

# Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies



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Rafal Stepien

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APA NEWSLETTER ON

# Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies

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RAFAL STEPIEN, GUEST EDITOR

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## FROM THE GUEST EDITOR

### *Buddhist Philosophy Today: Theories and Forms*

Rafal Stepien

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This is the second of two special issues of the newsletter dedicated to Buddhist philosophy.<sup>1</sup> My initial intention as guest editor was to prepare a single issue of the newsletter on the topic "Buddhist Philosophy Worldwide: Perspectives and Programs." The idea was to include descriptive and prescriptive/evaluative elements: On the one hand, scholars working on Buddhist philosophy throughout the world were invited to provide a descriptive snapshot of the state of the field in their geographical/disciplinary area; on the other, they could proffer an evaluative appraisal of how Buddhist philosophy has been carried out and/or a prescriptive program of how they feel it should be carried out. This dual remit played out in a foreseeable manner, such that some authors composed largely descriptive pieces, while others took a more methodologically oriented approach in which they outline a vision of what the practice of Buddhist philosophy could or should entail, and/or how it can or could contribute to the practice of academic philosophy *per se*.

Eventually, for both practical and programmatic reasons, the decision was taken to unweave these strands into two separate newsletter issues, with the previous spring 2019 issue remaining devoted to "Buddhist Philosophy Worldwide: Perspectives and Programs," and the current fall 2019 one on "Buddhist Philosophy Today: Theories and Forms." Practically, the total length of the articles submitted by the twenty authors I was able to corral greatly exceeded that typical for a single issue of the newsletter, and the subsequent realization that roughly half of the authors had taken each of the two tracks I had laid led me and the APA to decide upon dividing the articles accordingly. More substantively, upon reading the final products it became clear to me that we were dealing here with two distinct and individually important sets of contributions to the study of Buddhist philosophy. On the one hand, given that the more descriptive articles preponderantly issued from non-Western cultural/national contexts underrepresented within the field at large, and given also that the descriptions provided by these authors were typically accompanied by healthy doses of interpretation, I consider these contributions to constitute a solid bloc of scholarship on

the practice of Buddhist philosophy worldwide. On the other hand, those contributions whose authors took a more evaluative or prescriptive approach likewise taken together comprise a well-rounded collection of articles, in this case one theorizing contemporary Buddhist philosophical scholarship and the future directions it may take.

In preparing the collection as a whole, I was particularly resolute that contributions cover a greater geographical span than that encompassed by the major centers in Europe and North America. For the foregoing survey of "Buddhist Philosophy Worldwide," my insistence on a broad geographical coverage was motivated on the one hand by a methodological impetus to ensure as comprehensive as possible a spectrum of perspectives be included, and on the other hand by the conviction that Buddhist philosophy, being a strikingly multi- and trans-cultural phenomenon itself, could and should be studied, carried out, and put into practice most fruitfully from the widest possible range of vantage points. As such, I actively sought out contributors from a variety of countries in Asia, where Buddhist philosophy has, of course, the longest of intellectual pedigrees, as well as Australasia, Africa, South America, and the Middle East in addition to Europe and North America. Unfortunately, I was unable to locate any scholars based anywhere in Africa, South America, or the Middle East outside of Israel willing to take part.

Interestingly, it so happens that in almost all cases scholars working in European and North American universities where the field's center of gravity lies chose to concentrate on theoretical elaborations of Buddhist philosophical practice; their contributions thus appear in the present issue. Of course, the relatively limited geographical span within which the contributors gathered here work (if a span including Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, Austria, France, Iceland, the United Kingdom, as well as several North American institutions can be called "limited") has not led to any lack of diversity among the intellectual perspectives expounded in the pages that follow. On the contrary, the present volume includes what I believe is a hitherto unparalleled collection of texts not only detailing and appraising the general state of the scholarly field of Buddhist philosophy today but also proposing ways in which it can flourish further into the future. Brook Ziporyn provides a fitting start to this endeavor, as his "Philosophy, Quo Vadis? Buddhism and the Academic Study of Philosophy" moves from consideration of whether and how Buddhist thinkers could get to use the brand name "philosophy" to a provocative interpretation of Buddhist philosophy as uniquely instantiating the project of radical doubt lying at the threshold of modern Western philosophy. Hans-Rudolf

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Kantor's interrogation as to "What/Who Determines the Value of Buddhist Philosophy in Modern Academia?" continues probing the question of the disciplinary status of Buddhist philosophy. This article opens with a sweeping, and not uncontroversial, analysis of the field as practiced across the East-West divide, which Kantor then uses to propose a theoretical distinction between "philosophy in Buddhism" and "Buddhist philosophy." My own contribution, "Buddhist Philosophy? Arguments From Somewhere," continues this line of questioning as to the place of Buddhist philosophy in today's academe, in this case by assembling and critiquing the arguments standardly mobilized to exclude it along with all other non-Western systems of thought. In "Doing Buddhist Philosophy," C. W. Huntington, Jr., then theorizes the field from the perspective of the divergent means and ends of approaches to Buddhist philosophy that foreground reason and logic on the one hand and soteriologically oriented wisdom on the other. Mattia Salvini's account of "Decolonizing the Buddhist Mind" moves along complementary lines to investigate the nature of the institutional space wherein Buddhist philosophy could be the center and life-force of one's enquiry instead of a merely peripheral analytical object. In "Reflecting on Buddhist Philosophy with Pierre Hadot," Matthew T. Kapstein focuses on what he calls "Dharmakīrtian spiritual exercise" to explore the very question of what counts as philosophical progress, and thereby provide a useful pivot toward more explicit discussion of the future of Buddhist philosophy. Jan Westerhoff thus presents "Some Suggestions for Future Directions of the Study of Buddhist Philosophy," which he categorizes under the rubrics of "Editions and Translations," "Integrated Textual and Conceptual Presentation," and "Linkage with Contemporary Philosophical Discussion." In "Practicing Buddhist Philosophy as Philosophy," Pierre-Julien Harter likewise considers the next steps to take so that Buddhist philosophy may evolve from the stage of the recovery of texts and ideas to the stage of participation in the conversation of world philosophy. Gereon Kopf then adumbrates one specific manner in which such participation could take place. His "Emptiness, Multiverses, and the Conception of a Multi-Entry Philosophy" draws on classical Indian, Chinese, and Japanese Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings in conversation with the twentieth-century thought of Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Francois Lyotard to propose Buddhism as pre-eminently endowed to forge a new mode of philosophical inquiry according to which not one but multiple equally persuasive and insightful ways of answering the same question may be countenanced. Finally, Birgit Kellner's "Buddhist Philosophy and the Neuroscientific Study of Meditation: Critical Reflections" clarifies some of the points of tension between Buddhist philosophy and the contemplative neurosciences, and thereby seeks to clear the ground for more nuanced future work.

As may transpire from the foregoing account, I have structured this volume in a manner that self-consciously works against any easy compartmentalizations of academic Buddhist philosophy along geographical and/or cultural lines (e.g., South-Asian/East-Asian, Indo-Tibetan/Sino-Japanese, etc.). Instead, and in accordance with the mandate of this special issue, I have foregrounded those pieces which provide generalized accounts of and

responses to the disciplinary status of Buddhist philosophy, before moving to pieces geared more toward the future directions, general and specific, it could or should take. One abiding regret I have to do with the assembled pieces regards the gender representation of the authors, for only three of eleven contributors to the previous issue and only one of ten in the present one are female. This imbalance I readily recognize as problematic, though I can assure the readership that it remains not for any lack of trying to avert or rectify it: In addition to those who did agree to contribute, I invited a further eight female scholars of Buddhism who for various reasons were unable to commit to this project. Had they been able to do so (and I am not trying to make anyone feel guilty!), a more-or-less equal representation of genders would have been ensured; one, it merits mentioning, well in excess of the stubbornly skewed levels of representation in the field (of Buddhist philosophy, to say nothing of philosophy itself) as a whole.

My thanks go first of all to the previous editor of the newsletter, Prasanta Bandyopadhyay, for inviting me to act as guest editor, to the chair of the Committee on Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies, Brian Bruya, for supporting my suggestion as to the topic, to Erin Shepherd for her superb skills in coordinating publication, and to my anonymous peer-reviewer for not only agreeing to be involved but for producing such fine reviews at such a speedy rate. I also express my gratitude to the Berggruen Philosophy & Culture Center for funding that enabled initiation of this work while I was the Berggruen Research Fellow in Indian Philosophy at Wolfson College and the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Oxford, to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for funding that enabled completion of this work while I was a Humboldt Research Fellow at the Karl Jaspers Centre for Advanced Transcultural Studies of Heidelberg University, and to the Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies Programme of Nanyang Technological University in Singapore for providing a fitting setting for me, as the incoming Assistant Professor in Comparative Religion, in which to finalize publication of this work. At Oxford and Heidelberg, Richard Sorabji, Jan Westerhoff, and Michael Radich stand out as colleagues and mentors especially supportive of this and like projects in and of Buddhist philosophy. Of course, I reserve my most profound thanks to the contributors themselves, without whose energy and insight none of this could have come to fruition.

#### NOTES

1. Apart from the summary of contributions comprising this volume, this introduction reproduces (with but minor alterations) that of the preceding volume, on the understanding that this gives readers of each volume access to the overall thrust of both special issues.

## SUBMISSION GUIDELINES AND INFORMATION

### GOAL OF THE NEWSLETTER ON ASIAN AND ASIAN-AMERICAN PHILOSOPHERS

The *APA Newsletter on Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies* is sponsored by the APA Committee on Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies to report on the philosophical work of Asian and Asian-American philosophy, to report on new work in Asian philosophy, and to provide a forum for the discussion of topics of importance to Asian and Asian-American philosophers and those engaged with Asian and Asian-American philosophy. We encourage a diversity of views and topics within this broad rubric. None of the varied philosophical views provided by authors of newsletter articles necessarily represents the views of any or all the members of the Committee on Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies, including the editor(s) of the newsletter. The committee and the newsletter are committed to advancing Asian and Asian-American philosophical scholarships and bringing this work and this community to the attention of the larger philosophical community; we do not endorse any particular approach to Asian or Asian-American philosophy.

### SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

1) **Purpose:** The purpose of the newsletter is to publish information about the status of Asians and Asian Americans and their philosophy and to make the resources of Asians and Asian-American philosophy available to a larger philosophical community. The newsletter presents discussions of recent developments in Asians and Asian-American philosophy (including, for example, both modern and classical East-Asian philosophy, both modern and classical South Asian philosophy, and Asians and Asian Americans doing philosophy in its various forms), related work in other disciplines, literature overviews, reviews of the discipline as a whole, timely book reviews, and suggestions for both spreading and improving the teaching of Asian philosophy in the current curriculum. It also informs the profession about the work of the APA Committee on Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies. One way the dissemination of knowledge of the relevant areas occurs is by holding highly visible, interactive sessions on Asian philosophy at the American Philosophical Association's three annual divisional meetings. Potential authors should follow the submission guidelines below:

- i) Please submit essays electronically to the editor(s). Articles submitted to the newsletter should be limited to ten double-spaced pages and must follow the APA submission guidelines.
- ii) All manuscripts should be prepared for anonymous review. Each submission shall be sent to two referees. Reports will be shared with authors. References should follow *The Chicago Manual Style*.

iii) If the paper is accepted, each author is required to sign a copyright transfer form, available on the APA website, prior to publication.

- 2) **Book reviews and reviewers:** If you have published a book that you consider appropriate for review in the newsletter, please ask your publisher to send the editor(s) a copy of your book. Each call for papers may also include a list of books for possible review. To volunteer to review books (or some specific book), kindly send the editor(s) a CV and letter of interest mentioning your areas of research and teaching.
- 3) **Where to send papers/reviews:** Please send all articles, comments, reviews, suggestions, books, and other communications to the editor: Minh Nguyen ([atnguyen@fgcu.edu](mailto:atnguyen@fgcu.edu)).
- 4) **Submission deadlines:** Submissions for spring issues are due by the preceding November 1, and submissions for fall issues are due by the preceding February 1.
- 5) **Guest editorship:** It is possible that one or more members of the Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies could act as guest editors for one of the issues of the newsletter depending on their expertise in the field. To produce a high-quality newsletter, one of the co-editors could even come from outside the members of the committee depending on his/her area of research interest.

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## ARTICLES

### *Philosophy, Quo Vadis? Buddhism and the Academic Study of Philosophy*

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For quite a while now “philosophy” seems to have been undergoing something like what “Pink Floyd” underwent in the late 1980s: a viciously consequential branding dispute. For those of you who don’t obsess over prog rock history, what happened there was that when bassist, lyricist, main writer, and *de facto* creative director Roger Waters left the band around the middle of that decade, the remaining members—David Gilmour, Richard Wright, and Nick Mason—wished to continue using the copyrighted name “Pink Floyd” for their future musical projects. Waters objected, alternately claiming the name for himself on the grounds of his dominant role during the period of the band’s greatest successes, or else moving to have the name retired altogether, asserting that Pink Floyd as such was already by that time “a spent force creatively.” Years of litigation ensued. And we can understand why: a lot of money, and a lot of continuity and prestige and cultural attention and fanbase connection, were at stake. The words “Pink Floyd” were a brand, a recognizable name, which automatically brought with it millions of fans and a certain cultural position and resonance. “Pink Floyd” was a

bank account full of cultural capital. A concert played with hired backup musicians by Waters under his own name, recognized only by aficionados, and the exact same concert with the exact same band labeled "Pink Floyd," would have hugely different consequences, ticket sales, cultural impact. A Gilmour-Wright-Mason concert—under the name, say, GWM or The Space Cadets—could be expected to do a lot less well than the megaconcerts of the new Watersless Pink Floyd in the 1990s in fact did do. It didn't matter that more than half of the material played at those Watersless Pink Floyd concerts was penned by Waters, and reflected his own very personal and specific obsessions. What mattered culturally was who got to use the precious name. (For the record, I take no sides in the Pink Floyd branding dispute. May Gilmour and Waters both live and flourish.)

And something similar seems to be the case with the word "philosophy." Whatever account you favor for what defines the analytic/continental divide in philosophy, and whatever theory you might embrace about its causes, it is clear that "creative differences" have made it impossible for these bandmates to work together. The incompatibility has reached the point of breakup, whether for institutional or substantive reasons. It would be folly, I think, to try to adjudicate which party has a more legitimate claim to the brand name "philosophy" on the basis of historical precedent or traditional usage. Indeed, if we look to the history of the word, we find ourselves the more bemused as we descend into the Syd Barrett-era-esque morass of natural scientists and sage-figures who were among the undisputed claimants of the term in centuries past. The cynical, probably correct, view is that this is really about lucrative jobs at prestigious institutions, and the cultural cachet of the word, just as in the Pink Floyd case. But in any case, it is now indisputable that somehow, in Anglophone institutions of higher learning and academic presses, what "philosophy" has come to mean is a cluster of practices oriented toward certain forms of inquiry, methodologies, and areas of concern that most of us would not hesitate to call unambiguously "analytic." To those who do not participate in these practices, or perhaps have not been trained in them or are simply not good at them, they are easy to despise: they can appear to be a tragic narrowing of what philosophy meant in the good old heydays, a professionalized form of nitpicking designed for maximal convenience of professional assessment, or even a vipers' nest of mediocrity abdicating the glorious high calling of the philosophical demi-gods of old in favor of the rising dominance of a very different kind of human being, the plodding antihero—the reasonable jigsaw puzzle hobbyist rather than the raving tortured Prometheus. If the old philosophers were one-man bands, simultaneously playing bass drum with one foot and cymbal with another, a harmonica wired around the neck and a three-necked guitar strapped on the back and an accordion under the arm—ontology, metaphysics, epistemology, logic, and ethics all jumbled together and careening onward at once in a messy cacophony of virtuoso pyrotechnics—these new philosophers look like a man doing physical therapy after a serious car accident, relearning step by minute step how to use the fine muscles in his fingers so that he can one day again hold a pen: now bend the index finger at the first joint, now the second, now bring in the thumb, good,

good, now slowly lower it toward the paper. . . . To a neutral and uninformed observer this may indeed look pretty ridiculous. But it has its function, doesn't it? Some people need just this physical therapy, and it is important to relearn to do so, so it must be good that there is a method, a well-tested and effective and responsible method, to do it. I don't myself participate in these practices, and I am certainly (obviously) not immune to this temptation to disparage them, particularly keen when forced to witness the painful spectacle of well-meaning and often brilliant young students, afire with a passion for "philosophy" inspired by random and naturally quite superficial high school readings, having the gumption knocked out of them by their first "philosophy" class in a university: *this* is what philosophy is supposed to be? From there it's sink or swim: either they learn this new jargon and mode of procedure—the *responsible* way, the *conscientious* way, the *careful* way—or they change majors. The waste and moral destruction of these high-spirited talents is a subject almost worthy of a classical tragedy. As "thinkers," let's say, rather than the contested "philosophers," one often has the impression that these naïve and unbridled young minds are clearly superior to—or less contentiously, at least more interesting than—the professors who upbraid and regulate and re-educate them, who take it as their duty to whip them into line; it is not a pleasant thing to have to see. As a non-practitioner, though, and thus as unskilled labor in this realm, I not only must keep this sentiment to myself, but I must admit that it is probably unjustified. I am in no position to judge this set of practices, and could and should rationally give it the benefit of the doubt: probably they are doing something worthwhile, to someone, over there. But it remains a problem, though not one that can be readily blamed on any single set of bad actors, that they have won the branding battle and monopolized the holy and powerful name "Pink Floyd"—I mean "philosophy."

One of the effects of this outcome is the fate of prospective new members of the guild. Who gets to play with this band? Who gets to be part of the new lineup? On our analogy, perhaps the answer is "no one": the maximal membership of Pink Floyd is the four members during the 1973–1981 period of the band's greatest successes, when the brand acquired its market value. Therefore, the prestige follows either all four of them, or some subset of them; anyone else who plays on albums or concerts is a hired gun, a studio or road musician in the role of independent contractor. They can later go out and form their own bands, perhaps parlaying the prestige of having played with "Pink Floyd" for so long. Is this the case for the barbarians at the gate of philosophy? I mean, of course, those forms of thinking that are neither "analytic" nor "continental," that come from neither part of the contested European terrain. I mean non-European thinkers and traditions—my personal concerns lie mainly in Chinese traditions, i.e., Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, but the same question can be asked of traditions of thought originating in India or Africa or anywhere else. Do they get to use the brand name "philosophy"? Let's take the case of Buddhism: Should there be more of it taught in philosophy departments? Should Buddhist thinkers get to use the brand name "philosophy"?

Some try to adduce a criterion that would serve as a shibboleth for membership in the guild: as if to say, if you can play the bassline of “Money” the way Roger did, perhaps, you can be the new Pink Floyd bassist. Analogously, if you do not appeal to authority, with the exception of the absolute authority of reason as defined by Aristotle and his legitimate successors, if you offer evidence and arguments for your assertions and can defend them in the agreed-upon format of logical dispute, and do it exceptionally well, then you can be granted admission to the guild, irrespective of the content of the claims that you are arguing for or against. As long as you hold to the accepted method, all claims are welcome. This is already, I think, a quite generous and open-minded sentiment on the part of the gatekeepers, and one that should be applauded. To put it another way: Should the defining and identifying and qualifying characteristic of philosophy be the scope of *subject matters* with which it has, until quite recently, mainly concerned itself—what exists, what does it mean, what can and should we do, what can and should we know?—or with the *methods* by which answers to those questions were sought: not revelations from the gods, not fiat from a prophet, not catchy aphorisms from a charismatic sage, not poetic riffs from an inspired improviser, but reasoned argumentation? Much in these foreign traditions arguably addresses the areas that have been of greatest concern to many European philosophers of the past. But the method of presentation and establishment of their claims may not always accord in any obvious way with the accepted philosophical methods. Nor, however, do they seem to align easily with the foil of the philosophical methods in Europe, the anti-philosophical authoritarianism of monotheistic religious revelation. We begin to see a deeper problem here, in that the accepted methods embraced by European philosophies have themselves been forged on certain assumptions and presuppositions, not to mention the specific contours of the historical European case, particularly its highly abrasive love-hate relationship to its highly abrasive religion. For myself, I think the really interesting work to be done lies precisely here, in excavating those presuppositions and exploring the alternatives, which may also open up new methodological vistas that fit neither the philosophical nor the non-philosophical as generally understood in Europe. But it is not so unreasonable for the guild to want to reserve its imprimatur for the primacy of philosophical method as previously understood, given the historical divisions of labor that obtained in the context of European intellectual history, as the criterion for what gets to use the brand name philosophy. And on either grounds, in both method and content, Buddhist traditions certainly have much to offer, much that is recognizably within the fold of philosophical method understood in this relatively narrow way. This is not all Buddhism is, and in some ways, for me personally, it is not what is most interesting or intellectually exciting about Buddhist traditions, nor for that matter what is most intellectually thoroughgoing and rigorous in their thinking through of the reconfiguration of premises. This means that their full potential to dialogue and interbreed and cross-germinate with European thought, to generate new ways of thinking, and to shake up and/or invigorate European thought, is going to be severely crippled by the application of this (reasonable) criterion, and we’re going to end up with a Buddhist philosophy that is constrained to playing

by an alien set of rules. But there is much in Buddhism that has decent grounds to claim membership for those parts of the tradition that meet this narrow definition. Even hobbling around as the visiting team on this alien terrain, under the paranoid constitution of a manically litigious state, wearing this constricting gear required by the stringent safety regulations enforced by the hosts of this mutant form of away game, Buddhism is a pretty formidable player.

Indeed, one can imagine quite strong claims being made for the role even this restricted form of Buddhist thinking might play in modern philosophy. For modern philosophy begins, according to the standard textbook account, when Descartes declares, “If you would be a real seeker of truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things.” Thinking was at last to stand on its own feet, without support from the unexamined presuppositions that tend to lie low beneath our explicit ruminations; the ancient Socratic experiment which had been so long sidetracked or bought off or domesticated or enslaved as a handmaiden was now to be free of any heteronomous constraints, to throw off its demented master and run its own household once again. The unnamed cracker of the whip that had put philosophy as autonomous thinking in chains for so long here was, of course, theology, in particular the theology of a *revealed religion*. A supernatural revelation of this kind by definition claims for itself exemption from all doubt, because it makes no bones about placing itself above the realm of confirmable premises: in enforcing its claim that it is “revealed” at a particular time and place rather than deduced from or discovered in universally available premises, it admits and even brags that there is no other way to know that it is true other than by accepting what is revealed as coming from an unimpeachably authoritative supernatural source—and doubting it, the very mental state of doubting per se, in fact puts the fate of your soul at dire risk. Descartes flies in the face of this entire ethos, so it seems: doubt is necessary, doubt is good, doubt is an irreplaceable condition for the revelation of truth.

We know, of course, that if we read onward in the *Meditations*, this turns out to be largely much ado about nothing, a false alarm, maybe even a bit of a bait and switch: Descartes does want his moment of doubt—but only as a (very) temporary means not only to the most apodictic certainty possible, complete freedom from doubt, but also one that ends up doing just what reason was supposed to do in the subordinate role assigned it by the revealed religion: confirm the existence of God as necessary and also *necessarily extrinsic* guarantor of truth, not to mention free will and immaterial soul more or less as revealed back there in the revealed religion that had been with him since the nursery. And, to a Buddhist thinker looking at this spectacle from afar, in this Descartes really is the father of modern philosophy, for this same story seems to repeat *mutatis mutandis* again and again in the subsequent history of Western thought: someone makes an attempt to doubt accepted certainties so as to light out for new territories, but again and again they arrive back at their oldest presuppositions. Indeed, when viewed through Buddhist eyes, it might be claimed more broadly that we can scratch the word “subsequent” here and see

this pattern throughout Western thought both before and after Descartes. And this is what invites me to make a provocative claim about the irreplaceable necessity for anyone who claims to be a “seeker of truth” in Descartes’s sense to throw herself wholeheartedly into the study of Buddhist thought: for Buddhism, even in its restricted form, can make some claim to have broken through this impasse: perhaps it was over there that the program of doubt was really accomplished.

