

Historical Consciousness as an Offering to the Trans-historical Buddha¹

by John J. Makransky

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Although Religious Studies, including Buddhist studies, has begun to shed light on the historical nature of Buddhist traditions, only Buddhist traditions can reflect critically upon the implications of such findings for their own systematic understandings, practice and relevance to our time.

For the most part, however, Buddhists East and West have hardly begun to assess the implications of historical consciousness for their own self-understanding. For example, many of the most learned Asian Mahayana teachers continue to speak as if the historical Buddha personally taught the Mahayana Buddhist scriptures, in spite of much evidence to the contrary. And long time Western students of such teachers, who have begun to teach Zen or Tibetan practice in the West, often do the same. They do this, I believe, not so much to deny the historical evidence, but because they do not yet know what to make of it, what implications it may have for the self-understanding of their own tradition. Meanwhile, diverse forms of Buddhist practice plant roots more deeply into our culture, eliciting widespread and serious interest which appears to be growing exponentially.

We seem to find ourselves today in a confusing position analogous to China of the first centuries CE or Tibet from the 8th century: an early period of encounter between several Buddhist traditions at once with a new culture, a period in which intense exchange occurs in some sectors of the new culture even as barriers go up in other sectors. In contemporary Western academic culture, Religious Studies (or History of Religions) seeks to protect its hard-won status as "detached observer" that was necessary for it to emerge as a discipline distinct from Theology in the academy, and contemporary Buddhist studies inherits that ethos, enabling it to uncover historical and cultural data from an "objective" distance that renders it impotent to evaluate the implications of its findings for a tradition which still remains largely unaffected by them.

Buddhist Studies scholars have been taught how to critically analyze traditional Buddhist understandings of text, lineage, tradition, etc., but only to "bracket" (and therefore leave unexplored) what underlying truth or

¹ This essay is an extended rumination following upon recent completion of a book (Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied*, 1997). In the following notes, reference is made to sections of that book to further contextualize or exemplify topics under discussion here.

value in Buddhism may be left untouched by the critique, or may even be better revealed through such critique. Yet it is precisely Buddhism's possible truth and transformative value that has elicited so much of the contemporary world's interest in it. Since these are not the primary interests of the secular academy in which the discipline of Buddhist Studies has come to be situated, the latter has, more than it yet recognizes, rendered itself irrelevant to our historical moment.

Yet, as this volume demonstrates, there is a newly emergent movement in the academic study of Buddhism, including both Asian and Western Buddhist scholars, which seeks to address this need, a movement referred to here as "Buddhist Theology." Like Christian theologians who critically analyze elements of Christian tradition to clarify its truth and power for a new time, Buddhist scholars of Buddhism can now increasingly appropriate the academy's critical tools for the use of Buddhist tradition: to shine new light upon its historically conditioned patterns of thought and practice, to learn better how those inherited patterns have worked to communicate, or sometimes obscure, the truth and transformative power of Dharma, and thus, in what new ways the Dharma may need to be understood and expressed in our time.

The large and growing number of people in contemporary cultures with serious interest in Buddhism do not look to it primarily as a basis for fascinating discussions (a primary criterion of topic selection for Religious Studies forums), but for its truth and transformative potential. They include not only those who may identify themselves as contemporary Buddhists, but prominently also Christians, Jews and others who find that Buddhist teaching or practice sheds further light for them upon the truths of their own traditions, or upon possibilities for integration of those truths into life. For this reason, I believe, critical methods applied to Buddhism will make a greater contribution to Western culture and knowledge through their appropriation *by* Buddhist tradition -- which uses them to clarify its truth and power for our time -- than if they remain, as up to now, largely restricted in their application to the limited and arbitrary purposes of secular academic culture.

In this essay, I seek to provide one distinctly Buddhist approach to historical and constructive "theology." My own formation has occurred in Tibetan Buddhism, which is a form of Mahayana Buddhism within the Tibetan cultural sphere. Here, I will try to talk about Mahayana Buddhism in ways broadly relevant to all its cultural spheres, while standing both within Mahayana tradition and within historical consciousness. What follows is a critique that applies to all scholastic traditions of Mahayana that have legitimized their systematic perspectives by projecting them back upon Shakyamuni Buddha (or other figures constructed upon his paradigm), thereby absolutizing their systematic thought and repeatedly obscuring the

historico-cultural specificity and diversity of expressions intrinsic to continuing Mahayana revelation. Such legitimizing and absolutizing procedures, shared by most scholastic Mahayana traditions, are driven by cultural assumptions that are not shared by contemporary scholars. Yet, in subtle ways, they continue to effect contemporary attempts to understand and articulate Buddhism in our time.

The purpose of this critique, then, is to argue for a new appreciation of the tremendous wealth of methods for and perspectives upon awakening bequeathed to us from diverse, culturally specific communities of practice experience, as Buddhism and our culture enter a process of mutual transformation that will require us to draw upon a diversity of approaches founded upon the long experience of prior traditions. Another purpose is to demonstrate the inevitability of new authentic embodiments and expressions of Dharma in our culture, emergent now and in the future, as a phenomena in long continuity with the ancient process of ongoing (never closable) Mahayana revelation that has always been specific to time and place.

Mahayana as a distinct, self-aware movement within Indian Buddhism begins near the beginning of the Common Era (four to five centuries after the historical Buddha), with the appearance of new texts promulgated by their own adherents within the Sangha, the Buddhist religious community. Each text begins with the traditional phrase: "thus have I heard" marking it as "sutra," a scripture of teachings given or certified by the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni. In what follows, I focus upon Mahayana sutras to discuss the origins of their power for Mahayanists, the needs met by prior ahistorical understandings of them, and the problems such understandings now pose for us. Although my focus here is just Mahayana sutras, each Mahayana tradition's ahistorical pattern of understanding with regard to its sutras and other inspired texts has effected its systematic thought at every historical stage, in ways yet to be analyzed in detail by any tradition.

As contemporary scholars have noted, neither in the Mahayana nor in prior Buddhist traditions was the Buddha's official teaching limited only to what Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, spoke. Prior non-Mahayana traditions accepted some teachings as scripture (sutra) if they were inspired by Shakyamuni Buddha and certified by him (Davidson: 310). Mahayana sutras, although they appear centuries after the historical Buddha, use a literary device to fulfil that criterion: they mythologize history to place the scripture back into the time of Shakyamuni Buddha, so he can inspire and certify it.

