

Two Truths and Method*

Jay L Garfield
Smith College
Central University of Tibetan Studies
University of Melbourne

1. The Hermeneutical Predicament

In the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, the Buddha famously enunciates the four reliances: “Rely on the teaching, not the teacher; rely on the meaning, not the words; rely on the definitive, not that which requires further interpretation; rely on direct insight, not conceptuality.” That makes Buddhist philosophy and interpretation easy! All we need to do in order to engage successfully with the Buddhist philosophical tradition is to use our non-conceptual insight to read definitive texts, attending precisely to what they mean. On second thought, maybe that’s not so easy. And why it’s not so easy to implement the four reliances indicates some of why it’s not so easy to say what we are in fact doing when we engage philosophically with the Buddhist tradition.

When we pick up a text, all we have are words. Meanings do not lie on the pages but are at best indicated by what does lie thereon. Perhaps meaning lies ready for archeological excavation in the mind of a long-dead author; perhaps it emerges in the sustained engagement with the text by a scholastic commentarial tradition; perhaps it emerges in our own contemporary interrogation of the text, informed not only by that tradition, but by our own horizon of philosophical prejudices and interpretative practices. The terrible thing, though, is this: We must rely on the words to find the meaning, even if that meaning eventually releases us from the thrall of the words themselves.

And how do we choose the definitive from that which requires interpretation?

Traditional commentators often provide us with doxographies that purport to do the job; but of course there are rival doxographies, and choice between them can only be based on interpretation. So even to know what is definitive requires that we interpret. This admonition is thus the empty advice to buy low, sell high. And as for insight over

* Thanks to Parimal Patil, Koji Tanaka and an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

conceptual thought, that might work at the end of the path, but nowhere along the way. All we can do is read, interpret, and argue. So, the four reliances, rather than giving us guidance, only indicate the depth of our predicament as readers and as philosophers.

Despite these formidable obstacles, the last few decades have seen an explosion in interest in *doing* Buddhist philosophy. Dozens of articles in journals such as *Philosophy East and West*, *The Journal of Indian Philosophy*, *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, *Asian Philosophy* and *Sophia* might be cited. But I also note monographs and anthologies such as Arnold (2008), Cowherds (2010), D'Amato et al. (2009), Goodman (2009), Patil (2009), Tillemans (1999), Siderits (2007) and Westerhoff (2009), to name but a few salient examples. By “doing Buddhist philosophy,” I do not mean developing an account of the history of Buddhist philosophy—the exegetical project of figuring out what Buddhist philosophers said. Nor do I mean the mere assessment of the cogency of Buddhist philosophical arguments. Instead, I mean the attempt to address serious philosophical problems, of interest in their own right, some arising from the Buddhist tradition itself, some from the West, in conversation with the Buddhist tradition, taking it seriously as a source of puzzles and of insights, and taking its horizon of concerns seriously as a backdrop for philosophical reflection.

This last is perhaps most important, even if least salient, for what marks philosophical traditions one from another most clearly is not what texts they comprise, or what theses they advance, but rather what concerns are salient; what questions are important; what counts as a problem or a solution. It is only in the last half century, with an explosion in the last quarter century, that Western philosophy has taken seriously a Buddhist horizon, in which the problem of suffering frames philosophical reflection; in which interdependence is a default metaphysical position; and in which questions are questions concerning the nature of emptiness, the two truths and their relation to one another are central, and in which questions concerning *pramāṇa* structure epistemology. This burgeoning literature, including that within the covers of this volume, takes the problems arising within that horizon as genuine and compelling philosophical problems, and takes the insights and critiques offered by others who have worked within that tradition as a

source for solutions or refutations. This is what marks contemporary Buddhist philosophy. I reflect in what follows on how that is possible and how it is to be done.

