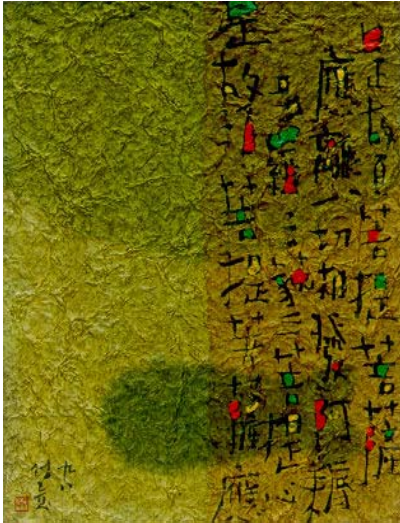


## Research Article

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The Emergence of Buddhist Critical-Constructive Reflection in the Academy as a Resource for Buddhist Communities and for the Contemporary World

John Makransky

Dept. of Theology, Boston College

Chestnut Hill, MA 02467

[makransk@bc.edu](mailto:makransk@bc.edu)

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Research Article

The Emergence of Buddhist Critical-Constructive Reflection in the Academy as a Resource for Buddhist Communities and for the Contemporary World

John Makransky  
Dept. of Theology, Boston College  
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467  
[makransk@bc.edu](mailto:makransk@bc.edu)  
617-552-4603

*Abstract:* Academic Buddhist Studies investigates historical and social conditions behind Buddhist formulations and institutions. Buddhists must appropriate these findings to establish their place in the modern world and to speak effectively within it. But many traditional Buddhist centers remain largely uninformed by such findings. Some academic scholars of Buddhism, who also practice Buddhism, are exploring new ways to serve both the *critical* interests of the modern academy and the *constructive* needs of their Buddhist communities in meeting the modern world. This new vehicle in the academy has been called “Buddhist critical-constructive reflection” or “Buddhist theology.” How might academic knowledge inform contemporary Buddhist understanding and practice? How might Buddhist understanding and practice help address current social needs and provide new insights into current issues? Buddhist critical-constructive reflection explores those questions.

## I. Introduction

*Buddhist critical-constructive reflection* is an emerging discipline in the modern academy. It has two purposes. The first is to explore how academic religious studies may newly inform Buddhist understanding of their own traditions, and thereby serve as a resource for Buddhist communities in their adaptations to the modern world. The second is to explore how Buddhist modes of understanding may help address pressing needs of modern societies and inform current issues. Also called “Buddhist theology,” such critical-constructive reflection has come to self-awareness recently in the academy in order to address needs inadequately met by the prior organization of disciplines in the study of religions. This essay will explore how Buddhist critical-constructive reflection arose as an academic focus of interest together with a few of its implications for Buddhist traditions, for the religious studies academy, and for the wider world.(1)

Russell McCutcheon’s recent essay in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* focused on what he referred to as “the insider/outsider problem.” The “outsider” is the academic scholar who studies another’s religion critically while the “insider” is one who participates in that religion. The problem is how the modern scholar’s critical analysis of a religion is to be understood in relation to the

self-representations of the religious insider.( 2 ) McCutcheon has entered into debate with other scholars of religion over whether an outsider's critical findings must accord with the self-representations of insiders. He has argued that they need *not* so accord, indeed often must not, if scholarly inquiry is to produce new knowledge and further theorization in the study of religions and cultures.

But what if the "outsider" who critically analyzes the tradition is also an "insider" who practices it? This essay focuses on Buddhist scholars who stand both outside and inside their own religious tradition: *outside* it as academic scholars who analyze Buddhism historically and critically in ways unknown to previous Buddhist cultures; *inside* the tradition as participating members who have undergone training in the studies and practices of their own Buddhist communities. Such scholars reflect critically and constructively upon Buddhism as academic thinkers and upon the contemporary world as Buddhist thinkers. But, until recently, there have been few institutional settings for such non-Christian, theological work - either within the modern Western academy or within traditional Buddhist centers of learning.

To participate both in the modern critical study of religion *and* in the religion under study generates tensions concerning the scholar's

functions in academia and in her own religious tradition. Yet these can be creative tensions that bring something fresh both to academia and to religious communities in dialogue with the modern world. While the example here is Buddhist, a growing number of Hindu, Muslim and other religious scholars are navigating similar worlds of academia and faith. New institutional niches for the study of religion are emerging to accommodate the constructive, critical work of such non-Christian theologians in the West.

### **Theology, Religious Studies, and Buddhist Studies in the Modern Academy**

The modern academic study of religions (under the rubrics of “religious studies,” “history of religions,” and “comparative religion”) analyzes how religious understandings and practices are related to historical, cultural and social developments. It is obvious to many how important such study is. How can we understand current societies, many of whose behaviors are conditioned by religious worldviews, if we do not study the reciprocal influence of religious worldviews and cultures throughout history? But it has not always been evident to religious cultures (and still not accepted by some) that such critical, historical investigation of religion has value, or indeed is not an evil.

In the West, Christianity has had dominant religious influence over European and American cultures. As new methods in historical and cultural analysis emerged, old ways of understanding world religions from a confessional Christian standpoint, and Christianity itself, came under new critical scrutiny. There arose a fresh interest in non-Christian religions as equally worthy of attention in the academy from the perspective of critical, historical analysis.

The modern study of religions emerged in the Western academy, under the influence of the Western enlightenment, through a methodology designed to permit new ways to analyze religions that differed from prior Christian confessional, theological norms. Central to its emergence has been the method of “epoché”—bracketing—avoiding judgments of normative truth and value so as to open a new space for the study of religions free from Christian judgments upon the truth or value of non-Christian religions, and also free from pre-modern Christian assumptions about Christianity’s own developments.<sup>(3)</sup> In twentieth century Europe and the Americas, departments of religious studies, history of religions and cultural area studies (that include study of religions) were established in hundreds of universities and colleges, while university divinity schools and theology departments remained the loci of Christian theological studies. Thus a basic institutional

separation was made between *religious studies* on the one hand and *theological studies* on the other.

