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TEARS OF EMPTINESS:

Contextual Dharmology and Buddhist Liberation Hermeneutics



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TEARS OF EMPTINESS:

Contextual Dharmology and Buddhist Liberation Hermeneutics

Inaugural lecture delivered on the occasion of the acceptance of the Chair of Buddhism, at the Faculty of Religion and Theology of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, on 7 April 2022.

Tears of Emptiness: Contextual Dharmology and Buddhist Liberation Hermeneutics

Rector, gentlepeople:

I am very happy to stand here today and give what is my second inauguration.

Since a main aim of this academic ritual is the vision of scholarship that the newly appointed brings to the chair, you as audience (and readers) will forgive me when the self-referencing to my previous and ongoing scholarship during this lecture might appear as lacking humility and as excessive, also in the reference list. Since this occasion invites you to come to know me a bit as a scholar reading my recent work might help, in loving, loathing, or civilised indifference.

Ten years ago, in 2012, I accepted an appointment as full professor in Religious Studies and Gender Studies at Canterbury Christ Church University and delivered an inaugural speech entitled "The Buddhist Queer and Queering Buddhisms: Cross-pollinations and Promiscuous Approaches". That inaugural reflected on my academic promiscuity as a scholar who had made contributions to Classics, Comparative Religion, Philosophy, Indology, and Gender Studies among others; my speech then also foreshadowed a refocussing of my scholarship towards the intersection of Buddhist Studies and Critical Theory.

After my rise to distinguished (Band 3) professor in the U.K. and my early retirement in 2019 I was happy to accept this new appointment in Buddhist Studies at VU Amsterdam since it would give me the opportunity to work closely with Buddhist communities as a "Buddhist Critical-Constructive Thinker". This term is often used for the Buddhist equivalent to a Christian systematic, public, or pastoral theologian. Instead of theologian I prefer the neologism dharmologist – someone studying and thinking scholarly about the *dharmā*, the Buddhist teachings. This is the 'dharmology' in my title – Buddhist Theology.

As I noted elsewhere,¹ I tend to use Roger Corless' term 'dharmology' (which was in fact coined by the Pure Land Buddhism scholar Taitetsu Unno 海野 大徹) in order to avoid the

¹ Scherer 2019: 151.

tediousness of contestations of the term 'theology' within Buddhist and Religious Studies circles that conflate semantics and etymology and are steeped in a mainly Germanic Religious Studies discourse, inherently oppositional and even hostile to theology that still dominates bodies such as the *International Association for the History of Religions* (IAHSR) and its European sub-umbrella, the EASR, - although not as much the American member association, the AAR.

Dharmology is an important part of my appointment that comes with the rectorship of the Buddhist seminary that trains Buddhist Spiritual Caregivers on behalf of the Buddhist Union of the Netherlands (BUN) and the Buddhist Sending Agency (BZI).

My appointment was not without obstacles. Predictably, the usual alt-right social media suspects lamented my arrival at the VU as another sign of decadence and decay. Some people might honour me by calling me a cultural Marxist – a slur purposefully coined by the Nazis to discredit Jewish intellectuals. One of the biggest challenges, however, appeared to me to re-enter a small, some might say: incestuous – environment as is Dutch academia as someone who despite their multiple marginalization has found high international esteem; being such a person, I have been daunted by the prospect to be confronted by some of the patterns that the Dutch author Willem Frederik Hermans almost fifty years ago in 1975 described poignantly for my alma mater Groningen and Dutch academia in his novel *Among Professors*; my worries appear mostly unfounded now, after more than one year into my appointment.

Tears of Emptiness

The title of my inauguration, tears of emptiness, points to the conceptual union of compassion (*karuṇā*) and emptiness (*śūnyatā*) or wisdom and skilful means² in Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhist thought. We find this union (*yuganaddha*) beautifully expressed, e.g., in the ca. 8th c. CE *dohākoṣa* of the Tantric saint Saraha in the following *Apabhramśa* (Late Middle Indo-

² prajñopāya cf. *Pancakrama* 5.8: prajñopāyasamāpattī jñātvā sarvaṃ samāsatah, yatra sthito mahāyogī tad bhaved yuganaddhakam.

