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Special Focus: Buddhism in the Anthropocene

The Contents Are the Vessel: *Snod bcud* Beyond Nature

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Reflecting on the implications of Dipesh Chakrabarty's "The Climate of History" for a critical Buddhist Studies of/for the Anthropocene, this article introduces a seven-hundred-years-old reflection among Inner Asian Buddhist scholastics about the perspectival tangle of worlds and beings. Rooted in canonical Indian Abhidharma literature and then the Tibetan Pakpa Chökyi Lodrö's didactic compositions meant for the princelings of the 13th century Mongolian Empire, Tibetan and Mongolian authors have long considered the ontological and epistemic nature of environments, beings, and perceiving minds in relation. Tracing an intellectual history leading into the Mongolian revolutionary period and Tibetan refugee diaspora in the twentieth century, this article shows that Inner Asian Buddhist have never been burdened by the tyranny of Nature and Culture, whose conceptual blurring in the Anthropocene Chakrabarty cites as imperiling the Humanities. Let the Humanities, as such, die. Finding resonances with earlier perspectival constructions of nature in the work of Alexander von Humboldt, the 19th century father of ecological studies, as well as critiques of nature/nurture in body and disability studies, this article argues for using Inner Asian perspectives as new methodological resources in the ruins of liberal humanism and the normative human sciences.

Keywords: Anthropocene; Buddhist studies; humanism; snod bcud; Tibet-Mongolia interface

In "The Climate of History," Dipesh Chakrabarty argued that the Anthropocene entails the end of humanism, and of the practice of history specifically, since distinctions between human and natural history no longer obtain (Chakrabarty 2009). What are the implications of this prediction for a Buddhist Studies of/in/for the Anthropocene?

In the first place, for the two centuries of its disciplinary history, Buddhist Studies have been a humanist endeavor *par excellence* and so may rightly feel imperiled by Chakrabarty's assessment.[1] Unlike the orientations of Buddhist Studies, however, premodern Buddhist sources knew neither "nature" nor "culture," and so remained exiled from those two solitudes of the Human. It is thus our disciplinary procedures, and not our disciplinary objects, that remain stubbornly bounded to human and natural history; those dogged North Atlantic universals and their grammars of description and command.[2]

Let them die. We who still dare to commit acts of history against "Buddhist Asia" must allow Nature and the Human to wither with every printed word. We must abandon that scholarly alchemy which converts traces of Buddhist life into progress stories about the Human, about Nature, about Culture. Amid the ongoing collapse of indefensible systems of production and consumption in the Anthropocene, we should find small

[1] For reasons I have described in print elsewhere, I identify the founding of Buddhist Studies—as a professionalized set of disciplinary spaces, procedures, objects, and audiences—within the milieu of the French Orientalist Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat (178–1832). There, I argue that "Buddhist Asia" was disciplined at the intersection of Leibnizian racial tableaus, a new text-critical Orientalism, and polylingual models of equivalency derived from Qing imperial sources available in Paris (see King 2022).

[2] On the genocidal and epistemic erasure of the human/inhuman, see: Yusoff (2018). On "North Atlantic universals" and their refusal, see: Trouillot (2002). On the historical specificity of progress narratives and on the epistemic firmament towards which deorientalist scholarship must drive, see: Allen (2016); Hallaq (2018).

joys in the accelerating incoherence of modernity's progress narratives (of which Buddhist Studies has always been an exemplary product). The stripped land, gutted mines, and acidic shorelines of Nature and Culture are full of possibility for thinking time and difference otherwise. Moving on from the picked-over bones of an appropriately disrupted natural and human history, a critical, even radical, Buddhist Studies may find nourishment elsewhere. A place to begin is in our premodern sources themselves; no longer simply disciplinary objects to be rendered across the chasm of primary-secondary sources by the purificatory gestures of History, Philosophy, Geography, and so on, but fonts of new methodological and theoretical imagination in their own right.

This article is a modest exploration of what such a project might entail. Across seven centuries of Buddhist historical writing in the epistemic frontiers of Inner Asia, we shall visit a recurring project to appeal to Vasubandhu's (Tib. Slob dpon dbyig gnyen) *Abhidharmakośa* to characterize the planetary tangle of environments and minds. In Abhidharma traditions, *world* (Skt. *loka*) is an external sphere of physical entities and processes; the phenomenal sphere of *perception* (Skt. *lokasaṃjñā*) occurring in dependence upon conceptual *proliferation* (Skt. *prapañca*).[3] Here, I propose, are models of relational knowledge, perspectival knowledge practice, and radical contexts for writing time and difference beyond Nature and Culture.

Environments and Minds Without Nature

Before coming to the Inner Asian material, we might remind ourselves about the scope (and blindnesses) of Nature and nature in the kinds of histories Chakrabarty describes. We might begin with that famous summation of the rationalization of natural philosophy: the epochal *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (1751–72), edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert (Diderot and d'Alembert 1770). That massively impactful project—a regular methodological and conceptual reference for those Orientalists founding a "science of Buddhist Asia" in the early 19th century—divided all *connoissances Humaines* into 1) natural and human history; 2) natural and human sciences; and 3) the imaginative work of sacred and profane arts (*poesie*) (Diderot and d'Alembert 1770: 164–65).

Since Plato, and across many dominant strands of the Christian tradition, Nature includes all facets of the physical world, conceived of as the contents of creation.[4] In another usage enduring since Aristotle, Nature distinguishes the living (those with life-force) from the non-living; frogs from water, sparrows from clouds, worms and bacteria from dirt. In still another usage, per the *Encyclopédie*, Buddhist Studies, and Chakrabarty's crisis, is Nature set off from the Human and Culture. Nature is what is acted upon by the human, the scene of action which distinguishes human from natural history, as on the view of John Stuart Mill, where the territory of the Human is not drawn by the course of Nature, but is in the agentive against it: the Human acts in order to "alter and improve Nature."[5]

Entwinned intimately with the above, Ducarme and Couvet provide four commonplace usages that serve my purposes below: to draw a contrast with a tradition of Nature-less (and Culture-less) Inner Asian scholastic reflection about minds and the worlds they know. Nature, for Ducarme and Couvet, is: "The whole of material reality, considered as independent of human activity and history"; "The whole universe, as it is the place, the source and the result of material phenomena (including man or at least man's body)"; "The specific force at the core of life and change"; "The essence, inner quality and character, the whole of specific physical properties of an object, live or inert."[6] Another derivative meaning of nature listed by Ducarme and Couvet (one that

[3] A theory of perception in which we apprehend the world as a tableau of conceptual associations, organized by language and conceptual association.