Yet the actual source of teaching authority has clearly shifted. For often in these sutras it is not Shakyamuni Buddha himself who is the first or primary teacher of the Dharma, but one of his disciples, in dialogue with others. And it is that Bodhisattva disciple's own appropriation of the

Buddha's teaching in practice experience which actually empowers him or her to stand in for the historical Buddha Shakyamuni as the teacher of the new scripture.

These two aspects of scriptural legitimation, the historical myth and the actual source of the teaching in practice experience, are inter-twined in Mahayana texts, through the concept of Buddha's power or authority (*buddhanubhava*, *adhishthana*). Does the power and authority to teach in the Buddha's place come from the Buddha as enlightened *other*, or through the disciple's own internalization of the Buddha's enlightenment?

As example, we turn to the beginning of the *Ashtasahasrika-prajñā-paramita sutra* (eight thousand verse perfection of wisdom scripture, henceforth abbreviated "*Ashta*.") a key text in the development of early Mahayana literature. This text centers upon the perfection of wisdom, *prajñā-paramita*, which it identifies as the guiding principle of the Bodhisattva path and the source and content of highest enlightenment.

The opening words, "thus have I heard," mark the text as scripture set in the historical Buddha Shakyamuni's time. The Buddha speaks first, but not to give the teaching. Rather, he requests Subhuti, one of his disciples, to teach the perfection of wisdom, on his behalf:

"Make it clear now, Subhuti, to the great Bodhisattvas starting from perfect wisdom, how the great Bodhisattvas enter into perfect wisdom."

Shariputra, another disciple of Shakyamuni, now wonders whether Subhuti will teach perfect wisdom by his own power or through the power of the Buddha. Subhuti, knowing his mind, says to Shariputra:

"Whatever, Shariputra, the Buddha's disciples teach, make known, explain, proclaim, reveal, all of it is to be known as the Tathagata's [the Buddha's] work, for they train themselves in the Dharma taught by the Tathagata, they realize its true nature (*dharmata*) directly for themselves (*sak"atk,*) and take possession of it. Having realized its true nature directly, and taken possession of it, nothing that they teach, make known, explain, proclaim, or reveal is inconsistent with the true nature of the Dharma. It is just the outpouring of the Tathagata's demonstration of Dharma. Whatever those sons of the family demonstrate as the true nature of Dharma, they do not bring into contradiction with that nature."²

² English translation mine, from Vaidya, pp. 2-3. For Conze's translation, see Conze pp. 83-4. Compare also *Prajñāparamita-Ratnaguṇaśāstra* 1.2-4 (Conze p. 9), and *Ashta*. passages 1.25 (Conze pp. 91-2), 2.44 (p. 100), 3.74-75 (p. 109), 4.99 (p. 118),

Thereafter, it is Subhuti, rather than the Buddha, who teaches most of the early portion of the sutra on perfect wisdom.

From the perspective of prior (pre-Mahayana) tradition, the certification to speak with the Buddha's authority can come only from the historical Buddha as the enlightened *other*. To meet that expectation, Shakyamuni Buddha is put in the scene as other than Subhuti, to certify him as the Bodhisattva disciple who may speak in his place. But this literary device also enables something new to be said: that the Buddha's authority and power comes *not* just from the historical Buddha, but from the wisdom of enlightenment itself, now located within other persons in the religious community, the Sangha, who have realized the perfection of wisdom that the Buddha had realized.

In contrast to the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, we might call the perfection of wisdom itself, the wisdom of enlightenment embodied in the practice experience of accomplished members of the Sangha, the "trans-historical Buddha."

Another quote from the Ashta. sheds further light on this:

"Any Bodhisattva who, after he has deceased in other world systems where he has honored and questioned the Buddhas, ..., is reborn here, would, when he hears this deep perfection of wisdom being taught, identify this perfection of wisdom with the Teacher, and be convinced that he is face to face with the Teacher, that he has seen the Teacher [the Buddha]" (Conze: 138).

The perfection of wisdom is the trans-historical Teacher that speaks through any teacher who has authentically embodied it. To recognize the real import of the sutra is to meet the trans-historical "Buddha," the perfection of wisdom that inspired its composition and now communicates itself to the disciple prepared to encounter it. The perfection of wisdom is a direct, non-dual, liberating awareness of the real, undivided, insubstantial nature of all phenomena (*dharmata*). It therefore comes to be designated in this and other Mahayana texts as "*dharmakaya*": embodiment (*kaya*) of the real nature of things (*dharmata*) in direct, non-conceptual knowledge. It is a knowledge that takes spontaneous expression in compassionate self-communication to those who have not yet awakened to it. Because, according to these texts, Bodhisattvas have awakened to such knowledge in many places and times, we can understand *dharmakaya* as a trans-historical

11.251 (p. 170), 16.321 (p. 199). Compare also *Maharatnakuta sutra*, Chang pp. 110-111.

principle that persons of many cultures have uniquely embodied as agents of awakening (*rupakaya*).

Dharmakaya, understood in this sense, has spoken through persons of flesh and blood throughout history. For this reason, although non-conceptual in nature and therefore literally inconceivable to us, its voices have always been those of historically and culturally conditioned persons, for whom liberating awareness was evoked and expressed through culturally specific concepts, images, practices, and languages.³

As in the Ashta., numerous Mahayana sutras characterize the knowledge and teaching of Dharma as the outflow of direct experience that has been elicited by many kinds of practice: elaborate rituals for serving and honoring the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, purification practices, devoted recollection and invocation of the qualities of Buddhahood (*buddhanusmrti*), visualization practices, visions and dreams of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, many levels of meditative attainment (*samadhis*), the formal taking up of Bodhisattva vows, long practice of the perfections

³ For a fuller explanation of the evolving concept of *dharmakaya* in *prajñāparamita* sutras and Mahayana *shastras*, see Makransky, chapters 3-5.

