

The authority of the Buddha: The limits of knowledge in medieval Indian Buddhist epistemology

Richard Payne

*Institute of Buddhist Studies
at the Graduate Theological Union*

Abstract. The Indian religious traditions, including Buddhism, are generally characterised by an understanding of the problematic character of the human condition as ignorance (*avidya*) instead of sin, as in Christianity.¹ The centrality of ignorance in defining the problematic character of the human condition creates a dramatically different religious dynamic—a religious dynamic that is fundamentally concerned with epistemological issues rather than with moral ones. In Indian discussions of the limits of religious knowledge, the shared intellectual framework was the idea of means of valid knowledge (*pramāṇa*). While other religio-philosophic traditions in India accepted testimony (*śabda*) as an autonomous (i.e., irreducible) means of valid knowledge, Buddhist epistemologists rejected it. Having rejected the idea that testimony is an autonomous means of valid knowledge (*śabdapramāṇa*), an alternative explanation for the authority of the Buddha had to be created. Against this background of epistemological discussion, particular attention is given here to Dharmakīrti's views on the authority of the Buddha as a means of valid knowledge regarding the ground of human existence, the path of religious practice, and the goal of awakening.

Preface

The study of Indian philosophy generally and Buddhist philosophy in particular has been hampered by the misrepresentation of Indian philosophic thought by some scholars who portray it as either irrational or antirational.² In this representation,

¹ The explicit formulation of this understanding has been traced to what is known as the 'old Nyāya school', the founding text of which probably dates from some time in the 3rd or 4th century CE. Any such explicit formulation must have a broad basis of intellectual consent upon which it is formulated. Van Bijlert 1989, 1, for example, tells us that '[t]he first Indian school of thinking which explicitly teaches that the supreme good, defined as emancipation from all suffering, can be the object of rational inquiry and which, moreover, propounds a system of epistemology, logic and dialectics in order to give definite shape to this rational inquiry, seems to be the old Nyāya-school'.

² Richard King calls attention to this one-sided representation of Indian thought in his discussion of the Nyāya school. 'The significance of the Nyāya system lies particularly in its thoroughgoing defence of perceptual realism, its appeal to a pragmatic empiricism and the school's strong commitment to rational debate and clear, logical argumentation. It is a crucial example, therefore, in demonstrating that Indian philosophical debate is thoroughly grounded in the rules of logical debate and is neither irrational nor other-worldly and impractical' (King 1999, 130). See also Ganeri 2003, ch. 20.

Indian thought is said to be solely concerned with ‘the spiritual’, which is itself defined in opposition to rationality. This image seems to date from the earliest contacts between modern European philosophers and Indian thought, forming part of the colonialist heritage, and was informed by a presumption that the values of the Enlightenment were uniquely the accomplishment of Europeans (Matilal 1986, 2–5).³ Romantics picked up this image, reversed the valence, and reinforced it by employing it in their own critique of Western modernity as burdening the creativity of the human spirit with the strictures of reason. Themselves appropriating this critique of Western modernism, some Indian thinkers then deployed this reversed valuation, placing a positive value on India’s putative spirituality, invidiously contrasted with Europe’s putative materiality. For example, the highly influential Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan asserted that the value of Indian thought was to be found in its ability to counteract modernity:

With its profound sense of spiritual reality brooding over the world of our ordinary experience, Indian thought may perhaps wean us moderns from a too exclusive preoccupation with secular life or the temporary formulations in which logical thought has too often sought to imprison spiritual aspirations.⁴

While the general rhetorical direction for representing Indian thought moved toward an image of an antirational, mystical spirituality, a similar kind of rhetorical apologetics—but with a different content—effected the representation of Buddhism as well. One version of this was modernising apologetics that tended to identify Buddhism with empiricism.⁵

³ Matilal cites both Hume and Locke in this regard, and goes on to point out that the misrepresentation has carried forward into the work of such recent philosophers as Anthony Flew (1971). In contrast, as Halbfass 1988, 161, notes in relation to the specifically philosophic discourse: ‘It is undeniable that there is currently a greater willingness to credit India with a philosophical tradition of its own, and to include some information about it in general reference works on philosophy and its history’. This improvement in academic philosophy is not, however, matched in the popular religious discourse at least in America, which continues to recycle dated stereotypes created by the Romantics in support of their own position.

⁴ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, ‘Fragments of a Confession’, quoted in Ganeri 2001, 2.

⁵ The equation of at least early Buddhist epistemology with empiricism is widespread throughout late 19th and early 20th century introductions of Buddhism to Western audiences and continues in popular representations of Buddhism right into the present. In chronological order, just some of the authors presenting this view includes: Olcott 1890; Carus 1894; David-Neel 1911; Dharmapala 1912; Shaku 1974; Suzuki 1933; Baptist 1959; Jayatilleke 1963; Kalupahana 1969; Ambedkar 1974; Kalupahana 1975; Batchelor 1997; Ricard, Trinh 2001; Wallace 2002; Jones 2003; Smith, Novak 2004; Harris 2006; Ajahn Brahmavamso [s.d.]. My thanks to Dr. Natalie Quli for compiling this list of sources.

We should not be misled into believing that this large bulk of sources indicates that the view must be correct. The sociology of knowledge teaches us that such ideas can become effectively self-replicating, taking on greater autonomy and the appearance of legitimacy through repetition. Becoming simply ‘what everyone knows’, they are accepted as implicitly valid. Although a detailed

Many contemporary popular representations intended for Western audiences still reflect this modernising apologetics, for example by characterising Buddhism as ‘a religion devoid of authority’ (Smith 1991, 94) or as a set of mental hygienic practices that do not demand the discomfort of evaluating beliefs and truth claims.⁶ Any radically empiricist interpretation of Buddhism that follows along these lines is far from accurate, however, and would seem to derive from the apologetics of late 19th century advocates who cast Buddhism in terms more easily accessible to liberal Protestants.⁷ Known under the general category of ‘Buddhist modernism’, the representation of Buddhism that was promoted by these advocates was one that purposely highlighted aspects of the Buddhist tradition specifically selected to create an image of a religion that was eminently practical, humanistic, reasonable,

critique of this view is beyond the scope of this essay, we can briefly say that the problem is with a simple, unnuanced equation of Buddhist epistemology with empiricism (not necessarily the case for all of the authors listed above). Risking something of a caricature by oversimplifying, we can summarise empiricism as deriving from the views of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, who asserted that there is only one means of knowledge—empirical. This position stands, of course, in opposition to the rationalism of Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibnitz, who also asserted a single means of knowledge, but in their case it was reason. As is fundamental to the rest of this paper, the Buddhist epistemologists asserted two means of knowledge, empirical (perception) and rational (inference). More generally, the tradition should not be described in such a way as to entail the oppositional structure of empiricism versus rationalism as those positions developed in Western philosophy. (Implicit in many such discussions is the idea that philosophy can be described in terms of a series of ahistorical positions on key philosophic issues. In works making this ‘philosophy is ahistorical’ assumption, one can find Indian philosophic views being explicated by reference to Western philosophic positions—Dharmakīrti’s position being explained not in terms of its own intellectual context, but by reference to Berkeley’s epistemological position. See, for example, Sinha 1972. In other words, under the assumption that philosophy is ahistorical, epistemology is assumed to be the same everywhere and always and that historical, social, or cultural differences are inconsequential to ‘purely’ philosophic projects. This attitude is evidenced, for example, by Surendranath Dasgupta, who opens his groundbreaking *A History of Indian Philosophy* with the assertion that ‘I have never considered it desirable that the philosophic interest should be subordinated to the chronological’ (Dasgupta 1975, 1: 11). Once clearly articulated, the assumption that there is some basic antagonism between the two should be obviously false.