How can I make this absurd claim, given the fact that Buddhism too is a “religion,” and one which depends for its doctrinal claims on authority—if not exactly on the authority of a revelation from a supernatural being who created the world, something pretty close: the revelations of someone who does claim to be a pretty supernatural being (not the creator or judge, but at least a wildly above-it-all best possible knower of the world) with a very special experience of ultimate truths, unavailable (for now) to the recipient of these claims, which cannot be justified independently of those (for now) unavailable experiences. Buddhist traditions do not “doubt all things,” because they accept the authority of the Buddha’s experience of enlightenment—not to mention plenty of other fanciful tales of supernatural comings and goings in an extravagantly mythical cosmos.

But nevertheless, there is room to assert that it may be only in Buddhism that a philosopher, Buddhist or not, can find true doubt. I say this although Buddhists never employ anything like the Cartesian method, and rarely even anything like the Socratic method. But Buddhism has special claims to define the heart of the philosophic quest because, for whatever reason, more or less every other form of thinking known to us seems to be unable to doubt *all five* of the following five things I am about to name. That is, whenever thinking starts to become active and autonomous and alive to its own critical power and self-authorizing claims in Descartes’s sense, able to doubt its own presuppositions and stand on its own to find new truths, the history of non-Buddhist thought (outside of China, may I add) seems to be unable to undermine any one or two or three or four of these five things without immediately, or even thereby, further embracing an unshakeable belief in the fifth, as if there is nowhere else to go besides these five, as if the undermining of any four of them proves the necessity of the fifth. The five are:

- 1) God
- 2) Mental Substance
- 3) Physical Substance
- 4) The Law of Non-Contradiction
- 5) Absolute Ethics

By “God” I mean any *intelligent* source of the world that either plans and designs it, or an incomprehensible ground of the world, beyond intelligence but with a specially favorable relationship to intelligence as opposed to its opposite, grounding it and for us exemplifying some kind of hyperintelligence, that stands as a supernatural guarantor and ground of the world’s consistency and/or reality.

By “mental substance” I mean self-sufficient and indivisible souls of individuals or a single world soul serving as the

ground of experience, and/or of material reality or the appearance of perceived material reality, or even any *irreducible or uncaused* units of thought or experience.

By “physical substance” I mean either atoms or forces or energies or fields or one or many indivisible masses that takes up space and stands as a substrate or as a concomitant for all mental experience.

By “the law of non-contradiction” I mean the unsurpassable logical structure construed as ontological information about the world, such that entities are real if and only if they cannot be both P and non-P at the same time and in the same respect.

By “Absolute Ethics” I mean ethics as first philosophy and last philosophy, either pragmatically or epistemologically defining what can and cannot, or must and must not, be thought, concluded, desired, surmised, assumed, but itself unsusceptible to critique or surpassing by means of anything thought, concluded, desired, surmised, or assumed.

I’m here making a controversial claim both about Western thought and about Buddhism, and there will be legitimate doubts on both sides of this assertion, from students of Western thought on the one hand and from students of Buddhist thought on the other. It should be clear from the above that I mean all of these five items in the broadest possible sense, allowing for a wide range of variation in the details, and without wanting to quibble about whether, on some elaborate interpretation, some exception can be found here and there in some marginal or very modern Western thinker. I submit nonetheless that when the dust settles, one of these five is always found holding up the tent at the end of the day. But I’m willing to simply assert that here as a research agenda: let’s go look and see if this is true or not. My own impression, after many years of concern over this issue, is that again and again, in one form or another, if God is rejected, matter is affirmed; if matter is negated, soul is affirmed; if God and matter and soul are rejected, logical absolutism is affirmed, if all of these are rejected, absolute ethics is assumed, and so on, round and round. It’s *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* all over again. In that story, the cat promises to clean a stain out of the bathtub, but does so using mother’s best towel. Now the stain is on the towel, so he cleans it off with the curtains. Now the stain is on mom’s beautiful curtains, and so on: the stain keeps getting transferred from one place to another, but mom is on the way home and the stain is still there, somewhere.

The “stain” here, of course, is foundationalism, absolutism, dogmatism, the uncaused as distinct from the caused, the unconditional as absolute other to the conditional, a one-direction chain of grounds that must end in a primary ungrounded ground of some sort: the very idea of “self-nature,” a self-standing, non-relational entity possessing fully on its own account and its own power its own determinate essence, being just what it is *simpliciter* and without qualification, which can be seen as the source or ground of all other composite or derivative epiphenomena. I will not go into the details of the critique of this idea in

Mahāyāna Buddhism (which is mainly what I have in mind here) in its many forms and with its multifarious implications. Nor will I delve into the possible responses Buddhist thinkers have and could have had to the objection that thinking is never presuppositionless, that the adoption of something unquestioned and unquestionable is inevitable and not to be shunned in a quixotic quest for Cartesian presuppositionlessness—but I will note, for interested readers, that those responses are well worth exploring. But I will say that the fact that Mahāyāna Buddhism from beginning to end identifies itself as a tradition that stands or falls with the nonreliance on substances, even very much in spite of apparent exceptions in seemingly backsliding concepts like ālaya-vijñāna or buddha-nature or dharmā-nature. The thorough chasing down and weeding out of all such irreducible first-cause notions, of anything both unconditional and determinate, even determinate to the extent of not-being-the-conditional, is its flagship doctrine, its *raison d'être*, its defining agenda.

Is there nothing like this in European thought? Yes, we have Pyrrhonian skepticism, with fine arguments to neutralize even the absolute authority of logical method and its presuppositions, and a close tracking of the influences of this unique incident in Western thinking throughout subsequent European traditions, pro and con, perhaps does some of the same heavy lifting, and it is true that this indubitably plays a part in modern philosophical curricula. But though we have here a similarly thorough countercommonsensical skepticism, in comparison to Buddhist commitments and elaborations we find it only in a soon-truncated form, roundly batted down by its respondents, extremely modest in its aims, a torso with no head. The systematic and practical application of Buddhist anti-foundationalism is different. Exactly how and on what premises, and to what effect, is precisely what we miss the opportunity to explore when we leave it out of account in our study of philosophy.

But do the Buddhists really succeed in their dismissal and doubt of these five items? Do they really want it quite as thoroughlygoingly as I'm suggesting? Here is where the other side may raise some objections, for some interpreters of Buddhist thought will also find at the end of the day that what Buddhist thinkers *really* mean cannot do without resting firmly on one or two of these items—most commonly, a highly unusual version of either physical substances or mental substances (or perhaps a neither-physical-nor-mental substance or substances—dharmas, dharma-nature, buddha-nature, etc.), and above all the law of non-contradiction, or the pragmatic ethics of a specific form of Buddhist life. I take this to be an interpretative misunderstanding of the entailments of the Buddhist sources, or perhaps just another example of the very lack of philosophical imagination I am trying to spotlight here. But in both the Western and the Buddhist cases, the conversation must proceed from this point through careful analysis of individual philosophers and texts. My own view is that in many if not most Buddhist systems *all five* of these items are not only doubted, but subjected to a principled and sustained rejection, at times in the form of an argued refutation, at times in the form of the premises of further developments that proceed in their absence.

This is not the same as doubt in Descartes's sense, in that precisely *this undermining of the five* is the very content of the undoubted doctrines delivered by the authority of the Buddha or, later, by philosophers who are themselves regarded as infallible bodhisattvas. Dogmatic nihilism! some might cry, and this is perhaps one of the reasons for that aversion to Buddhism—above and beyond the blasé neglect or condescending dismissal that philosophers have otherwise shown for this world of thought—lately given the handy name *Buddhaphobia*. And it might be argued, I think somewhat convincingly, that "seeker of truth" is not quite the right name for what a Buddhist thinker is: he is a seeker of liberation first and foremost, and that quest, while it perhaps must get its hands as dirty as possible in the thickest and most intricate tangles of thinking, does not do so in order to arrive at a thought which contains true propositions once and for all. If the latter is what Descartes or Socrates means by "truth" as what is sought or loved by a philosopher *qua* philosopher, then the Buddhist thinkers are not philosophers. But even if we grant this highly debatable description of the meaning of "truth" as it pertains to Western philosophical practice, and even if we bend over backwards to grant the forefronting of the soteriological framing and authority structures informing the practices of Buddhist thought (in my view rarely relevant to the on-the-ground proceedings of the actual thinking), we might still insist that the study of Buddhist thought is essential to every philosopher. For in Buddhism we see at least the possibility for a living, breathing human being to reject all five of the items listed above, and to the great profit of his thinking and living: to live and think and flourish in *the absence of God, soul, matter, absolute morality, and absolute logic*. Here alone can we envision what it would mean to doubt all things and to stay there, at last—and, not least, why anyone would want to do that.

What is left for a worldview that accepts no physical realities, no absolute logical laws, no absolute morality, no controlling creator God, and no souls? Buddhism. A philosopher who wishes to stand thinking on its own two feet, to *be able* to doubt all things, must become aware of what things there are to doubt, and how difficult it is to doubt them, how easily they slip back in unnoticed after being briefly doubted, how cunningly they replace each other and compensate for one another, how doubting one unjustified assumption tends to bolster an alternate one, what happens when they are doubted, whether it is possible to doubt *all* of them at the same time. Buddhists arguably fail to doubt the reliability of the Buddha, and in this they would to be judged to have failed Descartes's mission. Perhaps they therefore fail to doubt the key doctrines of Buddhism: non-self, anti-substantiality, radical atheism, translogicism, and so on. But without Buddhism, we would have no example in the history of the world of a well-thought-through, systematic, elaborate, rigorous, multi-millennial tradition of thought that functions and flourishes without falling back on one or more of the five. And perhaps to be *able* to doubt these five, to *succeed* in doubting them, it is necessary to know and understand this, and to see what the implications of that have been in all their multifaceted and varied forms throughout the histories of diverse Buddhist traditions of thought.



The above would be the case for a robust and even militant advocacy of Buddhism as a necessary component in the academic study of philosophy. But actually, for my part, I think the only reason this would matter one way or another is for the sake of those tragic freshmen I alluded to earlier. I'd like them to get the nurturing of their innate speculative talents that they yearn for, and I think it would be good for the world to see their thinking brought to term rather than aborted by the pressures of "philosophy" as now defined. Other than that, I would be very content to leave "philosophy" to its own devices, to disgrace itself or find new glories as it pursues its present narrow course—as long as those of us who do not fit the agenda can find the resources and the place in the world to flourish and to develop our alternate modes and methods and concerns. It is a pity, perhaps, that it gets to use the brand and wield the prestige of its noble ancestor to the exclusion of rival claimants. But which of us is better serving the spirit of philosophy as it was once known and lived is perhaps something only the future can judge.

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## *What/Who Determines the Value of Buddhist Philosophy in Modern Academia?*

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### **BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY AND MODERN ACADEMIA**

"Philosophy" is not an expression coined by Buddhists in Asia, just as Buddhism is not a teaching developed by philosophers in the West. However, for many in the field of philosophy in the social system of modern academia, "Buddhist philosophy" is a term which is substantiated by their perception that traditional Buddhist thinking deals with subject matters which belong to the concerns of traditional Western philosophy. But who is it, then, who says what "Buddhist philosophy" is? And who or what determines the value of Buddhist philosophy in modern academia?

Modern scholarship would hardly deny that interests, content, topics, and approaches developed in philosophical discourse are historically grown, as it seems to be rather unlikely that thinkers of different times, eras, as well as socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds, share the same concerns. This, of course, does not exclude an understanding across the temporal, cultural, or linguistic divides which philosophers might experience in their attempt to explore a source of inspiration that has developed independently from their own backgrounds. Nevertheless, philosophical questions and interests are distinctly informed by the temporal, social, cultural, and linguistic contexts in which they occur.

Hence, philosophical discourse across the East-West divide, as it is practiced not only in analytical philosophy but also in post-modern approaches, or by East Asian thinkers, tends

to adduce Buddhist views in order to tackle questions and problems that typically characterize the domain of thought in the social system of modern academic philosophy, which is deeply rooted in the cultural practices of Western traditions. For instance, currently discussed themes in that system are the question of free will in respect to Buddhist thought; the logical implications concerning paradoxes in Mahāyāna seen from the viewpoint of non-classical logic; Buddhist contributions to metaphysics and ontology; epistemological reflections of Buddhist thinkers in the light of cognitive science, phenomenology, idealism, etc.; Buddhist ethical values related to the question of human rights; Buddhist views on personhood and identity; Buddhist treatments of linguistic concerns seen from the viewpoints of recent philosophy of language; Buddhism in relation to post-modern gender issues; and the extent to which Buddhism coincides with environmental concerns and inspires eco-criticism, or might overlap with natural science.

The same applies to those East Asian thinkers from the twentieth century who considered themselves philosophers in a newly established modern academic system rather than literati or intellectuals in a traditional East Asian society. The most well-known figures are Mou Zongsan (1909–1995), Tang Junyi (1909–1978), Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945), and Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990). All of these figures were significantly inspired by Buddhist thought, and yet the philosophical problems that they addressed in their examination of Buddhist sources reveal very strong ties both to the topics discussed in the modern academic system and to the related traditions of Western thought, such as Buddhism in respect to the epistemological function of intuition, to the status of metaphysics and ontology, to ethics linked to the notion of the free will, to the role of religion in modern society, and to political theory and the building of modern society.

In all the accounts produced in this system, the evaluation of Buddhist teachings depends, then, on the amount of benefit which modern philosophical discourse expects to gain from including them. This becomes evident, for instance, if we look at Mou Zongsan's philosophical project of modernity. His Chinese work *Buddhanature and Prajñā* (佛性與般若. Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1982) is the first monograph which recounts the formation of East Asian Buddhist philosophy from a systematic point of view, as distinct from the usual chronological approaches. Together with his other works, he presents and evaluates pre-modern Buddhist thought within an expanded discussion about the relevance of Confucian values for his vision of modernity into which he further integrates Kantian ideas and those of other Western thinkers. Buddhist thinking plays a role only as a conceptual instrument that he borrows to construe his syncretism of values, based on which a global sense of modernity across the East-West divide is to be anticipated. Moreover, his systematic account selects only sources and thoughts which fit his overarching conceptual framework, while other traditionally important positions and thinkers are not even mentioned. This illustrates that what philosophy in Buddhism means to those who operate in a modern world and its academic system is inevitably defined by the selective perception informed by certain and particular interests immanent to that system.

In other words, we observe that academic interests, often enough, only marginally overlap with the seminal concerns that have been effective in shaping the traditions in which Buddhist doctrinal thought has been developed and transmitted. The most crucial one, certainly, is the soteriological concern of liberating the minds of sentient beings from their self-induced deceptions and the suffering that is rooted therein, as many traditional sources which focus on doctrinal exegesis explicitly hint at this purpose of their production. Of course, modern academia is aware of the discrepancy which such prioritizing of differing concerns entails. But again, at this point, it is important to mention that what Buddhist philosophy means and what its value signifies to those who develop an interest in it is tantamount to its potential contribution in solving an agenda of philosophical questions relevant to and typical of the discourse which the social system of modern academia has generated.

All this is not really a criticism, since the system as a whole can hardly operate in a different way. By virtue of its very nature, its functioning is selective. However, what matters and makes a difference for the agents in it is their awareness of this. A similar discrepancy might probably also occur when we look at this problematic from the opposite point of view, addressing the same question to the tradition of Buddhist thought. Only selected parts of the philosophical discourses which, in terms of origination, we would attribute to the traditions in the West would be considered beneficial to what is at stake and of particular interest in the world of thought that Buddhists have traditionally been committed to.

Therefore, in its attempt to capture the type of thinking that has independently developed within the Buddhist traditions, modern discourse would need to rephrase the question of the title in this way: To what degree can emic and traditional concerns, which are the constitutive factors in the formation, development, and transmission of Buddhist doctrines, be considered relevant to philosophical discourse in the system of modern academia? Seen from the viewpoint of philosophical hermeneutics, the modern academic understanding of pre-modern Buddhism would need to reflect on its own background of interests, agenda of questions, and also implicit pre-occupations informing its approaches, in order to be then capable of identifying and describing those seminal concerns. This is not at all solely a problem of historical discourse. To look at doctrinal contents apart from their formation within the traditional patterns of transmission means to miss the manner in which Buddhist thought really is, or could be, an independent source of inspiration for philosophical discourse in modern academia.

### **“PHILOSOPHY IN BUDDHISM” AND “BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY”**

Perhaps the distinction between “philosophy in Buddhism” and “Buddhist philosophy”—which is a distinction only between ideal types (*Idealtypus*)—might help to delineate the peculiarity and the value that philosophical thought in this particular tradition might imply. “Philosophy in Buddhism” would denote and signify the contributions of traditional

Buddhist thought to philosophical discussions in modern academia, while “Buddhist philosophy” would designate and underscore the particular type of thinking characteristic of the traditions wherein it has been developed. The value of “philosophy in Buddhism” depends then on the extent and significance of such contribution, whereas “Buddhist philosophy” would rather display an independent value of its own, and yet remain within philosophical discourse not strictly committed to ranking the relevance of its topics.

These are two different ways of looking at philosophical thought developed and transmitted in the Buddhist traditions. Most importantly, “Buddhist philosophy” in the context of modern academia would be more committed to philosophical hermeneutics, as it would aspire to understand Buddhist thought in its formation within the traditional patterns of transmission, without excluding the concerns of “philosophy in Buddhism.” In accordance with the insights of philosophical hermeneutics, “Buddhist philosophy” would need to cultivate an awareness of the historicity and contingency of its own interests and concerns which determine the selection of its themes and the perspectives on them.

Consequently, “philosophy in Buddhism” must then rely on the understanding of “Buddhist philosophy,” if it is to be deemed indispensable and unique in its contribution to modern academic discourse. If, however, “philosophy in Buddhism” is given priority so that the value of “Buddhist philosophy” depends on it, or the two are no more different from one another, the evaluation of Buddhist thought would then solely be determined by parameters which completely disregard the independence of the tradition that has generated it. This would hardly match the ethical standards which Bryan v. Norden and Jay Garfield have outlined in their conception of philosophical discourse in modern academia—a discourse of diversity, devoid of racism, or superiority complexes of Western thinkers, or their tendencies toward discrimination and exclusion.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, such a discourse should integrate these two ideal types—that is, the two should be related to one another in a fashion in which each takes the other into account, yet without denying the difference that persists between them.

Again, it is important to note that this difference is not one between philosophical and historical discourse. “Buddhist philosophy” deals not solely with the chronological order or diachronic development of thoughts. It focuses on thoughts in their formative and contiguous process because it intends to describe the specific dynamic wherein they persist. However, the reason why a certain thematic object is selected and appears to be relevant has to do with what constitutes the perspective of its description. It is the discourse of certain topics in modern academia which is the condition that enables “Buddhist philosophy” to emerge from its traditional background, and this must be explicated within that description. This approach would need to become aware of the contingency and historicity of its own concerns, and this is the specific manner in which “Buddhist philosophy” takes “philosophy in Buddhism” into consideration. Again, two aspects are important in this approach: (1) the specific dynamic of the

process wherein Buddhist thoughts have evolved; and (2) the specific conditions of modern discourse which enable “Buddhist philosophy” to emerge in it.

As “Buddhist philosophy” accounts for the approach which does not veil the facts of its own temporality and contingency, it has the capacity to embrace not only the method of modern philosophical hermeneutics but also the perspective that many traditional Buddhist thinkers have adopted when they have expressed what truth has meant to them. For many traditional Buddhist thinkers, such as the Mahāyāna masters, “ultimate truth” is what never separates from its opposite, “conventional truth.” This is provisional and does not cease to alter, as it is responsive and adaptable to the constantly changing circumstances which each instance of evidence that reveals a sense of truth is inextricably bound up with.

That view can indeed be considered as an important point of intersection between Mahāyāna thought and philosophical hermeneutics. The concept of the two truths—conventional truth and ultimate truth which persist only in correlation, as many Buddhist sources emphasize—inspired the pre-modern protagonists of the formative process of the Chinese Buddhist schools to construe doxographies with the interpretative purpose of (1) outlining the hidden coherence between all the numerous doctrines in the bulk of texts transmitted from India and translated into Chinese, and (2) showing that all these manifold expressions of Buddhist teaching are congruent with the ultimate meaning of awakened liberation which itself, however, is independent from any speech and thus reaches beyond language.

Hence, the Chinese practitioners and interpreters developed an ambiguous stance toward the textual transmission of Buddhist doctrine: independence of its ultimate meaning from speech on the one hand, and indispensability of the canonical word in the understanding of that meaning on the other. This indicates an awareness of the hermeneutical situation and its temporality which the accomplished understanding must realize in respect to its own exegetical activity. Such awareness promoted practices of self-referential observation and became an influential factor in the formation and transmission of Buddhist thought in East Asia. It shaped an approach which many of the traditional Chinese Buddhist masters, such as Tiantai master Zhiyi (538–597), Sanlun master Jizang (549–623), Huayan master Fazang (643–712), and also the masters of the Chan schools pursued—which could be referred to as “practice qua exegesis”: To practice the path to liberation is to specialize in doctrinal exegesis. “Practice qua exegesis” paradoxically culminates in accomplishing detachment from textual expression via such expression, or via other performances. Whereas Tiantai interpretation taught the inseparability of construction from deconstruction, the Chan masters tended to shift their focus on the performative aspect in their practices.

In a modified manner, the universal point of this stance might even concern the hermeneutical situation of modern academic philosophy, which asks for the role that the textual heritage of traditional Buddhist thoughts might play

for its discourse. Therefore, far from being just an object of chronological description, “Buddhist philosophy” itself would adopt, or be inspired by, essential considerations or positions developed and transmitted in the traditions that it refers to and, at the same time, would also follow the approaches of philosophical hermeneutics, which would fit the requirements of the modern academic system.

## INDO-TIBETAN AND SINO-JAPANESE BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY

Of course, in the world of Buddhist thought there are various traditions of transmission. Apart from few exceptions (Steven Heine, Brook Ziporyn, Graham Parks, Dan Lusthaus, etc.), the majority of academics in the West (Mark Siderits, Jay Garfield, Tom Tillemans, Georges Dreyfus, Guy Newland, Graham Priest, Jan Westerhoff, Jonardon Ganeri, Dan Arnold, Mario D’Amato, Sara McClintock, Karen Lang, Christian Coseru, David Eckel, Joseph Walser, Jose Ignacio Cabezón, Thomas Wood, etc.) emphasize and consider Indo-Tibetan Buddhist traditions, while modern scholars in East Asia, (Xiong Shili, Mou Zongsan, Tang Junyi, Wu Rujun, Nishida Kitarō, Keiji Nishitani, Masao Abe, Hajime Tanabe, Shizuteru Ueda, Hisamatsu Shinichi, etc.) primarily elaborate on Buddhist sources in Chinese or Japanese. This, of course, has to do with the fact that the Mahāyāna sources in Sanskrit and the three major traditions of textual transmission—the two Northern traditions in Chinese and Tibetan, as well as the Southeast Asian Theravāda tradition in Pāli, along with the commentarial and scholastic elaborations in each of these three regions—have developed and coexisted almost without mutual influence, although quite a few of the Indian root texts relevant to the formation of these three transmissions overlap to a certain extent. Studies which compare the peculiar features and philosophical characteristics of thought in these three have barely evolved yet. One of the few exceptions is Nakamura Hajime, yet his work does not really venture into a deep reading of the indigenous Chinese schools, which have been immensely important for the East Asian development of Buddhist thought.

One of the major problems which besets the attempt to make Buddhist thought accessible to philosophical discourse in modern academia consists of the self-referential or closed system of doctrinal concepts and idiosyncratic terminology in Buddhism. This is particularly true with regard to doctrinal exegesis in the Chinese Song (960–1279), Yuan (1279–1368), and Ming (1368–1644) dynasty sources. At that time debates in Chinese Buddhist exegesis had become very convoluted and specialized due to the long history of scholastic and sectarian ramifications. A coded idiom was used to communicate the complexity of references and contexts which the contentious issues in these debates between the different exegetical traditions implied.

