



Edited by STEVEN M. EMMANUEL

BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY

A COMPARATIVE APPROACH

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Buddhist Philosophy

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A Comparative Approach

Edited by Steven M. Emmanuel

*Virginia Wesleyan College
VA, USA*

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English translations of Pāli discourses that are essential for the study of early Buddhist philosophy. He has also published articles on early Buddhist epistemology, ethics, and social theory, including “A Survey of Early Buddhist Epistemology,” in *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, edited by Steven M. Emmanuel (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013). His research focus is on comparative philosophy, specifically comparing early Buddhism and classical American pragmatism with the aim of developing a naturalistic theory of aesthetics and religious meaning.

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Finally, I would like to express my deep gratitude to the contributors for generously lending their scholarly expertise to this project.

Abbreviations

Bibliographical

- AN *Aṅguttara Nikāya: The Book of the Gradual Sayings*. Trans. F.L. Woodward and E.M. Hare. 5 vols. London: Pali Text Society, 1932–36; *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*. Trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi. Boston: Wisdom, 2012.
- DN *Dīgha Nikāya: Dialogues of the Buddha*. Trans. T.W. Rhys Davids and C.A.F. Rhys Davids. 3 vols. London: Pali Text Society, 1899–1921; *Long Discourses of the Buddha*. Trans. M. Walshe. Second rev. edn. Boston: Wisdom, 1996.
- MN *Majjhima Nikāya: The Collection of the Middle Length Sayings*. Trans. I.B. Horner. 3 vols. London: Pali Text Society, 1954–59; *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*. Trans. Bhikku Ñāṇamoli and Bhikku Bodhi. Boston: Wisdom, 1995.
- MN-a *Majjhima Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā (Papañcasūdanī)*. Commentary on MN.
- SN *Samyutta Nikāya: The Book of the Kindred Sayings*. Trans. C.A.F. Rhys Davids and F.L. Woodward. London: Pali Text Society, 1917–30; *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*. Trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi. Boston: Wisdom, 2005.
- Sn *Sutta-nipāta: The Group of Discourses*. Trans. K.R. Norman. Second edn. London: Pali Text Society, 2001.

General

- Ch. Chinese
 Eng. English
 Gk. Greek
 Jp. Japanese
 K. Korean
 Skt. Sanskrit
 Tb. Tibetan

Editor's Introduction

Steven M. Emmanuel

In 1906, William DeWitt Hyde, then president of Bowdoin College, penned the words to “The Offer of the College,” his inspiring statement of the value of a liberal education. Chief among the benefits he cited was the promise of becoming a citizen of the world – or as Hyde more elegantly put it, the ability to “be at home in all lands and all ages; ...to carry the keys of the world’s library in your pocket, and feel its resources behind you in whatever task you undertake” (Hyde 1906, 3). In retrospect, one would have to say that the claim to global literacy was something of an overstatement. For the students of Bowdoin’s class of 1906, the world’s library did not extend beyond the classics of the Western tradition. In the philosophy department, for instance, where Hyde served as a faculty member, the curriculum was comprised mainly of courses in psychology (“treated from the point of view of natural science”), introduction to philosophy (being a survey of the familiar “problems” and their proposed “solutions”), history of philosophy (focused on the formation of “the occidental mind”), and ethics (organized around the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Mill, and Spencer).¹

While the curricula of American universities and colleges would, over the course of the twentieth century, gradually expand to include the study of non-Western civilizations, academic philosophy would remain notably resistant to recognizing the contributions made to its subject matter by other cultures. Indeed, the curriculum taught by Hyde in 1906 was not very different from what we would find in many philosophy departments today, especially in the way it approached the study of mind from “the point of view of natural science.” The insularity of the profession is reflected in the “American Philosophical Association Statement on the Philosophy Major,” which explicitly aligns the discipline with “an intellectual and historical tradition that began some 2,500 years ago in the Greek culture of the eastern Mediterranean region.”² Although the statement does acknowledge the existence of “similar developments” in other cultures, it goes on to define the scope of the discipline by reference to

the prominent figures and texts of the Western canon. Even in the association's statement regarding the "global character" of philosophy – where one might have expected to find a robust call for greater diversity in the curriculum – the reader is merely cautioned that "[t]erms such as 'History of Philosophy,' 'Ancient Philosophy,' and even 'the Classics' are ambiguous" and can easily give rise to confusion, "as when a specialist in the history of Chinese philosophy applies for a job advertised as 'history of philosophy,' in the expectation that his or her specialization is among those sought; usually such expectations will be disappointed."³

