

Hermeneutics and Historicity in the Study of Buddhism

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INTRODUCTION: THE NATURE OF THIS REPORT

In the past eight years there has been an increasing interest in Buddhist hermeneutics among scholars in North America. Although not the first article addressing the topic,¹ Robert F. Thurman's "Buddhist Hermeneutics," published in 1978,² was the incentive for other articles such as "Chinese Buddhist Hermeneutics: The Case of Hua-yen" by Peter Gregory,³ and "Prasaṅga and Deconstruction: Tibetan Buddhist Hermeneutics and the Yāna Controversy" by Nathan Katz.⁴ In addition, several academic conferences have held panel discussions devoted to cross-cultural hermeneutics in the study of religion. A University of Hawaii conference, in July 1985, on "Changing Facets of Buddhism," included a section on hermeneutics. The most substantial conference on Buddhist hermeneutics to date took place in June 1984 in Los Angeles; it was co-sponsored by the Kuroda Institute for the Study of Buddhism and Human Values and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Among the many presentations were those by George

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¹ As early as 1949 Étienne Lamotte published an article on the critique of interpretation in Buddhism: "La critique d'interprétation dans le bouddhisme," *Bruxelles Université Libre, Institut de Philosophie et d'Histoire Orientales et Slaves, Annuaire* 9, pp. 341-361.

² In the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 46, 1, pp. 19-39.

³ Also in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 51, 2 (1983), pp. 231-249.

⁴ In *Philosophy East and West*, 34, no. 4 (1984), pp. 185-203.

Bond, Kajiyama Yuichi, and Donald Lopez on Indian Buddhist hermeneutics; Robert Thurman, Jeffrey Hopkins, Michael Broido and Mathew Kapstein on hermeneutics in Tibetan texts; Peter Gregory and Robert Gimello on Hua-yen hermeneutics; Robert Buswell on Korean Ch'an hermeneutics, Thomas Kasulis on Kūkai's hermeneutics, and Roger Corless on Shinran's hermeneutics. Luis Gómez spoke on the possibility of a Buddhist hermeneutic, and I raised some questions pertaining to readings of Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō*. Alan Sponberg, Carl Bielefeldt, David Chappell and theologian David Tracy responded to the papers in general. They are being edited by Donald Lopez for publication as a book.⁵

The discussion so far has raised important questions for understanding the Buddhist tradition. Some of these questions have been dealt with explicitly; others remain to be investigated. In the following, I will characterize recent findings concerning Buddhist hermeneutics and will contrast them with the meaning of hermeneutics in the Western tradition that provided the initial paradigm. This contrast will point out two essential problems that need much more attention in future work: what is our own hermeneutical situation vis-à-vis the tradition we would interpret, and what is the meaning of history for Buddhism? These questions in turn provide a context for reviewing some recent works on Buddhist historicity and historical consciousness and for raising a final question: How might a deeper awareness of Buddhist notions of history change modern methods of studying Buddhism?

Needless to say, this brief review cannot do full justice to the works mentioned, much less to the vast domains of historicity and hermeneutics in Buddhism. But its purpose will be met if it gives the reader a sense of current scholarship in these fields and suggests meaningful topics for further research.

THE POSSIBILITY OF BUDDHIST HERMENEUTICS

The sense of hermeneutics in recent investigations. Hermeneutics is an ambiguous word with a wide range of meanings. Thurman's article defined it quite broadly as the "philosophical discipline of rational in-

⁵ *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, forthcoming in the Kuroda Institute Studies in East Asian Buddhism series, published by the University of Hawaii Press.

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terpretation of a traditional canon of Sacred Scripture” or the “science of interpretation of sacred doctrine.”⁶ Katz specified this no further when he defined hermeneutics as the “systematic interpretation of texts considered sacred by a given tradition.”⁷ For the most part, the recent investigations have focused on identifying the principles and techniques of interpretation utilized in ancient Buddhist writings. Often the principles underlying interpretive choices are only remotely implied in the scriptures or commentaries, and these must be surmised and articulated by the scholar today. Moreover, the implicit basis of interpretation may shift from a focus on content to a focus on context, or from the work itself to the reader who puts the work into practice. Thus we may distinguish between content-based and context-based hermeneutics, as Thurman suggests, and between text-based and adept-based hermeneutics, as Katz proposes.⁸ The latter distinction in particular is germane to the discussion, which I will return to later, of what Buddhism has to offer to the field of hermeneutics in general.

More explicit are the techniques and strategies invented to arrange as well as interpret the scriptures or passages in them. Most often mentioned is the early hermeneutical device (in *Anguttara nikāya* 1.60 and other texts) of dividing texts into two groups: those of definitive meaning (*nītārtha*) and those in need of interpretation (*neyārtha*). This strategy receives more sophisticated differentiation in the Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamika tradition where, as Thurman has pointed out, *nītārtha* comes to indicate a text or passage of ultimate subject matter, whether or not it can be read literally, and *neyārtha* indicates something of conventional or interpretable subject matter.⁹

Other examples of highly nuanced if philosophically ungrounded hermeneutical schemes are the systems of doctrinal classification such as Indian *siddhānta* and Chinese *p'an chiao* 判教. A great deal has been written about the latter, whose hermeneutical implications have been most clearly worked out by Peter Gregory. Gregory understands *p'an chiao* as a Chinese response to a twofold hermeneutical problem: how to explain Buddhism to an originally non-Buddhist Chinese mentality,

⁶ Thurman, pp. 19, 20.

⁷ Katz, p. 188.

⁸ Thurman, p. 26; Katz, pp. 185–186.

⁹ Thurman, p. 32.

and, more specifically, how to explain the wide array of often conflicting Buddhist teachings transmitted to China. Thus *p'an chiao* was "a hermeneutical strategy . . . to find a set of principles to provide a framework in which the vast and sometimes contradictory array of holy literature . . . could be understood in a systematic fashion."¹⁰

The doctrine of *upāya* in the Lotus Sutra is, as might be expected, another favorite example of a hermeneutical strategy. According to Gregory, it implied that the Buddha's teachings had to be understood in the context in which they were delivered, and it distinguished between provisional Hinayana teachings addressed to those of inferior understanding, and the ultimate Mahayana teaching. Hence, the doctrine of *upāya* shows an awareness of the Buddha's (the speaker's) intention and of the listener's/reader's capacity to understand. The Mahayana idea of matching the intent of a scripture or passage to the listener's capacity was not of course without Theravada precedent; the gradual path to *nibbāna* has been pointed out as a strategy to relate the one inclusive *dhamma* to monks and lay persons of different levels.

