James B. Apple


The topic of the Twenty Saṃghas (Skt. viṃśatiprabhedasamgha; Tib. dge ’dun nyi shu) is one which the Abhisamayālaṃkāra commentarial tradition traces back to the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras. In the Tibetan Gelug tradition, the subject is studied during the early stages of the long monastic education programme. As Tsong kha pa is held to be the founder of that tradition, his writings on the topic are obviously of particular interest. In the traditional monastic setting, where I studied the Twenty Saṃghas, it has a reputation for being a little dry: it consists of reams of lists, definitions, and enumerations, but is distinctly light on context and narrative. In addition, the subject, as presented in the monastic texts, has little direct relevance to the Mahāyāna path, focussing, as it does, not upon the goal of Buddhahood itself, but rather upon idealised categories of non-Mahāyāna practitioners, and the various paths they follow in striving for individual liberation.

This topic is largely unstudied in modern works upon Tibetan Buddhism, and Apple’s publication sets out to fill a lacuna. He deals with material from Tsong kha pa’s three treatments of the Twenty Saṃghas: two shorter texts, and a section within the much larger Golden Garland of Eloquence (legs bshad gser phreng), his early work related to the Abhisamayālaṃkāra-Prajñāpāramitā commentarial tradition. As far as I am aware, Apple’s is the first published book dealing exclusively with this material, and indeed devoted to the Tibetan presentation of the Twenty Saṃghas, although since the completion of Apple’s doctorate thesis, upon which the book under review is based, G. Sparham’s translation of the Golden Garland of Eloquence (Jain Publishing, 2008) has appeared.

Apple’s work does not start in a promising fashion; in the first chapter there are a number of glib analogies which are apparently intended to help the reader appreciate the relevance of the figures discussed in the Twenty Saṃghas. For instance Apple (p. 6) likens the three vehicles to the three academic degrees; “the Śrāvaka Arhat (BA), Pratyekabuddha (MA), and Mahāyāna Arhat, or Buddhahood (PhD.)” He then goes on (p. 7) to divulge the identity of the real audience he feels he is addressing, by proposing that the four principal divisions within the Twenty Saṃghas can be understood in terms of the four stages of progress through the American BA system ‘freshman’, ‘sophomore’, etc.

This chapter also contains a rather unimpressive methodological discussion. Apple eventually claims (p. 5) that he has elected to take an “emic” approach,
which utilises “the categories, terms, and structures within the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist intellectual milieu.” It would be difficult to assert however, that the Twenty *Saṃghas* went much beyond these categories, terms, and structures in Tibet. There is no evidence that this rather obscure branch of academic study ever formed the basis of any spiritual practice. The twenty are also not conceived of as historical figures, or characters within scripture; they represent generic, impersonal categories. So it is difficult to see how else Apple might realistically have presented the topic other than through the medium of the aforementioned schema.

This fact also makes Apple’s foregoing discussion about all the different approaches a scholar might take to the topic, ranging from (p. 5) structuralist literary theory, to psychological “case histories,” deeply unconvincing. Both in the analogies he chooses and the posturing that he employs to preface his work Apple offers us greater insights into the North American university culture than he does into the Tibetan Buddhist commentarial tradition, and much of the section comes across as a contrived remnant of the introduction to his thesis.

Despite these shortcomings, the first portion of the book is thankfully not representative of the rest of the work. In the second and third chapters, Apple offers a relatively clear description of the context of the material: the broader *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* literature, some details about the history of the Twenty *Saṃghas* as a distinct area of study, and where the material fits into the Indo-Tibetan worldview. The enumeration of Twenty *Saṃghas* themselves is tackled in the fourth and fifth chapters, leading on to the short conclusion. Apple’s description of the Twenty *Saṃghas* is in general correct and faithful to the tradition. The charts and tables he employs to organise the many divisions are also welcome. Given the less favourable nature of some other comments I have to make on his work, in the interests of balance, I wish to stress these points.

The Tibetan commentarial tradition did not inherit a single list of the Twenty *Saṃghas*. The Gelug tradition makes reference to two versions; those of the Indian commentators Ārya Vimuktisena and Haribhadra. The tradition tends to side with Haribhadra’s version, although it has been the source of some debate whether the variations in the two writers’ lists amount to substantive or simply terminological differences between them. The twenty are organised around a framework of four basic categories, which, according to most commentators, represent stages along the Ārya path. These are the Stream Enterer (*srotā-āpanna, rgyun du zhus pa*), the Once Returner (*sakṛdāgamin, lan gcig phyir 'ong*), Never-Returner (*anāgāmin, phyir mi 'ong*), and Arhat (*dgra bcom pa*). The twenty (following Haribhadra) are then divided amongst these four (five, three, ten, and two, respectively). Whilst the last of the four will be familiar to most people with some knowledge of Buddhism, the first three occur,