[4] Naddaf (2005: 168). Cited in: Droz and et al. (2022: 3).

[5] "For while human action cannot help conforming to Nature in the one meaning of the term, the very aim and object of action is to alter and improve Nature in the other meaning. If the natural course of things were perfectly right and satisfactory, to act at all would be a gratuitous meddling, which, as it could not make things better, must make them worse" (Mill 1904: 14).

we will return to below) is that invented distinction between outer and inner in contouring human/nature (Ducarme and Couvet, 2). As scholars such as Lyotard, Bauman, and Gellner began to observe already in the 1980s, the conceptual externalization of nature (in contrast to the internalization of culture) is fundamental to the project of becoming modern itself and, relatedly, is fundamental to the multiplicative crises of the Anthropocene and humanism to which Chakrabarty and others gesture so insistently (Haila 2000; Lyotard and Jameson 1984; Gellner 1988; Bauman 2013). Nature, finally, is also a source of authority in the Enlightenment tradition to which natural and human history (and Buddhist Studies) remains tethered. As Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal put it, nature has long been regarded "as a source of values and a value in itself; as a means of thinking about necessity and freedom; and as a permeable and moving boundary that demarcates individuals and categories" (Daston and Vidal 2004: 5).

Nature—an all-encompassing and singular sphere of physical reality, a place, a source, an essence, a property, a result of material reality, the living *contra* the inert, and a source of moral authority—is found nowhere in the Inner Asian Buddhist commentaries introduced below.[7] Elsewhere in the oeuvre of these authors, conceptual and linguistic differences are drawn between wilderness (es. *sa stong*; *bdag med yul*) and sovereign human territory (ex. *rgyal khab kyi yul khams*), and between human beings (*'gro ba mi*) and other sentient life (*sems can*) like dogs and gods. But there is not, in any sense, Nature or the Human, nor an unraveling of their bifurcated histories, whose territories Chakrabarty argues is so imperiled by the Anthropocene.[8] Instead, we find that the world and perceiving minds, the outer and the inner, immaterial causal chains and the events of human activity, are tangled in otherwise ways. To explore this further, we now turn to a chain of representative writing on "vessels and contents" (Tib. *snod bcud*) from the political and epistemic frontiers of Inner Asian Buddhism (including with European-derived natural science) between the 13th and early 20th centuries.

The scholastic interpretations that concern us here are focused on *bhājana-sattva*, worlds and cognizant beings, as well as with the hierarchies of sensory and inferential "valid knowledge" (Skt. *pramāṇa*; Tib. *tshad ma*; Mong. *kemjiy-e*) required to know them authoritatively.[9] These scholastics were mostly polylingual, cosmopolitan Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhist monks who needed to synthesize new circulations of knowledge from across Eurasia, including European positivist science, during the Qing and Tsarist empires, during the calamity of imperial collapse in the second decade of the twentieth century, during the rise of revolutionary nationalism and state socialism, and then the experience of state erasure and global refugee diaspora. In the scholastic conventions of the late-imperial Tibeto-Mongolian republic of letters, such discussions were typically organized under the topic "vessel-like world" (Skt. *bhājana loka*; Tib. *snod kyi 'jig rten*; Mong. *saba yirtinčü*) and its sentient "contents" (Tib. *bcud kyi 'jig rten*; Mong. *amitan yirtinčü*). There is an entirely other sphere of such reflection on these matters derived from the *Kālacakratantra,* which bear upon this discussion, but which is unfortunately beyond the scope of these pages.

[6] Although, it should be noted, Indo-European bhü–, "to grow," lies at the root of not only Greek *phusis* and Latin *natura*, but also Pāli *sabhava* and Sanskrit *svabhāva* (Tib. *rang bzhin*; Mong. *mön činar*; Ch. *zixing* 自性), meaning in Buddhist cosmology something like "essence," "own-being," or "nature" (though, as in ancient Greece, with dozens of specific and quite varied usages depending on region, period, philosophical school, etc.). See: Ducarme, Flipo, and Couvet (2021); Droz and et al. (2022: 4).

[7] Which is not to say that in modern vernaculars, oral traditions, or even in non-Buddhist intellectual traditions in Inner Asia, we don't find other concepts aligning more closely to Nature. Here we might think especially of the notion of *bayiγal* in Mongolian, derived from the verb *bai-* (to be), which as Caroline Humphrey notes refers to an all-encompassing system that is ideally in balance, entails a set of moral expectations about behavior, but which is not defined in the premodern period against the Human. Humanity, as such, is included already and deserves no special exile or command. See: Humphrey (1993).

[8] Or, more specifically, Aristotelean distinctions between "nature" and "technic"/"artificial," or Abrahamic conceptions of creation (*natura = creatio*), or Cicero's distinction between "nature" and "culture," or Descartes' instrumentalization of the sciences as a route for humans to "become masters and owners of nature," or by the flattening of nature into an open field for imperializing science to measure, assess, manipulate, and exploit from Galileo and Newton onwards.

[9] "Valid knowledge" is typically defined as a consciousness that is not deceived with regard to its object. There are two broad types of knowledge: 1) direct, sensory perception (Skt. *pratyakṣa*; Tib. *mngon sum*) and 2) inference (Skt. *anumāna*; Tib. *rjes su dpag pa*). Dharmakīrti claims in the 7th century *Pramāṇavārttika* that *pratyakṣa* and *anumāna* are aligned with a world comprised of both hidden (Skt. *parokṣa*; Tib. *lkog gyur*) and manifest (Skt. *abhimukhī*; Tib. *mngon du 'gyur ba*) objects.

