Why is there philosophy in Buddhism?

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by Richard Hayes in the autumn of 2009

1. Translation issues

Questions, no less than assertions, rest upon presuppositions. Asking why there is philosophy in Buddhism assumes that there is, in fact, philosophy in Buddhism. This assumption, like most assumptions, turns out to be controversial. So before doing anything else, we should explore some of the dimensions of the controversy surrounding the question of what philosophy is and whether Buddhists in Asia participated in it.

According to tradition, Buddhist texts were first translated from South Asian languages into Chinese in 67 C.E. The first efforts to translate texts written in an Indo-European language into a language belonging to a completely different language family and having a totally unrelated system of writing presented the translators with several problems. Among the many problems to be solved was how to translate the technical vocabulary of Sanskrit and other South Asian languages into Chinese. Most of the special vocabulary that had evolved in Buddhism over the course of 500 years had no obvious counterparts in Chinese. So translators were faced with the task of finding Chinese characters that got across the ideas of such Sanskrit words as *dharma, śīla, nirvāṇa* and even *buddha.*

At first Chinese translators used the strategy of translating key Buddhist concepts with the key concepts of familiar Chinese systems of thought, especially Daoism. This had the advantage of making Buddhism accessible to most people, but it carried with it the disadvantage of blurring the real and important distinctions between Buddhism and Daoism. It made Buddhism seem like nothing more than a slightly exotic flavor of Daoism. Making Buddhism seem already familiar was a way of adding an element of distortion to the explanation of what Buddhism was really all about.[1]

I use the Chinese example just to make the point that problems of translation have been with us for a very long time. These problems are always present whenever one culture comes into

1 There is a good discussion of this issue in Kogen Mizuno, Buddhist Sutras: Origin, Development, Transmission, (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Company, 1982), pp. 41–55.

contact with a different one and an exchange of ideas begins to occur. When Buddhism was first introduced to Europeans, the tendency was to translate key Buddhist ideas by using words from Christianity. And so it was not unusual to read of Buddhism having the counterparts of salvation, saints, savior figures, heavens, hells, grace, faith and spirituality. Some early interpreters of Buddhism, however, were very much opposed to Christianity, so they went out of their way to avoid speaking of faith and instead spoke of reason, rationality, empiricism, scientific spirit and enlightenment. Some people argued that Buddhism should not be seen as a religion but rather as a philosophy. This debate, of course, made people clarify what exactly they meant by the words "religion" and "philosophy" and ask whether there are any words in Asian languages that quite correspond to those European words.[2]

It has been observed that in some Asian languages the first equivalents of the words "religion" and "philosophy" were introduced in the late 19th century and that they came about as a result of trying to coin equivalents of the European words. These words probably would have been almost meaningless to educated Asians of previous centuries. Even now they tend to be used only by Asians who are speaking of Western intellectual history.

So if the people of ancient China and India had no words for "philosophy" and "religion," what does that mean? Does it mean that they had the activities and enterprises that we call religion and philosophy but that they simply had no words to name those activities? Or does it mean that they did not really have any activities that could properly be called religion and philosophy? People have argued both sides of this question.

2. The arguments against Asian philosophy

Several authors in the 20th century argued that "philosophy" is a distinctively European activity and that nothing quite like it ever existed in Asia until Asians were exposed to Western culture. Let us review the principal line of argument of two of these people.[3]

2.1. Edmund Husserl's claim

The first claim that we shall consider is that of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). In an address entitled "Philosophy and the crisis of humanity," delivered in Vienna in 1935, Husserl acknowledged that there are certain resemblances in the activities of Western thinkers and certain Chinese and Indian thinkers. These similarities, however, are, he argued, superficial and serve to mask profound differences that are far more important. First, the similarities that Husserl acknowledged were:

1. an all-encompassing interest in finding universal truths

2 My own attempt to grapple with this is found in Richard P. Hayes, Land of No Buddha: Reflections of a Sceptical Buddhist, (Birmingham, England: Windhorse Publications, 1998), pp. 139–152.