Albert William Levi (1974, 11) refers to the active historical placement of philosophic thought as ‘*the doctrine of essential temporality*, where the very meaning of texts hinges upon the historical questions they were designed to answer, and where, since “meaning” and “social context” are dependent variables, much attention must be paid by the historian of ideas to historical milieu, social structure, and epochal description’. I would maintain that this is not solely the task of ‘the historian of ideas’, but that it is the only intellectually defensible position. Philosophical—and theological—works are not created in some Platonic realm of ideas but are attempts to answer historically specific questions, and to abstract them from that purpose impedes our own accurate understanding, even when our intent is to use them to our own philosophical or theological purposes.

⁶ The power of this rhetoric lies, at least in part, in its retroflexive ability to protect itself from evaluation. If Buddhism is not a matter of evaluating beliefs and truth claims, then the claim that Buddhism is not a matter of evaluating beliefs and truth claims need not itself be evaluated.

⁷ We can speculate that the appeal of empiricism for Buddhist modernists is in part a consequence of their associating themselves with Romantic views, which (again simplifying) were expressed in opposition to the rationalism of Enlightenment thought. For more on this important topic, see McMahan 2008.

and concerned with promoting a rational ethical system.⁸ Such a representation, however, tended to marginalise aspects of the tradition that many living Buddhists both then and now considered to be very important.⁹ These included not only the ritual, mythic, and devotional aspects, but also views regarding Śākyamuni Buddha as the authoritative source for religious knowledge.¹⁰ It is justification for the authority of Śākyamuni Buddha by the medieval Indian Buddhist epistemologist Dharmakīrti that will allow us to explore the question of the limits of knowledge as understood in Buddhist epistemological thought more generally.

Introduction

As part of the broader Indian religious culture, Buddhist philosophy for the most part cast the problematic of human existence in terms of our ignorance about how the world works. How then can we learn how the world works, given that we are ourselves caught up in what Buddhist thought generally considers the two sources of error: afflictive obscurations and cognitive obscurations (*kleśa-āvaraṇa*¹¹ and *jñeya-āvaraṇa*)? Epistemologically, one of the sources for knowledge of the world is other people. But as children we are either taught—or learn the hard way—that not everyone is to be relied upon to tell us the truth or to provide us with an accurate understanding of how the world works. That strain of Indian Buddhist thought associated with the figures of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, which I will refer to here as the Buddhist epistemologists (*pramāṇikas*), asserted what might be considered a radically individual epistemology.¹² In terms of the varieties of valid means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*), the epistemologists only accepted perception and inference, rejecting dependence on any other person (usually couched as the ‘speech’ of another, *śabda*).

⁸ For a good summary treatment of Buddhist modernism, see Harvey 1990, 290–300. The ascription of rationalism to Buddhism is specifically mentioned on pp. 290, 297–98, and 300.

⁹ Upon reflection, in a remarkably ironic exercise in hubris, this kind of preconception led to attempts by Western convert apologists to reform Buddhism so that it meets their own preconceptions. Such efforts continue into the present, apparently unabated. This is not, of course, to defend all actions by all Buddhist institutions over the entirety of Buddhist history, but rather to simply raise the question of whether such efforts are not themselves part of a broader cultural imperialism.

¹⁰ This was a very early issue for Buddhists. The debate over whether one is justified in basing a teaching on their own understanding of the Buddha’s intended meaning or only on the specific words of the Buddha is found in *abhidharma* literature (Cho 1997, 37–42).

¹¹ Afflictions (*kleśa*) comprise two different kinds of obscurations (*āvaraṇa*), emotional and conceptual. The term *obscurations* is used in order to suggest the hindrance of not having clear insight, maintaining the visual metaphor in English. The cognitive (*jñeya*) are ‘deeper’ and more pervasive than specific concepts, or ideas. Loosely speaking, they have to do with the process of thinking rather than the contents of thought.

¹² While focusing on the corollaries of formal logic, Stcherbatsky’s *Buddhist Logic* (1958, 1) locates the concerns of these thinkers in a broader epistemological discourse, including sense perception as a source of knowledge, the reliability of knowledge, and the relation between cognition and the external world.

At present the discussion of Indian religious philosophy has come to accept the division of orthodox (*astika*, traditionally identified as six in number) philosophies from heterodox (*nastika*). The fundamental issue for this division is acceptance of the authority of the Vedas—the orthodox traditions accept, in one way or another, that the Vedas are authoritative, while the heterodox do not. As a tradition that is not based on the authority of the Vedas, Buddhism is one of the heterodox traditions. For Buddhism, however, the philosophic issues regarding authoritative knowledge raised by the Buddhist epistemologists make for a situation in which the authority of Śākyamuni Buddha cannot simply be substituted for that of the Vedas. An alternative justification had to be developed.

Testimony and the means of valid knowledge in Indian religion

One of the important dimensions of Indian philosophy is the role of testimony (*śabda*) as a means of valid knowledge (*pramāṇa*). *Śabda* has a complex of meanings, including both sound and speech—

In its widest sense, the word *śabda* means a sound. But in a narrower sense it means a sound used as a symbol for the expression of some meaning. In this sense it stands for a ‘word’. In the context of the *pramāṇa* doctrine *śabda* corresponds, therefore, to ‘authority’ or ‘testimony’. *Śabdapramāṇa* means knowledge derived from the authority of word or words. (Junankar 1978, 146)

This complex of meanings, then, places *śabda* equally within both epistemology and the philosophy of language—but as an epistemological concept it is commonly rendered as ‘testimony’. (Existing as it does as what in contemporary Western philosophic terminology would be a rather uncomfortable syncretism of philosophy of language and epistemology, *śabda* highlights the historically contingent character of the categories commonly used in Western philosophy.)

Standard treatments of classic Indian religious philosophy discuss six orthodox traditions, usually grouped into three pairs based on shared positions of one kind or another: Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya and Yoga, and Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta. Of these six schools, two took as their particular concern epistemological issues, the Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā.

Discussions regarding the limits of knowledge were generally conducted in terms of the possible means of valid knowledge. The Mīmāṃsā claimed that there are six autonomous means of valid knowledge (*pramāṇa*), that is that the six are distinct and cannot be reduced to any of the others, either singly or in combination. Speaking, for example, specifically of *śabda*, Jonardon Ganeri describes this view of an autonomous means of valid knowledge, saying, ‘the language faculty is a *sui generis* epistemic faculty, reducible to neither perception nor inference nor to some combination of

those two' (Ganeri 1999, 15). The six means of valid knowledge recognised by the Mīmāṃṣa school were perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), comparison (*upamāna*), verbal testimony (*śabda*, including both 'revelation', i.e., *śruti*—the Vedas as 'something heard', and the testimony of a reliable person), presumption (or postulation, *arthāpatti*), and non-apprehension (*anupalabdhi*) (Chatterjee, Datta 1960, 45–7).¹³ In contrast, the Nyāya school only accepted four means of valid knowledge: perception, inference, comparison, and testimony (Chatterjee, Datta 1960, 33).

