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About This Book

Buddhism As Philosophy was written to fill a particular pedagogical niche: to serve as a textbook that could be used in undergraduate philosophy courses focusing, in whole or in part, on the Buddhist philosophical tradition. We certainly hope that it will also be of some interest to readers other than the students in such courses and their instructors. But a few words may be in order at the outset about how it might best be used in the classroom by indicating what it does and does not try to do.

The first point that should be made clear is the scope of the book. The Buddhist philosophical tradition began with the Buddha, developed in South Asia for another one and a half millennia, but also spread to Southeast Asia, Tibet, and East Asia, and continues to develop today. This book treats only the South Asian part of the tradition. It does provide the background necessary for investigating those other parts, all of which developed in response to the Indian tradition. But the book is already more than long enough. Doing justice to the other components of the tradition would require something far, far longer.

Recent years have seen a substantial increase in scholarship focused on Indian Buddhist philosophy. Not surprisingly, this has meant the emergence of scholarly disagreements concerning the best interpretation of this or that Buddhist philosophical text, theory, or doctrine. There have been disagreements over such matters as whether the Yogācāra school of Mahāyāna Buddhism is a form of external-world antirealism, and whether any Buddhist philosophers hold that a contradictory statement can be true. Those disagreements will not be discussed here. The interpretations presented here are all, we think, defensible. But it was judged that their defense is probably best left to the pages of the relevant scholarly journals. Students might be interested to learn that there are other ways to read parts of the tradition than the ones presented here. Some of the Further Reading lists at chapter ends point them in useful directions. We felt, though, that substantive discussion of the interpretive disagreements among scholars might prove distracting at this comparatively early stage in student explorations.

At certain points in the book, there are comparisons of a Buddhist concept, theory, or argument with some related item found in the Western tradition.

It must be emphasized that this is not done in order to show that Buddhist thought is "real philosophy." We think it will be evident to anyone who examines the Buddhist corpus that its authors are engaged in philosophical inquiry; special pleading is not necessary. This book was written to be suitable for use in undergraduate offerings in a philosophy department, and comparisons with similar or related concepts and theories in the Western tradition should make sense in that context, for two reasons. First, some students in such courses will already be familiar with parts of the Western tradition, and making connections with things one has already learned is a useful teaching strategy. Second, in the case of students not already familiar with the Western side of the comparison, philosophy instructors may want to encourage their students to engage in further exploration beyond the course content. But in any event, the instructor need not feel compelled to explain the Western side of a comparison to those students for whom this is the first and perhaps the last philosophy course. Something can be gained from getting the comparisons, but little is lost for those who don't.

Some of the material in this book will be challenging for some students, especially those with no prior exposure to philosophy. Some individual chapters (such as Chapters 5 and 7) are fairly lengthy and cover a great deal of ground. It may be best to have reading assignments consist of one or a few sections of a chapter, and not assign a whole chapter at a time. And while the material in the book can probably be responsibly covered in an advanced undergraduate philosophy course, it may not be possible to cover the entirety in other sorts of settings. The ninth chapter, for instance, might be a chapter too far in some cases. Here are some other parts of the book that the instructor who feels pressed for time might consider skipping over:

> Sections 4.4 and 9.6, both of which take up the issue of whether it is possible to talk meaningfully of the utterly non-existent.
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> Section 5.9, which explores an argument for representationalism; since a different argument was presented in the immediately preceding section, and this argument is less clearly developed by its propounder, its discussion could be omitted without jeopardizing later uses of the representationalist thesis.
>
> Section 7.7, which discusses an argument for the Yogācāra thesis that the natures of the ultimate reals are inexpressible.

For instructors wishing to strictly adhere to the historical record, sections 3.4, 3.5, and 5.2 might seem problematic.

> Section 3.4 discusses an argument developed by the eighth-century Mādhyamika philosopher Śāntideva. Since the chapter as a whole seeks to explicate an approach to ethics that is already in place in early Abhidharma, this argument may strike some as out of place.
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> Section 3.5 discusses a problem that was not discussed by Indian Buddhist philosophers, the so-called free will problem. Students do frequently raise questions about this issue, and scholars have proposed several answers a Buddhist might give. But the solution described here is not found in the historical record.
>
> Section 5.2 discusses an approach to establishing non-self that is never fully developed in the Indian Buddhist tradition. Moreover, the discussion is triggered by an episode found in a Mahāyāna text, the *Mahā Prajñāpāramitā Śāstra*, and so might be considered not to belong in a chapter on Abhidharma theory.

