

The Authority of Compassion and Skillful Means

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1.0. Summary of the seminars

In the course of the Special Seminar at Otani University, I examined various aspects of authority as it impinges on the practice of Buddhist discourse. For the purposes of the seminar, I proposed that we understand Buddhist discourse in the broadest sense, including the discourse of scholars, monks, laypersons, preachers and teachers as well as the discourse of classical (that is, canonical or authoritative) Buddhist texts. In eleven lectures I presented a rough outline of the major dimensions of authority as they appear in the practice of “talking about Buddhism” and “talking as a Buddhist.” I tried to show how pervasive authority claims are in Buddhist discourse generally, how central these claims are to the survival, and to the social and psychological functions, of Buddhism as a cultural and religious system. I also strived to show how crucial authority claims are to the survival and to the psychological and social functions of Buddhist scholarship.

1.1. Why authority?

In these seminars, I have used the word “authority” in the broadest sense to mean “something that commands our respect, or something that guarantees for us the certainty of a value.” I have used this broad definition of authority to explore the interactions between traditional authority and a critical attitude, the ethics of authority, and the ethics of criticism.

Authority: The above short definition of “authority” was expanded as fol-

lows:

Although authority is an abstract term that refers to the quality that inheres in authoritative things, the word is used metonymically to refer likewise to the things that possess authority. These “things” can be persons, objects, actions, symbols, or segment of discourses. The kind of respect that they command varies, but generally it is the respect that inspires in us the confidence that this object, person, or expression holds or conveys a stable value, or that it tells us unambiguously what is true, beautiful, good, or just.

In its most common usage “authority” refers to public behavior, and is the power to enforce laws, exact obedience or command certain behaviors. In the seminars, however, I used the term “authority” in the context of judgements or claims of knowledge, value, and taste. Accordingly, authority was also conceived as the power to persuade others of the validity of certain judgements, e.g., judgements about truth, beauty, or taste, or propositions of factual or theoretical knowledge about the world, the mind, good or bad behavior, and spirituality.

The term “authority” was also extended to include those persons, words, or objects invested with the power of authority. After all, our earliest experience of authority is in the person of our parents, who **are**, or embody, authority. They embody many aspects of authority: they have power in the form of physical size and force, and in the capacity to coerce, but they also have the authority of love, of the proper tone of voice, and the linguistic expertise that allows them to persuade, and to create a universe that we as children cannot reject or question. As we grow older, moreover, we can appropriate and assimilate, “borrow” as it were, the authority of our parents: we can appeal to it and we can invoke it. We can also transfer our image of authority figures from our parents to other persons: teachers, government officials, judges, etc..

In adult life as well, power is also conceived as a commodity or property that can be exchanged and handed over to others. Thus, a judge and a policeman act as if they were law—that is, they are in fact empowered or invested to be authorities. And again, in adult life, that authority is based on physical force, and in the capacity to coerce, but also on the authority that issues from the security

and consensus that makes our society seem like a solid, closed universe. Authority in adult public life also depends on certain styles of speech, on the proper tone of voice, and the linguistic expertise possessed by those that can persuade us: doctors, lawyers, teachers. It is therefore an authority that thrives in a created universe, a universe of discourse and social exchanges that is the very fabric of our reality, and therefore almost beyond questioning or rejection.

In the world of scholarship and science, “authorities” are reliable sources of information, accepted sources (authorized voices) of expert opinion, information or advice. Although the source is often human speech, we usually prefer the written word—so much so that a scholar’s opinion has to be in book or essay form to carry full authority. In the humanities we need to quote authoritative sources. In religious traditions, the competition between the spoken and the written word takes even more interesting forms. The antiquity, and the illusory permanence, of the holy written word has displaced the ancient power of the oral tradition. Religious truths are therefore often justified on scriptural grounds.

When we ask the question: On what authority do you make such a claim? We often mean, “on what text, on what passage, do you base your opinion?” In the course of these seminars, however, I have emphasized the importance of many other sources of authority: the voice or speech of the master, traditional narratives and ritual behaviors, ritual vestments and paraphernalia, ritual space and position, and traditional roles and gestures.

Authority and Critical Thought: In the present lecture I wish to present a conclusion of sorts, suggesting some answers to the questions raised in the seminars, and summarizing the intellectual project and main goals underlying the seminars. Broadly speaking, I believe my reflections address three audiences, each with its own claim to authority. They are distinct in the abstract, but perhaps sometimes coinciding in the same group of persons—at the very least they all coincide in my person, so that, in a manner of speaking, when I address these audiences I address myself.

These three audiences are: (1) The scholar-philologist—the heir to a 2000-year old tradition of Indian Sanskrit scholarship, a 500-year tradition of Classical

and Biblical philology, and a 100-year tradition of modern Sanskrit scholarship. (2) The practitioner-believer—who is the heir to 2500-years of complex interactions between the words of Buddhist traditions, the practices and attitudes that we describe today as “Buddhist,” and the cultural values of numberless “Buddhist lands.” And, (3) the critical theorist—who is the heir to a 2500-year old tradition of questioning, beginning with the pre-Socratics in the West, and the shramanic movements in India, continuing in Western and Buddhist philosophy with figures like Descartes, Hume, Nāgārjuna, and Vasubandhu, but also present in the critical rhetoric of “religious” figures like Chi-tsang, Ta-hui, or Dōgen.

In addressing the philologists, I have tried to emphasize their critical role as curators of the textual tradition, and as guardians of “grammar.” But I have also warned them of the danger of forgetting the social field, the ritual text, and the nature of textuality. In addressing the practitioner-believer, I have noted the obvious: that everything else we might do “with” or “about” Buddhism owes its existence, function, and value to the believers’ existence and to their personal struggles. But I have also noted the important role of both philology and hermeneutical theory for the life of religious practice, for the maintenance of a sense of tradition and continuity, and for the maintenance of a critical distance that acts as a safeguard against dogmatism. I have, I believe, given ample credit to the contribution of critical theory—perhaps too much credit. But I have also tried to remind the critic of the need for an ethics of criticism. That is, I have tried to suggest a critique of criticism based on the assumption that the subject that pronounces a critical theory is him- or her-self also grounded in a universe of discourse and self-interest, with its own limitations and its own hidden personal agenda.

The present lecture focuses primarily on this last point: a search for an ethics of criticism that may suggest the values that underlie the critical enterprise, and perhaps the enterprises of philology and practice as well. I will first outline the main topics of the seminars, attempting to show how these topics are related to the issue of the social and ethical dimensions of criticism and practice.

1.1.1. Meaning of authority in the West

The broad sense of the term “authority” in the languages of Europe is in part an extension of the etymology of the word (related to “author, augment, august, and augur”)^① but also the result of the broadening of the basis for authority in Western societies—from the Church and the King to the Bible, then to the text generally, to the scholar of classical and scriptural texts, then to the scholar of secular texts, to the jurist, and more lately to opinion polls and electoral votes. With the Reformation, the personal presence and oral pronouncements of priesthood and nobility lost authority—they were at first replaced by a single religious authority, that of the Holy Book, the Bible. As long as one could think of this change as replacing the multitude of voices of priests and nobles by a single, unquestioned, truth, by the single voice of the book, authority seemed to be secure. But the model of the Bible introduced a new concept: anyone could read and interpret the Bible, and to interpret is in fact to change and divide. Soon, the single symbol of the Bible was the basis for a plurality of voices, all of them grounded ultimately on individual and conflicting readings of what was still believed to be a single text. The supreme book, the Bible, although “authored by the supreme Author” (God) could only be known in the readings of human beings.

