and *aranyavāsa* itself was considered a severely ascetic practice, classified as one of the twelve (sometimes thirteen) *dhūtaguṇas*.¹⁸ How is it, then, that Kumārajīva could have chosen to use the word *xian* 閑 “leisure” (a term also used to refer to the country hermitage of a wealthy man) to describe this demanding religious practice?

The question, though, is wrongly put, for a comparison of Kumārajīva’s *Vimalakīrti* with the earlier version by Zhi Qian quickly reveals that it was not Kumārajīva but his third-century predecessor who made this unlikely choice. Though above we have pictured Kumārajīva as translating from an Indian

¹⁷ See above, n. 1, for an update on this situation.

¹⁸ For a convenient discussion of these items see Reginald A. Ray, *Buddhist Saints in India: A Study in Buddhist Values & Orientations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 293-318.

version of the sūtra, there is overwhelming evidence that he consulted the earlier translation of the *Vimalakīrti* by Zhi Qian as well.¹⁹ In this passage Zhi Qian has *xianju* 閑居 “leisure-dwelling” or “hermitage-dwelling” (14.525a25), which clearly served as the prototype for Kumārajīva’s translation. Indeed a characteristic feature of Zhi Qian’s work is the use of vocabulary that evokes the image of a leisurely and cultured life, a practice which no doubt contributed to the great popularity of his translations among the southern aristocracy.²⁰

The radical alteration of the tone of a Buddhist scripture in the course of translation, then, is hardly peculiar to translators of our own time. As a result, we must take note of yet another challenge confronting the translator of the Chinese *Vimalakīrti* into English: the degree to which she wishes to make transparent the changes that Kumārajīva—or in this case, his predecessor Zhi Qian—introduced into the text. Such changes can only be observed, of course, by comparing the Chinese text with an extant or postulated Indian prototype, which makes this a challenging task indeed.

...

The passages discussed above are brief, yet a perusal of the entire text produced by each translator suggests that these examples are representative of their work as a whole. Watson’s translation is smooth and easy to read, but part of that smoothness is obtained by papering over jarring terms and concepts that have no place in the consciousness of a twentieth-century (and largely secularized) Japanese reader. Luk’s translation, on the other hand, veers off in another direction, freely interpolating explanatory material that serves to bring what is found in Kumārajīva’s text into line with modern Chinese Buddhist teachings. In terms of its faithfulness to a certain reading of the Chinese text (an issue to which we will return below), and above all in terms of its grammatical accuracy, Watson’s version is by far the better of the two. Thus of the currently available English translations of Kumārajīva’s Chinese text Watson’s rendition—despite certain shortcomings—is clearly preferable.²¹

¹⁹ Instances of Kumārajīva’s dependence on Zhi Qian’s translations are legion, and examples can easily be found in virtually any of Kumārajīva’s translations which have extant versions by Zhi Qian. We have already encountered two other examples in the brief passages cited in this review; see above, notes 10 and 12.

²⁰ We have another example of this practice in this very passage, for the term translated as “quiet meditation” by Watson and simply as “meditation” by Luk is in fact *yanzuo* 宴坐, an expression which means “leisurely sitting” but has overtones of attendance at a luxurious banquet (宴). The underlying Sanskrit term, *pratisamlayana* (“meditative seclusion”), has no such connotations.

²¹ Another English translation of Kumārajīva’s Chinese version, by John R. McRae, is expected to appear in a forthcoming volume of the Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai

Translations based on the Tibetan

We may now turn to two very different translations of the *Vimalakīrti*, by Étienne Lamotte and Robert A. F. Thurman respectively, both based on the sole complete (and canonical) Tibetan version. The English text of Lamotte's version is of course not his own work but a translation from the original French by Sara Boin. In evaluating the English version of Lamotte's *Vimalakīrti* we are thus separated from the Tibetan text itself by not one but two layers of translation. For this reason the French original of each citation will be given in a footnote, and instances where Boin's choices are unexpected will be noted there. It is a credit to Boin's expertise as a translator that, in all of the passages discussed here, there is not a single grammatical problem to report. There are, however, a number of instances in which Boin has chosen English wording that appears to be based not on the French text itself, but on Lamotte's reconstruction of the Sanskrit. Where the resulting divergences in meaning appear to be significant, they will be noted below.

