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Rethinking the Buddha: Early Buddhist Philosophy as Meditative Perception

by Eviatar Shulman (review)

David Nowakowski

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John Berthrong's "A Lexicography of Zhu Xi's Metaphysics," after reviewing some suggestions by Roger Ames and David Hall, presents a detailed analysis of four metaphysical domains within which Zhu Xi developed his philosophy, each domain embracing an array of concepts. The domains are (1) states, conditions, fields, formats, and textures; (2) dynamic functions or processes; (3) civilizing cultural outcomes; and (4) axiological values and virtues.

John Makeham's "Xiong Shili's Understanding of the Relationship between the Ontological and the Phenomenal" shows how Xiong's movement from his original Yogācāra Buddhism to developing the founding ideas of twentieth-century New Confucianism brought him to identify the ontological with the phenomenal. Makeham neatly traces Xiong's changing interpretations of what the ontological and the phenomenal mean.

To a remarkable degree this volume displays exciting and subtle metaphysics in the Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist strains of Chinese philosophy, from the earliest texts to Xiong Shili in the early twentieth century. Of course, each of these essays is but a sample of metaphysical problematics that might be analyzed. But there is one glaring omission that deserves comment. There is no sample here of contemporary Chinese metaphysics, only essays about other thinkers. Several of the authors—Vincent Shen and Roger Ames, for instance—are known for their own metaphysical views, but these are not expressed here. What would contemporary Chinese metaphysics look like? As the New Confucians have known, contemporary Chinese metaphysics needs to reformulate the classic language to take into account both recent science and the engagement with non-Chinese traditions of philosophy. The metaphysical themes so neatly analyzed in this volume need to be given contemporary language and argumentative forms to engage in the current global philosophical dialogue. As Ames says in his essay here and in many other writings, Chinese philosophy excels at *ars contextualis*, the art of thinking in context. The context for any contemporary metaphysics is the global situation with its multiplicity of cultures and raw wounds of intercultural brutalization. A study of past metaphysics is incomplete for a contemporary metaphysics whose context is the global situation. Can we not expect from the Chinese metaphysical traditions a new metaphysician?

Rethinking the Buddha: Early Buddhist Philosophy as Meditative Perception. By Eviatar Shulman. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. xviii + 206. ISBN 978-1-107-06239-9.



Reviewed by **David Nowakowski**
Union College
nowakowd@union.edu

Eviatar Shulman's *Rethinking the Buddha: Early Buddhist Philosophy as Meditative Perception* offers an important reminder to take early Buddhist texts seriously as

meaning (no more than) what they say, with regard to the four noble truths, dependent origination, and selflessness (*anatta*). Shulman's book ably makes this interpretive point, but is frustratingly unclear in its more general discussion of the relationship between philosophy and meditation.

Shulman's main thesis is that the four noble truths, as they are customarily taught today (i.e., as universal claims about the world or about all human experiences: "life is suffering," "[all] suffering is caused by craving/desire," etc.), are a younger philosophical elaboration of an original set of four observations (or, as Shulman sometimes calls them, "four truths," without the adjective "noble"), which were to be employed as a technique in meditative observation. They take the form of presently indexed observations about an individual's mental life: "*this* is suffering," et cetera. The four observations are then used within meditation, considering individual mental phenomena as they occur.

In Shulman's reading of the Pali texts (§ 3.1 and chapter 4), the central meditative processes of the early Buddhist community proceed in three stages. First, prior to beginning mindfulness (Pali *sati*, akin to Sanskrit *smṛti*) practice, the student learns the Buddhist conceptual and categorical schemata, particularly as these apply to naming and categorizing mental phenomena and observing the arising and cessation of these phenomena. Second, in the practice of *sati*, the student learns (and becomes habituated to) direct experience of his own mental life according to these schemata. In this way, he moves from an initial practice of recalling these schemata and consciously applying them to his present experience, to a more advanced meditative experience, which is structured according to these categories without any conscious effort to conceptualize them in that way. The student is thus "practicing toward" liberation. Finally, the meditator progresses to *samādhi*, characterized by the "embodied perception of impermanence" (p. 189), which comprises liberation itself.

