

**A REVIEW OF SOME APPROACHES TO  
HERMENEUTICS AND HISTORICITY  
IN THE STUDY OF BUDDHISM**

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**I. Introduction: the nature of my report.**

In the past seven years there has been an increasing interest in Buddhist hermeneutics among scholars in the United States. Their work raises important questions for understanding the Buddhist tradition. Some of these questions have been dealt with explicitly; others remain to be developed. In my opinion, there are two essential problems raised by a hermeneutical approach which need much more attention: what is our own hermeneutical situation vis-a-vis the tradition we would interpret, and what is the meaning of history for Buddhism?

My report attempts (1) to characterize recent work on Buddhist hermeneutics; (2) to contrast this work with the meaning of hermeneutics in the Western tradition; (3) to review some recent studies of Buddhist historicity and historical consciousness, contrasting modern with traditional historical interests; (4) to raise the question: how might a deeper awareness of Buddhist notions of history and hermeneutics change modern methods of studying Buddhism?

My report has several limitations: (1) the topic of history and hermeneutics is vast; I can deal with it only very selectively here; (2) I can offer only some examples of recent work on Buddhist hermeneutics, not an adequate survey or

summary; (3) I am largely ignorant of work in Japanese about Buddhist hermeneutics or a Buddhist notion of history; and (4) I offer these remarks as a student of hermeneutical philosophy, not as a Buddhologist.

## II. The possibility of Buddhist hermeneutics.

### *A. Recent English-language work on Buddhist hermeneutics.*

Recently published articles include Robert Thurman, "Buddhist Hermeneutics,"<sup>1</sup> Peter Gregory, "Chinese Buddhist Hermeneutics: The Case of Hua Yen,"<sup>2</sup> and Nathan Katz, "Prasaṅga and deconstruction: Tibetan hermeneutics and the yāna controversy."<sup>3</sup> In addition, several academic conferences have held panel discussions devoted to cross-cultural hermeneutics in the study of religion. A University of Hawaii conference in July, 1985, on "Changing Facets of Buddhism," included a section on Buddhist hermeneutics. In June, 1984, a special conference sponsored by the Kuroda Institute for the Study of Buddhism and Human Values and the National Endowment for the Humanities, took place in Los Angeles and explored the topic of hermeneutics in the Indian, Tibetan, Chinese and Japanese Buddhist traditions. Among the many presentations were those by George Bond, Yuichi Kajiyama, and Donald Lopez on Indian Buddhist hermeneutics; Robert Thurman, Jeffrey Hopkins, Michael Broido and Matthew Kapstein on hermeneutics in Tibetan texts; Peter Gregory and Robert Gimello on Hua-yen hermeneutics; Robert Buswell on Korean Ch'an hermeneutics, Thomas Kasulis on Kūkai's hermeneutics, and Roger Corless on Shinran's hermeneutics. Luis Gómez spoke on the possibility of a Buddhist hermeneutic, and I raised some questions about Dōgen's interpretation. Alan Sponberg, Carl Bielefeldt, David Chappell and theologian

David Tracy responded to the papers in general. They are being edited by Donald Lopez for publication as a book.

Many of these published articles and conference papers focus on hermeneutical schemes, or structures invented to arrange as well as interpret the scriptures or passages in them. Often mentioned is the early hermeneutical scheme (in *Āṅguttāra nīkāya* 1.60 and other sources) of dividing texts into two groups: those of definitive or ultimate meaning (*nītārtha*) 了義, and those in need of interpretation (*neyārtha*) 不了義. Another primary example are the *p'an chiao* 判教 schemes of doctrinal classification. Gregory understands *p'an chiao* as a Chinese response to a twofold Chinese hermeneutical problem: (1) how to explain Buddhism to an originally non-Buddhist Chinese mentality, and (2) more specifically, how to explain the wide array of (often conflicting) Buddhist teachings transmitted to China. Thus, for Gregory, *p'an chiao* was "a hermeneutical strategy...to find a set of principles to provide a framework in which the vast and sometimes contradictory array of holy literature...could be understood in a systematic fashion."<sup>4</sup>

The doctrine of *upāya* in the Lotus Sutra is, of course, another favorite example of a hermeneutical strategy. According to Gregory, it implied that the Buddha's teachings had to be understood in the context in which they were delivered, and it distinguished between provisional Hinayana teachings addressed to those of inferior understanding, and the ultimate Mahayana teaching. Hence, the doctrine of *upāya* shows an awareness of the Buddha's (the speaker's) intention and of the listener's/reader's capacity to understand.<sup>5</sup>

Many other examples of hermeneutical schemes and strategies have been analyzed in the recent literature, but I hope the above examples will suffice to

document the interest in Buddhist hermeneutics. I have found these studies to be very enriching, and I am awed at the deep appreciation in traditional Buddhist texts for the problem of interpretation. At the same time, I feel that the search for Buddhist hermeneutics is still quite immature – not because it has found insufficient materials to analyze, but because it has not fully appreciated two essential features of the Western hermeneutical tradition that provided the impetus for the search. Let me briefly review the development of hermeneutics in the West in order to expose this shortcoming in the search for Buddhist hermeneutics conducted so far.

