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Trickster-Like Teachings in Tibetan Buddhism: Shortcuts towards Destroying Illusions

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ABSTRACT

Trickster-like Dharma teachings in Tibetan Buddhism behave as a kind of shortcuts in the approach to leading people along the path of enlightenment. This essay collects three such teachings of different levels towards destroying illusions, i.e., Buddha's silence, Guru's paradox, and Ego's kleshas. They are necessary as "an ace up the sleeve" for Buddha to destruct disciples' metaphysical quagmire, for Guru to lead community toward perfect transcendence, and for individuals to attain self-consciousness.

Keywords: Trickster; Buddhism; enlightenment; consciousness.

1. INTRODUCTION

A trickster is any person or thing which acts as not only the rebel against authority but also the

breaker of all taboos to enlighten minds through levity, humor, or creative mischief [1]. Appearing as a cunning and/or foolish role played in the myths of different cultural and historical

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dimensions in different concepts, a trickster brings about positive even sacred effects in taking the form of practical jokes or thievery to violate commonly accepted social rules or norms, sometimes maliciously [2].

The definition of trickster varies pertaining to different dimensions in the cultural practice of indigenous people and the metaphysical reasoning of elites' abstractive thinking. Each trickster is unique in a specific practice and/or reasoning. A group of influential ones are illustrated in Fig. 1. Firstly, Jungian psychology is one of the European metaphysical theories, and shares intimate affinities with the Idealist tradition of philosophy [3]. In the Jungian paradigm, the trickster behaves as one figure in the claimed several metaphysical archetypes of the collective unconscious to demonstrate "the importance of the individual psyche and the personal quest for wholeness" [4].

Secondly, in contrast to the description of Native Americans that a trickster takes the form of earthbound human-like animals, e.g., coyote, which is constantly trying but always failing to transcend the fate by attempting to fly, [5] Hyde presents a cultural definition which extends the trickster as one of the gods or the messenger of the gods, which is "the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox" to perform as both a boundary-crosser and a boundary-creator of the world by crossing physical and/or social boundaries [6]. Based on his discussions, artists and some creative individuals often have much of the trickster in them [7].

Thirdly, among the eastern philosophers cultivated by ancient Chinese culture, there exists a cluster of Taoist Scholé (Leisure) sages who are considered as trickster-type characters, like Zhuangzi (c. 369-286 BC). The definition of the trickster here is purely metaphysical, but different from both Jung's psychological concept and Hyde's mythic idea, on that it refers to Aristotle-like synoptic thinkers who are able to develop an over-arching theory that ties together all aspects and fields, [8] while employing various modes of rhetoric, mostly expressed through philosophical demonstrations, to "establish and legitimate normative authority for the particular way of life" endorsed by them [9].

Lastly, the word of trickster is used in Tibetan literature and religion respectively for different purposes. On the one side, there is a popular group of tricksters which exist in Tibetan folk tales. Among them is the famous AkhuTönpa who demonstrates his wicked humors in the daily life to help serfs and all the poor people in the struggle of survival against greedy, cunning, and scoundrel lords [10]. On the other side, the stylistic and thematic hybrid during the 7th-15th centuries between the Han-Mahayana Buddhist culture and the indigenous pre-Buddhist Bön culture leads to the formation of three types of special tricksters as the "Illusion" destroyers in Tibetan Bön-Buddhist (simply hereafter, Buddhist) religious practices: the subtle Buddha-trickster, the charismatic Guru-trickster, and the abstruse Ego-trickster.

