

## INTERPRETATION AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: BUDDHISM AND CROSS-CULTURAL HERMENEUTICS

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*The article deals with a problem of relation between textual interpretation and methodology of enlightenment in the Buddhist tradition. According to traditional exegesis, works of Buddhist philosophy are something like a samādhi, a sustained and penetrating contemplation of certain pathways of thought and insight. The author reveals that the Buddhist hermeneutical tradition is a tradition of realization, and devoid of any dichotomy between intellect and experience, the rational and the mystical. A principal role of the tradition is to supply the intertextual context of prejudices that makes the reading and talking possible and the background in which the revelation of meaning and the composition of a meaningful text become possible. Finally, it is pointed out that it is impossible to separate the study of Buddhist hermeneutics from the question of hermeneutics of the modern scholar who having his prejudices and preunderstandings determined by time and culture interpretes traditional Buddhist texts.*

Whatever is well spoken,  
has been spoken by the Buddha  
*Āṅguttara nikāya* IV. 163

In recent years hermeneutical reflexivity has become a hallmark of East-West studies by reflecting the historical relativity of the comparative process itself in a self-critical way. It is by now a commonplace to remark that attempts to interpret Buddhist thought in Western terms have generally reflected the intellectual perspectives of interpreters as much as those of the Buddhist thinkers we wish to interpret. Nagarjuna has seen Hegelian, Heideggerian, and Wittgensteinian readings come and go<sup>1</sup>; Vasubandhu has been incarnated as both transcendentalist idealist and phenomenologist; the arguments of Dharmakīrti and his successors might have stepped out of the pages of Husserl's *Logische Untersuchungen* or the *Principia Mathematica* of Russell and Whitehead. To take an ungenerous view of our encounter with Buddhism, a great many Asian religions turn out to be whatever we happened to have had in our heads to begin with<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> See for instance, study of Andrew P. Tuck, *Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Ben-Ami Scharfstein provides a useful survey of contemporary interpretation of some of the major Asian philosophical thinkers, see: Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *A Comparative History of World Philosophy from the Upanishads to Kant*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988.

Let's take a look at the basic principles of textual interpretation in Buddhist hermeneutics which has highly elaborated systems for classifying the attitudes of practitioners. Questions concerning the interpretation are of crucial importance in Buddhism, since the Buddhist canons contain a huge number of texts that are considered by the tradition to have been spoken by the Buddha, although these often contain contradictory and apparently incompatible doctrines. As an intellectual discipline, hermeneutics begins with an awareness of the difficulties encountered in reading sacred texts, i. e. hermeneutics presupposes hermeneutical problems. According to the Buddhist tradition, the aim of the Buddha's teachings was to evoke enlightenment in living beings. He never preached a single message dogmatically but exercised what is known as "skill in liberative technique" (*upāya kauśalya*) and the methods he used were as various as are living beings themselves<sup>3</sup>. Thus, the hermeneutical enterprise, as the science of interpretation of sacred doctrine, is an essential part in the Buddhist methodology of enlightenment.

What we may term 'Buddhist philosophy' or 'Buddhist religion' has unfolded within those realms of discourse that might be more precisely called in the proper sense of the term 'Buddhology', i. e. the hermeneutics of *buddhahood* and of the message propounded by the Buddha. The word *Dharma* has almost identical connotations as the word doctrine in Western academic and theological contexts: the tenets or beliefs of a religious tradition as characterized in words. However, in Buddhism *Dharma*, as a doctrine refers to more than simply words, it connotes as well a set of experiences or states of mind<sup>4</sup>.

The Buddhist Canons – Pali, Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese, Korean, Mongolian – comprise volumes and volumes of often radically disparate views. The diversity of teachings is not due to confusion or weakness in the transmission. On the contrary, it is a proof of the Buddha's wisdom and compassion, of his ability to adapt to the needs, capacities, and dispositions of living beings. It is said, that the Buddha has taught different things to different people based on their interests, dispositions, capacities, and levels of intelligence. The Buddhist canons were the result of a long process of compilation and editing, which we can no longer reconstruct. It is

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<sup>3</sup> The Buddha's skill in liberative technique (*upāya kauśalya*) is illustrated in the *Lotus-sūtra*, with a parable about an intelligent physician whose sons drank some poisonous liquid and fell sick while the father was abroad. When the father returned, the sons greeted him and beseeched him to heal their pains. The father then prepared a remedy which was immediately taken by those sons who had right notions despite their pains; but those sons who had perverted notions would not take the medicine although they also wanted to be cured. Then the father decided to use a skillful means and announced to his sons that he had grown old, decrepit, advanced in years and that the term of his life was at hand. He went to another part of the country and sent a message to his sons, declaring that he had died. Due to the grief caused by the message, the perverted notions of the sons began to turn to right ones and the boys took the remedy prepared by their father and were healed. After having heard this, the father returned and, according to the Buddha and his listeners, was not to be rebuked of falsehood since his intent had been good and right, i. e. he had only used a skillful means. In a similar manner, the Buddha displays skillful means in order to educate beings, without there being any falsehood on his part. See: "Saddharmapuṇḍarīka or the Lotus of the True Law", tr. by Hendrik Kern, *The Sacred Books of East*, vol. XXI, Delhi, 1968, 304–306.

<sup>4</sup> See: John Ross Carter, "Traditional definitions of the term dhamma", *Philosophy East and West*, 26:3, July, 1976, 329–337; Th. Stcherbatsky, *The Central Conception of Buddhism and the Meaning of the Word "Dharma"*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1979. For a more complete bibliography of the modern scholarly work on the different senses of the word *dharma*, see: John Ross Carter, *Dhamma. Western Academic and Sinhalese Buddhist Interpretations. A Study of Religious Concept*, Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1978; Hajime Nakamura, *Indian Buddhism: A Survey with Bibliographical Notes*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1996.

not always possible to distinguish clearly between canonical, postcanonical, and paracanonical Buddhist literature.

The Abhidharma played a central role in the development of the practice and theory of exegesis and philosophical hermeneutics in all schools of Buddhism. The hermeneutical strategy of the Abhidharma, for instance, is itself derived from a practice attested frequently by the *sūtras*: catechistic or numerical lists known as “matrices” (*mātrkā*), which are digests or patterns for exegetical coherence. The *mātrkā*s, as early canons of orthodoxy and interpretation, provided the structure for Abhidharmic exegesis or simple logic of classification when each text must fit one or more of the categories contained in the traditional “matrix”<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, some Buddhists, for instance, the Mahāsāṅghikas, rejecting the doctrine of multiple meanings, seem to have wanted to forestall exegetical pluralism and protect the integrity of scripture by claiming that all *sūtras* have only one implicit meaning.