The Mīmāṃṣa tradition's epistemology is structured in large part by the tradition's primary concern, which is the efficacy of Vedic ritual. In other words, the goal of Mīmāṃṣa thinkers was to explain why Vedic ritual, which includes the recitation of portions of the Vedas (*mantra*), was efficacious in producing the goals intended by the ritual performance. For the Mīmāṃṣa, the authority of the Vedas was based not only on the idea that they are eternal and authorless, but that their existence is identical with the existence of the universe. In other words, they exist as an eternal sound (*śabda*)¹⁴ or vibration, and from that eternal vibration the existence of the phenomenal universe comes into being.¹⁵ Thus, when the Vedas are spoken in the proper ritual context, it is this foundational eternal vibration that is being made present, and which makes the ritual effective.

The Mīmāṃṣa conception of the ritual efficacy of Vedic words, i.e., *mantra*, exemplify for us the importance of the idea central to some of these conceptions of meaning, the idea that there is a strong relation (*sambandha*) between the word and its referent—a relation that provides validity or authority to the speech of such words.¹⁶ It is the ability to speak this eternal vibration that gives the speech of ritual performers authority in the sense of the efficacy of speaking what is true and real, giving us one conception of *śabdapramāṇa*, the authority of speech or testimony as a means of valid knowledge. The idea of the authority of speech, or testimony, was

¹³ Chatterjee and Datta note that while the school of Mīmāṃṣa established by Kumāriḷa Bhaṭṭa accepted these six, there was another Mīmāṃṣa school established by Prabhākara that only accepted the first five and excluded non-cognition (*anupalabdhi*). See also Clooney 1992.

¹⁴ 'Śabda' is 'sound', and although it can be distinguished from language and word, which are 'vāk', 'pada', and 'vacana', the terms are often used interchangeably (Motegi Shujun 2006, 39–40).

¹⁵ These ideas seem to have provided the basis for later, tantric development of emanationist metaphysics. This cosmogony is strikingly similar to a neo-Platonic one, including that both see the process of emanation as one of degradation. There is, however, a key distinction in that, while Plotinus conceived of the emanation of being, in the Hindu tantra the emanation is one of sound structured according to the sequence of the Sanskrit syllabary.

¹⁶ It is important to note that the idea of there being a 'real connection' (*sambandha*) between words and their referents is not universally shared by the orthodox philosophies. The position of Gautama, a key thinker for the Nyāya tradition, is like the Buddhist one a conventionalist understanding—'right cognition of objects denoted by words is based upon convention (*samaya*)' (Junankar 1978, 148). Regarding the characteristics of the Nyāya 'theory of the meaning of a verbal awareness', see Potter 1985, 217–18).

extended to include ‘verbal testimony of a reliable person’, *āpavacanā* (though in some cases *āpavacanā* is also taken to include the Vedas) (Motegi Shujun 2006, 47). This included extending the idea of there being a correspondence, or real relation (*saṃbandha*), between word and referent from the Vedas to all reliable speech.¹⁷

Perhaps the most important interlocutor for the Buddhist pramāṇikas was the Nyāya school, which also gave particular attention to issues related to epistemology and logic. As with the Buddhist epistemologists, Nyāya thought accepted perception and inference as means of valid knowledge. However, they also accepted ‘the credibility of testimony (*śabda*) which is a kind of indirect cognition (*parokṣa-jñāna*). One form of it is the reliability of what is commonly accepted (*loka-prasiddha*) except when there is overriding consideration to the contrary. Another form of it is that if the speaker or the author of the testimony is reliable, the testimony (unless there is counter-evidence) is reliable’ (Chakrabarti 1999, 12). This attitude of accepting testimony unless there is some reason to doubt it, some counter-evidence, differs markedly from the sceptical view asserted by Buddhist epistemologists such as Mokṣākaragupta in his *Tarkabhāṣā* (discussed *infra*).

Religious authority in Buddhism

For the authority of the Buddha, however, to posit a real relation between word and referent was problematic. Fundamental to all Buddhist thought is the ontology of interdependence (*pratītyasamutpāda*), according to which all existing things only exist as a consequence of causes and conditions and do not have any absolute, eternal, unchanging or permanent essence. From its earliest recorded systematic thought, Buddhism has generally been nominalist in its orientation toward words, arguing that the connection between a word and its meaning is a matter of social convention.¹⁸

Yet, members of the Buddhist tradition look to the words of the Buddha for guidance on the most basic aspects of their religious life, on what are commonly referred to in Buddhism as the ground, path and goal. Indeed, one finds contemporary Western Buddhist philosophers justifying their views by reference to the Pāli sutta literature, considered by many to be the oldest and therefore implicitly assumed to be the most authoritative record of the founder’s teachings.¹⁹

¹⁷ This view has striking similarities to the position of linguistic ‘naturalism’ attributed to Cratylus in the Socratic dialogue of that name. See Sedley 2006.

¹⁸ On Buddhist philosophy of language as nominalist, see Siderits 1999, 341–48. Siderits’ description of nominalism is that the only thing that all cows share is the label ‘cow’. See also, Cox 1995, 159–71; Jackson 1993, 125; and Klein 1986, 206–14. It is important to note that conventional does not mean arbitrary. While there may be no given or natural relation between words and meanings, such relations are established by social use.

¹⁹ Such bibliophilia—Biblio-phia—reflects not only the attitudes and presumptions of contemporary Western Buddhist thinkers, but also those 19th century Western proponents of Buddhism.

How many means of valid knowledge in Buddhism: one, two, or three?

Contemporary discussions of Buddhist epistemology have demonstrated a variety of positions on the question of the number of means of valid knowledge. Some of these, however, have simply demonstrated contemporary prejudices, rather than being informed by any philosophic reflection or understanding of the issues as they developed historically within the Buddhist tradition itself.

One means of valid knowledge

Dating from the earliest period of the Buddhist tradition, the Kalama Sutta is one of the best-known sources regarding issues of religious authority in the Buddhist canon. According to the text, the Buddha, upon arriving in the town of Kesaputta, is approached by its inhabitants, the Kalamas. Describing the number of religious teachers who have visited their town and given contradictory teachings, have lauded their own teachings, and deprecated the teachings of others, the Kalamas express their doubt and confusion. The Buddha replies to their concerns, saying

Of course you are uncertain, Kalamas. Of course you are in doubt. When there are reasons for doubt, uncertainty is born. So in this case, Kalamas, don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, 'This contemplative is our teacher'. When you know for yourselves that, 'These qualities are unskillful; these qualities are blameworthy; these qualities are criticized by the wise; these qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to harm & to suffering'—then you should abandon them. (Thanissaro [s.d.])