The assertion of a "trans-historical" principle of awakening (*dharmakaya*) may be controversial for scholars who adhere to more radical versions of post-modern thought, which assert absolute uniqueness and diversity among cultures and historical periods, highly skeptical of meta-narratives that assert any over-arching unity. But such a perspective is too one-sided, and possibly self-contradictory. Can a contemporary critic rule out the possibility that persons of different places and times have had a direct awareness of the impermanent and insubstantial nature of phenomena, an awareness that liberates from self-clinging and takes expression in unconditional love? From what frame of reference would such certainty come? A Western post-Enlightenment assumption of universal human limitation, imputed as meta-narrative upon all cultures and history?

There are not only dissimilarities, but also similarities among the diversity of human experiences in history and cultures. Sexual love, hatred, envy, grief are unique in each culture and time, but not entirely unique. Similarly, the dynamics of self-clinging, the expressions it takes, the sufferings it elicits, the possibility of freedom from it, and the means to that freedom (the Four Noble Truths) may be, in certain ways, uniquely experienced by persons of different places and times, without being absolutely unique.

The expression "trans-historical Buddha" used in this essay is inspired by Mahayana messages like that of the *Vimalakirti* sutra (quoted below). Members of Sangha in each place and time who awaken to the Dharma recurrently re-introduce the ultimate meaning of "Buddha" to their own place and time.

I use the expression "trans-historical Buddha," then, not to refer to an unchanging, substantial essence literally carried across cultures or time, but to an awareness of insubstantiality and unconditional love accessible to every place and time that is always unique in some respects, since elicited and expressed in culturally specific ways through unique individuals.

(paramitas) and other components of the path, recurrent references to unconditional compassion (*mahakaruna*), skillful means (*upaya*) and the perfection of wisdom. The precise relations between all such practices, and their relation to the liberating awareness of awakening that issues from them, are diverse and often ambiguous, expressed differently between sutras and within different parts of sutras, as we would expect from the diversity of practice communities in which the texts emerged.

In sum, composers of Mahayana sutras employed the literary device of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni to permit the trans-historical Buddha, liberating wisdom emergent in the practice experience of diverse religious communities (Sangha), to teach in new times and places.⁴ As the *Vimalakirti sutra* declares: "It is dualistic to say Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. The Dharma is itself the nature of Buddha. The Sangha is itself the nature of Dharma..." (Thurman: 75).

The Mahayana doctrine of skillful means, *upaya-kaushalya*, both emerged from and further informed this understanding. In the Ashta., skillful means are the diverse and often subtle activities through which Bodhisattvas progress on their path and elicit the wisdom of enlightenment (*prajña-paramita*) in others.⁵ In many other scriptures, such as the *Avatamsaka* and *Vimalakirti* sutras, the concept is expanded and much further developed: skillful means includes the infinite scope of activities and methods through which Buddhas and Bodhisattvas communicate Dharma in the precise ways appropriate to the capacities of all living beings. Skillful means, in such texts, is an infinitely vast, incomprehensible mystery, for the methods that Buddhas and Bodhisattvas employ to reach beings are as diverse as beings themselves, and are operative through all space and time.

Some *Avatamsaka* quotes as example:

"Buddha turns the wheel of true teaching, which is infinite and has no bounds; the truth taught is beyond compare: the shallow can not fathom it" (Cleary: 164).

"Their compassion and pity extends to all -- they know the mind of every sentient being, and expound to them in accord with their predilections, infinite, boundless enlightening teachings." (437).

⁴ For a more detailed analysis of the apparent role of inspired speech as an expression of liberating awareness in original expositors of Mahayana sutras, see MacQueen, 1981, 1982.

⁵ See, for example Conze, pp. 250-251.

"Just as no beings in the universe can count the drops of rain pouring from great clouds, and would go crazy if they tried, ... in the same way the Buddha ... showers a great rain of teachings that no sentient beings, seekers of personal salvation, or self-enlightened ones can know, and they would surely go mad if they tried to assess them in thought; only the great enlightening beings, lords of all worlds, by the power of awareness and intellect cultivated in the past, comprehend every single expression and phrase, and how they enter beings' minds..." (975).

"Just as the great clouds rain water of one flavor, yet there are innumerable differences according to where it rains, in the same way Buddha appearing in the world rains water of teaching of one flavor of great compassion, yet his sermons are infinitely variegated according to the needs of the situation" (976).

"Just as the ocean water flows under the continents and islands, so that all who drill for water find it, yet the ocean does not form any notion of itself giving out water, in the same way the water of Buddha's ocean of knowledge flows into the minds of all sentient beings, so that if they examine things and practice ways of entering truth, they will find knowledge, pure and clear, with lucid understanding -- yet the knowledge of Buddha is equal, nondual, without discrimination; but according to the differences in sentient beings' mental patterns, the knowledge they obtain is not the same" (999).

"In this world there are four quadrillion such names to express the Four Holy Truths, in accord with the mentalities of beings, to cause them all to be harmonized and pacified. ... [And] just as in this world... there are four quadrillion names to express the Four Holy Truths, so in all the worlds to the east -- hundreds of thousands of billions, countless, innumerable, boundlessly, incomparably, incalculably, unspeakably, inconceivably, immeasurably, inexplicably many worlds, in each there are an equal number of names to express the Four Holy Truths, to cause all the sentient beings there to be harmonized and pacified in accordance with their mentalities. And just as this is so of the worlds to the east, so it is with all the infinite worlds in the ten directions." (276, 281).

Skillful means in such texts, as the infinite self-communication of undivided and unlimited enlightened awareness, is as vast a mystery as the

Judeo-Christian God. If we take it seriously both from within historical consciousness and within Mahayana Buddhist tradition, it is the vast mystery through which authentic Mahayana experience has been made possible across diverse cultures through so many centuries. And it is precisely because accomplished members of diverse Buddhist communities through history have been the primary source of skillful means that skillful means have been so skillful: enabling the trans-historical Buddha, wisdom embodied in accomplished Sangha of new places and times, to speak again and again, always with fresh, intimate voices-- to speak directly from and to the hearts of Central Asians, Indians, Chinese, Koreans, Tibetans, Japanese, Vietnamese-- to speak to each in precise ways that uniquely invoke a wisdom and love beyond self-clinging in each culture and time.

