

Review of *Cultivating Original Enlightenment:*

*Wonhyo's Exposition
of the Vajrasamādhi-Sūtra,*
by Robert E. Buswell, Jr.

Charles Muller

*This is a review of the book *Cultivating Original Enlightenment: Wōnhyo's Exposition of the Vajrasamādhi-Sūtra*, by Robert E. Buswell, Jr., published by the University of Hawaii Press (2007). This volume, the first to be published in the *Collected Works of Wōnhyo* series, contains the translation of a single text by Wōnhyo, the *Kūmgang Sammaegyōng Non*, along with a substantial introduction. The contents of the introduction are discussed in depth, along with some comments regarding the content and character of the translation.*

Key words: Wōnhyo, Vajrasamādhi, Amalavijñāna, Tathāgatagarbha,
Geumgang sammaebyeong non, Buddha-nature, Meditation.

Charles Muller is a Professor at Toyo Gakuen University, Japan.

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The Wŏnhyo translation project has at last begun to show its concrete fruits with the release of Robert Buswell's translation of the *Kūmgang Sammaegyŏng Non* with the title *Cultivating Original Enlightenment: Wŏnhyo's Exposition of the Vajrasamādhi-Sūtra*. This is a translation of the Chinese text of the *Vajrasamādhi-sūtra** [hereafter, VS] including the exegesis of Wŏnhyo, accompanied by a substantial introduction by the translator.

The VS, long known to be of East Asian provenance, is a pivotal text in the development of the distinctive doctrinal and practical flavor of East Asian Buddhism, as it takes the evolution of the notion of original, pristine enlightenment (*amalavijñāna*, ninth consciousness) to what amounts to be its climax in the East Asian scriptural tradition. The VS, more completely than any text before it articulates the existence of a clearly distinguished mode of human consciousness that utterly transcends all worldly taints and "deceptions," which serves as both the soteric basis and ultimate object for the kind of attitude toward Buddhist practice that would develop in East Asian forms of Buddhism typified by Chan/Sŏn/Zen.

There is a special dimension to the appearance and dissemination of this scripture and its accompanying commentary, in that there is a strong possibility that the scripture itself was originally composed in Korea—a hypothesis elaborated in detail in a previous book by Buswell (1989). The other special dimension of the sūtra is that it received its definitive commentarial treatment from none other than Wŏnhyo (whom Buswell characterizes with the label of "doyen" of Korean doctrinal Buddhism), who explicated a large number of important Mahāyāna scriptural texts, most important among which is the other influential *original enlightenment* work, the *Awakening of Faith*. So this is not only the first translation into English of the sūtra itself, but it is also the dramatically important first English-language rendering of the accompanying commentary by the remarkable scholar Wŏnhyo.

I. Introduction: Study

The translation is accompanied by an extremely thorough, careful, and insightful introduction, entitled “Study” which is composed in three parts. Part one offers an analysis of the key issues of soteric theory and practice that are emblematic of the sūtra, and deeply intertwined with Wōnhyo’s personal interests in it—mainly the analogous notions of *tathāgatagarbha* (womb of the thus-come one), and *amalavijñāna* (“immaculate consciousness”), both of which refer to an inborn condition of mental purity, or original enlightenment. Here the author shows how these ideas developed, and how they are systematically articulated in the sūtra, providing extensive evidence of precedents and equivalents in other canonical works (especially the *Awakening of Faith*). This is a pivotal discussion, which summarizes the more extensive elaboration found in his earlier book on the VS. In terms of clarifying the main argument of the VS, Buswell shows how the notion of original enlightenment developed in prior works such as the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, *Buddha-Nature Treatise*, and *Awakening of Faith*. With the notion of original enlightenment already being sufficiently established, the purpose of the VS is not so much for the purpose of arguing for the existence of this pristine aspect of consciousness. Rather, its discourse is aimed at clarifying how the original purity of the mind is to be cultivated, and brought to its full manifestation. As Buswell notes: “For Wōnhyo, then, the *Vajrasamādhi-sūtra* provides the foundation for a practical soteriology of original enlightenment by shifting the *Awakening of Faith*’s account of mind and enlightenment from ontology into the realm of actual practice” (2007: 15). This thematic tendency is also reflected in the title that Buswell has chosen for the work.

Section Two “The Writing of the Exposition” summarizes the legendary, hagiographical, and historical narratives that document Wōnhyo’s arrival to, and completion of, the task of explicating this sūtra. This material necessarily draws from the explanation offered in Buswell’s prior book on the VS, while including numerous fresh insights based on the his further studies and ruminations in the interim, including dating information, relations with other

works, and so forth.

Chapter Three, entitled “The Exposition as Commentary” takes a fresh look at the genre of commentary in the broader Buddhist tradition, going back to such influential Indian figures as Vasubandhu. It then narrows the scope to identify some of the distinctive characteristics of this literary craft in East Asia. Buswell discusses the development of some of the major hermeneutic strategies that were utilized by exegetical giants such as Zhiyi, and then finally shows where Wōnhyo seized upon, and even became an exemplar in using these models. He also identifies some of Wōnhyo’s distinctive tendencies—perhaps the most significant being his incredible skill in layering and compartmentalizing the arguments and sub-arguments in his text. He concludes with a fascinating discussion showing why, from a political perspective, it would have been beneficial to both Wōnhyo and the Silla rulership for Wōnhyo to compose commentaries such as the one he wrote on the VS.

The Introduction, is, overall, very carefully and thoroughly wrought, serving well not only to introduce the book’s subject text, but also Wōnhyo’s place in the Korean tradition as well as in the larger East Asian tradition. We also are able to learn much about the overall character of Wōnhyo’s oeuvre. This introduction will be eminently helpful to the readers of subsequent volumes in this series as well.