We may now turn to exoteric scholastic writing derived from Vasubandhu's c. 4-5th century *Abhidharmakośa* (Tib. *Chos mngon pa'i mdzod*) (Slob dpon dbyig gnyen (Vasubandhu) 1800). Therein, Tibetan and Buddhist monks reflected upon, defended, and re-imagined, classical Indian Buddhist modeling of worlds and minds in conversation with competing models of planetary thinking, beginning in the Mongol Empire and continuing in the Eurasianist crossroads of the Qing Empire and its ruins. This was a turn to writing about environments and beings as a way of managing what Michel de Certeau would call the "eruption of social difference" along the frontiers of Inner Asian scholasticism. This critical project continued down to today, including eventually to manage the intrusion of European-derived natural philosophy, geography, humanism, and physical science beginning in the 17th century.

Pakpa Lodrö Gyeltsen's *Explanation of the Knowable* (1278)

We begin with an early and widely-circulated model: the Tibetan Sakya hierarch and Imperial Preceptor (Dishi 帝師) Pakpa Lodrö Gyeltsen's ('Phags pa blo gros rgyal mtshan, 1235–1280) *Explanation of the Knowable* (Tib. *Shes bya rab tu gsal ba*). This was an Abhidharma textbook written in 1278 for Qubilai Qaγan's son, the crown prince Činggim (Ch. Zhenjin真金, 1243-1285), an oft-cited addressee of Pakpa's writing. *Explanation of the Knowable* provided an overview of exoteric Buddhist cosmology and history, written as a reference for a devoted laity across cultural and linguistic differences at the cosmopolitan heart of the great Mongolian Empire.[10]

Pakpa's *Explanation of the Knowable* is in five parts.[11] The first two chapters, largely based on Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa* concern us most, since they provide the framework for much of the later Inner Asian Buddhist literature examined below. Given the disciplinary reflections which concern this article, it is illuminating to look at the Tibetan while also following Constance Hoog's 1983 translation of *Explanation of the Knowable.* Therein, she gives "The Inanimate World" for "Snod kyi 'jig rten" (lit. "The World of the Vessel") and "The Animate World" for "Bcud kyi 'jig rten" (lit. "The World of the Contents") ('Phags-pa Blo-gros-rgyal-mtshan and Hoog 1983). We might already suspect subtle and disfiguring appeal to culturally and historically removed concepts of "life" and "nature." In fact, Pakpa and the Abhidharma tradition which he summarizes are interested in classifying not life, nor nature, but the *dharma* ("phenomenon"; Tib. *chos*; Mong. *nom*): very specifically, causal interdependencies between material constituencies and immaterial minds and the ways these arrange themselves into perspectival, relational, subjective, ever-changing, and karmically driven spheres of experience. *Dharma* on Pakpa's view thus arguably maps over a concept like nature (as place, source, essence, property, and result), but also dramatically exceeds it. *Dharma* similarly subsumes and exceeds material reality and assigns no separate sphere for the human or culture as in Nature's familiar binaries.

Pakpa explains to Činggim that the World of the Vessel is established based on the arising of the four elements —earth, water, fire, and wind—and on the interplay of their elemental characteristics—solidity (*sra ba*), moistness (*gsher ba*), heat (*dra ba*), and movement (*g.yo ba*) ('Phags pa blo gros rgyal mtshan n.d.: 2). When these four "major elements" (Tib. *'byung ba chen po*)[12] arise, so too does the receptacle-like world. The site of this planetary drama, Pakpa continues, is the play of the infinitely small; the partless "minute particles" (*phra rab kyi rdul*)[13] which, by factors of seven, combine to form a particle (*rdul phra*), then an iron particle (*lcags rdul*), then a water particle (*chu rdul*), then a rabbit particle (*ri bong rdul*), then a sheep particle (*lug rdul*), then a bull particle (*glang rdul),* then a sun ray particle (*nyi zer rdul*). Seven sun ray particles are together the size of a louse egg (*sro ma*). Seven of those, in turn, are the size of a louse (*shig*). "From the assemblage (*bsdus*

[10] *Explanation of the Knowable* circulated in a variety of editions for centuries before being canonized in later editions of *Sakya Kabüm* collection (*Sa skya'i bka' 'bum*).
[11] 1) Snod kyi 'jig rten; 2) Bcud kyi sems can; 3) Lam; 4) 'Bras bu; 5) 'Dus ma byas.
[12] Skt. *mahābhūtāni*.
[13] Skt. *paramāṇu*.

pa) of all those," Pakpa writes, "the World of the Vessel and the bodies of beings take shape" ('Phags pa blo gros rgyal mtshan n.d.: 3).

In continual reference to Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa,* Pakpa provides descriptions of the elemental webbing of environment and embodiment in the worldly realm (Skt. *lokadhātu*; Tib. *'jig rten kyi khams*): the spatial and temporal classification of the arising and dissolving universe (centered upon the *axis mundi,* Mt. Meru), the geography and historical composition of human societies, the six realms of cyclical existence, and so forth. Dwelling at length upon the Desire Realm (Tib. 'Dod pa'i khams),[14] Pakpa then describes in passing the more rarified worlds experienced by those absorbed in higher and higher levels of meditative concentration (Skt. *dhyāna*; Tib. *bsam gtan*), and the nearly unfathomable numbers of world systems beyond our own.