For the sake of symmetry we will focus on the same passages—this time as found in the Tibetan version of the sūtra—that we examined above in translations from Chinese. Because the Tibetan version was based on a somewhat longer Indic recension of the text than was Kumārajīva's Chinese, the two versions will not always correspond precisely.

Near the beginning of the sūtra the bodhisattvas in the audience are described in the Tibetan version as follows:

(1a) *dran-pa dang | blo-gros dang | rtogs-pa dang | ting-nge 'dzin dang | gzungs dang | spobs-pa phun-sum tshogs-pa | (74.3.2)*

Lamotte: “gifted with awareness, intelligence, knowledge, concentration, magical formulae and eloquence (*smṛtimatyadhigama-samādhidhāraṇīpratibhānasampanna*)” (I, §3, p. 2)²²

Thurman: “Their mindfulness, intelligence, realization, meditation, incantation, and eloquence all were perfected.” (10)

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²² In the original French version, “doués de mémoire, d'intelligence, de science, de concentration, de formules magiques et d'éloquence” (p. 98). Boin's translation of “mémoire” as “awareness” appears to reflect the reconstructed Sanskrit term *smṛti* rather than the French translation itself.

There is nothing to quarrel with in either of these translations, for both present quite legitimate renderings of the Tibetan text. Though Lamotte's "gifted with" (Fr. *doués*) and Thurman's "were perfected" (for example) sound quite different, both are perfectly good translations of *phun-sum tshogs-pa* ("fully equipped [with], perfectly possessed [of]"). Note in particular that both Lamotte and Thurman have preserved the sense of the Tibetan by their choice of "magical formulae" and "incantation" (Fr. *formules magiques*), respectively, for *gzungs* (the standard equivalent of the term *dhāraṇī* discussed above).

(1b) *sgrib-pa dang kun-nas ldang-ba thams-cad dang-bral-ba | sgrib-pa med-pa'i rnam-par thar-pa-la gnas-pa | spobs rgyun mi-'chad-pa |* (74.3.2-3)

Lamotte: "based on the liberations without obstacle (*anāvaraṇa-vimokṣa*); gifted with indestructible eloquence (*anācchedya-pratibhāna*)" (I, §3, p. 2)²³

Thurman: "They were free of all obscurations and emotional involvements, living in liberation without impediment." (10)

Here, however, something has gone awry, for each translator has omitted part (though not the same part) of what is contained in the Tibetan. Lamotte has failed to translate *sgrib-pa dang kun-nas ldang-ba thams-cad dang-bral-ba* "free of all impediments and obsessions," while Thurman has elided the phrase *spobs rgyun mi-'chad-pa* "[their] eloquence was uninterrupted." Presumably these omissions were inadvertent—for there is nothing of doctrinal or sectarian significance at stake here—but they serve as a reminder to the translator of how easy it is to skip a passage when the text is repetitive.

(2) *sbyin-pa dang | dul-ba dang | mi-'gyur-ba dang | yang-dag-par sdom-pa dang | tshul-khrims dang | bzod-pa dang | brtson-'grus dang | bsam-gtan dang | shes-rab dang | thabs-la mkhas-pa dang | smon-lam dang | stobs dang | ye-shes-kyi pha-rol-du [sic] phyin-pa-las nges-par byung-ba |* (74.3.3-4)

Lamotte: "complying with the perfections of giving, morality, patience, vigour, concentration, wisdom, skillful means, vows, power, and knowledge (*dānaśīlakṣāntivīryadhyaṇāprajñopāyakaśālyaprañidhānabalajñāpāramitāniryāta*)" (I, §3, p. 2)²⁴

²³ Fr. "fondés sur des libérations sans obstacle; doués d'une éloquence indestructible" (pp. 98-99).

