

A Practical and Intellectual Agenda

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The time has long since gone when the study of Buddhism in the West was the preserve of a few scholars, or its influence confined to a handful of European intellectuals. The time is long since, too, when Buddhist *practice* in the West was a polite genuflection, 'meditation' merely the occasional ancillary to a self-defining intellectual conviction. Popular perception has altered too, and we are familiar enough now with Buddhist *chic*, with the movie stars photographed with smiling Lamas. But the current reality has become very interesting. Western Buddhism, especially in North America, is perceptibly becoming a popular movement, and the number even of mature practitioners of twenty years or more experience is surprisingly large. What is striking, however, is that although there is a reasonable number of journals dedicated to Buddhist scholarship, and to specific aspects of the Buddhist tradition, there is scarcely any regular interdisciplinary forum available for extended intellectual reflection about Buddhism or being Buddhist. So this journal has been started in order to satisfy a perceived need. Although it is intended for anyone with a critical, intellectual interest in Buddhism, it has a natural constituency within this new Western Buddhist population, that of an educated, critical Buddhist public concerned to relate intellectual issues to practical ones in the context of the Dharma, a public concerned to integrate their intellectual life into their Buddhist practice and experience. We hope, then, that we can contribute towards a(n) ecumenical) Buddhist culture in which the intellectual life and the life of spiritual practice mutually inform one another.

The real history of the developments that have led to the present condition of Buddhism in the West is partly written already, but there is still much to be said, and we hope that among other things our pages will be a place for some of it to be set down. But the repeated references to the West in these opening remarks should not be taken to indicate that the journal is to concern itself exclusively with the formations of Western Buddhism, or that its intended readership lies only within the Western Buddhist population. On the contrary, our title implies a wider interest in contemporary Buddhism as a whole, and this must naturally include the present condition of Asian Buddhism in all its variety. And it is scarcely to be doubted that, just as Western Buddhists have sometimes looked askance at the condition of Buddhism in Asia, Asian Buddhist thinkers have more than once had reason to cast a correcting sideways look at Western appropriations of Buddhism. Indeed, it is inevitable that *critical cultural comparison*, from many points of view, and from

more than one direction, is likely to figure large in these pages. The issue is not only to do with the complex relations between Western Buddhism and its many sources in the East, but, at the same time, with the wider cultures within which Buddhism has developed, and the complex relations between *them*. In the first place, Western Buddhism is a palpable product of Asian influence on Western thinking, and is, indeed, one of the points at which we are able to transcend the cautious, half-reluctant, mutual regard of multiculturalism, towards a genuine *inter-cultural* integration of perspectives. But the Buddhist influence is not simply one way. In the curious manner of these things, (and on a small scale, it must be said), the powerful and even oppressive global influence of Western culture carries fashionable versions of Buddhism back to its homelands, so that the sophisticated, and sometimes culturally alienated elites of those countries discover that it is not after all obligatory to despise their own Buddhist inheritance.

The late J.L. Mehta, an Indian philosopher well known as a commentator on Heidegger, once suggested that Western thought had entered into the thinking of the non-Western world 'like a Trojan horse': an innocent appearance, and a lethal effect overnight. But maybe there is a tiny trojan horse concealed within the body of the Trojan horse. Western science and technology arrive with an implicit, though not intrinsic, set of attitudes and (positivist) values that genuinely undermine traditional world views. After all, this is what has happened already to the secularised West. Nor do they as a matter of fact arrive without an extrinsic set of (materialist) values that genuinely undermine traditional customs and practices. It is not surprising that the non-Western recipients of Western culture begin to question and reject their own traditional religion and metaphysics, and lose their connection with the spiritual values that are therein embedded and seem thereon to depend. It is not surprising because it is the same secularising process that is still active in the West and that has caused the same kind of dismay among the guardians of the traditions. But what we all stand in need of is a critical account of 'spiritual values', the nature of their connection with 'religion', and of both with theism and metaphysics. The question concerns what might be accomplished by the trojan horse within the Trojan horse or, more prosaically, what negotiation might take place between the positivist temper of our dominant world view and the determinedly practical, anti-metaphysical temper of Buddhism and its offering of a non-religious spirituality whose fruit is claimed to depend upon a purification of consciousness that cleanses perception of obscurations we had not known were there.

Contemporary Buddhism, then, is intended to provide an ecumenical forum for conversations that include not only Buddhist voices, but the voices too of interested non-Buddhists. The success of a conversation depends upon the number of voices *heard*, and conversation fails when it is dominated by only one or two obsessives who can hear no one else. It is an interdisciplinary journal whose intended readership includes, as we have said, an educated, critical Buddhist public, who want access to more discursive and extended reflection,

more discussion and analysis of the full range of issues that concern them, than is currently available. We take it that these issues include quite general questions about Buddhist ideas and practice and about their history and the vicissitudes of their transmission. There are more specifically existential questions about what constitutes someone a Buddhist at all, about what counts as an appropriation of the Dharma, and about the idea of Sangha and its relation to the formation of persons. There are also more topical and particular questions about the current state of Buddhism in this place or that, and, in these dark times, the possibilities for Buddhist cultural criticism. There are plenty of excellent journals dedicated to Buddhist scholarship, and though we hardly wish to exclude such scholarship from these pages, our main concern is to help promote an intellectual Buddhist culture grounded in practice.

