Buddhism and American Thinkers

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Introduction
The Buddhist-American Encounter in Philosophy

The essays presented here constitute one kind of answer to the question as to why Buddhism, the last of the great Asiatic schools of thought to reach American shores, has been moving ever deeper into the very substratum of American philosophy, with the result that we find concepts of the self in William James which could have been written by a Buddhist, a concept of Peace in Whitehead which has been called an American formulation of Nirvana *, the ideas of personal identity which were first formulated in the Buddhist "no-soul, no-substance" perspective more than two thousand years ago, and the remark of Charles Hartshorne in this volume that he "was already almost a Buddhist without knowing it long before I had read much about Buddhism or had any habit of relating my thinking to that tradition." Hartshorne acknowledges that for many years he has been "trying to make Buddhism a factor in American thinking." Charles Peirce had preceded him in this, a fact that Hartshorne wishes to emphasize in the title of his essay, the term "Buddhisto-Christian Religion" coming straight from Peirce.

Without knowing it at the time, Hartshorne was already working in ideas that constitute a common core of Buddhist and American philosophy before he took up his work as graduate assistant to Whitehead in the mid-twenties. Ideas out of the broad Buddhist background had actually been a part of the Western tradition for so long that no one would normally have been conscious of his Buddhist origin, and, as Donald Lach says, "no systematic analysts of these materials has so far been undertaken." 1 Examples abound. "Point-instants" or "fleeting moments" (khanavada*) travel sub rosa the Eurasian continent from Buddhist beginnings, become a part of the Neo-Confucian synthesis of Chu Hsi (A.D. 1130-1200), and enter the Leibnizian "Monadology" which conceives the world as a vast organism of unextended atomic point-instants, each enjoying its own
distinctive "windowless" existence. While this is no longer Buddhism, neither is it the distinctive European tradition.

Whatever the specific influences, the Buddhist-American encounter is a matter of record. The essays presented here are an attempt to advance the dialogue which may be said to have commenced in earnest during the last decade of the preceding century in the writing of Charles Sanders Peirce, certain essays of Josiah Royce, the publication in 1896 of Henry Clarke Warren's *Buddhism in Translations* (still available in paperback), the World Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893 with the appearance of Dharmapala, Shaku Soyen and Daisetz T. Suzuki, and the decisive influence of Asia upon numerous people of prominence, such as, James Whistler in art, Frank Lloyd Wright in architecture, Paul Carus in philosophy, and many others like Henry Adams, grandson of the sixth American president, who for a time was a member of a Buddhist group in Boston.

Thousands of books, journal articles, and doctoral dissertations are appearing from year to year, written out of many different philosophical persuasions—Existentialism, Idealism, Linguistic Analysis, Marxism, Phenomenology—and by people with expertise in all the major areas of philosophy—aesthetics, comparative philosophy, epistemology, ethics, logic, philosophy of science, social philosophy, metaphysics and religion. For the most part, however, the essays in the present anthology are, in McDaniel's words, "an effort to use Whiteheadian categories of thought as aids in interpreting the Buddhist orientation to life."

All of this discussion is American philosophy's endeavor to take the non-Western world into account, and it is but a natural part of the move toward Asia among an intellectual elite; during the last twenty-five years membership has increased from a mere five hundred to more than ten thousand members in professional societies which include the Association for Asian Studies, American Oriental Society, International Association of Buddhist Studies, Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy, International Society for Chinese Philosophy, and many others. Midway in the present century, as Inada reminds us, investigations of Buddhism became more serious, lost the atmosphere of faddishness, freed themselves from damaging misconceptions stemming from Schopenhauer, emerged from European tendencies to see Buddhism as a mere extension of Hinduism, and with academic interchange accelerating between Asia and the West, reached a position where they are
now capable of asking the truly generic Buddhist questions. The present collection of essays is devoted to these questions, such as, human suffering (*dukkha*), its nature, sources and cure;
the social nature of reality and its creative freedom from any deterministic law; how reality is experienced and known; the nature of compassionate love; the problem of personal identity; and what one Japanese philosopher recently called "the aesthetic nature of man's ultimate concern," a concern which for Buddhism in all its forms is best left unconceptualized since the point is not to catch it in a linguistic and conceptual net but to awaken, to become more fully alive, compassionate and whole.