²⁴ Fr. "accédant aux perfections du don, de la moralité, de la patience, de

Thurman: “They were totally dedicated through the transcendences of generosity, subdued, unwavering, and sincere morality, tolerance, effort, meditation, wisdom, skill in liberative technique, commitment, power, and gnosis.” (10)

Here Lamotte’s wording is more traditional, for where he refers to “perfections” (French *id.*) Thurman uses the unfamiliar “transcendences” (which is, however, an excellent rendition of one traditional Indian understanding of *pāramitā*).²⁵ What is more significant, however, is the fact that several terms in the Tibetan text are missing from Lamotte’s translation. After the word *sbyin-pa* “giving” comes a term meaning “disciplined” (Tib. *dul-ba*, Skt. **dama*), another meaning “unchanging” (*mi-’gyur-ba*, presumably for Skt. **niyama* “fixed), and yet another meaning “genuinely binding” (*yang-dag-par sdom-pa*, Skt. **saṃnyama* “self-mastery”). There are, in other words, an additional three items between the first and second of the traditional *pāramitās* that do not appear in Lamotte’s English (or French) translation at all. Strangely, when Lamotte provides his usual list of Sanskrit equivalents he omits these non-standard items here as well. Faced with several terms which should not appear in a list of *pāramitās*, in other words, Lamotte has simply eliminated them.

Thurman, by contrast, has struggled to find a way to incorporate them into his translation, treating all three as epithets of “morality.” Whether this is in fact their function in the sentence is debatable, but nonetheless Thurman’s faithfulness to what actually occurs in the Tibetan allows us to perceive that we have here an unusual list of *pāramitās*.²⁶ But the Tibetan is not alone in this respect. The Chinese versions of Zhi Qian and Xuanzang, like the Tibetan, l’*énergie, de l’extase, de la sagesse, de l’habileté dans les moyens, du voeu, de la force et du savoir*” (p. 99). Here Boin’s choice of “concentration” again appears to owe more to the reconstructed Sanskrit term *dhyāna* than to Lamotte’s French “l’extase.” It also elides the distinction Lamotte makes between *samādhi* (which he regularly renders as “concentration”) and *dhyāna* (“extase”). Likewise, Lamotte distinguishes between *adhigama* (above, 1a), which he translates as “science, “ and *jñāna* “savoir” (2), a distinction which is masked in Boin’s version where both are translated as “knowledge.”

²⁵ This interpretation is reflected in the Tibetan translation of *pāramitā* itself, as *pha-rol-tu phyin-pa* “gone to the other side.” Not all Indian Buddhists, however, accepted this etymology; for a spirited defense of a different interpretation (as “excellent,” from Skt. *parama*) see the commentary on the *Heart Sūtra* by Vimalamitra translated in Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Elaborations on Emptiness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 52-53 and n. 14.

²⁶ Note that the Tibetan text, unlike that of Kumārajīva, actually uses this term.

both contain extra items—in this case, two rather than three—interspersed between the first and the second (standard) *pāramitās*.²⁷

It is essential, therefore, that the translator not attempt to “correct” an irregular-looking text, for in so doing she may inadvertently destroy evidence of other, less familiar, Buddhist traditions. What we see in the *Vimalakīrti* (in all versions except Kumārajīva’s) may well be evidence of the existence of lists of *pāramitās* that differed from the six (later ten) that eventually became standard. In this instance Thurman has done us a great service by providing an English rendition that is as idiosyncratic and unexpected as its Tibetan original.

(3) *mi-dmigs-pa’i chos-la bzod-pa dang-ldan-pa* | (74.3.4)

Lamotte: “convinced of the ungraspability of all dharmas (*anupalabhadharmakṣāntipratilabdha*)” (I, §3, pp. 2-3)²⁸

Thurman: “They had attained the intuitive tolerance of the ultimate incomprehensibility of all things.” (10)

Here both Lamotte and Thurman have given reasonable accounts of what we find in the Tibetan text, though Lamotte has translated the expression *chos* in the technical sense as “all dharmas” while Thurman has opted for the more general sense of “all things.”²⁹ Based on what we find in the Chinese translations, however—all three of which read *buqi fa ren* 不起法忍, “endurance of the non-arising of things”—it seems likely that the Tibetan version was based on a Sanskrit text which read **anupalabdha* “unobtained” in place of the expected **anutpāda* in the technical expression **anutpāda-* “un arisen” (or **anutpattika-*) *dharmakṣānti*.