Therefore, Western studies in Buddhism which deal with philosophical issues seldom reference those sources. For instance, the Cowherds’ (self-designation chosen by the authors: Jay Garfield et al.) book about the two truths in Madhyamaka thought, *Moonshadows—Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy*,<sup>2</sup> does not contain a single chapter

about that topic in the Buddhist philosophy of China, although it is this doctrine of the two truths which was one of the most debated issues in the exegetical traditions of medieval China, leading to the formation of the first indigenous Buddhist schools, those of the Sanlun and Tiantai, at the end of the sixth century. Sanlun master Jizang even composed a lengthy treatise on this Buddhist topic. Similarly, Zhiyi's complex Tiantai teaching is construed on the basis of this doctrine.

Moreover, seen from the background of the extremely abundant Chinese literature on this Buddhist topic, it is very surprising that the Cowherds focused only on "conventional truth," although this truth persists only in correlation to/with "ultimate truth" according to the textual transmission in Chinese. This is to say, understanding conventional truth consists in comprehending ultimate truth and vice versa, which also applies to *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*. Apart from its opposite, neither of the two can be adequately comprehended according to the pre-modern Buddhist texts translated into Chinese and those composed by the indigenous interpreters of them. It would have been necessary to explain why the modern discussion of this subject must deviate from the views in traditional Chinese Buddhism. All this illustrates that the content of Buddhist philosophy seems to exceed the scope which the recent promoters of this field within institutionalized academia in the West have, so far, been aware of.

Hence, the process of integrating Buddhist philosophy into the institutional and educational framework of modern academia in the West must be further advanced, as it is far from being completed. But most importantly, this process must overcome its strong tendency to prioritize "philosophy in Buddhism" over "Buddhist philosophy." The relevance of "Buddhist philosophy" does not need to be evaluated (solely) through an assessment of its meritorious contribution to philosophical discourse in modern academia, because this would be the value that it has for something other than itself. It would be more intriguing and enriching, also for the sake of plurality and diversity to which North American universities are so much committed, to recognize and display the value that it has in itself.

#### NOTES

1. Bryan van Norden and Jay Garfield, "If Philosophy Won't Diversify, Let's Call It What It Really Is," *New York Times*, May 11, 2016; *Taking Back Philosophy—A Multicultural Manifesto* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).
2. Jay Garfield et al., *Moonshadows—Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

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## *Buddhist Philosophy? Arguments From Somewhere*

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### INTRODUCTION

This article is principally a critique of arguments purporting to demonstrate that Buddhist philosophy is *not* philosophy. Now, the reasons as to why such arguments have been and in fact continue to be deployed (and thus stand in need of critiquing), and more generally as to why analytic philosophers (who continue to dominate the profession far beyond the Anglo-American axis at the analytic core) are preponderantly inimical (rather than sympathetic) to the idea of Buddhist thought being taken seriously as philosophy, doubtless have far more to do with personal biases and ignorances as well as with the systemic conservatism (and consequently, given the particular past they strive to conserve, the racism) of academic institutions than they do with reasoned argumentation (that is, if that's its definition, with philosophy). But reasons there are, and these tend to coalesce around the purported areligiosity of analysis and the related refusal to engage in metaphysics on the part of analytic philosophers (as opposed to the imputed religiosity and metaphysical nature of Buddhist arguments), as well as reference to (largely mythical) historical and linguistic threads linking all Western philosophers but alien to their brethren to the East or South. In discussing these reasons, I will leave aside the (to my mind obvious) fact that the practice of analytic philosophy as a whole (its areas of concern, its very identification of and manners of framing these topics, its criteria for adjudicating success, not to mention the personal convictions of many of its adherents, not ever wholly extricable from professional practice . . .) is governed by a prior intellectual history (including a prior *philosophical* history) utterly infused with religious presuppositions (which, for that matter, go well beyond what Heidegger called ontotheological ones). I leave aside also the related point that all philosophizing, down to the most nitpickety punctilios of the seemingly "hard" philosophies of logic, language, and mind (the preferred fields of traditional analytics) are, whatever their practitioners may claim to the contrary, suffused with metaphysical premises. Rather (that is, instead of pointing out their self-deception and double standards), I want for the moment to grant analytic philosophers their cake so as to see (not how it may taste—that particular fusion of horizons must await another symposium—but) whether it is reasonable to swallow it.

It should be clear that the *unargued* dismissal of any intellectual position or tradition is not conducive to disputation and refutation. Such unargued dicta as would simply deny the status of "philosophy" to non-Western thought traditions (including the Buddhist) are therefore not themselves philosophical; as such, I will not bother considering them here. Instead, I will draw liberally from Roy Perrett's classification of the four reasons standardly given to justify the divide, which I will call the Historicist

Argument, Terminological Argument, Argument Argument, and Religion Argument.<sup>1</sup> Although I augment Perrett's critical rejoinders with observations and examples of my own, nevertheless it should be clear to readers familiar with the relevant debates and diatribes that my descriptions and discussions of the arguments/conditions in the paragraphs that follow is heavily indebted to extant publications. I mention some of the more direct borrowings *ad locum*, but I hasten to admit that I do not claim to be making any major original contribution to what I see as an already done-and-dusted matter—at least philosophically, and there's the rub. For although scholars of Buddhist philosophy (or of many another non-Western philosophy) may well consider that "critique of the narrowness, arbitrariness, and ethnocentrism of this characterization [according to which only Western philosophy is properly to be accounted philosophy] is too easy and too boring to undertake,"<sup>2</sup> unfortunately, we are still a long way indeed, practically speaking, from actually having the conclusion—viz. that non-Western philosophies are philosophies—incorporated into institutional academic practice. As such, and in addition to the suggestion I make in the final portion of this piece as to philosophy being properly located *nowhere*, I hope that the present contribution may at least serve to assemble in one place (or better: one other place) the relevant arguments and counter-arguments, and thereby to act as a(nother) convenient gathering point for those of various persuasions along the route toward mutual comprehension, if not agreement.

**PHILOSOPHY & HISTORY**

Put succinctly, the Historicist Argument goes as follows: Philosophy has historically been practiced in the West; therefore, philosophy is a Western phenomenon (or, more strongly, a Western phenomenon *alone*). Heidegger provides a classic formulation of the strong version of this stance in stating:

The often heard expression "Western-European philosophy" is, in truth, a tautology. Why? Because philosophy is Greek in its nature. . . . The statement that philosophy is in its nature Greek says nothing more than that the West and Europe, and only these, are, in the innermost course of their history, originally "philosophical."<sup>3</sup>

In assessing the strength of this argument, note firstly the conflation Heidegger enacts between "Western-European" and "Greek." It is an obvious point, but "Greece" is not co-extensive with "Europe," much less with "the West." If we were to accept Heidegger's premise that "philosophy is Greek in its nature," the valid conclusion would be not that philosophy is an exclusively "Western-European" enterprise but an exclusively Greek one. This, however, would of course have the rather undesirable consequence that, depending on how "Greece" is defined, either philosophy stopped with the demise of ancient Greece or continues to this day only within Greek national or linguistic borders.

But let's grant for a moment Heidegger's conflation, accepting that philosophy has indeed been practiced in the West broadly understood. Is this a valid reason to deny that the same activity has been undertaken in other parts of the

world? Do we claim that music, art, or poetry are practiced only in Western civilization (whatever that is . . .) on the grounds that these domains are conceptually grounded, for "us" Westerners, in their Western histories? Even if we were to accept the claim that the first people to ever argue about the nature of reality were the Greeks—which is historically just plain false—would this suffice to restrict philosophy (if it is understood to be just such argument) to the West? After all, Indian linguists, for example, elaborated highly sophisticated analyses of grammar, phonetics, and semantics well before Europeans did: Does this mean that Europeans cannot legitimately speak of "linguistics"? And let us not forget the fact that Greek philosophy was itself largely forgotten for several centuries in the West, and only reintroduced via the translations and commentaries of Islamic scholars writing largely in Arabic. Perhaps, then, we should conclude that philosophy is an exclusively Arabic or Islamic endeavor, since there is no unbroken historical thread linking ancient Greek and post-Renaissance European thought? Hopefully, the various versions of a *reductio ad absurdum* I have proposed will suffice to persuade you that these and other such Historicist Arguments are patently false. They rest on a combination of conceptual conflation and historical fallacy.

**PHILOSOPHY & TERMINOLOGY**

This applies, *mutatis mutandis*, also to a second argument, sometimes taken as a linguistic sub-version of the Historicist Argument, which I call the Terminological Argument.<sup>4</sup> This states that since there is no (exactly) equivalent term for "philosophy" in Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan, or take your pick of any other non-European language, therefore there is no such thing as philosophy practiced in any of these language communities. This I find to be the most peculiar of the four arguments I am summarily working through, and one subject to what are surely two inter-related and fatal objections. Firstly, if the exact denotative and connotative force of a given term is what encloses the space, as it were, of the activity defined by that term, then the ancient Greek term *philosophia* is surely as distant and distinct from the contemporary English word "philosophy" as any potential equivalent in another language. After all, no one would claim that the cultural context informing the assumptions and presuppositions—the very intellectual frameworks—of the paradigmatic ancient Greek philosophers are similar to, let alone exactly equivalent to, those of today's English-language philosophers. Indeed, the fact that the overarching worldviews of members of these cultural worlds are vastly divergent itself reduces the Terminological Argument to the absurd conclusion that only the ancient Greeks practiced "philosophy." For even if we manage, through historical scholarship, to excavate, even to some extent comprehend, the manner in which a Plato or an Aristotle saw the world and his part in it, nevertheless we do not, and cannot, *share* that view. As such, to follow the logic of the Terminological Argument rigorously is to deny "philosophy" to any but the original practitioners of the activity denoted by the etymologically originary term. Indeed, we could force the point even further, and argue that, if we accept that no term means quite the same thing to any two language users, then strictly speaking we should restrict "philosophy" to the individual originator of the term itself—mythical though such a speaker be.

Secondly, and relatedly, why should the absence of an (exactly) equivalent term in one language to a term in another language (assuming for the moment that such trans-lingual exact equivalents exist . . .) entail that no such concept or activity exists at all in that language community? To advocate such a position would be to adhere to a very strong version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, and would likewise result in absurd consequences. Thus, applying the same logic, we would be led to conclude that there is no such thing as poetry in anything but Greek (or its direct etymological descendants) since the term itself derives from the Greek *poiesis*. Likewise, there can be no algebra in the West because the word used in English and numerous other European languages is derived from the Arabic *al-jubrā*,<sup>5</sup> and included fields of mathematics we would now classify under different branches. The denotative range (and therefore the very meaning) of the term in its original Arabic being quite different from that of its European-language etymological descendants, we are left to conclude that, while Europeans working in these languages may well engage in algebra-like thinking, “algebra” as such must be reserved for Arabic language users . . . just as non-Westerners may engage in philosophy-like thinking but not “philosophy” itself.

Or let me give a counter-example that remains within the Western tradition. We have all heard of the old sign standing atop Plato’s Academy, according to which no one ignorant of geometry was to be allowed entry. It would seem that, for Plato, philosophy without geometry was not philosophy at all—and if anyone should know what philosophy is, surely it should be Plato! Following the logic of the Terminological Argument, then, anyone not working in Philosophy and Mathematics (with a specialization in geometry no less) is not a real philosopher: Sorry! An acquaintance with the history of philosophy closer to our own time teaches us similarly that what we think of as philosophy today used to include fields now called physics, biology, astronomy, geology, etc. So again, either we conclude that Westerners active prior to the inauguration of these (now distinct) disciplines were not philosophers, or conversely we conclude that they were . . . but we cannot be. In either case, the Terminological Argument, like the Historicist one, entails conclusions we are all, I take it, unwilling to accept.

### PHILOSOPHY & ARGUMENT

Turning to what I call the Argument Argument, this proposes that philosophy is an activity defined by the use of *argument* for or against a given claim.<sup>6</sup> There may be plenty of wisdom in world literature, but only philosophy (that is, Western philosophy) deploys arguments in support of its conclusions. There are two ways we may defuse this argument. On the one hand, as with the Religion Argument (see below), it soon becomes clear that it leads us to a conclusion we are in all likelihood unwilling to accept; that is, that a great deal of the core canon of Western philosophy does not count as philosophy at all. Have you been taught that the Pre-Socratics were the first philosophers? Forget it. Throw them out: there are no arguments there, just gnomic pronouncements. Throw out a whole lot of Plato too, as well as much of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, even Wittgenstein.<sup>7</sup> The point is that philosophers have used a great variety of literary forms in which to couch their works,

from myths to dialogues, poems, parables, epigrams, etc. If we are serious about the Argument Argument, we will have to ditch all of this.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, perhaps we do want to bite the bullet. Let’s excise all that dross from philosophy; it will be the purer and better for it. So be it: Analytic philosophy has been taken by many to have originated in “a philosophical revolution on the grand scale—not merely in a revolt against British Idealism, but against traditional philosophy on the whole” (Preston, Introduction). However, this will in any case not lead to the conclusion that only Western philosophy is philosophy, for as even cursory acquaintance with relevant Buddhist (or Hindu, or Islamic, or Chinese, or African . . .) philosophical texts demonstrates, there are a great many works from within these traditions that utilize argument. Indeed, the logical rigor, technical sophistication, and intellectual ambit of the arguments deployed by Buddhist philosophers (to limit myself to the particular case under discussion here, but to in no way imply any lesser status to members of other non-Western philosophical traditions) are, in fact, formidable. If we are content to toss out the non-argumentative bathwater, the Buddhist baby will still remain, just as argumentative as any child.

### PHILOSOPHY & RELIGION

And so we arrive at the fourth and final argument in support of philosophy as an exclusively Western activity to be discussed here. This I call the Religion Argument, and it is perhaps the most commonly heard of the four. Here it is as formulated by Jay Garfield:

There is a world of difference between philosophy and religion, and what passes for “Eastern philosophy” is in fact religion misnamed. Western philosophy is independent of religion, and is a rational, religiously disinterested inquiry into fundamental questions about the nature of reality, human life, and so on.<sup>10</sup>

The idea here is that philosophy as “we” (Westerners) understand it, as we practice it, is *not* religion, whereas what some call non-Western philosophies are in fact inveterately religious thought-traditions. Thus (in a wondrously circular argument), Buddhism being a religion, it is strictly speaking a misnomer to speak of Buddhist “philosophy” for, being a religion, it cannot count as philosophy. Garfield continues:

But this distinction is supposed to deliver the result that St Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*, Descartes’s *Meditations*, including the proofs of the existence of God, and Leibniz’s discussion of theodicy are philosophical, while Dharmakīrti’s investigations of the structure of induction and of the ontological status of universals, Tsongkhapa’s account of reference and meaning, and Nāgārjuna’s critique of essence and analysis of the causal relation are religious. Anyone who has a passing familiarity with all of the relevant texts will agree that something has gone seriously wrong if this distinction is taken seriously.<sup>11</sup>

Now, it does not take a deep knowledge of the history of European philosophy to realize that it is permeated through and through with Christian doctrines and premises. If we take the Religion Argument seriously, we would have to jettison just about every Western philosopher from the canon of Western philosophy, which is surely (again) not a conclusion most Western philosophers are willing to countenance. Given that there is no justification for applying a condition of strict secularity discriminately (i.e., to non-Western philosophies, but not to Western ones), this argument also fails.

### PHILOSOPHY FROM NOWHERE

Having surveyed and dismissed four arguments standardly put forward against treating Buddhist (and more broadly non-Western) philosophies as “philosophy,” I want to make one final point about these and any other potential arguments in support of the idea that philosophy is an exclusively Western enterprise, or indeed in support of the idea that philosophy is grounded in, and therefore limited to, any one geographic-cultural region—be it on the basis of (stipulatively) definitive necessity or (selectively) historical contingency. Contrary to Heidegger, I want to suggest that philosophy—philosophy above all—is *not* Greek, *not* European, *not* Western. Don’t get me wrong: The last thing I want to claim is that only non-Western philosophy is philosophy. I am thinking instead of something A. L. Motzkin, a prominent Jewish philosopher, proposes in his piece on “What is Philosophy?” In the context of a discussion of Socrates, he writes:

In a word, and in a most fundamental way, the philosopher is unGreek. . . . In other words [and, be it noted, in outright contradistinction to Heidegger’s “tautology”], the phrase *Greek Philosophy* is an *oxymoron*. The first thing which Plato and his descendants throughout the ages, of whom the foremost was Aristotle, would like to call to your attention is, philosophy, is *not* Greek, *not* Roman, *not* French, *not* Russian. . . . The philosopher is neither child of his times nor even stepchild of his times.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, if we do take seriously the idea that philosophy (even, if philosophers are to be believed, *quintessentially* philosophy) is the unbiased pursuit of truth, then we are methodologically obliged to discard any and all of our biases, be these nationalist, racist, ethnic, religious, political, etc., to the extent possible. Only thus will what I would like to coin here the “solocentrist” view, according to which solely the Occident has philosophy, be seen to be but prejudice. However much it may be true that we are always already grounded in what Gadamer, borrowing (or perhaps stealing) from Hölderlin, called the “conversation that we ourselves are,”<sup>13</sup> nevertheless, if it is truth we seek, wisdom we love, then I propose that it is only by viewing from both “here” and “there,” from “within” and “without” simultaneously;<sup>14</sup> in other words, only by going beyond ourselves, beyond conversation *cum* internalized monologue into conversation *cum* other-oriented polylogue, that we may break out of the paradigms of our times, the “common sense” around us, and think outside those boxes; in other words, actually think.<sup>15</sup>

### NOTES

1. Perrett, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*, 4–6. Perrett himself speaks of the historicist condition, lexical equivalence condition, argumentation condition, and secularity condition respectively.
2. D’Amato et al., *Pointing at the Moon: Buddhism, Logic, Analytic Philosophy*. Also cited, alongside Jay Garfield’s lambasting of the “postcolonial racism” (Garfield, *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation*, 253) characteristic of the “intellectually and morally indefensible” (Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism: Why It Matters to Philosophy*, ix) nature of the mainstream view, and in the context of a broader theoretic-methodological discussion regarding the study of Buddhism as philosophy and/or/as religion, in Stepien, “Orienting Reason: A Religious Critique of Philosophizing Nāgārjuna,” 1081.
3. Heidegger, *What Is Philosophy?*, 29–30. This passage is also quoted by Van Norden (*Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto*: 25; “Western Philosophy Is Racist”), together with a not dissimilar pronouncement by Jacques Derrida (regarding which, see also Perrett, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*, 5).
4. The amalgamated Historical-Terminological Argument, as propounded by Nicholas Tampio (“Not All Things Wise and Good Are Philosophy”) is discussed, and comprehensively (even hilariously) disposed of, by Van Norden (*Taking Back Philosophy*: 16–17; “Western Philosophy Is Racist”), Garfield (“Foreword”: xiv–xix), and Olberding (“DoD named ‘Wise and Good!’”).
5. Cf. Van Norden, “Western Philosophy Is Racist.”
6. For a more extended discussion on argument and its spouse rationality, see in particular the section on “Philosophy as love of reason,” including Robert Nozick’s definition of philosophy there, in the contribution to this volume by C. W. Huntington.
7. Cf. Perrett, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*, 4.
8. In “Philosophy, Literature, Religion: Buddhism as Transdisciplinary Intervention,” I discuss Arthur Danto’s (“Philosophy and/as/of Literature,” 8) embrace of philosophy as a literary activity (“I cannot think of a field of writing as fertile as philosophy has been in generating forms of literary expression”), and attempt to expand his list of philosophical-literary forms to include those characteristic of Buddhist discourse.
9. Preston, Introduction, “Analytic Philosophy.”
10. Garfield, *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation*, 252.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Motzkin, “What Is Philosophy? Speech to the Graduating Class of 2000, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem,” 68; emphases in original.
13. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 386. For a fine discussion of Gadamer’s use of this expression in the context of “authentic conversation,” see Figal (“The Doing of the Thing Itself: Gadamer’s Hermeneutic Ontology of Language,” esp. 106ff). For references to the same Gadamerian position with specific application to Buddhist philosophy, see Avramides (“Engaging with Buddhism,” 548) and Garfield (“Engaging Engagements with Engaging Buddhism,” 583).
14. I am obliquely referring here (and in the title to this article), of course, to Thomas Nagel’s celebrated “deliberate effort to juxtapose the internal and external or subjective and objective views at full strength . . . [such that,] [i]nstead of a unified world view, we get the interplay of these two uneasily related types of conception, and the essentially incompletable effort to reconcile them” (Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, 4).
15. I am reminded here of Arindam Chakrabarti and Ralph Weber’s “fourth stage” of what their book titles *Comparative Philosophy without Borders*; a stage “beyond comparative philosophy” which “would amount to just doing philosophy as one thinks fit for getting to the truth about an issue or set of issues, by appropriating elements from all philosophical views and traditions one knows of but making no claim of ‘correct exposition’, but just solving hitherto unsolved problems possibly raising issues never raised before anywhere” (Chakrabarti and Weber, *Comparative Philosophy without Borders*, 22).

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## Doing Buddhist Philosophy

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We are getting pretty good at debating on Madhyamaka but this is not the real understanding of emptiness, for it is bound by conceptual elaborations (*prapañca*, *sprosa*). We could even defeat a person who had realized emptiness! Such a person would be able to see through conceptual elaborations but could not answer our questions.

– Gen Nyi-ma<sup>1</sup>

The *Journal of Indian Philosophy* commenced publication almost fifty years ago, in October of 1970, and immediately established itself as a premier academic setting for discussion of South Asian intellectual history. The first issue included a three-page editorial that defined the journal's objectives in the following terms:

The field of our contributions will be bound by the limits of rational inquiry; we will avoid questions that lie in the fields of theology and mystical experience. Our method will be, in a very general sense, analytical and comparative, and we will aim at rigorous precision in the translation of terms and statements. Our aim will be to attract professional philosophers rather than professional internationalists.<sup>2</sup>

The editors go on to lament what they see as the shortcomings of a discipline dominated for too long by scholars trained only, or primarily, as Sanskritists:

The philologists, interested always in the oldest texts of their chosen language, produced good translations of the ancient texts of Vedism and Hinduism. Unfortunately, the public applied to those texts the term philosophy, a term justifiable in such an application only if taken in its etymological sense. The *Upaniṣads* and the *Gītā* exhibit a 'love of wisdom', even as the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelations exhibit the same love. But their aim is a wisdom beyond reason and logic.<sup>3</sup>

The editorial concedes that such texts—and such wisdom—may have great human value, but it has nothing to do with philosophy as that is presently understood in the West: "For philosophy in the English-speaking world since somewhat before the time of the French revolution has expended its intellectual effort in fields where some degree of certainty may be achieved without recourse to religious or ontological commitment."<sup>4</sup> Philosophy in this sense of the word aspires to certainties not founded on any a priori faith or belief, but rather on universally acceptable, rationally justified premises. It has no pretensions to anything so grand or nebulous as "wisdom."



