BUDDHIST THEORIES OF INTERPRETATION

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Buddhist teachers, like their counterparts in other traditions, have always been engaged in the process of interpretation of that message which they had received, in the effort to clarify and understand it for themselves and to transmit the teachings, the Dharma, to others. Some of these teachers have devoted attention to the process of interpretation itself and have expressly discussed the principles designed to elucidate the authentic meanings of the text. In recent times several students of Buddhism who write in English have set forth to examine the principles of Buddhist hermeneutics, both by translations and descriptions of the Buddhist texts in which this is the subject of reflection, and by descriptions and discussions of the Budhist theories, explicit and implied, revealed by the way Buddhist teachers handle the material they interpret. Since about 1978 a number of significant articles have appeared which so describe and discuss Buddhist hermeneutics. These articles have been conceived primarily as contributions to Buddhism studies, but some of them draw attention to general principles and suggest insights with respect to traditions other than Buddhist. The purpose of this essay is primarily to survey this literature in Buddhist hermeneutics on behalf of an audience more broadly concerned and less highly specialized, and to reflect on the lessons to be learned from Buddhist theories of interpretation.

The most basic of these recent studies is probably Robert A. F. Thurman's article, "Buddhist Hermeneutics," published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (Vol. XLI, No. 1, March 1978). One of the things Thurman points out is that there is a classical tradition in Buddhist philosophical reflection which has centered on the rational interpretation of the authoritative text. It is important to note that "text" and "reason" may play somewhat different roles in the Buddhist from those which they play in other religious traditions. In all Buddhist traditions *wisdom* is the goal of *practice,* and text is supposed to serve reason and experience toward the achievement of wisdom. Text testifies to an experience in order to evoke it anew, not in order to define the truth. This means that the role of text is as a part of method, not a body of authority. Thurman says, "It should not be surprising therefore that hermeneutics, the science of interpretation of sacred doctrine, should be central in the methodology of enlightenment, the unvarying goal, though variously defined, of all the Buddhist traditions."[1]

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[1] Thurman, Robert, "Buddhist Hermeneutics," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion,* XLI, 1 (March 1978), p. 20.

In addition to the fact that the sacred text serves more as method, or stimulus, or occasion than as absolute authority, it is also the case that the words of the text, especially the more essential and technical ones, are multivalent and ambiguous. Edward Conze clarifies this when he points out that some ambiguous terms were preserved for use in more complex philosophical discussions because they had the sanctity of having been uttered by Lord Buddha himself, and their replacement would be an act of impiety. Further the most sacred doctrinal meanings are disclosed not in routine philosophical argument, but in a state of religious exaltation and in and for a community "of like-minded people, who at least in theory were more brethren than rivals, who had the same training, never ceased to agree on fundamentals, and who understood one another's mental processes....It is when the message had to be conveyed to outsiders that precise 'definitions,' semantic distinctions and so on, became necessary. A soteriological doctrine like Buddhism becomes a 'philosophy' when its intellectual content is explained to outsiders."[2] Explanation to outsiders, whether derived primarily from evangelical and propagandistic impulses or from the curiosity of the outsiders, is apt to generate a problem of interpretation. Outsiders do not necessarily share the meanings, feelings and assumptions that have shaped the vocabulary of explanation, and so they necessarily seem unexpectedly dense and difficult, even when they are openly curious, sincere, and sympathetic. Interpretation to outsiders was not the only hermeneutical problem for Buddhists, however. In answering the question concerning the need for a Buddhist hermeneutical tradition, Thurman develops the setting this way:

> Imagine for a moment that Jesus taught for about fifty years, to close disciples numbered in the thousands; that his pedagogical aim and skill were such that he formulated his doctrines to resonate precisely with the abilities and inclinations of each disciple; that, while recommending devotionalism to many, he taught others to rely on the intellect, and still others to rely on works motivated by love and compassion; that he constantly demanded critical reflection on the deeper meaning of his teachings; that he sometimes even provided conceptual schemes with which to interpret his own doctrines, which schemes sometimes included dismissal of the ultimate validity of a teaching he had previously set forth unequivocally; that it sometimes happened that two such schemes referred each to the other as merely conditional, valid only in that other context; and that in spite of these apparent contradictions he had to be accepted as supreme authority, incapable of self-contradiction; and finally that different groups of his disciples preserved traditional records of his promulgations in different places, some not even