A. *The Western hermeneutical tradition.*

The term “hermeneutics” was not used until the 17th century, when it came to signify the *principles and methods* of interpreting the Holy Scriptures (the Bible) *in distinction from* interpretation itself, or *exegesis*. But long before that, theologians had reflected on problems of interpretation, particularly in order to do justice to the Old Testament and to different levels of meaning from a Christian point of view. In the second century, Origen developed a scheme of three senses or levels of meaning in the sacred scriptures: literal, moral, and allegorical-mystical; the last level corresponded best to the intention of divine inspiration. Over the centuries many other hermeneutical schemes and strategies were formulated.

But not until Schleiermacher (1768-1834) did hermeneutics as an independent discipline begin. For him, hermeneutics could no longer be taken merely as an aid to understanding difficult passages or foreign languages, because the very act of understanding could no longer be taken for granted. Humans employ hermeneutics whenever they attempt to understand a written

work, be it sacred or profane, and even when they communicate in daily life; but the methodical and principled discipline of hermeneutics had yet to be developed, according to Schleiermacher. Hermeneutics was “the art of understanding,” achieved through analysis of language and empathy with an author; the interpreter needed to stand in an immediate relation with the matter to be understood.<sup>6</sup> Dilthey (1833-1911) then advanced Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics as the foundation of all the *Geisteswissenschaften*, which were built upon the possibility of empathetic understanding rather than objective explanation. Towards the end of his career, Dilthey came to see the act of understanding as a fundamental characteristic of human existence itself.<sup>7</sup>

Heidegger (1889-1976) then pursued the notion of understanding as a dimension of human existence, and proceeded to ontologize hermeneutics. Understanding is not something humans occasionally engage in; rather it is the very act of their being, it is a way in which they are, a *Seinsweise*; hence hermeneutics, as reflection upon understanding, became an analysis of human existence for Heidegger. One essential feature revealed by this analysis was the *Vorverständnis*, the pre-understanding, that is always operative in anticipation of our grasp of things in the world. Another was the radical historicity of our understanding, or the fact that our understanding is always historically conditioned and situated.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1960’s Hans-Georg Gadamer developed Heidegger’s ontological hermeneutics in his book *Truth and Method*.<sup>9</sup> He emphasized two points important for our deliberations here: (1) in the course of understanding a text, we must become aware of the prejudgments (*Vorurteile*) we bring with us, must evaluate them and notice how they are gradually transformed; (2) we must

appreciate the historical distance between us and a text or author of the past. Hence, understanding is a process of fusing our own horizon with that presupposed by the text, it is a *Horizontverschmelzung*; hermeneutics is active appropriation of a set of rules or canons. Gadamer also developed the notion of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, or history shaped by the effects of well-entrenched interpretations of the sources of a tradition. According to Gadamer, we must fully recognize the impact of the history operative between our times and those of an ancient author or text. Any attempt to evade this effective history and to stand in immediate relation with the past is an uncritical pretense. Finally, of utmost importance for the topic of Buddhist hermeneutics is Gadamer's notion of *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*, our awareness of the hermeneutical situation in which we stand as moderns and critics vis-a-vis the effective history of texts we seek to understand.

Of course, hermeneutics has also been developed in other directions since Heidegger. Emilio Betti has pursued a rule-governed, objective hermeneutics as the methodology of the *Geisteswissenschaften*.<sup>10</sup> Paul Ricoeur has formulated a "hermeneutics of suspicion," critical of systematic distortions at work on the cultural as well as personal level: our naivete in accepting the self-understanding of an author, text or tradition.<sup>11</sup> And "poststructuralists" Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault have articulated a kind of anti-hermeneutics which questions the notions of authorship, originality, influence, and determinate meaning.<sup>12</sup>

In all Western developments of the term, hermeneutics is a highly reflective and self-conscious discipline which focuses on methods and principles of interpretation as opposed to an interpretation or exegesis itself. In

the modern sense of the term, an interpretative scheme or strategy is not “hermeneutical” unless it reflects an awareness of the problems of method, historical distance, and the historical position of the interpreter. Further, in modern hermeneutical theory, language is essential to being human; there is no pre-linguistic or extra-linguistic experience (although there may be pre-conceptual experience). In the words of Gadamer, wherever being is understood, we are dealing with language (*Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache*); in the words of Derrida, there is no measure outside language, there is “nothing outside the text” (*il n’y pas de hors-textes*).