Whitehead was vaguely aware that his "philosophy of organism" bore certain similarities to Indian and Chinese thought, but the most striking example of the penetration of Buddhist philosophy into the American tradition is found in the nonverbal, tacit level of Whitehead's Buddhist affinities, all the more remarkable because of its testimony to the subtle nature of Buddhism's encounter with the West. Certain explicit similarities with Buddhist perspectives, on which a considerable literature is now available, appear in the work of Whitehead who not only knew very little about Buddhism, but was largely mistaken in the little that he knew. Inada has elsewhere explored these errors at length.

As compared to Whitehead, for example, Buddhism tries harder to cure man's unconscious tendency to mistake intellectual structure for clarity of thought and to manifest a surprising degree of emotional clinging to conceptual structures and certain persisting conclusions regarding our experience in the world. Buddhism in this respect is one of the world's great efforts toward a truly self-corrective community. The present dialogue, therefore, has some potential for generating among Americans the possibility for cultural renewal. The essay by Jacobson, indeed, suggests that the polarized conflicts of races, ethnic groups and social classes can be assigned to the back burner only as individuals become more capable of celebrating the creative fullness of their experience in and for itself. Nakamura makes this clearer in his discussion of a Buddhist concept of equality, based in the fact that persons, regardless of racial, ethnic and other groupings, individually "reflect the entire universe of existence," the poor no less than the rich, the politically powerful no more than the weak.

Of all the great philosophical orientations to life, none has been more critical and analytical, none more militantly concerned than Buddhism to probe the strange world of deep-rooted presuppositions and assumptive forms. Buddhism is the tradition most single-mindedly committed to penetrating the
menagerie of cultural form down to the movement of reality itself as it is self-evidently given in everyday experience. Buddhism is first in its systematic attempt to be free from what Wittgenstein called
"the tyranny of language," and to be free for what Einstein called "new creations of the mind."

Writing out of a critical, but nonetheless Whiteheadian orientation, David Hall argues that it is the primary responsibility of philosophy to free contemporary men and women from their cultural fragmentation, as victims of the constrictive and censorious ways in which existing forms of art, morality, science and religion destroy the unbroken wholeness of our cultural experience when it is examined in depth. This is why Hall has given his essay the title, "The Width of Civilized Experience." Hall discusses three philosophers of science—Needham, Northrop, and Whitehead—and concludes that of the three, Whitehead offers the most suitable bridge to Oriental thought and provides the needed basis for comparative understandings because of his emphasis upon the process character of reality. The major contrast, Hall argues, is not between East and West, but between substance- and process-centered philosophies. Substance philosophers remain enthralled with the form-enduring character of ideas, while the real world as we experience it is "form-transcending." At this point Hall faults Whitehead for not "widening" our civilized experience of religion, accusing him of being "half-hearted" and "somewhat apologetic" in his obvious intention of freeing his readers from the Western tendency to mistake an intellectually dear concept of God for the object of religious experience. In religion, as elsewhere, process philosophy sees the real world as "form-transcending."

Neville also finds Whitehead defective or ambiguous at this point and argues that one of the great services of Buddhism to the American scene stems from its call to abandon inadequate conceptions of the divine and develop a more convincing and profound ontological vision.

The analysis in which David Hume celebrated the firm roots of intellect in feeling has its parallel in the history of thought only in the equally radical anti-substantialism of the Buddhist legacy. Hume found the self a spurious notion built out of the whole cloth of supposititious learnings.

In both Peirce and Whitehead, likewise, we find brilliant elaborations of the life of feeling as the aesthetic foundation of life, with logic and ethics occupying the upper floors of the edifice of knowledge. "Concepts," Hall writes here, "are abstractions which must continually be referred to the concrete experiencings from which they derive." He continues, "The aim of philosophical abstractions is to heighten the experience of what is real."
Hartshorne agrees. "One thing we need to learn from the Buddhists," he says, "is the importance of nonconceptual, nontheoretical apprehension of reality." In the Buddhist tradition such statements are consistent with
the most rigorous concerns of logic, historical fact elaborated in Richard Chi's discussion of Dignaga * (c. A.D. 400-485), the founder of Buddhist logic, whose contributions to truth functions antedated the modern Western versions by over fourteen hundred years, in what Chi calls "the earliest logical tabulation in history." The dosing words of this introductory essay, which come from Hartshorne's contribution to the collection, should be read in the context of this long and creative Buddhist preoccupation with logic. No American metaphysician has ever exceeded Hartshorne's confidence and competence in logic.