But the two kinds of approaches, 'historical-cultural' study of religion and 'theological' study of religion did not remain separate, if they were ever really separable. Many Christian theologians have made use of the critical forms of analysis that emerged in departments of religious and cultural studies. Whereas religious studies scholars analyzed the historical and cultural nature of religious claims, bracketing questions of their normative truth or value for persons, Christian theologians like Paul Tillich, Hans Kung, Richard Niebuhr, David Tracy, Elizabeth Johnson, and Francis and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza explored how new insights into the historical nature of their traditions could *inform faith in* their traditions, so as to inspire fresh, newly effective ways to understand and practice Christianity in the modern world.

The historical study of religions in Western universities thus changed the way theology was done in Christian theological departments and divinity schools. Christian theologians used methods of religious studies to critically investigate their own traditions. But whereas religious studies scholars used such methods mainly to further their understanding of the culturally constructed nature of religions, Christian theologians used the same sort of data to see how it could

shed new light on the culturally conditioned reception of salvific truths so as to help them understand and communicate those liberating truths more effectively to people today.

Academic Buddhist Studies, as a field of religious studies, critically analyzes Buddhist beliefs, institutions and practices through academic disciplines of historiography, philology, literary criticism, and social and cultural analysis. It shines new light on the Buddhisms of Asia in their historical, culturally conditioned nature, deconstructing some of the beliefs long held by Buddhists about their own traditions.

For example, whereas Theravada Buddhists have believed the cultural myths that depict their canons as perfect conservators of the Buddha's original words, critical investigations of modern Buddhist studies shows such canons to be the product of centuries of development and redaction, including the production of Abhidharma texts after the Buddha's time. Whereas Mahayana Buddhists have accepted literally the depiction of Shakyamuni Buddha as teacher of Mahayana sutras, historical research indicates that those scriptures developed in Buddhist communities long after the Buddha lived. Shakyamuni was placed in those texts as a literary figure to help legitimize them in line with Indian Buddhist standards of authorization. In their historical reality, then, Mahayana sutras represent the attempt by a number of Buddhist movements, beginning from the first century BCE, to give



new expression to a host of developments in thought and practice of diverse Buddhist cultures during the centuries after the Buddha lived. Whereas Zen Buddhists have legitimized their traditions by tracing their lineages back to Shakyamuni Buddha, critical analyses show such lineages to be constructs of East Asian Buddhist cultures, created to legitimize new forms of teaching and practice particular to those cultural contexts. (4)

Generally speaking, religious change—historical development of thought and practice in new cultures—has *not* been valued in Asian Buddhist traditions. If religious practice or understanding were seen to have changed over time in new cultural contexts, it would mean that they had fallen away from the pure original—the original teaching of Shakyamuni. Yet if practice and understanding had not taken new forms in new historical periods and cultures, it would not have freshly inspired and informed those cultures. Given their ahistorical assumptions, Buddhists have used various strategies to establish legitimacy for new developments while hiding their newness. Often myths of origins were constructed—Shakyamuni Buddha as teacher of Abhidharma, as certifier of Mahayana sutras, as tantric adept, as teacher of Zen, as revealer of Amitabha's pure realm—so as to make it seem that movements that developed in Buddhist cultures many centuries after Shakyamuni lived were fully present in the teachings he gave during his lifetime, thus possessing unquestioned authority.(5)

I will focus here on Mahayana Buddhist traditions. Such traditions have been aware of the great diversity of messages in their scriptural collections. According to modern scholarly analysis, that diversity represents perspectives of diverse Buddhist communities that were often in doctrinal and institutional competition with each other. For example, there are texts in which the Buddha teaches the impermanent, dependently *arising* nature of things as the ultimate liberating view, and other (historically later) texts in which the Buddha criticizes that as a lesser view, asserting that it is the empty, *non-arising* nature of things that comprises the ultimate liberating view. Such seemingly contradictory assertions, modern scholars note, represent the views of different Buddhist schools that developed historically in opposition to each other—such as Sarvastivadin Abhidharma traditions on the one hand and Mahayana Prajnaparamita traditions on the other.

But since early Mahayanists had placed Shakyamuni Buddha into their scriptures for authority, Mahayana traditions did not understand those seeming contradictions as competing messages of diverse Buddhist communities throughout history. All such messages were ascribed to Shakyamuni himself for authority. So *ahistorical* explanations for the contradictions had to be found. One common explanation linked the apparent inconsistencies in the scriptural collections to the Buddha's underlying intention and skillful means. According to this

explanation, the varied people that dialogued with Shakyamuni Buddha during his lifetime had diverse mentalities and spiritual capacities. Because the Buddha knew the different mentalities of diverse individuals, he compassionately provided varied levels of teaching to them. In this way, the intent behind the Buddha's teaching was to help people of different spiritual capacities develop as far as they could toward the Buddha's own final, most fully liberating view. To those of lesser capacity he taught a lower understanding—the impermanent, self-identical, causally arisen nature of phenomena. To those of higher capacity, he taught a higher understanding—the emptiness of self-identity and non-arising nature of phenomena. According to this traditional Mahayana explanation, the teachings of each such level of understanding are retained in the collections of the Buddha's word for people of differing capacities, creating seeming inconsistencies that are merely apparent.(6)

What does an academic Buddhist studies scholar make of this? As an example, let's consider a seminal Buddhist studies article by Donald Lopez. In his essay, "On the Interpretation of the Mahayana Sutras," Lopez explains how Candrakirti (like other Buddhist interpreters) employed the doctrine of skillful means as an interpretive principle to gain control over all previous Buddhist scriptures and traditions by depicting them as preparatory steps toward the realization of his own Mahayana perspective.(7) In other words, Candrakirti naively

identified his own seventh century CE perspective on the Mahayana scriptures with Shakyamuni Buddha's fifth century BCE point of view on them. Such a view is naïve from an historical perspective because the Mahayana scriptures did not even exist during Shakyamuni's lifetime—they were products of Buddhist communities centuries after Shakyamuni. The Mahayana *Samdhinirmocana* scripture that preceded Candrakirti by several centuries had already established a similar hermeneutic paradigm by ascribing to Shakyamuni “three turnings of the wheel of Dharma” over the course of his lifetime, a scheme which subsumes the teachings of earlier Buddhist communities to those of later (Mahayana) communities, while making it seem as if the latter teachings expressed the higher teachings that Shakyamuni himself had taught to his sharpest students.