The vast meaning of skillful means articulated in sutra passages like those above, understood within historical consciousness, becomes a doctrinal resource for contemporary Mahayana traditions (each of which has tended to view itself as the "pure" repository of the Dharma) to reflect with new seriousness upon the possibilities of truth to be found in other Buddhist cultures throughout history.⁶

Skillful means, explicitly or implicitly, provided the rationale for the very appearance of new sutras, and by extension, for the very rise of the Mahayana as a distinct movement, for it enabled the trans-historical Buddha to speak newly again and again. So the anonymous author of the *Ashta* passage earlier quoted does not have the *historical* Buddha Shakyamuni himself begin the teaching on perfect wisdom, but has him request *Subhuti* to teach. The anonymous author, in his literary imagination, invokes the historical Buddha Shakyamuni to request *himself*, with Subhuti as his textual persona, to reveal the trans-historical Buddha's new teaching, to communicate the Dharma in newly effective ways necessitated by intervening centuries of development in thought and practice set within culture. And so new sutras continued to appear over centuries.

The anonymous authors of Mahayana sutras, then, by employing the literary device that put the historical Buddha in the text, liberated the wisdom of enlightenment in them to speak in new ways. But in ancient Indian culture where the new sutras appeared, to experience the power of the texts to elicit the very awareness they expressed was to take *literally* the

⁶ It is also a doctrinal resource for new Buddhist reflection upon the availability of its liberating truth within other religious traditions. See for example *Lankavatara sutra* 192-3 on the Tathagatha's manifestation as the various divinities of Hinduism; *Lotus sutra* chapter 24 on Avalokitesvara's manifestation as such; *Shiksha-samuccaya* 325, 332 on great Bodhisattvas maturing beings by following non-Buddhist ways, including manifestation as leaders of non-Buddhist traditions, and by teaching the Dharma through all cultures and in all languages. (Bendall and Rouse pp. 290, 295).

device that legitimized them: to believe that such texts had *actually* come from the historical Buddha Shakyamuni.

Now, as the new sutras themselves make clear, Buddhist Sangha members who conservatively adhered to prior tradition did not accept the new sutras as scripture (many passages in the new sutras prophesy their own rejection, describe the persecution of those who will promulgate them, explain why only some persons will be capable of recognizing their truth and others not, etc). The Mahayana movement was composed of those who *did* find the new sutras convincing and efficacious, and therefore, from within their ahistorical worldview, scriptures to be defended as Shakyamuni Buddha's own teaching. But then, so their ahistorical understanding entailed, if only some members of the present Buddhist community can recognize the truth of these texts, while others are unable to do so, that must be because the historical Buddha Shakyamuni had provided these texts for similarly perceptive disciples of his own time, even as others were unable to recognize their truth.

The literary device of Shakyamuni Buddha in the new sutras had projected the past into the present for legitimation. This now entailed that the very different ways the sutras were received in the present had to be projected back into the past. The historical Buddha in his lifetime, so the logic went, must have given different kinds of teachings to followers of different capacities: Mahayana teachings to those with the greater capacity to understand them; less profound, "Hinayana" teachings to those with lesser capacity. And as more Mahayana sutras emerged within different communities of practice, whose messages therefore differed from each other, this too had to be explained by reference to the differing capacities of Shakyamuni Buddha's followers, in a mythical past now absolutized as the differing capacities of all Buddha's followers in all times.

This, in turn, conditioned a much narrower understanding of skillful means than we find in the quotes above.⁷ Different thinkers identified a different teaching or set of sutras as the truest, the one that represents the historical Buddha's own final perspective; while other teachings were characterized as the Buddha's *lesser* means which he taught only to lead persons of lesser capacity to the highest teaching upheld by the new tradition. This much narrower, rigidly hierarchal understanding of skillful means makes diverse messages of scripture consistent by superimposing a single interpretive scheme upon them, and gives that scheme the aura of absolute finality by imputing it to Shakyamuni Buddha. Scriptural basis for this narrower sense of skillful means also occurs in the *Avatamsaka* as in

⁷ The historical order of development of wider and narrower expressions of skillful means is unclear. Often both occur in different portions of the same texts. In these paragraphs, I merely point out the different expressions and some of the understandings behind them.

many other Mahayana sutras, but appears in developed form in the *Sandhinirmocana sutra*, which places a hierarchical scheme of "three turnings of the Dharma wheel" into the mouth of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni.

Thus, even as the doctrine of skillful means (understood as infinite mystery) permits the transcendent (perfect wisdom) to take new expression, the new tradition that it gives rise to constructs a narrower sense of skillful means, not mysterious at all, to establish its authority vis a vis prior tradition. As new expressions of transcendent knowledge continue to unfold, and further reflection, each new tradition's systematic understanding establishes a new hierarchy of prior teachings leading to its own, which are de-historicized and absolutized in the same way: by projecting them back upon Shakyamuni Buddha as his own view. Each new tradition legitimizes itself by seeking to defeat the infinitely wide sense of skillful means that had enabled it to emerge, by using a narrower meaning of "skillful means" to absolutize its own historically conditioned understanding in the name of the Buddha.

Thus, the need for transcendent knowledge to take new expression in new places and times, which the doctrine of skillful means permitted, is actively obstructed sooner or later by every new tradition it gives rise to. By thereby controlling the doctrine of skillful means, each sub-tradition seeks to control transcendence, once and for all -- to stop the process of ongoing revelation that gave rise to itself *at itself* -- to stop the self-communication of eternal truth at its own understanding of it.

Notice, where the doctrine of skillful means is narrowed and absolutized, how the diverse historical origins of the new sutras become further obscured, hiding the historical nature of their power. Mahayanists had experienced their own sutras as uniquely powerful *not* because they came from Shakyamuni Buddha centuries before, but precisely because they came to them through religious communities and cultures much closer to their own place and time that could express enlightenment in much more intimate and fresh ways. And Sangha members who rejected those sutras did so not just because of differences in their own intrinsic capacity, but because they were conservative adherents of prior norms.