In the conceptualization of the *Explanation of the Knowable* the Human, as such, is neither a marked nor weighted category. The world, as such, is instead a causal framework, an interdependency of causes and results, but not like Nature or nature as outlined above.[15] More fundamentally, the differential logics used by north Atlantic historians working in the long shadow of Vico, Hobbes, Croce, and others are lacking. Natural and human history, the very terrain of *connoissances humaines* per Diderot, is nowhere known. Here we come back to the distinction between outer and inner that persistently defines Human and Nature: a separation Chakrabarty describes in reference to R.G. Collingwood (in *The Idea of History,* 1946): "In the case of nature, this distinction between the outside and the inside of an event does not arise. The events of nature are mere events, not the acts of agents whose thought the scientist endeavors to trace... all history properly so called is the history of human affairs."[16] The Human was thus marked off from Nature, as Deleuze once put it so elegantly, "as an opaque first reality, as a difficult object, the sovereign subject of all possible knowledge" (Deleuze 2004: 92).[17]

By contrast, we have seen that in Pakpa's fundamental text from 1278, and in Vasubandhu's 4th-5th century *Abhidharmakośa* upon which it draws, there is no separation to be made between an inside and outside. How, in this conceptualization, can an event be so distinguished from an agent as to be owed two parallel, and ontologically distinct, tracks of History (natural and human)? As Pakpa puts it in summary: "the power of the accumulated collective *karma* (*las mthun pa*) of the sentient beings born therein are the conditions which establish the worldly realm" ('Phags pa blo gros rgyal mtshan n.d.: 3). All is the elemental and karmic tangle of the World of the Vessel and the World of the Contents. There is neither Nature nor the Human in the myriad worldly realms of Pakpa's text to prince Činggim.

Writing the World After Explaining the Knowable

Neither can we find Nature or the Human in the centuries of frontier Inner Asian scholastic cosmological and historical writings that followed upon the example of *Explanation of the Knowable.* Within a few decades (c. 1302), that text was translated into Chinese as *Zhang suozhi lun* 彰所知論and eventually canonized in the Tripiṭaka (ex. T.1645). A Middle Mongolian translation appeared a few decades earlier, in the late 13th century, as *Medegdekün-i belgetey-e geyigülügči neretü šastir* (*Treatise Titled 'The One that Clearly Elucidates What Should be Known*).[18] As originally with Pakpa and Činggim, in translation and in circulation, that long Buddhist scholastic

[14] Skt. Kāmadhātu.

[15] In the remaining three sections of *Explanation of the Knowable,* Pakpa divides that fundamental meshing of experience into two, though ever emphasizing their inseparability: the "outer" (phyi) interdependent origination of the world of the vessel and contents, and the "internal" (nang) interdependent origination tethering of the mental factors within the mind of a sentient being, as this experiences and acts upon the world, leading to subjective and collective, though entirely perspectival, and immanently relational causal source for the worlds experienced by beings.

[16] Collingwood (1946: 214). Quoted in: Chakrabarty (2009: 203–4).

[17] Here from a review of Foucault's 1966 *Les Mots et les Choses* (translated as the *Order of Things*), explaining Foucault's argument that the human sciences preceded "humanity," as such.

[18] See: Bareja-Starzyńska (2002); Uspensky (2006); Kara (2016).

tradition on minds and environments continued in the Eurasian cultural, linguistic, and political frontiers of Tibet and Mongolia

A second major period of scholastic writing in this area came in the 16th century, during the "second conversion" of the Mongols. A 1587 meeting between the Tibetan Third Dalai Lama Sönam Gyatso (Bsod nams rgya mtsho, 1543–1588) and the Tümed Mongolian ruler Altan Qan (1507–1583) and his nephew, the Qalqa Mongolian ruler Abutai Qan (1544–1588) was an epochal event in this second wave of Buddhism's arrival into Mongol lands. An important literary product from this period was a Mongolian reference work entitled *Čiqula kereglegči tegüs udq-a-tu šastir* (*Treatise That Contains the Complete Meanings of the Most Important [Buddhist Concepts] to Be Used*).[19] Like Pakpa's textbook for prince Činggim, this Mongolian composition was a reference work of sorts to the Mahāyāna history of the Buddha Śākyamuni and the cycles of his teachings, a cosmological guide to the arising and dissolution of the world accompanied by histories of Indian, Tibetan, and Mongolian kings and polities (derived directly from Pakpa's *Explanation*), and a long glossary of Buddhist terms on the model of Abhidharmic *mātṛkās* (Bareja-Starzyńska 1997: 3). According to Agata Bareja-Starzyńska's in extensive and illuminating research on this fascinating work, it was composed by Širegetü güüsi čorjǰi, an erudite translator and personal disciple of the Third Dalai Lama, at most two decades after the latter's meeting with Altan Qan (Bareja-Starzyńska 1997: 1). As in the 13th century heart of the Mongol Empire with Pakpa and Činggim, here the Human-less and Nature-less cosmology of Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa* was again at the center of another formative transfer of exoteric Buddhist knowledge from Tibetan scholastics to Mongolian readers at the turn of the 16th century.

As Buddhist transfers from Tibetan to Mongolian societies deepened, including translation projects, the founding and patronage of monasteries, circulation of texts and people between Mongolian societies and Tibetan monasteries, it seems like explicit references to the World of the Vessel and the World of the Contents as a framing for historical narratives declined. For example, many 16th and early 17th century Mongolian authors deeply enmeshed in Tibetan Buddhist life—such as Qutuɣtai Sečen Qung Tayiji (1540–1586), author of the *Arban buyan-tu nom-un čaɣan teüke* [the *White History of the Dharma of the Ten Virtues*] or the anonymous 1607 Tümed Mongol *Erdeni tunumal neretü sudur* [*Jewel Translucent Sutra*]—did not feel the need to preface their accounts of Buddhist and political history with discussions about the co-production of environments and knowledge. Therein, it seems, the dominant concern was to establish the authority and continuity of Činggisid political dynasties in a post-imperial world.

A notable transition seems to have occurred in frontier Buddhist scholastic writing after the conclusion of the Mongol-Tsang War in 1642, the concurrent rise of the Gaden Potrang government of the Dalai Lamas and their Qošut Mongolian patrons, and the founding of the Qing Empire in 1644. Indeed, no doubt motivated to synthesize and legitimize these new imperial formations in the deep time of Buddhist cosmology, several impactful histories centred reflections on the worlds of the contents and their vessels. Examples are the 1655 *Altan tobči* and Saɣang Sečen's 1662 *Erdeni-yin tobči* [*Precious Summary*].[20] Neither text, however, offers critical reflections on the perceptual mechanics by which worlds are made and known as we saw in Pakpa's letter to Prince Činggim. That would come sometime after, in the 18th-early 20th centuries, when frontier Inner Asian Buddhist scholasticts began interacting with competing planetary traditions circulating through the Qing Empire. Specifically, in this Vasunandhu's *Abidharmakośa* was brought into contact with European derived natural philosophy, geography, and natural science. We might productively begin at the apex of that later reflective tradition (as I conceive of it in these pages): the work of the early 20th century Qalqa monastic

[19] This work has been deeply and revealingly studied by Prof. Agata Bareja-Starzyńska. See: Bareja-Starzyńska (1991, 1997, 2020).
[20] For a translation and study of the latter, see: Sagan Sechen (2023).

polymath Lubsangdamdin Zava Damdin (1867-1937). From Zavan Damdin, we may work backwards into the heart of the Qing period, and then forward into the Tibetan refugee diaspora.

