

H **B**UDDHIST H **E**RMENEUTICS

Edited by
Donald S. Lopez, Jr



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Standard abbreviations for collections of scripture cited throughout this volume are as follows:

- P Peking edition of the *Tibetan Tripitaka* Tokyo-Kyoto, 1956
T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* Tokyo, 1914-1922
ZZ *Dainihon zokuzōkyō* Revised edition Tokyo, 1950-

DONALD S. LOPEZ, JR.

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Introduction

DONALD S. LOPEZ, JR

Then the Bhagavan addressed the venerable Ānanda: “It may be, Ānanda, that some of you will think, ‘The word of the Teacher is a thing of the past, we have now no Teacher.’ But that, Ānanda, is not the correct view. The Doctrine and the Discipline, Ānanda, which I have taught and enjoined upon you is to be your teacher when I am gone.”¹

These last instructions of the Buddha before his passage into nirvāna attempt to address the dilemma of a religious community upon the death of its founder. Where, in his absence, shall authority reside? The Buddha instructs Ānanda that it is his teaching that shall be the teacher. But what, exactly, was his teaching and what does it mean for the teaching to be the teacher? It was the contemplation of these questions that led to what can be called Buddhist hermeneutics.

The term “hermeneutics” is heard frequently today in the fields of Biblical studies, philosophy, and literary criticism. It has been variously defined, encompassing notions of translation, exegesis, interpretation, and understanding.² For the purposes of this volume, hermeneutics will be broadly conceived as concerned with establishing principles for the retrieval of meaning, especially from a text. Hermeneutics is by no means a new science; sophisticated systems of interpretation were devised by the Talmudic rabbis and by the early Church fathers. However, current interest in hermeneutics is focused primarily on more modern theories of interpretation, a tradition beginning with the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher and continuing into the twentieth century with such figures as Martin Heidegger, Rudolf Bultmann, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur.

The interpretation of sacred scripture is, of course, a concern which is not confined to the Judeo-Christian tradition. It is also a major issue in

Buddhism, where the problems faced by the interpreters of the Buddha's word were somewhat different from those found in the West. First, Buddhism has a vast sacred canon, a fact due both to the length of the Buddha's teaching career and to the posthumous attribution of many discourses to him, especially by the Mahāyāna Sūtras continued to be composed for over a millennium after the Buddha's death. As philosophical and soteriological problems arose in the unfolding of the tradition, new texts, claiming the authority of the word of the Buddha, were composed to address those problems and to validate certain doctrinal positions. Indeed, it may be that one reason for the relative dearth of hermeneutical strategies in Buddhism when compared to the Jewish and Christian traditions is the size and plastic nature of the Mahāyāna canon. Whereas Origen, for example, had to develop his famous trichotomy of the literal, moral, and spiritual levels of scripture in order to find the truths of pagan philosophy in the Bible, the Buddhists seemed to have simply written a new sūtra or interpolated new material into an existing text. The authority of these texts was not, for the most part, questioned by the Mahāyāna savants, who were continually faced with the problem of interpreting these doctrines in light of myriad others, all in an attempt to have 'the teaching be the teacher'.

Besides the sheer bulk of the canon (for example, were the Chinese Buddhist canon translated into English, it would require more than 500,000 pages to print), the Buddhist schools of India, Southeast Asia, Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan were confronted with another problem in their attempt to interpret the Buddha's teaching: just as a physician does not prescribe the same medicine to cure all maladies, the Buddha did not teach the same thing to everyone. Or, as Nāgārjuna says in the *Ratnāvalī* (IV 94-96)

Just as grammarians
Begin with reading the alphabet,
The Buddha teaches doctrines
That students can bear

To some he teaches doctrines
For the reversal of sin,
To some, in order to win merit,
To some, doctrines based on duality

To some [he teaches doctrines] based on nonduality
To some, the profound, frightening to the fearful,
Having an essence of emptiness and compassion,
The means of achieving highest enlightenment.³

The Buddha is said to have taught different things to different people based on their interests, dispositions, capacities, and levels of intelligence. Furthermore, the tradition maintained that as a Buddha, an enlightened being, his teachings must be free of error and contradiction. But how is one to harmonize the statement “the self is one’s protector” with the statement that “there is no self”? How can the advice that suffering is to be identified, its origin abandoned, its cessation actualized, and the path to that cessation cultivated be seen as compatible with the declaration that “there is no suffering, no origin, no cessation, no path”? And given the enormity of the literature attributed to the Buddha, how is one to interpret the statement “From the night that he attained enlightenment to the night that he passed into nirvāna, the Tathāgata did not utter a single word”?