What are Lopez's conclusions? The Mahayana Buddhist commentator's basic goal in explaining a scripture's meaning, Lopez asserts, is to pretend that he can replicate the Buddha's intention behind the scripture, the sort of interpretive approach that Gadamer termed “romantic” and “inadequate.” Such an approach is inadequate, Lopez notes, because it is the Buddhist commentator's own foreknowledge concerning the text that determines its meaning for him—he doesn't notice how active his own viewpoint on the text is in the construction of its meaning. The goal of the interpreter, Lopez suggests, is to freeze the Buddha's “skillful means” for all time. It is

to reinterpret diverse Buddhist literary traditions in a newly homogenous way that supports the interpreter's own point of view over all other Buddhist traditions, while hiding the newness of his project by ascribing his own perspective to Sakyamuni Buddha. The Buddhist commentator is unaware both of the historical nature of the text (as a product of Buddhist communities through history) and of his own historically conditioned perspective upon it. In the end, Lopez concludes, interpretation is the Buddhist exegete's projection of prejudice upon a received text.(8)

## **II. The First Purpose of Buddhist Critical-Constructive Reflection: To Apply Critical Academic Findings to Inform Current Buddhist Understanding**

I first read Lopez's article as a PhD student in Buddhist Studies, and found his conclusions both insightful and somewhat disappointing. In his article, Lopez, the academic Buddhist studies scholar, functioned (in McCutcheon's terms) exclusively as '*outsider*' to Buddhist tradition (9) - critiquing the hegemonic approach of ancient Buddhist commentators. As an academic scholar trained in critical analysis, I could appreciate how perceptive Lopez's findings were. But as an *insider* who practices and participates in Buddhist communities, I saw his conclusions as merely preliminary to further questions he never

thought to raise: How might these historical findings inform current Buddhist traditions which draw heavily upon commentators such as Candrakirti in their interpretation of Buddhist texts? How could the seemingly *negative* findings in Lopez's essay contribute something *positive* to Buddhist traditions today—strengthening their ability to meet the historical consciousness of the modern world by updating their understanding of the historical nature of their own texts and institutions?

Schooled in the disciplines of academic Buddhist studies, Lopez was trained to do the *deconstructive* work of historical and literary analysis. But as part of a religious studies academy whose existence depends upon “bracketing”—withholding judgment on—the religious significance of its findings, Lopez didn't think to explore the implications of his analysis for current Buddhist understanding. One goal of *Buddhist critical-constructive* reflection is to explore how the *critical* findings of the religious studies academy might be used *constructively* to freshly inform Buddhist thought and practice today—like Christian theologians use historical findings on Christianity to freshly inform their faith today. The “outsider” *critical* approach and the “insider” *constructive* approach need not conflict. Indeed, the constructive approach explores how Buddhist traditions themselves may benefit from what has been uncovered through the critical disciplines of the modern academy. And this, in turn,

contributes new knowledge to the modern religious studies academy by showing the potential relevance of the academy's findings to the religious traditions under study.

### **Skillful Means Understood Historically as Effective Cultural Adaptation**

What can a constructive approach add to our understanding that Lopez's merely deconstructive, religious studies approach left out? The Mahayana doctrine of *skillful means* has not just provided a way for Buddhist commentators to project their later perspectives onto Shakyamuni Buddha so as to assert control over other Buddhist traditions (as Lopez accurately noted). More fundamentally, the doctrine of skillful means has provided a way within the *ahistorical* consciousness of Asian Buddhist cultures to grant the legitimacy needed for developments in thought and practice to take fresh expression in new periods and cultures despite the backlash by conservative Buddhist institutions that tended to suppress such developments.

Through innovative literary images, new written forms, fresh doctrinal and ritual expressions, Mahayana *sutras* gave new voice to centuries of

development in thought and practice of diverse Buddhist cultures whose voices could not be heard within the conservative scriptural norms of non-Mahayana monastic institutions. Because Mahayana sutras express centuries of developments of diverse Asian cultures, not just teachings given by Shakyamuni in his lifetime, they do not communicate Shakyamuni's atemporal ladder to enlightenment but multiple historical adaptations of Buddhism found transformative and liberating by Buddhist communities in varied cultures during the centuries after the Shakyamuni lived. But in order for such fresh, newly acculturated teachings to become formally accepted by Asian people who did not value historical change or development in their religions, Shakyamuni had to be placed into the texts and portrayed as the original teacher or certifier of those innovative teachings.

The composers of Mahayana *sutras* were members of Buddhist communities in various parts of Asia - brilliant scholars, practitioners and preachers of the *Dharma* who expressed deep experiences of non-dual wisdom, love, compassion, ritual power and devotion in their writings. They were given new voice by the permission of the literary "Buddha" whom they placed into their Mahayana sutras. They were given the literary Buddha's "permission" to freshly articulate the *Dharma* in ways that could inspire Buddhist communities of new times and places.



Accomplished practitioners in diverse Buddhist communities, including the composers of Mahayana *sutras*, have thus been the actual turners of the second, third and following “wheels of *Dharma* teaching” that were traditionally ascribed to Shakyamuni. The *skillful means* proclaimed in Mahayana sutras is a *historical* phenomenon, comprising centuries of development of thought and practice within cultures—*not* merely the work of one person of fifth century BCE India. In reality, then, the proclamations of “the Buddha’s skillful means” that appear in Mahayana texts across Asia express the ability of accomplished Buddhists of diverse communities to meet the hearts and minds of Asian peoples in newly effective ways. Indeed, it is because such figures throughout history have been a principal source of skillful means (*not* just Shakyamuni) that skillful means have *been* so skillful—speaking the *Dharma* directly *from* the hearts of Central Asians, Chinese, Koreans, Tibetans, Japanese, Vietnamese to the hearts of their fellow countrymen and women—in the culturally specific ways needed freshly to reveal the human capacity for self-transcending awareness, reverence and compassion in new places and times.