3 For a complete discussion, see Jitendranath Mohanty, Reason and Tradition in Indian Thought: An Essay on the Nature of Indian Philosophical Thinking, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 288–300

2. a tendency for this pursuit in truth to lead to the formation of vocational communities, that is, to guilds whose purpose was to live in accordance with the truths that had been discovered
3. the working out of methods to pass on the truths, and the lifestyles associated with them, from one generation to another.

Just about every civilization in the world has had these things in common, said Husserl. But philosophy, as that term is understood in the West, is not simply the enterprise of discovering universal truths and living in accordance with them and forming social organizations dedicated to educating future generations. More than anything else, said Husserl, the enterprise of philosophy should be understood as "a purely 'theoretical' attitude." In Greece, which is where the word "philosophy" was coined, the word referred to the enterprise of discovering truth for the pure joy of discovery. Philosophy, said Husserl, was the development of theory for the sake of developing theories. Philosophy is the discovery of truth without any regard whatsoever for practical consequences. It is a purely intellectual practice, and its descendants are pure mathematics and pure theoretical science.

Indian and Chinese intellectuals, argued Husserl, never got away from the practical issues of serving humanity and ordering the human being's life in the world and making the human being as happy and free from disease and distress as possible. Asian thinkers were always preoccupied with the problem of how to free people from the root causes of suffering and distress, how to make people well and how to face death with dignity. These may be noble enterprises, but no matter how noble they may be, they are not philosophy.

Husserl went on to argue that a distinction has to be made between two kinds of thinking. One kind of thinking is the *theoretical* sort of thinking that Greek and European philosophy embodied. The second kind of thinking is *mythological* thinking. It is the function of myth to convey values, especially practical values in the everyday world. Myth is a name given to stories and ways of seeing the world that supports social stability, political harmony, predictability and the preservation of traditions through many generations. Myth has its place in the world, but it has to be understood as being essentially different in nature from what the Greeks called *theoria. Theoria* is characterized by

1. the deliberate turning away from the practical affairs of ordinary life
2. the thinker's cultivating an attitude of being a disinterested observer of the world, unaffected by his or her own personal interests
3. a self-conscious awareness of the difference between the way the world is portrayed by various human cultures and the way the world actually is
4. the search for truth that is universal, that is, valid in all places at all times for all people

5. the enterprise of disseminating, through education, what has already been discovered and establishing institutions that will perpetually engage in the never-ending task of discovering new truths.

Given all these points, Husserl concluded

> It is a mistake, a falsification of their sense, for those raised in the scientific ways of thinking created in Greece and developed in the modern period to speak of Indian and Chinese philosophy and science…i.e. to interpret India, Babylonia, China, in a European way.

2.2. Richard Rorty

An influential American philosopher who wrote on this topic was Richard Rorty (1931–2007). Rorty's views on the topic were different from Husserl's, and indeed Rorty was critical in many ways of the pretensions of scientists who believe that their inquiry is purely objective, impartial, culturally neutral and therefore universal.

Rorty's claims were as follows:

1. What has come to be called philosophy in the west has deliberately and self-consciously distinguished itself from theology, natural science and such literary enterprises as poetry, drama and story-telling.

2. Especially in the modern West, what we call philosophy is the product of a series of cultural accidents, one of those accidents being the development of departments in universities that specialize in the study of the works of Plato, Aristotle, Socrates and the hundreds of people who keep referring to their ideas.

3. In neither ancient China nor ancient India was there any enterprise that deliberately distinguished itself from theology, natural science and poetry and story-telling. Nor have there been, until very modern times, academic departments devoting themselves to studies of people who regarded themselves as distinct from theologians, scientists and creative writers.

4. Therefore, to speak of anything in China or India as a kind of philosophy would be to impose European cultural standards onto cultures to which those standards do not belong. It could, in other words, be seen as a kind of European cultural imperialism, a sort of blindness to the integrity of Asian cultural realities, to insist on calling what they do by the name of philosophy.

5. In light of all these considerations, the enterprise of what some people call *comparative* philosophy is a “misleading and pointless discipline.”

