

Review

Paving the Great Way: Vasubandhu's Unifying Buddhist Philosophy, by Jonathan Gold. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. x + 322 pp., £38.00 (hb). ISBN 978-0-23116-8-267 (hb).

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As every scholar of Buddhism knows, Vasubandhu is a towering figure in Buddhist philosophy. In his new book, *Paving the Great Way: Vasubandhu's Unifying Buddhist Philosophy*, Jonathan Gold aims to acquaint us more fully with this philosopher and his philosophy. In a clearly-argued work that skillfully breaks down very abstract and difficult Buddhist concepts, Gold certainly achieves that objective. To summarize before going into a few particulars about the book, Gold sets out a few stated goals for his project. First, he sets out to establish that, despite his reputation as a thinker divided across doctrinal affiliations, there is in fact a coherent trajectory and unity to Vasubandhu's work. Second, Gold seeks to bring to light Vasubandhu's concern for scriptural interpretation, which has hitherto been an understudied aspect of his philosophy. Finally, Gold works to apply Vasubandhu's thought to the issue of moral agency in Buddhism, coining the term 'Buddhist Causal Framing', partly as a means to relate his approach to matters of social justice.

To accomplish these aims, the book is divided into six chapters, supplemented by seven short appendices of the author's translations of excerpts of Vasubandhu's writings. In the first chapter, Gold critiques the argument that Vasubandhu was in fact two different people, as might be suggested by his apparently divergent philosophical perspectives. Gold counters this stance by pointing out that the disparity can just as easily be accounted for by evolution of thought (simply put, Vasubandhu changed his mind) and also that Vasubandhu lived in a period when the lines between different Buddhist doctrines (such as Sautrāntika or Sarvāstivāda) were not quite so stark (p. 20). What would thus appear divergent to us would not necessarily be so at the time. In Chapters 2 and 3 Gold carries out close readings of Vasubandhu's most famous work, the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, examining the thinker's clari-

fications of Indian Buddhist teachings, as well as his criticisms of Buddhist rivals and Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, on topics such as temporality, *karma*, and no-self. Chapters 4 and 5 explore Vasubandhu's techniques for interpreting Buddhist scriptures, making, among others, the point that Vasubandhu was extremely flexible in his interpretation of those texts, falling often on the side of the figurative as opposed to the literal. Gold argues that this very flexibility may help explain Vasubandhu's aforementioned openness to the Mahāyāna, particularly the Yogācāra, alongside prior affiliations with the Śrāvakayāna (pp. 113–22). In this way, Gold deftly ties together Vasubandhu's philosophical approach with his sectarian leanings, as well as, ultimately in Chapter 5, his scriptural hermeneutics (p. 165). Chapter 6 and the conclusion hit something of a different note, applying Vasubandhu's thought to the broader themes of free will, moral agency, and social justice through a scheme the author labels 'Buddhist Causal Framing' (pp. 217–18).

This work and its author are to be commended for the clarity of exposition and thoughtfulness of exegesis throughout a challenging philosophical canon and maze of concepts. What emerges, as intimated above, is a thoroughly, satisfyingly holistic treatment of Vasubandhu. The exposition of Vasubandhu's thought will be of obvious importance and interest to Buddhist Studies scholars of all stripes, while those moments when Gold examines the conversation between Vasubandhu and Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika widen the audience to students of Indian philosophy in general. Philosophers of Western traditions or comparative interest will also find Chapter 6 an important contribution by elucidating a Buddhist position on the perennial philosophical issues of determinism and justice. That chapter is also remarkable for putting forward some of the most engaging stories to illustrate his points (i.e. a line of ants in a hotel room and his daughters love of basketball) that I have recently encountered in a scholarly work, and also connections to other disciplines, namely (albeit briefly) Gould's evolutionary concept of 'deep time'. To read a work by a scholar able to simultaneously maintain such broad connections with close, penetrating readings is a pleasure. If I were to make one mildly critical remark, it is that the transition to the topics of Chapter 6 and the conclusion is less smooth than the flow between the preceding chapters. Consequently, the tone of the ending of the book hits in a slightly different register than the chapters preceding it. This is, however, a very minor criticism of what is overall an important, eruditely argued, and very enjoyable work that will have a major impact on the study of Vasubandhu in particular and Buddhist philosophy in general.