Other examples of hermeneutical schemes and strategies have been analyzed in recent literature, but I hope that the above examples will suffice to document the interests and directions of current scholarship. There is a sense of excitement regarding the deep appreciation of hermeneutical problems in traditional Buddhist texts, but at the same time a sense that the search for Buddhist hermeneutics has just begun. In order for this search to progress and for the task of constructing a Buddhist hermeneutic really to begin, I feel that two essential features of the Western hermeneutical tradition must be realized. It is not a matter of importing a Western technology to come to the aid of an underdeveloped tradition; ever since the use of Western historical-critical methods it is of course already much too late to speak of a Buddhism uninfluenced by Western methodology. Besides, as we shall see, Western hermeneutics does not reduce to a concern with technical method, any more than Buddhist history reduces to a concern with historical fact. It is, however, a matter of appreciating and incorporating two interests within the current Western hermeneutical tradition that provided the impetus for the search for Buddhist

¹⁰ See Gregory's unpublished dissertation, "Tsong-mi's *Inquiry Into the Origin of Man: A Study of Chinese Buddhist Hermeneutics*" (Harvard University, 1981), p. 2.

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hermeneutics. Let me briefly review the development of hermeneutics in the West, in order to expose some shortcomings in the search conducted so far.

The Western hermeneutical tradition. The term "hermeneutics" was not used until the seventeenth century, when it came to signify the *principles and methods* of interpreting the Holy Scriptures (the Bible) *in distinction from* interpretation itself, or *exegesis*. But long before that, theologians had reflected on problems of interpretation, particularly in order to do justice to the Old Testament and to different levels of meaning from a Christian point of view. In the second century, Origen developed a scheme of three senses or levels of meaning in the sacred scriptures: literal, moral, and allegorical-mystical; the last level corresponded best to the intention of divine inspiration. Over the centuries many other hermeneutical schemes were formulated.

Not until F. D. E. Schleiermacher (1768–1834) did hermeneutics as an independent discipline begin. For Schleiermacher, hermeneutics could no longer be taken merely as an aid to understanding difficult passages or foreign languages, because the very act of understanding itself could no longer be taken for granted. Humans employ hermeneutics whenever they attempt to understand a written work, be it sacred or profane, and even whenever they communicate in daily life; but hermeneutics as a methodical and principled discipline had yet to be developed, according to Schleiermacher. Hermeneutics was "the art of understanding" achieved through analysis of language and empathy with an author; the interpreter needed to stand in an immediate relation with the matter to be understood.¹¹ Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911)

¹¹ Schleiermacher's scattered writings on hermeneutics have been edited by H. Kimmerle and published as *Hermeneutik, nach den Handschriften neu herausgegeben und eingeleitet* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1959, 2nd ed. 1974). The latter edition has been translated by James Duke and Jack Forstman as *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts by F. D. E. Schleiermacher* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977). For critical discussions of philosophical hermeneutics in the Western tradition since Schleiermacher, see John C. Maraldo, *Der hermeneutische Zirkel: Untersuchungen zu Schleiermacher, Dilthey und Heidegger* (Freiburg/München: Karl Alber, 1974, reprinted 1984); and Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969). *The Hermeneutics Reader*, ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (New York:

then advanced Schleiermacher's hermeneutics as the foundation of all the *Geisteswissenschaften*, which were built upon the possibility of empathetic understanding rather than objective explanation. Towards the end of his career, Dilthey came to see the act of understanding as a fundamental characteristic of human existence itself.¹²

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) then pursued the notion of understanding as a dimension of human existence, and proceeded to ontologize hermeneutics. Understanding is not something humans occasionally engage in; rather it is the very act of their being, it is a way in which they are, a *Seinsweise*; hence hermeneutics, as reflection upon understanding, became the analysis of human existence for Heidegger. One essential feature revealed by this analysis was the *Vorverständnis*, the pre-understanding, that is always operative in anticipation of our grasp of things in the world. Another was the radical historicity of our understanding, or the fact that our understanding is always historically conditioned and situated.¹³

In the 1960's Hans-Georg Gadamer developed Heidegger's ontological hermeneutics in his book *Truth and Method*.¹⁴ Gadamer emphasized three points important for our deliberations here. First, in the course of understanding a text, we must become aware of the pre-judgments (*Vorurteile*) that we bring with us, and we must evaluate

Continuum, 1985) contains important excerpts from the works of Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer and others.

¹² Dilthey's expositions on hermeneutics are found throughout his collected works, especially in volume I: *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, ed. B. Groethuysen, 1966; volume V: *Die geistige Welt*, which includes the essay, "Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik," ed. G. Misch, 1961; and volume VII: *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*, ed. B. Groethuysen, 1965, all published by Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Stuttgart-Göttingen. Volume IV of Dilthey's *Selected Works* in English translation, ed. Rudolf Makkreel & Frithjof Rodi (Oxford University Press, forthcoming) will be entitled *Hermeneutics and the Rise of Historical Consciousness*.

¹³ Heidegger developed his ontological hermeneutics principally in *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1927), translated into English by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson as *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962). Technically, Heidegger writes not of *Vorverständnis* but of a threefold structure that conditions all understanding: *Vorhabe* (pre-having), *Vorsicht* (foresight), and *Vorgriff* (pre-grasp).

¹⁴ *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1960, 3rd ed. 1972); English translation by Garret Barden and William G. Doerpel (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

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them and notice how they are gradually transformed. Secondly, we must appreciate the historical distance between us and a text or author of the past. Hence, understanding is a process of fusing our own horizon with that presupposed by the text; it is a *Horizontverschmelzung*. As such, hermeneutics is active appropriation, and not application of a set of rules or canons. Gadamer also developed the notion of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, or history shaped by the effects of well-entrenched interpretations of the sources of a tradition. According to Gadamer, we must fully recognize the impact of the history operative between our times and those of an ancient author or text. Any attempt to evade this effective history and to stand in immediate relation with the past is an uncritical pretence. Finally, of utmost importance for the topic of Buddhist hermeneutics is Gadamer's notion of *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*, our awareness of the hermeneutical situation in which we stand as modern readers and critics vis-à-vis the effective history of texts we seek to understand.

Of course, hermeneutics has also been developed in other directions since Heidegger. Emilio Betti has pursued a rule-governed, objective hermeneutics as the methodology of the *Geisteswissenschaften*.¹⁵ Paul Ricoeur has formulated a "hermeneutics of suspicion" critical of systematic distortions at work on the cultural as well as personal level, and of our naiveté in accepting the self-understanding of an author, text or tradition.¹⁶ The "poststructuralists" Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault have articulated a kind of anti-hermeneutics that questions the notions of authorship, originality, influence and determinate meaning.¹⁷ In all Western developments of the term, hermeneutics is a

¹⁵ See Betti's *Teoria generale della interpretazione* (Milan: Dott A. Giuffrè, 1955); translated into German as *Allgemeine Auslegungslehre als Methodik der Geisteswissenschaften* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1967); see also *Die Hermeneutik als allgemeine Methodik der Geisteswissenschaften* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1962).