When Mahāyāna Buddhism spread to other countries, the size and scope of the Buddhist canons made it necessary for Buddhist scholars to devise systems in terms of which the differences could be reconciled that would allow them to distinguish consistently which texts and teachings would be normative, having its definitive meaning (*skr. nītārtha*, *tib. nges don*) for their particular traditions and which would be held to be of interpretable meaning (*skr. neyārtha*, *tib. drang don*)<sup>6</sup>. The intention (*abhiprāya*) and skillful methods (*upāya*) became the keys to interpretation. What a given Buddhist community considers to be canonical – *buddhavacana*, *buddhabhāṣita*, *saddharma*, etc. – is what, or at least is a part of what, we would say it holds to be canonical, that is to say, representative of the ultimate scriptural authority to which it adheres. As Buddhist thought flowered in India, one finds adept-based elaborations such as *gotra* and *kula*, the ‘families’ or psychological types of practitioners, with differing texts and practices prescribed for different psychological types, much as a skilled physician prescribes different medicines for his patients, as the traditional metaphor goes. Several Mahāyāna texts mention four traditional hermeneutical strategies called the “four reliances” (*catuḥpratisaraṇa*), which are as follows:

1. rely on the nature of things (*dharma*) not on an opinion of a person (*puruṣa*);
2. rely on the meaning or purport (*artha*) of a text, not a letter (*vyañjana*);

<sup>5</sup> “Two of the earliest Buddhist works of conscious exegesis have been incorporated into the canon in the *Sutta Piṭaka*. These are the *Mahāniddeśa* and the *Cullaniddeśa*, commentaries on the fourth and fifth books of the *Suttanipāta*. They date from approximately the third century CE. However, two other works of early, but uncertain date occupy a much more important position in the development of Buddhist exegetical theories: the *Nettipakaraṇa* and the *Peṭakopadesa*, both attributed to a (Maḥa) *Kaccayana*. The *Nettipakaraṇa* formulates the principles of interpretation (*netti*) common to both works on the basis of twelve techniques classified under the headings of ‘interpretations as to sense’ (*byañjana*) and ‘interpretation as to meaning’ (*attha*).” Luis O. Gomez, “Buddhist Literature: Exegesis and Hermeneutics”, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. by M. Eliade, New York: Macmillan, 1985, vol. III, 531. According to George D. Bond, the *Nettipakaraṇa* and the *Peṭakopadesa* represent manuals of interpretation which present methods for the correct understanding of the *dhamma* and central to these methods is the concept of the gradual path to *nibbāna* as a hermeneutical device or strategy to explain the logic and the structure of the *dhamma*. See: George D. Bond, “Gradual Path as a Hermeneutical Approach”, *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988, 41.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the problems that the perceived self-contradictions of the Buddha presented for Buddhist exegesis and hermeneutics, see Robert Thurman, “Buddhist Hermeneutics”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, XI. VI. 1, 1978, 19–21.

3. rely on a definitive meaning (*nītārtha*), not on an interpretable meaning (*neyārtha*);
4. rely on intuitive wisdom (*jñāna*), not on conceptual understanding (*viññāna*)<sup>7</sup>.

The seventh chapter of germinal Yogācāra text *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra* provides another schema of Buddhist hermeneutics in which the teaching of the Buddha is divided into three stages or wheels of doctrine, with the first two being declared provisional and the third – the final stage definitive<sup>8</sup>. According to this doctrine of three “turnings of the wheel of Dharma”, the Buddha first preached the Hinayāna teachings in the Deer Park in Varanasi, then he preached the Mādhyamaka doctrine of emptiness (*sūnyatā*) at Vulture Peak in Rājagṛha. Later he preached the Yogācāra doctrine of *viññaptimatra* in the same place. A Mādhyamaka’s (*pāramitāyāna*) and Tantric (*vajrayāna*) versions of this story also exist. Both the Mādhyamaka and the Yogācāra along with *Akṣayamatīnirdeśa sūtra* hold that *nītārtha* texts deal with the ultimate level of the truth (*paramārtha*), or the goal (*ārtha*), while *neyārtha* sūtras deal with the relative level of the truth (*samvṛti*) or the path (*mārga*). Thus hermeneutical system *yāna* reveals an attempt to formulate a historical argument in favour of doctrinal claims and such pseudohistorical apologetic was a quite popular hermeneutical strategy in Asian development of Buddhism<sup>9</sup>. In addition, various Buddhist texts are spoken of as belonging to this or that ‘vehicle’ (starting with *śravakayāna*, *pratyekabuddhayāna*, and *bodhisattvayāna*), and this system is compounded by discourse that refers not simply to the texts as such, but to attitudes through which the texts are practised.

Since enlightenment is timeless, a Buddhist teachings are relevant for anyone at any time, and the state of Buddhahood for a Buddhist is not a unique and unrepeatable event that occurred thousands of years ago, but rather an enduring possibility in the contemporary world. We may say that Buddhist scholasticism is concerned with reconciling the rational and the experiential aspects of human religiousness. Not only was textual interpretation and rational inquiry perceived as essential to the preservation of the tradition’s self-identity, it was also considered essential to distinguishing that tradition from others, to defending it against the intellectual assaults of others, and to demonstrating its relative superiority to others. Finally, part of self-imposed task of scholastics is to synthesize the large quantities of disparate and often contradictory textual material into the ordered whole.

Buddhist thought differs from most theological systems, which presuppose that the human capacity for knowledge is limited, that only gods can be perfectly enlightened or omniscient, and that therefore certainty can only arise from dogmatic authority, from the recordings of the

<sup>7</sup> See: Asanga’s *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, edited by N. Dutt, Patna: K. P. Jayaswal Institute, 1966, 175–176. These “four reliances” more extensively have been studied by Robert A. F. Thurman, *The Speech of Gold: Reason and Enlightenment in the Tibetan Buddhism*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989, 111–130; and Etienne Lamotte, “The Assessment of Textual Interpretation in Buddhism”, in *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988, 11–27.

<sup>8</sup> E. Lamotte, *Explication des Mysteres*, Tibetan text and a French translation, Louvain and Paris, 1935.

<sup>9</sup> On *yānas* discourse, see: Nathan Katz, ‘Prasaṅga and Deconstruction: Tibetan hermeneutics and the *yāna* controversy’, *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 34, Nr. 2, April, 1984, 185–204; and Maria A. G. T. Kloppenborg, *The Paccehabuddha: A Study of the Paccehabuddha in Pali Canonical and Commentatorial Literature*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974.

utterances of these gods in sacred texts. It also distinguishes itself from the philosophies of sceptics, nihilists, atheists, and materialists, who, although they are eager to be critical of and eschew theological dogmatism, unwittingly presuppose the dogma of impossibility of perfect enlightenment, certain only that they must always be uncertain about ultimate questions. However, as Robert A. F. Thurman has pointed out, “Against the theological dogmatists, Buddhist philosophy is critical of their restriction of omniscience to superhuman beings and affirms the transcendent potential of humans. Against the philosophical sophists, Buddhist philosophy is critical of their dogmatic insistence that all certainty is merely dogmatic and that omniscience is utterly impossible, and affirms that a rigorously honest confrontation with actual experience does afford an ultimately certain insight into its reality and function”<sup>10</sup>. According to traditional exegesis, works of Buddhist philosophy are something like a *samādhi*, a sustained and penetrating contemplation of certain pathways of thought and insight. The Buddhist view is that the ultimate resolution of intellectual difficulties is simultaneous with the ultimately transformative experience of unexcelled perfection.