Perhaps the field of our labor grows poorer crops than the fields of the theologians and the mystics. Certainly our food lacks the ambrosia that they find in theirs. But it is a field that many farmers have plowed and we wish to emphasize that Indian farmers have been as diligent as Europeans and Americans. They too have spent lifetimes defining the epistemological process, framing systems of logic, analyzing language, speculating on the relationship between syntax and semantics.<sup>5</sup>

Having discussed the general outlines of their purpose and method, in the final paragraph the editors define the journal's mission in more exact terms:

Specifically, we intend to offer a medium where philosophers, using the word to mean those who pursue rationally demonstrable answers to meaningful questions, both Indian and Western, may converse. . . . We shall guide the conversation toward questions that seem to us important. But we will remember the value of precision, whatever the question on which it is achieved, and we will keep in mind the fact that the most important questions may be, for the time at least, insoluble by the methods we have chosen.<sup>6</sup>

In the case of Buddhism this approach to Indic texts has a long history. Efforts to rationalize or naturalize Buddhist doctrine have characterized a good deal of writing both in the West and among Western-influenced intellectuals writing in Asia. Such writing is one element of what has been referred to as "Protestant Buddhism" or "Buddhist modernism"—a progressive movement with roots in nineteenth-century colonial Sri Lanka that constituted from the beginning an effort to make Buddhist thought and practice palatable to modern Western sensibilities by looking for ways to make it conform to enlightenment and scientific ideals of rationality and empiricism. A characteristic feature of Buddhist modernism is its tendency to selectively cull the Indian texts so as to view Buddhism more as a "philosophy" than a "religion." Walpola Rahula's *What the Buddha Taught* is a classic of the genre; it exemplifies this strategy not only in the interpretive and exegetical chapters of the book, but also in the English translations of Pāli scriptures included as appendices, which have been bowdlerized so as to eliminate all reference to divinity, magic, or supernatural attainments (*siddhis*). As Robert Sharf puts it in speaking of Japan's New Buddhism, "'indigenous' traditions were reconstituted so as to appropriate the perceived strengths of the Occident . . . Buddhist apologists sought to secure the integrity of Buddhism by grounding it in a trans-cultural, trans-historical reality immune to the relativist critique."<sup>7</sup> A similar observation has recently been brought to bear on the effort by a number of Western scholars to define and legitimize Nāgārjuna's *Madhyamaka* in strict rationalist terms.<sup>8</sup>

### PHILOSOPHY AS LOVE OF REASON

The definition of philosophy advocated by the editors of the *Journal of Indian Philosophy* is by no means exceptional. "The word philosophy means the love of wisdom," writes Robert Nozick in *The Nature of Rationality*, "but what philosophers really love is reason. . . .":

They formulate theories and marshal reasons to support them, they consider objections and try to meet them, they construct arguments against other views. Even philosophers who proclaim the limitations of reason—the Greek skeptics, David Hume, doubters of the objectivity of science—all adduce reasons for their views and present difficulties for opposing ones. Proclamations or aphorisms are not considered philosophy unless they also enshrine and delineate reasoning."<sup>9</sup>

To advocate for a particular way of doing philosophy is to express an opinion about what constitutes valid philosophical method and what purpose is served by philosophizing in this or that way. As Nozick makes clear, when philosophy is grounded in love of reason its method is argument and its purpose is to compel others to accept one's own opinion, belief, or view, which is itself construed as the outcome of right reason:

The terminology of philosophical art is coercive: arguments are *powerful* and best when they are *knockdown*, arguments *force* you to a conclusion, if you believe the premises you *have to* or *must* believe the conclusion, some arguments do not carry much *punch*, and so forth. A philosophical argument is an attempt to get someone to believe something, whether he wants to believe it or not. A successful philosophical argument, a strong argument, *forces* someone to a belief.<sup>10</sup>

The catch here, of course, lies in the protasis: *if you believe the premises*. And there is a single premise that underwrites the entire enterprise: In order to do philosophy in this way everyone involved must maintain an unquestioned faith in the value of rationality as the only reliable guide to any truth worth knowing. Without this faith, philosophical argumentation has no clout.

Though philosophy is carried on as a coercive activity, the penalty philosophers wield is, after all, rather weak. If the other person is willing to bear the label of "irrational" or "having the worse argument" then he can skip away happily maintaining his previous belief. He will be trailed, of course, by the philosopher furiously hurling philosophical imprecations: "What do you mean, you're willing to be irrational? You shouldn't be irrational because..." And although the philosopher is embarrassed by his inability to complete this sentence in a noncircular fashion—he can only produce reasons for accepting reasons—still, he is unwilling to let his adversary go.<sup>11</sup>

"Wouldn't it be better," Nozick suggests, "if the philosophical arguments left the person no possible answer at all. . . ?" Silence is certainly preferable to unreason. Or even better:

Perhaps philosophers need arguments so powerful they set up reverberations in the brain: if the person refuses to accept the conclusion, he *dies*.<sup>12</sup>

The problem for philosophers is that people are not always able, willing, or even interested in offering a reasoned defense for what they know to be true from their own experience. As my high school girlfriend once remarked, after listening patiently while I unspooled an elaborate rationalization for some bit of typically inconsiderate behavior: *you may win every argument, but you're still wrong.*

Arguing to prove one's point and so force one's interlocutor to accept one's own view, Nozick concludes, is an uncivil way of doing philosophy;<sup>13</sup> he proposes explanation as an alternative method more in harmony with philosophy's quest to achieve mutual understanding through the congenial exchange of ideas. However, setting aside the issue of incivility, there are other matters that warrant our attention in this context. As Nozick's discussion reveals (and as I have already noted), both argument and explanation are rooted in a single, a priori commitment to reason as the final arbiter of any truth worth knowing. Moreover, regardless of whether it is achieved through argument or explanation, the purpose of philosophizing in this way is to present and defend one's own theories, opinions, beliefs, and views as the best possible theories, opinions, beliefs, and views. As Nozick has it, in characterizing his own preferred approach to philosophizing: "On the view presented here, philosophical work aspires to produce a highest ranked view, at least an illuminating one, without attempting to knock all other theories out as inadmissible."<sup>14</sup> Philosophy of this kind—whether argumentative or exegetical—is all about holding and defending views, and what is of primary meaning and value turns out to be, for the most part, views that have to do with "defining the epistemological process, framing systems of logic, analyzing language, speculating on the relationship between syntax and semantics" and etc. This way of doing philosophy is a profoundly theoretical affair, and its altogether modest certainties—"rationally demonstrable answers to meaningful questions"—are at once both precise and entirely speculative and abstract.

Like Nozick, I cannot see how disputes about the nature of the philosophical enterprise—"how to satisfy the desire to start philosophy in a neutral way"<sup>15</sup>—can ever be resolved. Nor—again, like Nozick—do I see this as a particularly troubling problem. What counts as legitimate philosophical purpose and method is and should be (in my view) open to discussion. In the words of the editorial I quoted above: "[W]e will keep in mind the fact that the most important questions may be . . . insoluble by the methods we have chosen."<sup>16</sup>

### PHILOSOPHY AS LOVE OF WISDOM

What, then, are the most important questions for Buddhist philosophers, and how are they addressed?

Rather than deal in generalizations, I suggest we look closely at the work of one particular individual: the Mahāyāna philosopher Nāgārjuna (c. 150–250 CE), arguably the most renowned author in the Indian Buddhist tradition. As it happens, the third issue of the *Journal of Indian Philosophy* included an article by Frederick Streng, titled "Buddhist Doctrine as Religious Philosophy," that directly addresses Nāgārjuna's central composition, the

*Mūlamadhyamakakārika* (or *Madhymakaśāstra*). In this article Streng proposed that the text was informed by two distinct methodological assumptions:

The first is that the statements are made in the context of religious philosophy; that is, the highest purpose for formulating any statement is soteriological, not speculative. Thus "truth" can refer to a development of an attitude as well as a judgment about a proposition. The second is that the meaning or significance of the most profound religious statements includes reference to, though not limited to, commonly recognized experience of reality.<sup>17</sup>

He adds, "To the extent that the latter assumption is correct we can understand the religious significance of the statements without claiming that we have attained the highest spiritual insight."<sup>18</sup>

And so, in a single stroke, Streng appears to have subverted—or at least reframed—the stated intentions of the journal's editorial board to "avoid questions that lie in the fields of theology and mystical experience." This was inevitable, it seems to me, since Indian intellectuals writing in Sanskrit have traditionally been preoccupied by precisely these sorts of questions. In South Asia, concern with theology and mystical experience is like the ceaseless drone of the tanpura in Indian classical music—it permeates the atmosphere in which discourse on issues of epistemology, ontology, and ethics takes place. By obviating the need for any claim to "spiritual insight," Streng has legitimized his interest in theology and mysticism; as a modern analytically inclined philosopher he is free to discuss these dimensions of the Sanskrit texts without compromising his faith that rationally demonstrable truth is the only kind of truth worth pursuing.

Be this as it may, Streng nevertheless introduced the expression "religious philosophy" and thereby implicitly sanctioned a properly philosophical enterprise grounded in a methodology and purpose that do not prioritize the truth claims of reasoned argumentation—much less certify it as the only acceptable model of philosophical discourse. According to Streng, the highest meaning and value for the practitioners of so-called religious philosophy is not found in "the conceptual content of statements, nor the accuracy with which one identifies notions with their assumed objective referents," but rather in "a difference of perspective of the user of truth statements: whether he is attached to, or free from, the distinctions he makes for the purposes of communication."<sup>19</sup> "Absolute truth is not only a definition of 'the way things are'; it is a situation of freedom, of health, of joy."<sup>20</sup>

In other words, for Nāgārjuna, genuine understanding of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is not about holding or defending a theoretical position, nor is philosophical work a matter of producing "the highest ranked view." Rather, to genuinely understand the truth of emptiness is to be free from attachment to the method and goals of reasoned argumentation and therefore no longer susceptible to the frustration and anxiety associated with this way of thinking,

speaking, and writing. This “attitude”—to use Streng’s term—constitutes a “transformation in self-awareness”,<sup>21</sup> the freedom it embodies is captured above all in the Sanskrit word *prajñā*, commonly translated into English as “wisdom.”

## THE SOTERIOLOGICAL METHOD AND PURPOSE OF BUDDHIST TEXTS

Where reason is employed in Nāgārjuna’s philosophy it is subordinated to a soteriological end conceived as freedom from suffering. Suffering (*duḥkha*)—defined as a fundamental, existential dis-ease—is rooted in both intellectual and emotional soil; it manifests in ignorance or misunderstanding of the nature of reality (*avidyā*) and in a variety of negative emotions (*kleṣa-s*)—notably “thirst” or “clinging” (*trṣṇa/upādāna*). The absence of suffering—*nirvāṇa*—is similarly conceived as two-fold, characterized by the presence of wisdom (*prajñā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*). Within Nāgārjuna’s *Madhyamaka*, reasoned argument serves as a methodological strategy (*upāya*) for the cultivation of wisdom, but argumentation has in itself no ultimate value and is moreover explicitly recognized as risky medicine, precisely because it can so easily promote, rather than diminish, attachment to views, opinions, beliefs, and other conceptual abstractions (*prapañca*). In doing so, it can as easily foster intellectual hubris as compassionate wisdom:

Emptiness is proclaimed by the conqueror as the unmooring of all views; those who hold emptiness as a view are deemed incurable.<sup>22</sup>

Given this inherent danger, the use of rational argumentation is traditionally circumscribed within a Buddhist context that includes the practice of morality and meditation. These three—morality (*śīla*), meditation (*samādhi*), and “wisdom” (*prajñā*)—constitute the ancient components of the Buddhist soteriological path as described, for example, in Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga*. Wisdom is further broken down into three developmental stages: (1) familiarizing oneself with basic Buddhist doctrine (*śrotamayī-prajñā*); (2) critically reflecting on this doctrine (*cintamayī-prajñā*); and (3) actively cultivating what has been understood conceptually through a variety of ethical and ritual practices (*bhāvanāmayī-prajñā*) that culminate in the “transformation of self-awareness” mentioned above. Strictly speaking, the use of reason is confined to the first and second stages, but primarily to the second. In this respect, although Nāgārjuna makes an appeal to rational argument, as a Buddhist (“religious”) philosopher, he does so within a broader context where argument is not, in and of itself, considered an entirely reliable strategy; nor is it the fundamental or sole defining characteristic of his philosophy.

## UNDERSTANDING NĀGĀRJUNA OUTSIDE ANY TRADITIONAL BUDDHIST CONTEXT

In a piece written for *The New Yorker* on Stanley Kubrick’s enigmatic masterpiece *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Dan Chiasson observes that the film baffled early audiences because it had yet to create the taste it required to be appreciated. Nevertheless, repeated viewing of Kubrick’s

work forged its own context for interpretation. “You didn’t solve it by watching it a second time,” Chiasson comments, “but you did settle into its mysteries.”<sup>23</sup> One might similarly argue that Nāgārjuna’s writing has yet, in the West, to forge its own interpretive context. Certainly Western scholars have had some difficulty settling into its mysteries.

Nāgārjuna situated himself resolutely within the Mahāyāna Buddhist lineage, as a commentator on the *prajñāpāramitā* literature; his highest commitment was to a soteriological purpose that explicitly repudiated all interest in propositional truth claims. Modern scholars and professional philosophers engaged with his writing have for the most part been bound to a set of goals and methods shared by the academic community; we deploy the tools of philology, historiography, and rational exegesis, positioning ourselves securely outside any Buddhist tradition while attempting to speak for Nāgārjuna in a way that does not compromise whatever meaning and value his work may possess on its own terms. The extent to which such an undertaking can hope to succeed is debatable. At best it’s like the difference between, on the one hand, telling a joke, and on the other, explaining the same joke or trying to prove that it’s funny; no matter how adroit the explanation or how convincing the proof, no one’s going to laugh.

In any event, at this point Anglo-American analytic philosophy has emerged as the only widely accepted model for understanding Nāgārjuna as *philosophy*. In practice this has meant that his writing is viewed almost exclusively as a species of rational argumentation. In recent years forms of non-classical logic—in particular paraconsistent logic and dialetheism—have attracted the attention of scholars in the field, but unexamined assumptions about the priority of reason in Nāgārjuna’s writing persist.

No doubt, reading Nagarjuna through an analytic lens has the advantage of making him seem appealing to modern intellectuals and in particular to analytical philosophers, but it has tended to marginalize his profound distrust of theoretical, propositional truth and his central and overriding concern with soteriology. Nāgārjuna’s writing, as a form of religious philosophy, is not designed to advocate for one view over another. Rather—as Streng pointed out—its objective is to provoke a fundamental shift in one’s attitude toward thinking and reasoning, a shift in attitude that goes hand in hand with the development of nonattachment and compassion. In this respect, analytic philosophy may not be the best model for appreciating what Nāgārjuna is about, and indeed, other models have been proposed. Nāgārjuna’s approach to philosophizing bears comparison with Rorty’s “edifying philosophy,” with Wittgenstein’s notion of philosophy as therapy, and with Derrida’s deconstruction. It shares the general concern of Continental philosophers with the unification of theory and practice and the goal of cultural and personal transformation, and is in this respect in accord with Pierre Hadot’s characterization of ancient Greek philosophy as a genre of spiritual exercise aimed toward a “transformation of self-awareness” marked by freedom from anxiety (*ataraxia*). There are especially interesting parallels between Nāgārjuna and Pyrrhonian skepticism. There are as well important affinities between Nāgārjuna

and contemporary Western ethicists like Martha Nussbaum, Alasdair MacIntyre, Cora Diamond, and Christopher Hamilton, all of whom maintain in one way or another that its preoccupation with reason and rational discourse makes analytic philosophy incapable of engaging with the deeper recesses of human moral experience. "As it seems to me," writes Hamilton,

the truth that a poem or other work of art can tell about the world seems to leave philosophy behind and to show its inadequacy. This is no doubt connected with the typical failings of (much) philosophy: its conviction that all that is true can be stated clearly and without self-contradiction; its hostility to imagination and its literal-mindedness; its reduced conceptual repertoire; and so on.<sup>24</sup>

By shifting the conversation from talk of logic and reason to discussion of literature, poetry, and metaphor, Hamilton directs our attention to a form of lived truth that cannot be captured through explanation of or arguments for a particular point of view—even if (or especially if) the truth represented in that point of view is considered in some way to transcend the arguments constructed to reveal it. In this respect he offers the possibility of a radically different approach to interpretation of Nāgārjuna's use of language in the service of soteriological ends.

Understood from Hamilton's perspective, the appearance of rational or logical argumentation in Nāgārjuna's writing can be interpreted not as a means to secure propositional truth (e.g., the theoretical truth of emptiness), but rather as a literary device—a *semblance* of reason—that serves to illustrate an attitude of nonattachment with respect to the distinctions fostered by literal, discursive thought and associated forms of discourse. Georges Dreyfus seems to suggest as much when he writes,

Because emptiness requires the overcoming of any reification and thus of any differentiation, it cannot be understood conceptually in the same way as other points of Buddhist doctrine such as impermanence. Applying a concept will not do, for emptiness is not a thing or an object that can be captured by distinguishing it from other things. Hence, it cannot be said (i.e. directly signified); it can only be skillfully shown (i.e. indirectly indicated).<sup>25</sup>

This way of reading Nāgārjuna—as the skillful display of a particular attitude of non-clinging—is in broad accord with traditional Mahāyāna Buddhist practice, where the *Madhyamakaśāstra* is studied in the context of a community of like-minded *religiosi* engaged in ritual activities of various kinds, including forms of devotional prayer and meditation, and governed by a shared commitment to a set of ethical principles—a radically different environment from the arid, hyper-rationalist atmosphere of a seminar room at Oxford or Berkeley. Philosophical argumentation is framed within this traditional Buddhist context not as a strategy for establishing some recondite version of Nozick's "highest ranked view," but rather in such a way as to exhibit the futility of reason's endless, tortured striving to overcome its own self-imposed limitations. I want to suggest that

for someone properly situated within this ritual frame, Nāgārjuna reads more like literary fiction or poetry than analytic philosophy. Which is to say, first of all, that for such a reader Nāgārjuna's writing is inextricably caught up in its own fictive ontology.<sup>26</sup> But there is yet another sense in which the *Madhyamakaśāstra* functions more like a work of narrative literature than a logical tract. I am thinking here of Jerome Bruner's point that narratives "recruit the reader's imagination" by offering "'performances' of meaning rather than actually formulating meanings themselves."<sup>27</sup>

Understood within a traditional Mahāyāna Buddhist milieu, it becomes clear that Nāgārjuna is not ensnared in the fiercely theoretical contest of reason versus unreason, and is not bound by any version of its rules. Rather, his writing evokes an empty, insubstantial world—an utterly contingent "cultural universe"<sup>28</sup>—to be imaginatively entered and inhabited, so that we might learn to live more authentically in the face of impermanence and death. It seems to me that this is a useful and appropriate perspective from which to assess the significance of the *catuṣkoṭi*:

When all things are empty,  
What is endless and what is not?  
What is both endless and not endless?  
What is neither endless nor not endless?

What is one thing and what is another?  
What is immortal and what must die?  
What is both, and what is neither?<sup>29</sup>

The appearance of rational argumentation has an important role to play in Nāgārjuna's soteriological project—just as it does in the famous scene from Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, where, in response to the force of the Grand Inquisitor's subtle logic, Jesus offers a single, silent kiss; or in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, where Atticus Finch argues in vain before the Maycomb County court on behalf of his client. In these groundless worlds—where words take their meaning not through reference to extra-linguistic, intrinsically real people, things, and places, but rather only in relationship to each other—what is proven and what is refuted? What is justified or forgiven and what is not? What innocent life is either saved or lost?

It is as if a skilled magician or a magician's apprentice were to conjure up a large group of people at a crossroads, and then, having conjured them, he were to make them disappear. What do you think, Subhūti, has anyone been slain or killed, destroyed or made to disappear? In just this way a bodhisattva leads measureless, countless beings to nirvana, and yet there is not a single being led to nirvana nor anyone who does the leading.<sup>30</sup>

## PREACHING THE DHARMA/DOING BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY

In a review of Francisca Cho's book *Seeing Like the Buddha*, Lina Verchery writes:

The book is a welcome expansion on a compelling claim Cho previously made in an essay for *Imag(in)*

*ing Otherness*: “I turn to Buddhism as the *source* of my theory making rather than as the *object* of ideological clarification. . . . Buddhism is the instrument of my analysis rather than its target.” In *Seeing Like the Buddha*, Cho models what such a project—namely, the deployment of Buddhism as a source rather than an object of theoretical investigation—might look like. This is valuable for . . . as many have noted, the traditional divide between “theory” and “data”—which makes the former the exclusive purview of scholarly authorities and relegates informants and religious “insiders” to the latter—has perpetuated precisely the kinds of problematic power dynamics that so much work in postcolonial, post-orientalist Buddhist studies, and in the humanities more broadly, has sought to dismantle.<sup>31</sup>

To take Nāgārjuna’s writing as the object of theoretical investigation is to prioritize the methods and goals of modern Western academic discourse. But to write as he writes—to make use of the language of reason while no longer being bound by it—is to subvert those same standards. Streng made it possible for analytic philosophers to acknowledge Buddhist religious philosophy as philosophy and to take an active interest in it, but he did not clear the way for such philosophy to be practiced within the pages of academic journals. As Jay Garfield has pointedly observed, “doing the history of Buddhist philosophy” is one thing; “doing Buddhist philosophy” is another.<sup>32</sup> For a contemporary Buddhologist to argue for any particular understanding of Nāgārjuna’s project—how he writes and for what soteriological purpose—falls well within the accepted methodological parameters of academic scholarship. For that same person to attempt to take up in earnest Nāgārjuna’s philosophical task—to write as I claim he did, for the express purpose of exhibiting an attitude of nonattachment to the distinctions fostered by rational, discursive language—is another thing altogether. What is jettisoned in such writing is not reason *per se*, but rather an implicit loyalty to reason, an undergirding faith in rationality as the essential guide to any truth worth knowing. What remains when this faith has gone is what I refer to as the mere *appearance* of rational argumentation.<sup>33</sup> To abandon faith in reason and do philosophy as Nāgārjuna does means to write in a way that favors figurative, tropological language over a style of discourse that is forthrightly analytic, literal, or referential. Writing like this means that any overt appeal to reason is necessarily, even if not obviously, ironic. That is to say, in Nāgārjuna’s hands rational argumentation maintains the pretense, but not the substance, of intrinsic authority. Only when understood in this way can his writing successfully communicate its peculiar brand of soteriologically pragmatic, fictional truth.

Not so long ago I wrote an article in which I intentionally set out to blur the line between talking about what Nāgārjuna does with language and attempting to actually do it. I submitted the essay to the *Journal of Indian Philosophy*. Following protocol, the editors of the journal solicited comments from anonymous reviewers and forwarded those comments on to me. Here is an excerpt from one reviewer’s response:

I have some reservations about the idea that an academic journal article should be written so as to provide a “catalyst for inner transformation” in the reader. Frankly speaking, readers of academic journals are not usually looking for Dharma-preaching in those journals, and I personally think they would be misguided to do so: there exist other more contextually appropriate venues to perform the beneficial function of Dharma-teacher. The article’s present format makes it even difficult for colleagues to engage with its content (how to do so, if rational engagement has been intentionally substituted with literary fiction?) There is a risk for the article to become entirely self-referential and impermeable to academic discussion.

Iris Murdoch once wrote that in order to understand a philosopher we need to look for what it is he or she fears.<sup>34</sup> What this anonymous reviewer seems to fear are consequences perceived to follow from the substitution, within an academic context, of religious commitment for fidelity to reason. The article was eventually accepted and published,<sup>35</sup> but the reviewer’s comments left me wondering what exactly I was hoping to accomplish in my attempt to carry forward Nāgārjuna’s project within the pages of a scholarly journal.

What my reviewer meant by “Dharma-preaching” is presumably some kind of homily intended primarily for spiritual edification; in essence, a sermon that lacks the requisite critical engagement with original Sanskrit sources. But that is not necessarily a fair characterization of what it means to preach or teach the Dharma. Streng viewed Nāgārjuna’s “Dharma-teaching”—an activity he identified as an explicitly Buddhist genre of “religious philosophy”—as a means “to develop an attitude which frees one from attachment to any single idea or experience without rejecting all ideas or experiences for some projected opposite.”<sup>36</sup> To teach or preach the Dharma, then—regardless of the context in which it is done—does not require that one forgo critical engagement with the classical texts, but rather only that one write in such a way as to abandon unquestioning confidence in reason without embracing its opposite, unreason or irrationality. Writing like this is at the core of Nāgārjuna’s soteriological philosophy. Whatever one might think about such a philosophy, it leaves us with plenty to discuss.

**NOTES**

1. Quoted in Dreyfus, *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping: The Education of a Tibetan Buddhist Monk*, 333.
2. JIP Editorial Board, “Editorial,” 1.
3. *Ibid.*, 2.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, 3.
7. Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience,” 259 & 268.
8. Stepien, “Orienting Reason: A Religious Critique of Philosophizing Nāgārjuna.”
9. Nozick, *The Nature of Rationality*, xi.

10. Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, 4.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. "Is that a nice way to behave toward someone?" (Ibid., 5).
14. Ibid., 24.
15. Ibid., 19.
16. JIP Editorial Board, "Editorial," 4.
17. Streng, "The Buddhist Doctrine of Two Truths as Religious Philosophy," 263.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 264.
20. Ibid., 270.
21. Ibid., 269.
22. Vaidya *Madhyamakaśāstra of Nāgārjuna with the Commentary Prasannapadā by Candrakīrti*, 108 (*Madhyamakaśāstra* 13.7): *śūnyatā sarvadr̥ṣṭinām proktā niḥśaranam jinaiḥ/ yeṣām tu śūnyatādr̥ṣṭis tān āśādhyān bahāṣire//*
23. Chiasson, "'2001: A Space Odyssey': What It Means, and How It Was Made."
24. Hamilton, "Review of *The Aesthetics of Argument*, by Martin Warner."
25. Dreyfus, *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping*, 241.
26. If, as Nāgārjuna seems to argue, words do not take their meaning through reference to an extra-linguistic reality, then this applies equally to his own words. Such reflexivity is precisely the sense in which emptiness is itself empty. See, e.g., *Madhyamakāvāṭāra* 6.186 (Huntington, *The Emptiness of Emptiness*, 180), and *Madhyamakaśāstra* 22.11: "One should not definitively assert 'empty', 'not empty', both or neither; [the word 'empty'] is used simply as a heuristic." (Vaidya, *Madhyamakaśāstra of Nāgārjuna with the Commentary Prasannapadā by Candrakīrti*, 192–93: *śūnyamiti na vaktavyam aśūnyamiti va bhavet/ ubhayam nobhayaṃ ceti prajñāpyarthaṃ tu kathyate//*)
27. Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, 39.
28. I've borrowed this phrase from Georges Dreyfus, who eloquently documents the complex strategies that have evolved among Tibetan Buddhists as they attempt to balance the demands of reason and soteriology in the study of Nāgārjuna. As he puts it:
 

[Tibetan Buddhist] scholastics see their activities not just as a search for knowledge for its own sake but as central to the religious pursuits of the larger tradition of which scholasticism is part. That religious relevance should be understood properly: scholastic studies should be seen not as directly preparing scholars for personal practice but as helping them to construct a cultural universe in which practice makes sense and to develop confidence in the soteriological possibilities of such a universe. (*The Sound of Two Hands Clapping*, 164–65)
29. Vaidya *Madhyamakaśāstra of Nāgārjuna with the Commentary Prasannapadā by Candrakīrti*, 235 (*Madhyamakaśāstra* 25:22–23): *śūnyeṣu sarvadharmesu kimanantaṃ kimantavāt/ kimanantaṃ antavacca nānantaṃ nāntavacca kim// kim tadeva kimanyat kim śāśvataṃ kimaśāśvataṃ/ aśāśvataṃ śāśvataṃ ca kim vā nobhayamapyataḥ 'tha//*
30. Vaidya, *Astasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā with Haribhadra's Commentary Called Āloka*, 10–11 (*Astasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*): *yathāpi nāma subhūte dakso māyākāro vā māyākārāntevāsi vā caturmahāpathe mahāntam janakāyam abhinirmimīte/ abhinirmāya tasyaiva mahato janakāyasyāntardhānam kuryāt/ tatkim manyase subhūte api nu tatra kenacitkaścid dhāto vā mṛto vā nāśito vā antarhito vā? [...] evameva subhūte bodhisattvo mahāsattvo 'prameyānasamkhyeyān sattvān parinirvāpayati/ na ca sa kaścitsattvo yaḥ parinirvṛto yena ca parinirvāpito bhavati/*
31. Verchery, "Review of Cho, Francisca, *Seeing Like the Buddha: Enlightenment through Film*"; emphases in original.
32. Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism: Why It Matters to Philosophy*, 320ff.
33. In referring to the "appearance" or "illusion" of rational argumentation I have in mind a central distinction in Madhyamaka texts between "conventional truth" (*saṃvṛti-satya*) and "ultimate truth" (*paramārtha-satya*).
34. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 71.
35. Huntington, "Nāgārjuna's Fictional World."
36. Streng, "The Buddhist Doctrine of Two Truths as Religious Philosophy." Cf. Dreyfus: "To understand emptiness requires that one free oneself from any reification, negative as well as positive" (*The Sound of Two Hands Clapping*, 240).

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## Decolonizing the Buddhist Mind

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And so we distort the arts themselves to curry favor for them with the machines. These machines are the inventions of Westerners, and are, as we might expect, well suited to the Western arts. But precisely on this account they put our own arts at a great disadvantage.

– *In Praise of Shadows*, Jun'ichirō Tanizaki<sup>1</sup>

In this brief reflection on the present state of research on Buddhist philosophy, I will include observations from my own experience as an educator and administrator, and, primarily, as a student of Buddhist thought. My purpose is to imagine a better direction for the integration of Buddhist philosophy (and philosophers) in a contemporary university setting.

The borrowed title of this essay (Ngūgī wa Thiong'o, 1986) is meant to highlight an intellectual and institutional problem: there is, to the best of my knowledge, no clear institutional space where Buddhist philosophy could be the center and life-force of one's enquiry, instead of being the periphery or object. I do not see institutional spaces which would *explicitly* support someone's work as a Buddhist philosopher: I see how a modern university may support an analytical philosopher writing about Buddhism, or a historian, or a social scientist exploring Asian realities. I also see how someone may remain in one of these contemporary institutional spaces and yet, through some expedient, retain Buddhist philosophizing as one's primary interest (indeed I see this rather well). Yet this is far from an ideal situation, and is after all an expedient. While I very much wish to be proven wrong, my knowledge of the field suggests that Buddhist thought remains a periphery: a "colony," to borrow a metaphor whose historical undertones are here not entirely irrelevant (although without a wish to be too polemical).

We should notice from the start that Buddhist philosophy works within a framework that is somewhat different from contemporary (dominant) Western modes of philosophizing; i.e., it is primarily an exegetical undertaking, meant to unravel the thought of the founder, i.e., the Buddha, and of the most esteemed among the Buddha's followers. This may perhaps bring it closer to theology—in some ways—and yet calling it theology brings in potentially more problems and misunderstandings than it is meant to solve, as Buddhist thought is arguably not theological (pardon the sweeping generalization). Being primarily exegetical is in this context compatible with independent reflection on the nature of reality (*tattva*), with a privileged role for reason/proper reasoning (*yukti*) and with the ample use of logical grounds (*hetu*) to prove or reject specific theoretical positions. How this compatibility works is, however, a topic beyond the scope of the present essay, as it varies, even considerably, in different Buddhist systems and authors.

Whether Buddhist philosophy is a perfect fit for a Western philosophical framework is, however, not so crucial, as rather obviously I am here using the term "philosophy" in a flexible enough way to include what in Sanskrit would be called "Established Conclusion" (*siddhānta*), "Instrument of seeing/View" (*darśana*), "Position" (*sthiti*), etc. Since within Western culture itself "philosophy" has meant many different types of intellectual activities for different people, using the term to broadly reflect the sense of these Sanskrit key-words seems to me acceptable, given some remarkable similarities that have not passed unnoticed through the ages. But if someone may find it more agreeable, I would not object to substituting the word "philosophy" everywhere in this essay (even when it refers to Western thought) with *siddhānta*, and the word "philosopher" with *siddhāntin*. It may in fact be worthwhile to step into the looking glass of using a Buddhist category to parse a Western type of intellectual endeavor, rather than the familiar vice versa.

The absence of a Buddhist voice from the stage of modern academic institutions is not without a price. Some may think that this is not a problem, since traditional Buddhist institutions of learning (such as monasteries) provide the appropriate space for aspirant "Buddhist philosophers" in the sense I delineated above; modern universities offer something different, as they should. Yet this is a simplistic understanding of the situation "on the ground." First of all, traditional institutions are in many ways marginalized; most significantly, the (unfounded) prejudice that traditional scholars are incapable of that magic act called "critical thinking" means that traditional institutions are looked upon with suspicion, as bastions of dogma and intellectual stagnation. There is some truth to this criticism: but the dogma that some "traditional" institutions are defending is that of the superiority of Western modes of learning and research, and some may be quite surprised to find out that a number of Buddhist institutes of learning have discarded any trace of traditional learning in favor of Western so-called "critical thinking." This, more often than not, means that—paradoxically—these very Buddhist institutions favor the marginalization of Buddhist thought, which once again becomes purely an object of research, and not a living intellectual resource. It becomes a colony within one's own mind, whose center is (uncritically) set as the Western mode of "critical thinking."

Hence: modern academic institutions affect Buddhist societies, even their most traditional niches. That Buddhist philosophers, institutionally, do not exist, strongly suggests to Buddhist societies that they are irrelevant. And this in turn affects the intellectual continuity and strength of the Buddhist tradition as a whole, not due to some deep and well-thought-out rational decision, but due to a number of historical contingencies that are either left unaddressed or are addressed in a polarizing and politically overcharged manner.

Some may retort that it is up to individuals to determine the center of their intellectual endeavors. In principle, I agree: I do not wish to explain away individual choice and agency. Yet even individuals who may start their academic careers (as students) with the clear purpose of engaging

with Buddhist thought as a living intellectual resource, and as the center of their lifetime project, receive significant institutional pressure to shift priorities and modes of thinking. They are expected to trust modern academic writing over and above the claims of the primary sources, assuming that modern professors are wise, detached, knowledgeable critical thinkers capable of disentangling valuable intuitions from the net of “pre-modern” and/or “native” dogma, superstition, and lack of critical/historical reflection. We should not be insensitive to the fact that it is difficult enough to study Buddhist philosophy at a high level even while receiving support, encouragement, and a clear indication of its value. Studying it while receiving a constant indication of its marginality is, however, disheartening, and may turn even the most enthusiastic young student into a jaded cynic feigning eloquence well beyond one’s understanding of the subject-matter—just so as to “fit in.”

Monasteries and Buddhist universities, even those which allow for and nourish one’s growth as a Buddhist thinker, are not always easily accessible to all; nor are they public spaces broadly recognized as offering legitimate (and relevant) forms of contemporary enquiry. Just as there are public spaces for students to grow as anthropologists or analytical philosophers, there should be similar spaces for someone to grow as a Buddhist thinker—even if the person cannot or does not wish to enter a monastic institution.

Institutional pressure on students is sometimes, perhaps even often, a brutal matter of economics—such as when a student has to apply for a grant and is expected to advertise novelty at all costs. Can one genuinely keep writing such grants for a lifetime without one’s initial sense of direction being lost? The problem is arguably affecting the humanities as a whole, since, it seems to me, the “novelty/discovery/original contribution” model might primarily come from the hard sciences, and affects the existence of the humanities as an independent form of enquiry even capable of reflecting on the value and proper context of science (the paradoxical assumption seems to be that science is the best form of empirical observation and everyone should simply accept this without any reflection).

Even more significantly, the pressure to adopt a “critical” stance is enormous, where “thinking critically” often means criticizing what one has not yet understood or mastered, with the same gusto and sneering of a sadist vivisectioning a frog. Adopting a detached stance, without genuine intellectual conviction, is an obvious rhetorical shortcut to make one’s writing appear “academic,” and sadly my own experience shows that this shortcut is wholeheartedly adopted even by a number of students who will then quickly disown it in private. Is it desirable, though, to encourage this form of intellectual schizophrenia? Not that “critical thinking” is itself undesirable, but there is great difference between understanding what it means (i.e., a type of thoughtful and open-ended reflection) and posing as an academic by gratuitously criticizing the subject matter of one’s research.<sup>2</sup> I would argue that someone who understands what “critical thinking” means would not work under the false assumption that traditional Buddhist scholars are or have been incapable of thinking critically.

Precisely because I suspect institutional pressure may adversely affect the minds of prospective Buddhist thinkers, I think it is the greatest threat to the study of Buddhist philosophy: it threatens it from the inside in the most vital sense of the term. Perhaps even unwittingly, modern institutions compel researchers to work under the premise that Buddhist philosophy is “wrong”; at least “wrong” enough that all the tools to be employed for its study must be of a Western heritage.<sup>3</sup>

This paper, however, is primarily meant as constructive criticism. There does exist a long and remarkable tradition of scholarship on Buddhist thought (primarily thanks to philologists), and some contemporary developments could offer valuable opportunities to create more serene spaces and thoughtful engagement with Buddhist philosophy.

### **INSTITUTIONAL LOCALES FOR BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY: AN ARGUMENT IN FAVOR OF TEXTUAL STUDIES**

A positive development in the study of Buddhist thought is the general move away from what could appear as institutional segregation of sorts, where departments of philosophy and “professional” philosophers would have little to do with anything apart from so-called Western (i.e., European-American) philosophies. No doubt the increased integration of Asian philosophy within the horizon of, say, analytical philosophy, is commendable. More than that—it is perhaps a matter of common sense that there is no possible justification for excluding Asian philosophies from such institutional spaces.

That said, one may also wish to consider what this integration means, and how it happens; and whether something could be improved or profitably expanded upon. One relatively straightforward problem that may arise when integrating Buddhist philosophy in the framework of modern philosophy departments is: how to also ensure that students go through the (to my mind very much necessary) training in the primary source languages? This is, indeed, a purely administrative/institutional problem. Of course, it is possible to acquire some generic notions about Buddhist philosophy even by relying on Buddhist literature translated in English. Yet I do not think that an in-depth study of any area of Buddhist philosophy is (at least at this point in time) possible without becoming proficient in at least one Buddhist source language. The primary reason is rather simple—translations of Buddhist philosophical texts are after all rather scarce (even a foundational text like the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* does not exist in a complete translation from the Sanskrit). Furthermore, the level of the available translations varies considerably, as does the terminology employed to translate recurrent technical terms; often, the terminological choices are philosophically very specified and could reasonably become occasions for philosophical and exegetical debates in their own right, and we should, I think, avoid this tendency towards meta-philosophical complications. Understanding key philosophical terms is unquestionably affected by the quality of their translation.



A simple solution would be to have some amount of collaboration with departments that offer training in the primary source languages and in reading Buddhist philosophical texts in those languages. This should be easily achievable. For those wishing to specialize in Buddhist philosophy, I am convinced that language training should be the first and foremost prerequisite.

Setting up a sensible curriculum for prospective students also poses some challenges. Students who wish to focus on Indian Buddhist philosophy should receive sufficient Indological training, i.e., become acquainted with some of the background taken for granted by Buddhist philosophical texts (*vyākaraṇa*, *abhidharma*, etc.). They should also become sufficiently perceptive of the nuances of the language by studying literary genres other than the purely philosophical, such as *sūtras*, poetry, etc.

Programs offering textual studies are crucial for the survival of reliable research in Buddhist thought. The task of creative philosophy may (to an extent) do away with plausible exegesis, dismissing it as being of purely historical/antiquarian value. Yet this should be made clear: if those who do not mind using Buddhist philosophical texts merely as boxes of new exciting philosophical tools are not interested in whether those “tools” were at all intended by the texts they draw them from, they cannot claim to be producing plausible exegesis. The reply that the difference between “creative philosophy” and plausible exegesis is not so clear-cut is fine, but only in the abstract. There are cases where some lines of exegesis can be very safely dismissed as implausible on philological grounds; this view does not entail being fastidiously nitpicky, but simply reading the texts with a modicum of respect and attention (some interpretations can be discarded as little more than syntactical misreadings, which are sadly more frequent than what one may expect).

This brings to mind another consideration: Buddhist philosophical texts studied in a modern (i.e., “Western”) setting tend to become ornaments of an already established project. Rather than being strong voices of their own, having significant continuities with the concerns that still form the backbone of the Buddhist tradition, they are transplanted into an (I would say, inhospitable) atmosphere of no-rebirth, materialist scientism, neuroscience, and other concerns that are as alien to the texts as they are alienating to much of the tradition within which the texts have been transmitted. They are small ornamental plants, quickly forgotten in the background of some enthusiastic discussion about something else entirely.

### **AN ALTERNATIVE NETWORK OF LIKE-MINDED INSTITUTIONS**

Luckily, Asian universities are on the rise; and among them, several universities located in countries wherein Buddhism was or still is a strong cultural and intellectual force. This presents a great opportunity for the Buddhist tradition; not only could it be integrated within indigenous new models somewhat independent of (or at least not subservient to) Western approaches, but even more significantly, it could help rethink and redefine what a university is in the first

place and what university education is meant to provide. Perhaps this could even help save the contemporary university system from the impending self-annihilation it seems headed towards.

Unfortunately, in Asia too institutions tend to disastrously follow an Anglo-American model of administration, evaluation, ranking, and so forth. The disaster is not in the model itself, but in the conformity and subservience; in the assumption that local cultures and traditions are incapable of generating alternative models more suited to local conditions and needs (such as favoring long-term assimilation of the subject matter over quick results in terms of publication output). Changing this situation is possible, by creating a network of collaboration between like-minded institutions, so that Buddhist textual studies may thrive independently of the dubious game of rankings and eloquent yet vacuous publish-or-perish models that so tragically affect higher education through the medium of English. After at least a century of academic study of Buddhism there are thousands of publications with catchy titles, yet very few translations of foundational Buddhist texts; despite the increase of electronic resources and accessibility of texts, achievements like De La Vallée Poussin’s work on the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* seem unthinkable for most present-day university employees. Working “horizontally,” though, Buddhist Studies programs may to some extent even escape or bypass the higher administrative levels that form their present-day straitjackets, or at least gain greater intellectual freedom.

### **OLD HABITS**

Long-standing Buddhist approaches to education can and perhaps should be integrated into the didactics of Buddhist philosophy in contemporary universities (why should *everything* come from Europe and from the Christian educational traditions?). For example, chanting Buddhist philosophical texts in Sanskrit,<sup>4</sup> Pāli, Tibetan, or Classical Chinese. This simple act of repeatedly chanting aloud brings the student of Buddhist philosophy in tune with the purpose of the text, with its intended usage and manner of assimilation, and with its structure and performative elements. Even a few minutes of daily chanting can have a drastic impact on one’s learning experience, and give at least some of the flavor of what these texts are (they are not modern treatises of analytical philosophy, which are not written so as to be suitable for chanting; Buddhist root treatises are, one could say, philosophical “songs,” or at least “chants,” and reading a song in one’s mind without ever hearing the melody is not the same as learning how to sing it).

There is no reason to forget or marginalize Buddhist traditional didactics in favor of Western approaches. Those who agree that Buddhist philosophical texts should be integrated into the curriculum of modern philosophy departments may have no problem in agreeing that some features of non-Western didactics may also be integrated within a university setting. If the content need not be only Western, the same applies to the didactic approaches, and one may decide on a case-by-case basis rather than starting from a priori assumptions of cultural superiority.

## AGAINST EARLY INTERDISCIPLINARITY

Interdisciplinarity may be very fruitful when the researcher is familiar with both the disciplines that he/she is employing: in other words—later. It is not reasonable to expect that a student will effectively learn Buddhist philosophy, with its necessary background and source languages, while being forced to absorb gender studies, comparative religions, and whichever fashionable technicality may encourage eloquence and “professionalism” at the expense of substance and understanding. I think it is very important to ensure that programs that offer basic training in language and textual studies still exist and are supported, without bullying them into the endless labyrinth of “Buddhism and . . .” where one ends up studying anything else but Buddhism and yet ends up passing as an expert in the field.

## COLLABORATION

Another positive development in the past few decades has been the increased number of collaborations between scholars with significantly different backgrounds. For Jay Garfield, Tibetan traditional scholars have been “colleagues,” not “informants”; this collegiality has resulted in philosophically well-informed vistas of what contemporary Tibetan thinkers may have to say on, for example, key points of Madhyamaka thought. Another type of collaboration is that between those coming primarily from a contemporary philosophical training and philosophically minded philologists: thus we now have an excellent guide to Nāgārjuna’s thought in the form of Siderits and Katsura’s translation and commentary on the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*.<sup>5</sup>

The increased frequency of these collaborations allows for a level of optimism, and may result in better opportunities for research in Buddhist philosophy that is both well-grounded in the source texts and philosophically engaged, taking traditional exegesis seriously in an atmosphere of non-competitive intellectual dialogue. It is, however, yet early to see the extent to which these positive results may have an impact on institutional thinking and on the organization of modern universities.

## BUDDHISM IN THE UNIVERSITY AND OUTSIDE: CREATING A MEANINGFUL INTERFACE

Buddhism is still important, in different ways, to a large section of human society. A sensible way to ensure support and visibility for Buddhist Studies, and for the study of Buddhist philosophy therein, is to create workable interfaces with the society outside of the university. By “workable” I mean that such interfaces should be fruitful for both parties involved.

For example, opening up classes for auditors is a simple way to allow interaction with larger segments of society. Personally, I have found this to be extremely valuable. Auditors participate without the pressure of a clear-cut career program, and occasionally with a clearer and keener interest in the subject matter than what we find in regular students (alas). From this perspective too, their presence helps create a healthier learning environment.

Going back to chanting: chanting sessions can be didactically relevant for both specialized researchers in Buddhist studies, as well as for Buddhist practitioners from outside of the university. This added interest should not be brushed aside: when we compare this with the integration of, say, sanitized/secularized “mindfulness” sessions, one could argue that sessions of chanting achieve almost the same purpose, i.e., integrating a key traditional practice and improving the student’s ability to focus, while being at the same time truer to the tradition and even less religiously charged (for those participants who do not want them to be so, they function as “mere” linguistic training).

At this point, I consider the simple act of including chanting sessions in the didactics of Buddhist philosophy as a symbol of intellectual freedom: “decolonizing the mind” from the clutches of modernist distortions, from cynicism towards the texts, and from the uniformly Western flavor of contemporary university education. Most importantly, it is a symbol, and a performative enactment, of the relationship between memory and understanding, scholastic training and *Buddhist* philosophical reflection.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## NOTES

1. Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*.
2. Or, by arguing for argument’s sake. On this, and on a possible Buddhist stance towards academic argumentation, see Stepień, “Do Good Philosophers Argue? A Buddhist Approach to Philosophy and Philosophy Prizes.”
3. A similar reflection has been applied to the social sciences by Dipesh Chakrabarty:

This engagement with European thought is also called forth by the fact that today the so-called European intellectual tradition is the only one alive in the social science departments of most, if not all, modern universities. I use the word “alive” in a particular sense. It is only within some very particular traditions of thinking that we treat fundamental thinkers who are long dead and gone not only as people belonging to their own times but also as though they were our own contemporaries. In the social sciences, these are invariably thinkers one encounters within the tradition that has come to call itself “European” or “Western.” I am aware that an

entity called “the European intellectual tradition” stretching back to the ancient Greeks is a fabrication of relatively recent European history. Martin Bernal, Samir Amin, and others have justly criticized the claim of European thinkers that such an unbroken tradition ever existed or that it could even properly be called “European.” The point, however, is that, fabrication or not, this is the genealogy of thought in which social scientists find themselves inserted. Faced with the task of analyzing developments or social practices in modern India, few if any Indian social scientists or social scientists of India would argue seriously with, say, the thirteenth-century logician Gangesa or with the grammarian and linguistic philosopher Bartrihari (fifth to sixth centuries), or with the tenth- or eleventh-century aesthetician Abhinavagupta. Sad though it is, one result of European colonial rule in South Asia is that the intellectual traditions once unbroken and alive in Sanskrit or Persian or Arabic are now only matters of historical research for most—perhaps all—modern social scientists in the region. They treat these traditions as truly dead, as history. Although categories that were once subject to detailed theoretical contemplation and inquiry now exist as practical concepts, bereft of any theoretical lineage, embedded in quotidian practices in South Asia, contemporary social scientists of South Asia seldom have the training that would enable them to make these concepts into resources for critical thought for the present. And yet past European thinkers and their categories are never quite dead for us in the same way. South Asian(ist) social scientists would argue passionately with a Marx or a Weber without feeling any need to historicize them or to place them in their European intellectual contexts. Sometimes—though this is rather rare—they would even argue with the ancient or medieval or early-modern predecessors of these European theorists. (Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Post-Colonial Thought and Historical Difference – New Edition*, 5–6).

The implicit rationale for Chakrabarty’s qualified usage of terms such as “Western” may be similar to my own; whether one is convinced of the historical accuracy of a subdivision of world culture into “Western” and “Eastern,” this dichotomy informs the type of institutional thinking that I analyse in this paper.

4. See also Salvini, “Chanting the Abhidharma: A Didactic Tool for Modern Universities,” for a more elaborate discussion on chanting Sanskrit as a viable didactic tool.
5. Siderits and Katsura, *Nāgārjuna’s Middle Way: Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*.

