

Continental Philosophy and Buddhist Texts

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Abstract

Some of the concepts contained in the Sanskrit and Pali Buddhist texts do not have clear equivalents in the English language. Behind each language lies a great background of cultural symbolism and linguistic usage. Terms such as 'insight', 'consciousness' and even 'spirituality' are understood in the West according to a cultural heritage that has its roots firmly embedded in Judeo-Christian narratives and cosmologies.

However, 'continental philosophy', with its notions of the 'deconstruction' of culturally constructed ideas and the transcendence of the symbolic self, are related directly to Buddhist epistemology. The Pali term *anatta* or 'non-self' resonates strongly with the postmodern issue of the symbolic self, an illusory sense of self that emerges from a radically objective interpretation of the world. Both Buddhism and continental philosophy share the idea that all perspectives are conditioned viewpoints. The Pali term *saṅkhārā* expresses this notion of conditioning and the five aggregates of existence (*pañcupādānakkhandā*) demonstrate the way this conditioning takes place by means of the human tendency to cling to sensory objects and to identify with personal feelings and thoughts.

Many Buddhist texts employ narrative strategies such as metaphor, analogy and semiotic flow to express contemplative experiences and levels of consciousness that cannot be adequately described in the third-person oriented, propositional language of Western academia. Academic terminology is dominated by a thirst for objective facts because its roots still lie in a Cartesian logico-empiricism. It is therefore necessary to consider the great distance between the linguistic and narrative foundations of Buddhism and present-day Western culture: it becomes necessary to find an appropriate terminology or 'language' to fruitfully interpret the wisdom of these ancient documents. This paper will argue that the form of expression employed by continental philosophers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault and Derrida is just such a language.

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Introduction

Continental philosophy can be said to have its origins in the writings of Nietzsche, to progress through the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger and to reach its fruition in the French postmodernism of Foucault,

Derrida and Kristeva. Its heavy emphasis on the importance of the study of language makes possible the science of ‘semiotics’. Semiotics, or semiology, is the study of language as signifying process. It is a process in which the written or spoken word, as well as the visual image, is said to invoke certain associated concepts in the mind of the beholder or listener. Few words and images however can be said to be associated with just one clearly defined concept. Rather the reverse is true: each signifier tends to produce a constellation of signifieds, a complex array of meanings and values. This leads many researchers in the fields of language studies, philosophy and the human sciences to question the ability of language to faithfully represent that which is ‘in the world’. (Francisco J Varela, 1991 : 15)

To adopt this questioning attitude to language, it is argued here, resonates strongly with that of the early Buddhists, who considered the apparent substantiality of the objective world as the result of a human desire for certainty and solidity. Clinging to the objects of desire, according to this view, restricts the freedom of a person to adapt to momentary changes of circumstance, creating the illusion of a static world and a static personality which is imprisoned within its intransigent boundaries. One system taught by the Buddha to describe the process by which this imprisonment occurred was known as the *khandhas* (Skt: *skandhas*) or ‘aggregates’, the ‘five constituent elements of being’. (Monier Monier-Williams, 2002 : 1256) In a general sense, the term *khandha* refers to the notion of an aggregation of separate elements. In an applied sense it relates to the aggregation of the elements that constitute a personality, an ego. The five *khandhas* - material form (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), karmic (or ‘conditioned’) influences (*sankhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāna*) - together constitute the ‘sensorial aggregates which condition the appearance of life in any form’. (Rhys Davids and William Stede, 1994 : 233)

Everything that is available to sense perception is thus compounded or conditioned. What appear to be straightforward substantial objects are aggregations of various sensory processes. One such process (*rūpa*) identifies the form of an object while another (*vedanā*) evaluates the object emotively. The aggregate of *sankhāra* (the karmic dispositions or karmic formations) could be expressed in Western terms as the influence of a person’s previous experience or history of structural coupling with the world, his or her history of interactions with an environment. By recognising the *khandha* nature of perception, practitioners come to realize - in contemplative *experience* - the epistemological notions of impermanence (*anicca*), discontent (*dukkha*) and no-self (*anatta*). That is, he or she *experiences* the impermanent nature of phenomena through a direct recognition of the processes that compound the various perceptual elements into an appearance of substantiality. The ego comes to be seen, from the perspective of insight, as “simply five ‘heaps’ (*khandhā*) of psycho-physical phenomena”. (Sangharakshita, 1993 : 199) This

paper suggests that the doctrine of the five aggregates resonates in such ways with certain theories of signifying process that are employed in continental philosophy.