The major schools of Buddhist philosophy in India each set forth its own opinion as to the nature of the Buddha’s final view. They were still faced with the difficulty, however, of accounting for those statements that seemed to contradict what they understood the Buddha’s final position to be on some point of doctrine. This problem provided the impetus for the development of interpretative formulae in India, the formal beginning of Buddhist hermeneutics. The situation was further complicated by the existence of interpretative guidelines in discourses attributed to the Buddha himself, the Buddha was seen in some instances to provide autocommentaries in which he explained what he meant by some previous teaching, while in other instances he provided rules for the interpretation of his own statements. One such guideline was that found in the *Catuhpratisaranasūtra*, in which the Buddha provided four reliances

- Rely on the teaching, not the teacher
- Rely on the meaning, not the letter
- Rely on the definitive meaning (*nītārtha*), not the interpretable meaning (*neyārtha*)
- Rely on wisdom (*jñāna*), not on [ordinary] consciousness (*viñāna*)

Another schema is that provided in the seventh chapter of the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*, where the teaching of the Buddha is divided into three stages or wheels of doctrine, with the first two being declared provisional and the third and final stage definitive.

The situation in China was complicated by several factors, beginning with the fact that when the Buddhist teachings entered China during the Han dynasty, they entered a culture quite alien to that of India. Furthermore, the Buddhist sūtras arrived in a haphazard fashion, and the

Chinese were soon bewildered by the conflicting claims to authority made by various texts and teachers. They responded by devising a number of classification systems (*p'an-chiao*) which attempted to order the various sūtras and sūtra genres according to when they were taught by the Buddha and to whom. As was the case in India, a divergence of opinion occurred as to which sūtra constituted the Buddha's highest and final teaching, with the T'ien-t'ai school, for example, placing the *Lotus Sūtra (Saddharmapundarīka)* atop its hierarchy and the Hua-yen school assigning the *Avatamsakasūtra* to that position.

The Japanese appropriated the Chinese rubrics at first but came to take a more radical and exclusionary hermeneutical stance during the Kamakura period when the Zen, Pure Land, and Nichiren schools each claimed that their interpretation of the teachings of the Buddha constituted the sole vehicle to enlightenment.

The Tibetans, benefiting from the relatively late propagation of Buddhism in their snowy land, were able to systematize the various interpretative strategies devised in India. They also took over the task of seeking to find meaning and consistency in the often cryptic tantric literature, and developed hermeneutical principles to that end.

The hermeneutical dilemma faced by Buddhism in its various forms is summarized by Robert A. F. Thurman:

Imagine for a moment that Jesus taught for about fifty years, to close disciples numbering in the thousands, that his pedagogical aim and skill were such that he formulated doctrines to resonate precisely with the abilities and inclinations of each disciple, that while recommending devotionism to many, he taught others to rely on the intellect, and still others to rely on works motivated by love and compassion, that he constantly demanded critical reflection on the deeper meaning of his teachings, that he sometimes even provided conceptual schemes with which to interpret his own doctrines, which schemes sometimes included dismissal of the ultimate validity of a teaching he had previously set forth unequivocally, that it sometimes happened that two such schemes referred to each other as merely conditional, valid only in that other context, and that in spite of these apparent contradictions he had to be accepted as a supreme authority, incapable of self-contradiction, and finally that different groups of his disciples preserved traditional records of his promulgations in different places, some not even knowing of the existence of the others during certain periods during and after the Teacher's lifetime. It is easy to see that all this would result in the situation for all later generations in which a bewildering profusion of doctrines, all embedded in hallowed scriptural traditions, is presented as uniformly authentic.⁴

The essays in this volume demonstrate the various ways in which Buddhist exegetes dealt with this situation. It is not the purpose of this

volume to identify some specific and unique “Buddhist” hermeneutic, but rather to suggest some of the problems encountered by Buddhist scholars in the interpretation of their scriptures, as well as the principles of interpretation that they developed in response to those problems.

