CHAPTER 7

Pratītyasamutpāda in the Translations of An Shigao and the Writings of His Chinese Followers

Eric M. Greene

1 Introduction

It goes without saying that pratītyasamutpāda – “dependent origination” – is one of the most important technical formulations of doctrinal Buddhism.1 According to some early sources, pratītyasamutpāda indeed encapsulates the whole of the Buddha’s teaching, such that “one who sees dependent origination sees the Dharma, and one who sees the Dharma sees dependent origination”.2

It is thus not surprising that pratītyasamutpāda figures prominently in the works of the earliest known translator of Buddhist texts into Chinese, An Shigao 安世高 (fl. 148–168 CE),3 whose oeuvre focused precisely on the kinds of Āgama, early commentarial, and proto-Abhidharma literature where pratītyasamutpāda plays such an important role. An Shigao’s translations can be dated with reasonable precision, and they are thus important source materials for Indian Buddhism during the early years of the common era, a moment in Indian Buddhist intellectual history for which we have little other direct evidence. Since the Abhidharma itself was a project centered on the precise and systematic definition and explication of the important technical terminology found in the sūtras, An Shigao’s varied and often surprising Chinese translations of this terminology (such as the pratītyasamutpāda formula) may in some cases give us a window onto the currents of Indian scholastic thought

1 On pratītyasamutpāda, the classic study of Louis de La Vallée Poussin, 1913 remains one of the best. See also Johansson, 1979; Nakamura, 1980; Stalker, 1987: 47–96; Cox, 1993; Bucknell, 1999; Jurewicz, 2000; Shulman, 2008.

2 Yo paṭiccasamuppādaṃ passati so dhammaṃ passati, yo dhammaṃ passati so paṭiccasamuppādaṃ passatīti (MN, 1:190–191).

3 Little is known about An Shigao himself (see Forte, 1995 for some interesting theories) or his translation methods. He may have simply been the reciter of the Indian texts, as was the normal role of the non-Chinese “translators” in later times (Zürcher, 1972: 31). For the sake of convenience, I shall refer to “An Shigao” as an individual person, but we should remember that the works associated with this name may have had a collective authorship.
that were, in this same period of time, leading to the formation of the various Abhidharma collections.

An Shigao’s translations are equally important – if so far underutilized by scholars – from the perspective of Chinese Buddhism, as they allow us, in some cases at least, to glimpse how key Buddhist ideas were initially understood in China. Such questions can be asked, of course, about a broad range of topics. However focusing our attention on a fixed list of terms such as the pratītyasamutpāda formula allows us to be certain of the underlying Indic vocabulary that An Shigao was translating, something difficult to achieve in other cases. With this as a point of reference, we can then begin to observe notable features of the Chinese terms An Shigao selected in his translations, as well as of the interpretations of these terms by subsequent Chinese commentators.

As I will show, An Shigao had particular difficulty finding a suitable Chinese translation for the term sparśa, “sense contact,” a concept that did not have a ready equivalent within pre-Buddhist Chinese theories of sense perception. The subsequent efforts of commentators to grasp this topic, which occupies a central place within pratītyasamutpāda, shows that sense perception was an area where pre-existing Chinese theories and technical vocabulary strongly shaped the Chinese interpretation of Buddhist ideas.

2 The Terms

It will be convenient to first present a table with all known examples of the members of the pratītyasamutpāda formula within the surviving translations of An Shigao. In compiling this information, I have limited myself to the con-

---

4 Indic parallels have been identified for some of An Shigao’s translations (Harrison, 1997; Harrison, 2002; Zacchetti, 2002). When possible I have used these to help establish An Shigao’s usage (for a complete survey of known parallels to An Shigao’s translations, see Nattier, 2008: 35–72). But even without such parallels, it is usually possible to identify the pratītyasamutpāda formula, safely allowing us to align the translated terms with the items in this list.

5 For the purposes of this chapter, “An Shigao’s translations” are those given by Nattier, 2008 and Zacchetti, 2010a. I cannot here address the important question of the reliability of the received texts of An Shigao’s translations. Though there is no reason to doubt them on the whole, there is some evidence that, within early Chinese Buddhist texts in general, later copyists or editors occasionally replaced unusual technical terms with more familiar ones. Thus in the Xiuxing benqi jing修行本起經 (possibly a third-century text; Nattier, 2008: 104–109), the second Koryo edition (the main Taishō text) gives shou受 as the translation of upādāna, which is standard in early translations (T.3.184: 470c2). However the Sixi and Puning editions