Aryan) couplet: *If you can unite emptiness and compassion, you will not stay in either being or cessation (nirvāṇa).*³

Following mainstream Mahāyāna, Indic and Tibetan Yoginī Tantric and Mahāmudrā traditions speak of the experience of ultimate reality, the Great Seal in the form of the inseparability of emptiness and compassion.⁴

Indeed, 'emptiness', or 'openness', 'zeroness',⁵ describe from Early Buddhist texts onwards highly advanced *experiences* in Buddhist meditative practice and soteriology⁶ as well as, para-ontologically, lack of intrinsic independent existence of persons (*anātman*) and phenomena. With the rise of Mahāyāna, the concept to a degree overrides the soteriology of *nirvāṇa* (cessation) to denote experience of how things are: openness as the pre-linguistic potential that is inseparable from *saṃsāra*, the world of existences, as its playful actualisation conventionally named "interdependency" or "interconnectedness": *pratītyasamutpāda*. At least this is how the 2nd c. foundational Mahāyāna philosopher Nāgārjuna in his *Root Verses on the Middle Path*, the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, defines the heart of the Buddhist Middle Path: *We declare the pratītyasamutpāda to be emptiness; this (emptiness is called p. when it) has acquired a conventional designation (prajñaptir upādāya) and this is indeed the "Middle Path" (madhyamā pratipad).*⁷

Mahāyāna Buddhist soteriologies hence include elaborate dharmologies of realised beings that oscillate between the realisation of ineffable emptiness and compassionate activity for the benefit of all sentient beings: actualisation as *Realsymbole* of qualities and aspects of enlightenment itself. Such Bodhisattvas and Buddha forms are discussed both from a preliminary perspective according to gradual development, e.g., in the ten Bodhisattva stages, or from an angle of ultimate and abstract experience with different terms such as truth state,

³ suṅṅa karuṇa jai jouṇu sakkai, ṇau bhava ṇau nivvāṇeṇṇ thakkai 15b (Jackson 2004: 61).

⁴ śūnyatākaruṇābhinnarūpiṇī mahāmudrā *Mekhalāṭīkā* ad 21.2, Schott 2019: 291.

⁵ See Scherer 2005: 115.

⁶ See Choong 1995.

⁷ MMK 4. 18: yaḥ pratītyasamutpādam śūnyatām tām pracakṣmahe, sā prajñaptir upādāya pratipat saiva madhyamā; see Scherer 2012: 127.

purity, suchness, etc.; here, Buddhist philosophy, particularly in East Asia, appears to occasionally cross the line from pragmatic para-ontology to qualified monism.

In the developing Mahāyāna corona of enlightenment forms, one, the female embodiment of compassion, becomes popular at least from the Gupta era onwards. This figure who is conceptualised in blurred lines both as bodhisattva, Buddha, or enlightened goddess is Tārā. Her name can mean 'star' and as such is connected in some Hindu theologies with the titular deity of that particular time (or 'wake') in the night between complete darkness (*kālī*) and dawn (*uṣas*). In Buddhist contexts, Tārā's name means 'saviouress' or 'liberatrice': the one who *brings* beings safely *over* (sc. to the other shore of the ocean of suffering). I have argued that the name Tārā might also point to the loving, compassionate pupil of the eye ('star') of the Buddhist embodiment of compassion, Avalokiteśvara, connecting the etymology with the Indic and Tibetan Buddhist narratives that tell her origin story:⁸ For Tārā is called the *karuṇā*, the active side of Buddhist compassion, of the principal male embodiment of Buddhist compassion Avalokiteśvara,⁹ springing from his tears.

The 8th c. scholar Buddhaguhya's 這個頁面 relates this story of Tārā in his commentary on the *Vairocana-abhisambodhi-tantra* 大毘盧遮那成佛神變加持經 (T. 848) as follows.

*Avalokiteśvara gazed upon realms of beings and he saw that even if he were to transfer all his accumulation of merit and awareness in order to benefit all countless beings and save them, he would still not be able to free them all from saṃsāra. Then from his tears which arose from the power of his great compassion, many Tārā goddesses emerged and took on the forms of saviours for all beings. Therefore she is called the Goddess Tārā (saviouress). Moreover, her many forms may be known from other Tantras.*¹⁰

⁸ Scherer 2018: 292.

⁹ E.g., in the *Mañjuśrī-mūla-kalpa*, 7th to 8th c. CE.

¹⁰ Tr. Hodge 2003: 108.