What is more, the reading of the Bible required translations and annotations. Soon the authority of the Biblical scholar began to displace the authority of the Bible—as it should be, for “the Bible” is only a certain person’s Bible. The overlap between scholarly authority and ecclesiastical authority increased even as it seemed to diminish. For, as the methods and reasoning of the Biblical scholar have become more “independent,” they have become more secular (after all is it not the case that “independent” here means only “secular”?). The opinion of the “expert,” therefore, had come to stand on non-religious grounds, implicitly challenging religion. History competed with revelation, historical linguistics with unchanging truth.^②

Additionally, the history of authority in the West has made Western societies very suspicious of authority, especially the authority of the Church and the state. Religious authority is often associated with a long history of oppression

and exploitation of the poor by ecclesiastical forces. Partly as an expression of this skepticism, partly as a result of the appearance of a middle class and the flourishing of secular values (especially the valuing of private property, and of consumption over the preservation of communal property and tradition), more and more sources of expert authority have been created outside the direct influence of religious institutions and religious discourse. Our ideas of what is good, of what are the limits of human greed, sexuality, and anger, are defined by powers other than those of religious tradition. Today TV commercials have become powerful, and ever-present, sources for determining the preferences and values of vast segments of population.

1.1.2. Meaning of authority in Buddhism

These changes have also affected Buddhism and Buddhist societies. Especially in societies like Japan, with a long history of capitalism, a middle class, and a secular government, the changes I have summarized for the West have also occurred. I would argue, moreover, that some of my remarks about the Bible also apply to Buddhist texts.

Although Buddhism does not have a single book, whose author is believed to be the Supreme Author of the universe, Buddhist sacred books are believed to be the word of an all-knowing being. They were also once believed to be the single source for all truth and proper judgements of morality, taste, and truth.^③ Similarly, at one time the Buddhist scriptures sat in the background, while the person and word of rulers and priests were seen as the immediate source of authority; but scriptures began to acquire a life of their own already in the reforms of the Kamakura (especially in Nichiren and Jōdo). With the growth of the Japanese middle class, the increase in literacy, and the adoption of Western models of scholarship, Japanese Buddhist may find themselves today at a juncture where there are simply too many sources of religious authority. Japanese Buddhism has also adopted, without much adaptation, the methodologies of Western Classical and Biblical philology, and thereby have added in the last hundred years a new layer of authority to the competing voices generated earlier in the clash between different Buddhist groups, and between non-Buddhist forms

of Japanese and Chinese culture.^④

Accordingly, the question of where we shall find a reliable source, a reliable expert opinion on matters of truth, morals, and taste, is as pressing for Buddhists as it is for Christians. The seminars have attempted to lay the groundwork for future reflection on this question—of the where and the how of authority in Buddhism. The seminars have had as their central aim fostering such reflection, investigating the traditional rhetoric of authority in Buddhism and Buddhist scholarship, examining these sources critically, questioning their validity and their self-awareness, and suggesting alternative or unacknowledged sources of authority.

1.2. Challenges to authority

The seminars also investigated the problem of the challenges faced by traditional authority—that is the problem of the so-called “crisis in authority.” We asked about contemporary challenges to authority, and why they are different from the challenges authority has faced in the past. The uncertainty that characterizes our age is not totally unique. Other ages in the past have also known hesitation and uncertainty in knowing how to judge what is valuable, what is the good and the true. Other ages have also had to confront a “plurality of voices” and a “conflict of interpretations.” Perhaps what is unique to our age is the power of the forces that oppose traditional authority, the primacy of the individual, and the dominance of a philosophy of individualistic hedonism, and the power of the secular media.

1.2.1. Challenges to authority generally

But we are also in an age in which we are sometimes told that the plurality of voices is in fact good and that societies can survive with conflicting voices of authority. Although I believe that there have to be constraints on individual desire and on the plurality of voices, and that not all voices can have the same authority if a society is to survive, I also doubt very much the solution is in a return to the illusion of unity that traditional societies fostered by suppressing dissident or deviant voices. It would be a mistake to imagine that the question is simply

one of choosing amongst the many voices claiming to be authoritative, imposing *one form of authority, or choosing the path of religious authority in opposition to secular authority.*

The critique of authority: We cannot set the clock back. We cannot return to the days when kings and priests dictated truth and value. This is not to say that it will not happen—recent attempts to do just that in Iran suggest that it can be done, and that some societies may need to do that. But at least in modern industrialized societies we have learned to think in a manner that makes a return to the past difficult, if not impossible. We have learned that authority is always vulnerable, that it is always open to criticism, and that when authority is not questioned and criticized, it can become abusive and exploitative.

Against the state: Today authority is threatened on many fronts. The failure of most nations—industrialized and developing—to produce real leaders is, I believe, not only a passing phenomenon, a coincidence or a random event. The absence of “leadership” is due to our incapacity to believe any more in the myth of the state, to place our trust on the state and the leaders of the state. We no longer feel that the state (“our country,” “our fatherland”) is a value higher than our own interests and preferences.

The negative side of this situation is the resulting confusion and the lack of sense of direction that we all seem to suffer. The positive side is that the public can now be more suspicious of exploitative regimes and political ploys. In other words, as with traditional authority generally, the authority of the state is viewed with suspicion as a mask for the power of a few individuals or groups of individuals.

Against traditional authority: Suspicion of the state is an extension of our suspicion of authority generally, and suspicion of authority is based in part on an awareness of the ways in which it is often manipulated. This would not be reason enough, however, for the intensity of our distrust of authority. Authority has also lost its capacity to be meaningful or persuasive at the level of the symbol. As Tillich would have said, traditional symbols now suffer from fatigue, they are tired and weak—if not in their death throes. Traditional authority is bankrupt, not only because it was only a veneer for coercion (which it often was),

but because it has lost both its social and its symbolic basis.

Against the self: Traditional authority, however, also possessed a powerful symbolic tool for the superintendency of the self, and it therefore tended to define the self in characteristic and secure ways. The weakening of the symbols of authority, therefore, also weakened our sense of self. Tied to traditional authority was (1) the self as a member of the group, (2) the self as perfectible, and (3) the notion that self-sacrifice could be synonymous with self-fulfillment. With the loss of traditional authority, therefore, we have also lost certain notions of self and of our possibility of being human. In fact, at a philosophical level, we have even lost a sense of a solid subject—paradoxically the self dissolves and becomes diffuse and confused when it is declared autonomous and self-sufficient. A critique of authority generally, therefore, becomes a roundabout way to attack the self. The self is no longer surrendered, but it is lost.

The need for renewed critique: In the seminar I also argued that we could attempt to follow the road of criticism to see where it would take us. I argued that further critiques of authority may reveal for us alternatives to traditional authority. I proposed that we seek ways of speaking about Buddhist values and aspirations that allow for criticism and questioning, yet provide a language for persuasion, constraint, and guidance in the management of the self and of the self in society. I argued that although this was sure to make our understanding of Buddhism more critical, and therefore more suspicious of Buddhist rhetoric, it could also liberate Buddhist rhetoric from its fear of self-criticism, and lead Buddhism to ways of speaking and thinking that can make its traditions more adaptable and meaningful in a contemporary environment.

1.2.2. Challenges to Buddhist authority

As already noted above, challenges to Buddhist authority are not unique; they are part and parcel of the general critique or mistrust of authority of our age. Threats to Buddhist authority are as real as the challenges to other kinds of traditional authority, and the reasons for the challenges are similar: (1) an awareness of history, especially the history of exploitation and abuse, (2) an unwillingness to tolerate the exploitation that came with traditional authority, (3) doubts

regarding the metaphysical, spiritual, and cosmological claims that supported Buddhist hierarchies, and (4) the disappearance of the social and economic base that gave those hierarchies their power. The combined effect of these factors has made the rhetoric of Buddhism meaningless to many people that would have been believers in another age. What in the past may have seemed persuasive and mysteriously true now sounds untenable, unnecessarily mystified, foreign and technical to the point of becoming meaningless.

