AN SHIGAO’S (安世高) GARDEN OF FORKING PATHS:
EXEGETICAL AND LINGUISTIC EVIDENCE FOR A SARVĀSTIVĀDA
THEORY OF TIME
IN
YIN CHI RU JING T603 (陰持入經)

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AN SHIGAO’S (安世高) GARDEN OF FORKING PATHS

Introduction

According to tradition, in the wake of the Buddha’s death twenty-five centuries ago, a community of 500 enlightened disciples (arhats) convened for a “communal recitation (sāṃgīta)” of the Buddha’s word.¹ The scriptures penned at this “first Buddhist council” can be divided into three classes: sūtras, vinayas, and mātṛkās.² Together these texts constitute the Buddhist canon in three extant forms, “the Pali or Theravāda Canon of the southern tradition of Sri Lanka and South-East Asia, the Chinese Tripiṭaka of the eastern tradition of China, Korea and Japan, and the Tibetan Kanjur (bKa’-gyur) and Tenjur (bsTan ‘gyur) of the northern tradition of Tibet and Mongolia.”³ The third class of canonical teachings known in Sanskrit as mātṛkās (Pali māṭikās)⁴ form the textual basis for the abhidharma (meaning “higher” or “with regard to” the dharma⁵). The term māṭkā is “etymologically related both to the term ‘matrix’ and the term ‘mother’”⁶ and is a taxonomy or list of “the terms and topics found in the sūtras.”⁷ The oral transmission of the Buddhist canon in early India, in Jan Westerhoff’s estimation, motivated the use of mnemonic lists that “facilitated the retention of the material without the need for written versions.”⁸

The discourses surrounding the māṭkās characterize the development of ancient Buddhist schools of thought, only two⁹ of which are understood in detail today due to lacunae in the historical record: the Sarvāstivādins and the Theravādins.¹⁰ Here we will focus on a particular facet of the Sarvāstivāda legacy: the 2nd century Parthian¹¹ translator An Shigao (安世高) and his conception of time.

¹ Gethin, 39-40, 1998
² Ibid.: 40
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Westerhoff, 37, 2018
⁶ Ibid.
⁷ Ibid.
⁸ Ibid.: 38
⁹ As the centuries progressed Indian Buddhism split into eighteen recognized schools; here I am referring to the ancient schools (Westerhoff, 43, 2018).
¹⁰ Gethin, 48, 1998
¹¹ Zacchetti, 74, 2002
An Shigao is the earliest known translator of Buddhist scriptures into Chinese and is therefore the “first historical figure of Chinese Buddhism” whose work exercised lasting influences on the style and “terminology of several subsequent translators.”\textsuperscript{12} Among his stylistic peculiarities, he eschewed phonetic transcriptions\textsuperscript{13} and “scrupulously avoided [indigenous Chinese religious terminology to express Buddhist ideas]... and [translated] Indian poetry simply as prose.”\textsuperscript{14} His sectarian affiliation is a subject of vigorous debate. Zacchetti formulates the question thus: “if he was a follower of the Śrāvakayāna (i.e. of the Hīnayāna), as the corpus of his surviving translations---none of which belongs to the Great Vehicle [Mahāyāna]---seems to suggest, to which school did he belong? Or, rather, to which canon(s) do the scriptures he translated belong?”\textsuperscript{15} This formulation highlights the difficulty in assigning An Shigao to a particular tradition on the basis of his corpus, as the contents of his translation work do not necessarily represent his own views. The only evidence we have in this regard is to note the specific translation choices An Shigao made and examine their exegetical and linguistic consequences.

On this point, Stefano Zacchetti writes that “the prevailing opinion among scholars is that An Shigao was a Sarvāstivādin,” pointing to the work of Paul Harrison (1997) and Florin Deleanu (1997).\textsuperscript{16} There are dissenting voices such as Nobuyoshi Yamade (1997) who instead highlights “similarities in content” between *Yin chi ru jing* “and part of the Śrāvakabhūmi section of the Yogācārabhūmi, the summa of the Yogācāra school”\textsuperscript{17} and Deleanu (1992) who, Zacchetti writes, “rightly stresses the complexity of this issue, given that in several places An Shigao diverges from ‘Sarvāstivāda orthodoxy.’”\textsuperscript{18} What then is “Sarvāstivāda orthodoxy” with respect to the theory of time?

