

Wisdom of Buddha: A Translation of the Samdhinirmocana Sutra, By John Powers

Reviewed by Tom Graham

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One of the few things that makes me sad about the Dharma is the difficulty of making it accessible to large numbers of people. The

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truths that the Buddha taught are useful to everyone, and yet too often they languish between the pages of unread books. Those of us who are concerned about Dharma literature must ask ourselves why this is so. Why is it so hard to convey the wonders of the Dharma to people who are unfamiliar with it? And why has the Dharma all but disappeared from India, while it has declined into empty ritual in much of China and Japan?

The easy answer to this question is the Dharma is hard to understand; it cannot be fully appreciated unless it has been studied for more than a few years. The harder answer is those of us who care about it simply are not doing enough to communicate its importance to others.

An excellent example of the reclusive nature of Dharma literature is the *Wisdom of Buddha*, a translation of the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra* by John Powers. Published in 1995, this exquisite volume has sold a mere few thousand copies in four years. With a potential readership in the tens of millions, one must wonder why this fascinating discourse of the Buddha has gone largely unread in the West. A translation of the same text by Thomas Cleary also appeared in 1995; it is now out of print. This is a discouraging showing for one of the most important sutras in the East Asian Buddhist tradition, and one of the most concise and illuminating analyses of the human mind in all of world literature.

The *Samdhinirmocana Sutra* is one of the Buddha's core teachings on the nature of consciousness. It reads almost like a textbook on awareness and the meditative techniques that can be used to understand what it means to be consciously alive. Its topics include: ultimate truth, the relationship between truth and practice, the nature of consciousness, the nature of phenomena, meditation, the path to enlightenment, and the nature

of a Buddha. In his introduction, Powers says that the *Wisdom of Buddha* "is intended as a basis for meditative practice," and "a guide to training for enlightenment" He also says that "careful and sustained study" are necessary to "reveal the full depth and scope of this profound work."

The *Samdhinirmocana Sutra* is so central to the Yogacara ("practice of yoga") tradition that Cleary chose to call his version of it *Buddhist Yoga, A Comprehensive Course*. Powers has based his translation on a Tibetan edition of the sutra (found in the sDe-dge bKa'-'gyur). He says that he relied on five commentaries from the Tibetan cannon for his interpretations and, emanations of the text.

His translation is a masterpiece. Though *Wisdom of Buddha* contains almost sixty pages of notes (and is much enhanced by them), the text itself is practically readable without them. Powers chooses words well; difficult passages are almost always rendered into a very readable English that is at once both clear and precise. In chapter six, for example, he provides us with a very smooth rendition of a paragraph that contains several difficult concepts:

"Gunakara, for example, you should see that in the same way as a very clear crystal comes in contact with a color, the other-dependent character comes in contact with the predispositions for conventional designations that are the imputational character. For example, in the same way as a very clear crystal is mistaken for a precious substance such as a sapphire, a mahaniila, a ruby, an emerald, or gold, see how the other-dependent character is apprehended as the imputational character." (page 85)

"Other-dependent character" and "imputational character" have been clearly defined by the Buddha just prior to their appearances above. Powers has a very good eye for sequence and context; his translation consistently makes the ideas presented in the text clear to anyone who is willing to spend the time studying it.

Wisdom of Buddha is a bilingual book; the translation and the original Tibetan text are presented on facing pages. Though bilingual editions are always welcomed by scholars, one wonders if the added printing expenses really justify their use. Those who want to read both languages together can do so easily enough by providing themselves with their own Tibetan copies of the text. And perhaps this is part of the reason that this magnificent sutra has found such a small audience in English. This cannot be the

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whole reason, for Cleary's monolingual edition is out of print, but it does seem to suggest that some of the effort that went into producing this volume may have been wasted.

Powers has shown that he recognizes the importance of making the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra* accessible to a wider audience by changing its name to *Wisdom of Buddha*. Cleary made a similar decision when he chose to call his version Buddhist Yoga. If the title of a sutra can be changed, perhaps some of the traditional assumptions that we have about translations of them should also be reconsidered. First among these might be the idea that translations are made for the purpose of ensuring preservation of the sutras themselves; while this was true centuries ago, it no longer is. Copies of Buddhist sutras have been saved in libraries and computers all over the world. In today's world, propagation is far more important than preservation. Powers, who is also the author of *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, surely understands this as well as anyone. I wonder if he would not agree that *Wisdom of Buddha* might benefit by having more of his own commentary added to it? Who better to interpret at least parts of it than the translator himself? Is it not true that more people would benefit from the wisdom of this sutra if it were presented in a way that was easier for readers to understand?

Phrases like "the other-dependent character comes in contact with the predispositions for conventional designations that are the imputational character" are fine translations, but I suspect that most readers would appreciate hearing from Powers what that phrase means to him. There is a place for everything, including

bilingual editions of Buddhist sutras. The comments offered here are not intended to detract from the conspicuous excellence of this work; rather, I have made them more in praise of Powers; I wish that he would have allowed his own subjectivity to appear a little more.

In an ideal world, Cleary's translation of the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra* would still be in print, and several more versions would have been added by other translators. As Buddhism continues to enter the West, we need as many translations of the great sutras as we can get. It is my hope that there will be more to come. And it is also my hope that translators with as much ability as Powers or Cleary will become bold enough to make commentaries of their own, and not just rely on what has been handed to us by tradition.

Books used in this review:

- 1) *Buddhist Yoga, A Comprehensive Course*, translated by Thomas Cleary. Published by Shambala Publications, Inc., Boston, MA, 1995. Out of print.
- 2) *Chieh Shen Mi Ching Shu*. Published by Yuan Kuang Fo Hsueh Yuan, Chung Li, Taiwan, 1986.
- 3) *Fo Kuang Ta Ts'e Tien*. Published by Fo Kuang Ch'u Pan She, Kao Hsiung, Taiwan, 1989