European enlightenment has no historical counterpart in India or China. A cataclysmic rift between religion and science never occurred there, and thus philosophy never had to take sides. Buddhism is atheistic, it rejects revelation as epistemically authoritative, and is committed to infinite human perfectibility through empirical inquiry and rational analysis, culminating in full awakening or buddhahood (*buddhatva*, *buddhattā*). Buddhist philosophy, like Western philosophy, aims to understand the fundamental nature of reality, the nature of human life, and hence provides a hermeneutical context in which those in Buddhist cultures constitute and understand the meaning of their lives. In Buddhist context, religious and philosophical practices have never been priced apart as distinct and independent cultural practices, as opposed to connected parts of seamless cultural artefact. As Jay L. Garfield notes, “The categories of religious and philosophical discourse determine a dichotomy, which is in turn determined not by the respective characters of religious thought and philosophical thought *per se*, but rather by the particular methodological and substantive commitments of specific religious and philosophical traditions at particular historical junctures. Seen from the standpoint of their role in the project of human self-understanding, the continuity between religious and philosophical discourse – and indeed between them both and literary and historical discourse – is more dramatic than any differences”<sup>11</sup>. For example, Paul Griffiths uses the terms ‘buddhology’ and ‘buddhological’ in ways that directly parallel the uses of the terms ‘christology’ and ‘christological’ in the Christian tradition. He derives the primary theme of his book from Immanuel Kant’s broadly generalized notion that “human beings need an idea of highest perfection in order to have a standart to apply in making determinations of an axiological kind”. Griffiths appropriates and utilizes Kant’s suggestion by organizing his study around the notion

<sup>10</sup> Robert A. F. Thurman, *The Speech of Gold: Reason and Enlightenment in the Tibetan Buddhism*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Jay L. Garfield, *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation*, Oxford University Press, 2002, 257.

that classical buddhological doctrine may usefully be thought of as “a systematic attempt to define and list those properties that something must have, within the constraints of Buddhist metaphysics, to be maximally great... and as a basis for, and fullest representation of, Buddhist axiological commitments”<sup>12</sup>.

Hence, rational inquiry and systematicity becomes necessary from a textual standpoint as well. The *Buddhist hermeneutical tradition is a tradition of realization, devoid of any dichotomy between intellect and experience, the rational and the mystical*. Enlightenment as wisdom is perfected as the culmination of the most refined rational inquiry, not at the cost of reason.

However, in the Buddhist tradition there has, at times, been a great tension between the scholastic and the purely meditative approaches, each of which has been prone to its own excesses.

The meditative traditions (epitomized by certain schools of Chinese Ch’an and Japanese Zen) have at times repudiated the need for the study of the scriptures as prerequisite to spiritual growth. The famous phrase from *Lañkāvatara sūtra* is often quoted “From the night of his Enlightenment, to the night of his *nirvāṇa*, the Blessed one did not utter a single word”. Nāgārjuna also states in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*: “The Buddha did not teach any doctrine anywhere to anyone” (XXV.24). The Mahāyāna insists that the highest stage in the Path, and therefore, the highest order of meaning, can only be expressed in apophatic statements such as ‘appeasing all discursive thinking’ (*sarvaprapañcōpaśama*) and ‘cutting out all doctrines and practices’ (*sarvavādacaryoccheda*). The ineffability of Buddha’s experience is clearly described in *Ratnagotravibhāga uttara tantra*:

Being unutterable, containing the Highest Truth  
Inaccessible to investigation and incoparable,  
Being the Supreme, and relating neither  
To the Phenomenal World nor to Nirvana  
The sphere of Buddha is inconceivable even for the Saints.<sup>13</sup>

So Japanese Zen master Eisai taught that the Buddha-mind is directly transmitted from Buddha to Buddha apart from the *sūtras*, which were of no value unless one had directly realized the Buddha-mind.

The deconstructive tendencies of experientially pragmatic Ch’an-Zen schools are grounded on the idea of the inadequacy of words or conceptualizations as a vehicle for conveying the truth, and emphasize the quest for meaning in practice and a gradual detachment from doctrinal conceptions, as well as from meditation experiences. This Buddhist deconstruction implies

<sup>12</sup> Paul Griffiths, *On Being Buddha: The Classical Doctrine of Buddhahood*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994, 58. Also “Buddhological doctrine rests upon a single formal or procedural intuition: the intuition that Buddha is maximally great, that whatever great-making properties there are, Buddha has them maximally [...]. The maximal-greatness intuition entails its negative correlate: the intuition that whatever negative properties there are, Buddha is maximally free from them” (P. 182).

<sup>13</sup> *A Study on the Ratnagotravibhāga (Uttara tantra), being a treatise on the Tathagatagarbha theory of Mahāyāna Buddhism*, tr. by Jikido Takasaki, Serie Orientale, Roma, XXXIII. Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1966, 334.

that linguistic meaning is so inevitably dualistic that it can never adequately describe or express reality<sup>14</sup>. Therefore, “Ch’an hermeneutics confronts two of the most fundamental problems in Buddhist spiritual culture: first, what is the process through which enlightenment is achieved, and second, what is precise content of enlightenment?”<sup>15</sup>

The fundamental hermeneutical principle of so called “scriptureless” Ch’an claims that texts can be interpreted adequately only by enlightened masters. Reliance is placed on individual practice and inner realization of the truth, and interpretative distinctions are to be applied to people, not to texts. The hermeneutical principles were developed in order to help distinguish Ch’an’s descriptions of practice and enlightenment from seemingly parallel descriptions in the *sūtras*. Rather than remaining complacent with a hermeneutic that described the principles by which the truth was to be explained, Ch’an’s adepts insisted on taking the extra step to a direct, personal experience of that truth.

The scholastic tradition, on the other hand, has often become immersed in words to the exclusion of practice. However, scripture elicits the transformation of the person by acting as the cause that generates successively more profound and subtle levels of realization that eventually culminate in the state of complete perfection known as *buddhahood*. For the scholastic tradition of Buddhism, without the understanding of scripture as the successive expression of the Buddha’s own insight, there can be no realization or the successive levels of insight that lead to the recreation within the adept of the Buddha’s ultimate experience, enlightenment<sup>16</sup>. A Buddhist considers philosophy itself a therapeutic process rather than a constructive metascience.

Vasubandhu, in a frequently cited verse, divided the Buddhist teaching into the two great domains of transmitted doctrine (Skt. *āgama*, Tib. *lung*) and realization (Skt. *adhigama*, Tib. *rtogs-pa*). (*Abhidharmakośa*, VIII. 39) M. T. Kapstein suggests that the transmitted doctrine is the one which *comes down* to us, while realization is that which *comes through* when the transmission is rightly understood. Vasubandhu associated these two domains with two sorts of spiritually meaningful activity: exegesis and practice. Jointly, they guarantee the continuing integrity of the Buddha’s message in the world. The close connection between interpretation and religious practice is even more elaborated with the rise of Tantric hermeneutics, where orthopraxy becomes central to textual interpretation and a single text or passage can be both *nīta* and *neya*, depending on the receptor of the message<sup>17</sup>. It is evident in the *Hevajra* and *Guhyasamāja tantra*’s analysis of archetypical personality types under the heading of the five Buddha families.

<sup>14</sup> In recent turns of thought among the so-called postmodernist school of French literary criticism, one finds textual strategies echoing several of the principles of Buddhist hermeneutics. According to David R. Loy, what is interesting about Buddhism from a deconstructive points of view is, “that it is both onto-theological (therefore what-needs-to-be-deconstructed) and deconstructive (providing a different example of how-to-deconstruct). And what is interesting about Derrida’s type of deconstruction, from a Buddhist point a view, is that it is logocentric”. See: David R. Loy, “The Deconstruction of Buddhism”, *Derrida and Negative Theology*, H. Coward and T. Foshay (eds.), Suny Press, 1992, 227.