Nevertheless the Mahayana's ahistorical understanding of its sources, together with the narrow sense of "skillful means" that rationalized it, has been presupposed by its scholastic traditions of India, Tibet, and East Asia. Scholastic disagreements over soteriology, for example, have been conducted, in part, by subsuming Mahayana sutra messages of immediate transcendence and spontaneity under messages of gradualism and human effort, or vice versa. Similarly, scholars who have disagreed over the meaning of Buddha nature (*tathagathagarbha*) blithely subsume messages of intrinsic purity under messages of potential purity, or vice versa,

simplistically marginalizing many parts of sutras and *Āstras* that contributed to the concept, as if the tension between messages is not the expression of diverse practice communities and contexts, but of an eternal hierarchy of Buddha's skillful means, which the exegete, pretending to inhabit Shakyamuni Buddha's perspective, identifies as his own. Along similar lines, overly simplistic conclusions have been reached as to which methods of practice described in Mahayana sutras are the only ones that lead directly to ultimate awareness, which conceptual understandings of (non-conceptual) reality are final, which ways of conceptualizing (inconceivable) enlightenment are final, etc.⁸

⁸ So, for example, Tibetan traditions tell of a council during the reign of the eighth century Tibetan king Khri-srong lde brtsan to determine which form of Buddhist understanding and practice was to be officially sanctioned in Tibet: the gradualist perspective expounded by the Indian scholar Kamalashīla or the simultaneist perspective of immediate access to awakening expounded by the Chinese Ch'an teacher Hva-Ÿang Mahayana. The historicity of the council may be uncertain, but Tibetan writings and materials found at Tun Huang have repeatedly expressed the concern among Buddhists to argue for one perspective over the other, based again on the assumption that Shakyamuni Buddha personally taught all the Mahayana sutras in which a confusing diversity of messages concerning gradualism and immediacy appear. Kamalashīla and his subsequent defenders have thought they were arguing for the one final view of Shakyamuni: gradualism, with all sutra messages of immediacy requiring interpretation, while Hva-shang Mahayana and his defenders based their argument on the opposite view, that Shakyamuni's final understanding was immediacy (Gomez 1983a, 1983b, Ruegg 1989).

But if, as argued here, diverse sutra messages of gradualism and immediacy represent the expressions of diverse practice communities with very different needs, they express not the point of view of one ca. 5th century BCE North Indian figure, but diverse experiential findings of what has been found convincing and transformatively effective in many different places and times. Then the meaning of the "debate" between Kamalashīla and Hva-Ÿang Mahayana must be entirely different for us than for past interpreters. It is no longer a matter of who has properly understood Shakyamuni's message in toto and who got it wrong and must be banished to preserve the Dharma's purity. Rather, the question becomes which elements of thought and practice, convincing and transformatively effective for diverse prior communities, may inform and empower practice and thought now and in the future. We are no longer concerned to determine Shakyamuni Buddha's one final intention of an exclusive, absolutized paradigm, but rather to uncover alternative models for systematic practice and thought already found effective by others, elements of which, taking new expression, may speak powerfully to the specific conditions of our place and time, thus contributing to the ongoing reconstruction of systematic understanding. So, for example, some contemporary Buddhist teachers have noted that many Westerners suffer both from intense guilt and lack of self-confidence on the one hand, and a naive expectation for instant spiritual gratification on the other. If so, our culture may need to draw heavily upon both gradualistic and simultaneist elements of prior Buddhist systems. For only if we sensed the immediate

Scholars' systematic choices in each place and time occurred largely in ignorance of their own historical conditioning and of the historical nature of the inspired texts upon which they drew. A diversity of expressions from a diversity of prior practice communities were homogenized into the single ordered expression of one person, Shakyamuni Buddha, through narrow schemes of skillful means absolutized as the only ladder to enlightenment. sutras such as the *Sandhinirmocana*, which put such schemes into Shakyamuni Buddha's mouth, enabled scholars of each later tradition, in the name of the Buddha, to think of their own, conditioned decisions as transparent windows upon the Buddha's unconditioned perspective, making it routine for their systematic writing to contain the implicit claim to know the absolute scheme to enlightenment for all living beings through all time (enshrined in p'an-chiao, grub mtha' and related schemes in Buddhist cultures of East Asia and Tibet).

Such habits for interpreting sacred text, driven by Asian assumptions concerning authority and legitimation, carry over from early Mahayana into scholastic interpretations of later inspired texts such as the tantras, the origins of Zen teachings and the origins of Tibetan treasure texts, distorting the systematic Mahayana understandings of all its traditions.⁹

Because these ahistorical understandings give the sectarian views of each sub-tradition the aura of unique and absolute authority, they support each in its competition with others for social and institutional support, from which has come great social pressure in Tibet and East Asia to argue for one such understanding over the others. And this pressure continues to operate as these traditions now enter our culture, promoting a narrowness with regard to possibilities of liberating truth both within the diverse traditions of Buddhism and within other traditions.

Contemporary Buddhist academics and teachers of Dharma (East and West) are still prone to this error. By failing to fully recognize the historically conditioned nature of our own perspectives and needs, and those of the past, we still fall into the habit of pretending to the ahistorical view of Shakyamuni Buddha in order to promulgate a relatively narrow systematic perspective that oversimplifies the Mahayana's complex history of doctrinal development and thereby stunts the future possibilities of our

accessibility of the real power of awakening could we find the delight of discovering it afresh in each moment of a life-long discipline (Shantideva: "Enthusiastic perseverance is delight in the virtuous").

⁹ Those elements of Mahayana traditions that more openly express the ongoing nature of continuing Mahayana revelation, exemplified in "Pure Vision" revelations of Tibet (which play an important role in all Tibetan sects), escape the critique of this essay, for they more transparently reveal the actual dynamics of continuing revelation that have always been operative. See Mayer: 1996 chapter 1.

tradition. And this may be masked not only by old sectarianism assumptions, but also by the more contemporary rhetorics of critical method.

D. Seyfort Ruegg criticized two such developments in a recent article. The first development is the recent taking up of Tibetan sectarian positions by contemporary scholars, such as *rang stong* (empty of self) versus *gzhan stong* (empty of anything extrinsic), to argue for one doctrine over the other with the sectarian assumption that they are "opposed theories located on the same level of discourse," an assumption partly based upon the ahistorical hermeneutics of prior Tibetan systematians (who followed the *Sandhinirmocana sutra's* "three turnings of Dharma" hierarchal scheme noted above). Ruegg suggests that much historical and philosophical work needs to be done to explore the extent that elements of these doctrines may have been complementary in Indian and Tibetan thought and practice, or may have functioned as incommensurables ("located on different levels, or within distinct universes of religious and philosophical discourse"). Ruegg continues: "What is needed in Buddhist studies is not enlistment in campaigns and polemics with other schools of Buddhist thought, but careful descriptions and analyses of the various traditions establishing their sources and religio-philosophical problematics and identifying how each dealt with the philosophical and hermeneutical questions that arose in their respective schools" (168).