[2] Conze, Edward, *Buddhist Thought in India,* (University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, 1967, original in 1962), p. 28.

knowing of the existence of the others during certain periods during and after the Teacher's lifetime. It is easy to see that all this would result in the situation for later generations in which a bewildering profusion of doctrines, all embedded in hallowed scriptural traditions, is presented as uniformly authentic.[3]

In the light of this, the need for "principles of interpretation" is more than obvious even without consideration of the diversity of cultures and the unforseen philosophical contests into which Buddhism has entered in more than 2,500 years of subsequent development of the movement.

For cutting through to the principles of interpretation which the Buddhists ultimately evolved, I know of no analysis more straightforward, clear and helpful than Thurman's description of the "Four Reliances" as developed by the Tibetian Buddhist philosopher, Tsong Khapa, in his *Essence of the Eloquent,* written in 1407 C.E. I paraphrase the key insights from Thurman's description, but provide my own illustrations.

1. Rely on the Teaching, Not the Teacher

A Buddha is a personification of the full possession of the truth. This truth itself must be contemplated, made the governing awareness of the individual. Motivated by compassion a Buddha may assist by turning persons in the direction of truth. Understanding the truth is not a dogmatic possession which is his to give away, but is the essential nature of all those who are truly awake. A possible illustration for a Buddha is that of a coach, who inspires, illustrates, motivates, explains, suggests many things in order to evoke the development of appropriate skills or responses from the athlete. The coach does not give the athlete a new skill. He enables one to find ones own. The authority of the teacher is designed as a strategy, or preliminary to draw attention to, not to justify, the teachings. Thurman concluded:

> In sum the first Reliance alerts us to the fact that the Buddha's Dharma claims to stand on its own philosophical cogency, not requiring a personal authoritarianism for its legitimation. We are reminded of the famous goldsmith verse: 'O Monks—Sages, accept my teachings after a thorough examination and not from (mere) devotion, just like a goldsmith accepts gold only after burning, cutting and polishing.[4]

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[3] Thurman, p. 22

[4] Thurman, pp. 24-25.

2. Rely on the Meaning, Not the Letter

The essence of Buddhist teachings lies in their practice, not in their coherence in a philosophical system. Wisdom is practical awareness and is not anti-rational. This practical orientation, combined with respect for reason, has always pervaded Buddhist intentions. Tsong Khapa makes it a principle of authentic interpretation.

3. Rely on the Definitive Meaning, Not Interpretable Meaning

In case of apparent differences, what determines the true meaning? Here we clearly encounter a developing hermeneutical tradition in Buddhist history. "Definitive Meaning" (*nītārtha*)—meaning acceptable as literally expressed, and "Interpretable Meaning" (*neyārtha*)—meaning acceptable after interpretation, are western translations of the early Buddhist categories for developing this point. In the simplest form this can be contrasted as explicit (literal) vs. implicit (indirect, hinted, metaphorical) meaning. But this distinction may be extended, and teachings once thought to have been literal later are treated as more indirect than they had appeared. Although this principle is widely acknowledged, in practice it often turns out that the definitive teachings are those characteristic of and essential to the text (or sect) in which they occur, while "interpretable meanings" are all predecessors, introductions, or alternative views or texts. For this principle a great watershed in Buddhism occurred when the two-fold theory of truth (relative and absolute) appeared in the Mahayana. All *discourse about the relative* then becomes interpretable, but that concerning the absolute is direct. Since the absolute is emptiness, desirelessness, birthlessness, deathlessness, etc. great freedom is available for dealing with the tradition. All the Buddha's teaching (except the affirmation of Emptiness) are part of the relative and interpretable past. They are not false (unless absolutized) but they are preliminary, relative, instructive and useful, not *nītārtha*, translucent.[5]