What implications are there for Buddhists today of paying new attention in this way to the historically conditioned nature of Buddhist texts throughout history? How might a Buddhist commentator today read Mahayana sutras and later literatures differently in light of this

historical knowledge? Instead of viewing Mahayana scriptures as teachings from different phases of Shakyamuni's life, we understand them to represent a variety of perspectives from previous Buddhist cultures—diverse ways to express the ultimate undividedness of *nirvana* and *samsara*, compassion, innate awakened potential, ritual power, and reverent devotion. These texts disclose a multitude of ways that *Dharma* teachings and practices changed as they adapted to prior settings, communities, and cultures. Instead of treating Mahayana texts ahistorically as resources to authorize one tradition's interpretation of Buddhism by identifying it uncritically with Shakyamuni's view from thousands of years earlier, we could instead view Mahayana texts as a historical resource for current Buddhist communities to draw upon—a record of diverse cultural adaptations of Buddha *Dharma* that can inform the current adaptations necessary to meet present cultures.

So, for example, Tibetan traditions tell of a council during the reign of the eighth century Tibetan king Khri-srong lde brtsan to determine which form of Buddhist understanding and practice was to be officially sanctioned in Tibet: the gradualist perspective expounded by the Indian scholar Kamalashila or the simultaneist perspective of immediate access to awakening expounded by the Chinese Ch'an teacher Hva-shang Mahayana. Tibetan writings have repeatedly expressed the concern among Buddhists to argue for one perspective in toto

against the other, based again on the assumption that Shakyamuni Buddha personally taught all the Mahayana *sutras* in which a confusing diversity of messages concerning gradualism and immediacy appear. Kamalashila and his subsequent defenders have thought they were arguing for the one final view of Shakyamuni: gradualism, with all *sutra* messages of immediacy requiring interpretation, while Hva-shang Mahayana and his defenders based their argument on the opposite view, that Shakyamuni's final understanding was immediacy.(10)

But if, as argued here, diverse Mahayana *sutra* teachings of gradualism and immediacy are expressions of diverse practice communities, they do *not* represent the point of view of one ca. fifth century BCE north Indian figure (Shakyamuni), but diverse findings of what was found convincing and transformatively effective in several different places and times. Then the meaning of the "debate" between Kamalashila and Hva-shang Mahayana must be different for us than for past Buddhist interpreters. It is no longer a matter of who has properly understood Shakyamuni's message in toto and who got it wrong and must be banished to preserve the *Dharma's* purity. Rather, the question becomes which elements of thought and practice, transformatively effective for diverse prior communities, may inform and empower practice and thought now and in the future. We are no longer concerned to determine Shakyamuni Buddha's one final

intention of an exclusive, absolutized paradigm, but rather to uncover alternative models for systematic practice and thought already found effective by others, elements of which, taking new expression, may speak to the conditions of our current place and time, contributing to the ongoing reconstruction of systematic understanding. So, for example, many Westerners like myself who take up *Dharma* practice seem to suffer both from feelings of self-doubt on the one hand and a naive expectation for immediate spiritual results on the other. If so, Western Buddhists may need to draw both upon gradualistic and simultaneist elements of prior Buddhist systems. For, it could be argued, only if we sense the *immediate* accessibility of the power of awakening here and now can we find the delight of discovering it afresh in many moments of a *gradual*, life-long discipline.

One of the key functions of the doctrine of Buddha's skillful means, then, has been to make *ahistorical* sense of a host of *historical developments*: a multitude of texts that emerged in different settings in the centuries after Shakyamuni lived. Each Buddhist tradition has constructed itself as the conservator of Shakyamuni's original teaching, reiterating the principles he taught, without noticing how the ongoing development and *recurrent adaptation* of *Dharma* teaching to new settings has been just as essential to conserve the *Dharma's* liberating power as the reiteration of core principles. Within historical consciousness, we can newly appreciate the native genius of Buddhist

communities in developing such varied means of liberating transformation within such diverse cultures. We may note with amazement how Buddhist traditions have so skillfully met two essential needs for thriving through the ages: the need to conserve foundational Buddhist principles (such as the four noble truths) and the need to reformulate those principles in striking new ways that effectively meet the hearts and minds of people in new times and places. As always, both those needs press upon us again as the *Dharma* now becomes part of contemporary cultures.

Lopez functioned just as a Buddhist studies scholar, not as a critical constructive theorist. Restricted by his Buddhist studies methodology, his historical perspective on Buddhist texts provided only a basis for critiquing ahistorical Buddhist interpretations of the past. Lopez didn't notice that the same historical perspective on Buddhism could be a basis for the construction of new, historically conscious Buddhist understandings today. Yet it is not just the Buddhist studies academy, restricted by its own methodology, that ignores such constructive possibilities. Many Buddhists today, educated in traditional monasteries and *Dharma* centers, are unaware of modern historical perspectives on their texts and traditions and therefore also unaware of such constructive possibilities.

Some years ago I attended a gathering of Western *Dharma* translators and teachers, most of whom had long trained in Asian Buddhist monastic institutions. When asked about the variety of ways that the *Dharma* is finding new expression in the West, one such translator declared: “The Buddha himself gave eighty-four thousand *Dharma* teachings. Why don’t modern Dharma teachers simply draw from them? Why do they feel the need to make things up that the Buddha never taught?” She was completely unaware that Mahayana *sutras* and *tantras* were *historical* documents, composed by Buddhist adepts who adapted the *Dharma* to new settings and cultures many centuries after Shakyamuni lived. Because she was unaware of how much cultural adaptation had *previously* occurred in her tradition, she saw no reason for such adaptation to be happening *now*. I have heard similar statements both from monks trained in Tibetan monasteries and from Western Buddhists who study the *Dharma* exclusively with such monks. Asian Buddhist traditions established legitimacy for religious change in cultures that do not value religious change through myths of origins that met ahistorical, pre-modern standards of legitimation. But the same strategies tend to *delegitimize* Buddhist teachings for most modern people whose historical consciousness is not pre-modern. Old methods of legitimation are still being invoked to fight new developments, without realizing that new developments have been essential to the life of Buddhist traditions all along.