It would be difficult to summarize here the salient points of each of the essays in the volume. However, there are a number of recurrent issues that appear central to the hermeneutical enterprise in Buddhism and that warrant brief consideration. These include the use of the doctrine of *upāya* as a hermeneutical principle, the role of spiritual development in understanding a text, the relationship between hermeneutics and soteriology, and the question of the existence of historical consciousness in Buddhism.

As we have seen, a belief common to the major schools of Buddhist thought in Asia is that the Buddha did not teach the same thing to all, but rather expediently adapted his message to meet the specific needs of his audience. Based on his knowledge of the interests, needs, and capacities of his listeners, he is said to have taught what was most appropriate for each. Furthermore, his approach seems to have been facultative rather than dogmatic with regard to the acceptance of his teachings. He adjured his followers to adopt only what they found to be apodictic.

Like gold that is melted, cut, and polished,
So should monks and scholars
Analyze my words [before] accepting them,
They should not do so out of respect.⁵

But how should these words be analyzed? It was the conviction of the various Buddhist schools that the Buddha was not an agnostic, moreover, his teachings were never regarded as ultimately contentless forms to be filled by interpretations projected by his followers as in a Rorschach inkblot. Rather, it was their belief that the antinomic character of his teaching was only apparent and that his final view could be ascertained. Seeking to determine this final view became an overriding concern in Buddhist hermeneutics, and it is not surprising that the doctrine of *upāya*, of the Buddha’s skillful methods in teaching the doctrine, which caused such problems in the interpretation of scripture should itself become a principle by which that interpretation was undertaken. Peter Gregory points out that the various Chinese *p’an-chiao* classifications were based on the notion of *upāya*, that the Buddha’s teaching was bound by context. *Upāya* also seems to form the basis of textual taxonomies that are as ostensibly disparate as those set forth in the Theravāda *Netti Pakarana* and Kūkai’s *Jūjūshimon*. As George Bond shows, the Theravādin exegetes based their hermeneutical strategy on the idea of a

gradual path to enlightenment. Hence, they delineated a typology of persons, based on factors such as level of spiritual development and temperament, to whom the Buddha addressed his teaching. They then classified the *suttas* and their appropriate audiences, forming a correlation between types of scriptures and types of personalities. The exegetes were thus able to construe a “hierarchy of means and ends necessary to relate the *dharmma* to a variety of people and yet to maintain the belief in one ultimate goal and one ultimate meaning of the *dharmma*.”

Kūkai’s ten stages, discussed by Thomas Kasulis, were far more comprehensive in scope, attempting to encompass all spiritual levels from the ramlike state of ignorance to the enlightened Shingon participation in the dharmakāya, and all the philosophies current in Heian Japan, including Confucianism and Taoism as well as the various Buddhist schools. However, like the Theravāda, Kūkai envisioned a progression from lowest to highest through appropriate spiritual development ending finally in the experience of enlightenment.

As I note in my essay on the interpretation of the Mahāyāna sūtras in India, upāya did not function simply as a hermeneutic of accommodation, in which all the Buddha’s teachings are understood as appropriate, it also served as a hermeneutic of control, whereby rival philosophies are subsumed. Even the Ch’an school, renowned as “a special transmission outside the scriptures,” selectively used scripture to uphold sectarian positions, as Robert Buswell demonstrates. Thus, each school placed a different text or teaching at the pinnacle of its hierarchy: for Kūkai it was his own Shingon school, for T’ien-t’ai it was the *Lotus Sūtra*, and for Hua-yen, the *Avatamsakasūtra*. Candrakīrti looked to the *Aksayamatīnirdeśasūtra* for his understanding of what constitutes the definitive (*nītārtha*) and the interpretable (*neyārtha*) while the *Samdhinirmocana* provided these criteria for the Yogācāra. As Lamotte notes, “Each school tends to take literally the doctrinal texts which conform to its theses and to consider those which cause dilemmas as being of provisional meaning.” This trend makes the Ch’an and Hua-yen patriarch Tsung-mi’s recognition of the danger in the perfect teaching of the interpenetration of phenomena and phenomena (*shih shih wu ai*), as discussed by Peter Gregory, particularly intriguing.