While it appears that some interpreters have seen this as the basis for an individualistic ethics (*ibid.*, translator's note), it has a more general application to the question of religious authority. This and other similar texts have been understood by some contemporary interpreters as indicating an empiricist epistemology—the idea that experience is the sole means of valid knowledge.

While not citing the Kalama Sutta *per se*, Elizabeth Valentine evidences this idea that the Buddhist tradition holds experience to be the sole means of valid knowledge. Her initial assertion is that 'Experience is the starting point of all our knowledge' (Valentine 1997, 208). As support for this, she goes on to cite not

Under the influence of Protestant conceptions of scripture, they sought the authority of the Buddha's words in the same way that their contemporaries were seeking the authoritative words of Jesus. This latter of course initiated the 'quest for the historical Jesus', and for the earliest Gospel source. Buddhist studies has also seen a similar quest for the historical Buddha, though without also appropriating the mistaken notion that demonstrating the truth of historical claims regarding the existence of Jesus also demonstrates the truth of religious claims regarding his divinity.

Buddhist epistemological thinkers—despite the fact that Buddhism is the putative topic of her essay—but instead uncritically cites the physicist Erwin Schrödinger and the statistician Karl Pearson (Valentine 1997, 208–9).²⁰ On this basis then, she makes a general epistemological claim that ‘all knowledge is essentially mental, psychological’ (ibid. 1997, 209).²¹ She goes on to make a strategic move common among modernising Buddhist apologists, which is to claim the authority of ‘Buddhism’ when she claims that ‘Here, as so often, Buddhism has penetrated to the truth; indeed no sharp distinction is drawn between sensations and thoughts’ (ibid.).²²

Valentine’s argument that experience is the sole means of valid knowledge skirts very close to solipsism. She asserts that

According to Buddhism, both the external world and the self, the perceiver, are constructions, conceptual fabrications. The fundamental insight from meditation is that the projecting process knows itself, that is all, nothing else; there are no atomic minds and no unknowable things in themselves. (Valentine 1997, 211)

The characterisation of consciousness given by Valentine reflects the formulation of the problematic of the human condition within Buddhism. We can refer to this as the ‘deluded self’. The deluded self is out of touch with the realities of human existence, believing that persons—including oneself—and things have an essential self, that is, one that is permanent, eternal, absolute, unchanging. It is the deluded character of

²⁰ In fact, only one of her sources is Buddhist, and that one is itself problematic. This is Jeremy W. Hayward (Valentine 1997, 209, 212, 214), who as a disciple of Chögyam Trungpa inherited an explicitly modernising version of Buddhism and is a teacher of the Shambhala Training, which is itself presented as something other than Buddhism. This is, of course, another one of Buddhist modernism’s strategies. By focusing on meditation, it is possible to deny that Buddhism is a religion (which protects it from being in competition with Christianity), but simply a philosophy, a way of life, or some other formulation that attempts to conceal the role of ideology, asserting instead that Buddhist meditation—or in this case, the Shambhala Training—does not depend on any specific belief system. See, for example, <<http://sti.shambhala.org/>> (accessed 26 November 2006).

²¹ There seems to have been a rather major slippage here, in that her argument goes from being based on sensation to being ‘essentially mental’. This ignores the philosophic problems involved in psychologising epistemology. Consider, for example, Husserl’s retreat from his early psychologising of mathematics in light of these kinds of problems when they were pointed out to him by Frege (Smith 2007, 18).

²² This passing use of the undefined term ‘Buddhism’ functions here as little more than an empty signifier, ready to be filled with whatever modernising apologia she sees fit, while still claiming the authority of the tradition. Additionally, it is misleading for her to state without any qualification whatever that ‘no sharp distinction is drawn between sensations and thoughts’, as she does. While it is true that they are included in the same category under some of the organisational schemas found in the abhidharma literature (*skandhas*, *dhātus*, and *āyatanas*), they are distinct elements within those categories. While mental perception of thoughts may be interpreted as being treated on a par with the visual perception of visual objects, there are distinctions made between the five physical senses and the mental in the literature. More generally, however, there is a problem with simply equating the concept of experience as found in the suttas with empiricism as a Western post-Enlightenment epistemological position, in that the equivalency of the two kinds of empiricism needs to be established.

most of our living in the world that Buddhism seeks to address. It would be a mistake, however, to take Valentine's characterisations as indicating that Buddhism holds a solipsistic view, for to do so would deny the possibility of awakening, of liberation from the deluded condition. If there is nothing known but a self-reflective process of projection, which presumably is the round of suffering (*saṃsāra*), then there is no Archimedean point outside of that process that provides leverage for change.²³

At the same time, it would be a mistake to see Buddhism as holding to a simplistic notion that perception can be direct or unmediated—as the commonly employed analogy of the mirror would seem to imply.²⁴ In this analogy, the mind of ordinary, deluded awareness is likened to a mirror obscured by dust and corrosion, while the mind of awakened awareness is likened to a mirror polished and bright—one that simply reflects the actuality of things as they are. Invoked in many discussions of the effects of meditation, such a simplistic view in fact runs directly counter to both the conceptions of Buddhist philosophy regarding the constructed character of conscious awareness and contemporary perceptual psychology. But absolute accuracy of perception is not the goal, as that is not liberating. It is freedom from the delusion of an essential self (*ātman*, that is, either of persons or of things) that liberates. It is attachment to the delusion of an essential self—permanent and unchanging—that is problematic for human existence. Liberation from that deluded view is what is important—not a naïve empiricism.

Three means of valid knowledge

At least implicitly many within the Buddhist tradition accept three means of valid knowledge. Matthieu Ricard, for example, makes this epistemological stance explicit, asserting that Buddhists accept three means of valid knowledge: perception, inference, and testimony (Ricard 2003). As given, however, this is on his part simply an assertion of the three-means epistemology for all of Buddhism, without providing any justification or nuancing of his position in relation to the position of the Buddhist epistemologists, which was well-known and long-debated in the Tibetan scholastic tradition—the tradition of Buddhism to which he himself adheres. Because Ricard simply asserts this claim, we have no means of engaging his claim other than pointing out that he simply asserts it.

²³ See also Georges Dreyfus, who rejects the interpretation of Dharmakīrti's view by some contemporary scholars as an extreme nominalism. 'Scholars who think of Dharmakīrti as a nominalist often understand his view to be extreme. They think that Dharmakīrti rejects not only the reality of the referents of general terms, which is true, but even their objective basis, which is wrong' (Dreyfus 1997, 133).

²⁴ For a discussion of this metaphoric conception of the mind in Western philosophy, see Rorty 1981.