Zava Damdin was the last great monk historian of the Qalqa Mongols who brought a late-Qing centered Buddhist scholasticism to bare upon the challenges of the imperial collapse, the rise of nationalist and then socialist state revolutions, and the eruption of repressive state violence.[21] Indeed, in his *magnum opus*, the 1931 *Golden Book* (Tib. *Gser gyi deb ther*; Mong. *Altan debter*), Zava Damdin gives planetary thinking such pride of place that it not only prefaces his extensive history of politics and religion, but it is also one of its three major sections.[22] Dominant references for Zava Damdin, as for all the monastic historians he cites from the two centuries prior, are focused on making sense of competing models of worlds and minds in reference to a relatively small group of Indian references. For example, Zava Damdin appeals often to the *Avataṃsaka*,[23] and especially the *Gaṇḍavyūha,* the *Avataṃsaka*'s tenth chapter, which circulated as an independent text in East and Inner Asian Buddhist tradition.[24] Therein, as in Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa* (which Zava Damdin also references in abundance), minds and environments are always already tangled, quite beyond the doubled blindnesses of Nature and Culture.

The *Gaṇḍavyūha* follows the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī to South India, where he is inspired to guide the disciple Sudhana (Tib. Nor bzangs) in pursuit of *kalyāṇamitras* who may instruct him in bodhisattva conduct. The *sūtra* follows Sudhana's travails, which focus most on testimonies by his many guides about the buddhas they perceive because of their purified vision. Upon revealing this to Sudhana, usually the guide in question then discloses that her or his vision is necessarily partial, and so urge Sudhana to travel on to meet some other qualified teacher. In my reading at least, the place-based limit of knowledge about other minds is the main narrative throughline of the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, all unspooled over Sudhana's shoulder as he moved from realm to realm. It is thus not surprising that Zava Damdin drew lessons from the *Gaṇḍayūha* about how to understand wildly differing accounts about that great communion of environments and knowing minds, the *dhatu-sattva*. Zava Damdin, for example, quotes:

> Oceans appeared in the lands of all directions.
>
> Some are round and others triangular.
>
> And, in some quarters, they are square.
>
> In every case, they are all fashioned (*bris*) by the ocean of karma. (bLo bzang rta mgrin 1975: 44)

Elaborating on the above, Zava Damdin writes: "In the sūtras and tantras—(including) the higher and lower Abhidharma, the *Kālacakra-tantra*, and so forth—there are different ways of explaining such things as the number, size, and measure of the underlying *maṇḍala* base, the mountains, the oceans, and the continents. However, these [presentations] are never mutually contradictory (*phan tshun 'gal 'dur mi 'gyur*). As for the meaning of that: those lands are not established by their own power, from their own side. They are established by the *karma* of sentient beings" (bLo bzang rta mgrin 1975: 44).

[21] See: (King 2019).

[22] "1) An explanation of the arrangement of the vessel and its contents, together with a history of its origins; 2) A general overview of the extensive spread of political authority (rgyal srid) and the previous Victor's teachings; 3)A detailed explanation of the circumstances (gnas tshul) in which the teachings and the political authority developed in the dominion of Khalkha, the heartland (dbus 'gyur) of Mongolia (Hor yul)" (bLo bzang rta mgrin 1975: 44).

[23] Tib. *Phal po che*. Also known as the *Buddhāvataṃsaka* (Tib. *Sangs rgyas phal po che*).

[24] Tib. *Sdong pos brgyan pa.* Other important references for Zava Damdin in the section of the *Golden Book*, unfortunately beyond this short summary, include: *Summary of the Great Vehicle* (Skt. *Mahāyānasaṃgraha*; Tib. *Theg pa chen po bsdus pa*); the *Noble Application of Mindfulness of the Holy Dharma Sūtra* (Skt. *Saddharmasmṛtyupasthāna-sūtra*; Tib. *'Phags pa dam pa'i chos dran pa nye bar gzhag pa'i mdo*); the *Sūtra of the Inconceivable Secret* (Skt. *Tathagata-acintya-guhya-nirdeśa-sutra*; Tib. *De bzhin gshegs pa'i gsang ba bsam gyis mi khyab pa bstan pa'i mdo*); and the *Kālacakra-tantra* (Tib. *Dus kyi 'khor lo'i rgyud*).

Zava Damdin's point, and the point of the many frontier scholastics he quotes, is that the vessel-like world and its sentient contents are produced by the other: knowledge and, indeed, environments, are co-produced and fundamentally perspectival. "Though the great many oceans, mountains, and continents were all established simultaneously in our composite world (*cha can 'jig rten*), they might appear to one being but not to another" (bLo bzang rta mgrin 1975: 44). The water known to humans is puss to hungry ghosts and nectar to gods. The world known to the ant is not that known to the emperor. In an appeal to that great Eurasian trope, Zava Damdin evokes the eighteen blind men each trying to give an account of an elephant based only on their grasping the rough skin of a leg, a sweeping tail, or the mystery of a trunk.[25]

Important Inner Asian commentaries, upon whose well-worn precedent Zava Damdin presents his exploration about the tangled, relativist world of knowing minds and worlds thus known, was the fourth Mindröl Nomin Han's[26] magisterial 1830 *Mirror Clarifying the Vessel and its Contents: An Extensive Description of the World.*[27] An influential abbot-scholar in the eastern Tibetan cultural region of Amdo, Mindröl Nomin Han also worked in the cosmopolitan Qing imperial administration in Beijing and in conversation with Russians such as Osip Mikhailovich Kovalevsky (1801–1878), who himself wrote an important 1837 Orientalist study on these sources entitled *Buddiyskaya Kosmologiya,* based on the same canonical sources! (Ковалевский 1837). Mindröl Nomin Han's work is essentially a geography of the known world, offering Tibetan letters its first sustained account of Africa, the Arctic, and Europe, alongside more well-known locales like India, China, Mongolia, Tibet, and Śambhala. Like Zava Damdin a century later, Mindröl Nomin Han prefaces his masterpiece by writing, "the sūtras and tantras offer differing accounts [of the vessel and its contents] because of the differing powers of sentient beings..." ('Jam dpal chos kyi bstan 'dzin 'phrin las (Btsan po no min han bzhi pa) 2013: 4).