Indeed, the Tibetan lamas who seem most skilled at adapting the *Dharma* to modern cultures, and therefore most effective at communicating with people in modern societies—such as the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Lama Thubten Yeshe, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, Chogyi Nyima Rinpoche, Tulku Thondup, Sogyal Rinpoche, Chagdud Tulku --have learned to do so through intimate dialogue with many of their modern students. The monasteries where such figures studied provided rigorous training in the traditional learning that supported their deep life-long practice and realization. But principles for effective adaptation of the *Dharma* in new cultures were *not* taught in the monasteries of their training, where ahistorical perspectives still dominate. These remarkable teachers have had to learn how to adapt the teachings to new settings and cultures largely on their own.

### **Reevaluating Modern Buddhist Curricula**

In what new ways do topics of Asian Buddhist learning need to be ordered and expressed to meet the current world and the West? For example, in past years, a number of Tibetan monks have told me that Buddhist teachers must first find ways to convince Westerners of the truth of rebirth before they can be seriously entered into higher practices of the path, such as universal compassion and non-conceptual

wisdom. That order of teaching seems to have been effective for many Tibetans. It is *not* effective for many Westerners who find ancient Indian proofs of rebirth unconvincing but have strong interest in truths of impermanence, inter-dependent existence, emptiness, and in the power of impartial compassion to make a difference in their world. For some Western practitioners, I have noticed, the Buddhist teaching that one's awareness has no beginning or end becomes more plausible after they have done long contemplative practice on the emptiness of all conceptualizations of time and space.

That example suggests that the order of topics needs to be changed in new cultural contexts. The content of *Dharma* topics also needs continued reevaluation in light of modern sciences, including the social sciences. Classical Buddhist scholastic texts analyze the conditioning of persons in their individual habits of emotional projection and reaction (*karma*), but have little to say about social structures, social conditioning and how they affect social behavior in ways crucial to understand in the modern world. Nor do such manuals discuss applications of the *Dharma* to the challenges of modern life within workplace, family, contemporary social service or social action.

Many of the most influential Asian Buddhist scholars, such as Atisha, Machig Labdron, Gampopa, Tsongkhapa, Chih-i, Tsung-mi, Chinul,



and Shinran were forced to rethink Buddhist teachings and practices, their systematic relationships, and the most effective ways to introduce them in new cultural settings. Contemporary Buddhist thinkers can not avoid doing similarly.

While it is heresy in post-modern religious studies to claim that any religion has an “essence,” Buddhist thinkers today can not avoid asking a related question: What, in current circumstances, is *essential* to draw upon from our traditions of thought and practice for *this* context, in dialogue with *these* people with *these* culturally conditioned needs, desires and assumptions? Which teachings and practices are to be understood, highlighted, ordered and communicated in what ways for contemporary people? What systematic Buddhist visions in our time are to hold the particulars of Buddhist teaching and practice together? Who can appropriately authorize the adaptation of teaching and practice to these new settings and mentalities—what individuals and communities of oversight, and what internal criteria of prior traditions that remain relevant today? While the Buddhist studies academy is inhibited by its own methodology from seeking to answer such questions, they are central to the work of Buddhist critical-constructive reflection.

**III. The Second Purpose of Buddhist Critical-constructive Reflection:  
to explore how Buddhist Thought and Practice may address pressing  
needs of Modern Societies and Inform Current Issues.**

At a public forum of Tibetan Buddhist leaders in the Americas that I attended in 2003,(11) one Western Tibetan Buddhist leader declared: “The Buddha taught the *Dharma* for the purpose of helping sentient beings attain ultimate liberation and enlightenment. The mundane concerns of this lifetime are *not* the proper focus of *Dharma* practice but a distraction from it. The various ways that people in the West have been applying the *Dharma* to satisfy merely mundane desires, such as merely reducing stress, are not in accord with the Buddha’s intention.” There is an important truth in this statement for the individual *Dharma* practitioner. But it does not capture the whole truth from a social and cultural perspective.

On the individual level, *Dharma* practice can work to undercut deeply cherished illusions—such as the illusion of a substantial self. There is a strong tendency to subsume the ego-challenging nature of the *Dharma* to ego-centered agendas—for example, to shore up the reified sense of self that Buddhist investigation undercuts by trying to appear like a spiritual person. One might also seek to accumulate wealth, power or prestige through ostentatious ways of teaching or performing

rituals. It is well known that the liberating potential of the *Dharma* is subject to sabotage by “worldly” self-centered concerns that tend to appropriate supra-mundane systems of thought and practice for merely mundane ends.

Yet in Asian Buddhist societies throughout history, adepts, ritual specialists and scholars have routinely applied Buddhist practices to meet the “worldly” needs and desires of their societies: such as desires for ritual protection from diseases, natural disasters, powerful spirits or enemies; for promoting the prosperity of communities; for providing ethical frameworks to establish social order and cohesion, for healing the sick, for easing the suffering of the dying and assisting them in the afterlife, and so forth.(12)

The ideology that the pure, liberating *Dharma* has nothing to do with such worldly concerns has sometimes hidden from Buddhist consciousness the social and cultural significance of such mundane applications of the *Dharma*, both to serve people in need and to convince cultures new to Buddhism of the practical relevance of its teachings and institutions—thereby eliciting the social and economic support essential to its success in cultures.

