

Scriptural Authority & Historical Research¹

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In the field of anthropology the question of what constitutes a religion has been subject to endless debate. Definitions aside, many world religions have developed similar characteristics even though their metaphysical beliefs may have little in common. Many religious traditions, for example, provide ethical principles and sets of practices that men and women tend to follow in order to attain a form of liberation or salvation. To support their endeavour they rely, in part, on written scriptures (e.g. the Buddhist Canon, Christian Bible, Hindu Veda, Jewish Torah, and Muslim Qur'an) which are typically believed to have been revealed by a founder figure. A body of people (e.g. Buddhist monks and nuns, Christian clergy, Hindu priests and pundits, Jewish rabbis, and Muslim imams) ordained for religious studies and well versed in rituals or other forms of religious observance frequently act as religious experts and in the long run become figures of authority. Ultimately written scriptures uphold religious orthodoxy and therefore remain unquestioned and unquestionable.

¹ This paper is a modest contribution to the *Science meets Dharma* Pilote Project I was meant to attend. In particular, I wish to personally thank Heiri Schenkel for his kind invitation and for all the fruitful discussions we have had. I owe a debt of gratitude to Prof. Gregory Sharkey who patiently revised the English and gave wise counsel. Catherine Pittet and Thierry Theurillat made generous and insightful comments. Last but not least, my thanks go to Birgit and Raj Gyawali for providing a resting place and a hard wooden bench, here in Kathmandu, where I had the leisure to work on this paper.

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In the course of their history, religious communities contribute to the development of material culture by building places of worship (e.g. temple, sanctuary, and monastery), producing images or symbols (e.g. statue, painting, and calligraphy), and by making cultic objects and religious implements (e.g. altars, incense burners, rosaries, and musical instruments). In addition to text based information (e.g. scriptures, epigraphical inscriptions, and numismatic evidence), the materiality of world religions, rooted in the physical world [*gzugs kham*s]³, can consequently be an object of research for historical science. As we intend to discuss, the study of past civilizations and human development through their material remains ultimately shed a unique light on the history of religious communities, practices, and beliefs that is at variance with scriptural tradition. This short paper aims to present a few examples of discrepancies between Buddhist literary tradition and modern historical research. For the purposes of clarity a few essentials ought to be borne in mind here.

Buddha, Buddhism & Buddhist Canons

Sometime between the 6th and 5th centuries BCE, a young prince named Siddhārtha Gautama, also known as Śākyamuni, undertook a spiritual journey and eventually became the Buddha, or Enlightened One. Among historians, and the different Buddhist traditions of Asia, arguments continue regarding the date of Siddhārtha's

³ Tibetan transliteration is occasionally provided to help the task of the translator. In case of discrepancies between the English version and the Tibetan translation the former shall prevail.

birth⁴. Following his enlightenment the Buddha started to preach the *dharma* [*chos*] and gradually established an itinerant mendicant order known as the *saṃgha* [*'dus sde / dge 'dun*]. The Buddha and his disciples, both lay and ordained, did not live in monasteries [*dgon pa*] but would meet periodically in groves, villages or private households to recite the teachings and to discuss the rules of the order. Although the Buddha expounded the path to liberation for forty years or so, not a single word was written down during his lifetime. Buddhist tradition holds that at the age of eighty he passed away in a moment known as his final transcendence or *parinirvāṇa* [*yongs su mya ngan las 'das pa*]. The literary tradition has it that shortly afterwards a first council was held in order to recite and write down his word (i.e. the *sūtra* [*mdo*], the *vinaya* [*'dul ba*], and possibly some parts of the *abhidharma* [*chos mngon pa*]).

When it comes to the process of preserving the Buddha's words and the material evidence of these texts, the earliest Buddhist manuscripts preserved belong to the Pāli and Gāndhārī Canons, which were composed more or less at the same time between the end of the 1st century BCE and the 1st century CE, as palaeographical analysis and carbon-14 dating suggest. Not only were they written some four to six hundred years after the passing away of the Buddha and the first writing down of his word; but they also belong to different schools of Buddhism and do not

⁴ See H. Bechert (ed.), *When did the Buddha live? Controversy on the Dating of the Historical Buddha*, Selected Papers Based on a Symposium Held Under Auspices of the Academy of Sciences (Bibliotheca Indo-Buddhica), Sri Satguru Publications, 1996

necessarily reflect the same doctrinal influences⁵. Consequently, the original *buddhavacana*, or the actual word of the Buddha, must, alas, remain uncertain.

After the 1st century CE, Buddhism broke out of its cultural, linguistic, and geographic cradle in the Ganges plain and spread throughout the Indian subcontinent, Central Asia and Southeast Asia as a result of which the Buddhist scriptures were translated into several non-Indic languages (e.g. Chinese, Tibetan, and Korean). In the compiling of these new canons great effort was expended in the translation of Buddhist terminology. Their comparative analysis occasionally reflects doctrinal innovations, regional trends, or cultural influences.