4. Rely on (Non-Conceptual) Wisdom, Not on (Dualistic) Consciousness

For Buddhists of any school the success of interpretation is enlightenment. In Thurman's account, "Thus, even though one has reached a profound intellectual knowledge of the definitive meaning of the Scriptures, one must go on cultivating this knowledge until it permeates one's deeper layers of consciousness.... Reason is pushed to its utmost and held there by the cultivated power of concentration."[6]

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[5] Thurman, pp. 25-34

[6] Thurman, p. 35

Tsong Khapa, in the early 15th Century, developed a series of interrelated principles of interpretation which account for the apparent inconsistencies in the teachings of the Buddha and offer a base for a coherent interpretation grounded in the Absolute of the Doctrine of Emptiness. Meanwhile, however, Buddhism had also gone to China and had developed distinctive forms there which needed to see themselves as justified by the authentic teaching of the Buddha properly interpreted.

Chinese Traditions of Interpretation

By following the line of argument developed primarily by Tsong Khapa we have given place to one of the powerful Indo-Tibetian Buddhist traditions (technically the Prāsangika Mādhyamika School) which finds its ultimate in negation, the affirmation of Emptiness (*Śūnyatā*). A look at Chinese Buddhism however makes us clearly aware that there have been other principles of Buddhist interpretation with a stronger accent on the positive. The ground which Thurman had noted, that there is in Buddhism much room for difference in interpretation and potential for confusion and misunderstanding, is even stronger in the Chinese case. Buddhism was brought to China in bits and pieces, but always with texts. The order was haphazard. Later texts such as the Prajñapāramitā and esoteric meditation texts were some of the first to be translated into Chinese. Earlier foundational works were brought to China later and were relegated to inferior status by some. Some Taoists were especially attracted to the paradoxical esotericism of texts extolling emptiness, but the prevailing Chinese tendency seems to have been for the more positive teachings, books which teach something rather than nothing as the highest wisdom.

All Mahayana reinterpretations of the hermeneutical process are grounded in the doctrine of Skill-in-Means (*upāya*). This doctrine, extolled in such familiar Mahayana accounts as the Parables of the Burning House and of the Prodigal Son in the Lotus Sutra, and in many other places, accounts for apparent changes or contradictions in the teachings as the adaptation by the Buddha of his teachings to the skills and context of his hearers, leaving teachings for each of the historical epocs which would succeed him. His skill implies a philosophy of history as changing and an awareness of its changing needs with respect to his message of relief and fulfillment. Teachings valid for one circumstance would be replaced by teachings valid for a very different one. Each generation's understanding of the Buddha had been correct in its own time—but would be inappropriate if maintained unresponsive when times have changed. This confidence in the Buddha's skill allowed for emerging theories of interpretation suitable to the succeeding eras.

A paper, "Chinese Buddhist Hermeneutics: The Case of Hua Yen," read

by Dr. Peter N. Gregory, Stanford University, before the American Academy of Religion (1981) does much to clarify the Chinese approach in general and the Hua Yen tradition in particular. For some Chinese the answer to the opportunity opened by the doctrine of Skill-in-Means was found in a doctrine called the *tathāgatagarbha,* 'the matrix from which come enlightened ones.' A principal textual source of this doctrine is in the Srimālā Sūtra. Apparently at one time there were at least three principal Mahayana schools in India—the Mādhyamika (the negationists), the Yogācāra (the idealists), and the Tahtāgatagarbha (the inclusivists). The former two continued to thrive in the Indo-Tibetian and the Chinese traditions while the latter school survives only in China, primarily in the Hua-yen (Flower Garland) School.[7]

From the standpoint of theories of interpretation the issue may be stated quite briefly. What is needed to develop a correct interpretation is to distinguish between the ultimate (*nītārtha*) and the provisional (*neyārtha*) teachings. The Mahayana philosophers, especially Nagarjuna, had shown that this ultimate teaching was the Teaching of Emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Everything else was provisional. Such negativity struck sharply at Chinese social and intellectual assumptions. The practical and the positive have had high value in the historically dominant systems of Chinese thought. In the Tathāgatagarbha Doctrine those Chinese with a penchant for the positive found a useful basis. To over-simplify, the Tathagata Doctrine justifies the Teaching of Emptiness because the Buddha (Tathāgata) is empty of all *inauspicious* qualities and views. He is entirely free from suffering, impermanence, ego, attachment or defilements. But on the other hand, this teaching of Emptiness does not do justice to his excellent and *auspicious* qualities. The Tathāgatagarbha Doctrine reflects both of these aspects. In the Srimala Sutra (*The Lion's Roar of Queen Srimālā*) it says:

