

IN CONVERSATION, IN THE lecture hall, and in the dharma center, Buddhists and students of Buddhism worry about authenticity. Is a doctrine or is a particular textual interpretation authentic? Is a particular teacher authentic? Is a particular practice authentic? Is the subject of a scholarly research project authentically Buddhist?

If the doctrine, teacher, practice, or phenomenon is not authentically Buddhist, we worry that it is a fraud, that our scholarship, teaching, or religious life is vacuous, or at least that it is not really *Buddhist* studies or *Buddhist* practice. I've rarely had a conversation of any length with a Western or Tibetan colleague, or with a serious student, in which the term "authenticity," or a cognate, did not arise, and in which it was not considered a virtue.

I once heard an eminent Tibetan scholar, in response to a talk on methodology at a major Buddhist studies research institute, say that the field of Western Buddhist Studies is not actually *Buddhist* Studies, for two reasons: first, Westerners are willing to study the traditions called "Buddhist" in such places as Sri Lanka, Thailand, China, and Japan. But only the "stainless Nalanda tradition (transmitted by Kamalashila, Atisha, and Shantarakshita to Tibet from Nalanda University in India) preserved without alteration in Tibet" is *authentic* Buddhism. So, he concluded, Westerners are studying fraudulent traditions under the guise of Buddhist studies. Secondly, he argued, to study Buddhism is to study realization, and realization requires authentic practice. But Westerners freely adopt practices from these fraudulent Asian traditions and so adulterate the Nalanda tradition. There is therefore, he concluded, no hope of any valuable insight emerging from their study.

To be sure, this response is extreme. But responses that reflect similar sentiments, perhaps with different traditions valorized, are not rare; nor are they unrelated to more moderate worries about the scope of Buddhist Studies and Buddhist practice. Concerns about authenticity have been part of Buddhist dialectics from the earliest period, and motivated

BY JAY GARFIELD



the decision to commit the Pali canon to writing in the first place. Debates about authenticity intensified with the rise of Mahayana Buddhism and the questions that arose about the validity of new scriptures and the very nature of *buddhavacana*—the word of the Buddha. With the transmission of Buddhism to China and Tibet, the activity of translation raised further questions regarding the relation of translated texts to their Sanskrit or Pali originals. And more recently, the transmission of Buddhism to the West and the impact of modernity on Asian Buddhist cultures has raised new questions about what is authentically Buddhist practice, ideology, lineage, and object of study. I believe that all these questions are best discarded along with the very concept of authenticity. To put it bluntly, worrying about authenticity is at best a waste of time and at worst actually destructive.

## THE ACADEMY AND THE PRACTITIONER

The academy is hardly the final arbiter of reality within the Buddhist world. Although scholars of Buddhism may propose that there is an underlying unity or at least a web of family resemblances between diverse Buddhist schools, doctrines, and traditions, if Buddhist practitioners themselves reject the characterization proposed by academics, it would be reasonable to suspect that the academy got it wrong. After all, it is the job of theory to match the object of study, not the other way around; when the object of study is the practice and views of individuals or groups, they must be the final arbiters of their own practice and views.

Where there is a multiplicity of communities of varying views and practices, each claiming authenticity, the classical problem of the criterion arises: how can we find an Archimedean fulcrum from which to adjudicate competing claims to correctness? We

cannot take the criterion of authenticity proposed by any one tradition as definitive. The Zen roshi has her criterion, which leads to the conclusion that the Zen tradition is the only fully authentic transmitted Buddhist tradition. The Gelug geshe argues, using his criterion, that only his tradition is completely authentic. There is no neutral ground on which to settle this issue. Clearly, turning to Buddhist practitioners themselves does not provide any single account of what it is to be authentically Buddhist. This should already give proponents of the authentic reason to pause.



## TRANSMISSION, TRANSFORMATION, AND ORIGINALISM

Buddhism has from its inception been a missionary religious tradition and a polemical philosophical tradition, with a system of textual study and a framework for organizing the relations between monastics and laypeople. As a missionary tradition, Buddhism has penetrated a number of dissimilar cultures, and continues to do so. In each case, from the earliest transmissions across India and into China to the most recent to the West and to Africa, Buddhism has relied upon the translation of texts from one language to another and the adaptation of its social and monastic institutions to local cultural

conditions. Each instance of translation and adaptation is an instance of transformation.

Not surprisingly, the fact that Buddhism has been transformed in so many ways throughout its history has spawned much of the controversy about authenticity, past and present. In the face of this transformation there is an inevitable tendency, both within Buddhist traditions and among Buddhist studies scholars, to search for the “original Buddhism” in order to validate one tradition as the legitimate custodian of that original form.

