

COMMENTS

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1. GENERAL QUESTION OF ALL PANELISTS

What exactly is one doing when looking at the Buddhist tradition through the lens of William James or any other modern Western philosopher? Is there a way that placing the label “pragmatist” on the Buddha or Nāgārjuna or Dōgen enables us to understand better what those thinkers were saying than if we did not apply the label? What kinds of possible misinterpretations might we be avoiding by correctly applying the label “radical empiricist” or “Pragmatist” to these figures from the past who lived in a world that would in many ways feel unrecognizable to us if we were suddenly to be transported there in a time machine?

I feel confident that each of today’s panelists has an answer to that question, and to some extent I can anticipate what their answers would be, but I would like to hear each of them state what they think they are doing when they offer the kinds of comparisons they have offered in their paper.

2. HOLDER’S “JAMES AND THE NEUROSCIENCE OF BUDDHIST MEDITATION”

The initial question that John Holder begins his paper with is an intriguing real-life example of how exactly the same set of experimental results not only can be but actually are interpreted in radically different ways by two camps. The experimental observation that contemplative exercises, when carried on consistently and repeatedly for a long time, are attended by apparent changes in how the brain functions is seen by a neurophysiologist as evidence that the “wiring” and “rewiring” of the brain causes changes in temperament. The Dalai Lama sees the very same experimental observation as evidence that a mental exercise can cause changes in the structure of the brain. This situation seems like an excellent example of William James’s famous observation that people have a strong conservative tendency whereby they see things from within approximately the same framework for all their lives, and that when new observations come along, people tend to interpret them from within the framework that has always worked for them. So James would have predicted that Richard Davidson would interpret the experimental results in question within his essentially physicalist framework, and the Dalai Lama would interpret those same results within the standard Buddhist framework of mind and body being genetically discrete, neither being reducible to the other. In other words, the experiments in question did not yield results that produced enough heat to make “experience boil over” for either Davidson or the Dalai Lama.

Holder, I think, is right on target when he playfully envisions James coming onto the scene and recounting his famous story about the people on a picnic arguing about whether a man going around a tree also goes around a squirrel on that tree when the squirrel always scurries to be on the opposite side of the tree from the man. If James were to happen onto the scene when Davidson

and the Dalai Lama were disagreeing about whether mental events cause physical events or so-called mental events just are physical events under a convenient description, I can imagine that James would congratulate both Davidson and the Dalai Lama for doing their respective jobs very well. After all, the job of a neurophysiologist is to gain insights into how the various components of the brain interact, and that job may very well be easier to carry out if one does not introduce rather poorly defined and immeasurable notions such as mental states, emotions, affects and so forth. The Dalai Lama, on the other hand, has a different job, which is to inspire people to realize that they can play a role in their own happiness and well-being—that they do not have to see themselves as hapless victims of an unsympathetic and uncooperative world but can take at least some measure of control over their own lives and thought processes. The Dalai Lama’s job is probably somewhat easier to carry out if he does not have to speak about mental events in a way that suggests that what we call mental states are entirely dependent on electrochemical and mechanical processes over which no one can claim to have any control.

Rather than applying the squirrel-around-the-tree story to the Donaldson-Dalai Lama conversation, Holder takes us in a rather different direction, which is to make and then defend the claim that James’s discussion of pure experience “provides the best philosophical interpretation of the neuroscientific study of Buddhist meditation.” So whereas I imagine James coming on the scene and congratulating each party for doing his job well, Holder pictures James coming on the scene and showing “that, in fact, both sides in this debate have got it fundamentally wrong.”

Now at this point we might benefit by having William James saunter into the room after taking a stroll along the Riverwalk and congratulate both Holder and me for doing our jobs very well before pointing out that we are both fundamentally wrong. Just in case that does not happen, let me anticipate a few ways that James might congratulate Holder for doing his job very well. First, I think Holder does an excellent job of explaining for the purposes of this discussion what sort of task James hoped the doctrine of pure experience would be able to do, and what sorts of blind alleys it might help us avoid going down. I find it very helpful to note that James’s pure experience “is fundamentally a phenomenological concept, a starting point for the analysis of experience, a methodology rather than a metaphysical concept.” I think this is helpful in the context of talking about early Buddhism in that it serves as a useful reminder that the Buddha as portrayed in Theravāda literature was not in the business of being an academic philosopher specializing in metaphysics but rather was offering a set of methods by which people would look at their own thought processes, study how certain patterns of thinking seem to be regularly followed by others and bring about changes in one’s habitual way of looking at things that would be followed by a generally happier outlook. Even that task, however, was only a step on the way to what the character known as the Buddha in Theravādin literature keeps saying is the ultimate goal, which is to stop generating a craving for continued existence that fuels the engine of rebirth. To take anything said by almost any Buddhist (with the possible exception of Stephen Batchelor) out of this essentially soteriological framework is to run the serious risk of distorting its meaning. I think Holder has done a fine job of helping to remind all of us of that risk, and I think his invocation of James is a good way of reinforcing that reminder.