²⁷ Zhi Qian’s text reads 布施調意自損戒忍精進一心智慧善權 (14.519a16-17), adding *tiaoyi* 調意 “taming the mind” (for *sama*?) and *zisun* 自損 lit. “self-harming” (for *samīyama* “self-restraint”) between the *pāramitās* of “giving” and “morality.” Xuanzang has 布施調伏寂靜戒忍精進靜慮解脫等持等至般若方便願力智 (14.561a14-15), adding *tiaofu* 調伏 “subduing” (**dama*) and *jijing* 寂靜 “quieting, stilling” (**sama*) in the same position.

²⁸ Fr. “convaincus de l’inexistence de tous les dharmas” (p. 99). For “l’inexistence” Boin gives “ungraspability,” a choice clearly determined by the reconstructed Sanskrit term *anupalabdha* rather than by Lamotte’s French translation itself. It could well be argued that Boin’s wording is preferable to Lamotte’s, yet such a choice reveals a greater concern on Boin’s part with translating the meaning of the “original” text (i.e., of the Sanskrit as reconstructed by Lamotte) than with conveying Lamotte’s French rendition of the Tibetan.

²⁹ Both translators are inferring the presence of the term “all,” which has no equivalent in the Tibetan.

Turning now to the account by the bodhisattva Sudatta (Tib. *Legs-par byin* “Well-Given,” the same figure who is called *Shande* 善德 “Good Virtue” in Kumārajīva’s version) of his encounter with Vimalakīrti, we find Vimalakīrti quoted as making the following remarks:

(4) *snying-po med-pa-las snying-po len-pas mngon-par bsgrubs-pa’i lus dang*
| *srog dang* | *longs-spyod rnyed-pa dang* | (83.3.6-7)

Lamotte: “[The offering of the Law (*dharmayajña*) means] the gains of body, life and riches (*kāyajīvabhogalābha*) resulting from the action of taking for substantial that which is not substantial (*asāre sārōpādānam*). . . .” (III, §72, 108)³⁰

Thurman: “[The Dharma-sacrifice consists of] the gain of body, health, and wealth, consummated by the extraction of essence from the essenceless. . . .” (40)

In this passage we have a noticeable difference between the two translations, with Lamotte’s version stating that these three types of gains result from “taking for substantial that which is not substantial,” while Thurman states that they culminate in “the extraction of essence from the essenceless.” The former might seem to conform to traditional Buddhist doctrine, but it is Thurman’s rendition that is correct. As we have seen, the underlying motif here is that the bodhisattva can extract something of substance (merit that can contribute to his future attainment of Buddhahood) from entities that are in themselves insubstantial (his transitory body, life, and wealth). In an apparent attempt to read the text in a way that would sound familiar, however, Lamotte has violated the grammatical constraints of the Tibetan.³¹

(5) *rab-tu byung-bas mngon-par bsgrubs-pa’i lhag-pa’i bsam-pa dang* |
nan-tan-gyis mngon-par bsgrubs-pa’i thos-pa-la mkhas-pa dang |
(83.4.1)

³⁰ Fr. “les gains du corps, de la vie et des richesses résultant du fait de prendre du solide dans ce qui n’est pas solide” (pp. 213-214).

³¹ The structure here is quite straightforward: the Tibetan can only be understood as meaning “by extracting the substance” (*snying-po len-pas*, in the instrumental case) “from that which is without substance” (*snying-po med-pa-las*, in the ablative). Happily we have an occurrence of this expression in the Sanskrit *Śikṣāsamuccaya* (200.17) where “insubstantial body” is also given in the ablative case (*asārāt kūyāt*). Lamotte’s Sanskrit reconstruction, by contrast, places the term “insubstantial” in the locative (*asāre*), thus departing from the grammar of the Tibetan.