Such an account, which emerges slowly from Shulman's study, is both highly plausible and quite consistent with the practice of later Buddhist communities in India, Tibet, and elsewhere, for whom there is no sharp disconnect between doctrine, reasoned argument, and contemplative practice. Indeed, Shulman himself has little difficulty in showing the essential continuity of Buddhist thought and practice; he struggles, rather, in his attempts to set out a tension between them in the first place.

We can identify four main elements to Shulman's thesis: (1) We should understand the mindfulness practice of *sati* to be intentionally contentful, (2) we should take seriously the common phrasing of the four truths as "*this* is suffering," "*this* is the cause of suffering," et cetera, while (3) disregarding the account of the Noble Truths in the received texts of the Buddha's first sermon, the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta*, and (4) we should emphasize the tight connection between the four observations as phrased with "*this*" and the accounts of dependent origination and *anatta*.

In his discussion of the first of these elements, Shulman emphasizes the root meaning of *sati/smṛti* as "memory" or "recollection," and produces a range of texts giving instructions on *sati* in which the meditator is to consider himself or his experi-

ence with a certain affective valence (as in the “charnel ground” meditations), or as composed of a precise list of elements, or in terms of the five aggregates, and so on. More than simply passive witnessing, such practices help the meditator to develop the habit of perceiving in certain ways, which will be conducive to liberation.

In support of the second element, Shulman notes the overwhelming frequency of this formulation of the four observations in the Pali canon, and cites a variety of texts illustrating how to make use of such observations in practice.

Against the phrasing of the Noble Truths in the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta*, Shulman notes the problems in the grammar of the received text, and the difficulty in finding a single solution that renders the statements of the second, third, and fourth noble truths both sensible and grammatical. Further, he suggests that the term *ariya-sacca* (“noble truth”) is a historically late one, which “tends to appear in contexts in which we have good reason to assume that the text has been manipulated” (p. 142). If Shulman is correct about the later editing of the text of the first sermon, then the way is clear for his own interpretation of the four truths. But even if this textual conjecture were judged to be implausible, Shulman’s work in the other portions of the book has at least demonstrated that there is substantial evidence for a strong tradition (even if not the only tradition) of observations of the style “this is suffering,” et cetera.

Reflecting on dependent origination and the four truths, Shulman notes that both of these sets of formulae, as they are expressed in an overwhelming number of texts, feature reflection on the arising and cessation of “this,” as well as a four-step statement which analyzes “this” in terms of the causes of its arising and ceasing. The second and third truths are frequently phrased, or explained, in the language of dependent origination. And so, Shulman concludes, the “principles are complementary and represent aspects of one and the same reflection” (p. 161) on the present contents of one’s experience. Likewise for selflessness, where impermanence (which just is arising and passing away) “is not an argument in favor of *anatta* but a direct perception of its reality” (p. 165). The initial conceptual understanding of selflessness is followed, through meditative practice, by the direct perception of selflessness, which in turn has the full impact of uprooting attachment to the notion of a self. The meditator is liberated precisely through habitually seeing his present experiences in terms of the Buddhist analysis of reality.

To this point, I have not employed the term “philosophy” in my review of Shulman’s main claims. Indeed, it is with regard to this term that the book stumbles most significantly. At the outset of his first chapter, Shulman suggests a *prima facie* tension between philosophy and meditation, which his work will resolve. In the first chapter, Shulman is explicit about his use of the term “meditation” to encompass both mindfulness (*sati*) as the “intense observation of mental content, which is aided by a familiarity with Buddhist conceptual schemas” (p. 4) and which is the topic of chapter 3, and concentration (*samādhi*), the deeply concentrated, distraction-free meditative state characterized by one-pointedness, which is examined throughout chapters 1 and 4. The intended meaning of “meditation,” then, is clear and consistent throughout the book: it is the group of mental states or activities that includes both *sati* and *samādhi*.