So far, I have been indicating the familiar predicament of understanding. But there is a second hermeneutical problem facing those of us who would think philosophically with classical Buddhist texts. What exactly are we doing? If we are just doing *philosophy*, relying, as it were, on the teaching, not the teacher, why are we worried about what a bunch of old books say? We could simply address philosophical questions on their own, taking the most recent issues of professional journals as determining the state of play from which we depart. On the other hand, if we are just doing the *history of philosophy*, then why do we care about truth, cogency or contemporary issues? All that would seem to matter is what the texts themselves *say*.

Note that this methodological puzzle has nothing specific to do with *Buddhist philosophy*, *per se*. Instead, it is a general problem for that sub-discipline of philosophy, we call “the history of philosophy.” The question, “Why, and how, do we read Plato or Aristotle?” is no different in principle from that of why, and how, we read Nāgārjuna. The answer to the general question forces us to face the often-unacknowledged scholasticism of Western philosophy, even as it is practiced today. While we often take ourselves to be asking abstract questions that arise from pure, context-free reflection, this is serious false consciousness. Our philosophical questions emerge from our engagement with our tradition, and are answered often by judicious revisiting of the insights proffered by our predecessors. While this fact may escape us pre-reflectively, it is painfully obvious on even the most cursory self-examination. Our engagement with Buddhist philosophy is hence not novel in its attention to a tradition in the development of a philosophical problematic, but only in its extension of our purview beyond Europe and its diaspora.

That extension, however, does introduce problems of its own. Some are philological in character. To take a textual tradition, such as the Buddhist tradition seriously is to undertake the serious task of figuring out what the texts are, how best to understand and to translate key terms, and how to adjudicate difficult questions of authorship, influence, etc... These are non-trivial problems, and while they certainly emerge even in classical

Western scholarship, they emerge with particular poignancy when we cross so many centuries and deal with so many languages. Context becomes harder to establish; intertextual relations are harder to discern; translation is simply more difficult.

As philosophers, we owe our philologist colleagues debts of gratitude and considerable deference. But beyond the thorny hermeneutical problems to which we will shortly return, and the philological problems we will set aside for present purposes, there are significant problems in the choice of modes of textual engagement. For instance, we sometimes encounter in the Buddhist traditions texts that urge us to transcend reason and conceptual thought. Should we set reason and conceptuality aside as we read them? If so, how? When we address texts whose *authors* grasp only a classical Indian categorical logic, is it appropriate to avail *ourselves* of the tools of modern mathematical logic? And when we address texts that take certain issues off the table, such as the possibility of full awakening, or the probative value of non-conceptual insight, can we leave them off the table? We will return to these questions below, but let us begin with another question of engagement: Buddhist hermeneutics is avowedly a hermeneutic of authorial intent, even if authorship and intentionality are often very differently understood in that tradition. Can we follow that interpretative path in good faith?

2. A Hermeneutic of Authorial Intent?

If we turn to the Buddhist tradition for guidance, we find ourselves admonished to interpret texts in order to determine authorial intent. If the text is *Buddhavācana*, we are after the intention of the Buddha. When Candrakīrti comments on Nāgārjuna or on Āryadeva, he is clear that he takes himself to be illuminating the author's intent. And indeed there are many contemporary commentators who take themselves to be doing much the same thing. Gombrich (2009) is a good example of a scholar who takes himself to be revealing precisely *what the Buddha thought*. But many of us have become suspicious of this undertaking, and however much we might take ourselves to be the inheritors and propagators of a Buddhist commentarial tradition (and for many of us, that is a very great extent), we part with that tradition in its self-understanding.