The aggregates construct the familiar phenomenal world we know by joining together our impressions, habitually-acquired meanings, values, and our personal feelings; that is, our feelings of desire or aversion for the object. In a similar fashion, through the signifiers and invoked concepts of the occidental signifying process, the phenomena of the world come to acquire definite meanings and values. Through recursive interactions with phenomena in particular cultural contexts we come to regard these meanings and values as fixed and immutable. We learn to read the world as if it were a text. The meanings that we read into the world affect our perceptions of the world. Continental philosophy, in a similar way to Buddhist epistemology, views ordinary perception as compounded and constructed. Like Cervantes' character, Don Quixote, (Miguel de Cervantes, 1987 : 104) whose perception of the world is dominated by the romantic novels he has read, we learn who we are and what is expected of us by constantly referring back to stories told to us in childhood and we demonstrate our knowledge of this text by acting out the heroic adventures of the characters portrayed. Like the Buddhists of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, whose aim was to transcend the mundane world of conceptualizations, the challenge of the continental philosophers is to escape from the text, to avoid the constructed meanings and values that distort understanding, and to disrupt and deconstruct the processes implicated in these distortions.

Semiotics, as the French theorist Roland Barthes has pointed out, recognizes three terms as constituting the signifying process; the 'signifier' (the word or image presented), the signified (the concept 'seen' by the mind) and the sign (the larger, metaphorical meaning). This third term, the 'sign', is the 'associative total of the first two terms' (Roland Barthes, 1993 : 97) and adds a whole new dimension of significance to the original concept. Barthes gives the example of a bunch of roses that a man gives to his wife: in this context, the roses signify 'passion'. They have taken on a metaphorical or symbolic meaning as they appeared in this particular context. The word 'rose' is spoken and the image of a red flower appears in the mind's eye of the listener. But here, the emotions and personal history of the man and wife are engaged in the signifying process evoking an entire flood of significations, narratives and mythologies. It is only when the three elements of the signifying process arise in relationship that we receive the whole message in the form of 'passionified' roses. (Ibid, p.98.) These roses, delivered in a romantic context, become weighted with fresh value; something is created which was not there before. They are weighted with passion and the participants' history and mythical associations are brought into play.

It can be said then, that when the object and its concept appear in a particular context they are swamped by a deluge of secondary significations: surplus semantic value is added according to the recursive usage of the sign, its genealogy and mythology, in the history of the culture, and the individual, to which it belongs. The basic sensory value of the first two terms becomes a mere primary material from which the third term - the sign - draws its greater meaning. The simple sensory image provided by phenomenal experience and the concept to which it is arbitrarily yet uncomplicatedly related, contribute to the creation of a new metaphysical reality which is at the same time something more and something less than the original perception.

The *khandas* work in a similar way. They constitute a similar analysis of the signifying process. When they arise together in various combinations they form particular perceptions, meanings and cognitive events. They are the five constituents of being but they are also known as the five aggregates of clinging (*pañcupādānakkhandā*) because they are the attributes of a person's personality that the person is attached to. The individual identifies with his or her own personal thoughts, feelings and perceptions and this leads to an overindulgence in a narcissistic sense of selfhood. Just as continental philosophy views the self as a social construction created from a mythical use of language, the Buddhism of the *prajñāpāramita* texts sees it, and reality itself, as a 'linguistic construction' that is mistaken for a 'self-existing' entity. It arises from the *khandas* and refers to 'personal awareness' rather than to reality. (Lex Hixon, 1993 : 120)

Every thought, like every perception of self, is a creation of the five aggregates and cannot reveal the independent existence of external objects. Each perception is to be treated as an interaction between knower and known. In the *aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitasutta* (Perfection of Wisdom Sutra), Subhuti, a disciple, asks the Buddha what in fact is to be understood by the expression 'the world'. The Buddha answers that the world is to be understood in terms of the *khandhas* (aggregates), which are 'empty of own being'. (Edward Conze, [trans] 1973 : 173) In other words, not only must human perception of an objective world be mistrusted on the grounds of the arbitrary nature of the senses, feelings and habitual mentation but the aggregates themselves must be considered as having no true existence. The 'marks' of rational thought are mere appearances, signifiers pointing to insubstantial referents; they are metaphorical recreations which are only 'directed [onto] external objects'. (Ibid, p.174.)