Buddhist critiques of authority: In the seminars I also argued that Buddhism has a number of traditional critiques of authority. In other words, that Buddhism already has a tradition of criticism, a rhetoric of criticism that could prove useful in our analysis of authority.

The most obvious example is the Buddhist critique of Brahmanic authority. This is not the most subtle dimension of Buddhist criticism, but it is well known and has clear social and political implications, thus indicating the connection between religious and cosmological knowledge and knowledge as social power. I suggest that the arguments used against Brahmanism can be used as part of a systematic Buddhist critique of its own rhetoric of authority and power.

Critique of self and “the master of the house” : The most radical critique proposed by Buddhism, however, was the critique of self. It is not difficult to understand this critique as an abstract critique of certain philosophical ideas about the self. It was, indeed, among many other things, a critique of identity and of the self as a single, enduring substance; but we often forget that this critique also implied a critique of the notion of self as “the master of the house” of our bodies and our persons, that is, a critique of our capacity to have complete control over ourselves. The rejection of the notion of self as the master of the house was the early Buddhist equivalent of the modern loss of the subject—with the significant difference that the Buddhists interpreted this critique paradoxically as the foundation for a technology of self and a philosophy of human perfectibility. That is to say, for the Buddhist, the loss of the subject did not imply a loss of “reflexivity,” of our capacity to act on the self, and it did not imply a loss of meaning. These are two of the great aporias of Buddhism: (1) We know of no-self because we know of no true self-control, but we are asked to develop

control of self. (2) We know of no self, because our expectations are shown to be illusions, yet we are asked to strive towards self-perfection. In the words of the *Mahāparinibbāna Suttanta*: “[all] compounded things are impermanent, strive earnestly” (*vayadhammā saṃkhārā appamādena sampādettha*—DN 2:156).

I shall return to this topic, because it is central to my argument that criticism of tradition and traditional authority, criticism of truth, does not necessarily remove the basis for action, social and moral. But at this point I wish to note another form of Buddhist criticism.

Critique of Buddhism itself: Buddhism also evolved by the systematic development of a critique of Buddhism itself. That is to say, the history of Buddhism may be seen as the history of Buddhist critiques of Buddhism. The central and subtle doctrines of emptiness and skillful means (*upāya*) are expressions of this Buddhist perspective on Buddhism.

These two doctrinal formulations can be explained as follows: First, the “truths” of Buddhism are only tools, empty of any substantial or referential ground. Second, Buddhist rhetoric and practice are means, not ends. But, if practice is only a means, and the end is groundless, then the whole edifice of Buddhist teachings and institutions is groundless. This is the most modern (or shall I say “post-modern” ?) aspect of Buddhist rhetoric; but it is also a doctrine of limited use within Buddhism, because the tendency traditionally has been to stop short of a total and radical criticism. Perhaps only Nāgārjuna’s *Mūla-Madhyamaka-kārikā* came close to a radical dismantling of the foundations of Buddhism. The most common strategy within Buddhism is to use its critical rhetoric as a foundation for what Derrida has called “hyperessentiality” : the critique of essence at the service of a higher essence, the critique of substance at the service of a “holy substance.”

1.3. Patterns to avoid

It is easy to become complacent and assume that because Buddhism has a critical tradition, it is safe, protected from any criticism. It is a critique that clears the slate for the inscription of Buddhist truths. This is a peculiar use of criticism, it is an apologetic move, not a critical move, a defensive or preemp-

tive move, not a true act of self-criticism. This strategy was discussed in the seminar in the context of what I call the four dogmatic uses of Buddhist criticism:

(1) **“The texts say:”** Although we pay lip service to Buddhist criticism, we argue for the validity of this criticism on the basis of a “true interpretation” of “a meaning” transmitted or present in the Buddhist texts.

(2) **“The Buddha says:”** Although we pay lip service to Buddhist critiques of self and substance, we hypostatize Buddha and his words. We turn the speaker of the criticism into an object beyond the criticism.

(3) **“Buddhism is” or Buddhism as received presence:** We ignore history and reify Buddhism into a solid lasting entity. Buddhism stands before us, and all we have to do is receive it or join it. This attitude overlooks the complexities of the process of transmission and self-definition that is required in any act of conviction or joining.

(4) **“Buddhism is about ineffable experiences” or all of this is ultimately unspeakable:** When confronted with criticism (e.g., the criticisms of points 1,2,3), the Buddhist appeals to mystery—it is possible to speak of the Buddha’s words as lasting, permanent, and univocal, but this is really not speaking, and “please don’t ask me to explain, because all of this is unspeakable.”

1.3.1. The uses of the text

Because these four “moves” are based on peculiar uses of language, or language strategies, much of the seminar was devoted to exploring issues of language and textuality.

Textuality: The first problem addressed was that of the “text” as authority. Traditional concepts of text and work were challenged by analyzing the nature of textuality (intertextuality) in light of recent critical theory. The seminars attempted to show that a close analysis of the process of creating, transmitting, and reading texts reveals a reality very different from the one assumed by naive notions of the literary work (Barthes). The text is a non-substantial, impermanent, and interdependent set of phenomena. The text comes into being anew every time it is read or remembered, and it is found only in this process of re-

creation (Kristeva). No real core is preserved or recovered.

The seminars investigated some of the implications of this approach, especially implications for the maintenance of religious authority.

The voice of the master: Even if Buddhist texts got back to the Buddha himself, and even if the work somehow preserves or carries “the word” through time, texts have many voices, that is, they carry many words. We also explored this second aspect of textuality—the polyphonic character of the text.

Self-referentiality, circularity, and dialogic imagination: When these aspects of the text are ignored for the sake of religious propaganda, we are in fact appealing to the authority of the text only to hide behind the text. In reality we are simply appealing to our own authority, to the authority of a text we have constructed. When we interpret we rewrite the sutras. It is possible, however, to make use of this criticism in the process of interpretation, recognizing the plurality of voices already present in the text, and recognizing the ways in which the text’s history has contributed to the creation of a live text.

Although the reading of a text is, in many, ways a reading of the self, although the authority I borrow from the text is based on the authority I have invested the text with, although the text is only a trace of a former dialogue, a former confrontation—the text is also a rich treasure house of possibilities, a door to new worlds. The encounter with the text as intertextual phenomenon is an example of the encounter with a self that is in reality constructed in an ongoing encounter, in a never ending interpersonal and linguistic encounter with self and other. To appropriate a text and its authority is, in reality, a way of giving up parts of a false self.

1.3.2. Where is Buddhism?

But, where is Buddhism in all of this? In other words, a critique can be so devastating that nothing will remain. If Buddhism has no self, then are we left with no Buddhism at all? Certainly not. As with other critiques of reference and substance, the notion of reference and the belief in a substantial ground have been removed, but the word and its usage, and its function, remain. What is it that remains? The language of Buddhism, and, above all, the behaviors that we

usually describe as Buddhism. What is lost is the security that there is a single formula, and a solid truth behind these behaviors. There is, nevertheless, a “presence” in the sense of an experience of a presence. The presence of Buddhism is the presence of tradition and voices in dialogue. We do not construct texts and selves in a vacuum, but rather we construct in a constant dialogue with a tradition.