3. JOHN’S “DAVID KALUPAHANA ON WILLIAM JAMES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY BUDDHISM”

Because Joseph John’s paper, like Holder’s, deals with early Buddhism, let me turn next to it. The lens through which John looks at early

Buddhism, and then Nāgārjuna, is William James as understood by David Kalupahana. Perhaps more accurately we could say that John is looking at the Buddha as understood by Kalupahana through the lens of William James as understood by Kalupahana. As John says in his opening sentence, “David Kalupahana argues that an understanding of William James can help to understand the development of early Buddhism.” John offers us a critical look at that claim by Kalupahana. As I understand Kalupahana’s argument—and I stand to be corrected by Joseph John and other Kalupahanologists—the claim is that the Buddha eschewed metaphysical claims in favor of pragmatic attitudes, where a metaphysical claim is a claim about something that has not been or cannot be experienced. Nāgārjuna also eschewed metaphysical claims and was therefore in line with the Buddha. The Sarvāstivādins and Sautrāntikas did make metaphysical claims and in so doing distorted the teachings of the Buddha. In showing the pitfalls of Sarvāstivādin and Sautrāntika metaphysical thinking, Nāgārjuna restored the teachings of the Buddha to their pristine Theravādin condition. Something along those lines is what it seems to me Kalupahana was arguing, although in a more elegant way than my overly brief summary suggests. Incidentally, in a longer version of John’s paper, he does an excellent job of problematizing Kalupahana’s rather narrow understanding of what metaphysics is. He cut that section out in the version of the paper he gave today, but I do wish to commend him for dealing with that clearly. It is a matter than might be pursued in the Q&A.

John states that “Kalupahana is undoubtedly correct that the Buddha was an empiricist.” It is not a good idea to say “undoubtedly” in my presence, since it invariably causes me to be doubting. Now it is true that the Buddha invited people to trust their own experiences rather than believing things simply because they were spoken by people who were skilled in speculation or people who were what we might call charismatic. But in the very same sutta, which in modern discussions has come to be called the Kalāma Sutta, the Buddha goes on to say that when one studies one’s own experience one should remember what kinds of things are approved by the wise. All things considered, the so-called Kalāma Sutta is not so much an invitation to be an empiricist as it was an invitation to eschew what we might call sophistry in favor of genuine wisdom—and to follow the guidance of truly wise people in the search for genuine wisdom. The advice to the Kalāmas, of course, leaves unanswered the non-trivial question of how it is that one goes about deciding who the truly wise are and how one tells a genuine sage from a convincing charlatan.

While I am not as convinced as John seems to be that the Buddha of Theravādin literature should be called an empiricist, I think he does an excellent job of showing that even if the Buddha was an empiricist, he was not necessarily a radical empiricist in the sense that James talks about radical empiricism. In particular, I think John hits the nail squarely on the head when he writes: “This is the aspect of radical empiricism that I do not see clearly articulated (or denied) in original Buddhist doctrine. The listing of aggregates and parts of the self seems to be the very fallacy that James seeks to avoid: you cannot explain the self by looking at the parts and building it up” and when he goes on to say a bit further “there is a leap between a list of aggregates and a doctrine of dependence, on the one hand, and a radical empiricism that says that we have a direct experience of relation.”

Later in his paper, John rightly observes that the Buddha, unlike Hume, was not skeptical of causation. If anything, that is a dramatic understatement. The Buddha is reported to have said that whoever sees dependent origination sees the Buddha. Dependent origination is the very backbone of Buddhist doctrine; it is said to be the main content of his liberative awakening experience. It is what he taught in virtually everything he reportedly said. What is not clear, however, is whether the Buddha would say that causal relations are given as

primitive and irreducible items of experience, or whether a notion of causal connection is a matter of inference. The logical structure of the general formulation of the doctrine of dependent origination is exactly the same as the formal structure of a well-formed inference. One observes that X occurs with Y. One observes that Y does not occur in the absence of X. One concludes that a way to eliminate Y would be to eliminate X. A shorthand way of way all this is that one knows that X is a cause of Y. But does one see this as a radically empirical James would insist, or does one infer the causal relation it or even construct the fiction of a causal relation as an empirical Hume might insist? I do not think this question has an obvious answer. Moreover, I am not entirely sure this question even needs an answer. That is to say that I am not sure that answering the question one way would lead to living one's life much differently than if one answered it the other way.

John's analysis of Nāgārjuna is interesting in itself, although I remain unconvinced that comparing either the Theravādin portrayal of the Buddha or anyone's portrayal of the ever-mysterious Nāgārjuna with James will shed much light on the evolution of Buddhist doctrine. For a purely historical point of view, I think the actual history is impossible to determine on the basis of available evidence, and I see no non-dogmatic way of speculating on what the relation of Nāgārjuna's thinking was to the thinking of the historical Buddha (if there was such a person). That notwithstanding, I would call attention to a famous James quotation that John cites in his paper:

The definite images of traditional psychology form but the very smallest part of our minds as they actually live. The traditional psychology talks like one who should say a river consists of nothing but pailsful, spoonsful, quartspotsful, barrelsful, and other moulded forms of water. Even were the pails and the pots all actually standing in the stream still between them the free water would continue to flow.