\textsuperscript{12} Zacchetti, 74, 2002
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.: 92
\textsuperscript{14} Nattier, 4, 2008
\textsuperscript{15} Zacchetti, 92, 2002
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Zacchetti, 75, 2002 (Footnote 11, referencing Yamade, 157-162, 1997)
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.: 92
Sarvāstivādin Eternalism

The Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma is composed of seven texts. On Westerhoff’s account “the most important of these is the Jñānaprasthāna” which was composed some one to three centuries following the Buddha’s death and represented the Kashmir or “orthodox” Sarvāstivādin view. The word Sarvāstivāda means “the theory that everything exists,” and was a philosophical position which argued against the contemporaneous philosophical theory of “momentariness” -- that only the present was real -- by positing that past and future were as real as the present. For our purposes the two most relevant arguments for “Sarvāstivādin eternalism” were 1) that states of consciousness exhibited a feature called intentionality and therefore thoughts about past or future objects needed real objects to exist, and 2) that karmic actions from past lives could only bear fruit in the present if the past action still “existed” in a certain way. We may call this view “Sarvāstivādin eternalism.”

The central claim of this paper is that Sarvāstivādin eternalism surfaces in the Yin chi ru jing T603 (YCRJ) with An Shigao’s choice to translate the sixth link in the twelve-linked chain of dependent origination (Sanskrit: pratītyasamutpāda Pali: paṭiccasamuppāda “sense-contact” (Sanskrit: sparśa Pali: phassa) with the Chinese term zhi (致). To substantiate this claim certain background considerations concerning YCRJ and the Indian original from which it was derived must be addressed before moving on to an assessment of the relevant exegetical and linguistic evidence. In the next section we will discuss the structure and content of the YCRJ and its corresponding Indian original: the sixth chapter of the Peṭakopadesa. We will note the form and content of the māṭkā of “eighteen roots” and its

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19 Westerhoff, 60, 2018
20 Ibid.: 60-61
21 Westerhoff, 61, 2018
22 Ibid.: 61-62
23 Intentionality is the aboutness or “directedness toward an object” of mental states.
24 Westerhoff, 61-62, 2018
25 Greene, 248, 2016
26 Zacchetti, 81, 2002
27 Greene, 250, 2016
28 Nāṇamoli, 300, 1977
relation to the exposition of the doctrine of \textit{pratītyasamutpāda} within the two texts and some arguments.

Zacchetti fields for assigning An Shigao to the Sarvāstivāda school. We will then turn to the various translations An Shigao offers throughout his corpus for \textit{sparśa} as elucidated by Greene (2016) and focus on the conceptual consequences of translating \textit{sparśa} as \textit{zhi} (致) in the YCRJ.

\textbf{Correspondence of YCRJ to Chapter 6 of the Peṭakopadesa}

Zacchetti translates the title of the \textit{Yin chi ru jing} (陰持入經) as “canonical text on the aggregates, the constituents, and the sense-fields” and notes that “among the texts ascribed to An Shigao, [YCRJ is] one of the four which may be attributed with the highest degree of probability.”\textsuperscript{29} Until Zacchetti’s study, “the lack of a clear Indian parallel” to the YCRJ had “hindered the interpretation” of the text, but he proposes that the sixth chapter of the \textit{Peṭakopadesa}, a non-canonical Pali text “agrees almost perfectly” with the YCRJ and is in fact “the very same text.”\textsuperscript{30} His parallel synopses of the two texts clearly demonstrate that “apart from a few minor variants” the two texts “share the same reading.”\textsuperscript{31} This is not to say that the YCRJ is a direct translation of a Pali original of the \textit{Peṭakopadesa} per se as “An Shigao’s version is sometimes more detailed than its Pali counterpart”\textsuperscript{32} and it is certainly possible given the text’s non-canonical status that a parallel or prior Sanskrit text is now lost.\textsuperscript{33}

\textbf{Summary of Form and Content of the YCRJ/Peṭakopadesa-6}

Both texts begin with a taxonomy of the \textit{dharma/dhammā} which is composed of five aggregates (五陰, \textit{khandha}), eighteen constituents (十八本持, \textit{dhātu}), twelve sense-fields (十二入, āyatana), two forms of \textit{pariññā} (“full understanding”\textsuperscript{34}) and the category of the four truths (四諦, \textit{cattāri}) adding up to a total of thirty-seven categories of \textit{dharma/dhammā} (bodhipakkihikā \textit{dhammā}, 三十七品經法).\textsuperscript{35} The rest of both texts is dedicated to a “long exposition, in three parts, of the twelvefold chain of dependent