Yogācāra is treated in Chapter 7 and Madhyamaka in Chapter 8, reversing the historical order of initial development of these schools. The rationale is that students who have been exposed to Madhyamaka dialectic are sometimes reluctant to return to the sort of metaphysical theorizing found in Yogācāra. Still, the instructor committed to adhering to the historical record might prefer to discuss these chapters in reverse order.

Instructors sometimes want to bring parts of the Buddhist philosophical tradition into a course that is otherwise devoted to the Western tradition. One way this book might be used to that end would be to begin with the material presenting the Buddha's basic teachings and a common core of philosophical elaborations (Chapters 1–3, possibly omitting 3.5), and then use parts of some of the remaining chapters to discuss different ways in which that common core was developed. From Chapter 5 (on Abhidharma), for instance, one might confine one's attention to sections 1, 3, 4, and 5. A discussion of Yogācāra might be restricted to the material presented in sections 1–4 and section 6 of Chapter 7. A brief exploration of Madhyamaka might focus on sections 1–4 and section 7 of Chapter 8. And no doubt there are many other configurations of the material presented here that would be suitable for different classroom contingencies.

Preparation of this second edition of *Buddhism As Philosophy* would not have been possible without the help and encouragement of Jeff Dean, Liz Wilson, and the staff at Hackett Publishing. Many others had useful suggestions for ways to update and improve the first edition. Laura Guerrero and Malcolm Keating earned an inexhaustible store of merit for their *kauśalya* counsel. I benefited as well from the advice and suggestions of Matthew Dasti, Graham Priest, Karsten Struhl, Jan Westerhoff, and an anonymous reviewer for Hackett. Needless to say, any remaining defects are due only to the beginningless ignorance of *this* causal series.

Guide to Translation Sources, Pronunciation

Abbreviations

AKBh: *Abhidharmakośābhāsyam of Vasubandhu*, Prahlad Pradhan, ed. (Patna: Jayaswal Research Institute, 1975).

AP: *Ālambanaparīkṣā with Ālambanaparīkṣāvṛtti of Diṅnāga*, N. Aiyaswami Shastri, ed. (Madras: The Adyar Library, 1942).

BCA: *The Bodhicāryāvatāra of Śāntideva with the Commentary Pañjika of Prajñākaramati*, P. L. Vaidya, ed. (Dharbanga: Mithila Institute, 1960).

BSB: *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, Nalinaksha Dutt, ed., Tibetan Sanskrit Works, vol. 8 (Patna, 1966).

M: *Majjhima Nikāya*, V. Trenckner, ed. (London: Pali Text Society, 1948–1960).

MMK: *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Raghunath Pandeya, ed., as *The Madhyamakaśāstram of Nāgārjuna, with the Commentaries Akutobhayā by Nāgārjuna, Madhyamakavṛtti by Buddhapālita, Prajñāpradīpavṛtti by Bhāviveka, and Prasannapadā by Candrakīrti* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988).

MP: *Milindapañho*, R. D. Vadekar, ed. (Bombay: Bombay University Publications 1972).

MPS (*Mahāprajñāparāmitā Śāstra*): Étienne Lamotte, trans., *Le traité de la grande vertu de sagesse de Nāgārjuna (Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra)* (Louvain, 1944).

NS, NSB, NSV: *Nyāyadarśanam of Gotama, with Vātsyayana's Bhāsya, Uddyotakara's Vārttika, Vācaspati Miśra's Tātparyatika, and Viśvanātha's Vṛtti*, Tārānātha Nyāya Tarkatīrtha and Amarendramohan Tarkatīrtha, eds. (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2003).

PV, PVBh: *The Pramāṇavārttikam of Dharmakīrti*, Ram Chandra Pandeya, ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989).

S: *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, M. Leon Feer, ed., 5 vols. (London: Pali Text Society, 1884–1898).

TB: *Bauddha Tarkabhāṣā of Mokṣākaragupta*, B. N. Singh, ed. and trans. (Varanasi: Asha Prakashan, 1985).

TS: *Tattvasaṅgraha of Sāntarakṣita*, edited with the *Pañjikā* (=TSP) by Embar Krishnamacharya (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1984).