This departure from a hermeneutic of authorial intent is motivated by several considerations. First, with the texts we are considering, it is sometimes hard to identify

authors beyond names that have no more referential force than the definite description “the author of this text.” (Though to be sure, there are also many cases where we in fact know quite a bit about authors.) Foucault’s (1982) insight that often the author is a mere function created to unify a corpus is apposite here. How many times, for instance, do we hear Nāgārjuna identified as “the author of the six treatises of reasoning,” or something like that? And about whom are we inquiring when we ask whether there were two, three or even more Nāgarjunas. If all we know of an author is his authorship, and if we are often not even sure of which texts a single shadowy individual is the author, how are we to pretend that in ascribing an intention we are doing more than figuring out what the texts mean to the best of our ability? We do not, as would many of our more canonical colleagues, sort matters out by assigning texts to authors merely on the authority of classical categories, and then employ a canonical view of the author’s intentions in order to interpret them; nor do we sort them into canonical doxographic categories, imposing a view on the author in virtue of his supposed affiliation.¹

This situation is bad enough to discredit such a hermeneutical method. But things get worse in Buddhist Studies. When we turn to sūtra and tantra literature, the authorship attributions are so murky as to be useless. All suttas/sūtras, even the Mahāyāna sūtras, are traditionally taken to be composed by the Buddha himself (or at least recited in his presence and approved by him). But of course he wrote nothing at all. The Pāli sūttas purport to be the written record of oral teachings presented centuries before their literary ossification. There is so much opportunity for deliberate or accidental editorial intervention or pure creation that divination of the intent of an author of the discourses that lie behind these texts, especially at the remove at which we now stand, would be an impossible task. We know that the Mahāyāna sūtras were written centuries after the death of their ascribed author, and know nothing about their actual authors. (Even if you believe that they were composed by the Buddha and entrusted to the nāgas, we need to

¹ One is reminded here of Huxley’s quip that none of the texts ascribed to Homer were actually written by Homer, but instead by someone else of the same name!

worry about the fidelity of ancient undersea preservation techniques!) Intention-attribution here is even more quixotic a practice.²

The impossibility of determining authorial intent for most of the Buddhist philosophical texts with which we engage is hence principled. In the case of sūtra material, we have no idea who the authors were; and even in the case of much śāstra, we know little more than a name. In these cases, to figure out what an author may have intended is no more nor no less than to work out an interpretation of the text. There is no extratextual evidence that could be brought to bear, and so whoever put quill to palm leaf falls out of the equation entirely. Even when we do have an author, we often know no more about him than that he authored the text in question, and hence an identified author is no better than no author at all.

This inability to locate authors to whom intentions might be described is not necessarily a bad thing. To regard this as hermeneutical tragedy would make sense if we also believed that we would get *more* insight into textual meaning by knowing the intentions of the authors of these texts. But it is not clear that this would help us at all. The reason for this is straightforward. Most of these texts are significant in the first place not because of their *origins*, but because of their *sequellae*. In Buddhist terms, they exist, and are objects of knowledge, precisely because they are *functioning things*, that is, objects with *effects*. The relevant effects are the commentarial traditions they generate, the insight they generate in their readers, the debates they initiate or settle. Therefore, when we ask what these texts mean, it is their effects, rather than their causes, that are more important. And fortunately, given the richness of the Buddhist scholastic traditions, we can often say quite a lot about these effects, and so say quite a lot about textual meaning.

How do we read without attributing intent to shadowy authors? The answer is simple: we read. We interpret the texts we have on the basis of the words they contain and on the basis of the intertextual relations we can determine, relying on the acumen of our philological brothers and sisters for lexical and historical assistance. Our reading and interpretation is constrained not by imagined psychobiography of the authors, but rather

² To be sure, there are well-known cases of Indian texts, particularly the Vedas, being preserved orally with astonishing fidelity, but we have no independent evidence that a similar textual practice preserved the oral teachings of Śakyamuni Buddha.

by our understanding of the language in which the text is written and the complex web of intertextual relations in which the text in question figures. This is the great hermeneutical advantage we are afforded when we work in a scholastic tradition (or family of scholastic traditions) such as the Buddhist tradition. We are assisted in reading texts, and forced to interpret them in restricted ways, by the commentaries that reflect on them, by the texts they take as their foundations, and by those with which they are in critical dialogue. Just as in interpreting a text one hermeneutical circle calls upon us to read each passage in the context of the meaning we assign to the whole, even as we assign meaning to that whole as a function of the meanings of those parts, a second, larger circle, forces us to read each text in a tradition in light of our understanding of the tradition as a whole, even as we assign meaning to that tradition as a function of those we assign to the texts it comprises. There is nothing new here, and no reason to incorporate theories about authorial intent into this procedure.

