but their services were (and to some extent still are) considered necessary. Shamanism is the oldest religion in Korea by far, and this helps to explain the relatively strong emphasis in Korean Buddhism on magic and the supernatural.

In her remarkable short book of linked essays, *Princess Abandoned*, Kim links the woman shaman and the woman poet: ". . . the books of such poetry are the records of the process of pulling out life from death . . . like the way the boundary between life and death is mashed inside the performance-space [of the shaman] . . . she [the poet] begins to realize that she stands at the center of death rather than at the center of life and that she cannot maintain her life if she does not embrace death."

Kim's poetry embodies this process, perhaps most starkly in her remarkable long poem *Manhole Humanity*, in which the word *hole* evokes the emptiness of Buddhism, the holes of the body and, as the translator notes, the physical situation of a bombed-out Korea after the Korean war, as the poem lurches from dream to doctor's office to a child in a subway station to an intensive-care ward to wherever Kim is looking/remembering/attending to.

> *"I" is a name for a place of confinement in my body!*
> *"I" is a name for all the things that don't appear outside the body's hole!*[3]

And, two stanzas earlier, the shamanistic *Today's dish—put several roots of hatred, add my mashed hole, and mix in shadow powder. Then boil the mixture down.*[4]

In some sense that last sentence encapsulates Kim's project: embracing everything and boiling the mixture completely and entirely down.

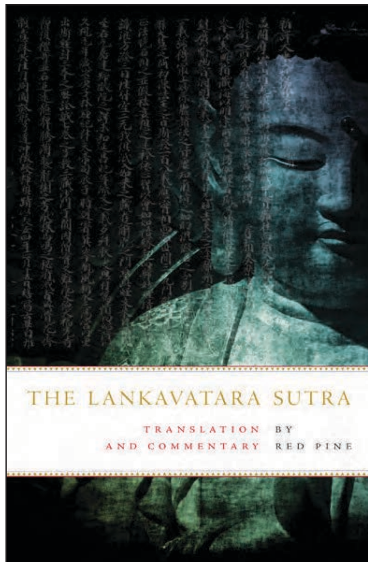
This review was first published in *Galatea Resurrects* #20, May 10, 2013 (galatearesurrection20.blogspot.com)

Notes

1. From "The Saints—Mr. and Mrs. Janitor" in *Mommy Must Be a Fountain of Feathers.*
2. From "When the Plug Gets Unplugged" in *Mommy Must Be a Fountain of Feathers.*
3. From *Manhole Humanity*, in *All the Garbage of the World Unite!*
4. From *Manhole Humanity*, in *All the Garbage of the World Unite!*

Book Review

The Lankavatara Sutra: Translation and Commentary
By Red Pine
Counterpoint Press, 2012
Review by Jess Row



In one of the earliest histories of Chinese Zen, the *Xu gaoseng chuan* (Transmitted Biographies of Eminent Monks) there is a famous passage about Bodhidharma:

> In the beginning dhyana master Bodhidharma transmitted the four-fasicle *Lankavatara Sutra* to Huike, saying, "This sutra is the only one that is suitable for China. If you base your practice on it, you will attain salvation."

Other entries in the same history elaborate this story, claiming that Bodhidharma's study of the *Lankavatara* carried on for generations among the early Zen masters. Indeed, another history of early Zen is called "Record of the Teachers and Disciples of the *Lankavatara*." On the face of this evidence, it seems fair to conclude, as Red Pine's publishers have, that the *Lankavatara Sutra* is "the holy grail of Zen" (this phrase appears prominently on the dust jacket) or "The only Zen sutra spoken by the Buddha" (the title of the book's press release).

Unfortunately—at least for the publicists—these claims are only a fragment of the story. Most students of Zen know that, in point of fact, there are few references to the *Lankavatara* in traditional Zen texts—and not because the sutra was lost or somehow "hidden." (The Chinese translations have remained in circulation from the fifth century to the present.) Even in these historical texts, there's almost no evidence that any of the early Zen masters actually drew from the *Lankavatara* in their teachings, because no quotations from the sutra are included in their records. After an exhaustive search in his book, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch'an Buddhism*, the scholar John R. McRae concludes that "although the scripture apparently had some kind of mysterious appeal to the followers of early Zen, there is no evidence that its contents had any particular impact on the development of the school."

So why would the eminent translator Red Pine—who's published important new translations of the *Diamond Sutra*, teachings attributed to Bodhidharma and the complete poems of Han Shan, among many other texts—set out to translate this admittedly difficult, obscure (and long) sutra, which has no reliable Sanskrit source, and which in Chinese is full of what seem to be copying errors and other textual imperfections? In his preface, he argues that the "mysterious appeal" between Zen and the *Lankavatara*, however historically tenuous, is crucial: "[The *Lankavatara*] is unrelenting in its insistence in the primacy of personal realization and is unlike any other teaching in this regard."