From a theological perspective, I would add, such "careful descriptions and analyses" are important not just to uphold scholarly standards for the secular academy, but to meet the present and future needs of Mahayana tradition. For example, based upon such research, future Mahayana systematians, freed from the ahistorical hermeneutics of prior tradition, may not need to construct a rigid dichotomy from those elements of Indo-Tibetan thought that some have dichotomously constructed as *rang stong* versus *gzhan ston*. Rather, instead of seeking to construct one architectonic, hierarchal scheme (based on an ahistorical re-construction of Shakyamuni Buddha's teaching career), future systematians will study roles of context-specific practice experience and uses of language by diverse communities in the development of varied doctrinal discourses. And this information can then be applied to re-evaluate how elements of ancient doctrine and practice might be incorporated into newly effective systems of understanding and praxis for persons of the present and future. It is time, in other words, within our historical consciousness, to lay the foundation for new constructive, systematic work, rather than to argue for one prior systematic scheme in toto over another, each such prior scheme having been designed to address the problems and needs of other places and times, based upon hermeneutic assumptions some of which we do not share.

The second recent development that Ruegg critiques does constitute new systematic analysis, but analysis that falls far short of the mark by failing to avoid prior sectarian traditions' worst habits of ahistorical criticism, and by largely ignoring praxis as a force in doctrinal development. I refer to the "Critical Buddhism" movement in Japan, which portrays the Buddha-nature doctrine (*tathagathagarbha*) as non-Buddhist (169). "Critical Buddhists" simplify the internally complex discourses of Buddha-nature that emerged from diverse Buddhist practice communities and cultures into a reified philosophical construct, project that reified understanding back upon the whole prior history of Buddhism, and argue against it in the name of an equally narrow philosophical reconstruction of Shakyamuni's "real teaching" (*pratityasamutpada*, dependent arising) that is supposed to contradict it.

As Ruegg notes, however, "... in totally rejecting [Buddha-nature] ... as non-Buddhist ["Critical Buddhists" of Japan] seem to have overshot the mark by giving scant attention to the explications of the *tathagathagarbha* theory by Buddhist thinkers who, outside Japan, have at the same time accepted *pratityasamutpada* as basic." Ruegg points to a Tibetan figure, Gung thang dKon mchog tstan pa'i sgron me, as example of such a thinker. But it should also be noted that the Buddha-nature doctrine is complex in its Indian development, evolving out of many practices and doctrines that may have developed in synergy, prominently including *Prajñāparamita* thought and praxis for which pre-Mahayana and evolving Mahayana concepts of *pratityasamutpada* are foundational. Ironically, in its very attempt to challenge Buddhist tradition, the new "Critical Buddhism" of Japan falls into the tradition's own worst habit of constructing from within the relatively narrow viewpoint and concern of its own place and time an ahistorical, absolutistic version of Buddhism naively legitimized as Shakyamuni's original view (Swanson: 120, 121, 127-8).

The same basic pattern of narrow ahistorical absolutism in the name of Shakyamuni Buddha finds a different kind of contemporary expression in a recent essay by Stephen Batchelor, who asserts a Buddhism purified of the accretion of all beliefs and religious practices which, he argues, would have been abhorrent to the version of Shakyamuni Buddha that he has constructed as the historical Buddha (Batchelor, "Buddhism without Beliefs"). Batchelor, like prior traditional scholars who, unaware of their own historical conditioning, were unable to recognize the transformative power of Buddhist beliefs and practices of places and times other than their own and rationalized their exclusivism by projecting it upon a "Shakyamuni Buddha" they had constructed in their own image, asserts a new hegemony over Dharma by re-constructing it narrowly within the presuppositions of his own place and time (in his case, a post Western enlightenment agnosticism) projected back upon Shakyamuni.

A historically responsible detailed construction of "the real" Shakyamuni Buddha will likely never be possible, given the limitations on historical materials of ancient India. But the recurrent desire to make such a construction in the specific form needed to authorize one's current perspective is the ahistorical habit we have inherited from prior Buddhist tradition. It is a bad habit: a repeated falsification through which we hide from ourselves the complex historical conditions of doctrinal transformation within Buddhist communities of practice and the historically conditioned nature of our own systematic work within current communities of practice.

Like systematic Buddhist thinkers of the past, we too must identify the basic principles of thought and practice that can serve as criteria to judge the authenticity of any systematic Buddhist understanding of any place and time, including our own. And the underlying principles identified must be consistent with what we know of Shakyamuni Buddha's teaching mainly through textual sources that date centuries after him. *Equally important*, however, are the developments in practice and thought that contributed to authentic doctrinal development and transformation in all periods from Shakyamuni to the present. Without falling into the ahistorical error sketched above, we do have enough from such sources to agree upon a few core principles readily discernable both within Shakyamuni Buddha's teaching and, through their repeated reinterpretation, within the Buddhist traditions of cultures of Asia.

The previous *Avatamsaka* quote that alludes to the "four quadrillion names" of the Four Noble Truths identifies those core principles. In the Buddha's teaching of the Four Noble Truths we have the essential criterion through which we can analyze and argue over the adequacy and authenticity of any Buddhist system of thought and practice past or present. This criterion does not deny the re-interpretability of those Truths in accord with the real problems and needs of thought and practice in each new place and time. Indeed, the Mahayana doctrine of skillful means as articulated in texts such as the *Avatamsaka* would argue for the necessity of such repeated reinterpretation: so as to make the nature of suffering, its connection to self-clinging, and the possibility of its transcendence through specific forms of practice intimately accessible to the variety of dispositions and worldviews of real persons situated in different cultures and times.