¹⁶ See especially Ricoeur's *De l'interprétation: essai sur Freud* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1965); translated into English by Denis Savage as *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay in Interpretation* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1970). See also *Le conflit des interprétations* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1969); English translation as *The Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974).

¹⁷ For Derrida's "deconstructionist" hermeneutics, see particularly *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1967); translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins

highly reflective and self-conscious discipline that focuses on methods and principles of interpretation as opposed to interpretation or exegesis itself. In the modern sense of the term, an interpretive scheme or strategy is not "hermeneutical" unless it reflects an awareness of the problems of method, historical distance, and the historical position of the interpreter. Further, in modern hermeneutical theory, language is essential to being human; there is no pre-linguistic or extra-linguistic experience (although there may be pre-conceptual experience). In the words of Gadamer, wherever being is understood, we are dealing with language ("*Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache*");¹⁸ in the words of Derrida, there is no measure outside language, "there is nothing outside of the text" (*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*).¹⁹

The task of a search for Buddhist hermeneutics. Now let us return to the question of Buddhist hermeneutics, for example, the Buddhist interpretive scheme of designating a given text as *nīlārtha* or *neyārtha*, or placing it within a *p'an chiao* system, or developing such a doctrinal classification. From the perspective of modern Western hermeneutics, these schemes would be "hermeneutical" only in a very qualified sense. They would need at least to show some degree of reflection upon methods of interpreting or classifying scriptures. To qualify for the designation "hermeneutical" in a more restricted sense, they would need to be cognizant of understanding as a mode of being, and of language as essential to experience. Even Thurman's initial definition of hermeneutics as "a philosophical discipline of rational interpretation of a traditional canon of Sacred Scriptures authoritative for a

University Press, 1976). See also *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967); English translation by Alan Bass: *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). David Couzens Hoy, *The Critical Circle* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978) is a critical discussion of Derrida and other recent developments in philosophical hermeneutics. Foucault's views are developed in, among other works, D. F. Bouchard, ed., *Michel Foucault: Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977). For a critical discussion of his entire corpus, see Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

¹⁸ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. xxi; *Truth and Method*, p. xxiii.

¹⁹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 158.

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religious community” seems closer to a definition of scriptural exegesis than of hermeneutics.

Examples of the distinction between exegesis and hermeneutics are easier to find in the Western theological tradition than in Asian Buddhist traditions. Karl Barth’s 1918 exegesis, *Der Römerbrief* (Epistle to the Romans), as methodical and historically aware as it is, is clearly different in character from his hermeneutical remarks, in the prefaces to its various editions, that place a limit to historico-critical methodology, or from his later reflections in *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (Christian Dogmatics) upon the problem of which principles of interpreting the Bible are valid (proclaiming as such only those that derive from one’s witness to revelation). Similarly, Rudolf Bultmann’s general reflections on the set of initial questions (the pre-understanding) that guides any interpretation are quite distinct from his expositions of specific passages of the New Testament, and even from his classification of passages according to historical genres (his application of *Formgeschichte*, or form criticism). In the Buddhist tradition one finds ample instances of exegesis in the numerous textual commentaries; but any explication of the principles that the commentator actually used in dealing with a text in detail is, almost without exception, a task left to the scholar today. Other Buddhist texts are explicit and generalizing enough about how to understand or how to place previous teachings, but are notably lacking in justification of their interpretive principles. For example, the Lotus Sutra’s doctrine of *upāya* is clearly a means to make sense of discordant teachings or “vehicles,” and Chih-i’s intricate classification system articulates a rationale for arranging scriptures in a hierarchy culminating in the Lotus Sutra; but neither the Lotus Sutra nor Chih-i attempts in general to justify the principle of *upāya*.²⁰

²⁰ In an unpublished book-length manuscript, “Rational Justification and Buddhist Hermeneutics,” Douglas Daye of Bowling Green State University is skeptical of the *upāya* theory as an adequate strategy to reconcile conflicting doctrines. On the other hand, William LaFleur ascribes a high level of reflection to the Lotus Sutra, sees its presentation of *upāya* as “self-reflexive allegory,” and says that “the parables of the Lotus are about the role and status of parabolic speech itself” (*The Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983, p. 87).

In short, it is an exegetical exercise to give a systematic interpretation of a text or to arrange texts systematically; it would be a hermeneutical exercise to determine the methods and bounds of interpretation, to consider the validity of textual classifications, or to construct a general theory of interpretation. Scholars have noted the dearth of reflection on method in interpretive texts of the Buddhist tradition, and the almost complete absence of general theories of understanding.²¹ A clear-cut distinction between exegesis and hermeneutics may, however, turn out to be inappropriate in the search for Buddhist hermeneutics, particularly if hermeneutics is construed as the *theory*, and exegesis as the *practice* of interpretation. The major Western theorist, Hans-Georg Gadamer, has himself emphasized *application* as a genuinely hermeneutical task that calls for relating the meaning of a text to the present and requires a critical appreciation of historical distance.²² Paul Ricoeur also has stressed *appropriation* of a text's meaning or power to disclose to the present reader.²³

The respondents at the previously mentioned Kuroda Institute conference suggested that the major contribution of Buddhism to the general field of hermeneutics may be its sophisticated if latent theories of application and reference to the present student of the texts.²⁴ Application in Buddhist theories is radically situational, disclosive, and soteriological. That is, texts are often read as addressing not only a present reader, but a reader in a particular situation or stage of spiritual development; they disclose the meaning of one's experience of the world more than they serve as authoritarian sources of doctrine; and they fulfill a salvific or liberative function by divesting one of illusions or false views (*dr̥sti*). This sort of dis-illusionment and identification of

²¹ One exception, at least in the interpretation of Mathew Kapstein, is the work of the Tibetan scholar Mi-pham (1846-1912) that reflects on the foundations of interpretive systems, rather than giving rules of thumb to make doctrines consistent. See Kapstein's contribution to the forthcoming book, *Buddhist Hermeneutics*.

²² Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 290ff.; *Truth and Method*, pp. 274ff. It appears, however, that the Buddhist sense of application would collapse the historical distance so esteemed by Gadamer.

²³ See Ricoeur's *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), pp. 92ff.

