

# Scholarly Approaches to Buddhism

## A Political Analysis

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### I. Introduction

Considering issues involved in research trends into Buddhism, my mind immediately moved in the directions one might expect. Which texts cry out for translation or retranslation, which historical periods are least understood, which rituals need unfolding, which methods—semiotical, deconstructionist, phenomenological, structural—need to be applied to which cases, and so on? But this is not at all what I'm going to do, and I'm not going to do it for two reasons.

The first reason is that it has been done before, it has been done recently, and it has been done well. At the 1980 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Dallas, an entire panel was dedicated to just this purpose.<sup>1</sup> Professors Prebish, Bond, Gómez and Gimello summoned their collective expertise to present Buddhologists with a detailed and demanding agenda for the next decade, and I quite frankly have nothing to add on these terms.

However, at this panel, excellent as it was, some theoretical questions were raised, questions which force us to examine our own assumptions and prejudices as they relate to the scholarly enterprise of Buddhist studies. This is the second reason I will not do what my respected colleagues did: there are prior issues, more fundamental questions, which must first be discussed.

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\* This paper was first presented at the annual meeting of the New England region of the American Academy of Religion, held at Brown University, Providence, R. I., on April 3, 1981.

<sup>1</sup> "Buddhist Studies in the 1980s" (a panel composed of Charles S. Prebish, chair, George D. Bond, Luis O. Gómez, and Robert Gimello) as listed in the *Program of the Annual Meeting, 1980, AAR-SBL*, nos. A409–A412, p. 76.

Most of us in Buddhist studies, as much as we appreciate what our colleagues in the field are doing, have a vague feeling that we are not taken seriously enough by colleagues in the disciplines of religious studies, philosophy, psychology, and so on. To us, our texts are of the greatest intellectual significance; yet our colleagues don't seem to see it this way. Today I will discuss how and why this is the case. I'm afraid that a good deal of the fault is ours. I will argue that at the root of the problem is how we define ourselves and our discipline, and that we contribute to and help to maintain this trivialization of materials which are not at all trivial.

## II. Buddhism as the "Other"

In order to illustrate the point I am about to make, I would ask you to free associate with the word "Asia." Which adjectives come to mind when one hears this word? I tried this with my students at Williams, and the adjectives that came up, not untypically, were "mysterious," "backward," "motherly," "traditional" or "unchanging," "mystical," "passive," "pessimistic" or "fatalistic," and so on.

These terms serve to indicate the parameters of a "discourse," in Michel Foucault's sense of the term. I shall argue that this discourse cannot be dismissed as a simple, popular misconception: rather, it is a discourse in part established and maintained by scholars of Asia, we Buddhologists included.

Immediately apparent is that this Asia discourse bears striking resemblances to sexist discourse: that is, what westerners say about Asia is disturbingly close to what men say about women. As with sexist discourse, this Asia discourse contains romanticizing as well as disparaging units, and such a discourse is made up of dialectical pairs which at one and the same time tend towards romanticizing and derogating. Just this phenomenon has demanded the attention of feminist thinkers as well. In that context it is called the "pedestal effect." Men evidence a strong ambivalence about women by discourse that does not merely demean, but also idealizes. This idealization serves the purpose of avoiding genuine encounter with the other. To be in dialogue with the other, as Buber tells us, means to encounter them as persons and not as projections.<sup>2</sup> Our Asia discourse, then, is a system of projections, both romanticizing and derogating, but all trivializing. The net effect of this discourse is to mitigate against both encounter and understanding.

This discourse establishes and reveals a structure. Through this structure, Asia in general and Buddhism in particular are seen as passive, as mysterious,

<sup>2</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Scribners, 1970), p. 59.

and in need of the activity of revealing and interpreting. Historically, the scholar of Asia has seen his task as representing his object of study to the west. This process of re-presenting entails that Asia or Buddhism is something mute which becomes vocalized by and through our re-presentations, our Asia discourse, which Edward Said aptly labels "orientalism."<sup>3</sup>

Orientalism is a discourse; we orientalize Asia. We make it into something alien, both from ourselves and from itself, largely by our false dichotomization of our planet into an "east" and a "west" and, as we all know, "never the twain shall meet." Our knowledge of Asia, then, follows an epistemological structure of activism and passivity; we scholars are the active re-presenters of a passive tradition.

This epistemological structure, Said goes on to tell us, follows a political one: the experience of imperialism. This activism/passivity structure did and could only arise in the context of European empire building. The intellectual structure itself reflects and maintains socio-political structures. We all believe that Buddhism has contributed vastly to human thought; but these contributions are clouded over by a pernicious orientalist-imperialist epistemology which, once assumed, insidiously perpetuates itself in both popular and scholarly re-presentations of Asia. The orientalist approach trivializes Asia by romanticizing it or by objectifying it into irreducible "facts," prohibiting any genuine intercultural dialogue.<sup>4</sup> As Said writes, "Orientalism [is] . . . a western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."<sup>5</sup>

What this implies are the views that, on the one hand, hold Asia to be the source of all wisdom which we "merely translate" and must uncritically accept, the devotee position; or, on the other hand, that Asia is backward, inferior or underdeveloped such that it couldn't possibly address genuine issues of concern to the west, the view of the area specialist and imperial agent. Both notions treat Asia as passive and see the scholar, be s/he devotee or specialist, as the public's only access to a world otherwise mute. Thus the basic epistemological and political structure of orientalism, of activism/passivity, is artificially reinforced and maintained.

This is the context in which we must view our common endeavor of Buddhist studies. Ultimately we must work to rid ourselves of this structure, which is

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<sup>3</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> Herbert Marcuse argues that a reliance upon "facts" or "objectivity" is a pernicious attitude which invites fascism, since "facts" have no meaning apart from the context in which they are understood. See Paul A. Robinson, *The Freudian Left: Wilhelm Reich, Geza Roheim, and Herbert Marcuse* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1969), p. 167.