Another 8th c. testimony is a hymn by the Tantric Nāgārjuna, the **Khadiravaṇī-tārā-stotra* only extant in Tibetan translation,¹¹ calling Tārā the "goddess sprung from (his) tears".¹²

The passage adds weight to my hypothesis that this Tārā legend developed within the particular Tantric dharmology of the Ārya school ('phags lugs) of the Guhyasamāja. I find it therefore likely that the most influential Sanskrit *stotra* (hymn, praise) to Tārā, the *Ārya-tārā-namaskāraikavimśati-stotra* (*Praise of the Twenty-One Forms*), is equally linked to Ārya Guhyasamāja circles. This widely recited long praise forms the backbone of the two-hour daily morning *pūjās*, or chanted meditation, in many Kagyu and Sakya, as well as other, Tibetan monasteries, during which the praise is recited twice, thrice and seven times. In its first verse, 1c, the *stotra* alludes prominently to Tārā's origin story with an ambiguous term: *vakrābja* (Tib. chu skyes zhal): 'face-water-born' i.e., tear-born or 'facial lotus ...'

In the 15th c., the principal student of the Gelugpa founder Tsongkhapa posthumously recognized as the first Dalai Lama, Gendun Drup,¹³ explained that Avalokiteśvara

*saw that however many migrating beings He removed from samsara, they grew no fewer, and He wept. Tara sprang from the opening filaments of His face — of an utpala (blue lotus) that grew in the water of His tears.*¹⁴

Liberation Dharmology and Contextual Hermeneutics

What we learn from the dharmology (or theology) of Tārā is that realisation of emptiness must be joined with the sometimes tearful and frustrating struggle for the benefit of others. Indeed, emptiness and compassion need to be united, as Saraha reminds us above.

Hence, the Buddhist path is, contrary to some of its modernist appropriations, not an individualistic, quietist, personal quest but a deeply socially active enterprise. It is neither an existential absurdism or the universalist shallowness in, e.g., some American modernist

¹¹ seng ldeng nags kyi sgrol ma la bstod pa: Q4881 vol.191, 195a5; N3670 vol. 183, 194a; GT2880, rgyud 'grel, zu 258a6.

¹² Verse 6a sryan gyi chab las lha mo sku 'khrungs, cp. the translation of the hymn in Willson 1996: 283.

¹³ dGe 'dun grub, 1391 -1475.

¹⁴ Willson 1996: 125.

Buddhism – Zen or otherwise; nor a lone wolf empirical, secular path of personal (deeply colonialist) wisdom exploration whereby the living Asian traditions are merely cultural overgrowth that can be culled by the "superior" orientalist seekers.

Rather, the tears of emptiness point to the necessity to marry transformative insight to transformative action: *action dharma*, social engagement for the liberation of all. In this train of thought, Chinese Republican era (1912-1949) reform Buddhism famously refocused on the "Pure Land in the Human Realm" *renjian jingtu*,¹⁵ giving rise to what is called Humanistic Buddhism.¹⁶ In dialogue with Humanistic Buddhist Chan Master Sheng Yen 聖嚴 (1931-2009), also the 14th Dalai Lama has spoken of the need for the *nirvāṇa* of society;¹⁷ of course it was the late Vietnamese Thiền 禪 (Chan, Zen) master Thích Nhất Hạnh (1926-2022) who famously coined the term Socially Engaged Buddhism, making it productive globally for contemporary Buddhist social thought and practice.

Despite the emergence of Buddhist convert alt-right anti-social justice habitus,¹⁸ all these 20th c. and 21st c. expressions of Buddhist thought are actually deeply rooted not just in Buddhist philosophy but in the lived understanding of the inseparability of enlightenment and compassionate action.

In the last decade I have spent some time thinking about the triangulation of Buddhist texts/scriptures – concepts – and social justice applications. I have called this Public Dharmology of Liberation dharmology.¹⁹ In the light of consistent ableist and anti-LGBTIQ proof-texting of premodern scriptures and traditional practices, liberatory hermeneutics challenges, defies, and subverts and is therefore aligning itself with the defiant impulses of Queer Theory and Crip Theory (and Critical Race Theory among others). I have theorised and exercised through these alignments, for example in relation to the gender-deficient category in Early Buddhist texts, the *paṇḍaka*, or in the case of scriptural ableism where proof-texting

¹⁵ 人間淨土, see Jones 2020 on Taixu.

¹⁶ See the discussion of the term in Scherer 2021: 130-132.

¹⁷ In Sheng-yen and Dalai Lama 1998: 55.

¹⁸ See Gleig and Artinger 2021.