On the positive side, Rorty argues that Europeans and Americans should make every effort to study the likes of Gotama the Buddha, Mahāvīra, Nāgārjuna, Confucius, Laozi, Zhuangzi and Zhuxi by letting them tell us what their issues are. We must learn their terminology. We must

learn their language, as it were. Even if we do not become fluent in Sanskrit or Pali or Chinese, we must enrich our own vocabulary with words from those languages and learn what those words meant to the people who used them. We must seek to understand them without giving in to the temptation to translate their most important terminology into our own familiar idiom.

3. The case for comparative philosophy

One of the most eloquent spokesmen in favor of the enterprise of comparative philosophy is a remarkable figure named Jitendra Nath Mohanty (born 1928). Mohanty was born into a traditional Brahman family in the Indian state of Bengal. As a Brahman child he learned Sanskrit as a young child and spent his childhood and adolescence memorizing key Sanskrit religious texts and studying their commentaries. As a young adult he was recognized as a pundit in the very technical literature of the Nyāya school of Hindu thought. Like many young Indians of his time, he also sought a European education. He undertook the study of Western philosophy and eventually distinguished himself as one of the foremost experts in the world on the philosophy of Edmund Husserl. After retiring for a distinguished career as professor of philosophy at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Mohanty turned his attentions once again to the study of the Sanskrit texts he had studied in his youth. After leaving them aside for some forty years, he returned to them with a very different mentality than he had had as a young adult.

Having studied both Western philosophy and classical Indian texts, Mohanty came to hold a view diametrically opposed to that of Husserl. Husserl had argued that the similarities between Greek and Indian thought are superficial while the differences are profound. Mohanty came to believe that the differences are superficial but the similarities profound.

First of all, Mohanty argues that Husserl's distinction between *theoria* and *mythos* is itself a myth. It is a story that scientists tell to justify what they do, but the story is not necessarily true. It takes only a little observation to conclude that none of the Greeks divorced themselves from practicality and myth. None of them were really interested in theory for the pure sake of theory. On the contrary, they were every bit as preoccupied as the Indians and the Chinese were with finding a way to live in this world, in how to organize society and in how to live a fulfilling life in which one is liberated from the root causes of suffering. As for scientists in modern times, it is not difficult to observe that they are not nearly as free from prejudice, personal bias and various cultural assumptions as they might like to believe they are. As for philosophers, they are not really as distinct from scientists and poets and politicians and economists as they might like to believe they are.

Mohanty's case does not rest with the observation that there has never really been, even in the West, such a thing as philosophy of the sort that Husserl and Rorty talk about. His real case rests on the observations that

- both Indian and European thought—and one could say the same of Chinese thought—are based on careful observation of human experience and on attempts to arrive at rational and logically consistent accounts of what is behind human experience
- both Western and Asian philosophical systems involve critical reflections of the state of the world as it is
- both are grounded in a conviction that the world need not be as it now is but that in fact the world could be much better than it now is

So whether we are speaking of China, India, Europe or the Americas, we can always find visionaries who dared to criticize the status quo and dared to be true to their own observations and experiences and ideas. These people, says, Mohanty, deserve to be called philosophers whether they are found in Greece, Babylonia, China, India, Africa or pre-Columbian America.

4. Overview of Buddhist philosophy

It must be explained at the outset how philosophical inquiry fits within the context of Buddhism as a whole. Some Buddhist traditions, especially in East Asia, have taken the stance that conceptual thinking is an obstacle to the practices that lead to the ultimate goal of realizing one's true nature. Given the influence that such forms of Buddhism as Chan (Zen) and Pure Land have had in forming the Western perception of Buddhism, a case must be made for the importance of systematic philosophical inquiry as a form of Buddhist religious practice.

Showing that philosophical inquiry is a Buddhist practice requires first discussing in general what the goal of Buddhist practice is, and then showing that philosophical inquiry is a method of reaching that goal. In what tradition records as the first talk given to the five wandering ascetics who became the Buddha's first disciples, the newly awakened (*buddha*) teacher says that there are two extremes that a person who has renounced the world and undertaken the homeless life should avoid. The first extreme is the pursuit of sensual pleasures, since this pursuit "does not lead to the goal." The other extreme is self-mortification, since this pursuit is painful and also does not lead to the goal. The path of moderation, which avoids these two extremes, says the Buddha, produces vision and knowledge and leads to peace, higher knowledge, full awakening, and nirvana.[4] Nirvana is described as the eradication of the root causes of discontent, those conditions that lead to dissatisfaction, frustration and alienation. Three root causes of discontent are traditionally enumerated in the Buddhist tradition: desire, aversion and delusion. These root causes of discontent are also called *kleśas*, a word that can be translated as "afflictions." They are also called *āśravas*, a word that literally means "flowing" and that conjures up a multiplicity of images ranging from a flow of wine that causes intoxication, to the discharge of pus from a suppurating wound that resists healing. The goal of Buddhist practice, then, is nirvana, which is the final elimination of these three