Despite the narrow Eurocentric focus of the profession, interest in Asian philosophy has risen steadily in recent decades. This research has been supported mainly by independent societies and a handful of peer-reviewed journals dedicated to publishing articles in area and comparative studies. We have also seen a noticeable increase in the number of titles on Asian philosophy coming from the most highly respected academic presses. Yet, philosophy departments have been slow to reflect these developments in their course offerings. Even at some of the nation's most prominent institutions, which have large, well-staffed philosophy programs,⁴ students who wish to become acquainted with Eastern thought must look for opportunities in other departments. When Asian philosophy courses do appear, they are often limited to a single general survey. These courses vary in scope, from presentations of major themes in classical Chinese philosophy or Buddhist thought, to sweeping overviews of the philosophical traditions of South and East Asia. Needless to say, the sheer breadth of such courses does not allow for a very detailed treatment of the material, let alone a substantive engagement with the diversity it represents.

The tendency to treat Western philosophy as though it were coextensive with the history of the subject is not a harmless conceit. For one thing, it fails to appreciate the fact that philosophy is a universal human activity, and that the Western tradition is but one strand of thinking about questions that have pre-occupied human beings for millennia. It suggests, moreover, an artificial and misleading picture of the history and transmission of ideas – one that fails to acknowledge the extent to which the philosophical traditions of every culture have been shaped by their interactions with others. As Justin E.H. Smith observed in a *New York Times* piece on "Philosophy's Western Bias," what we call the "Western" tradition of philosophy is "in the end only a historiographical artifact, a result of our habit of beginning our histories when and where we do, for there was always influence from neighboring civilizations" (Smith 2012). One pertinent example of this influence is the crucial role that scholars in the Islamic world played in preserving, interpreting, and transmitting the ideas of ancient Greek philosophers to medieval Europe.⁵ Smith's observation is not intended to diminish the value of the Western tradition, but rather to remind us that its richness "has always been a result of its place as a node in a global

network through which ideas and things are always flowing. This was true in 500 B.C. and is no less true today" (Smith 2012).

There is a certain irony in the fact that globalization was already creating vibrant and diverse intellectual cultures throughout the pre-modern world – not least among these the ancient Greco-Buddhist and medieval Islamic civilizations that flourished in Central Asia⁶ – and yet, in the present age of unprecedented global interconnectedness, we manage to proceed as though the philosophical traditions of half the world did not exist. This irony is not lost on Smith, who concludes his editorial with an admonition:

Western academic philosophy will likely come to appear utterly parochial in the coming years if it does not find a way to approach non-Western traditions that is much more rigorous and respectful than the tokenism that reigns at present.

(Smith 2012)

Accomplishing this goal will not be easy. First and foremost, it will mean committing ourselves to a philosophical pluralism that not only welcomes non-Western voices into the conversation but also engages them on their own terms. Further, it will mean fostering the kind of intellectual humility exhibited in Philip L. Quinn's acknowledgment that we "have much to learn about and from the philosophical theology of medieval Islam, Indian logic and metaphysics, Buddhist philosophy of mind and language, Confucian and Taoist ethics and social philosophy, Zen spirituality and other non-Western traditions" (Quinn 1996, 172).⁷

Progress toward a globalized philosophical curriculum will undoubtedly be incremental at best. But shifting demographics, combined with a growing recognition that we must prepare our students to live and work in a world of increasing economic and political interdependence, will provide added impetus to change. As Quinn noted twenty years ago, "the waxing economic power of Asia provides an argument from prudence for the conclusion that Americans ought to be learning a lot more than they currently are about Asian cultures, including their philosophical traditions" (Quinn 1996, 172). The force of that argument has not diminished.