Lamotte: “[It means] the high resolve (*adhyāśaya*) resulting from leaving the world (*pravrajyā*), the ability in skillful means³² and learning (*upāyabahuśrutakauśalya*) resulting from religious practice (*prati-patti*)” (III, §72, 109)³³

Thurman: “[It consists] of high resolve, consummated by renunciation; of skill in erudition, consummated by religious practice” (40)

Here there is little difference between the two translations, and both are acceptable renditions of the Tibetan. But the wording of the Tibetan offers a clue that can elucidate a puzzling passage in Kumārajīva’s Chinese version. The Tibetan *lhag-pa’i bsam-pa* (as Lamotte indicates in his Sanskrit reconstruction) is the regular equivalent of *adhyāśaya* “high resolve,” a term which makes good sense here. Read in this light, we might ask whether Kumārajīva’s *shenxin* 深心 “profound mind” could be an attempt to make sense of an Indic text that read *atisaya* “deep” as the result of an error in transmission.³⁴

(6) *nyon-mongs-pa med-pa’i chos rtogs-pas mngon-par bsgrub-pa’i dgon-pa-la gnas-pa dang | sangs-rgyas-kyi ye-shes ’thob-par byed-pas mngon-par bsgrub-pa’i nang-du yang-dag ’jog-pa dang |* (83.4.1-2)

Lamotte: “[It means] the dwelling in the forest (*aranyavāsa*) resulting from the knowledge of the peaceful dharmas (*araṇādharmāvabodhana*), the solitary absorption in meditation (*pratisamlayana*) resulting from the search for the knowledge of

³² The small type (so in the original) indicates that Lamotte is supplying words found in Xuanzang’s seventh-century Chinese version but not in the Tibetan.

³³ Fr. “la haute résolution résultant de la sortie du monde, l’habileté en moyens salvifiques et en érudition résultant de la pratique religieuse” (p. 214).

³⁴ Though space does not permit a detailed discussion of this issue here, evidence of confusion between voiced and unvoiced consonants and between aspirates and their unaspirated counterparts abounds in early Chinese Buddhist translations. For examples in the work of Dharmarakṣa (late 3rd/early 4th century CE) see Daniel J. Boucher, “Gāndhārī and the Early Chinese Buddhist Translations Reconsidered: The Case of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 118, no. 4 (1998), pp. 471-506. Instances of these confusions are, if anything, even more common in the work of Zhi Qian, as I hope to document in a forthcoming lexicon of his translation terms.

the Buddhas (*buddhajñānaparyeṣṭi*)” (III, §72, 109)³⁵

Thurman: “[It consists] of retirement in solitary retreats, consummated by understanding things free of passions; of introspective meditation, consummated by attainment of the Buddha-gnosis” (40)

Once again Lamotte’s translation sounds more reasonable than Thurman’s, but it is the latter that actually conforms to the wording of the Tibetan. Where Lamotte refers to “the search for the knowledge of the buddhas” (Fr. *la recherche du savoir des Buddha*), the Tibetan text—as correctly translated by Thurman—refers to its “attainment” (*’thob-pa*). Lamotte’s translation of the expression *dgon-pa-la gnas-pa* as “dwelling in the forest,” however, is preferable to the “retirement in solitary retreats” given by Thurman, whose work (like that of his third-century counterpart Zhi Qian) betrays a general tendency to elide references to ascetic activity.³⁶

• • •

Of these two translations there is no question that Thurman’s is more accessible to the general reader. His fluid and colloquial style succeeds—far better than any of the other translations considered here, whether based on the Chinese or on the Tibetan—in conveying not only the dramatic flair but also the abundant humor found in the text. It is also generally more accurate than Lamotte’s version, both in grammatical terms and in its faithfulness to the (sometimes unexpected) content of the Tibetan. The very helpful glossaries of Sanskrit names and terms, numerical categories, and (English) Buddhist technical terms also contribute to its appropriateness for use in the classroom. While one might occasionally quibble with Thurman’s choice of translation terminology,³⁷ his version emerges as the best of the four in terms of both

³⁵ Fr. “le séjour dans la forêt résultant de la connaissance des dharma exempts de dispute, la méditation solitaire résultant de la recherche du savoir des Buddha” (p. 214). For *exempts de dispute* Boin gives “peaceful,” again presumably based on the reconstructed Sanskrit (*araṇā*) rather than the French.