²⁴ See especially the contributions by David Tracy, Alan Sponberg, and David Chap-

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systemic distortions in one's view of reality may be seen as a radicalization of Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion. Ricoeur has also written of the world as the ultimate reference of a text;²⁵ Buddhist hermeneutics often more radically undercuts any distinction between interpreting texts and interpreting reality, as the conference respondents pointed out. This radicalization may seem to lie in the direction of Derrida's collapse (or endless deferral) of a determinate difference between language and a reality outside language that words refer to.²⁶ But whereas Derrida consequently remains bound to language, remains "logocentric" himself in spite of his suspicion of the spoken word, it was suggested that in Buddhism there never was a *logos* tradition; from the beginning the word has been as suspect as are egocentric modes of perceiving the world. Moreover, a reconstruction of the latent Buddhist hermeneutics would show it, unlike its Western counterparts, to be radically transformational; it serves the purpose not primarily of understanding a text or the world but of transforming the interpreter, and along with him, the world. It has even been suggested that Buddhist meditation practices are hermeneutical exercises or systematic methodologies "for uncovering and transforming the basis of our understanding of the world."²⁷

These envisioned Buddhist contributions to hermeneutical theory notwithstanding, there is a crucial part of our task that has been sorely neglected. Even if the intended relevance of texts to readers has been recognized by buddhologists, their own relation to the textual traditions they study is hardly ever defined. In our task to fully develop Buddhist hermeneutics, we must be aware of the hermeneutical situation in which we stand vis-à-vis the tradition or text we wish to understand.

pell in the forthcoming *Buddhist Hermeneutics*.

²⁵ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, pp. 36–37, 92.

²⁶ One recent work takes up Buddhism, especially Nāgārjuna, as a way to resolve some Derridian difficulties: Robert Magliola, *Derrida on the Mend* (Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1984).

²⁷ Peter Gregory, "Reflections on the Chinese Buddhist Meditation Tradition," in *Traditions of Meditation in Chinese Buddhism*, Studies in East Asian Buddhism, vol. 4. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, forthcoming). In a previous essay in this journal, "The Hermeneutics of Practice in Dōgen and Francis of Assisi" (*Eastern Buddhist* 14, 2, 1981, pp. 22–46), I argued that practice can be seen as a hermeneutical principle that discloses the meaning of certain texts at the same time that the texts tell one how to practice.

We must do more than present Yogacarin and Svatantrikan hermeneutics, the hermeneutics of Tsong-kha-pa or Tsung-mi or Kūkai; we must at the same time reflect upon and articulate how we come to understand their respective teachings. If we would explain the way that Dōgen, for example, interpreted other texts, we must make explicit 1) the methods we use to interpret Dōgen, and 2) the historical context in which we interpret Dōgen's interpretations. Until we do so, I believe that our search for hermeneutics within the Buddhist tradition will remain limited and immature. I hope that the promise of another conference on Buddhist hermeneutics can be realized to explore this indispensable dimension.

The task of defining our own own stance toward a tradition we would understand brings us face to face with the problem of how we should understand history in a Buddhist context. I will now attempt to describe that problem.

THE POSSIBILITY OF A BUDDHIST SENSE OF HISTORY

From Buddhist hermeneutics to Buddhist history. I have mentioned that, in Heidegger's hermeneutical ontology, human understanding is historical in its very nature, because human beings are historical in their very nature. In Gadamer's extension of this ontology, an awareness of our contemporary historical situation is indispensable for an appropriate understanding of a past tradition or text. As scholars, whether Western or Asian, we have come to stand in a very peculiar "hermeneutical situation" vis-à-vis the Buddhist tradition. This arises from the fact that the methods we employ to study Buddhism derive predominantly from the West. Modern buddhology originated in nineteenth century Europe, that is, in a situation that was culturally, ideologically, and historically remote from the Buddhist tradition it began to study.

The historical orientation of modern scholarship. The historico-critical methods developed in the West have given buddhology a strong orientation toward historical study. Historical knowledge of the development of Buddhism and its scriptures has been emphasized equally with translation of the scriptures and texts. Minoru Kiyota contrasts the

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orientation of modern buddhology with the non-critical and ahistorical attitude of sectarian Buddhism scholarship. This traditional scholarship

viewed systems of Buddhist thought from the perspective of a *p'an chiao* system which classified doctrines and evaluated them by presupposing the superiority of one's own doctrine. The *p'an chiao* system established its own patriarchal lineage and honored the sayings of those patriarchs without criticism, without investigating the primary sources from which the theory and practice basic to the development of a given doctrine were derived. It was ahistorical in its approach to describing the evolution of Buddhist thought. . . . An understanding of the history of the evolution of Buddhist thought, then, involves in part an investigation of [the doctrinal] problematics and [textual] presuppositions [operative at the time of composition], not simply an understanding of a fossilized *p'an chiao* system, arbitrarily assigned to enhance a given sectarian dogma. Modern Buddhology challenges the *p'an chiao* system and critically examines the sayings of the patriarchs.²⁸

Ironically, in the light of Peter Gregory's work on *p'an chiao* as a hermeneutical strategy, we can apply Kiyota's criticism of traditional scholarship to Kiyota himself here. That is, we can say that one must understand the historical context, the hermeneutical situation, in which the *p'an chiao* system was developed. Gregory has shown that *p'an chiao* schemes were themselves a historical response to a particular Chinese hermeneutical problem, and has reminded us that the Chinese did not have access to many of the primary sources for the doctrines that they classified at the time. Of course, Kiyota is right in asserting that later scholarship based upon such doctrinal classifications was uncritical. But his contention that *p'an chiao* was ahistorical in its approach belies a modern Western sense of history that the ninth-century Chinese may not have shared. Respondents at the Kuroda Institute conference on Buddhist hermeneutics cited the Lotus Sutra, and Chih-i's

²⁸ Minoru Kiyota, "Modern Japanese Buddhology: Its History and Problematics," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 7, 1 (1984), pp. 21-22.

use of it, as works very conscious of history. Chih-i's works reflect a tension between timeless categories and a sense of history; between his unification of doctrines into a system and their place in his day, the Sui dynasty; and his own sense of time and need to relate Buddhism in an appropriate if novel way. It was suggested that scholars need to consider history as a hermeneutical principle within Buddhism, to reconsider how Buddhists used time, temporality, and history as ways to organize and interpret material.²⁹ In order to suggest just how different their notions of time and history might have been, and to clarify further the hermeneutical situation in which modern Buddhist scholarship stands, let me briefly summarize the relevant Western notion of history.

The sense of history governing modern scholarship. It is widely recognized that "history" has two levels of meaning. Miki Kiyoshi (1897-1945), in his *Philosophy of History*, drew the traditional distinction between *res gestae* and *historia rerum gestarum*.³⁰ I would describe the two levels of history as 1) story, or the narrative, temporally successive account of people and events, and 2) historiography, or the critical study of such accounts.