<sup>15</sup> Robert E. Buswell, Jr., “Ch’an Hermeneutics: A Korean View”, *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988, 231.

<sup>16</sup> This was lucidly discussed by Robert Gimello “Mysticism and Meditation”, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. S. T. Katz, New York: Oxford University Press, 1968, 170–199.

<sup>17</sup> More about Buddhist tantric hermeneutics, see: Ernst Steinkellner, “Remarks on Tantristic Hermeneutics”, *Proceeding of the Csoma de Kőrös Symposium*, ed. L. Ligeti, Budapest, Academia, 1978, 445–458; A. Bharati, “Inten-

In Buddhism, as in many religious traditions, a scriptural, i. e. linguistic, understanding of doctrine has never been considered an end in itself. Without having spiritual realization and transformation as its aim, a scripture would be nothing but dry words. For Buddhist scholastics the problem of the nature, of scripture arises in the context of describing the mechanism whereby the doctrine can become a soteriologically valid entity, an adequate medium for generation of salvic experience. The doctrine is perceived as having two components, one mental, or experiential in nature and the other linguistic, or scriptural. As the often cited verse from the *Abhidharmakośa* states: “The holy doctrine of our teacher is of two kinds, that which is of the nature of scripture and that which is of the nature of realization”<sup>18</sup>. Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions focus their question on origins of scripture and its compatibility with God’s essence. Buddhists, not concerned as much with the origins of scripture as with the transmission and internalization of the doctrine it contains, pose the question in pragmatic and dynamic terms: how can soteriologically valid experiences of an enlightened individual, experiences that – by virtue of becoming mental states – are non material, be coded into a material medium, language, and then decoded as the mental states of the adept. Language with all its limitations is recognized as an important vehicle (*upāya*) for salvation. Buddhism’s long-standing preoccupation with language throughout its history may be simply due to the fact that “any tradition that seeks mystical silence becomes intensively involved with the question of the role language” as Gomez aptly puts it<sup>19</sup>.

A text is not a mere splash of ink on paper, a text is constituted as such by its meaning, and hence by being understood. Its character and identity are hence determined by a history of encounters with readers and each encounter transforms its meaning, and hence its identity. A reader is a structure of prejudices, anticipations, and views: an occupant of horizon whose interaction with that of the text constitutes the phenomenon of understanding. For a text to be understood is, however, for the horizon of the reader to be altered thereby. A strictly Gadamerian-Heideggerian account of the circular and temporal structure of understanding and of writing presupposes the integrity and the uni-dimensionality of a tradition<sup>20</sup>. A principal role of the tradition is to supply the intertextual context of prejudices that makes the read-

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tional Language in the Tantras”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Nr. 81, 1961, 261–270; A. Wayman, “Twilight Language and a Tantric Song”, *The Buddhist Tantra*, London, 1973, 128–135; Robert A. F. Thurman, “Buddhist Hermeneutics”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Nr. 46, 1978, 19–35; E. Lamote, “La critique d’interprétation dans le bouddhisme”, *Annuaire de l’Institut de Philologie et d’Histoire Orientales*, vol. 9, Brussels, 1949, 341–361.

<sup>18</sup> *‘saddharmo dvividhaḥ śāsturāgamādhigamātmakāḥ’ – Abhidharmakośa*, VIII, 39 ab.

<sup>19</sup> Luis O. Gomez, “Buddhist Views of Language”, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. by M. Eliade, New York: Macmillan, 1985, 446. In this article, under general entry “Language” an over view of some questions relating to language in a Buddhist context is given.

<sup>20</sup> H-G. Gadamer writes: “A person who is trying to understand a text is always performing an act of projecting. He projects before himself a meaning for the text as a whole as soon some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the latter emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. The working out of this fore-project, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there.” Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, tr. by G. Barden and J. Cumming, New York: Seabury Press, 1975, 236.

ing and talking possible and the background in which the revelation of a meaning and the composition of the meaningful text become possible.

The most contemporary hermeneutic theory presupposes the integrity and relative insularity of traditions, and, despite their historicity, the stability of texts as objects of interpretation. Deutsch and Smart have already revealed the difficulties in applying Western Hermeneutic methods to Asian philosophical traditions<sup>21</sup>, and Scharfstein, Lopez, and Cabezon have discussed of the very different hermeneutic approaches characteristic to Buddhist traditions<sup>22</sup>.

Ben-Ami Scharfstein, in his broadly comparative discussion, considered a variety of traditions in the history of religions in which the power of Word or words to adequately represent religious reality has been affirmed<sup>23</sup>. He also treated, critically and in depth, the various kinds of ineffability that a comparative philosophy of religions, especially a comparative philosophy of religions that recognizes the importance of psychology, must take seriously into account.

Jose Cabezon chooses a different strategy. He emphasizes the ways in which – in the kind of contexts that he identifies as scholastic – language serves as a source of authority (e. g., in scripture), as the medium of expression, and as a central object for philosophical reflection<sup>24</sup>. He takes serious account of the structural differences between scholastic traditions and the significance of these differences for patterns of historical development. He notes, for example, that in the Buddhist traditions of India and Tibet scholasticism has always been associated with a specifically monastic environment. This he contrasts with the situation in the Christian West where, during the medieval period, a separation took place between the scholasticism of the monastics, on the one hand, and the scholasticism of the clerics, on the other. To demonstrate this he brilliantly investigates *dGe lugs pa* analysis of various aspects of language, scripture, and their relationship, and explores the ways in which *dGe lugs pa* scholastics have affirmed and analyzed the potentialities of specifically philosophical language as a vehicle for articulation and defending Buddhist ontology and soteriology. Cabezon then goes on to contend that the consistently monastic environment in India and Tibet is closely associated with the long-term continuity that has characterized that tradition. Further he makes the correlated claim that the medieval separation of clerical scholasticism from the monastic environment provided the necessary preconditions for the development of the secularized styles of research and argument that have come to characterize our own work as humanist scholars in the modern academy. John B. Henderson calls such depersonalization and eventual secularization of scholastic philosophical discourse “the transition from commentarial forms and modes of discourse to modern scholarship and criticism”<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> G. J. Larson and E. Deutsch (eds.), *Interpreting across Boundaries: New Essays in Comparative Philosophy*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989.

<sup>22</sup> D. Lopez, *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988.

<sup>23</sup> Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *Ineffability: The Failure of Words in Philosophy and Religion*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1992.

<sup>24</sup> J. Cabezon, *Buddhism and Language: A Study of Indo-Tibetan Scholasticism*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1994.

<sup>25</sup> John B. Henderson, *Scripture, Canon and Commentary: A Comparison of Confucian and Western Exegesis*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991, 200.

Indeed, was a common concern of all scholastic traditions was to develop elaborate methods for interpretation of scripture and, in order to reconcile scriptural inconsistencies, to create hermeneutical strategies while distinguishing between different kinds or levels of meaning in sacred texts. Hence, in Islamic law (*sharī'ah*) there exists a distinction between texts that are to be literally interpreted (*ḥaqīqah*) and those that are to be interpreted figuratively (*majaz*). In the works of the great Jewish commentator Rashi (1040–1105 A.D.) a distinction is made between the literal (*peshat*) and the homiletical (*derash*) meanings of sacred texts. In the history of Christianity, Origen's (185–254 A.D.) classification of the senses of scripture into a threefold division – somatic, psychic and pneumatic – gave rise in medieval times to the fourfold senses of scripture: literal, analogical, moral and anagogical.