In other words, we must learn to eschew the traditional habit of seeking to absolutize our own sectarian (or agnostic) view through detailed re-construction of Shakyamuni Buddha in our own image. Instead, we should adopt a more minimal understanding, that the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths, that he sought the liberation of persons from self-clinging and consequent suffering, that he sought their awakening to a penetrating wisdom and unconditional love free from such clinging. On that basis alone, I would argue, Shakyamuni would likely have approved of

the many methods through which precisely what he sought for others *has* been accomplished in so many places and times quite different from his own: a vast array of practices of devotion, offering, repentance, recitation, ritual purification, sacred memory, holy visions, contemplative practices, sacramental feasts, etc. many of which (contra Batchelor) have been both deeply religious and transformatively effective; many of which (contra "Critical Buddhism") have functioned as ritual-contemplative means to express and evoke deep experiential intuitions of Buddha nature (not just to speculate about it).¹⁰

Which of this vast treasury of beliefs and practices may help elicit similar liberating awareness now and in the future remains to be seen. People, as ever, possess a wide variety of dispositions situated in diverse cultures. It would be lethal for us to assume that we further the tradition by seeking to marginalize or erase many of its past practices and all the beliefs that have motivated them, whether the quest to do so is rationalized in terms of the sectarianisms of past traditions ("only the practices of my tradition lead to complete awakening") or the new parochial sectarianisms of agnostic modernism or "Critical Buddhism" ("only agnostic inquiry avoids clinging and leads to awakening, not religious understandings and practices," or "never practices informed by the Buddha-nature doctrine").

Contrary to the sectarian assumptions of our various sub-traditions past and present, the history of Buddhist praxis and doctrine would indicate that there has *never* been only one narrowly delimited way to awaken, and that *any* means to awaken is also a potential object of clinging. That the doctrine of Buddha-nature has become, to some degree, a superficially understood rationale for social inertia in contemporary Japan does not mean that it has been such always or everywhere else. That agnosticism is experienced by some (like Batchelor) as a liberating method does not preclude its becoming a stultifying absolutism for others, discouraging them from drawing upon the more highly developed capacities they may have for self-transcendence through faith or devotion.

¹⁰ One colleague who read this paragraph asked if I had not fallen prey here to the very "Shakyamunification" against which I had argued in the rest of the essay. Any follower of the Buddha must have some concept of what the Buddha was in support of his or her understanding and practice. I do not argue against having any such concept, but rather for a minimal concept in keeping with the little we know: primarily that he sought and provided means for others' awakening appropriate to his own place and time. What I argue against is a detailed concept of Shakyamuni that is filled in primarily with the details of one's own (or the founder of one's sect's) world-view projected back upon him, obscuring from our view many other embodiments and expressions of awakening potentially relevant to our place and time.

As Mahayana traditions enter our culture, they already begin to transform it in ways whose long term outcomes we can hardly imagine. Reciprocally, each Mahayana tradition will now need to undergo the deeper transformations in its own self awareness that its entry into contemporary culture's historical consciousness ought to elicit. Based upon the preceding discussion, and speaking from within Mahayana tradition, here are a few of the principles I suggest should guide this process:

1. We should recover the wider understanding of skillful means (*upaya-kaushalya*) revealed in Mahayana scriptures

Mahayana understanding of skillful means must shift away from the narrow, ahistorical interpretation that absolutized each of our traditional systems of thought and practice, cutting us off from the historical sources of our inspired texts and putting us into sectarian competition with each other based in large part on mutual ignorance.

Instead, if we re-examine the doctrine of skillful means from within historical consciousness, as we must, our attention is shifted to the much vaster sense of the concept found in other parts of the Mahayana textual corpus: skillful means as the infinite means through which enlightened ones lead beings to awaken, suited to the vast diversity of their capacities and mentalities. This is the wide sense of "skillful means" that both permits and encourages us to look with wonder upon the great diversity of ways, situated within each place, time, and culture, Mahayana practice has elicited an ultimate awareness in persons that transcends egocentrism and expresses itself in unconditional concern for all.

2. We should pay new attention to the historical conditions of ongoing revelation and doctrinal development, contextualized in the practice of communities, to provide Mahayana tradition much more knowledge to evaluate its present and future possibilities.

To understand skillful means in this vaster way, rather than in the narrow, hierarchal way of past interpretive schemes, points us toward, rather than away from, the actual historical conditions for inspired texts like the Mahayana sutras and the implications of such conditions for the present and future of our tradition. Instead of repeatedly gazing upon ahistorical images of Shakyamuni we ourselves have constructed to legitimize our current perspectives, we can put new emphasis on exploring the diverse ways enlightened wisdom has uniquely emerged in accomplished members of practice communities of different times and cultures, sensitizing us to the possibility of new expressions already emerging and to come. If Mahayana revelation specific to our place and time is already emergent, nothing could be more traditional.

In addition, by shifting our attention *away* from previous ahistorical ascriptions of doctrines to Shakyamuni Buddha *toward* the ways diverse communities have appropriated the Dharma in practice experience

accompanied by doctrinal change, current Buddhist communities receive more light to discern the nature of authentic doctrinal transformation. This can shed light for us upon analogous processes already operative in the present of which we are as yet only dimly aware.¹¹ We authentically follow upon prior tradition neither by precise imitation of prior systematic understandings, nor by rejecting them wholesale (a la Batchelor), but by learning how to enter into the same synergy of practice experience and long reflection upon received doctrines through which such understandings came to be newly constructed in other places and times.

3. We should recognize the limitations of all systematic schemata, past and present. We should also recognize the likelihood of an irreducible pluralism of valid Mahayana perspectives, while continuing to uphold the Four Noble Truths as criteria for judging their authenticity, adequacy, and transformative effectiveness.

By adopting the wider understanding of skillful means over the narrower, I do not argue for a new uncritical and equal acceptance of all past practices of Buddhist cultures. Buddhism's own moral imperative to investigate what is convincing and effective from the perspective of one's own time and place must never be abandoned.

Rather, I argue that whatever systematic conclusions we reach now, as in the past, are conditioned and incomplete. In our world alone, says the *Avatamsaka sutra*, the Four Noble Truths have four quadrillion names! The Four Noble Truths hold, but precisely how it is that each individual in each place and time comes to profound recognition of their meaning is not something we should ever pretend to fully know again. Rather, historical awareness shines light for us on the plurality of ways the Four Truths have been repeatedly reinterpreted to meet hermeneutic needs specific to each culture and period, so they may be authentically and freshly reappropriated. Effective appropriation of the Four Noble Truths in practice experience has never been monolithic, and is never figured out once and for all for all cultures and times in the abstract, no matter how clever one's reconstruction of Shakyamuni Buddha or Buddhist history to mask the limitations of one's abstraction. Nor is fresh and authentic appropriation of them ever guaranteed by simply repeating the now archaic idioms of past Buddhist cultures.