> "Lord, the knowledge of the tathagatagarbha is the voidness knowledge of the tathāgatas....The voidness knowledge of the tathāgatagarbha is of two kinds. The two are as follows.
>
> "Lord the tathāgatagarbha is void of all the defilement stores, which are discrete, and knowing as not liberated.
>
> "Lord, the tathāgatagarbha is not void of the Buddha *dharmas* which are nondiscrete, inconceivable, more numerous than the sands of the Ganges, and knowing as liberated."[8]

Eventually this kind of view was held to supersede the Prajñāparamitā Sutras and the Mādhyamika treatises in which the Emptiness Doctrine was

[7] Gregory, Peter N., "Chinese Buddhist Hermeneutics: The Case of Hua-Yen," paper presented at the AAR Annual Meeting, San Francisco, 1981, forthcoming in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion.*

[8] Wayman, Alex and Hideko Wayman, *The Lion's Roar of Queen Srimala,* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1974), p. 99.

ultimate. This established a principle of interpretation which came to be vital in several forms of both Chinese and Japanese Buddhism. What was still needed to produce a dialectical theory of interpretation was to put the history of these views (and the characteristic emphasis of each) into perspective.

The initial teachings of the Buddha, as carried in the Hinayana (Theravada) Tradition destroys belief in a self-subsisting ego (*ātman*, self), but affirms the reality of the elements of existence (*dharmas*). It was superseded by the Elementary Mahayana Teachings in which the belief in the reality of the elements of existence is refuted by the Doctrine of Emptiness in both the Mādhyamika and Yogācāra versions. Finally, the Elementary Teachings give way to the Advanced Mahayana, exemplified by the Tathāgatagarbha Doctrine, articulated in the Srimālā Sūtra, the Awakening of Faith, and elsewhere, which teaches the interfusion of the denial of the dharmas and affirmation of the auspicious qualities of the Buddha.[9] In the specific versions of Chih-yen and Fa-tsang (7th century) these three stages were followed by two others, namely, the Sudden Teaching, beyond language, illustrated by Vimalakirti's "Resounding Silence," and fifth and finally, the "Perfect Teaching" or "Round Doctrine" of the Hua-yen School and its Sutra.[10]

There are some unresolved problems with this scheme, and it was revised and improved by Tsung-mi and others with the intent of disclosing a consistent dialectical development of the following sort:

1. Negation of ego—affirmation of dharmas (Hinayana)
2. Negations of dharmas (Nirvana as Freedom) Mādhyamika (Elementary Mahayana)
3. Affirmation of Enlightenment (Nirvana as tranquility, illumination) Tathāgatagarbha Doctrine.

This culminates of course in the Perfect (Hua-yen) Doctrine.[11] The larger culmination of this procedure of arranging interpretive principles dialectically or at least historically, does not come so much from China as from Japan.

The Japanese Interpretations of Kukai

Surely one of the most convenient sources for a summary statement of the interpretative process in Buddhism is in the works of the Japanese monk, founder of the Shingon School, Kukai (posthumously known as Kobo Daishi, 774-835). The estimate of his significance in Japan is given in a single sentence by the historian George Sansom. "His memory lives all over the country, his

[9] Gregory, pp. 12-13
[10] Gregory, p. 13
[11] Gregory, pp. 15-19

name is a household word in the remotest places, not only as a saint, but as a preacher, a scholar, a poet, a sculptor, a painter, an inventor, an explorer, and—sure passport to fame—a great calligrapher."[12]

In both long and closely argued text and in prief poetic statement, Kukai asks and answers his question. His poem introduces the problem:

> From the deep, dim, most distant past,
> A thousand thousand tomes we hold
> Of sacred texts and learned lore.
> Profound, abstruse, obscure and dark,
> Teachings diverse and manifold—
> Who can encompass such a store?[13]

Then, following the pattern already traced, he follows his first question with another which shows that he presumes that the Buddha himself has authorized the many versions or stages of his teaching.