Triṃś: "*Triṃśikā*: *Kārikā* and *Bhāsya,*" in *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi*, K. N. Chatterjee, ed. (Varanasi: Kishor Vidya Niketan, 1980), pp. 27–134.

Viṃś: "*Viṃśatikā*: *Kārikā* and *Vṛtti*," in *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi*, K. N. Chatterjee, ed. (Varanasi: Kishor Vidya Niketan, 1980), pp. 1–26.

VM: *Visuddhimagga of Buddhaghosâcariya*, Henry Clarke Warren, ed., rev. by Dharmananda Kosambi (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950).

VV: *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, edited and translated in *The dialectical method of Nāgārjuna: (Vigrahavyāvartinī)*, E. H. Johnston and Arnold Kunst, eds., Kamaleswar Bhattacharya, trans. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978).

Pronunciation

1. The macron over a vowel (*ā*, *ī*, *ū*) indicates that the value of the vowel is doubled in length. So *a* is pronounced like the "u" in "but," while *ā* is pronounced like the "a" in "father" and held longer.

2. An *h* after a consonant indicates aspiration: the consonant sound is followed by a small puff of air. So *th* is not pronounced like the "th" in "the," but rather like the "th" in "warthog."

3. Both *c* and *ch* are pronounced roughly like the "ch" in "cherry," but the *c* is pronounced without aspiration.

4. The three sibilants *s*, *ś*, and *ṣ*: the first is pronounced like the English "s," the second and third roughly like the English "sh."

5. There are no pitch or tonal accents in Sanskrit, but stress accents of three- and four-syllable words work roughly as follows:

   If the penultimate syllable has a long vowel, e.g., the *kā* in *Nikāya*, stress falls on the penultimate syllable: ni-KĀ-ya

   If the penultimate syllable has a short vowel, e.g., the *ju* in Nāgārjuna or the *la* in Himālaya, the stress falls on the preceding syllable: nā-GĀR-ju-na, hi-MĀ-la-ya

For more details on Sanskrit pronunciation, see the "Pronunciation of Sanskrit words" page on the Rigpa Shedra Wiki website at https://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Pronunciation_of_Sanskrit_words.

Introduction

Buddhism As Philosophy?

The purpose of this book is, as the title suggests, to examine Buddhism as philosophy. Before we actually start doing that though, it might be good to first get a bit clearer about what each of these two things—Buddhism and philosophy—is. That will help us see what might be distinctive about studying Buddhism as a form of philosophy. And it is important to be clear about this, since there are some preconceptions about these matters that might get in the way of fully grasping how the philosophical study of Buddhism works.

I.1 What Is Philosophy?

When people first encounter philosophy, they want to know what it is about. Other disciplines have their own subject matter: biology is the study of life processes, sociology is the study of human societies, astronomy looks at planets and stars, and so on. So what is philosophy about? If you are not new to the study of philosophy, you know that what makes philosophy a separate discipline is not necessarily its special subject matter. True, there are questions that we naturally think of as "philosophical" in some sense. Questions such as, "How should I live my life?" and "How do we know anything?" and "How did all this come to be?" But the first question is also addressed by literature, the second by cognitive science, and the third by astrophysics. What distinguishes philosophy from other disciplines?

Someone who has already studied philosophy will also know that the answer has more to do with method than with content. What sets philosophy apart as a discipline is more its concern with how to answer questions than with the answers themselves. To study philosophy is to learn to think carefully and critically about complex issues. It is not necessarily to learn "the answers" that the discipline has arrived at. This can make the study of philosophy frustrating for some. When we first study a subject, we expect to learn the body of knowledge that has been developed by that discipline. When we study chemistry we

learn the atomic weights of the elements, when we study history we learn the causes of the First World War, and so on. Only later, if at all, does one start looking into the methods the discipline uses within its field of knowledge. The study of philosophy is not like that. True, one might find out in an introductory philosophy course that Plato thought the soul must be immortal, or that Descartes held the one thing that can't be doubted is that the "I" exists. But one also learns that not all philosophers agree with Plato or Descartes on these claims. Some students find this immensely frustrating. Where, they want to know, are the facts that philosophy has established? In all the centuries that philosophy has existed, has it made any progress, come up with any answers?