4 Dhammacakkappavatanasuttaṃ, Saṃyuttanikāya, PTS edition, p. 421.

afflictions or toxins; by “final elimination” is meant their removal with no possibility of their returning.

Of the three afflictions, one is usually said to be the root cause of the other two. Since both desire and aversion arise from a warped understanding of the nature of things, it must be delusion that gives rise to them both. Delusion, then, turns out to be the root cause of all discontent. A person who sees things just as they are neither hankers for anything nor resists anything. Such a person has no expectations that things will be any other way than they are, and therefore is free of all the frustrations that go with having unrealistic expectations. The Buddha apparently realized that different people have different temperaments and different abilities, so he offered a variety of methods of reducing desire and aversion. For delusion, which consists in being convinced that things are other than they in fact are, an important antidote is learning to think carefully and critically. This means changing the habits of thinking that have been acquired over a lifetime. To some extent this changing of old habits of thinking entails thinking differently about things, and to some extent it entails thinking about different things than one used to do. Both of these kinds of change are facilitated by at least one of the enterprises that in the West is called philosophy.

Changing old patterns of thinking may involve thinking differently about the kinds of things one has always thought about. It may help to examine some examples of this shift in perspective. The most important shift has to do with what the Buddha called inverted views, that is, the tendency to think that things have exactly the opposite features than what they in fact have. There is a classical enumeration of the inverted views, namely, 1) the tendency think that something can provide satisfaction when it really cannot, 2) the tendency to think that something is attractive when in fact it is not, 3) the tendency to think that something can last when in truth it cannot, and 4) the tendency to see something as being personal or as part of oneself when it really cannot, or as capable of being owned when it really cannot.

The overall picture of reality that Buddhism most often promotes is that all the objects with which one deals in everyday life arise as they do because of a complex network of constantly changing conditions. Because the conditions are changing at every moment, the composite objects that those conditions produce are also changing from one moment to the next. Even if those momentary changes are subtle, the changes that occur over time are more noticeable. Things decay and eventually fall apart; to the extent that one hoped that these things would not degenerate and break down, one is disappointed.

Moreover, one’s own mentality and values are constantly undergoing subtle changes, with the result that things that once were pleasing and entertaining become ordinary and boring. As a result, most people are never quite satisfied and are constantly driven to seek things that will bring pleasure, comfort and contentment. Realizing that things of the world, whether they are concrete objects or abstract ideas, are ultimately incapable of providing lasting satisfaction can help one reduce the frustration that comes from constantly striving to attain the unattainable.

Learning to think differently about the ordinary things of daily life is, as was said above, part of what must be done in changing old habits of thinking. Another part of what must be done is to learn to think about different things, that is, to focus one's attention away from the ordinary objects of everyday life and to focus attention instead on the basic conditions that give rise to the experience of those ordinary objects. It was said above that an important antidote to delusion is learning to think carefully and critically. There is a Sanskrit word used by Buddhists for the kind of thinking that liberates one from delusion. The word is *yoniśas manaskāra,*[5] which is often translated as "thinking [about something] thoroughly." Literally, the word *yonisas* means "from the source." The basic idea of the whole expression, then, is thinking about things by paying attention to their sources.

