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## Guest Editorial: Morning Thoughts on Application

**David W. Jardine**

*The text . . . if it is to be understood properly  
-- i.e., according to the claim it makes--  
must be understood at every moment, in  
every concrete situation, in a new and  
different way. Understanding here is always  
application.*

Hans-Georg Gadamer  
(1989, p. 309) *Truth and Method*

Below is an amazing passage in light of Gadamer's thoughts on application and how interpretation makes little sense "in general." Its character only starts to appear once it is applied to a topic, a case, a locale, an instance. Only in the face of the specific resistances and demands that the case brings, is interpretation able to "work."

The individual case is thus "fecund," not only in the sense that its new arrival demands that what has been previously established open itself up to the arriving sense of potency and possibility and demand that the new case brings (thus demonstrating the deep and unavoidable impermanence of such establishments). It is also fecund in the sense that facing and working through such

moments of arrival, again and again, is how getting "good" at interpretation happens -- it is fecund in relation to *my* ability to work interpretively. That is why it is always I, myself, who must take this venture. It is also why understanding a hermeneutic study requires precisely such a venture from readers.

Interpretation is, in this sense, an ongoing practice that takes practice to become practiced in. One's "general" ability in this regard is the product of something specific being repeatedly practiced, and, therefore, it never becomes simply a method that can be handed over to someone unpracticed. It is always a practice whose practice can, and must be, cultivated in order to be understood. "Understanding here is always application," and this *includes* understanding a hermeneutic study and understanding how to "do" hermeneutic work. Hermeneutic work is thus always both *about* application and *cultivated at the locales of application*.

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So, now, the amazing passage that parallels this hermeneutic arc. It is from Volume Two of Tsong-kha-pa's (2004), *The great treatise on the stages of the path to enlightenment*, originally composed in 1406 CE:

It is an extremely important point. If you train in these attitudes of impartiality, love and compassion without distinguishing and taking up specific objects of meditation, but only using a general object from the outset, you will just seem to generate these attitudes. Then, when you try to apply them to specific individuals, you will not be able to actually generate these attitudes toward anyone. But once you have a transformative experience towards an individual in your meditations practice . . . you may then gradually increase the number of individuals you visualize within your meditation. (Tsong-kha-pa, 2004, p. 35).

This passage highlights why, earlier in this text, Tsong-kha-pa stated that we must avoid falling into the "problems of peace" (p. 24). Our professions - - teaching, nursing, counseling, working with troubled students in schools, or any other locale of interpretive venture in the face of some face in the world - - do not lead us to seek our own peace separate from the suffering of the world, but seek, rather, to "take on a life of suffering . . . in order to help all living beings" (p. 29). This is a life, shall we say, of enduring and undergoing, of venture, hidden as these images are in Gadamer's use of the term *Erfahrung* for the sort of "experience" from which we might learn (with its etymological root *Fahren*, to journey, venture, and its other derivative, *Vorfahren*, those who have ventured "before" [*Vor-*], i.e., ancestors). This is why Gadamer (1989, p. 356) cited in this regard an idea central to his hermeneutics that is inherited from the Greek traged-

dies of Aeschylus (c. 525 BCE): *pathei mathos*, "learning through suffering."

Hermeneutically understood, our professions are not seeking theories or explanations or models or interventions that promise to pacify or cure the life-world and its woes. We know precisely how often such promises have not only come to grief but unwittingly *caused* suffering. We know, too, from Alice Miller's (1989) work, how education in particular was once, and in many ways, still is, quite witting about such matters of inflicting suffering, as Miller's title announces, "for your own good."

Still and all, and despite the understandable hesitancy that must surround our work, that work requires that we "remain in the realm in which beings dwell" (Tsong-kha-pa, 2004, p. 30). We turn *toward* suffering, again and again. This is akin to hermeneutics persistently turning towards the life-world and not away from it to some Edenic world of essences cast in peaceful, finalized composure; this is how hermeneutics takes on part of the phenomenological lineages of a return to lived-experience whilst jettisoning Edmund Husserl's frightened desire to quell that life with the eidetic reduction. Hermeneutics interprets, not in order to thematize, essentialize, or placate, but in order to let our troubles be what they are, thus ameliorating our fraught "if onlys" and therefore making clear-sightedness and well-judged action possible. Letting it be what it is involves, in some sense, freeing ourselves from our attachment to it: "To rise above the pressure of what impinges on us from the world means to keep oneself so free from what one encounters of the world that one can present it to oneself as it is" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 444).

Tsong-kha-pa does say, earlier in the text, that "those who have developed

the . . . spirit of enlightenment and [thus] aspire [to it], although they lack its application, still ‘shine’” (2004, p. 16). I think, with student teachers for example, who sometimes desperately ask where to begin, of how *taking on the spirit of interpretability* is the key (Tsong-kha-pa calls this “aspiration”). It means, simply put, proceeding in light of an understanding of the interpretability of the world, seeking those dependent co-arising that surround things, and resisting the logic of substance (Gadamer, 1989, p. 242) and the temptations of reification (Tsong-kha-pa, 2002, p. 120), both of which aim to suppress the uprisings of the world and seek false permanencies in this, the deeply human land of shadow. Even if you have not often practiced the application of such a spirit and have not therefore, built up the composes of practice, still, it is in this spirit that one proceeds in the repeated practice of application.

Again, however, the repeated practice of application is essential: “if you have only an intellectual understanding of this spirit, then you likewise have only an intellectually understanding of what it means to be a . . . practitioner” (p. 17). It is always *this* child’s life, *that* parent’s woes, *this* client’s nightmare, *that* patient’s desire to let go in the face of impending death, that is key. Interpretation always requires doing the work *again* in the face of the task we face. It is good to hear that:

The more you practice these things, the more accustomed your mind will become to them, and the easier it will be to practice what you had initially found difficult to learn. (Tsong-kha-pa, 2000, p. 185-186)

However, our proper relation to such matters must always and everywhere be re-won, here, and here. This is where is borne

the deep hesitancy that is part of hermeneutic work (see Jardine, in press), and about such hesitancy, both hermeneutics and Buddhism are steadfast. Our composure must always be re-gained, re-dedicated to the work at hand. Our becoming experienced practitioners always involves venturing out all over again always having to suffer once again the exigencies of existence and their lessons and, as I have found in my own work, that there the fellowship (*Sangha*) of such work is a great comfort. It is in this common fortitude or strength that the strength of hermeneutics lays, even though part of its demand is that *I myself and no one else* must take on this dedication and no one can take it on in my stead.

It is with no irony at all, however, that Tsong-kha-pa (2004, p. 182-207, emphasis added) names this “joyous perseverance.” It is thus that *pathei mathos* can shed something of its dour countenance.

Very Early Morning,  
Bragg Creek AB, July 16, 2013

### Biography

David W. Jardine, PhD is a Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Calgary.

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