Ever since the researches of Herodotus and Thucydides, historiography has placed great importance upon discovering reasons for historical occurrences and evidence for the historian's claims. The search for reasons often took the form of establishing causal connections between different events, or between background conditions and historical occurrences. The search for evidence became a prerequisite for historical objectivity. In the 1860's, the father of *Universalgeschichte*, Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), said that history (i.e., historiography) must seek to establish only "what really happened," "things as they actually were" (*wie es eigentlich gewesen [ist]*).³¹ If we ignore Ranke's attempt to link historical epochs with God, we can say that he championed a new objectivity in the study of history. At the same time that Western scholars such as Eugene Burnouf and Friedrich

²⁹ See especially the remarks of Carl Bielefeldt in the forthcoming volume, *Buddhist Hermeneutics*.

³⁰ *Rekishi no tetsugaku 歴史の哲学* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1932), p. 1.

³¹ Cited in Hans Meyerhoff, *The Philosophy of History in Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), p. 13.

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Max Müller began to develop modern buddhology, theologians contributed much to modern historico-critical methods in their search for a historical Jesus behind the "Christ of faith" depicted in the Gospels.³² A new kind of Church history began, followed by a history of religions. One part of these developments was explicit reflection on the problem of what should count as historical writing, particularly in the past. In 1892, Church historian Franz Overbeck (1837–1905) described the characteristics considered essential for historical writing: there must be 1) a chronological presentation of material, and 2) an intention to pass the account on to progeny. Further, in order to have Church history (or the history of a religious institution), the Church (or institution) must be seen as something that can be described historically, that is, as subject to history. According to Overbeck, the idea of writing history can only occur when a people has learned to distinguish one time-period from another, or more precisely, when it is conscious of changes undergone *and* of the value of recording them for the future.³³ If modern historiography finds its roots in the classical Greek works, history as the story of a people finds its paradigm in the Old Testament writings. A pronounced historical consciousness is evident in both the Israelites' concern with salvation in this world through history, and the Christian view of the crucified Christ "hurtling us back on our own finite history as the place in which God chose to pitch his tent."³⁴ The qualities that Overbeck sees as defining historical work obviously derive from the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Historians today may describe the conditions necessary for historical writing differently, and may also rightly insist that objective historical writing was not the province of the modern West alone. In any case, however, the ideas summarized above helped to form the historical con-

³² A similar search for the teaching of the historical teachings of the Buddha was launched by European scholars and taken up by Meiji period Japanese Buddhists, though it was not of the same significance for Mahayana Buddhists as the Christian search was for Christians. See Whalen Lai, "The Search for the Historical Śākyamuni in Light of the Historical Jesus," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 2 (1982), pp. 77–91.

³³ *Über die Anfänge der Kirchengeschichtsschreibung* (Basel, 1892); cited in Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, *Die Identität der buddhistischen Schulen und die Kompilation buddhistischer Universalgeschichten in China* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1982), p. 3.

³⁴ I owe this phrase to Joseph S. O'Leary, from a review in *Inter-Religio* (Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture) 7 (Spring 1985), p. 46.

sciousness of modern buddhology, with its insistence on objectivity and its interest in establishing who were the historical authors, and what was the historical background of the various texts. The story of the rise of modern buddhology is made more interesting when we see what evidence it has discovered for *Buddhist* historical writing in the past. In the following I will limit myself to a few examples, rather than attempt an adequate review of all recent work on this topic.

The search for historical consciousness in Buddhism. Scholars generally assume that there is little, if any, historical consciousness in Indian religions. Heinz Bechert states that, other than accounts of a few central events, there is no sign of an Indian Buddhist history that is to any extent faithful to reality. Singhalese Buddhist historical accounts from the second century on form a special case. Bechert regards the Tibetan works on Buddhist history as inspired by Chinese historical writing, not by Indian example.³⁵ Of course, these assumptions do not obviate the need to search for a specifically Indian conception of history. Here I will only exemplify the search in Chinese and Japanese materials.

Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer's book, *Die Identität der buddhistischen Schulen und die Kompilation buddhistischer Universalgeschichten in China*, is a thorough examination of Sung period Buddhist universal (i.e., cross-sectarian, cross-dynastic) histories. A review of this rich study is beyond the scope of my report, but I do want to mention one of its conclusions that is relevant to the question at hand. (Although Schmidt-Glintzer does not define "history" or "historical writing," the characteristics described by Overbeck would seem to hold in his case too.) He notes that Buddhist historical accounts in China began at least by the fifth century, when Buddhists wanted to show that Buddhism was truly Chinese, that it had a kind of pre-existence in China. He concludes that Chinese Buddhist historical writing had to be modelled after Confucian precedents, since history was not originally a Buddhist concern.³⁶ Hence Chinese Buddhist histories originated in an

³⁵ Heinz Bechert, *Zum Ursprung der Geschichtsschreibung im indischen Kulturbereich* (Göttingen, 1969), pp. 39ff., 52ff., cited in Schmidt-Glintzer, p. 2.

³⁶ Schmidt-Glintzer, pp. 4-5. For a summary of classical Chinese notions of history, see the chapter "Philosophy of History" in Roger T. Ames, *The Art of Rulership: A Study in Ancient Chinese Political Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), pp. 1-27.

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attempt to “naturalize” Buddhism in China. These Buddhist histories, to be sure, included features that distinguished them from their non-Buddhist precedents, but the Confucian model remained decisive. Histories of Buddhist schools in the T’ang period paralleled earlier ancestral and clan histories; Sung period histories were even more sectarian. The import of this conclusion is that there is nothing essentially Buddhist about Chinese Buddhist histories; these histories were not shaped by Buddhist philosophy, but rather by motives to legitimize Buddhism, or a particular Buddhist school, in the eyes of non-Buddhists or non-members of that school. The 1964 article by Jan Yunhua, on “Buddhist Historiography in Sung China,”³⁷ describes several characteristics of Sung Buddhist historical activities, but does not alter the import of this conclusion.

In my article, “Is There Historical Consciousness Within Ch’an,”³⁸ I attempted first to specify the notion of history that is tacitly employed by historians of Zen such as Yanagida Seizan and Heinrich Dumoulin, then to initiate the search for historical consciousness in Zen texts. My tentative conclusions were: 1) if we judge the texts by modern standards of fact versus fabrication, and by their awareness of historical conditioning versus mythical consciousness, then the Zen chronicles and accounts reveal little, if any, historical consciousness in the modern sense of the term (a few passages in Tsung-mi’s accounts of Zen schools would seem to be an exception); and 2) in order to deepen the search and to appreciate the texts better, we need to explore a specifically Zen, or at least Buddhist, sense of history. I will return to this theme in a moment, but first let me mention an exploration of historical consciousness in one Japanese text.

The *Gukanshō* 愚管抄, written by Jien 慈円 in 1219, is characterized by its translators Delmer M. Brown and Ichirō Ishida as an “interpretive history.”³⁹ It is the “first known Japanese attempt to construct a pattern of historical change that would explain the disturbed situation of that day and show what could be done and should be done to

³⁷ In *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 114 (1964), pp. 360–381.