What this means in practice can best be illustrated by giving an example. In the course of ordinary daily life, one might encounter an object such as an apple, apply the word "apple" to it and never give the matter any further thought. Buddhist practice, on the other hand, consists in putting the idea of the whole apple aside and focusing attention instead on all the ways in which what we call an apple is presented to the senses. There is the visual sensation of a particular color and shape; there is the olfactory sensation of a particular aroma; there are the tactile sensations of texture and temperature; there is the gustatory sensation of a distinctive taste; when one bites into the apple, there is the audible sensation of sound; and finally there are the subjective sensations that arise in the mind of the beholder from all these impressions coming in through the sense faculties. Thinking about the apple as an abstract whole experience is, according to Buddhist teachings, more likely to lead to desire, aversion and delusion than is focusing the attention on the concrete sensory experiences that are the basis for the idea of an apple. It is not obvious that this Buddhist teaching is true, and for this reason Buddhists provided arguments in support of their claim. Some of those arguments will be examined in lectures to come. For now let us look briefly at topics in Buddhist scholasticism under headings familiar to students of Western philosophy.

4.1. Metaphysics

Given that the first premise of Buddhist doctrine is that human discontent arises out of unrealistic expectations, it is natural that Buddhists would have concerned themselves with determining what is realistic, which of course entails determining what is real. The need to determine what reality is leads naturally to a number of ontological issues, and in Western philosophy ontology is one of the topics discussed under the heading of metaphysics.

The most fundamental idea of Buddhism is that people are unhappy for a reason; that is, there are causes of human unhappiness, and removing this unhappiness requires removing its causes. This very simple observation led naturally to increasingly complex discussions of causality in general. Various attempts were made to classify the kinds of cause and their effects and to show how the kinds of cause were related to one another. In Western

5 The form in which the Sanskrit term is usually cited is *yoniśo manaskāra.* Authors citing sources from the Pali language usually use the Pali form of the word, *yoniso manasikāra.*

philosophy, the study of causality is another of the topics discussed under the heading of metaphysics.

Finally, under the heading of metaphysics, there is in the West an issue that has been called anti-realism, that is, a radical questioning of the very possibility of sorting out any of these thorny metaphysical issues. Nāgārjuna and his commentator Candrakīrti have been portrayed by some modern philosophers as anti-metaphysical philosophers who were intent to show that all attempts to solve these metaphysical issues succeed in generating nothing more than unsatisfactory dogmatic convictions.

4.2. Personal identity and human psychology

Although the discussion of personal identity can be seen as a special instance of the more general problem of the nature of particulars discussed within metaphysics, personal identity is such a complex issue in Buddhism that it is often discussed as a topic unto itself. A question that has always faced Buddhists is how to account for the apparent fact that human beings endure through time. Not only does some kind of personal continuity tie together all the events of what we intuitively call a single human life, say Buddhist philosophers, but there is a continuity of some kind over the course of several lifetimes. If the human being, like all other particulars, is seen as nothing but a bundle of transitory properties or events, how is one to account for continuity throughout a single life, let alone through several lifetimes?

The discussion of personal identity in Buddhism cannot be explored without a discussion of the relationship between physical events and mental events—or between what we call body and mind. A common view among Buddhists is that awareness or consciousness is a flow of events that cannot be fully reduced to physical causes but that is somehow influenced by the physical senses and the physical body as a whole. If what we call the body is nothing but a bundle of physical properties, and if what we call the mind is nothing but a flow of mental events, how are these two bundles related to one another? This problem proved to be as difficult for Buddhists as it has been for Western philosophers.

Independently of how the human mentality is related to the physical body, Buddhists spent a considerable amount of energy exploring the various components of what we call mentality. A discussion of Buddhist psychology must therefore include a discussion of what Buddhists said about how sensual awareness arises, what (if anything) ties together the separate kinds of awareness such as vision and tasting and touching, how internal states such as joy and sorrow are known and how they relate to sensual modes of awareness, and how decisions are made on how to respond to all these stimuli.

One attempt to respond to the question of how the separate bundles of mental events are related was to posit an abiding substratum of all consciousness out of which particular instances of awareness arose. Called by various names, this notion of an abiding core of awareness eventually evolved into the East Asian Buddhist notion of Buddha-nature, the claim being that this Buddha-nature occurs in all beings and that therefore all beings are in

some sense parts of a single being. This doctrine was staunchly supported by some and vigorously rejected by others.