Moreover, not only does focus on these hermeneutical circles set authors and their intentions aside as interpretative reference points, but it undermines another hermeneutical myth that often haunts Buddhist studies, that of the *uniqueness* of textual meaning. Debate about how to read texts is an old and healthy practice in every Buddhist tradition, and a practice very much alive today, both in Asia and in the West. The fact that the meaning of any eminent text emerges and develops in the context of commentarial traditions guarantees that meanings will be unstable and multiple. This means that interpretation does not *settle* meaning—however much that may be the aim of each interpreter—but *creates* an ineliminable polyvalence in texts, a polyvalence that must be honestly acknowledged by even the most passionate partisan of any particular reading. To acknowledge this polyvalence, however, as opposed to mere diversity of opinion about a text that nonetheless has a single, determinate meaning, is once again to diverge in hermeneutical practice from most canonical commentators.

3. Textual Dialogue

There is still an obvious question. Why should we twenty-first century philosophers bother reading classical Buddhist texts? Here is one answer. They make for excellent partners in philosophical dialogue. That is to say, they engage with questions and

problems in which we are interested, sharing enough common ground for us to understand what they have to say, and contributing enough that is new that we have some reason to listen to it. They invite us to inhabit a new philosophical horizon, different enough from our own to set new questions, and new phenomena in relief, but familiar enough that many of them will be recognizable as philosophical puzzles and insights. That is the nature of real dialogue. But to take someone, whether a person or a text, on as a dialogical partner, is to make a set of dialogical commitments.

First among those is a commitment to openness, that is, a commitment to treat our partner with *respect*. Openness, or respect, in this case, entails a commitment to the possibility that our interlocutor is *correct* about at least a good deal of what is at issue in the conversation. This is not, of course, the demand to take our interlocutor—whether a live human or an old text—as oracular, or even the demand that we end up agreeing about *anything* at the *end* of the conversation. It is merely the demand that when we read a text (for that is what we care about here) we read with “charity” (Davidson) or an “anticipation of perfection” (Gadamer). We interpret, insofar as we can, consistent with the constraints of philology and canonical holism noted above, the claims in the text so as to make them as true as possible, the arguments so as to make them as compelling as possible, and the broad pictures sketched so as to make them as interesting as possible.

Doing so necessarily requires us often to engage in a delicate tightrope walk between the careful attention to scholastic and textual context that is necessary in order to fix lexical meaning in the first place and the decontextualization that is needed in order to yield truth and contemporary engagement. So, for instance, when we read Candrakīrti’s sevenfold analysis of the self, and we consider his response to the idea that the self is the *shape* of the aggregates, we need both to recognize his response to a particular interlocutor to understand *why* this is an important position to refute, and how Candrakīrti’s argument refutes it.

To be sure, it is important to see that Candrakīrti is making this move in the context of an archaic scholastic debate, refuting the position that the self is an abstract entity over and above the aggregates, namely, the way that they are arranged. But it is equally important to see that Candrakīrti is advancing an argument that has a place in present discussions of

constitution and identity. He is pointing out that while at any time the aggregates so arranged may *constitute* the basis of designation of an individual's conventional identity, neither they, not their arrangement, nor they so arranged are *identical* to that individual. To note that present debates about constitution and identity would have been unknown to Candrakīrti and his contemporaries is important to the philology of the argument, but not to philosophical methodology. Otherwise, we have little to learn.