A univocal reading of “philosophy” is much more difficult to obtain. We can identify at least four distinct usages of this term throughout Shulman’s book: (1) the mere holding of a thesis; (2) any form of conceptual thinking; (3) abstract, syllogistic reasoning; and (4) a transformative mode of living, characterized by spiritual exercises. I will consider each of these in turn.

First, Shulman at times employs the term “philosophy” to mean simply holding a thesis, or, more strongly (though without any principled basis for this restriction), holding a thesis in metaphysics. We see such a sense in the discussion of the “central teachings” (p. 104) or “early Buddhist philosophical doctrines” (p. 105) at the conclusion of chapter 2. Such philosophical doctrines include the ten unanswered questions, the teaching of *anatta*, and the theory of dependent origination. When Shulman claims that his study of mindfulness meditation (*sati*) will help us to “see how philosophy can be integrated into one’s vision so that it becomes a spontaneous form of perception” (p. 105), he must be using the term “philosophy” in this sense; I am certainly not integrating syllogistic reasoning into my perception as such. In this reading of the word “philosophy,” the apparent contrast with certain meditative states is clear, but the remaining characterization of philosophy, as the mere making of claims about practically anything, will doubtless be unsatisfying to those who wish to bound off the practice of philosophy from other domains.

The key insight from the first sense of “philosophy” might be better captured by emphasizing philosophy in a second sense, as something conceptual. Shulman expresses a contrast between “states of mind that are either more conceptual and philosophical, or more quiet and meditative” (p. 170). Yet Shulman cannot really intend to place the philosophical, understood as “more conceptual,” and the meditative, understood as “more quiet” or less conceptual, at opposite ends of some spectrum. To do so would be to include in the very definitions of the terms the unbridgeable opposition that Shulman intends to overcome in his book on “Buddhist philosophy as meditative perception,” and would contradict his own definition of *sati*, cited above, from the opening pages of the book. Such a usage would also be radically at odds with the later Indian philosophical traditions—both Buddhist and non-Buddhist—and may stem from Shulman’s uncritical rendering of the Pali *ñāṇa* (= Sanskrit *jñāna*) as “knowledge.” As Shulman observes, the fourth *jhāna*—the stage of *samādhi* during which, according to the ostensibly autobiographical accounts, the Buddha’s own liberation took place—is characterized by the destruction of negative inflows (*āsava*), which occurs by means of *ñāṇa* (p. 36).

The alleged tension between philosophy and meditation may only arise if we try to pack too much into the meaning of this term by supposing that knowledge (*ñāṇa*) is necessarily some kind of structured propositional awareness, which plays a starring role in abstract theorizing. Such an assumption would be shocking, if not entirely incomprehensible, to philosophers of the Dignāga/Dharmakīrti school in the later Indian Buddhist tradition. As they employ the equivalent Sanskrit term, *jñāna* most accurately means something like “cognition,” and encompasses any contentful event in one’s mental life, from non-conceptual (*nirvikalpaka*) perception to conceptual (*savikalpaka*) linguistic/inferential modes of thought.¹ So the readings of “knowledge”

and “philosophy” as being what is essentially conceptual and non-meditative are inconsistent both with Shulman’s own thesis and with the wider Indian philosophical tradition. A more careful rendering of *ñāṇa/jñāna* also eliminates at the outset any tension that may have arisen between meditative awareness and philosophy in the first sense of holding a thesis. Cognitive states, including those that arise in meditation, are conditioned by our exposure to Buddhist (or any other) classificatory schemata. It is only when we have learned that mental phenomena are impermanent and composed of the five aggregates that we begin to experience our own inner lives in these terms.