II. Translation

1. Structure

The *Exposition of the Vajrasamādhī-sūtra* is the longest extant work by Wōnhyo. It is also a difficult text, so it is fitting that it be translated by someone like Buswell, who possesses the requisite long experience, linguistic skills, and deep Indian and East Asian Buddhist doctrinal background. It is a carefully executed translation, which, as the translator himself states, aims to

stay on the side of literality. This is probably a safer choice, one that will allow later students of the text to closely follow and examine his work. It is also an extremely well annotated translation, with the author providing extensive references to relevant scholarship on the themes presented in various sections of the text.

One of the distinctive things Buswell has done in the process of this work is to attempt to thoroughly analyze and present Wōnhyo's layer upon layer of subdivisions in the text—a daunting task to say the least. This sort of representation of layered textual structures is something that has commonly been handled in traditional East Asian scholarship in the form of a chart—an apparatus that is reflective of the logographic character of Sinitic writing. In a way that corresponds more closely to Western alphabetic writing, Buswell has labeled subparts and subsections with textual labels that go as much as ten layers deep, for example: “II.B.2.b.ii.a.3.a.IV Clarify the level of the ten transferences 642a.” These section headings are included in the main text, as well as in an appendix in the back of the work. Whether these divisions were created manually, or with the use of XML or some other hierarchy-friendly programming language, including this kind of structure was clearly an exhausting task, for which we should offer much thanks!

2. Terminology

It is inevitably the case that reviews of books that are basically translations end up focusing mostly on what the translator has to say in his/her introduction, and then offering a few brief comments regarding the accuracy and/or style of the translation. This tendency to focus almost solely on the introduction is in some ways understandable, since it need not be the reviewer's job to reproduce or critique the arguments made by the author or commentator of the *original* scripture.

Reviewers also don't usually go into the territory of choices of terminology for the rendering of specific terms, except perhaps in places where there are glaring errors or clearly some deficiencies in the background that the

translator has brought to the task. In the case of an eminent scholar such as Robert Buswell, we need not have such concerns. In fact, I suspect that there are numerous scholars, both senior and junior to Buswell who have been able to learn from his vast vocabulary, and who perhaps, like myself, even need to have ready access to a dictionary to learn new words while reading his translations! Thus, in the course of reviewing such work as this, we are not inclined to venture into the territory of second-guessing about translation choices. Indeed, the way we are inclined to translate a given term, assuming sufficient grasp of the doctrine under discussion, often depends simply upon personal feelings about the nuances of a given term—in the Buddhist context—or as we understand the scripture’s author and commentator’s view of Buddhism.

That being said, there are two terms in particular that Buswell renders that I would like register my misgivings from a purely personal perspective, reflecting, no doubt, my fundamental understanding of the Buddhist truth(s) being implied—which I’ll admit, may be little more than simple intuitions.

The first is Buswell’s consistent rendering of 入 as “access” (rather than something like “entry,” or “entering”). The problem for me is that with this rendering, what seems to be implied throughout the text, is that what the practitioner has, is nothing more than “access” to reality, enlightenment, or whatever, with it never ending up that one “enters” into any of these experiences. This may engender a sense of mere potentiality that never results in the kind of actualization that the VS seems so intent upon conveying. Thus, the received impression is that the contemplative practices are nothing but cogitative exercises that forever leave one the outside, looking in, from some kind of vantage point of “access.”

The second key term that concerns me, giving, it seems, an almost un-Buddhist sense, is the rendering of 實際 as “edge of reality” (glossed as *bhūta* *koṭi*, but we need to keep in mind that it is unlikely that there was an original Sanskrit version of the text). Of course, this is not an easy term to translate, and the combination of the original Sanskrit components of *bhūta* and *koṭi* do lend themselves to this literal rendering.

But with the sense that I have of Buddhist onto-cosmology, or epistemology for that matter, it is hard to imagine there being an “edge” or limit to anything, not to mention “reality.” In his translation of the *Baozang lun*, Robert Sharf renders this term as “point of genesis.”¹ But I am also not sure if this ontological sense is what is being indicated by the VS in this case, either. I would tend to take it as referring to an experiential state of consciousness, as a sort of synonym for enlightenment, that points to a sort of “peak experience of consciousness,” a “true state,” or “originary condition” wherein there has never been discriminating activity—and this is certainly a repeated theme in the VS.

These are, nonetheless, merely personal preferences, and it is rarely the case that any of us are ever fully comfortable with the choices made by others in terms of rendering Buddhist technical terms. The more important fact is that Buswell does render his terminology consistently, based on careful consideration and scholarship. Thus, there is no intent here to give the impression that the work is in any way flawed. This volume represents an invaluable contribution, not only to our understanding of Wōnhyo and Korean Buddhism, but to our grasp of East Asian Buddhism as a whole. And it is of great value to fellow translators of the *Collected Works of Wōnhyo* as an example of translation and scholarship that we can emulate in our forthcoming works.

Glossary of Chinese Terms

(K=Korean, C=Chinese, S=Sanskrit)

Awakening of Faith 大乘起信論

Baozang lun (C) 寶藏論

Buddha-Nature Treatise 佛性論

Geumgang sammaegyeong non, *Kūmgang Sammaegyōng Non* (K)
金剛三昧經論

¹ In response to the fact that this is a pivotal term in that text, Sharf gives a detailed analysis of the origins and permutations of the term. See Sharf (2002: 229-238).

Ratnagoṭṭravibhāga (S) 寶性論
 Vajrasamādhi-Sūtra (S) 金剛三昧經
 Wŏnhyo (K) 元曉
 Zhiyi (C) 智顛

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