If only we could determine what the precise words of the Buddha were, one might think, how the doctrine was understood at the moment it was spoken, what the practices of the first disciples were, and then compare each text, each doctrine, and each practice against that gold standard. However attractive this approach sound, however, it is not only impossible in practice but incoherent in principle. It is impossible in practice simply because we are too far from the time of the Buddha to determine precisely what he

said to whom, and what went through the minds of those he addressed. Even the Pali canon was first committed to writing long after his demise, and only the most idealized understanding of the process of its construction could lead one to believe in its historical purity.

It is incoherent in principle for deeper reasons, too. Nobody can suggest seriously that Buddhist doctrine or practice, or the object of study in Buddhist study, is limited to the historical episodes of Siddhartha Gautama’s life, between his awakening at Bodhgaya and his *mahaparinirvana* at Kushinagar. To say so would be to rule out the authenticity of all the Abhidharma literature and all the philosophical, literary, artis-

tic, and ritual traditions that Buddhism comprises. And that would be to ignore Buddhism's own conception of lineage, and of the transmission of doctrine, practice, and realization through lineage. For lineage persists through time and across space, and necessarily involves augmentation and change. Buddhism without these textual and practice traditions would be unrecognizable as Buddhism and irrelevant to contemporary Buddhist practice. Buddhism so conceived would have ended with the Buddha's life.

Moreover, such a criterion of authenticity would not be consistent with scripture, particularly from the standpoint of Mahayana Buddhism. The *Ashṭasahasrīka-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* ("Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines"), for example, a touchstone of many schools of Mahayana, describes the word of the Buddha as far more than the words uttered by Shakyamuni. It is anything that is inspired by the Buddha, anything in accord with what the Buddha said, anything conducive to liberation.

So even in the heart of Buddhist literature, the speech of the Buddha himself, the criteria of authenticity are not originalist in character. In order to determine whether a claim or text counts as *buddhavacana*, the word of the Buddha, we first need to know whether it is conducive to liberation, in line with doctrine. Authenticity doesn't help us filter doctrine; doctrine helps us determine authenticity. Buddhist scripture itself is liberal with respect to what counts as Buddhism.

**L**UIS GÓMEZ, THE LATE Buddhist scholar who founded the University of Michigan's PhD program in Buddhist Studies, took a similar tack when he came up with the five characteristics that define something or someone as Buddhist: finding diverse aspects of Buddhist

traditions inspiring; having sufficient respect for Buddhist doctrines and statements to take issue with them when they do not withstand scrutiny; seeing the world through Buddhist ways of imagining and engaging through Buddhist ritual; showing suspicion of fixed doctrinal systems; having an ethics of acceptance that (in Gómez's words) "considers as desirable and good the capacity to restrain our impulse to turn disagreement into sectarian bias or into condemnation or disparagement. The question of which form or forms of Buddhism are prefer-

among Buddhist traditions. If we are to be faithful to the diversity we find within Buddhist traditions, and consistent with the outlook that appears to lie at their heart, it is hard to see how we could ask for anything more restrictive.

## DIRECTION OF FIT

We are now in a position to see what is really problematic about the discourse of authenticity in Buddhist practice and Buddhist studies. The discourse rests upon a falsification of what philosophers would call the direction of fit between authenticator and authenticated. If I am authenticating a signature on a check or an antique coin, the direction of fit of authentication is clear. For the signature or the coin to be authentic is not an *internal* fact about the signature or the coin itself (that is, what it looks like now), but rather an *original* fact. If, and only if, the *origin* is proper—the person whose name appears in fact signed the check, or the coin was minted in the proper place—the signature or the coin is *authentic*. Having learned about origins, I can then identify things that have those origins. Your authentic signature looks just so, unlike forgeries; authentic coins of a certain kind look just so, unlike counterfeits.

It is this direction of fit that gives the rhetoric of authenticity its punch. We value certain items precisely because of their origins, and precisely because we can authenticate them by tracing their origins. Coins, objects of art, and relics are like that. Suppose that two coins, two objects of art, or two relics are identical—save that one is minted by the government and one is not; that one was once part of the body of a saint and one was not. In that case—despite being otherwise identical—in virtue of their different origins they differ in value and in significance. That is why we care

able must remain open."

In fact, none of these characteristics are individually either necessary or sufficient for a doctrine, practice, or person to count as Buddhist. One could satisfy the first—finding diverse aspects of Buddhist traditions inspiring—and not be a Buddhist at all. In some traditions, the second characteristic would be apostasy. But like the four seals that many in the Buddhist tradition take to be essential for a doctrine to qualify as Buddhist (that it take all compounded things to be impermanent; all contaminated things to be suffering; all things to be empty; and nirvana to be peace), these five conditions can be taken as marking out a rough outline of commonalities

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about authenticating the provenance of art, coins, and relics, and why forgeries are to be rejected, not celebrated as multiplications of beauty, money, or holiness. It is this curious concern with origins that accounts for our concern with authenticity.