³⁸ In *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 12, 2 (1985), pp. 141–171.

³⁹ *The Future and the Past: A Translation and Study of the Gukanshō* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979). See also Brown’s “Early Evolution of Historical Consciousness [in Japan],” forthcoming.

restore peace and stability.”⁴⁰ Brown and Ishida mention three specifically Buddhist characteristics of this secular history: its periodization in terms of kalpic progression and decline, resulting in the present era of *mappō* 末法; its designation of four Japanese leaders as incarnations of Buddha; and its views of the Buddha Law (*buppō* 仏法) as a positive force that can be invoked to check kalpic decline in this world.⁴¹ They also remark that in its organization, the *Gukanshō* differs significantly from a Confucian view of how history should be written.⁴² Nevertheless, their conclusion is that the *Gukanshō* is inspired as much by Shinto as by Buddhism; it was determined to uphold the divine origin and succession of the Japanese emperors, and it was guided by a belief in the efficacy of the gods’ blessings and in their power to rejuvenate the land. Of course this syncretism of *mappō* mentality and belief in regeneration does not necessarily detract from the *historical* character of the *Gukanshō*, but its attempt to explain the conditions of the times in terms of metahistorical principles (*dōri* 道理), both destructive and constructive,⁴³ does weaken the argument for the historical consciousness of its author.

The various studies described above do locate historical consciousness, in a limited sense, in Chinese and Japanese Buddhist accounts. But the degree of this historical consciousness is tacitly measured by modern standards, such as chronological order, ideals of factuality and objectivity, awareness of historical conditioning and of relevance for the future. In other words, the search for historical consciousness in Buddhism is itself a reflection of modern, and mostly Western, historical consciousness; it is an unacknowledged symptom of the hermeneutical situation in which we stand vis-à-vis the texts we interpret. None of the studies has been able to specify a philosophically Buddhist sense of history, which would challenge modern historical sensitivity and call for a real “fusion of horizons” (*Horizontverschmelzung*). Perhaps we do not know yet where to look for a specifically Buddhist notion of history, or what to look for. One obvious place would seem to be in the teaching of the three ages of the

⁴⁰ Brown and Ishida, p. x.

⁴¹ Brown and Ishida, p. 10.

⁴² Brown and Ishida, p. 12.

⁴³ Brown and Ishida, pp. 4-5.

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Dharma, leading up to the age of the Final Law or *mappō*, that was so influential in medieval Japanese Buddhist thought. But today this teaching appears too mythical to function as an idea that touches the actual history of the world. Likewise, the idea of karma would seem to offer a basis for establishing causal connections in the nexus of events, but this idea was formed in a cyclical, "ahistorical" worldview and also appears too mythical for modern sensitivity, which is to say that it was not part of the Western myth that led to the decisive sense of history in modern scholarship. The ideas of the three ages and of karma do, however, provide a starting point for two recent philosophical attempts to define a Buddhist sense of history.

The philosophical search for a Buddhist notion of history. In an essay translated as "Centering and the World Beyond,"⁴⁴ Takeuchi Yoshinori (b. 1913) offers an existential interpretation of the ideas of *mappō* and Buddhist eschatology. According to Takeuchi, Shinran implied that the three ages of the Dharma, the three periods of eschatological history, are recapitulated in the life of the individual. Accordingly, we do not simply live in an age of *mappō*, in which direct awakening and self-directed practice are impossible. Rather, within this world of *mappō*, each individual can live out the three stages of transformation in his or her spiritual life. In the culminating age, the tension between the pride remaining in our practice and our will to surrender is overcome, and the Name of Amida realizes itself in the world. In other words, in Takeuchi's interpretation, world history becomes an existential dimension of the individual in his encounter with the Name of Amida. If we try to extrapolate a notion of history from this interpretation of Shinran, we might say that in this view history realizes itself from within, in the present moment of encounter, rather than in a present set of circumstance externally conditioned by the past.

Takeuchi speaks more explicitly about history in the essay, "Freeing and the World Beyond."⁴⁵ There he interprets Bultmann's eschatology: what is central is not a historical transmission of revelation in the past, but a here-and-now encounter with the Gospel *kerygma* that

⁴⁴ In Takeuchi Yoshinori, *The Heart of Buddhism*, trans. James W. Heisig. (New York: Crossroad, 1983), pp. 48-60.

⁴⁵ Takeuchi, pp. 127-143.

comes to us from the future. "With the world as its mediation, history can thus open up from the individual history of existential reality into world history. . . . The full meaning of history can only be conceived in terms of the meaning of religious existence as a being in the historical world." He goes on to apply this interpretation to Buddhism: "It is the same in the case of the name of Amida Buddha. I encounter the name of the Buddha here and now, ad-vening as eternity from the Pure Land." The world symbolized by the Pure Land both is "discovered directly underfoot of the present" and "signifies the opening up of the world in which the *nembutsu* is transmitted historically. . . . This in turn means the realization of the world in which everything mirrors everything else."⁴⁶ Takeuchi mentions that he has synthesized Bultmann and the later Heidegger here; we should also note that in one point at least he has reconciled Buddhism with Christianity, finding that, in both, truth is realized in history. I do not know whether most scholars of Shin Buddhism will agree with Takeuchi's interpretations, but I do know that not all theologians agree with Bultmann. Takeuchi's book is a profound attempt to reflect on the meaning of history for Buddhism and for Buddhist scholarship. In the end, however, it seems that he presents not a Buddhist notion of history, but rather an existential notion shared by some Buddhist *and* Christian thinkers.

The realization of truth in history was also a conviction of Takeuchi's teacher, Tanabe Hajime (1885–1962), who sought to formulate a philosophy of history that was also a philosophy of religion. Tanabe was critical of Heidegger's hermeneutical analysis of human existence as being too historicist, forgetting the absolute dimension of time, and too idealist, ignoring political reality.

Hermeneutics is always accompanied by historicism. But history cannot get free of the relativism involved in "historicism" if it is deprived of the unity of transcendent nothingness in the "eternal now." . . . [Heidegger's] hermeneutics . . . has not escaped idealistic subjectivism. . . . From such an abstract standpoint, it is impossible to understand the political vicissitudes of societies or states, which

⁴⁶ Takeuchi, p. 141.

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make up the content of history. This limitation is understandable, given the fact that hermeneutics has developed from a method of interpreting the history of culture [and not the history of politics].