It would be misleading, however, to see the hermeneutical concern with upāya as motivated purely by intersectarian polemic. It is motivated by a more difficult problem: what was the most exalted vision of the Buddha? To what final truth was he leading his disciples with his skillful methods? Robert Buswell correctly identifies the fundamental question of Mahāyāna hermeneutics: what was the content of the Buddha’s enlightenment? Korean Ch’an addressed this question by attempting to make the step from the principles by which the truth is

explained to the direct experience of that truth, labeling theoretical statements “dead words” and statements that effect realization “live words”

This distinction leads immediately to the question of establishing the Buddha’s intention in giving a specific teaching. As I note in my essay, this concern with intention may very well run counter to modern trends in hermeneutics, but its centrality to the Buddhist interpretation of scripture is undeniable. Indeed, Michael Broido remarks that “it seems wholly plausible that we shall be able to make sense of the Buddhist hermeneutical enterprise by seeing it as founded upon intention-ascription” (Broido shows that this is equally true of the tantras as well as of the sūtras.) The various hermeneutical tools devised by the Buddhists, including the categories of the definitive (*nītārtha*) and the interpretable (*neyārtha*), the four special intentions (*abhiṣprāya*) and the four hidden intentions (*abhisamdhi*) (all discussed by Lamotte), as well as the seven ornaments (*alamkāra*) and the six alternatives or parameters (*koti*) employed in the interpretation of the tantras (discussed by Robert Thurman), are all concerned in some way with determining the intention of a particular statement.

If the goal of Mahāyāna philosophy is to bring oneself and others to the experience of enlightenment, which is nothing more or less than a repetition of the experience of the Buddha, then the attempt to establish the intention of the author, the goal of what Gadamer terms the Romantic endeavor, has strong soteriological overtones for the Buddhist. In this respect, the discussion of the intended audience of a given teaching is not merely a device by which one can relegate one’s opponent to the audience of a provisional teaching. Rather, it is a means by which the interpreter attempts to find his own place among the circle surrounding the Buddha.

If the Buddhist interpreters sought in their way to follow Schleiermacher’s dictum that to understand the text one must experience the mental processes of the author, then the interpreters were compelled to become enlightened, and that, indeed, would seem to be their ultimate goal. It would follow, then, that it is the experience of the Buddha’s enlightenment that provides final validity in interpretation. Étienne Lamotte derives this position from the fact that the last of the four reliances is to rely on wisdom (*jñāna*) and not on ordinary consciousness (*vyjñāna*). For Lamotte, this wisdom “constitutes the single and indispensable instrument of true exegesis.” His view is supported by the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* (VIII 24) which says

Through a wisdom arisen from [hearing] the doctrine, Bodhisattvas base themselves upon the words [of the sūtras], take the text literally, and do not

yet understand the intention Through a wisdom arisen from thinking, Bodhisattvas do not base themselves solely upon the words or take the meaning literally, and understand the intention Through a wisdom arisen from meditation, Bodhisattvas either base themselves on the words or do not, either take the text literally or do not, but they understand the intention, manifested through the images which are the object of the *samādhi* that accords with the nature of things ⁶