A classic is a classic because it engenders multiple meanings. Recently Pierre Hadot has elaborated a rereading of the classical tradition and at the center of his reflections is the concept of 'spiritual exercise', because "Philosophy then appears in its original aspect: not as a theoretical construct, but as a method for training people to live and to look at the world in a new way. It is an attempt to transform mankind"<sup>26</sup>. For, although it is a contribution of inestimable value to delineate with care the manner in which classical philosophy embodied commitments to well-formed regimes of self-cultivation, in which dialectic and argument played central roles, it remains nevertheless true that classical philosophy was also concerned with both speculative and practical knowledge. Such reading of the classical Greek tradition has a powerful analogy in Buddhism and in Asian traditions in general.

Traditions, according both to Gadamerian and to Māhāyana Buddhist hermeneutic theory, have an additional crucial role in the hermeneutic enterprise: they are a repository not only of context but also of commentary. In an articulated tradition, such as the philosophical, musical, artistic or literary traditions of Asia, a large volume of textual material consists of commentary and subcommentary, and these commentaries provide constraints on subsequent discussions of texts. Hadot argues that "A tradition text has... authoritative sources grounded in the oral transmission, its summaries, its ongoing written elaborations. The basic commentaries (*bhāṣyas*), or the shorter commentaries (*vṛtties*), with the subcommentaries (*tikas*) and glosses (*vārttikas*), form, hermeneutically, integral parts of a continuing argument or text. They are not so much appendages to an otherwise fixed and completed work (*sūtra*)... as they contribute to a larger, developing work. The exegetical material expands, refines, modifies arguments and ideas, and presents new ones, usually with increasing precision [...], seeking to bring greater systematic coherence to a body of ideas. The philosopher-commentator seeks to remain faithful to his authoritative sources, but on his own creative terms. It is thus that we can speak of his work, together with its authoritative sources, as constituting a 'tradition text'"<sup>27</sup>.

As we know, Paul Ricoeur defines hermeneutics as a discipline primarily concerned with textual exegesis. He states, "The hermeneutical problem was first raised within the limits of

<sup>26</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, tr. M. Chase, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, 107.

<sup>27</sup> E. Deutsch, "Knowledge and the Tradition Text in Indian Philosophy", *Interpreting across Boundaries: New Essays in Comparative Philosophy*, eds. G. J. Larson and E. Deutsch, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989, 169–170.

exegesis, that is, within the framework of a discipline which proposes to understand a text – to understand it beginning with its intention, on the basis of what it attempts to say”<sup>28</sup>. Usually hermeneutics is conceived as being the rules and methodologies used in interpretation, rather than the act of interpretation itself. This distinction has also been noted by John C. Maraldo, who distinguishes between textual exegesis and discussions of methods and rules for interpretation. “In all Western developments of the term, hermeneutics is a highly reflective and self-conscious discipline that focuses on methods and principles of interpretation as opposed to interpretation or exegesis itself. In the modern sense of the term, an interpretive scheme or strategy is not ‘hermeneutical’ unless it reflects an awareness of the problems of authorship, historical distance, and the historical position of the interpreter”<sup>29</sup>.

It was customary in classical Buddhist India to introduce a text by identifying its purpose (skr. *prayojana*, tib. *dgos pa*) and its ultimate purpose (skr. *pratyartha*, tib. *nying dgos*). Traditionally, the purpose was considered to be the elucidation (literally, “the making known”) of any of a number of religio-philosophical subjects, and the ultimate purpose (or the purpose of the purpose) was usually identified as the attainment of the state of human perfection known as enlightenment (*bodhi*). Indeed, it is neither the authenticity nor the pragmatic truth of the Buddhist scripture that the tradition questions, but rather their intended meaning (*abhiprāya*, *dgongs pa*). As Donald S. Lopez notes, the methodology of Buddhist exegetes has been and continues to be much closer to that of Schleiermacher than Gadamer. “If the goal of Mahayana philosophy is to bring oneself and others to the experience of enlightenment, which is nothing more or less than a repetition of the experience of the Buddha, then the attempt to establish the intent of the author, the goal of what Gadamer terms the romantic endeavor, has strong soteriological overtones for the Buddhist”<sup>30</sup>. Buddhist hermeneutics is based on an assumption that the author of scriptural text had an intention or a set of intentions that can in principle be realized and explicated by competent exegetes.

This assumption, which H.-G. Gadamer labeled the ‘romantic endeavor’, is central to Buddhist commentarial literature, which assumes that the Buddha had a hidden intention when he made conflicting statements and that this intention can and indeed must be discovered by this followers, even those who are separated from him in time, language, etc. Like Schleiermacher, Buddhist philosophers proposed to understand a text by understanding the mental processes

<sup>28</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Existence and Hermeneutics”, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. Don Ihde, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974, 3.

<sup>29</sup> John C. Maraldo, “Hermeneutics and Historicity in the Study of Buddhism”, *The Eastern Buddhist*, 19.1, 1986, 23–24. Michael M. Broido also makes a statement that provides a good cautionary note for scholars trying to explicate ‘Buddhist hermeneutics’: “This important distinction cannot perhaps be made completely hard-and-fast, but it is essential that we nevertheless try to keep it in mind; for otherwise there will be nothing to prevent the study of Buddhist hermeneutics from becoming the study of absolutely anything with Buddhism. It is not difficult to see that this confusion is rampant in much work on Buddhist hermeneutics”. (Michael M. Broido, “Killing, Lying, Stealing, and Adultery: A Problem of Interpretation in the Tantras”, *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988, 83.)

<sup>30</sup> “Introduction”, *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988, 7.

of the author. In Buddhist hermeneutics, one re-experiences to some degree the processes of the author's thought through the medium of the text and through oral and written commentarial traditions. Understanding of both the words and their meaning are but preparatory stages to the internalization of that meaning via the transformative experience of meditation. Buddhist thinkers, of course, believe that at advanced stages of spiritual developments a person does know the Buddha's thought with certainty.

Actually, the Buddha's words were all spoken with particular intentions and this intention has also had a soteriological dimension of bringing his followers progressively closer to the state of enlightenment. All the words of the Buddha are considered to be a vehicle for the attainment of *nirvāṇa*. The statement in *Aṅguttara nikāya* (IV. 163) that, "whatever is well-spoken (*subhāṣita*) has been spoken by the Buddha", is often taken to mean that anything not fundamentally at variance with the essence of Buddhist doctrine and practice can legitimately be adopted. An underlying premise of Buddhist philosophy and meditation theory is that the Buddha has actualized a potential that is present in all sentient beings, and all beings share the capacity to progress in understanding and eventually attain the state of Buddhahood. *Understanding can occur because there is some correspondence between our own inner experience and the experience and teaching of the Buddha*. To do hermeneutics means to shake a text to its foundations, to solicit it to reveal its psychological, or better to say, soteriological matrix.

It means that the goal of Buddhist hermeneuticians is closer to Hirsch's contention that "the interpreter's aim is to posit the author's horizon and carefully exclude his own accidental associations"<sup>31</sup>. Finding Buddha's meaning is difficult, and the gulf in understanding between the Buddha and an unenlightened exegete makes it necessary that he or she initially identify and rely on *sūtras* of definitive meaning, but it is assumed that through this process one may in fact bridge the temporal distance separating the Buddha from one's own time, culture, etc.