This is what we have in mind when we say in approval of a doctrine or practice that it is authentically Buddhist, or disparage another as inauthentic. But the appropriation of this valorization of origins is deceptive. It is deceptive precisely because when we elevate origins in this way we subtly reverse the direction of fit that gives authenticity its point. In this case we do not begin by tracing the doctrine or practice to its origin on the lips of the Buddha and then discover what the character is of things with that origin. Instead, we determine first whether we approve of the doctrine or practice, and then decide on that basis whether or not to assert that it *must* derive from the Buddha. We demand, in other words, that the original facts fit the internal facts, and not the other way around.

The claim to authenticity in such a circumstance is basically fraudulent. The word “authentic” in the absence of independent authentication is simply an honorific shorthand for “approved by the speaker.” Disputes about doctrinal coherence, truth, or history; disputes about authorship or provenance of texts; disputes about the efficacy of rituals can be prosecuted on their merits, and that is the basis on which, by the way, the Buddha at the end of his career suggested that they be prosecuted. It might be the authentic Buddhist alternative to authenticity.

## THE WORD OF THE BUDDHA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Why worry about all of this? I think about this problem because when we work to understand the shape of Buddhist practice and theory and the scope of Buddhist studies in the 21st century, we must come to grips with a new Buddhist transmission. While it shares many features with past transmissions of Buddhism in Asia, it is distinctive in ways that raise interesting questions and stimulate disputes about authenticity. We are in the midst of the transmission of Buddhism to the West. Like the transmission of Buddhism to China, this one introduces Buddhist ideas and practices into an already highly literate and articulate set of cultures. As a consequence, Buddhism is inevitably read through the linguistic, cultural, and ideological lenses of the cultures to which it is being transmitted. Translation of Asian texts into English or other Western languages inevitably laces them with nuances they never had in Asia. Cultural forms that are natural in Asian cultures appear exotic in their new homes and may wither, be transformed, or acquire a new salience. Ideas taken for granted in Asia may be problematized or rejected in the West. We see each of these phenomena at work and each issue in a further transformation and adaptation of Buddhism, a continuation of the process of change that characterizes all compounded phenomena. To reject the new cultural forms of Buddhist practice and thought because of such transformations would require rejecting all of Buddhist practice and thought as inauthentic. Nothing we see now is just as it was at the time of Shakyamuni.

The current transmission of Buddhism poses other challenges, too. In previous transmissions, one might have thought that authenticity could be recovered at least by the tracing of single unbroken lineages, however much change there might be within those lineages. But in the westward movement of Buddhism today, multiple traditions collide. We see the mixing of practices and ideas and the juxtaposition of texts

from traditions that were quite distinct in Asia. Is a Buddhist practice that combines Tibetan tantra and Zen meditation authentically Tibetan? Authentically Zen? Authentically Buddhist?

Things get even more complex when we consider the impact of the interaction with the West on traditional Buddhist cultures and practices in Asia. The current transmission, unlike many previous transmissions of Buddhism, proceeds not on a narrow one-way caravan track but on a multi-lane superhighway, with a great deal of diverse traffic flowing in both directions. Buddhist doctrine and practice in Asia is now saturated with Western modernist and postmodernist ideas. Some years ago, at Kalachakra teachings in Amara-vati, India, for instance, His Holiness the Dalai Lama's embrace of modernism was on full display as he described the need to correct Buddhist cosmology with modern astronomy and to join Buddhist theories of mind with those of cognitive neuroscience. And when

we look at the literature of the engaged Buddhist movement, it's hard to miss the influence of American transcendentalism and liberalism on such thinkers as Thich Nhat Hahn, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, and Ajahn Sulak Sivaraksa. Anyone who says that these great teachers, the doctrines they have propagated, and the movements they have inspired are not authentically Buddhist will have trouble finding *any* Buddhist teacher, doctrine, or movement that is authentic.

Does this mean that anything goes? Is anything anyone cares to call a Buddhist doctrine or teaching thereby Buddhist? Of course not. It means that the adjective "Buddhist," like most adjectives, allows for matters of degree and denotes a set of overlapping patterns of family resemblances, causal chains, and conventional associations. Some things count as Buddhist because of causal connections to other Buddhist practices, doctrines, or institutions; some because of ordination or textual lineages; some because of resemblances to other Buddhist phenom-

ena; some because they are conducive to awakening; some because they are connected to refuge; some because they involve certain rituals. This might make it hard to count Buddhists, traditions, and lineages, and to draw sharp lines. But reality is hard to enumerate, and it contains few sharp lines. The discourse about authenticity is nothing more than an attempt to superimpose clarity where there is none—and thus it is one more symptom of primal ignorance. **t**

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**Jay Garfield** is a professor of philosophy, logic, and Buddhist Studies at Smith College and a visiting professor of Buddhist philosophy at Harvard Divinity School. He has written, translated, and edited several books, including *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika* and *Engaging Buddhism: Why It Matters to Philosophy*.