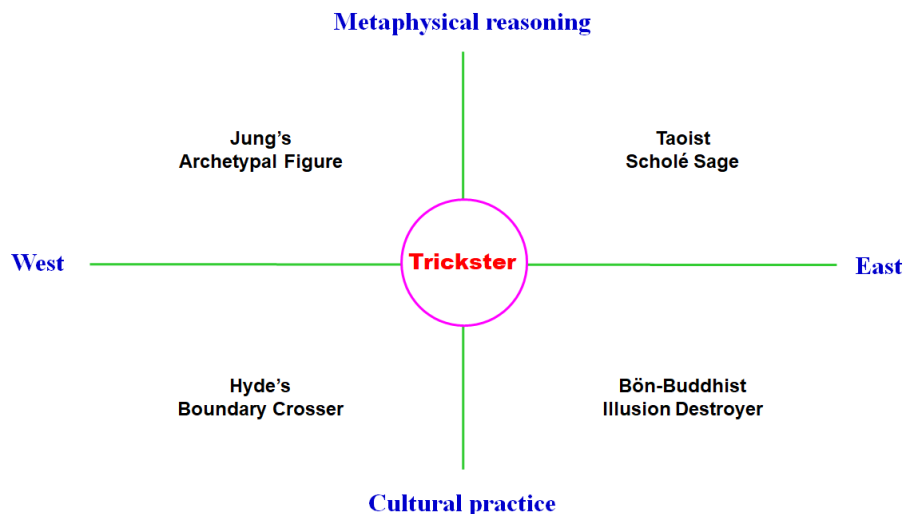


Fig. 1. Nomenclature of tricksters in cultural practice and metaphysical reasoning

This essay introduces the unusual trickster-like teachings in Tibetan Buddhism to lead people along the path of enlightenment. The methodology employed to carry out the study lies in the following two steps: (1) Offering a general characterization and classification of different types of tricksters; (2) Exposing the significance of the trickster-like teachings to guide beings away from rigid, irreconcilable facets in reality. The layout of the paper is as follows. Section 2 focuses on Buddha's trickster-like teaching presented in his tricking silence to metaphysical questions. Section 3 describes Guru-trickster teaching, by taking Dalai Lama as an example, shown in his tricking argument on the cosmic evolution. Section 4 elaborates the Ego-trickster and its tricking properties in the transcendence of self-consciousness. Finally, Section 5 gives conclusions.

2. BUDDHA-TRICKSTER TO DESTRUCT METAPHYSICAL QUAGMIRE

Fundamentally as a literary character in the early Pali Canon of Buddhism [11], Buddha appears as a compassionate trickster whose actions embody the paradoxical and/or provocative states of the unconditioned, both deceptive and illusive, tricks to "enable those who experience them to put an end to defilements through unmistakable and often funny encounters with their own impermanent limitations" along the path to awakening [12].

The dominant trick Buddha used is his silence when facing 14 metaphysical questions, a treatment of the fundamental Buddhist tradition to destroy metaphysical illusions and stimulate spiritual growth for enlightenment. It influences Madhyamika, Yogacara, and in particular, Zen Buddhism [13]. These questions are divided into four groups: [14] Group 1 deals with Time, including (1) Is the Universe eternal? (2) Is the Universe non-eternal? (3) Is the universe at one and the same time eternal and non-eternal? (4) Is the Universe neither eternal nor non-eternal? Group 2 deals with Space, including (5) Is the Universe infinite? (6) Is the Universe finite? (7) Is the Universe at one and the same time infinite and finite? (8) Is the Universe neither infinite nor finite? Group 3 deals with Soul & Body, including (9) Are the soul and the body identical? (10) Are the soul and the body non-identical? And, Group 4 deals with the Survival of Buddha, including (11) Does Buddha survive death? (12) Does Buddha not survive death? (13) Does Buddha both survive and not survive death? and, (14)

Does Buddha neither survive nor not survive death? [15].

The Buddha's silence demonstrates the core of Buddhist doctrine, the Middle Path between Eternalism or Nihilism, to manifest the principle of Dependent Origination (Pratītyasamutpāda) in the way of destroying illusions and transforming insights into Emptiness (śūnyatā). The silence ignores the principle of non-contradiction, and offers a paradoxical view to illustrate the ineffable reality of some logical questions like, either A or B; neither A nor B; or, not neither A nor B: [13] on the one hand, the silence implies to admit some validity of the words, symbols, or metaphors to describe the ineffable reality; on the other hand, it entails that the words, symbols, or metaphors are not the perfect tools to describe the ineffable realm.