Buddhism is a philosophy of internal criticism, using concepts to extend the range and vividness of awareness, to loosen the grip of dominant conceptual metaphors and compulsive unconscious drives, and to deepen attention to the rich qualitative flow people discover in their own experience as they free themselves from their culture-bound caves. For Buddhism, the function of philosophic thought is to foster the ultimate momentum of life in its concrete, harmonious flow. In the second century A.D., Nagarjuna* was saying that the sense of the real in man needs to be put on its own. As Ramanan expands, "to set free the sense of the real from its moorings in abstractions constitutes the chief-most mission of the farer on the Middle Way."4

Philosophers of both Buddhist and American traditions have been distrustful of language, unwilling to take it at face value, wary of seeking reality in the realm of what is most indefinite and abstract. When expressed in systems of belief passively accepted and adhered to by any individual or group, thinking loses its distinctive power to discern and communicate the unfamiliar, the unconventional, the strange and novel forms of togetherness, which Whitehead called "the really real things whose interconnections and individual characters constitute the universe."5 "The real world is the aesthetically breath-taking colorful world," as Northrop writes, "and it is no longer necessary to infer non-aesthetic material and mental substances whose interaction has the effect of throwing our emotive, aesthetic selves and the other directly sensed concrete facts of experience out of nature, as unreal phantasms."6 The balanced intensity of experience needs no philosophical or theological support; it has positive structure and value in and for itself; it is, indeed, the fundamental chaos-transcending point in the creative advance of life.

This kind of focus on language is equally at home in both Buddhist and
American philosophy. In its ordinary dictionary form, language is unconfessedly provincial and parochial, reflecting the metaphors of a particular self-encapsulated culture. While we cannot leap free from our
dictionaries, linguistic analysis has a role to play where men and women in
the American experience are involved in new dialogues at the interface
between radically different racial, ethnic, ancestral cultures and traditions
which no linguistic technology has any license to forbid. The possibility,
acceptable to Buddhism from its beginnings, has come to puzzle and
confound: the more our understanding grows, the less familiar, the stranger
and more beautiful the world becomes. Neville shows us here the ontological
basis for the Buddhist experience of enlightenment. No bond is stronger
between Buddhism and American philosophy than this vision and its
accompanying sophistication regarding language.

The deepest American encounter with Buddhism, however, makes its
appearance with Peirce, who related his convictions more specifically to
Buddhism than anyone had previously done. For Peirce, as for Buddhism in
all its forms Theravada *, Mahayana*, Vajrayana*, Zen and other there is no
determinate actuality nor autonomous being or entity at the center of things;
the world is ruled neither by the relentless sway of omnipotent matter nor by
blind chance.

The world that exists is the result of the nonexistence of any independent
substance, any ultimate, unanalyzable entity. What is universal and concrete is
the self-surpassing process and unbroken wholeness of a world in whose
microscopic "point instants" the instantaneous joy and compassion are
generated and felt in all who have not turned away. The oceans are not deep
even to contain the tears of billions of men and women who have been too
distracted by compulsive drives and one-sided cultural perspectives to relate
themselves richly to the harmony of life-enjoying-life in their own
experience. Human failure and personal defeat are here the sources of what
Buddhism means by suffering (dukkha). Buddhism is a long effort to help
individuals seek their sense of worth and participation in the original centers
of relatedness, in the qualitative fullness of the passing forms of a world.

This "fullness of existence," the term offered by Inada, has been discussed
under the category of sunyata*, where he attempts to relate it to the American
experience. Sunyata*, Inada says, is the single most important category of
Mahayana* Buddhism, lying at the experiential basis which ends in the
Bodhisattva Ideal with its extensive fellow-feeling and compassion.

In many ways this is the exact opposite of the Aristotelian-Thomist position,
where the exhaustive actualization of all possible being and value is
contributed by none of the world's creatures since the forms of reality were given from the first day of creation. Nagarjuna* put the Buddhist
position in the most provocative way: "At nowhere and at no time can entities ever exist by originating out of themselves, from others, from both (self-other), or from the lack of muses." Neville's essay explores in considerable detail some of the ways in which this proposition is being interpreted by American process philosophers.