To take another example, when we read *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, and see Nāgārjuna criticizing Nyāya semantics and epistemology, there is nothing wrong with extrapolating his arguments as general attacks on what we would regard as a Fregean program in natural language semantics or a foundationalism in epistemology, even though these broader categories would have been unavailable to Nāgārjuna. By doing so, we recognize both the historical context and the contemporary relevance of Nāgārjuna's work. If it did not have this contemporary relevance, there would be no *philosophical* reason to engage with his corpus. Moreover, when we appreciate this philosophical relevance, it allows us a new perspective on the history of Indian philosophy, allowing us to see nascent concerns that otherwise might escape notice.

When we ask about the logic that Nāgārjuna employed, or might have endorsed (Garfield and Priest 2003, Priest 2009, Huntington 2007, Garfield 2008) we do not pretend that Nāgārjuna was thinking explicitly about modal logic. But we do think that he implicitly endorsed certain inference patterns and not others. In conversation with his text, we can make those endorsements explicit so as to make the best overall sense of his text. While some might see this as violence to his work, it is in principle no more violent than Candrakīrti's ascription to him of a commitment to prasaṅga inference, or a conventional endorsement of the Nyāya prāmaṇas, even though none of this is explicit in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*.

Finally, and perhaps most dramatically, contemporary Yogācāra studies many scholars have turned to reading Vasubandhu, Sthiramati and their followers, and even the *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra* not as idealist, but as phenomenological texts. There is overwhelming textual evidence that in India and Tibet these were always regarded as idealistic, and overwhelming textual evidence (viz., the *Viṃśatikā*) that Vasubandhu took

himself to be arguing against the possibility of matter. But idealism has little traction nowadays, and phenomenology is interesting; moreover, many of the arguments developed in the Yogācāra tradition convert quite naturally into phenomenological analysis, in which context they sustain interpretations that yield rich insight (and indeed connect them in productive ways to much later phenomenological developments in the Chan/Zen tradition).³ Some might say that this is so tendentious a reading, so philologically unjustified that it amounts to a distortion of the texts. But this is only textual distortion if one insists that Vasubandhu's texts, or the *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra* have unique, fixed meanings. If we take textual polyvalence seriously, however, such a reading is instead the kind of creative textual engagement that marks the best history of Western philosophy as well as the best commentarial work in the Buddhist tradition.

The second dialogical commitment central to serious, respectful conversational engagement is what Ricoeur felicitously called “hermeneutical suspicion.” When we engage with an interlocutor, to treat her seriously is not only to credit her, *ab initio*, with cogency and a fair grasp of the truth, but also to credit her with the same attitude towards us. Otherwise the conditions of genuine interchange are not satisfied. That in turn means that we have to treat her as crediting our own cogency and views, even though our views may diverge from her own, and our arguments might lead down paths she would prefer not to tread. And *that* means supposing that we, too, might have some grasp of the truth, and hence that our partner may well be *wrong* about a great deal. That is, in short, while we cannot begin conversation with the assumption that our conversational partner is crazy, or wrong about everything—that we have nothing to learn and everything to teach—nor can we begin by assuming that she is an oracle. That would not be conversation but obeisance.

³ For instance, the doctrine of the three natures developed in the *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra* and in *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* is read in India and in Tibet as an analysis of the nonexistence of external objects. This idealism had little appeal in classical China, and has little appeal in the contemporary West. Nonetheless, Yogācāra has attracted considerable interest in both cultures, and is enormously influential even in non-idealist schools of East Asian Buddhism. This is because we can also, as Lusthaus (2000) among others, argue, read *trisvabhāva* theory as a phenomenological account of the nature of experience: Our *thoughts, perceptions, representations and conceptions of the world* are at once dependent on our own mental processes (*paratantra*) and are *experienced by us* to be entirely external and independent, to be objects of our own subjectivity (*parikalpita*). The truth about them (*pariniṣpanna*) is that they are empty of that mode of that existence.