Unaware of the centrality of this mundane focus for the success of the *Dharma* in prior Buddhist cultures, some Buddhists today voice distrust of new applications of Buddhist thought or practice to meet current social needs. There is a tendency to overly romanticize Buddha *Dharma* as it has existed in Asia as opposed to the West. As if the very idea of applying Buddhist knowledge to meet mundane needs is unique to the West. As if the *Dharma* were kept pristine in Asia and is being newly corrupted by modern consumer societies. It is true that modern, globalized societies have a tendency to commodify whatever catches their interest. But we should remember that Buddhist cultures in Asia throughout history have also been “consumers,” seeking in Buddhism new techniques to meet deep-felt social wants and needs.

Since Buddhist knowledge throughout history has always been applied to meet such wants and needs, why debate the legitimacy of doing so today? Instead, current Buddhists, as in the past, are called to work through the issues that such practical applications raise. This also calls for new critical and constructive reflection. Ways must be found to hold several concerns in proper balance: 1) As in the past, we need *to adapt Buddhist teachings and practices so as to meet pressing needs* of current societies whose populations are mostly not Buddhist. Prominent examples include current ways Buddhist meditations are being applied to help reduce stress, burnout, PTSD, addiction and secondary trauma; to treat attention deficit and other learning

disorders, to help those in pain, to help the dying, to help teachers and caregivers become more fully present to their students and clients, to train peace activists, to help at-risk youth and prisoners, to help school children improve their social intelligence, and so forth. 2) If contemporary Buddhists do not learn and draw deeply enough from systematic Buddhist thought and praxis as they apply Buddhist principles to new social needs, they may be *at risk of losing the full liberating potential* of Buddhist practice for present and future generations, the possibility of attaining deepest human freedom, *nirvana*, enlightenment. 3) When applying Buddhist practices to meet needs of mostly non-Buddhist populations, we must not lose the connection between those helpful applications and Buddhist institutions. It is appropriate and important, just as in the past, for new applications to draw new social and economic support for Buddhist institutions East and West. For these are the settings where people receive the most extensive training necessary to develop new applications of Buddhist thought and practice for societies over time.(13)

Increasing academic interest in “engaged” Buddhism has created new niches for critical-constructive reflection. Growing numbers of scholars critically evaluate Buddhist concepts and institutions in light of modern disciplines while also exploring how Buddhist understandings may inform current issues, such as the ecological crisis,

economics, social activism, social justice, and contemporary philosophy.(14) In addition, Asian and Western Buddhist scholars have been publishing normative works of Buddhist thought and practice intended to communicate Buddhist principles and practices in fresh ways that meet modern mentalities and modern problems.(15)

#### **IV. The Emergence of Buddhist Critical-constructive Reflection in the Modern Academy**

Both purposes of Buddhist critical-constructive reflection discussed above involve a concern not just for *critical* analysis but also for *constructive* (theological) analysis of Buddhist traditions—a concern to clarify the normative truths, creative potential, and liberating power of Buddhist modes of knowledge and practice as they meet new worldviews and cultures. But academic religious studies (which includes Buddhist studies) came into being by *distancing* itself from all such normative judgments of truth and value, by distancing itself from the theological concern behind all such questions. And it tends to maintain that distance from normative concern in order to maintain its freedom as a discipline of cultural studies that never seeks to decide on the truth or value of any religion from the point of view of any particular religion.

So academic institutions for study of religion tend to remain organized within a separation of “religious studies” (including Buddhist studies) and “theology.” The institutions of learning to which one goes to train in religious studies want to investigate critically the cultural phenomena of religions but are *not* oriented to constructive theology, to the application of their critical findings on behalf of any particular religion. And the places one goes to do constructive theology, by and large, are Christian—interested in applying critical findings on behalf of *Christian* traditions, not on behalf of other religions.

Given *this* social organization of knowledge, some members of non-Christian religions, whose interest in their traditions is both critical and constructive-theological, entered religious studies programs where only the critical interest was welcome, not the theological interest, and they had to adapt to that reality. Some Buddhist studies scholars that entered graduate school as Buddhists have learned to de-emphasize, or even to forget, their practice of Buddhism and their place within a Buddhist community in order to thrive in graduate programs where only critical, deconstructive analysis of religion is welcome, not constructive analysis. One earns As for uncovering historical conditions of Buddhist developments that further the theoretical interests of the academy, not for analyzing how to offer those critical findings back to Buddhist communities to help them adapt to modern societies.

Meanwhile, as noted, many traditional monastic and lay *Dharma* centers East and West continue to teach the *Dharma* in ways ancient Asian cultures found effective, with little critical historical awareness. Many of these centers still distrust historical findings on Buddhist developments that differ from the legitimizing myths that their traditions continue to pass on as literal truths.<sup>(16)</sup> This leaves a gap between the world of living Buddhist practice and the world where modern knowledge of Buddhism progresses - many traditional monasteries and *Dharma* centers remaining largely uninformed by the findings of the modern academy and what they might mean for the future of their traditions. They therefore have difficulty meeting the modern world effectively both within their own self-understanding and within their modes of teaching.

Buddhist studies scholars who practice in Buddhist communities learn that the historical study of their own tradition relativizes some aspects of Buddhist teaching that had been promulgated as absolute, such as the myths of legitimation noted earlier. To some degree, this redefines their tradition for them in ways that come into tension with it. On the other hand, if these scholars continue to deepen their *Dharma* practice within their Buddhist communities, such practice increasingly informs their academic studies - by affecting their discernment of what



counts as important in current research and how they formulate their own research agendas.

For example, a modern Buddhist scholar who has a constructive interest in her tradition may pose the same kinds of critical questions about the Buddhist past that other religious studies scholars pose, but for a different purpose—not only to contribute to academic knowledge of human cultures but *also to inform present Buddhist decision-making*. Which Buddhist understandings did past Buddhist figures emphasize in their time and place in China, Tibet, Japan and why? How did Buddhist teachings become newly understood, ordered and articulated through the symbolic and linguistic patterns of those cultures? How did such adaptations meet the culturally conditioned mentalities and concerns of people in those settings? What systematic Buddhist visions were newly constructed to hold the particulars of doctrine and practice together in that context, both to meet social needs and to impart what was viewed as a complete path of awakening in its full depth? What figures, institutions and cultural strategies were used to authorize the adaptation of teaching and practice in those ways? Such historical findings are needed to help Buddhist communities today find their own best responses to the very same questions.