Practice is an issue because it raises the question of the individual being of the scholar or intellectual who engages with Buddhism, and is anyway claimed in the traditions to determine the formation and application of those experiential concepts that give the means of access to the subterranean sources of distinctively Buddhist perspectives: and whose absence, presumably, reduces our purchase on what is there to be studied. Though it is not to be doubted, on the other hand, that archaeologists who never dig can still report back useful findings.

We expect that in the main our contributors will be Buddhist thinkers from across the academic and intellectual disciplines, that is to say, Buddhist practitioners who wish to reflect upon the impact of their practice upon their intellectual life, and critically to deploy such Buddhist concepts as might be appropriate to their fields of theoretical or cultural concern. But the pages of this journal are open also to thinkers from other spiritual and moral traditions who wish to make comparisons, trace influences and explore connections, or, indeed, to challenge Buddhist representations of themselves. We do after all define ourselves through the registering of both similarities and differences, so our representations both of similarity and of difference had better be accurate, and we had better compare like with like. Such an injunction might seem otiose to those who have not witnessed or discovered themselves implicated in that common, almost unconscious, human temptation towards caricature, the valorising of one's own tradition over against another by comparing the best, most sophisticated, most sensitive version of the one with the worst, crudest, least nuanced of the other. It is a plain enough fact that many of us 'in the West', and thus many of the potential contributors to this journal, came to Buddhism from either a Judeo-Christian or a secularised background. So we belong to and have been to some degree formed by a fraught and dreadful history of religious intolerance and persecution, then of religious doubt, and, more recently, the progressive secularisation and 'materialism' that is now such a substantial portion of the Western heritage pressingly on offer to the rest of the world. It is an offer the Buddhist resistance to which requires, as we have started to indicate, the beating of a path between theism and physicalism, so widely nowadays seen to represent the exclusive options. Asian and East-Asian Buddhist thinkers are situated somewhat differently from

Western Buddhists, and their self-definition not only stands over against aggressive Western cultural forces, but needs to locate itself within the network of its own regional spiritual traditions.

The leave-taking of a secularised world-picture, and indeed of secular humanism, is fraught in a different way, and maybe represents one of our most formidable contemporary intellectual problems. One has to articulate and ground the proper limits of agnosticism, and of a distinctively Buddhist sense of transcendence which allows us to sail between the Scylla and Charybdis of anthropology and metaphysics, of secularism and theological realism. Such turbulent marine spaces are not pleasant places to find oneself in or to have to navigate one's way through, and the problem is probably not so much to find a middle way between two well-understood and rocky options, as to re-examine the terms of the dichotomy, since it is not so very clear, under the discipline of Buddhist practice, what is to constitute either an anthropology or a human nature, on the one hand, or what is to count as a metaphysics, on the other, since such practice may put pressure on any fixed conception of either of these. This is not a uniquely contemporary intellectual task, we shall want to know of analogues in Buddhist history, and we expect that a number of contributors to these pages will offer (no doubt contested) re-assessments of the great Buddhist thinkers of the various traditions, who cannot be counted intellectually discerning just because they are good or widely revered Buddhists.

We sometimes bring into our appropriation of Buddhism a mental template that belongs more to what we have left behind than to what we are now discovering, a template which may well be unconscious, and which may well distort our understanding of Buddhism. It is significant, for instance, how easily Buddhists can transfer or project onto Buddhism a discourse of belief that belongs to the quite different religious formations of Judeo-Christianity and Islam. So here is one pretty clear agenda for a journal such as this one, the judicious clarification of similarity and difference between traditions, and the irenic correction of misrepresentation. As far as this latter is concerned, Buddhist intellectuals still have work to do to correct the distorted picture of Buddhism that has become a complacently unexamined commonplace in some postmodernist intellectual circles, that have simply received without question the (pessimist and nihilist) assessments of Buddhism transmitted by such thinkers as Hegel, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.

But these Western assessments of Buddhism are an obvious point of departure for Buddhist intellectuals concerned to see what kinds of estimate of the Western traditions might be available from a Buddhist perspective. However, it is common nowadays to think of 'perspective' and 'point of view' in at least a relativist and sometimes in an idealist spirit, as though the perspective or the point of view itself brought into existence the very thing it gives us access to. But of course it does no such thing, and it would be futile to encourage *critical comparison* on these terms. There are features of a common landscape that can be seen better from here than from there: this height commands a view to the horizon.

but anyone who knows the terrain will point out that the view occludes the swamps hidden by those trees. But in any event our metaphor only takes us so far in dealing with the issues of the spiritual life and the problems of communication and dialogue that belong to them, whether our perspective is Buddhist or non-Buddhist. At least in the Buddhist tradition there is a further demand on our stock of metaphors and sleep and noxious substances can provide terms for reflecting on the nature of our access to reality. The issue is not so much what can be better seen from here or there, as whether or not our viewing mind is infected by the defilements, contaminated by the mental poisons, heavy with sleep.

It may be, as the poet John Donne said, that 'on a huge hill, cragg'd and steep, Truth stands', and that 'he who would reach her about must, and about must goe', but it is also the case that the one who would thus 'go about' must needs be unintoxicated (*apramāda*). Metaphors give us angles on things, but can fixate us too on just those angles. Perhaps Buddhist practice allows us the pause or the interlude in which we can see things anew and start to hear each other. If human life is contaminated in the way that Buddhism avers, then it is likely that our intellectual life and deportment in dialogue share that condition, and stand as much in need of *practice* as the rest of life.