*C. The task of a search for Buddhist hermeneutics.*

Now let us come back to the question of Buddhist hermeneutics, for example, the Buddhist interpretive schemes and strategies such as designating a given text as *nītārtha*, or placing a text within a *p’an chiao* system, or developing such a doctrinal classification. From the perspective of modern Western hermeneutics, these schemes would be “hermeneutical” only in a very qualified sense. They at least would need to be self-reflective about their own methods of interpreting or classifying scriptures. To qualify further for the designation “hermeneutical,” they would need to be cognizant of understanding/interpretation as a mode of being, and of language as essential to experience. Even Thurman’s initial definition of hermeneutics as “a philosophical discipline of rational interpretation of a traditional canon of Sacred Scriptures authoritative for a religious community”<sup>13</sup> seems to be closer to a definition of scriptural exegesis, not “hermeneutics.”

More important than these qualifications, however, is the awareness of the hermeneutical situation in which we stand vis-a-vis the tradition or text we

wish to understand. In order to fully develop Buddhist “hermeneutics,” we must do more than present Tsung-mi’s hermeneutics, or Kūkai’s, or Shinran’s, or whoever’s; we must at the same time reflect upon and articulate how *we* come to understand their respective teachings. If we would explain the way Dōgen, for example, interpreted other texts, we must make explicit (1) the methods we use to interpret Dōgen, and (2) the present historical context in which we interpret Dōgen’s interpretations. Until we do so, I believe that our search for hermeneutics within the Buddhist tradition will remain limited and immature. I hope that the promise of another conference on Buddhist hermeneutics can be realized to explore this indispensable dimension.

### III. The possibility of a Buddhist sense of history.

#### *A. From Buddhist hermeneutics to Buddhist history.*

I have mentioned that, in Heidegger’s hermeneutical ontology, human understanding is historical in its very nature, because human beings are historical in their very nature. In Gadamer’s extension of this ontology, an awareness of our contemporary historical situation is indispensable for an appropriate understanding of a past tradition or text. As scholars, whether Western or Japanese, we have come to stand in a very peculiar “hermeneutical situation” vis-a-vis the Buddhist tradition. This arises from the fact that the methods we employ to study Buddhism derive predominantly from the West. Modern Buddhology originated in 19th century Europe, that is, in a situation that was culturally, ideologically, and historically remote from the Buddhist tradition it began to study.

*B. The historical orientation of modern scholarship.*

The historico-critical methods developed in the West have given Buddhology a strong orientation toward historical study. Historical knowledge of the development of Buddhism and its scriptures has been emphasized equally with translation of the scriptures and texts. Minoru Kiyota contrasts the orientation of modern Buddhology with the non-critical and ahistorical attitude of traditional sectarian Buddhist scholarship. This traditional scholarship

viewed systems of Buddhist thought from the perspective of a *p'an chiao* system which classified doctrines and evaluated them by presupposing the superiority of one's own doctrine. The *p'an chiao* system established its own patriarchal lineage and honored the sayings of those patriarchs without criticism, without investigating the primary sources from which the theory and practice basic to the development of a given doctrine were derived. It was ahistorical in its approach to describing the evolution of Buddhist thought....An understanding of the history of the evolution of Buddhist thought, then, involves in part an investigation of [the doctrinal] problematics and [textual] presuppositions [operative at the time of composition], not simply an understanding of a fossilized *p'an chiao* system, arbitrarily assigned to enhance a given sectarian dogma. Modern Buddhology challenges the *p'an chiao* system and critically examines the sayings of the patriarchs.<sup>14</sup>

Ironically, in the light of Peter Gregory's work on *p'an chiao* as a "hermeneutical strategy," we can apply Kiyota's criticism of traditional scholarship to Kiyota himself here. That is, we can say that one must

understand the historical context, the hermeneutical situation, in which the *p'an chiao* system was developed. Gregory has shown that *p'an chiao* itself was a historical response to a particular hermeneutical problem, and has reminded us that the Chinese did not have access to many of the primary sources for the doctrines that they classified at the time. Of course, Kiyota is right to imply that later scholarship based upon such doctrinal classifications was uncritical. But his contention that *p'an chiao* was "ahistorical" in its approach belies a modern, Western sense of history that ninth-century Chinese may not have shared. In order to clarify further the hermeneutical situation in which modern Buddhist scholarship stands, let me briefly summarize the relevant, Western notion of history.