The whole of Buddhist thought is permeated with this Heraclitean perspective. Like Whiteheadian thinking, Buddhism is a philosophy of process. "One easily understands, therefore," Neville writes, "the enthusiasm with which process philosophers applaud the Western discovery of Buddhist philosophy as a commanding metaphysical vision of process whose profoundest technical expressions are themselves ancient." In this connection, one of the major aims of Hartshorne's essay is to stress the one-way, asymmetrical and creative freedom of the process, a matter left ambiguous in most forms of Buddhism. A quote from Peirce puts the point with precision: "The indeterminate future becomes the determinate past." The process of creative becoming perpetually resynthesizes its previous productions, and the emergent synthesis is what production ultimately is. "So far as becoming is a process of creative synthesis," Hartshorne writes, "the future in its concreteness is only possible, rather than necessary." Various interpretations of Buddhism, Fa-tsang's (A.D. 643-712) in particular, appear to deny Peirce's point in favor of a symmetrical interpretation of future and past. Neville's essay offers alternatives for the clarification of Buddhism's long ambiguity on the issue.

In his comparisons of Western interpreters of nirvana*, Welbon has argued that "creativity pervades both the way and the goal of Buddhism. To ignore its presence would be to imperil any attempt to understand the Buddhist nirvana* and to overlook the one unambiguous distinction between Buddhism and Hinduism in most of its forms." Persisting analysts of what is actually going on in the stillness of the passing moment reveals a creativity infinitely productive of actualities, each fleeting instant participating in the determination of the actual world. Buddhism is the first philosophy to perceive reality as a creative social process. Herbert Guenther remarks succinctly that creative forces are all that exist in all the interrelated forms of the world, in flowers that bloom, in the birdsong of the passing moment. The logical opposite of creativity for Buddhism is not its absence. The opposite of creativity is suffering (dukkha). The initial essay by Hartshorne calls for a "Buddhisto-Christian" dialogue to understand the real nature of this creativity.
in man and the rest of nature. Hartshorne believes that the creativity in this process form "can do more to explain reality than any other belief." The dialogue of Buddhism and American
thinkers on this point has the potential for producing those "physicians of culture" anticipated by Nietzsche a century ago, healing encapsulation by outworn and exhausted ideas and assumptions.

Inada finds much in the American experience that is creative in this Buddhist efree, flexible, resilient, accommodative, integrative and whole. Polarities both positive and negative, with their attendant tensions and sufferings, are awakening the deep consciousness of the average American. "He is being tempted to be more sensitive and probe deeper into the dynamics of his experience." Writing from a Buddhist point of view, Inada finds the conditions unique here for something approximating a sunyata-oriented * experience. Qualifies such as freedom, freshness, movement, vision and vividness are realizable "only because of the 'empty' nature in which plural elements are thrashed out, assimilated and embodied in the on-going process"a process which is through and through pragmatic and self-perpetuating.

As a philosopher dominated by theological concerns, Henry Nelson Wieman found the ontological sources of these cultural dynamics in a creative interchange that is never within the control of man because it transforms human experience with new meanings which individuals have no way of seeking in advance and integrates new meanings with old, expanding man's appreciable world and shared community in ways that are likewise without a human handle. The vivid qualities of an individual's original experience emerge in a creative interchange that transforms the world. Wieman sees that within the cultural context of the American experience, men and women have arrived at a point in human history where interdependence has become so inmate and so coercive between different regions, social levels, and areas of experience that this creative interchange must be viewed as the ontological imperative "if the story of man is to continue." Wieman appears to have joined much of John Dewey's pragmatism and empiricism with Whitehead's insights as a process philosopher, particularly in his stress upon the prehensiveness, responsiveness, vivid feeling, and "novel forms of togetherness" which everyone and everything share in greater or lesser degree.

Wieman is a different kind of Buddhist, to be sure, but the way he connects creativity as dynamic process with the joy or suffering that attend its freer or more restricted operation, finds obvious echoes in what Welbon, Guenther,
Hartshorne and Inada have said. Wieman also shares with Buddhism, as David Miller's essay shows, a strong suspicion of those forms and formulations of large-scale religious organizations which have the potential for becoming one of the major evils in human life. Religion