According to Jose I. Cabezon, from the point of comparative hermeneutics, when we come to the question of the authenticity of canonical Buddhist texts there are two major avenues of approach: "The first, a path admired by elements of the Śrāvaka community and many members of our own, looks to history and to philology as the answer to questions of authenticity; the second, espoused by early Māhāyana scholastics such as Vasubandhu, looks only to ahistorical elements, where accordance with reality is the ultimate and final criterion, as the relevant factors in the determination of authenticity"<sup>32</sup>. And such rejection of history in favour of a doctrinal or philosophical principle ("accordance with reality") as the ultimate criterion of authenticity is far from being an instance of hermeneutical naivety. That reality was the guiding principle of Māhāyana scholastic hermeneutics, and exegesis was the road to it. We may also add the third position, that of the radical ineffability, the claim that the ultimate truth and,

<sup>31</sup> E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1967, 222. If there are present-day supporters of textual objectivism who have tried to defend Dilthey's and Schleiermacher's interests in the intentions of the author; E. D. Hirsch's *Validity in Interpretation* is a prominent example of this kind of defense.

<sup>32</sup> Jose I. Cabezon, "Vasubandhu's Vyākhyāyukti", *Text in Context: Traditional Hermeneutics in South Asia*, ed. By Jeffrey R. Timm, State University of New York, 1992, 234.

according to some, any phenomenon cannot be expressed in words and that linguistic analysis is tantamount to bondage – as represented by some Zen schools.

G.-H. Gadamer contends that “every encounter with tradition that takes place within historical consciousness involves the experience of the tension between the text and the present”<sup>33</sup>, which accurately reflects a concern of Buddhist hermeneutics. Unlike Gadamer, however, Buddhist exegetes think that this gap is not an unbridgeable one and that through following proper exegetical principles and through practicing meditation in accordance with the Buddha’s instructions they can re-cognize the Buddha’s meaning and re-create in their own minds his understanding of reality. At the same time, traditions are not to be viewed as ossified and rigid systems that are resistant to change and innovations, but rather as continually changing organisms that require innovations in doctrine and practice to retain their validity. Doctrines as spiritual realizations represent the experiential dimension, and are modified, interpreted, or discarded to the extent that they contradict compelling evidence or prove unfruitful for new or different questions that come to interest members of the tradition, and this process of innovation and reinterpretation is a sign that the tradition remains vital and relevant for its adherents.

In Indian literature, however, it is more difficult to find terms that correspond to Western usages of the term hermeneutics. One of the few examples of an Indian term that has some of the connotations of this word is the term *saṃdhinirmocana*, ‘explaining the thought’ as it is used in the *Saṃdhinirmocana-sūtra*. In this *sūtra* in which the Buddha not only explains what he was thinking of when he made some of his earlier statements, but also expounds general rules for determining the meaning of other scriptural statements and how to understand the thought behind them<sup>34</sup>. The term *saṃdhi* in this context means “intention” with the sense of a deep or underlying meaning and *nirmocana* means “explanation or “interpretation”. This, then, is the *sūtra* in which the Buddha’s intention, his underlying meaning is freed from illusory knots of contradiction that appear when all his statements are read literally. “The intent of the discussions of the strategies is not simply to provide guidelines for interpreting certain texts and teachings, but to suggest new ways of viewing the world which, if properly understood, can radically transform one’s consciousness and overturn deeply rooted misconceptions about the nature of reality”<sup>35</sup>. This attitude accords with Ricoeur’s idea that the world is the ultimate referent of a text<sup>36</sup>, since the aim of Buddhist teachings is to bring about the elimination of one’s illusions and misconceptions about the world and to replace them with understanding that accords with reality. We may say that *the goal of Buddhist doctrine is to present guidelines for re-interpreting all of one’s experience, to reorient one’s perceptions and understandings in such way that one is no longer confused and deluded by false appearances and mistaken conceptions*. In this sense, the referents of Buddhist teachings are the world and one’s perceptions of it.

<sup>33</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, tr. by G. Barden and J. Cumming, New York: Seabury Press, 1975, 236.

<sup>34</sup> See: John Powers, *Two Commentaries on the Saṃdhinirmocana-sutra by Asanga and Jnanagarbha*, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992.

<sup>35</sup> John Powers, *Hermeneutics and Tradition in the Saṃdhinirmocana-sutra*, Leiden, New York, Köln, E. J. Brill, 1993, 85.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, Fort Worth: Texas Christian university Press, 1976, 36.

This focus has been noted with respect to Buddhist hermeneutics by Etienne Lamotte, who states that sound hermeneutics in Buddhism is based not on theoretical understanding, but on direct knowledge of reality. Nevertheless, Lamotte pays little attention to the role of tradition, custom, and Buddhist notions of authority in this process, and stresses the importance of reasoning for Buddhist thinkers seeking to decide what can legitimately be considered the ‘word of the Buddha’. “In order that text be accepted as the ‘word of the Buddha’ is not sufficient to call upon the authority of the Buddha himself, upon a religious community (*saṃgha*) which has been formally established, or upon one of several particularly learned elders; the text in question must also be found in the sutra (*sūtra* ‘*vatarati*), appear in the *Vinaya* (*vinaye saṃdṛśyate*), and no contradict the nature of things (*dharmatām ca na vilomayati*). In other words, adherence to the doctrine cannot be dependent on human authority, however respectable, since experience shows that human evidence is contradictory and changeable; adherence should be based on personal reasoning (*yukti*), on what one has oneself known (*jñāta*), seen (*dṛṣṭa*), and grasped (*vidita*)”<sup>37</sup>. This is certainly true of the Buddhist doctrine, which stresses the importance of direct personal understanding and the soteriological benefits gained by those who contemplate its teachings. The single aim of all the Buddha’s teaching was to evoke enlightenment in living beings.

Another good example is Tsong kha pa’s *Essence of True Eloquence*, a text which, as it has been explicitly revealed by R. A. F. Thurman, from the beginning stresses the importance of reasoning and which states that the Buddha’s words must be examined by ‘stainless reasoning’ to settle the difficult points of his teaching. Nevertheless, this should not be considered to be a one-sided rationalism since Tsong kha pa’s arguments are based on Buddhist notions of tradition and authority and mainly on the interpretations of Nāgārjuna and Asaṅga<sup>38</sup>. Reasoning takes place within a context, and all traditions (including contemporary science, humanities, etc.) reason within implicit or explicit rules, guidelines, and paradigms. Furthermore, the reasoning of Buddhist scholars is governed by the rules accepted as normative by their traditions, and their arguments would not be perceived as valid if they did not so conform. Many examples of Buddhist exegetes relying on particular texts can be found throughout Buddhist literature, perhaps most strikingly in several East Asian classification schemes – those of Pure Land, T’ien-t’ai, Huan-yen, Shingon, Nichiren, – each of which relies on a particular text (or a group of related texts) that enabled exegetes in their respective traditions to make sense of the confusion of the Buddhist canon and to create a coherent system of exegesis.