Indeed, meditational and visionary experience have played an important role in the interpretation of religious texts In the case of Buddhism, there are many examples, such as Shinran's revelation of the implosion of all practice into the *nembutsu* and Tsong-kha-pa's vision in which Buddhapālita placed his commentary on the *Madhyamakāśāstra* upon Tsong-kha-pa's head, thereby signifying that his was the Indian commentary to follow Sadly, perhaps, the visions and experiences of enlightenment of the exegetes are by no means uniform, raising the question, which Roger Corless takes up, of the line between valid interpretation and misreading—is the manipulation of texts to conform to sectarian viewpoints justified by religious experience? Here, Gershom Scholem's observation that the mystical approach to sacred texts contains two complementary or contradictory elements, the conservative and the revolutionary, seems especially germane He writes

Precisely because they preserve the foundations of the traditional authority for all time, they are able to treat Scripture with the almost unlimited freedom that never ceases to amaze us in the writings of the mystics, a freedom even to despair, as in our metaphor of the wrong keys Recognition of the unaltered validity of the traditional authority is the price which these mystics pay for transforming the meaning of the texts in their exegesis As long as the framework is kept intact, the conservative and revolutionary elements in this type of mystic preserve their balance, or perhaps it would be better to say, their creative tension ⁷

Bracketing the question of whether Buddhism is "mystical," it would seem that the tension between the revolutionary and the conservative exists also in Buddhism, a tension that Matthew Kapstein discerns in Buddhist technical terminology between scripture (*āgama*) and realization (*adhigama*)

Thus, the dictum that enlightenment provides the final criterion for interpretation raises as many questions as it settles, for Buddhism is a tradition that has developed in history, with new interpretations formulated to resolve crises, scriptures used to legitimate these new interpretations, and those interpretations propagated to establish their superiority (This threefold process is illustrated by David Chappell in the cases of the Ch'an and Pure Land schools in China)

The question remains, then, whether enlightenment obviates hermeneutics. Nevertheless it seems certain that without enlightenment, there must be hermeneutics—which, as Alan Sponberg noted at the conference, provides the soteric function of serving as a technique for divesting oneself of illusion, a radical hermeneutics of suspicion. Those who are not yet enlightened must interpret. The Buddhist exegete suffers from a displacement, an absence, he did not sit in the circle at the feet of the Buddha and hear the doctrine that was intended especially for him. Now the Buddha is gone, the audience is gone, now the teaching must be the teacher. The exegete is constantly in search of his place in the absent circle, and his hermeneutics provide the compass.

Some have objected to the application of modern hermeneutical theory to Buddhism because Buddhism lacks the historical consciousness that has, in large part, defined the hermeneutical enterprise since Heidegger. But there is historical consciousness in Buddhism, often understood in terms of one's temporal distance from the Buddha, as in the various theories of the degeneration of the doctrine, or in the attempts to account for the late appearance of the Mahāyāna sūtras and the tantras, or the emphasis on lineage in the Ch'an and Tibetan traditions. In his remarks at the conference, Carl Bielefeldt observed that the very fact that there is something called hermeneutics in Buddhism is a sign of alienation, of distance from a tradition that Buddhist thinkers felt the need to somehow recover. He also discussed the tension between the historical and ahistorical as manifested in Chih-i's use of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Chih-i encompassed the doctrine of the Buddha in four teachings: the Hīnayāna sūtras teach being, the early Mādhyamika teaches nonbeing, the tathāgatagarbha teaches both, and the perfect teaching, that of the *Lotus Sūtra*, neither. Chih-i saw these four teachings as unfolding sequentially in the teachings of the Buddha historically and as unfolding in the experience of the practitioner as well. But such a historical system raises an entirely new set of questions, for if we are living in an age in which the perfect teaching has been fully revealed, what is left for us to discover? Such questions suggest that the relationship between the historical and the ahistorical, of the putatively timeless nature of the Buddha's enlightenment and the manifestation of that enlightenment in time, calls for our further reflection.

Among the questions left unexplored in this volume is that of the hermeneutical enterprise not of the ancient Buddhist exegete but of the modern western Buddhologist. Although it is impossible in light of the work of Gadamer to separate the study of Buddhist hermeneutics from the question of the hermeneutics—the principles and presuppositions of interpretation—of the modern scholars who today interpret Buddhist texts, such a separation is attempted here (perhaps naively), with the