Two means of valid knowledge

The Buddhist epistemologists, however, took a more stringent view and only accepted two means of valid knowledge—perception and inference—eliminating testimony, along with all the other *pramāṇas*, as lacking any autonomy. In relation to our considerations here of the authority of the Buddha, it is important to emphasise that the Buddhist epistemologists did not eliminate testimony as a reliable means of knowledge, only that it was reducible to other means. Therefore, testimony is not *in itself* a means of valid knowledge in the way that perception and inference are. Further, the question of the authority of the Buddha concerns the question of relying on him as a means of valid knowledge about religious life—the ground, path and goal—and not on other issues.²⁵

Dignāga (ca. 480–540) is considered to be the founder of the school of Buddhist epistemologists. His most important work is the *Pramāṇasamuccaya* (Compendium on Reliable Knowledge). Dharmakīrti (ca. 600–670) is the most influential member of the school, so much so that his work has effectively displaced Dignāga’s for much of the later scholastic tradition. Dharmakīrti’s best-known work—one that continues to be studied and debated even today by Tibetan scholastics—is the *Pramāṇavārttika* (Commentary of Reliable Knowledge). As is often the case in Indian scholasticism, Dharmakīrti’s work is not a commentary in the same sense that we would understand a commentary—as primarily an explanation. Although based on the *Pramāṇasamuccaya*, Dignāga’s text simply provides the structure upon which Dharmakīrti develops his own thinking about the same issues.

Mokṣākaragupta, a later member of the group of Buddhist epistemologists, argues strongly for ‘the Buddhist theory that valid cognition is of two kinds, indeterminate (*pratyakṣa* [RKP: rendered in this essay by the more common “perception”]) and determinate knowledge (*anumāna* [RKP: here, “inference”])’ (Kajiyama 1998, 2)²⁶ in his *Tarkabhāṣā*.

Mokṣākaragupta considers two arguments for accepting *śabda* as a means of valid knowledge—first, the argument from a real connection between word and referent

²⁵ It is often assumed in Western discussions of Buddhism that the Buddhist idea of the Awakened One includes the idea of his omniscience. The limitation of the Buddha as a reliable means of knowledge in the authors being considered here suggests that the conceptions of the Buddha’s knowledge are simply equatable to Christian conceptions of the omniscience of God. Although the epithet of ‘all-knowing’ (*sarvajñā*) would seem to support this equation, the question of what that word itself meant is more complex than a simple, straightforward etymology would suggest. More generally then, in making comparisons between Buddhist thought and Christian it is entirely inappropriate to simply assume that one-to-one substitutions based on analogy (God in Christianity is omniscient. Buddha is for Buddhism the same as God is for Christianity. Therefore Buddha is omniscient) are in any way meaningful or informative.

²⁶ For philological discussions of *pratyakṣa* and *anumāna*, see Kajiyama 1998, 29 and 30 respectively.

(*sambandha*, discussed *supra*), and second, the argument from the trustworthiness of certain speakers. In relation to the idea of a real connection existing between words and their referents, he considers two possibilities—that the connection is one of identity and that it is one of causality. He argues against the idea that a word and its referent are identical on the grounds that if this were the case, then there would not be a plurality of languages. Introducing a hypothetical ‘man from Nicobar’, that is, someone who does not speak Sanskrit, he says that if words were identical with their referents then such a man should already know that ‘agni’ means fire.²⁷ Mokṣākaragupta argues that because the ‘man from Nicobar’ does not know that fire is the meaning of ‘agni’ is proof that no such identity exists.

The argument against causality as the basis for there being a real connection between words and their referents is a bit more complicated. Behind Mokṣākaragupta’s argument is the concept of *vyapti* or ‘pervasion’, which played an important role in the development of Buddhist epistemology (see Jackson 1993, 103–4).²⁸ He argues that if there were a real connection between words and their referents then the two would pervade one another, that is where one is found the other would also always be found (*anvaya*), and where one is absent then the other would also always be absent (*vyatireka*). As Mokṣākaragupta says, ‘a causal relation [is not] possible between the word and the thing-meant [i.e., its referent], since neither concomitance in agreement (*anvaya*) nor in difference (*vyatireka*) is observed [between them]’ (Kajiyama 1998, 32).²⁹ When he later addresses the question of the authority of the Vedas, Mokṣākaragupta simply dismisses it as having already been dealt with by his argument regarding the two bases for a real connection existing between words and their referents.

The argument Mokṣākaragupta makes against a trustworthy speaker is quite striking as it applies rather directly to our considerations of the authority of the Buddha, and so is worth quoting *in extenso*:

It is also not acceptable that the words spoken by trustworthy persons are a means of valid knowledge, since trustworthiness is impossible to be ascertained. The state of being emancipated from all faults (*kṣiṇadoṣatva*) is called trustworthiness (*āptatva*). Emancipation

²⁷ For a response to Mokṣākaragupta’s argument, see Dalvi [s.d.]. Dalvi’s response is based on the notion that there are certain ‘basic conditions under which knowledge through *śabda* becomes possible ... [including] among other things, the hearer to understand the language of the speaker’ (pp. 6–7). This seems to me to make the notion of a real relation between word and referent so weak as to be effectively meaningless, or simply an implicit admission that the connection is conventional, that is, in this case based on sharing a common language rather than being located somewhere external to the subjects in communication with one another.

²⁸ Jackson employs another rendering for *vyapti* that is also found in the literature, ‘invariable concomitance’.

²⁹ Note: material in square brackets are the translator’s additions, while the material in braces is this author’s.

from all faults refers to a certain state belonging to another person's mind. And this is hardly visible [i.e. determinable], since we see [sometimes] that physical and lingual actions [supposed] to be the logical mark [through which we infer the trustworthiness of the concerned person] occur in persons who are not [really trustworthy]. When it is usual that a man having passions pretends to be free from passions, how can you ascertain trustworthiness? (Kajiyama 1998, 34–5)

Mokṣākaragupta's skepticism provides perhaps an interesting insight into the sociology of religion in his day—that people engaging in the pretence of being free from faults were so common as to produce this very sense of skepticism about their claims.

These epistemological views—only two means of valid knowledge and a sceptical attitude toward the reliability of people claiming to be trustworthy means of knowledge about religious matters—created a logical problem for the tradition, particularly regarding the authority of Śākyamuni Buddha as a means of valid knowledge about the nature of the ground of human existence, the path of religious life, and the goal of awakening. In other words this is a question regarding the status of 'buddhavacana', the speech of a buddha.

The question of the appeal to authority cannot be treated in a narrowly epistemological framework alone but rather is enmeshed with the religious questions central to Buddhism (Dreyfus 1997, 441). The historical integrity of Buddhism as a religious institution depends on the idea of lineage, that is on the authority of the Buddha Śākyamuni as the Awakened One and the transfer of that authority to subsequent members of the Buddhist sangha. While having broader ramifications, to the extent, however, that the awakening of the Buddha has been understood (at least metaphorically) as the waking up from the sleep of ignorance (*avidya*), the authority of the Buddha is itself an epistemological matter.

The structure of Dharmakīrti's argument regarding the authority of the Buddha

Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavārttika* is his most famous and most influential text and is presented as a discussion of Dignāga's *Pramāṇasamuccaya*. The 'Pramāṇasiddhi' ('perfection of knowledge') chapter of the *Pramāṇavārttika* is a lengthy comment on the opening lines of Dignāga's text, which Roger Jackson has translated as:

To the one who has become an authority, the one who desires to benefit beings, the teacher, the sugata ('well-gone'), the savior, I bow down.