<sup>37</sup> Etienne Lamotte, “The Assessment of Textual Interpretation in Buddhism”, *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988, 13. In a similar way David S. Ruegg while presenting the detailed analysis of the term *ngoṅs gzi* (which he translates as ‘intentional ground’), overemphasizes the role of individual reasoning and analysis and overlooks the powerful role of tradition and authority in Buddhist hermeneutics. “The competent exegete, who has at his disposal the corpus of the Buddha’s teaching (together, eventually with the oral and/or written commentarial tradition), is able to discover – to ‘calculate’ as it were – the *ngoṅs gzi* by means of the systematical interpretation of the corpus”. David S. Ruegg, “Purport, Implicature, and Presupposition: Sanskrit *Abhiprāya* and Tibetan *Dgoṅs gzi* as Hermeneutical Concepts”, *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 13, 1985, 309–325.

<sup>38</sup> Robert A. F. Thurman, *The Speech of Gold: Reason and Enlightenment in the Tibetan Buddhism*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989.

It is worthwhile in Buddhist studies to attempt to reconstruct the context in which particular doctrines were formulated, since the context of an utterance or doctrine is of crucial importance in determining its meaning and application. Buddhist doctrines operate within the context of functioning system of shared symbols and assumptions, and a contemporary interpreter should seek to understand and explicate this context. We should keep in mind that “Even the most radical destructions of the world and the self in Buddhist contemplative experience, where the disposition to hanker after the merest grain of reality in body or mind undone, must be seen to be indexed to specific soteriological projects and the axiological assumptions that accompany them”<sup>39</sup>. The interpretive community to which one belongs will determine one’s hermeneutical orientation to a large extent. Buddhists teachings are meaningful to Buddhists primarily insofar as they are perceived as saying something significant about human existence, and this is what Buddhists try to find in them.

In Buddhism grasping texts literally does not lead to comprehension of the *Dharma* and is equal to scorning of the *Dharma*. Buddhist philosophers and meditators are generally not primarily concerned with learning about other topics (history, geography, etc.) that are not perceived as being relevant to this soteriological orientation. “Buddhist thinkers attempted to justify their ideas through recourse to tradition and accepted notions of authority, and their reasoning processes cannot intelligibly be lifted from their context and studied in isolation.... In order to understand traditional thinkers or texts, it is necessary to attempt to reconstruct as much as possible the rules of thought and discourse in which they operate.”<sup>40</sup> Such procedure can be viewed as a philosophical equivalent of Clifford Geertz’s idea of ‘thick description’ in anthropology. It is clear that the more contextual the treatment, the “thicker” the description, the less chance there will be of overt misrepresentation<sup>41</sup>. It seems that the most lasting truths are found in the least reductive configurations of the largest possible number of conflicting interpretations. In other words, the most useful interpretation may well be one that takes into account as many previous interpretations as possible and attempts to disclose the ways in which these earlier readings made sense, both to the interpretive scholar and to his reader. The most we can hope for from our own interpretation is to provide, in Richard Rorty’s words, “the culminating reinterpretation of our predecessors’ reinterpretation of their predecessors’ reinterpretation”<sup>42</sup>.

European scholars have consistently looked in the Indian and Buddhist traditions for an answer to Western philosophical problems. They have used European technical terminology in translations and analyses of Sanskrit, Pali, Tibetan, Chinese, Japanese Buddhist texts, and in the interests of elucidating Asian thought for a Western readership, they have made it an

<sup>39</sup> Matthew T. Kapstein, *Reason's Traces: Identity and Interpretation in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist Thought*, Boston, Wisdom Publications, 2001, 19.

<sup>40</sup> John Powers, *Hermeneutics and Tradition in the Samdhinirmocana-sutra*, Leiden, New York, Köln, E. J. Brill, 1993, 162.

<sup>41</sup> Geertz’ approach involves providing as much detail and information as possible in order to give a holistic picture of the object study. See, Clifford Geertz, “Religion as Cultural System”, *The Religious Situation*, ed. by D. Cutler, Boston: Beacon Press, 1968, 639–688.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982, 92.

accepted practice to compare Western and Indian philosophers. In each generation, the new problematics of Western philosophy have yielded correspondingly new, but not necessarily more “correct” readings of the Buddhist tradition. As the aims, conscious and unconscious, of scholars change, their readings of texts will change as well. To this extent, their readings are isogetical (*isogesis* – “reading into”): they reveal far more the views of scholars and their scholarly eras than exegesis is said to do. Exegesis is conscious intent, whereas isogesis is simply unconscious and inevitable phenomenon that often reveals as much about the interpreter as it does about the being interpreted.

It was not until the late nineteenth century that “Buddhist philosophy” was first recognized as an independent subject for scholarly inquiry. Prior to this time, “the treatment of the Buddhist philosophical systems, as a field of study distinct from Buddhist religion and literature, was virtually nonexistent: most early nineteenth-century studies of Indian and Buddhist culture treated philosophical, poetic, and religious literatures as equal and indistinguishable objects of philological research”<sup>43</sup>. Nineteenth-century idealists from Schopenhauer on viewed Indian thought as a response to the problem of relation between appearance and reality and found their own concerns mirrored in Upaniṣadic, Vedāntin, and Mādhyamika writings and, accordingly, Nāgārjuna and other Buddhist scholars were read as if they were Platonic or, more usually, Kantian transcendentalists.

In the nineteenth century, philosophy came to be perceived in Europe as an autonomous academic discipline, distinct both from theology and from the natural sciences. Once the Kantian shift from metaphysics to epistemology had been accomplished, philosophy could be viewed as a field of inquiry distinct from all others, a professionalized area of expertise with its own concerns and techniques. For Sanskritists and Buddhologists, the result of the professionalization of philosophy in European universities was a rush to demarcate the “strictly philosophical” in their own field. Differentiation began to be made among Indian and Oriental texts: some were labeled products of poetic or religious inspiration, and others were offered as examples of pure philosophy. In other words, the founders of “Indian philosophical studies” (Paul Deussen, Richard Garbe, Max Muller, Arthur Berriedale Keith, Sir Monier Williams) conceived their enterprise under the influence of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German idealism and presented Indian philosophical tradition as duplicating the latest “discoveries” of the great European thinkers.

Although attention to Indian idealism continued, the new analytically oriented scholars, in the manner of the Vienna Circle, shifted their focus from the primarily metaphysical interests of the idealists to “critical realism”, “logical positivism”, “conceptual analysis”, and began to concentrate more on the Indian views about language, logic, causation and the justification of knowledge. The general widening scope did not preclude, however, a concentration of Indological interest on specific “analytic” schools and texts. In the first half of the twentieth century, analytic and positivist philosophers characterized the Indian philosophical spectrum

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<sup>43</sup> Andrew P. Tuck, *Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1990, VI.

as an assortment of rival claims about causal efficacy and logical accuracy. In this context Buddhism was viewed as a logical analyst of competing metaphysical and epistemological propositions.

In the second half of that century, the analytic turn in interpretation was joined by an alternative mode of philosophical discourse. Beginning with Wittgenstein's assault on the viability of traditional "theory of knowledge" and on the efficacy of meaning analysis, and continuing with Quine's critique of the distinction between language and fact, with Sellars's attack on the "Myth of the Given", and with Kuhn's and Feyerabend's portrayals of scientific facts as "theory-laden" – the notion that language can correctly represent or "picture" the world by connecting words with objects, sense-data, or facts has lost currency with a new kind of philosopher. Post-Wittgensteinian (post-Heideggerian, post-modern, or simply, post-Second World War) holistic antifoundationalism has also begun to have an effect on the Indologists' and Buddhologists' interpretive work. Subsequently, postempiricists, post-Wittgensteinians have seen Buddhists as antiphilosophers, primarily concerned with language use, conceptual holism, and the limits of philosophical discourse. It has become possible to describe Wittgenstein's prescription for a philosophical "therapy" as a search for something not unlike Buddhist enlightenment, and to portray Nāgārjuna as an Indian metaphilosopher, concerned with "languages-games" and "forms of life": "Only Wittgensteinian interpretation will suffice for certain central Buddhist concepts"<sup>44</sup>.

