Paving the Great Way: Vasubandhu’s Unifying Buddhist Philosophy, by Jonathan Gold, New York, NY, Columbia University Press, 2015, 309 pp., $28 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-231-16826-7

Vasubandhu was a hugely influential and prominent figure in the Indian Buddhist tradition. Despite this influence, his profile in the Western academy has resisted the recognition accorded to many other Indian Buddhist philosophical heavyweights. Vasubandhu’s ability to genuinely inhabit multiple, often opposing, philosophical positions throughout his life has confounded the scholarly tradition in its ability to recognize Vasubandhu’s corpus as a unified whole. In fact, Vasubandhu’s ability to inhabit these multiple perspectives is, in large part, responsible for the ‘two Vasubandhus’ theory that scholars of Indian Buddhism have been debating for the better part of the past century.

In his book, Paving the Great Way: Vasubandhu’s Unifying Buddhist Philosophy, Jonathan Gold presents the reader with a particularly clear presentation of the full scope of Vasubandhu’s philosophical corpus. His primary intention is ‘to draw a coherent picture of the broad conceptual structures that underlie Vasubandhu’s texts together, intertextually, for their common methods and goals’, a project that has thus far yet to be accomplished.1 In so doing, he undertakes a long overdue project of thematizing the life work of Vasubandhu, from his early Buddhist period through his ‘conversion’ to the Mahāyāna and diverse body of scholarly material.

In Chapter 1, Gold summarizes Vasubandhu the person and comes down squarely in the camp of one-Vasubandhu, while hopefully finally dispelling any doubts that may remain about the existence of multiple Vasubandhus.

In the subsequent three chapters (Chapters 2–5), Gold dives more deeply into the project of explicating and unifying those threads of argument and style that characterize Vasubandhu’s voice throughout his extensive corpus. In Chapter 2, we see a detailed presentation of Vasubandhu’s early philosophical view in opposition to his challengers. Here Vasubandhu refutes the strict realist schools in their belief in the existence of the past, present and future as well as truly existent external objects by offering a theory of causation in place of a materialist view.2 He demonstrates that objects of past and future times are unable to produce causal results and therefore do not qualify as existent phenomena. He develops this further to show that causal relations ‘are all there is’ where agents appear to be producing results.3 As Gold shows, this emphasis on causality forms a key, and perhaps foremost, unifying thread through all of Vasubandhu’s work and ties his earlier thought to his later Mahāyāna work.

In Chapter 3, Gold presents Vasubandhu through his appeals to the ‘intended’ meaning of Buddha’s speech in scripture while wielding ‘Occam’s razor’ to search for the simplest and most common sense meaning of terms.4 In so doing, Vasubandhu is able to demonstrate (again) a causal reductionist reading of scripture that points to the reality of no-self, despite the apparent existence of external agents and objects.

1Jonathon Gold, Paving the Great Way: Vasubandhu’s Unifying Buddhist Philosophy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 20.
2Ibid., p. 33.
3Ibid., p. 92.
4Ibid., p. 106.
In Chapter 4, Gold demonstrates both how Vasubandhu’s work lays the foundation for a particularly Buddhist brand of epistemology and how Vasubandhu’s concern with preserving the rationality of the Buddha’s speech lead him to employ an interpretive reading of scripture.

In Chapter 5, Gold wades into the ‘Mahāyāna conversion’ territory. He shows clearly how the earlier work done to reduce existent objects of past and future times to a casual momentum along with a flexibility to allow for an interpretive view of scripture moves quite naturally to an idealist position that finally relaxes the project of attempting to rectify the problem of the karmic continuity of existent present external phenomena. For Vasubandhu, it is only a short step to the mind-only philosophy of the Yogācāra school of Mahāyāna Buddhism. As Gold explains, ‘Once you see that all of your ordinary perceptions and concepts are false, something else falls away: namely, the perceiving mind. Thus recognizing mind only leads directly to recognizing no mind’. 5

While in some sense, this rescuing of Yogācāra is not, in itself, new. Plenty of recent scholarship has been done on the influence and importance of Yogācāra philosophy in the Indian Buddhist tradition and its covert survival in Tibet via the Shentong Madyamaka tradition, the unique and interesting contribution of Gold in *Paving the Great Way*, is to both present the reader with a comprehensive picture of the life work of one its founders and make that work applicable to the contemporary reader.

In the final two chapters (Chapter 6 and conclusion), Gold draws out the ethical implications and contemporary relevance of Vasubandhu’s insight. Here again we see the correction of a distorted caricature of Vasubandhu. In Gold’s presentation, by unifying Vasubandhu’s philosophy, a religious model of social action can give voice to ethical questions and issues facing contemporary people. For Vasubandhu, reality as we perceive it is not reality as it is. It is through deep analysis of phenomenal appearances as well as contemplative practice that one can gain a clearer understanding of the way things actually are. From this perspective, Vasubandhu’s profound insight into the essenceless nature of appearances and the causal relationship of all apparent things can inform our action in the world and make it more in-tune with the way things truly are and, consequently, produce less suffering.

Where a view based on a misunderstanding of Vasubandhu’s philosophy may see a danger of devolving into idealist metaphysical solipsism, Gold shows that for Vasubandhu, while things may not actually be as they appear to our distorted perception and confused cognitive process, our actions still matter very much. They matter in the sense that our karmic causal continuum determines the arising of our world and makes room for a gradual adjustment toward both personal liberation and acting ethically in the world.

*Paving the Great Way* is clearly written and highly recommended. While some of the Indian Buddhist philosophical points may become difficult for a non-specialist, Gold succeeds in writing clearly and accessibly. His examples and style make *Paving the Great Way* eminently readable. It will influence how Vasubandhu and Yogācāra scholarship is done in the future.

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5Ibid., p. 171.