The trick of silence reflects the wisdom of Buddha to destroy the illusions for the exact answers of these metaphysical questions which are helpless in spiritual awakening: First of all, the questions do not have much to do with the basic teachings of the Buddha: (1) Three Dharma Seals (Tri-drsti-namitta-mudrā), i.e., impermanence, non-self, and nirvana; (2) Four Noble Truths (cattāriyāsaccāni), i.e., suffering, cause of suffering, end of suffering, and, the path that leads to the end of suffering; (3) Noble Eightfold Path (ariyaṅgaṅgikomagga), i.e., right view, resolve, speech, conduct, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and, perfect meditation; and, (4) Twelve Nidānas (paṭicca-samuppāda-aṅga), i.e., ignorance, fabrication, rebirth consciousness, name & form, six entrances, contact, sense, craving, attachment, becoming, birth, and aging-deceasing. Secondly, the questions are so abstract that they lead people to go astray, lose the way, and waste the time in the ego-transcending practice (Sādhana) during the short secular life. Thirdly, they are so inscrutable due to the limitations of language, which is bounded merely within the ranges of familiar things and ideas confined to time, space and origin, that normal people are unable to understand the answers. Finally, Buddha is not a computer to reply any kinds of questions without thinking; instead, he is a practical teacher full of compassion and wisdom, and pay attention mainly to what are helpful for the questioners to follow the right path toward destroying illusions to gain enlightenments.

Therefore, behaving as a trickster, Buddha adopts silence to treat metaphysical problems. This response supersedes any eloquence for the

listeners. More importantly, the tricking silence displays Buddha's deep concerns and considerations to the puzzlers entangled in the mesh of logical and/or metaphysical issues.

3. GURU-TRICKSTER TO ATTAIN PERFECT TRANSCENDENCE

The deluded ego makes our secular people to own a mind which is chaotic. Ignorance and darkness blind our eyes to hardly see ourselves clearly, but trust illusions which resist the self-realization. As the destroyer of illusion, the guru is both a mirror to reflect our inner self and a trickster to gleefully goads us to grow the perception of emptiness beyond hope and fear and the awareness of the universal law of the dependent origination.

In his masterpiece, *The Universe in a Single Atom* [16], His Holiness the Dalai Lama admitted that "our universe ... is continuously evolving and expanding," a similar view to that assumed by the modern *big-bang* cosmological model. However, he provocatively argued that "the idea that there is a single definite beginning is highly problematic": if such an absolute beginning exists, only two options are possible, theism and causationlessness. While the former "proposes that the universe is created by an intelligence that is totally transcendent" and therefore against the law of cause and effect, the latter "is that the universe came into being from no cause at all", also in opposition to the law of cause and effect. This paradoxical argument does force readers to turn to Tsong kha pa's doctrine on Wisdom of Emptiness [17] so as to be able to destroy the accompanying illusions in the full spectrum of consciousness.

Set forth by the Buddha and explicated by Nagarjuna of Madhyamaka, the most profound Buddhist wisdom was the knowledge of Emptiness. It refers to the fact that everything in the universe, from various physical forms to the omniscient consciousness of the Buddha, is contingent without exception, and featured by the dependence for its existence on its causes, its parts, or a designating consciousness, while devoid of an independent or intrinsic nature; that is to say, nothing in reality is able to stand alone by itself and on itself, and to exist in and of itself [17].

The tenet of the Emptiness philosophy is the emptiness of the Emptiness: "it does not have an existence on its own, nor does it refer to a transcendental reality beyond or above

phenomenal reality" [18]. The state of the full consciousness of the intensive and extensive emptiness is characterized by the Dharma-Realm Essence [19] without birth or death, without being or non-being, without defilement or purity, and, without increasing or decreasing.[20] In the Yogachara (or, Consciousness-only) School, it refers to the Amala consciousness, corresponding to the state of Tathāgatagarbha, the ultimate, pure, ungraspable, inconceivable, irreducible, unassailable, boundless, true and deathless quintessence of Buddha's emancipatory reality [21]. This is the state of Nirvana to manifest four perfect transcendences: [22] Perfect permanence due to the realization of the samsara-nirvana unity; Perfect happiness due to the disappearance of the five aggregates and their causes; Perfect self due to the transcendence of the conceptual constructions of the self and non-self; and, Perfect purity due to the pure dharmakaya in nature.