\textsuperscript{29} Zacchetti, 75, 2002
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.: 76
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.: 79
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.: 80
\textsuperscript{34} \url{http://dictionary.sutta.org/browse/p/pari%20%C3%B1%C3%B1%C4%81}
\textsuperscript{35} Zacchetti, 80, 2002
origination” and of the thirty-seven categories of *dharma* which are further illustrated with subcategories and examples by argument and analogy.³⁶ This “māṭṭkā-based structure,” Zacchetti contends, lends the text an “archaic flavour” that leads him to posit that “by the time it was translated by An Shigao the original of the YCRJ was probably circulating as an independent treatise.”³⁷ The YCRJ stops short of the *Peṭakopadesa* after a discussion of the meaning of “hindrance” while “the Pali *Peṭakopadesa* goes on” to further illustrations.³⁸ Zacchetti observes that this lacuna likely did not exist “in the original Indic text used by An Shigao” by noting that “the YCRJ introduces the first jhāna, which is defined as ‘having abandoned five categories’” or “‘being in agreement’” with the five categories and that, while the first group of terms is treated in YCRJ and the *Peṭakopadesa*, the second group of terms is treated in a “subsequent portion of the sixth chapter of the *Peṭakopadesa*… which, therefore, was also present in the original of the YCRJ.”³⁹

*Pratītyasamutpāda/Paṭiccasamuppāda and the Eighteen Roots in YCRJ/Peṭakopadesa-6*

Zacchetti makes a further exegetical argument to support the claim that the Indian original of the YCRJ circulated as an independent treatise. Regarding the placement of the “eighteen roots” (十八本持, *dhātu*) in the texts, Zacchetti notes that the terms “occur in a very logical position, as a natural continuation---or, rather, a variation---of the doctrine theme introduced by the *paṭiccasamuppāda*” but importantly “they are carefully analyzed in themselves, but not applied to the interpretation of other topics.”⁴⁰ This omission can be explained, on Zacchetti’s account, by the fact that in other chapters of the *Peṭakopadesa* “the eighteen terms are systematically employed as the fundamental hermeneutical scheme, but detailed knowledge of them… is largely taken for granted,” suggesting that “the sixth chapter may represent a particularly ancient layer of the tradition” and was “probably an independent text by the time

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³⁶ Zacchetti, 81, 2002
³⁷ Ibid.: 90
³⁸ Ibid.: 88
³⁹ Ibid.
⁴⁰ Ibid.: 91
it was introduced into China, around the second half of the second century AD.\textsuperscript{41} Given the prevalence of the the Sarvāstivāda school in India around this time and “a number of textual parallels to An Shigao’s translations” that “suggest this connection” the dominant position among scholars is that An Shigao was indeed a Sarvāstivādin; however, there are several places as Deleanu notes where “An Shigao diverges from ‘Sarvāstivāda orthodoxy.’”\textsuperscript{42} Drawing on the work of Greene (2016), a further textual parallel can be posited: An Shigao’s translations of \textit{sparśa/phassa} (sense-contact), the sixth link in the chain of \textit{pratītyasamutpāda} bespeak a Sarvāstivādin conception of time.

\textbf{The Temporal Dimension of “Sense-Contact”}

Whereas An Shigao consistently translated links 1-3, 8, and 10-12 in the chain of dependent origination, he notably uses six different terms to translate \textit{sparśa}\textsuperscript{43} in his corpus.\textsuperscript{44} The six Chinese translations Greene lists\textsuperscript{45} and translates into English are:

1. \textit{geng} (更) “to suffer”
2. \textit{gengshou} (更受) “suffering and grasping”
3. \textit{zhi} (致) “reaching”
4. \textit{si} (思) “longing”
5. \textit{siwang} (思望) “distantly longing”
6. \textit{zai} (栽) “planting” or “a seedling”

Greene contends that An Shigao “had particular difficulty finding a suitable Chinese translation for the term \textit{sparśa}.”\textsuperscript{46} He writes that in the formulation of \textit{paṭiccasamuppāda} “the typical approach of the Pāli commentarial tradition marks a distinction between the fruits (\textit{phala}) of past karma (consciousness, name-and-form, the six sense gates, contact and sensation) and present karmic causes (\textit{hetu}), namely