*C. The sense of history governing modern scholarship.*

It is widely recognized that "history" has two levels of meaning. Miki Kiyoshi, in his *Philosophy of History*, drew the traditional distinction between *res gestae* (出来事) and *historia rerum gestarum* (出来事の叙述).<sup>15</sup> I would describe the two levels of history as (1) story, or the narrative, temporally successive account of people and events, and (2) as historiography, or the critical study of such accounts.

Ever since the researches of Herodotus and Thucydides, historiography has placed great importance upon discovering reasons for historical occurrences and evidence for the historian's conclusions. The search for reasons often took the form of establishing causal connections between different events, or between background conditions and historical occurrences. The search for evidence became a prerequisite for historical objectivity. In the 1860's, the father of *Universalgeschichte*, Leopold v. Ranke, said that history

(i.e., historiography) must seek to establish only “what really happened,” “things as they actually were” (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*).<sup>16</sup> If we ignore Ranke’s attempt to link historical epochs with God, we can say he championed a new objectivity in the study of history. At the same time that Western scholars such as Burnouf and Friedrich Max Müller began to develop modern Buddhology, theologians contributed much to modern historico-critical methods in their search for a historical Jesus behind the “Christ of faith” depicted in the gospels. A new kind of Church history began, followed by a history of religions.

One part of these developments was explicit reflection on the problem: what should count as “historical writing,” particularly in the past? In 1892, Church historian Franz Overbeck described the characteristics considered essential for historical writing: there must be (1) a chronological presentation of material, and (2) an intention to pass the account on to progeny. Further, in order to have Church history (or the history of a religious institution), the Church (or institution) must be seen as something that can be described historically, that is, as subject to history. According to Overbeck, the idea of writing history can only occur when a community has learned to distinguish one time-period from another, or more precisely, when it is conscious of changes undergone *and* of the value of recording them for the future.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, historians today may describe the conditions necessary for “historical writing” differently, and may also rightly insist that objective historical writing was not the province of the modern West alone. In any case, however, the ideas summarized above helped to form the historical consciousness of modern Buddhology, with its insistence on objectivity and its interest in establishing who were the historical authors, and what was the historical

background, of the various texts. The story of the rise of modern Buddhology is made more interesting when we see what evidence it has discovered for *Buddhist* historical writing in the past. In the following I will limit myself to a few examples, rather than attempt an adequate review of all recent work on this topic.

*D. The search for historical consciousness in Buddhism.*

Scholars generally assume that there is little, if any, historical consciousness in Indian religions. Heinz Bechert states that, other than accounts of a few central events, there is no sign of an Indian Buddhist history that is to any extent faithful to reality. Singhalese Buddhist historical accounts from the 2nd century on form a special case. Bechert regards the Tibetan works on Buddhist history as inspired by Chinese historical writing, not by Indian example.<sup>18</sup> Of course these assumptions do not obviate the need to search for a specifically Indian conception of history. But because I am unfamiliar with Indian notions, as well as with the Tibetan histories, I will proceed to exemplify the search in Chinese and Japanese materials.

Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer's book, *Die Identität der buddhistischen Schulen und die Kompilation buddhistischer Universalgeschichten in China*, is a thorough examination of Sung period Buddhist universal (i.e., cross-dynastic and cross-sectarian) histories, Ch'an chronologies, and T'ien-t'ai histories. A review of this rich study is beyond the scope of my report, but I do want to mention one of its conclusions, which is relevant to the question at hand. (Although Schmidt-Glintzer does not define "historical writing," the characteristics described by Overbeck would seem to hold in his case too.) He notes that Buddhist historical accounts in China began, at least by the 5th century, when

Buddhists wanted to show that Buddhism was truly Chinese, that it had a kind of pre-existence in China. He concludes that Chinese Buddhist historical writing had to be modelled after Confucian precedents, since history was not originally a Buddhist concern.<sup>19</sup>

Hence Chinese Buddhist histories originated in an attempt to “naturalize” Buddhism in China. These Buddhist histories, to be sure, included features that distinguished them from their non-Buddhist precedents, but the Confucian model remained decisive. Histories of Buddhist schools in the T’ang period paralleled earlier ancestral and clan histories; Sung period histories were even more sectarian. The import of this conclusion is that there is nothing essentially Buddhist about Chinese Buddhist histories; these histories were not shaped by Buddhist philosophy, but rather by motives to legitimize Buddhism (or a particular Buddhist school) in the eyes of non-Buddhists (or non-members of that school). The 1964 article by Jan Yün-hua, on “Buddhist Historiography in Sung China,”<sup>20</sup> describes several characteristics of Sung Buddhist historical accounts, but does not alter the import of this conclusion.