³⁶ See for example p. 59 of his translation, where the Tibetan text contains the standard expression “having gone forth in the well-taught Dharma and Vinaya” (*legs par gsungs pa’i chos ‘dul ba la rab tu byung nas*, 89.4.5), which Thurman renders “renounced the world for the discipline of the rightly taught Dharma,” thus causing the Vinaya to disappear into the category of “Dharma.”

³⁷ E.g., the rendition of *mahāsiddha* as “great sorcerer” (p. 8), or of *brāhmaṇa* (Tib. *bram-ze*) as “aristocrat” (p. 21), or the use of the term “supernovas” to refer to the fires that consume the universe at the end of a kalpa (p. 53).

accuracy and style.

Lamotte's translation, however, retains a certain value for specialists, above all in his extensive introduction and annotations. While the examples given above make it clear that one cannot simply take his readings at face value, this volume remains a real contribution to our knowledge of Indian Buddhism.

Artifacts and Audiences

It is a fairly straightforward process to assess the accuracy of a translation by evaluating the author's grasp of the grammar of his source-language and his faithfulness in rendering the words actually found in the text. But a more fundamental question still remains. What is the translator doing when she produces an English rendition of Kumārajīva's Chinese *Vimalakīrti* or of Dharmatāśīla's Tibetan version of the text? When we pick up such a book in a bookstore, or assign it to our students, what precisely—in the fullest sense of the word—does such a work *represent*?

This question involves a whole range of issues, from the author's choice to translate a certain text to his selection of a particular source-version to the style in which he chooses to render that source into English. Indeed, it involves a prior and even more fundamental issue: Is this text worth translating at all? What makes a certain Buddhist scripture, and not another, worthy of the intensive scholarly effort required to make it available in English? Is it the significance of the text in India, its use in other Asian cultures, or its influence on one of the living traditions of Buddhism of our own day? Or is it, perhaps, simply that the potential translator likes what the scripture has to say?

In the case of the *Vimalakīrti* the decision to translate Kumārajīva's Chinese version into English requires no justification. This scripture, as we have seen, had a profound impact on East Asian Buddhism, and Kumārajīva's text soon outshone Zhi Qian's pioneering translation, ultimately becoming the sole version of the scripture actually used in East Asia. Even the meticulous version produced by Xuanzang was unable to displace it, and (with one exception) it is Kumārajīva's version that served as the basis for all of the extant East Asian commentaries.³⁸ The pervasive influence of this version of the text in both medieval and modern East Asian Buddhism thus makes an English translation entirely appropriate.

Simply deciding to work from Kumārajīva's version, however, is not the end of the matter. The translator must also decide *how* to read Kumārajīva's text. Does she want to represent the text in English as it would be understood by a contemporary reader from, say, Taiwan, or Hong Kong, or Japan? Or

³⁸ The sole exception is a commentary by Xuanzang's student Kuiji 窥基 (T1782), which is based on Xuanzang's translation of the text.

does she want to create an English version that would convey the way the text might have been received by Kumārajīva's original audience in fifth-century north China? Or again (if she is Indologically rather than Sinologically oriented) does she prefer to read *through* Kumārajīva's Chinese text to recover the content of the underlying Indic version—that is, to translate the text as Kumārajīva himself, with the Indic text before him, might have understood it? There are decisions to be made at every step—decisions that are not always faced squarely, let alone made clear to one's readership, by contemporary translators. In sum, simply to say that one is working from "Kumārajīva's version" is not yet enough; the translator must also decide which *reading* of Kumārajīva's text she wishes to convey.