Therefore, thanks to the trickster-like wisdom of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, it is evident that the Buddhist Emptiness philosophy does not refer to that "everything is empty;" by contrast, it demonstrates that all things, including the *big-bang* cosmogenesis, of the Universe are dependently arisen. It was more than 2000 years ago, prior to the emergence of science on the Earth, that this unique, profound insights began to shed light on the secular world for the continuous birth and death, happiness and suffering, and prosperity and dissipation of both nature and mankind. Without exaggeration, guru-trickster plays a key role in the secular world to unlock the truth of the mysterious universe. Under the guru-tricksters' paradoxical and/or provocative robe of Emptiness, it is clearly seen that everything is made from mind alone, and the myriad dharmas are only from the mind to reveal the law of the dependent origination.

4. EGO-TRICKSTER TO DEVELOP SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

The ego is the most difficult trickster for us to recognize. This is because the ego-trickster cannot be aware of via the five sense organs. However, it appears as "both our closest friend and our worst enemy" [(2) in ref.1]. It is the illusion that hides in mind (the compound word of *cittas*), and disguises its thoughts and feelings as our realistic ones [23].

Ego-trickster is the external expression of one of the eight Consciousnesses, while the undefiled

ingredient of the 8th consciousness, Alaya, is ascribed as the 9th one, Amala (or, the pure consciousness) [24]. The additional seven Consciousnesses include the five sensational ones and two minds, Mano and Manas, the root of which is Manas. The twins and Alaya are described as the three cittas [25]. Manas is equivalent to “transference,” owning neither inner Essence (or Substance) nor outer function (or Karma), but makes use of Alaya as its internal essence, and takes advantage of Mano to show its external function. Particularly, the twins are characterized by the non-equanimity with Manas dominated rationally or logically by the left brain, and with Mano dominated sentimentally or perceptually by the right brain [26]. Table 1 lists all of the nine consciousnesses in five levels [27].

The ego-trickster is the external expression of Manas, Level 3, characterized by the concept of the Self while, on the one hand, gaining previous and present experiences through Mano and the five senses; on the other hand, universalizing the experiences through intuitive and abstract perceptions of the universal mind of Alaya to discern the inner world [28]. The ego-trickster keeps the full function of Upadana (“attaching” plus “clinging” plus “grasping”)[29] to giving rise to five fundamental Kleshas (poisons or negative emotions): (1) Chi: ignorance, folly, confusion, bewilderment, or delusion; (2) Chen: dislike, aversion, anger, or hatred related to the turbidity, prejudice, prohibition, deviance, discrimination, or dualism of views; (3) Tan: attachment, greed, desire, or passion; (4) Man: pride, arrogance, conceit; and (5) Yi: envy, doubt, indecision [30]. Whenever the mind of the Self is present, there follows at the same time these Kleshas to obscure and delude the absolute Bodhi Citta of Emptiness, resulting in the arising of the inability in the Mindsight (a concept to understand the mind of the self and others and see the reality of Nature) [31]. Consequently, as the subtle and

mischievous prime mover, the ego-trickster drives to grow the perceptual illusions of the outer world and entrap the mind mired “in delusions either of grandeur or of insecurity and self-doubt” [32].

It is therefore mandatory to destroy the illusions of the sentimental beings by transcending the ego-trickster with the cultivations of Precepts, Samadhi, and Wisdom [33]. Among the numerous approaches, the most efficient and effective one is the use of Mandala and subtle energies of the mind, of wind, and of the channels, to transform Kleshas to a valuable vehicle (*yana*) via achieving 3-level kayas of the truth body (Dharmakaya), the enjoyment body (Sambhogakaya), and the emanation body (Nirmanakaya), thus reaching the enlightenment of consciousness after the 3-stage practices of foundation, path, and result [34]. Embodied by five Buddha families, Mandala is a tantric construction of the energy grid to represent the constant cosmic flow of divine and demonic, human and animal impulses as they interact with the sentimental world in both constructive and destructive patterns [35]. The 5 Buddha families, as well as the corresponding 5-level consciousnesses in Table 1, are presented in Table 2 [36].