Transposed to the textual domain, this means that while we strive to get the best, the strongest reading possible from a text consistent with philological and historical fidelity, we cannot treat Buddhist texts as oracular. After all, they disagree with one another, and they were written by fallible human beings in an epistemological context in which a lot less was known about the world than is known now. A hermeneutic of suspicion demands a critical reading in which we locate error and fallacy and diagnose it, just as we locate truth and cogency, and learn from it. This is textual respect. As Aristotle said of Plato and Platonism, “our friends are dear, but the truth is dearer.” [1096a15]

None of this is to provide a recipe for reading, for translating, or for using the texts we encounter in the classical Buddhist scholastic traditions. It is instead to identify the challenges implicit in the project of reading this tradition philosophically, which entails a fusion of our postmodern global horizon and those of the classical Asian Buddhist traditions, a task necessary even for philology, even for translation. Understanding requires such a fusion. We can no more transpose ourselves into the historical context of the texts we read than we can expect their authors to address directly the literature to which we now contribute. But the meaning that emerges in our encounter with and deployment of these texts in our own philosophical activities must be responsive to a new horizon constituted by elements from each. That new horizon is the contemporary stage of a continuous scholastic tradition in which—even if we pretend only to study and to draw from it—we are the most recent, but certainly not the last, participants.

4. Learning from Old Books and Dead Robed Men

What do we learn when we inhabit this new horizon? Quite a lot. That is not surprising, of course, unless one thought either that the only people who have ever had useful philosophical ideas are the European intellectual descendants of the Athenians, or at least that these privileged few of the world’s citizens had managed to come up with everything interesting that anybody else had considered. I hope that we have reached a stage of historical consciousness at which this view is, at minimum, a cause for embarrassment once excavated from preconsciousness.

For one thing, we encounter new philosophical problems and new ways of posing those problems. Thinking about metaphysics through the idea of *svabhāva*, for instance, forces

us to ask questions distinct from those often asked in the West, and forces us to ask about the interrelations among our own cluster of concepts such as those of *essence*, *substance*, *intrinsic properties*, etc... Are they really independent of one another? How do they connect to causation and to impermanence? Doing epistemology in terms of *pramāṇa* is different from thinking about knowledge as justified true belief. For one thing Stoltz (2007) argues that Gettier problems may not arise in this context. (Although it is arguable that Śrīharsa does indeed develop a version of the Gettier problem.) For another, epistemology may be more easily naturalized in a framework in which epistemic instruments are treated causally, and in which there is no principled distinction drawn between the cognitive and perceptual aspects of knowledge-acquisition. Ethics is constructed differently in Buddhist philosophy. An alternative to thinking about morality in one of the three familiar frames of Western philosophy is suggested by the moral phenomenology developed initially in Pāli Buddhism and refined by Śāntideva. (Garfield in press) By addressing classical Buddhist texts, we may therefore gain a new window on our own concerns.

Addressing the Buddhist canons also forces us to think explicitly about and even to revise, our normal textual practices. Our attention is drawn in this tradition to the role of commentary to a greater degree than it is in much contemporary philosophy. The difficulty of mapping important philosophical terms in Asian languages to terms of art in European languages forces us to confront not only questions about translation itself, but also the arbitrariness of certain distinctions or absences thereof.

When we worry about translating *pramāṇa*, and realize that it could as well be translated as *warrant*, *epistemic instrument*, *warranted cognition*, we must pause regarding the relationship between these terms. We must take seriously an epistemology that combines a kind of process reliabilism with a naturalistic psychology of knowledge, and allow the epistemic categories and questions that frame that tradition call into question those that frame our own. When we consider *essence*, *substance*, *intrinsic nature*, or some neologism as translations of *svabhāva*, similar questions arise. Is there a single concept or a cluster of concepts here, as the Buddhist might take there to be, or a confusion of ideas that need to be kept distinct, as some Western philosophers would argue?