How is this so? To begin with, let's look at the basic structure and narrative of the text. *Lankavatara* means "descent to Lanka," that is, the island we now call Sri Lanka; the sutra tells us that the Buddha has come to Lanka to deliver teachings at the palace of

the serpent king, Sagara, and that among those in attendance are Ravana, the ten-headed demon king, and the great bodhisattva Mahamati. Ravana asks the Buddha to present his "immaculate teaching," the teaching that leads to Buddhahood, and the Buddha responds by conjuring up a delightful fantasy—"peaks covered with jewels . . . cities, groves and sunlit forests"—which disappears in an instant. Reflecting on this experience, Ravana asks the Buddha to explain a kind of logical paradox: how can we simultaneously give up attachment to what we think of as reality, *and* what we think of as illusion? "What do you mean," he asks, "when you say we should abandon these two kinds of dharmas? Wouldn't this result in projecting the existence of something or the nonexistence of something, something that is real or something that is not real?"

The Buddha's answer—extended over the whole body of the sutra in a long dialogue with Mahamati—is the fundamental teaching of *cittamatra*, or "mind only": everything we experience is a projection of mind; the universe as we know it is created by mind. This includes our perception of reality, which largely arises from our seventh, or discriminating, consciousness (*manas*), and our experience of dreams, fantasies and magic, which often emerge from our eighth consciousness—the storehouse consciousness, or *alayavijnaña*, which (somewhat like the Western concept of the unconscious) contains the seeds of our habits, tendencies and karma. The eighth consciousness is key to understanding how Mahayana Buddhist practice works, because the only way to access it—to perceive its workings and its illusory nature—is through meditation as part of the bodhisattva path. As the Buddha says in the *Lankavatara's* second chapter:

> Practitioners who enter dhyana or samadhi but who remain unaware of the changes of the subtler forms of habit-energy think they enter dhyana or samadhi only after consciousness ceases. But in fact their consciousness does not cease . . . because the seeds of habit-energy are not destroyed. The full extent of the subtlety of the repository consciousness remains completely beyond the ken of practitioners of other paths . . . likewise how to get free from the projections and fabrications that are perceptions of their minds.[1]

In the teaching of the *Lankavatara*, the bodhisattva finally becomes free from the workings of the storehouse consciousness by transforming it, through practice, into Buddha nature, the *tathagata-garbha*, or "womb" of the Tathagata.

The problem with learning these complex teachings through the *Lankavatara* is that the text itself is so tricky—full of repetitions, contradictory passages, questions that aren't answered or passages that are (as Red Pine admits) simply unreliable. (Even the term that he insists definitely links the *Lankavatara* to Zen practice is an ambiguous one: *pratyatma-gati*, or "self-realization," according to the Digital Dictionary of Buddhism[2] means "personal realization without a teacher," and is an esoteric term associated with Vairocana Buddha, not influential in Chinese Zen.) Thus this book is a wonderful resource for students who are already familiar with the foundations of Mahayana philosophy, but not a good entry point. For that, I would recommend Paul Williams' textbook, *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, which not only provides a clear outline of the teachings but pulls important quotations from a large number of sutras and commentaries that would otherwise remain almost intractable. Also, because Cittamatra (also called Yogacara) thought forms a large part of Tibetan Buddhist scriptural training, we can rely on our friends in that tradition for resources, too: a great place to start is Andy Karr's *Contemplating Reality: A Practitioner's Guide to the View*. A good detailed exploration of the eighth consciousness in particular is William Waldron's *The Buddhist Unconscious.*

All of the canonical Mahayana sutras have something to say about the importance of personal realization, and most of them—even very difficult and immense texts like the *Avatamsaka Sutra*—are in some ways more appealing, and more consistent, than the *Lankavatara Sutra.* If I were speaking to a new student who hadn't yet started studying the Mahayana sutras (other than the summaries in *The Compass of Zen*) my own reading recommendations might run in this order of importance and accessibility:

1. *Vimalakirti Sutra* (Burton Watson translation)[3]
2. *Diamond Sutra* (Red Pine translation)[4]
3. *Platform Sutra* (Philip Yampolsky translation)[5]
4. *Lotus Sutra* (Burton Watson translation)[6]
5. *Entrance to the Realm of Reality* (the last section of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, Thomas Cleary translation)[7]

The *Lankavatara* in this new translation would come after that, along with the *Sutra of Complete Enlightenment*, a text of Chinese origin which had a much larger impact on later Chinese Zen.

As Zen students it's important for us to read and study sutras, not just to gain deeper and more systematic insight into the buddhadharma, but also to become acquainted with the parts of the Buddhist tradition that Western Zen doesn't emphasize—the ritualistic importance of texts, the ways the teachings could be manipulated for political or cultural or personal purposes, the messiness and unpredictability of translation between largely incompatible languages and civilizations and the fact that we are encountering a very ancient tradition replete with questions we can never answer and gaps we cannot fill. I like to keep my copies of the sutras on a shelf near where I sit for my daily practice, and read a little bit every few days, becoming accustomed to them as artifacts that offer new insights—and sometimes open up new puzzles—over time. Their nonlinear, repetitive, sometimes opaque language and structure is part of the mystery of the transmission of the dharma itself. On that level alone the *Lankavatara Sutra* is an important text for us to recognize and understand. ◆

Notes

1. *The Lankavatara Sutra*, p. 74.
2. http://www.buddhism-dict.net/ddb/
3. Burton Watson, trans., T*he Vimalakirti Sutra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).
4. Red Pine, trans., *The Diamond Sutra* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2002).
5. Philip Yampolsky, trans., *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).
6. Burton Watson, trans., *The Lotus Sutra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
7. Thomas Cleary, trans., *The Flower Ornament Scripture* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1993).