4.3. Epistemology

All the issues explored in these lectures presuppose the possibility of distinguishing defensible knowledge from fancy or mere whim. This presupposition invites inquiry into the sources of knowledge. All Buddhists placed confidence in sense perception, and most Buddhists also accepted that reasoning can yield knowledge. Where there was controversy was on how sense perception relates to reasoning. Do sense perception and logical reasoning operate on entirely different kinds of being—beings with very different properties—, or are some beings known by both perception and intellectual judgment? If they are entirely separate, how do reasoning and language connect to the data of the senses? Two thinkers who dealt at length with these problems were Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, both of whom were embroiled in controversies with non-Buddhists as well as with other Buddhists.

An important aspect of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti's treatment of these problems was a discussion of the possibility of human knowledge being complemented by divine revelation; like most Buddhists, these two Indian Buddhists argued strongly against this possibility, claiming that everything that is passed off as divine revelation is in fact the invention of human beings. If one accepts their arguments against the possibility of bolstering fallible human understandings with some sort of insight that is deemed superior to that of ordinary human beings, then what is the place of the teachings of the Buddha? Does it deserve a special place in the corpus of human literature? Is it in some way authoritative, or is it simply a set of hypotheses that each of us must test before accepting? If the latter, then why give any Buddhist teachings a privileged status; why not regard everything that is said by everyone as equally worthy of being tested in the crucible of experience and therefore equally worthy of respect? Most Buddhists were decidedly not what we would today call religious pluralists; so how did they defend their exclusion of other teachings, and was this defense rational or polemical in nature?

Finally, just as Nāgārjuna offered a radical questioning of the possibility of solving metaphysical puzzles, he also offered a radical questioning of the possibility of finding a satisfactory method of distinguishing knowledge from fancy. He, and his commentator Candrakīrti, can be seen as radical skeptics. If that is a correct reading of their stance, how can one reconcile a radical skepticism with the fundamental Buddhist claim that human beings suffer because of ignorance and they can eliminate suffering only by replacing misunderstanding with insight? This question will be explored in lecture seven, entitled “Is knowledge even possible?”

4.4. Ethical theory

Traditional Buddhism makes the claim that it is possible to eradicate the root causes of suffering—namely, desire, aversion and delusion—and that doing so requires following a method. An indispensable part of that method is leading a pure life, a life in which one does

no deliberate harm to oneself or to others. Typically Buddhist teachers present lists of actions to avoid as a beginning of leading a pure life. These lists invite inquiry into whether there are principles underlying these particular prohibitions and injunctions.

Essential to any discussion of Buddhist ethics is a discussion of Buddhist views of karma (deliberate action) and its psychological (and perhaps physical) consequences. A discussion of karma brings us back to a discussion of causality in general, for karma is seen as but a particular kind of causation. Karma is usually described as having the effect of reinforcing habits; that is, the more a type of action is done, the more likely one is to do the same kind of action again in the future. Any discussion of habit formation invites questions about the extent to which agents have freedom to choose; the clear Buddhist assumption is that beings do have free will, but that this freedom to choose can be significantly diminished by consistently making bad decisions. Can this capacity to choose good paths of action become so diminished that a being in effect loses the freedom to choose? Can beings become so depraved that the very idea of doing good no longer occurs to them? Some Buddhists argued yes, while others claimed otherwise. These issues will be explored in lecture eight, entitled "What is karma and how does it ripen?".

Among those who argued that a being could become so depraved as to lose the will to do good, there arose the notion that they could nevertheless be brought out of depravity by a kind of grace. One being of exceptionally high virtue might transfer the benefits of that virtue to a being of exceptional depravity. How might such a transfer of merit take place? How could belief in such a doctrine be defended? This issue will be explored in lecture nine, entitled "Can you give me the benefits of your good karma?".

Although karma is usually discussed mostly from an individual point of view, no discussion of Buddhist ethical theory would be complete without some discussion of collective action, especially political theory. What, from a Buddhist point of view, are the responsibilities of a government for its citizens, and how should one country conduct itself in a community of nations? Is war ever justifiable? If so, under what circumstances? Is an individual Buddhist best advised to stay out of the disturbing fray of public life or to work out a path of personal liberation by working for the liberation of others? This question will be explored in lecture ten, called "Is there such a thing as collective karma?"

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