The historical world must rather be conceived in terms of a circular movement toward the absolute in ethics and back to the world in religion.⁴⁷

Takeuchi and Tanabe, in their common concern to relate Pure Land Buddhist philosophy to a modern, secularized world, have recourse to the here-and-now realization of truth. In this respect they would seem to be in accord with Zen views. On closer examination, however, their views contrast with those of Zen-oriented philosophers. Zen has tended not to separate so clearly the secular and the sacred, or this world and a beyond, and so has not felt the same need to reconcile history and religious truth. Hisamatsu Shin'ichi (1889-1980) goes so far as to say: "That man has religion is proof that he is not satisfied with the view that history is everything, or that it is central." He speaks of the emergence of the true self or "fundamental subject" that "is not achieved in the movement of history, that is, through the historical dialectic. It is accomplished at the root-source of history, which is prior to the birth of history."⁴⁸ This is the source of Hisamatsu's famous "supra-historical history," "history that transcends history."

Takeuchi's tendency to existentialize history, and his discovery of truth "directly underfoot of the present," would also seem to reflect the views of another Kyoto School philosopher, Nishitani Keiji (b. 1900); but again the emphasis has shifted. Instead of a realization of truth in history, we find the realization of history in the infinity of the moment. Nishitani's reflections on historicity and historical consciousness occur in the two final chapters of his book, *Religion and*

⁴⁷ Cited from chapter three, "Absolute Critique and Historicity," of *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, trans. Y. Takeuchi, V. Viglielmo, and J. Heisig (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, forthcoming). This is not the place to assess critically Tanabe's philosophy of history; indeed the treatment of history by all the Kyoto school philosophers I mention, and by Nishida as well, deserves a much fuller account than can be given here.

⁴⁸ "Ordinary Mind," trans. Tokiwa Gishin and Howard Curtis, in the *Eastern Buddhist* 12, 1 (May 1979), pp. 24, 28.

Nothingness.⁴⁹ These reflections can help us determine the extent to which modern historiography is part of a heritage alien to Buddhism and perhaps prejudicial to Buddhist notions of history. In Nishitani's work, the myth of karma that might have given rise to a Buddhist notion of history is demythologized and given an existential interpretation. More germane to our consideration here, however, is the direction in which Nishitani develops the notion of historical consciousness.

"The claim that historical consciousness originated with the Jewish people contains serious problems," he writes.⁵⁰ But the problems he points out are of a religious, not historical nature. That is, he does not concern himself with historical counterclaims that the ancient Greeks, or the Chinese long before them, were historically conscious. Rather he suggests that the ancient Israelites' consciousness of being a chosen people with a divine career entailed a deeply rooted self-centeredness.⁵¹ Historical consciousness here seems to mean an awareness of retaining through time a privileged identity as a group, though this sense would certainly fit groups other than the Israelites. For Christianity, Nishitani continues, not only does history have a beginning and a divine plan but also an end determined by the transhistorical will of God. Redemption and the last judgment occur as irrevocable historical events within linear time. The consciousness of history that arises from this awareness of original sin, freedom, and the once-and-for-all nature (*Einmaligkeit*) of time, is one of self-centered consciousness. Later European Enlightenment retained the view that history has a meaning, but one given by the intellect of man, not by the will of God. It replaced eschatology with a belief in historical progress.⁵² The aim of history was immanent in history: the rationalization of human life. Although both the Christian and the Enlightenment views were undermined by Nietzsche, they made a lasting contribution to the Western heritage in what Nishitani calls historicity in its twofold sense: historical consciousness, and history become conscious.⁵³ (Both of

⁴⁹ Nishitani Keiji, *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (Tokyo, 1961); translated with an introduction by Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982).

⁵⁰ Nishitani, p. 206.

⁵¹ Nishitani, p. 203.

⁵² Nishitani, p. 209.

⁵³ Nishitani, p. 211.

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these senses harbor the aforementioned problem of self-centeredness.) "History become conscious" presumably refers to the Enlightenment ideal, whereas "historical consciousness" would here again refer to the notion of a divine plan. Both allow for something absolutely new being created in time, or for "historicity" in Nishitani's preferred sense of the term.⁵⁴ But modern historical consciousness began precisely with the denial of a beginning and end to history and with the commitment to reason. This immanent view, which developed into history as a social science, is as much a part of the modern Christian's view of history as is the contrary notion of transhistorical meaning.

What is germane to our topic here is not Nishitani's critique of the Christian view or of self-centeredness,⁵⁵ but the connection he sees between modern historiography and the Western heritage of Judeo-Christianity and the Enlightenment. Extrapolating from Nishitani's account, it would seem that modern historiography, as practiced by many buddhologists for example, carries on certain features of the the Western heritage but leaves behind other elements. It suspends judgment on the question of the meaning or progress of history, but continues to assume linear time and the once-and-for-all character of actual events. Likewise, it brackets the question of a beginning or end to history, but assumes the Enlightenment notion of an objective equality of succeeding moments.⁵⁶

Nishitani seeks a sense of history that recognizes the once-and-for-all character of time and the possibility of truly novel occurrences, and that in this respect is consonant with the viewpoint of modern historiography. But, at the same time, he seeks a sense of history that realizes the absoluteness and incomparability of each moment, and therefore preserves the religious character of history.⁵⁷ The full

⁵⁴ Nishitani, p. 212.

⁵⁵ As Winston King suggested to me, one might better call the Judeo-Christian notion of time and history "homo-centric"; from a Christian perspective, the Zen view might appear extremely self-centric, collapsing past and future to the present moment.

⁵⁶ Historian Leonard Marsak notes that the Enlightenment "sense of historical time . . . saw history as a continuum of moments objectively equal in time, in which each moment may be subjectively heightened by the sum of lived experience, personal and historical. The millenarian conceives the moment otherwise; as the sum of all time contained in one lived experience" (*The Enlightenment*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1972, p. 7).

historicity of history is not captured by a sense of history 1) as terminated by the intrusion of the transhistorical at the end of time (the Christian view); 2) as progressing toward the consummate rationalization of human life (the view of the European Enlightenment); 3) as groundless and of unbounded meaninglessness (nihilism); nor 4) as repeated endlessly on the transhistorical ground of "eternal recurrence" (Nietzsche). Rather, history becomes radically historical when its historicity is carried through to a transhistorical ground. But how is this possible? Historicity is able to realize itself radically only on the standpoint of *sūnyatā*, the standpoint of the bottomlessness of the moment.⁵⁸ Each individual moment of unending time possesses the very same solemnity that is thought in Christianity to be possessed by the special moments of the creation, fall, redemption, and second coming.⁵⁹ "In bottomlessly embracing the endless past and endless future, we bring time to fullness of time at each and every moment of time."⁶⁰ Each point of historical time pierces through the field of emptiness, *sūnyatā*.