In order to establish authority, I make here a single compendium of my various scattered writings. (Jackson 1993, 127)

As Jackson notes, 'Dharmakīrti's primary purpose in the *Pramāṇasiddhi* chapter is to demonstrate that the Buddha is an authority for those intent on spiritual freedom, or

liberation’ (ibid.). The five epithets of the Buddha listed by Dignāga give Dharmakīrti the basic structure for his arguments regarding the authority of the Buddha:

1. *pramāṇabhūta*: that the Buddha has become an authority,
2. *jagadhitaśin*: that the Buddha desires to benefit other living beings,
3. *śāstr*: that the Buddha is a teacher,
4. *sugata*: that the Buddha is ‘well-gone’, and
5. *tāyin*: that the Buddha is a protector (translated above as ‘savior’).

Before attempting to demonstrate that the Buddha has become an authority—the first of Dignāga’s five epithets—it is necessary for Dharmakīrti to define the concept of authority itself. To do so, Dharmakīrti identifies three characteristics of authoritative knowledge.³⁰ Authoritative knowledge is (1) original and not derivative, (2) cognitive and not either apperception or some other, perceptual, means, and (3) not contradicted by either of the two autonomous means of valid knowledge, perception or inference (Jackson 1993, 129; see also, van Bijlert 1989).

The first step in Dharmakīrti’s definition of authority is that direct, perceptual knowledge is authoritative because it constitutes an original (Jackson uses ‘new’) ‘non-deceptive’ cognition (Jackson 1993, 176). rGyal tshab rje is the Tibetan author of an important commentary on Dharmakīrti’s text, which is itself translated and commented on by Roger Jackson. rGyal tshab rje explains that this non-deceptive cognition differs from apperception in that authoritative cognitions, such as those based on a perception (of, for example, a patch of blue), are ‘immediately and self-evidently authoritative’—as Jackson puts it (ibid., 177, n. 2). Apperception of a perception, however, is itself only authoritative about the perception *per se* and not about the cognition based on it. (This seems to fit well with contemporary arguments regarding the authority of first-person, subjective experience.) This is made clearer with regard to other authoritative cognitions, such as those based on prior experience—exemplified by the authoritative character of our cognition regarding the causal efficacy of ‘cooking, burning, etc.’ (ibid., 176).

Speech is also non-deceptive to the extent that one cognises the meaning intended. As Richard Hayes has said in relation to Dignāga’s understanding of this point, ‘a linguistic sign (*śabda*) serves as an inferential sign (*liṅga*) to produce in the hearer of the symbol knowledge that the subject of discourse, the thing to which the speaker of the symbol is applying the symbol, has a given property’ (Hayes 1988, 203). In

³⁰ Jackson’s discussion seems to reflect the terse character of the Sanskrit original in that he simply speaks of ‘authority’. For presentation here we will employ various adjectival uses of the term authority, while at the same time recognising that these are not substantive distinctions, but rather simply ones imposed by the grammar of ordinary English. Thus, the assertion that the Buddha is an authority is identical with the assertion that he possesses authoritative knowledge, without reifying these as two separate things.

other words, testimony is not an autonomous means of valid knowledge, although it may be the case that one can truly understand a statement, since that knowledge does not necessarily extend to the truth of that statement. That is, truly understanding a statement does not extend validity to cognition of the referent. To employ an example frequently used in Buddhist thought, one can speak of—and understand what is meant by—the phrase ‘horns of a rabbit’. As rabbits do not have horns, however, there is no objective referent to that phrase. Thus, one can authoritatively cognise the meaning of the speech, without having that speech extend authoritative cognition to any referent.³¹

This same reasoning regarding the difference between the cognition of word, meaning and referent extends to the commentaries on the words of the Buddha (i.e., *śāstra* as distinct from *sūtra*, which according to the tradition are records of the Buddha’s teachings). While we can have authoritative cognition of the words of a śāstra and their meaning, that does not give us authoritative cognition of the referents of the words of a *śāstra*. ‘Not everything for which we have a name actually exists’ (Hayes 1988, 178, n. 6).

Authoritative cognitions must also be original (new, novel).³² This is required because a derivative³³ cognition such as a memory depends upon, or derives from, some other cognition.³⁴ While an authoritative cognition directly (immediately, independently) apprehends its object (as in the cognition based on the perception of a blue patch), memory (and other such derivative) cognitions are not in direct apprehension of their object, but depend on other, prior cognitions. In Dharmakīrti’s (or rGyal tshab rje’s) view then, it is apparently the case that the authority of the prior cognitions does not carry forward to give memories an equal authority.³⁵

The argument made for the position that authority is cognitive reflects the religious and pragmatic orientation, i.e., the concern being the authority of the Buddha for those seeking awakening. The cognitive dimension of authority is explained in terms of the mind being the causal agent for engaging in actions conducive to awakening

³¹ This would seem to imply a three-term relation between word, meaning and referent. More immediately, it would seem to connect with the idea of language being conventional, rather than being based on some real relation [*sambandha*]. This also connects with Dignāga’s theory of meaning by exclusion, but that complicated and tendentious topic is outside our range of concerns in this essay.

³² This is based on a philological understanding of the term *pramāṇa*, specifically regarding the prefix ‘pra-’. Dharmakīrti and others following his interpretation understand this to mean ‘new’. Another school, the Prāsaṅgikas, understood it to mean ‘foremost’, i.e., best. (Consider, for example, how we would understand the meaning of the prefix ‘pre-’.) See, Cozort, Preston 2003, 73.

³³ Jackson uses ‘conventional’. Does he mean *construction* rather than *convention*? In any event, it seems clear that the significance of the argument is that such cognitions are derivative, which is therefore the term I will use here.

³⁴ For a general discussion of memory in Western epistemology, see Audi 2003, 56–74.

³⁵ This would seem to actually complicate the case for causal efficacy discussed *supra*.

and rejecting those with are not (Jackson 1993, 179). This becomes even clearer as Dharmakīrti moves into his argument for the authority of the Buddha.

Having defined what authority means, Dharmakīrti is now ready to explain how it is that the Buddha is an authority. First, the Buddha is an authority in the sense defined because he does in fact possess ‘new, non-deceptive cognition’ (ibid., 188). This cognition of the Buddha’s is an accomplishment and is not an inherent quality such as that asserted by theists to be true of deities. The Buddha has attained ‘method and wisdom’ as a constant state of cognition (ibid., 194). Dharmakīrti goes on to identify what kind of an authority the Buddha is.

According to Dharmakīrti, religious teachers are sought after because they have a ‘method of pacifying suffering’ (ibid., 216). In other words, for the Buddhist epistemologists, ‘Someone is an authority who has cognition of what is to be adopted and rejected, together with the methods’ for effecting such adoption and rejection (ibid., 218).

That the religious authority of the Buddha is not omniscience³⁶ as conceived in the Western theological descriptions of the attributes of God is made evident when Dharmakīrti says that ‘[f]or us, [a teacher’s] knowledge of how many insects there are is not at all useful’ (ibid., 217). Or, as he also says, ‘If it is the case that [you define] authority [by] seeing a great distance, rely on the vulture [as your teacher]’ (ibid., 218). These latter assertions help to clarify the view widely-held among Buddhists of many different lineages that while supernatural powers (*ṛddhi*) may result from meditative practice, they are not to be confused with the actual goal, which is awakening (*bodhi*).