Similarly, to study how Buddhist modes of practice and understanding met diverse needs of Asian cultures in the past can shed light on how current Buddhist understandings and practices may help address needs of contemporary societies. Buddhist methods to calm the mind are being adapted to help people manage pain and stress. Buddhist techniques to cultivate empathy, compassion, attention, insight and equanimity are being used to empower social workers, nurses, doctors, therapists, prison chaplains, hospice workers, and counselors. Such techniques are also being taken up by artists, writers, and athletes. Viewed from an historical perspective, nothing could be more traditional than the fresh adaptation of Buddhist practices to new cultural settings, often unrecognizable to prior Buddhist cultures.

For the Buddhist scholar who practices Buddhism, then, her modern academic training redefines the significance of her tradition in historical terms while her Buddhist training redefines the significance of modern academic findings in their relevance to her adapting tradition. To participate in both the Buddhist and academic communities is thus to redefine the meaning of each in relation to the other. This internal dialogue of worldviews and disciplines meets quietly within the minds and hearts of a growing number of contemporary academic Buddhist scholars - a dialogue that can contribute something fresh and important both to Buddhist communities and to academia. Yet as institutions of learning East and

West are currently organized, this kind of internal dialogue is difficult for most centers of study to acknowledge or support, since neither the academy nor the traditional Buddhist community has been especially interested in being redefined by the other.

What is needed? To meet modern cultures successfully, Buddhist traditions need Buddhist scholars who serve them in ways analogous to the ways critical, constructive Christian theologians serve their traditions—by incorporating insights of modern disciplines into Buddhist self-understanding and by learning to speak from their traditions in ways that newly communicate the transforming power of the Dharma in our time. Contemporary Buddhist scholars, like those of the past, need to discern and clarify for multiple communities what the path of awakening is here and now and what benefits it can bring to the contemporary world. Such scholars are needed to serve as public theologians who can respond knowledgeably from Buddhist traditions about contemporary issues when requested to do so by public figures, journalists and the general public.

Who can and should do such critical, constructive work on behalf of current Buddhist traditions? What supervision should they have, from teachers and communities, Buddhist and academic? What norms of traditional and modern learning should they have, and from whom

should they acquire them? What settings will they work in? Traces of answers to these questions are beginning to emerge in new settings where traditional Buddhist learning is brought into dialogue with contemporary disciplines, and where modern scholars offer themselves both to academia and to Buddhist communities in new ways.

For example, Harvard Divinity School has been developing a new Buddhist ministry program that provides a niche for graduate students trained in Buddhist communities to explore new directions in Buddhist pastoral work and practical theology. Boston University's division of theological studies permits a PhD in critical-constructive theology for non-Christian scholars, such as Buddhists, Confucianists and Taoists. Boston College has created a PhD program in comparative theology focusing on ways that study of a non-Christian religions may inform Christian understanding. A Buddhist (or other non-Christian scholar) may also enter the program to explore how Christian intellectual traditions might inform her own tradition.

Buddhist principles and contemplative practices play an increasing role in graduate continuing education for social workers, nurses, doctors, therapists, hospice counselors and social activists. Buddhist methods are applied in service to troubled youths, addicts, prisoners, the mentally ill, the learning disabled, the dying, and the homeless.

Connections between such applications and systematic perspectives on Buddhist thought and practice are undergoing fresh evaluation and debate in contemporary writings and academic settings as well as in Buddhist communities.

The Mind and Life Institute brings together Tibetan lamas, Western Buddhist scholars, scientists and philosophers to explore what Buddhist contemplative traditions and modern science may learn from each other.(17) The Institute for Meditation and Psychotherapy sponsors programs to explore the new interface between modern psychology, psychotherapy and Buddhist meditation.(18) Naropa University, the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Berkeley, and the University of the West in California, like a number of universities in Taiwan and Japan, are exploring new ways to relate traditional and contemporary disciplines in the study of Buddhism and society. Rangjung Yeshe Institute's partnership with Kathmandu University in Nepal has created a new Centre for Buddhist Studies that embraces both traditional and contemporary modes of Buddhist studies. Maitripa Institute in Oregon, Barre Center for Buddhist Studies in Massachusetts, and Nitartha Institute are each exploring new ways of bringing together contemporary Buddhist studies with Buddhist praxis.(19)

In light of all the developments discussed above, in 2006, a new vehicle was created in the American Academy of Religion, the Buddhist Critical-constructive Reflection Group, to provide a place for scholars regularly to discuss how the academic study of Buddhism may inform Buddhist understanding today and how Buddhist modes of understanding may inform contemporary problems in society, philosophy and religion.(20)

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#### NOTES

(1) See Roger Jackson and John Makransky, eds. *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars* (New York: Routledge, 2000) for an early collection of essays exploring the discipline of Buddhist critical-constructive reflection (“Buddhist theology”).

(2) Russell McCutcheon, “‘It’s a Lie. There’s No Truth in It! It’s a Sin!’: On the Limits of the Humanistic Study of Religion and the Costs of Saving Other from Themselves.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 74, 3 (Sept., 2006: 724-72), 720-750. For a sustained critique of the assumption shared by McCutcheon that academic study of religion is appropriately a study of the “Other,” see Jose Cabezon, “The Discipline and its Other: The Dialectic of Alterity in the Study of Religion” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 74.1 (March 2006), 21-38.

(3) See Eric Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (London: Open Court, 1990) and Gregory Alles, “Study of Religion: An Overview,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd Edition, Vol. 13 ed. by Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2005), pp. 8761-8767.