¹⁹ Scherer 2019; 2021a.

mistakes societal context and metaphorically and narratively complex passages as doctrinal or ethical. Here, my starting point, as a philologist, aims to be the careful examination of textual evidence (text) in context on which basis conceptual and applicational dharmologies arise.²⁰

It is my deep held conviction that any conceptual or philosophical inquiry without the knowledge of source language, texts and the complexity of historical contexts and receptions will always face the danger of shallowness and of easily be hijacked by unconscious positional biases. For my appointment at the Buddhist Seminary and the VU I therefore wish to strengthen training in original languages and in the complexity of Buddhist traditions to counter romanticist universalist and orientalist claims. At the same time philology, textual studies, without transformative application will often be in danger to remain an ivory tower luxury; hence it is my wish that our Buddhist Seminary will lay the foundation both for deep and complex insights based on Buddhist sources *and* for the impulses for unwavering, all-day liberational compassion-in-action. Our Buddhist Spiritual Caregivers are, and should be, enabled to marry deeply fathomed understanding and experience of the *dharma* to the everchanging challenges of care giving in deep listening, witnessing, and catalysing growth and cultivation in their multiple and diverse Buddhist, semi-secular, and secular settings.

In my welcome address to students last year, I made a point of distilling the daunting commitment to altruism we find on the Buddhist paths, e.g., in the Bodhisattva vow, to one simple ask: *Promise to be kind*.

In the light of *dukkha* (dissatisfactoriness, dis-ease, suffering), simple loving-kindness appears as a counterpoint and an antidote to toxic positivity. In psychoanalytical terms Victor Frankl's 'tragic optimism' resounds; yet, centring the construction of meaning, as Frankl and his logotherapeutic approach do, also entails hidden dangers such as the impetus to reify purposes that can never be achieved, retained, and stabilised. In other words, *tragic optimism* falls at the hurdle of permanency. 'Transformative gentleness' however might transcend both 'tragic optimism' and, if you want 'comic pessimism' whose teleological elements misinterpret the experience of *Dasein* and *Dawerden* (becoming-in-time). Letting go of hope and fear, meaning and despair, the Buddhist paradox compassion-in-action freely appreciates the tragicomedy

²⁰ See Scherer 2016a; 2016b; 2019; 2020; 2021.

of our being- and becoming-in-time without constructing or inferring stability in any purposes, goals, and attempts to meaning-making. The tears of emptiness, just as the *Lotus Sūtra's* dharma rain that makes all plants grow within the framework of to their own conditions, could be accepted as the mystery of the bodhisattva absurdity beyond the doctrinal optimism of parts of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Liberation dharmology boils down to the question, how can we live the promise of altruism facing the concrete pain (*dukkha-dukkhatā*) of those to whom we tend, and facing the systemic suffering of the marginalised? Liberation dharmology challenges the usage of Buddhist teaching when this usage cements any oppressive status quo, just as Japanese 'Critical Buddhism' challenged the adharmic entanglement of Buddhism and oppressive nationalism. Given the growth in numbers of reactionary anti-social justice convert Buddhists, liberation dharmology needs to counter simplistic *dharmasplaining*, e.g., by means of reductionist karma theory, and spiritual bypassing (*Meditate more! Repent more!*). Instead, the dharma of the oppressed acknowledges the contingent origination of teachings, their contexts, and excavates liberatory paradigms by disentangling concept confluences and re-applying carefully unearthed conceptual principles with the very altruistic impetus that springs from realisation and enlightenment when, in realisation, No-Self blazes through interdependent non-realisation: where nothing and nobody is liberated whence the liberation of all is paramount.

Concluding Thoughts

I am returning to the question how I intend to embody the chair in Buddhist Studies at the VU as a scholar and dharma teacher who cannot lay claim on realisation of emptiness and who again and again fails in their aspiration to embody loving-kindness. My chosen name, *Bee*, is not intended to drawing boasting parallels to the story where Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhisattva of compassion, manifested in the form a bee,²¹ buzzing the refuge formula to the wretched

²¹ *bhramara*, Pāli bhamara, 蜂 feng; Tib. bung ba; sbrang ma; Toch.B kroñkśe.

hundreds of thousands of insects in a cesspit in Vārāṇāsī, and doing so liberating them.²² For, in this narrative I can merely be a wretched bug myself far from liberation and enlightenment. But as a bee, I also do not want to be trapped in the allegory of another wretched insect, found in various Buddhist scriptures,²³ that is often used as a warning example by contemporary Tibetan Buddhist masters: the silk moth larva (silkworm)²⁴ who through defilements,²⁵ cocoons itself to death without ever reaching its potential.²⁶

So, I will aim to be a Buddhist studies chair unlike a silkworm, greedily and jealously ensnaring myself in ivory tower cocoons of vacuous erudite narcissism. Rather, if I can, I would like to aspire to live up to that famous verse about the bee: *Dhammapada* 49. The verse occurs about thirty times in early canonical Buddhist literature across different languages transmissions - in Pāli, Gāndhārī, "Patna"-Prakrit, Sanskrit, Tibetan and Chinese -even with a beautiful adaptation in Kuchean/Tocharian B -, yet with remarkable textual consistency:²⁷ *just like a bee collects nectar and leaves without harming the flower, its color or its scent, so also should the wise move around in the village.*²⁸

²² *Kāraṇḍavyūha* 1,15 (p. 281 Vaidya).