## Reflecting on Buddhist Philosophy with Pierre Hadot

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In *The Paris Lectures*, phenomenologist Edmund Husserl tells us something startling. He writes, “First, anyone who seriously considers becoming a philosopher must once in his life withdraw into himself and then, from within attempt to destroy and rebuild all previous learning. Philosophy is the supremely personal affair of the one who philosophizes.”<sup>1</sup> In presenting the Cartesian meditation not as a historical anecdote explaining the origin of a particular path of argument, but as a vital practice that we are called upon to repeat within ourselves, Husserl here seems to broach a key concern of French philosopher Pierre Hadot,<sup>2</sup> to find in the history of philosophical practice, beyond the catalog of doctrines and arguments, a fully lived awakening of reason, or what Hadot, borrowing from the terminology of Loyola, calls “spiritual exercise.”

Hadot’s redeployment of Loyola’s conception within his own field, the study of ancient philosophy in the West, has had wide repercussions in recent years, eliciting new readings of ancients and moderns, European and Asian thinkers.<sup>3</sup> The study of Buddhist philosophy has not been immune to Hadot’s broad influence, for, indeed, he appears to suggest a way for us to overcome the incoherence of treating “Buddhist philosophy” as something alien to the Buddha’s teaching, defined by its therapeutic goal of achieving freedom from suffering. As a number of publications have already taken up varied aspects of Hadot’s thought in its possible relations to Buddhism,<sup>4</sup> my brief remarks here will be limited to a consideration of some of the themes of Hadot’s “Inaugural Discourse” pronounced at the Collège de France in 1983.<sup>5</sup>

In its brief span, the “Inaugural Discourse” surveys many of Hadot’s chief concerns. It is impossible for a specialist in Buddhist philosophy to read it without a strong sense of recognition on almost every page. This is so whether the topic be the allegorical nature of ancient autobiography, or philosophical wisdom as a “stranger” to the world, or, in respect to methodological issues, the challenges posed for the reconstruction of Hellenistic philosophy by the necessity of referring to Latin, as well as Arabic, sources—for Hadot’s remarks about this clearly resonate with difficulties we face in the study of Buddhist philosophy in respect to the relationship between Indian origins and later Chinese and Tibetan works. Above all, Hadot’s substantive reflections on the constitution of philosophical schools, and the figure of the sage, meditation, and the refinement of argument within them, offer distinct parallels to the shape of philosophy in India overall.<sup>6</sup> With this in mind, it will be useful to consider just one issue in connection with which several of these topics may be engaged, so as to illustrate something of the pertinence of Hadot’s approach for the study of Buddhist philosophy. We may ask, in respect to the traditions that concern us, just what counts as philosophical progress?

The question, of course, may appear paradoxical, for, as the historian of philosophy Martial Gueroult observed, philosophy, insofar as it stakes its claims on the abiding reality of things, involves a radical denial of history. To insist upon a “history of philosophy” becomes a negation of philosophy itself.<sup>7</sup> Referring to the Hellenistic schools, Hadot expresses a similar puzzle:

In each school, the doctrines and methodological principles were undisputed. To practice philosophy, in that period, was to choose a school, convert to its way of life and accept its doctrines. That is why the fundamental doctrines and rules governing lifestyle for Platonism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism did not change throughout antiquity. . . . That is not to say that theoretical reflection and elaboration were absent from philosophical life. However, such activity did not pertain to the doctrines themselves or to their methodological principles, but to the mode of demonstration and doctrinal systematization, and to secondary points of doctrine that were entailed but without unanimity within the school.<sup>8</sup>

That the conditions of development within Buddhist philosophy were in some respects similar may be illustrated with reference to the great figure in the history of Buddhist epistemology and logic, Dharmakīrti (ca. 600 CE).<sup>9</sup> Often considered a revolutionary thinker, after whom not only Buddhist philosophy, but Indian philosophy more broadly, came to be characterized by a rigorous adherence to and ongoing refinement of the “modes of demonstration” that he set forth, Dharmakīrti was nevertheless a *Buddhist* thinker, whose commitments to his school were fully explicit. This may be seen most clearly in his major work, the *Verse Commentary on Epistemology (Pramāṇavarttika)*, above all, in the chapter on the “Proof of Epistemology” (“Pramāṇasiddhi”), or, more exactly, the proof of the Buddha’s epistemologically authoritative status.

For Dharmakīrti, the sage to whom he adheres, the Buddha, is the veritable embodiment of genuine knowledge, and this may be established by putting his key doctrines to the test. More than this, the Buddha is forever *compassionate* and has not hoarded his liberating knowledge for himself alone, but has freely dispensed it to ameliorate the world. Much of the “Proof of Epistemology” chapter is therefore concerned to argue that the claims made for the Buddha’s compassion and knowledge are indeed warranted, in short that the “Four Noble Truths” that he proclaimed—suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path whereby this may be achieved—are supported by reason and not by revelation alone.

At the outset, however, some doubts about the nature of the Buddha’s compassion must be settled. For if we take compassion to be limited to the impulse to alleviate the physical pain of others during this lifetime alone, then we might well affirm the Buddha’s compassion without committing ourselves to much of the rest of his teaching, which asserts that suffering in fact belongs to minds and that these minds are processes continuing through innumerable lifetimes, thereby repeatedly suffering through rebirth and redeath. The Buddha’s compassion, it follows, derives its specific character from its embrace of the sufferings of limitless beings throughout those incalculable lives. It is, in fact, an expression of *omnibenevolence*, a quality not of ordinary mortals, but of divinity.<sup>10</sup> (One may bear in mind here Hadot’s remarks on the divinization of the sage in Western antiquity.<sup>11</sup>)

Given this characterization, the work of reason faces a hurdle, for, if the Buddhist project is to succeed, it must be warranted to hold that there are minds, not only bodies, and that these are continuous over the course of many bodily lives. Dharmakīrti is a philosopher, no mere dogmatist, precisely because he accepts this as a challenge to reason, to which he seeks to respond through reasoned arguments. It would take us beyond the requirements of this short essay to enter into the details of the arguments he presents, not to speak of their assessment. Our sole concern, rather, is to suggest that the pattern observed by Hadot in the case of the Hellenistic schools—that is to say, their adherence to the doctrine of a sage and their progressive cultivation of philosophical advancement within the ambit thereby defined—is precisely what we find here as well. Dharmakīrti emerges as a revolutionary conservative in the history

of philosophy, whose innovations impelled substantive progress in subsequent Indian and Buddhist philosophical practice, while simultaneously upholding the primacy of the Buddha and his cardinal teachings.

If, however, the trajectory of Dharmakīrti’s thinking is in this sense fundamentally conservative, then just what is the interest of his philosophical project to us? Would we not do better, if we wish to orient ourselves to Buddhist thought, to return to the sources of the tradition? Would this not offer a clearer path than the reasoned subtleties of Dharmakīrtian philosophy, where, as has been sometimes suggested, a major motivation is the polemical defense of Buddhism against its detractors?

To respond to such questions, I believe it worthwhile once again to attend to a suggestion from Hadot, in particular, his manner of defining “meditation” in ancient philosophy:

Græco-Roman philosophical meditation is an exercise that is purely rational, imaginative, or intuitive. . . . It is first and foremost the memorization and assimilation of the school’s fundamental doctrines and rules governing lifestyle. Thanks to this exercise, the worldview of one who endeavors to progress spiritually is totally transformed.<sup>12</sup>

Dharmakīrtian spiritual exercise, I would argue, came to play a similar role in later Indian Buddhism, a role that it continued to enjoy in Tibet. By presenting the essentials of the Buddha’s teaching as a rational and coherent whole, it served not only to prepare its adepts to defend their doctrine, but above all to put their own thought-worlds in order accordingly. As such, philosophical activity became the bridge joining doctrinal study to the practical exigencies of the Buddhist path.<sup>13</sup>

We must recall, as well, that Dharmakīrti’s project was just one of several major efforts within Indian Buddhism to elaborate a reasoned account of the Buddha’s thought. An understanding of the historical movement of Buddhist philosophy emerges when we take account of Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu, Śāntarakṣita, and others not only in respect to their individual contributions, but above all in relation to the dynamic tensions that arose through the effort to reconcile these and others thinkers with one another. Hadot’s remarks on the disaccord, within ancient Stoicism, between Chryssipus and Zeno and Cleanthes point to a similar phenomenon of creative opposition within the schools.<sup>14</sup>

This much will suffice, I believe, to suggest that Pierre Hadot’s thinking on Hellenistic philosophy may serve as a stimulus in our investigations of Buddhist philosophy and, indeed, Indian philosophy more broadly. Some points of caution, however, must also be borne in mind. It would be an error to see in the history of Buddhist thought too close an image of its possible Hellenistic parallels, for, although fruitful comparisons have been proposed between specific aspects of Buddhist philosophy and the doctrines and arguments of particular Hellenistic schools, the precise significance of these is often elusive.<sup>15</sup> In the case of Skepticism, above all, striking resemblances between

certain of the arguments we find in Sextus (ca. 160–210 CE) and those of his near-contemporary Nāgārjuna (second century CE) have been sometimes taken to demonstrate the likelihood of transmission between Hellenistic and Indic worlds, which were, after all, in communication with one another during the period concerned.<sup>16</sup> Whether transmission or parallel development is at stake, however, the peculiar character of each school remains irreducible. Whatever the analogies Buddhism may present in relation to Stoicism, Skepticism, or other Hellenistic philosophies, Hadot's emphasis on the integral constitution of the various schools, with their particular sages, lifestyles, and forms of wisdom, must, I think, be kept always in view. To insist that Siddhārtha and Socrates remain distinct figures, however, should not preclude the exploration of possible connections—whether historical or purely conceptual—among the diverse philosophical traditions their teachings spawned.

NOTES

1. Edmund Husserl, *The Paris Lectures*, trans. Peter Koestenbaum (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970), 3–4.
2. For Hadot's own appreciation of Husserl's reading of Descartes, in its relation to his thinking on classical philosophy, refer to Pierre Hadot, *La Philosophie comme manière de vivre: Entretiens avec Jeannie Carlier et Arnold I. Davidson* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2001), 124.
3. This is not the place for a detailed bibliography of Hadot-inspired scholarship. For a range of examples, see Stephen Clark, Michael McGhee, and Michael Chase, eds., *Philosophy as a Way of Life, Antients and Moderns: Essays in Honor of Pierre Hadot* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2013).
4. See, in particular, David V. Fiordalis, ed., *Buddhist Spiritual Practices: Thinking with Pierre Hadot on Buddhism, Philosophy, and the Path* (Berkeley: Mangalam Press, 2018), which includes a thorough bibliography.
5. Pierre Hadot, *Leçon inaugurale* (Paris: Collège de France, 1983) and reprinted many times since under various titles. The edition to which I refer here is: Pierre Hadot, *Éloge de la philosophie antique* (Paris: Éditions Allia, 2012). At this writing, I do not have at my disposal the English translation by Arnold Davidson and Paula Wissing, "Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse in Ancient Philosophy," in Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995). The passages that I have translated in the present article may therefore differ to some extent from the published English text.
6. Thus, for instance, the prolific Jain philosopher Haribhadrasūri (eighth or ninth century), in his *Compendium of the Six Worldviews (Śaddarśanasamuccaya)*, classifies the schools of thought he treats according to their divine promulgators (*deva*) and characteristic doctrines (*tattva*), the latter embracing both topics of argument and themes of meditation.
7. Martial Gueroult, *Histoire de l'Histoire de la Philosophie: I. En Occident, des origines jusqu'à Condillac* (Paris, Aubier, 1984), 13: "On se demande alors comment la philosophie peut être à la fois une vérité, par définition intemporelle, et une suite de doctrines se succédant dans le temps et s'engloutissant dans un passé révolu."
8. Hadot, *Éloge*, 38–39.
9. Scholarship on Dharmakīrti has assumed considerable proportions in recent years. For a survey with copious references, refer to Vincent Eltschinger, "Dharmakīrti," *Revue internationale de philosophie* 3 (2010): 397–440. On the specific subject-matter briefly summarized below, see Eli Franco, *Dharmakīrti on Compassion and Rebirth*, Wiener Studien zur Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde 38 (Vienna: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien Universität Wien, 1997).
10. On the Buddha's compassion as a "maximal" property, refer to Paul J. Griffiths, *On Being Buddha: The Classical Doctrine of*

*Buddhahood* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), ch. 3.

11. Pierre Hadot, "La figure du sage dans l'Antiquité gréco-latine," in Pierre Hadot, *Discours et mode de vie philosophique* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2014), 177–98.
12. Hadot, *Éloge*, 35.
13. For a much fuller discussion of "spiritual exercise" in relation to the Dharmakīrtian tradition, see my "Spiritual Exercise' and Buddhist Epistemologists in India and Tibet," in Steven Emmanuel, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Buddhist Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2013), 270–89.
14. Hadot, *Éloge*, 39.
15. See, for instance, Christopher W. Gowans, *Philosophy of the Buddha* (London/New York: Routledge, 2003), and my "Stoics and Bodhisattvas," in Clark, McGhee and Chase, eds., *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 99–115.
16. The possibility of connections between the ancient Sceptics and India has been the subject of much speculation. See, for instance, Thomas McEveilly, *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies* (New York: Allworth Press, 2002); Adrian Kuzminski, *Pyrrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism* (Lanham MD: Lexington, 2008). A very thorough account of parallels in Buddhist Madhyamaka and classical Skepticism is set forth in Matthew James Neale, "Madhyamaka and Pyrrhonism: doctrinal, linguistic and historical parallels and interactions between Madhyamaka Buddhism & Hellenic Pyrrhonism," Ph.D. Thesis, The University of Oxford, 2014. The publication of this meticulous work has been impeded following the author's tragic, premature passing in 2017.

## Some Suggestions for Future Directions of the Study of Buddhist Philosophy

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There are many ways in which Buddhist philosophy can be studied, and my following remarks should be understood as suggestions for pursuing one direction that seems to me particularly fruitful. I believe there are three areas where further development would be particularly helpful. The first of these is concerned with texts, the second with the relation between texts and the concepts they express, and the final one primarily with concepts.

### 1. EDITIONS AND TRANSLATIONS

Even though a number of high-quality translations of central Buddhist philosophical texts have come out over the last couple of decades, it is evident that we are still a long way away not just from comprehensive coverage, but even from coverage of much of the basics. To use my own main area of research, Madhyamaka, as an example, none of the canonical Indian commentaries on Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyakārikā* by Buddhapālita, Bhāviveka, and Candrakīrti are currently available in complete English translations. (An English translation of Buddhapālita's commentary by Ian Coghan is forthcoming from Wisdom Publication). Several chapters of Bhāviveka's commentary have been translated, and the whole of Candrakīrti's commentary is available in partial translations in French, German, and English. Matters do not look much better if we look beyond commentaries on the *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*. We do not have complete translations of other key works such as Candrakīrti's commentaries on

Nāgārjuna's *Śūnyatāsaptati* and Āryadeva's *Catuḥśataka*, or of Avalokitavrata's subcommentary on Bhāviveka's commentary on Nāgārjuna.

Such translations are necessary not simply to aid those researchers without or with only limited command of Sanskrit and Tibetan. A high-quality translation is much more than simply a word-for-word rendering of the Sanskrit or Tibetan into English. The translator's task is more complex; amongst many other things, they have to decide between different possible readings of the text, identify quotations, determine when the author and when an opponent is speaking, analyze the dialectical progression of the text, and describe parts of the ancient Indian philosophical or factual background necessary for understanding the argument. As such, any useful translation will already fulfill some functions of a commentary, even though it will not usually provide a full-scale analysis of the text's argument and an assessment of its philosophical plausibility.

Translations thus occupy a middle position between critical editions of texts and high-level philosophical commentaries on them. Without a reliable philological basis, the translator's work is hardly feasible, and a philosophical commentary requires the presence of the basic commentarial functions a translation provides.

It is unclear how we should ever be able to arrive at a reliable understanding even of Indian Madhyamaka (to say nothing about other Madhyamaka traditions based on the Indian one) in the absence of reliable editions and high-quality translations of the majority of key Indian Madhyamaka texts still extant. As such, one requirement for the progress of the study of Madhyamaka in the West (and, given that similar considerations apply to other Buddhist traditions, a requirement for the progress of the study of Buddhist philosophy more generally) is to increase the amount of key texts currently covered by reliable editions and translations.

Given the complexity of the texts involved, it may be that tackling some of these translations as committees (as has been done, for example, in the translation of Tsong kha pa's *Lam rim chen mo*) might be the best way forward. Apart from speeding up the translation process, the result also benefits from the joint expertise of a community of scholars for resolving difficult points.

## 2. INTEGRATED TEXTUAL AND CONCEPTUAL PRESENTATION

Another set of resources that would greatly facilitate the further study of Buddhist philosophy is an integrated framework for the presentation of texts and concepts. What I mean by this can be most easily described by a simple example. Consider a verse from Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, such as 24:18 (*yaḥ prañīyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tāṃ pracakṣmahe | sā prajñaptir upādāya pratīpat saiva madhyamā* ||, "Dependent origination we declare to be emptiness. It (emptiness) is a dependent concept; just that is the middle path."<sup>1</sup> There is a plethora of material on how to make sense of this verse both in the traditional Buddhist commentarial

literature as well as in the works of Buddhist studies from the last century or so. Reading texts from either of these two groups, the reader will be made familiar with some of the various ways of understanding Nāgārjuna's connecting dependent origination, emptiness, and conceptual dependence. What would be extremely useful, however, is to compile as far as possible a complete collection of the different ways in which this verse has been understood by interpreters ancient and modern, together with a collection of the relevant bibliographic references, and to do this not just for this very famous verse, but for all the 450 verses in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. This would allow researchers to move from pieces of the text to its conceptual content, together with references to the authorities ancient and modern that underpin the reading of this particular piece of text in this particular way. If this could be carried out for more than one text, we could then envisage going in the opposite direction, from a specific piece of conceptual content to a piece of text that (as interpreted by a specific authority) expresses this content. One such piece of conceptual content expressed by *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 24:18, for example, is the identification of dependent origination and emptiness. We could then imagine a kind of conceptual index, one entry of which would be "identity of dependent origination and emptiness," and which would direct the reader to all the passages in the texts covered by the index that stated (or were interpreted by someone to have stated) that dependent origination and emptiness are identical, including *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 24:18.

This opens up the possibility of moving back and forth between texts and concepts, beginning with a piece of text, moving to the concepts it discusses, and moving back from there into different texts; or beginning with a specific concept, moving from there to supporting textual sources, and from these to other concepts also supported by them.

The best way of producing and presenting this information would be in electronic form, not just for facilitating access, but also because the conceptual and bibliographical part of the resource would require continuous updating, incorporating new information as more research on specific texts and their interpretations is published.

It should be evident that the production of such a resource faces a number of challenges. The level of expertise required to provide the necessary linkage between texts and concepts is high, and the process itself is relatively time-consuming, especially if a larger group of texts dealing with technically difficult material is considered. At the same time, such work falls outside the familiar forms of academic output such as monographs and articles, making it difficult for younger academics who need to build up their list of publications to participate. Fortunately, there are at least some examples of electronic resources where this kind of challenge has been overcome. One example is the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, which has attracted a number of highly qualified collaborators in part by the fact that authorship of an article on a particular subject-matter now often signals recognition as an authority on the topic concerned.

The general usefulness of such a resource for developing a reliable, synoptic account of what Buddhist philosophers

had to say on specific topics that is not hindered by restriction to a single text or set of texts is evident. More specifically, however, one area where the potential of an integrated presentation of the textual and conceptual dimension of Buddhist philosophical works is immediately obvious is for constructing a conceptual history or *Begriffsgeschichte*<sup>2</sup> of specific concepts in Buddhist philosophy. It is common knowledge that such central concepts as *svabhāva*, *satyadvaya*, *vijñāna*, or *ākāra* (to give just a few random examples) are used in a variety of ways by different Buddhist philosophical authors. In order to describe how this usage changes throughout the development of the Buddhist philosophical tradition, it is essential to be able to present key passages where the relevant term is used, together with a reliable account of what the term means in this context. If the resource sketched above covered a sufficient number of texts spread throughout the history of Buddhist thought, it would provide the perfect starting place for compiling such a history of technical terms in Buddhist thought.

### 3. LINKAGE WITH CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHICAL DISCUSSION

Once we have a reliable set of editions and translations, and a clear idea how the texts relate to the concepts they express, there is one more piece of the puzzle still missing: we need to show how the ideas and concepts we find in Buddhist texts *matter*. I am aware that not every scholar of Buddhist studies sees this as a necessary requirement. If we regard Buddhist philosophy strictly as a part of the history of ideas, what we should do, it seems, is to describe the thoughts and arguments of the ancient Indian thinkers as clearly and with as much historical contextualization as we can. Whether their premises are plausible or whether their arguments are sound are questions the historian does not need to have an opinion on. While the intellectual merit of this approach is beyond dispute, and the insight it has produced into the historical background of Buddhist thought is considerable, it also strikes me as incomplete. I believe we need to take one further step, and move from Buddhist philosophy as *history of ideas* to Buddhist philosophy as *philosophy*.<sup>3</sup>

The contrast between these two approaches can be illustrated by considering the example of the history of technology. When historians study some ancient technological device there are two different approaches they could take. One is to describe in as much detail as the historical sources permit the structure of the device, what it could do, and how it might have related to other devices that were extant at the time. The other is to do all this, and then ask the question: Would the device have worked, i.e., was it able to do what ancient sources tell us it could do? If the information on the structure of the device is incomplete, the historian might try to build a working model that restricts itself to the kind of technological resources that might have been available at the time. Or, in addition to this kind of historical reconstruction, one might try to focus on what the device was supposed to be able to do, and construct a version of it that possesses the same functionality, but uses resources that only became available at a later time. The application of the example to the study

of Buddhist philosophy is evident. The first kind of historian corresponds to one who is interested in arguments simply as parts of the history of ideas. The second kind's ultimate concern is the question: Does the argument work? In order to answer this question, he might pursue two approaches. The first, the route of logical reconstruction, tries to make the structure of the argument found in historical texts as clear as possible in order to be able to assess its validity and soundness. The second, which we might call the route of contemporary amplification, explores the possibility that although a given argument philosopher *x* presents for conclusion *y* we find in the texts is either unsuccessful or weak, there may be a different way of arguing for *y*, one that draws on resources that would not have been available to philosopher *x*, but that also do not stand in conflict with other assumptions the philosopher made. These are resources where we can be relatively confident that if philosopher *x* had been presented with them, he would have regarded them as supportive of his own approach.

I believe that the overall aim of the provision of reliable editions and translations of texts, the development of a clear account of how the texts and the concepts they express are linked, and the study of the Buddhist philosophical tradition as history of ideas is the logical reconstruction and contemporary amplification of Buddhist philosophical arguments. It also seems to me that this conception of the Buddhist philosophical enterprise is fairly close to what the commentators of the ancient Indian Buddhist scholastic tradition were aiming at. They certainly tried to give a faithful interpretation of the author's intent, but always within the horizon of connecting what they took to be this intent with the philosophical interests and concerns of their contemporary audience. This is, I believe, the right model for the Buddhist philosopher to follow.

#### NOTES

1. Siderits and Katsura, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way. The Mūlamadhyamakārikā*.
2. For example, along the lines of Gerhard Oberhammer's *Terminologie der frühen philosophischen Scholastik in Indien*.
3. One clear example of what I have in mind by the latter is Jay Garfield's 2015 *Engaging Buddhism*.

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## Practicing Buddhist Philosophy as Philosophy

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Scholarship on Buddhist philosophy<sup>1</sup> has made impressive progress in the past fifty years. Despite the still unsurpassed contributions of such giants as Thomas and Caroline Rhys Davids, Stanislaw Schayer, Louis de la Vallée Poussin, Theodore Stcherbatsky, Eugene Obermiller, and Étienne Lamotte, among many others, what Buddhism has achieved since 1970 will likely be recognized in future historiographical research as a major advance in the scientific task of understanding the historical development and philosophical significance of the Buddhist tradition. Today's Buddhist scholars owe a debt of gratitude to those who have not only made this tradition more accessible by providing editions, translations, and studies, but who have also made possible the very production of scholarship by pressuring institutions to create research and teaching positions that guarantee the long-term presence of Buddhist scholarship within the academy—hence the continually growing interest in a still largely neglected voice of world philosophy.