Nishitani's reflections give rise to a uniquely Buddhist (or at least Zen) sense of history. Based upon the Buddhist notion of *sūnyatā*, this view points to the concentration of time in the present moment, and, at the same time, to the infinite openness beneath each present moment, freeing it to be uniquely itself—but realized only when the actor in history loses his self-centeredness. As profound as these reflections are, however, it is difficult to apply them to the sense of history operative in modern historiography and buddhology, and thus it is difficult to surmise how they might revolutionize historical methods in the study of Buddhism. Nishitani himself pointed out to me that his reflections were meant to explicate a notion of historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*), not a notion of history as practiced by historians.

I will summarize one other philosophically oriented attempt to specify a Buddhist sense of history. Aramaki Noritoshi, in an essay on "History and Buddhism in Creative Ages,"⁶¹ outlines a general theory

⁵⁷ Nishitani, pp. 207-208.

⁵⁸ Nishitani, pp. 211-217.

⁵⁹ Nishitani, p. 272.

⁶⁰ Nishitani, p. 181.

⁶¹ In *Zen Buddhism Today: Annual Report of the Kyoto Zen Symposium 1* (1983), pp. 56-70.

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of history and illustrates the theory with two examples. He suggests that historical periods can be defined as community-based, as individual-based, or as formed by the complex interaction of these two: the existential-communal and the individual-intersubjective social structures. Buddhism is a religion of the last category. To exemplify his thesis, Aramaki translates a passage, thought to be the Buddha's words, from the *Attandandasutta* (*Suttanipāta* 935-954) and then a passage from Zen master Hui-ssu 慧思 (515-577), both expressing a deep consciousness of *samsāra* and, in the case of Hui-ssu, also of *mappō*. In conclusion, Aramaki states that "creative thinkers such as the Buddha and Hui-ssu experienced their historical and social situations as nihilistic *samsāra*, and were thus conditioned by history; and . . . [yet] transformed their historical and social situations into a cultural *nirvāna*, and are thus conditioning history."⁶² Although I do not grasp what "cultural *nirvāna*" means here, I think that Aramaki is suggesting that *samsāra* and *nirvāna* are not only notions that arose at a certain time in history, and not only reflected the historical conditions of the time, but actually transformed those conditions. If my understanding is correct, then Aramaki's suggestions would provide a starting point for a peculiarly Buddhist notion of history.

As will be evident to any scholar of Buddhism, it is difficult indeed to apply any of these philosophical discussions to the search for Buddhist notions of history in the past, much less to actually practiced historiographical methods. But to say how far apart this discussion and current practices are, is to say how far we still are from specifying Buddhist notions of history. It should not be forgotten that modern buddhological investigative technique often derived from sophisticated philosophical discussions, but discussions informed by Western, not Buddhist, philosophy.

CONCLUSION: AN APPEAL FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

I concluded section two of this report by saying that the current search for Buddhist hermeneutics is impeded by a lack of self-reflection; we need to reflect upon our own "hermeneutical strategies" and our own "hermeneutical situation" vis-à-vis the tradition, if we are to

⁶² Aramaki, p. 70.

do justice to the figures and texts that we investigate. (Of course, it may be said that my emphasis on our present “hermeneutical situation” and on self-reflection is itself a bias of modern Western hermeneutics, and not necessarily a feature of *Buddhist* hermeneutics; but I believe that this self-investigation is essential to Buddhist teachings as well.) The hermeneutics we investigate is often remote from the hermeneutics we ourselves practice. For example, we no longer apply *p’an chiao* schemes to our own (historical) classifications of Buddhist scriptures. And although we may employ expedient means in teaching one another, and may call some texts more difficult than others, as objective buddhologists we do not ordinarily interpret some teachings as inferior and others as superior; *upāya* is not one of our hermeneutical strategies. Further, there are probably no texts that for us are *not* in need of interpretation, that are *nīṭārtha* as opposed to *neyārtha*. In our present historical, hermeneutical situation, we usually do not appropriate the various Buddhist hermeneutics that we discover; what then is their significance for us?

Concomitantly, we may ask why we study history in the first place. Among the many reasons that have been offered are: 1) To learn the truth about the past—an objective, factual truth. Ranke said, “History cannot judge the past, or instruct the present for the benefit of future ages; it wants only to show what actually happened.” 2) To guide us into a better future. Santayana said that those who are ignorant of history are bound to repeat its mistakes. 3) To enlighten us about our present conditions. The critical study of history exercises the enlightening function of reason, Habermas claims. Whether oriented toward past, future, or present, however, these statements presuppose notions of actuality that may not be shared by ancient Buddhist writers. If Buddhist hermeneutics is liberating in the sense of divesting one of illusions and serving as a critique of ideologies, then one would expect it also to be critical of the notions of actuality that are taken for granted in the current methods of historians.

Minoru Kiyota also reflects upon the function of historical study in the article I referred to before. Describing the tasks of modern buddhology, he calls for more translations of texts (a supremely hermeneutical task), and he upholds the modern emphasis on the importance of historical knowledge, especially of “the socio-cultural basis that led to the origin and subsequent development of Buddhism. . . .

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[The modern] “historical approach to Buddhism no longer allows the mythologization of the historical Buddha and of Buddhist India, and the concomitant dogmatization of Buddhist thought.”⁶³ On the other hand, he writes that it is inadequate to identify Buddhism only within the limits of a nineteenth-century European rational philosophy.

The pitfall of modern Buddhology—with its emphasis on sheer objectivity—lies in ignoring the hopes and aspirations which the Buddhists throughout their history have derived from the Buddha-Dharma, as they themselves have conceived it. . . . The intent of the historical Buddha was not by any means to ignore the historicity of mankind, but to provide the wisdom to cope with the everlasting crisis to which man is subject, and to contribute creatively to world civilization.⁶⁴

What Kiyota intimates, then, is that we study Buddhist history to actualize Buddhist *prajñā*.

I feel that we need to pursue the study of Buddhist history in a way that is not rationalistic, not apologetical, not sectarian, but also not timorous; we should not hesitate to articulate Buddhist notions of history and their relevance for modern buddhology. Buddhologists have often been critical of the lack of objectivity in traditional Buddhist histories and chronicles that were composed, in part, to legitimize Buddhism, or a particular Buddhist sect, in the eyes of others. At the same time, many today pursue objectivity in their studies in order to legitimize Buddhism, and particularly Buddhist studies, in the academic world. In the world of modern buddhology, reflection upon methodology is commonplace; but reflection upon what history might have meant for the figures and texts of the past, and upon what it means to us today, is rare. This lack of reflection accompanies that in the search for Buddhist hermeneutics, where scholars have thought about what interpretation meant for various figures and texts, but have not reflected sufficiently upon their own interpretive stance. I hope that more attention will be given to these problems in the future.

⁶³ Kiyota, p. 29.

⁶⁴ Kiyota, p. 31.