The human need to create meaning and order out of the overwhelming diversity of phenomenal experience produces the metaphorical nature of the sign which constructs itself through a process of resemblances rather than identities, as Michel Foucault demonstrates in *Les Mots et les Choses*. (Michel Foucault, 1966 : 32-59) The term 'sign' comes from the verb 'to signify' and produces both linguistic concepts and visual images in its

attempts to communicate. Since the renaissance of classical Greek thought, the West has employed a form of language that minimizes the visual. Foucault suggests that knowledge was characterized by resemblance until the end of the sixteenth century when Cartesianism reduced the function of the sign to that of creating clear and distinct identities. The third-person, objective perspective that produces the propositional language of present-day scientific thought follows Descartes in its attempt to reduce the metaphysical aspects of the signifying process. Yet the sign continues to seize upon certain aspects which 'this' and 'that' have in common, creating in the process a third 'thing' which presents itself as both 'this' and 'that' in combination. If all the details could be seen, together with the associative total of the constitutive elements of the sign, a clear and inclusive view of the object might emerge that was free from habitualised metaphorical projections. Because the object shares similarities with others of its kind, it is dominated by, and embedded within, universalizations.

A similar process is recognized in Buddhism. When bare consciousness of the object or sensual image that is immediately available to perception encounters the emotional, volitional and precognitive dispositions of the perceiver, a more specific cognition is produced, a cognition that is conditioned by the previous mental habits of the person (*sankhāra*). Buddhist contemplative practices are concerned with disrupting these previous habitual processes in order to see the object more clearly and in a more transparent fashion. (Jeff Wilson, 2017) This can be rendered by Jacques Derrida's notion of a 'primitive meaning, the original, and always sensory and material, figure', which, while not 'exactly a metaphor' is a 'kind of transparent figure' that is as close as it is possible to get to 'a literal meaning' or '*sens propre*'. (Jacques Derrida, 1982 : 207-271. p.211) Meditation, at its most basic level, strips the object of the narratives that conditioning has attached to it and frees consciousness from its habitual associations.

In Buddhist practice, the main object under deconstruction is the self. '*Cetovimutti*', the freeing of the mind, is achieved through what Japanese Zen patriarch Dogen referred to as a shedding off of the 'accumulation of habits' which constitute what we think of as the 'self'. (Dogen, 1986 : 29) Delusion is created as we experience the world with the 'burden of the self', which is just a 'bundle of mental habits' and 'ingrained views'. (Ibid, p.30) To perceive objects or cognitive events as unconditioned phenomena it is necessary to transcend these ingrained views through meditation. From the perspective of continental philosophy it is to deconstruct the specific interpretations and meanings which can themselves be seen to have been created by the conventional usage of the sign in its own cultural history. Dogen's insight, that the self is a burden, artificially constructed from mental habits, shows that meditation is concerned with appreciating the pure phenomenon of this 'passionfied' rose by separating out its second-order, metaphorical meaning.

That is, such contemplative practice aims to reinstate the sensory, transparent and ‘literal’ meaning of the phenomenal experience itself. It is, again from the perspective of continental philosophy, to transcend the subject/ object dichotomy by ‘bracketing out’ (Roger Brooke, 2000 : 14) the over-conceptualized explanations imposed by the conditioned mind. To describe phenomena in terms of this conceptualized and mythologically-determined language results in a distancing of the person from the experience. Such a deluded and conditioned reading of the world is the result of unexamined views: it is what Buddhist contemplative practices attempt to transcend, and that postmodernism seeks to deconstruct.

To state that our representations of the phenomenal world are based on metaphor is, of course, to suggest that the world we profess to know is not really an objectively knowable world at all. As Heidegger pointed out, Kant’s influential ‘proof’ of the possibility for empirical knowledge of the world depended on his assumption that the contents of his own consciousness correlated precisely with the Being ‘of objects in the space outside of me’. (Kant’s ‘Critique of Pure Reason’, quoted in Martin Heidegger, 1962 : 247) For the first-century *Mahāyāna* Buddhists, this kind of proof of an external world amounted to nothing more than ‘linguistic convention’; to an exercise in ‘seizing on a material object’ which in truth was simply the product of a ‘verbal expression without factual content’. (The Diamond Sutra’, in [trans] Edward Conze, 1973 : 138)