In my article, “Is There Historical Consciousness Within Ch’an?”<sup>21</sup> I attempted first to specify the notion of history that is tacitly employed by Ch’an historians such as Yanagida Seizan and Heinrich Dumoulin, and then to initiate the search for historical consciousness in Ch’an texts. My tentative conclusions were: (1) if we judge the texts by modern standards of fact vs. fabrication, and by their awareness of historical conditioning vs. mythical consciousness, then the Ch’an chronicles and accounts reveal little, if any, historical consciousness in the modern sense of the term (a few of Tsung-mi’s accounts would seem to be an exception); and (2) in order to deepen the search

and to appreciate the texts better, we need to explore a specifically Ch'an, or at least Buddhist, sense of history. I will return to this theme in a moment, but first let me mention an exploration of historical consciousness in one Japanese text.

In their translation and study of Jien's *Gukanshō* written in 1219, Delmer M. Brown and Ichirō Ishida characterize the work as an "interpretive history."<sup>22</sup> The *Gukanshō* is the "first known Japanese attempt to construct a pattern of historical change that would explain the disturbed situation of that day and show what could be done and should be done to restore peace and stability."<sup>23</sup> Brown and Ishida mention three specifically Buddhist characteristics of this secular history: (1) its periodization in terms of kalpic progression and decline, resulting in the present era of *mappō*, (2) its designation of four Japanese leaders as incarnations of Buddha, and (3) its view of the Buddha Law (仏法) as a positive force that can be invoked to check kalpic decline in this world.<sup>24</sup> They also remark that in its organization, the *Gukanshō* differs significantly from a Confucian view of how history should be written.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, their conclusion is that the *Gukanshō* was inspired as much by Shintō as by Buddhism; it was determined to uphold the divine origin and succession of the Japanese emperors, and it was guided by a belief in the efficacy of the gods' blessings and in their power to rejuvenate the land. Of course this syncretism of *mappō* mentality and belief in regeneration does not necessarily detract from the *historical* character of the *Gukanshō*, but its attempt to explain the conditions of the times in terms of *metahistorical* principles (道理), both destructive and constructive,<sup>26</sup> does weaken the argument for the historical consciousness of its author.

The various studies described above do locate historical consciousness, in a limited sense, in Chinese and Japanese Buddhist accounts. But the degree of this historical consciousness is tacitly measured by modern standards, such as chronological order, ideals of factuality and objectivity, awareness of historical conditioning and of relevance for the future. In other words, the search for historical consciousness in Buddhism is itself a reflection of modern, and mostly Western, historical consciousness; it is an unacknowledged symptom of the hermeneutical situation in which we stand vis-a-vis the texts we interpret. None of the studies has been able to specify a philosophically Buddhist sense of history, which would challenge modern historical sensitivity and call for a real “fusion of horizons” (*Horizontverschmelzung*). Perhaps we do not know yet where to look for a specifically Buddhist notion of history, or what to look for. One obvious place would seem to be in the teaching of the three ages of the Dharma, leading up to the age of the Final Law or *mappō*, which has been so influential in medieval Japanese Buddhist thought. But today this teaching appears too mythical to function as an idea that touches the actual history of the world. Likewise, the idea of karma would seem to offer a basis for establishing causal connections in the nexus of events, but this idea was formed in a cyclical, “ahistorical” worldview and also appears too mythical for modern sensitivity. The ideas of the three ages and of karma do, however, provide a starting point for two recent philosophical attempts to define a Buddhist sense of history.

*E. The philosophical search for a Buddhist notion of history.*

In an essay translated as “Centering and the World Beyond,”<sup>27</sup> Takeuchi Yoshinori offers an existential interpretation of the ideas of *mappō* and

Buddhist eschatology. According to Takeuchi, Shinran implied that the three ages of the Dharma, the three periods of eschatological history, are recapitulated in the spiritual life of the individual. Accordingly, we do not simply live in an age of *mappō*, in which direct awakening and self-directed practice are impossible. Rather, within this world of *mappō*, each individual can live out three stages of transformation in his or her spiritual life. In the culminating “age”, the tension between the pride remaining in our practice and our will to surrender is overcome, and the Name of Amida realizes itself in the world. In other words, in Takeuchi’s interpretation, world history becomes an existential dimension of the individual in his encounter with the Name of Amida. If we try to extrapolate a notion of history from this interpretation of Shinran, we might say that in this view history realizes itself from within, in the present moment of encounter, rather than in a present set of circumstance externally conditioned by the past.