The diffusion throughout Asia of various traditions (i.e. *yāna*), doctrinal affiliations (e.g. gradualism [*rim gyis pa*], *yogācāra* [*sems tsam*]), or schools (e.g. *sthaviravādin* and Tibetan sects [*chos lugs*]) which over time compiled their own corpus of texts and exegetic literature, was accompanied by an artistic flowering based to a greater or lesser degree on the written sources. *Stūpa* monuments [*mchod rten*], cave sanctuaries, and *viharas* [*dgon pa*] came to be richly decorated with paintings and sculptures depicting visual narratives of the lives of the Buddha, or devotional and tantric imagery, etc. The evolution of Buddhist art equally reflects the complexity of this

⁵ The compilation of Pāli Canon is attributed to the Sthaviravāda-Theravāda school while the Gāndhārī Canon belongs to the Dharmaguptaka. They are two of the three surviving *vinaya* lineages.

tradition and the multiplicity of forms – both scriptural and devotional – that Buddhism developed over time⁶.

Today more than ever before, Buddhism is multifaceted and plural. Migrations of Asian communities (e.g. Japanese, Vietnamese, and Tibetan), communication technologies and mass media have contributed to the diffusion of Buddhism worldwide. Canonical literature has been translated into many Western languages⁷ and Buddhism's encounter with the West is giving birth to a new cultural expression of this tradition. Nonetheless, institutionalised Buddhist communities, lay and monastic, seem to preserve a rather traditional, or even conservative, approach to contemporary issues. Their insistence on relying on scriptural evidence and canonical literature alone is challenged in more than one field, as the following examples indicate.

Monasticism & Monasteries in Ancient India Canonical Literature & Archaeological Vestiges

For 19th and early 20th century scholars, the history of Indian Buddhist monasticism was unquestioningly based on the view that texts such as the *Vinaya Piṭaka* [*'dul ba'i*

⁶ See D. Patry Leidy, *The Art of Buddhism ; An Introduction to its History and Meaning*, Shambhala Publications, 2008

⁷ Contrary to what some Buddhist monastics believe, European languages (e.g. English, French, and German) are perfectly apt to render Buddhist concepts or coin neologisms thanks to a rich etymological background and a shared Indo-European heritage. Moreover, not only have western academics a long tradition of philosophical and philological studies but they were also the first to decipher and translate many ancient Asian languages (e.g. Kharoṣṭhī).

sde snod] reflects, not only the deontological code of early Buddhist communities, but the actual daily life of monasteries in ancient India. This same perception is still largely prevalent in almost all contemporary Buddhist traditions; and the vast content of the *vinaya* is believed to go back to the Buddha himself.

As briefly noted earlier, the development of different *vinaya* corpuses and their redactions happened over many centuries. Three of these are still in use today, the *Theravadin vinaya* (in Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka, and Thailand), the *Dharmaguptaka* (in China, Korea, and Vietnam), and the *Mūlasarvāstivāda* (in Tibet and Mongolia). The last of these, the *Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya*, was composed in Sanskrit between the 5th and 6th centuries and translated into Tibetan between the 9th and 10th centuries (i.e. into the Lower Tibet Vinaya [*sMad 'dul*] and then the Upper Tibet Vinaya [*sTod 'dul*]). In the Derge edition [*sde dge*], the Tibetan *Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya* is almost four thousand folios, takes up thirteen volumes, and constitutes one of the five major subjects [*gzhung bka' pod nga*] studied by the *dge lugs pa* candidates for the prestigious title of *dge bshes*.

Yet, with regard to Indian Buddhist monasticism, *vinaya* sources describe fully developed, well-organised, walled monasteries that archaeological records and epigraphical inscriptions do not attest for the pre-Aśoken period (i.e. before the middle of the 3rd century BCE). The earliest Buddhist sites in India attested by archaeological findings are not even monasteries but rock-cut architectural caves containing *stūpa* monuments and worship halls or shrines known as *chaitya-griha*

most of which are found on the western Deccan plateau in the Indian State of Maharashtra, and which chronologically cannot be much older than 250 BCE (e.g. Karla, Bhaja, and Bedse)⁸.