However, the pluralist faces other, more practical challenges, as decisions about which courses should be offered and the depth of coverage they should receive are invariably tied to programming constraints and the limitation of resources. The literature comprising the Western tradition is vast, and many departments already struggle with questions about how to provide adequate coverage of its history, seminal thinkers, texts, and problems. The prospect of adding the literatures of other cultural traditions complicates this task considerably. For smaller departments, faced with hard decisions about where to concentrate the talents and energies of their faculty, a truly globalized philosophical curriculum may seem virtually impossible to attain.

Even in departments that have the resources to expand, opponents of change may worry that pluralism threatens to undermine the integrity of the curriculum by promoting multiculturalism and inclusiveness at the expense of depth and specialization.⁸ The preference for depth over breadth is stressed in the American Philosophical Association (APA) statement on the major, which notes that “[a] good understanding of a few important philosophers and central problems of philosophy is better than a mere acquaintance with many of them.” Every philosophy major, we are told, should be introduced to the writings of figures “whose historical importance is beyond dispute, such as Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hume, and Kant,” as well as “various problems central to the major areas of philosophical inquiry, pertaining to the world’s and our own nature and existence (metaphysics), the knowledge we may have of them (epistemology), sound reasoning (logic), and human conduct (ethics).” These elements are said to constitute the “core” of a good philosophy program, which can then be filled out with a complement of courses that reflect the particular interests of a department. Here, however, the decision to cover non-Western traditions must compete with the potential value of exploring other periods of Western thought (e.g., Hellenistic or medieval philosophy) or other important subfields of philosophical inquiry, or adding courses in applied philosophy, or utilizing the research specializations of the faculty to engage in a deeper study of selected topics related to the core.

Let us be clear about the nature of the problem. The pluralist’s goal is not, as some in the academy fear, to overturn the Western philosophical canon, but rather to broaden and enrich the curriculum by adding other cultural voices to the conversation.⁹ As Jay L. Garfield and Bryan W. Van Norden explain,

Clearly, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with philosophy written by males of European descent; but philosophy has always become richer as it becomes increasingly diverse and pluralistic. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) recognized this when he followed his Muslim colleagues in reading the work of the pagan philosopher Aristotle, thereby broadening the philosophical curriculum of universities in his own era. We hope that American philosophy departments will someday teach Confucius as routinely as they now teach Kant, that philosophy students will eventually have as many opportunities to study the “Bhagavad Gita” as they do the “Republic”....

(Garfield and Van Norden 2016)

The question is whether, given the aforementioned constraints, we can realistically hope to accomplish this goal while honoring our commitment to preserve and transmit what is most valuable in the Western tradition. Can we do better than simply adding a perfunctory survey course on Asian philosophy?

Must we settle for what John J. Stuhr has called “a pluralism by partition,” or a “mere plurality” (Stuhr 1997, 52) that amounts to the kind of tokenism decried by Smith?

It is the premise of this volume that we can do better. The goal of adding diversity to the philosophy curriculum does not require a proliferation of courses. A meaningful pluralism can be achieved simply by introducing a comparative element into the courses we already teach – that is, expanding our inquiry into the central problems of philosophy by incorporating the ideas and arguments of thinkers from other traditions. This comparative approach side-steps concerns about watering down the curriculum, as it offers us a natural way of integrating different cultural perspectives into any course at any level, whether an introduction to philosophy, an advanced seminar in analytic epistemology, or a course on feminist thought.

The present volume demonstrates how a “more rigorous and respectful” engagement with the great thinkers and texts of the Buddhist tradition can expand and enrich our philosophical discourse. The contributors are all trained in the Western tradition but have a firm grounding in Buddhist philosophical literature. While the approach they take is comparative, their goal is not merely to provide descriptive accounts of what influential Buddhist thinkers have written. Nor is it simply to pose Western questions and look for Buddhist answers to them. Rather, the contributors have set up their discussions in a way that allows for a genuine cross-cultural dialogue by engaging Buddhist thinkers on their own terms, thereby allowing different questions and answers to be framed through the Buddhist texts.