Takeuchi speaks more explicitly about history in the essay, “Freeing and the World Beyond.”<sup>28</sup> There he interprets Bultmann’s eschatology: what is central is not a historical transmission of revelation in the past, but a here-and-now encounter with the Gospel *kerygma* that comes to us from the future. “With the world as its mediation, history can thus open up from the individual history of existential reality into world history.... the full meaning of history.... can only be conceived in terms of the meaning of religious existence as a being in the historical world.” He goes on to apply this interpretation to Buddhism: “It is the same in the name of Amida Buddha. I encounter the name of the Buddha here and now, ad-vening as eternity from the Pure Land.” The world symbolized by the Pure Land both is “discovered directly underfoot of

the present” and “signifies the opening up of the world in which the *nembutsu* is transmitted historically....this in turn means the realization of the world of all Buddhas praising and reconfirming the name of Amida—a world in which everything mirrors everything else.”<sup>29</sup> Takeuchi mentions that he has synthesized Bultmann and the later Heidegger here; we should also note that he has reconciled Buddhism with Christianity, finding that, in both, truth is realized in history. I do not know whether most scholars of Shin Buddhism will agree with Takeuchi’s interpretations, but I do know that not all theologians agree with Bultmann. Nevertheless, Takeuchi’s book is a profound attempt to reflect on the meaning of history for Buddhism and for Buddhist scholarship. In the end, however, it seems that he presents not a Buddhist notion of history, but rather an existential notion shared by some Buddhist *and* Christian thinkers.

Takeuchi’s tendency to existentialize history, and his implication that history bursts forth “directly underfoot of the present,” reflect the influence of Nishitani Keiji. Nishitani’s reflections on historicity and historical consciousness occur in the two final chapters of his book, *Shūkyō to nani ka* (*What Is Religion?*). In an earlier paper I attempted to summarize his views and to extrapolate from them a kind of “historical consciousness” more appropriate to many Zen *mondo*. Here I can only abbreviate further that already inadequate summary.

Nishitani seeks a sense of history that recognizes the once-and-for-all character (the *Einmaligkeit*) of time and the possibility of truly novel occurrences, and that in this respect is consonant with the viewpoint of modern historiography. But, at the same time, he seeks a sense of history that realizes the absoluteness and incomparability of each moment, and therefore preserves

the religious character of history.<sup>30</sup> The full historicity of history is not captured by a sense of history (1) as terminated by the intrusion of the transhistorical at the end of time (Christianity); (2) as progressing toward the consummate rationalization of human life (the European Enlightenment); (3) as groundless and of unbounded meaninglessness (nihilism); nor (4) as repeated endlessly on the transhistorical ground of “eternal recurrence” (Nietzsche). Rather, the radically historical character of history is realized only on the standpoint of *śūnyatā*, the standpoint of the bottomlessness of the moment.<sup>31</sup> Each individual moment of unending time possesses the very same solemnity that is thought in Christianity to be possessed by the special moments of the creation, fall, redemption and second coming.<sup>32</sup> “In bottomlessly embracing the endless past and endless future, we bring time to fullness of time at each and every moment of time.” Each point of historical time pierces through the field of emptiness.<sup>33</sup>

Nishitani’s reflections give rise to a uniquely Buddhist (or at least Zen) sense of history. Based upon the Buddhist notion of *śūnyatā*, this view points to the con-centration of time in the present moment, and, at the same time, to the infinite openness beneath each present, freeing it to be uniquely itself—but realized only when the actor in history loses his self-centeredness. As profound as these reflections are, however, it is difficult to apply them to the sense of history operative in modern historiography and Buddhology, and thus it is difficult to surmise how they might revolutionize historical methods in the study of Buddhism. Nishitani himself pointed out to me that his reflections were meant to explicate a notion of historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*), not a notion of history as practiced by historians.

I would like to mention one other philosophically oriented attempt to specify a Buddhist sense of history. Aramaki Noritoshi, in his essay “History and Buddhism in Creative Ages”<sup>34</sup>, outlines a general theory of history and illustrates the theory with two examples. He suggests that historical periods can be defined as community-based, as individual-based, or as formed by the complex interaction of these two: the existential-communal and the individual-intersubjective social structures. Buddhism is a religion of this last category. To exemplify his thesis, Aramaki translates a passage, thought to be the Buddha’s words, from the *Attandandasutta* (*Suttanipāta* 935-954) and then a passage from Zen master Hui-ssu 慧思 (515-577), both expressing a deep consciousness of *saṃsāra* and, in the case of Hui-ssu, also of *mappō*. In conclusion, Aramaki states that “creative thinkers such as the Buddha and Hui-ssu experienced their historical and social situations as nihilistic *saṃsāra*, and were thus conditioned by history; and...[yet] transformed their historical and social situations into a cultural *nirvāṇa*, and are thus conditioning history.”<sup>36</sup> Although I do not grasp what “cultural *nirvāṇa*” means here, I think that Aramaki is suggesting that *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are not only notions that arose at a certain time in history, and not only reflected the historical conditions of the time, but actually transformed the conditions of the world. If my understanding is correct, then Aramaki’s suggestions would provide a starting point for a peculiarly Buddhist notion of history. I look forward to seeing how Aramaki’s theory actually conditions the methods of his own historical research.