By the 2nd century BCE, monastic complexes or *viharas* developed along trade routes and at economic centres (e.g. Thotlakonda in Andhra Pradesh and Takṣaśilā in Pakistan). These monasteries gradually adopted a standard plan which consists of a walled quadrangular courtyard flanked by monastic cells. They could also host *chaitya* shrines and monumental *stūpas*, as at Sanchi in Madhya Pradesh, which were the focus of devotional practices (i.e. circumambulation and offerings). In addition, facilities such as water tanks, storerooms, kitchens, refectories, and bathrooms were also built within monastic complexes. These elements appear to be in perfect contradiction to the literary description of the early Buddhist *saṃgha* as an itinerant order composed of wandering monks and nuns who would go and beg their daily food as described in other scriptures. How could the Buddha and the first *saṃgha* have then been responsible for the composition of *vinaya* sources in which the construction and use of steam rooms or *jentāka* [*bsro khang*] were scrupulously elaborated?⁹

⁸ See R. Coningham, "The archaeology of Buddhism", in *Archaeology and World Religion*, edited by Timothy Insoll, Routledge, London, 2001, pp.61-95

And also G. L. Barnes, "An Introduction to Buddhist Archaeology", in *World Archaeology*, Vol.27, No.2, Oct.1995, pp. 165-182

⁹ I wish to express my deep thanks to Prof. Schopen for mentioning to me the following references. The Tibetan word for *jentāka* is *bsro khang* although *dugs khang* is also used and elsewhere (e.g. in the *Avadānaśataka*) the term is translated by *cho ga dang ldan pa'i khrus*. The fullest treatment is probably

Although these examples may sound trivial, historical studies based on comparative analysis and material evidence provide a more realistic picture of the life of Buddhist communities in ancient India. They challenge traditional assumptions based on canonical literature. Largely ignored by monastic communities, the work of historians and archaeologists invites reflection, or as Schopen puts it, “the early history of Buddhist monasticism and Buddhist monasteries in India must be fundamentally rethought and re-examined”¹⁰.

Monasteries in the Western Himalayas Hagiographic Literature as Historical Source

Around the beginning of the 10th century CE, West Tibet was the theatre of a Buddhist renaissance known in Tibetan literature as the later diffusion [*bstan pa phyi dar*]. This massive cultural and intellectual process was initiated by a dynasty of pious kings [*lha bla ma*] and furthered by the work of Buddhist scholars, among whom was the famous Tibetan translator [*lo tswa ba*] Rin chen bzang po (958 – 1055). The latter was sent to Kashmir [*Kha che'i yul*] and Bengal where he spent many years in order to learn Sanskrit and to study and translate over one hundred and seventy-

in the Vinaya-sūtra [Derge Wu 6a.1ff]. See also randomly Uttaragrantha Pa 76b.2, 101b.2ff, 185a.4, Vibhanga Ca 146a.5, Pravrajyavastu Ka 122a.3. All references are to the Derge edition.

¹⁰ For his outstanding contribution to the history of Indian Buddhist monasticism, see the following titles: G. Schopen, *Bones, stones, and Buddhist monks: collected papers on the archaeology, epigraphy, and texts of monastic Buddhism in India*, University of Hawaii Press, 1997. *Buddhist monks and business matters: still more papers on monastic Buddhism in India*, University of Hawaii Press, 2004. *Figments and fragments of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India: more collected papers*, University of Hawaii Press, 2005.

eight Buddhist texts, many of which still bear his name in their colophons. The name of the translator thus became strongly associated with the *gsar ma* movement, which designates a second wave of translation and the formation of new Buddhist schools (i.e. *bka' brgyud*, *sa skya*, and *bka' gdams*).

According to the translator's hagiographies [*rnam thar*], Rin chen bzang po is also credited with the founding of a hundred and eight religious edifices, such as temples [*lha khang*] and stūpas [*mchod rten*], which are disseminated all over Upper Kinnaur [*Ku nu*], Spiti [*sPi ti*], Ladakh [*La dṅwags*], and Guge [*Gu ge*].

Generally speaking, hagiographic literature is regarded suspiciously in the field of historical studies due to its tendency to narrate extraordinary and supernatural events¹¹. While Tibetan *rnam thar* may somehow provide valuable information for the understanding of Tibetan history, their content calls for corroboration from other sources. Likewise the number hundred and eight must be understood symbolically as an auspicious number which may not reflect the reality behind Rin chen bzang po's patronage.

Regardless of archaeological evidence, such as architectural typology, wall-painting style, and epigraphic inscriptions, people in the Western Himalayas continue to

¹¹ Tibetan historian and Canada Research Chair in Religion and Contemporary Society in Asia at British Columbia University, Tsering Shakya, suspects a reluctant and disinclined feeling among contemporary Tibetan monastics to produce *rnam thar* after the passing away of important religious figures (e.g. 16th Karmapa). See T. Shakya, *Tibet: Does history matter?*, UC Berkeley, 2006, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uA6jlvwrtns>

credit him with the founding of many “magical temples” [*phrul khang*] built overnight, or self-manifested (e.g. Ribba, Thangi, Nako, and Tabo). The famous monastery and translation centre of Tabo [*rta po*] in the Spiti valley is a classic example of this.