I can think of no other passage in the writings of William James that better illustrates the insight that seems to me to lie at the heart of everything Nāgārjuna writes in the MMK. When we take fluid processes and analysis them into a set of putatively related parts, we deprive them of their fluidity. If we think of a river as having currents that a kayaker must take seriously but that cannot be delimited or bounded, we experience a river as a river. If we try to determine where one current ends and another begins and try to separate the currents from the river itself, we end up with no currents and no river. Similarly, if we analyse a continuous flowing process such as an ant walking across a table into an agent doing an action in a locus and try to treat agent, action and locus as entities that somehow exist outside or independently of the process, then we make the process impossible. All the reasoning in the world won't put the process back together again. Good Buddhist practice, we might say, is to make use of the concepts of agents, actions, instruments, purposes and loci as heuristics by which one develops a keener sensitivity to processes, but to be ever mindful of the hazards of forgetting that these concepts are never more than heuristic.

4. ISHIDA'S "THE METAPHYSICS OF PLURALISTIC MANIFESTATIONS IN JAMES AND EAST ASIAN BUDDHISM"

Let me turn now from James's river to Dōgen's mountain and to Masato Ishida's stimulating discussion of Furong Daokai's saying "The green mountains are always walking; a stone woman give birth to a child at night." As Ishida points out in his elegant treatment of how Dōgen understands this saying, the point is that everything in the universe is flowing. As Ishida puts the matter toward the beginning of his paper, the heart of Zen is the fluidity of life—"this is almost here Zen begins and ends." Rivers flow in ways that are obvious to

human beings. We can, as Bob Dylan reminded us, “sit down on this bank of sand and watch the river flow.” It is much less easy to catch a mountain in the act of flowing, unless we happen to be on hand to witness a volcano or an earthquake or a rockslide. And yet, if we make use of seismological equipment or other instruments that supplement the data we can get from our sense faculties, mountains are constantly changing. Sayings such as “The green mountains are always walking; a stone woman give birth to a child at night” are invitations to consider that what is obvious to the senses and obvious to a mind that always thinks within the framework of its habitual ways of understanding is not the full extent of reality, and that there are always ways of expanding one’s horizons. Ishida’s paper does a wonderful job of showing how that spirit of Zen is congruent with the spirit of openness and appreciation of fluidity that abound in the many writings of William James.

That congruence having been acknowledged, I would like to raise the question of whether James’s recommendation that we “equally abjure absolute monism and absolute pluralism” is grounded in the same considerations as a Dōgen’s shying away from seeing the world of phenomena as one or many. Ishida’s take on Dōgen is that the Chan and Zen tradition holds that buddha-nature “does not reside in things like an essence. Buddha nature cannot be counted, measure, let alone objectified. The question Many or One? is, therefore, itself a misguided question.”

First, I would like to point out that in the wider Buddhist literature it is not only Buddha-nature that resists being described as one or many. In the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, which was one of the most influential sources of Chan, one finds that everything resists being so characterized. Everything we experience, says this sutra, is like a phantom, a magical illusion, a city in the clouds, a rabbit’s antlers or a barren woman’s son. Predicates can only be pinned onto existing subjects, but if every apparent subject is purely a fiction delivered up by a deluded mind, then there are no things on which to pin such predicates as “one”, “many”, “large”, “small”, “same” or “different”. The question of Many or One? is ill-formed because of a massive failure of there to be bare particulars to cloth in predicates. The *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* offers little to defend this view; rather, it offers up an incessant flow of poetic imagery apparently meant to help the reader get the idea that the mind is not a passive receptacle into which data about an extramental reality pours in and gets interpreted, but rather the mind itself actively creates the things of which it is aware. The Huayan, Tiantai and Chan traditions ran with these images (which occur in a good many Mahāyāna sutras and not merely the *Laṅkāvatāra*) in one way, often by heaping poetry upon poetry, and various Indian philosophers ran with those images in a somewhat different way, often by heaping arguments upon poetry. What is not clear to me is that William James was abjuring absolute monism or absolute pluralism in the same way that Buddhists were desisting from predicating unity or plurality of things. James seems to have been keenly and persistently aware that there are a good many ways of seeing things and that there is a certain kind of legitimacy in all these many ways of seeing. There is a sense in which they are all legitimate for James, and none can be seen as legitimate to the exclusion of all the others. The claims of some of the Buddhists we have been discussing, on the other hand, appears to have been that under analysis there turns out to be no legitimacy to any act of predication.

CONCLUDING REMARK

I would like to thank all three of tonight’s authors—Holder, John and Ishida—for their insightful and thought-provoking papers. Each of them was

admirably clear, and I hope my comments have introduced enough confusion into the topic to help provoke some discussion.

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