A third alternative is to define “philosophy” not as a corpus of conceptually expressed doctrines, but in terms of the process by which one arrives at these doctrines. Shulman suggests such a definition by way of example: “This is nothing but concrete, forceful, philosophical reasoning: everything one perceives is ephemeral and hence no view can capture the nature of reality” (p. 66). Here, “philosophical reasoning” seems to be nothing more than proceeding from premise(s) to conclusion. Its concreteness seems to consist in being an explicit syllogism. In this context, Shulman suggests that a contrasting approach would be “more pragmatic than philosophical” (p. 67 n. 14), that is, given over more to acting in the world than to reflecting about the world.

This leads into the fourth of Shulman’s definitions, according to which we may consider philosophy to be a mode of living, a way of transformatively engaging with oneself and the world. Early in chapter 1, Shulman appeals to Pierre Hadot’s characterization of ancient Greek philosophy as “spiritual exercises leading to self-transformation” (p. 5). While this is the closest Shulman comes to offering an explicit definition of “philosophy,” it is a definition that fails to capture many of his own uses of that term, including (but not only) those mentioned above. If philosophy were characterized *only* in this fourth way, without requiring any additional features (such as those implicated in the first three definitions), there would be no basis at all for a tension between philosophy and meditation. Clearly, meditation could very well be part of “spiritual exercises leading to self-transformation.”

As I hope to have suggested in my characterization of Shulman’s main claims, the question of what counts as philosophy is confusing, irrelevant, and deeply unhelpful. Unfortunately, it is also an issue over which Shulman expends a great deal of verbiage, especially in the first two chapters, which together comprise more than half the book. We would be better served to abandon the oppositions (whether implicit or explicit) in the first three definitions, and accept that the positive components of all four definitions capture important elements. Let us simply say that the practices of the early Buddhist community, as expressed in the Pali discourses, included the teaching of important doctrines, conceptual schemata for describing and analyzing lived experience, reasoning from premises to conclusions, and spiritual exercises leading to liberation. To attempt to expand on such a description, by calling one or more of these elements “philosophy,” only to be shocked when that element turns out to be connected with the rest of the community’s practice, adds nothing but unclarity. This more fruitful description of interrelated elements can indeed be teased

out of Shulman's work, along with the ample evidence that all of these elements were tightly integrated with each other and with the meditative practices of that Buddhist community, culminating in liberation.

In conclusion, Shulman's *Rethinking the Buddha* succeeds as a description of the integrated elements of teaching, reflection, argument, and observation of the early Buddhist community, and the importance of reading the statements of the four truths and related teachings on selflessness and dependent origination as local observations on a meditator's present experience: "this is suffering," "this is the cause of suffering," et cetera. Yet the book stumbles in its attempt to bracket off and evaluate a distinct domain of philosophy.

Note

1 – The Naiyāyika rivals of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti would, of course, acknowledge even some perceptual states that are in their essence conceptual.

Whose Tradition? Which Dao? Confucius and Wittgenstein on Moral Learning and Reflection. By James F. Peterman. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015. Pp. xx + 319. ISBN 978-1-4384-5419-1.



Reviewed by **Galia Patt-Shamir**
Tel-Aviv University
galiap@tau.ac.il

Whose Tradition? Which Dao? Confucius and Wittgenstein on Moral Learning and Reflection by James F. Peterman addresses the valuable position that Confucius' *dao* can and has to be understood within the useful framework of Wittgensteinian forms of life, their concrete language games, and the mastery of techniques and rule-following, and that Wittgenstein's forms of life embody critical therapeutic interventions that can be better understood through Confucian ideas of moral practice and reflection, most significantly as the practice of ritual (禮 *li*).

Placing Confucianism in a global philosophical context is necessary, since the self-sufficiency of Confucianism demands that it should be possible to have the Confucian message *in discourse* with other intellectual points of view. Wittgenstein's ideas introduce a method of looking at texts as integral to human life, and demand that we reflect on the life that the texts represent. If his ideas about language games and forms of life are true, they should apply to particular traditions. Confucian moral practice and its significance in one's reflection on life expands the understanding of forms of life. In this way Confucianism and Wittgensteinianism support each other. The dialogue between the two philosophies demands of us that we open ourselves to others in order to better understand their philosophies as well