²³ The comparison is best known among contemporary Tibetan Buddhist ris med (non-Gelug) teachers from Mipham's *Beacon of Certainty* (nges shes sgron me, composed probably before 1870) where it refers to the relation of insight meditation (lhag mthong, *vipaśyanā*) vs. calm abiding (zhi gnas, *śamatha*): gang tshes dpyod pa'i mtshan 'dzin des | dar gyi srin bu ji bzhin du | rtog pa de yis de bcings nas | yang dag don ji bzhin mi mthong "When the analytical apprehension of characteristics binds the thinker like a silkworm in its silk, the authentic nature will not be seen as it is." (tr. Pettit 1999: 211).

²⁴ Kośakāra(kiṭaka), 蠶 can, Tib. dar (gyi) srin (bu).

²⁵ 煩惱 fan-nao, = Skt. *kleśa: (*Mahāvāna*) *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* (*Da banniepan jing* 大般涅槃經, T.374: 373b; cf. Tibetan e.g., Q Tu 134b2-3). Cf. 纏 chan in T. 375: 654c.; in the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (ch. 3, p. 192 Vaidya) we read *saṃraktā rāga dveṣa mahajaṃ karmābhisaṃskurvanti* "afflicted, they produce karma generated from craving, aversion and delusion [sc. the three primary defilements/poisons]".

²⁶ See further *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* ch.3 v. 47, *Dazhudu lun* 大智度論, T. 1509, 294b; see the discussion Young 2017: 38-42; additionally, cp. *Kālacakratānta* ch. 2 v. 85.

²⁷ *Patna Dhp* 127; *Gāndhārī Dhp* 292; *Udānavarga* 18, 8 (with chin. and tib. versions); MS, SV, MSV *pratimokṣā*; *Ekottara-Āgama* 44 (T.125), 787a; various SV and MSV *vinaya* sections etc., see Dhammajoti 1995: 130n14 for parallel references; add to that the appraising adaptation in the Tocharian B *Udānastotra* Pelliot Koutchéen AS 5B a2 *mākte kroṣṣamts cāñcarñe pyāpyai warssi ...* ("as it is the joy of the bees to smell at a flower, ..."). An (already) Indic variation is the verbform root meaning 'to leave' *parā-vī* (majority) vs. 'to fly away' *pra-vṛī* (*Patna Dhp*; Tibetan *Udānavarga*) s. Levman 2014: 459-460; T. 210, 563b interchanges 味 (*mei* ignorant) for 味 (*wei* taste, nectar) found in the Chinese *Udānavarga* T.213 786a, EĀ T. 125 787a12 etc.

²⁸ *Dhp.* 49 yathāpi bhāmaro pupphaṃ, vaṇṇagandhamahethayaṃ, paleti rasamādāya, evaṃ gāme munī care.

This verse stresses the eco-symbiosis of the bee and its field of activity, the flower it visits: the bee only pollinates and doesn't harm. Equally the flower sustains the bee.

Just like that I hope to inspire, and be inspired by, my students and colleagues at the VU, my team at the Buddhist Seminary, my colleagues in the field of Buddhist Spiritual Care in Dutch society and beyond and my friends at the Dutch Buddhist Union and Dutch Buddhist Sending Agency.

Words of Thanks

This brings me to the customary words of thanks which I offer in all sincerity to the Executive Board and to the Board of the Faculty.

Furthermore, I would like to thank my friends from the BZI and the BUN and in particular to Michael Ritman (BUN) for proofreading the Dutch version of this lecture.

Above all I would not stand here today without the love of my spouse, Dr. Patrick de Vries.

Finally, as a Tibetan Buddhist I lay down all my gratitude at the lotus feet of my *gurus*.

དགེ་བ་འདི་ཡིས་སྦྱར་དུ་བདག་། རྒྱ་མ་སངས་རྒྱལ་འགྲུབ་རྒྱུར་ནས་།
འགྲོ་བ་གཅིག་གྲང་མ་ལུས་པ་། དེ་ཡི་ས་ལ་འགོ་དཔར་ཤོག་།

I have spoken.

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