(4) Ronald M. Davidson, "An Introduction to the Standards of Scriptural Authenticity in Indian Buddhism," in *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*, ed. by Robert E. Buswell (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawaii Press, 1990), pp. 291-323. Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (New York: Routledge, 1989). John R. McRae, "The Story of Early Ch'an" in *Zen: Tradition and Transition*, ed. by Kenneth Kraft (Grove Press: New York, 1988), pp. 125-139. John R. McRae, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch'an Buddhism* (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawaii Press, 1986).

(5) Davidson, "Scriptural Authenticity in Indian Buddhism," 291-312. John Makransky, "Historical Consciousness as an Offering to the Trans-historical Buddha," in *Buddhist Theology*, ed. by Roger Jackson and John Makransky (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 111-135. David McMahan, *Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahayana Buddhism* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002).

(6) Makransky, "Historical Consciousness as an Offering," pp. 113-122

(7) Donald S. Lopez, "On the Interpretation of the Mahayana Sutras" in *Buddhist Hermeneutics* ed. by Donald S. Lopez (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawaii Press, 1988), pp. 47-67.

(8) Lopez, *ibid.*

(9) One who views Buddhist concepts, practices and institutions purely in "etic" terms, not emic terms - not from the perspective of someone who practices and participates in the tradition under study. On this distinction, see Jonathan A. Silk, "Buddhist Studies" in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism* ed. by Robert E. Buswell, Volume One (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), p. 94.

(10) Luis O. Gomez, "Indian Materials on the Doctrine of Sudden Enlightenment," in *Early Ch'an in China and Tibet* ed. by Whalen Lai and Lewis R. Lancaster (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1983), pp. 393-434. Luis O. Gomez, "The Direct and Gradual Approaches of Zen Master Mahaayana: Fragments of the Teachings of Mo-ho-yen," in *Studies in Ch'an and Hua-yen* (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawaii Press, 1983), pp. 69-168. David Seyfort Ruegg, *Buddha-nature, Mind and the Problem of Gradualism in a Comparative Perspective: On the Transmission and Reception of Buddhism in India and Tibet* (London: SOAS, Univ. of London, 1989).

(11) 2003 conference with the Dalai Lama for representatives of Tibetan Buddhist Centers in the Americas, Garrison Institute, Garrison, NY.

(12) On practical, mundane applications of Asian Buddhist meditative and ritual powers, see for example Stephan Beyer, *The Cult of Tara: Magic and Ritual in Tibet* (Los Angeles, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1978), pp. 227-360; Geoffrey Samuel, *Civilized Shamans* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), pp. 176-198, 258-269, 309-335; Donald S. Lopez, ed., *Buddhism in Practice* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1995); Donald S. Lopez, ed., *Religions of China in Practice* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1996).

(13) For example, my recent book *Awakening through Love: Unveiling your Deepest Goodness* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2007) adapts Tibetan forms of meditation in the attempt to make them newly accessible to a wider public that includes non-Buddhists. In doing so, the book sought to balance the three concerns noted here: 1) adapting Buddhist contemplative practices to meet contemporary needs of non-Buddhists as well as Buddhists. 2) demonstrating how the same practices traditionally fit within a complete Buddhist system of awakening to enlightenment. 3) pointing to traditional teachers, and through them to their communities and institutions, to make readers



aware of the institutional bases of learning from which such adaptations have come.

(14) See, for example, writings by David Loy, Christopher Ives, Kenneth Kraft, Ken Jones, and Damien Keown on Buddhism and social ethics; Rita Gross, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, and Anne Klein on Buddhism in dialogue with feminist thought; Robert Magliola, Jin Park, Roger Jackson and Steven Laycock on Buddhism and post-modern philosophy; Tom Kasulis, Steven Heine, Janet Gyatso, and Richard Hayes on Buddhism and comparative philosophy; the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, A.T. Ariyaratne, Sulak Sivaraksa and Aung San Suu Kyi on Buddhist economics, social action and social justice; Ian Harris, Lambert Schmithausen, Stephen Batchelor, and Joanna Macy on Buddhism and ecology; Jose Cabezon on Buddhism and sexuality. Scholarly journals dedicated to such topics appear in the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, *Contemporary Buddhism*, the *Journal of Global Buddhism*, and the *Sakhyadhita* newsletter. For a survey of modern Buddhist intellectual responses to contemporary social problems, see Harvey (2000: 177-186, 215-238, 270-285). For a survey of engaged Buddhism in Asia, see King and Queen (1996), and for engaged Buddhism in the West, Queen (2000). For an exploration of new roles of academic Buddhist scholars in the West, see Charles Prebish, "The New Panditas," *Buddhadharma* (Spring 2006), 62-69. Also see Charles Prebish, *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

(15) Examples include works by the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, Chogyam Trungpa, Tarthang Tulku, Chogyi Nyima Rinpoche, Taitetsu Unno, Robert Thurman, Jeffrey Hopkins, Anne Klein, Harvey Aronson, Rita Gross, Alfred Bloom, Ken Tanaka, Mark Unno, Judith Simmer-Brown, Reginald Ray, Alan Wallace.

(16) This has been my experience the past three decades in my contacts with *Dharma* centers and monastic centers in the Tibetan Buddhist

world, although this is beginning to change with the encouragement of modernizing figures—such as the current Dalai Lama, Chogyam Trungpa, Lama Thubten Yeshe, Chogyi Nyima Rinpoche, Dzogchen Lobpon Rinpoche, Yangsi Rinpoche—and through new Buddhist centers of study such as Naropa University.

(17) [www.mindandlife.org](http://www.mindandlife.org)

(18) [www.meditationandpsychotherapy.org](http://www.meditationandpsychotherapy.org)

(19) [www.dharma.org/bcbs](http://www.dharma.org/bcbs), [www.nitarthainstitute.org](http://www.nitarthainstitute.org),  
[www.maitripa.org](http://www.maitripa.org)

(20) [www.aar-site.org/Meetings/Annual\\_Meeting/Program\\_Units/PUinformation.asp?PUNum=AARPU148](http://www.aar-site.org/Meetings/Annual_Meeting/Program_Units/PUinformation.asp?PUNum=AARPU148)