The five terms which constitute the *khandhas* - forms, feelings, perceptions, reactions and bare awareness - provide an apparently definite shape and character to the domain of our experience. Objects are conditioned, for instance, by our feelings toward them and by our intentionality (or volition) in regard to them. The value we perceive to be inherent in them, the meanings we read from their surfaces, as well as the attachment we form for them; are all products of a personal and cultural investment. That is, we judge each object to be good or bad from the vantage point of culturally-created individualism, dependency and egocentricity. The object is thus metaphorised in the same way as the ‘passionified’ rose: its sign is the product of a complicity between the form we perceive through bare awareness - the sensory, material and transparent impression - and the feelings of desire or aversion we feel toward it.

We become incapable of standing outside of language: we are trapped within a textually-created, symbolic world of our own making, trapped by desire and by a world metaphorically constructed by our desire. A desire to escape from the painful and unsatisfactory aspects of human life, together with a fear of uncertainty, leads us to invest meaning in things and to become attached to them. The apparent solidity and permanence of our possessions provides the comforting delusion of a static and predictable world filled with eternal and unchangeable significance. For this reason, a major aim of

contemplative practice has been to invoke an attitude of equanimity; to stand between the extremes of desire and aversion. Such an attitude, rather than forcing humans into subjection to the all-powerful object of their own invention, creates a space in which to be self-reliant, self-fulfilled and unconditioned.

This paper began by separating the signifying process into the signifier (the word or external image), the signified (the invoked concept or internal image) and the sign (the associative total of the first two terms). This western analysis of the way language works was compared to the Buddha's teachings by relating it to a signifying process consisting of the five aggregates. In Mindfulness meditation, it is through momentary, mindful awareness that the effects of the aggregates are recognized and their power diminished. These five aggregates are traditionally credited, above all, with the constitution of the subject-ego. The signifying process, in both Western and Buddhist systems, is intimately involved with the construction of self. Only through constant self-recollection does the individual produce meaning and value and only through constantly consulting one's own desire does one construct the objects of desire; the mental contents.

When this habitual and unwholesome self-referentiality comes into contact with bare, mindful attention, and with the Buddhist epistemological trinity of impermanence, no-self and discontent, it loses its centrifugal omnipotence. When the associated narratives and mythologies of the 'passionified' rose are stripped away so that the form, texture and smell of the rose itself can be immediately perceived, universalisations give way to a multiplicity of particularities and a conditioned 'reading' of the object dissipates, leaving a space for the emergence of insight.

However, while the philosophical deconstruction is theoretical, its Buddhist counterpart is practical. After being instructed in the adoption of a suitable posture and the appropriate method of observing respiration, the student of Mindfulness is introduced to this central doctrine of the aggregates. All other aspects of Buddhist contemplation revolve around an understanding of these *khandhas*: impermanence, the hindrances, the sense spheres and the accomplishment of enlightenment. In the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the discourse on mindfulness, the student finds the methodology for 'observing mental contents'. (Vipassana Research Institute, 1996 : 35) Clinging to the mental contents is considered a fundamental hindrance to enlightenment. As thoughts, feelings and sensations enter the personal domain of consciousness they are taken note of in the following manner: 'such is matter, such is the arising of matter, such is the passing away of matter'. This formula is repeated for each of the aggregates: feeling, perception, reaction and naked impression. Returning always to the observation of respiration, the practitioner notes the arising of each thought, impression and sensation and observes its passing away. In this way the impermanence and contingency of each

perception is gradually understood. The symbolic stases - or eternal and unchangeable mental contents - gradually lose their potency due to a refusal to hold onto them. It becomes apparent that their status as stases is ultimately due to this process of clinging to recursive phenomena as objective realities.

Despite its theoretical approach, I suggest that continental philosophy seeks to subvert the static tendencies of language in a similar way to that of Buddhist epistemology. When the centrifugal force of the transcendental signifier is lessened through a deconstruction of the 'reading' that supports it, a *body* of experience is liberated. While Mindfulness techniques effect this liberation from conditioned perception through meditational practice, postmodern techniques engage with the cultural, religious, philosophical and literary sources of the dominant *readings of the world* that contribute to the construction of deluded subjectivity. Figures emerge within the literature of a culture which embody these dominant readings, and which can be said to personify certain cognitive patterns, just as Cervantes suggests with the figure of Don Quixote.