Recently both Stanley Fish and Jacques Derrida have emphasized the importance of tradition. Like Bruner, and other “constructivists” and “deconstructivists,” Fish understands that there is authority in tradition and community, but it is not the authority of a single, unchanging voice, much less the authority of a core or essential truth.

As I have already noted above, this conception of “presence” and “authority” is best understood by reference to Buddhist notions of non-self or selflessness. Life in community requires a certain inversion of the predictable roles of selfhood and selfishness: life in community requires that we recognize that self is constructed in community. In the same manner, truth and authority in community is also an inversion of the ostensible order of authority. It is not that a solid core and an unchanging voice defines truth and thereby forces the self to submit to the authority of a higher truth. Rather, authority is possible only because the self is capable of accepting its own fragility, unreality and constructed nature—when the self accepts its own construction in community, it recognizes the authority of the community. And yet, the self is also making community, creating authority for the community, or investing the community with the authority that emanates from the self’s own capacity to recognize its own limitations, the constraints of tradition and community.

1.3.3. The uses of silence

In the seminars, I used the metaphor of “silence” : the self silences itself. I also extended this metaphor to the process of communication itself: communication, and hence community, occurs only when one allows silence to take place.

This metaphor led to a reinterpretation of Buddhist ideas of silence and language: silence is not the silence of what cannot be expressed, but rather the si-

lence of expression itself—communication depends on the self's capacity to silence itself, that is, on its capacity to use a critique that is not itself a higher or transcendental truth. Hence, to speak of emptiness and no-self makes sense only when we stop imagining a higher truth of self and no self.

This is the exact opposite of silence as a way of avoiding confrontation and challenges to the self. It is not the silence that claims that there is a higher truth that cannot be put into words. Rather, it is the silence of words themselves.

Turning authority inwards (silencing the self): It is a silence that inverts the ostensible order of authority: not an authority that commands silence and curtails the critique, rather it is the self's capacity to know the limits of its own language and power that allows for the creation of authority in community. I therefore propose an alternative use of silence: Silence as a way of silencing the self, a way of participating in the community.

The uses of paradox and the two truths: At the same time, and paradoxically, this is a silence that restores the self. In criticizing the higher truths upon which the self builds its illusion of a world outside of community and communication, I have also criticized the concept of absolute. I have, as it were, come to the defense of the relative truth. I have argued that there is only relative truth, and even that is not a completely accurate representation. There is only relative truth because there is a need to seek an absolute foundation. For all of us this foundation starts as a foundation for the self. A higher criticism of the self, however, eventually leads to the belief in an absolute beyond the self. It is in contrast to this displaced substantial self that we posit the relative. It is in the hope of preserving this illusion of the higher reality that we attempt to silence the discourse of everyday life. But the "higher truth" has meaning only in contrast to the relative, to the presence of life in community. Apart from this dialectic, there is no absolute truth— "higher truth" is a phrase we use to describe our capacity to assume a critical stance in the face of everyday activity and the secret expectation, the secret hope of the self, which though ever lacking and incomplete, awaits the coming of a perfect world, and a perfect state of freedom.

I believe we should remain suspicious of “higher truths.” We need a critique of the higher truths, a dialectic of the emptiness of emptiness. The analysis of texts and language is one way to attempt this critique. Another way is the exploration of alternative modes of authority—that is, modes of authority that do not rely completely on concepts of epistemological hierarchies and ontotheological systems. I therefore propose that we also study the way in which myth, ritual, and social action can generate authority.

The introduction of the themes of myth, ritual, and compassion is an attempt to restore “speech” to the religion of silence. If Buddhism were only about silence, it would be a speechless religion, which it is not. We are therefore faced with the problem of explaining speech—which was part of the problem to begin with. Institutions and traditions, narratives and rituals may be grounded in a mysterious silence, but we still need to know how silence and speech are to work together.

1.3.4 The wake of imagination

An important point also pursued in the seminars was the Buddhist view of language as “empty” (non-referential). I interpreted this to mean that the effectiveness of language depends on this non-referentiality. In a personal interpretation of Nāgārjuna, I suggested that language means only because it is not attached to anything. I further suggested that tradition is the repository of meaning because of its capacity to bridge the gap between the myth of permanent meanings and the reality of impermanent language. This suspended state between the idea of the permanent and the reality of the evanescent is at the heart of the “relative” or “consensual” meanings that make up language and social life.

The uses of myth: An integral part of this “relative” or “consensual” truth is the social construction of the world through narrative. Narrative or myth is a technique of language, a way to cross beyond the limitations of language itself, yet at the same time reveal these limitations. I therefore introduced in the seminars the notion of narrative or mythical truth. I argued for the importance of narrative truth as an essential element in the generation of authority. I also

explained the connection between myth and locality, and myth and body. I lamented the disappearance of myth, and suggested as a substitute the creation of mythical fiction—narrative with no claim to religious authority but with claim to mythical authority.

The uses of ritual: The seminar also explored, albeit cursorily, the importance of ritual. Again I lamented the loss of ritual, and the loss of our capacity for symbolic action. The study of ritual is still another way to approach an understanding of the construction of authority, and its connections to the construction of selfhood. It is a particularly powerful means for the grounding of authority in the human body and the human “home” (the social and natural habitat).

Needless to say, both myth and ritual are prone to be misused as a door for the return of foundationalism and essentialism. The rhetoric of the absolute can pervade mythic traditions as dogma, and ritual traditions as ritualism—the extent to which this can affect the meaning and adaptive functions of myth and ritual is a question worth examining, but best left for a different forum.

2.0. Alternative uses of the silence of self

Nevertheless, one should note that traditional societies have used myth and ritual as an effective way of assuring adaptable authority. As a strategy open to criticism, the use of myth and ritual can be compared to the use of the ineffable numinous (the higher, sacred, reality that is beyond language, beyond doubt, beyond falsifiability). But one should note that narrative and ritual also serve as tools for the type of silencing of self I have mentioned above. Social narrative allows us to substitute self for other, allows us to enter worlds that would otherwise be inaccessible to us. This is why the loss of ritual and myth is in many ways an impoverishment of human life—because it is a loss of access to a variety of traditional worlds, constructed social, rather than self-centered, universes.

It is in such worlds that we can shed the self-importance of claims to authority, and share realities that are constructed and guaranteed by community life. We can therefore speak of a world of self-transformation in a shared universe,

of the substitution of self-centered worlds with social narratives.

The authority of self-transformation: Whereas authority is usually defined by our need for self-importance and security, there is an aspect of authority that is defined by a willingness to change. In other words, the quest for “the truth” is also a quest for adaptation. Such dimension of authority is partly represented in scientific and scholarly endeavors, and in religious practices that we have designated as technologies of self. This form of authority is also represented by activities that can be best characterized as technologies of self in community—such as philanthropy, service, and the quest for justice. All of these varied activities can be subsumed under “self-transformation,” which includes the process of changing and exchanging roles.

2.1. The authority of compassion.

The most common or prototypical style of Buddhist self-transformation is the practice of meditation. In the seminars we explored, albeit cursorily, the role of meditation as a complex technology of self. But I also introduced in this context the connection between meditation, criticism, and compassion. Using in particular the meditation practices developed by Śāntideva, I suggested that compassion has critical and practical dimensions that go well beyond the affective states of pity or sympathy that we usually associate with it.

Buddhist compassion can also be seen as a counterbalance to Buddhist wisdom, and therefore as a counterbalance to some of the pitfalls of the Buddhist emphasis on wisdom and detachment.⁵ Furthermore, in its close association to skillful means or *upāya*, compassion also serves to integrate wisdom into consensual language and behavior, and to counterbalance the antisocial or asocial dimensions of the quest for self-perfection.

