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The Legend of King Aśoka: A Study and Translation of the "Aśokāvadāna," by John S. Strong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983. Appendix. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. 336 pages.

Since this book has been reviewed a number of times already, the present review will focus upon various of its features which have not, to my knowledge, received attention elsewhere. However, for those who are unfamiliar with this volume, a summary of its contents may be useful.

The book consists basically of two parts, as the sub-title indicates, roughly 160 pages of discussion about Aśoka and the legends which gradually grew up around him, followed by the author's translation of the *Aśokāvadāna* itself. As John Strong makes clear, this text is a product of the various Hīnayāna, though non-Theravāda, circles in Northwest India probably around the second century A.D. and quite possibly of Sarvāstivādin origin. The text is part of the voluminous Sanskrit anthology of Buddhist legends called the *Divyāvadāna*, though it may also be found separately, e.g., in two Chinese translations. While the text reflects the world of the second century A.D., it also represents legends which are much older and essentially was intended to help Buddhists seek solutions to the problems of maintaining the ideals of the Buddhist tradition in a pluralistic age and in the absence of the historical Buddha. As Strong develops at considerable length in later chapters, this is the dharmalogical task of relating the tradition to everyday life and activity. Specifically, as he indicates in his Preface, the central questions were: "What is the nature of Buddhist kingship? What is the relationship between the state and the Buddhist monastic community? What role does the king play in this? What is the religious nature of practices such as merit making? What role does devotion play in Buddhism?"

Among the many interesting points made by Strong is his statement that the legends about Aśoka influenced the reading of the famed Aśoka Edicts, which were not finally translated authoritatively until 1837, as well as the fact that many interpreters did not "take seriously into account the literary form and religious intent of the legends qua legends." He makes it clear that it was, in fact, by means of these embellished Aśoka legends that second century Buddhists preached the *Dharma*, proselytized for converts, stressed the merits of *dāna* (of giving to the Buddhist community), and further articulated the role of kingship and its

relationship to the Buddhist religion.

One of the book's central points is that in the *Aśokāvadāna* we are presented with a complex portrayal of Aśoka, as great king and as simple layman, as "an impetuous monarch to be feared or maligned" and as "the mythical ideal of the cakravartin." It is this very ambiguity which makes the image more believable, especially in relationship to a clearly imperfect world. This reviewer has no quarrels with that interpretation. When a sharp contrast is drawn between this text and the Sinhalese chronicles (*Mahāvamsa*), some questions do arise. For instance, an *avadāna* is rightly seen as "a narrative of the religious deeds of an individual and is primarily intended to illustrate the workings of karma and the values of faith and devotion." In contrast, in Strong's words, a *vamsa* "is a lineage or chronicle. . . primarily concerned with giving the sacred pedigree of a country (such as Sri Lanka), or of a particular Buddhist sect, or of a holy object." While often true of chronicles, the *Mahāvamsa* is more complex than this and it would not be difficult to show that many of the greatest kings in Sri Lanka history are portrayed in strongly ambiguous terms. One finds an important instance of this in the treatment of Duṭṭhagāmiṇi, but the portrayal of Parākramabāhu I (1153–1186) in this sense is both more extended and, humanly speaking, more convincing. Indeed, it is this portrayal which is more parallel to what one finds of Aśoka in the *Aśokāvadāna* than perhaps any other one might cite. Also, while the treatment is not extensive, one can note in these chronicles a slightly more complex depiction of Aśoka than this book suggests, but Strong is correct in saying that once Aśoka has undergone his "conversion" he is perceived in basically ideal terms. The same is also true of how many Sinhalese monarchs are portrayed, but elsewhere one finds strongly realistic accounts of kings who are otherwise considered great. In other words, because they are a complex work, compiled over centuries, one would expect the chronicles to be somewhat varied in treatment, despite the obvious fact that they were generated by monks from within the Mahāvihāra tradition and thus had their own forms of partiality.

However many parallels exist between an *avadāna* and a *vamsa* or chronicle, Strong is right to draw a sharp line between them. In the *Aśokāvadāna*, for instance, there is a basic integrity to the text which has taken various legends about the central figure and woven them into an entire picture to be used by the Buddhist community as it sought to relate ideals of kingship, of the Buddhist *saṅgha*, of the emerging portrayals of the Buddha

himself, and of enriched practices for the laity to the ambiguous world of real kings, monks, and laymen. While chronicles clearly have threads of interpretation, they lack the same kind of aesthetic and interpretive capacity one finds in a text like the *Aśokāvadāna*, which does not have to be as concerned about the facts of history but which seeks to relate the classic Buddhist ideals to new historical contexts. The presence of the Buddha in this world, the nature and meaning of a *cakravartin* king, and the increasing practice of merit-making were central to the questions this text addressed. Strong's analysis is extremely useful in a discussion of the larger dharmalogical issues which were alive in the second century A.D. And, as he reminds us, the primary concerns implicit in the text were "the attraction of new converts, the reinforcement of the faith of established followers, and the encouragement of both devotion and donation. And all of this was best accomplished by the telling of popular, appealing stories about the religious exploits of others," especially in this case about Aśoka. As such, this text is a vital one to historians of religion and, as Strong concludes, "belongs to the whole of Buddhism."

Bardwell L. Smith

Nāgārjuna. The Philosophy of the Middle Way, translated with an introduction by David J. Kalupahana. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, SUNY Series in Buddhist Studies, 1986. xv 412 pages.

The blurb on the back of this book credits it with showing that Nāgārjuna's ideas are not original, not an advancement from the early Buddhist period, and that he was not a Mahāyānist. As Professor Kalupahana rightly notes in his preface to this new translation of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MK), his position is controversial. He argues that since "sophisticated Mahāyāna sūtras" such as the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* were unavailable to Nāgārjuna, he used the early discourses in the *Nikāyas* and the *Āgamas* to criticize the sectarian views of "metaphysicians like the Sarvāstivādins and Sautrāntikas" and the "more popular religious teachers like Aśvaghosa, who overemphasized the function of 'faith' in the emerging belief in a transcendent Buddha" (pp.xiv-xv).

Kalupahana bases his argument on "a careful reading" of