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.: 92
\textsuperscript{43} Greene notes that ‘the texts An Shigao translated were certainly not written in Sanskrit’ however he uses Sanskrit for the sake of ease of exposition and my use of \textit{sparśa} reflects that. Greene, 251, 2016: Footnote 7.
\textsuperscript{44} Greene, 250, 2016
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} Greene, 249, 2016
craving, grasping and becoming”\textsuperscript{47} and observes that many of An Shigao’s translations of sparśa “blur” these distinctions “in a potentially similar way.”\textsuperscript{48} He attributes this blurriness to the hypothesis that there wasn’t a “ready equivalent within pre-Buddhist Chinese theories of sense perception” for the concept of sense-contact.\textsuperscript{49} To account for the difference in conceptual schemas available to the pre-Buddhist Chinese and the Indian Buddhists, who “consistently posit an important analytical and practical distinction between raw sensory activity and mental defilements such as craving or aversion,”\textsuperscript{50} Greene suggests that the “diversity of [An Shigao’s translations [of sparśa] reflects a continuing struggle to convey the meaning of this term.”\textsuperscript{51} A further complication is that An Shigao’s own philosophical views may have influenced how he translated sparśa as “none of [his] choices for sparśa ultimately proved satisfactory, and most were never used again by later translators.”\textsuperscript{52} Indeed I believe this is precisely the case, and that the “blurring” of karmic past and present (phala and hetu) seen in An Shigao’s translation indicates that present and past were equally real to him, in other words, that he was a Sarvāstivādin.

One example we may use to support this claim is “the seemingly strange translation of sparśa as zai 載” in T2.150A\textsuperscript{53} which, Greene posits, “might have been motivated by the analogy between ‘internal’ pratiyāsamutpāda and an ‘external’ sequence of the growth of a plant” which “indeed fits with typical explanations of saṃskāra [“volitional formations”\textsuperscript{54}] (in this context) as the past karmic activities that have given rise to present existence.”\textsuperscript{55} If this is true, we can apply the Sarvāstivādin notion of time seamlessly to the interpretation of the metaphor of sense-contact as “planting”. One argument for Sarvāstivādin eternalism was the “necessity to account for karmic responsibility” as Westerhoff notes,

\textsuperscript{47} Greene, 257, 2016: Footnote 34.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.: 258
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.: 249
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.: 257
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.: 255
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid. (cf. T0150A.02.0875c01: 何等為痛 * 癢能知六痛 * 癢。眼 (15) 載痛 * 癢。耳
\textsuperscript{54} Greene, 250, 2016
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.: 258-9
because from the fact that actions from past lives “can bear fruit now,” one may infer that “the past act must still in some sense be in existence, otherwise it could not be efficacious now.”56 If the sixth link in the chain of ṗraṭīyasamutpāda is conceptualized as planting, in previous times, the actions (or karmic seeds) which bloom and bear fruit in the present moment, a theory of time that declares “past, present, and future as mutually interconnected notions” would make such a translation apt.57

Is there Sarvāstivādin Eternalism implied in the translation of sparśa the YCRJ?

While a tentative hypothesis, it may be the case that the choice of zhi (致) to translate sparśa/phassa suggests An Shigao’s sympathies with Sarvāstivādin eternalism. In his exposition of Sarvāstivadin thought Westerhoff writes that causation and the capacity of a cause to produce an effect “stands at the very centre of Sarvāstivadin ontology”.58 With respect to causation and temporality, “the most controversial notion in this context is the Sarvāstivāda idea of the simultaneity of cause and effect (sahabhū-hetu)” such as when “mental events (citta) and their accompaniments (cittānuvartin)” arise together mutually.59 One illustrative metaphor the Sarvāstivadins used for such co-dependent arising was the example of a bundle of upright reeds. “The cause of each reed staying upright is the other reeds staying upright, but all the reeds stay upright simultaneously, hence the causes and effects happen at the same time.”60

Contra Greene, who posits that the “blurring of the line between sparśa and karmically productive desire was… part of a more general pattern in the earliest Chinese interpretations of Buddhist theories of sense perception,”61 I posit that the use of zhi (致) blurs these lines along the temporal dimension of cause and effect. Greene notes that of An Shigao’s various translations for sparśa “only ‘reaching’ the least common of them, is even plausibly a literal translation of the basic meaning of sparśa,