2.1.1. Compassion and omniscience

In the Buddhist tradition the proper exercise of compassion is often connected with the idea of omniscience or the capacity to know the condition of all living beings and the best method for assisting all living beings. Buddhas are in fact defined by these two attributes, and the bodhisattva vow involves a double

aspiration: to attain the all-knowing vision of a Buddha, and to exercise compassion by saving all living beings. A generous interpretation of this aspiration would see in it a hyperbole, a poetical exaggeration, the purpose of which is to instill in us a sense of the limitations of our powers and of the magnitude of the task of aspiring to human perfection. But, as with aspirations to perfection generally, the rhetoric of the vow also has the taste of grandiosity.

The dividing line between the poetical expression of an ideal and the belief that we possess that ideal, or that we can actually possess the ideal in the form that it is envisioned in myth, poetry, and theology, suggests a grandiose view of oneself. I realize that this observation may be understood as a disrespectful reduction of high spiritual ideals to base human vices; it is not my intention, however, to reduce the ideal, but rather to criticize its use.

Carl Jung noted, in the *Lectures on the Psychology of Religion* that he delivered at Yale University in 1938, that religious institutions and doctrines are a double-edged sword: like dreams, they can conceal even as they reveal, they can deceive even as they point in the direction of insight. I extend these perceptive remark to the realm of religion as “ideal”—that is as authoritative model of behavior, adding that the “shadow” of spiritual ideals is self-importance and self-aggrandizement, that the dark side of our aspirations towards perfection is self-righteousness and self-importance.

Omniscience and the text: Similar observations can be made with respect to doctrine and exegesis. The reading of the authoritative text in search of a guiding truth easily becomes the reading of the text in search of a solid, super-human truth to aggrandize myself. The quest for “the true,” “pristine,” and “final” reading or meaning is in fact the quest for omniscience. The scholar may be circumspect and restrained in his claims, but he is nevertheless secretly hoping for the “discovery” that will make him, in the words of Derrida, “the last man,” that is, the person with “the final word” —which, ironically, is presented as the first word, the original truth, the truth for all time being the timeless truth. One of the greatest contributions of critical theory, and the implied critique of established and traditional authority, is the capacity to reveal, to unmask, the hypocrisy of arrogance, the arrogance of the person who believes he or she

can be the last man or woman, the person with the last word. And such critiques extend easily to religion, religious discourse, and religious life generally.

The hope of being omniscient is in some ways a return to what Heinz Kohut has called “the grandiose self.” It is a return to a childlike state in which we barely distinguish our fantasies from reality. This is a powerful error, because it avails itself with the tools of narrative and ritual and with the powerful capacity of language to create worlds of the imagination. The problem is that even as it does so, it disguises or conceals a fundamental lack, the child’s impotence, and sense of limitation. It is the fundamental lack of the self that is at the root of desire and ambition.

As a sign of our impotence, the press for knowledge, especially final knowledge, is an expression of our need to identify with the powerful, the child’s need to hide behind an all-powerful parent. Texts, ancient “truths,” become safe havens and protective masks, a disguising, but powerfully real, version of the self.

In the seminars I spoke of the ways in which we protect religious or spiritual leaders from everyday roles, roles that may be shameful or self-revealing. In a paradoxical move, we remove them from those things that we share with them.⁶ As common individuals we use religion in a similar manner. Sacred books and sacred identities protect us in the same way. They protect us from our ignorance and fragility, they protect us from our impotence. I can hide behind an ideal identity: I can be a Buddhist, before, as it were, I am a human being with defects, imperfections and above all confusions, with physical defects and infirmities, with everyday needs and greeds. I can hide behind this ideal identity and hope that no one (including myself) will even notice what I really am, the fragmented and fragile character of my existence.

Perhaps it is this subliminal awareness of our fragility that leads us to the narcissism and the grandiosity of self-centeredness, stubbornness, and pride.

Compassion and the text: We may ask then if there is any escape from our own self-centeredness, from our own selfishness. We may ask then if it is possible to have an authoritative voice that is not grandiose, that does not aspire to omniscience and omnipotence. I believe there is. But before I attempt

to explain how this is possible, permit me to add one last word of caution: all escapes from selfishness are temporary, and the easiest way to sink deeper into selfishness is to spend too much time dreaming of the state in which we can be totally and forever free of that selfishness.

The tools of authority are many, but I have argued in the course of the seminars that the tools of criticism and compassion are central to a position of balance in which we can live with authority without coercion or submission, yet with a critical suspicion that is not destructive.

When we aspire to buddhahood and the salvation of all beings, the aspiration can be a frozen formula. This view places compassion at the same level as the dogmatic reading of the text: the text contains an unmoving and absolute truth, there is nothing outside of it—compassion stands on an absolute feeling, the feeling of a buddha, nothing appears to contaminate this feeling, although it is in fact an unmoving feeling.

It is possible, on the other hand, to see the aspiration as a comment on the imperfect self, and thereby to place compassion at the same level as the critical reading of a text. This view of the aspiration sees it as containing a running commentary, a “truth” that exists in the interface between the tradition as received symbolic system and living human beings. The imperfect and barely self-conscious human being is the subtext of the vow. Conversely, we may say that it is possible to read a text the same way one reads a human being as an unfinished life story.

Back to the self: Thus, the vow as text and as aspiration, is perceived as a reminder of the fragility of knowledge and virtue. Centered on compassion for self and others, this text is read as an uncentered text, an open text. This is analogous to the uses of criticism as a means of preserving an awareness or an acceptance of the fragility of texts. The intertext is the intellectual or linguistic equivalent to social and personal interdependence; the evanescence and elusiveness of the text, equivalent to the evanescence and elusiveness of the self. In the same way that we become able to recognize the process of the creation of texts and the creation of authority, we come to recognize the ways in which self and others are generated or created in an interpersonal world, we come to rec-

ognize the ways in which tradition and authority grow in human interactions.

2.2. Compassion as empathy

The above points regarding the authority of compassion can be rephrased by exploring further the meanings of compassion and empathy. Buddhist compassion is part of a set of states of mind (cognitions and affects) known as the “limitless” states of mind, or the “four boundless abidings.” These are: (1) benevolence, or to desire good for others; (2) joy at the good that self and others might obtain; (3) equanimity, a detached or composed appreciation of others without feelings of attachment or hostility; and (4) compassion, or the capacity to feel the suffering of others and wish it to cease.

These four states I understand as both acts of feelings and acts of cognition. There is the danger, however, of understanding them as limited to feelings states, and as representing two distinct types of feelings: sympathy and detachment. The term “compassion,” perhaps even more than Sanskrit *karuṇā*, suggests pity, and therefore a “feeling sorry,” that is, a sentimental attitude, and perhaps a surreptitious feeling of superiority. To avoid this pitfall, I explain “compassion” as one dimension of the acts of detached cognition listed under the “four boundless abidings.” Of the four, compassion in particular is best understood under the heading of “empathy,” a term created by the German-British psychologist Heinz Kohut as a translation of German *Einfühlung* (translated into Japanese as 感情移入). “Empathy” is the capacity to identify with and understand another person’s situation, feelings, and motives. It differs from compassion and sympathy, because the former “denotes deep awareness of the suffering of another and the wish to relieve it” (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 3rd ed.), and the latter implies agreement or harmony with the feelings and preferences of the other. Empathy is neutral, yet sympathetic, reflective, yet compassionate.

Kohut (1984) explains that it is “the capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person,”⁷ and notes that it is both affective and cognitive.