Karma action, object of action, consequence of action), *dharma* (*truth, entity, fundamental constituent, virtue, duty, doctrine...*) and other essential Buddhist terms of art each raise a host of similar issues. Each draws together what appears from a Western point of view to be a vast semantic range into what appears from a Buddhist perspective to be a semantic point. Translation, and the cross-cultural encounter in which it plays such a central role thus forces us to reconsider, and to appreciate the somewhat arbitrary character of, our own fundamental philosophical vocabulary and conceptual apparatus.

We also encounter philosophical texts composed in forms that challenge our sense of what an argument looks like, texts composed in highly allusive verse, for instance, or arguments framed from the standpoint of doxography. All of this is a good thing—stretching our conceptual boundaries and methodological perspective.

Reading texts that are often antinomian, or at least highly suspicious of the role of reason and language in human cognitive life also raises significant and difficult methodological questions about the role of reason and of reasoning in philosophical practice. Is it permissible, or appropriate, to take reason as a transcendental condition of the possibility of philosophical inquiry? After all, if a text argues that reason and conceptual thought inevitably distort reality, and that the truth is inexpressible, eschewing reason as probative, is it appropriate for us to demand arguments, or even to seek for them in the text, to assess them, or to mobilize arguments of our own in understanding those texts?

This is an intriguing challenge. Huntington (2007), for instance, answers in the negative, arguing that to employ reason, and in particular, the techniques of logic, to interpret or to criticize texts that reject the probative force of logic and rational arguments is to do violence to those texts, begging the question against them in the very act of interpreting them. I have argued in (2008) that this is wrong. Even arguments against the probative force of logic must use logic; even claims to the nondiscursivity of certain knowledge must themselves be discursive, and even if we read texts to offer these arguments, even if we accept their conclusions, our arguments for those readings, and even for the correctness of those conclusions must themselves be discursive, rational, and probative. Reason is thus a transcendental condition of interpretation both in the sense that we can only vindicate an interpretation to the extent that we read the text as rational, and we can

only justify a reading rationally. Paradoxically, this is true even if, on the most antinomian reading of these texts, they are correct in their radical critique of reason itself. (See Dreyfus and Garfield and Dreyfus in Cowherds 2010.)

5. Reflexivity: Reading our own Texts

A pernicious version of the subject-object duality that Buddhism targets so assiduously arises quite naturally in Buddhist Studies itself, and demands vigilance. That is the conceit that we as contemporary Western scholars are writing *about* the scholastic Buddhist tradition, and that our own texts are to be read in a fundamentally different way from the canonical texts we interpret. We thus set ourselves up as privileged subjects writing hermeneutically closed texts that illuminate the Buddhist philosophical tradition with the cool light of scholarly objectivity. This is doubly dangerous. On the one hand, it hides the intertextuality and scholastic context of our own texts, their liability to interpretation by others and their own multivalence. On the other hand, it fossilizes the Buddhist tradition as a complete, mummified object of primarily curatorial interest. Each of these errors cuts off dialogue. We expect to be heard, but not to be interrogated; our presumed interlocutor is the object only of an epitaph.

In fact nothing could be further from the truth. The Buddhist philosophical tradition is so fascinating in large part because it is alive, because the discussions that proceed in our own time and the texts we and others publish are not *about*, but are moments *within* that tradition, extending the practice of critical reflection, reinterpretation and dialogue that has characterized the tradition from the very beginning. We sometimes do what Candrakīrti and Śāntarakṣita did, sometimes what Śāṅkara of Gaṅgeśa did. We just have more hair, wear different clothes and speak in strange tongues. Contemporary Buddhist philosophical thought thus reflects the fact that the continuum of Buddhist thought, like the personal continuum is neither permanent nor terminated; it is a constantly changing, dependently originated sequence of dialectical events, beginning in the indefinite past, and stretching into an indefinite future.