‘le asaltó un pensamiento terrible ... y fue que le vino a la memoria que no era armado caballero’ (he was struck by a terrible thought ... it came to him that he was not, [after all], a knight at arms). (Miguel de Cervantes, 1987 : 104)

Don Quixote, like Neo, the hero of the Matrix movie, inhabits two parallel worlds: the dominant dimension of his conditioning and a dimension that he only occasionally remembers. Michel Foucault suggests that he is duty bound to constantly consult his internalized book of chivalric law in order ‘to know what to do and what to say’ and to discover ‘what signs he should give to himself and to others’. (Michel Foucault, 1966 : 60) Having appropriated the romances, the world he inhabits becomes a text, and he lives out the text by assigning its characters to the actual people he meets. He lives entirely in the symbolic and sees others only as signifiers, as he ‘reads the world in order to demonstrate that he is of the same nature as the texts from which he is descended’. The flimsiest resemblances between inn and castle, between innkeeper and baron are exploited to force the world to conform to this internal preconfiguration. Content and secure within his symbolic world, he refuses to look beneath the signifying surface and the people he encounters serve a purely signifying role.

Don Quixote, as the centre of his own drama, is a self at the centre of its solar system of objects. A social ego is produced through the placing of desire's attention. Whenever an object is seized upon by desire, a mirror is created which reflects an aspect of the self. The object, which had hitherto orbited the cognitive domain (which has the ego as its solar centre), has become the focus of desire and begins to exert an ‘exorbitant’ pressure on the attention. (Julia Kristeva, 1982 : 14) The pressure from the world-as-sign is so great that the body, as the site of immediate experience is thrown off and

becomes abject. All that which is not preconfigured in this conditioned conceptualization of a world, and which has not been appointed a definite sign, is excluded from this symbolic order. Emotion, *jouissance*, spirituality and experiential knowledge are all abandoned in the quest for rational clarity.

Abandoning the Subject: the Concept of Anatta

Both Foucault and Julia Kristeva have questioned the status of the subject and suggested that, rather than being in control of its predicate, subjectivity is *subjected* to the object, to the conventional knowledge of its social genealogy and to its own desire for the object. To retain and identify with a strong sense of self is thus recognized in contemporary semiotics, as it is in Buddhist contemplative practices, as condemning perception to a preconfigured view of the world. Foucault's philosophy in *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, is primarily concerned with these preconfigured viewpoints, their origins, and the freedom from conditioning which can result from a constant vigilance against their re-occurrence.

Like Buddhism, continental philosophy sees a direct correlation between the world read as text and the self as egocentric perspective. The conditioned worldview is constructed by inscribing significances and values onto the surfaces of the world in a way that they might better satisfy the needs of the self. This perspective is not the product of a dispassionate view of the world, or of interactions with phenomena as they reveal themselves to a viewpoint oriented in equanimity. It wishes to see its objects as they relate to its own desire. The meaning and value that it inscribes on its objects, and the way it orders its interactions with the phenomena of the world are created by the feelings, sensations and mental habits which have created the self as subject in the first place. Many western neuroscientists now believe that the neurological functions necessary to human life have no central processing unit in the brain and nervous system. Foucault breaks down the domination of this fictional ego "at the centre of thought in order to clear a space for radically 'other' ways of thinking and being". (Lois McNay, 1994 : 4) This resonates strongly with the sense of *vimutti* that emerges from the emptiness of *anatta*.

However, the Pali concepts of self (*atta*) and no-self (*anatta*) are far from simple. What exactly is the 'self' that should be abandoned? A similar confusion surrounds the use of the psychoanalytic term 'ego'. Freud introduced the term to distinguish the organisational faculties of the psyche; to stand for 'reason and circumspection' in contradistinction to the 'Id' which stood for 'the untamed passions'. (Sigmund Freud, quoted in: James Austin, 1998 : 35) Later, 'ego' came to signify 'selfishness', at least in terms of popular consciousness or folk psychology; but the result is that the two meanings have coalesced to a large extent.