A famous Tibetan Buddhist ritual to transcend the ego-trickster and destroy the illusions was held annually in the Everest Solu-Kumbu region of Nepal, officiated by Trulshik Rinpoche.[37] In practice, because Buddhism is not an ahistorical unchanging tradition in time, space, and texts versus lived reality,[38] the Tantric festival demonstrated several indigenized and simplified characteristics owing to the cultural localization influenced by the Shamanism-like Bon religion, while still presenting the theme of traditional Tantric practice: [39] (1) Among the Kleshas, only the *illusion* (or *ignorance*) of human beings

Table 1. Five levels of the nine types of consciousness (with the row of Level 3 in red)

Level 5	9 th	Amala or pure consciousness	free from all karmic impurity
Level 4	8 th	Alaya or repository consciousness	through reflective awareness
Level 3	7th	Manas or self consciousness	through deluded awareness
Level 2	6 th	Mano or perception/ideating consciousness	through the senses in Level 1
	5 th	Body or touching consciousness	due to tactile stimulus
	4 th	Tongue-or-tasting consciousness	due to gustatory stimulus
Level 1	3 rd	Nose-or-smelling consciousness	due to olfactory stimulus
	2 nd	Ear-or-hearing consciousness	due to auditory stimulus
	1 st	Eye-or-seeing consciousness	due to visual stimulus

Table 2. Five buddha families in Mandala (with the column of Level 3 in red)

Property	Level 5	Level 4	Level 3	Level 2	Level 1
Family	Buddha 3	Vaira 2	Ratna 4	Lotus 1	Karma 5
Bodily Acts					
Five Tathagatas	Vairocana	Akshobhya	Ratnasambhava	Amitabha	Amoghasiddhi
Kayakarmam					
Verbal Acts	Samantabhadra	Manjusri	Akasagarbha	Avalokitesvara	Vajrakarma
Vak karmam					
Mental Acts	Acalavajra	Trailokya-vijaya-rajā	Kundali Vidyaraja	Yamantaka	Guhyapada
Manokarmam					
Consciousness	Amala	Alaya	Manas	Mano	5-Organ senses
Wisdom	Dharma-Realm	Great, Perfect Mirror	Equality	Discrimination	Accomplishment
Position	Center	East	South	West	North
Color	Yellow	Blue	Red	White	Black
Element	Earth	Wood	Fire	Metal	Water
Body Organs	Spleen	Liver/Gall	Heart/Pericardium	Lung	Kidney
	Stomach	Bladder	Small Intestine	Large Intestine	Urinary Bladder

was suggested to limit their potential of imaginations and wills for the mind empowerment of transformation; thus, destroying the *illusion* is the highest form of magic; (2) The compassion of all the Buddhas was personified specifically as the Lord of the Dance, named Garwang Tojay-chenpo, the deity of Mani-Rimdu whose infinite creativity is symbolized by dance; (3) Trulshik Rinpoche was regarded to embody the Lord of the Dance and destroy the *illusion* in the tantric battles via dances with the malevolent supernatural forces of the Universe at Thubten Chiwong Monastery each autumn; (4) The three dimensional mandala was reduced to a design of a brightly colorful painting with sand, prepared painstakingly on a two dimensional plane grain by grain and mantra by mantra; however, the elaborated final product was destroyed to symbolize sending the mandala gods back to their realm; and, (5) Mental empowerment or spiritual sustenance was assumed to be able to be reached by taking man-made *mani* pills which were considered to have absorbed the power of the god to help people, and therefore to be treasured and kept for taken in time of need [40].

5. CONCLUSION

Buddhist tricksters are different not only from the cunning and/or foolish tricksters in folklores or legends, but also from the western Jungian archetypal figures & Hyde's boundary-crossers, as well as from the eastern Taoist Scholé sages. They cover a wide range of characters, from the Buddha to the self, in the Tibetan Buddhist religion. It is shown that the Buddhist trickster-like teachings act as "an ace up the sleeve" to provide shortcuts towards destroying illusions, and to mitigate the most awkward or perplexing tension emerging between the Buddha and his disciples, between the teachers and their audience, and between the awakened and defiled states of consciousness. The three-dominant trickster-like teachings are featured by the following:

- (1) Buddha trickster-like teaching, with the most representative trick expressed by the subtle silence to destruct metaphysical quagmire in the exhibition of his cosmic wisdom and compassion;
- (2) Guru trickster-like teaching, with the most representative trick performed charismatically by Dalai Lama on the recognition of Emptiness in the sentient world;

- (3) Ego trickster-like teaching, with the most representative trick in self-consciousness to differentiate the three abstruse cittas and twins of the mind in the external expression of the self.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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40. Note: these pills were treated as the symbols of the Nectar pills as introduced in Mahayoga, the early stage of the Highest Yoga Tantra.

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