> How could the Great Enlightened One, feeling a fatherly compassion for all sentient beings and seeing the misery of their existence, silently let it pass? It was for this reason indeed that he provided *many sorts of remedies* to guide them in their perplexities.[14]

Kukai then sets forth ten successive stages in which the remedies are prescribed.[15] The first of the teachers of the truth is the continual misery of life itself, which inclines us to look for help. Religious consciousness emerges with awareness of our sick aimlessness. This first lesson, learned from nature itself, is succeeded by the teachers who commend cultivation of virtues and promotion of the social order (by which, of course, Kukai means Confucianism). This elementary social control must then be followed by cultivation of mental discipline toward the attainment of persistent happiness (which he sees as Taoism, but Yoga in India could also be seen as an example). The fourth stage of consciousness emerges with the awareness of the unreality of the Self and the cultivation of supernormal powers (Hinayana Buddhism). The fifth arises with the contemplation of the impermanence and ego-lessness of all things and the starving-out of the seeds of karma (Advanced Hinayana, Preteyaka Vehicle Buddhism). The sixth stage comes forth with the sense of unlimited compassion for others and the overcoming of the impediments to wisdom (Early

[12] Quoted by William T. De Bary, ed., in *Sources of Japanese Tradition,* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1958), p. 133.

[13] Kukai, "Precious Key to the Secret Treasury," translated in *Sources of Japanese Tradition,* p. 146.

[14] *Sources,* p. 147

[15] *Sources,* pp. 147-150

and Yogacara Mahayana). Negation and Emptiness, practiced as disciplines of concentration form the seventh stage (Madhyamika, Sanron). The eighth stage turns from the negative toward the positive, following the Chinese model. Kukai says:

> That which, by realizing the absolute and universal way in one's primal nature, causes the Bodhisattva of Mercy, Kannon, to smile with delight. (The Tendai School of Kukai's compatriot and competitor, Saicho)[16]

The ninth stage is the Japanese version of the Hua-yen School we have already described (Kegon School in Japan). It arises with the embracing of cosmic existence in the first awakening of religious consciousness, depicted by the "Smile of the Bodhisattva Fugen." Kukai describes the tenth and final stage as follows:

> By these teachings the dust and stains of the world are cleansed away, revealing the splendor and solemnity of the World of the Mandalas. As the performer of the Mantra meditates on the syllables *Ma* and *Ta* the Buddha's nature shines forth and dispels the darkness of ignorance. In the lasting light of sun and moon appear the Bodhisattvas of Wisdom, while the Five Buddhas reign supreme, each making his characteristic sign of the hand.[17]

This final stage of consciousness is, of course, Kukai's own school, the Shingon Sect. One can see an obvious historical sequence in this account, but I cannot make out a coherent dialectical development in his arrangement. The conclusion is not in doubt, however. *Everything* teaches us, moves us ahead in the universal evolution of Buddhahood. But only the true and final interpretation teaches us everything, subsumes the rest and fulfills them all. By bringing Confucius and Lao Tzu into the circle of Buddha-approved teachers—even though at relatively elementary levels—Kukai has opened a new principle of interpretation, an awareness of the value in other messages. It does not surprise us that each of these teachers should find the culmination and fulfillment of interpretation in his own sect or school. What may surprise us was the increasingly clear necessity each of them felt to find some positive values in the teachings of their predecessors, within and finally even outside of their own tradition. In India, Tibet, China and Japan, more than a thousand years ago, there were scholar/saints seeking to hear the word of their own Great Teacher

[16] *Sources,* p. 148

[17] *Sources,* p. 149

in the words and impact of adversaries, predecessors and rivals. Finding the "definitive" meaning amid all the relative and interpretable teachings turns out to be a continuing vital quest. Perhaps other interpreters can join in a more global effort to find ways to hear the word of their teachers in the words of the Buddhists.