The contemporary dialogue of Buddhist thought with Western textual traditions, Western hermeneutical methods and presuppositions, Western science and Western academic practice is thus, while new in one sense, old in another. It is new in that the

conversational partner, and the cultural context is new, only about one hundred fifty years old. For this reason, we are still feeling each other out, adjusting vocabulary, assimilating conceptual categories and scholarly presuppositions. Hence a paper such as the present one.

But it is also old. While it is true that Buddhism officially denies its own progressive character, depicting itself as a tradition with roots in an omniscient founder that has been steadily declining from a golden age, as insights are lost in transmission and translation, this self-image is hard to sustain. In fact, Buddhism has been self-reflective, internally complex, and philosophically progressive from the start. Buddhist philosophy has evolved in response to debate with and influence from other traditions from the beginning, including classical Indian traditions, traditions from East Asia, and more recently from the West. While the teachings of the Buddha obviously form the foundation for this vast and diverse scholastic edifice, it is equally obvious that many of the later developments in Buddhism that we now regard as so central to Buddhist philosophy were not present in the Pāli canon (including much of the Mahāyāna), even if they were somehow, or to some degree, implicit. Buddhist philosophy, like all philosophy, has developed and become more sophisticated over time. This is as it should be—it is a sign of life, not of weakness.

A corollary of this fact is that the impact of Buddhist philosophy on the West is both old and new. It is old in that, first, Buddhism has transformed many civilizations and intellectual traditions in the past, and there is no reason to expect that that should cease now, and in that, second, the Western tradition has never been closed, Eurocentric commentators to the contrary notwithstanding. But it is new in that, perhaps with the exception of some early interaction mediated by Bactria, until the nineteenth century, the Buddhist tradition has not been one of its principal sources of ideas. That, however, is a rather insignificant matter in the grand scheme of intellectual history.

While all of this history of ideas may seem to be nothing but truisms, it is nonetheless worth bearing in mind as we find our way in contemporary Buddhist philosophy. It is important to distinguish between the role of a curator of philosophical mummies and that of the role of a participant in an ongoing dialogue, and it is all too easy, for instance to

treat Śāntarakṣita as a distant, isolated curio, while treating Aristotle as one of us. When we do that, we distinguish living philosophy from dead ideas on the basis of an arbitrary criterion of cultural proximity, and in doing so, license an intellectual attitude towards that which we designate as distant that we would never permit towards that which we regard as proximate. Another way of putting this point is that in commenting on Buddhist texts, or in using them for our own philosophical purposes, we must be careful of pretending to transcendence, of adopting a view, if not from *nowhere*, at least from some Archimedean point outside of the tradition we take ourselves to study, permitting an objectivity that we would never ascribe to one within the tradition, and in the end distinguishing ourselves as scholarly subjects from our interlocutors as philosophical native informants.

This reflexivity in practice therefore also demands that we treat our own work and that of our contemporaries in the same way that we treat the older canon. As participants, as opposed to curators, we get neither a front row seat in the debate courtyard nor are we restricted to standing room along the temple wall. We must thus extend both the same principle of charity in reading to contemporary texts, making the best of them, as opposed to constructing the straw men that fuel the bushfires of academic debate, and so perhaps actually learning from each other's insights, and moving Buddhist philosophy along. But we must also approach our own texts and those of our colleagues with the same hermeneutic of healthy suspicion, alert for heresy, apology and all the ills that hermeneutical flesh is heir to.

The Buddhist and Western traditions (and indeed we could say the same of the great Chinese traditions of Confucianism and Daoism) are made for each other, as each is articulated through and open canon; each is internally diverse; each constantly in dialogue both internally and with external critics and interlocutors. Our task as Western Buddhist philosophers (however we understand that deliberately ambiguous phrase) is to do our part to move both traditions along the increasingly broad and pleasant path they tread together. That won't be so hard, as long as we remember that that is what we are doing.

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