The monastic complex of Tabo¹², which comprises nine different buildings, revolves around the main temple [*gtsug lag khang*], a three dimensional architectural representation of Sarvavid Vairocana’s *maṇḍala* [*kun rig rnam par snang mdzad kyi dkyil ’khor*] also known as the *vajradhātu maṇḍala*. This powerful aesthetic and architectural work, with its thirty-six life-size clay statues projecting from the walls, is based on the *Compendium of Principles of All Tathāgathas* [*de bzhin gshegs pa thams cad kyi de kho na nyid bsdus pa*], an Indian Buddhist *tantra* [*rgyud*] translated by Rin chen bzang po.

Despite the significant role played by the great translator in revitalizing Buddhism in the mNga’ ris area [*mnga’ ris skor gsum*], Rin chen bzang po cannot be the founder of the main temple at Tabo as is claimed by later Tibetan tradition. The argument against such claim is threefold. First and foremost, an inscription located on a wall of the sanctum [*dri gtsang khang*] unambiguously states that the building was renovated by the royal priest [*lha bla ma*] Byang chub ’od forty-six years after his grand-uncle king Ye shes ’od founded it in 996. Above the so-called “Renovation Inscription”, a wall-painting also represents Byang chub ’od surrounded by the lay and monastic

¹² The scientific literature about Tabo is too vast to be mentioned here. See D. E. Klimburg-Salter, *Tabo, a Lamp for the Kingdom: Early Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Art in the Western Himalaya*, Milan, 1997, *Tabo Monastery: Art and History with an Interview of Geshe Sonam Wangdu by Peter Stefan*, Vienna, 2005

community of that time. At his feet stands a richly dressed person from Rum who has been interpreted as the main donor. Not only does the Restoration Inscription not mention the name of Rin chen bzang po, but another wall-painting located inside the entry hall [*sgo khang*], which clearly belongs to the first construction phase, depicts the first monastic community of Tabo. Each monk is represented individually and his name is recorded in a small cartouche just below. The famous translator and supposedly founder of Tabo Monastery is not one of them. Finally, based on philological research, some historians have conclusively argued that Rin chen gzung po was in all likelihood sojourning in Kashmir in search of more Buddhist texts in the year 966. Despite this clear evidence he is still credited with the construction of the temple and his hagiographies largely prevail as sources of historical information.

Scriptural Authority & Western Epistemology

In light of the preceding discussion, it is probably fair to note that historical studies are not always conducted according to solid methodological principles and can be overly confident in their conclusions. Occasionally, historical studies become political and justify some national or territorial claims based on pseudo-scientific literature. In its worst instances, the study of the past serves as ideological propaganda.

In the perspective of this new *Science meets Dharma* course, we wish to underline the absolute necessity for both parties to engage in an unbiased and critical analysis of their respective disciplines.

Due to the long history of political movements, intellectual reforms, and scientific discoveries in the West, knowledge itself (i.e. use of language) has come under criticism for its tendency toward authoritarianism and coalescence with power. A branch of western philosophy (i.e. epistemology) hence started to address the questions of the nature and development of knowledge, as well as the means of its production.

In the field of historical science too the study of the way history has been and is written came to be the focus of historiography, which aims at underlining the changing interpretations of past events in the works of historians.

With regard to the history and development of Buddhist thought, art, and practices, however, these questions are often left to secular academics. A dispassionate, self-critical, and diachronic analysis of Buddhism does not seem to interest traditional monastic communities for whom the Buddhas' omniscience and the content of canonical literature are incontrovertible facts. Ultimately, this singular insistence on scriptural authority¹³ [*yid ches rjes dpag*] shows not only the constraints of Buddhist

¹³ In Buddhist philosophy inference based on scriptural evidence [*yid ches rjes dpag*] is regarded as a prime cognizer [*tshes ma*] but only of the second class (inferential cognizer [*rjes su dpag pa'i tshes ma*]). In modes of reasoning or *pramāṇa*, priority is given to a direct perceiver [*mngon sum gyi tshes ma*] which is

ἐπιστήμη (i.e. scientific knowledge) but also the limits to an open dialogue with contemporary western thought. The question whether there is a common platform of discussion between Buddhism and modern science is long overdue. Actors from both sides have been dialoguing for more than three decades now. These individuals, however, often represent a minority among their peers for their willingness to engage into unfamiliar grounds but also for their capacity to view their own tradition critically. The debate, however, gets muddy when one party is engrossed with certitudes. The conservative attitude, which still prevails in some Asian monastic communities, noticeably points towards the altered form of a soteriological tradition within which the authority of the clergy and thus its power and influence are at stake.

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defined as a new, non-deceiving and non-mistaken knower that is free from conceptuality [*rtog pa dang bral zhing ma 'khrul pa'i gsar du mi bslu ba'i rig pa*].