And yet, this sense of gratitude should not prevent Buddhist philosophers from acknowledging that the field is, in many ways, still in its infancy. This awareness is all the more important if they want to consider the next steps to take on behalf of Buddhist philosophy: to evolve from the stage of the recovery of texts and ideas to the stage of participation in the conversation of world philosophy. While scholars of ancient Greek philosophy can look into critical editions, dozens of translations, and multiple interpretative theories and syntheses for a single author, Buddhist scholars do not even have full translations available of fundamental texts of the tradition: to restrict the focus to Indian Buddhism only, think of Bhāviveka's major works, of all the works of Dharmakīrti (despite his being one of the current foci of Buddhist scholarship), or of later authors (Jñānaśrīmitra, Ratnākaraśānti, etc.). When translations do exist, they are often scattered in bits and pieces in journals or book chapters, or they exist in certain languages and not in others. The lamentation of Edward Conze about the lack of a full translation of Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā* in one language and one volume ("what a higgledy-piggledy way of dealing with a great classic all this is!"),<sup>2</sup> though more than fifty years old, still rings true to this day. Even when we are blessed enough to find a translation, it is not necessarily in the language in which the scholar is supposed to teach, thus prohibiting her from using it in class and introducing students to the text. And, of course, one cannot be picky about the quality of the translation, as every reader of Buddhist philosophy (in English at least—and English is probably the best served European language in this regard) is well aware that translations of Buddhist texts are sometimes plagued by so many mistakes and stylistic infelicities (the famous "Buddhist Hybrid English") that they are almost impossible to use. When, for instance, will we finally get an updated, elegant, and full English

translation of such a fundamental (and delightful) text as the *Milindapañha*?

Translations are, no doubt, critical in enabling a disciplinary field to evolve from a space reserved for specialists to a field open to other scholars and available for teaching—and thus to a larger educated audience. Philosophy has thrived through translations—from the *translatio studiorum* that saw philosophical works in Greek translated and preserved in Latin, Arabic, and Persian, to the translations of works across European languages and between European languages and Japanese in modern times; would Wittgenstein ever have revolutionized philosophy if his *Tractatus* had not been translated from German into English almost immediately? If Buddhist philosophy wants to be a part of philosophy, its texts need to be available to a larger circle of readers than those who can access Sanskrit, Pāli, Chinese, Tibetan, Japanese, or Korean texts in the original. And for this to be possible, institutional support is essential, which is why it is crucial for philosophy departments to recognize the demanding and tedious work that philosophical translations represent—work that is often as *philosophical* as new and original works, despite not receiving the same prestige or weight in tenure files or promotions. One translation has often done much more for the field than countless monographs, now long forgotten.

But the translation of texts has a necessary condition that is almost never fulfilled in the field of Buddhist philosophy: the availability of critical editions. Again, a simple comparison with ancient Greek philosophy or the massive critical editorial work that specialists of nineteenth- or twentieth-century philosophers accomplished (whether for Hegel, Nietzsche, or Husserl) can only make a Buddhist scholar envious of the existence of so much reliably edited material. It goes without saying that often Buddhist scholars do not even have the luxury of hoping for critical editions, since so many texts of the tradition have forever disappeared in the original language. But we also know that manuscripts exist, whether in India, Tibet, or China, that are awaiting the administrative or political green light, or the development of intellectual interests and efforts on the part of scholars, to make it to the academic showroom.

These considerations are far from being trivial if we want to think seriously about the academic and intellectual future of Buddhist philosophy. They nevertheless belong more to what Sheldon Pollock calls "philology" (with all the positive attributes that Pollock bestows upon that term) than to philosophy proper. In my opinion, there will be no good Buddhist philosophy without good Buddhist philology, but, surely, a necessary condition is not a sufficient one.

Philosophy—at least when it explicitly claims to be rooted in a tradition of texts, thought, and practice (that is, not only of textual transmission—*āgama*—but also of intellectual and spiritual comprehension—*adhigama*—two aspects claimed by many Buddhist authors, which could arguably also be ascribed to Western philosophy)—is not just constituted by philological research. Otherwise philosophy would run the risk of cultivating a relation with its past on the model of an "antiquarian history," as Nietzsche puts it. It would consist in preserving the texts of the tradition



in their proper contexts, shielding them from the present, as traces of a lost past that is worthy of being preserved in its own right. If we want Buddhist philosophers today to be more than curators, they need to invest in another dimension of philosophy as well, a dimension where the concern with the texts of the tradition does not stifle the critical life of thought.

In a sense, there is an aspect of philosophy that is radically ahistorical: a philosophical thought should be able to engage with texts, ideas, arguments from the past as if they were not from the past, but belonged to a sort of eternal present we can always participate in. This present is the present of arguments and claims to truth, in which we can read Nāgārjuna's verses or Vasubandhu's arguments and wonder whether their arguments hold true or not, despite their being from another time and another place. This presupposition of a philosophically eternal present grounds the very possibility of taking these ideas and arguments seriously enough to wonder whether they are true, convincing, believable, or plainly false. To practice philosophy is precisely to keep alive this capacity of conversing with texts and arguments from other times and other places; it is what turns the *āgama*, the textual basis, into an *adhigama*, an engagement with the ideas of those texts that retrieves their claims to truth and their theoretical and practical potentialities. This is why I would argue that practicing Buddhist philosophy as philosophy, and not simply treating it as a relic of the past, remains true to Buddhist philosophy itself, as well as to philosophy more broadly.

Certainly, there is no shortage of views in (academic) philosophy opposed to such an approach. The historicist trend would tend to reduce all ideas and arguments to context—as if that were even possible—and to suspend judgment about the actual worth or significance of the texts and arguments. On the opposite side, there is a (once ubiquitous, but now less widespread) view that considers anything remotely resembling historical work to be outside the scope of philosophy, and philosophy to begin only when we leave the history of philosophy behind.

It seems to me that the future of Buddhist philosophy hinges on avoiding the historicist Scylla and the anti-historicist Charybdis, and on navigating with the compass of *āgama* and *adhigama*. A Buddhist philosophy that would dispense with the meticulous and tedious confrontation and interpretation of the texts of the tradition (*āgama*) along the philological lines mentioned above would be hard pressed to justify its very name. But scholarship that would restrict itself to archival work would hardly be more than intellectual history, missing proper philosophical comprehension (*adhigama*). Guardians of the *āgama* sometimes turn out to be the censors of *adhigama*.

It is this "philosophically eternal present" that, it seems to me, requires a new specific effort on the part of Buddhist philosophers. For too long Buddhist scholarship has considered Buddhist philosophy as an object of study—though, of course, it was necessary for scholars to explore texts that they did not know, remote in time and cultural circumstances, and subject them to study through rigorous

academic methodology and standards. This effort certainly should never stop. As we know from the example of traditional exegetical traditions in Buddhist countries and from Western scholarship on the history of philosophy, it is an infinite task, always renewable and always promising. But it is time as well for those who consider themselves philosophers to shift their attitude towards Buddhist philosophy from an "objective" approach to a "subjective" one; that is, to occupy Buddhist texts, ideas, and arguments as subjects so as to use them in producing philosophical thought. Such an idea was expressed masterfully by M. P. Rege regarding the situation of Indian philosophy, but it would perfectly fit the picture of Buddhist philosophy as well:

In a way [Indian philosophy] is already in the arena but only as a passive object of examination and assessment. What is necessary is for it to assume the role of a subject actively criticizing and evaluating western philosophical theories from a perspective yielded by its own philosophical standpoints.<sup>3</sup>

This movement has already begun, and I will not make the mistake of mentioning any names, since mentioning is always a matter of selecting and forgetting. Many talented individuals have already changed the face of Buddhist scholarship through their philosophical writings. Nevertheless, it seems difficult to point at contributions that have changed the general philosophical conversation in any of the major specialized fields in philosophy. The fault certainly falls in part on philosophers who neglect, if not frankly and openly despise, non-Western philosophies. But it seems appropriate to be self-critical as well and recognize that Buddhist philosophers might not yet have taken the steps to really produce new, independent works that would alter general philosophical conversations. Inhabiting Buddhist philosophy as creative subjects means that Buddhist philosophers should engage in such different fields as epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and (likely less obviously) aesthetics and political philosophy, so as not only to add their contributions to the existing conversation, but also (as great philosophers have always done) to change the conversation and criticize in turn the presuppositions of such fields, even the very constitutions and definitions of those fields.

These two approaches can be understood as two strategies that are available for those who would want to practice Buddhist philosophy as philosophy: one we could call "the appeasement strategy," the other the "confrontation strategy." The "philosophically eternal present" can be more or less extended (as we know since Augustine at least, the present is not a point in time, but has a certain extension), and the whole question is how long we want it to be. One strategy is to make every effort to speak to philosophers trained in and reading exclusively Western philosophy: to speak their language, to use their categories, and to make the same references they do. With this approach, the philosophically eternal present remains restricted mainly to the questions and concepts of Western philosophy, which dictates the extension of that present. This has been the dominant strategy for Buddhist philosophers and has

proved successful to the extent that Buddhist philosophy has evolved into a field that is now recognized in philosophy departments and professional philosophical organizations.

But one can always wonder whether the result has been as successful as it could be. If we acknowledge that Buddhist philosophy remains largely marginalized, there is still probably some room for improvement. Another issue with this approach is that it seems to convey a certain lingering fragrance of colonialism. Western philosophy still remains in command with its questions, its concepts, and its frame(s) of reference. Certainly, there is no discussion without those, and so the point is never to dream of a discussion that could do away with them, as hermeneutics has long taught us, and as the Buddha's *suttas* often exemplify. The question is rather—to follow the trend above—how to extend the philosophical present so as to welcome new questions, concepts, and references. The second strategy puts its effort in this endeavor by empowering Buddhist philosophy as a real subject that is not merely, again, the passive object of investigation of Western scholarship, which would maintain Buddhist philosophy in the role of the respondent or, worse, the defendant. It encourages Buddhist philosophy to take on the role of questioning Western philosophy's concepts and frameworks. It is not enough, for instance, to interrogate Buddhist philosophy about the absence of the concept of free will in its ethical developments. It is also necessary to wonder why this concept appears in its full force in the Latin Middle Ages and acquired such a central role in Western ethics and moral psychology—its presence might be as much of an issue as its absence. Conversely, the detailed development of theories of ethical and moral cultivation in Buddhist philosophy finds very little equivalent in Western philosophy, which is more interested in the analysis of moral principles (i.e., Ethical Theory). Is there here a blind spot in Western philosophy that Buddhist philosophy could help point out and fill in? The concept of the path, so central to so many Buddhist philosophical developments, finds few parallels in Western philosophy: Could Buddhist philosophy perhaps help provide new ways to frame philosophical fields?

Such a strategy will be possible only if we are patient enough to listen to Buddhist texts and hear what they have to say from their own perspectives, as opposed to interrogating them with our own questions. Certainly, this approach has been extensively criticized from the standpoint of certain philosophical, literary, and critical theories in the twentieth century that pushed against the notion of the author's intent. Nonetheless, it has a long, established tradition, both in Western philosophy and in Asian Buddhist traditions, and one can say that the interpretative results it has yielded are enough justifications of its heuristic and pragmatic value. This is where, interestingly, the philosophical conjoins with the philosophical: recovering the voices of Buddhist philosophers, in a way that is not necessarily different from the way scholastic Buddhist traditions have done for centuries, can fuel the practice of Buddhist philosophy as philosophy. To dig out concepts that are not usually included in the philosopher's toolbox—*karma*, *nirvana*, *path*, means of valid cognition—requires an effort to bring out their philosophical dimensions, which in turn allows one to develop further their philosophical potentialities.

Buddhist philosophers can thus draw from Buddhist texts and traditional hermeneutical practices to tune their own voices, at once Buddhist and philosophical, so as to participate fully as subjects in the general philosophical conversation.

Buddhist philosophers who want to extend the philosophical present might find unsuspected allies. I can think of two who are not usually even on the radar of Buddhist philosophers, in contrast to more popular candidates such as neuroscience or analytic epistemology. I believe Buddhist philosophy might develop a promising association with ancient Greek and Latin philosophies as well as medieval Islamic, Jewish, and Latin philosophies that could help move the conversation in directions hitherto unexplored. Medieval philosophies show similar trends in scholastic and exegetical cultures, and in the autonomous developments of logic and epistemology. They are often guided by a certain conception of the *summum bonum*, which is also shared by ancient Greek and Latin philosophies. All these aspects hint at a potential fecund dialogue with Buddhist philosophy. One could imagine the emergence of new fields, *Ancient Philosophies* and *Medieval Philosophies*, which would help to de-regionalize and decenter the usual way to compartmentalize Western and non-Western philosophies—thus changing the conversation, introducing new questions and concepts.

There are arguments to be made—in another paper—about the shared commitments of pre-modern philosophies. But would this direction not preclude the emergence of a Buddhist philosophy as philosophy with its own, proper voice, since it would bring Buddhist philosophy back to a more historical-comparativist approach that tries to find equivalents between philosophical traditions? This is definitely a danger. But it will be avoided if Buddhist philosophers can protect themselves against the historical-comparativist perspective by making sure that they remain conversation partners in whichever conversation they have—instead of being used as tokens for comparison. Ancient philosophy might have the advantage, compared to other conversation partners, of the historical and conceptual distance with our own time, which helps in preserving oneself against contemporary prejudices and starting new subjects of conversation. Ancient philosophy, after all, was a source of inspiration for Alasdair MacIntyre and Martha Nussbaum, two of the most influential philosophers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Buddhist philosophers could certainly be inspired by their examples, drawing from their own *āgamas* to develop an *adhigama* that can speak to and be in conversation with philosophers in general. Only then will Buddhist philosophers actually be part, with their distinct and hopefully diverse voices, of the global philosophical conversation.

#### NOTES

1. By "Buddhist scholarship" I mean the kind of modern scholarship that has developed since the nineteenth century using scientific methods in the study of Buddhist texts and the Buddhist tradition in general. Buddhist scholarship is not exclusively Western, at least in the geographical sense of the category. Much of Japanese and Chinese scholarship on Buddhist texts produced in the past fifty years is included in the category of Buddhist scholarship, and conversely many Western publications on the Buddhist tradition do not really fall under the category of scholarship.

2. "Recent Progress in Buddhist Studies," in *Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1967), 20.
3. Daya Krishna, M. P. Rege, R. C. Dwivedi, and Mukund Lath (eds.), *Samvāda. A Dialogue between Two Philosophical Traditions* (Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 1991), xxiv.

## *Emptiness, Multiverses, and the Conception of a Multi-Entry Philosophy*

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As a scholar of Buddhist philosophy, I am frequently asked what the purpose of the study of Buddhist philosophy may be for people who are not practitioners of any of the Buddhist schools. Besides the obvious contribution of thinkers and texts within the Buddhist tradition on topics central to the philosophical project for almost 2,500 years, I believe that one can find within the Buddhist tradition, like in any tradition that furthers intellectual engagement with the world and reflection on the place human beings inhabit in it, quite a few gems that could significantly contribute to pressing issues of our times. One of these gems is the blueprint of what I have come to call a "multi-entry philosophy." In short, a multi-entry philosophy challenges the assumption pervasive in many schools and practices of academic philosophy that to every philosophical question the philosophical inquirer can and will find one correct way of answering, and then one correct answer, while alternative options are deemed untenable or inconsistent. The assumption is that since philosophical inquiry will inevitably lead to the truth, there is only one right way of answering any philosophical but especially any so-called perennial question. I believe that some of the most pervasive conceptions developed in the Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions render a different approach, namely, one that suggests that there are multiple equally persuasive and insightful ways of answering the same question. This is what I call "multi-entry philosophy."

Recent decades have seen a proliferation of conferences, positions, publications, and journals in the fields of, first, comparative and more recently, global philosophy. This expansion of what is included in the discourse and discipline of academic philosophy has been accompanied by discussions about the definition of what philosophy is and what tradition can be recognized as "philosophical" and not merely "intellectual." In general, these discussions have essentialized a modernistic definition of philosophy and traditions as entities with impervious boundaries. These definitions, which have been critiqued by postmodern philosophers as well, are clearly culturally conditioned and ignore other, alternative models such as the understanding expressed by the concept of *sanjiao*, literally "three teachings," which challenges the notion of separate traditions. More interestingly, however, these definitions bring to the fore the fundamental predicament of philosophy as, depending on one's view, either culturally conditioned discourses with universal significance or as universal insights and rules expressed in culturally

conditioned terminology. In his "Zen to sekai" 禪と世界 ("Zen and the World"), UEDA Shizuteru distinguishes "Zen philosophy" from other Zen discourses by emphasizing that the former envisions "one world," what NISHIDA Kitarō 西田幾多郎 (1870–1945) called "global world" (J. *sekaiteki sekai* 世界の世界),<sup>1</sup> in a specific vernacular. Subsequently, located at the intersection of the local and global, the philosopher faces the conundrum of how these two realms can be reconciled. How can we make global claims using a vernacular that is regional and contextualized? In my readings of Buddhist texts, I have found a refreshing solution to this conundrum.

My foray into the Buddhist terminology that renders a multi-entry philosophy begins with Mahāyāna Buddhist conception of "emptiness" (S. *śūnyatā*). This concept finds its first systematic formulation by the philosophers of the Madhyamaka school such as Nāgārjuna (second/third century CE) and Jizang 吉藏 (549–629). In its basic stratification, it possesses an ontological, an epistemological, and a soteriological significance. In a general sense the "theory of emptiness" (S. *śūnyatāvāda*) denies causally independent and permanent substances as well as the possibility of absolute truth and proposes a method of systematic detachment from all desires as well as their objects including the desire to attain detachment itself. What is important here is that while many texts in the Madhyamaka tradition contain *bona fide* ontological, epistemological, as well as soteriological observations, it is almost impossible to clearly separate them into discrete categories or discourses. Since there are no independent permanent entities, it is impossible to make final and definite truth claims. Therefore, we need to let go of many of our long-held beliefs about reality.

But how does this denial of the possibility of arriving at ultimate truth claims explain the construction of knowledge and even the relevance of the doctrine of emptiness itself? To develop a cogent and practicable epistemology, Madhyamaka philosophers introduced the theory of the "two truths" (S. *satya dvaya*, J. *nitai* 二諦), namely, the "conventional truth" (S. *saṃvṛti-satya*, J. *zokutai* 俗諦) and the "ultimate truth" (S. *paramārtha-satya*, J. *shintai* 眞諦). The doctrine of the two truths has been frequently interpreted to restrict linguistic formulae as insufficient and to deem ultimate truth claims impossible. Some representatives of the Chan Buddhist tradition have taken this doctrine to privilege silence over language and to advocate non-linguistic means of communication and verification of a student's insight. However, the doctrine of the two truths does not necessarily imply that linguistic formulations are to be eschewed and to be replaced by the practice of silence as articulated as "non-reliance on words and letters" (C. *buli wenzi* 不立文字), the second of the so-called four principles of Chan Buddhism. For example, WATSUJI Tetsurō (1889–1960) argued in his volume *The History of Buddhist Ethical Thought* that the conventional truth is not to be considered inferior to the ultimate truth since it constitutes the "dharma talk of Buddha."<sup>2</sup> Both, conventional and ultimate truth, are equally necessary—there is no hierarchy among them: While *paramārtha-satya* facilitates the "destruction of attachments to being," *saṃvṛti-satya* implies the "destruction of the attachment to

emptiness."<sup>3</sup> Not only are both truths correlated, they are equally necessary in the pursuit to describe reality. In his *Emptiness and Omnipresence*, Brook Ziporyn paraphrases these two truths appropriately as "local coherence" and "global incoherence":<sup>4</sup> since all truth claims are contextual, linguistic formulations are not able to articulate universal truths. Conceptions and ideologies illuminate specific contexts but the global perspective is doomed to be incoherent.

One conception that coalesces this understanding of the two truths is the concept of "skillful means" (S. *upayā*). Introduced by the *Lotus Sūtra* (S. *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka sūtra*), this conception and the parables that illustrate it are designed to articulate the belief that while no concept refers to one clearly demarcated signified (F. *signifié*) and no truth claims are universalizable without becoming incoherent, every concept and theory communicates the nature of reality and thus helps propel the listener or reader from a state of "ignorance" (S. *avidyā*) to one of "wisdom" (S. *prajñā*). The theory of "skillful means" thus adds a soteriological dimension to the epistemological rhetoric of the two truths. The central question raised by this terminology—a question the answer to which Buddhist thinkers obviously cannot agree on—is whether complete ignorance and absolute wisdom actually exist or whether they constitute two extreme limit functions that can only be asymptotically approached. The rhetoric of "false views" (S. *mithyā dr̥ṣṭi*) and "correct views" (S. *samyag dr̥ṣṭi*) seems to indicate that ignorance and wisdom constitute real existing states, while the "theory of emptiness," as articulated in the doctrine of the two truths, and the notion of the skillful means seem to indicate, on the contrary, that linguistic formulae are locally coherent and globally incoherent. In his essay "The Standpoint of Zen" (J. *Zen no tachiba* 禪の立場),<sup>5</sup> NISHITANI Keiji 西谷啓治 (1900–1990) argues that philosophical positions tell us less about the nature of reality and more about the "standpoint" (J. *tachiba* 禪の立場) of the proponents holding them. He does, however, suggest that the standpoint of Zen articulates the theory of emptiness, transcends all conventional hypotheses, and embraces what his student ABE Masao (1915–2006) calls the "positionless position."<sup>6</sup> While this approach constitutes a common if not mainstream reading of *śūnyatāvāda* among the Zen Buddhist thinkers, it nevertheless falls into the "transcendence trap"<sup>7</sup> and defies our earlier discussion of the two truths. An alternative interpretation of *śūnyatāvāda* that is held by, among others, Ziporyn implies that our understanding and articulation of reality is necessarily *in the grey* between the extremes of the false and the correct views. As implied by the notion of skillful means and the "ranking of the doctrines" (C. *panjiao* 判教) common in East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism, philosophical concepts, positions, and systems are indicative of the standpoint of the beholder or adherent. This insight adds the ontological dimension of *śūnyatāvāda*, i.e., the relationship of the local to the global, to our discussion. An elucidation of this relationship illustrates how philosophy as an academic project can be re-envisioned in the light of the "theory of emptiness."

The final piece of the puzzle in our inquiry is the relationship between particular standpoints and the totality of the

cosmos. As is well known, the Chinese Buddhist thinkers of the Tang dynasty (618–907) developed a dynamic since non-essentialist conception of the universe. Thus, for example, Chengguang 澄觀 (738–839) in his *Mysterious Mirror of the Huayan Dharma World* (C. *Huayan fajie xuanjing* 華嚴法界玄鏡) used the common Huayan Buddhist slogan "one-and-yet-many" (C. *yijiduo duojiyi* 一即多多即一) as well as neologisms such as "the unhindered penetration of the universal and particulars" (C. *lishiwuai* 理事無礙) and "the unhindered penetration among particulars" (C. *shishiwuai* 事事無礙) to articulate the philosophical foundation underlying the image of Indra's net.<sup>8</sup> According to Huayan scriptures, in Indra's net a multifaceted jewel is attached to every intersection in the net. Each jewel reflects simultaneously the net as a whole and every other jewel. Each individual jewel symbolizes one awareness event, and the net the totality of the cosmos. Not only does each awareness event reflect all other awareness events, it does so in a unique way. Therefore, there exist infinite manifestations of what we call cosmos. Ziporyn calls this conception of the cosmos not a "universe" but a "multiverse."<sup>9</sup> This multiverse is constantly changing and, at any given time, is embodied in multiple manifestations. The Japanese Zen master Dōgen 道元禪師 (1200–1253) refers to these manifestations as "expressions" (J. *dōtoku* 道得). Like the Huayan thinkers before him, Dōgen was convinced that particular awareness events express all other awareness events as well as their totality. In his fascicle "Expression" (J. *Dōtoku* 道得), however, he highlights another important dimension of this relationship when he coins the term "expression-and-non-expression" (J. *dōtoku fudōtoku* 道得不得)<sup>10</sup>: Expressions, be they discursive or in non-linguistic modalities, comprise full but incomplete embodiments of the buddha-dharma, what we would call the "truth." They constitute unique yet incomplete views on the world. They disclose as much about their own standpoint, which is defined *vis-à-vis* other standpoints, as they reveal about the nature of reality. Consequently, an integration of as many standpoints as possible increases our understanding of world and our place within it.