One response to this question is that indeed philosophy has established something quite significant—that the truth turns out to be very complicated. None of the simple answers to the questions that philosophy looks at is correct. This is an important (and unsettling) result. The questions that philosophers ask often seem like they should have simple and straightforward answers. Take, for instance, the question of how the mind and the body interact. The state of my stomach causes me to think about what there is to eat, and then the resulting state of my mind brings about bodily motion in the direction of the refrigerator. How do these things happen? One thing that philosophical investigation of this question has shown is that we still don't know the answer. Even more detailed scientific study of the brain won't succeed (at least by itself) in explaining how this works. Yet we rely on the mind and the body working together in everything we do. So perhaps philosophy has established something after all—that under the surface of seemingly mundane matters lurks surprising complexity. Getting to the bottom of things turns out to be really hard work.

But there is another way to answer the complaint that philosophy hasn't established any facts. Someone who says this might be wondering what the point of studying philosophy is. And the way the challenge is posed suggests that they think the point of studying some subject is to acquire a body of knowledge—to add new facts to the facts they already know. So one response to the challenge might be to question this assumption. Perhaps the point (or at least a point) of studying philosophy is to acquire a set of skills. Specifically, the study of philosophy might turn out to be one of the best ways to learn some critical argumentation skills: defining one's terms carefully, constructing good arguments in support of one's views, critically evaluating arguments (one's own

and others'), responding to objections, and the like.[1] And these skills turn out to play a crucial role in many different areas of life. They are, for instance, extremely important to the practice of law. This would explain why the study of philosophy is recognized as one of the best ways to prepare for legal practice (something that was known in ancient Greece and in medieval India). Of course the issues that philosophers grapple with can be intrinsically interesting to anyone who is at all thoughtful and reflective. But on this way of thinking about philosophy, the benefit of grappling with them is not so much that one gets the "right" answer, as that one learns to think more carefully and critically about complex matters in general.

To say this is not to say that the questions that philosophers ask are unimportant. It's because people find these to be pressing questions that they pursue the difficult task of trying to answer them—and thereby develop their logical and analytical skills. So something more should be said at this point about what sorts of questions these are. Philosophical inquiry can be sorted into several broad areas. One such domain is ethics. This has to do with the general question of how we should live our lives. So it includes not just questions about the nature of morality (which is concerned with what constitutes right and wrong in the treatment of others). It also deals with questions about what sort of life might be the best life for persons. Now it is sometimes thought that questions of ethics and morality are questions for religion. And it is true that most religions have a great deal to say on these matters. But when people think of questions of right and wrong, good and bad, as matters for religion, they often have in mind the idea that a religion simply tells us how we ought to behave. So they are thinking of ethics and morality as a set of rules or commandments. This is not what philosophers mean by ethics, though. As they use the term, ethics

1. A note about the word "argument." As philosophers use this term, an argument is just a presentation of evidence that is meant to support some conclusion. An argument always consists of two or more statements: a conclusion and one or more premises. The conclusion is the statement that the author of the argument is trying to get the audience to accept. The premises are statements that the author thinks the audience is likely to already accept, and that the author thinks will show that the conclusion is more likely to be true. Giving an argument is one way of trying to persuade others of something. It differs from other forms of persuasion in that when it is properly done it engages the rationality of the audience—it leaves it up to them to determine whether or not they've been given good reasons to accept the conclusion.

involves critical examination of competing views about how we ought to conduct ourselves. And this is something that one can do regardless of what (if any) religious beliefs someone has. The medieval Christian thinker Thomas Aquinas was doing ethics in this sense when he tried to determine what conclusions we can draw about being virtuous from a certain view of human nature. But so was the nineteenth-century German atheist Friedrich Nietzsche when he asked how we should live our lives given that God is dead. What makes both their discussions of ethical matters philosophical is that both involve the critical examination of arguments.

Metaphysics is another major area of philosophy. The word "metaphysics" gets used in several different ways. For instance, in bookstores the "metaphysics" section often has books on astrology and the occult. But as it is used in philosophy, it simply refers to the disciplined investigation of the most basic features of reality. Where ethics concerns the question of how things ought to be, metaphysics concerns the question of how things fundamentally are, or what reality is basically like. Now we might think that questions about how things are, or what reality is like, should be left to the sciences. And it is true that if, for instance, we wanted to know what a certain chemical compound is like we should turn to chemistry. But metaphysical questions are much more basic or fundamental than those that science can answer. Chemistry can tell us what effects might be caused by mixing two chemicals. But it is a metaphysical question what the general nature of the relation between cause and effect is. Likewise the sciences tell us a great deal about the nature of the physical world. But it is a metaphysical question whether everything that exists is physical; this is not a question that scientists can or should try to answer using the methods of science. Some other examples of metaphysical questions include: What is the nature of time? Are there, in addition to particulars such as individual cows, universals such as a single cowness that exists in all of them simultaneously? Does there exist an all-perfect, eternal creator of the universe? Is there a self, and if so what might it be like? The pursuit of metaphysical questions like these has often led philosophers to related but separate questions in the philosophy of language, such as how it is that words and sentences have meaning, and what it means for a statement to be true.

