

LA VALLÉE POUSSIN, LOUIS DE

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LA VALLÉE POUSSIN, LOUIS DE (1869–1938), was a Belgian Indologist and specialist in Buddhist philosophy. Educated in Liège, Louvain, Paris, and Leiden, La Vallée Poussin became professor at the University of Ghent. He entered his field of research at a time when Buddhist studies were dominated by the study of the Pali canon and Sanskrit narrative literature with an emphasis either on psychological and ethical aspects or on mythology and social concerns. (A more doctrinal approach did exist, mostly in the French and Russian traditions.) La Vallée Poussin dedicated all the strength of his philological genius to this field and thus contributed to a reorientation of Buddhist studies toward the languages of northern Buddhism (Sanskrit and Tibetan) and toward Buddhist philosophy considered in its historical perspective. He produced two main types of studies: scholarly editions, and translations with exegeses. These correspond roughly to the two periods of his activity, that before and that after World War I.

During the first period, there was a need for accurately edited texts. It remains La Vallée Poussin's major contribution to Buddhist studies that he compiled several text editions, some published in Belgium, others in the classical series "Bibliotheca Indica," Calcutta, and others in the series "Bibliotheca Buddhica," Saint Petersburg. He began with some of the then-neglected Tantric texts, *Panṇāskrama* (1896) and *Adikarmapradīpa* (1898), and continued with important Mādhyamika writings, among them Nāgārjuna's *Mādhyamikasūtras* (1903–1913) and Prajñākaramati's *Panjikā* commentary on the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* of Śāntideva (1901–1905). Other texts he edited included some fragments then newly discovered by Aurel Stein.

Besides this editorial oeuvre, La Vallée Poussin produced numerous translations, exegetical studies, and text analyses. He also wrote several essays (including some that were to appear in Christian publications) that show his preoccupation with and perpetual reassessment of what he called Buddhist dogmatics.

After World War I, La Vallée Poussin, who had in the meantime mastered the languages of the Chinese Buddhist translations, undertook the enormous enterprise of translating and critically annotating two *summae* of Buddhist scholastics: Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa*, the masterwork of the northern Hīnayāna *abhidharma* school, and Xuanzang's *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi*, the best compendium of the tenets of the Yogācāra, or Idealist, current of the Mahāyāna. For his *Abhidharmakośa* (1923–1931), La Vallée Poussin had to master the huge Kashmirian *Mahāvibhāṣā*, which even today has not been translated into a Western language. With his *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi: La Siddhi de Xuanzang* (1928–1929) he took the lead in the study of Idealist Buddhism, a field in which Sylvain Lévi had laid the foundation and which Paul Demiéville and La Vallée Poussin's pupil Étienne Lamotte were to continue.

These exegetical exercises did not keep La Vallée Poussin from pursuing other areas of Buddhist thought. Paradoxically, La Vallée Poussin was both fascinated and reticent regarding the Mādhyamika; he was attracted by the critical stance of Mādhyamika thought, but this attraction was resisted by his strong personal convictions. His attitude is reflected in numerous publications on the meaning of *nirvāṇa* (annihilation or bliss?) and in his polemics with Theodore Stcherbatsky on the interpretation of *sūnyatā* (emptiness or relativity?). La Vallée Poussin submitted the ancient history of India to his Nagarjunian criticism in three volumes: *Indo-Européens et Indo-Iraniens* (1924), *L'Inde aux temps des Mauryas* (1930), and *Dynasties et histoire de l'Inde* (1935).

Bibliography

Besides the writings mentioned in this article, the thirty-six articles La Vallée Poussin contributed to the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, edited by James Hastings (Edinburgh, 1908–1926), yield much information on the results of the studies of his first period. A good overview of his second period can be gained from his "Notes bouddhiques" in the *Bulletin de la classe des lettres* of the Académie Royale de Belgique (Brussels, 1921–1929) and from his numerous contributions to the first five volumes (Brussels, 1932–1937) of the publication series he founded in 1931, the "Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques."

Works on La Vallée Poussin include Marcelle Lalou's article "Rétrospective: L'œuvre de Louis de la Vallée Poussin," in *Bibliographie bouddhique*, fasc. annexe 23 bis (Paris, 1955), pp. 1–37; and Étienne Lamotte's article "Notice sur Louis de la Vallée Poussin," *Annuaire de l'Académie Royale des Sciences, des Lettres et des Beaux-arts* 131 (1965): 145–168.