Because the Buddha ‘has complete perceptual cognition of what is to be adopted and what rejected ... together with the methods’ thereto, then he ‘is an authority for those intent on freedom’ (ibid.). It is, then, in this specific and limited sense that the Buddha is an authority—that his testimony on religious matters of liberation from afflictive and cognitive obscurations can be accepted.

Clearly, the question of the authority of the speech of the Buddha is directly related to the question of scriptural authority. This issue was also addressed by Dharmakīrti.

Scriptural authority

Both Hinduism and Christianity rely on a foundational set of texts that are held to be exceptional, to have a non-human authorship—the Vedas and the Bible. The Buddhist tradition seems to be much more ambiguous about the status of its scriptural sources.

³⁶ *Sarvajña* is an epithet of the Buddha that has uncritically been rendered as ‘omniscience’ by the easiest, most literal translation as ‘all’ (*sarva-*) ‘knowing’ (*-jña*). In light of Dharmakīrti’s comments, perhaps *sarvajña* might be better rendered as ‘knowing thoroughly, knowing completely, knowing accurately’.

The teaching that the Buddha has three-bodies (*trikāya*) complicates the simple story propagated by Buddhist modernists. According to this latter view, the Buddha is simply a human being—an exceptional one, yes, but not ontologically different from the rest of us. The teachings of the Buddha, then, are simply on a par with the insights, the wisdom that would be available to us from anyone who has attained such a state of awakening.

However, beginning in the early medieval period of Indian Buddhism, there developed the idea of the Buddha's three bodies, or what we might perhaps call three forms of the Buddha's existence. First, there is the historically existing figure of Śākyamuni (*nirmanakāya*), second, a glorious body, exemplified by such figures as Amitābha (*sambhogakāya*), and third, a body identical with the actual existence of all things, i.e., their emptiness (*dharmakāya*). Clearly, the ontological status of these latter two bodies of the Buddha is different from that of ordinary humans. Thus, texts said to be spoken by these kinds of Buddhas might be thought to be authoritative in the same way that the Vedas and the Bible are authoritative. What we find, however, is that the approach of Dharmakīrti and the other Buddhist epistemologists is much more measured and continues to employ the two means of valid cognition as the criteria for the authority of scriptures said to be spoken by the *sambhogakāya* and *dharmakāya* as well.

Perhaps more importantly as far as the Buddhist tradition itself is concerned, the very nature of a buddha's teachings, what is known as the *dharma*, is simply true because it is an expression of the way things are. This proved problematic for scholastics within the tradition, however, who in turn developed the idea of heuristics (*upāya*) as a means of explaining differences between texts. While the scope of this essay is such as to not allow us to go into all of these issues in detail, they do form part of the overall background when considering Dharmakīrti's views on the status of scripture.

Dharmakīrti directly deals with the issue of scriptural authority, specifically in the form of the question of inferences based on scripture. A reliable scripture is one that meets a three-fold set of criteria. First, 'it does not describe verifiable perceptible matters (*pratyakṣa*) in a way which would be in contradiction with observation' (Tillemans 1999, 395). Second, it 'does not describe rationally accessible, but imperceptible matters (*parokṣa*) ... in a way that would be in contradiction with ... "objective inference"', it is 'not in any way [dependent upon] belief, acceptance or faith in someone or his words' (ibid.).³⁷ Third, its 'description of matters inaccessible to either observation or objective inference (*vastubalapravṛttānumāna*) are not internally contradictory' (ibid.).

³⁷ The term 'objective reasoning' is Tilleman's more euphonic rendering of what would more literally be 'inference functioning by the force of real entities' (*vastubalapravṛttānumāna*) (p. 395).

One of the consequences of Dharmakīrti's formulation of this three-fold criteria for a scripture that can be relied upon for inference is to avoid the kind of conflict between reason and faith that has plagued Western philosophy of religion for—what, millennia? Quoting Tom Tillemans' discussion of Dharmakīrti's treatment of scriptural authority *in extenso*:

Now, if the scripture passes this triple test, it is fit to be used in 'scripturally based inferences', but with the all-important stipulation that such inferences are only to be used in case of radically inaccessible matters (*atyantaparokṣa*), ones which are not in the domain of observation or objective reasoning, but are only accessible once we have accepted (*abhyupagata*) scripture [as reliable according to the three-fold test]. In short, *āgamaśrītānumāna* works where objective inference and observation leave off. In this way Dharmakīrti rather effectively avoids the recurring conflict between reason and faith (more technically here, *viruddhāvyaḥicāra*), for the type of inference which depends on acceptance [of scripture as reliable] will only treat of things outside the domain of objective reasoning. (Ibid., 395–96)

In considering Tillemans' description of the limitations on the use of scripture,³⁸ it

³⁸ One of the participants in the conference where this paper was first presented mistook Dharmakīrti's limitation on the use of reasoning from reliable scripture to matters that are beyond perception and inference as an indication that Buddhism suffered from a 'God of the gaps' theology, a derogatory term and at least implicitly therefore a derogatory allegation regarding Dharmakīrti's argument. At the time I was not able to respond as clearly as I would have liked—not being a theologian, the term 'God of the gaps' was opaque to me. The only similarity between the two, however, is that both are concerned with knowledge other than that verified by perception or inference. A 'God of the gaps' theology is an argument for the existence of God on the basis of the limitations—gaps—in scientific knowledge: science cannot explain everything, so the difference between what science can explain and everything proves that there is something beyond science; therefore God exists. It is, in other words, a theological version of the argument from ignorance. Given the expansion of scientific knowledge, such an argument for the role of God is seen as one of continued retrenchment.

Although there is an only superficial similarity, as has been pointed out elsewhere in this paper, Buddhism does not in general take on the role of explaining the existence and nature of the cosmos. This has traditionally been part of Christian thought, which inherits this function from the mythology embedded in Genesis. God's creative role as explanatory of the nature of the cosmos thus comes into conflict with scientific explanations. However, even to the extent that Buddhism does propose cosmogonic and cosmological explanations, these are in large part simply adopted from Indic religious culture, and they are in no way central to Buddhist religious thought, concerned as it is with awakening to the truth of emptiness. From a Buddhist perspective, there is something very odd about asking whether or not the six realms of birth (gods, titans, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell-beings) is literally true.