The comparative approach modeled in this volume is informed by a deeper understanding of diversity – one that moves beyond the tokenism that *includes* but does not necessarily *value* different points of view. For what the pluralist seeks is not merely variety, but a richer sort of diversity that implies what Peter D. Hershock calls “a distinctive and achieved quality of interaction” (Hershock 2012, 49). Among other things, this means engaging culturally different perspectives in a way that allows for a process of rigorous critical assessment in both directions. As Julian Baggini commented in a recent piece,

The point of cross-cultural inquiry is not to reach some kind of warm, ecumenical mutual understanding, rooted in profound respect for difference. Rather it is to see that our questions are not the only ones worth asking and that by considering others, we might not only open up new vistas but also see our familiar intellectual territory in a different light.

(Baggini 2016)

A substantive engagement with Buddhist thought creates opportunities for us to gain insight into the nature of the philosophical process by reflecting on the kinds of questions we ask and the methods we use to arrive at

answers to them.¹⁰ It may even point to the limitations of certain questions that have been central to the Western tradition – questions that may not be as useful or meaningful today as they were in earlier times, and perhaps never were for thinkers in other traditions.

A key feature of this volume is the recognition that philosophical traditions are not monolithic. The history of Buddhist thought is long, culturally diverse, and informed by different textual traditions. One is always on thin ice when making blanket generalizations about what “Buddhists” think. The Western tradition is similarly heterogeneous, with a wide variety of methods and approaches having developed over the course of its rich history. For this reason, the chapters are organized around the writings of prominent thinkers and movements in Buddhist and Western thought, with a view to reflecting the diversity found within each tradition.

In the opening chapter Gowans compares Buddhist and Hellenistic conceptions of philosophy as a way of life. Focusing on a seminal text in Tibetan Buddhist literature, Tsongkhapa’s *Great Treatise*, the discussion highlights the similarities between the two traditions, but also draws attention to some important differences between Tsongkhapa’s approach, which emphasizes the importance of serenity meditation as a basis for sound philosophical reflection, and the various forms of “spiritual exercise” presented in Stoic and Epicurean writings.

Duckworth (Chapter 2) offers an illuminating discussion of the sixth-century philosopher Dignāga that draws important parallels between his Yogācāra theory and the panpsychism developed in the work of F.H. Bradley and others. The result is a nuanced reinterpretation of Dignāga’s position that reveals it to be more complex than the version of subjective idealism commonly ascribed to him.

Holder (Chapter 3) explores the deep connections between Deweyan pragmatism and early Buddhist metaphysics. Borrowing philosophical ideas from each tradition, he constructs a strong ontological form of emergentist naturalism: a metaphysical view that represents a middle way between dualism and reductive physicalism.

Bliss and Priest (Chapter 4) investigate the concept of metaphysical dependence. They show that while Buddhist and Western philosophers put forward radically different accounts of the dependence relation (Buddhist accounts being largely anti-foundationalist, and Western accounts largely foundationalist), careful consideration of the arguments developed on each side provides rich opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue and critical reassessment.

Tillemans (Chapter 5) moves from metaphysical questions about the nature of reality to second-order questions about metaphysics itself. After sketching out the main types of metaphysical argumentation found in the Buddhist literature, he presents a comparative examination of various Buddhist meta-ontological stances, and considers the implications of these positions for traditional Buddhist teachings.

Coseru (Chapter 6) puts the seventh-century Indian Buddhist philosopher Dharmakīrti into conversation with contemporary epistemologists regarding the relation between reasons and causes. He shows that the causal model of embodied cognition implied in Dharmakīrti's theory of inference can be read as a version of "process externalism," according to which reasons depend on bodily processes that are embedded in the environment.