The elaboration of doctrine and argument in traditional Buddhist settings necessarily responded to the intellectual cultures of the times and places concerned. We cannot rightly expect to find there ready-made answers to the problems that confront our contemporary philosophical culture. And one of the hallmarks of philosophy is that it must forever renew itself in response to specificities of place and time. We would agree with the sentence of M. T. Kapstein that "Perhaps the richest analogue between traditional Buddhist thought and Western philosophies is to be found not in the comparison of particular arguments so much as in the overriding project of philosophy as a vehicle for the formation of the person through spiritual exercise a new perspective may also be disclosed"<sup>45</sup>.

The central ideological commitments of translators – the criterion of objectivity, – has supposed that interpretation and translations of ancient Buddhist texts are intended to be as "accurate", "objective", and "close to original" as possible. The standard reading of the nine-

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<sup>44</sup> Chris Gudmunsen, *Wittgenstein and Buddhism*, New York: Harper and Row, 1977, 113. Even the claim was made that "much of what the later Wittgenstein had to say was anticipated about 1800 years ago in India" (P. 115). It was also asserted that Wittgenstein, "was applying to European absolutism the same critique earlier applied to Indian absolutism by the proponents of the Mādhyamika". Robert Thurman, "Philosophical Nonegocentrism in Wittgenstein and Candrakīrti in their Treatment of the Private Language Problem", *Philosophy East and West*, 30:3 (July 1980), 336. According to Nathan Katz: "The Parallel between the Buddhist notion of 'convenient' designation and Wittgenstein's 'everyday language' is clear. Both are saying that because a word may be used, we should not get carried away with philosophies about essences and the like". Nathan Katz, "Nāgārjuna and Wittgenstein on Error", *Buddhist and Western Philosophy*, ed. by Nathan. Katz, New Delhi: Sterling, 1981, 311.

<sup>45</sup> Matthew T. Kapstein, *Reason's Traces: Identity and Interpretation in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist Thought*, Boston, Wisdom Publications, 2001, 20.

teenth-century hermeneuticist position is that it is concerned with the recovery of original textual meaning, which can be recovered only through the reconstruction of the historical, psychological, and cultural context in which the text was written. In essence, traditional hermeneutics insists that there is one true meaning that is the goal of any interpretation, and that this meaning is effectively identical with the author's intention. But this notion of "objectivity" is itself a product of Western theoretical assumptions. The Kantian ideal of the neutral observer, like the Cartesian program of doubting all accepted beliefs, assumes the possibility of an epistemologically neutral state, a way of seeing the world that is not influenced by any specific cultural or personal factors. And this ideal is inherently problematic. It ignores the fact that "no man wholly escapes from the kind, or wholly surpasses the degree, of culture which he acquired from his early environment"<sup>46</sup>.

William Jones's assumption that Asian materials are crucially interesting because of what they can tell us about ourselves, clashes with the methodological goal of exegetical objectivity<sup>47</sup>. It is evident that every reading of a text – including the most carefully contextualized and historicised readings – will, in some ways, be unavoidably determined by some set of prejudices. There are no non-culture-specific languages in which to write or unconditioned perspectives from which to view another age or culture. However, no translator or scholar engaged in textual exegesis wants to think that he is guilty of reading his own cultural presuppositions or forcing his own interests onto the text: "To impose our own categories on the data provided by the Buddhist source materials is to run the risk of violating their intentionality and, consequently, to vitiate the entire interpretive enterprise"<sup>48</sup>. This type of textual positivism has been reinforced by the view that the interpretation of another culture's texts is primarily a philological matter and that the production of a good translation is tantamount to solving most important interpretive questions.

Our present philosophical era is characterized by the idea that it is more self-conscious than earlier periods and by its suspicion of any theoretical commitments. It is a contemporary belief that the subject of scholarly self-consciousness is of central importance among proponents of interpretive movements such as Heideggerian holism, Whiteheadian process philosophy, Gadamerian hermeneutics, Derridian deconstruction, Rortian neopragmatism, and critical theory etc. We do subscribe to the words of Matthew T. Kapstein: "Our problem is not to discover, *per impossibile*, how to think Buddhism while eliminating all reference to Western ways of thinking; it is rather, to determine an approach, given our field of reflection, whereby our encounter with Buddhist traditions may open a clearing in which those traditions begin in some measure to disclose themselves, not just ourselves"<sup>49</sup>. We see that in the light of the work

<sup>46</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1949, 115.

<sup>47</sup> See: Garland Cannon, *Oriental Jones*, London: Asia Publishing House, 1964, 140–141.

<sup>48</sup> Guy R. Welbon, *The Buddhist Nirvāṇa and Its Western Interpreters*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968, 300.

<sup>49</sup> Matthew T. Kapstein, *Reason's Traces: Identity and Interpretation in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist Thought*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001, 3.

of Gadamer it is impossible to separate the study of Buddhist hermeneutics from the question of hermeneutics of the modern scholar who having his prejudices and preunderstandings determined by time and culture interpretes traditional Buddhist texts. Perhaps, if we cannot eliminate the conceptual background engendered by our time, place, and personal circumstances, we can, however, with sufficient care, discern some of the ways in which our vision is at once constrained and enabled by it.

**INTERPRETACIJA KAIP DVASINĖS PRATYBOS:  
BUDIZMAS IR TARPKULTŪRINĖ HERMENEUTIKA**

**Andrius Beinorius**

Santrauka

Apžvelgdamas pagrindinius budizmo mokyklų tekstų interpretavimo ir suvokimo principus autorius atkreipia dėmesį, kad tradicinės budizmo hermeneutikos kontekste egzistuoja ypatingas tekstų interpretavimo ir ortopraksijos, budistinės nušvitimo metodologijos, ryšys. Tai liudija ir paties Budhos plačiai naudojamas situatyvinio intencionalumo (*upāya kauśalya*) metodas. Pasak tradicinės egzegzės, budistinė filosofija, kurią galėtume vadinti budystės (*buddhatva, buddhattā*) sklaida, yra savotiškas terapinis procesas, nepertraukiamos *samādhi* meditacijos ir įžvalgos puoselėjimo praktika. Autorius atskleidžia, kad budistinė hermeneutinė tradicija yra soteriologiškai orientuota patirties tradicija, kuriai nebūdinga intelekto ir patirties, racionalumo ir mistiškumo dichotomija. Esminis tradicijos vaidmuo – suteikti intertekstinį kontekstą toms nuostatoms, kurios, išryškindamos reikšmes, nulemia tekstų skaitymo ir analizavimo galimybę. Galiausiai parodoma, kad budistinės hermeneutikos studijų neįmanoma atskirti nuo šiuolaikinių Vakarų mokslininkų hermeneutikos, kurioje budistinių tekstų suvokimą determinuoja konkrečios kultūros ir istorinio laikotarpio tendencijos.

*Įteikta 2002 m. spalio 29 d.*