Another important area of philosophy is epistemology, or the theory of knowledge. Here the basic question is how we can come to know what things are like and what should be done. Inquiry in epistemology has often taken the

form of asking just what it means to say that someone knows something or other. For instance, can someone be said to know something if they haven't ruled out all the ways in which they could be mistaken (even when they're not mistaken)? But epistemological inquiry may also take the form of asking what are the means or methods of knowledge. Sense-perception and inference (or reasoning) are popular candidates for reliable ways to acquire knowledge, but what about authority (taking the word of some trustworthy person), or reasoning by analogy? And if there are different means of knowledge, how are they related to one another? Does each have its own distinctive sphere, or do they all serve equally well to give us knowledge about the same objects? Does any one means of knowledge have precedence over others?

As you might have guessed given what was said earlier about the nature of philosophy, philosophers have developed a number of different theories in each of its different branches. And there is no general consensus as to which theories in metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics are correct. There is general agreement that the simplest answers are wrong. Take, for instance, the ethical theory of subject-based ethical relativism. This is the view that whether an action is morally wrong for someone to do depends on whether or not they sincerely believe that doing it is wrong. All philosophers today would agree that this theory is false. But when it comes to more sophisticated theories in these areas, agreement breaks down. For every theory that has been proposed in metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics, there are serious criticisms that have been developed by philosophers. Much of the practice of philosophy involves looking at these objections to a given view and seeing if it's possible to answer them. (It is through this process that philosophical theories have grown so sophisticated.) But in doing so one frequently discovers that there are important connections between the view one holds in one area of philosophy and the positions one takes in other areas. A particular theory in ethics might for instance turn out to be unworkable unless one holds a certain position on some metaphysical issue. Learning to see these sorts of connections is another important benefit of studying philosophy.

When we understand philosophy this way, we can say that not every culture developed its own philosophical tradition. But ancient Greece did—this is where modern Western philosophy began. And so did classical India. In each case the original impetus seems to have come from a concern to answer ethical questions. Out of dissatisfaction with the received view of how people

should live their lives, there arose efforts at thinking systematically about these matters. But in both cases these inquiries soon led to major developments in metaphysics and epistemology. For philosophers became aware that if we are to make progress toward determining how we ought to live, we need to be clearer about the nature of the world and our place in it. And this in turn requires greater clarity about what constitutes knowledge and what processes lead to it. People sometimes wonder if it could be just a coincidence that philosophy arose in two such different cultures at roughly the same time. Now we know that there were trade contacts between classical India and the Hellenic world. So it is at least conceivable that some ancient Greek philosophers and some classical Indian philosophers knew something of one another's work. But the two philosophical traditions appear to be genuinely distinct. They tackle the same basic questions in ethics, metaphysics, and epistemology. And they employ the same basic techniques of analysis and argumentation. Sometimes individual philosophers in the two traditions even reach strikingly similar conclusions. But this should not lead us to suppose that there was significant borrowing between one tradition and the other. We know, after all, that the same invention can occur independently in two distinct cultures. In mathematics, for instance, the zero was invented separately, in ancient India, and also by the Mayans of precontact Mesoamerica.

I.2 What Is Buddhism?

Philosophy, then, is the systematic investigation of questions in ethics, metaphysics, and epistemology (as well as several related fields). It involves using analysis and argumentation in systematic and reflective ways. This will do, at least for now, as an account of what we will mean by philosophy. What about the other term in our title, Buddhism? We might seem to be on safer ground here. While many people might lack detailed knowledge about what it is that Buddhists believe and what Buddhist practice involves, surely everyone knows that Buddhism is the religion that was founded in ancient India by the Buddha, subsequently spread throughout Asia, and is now attracting adherents in the West? Well, yes, but there's a load of mischief lurking in that word "religion." There is one sense in which Buddhism can accurately be called a religion, but there is another sense in which it would be a mistake. And clarity about this