#### IV. Conclusion: an appeal for further investigation.

I concluded section II of my report by saying that the current search for Buddhist hermeneutics is impeded by a lack of self-reflection; we need to reflect upon our own “hermeneutical strategies” and our own “hermeneutical situation” vis-a-vis the tradition, if we are to identify specifically Buddhist forms of hermeneutics and to do justice to the figures and texts that we investigate. (Of course, it may be said that my emphasis on our present “hermeneutical situation” and on self-reflection is itself a bias of modern Western hermeneutics, and not necessarily a feature of *Buddhist* hermeneutics; but I believe that self-investigation is essential to Buddhist teachings also, and to what might be called a “universal hermeneutics”.) The hermeneutics we investigate is often remote from the hermeneutics we ourselves practice. For example, we no longer apply a *p’an chiao* scheme to our own (historical) classifications of Buddhist scriptures. And although we may employ expedient means in teaching one another, and may call some texts more difficult than others, as objective Buddhologists we do not ordinarily interpret some teachings as inferior and others as superior; *upāya* is not one of our hermeneutical strategies. Further, there are probably no texts which for us are *not* in need of interpretation, which are *nītārtha* as opposed to *neyārtha*. In our present historical hermeneutical situation, we usually do not appropriate the various Buddhist hermeneutics that we discover; what then is their significance for us?

Concomitantly, we may ask why we study history in the first place. Among the many answers offered in past history are these: (1) To learn the truth about

the past—an objective, factual truth. Ranke said, “History cannot judge the past, or instruct the present for the benefit of future ages; it wants only to show what actually happened.” (2) To guide us into a better future. Santayana said, those who are ignorant of history are bound to repeat its mistakes. (3) To enlighten us about our present conditions. The critical study of history exercises the enlightening function of reason, Habermas teaches.

Minoru Kiyota also reflects upon the function of historical study in the article I referred to before. Describing the tasks of modern Buddhology, he calls for more translation of texts (a supremely hermeneutical task), and he upholds the modern emphasis on the importance of historical knowledge, especially of “the socio-cultural basis that led to the origin and subsequent development of Buddhism.” The modern “historical approach to Buddhism no longer allows the mythologization of the historical Buddha and of Buddhist India, and the concomitant dogmatization of Buddhist thought”.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, he writes that it is inadequate to identify Buddhism only within the limits of a 19th-century European rational philosophy. “The pitfall of modern Buddhology—with its emphasis on sheer objectivity—lies in ignoring the hopes and aspirations which the Buddhists throughout their history have derived from the Buddha Dharma, as they themselves have conceived it....the intent of the historical Buddha was not by any means to ignore the historicity of mankind, but to provide the wisdom to cope with the everlasting crisis to which man is subject, and to contribute creatively to world civilization”.<sup>38</sup> What Kiyota intimates, then, is that we study Buddhist history to actualize Buddhist *prajñā*.

I feel that we need to pursue the study of Buddhist history in a way which

is not rationalistic, not apologetical, not sectarian, but also not timorous; we should not hesitate to articulate Buddhist notions of history and their relevance for modern Buddhology. Buddhologists have often been critical of the lack of objectivity in traditional Buddhist histories and chronicles that were composed, in part, to legitimize Buddhism, or a particular Buddhist sect, in the eyes of others. At the same time, many today pursue objectivity in order to legitimize Buddhism, and Buddhist studies, in the world of scholars.

In the world of modern Buddhology, reflection upon methodology is commonplace; but reflection upon what history might have meant for the figures and texts of the past, and upon what it means to us today, is rare. This lack of reflection accompanies that in the search for Buddhist hermeneutics, where scholars have thought about what interpretation meant for various figures and texts, but have not reflected sufficiently upon their own hermeneutical situation and their own schemes of interpretation. I hope that more attention will be given to these problems in the future.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Robert Thurman, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 46,1 (1978) 19-39.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Gregory, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 51,2 (1983) 231-249.

<sup>3</sup> Nathan Katz, *Philosophy East and West* 34,4 (1984) 185-203.

<sup>4</sup> See Gregory's unpublished dissertation, "Tsong-mi's *Inquiry into the Origin of Man: A Study of Chinese Buddhist Hermeneutics*," Harvard University, 1981, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Another investigator of Buddhist hermeneutics, Douglas Daye of Bowling Green State University in Ohio, is skeptical of the *upāya* theory as an adequate strategy to reconcile conflicting doctrines. He develops his critique in “Rational Justification and Buddhist Hermeneutics,” an unpublished book-length manuscript.