In an article published in the journal *Psychotherapy* in 1990, Sweet and Johnson proposed an adaptation of Śāntideva’s meditation on compassion as a techni-

que for “enhancing empathy,” which they have applied to the treatment of personality disorders. I do not wish to be side-tracked by the details of this interesting article, but I do want to note that Sweet and Johnson have followed through with the interpersonal implications of Śāntideva’s “inversion of self and other” (*parātmaṣarivartana*) as a technique of empathy, and have shown that “its cognitive behavioral procedures” have many “points of convergence with a core of psychological knowledge in common with Western psychologies”.⁸

Conversely, one could note that some Western psychotherapies can also be understood as narratives that liberate, narratives for negotiating authority, and for transfers of benevolent authority, from therapists (or the ideal of psychotherapy) to the client.

Making room for others (*kṣānti* #1): Be that as it may, from a Buddhist perspective the cultivation of empathy is an integral part of the cultivation of oneself. In Śāntideva, both goals (divesting the self of selfhood, and cultivating compassion) are closely connected with the practice of the virtue of “patience.” The term “patience,” however, does not quite convey the sense of Sanskrit *kṣānti*, which stands for an affective and cognitive state of receptivity, approximately somewhere between tolerance and openness.

As a dimension or extension of tolerance, compassion is the receptivity to the feelings and thoughts of others. It, so to speak, makes room for others, for their needs and their feelings.

To phrase it more strongly, *kṣānti* is the capacity to accept others, especially others when they are perceived as being limited, unpleasant, hostile, in essence antithetical to ourselves. Under those circumstances, *kṣānti* is both a virtue and a procedure for acceptance.

Making room for causation and interdependence: But *kṣānti* is also a dimension of wisdom, and as such, it is openness to the limitations of reality. When reality does not meet our expectations, we can either sulk and simmer forever in resentment, or we can accept reality for what it is. Philosophically stated, *kṣānti* is acceptance of causation; particularly causation as it impinges on our lives, by limiting the duration of the pleasant and bringing about what is unpleasant, by constantly reminding us of our own fragility.

Tolerance is also acceptance of change and difference. What makes room in us for this acceptance of difference is the understanding of causation.

Making room for the imperfect self: If it is difficult to accept difference, variability, and disappointment from our environment, from reality itself; it is even more difficult to accept it in other human beings. If it is difficult to make room for the difference and imperfection of others, it is as difficult to make room for our own imperfection. It is not that we do not make allowances for our own limitations, but rather that we turn the knowledge of our imperfection into a source of entitlement. We are unable to accept our imperfections as imperfections, we must see them as demands, as needs that must be met, not as a fundamental lack.

2.3. Compassion as emptiness (*kṣānti* #2)

The argument of the last paragraphs has an important implication; for, the moment tolerance is extended to environment and circumstances (*kṣānti* #2), it is easy to assume that it can be extended to the self. In other words, tolerance, and by extension empathy, is also self-referential.

The doctrine of emptiness does not solve the problem of intolerance, but it proposes a way to conceive of tolerance. Reflections on the nature of causation and on the absence of self will not make us tolerant or compassionate, but they give us a tool for understanding why tolerance makes sense, and provide techniques (as illustrated by Śāntideva) for the cultivation of tolerance. Extended to the self these techniques furthermore form the basis for the cultivation of acceptance and openness.

In other words, I argue that the concept of emptiness can be extended to the “ethical” or “behavioral” realm, and to the personal realm. Reflections on emptiness can, and should be, taken out of the metaphysical realm. Understood as commentary on the nature of self as behaving human being, emptiness is the recognition of personal fragility and imperfection. As a commentary on the nature of self as controller, emptiness is the recognition that there is no master of the house, in self or in others.

The groundlessness and the authority of compassion: Part of the

reason compassion is possible is precisely because there is no master of the house. Conversely, the cultivation of compassion and tolerance, the cultivation of empathy, is a tool for the gradual acceptance of the absence of a master. But is it not the case that, in the absence of a master, there is also an absence of authority? For, whose authority would it be? How is authority to be maintained and enforced, if there is no one to hold and wield this authority?

Paradoxically, compassion itself, empathy itself becomes the fundamental authority, but it is an authority that persistently and continuously questions its own authority, questions its mastery and its hegemony.

I realize that one way of viewing compassion is to imagine it as the feeling of sympathy and the altruistic instinct of a being who stands far above the human condition of suffering, in other words, as the feelings of pity arising in a perfect being who appraises the distance between his perfection and our imperfection. I cannot argue for or against this conception, for I have no first hand knowledge of such perfect beings—I rather understand these beings as projections of our own capacity to imagine perfectibility. But, be that as it may, I would argue that the practice of compassion I am capable of imagining is the imperfect, the deluded being's practice, and that such practice is a commentary on this being's own suffering and fragility as well as a reaction to the suffering of others.

The authority of “skillful means”: Accordingly, compassion is also empathy with respect to oneself—true knowledge of our own lack, or our own fragility and limitation. And, as explained earlier, as an important aspect of this empathy that is practiced with respect to others and self alike, tolerance is also a tolerance of oneself, an acceptance of the reality of self and the reality of its environment. One can extend both of these concepts—acceptance-tolerance and compassion-empathy—to include the methods whereby we know and act: this broad understanding of compassion and wisdom is what is sometimes called *upāya* or (for lack of a better word) “skillful means.”

Skillful means is a skill that is partly innate, but partly in need of cultivation. It is the skill that allows us to understand language in spite of the fact that words have no solid reference, to understand instructions for action and to have the initiative to adapt the instructions to the reality of the situation. As part of

the practice of compassion, skillful means is what allows us to realize that a suffering being is at a given moment in need of and ready for material assistance, and at another given moment in need of advice, or support. These are decision that cannot be prescribed in advance.

I would like to propose that skillful means is (a) a key dimension of compassion, and (b) a key dimension of our critical faculties. Skillful means is what allows us to feel compassion and yet be critical of the sentimentality of this compassion, what allows us to feel sympathy, yet have the insight to see ourselves as equally lacking and suffering, what allows us to recognize those realities that no amount of reasoning or advice can reveal to us, such as rigidity, stubbornness, self-deception, self-pity, self-righteousness, self-importance, and hidden self-interest. It is therefore a fundamental virtue for the ethical exercise of both criticism and authority. Like compassion and tolerance, the practice of skillful means carries its own authority, and is open to a criticism of its own authority.⁹

That we are able to adapt, able to accept criticism, and able to assimilate knowledge without distortion are great mysteries. Self-criticism and adaptability are both great mysteries and fundamental authorities. They are part of the self-referential dimension of tolerance. These are part of what Śāntideva calls the great “mystery” of “substituting self for others.”

It is of course a mystery in the sense that we cannot understand how it happens, and in the sense that we can never be completely sure of the sincerity of our own compassion and tolerance. But it is no mystery if we realize that this is the authority of the person who can show to others a face of understanding, hence who can meet others on the same ground of their own authority.

The transformations of Avalokiteśvara: My audience in Japan, I am sure, is familiar with the belief that Kannon can take the shape of any living being: when Kannon is about to rescue a Brahmin, he appears as a Brahmin, when he is about to rescue a child, he appears as a child. When about to rescue a beggar, she takes the form of a beggar. This is a beautiful myth which embodies both the mystery and the authority of compassion as adaptability and openness.

2.4. A model for meaning in a world without foundation

I have argued earlier that skillful means and adaptability depend on emptiness, and therefore depend on, or entail, a denial of a referent for language, a solid foundation for truth, and a self that is the master of the house. The transformations of the bodhisattva may be interpreted as expressions of this absence of foundation.