56 Westerhoff, 62, 2018
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.: 67
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
61 Greene, 264, 2016
‘touching.’ In the YCRJ, An Shigao uses *zhì* (致) to translate *sparśa/phassa* at lines 174b25 and 174b30 which the Digital Dictionary of Buddhism at the SAT Daizōkyō Text Database translates in context as “to cause” in accord with the Unihan definition “send, deliver, present; cause.” The relevant passages are quoted and transliterated from the SAT Daizōkyō Text Database:

YCRJ, T.15.603.174b25: 從六入令有致。從致*令有痛痒

(cóng liùrù lìng yǒu zhì。cóng zhì * lìng yǒu tòng yǎng)

YCRJ, T.15.603.174b30: 已六入盡便致盡

(yǐ liùrù jìn biàn zhì jìn)

Lines 174b23 - 175a24 of the YCRJ are a “long exposition, in three parts, of the twelvefold chain of dependent origination,” and in these two passages, on Zacchetti’s account (falling within lines 174b23-c4) the links “are simply enumerated.” This being the case, we wouldn’t expect much more than a literal translation from An Shigao, as no arguments or metaphors are being provided in this section.

In 174b25 the link immediately preceding *sparśa* in *pratītyasamutpāda* (ṣādāyatana, the “six sense gates” translated here as *liu ru* 六入) requires some brief remarks to preface the meaning of An Shigao’s translations of the sixth link as *zhì* 致. For *āyatana*, An Shigao uses “two quite distinct Chinese expressions: the ‘six entrances’ (*liu ru* 六入) and the ‘six destroyers’ (*liu shuai* 六衰)” which prompts Greene to comment that “the mere fact that in this case, unlike for most other terms in the *pratītyasamutpāda* formula, An Shigao felt the need to go beyond a literal translation, to explain the importance of the word rather than merely translate its meaning” highlights the importance of this term.

In YCRJ, T.15.603.174b25 the term *zhì* 致 (cause, reaching) is brought into relation with *liu ru* 六入 (“six

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62 Greene, 254, 2016
63 Greene, 250, 2016: Footnote i.
64 http://21dzk.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/SAT/satdb2015.php
65 https://ctext.org/dictionary.pl?if=en&char=%E8%87%B4
66 Zacchetti, 81, 2002
67 Greene, 253-4, 2016
entrances”) a translation which “fits a common Indian Buddhist explanation of the āyatanas as the gateways through which sense data arrive.” However, on Greene’s account, “in early China the sense were not seen merely as windows onto the world, but as localized embodiments of particular forms of desire, as independent centers of willful activity.” As discussed above, sense-contact or sparśa is the turning point in pratītyasamutpāda wherein the impersonal causal factors of sense-data and past karmic fruits (phala) are transmuted into personal karmic forces (hetu). Here Greene’s argument that pre-Buddhist Chinese models of sense perception could have contributed to An Shigao’s choice to use the term zhi (致) to represent this link in the chain, seems at odds with An Shigao’s apt translation of āyatana as liu ru (六入). A plausible alternative hypothesis is rather that An Shigao’s conception of time, which would have included the simultaneity of cause and effect (sahabhū-hetu) as a Sarvāstivādin, could have made zhi (致) -- read as cause -- an apt literal descriptor of the process. The moment when sense perception is transmuted into cognition through “sense-contact” and thereafter into karmically valenced action could plausibly be read as causing those sense perceptions to occur in just the way they do if the past and future are equally real and (insofar as the former is the cause of the latter) simultaneous.

Further studies which bridge pre-Buddhist Chinese theories of sense perception to Indian theories of time may yield fascinating insights into the translation styles and choices of early Chinese Buddhists. In this essay a first attempt was made at such a study, limited principally by the ingenuity and training of the author and of course the limiting factor of time. The title of the essay was chosen in homage to Jorge Luis Borges’ The Garden of Forking Paths, which struck the author as a vivid literary rendering of a conception of time An Shigao may well have recognized. “The future exists now.”

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68 Ibid.: 253
69 Ibid.: 271
70 Borges, 101, 1962
References


Chinese Text Project. https://ctext.org/dictionary.pl?if=en&char=%E8%87%B4 “The Chinese Text Project is an online open-access digital library that makes pre-modern Chinese texts available to readers and researchers all around the world.” Accessed November and December 2018.