To apply this to Buddhism, it is necessary to restore and separate these two senses of 'ego'; as discerning intelligence applied to ordering and

self-discipline, and to self-serving passion which resonates more closely with the Freudian 'Id'. Meditation practice 'strengthens the ego in its original Freudian sense', while simultaneously working to diminish self in the latter sense of a 'selfish pejorative self'. Although ego in the former sense is maintained in order that the person might continue to deal with life in a 'mature, realistic, matter-of-fact way', the aim of meditation is to transcend the ego's limitations in order to rediscover an original 'natural open domain' which stretches around and interpenetrates the body and its senses. It is a perspective that has no mundane function: it obeys 'no laws of logic except its own' and is characterised by 'suchness or thusness'.

This is the perspective often referred to in religious studies as the product of 'alternate' or 'mystical' states. (See for example, William James, 1982 : 380-382) which seem oriented, albeit temporarily, in a modality that does not constantly refer back to a symbolic self or limited ego in order to inscribe meaning and value onto phenomena. It is frequently characterised by the absence of the usual 'sense of exerting active "self control" over events' as well as by changes to the 'self/other boundary which separates our inner self from the outside world'. Practitioners thus learn to assert control and also to relinquish control: they learn to direct intentionality toward self-discipline as well as beyond discipline. Will, as Nietzsche knew, is not wishing or wanting but a dynamic commitment, a commitment that can be focused in any direction because, fundamentally, it is a 'submission of ourselves to our own command'. (Martin Heidegger, 1991 : 40)

The goal of Buddhist contemplative practice, then, is not to destroy or dismantle self due to a view of the ego's subjectivity as essentially selfish, dishonest or sinful, but to discover means of passing beyond the perceived need to constantly refer back to a super-ego or hierarchical genealogy of predetermined needs and values in order to inscribe the world with meaning. Looked at in this way, the illusory substantiality of the symbolic self can be considered, from the perspectives of both Buddhism and continental philosophy, as a mere sequential chaining-together of cognitive experiences, together with the labelling of the package as 'me and mine'.

Beyond the World as Text

Nevertheless, among the 'three baskets' (*pitaka*) into which the teachings of Theravada Buddhism are deployed, ie, the '*sutta pitaka*' (the main discourses of Buddha), the '*abhidharma pitaka*' (intricate analyses of the suttas), and the '*vinaya pitaka*' (mainly concerned with monastic discipline); the '*vinaya*' represents the existence of an analytic domain within Buddhism. As the ethical code of monasticism, it holds the semiotic flow in check and moulds the primary material of perception into codes, signs and symbols. The Mahayana considered this a fossilization of '*vinaya*' symbolism just as Kristeva saw that the forces of stasis are under constant attack by the drives,

which, in their motility, refuse to be held down by that which attempts to codify and control them. (Julia Kristeva, 1986 : 94)

The Mahayanists, while holding to the importance of equanimity as the middle path between extremes of behaviour, mitigated what they saw as an inherent tendency in Buddhism for extreme detachment, with an emphasis on compassion. The codified moralism and strict precepts of early Buddhism were deconstructed by scholars such as Nāgārjuna, and the authors of the Perfection-of-Wisdom *sūtras*. For them, ethics were henceforth guided by a direct, moment-by-moment appreciation of the emotional state of others, a sensibility to the suffering of others and a fluid and energetic exchange of feeling.

Strive at first to meditate

Upon the sameness of yourself and others.

In joy and sorrow all are equal.

Thus be guardian of all, as of yourself. (Shantideva, 1997 : 124)

Thus, the tendency toward a static and overly analytic attitude to the world was balanced by the adoption of a more empathic orientation. The Mahayanists, although continuing to direct their will and intentionality toward self-discipline, directed it further, beyond the symbolic order and beyond the confines of doctrine.

Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi

svaha.

(Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone

altogether beyond, O what an awakening, all

hail!) (Edward Conze, 1973 : 141)

This statement, probably one of the most sublime of all mystical statements, refers to a meditational experience beyond the boundaries of language and of subjectivity. Its insight goes far beyond the habitualised reactions, doctrines and ideologies that confound subjectivity; transcending both analytic and non-analytic modalities, by means of a synthesis between structure and play. All that which was hitherto symbolically confined has been loosened and now flows freely: only momentary mindfulness can trace the limitless fluidity of thought and perception which clings to nothing, that finds nothing substantial to which it can attach itself. An important aspect of this transcendence is a refusal to read the world as a text, and instead, to open the parameters that confine subjectivity allowing the free flow of insight and intuition. The terms ‘intuition’ and ‘insight’ sometimes intersect: Clair Petitmengin-Peugeot’s definition of ‘intuition’ bears resemblances to the ‘heart *sūtra*’ passage quoted above:

intuition does correspond to an experience, that is, a set of interior gestures which involve the entire being ...