One is reminded here of the allegory spoken by the Buddha in response to being asked why he did not respond to such questions as whether the universe were infinite or not. He says that to ask such questions is like a man who has been struck by an arrow asking about the kind of wood that the arrow is made from, the kind of bird whose feathers were used to fletch the arrow, the wood of the bow, the material of the bowstring, the caste of the person who shot him, and so on. The critical issue is to remove the arrow. Thus it is with humans faced with the reality of their own self-produced dissatisfaction and disease. The gaps in scientific knowledge are not of any particular interest to Buddhist thought, which to the best of my knowledge never claimed the explanatory scope that Christian theology has at some points in its own history. Rather, it is the problematic character of

is important to keep in mind that the goal of Dharmakīrti's arguments to establish that the Buddha is a reliable authority are in relation to the issues of the religious life for those seeking awakening. This is not a general argument regarding recourse to scripture for any and all knowledge beyond 'where objective inference and observation leave off', but rather for the sake of reliable knowledge about the ground, path and goal, that is, the problematic nature of human existence, the path of efficacious practices, and the goal of awakening.³⁹

Conclusion

One of the things that seems to make Indic thought relevant to modern philosophy is the centrality of the concern with epistemology for both. Jürgen Habermas, for example, asserts that the only question for modern philosophy is 'how is reliable knowledge possible' (Habermas 1971, 3).⁴⁰

For Buddhism the primacy of epistemology is not as an abstract set of intellectual concerns divorced from the practical issues of life. Rather, for the Buddhist tradition epistemology is central to the goal of awakening. The Indian religio-philosophic traditions in general do not describe the problematics of the human condition as an ethical condition—sin—but, rather, see as our primary problematic ignorance (*avidya*). Jeffrey Hopkins opens a series of lectures by stating 'Nirvana is an extinguishment of desire, hatred, and ignorance that is often likened to the dying of a flame. Since ignorance is the fuel or source of both desire and hatred, the primary task in achieving nirvana is to remove ignorance' (Hopkins 1984, 15). Given the important epistemological dimension of Buddhist conceptions of the path to awakening, Buddhism has often been considered to be a form of gnosticism.⁴¹ It is important to note, therefore, that in the broader Indic epistemological tradition knowledge is not the possession of a 'justified true belief' by a subject as it has been conceived by most members of the Western philosophic tradition since at least the time of Descartes. In contrast, in Indic epistemology knowledge is 'a mental event that cognizes the object as a momentary knowledge event', part of a 'phenomenologically continuous' cognitive process marked by certainty. Thus, ridding oneself of delusion

human existence, the question of which practices are actually efficacious, and the nature of the goal of awakening that structure critical reflection in Buddhism.

³⁹ An important recent contribution to the literature on the question of the authority of the Buddha, but which appeared too late to integrate into this paper, is McClintock 2010.

⁴⁰ Not all contemporary philosophers share Habermas's understanding of philosophy. See, for example, Alain Badiou's assertion that ontology, not epistemology, is the central issue (Norris 2009, 2).

⁴¹ It is indicative of this idea that Edward Conze, who is perhaps most responsible for the common use of the phrase 'perfection of wisdom' for the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature, dubbed his autobiography *The Memoirs of a Modern Gnostic* (Conze 1979).

is not ridding oneself of false beliefs (heresy), but rather accurately perceiving how the world works. This allows us to avoid the frustrations (*duḥkha*) consequent upon trying to live in a world that works the way we want it to, but in fact does not.⁴²

Specifically, for Buddhism religiously significant ignorance is of the nature of existence, or—to put it colloquially—of how things work. What one needs to realise—come to understand and to actualise in one's life—has been identified under a variety of rubrics during the course of Buddhist history. One of these is the three marks of existence—everything that actually exists is lacking in permanence, lacking in essence, and a source of dissatisfaction.

Such realisation can be attained either through yogic practices, or through cognitive practices. Part of the rhetoric of Buddhist modernism has been to privilege silent seated meditation as Buddhist practice. Although this view is, of course, not without historical precedent, it is necessary to provide some balance to the Buddhist modernist representations of Buddhism that are overwhelmingly dominant in popular culture.⁴³ Indeed, the question people commonly ask in discussions about one's own religious affiliation is, Are you a *practicing* Buddhist? This evidences the extent of this privileging of meditation. Yet from its very earliest forms, *both* 'right view' and 'right practice' have been part of the Buddhist path. Lama Mipham, one of the most famous leaders of the 19th century movement to unify Tibetan Buddhist teachings⁴⁴ (Tib. *ris med*), addresses the role of cognitive practices in the realisation of emptiness.

By accustoming oneself to the ingrained tendency toward *sūnyatā* (emptiness, lack of essence), one will eliminate the tendency toward concrete entities. Eventually, even the accustoming oneself to the complete non-existence of entities will be eliminated. When one cannot represent an entity to be investigated as 'that which is non-existent', then how can non-existence, being without a basis, remain before the intellect? When neither entities nor their negation as an abstraction remain before the intellect, then, since there is no other possibility, the discursive intellect is pacified, there being nothing to objectify. (Quoted from Lipman 1992, 32)

Śabdapramāṇa has generally been treated in English-language philosophic discussions under the category of 'testimony', a convention that we have in general

⁴² The implications of this, even for understanding what a Buddha is, are very important. In light of this, the equation of the epithet *sarvajñā* ('all-knowing') with the omniscience of the Christian deity would seem to be mistaken.

⁴³ It is important to note, however, that this dichotomy between yogic practice and epistemology is not unique to Buddhist modernism. According to Tom Tillemans, for example, it is a long-standing issue in Tibetan Buddhism, there being 'many Tibetans who maintain a strong separation between the meditational-yogic aspects of Buddhism—which they take as being quintessential—and its logico-philosophical speculations, which they take as being by and large of little or no religious value' (Tillemans 1993, 2). The treatment of epistemology as 'being without much soteriological import' (*ibid.*), however, was not the only view, as many also held that epistemology was directly conducive to awakening.

⁴⁴ For a discussion of the *ris med* movement, including Mipham's role in it, see Ringu Tulku (2006).

followed in this essay. There is, however, an important nuance that serves to distinguish the two—and it seems to me that this is a distinction that does indeed make a difference. Epistemological considerations of testimony focus (almost) entirely on the qualities or status of the ‘speaker’. For example, does the speaker’s knowledge have to be first hand for it to be considered a reliable form of testimony? Or, does hearsay also count? Do documents, which are ‘not an obvious product of [any] obvious speech act’ count as a form of testimony? (Coady 1992, 50). Does the information provided by such social practices as ‘road signs, maps, the measurement markings on rulers, destination-markers on buses and trams, the author attribution on the title-page of a book, and so on’ count as testimony? (ibid., 51: referring to H.H. Price). Thus, we can see that the focus in Western epistemological considerations of testimony is on the qualities or status of the speaker, broadly construed to include author, document, record, and so on. In contrast to this, in classic Indian discussions of *śabdapramāṇa* the emphasis is placed much more on what is heard. The power that speech *per se* has is located in what might be called the ‘speech-event’ rather than in the speech-act.⁴⁵

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⁴⁵ The distinction that I am attempting to clarify here through the use of the neologism ‘speech-event’, as vs. ‘speech-act’, is not the same as the locutionary speech act. The locution of a speech act still binds the locution to the speaker. It is perhaps suggestive of the distinction, though still not entirely accurate, to think of the speech-event as the aural event (the hearing), and the speech-act as the oral event (the speaking). Unfortunately, the common usage regarding ‘what is heard’ is used to distinguish the meaning intended from the meaning perceived, which is also something different from what I am trying to articulate here.

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Richard PAYNE, Ph.D. (rkpayne1@mac.com), Yehan Numata professor of Japanese Buddhist Studies, Institute of Buddhist Studies at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California

✉: Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2140 Durant Avenue, Berkeley CA 94704, U.S.A.