<sup>6</sup> Schleiermacher’s scattered writings on hermeneutics have been edited by H. Kimmerle and published as *Hermeneutik, nach den Handschriften neu herausgegeben und eingeleitet* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1959). For critical discussions of philosophical hermeneutics in the Western tradition since Schleiermacher, see John C. Maraldo, *Der hermeneutische Zirkel: Untersuchungen zu Schleiermacher, Dilthey und Heidegger* (Freiburg: Karl Alber, 1974, reprinted 1984); and Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics : Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969).

<sup>7</sup> Dilthey’s expositions on hermeneutics are found throughout his collected works, especially in volume I: *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*; volume V: *Die geistige Welt*, which includes the essay, “Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik”; and volume VII: *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften* (ed. B. Groethuysen, Stuttgart-Goettingen, 1961-66).

<sup>8</sup> Heidegger developed his ontological hermeneutics principally in *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1927, 7th edition 1963). Technically, he speaks not of *Vorverständnis* but of a threefold structure that conditions all understanding: *Vorhabe* (pre-having), *Vorsicht* (foresight), and *Vorriff* (pre-grasp).

<sup>9</sup> *Wahrheit und Methode : Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1960).

<sup>10</sup>See Betti's *Teoria generale della interpretazione* (Milan: Dott. A. Giuffrè, 1955), translated into German as *Allgemeine Auslegungslehre als Methodik der Geisteswissenschaften* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1967); and *Die Hermeneutik als allgemeine Mehtodik der Geisteswissenschaften* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1962).

<sup>11</sup>See especially Ricoeur's *De l'interprétation: essai sur Freud* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1965) and *Le conflit des interprétations* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1969).

<sup>12</sup>For Derrida's "deconstructionist" hermeneutics, see particularly *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1967) and *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967). David Conzens Hoy, *The Critical Circle* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California press, 1978) is a critical discussion of Derrida and other recent developments in philosophical hermeneutics. Foucault's views are developed in, among other works, D.F. Bouchard, ed., *Michel Foucault : Language, Counter-Memory, Practice : Selected Essays and Interviews* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977); for an critical discussion of his entire corpus, see Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault : Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

<sup>13</sup>Thurman, 19.

<sup>14</sup>Minoru Kiyota, "Modern Japanese Buddhology: Its History and Problematics," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 7,1 (1984) 21-22.

<sup>15</sup>歴史の哲学 *Rekishi no tesugaku* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1932) 1.

<sup>16</sup>Cited in Hans Meyerhoff, *The Philosophy of History in Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 1959) 13.

<sup>17</sup>*Über Anfänge der Kirchengeschichtsschreibung* (Basel, 1892), cited in Helwig

Schmidt-Glintzer, *Die Identität der buddhischen Schulen und die Kompilation buddhistischer Universalgeschichten in China* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1982) 3.

<sup>18</sup>Heinz Bechert, *Zum Ursprung der Geschichtsschreibung im indischen Kulturbereich* (Göttingen, 1969) 39ff., 52ff., cited in Schmidt-Glintzer, 2.

<sup>19</sup>Schmidt-Glintzer, 4-5. For a summary of classical Chinese notions of history, see “Philosophy of History,” in Roger T. Ames, *The Art of Rulership: A Study in Ancient Chinese Political Thought* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1983) 1-27.

<sup>20</sup>Yün-hua Jan, *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, 114 (1964) 360-381.

<sup>21</sup>John C. Maraldo, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 12,2 (1985) 141-172.

<sup>22</sup>Delmer M. Brown and Ichirō Ishida, *The Future and the Past: A Translation and Study of the Gukanshō, an interpretive history of Japan written in 1219* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979). See also Brown’s “Early Evolution of Historical Consciousness [in Japan]”, forthcoming.

<sup>23</sup>Brown and Ishida, x.

<sup>24</sup>Brown and Ishida, 10.

<sup>25</sup>Brown and Ishida, 12.

<sup>26</sup>Brown and Ishida, 4-5.

<sup>27</sup>Yoshinori Takeuchi, *The Heart of Buddhism*, translated by James W. Heisig (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 48-60.

<sup>28</sup>Takeuchi, 127-143.

<sup>29</sup>Takeuchi, 141.

<sup>30</sup>Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, translated with an introduction by

Hermeneutics and Historicity

Jan van Bragt (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982) 207-208.

<sup>31</sup>Nishitani, 211-217.

<sup>33</sup>Nishitani, 272.

<sup>34</sup>Nishitani, 181.

<sup>35</sup>Noritoshi Aramaki, *Zen Buddhism Today. Annual Report of the Kyoto Zen Symposium 1* (1983) 56-70.

<sup>36</sup>Aramaki, 70.

<sup>37</sup>Kiyota, 29.

<sup>38</sup>Kiyota, 31.