[P]reparation [for intuitive cognition] does not consist in learning, in progressively accumulating knowledge. It consists in emptying out, in giving up our habits of representation, of categorization, and of abstraction. (Clair Petitmengin-Peugeot, 1999 : 76-77)

A preparatory process precedes the emergence of intuition or insight and yet it is not an accumulation of empirical or third-person knowledge. It is an 'emptying out' of assumptions, and a 'giving up' of structural and sequential reasoning in order to clear a space for intuitive epistemological experience. Structure merges with play when this non-analytic 'emptying out' of habitualised representations meets and interacts with the analytic *discipline* required to achieve bare attention. In this way, the non-analytic cognitive modality contributes to the setting up of the conditions for the emergence of insight. Kristeva posits two separate, albeit interactive and interdependent domains within the signifying process; the symbolic and the semiotic. The latter is characterised by 'discrete quantities of energy' - like music rather than prose - which flow through the body of the subject who is 'not yet constituted as such'. (Julia Kristeva, 1986 : 94)

The motility or natural flow of this 'pre-verbal semiotic space', (Ibid, p.94.) is reduced and re-configured into a rigid and fossilised continuity of stases. What had hitherto appeared as recursive phenomena within a fluid continuum of impulses, perceptual impressions and sensations, are solidified as continually recurring phenomena are taken for concrete objective realities. The organisation of social conduct with its genealogy of morals, which reaches back to origins beyond memory or imagination, informs and governs this process of solidifying, reinforcing and amplifying the illusion of a 'real world' that constitutes the predicate of an objective, third-person viewpoint.

Conclusion

Contemplative practitioners, like poets and painters, have as a primary motivation the re-institution of this pre-symbolic semiotic space. The rigid constitution of the symbolic is under constant attack during the production of art as it is during the production of the contemplative states of tranquility, equanimity and compassion. While in the former, it is the passion of the artist which attacks the stases, in the latter it is the one-pointedness of attention and (psychic) energy directed by a will-power turned back against itself. Will, in its conventional sense, as Nietzsche reminded us, is primarily a will-to-power directed out onto the world and the other. In contemplative

practice, will be brought to bear on the true adversary; one's own restlessness and striving for control over external circumstances.

The dissolution of the power of the dominating symbolic domain is closely connected to the diminishing of the power of the subject-ego. *Anatta* is central to the Buddhist enterprise as freedom from the dominance of the symbolic is central to continental philosophy but both systems share similar concerns. Yet while investigations into the mechanics of the sign involve lengthy deconstructions and analyses of origins and genealogies, mindfulness meditation brings an immediate recognition of the signifying process as it happens. At any moment the mindful practitioner can see how the phenomena of the present are conditioned, governed and determined by the feelings, mental dispositions and habits. When the rose can no longer be seen, because it has been obscured by habitual representations that have reduced it to a metaphorical token for something else, an immediate perceptual experience of the unadulterated flower itself can be restored by practicing the art of mindfulness and by observing the simultaneous arising of the initial word or image, its habitually-invoked concepts and its 'second order', metaphorical meanings.

Our symbols and over-conceptualised values have taken on a substantiality that the *Perfection-of-Wisdom* texts warned against in their doctrine of emptiness. Continental philosophy is able to mitigate to a certain extent this over-emphasis on the symbolic through a rediscovery of the pre-verbal semiotic space in which a release of emotion and intuition can facilitate insight and compassion for others. However, occidental societies, alarmed by Freud's discovery that reason has not succeeded in repressing the untamed passions, tend to devalue the language of first-person experience in favour of a more propositional vocabulary that can impose order on the undifferentiated. This produces a textuality in which the third-person, objective view dominates the first-person, experiential perspective. The Buddhist texts reveal a balance between the objective and experiential (*ajjhatabhidā*) and the realization that another level of knowledge lies beyond that of the intellectual level. Knowledge obtained through meditation (*bhāvanāmayāpaññā*) is of more value than knowledge that is handed down by tradition or arrived at by intellectual means alone. Perhaps this is because meditation employs the analytic mode of cognition, in, for example, its observation of body and mind and uses a more poetic, metaphorical language to describe contemplative forms that involve visualization and the immediate perception of phenomena.

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