¹¹ This is part of the reason contemporary critical tools applied to study of Buddhism will make more of a contribution to contemporary culture through their appropriation by Buddhist tradition than through their exclusive use by and for the secular academy. In this regard, see for example Makransky: preface, chapters 1, 13. The discussion there represents an attempt to shed some light on future Mahayana doctrinal possibilities by using critical tools to illuminate the historical and structural nature of some past doctrinal developments around Buddhahood.

Roger Haight, a contemporary Roman Catholic theologian, has recently made observations regarding the pluralism of christologies observable in the New Testament and throughout the history of Christian reflection that are highly relevant to the present discussion. He says:

New Testament christologies differ because they are historical: the texts making up the New Testament were written by different authors, representing different communities, writing for different audiences, facing different problems. These different communities had different cultures, with different traditions, interests, and styles of speaking and understanding. Also, the subject matter, Jesus, displays any number of different facets of religious mediation. Historically, then, each New Testament text is historically situated and contextualized; it is the product of the inculturated interpretation and appropriation of Jesus of Nazareth... christology should be a pluralistic discipline today because Jesus Christ must be interpreted and culturally appropriated by particular communities today even as he was in the formation of the New Testament... To summarize the point in a sharp phrase, the New Testament does not merely tolerate a situation of pluralism in christology, it prescribes it.

... In a pluralistic situation one cannot consider one christology as exclusively authentic and valid so that all others must conform to it. This does not mean that all christologies are equally legitimate. Nor does it imply that certain standards and norms cannot be established to govern all christologies; they can. But it does imply that authority must appeal to more than simply the citation of an objectively defined christology (44-45).

The pluralism of interpretations of Buddhist principles in Mahayana texts are the products of communities of practice even more diverse than those that produced the New Testament. We must agree with Haight, though here with reference to the pluralism of Mahayana understandings starting from its sutras, that we cannot responsibly view one such understanding as "exclusively authentic and valid so that all others must conform to it." This does not mean that all systematic understandings are equally legitimate. The standard and norm remains the Four Noble Truths, to which systematic thought and practice has been held accountable in Mahayana as in pre-Mahayana traditions.¹² But like Haight's Jesus, the

¹² For example, the Bodhisattva resolve of *bodhicitta* (the resolve to fully awaken for all beings) constitutes a Mahayana response to the First Noble Truth of suffering with particular focus on its universality and ultimate undividedness. Mahayana teachings of

Four Noble Truths have displayed "any number of different facets of religious mediation." And, as the *Avatamsaka* so eloquently intimates, those Truths take expression in a limitless variety of ways found effective for experiential appropriation by a diversity of communities of practice and reflection. This leaves us with an irreducible pluralism of systematic perspectives that have supported awakening in and through the differing capacities, needs and cultural conditionings of diverse communities. We have no basis for arguing that all others conform to one systematic viewpoint where they can authentically defend their own viewpoint by reference to the Four Noble Truths and experience it as more transformatively effective.¹³ We should therefore get out of the habit of inserting our own current systematic perspective into Shakyamuni Buddha's mouth in the mistaken attempt to force such conformity.

Such has been the repeated misuse of our reverence for Shakyamuni Buddha. Accomplished members of practice communities in all Buddhist cultures past and present are the actual source of our wisdom through history, yet each of our traditions has repeatedly submerged or erased many of their voices, voices of the trans-historical Buddha, for ahistorical reconstructions of Shakyamuni that support our own exclusive understanding of the moment. If indeed Shakyamuni sought for others to awaken and teach the Dharma, the better way to demonstrate reverence for him would be to pay new attention to the plurality of voices of awakening he inspired: the "lion's roar" of the trans-historical Buddha that has echoed for so many centuries from Shakyamuni's time to our own.

An increased capacity to hear and revere Buddhist perspectives that had previously seemed alien from our own may also help us enter more seriously than in the past into dialogue with other religious and cultural traditions of our time. Perhaps some of the "four quadrillion names" of the Four Noble Truths can only be heard if we learn the mindfulness that permits echoes of the trans-historical Buddha's voice to be heard in the words of non-Buddhists.

emptiness/perfection of wisdom are deconstructive responses to the Second Noble Truth, the self-clinging that causes suffering, and diverse means of eliciting and expressing such wisdom comprise the paths (Fourth Truth) to full awakening and freedom (Third Truth) for several traditions of North and East Asia. Mahayanists have understood the Four Truths as foundational, while repeatedly reinterpreting them in conformity with the specific features of inculturated, i.e. living, practice experience.

¹³ The Four Noble Truths in their mutual relations have had a diversity of interpretations that are not merely speculative but intimately related to the practice experience of diverse communities. On the Mahayana quest for authentic reinterpretation of the Four Noble Truths as a driving force behind doctrinal transformation in light of practice experience, see Makransky, chapter 13.

In sum, this stage of Buddhist entry into our culture is a time to receive as much as we can from all sources of doctrine and practice, without cutting off prematurely something the tradition may need for its future by uncritically adopting the absolutizing and totalizing habits of *any* of the sectarian schemes of interpretation now promulgated in each of the traditions we inherit. This entails a critical re-examination of all prior systems of thought regarding the extent of their dependence on inadequate interpretive methods, accompanied by new systematic work that breaks from the ahistorical absolutism of many of those systems. If done in conformity with principles like those suggested here, this will constitute critical and constructive theological work. For the purpose of criticizing some prior methods of tradition is precisely to recover or re-emphasize other key principles of its thought and praxis in the light of historical consciousness. While doing this, however, we should be on our guard to avoid the modern (and very seductive) temptation to create new absolutisms that naively dismiss too much of a past we know too little of in the name of a narrow contemporary direction for Buddhism whose long term value may be quite limited.

This puts us in a ticklish position vis a vis the Buddhist traditions in which we continue to train. From one perspective, we seek to be profoundly, utterly formed by them. From another perspective, for us, as for all who have come before us, to take possession of the tradition is to find its authentic expression within our own place and time, in and through our historical and cultural being, including historical consciousness. As contemporary Mahayana thinkers, this is not just the responsibility to find our own authentic Buddhism. If we proceed wisely, it will be our culture's precious offering, through us, to the ancient Mahayana tradition we love. May it become such an offering, to be received and returned as a blessing upon our culture and our world.

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