Meaning without foundation is meaning that acts in the world of change and fragility. Meaning without foundation is the direction and intention of a being that recognizes the fact that intention is groundless, that there is no powerful master behind the will of the self. Like language generally, compassion conveys or imparts meaning because it mirrors and creates a world of conventional meanings. But, unlike language generally, compassionate language creates benevolently an interaction, and this interaction is indeed the reality of self and other, the recognition of the fundamental lack of the self. Its authority derives from its capacity to surrender its delusions of power.

Surrendering authority: For, authority can increase when it is surrendered. In the course of the seminars I argued that those in position of authority gain authority by coming down to the level of those who invest them with that authority. In other words, authority derives ultimately from an illusion created by a community that authorizes a person or a set of words and behaviors. The person in a position of authority can acknowledge the authority, but this person can also expose or unveil the fundamental lack behind the power of this authority. In the same way, the activity of compassion generally gains new and unexpected strength from “coming down” to the level of the recipient of compassion. Compassion gains strength from the recognition of its own weakness—the weakness of the person capable of experiencing suffering.

In the public realm one can think of the authority of someone like Mother Theresa of Calcutta, whom world leaders, political and religious, often woo for the benefit of sharing in her charisma. Or one can think of the unbounded authority gained by the Dalai Lama through his warm and sincere demeanor—a person who has authority gains in authority whenever he can unveil the fundamental weakness (in fact, the sham) of such authority.

But these compassionate actions are also examples of criticism, of a criticism that is *often forgotten, the criticism of compassion*. For a total and sincere commitment to empathy, warmth, acceptance, and self-sacrifice is in fact a commentary on the other side of authority—the authority of the state, of power, of wealth. One has only to think of the cold reception that the Church and the nobility gave to figures like St. Francis of Assisi and St. Vincent de Paul to realize the extent to which compassion is in fact a critique, the most cutting, the most powerful. In this sense, compassion is a competing authority, as it were.

The authority of hope and transformation: The examples I have just given also suggest a third dimension of authority: the authority of self transformation and openness is also the authority of hope and change. One can oppose tradition as conservatism to tradition and community: in one case tradition has the role of preserving the relative positions of certain persons in power, in the other case tradition has the function of preserving a community. The two, power and community, cannot be neatly separated, of course. But it is possible to envision the two as competing forces, since power tends to concentrate in particular segments of a community, and since local communities can also have privileged access to power that excludes other communities. The capacity of a tradition to separate the two, and to look forward towards a sense of a common language that challenges the concentration of power is part of a tradition's capacity to make use of compassion as tool of hope.

Compassion and hope, however, are not merely appendages of tradition; they look beyond tradition to the ground of tradition: our sense of community and our desire to see community endure. In this sense it shares with tradition the need for continuity, but unlike tradition as closed text, it is a force of authority based on a more fundamental need to ensure the caring or nurturing functions *of tradition and communal living, rather than the need to ensure the ideological cohesion of a community*.

The distinction is similar to that between an open text and a closed text, between authority that admits of no criticism, and the authority of self-critical compassion. The critique of authority is then seen as grounded in a set of values that form the ethics of criticism: namely, compassion as self-criticism and

empathy, tolerance as self-acceptance and toleration, and the open acceptance of the fundamental lack of self and other.

3.0. Some questions and warnings

I am afraid I must conclude, however, with some words of warning. The authority of compassion is of course as liable to be misused as any other. Compassion can be turned into a dogma, into a rigid preaching, into an abstract or cerebral exercise of the imagination. One can cling to abstract ideas of compassion with as much persistence as some people cling to rigid ideas of hatred and intolerance. Compassion is also as likely to be forgotten as any other virtue that requires a surrendering of our daily preoccupations. Compassion as authority, moreover, must have some persuasive power, and as such must either serve to persuade or need the assistance of other powers in order to persuade. That is, compassion as authoritative doctrine can be a tool assisting some other system (such as a social system without mechanisms for social justice), and compassion may be maintained by a system that is otherwise coercive (such as ecclesiastical hierarchies).

3.1. Authority and coercion

The main problem with authority, I have argued, is its power to coerce. I have repeatedly asked during the seminars how it is possible to have authority (a source of certainty and value) without coercion. I do not have an answer to this question, except to suggest that I cannot see how human beings can live in society without authority, and that most likely coercion of one sort or another is unavoidable, perhaps an integral part of authority. If my intuition on this point is correct, then the real problem is not how to avoid coercion. Rather, we must ask, what are the limits of coercion, what sorts of coercion are tolerable, and of what intensity, and what are the least coercive forms of authority?

As a preliminary exploration of these points, I would like to suggest the following:

(1) **Self-transformation without coercion?:** To internalize constraints is not the same as to impose coercive force. Internalization of values is preferable

to external controls—in other words, the loss of internal controls leads to greater, not lesser, coercion.

(2) **Persuasion without coercion?:** To accept is not the same as to coerce. The model of an authority figure that both empathizes and accepts (validates) others, is preferable to one that dictates behavior.

(3) **Criticism as safeguard?:** A critical attitude that is alert and rebellious is as necessary as a desire to be open to tradition and community. In other words, we must take the risk of accepting the vagaries of critical inquiry as self-serving intellectual rebellion. This is the safeguard against the dogmatism of traditional authorities.

(4) **Compassion and openness:** Yet, we must continue to explore and expand the concept of an ethics of criticism. For the time being, I propose that this ethics is based primarily on a broad understanding of the cognitive and affective process called “empathy.” This broad understanding includes the traditional concept of sympathy and compassion, of course, but also includes the concepts of the emptiness of self (especially as fundamental lack of the master of the house), fragility of self, and open acceptance of other.

3.1.1. Open texts, open selves

A criticism of modern critical theory: As suggested above, the open acceptance of the other is the personal and ethical equivalent, if not the foundation, for critical thought that is capable of looking at itself. Critical theory can fall into the same traps into which traditional authority falls: self-aggrandizement, insensitivity to the fundamental lack of self and to the fragility of knowledge. It too can play the game of the child seeking certainty and security. But in addition it can fall into the game of the rebellious child, who ends with the moral vacuum of a self-centered authority.

A criticism of traditional Buddhist rhetoric: In many ways critical theory can fall prey to those weakness of traditional Buddhist rhetoric that we outlined in the seminars: the tendency to deny foundation only to assert itself as ultimate authority. In the end, the critical method is reified, the words of the critic are reified, and the whole world stops—change and difference, and the

reality of human suffering stops. No wonder that these ideas can be reassuring for some!

But this only reinforces our criticism of Buddhist foundationalism and fundamentalism. As I have argued during the seminars, traditional Buddhist rhetoric tends to be a rhetoric of reification. Buddha is reified, Buddha's words are reified, and Buddhism is reified—all become foundations even as a foundation is denied. Emptiness also is reified. Even as we speak, and the moment we deny that it is reified, it becomes a thing, a solid foundation. The whole world stops and becomes one single Buddha-nature—and yet, the world still suffers, and the self is still ignorant, evanescent, and fragile.

Uncritical self-surrender of words and texts: Similarly, the critique of criticism and of traditional Buddhist rhetoric, applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the hope that scholarship will provide a solid foundation that will free us from the fundamental lack of self. The blind acceptance of texts, our clinging to texts and books that we carry under the arm with great devotion, our insistence that this or that text has “the correct explanation,” these are all examples of surrendering to another power without surrendering the self—that is, the lacking self.