Davis (Chapter 7) discerns in Zen's nondualist approach a form of perspectivism that differs from egocentric versions of the theory developed in the West, most notably by Nietzsche. This nonegoistic perspectivism involves more than an awareness of the limits of any particular knowledge claim. In Zen Buddhism, meditation on the emptiness of the self cultivates one's ability to respond empathetically and compassionately to the world by alternately occupying the perspectives of "host" and "guest." Thus, like Nietzsche's theory, Zen offers a way of appreciating perspectival plurality, but it differs from Nietzsche's theory in offering a way of "engaging in perspectival delimitation in a manner that is neither willful nor egocentric."

Heine (Chapter 8) compares the view of enlightenment found in the *kōan* collection known as the *Blue Cliff Record* with the notion of epiphany developed in the writings of James Joyce. The discussion focuses on the rhetorical strategies of uncertainty, ambiguity, and incompleteness which, in the case of the Buddhist trainee, create the conditions for an instantaneous spiritual awakening, and in the case of Joyce's reader, a sudden and profound insight into a character whose deeper motives and reactions are not directly revealed in the story.

Davis and Thompson (Chapter 9) draw primarily on Pāli textual sources to develop a cross-cultural approach to cognitive science. In this expanded version of a chapter that was originally published in *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy* (Emmanuel 2013), the authors combine a traditional Buddhist framework for understanding mind and the practice of mindfulness meditation with scientific methods currently used by clinical researchers to investigate the relation between attention and consciousness.

McCarthy (Chapter 10) employs the radical nondualism of Zen to develop a comparative feminist philosophical framework for the project of revalorizing women's bodies. Drawing on the writings of the thirteenth-century Zen master Dōgen, she demonstrates how the perspective of emptiness can help us transcend the limiting conceptualizations of "feminine" and "masculine" without discarding the difference of gender as the "lived experience of being in differently sexed bodies."

Cummiskey (Chapter 11) compares the concept of enlightenment developed in early modern European thought and Buddhist Modernism.¹¹ He shows that while both call for "a transformative reorientation of the self," socially engaged Buddhism presents a more complete account of the integration of personal moral development and social engagement, as well as of the challenges involved in achieving enlightenment.

In the concluding chapter, Powers reexamines the role of rebirth in Buddhist thought in light of the tendency among modernist Buddhists to downplay the importance of that teaching. Powers' discussion not only illuminates the deeper ethical implications of rebirth for understanding Buddhist compassion and social engagement, but also demonstrates some of the dangers involved in comparative studies that attempt to decontextualize Buddhist ideas.

Notes

- 1 *Catalogue of Bowdoin College & the Medical School of Maine for the Year 1906–1907* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1906), 62–64.
- 2 Published in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 80(5): 76 (2007).
- 3 Published in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 66(5): 38 (1992).
- 4 For example, as of this writing, the departments at Princeton and Yale offer no courses in Asian philosophy.
- 5 For a detailed account of this see Watt (1972).
- 6 See Beckwith (2011, 2015).
- 7 From an address presented at the Eastern Division Meeting of the APA on December 28, 1995. It was part of a symposium sponsored by the Metaphysical Society of America and the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy and published the following year in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 70(2): 167–187 (1996).
- 8 See Stuhr (1997, 82).
- 9 Even Smith (2012) concedes that the West has “an extremely rich philosophical tradition – one of the two or three richest, in fact – and it is eminently worthy of preservation and transmission to future generations.”
- 10 J.B. Schneewind notes this role for comparative philosophy: “We find striking parallels in philosophies in different cultures at different times, and we can see how similar contexts shape problems in similar ways. If globalized history can produce more cases like this, it might help us to a better understanding of philosophy as a cultural form” (Schneewind 2005, 176).
- 11 For a comprehensive discussion of the development of Buddhism in the West, see McMahan (2008).