These arguments are common in the late imperial Tibeto-Mongolian frontiers of the Qing empire and Russia, including Könchok Tenpa Rapgyé's (Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas) great 19th century geographical work *Oceanic Book* (*Deb ther rgya mtsho*) and the wildly synthetic writing of Sumpa Khenpo, to whom I return below.[28] Each of these works sought to make sense of newly available European and Chinese knowledge about environments and beings by appeal to perspectival theories described in Indian sources. Here are the grand accounts of the co-becoming of environments and sentient life, wherein nothing like the solitudes of Nature and the Human, nor their partitioned histories, are to be found.

The World is Round for Whom? And When?

In the ruins of the empire and in the shadow of socialist state violence in Siberia, Mongolia, and Tibet, later in the 20th century many Tibetan and Mongolian scholars returned to these themes in planetary thinking.[29] In an undated essay published posthumously in 1997, the eminent Tibetan monastic scholar and education reformer Dzémé Rinpoché addressed an "issue" (Tib. *dpyad gzhi*) that for centuries had vexed Buddhist literati in the Tibetan, Mongolian, and Siberian heartlands of Asia.[30] This concerned the scandalous proposition that our world is round, attributed in the 17th-18th centuries to "heretical" (Skt. *tīrthika*; Tib. *mu stegs pa*; Mon.

[25] Zava Damdin's citation of the eighteen blind men and the elephant is from the *Summary of the Great Vehicle.*

[26] Smin grol no min han 'jam dpal chos kyi bstan 'dzin 'phrin las (1789–1839).

[27] Full title: *'Dzam gling chen po'i rgyas bshad snod bcud kun gsal me long.* For a wonderful study, focused on geography and not the twining of perception and environment as here, see: Yongdan 2011.

[28] On the *Oceanic Book,* see: Tuttle (2011).

[29] Specialist readers will note that I have skipped over the great Amdowa scholar Gendün Chöpel's (Dge 'dun chos 'phel, 1903–1951) famous Tibetan Buddhist work on science, including the question of a round earth. Since his work is so well studied, and since it does not make any additional points on the theme of this short article beyond the other, less well studied figures above and below, I have left him aside. Interested readers should consult Donald Lopez's many studies for an in-depth and fascinating intellectual portrait: Lopez and Dge-'dun-chos-'phel (2006); Dge-'dun-chos-'phel (2014); Lopez (2018).

[30] Dze smad rin po che alias Blo bzang dpal ldan bstan 'dzin yar rgyas (1927–1996). The fourth incarnation in the Dze smad line, this hermit, scholar, and poet was a very influential though controversial figure in the first forty years of the Tibetan diaspora. For a biographical sketch and summary of his works, see the memorial of his student and editor, Thupten Jinpa, in: Dze smad rin po che (1997a). For his collected works, see: Dze smad rin po che blo bzang dpal ldan bstan 'dzin yar rgyas (1997).

buruɣu nomtai) Chinese literati and Indian panditas but which had in fact arrived with the Jesuits during the Ming dynasty. Canonical sources record the Buddha describing, in some detail and on multiple occasions, the world as flat. Unlike more familiar debates in the early-modern history of religion and science in Europe, such incommensurable representations of the world, whether attributed to the Buddha or Copernicus, were not in fact the problem for Dzémé Rinpoché and the long debate he engaged in. The Buddha had hardly been consistent on the issue in the sūtras or tantras, which have him describing the world's beings and their environment in innumerable, contradictory ways.[31]

The "issue" for Tibetan and Mongolian scholastics, as we have seen, and which Dzémé Rinpoché felt compelled to settle just a few decades ago, concerned not the world but how we know it. Using his famous gifts for poetry, Dzémé Rinpoche begins by arguing that in any legitimate religious or scientific inquiry, "actual investigation is like a jewel: appropriate to clasp at one's heart as if it were one's heart (*dpyad pa'i dngos ni rin chen bzhin snying la snying bzhin 'dzin 'os*)" (Dze smad rin po che 1997b: 205). With analysis (Tib. *dpyad pa*) and not faith (Tib. *'dod pa*) in hand, Dzémé Rinpoche then confronts two erroneous positions held by his readers: 1) that a round earth is debatable despite incontrovertible empirical evidence; and 2) that the undeniable roundness of the earth is proof of the Buddha's ignorance.

Regarding the empirical evidence, Dzémé Rinpoché writes: "Established on the basis of direct perception (Tib. *mngon sum*), the world's discerning knowledgeable ones assert unanimously that the earth is round. If one disagrees, this is a clear sign of the fault of one's own foolishness" (Dze smad rin po che 1997b: 205). The Cārvāka materialists denied the reality of phenomenon unperceivable to the senses, such as *karma* and rebirth. However, even they would never dispute the reality of something perceived directly by the senses. But hadn't the Buddha described a flat earth, thus contradicting the evidence of sensory observation available to 20th century monks?