None of the translations considered here includes an explicit discussion of this issue, though Watson ventured briefly into this territory in his earlier translation of the *Lotus Sūtra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). Since he states in the preface to his translation of the *Vimalakīrti* (x) that he intends to follow the same methods used in this earlier work, it is worth pausing to take note of the approach described there. As with his *Vimalakīrti* translation, Watson writes that his version of the *Lotus Sūtra* "is designed for readers who have no special background in Buddhist studies or Asian literature" (xxiii-xxiv). But he goes on to tell us more about the text—that is, about the reading of the text—on which his translation is based:

I have tried to render the text [of Kumārajīva's *Lotus Sūtra*] in the way that it has traditionally been understood in China and Japan. That is why I have carefully taken into consideration the Japanese *yomikudashi* reading . . . which rearranges the Chinese characters of the text so that they conform to the patterns of Japanese syntax.
(xxvi)

The results of these methodological choices are evident. Watson has produced a translation that is smooth and easy to read, offering no strange technical terms or transliterated Sanskrit expressions that might deter a reader who knows little or nothing of Buddhism. But while he makes it clear that he will exclude from consideration the Indian background of the text, he does not discuss the fact that "the way [the sūtra] has traditionally been understood in China and Japan" is a category that contains a vast array of possible readings. In the case of the *Vimalakīrti* (and presumably of the *Lotus* as well) it is clear that Watson has *not* chosen to translate the Chinese text as Kumārajīva himself might have understood it (which would require, unavoidably, a familiarity with its Indian background), nor to produce an English rendering of the sūtra as Kumārajīva's original audience would have received it (which would require reading the text primarily in terms of the vocabulary and religious currents circulating in north China in the fifth century CE). Rather, what Watson has done is to translate

the Chinese text as it was understood in twentieth-century Japan.³⁹ As a result, the artifact that Watson has produced may be more useful for understanding the role of the *Vimalakīrti* in modern Japan than for gaining access to its interpretation in early medieval China.

Luk's creation, on the other hand, is clearly shaped by his own commitment to Buddhism, specifically to a particular Chan tradition taught in Hong Kong. As we have seen, on numerous occasions he has amplified and in some cases even altered the text to make it conform to current Chinese Buddhist expectations. The result is a text that is a useful source for understanding Buddhism in the contemporary Chinese cultural sphere, but which cannot serve as an entrée to the Buddhism of Kumārajīva's day. Once again, in other words, we have a document that is distinctly modern in its rendition, though it lacks the demythologizing and secularizing tone that characterizes Watson's work.

What, then, of the translations from the Tibetan? Here we are on quite different ground, for as noted above there is no evidence that this sūtra was ever actively used by Tibetan Buddhists. In light of this fact, it seems appropriate to ask why Lamotte and Thurman have chosen to base their translations on this version of the text. What could be the value of such an artifact? Or—to put the question more bluntly—does it have any value at all?

Certainly it cannot be argued that these translations represent a contribution to our understanding of Tibetan Buddhism, and indeed neither translator presents his work in this way. Granted, both are working from the version preserved in the Tibetan canon, but there are no traces here of how a Tibetan reader would perceive the scripture, either today or in Dharmatāśīla's time.⁴⁰ On the contrary, both translators are using the Tibetan version to gain access to the way the text would have resonated in India. As noted above, Thurman states explicitly that he intends to convey "the authentic *teaching* of *Vimalakīrti*" (x; emphasis in the original), while Lamotte's objective—as his copious Sanskrit glosses make clear—is to reconstruct the underlying Indian text.⁴¹ What both translators are doing is thus to read *through* the Tibetan text

³⁹ The Japanese translations Watson cites range in date from 1934 to 1993, and the *yomikudashi* version was published in 1932.

⁴⁰ A reading of the scripture through a Tibetan lens would necessarily require the rendering of the underlying word *nirvāṇa*, for example (Tib. *mya-ngan-las 'das*) as "having passed beyond suffering," and the equivalent of *arhat* (*dgra bcom-pa*) as "one who has vanquished the enemies."