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Buddhist Philosophy as a Way of Life: The Spiritual Exercises of Tsongkhapa

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Pierre Hadot's signature theme, that for which he is best known – indeed what made him rather well known – is his thesis that the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers regarded “philosophy as a way of life” devoted to bringing about a radical transformation of the self, so as to attain genuine well-being, through the practice of an ensemble of “spiritual exercises,” of which the study of philosophical discourses is one part, but by no means the only or even most important part.¹ As an interpretation of ancient philosophy, Hadot's thesis is not without its critics.² But I suspect that, for many, the interest in Hadot has as much to do with the attraction of regarding philosophy as having such a practical aim as it does with the accuracy of his proposal as an interpretation of the early formative period of Western philosophy. In any case, that philosophy, with its propensity for rather abstract and often esoteric modes of rational reflection, could have “living well” as its primary rationale is certainly a thought worthy of consideration.

It has been suggested that Hadot's understanding of philosophy as a way of life might be valuable in interpreting Buddhist thought and practice.³ From one perspective, this is a rather natural suggestion. Buddhist practice often involves spiritual exercises, and Buddhist philosophy is sometimes intimately related to these exercises. However, more inquiry is needed to see just how fruitful this interpretive proposal may be. The great diversity of Buddhist traditions should caution us against the temptation to make unqualified statements in this regard.

In this chapter I explore this proposal by reference to a single important text: Tsongkhapa's *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* (*Byang chub lam rim che ba*) (Tsongkhapa 2000–2004). The *Great Treatise* is a lengthy discourse on a form of Buddhist practice, and an understanding of Buddhist philosophy plays a crucial role in this practice. Hence, we have considerable reason to expect that Hadot's notion of philosophy as a way of life will be an illuminating interpretive strategy in reading this text. Though I hope to fulfill this expectation, I will also propose that the differences between Tsongkhapa and Hadot's philosophers are as important as the similarities.

A central lesson is that Buddhist philosophy as a way of life, as understood by Tsongkhapa, takes us in directions that depart in important ways from the philosophical ways of life considered by Hadot.

I will begin with a brief elaboration of some central themes in Hadot based on a distinction between the concept of philosophy as a way of life and particular conceptions of this idea that he supposed were dominant in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy. I will then examine the *Great Treatise* in some detail and argue that it clearly exemplifies Hadot's concept of philosophy as a way of life. Finally I will highlight some of the main ways that Tsongkhapa's particular conception of this converged and diverged from the conceptions of the philosophers featured in Hadot's accounts.

Hadot on Philosophy as a Way of Life

Though Hadot believed that his account of philosophy as a way of life applied rather broadly to ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, he stressed that in some respects these philosophers developed it in divergent ways. For example, there are key differences in the manner in which the Stoics and the Epicureans envisioned philosophy as a way of life. In light of this, and in light of my interest in employing Hadot's account in interpreting Tsongkhapa, it will be helpful to distinguish the *concept* of philosophy as a way of life and particular *conceptions* of philosophy as a way of life. The concept is the basic idea, that which is largely shared by all proponents of philosophy as a way of life, and the conceptions are different ways the proponents fill out this idea by explaining, elaborating, and applying it in accordance with their distinctive philosophical visions.⁴

There are two interrelated aspects to Hadot's concept of philosophy as a way of life (sometimes referred to as an "art of living"). First, it is supposed that, in their ordinary condition, human beings are quite deficient in well-being in significant respects, but human beings have the capacity to undergo a radical transformation so as to achieve, or at least approach, an ideal state in which there is genuine well-being (the state of "the sage"). The deficiencies pertain primarily to beliefs, desires, passions, and actions. These deficiencies render our lives unsatisfactory in some fundamental ways: we are frustrated, anxious, fearful, angry, alienated, and so on. The ideal state is characterized by some kind of understanding or wisdom, a high level of contentment typically involving tranquility (*ataraxia*), and (at least often) some form of moral virtue.

Second, it is thought that the way to bring about this transformation is to practice a set of spiritual exercises (*askēsis* or *meletē*) in which philosophy plays an essential, but not exclusive, role. The exercises are wide-ranging: they involve cognitive, affective, sensory, imaginative, volitional, moral, and other aspects of a person's character. They are needed because the obstacles to our well-being are deep and diverse: only exercises that alleviate the totality of