3.1.2. Warning against naive understandings of Buddhist compassion

But, I must repeat, compassion is also limited by our tendency to reify compassion, our capacity to turn it into a tool of the seeking self, the self that refuses to know itself as lacking a self. It is, unfortunately, all too common to understand Buddhist compassion as a vague feeling of sympathy, an endearing quality that allows the sage to say we are all lovable but which does not give us any tools to confront suffering.

That suffering and evil can be reduced to ignorance: A superficial, and all too common, understanding of the critique of self and the ethics of compassion proposes that we have a solution to suffering in our understanding that suffering is somehow unreal, or only the product of human ignorance. Thus, we end up with a bland view of compassion that sees suffering as “only ignorance,” and sees abstract notions of “no-self” as a solution to the overwhelming reality

of human confusion and suffering. This is a facile way of denying the reality of suffering, and the reality of how deeply rooted suffering is.

When the bodhisattva vows refer to the endless realm of living beings in need of liberation, some may see in this the idea (which I have characterized as superficial) that my vow will encompass all living beings, that this vow is the supreme answer to all problems. But two other interpretations are possible, and to me preferable. Two other notions can be derived from the symbol of the bodhisattva vow: on the one hand, the sphere of action for compassion is endless—hence the magnitude of the problem would be normally overwhelming. On the other hand, the sphere of living beings is endless, and hence encompasses the speaker, who is also suffering and in need of liberation.

A challenge to the authority of compassion and skillful means: This also means that the authority of compassion is constantly threatened by the reality of suffering. That, by definition, the bodhisattva's compassion has limited authority. Suffering belies any complacent self-concept that assumes that the speaker of the vows is somehow above suffering or above ignorance, or that the speaker's perception of the world and its suffering is privileged. This is then an inverted notion of authority—the authority of compassion is not only the authority of the ideal being, the Buddha, but also the authority of the deluded sentient being, who embodies the fundamental lack of self.

An aporia: Of all the doubts I have regarding compassion as doctrine, the most troubling is its use in the abstract as a feather in the cap of dogmatic truth, because this use can disarm compassion of its critical power, hence its true authority. This is the use of “compassion” that can make place for indifference, or even for cruelty and coercion. To suggest that God is compassionate and then allow ourselves to harbor feelings of hatred, and then to practice cruelty towards others, is to betray compassion. Similarly, to talk about compassion and skillful means and then use this talk to assume an indifferent posture, to hide behind Buddhist silence to tolerate cruelty and abuse, this is another betrayal of compassion. In these cases, it is not the authority of compassion that we respect, but some other authority to which compassion as a symbol becomes subservient.

3.2. Concluding Notes

Self-consuming words and acts: Compassion as criticism is then a constant self-reflection as well as a constant concern for others. In the course of the seminars, I spoke of the concept of the text as self-consuming artifact, of something that comes to mean only because it allows itself to be consumed and transformed. I argued that a text's primary force as source of authority is in its capacity to communicate by denying itself, by allowing tradition and community to live through it. I also argued, following contemporary notions of textuality, that the idea of the unchanging text is an illusion, a vain attempt to fix authority once it is gained by the transformation of an earlier stage of the text. I now propose that certain non-textual behaviors are of the same nature, that certain actions inspire respect and appear to be inherently worthy, precisely because they make way, as it were, to a transformation of the self and of the community in which the self lives. Such behaviors, *tolerance and compassion in particular*, convey meaning and gain authority, because they come to be by virtue of their capacity to give in or allow other realities to become manifest, somehow displacing certain notions of self-interest and self-importance.

On the authority of self-transformation: Speaking in modified Buddhist terms, I would say that the knowledge born from self-transformation is wisdom. It is the knowledge that makes room for the rest of life, from other human and living beings, and from the world. But this knowledge must in fact transform the self, it is not enough to assimilate knowledge, one must adapt accordingly. This process of adaptation is what constitutes compassion and tolerance, or openness.

Compassion, then unlike the completed book, the authoritative book, is an authority of change, an open text in the process of change. It embodies the Buddhist virtue of self-consumption, of the capacity to make the self disappear. As altruistic, social, or public virtue, compassion is an action of self-effacement; but as knowledge, as private feeling and realization, it is an action of self-recognition and self-criticism.

The limits of compassion: Expressed in a mixture of contemporary idiom and traditional Buddhist terms, we may say that "wisdom" is a form of criticism,

and that compassion, insofar as it sets limits on this critique, is itself a form of criticism. Wisdom without compassion enslaves the human being, and distorts our perception of “the lack” of the master of the house, because wisdom by itself abstracts the interpersonal reality of self and no-self. Yet, compassion without the capacity to stand back and be critical is also enslaving or perhaps blinding. Without wisdom, compassion becomes sentimentality, and loses its critical edge.

In the words of the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*: wisdom without skillful means is bondage, skillful means without wisdom is bondage.

Notes

- ① Middle English auctorite, from Old French autorite, from Latin auctōritās, auctōritāt-, from auctor, creator. From *aug-T-, to increase. Also related to Latin augur, diviner (< “he who obtains favorable presage” < “divine favor, increase”), and to Latin augustus, majestic, august.
- ② The Biblical scholar had to speak first, before the Bible was allowed to speak. Schleiermacher comes before the Bible. Similarly, the philologist has the key to the Buddhist texts.
- ③ This statement is an exaggerated generalization. In Europe and in Asia, other authorities competed with religion in the realms of political, aesthetic, and moral authority. In China, for instance, the Confucian and Taoist Classics were important sources of authority even for Buddhists—very much like Western philosophers and psychologists are often used by Western Buddhists as sources of authority and confirmation for their religious beliefs.
- ④ Needless to say, modern Japan is also on its way to becoming (alas!) a society where television and the commercial interests behind television shape morality and truth.
- ⑤ I use the term “counterbalance” as an approximate equivalent of Sanskrit *prati-pakṣa*, with the following connotations: a positive force or influence that counteracts another force, positive or negative. But, unlike the traditional *prati-pakṣa*, a counterbalance may be a temporary measure and may derive its force, function and meaning through the dialectic process of opposing another force. Like *prati-pakṣa*, a counterbalance is also presumed to act with approximately the same force as the actions or processes that it opposes. In the case of compassion, one may also suggest that it is complementary, and not contradictory, to the force it balances, namely, critical intelligence.
- ⑥ The story of Father Zosima in the *Brothers Karamazov* is a good example of this

phenomenon. Among historical figures we can think of Kūkai. But the protection of living saints from the vicissitudes of every day life is even more interesting—we protect them from frustration, anger, and pain, or make sure that their anger and pain are interpreted spiritually.

- ⑦ The notion of “inner life” presents formidable problems from a systematic philosophical point of view, but I will leave those for another occasion. Heinz Kohut, *How does analysis cure?* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984 — posthumous), p. 82. See also, Kohut, *Self psychology and the humanities: Reflections on a new psychoanalytic approach* (New York: W.W.Norton, 1985 — posthumous), pp. 115–118, 222.
- ⑧ Michael J. Sweet & Craig Johnson, “Enhancing empathy: The interpersonal implications of a Buddhist meditation technique.” *Psychotherapy*, vol. 27, number 1 (1990), pp. 19–29.
- ⑨ As, e. g., when skillful means become rigid, or become an excuse for deception, or a way to avoid criticism.

付記 本稿は「大谷大学大学院特別セミナー」の公開講演会（1994年7月15日）において発表されたものである。ミシガン大学のゴメズ教授による特別セミナーは1993年7月と1994年7月の二度（各五回）にわたり集中して行なわれたが、本稿はその結論部分に相当する。なお、当該セミナーの序論に相当する Luis O. Gómez “Sources of Authority in Buddhism and Buddhist Scholarship” (『大谷学報』No. 72-1, 1992) があるから参照されたい。