<sup>5</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 3.

predicated upon the belief in an Asian or Buddhist "way of thinking," inscrutable to the western mind.

### III. Imperialism and Buddhist Studies

To return to the question I posed earlier: Why don't our colleagues in other disciplines take our materials as seriously as they deserve? Let me attempt an answer by discussing the context in which we understand a text, for example, Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*.

Let's ask ourselves: What are we really studying when we study the *MMK*? For some of us, we're studying the "true meaning" of the early Buddhist tradition. We all know this is the claim the *MMK* makes about itself. Yet how satisfied can we remain with such a normative and uncritical view of our materials? Another possible answer is that we are studying a Buddhist text of the first or second century CE, something of historical importance to the Buddhist tradition, which comes down to saying that we are studying "Buddhism." What I'd like to offer is that we're doing none of the above. What we're doing is studying the nature of language. What Nāgārjuna writes about is not simply of historical import, but he tries to explain and describe the very structures of human thinking and speaking.

Thus, to understand the text is to squarely confront our hermeneutical situation. Hans-Georg Gadamer tells us that to understand a text, we must understand "the fundamental concern that motivates the text—the question that it seeks to answer and that it imposes again and again to its interpreters."<sup>6</sup> Thus what we do as scholars of Buddhism is to enter into the gestalt of issues which consume the authors of our texts. What we do is philosophy, psychology, literature, hermeneutics or poetics. What we *don't* do is "Buddhism." I'm suggesting that our endeavor needs to be understood in terms of disciplines, not in terms of geography, or that artificial construct we evoke by the word "Buddhism." That, too, may be a discourse in a very pernicious form.<sup>7</sup>

With such an understanding of our work, we enter into dialogue with both our texts and our colleagues. What's being suggested is that our materials aren't taken seriously because we don't take them seriously. As long as we artificially bifurcate our world into "east" and "west," as long as we systematically avoid the very dense, issue-oriented world of the authors of our texts, we serve, by trivialization, the discourse of orientalism.

<sup>6</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. xxi.

<sup>7</sup> I think this might be what's suggested by Wilfred Cantwell Smith in *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

#### IV. Implications and Recommendations

What does all of this recommend for our common endeavor of Buddhist studies? The first thing these ideas tell us is that we need to be aware of the context in which we do our work. We live in a world pervaded by orientalism, which is a form of racism. One need only look at the structures of our colleges and universities, the organization of our professional groups, to find this pernicious orientalism. A typical American college department of religious studies, if such a thing could be said to exist, might be comprised of five members: perhaps three in Christianity, one in Judaics, and one in "Asian religions," another name for "the other." One feature of orientalism is that it imposes a sense of sameness onto Asia, an attitude clearly reflected by departmental structures. Since Asia is thought of as monolithic, many of us are left with teaching responsibilities subsuming this artificial whole. One need only glance through the book review section of our professional journal, the *JAAR*, to get a sense of what is considered important to the field, and what is important certainly is not serious work in Buddhism or Hinduism. While there's not much we can do about these things, we can at least be aware of our matrix. We can also seek to inform our colleagues about the richness and pluralism of Asia through our work.

Our work, therefore, should be less categorical and more specific. We cannot accept this discourse of sameness, so we must be very clear about the parameters and limits of our studies in historical, textual, and conceptual terms. Moreover, we need more issue-orientation in our scholarship. What I am advocating are comparative studies in a double sense.

The first sense is obvious: explicit comparisons of how issues of concern are treated by Buddhist and non-Buddhist authors. But even more important is the way in which we go about translating our texts, which is perhaps the primary arena of our work.

Our translations should be informed by the disciplinary questions which our texts raise. This is to say that a new translation of the *MMK* would probably need to be informed by the discourse known in the west as language analysis, for example.<sup>8</sup> If we are translating a tantric text about mind, then we need various psychological vocabularies. If we're working on Dignāga, then we should be seeking our vocabulary from western logical and epistemological disciplines.

One proposal is that we should be translating Sanskrit or Tibetan texts into good, everyday English, letting the text speak for itself. I find this alternative

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<sup>8</sup> This is an important feature of the excellent translation by Mervyn Sprung in *Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way: The Essential Chapters from the Prasannapadā of Candrakīrti* (Boulder: Prajna Press, 1979).

utterly specious; one reason is that these texts were not written in everyday Sanskrit or Tibetan in the first place, but rather were written in highly articulate, philosophic and technical idioms. How could we, then, claim to be in the business of translating unless we employ analogous vocabularies? There is no one English, just as there is no one Sanskrit or Tibetan. Rather, there are many "language games" within a language, and the first task of the translator is one of matching up appropriate discourses. Any English we might use for translating is loaded; there is no obvious, naive choice. Therefore, however we translate, we are re-presenting the text. This is not a weakness, but the very starting point of our dialogue with the text. "The familiar horizons of the interpreter's world," Gadamer writes, "though perhaps more difficult to grasp thematically, are integral a part of the event of understanding as are the explicit procedures by which he assimilates the alien object."<sup>9</sup> We need no apologies, we need honesty. The process of understanding the text entails a self-understanding, even if this is only an understanding of one's conceptual, political, and historical matrices. What we do is interpret, not merely translate, and what we need is to incorporate into our studies this reflexive aspect of interpretation.

With such informed translations, textual studies, and conceptual analyses, by the very fact of our intellectual honesty, we may arrive at a response to our initial question. Taking our texts seriously entails taking our world seriously, and it is only by virtue of such seriousness that our work may begin to reach the world co-inhabited by our colleagues.

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<sup>9</sup> Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. xii.