⁴¹ Another difficulty with Lamotte's work can be observed in retrospect now that we have seen how he handles the Tibetan text itself. For just as he attempted to regularize a passage which contained an unusual list of *pāramitās*, so in his introduction he attempts to standardize the doctrinal content of the text. The *Vimalakīrti*, according to Lamotte, represents "a pure *Madhyamaka*" (lx), and when compared with the

to an underlying Indic version, and thus to convey in English what the postulated “original” would have said.⁴²

Ironically, this means that while the two translators of the (older) Chinese version of Kumārajīva have consciously or unconsciously engaged in a modernizing reading, the translators of the (considerably more recent) Tibetan version have deliberately undertaken an antiquarian project. For both Lamotte and Thurman, in other words, the fact that this sūtra is being translated into English from its Tibetan version is largely irrelevant; what is at issue is not its cultural setting but its primordial truth. It is therefore worth noting that both translators are working from the version of the scripture which, by virtue of its relatively recent vintage, is the farthest removed from whatever the “original” Indian version of the text might have been. In Lamotte’s case the irony is compounded, for the two versions on which he relies—the Tibetan and (where noteworthy differences occur) Xuanzang’s Chinese version—are clearly those that have been the *least* influential of the four extant versions.⁴³

Conclusions and Desiderata

The four English versions of the *Vimalakīrti* considered above constitute four quite distinct representations of the text, produced with different audiences in mind and employing different (and not always consciously articulated) readings of their respective source-texts. Luk and Lamotte share the liability of having subordinated the scripture to a vision of what the text “ought” to say, drawn from contemporary Chinese Buddhism in Luk’s case and from a study of medieval Indian Buddhist philosophy in Lamotte’s. Watson has conveyed a good sense

larger Perfection of Wisdom sūtra (*Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*) and with Candrakīrti’s *Madhyamakavṛtti* the *Vimalakīrti* “expresses identical views” (lxviii). But such statements are extremely hazardous if we are ever to have any hope of recovering the richness and variety of Indian Buddhism. No doubt there are points (perhaps many of them) at which the *Vimalakīrti* does coincide with perspectives found in these and other Buddhist texts. But to decide in advance that our text represents “pure Madhyamaka” is sure to limit, and not to expand, our perception of its content.

⁴² Once the surviving Sanskrit text of the *Vimalakīrti* has been published, we will be in a quite different situation.

⁴³ Presumably Lamotte chose these two versions because of their philological precision, but this does not alter the importance of considering their date and their impact (or lack thereof) on actual Buddhist communities. If one wanted to gain access to the earliest possible recension of the text the best option would be to work from the third-century version of Zhi Qian, though it must immediately be added that Zhi Qian’s version abounds in difficulties and cannot simply be taken as a word-for-word rendition of an Indian original.

of its overall grammar, though in his reading the sūtra is shorn of many of the distinctive terms and concepts that would be foreign to readers in contemporary Japan. All in all it is Thurman who—though clearly operating from a position of advocacy—provides the best access to a particular version of the text, though he does not confront directly the implications of the fact that his reading is based on a relatively late Indian recension preserved only in Tibetan.

What all of these works demonstrate, in sum, is that there is still room for greater reflection on the status of all translations, both ancient and modern, as cultural products. There can be no perfect or definitive translation, of course, just as there has not yet been, in the two and a half millennia or so since the time of the Buddha, any one definitive articulation of his message. But there is much to be said for the ongoing process of becoming more conscious of the locus of our source-texts in a complex network of transmission and of our own inevitably constructive role as translators. To borrow the sometimes amusing vocabulary used by Edward Conze in his translation of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, if the translator can entertain these thoughts—and articulate them to potential readers—without becoming “cowed,” or “stolid,” or “cast down,”⁴⁴ the translations we produce will surely be the better for it.

⁴⁴ See Edward Conze, trans., *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines* (Bollinas, CA: The Four Seasons Foundation, 1973), p. 126.