Thus understood, Dōgen's notion of expression provides the blueprint for a multi-entry philosophy. This particular model of doing philosophy is inspired by the trope of Indra's net developed in the writings of Huayan Buddhism and Dōgen's conception of "expression" but also by the rhizomatic model of Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995) and Félix Guattari (1930–1992)<sup>11</sup> as well as Francois Lyotard's (1924–1998) "small narratives" (F. *petit récit*).<sup>12</sup> It is based on Dōgen's insight that "when one aspect is brought to the fore, another aspect is obscured."<sup>13</sup> A multi-entry approach to philosophy realizes that even the best philosophical systems are only locally coherent insofar as they highlight some aspects while ignoring others. Finally, every philosophical system expresses one standpoint and is constructed *vis-à-vis* other standpoints: e.g., atheism is constructed *vis-à-vis* theism, materialism *vis-à-vis* idealism, and rationalism *vis-à-vis* empiricism. To be fruitful, a philosophical inquiry will invite a multiplicity of approaches, listen to their language, understand their standpoints, and discern their contribution to the specific inquiry as well as to the philosophical project in general. Of course, the format of this essay does not allow for a careful stratification

of such a multi-entry philosophy. I hope, however, that the current sketch of such a philosophy illustrates the kind of systematic thinking Mahāyāna Buddhist texts that propagate the notion of emptiness, the rhetoric of skillful means, the vision of a multiverse, and our understanding of human activity as expression engender. It is a method that embraces epistemic humility and emphasizes listening as a path to self-awareness and to a deeper understanding of the world.

#### NOTES

1. Abbreviations are as follows: C for Chinese, F for French, J for Japanese, S for Sanskrit.
2. Tetsurō Watsuji, *Watsuji tetsurō zenshū 和辻哲郎全集 [The Complete Works of Watsuji Tetsurō]*, 21 volumes. (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1961–1963) [hereafter abbreviated as “WTZ”], 19: 297.
3. WTZ 19: 297.
4. Brook A. Ziporyn, *Emptiness and Omnipresence: An Essential Introduction to Tiantai Buddhism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 151.
5. Keiji Nishitani, *Nishitani keiji chosakushū 西谷啓治著作集 [Collected Works of Keiji Nishitani]*, 26 volumes. (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1986–1995), 11: 3–157.
6. Masao Abe, *Zen and the Modern World: A Third Sequel to Zen and Western Thought*, ed. Steven Heine (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2003), 10.
7. James Whitehill, “Buddhist Ethics in Western Context: The ‘Virtues’ Approach,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 1 (1994): 6. This essay was republished as James Whitehill, “Buddhism and the Virtues,” in *Contemporary Buddhist Ethics*, ed. Damien Keown, 17–36 (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000), 21. See also Jin Y. Park, “Wisdom, Compassion, and Zen Social Ethics: The Case of Chinul, Sōngch’ōl, and Minjung Buddhism in Korea,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 10 (2006): 10.
8. *Taishō taizōkyō 大正藏經*, ed. Junjirō Takakusu and Kaigyoku Watanabe (Tokyo: Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō Kankōkai, 1961), 1883.45.672-683.
9. Brook A. Ziporyn, *Emptiness and Omnipresence: An Essential Introduction to Tiantai Buddhism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 143.
10. *Dōgen zenji zenshū 道元禪師全集 [Complete Works of Zen Master Dōgen]*, ed. Dōshū Ōkubo 城大久保道舟, 2 volumes (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1969–1970) [hereafter abbreviated as “DZZ”], 1: 305.
11. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, transl. Brian Massumi (New York: Continuum, 2003), 3–25.
12. Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1984), xxiv.
13. DZZ 1: 7.

become designated as “contemplative neurosciences,” a field evolving in mutual interaction with the development of mindfulness therapies that are now being applied in a growing number and variety of social contexts. Historically and traditionally, the Buddhist practices targeted in neuroscientific research were embedded in soteriological, ethical, and philosophical frameworks which provided them with their meaning and function, and they continue to be so embedded among traditional Buddhist communities across Asia. Critical observers of mindfulness studies and practices have variously problematized the disassociation of meditation from these frameworks, and in doing so concentrated on ethical and religious contexts.<sup>1</sup> In this essay I want to broaden the discussion by offering some critical reflections on the place of Buddhist philosophy in contemplative neurosciences.

To begin with, it is not entirely unreasonable to expect that philosophical ideas developed in Buddhist traditions would be relevant to the empirical study of contemplative practices that can claim to be grounded in the same traditions. An argument for this could be developed along the following lines. Generally speaking, in Buddhism the philosophical analysis of consciousness and the elaboration of meditative states form part of the same overarching soteriological discourse aimed at determining the causes for human bondage, at making a case that liberation is possible, and at devising methods for attaining it. The relationship between philosophy and meditation is complex, as can be expected from an internally heterogeneous religio-philosophical tradition with a history of over 2,500 years that geographically extends over nearly all of today’s Asia and has in the course of its history been shaped by vastly divergent societies and cultures. But the following appears to apply across many historical, societal, cultural, and doctrinal divides. Buddhist traditions develop fundamental philosophical principles such as the idea that there is no enduring self-as-substance that serves as a core of human individuality and subjectivity (selflessness), the idea that consciousness is ultimately non-dual and devoid of subject and object (a notion frequently taken to entail a denial of the external world), or the idea that all phenomena, material as well as mental, lack inherent existence that would allow them to exist independently of causes and conditions (emptiness). Not all traditions assent to all of these principles, and among those who assent to the same principles there is, again, variation in their interpretation. More important for the present context, however, is the dual function that these principles fulfill: on the one hand they serve as presuppositions in general theories of the mind that also extend to meditative states. On the other hand such philosophical principles are themselves the focus and content of certain forms of meditation. In other words, there is a type of meditative practice that consists in, or includes, the realization of such principles as selflessness, non-duality, or emptiness, which are understood as representing the true nature of reality. This realization is thought to be indispensable for attaining liberation. Following a helpful taxonomy of Buddhist meditation devised by Florin Deleanu, we can describe this kind of meditation as reality-directed and reflection-centered.<sup>2</sup> The category of “meditation” in Buddhism is by no means exhausted by this type of practice; others—

## *Buddhist Philosophy and the Neuroscientific Study of Meditation: Critical Reflections*

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Since the early 2000s, the scientific study of Buddhist (or Buddhism-inspired) meditation has expanded and intensified considerably. The study of the effects of contemplative practices on the brain has more recently

again following Deleau's taxonomy—focus on eliminating disturbing emotions, on the suppression or elimination of consciousness, on the cultivation of moral qualities such as loving-kindness, or on controlling or manipulating the esoteric physiology of the body. Most of these practices were historically developed in ancient and medieval India, and a number of them are shared with non-Buddhist religious-philosophical movements.

Although this background would seem to justify some consideration of Buddhist philosophy in the empirical study of Buddhist or, to put it more cautiously, Buddhism-derived contemplative practices, this has scarcely been the case. Indeed, this seems to be one of the issues that this line of research is currently grappling with. But why have philosophical ideas played such a marginal role in scientific studies of meditation? The answer to this question can be sought in the nature of the cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary engagement that initiated, catalyzed, and shaped the development of contemplative neurosciences—a process on which I will take the liberty of commenting in broad brushstrokes for the sake of argument, while being aware that some of my extrapolations will not do justice to the variety of standpoints taken by the various actors involved in the process at different stages.

Instrumental in this process were the activities of the Mind & Life Institute, founded in 1990 as a result of conversations of the fourteenth Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso with scientists (in which the neuroscientist Francisco Varela was crucially involved).<sup>3</sup> Since 1998 the institute has worked to “create a collaborative research program for investigating the mind with scientists, Buddhist contemplatives, and contemplative scholars,”<sup>4</sup> resulting, among others, in neuroscientific studies with long-term meditators conducted in Paris and in Wisconsin–Madison. The principle guiding the institute's activities is that a purely scientific investigation of the nature of reality is incomplete, and must be supplemented by contemplative practices (including, but not limited to, Buddhism-derived practices), which are regarded as playing an equal role as instruments of investigation.<sup>5</sup> Buddhism is in this context seen as a resource for contemplative practices with the potential of contributing to overall human well-being. The view that both partners, science and Buddhism, each have their own unique investigative methods that complement each other and should work together can be seen as a step to move the scientific study of meditation forward, away from a mere objectification of Buddhism to a more dialogical framework.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the primacy of science in this dialogue is reflected in a more or less explicit agreement to sidestep issues where Buddhist doctrine might be in conflict with modern scientific worldviews—an agreement which also permits the Buddhist participants in these dialogues to compartmentalize science and its scope of authority while protecting their own interests.<sup>7</sup>

Obviously, this engagement reflects a complicated process of negotiation between actors with different and divergent perspectives on meditation and its study, in pursuit of a common goal. These complexities notwithstanding, the framework as such arguably has the tendency of producing what one might call, for lack of a better term, an “empiricist

filter” which regulates what is and what is not fed into these dialogues from the rich repertoire of Buddhist thought. This filter appears to leave little room, if any, for philosophical ideas that Buddhist thinkers developed as an analysis of reality—unless these ideas can be claimed as having been the product of meditation as a method of investigation. An example may serve to illustrate how this filter operates in practice. In one conversation between the Dalai Lama and scientists, scientists enquired about the intriguing notion of a “storehouse consciousness” (Sanskrit *ālayavijñāna*), a subliminal layer of consciousness that the Buddhist Yogācāra school postulates to run alongside manifest forms of consciousness such as sense-perception. In response, the Dalai Lama criticized and dismissed the storehouse consciousness on the ground that the Yogācāras were compelled to formulate it “because of their rational presuppositions, rather than through empirical investigation or realization.”<sup>8</sup> Many scholars studying the intellectual history of Buddhism would find themselves in general agreement with this assessment, if it is taken as a claim about how the notion of the storehouse consciousness was historically introduced. One plausible hypothesis for its genesis—in texts datable to the early fourth century—is that it was introduced as an explanatory principle to account for the continuity of consciousness across states of deep meditative absorption where all ordinary mental functions have ceased—and for how it is possible that after such an interruption ordinary mental functions can reoccur.<sup>9</sup> However, the storehouse consciousness also fulfills other important functions in later discussions of consciousness, after the principle was initially introduced. To occlude Buddhist philosophical ideas from dialogues with science because they were not empirically discovered is therefore problematic because it reduces the relevance of such ideas to the mode of their initial discovery, disregarding how they might nonetheless become relevant in different theorizations at a later stage. On a more fundamental level, claims as to which principles were or were not discovered through meditative practice remain inherently problematic, as evinced by the fact that scholars of Buddhism continue to debate the issue controversially.<sup>10</sup>

The even more basic question is whether meditation can claim the status of an empirical investigative method in the first place. At the very least, this conception contradicts some of the historically significant ways in which meditative practice was conceptualized in traditional Buddhist contexts, especially in relationship to philosophical analysis conducted with the help of logical reasoning. According to an influential Indian Buddhist approach that also impacted upon Tibetan traditions—some of whose exponents are mentioned further below—meditation is precisely *not* conceived as an independent investigative method leading to new discoveries about the mind. Rather, this approach is premised on the idea that meditative practice—here referred to with the Sanskrit term *bhāvanā*—serves to turn principles like emptiness that are first proven through scriptural study and rational inquiry into objects of experience. Following Tom Tillemans, we can extrapolate the principle underlying this approach as a “continuity thesis” claiming that meditative understanding is continuous with and dependent upon preceding philosophical analysis; it has no independent epistemic value of its own.<sup>11</sup> On this

understanding, meditation internalizes and inculcates principles determined by reasoning and is thought to thereby fundamentally transform consciousness so that it operates in accordance with those principles—principles which are taken to reflect the true nature of reality. While meditation affects the quality of knowledge (it produces non-conceptual awareness of something known before only in propositional terms), it does not generate knowledge of new objects or contents. The eighth century Indian Buddhist scholar-philosopher Kamalaśīla (c. 740–795 CE) famously advocated this position in polemical exchanges with the Chinese Chan master Moheyan in imperial Tibet, and the matter is traditionally taken to have been settled in a public debate presided over by the emperor himself at Samyé monastery. Moheyan’s position, more difficult to reconstruct from a patchy textual record, was likely premised on an “independence thesis” (again, Tillemans’s term) that denies soterial value to philosophical analysis and conceptual understanding. On Moheyan’s view meditation has a unique role in disclosing the true and primordially awakened nature of the mind.

Without going deeper into the long and complicated further history of these approaches in Tibetan Buddhism—in the course of which models were developed that do not view them as diametrically opposed—let us note that a continuity thesis of the kind advanced by Kamalaśīla would challenge the attribution of an independent investigative role to meditation. Meditative cultivation is here not admitted to be a reliable source for knowledge in its own right. Following ideas prominently advanced by the earlier Buddhist epistemologist Dharmakīrti (mid-sixth to mid-seventh centuries), Kamalaśīla would as a matter of fact insist that meditative cultivation on its own is not reliable; it is no warrant for the reality of its objects. Dharmakīrti and his many followers in India and Tibet consider the basic mechanism of meditative practice, that of transforming abstract, conceptual knowledge into direct experience, to be effective regardless of whether meditation is applied to something real or fictitious. Thus, for example, if one contemplates an object of desire long enough, it will eventually appear vividly as if in front of one’s eyes. Precisely for this reason meditation must be preceded by a process of reasoning that proves its content to represent the nature of reality. The direct experience which meditation produces is thought to be necessary because of its presumed special power to effect a lasting transformation of consciousness; it is not, as recently claimed,<sup>12</sup> thought to corroborate or confirm the validity of any preceding reasoning. The process of reasoning is not regarded as incomplete in terms of the evidence that it produces. Rather, since it is limited to producing a merely conceptual certainty, it is simply not capable of transforming consciousness in the way that this is necessary from a soteriological perspective, and which meditation eminently accomplishes.

The particular engagement of Buddhism with science that fed into the formation of contemplative neurosciences thus conceives of meditation in a way at odds with its function in at least some influential traditional contexts. While this itself does not discredit a conception of meditation that takes it to perform an investigative role, one has to be clear about the extent to which this marks a departure from

traditional conceptions. Moreover, once we look at how Buddhist scholar-philosophers like Kamalaśīla conceived of meditation (in the sense of *bhāvanā*), we may also formulate the question differently and ask precisely how it is that meditation is understood to play an “investigative” role. At the current stage of research, and quite apart from the fact that at least one influential tradition of Buddhist thought on the matter explicitly argues *against* meditation possessing an investigative function, the nature and extent of the investigative function meditation *could* play remain rather unspecified in the realm of contemporary contemplative neurosciences.

One could question the relevance of my reflections inspired by Kamalaśīla by pointing out that the form of meditation he discusses—in Deleau’s terms: reality-directed and reflection-centered meditation—is just one of many, and that others are far more pertinent to the dialogue between Buddhism and science. Emotion-regulating practices, for instance, might be considered far more relevant to a dialogue conducted in pursuit of human well-being. This, however, leads to yet another problem: Deleau’s taxonomy notwithstanding, philosophical notions such as emptiness are also relevant to practices that in themselves are not directly directed at an understanding of reality. In the 1980s, a Tibetan meditator called Lobsang Tenzin participated in studies on the biomedical effects of meditation conducted by Herbert Benson, a pioneer of biofeedback research.<sup>13</sup> Tenzin was asked to participate in such studies on account of his expertise in the Tibetan *tummo* practice by which a meditator becomes capable to regulate their body temperature; in Deleau’s taxonomy, *tummo* would belong to the class of practices serving to control or manipulate the esoteric physiology of the body. Tenzin’s report offers insights into a variety of problems involved in experimental studies from the perspective of participants—problems which also raise serious ethical questions.<sup>14</sup> Among others, he expresses fears that his practice might be adversely affected by the scientists since the drawing of blood by doctors intervened with the subtle physiology of channels and winds that form the basis of the practice. The environmental conditions of the exams he underwent weakened his practice, he writes, but the scientists were very pleased.

Particularly relevant for our context is that Tenzin astutely draws attention to epistemic limitations of the scientific apparatus. The scientists, he writes, could see certain things with their instruments, but there were also things that they could not see: the non-dual insight into “great bliss” and emptiness, the root of all gnosis. But as he was able to confirm from his own experience, without this subjectively experienced wisdom, the control over wind and channels that *tummo* practice required would not be possible at all. To reformulate the problem that Tenzin points out in other words, there are certain factors which render a given practice effective according to those who are engaged in it, and precisely these factors are not being taken into account when scientists study these practices. These factors notably include elements of Buddhist philosophical theories such as non-dual insight and emptiness, even in a practice that in Deleau’s terminology would not in itself be reality-directed.

It is now widely recognized in scientific studies of meditation that the subjective reports by meditators must be included in the research process. Ambitious proposals on how to combine first-person phenomenological reports with third-person scientific methods have been put forward.<sup>15</sup> But at more or less the same time, scientific research paradigms seem to have started to exercise methodological constraints that push in the exact opposite direction: one where empirical studies become even more divorced from the universe of meaning, including philosophical meaning, that renders Buddhist meditation effective according to those who practice it. A study conducting EEG measurements on eight experienced meditators practicing unconditional loving-kindness and objectless compassion illustrates this dynamic well. In this practice, benevolent attitudes are radiated outward without being confined to any one person or group. Studies indicated regular abnormalities in high-frequency gamma waves.<sup>16</sup> The practice appeared capable of synchronizing neurons in great numbers and to change neuronal activity in a sustainable fashion. This suggests long-term meditation practice can effect lasting changes in the brain, but according to the scientists who conducted the study one cannot exclude that these EEG measures derive from preexisting peculiarities of individual participants. Such peculiarities might have motivated the participants to take up serious practice in the first place; they need not be the results of long-term practice itself. Meditation practice, moreover, is over the long term a highly individual affair, as meditators may after all choose, upon the advice of their teachers, to combine different practice styles.

One conclusion that may be drawn from this is that if more precise causal relationships were to be established between meditation practice and measurable brain activation patterns, the training process would have to become part of the experiment so as to become subject to methodological control. The “attentional blink” study subsequently conducted in Wisconsin–Madison illustrates this approach.<sup>17</sup> It combined a group of subjects trained in *vipassanā* for three months as part of the study, and a control group that received only a one-hour crash-course. When these two groups, as well as totally untrained subjects, were asked to identify two visual objects shown to them in a 500 milliseconds interval, their responses differed significantly. Only the retreat participants were able to consistently identify the second object since the practice had trained them to suspend cognitive and emotional reactions that untrained and lesser-trained persons exhibit immediately after registering a visual object.

My concern here is not with the merits of this experiment or the reliability of its results, but with the sociocultural consequences entailed by a larger-scale adoption of its underlying approach: if only a strictly controlled environment in which scientists cooperate with therapists and *vipassanā*-teachers were admitted to provide results with scientific authority, the scientific study of meditation would end up producing the very context that it is to study. A self-reproducing environment would emerge that takes the disassociation of meditative practice from its soteriological, ethical, and philosophical frameworks to an entirely new level.

Scientists and scholars of Buddhism who collaborate in the neuroscientific study of meditation occasionally express the hope that future studies should more strongly engage with questions of context,<sup>18</sup> which may signal that the production of closed and controlled training environments is not viewed as a direction the field should take as a whole. What those who conduct such studies have in mind when they speak of context are primarily ethical principles, traditional background, culture as well as environment, including such factors as altruistic motivations and teacher-student relationships. At this stage, it seems to be recognized as a challenge how neuroscientific research might be able to incorporate such aspects to explore their function in modulating the production of particular mental states, but attempts to address this challenge appear to be still in their initial stages. The authors of one research paper consider it to be extremely difficult to take subjective reports by participants into account because it is hard to distinguish clearly defined descriptions of meditative states from a first-person perspective from other statements that at first sight look like descriptions, but might in the end better be treated as certain “cultural and religious exigencies that are not strictly rooted in scientifically tractable observations.”<sup>19</sup> This distinction seems opaque and might even be viewed as yet another expression of the “empiricist filter.” If a meditator were to report on their experiences by saying “and then I entered a state of clear light,” perhaps the scientists might consider this close enough to a “descriptive” statement because ways could be found to translate such statements into phenomenological descriptions, or into the language of empirical psychology. But one can imagine that the claim “and then I entered non-dual awareness of emptiness and experienced the Great Bliss” would pose greater challenges and end up being dismissed as not “properly” descriptive.

If Buddhist philosophical frameworks are admitted as shaping the kinds of experiences contemplative practitioners from such traditions make, then a research process conducted in dialogue with such contemplatives will have to somehow attend to these frameworks. The research contexts discussed in this essay do not yet seem to have reached a stage where this particular challenge can be met. Whatever direction they may take in the future, it stands to reason that the more room that is given to the methodological constraints of natural sciences—and the investigative primacy of science—the more difficult it will become to incorporate contextual factors that are outside the sphere of control of scientists. One conclusion to draw from this is that the research framework for the empirical study of contemplative practices might have to be reconsidered, or that new research frameworks might have to be devised in order to facilitate a more open-ended dialogue that does full justice to the richness and variety of Buddhist philosophical discourse.

#### NOTES

1. Harrington and Dunne (“When Mindfulness Is Therapy”) review ethical critiques and place them in a historical context; Lopez (*Buddhism & Science: A Guide for the Perplexed*, chapter 5) gives a general and critical account of how the mindfulness movement and neuroscientific research disassociated meditation from religious frameworks.
2. Deleau, “Agnostic Meditations on Buddhist Meditation.”



3. A brief history of the Mind & Life Institute is given as an Appendix in Wallace *Buddhism & Science, Breaking New Ground*, 417–21.
  4. Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being. Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy*, Kindle version, position 1795.
  5. See, among others, the mission statement of the institute at <https://www.mindandlife.org/mission/>, last accessed January 4, 2019.
  6. Cabezón, "Buddhism and Science: On the Nature of the Dialogue," 36–39, for a critical discussion of "objectification" as a dominant mode of interaction between Buddhism and science.
  7. Dunne, "What Is Inner Science?," 323.
  8. The Dalai Lama and Varela, *Sleeping, Dreaming, and Dying: An Exploration of Consciousness with the Dalai Lama*, 88.
  9. Schmithausen, *Ālayavijñāna: On the Origin and the Early Development of a Central Concept of Yogācāra Philosophy*.
  10. The view that central philosophical doctrines of Buddhism derive from spiritual practice was advanced in Schmithausen ("On the Problem of the Relation of Spiritual Practice and Philosophical Theory in Buddhism"), subjected to critique in Franco ("Meditation and Metaphysics: On their Mutual Relationship in South Asian Buddhism"), to which Schmithausen responded in Schmithausen (*The Genesis of Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda: Responses and Reflections*).
  11. Tillemans, "Yogic Perception, Meditation, and Enlightenment: The Epistemological Issues in a Key Debate." Tillemans's discussion is confined to the eighth-century thinker Kamalaśīla whom I discuss further below, but the "continuity thesis" as he outlines it is also applicable to a great number of other Indian Buddhist scholar-philosophers.
  12. Adam, "Philosophy, Meditation, and Experience in the Great Debate at Bsam yas," 364.
  13. Tenzin, "Biography of a Contemporary Yogi," is a first-personal account of his experiences; for background discussion see Harrington, *The Cure Within: A History of Mind-Body Medicine*, epub version location 475, 5–481, 7.
  14. Cabezón, "Buddhism and Science: On the Nature of the Dialogue," 37f.
  15. Lutz and Thompson, "Neurophenomenology: Integrating Subjective Experience and Brain Dynamics in the Neuroscience of Consciousness."
  16. Lutz et al., "Long-Term Meditators Self-Induce High-Amplitude Gamma Synchrony During Mental Practice."
  17. Slagter et al., "Mental Training Affects Distribution of Limited Brain Resources."
  18. See Lutz et al., "Attention Regulation and Monitoring in Meditation," 168; Lutz et al., "Investigating the Phenomenological Matrix of Mindfulness-Related Practices from a Neurocognitive Perspective."
  19. Lutz, Dunne, and Davidson, "Meditation and the Neuroscience of Consciousness: An Introduction," 544.
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