To answer this question, Dzémé Rinpoché employs several of the dominant interpretative strategies used by his frontier Géluk predecessors for the last three centuries. In the first place, he writes, neither monastic scholars nor scientists have direct access to the contents of the Buddha's mind. Furthermore, there are many possibilities as to why statements on a round earth are absent in the Buddha's recorded teachings. Why? Perhaps the early Buddhist community failed to record such teachings, Dzémé Rinpoché muses (after all, the Buddha never wrote anything)? Or perhaps the Buddha's teaching on the round earth were recorded but were never translated from Indic sources? Perhaps they lay abandoned in their original form, buried somewhere along the Silk Road? Or perhaps the Buddha may have given such teachings, compatible with contemporary scientific modeling, in another country, in another time, in another body, or in another language (Dze smad rin po che 1997b: 205).

Dispensing with the view that the Buddha's silence on a round earth supports a tenable conclusion about his ignorance, Dzémé Rinpoche then turns to another of the major interpretative strategies employed by his late-and post-imperial forebears. This is to relativize scientific knowledge that challenges accepted doctrinal positions, whether provisional (Skt. *neyārtha*; Tib. *drang don*) or definitive (Skt. *nītārtha*; Tib. *nges don*): "Even if the Buddha mentioned something in the sūtras, it did not necessarily exist. For example, [he sometimes said] a person is truly existent [when persons are in fact empty of inherent existence] or that Mt. Sumeru is both round and square. When he was questioned [on such disparities], moreover, he said these both exist and do not-exist" (Dze smad rin po che 1997b: 206). The world appears differently to ants and elephants. A person appears differently to her friends and enemies. Worlds *appear* differently and thus *exist* differently, dependent upon the theoretically limitless karmic and perceptual positions from which they may be known. On this note, Dzémé Rinpoché concludes his short 1997 essay, contented that he had valorized the undeniable

[31] The *Abhidharma* and *Kālacakra-tantra*, for instance, have him giving the shape of the axis mundi, Mt. Sumeru, as both square and circular.

reality of the round earth by undermining the finality of any conventional knowledge about the world and its beings.

For Dzémé Rinpoché, as for Zava Damdin, and for the many generations of Qing-era frontier Buddhist scholastics whose engagements with European technical knowledge hangs in the background of this short missive, such disciplinary knowledge was tied to a single and vastly understudied trans-Asian institution: the Buddhist scholastic college (Tib. *grwa tshang*; Mong. *datsang*). While monastic colleges always existed in local ecologies of political intrigue, patronage, and administrative affairs across Tibetan, Mongolian, and Buryat societies, over the course of the late Qing and Tsarist period they shared institutional forms (a five-fold college structure), degree systems, dialectical training, coursebooks, interpretative techniques, genres of expression, and importantly, a *lingua franca* (literary Tibetan).[32] Directly related to the development of a dispersed Eurasianist public culture, pupils traveled by the tens of thousands over vast distances during this period to study and teach in scholastic centers, such as in the great Géluk monasteries of the Lhasa region in Central Tibet (Tib. *Dbus gtsang*), in Eastern Tibet (Tib. *A mdo*), in Beijing (such as the imperial Yonghegong Monastery), Mt. Wutai (in Shanxi), or Yeke-yin Küriy-e (contemporary Ulaanbaatar).

Within this complex field of political, social, economic, and intellectual developments in the 17th century, one figure and one series of texts from Amdo provided generations of frontier Géluk scholastics with the interpretative and dialectical arsenal with which to confront circulating and competing planetary models. This was the polyglot Amdowa scholar Sumpa Khenpo Yéshé Peljor (Tib. Sum pa mkhan po ye shes dpal 'byor, 1704–1788). Sumpa Khenpo was famous (perhaps infamous) even during his own lifetime for entertaining a sober discernment between superstitious fantasy and evidence-based assertion in medicine, astronomy, geography, and history. He influenced generations of later frontier scholastics with his major writing on these topics, such as his 1747 world history, *The Wish-fulfilling Tree* (Tib. *Chos 'byung dpag bsam ljon bzang*), his regional history of Kokonor (Tib. *Tsho sngon lo rgyus*), and his 1777 geography *A General Description of Jambudvīpa* (Tib. *'Dzam gling spyi bshad*).[33]

Most important for the two hundred years of polemical engagement with empirical models of the human and nature that came after, was a widely read letter exchange with the Sixth Panchen Lama Lozang Palden Yéshé (Tib. Paṇchen bla ma blo bzang dpal ldan ye shes, 1738–1780).[34] The Sixth Panchen Lama wrote to Sumpa Khenpo on a variety of scandalous issues found in the latter's works, as diverse as the actual cause of Činggis Qan's death, the historicity of King Gesar of Ling, and very importantly, the shape of the earth and the way we might know it (Ye shes dpal 'byor 1975).

In *The General Description of Jambudvīpa,* Sumpa Khenpo had taken serious account of Jesuit publications (in Chinese) on heliocentrism, Copernican astronomy, and state-of-the-art European geographical knowledge and cartographic techniques widely embraced in the Qing courts and available in Chinese translation. The result was revolutionary. In Sumpa Khenpo's erudite work, Germany, France, and St. Petersburg (never known in Inner Asia) were mapped onto classical Indic cosmologies recorded in the Buddhist canon. More problematic was Sumpa Khenpo's synthesis of Jesuit narratives about the Arctic Circle, a previously unheard-of part of the world where the sun either never set or never rose. Herein lay the controversy: as the Jesuits already knew, to account for these cycles of arctic sunlight the world had to be spherical and not flat. Also, the planets and the sun needed to be in orbit around one another. This caused an explosion in frontier Tibetan and Mongolian intellectual circles that could only be quelled by the supreme authority of

[32] On Géluk scholastic colleges along the Tibeto-Mongol-Sino-Russian frontiers in this period, see: Van Vleet (2015); King (2019); King and Klassen (2015); Sullivan (2021).
[33] For an excellent study of Sumpa Khenpo on the matter of geography, see: Kapstein (2011).
[34] For biographical surveys beyond what is possible here, see: Griffiths (2020); Erdenibayar (2007); Das (1889); Hanung (2013); Jong (1967).

the Panchen Lama, who wrote a widely read public letter which demanded that Buddhist scholastics account for these European views.[35]

Conclusion

We have briefly traced Pakpa's *Explanation of the Knowable*, and Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa* more distantly, along circulatory histories in the frontiers of Inner Asian Buddhist scholasticism. Therein, we find little justification to perform that familiar scholarly alchemy, in which snod bcud, 'jig rten, or khams gsum may be rendered into Nature (and the texts into Culture). We ought instead to pay our sources the kind of radical disciplinary attention they deserve, in which they might, as Michel de Certeau would put it, "bite back" (*re-mordent*) and demand new disciplinary treatment (Certeau 1986: 8). We might, by this, be challenged by our nature-less and culture-less sources, not aspire to be masters of them. And, by this, we might bring a critical, even radical Buddhist Studies, into conversation with new work in the Humanities that is refiguring its disciplinary practices considering the demands of the Anthropocene, not withering in the face of it.

Natural and human history are simply incoherent without the "ladder" mode of evolutionary progress, the "tree of life," market-like species competition, and sovereign individualism assumed for centuries. Or when the world is not gridded by progress time, the externalized mechanisms of nature, the symbolic and material solitudes of culture, or the sovereign individual. These logics of difference are made (and unmade) through engaging with the assemblages of the world in particular, perspectival ways. They are but one plateau of knowing in a world that is abundantly multifaceted, multispecied, and multitemporal. The insight of the Buddhist observers and logicians introduced above is that the world is as multiple as the positions in which it, and we, and they, may know. "[J]uxtaposed with the stories made available from many arts and sciences, vernacular and academic, we learn the liveliness of landscapes." To account for them, "we need new histories and descriptions, crossing the science and humanities" and other contiguous knowledge forms, such as Inner Asian Buddhist scholasticism (Tsing et al. 2017: g12).

Herein lies interesting revisionist possibilities of a Buddhist Studies of/for the challenges to humanism evoked by Chakrabarty. For the Tibetan and Mongolian thinkers introduced briefly above, the tangle of perceiving minds, conceptual and embodied particularism, language work, and arts of observation all are co-productive of worlds. The language of fact and event privileged by scientists and historians (and Buddhist Studies scholars?) are untenable. The pure land and the wasteland, the pot of water and the put of pus, are not different places or objects. They are different perspectives of knowing. Here I see interesting resonances, and possibly theoretical exchanges, with insights in feminist criticism and new materialism, phrased nicely in Stacy Alaimo's foundational work (which otherwise remains much beholden to Nature): "Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from 'the environment' (Alaimo 2010: 2).[36]

Interestingly, an analogous but long forgotten position was held in the founding scientific invention of ecology; in the very site wherein the modern notion of Nature was disciplined in the North Atlantic language of description and command: Alexander Von Humboldt's 1849 *Ansichten der Natur.* Humboldt's use of "Ansichten" must give us pause. The usual translation of "Ansichten der Natur" as "view of nature" flattens the meaning in German. "Ansichten," in fact, referred to an active, in process, place bound, and intentional way of looking, to a practice of regarding, in which "Nature" is not an empirical object but rather a style of seeing (Humboldt 2014). In this relational, participatory, perceptual notion, the imperializing and selfless

[35] Ibid. 88–9.

[36] So, too, several strands of "embodied subjectivity theories," queer and trans theories of embodiment, and critical disability studies. For an incisive survey, embedded in an exemplary study, see: Pitts-Taylor (2016: 46–65).

ground, the territories of natural and human history are implicated already. Nature is a perceptual verb by which we see connection and assemblage all the way down.

And, in this specific sense, the foundational work of Humboldt bears much in common with Vasubandhu, the turn of the 5th century author of the *Abhidharmakośa* whose exposition on the inextricableness of perception and worlds thus known, unburdened by the Human and Nature and History, we have briefly explored along the cultural frontiers of Buddhist Inner Asia between the 13th and 20th centuries. This facet of Vasubandhu's work has been revealingly studied by Sonam Kachru (largely based not on the *Abhidharmakośa,* but on the *Twenty Verses,* another of Vasubandhu's works).[37] Somewhat like Humboldt, but quite unlike the partitioning of natural and human history whose crisis was evaluated by Chakrabarty, on Vasubandhu's view "[i]nstead of two separable kinds of processes—one running from mind to world (through action), and another from world to mind (through perception)—there is only one kind of process, with distinct phases, or moments. *Perceptual uptake of the world is the culmination of a process of habituation to action, one that accounts for our having available anything to take up as content*" (Kachru 2021: 184).[38] And here, vitally, there is also a quite different notion of history bridging (and twinning) the "inside" of perception and the "outside" of the environment. "Vasubandhu is effectively claiming that, in some quite literal sense, in perception we see the traces of what has been made by living beings to whom we are connected by a history of cause and effect. Perception discloses a constructed context of which we are a part" (Kachru 2021: 184).

So Pakpa Lama, Zava Damdin, Sumpa Khenpo, Mindröl Nomin Han, and Dzemé Rinposhé have told us. Natural history was always already human history, and vice versa, in ways that negate the ontological entailment of both. The "inside" of the "outside" phenomenal world was always already perceptual. The realm of sentience (not exclusively the Human) was always already "outside." Per Vasubandhu, "in experience we are responding to a variety of collective history we have forgotten" (Kachru 2021: 186). Leaning into new disciplinary possibilities, a critical Buddhist Studies must move forward without Nature and without the cleaved-off Human "as an opaque first reality, as a difficult object, the sovereign subject of all possible knowledge."[39] By harkening back to such tangled perspectives, ones that align in fascinating ways to the original *Ansichten der Natur* of Humboldt, as well as a great many radical traditions stepping intentionally out of the Enlightenment's long shadow, perhaps there is room for disciplinary renewal and not only crisis in the humanities of the Anthropocene? What role might a critical Buddhist Studies have in leading, not simply following, such a project?

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[37] Sonam Kachru study is mostly based on the former's *Twenty Verses* (Skt. *Viṃśatikā*; Tib. *Nyi shu pa*; Ch. *Weishi ershi lun* 唯識二十論).
[38] Italics are mine.
[39] (Deleuze 2004: 92). Here from a review of Foucault's 1966 *Les Mots et les Choses* (translated as the *Order of Things*), explaining Foucault's argument that the human sciences preceded "humanity," as such.

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